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Six ways alt-left media legitimatise their criticism of mainstream media: An analysis of The Canary and Evolve Politics (2015-2019)

Abstract

In recent years, new alternative left-wing media sites in the UK – labelled alt-left media – have become popular sources of news. They often focus their attention on the ‘MSM’, an acronym used to pejoratively represent ‘mainstream media’. But there has been limited academic attention about how these new alternative media report mainstream media and critique professional journalism. Drawing on a highly focused dataset of 158 stories from a sample of 1284 articles, this study examined two alt-left media sites in the UK, The Canary and Evolve Politics, from 2015 to 2019, and identified six specific ways they legitimised their criticism mainstream media. This involved the constant surveillance of mainstream media reporting, questioning editorial judgements with close textual analysis, and drawing on authoritative sources to substantiate claims. It is argued that more research is needed to understand how alternative media are delegitimising the value of professional journalism.

Keywords

Alternative media, Alt-left media, Journalistic legitimacy, Mainstream media, Professional journalism

Introduction

The acronym – ‘MSM’ – has become a widely used term in online and social media to pejoratively represent the mainstream media, such as the BBC or New York Times. It is often invoked to point out the perceived ideological bias of news reporting from both left- and right-wing perspectives (Holt, 2019). Of course, the antagonism of alternative media towards mainstream media is nothing new or surprising. It has long been acknowledged that the ownership, production and content of alternative media have been self-consciously developed in opposition to mainstream media (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). As mainstream media and professional journalism have evolved into the digital age, the conventions and practices of alternative media have also changed, such as how news is reported (Forde, 2011). But it is important to recognise that alternative media criticising professional journalism has become one of their dominant traits over recent decades (Forde, 2011; Atton and Hamilton, 2008). With rising populism in many established democracies, in recent years academic studies have focussed their attention on new right-wing alternative media and their relationship with mainstream media (Burack et al 2012; Holt, 2019).

The UK’s media system, by contrast, has remained influenced by a right-wing news ecosystem (Cushion et al 2018), with only a few prominent far right alternative media sites being launched in recent years. Instead, newly established alternative left-wing media in the UK – labelled alt-left media – have become popular sources of news and vocal critics of mainstream media political reporting (Waterson, 2017). But despite the prominence of new alt-left media in the UK, there has been limited academic attention about how they report mainstream news, such as their coverage of professional journalism.

This article examined coverage in The Canary and Evolve Politics between 2015 and 2019 by assessing how they *legitimise their criticism* of mainstream media. Both sites have an editorial agenda of promoting left-wing politics, but also an editorial mission to provide an

‘alternative agenda’ to mainstream media. As recent analysis of new alternative media has revealed across several European countries, their output has increasingly focussed on challenging mainstream coverage of news, as well as relying on it to inform their own content (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Dodson 2018; Holt 2019; Cushion 2020).

The study makes an intervention into these debates by carrying out a qualitative assessment of the nature of alternative media criticism towards mainstream media. It drew on a study of 1284 articles over a five-year period - 1178 Canary articles and 106 Evolve Politics articles – *and isolated every story* that criticised mainstream media (N=158).¹ In doing so, the article found six ways alt-left media legitimise their criticism of mainstream media: 1) by alleging political bias, 2) focussing on examples of a professional journalist or a left-wing public figure exposing the inadequacies of reporting, 3) using hard evidence from academic sources and official bodies, 4) critiquing professional conventions, practices and values, 5) exposing instances of sloppy or inaccurate journalism and 6) drawing attention to the problems of media ownership and marketisation of journalism. By generating a highly focussed dataset, this article contributes to academic debates about the legitimacy of alternative media sites as well as their wider impact on delegitimising mainstream media and professional journalism.

Alternative media coverage of mainstream media

A wide range of online and social media platforms today compete and claim to represent ‘alternative’ perspectives. The study focussed on new alt-left media in the UK that *self-define themselves as being in opposition to mainstream media*. It defines what is meant by mainstream media by relying on *how alt-left media classify MSM in coverage* and in their references to other news media outlets and journalists. The focus is on how alt-left media report mainstream media, and to assess the legitimacy of their criticism towards the ‘MSM’ generally and news outlets specifically. The concept of journalistic legitimacy has been used by scholars to interpret how alternative media reflect different ways of reporting and claim authority over how news should be constructed (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019). There is a long history of how different news media convey authority in the format and style of reporting (Atton and Hamilton, 2008) by, for example, drawing on specific journalistic conventions and routines (Lipari, 1996). But there is also an emerging literature that considers how journalistic legitimacy is interpreted by journalists, and identifying when and why different forms of news are accepted, resisted or challenged (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019; Vos and Ryan, 2018).

There is also a growing literature about how alternative media report mainstream media, but the recent emphasis has almost exclusively focussed on the rise of alt-right media in many countries (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019; Holt 2019; Holt et al 2019). So, for example, Holt (2019) interviewed contributors to right-wing alternative media outlets about their attitudes towards mainstream. He found that collectively editors believed that “mainstream media deliberately favor some perspectives and frame news by withholding information in order to control people’s opinions and that they have a deliberately skewed selection when it comes to letting people with different opinions be heard” (Holt, 2019: 21). There has been some textual analysis of how this manifests itself in alternative right-wing media content. But Figenschou and Ihlebæk’s (2019) qualitative assessment of mainstream media criticism in far-right alternative online media represents the most comprehensive study to date. After evaluating 600 articles, they uncovered five ways in which journalistic

legitimacy and authority was conveyed by alt-right media. First, criticism was in direct response to stories taken from the mainstream media, and used as being representative of bias in various ways. Second, there were attempts to display more specialist knowledge than journalists, offering expert analysis in areas such as international news and statistics. Third, in order to authenticate their claims, they drew on personal experience of mistreatment from mainstream media, casting themselves as victims in their own right. Fourth, they regularly sought to reflect the views of ordinary people, whereas mainstream media are distant from their concerns. Fifth, the mainstream media view of the world was challenged by an activist position, whereby alt-right sites access full transcripts of interviews to give divergent perspectives of coverage or they investigate the funding and editorial purpose of particular outlets to expose their ideological agenda. Taken together, Figenschou and Ihlebæk's (2019) study characterises how far right-wing media criticise mainstream media. But since alternative media is a relational concept – such as being defined in opposition to mainstream media – the editorial motivations and perspectives of far-right wing might be distinctive from a more moderate ideologically driven site or the politics of left-wing alternative media. The focus of this study is specifically on *alt-left media opposition to mainstream media in the UK*. There has been little academic attention paid to understanding the production and content of sites, such as The Canary and Evolve Politics.

As part of a larger study that informed the research in this article (Cushion 2020), a systematic content analysis of The Canary and Evolve Politics was carried out between 2015 and 2019. It found both sites included stories not ordinarily covered by mainstream media, with news about UK politics top of the agenda followed by coverage centred on critiquing mainstream media, especially BBC news. When analysed more closely it showed coverage was largely about a perceived media bias against Labour – the main left-wing opposition party - and political reporting that was interpreted as reinforcing the views of the establishment. But, despite opposition to mainstream media, both The Canary and Evolve Politics drew heavily on them for secondary sources of information, in direct quotes or tweets, as well as in videos embedded into articles. While this reinforced the findings of previous studies, the study also suggested that the rise of new alt-left media in the UK was a response to the national media system, which is dominated by right-wing newspapers and a public service broadcaster – the BBC – viewed as being too close to the government in power (Freedman, 2018). Hence, central to their editorial news agenda was exposing the ideological consequences of mainstream media, in particular BBC news, which was, by far, subjected to more criticism than any other news organisation.

However, although the study quantitatively captured the extent to which alt-left media critically reported mainstream media as well as how far they relied on them to inform their routine agenda, it did not *qualitatively* assess the legitimacy of their criticism of professional journalism. This article will address this by analysing the various ways journalistic legitimacy was conveyed in stories about mainstream media in The Canary and Evolve Politics between 2015-2019. Before explaining the study's method, the rise of new alt-left UK media needs further context and explanation.

The rise of UK alt-left media

Both The Canary and Evolve Politics were launched in 2015 after the UK's main centre-left Labour party was narrowly defeated at the general election. In the subsequent leadership contest, a left-wing candidate – Jeremy Corbyn – was surprisingly elected. Both sites were

launched as enthusiastic supporters of Corbyn's brand of left-wing politics, challenging Labour members who wanted the party to return to the ideological centre, while being highly critical of the centre-right Conservative government. But one of the main reasons for the arrival of new alt-left media sites was not just about reporting politics from a left-wing perspective. They were launched to provide a counter-balance to the right-wing press that have long influenced British politics, as well as broadcasters, notably the BBC. Several other sites were also launched to support Corbyn's brand of left-wing politics and to challenge the mainstream media's portrayal of politics.

But the focus of this study is on two of the most influential sites – The Canary and Evolve Politics – which had some of the widely shared news articles during the 2017 election campaign, higher than many right-wing mainstream digital platforms (McAlister 2017; Waterson 2017). In doing so, they were viewed as offering a counter-weight to Conservative supporting newspapers that play an important agenda setting role during election campaigns (Cushion et al 2018). Of course, the collective of influence of new alt-left media does not match the power and reach of mainstream media. As a Reuters (2019) survey of news consumption confirmed, a far smaller proportion of respondents had heard of sites such as The Canary and Evolve Politics compared to legacy brands such as the BBC and Daily Mail. Alt-left media instead appear to wield influence at key points in time, such as during an election campaign or in reporting a particular news story, event or issue. In attracting attention about specific stories, they can often be more widely shared across sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and then influencing mainstream news agendas.

Sample and method

This article builds on a quantitative content study (Cushion 2020) that examined 1284 articles over a five-year longitudinal period (2015-2019). Although Evolve Politics was launched in 2015, it did not produce much regular content until 2016 (hence sampling from this point in time). The total number of Canary news items (1178 articles) was far higher than that supplied by Evolve Politics (106 articles). There were three-week sample periods over the four-year period of analysis (in 2015, October 6 to 24, in 2016, 9 to 29 October, in 2018, 8 to 28 October and, in 2019, 7 to 27 October). The sample dates were selected to ensure analysis took place when UK parliament was in session. As 2017 was an election year and a significant period of time in the rise of alt-left media, the sample was extended over 5 weeks - between 30 April and 7 June – to examine coverage over the campaign.

The focus of the content analysis was to systematically examine both the volume and nature of coverage over time. The study examined the main topic of each article and, in doing so, did not anticipate that criticism of mainstream media would made up a significant part of the news agenda – up to approximately 20% of all articles in some years - on both The Canary and Evolve Politics. More generally, the study found that while Evolve Politics was primarily focussed on news about UK politics, The Canary focussed on both domestic and international affairs. But many stories appeared distinctive from mainstream media news agendas, including articles about animal welfare, for example. The main focus of both sites was about politics and particularly on challenging the government of the day's right-wing agenda. When articles were principally about criticism of the mainstream media, in 2015 this made up 5.7% of all articles for The Canary, rising to 19.8% in 2016, 15.4% in 2017, 21.3% in 2018 and 6.9% in 2019. By contrast, in Evolve Politics the proportion of articles about criticism of mainstream media was 11.1% in 2016, 20.4% in 2017 and 17.4% in 2018. In 2019 there were four articles overall, with just one about mainstream media. Overall, in this

subsample of 158 stories there was often general criticism towards the media, but it was difficult to isolate any specific hostility towards, say, a journalist, or a news outlet.

The aim of this article was to dig deeper into the 158 stories specifically about mainstream by more qualitatively identifying the focus of the ways they legitimise their criticism of professional journalism. Following Figenschou and Ihlebæk's (2019) method of examining how media authority was conveyed in far right-wing media sites, an inductive approach to analysing stories was undertaken. This involved carefully reading through all 158 stories several times and identifying reoccurring themes of how journalists legitimised their critique of mainstream media. While qualitative software, such as NVivo, offers a way of analysing discourse, the study relied on the author's systematic reading of all stories, making judgements about the editorial characteristics of coverage, including how headlines were constructed, the type and nature selection of sources, and ways supporting evidence informed coverage to the style of writing, structure and format. In doing so six overlapping themes were identified.

This is broadly recognised as an inductive approach to empirical research, whereby an author draws on their knowledge and understanding of journalism literature and practise in order to make informed observations. To paraphrase Westley (1958), an inductive approach advances science by drawing on empirical research and giving it order and focus by classifying, generalizing and ordering data into some coherence. It is necessarily subjective, but it does offer a more discursive picture of alt-media sites than relying entirely on quantitative data. Indeed, the aim of this study was not to quantify the degree of journalistic legitimacy, but to qualitatively characterise the nature of these practices and conventions. The evidence used to support the study is close textual analysis of a sample of 158 articles isolated over a five year period to consider how they critique professional journalism. The dataset, in this sense, is highly focussed and necessarily qualitative, with examples used to illustrate the common strategies used to legitimise criticism of the MSM.

Six ways alt-left media legitimatise their criticism of mainstream media

Political bias in professional journalism

By far, on both alt-left sites, criticism towards mainstream media was primarily focussed on highlighting political bias among professional journalism. This was predominantly centred on BBC news reporting and targeting specific journalists. A close reading of these stories revealed that the BBC's political editor, Laura Kuennsberg bore the brunt of most criticism. Stories of this type were mostly based on individual reports that both sites challenged with relevant facts and figures. So, for example, in an item (16 May, 2017) headlined: "Laura Kuennsberg's response to the Labour manifesto shows the BBC is moving from bias to naked self-interest", The Canary drew on selective quotes from her coverage of Labour's economic proposals during an election campaign, which, it was argued, did not reflect all aspects of it:

[Kuennsberg] stated:

'The party is including £48.6bn of extra tax rises, and the same in extra spending commitments.'

She continued:

‘Jeremy Corbyn is taking the Labour Party in this election to a very different place – away from the recent consensus that the UK should be moving to lower borrowing, and lower taxation.’

And she ended by drumming the point home:

‘The manifesto spells out a vision, for good or for ill, of more spending, more tax, and more borrowing.’

And in a big way.

There is no mention of the fact that 95% of the population will not see a tax increase, as Corbyn clearly stated in his speech:

‘And Labour will provide a tax guarantee: No VAT, national insurance or income tax rise for 95% of all people with only the top 5% of earners paying more. We’ll introduce an excessive pay levy to clampdown on boardroom pay.’

The legitimacy of criticism towards mainstream media, in this context, was achieved by not alleging overt bias about what was said, but about what was *excluded*.

The framing of particular stories or events were subject to intense analysis in both alt-left media sites. Evolve Politics, for example took exception to a BBC story that was headlined “Concerts for Corbyn: personality cult or good cause?” (15 October, 2016). It centred on how a left-wing organisation, Momentum, was holding concerts to boost Labour’s electoral prospects. However, Evolve Politics pointed out that because the full title of Momentum’s concerts was actually “PEOPLE POWERED: Concerts For Corbyn” the headline was misleading, since events were not driven by a political personality but members of the public.

It was not just language that alt-left media deconstructed to allege mainstream media political bias. Stories often focussed on the editing of broadcast political programming that were used to substantiate criticism. So, for example, in an item headlined: “One shocking Newsnight clip explains why the BBC is seen as a mouthpiece for the Tories” (21 October 2019), The Canary closely analysed the video footage accompanying a report. The story was about public anger with all MPs in the context of the Brexit debate, but – according to The Canary – the BBC only used pictures of Conservative MPs being abused when evidence showed Labour MPs were too. This story was supported by social media clips that highlighted left-wing politicians being criticised by members of the public. Again, bias by *exclusion* was central to the story.

The close attention paid to the construction of mainstream political news on both alt-left media sites was well illustrated by an Evolve Politics story that focussed exclusively on anti-Labour comments made by Sky News journalists who did not realise they were being recorded in a Facebook Live broadcast (24 May, 2017). They were broadcast in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack in the UK during an election campaign. The journalists were reported as saying: “As much as it sounds disgusting and awful, this plays in her (Theresa May’s) favour. a) the whole kind of social care stuff is dead, and you know [Corbyn], who’s been portrayed as a terrorist sympathiser for the last...”. Not long after

being broadcast it was removed from Sky News's website, but Evolve Politics still managed to observe the off-the-camera comments, suggesting that either the contributors – or its readers – were highly alert to exposing any mainstream media bias.

Criticism of political bias in mainstream media was not limited to broadcast news. Right-wing newspapers, in particular, were often singled out for unquestionably supporting Conservatives, while demonising the Labour Party and notably its leader. So, for example, one Canary story headlined: “The Daily Mail's response to the Manchester attack was even worse than The Sun's” sought to compare bias in not one but two newspapers in relation to criticising Corbyn's reaction to a terrorist attack in the UK (25 May, 2017). Criticism of Corbyn was also identified in a left-wing newspaper – The Independent – by Evolve Politics. It featured a story about a poll commissioned by the Independent that claimed the public felt a former centre-left Labour leader, Tony Blair, was more electable than Corbyn, the current left-wing leader (17 October, 2016). Evolve Politics questioned this by quoting the interpretation of the polling organisation that carried it out: “A new ComRes poll for the Independent and Sunday Mirror shows that the British public is split over whether Labour has more chance of winning a general election if Tony Blair or Jeremy Corbyn were leader (36% vs 35%)”. In other words, while the polling organisation said the public was “split”, the Independent misrepresented – according to Evolve Politics – the findings to suite its own editorial brand of *centre-left* politics.

Taken together, new alt-left media criticism of mainstream was legitimatised by often quite nuanced interpretations of political bias in reporting. This was achieved by scrutinising not just the use of language by journalists, but in broadcast editing, visual imagery and even subtle differences in the interpretation of opinion poll data, which included the use of independent sources to back up claims.

Media or (left-wing) political exposé of mainstream media reporting

Both alt-left sites regularly focussed on examples of a professional journalist or a left-wing public figure exposing the inadequacies of mainstream media reporting. For example, The Canary revealed that when the head of an influential Union, Len McCluskey, cast doubt on the likelihood of Labour winning the 2017 election the mainstream media did not explain why that was view was taken (17 May, 2017). It found professional journalists did not report McCluskey's full comments which referred to “media” bias being the reason he thought Corbyn would not be electable.

Exposés of mainstream media bias were also evident in longer, more analytical pieces about particular events or issues. One Canary story, for example, argued that while mainstream journalists were quick to criticise left-wing protestors throwing eggs at delegates at the Conservative Party conference, there was no condemnation of Israelis throwing stones at Palestinians (16 October, 2015). The article concluded: “it seems that the Israeli crime...has to be ten times worse for it to receive the condemnation reserved for a crime by a mere protester for the British Left.”

Most of the exposés of mainstream media coverage, however, were quite specific, relatively isolated instances, which both sites championed for challenging the status quo. So, for example, The Canary featured a tweet about the European Union (EU) from the leader of the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon, which was in response to a right-wing Daily Mail commentator's criticism of the party's stance towards Brexit (9 October, 2018). It pictured the exchange on the social media site, with the following headline: “Nicola Sturgeon takes down a Daily Mail

‘political hack’ with just 10 words”. It would be hard to describe the response as a particularly tough ‘take-down’ – since it read “The people I serve voted 62% to remain the EU” - but it reveals how alt-left media will quickly seize on an opportunity to highlight criticism of mainstream media from people in power, in particular political elites.

Indeed, even when the exposé of a professional journalist was a stage-managed event rather than genuine criticism, Evolve Politics sought to draw attention to it. For example, Channel 4, a television broadcaster, agreed to tweet public messages if people donated to a charity, Stand Up to Cancer (26 October, 2018). When someone recommended criticising Piers Morgan, a well-known former tabloid editor and now ITV News presenter, Channel 4 obliged. However, it was left to the very end of the Evolve Politics article - not the headline – to explain Channel 4’s Twitter account was being used for charitable purposes. The headline read: “SOMEONE ON THE OFFICIAL CHANNEL FOUR TWITTER ACCOUNT LITERALLY JUST TOLD PIERS MORGAN TO GO F**K HIMSELF”.

In order to legitimatise their criticism of mainstream media, both The Canary and Evolve Politics pay close attention to instances of reporting when either a professional journalist or a left-wing public figure can expose the inadequacies of mainstream media. In doing so, it does not appear an alt-left media judgement, but an acknowledgement from established and authoritative sources about the shortcomings of mainstream media.

The use of hard evidence from academic sources and official bodies

Alt-left media sites regularly drew on statistics from official bodies or academics in order to support their critique of mainstream media and professional journalists. So, for example, in a Canary story titled “Now we have evidence, everyone can see the real reason it looks like Corbyn didn’t back Remain” three academic studies were used to challenge the proposition that the Labour leader did not campaign during the referendum to remain or leave the EU (10 October, 2016). In one study it not only summarised key findings to support criticism of how mainstream broadcasters reported the Labour leader, it unpacked the methodology and sample period. In doing so, the legitimacy of criticism was supported by, as The Canary put it, “hard evidence of mainstream media bias during the EU referendum”.

When professional journalists challenged facts and figures, alt-left media were quick to seize on any examples that demonstrated under-informed commentary. In a story headlined “The Sun’s Political Editor picks a fight with an economics professor, and gets utterly schooled”, for instance, The Canary reported a Twitter exchange between a journalist and an academic revealed the former was unaware that nationalising water would not have an impact on how the deficit was calculated (18 May, 2017). The article concluded by stating: “The Sun journalist should think twice about challenging an economics professor next time.”

There were times when The Canary drew on academic research to support criticism of the mainstream media without it leading the story. For example, in an item about the bias of the BBC’s political editor the story was supported by key findings of a Cardiff University content analysis study, as well as referencing – with hyperlinks – two other academic studies that, in the alt-left sites words, found a “serious imbalance in reporting of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn” (17 May, 2016). Similarly, in a story about a rapper alleging media bias, The Canary referenced Loughborough University research to challenge a politician’s assertion that the new alt-left media provided a counter-balance to the national press agenda, which remain, by far, the most read daily papers (3 June, 2017).

Beyond academic research, alt-left media legitimised their criticism of mainstream media by making use of data from official bodies, which showed evidence of low standards in professional journalism. The Canary produced an extensive piece, for instance, about a Council of Europe report that was highly critical of the UK press and its weak regulatory system (10 October, 2016). It pointed out how little mainstream media had covered the report despite its significant criticism of the UK's media and political classes. The Canary also drew expansively on an Ofcom study, which regulates all UK broadcast media, focussing exclusively on its criticism towards not adequately engaging with or reflecting the British public, notably young people (24 October, 2019). There was little independent analysis of the report; instead, The Canary story almost entirely consisted of direct quotations taken from the Ofcom study, helping to legitimise criticism towards the BBC by allowing the official regulator to speak for itself.

While academics typically make up a tiny fraction of sources that inform mainstream media reporting (Cushion and Lewis 2009; Cushion et al 2017), alt-left media sites regularly used media scholarship to help legitimise their criticism of professional journalism. Academic studies were specifically used to provide hard evidence that reinforced alt-left media criticism of mainstream media reporting. Data from official bodies was further used to substantiate alt-left criticism of professional journalism.

Professional conventions, practices and values

Beyond specific instances of criticism towards professional journalism or studies highlighting media bias, both alt-left media sites identified overarching problems with the conventions, practices and values of mainstream media. In many of these stories, the focus of alt-left media attention was not on specific outlets, such as the BBC, but mainstream media *generally*. The Canary, for example, reported how mainstream media were criticising each other about media bias, which – it was argued – reflected a broader problem with how professional journalism does not engage with ordinary people's concerns and anxieties (26 October, 2016). In another article, the focus was on Western mainstream media for their reporting of events in Yemen, including examples taken from US news media reporting (12 October, 2018). Drawing on a number of examples from mainstream journalists, during the 2017 election campaign The Canary suggested there was a collective effort to discredit the chances of Corbyn's electoral chances (6 May, 2017). This was viewed as reflecting a "real scandal: a broken media", with mainstream perspectives viewed as antithetical to the alternative, left-wing politics of the Labour leader.

Evolve Politics took aim at mainstream media by considering how they reported the report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which recommended national governments needed to take drastic action (8 October, 2018). But, as the alt-left media site pointed out, there was minimal coverage of the panel's report, which it accounted for by the tabloid values of professional journalism. In the words of Evolve Politics: "with a tabloid media intent on delusion, on reflecting a world to its readership that has no cares nor qualms, save reality TV gossip, that isn't standing with its toes curled around the lip of the precipice, how is change to come?"

Alt-left media sites also criticised specific conventions of mainstream media coverage. In coverage of refugees, for example, it drew on a consultant who had advised professional outlets like the BBC and ITV in covering the topic (9 October, 2018). She stated: "that the structure of broadcast news too often requires the packaging of stories into

short clips, making it difficult to give a truly fair and honest picture or a real critique of government policies”. Similarly, in another article, The Canary took issue with the regulatory practices of BBC journalism in an article entitled: “After last night, the BBC’s impartiality guidelines aren’t worth the paper they’re written on” (9 October, 2018). It related to an appearance by a climate change denier appearing as a guest on a BBC news programme despite the fact that the public service broadcaster had issued guidelines strictly telling journalists not to balance debates in this way because the scientific consensus was clear.

In different ways, both alt-left media sites identified professional conventions, practices and values that undermined the quality of mainstream media. In doing so, the legitimacy of criticism was not an isolated moment, but indicative of a systemic problem with mainstream media.

Exposing instances of sloppy or inaccurate journalism

Contributors to alt-left media regularly produced close textual analysis of news that exposed instances of sloppy or inaccurate journalism. While many of these stories focussed on criticising right-wing politics (as already acknowledged), both The Canary and Evolve Politics also frequently picked out instances of mainstream journalism that were not explicitly partisan. This often took the form of singling out columnists for their provocative commentary, quoting passages of an article and identifying issues with the language used.

So, for example, The Canary highlighted the racist language of a Sunday Times columnist, calling out its racism, while also pointing out that many people had complained to IPSO – the main UK press regulator - about the article (23 October, 2020). At times, mainstream journalists were pitted against experts who were able to expose a particular reporter’s sloppiness or factual errors. Take, for instance, The Canary’s coverage of a right-wing talk radio presenter’s on-air conversation with an activist that challenged her perspective about international affairs. The Canary began the article: “TalkRADIO host Julia Hartley-Brewer just completely lost the plot live on air. She was arguing for more military intervention in Syria with the Stop the War Coalition’s (StWC) Chris Nineham. But when Nineham attacked her argument, all the TalkRADIO host could muster in response was to shout at her guest, continuously interrupting his case” (12 October, 2016). The Canary story featured selective quotes from the programme as an illustration of an ill-informed mainstream journalist.

There were also stories informed by selective moments taken from a programme where – it was identified – a media presenter and politician acknowledged criticism of mainstream media. So, for example, a Canary headline read: “After rapper Akala nails the heart of UK media bias, even the BBC’s Andrew Neil is forced to agree”, referencing a high-profile political journalist (3 June, 2017). But the textual evidence to support the claim of the headline was relatively limited. In response to the Rapper stating: “I don’t believe complete objectivity is even philosophically possible... If I ran a news channel, even if I didn’t mean for it to, it would naturally reflect some of my passions”, the BBC journalist was quoted as saying: “Because you choose the agenda... and so on”. Likewise, when the Rapper argued: “So if you have... similarly educated people from similar backgrounds running all of the main institutions, even if they don’t intend it, the outcome can often be... biased”, the politician featured as a guest in the programme simply said: “I think that’s one of your strongest points”. Links to a YouTube video of the exchanges were provided (although they were later removed due to, presumably, a copyright infringement).

Overall, both alt-left sites legitimised their criticism of mainstream media by quoting selective moments from newspapers articles and broadcast programming in order to support their claims. In doing so, the textual evidence – often with supporting video – was used as a basis of fact that informed the headline and the main substance of the story. At times, the selective quotes helped legitimatise the framing of the story.

Media ownership and marketisation

A broader critique of mainstream media in alt-left media was most evident in their repeated references to the impact of concentrated media ownership and marketisation of journalism. One feature article – headlined: “These are the billionaire tax avoiders who control the media” that explored this theme was published not long after The Canary was launched (14 October, 2015). It identified a number of media moguls controlling UK media organisations, including Rupert Murdoch who, the story argued, “owns a substantial portion of the total media real estate, and he frequently uses these assets to push the outcome of UK elections one way or the other”. Indeed, Murdoch was often singled out by both alt-left sites for his editorial influence on specific newspaper headlines and stories. For example, the Canary took to the defence of Corbyn after his character was questioned by a number of Murdoch-owned papers (26 May, 2017).

During the 2017 election campaign, The Canary pointed out the imbalanced ownership structure of the most widely read newspapers:

Murdoch owns The Sun and The Times.

The Barclay brothers, worth £7.2bn [paywall], own The Telegraph.

With a fortune of £2.5bn [paywall], Richard Desmond owns The Star and The Express.

Viscount Rothermere, whose family is worth almost a billion [paywall], hereditarily owns The Daily Mail.

Russian billionaire Alexander Lebedev owns The Independent with his son (19 May, 2017).

In doing so, it highlighted how their agenda setting power was hindering the prospects of electing a left-wing, alternative party to the establishment. In a separate article, The Canary also reported the close relationship between the Conservative Government and right-wing press owners. It revealed that “Senior executives from Rupert Murdoch owned companies met either the Conservative Prime Minister or Chancellor ten times in a year. More broadly, News Corp executives met senior government representatives 20 times between April 2015 and September 2016” (21 May, 2017). Its criticism of media ownership, in this context, was legitimised by official records – supported by evidence from a Media Coalition Reform report – documenting the frequency of meetings between politicians and press barons.

Criticism of media ownership was not confined to the UK. The Canary reported on a meeting between the Amazon and Washington Post owner – Jeff Bezos – and a Saudi Arabi Prince (8 October, 2018). It was claimed Bezos was seen laughing in the Prince’s company, despite much criticism of the Saudi Arabian government because it was alleged they had murdered a journalist. The owner of a corporate mainstream media organisation, in other words, was not standing up for journalistic safety and free speech.

In legitimatising their criticism of mainstream media, both alt-left media sites regularly drew attention to the power of press ownership and the influence they have on the editorial agenda of professional journalism. As previously identified, this was often supported by academic evidence to substantiate the claims of isolated examples.

From legitimatising alt-left media to *delegitimising* mainstream media

This study identified six ways that criticism of mainstream media was legitimised in new alt-left media sites in the UK, The Canary and Evolve Politics, from 2015 to 2019. First, allegations of political bias were substantiated by deconstructing the language of journalists, broadcast editing, visual imagery, as well as interpretations of hard evidence, such as opinion poll data. Second, professional journalists or left-wing political figures were drawn upon to expose the inadequacies of mainstream media. This meant criticism of mainstream media was not an alt-left media judgement, but a position supported by established and authoritative sources. Third, statistics from official bodies or academics were routinely drawn upon in order to support their critique of mainstream media and professional journalists. Fourth, overarching problems with the conventions, practices and values of mainstream media were used to illustrate criticism was not an isolated moment, but indicative of systemic problems with mainstream media. Fifth, mainstream media were under constant surveillance – even when material had been removed after being published – in order to expose instances of sloppy or inaccurate journalism. Sixth, criticism of mainstream media was often based on the power of press ownership and their editorial influence on professional journalists.

Taken together, both alt-left media sites sought to legitimise their criticism of mainstream media by drawing on specific examples of journalism – mainly supported by selective quotes, but also video clips – and making extensive use of authoritative sources, in particular academic research produced by media and communication scholars. This legitimatising strategy echoes practices long used in professional journalism (Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Forde, 2011). For example, relying on institutional actors, whether politicians, academics, or representatives of official bodies, have long been used to provide authority in every-day news reporting (Fishman, 1980). A key difference – certainly in respect of UK news reporting – is that media and communication scholars rarely inform mainstream media reporting. Mainstream media, in this respect, are not prone to introspection about their own journalism.

A common way alt-left media legitimised their criticism of mainstream media across the six strategies identified was by drawing attention to not what was included, but *excluded* in coverage. This, as Atton and Hamilton (2008) have observed, is a long-standing convention of alternative media coverage of mainstream media. They have argued “Alternative media are characterised by their explicitly partisan character. In the language of ethics, they exhibit clear biases, yet they proclaim their selectivity and their bias, and generally have little interest in ‘balanced reporting’” (Atton and Hamilton 2008: 86). By drawing attention to what is *excluded* in mainstream media, alt-left media can seek to identify specific instances lacking editorial balance or background. In doing so, they have the power to isolate moments as being indicative of coverage more generally even if they are presented out of context. Indeed, evidence used by alt-left media sites to highlight criticism towards mainstream media – in the form of original analysis, quotes or videos – was, at times, relatively thin and lacking substance. However, when both alt-left media sites legitimised their criticism of journalism by drawing on academic analyses or addressing structural issues

that confounded the performance of mainstream media they provided more credible and robust evidence-based critiques.

This opens up a debate about how we should interpret why alt-media aim to delegitimize professional journalism. As scholars in the field of alternative and community media have long pointed out, criticism of journalism is not synonymous with fault finding. A normative goal of alternative media is to point out failures, contradictions and shortcomings in mainstream journalism in order to improve the performance of MSM. But, in the case of alt-left media under analysis, how this should be improved is driven by an ideological goal of advancing left-wing politics and challenging what they see as the hegemony of MSM promoting a centre-right political agenda. Or, put another way, their goal is not to objectively enhance journalistic practise by improving public understanding of issues and debates, but to convey a left-wing view of the world that undermines the agenda of right-wing politics. In fairness to both alt-left media sites, they are open about their political ambitions on their websites and in media interviews. So, for example, the editor of The Canary, Kerry-Anne Mendoza has said: “readers of The Canary know they can count on us to champion progressive ideas and challenge those who undermine those values, whatever their position or party” (Mayhew, 2017c). In doing so, she continued, The Canary’s approach is to follow professional partisan media which adopt a kind of “tabloid styling, tabloid-level language” (Chakelian, 2017). Similarly, in an interview with Matt Turner, a founding editor of Evolve Politics, he states:

I wear my political allegiances on my sleeve and I think people respect that – whether they agree with me or not. People on the left know that new, up and coming commentators like myself are always going to fight their corner when spineless mainstream columnists will start to waiver and sit on the fence. People don’t trust the mainstream media anymore, whether it is the BBC or The Guardian (cited in Florit 2017).

In short, alt-left media criticism of professional journalism is driven by a political agenda.

Since alt-left media have the power to include and *exclude* evidence to support their criticism of mainstream media, it can lead to selective editing that serves their own editorial purpose. There were isolated moments when clearly both sites were quick to seize on perceived sloppy journalism or media bias because material had been removed by a broadcaster not long after it had been aired or published. This forensic surveillance of mainstream media from critics such as new at-left media sites appear to be having an impact on BBC editorial staff. For example, when BBC news staff were reflecting on criticism about their impartiality after the 2019 general election, their thoughts were briefed to the Guardian’s Media Editor:

Almost all of them [BBC news staff] who spoke anonymously to give their frank views, believed strongly in the BBC’s purpose and importance as a unifying force of reliable news in a divided country. But many raised doubts as to how the corporation’s output can withstand such a level of scrutiny. A common complaint was the risk of feeling paralysed by the knowledge that every single piece of television, radio or online output is at risk of being examined in detail on Twitter for allegations of bias.

In other words, under constant scrutiny it was acknowledged that there will inevitably be editorial misjudgements, which can be isolated and exacerbated across online and social media platforms in order to allege deliberate or unconscious mainstream media bias.

The focus of this study has been on left-wing alternative media, but the wider relevance also extends to alt-right media. After all, alternative media is a relational concept, which means their content aims to be distinctive from the mainstream agenda. As a consequence, the national media system plays an important role in determining the shape and character of alternative media, including how they criticise mainstream media reporting. Since the UK's press system had long been dominated by right-wing newspapers, the motivation of new alt-left sites has been to provide a counter-point to their journalism. Whether right-wing alternative media sites in the UK, such as Breitbart or Westmonster, adopt the same kind of legitimising strategies as alt-left media remains open to future empirical inquiry. Since public service broadcasters, in particular the BBC, are dominant sources of news in the UK while much of national press pursues a centre-wing agenda, it could be that they are subject to even more criticism than alt-left media sites. But more generally, the findings of Figenschou and Ihlebæk's (2019) study of Norwegian far right-wing media sites chime with this UK study of alt-left media. In particular, the editorial focus on critiquing mainstream media and challenging their alleged bias with specialist knowledge and academic evidence.

But in order to better understand the impact of alternative media, more analysis is needed about the editorial strategies used to inform their reporting of mainstream media and professional journalism. While this study identified six ways they legitimised their criticism of mainstream media, audience research is needed to interpret whether users of alt-left media agreed with how professional journalism was portrayed. If they did, while these new alternative media sites may be increasingly viewed as legitimate news sources, it follows that all mainstream media may be becoming *delegitimised* in the process. Since most people continue to rely on mainstream media for news about politics and public affairs (Ofcom 2019), alternative media may be having a small but significant impact on how their audiences understand what is happening in the world. Further research is needed to identify how alt-media audiences assess the credibility of different news sources – from partisan media to impartial public service broadcasters – and, by extension, how far they consider alt-left media criticism of all mainstream media to be legitimate or not.

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