

From the rise of alternative media to the (dis)engagement of MSM:

- making sense of the new political news environment and its audiences

Over recent decades, many countries have seen emerging online and social media platforms offering *alternative* political agendas to the mainstream media. In the US and Europe, the rise of right-wing partisan sites has recently received particular attention (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018), but alternative media from both sides of the political spectrum have become prominent sources of news for particular user groups around the world (Zhang 2016). Traditionally, globalization and capitalism have motivated left-wing alternative media (Atton 2002), while right-wing alternative media has particularly been concerned with topics like immigration and Islam (Holt 2019). A common drive for both left-wing and right-wing alternative news providers, however, is media criticism and the need to challenge the communicative authority of professional journalism (Carlson 2017, Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). The acronym ‘MSM’ has become a widely used pejorative term to describe mainstream/established media, but it is often invoked in different ways to criticize how the media represent the interests of elites and perpetuate the political status quo. A starting point for the pre-conference is how the rise in alternative media and a growing discontent with MSM leads to a new political environment, prompting questions about how people are being informed about politics and public affairs, and the consequences of audiences relying on news that is consistent with their own ideological perspectives.

In this one-day ICA pre-conference we will bring together academics, researchers and students from a range of countries within the fields of journalism, media, and communications, in order to critically assess the implications of the rise of alternative media and corresponding (dis)engagement of MSM. As alternative media studies have grown, there have been competing interpretations of what constitutes ‘alternative media’. For the purposes of this pre-conference, we take a broad approach to alternative political media sites as those that define themselves in opposition to the mainstream media or the establishment (Holt, Figenschou and Frischlich 2019). We welcome papers that will explore the phenomenon of alternative media and MSM (dis)engagement, including both theoretical and empirical contributions that focus on issues such as:

Production and professionalization. Research has pointed out how the boundaries between alternative and professional journalism can be difficult to draw, in particular as alternative media professionalize, pointing to the need for theoretical and conceptual developments of how to draw the distinctions (Holt, Figenschou and Frischlich 2019). We invite papers that highlight how the ongoing boundary-work between alternative media and the mainstream media is constructed and negotiated.

Audiences of alternative media. Audiences of alternative media should not automatically be denounced as misguided or passive ‘populist’ media users. Rather, recent studies show that audiences of alternative media can be highly engaged media consumers that to a varying degree express distrust to journalists or the establishment (Noppari, Hiltunen and Ahva 2018; Schulz 2019). However, we still know too little about the gratification and motivation of those

that consume alternative media, and thus encourage papers that explore the ideological, political and affective dimensions of alternative media engagement.

News, information and opinions. Research has demonstrated how the content of alternative media is ideologically driven and often blurs the divide between news and views (Nygaard 2019). That being said, the content on alternative media sites are still strikingly unexplored, in particular when it comes to visual analysis, largescale content analysis and network studies. We welcome papers that systematically examine the content of alternative media, as well as research that compares news agendas with mainstream media.

Cross-national studies and research from the Global South. While the US and Europe has long been the focus of academic and popular debates, the rise of alternative media in other media systems and political cultures have brought new types of ideologically-driven news sites. We invite comparative papers that, for example, compare cross-national differences in the production, content and users of alternative media, along with how the MSM has been characterized across countries. Also we strongly encourage research that focuses on the southern hemisphere and/or non-democratic contexts.

Please send a 300 word abstract to ihlebaek@oslomet.no by the 20th of January 2020

All participants – whether speaking or not – must register and pay fees. Registration costs (including a welcome breakfast, coffee breaks and lunch buffet) are 100 USD for presenters and non-presenters. To register, participants need to go to www.icahdq.org and register online as part of their main ICA conference registration, or as a stand-alone registration. As spaces are limited to 40 participants, priority will be given to those accepted for presentation.

We are in discussion with relevant journals for a special issue on new developments in alternative media and political disengagement.

Organizers:

Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, Oslo Metropolitan University

Tine Ustad Figenschou, Oslo Metropolitan University

Stephen Cushion, Cardiff University

Scott Wright, University of Melbourne

Contact person: Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk: ihlebaek@oslomet.no