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Alternative news on social media in Norway

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Abstract

Alternative news media in Norway have become visible in public debates. Partly because of news sharing on social media. Social media has become an arena for news, information, and public debate, and has also become a place to fight for the news agenda. The present study examines news sharing in social media in Norway and how right-wing alternative news outlets use social media to impact the news agenda. These are small organizations with only a handful of employees, but they have very proactive readers and feature a considerable amount of user-generated content. They are critical of immigration, particularly from Muslim countries, and of the political elite. They mimic traditional media in the way they organize and label their content, but their reporting is more subjective. The present study uses quantitative content analysis to reveal which topics are the most shared on social media, and from which news type of news organizations they come. It also looks at how news sharing differed in the days following a series of terrorist attacks and how the pattern changed during the course of a normal day. This leads to a discussion on participatory journalism and how news sharing can be seen as a part of the public debate.

Keywords

Social media, news sharing, alternative media, public debate, Agenda setting, participatory journalism.

1. Introduction

Alternative news media in Norway have become visible in public debates, partly as a result of news sharing strategies on social media (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2021; Larsson, 2019). Because social media have become an arena for news consumption and debate, it is possible to reach an audience that would normally not engage with them.

Legacy media still produce most of the news content, but there has been a decline in the use of traditional platforms (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018; Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Two out of three Norwegians access news via social media; Facebook is the preferred platform for reading or watching the news, with Twitter in second (Sakariassen, Hovden & Moe, 2017). Young users in particular rely on their social media networks to keep them updated on news and current affairs (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018), and in Norway, social media are the most important source of news for young people (Sakariassen *et al.*, 2017). Hence, news sharing on social media has become an important strategy to gain readership and impact the agenda. News distribution is an essential element of journalism. News sharing on social media is a relatively new form of distribution. The active involvement of the audience in the news agenda borders on participatory journalism. The present study examines news sharing in social media, and how right-wing alternative news media in Norway use social media to impact the agenda.

2. News sharing

News sharing on social media has been defined as “the practice of giving a defined set of people access to news content via social media platforms, as by posting or recommending it” (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015, p. 2). Here, sharing refers to the redistribution of content already published by someone else rather than the production and publication of one’s own content (Larsson, 2016a). It means posting links to online newspapers or other news providers on social media, which will increase the visibility of the content (Karlsen, 2015). Writing a comment or pressing “like” or any other of the reaction symbols will do the same (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017; Karlsen, 2015).

Social media are used to share news online more than, for instance, e-mail and discussion forums (Khuntia, Sun & Yim, 2016; Ma, Lee & Goh, 2014). Facebook and Twitter in particular have become important platforms for news consumption and significant traffic sources for online newspapers (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017; Sakariassen *et al.*, 2017).

This process can be understood as social curation. Social networks –friends, family, and social media contacts– are influencing the information flow by acting as opinion leaders. At the same time, we have algorithmic curation, where data algorithms that are mostly invisible to the user influence the visibility of content (Thorson & Wells, 2016). In other words, what shows up on your feed on Facebook will be influenced by the type of content you and the people in your network have shared.

2.1. Alternative media

Alternative media is an umbrella term for publications produced outside mainstream media, and a common denominator is dissatisfaction with the coverage of certain topics by the latter (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). There have been several debates on what the term really means because it can refer to publications with different ownership structures, topical profiles, and editorial agendas (Cushion, McDowell–Naylor & Thomas, 2021; Mayerhöffer, 2021). A characteristic of alternative media is that they challenge hegemonic perspectives; they are system critical; and they see themselves as a corrective to mainstream media (Cushion *et al.*, 2021; Ihlebæk & Holter, 2021; Mayerhöffer, 2021). They do not operate in accordance with traditional journalism, and they are more welcoming of audience contributions (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Nygaard, 2019). Professionals might be involved, but a large proportion of the material is usually produced by amateurs who write as members of communities, activists, or fans (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

Alternative media cover a wide area of topics, but most relevant to the present study are the so-called hyper-partisan news sites, which have increased in number (especially on the political right; Mayerhöffer, 2021). In Norway, right-wing partisan media have grasped the opportunity to establish themselves as a part of the public debate. They focus heavily on immigration, Islam, and critiques of mainstream media, and they have an active follower base on social media (Haller & Holt, 2019; Ihlebæk & Holter, 2021; Larsson, 2019; Nygaard, 2019). They tend to mimic mainstream media in the way they organize their content, but the writing style is more subjective than descriptive. They argue that immigration has made Norwegian society unsafe, and that the political elite and the justice system are to blame (Nygaard, 2019).

Only 5% of Norwegians read alternative media on a regular basis, but they have attracted a great deal of attention in both traditional and social media (Nygaard, 2019). This is partly due to their audience participation and news dissemination strategies. News articles from alternative media are often amongst the most shared on social media in Norway (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2021; Larsson, 2019; Wold, 2020). The users of right-wing alternative media are very active. They write letters to the editor, they share and discuss news stories on social media, and they contribute to website comment sections where they can post pretty much anything, as long as it is legal (Nygaard, 2019).

Encouraging the audience to share news stories on social media is an important participatory strategy for online newspapers (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017; Krumsvik, 2018). News sharing can be conceptualized as a form of participatory journalism, as distribution is part of the news process. News sharing is not integral to the journalistic process, but it may influence the type of stories journalists and news editors choose to publish and promote.

2.3. *Participatory journalism*

Participatory journalism, audience participation, and citizen journalism have different foci, but they each involve the engagement of users to the journalistic process; they thereby constitute a very important development within digital journalism (Bruns, 2005; Kammer, 2013). Participatory journalism encompasses eye-witness interviews, photo and video submissions, readers' polls, blogging on current events, partaking in online debates, and the production of journalistic content (Feezell, 2017; Ihlebæk & Krumsvik, 2015; Kammer, 2013). Audience participation can strengthen a news organization's brand and generate traffic (Borger *et al.*, 2013). For this reason, some researchers describe engagement in the collection and dissemination of news and information as audience participation (Holt & Karlsson, 2015). It is a matter of debate whether news sharing on social media should be considered as a form of participatory journalism, so the present study does not provide a definitive answer.

3. Theoretical concepts and previous research

Interest groups, stakeholders, and others have often tried to change the news agenda by working through organizations. A different way to impact the agenda is to share news on social media and change the way it is perceived. Highly visible stories on social media platforms may appear to be more important to users than those that are less visible.

3.1. *Incidental news reading and confirmation bias*

People seem to have a preference for messages that fit their existing attitudes, exhibit a confirmation bias when encountering news, and filter content through perceived ideological congruence (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). This has led to concerns that social media conduct a one-sided news diet, but at the same time, one out of four social media users in Norway say they often find news on social media from news providers they do not ordinarily use (Sakariassen *et al.*, 2017). Several studies have shown that many social media users stumble upon news while they are doing something else (Bode, 2016; Boulianne, 2016; DeSilver, 2014; Karlsen, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Sakariassen *et al.*, 2017). This implies that such individuals are not actively looking for news and political information (Bode, 2016; Boulianne, 2016) and that news sharing on social media might be more prevalent than the share figures indicate (Karlsen, 2015). Some researchers have suggested that there is a higher chance that people will read a news article if it has been recommended by someone they know or who is in their network (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Näsi, 2015). The effect this may have is not yet known.

3.2. *Setting the agenda on social media*

Walter Lippman wrote about the agenda-setting function of media as early as 1922. His views were later elaborated upon by Bernard Cohen (1963), who stated that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about," the implication being that the world looks different to different people depending on what newspapers they read. The agenda-setting function of the media was formulated at a time when a relatively small number of media outlets reached a rather broad public (Feezell, 2017). Does it still apply in a world in which several smaller media outlets reach a fragmented audience?

News sharing on social media might constitute a threat to the traditional agenda-setting function of news media, creating individualized agendas where users get their news updates

from friends, families, and other contacts (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Jensen, 2016; McCombs, 2005). Opinion leaders in social networks can assume the role of news editors by deciding which content is important, interesting, or entertaining enough to be distributed or recommended as part of a two step-flow (Hermida *et al.*, 2012); the second step takes place on social media, where the agenda is shaped.

3.3. *The two-step flow of communication*

News sharing on social media can be conceptualized as a digital version of the two-step flow of communication. The first step is that news media publishes news stories, and in the second step, opinion leaders interpret and disseminate them through their network (Karlsen, 2015; Singer, 2014).

The two-step theory was formulated by Katz and Lazarsfeld in their study of the presidential election campaign in the United States in 1940. They found that electoral media campaigns rarely influenced voters directly and that personal communication had more impact. According to their theory, some people pay closer attention to media coverage than others, and if they have a certain expertise or status, they function as sources and opinion leaders for others (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The two-step theory of communication was later developed into a multi-step theory, but the basic assumption was the same: that media messages are usually transmitted to the public through opinion leaders.

The two-step theory is relevant for news sharing on social media in terms of how opinion leaders choose news stories to interpret and forward to their network as part of a more personal communication. Many of the people who are most active in news sharing on social media regard themselves as opinion leaders, and they seek recognition and status by calling attention to their own opinions (Kümpel *et al.*, 2015; Ma *et al.*, 2014). In this way, the two-step flow of communication can increase the audience for a news story, and opinion leaders can influence the less attentive citizens (Feezell, 2017; Karlsen, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Singer, 2014).

A similar way to conceptualize news sharing is as a continuation of the gate-keeper function, which refers to the power news editors and other key players have in deciding what news deserves to be published (Bruns, 2016; Kammer, 2013). Gate-watchers are individuals who decide what news stories deserve to be redistributed through social media and other channels (Bruns, 2005, 2016; Singer, 2014). As with the two-step model, gate-watching refers to the way news organizations decide what stories get published and promoted, but the audience can give their evaluation on which ones are given the greatest visibility through news sharing on social media (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Tandoc, Jenkins & Craft, 2019) where gate-watchers are particularly active.

3.4. *Power users as opinion leaders*

Some social media users are more active in news sharing than others. The majority of social media users in Norway rarely share news or other content (Brandtzæg, 2012). This is reflected in several studies from other countries as well, where only small groups of the news audience often share news on social media (Barnidge, 2015; Bruns, 2016; Feezell, 2017; Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017; Kammer, 2013; Nielsen & Schröder, 2014; Singer, 2014). It has been estimated that approximately 20–30% of social media users are responsible for a large proportion of the content on social media (Barnidge, 2015). They have been dubbed power users, and are perceived, both by themselves and by their network contacts, as opinion leaders and as particularly knowledgeable and up to date on certain topics (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). So, it matters what they share.

3.5. Research on news sharing

The results of research on news sharing in social media point in different directions. Content analysis (Wadbring & Ödmark, 2016) of the most shared news stories in Sweden showed that they followed traditional news values, but the content tended to be more positive than the front-page stories in the paper editions. Politics was one of the most shared topics, whereas crime and accidents dominated the front pages. Funny and parodic stories were also popular, with the most shared story featuring a report that beer makes drinkers smarter. A Norwegian study showed that stories on immigration, Islam, and vaccines were often shared and that Norwegians are likely to share engaging, provocative, or humorous stories (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017). Different news organizations offered different types of content. The biggest tabloid in Norway, *VG*, shared a large number of stories on immigration, the Middle East, and football on its Twitter feed. The most shared stories from the commercial TV station TV2's online newspaper focused on celebrities or featured clickbait headlines such as "you won't believe what happened next." The most shared story concerned a scientific breakthrough in cancer research (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017).

The most shared news stories on social media in Norway are conventional in terms of topic, genre, and sources, notwithstanding the contribution of a high proportion of ordinary people. Domestic politics was the most shared topic; few news articles concerned other countries. Social issues and culture were also popular categories, but stories on crime, sport, and the weather were rarely shared. The larger news organizations were the most prominent disseminators, though alternative media also made their mark (Wold, 2020).

Studies from other countries vary in their findings. In some cases, there was no difference between soft and hard news in terms of sharing and liking and between objective news and partisan news (Ksiazek, Peer & Lessard, 2016). A United States study of news sharing showed that there were more stories on art and culture on Facebook, while Twitter featured a larger proportion of stories on economic, technological, and national news (Bastos, 2015). Both Twitter and Facebook users gave hard news a higher priority than the news services, and stories on sport were rarely shared. Stories on art, science and technology, and opinion pieces were often shared (Bastos, 2015). A study of BBC news showed that politics, accidents, disasters, and crime items were frequently shared, while social welfare, science, and technology items were not (Bright, 2016).

4. Research questions

The present study focuses on news sharing of both traditional media and alternative media, and how patterns develop through the course of the day. Earlier research has shown that certain events, such as electoral campaigns, can have an impact on the way audiences interact with the news (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). The present study examines how news sharing differs in the days following a terrorist attack compared with normal weeks. The three research questions are:

RQ1. Which news topics are most shared on social media, and from which type of news organization?

RQ2. How do news share patterns on social media change during the course of the day?

RQ3. How do news sharing patterns on social media change in the days following a high-profile terrorist attack?

The study also discusses alternative media as a form of participatory journalism and how news sharing can be seen as part of the public debate. The recent growth of news sharing on social media and the rise of alternative outlets are likely to continue, both in Norway and in other countries. Such phenomena, and their effect on the information flow and the democratic processes in particular, are worthy of further discussion. It is probable that social media will become more important as an arena for news, information, and debate. These are

important elements in a democracy, so it is important to research the impact social media can have on them.

5. Method

Previous content analyses of news sharing have focused on stories from traditional news organizations (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2017). The present study includes every type of online news sites, such as local newspapers, websites of political parties, blogs, and alternative news media. Sharing numbers on social media was the only selection criteria, not commenting, liking, or any other form of audience engagement. The online service Storyboard was used to collect the data material. Storyboard provides statistics on news sharing on social media in Norway. Three different data sets were collected:

Dataset 1: The 20 most shared items for 12 selected weeks in 2017, one week for every month; a total of 240 items. An early week was selected for one month, a late or a middle week for the next month, and so on. Weeks with big events or happenings, such as Christmas and Constitution Day, were avoided. Weeks with high profile acts of terrorism were also avoided and collected in a separate data set to be analysed separately.

Dataset 2: The 20 most shared stories in the three days after five different terrorist attacks that received a great deal of media coverage in Norway in 2017: Westminster Bridge, London in March; Stockholm in April; Manchester Arena in May; London Bridge in June; and Las Ramblas, Barcelona, in August. A total of 100 stories.

Dataset 3: The 20 most shared news articles in social media by noon on 14 randomly selected days in 2018; a total of 280 items. The reason for this selection was that I had the impression that the smaller news services often were very visible on social media in the morning only to be surpassed by the large news providers later on in the day, so I wanted to check whether this was indeed the case.

5.1. Coding process

The URLs of each item were stored to facilitate backtracking. They were also stored as PDF files and printed to ease the coding process. The articles were coded according to the type of publication; the topic of the article; the genre; and the sources and pictures that were used. The topic describes the main theme of the article. The categorization scheme was taken from Kalsnes and Larsson (2017) who, following Sjøvaag, Moe and Stavelin (2012), analysed article topics according to nine main categories:

1. Politics (including war and terrorism, demonstrations, and public administration)
2. Economy (including personal economy, business, finance, and markets)
3. Crime (including murders, violence, trafficking, police issues, and trials)
4. Social issues (including work, health and education, environmental issues, consumer, construction, animal welfare, and traffic issues)
5. Culture (including the arts, media, royalty, curiosities, leisure, and popular culture)
6. Sport
7. Accidents
8. Weather
9. Science and technology issues

The articles were also coded to indicate whether they referred to domestic or foreign news, immigration, Islam, or terror. We did not code information about who shared the articles, whether the articles had been given a prominent place in an online newspaper, or their publishing date or time of day because the manifest content of the items was being examined, not their latent or implied content. The purpose of this kind of quantitative content analysis is to give an objective and systematic description of observable content (Schwarz & Hammarlund, 2016).

The author of the present study coded the material. A trained assistant coded randomly selected parts of the material: two weeks from Dataset 1 (17%); one of the attacks from Dataset 2 (20%); and two days from Dataset 3 (14%). Holsti's method, as described in Messner and Distaso (2008), was used to evaluate the intercoder reliability. The coding similarity for the categories were 100% for the type of publication; 94% for the topic; and 98% for immigration/Islam. This is within the parameters for good intercoder reliability.

A weakness with this method is that it does not take into account the coding similarity that would in any case have arisen by chance, so the reliability is exaggerated. Holsti's method was considered to be a good measure of intercoder reliability for the present study because there were only two coders involved, and the second coder was not involved in the development of the coding key (to avoid any shared preconceptions of how the material should be interpreted). As was stated above, the manifest meaning of the cases was coded, not the latent meaning, and the low number of coding in the "other" categories suggested that the categories were clear and exhaustive.

6. Results

The three research questions (see p. 6) were connected, so they will be addressed simultaneously. Table 1 shows the percentage of the most shared news stories according to the type of media organization. The first column shows the percentage for the year 2017, Column 2 shows the percentage in the days after a high-profile terrorist attack, and Column 3 shows the percentage at noon on randomly selected days.

Table 1. Types of publication (%age).

Publication	2017	After terror	Noon
National news services	62	62	42
Regional and local news services	11	11	8
Entertainment or viral sites	10	10	9
Online native newspapers	7	7	9
NGOs and political party websites	5	5	3
Right-wing alternative news sites	3	3	29
Left-wing alternative news sites	0	0	0
Blogs	2	2	0
Total	100	100	100
	N: 240	N: 100	N: 280

Source: Own elaboration.

The majority of the news stories are from national news services, with viral sites in second place. It is not surprising that the largest news services with the biggest audience provide the largest number of news-sharing stories. The category "Online native newspapers" category includes legacy news services that started as online newspapers and whose website is their primary publishing platform, whereas the other legacy news services originated as paper editions or TV stations.

The category "Viral sites" does not include traditional news media, but websites that publish stories that are tailor-made to go viral. They publish a mix of popular science, satire, and human-interest stories, for example, a touching story about a nurse who revolutionized the food service at a retirement centre (*Dagens Nytt/Daily News*), a story that exists in various versions, or popularised versions of sensational and amusing scientific discoveries where it is impossible to find the actual scientific projects they claim to be referring to. For instance, the

story “Unbelievable: These berries kill cancer” was published on Viraltube.no. The trustworthiness of these stories is questionable at best; they resemble digital versions of urban myths or canards.

The alternative news sites represented in this table are the right-wing-orientated Resett (established in August 2017), Document, and Human Right Service (HRS). They offer only 3% of the most shared news stories in 2017 as a whole and in the days after a terrorist attack, but they are significantly higher on the list of most shared stories by noon, with 29%. In several of the selected weeks, these sites were in the top 10 list of news sharing in total, but only a few made it to the top list of 2017. This implies that many of their published news stories are shared to a certain degree, and this adds up to a considerable volume overall.

Table 2 shows the most shared topics in 2017 as a whole, in the days after a high-profile terrorist attack, and at noon on randomly selected days. Politics, social issues, and culture are the three largest categories. It is worth noting that there are few articles on sports, accidents, crime, and the weather, which are otherwise popular news categories. Politics news stories are less shared after a terror attack, while stories on crime are significantly more shared in the days after a terror attack and at noon.

Table 2. Topic (%age).

Topic	2017	After Terror	Noon
Politics	40	34	40
Social issues	27	30	27
Culture	17	16	12
Crime	3	11	10
Sports	3	6	7
Weather	2	3	3
Accidents	0	0	0.5
Economy	3	0	0.5
Science and tech.	5	0	0
Total	100	100	100
	N: 240	N: 100	N: 280

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3 shows the percentage of the most shared news articles. They concern immigration, Islam, terrorism, and events in foreign countries, regardless of the topic or the genre of the article.

Table 3. Immigration and Islam (%age).

	2017	After Terror	Noon
Immigration	17	9	34
Foreign countries	1	7	20
Terrorism	0	12	1
Islam	9	8	25
	N: 240	N: 100	N: 280

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3 shows the percentage of articles that referred to immigration, Islam, terrorism and events in foreign countries. Nearly all the stories originated from Norway. All the articles in

the politics category in 2017 dealt with domestic politics, not international affairs or events in other countries. There was a slight increase in articles referring to foreign countries in the days after a terrorist attack, but the difference was way higher for the articles shared at noon, as 20% of them referred to foreign events. For 2017 as a whole, 17% of the articles dealt with immigration. Most were in the politics category. In the days after a terror attack, only 7% of the articles referred to immigration. Articles on immigration were shared less in the days after a terror attack. At noon on randomly selected days, the number was considerably higher, at 34%.

7. Discussion

Politics, social issues, and culture are the three largest categories for news sharing on social media. Articles on sports, accidents, and the weather are rarely shared. In the days after a terrorist attack, fewer politics stories are shared, and significantly more crime stories. The latter are shared more at noon. Nearly all of the most shared news stories originate from Norway. In the days after a terrorist attack, there are some articles on issues arising in other countries, the percentage of which is 20% at noon.

Articles on immigration are often shared on social media, particularly at noon, when 34% of the most shared articles deal with immigration, compared with 17% for 2017 as a whole, and 7% in the days after a terrorist attack. Most of these articles are in the politics category. Articles on Islam also have a significantly higher percentage of shares at noon. This is partly because articles on immigration often refer to Islam, and they are particularly popular amongst the readers of alternative news sites.

The largest news media organizations dominate social media, but alternative media and viral sites also make their mark in the digital news world. Viral sites succeed through their less trustworthy but often entertaining human-interest stories and so-called science reports, while alternative news sites gain social media visibility by focusing on anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and anti-elite reporting. At noon on randomly selected days, they have 29% of the most shared news stories on social media. Alternative news sites have a considerable social media visibility, especially considering their small size. This suggests that they are able to have at least some impact on the news agenda on social media, though this is partly the result of audience participation.

Visibility on social media is no guarantee of readership, but it is one way to impact the news agenda, particularly when social media users in Norway claim that they often read news from smaller outlets (Sakariassen *et al.*, 2017). This makes it possible for the latter to reach a new audience. It is also a contemporary way for opinion leaders to perform the traditional two-step function and tell people what to think. Some researchers have dubbed this a gate-watching function, where individuals decide which of the published news stories deserve a second airing (i.e., on social media platforms).

Most news readers show little interest in commenting on news sites or creating news content. However, a small group of so-called power users are very proactive in using social media to address topics they think are deserving of public attention (Barnidge *et al.*, 2018; Brandtzaeg, Heim & Karahasanovic, 2011). Similarly, the comments sections of online newspapers were usually dominated by a small number of readers. The lack of broader representation is one reason why many newspapers have shut them down (Almgren & Olsson, 2016; Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Larsson, 2016b). But public debate lives on, for instance on social media. Engaged debaters use Facebook and Twitter (and blogs to some extent) to write about and comment on issues they claim are underreported by legacy media.

Right-wing alternative media thrive in this online environment. They have a high degree of audience participation. Readers write letters to the editor and participate in lively comments sections. They are also engaged in actual news production to the point where it

often is difficult to distinguish editorial content from user-generated content. In Norway, the previously referred to websites Resett, Document, and HRS have secured a place in the public debate by focusing heavily on anti-immigration and anti-Islam content. For instance, HRS encourages its readers to submit photos that document what they regard as the “Islamisation” of Norway.

Should this be understood as participatory journalism? There is some debate whether the right-wing alternative media should be understood as journalism at all because they are driven by ideology do not abide by the traditional journalistic standards. But in some sense, all journalism is ideology-driven in that it seeks to address important issues in society. Also, quality is not inherent in the concept of journalism, though there seems to be a tendency to see journalism as an honourable pursuit and participatory journalism in particular as morally virtuous. Alternative media are also driven by the notion idea that they have to address important topics they believe go underreported by legacy media, and they often discuss subjects that are not worthy of social and cultural status –though they also tend to present these issues in a manner that is not widely respected.

There is widespread agreement amongst practitioners and researchers that audience participation is one of the most important developments in journalism (Bruns, 2005, 2016; Kammer, 2013). However, journalists and news organizations have mixed attitudes. Many of the latter have shown interest in audience participation, but only when it fits their traditional model and their professionally generated content; active audience involvement in the production of news content is not generally welcomed (Almgren & Olsson, 2016; Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Karlsson *et al.*, 2015).

Researchers have argued that audience participation generates news that does not fit into the logic of traditional media. It can boost civic engagement in public discourse, give more power to ordinary people, and make news production a collaborative process (Bruns, 2016; Holt & Karlsson, 2015; Pantti & Bakker, 2009). All these traits seem to be characteristic of the right-wing alternative media; there seems to be a close proximity between editors and the audience, who are very engaged and active in submitting material, posting in comments sections, and sharing on social media. Such outlets also give space to non-traditional sources that are rarely quoted in traditional news media.

8. Closing remarks

Do we detect the emergence of an alternative public debate? Social media have not taken over as the main news platform; legacy media still attract the largest audience. However, they are particularly popular as a news source for young people (Sakariassen *et al.*, 2017), so it is reasonable to assume that they will become significant. News, information, and debate are important for democracy, so it is important to study how social media influence them. Because news consumption increasingly takes place on social media, news sharing has become popular. The traditional agenda-setting function of news media is being challenged; the most active social media users are now able to create an alternative news agenda by sharing stories.

Are we at the early stages of a development where the traditional news services can no longer rely on securing a readership through their own platforms and becoming more or less dependent on social media? If so, what will the consequences be? It is also unclear how much power online opinion leaders actually have. As has been noted, legacy media still predominate (even on social media), and their news stories reach the biggest audiences.

A large part of the development and testing of knowledge and technology takes place in the media newsrooms, but it is often the job of the researchers to identify and investigate the potential positive or negative consequences of this. A weakness of such binary thinking is its underlying assumption: that it is easy to classify potential outcomes as unambiguously positive or negative (Balmer *et al.*, 2015). Knowledge of how social media works can help to

strengthen democracy or to propagandize. Certainly, the potential negative outcomes of social media on democratic processes must be addressed.

9. Limitations

The present study is limited in scope because it focuses on only a fraction of the news material shared on social media. The data mostly comprise single stories, and these are not entirely representative. The data and the analysis do not address the question of how news sharing in social media might affect the readership of a news article or how external factors might affect visibility and shareability. For instance, most online newspapers have lists or ratings that display the most read or most shared articles, which can affect the sharing process (Almgren & Olsson, 2016; Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Kumpel *et al.*, 2015; Singer, 2014). Finally, content analysis cannot explain why the audience has chosen to share particular articles, for example, whether it was the overall content, parts of it, or the responses in the comments section.

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