

Who are the users of Danish alternative media?

A survey study on the prevalence of alternative news use in Denmark and profiles of the users

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ABSTRACT

Nordic countries have experienced an upsurge of partisan alternative media positioning themselves as correctives of the mainstream, but only little is known about how many and who uses them. Building on original survey data from a representative sample of the adult Danish population ($n = 2,455$), this article presents the first study of the use of left-wing and right-wing alternative media in Denmark. Findings show that users are generally more likely to be older, male, and live in disadvantaged parts of the country, but that alternative media appeal across all levels of education and urban–rural divides. Results also show positive associations with use of national dailies and high political interest. Furthermore, use of alternative media is associated with taking ideological positions further to the left or right. Yet, the findings do not indicate that users generally take extreme positions. This study thus adds considerable nuance to the picture of alternative news users and also finds that alternative media with different degrees of alternativeness attract similar users.

KEYWORDS: left-wing and right-wing alternative media, alternative news users, partisan media, degrees of alternativeness, Danish media system

Introduction and aims

Over the past decade, alternative media have increased in numbers across the Nordic countries. They position themselves as correctives of mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019), whose credibility they often blatantly attack (e.g., Figschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Mayerhöffer, 2021), and disseminate highly partisan content in pursuit of their own (sometimes radical) ideological or party-political agendas (e.g., Brems, 2022; Nygaard, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019). At the same time, some of them mimic a neutral style (Klawier et al., 2022; Nygaard, 2019) associated with professional journalism, making it more difficult to clearly distinguish them from their mainstream counterparts. This upsurge of alternative media has been enabled by digital development where any amateur or political activist can launch their own news site (Leung & Lee, 2014), and conversely, citizens can pick and choose the news content they want and wall themselves off from the rest (Helberger & Wojcieszak, 2018). Accordingly, there has been a similar upsurge in concerns that alternative media might fuel political extremity (Heft et al., 2020) and “fears about alternative media users inhabiting so-called filter bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce rather than challenge their ideological convictions” (Cushion, 2023: 9). Consequentially, alternative news users have stereotypically been portrayed as “conspiracy-loons with insufficient media literacy or even prone for radicalization” (Schwarzenegger 2021: 107; see also Noppari et al., 2019).

Recent scholarship has, however, painted a more nuanced picture of alternative news users. Survey studies suggest that they do not turn their backs on mainstream news (Andersen et al., 2021; Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Schulz, 2021), and qualitative interview studies challenge the notion of them lacking media literacy (Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger, 2021). Yet, studies on alternative news users are still limited in number, and existing evidence on associations between alternative news use and level of education, political interest, and ideological orientation points in different directions (Andersen et al., 2021; Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Bach, 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Newman et al., 2018; Schulze, 2020). This calls for more research into what characterises the users of alternative media in the Nordic countries as well as how large the audiences are that they reach, especially in the Danish case, where no such user studies are currently available. Moreover, most existing scholarship has focused on users of right-wing alternative media or treated alternative news users as one group, leaving differences between users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media, and alternative media with different degrees of alternativeness, more or less unexplored. Finally, despite limited empirical support for the existence of filter bubbles and echo chambers (Arguedas et al., 2022), alternative media continue to be associated with such concerns in public discourse (Cushion, 2023: 131). This demonstrates the need for solid and sober research qualification of public debate on the potential negative implications of the spread and use of alternative media.

Against this backdrop, I explore how widespread the use of a broad left-to-right spectrum of Danish alternative media is among the adult Danish population and what characterises their users in terms of sociodemographic traits, political interest, ideological orientation, and mainstream news use. To my knowledge, this is the first study to explore these questions in a Danish context. In doing so, I aim to further understanding of what characterises the parts of the population who are attracted by (different) alternative media and contribute to ongoing scholarly – and not least public – debate on potential negative impacts associated with the use hereof.

Alternative media and their users in Nordic countries

How alternative media should be defined continues to be debated. Originally, the term was used to denote mainly left-wing outlets whose promotion of progressive agendas, capitalist critique, and non-commercial production structures were generally considered democratic assets (e.g., Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Rauch, 2019). More recently, however, the term has been used for denoting (predominantly right-wing) online news sites, and attention has turned to the potential democratic perils associated with their explicit partisanship and criticism of the media and political mainstream (for a review of this development, see Holt, 2020). This has led some to argue that the term alternative media should be reserved for news outlets possessing the traits originally associated with it (Rae, 2021).

In this article, I consider alternative media an umbrella term and adopt the non-normative definition proposed by Holt and colleagues (2019). Following this, alternative media represent “a proclaimed and/or (*self-*) *perceived corrective*, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system [emphasis original]” (Holt et al., 2019: 862). From this perspective, the defining trait of alternative media is their *proclaimed* position as correctives of the media mainstream, and the term can be applied to left-wing as well as right-wing cases pursuing different (more or less radical) ideological goals. Moreover, this definition considers the mainstream–alternative schism as a spectrum rather than binary categories (see also Kenix, 2011). Thus, any news outlet can be more or less alternative on different parameters, for example, their degree of deviation from professional journalistic norms (Holt et al., 2019).

Turning to the empirical traits of Nordic alternative media, in a study on six right-wing Norwegian alternative media, Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019) found that they criticise mainstream media for being politically biased, “politically correct”, distanced from the people, and for omitting immigration problems from coverage. Similar criticism was identified in five Danish right-wing alternative media (Mayerhöffer, 2021). Content analyses of right-wing German, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish alternative media have revealed that they advocate their own, often immigration-critical, agendas (e.g., Mayerhöffer, 2021; Nygaard, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019) and attack political opponents (Mayerhöffer &

Schwartz, 2020). Although these are characteristics that (right-wing) alternative media hold in common, recent studies suggest they are a heterogeneous group. For instance, some alternative media “radicalise” and openly advocate their partisanship, while others “normalise” by appearing as conventional news sites (Heft et al., 2020) and adopt a neutral style resembling traditional news (Klawier et al., 2022; Nygaard, 2019).

As this brief review indicates, much research positioned within the more recent strand of alternative media scholarship has focused on right-wing cases. However, studies including left-wing cases have found that they, too, can be characterised by mainstream media criticism and explicit partisanship (e.g., Brems, 2022, 2023; Cushion et al., 2021; McDowell-Naylor et al., 2023). Exemplifying this, Freudenthaler and Wessler (2022) found cases of both left-wing and right-wing German-language alternative media that came close to a detached style of reporting, or were corrosive and delegitimised their political opponents, for example, by portraying them as threats to German culture (right-wing outlets) or as racists (one left-wing outlet). These differences between alternative media, both regarding their ideological agendas and degrees of deviation from professional journalistic norms, raise the interesting question of whether they also attract different users (elaborated on below).

While a growing body of literature has shed light on the content that alternative media disseminate, we have only limited knowledge about how big the audiences are that their content reaches. A secondary analysis of data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* found that between 7 and 9 per cent of the populations in Finland, Austria, and Germany use right-wing alternative media and that 22 per cent do so in Sweden (Schulze, 2020). Other studies have arrived at estimates of 16 per cent in Sweden (Andersen et al., 2021) and between 7 and 28 per cent in Germany (Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Bach, 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021). The differences should be viewed in light of the different measurements employed for tapping alternative news use (for an overview, see Appendix A).

Less is known about the prevalence of alternative news use in Denmark. In terms of supply, the Danish alternative media ecology is not as developed as that of Sweden and Germany (Heft et al., 2020). Based on web page rankings (Heft et al., 2020) and traffic to alternative media’s web pages, use hereof has been characterised as a niche phenomenon, with only the right-wing outlet *Den Korte Avis* having traffic comparable to that of established mainstream niche newspapers (Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021). In the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, only *Den Korte Avis* is included, and data from recent years show that 2–6 per cent of Danes report using this outlet (Schröder et al., 2018, 2021). One survey study using an open-ended question where respondents could name up to three alternative news sources they used arrived at a much higher estimate of 16 per cent of the population using alternative media (Steppat et al., 2021). This leads to the following research question:

RQ1. How widespread is the use of Danish alternative media among the adult Danish population?

Recent studies suggest that users of alternative media in Germany and Sweden are more likely to be male and belong to the younger parts of the population (Andersen et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021). In Sweden, alternative news orientation was found to be related to lower levels of education (Andersen et al., 2021), whereas frequent alternative news use was related to higher levels of education in Germany (Müller & Schulz, 2021). Any relationship with place of residence has not yet been investigated. In this regard, an interesting question is whether alternative news use is related to urban–rural divides, which has been identified as a new political cleavage (Hansen & Hjorth, 2021). This leads to the following research question:

RQ2. What sociodemographic traits characterise users of Danish alternative media with regards to 1) gender, 2) age, 3) level of education, and 4) place of residence?

The relationship between alternative news use and political interest is also unclear. One study found a positive relationship between political interest and use of right-wing alternative media (Schulze, 2020), while another study found no significant relationship (Müller & Schulz, 2021). Tracking studies from Germany have also led to mixed conclusions (Müller & Bach, 2021). Regarding ideological orientation, evidence also points in different directions. Data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* suggest that users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media ideologically lean to the left and right, respectively (Newman et al., 2018). Schulze (2020) found that immigration-critical attitudes, but not right-wing ideological orientation, related to use of right-wing alternative media. Similarly, other studies have found a positive relationship with populist vote casting and holding populist attitudes (Müller & Bach, 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021), but not with ideological orientation or extremism measured as fringe ideological orientation (Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Schulz, 2021). This leads to the following research question:

RQ3. What is the relationship between alternative news use and 1) political interest, and 2) ideological orientation?

Parallel to alternative media’s criticism of mainstream media, using alternative media (and other non-mainstream news sources, such as political talk radio) is related to lower levels of trust in mainstream media (e.g., Andersen et al., 2021; Schulze, 2020; Tsfati & Capella, 2003). Low levels of trust in mainstream media have been assumed to lead to less consumption hereof (e.g., Tsfati & Capella, 2003), and the rise of alternative media has been accompanied by concerns that their users’ disenchantment with mainstream media might result in them turning their backs on mainstream news (Cushion, 2023). However, recent findings suggest that alternative media users in Germany and Sweden generally do not shy away from mainstream media, and some studies even find a positive

association between alternative and mainstream news use (e.g., Andersen et al., 2021, 2022; Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Schulz, 2021). In her study, Schulze (2020) found that while alternative media use is related to lower levels of trust in legacy and public service news media, the users have higher levels of trust in tabloids. This gives reason to distinguish between these types of news media when assessing the relationship between alternative and mainstream news use, resulting in the final research question:

RQ4. What is the relationship between alternative news use and use of
1) public service, 2) national dailies, and 3) tabloid news?

While Müller and Schulz (2021) distinguished between occasional and frequent use of alternative media, most previous studies have focused only on the use of right-wing alternative media (Schulze, 2020) or treated alternative news users as one group (Andersen et al., 2021; Müller & Bach, 2021). Consequently, differences between users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media, and alternative media with different degrees of alternativeness, remain largely unexplored. As exceptions, Rauch (2019), in a re-analysis of US survey data from 2009, distinguished between Democrats and Republicans self-identifying as alternative media users and found differences in their criticism of mainstream media; and Theorin and Strömbäck (2020) investigated effects of exposure to one left-wing and one right-wing alternative media outlet on immigration perceptions and attitudes. However, neither of these studies investigated whether the users of different alternative media have different characteristics with respect to the variables outlined above. As a substantial contribution to the existing literature, this article distinguishes between left-wing, right-wing, and cross-cutting alternative news use as well as between use of alternative media with different degrees of alternativeness (see categorisation below).

The Danish case and selection of alternative media

Like in the other Nordic countries, the Danish media system is characterised by high levels of trust (Schrøder et al., 2018, 2021) and a strong tradition of public service media (Syvertsen et al., 2014) offering politically balanced news (Albæk et al., 2010, 2015). While the party-press waned during the twentieth century, national dailies still have ideological leanings, which, to some extent, are mirrored in their news coverage (Hjarvard, 2010). In other words, neutral as well as ideologically oriented news is already available in the mainstream media system. Setting Denmark apart from the other Nordic countries, the Danish public debate and parliamentary system are considered more open to extreme points of view, especially compared to Sweden (Heft et al., 2020). Over the past two decades, the immigration-critical Danish People's Party has acted as a support party for different centre-right governments and has thus been treated as a legitimate political partner. Furthermore, public debate in mainstream media is considered open to immigration-critical points of view, creating what has been labelled a harsh tone in the immigration debate (Heft et al., 2020). In contrast,

Swedish public debate was long considered to be less open to immigration-critical points of view (Heft et al., 2020), and the present centre-right government is the first Swedish government that collaborates with the (right-wing populist) Sweden Democrats. Altogether, these characteristics of the Danish media–political context make Denmark a least likely case for alternative media to find an audience, as also argued by Heft and colleagues (2020). This makes Denmark a particularly interesting context for studying the prevalence of alternative news use and what characterises the users.

Blach-Ørsten and Mayerhöffer (2021) have provided a broad overview of the alternative media landscape in Denmark, and they identify ten cases (three left-wing and seven right-wing) of what they term “hyperpartisan” alternative media. As I aim to investigate how widespread the use of alternative media is in Denmark, all these outlets were included in the survey. Additionally, two other right-wing outlets that were considered alternative media in previous studies (Brems, 2022, 2023) were included, resulting in a total of twelve alternative media (see Table 1). Thus, the survey aims to cover all relevant cases of Danish alternative media.

In a recent study, I explored the structure and content of the same twelve Danish alternative media and found considerable differences in the extent to which they adopt or deviate from a neutral journalistic style, how radical the ideological agendas are that they advocate, and the amount and vehemence of the explicit media and political criticism they voice (Brems, 2023). Though not providing a formal classification of the twelve outlets into different types, the results showed that three outlets consistently stood out from the rest: *Den Korte Avis*, *Document*, and *NewSpeak*. These outlets voiced the most severe explicit media criticism and radical distrust in politicians, deviated starkly from a neutral journalistic style, and advocated more radical right-wing ideological agendas, mirrored, for instance, in the use of degradation of particularly Muslim immigrants. The rest of the investigated outlets also advocated in favour of left-wing or right-wing agendas, for example, pro-climate or anti-immigration, but did so by way of, for example, giving high priority to these topics or using direct commentary. While varying in degree of deviation from a neutral journalistic style and media and political criticism, all these outlets refrained from use of degradation and severe or radical criticism of the media and political mainstream. Based on these insights, I distinguish between alternative media that have a high degree of alternativeness (the three formerly mentioned outlets) and alternative media that have a low/moderate degree of alternativeness (the rest of the outlets), summed up in Table 1. This notion of a higher degree of alternativeness should be understood as capturing the traits outlined above, that is, a more critical opposition to the media and political mainstream, greater distance from professional journalistic norms, and advocacy of more radical ideological agendas. Notably, all three outlets with a high degree of alternativeness are right-wing, while the other group contains both left-wing and right-wing outlets.

TABLE 1 Classification of Danish alternative media

	Left-wing	Right-wing	
High degree of alternativeness		Den Korte Avis	
		Document	
		NewSpeek	
Low or moderate degree of alternativeness	Konfront	180Grader	
	Netavisen Pio	24NYT	
	Solidaritet		ditOverblik
			Folkets Avis
			Indblik
			Kontrast

Comments: *Folkets Avis* and *Konfront* were not included in the content analysis in Brems, 2023. In this study, they are grouped together with the alternative media with a low or moderate degree of alternativeness. If the respondents who were coded as users of alternative media based on use of *Folkets Avis* and *Konfront* are dropped from the analysis ($n = 39$), this makes no substantial differences to the results.

Source: based on findings from Brems, 2023

Method and data

Survey sample

Respondents were sampled among YouGov's panel in Denmark using quotas to match the adult Danish population (18+) in terms of age, gender, level of education, and place of residence. Data was collected 17 January–7 February 2023, representing a normal period with no elections coming up. Invitations to participate were sent via e-mail to 3,116 respondents, out of whom 2,735 completed the survey (87.8%). Following previous studies (e.g., Frischlich et al., 2022), 280 respondents who spent less than four minutes completing the questionnaire (just below half of the median time spent by the remainder of respondents) were excluded, as this was deemed too fast for meaningful participation. This resulted in a final sample of 2,455 (properties of the sample are available in Appendix B).

Measurements

The sociodemographic variables included in the analysis are gender, age, level of education, and place of residence. Gender was measured as a binary variable with all respondents identifying as male or female. Age was measured using a categorical variable with five age categories: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and 60+. Level of education was measured by the respondents' highest level of education based on which respondents were coded into six education categories (see Appendix B). Place of residence was measured at municipality level and municipalities were classified as outer (1), rural (2), middle-range (3), or city (4) municipalities based on Kristensen and colleagues' (2007) classification.

Political interest was measured using the following item: “Would you say that you are very interested in politics (1), somewhat interested (2), only a little interested (3), or not at all interested (4) in politics?” The variable was treated as categorical and “do not wish to answer” ($n = 22$) responses were coded as a separate category to keep respondents with missing values on the item in the analysis. Ideological orientation was measured as left–right self-placement using the following item: “In politics, people often talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” The scale ranged from 0 (most left-wing) to 10 (most right-wing). Respondents with missing values on this item were excluded from the parts of the analysis where this variable was used. Both of these items (political interest, ideological orientation) were adopted from the National Danish Election Survey (Hansen & Stubager, 2020).

Furthermore, alternative and mainstream news use was measured using the list-frequency technique (Andersen et al., 2016), which has also been employed in previous studies on alternative news use (e.g., Müller & Schulz, 2021). The item used was “People get news from many different sources. How many days during the past week have you watched, read, or listened to news from the following news media? Please include both TV, radio, podcast, print, and online use”. Respondents were presented with a total of 19 Danish news brands (seven mainstream media and twelve alternative) and response categories were 0–7 days. The mainstream media included were the two national public service broadcasters (*DR* and *TV2*), the three biggest national dailies (*Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Politiken*), and the two biggest tabloids (*Ekstra Bladet* and *BT*). The twelve alternative media included were those outlined in Table 1. To avoid giving the impression of a block of mainstream media and a block of alternative media, the news sources were presented to each respondent in a random order, and the names of the news media were displayed alongside their logos to mitigate recall bias.

Coding news use variables

The list-frequency measure provides data for how frequently the respondents use alternative media. However, because the vast majority of the respondents either use no alternative media or only use them infrequently (elaborated in analysis below), the variables for alternative news use become heavily skewed if treated as continuous, potentially creating issues with heteroscedasticity. For this reason, variables for alternative news use were treated as categorical.

To explore how widespread the use of alternative media is, respondents were coded as users of alternative media if they reported having watched, read, or listened to news from alternative media on at least one day during the past week, and as non-users if they reported zero days of use. To explore whether alternative media with different ideological leanings and different degrees of alternativeness attract different users, a categorical variable was generated corresponding to the classification outlined in Table 1. This resulted in a categorical variable with six categories:

- Do not use any alternative media (0)
- Use only left-wing alternative media with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness (1)
- Use only right-wing alternative media with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness (2)
- Use at least one left-wing and at least one right-wing alternative medium with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness and no right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness (3)
- Use at least one right-wing alternative medium with a high degree of alternativeness and no left-wing alternative media (4)
- Use at least one left-wing alternative medium with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness and at least one right-wing alternative medium with a high degree of alternativeness (5)

Three formative indexes¹ were generated for mainstream news use: public service orientation (*DR, TV2*), national dailies orientation (*Politiken, Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske*), and tabloid orientation (*Ekstra Bladet, BT*). Following the procedure outlined in Andersen and colleagues' (2016) research, the indexes were generated by dividing the total number of days that respondents reported using mainstream media from the given category by the number of mainstream media inquired about in that category. Thus, a respondent who reported using *DR* for 7 days and *TV2* for 5 days during the past week would get a score of 6 on the index $[(7+5) / 2]$. This resulted in indexes ranging from 0 (no use of the given type of mainstream media) to 7 (using all mainstream media of the given type all days during the past week). Summary statistics for all variables are available in Appendix B.

Analytical approach

To answer the first research question regarding how widespread the use of alternative media is in Denmark, dummy variables for use/non-use of each alternative medium and an aggregative dummy variable for use/non-use across all twelve alternative media were used for presenting a descriptive overview.

To answer the second, third, and fourth research questions, a four-step multinomial logistic regression analysis was performed. In all four steps, the categorical variable for alternative news use was treated as the outcome variable. To avoid post-treatment bias, the independent variables were inserted into the regression model stepwise. In the first step, age and gender were used as the only predictors of alternative news use. In the second step, level of education and place of residence were added, and in the third step, political interest and ideological orientation were added. Finally, in the fourth step, the three indexes for mainstream news orientation were added. In each step, the variables from the former steps were used as controls (for similar stepwise approaches, see Hansen, 2021; Stubager et al., 2021). The variables for mainstream news use were included in a later step than ideological orientation and political interest

because people with consistently conservative or liberal views have been found to orient more to political news than people with mixed ideological orientations (Mitchell et al., 2014), and political interest is an important determinant of news use (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2013).

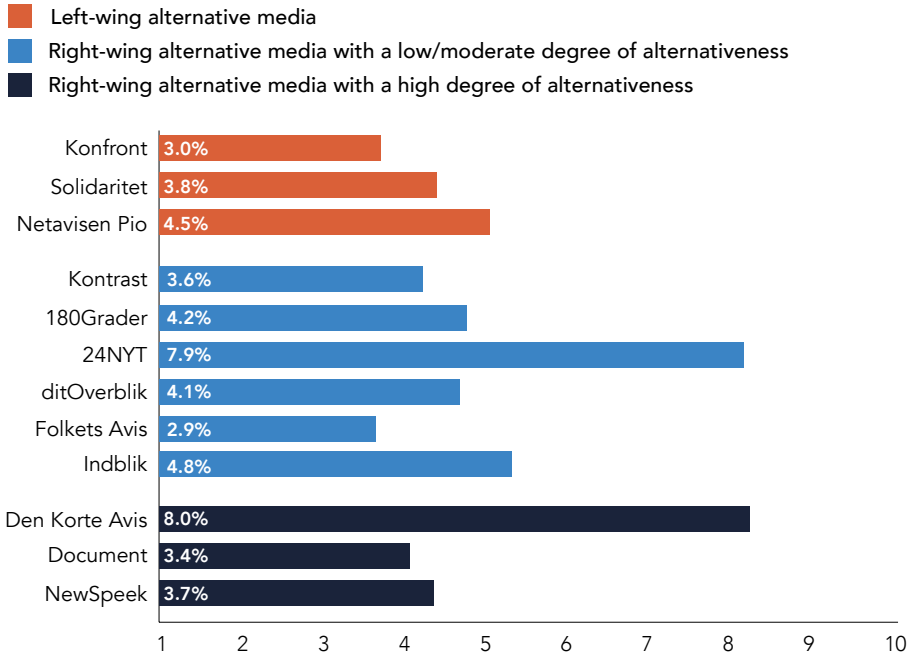
The results from the multinomial logistic regression analysis are presented in figures displaying the predicted average probability of alternative news use by each variable included in the analysis, controlled for the other variables included in the given step of the analysis. This approach has the advantage of allowing for direct interpretation of the results, *independent* of the reference category used. Moreover, presenting the results this way makes it possible to assess how small or great the predicted average probability of use is for different groups or across the spectrum of a continuous variable in absolute terms. For better graphical overview, the figures are displayed without CI error bars, but significant differences are commented on in text. Figures with CI error bars are available in Appendix E in the online supplement. For the categorical independent variables, pairwise significance tests were performed to test the differences in predicted average probability of alternative news use between groups; the results of these tests are available in Appendix C in the online supplement. Tables with regression results presented as relative risk ratios² are available in Appendix D in the online supplement.

Results

Prevalence of alternative news use in Denmark

Beginning with the first research question, Figure 1 displays a descriptive overview of the estimated share of the adult Danish population who use each of the alternative media inquired about on a weekly basis, with data weighted to match the adult Danish population on gender, age, level of education, and place of residence. The results suggest that between 2.9 and 8.0 per cent of the population use each of the alternative media. *Folkets Avis*, which has a limited output of news content (Mayerhöffer, 2021), attracts the smallest audience, and *Den Korte Avis* and *24NYT* the largest. In total, an estimated 23.4 per cent of the Danish population use at least one of the twelve alternative media inquired about. This number might seem surprisingly high but should be read in the context of the relatively low threshold set for being considered a user of alternative media (exposure to just one outlet over the past week). At the same time, frequent use and use of multiple alternative media is less widespread: An estimated 16.2 per cent use alternative media more than two days per week, and only an estimated 9.2 per cent use more than one alternative news outlet. These numbers are more comparable to the 16 per cent found in the study by Steppat and colleagues (2021), which notably used a screening question that might have filtered out respondents who did not self-identify as alternative media users (see Appendix A).

FIGURE 1 Estimated use of alternative media among the adult Danish population (per cent)



Comments: *N* = 2,455. Data weighted to match the adult Danish population on age, gender, level of education, and place of residence.

Looking at how widespread different types of alternative news use is, the findings displayed in Table 2 show that an estimated 15.8 per cent of the population use only right-wing alternative media, split evenly between using only those with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness (7.6%) and using at least one outlet with a high degree of alternativeness (8.2%). An estimated 3.2 per cent use only left-wing alternative media. This suggests that use of left-wing alternative media is much less widespread in the Danish population than use of right-wing alternative media, also to a degree that cannot be explained by the fact that more right-wing alternative media were included in the survey.³ In addition to this, the findings indicate that most of the users confine their use of alternative media to outlets from one political side, although an estimated 4.4 per cent of the population are cross-cutting users.

TABLE 2 Use of different types of alternative media

Category	% (weighted)	n
Use no alternative media	76.6	1,867
Use left-wing alternative media, low/moderate alternativeness	3.2	81
Use right-wing alternative media, low/moderate alternativeness	7.6	195
Use left-wing and right-wing alternative media, low/moderate alternativeness	1.5	38
Use right-wing alternative media, high alternativeness	8.2	208
Use left-wing and right-wing alternative media, high alternativeness	2.9	66
Total	100	2,455

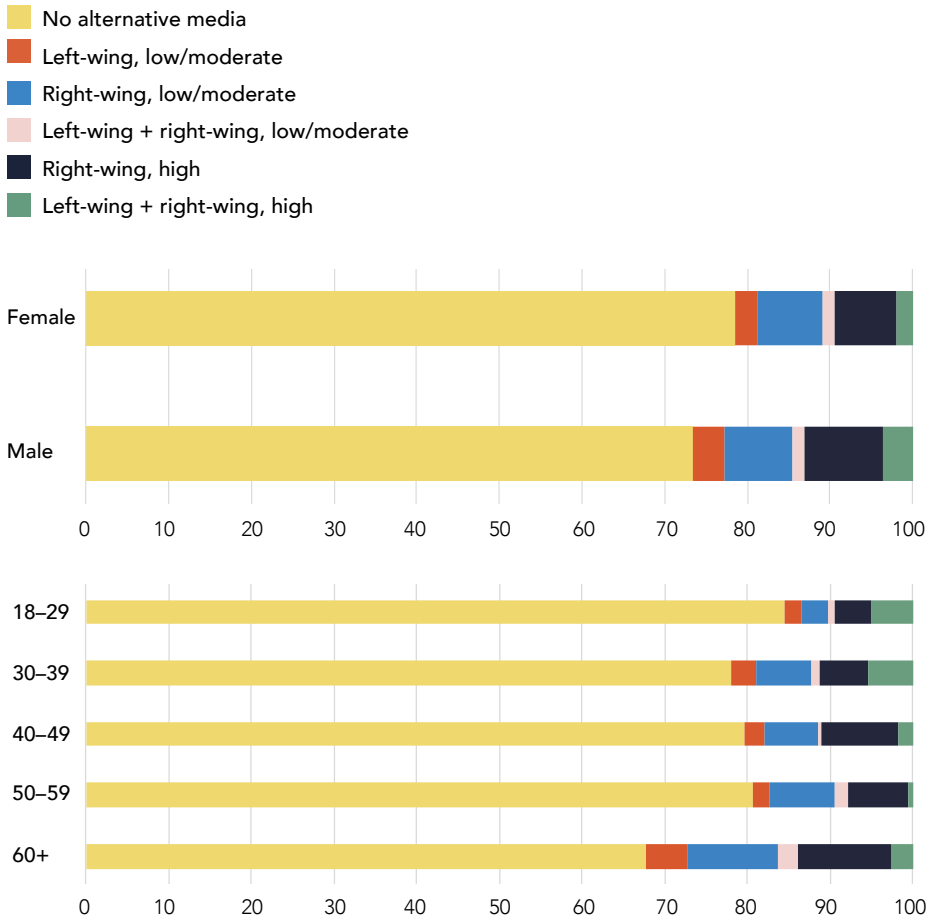
Comments: No left-wing alternative media were classified as characterised by a high degree of alternativeness. Therefore, there is no user category for use of left-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness.

Sociodemographic characteristics of Danish alternative news users

In line with previous studies (Andersen et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021), the findings displayed in the upper panel in Figure 2 show that men have a greater predicted average probability of using alternative media than women (RQ2.1). When looking at the different types of alternative news use, the findings displayed in the figure indicate that it is especially alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness that appeal more to men than women. However, the difference is only significant for cross-cutting use of left-wing and right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness.

Moving to the relationship between age and alternative news use (RQ2.2), the findings displayed in the lower panel in Figure 2 show a strong association between older age and greater predicted average probability of alternative news use. The 60+ age-group has a significantly greater predicted average probability of using alternative media than all other age groups. At the same time, the 18–29-year-olds have the least predicted average probability of alternative news use, though only significant when compared with the 60+ and 30–39 age groups. In this regard, Danish alternative news users thus seem to differ from those in other European countries, who have been found to be younger (Andersen et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021). Looking at different types of alternative news use, this pattern largely holds up. Diverging from this, however, the two youngest age-groups have significantly greater predicted average probability of cross-cutting use of left-wing and right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness compared with the three older age groups.

FIGURE 2 Predicted average probability of alternative news use, by gender and age (per cent)

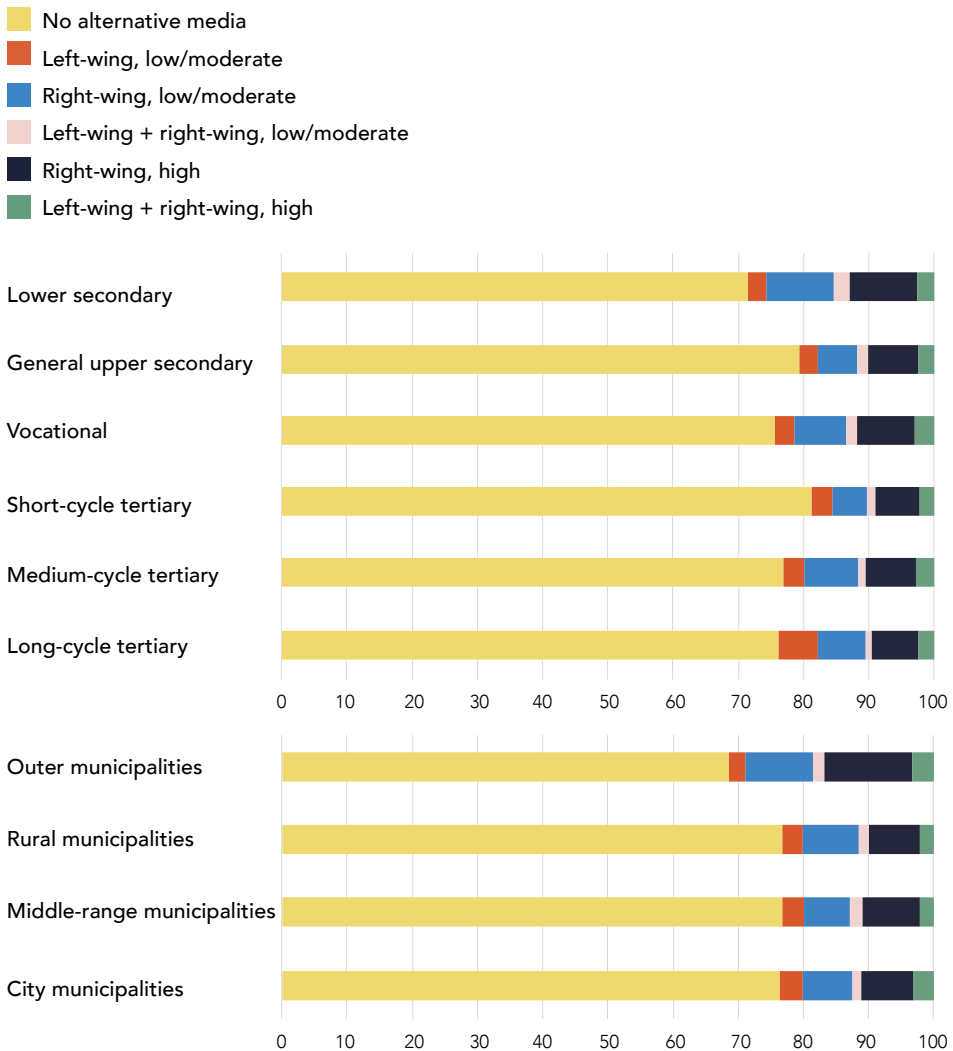


Comments: $N = 2,455$. McFadden's pseudo-R² = 0.028; Nagelkerke's pseudo-R² = 0.059. Variables included in the model: gender and age. CI error bars omitted for better graphical overview (for graphs with error bars see Appendix E in the online supplement).

Proceeding to the second step in the multinomial logistic regression analysis, the upper panel in Figure 3 displays the predicted average probability of alternative news use by level of education (RQ2.3). Somewhat surprisingly, the results suggest that all types of alternative media appeal across all levels of education. The parts of the population with the lowest level of education do have significantly greater predicted average probability of alternative news use compared to the groups holding general upper secondary or short-cycle tertiary as highest levels of education. However, the findings indicate no consistent pattern of a relationship between higher levels of education and less predicted average probability of alternative news use, and none of the other education groups are significantly

different from each other. In other words, alternative media – also the ones that voice the most vehement criticism of the media and political mainstream, diverge starkly from the professional journalistic norm of neutrality, and make use of degradation – seem to attract users from all education groups, including the most well-educated.

FIGURE 3 Predicted average probability of alternative news use by level of education and place of residence (per cent)



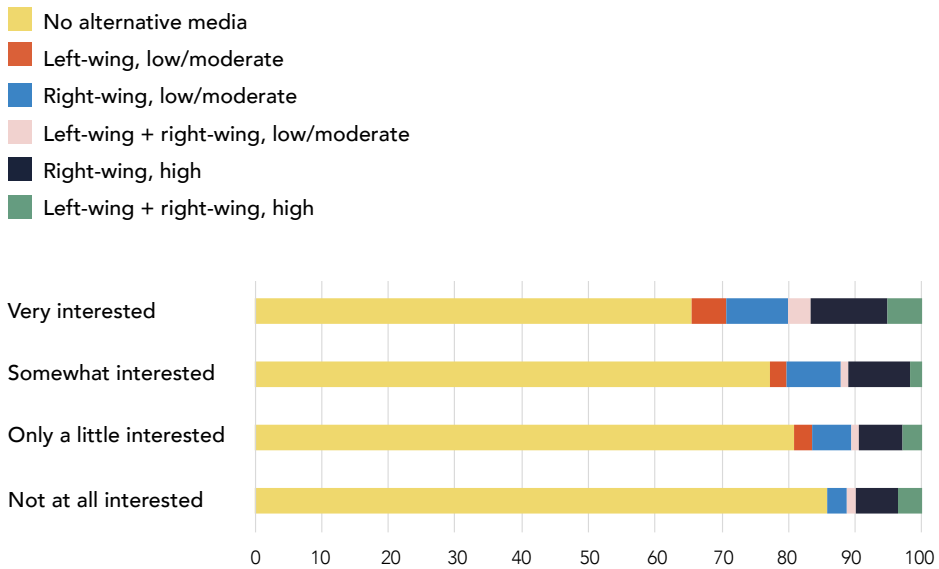
Comments: $N = 2,455$. McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.035$; Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.072$. Variables included in the model: gender, age, level of education, and place of residence. CI error bars omitted for better graphical overview (for graphs with error bars, see Appendix E in the online supplement).

Looking at place of residence (RQ2.4), the lower panel in Figure 3 shows that the parts of the population living in the outer municipalities of Denmark have greater predicted average probability of alternative news use compared to all other groups. These municipalities have experienced decline in population and employment, are the least wealthy (Kristensen et al., 2007), and are geographically far from the centre of power. At the same time, none of the other groups are significantly different from each other, meaning that people living in city and rural municipalities do not have significantly different predicted average probability of using alternative media. This suggests that alternative news use does not relate to a general urban–rural divide, but that there is a relationship between living in the most disadvantaged parts of the country furthest from the centre of power and using alternative media that, to varying extents, criticise the established media and political systems. Looking at specific types of alternative news use, the differences between the groups are not significant.

Political interest and ideological orientation of Danish alternative news users

Moving to the third step in the multinomial logistic regression analysis, the results displayed in Figure 4 suggest a strong positive relationship between high levels of political interest and using alternative media (RQ3.1). The parts of the population who are “very interested” in politics have significantly greater predicted average probability of using alternative media than all other groups. As displayed in the figure, the general pattern is also that higher interest in politics is associated with greater predicted probability of the specific types of news use, although it varies whether the differences between the groups are significant (see significance tests in Appendix C in the online supplement). Interestingly, this suggests that one of the things that clearly sets alternative news users apart from the rest of the population is a high interest in politics, a trait normally considered a democratic asset.

FIGURE 4 Predicted average probability of alternative news use by political interest (per cent)



Comments: $N = 2,118$. McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.066$; Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.135$. Variables included in the model: gender, age, level of education, place of residence, ideological orientation, and political interest. Results for "do not wish to answer" not displayed in figure ($n = 22$). CI error bars omitted for better graphical overview (for graphs with error bars, see Appendix E in the online supplement).

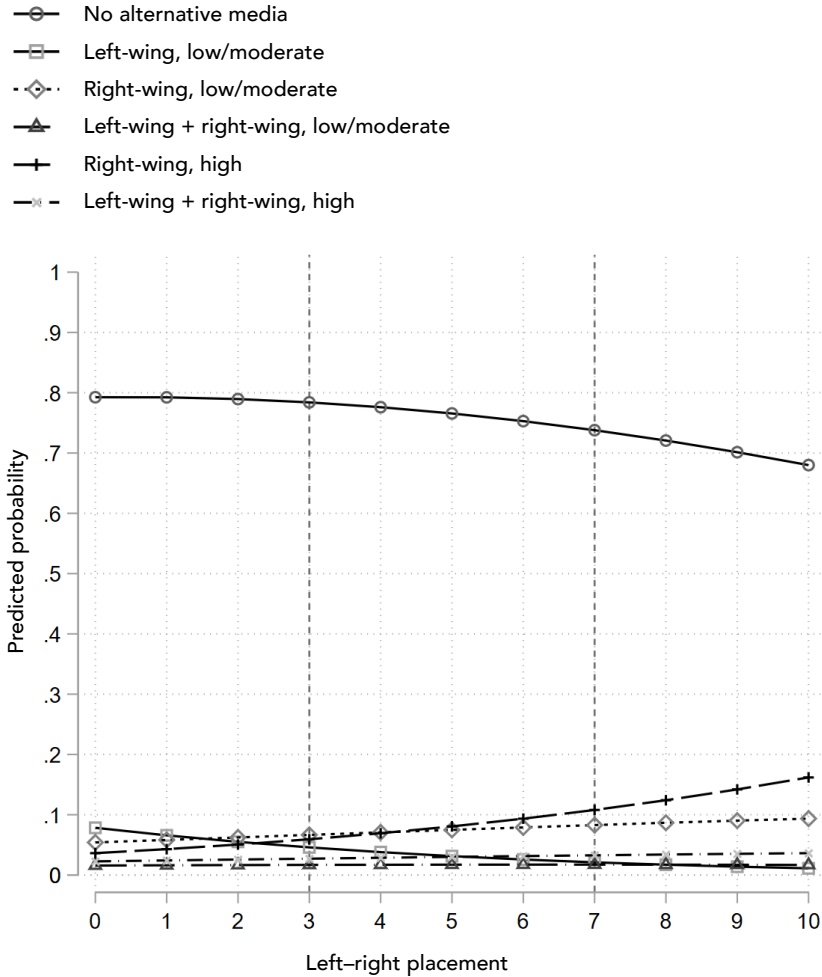
Figure 5 displays the association between ideological orientation and predicted average probability of the different types of alternative news use (RQ3.2). As the figure shows, taking ideological positions towards the right of the spectrum is associated with significantly greater predicted average probability of using only right-wing alternative media with a low/moderate or high degree of alternativeness. Conversely, taking ideological positions towards the left of the spectrum is associated with significantly greater predicted average probability of using only left-wing alternative media. The findings thus show that use of right-wing and left-wing alternative media is associated with taking ideological positions further towards the ends of the ideological spectrum.

However, the findings also show that big differences in ideological orientation only have a small impact on the predicted average probability of the different types of alternative news use in absolute terms. Comparing the lower and upper bounds of the interquartile range (marked by the vertical dashed lines), the predicted average probability of using right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness is 5.9 per cent, with a position of 3 on the ideological scale, and 10.8 per cent, with a position at 7 on the ideological scale ($p = .000$). For use of right-wing alternative media with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness, the difference in predicted average probability is 6.7

versus 8.3 per cent ($p = .063$), and for use of left-wing alternative media with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness 4.6 versus 2.1 per cent ($p = .000$). At the same time, it should be pointed out that, on average, the users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media only position themselves slightly left-of-centre and slightly right-of-centre on the ideological spectrum (not displayed in the figure). Thus, on the one hand, the findings show a significant association between taking positions further towards the left and the right of the ideological spectrum and using left-wing and right-wing alternative media, but on the other, they do not indicate that users generally take extreme positions.

Finally, the figure shows that positions towards the right of the ideological spectrum are associated with significantly less predicted average probability of belonging to the non-user-group, whereas a similar association is not seen for positions towards the left. This indicates that there is an association between right-wing ideological orientation and greater probability of using *any* kind of alternative media. Importantly, though, this should be viewed in the context that use of right-wing alternative media is more widespread than use of left-wing alternative media, and that more right-wing cases were included in the measurement for alternative news use employed. Cross-cutting use of alternative media is not significantly associated with ideological orientation.

FIGURE 5 Predicted average probability of alternative news use by ideological orientation



Comments: $N = 2,118$. McFadden's pseudo-R² = 0.066; Nagelkerke's pseudo-R² = 0.135. Variables in the model: gender, age, level of education, place of residence, political interest, and ideological orientation (0 = left; 10 = right). Vertical lines indicate lower and upper quartiles. CI error bars omitted for better graphical overview (for graphs with error bars, see Appendix E in the online supplement).

Mainstream news orientation of alternative news users

Moving finally to the relationship between alternative news use and use of mainstream media (RQ4), a first notable observation is that only four of the 588 respondents who reported use of alternative media reported no use of mainstream media at all (corresponding to 0.7% of the users). Like recent studies (see Arguedas et al., 2022), this suggests that the prevalence of so-called echo

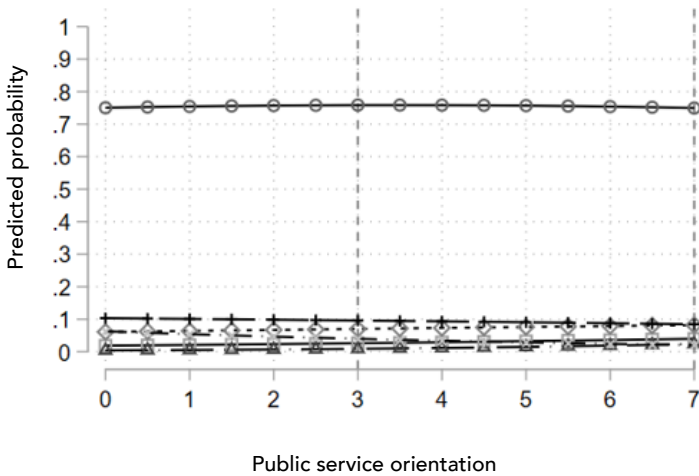
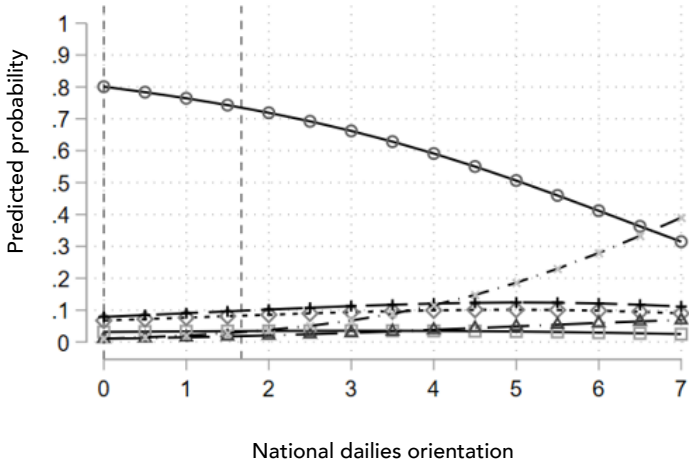
chambers is very limited. As another notable observation, the users of alternative media, on average, reported having used 4.5 of the 7 mainstream outlets inquired about in the survey questionnaire during the past week, compared with 3.5 among non-users. Moreover, all groups of users, on average, score higher than or approximately equal to non-users on the indexes for mainstream news orientation. This gives an initial indication that the users of alternative media are also frequent users of mainstream media.

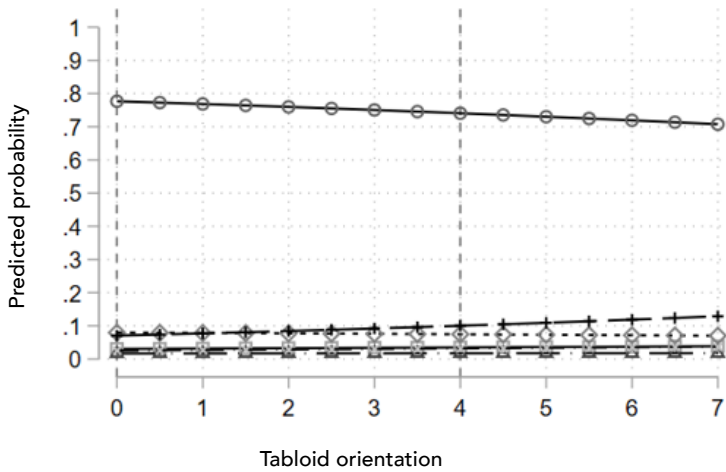
Proceeding to the fourth and final step of the multinomial logistic regression analysis, Figure 6 displays the relationship between public service, national dailies, and tabloid news orientation and predicted average probability of the different types of alternative news use (RQ4). Beginning with the top graph, the findings displayed show a particularly strong association between more orientation towards national dailies and greater predicted average probability of cross-cutting use of left-wing and right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness. However, the upward trend in the curve especially gains pace from a score of 4 on the national dailies orientation index and onwards, and as the vertical dashed lines marking the interquartile range show, most respondents orient much less towards national dailies. Even so, when only looking at differences within the interquartile range, there is an upward trend in predicted average probability for all types of alternative news use, and conversely, a downward trend in the predicted average probability of not using alternative media (significant except for use of only left-wing alternative media). While the associations are generally modest, the findings thus suggest that more use of national dailies with an ideological orientation is positively associated with all types of alternative news use.

Turning to the middle graph, the findings displayed show that more orientation towards public service news is slightly positively associated with predicted average probability of using alternative media with a low/moderate degree of alternativeness, and slightly negatively associated with predicted average probability of using alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness. This difference is interesting since alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness voice more vehement media criticism for, among other things, serving as mouthpieces of the political elite (Brems, 2023), a point of criticism particularly pertinent for state-funded public broadcasters. When comparing the predicted probability of alternative news use at the lower and upper bounds of the interquartile range (marked by the vertical dashed lines), the differences are, however, small and only significant for cross-cutting use of left-wing and right-wing alternative media with a low/moderate ($p = .0231$) and high ($p = .0056$) degree of alternativeness.

FIGURE 6 Predicted average probability of alternative news use by mainstream news orientation

- No alternative media
- Left-wing, low/moderate
- ◇ Right-wing, low/moderate
- △ Left-wing + right-wing, low/moderate
- ✦ Right-wing, high
- ✧ Left-wing + right-wing, high





Comments: $N = 2,118$. McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.102$; Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.202$. Variables included in the model: gender, age, level of education, place of residence, political interest, ideological orientation, public service orientation, national dailies orientation, tabloid orientation. Vertical lines indicate lower and upper quartiles. CI error bars omitted for better graphical overview (for graphs with error bars, see Appendix E in the online supplement).

Finally, the findings displayed in the bottom graph show a slightly negative association between more use of tabloids and predicted average probability of belonging to the non-user group. At the same time, there is a slightly positive association between more use of tabloids and predicted average probability of using right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness. The differences at the lower and upper bounds of the interquartile range are small but significant in both cases ($p = .0010$, $p = .0145$), suggesting a positive association between appetite for tabloid news and alternative news, especially from right-wing alternative media with a high degree of alternativeness.

Discussion and conclusion

To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first investigation of how prevalent the use of left-wing and right-wing alternative media is in Denmark, as well as what characterises their users. The findings suggest that use of alternative media is more widespread among the Danish population than previous studies have indicated (Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021; Heft et al., 2020; Schröder et al., 2018, 2021), with more than one in five reporting at least some use of alternative media, but that frequent use is less widespread. The findings indicate that use of right-wing alternative media is more prevalent in Denmark than use of their left-wing counterparts. This raises the interesting question for future exploration as to why there is apparently not only a greater supply of (e.g. Blach-Ørsten &

Mayerhöffer, 2021; Brems, 2023), but also a greater demand for right-wing than left-wing alternative news content in the Danish media system.

It should be noted that the way in which alternative news use is tapped seems to influence the estimates of its prevalence (see the overview in Appendix A). In the German case, for instance, the measure employed by Schulze (2020) was a list of five alternative media and inquired about use during the past week, whereas Müller and Schulz (2021) used a list of twelve alternative media and included a response option of using alternative media “very rarely”. They arrived at estimates of 9 and 28 per cent users of alternative media in the German population, respectively. For this study, I inquired about days of use within the past week, but it is possible that some respondents have evaluated the question more holistically and indicated less frequent use by checking the response category of one day of exposure. Including twelve alternative media in the survey questionnaire has likely increased the estimated share of users. This does not necessarily mean that the estimate is inflated, however. *Ceteris paribus*, including a broad spectrum of outlets should give a better estimate of how widespread the use of alternative media is, especially since most users reported using only one alternative medium. This indicates that while most alternative media might have small user bases, collectively they can amount to a fair share of the population, speaking in favour of casting the net wide when estimating their prevalence. Future studies could qualify survey-based estimates with digital tracking, which can also capture the “long tail” of alternative news use.

The spread of alternative media has been accompanied by concerns over users falling prey to alternative media because they are incapable of telling alternative from mainstream content, extremity, and echo chambers (e.g., Cushion, 2023; Noppari et al., 2019; Schwarzenegger, 2021). Like recent scholarship (Andersen et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Noppari et al., 2019; Schulze, 2020; Schwarzenegger, 2021), this study adds considerable nuance to this picture of users and furthermore suggests that there is reason to temper such concerns, at least in the Danish case. While the parts of the population holding the lowest level of education are more likely to use alternative media than some higher-level education groups, the general picture is that all types of alternative media appeal across levels of education. Although this study does not include measures of media literacy, this suggests that the upsurge of alternative media cannot be written off as solely the result of less-educated parts of the population being unable to distinguish between alternative and mainstream media. The findings also show a strong association between alternative news use and high political interest, a trait normally considered a democratic asset.

Regarding concerns over extremity, the findings show that ideological orientation further towards the left and right ends of the spectrum is significantly associated with greater predicted average probability of using left-wing and right-wing alternative media, respectively. However, the findings also show that big jumps on the ideological spectrum are not associated with big differences in predicted probability of alternative news use in absolute terms, and the findings do not indicate that the users on average take extreme ideological positions. As

such, the users of left-wing and right-wing alternative media are relatively more ideologically extreme than non-users, but cannot be characterised as extremists. This is in line with the previous finding that political extremity does not predict alternative news use (Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Schulz, 2021). Since ideological orientation was measured based on self-placement, it is, of course, possible that the users do not consider themselves extreme yet nonetheless hold more extreme policy attitudes than non-users, as found in previous studies (e.g., Schulze, 2020; Theorin & Strömbäck, 2020). Investigating this as well as any causal influence of alternative news use on policy attitudes are important paths to explore in future studies.

The findings also show that alternative news use is generally positively associated with being older and male, and that users are more likely to live in the most disadvantaged parts of the country, geographically far from the centre of power. Thereby, they share traits with Danish populist voters (Reinemann et al., 2016), and previous studies have found that alternative news use is associated with holding populist attitudes (Müller & Schulz, 2021) and lower political trust (Andersen et al., 2021). The findings could thus indicate that this is also the case in Denmark. The study finds no general urban–rural divide, though, suggesting that alternative news use is not associated with this new political cleavage (Hansen & Hjorth, 2021).

In response to concerns about filter bubbles and echo chambers commonly voiced in public debate (Cushion, 2023), this study corroborates previous findings (Andersen et al., 2021, 2022; Frischlich et al., 2022; Müller & Schulz, 2021) and shows that only a small fraction of users seek out no mainstream media at all and that the users are generally frequent users of mainstream media. The findings also show a general positive association with use of national dailies.

When the users seek out mainstream media despite their lower levels of trust in them (Andersen et al., 2021; Schulze, 2020) and the explicit media criticism voiced by alternative media (Brems, 2023; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), it begs the question why they continue to find mainstream media relevant. In the Danish case, this should likely be understood in the context of a less-developed alternative media ecology (Mayerhöffer, 2021) and more broadly in the Nordic context of a strong public service tradition (Syvertsen et al., 2014) and ideologically oriented mainstream news on offer (Hjarvard, 2010). Studies on populist citizens with hostile media attitudes and news sceptics have proposed that their use of mainstream news media might be explained by habitual news use, a need for staying oriented (and lack of alternatives for doing so), seeking confirmation that mainstream news is biased, or simply an urge to argue with the media (Schulz, 2019; Tsfati & Capella, 2005). Along the same lines, a qualitative interview study with Norwegian users of alternative media shows that they are particularly critical of mainstream coverage of specific contested topics such as immigration, but that they seek out mainstream news for orientation on topics such as traffic and local issues (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2020). An important path for future research would be further exploring the users' motivations for seeking out mainstream news and how they combine alternative and mainstream content.

Finally, it is noteworthy that while the findings in some cases show small differences between the users of different types of alternative media, the general picture is that different alternative media seem to attract similar audiences. Thus, although substantive differences can be found between alternative media with respect to the amount and severity of their media and political criticism, deviation from professional journalistic norms, and how radical the agendas are that they advocate (Brems, 2023), these differences cannot necessarily be transferred one-to-one to their users.

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Endnotes

1 The indexes are considered formative because they express the respondents' use of the given type of mainstream media. If considered reflective indexes: Pearson's r for public service news orientation = 0.46; Pearson's r for tabloid orientation = 0.61; Cronbach's alpha for national dailies orientation = 0.62. Pearson's r computed for the former two because they consist of only two variables each (frequency of use of *DR* and *TV2*; *Ekstra Bladet* and *BT*, respectively).

2 In multinomial logistic regression analysis, the exponentiated logit coefficients are referred to as relative risk ratios rather than odds ratios (used in logistic regression analysis). The reason for this is that odds refer to the ratio of the probability of being in an outcome category divided by the probability of not being in the outcome category. However, in multinomial logistic regression analysis, there are more than two outcome categories. The probability of being in a specific outcome category is thus not compared to the probability of not being in the given outcome category but to the probability of being in another specific category on the outcome variable, that is, the selected base category (see Pampel, 2021: 95–98). In this study, odds would refer to belonging to a specific (non-)user group relative to belonging to any other (non-)user group, whereas the coefficients in the multinomial logistic regression analysis employed refer to belonging to a specific user group relative to belonging specifically to the non-user group (the selected base category).

3 Given that the share using only right-wing alternative media is five times as high, and only three times as many right-wing outlets were included in the survey.

Appendix

Appendix A

TABLE A1 Measurements of alternative media use in previous studies

Study	Method	Item(s) and/or number of outlets included	Country	Estimated share of population using alternative media
Andersen et al., 2021	Survey self-report	<p>"How often do you use online news websites or social media to follow... 'News about societal issues <i>not reported</i> by the traditional media'; 'News that provide an <i>alternative view</i> on societal issues than traditional media' [italics original]?"</p> <p>"How often do you use online news websites or social media to follow news that provide an <i>alternative view than the traditional media</i> on the following topics?" 'News about crime'; 'News about the climate and environment'; 'News about integration and immigration' [italics original]".</p> <p>Scale: never (1), more rarely (2), once a month (3), once a week (4), several times a week (5), daily (6)</p>	Sweden	Across four survey waves, approximately 16% report using alternative media once a week or more often.
Frischlich et al., 2022	Survey self-report	<p>"In recent years, numerous news websites have emerged that often disseminate their content via social media and present themselves as an alternative to the established or 'mainstream' media. Which of the following alternative news media, if any, have you used to access news in the past week?"</p> <p>List of six alternative media provided and a category of "other" alternative news.</p>	Germany	12%

Müller & Bach, 2021	Digital tracking (2.5 months in 2017; 1 month in 2019)	137 online news sites defined as populist alternative news media. Use defined as at least one visit to the page in the observation periods.	Germany	16.5% (2017) 7.4% (2019)
Müller & Schulz, 2021	Survey self-report	List-frequency technique including 12 alternative media with affinity for populism. Respondents were asked whether they knew the outlets and if so, how often they used them. Scale: never (0) to very frequently (5)	Germany	Total share of users (use at least one outlet at least "very rarely"): 28.1% Occasional users (use at least one outlet "very rarely" but none "frequently" or "very frequently"): 12.6% Frequent users (use at least one outlet "frequently" or "very frequently"): 15.5%
Schulze, 2020	Survey self-report (secondary analysis of 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report data)	"In recent years a number of online news sites have emerged with their content often distributed via social media. Which, if any, of the following have you heard of/used in the last week?" (Item quoted from <i>Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019</i> : 24–25). Four to seven alternative media included in each country.	Austria Finland Germany Sweden	Use at least one of the listed outlets during the last week: Austria: 8% Finland: 7% Germany: 9% Sweden: 22%

Steppat et al., 2021	Survey self-report	<p>“Some people are disappointed by political news coverage and have the feeling that the (most frequently used) mainstream media sources do not report information fully. As a result, these people seek out alternative sources of information (e.g. they may seek out sources on the Internet where they can find their opinion better represented or can cross-check information). Do you belong to this group?”</p> <p>Scale: no, not at all (1), no, mostly not (2), yes, mostly (3), yes, definitely (4)</p> <p>Respondents who answered 3 or 4 were asked to specify up to three alternative media in an open-ended question.</p> <p>Coded into media categories by the study’s authors, one of which was self-proclaimed alternative media matching the definition in Holt et al., 2019.</p>	Denmark Switzerland Italy Poland US	<p>Respondents who consider themselves alternative media users and seek out self-proclaimed alternative media, according to the study’s authors’ coding:</p> <p>Denmark: 16%</p> <p>Switzerland: 15%</p> <p>Italy: 11%</p> <p>Poland: 12%</p> <p>US: 19%</p>
Theorin & Strömbäck, 2020	Survey self-report	<p>“In general, how often do you visit the following news sites on the Internet?”</p> <p>List included one right-wing and one left-wing alternative news medium.</p> <p>Scale: daily (6), 5–6 days a week (5), 3–4 days a week (4), 1–2 days a week (3), more seldom (2), and never (1)</p>	Sweden	<p>Left-wing outlet:</p> <p>At least one day a week: 6%</p> <p>More seldom: 9%</p> <p>Right-wing outlet:</p> <p>At least one day a week: 5%</p> <p>More seldom: 10%</p>

Appendix B

Summary statistics

TABLE B1 Sociodemographic variables in the analysis weighted and unweighted

Variable		Weighted (%)	Unweighted (%)	<i>n</i>
Gender	Female	50.6	52.3	1,283
	Male	49.4	47.7	1,172
Age	18–29	17.8	13.9	342
	30–39	15.8	13.9	342
	40–49	14.5	14.8	363
	50–59	20.1	21.5	527
	60+	31.8	35.9	881
Level of education	Lower secondary	12.7	12.5	306
	General upper secondary	11.8	10.5	257
	Vocational	43.7	44.2	1,084
	Short-cycle tertiary	5.8	6.1	149
	Medium-cycle tertiary	16.6	17.4	426
	Long-cycle tertiary	9.4	9.5	233
Residence	Outer municipalities	6.3	6.4	158
	Rural municipalities	25.1	26.2	644
	Middle-range municipalities	16.5	17.1	419
	City municipalities	52.1	50.3	1,234

Comments: *N* = 2,455. The education category “vocational” includes the technically and commercially oriented upper secondary educations (in Danish, HTX and HHX). In the survey, the small islands of Fanø, Læsø, Langeland, Samsø, and Ærø were collapsed into one response category for the municipality question. Respondents ticking this category were coded as outer municipalities, as four of the five islands belong to this category in Kristensen et al., 2007.

TABLE B2 Other variables in the analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value	n
Political interest	2.78	.85	1	4	2,433
Ideological orientation	5.31	2.58	0	10	2,118
Public service orientation	4.52	2.24	0	7	2,455
National dailies orientation	.93	1.39	0	7	2,455
Tabloid orientation	2.30	2.46	0	7	2,455

Comments: In the analysis, political interest is treated as a categorical variable and “do not wish to answer” included as a separate category ($n = 22$).