



COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,
Nico Carpentier**

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The rise of the alternative: Critical usefulness of the “Alternative Media” notion in the Czech context

Ondrej Pekacek

Abstract

Czech alternative media have experienced a decade of remarkable growth. One of the exemplary cases is the rise of the alternative outlet *Parlamentní Listy* (*The Parliament Letters*), whose readership rivals the mainstream press, despite media watchdogs implicating it in the spread of disinformation. The emergence of staunchly anti-pluralist and disinformation-linked outlets such as *Parlamentní Listy* has proved to be a substantial challenge to the prevailing research paradigm that has considered the proliferation of alternative media as a positive development for democracy. The first part of this chapter examines structural factors of this conjuncture, particularly the role of public distrust of mainstream media, the increased media concentration at the hands of domestic business moguls and foreign actor sponsorship. To address the shortcomings of current research, the chapter also examines the applicability and limitations of two additional frameworks. The Alternative Media Anti-Systemness Matrix (AMAM), which extends the Mainstream/Alternative Continuum (MAC) by focusing specifically on ideological and relational anti-systemness of alternative media. The Populist Political Communication Framework (PPCF), in turn, expands on the character of the communication of the antagonistic relations, thus enabling us to gather additional insights regarding the creation of horizontal (“the people” vs “the elites”) and vertical (“the people” vs “the others”) antagonisms and better distinguish between the ideological orientations of the Czech alternative media outlets.

Keywords: Czech media ecosystem, media transformation, alternative media theory, anti-systemness, populist communication

1. Introduction

Czech society has not escaped the global phenomenon of political polarization as evidenced by the Presidential election of 2018 and the attitudes towards the European refugee crisis (Cervenka, 2018; Pehe, 2018). A change of the “*media regimes*” (Beaufort, 2018) with the increasing dominance of digital news sources, seems to drive this development (Yang et al., 2016). The growth of antagonistic alternative media outlets with questionable regard for journalistic norms is a significant factor in the process of political polarization that works through the “*spiral of mistrust*,” conspiracy theories and the promotion of anti-elite sentiments (Figen-schou & Ihlebæk, 2018; Haller & Holt, 2018).

In this context, the Czech case study is worthy of closer attention. As a result of growing distrust towards traditional media, intensified ownership concentration and foreign actor sponsorship, the Czech alternative media ecosystem experienced a boom in the past decade. Currently, some 39 percent of the respondents engage with the alternative sources at least a few times per month (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2017). A case in point is the most widely read alternative outlet *Parlamentni Listy* (*The Parliament Letters*). Despite its evocative name, it has no affiliation to the Czech Parliament. It has been characterized by some commentators as a “*bridge into the world of disinformation*” (Kundra, 2017). Researchers have also questioned its manipulative strategies, such as blaming, labeling and fabulation (Gregor & Vejvodova, 2016).

The story of the emergence of *Parlamentni Listy* is exemplary of other Czech alternative media. Established in 2003 as a print monthly with limited circulation, it has seen its readership rise since 2008 with its new online platform and a novel publishing strategy. The site publishes over 100 articles per day, but its original content accounts only for about 15 percent of the material (Stetka, 2016). This approach has paid off, as it attracts about 700,000 monthly readers. Understanding this success begs the question: What was the opportunity structure that enabled Czech alternative outlets to quickly establish themselves as serious competitors to the mainstream media?

Despite the dramatic changes, critical research of the Czech alternative media has been limited to the work conducted by investigative journalists, such as Ondrej Kundra from *Respekt* magazine, think tanks such as *European Values* and fact-checking initiatives, such as *Demagog* and *Manipulatori* (European Journalism Observatory, 2017). To enhance the lack of academic research on the issue, the second part of this chapter examines three key explanatory threads to the

emergence of the alternative media ecosystem. Finally, the third part discusses the advantages and limitations of three theoretical frameworks for alternative media categorization.

2. The rise of Czech alternative media: Three explanatory threads

In 1993, the newly established independent Czech Republic and its democratic system brought in media commercialization and tabloidization, with priorities shifting from information value to entertainment (Volek, 2010). These trends were closely linked with an increasing domestic ownership concentration which accelerated after the exit of foreign media houses in the early 2010s (Stetka, 2012a). How could we then categorize the current Czech media ecosystem? Within the group of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, the Czech media system belongs to a cluster, which also includes Poland, Croatia and Slovenia. All of these countries share a high prevalence of domestic ownership in the post-2008 period, unlike the “northern cluster” (Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia), where the domestic actors are weaker (Herrero, Humprecht, Engesser, Brüggemann, & Büchel, 2017). Foreign ownership tends to positively impact investigative journalism quality (Salovaara & Juzefovics, 2012) and substantial differences exist in the CEE region in this aspect (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). Given this intra-regional diversity, we should also expect different configurations of alternative media, highlighting the need for individual country studies to fully grasp this phenomenon. To capture these specific conditions in the Czech case, three threads are crucial: distrust of mainstream media, “oligarchization” and sponsorship of foreign actors.

While the long-term *decline of media trust* is a global phenomenon, the Czech Republic, with 31 percent overall media trust, ranks the 5th lowest in the world (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). The relative stability of trust persisted into the late 2000s but sharply declined since then (Hanzlova, 2018). This development predominantly affected the youngest cohort (18 to 29-year-olds), those with low economic background and the left-wing voters (Volek & Urbanikova, 2018). Closer scrutiny shows that only 15 percent of young Czechs trust professional media, while 30 percent trust the alternative media and 20 percent trust both types of sources (Macek et al., 2018). The ideological discrepancy is one of the factors; Czech journalists tend to be more right-wing than the Czech public. The new generation of journalists has not significantly changed this trend (Moravec, Urbanikova, & Volek, 2015). In addition to demographics, media logic is another factor in public trust. As Bartholome, Lecheler, and de Vreese (2015) argue, jour-

nalists contribute to the emergence of conflict frames in the news. This game-framing of political news coverage could negatively affect trust (Hopmann, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2015) and result in alternative news-seeking behavior, contributing to a feedback loop leading to more distrust and cynicism (Jackob, 2010). Media trust also correlates with a general trust in political institutions, either directly (Lee, 2010) or through journalists as mediators in this process (Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012). Recent international data support this interpretation, but it remains to be seen to what degree there is an interplay in the Czech case as well (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The process of *oligarchization* has been partially theorized as the effect of perceived political bias on declining media trust (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil De Zúñiga, 2017). In the early 1990s, the journalistic community expected fast development of professional journalism, with independent media serving as the fourth estate of the young liberal democracy. However, this vision left little room for the critical consideration of the role of media ownership and the character of the media market (Jirak & Köpplova, 2013). A loose regulatory framework of media ownership enabled early privatization and foreign investment. Swiss and German publishing houses were particularly active, with *Ringier* establishing the first Czech tabloid *Blesk* in 1991 (Stetka, 2010; Stetka, 2012b). However, domestic ownership escalated after the Great Recession of the late 2000s, when foreign investors divested, enabling the domestic business tycoons such as Zdenek Bakala, Daniel Kretinsky and Jaromir Soukup to step in (MediaGuru, 2016; Stetka, 2015). Concerns over political instrumentalization of media have amplified. In a 2015 interview, Czech billionaire Marek Dospiva admitted that media ownership provides a potential “*shield against irrational attacks*” by political adversaries (Mikulka, 2015). The most high-profile case is the current Prime Minister Andrej Babis. He acquired the largest publishing house, MAFRA, shortly before the 2013 parliamentary elections (Esser, Stepinska, & Hopmann, 2016). This caused an outflow of journalists, some of them founding alternative media outlets such as *Echo24* and *Forum24* (Hajek, Stefanikova, Lab, & Tejkalova, 2015). Decreasing media pluralism has resulted in a falling trend of the Czech Republic in international press freedom indexes.¹

The final thread of *foreign influence* ties to the general scholarly debate on disinformation and hybrid warfare (see Faris et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). The

1 *World Press Freedom Index* from 16th (2008) to 34th (2018) (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). The *Freedom of the Press* shows a smaller drop, 25th (2008) to 26th (2017), but the absolute score describing ownership concentration and political instrumentalization has clearly worsened (Freedom House, 2018).

2017 report of the Czech Security Information Service details robust Russian hybrid warfare strategy aimed to foment internal divisions. A backbone of this effort is the “*information warfare*,” which spreads disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda through covert infiltration of the Czech alternative media scene (Security Information Service, 2018). Researchers identified 39 disinformation-linked alternative media websites (Janda & Vichova, 2016) and follow-up survey found that 25 percent of respondents trust these outlets (Janda, Blazejovska, & Vlasak, 2016). It is not easy to distinguish between some alternative media directly working under foreign sponsorship and some merely having similar political objectives. For instance, the Czech version of *Sputnik News* (formerly *The Voice of Russia*) has a clear pro-Russian affiliation. *Aeronet*, in turn, initially served as a closed forum for hackers and transformed to a news server the day after the Russian annexation of Crimea. It has a complex international ownership structure but lacks the “smoking gun” evidence of Russian involvement (Kundra, 2016). Finally, there are outlets such as *AC24*, founded by a Czech entrepreneur Ondrej Gersl, who claims to challenge the “*lying and manipulative mainstream media*” (Rostecky, 2014). While the style and content of *AC24* are close to other pro-Russian disinformation outlets, similarly to the case of *Aeronet*, current evidence is mostly circumstantial.

To fully understand the interplay between alternative media and disinformation, a two-pronged approach is needed. Firstly, a qualitative examination would analyze the ownership structures and motivations of journalists in these outlets. Secondly, we need a “big data” approach, such as that of Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, & Nielsen (2018), to examine the degree of the disinformation spread and the interplay with social network platforms.

3. Categorizing the alternative media: Three ways forward

A substantial amount of literature, particularly in the critical media studies (CMS), adopts a normative outlook—alternative media are seen to positively affect democracy through the empowerment of marginalized groups (Atton, 2015; Kenix, 2011; Lievrouw, 2011). However, the emergence of anti-pluralist and disinformation-linked outlets has challenged this research paradigm, highlighting the need for an interdisciplinary understanding of this phenomenon (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Holt & Haller, 2017; Kaati, Shrestha, & Cohen, 2016). In what follows, I will compare three theoretical frameworks from comparative politics, critical media studies and political communication to help alternative media scholarship to make a more elaborated sense of the current research needs.

3.1. Mainstream/Alternative Continuum (MAC)

The first model, Mainstream/Alternative Continuum (MAC), stems from critical media studies where the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative media has given way to the notion of hybridity (Rauch, 2014, 2016), conceiving the difference as a “*spectrum*” (Kenix, 2011) or a “*continuum*” (Harcup, 2005). The resulting overview in Table 1 follows Atton (2001); Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes (2003); Hajek & Carpentier (2015) and incorporates two major approaches to the study of alternative media in CMS scholarship: structural (see “social context” and “content”) and process approach (see “organization” and “funding”).

The MAC model sets qualitative criteria for alternative media structure and behavior and acknowledges its anti-systemness. However, it does not elaborate on the type of this antagonism nor the way it is communicated. This framework is valuable for recognizing alternative media without strong antagonistic/populist characteristics. A Czech example is *Denik Referendum* (Referendum Daily), founded in 2009, a grassroots, left-wing outlet, which is dependent on community donations and has around 10,000 readers a day.

Table 1: MAC framework

Features	Mainstream media	Alternative media
Social Context	Serves the owners' interests Owners are often the business "elite" Market-oriented Supports the current state of social relations Low degree of users' control	Self-identifies as "alternative" Participatory production of small communities Encouragement of social change Relatively small reach and influence A higher degree of users' control Platform for those marginalized by the mainstream media A part of civil society
Content	Culturally, politically and socially conformist Broad reach Humor amuses the audience Fewer genres	Critical content challenging "elites" and mainstream media discourse Culturally, politically and socially radical Innovative graphical layout Divergent cultural choices and genres Humor relays political messages
Organization	Vertical organization High levels of hierarchy Bureaucracy	Horizontal organization, grassroots and collective ownership Low levels of hierarchy Use of low-cost technologies such as open access
Funding	Sponsored by commercial sources such as corporations Dependence on advertising	Sponsored from non-commercial sources such as grants and small donations Less pronounced advertising model

3.2. Alternative Media Anti-Systemness Matrix (AMAM)

The Alternative Media Anti-Systemness Matrix (see Table 2) by Holt (2018) builds on the notion of *ideological* and *relational* anti-systemness, adapting the political party typology of Capoccia (2002). *Ideological* anti-systemness entails a strong antagonism towards the mainstream media system; it considers it *beyond repair*. The media with *relational* anti-systemness do not necessarily have the same intensity of antagonism and a desire to replace the entire media system. However, such outlets still exert a polarizing effect on the whole media discourse, for instance, by opening debates avoided by mainstream media.

Table 2: AMAM matrix

	Relational anti-systemness present	Relational anti-systemness absent
Ideological anti-systemness present	Anti-system alternative media	"Irrelevant" alternative media
Ideological anti-systemness absent	Polarizing alternative media	Provocative alternative media/community media/mainstream media

In the Czech context, *TV Barrandov*, *Parlamentní Listy* and *AC24* all fit the *anti-system alternative media* category, with both types of the anti-systemness present. They display a strong antagonistic stance towards the media system and, simultaneously, attract a substantial amount of critical attention from the mainstream press (Svobodova, 2017). Media such as *Forum24* and *Echo24* also represent relational anti-systemness, with less *ideological* antagonism, resulting in *polarizing alternative media*. They are antagonistic towards the *oligarchized* mainstream and often harshly critical of media moguls such as Andrej Babis. The "*irrelevant*" *alternative media* exhibit ideological anti-systemness but fail to attract a significant readership. This is exemplified by short-lived radical blogs and online news media on the fringes of the media system. A fitting example is *Svet Kolem Nas* (World Around Us), which, while being *ideologically* antagonistic, was virtually ignored by the mainstream media. It had about 20,000 daily readers during its primetime and stopped publishing new articles in mid-2018 (NetMonitor, 2018). Finally, the fourth media type in the AMAM typology has neither ideological nor relational anti-systemness and should, therefore, be assessed by the other two typologies. While AMAM model usefully distinguishes between the types of relational antagonisms, it does not allow for ideological distinction of media outlets and does not consider the character and degree of the antagonistic communication.

3.3. Populist Political Communication Framework (PPCF)

The PPCF model draws from the scholarship on populism and political communication (see Table 3). As illustrated by cases as diverse as Germany, the U.S. and Hong Kong, populism and alternative media often intersect (Arzheimer, 2015; Bachl, 2018; Haller & Holt, 2018; Kenix, 2011; Wang, 2018). Populist communication is, in its *people-centrism*, *anti-elitism* and *exclusion of others*, fundamentally antagonistic (Hameleers, 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Thus, the *communication-centered* approach to the study of populism by Aalberg et al. (2017) can help us comprehend the character and degree of antagonism in alternative media. This approach also enables one to distinguish between populism *through* the media, populism *by* the media, and populist *citizen journalism*.

Parlamentni Listy fits the *completely antagonistic right-wing alternative media*, exhibiting all three dimensions of populist communication. It communicates antagonism through original content, but it also gives space to populist actors (such as the Czech President Milos Zeman) and provides a platform for readers' blog posts. At first glance *Halo Noviny* (Hello Newspaper), a daily print (increasingly active online) of the Czech Communist party, fits the *antagonistic left-wing alternative media*. A closer examination, however, also points to converging exclusionary political positions of the Communist party and the right-wing populist Freedom and Direct Democracy party towards outgroups such as Roma and refugees (Tiscali, 2018). Finally, examples of *exclusionary right-wing* and *empty populist alternative media* should be relatively rare as *exclusionary* and *people-centric* strategies in populist communication are infrequently present without *anti-elitism* (Blassnig, Ernst, Büchel, & Engesser, 2018; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Zulianello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli, 2018).

Table 3: PPCF matrix

	Completely antagonistic right-wing alternative media outlet	Antagonistic left-wing alternative media outlet	Exclusionary right-wing alternative media outlet	Empty populist alternative media outlet
People-centrism present	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anti-elitism present	Yes	Yes	No	No
Exclusionary populism present	Yes	No	Yes	No

4. Conclusion

Any examination of “alternative media” comes with its limitations and caveats. This means that alternative media theory is in some sense geographically and temporally relative (what is “mainstream” in one country could be “alternative” elsewhere) (Hajek & Carpentier, 2015). However, such relativity does not diminish the epistemic value of the concept if both limitations are reflected in the research design. We need to acknowledge complex local translations of “alternative” but still work with carefully planned cross-country studies. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize the time-dependency of our findings and be aware of the possibility of rapid shifts.

There is a substantive research agenda for alternative media scholars. For instance, how does the hybrid media system moderate the alternative media content (Chadwick, 2017)? How do the journalistic routines and ideological orientation of the alternative and mainstream journalists differ (Lindner, 2017; Reul, Paulussen, Raeijmaekers, van der Steen, & Maesele, 2018)? Is immigration a driving issue of media populism more in the alternative than in the mainstream media (Wettstein, 2018)? How does politicians’ use of alternative and mainstream media for mobilization differ (Atkinson & Leon Berg, 2012)? Do patterns of alternative media configuration across countries conform to the established media system models (Herrero et al., 2017)? In what way do alternative media intersect with some of the democratic challenges of the high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017)? These questions lead to diverse theoretical and methodological debates. However, the scientific and societal contribution should be worth it.

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Biography

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