

MEDIA TRUST IN POLARIZED AND FRAGMENTED MEDIA CONTEXT: AN ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE NEWS SOURCES

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Abstract

The contemporary news and information landscape offers abundant media choices, making selective exposure a prominent feature of user behavior. This study explores the motivations behind users' selective exposure and their choices among various media types, focusing on both mainstream and alternative news sources. Media trust plays a crucial role in shaping consumption patterns, yet it remains unclear to what extent individuals trust traditional news outlets and how this trust—or lack thereof—influences their reliance on alternative media. By examining users' perceptions and behaviors, this research aims to understand the evolving dynamics of media trust and its impact on news consumption. Study findings are based on original survey (n=408) collected from both male and female. Analysis focused on what are the primary sources of news and information seeking and what media sources are used as an alternative to primary sources for various purposes based on users' needs. What consequences media fragmentation and media polarization have on the users' perception about alternative media? Findings demonstrate that users have their own distinct meanings of mainstream and alternative news sources. Users' perception has moved from mainstream (TV and Newspaper) and alternative news sources (digital media) to mainstream (digital media) and alternative news sources (TV and Newspaper). Additionally, people in more fragmented and polarized media contexts, are more likely to utilize mass media such as tv and newspaper outlets as alternative news media and digital media such as social media, websites etc...as mainstream news source, even if more news sources are available.

INTRODUCTION

One of the media's primary roles from a democratic standpoint is to assist citizens in becoming informed (Grabe & Myrick, 2016). Required information exposure and scrutinizing the information is a crucial precondition for independent working of the news media (Carner, 2003; Marciel, 2023). However, this is insufficient on its own. Considering people's use and trust in traditional news media is also quite important. After all, if the majority of citizens do not consume or believe the news, even an environment with highly informational news media is not very useful for democracy (Reglitz, 2022).

Research also indicates that there is a sizeable majority who does not trust the traditional news media, or that traditional media trust is declining. For instance, according to Gallup, the percentage of Americans who believe they have a great deal of "trust and confidence" in "the mass media" which has reduced from 68% in 1968 to 32% in 2016 (Jones, 2018). While it has since increased, only 12 percent say they have "a great deal" of faith in the media (Guess et al., 2018; Vasist et al., 2024). Other comparative studies indicate that, across all nations examined, roughly 49% of people trust "majority of the news most of the

time" (Tobergte & Curtis, 2013). It is evident that traditional news media trust is at least brittle, even while assertions that generally the traditional media trust is declining are overblown (Fotopoulos, 2023).

In recent years, alternative news sources have seen significant shift. Because of this, it has become difficult to define alternative media and has become important to continuously update definitions to incorporate new forms of alternative media (Fotopoulos, 2023; Holt et al., 2019). Although scholars agree that news sources classified as alternatives can differ significantly on a spectrum from "alternative" to "mainstream" (Pimlott, 2015), little is known about how audiences view alternative media. What, in the opinion of many users, makes alternative news media? Since audiences have historically been actively involved in the creation and dissemination of alternative media material, using an audience-driven strategy is pertinent. When studying actual media material, media audiences have been found to have similar understandings of the media's roles and performance, prevailing journalistic norms, and the purposes of various media kinds (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Liao, 2023).

In addition to the aforementioned, traditional news media trust has faced a number of additional or heightened issues as a result of the shift to high-choice media contexts (R. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017a; Liao, 2023; Van Aelst et al., 2017). First, there are a lot of different information sources that compete with news media for people's attention now more than ever before. Second, many of the more recent rivals of news media are politicized and so-called alternative media, which frequently criticize established news media for being unreliable (R. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017a). Third, social media and digital platforms have reduced the need for news media to reach the public, enabling political and other social actors to circumvent the media while also opening avenues for criticism of it. Fourth, there is likely more misinformation, deception, and so-called what is termed as "fake news" in the public sphere than ever before (Bradshaw & Howard, 2021; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Fifth, it is well known that when faced with difficult information, people are more often engaged in deliberation and skepticism and to favor information that is congruent with their attitudes (Frauhammer & Neubaum, 2023).

It has also been demonstrated that views and usage of news media differ among various information settings (Ksiazek, 2019). In accordance with Van Aelst et al. (2017), we recognize that media choice and perception are significantly influenced by contextual circumstances in addition to being the result of personal predispositions. For example, alternative news outlets appear to thrive in more divided and polarized political information contexts (Ksiazek, 2019; Wells et al., 2017)

This study revolves around audience's choices to studying perceptions of news seekers about alternative media use. Our goal is to demonstrate how the political news and information choices differ in their preferences to use alternative news and how the structural characteristics of the information environment affect how different media kinds are seen as alternative. We used a classification continuum that ranged from traditional mass or "mainstream" media to self-described alternative media to determine how alternative various media kinds were considered to be. Future research is anticipated to benefit greatly from the measurement of self-reported alternative place of various media.

We used a classification continuum that ranged from traditional mass media or "mainstream" media to self-reported alternative media to determine how alternative various media kinds were considered to be. Future research is anticipated to benefit greatly from this continuum of self-reported alternativeness of various media. News consumers have different notions about what alternative news media are, according to our research using this tool.

The need for news media to be trusted has grown as a result of all the difficulties traditional news media face today. The question that "would people otherwise trust alternate news media information more than they would traditional sources of information?" is a repelling force for this research. Now it has become imperative to investigate the space of alternation media in users' routine life and the trust they have developed for alternate news sources.

1. Literature Review

Because alternative news sources can take many different forms, it can be challenging to agree on what their main constituents are (Holt et al., 2019; Pimlott, 2015). Digital technologies such as online platforms, social media, youtube journalism, and the appearance

of social media influencers have expanded the boundaries of what we call alternative media. Since it is now simpler to post content online regardless of one's level of skill, digital technology has also helped to blur the boundaries between various media (Harlow & Harp, 2013). Due to these advancements, academics are gradually moving away from the dichotomy of alternative and non-alternative media and instead view alternative media as existing on a media landscape that extends from "alternative" to "mainstream" (Cushion, 2024; Kenix, 2011).

There are various stages at which alternative/ non-alternative forms of media can intersect. For example, traditional journalism is increasingly being challenged by the voices of citizen/ freelance journalists and semi/non-professional actors, which are essential components of alternative news reporting (Kenix, 2011; Kivak, 2025). In a similar fashion, journalists regularly switch between traditional and alternative news sources for news reporting. Nevertheless, the issues discussed on alternate news media sources are adapted from traditional media coverage which makes up a big stream of alternate media content (Zeib, 2022; Zeib & Tahir, 2022). On the other hand, the content of alternate media sources such as X, Instagram is also discussed on traditional media sources in their news reporting.

According to Rauch (2015), when using an audience related framework specifically, the distinction between 'alternative' and 'non-alternative' news outlets carries potential repercussions. It helps users to make an impression on the bases of rational decisions and understanding about the accuracy and trustworthiness of traditional and alternate media sources. Prior research on the usage of alternative news outlets has shown that consumers share a common view of the roles and attributes that these platforms play, in terms of participatory behaviors, they most evidently differ in their perceptions of which particular channels best satisfy their alternativeness aspirations (Rauch, 2015).

Two macro-level elements have been identified by research on political information settings as the cause of pertinent country-specific variations in the prevalence of such alternative sources: the degree of media polarization and fragmentation (Van Aelst et al., 2017). First, when audiences spread over more different media venues, media fragmentation denotes

a rise in both supply and demand for media while also reducing the size of audiences for specific outlets and depriving news consumers of a common frame of reference. Second, media polarization is the process by which media audiences are further sorted into media outlets that are used by a comparatively homogeneous group of media users (referred to as in-group members) who share their political beliefs (R. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017a). Polarization in the political landscape of any country does not only encourage more partisan media outlets, which fulfils the need of bipolar audience but also strengthen the need for alternative media i.e. digital and social media.

Heft et al. (2020) determined that distinct political information environments offer distinct opportunity structures by examining content attributes and user behavior with alternative news content on social media for ideologically polarized audiences. They further pointed out that because there are more hostile stances amongst media outlets in more polarized environments, alternative media has the opportunity to flourish there.

Media consumers are more likely to rely on sources that are more in line with their personal political beliefs when there is media fragmentation and division (Blum et al., 2024). The users of digital technologies have been growing continuously in the past two decades in terms of accessibility to the internet and internet-related applications (Tariq & Zeib, 2023). In this perspective, users considerations should have been given prime importance. The audience's significant role stems from alternative media sources with the characteristics of communal, activist, participatory and user-generated content (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Digital media's role in past few years have been dominated by social and political movements such as Arab spring, one million voices against FARC in Colombia, military coup failure against Tayyip *Erdogan* and political and electoral campaigns throughout the world (Zeib & Tahir, 2022).

Alternative media, which originated in the context of social movements, frequently advocate for certain social concerns or represent different political stances, favoring people who interact with content that aligns with their political beliefs (a practice known as

selective exposure) (Blum et al., 2024; Kenix, 2011; Rauch, 2015).

Fletcher & Nielsen (2017b) and Prior (2007) taking into account hyper-partisan alternative news websites, discovered that the number of alternative media consumers is higher in nations with a greater supply of these sources than in those with a lower supply. In a high-choice media environment, media becomes more fragmented and competitive in their products, the coexistence of traditional and non-traditional media outlets is natural (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). Karlsen et al. (2020) shown that news consumers are more inclined to use alternative media when they perceive less reliance on a single media outlet, which helps to explain fragmentation as giving media users more options when choosing their political information. Put another way, news consumers are more inclined to interact with alternative sources when they have access to a greater number of information sources. Therefore, more favorable conditions for promoting alternative news sources to a wider audience are found in fragmented, polarized media contexts.

2.1 Media Trust

Additionally, Heft et al. (2020) proposed that a key element in understanding the growth in demand for alternative media is public faith in the media. Trust in democratic institutions is eroding in more divisive media environments (Prats et al., 2021). Given that media can be viewed as an institution (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020), people's trust in "mainstream" news media is likely to decline in more divisive political information environments. This could reduce their willingness to rely on traditional media sources and increase their use of alternative media (R. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017a).

Synthesizing the above discussion, the degree to which news consumers acknowledge using other sources may be impacted by media fragmentation and polarization in the political information environment. First, media environments that are more polarized and fragmented provide more favorable conditions for alternative news sources compared to those that are more widely visible, which should raise the probability that people will consider themselves to be users of alternative news sources. Second, people should be more hesitant to identify as consumers of so-called "mainstream"

media and more inclined to self-identify as alternative news users in increasingly fragmented and polarized media settings because there is generally less trust in news media.

Additionally, trust and credibility are frequently employed interchangeably or viewed as aspects of one another (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). Nowadays, credibility is seen as a more limited term than trust since it focuses on a particular assessment of media content (i.e., the perceived truth of information at a single moment in time) and is not future-focused.

According to some, mistrust is the same as skepticism and is defined as systematic, reasonable doubt (Graber et al., 2008; Schiffrin, 2019). Distrust, on the other hand, is linked to (though distinct from) negative suspicion and cynicism, and it represents the strong conviction (without supporting data or justification) that the thing is unreliable (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Park et al., 2024). This leads to the question of whether no trust is equivalent to distrust. However, media trust as a type of institutional trust is the focus of the majority of study on trust in news media (i.e., the trust people have in public institutions and professional roles). As a result, there are two types of media trust: generalized (i.e., people's institutional faith in news media or journalism in general) and specific (i.e., people's trust in particular media objects) (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). As a result, both generalized and specific media trust might apply to a variety of items. Therefore, media trust can be either generalized or specific, for example, trusting a newspaper or a journalist and trust in the news media. As a result, it is evident that the term "media" may refer to a wide range of partially overlapping aspects of media, especially in high-choice media contexts that are experiencing an unprecedented amount of media. This is crucial for evaluating time trends as well, especially when questions concern unidentified media. When answering questions regarding media trust in prior low-choice media environments, people were probably considering quite identical mainstream news media, assuming an accessibility bias is at play (Strömbäck et al., 2022).

The media they are considering may be more politicized, high-profile, and diversified in today's media contexts, especially in nations where these media are well-established (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Indeed, according to Daniller et al. (2017), changes in

the most accessible referent—that is, what media individuals are thinking of—when answering questions about media trust may account for up to 60% of the drop in the credibility of press among Americans. This serves as a reminder that "the meaning of survey responses might still alter even the survey language, for the items, is kept consistent."

People incur a certain risk when they trust the news media. This is a result of journalists favoring certain information over others. As a result, when individuals trust the news media, they trust certain choices (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Steindl et al., 2024). More precisely, they assert that there are four distinct dimensions of confidence in the media: faith in journalistic assessment, trust in the accuracy of portrayals, trust in the selectivity of facts, and trust in the selectivity of topics.

In summary, this research demonstrates that there is considerable variation in the conceptualization of "trust" and "news media" in relation to "news media trust". While it seems theoretically sound to view news media trust as comprising multiple sub-dimensions, empirical research must conclude that measuring news media trust's sub dimensions with enough discriminant validity is challenging (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). Having said that, there is consensus that news media trust is referred as the relationship between citizens, who trust and the news media, who is trusted, where citizens, whether explicitly stated or implicitly, expect that their interactions with the news media will result in gains rather than losses during uncertain times of use.

2.2 Effects of Polarization and High-choice Media environment

Two macro-level elements have been identified by research on political information settings as the cause of pertinent country-specific variations in the prevalence of such alternative sources: the degree of media polarization and fragmentation. As audiences spread across more different media outlets, media fragmentation denotes a rise in both supply and demand for media while also reducing the size of audiences for individual outlets and depriving news consumers of a common frame of reference (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

Media polarization is the process by which media audiences are further sorted into media outlets that

are used by a comparatively homogeneous group of media users who share their political beliefs (R. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017b). Suspicions about increasing mass polarization, or the polarization of common people, have emerged in recent years. Even while surveys indicate a rise in political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

In addition to creating more partisan media outlets, growing political polarization in the US also aided the establishment of alternative media in the US media landscape. Heft et al. (2020) came to the conclusion that various political information environments offer various opportunity structures for political parties to flourish on alternative media by analyzing content characteristics and uses of alternative media content on social media. Media consumers are more likely to rely on media sources that are more in line with their personal political beliefs when there is media fragmentation and polarization (Blum et al., 2024; Rauch, 2015; Zeib & Shahzad, 2025). Originating from the social movement context, alternative media frequently support specific social causes or political viewpoints, and they encourage people to interact with content that aligns with their own beliefs. This practice is referred to as selective exposure (Kenix, 2011; Rabb et al., 2023). Based on the above-mentioned literature, we hypothesize that

H1: Respondents who use alternative media are more prevalent in polarized and fragmented information environments.

H2: Respondents who use alternative news media in highly polarized and fragmented information environments also use "mainstream" news media

2. Methods and Measures

The respondents (n= 408) were selected through simple random sampling and from every age group. Total respondents include male (n=217) and female (n=191). A cross-sectional survey was conducted using a questionnaire comprising below mentioned variables. In order to be included in the study, participants had to consent to participate. Other demographic details are provided in Table 1. Linear regression with bootstrapping using SPSS was used to test the relationships stated above.

3.1 Media Trust

Media trust was measured as institutional trust and information trust.

Institutional trust

Primarily alternate media trust is measured by asking the respondents about their trust or confidence in media such as press, TV and Digital media. As an example, "In general, I trust and feel confident about using following mass media - newspapers, TV and internet -when it comes to reporting the news" and responses include fully accurately and fairly - a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all. Confidence in media include the responses e.g., never trusted/confident to always trusted/confident. The scale is adapted from (Guess et al., 2018) and (Carlsson et al., 2024). Other measures include, 'What do you think of following media sources e.g. daily newspaper, television news and digital media. Pairing of words comprises fair-unfair, biased-unbiased, tells whole story- does not tell the whole story, can-cannot be trusted, factual-opinionated. According to Reuters Digital News Report, a new contribution to cross-national research uses the following question to gauge media trust: "Please mark the level of agreement with the following statements: I think you can trust most news on social media/news on TV/ News in Newspaper most of the time' (Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, 2024).

Information trust

Trust in information coming from news media of various types (e.g. newspapers, television, digital media) is measured along following parameters

News media in general: 'Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from news media?

Journalists: 'Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the journalists of mentioned media types?

Media content: 'Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media when they cover political topics?

2.1. Measurement of Media Fragmentation

Media fragmentation is measured by comparing the share of active news users of particular media type with size of total market. This included the number of total respondents for every media type (Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, 2024).

2.2. Media Polarization Index

Audience polarization is measured on 0-9 scale on two distinct positions the average position of the political orientations of the three most used news outlets (TV, Newspaper and Digital media) from the average political orientations. Our own data set was used to determine the political stances of the audiences. We determined the average deviation between the political orientation of the audiences of each media outlet and the population's average values (Richard Fletcher et al., 2019; R. Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017b). The average divergence score of all the channels was used to create our final metric, which was then weighted by each channel's audience share.

We created a combined index using the five previously mentioned indicators in order to examine the impact of differing levels of fragmentation and polarization in each media source. We ranked the three mass media sources for our analysis. The mean score of the ranks of these indicators was then determined denoting greater degrees of media polarization and fragmentation with higher numbers

2.3. Alternative News Media Use (self-perceived)

Alternative media was regarded as corrective to previously utilized mainstream media use. Respondents were asked.

"After being disappointed by the news and information coverage of their most frequently used media outlet, people look for different information sources e.g. they might go for online sources where their viewpoint is more accurately portrayed, cross-check material from other sources, or watch TV to confirm the information. Do you associate yourself with this?". Respondents were given the options 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always (Holt et al., 2019).

Our second determinant of alternative media use was measured by asking the respondents to mention the name of alternative media they mostly use and the purpose of alternative media use by mentioning the

categories e.g. fact checking, news verification, opinion seeking, portraying their viewpoint, getting diverse viewpoints. Responses were on 5-point Likert scale e.g. never to always.

2.4. Mainstream Media Sources

The respondents were simply asked to identify the mainstream media sources (e.g. tv and newspaper) based on organizational structures. Additionally they have institutionalized broadcast and published editorial content by professional journalists from public or private corporate media.

2.5. Miscellaneous Sources of Information

This led us to combine four (4) categories into the following scale of above-mentioned media use types, which are carefully arranged between the two endpoints from mainstream to alternative media use: use of self-reported alternative media use, usage of self-reported alternative media use and miscellaneous

sources of information, miscellaneous sources of information and mainstream media and only mainstream media outlets. Social media platforms may be considered as other media sources in a situation when they allow consumers to connect with opposing viewpoints or follow various news sources. We have conceptualized ‘miscellaneous sources of information’ (M=3.01, SD=1.23) as all sources which come between alternative media sources and mainstream media sources. This has been provided to bridge the gap between alternative media use and mainstream media use.

2.6. Control Variables

We account for demographic factors including gender, age, education and profession. Additionally, we also included political interest, news interest, and political knowledge as well.

Table 1 Demographic details

Variable	Value
Gender	Male= 53%, Female= 43%
Age	18-23= 29%, 24-29=24%, 30-35= 23, 36-41= 11%, more than 41= 13%
Education level	Undergrad=38%, Graduate=31%, post-graduate=7%, other= 24 %
Professional status	Employed= 42%, Unemployed= 17%, Student=41%
Political Interest	Mean=3.6, SD=1.71
News Interest	Mean=2.1, SD=1.96
Political Knowledge	Mean=2.6, SD=1.03

Results and Analysis

It is frequently considered that media credibility is virtually declining everywhere. This is probably because of the long-term trend in terms of media users in Pakistan whose trust is dwindling in the ‘press’.

Additionally, this mistrust is generalized on mainstream media and that people prefer inferring the veracity and agreed view from the number of times it has been repeated.

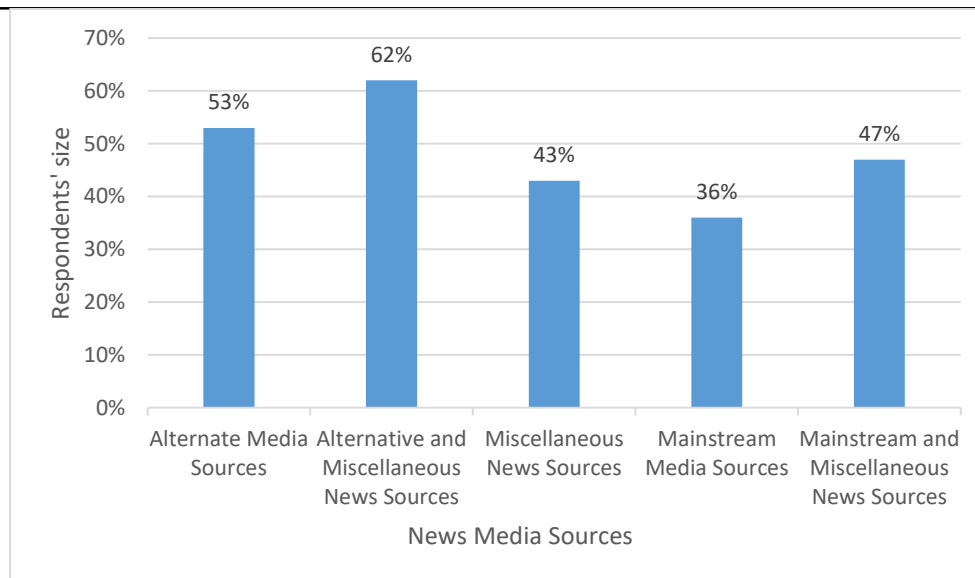


Figure 1. Share of all news media types

According to our findings, more than half of users of alternative news sources ($n=253$, 62%) cite sources that they considered as "alternative". These include digital media such as social media, online search engines, online applications and websites run by political stakeholders, but that can nevertheless be used in place of mainstream media. Ironically, a sizable percentage of respondents ($n=149$, 36.5%) gave titles that fit their role as mainstream media. Respondents had the option to selection more than one options and an open-ended response for miscellaneous sources. Finally, 53 percent of respondents who regarded themselves as the users of alternative media actually used news sources that fulfilled the research criteria for alternative news media.

These respondents discovered that there was enough diversity in the mainstream category titles to meet their need for different perspectives. Next section will explore if this is true generally or only for specific media settings.

Further, our survey findings imply that people's opinions about the reliability of certain news items reflect these divisive views. Across a range of media sources, we discovered evidence of high levels polarization in some media sources e.g. for TV ($M=7.96$), Newspaper ($M=5.62$) and digital media ($M=3.62$). Mean score of television polarization appeared very high. This shows higher level of polarization in mainstream media in Pakistan.

Further, we asked respondents to rate their level of trust in major news outlets during the pre-survey. The average expressed trust for all media types is shown in Table 2 and Table 3. The findings demonstrate strongly divided opinions regarding all forms of media, which is in line with the data on public opinion already available.

Linear regression tests with cluster bootstrapping were conducted to test both hypotheses (MacKinnon, 2023). Dependent variables included in regression were alternative news media use and mainstream to alternative news media sources. The primary purpose was to know if people who consume news in increasingly polarized and fragmented media environments think of themselves as alternative news consumers more frequently. The findings demonstrated justification for the hypothesis as shown in the table, news media users more often associate themselves with alternative media in mainstream media environment which more polarized and fragmented ($B=.145, SE=.014, p=.001$). We then conducted an additional test for variance that allowed us to better understand differences in media types. We found clear indication that media users in Pakistan are using alternative media sources for political news. Further, the reasons for using alternative media sources were also reported. Findings show that 68% of alternative media users use alternative media as a primary source of news and information, 58% turn to alternative sources to verify

mainstream media information, 34% consult alternative sources for opinion seeking and building, 72 % use alternative sources for portraying their viewpoint, 24 % for getting diverse viewpoints. Higher

values represent higher likelihood of using alternative media sources in replacement of other sources. Moreover, a significant majority chose digital media as alternative to the other news media sources.

Table2 Linear Regression with cluster bootstrapping (Model 1)

Variables	Model 1 Alternative news media users			
	B	SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Gender	-.023***	.013	-.039	-.014
Age	-.011***	.002	-.010	-.004
Education	.034***	.011	.028	.061
Profession	.037***	.007	.021	.036
Political Interest	.033***	.016	.018	.035
News Interest	-.006*	.013	-.017	-.008
Political knowledge	.016***	.002	.015	.064
Trust in Television	-.124**	.001	-.119	-.090
Trust in Newspaper	-.101***	.005	-.121	-.097
Trust in alternative media (Digital)	.167***	.004	.165	.183
Polarization and Fragmentation	.145***	.008	.043	.057

(N=408): $p > .001$, $R^2 = .242$; *** $P < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ and $p < .1$ (two-tailed).

Table 3 Linear Regression with cluster bootstrapping (Model 2)

Variables	Model 2 Alternative news media users			
	B	SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Gender	-.012***	.023	-.032	-.011
Age	.009***	.001	.010	.084
Education	.021	.016	.047	.051
Profession	.043***	.029	.031	.063
Political Interest	.044***	.016	.029	.053
News Interest	-.002*	.013	-.017	-.008
Political knowledge	.037***	.031	.015	.044
Trust in TV	-.108*	.001	-.119	-.047
Trust in Newspaper	-.121***	.016	-.121	-.067
Trust in alternative media (Digital)	.098***	.013	.143	.196
Polarization and Fragmentation	.085***	.024	.057	.077

(N=408): $p > .001$, $R^2 = .165$, *** $P < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ and $p < .1$ (two-tailed).

Further, we tested our second hypothesis (H2), which states that respondents who use alternative news

media in highly polarized and fragmented information environments also use "mainstream"

news media. Our findings demonstrate that the respondents in highly polarized and fragmented political environment use mainstream media as an alternative to other news media sources ($B=.153$, $SE=.097$, $p=.01$). An additional analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was run to identify calculate the difference between mainstream media sources. The association between alternative news sources and

Television as mainstream news source was stronger than the association between alternative news sources and newspaper. We asked an additional question about the motivations of using alternative news media. Respondents use mainstream news sources as alternative, mainly to verify the news, fact checking.

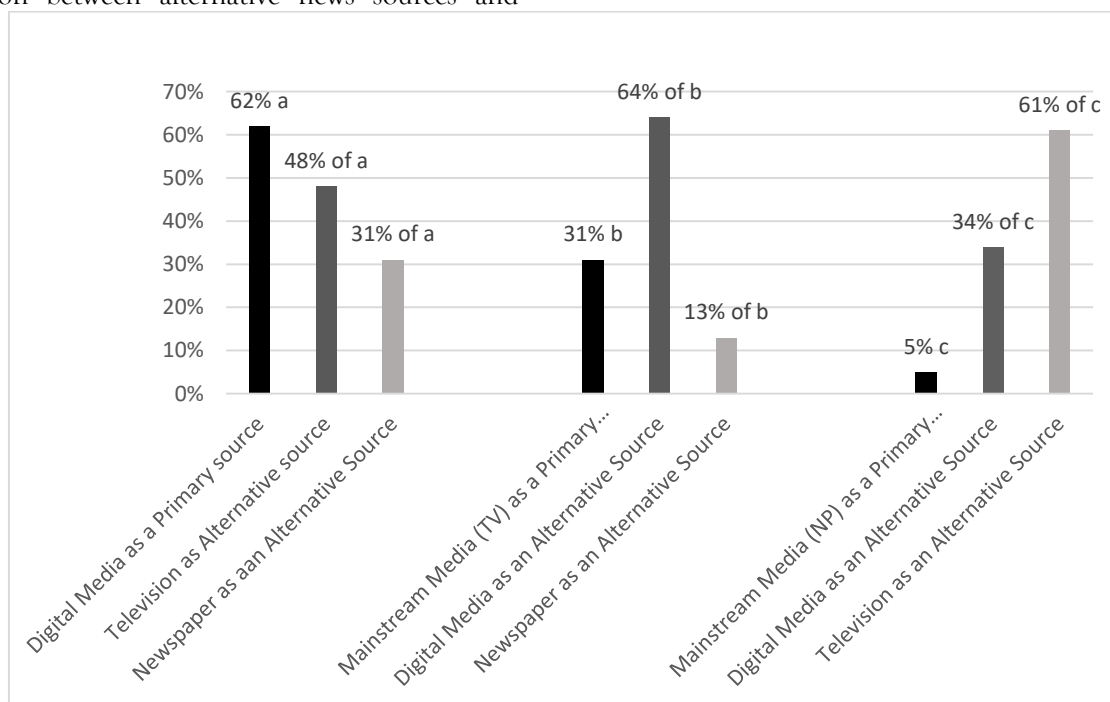


Figure 2 Share of all media types as Primary Source and Alternative News Source

3. Discussion

We looked into the dynamics of public trust in different media types including mainstream media (TV and newspaper) digital media and miscellaneous sources of information (face-to-face interaction, newsletters etc). Existing political setups and information dissemination environments in most of the democracies in the world have become more fragmented and polarized (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Because media outlets exhibit similarities in their news reporting, business models, and content, it has become more challenging to classify them into either of these groups (Rauch, 2015). Additionally, the audience’s perspective has not been recorded due to less attention paid to this phenomenon.

The purpose of this study was to determine what kinds of media sources consumers consider to be alternatives and how much increasingly fragmented,

divided political information environments help to further conflate mainstream and alternative. One of our primary goal was to test whether people who consume news in increasingly polarized and fragmented media environments think of themselves as alternative news consumers more frequently and whether the respondents who use alternative news media in highly polarized and fragmented information environments also use "mainstream" news media. The finding provided justification for both hypotheses.

Findings demonstrate that a lot of people don't trust traditional news outlets. Additionally, it is evident that the shift to high-choice media contexts has resulted in a number of fresh and worsened issues that threaten to erode public confidence in news media, whether it is either already declining or has been more

constant so far. A plethora of studies summarizes certain purposes that alternative media fulfils, however, our study's findings. However, they classify both mainstream and alternative sources as alternative media when they were asked to identify. Nevertheless, It's possible that many mainstream sites use elements of alternative media to thrive in a fragmented and polarized media landscape, which explains why many US respondents also list these channels as alternative news sources.

When asked about the specifics of their alternative media, news consumers in more polarized and fragmented political information settings are more likely to mention using alternative media in general, but they frequently give titles that are more typically associated with the mainstream media category. The primary conclusion drawn from our research is that various media forms can serve the role of alternativeness in various political information contexts. At least in highly polarized and fractured contexts, media sources that do not consider themselves alternatives can fulfill their particular functions.

Our findings suggest that political information environments that exhibit increased media polarization and fragmentation have a role in the continued convergence of mainstream and alternative media. This is significant because research has primarily used alternative media to align with traditional media. According to the study's findings, traditional mainstream media are attempting to set themselves apart from other channels by employing alternative media tactics in an effort to remain current and "relatable". This result is consistent with what we expected theoretically. We discovered the oddity that when users seek opinions that are not mainstream, they cite both self-described alternative media and traditional news outlets. Pakistan's policy environment provides alternative media with exceptionally favorable opportunity frameworks, and its self-declared alternative media audience is the greatest of all media types.

4. Recommendations

Despite bridging the gap which previous studies have left, this study has its own limitations. The study focused on two mainstream media channels tv and newspaper, generally. Future studies can extend the

analysis including many other mainstream news sources including private and public tv channels and newspaper chains. We did not distinguish between the various degrees of alternativeness in our coding, even though our classification of self-perceived alternative news use is in line with the most recent academic definition (Holt et al., 2019). Building on this study's initial attempt at categorization, future research should take into account a more nuanced definition of alternativeness for classifying alternative media sites. Applying quantitative methods would result more significant findings. Additionally, this study only considers the outlets' alternativeness and the audiences' perception of it. Future research using actual content of these channels to compare these two evaluation levels would be intriguing.

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