

Misplaced optimism: Alternative media and the failure to build a pluralist society

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Abstract

As the twentieth century bled into the twenty-first, a more pluralist society facilitated by a pluralist journalistic field was imagined. Barriers to ‘doing journalism’ were lower online, and a vast array of media voices on the increasingly interactive web signaled how a more diverse journalistic field could invigorate democracy (Ruiz, et al. 2011). Or so many hoped (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006).

A quarter century later, there are signs this optimism was misplaced. This paper draws from two studies looking at the past decades of digital, political, alternative journalism to explore the promise of an agonistic journalistic field. Each analyzes metajournalistic discourses (Carlson, 2015) as a specific form of social-constructive ‘journalistic talk’ (Eldridge 2024, *forthcoming*). The first uses archived websites to establish a longitudinal perspective across ten years. The second compares US and UK alternative political media at discrete critical discourse moments (Carvalho, 2008) –2019 coverage of the first impeachment of Donald Trump and BBC’s Panorama investigation into antisemitism within the UK Labour Party.

Its findings highlight a shift from agonistic, critical, alternative *journalistic* voices, towards something more antagonistic, divisive, and overtly political (see: Eldridge, 2019). This is particularly evident in alternative media’s use of pejoration when attacking other journalistic actors, and in their use of a plural-personal form of address to construct their audience. Rather than fostering counter-journalistic diversity or espousing pluralism, such discourses intensify counter-public fragmentation and retrenched polarization.

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Weighing these journalistic narratives against wider trends of calcified political grievance, alternative media discourses reflect a similar march towards intractable fragmentation (c.f. Mouffe, 2013; Sides, Tausanovitch & Vavreck, 2022). This paper concludes with a note of caution for journalism scholars. It argues that normative wish-casting and a traditional journalism bias in journalism research has overlooked the ways in which alternative media were rending the journalistic field, and that the journalistic field is best understood as a microcosm of the larger societal macrocosm (Bourdieu, 2005). This offers a clear reminder that journalism can neither save, nor save itself from, the dynamics of division in our wider societies.

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Keywords

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Bio

Dr Scott A Eldridge II is Assistant Professor/Senior Lecturer with the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies. His research explores the boundaries of the journalistic field, interloper media, and peripheral journalistic actors. He is the author of numerous studies and books on digital journalism, including *Online Journalism from the Periphery: Interloper Media and the Journalistic Field* (Routledge, 2018), and has co-edited several volumes on the development of digital journalism research, including most recently *The Institutions Changing Journalism: Barbarian Inside the Gate* (Routledge, 2022, with Patrick Ferrucci). From 2018-2022 he was Associate Editor of *Digital Journalism* and is series editor of the *Frontiers in Journalism Studies* book series with Peter Lang.

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