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The System Is Corrupted, and the Mainstream Media Is Lying to us! Exploring the Relation Between Affinity Toward Conspiracy Myths and Alternative News Media Usage

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Abstract

Alternative news media (ANM) have become an important information source for certain audiences. Research shows that ANM usage is linked to a preference for populist parties and the use of digital media. However, ANM existed before the rise of populism and digital media over the last two decades. Thus, we must assume that additional factors are related to ANM usage. To investigate such factors, we conducted a cross-sectional online survey (*N* = 1,212) of the Swiss population. We analyze how affinity toward conspiracy myths, preference for populist parties, the usage of social media, and the Telegram messenger app are related to ANM usage. The results indicate that people with a high affinity toward conspiracy myths are more likely to use ANM. Different than in previous studies, preference for populist politics is not related to higher ANM usage in Switzerland. Our results suggest that the political context matters when studying ANM usage and that the strong focus on right-wing populism might lead to scholars missing part of the bigger picture. Furthermore, our findings indicate that the use of social media and Telegram, which recently gained relevance as a channel for mobilizing protests during the COVID-19 pandemic, positively connect with ANM consumption.

In recent years, alternative news media (ANM) has become a critical information source for certain news users (Holt, 2018; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020; Steppat, Castro, & Esser, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further directed scientific and public attention toward ANM (Boberg, Quandt, & Schatto-Eckrodt, 2020). However, we know little about the factors that drive people to use ANM as an information source.

The current literature typically identifies two main factors related to ANM usage: political attitudes and media usage. Populist attitudes, whose core dimensions are anti-elitist views and belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty (Wuttke, Schimpf, & Schoen, 2020), are one of the most prominently featured explanations for ANM usage (Müller & Bach, 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Digital media usage, especially social media, has often been shown to be positively related to ANM usage (Chan, 2017; Müller & Bach, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Furthermore, users of ANM distrust the mainstream media and are skeptical about news quality (Schulze, 2020). However, ANM existed before the rise of populism and digital media over the last two decades and has its roots in the alternative press of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Schwaiger, 2022; Wimmer, 2015). ANM is a complex phenomenon as users perceive very different news sources as ANM (Steppat et al., 2021). Thus, we must assume

that other factors than populism and digital media are related to ANM usage.

The most basic definition of ANM assumes an oppositional stance to an identified mainstream (Atton, 2011; Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019). We argue that an overarching affinity toward conspiracy myths (Schwaiger, Schneider, & Rauchfleisch, 2022) offers a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between political attitudes and ANM usage. Affinities toward conspiracy myths are rooted in anti-system attitudes (cf. Holt, 2018) or anti-establishment orientations (cf. Uscinski et al., 2021) and only partially overlap with populist attitudes.

With our preregistered cross-sectional study, which is based on a standardized online survey (*N* = 1,212), we analyze how affinity toward conspiracy myths and digital media consumption are related to ANM usage in Switzerland.[1] By doing so, we derive characteristics of typical Swiss ANM users. Switzerland is an interesting case for studying ANM use. Few Swiss-specific ANM outlets exist, but people often

[1] We only include hypotheses with alternative media usage as the dependent variable for this paper. We renamed one of our main variables post hoc as we found it to be more appropriate. We now speak of affinity toward conspiracy myths instead of anti-system attitudes. Furthermore, hypothesis 4 has been edited for clarity from its original form in the preregistration without changing its meaning. URL to preregistration: https://osf.io/tz57k?view_only=920181bf826b40288c653cc91a2bbe51.

turn to internationally renowned ANM, especially from the larger neighboring countries like Germany (Schwaiger, 2022). Therefore, we study ANM usage in a country with a low domestic supply of ANM and distinct cross-border ANM consumption.

Framework

Alternative news media (ANM) see themselves in opposition to an identified mainstream in media and society (Holt et al., 2019; Schwaiger, 2022) and often take a different stance on issues to give ignored citizens a voice (Atton & Couldry, 2003). Generally, the diversity of voices in public debates is regarded as desirable and vital for democratic societies (Van Aelst et al., 2017). This is also reflected in the roots of ANM, for instance, the alternative press of left-wing movements during the 1960s and 1970s (Atkinson, 2017; Wimmer, 2015). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some contemporary ANM have been shown to disseminate extremist views, misinformation, and conspiracy theories (Boberg et al., 2020; Schemer et al., 2021). Consequently, research shows dysfunctional characteristics of ANM audiences, like a higher affinity toward right-wing populism and lower trust in news media (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to better understand which factors are related to the use of ANM as a source of information.

Political Attitudes

Party preferences and populist attitudes are shown to correlate with news consumption patterns (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). A factor often related to ANM consumption is the political preferences for right-wing populist parties. Müller and Schulz (2021) show that in Germany, ANM consumption is related to a higher likelihood of voting for the German right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—a finding which is confirmed by Müller and Bach (2021). We assume a similar relationship between attitudes toward the largest populist party in Switzerland, the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), and ANM usage. The SVP is an established political party and part of the Swiss parliament but is also considered a prototypical populist party and one of the first parties to adopt the populist politics style in Europe (Bornschier, 2007; McGann & Kitschelt, 2005). Thus, we formulate the following noncausal hypothesis:

H1: The more positive the attitude toward the right-wing populist party SVP, the more likely an individual is an ANM user.

Many studies on ANM and populism do not only look at preferences for populist parties but also populist attitudes (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Although disagreement persists about the exact definition of populist attitudes (Wuttke et al., 2020), most definitions regard anti-elitism as the core of the concept (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Schulz et al., 2018). This resonates with the self-perception of ANM in opposition to the mainstream and elites. Müller and Schulz (2021) show that populist attitudes are related to frequent ANM consumption. However, ANM are often discussed in the context of conspiracy myths (e.g., Boberg et al., 2020; Mancosu & Vegetti, 2021), so ANM consumption might be related to a more general and diverse set of attitudes against the sociopolitical mainstream (Holt,

2018). This would include, for instance, skepticism against elites or science, which belong to the core definition of conspiracy myths (Schwaiger et al., 2022). Thus, we assume that the affinity toward conspiracy myths as a generalized political attitude (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) rooted in anti-system attitudes (Schwaiger et al., 2022) is positively related to ANM consumption.

Affinity toward conspiracy myths can have different dimensions. Schwaiger et al. (2022) distinguish between populism, far-right and far-left attitudes, anti-elitism, science skepticism, and criticism of the political system. These dimensions are discussed in relation to ANM usage in the literature, albeit to a different extent. Current research on ANM focuses primarily on *populism* and *far-right attitudes* (Holt, 2018). However, ANM initially emerged from the left-wing political spectrum (Wimmer, 2015), highlighting *left-wing attitudes* (e.g., criticism of social inequality) as a possible factor related to their usage. ANM are also often explicitly discussed in the context of conspiracy myths (e.g., Boberg et al., 2020; Mancosu & Vegetti, 2021) which moves *anti-elitism* and *science skepticism* into the center of attention. Especially the COVID-19 crisis showed that a critical stance toward measures to fight the pandemic was often related to science skepticism (Rutjens, van der Linden, & van der Lee, 2021). Anti-elitism and science skepticism, thus, should resonate with alternative narratives found in ANM. Finally, *criticism of the political system* is related to ANM usage. Chan (2017), for instance, showed a connection between ANM usage and anger about the political direction the government was taking to handle Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. Thus, we investigate the relationship between affinity toward conspiracy myths and ANM usage.

H2: The higher the affinity toward conspiracy myths, the more likely an individual is an ANM user.

Media Use

ANM usage is related to frequent consumption of social media (Chan, 2016; Müller & Bach, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Chan (2016), for instance, found a positive relationship between social media usage and the consumption of ANM in his representative study on protest intentions in Hong Kong. Using web-tracking and survey data, Müller & Bach (2021) show that social media are important referrers to ANM. Given the clear picture provided by the literature, we assume that frequent information consumption on social media is positively related to ANM consumption.

H3: The higher the social media usage for information purposes, the more likely an individual is an ANM user.

The topical focus of most ANM lies on political news (Boberg et al., 2020; Schwaiger, 2022), and political interest is positively associated with mainstream but also non-mainstream media consumption (Schulze, 2020; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). As in her international comparative study, Schulze (2020) shows that social media usage for news increases the likelihood of ANM usage, we suppose:

H4: Higher social media use for news and politics is positively related to a higher likelihood of ANM usage.

In their self-description, many alternative news media position themselves as correctives of the mainstream news media (Schwaiger, 2022). Often public service broadcasters (PSB)

are seen as the nucleus of the mainstream media. Trust in PSB (Schulze, 2020) and mainstream media (Steppat et al., 2021) are both negatively related to ANM usage. Accordingly, we assume the following hypothesis:

> H5: The higher the broadcast media usage, the less likely an individual will be an ANM user.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the messenger app Telegram played an important role as a mobilization channel for protests against governmental pandemic measures (Nachtwey, Schafer, & Frei, 2020). Telegram became very popular and 'developed into a hub for alternative truths and their dissemination' (Schwarzenegger, 2023, p. 17), with alternative news media as content providers (Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). Telegram has also become a platform of choice for actors with alternative or extremist views (Rogers, 2020; Urman & Katz, 2022). Therefore, in deviation from our preregistration, we included the usage of Telegram as a further media use factor for our analysis.

> H6: The higher the usage of the messenger app Telegram, the more likely an individual will be an ANM user.

Methods

The study is based on a representative online survey (*N* = 1,212 interviews; *N* = 766 without any missing items for our analysis) of the Swiss population with online access aged 18–74 (sample characteristics in Appendix C). Participants were recruited from an online-access panel of a research company. To represent the structure of the Swiss population, a proportional quota was applied to sex, age, education, and the three main language regions. The questionnaire was available in German, French, and Italian language. Data collection took place from November 23 to December 7, 2020.

Measures
ANM usage.
We measured ANM using a list frequency technique (Andersen, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2016; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020). The list of ANM for this study (see Table 1) was compiled based on various scientific studies and consultations with experts (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020; Schwaiger, 2022). The list included the most popular outlets at the time and was rather homogenous as it exclusively contained ANM with a right-wing orientation, albeit to a different degree and not on all issues. First, participants were asked if they knew the ANM outlets on the list. Then we asked people who knew ANM outlets about their usage of these ANM on a scale from 1 ('never') to 5 ('every day'). As described in the preregistration, we then measured ANM usage with a binary variable, as proposed by Müller and Schulz (2021). If respondents did not know any ANM or indicated that they did not use the ANM they knew, we coded 0. If they indicated that they use at least one ANM outlet occasionally or more frequently, we coded 1. Thus, an ANM user is any person who uses at least one ANM from our list from time to time.

Political attitudes.
We measured the attitude toward the right-wing populist party SVP with a single item on a 5-point scale from 1 ('do not like it at all') to 5 ('like it very much').

Table 1. Self-reported Usage of Individual ANM outlets in %

Outlet	Don't know the outlet (%)	Know, but never use the outlet (%)	Use the outlet at least 'very rarely' (%)
Breitbart News	92.24	5.76	2.00
Ken FM	96.34	2.31	1.35
RT Deutsch	94.51	2.60	2.89
Legitim.ch	97.78	0.90	1.32
uncut-news.ch	98.34	0.51	1.15
Les Observateurs	94.09	2.42	3.49
Epoch Times	97.81	0.86	1.32
Tichys Einblick	98.86	0.38	0.76
Schweizer Morgenpost	97.69	1.16	1.15
COMPACT Magazin	95.37	2.14	2.49
Sputniknews.com	94.08	3.07	2.85
Primato Nazionale	99.28	0.02	0.70
Overall[1]	80.3	9.1	10.6

Note. Online survey representative for the population of Switzerland (*N* = 1,212). Respondents were asked about their ANM usage with a predefined list of ANM outlets.
[1] Overall category refers to usage of at least one of the ANM on the list.

Affinities towards conspiracy myths.
We measured affinities toward conspiracy myths with a 12 item-scale, out of which we calculated a mean index (see Appendix A for full scale). The scale was grouped into five dimensions and included two statements on populist attitudes (e.g., citizens often agree, but politicians pursue very different goals), general anti-system attitudes (e.g., the political system should be fundamentally changed), anti-elitism (e.g., we have to assume that there are secret elites that control the world), science skepticism (e.g., science is controlled by economic and political interests), far-left attitudes (e.g., large corporations and the economy ensure that existing power relations do not change), and far-right attitudes (e.g., changes are being forced on us that threaten our culture). The answers were given on a 5-point scale from 1 ('do not agree at all') to 5 ('fully agree'). For the complete confirmatory factor analysis, see the appendix.

Media usage.
We measured the usage of broadcast media for information purposes with two items (usage of public TV/radio, usage of private TV/radio) and calculated a mean index. We measured social media usage for information purposes with two items (usage of social media, usage of video platforms) and calculated a mean index. We measured social media motive news and politics with three items (to inform myself about the news, political topics, problems in society) and calculated a mean index. Finally, we measured Telegram usage with a single item. All answers were given on a 5-point scale from 1 ('never') to 5 ('every day').

Covariates.
We investigate the differences between Switzerland's three main language regions (German, French, and Italian). Further covariates are sex, coded as male (1) and female (0), age,

which we measured as a continuous variable, and educational attainment as a binary variable coded as higher education degree (1) and below (0).

Results

Descriptive results for ANM usage per outlet are shown in Table 1. ANM users are a very small group in Switzerland. Only 129 (10.6%) respondents indicate very rarely using at least one of the ANM on our list. Furthermore, 110 (9.1%) respondents stated that they knew one of the presented ANM but never used it. The most used ANM are *Les Observateurs* (3.49%), *RT Deutsch* (2.89%), *Sputniknews.com* (2.85%), *COMPACT Magazin* (2.49%), and *Breitbart News* (2.00%). Only one of them, *Les Observateurs*, is based in Switzerland.

To test our hypotheses, we use a binary logistic regression model (see Table 2; model with data imputation for all cases in Appendix B). A more positive attitude toward the right-wing populist party SVP does not increase the likelihood of consuming ANM ($OR = 1.07$; $p = .448$). Thus, our data do not support H1. However, affinities toward conspiracy myths are positively related to ANM usage ($OR = 1.56$; $p \leq .001$), which supports H2. People with higher social media usage for information purposes are more likely to turn to ANM as a source of information ($OR = 1.45$; $p = .032$), which supports our H3. Social media usage for news and politics does not influence the likelihood of ANM consumption ($OR = 0.92$; $p = .611$). Therefore, our H4 is not supported. The data does not support H5, as usage of broadcast media does not affect the likelihood of ANM usage ($OR = 1.11$; $p = .368$). Our data support H6 as the usage of Telegram increases the likelihood of ANM consumption ($OR = 1.35$; $p = .002$). Looking at

the covariates, we see no significant difference between the French-speaking and German-speaking region ($OR = 1.13$; $p = .662$). However, people in the Italian-speaking region are less likely to use ANM than people in the German-speaking region ($OR = 0.22$; $p = .002$). We see no relation between age ($OR = 1.00$; $p = .686$) or higher education ($OR = 1.58$; $p = .066$) and ANM usage. Females are less likely to use ANM than males ($OR = 0.61$; $p = .040$).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study shows that the typical Swiss ANM user has high affinities toward conspiracy myths, high consumption of social media for information purposes, frequently uses the messenger app Telegram, and is more likely male. Our list frequency approach identified 10.6% of the Swiss population as ANM users. This share is lower than in Steppat et al.'s (2021) study, which identified 15% of the Swiss population as self-proclaimed alternative media users. Even though the results of the two studies do not differ largely, the comparison shows that it makes a difference if we measure ANM usage on the outlet level or through a generic question. Furthermore, when comparing our results to the study of Müller and Schulz (2021), we find that ANM usage in Switzerland (10.6%) is lower than in Germany (28.1%). However, the fact that only a few Swiss-specific ANM exist must be considered before diagnosing a lower prevalence of ANM usage in the Swiss population. Future studies could investigate if our findings are generalizable for other countries with a low domestic supply of ANM.

The preference for the right-wing populist party SVP is not positively related to ANM usage. Therefore, the results for political factors are only partially in line with previous studies, which showed a more apparent relation between ANM consumption and the preference for populist parties in Germany (e.g., Müller & Schulz, 2021). The observed divergence in our findings might be partially due to a difference in the operationalization of political preferences as we asked people about their feelings toward the right-wing populist party and not their voting preference like past studies (e.g., Müller & Bach, 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021). Nevertheless, this finding is striking, as the majority of the investigated ANM outlets have a distinct right-wing orientation. At least for the Swiss case, our approach with the affinity toward conspiracy myths scale adds an important nuance to the investigation of the relationship between populist politics and ANM usage. Explaining why this is the case and what role the political system, the media system, or populist attitudes might play is beyond the scope of this study (cf. Steppat et al., 2021).

However, our results indicate that the political context matters. If we had focused on right-wing populism alone, we would have missed part of the bigger picture when looking at ANM usage. In some terms, Switzerland might be a particular case. The German populist party AfD differs from its Swiss counterpart SVP. The AfD is a newly founded prototypical populist party (Lees, 2018). The SVP, even though a prototypical populist party when it comes to campaigning on the national level, has its origin as the farmers' party in the 1920s (Bornschier, 2007). Thus, it traditionally has a more conservative electorate in rural regions, which is not necessarily receptive to strong populist narratives. At least in some regions, the SVP uses more moderate strategies, especially on the cantonal and municipal levels.

Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression Model for ANM Usage

Predictors	Odds ratio	CI	p
Intercept	0.01[+]	0.00–0.06	<.001
Affinity toward conspiracy myths	1.56	1.20–2.04	.001
Attitude toward right-wing populist party SVP	1.07	0.90–1.27	.448
Usage social media	1.45	1.03–2.05	.032
Social media for news and politics	0.92	0.67–1.27	.611
Usage broadcast media	1.11	0.88–1.41	.368
Telegram usage	1.35	1.11–1.62	.002
French-speaking region[a]	1.13	0.65–1.90	.662
Italian-speaking region[a]	0.22	0.07–0.53	.002
Age	1.00	0.99–1.02	.686
Higher education	1.58	0.97–2.58	.066
Sex[b]	0.61	0.37–0.97	.040
Observations	766		
R² Tjur	.075		

Note. Online survey representative for the population of Switzerland ($N = 1,212$) conducted in 2020. Using $N = 766$ cases without any missing items for our analysis. Table entries are odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals and p-values.
[a] German-speaking region is the reference category.
[b] Male is the reference category. Model with data imputation for all cases ($N = 1,212$) in Appendix B.
[+] The odds are reported for the intercept.

We suggest further investigating the relationship between affinity toward conspiracy myths and ANM usage. Doing so would also remedy some limitations of our cross-sectional study. With a panel design, one could show correlations between ANM usage and affinity toward conspiracy myths and shed light on the direction of a possible causality. Future research could investigate if people turn to ANM because they have a high affinity toward conspiracy myths or if frequent ANM consumption results in a higher affinity toward conspiracy myths. In addition, our study showed a striking difference between Switzerland and Germany. Further studies could compare the relationship between affinity toward conspiracy myths and ANM usage with comparative designs (e.g., multilevel design with a country-level nesting), which would shed light on the influence of the political and media system as well as the generalizability of our findings. Such studies could also use more extensive lists of ANM. The difference we found between the German-speaking and the Italian-speaking regions of Switzerland indicates that the measurement with the list-frequency technique is sensitive to the provided number of ANM outlets. Thus, the higher share of ANM users might result from fewer outlets in Italian on our list.

Regarding media use factors, our study shows a positive relation between ANM usage and social media usage as well as ANM usage and Telegram app usage. Social media usage has been shown to be linked to ANM usage in previous studies (Chan, 2016; Müller & Bach, 2021; Schulze, 2020). Messenger apps, however, haven't yet been investigated extensively in this context. Our analysis indicates that the Telegram messenger app, which gained a reputation as a channel for mobilizing protests against government measures against the COVID-19 pandemic (Nachtwey et al., 2020), is relevant when analyzing ANM usage. However, our study did not investigate why there is a positive correlation between Telegram and ANM usage. The relationship might result from high ANM activity on Telegram, referring audiences to ANM (Schulze et al., 2022). ANM usage and Telegram usage might also both be outcomes of people's motivation to distance themselves from established news media (Schwarzenegger, 2023). Furthermore, Telegram is used in different ways. First, for messaging with peers and friends, and second, to follow specific channels in which usually a host posts content. Future studies could differentiate between the two manners of Telegram usage and reduce noise in the measurement we have in our study. In any case, if and how Telegram acts as a hub for ANM would be a research question worth pursuing in the future.

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Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* online.

Biographical Notes

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