

# Start Sharing the News

## *Exploring the Link Between Right-wing Alternative Media and Social Media During the Swedish 2018 Election*

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the influence of right-wing alternative media on social media during the Swedish 2018 general election, by analyzing links shared on Facebook and the engagement around these links. The results indicate that content originating from such sites had notable visibility on social media in comparison to traditional news-media content. Of the news stories shared in our sample, 28 % originated from right-wing alternative media outlets and the amount of engagement around links shared was comparable to that of mainstream news media. Immigration and integration-related issues dominated the covered content shared from right-wing alternative media. Content in links that evoked highest engagement on Facebook similarly revolved around immigration, crime, and the Sweden Democrats. In this regard, Facebook might contribute to giving voice to contested views of these controversial news sites and the platform, to broaden their reach.

An important question in all democracies concerns who manages to set the agenda during election time. While traditional editorial-driven media still plays a crucial role when it comes to informing people about political and societal issues, the role of social media has enabled new actors to compete for visibility and impact. In this article, we will focus particularly on the extent to which right-wing alternative news media managed to gain visibility and create engagement on Facebook during the election campaign in Sweden, in comparison to established news media. The type of media actors in question includes a variety of amateur or semiprofessional news outlets that aim to represent an alternative to the mainstream-media coverage (Figenschou & Ihlebæk 2018; Holt 2016a). Even though studies have shown that the Swedish mainstream press predominantly frames immigration negatively (Strömbäck Andersson & Nedlund 2017), right-wing alternative media actors often claim that what is perceived as left-wing journalism does not cover immigration fairly

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(Figenschou & Ihlebæk 2018). Furthermore, anti-system and anti-elitist attitudes often characterize such sites, mirroring the rhetoric of far-right populism (Holt 2018).

Arguably, the Internet and social-media platforms have lowered the threshold for populist or non-elite actors to enter the arenas of communication (Atton 2004; Engesser, Fawzi & Larsson 2017). The rise of right-wing alternative media can therefore be seen in relation to the growth of far-right populist political actors in Sweden, as well as in Europe and the U.S. (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2017; Haller & Holt 2018; Krämer 2017; Schierup & Ålund 2011). The concern is that by promoting values like anti-elitism and anti-immigration on social-media platforms, the influence from such actors will lead to polarization, mistrust, and racism (Krämer 2017). The partisan and often hostile reporting found on the right-wing alternative media sites in Sweden have been highly controversial (Holt 2016a; 2016b), and they have been framed as “hate sites,” “racist sites,” or “Sweden Democrat sites” in the Swedish press (Andersson and Hammarlund 2016). As the latter name implies, some right-wing alternative news sites have had close links to representatives of the Sweden Democrats; *Avpixlat* (the predecessor of *Samhällsnytt*), for instance, was economically founded by Kent Ekeröth from the Sweden Democrats, while *Nya Tider* was the party paper of the now dissolved *Nationaldemokraterna*.

Recent numbers show that right-wing alternative news outlets in Sweden appear relatively modest in comparison to national established news media when it comes to readership. However, many sites have nevertheless managed to attract a solid audience base. Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2018) shows that between 6% and 11% say they have used alternative media in the last week (*Nya Tider*, *Fria Tider*, *Samhällsnytt*, *Nyheter Idag*, *Ledarsidorna*). In comparison, 46% say they have used *Aftonbladet* online, 32% have used *Expressen* online, and 17% have used regional or local newspapers. Furthermore, studies from Norway and the U.S. have indicated that right-wing alternative media often successfully manage to elicit user engagement on social media, which in turn might influence the wider public agenda (Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018; Larsson 2019). Therefore, it is important to examine the sharing potential of a right-wing agenda in news articles on Facebook and engagement around this content, especially in Sweden, since many of these sites have attracted a relatively large audience.

By analyzing a unique dataset of links posted on Facebook, we examine to what extent they originated from right-wing alternative or established news sites, as well as what type of political topics evoked most engagement. Furthermore, we apply an explorative approach to examining the news reports originating from right-wing alternative media and receiving the highest level of engagement, focusing on topics covered and their framing.

The study contributes to knowledge about right-wing alternative media and their visibility on social media in a Swedish context. The aim is to inform the discussion concerning the role of new agenda-setters in a high-choice media environment, and how platforms like Facebook reinforce the position of marginal actors. In the following discussion, we will first outline theoretical perspectives on “alternative media” before we present the hypotheses tested in the article.

## Perspectives on Alternative Media

A central precondition of our study concerns the distinction between established and alternative forms of journalism. Scholars within the field of media and communication have long grappled with questions concerning what constitute the key differences between the two. Several authors have argued that the boundaries between professional and amateur journalism must be understood as blurry and fluid, rather than something static and fixed (Kenix 2013; Carlson 2015; Hujanen 2016; Singer 2015). That being said, some key characteristics that have been identified as significant markers in the literature include: (1) alternative media are often run by a small number of activist or semiprofessional actors motivated by political, ideological, or economic interest; (2) alternative media are funded on scarce economic means since they operate outside the structures of the established commercial media industry; (3) alternative media are structured as nonhierarchical and participatory organizations; (4) people working for alternative media reject or have an unclear relationship to press ethics or editorial responsibilities; (5) the journalistic content is characterized by a more personal and biased style (Atton 2002; Atton and Hamilton 2008; Atton 2015; Figenschou & Ihlebæk 2018; Nygaard 2019; Wickenden & Atton 2005).

Another somewhat more disputed component is the normative dimension of the term “alternative media.” Historically, alternative media have been studied in relation to left-wing media connected to social-protest movements and grassroots activism. From this perspective, alternative media is defined as democratic projects, mobilizing citizens to actively participate in news production or political activism and consequently empowering them (Fuchs 2010; Haas 2004). Haas’s definition of alternative media builds on this approach, identifying them as “media devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform” (Haas 2004: 115). While studies of left-wing alternative media dominated the field for some time, the role of right-wing and far-right alternative media gained less attention. Atkinson and Berg (2012a) argue that this “flaw” has “left scholars half-blind to the political realities of the twenty-first century” (p. 117), pointing to how far-right populist parties and movements

have managed to engage an active follower-base. However, a number of studies have recently explored how right-leaning online news sites have managed to set the agenda, often promoting critical stories against immigration and Islam, as well as fronting explicit and extensive media criticism and skepticism toward the cultural elites (Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018; Figenschou & Ihlebæk 2018; Atkinson & Berg 2012a; Atkinson & Berg 2012b; Nygaard 2019; Rauch, forthcoming; Haller & Holt 2018; Holt & Haller 2017).

Based on the traditional normative benchmarks of “alternative media”, questions have arisen as to whether this kind of alternative media should be termed “alternative” at all (Atton 2006). Some scholars have instead labeled far-right groups as “communities with closure” (Atton 2006), “anti-publics” (Cammaerts 2009), “anti-democratic publics” (Alvares & Dahlgren 2016), “repressive radical media” (Downing 2001), “populist counter-media” (Noppari, Hiltunen & Ahva 2019), “hyperpartisan news” (Bastos & Mercea 2019; Larsson 2019) or simply “partisan media” (Newman et al. 2018). Whether “alternative media” can include right-wing news media is consequently contested. Studies have acknowledged that right-wing alternative media cater to participatory involvement and mobilize for political activism. At the same time, they also fuel cultural divisions and promote exclusionary viewpoints (Padovani 2016; Atkinson & Berg 2012a). Furthermore, it is imperative to take into account that what has been referred to as right-wing or far-right (alternative) news media might differ greatly in terms of their ideological position (ranging from controversial to extreme positions), production practices, diversity of content, and participatory possibilities. While some sites produce and distribute misinformation or disinformation that could be harmful and polarizing, others are more moderate in their stance and style, aiming to present alternative viewpoints to their audiences. Conceptualizing this phenomenon by considering the similarities, but also acknowledging the differences among the variety of sites in question, is a complex and difficult exercise. In this context, Holt points to the importance of also looking at the role of alternative media as “self-perceived correctives” for traditional media. Holt proposes the following definition: “A self-assumed term that signals an opposition to traditional media (‘old media’), which many of the writers in this field regard as failing to report properly on important societal issues, for example, by avoiding reporting on social problems related to immigration” (2018: 52). In other words, the self-defined outsider role as alternative or independent is emphasized. While Holt’s definition is useful to escape the strong normativity that has dominated the scholarship on “alternative media”, it surely also has some weaknesses. The self-ascribed role cannot be the only parameter; it should be seen in combination with other dimensions identified in the literature, as outlined above.

Acknowledging that the term “alternative media” is disputed and that “right-wing alternative media” might be controversial, we nevertheless believe

the term is useful for analytical purposes. By “right-wing alternative media”, we mean online news sites that more or less explicitly position themselves as an alternative or corrective to the established media; are run by amateur or semiprofessional actors motivated (more or less explicitly) by conservative-to-far-right values; and resist or have an unclear relationship with press ethics.

## Setting the Agenda on Social Media

The competition for attention and visibility is fierce in high-choice media environments. Old and new content producers experiment with how they can utilize social media to spread their content. National news outlets still have the highest readership and strongest agenda-setting power; consequently, they arguably also have the strongest presence on Facebook in terms of user engagement. However, recent research indicates that alternative news sites have an active audience base that eagerly shares content, and many right-wing groups seem to be highly knowledgeable about the dynamics of social media and attaining visibility online (Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018; Marwick & Lewis 2016; Krämer 2017; Haanshuus & Jupskås 2017). A study by Larsson (2019) compared news use and audience engagement on Facebook with a cross-section of national, regional, and what he terms “hyperpartisan news” in Norway. He found that national news outlets have a much higher number of followers on Facebook; however, hyperpartisan actors “emerge as more successful in terms of the degree to which their followers engage as news users” (p. 19). This follower-base both shares and comments to a higher degree, “resulting in the amplification of the perspectives purveyed by these pages” (p. 19). Similarly, it has been argued that these sites have “a political or ideological agenda and their user base tends to passionately share these views” (Newman et al. 2018, p. 15). Therefore, it seems plausible that the recent emergence of right-wing alternative-media sites and their rapid growth in some countries has been, if not made possible, at least facilitated by social-media distribution.

Fewer total users consume content directly from right-wing media outlets; however, those outlets’ reach on Facebook might be greater, since their audience is more active in sharing and engaging around this content. In addition, the content itself might evoke more engagement, as it deals with controversial topics and uses contested frames or a “mobilizing tone” (Larsson 2019). Many of these sites position themselves in opposition to the journalism found in the established press, which they perceive as failing in the responsibility to report on issues of immigration and integration. The self-ascribed role of producing content omitted from mainstream media might, by definition, lead to news coverage more likely to be engaging on Facebook. In established theories from communication research, the elements that enhance the popularity of a political message include persuasive elements or news factors (Porten-Cheé

et al. 2018). Empirical research on social media seems to support this claim; journalistic content that could be characterized as newsworthy (i.e., connected to geographical and cultural closeness, conflict, and human-interest stories) correlates positively with content that becomes “shareworthy” on Facebook. Moreover, traditional news-agency articles receive less engagement, indicating the importance of exclusivity (Trilling, Tolonchko & Burscher 2017). We therefore expect the following relationship between right-wing alternative media and national news outlets to characterize engagement around news content:

H1: The mean engagement score per link originating from traditional news outlets versus right-wing alternative media will be equivalent.

We have previously outlined that questions related to immigration and Islam have been some of the topics that have motivated the rise of right-wing alternative media (Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018; Holt 2016a; Holt 2016b; Figneschou & Ihlebæk 2018), and that news items on issues pertaining to immigration and Islam resonate well with the follower base of partisan outlets on Facebook (Larsson 2019). At the same time, there is widespread mistrust of traditional-media reporting on immigration-related issues (Sandberg & Demker 2014). Therefore, we expect immigration to score high, particularly for the alternative-media sites.

H2: Compared with other topics, immigration will dominate the coverage in shared links originating from right-wing alternative media.

H3: News stories on immigration-related issues from right-wing alternative-media outlets will similarly evoke the most engagement, compared with other topics.

In the following section, we will discuss the data and methods used in this study before we move on to present results on how content from alternative media was shared, and how Facebook groups engaged with it during the Swedish election, compared to the traditional-news-media content, and the level of engagement related to political issues covered.

## Data and Methods

### DATA SELECTION

The Swedish public broadcaster (SVT) collected the data used for analyzing engagement around news links (URLs) on Facebook during the three weeks prior to the Swedish national election and one week after the election on September 9, 2018. SVT selected groups on Facebook that in some way discussed election-related issues based on searches in the social-media tracking tool, Crowdtangle. After a manual classification by relevance and size, a list of

850 open Facebook groups was compiled. This selection is not comprehensive; nonetheless, it comprises a substantial number of the links shared on Facebook. Crowdtangle does not access links shared from private accounts or closed Facebook groups, and the information gathered from Facebook is completely anonymous.<sup>1</sup> The dataset used in this study consists of shared links that originated from either national news media or what we have classified as right-wing alternative-media outlets. Therefore, using secondary-data analysis, we can only assess the relationship between national news media and right-wing alternative media, not the total number of links shared in this time span and the sources behind them.

News articles shared on Facebook that were liked, shared, and commented on were aggregated into a “total engagement” score. SVT measured engagement by using a point system in which “shares” and comments were each given two points, and “likes” and other reactions (i.e., love, anger, sad, wow, and haha emojis) were each given one point. Both sharing and commenting signals a greater interest in a post than merely liking or another emoji that expresses feelings toward a post. Users make a greater effort in sharing or commenting on a post, reflected in a higher engagement point value, as not all interactions with a post indicate equal commitment. “Likes” and “shares” function as popularity cues, i.e., indicators of the perceived relevance and positive evaluation of news items and political messages (Porten-Cheé et al. 2018). Based on the aggregation of engagement, we cannot conclude that all engagement is positive. Comments in particular might express both negative and positive attitudes toward the content.

Engagement on Facebook does not necessarily reflect public opinion or citizens’ issue engagement. Rather, it reflects exposure and visibility of issues and news content on this specific platform. On Facebook, the activities leading up to increased visibility of a post are largely driven by Facebook’s algorithms, and the engagement around posts can be driven by automatic or semi-automatic accounts (so-called “bots”) or by single individuals. In this way, actual engagement and visibility can be manipulated, and it is difficult to examine the extent to which this affects the result. Greater numbers of interactions with a post are nonetheless rewarded by algorithms and increase visibility and exposure (DeVito 2017). Thus, aggregated engagement with links shared on Facebook reflect what users see and what content those users perceive as prominent.

## **ISSUE ENGAGEMENT**

Journalists at SVT manually coded the content of links shared on Facebook. The choices of issues coded were based on the most important topics for the

1 SVT describes their data collection and methods here: <https://www.svt.se/opinion/metod-facebook-kartan>.

electorate, as reported in a survey conducted by Novus from July to August 2018.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the survey, SVT added a category of election/government by which to classify articles about government formation, election campaigning, and party strategy. A category of “other” was also used for content not suitable to any of the predefined categories. It was not possible to see from what group or page the link was shared in the coding procedure. An inter-coder reliability test of a 10% randomly selected sample revealed 94% and 89% inter-rater agreement in coding of link topics, between the coding done by SVT and the sample coded by the authors, which is rather high.<sup>3</sup>

### **CLASSIFICATION OF RIGHT-WING ALTERNATIVE AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA**

The focus in this paper is to compare shared links and engagement around content originating from right-wing alternative media and traditional media. Traditional mainstream media in our sample consist of well-established national news-media sites in Sweden; local newspapers are excluded, to limit the sample size of traditional media. More specifically, the national news sites are *Dagens Nyheter*, *Sveriges Television*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *TV4*, *Metro* and *OMNI*.

Table 1 outlines some key characteristics of the sites classified as right-wing alternative. We have based our classification on previous research (Holt 2016a; Nygaard 2019; Newman et al. 2018) as well as a qualitative interpretation emphasizing their self-ascribed role and stated motivation. We have also considered if they report following the ethical codes for the Swedish press; however, we do not know if this is implemented in practice and in the content presented on their website.

2 The topics were Environment/climate, Economy, Labor market, Pensions, Healthcare, Elderly care, Education, Immigration/Integration, and Crime. Additional categories added were Election/Government formation and a category for other content.

3 Out of all 1,214 shared links from traditional media, 121 links were randomly selected in order to test the inter-coder reliability score. Correspondingly, 47 links shared from alternative-media sites were coded by a second coder based on content. Cohen's kappa was used for measuring interrater reliability and resulted in  $K = 0.92$  for national news media and  $K = 0.86$  for content from partisan media outlets.



Table 1. Overview of Right-Wing Alternative Media

	Ascribed editor	Stated commitment to press ethics	Self-description on their website
<b>Nyheter Idag</b>	Yes	Yes	Independent news site in tabloid format focusing on politics, gossip, social media and foreign policy by creating own news through interviews, be on site to film/photograph and follow developments on social media. Rests on a libertarian outlook.
<b>Rapport 24</b>	No	No	Swedish political discussions and satire daily. Do not support racism or hate speech. Critical towards the Swedish government and its handling of the country.
<b>Ledarsidorna</b>	Yes	Yes	Independent web based newsmagazine. Critics of the system, "consequence-neutral" and constantly in opposition.
<b>Nyhetsbyrån</b>	Yes	No	Nyhetsbyrån is needed in a media buzz and news flow that increasingly comes to consist of values and emotions. We created NB to select news in areas important to the development of society and its survival.
<b>Samhällsnytt</b>	Yes	No	Samhällsnytt takes on a broad publicist approach. We specifically cover the areas in which "establishment media" prove to neglect or to lapse, but also focus broadly on common news journalism. We aim to be the publicist product that tomorrows' media consumers interested in society, wants and have the right to demand.
<b>Fria Tider</b>	No	No	Media in Sweden needs to have the screws put to it. [Mediesverige behöver en rak höger]
<b>Samtiden</b>	Yes	Yes	Independent news site with social conservative editorial tendencies. We seek to offer our readers news, relevant analyzes and a debate around conservative values.
<b>Nyatider</b>	No	No	The only printed-paper to refute the "press-system's" lies in their own format: on paper. Since its founding in 2012, Nyatider scrutinize the political correctness and report how reality looks like beyond "system-media's" distorted view.
<b>Svegot</b>	No	No	Daily digital newspaper that aims to broaden the Swedish media landscape and at the same time raise issues important to our non-profit organization and try to push the opinion in a direction more in line with our organization's ideas. Our editorials political profile is libertarian-nationalist.
<b>Nyadagbladet</b>	Yes	No	Independent, humanist and ethno-pluralistic daily newspaper with an anti-globalist stance and an international perspective. Founded in 2012 as a new media platform publishing news, analyses, stories etc. in all media formats. It specifically covers issues on ethical and cultural rights, integrity and surveillance, environment and health.

Note: Self-presentation in the table is a summarized version of how these sites present themselves on their webpage in December 2018 and translated to English. Accountable editor or publisher, and commitment to press ethical norms is noted if it has been stated on the site.

We argue that even though the included sites differ in many ways, the uniting features are that they are run by amateur or semiprofessional actors, that they employ a more or less explicit anti-establishment rhetoric and critical approach toward traditional media outlets. The ideological position also varies within the selection of sites, and some are more conservative than far right. Our classification further demonstrates the limitations of characterizing these sites only by taking into account their self-ascribed role. For instance, *Nyheter Idag* does not explicitly state an oppositional role, rather claiming to be “independent,” and furthermore claiming to follow the ethical standards of the press. Consequently, its self-ascribed role in opposition to the mainstream media or as anti-establishment is less explicit. However, previous research has classified this site as alternative, based on its partisan and anti-immigration reporting (Holt 2016a; Newman et al. 2018). At first look, the content on some sites might also appear noncontroversial; a closer reading can reveal, however, a potentially extreme underlying political agenda. The site *Nyadagbladet*, for example, provides a broad range of news articles and presents itself as Sweden’s broadest and most independent daily newspaper, with the aim of becoming “Tomorrow’s Newspaper!” However, it also defines itself as ethno-pluralistic, and journalists have described it as extreme right.<sup>4</sup> Its publisher and news director were previously active in the extreme-right party, *Nationaldemokraterna*, until the party dissolved. Similarly, the organization behind *Svegot* has a stated purpose to act as an association for ethnic Swedes, “by standing up for the Swedes and working against the growing hostility by ethnic minorities towards everything Swedish.” “The organization will also work long-term by building networks, purchasing real estate, creating Swedish zones and laying the foundation for an alternative to the failing multicultural state.”<sup>5</sup> Like the two examples above, the majority of these sites can be described as far right, based on their coverage and stated purposes of covering news.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

From all content shared on Facebook in our material, 1,214 links originated from national news media and 466 from right-wing alternative media. Engagement with links shared from national news media scored mean per link of 1,742, compared to 1,352 per link originating from right-wing media (the total engagement score for national news media was 2,114,849, and 628,666 for right-wing media). Engagement per link compared between the two media

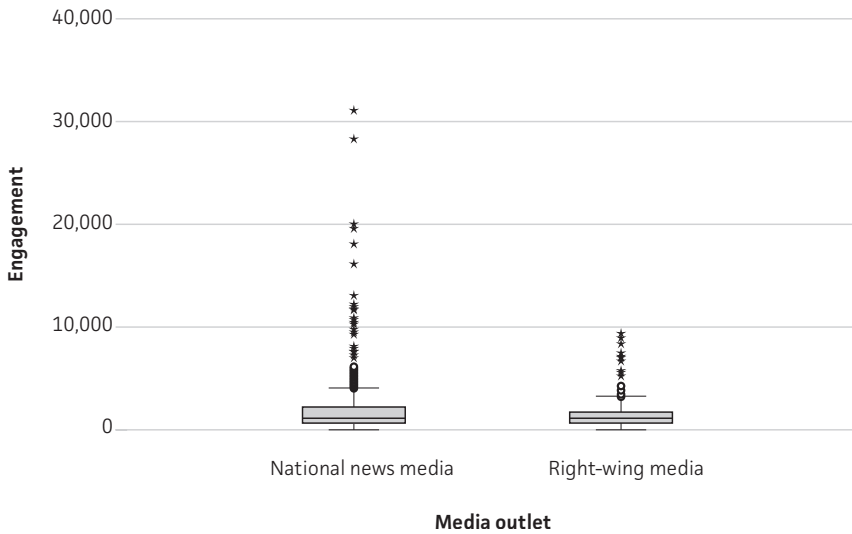
4 <https://www.dn.se/webb-tv/klipp/nyheter/det-har-extremsajterna-gemensamt/>.

5 <https://www.defriasverige.se/english/> Accessed 23.04.2019.

6 *Far right* is used here as a unifying concept ranging from right-wing populists to neo-Nazi terrorists, following Mudde’s (2017) classification.

types was thus similar, even though more links from national news media were shared in our sample of Facebook groups, supporting Hypotheses One (H1). Distribution of engagement with links shared however, varied considerably between the two media types. Links shared from national news media had higher variation in total engagement points. The top link from traditional news media with highest engagement had 31,024 points, and the equivalent link shared from a right-wing outlet had 9,391 points (see Figure 1), suggesting that the total reach is greater for national news media. Nonetheless, the link from right-wing media evoking the highest engagement came in at thirteenth place for total engagement, compared with links shared from national news media.

Figure 1. Engagement on Facebook Around Links Originating from National News Media and Right-Wing Alternative Media Outlets



Comment: Boxplot showing the spread of engagement around news links, originating from either national news media or right-wing media outlets. Engagement is measured as the total sum of shares (2 p), comments (2 p), likes (1 p) and other reactions (1 p).

Notably, as much as 28% of the content originated from right-wing alternative media sites in our sample of links shared. Given the profile of these sites summarized previously (Table 1), the results not only point to considerable visibility of partisan alternative media on Facebook, but influence from sites specifically hostile to traditional media and the government. Many of these are far-right sites with connections to extreme-right movements. The amount of engagement evoked and the number of links shared is therefore noteworthy in the Swedish context. The results tell us something about the media landscape in Sweden today and the importance of Facebook for spreading and potentially broadening the audience reach of right-wing alternative media.

We will return to a more in-depth discussion of the content shared in prominent posts to examine further the appeal of right-wing news sites. First, we discuss what political topics evoked most engagement, in the form of shares and total engagement (including number of shares, likes, other reactions and comments) on Facebook, comparing traditional news media and right-wing alternative media.

Table 2. Political Topics Covered in Relation to Shares and Engagement (percentage and mean)

	Topics covered in shared links, % (n)		Total engagement per topic, Mean (Std.D)	
	Traditional news media	Right-wing alternative media	Traditional news media	Right-wing alternative media
<b>Immigration</b>	20 (247)	41 (190)	1721 (1958)	1479 (1344)
<b>Election and government</b>	27 (327)	28 (131)	1754 (2273)	1340 (1191)
<b>Law and order</b>	13 (154)	11 (52)	1652 (1638)	1467 (1359)
<b>Environment</b>	6 (75)	2 (8)	1894 (3713)	1039 (425)
<b>Elderly care</b>	0 (3)	2 (8)	1421 (343)	1681 (1217)
<b>Healthcare</b>	6 (69)	2 (9)	1263 (1112)	1420 (855)
<b>Education</b>	3 (34)	2 (8)	1718 (1674)	898 (645)
<b>Pension</b>	2 (20)	1 (3)	2031 (1402)	1108 (518)
<b>Economy</b>	7 (85)	0 (11)	2182 (2810)	799
<b>Labor market</b>	1 (8)	0 (1)	995 (522)	524 (-)
<b>Defense</b>	1 (9)	0 (0)	988 (614)	-
<b>Other</b>	15 (183)	10 (45)	1788 (2225)	943 (581)
<b>Total</b>	100 (1214)	100 (466)		

Comment: There was a positive correlation between topics in links shared from traditional news media and right-wing media (Pearson). The value of  $R^2$ , the coefficient of determination, was 0.7472; yet, no correlation between mean engagement scores for which the value of  $R^2$  was 0.0017.

Of the unique links shared on Facebook, most covered topics of immigration/integration, election and government formation, and law and order, originating from either traditional or alternative right-wing media. The other political topics were covered in less than 10% of shared links. In links originating from right-wing alternative media, 41% covered topics concerning immigration/integration, whereas the corresponding percentage for traditional media was 20%; thus, these topics dominated the coverage in links shared from alternative media, in particular. Topics of election, government formation, and party strategy were covered in most of the links shared from traditional media (27%) and were also the second-most-covered topic in links originating from alternative media (28%). “Law and order” was the third-most-prominent topic in links shared both from traditional news media and from right-wing

alternative-media sites. Other topics were covered considerably less, and regarding content from right-wing alternative media, the other topics were only covered in 0–11 links, compared with 3–85 links from established media. Content classified as covering topics other than those mentioned in Table 2 appeared to a similar degree in content shared from alternative or traditional media (10% and 15%, respectively).

The results indicate that similar political topics in the unique links activate sharing practices on Facebook. These topics thus appear to be salient and “shareworthy,” regardless of source. Topics that the different outlets themselves cover is, of course, also likely to influence type of content shared, especially since partisan alternative news sites tend to have a narrower focus (Newman et al. 2018). Although there was a correlation between the topics featured in most links originating from national news media and right-wing alternative media, the result gives some support to Hypothesis Two (H2), since issues relating to immigration dominated the coverage in links shared from right-wing alternative media. Apart from content concerning “election and government,” topics other than immigration only appeared in 0–11% of the news stories shared.

On the other hand, comparing the topics’ different degrees of engagement reveals less similarity, and there was no correlation in topic engagement between traditional and right-wing alternative media. Among the news from right-wing alternative media, topics concerning elderly care and immigration, followed by law and order, received highest engagement value (measured as mean engagement score). However, differences in mean were small for most topics, with respect to content shared from right-wing alternative media. On the other hand, the mean engagement score varied considerably between the topics evoking highest engagement value (elderly care) versus lowest (labor market), ranging between 524 and 1,681. Topics evoking the highest engagement in shares from traditional news media were the economy, followed by pension and the environment. Election and government topics had the fourth highest mean score, followed by immigration, education, law and order, elderly care, health care, labor market, and, lastly, issues regarding Swedish defense. Defense-related issues were not covered in any of the links shared from right-wing alternative media.

Compared with other political topics, immigration coverage evoked the second-highest mean engagement score in links from right-wing alternative media. Although immigration was not among the topics that evoked most engagement in links from national news media, it did evoke a higher mean engagement score (1,721) than it did in links from right-wing alternative media (1,479). Therefore, the coverage of immigration did not evoke the highest engagement value on average, compared to other topics, nor did it evoke higher mean engagement value compared with immigration coverage in national news

media. Our results, therefore, do not give full support to our third hypothesis that immigration-related issues would generate highest engagement around content originating from right-wing alternative media.

Next, we will take a closer look at the content in links shared that received highest engagement value, to further explore the link between right-wing alternative media and its engagement appeal on Facebook.

### **IMMIGRATION, CRIME, AND THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS**

Among the links originating from right-wing alternative media sites with highest engagement value, scores for the top eight news articles shared varied between 9,391 and 5,481 (see Appendix). Content in these most engaging links was published on three different alternative news sites (*Samhällsnytt*, *Fria Tider*, and *Nyheter Idag*). *Samhällsnytt* published the news article evoking the highest engagement. The article describes a candidate for the Social Democratic party and his criminal record, focusing on his background as an immigrant and statements he had made about reducing crime rates. Another article from *Fria Tider* with the third-highest engagement value also focuses on a Social Democratic politician with an immigrant background who fled the scene of a car accident with “a minivan full of immigrant-politicians.” The article explains this accident in the author’s own words: “Was in a rush to get to the airport as they were flying home to the countries they fled from on vacation.” The article with second-highest engagement points also concerns immigration and integration themes. In the article, a Social Democratic Danish politician is quoted as encouraging the Swedish population to vote for the Sweden Democrats: “He believes that Sweden’s prime minister lacks the correct ‘reality view’ and that immigration is so severe that it can bring down the Nordic welfare state.” The three links with the highest engagement of all concerns immigration and integration, as well as Social Democrats, either committing criminal acts as in the two first examples, or as in the last example, using a quote from a Social Democrat encouraging voting for the Sweden Democrats. Moreover, the links with the fourth- and fifth-highest engagement rates deal with immigration-related issues and Islam—more specifically: “Residential area in Västerås is taken over by Salafists—the police deeply concerned” and “Poland rather leave the EU than being forced to admit Muslims.”

Another theme in the links with highest engagement (6th through 8th place) concerns the Sweden Democrats and fraud or crime allegedly committed against them. In one, a journalist is perceived as boasting about sabotaging ballot papers belonging to the Sweden Democrats while she expresses support for the Center party on Instagram. In a comment, the party leader thanks her for her support, which is interpreted as the party leader supporting the act of sabotage. Another link reports on a false call against the Sweden Democrats in

which several celebrities supposedly signed this list, but in fact had not. Lastly, a link with the title “Sweden Democratic youth heavily assaulted by Somali gang” evoked high engagement.

Immigration, the Sweden Democrats, and crime dominated the content in the links evoking the highest engagement value on Facebook. In some articles, the themes overlap. For example, regarding the Social Democratic politician’s alleged misconduct, both angles of immigration and crime are used while the main message is aimed at the faulty behavior of Social-Democratic politicians. When articles concern the Sweden Democrats, they express either support for or wrongdoings against the party. Also, worth noting is that while some of the articles evoking high engagement are neutral in tone and reporting, others are depreciatory and ridiculing toward political opponents. While there is no indication of fabricated news content, some of the articles give the impression of exaggerating and, to some extent, tailoring the facts to fit a cause. News reporting in these articles features both, in the form of self-produced content and news from established media, recontextualized to make a political statement.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we explored the role of right-wing alternative media on Facebook during the Swedish general election, in particular, the degree to which they managed to create visibility and engagement in relation to the established media. A common line of argument in the self-presentation of these sites is anti-establishment rhetoric, such as “system critical,” “constantly in opposition,” “establishment media,” refuting “system-media’s” distorted view and the “press-system’s” lies. *Fria Tider*, one of the most well-known and read sites included in our analysis, has the slogan, “Media in Sweden needs to have the screws put to it [Mediesverige behöver en rak höger].” Another example takes this rhetoric a step further by arguing for the need of alternative news in order to cover areas “important to the development of society and its survival.” Uniting features of these sites are criticism or hostility toward legacy media that are believed to censor important information, anti-establishment, and a strong focus on immigration-related issues and what are perceived as negative immigration policies or effects of immigration.

Our study finds that right-wing media sites seem to have had a substantial influence on social media during the Swedish 2018 election, compared with national news media. Of the news stories shared in our sample, 28% originated from these sites, compared to national news media on Facebook. As many of these sites are far-right with stated motives going beyond merely covering what traditional news media are perceived to neglect, the reach and potential influence are made more striking.

In line with our expectations, the engagement with links shared was similarly high, despite the fact that traditional news media generally reaches a larger segment of the population. This tells us something about the audiences of alternative right-wing media and supports previous findings of this reader base being particularly active in sharing and engaging with this content (Larsson 2019).

Concerning our second and third assumption, we believed that immigration would dominate the coverage in links shared on Facebook and that immigration-related issues would generate the highest engagement scores, which our study partly supported. Immigration-related issues were covered in the majority of links shared from right-wing alternative media and evoked high engagement; however, this topic did not evoke the highest engagement score on average. Compared to traditional news media, the mean engagement score was also lower. This suggests that immigration-related issues evoke relative high engagement, regardless of the news media actor. Immigration-related issues were covered in a substantial portion of links shared from national news media (20%). Negative reporting of immigration-related issues in traditional media might therefore generate engagement similar to the coverage of right-wing alternative media, although this content is more controversial and uses contested frames.

Taking a closer look at the content in the most engaging links revealed quite a homogeneity in the right-wing agenda, both in type of content and partisan or one-sided angles. Content concerned immigration in particular, but also crime, and indicated support for the Sweden Democrats. In several, a sarcastic undertone can also be detected, possibly aimed at undermining political opponents or expressed as contempt for politicians with an immigrant background. The links receiving highest engagement value originated from three different sites (*Samhällsnytt*, *Fria Tider*, and *Nyheter Idag*). This also indicates a widespread supply of alternative news, as not only one or two outlets seem to have dominated the “alternative agenda”.

In this study, we have only examined the relationship between national news media and right-wing alternative-media outlets. We can therefore not assess how right-wing content was shared and engaged with, compared to all content shared on Facebook. Other outlets, particularly political blogs, would be of value to include in future studies. Moreover, due to data restriction, we only examined open Facebook groups and can therefore not know how this distribution differs from that in private profiles or closed Facebook groups.

Sweden received significant international attention around its 2018 election, in particular, misinformation and the influence of bots on social media. These bots expressed support for the Sweden Democrats, criticism of immigration



and refugees, and critique of the elites and of the media.<sup>7</sup> Compared with the result presented in this study, a similar agenda can be found in content originating from right-wing alternative media. Since many of the sites in question have a fundamentally radical or extreme agenda, the influence of content from these sites on the political news flow on Facebook might contribute to increasingly polarized debates and reinforcing political beliefs about a lying press and harmful immigration. In future research, it will be of importance to examine these outlets more closely and the extent to which social-media dynamics reinforce these types of messages.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Links Originating from Alternative Media Sites With Highest Engagement Scores

Engagement-score	Outlet and date	URL link
9391	Samhällsnytt (27/08/2018)	<a href="https://samnytt.se/forsokte-strypa-kassor-kandiderar-for-socialdemokraterna-i-valet/">https://samnytt.se/forsokte-strypa-kassor-kandiderar-for-socialdemokraterna-i-valet/</a>
8864	Fria Tider (25/08/2018)	<a href="http://www.friatider.se/dansk-socialdemokrat-till-svenska-folket-r-sta-p-sd">http://www.friatider.se/dansk-socialdemokrat-till-svenska-folket-r-sta-p-sd</a>
8278	Fria Tider (04/09/2018)	<a href="http://www.friatider.se/smet-fr-n-trafikolycka-och-lj-g-sig-till-l-gre-b-ter-sen-blev-haxhimustafa-32-l-fvens-nya">http://www.friatider.se/smet-fr-n-trafikolycka-och-lj-g-sig-till-l-gre-b-ter-sen-blev-haxhimustafa-32-l-fvens-nya</a>
7603	Samhällsnytt (29/08/2018)	<a href="https://samnytt.se/bostadsomrade-i-vasteras-tas-over-av-salafister-polisen-djupt-oroad/">https://samnytt.se/bostadsomrade-i-vasteras-tas-over-av-salafister-polisen-djupt-oroad/</a>
7071	Nyheter Idag (08/08/2018)	<a href="https://nyheteridag.se/polen-lamnar-hellre-eu-an-tvingas-ta- emot-muslimer/">https://nyheteridag.se/polen-lamnar-hellre-eu-an-tvingas-ta- emot-muslimer/</a>
7054	Nyheter Idag (06/09/2018)	<a href="https://nyheteridag.se/det-stammer-inte-kandisartar-avstand-fran-kandislista-mot-sd/">https://nyheteridag.se/det-stammer-inte-kandisartar-avstand-fran-kandislista-mot-sd/</a>
6486	Nyheter Idag (25/08/2018)	<a href="https://nyheteridag.se/journalist-skryster-om-valsabotage-mot-sd-annie-loof-tackar-for-stodet/">https://nyheteridag.se/journalist-skryster-om-valsabotage-mot-sd-annie-loof-tackar-for-stodet/</a>
5481	Nyheter Idag (03/09/2018)	<a href="https://nyheteridag.se/sverigedemokratiska-ungdomar-grovt-misshandlade-av-somaliskt-gang-de-fortsatte-sparka-pa-honom-nar-han-lag-ner/">https://nyheteridag.se/sverigedemokratiska-ungdomar-grovt-misshandlade-av-somaliskt-gang-de-fortsatte-sparka-pa-honom-nar-han-lag-ner/</a>