

That Is So Mainstream: The Impact of Hyper-Partisan Media Use and Right-, Left-Wing Alternative Media Repertoires on Consumers' Belief in Political Misperceptions in the United States

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Two studies examined hyper-partisan and alternative media audiences in the United States and their relationship with misperceptions—or false beliefs—despite available evidence to disprove them. Study 1, which used secondary data (ANES), yielded limited findings and suggested that hyper-partisan conservative content was associated with holding misperceptions. Study 2 used an original survey ($N = 661$) to examine American alternative media repertoires and their relationship with holding false beliefs. The findings of Study 2 suggested that not only is alternative media exposure related to misperceptions but so was exposure to media generally among our respondents.

Keywords: alternative media, media repertoires, hyper-partisan media, misperceptions

Media ecosystems are continuously growing and evolving as partisan and alternative outlets compete with traditional programming (Strömbäck et al., 2020). This evolution comes at a time when news media trust has dipped to new lows in the United States, with only 32% of Americans saying that they can trust the news most of the time (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2023). In response, some consumers are turning away from traditional outlets and toward partisan media with an overt political slant (Levendusky, 2013), while others are turning to alternative outlets that often have grassroots origins, call for activism, and stand in opposition to the mainstream (Hameleers, Brosius, & de Vreese, 2022; Rauch, 2023; Waisbord, 2022). However, scholars have found that partisan media use may be associated with holding misperceptions or beliefs that are false or unsupported by the best available evidence (Nyhan, 2020). In the United States, this means readily accepting misinformation that favors one's party or denigrates the opposing party, driven in part by ideological media use (Garrett, Weeks, & Neo, 2016; Weeks, Menchen-Trevino, Calabrese, Casas, & Wojcieszak, 2021). Despite recent extensive work on alternative media (Rauch, 2023), little scholarship has examined the impact of alternative media use on holding misperceptions (see Frischlich, Kuhfeldt, Schatto-Eckrodt, & Clever, 2023b; Vliegthart et al., 2023;

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Ziegele et al., 2022 for examinations in European contexts). To enhance our understanding of alternative media in general, we must first understand alternative media audiences (Frischlich et al., 2023a).

The work herein seeks to expand our understanding of alternative media users by examining the understudied left-leaning alternative outlets in addition to the right. First, we used data from the American National Election Study (ANES) to establish a baseline and examine the relationship between categories of media use and holding misperceptions. However, we were limited to ANES media measures, which missed many right-leaning alternative outlets and did not include any left-leaning alternative outlets. While recent research has begun investigating left-wing alternative media (e.g., Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, & Thomas, 2021), it is dwarfed by a deluge of research on right-wing sites. To this end, we extend the ANES measures and previous research in Study 2 by conducting an original survey with robust mainstream and alternative media measures, ranging from extreme-right Neo-Nazi sites to independent left-wing sources. We also used deeper misperception measures, including assessing individuals' belief in general political misinformation and COVID-19-related misinformation. Additionally, we use latent profile analysis (LPA) to create eight unique profiles of American news consumers. Taken together, our studies provide insight into American alternative media users' diets and their belief in inaccurate information.

Partisan Media and Misperceptions

Per selective exposure, individuals prefer information in line with their existing beliefs, with this largely occurring along political party lines in the United States (Stroud, 2011). In other words, Democrats exhibit a preference for left-leaning outlets, while Republicans prefer right-leaning outlets. In turn, partisan media consumption contributes to holding misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2016). Misperceptions are defined as beliefs that are false and unsupported by the best available evidence (Nyhan, 2020) and are often held to a high degree of confidence, making them difficult to correct (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000). Holding political misperceptions is common in the United States (Weeks & Garrett, 2014), especially among partisans, occurring largely along party lines. Relatedly, people are likely to spread unsubstantiated beliefs favoring their political party, regardless of whether they truly believe them (Schaffner & Luks, 2018). This includes readily accepting falsehoods that paint one's party in a positive light and negative misinformation about the opposing party (Weeks & Garrett, 2014). One possible mechanism for reducing partisan susceptibility to misinformation could be seeking out multiple viewpoints, with individuals being more likely to do so if they trust the media (Schranz, Schneider, & Eisenegger, 2018). Conversely, without such trust, people interact with what they know best—like-minded partisan media, which affects political opinions and increases polarization (Levendusky, 2013). Furthermore, research points to a clear link between using partisan media and holding inaccurate beliefs, regardless of clear evidence to disprove them (Garrett et al., 2016). Additionally, conservative media has recently been linked with holding misinformation-based conspiratorial beliefs (Romer & Jamieson, 2021). Taken together, we expect the following:

H1: Partisan and hyper-partisan media use will be associated with the belief in false information (holding misperceptions).

Method: Study 1

The above hypothesis was analyzed using data from the American National Election Studies 2020 Time Series Study (DeBell et al., 2022). The 2020 study included two waves of data collection (one pre-election and one post-election), ranging from August 2020 to December 2020. The data are considered nationally representative and collected using a combination of web, phone, and video interview methods. In total, 8,280 respondents completed the pre-election survey, and 7,449 completed the post-election survey for a retention rate of 89.96%. We used items from both the pre- and post-election surveys.

Measures

Media Use

To assess media use, participants were first asked whether they used four categories of media to follow the presidential campaign: television, newspapers, the Internet, and radio. For each category used, participants were presented with a list of specific programs and asked to identify which they watched "regularly" (i.e., at least once a month; 1 = viewed program, 0 = did not view the program or use category). We then ran an exploratory factor analysis, using principal axis factoring and oblique rotation, on all media items, resulting in five factors with Eigenvalues above 1. While the factor analysis primarily revealed factors based on platform type (e.g., Internet news versus television news), it also showed a factor that would be considered "hyper-partisan," comprised of conservative radio and web sources that did not factor with other conservative sources (e.g., *Fox News*, *Wall Street Journal*) and a public media factor (e.g., NPR radio programs). Given the results of the factor analysis and prior scholarship identifying partisan lean of various programs (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011), we created 10 media indices by averaging the number of programs that individuals indicated they consumed. A program had to have a distinct factor loading (i.e., greater than 0.3 on the observed factor and less than 0.1 on all other factors) to be included in a media use index.

The 10 media indices were *hyper-conservative media*, which included several radio programs and websites ($M = 0.041$, $SD = 0.105$, $\alpha = 0.61$)¹, *conservative television* which included several Fox News programs ($M = 0.113$, $SD = 0.163$, $\alpha = 0.67$), *liberal television*, which included several MSNBC and CNN programs ($M = 0.106$, $SD = 0.145$, $\alpha = 0.66$), *mainstream television*, which included the morning and nightly newscasts from ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as other news programming from each network and PBS ($M = 0.099$, $SD = 0.133$, $\alpha = 0.60$), *NPR* which included several national NPR programs ($M = 0.076$, $SD = 0.229$, $\alpha = 0.88$), *web news* which included several digital-only news sources as well as the websites of major national newspapers ($M = 0.111$, $SD = 0.187$, $\alpha = 0.83$), *print news* which included the print versions of national newspapers ($M = 0.162$, $SD = 0.355$, $\alpha = 0.66$), and *social media* which included news consumed via Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, or any other social media

¹ The exploratory factor analysis revealed that Fox News' website factored in with sources that would be characterized as hyper-conservative. Trusting the results of the factor analysis to accurately reflect news consumption patterns, we kept Fox News' website within the hyper-conservative category.

platform ($M = 0.362$, $SD = 0.231$, $\alpha = 0.73$). For a complete list of media sources included in each index, please contact the corresponding author.

Misperceptions

The extent to which individuals held a belief in unsubstantiated information was measured by asking participants first to select the correct answer to four yes or no questions² regarding whether Russia tried to interfere in the 2016 election, if there was evidence that vaccines caused autism, if there was evidence that temperatures had increased over the past 100 years, and if there was evidence that hydroxychloroquine was an effective treatment for COVID-19. Correct responses were coded as -1 , and incorrect responses were coded as 1 . Respondents were then asked to indicate how confident they were about their answers on a five-point scale, ranging from "not at all confident" (0) to "extremely confident" (4). Each pair of questions (correct/incorrect assessment and confidence) was then multiplied to create a measure ranging from -4 (extremely confident and correct) to 4 (extremely confident and incorrect). This misperception confidence score was then averaged for the five topics ($M = -1.797$, $SD = 1.564$, $\alpha = 0.70$).

Demographic and Political Controls

Several demographic and political controls were included in all models. They were *age* (measured in years, $M = 51.585$, $SD = 17.207$), *biological sex* (54.18% female), *education* (measured on a five-point scale ranging from less than high school to a graduate degree, median and mode = some post-high school but no bachelor's degree), *income* (measured with a 22-point scale ranging from less than \$9,999–\$250,000 or more, $M = 11.733$, median = 12, \$65,000–\$69,999), *race/ethnicity* (72.02% White, non-Hispanic), *political interest* (single item asking how interested they are in politics, ranging from not at all (0) to very (3), $M = 1.907$, $SD = 0.852$), and *political ideology* (self-placement on a very liberal (0) to very conservative (6) scale, $M = 3.091$, $SD = 1.669$).

Analysis Plan

Respondents were included only if they responded to all questions used in the analysis, resulting in a sample size of 5,488. An ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model created in Stata version 16 using full sample post-election weights (*pweights* function) was used to test our hypothesis. While partisan media indices are the focal variables of interest in this article, all media variables were included in our model, in addition to the above demographic and political controls.

Results: Study 1

H1 predicted that partisan and hyper-partisan media use would be associated with holding misperceptions. Supporting this, we find that both conservative ($b = 0.531$, $SE = 0.114$, $p < 0.01$) and

² There were six items available in the 2020 data set, however, the sixth item addressed whether or not there was evidence about whether COVID-19 was created in a lab. Given there is still uncertainty about this question, it was not included with the remaining items.

hyper-conservative ($b = 0.734$, $SE = 0.140$, $p < 0.001$)³ media use are positively associated with holding misperceptions. As use of these types of media increases, so too does holding misperceptions. Conversely, liberal media use ($b = -0.873$, $SE = 0.138$, $p < 0.001$) is negatively associated with holding misperceptions. In other words, as the use of liberal media increases, misperceptions decrease. Overall, this provides support for H1 (see Table 1).

Table 1. ANES 2020 Time Series Results.

	Holding Misperceptions
Age	-0.009*** (-0.005)
Sex (female high)	0.208*** (0.313)
Education	-0.145*** (-0.091)
Income	-0.021*** (-0.013)
Race/Ethnicity (White, non-Hispanic high)	-0.168* (-0.044)
Ideology (conservative high)	0.181*** (0.221)
Political Interest	-0.177*** (-.108)
NPR	-0.489*** (-0.266)
Web News	-0.598*** (0.281)
Print News	-0.399*** (0.144)
Mainstream TV	-0.687* (-0.186)
Social Media	-0.159 (0.108)
Hyper-Conservative	0.459*** (1.010)
Conservative TV	0.307** (0.754)
Liberal TV	-1.444*** (-0.602)
Constant	-1.475*** (-1.123)
<i>N</i>	5488
<i>R</i> ²	0.467

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion: Study 1

Our first study used secondary data to explore problematic partisan media effects. In line with prior research, we found relationships between partisan media exposure and holding misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2016; Weeks et al., 2021). Specifically, conservative and hyper-conservative media use were associated with holding higher levels of false beliefs, while the inverse was true of liberal media use. This echoes prior research showing that conservative media use has been positively related to believing misinformation (Romer & Jamieson, 2021). Perhaps most interesting was that the coefficient for hyper-conservative media

³ The regression was re-run with Fox News' website removed from the hyper-conservative category, and the significance of the modeled results did not change. Hyper conservative ($b = 1.828$, $SE = 0.184$, $p < 0.001$) and conservative media ($b = 1.194$, $SE = 0.146$, $p < 0.001$) both remained significant.

use was larger than the coefficient for mainstream conservative media use (i.e., Fox News programming), illustrating the differential effects within right-leaning media itself, as opposed to between conservative and liberal media, about individuals' belief in unsubstantiated or inaccurate information. This highlights the need to examine media effects beyond the mainstream. As the media environment continues to fracture, more options will become available for people to fit their individual preferences and needs for information, even if that information is telling them what they want to hear at the expense of the truth, adding more fuel to the misperception fire and deepening the negative effects of partisan selective exposure.

While these results provide compelling evidence that selective exposure effects are moving beyond the mainstream, our understanding is limited due to our use of secondary data. Indeed, the ANES data analyzed here only includes hyper-partisan outlets on the far right of the ideological spectrum and are limited to those "with a high reach and professionalized staff" (Haller, Holt, & de la Brosse, 2019, p. 3). However, extant research highlights a myriad of U.S.-based alternative media on both ends of the ideological spectrum (Rauch, 2019). While this study yielded fruitful findings, its limited scope leaves out a wide variety of alternative media users. To understand more about the widespread use of varying alternative media outlets and the effect of such use on holding misperceptions, we turn your attention to Study 2.

Study 2

Media Repertoires

Recent scholarship has indicated that using a media repertoire approach is imperative to understanding alternative media and their consumers, as media use rarely occurs in a vacuum (Ihlebak et al., 2022; Schwarzenegger, 2023). Essentially, media repertoires describe media diets—the portion of available media that audiences use to cope with an oversaturated news environment (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Extensive research has examined the factors that influence a repertoire's composition, including demographic characteristics (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). Most notably, Schwarzenegger (2020) found that alternative media repertoires were influenced by perceptions of media trust and credibility. He continued this research by examining the role that alternative media played in Germans' repertoires (Schwarzenegger, 2023). Previously, Edgerly (2015) examined 27 mainstream news sources that highlighted six classes of news consumers, each revealing a unique pattern of media use, with some separated along partisan lines (i.e., a distinct group of conservative media users and a distinct group of liberal media users). Finally, most relevant to the current work, recent scholarship by Vliegthart and colleagues (2023) took a repertoire approach to Swedish media use, revealing only one unique repertoire of alternative media users who still had a propensity to consume mainstream sources in addition to alternatives. While extant research offers fruitful findings, it is limited by geographic constraints, secondary data analysis, and largely mainstream news sources. We expand this line of inquiry in Study 2 by capturing American alternative media consumption, in addition to the mainstream.

Ambiguous Alternative Media in the United States

The term "alternative media" has been circulating throughout scholarship since the early 1980s (e.g., Armstrong, 1981), but the term remains contested. In fact, Waisbord (2022) noted that alternative media is an ambiguous, context-dependent concept that is unlikely to reach academic consensus. However, a recent burst

in scholarship on alternative media makes it clear that alternatives are distinct from partisan outlets, as Stier, Kirkizh, Froio, and Schroeder (2020) note that hyper-partisan sources operate within the mainstream to promote subjective political agendas. While alternative and mainstream media exist on the same continuum (Rauch, 2023), scholars maintain that alternative media must be understood in relation to other media (Frischlich et al., 2023a; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019; Waisbord, 2022). Generally, we operationalize alternative media as serving a relational, participatory function in opposition to the political establishment and mainstream media (Bártová, 2022; Holt et al., 2019). In a more specific U.S. context, alternative journalism refers to “news organizations that embrace advocacy and mobilization (instead of straight information) and focus or favor particular political parties and ideologies, issues, and sources” (Waisbord, 2022, p. 1434). Indeed, scholars have noted that alternative media organizations have historically served as legitimate platforms for political zeitgeists and anti-establishment views (Armstrong, 1981; Schwarzenegger, 2023).

While it is advantageous for scholarship to have a conceptualized definition, it is important to understand what makes alternatives distinct. To this end, there are two relevant lines of inquiry: research looking at alternative media from the supply side and from the demand side. Beginning with the former, Hájek and Carpentier (2015) note that there are several fundamental characteristics of alternative media: amplifying voices silenced by the mainstream, a participatory and pluralist forum, and non-corporate funding. In other words, outlets should provide audiences with mobilizing information that encourages activism among consumers and active participation in news production (Bártová, 2022). To this end, Bártová (2022) found that when an organization establishes a relationship with its consumers, alternative media can be a useful tool for fundraising. In addition to over one dozen podcasts, Crooked Media (a progressive media network started in 2017) founded several advocative programs, including Vote Save America, which raised more than \$5 million to support local/federal elections and organizations and worked more than 49,000 volunteer shifts (Vote Save America, 2023). For a right-leaning example in the United States, Atkinson and Leon Berg (2012) speculated that right-wing alternative organizations practiced “narrowmobilization,” wherein they only sought to mobilize pure conservatives. Taken together, alternative media organizations in the United States are encouraging activism among their consumers in a way that other media do not—and in a way that consumers are noticing.

Alternative Media Audiences

Scholars have recently asserted that to enhance our understanding of alternative media, we must shift our scholarly focus to examining the audiences that regularly consume the content (Frischlich et al., 2023a). In turn, research has begun examining alternative media from the demand side to understand *who* alternative media users are and *what* they expect from alternative media. In their extended literature review, Frischlich and colleagues (2023a) note that scholarship on alternative media typically categorizes alternative media users into three distinct camps. First are those who seek alternative media for its advocative qualities and are influenced to politically engage with the content (Selvanathan & Lickel, 2021). Next is the scholarly assumption that “alternative media” and “fake news” are interchangeable terms, and as such, alternative media users are labeled as vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation by organizations (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Third are users who seek alternative media due to dissatisfaction with mainstream media (Hameleers et al., 2022; Ries, Bersoff, & Peterson, 2023). While Frischlich and colleagues (2023a) did not have original data to create alternative media user profiles, the work of Noppari, Hiltunen, and Ahva (2019) and Schwarzenegger (2023) support these claims

qualitatively, as their interviews revealed that the most common alternative media user sought such content because they were skeptical of the mainstream. These users sought alternative content to get a holistic story of issues typically neglected by the mainstream. This extends another line of inquiry that has examined what audiences seek from alternative content. For example, Rauch (2015, p. 124) found that American alternative audiences valued “alternative content” (i.e., a focus on issues neglected by the mainstream, diverse sources, and the use of mobilizing information) above the “alternative form” (i.e., their status as nonprofits, small-scale, or non-commercial organizations; p. 124). In other words, alternative media consumers value calls for activism by news organizations, a trait that is considered “ideal” by Frischlich and colleagues (2023a). Substantiating this, Bártová (2022) found that Crooked Media consumers thought that the alternative organization’s position was unique in encouraging advocacy—a function that would be inappropriate for mainstream media to participate in.

Current Work

Previous scholarship has yielded fruitful speculation and results about alternative media users, but researchers have yet to create present-day alternative media user profiles. For decades, research has surrounded left-wing alternatives (e.g., Cushion et al., 2021) that were later dwarfed by a deluge of scholarship on right-wing media (see recent extensive political communication scholarship). However, very rarely does research include an analysis of both left- and right-wing alternative media in the same study. To our knowledge, Rauch (2015, 2019) is the only scholar who has examined alternative media from the consumer perspective and analyzed sources both on the left and right. We expand previous research by creating alternative media user profiles from quantitative data and utilizing sweeping media measures on both the left and the right, using a media repertoire approach (Schwarzenegger, 2023). As such, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: What are the media repertoires of alternative media users in the United States?

As stated above, a recent line of inquiry has investigated the relationship between alternative media and belief in misinformation despite the best available evidence. Websites that spread disinformation often self-identify themselves as alternatives (Robertson & Mourão, 2020), and alternative news organizations have been found to spread conspiracy theories (Starbird, 2017). As such, scholars have often diagnosed alternative media users as those most vulnerable to dis- and misinformation (Frischlich et al., 2023a). Experimental research has found that alternative news use is associated with belief in COVID-19-related misinformation (Frischlich et al., 2023b) and COVID-19-related conspiracy theories (Ziegele et al., 2022). However, survey research in a Swedish context found that alternative media use was not related to belief in misinformation, while television news consumers were more vulnerable (Vliegenthart et al., 2023). Study 1 showed that conservative and hyper-conservative media use was associated with holding false beliefs. To extend these findings and those of previous research, Study 2 examines how different media repertoires—including those comprised of both left- and right-wing alternative sources—are related to holding misperceptions. Given the mixed findings of previous research, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: How are alternative media repertoires related to the belief in false information (holding misperceptions)?

Method: Study 2

Procedure

The above research questions and hypotheses were evaluated using an MTurk survey disseminated in March 2022. The authors were responsible for creating the survey and all participants consented to participate. We used quota sampling to over-represent alternative media users compared with the general population—if the survey was to be disseminated without quotas, we would likely require many more participants to acquire responses from alternative media users, the focus of the work herein. The quota question asked participants, “Do you ever seek content from media outlets that are considered to be ‘alternative,’ such as Breitbart, The Daily Caller, InfoWars, Occupy Democrats, Alternet, or Mother Jones?” Further, we used quota sampling to ensure that there were 500 self-identified Republican respondents, 500 self-identified Democrats, and 500 self-identified Independents in the sample.

Data Reduction

We obtained 1,500 participants but ultimately included 661 in the final analysis due to incomplete or “bot” data. This dramatic loss of participants is in line with previous research that found MTurk is not ideal for social science data collection, as it often results in many lost responses (Webb & Tangney, 2022). To ensure that the final sample consisted only of legitimate responses, we used several tactics. First, we implemented two attention checks in the survey to ensure active participation. The first question appeared in the first half of the survey and asked participants to select “agree” from several response options. The second occurred later in the survey and asked participants to select “disagree” from many response options. Any participants who failed these attention checks were removed from the sample. Next, we removed any participants who spent less than 10 minutes taking the survey. The survey consisted of 94 media measures and 95 other items, including demographics, so it was not realistic that they could read every question in its entirety in less than 10 minutes. Furthermore, MTurk offers reCAPTCHA technology to catch robots that attempt to take surveys. If a participant failed the reCAPTCHA test, they were subsequently removed from the sample. Finally, we used listwise deletion to remove participants who had missing data for the questions analyzed in the current work.

Measures

Media Use

Participants were presented with 15 media categories. Within each category, a matrix table provides a list of platforms, outlets, or organizations. Participants were asked how often they saw content from the list, measured through a seven-point scale that included never (0), less often (1), several times per year (2), several times per month (3), several times per week (4), once per day (5), or several times per day (6). Media platforms, outlets, and organizations were items taken from other studies of partisan and alternative media use (Ad Fontes, 2021, 2022; Haller et al., 2019; Hutchens, Hmielowski, Beam, & Romanova, 2021; Rauch, 2015, 2019), with a few added at the authors’ discretion.

The *right-wing alternative media with high reach and professionalized staff* index included several websites with high traffic and a large staff with a clear conservative partisan bias ($M = 3.042$, $SD = 1.877$, $\alpha = 0.96$), *left-wing independent alternative media* included several digital-only websites with clear liberal partisan bias ($M = 2.828$, $SD = 1.932$, $\alpha = 0.98$), *right-wing independent alternative media* included several digital-only websites with clear conservative partisan bias ($M = 2.873$, $SD = 1.951$, $\alpha = 0.98$), *left-wing misinformation* ($M = 2.931$, $SD = 1.071$, $\alpha = 0.96$) and *right-wing misinformation* ($M = 2.837$, $SD = 2.145$, $\alpha = 0.96$) included several websites considered "selective, incomplete, unfair persuasion, propaganda," "contains misleading info," or "contains inaccurate/fabricated info" by the Ad Fontes (2021) media bias chart. *Far-right Neo-Nazi* sites were found via a researcher's search engine investigation into radical sites described as conspiratorial White supremacist sites promoting anti-Semitic, misogynistic, and Islamophobic views ($M = 2.904$, $SD = 2.196$, $r = 0.907^{***4}$). The *liberal/Democratic party-favoring national news* index included several websites, cable networks, or websites of major national newspapers typically categorized as having a liberal bias or favoring the Democratic Party ($M = 3.558$, $SD = 1.377$, $\alpha = 0.86$). The *conservative/Republican party-favoring national news* index included several digital sites, cable networks, or websites of major national newspapers typically categorized as having a liberal bias or favoring the Republican Party ($M = 3.758$, $SD = 1.419$, $\alpha = 0.89$). The *national news characterized as not favoring a political party* index included the use of network news and a national newspaper deemed neutral by Ad Fontes (2021; $M = 3.998$, $SD = 1.366$, $\alpha = 0.88$), the *public access news* index included the use of PBS, C-SPAN, or NPR ($M = 3.534$, $SD = 1.591$, $\alpha = 0.89$), and the *international news characterized as not favoring a political party* index included the use of several international sources ($M = 3.690$, $SD = 1.464$, $\alpha = 0.86$). The *local news* measure was a single-item question that asked participants how often they consumed local news ($M = 4.590$, $SD = 1.318$). The *comedy shows* index included several late-night shows that discuss politics ($M = 3.289$, $SD = 1.622$, $\alpha = 0.93$), and the *podcast or audio sources* index included the top political and news podcasts on Spotify ($M = 2.866$, $SD = 1.880$, $\alpha = 0.98$). Finally, the *miscellaneous* index included smartphone push notifications leading to news app use, using news aggregate sites, news listservs or email newsletters, news from an online community or bulletin (e.g., Reddit), or news via word of mouth ($M = 3.818$, $SD = 1.233$, $\alpha = 0.84$). For a complete list of media sources, please contact the corresponding author.

Misperceptions

Belief in misperceptions was captured by presenting participants with a list of statements and asking them how much they believed the items to be true, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from "not at all true" to "completely true." The misperceptions were separated into "general misperceptions" and "COVID-19 misperceptions" and were considered misinformation by FactCheck.org from the Annenberg Policy Center (www.factcheck.org), statements denoted as "pants on fire" by Politifact of the Poynter Institute (www.politifact.com) or received four Pinocchios by the *Washington Post* political fact-checker (*Washington Post*, 2022). As such, the following statements measured *COVID-19 misperceptions*: "In New York state, if you're White, you have to get to the back of the line to get medical help" (Terrerri Ramos, 2022, para. 2), "Twice as many children have died from taking the COVID-19 vaccination than have died from COVID-19" (Kertscher, 2021, para. 2), "People who exercise their health autonomy and don't get vaccinated are being put into internment camps" (Heim, 2021, para. 3), and "The COVID-19 vaccination is

⁴ Note. Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$

the deadliest vaccination ever made" (Putterman, 2021, para. 4; $M = 2.856$, $SD = 1.943$, $\alpha = 0.94$). The following statements measured *general misperceptions*: "Gun manufacturers are the only industry in America that is exempt from being sued by the public" (Kiely, Farley, & Robertson, 2021, para. 4), "There are over 1 million phantom voters in Florida" (Sherman, 2021, para. 1), "Georgia election laws end voting hours early so that the working people cannot cast their vote when their shift is over" (Kessler, 2021a, para. 1), and "Without a cure for Alzheimer's, every hospital bed in America will be occupied by an Alzheimer's patient within the next 15 years" (Kessler, 2021b, para. 1; $M = 3.210$, $SD = 1.621$, $\alpha = 0.86$).

Demographic and Political Controls

Several demographic and political controls were included in all models. They were *biological sex* (56.30% male), *education* (measured on a 9-point scale ranging from none to a graduate degree, median and mode = 8.00, a four-year college degree), *income* (measured on a ten-point scale ranging from less than \$10,000 to \$150,000 or more, $M = 5.77$, median = 6.00, \$50,000 to \$59,999), *political interest* (single item asking if they are very interested in politics, ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (6), $M = 4.566$, $SD = 1.222$), and *political ideology* (single item asking for their placement on a very liberal (0) to very conservative (6) scale, $M = 3.544$, $SD = 1.945$).

Analysis Plan

To address our research questions, we used latent profile analysis (LPA; McCutcheon, 1987) and ANCOVA (using the above-listed controls) with Tukey-Kramer post-hoc tests to account for unequal cell sizes in Stata version 15.

Latent profile analysis (LPA) was used to create unique media repertoires based on the levels of use of the 15 different media categories. LPA is the continuous variable version of latent class analysis (LCA), which allows scholars to uncover the underlying mechanism driving responses to various questions, which is similar in logic to a measurement model in structural equation modeling. In our case, we assume that there is an underlying mechanism that can explain the frequency with which an individual uses a combination of communication sources. Creating profiles or classes is a data-driven approach, similar to principal components' analysis, where the researcher sets the number of classes or profiles to create. Then, utilizing maximum likelihood estimation, the analysis places each individual in the class or profile in which they have the highest probability of fitting. Multiple class or profile sizes are tested, and fit statistics and the percentage of participants in each class or profile are assessed. The model that is considered the best fitting is then retained, and class or profile codes are assigned to each individual. By examining how different classes or profiles vary across the indicators that were used to create the classes or profiles, one can see what may be driving the class or profile assignment.

Results: Study 2

To answer RQ1, we ran LPA, varying our profile size from two to 12. Fit statistics improved with each successive profile size; however, changes in fit statistics were lower (less than a 100-point change in negative log likelihood) for profiles larger than seven. Therefore, we took a closer look at the seven-, eight-

, and nine-profile solutions. The eight-profile solution appeared to create eight distinct repertoires, whereas the nine-profile solution did not appear to add an additional qualitative description to the media repertoires; therefore, the eight-profile solution was retained. Our profiles are visualized in Figure 1, going from largest to smallest, utilizing how each profile deviates from the mean on our 15 media subscales.

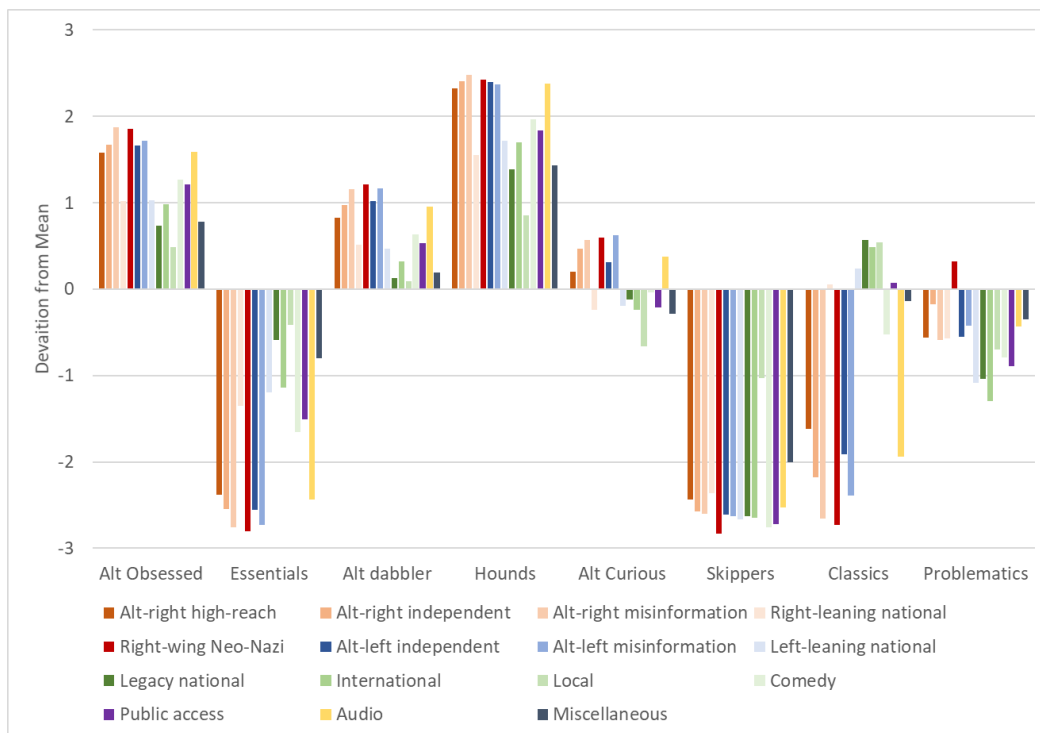


Figure 1. Representation of the eight profiles based on deviation from the sample mean on media sources use.

Our largest profile, *Alternative Media Obsessed*, accounted for 29.5% of our sample. These participants were above average for all of our measures of media use but were even more above average for our measures of alternative media in comparison to our traditional or mainstream sources. The second-largest profile, *The Essentials*, which represents 17.5% of the sample, was below average on all media sources, but was closer to the mean for non-partisan legacy national, international, and local news sources. The next profile, *Alternative Dabblers*, accounted for 14.98% of the sample. Similar to the first profile, these individuals are above average on all alternative sources, but not to as great an extent as the Obsessed. Their legacy use is very close to the mean, and they use both right- and left-wing alternative sources. Our fourth profile, *News Hounds*, accounts for 10.74% of the sample and is above average for all sources. Individuals in this profile have the highest average use in comparison to all other profiles, and this high use is present for all sources of media. The fifth profile makes up 9.68% of our sample, and we call it *The Alternative Curious*. They are close to average on all of the various media sources, but above average for the more extreme categories of right- and left-wing alternative media and audio news, where they are below average on all other media subtypes. The *News Skippers* make up 7.72% of our sample. They are below

average for all media types and have the greatest deviation from the mean for all media subtypes, but one (alt-right misinformation use is lower for Essentials and Classics). Our seventh profile we have dubbed *The Classics*, and they represent 6.35% of the sample. They are below average on all alternative media types and above average on left-leaning national, legacy national, international, local, and public access. Our final profile accounts for 3.78% of our sample and is dubbed *The Problematics*. They are below average on all media subtypes but one: Right-wing Neo-Nazi.

To examine RQ2, we used ANCOVA with Tukey-Kramer corrections to assess the relationship between our generated profiles and holding misperceptions. The data indicate that our profiles are associated with misperceptions surrounding COVID-19 ($F(7, 504) = 152.94, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = .680$) and general misperceptions ($F(7, 505) = 123.52, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.631$). The estimated marginal means for each profile are visualized in Figure 2. In general, we see four groups emerge regarding their beliefs about misperceptions. The Skippers, Essentials, and Classics are one group; the Problematics, Alternative Curious, and Alternative Dabblers are the second; the Alternative Obsessed the third; and the News Hounds the fourth. The three profiles with the lowest levels of misperceptions were the profiles associated with below-average use of alternative media: the Skippers, the Essentials, and the Classics. These three profiles were not statistically different from each other in pairwise tests and were significantly lower than all other profiles. News Hounds, who were high consumers of all forms of media, had the highest levels of misperceptions of all the profiles, and this difference was statistically significant in all pairwise tests. The Alternative Obsessed was statistically higher in misperceptions than all groups except for the News Hounds, which left the Problematics, Alternative Curious, and Alternative Dabblers similar to each other and in the middle of the pack as far as belief in misinformation. Therefore, it is not the presence of quality media that reduces misperceptions but the absence of exposure to it in the first place.

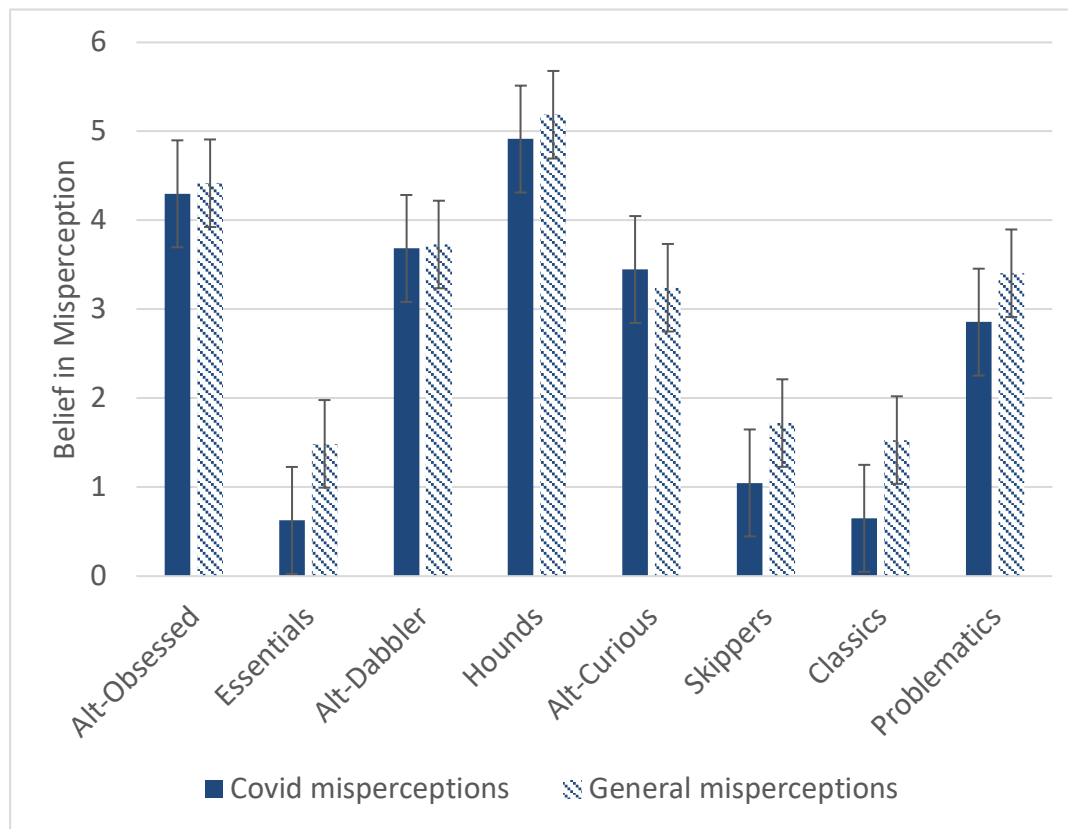


Figure 2. Marginal means of belief in misinformation by profile.

Discussion: Study 2

To our knowledge, Study 2 is among the first to examine American alternative media audiences and their relationships with misperceptions, highlighting eight alternative media user profiles based on unique media consumption habits. Our profiles indicate that it is imperative for scholars to continue the current momentum in examining not only partisan and hyper-partisan media but also alternatives that promote activism among their consumers (Waisbord, 2022). The current work reveals that Americans seek alternatives on both the left and right, highlighting the need for scholars to return to studying left-wing media (e.g., Cushion et al., 2021) in addition to the right (e.g., Holt et al., 2019). Moreover, we believe that Study 2 contributes to the previous literature in two notable ways.

First, we turn to the profiles that revealed the most compelling findings about alternative media use. To begin, the Alternative Curious are of note, as both their use of alternative media and audio sources were above the mean (except for alt-right misinformation sources), while their cable and mainstream use were below the mean. While the profiles do not offer the reasons *behind* alternative media use, it is noteworthy that when these users occasionally access news, they favor alternative sources over cable and mainstream sources. Perhaps this is due to dissatisfaction with traditional cable and mainstream programming, as previous research

suggests (Hameleers et al., 2022; Ries et al., 2023). Next, the Essentials and Classics highlight an audience segment that seeks only fundamental news sources in the form of mainstream and local news—perhaps to keep up socially but may also be a result of disillusion with partisan media (Newman et al., 2023). While it is important to note that the Problematics were the smallest profile, accounting for only 3.78% of the sample, we believe that they were of chief social concern. This profile is particularly alarming, as the participants were not primed for the use of these sites in the quota question. As such, a minority of those seeking content from Breitbart, The Daily Caller, InfoWars, Occupy Democrats, Alternet, or Mother Jones are also seeing content from sources that promote misogynistic, Anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic beliefs. Future research should continue to examine the impact of this media use on social outcomes beyond the belief in misperceptions.

Second, we turn to what we believe to be our biggest contribution to the extant literature: the relationship between alternative media use and holding misperceptions, beliefs that are false and unsupported by the best available evidence (Nyhan, 2020). We found that our profiles accounted for more than 60% of the variance in predicting belief in misperceptions (68% for COVID-19 misperceptions and 63.1% for general misperceptions). This highlights the importance of a media repertoire approach—it is not an issue that exists only on the left or right, but may instead be an issue of media use in a general sense. As our profiles revealed, media use was rarely siloed into the left and right. Instead, if one sought alternative news from the left, they also sought it from the right. As such, we expand previous experimental research that found that German right-wing alternative sources were associated with an increased recall of false COVID-19 information (Frischlich et al., 2023b) and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Ziegele et al., 2022). Affirming this research, we believe that it may not be the presence of quality media that “overrides” the belief in misperceptions (Vraga, Kim, & Cook, 2019). This notion is exemplified through the Essentials and Classics, the groups with the lowest belief in misperceptions. While the Essentials were below the mean on all media use and the Classics were hardly above the mean on mainstream sources, they were still the best at identifying misinformation. Moreover, our findings indicate that while alternative media increases susceptibility to misinformation, consuming more media by way of mainstream sources does not decrease this vulnerability. For instance, the Hounds highlight consumers who likely overwhelm themselves with high use of alternative, mainstream, and partisan news but were most vulnerable to believing unsubstantiated information. We are not arguing that consumers should avoid news altogether but instead should be selective with their consumption and practice media literacy techniques to decrease their susceptibility to taking misinformation at face value. Future research should continue to analyze the outcomes of alternative media use.

General Discussion

While organizations that spread disinformation often market themselves as alternatives, it is important to note that genuine alternatives seek to mobilize consumers and promote political engagement, not conspiracies (Frischlich et al., 2023a; Waisbord, 2022). However, we believe that it is imperative for future scholars to employ a media repertoire approach to understand alternative media use, as our profiles reveal that most alternative media users do not overtly avoid the mainstream. A repertoire approach would continue to advance our understanding of alternative media users, which Frischlich and colleagues (2023a) argued is essential to gaining knowledge on alternative media more generally.

Importantly, we hope that the current work serves as a starting point for examinations of left-wing alternative media in the United States by examining the impact of this content, leaving room for future research to continue exploring the motivations behind this news consumption. While the ANES obtained representative data, it did not include hyper-partisan measures on the left. Study 2 reveals that left-wing sources are essential in wholly examining alternative media users' beliefs in false or inaccurate information, despite the best available evidence. However, the utility of Study 1 lies in the differential relationships revealed between hyper-partisan and mainstream conservative media as they relate to holding false beliefs, in that the coefficient was larger for hyper-partisan media use. Not only does this support the notion that partisan media is associated with holding misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2016), but also that differential effects may be evident with a representative sample, the primary weakness of Study 2.

Limitations and Future Research

Our work encountered limitations, but offers fruitful opportunities for future research. First, Study 2 suffered from a small sample size, as we obtained 1,500 participants but were left with 661 after removing suspected robots and those who failed attention checks. As stated above, MTurk has become financially inefficient for social science data collection (Webb & Tangney, 2022). Second, Study 2 used quota sampling to acquire an over-sample of U.S. alternative media users to ensure an over-representation of alternative media users compared with the general population. While this was necessary to examine the effects of alternative media use, it was not a representative sample. The current study suggests that there is a relationship between alternative media use and misperceptions, but future research should obtain a representative sample to observe macro patterns of alternative media users within the general population. Third, Study 2 analyzed alternative audio sources not only in the form of radio but also podcasts—an understudied area of alternative media research (Bártová, 2022). However, this was a limited list of podcasts that was not indicative of the contemporary podcast ecosystem. To this end, future research should expand the examination into alternative podcasts on both the left and the right. Finally, and most broadly, Study 2 did not reveal differential effects about a belief in misinformation among left- and right-wing alternative media users. While Study 2 used sweeping media measures, there were still more right-wing sources than left. While this is an accurate depiction of the current media landscape, the United States' media environment is constantly changing, so future research would be wise to be flexible in its media measures rather than relying on extant indexes.

Conclusion

A recent burst in scholarship has revealed that alternative media remains an ambiguous concept that is context-dependent (Waisbord, 2022). While scholars have relegated alternative media use to only sources spreading disinformation (Frischlich et al., 2023a), genuine alternative media seeks to mobilize their consumers, promote political engagement, and emphasize issues that are neglected by mainstream media (Rauch, 2015; Waisbord, 2022). However, a proper understanding of alternative media will only come with the knowledge of its consumers (Frischlich et al., 2023a). The current work revealed that it is not the presence of alternative media in one's repertoire that impacts a belief in misperceptions, but rather the presence of news (mainstream, partisan, or alternative) altogether. We hope that the current work serves to expand scholars' understanding of alternative media users and their relationship with misperceptions.

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