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Published online: 09 Aug 2024.

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Politicized and Paranoid? Assessing Attitudinal Predictors of Alternative News Consumption

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ABSTRACT
The study of right-wing alternative news sources has moved to the center of scholarly attention recently. Such sources cater to news consumers characterized by extreme political views and mistrust toward mainstream news. However, research into the predictors of alternative news consumption is still scarce. We approach this gap by combining online tracking and survey data from 2,009 German panel participants. We find conspiratorial thinking and pro-Russian stance to be predictors of alternative news consumption, both in absolute and in relative terms. Our analysis thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of alternative news consumers.

Introduction

Citizens' engagement with news and current affairs is widely considered to be of pivotal importance for the functioning of Western democracies (Boulianne, 2011; Moeller & de Vreese, 2019; Watts et al., 2021). Both the manner in which news media depict events and the reception of news by citizens represent subjects of intense academic scrutiny, yet the ongoing shift to digital news consumption and highly individualized media diets have complicated our understanding of how politics are framed in news reporting, the ways in which news is encountered and consumed, who actively engages with it, and how these aspects play out together (Karnowski et al., 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020; Kümpel, 2020; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018).

Recently, computational techniques for the textual and visual analysis of news have proliferated, and there exist ample examples of research based on social media data. Yet, only recently has there been a rise in research that combines digital behavioral data with survey data for a fuller picture of individual news consumption (Jürgens & Stark, 2022; Müller & Bach, 2021; Scharkow et al., 2020; Stier, Breuer, et al., 2020). This approach holds considerable potential to improve research on news consumption, as self-reported measures of (digital) media use may be more inaccurate than had previously been assumed (Parry et al., 2021; Prior, 2009).

This is particularly true for the engagement with *right-wing alternative news sources*, which appear to have an outsized visibility on social media (Andersen et al., 2023; Bachl, 2018; Frischlich et al., 2020; Heft et al., 2020; Steppat et al., 2023). While the term is quite broad and a range of competing definitions exist (cf. de León et al., 2024; Schulze, 2020; Schwarzenegger, 2022), we understand these sources as differing from mainstream news on several key dimensions, including their political stance, organizational structure, professional ethos and business model, as well as the characteristics of individual news items published in them with regard to content, style and ephemerality. In a shifting media environment, right-wing alternative sources cater to online news consumers who are frequently distinguished by their extreme political views, low degree of trust in established mainstream news sources and Manichean view of politics (Frischlich et al., 2021). They have also been linked to conspiracy myths, for example that immigration is used strategically by liberal elites to further a "great exchange" of the autochthonous population, or that man-made climate change is fabricated or its effects exaggerated to serve economic and political goals (Hameleers, 2021). While existing research has investigated both the style and content of alternative news and the views of their users, such as the level of political interest and party preferences, other predictors of alternative news consumption have been scrutinized less thoroughly. This holds true in particular for latent traits that are difficult to study without extensive item inventories, such as individuals' general tendency toward conspiracy thinking (Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013). At the same time, conspiracy-minded individuals have previously been shown to assign above-average credibility to alternative news outlets (Frischlich et al., 2021; Vogler et al., 2024).

Alternative news sources have entered the global news market en masse in recent years and captured an increasing audience share, although established national news brands still tend to be much more visible. The aims of the news organizations behind alternative news sources differ widely and range from overt state-funded propaganda, for example from Russia (*RT*, formerly *Russia Today*), and the advancement and political mobilization of fringe right-wing movements (*Junge Freiheit, COMPACT*) to building successful brands in alignment with new populist political parties (*Epoch Times*) and

generating ad revenue through clickbait with no apparent political aims (*Truth24.net*). Accordingly, we do not assume alternative news sources to supply a single homogenous type of content, but rather see them as distinct from mainstream sources in a predictable manner, with one constitutive element being an incendiary and polarizing style of presenting politics (cf. Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022). It is also unclear how alternative news consumption relates to mainstream news consumption, i.e., to what extent users of alternative news rely on a mix of mainstream and alternative sources, or are trapped in "echo chambers" (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Geiß et al., 2021).

In this article, we focus on *conspiracy ideation*, i.e., a general affinity toward conspiracy theories, and a *pro-Russian stance*, which we define as viewpoints aligned with Kremlin-led propaganda, particularly regarding the invasion of Ukraine, as predictors for the consumption of alternative right-wing media. While predictors such as political interest, media trust and party preference are well-established in the literature, conspiracy ideation has not yet been widely studied in relation to alternative media consumption. In the following, we first discuss the *supply side* of alternative news, i.e., the evolving role of alternative media in the online news ecosystem. We then turn to the *demand side*, i.e., the role of selective exposure and the psychological need for self-validation as central for understanding media consumption choices that differ from the mainstream. We formulate a single research question on this presumed interdependence. After describing our data and methodological approach, we turn to an analysis of combined survey and digital tracking data collected over an extended period. We close with observations of future research on alternative media consumers.

Characteristics of Right-Wing Alternative Media

Alternatively, oppositional and marginal voices that seek to counter mainstream journalism have always existed. However, since the turn of the century the proliferation of online media has significantly simplified access to news and current affairs via the Internet and have, among other things, also provided opportunities to outlets that have been variously characterized as *right-wing hyperpartisan media* (Schulze, 2020; Stier, Kirkizh, et al., 2020), *right-wing alternative media* (Heft et al., 2020) and *alternative media with an affinity for populism* (Müller & Schulz, 2021). This is a recent development representing a turn from a prior phase spanning the 1990s and early 2000s, during which the adjective alternative chiefly described progressive news sources (Harcup, 2016; Rone, 2021; Schwarzenegger, 2021). However, there is continuity in that alternative news media commonly position themselves as the corrective of mainstream media and dominant political actors (Frischlich et al., 2023; Holt et al., 2019). In this view, the mainstream media is largely characterized as uniform, self-interested and pliant, if not

captured by vested interests. Journalists are framed as aloof and elitist, as well as frequently being aligned with traditional political factions. Alternative media outlets use collective modes of organization paired with a radical progressive political agenda and sustained close ties to grass-roots social movements (Haller & Holt, 2019; Haller et al., 2019; Holt, 2018).

Prior to the rise of right-wing alternative news sources, research placed mainstream and alternative media in a continuum rather than conceptualizing them as opposed binary categories (Hackett & Gurleyen, 2015; Hájek & Carpentier, 2015), suggesting that the distinction is frequently difficult to make and depends strongly on the political context. Holt et al. (2019) proposed a relational and multilevel definition, arguing that "alternativeness" should be studied on four levels: Alternative news media can 1) highlight new voices (*alternative content creators*); 2) attempt to influence public opinion based on agendas that are perceived by proponents and audiences as underrepresented; 3) provide alternative coverage and interpretation (*alternative news content*) of political and social events that are excluded or otherwise marginalized in the mainstream news media; 4) rely on *alternative publishing routines* via channels outside and unsupported by the major networks and newspapers in an alternative media system. Such differences can be further systematized to enable transnational comparisons of alternative news outlets. For example, Heft et al. (2020) developed a typology of alternative news outlets along the dimensions of extreme right-wing and conventional tendency and low to high journalistic transparency, and relate sources' scores on a number of benchmarks based on reach and audience exposure to these dimensions.

In contrast to mainstream journalism, many alternative media overtly aim to shape public opinion according to a political agenda that is perceived as "being underrepresented, ostracized or otherwise marginalized in mainstream news media" (Holt et al., 2019) with some apparent success (cf. Benkler et al., 2018; Kaiser et al., 2020; Starbird, 2017 for the U.S. context). There is also mounting evidence for an association between the use of right-wing alternative news outlets and an affinity for political populism among voters, though this is somewhat complicated by the fluidity of the alternativeness of media in the eyes of news consumers, impacting survey-based usage research in particular (Steppat et al., 2023). Müller and Schulz (2021) find the strength of exposure to alternative news to be an important predictor of right-wing political preference, with frequent exposure related to stronger populist leanings and increased likelihood to vote for a right-wing party. The preference for alternative news sources had also been found to be more broadly associated with populist political attitudes, both in Germany and across Western democracies (Stier, Kirkizh, et al., 2020). Finally, conspiracy-minded citizens have been found to assign outsized credibility to alternative news outlets, compared to mainstream news consumers (Frischlich et al., 2021).

The turn from alternative media as a label for progressive political ideology to an association with nationalistic, xenophobic and authoritarian movements has complicated the scholarly perspective on such media in relation to their "alternative" status. For example, Frischlich et al. (2023) argue for a deeper understanding of alternative news consumers that goes beyond a binary normative understanding of "good" and "bad" sources and argue for greater conceptual clarity regarding the label's constitutive elements (see also Rae, 2021). At the same time, weighing both possibilities, Strömbäck (2023) finds alternative media to represent a problem, rather than an opportunity for democracy, because of a link between its content and function to users that is emblematic of a decline in the "shared facts and trust in processes of epistemic validation" (p. 881) that are essential in democracies. This contribution seeks to respond to Frischlich et al. (2023)'s call for placing alternative news consumers and their preferences and personality at the center of attention, while our findings on the link with conspiracy ideation substantiate Strömbäck's (2023) arguments regarding the challenge that such outlets and their users pose to democracy, particularly because of their tendency to imagine the world as a Manichean political struggle (Quandt, 2018).

(Alternative) News Consumption and Selective Exposure

Different motivations prompt users to engage with online news. Extant research has investigated habitual use, active searching and serendipitously coming into contact with news via social media interaction or recommendation systems as central pathways (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Merten et al., 2022; Möller et al., 2020; Wojcieszak et al., 2022). In recent years, this view has become more nuanced, particularly with regard to the incidental nature of incidental news exposure (Haim et al., 2021; Merten, 2021; Thorson et al., 2021). Active news seeking in particular has been linked to news engagement via social media and search engines (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Wojcieszak et al., 2022).

Conceptually, the theory of selective media exposure unsurprisingly provides the backdrop to our analysis (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014). We argue that individuals with an affinity for conspiracy thinking seek out sources that are consonant with their views (Ziegele et al., 2022). Factors supporting this argument include the need to reduce cognitive dissonance, the desire to maintain a positive self-image, and the comparable ease of processing information that is consistent with existing beliefs – all of which apply to an heightened degree when one's beliefs are perceived as socially and politically marginalized (Frischlich et al., 2021; Hameleers & Yekta, 2023). Digital news environments where information is disseminated rapidly and widely and which provide extensive facilities for tailoring news

consumption to individual preferences potentially increase the degree to which users may rely on selective exposure (Ohme & Mothes, 2020; Tóth et al., 2023). At the same time, it is debated intensely within political communication what consequences, if any, such a shift may have on political polarization, the fragmentation of public opinion, and the role of media in shaping public discourse (Nelson & Webster, 2017; Steppat et al., 2022; Stier et al., 2023; Törnberg, 2022). While no panacea, novel passive approaches to capturing user behavior, such as automated tracking, are widely regarded as vital to addressing these complex challenges.

Whereas the connection between online selective exposure and political stance has been extensively studied for decades, particularly in relation to two-party systems such as the United States (Peterson et al., 2021; Tyler et al., 2022), it is somewhat less clear how partisan selective exposure plays out in European multi-party democracies (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021; Stier, Kirkizh, et al., 2020; Trilling et al., 2017). The second component of selective exposure, i.e., the tendency to avoid information that disagrees with one's own views, is less well-established in the context of a connection between conspiratorial thinking and alternative media consumption. Research has recently begun to differentiate more strongly between selective exposure and selective avoidance, under the premise that while audiences seek out ideologically aligning media, they do not actively avoid cross-cutting news sites (Nelson & Webster, 2017). This possibility fits with the complications that Frischlich et al. (2023) argue for with respect to how research regards consumers of alternative news, i.e., the assumption that such individuals have a narrow media repertoire. Given the importance of heightened political interest as a predictor of news consumption, it seems plausible that alternative news consumers outside of the United States may have rather broad news media repertoires.

Regular use of alternative news outlets varies strongly by country, with up to 22% of news consumers in the U.S. and 7% in the United Kingdom regularly accessing such sources. Stier, Kirkizh, et al. (2020), in their analysis of cross-national web tracking data, found legacy media outlets to lead in overall online news consumption, with differences among countries overall, and large differences between the United States, where hyperpartisan news played a relevant role even among mainstream consumers, and Western Europe, where their role was more marginal. In Germany, by contrast, Schulze (2020) found only 12% of respondents with internet access to be aware of alternative media outlets and about 4% to use them regularly. In another recent survey, Müller and Schulz (2021) found between 8% and 15% of respondents to use right-wing alternative media outlets at least occasionally, depending on the specific outlet. While this represents a relatively low level of visibility, prominent alternative media outlets have a high level of online activity associated with them (Heft et al., 2020). In an analysis of web

tracking and survey data collected in 2017–19, Müller and Bach (2021) find up to 40% of visits to right-wing alternative sources to be referrals from Facebook, leading clearly over search engines and other social media platforms. In step with these findings, de León et al. (2024) relate trust in political institutions and mainstream media, as well as political extremity and perception of threats among users to alternative media consumption in a recent comparative Swiss-German tracking study, also finding social media referrals to be of key importance. At the same time, comparisons of user engagement between followers of mainstream and alternative news on social media suggest that the latter engage in activities such as commenting, liking and sharing more than the former (Boberg et al., 2020; Sandberg & Ihlebæk, 2019; Zannettou et al., 2017). News sharing in particular expresses (public) interest in certain issues and is accompanied by the risk of negative reactions from others, which is especially true for alternative news (Løvlie et al., 2018). Some studies also indicate that the political factors that positively influence mainstream news engagement also apply to alternative news, as the sources that receive the most user feedback are often the most ideologically extreme ones (Hiaeshutter-Rice & Weeks, 2021).

Conspiracy Ideation and Pro-Russian Stance as Predictors of Alternative News Consumption

Conspiracy myths have always been politically salient (Chlup, 2023).[1] Myths and half-truths are increasingly wielded by insurgent political actors with the intention of subverting state institutions and bolstering their own legitimacy, a development that has been spurred by the internet and social media as sources of political information. Notable instances on the right encompass individual politicians, parties, and grass-roots movements (Engesser et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018; Puschmann et al., 2020). Conspiracy myths associated with contentious political matters, in particular, engage supporters of both right-wing and left-wing ideologies by harnessing potent emotions, including doubt, alienation, fear, and resentment and incorporating them into a simple and captivating narrative (Chlup, 2023; Hameleers, 2021; Spiegel et al., 2020). Indeed, conspiracy theories serve as a common denominator to ideologically disparate populist strands (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). Though historically bottom-up conspiracy theories that involve foreign enemies have been popular, a tendency in Western countries toward internal and top-down conspiracies has been identified in recent decades (Butter & Howe, 2020). Meanwhile, anti-elitism and conspiracy beliefs link seamlessly in

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[1]We here follow the argumentation of Schwaiger et al. (2022) and use the term *conspiracy myths* instead of *conspiracy theories* throughout the article. The term *theory* is suggestive of scientific verifiability or refutability, which is not always the case with conspiracy myths, which are rather characterized by their narrative nature (Schwaiger et al., 2022; Spiegel et al., 2020).

populist politics, because their combination makes it easy to suggest that those in power use foul play to suppress the will of the people (Castanho Silva et al., 2017).

The questions and issues discussed in research on conspiracy myths overlap substantially with those discussed in populism research, which justifies further interrogation of the connection between the two phenomena (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). Expressed in terms of an ideational approach, populism can be defined as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Though research on conspiracy myths often mentions their possible function for populist or authoritarian politics and vice versa, there is a relative lack of research studying the connection explicitly. At the same time, there are reasons to assume that some but not all aspects of populism connect to conspiracy psychologically. Castanho Silva et al. (2017) find an association of conspiracy with self-interested, but not necessarily purely evil, elites to be associated with populism. They furthermore identify people-centrism and anti-elitism as aspects of populism linked with conspiracy beliefs, in contrast to a good-versus-evil view of politics.

On the content level, the connection between conspiracy ideation and the style of populism manifests in right-wing alternative news sources, which blend the two and, unsurprisingly, seem preferentially linked. Frischlich et al. (2021) investigate the relationship between conspiracy thinking and trust in alternative news, though they do not study news consumption. According to the authors, individuals with higher levels of conspiracy mentality are more likely to perceive alternative counter-news articles to be more credible. They also note that preferential selection and selective news exposure are not unique to alternative counter-news, but are likely to be particularly relevant for extremely opinionated information sources and participants with attitudes consonant with them.

In a similar vein, Hetzel et al. (2022) find the regular use of at least one alternative medium to be slightly positively associated with conspiracy beliefs. However, factors such as above-average political interest or distrust of mainstream media were identified as drivers of alternative news consumption, leading the authors to conclude that an affinity for alternative news could not be linked primarily to conspiracy beliefs. Vogler et al. (2024) study the association between political beliefs and information among Swiss internet users, finding conspiracy myth affinity, use of Telegram and use of social media for information seeking to increase the odds of using alternative media. Klawier et al. (2023) find that exposure to right-wing alternative media to be reliably associated with specific conspiracy beliefs, such as the belief that the COVID-19

pandemic was a hoax. The authors also identified political interest, a critical stance toward immigration, the relevance of social media as a news source, as well as distrust of public service broadcasting media to be strong predictors of right-wing alternative news use. Finally, Strömbäck et al. (2023) identify the use of right-wing alternative media as the strongest predictor of conspiratorial predispositions, followed by ideological leaning. However, the authors argue that the relationship between news use and conspiratorial predispositions is overall under-explored and requires further investigation.

The right-wing alternative media ecosystem both in and beyond the United States has also shown signs of becoming increasingly interconnected (Heft et al., 2021), which has partly been attributed to a push for digital information influence by autocratic state actors (Bolsover & Howard, 2019; Wagnsson, 2023). These actors strategically embed their narratives within seemingly objective news reports disseminated through mass media channels. This approach deviates from traditional propaganda by leveraging familiar media formats and consumption habits to target audiences beyond their borders (Watanabe, 2017). Among state-directed media outlets, the Russian broadcasters RT and Sputnik (now digital outlets as well as broadcasters) have been found to promote conspiracy myths and promote misinformation (Elswah & Howard, 2020; Wagnsson, 2023; Watanabe, 2017). Wagnsson (2023) refers to "malign information influence" (MII) in relation to information sponsored by authoritarian regimes or hostile actors that is distributed to manipulate foreign audiences, arguing that this strategy blurs the lines between public diplomacy, propaganda, and traditional journalism. MII often utilizes emotionally charged narratives that incorporate, but are not limited to, disinformation. In their analysis of its organizational behavior, Elswah and Howard (2020) underscore the need to understand RT's viewership, presumably composed of individuals holding anti-establishment and anti-Western views, an aspect that we take up in our study.

These strategic aims come to the fore in particular in conjunction with armed conflict, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2014/2022). In his content analysis of ITAR-TASS's news coverage during the Russian annexation of Crimea, Watanabe (2017) reveals systematic bias in the agency's portrayal of Ukraine. This finding underscores the potential role of ITAR-TASS in Russia's "hybrid warfare" strategies, which employ nonmilitary instruments to achieve military objectives. Furthermore, Watanabe identifies recurring patterns in the agency's framing of mediated communication that appear to serve the purpose of bolstering Russian influence over Ukraine. Authoritarian state broadcasters often seek to reach audiences with general interest news topics, such as sports, economy, or international relations according to a content analysis of German alternative news outlets by Müller and Freudenthaler (2022).

In summary, the link between right-wing alternative media and state actors, particularly authoritarian regimes, has been widely studied. Less attention has been devoted to a range of notionally independent news outfits that are heavily influenced by state actors through indirect forms of sponsoring and financial as well as logistical support. The situation is documented in detail in a study by Beseler and Toepfl (2024) who document links between the Russian state and different alternative news outlets in Germany. Their analysis subsequently reveals that at least one of these three types of connections to the Kremlin is maintained by half of the investigated German-language alternative media outlets. These findings therefore further enrich our understanding of alternative media landscapes, alongside Russia's overt and covert foreign influence campaigns.

Our observations on these two factors let us formulate the following research question:

RQ1:   To what extent are conspiracy ideation and a pro-Russian stance connected with alternative news consumption?

Data and Methods

The present study relies on a combination of two data sources, digital tracking and survey data, collected jointly within a longitudinal panel study on the linkage between political polarization and online news consumption. The entire analysis was conducted in R 4.3.1 (R Core Team, 2021).

First, drawing on a commercial market research panel operated by Bilendi SA, a multi-wave survey was conducted among German internet users between March 2022 and October 2023. Survey waves were deployed in November/December 2022, April/May 2023, September/October 2023 and November/December 2023. The large panel represents the demographics of German internet users in terms of age, education, and gender well, but due to the non-probability-based nature of the panel, we cannot make inferences to the whole German population. This survey contained standardized items on constructs that have been connected with alternative media consumption in the literature, such as political interest, media trust, political preferences and trust in democracy. In addition, standard sociodemographic variables on age, gender and education were included. While sociodemographic variables were obtained in the onboarding of survey participants, other relevant items were fielded in different waves. The Support for Russia construct was based on three items included in waves 2 through 4. Details on the survey items and the construct are provided in Appendices B and C.

The Conspiracy Ideation construct used in this study was derived using the open survey responses from the panel participants on four separate

issues, obtained in waves 1–4. These issues were climate change policy, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the government's policy toward energy shortages and inflation, and gender politics. Participants were asked to articulate their thoughts on these issues and specifically to voice their opinion on the adequacy of government policies in these areas. Responses could be made during each of the survey waves, though each item could only be responded to a single time. In total 2,098 respondents chose to answer between one and all four questions. Responses were concatenated into a single character string and subjected to dictionary analysis (see below for details on the validation).

The second component of our analysis was digital-tracking data on the internet use of the same users. The panel provider utilized both automated mobile and desktop browser tracking with the consent of subjects. On mobile devices, a tracking app was installed while on desktop a browser plugin for all major browsers was used. Whenever a participant accessed a website, the complete URL and a timestamp were recorded. All data were provided in a pseudonymized and de-identified format. Tracking was opt-in in the sense that users could at any time disable tracking in the app or by choosing private mode in their browser. Automated tracking began early in March 2022 and continued to December 2023. While a total of 4,654 users participated in automated tracking in principle, the level of activity of these users varied substantially. We filtered users who, in addition to responding to the survey questions, actively participated in the tracking over a sustained period. We defined active participation as a minimum of 1,383 recorded actions (opening a web address via a web browser on a mobile/desktop device or using an app) and a minimum of 35 active days over the course of the study. Both figures correspond with the 25th percentile of the activity distribution (actions/days). The median number of actions within this group stood at 56,200 actions and 351 days of tracked activity, i.e., considerably higher than the minimum. Thus, filtering the data resulted in a final sample of 2,009 users who provided both detailed survey and tracking data.

To measure the level of conspiracy ideation in the open survey responses, we applied a word-list-based approach. Relying on a computational dictionary (*RPC-Lex*) developed for the analysis of right-wing populist and conspiracy discourse (Puschmann et al., 2022), we counted the number of terms in the dictionary matched in the survey responses. Rather than working with the entire dictionary, we selected only two components of RPC-Lex from a total of 13 sections, namely the stylistic section on *suspicion/manipulation* (#2), the antagonists section on *anti-elitism* (#6) and the topoi section on *conspiracy (#9)*. This choice was made in order to ensure that the measured construct in fact relates distinctly to conspiracy, rather than more generally to other aspects represented in the dictionary, such as nationalism or esotericism. The dictionary was applied by first matching the concatenated (i.e.

pasted into a single text) survey responses with the dictionary terms, weighting the number of matches by the total word count and finally scaling the result. For validation, we proceeded as follows: We first applied a five-point ordinal scale (none – very high) based on adjusted quantiles to the machine-classified responses and drew a stratified sample of 150 items (30 per cline). This sample was manually coded by one of the authors and results compared to the automated classification. We achieved a satisfactory Krippendorff's alpha of .81.

After combining survey and tracking data, news website impressions were counted at the domain level. For classification of visits as right-wing alternative news, we used a list of 153 German-language websites (see Appendix A). Our list is strongly congruent with similar ones used in prior research, while also incorporating more recent sources based on the criteria previously outlined for such sources (Boberg et al., 2020; Müller & Bach, 2021; Stier, Kirkizh, et al., 2020). The use of an alternative source was determined by counting each visit to an alternative new site. We discounted visits that were shorter than 5 s.

The data was then incorporated into a regression model. As the data contained a large number of subjects with no exposure to alternative news, we chose a hurdle model (Zeileis et al., 2008) to account for this skewed distribution. Hurdle models are two-part regression models, with the first part modeling the likelihood of zero exposure and the second part modeling the number of visits to alternative news sites for those users with at least one visit. In taking this approach, we closely follow the analysis strategy taken by Müller and Bach (2021) and extend the approach of Möller et al. (2020), who applied a zero inflated Poisson model to digital tracking data. In addition to being statistically pertinent, such a strategy also has the advantage of conceptually differentiating between usage in a binary sense (i.e., usage versus non-usage), while also being able to capture differences in degree of usage (i. e., occasional and frequent use) – a distinction that is theoretically relevant. Appendices D and E contain details on descriptive statistics and regression models.

Results

In descriptive terms, we find 478 (or 24%) of the final sample ($n = 2,009$) to have at least a single visit to an alternative news site. The median number of visits for these users is $M = 3$, indicating a very skewed distribution with a few marked outliers and limited exposure overall. A total of 74 participants (or 4% of all users) accessed 20 or more unique alternative news items.

Our inferential findings (also represented visually in Figure 1) match those of previous studies in some respects, but expand earlier findings by incorporating both a pro-Russian stance and conspiracy ideation as relevant
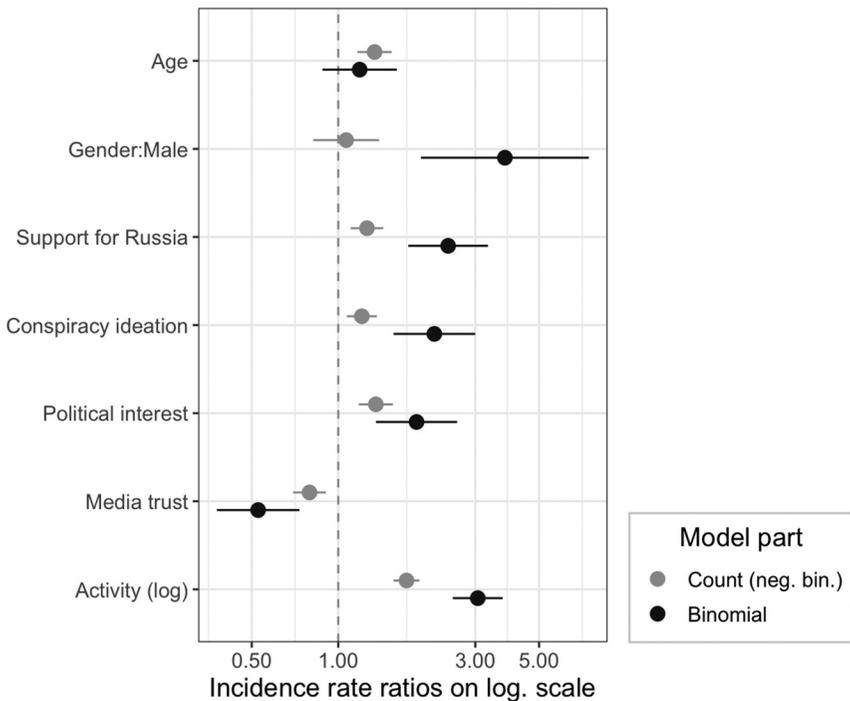
Figure 1. Hurdle models predicting right-wing alternative news use. Point estimates are incident rate ratios (IRRs) of hurdle models predicting exposure, with a logistic regression model for the zero-hurdle component (no exposure vs. any exposure) and a negative binomial regression model for the count component (frequency of exposure). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Dashed line indicates null effect.

predictors of alternative news consumption. We find support for Russia, conspiracy ideation and political interest to be salient, with all three exerting a significant positive effect. For all three variables, this effect is more pronounced for binary use vs. nonuse than for the degree of usage. We furthermore find male gender to exert a marked and significant positive effect for binary use/nonuse, but no effect on frequency, and age to have a small significant positive effect on frequency, but not on use. Media trust has a significant negative impact on alternative news consumption, with greater media trust resulting in a lower likelihood of relying on alternative sources, both in the binary and the count model. Finally, overall activity is a significant positive predictor in both models, as more active participants were also more likely to visit alternative news websites.

Other potential predictors, such as political orientation on a left-right scale, satisfaction with democracy, political efficacy and education were found to have no significant effect. The former can plausibly be explained by the phrasing of the item in the survey, which asked users to place

themselves in a continuum between left and right wing, rather than for voting intention. By contrast, Müller and Bach (2021) explicitly asked for the intention to vote for the Alternative for Germany (AfD), finding the preference to vote for the party to be a strong predictor of alternative news consumption. Political interest consistently emerges as a relevant predictor of both the difference between users and non-users, and of the relative degree to which subjects rely on alternative news.

A novel finding is that both conspiratorial ideation and support for Russia prove to be reliable predictors of alternative news consumption and are stronger than other influencing variables with the exception of gender and activity, though male gender only matters in absolute but not relative terms. It seems relevant in this context to point out that the measurement of both overall activity and of alternative news consumption is extremely granular due to the nature of automated tracking and given the long tracking period, whereas other measurements, including that of conspiracy ideation, are by comparison much more coarse, due to the smaller number of observations.

Our findings can be further illustrated qualitatively with an example of how conspiracy ideation manifests. Table 1 shows responses from the participant scoring highest in conspiracy ideation (CI) and a random user with zero conspiracy ideation. High-scoring responses show clear signs of conspiracy thinking and deep mistrust of the government. By contrast, the non-CI respondent expresses frustration with government measures on inflation, which are seen as inadequate, and indifferent to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, but does not exhibit CI. Accordingly, we judge CI to accurately capture a tendency toward conspiracy among participants that we find to be linked to alternative news consumption.

Table 1. Examples of survey responses (translated to English) with high/no conspiracy ideation.

Issue	High CI Scoring Response	No CI Response
Inflation	*the illusion of worthless non-gold/silver backed paper money will fail with an economic crash. the system is controlled by criminal elites and their puppet politicians. they want or provoke a crash in order to form a new authoritarian dictatorial world order out of chaos and wars.*	*all in all, we will soon no longer be able to afford the prices for food, electricity, oil, gas and petrol. no help will come from the government. the main thing is that they discuss and discuss and come to no conclusion.*
Ukraine	*the us imperialism with the nato bombing of serbia in 1999 did not abide by any norms of international law. in 2014, with the us-financed maidan coup, the escalation began. the russians exercised patience for a long time and tried to keep the peace politically and diplomatically.*	*germany should back off and not supply weapons and money to them. we have enough problems of our own that the government can't get to grips with.*
Climate change	*there is no such thing as climate change, at least not in the way the greens are trying to push it.*	*we must all actively contribute to stopping climate change.*

Discussion

Our findings contribute to the study of (alternative) news consumers and their editorial preferences in two ways. Firstly, it is a widely held assumption in antecedent research that *conspiracy ideation* – presumed to be an expression of conspiratorial thinking – is linked to alternative news consumption, but this has to our knowledge not been previously studied empirically. While Frischlich et al. (2021) find a positive relationship between an affinity for conspiracy myths and the perceived credibility of what they refer to as distorted news, they do not study the impact of conspiracy-mindedness on news consumption. Secondly, we are able to link the endorsement of a *pro-Russian stance* in the context of the invasion of Ukraine to the consumption of alternative news. As with conspiracy ideation, this aspect is difficult to study. At the same time, the link is all the more plausible due to the close connection – financially, logistically and ideologically – between many German-language alternative media outlets and the Russian state (Beseler & Toepfl, 2024). Propaganda plays a vital part in Russia's overt and covert foreign influence operations, and connections between alternative news outlets and the Kremlin extend well beyond openly state-sponsored outlets, such as RT and Sputnik (Wagnsson, 2023). Empirically testing an assumed positive connection between expressing sympathy for Kremlin propaganda and consuming alternative media therefore contributes a vital puzzle piece to the motives of alternative news consumers.

The effects we find for our two principal variables of interest should be seen in conjunction with other factors. Additional variables already well-established in the literature, namely political interest, media trust, age and gender prove salient in our analysis, though for the latter two the results offer intriguing differences to extant research. The particular benefit of being able to assess their influence on usage both on a binary and frequency level, in other words assessing at once the use/nonuse of alternative news *and* the degree to which alternative news are consumed represent an important addition to the state of research. While we find that for all effects except for gender, the binary component is more strongly expressed than the count component, the gap is particularly great for gender – in other words, being male makes alternative news consumption principally more likely, but is not a predictor of the degree of use, with the effect registering as non-significant. At the same time, age has only a small effect on the degree of alternative media usage, but no effect on (non-)use. For political interest, by contrast, the gap between these two dimensions is narrow, i.e. politically interested users are both more likely to be consumers and tend to consume more. Finally, media trust has a negative impact on consumption, which is hardly surprising. However, this effect is smaller than could be projected on the

basis of the literature and applies to the binary component more strongly than to the count component.

These findings demand a contextualization with prior research on the characteristics of (alternative) news consumers and the presumed link to conspiracy ideation and a pro-Russian stance. Politically interested persons are more knowledgeable about politics, more politically engaged, and consume more news (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011), while media skepticism has been found to be negatively associated with mainstream news exposure but positively associated with non-mainstream news exposure (Andersen et al., 2023; Frischlich et al., 2023; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Evidence suggests that these two variables manifest differently among particular groups of news consumers. In a qualitative study, Schwarzenegger (2022) identified five types of alternative news consumers, each characterized by different aims and gratifications: the awakened infowarrior, the critical curator, the completist, the reconnaissance user, and the community seeker. Of these types, the infowarrior category, encompassing the most committed users of alternative news, exhibited low trust in legacy media paired with a high level of political interest, while critical curators and completists relied on both mainstream and alternative sources to get a fuller picture, believing all sources to be biased in some form. There are ample data suggesting an association of heightened political interest with alternative media consumption (Müller & Bach, 2021; Schulze, 2020), though it is unclear in what way temporal and contextual factors, such as election campaigns or the COVID-19 pandemic influence this relationship (but cf. de León et al., 2024; Frischlich et al., 2023). In their survey study Müller and Bach (2021) comparing the 2017–19 periods, found political interest to be associated with alternative news consumption in 2017, but not in 2019. Schulze (2020) in her reanalysis of the Reuters Digital News Survey (Newman et al., 2019) found an association of alternative news usage with increased political interest, mistrust in the quality of news, particularly public service broadcasting, and the reliance on social media as a news source. In summary, studies have variously found users of alternative news to exhibit normal to above-average levels of political interest (Andersen et al., 2023; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020), while also being more skeptical of mainstream news than the median news consumer, with only few exceptions (cf. Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019) that may be explained by the different usage types qualitatively described by Schwarzenegger (2021). Our findings on the prevalence and consumption patterns of alternative media match those described by de León et al. (2024), who find 15% of users visiting an alternative media source at least once, with repeat consumption highly concentrated among few users.

Differences in online news consumption habits and political engagement in conjunction with gender have also been widely studied (Bode, 2017; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) highlight the differences

between men and women in terms of political participation, finding women to be more likely to vote and engage in forms of civic activism, while men are more likely to engage in direct political contact and collective action. More male than female users engage with news on social media, with considerable national variation (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Greenwood et al., 2016). Results related to alternative news engagement and gender are limited (cf. Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulze, 2020), but match our findings, though we see indications for a more nuanced relationship, in which (non)use is more strongly predicted by age and gender than the degree of use.

It must also be noted that we found several potentially relevant influencing factors to be non-significant. Among these were political orientation on a left-right scale, satisfaction with democracy, political efficacy and education. These null findings further highlight specific characteristics of alternative media users. For example, it appears plausible that left-right orientation maps imperfectly onto media usage given the fluidity and subjectivity in the political self-assessment of individuals who may regard themselves as politically moderate, while holding extreme views. There also exists no immediate connection in principle between a lack of satisfaction with democracy and alternative news use, but rather a perceived insufficiency of contemporary democratic institutions, and alternative news consumers do not differ from mainstream news consumers in how they assess their own potential for effecting political change (Strömbäck et al., 2023). Finally, education conforms with age and gender in being relatively unimportant. Alternative news consumers thus present themselves as fairly heterogeneous in both their attitudes and sociodemographics.

Finally, there are limitations to our research. A question that is inexorably raised by our study is that of causality. While we see strong arguments for interpreting our results before the backdrop of selective exposure – in other word, to regard established political beliefs and personality traits as stable predictors of short(er)-term media consumption habits – there exist good reasons to thoroughly scrutinize the reverse media effects argument, namely that longer-term alternative media consumption affects its users' attitudes. Our primary reason for working within a selective exposure paradigm are the practical constraints of our research design. Although in theory long(er)-term news consumption patterns are likely to influence the world-view of users, our data are not suitable to systematically test for this. It is in general extremely difficult to study media effects outside of the confines of a laboratory experiment which cannot account for long-term exposure under realistic conditions. Conducting information experiments in combination with digital behavioral tracking represents an important way forward methodologically in our view. Still, such experiments – especially on alternative media use – are difficult to execute in an ethically responsible manner. By subjecting users to misinformation or extremely biased and politically incendiary content, researchers

potentially place them in harm's way. Despite these reservations, we acknowledge that a media effects perspective is not only principally interesting but also that our two main independent variables of conspiracy ideation and support for Russia can plausibly be linked to the style and content of propaganda, and that their positive expression among users can therefore be interpreted as a result of prolonged exposure, i.e., a media (or propaganda) effect. Whereas a conspiracy mind-set is likely to be the result of long-standing personality traits, the expression of concrete conspiracies in user open survey responses may well be the result of "active measures" by the authoritarian governments. Future research should therefore aim to assess media effects in relation to this question. In shedding light on the complex interdependencies underlying alternative news consumption, we hope to contribute to an audience-centered agenda in the study of alternative news media, enabling a more thorough picture of its potential ramifications for democracy.

Disclosure Statement

Funding

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Appendices

Appendix A – Domain list

Our classification of alternative news sources is based on a list of 153 websites combined from Boberg et al. (2020), Müller and Bach (2021) and Stier, Kirkizh, et al. (2020), as well as a small number of additional sites that we added based on desk research.

19vierundachtzig.com	freiesnachrichtenblatt.com	quotenqueen.wordpress.com
achgut.com	freiewelt.net	radio-utopie.de
alexander-wallasch.de	freiezeiten.net	rapefugees.net
alles-schallundrauch.blogspot.com	freitum.de	refcrime.info
	gatestoneinstitute.org	reitschuster.de
alpenschau.com	geolitico.de	report24.news
altermannblog.de	guidograndt.de	rheinneckarblog.de
anderweltonline.com	haunebu7.wordpress.com	rt.com
andreas-unterberger.at	heimat-kurier.at	rtde.live
anonymousnews.org	hintermbusch.wordpress.com	rubikon.news
anonymousnews.ru	indexexpurgatorius.wordpress.com	rundertischdgf.wordpress.com
ansage.org	info-direkt.eu	schluesselkindblog.com
antaios.de	inge09.blog	sciencefiles.org
anti-spiegel.ru	journalistenwatch.com	seidwalkwordpresscom.wordpress.com
antilobby.wordpress.com	juergenfritz.com	
apolut.net	jungefreiheit.de	sezession.de
bayernistfrei.com	kenfm.de	sichtplatz.de
blauenarzisse.de	kopp-report.de	signal-online.de
breitbart.com	kopp-verlag.de	sott.net
compact-online.de	korrektheiten.com	spoekenkiekerei.wordpress.com
conservo.wordpress.com	kpkrause.de	sputniknews.com
contra-magazin.com	legitim.ch	steinhoefel.com
danisch.de	lepenseur-lepenseur.blogspot.de	tagesereignis.de
ddbnews.wordpress.com		terminegegenmerkel.wordpress.com
de.europenews.dk	luegenpresse2.wordpress.com	
de.gatestoneinstitute.org	man-tau.com	terra-kurrier.de
de.news-front.info	marbec14.wordpress.com	thedailyfranz.at
de.sott.net	michael-klonovsky.de	theepochtimes.com
de.sputniknews.com	michael-mannheimer.net	tichyseinblick.de
de24live.de	michaelgrandt.de	truth24.net
der-kleine-akif.de	mmnews.de	uncut-news.ch
derwaechter.net	moshpitscorner.wordpress.com	uncutnews.ch
deutsch.rt.com		unser-mitteleuropa.com
deutsche-mittelstands-nachrichten.de	n23tv.wordpress.com	unzensuriert.at
	nachdenkseiten.de	unzensuriert.de
deutsche-stimme.de	nachrichten.posthaven.com	vera-lengsfeld.de
deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de	nachrichtenspiegel.de	vunv1863.wordpress.com
	nation24.de	wahrheitspresse.xyz
deutschland-kurier.org	neopresse.com	watergate.tv
dieunbestechlichen.com	newstopaktuell.wordpress.com	wirsindeins.org
dushanwegner.com		wissensmanufaktur.net
ef-magazin.de	nius.de	wochenblick.at
eike-klima-energie.eu	nixgut.wordpress.com	yoice.net
einprozent.de	oliverjanich.de	zaronews.world
einwanderungskritik.de	opposition24.com	zettelsraum.blogspot.de
epochtimes.de	paz.de	zuercherin.com
europenews.dk	pboehringer.de	zuerst.de
eva-herman.net	peymani.de	zukunft-ch.ch
extremnews.com		

(Continued).

fdogblog.wordpress.com	philosophia-perennis.com
feynsinn.org	pi-news.net
frankjordanblog.wordpress.com	politaia.org
free21.org	politikstube.com
freie-presse.net	politikversagen.net
	politonline.ch
	prabelsblog.de
	pravda-tv.com
	preussische-allgemeine.de
	propagandaschau.wordpress. com
	publicomag.com

Appendix B –Support for Russia scale

The Support for Russia scale was assembled from three items coded as 5-point Likert agreement scales. We achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 for the index, giving it satisfactory reliability.

Item	English (translation)	German (original)	Uniqueness	Loading
open ukraine item 1	*Nato threatened Russia – Putin had to defend himself*	*Die Nato hat Russland bedroht – Putin musste sich verteidigen*	0.28	0.85
open ukraine item 2	*Ukraine historically belongs to Russia*	*Die Ukraine gehört historisch gesehen zu Russland*	0.60	0.63
open ukraine item 3	*The USA is mainly to blame for the war in Ukraine*	*Hauptschuldig am Ukraine Krieg sind die USA*	0.25	0.87

SS loadings: 1.88.
Proportion var: 0.63.

Appendix C: Text and response options of used survey items

Item	English (translation)	German (original)	Response Options
polinterest	To begin with, we would like to ask you a few questions about politics. How interested are you in politics?	Zu Beginn wollen wir Ihnen einige Fragen zur Politik stellen. Wie sehr interessieren Sie sich für Politik?	1=not interested at all, 2=not very interested, 3-fairly interested, 4=very interested
ukraine_statements_1	Are you concerned about the situation in Ukraine?	Sind Sie besorgt über die Situation in der Ukraine?	1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3=partly agree; 4=somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree
ukraine_statements_2	Do you believe that Russia is a threat to world peace?	Glauben Sie, dass Russland eine Bedrohung für den Weltfrieden darstellt?	1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3=partly agree; 4=somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree
ukraine_statements_3	Do you believe that the West is doing enough to help Ukraine?	Glauben Sie, dass der Westen genug tut, um der Ukraine zu helfen?	1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3=partly agree; 4=somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree
ukraine_statements_4	Do you think that sanctions against Russia are a good idea?	Finden Sie Sanktionen gegen Russland eine gute Idee?	1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3=partly agree; 4=somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree
gender	And your gender?	Und ihr Geschlecht?	1-Male; 2-Female; 3-Diverse
age	And now we'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself would you tell us what year you were born?	Und nun stellen wir Ihnen einige Fragen zu Ihrer Person. Würden Sie uns sagen, in welchem Jahr Sie geboren sind?	1930 to 2004 (converted to age at article submission time)
media_trust_1	Now let's look at your general impression of the media's coverage of current political and social issues: Do you think that the media as a whole…? …are balanced	Nun geht es ganz allgemein um Ihren Eindruck von der Berichterstattung über aktuelle politische und gesellschaftliche Themen in den Medien. Finden Sie, dass die Medien insgesamt…? … ausgewogen sind	1-strongly disagree; 2-somewhat disagree; 3-partly/somewhat agree; 4-somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree
media_trust_2	Now let's look at your general impression of the media's coverage of current political and social issues: Do you think that the	Nun geht es ganz allgemein um Ihren Eindruck von der Berichterstattung über aktuelle politische und	1=strongly disagree; 2-somewhat disagree; 3-partly/somewhat agree; 4-somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

Item	English (translation)	German (original)	Response Options
	media as a whole…?	gesellschaftliche Themen in den Medien. Finden Sie, dass die Medien insgesamt…?	
media_trust_3	Now let's look at your general impression of the media's coverage of current political and social issues: Do you think that the media as a whole…? ….are fair	Nun geht es ganz allgemein um Ihren Eindruck von der Berichterstattung über aktuelle politische und gesellschaftliche Themen in den Medien. Finden Sie, dass die Medien insgesamt…? …fair sind	1-strongly disagree; 2-somewhat disagree; 3-partly/somewhat agree; 4-somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree
media_trust_4	Now let's look at your general impression of the media's coverage of current political and social issues: Do you think that the media as a whole…? …present things correctly	Nun geht es ganz allgemein um Ihren Eindruck von der Berichterstattung über aktuelle politische und gesellschaftliche Themen in den Medien. Finden Sie, dass die Medien insgesamt…? …die Dinge richtig darstellen	1=strongly disagree; 2-somewhat disagree; 3-partly/somewhat agree; 4-somewhat agree: 5=strongly agree
media_trust_5	Now let's look at your general impression of the media's coverage of current political and social issues: Do you think that the media as a whole…? …are trustworthy	Nun geht es ganz allgemein um Ihren Eindruck von der Berichterstattung über aktuelle politische und gesellschaftliche Themen in den Medien. Finden Sie, dass die Medien insgesamt…? …vertrauenswürdig sind	1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3-partly/somewhat agree; 4-somewhat agree; 5-strongly agree

Appendix D –Descriptive statistics

The table below lists means and standard deviations of variables relevant to the inferential analysis. Note that while we differentiate between occasional and heavy alternative news users here to show differences between degrees of use, we do not make this ordinal distinction in the hurdle regression, but treat use as a continuous variable in the count model.

	Non-user 1531		Occasional user 370		Heavy user 108	
n	M = 807	F = 724	M = 225	F = 145	M = 72	F = 36
Age (M)	47 (13.41)		51.6 (11.30)		52.6 (12.05)	
Education (M)	2.28 (0.76)		2.25 (0.75)		2.33 (0.79)	
Political Interest (M)	2.92 (0.84)		3.18 (0.79)		3.29 (0.81)	
Media Trust (M)	15.9 (4.31)		15.4 (4.81)		12.2 (5.51)	
Left-Right-Orientation (M)	5.62 (1.88)		5.85 (2.00)		6.47 (2.25)	
Conspiracy Ideation (M)	0.391 (0.49)		0.497 (0.61)		0.760 (0.72)	
Support for Russia (M)	6.39 (3.14)		6.57 (3.57)		9.05 (4.24)	

Non-user: 1st to 75th percentile of the distribution (=0).
Occasional user: 76th to 95th percentile of the distribution (≤11).
Heavy user: 95th to 100th percentile of the distribution (≥12).

Appendix E – Hurdle regression models

The table below details combined hurdle models predicting right-wing alternative news use. Point estimates are incident rate ratios (IRRs) predicting exposure, with a logistic regression model for the zero-hurdle component (no exposure vs. any exposure) and a negative binomial regression model for the count component (frequency of exposure). Confidence represents a 95% interval. Note that for some predictors (age, gender) effects are only significant in one of the two models.

	estimate	std.error	conf.low	conf.high	statistic	p.value	model
Age	1.34	0.07	1.17	1.53	4.16	0.00 ***	Binary
	1.19	0.15	0.88	1.60	1.13	0.26	Count
Gender:Male	1.07	0.13	0.82	1.39	0.47	0.64	Binary
	3.80	0.34	1.94	7.45	3.89	0.00 ***	Count
Activity (log)	1.73	0.05	1.56	1.92	10.30	0.00 ***	Binary
	3.06	0.10	2.50	3.73	10.97	0.00 ***	Count
Political interest	1.35	0.07	1.18	1.55	4.32	0.00 ***	Binary
	1.87	0.17	1.35	2.59	3.78	0.00 ***	Count
Media trust	0.79	0.07	0.70	0.91	−3.44	0.00 ***	Binary
	0.53	0.17	0.38	0.73	−3.80	0.00 ***	Count
Conspiracy ideation	1.21	0.06	1.07	1.36	3.08	0.00 **	Binary
	2.16	0.17	1.56	3.00	4.62	0.00 ***	Count
Support for Russia	1.26	0.07	1.10	1.43	3.45	0.00 ***	Binary
	2.41	0.16	1.75	3.32	5.41	0.00 ***	Count