

The printed (French-speaking) alternative media in Belgium: Journalism or activism?

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Abstract

This article provides an insight into the Belgian alternative media landscape. Ten French-speaking printed media are analysed to understand how they develop a socio-economic structure that allows independence from any financial sources and to establish their goals regarding the media and society. The methodology is based on interviews and analysis of the background and descriptions of these media. Findings show three categories of media: journalism-oriented (with the objective of practising another journalism); content-oriented (focused on specific issues); and counter-hegemonic-oriented (promoting another society). A clear distinction emerges between them. On one side, media-centred alternatives are developed by professional journalists, who may accept advertising and whose goal is to provide another journalism (deep or slow journalism) without the constraints of traditional media (speed, low-paying jobs, influence of capital, etc.). On the other side, society-centred alternatives are independent from advertising and are composed of non-professional journalists (volunteers) willing to provide a strong alternative voice and opposed to the hegemonic discourses of traditional media, an approach that is very close to activism.

Keywords

Activism, alternative media, Belgium, democracy, journalism, mediactivism, public sphere

Media landscape and democracy

Analysing the media landscape of a society is similar to gauging the pulse of its democracy. Indeed, in addition to the three major poles of power (legislative, executive and judicial), democratic societies can count on a fourth power to counterbalance the other three: the media. Yet the media are increasingly being criticised: they are owned by only a few individuals, they are being tabloidised (Zelizer, 2010), journalistic practices are routinised and institutionalised (Schudson, 2003) and they show bias in their approach to certain topics (Entman, 2007). Given these circumstances, it can become very difficult for journalists to do their jobs properly if their goal is to invigorate democracy. It seems important to analyse initiatives that go against these trends.

The overall media landscape in the French-speaking part of Belgium is already well known and well described (Antoine & Heinderyckx, 2011).¹ In parallel to traditional media institutions, many small-scale initiatives are emerging, with their own objectives and structures, and different styles of journalistic practice: 'the practices of alternative media highlight challenges to dominant media practices with respect to structure (the market and the state), agency (participation, the

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network), and the ideology of journalistic practices (representation)' (Atton, 2011). This phenomenon has been particularly rich in Belgium since 2013, with the emergence of six new alternative printed media. These initiatives want to go against the flow and propose new solutions to the problems facing traditional media, as explained by Atton and Hamilton (2008: 42): 'When we explore the political economy of alternative journalism, we argue that it provided two challenges to the dominant modes of media production: capitalization and institutionalization.'

The aim of this article is to provide a detailed overview of 10 Belgian French-speaking alternative printed media, in chronological order of appearance: *La Revue Nouvelle* (1945), *Alter Echos* (1995), *Imagine Demain le Monde* (1996), *Politique* (1997), *Kairos* (2012),² *24h01* (2013–18,³) *Même Pas Peur* (2015), *Médor*⁴ (2015), *Pour* (2015) and *Wilfried* (2017). This article focuses on the 'capitalisation' threat – understood as the fight for editorial independence – and the ways in which alternative media develop other types of socio-economic structure. The first section is dedicated to the theoretical approach of alternative media, with an overview of different definitions of this concept and key elements of the (alternative) press in French-speaking Belgium. The definitions provide a framework that will characterise the alternative media and show a distinction between 'media-centred' and 'society-centred' media. The second section consists of findings and discussion, and is divided into two main parts: the socio-economic structure and the essence of each studied media. The final section then draws a conclusion about the theoretical notion of 'alternative media' and their role in society.

Evolution of alternative media and its definition

The field of research dedicated to alternative media is quite recent. It was first defined by Downing (1984), who proposed the term 'radical media'. Many researchers then added their contributions to this field. A bottom line is the tension between traditional media and alternative media, and establishing whether or not these are opposed (dichotomy). As explained below, the line between traditional and alternative is sometimes a very fine one. Researchers also tried to characterise and order these initiatives. The last part of this section focuses on the evolution of alternative media and press in Belgium.

Defining alternative media

Defining alternative media is a difficult task, mainly due to the broad meaning of 'alternative'. Scholars prefer to highlight a specific aspect of these initiatives as Downing's (1984) radical media, Rodriguez's (2001) citizens' media and Carroll and Hackett's (2006) notion of democratic media activism. Downing (1984: v) prefers to speak of 'radical media', defining them as 'generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives'. This definition mentions two aspects, one related to the organisation – small scale and diversity – and the other related to the content – counter-hegemonic. Watson and Hill (2003) propose a very similar definition, with the same key points: 'Essentially counter-hegemonic, that is challenging established, hierarchical, systems of politics, economics, and culture, alternative media take many forms' (Watson and Hill, 2003: 172). Cardon and Granjon (2003) define these initiatives as counter-hegemonic.

Another important element was introduced by Rodriguez's (2001) conceptualisation of 'citizens' media'. For Rodriguez, the importance of alternative media is to give a voice to the entire population, and not just to a journalistic caste. She insists on the importance of information regarding the role of citizens: 'Alternative media function as environment that facilitates the fermentation of identities and power positions. In other words, alternative media spin transformative processes that alter people's sense of self, their subjective positioning, and their access to power' (Rodriguez 2001: 18). Cardon and Granjon (2003) define these initiatives as expressivist.

For their part, Carroll and Hackett (2006) refer to democratic media activism, and define alternative media using three salient points. First, alternative media tend to become more autonomous in terms of advertising revenue and even public support. This allows them to try new organisational practices that are more inclusive and egalitarian. Second, they are politically progressive, providing access to ‘voices and issues marginalised in hegemonic media’ (2006: 58). Finally, they promote horizontal communication, changing citizens from media consumers into participants in the media production process. The first two points (organisational form and counter-hegemonic discourse) meet Downing’s (1984) definition and the last meets Rodriguez’s (2001) criterion of citizens’ involvement.

The difficulty is to capture all the diversity of what is called alternative media in one sentence. Definitions often highlight only one specific aspect of alternative media. The definition adopted in this research is based on the three points proposed by Hackett and Carroll. An alternative media is a structure that: (1) produces information that is politically progressive and alternative to the dominant hegemony; (2) proposes a socio-economic model tending towards a horizontal structure and an independence from the financial sources that can influence the content; and (3) involves citizens in the structure and/or process of producing information. I consider that proposing a socio-economic model that can be independent of any financial sources is the most difficult aspect of creating and sustaining alternative media.

Characterising alternative media

Instead of proposing a brief definition, researchers have also provided a list of elements that can help us to understand alternative media. Indeed, given that they take many forms, defining it in one sentence can be impossible: ‘Even within a single area of alternative media there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives)’ (Atton, 2002: 8). For example, Downing (1984) proposes 10 aspects of alternative media, including their different forms, their positive and progressive discourses and their democratic internal structure. Another way to characterise alternative media is by creating categories. Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2007) propose four approaches (see Table 1). For this research, and related to the literature, it seems that the tension between the ‘media-centred’ and the ‘society-centred’ helps to understand the different initiatives.

Table 1: Four approaches for alternative media proposed by Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier (2007: 7)

	Media-centred	Society-centred
Autonomous identity of community media (essentialist)	Approach I: Serving the community	Approach III: Part of civil society
Identity of community media in relation to other identities (relationalist)	Approach II: An alternative to mainstream	Approach IV: Rhizome

Between media-centred ...

The ‘media-centred’ approach offers a reflection about the role of alternative media in media production, serving a community (approach I) or proposing an alternative to the mainstream (approach II). The first approach includes the community, based not only on geography or ethnicity, but also on its access to and participation in this media. In some way, the second approach bonds with the question of whether or not a dichotomy exists between traditional and alternative media. Downing (1984) and Atton (2002) claim an anti-dichotomy exists. In this regard, Fuchs (2010: 178) proposes a clear distinction between capitalist mass media and critical media, while insisting that they should not be seen as dichotomic categories, as there could be initiatives with different characteristics within each of them, such as journalistic production (elite or citizen), organisational structures (hierarchical or grassroots), and reception practices (manipulative or critical).

... and society-centred

In the 'society-centred' approach, alternative media are seen as social actors in the field of a society, as part of the civil society (approach III)⁵ or as a rhizome (approach IV). They 'try to effect social and political change' (Atton, 2011: 17). The third approach has profound implications – indeed, in some way the definition of an alternative media has similarities to a definition of a social movement: 'those organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation' (McAdam, 1982: 25). The links are: (1) the notion of organisation, which can take many forms; (2) the promotion or resistance to change with counter-hegemonic discourses; and (3) the involvement of excluded groups, such as citizens excluded from traditional media. In some ways, they constitute the 'third voice' between state media and private commercial media (Servaes, 1999: 260). The rhizomatic approach includes non-linear, anarchic and nomadic initiatives, opposed to arborescent structure, and much more linear, hierarchic and sedentary. This approach 'focuses on three aspects: their role at the crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state' (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007: 44).

In terms of their role in society, alternative media can improve democracy by vivifying the public sphere (Habermas, 1992). Harcup insists on the place of citizens in alternative media, as a tool to give a voice to the 'voiceless' and a place where citizenship is forged, and where a public sphere can emerge: 'By helping to produce community communication and citizens' media, we took our place as plebeian public sphere, a conceptual space that, according to Jurgen Habermas, forms part of 'a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination' [...]' (Harcup, 2013: 31). He stresses the importance of access to information for all citizens in order to engage debates and critical reflection. These alternative media offer counter-hegemonic alternatives for a healthier public sphere (Harcup, 2013: 59). For Bohman (2004: 152–3), this can lead everybody who participates in the institutionalised public sphere to become a 'citizen'. Coyer (2007) goes further and talks about the existence of an alternative public sphere, associated with alternative media. More generally, alternative media are seen to be able to institute or feed this kind of public sphere in a plural form: 'In this way, alternative media can provide arenas for "subcultural or class-specific public spheres" to compete with the dominant hegemonic public sphere' (Harcup, 2013: 78). It also involves 'establishing alternative, discursively connected public spheres' (Calhoun, 1992, cited in Downey & Fenton, 2003: 186).

Alternative media through history in Belgium

The Belgian media landscape is quite unique, with a clear distinction between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking media. Freedom of the press is expressed in the Belgian Constitution. Traditional media are widely supported by the French-speaking government, regarding both their sales and their deontology: in 2016, €7.892 million in public subsidies were shared between six media institutions and the association of editors. For example, Sudpresse, a media company that offers popular newspapers, with 106,315 copies sold per day (data from April 2014 to March 2015 – CIM, 2015) receives €1.6 million each year, while alternative media share a constant budget of €272,000 for five initiatives (see details below).

As far as alternative options are concerned, the Belgian alternative press includes a wide range of titles, most of them radical or left-wing in nature. The media boom in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century especially allowed the development of opinion journalism. These newspapers – often local and specific to societal issues – ranked behind the banner of a party or an ideology. Some socialist and communist titles provide a good idea of the longevity of opinion press: *Le Peuple* from 1885 to 1998, *Le Drapeau Rouge* from 1921 until the present, and *La Gauche* from 1956 until the present (Gotovitch & Morelli, 2007). Nevertheless, after World War II, a gap began to widen between the opinion press

and the emergence of a press that seemed more neutral (Antoine & Grevisse, 1997). The latter, with more consensual titles, gathered a larger readership, to the detriment of the press of opinion. Moreover, a decrease in readership for all printed media had been felt since the beginning of the twentieth century, before other causes such as the appearance of new technologies (radio, television and the internet), the fragmentation of audiences, the choice of other ways of spending time, such as hobbies (Antoine & Grevisse, 1997). Since then, four important periods in the French-speaking alternative media landscape can be pointed out: May 1968, the 1980s, the end of the 1990s and the 2010s.

May 1968 saw the emergence of the New Social Movements, which brought new claims into the public space (Touraine, 1975). These claims went further than a social class struggle and took into account other considerations, such as the environment (environmental movement), humankind (peace) and the place of individuals in this society (feminism, defence of the homeless, refugees). This movement shook the social landscape, allowing the emergence of new press titles in Belgium, such as *Notre Temps* (1968), *L'Hedbo* and *Pour* (1973–82)⁶ (Gotovitch & Morelli, 2007).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, community media and free radio emerged in Belgium (north and south). These were supported by the anarchist punk movement, the student movement and the environmental movement. Their goal was to challenge 'the boring formats and paternalistic content of the public broadcaster' (Cammaerts, 2009: 12). Among French-speaking community radio, Radio Panik, Radio Air Libre and Atelier Radio Arlon are the best-known examples. They formed the Association pour la Libération des Ondes (ALO) in 1978. They still exist, but their audience is now limited.

Towards the end of the 1990s, a period of free movement of capital, services, technologies and information occurred, mostly due to the liberalisation of trade, the development of new means of transport and the emergence of the internet. This period resulted in the awakening of a part of civil society focused on local issues,⁷ and also saw the organisation of an anti-globalisation movement (*altermondialiste* in French). This movement opposes, among other things, the omnipotence of certain world organisations. The best-known anti-globalisation rally took place in Seattle in November 1999 at a meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO). During these protests, the Indymedia network was born (Milberry, 2003; Platon and Deuze, 2003), with up to six local Independent Media Centers linked to the network created in Belgium. The press has seen decreasing sales since the beginning of the twenty-first century. If there is a crisis, it is not a new one. In addition to fierce competition from other means of communication (television and especially the internet), and an inability to adapt to this new environment, the press is also facing an internal crisis. The big titles (in deficit) belong to some big groups (in profit), the job is more and more precarious and the readership numbers have become critical. In this context, social movements have been launched by citizens or through social media, such as the Fifth Power (Ramonet, 2003), the Arab Spring (2010), the *Indignados* (2011) and Occupy Wall Street (2011).

Taking these theoretical preoccupations and this short Belgian alternative media history into account, the first research question focuses on the tensions within media organisations: whether they are traditional or alternative, and how they can survive economically and maintain their independence from the state, the market or any financial sources. The second research question highlights the essence of alternative media, their role regarding the media and society, and how this can help scholars to categorise alternative media in order to better understand them. The following research questions were laid down for this study:

RQ1: How can printed alternative media survive economically while maintaining independence from any financial sources?

RQ2: To what extent are the mottos/descriptions of alternative media adequate to categorise their role regarding the media and society?

Methodology

The analysis is empirical. It is based on 10 Belgian printed media: *La Revue Nouvelle*, *Alter Echos*, *Imagine Demain*, *Le Monde*, *Politique*, *Kairos*, *24h01*, *Même pas peur*, *Médor*, *Pour* and *Wilfried*. Given the difficulty of practically defining what an alternative media is, choosing the sample was complex. The chosen media are: (1) printed; (2) periodicals (not daily media); (3) generalist; (4) accessible to a wide public – not scientific or academic journals; (5) independent of any party, trade union or association; (6) French-speaking; and (7) progressive. The decision to select printed media was motivated by two arguments. On one hand, as explained above, there has been an incredible emergence of printed media (six since 2013) for such a small region. On the other hand, this could seem insane in view of the difficult economic context for printed media, which face fierce competition of online media. The penultimate point – French-speaking – is due to the regulatory context, in which Dutch-speaking media cater for the Flemish community while French-speaking media cater for the French-speaking community. Focusing on the French-speaking media helps the comparison between these initiatives, as they share the same regulatory framework. Finally, only progressive content was selected. For example, *Pan* ('The greatest (and the only ...) Belgian satirical journal!') is distributed in Belgium but offers content that is very close to racism and discrimination, which is not really considered 'counter-hegemonic'. *Pan* does not try to develop a more democratic organisation, such as the selected media. Nevertheless, if other research questions were considered, it could be very interesting to research this publication.

The research was conducted from September 2017 to April 2018. The methodology is based on semi-structured interviews with the founders or the administrative managers of these titles. I preferred them to journalists because they have a better understanding of the economic issues of their media, which is a central research question. The interview protocol was structured around 4 themes (1) history of your media; (2) problems of traditional journalism; (3) structure of your media; and (4) circulation and revenue. To analyse the data, I transcribed the core ideas of each participant in a document. Considering that there are no systematic published financial reports, interviews were the best tool to obtain quantitative data such as the circulation, the audience ratings and the sources of revenue. The interviews were confined to content and information found on different tools such as the media website, social media accounts or printed copies. The interviews were listened multiple times and relevant declarations coded following the research questions: (1) comments on their socio-economic structure; (2) comparison with other studied alternative media; (3) role regarding traditional media; and (4) role regarding society. Another part of the analysis was comparison between the content of the interviews and the motto of the media. This 'motto', which is a kind of subtitle found on the website or the front page of the printed copies, gives a good idea of the essence of each media. The analysed media are categorised on the basis of these mottos.

Findings and discussion

Surviving economically while maintaining their independence

The question of the financial stability of a media is crucial. According to the reality of its expenses, a media outlet has to earn money to survive; at the same time, though, it has to maintain its independence from these financial sources. In this research, five strategies to earn money were observed (see Table 2): (1) state aid; (2) advertising; (3) crowdfunding; (4) shares; and (5) sales:

[We aim at] having a greater diversity of financing sources to guarantee our independence. (Sandrine, *Alter Echos*).

Alter Echos, *Médor* and *Pour* have four different financial sources. According to *Médor*, this independence is very important and has to do with keeping true to the media outlet's values and convictions:

The day when we feel that things are not going well, that the sales are going down, that the financial plan does not follow, we prefer a proper closure, rather than twisting the project in order to still have a subsidy, or taking decisions depending on advertising. We are not in this perspective. We want a model according to our conviction and not the demands [of financial sources] (Laurence - *Médor*)

On the other side, *Kairos*, *Même pas peur* and *Wilfried* have only two sources of money. If one of these sources was stopped, it might have a great influence on the structure of the media outlet. For example, thanks to state aid, *Kairos* is now able to pay its chief editor. Losing this aid would mean this would again become a volunteer position.

Table 2: Type of revenue (state aid, advertising, crowdfunding, shares and sales) for the 10 media

	State aid	Advertising	Crowdfunding	Shares	Sales	Total (/5)
<i>La Revue Nouvelle</i>	x	x			x	3
<i>Alter Echos</i>	x	x	x		x	4
<i>Imagine</i>	x	x			x	3
<i>Politique</i>	x	x			x	3
<i>Kairos</i>	x				x	2
<i>24h01</i>		x	x		x	3
<i>Même pas peur</i>			x		x	2
<i>Médor</i>		x	x	x	x	4
<i>Pour</i>	(x)			x	x	4
<i>Wilfried</i>		x			x	2

State aid

Among the titles analysed, there are two types of subsidies: structural yearly funding and grants for specific projects. The five media supported by the structural subsidy for periodical opinion press from the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB) are *Imagine Demain le Monde*, *Politique*, *La Revue Nouvelle* and *Kairos*. This grant for the periodic press is a closed budget: the amount of €272,000 does not change according to the number of beneficiaries or from year to year. This means that the more media there are, the smaller the amount that is allocated to each. Alternative media regard this amount as incredibly low compared with the funding for traditional media. In order to receive this support, the media outlet has to be a non-profit association. *Politique* was a cooperative during three years and changed to a non-profit association to receive this aid. For its part, *Alter Echos* benefits from an annual grant in *éducation permanente* from the FWB as well, to fund its educational role. It also benefits from targeted aid for specific projects.

This type of assistance is often welcome, but it could weaken the socio-economic model of the media. In fact, at any time the state may abolish such grants without the need to explain why:

The subsidy of the FWB leaves us totally free, which is a key issue. And it's really useful. But it is a precarious situation because you never know if it will be renewed. (Alexandre, *Kairos*)

We have to ask for [state aid] every year. Most of the time it goes well, but it still puts us in a relationship that is a little difficult, because a minister finances us on a matter of press, but we still have to ask him every year. (Sandrine, *Alter Echos*)

This is particularly dangerous, especially when the public authorities can influence the proposed content. In this regard, *Alter Echos* received threats of suspension of a subsidy from a public body following the publication of an article criticising the way the public body was managed. Maintaining its independence seems complicated when a media outlet is financially linked to the state.

Advertising

There are three approaches to the presence of advertising in the media pages: (1) rejecting it; (2) accepting it under some conditions; and (3) accepting everything. *Même pas peur*, *Pour* and *Kairos* totally reject advertising, which goes against their editorial line, such as anti-productivism for *Kairos* and promotion of free speech for *Même pas peur*. *Kairos* rightly notes that it is very difficult to find advertisers willing to spend money in order to appear in their newspaper. They are generally surprised when alternative media accept advertising, even under restricted conditions. This is the case for *Médor*, *24h01*, *La Revue Nouvelle*, *Imagine*, *Politique* and *Alter Echos*, which accept advertising depending on an 'ethical' or an 'institutional' perspective. There is not necessarily a precise definition of these terms; these are advertisements for products or companies that respect the same values as the media outlet, and respect people and the environment. For example, *24h01* accepted advertising from the *STIB* (public transport society in Brussels). Only one title accepts all advertising: *Wilfried*. For example, the back cover of the second issue is an advertisement for a Belgian bank, which is not necessarily categorised as 'ethical'. Nevertheless, in the third issue of *Wilfried*, there are three ads on 100 pages, which is still less than for many traditional media. According to the chief editor, *Wilfried* wants to sell a lot of copies in order to have an impact on society and to increase its ad revenue (in order to do more and to increase their impact).

Like the state, the market also has power over the media. At any time, advertising can be pulled, which could mean an important loss of revenue, or advertisers can attempt to influence content. Some alternative media try to restrict this influence by limiting the proportion of advertising in their total revenue.

Crowdfunding

This phenomenon, largely supported by new technologies, consists of financing projects with money from citizens who want to invest in a specific initiative, often in exchange for something. It is often used by the media (Cariou, Lyubareva & Rochelandet, 2017). Five media used crowdfunding. *Médor* and *Wilfried* crowdfunded their project in order to have a starting capital – €10,750 and €33.595 respectively. In 2017, two other media – *Même pas peur* and *24h01* – used it to overcome financial problems. The difference in amounts gives a good idea of the reception given to the media. *Même pas peur* collected €6885. This campaign was relayed by traditional media in the form of an online article from RTBF (public broadcasting channel). Looking back on this campaign, a member of the editorial team was surprised by its lack of success. Indeed, a few months later, *24h01* launched a call to refinance the project, raising €79,500 thanks to a vast communication campaign covered by traditional media (*RTBF*, *Le Soir*, *La Libre Belgique*, *7sur7*, etc.).

Jean-Philippe Querton (*Même pas peur*) underlines the fact that he does not belong to the journalistic bubble, and therefore does not have a network as developed as *24h01*.⁸ Paradoxically, that did not help *24h01* to find financial stability and it stopped publication a few months later. *Même pas peur* continues to be published. This aspect of the journalistic bubble, called resource endowment, includes human, financial and social capital; it is a key factor for the success of such an initiative (Naldi & Picard, 2012). Lastly, *Alter Echos* collected €3573 to change some elements (business model, communication, launching event for the new business model). Being crowdfunded by citizens may

seem a good opportunity to earn money and maintain some independence, but in order to crowdfund successfully, the media outlet has to have social and symbolic capital.

Shares

Médor, *Pour* and *Wilfried* have opted for a cooperative form - '*société coopérative à responsabilité limitée*', a limited liability cooperative company. The first two stress this aspect, and specify another element: a cooperative form for social purposes. This form was very important for some of the interviewees:

A cooperative is a form of organization that has a history. (Jean-Claude, *Pour*)

The goal here is twofold. On one hand, the launch of a cooperative is preceded by a phase of capitalisation and fundraising, via the shares of contributors – €20 for *Médor* with a total of 900 contributors and €50 for *Pour* with a total of 85 contributors. For *Pour*, public authorities, represented by the Walloon Region, matched the amount collected from citizens for the establishment of a cooperative with a social purpose (which explains the state aid for *Pour*). This money is quite important during the first steps of launching, and constitutes starting capital for these initiatives – €70.000 for *Médor*, for example. On the other hand, it gives the contributors some power in the functioning of the cooperative by influencing the socio-economic decisions of the media. Citizens participate in the project and have a place in the company. For instance, at the General Assembly of *Médor* (held every year in June), the contributors discuss various points such as the budget or the orientation of projects (except the editorial line). In terms of organisation, the other alternative media generally take the form of non-profit associations ('*asbl*', for '*association sans but lucratif*', is the legal term used in Belgium). They have a board of administrators, must convene a general meeting every year and therefore have an obligation to submit their legal documents and account to the public administration. Despite this more open and transparent structure, these media do not open their general meetings to the public.

Sales

The sales/subscribers and the price of each media are shown in Table 3. The price of a copy is mainly due to whether the journalists are paid (see section 'Profile of the contributors'). Other minor aspects can be the price of the material or the release frequency.

Table 3: Price, sales (subscribers excluded) and subscribers of the 10 analysed media, by price order

Media	Price (€)	Sales	Subscribers
<i>Pour</i>	3 (or free)		
<i>Kairos</i>	3	300	450
<i>Même pas peur</i>	4	700	200
<i>Alter Echos</i>	6	150	700
<i>Wilfried</i>	8 (first two issues) – 9.90	8000	1000
<i>Imagine</i>	8.5	650	4000
<i>Politique</i>	9	250	600
<i>Revue Nouvelle</i>	12	200	600
<i>24h01</i>	14.50	4600	650
<i>Médor</i>	17 (or 1.25)	4500	2800

Pour, *Kairos* and *Même pas peur* rely on volunteers and are printed in a 'newspaper' form, with large, thin paper. *Alter Echos*, *Wilfried*, *Imagine*, *Politique*, *Revue Nouvelle*, *24h01* and *Médor* pay their journalists or (a part of) the editorial staff and have a magazine format, with more

pages and thicker paper. The media organisation can also make the decision to offer discounts. *Médor* has a partnership with the Article 27 association,⁹ to provide its magazine at a price of €1.25 (instead of €17) for low-income people. *Pour* has two versions of its newspaper: a version sold at €3 and a free version. The principle is that the wealthiest pay for the poor. For example, a trade union can agree to pay 10,000 copies for distribution to its members. Even *Pour* itself proposes some free copies distributed during specific events or given to temporary partners. The initiative allows easier access to alternative information. As Jean-Claude Garot (*Pour*) mentions, though, the difficulty is then to find the resources to distribute all these newspapers. 100,000 to 150,000 copies are printed each time, which makes analysis of the newspaper's circulation difficult. Besides the printed version, *Pour* publishes an electronic version, with an online subscription (since 2017), which explains the absence of a number for print subscribers.

The circulation of these media also raises questions. With a low or free price, *Pour* prints a lots of copies (~100,000), but this does not necessarily mean that they are distributed. *Wilfried* has the second best sales, thanks to its communication policy. The comparison between sales and subscribers also provides additional information. According to Hugues Dorzée (*Imagine*), his publication gathers a community of readers who are really attached to the title; they pay automatically every month, while *24h01* was sold mostly in bookstores and depends on its spot in the showcase. *Kairos*, *Même pas peur*, *Politique* and *La Revue Nouvelle* print less than 1000 copies, and the same goes for *Alter Echos*, with the latter being dedicated to social workers, which could explain this situation. This illustrates various strategies at play, despite the desire by all interviewees to maximise sales and subscriptions. In parallel, a magazine such as *Politique* concedes that it is produced simply for the pleasure of writing and discussing ideas with like-minded people.

In conclusion, each media outlet has its own view of independence. More radical media believe that independence is impossible, unless revenue comes from the reader/civil society (sales, shares and crowdfunding) and self-censorship is absent:

Our media is totally free if it is totally funded by our readers. But it is not totally true because we could do self-censorship, when we think that if we talk about something, we can lose readers. It's self-censorship. (Alexandre, *Kairos*)

They can also accept advertising or public subsidies, relying on the market or the state. In some ways, their socio-economic structure is very close to the rhizomatic approach (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007), with simultaneous support from the market, the state and civil society, in order to avoid dependence on any one of these.

Alternative media role regarding media and society

By looking at the motto of each media, the interviews and the content, there is a clear distinction between the titles: some are more society-centred while others are more media-centred (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007) (see Table 4). A distinction can be made, however, about whether they refer to society or to media/journalism/topics in their description.

The last three – *Même pas peur*, *Kairos* and *Pour* – are society-centred, as they focus on describing the society in which they would like to live: 'for a decent society' (*Kairos*), 'For writing freedom' (*Pour*); and 'in order to develop a popular cultural hegemony' (these are the goals of *Même pas peur*, from the statutes of this non-profit association). They are definitively opposed to the cultural hegemony of traditional media and want to replace these media:

[We] do not [want to] coexist peacefully next to the mass press, which does not do their job well. (Alexandre, *Kairos*)

Table 4: Titles (in chronological order) and their motto, highlighting three ways of conceiving their media: (1) journalism-oriented; (2) content-oriented; (3) counter-hegemonic-oriented

Title	Translated motto	Centred	Type
<i>24h01</i>	The Belgian magazine of great investigations	Media	Journalism
<i>Médor</i>	Belgian quarterly of investigations and narratives	Media	Journalism
<i>La Revue Nouvelle</i>	Societal questions in debate	Media and society	Content
<i>Alter Echos</i>	Social news with the decoder	Media and society	Content
<i>Imagine</i>	Ecology, society, North-South	Media and society	Content
<i>Politique</i>	Belgian magazine of analysis and debate	Media and society	Content
<i>Wilfried</i>	Narrate power	Media and society	Content
<i>Même pas peur</i>	Belgian satirical newspaper (without GMO nor preservatives)	Society	Counter-hegemonic
<i>Kairos</i>	Anti-productivist newspaper for a decent society	Society	Counter-hegemonic
<i>Pour</i>	For writing freedom	Society	Counter-hegemonic

They position themselves in a counter-hegemonic way, and they acknowledge that they are a tool for human emancipation:

We want to be tools at the service of political, social or civic struggles, and voices of new experiments. Because we feel that they do not have the means to make themselves known enough' (Jean-Claude, *Pour*)

The other initiatives are half society-centred and half media-centred in the way they focus on the content and issues ignored in traditional media, such as social questions for *Alter Echos*, ecology for *Imagine* and political issues for *La Revue Nouvelle*, *Politique*¹⁰ and *Wilfried*. Finally, media-centred initiatives propose a 'new' journalism, such as slow or deep journalism, with *24h01* and *Médor* focused on a 'deep journalism' and highlighting their will to do 'great investigations'. This does not mean, however, that media-centered initiatives are not worried about the evolution of society and position themselves regarding the other media, with a clear distinction between engagement and activism:

What is certain is that there is a conviction and a commitment. The conviction that we can change the world in a certain way. Now, there is no left-right ideology, and it is clearly stated in the statutes. To be in the board of directors, you cannot have belonged to a party in the previous two years ... When you participate in a debate with a person from *Médor* and a person from *24h01*, you can feel from their speech that there is something behind *Médor*, deeper and more convinced ... They were all a bit convinced at the beginning and then they convince each other even more when they sit around the table. (Laurence, *Médor*)

Concerning the editorial line of *Alter Echos*, it is engaged, but not activist. In the sense that politicians give opinions, while we are in a more classical form of analysis. In order to have as many sources as possible (peculiarities of work) and have something balanced. For the defence of economic rights, social rights, etc. But with an analytic treatment that ... wants to be apolitical or as honest as possible without any ideological bias, or a message that one wants to communicate in an activist way. (Sandrine, *Alter Echos*)

Interviews, 'about us' sections of websites and practices are not always consistent, but generally emphasise one aspect: media or society. Society-centred media are highly political initiatives that want to promote counter-hegemonic discourse and recognise a left-wing orientation, while

media-centred initiatives promote 'new' ways of practising journalism. Of course, this is not a simple dichotomy, but rather a scale on which media can have specificities from both categories.

Profile of the contributors

Another aspect that can profoundly influence the socio-economic structure and role of these alternative media regarding media and society is how they conceive their role as producers of information. On one side, an alternative media can involve professional journalists, who have work (or still work) for traditional media, and pay for their articles. On the other side, closer to the notion of citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001), participants are volunteers and the alternative media try to involve more citizens in the process of production of information. Of course, these are the extremes and the reality is generally somewhere in between; there is a continuum of practice. A distinction can be made between media-oriented and society-oriented initiatives, depending on the profile of the journalists (paid as employees, paid as freelancers or volunteers) and the overlap of the editorial teams for some media with each other and with traditional media on one side (*Médor*, *24h01* and *Wilfried*) and other alternative media on the other side (*Pour* and *Kairos*). These questions are central to these media, including the way they conceive journalism, how they select information, how they conceive their role in their media and in the society, how they frame a subject, the necessity to be a professional, etc. (Harcup, 2013: 68). This point seems so important that it will require another article dedicated to the profile of these 'alternative' journalists and how they can cooperate, depending on their social and symbolic capital, in this competitive environment (Van Leeckwyck, forthcoming). After this study, it seems that the profile of contributors may be the characteristic best suited to differentiating media-centred and society-centred initiatives.

Conclusion

Trying to classify alternative media in Belgium is a challenging task, given the wide variety of initiatives. In this analysis, even with only 10 media outlets, it is clear that they have many similarities to and differences from one another. Trying to put these media in 'boxes' may, in the end, not be particularly relevant. In contrast, talking about their characteristics is crucial because these media can play a role in society, and can provide potential solutions to the main threats of mainstream/traditional media (particularly capitalisation and institutionalisation). This conclusion answers the research questions on the tension between financial sources and independence and their role regarding media and society, then highlights the gap between two groups of alternative media in Belgium. Finally, some orientations for future research are proposed.

From traditional to alternative media

Every media outlet analysed here constitutes 'an alternative to the mainstream' (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007). They create room for experiments, especially regarding the capitalisation that is one of the threats to the structure of a media outlet. By developing new socio-economic models, they try to solve a tension present in any form of media: (1) in order to live, they need money, but (2) these sources of money might have an influence on the content of the media. These alternative media did not only get money from the market (like private media) or the state (like public media), but rather attempted to implement a combination of these. They diversified their financial sources and tried to find a good balance between the state (public subsidies), the market (advertising) and civil society (shares/sales/crowdfunding). This 'good balance' is hard to define and depends on the goal of each media outlet, but still remains the best solution to maintaining their independence from any financial sources, with a rhizomatic model (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007). This question has no easy solution and depends on the context and the ideology of each participant: 'Can we be critical regarding the state/market/civil society when they give us money?'

These alternative media also provide room for experimenting with other ways of doing journalism, different from the hegemonic conceptions. According to their mottoes, most of the media analysed here are both media-centred and society-centred, because they reinvent and complement traditional media while being willing to bring social and political change regarding specific issues: ecological, political or social. Others are journalism-oriented, focusing their innovation on *how* they want to practise their journalism, with ‘deep’ or ‘slow’ journalism. With in-depth investigations, these media represent how traditional media should be: a sort of fourth power (estate), the watchdog of our democracies. The symptoms of a sick traditional journalism are worsening, and the only way for journalism to survive is to completely reinvent itself, according to the proposition of these alternative media.

From journalism to activism

Some of these 10 media are not only alternative to the mainstream but also strongly linked to civil society, as the third approach in Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier (2007). These counter-hegemonic media are opposed to traditional media, and their main goal is to resist to or to promote changes in society; they are thus society-centred. They could be considered civil society actors, by improving democratisation and participation and giving a voice to citizens, just as social movements do; this has been called mediactivism (Cardon & Granjon, 2010). The goal of their left-wing or anarchist orientation is to build a ‘better society’.

All the analysed media understood that capitalisation might weaken the structure of a media outlet and its role regarding democracy. Avoiding a dependence on the market and accumulating profit is key to leaving the deadlock in which traditional media are trapped. In some ways, they are anti-capitalist media: some initiatives do not necessarily rely on the economic capital, but on other types of capital – social and cultural capital (Naldi & Picard, 2012), while enclosed in a journalistic bubble, and symbolic capital, detectable by the ‘institutional recognition (in the form of awards and prizes’ (Atton & Hamilton, 2008: 132).¹¹ This may lead to a form of institutionalisation, which is the second threat to traditional media. The counter-hegemonic media are also against this kind of capital, wanting to be as inclusive possible. They thus avoid becoming the new dominant media and try to develop media without taking the associated power (Holloway, 2002). To a certain extent, media-centred initiatives are closer to the sub-field of journalism, whereas the society-centred media are closer to activism (see Table 5).

Table 5: Media classification based on the typology adopted above (journalism, content and counter-hegemonic-oriented)

Media-centred		<----->		Society-centred
Journalism-oriented		Content-oriented		Counter-hegemonic-oriented
Practise another kind of journalism		Focus on specific issues		Promote another society
Accept ethical advertising				Reject advertising
Magazine form				Newspaper form
High price		Middle price		Low price
Involve mainly journalists		Involve both		Involve mainly citizens
Cooperate with traditional media		Cooperate with both categories		Cooperate with each other
Sense of community – Meet the readers				
From journalism (fourth power)		...		To activism (fifth power)

Media-centred initiatives thus want a journalism that is identified as the fourth power (or estate), as mentioned previously, whereas society-centred media want to abolish capital, and to improve access and participation through the process of doing journalism, which is very close to the concept of a fifth power (or estate) (Ramonet, 2003).

Future research

This research highlights the main problems involved in studying alternative media: (1) the strong relationship between alternative media and the context in which they evolve, resulting in the difficulty of drawing more general conclusions; and (2) the wide range of existing alternative media, including their similarities and differences, which can make classification difficult. In the case of this study, there may be too many media; however, showing the great diversity in only 10 titles was a considered choice. It could also be interesting to include other printed alternative media (such as *Pan*), other alternative media (radio or online) or Dutch-speaking alternative media. Lastly, the media landscape is constantly changing, which inevitably makes this analysis biased. This analysis shows the situation of Belgian (French-speaking) printed alternative media from September 2017 to April 2018. Future research is needed to deepen the question of independence of media regarding their financial sources and to avoid any capitalisation, especially to see if this diversification of revenue sources takes place everywhere or if it is a French-speaking Belgian particularity. In Belgium, it would be interesting to undertake a deeper analysis of the description/about us section of alternative media (Wiard et al., forthcoming). Future research could also provide a better understanding of social, cultural and symbolic capital regarding alternative media. This includes the profile of the contributors and the link between traditional and alternative media. This research would focus on how social/cultural/symbolic capital might change the ways in which the two forms of media conceive journalism and how this might lead to the institutionalisation of practices/structures.

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Notes

- ¹ Despite some changes since then.
- ² Kairos is a Greek divinity with a clump of hair on the head. When Kairos is next to someone, there are three possibilities: not see him, see him but do nothing, or take the clump in one's hand and 'seize the opportunity'.
- ³ In July 2018, *24h01* ceased publication. This was explained by the lack of sales (1800 copies instead of the planned 2650). Some reasons evoked are: the economic model of mook is tenuous, limited human and financial resources, a lack of visibility in this narrow French-speaking media market and difficulty defining a clear identity for the magazine.
- ⁴ In French-speaking countries, *Médor* is often used as a nickname for dogs.
- ⁵ Proposed definition: 'The idea of institutional and ideological pluralism, which prevents the establishment of a monopoly of power and truth, and counterbalances those central institutions which, though necessary, might otherwise acquire such monopoly' (Gellner, 1996: 4).
- ⁶ *Pour* disappeared in 1982 because of an arson attack on its building by extremists. For the revival of the magazine in 2015, the director chose the same title.
- ⁷ Students' protest in 1994, corruption of politicians in the 'Agusta Affair' in the same year, teachers' and social protests and the *Marche Blanche* against the police dysfunctions in the 'Dutroux Case' in 1996 and mad cow disease in 1997.
- ⁸ Jean-Philippe Querton explains that he received support from the traditional media for the first issue of his newspaper. In his opinion, this support can be explained by its release coinciding with the first issue of *Charlie Hebdo* just after the attacks of 7 January. There was a craze for the satirical press and the creation of a new Belgian satirical title attracted a lot of attention (even in the French media). However, once the craze passed, traditional media did not pay any attention to the financial difficulties of his newspaper. One of the answers to the request to interview *Même pas peur* was that it had been already been interviewed about this release.
- ⁹ The association *Article 27* promotes culture for the disadvantaged citizens, based on Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.'
- ¹⁰ *La Revue Nouvelle* and *Politique* are quite close and often discuss the same issues. The distinction between them can be made on the basis of the fragmentation of Belgian civil society into three pillars: liberal (blue), socialist (red) and Christian (green). *La Revue Nouvelle*, which is the new form of *La Cité Chrétienne* (1926–40) and *Politique* are included in the Christian and the socialist pillars respectively.
- ¹¹ 'The popularization and acceptance of hitherto experimental forms of journalism can be seen as a form of absorption and depoliticization, but they must also be considered by general audiences as alternative journalism beyond the typical audiences for alternative media who may be considered "subaltern counter publics"' (Fraser, 1992: 123). 'In short, the radical has changed' (Atton & Hamilton, 2008: 138).