Stephen Cushion, **Beyond Mainstream Media: Alternative Media and the Future of Journalism,** London: Routledge, 2024, 178 pp., $36.19 (paperback).

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Despite the well-established body of research on alternative media, scholars still struggle to define what makes them "alternative" (Harlow, 2022). The struggle arises partly because alternative media are still described as alternatives to mainstream media and are seen outside the traditional media landscape. Alternative media are also still largely understood based on their critiques of mainstream media's journalistic practices.

In this context, the book **Beyond Mainstream Media: Alternative Media and the Future of Journalism** is essential reading. Stephen Cushion, a Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Culture professor, expands the framework for understanding alternative media and how these concepts interact with the broader media system.

This compelling argument echoes Rauch's (2016) assertion that the alternative-mainstream relationship should be understood as a continuum or spectrum, along with Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich's (2019) argument about the need to account for the diverse range of platforms and content that express varying degrees of alternativeness. These arguments are important because not everything that deviates from the mainstream can be considered alternative. The conceptual broadening is also significant, as the digital era has led to the mainstreaming of alternative media in terms of content, management, organization, advertising, and so on.

The mainstreaming process blurs the boundaries between alternative media and mainstream media. It means that rather than understanding alternative media as a binary opposition to mainstream media, viewing alternative media as actively interacting multilayered and connected with mainstream media within the media system is more comprehensive.

Focusing on alternative online political media and original case studies in the UK between 2015 and 2021, Cushion provides a normative and empirical analysis of how both producers and users construct and understand alternative media's editorial and content. This analysis draws from a comprehensive study of 3,692 articles, 17,207 social media posts, 40 interviews with editors and contributors, and a survey of 2,751 individuals regarding their relationship with the media, including a focused survey of 303 frequent alternative media users.

To understand alternative online political media, Cushion focuses on content, production, and audience (p. 18). The content examines what is produced and how it is delivered to the audience. The production aspect explores how production processes, such as organizational routines, function and the culture surrounding output production. Lastly, the audience aspect considers the users, specifically those who consume alternative media content.

Beyond Mainstream Media: Alternative Media and the Future of Journalism comprises nine chapters. In the first chapter, Cushion elaborates on how alternative media are theorized and conceptualized in English-language scholarship. This chapter argues that scholars and researchers of alternative media must go beyond studying one specific outlet and focus more on comparative studies with diverse outlets to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Chapters two, three, and four focus on the content produced by alternative online political media, ranging from commentary to reporting on the journalistic models that alternative media produce. Additionally, attention is given to the use of social media and how alternative media portray journalists and mainstream media.

Cushion develops a comprehensive typology to categorize and explain alternative online political media. To construct this framework, he examines a diverse range of alternative media outlets across the political spectrum in the UK, spanning both the left and right, including sites such as Evolve Politics, Novara Media, The Canary, Breitbart London, and Guido Fawkes.

The typology divides alternative online political media into four categories based on their content and goals: (1) political cycle specialists produce niche content to influence mainstream media's agenda; (2) electoral hyperpartisan media produce comments, opinions, and news supporting political parties that align with their ideology and aim to influence electoral politics; (3) cultural partisans, unlike electoral hyperpartisan, do not necessarily support a particular political party but focus on cultural issues from a populist perspective; and (4) vernacular macro-blogs emphasize their presence on social media and do not prioritize producing news on their website. In this typology, they do not have a specific editorial agenda and instead focus on addressing a range of anxieties and concerns about political and cultural issues.

After focusing on content, chapters five and six shift attention to the production characteristics of alternative media. These chapters argue that studies of alternative media have so far mainly focused on their "activist aspirations" for social change (p. 91). However, as shown in these two chapters, there is a process of professionalization in the work routines of alternative media, making their production process not solely driven by activism motives.

The professionalization process in alternative media is evident, for example, in their gradual adoption of working methods similar to mainstream media. One example is the need to recruit professional staff to train their workers. The goal is to make the work process more systematic and structured, following universally accepted journalistic principles.

The process of professionalization also reflects a tacit acknowledgement of the need to adapt to the broader media system. This shows that their existence goes beyond simply opposing mainstream media. Based on his interviews with alternative media editors, Cushion argues that professionalization is an effort by alternative media to gain broader legitimacy and recognition from the public.

One interesting aspect of this professionalization is that alternative media are also beginning to consider funding models that make them more sustainable in the long term. For example, they have started operating on a subscriber-based model. Cushion notes that this also critiques past practices in alternative media, which neglected sustainability.

The book focuses on the alternative media audience in chapters seven and eight. This focus is intriguing because it addresses the gap between what scholars understand and what is understood by the audience or users of alternative media. It also challenges the assumption that alternative media audiences are politically partisan, driven by ideological motives, and trapped in their own echo chambers and filter bubbles (p. 111).

However, based on a survey of 2,751 UK respondents, Cushion shows that these stereotypes are not supported. As explained in these chapters, most audiences do not turn to alternative media to replace mainstream media consumption. Instead, they access alternative media from various ideological perspectives, whether right-wing or left-wing, to obtain alternative information that complements what they get from mainstream media.

In the context of analyzing alternative media audiences, it is interesting to discuss this within the framework of trust and distrust of mainstream media. A common argument in scholarship is that audiences turn to alternative media because they no longer trust mainstream media. However, alternative media is not merely an "escape" from mainstream media. They access alternative media to be more critical of political issues or what this book calls "a skeptical media-savvy user" (p. 146).

Chapter nine concludes the book with a discussion of the future of journalism, extending beyond the findings of this book. Cushion states that it is important to consider broader questions about the significance of national and media political environments in fully understanding alternative media.

One such effort is to de-Westernize alternative media studies to provide a more comprehensive cross-national understanding. This de-Westernization effort is essential, and since Cushion's book is based on extensive research in the UK, scholars should approach it with caution when comparing it to studies of alternative media in non-Western countries, ensuring proper context is considered.

In conclusion, this book is essential for scholars of alternative media and practitioners and audiences alike. It provides a more comprehensive understanding, demonstrating that alternative media are not simply distinct from mainstream media. Instead, alternative media interact with and connect to mainstream media in complex, multilayered ways, particularly in content, production, and audience engagement.

References

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