



Far-Right Politicians, Alternative media & Twitter

A explanatory study on far-right politicians use of alternative media
on twitter

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Abstract

As alternative media and its dangers have become increasingly established in the last few years and got to the forefront of Swedish politics because of the planned murder of Sweden politician Annie Lööf, this study aims to look into if far-right politicians use alternative media in order to spread their message using the research question: Do politicians of the Swedish Democrats spread more alternative media on their social media accounts than politicians of the mainstream conservative Moderates? The result of this research question was a positive causality where Sweden democrats to a statistically significant degree do post more links to alternative media than moderates politicians meaning they most certainly do. The most interesting thing about this study may be that politicians with a higher position within the party, and thus should be most in the know with the potentially damaging aspects of alternative media, post the most. Suggesting that this posting very well can be a planned strategy.

Innehållsförteckning

Introduction	1
Purpose	2
Literature review	2
Alternative media	2
Radicalization	3
Alternative media and radicalization	4
Party sympathy for radical parties & “dangerous worldview”	6
The relationship between politicians and voters	7
Social media and reputation	8
Theory	9
Hypothesis	10
Method	11
Collecting the data	13
Data analysis	14
Dataset	15
Results	16
Conclusions	21
References	24
Appendix	26

Introduction

Alternative media has become more and more at the forefront of Swedish politics. This is due to, in part, the right-wing party Sweden Democrats gaining more and more prominence but more importantly the planned murder of the Swedish politician Annie Lööf during the political 'Almedals' week, by an alleged Nazi sympathizer (Expressen). Although the planned murder never got past the planning stage, the to-be murderer instead murdered another participant whom he did not agree with, Ing-Marie Wieselgren. Even though the information that Lööf was the planned target only surfaced a while after the murder of Wieselgren, it still sparked a big debate about alternative media, and radicalization, in Swedish politics, which this study aims to look further into.

The party who has received maybe the most criticism due to this scandal is the Sweden Democrats, the far-right party in Sweden, and, more specifically, the alternative media that share the core principles with the party. This is because the Sweden Democrat-tied alternative media were very critical towards Lööf specifically. Alternative media, with anti-immigration tendencies, have in turn been linked to radicalization in studies by both Kaisler et al (2020) and Nygaard (2019). This, in turn, lays the groundwork for this article as I will look further into if far-right politicians spread these articles to a higher degree than other parties, such as mainstream conservative politicians. We already know that far-right politicians use twitter to spread their message. We also know that Politicians have an effect on their voters, and not only the other way around, and we also think, with some evidence, that alternative media have an impact on its readers' political beliefs. But we do not know if politicians use alternative media as a sort of tool for spreading their ideology in their twitter usage, despite its dangers, thus motivating this study.

In summary I will in this paper do an explanatory study where I look into the following: Do politicians of the Sweden Democrats spread more alternative media on their social media accounts than politicians of the mainstream conservative Moderates? The choice of the Moderates as the comparison party is based on the fact that they are the established party that lays closest to the Sweden Democrats concerning immigration policy thus is most likely to

consume the same alternative media as the Sweden Democrats based on the definition of alternative media used in this study.

Purpose

By studying if the Sweden Democrats do indeed link more to alternative media than the Moderates in Sweden, I aim to further add to the literature in the political communication field, as I add information on whether or not far-right politicians actually use alternative media, despite its dangers, to spread their message. If far-right politicians do spread alternative media more than mainstream conservative politicians this could be a warrant for further research on the effect alternative media has on its readers, for example, as it is a subject not thoroughly researched and an area that could be a large actor in the increasingly more polarized political spectrum in Sweden, and other Western countries.

If far-right politicians are proven to be a large distributor of alternative media, it would be important for that to spark a debate in, mainly, Sweden about what role politicians should have in our information society, should they be a ‘guiding light’? Or should they act merely in the best interest of themselves and their party?

Literature review

This literature review will look into earlier research concerning alternative media and its dangers, it will also look into how different political elites act on social media.

Alternative media

Firstly, we must establish what alternative media is, which is a lot more complicated than it may seem. The direct and wide definition of alternative media is as follows:

“... media that challenge the established channels and put forward alternative approaches and perspectives that contradict or diverge from an experienced dominant discourse in the mainstream media” (Holt 2018)

Although it is when you try to specify it further that it gets a lot harder, because there are a few different ways to go. But in this paper the definition that I am going to use is Holt’s (2018) definition that is adapted to the Swedish context, as it is the best definition to capture the alternative media that have ties to the Sweden Democrats or have an ideology that matches best with the Sweden Democrats. This definition goes as follows:

“A self-assumed term that signals an opposition to traditional media (“old media”), which many of the writers in this field regard as failing to report properly on important societal issues, for example, by avoiding reporting on social problems related to immigration” (Holt 2018)

In this paper I am purposefully looking at alternative media that are just immigration critical, as they are more linked to the right of Swedish politics. Holt (2018) mentions a few alternative media that fit the example and will be used in this paper. These alternative media are: Fria Tider, Samhällsnytt, Nya Tider, Nyheter Idag och Ledarsidorna.

Alternative media and radicalization

As we now well know there are different definitions of alternative media but, as already explained, the far-right definition that Holt (2018) uses is the one that this study will use. The thing that these alternative medias have in common are that they are more critical towards immigration, aswell as islam, than mainstream media, according to studies from the US aswell as Scandinavia and central Europe (Nygaard, S. 2019. Kaisler, J et al. 2020. Holt, K. 2018).

In Nygaards article from 2019 she reviews the far-right alternative media in Sweden, Norway and Denmark whereas she finds two different types of alternative media, named descriptive and normative. These two types of far-right alternative media are opposing extremes, in terms of how they convey their messaging, whereas the normative is mainly found in Denmark and the descriptive one is the main one in Sweden, Norway's alternative media can be found ‘in between’ these two extremes.

Out of the two types of alternative media presented in Nygaards (2019) study the most interesting for this study is the descriptive one as that is the one found in Sweden. When Nygaards (2019) explains the descriptive style she refers to a quote from former 'Chicago daily news' editor Paul Mowrer where he highlights the importance of "the appearance of objectivity":

"Thus it is better to scrap an editorial calling the mayor a liar and a crook, and to write another which, by reciting facts without using adjectives and without calling names, makes it obvious that the mayor is a liar and a crook" (Mott and Casey 1937 in Nygaard 2019, p.1159)

In this quote Mowrer rather explicitly, depicts how Sweden's alternative media works according to Nygaard where they try very hard not to explicitly say what they think about an event and instead try to 'guide' the reader to the same conclusion. This 'false objectivity' Nygaard argues is the same thing as political propaganda.

Nygaards (2019) findings is something that is backed up in Odağ et al. (2019) literary review with the name of "Reviewing the role of the internet in radicalization processes". In this review, where they are generally critical towards most research on radicalization on the internet, they do however find earlier research that point out that right-wing sites do their best to cloak their connection to the extreme right-wing communities. They do this by portraying democratic values such as education and freedom of speech but beneath this they spread white supremacy propaganda by using rhetorical devices in order to legitimize these right-wing groups.

The third study looked at in the context of alternative media and its link to alternative media is a study by Kaisler et al.(2020) in which they do a topic modeling study, which is a kind of statistical model that looks for topics in a large text base, and hyperlink analysis, which looks for information through hyperlink networks, from several alternative media in the United States. In this study they see a clear linkage between size and professionalization of alternative media, something that has been seen as something good for democracy for a long time. But in this study Kaisler et al. (2020) problematize this as they do see that this professionalization does not lead to social inclusion and is not progressive, in turn they look at the effect this professionalization has on the mainstream media in America. They argue

that when right-wing media becomes more professional and thus becomes more mainstream that in turn pulls the mainstream media more towards them meaning that the whole media landscape radicalizes to some extent (Kaisler, J et al. 2020).

The last study looked at in this section of the literary review is a study by Leung & Lee (2014) which is not perfect for this study as they looked at alternative media in Hong Kong and thereby 'left' alternative media. Why this Leung & Lee study is still relevant to this study is because they are the only ones, I could find, who have even remotely looked at the empirical political impact from alternative media. The previous studies presented have rather looked at alternative media in itself and then speculated, based on their research, that its aspects should have an impact. In Leung & Lee's (2014) study they set out to see if internet alternative media do in fact have an impact on the readers, and found support for their hypothesis: "Internet alternative media usage relates positively to protest participation." and "Internet alternative media usage relates positively to support for the planned civil disobedience campaign for universal suffrage." (Leung & Lee 2014; 8). Although they did find support for their hypothesis they did concede that they could not determine which way the causality went.

To summarize these studies we can look at three aspects, firstly they find that alternative media, as defined in this study, often present themselves as objective, an objectivity that turns out to be a sort of political propaganda called 'false objectivity'. Secondly, alternative media may also have an effect on mainstream media by pulling them closer to themselves in the process of their own professionalization, meaning that the whole political spectrum in the country may be affected. Lastly, alternative media seem to have a political effect on its readers.

The relationship between politicians and voters

Two separate studies, made by Bischof and Wagner (2019) and Silva (2018) have both looked at the correlation between radical parties and political polarization, and thus the effect politicians have on voters, in the Netherlands since the breakthrough of radical right parties in their 2002 election. Both of their studies did indeed find that the political polarization of the voters has increased since the emergence of these parties and that this increase is higher than

it would have been without them. This is then further established in Castanho Silvas (2018) article when he tests the increase in polarization in relation to another 13 Western European countries, in order to get a general polarization to compare with, where the Dutch case indeed has a larger polarization. These findings then showed a larger effect on polarization of the radical right as Bischof and Wagner (2019) find that this polarization could not be seen in relation to the entry of radical green parties, which in turn suggest that this polarization is maybe more driven by the radical right.

What makes these studies interesting in the case of this study is that they show that politicians have an effect on the voters' views, and not just the other way around. This then begs the question as to what politicians do with this influence and maybe more importantly why far-right politicians seem to have an even larger impact on voters than other politicians. This in turn is a motivation to this study as it is looking at whether or not there is a difference between far-right politicians and mainstream conservative ones concerning the spread of alternative media, which in turn could be part of an explanation to this question.

Politicians use of Twitter

In a study from 2016 that van Kessel and Castelein named “Shifting the blame. Populist politicians’ use of Twitter as an oppositional tool” they look into how two political leaders of populist parties in the Netherlands used Twitter. By looking at and comparing the twitter feeds of Geerts Wilders, Party for freedom(PVV), and Emile Roemer, former leader of the Socialist party(SP) they tried to answer the following question: Did their Twitter usage reflect well the anti-establishment strategies of populist parties, and can the medium therefore be considered suitable to study the construction of populist injustice frames?

The answer to this question was generally yes, meaning that the twitter feeds of both these political leaders, to a certain degree, matched the party's political manifesto in criticizing their relevant issues. Meaning that they very well used twitter as a tool of political opposition. But the main difference between the two party leaders was that the far-right leader of the PVV, Geert Wilders, was much less consistent with its messaging than Emile Roemer. This basically means that Roemer to a larger degree kept tweeting about the same views and opinions while Wilders used to switch between different political actors during the time

period depending on the relevant issues at hand and the current political landscape. The result of this is that the main issues of Wilders ideology, being opposed to progressive elites, immigration and islam, sometimes took a backseat to more adverserviable tweets depending on the issues at hand. The target of the criticism by the ideology also changed during the time period depending on, as said, the issues at hand and the political landscape, as when PVV chose not to support the centre-right VVD-CDA minority government anymore (van Kessel & Castelein 2016).

This result is further backed up in a study from 2017 by Engesser et.al in which they also studied populist politicians' use of twitter, but in this case also facebook. In this study they looked at a few different European countries, Austria, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Italy, which gives the result further legitimacy and generability. The result of this study also showed that populist parties used social media as a tool for the spread of its ideas, although the major finding of this study showed that these ideas only were spread in a fragmented form.

Lastly, to put this into comparison to more established politicians, Jacobs et.al (2020) found in a study that populist politicians were more likely to be “...*naming and shaming on Twitter and anger activation on Facebook*” (Jacobs et.al 2020; 628). This result is interesting in the context of this study as it shows a clear divide in the usage of social media between populist and non-populist politicians, something that this study also looks at.

These findings are interesting for this study as we now know that populist politicians to a higher degree use social media to push their narrative, or ideology, than more established politicians. We also know, referring to the last chapter, that politicians, especially far-right politicians, have an effect on voters. Lastly, we think that alternative media does have an impact on its readers. These three findings point to a potential answer to the question of this study, Do politicians of the Swedish Democrats spread more alternative media on their social media accounts than politicians of the mainstream conservative Moderates? These findings suggest that they should post more alternative media links than the Moderates as, for one, Sweden Democrat politicians share the same basis of ideology as the alternative media and thus can use them to spread their message. Secondly, we know that politicians have an effect on their voters, and not only the other way around, and we also think that alternative media

has an effect on its readers meaning that exposure to the narrative of alternative media should, theoretically, lead to a voter gain for the Sweden Democrats.

Social media and reputation

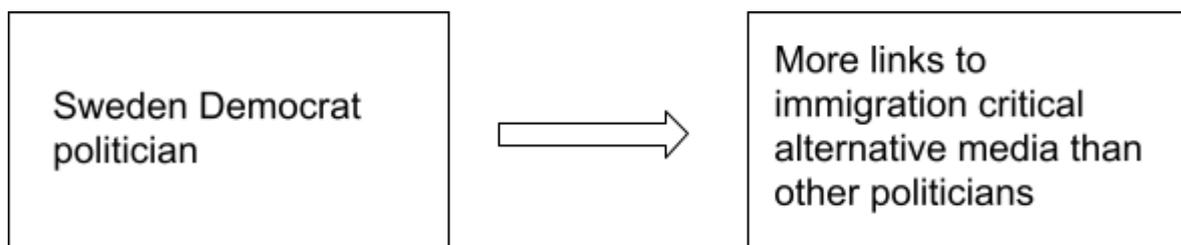
Although there is evidence to suggest that far-right politicians should spread links to alternative media on their twitter there is another aspect that also should be looked at. In a study by Kalsnes (2016) with the name of “The social paradox explained: Comparing political parties’ facebook strategy versus practice” Kalsnes looks into which strategies political parties in Norway have with social media and then how the strategies played out. Quickly summarizing it, the conclusion was that parties generally have grander strategies for social media than what they then actually turn out doing during the campaign. What is interesting from this in the context of this study is that party leaders are generally bad at prioritizing social media, something that is based on a couple of arguments. The most interesting argument in terms of this study is that there is a lack of control of online reputation and negative media attention when a politician/party is active on social media (Kalsnes 2016). An argument that could be used in this study aswell when looking at politicians. This is because the same motivation could be used as to why someone with a high position within the party, as a party leader, could be afraid to post links to alternative media, as alternative media generally does not have a good reputation in Sweden meaning that they do not want that bad reputation ‘rubbing’ of upon them. This could be a reason as to why we would not see more links to alternative media from Sweden democrats in relation to Moderates.

Theory

According to the earlier research far-right politicians do use social media, and twitter specifically, in order to spread their ideologies. This in itself would suggest that far-right politicians should post more links to alternative media as they share the same core principles of their ideology meaning that alternative media could be a way of further spreading that message. To substantiate this theory even further we also know that politicians have an effect on voters. This combined with the small amount of evidence that suggest alternative media

have an effect on voters should motivate far-right politicians into posting links to them regularly, as it could be used as a tool to spread political propaganda as Nygaard (2019) theorizes. But in order to actually know if they see a benefit to sharing alternative media to their followers, we need to know if they in fact share it regularly. This in turn leads us to the causal model of this study, see figure 1.

Figure 1. The causal model of this study



By testing this model, I hope to establish if far-right politicians link more to alternative media than other politicians. If this causality turns out to be positive it would suggest that these politicians indeed use alternative media to spread their ideology, even though they should be aware of the negative aspect of alternative media. It can also suggest that they use Alternative media to spread political propaganda in a more hidden way, as the media are not directly linked to the party. If the causality turns out to be negative that would start to ask questions as to why they do not use alternative media to help them spread their ideology, is it because they do not see any benefit to it and is that then related to them not wanting to harm their reputation.

The politicians position within the party will also be looked at as an independent variable because of Kalsnes(2016) research as it may have a rather large impact on the result of the study. If it is so that politicians with a higher position within the party, and thus have a larger reputation to uphold, are less likely to be controversial on social media because of the hardship in controlling the narrative it could have a negative effect on the causality, thus the need of having it as an independent variable. This variable could be looked at as a risk versus reward kind of scenario where someone with a higher position, and thus reputation, should have the largest positive effect of spreading alternative media on social media; but they are also the ones with a reputation to lose. Another potential scenario could be that this only affects the Moderates, their party leader Ulf Kristersson does not have a twitter for example,

as they are more established and seen as non populist leading them to be more careful in not being controversial, something that could have a positive effect on the causality. The amount of followers will also be looked at as a control variable as followers potentially could have the same effect, as those who have a larger following on social media also could want to be more careful.

Hypothesis

Based on the above literature and theoretical framework, I hypothesize that:

H1: The far-right politicians in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats, post more links to alternative media articles than the mainstream conservative politicians in Sweden.

Hypothesis 1 is based on earlier research. Considering that we know that far-right politicians to a high degree use social media, and most importantly for this study, twitter in order to spread their message and that combined with the findings that Alternative media and politicians has an impact on their readers and voters respectively it is thus then highly likely that far-right politicians would use alternative media as a tool in spreading their ideology. This is because it seems, from earlier research, that it would have a positive effect for their party and thus individual politicians. This is in spite of the fact that it may have a negative effect on their reputation as it is difficult to have control of the narrative on social media and thus running the risk of the bad reputation of alternative media spilling over on you. This is as the potential rewards outweighs the risk.

H2: People with a higher position within the party post fewer links to alternative media than their political colleagues with lower positions

Although the potential reward should outweigh the risk for the average politician that may not necessarily be true for the politicians with a higher position within the party, as reputation and legitimacy should be much more important for a party leader than a 'regular' parliament member for example. This could make for an interesting scenario where primarily the people with a lower position within the party post more links to alternative media as they do not have the same risk hanging to it. This could however be looked at in a completely different

way as they, the politicians with a lower position within the party, probably won't have the same reach and thus same reward. It could also be so that this only affects the Moderates as they are seen as more established, and thus legitimate, leading them to be more careful. But for the interest of this study a path would have to be chosen and my, personal, first instinct was that people with a higher position would post less links due to the risk of a hampered reputation and thus hypothesis 2 was based on that argument.

Method

Firstly, I have to establish which country this study is going to be based in. The country chosen is Sweden because of the fact that the motivation for this study is based on an event in Swedish politics, the attempted murder of politician Annie Lööf. Next up is the choice of the first party studied. The criterion of this party is that it needs to be far-right. The only party in the Swedish parliament that can be considered far-right is the Sweden Democrats, which made their selection straightforward. The party needs to be in the parliament because, as we can see in the earlier research, it is mainly when a far-right party enters parliament that it starts to affect the voters (Bischof, D. Wagner, M. 2019; Silva, C. 2018).

The next step will be to decide where we will find the potential posts where the Sweden Democrats' politicians link to the alternative media articles. Here, only Twitter is chosen due to the time limit and its high quality search engine. This is of course not perfect as Twitter is not the largest social media available to me, Facebook and Instagram are both larger. But due to Twitter's 'advanced search' engine, where you can be very specific when you search, it was the obvious choice. The alternative media that will be searched for is the ones mentioned in Holt's (2018) article: Fria Tider, Samhällsnytt, Nya Tider, Nyheter Idag och Ledarsidorna.

The next step is to narrow the study down in scope. To do so, I will only look at politicians that have been elected to the Swedish parliament in the latest election, as they are the ones who have an effect on voters (Bischof, D. Wagner, M. 2019; Silva, C. 2018). This does however come with the negative effect that they may have 'cleaned' up their twitter account when they ran for this seat, because alternative media still generally have a bad reputation in Sweden. The number of their Twitter followers will be looked at as a control variable whereas position within the party will also be coded as an independent variable. Position

within the party will be looked at as it will give us the answer to H2, people with a higher position within the party post fewer links to alternative media than their political colleagues with lower positions. The amount of followers will also be looked at as it could have the same effect, as politicians with more followers are more likely to be less controversial on twitter in order to not upset people and thus keeping their high number of followers.

The third part is to decide which comparison party I should look more into, in order to establish whether or not the Sweden Democrat politicians post more alternative media than other politicians. The main criterion for the comparison party is that they are the closest to the Sweden Democrats politically. If they are too far apart politically, I run the risk that they still consume alternative media but just not the Swedish, immigration critical, version that I am looking at. In other words, a party whose politicians, and voters, would read the same alternative media as Sweden Democrats if they were to consume alternative media is desired. The Moderates is the party best aligned with the Sweden Democrats concerning the immigration policy according to CHES (2019). Meaning they are the party most likely to be best aligned ideologically to the alternative media chosen in this study.

Another part that would need to be decided is which media sources are going to represent 'mainstream' media, in order to be able to use the search engine on Twitter which in turn saves a lot of time. As this study will be conducted using "advanced search" on twitter I need to decide which links should be considered mainstream media. The media chosen were mainly based on a survey conducted by SIFO where 45 000 random people of the Swedish public asked them about their media consumption. Out of the papers mentioned in the SIFO study I chose the first five, as the sixth one was a local paper. The first five were: Dagens Nyheter, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Svenska Dagbladet and Dagens Industri. A few other media was also added on an inductive basis from me looking at various media often linked from politicians. These were: TT nyhetsbyrå, Omni and SVT. SVT can be considered mainstream as they are the public service media for Sweden and thus are very highly used, TT are a news agency who also can be considered mainstream as Aftonbladet, and many other newspapers, often buy articles and have much collaboration with them. Omni can also be defined as mainstream as they are a so-called "news aggregator" which basically means they mainly summarize the reporting of other media.

The last aspect that needs to be established is the time aspect. This is about how long I will go back in time on the politician's Twitter profile while searching for the posts. This is mainly because of how long it will take to gather all the information. So, considering this, I will only go back to when they first entered the Parliament plus one year, as that would have roughly been when they got put on the list to enter parliament, and that would be the first time they would benefit from spreading alternative media to their potential voters. If they have had gap years during their time in political office, I will only go back to the most recent time in order to not make it too difficult.

Collecting the data

As already mentioned, Twitter is the social media chosen due to its very high quality search engine called "advanced search". Advanced search is basically a system to help you navigate through all the different commands that can be used in the search bar and to help you formulate them, this means when you fill in the parts you want the engine to search for you will get a special 'code' that will run that search. As for this study I got "(samnytt.se OR nyheteridag.se OR nyatider.nu OR friatider.se OR ledarsidorna.se) (from:) since:-12-31 filter:links -filter:replies". The OR in the command means that the engine will show every hit it gets from either of the keywords, the sites, searched for. Meanwhile, "from:" entails which account the tweet shall come from, meaning the different politicians' accounts. "Since:" is then the time period, meaning in this case one year before the politicians entered parliament most recently. To determine the time period, I searched for the politician on "Riksdagen.se" to see when they entered, and then went back in time by one year. In order to save time, I did not look at the exact date, only the year, meaning 12-31; month/year was exactly the same for every politician. "filter:links" means that only posts where links were shared came through the search engine. "filter-replies" meant that replies to other people were not shown, as the study wanted to only look at the articles the politician actively wanted to distribute.

This search basically searches for all links shared that contain the alternative media filled in from a certain date. Then when looking into the different politicians from each party I put their username after "from:" and the year they entered the year they ran for parliament and got in after "since:", this was then done for every politician looked at as well as the two respective parties twitter, but then using the date they joined twitter as the start of the time

period. This practically means that if two different people entered, let's say, 2018 and 2020 respectively they both would get 2017 as they both were put on the list to the parliament roughly one year before the election; depending on party rules. This means that politicians who replaced other politicians on leave and then got elected were counted from the time they stood on the list as replacement for the year they got the chance to act in the parliament for the first time. The exact same thing was then done when searching for the mainstream media articles but this time instead with the mainstream media websites, giving me the following code: “(aftonbladet.se OR dn.se OR di.se OR expressen.se OR svd.se OR tt.se OR omni.se OR svt.se) (from:) since:-12-31 filter:links -filter:replies”.

Data analysis

With the material collected for this study there are three variables that I look further into, based on the above-developed hypotheses. The main one would be to see if Sweden Democrat politicians do post links to alternative media more often than the Moderate politicians. The main way of doing this is by firstly adding all links to alternative media that Sweden Democrats politicians have shared together. Then doing the same with the Moderates politician, then dividing this sum by the number of investigated politicians from each party. With this method I will get the arithmetic mean of the average number of alternative media links per politician of the respective parties. By comparing these two, I will get the average number of posts to alternative media made during the investigated time period from the Sweden Democrats and the Moderates.

The main problem with arithmetic means though is that they are very sensitive to extreme cases. If one politician posts a lot of links this would of course make the average go up, something that can build a skewed picture. Because of this I am going to use another measure of central tendency called the median. Calculating the median works by basically lining up all the number of posts per politician, ranked by size, before counting each and every one until you get up to half the number of respondents, you calculate the 50th percentile statistically speaking (Esaiasson et al., 2017, pp. 364-366; Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp.116-117). By doing this, I can in a better way get rid of the most extreme linkers, the ones that post abnormally many links, and instead see what number of links most of the politicians post per party.

When this data collection and descriptive analysis has been made and a mean and median value have been revealed it is time for further analysis. The next part of the analysis will be a so-called bivariate regression analysis, in which I will be able to further establish whether there is a positive or negative relationship between the party and the number of alternative media links posted. In this analysis, being a parliamentarian of the Sweden Democrats or the Moderates constitutes the independent variable and the number/share of posts linking to alternative media constitutes the dependent variable. The Moderates will be given the number 0 and the Sweden Democrats the number 1. This would mean that, if the hypothesis is correct, that we would get a positive correlation between the party and the number of alternative media links posted. This would be seen with the help of bivariate regression analysis and then further determined with the use of the p-value in order to establish whether or not the result is statistically significant. Then I will add the independent variable and the control variable in order to see if they have any effect on the result. The same bivariate regression analysis will then be run but this time looking at the share of alternative media links posted in relation to total links posted to both alternative and mainstream media. Lastly, both of these bivariate regression analysis will be run with followers and position in party as a control and independent variable respectively in order to see which effect they have and if H2 thus is correct. Position in party will be coded with a 1 given to them with a high position, party leadership, committee chairman and cabinet members, and a 0 given to the rest of the politicians.

Dataset

The data collection has left me with 82 politicians representing the Moderates and 74 politicians representing the Sweden Democrats, meaning 156 politicians altogether. In addition to politicians' Twitter feeds, this number does not include the official Twitter accounts of the parties. Although the Sweden Democrats received more votes in the last election, and thus has more politicians in parliament, the study looked at more Moderates as 13 of the original parliament politicians ended up in the cabinet¹. Because of this I decided to

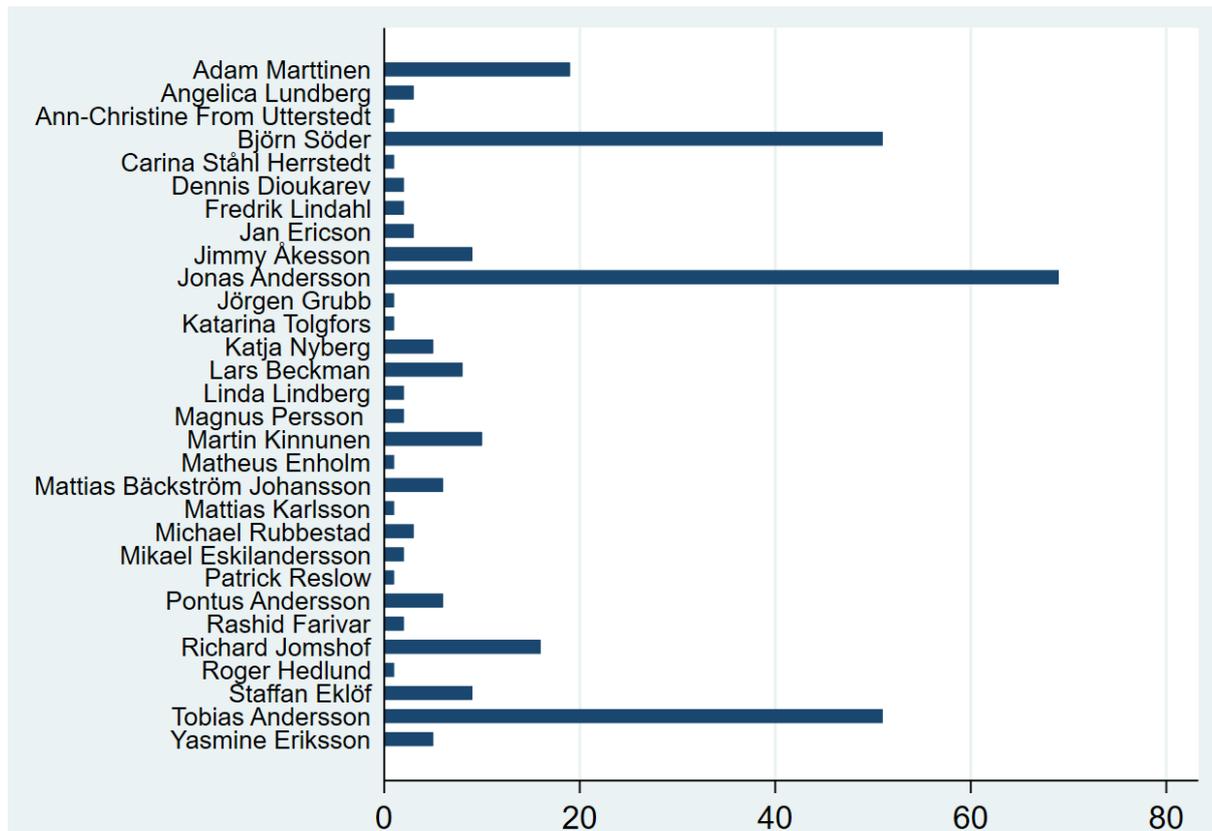
¹ If a politician from the parliament ends up chosen into the cabinet by the prime minister, he/she will have a replacement in parliament as they can no longer serve in it. Ministers and their replacements in parliament have both been included in this data collection.

also look through these politicians' feeds as well, as they are some of the most high-profile politicians in the moderates, as their replacements in parliament. Three of the Moderates in the cabinet were not elected to the parliament, despite this they were also studied as they are seen as people with a high position in the party. Out of the combined 156 politicians looked at, 43 did either not have a Twitter account or have not tweeted from their account, and are thus excluded from the sample. 5 politicians did not tweet more than 3 tweets and were therefore excluded from the sample, as these tweets were just replies. In total, the data collection thus comprised posts from the Twitter accounts of 113 politicians.

Results

The combined number of links to alternative media from Sweden Democrat politicians is 301. 20 of them were posted by the official Twitter account of the Sweden Democrats and 9 were posted by their party leader Jimmie Åkesson. The biggest alternative media posters were Jonas Andersson, with 69 links, and Tobias Andersson and Björn Söder with 51 links, respectively, all three of these have a place within the party leadership and thus are given a 1 in regards to position in party. 301 divided by 74, which is the number of Sweden Democrats politicians in parliament, gives us an arithmetic mean of circa 4.1 (counting all politicians of the Sweden Democrats, even those without Twitter). If you exclude the 21 Sweden Democrats politicians without Twitter accounts, the arithmetic mean goes up to circa 5.7 posted links per Sweden Democrat politician. The mean number of shared posts by Sweden Democrat politicians is in stark contrast to the respective number for Moderates politicians: 0.15. Not counting the Moderates politicians without Twitter accounts, the average Moderates politician shares 0.2 alternative media links throughout the investigated time period. In figure 2 below you can see the amount of posts to alternative media from every politician who posted a minimum of 1 link to alternative media, both parties' politicians can be seen.

Figure 2. The box plot of alternative media posts by politician(of them who did post)



As mentioned, in this box plot you can see the number of posts to alternative media by each politician who actually posted. The y-axis shows the politician and the X-axis shows the number of posts, only Beckman, Ericson and Tolgfors represent the Moderates. As you can see here, it is mainly five heavy posters who impact the average number of posted alternative media links of the Sweden Democrats. Meanwhile there is mainly one of the Moderates politicians who posts alternative media links, committee member Lars Beckman, although on this plot he merely represents an average poster in contrast to the Sweden democrat posters.

The results further reveal that there are some heavy posters of alternative media links in both of the parties. Here is when the median link posted per politician becomes interesting, without counting the politicians without Twitter accounts. The median number of alternative media posts per Moderate politician is 0, considering that only 3 Moderates actually posted links to alternative media. For the Sweden Democrats, the median number of alternative media posts by politicians is only 1 compared to the arithmetic mean of 5.7. This shows that the heavy posters have had a rather large impact on the arithmetic mean for the Sweden Democrats.

Table 1. The bivariate regression analysis

	(1) AMLinks
SD	5.430** (3.10)
Constant	0.190 (0.16)
<i>N</i>	113
<i>R</i> ²	0.080

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

In table 1, you can see the results of a bivariate regression analysis between being a Sweden Democrat (vs. Moderate) politician and the number of shared alternative media links. Here we can see that the party has a statistically significant impact on the number of alternative media links shared on Twitter per politician (p -value < 0.01). The coefficient shows that a politician of the Sweden Democrats would post 5.2 more links to alternative media during his or her time in parliament and a year before than a Moderates politician. If you look at the constant, you can also see that a Moderates politician would post 0.188 links to alternative media during their time in parliament and a year before.

Table 2. Multivariate regression

	(1) AMLinks	(2) AMLinks	(3) AMLinks	(4) AMLinks	(5) AMLinks
SD		5.430** (3.10)			4.712** (2.74)
High position in party			5.829** (3.19)		4.704* (2.48)
Followers				0.0000917 (1.70)	0.0000376 (0.70)
Constant	2.593** (2.87)	0.190 (0.16)	0.581 (0.54)	1.985* (2.06)	-1.364 (-1.09)
<i>N</i>	113	113	113	113	113
<i>R</i> ²	0.000	0.080	0.084	0.025	0.147

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 shows the positive relationship between being a Sweden Democrats politician and the number of shared alternative media links. We can also see that a politician's position in a party has a large effect concerning the result, even though this is not as statistically significant. This means that people with a higher position in the respective parties, as defined in the collection of data, in general are more likely to post links to alternative media. In contrast, the number of followers does not have an effect on the number of links to alternative media that a politician posts.

Now when we start to look at the share, rather than the absolute number, of alternative media that's been linked in contrast to mainstream media by the politicians it gives us another perspective on the results. But firstly, in order to work the data, we needed not only to remove all the people who did not have a Twitter account but also all of those who have not linked to either alternative or mainstream media, as you cannot divide 0 by 0. After calculating the share of alternative media from all politicians who have linked to either mainstream or alternative media, the same bivariate regression analysis with the same independent variables was run, giving us figure 3 and table 3.

Figure 3. The box plot analysis looking at the share

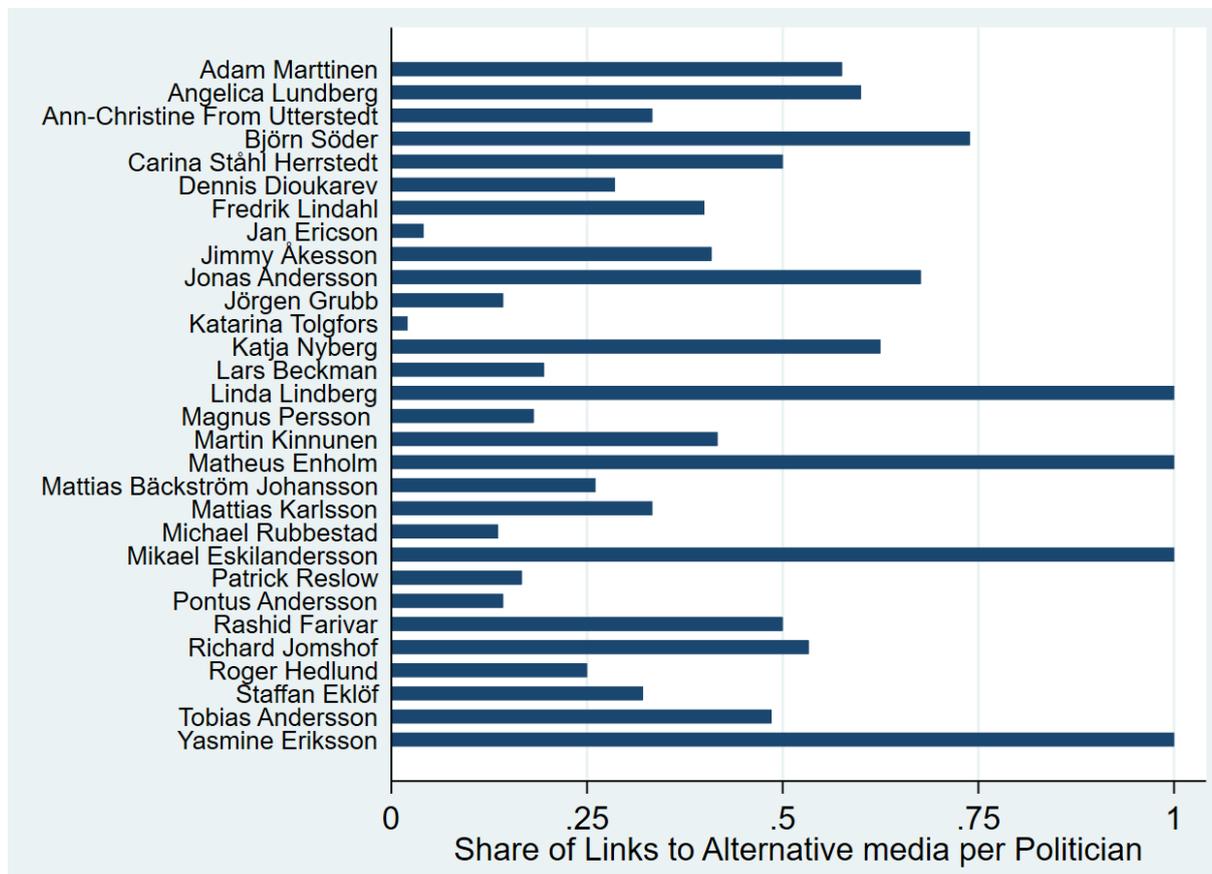


Table 3. The independent variables in relation to the share

	(1) ShareAMLinks	(2) ShareAMLinks	(3) ShareAMLinks	(4) ShareAMLinks	(5) ShareAMLinks
SD		0.353*** (6.13)			0.344*** (5.87)
High position in party			0.120 (1.68)		0.0645 (1.04)
Followers				0.000000661 (0.38)	0.000000352 (0.24)
Constant	0.198*** (5.53)	0.00829 (0.20)	0.146** (3.12)	0.192*** (4.80)	-0.0182 (-0.38)
<i>N</i>	67	67	67	67	67
<i>R</i> ²	0.000	0.366	0.042	0.002	0.380

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Here, when looking at figure 3, we see a much more even distribution. This is because this figure is looking at the share or in other words the percent of alternative media shared per politician of those who posted links to alternative media. The main thing to mention here is that two out of the Moderate politicians who posted links to alternative media, Ericson and Tolgfors, had a very low percentage, and thus share. When looking at the share of alternative media and mainstream media in a bivariate regression analysis, table 3, we see an even more statistically significant effect of being a Sweden Democrat politician vs. a Moderates politician (p -value < 0.001). This is likely because only one of the politicians in the Moderates, Beckman, scored a competitive share in contrast to the Sweden Democrat politicians. On another hand, a politician's position in the party and number of followers is not significantly related to the share of alternative media sources shared by a politician anymore.

Some more interesting findings in the collected data that should be mentioned is that Jimmie Åkesson, the party leader of the Sweden Democrats and the person with the most followers on social media, did in fact post to alternative media regularly, 9 times, which is a share of circa 41%, since his re-entry to parliament in 2015. Another finding that goes against H2 was that the official Sweden Democrat page on Twitter posted even more links to alternative media than Jimmie Åkesson, posting 20 links since its creation in 2010, although it is only a share of 33.33%.

Conclusions

The main conclusion to be drawn from this study is that H1 “The far-right politicians in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats, post more links to alternative media articles than the mainstream conservative politicians in Sweden.” is confirmed and that the answer to the question: “Do politicians of the Swedish Democrats link to more alternative media on their social media than politicians of the mainstream conservative Moderates?” is yes. As presented in the results, there is a statistically significant positive relationship, meaning that politicians of the Sweden Democrats do in fact post more links to alternative media, during their time in parliament and a year before, than the Moderates. The relationship is even stronger when looking at the share of alternative media posted in relation to mainstream media giving further evidence to support H1. This result shows what is at best carelessness from Sweden democrat politicians regarding the dangers of alternative media, who politicians at parliamentary level which are supported by a team of communicators and consultants should know, and at worst a calculated effort in trying to gain party support with the help of the ‘false objectivity’ that alternative media uses as Nygaard(2019) mentioned. The result also starts to highlight a possible answer, or part of an answer, as to why far-right politicians have a larger impact on political polarization than other ideologies, something that should be researched further.

A result that could suggest that it is the latter is the answer to H2 “People with a higher position within the party post fewer links to alternative media than their political colleagues with lower positions” was not confirmed. This means that politicians with a higher position within the party, and thus are working closer to the communicators hired by the party, are not less likely to post links to alternative media sources. This is even more emphasized when looking at the parties’ own official twitter page, which presumably is run by the communicators hired to handle the communication for the party, that in turn is the fourth highest poster of links to alternative media of all accounts looked at in this study. This suggests that even those who should have the most knowledge about the fallacies of alternative media, the communicators, still choose to regularly post links to it, meaning they probably think it is a net gain for the party. It also suggests that the bad reputation they eventually could get from it, based on the arguments presented by Kalsnes (2016), either does not exist, as alternative media maybe does not have a bad reputation, or that the politicians

and their communicators make the call that it does not matter in regard to the net gain of spreading alternative media.

If we now move on to look at some limitations of this study, one is that it does not actually prove if alternative media spread actually have an effect on voters and ‘only’ gives us an suggestion as to whether or not the communicators and politicians of the Sweden Democrats think that the spread of these alternative medias, with all of the faults mentioned mainly by Nygaard (2019), may lead to them getting more support in the future. But this is maybe also the best thing about this study because what this study does in fact show is that there definitely is something here that needs to be further studied by the political communication field, something that I suggest the field should do. One good place to start may be to research more about if alternative media has an effect on its readers' political beliefs.

If we continue to look at deficiencies with the study two that probably did have an impact is that the study did not look at what the individual politicians wrote when linking the articles, they could have supported it as well as criticized it. This should have, too a small part, been mitigated by looking at the share of alternative media links, as this measure takes into account both mainstream and alternative media.

The last criticism that I have of my own study is that twitter’s code did not include retweets, meaning that retweets were not accounted for in the study. However, this should only have had an impact on the number of links behind the study as it should have had a similar effect on both mainstream and alternative media. This is because all of the media looked at does have individual twitter sites, meaning they did not have to post links in order to show the article, they should have had the option to retweet for both alternative as well as mainstream media.

This result should also call into question which role politicians in general have in today's information society. Should they act as a guiding light? Or only post what best fits their narrative and thus have a positive impact on their individual careers/their party's successes? If it is the first option then both mainstream media and the general public should to a greater degree call out politicians who do not act according to the norm of being a ‘guiding light’.

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Appendix

All the politicians looked at:

Parti	Namn
SD	Anders Alftberg
SD	Jonas Andersson
SD	Lars Andersson
SD	Pontus Andersson
SD	Tobias Andersson
SD	Clara Aranda
SD	Mats Arkhem
SD	Ludvig Aspling
SD	Angelika Bengtsson
SD	Sara-Lena Bjälkö
SD	Anna-Lena Blomkvist
SD	Carita Boulwén
SD	Bo Broman
SD	Mattias Bäckström Johansson
SD	Alexander Christiansson
SD	Dennis Dioukarev
SD	Staffan Eklöf
SD	Aron Emilsson
SD	Matheus Enholm
SD	Mattias Eriksson Falk

SD Yasmine Eriksson
SD Mikael
Eskilandersson
SD Rashid Farivar
SD Runar Filper
SD Ann-Christine From
Utterstedt
SD Nima Gholam Ali
Pour
SD Rasmus Giertz
SD Jörgen Grubb
SD Roger Hedlund
SD Erik Hellsborn
SD Richard Jomshof
SD Patik Jönsson
SD Mattias Karlsson
SD Martin Kinnunen
SD Julia Kronlid
SD Fredrik Lindahl
SD Linda Lindberg
SD Ulf Linholm
SD Angelica Lundberg
SD David Lång
SD Adam Marttinen
SD Thomas Morell
SD Mats Nordberg
SD Katja Nyberg

SD Mona Olin
SD Eric Palmqvist
SD David Perez
SD Daniel Persson
SD Magnus Persson
SD Charlotte Quensel
SD Anette Rangdal
SD Patrick Reslow
SD Michael Rubbestad
SD Oscar Sjöstedt
SD Jessika Stegrud
SD Robert Stenqvist
SD Carina Ståhl Herrstedt

SD Jimmy Ståhl
SD Johnny Svedin
SD Sven-Olof Sällström
SD Björn Söder
SD Per Söderlund
SD Victoria Tiblom
SD Björn Tidland
SD Beatrice Timgren
SD Henrik Vinge
SD Martin Westmont
SD Eric Westroth
SD Elsa Widding
SD Marcus Wiechel

SD Lars Wistedt
SD Leonid Yurkovskiy
SD Jimmy Åkesson
SD Sverigedemokraterna
M Fredrik Ahlstedt
M Emma Ahlström
Köster
M Ann-Sofie Alm
M Alexandra Anstrell
M Kristina Axén Olin
M Lars Beckman
M Sten Bergheden
M Jörgen Berglund
M Helena Bouveng
M Camilla Brunsberg
M Crister Carlsson
M Margareta Cederfelt
M Mikael Damsgaard
M Ida Drougge
M Lars Englund
M Karin Enström
M Jan Ericson
M Mats Green
M Gustaf Göthberg
M Ann-Charlotte
Hammar Johnsson
M Ulrika Heindorff

M Johanna Hornberger
M Johan Hultberg
M Marie-Louise Hänel
Sandström
M Malin Höglund
M Caroline Högström
M Kjell Jansson
M Lars Johnsson
M David Josefsson
M Ellen Juntti
M Arin Karapet
M Mattias Karlsson
M Fredrik Kärrholm
M Ann-Sofie Lifvenhage

M Merléne Lund
Kopparklint
M Josefine Malmqvist
M Noria Manouchi
M Louise Meijer
M Marie Nicholson
M Ulrik Nilsson
M Carl Nordblom
M Charlotte Nordström
M Susanne Nordström
M Peter Ollén
M Stefan Olsson

M Erik Ottoson
M Lars Püss
M Saila Quicklund
M Thomas Ragnarsson
M Johanna Rantsi
M Magnus Resare
M Adam Reuterskiöld
M Edward Riedl
M Jessica Rosencrantz
M Oliver Rosengren
M Anna af Sillén
M Jesper Skalberg
Karlsson
M Maria Stockhaus
M Helena Storckenfeldt
M Oskar Svärd
M Magdalena Thuresson

M Katarina Tolgfors
M Hans Wallmark
M John E Weinerhall
M Jennie Wernäng
M John Widergren
M Viktor Wärnick
M Boraina Åberg
M Moderaterna
M Ulf Kristersson

M Jessika Roswall
M Elisabeth Svantesson
M Niklas Wykman
M Pål Jonson
M Carl-Oskar Bohlin
M Gunnar Strömmer
M Maria Malmer
 Stenegard
M Parisa Liljestrand
M Anna Tenje
M Camilla Waltersson
 Grönvall
M Tobias Billström
M Johan Forssell