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Ideological crystallization: rethinking the alternative-mainstream binary in times of populist politics

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Abstract

This paper assesses if and how alternative news media manifest their counter-hegemonic potential within the current conjuncture of populist politics in Western liberal democracies. Based on the method of critical discourse analysis, it compares the ways in which the yellow vests movement is discursively (re)constructed by two Flemish legacy newspapers and five alternative news media. Analytically, it engages with an agonistic pluralist perspective. Findings show how both newspapers and alternative media reproduce the same discursive constructions that legitimize the yellow vests' socio-economic and political grievances. What distinguishes alternative from traditional media is not so much their counter-hegemonic potential but their ideological crystallization, as they reproduce only one discursive construction each. With legacy media now also operating as sites of contestation, this paper makes the importance of the role of political context all the clearer in the assessment of the counter-hegemonic potential of alternative news media.

Keywords: alternative news media; media pluralism; populist moment; yellow vests; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

Alternative media scholars have developed a large body of definitional work aimed at offering key benchmarks to assess the alternative character and added value of alternative media practices (Downing, 2001; Bailey et al., 2007). Next to challenging established journalistic formats and routines, and relying on innovative financing logics, the ability to oppose dominant discourses is a recurring criterion when mapping alternative news media's contribution to the journalistic field and public debate. As Holt et al. (2019) put it: "the alternative quality of any news medium is derived from claims to its counter-or complementary position to certain hegemony" (p. 864). Often, the aim to articulate a counter-discourse stems from an opposing stance towards legacy or mainstream media which are perceived as providers of hegemonic ideological frameworks (Atton, 2002). However, this paper refrains from accepting this monolithic categorization of mainstream media at face value, but instead calls for starting from the existing sociopolitical context when assessing the role of both alternative and mainstream media in Western democracies (Carpentier & Hajek, 2015).

This seems to be ever so urgent as the last decade has been marked by critical upheavals. Both on the Left and on the Right, multiple political forces and social movements (e.g. Me Too, Black Lives Matter, Youth for Climate, and the alt- and far-right movement) successfully reinvigorated forms of resistance to various socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural developments. According to Mouffe (2018), these movements anchor in what she calls the “populist moment”: a revival of political frontiers that mobilize around the subject of “the people” to generate collective action “capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust” (p. 11). As Mouffe argues, these forms of action act upon the post-political deadlock of the last few decades which impeded the imagination of and pluralist discussion on alternatives beyond established social structures and ways of life. A vivid example of such a collective action structured around the notion of “the people” is the yellow vests movement. On November 17th, 2018, about 280.000 people took to the streets across France wearing yellow high-visibility vests. Whereas initially a projected increase in fuel taxes by the French government was considered the motivating factor, in the following months the movement quickly grew into a worldwide phenomenon against social inequality and injustice, with people barricading highways and claiming city streets across the world (Jetten et al., 2020).

The aim of this paper is to assess the discursive roles of alternative and legacy media in the context of the populist moment. Specifically, it examines if and how alternative news media fulfill their alleged counter-hegemonic potential during times in which “the dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands” (Mouffe, 2018: 11). Through this study, we use the notions of both ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ as open-ended labels of inquiry, thereby foregrounding the contingent nature of their positions and of the theoretical perspectives through which they are studied. This paper presents the results of a critical discourse analysis that compares two Flemish legacy newspapers with five alternative news media in terms of how they discursively (re)construct the yellow vests movement. In doing so, we engage with the analytical framework of agonistic media pluralism (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020).

From post-politics to populist politics?

For decades, neoliberal globalization has been represented as the only viable and responsible direction in Western liberal democracies. Contestations from both the Right and the Left were disqualified as extreme, counterproductive, or outdated. Political theorists identified that period as an age of post-politics: an age in which democratic politics was generally reduced to the technocratic management of public affairs. The prevailing dominant status of this thesis, also referred to as “the end of ideology”, smothered any ideological conflict on opposing values and interests in favor of an allegedly natural social consensus (Mouffe, 2005; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). As such, real alternatives to a neoliberal form of globalization remained invisible or struggled to attain political legitimacy.

Today, such alternative choices and their corresponding political passions appear to have returned to the public agenda. According to Mouffe, Western-European democracies are currently witnessing a populist zeitgeist which is marked by “the expression of a variety of resistance to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony” (2018: 12). Mouffe states that these political frontiers revitalize “the agonistic

tension between the liberal and the democratic principles” that underlie liberal democracies (p. 16) by foregrounding long neglected debates on equality and popular sovereignty after decades of settling this tension in favor of liberty and free markets. This reinvigorated an abundance of political struggles over societal challenges, such as inequality, climate change, migration, racism/decolonization, patriarchy, and Covid-19.

When claiming that populism can foster the vital democratic tension between the principles of freedom and equality, Mouffe (2005) relies on an agonistic pluralist take on democracy. For a conflict or debate to be democratic, two conditions should be met: (i) a discursive struggle between opponents on certain values or ideas who, despite their oppositional relation, acknowledge each other as legitimate adversaries and (ii) a struggle in which political and ideological positions are at stake, as matters of social relations and power structures are inherently contingent, meaning that they can't be settled through merely rational or moral arguments (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020).

Alternative media and counter-hegemony

The current historical context, a public sphere being marked by multiple political forces promoting diverse aspirations on how to build an ideal society, raises questions about the study of alternative news media and their ambitioned counter-hegemonic position towards 'mainstream' mediated discourse. This section highlights three perspectives within alternative media scholarship which we argue correspond with the broader evolution from a post-political to a populist public sphere, each one of them shedding a different light upon (i) alternative media's relationship with mainstream media and (ii) the nature of their counter-hegemonic potential.

When examining early scholarly work on alternative media, a clear oppositional alternative-mainstream dynamic surfaces. At the core of this dichotomy, we find epistemological dissatisfaction on the side of alternative news media with the way journalism is conceived and practiced by established news media. Mainstream media are refuted for their general aim to serve as “general interest intermediaries” (Dahlberg, 2005: 840), as this self-proclaimed function conceals its rooting in dominant understandings of meaning and representation, and as such only reinforces unequal power relations. As a result, the core discursive functions ascribed to alternative media are (i) “to reveal the structuredness of media discourse” (Atton, 2015: 2) and (ii) “to express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing, 2001: v). Within this early alternative media perspective, there is a strong tradition to commit to an emancipatory-democratic articulation of these alternative visions, aimed at enhancing social justice and countering capitalism (see Fuchs, 2010; Holt, 2019; Rae, 2020). This perspective not only makes a distinction between the mainstream media as powerful distributors of dominant discourse and alternative media as progressive sites of resistance - aimed at giving voice to “the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited” (Fuchs, 2010: 170), but also naturalizes and objectifies this distinction.

Over the years, the alternative-mainstream dichotomy has been the subject of a rigorous amount of critique. One of the main points of critique is that it does not account for the postmodern and hybrid features of the current media environment (Deuze & Witschge, 2017; Carlson & Lewis,

2015). Treating alternative and mainstream entities as exclusive monolithic categories would deny the internal complexity of and crossovers between them (Atton, 2013; Hajek & Carpentier, 2015). Instead of starting from a binary perspective, scholars introduced the notion of a continuum in which several positions of alternativeness can be examined (Harcup, 2005; Hackett & Gurleyen, 2015). In order to define media initiatives as alternative, the continuum approach often relies on proclaimed positions of being a “self-perceived corrective”, regardless of alternative media’s actual ideological orientations (Holt, Figenschou & Frischlich, 2019: 3). Such an approach accounts for a second critique on the alternative-mainstream dichotomy, namely its equalizing of alternative media’s ideological positions to a left-wing emancipatory agenda. Various scholars have called for the inclusion of right-wing alternative media because of their influential and interdependent relationships with successful right-wing parties, and the increasing professionalism of their news practices (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haller, Holt & de La Brosse, 2019). By using a non-normative definition, the right-wing media ecology can be integrated into alternative media research designs. However, by merely relying on media’s self-perception of their alternative status and accompanying counter-positions, criteria for assessing their counter-hegemonic potential are left indeterminate. To assess the counter-hegemonic nature of their positions, and thus to account for unequal (political and financial) structures of power within the media system, the continuum-approach would benefit from relational/contextual research.

This brings us to the third perspective: a politics-centred approach to alternative news media. Fenton (2016) illustrates the main principle of this perspective in her call for centring questions of power when studying alternative media in order “to circumvent this obsession with the definitional and avoid getting lost in its descriptive mire” (p. 10). Fenton (2016) asserts that only through illuminating logics of power within a particular societal context, we can assess whether and how alternative media address “imbalances of power and social, economic and cultural inequalities” (p. 11). Such an approach can be found in the work of Rae (2020) on hyperpartisan media. Rae (2020) closely examines the current conjuncture of populist politics in Western liberal democracies in order to understand and assess the rise of alt-right and alt-left news websites. In doing so, Rae explicitly refrains from accepting their self-definitions of being alternative media as it would dismiss the media power these new players have obtained through extensive social, economic, and cultural capital. Here, a resignification of alternative media occurs in which some media positioning themselves as marginalised or underrepresented are simultaneously working *within* established societal power structures through the support of (far) right political parties and corporate capital (ie ‘hyperpartisan media’). In a similar vein, Phelan (2021) highlights the resignification of critique or counter-discourses: “Critiquing the complex entity called “the media” has never been as straightforward as it might seem, but the ideological and political underpinnings of media and journalistic criticism are now wildly heterogeneous.” (Phelan, 2021). In the current political moment, critique on traditional media and journalism is extensively appropriated by the far-right. Consequently, the practice of deconstructing dominant media discourses, an ascribed core function of alternative media, often takes a reactionary form. Thus, whereas the continuum-perspective allows for a non-normative inclusion of hybrid media practices, the politics-centred perspective underlines the complexities

of assessing the counter-hegemonic nature of these practices due to shifting power relations in current Western liberal democracies.

Case selection and Analytical Approach

This article examines the counter-hegemonic potential of alternative news media in the debate on the yellow vests movement within the context of the populist moment. In terms of research method, this paper relies on critical discourse analysis. CDA is used as it accounts for the dialectic relationship between discourse and specific social, political, and historical contexts. By empirically analyzing the situational use of discourse, CDA aims to evaluate “which social agents are more capable than others to create new articulations and why” (Montesano Montessori, 2011: 5, 6). As such, critical discourse analysis adequately suits the paper’s case and time-specific focus on alternative and legacy news media’s (counter-)hegemonic roles. An agonistic media pluralism perspective (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020) was used to inform the CDA’s analytical categories. This perspective enables examining the extent to which news media promote and facilitate “public scrutiny, discussion, and reflection about (alternatives to) established societal structures and ways of life” (p. X). In doing so, it makes an analytical distinction between the scope and form of media discourse. *Scope* refers to which actors (don’t) get to define the debate in terms of ideological motives (i.e. problem definitions and policy responses). *Form* refers to how these actors and ideological motives are represented through linguistic and discursive strategies. In terms of form, special attention is rewarded to how particular discursive strategies either facilitate or impede respectful ideological contestation. In this regard, three discursive strategies serve as main empirical tools: positioning (e.g. indicates which arguments are preferable over others), de/legitimizing (e.g. sets the borders of the discursive space in which a debate can take place), and de/naturalizing (e.g. defines whether a debate must take place).

Finally, through distinguishing patterns in scope and form, we can evaluate if and how news media narrow or foster pluralistic debate and, as such, invigorate political struggles over societal challenges (Raeijmaekers, 2018). In this regard, we can delineate three outcomes: (i) exclusion, which refers to the privileging of “established actors and preferences, which are presented in a depoliticized way as the only rational, moral, or natural ones”, (ii) exposure, which means “recognizing the existing limitations in scope and form, by identifying particular actors and demands as privileged, and/or discursive strategies as depoliticizing” and (iii) expansion, which entails “introducing alternative actors and demands” (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020, p. 1600). The mechanisms of exposure and expansion clearly resonate with the traditional perspective on alternative news media’s core functions, (i) “to reveal the structuredness of media discourse” (Atton, 2015: 2) and (ii) “to express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing, 2001). However, in the current conjuncture, the presence and nature of these mechanisms need to be re-evaluated.

To assess the (i) dynamic between legacy and alternative discursive constructions and (ii) the extent to which alternative news media provide different problem definitions and (policy) solutions, we first examine the discourses in two legacy newspapers: *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* - the quality up-market newspaper of each of the two remaining media groups in Flanders (Dutch-speaking region of Belgium), *DPG Media* and *Mediahuis*. Next, we delineate

the contributions of a heterogeneous set of Flemish alternative news media, being *Apache*, *DeWereldMorgen*, *Doorbraak*, *MO* and *SCEPTR*. Presenting itself as a platform for investigative journalism, *Apache* aims to publish impactful research which, by revealing wrongdoings of political and business elites, ideally enables “mentality shifts and/or tangible changes” within society (Apache, n.d.). *DeWereldMorgen*’s goal is to give voice to non-governmental organizations, social movements, and trade unions, as well as being guided by an anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-sexist and decolonizing editorial agenda (DeWereldMorgen, n.d.). *Doorbraak* is a product of the Flemish Movement, the primary voice of right-wing nationalism in Flanders. Its alleged aim is to diversify the spectrum of opinion journalism and in doing so disrupt a culture of “political correctness” (Doorbraak, n.d.). *MO*’s stated aim is to invigorate a global point of view. This translates into their issue selection, focusing on development, the South, (alter)globalization, and sustainability. In addition, *MO*’s ambition is to offer a form of explanatory or slow journalism: shedding light upon “the cohesion of evolutions and realities from afar and nearby” (MO, 2019). *SCEPTR* profiles itself as a right-wing, conservative alternative to traditional and other alternative media. It was founded by investors closely related to radical-right and Flemish-nationalist weekly magazine *’t Pallieterke* (Van Der Mensbrughe, 2016).

The corpus consists of each article with the yellow vests movement as its main topic, published during the period between the first day of protest (November 17 2018) and the seventh mass demonstration (December 29 2018). This timespan allowed us to investigate mediated discourse on both the sudden rise of the movement and its development in the consecutive two months. The selected articles cover a minimum word count of 150 words. We collected the articles of *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* using the *GoPress Academic* database, and in the case of the startups we relied on their own online archives. Key words were ‘gele hesjes’, ‘gele vestjes’ and ‘gilets jaunes’ (‘yellow vests’ in Dutch and French, respectively). The following article genres were included in the data selection: editorials, news articles, interviews and opinion pieces/columns. In total, the data collection generated 153 articles.

	Editorials	News articles	Interviews	Op-eds/columns	Total
De Standaard	3	38	/	22	63
De Morgen	2	20	/	11	33
DeWereldMorgen	/	6	1	7	14
MO	/	1	1	2	4
Apache	/	3	1	3	7
Doorbraak	/	/	/	10	10
SCEPTR	/	14	/	/	14
Total					153

Table 1 Amount of selected articles per news outlet and article genre

Analysis

In this section, we report on the results of the critical discourse analysis. First, we delineate how the newspapers discursively (re)construct the debate on the yellow vests movement. In doing so, we first discuss how their discourses are clearly embedded within the populist moment. Second, we present the articulation of three discursive constructions through which we find claims about the character and value of the yellow vests. Lastly, we assess to which extent the discourses of the alternative news media offer a (counter-hegemonic) alternative to those offered by the two legacy newspapers.

Legacy newspapers: a populist moment

In terms of scope and form, a recurring pattern was found in the newspapers' news articles, editorials and op-eds which we refer to as the populist moment. Both the yellow vests and other social actors within the articles, as well as journalists and guest contributors themselves, foreground and discuss equality and popular sovereignty, either as essential analytical points of reference or as key objects of struggle (i.e. scope). Both notions are entangled in what we can refer to as a 'populist logic': a discursive strategy of building a political frontier through which 'the underdog' is mobilized against 'those in power' (i.e. form) (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). This populist logic is both central within the discursive interventions of the yellow vests (and specific journalists) and within the interpretations of these discursive interventions found in news articles and op-eds.

Evidence of this discursive convergence takes place on several levels. When looking at their news sections, the newspapers offer an extensive platform for the yellow vests and their socio-economic grievances through lengthy reportages ^(1; 3; 7; 9; 15; 26). They are provided the space to explain how their discontent with a projected raise in fuel taxes stems from a general inability to uphold a decent level of socio-economic security at the end of the month, thereby framing their grievances as a call for socio-economic dignity: "the people are hungry" ⁽⁷⁰⁾, "we want to live, not just survive" ⁽⁷⁰⁾, "we are treated like cash cows" ^(63, see also 65). At the same time, they point out the support of French and Belgian governments for corporations and "the rich" ^(63, 76, 83). Journalists *emphasize* these concerns by shedding light upon the way social inequality is amplified geographically, thereby pointing towards the desolation, unemployment, loss of local services, and (mobile) isolation of the yellow vests' home base: small to medium-sized large villages and cities in peripheral regions of France and Wallonia (French-region of Belgium). An increase in fuel tax thus disproportionately affects those who are highly dependent on cars, as public transportation is not available or insufficiently developed for daily commutes to work. ^(4, 5, 6, 7). In other news articles, journalists discuss the yellow vests' protest against social inequality and fiscal injustice by providing scientific evidence over the decreasing purchasing power which disproportionately affects lower class people ^(80, 89, 91).

In the reportages on the yellow vests, it becomes clear that the protesters blame the political elite (i.e. the French and Belgian government) for being ignorant and indifferent towards their socio-economic needs and claims ^(1, 9, 31, 70, 79). According to casual "spokesperson" Jacline Mouraud, this is why the yellow vests are the movement of "those who are forgotten" ⁽¹⁾. Journalists underline this resentment in news articles by critically assessing the way French president Macron distances himself as a "king" from "his subordinates" ⁽³⁶⁾ and the way he

dismantled democratic institutions such as political parties and labor unions ⁽⁸⁰⁾. The issue of political indifference also finds its way into the editorial section. *De Standaard*'s senior political writer Bart Brinckman explicitly calls upon Belgian politicians to listen to and capture the concerns of "those who feel abandoned" ⁽¹²⁾. Last, it's present in the op-ed section where scholar Martin Schoups refers to the yellow vests as those who lost any other means than to protest in order to raise their voice because of the "dismantling" of collective assemblages such as "unions, tenants associations or health insurance funds" ⁽²⁸⁾.

In several reportages, the yellow vests identify as being "the common people" ⁽¹⁵⁾, "average Belgians" ⁽³⁾, "normal citizens" ⁽¹⁶⁾ "a revolution of the ordinary man" ⁽⁷⁰⁾, thereby explicitly distancing themselves from institutions such as political parties and labor unions ^(1, 3, 7, 9). This populist logic is further reproduced by journalists who characterize the yellow vests as being "the French anger" ⁽¹⁾, "a revolution" ⁽⁷⁰⁾ of "ordinary French" ⁽⁴⁾ fighting against "the elite" ⁽⁶³⁾.

Legacy newspapers: a variety of resistance

Newspaper discourse on the yellow vests movement thus constructs social inequality and political indifference/isolation as the main subjects of dissatisfaction and contestation rooted in a populist us-them logic. The question is now how these aspects are further interpreted, explained, and evaluated, and what ways forward are offered. In that respect, the analysis reveals three discursive constructions, i.e. opposing formations of ideological problem definitions and demands, built upon different social identities and constructed through specific discursive strategies. Two of these discursive constructions share a mutual understanding of the event at stake and similarly expose voices that take a stance against the politico-economic status quo. However, they hold different actors and ideological visions accountable for this status quo and therefore strongly differ in the way they comprehend and/or promote alternative visions of society. Furthermore, we also found evidence of a third discursive construction: a conserving stance not aimed at contesting the status quo but at positioning it as the inevitable way forward.

Neoliberalism under siege

Relying on the discursive strategies of denaturalization and (de)legitimization, a first discursive construction interprets the demands of the yellow vests as an appeal to fundamentally transform the socio-economic system by exposing globalization's underlying neoliberal logics for their destabilizing effects on social inequality and democracy. Social and climate justice are seen as two sides of the same coin (i.e. increasing socio-economic dualization) and the sense of political unresponsiveness towards these issues is traced back to the naturalized hegemony of neoliberalism that favors the interests of the haves over the have-nots. The oppositional nature of this discursive construction is thus directed towards a politico-economic project.

This interpretation of the yellow vests as a phenomenon is rather limited in the news sections of the newspapers. One article covers the new program of European social democrats in which they construct the yellow vests as victims of social inequality and in which they propose an alternative to neoliberalism and its damaging effects on "economic, social, climate, and political crises" ⁽²²⁾. Whereas news articles give a limited *platform*, we found a large number of explicit *stances* in the op-ed section and editorials. For example, editor in chief of *De Morgen* Bart Eeckhout not only describes the presumed effects of globalization but also attributes a

hegemonic status to it: “Truth is that all governments from centre-left to centre-right conduct a policy that more or less stays between the same range. It’s a policy that protects the middle class but becomes more painful as you descend the ladder.”^(90, see also 71). In the same vein, senior writer Marc Reynebeau⁽³⁸⁾ and publicist Tinneke Beeckman⁽⁴⁰⁾ rely on a discursive strategy of denaturalization when they expose the hegemonic nature of globalization’s “neoliberal” and “technocratic” incarnation. They criticize how it is generally presented as a natural given instead of a political choice, thereby stigmatizing any opposition as violent radicalism and excluding it from democratic debate. The resentment about political unresponsiveness is thus traced back to the declining democratic foundations underlying this neoliberal project^(see also 21). This project, established by a so-called “realistic” way of doing politics^(92, 88), is perceived to be challenged by the yellow vests.

Ethnocultural nationalism

Like ‘Neoliberalism under siege’, a second discursive construction also embeds social inequality in a broader phenomenon of socio-economic dualization. Relying on discursive strategies of delegitimization, it contests the project of globalization and its inability to provide “economic shelter” for the lower and middle classes. However, this discursive construction adds a socio-cultural dimension when contesting the dualizing effects of globalization, thereby reconstructing the yellow vests as an object of ethnocultural alienation and legitimizing their demands as a rightful call to restore national sovereignty. This feeling of alienation is ratified by morally delegitimizing the political elite’s cosmopolitical disdain towards the socio-cultural concerns of the lower and middle classes (i.e. security, economic safety and cultural warmth). They are held accountable for prioritizing “open borders” migration policies and free trade treaties above the concerns of national citizens. Thus, this discursive construction makes a clear separation between the yellow vests as “our own people” whose socio-cultural values, legitimized through nationalist grounds, need to be restored and defended on the one hand, and all those who are held accountable for their loss of identity and respect, referred to as “the elite”, on the other.

Evidence of this discursive construction was only found in two columns, one in each newspaper. In her column ‘A cry for respect’, former journalist Mia Doornaert interprets the yellow vests as the product of a cultural divide between the winners and losers of globalization, in which the latter have disconnected, in both socio-economic and socio-cultural terms, from a world that looks down at them for being “xenophobes, (...) racists, (...) and rednecks (...) who are nostalgic for a nation that offers security, economic safety and cultural warmth (...) from a bygone era”⁽⁵³⁾. Likewise, Joachim Pohlman, then spokesman of the nationalist conservative party New Flemish Alliance, delegitimizes the “experts, pundits, fact-checkers, journalists, sociologists [from] a leftist-liberal elite” on moral grounds for their disdain and moral superiority that brings middle class people to angrily put on a yellow vest and stand up for traditional values such as “stability, certainty and identity”⁽⁶⁸⁾. These weekly columns are typically authored by voices who are hired by newspapers because they are perceived to offer a different, often transgressive, perspective on events that appeals to specific groups of readers. In this respect, these two columns clearly succeed in signaling the existence of ‘alternative’ ideas and values in the public sphere, which however are not represented in any other article genre of both newspapers.

The end of the month versus the end of the world

The third discursive construction is found to start from a problem definition in which a necessary and efficacious climate policy is at stake, and its development and implementation is put forward as part of a logical, inevitable, and natural process that serves the common interest. Relying on the discursive strategy of positioning, it interprets those who go against such a policy as ignorant towards the urgency and efficacy of the climate measures at stake, thereby underlining the necessity of a green transition. Within this discursive construction, two perspectives towards the yellow vests and their claims are articulated. The first perspective hears and acknowledges the ‘social alarm’ of the yellow vests but prefers to prioritize actions to answer the ‘environmental alarm’. Measures to restore social equality should thus always fit within the project of this unavoidable green transition. The second perspective minimizes and/or questions the validity of the yellow vests and their claims. It considers their assessment of Belgian and French socio-economic and climate policies as based upon false assumptions. As such, this discursive construction relies on naturalization, as its stances are constructed as outcomes of merely rational reasoning and not as ideological claims.

The first perspective is salient in the news articles that cover the discourse Macron uses when defending his climate policy. While he also openly acknowledges and legitimizes the socio-economic grievances of the yellow vests ^(4, 23, 86), he simultaneously positions these grievances in a context of ecological crisis. Macron thus makes a distinction between ‘the end of the month’ and ‘the end of the world’ and, especially during the first weeks of the protests, he prioritizes his policy measures to tackle the latter because of its more urgent and precarious nature ^(2; 23; 44, 63, 64). A similar approach was found in two opinion pieces. Here, economist De Grauwe makes an alarming plea for high fuel taxes by pointing towards the environmental catastrophes that will be ahead of us when unavoidable drastic measures are obstructed. In addition, socio-economic scientist Ive Marx acknowledges the socio-economic grievances of the yellow vests by stressing the importance of social compensations in excise duty increases, while simultaneously stating that people will “unavoidably” face financial implications of efficacious climate policies ⁽⁵⁶⁾. Marx also adheres to the second perspective: minimizing the yellow vests’ “middle class” concerns by comparing them to those who really have the right to complain (i.e. those who experience “real poverty”) ⁽⁸³⁾. The second perspective was also found in the editorial ‘Perception and reality’ ⁽¹⁹⁾ by senior economics writer Ruben Mooijman. Mooijman reduces the rise of the yellow vests movement to a communication problem by contrasting the latter’s perception of (socio-economic) injustice with the reality of a Belgian government that has already done substantial efforts for people with lower incomes ^(see also 74).

Alternative news media

In this section, we delineate if and how alternative news media’s self-defined position of being a corrective for traditional news coverage is reflected in the way they discursively address the protests. We discover that article genres play a decisive role in the way the startups represent and discuss the yellow vests, either through elaborating the scope (i.e. different issue-specific angles and sources) or through antagonizing the form (i.e. moralization, stigmatization, weaponization) of the discursive constructions formulated by the newspapers. When looking at

the dynamic between article genres and the discursive constructions, three categorizations can be made.

Apache & MO

First, *Apache* and *MO* share a similar approach with the newspapers when it comes to the relationship between discursive choices and article genres. They both emphasize the issue of social inequality in their news articles, but in such a way that different issue-specific angles and sources are foregrounded. In addition, like most op-eds in the newspapers, *MO*'s opinion pieces foreground 'Neoliberalism under siege'.

Although *Apache* doesn't explicitly expose or critique the project of neoliberal globalization, the recurring issue in its reporting is the question of how to tackle the reinforcement of social inequality by particular climate and socio-economic measures. This is evident from the topics both *Apache*'s editors and guest authors foreground, such as the redistribution effects of a kilometer toll ⁽¹¹⁷⁾, the increased level of European purchasing power parity ⁽¹²⁰⁾, the public support for a European allowance system ⁽¹²¹⁾, and a plea for a participatory and inclusive spatial planning policy ⁽¹¹⁹⁾. Apart from two opinionated guest contributions, *Apache* relies primarily on scientific studies to address these topics. These insights are displayed extensively, accompanied with a minimum of reflective notes by the editors. Such a format seems to adhere to a logic of 'letting the (scientific) facts speak for themselves', attributing a great deal of epistemic credibility to the scientific standpoint. This form of evidence-based journalism can be referred to as investigative reporting, clearly conducted through a progressive editorial philosophy aimed at "making values such as solidarity and ecological sustainability explicit" (Apache, n.d.).

While *MO* equally exposes social inequality, it does so by foregrounding the entanglement of climate and social inequality with a prominent focus on the former. This can be explained by the author of both a news and interview article, climate correspondent Tine Hens. Hens interprets the concerns of the yellow vests as a call for "climate justice", which she defines as "a more equitable distribution of the burdens and benefits of the transition to a more ecological society" ⁽¹²³⁾. As such, by opposing the alleged opposition between the concerns of the yellow vests and the implementation of climate policies, she explicitly contests the discursive construction of 'End of the month versus end of the world'. Furthermore, Hens addresses this call for climate justice by providing alternative policy solutions (e.g. investing in public transport) ^(123,126). The two opinion pieces clearly adhere to the discursive construction 'Neoliberalism under siege', notwithstanding they add two different dimensions to it in comparison to how it was presented in the newspapers. First, they politicize the notion of violence (i.e. structural violence enacted by neoliberal policies, rather than any violence by the protests themselves). Second, they embed the protest of the yellow vests in a framework of "class struggle", thereby intensifying the populist us-them dimension (e.g. labor versus capital) ^(124, 125).

DeWereldMorgen and Doorbraak

Second, the articles of *DeWereldMorgen* and *Doorbraak* clearly promote one discursive construction each, respectively 'Neoliberalism under siege' and 'Ethnocultural nationalism'.

This is plausible for *Doorbraak* as it only publishes op-eds. In contrast, *DeWereldMorgen* does publish articles with a ‘news’ tag but without generating discursive distinctions across article genres.

DeWereldMorgen’s discourse on the yellow vests clearly resonates with ‘Neoliberalism under siege’. Both editors and guest contributors expose the values, interests, and assumptions underlying the existent politico-economic model of neoliberal capitalism together with its deficits on a socio-economic, democratic, and environmental level ^(96, 99, 100, 102). They also highlight alternative politico-economic models about “a government that regulates and invests” and exercises “democratic control over common goods” ^(97, 101, 106). In addition to aligning with the way newspapers cover the discursive construction of ‘Neoliberalism under siege’, *DeWereldMorgen* adds four distinctive elements in its analysis and representation of the yellow vests. Two of them correspond with those salient in *MO*’s op-ed section. First, it equally strengthens the populist logic by relying on the notion of “class struggle” ^(94, 95, 97, 100). Second, both editors and guest contributors similarly evoke the systemic dimension of violence: next to violence as a physical or material expression of outrage by individuals, there is violence on a structural level as an effect of “draconic social, fiscal and economic politics” ^(94, see also 100, 102). In that respect, a rising fuel tax further magnifies the pain ⁽⁹⁵⁾. In addition, editors Thomas Decreus and Christophe Callewaert critique how the yellow vests are faced with “harsh repressive” police interventions ^(98, 103, 104), a perspective that was left untouched in both the newspapers and the other startups. Third, similar to voices in the newspapers, editor-in-chief Thomas Decreus emphasizes how the hegemonic status of the current neoliberal politico-economic system produces a feeling of political isolation, with the yellow vests’ protests being the only democratic option left for lower and middle class to express their concerns. However, in one analysis, he targets president Macron as a catalysator for this feeling of helplessness, thereby morally delegitimizing him for his “arrogant”, “paternalistic”, and “megalomaniac” attitude towards “the French” ⁽⁹⁸⁾. As such, Decreus’ analysis takes a firm anti-elite stance. Lastly, although to a limited extent, we find expressions of media critique by both editor Thomas Decreus and French author Edouard Louis whose commentary was translated and published by *DeWereldMorgen*. They hold “the media” accountable for falsely stigmatizing the yellow vests as “extreme right”. According to Decreus, such a frame only contributes to discrediting the movement while Louis points to the ways in which such a frame impedes a proper acknowledgment and discussion of lower middle class’ socio-economic grievances ^(98, 100).

The discursive construction central in *Doorbraak* is ‘Ethnocultural nationalism’. Like the op-eds of Doornaert (*De Standaard*) and Pohlman (*De Morgen*), the event of the yellow vests movement is regarded as a “revolt of the people” against the socio-economic and socio-cultural effects of globalisation (i.e. loss of sovereignty, immigration, multiculturalism and inequitable green policy). However, *Doorbraak* furthers the oppositional narrative of this discursive construction salient in the newspapers’ columns. In doing so, although serving very different problem definitions, it shares two similar discursive traits with *DeWereldMorgen*. The first similarity takes place in the characterization of Emmanuel Macron. Leading author Alexander Van der Meer consistently builds an oppositional narrative in which he frames the yellow vests as victims of the French government. The leader of this government, President Emmanuel Macron, is morally delegitimized as an “unscrupulous globalist” and “elitist autocrat” ^(108, see also 113). A second similarity connects to the act of expressing media critique, again, serving a very

different problem definition than the one salient in *DeWereldMorgen*. Both Alexander Van der Meer and Jan Van Peteghem hold “media” accountable for purposely misrepresenting the yellow vests in terms of underestimated turn-out numbers ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ and incorrect framing of the riots coming from “extreme right” thug ^(111, 113, 115). The latter is countered by Van der Meer who relocates the origins of the violence and thefts to the “extreme left” and, in a stigmatizing manner, to “tinted herds of the suburbs” ^(111, 115). Van der Meer goes one step further by asserting that these misrepresentations are part of a plan set up by both French media and the government to discredit “the real demonstrators” ⁽¹¹⁵⁾. He thereby refers to “images” which would illustrate that the riots were staged. A hyperlink to these images was not provided. Next to anti-left, anti-migration, and anti-media discourses, *Doorbraak* enhances the usage of anti-climate discourse. Three authors interpret “climate change” and “climate ambitions”, performed through a so-called “climate religion”, as another way of the leftist elite to exploit lower class people ^(108, 109, 110). Next to these general findings, we do find slightly different, although important, takes regarding tone and narrative in the other op-eds. Where an oppositional narrative is salient throughout all *Doorbraak*’s articles, guest writer Sid Lukkassen sharpens this us-them dimension by turning it into a war narrative, thereby explicitly calling on the “combative lower-class” to start a “revolution” to safeguard “Western culture”. According to Lukkassen, the preservation of “a free and authentic Europe” is prevented by a “collusion of both left and right forces” with “the mainstream media” as “collaborators”. This war narrative is further weaponized when Lukkassen presents the police with two options: “to be a lifeguard for the elite or to battle along with the people against the elite” ⁽¹¹⁰⁾. According to Lukkassen, choosing the latter is evident as the only alternative is “having to sweep all the problem cases pumped inside by the establishment on a daily basis”. The alternative of “Western culture” is equalized to a further “Islamization” of Western societies, fostered by migration. Similar claims are found in the article “The yellow vests are our deplorables”, in which guest writer Van Wijk refers to “intrusive foreign cultures” who take away socio-economic opportunities and socio-cultural safety from “hardworking men and women” ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾. Thus, in comparison to the articulations in the columns by Pohlman and Doornaert, we found ‘Ethnocultural nationalism’ being expanded by *Doorbraak*’s authors on the level of scope (i.e. anti-migration, anti-Islam, anti-elite, anti-media) and form (i.e. stigmatization and weaponization).

SCEPTR

The last classification entails *SCEPTR*. Here, we find a strikingly different discursive approach, connecting to a recurring phenomenon in media representations of social movements: the protest paradigm. This paradigm, rooted in social movement literature, explains how the objectivity norm in journalism generally results in an overall negative representation of protest movements, in terms of predominantly assigning attention to protest form over content and relying on elite sources (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). *SCEPTR* relies predominantly on the genre of short news reports with Belgian/French government officials and police officers as prominent framing sources. The reporting mainly highlights manifest violence and traffic obstructions by protesters. However, while this main focus limits further discussion on protest content, it doesn’t lead to the frame of the yellow vests as violent and harmful protesters as both Belgian and French government officials make a clear distinction in these articles between ‘legitimate protesters’ and ‘thugs’.

Nevertheless, while the discussion on the underlying concerns and demands of the yellow vests is limited, it's not absent. In that regard, we found two unique features within *SCEPTR*'s coverage. The first one exists at the level of sources where *SCEPTR*, contrary to the newspapers and other startups, assigns a distinct amount of framing power to French politicians of oppositional parties: Marine Le Pen from the far-right party Rassemblement National, formerly the Front National ^(129, 133, 135, 137), Jean-Luc Mélenchon from socialist party La France Insoumise ^(129, 125, 137). Both Le Pen and Mélenchon express great sympathy towards the yellow vests' socio-economic demands. In addition, they both accuse Macron and his entourage of purposely escalating the protests in order to discredit the yellow vests ⁽¹³⁵⁾. A second distinctive feature was found in the article "Wallonia: French protest against high fuel taxes finds resonance". Here, then editor-in-chief Jonas Naeyaert articulates a right-libertarian discourse when he relies on a discursive strategy of popularization ("resonance", "momentum") to legitimize the protests as a form of tax resistance in the face of a self-serving government ⁽¹²⁹⁾. The frame of the yellow vests targeting French and Belgian *fiscal* policies is reaffirmed in four other articles ^(130, 135, 137, 140).

Conclusion

So, how do we find these self-proclaimed correctives of legacy media manifest their counter-hegemonic potential in the context of populist politics? First, our analysis highlights the contingency of the alternative-mainstream binary (Hájek & Carpentier, 2015). Significant resemblances were found between the ways legacy and alternative media discursively (re)construct the yellow vests movement. Both the legacy newspapers and most of the alternative news media clearly express and give a platform to various grievances and concerns about social inequality and political isolation, mobilized through a populist us-them discourse. Moreover, they both enable a *pluralistic* debate by predominantly delineating and exposing the contingency of a society that favors specific interests at the cost of others. Thus, a monolithic characterization of legacy media as dominant suppliers of post-political discourse and vice versa is clearly no longer tenable in the current conjuncture as ideological contestation now seems to have taken a crucial position within legacy news discourses. Hence, in order to assess the role of alternative news media, our analysis points to the need for a continuum and context-reflective approach as political and cultural configurations reshape alternative-mainstream dynamics (Holt et al., 2019; Rae, 2020).

Perhaps most importantly, the findings put forward the concept of ideological crystallization: next to addressing the same perspectives as the legacy newspapers, alternative news media are found to advocate only one discursive construction each. This ideological crystallization puts their identity as "self-perceived corrective" in a nuanced perspective (Holt et al., 2019: 13), as they are not fundamentally contesting traditional representations of the yellow vests leading to *exposure* or "openings and movements in dominant discourse" (Dalhberg, 2007: 836). However, this ideological crystallization simultaneously provides more in-depth elaboration on the yellow vests and their grieves and consequently enables *expansion*. In other words, it facilitates a broader debate in terms of scope (i.e. actors, problem definitions, and policy responses). In addition, this ideological crystallization fits the alternative news media's extensive reliance on openly subjective article genres which fosters a more advocative take on form (i.e. linguistic and discursive strategies). In most cases such an approach highlights the

political struggles at stake, thereby enabling a pluralistic debate. Nonetheless, the analysis also showed evidence of antagonistic or polarizing discourse (i.e. stigmatization, weaponization), especially in the case of the right-wing opinion website *Doorbraak*.

Whilst we foreground the importance of context-reflective research, several limitations of this case study must be acknowledged. First, no distinctions were made between articles related to either the French or Belgian context. This limits our understanding of the national-specific characteristics of the yellow vests movement. However, during the protests, both countries were governed by liberal parties (i.e. 'Mouvement Réformateur' and 'La République En Marche!') which we consider a significant denominator. Lastly, in terms of data selection, the analysis only focuses on the yellow vests' first month of protesting, which may have contributed to the discursive convergence among the media outlets. A longitudinal study of the protests would possibly lead to larger differences with regard to (de)legitimizing the movement.

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