A User Research on Alternative Media

By Deniz Demir[*]

This research aims to contribute to the debate on the concept of alternative media by trying to understand what this term means for its users. The responses that emerged in the focus group discussions revealed which values and which characteristics are important in the eyes of the participants to define a media as "alternative". The interviews were analyzed with the grounded theory method and the themes and sub-themes were determined with the open coding method. The first point to note is that interviewees consider a wide range of media as alternative. These include a channel affiliated with a large conglomerate; news broadcasters of different countries; some small-scale media organizations, journalists broadcasting through social media platforms, opposition and pro-government publishers coexist. In the study, it was determined that the alternative media users of the focus groups attach more importance to the content than the formal features such as being non-commercial.

Keywords: alternative media, mainstream media, user research, journalism, focus group

Introduction

This study contributes to the debate on the concept of alternative media, by trying to understand what this term means for its users. Focus group discussions with journalism students who are also alternative media users disclosed which principles and features are indispensable for the participants to describe a media as alternative. Marmara University Journalism Department students were chosen as the sample of the study. The first point to note is that interviewees consider a wide range of media as alternative. Among them, there are channels like Fox TV, which is actually affiliated with a large holding; news channels of different countries such as BBC Turkish, Deutsche Welle Turkish and Sputnik Turkey; and also small-scale organizations such as Onedio.com, 140journos and independent journalists broadcasting on YouTube.

Although the majority of interviewees criticize the mainstream media for its links to capital and the government, and say that alternative media should definitely act with a different motive, they still consider a commercial establishment such as Fox TV as an alternative media. Of course, this situation is not independent of Turkey's political atmosphere. This research found that alternative media users attach more importance to critical content, like publications addressing issues that the mainstream media ignores, and diverse voices, than to structural features like being non-commercial and acting with non-profit purposes. This paper, first of all, discusses different definitions of alternative media by researchers working in this

[*]Research Assistant, Faculty of Communication, Marmara University, Turkey.

field. It then reviews the alternative media and user research literature. Finally, the paper presents the research focusing on what alternative media means to its users, including methods and findings.

Defining Alternative Media

Alternative media has always been a difficult concept to define for researchers working on the subject. Looking at discussions about this concept, researchers mostly focus on specifying which feature of alternative media makes it "alternative". For example, Downing (2001) defines alternative media as "radical media" and emphasizes its connection with social movements. Rodriguez (2001) claims that the element that renders alternative media alternative is the participation of ordinary citizens in the news production process, defining it as a kind of citizen's media. According to Waltz (2005), alternative media is an activist media. Atton (2002) argues that alternative media should be autonomous, horizontally organized and open to participation. Christian Fuchs (2010) argues that the content of alternative media should create an alternative to existing content, but shouldn't be necessarily alternative in terms of form.

A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America by Armstrong (1981) is one of the first academic works on alternative media. In this work, Armstrong links alternative media with social movements. He argues that the underground press, which diversified and increased in number with the rise of social movements, was the precursor of alternative media. Following Armstrong, Downing, in his famous work Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication, examines the relationship between alternative media and social movements and infers that social movements can be created or kept alive by alternative media. When social movements fade, alternative media becomes a less used medium (Downing, 1984).

One of the first attempts to define alternative media was carried out by a British research group called Comedia. According to their definition, which positions alternative media as the exact opposite of mainstream media, alternative media should be against the established order and the capitalist system, should be closed to all mainstream interpretations and should not be traditional in terms of form (Comedia, 1984). Subsequent authors did not find this early definition satisfactory and especially the positioning of alternative media as the exact opposite of mainstream media was criticized. Today, many researchers consider alternative and mainstream media as parts of a whole or as a spectrum (Harcup, 2005).

Downing combined theories of power and hegemony with theories of alternative media creation and argued that social imperatives arising from power and hegemony led to the emergence of alternative media in many different forms. Following the lead of this study, other researchers expanded the function of alternative media to include preparing ground for various resistances, mobilizations and changing attitudes against the hegemonic structures of the society, taking it beyond merely being the voice of social movements (Atkinson, 2010). From a

similar point of view, Atton emphasizes the necessity of producing a model for alternative media that is not limited to political media and resistance media. Instead, Atton's purpose is to develop a model that includes artistic and literary media, in which relatively new cultural structures such as electronic journals and hybrid forms of electronic communication can be included (Atton, 2002).

Dominating the literature in this field is the view that the feature that makes alternative media "alternative" is the participation of ordinary users. Such views, which are called participatory approaches, argue that the active participation of non-professional users is a necessity in the production of alternative media. Advocates of participatory approaches emphasize the liberating effects for society of user participation in the production processes. According to Servaes (1999, p. 269), participatory communication is the most important element of social change, cultural development and democratization. Carpentier (2007, p. 88) claims that participation in alternative media strengthens the civic movement and enables citizens to become active in many micro-areas. Participatory media challenges the concentration of symbolic power (Couldry, 2003), and empowers ordinary people by giving them a voice (Carpentier, 2007; Dagron, 2004; Rodriguez, 2003) and helping them to live a self-determined life (Rodriguez, 2003).

Researchers approaching alternative media in the context of participatory media draw attention to how alternative media organizational structures differs from those of mainstream media. According to these researchers, user participation, collective and horizontal organizational structure and non-commercial financing are the distinguishing features of alternative media. Such participatory media approaches reveal participation in both media production and media management as indispensable features of defining alternative media. According to Atton, alternative publications should attach more importance to the free flow of ideas than profitability; it should be interactive, relevant to everyday life and the ordinary needs of people. Although collective organizational structure has different aspects, involving readers in the decision-making process is one of the most important ones. The vertical, top-down communication model commonly used by many media outlets is not suitable for alternative media. Horizontal communication between authors and readers is essential.

In describing alternative media, Atton emphasizes the fact that alternative media is a media that bypasses traditional commercial production and distribution, often organized and produced by ordinary people. According to Atton (2015, p. 1), alternative media is primarily associated with social and cultural practices that enable people to participate in media organization, production and distribution, and is responsible for representing phenomena that are underrepresented, excluded or ignored in the mainstream media. Alternative media are responsible for monitoring mainstream media's power and specifically its political power, and to warn the public against it. The role of alternative media as an observer of those in power is one of its fundamental characteristics (Forde, 2015, p. 296). These authors highlighted participatory approaches to alternative media, active participation in the production and circulation of media content; and argued that if this were achieved, alternative media will become a participatory citizen's media (Atton, 2002; Carpentier, 2007; Rodriguez, 2001).

Approaches that criticize the participatory approach, on the other hand, place the focus of alternative media on its content. They advocate the idea that alternative media should spread a worldview that questions dominant realities, that it should produce content for groups that are not represented by the mainstream media, and that these groups should have their voices heard with a critical perspective. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) argue that it is critical content that makes alternative media alternative.

Alternative media can only help social transformation and contribute to the establishment of a truly participatory society by producing critical content. For Sandoval and Fuchs, it is essential that alternative media be critical at the structural level and that media producers provide critical content that responds to the needs of individuals. As such, it is not necessary that these media are also alternative in terms of their production process and form as an economic product. In other words, commercial media and non-participatory media can also be called alternative media if they produce critical content (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). Although alternative media is ideally positioned completely differently from the mainstream media both in terms of structure and content, many researchers claim that this distinction is blurred in practice and the field needs different theories to deal with this. A small-scale, individualized alternative media alone cannot be a powerful part of large, transformative social movements. In many cases, such media remains a mere expression of a lifestyle that satisfies its producers. However, a voice that cannot reach large audiences is far from being a significant one and is therefore relatively ineffective (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2015).

Adaklı (2021), in her analysis on the problems of alternative journalism in Turkey, similarly states that when journalism experiences a lack of qualified labor and financial resources, the quality of its product declines in direct proportion. She adds that for good reporting, well-organized databases, professional reporters, a variety of news sources, and a significant source of finance are needed. In other words, she argues that a certain institutionalism is essential for doing good journalism. According to Adaklı (2021), if alternative media wants to do quality journalism, it has to earn an income in order to access serious financial resources and qualified workforce, as required by the capitalist market system we live in.

User Research Literature on Alternative Media

While discussions on defining alternative media have been shaped around participatory theories and their criticisms, very little work has been done on how users themselves define this media. Considering the alternative media definitions that center the active participation of users, this situation seems paradoxical. Downing (2003) states that this gap needs to be filled urgently, and what alternative media means for this active community should be explored. He states that the vast majority of user research on mainstream media has been conducted by companies and is not open to public knowledge. Such research is mostly shaped around demographic data and looks at why media content attracts attention, but in the context of profitability. In other words, research on media users consists of

quantitative research, such as rating measurements, that is closely tied to marketing dynamics. Downing states that although some small-scale ethnographic studies were conducted in the 1980s, academic research on media users has followed this commercial trend. Commercial and subsequent academic research differs radically from research into understanding alternative media and its relevance to its users. As such, interacting with and understanding media users is definitely lacking in research on alternative media.

There are some exceptions in this area. One of them is Rauch's (2015) quantitative study of alternative media users in the United States. In her research, Rauch examined the dialectic between mainstream media and alternative media, and investigated what people thought the characteristics of alternative media should be, through a questionnaire to hybrid users, who follow both media. Another study on alternative media users is Harcup's (2011) Alternative Journalism as Active Citizenship, in which the author explores the relationships between alternative forms of journalism and the concepts of democracy and active citizenship. In his qualitative empirical research with alternative media users in England, Harcup concluded that although there is no consensus on a universal and precise definition of alternative media, this media can play a role in nurturing, motivating and activating a phenomenon that can be defined as active citizenship. In Turkey, too, an empirical study has been carried out on people who are both producers and users of alternative media (Kejanlıoğlu, 2012). This research focuses on the Independent Communication Network (Bianet) as an example of alternative media in Turkey. Using qualitative research methods, the study focuses on both alternative media producers and users; it questions participation, interaction and the conditions in which users can be productive.

In the digital age, new media platforms have provided tools appropriate for the expansion of oppositional and dissedent public spaces, facilitated the participation of users in alternative media activities, and made it possible for alternative media to reach wider audiences (Vatikiotis, 2019). For this reason, alternative media has become a focus of interest both in academic literature and among users in recent years. Another reason for this interest is dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. This dissatisfaction leads those who are relatively more media literate to alternative news sources (Müller and Schulz, 2021). In recent years, trust in corporate media has seriously declined in some countries around the world, including Turkey (Newman, 2021). All these reasons have made the subject of alternative media, and what it means in the eyes of its users, come to the fore as a significant research topic.

Research: What Does Alternative Media Mean for its Users?

This research is based on focus group discussions with alternative media users who are also journalism students. Discussions were held on how interviewees define alternative media, which media they position as alternative, which alternative media they follow, and which indispensable feature makes alternative media "alternative". Students from Marmara University's Department of

Journalism were chosen as the research sample. Of course, it should be kept in mind that the findings do not cover all alternative media users, they are limited to this selected micro sample and depend on the date and place of the research. Based on the view that every empirical effort can contribute to theory (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2003), the research is a contribution to the gap in the literature discussed above, by trying to describe how alternative media is defined by its users.

Methodology

This study used the focus group interview as its method. The main purpose of the focus group is not to collect large numbers of statistically measurable data (Krueger and Casey, 2009), but it is a well-established research method in which insightful findings are obtained (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). While survey-based methods are more suitable for quantitative research, focus groups in qualitative research are ideal for examining people's experiences, ideas, wishes and concerns in a social context (Harcup, 2015). The type of social interaction in focus groups is seen as an integral part of user research. Rather than asking each person individually, researchers in a focus group study encourage participants to talk to each other, ask questions to each other, and comment on each other's experiences. In this way, in social sciences in general and media and communication studies in particular, focus group discussion helps the researcher understand how meaning is socially constructed in everyday speech (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

This emphasis on sociability and collectivity makes the focus group an ideal method for research on alternative media users, in that alternative media also has a social and collective basis (Harcup, 2015). The focus group is also well suited for studying communities that do not passively consume but actively participate, as it creates a shared meaning and treats participants not as individuals acting alone but as interacting members of a social group (Harcup, 2011). This method is considered essential for this study because it gives the chance to establish a direct relationship with the subject group, to address theoretical questions about alternative media, and to have direct interaction through which to understand the group.

Focus group interviews were conducted as group interviews in which the moderator led the discussion and prompted participants to participate by asking open-ended questions. The purpose of these focus group discussions, from an analytical point of view, was to identify some patterns based on the definitions made by the participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p. 119). In the analysis of the interviews, a grounded theory approach was used, in which the interviews were transcribed and read, and recurring themes were identified. Within the framework of this approach, the analysis took place in the form of researching concepts, key themes and categories on an open coding axis. In the focus group discussions, the moderator brought up the issues she wanted to be discussed and initially asked the participants in the group one by one what alternative media meant, and then encouraged them to continue the discussion. With one or two exceptions, the participants actively discussed the issues. In cases where the

participants hesitated to speak, the moderator stepped in and encouraged the interviewees to express themselves by asking questions.

Research Findings

Focus group discussions were held in March 2021. All participants were informed about the purpose, subject and scope of the research. Data collection and analysis techniques were mentioned and the consent of participants was obtained. While analyzing the data, a coding was used to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. As seen in Table 1, participants consisted of six women and four men, aged between twenty-two and twenty-six, studying journalism at Marmara University. Discussions were held about how the interviewees define alternative media, which media they position as alternative, which alternative media they follow, and which indispensable feature makes alternative media "alternative".

The research found that alternative media users give importance to both content and form of the broadcasts/publications they follow. As discussed above, acting on non-profit and non-commercial principles, not having a hierarchical structure from top to bottom, being open to user interaction and producing critical content are the main features referred to by researchers in the field when defining alternative media. These characteristics were similarly brought up in the interviews. Dissatisfaction with the mainstream media is also one of the themes frequently mentioned in the interviews. Female participants in the focus group were coded with the letter F and male participants with the letter M, and their ages were also included for explanatory purposes.

Table 1. Focus Group Interviewees

Interviewees	Age
F1	22
F2	24
F3	26
F4	23
F5	26
F6	23
M1	22
M2	25
M3	25
M4	25

All of the participants in the focus group were residing in Istanbul. Among the interviewees, F2 (24) and F4 (23) were doing internships in media organizations that they called alternatives. F1 (22) and M3 (25) were blogging about current social events. F3 (26) was a volunteer in a project on gender equality in a non-governmental organization. F1 (22) was making regular payments to an organization she called alternative media. Others stated that they would pay for an alternative entity that meets their expectations. Six of them had participated in a

number of social actions, including the Feminist Night March[1] and no war demonstrations. While many of them stated that they follow the mainstream media from time to time with a critical point of view, they also stated that their main news sources are media organizations which they describe as alternatives. As a result of the analysis of the focus group interviews the main categories of form and content came to the fore, although many sub-categories were included in the definitions of alternative media made by the interviewees.

Discussion

The Form of Alternative Media

Almost all of the interviewees agreed that alternative media should be a media that broadcasts digitally over the internet. When F1 referred to alternative media, she imagined something that can be accessed over the internet and spread quickly. F2 said that she thinks that alternative media is "a media that everyone can reach with one click thanks to the internet, rather than print", while M1 stated that this digital broadcasting situation is a necessity rather than a choice: "Is there any alternative media other than that? I don't think there will be much outside of the internet since they can't afford it financially, because I think it requires a large amount of capital." According to M2, alternative media are news sites that we can access more easily over the internet, unlike the news broadcast on television or printed in the newspaper. It was often expressed that alternative media is a media that is easily accessible and uses digital publishing tools for both financial and practical reasons.

The issue of active participation of users, which is frequently emphasized by researchers in the alternative media literature, was expressed by only two interviewees. F6 stated that she thinks that alternative media provides more space for its followers to express themselves because they are in digital environment, that this supports freedom of expression and that interaction with the reader/ audience is higher compared to traditional media. F2, on the other hand, discussed participation in alternative media in terms of citizen media practice and stated that "many people now contribute to alternative media directly through social media, which we call citizen journalism." F2, who also interned at an alternative media organization, stated that she thinks she is a part of alternative media formations through her interactions with social media. According to the interviewees, this interaction with users also shapes the language used by alternative media. F3 stated that alternative media has a very high potential for being "cancelled" when they use a wrong expression, and for this reason they behave more sensitively in the language they use: "The person who will limit alternative media is not the boss, but society itself. I think they are being more careful because they are in contact with society."

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[1]Feminist Night March is the march of various women's organizations against patriarchy, sexism, discrimination and male violence every 8 March in Turkey.

Horizontal organization styles, which is discussed by alternative media researchers and thought to be one of alternative media's indispensable features, was also expressed by one of the interviewees. F4, who had an internship at 140journos a small-scale media organization, stated that there should be no hierarchy among alternative media workers: "I did my internship at 140 for a month. It was a beautiful environment. Well, they said themselves 'we created a democracy here, we don't approach each other very professionally. We get ideas from each other, nobody is the boss'. They work in this way. I think that most alternative media work or should work this way, that there is no hierarchy, and that attracts the attention of young people in terms of freedom."

Non-profit or non-commercial features, which are considered another important feature of alternative media, also came up in the focus group discussions. M2 stated that alternative media is "a media based on ideas beyond certain kinds of capital" and that it should consist of "small-scale non-profit organizations." M3 stated that if alternative media is successful, it can be bought out by a large corporate company as a way for alternative media organizations to make money. M3 thought that this would be perfectly acceptable (M3). In response to M3, F3 stated that such a situation encompasses the risk of alternative media being included in mainstream media: "It will definitely be censored. In the first place, it started to work as an alternative media in order not to be censored. If some big company buys it, it will continue to function like any other media or newspaper that has been included in the mainstream media, and we will continue to receive censored news." The interviewees defined the alternative media category and gave definitions that would differentiate it from the mainstream media. Connections with capital and power, the dominance of one point of view, and unreliability were the most important problems that participants had with the mainstream media. These factors were also the most important reasons that pushed them to alternative media organizations.

Content of Alternative Media

Just like the form of alternative media, the content of alternative media constitutes another core theme that emerged in the interviews. While defining alternative media in the discussions, interviewees often compared it with the mainstream media in terms of content. The first of the sub-categories that stands out in terms of content is that alternative media should have a critical content compared to the mainstream media. F6 stated that alternative media's perspective is different from the mainstream, and, of course, it should be more critical, M1 emphasizes the diversity of topics in alternative media in contrast to the dominance of one point of view in the mainstream: "I think that alternative media is more beautiful in terms of diversity of topics. Almost everyone in the mainstream media says the same thing like a parrot. Most of them have the same ownership structure. That's why there's a variety out there, and at least it's more attractive to me because they don't fall into repetition. I have completely shifted to alternative media in following the news."

On the other hand, F1 stated that there is no big difference between the mainstream and alternative media in terms of news and that the important difference is in the perspective between the two:

> "The mainstream has little opportunity to be critical due to current ownership structures. That's why, in general, it's up to the alternative media. Because of the economic structure they have assumed. And because there is no such thing as a barrier to entry in the industry thanks to digitalization. Since they do not spend a significant among of capital, they can gather news more easily and create their own audiences. They undertake such a mission reluctantly. Because I read the same news that we get in the mainstream media, for example, in *Gazete Pencere*[2], but [the alternative media] offers me a different perspective. For example, it makes me question what is in the news with its choice of words. In that sense, I follow them, even though they give the same news. The important thing is that critical point of view in broadcasting the news."

From another perspective, M3 shares the idea of Atton, who has made significant contributions to the alternative media literature, arguing that alternative media should not be limited to political media and resistance media and should also include cultural forms including art and literature. "I see it as a medium where people interested in specific fields can make their voices heard. It could be music, it could be philosophy, it could be art. I see it as a media where people who are interested in specific fields feel that they belong and can have information related to their own tendencies" (M3).

Only one of the interviewees emphasized the activist feature of alternative media, and stated that it should be the voice of those who cannot find a means of expressing themselves adequately in society. According to F3:

> "There should be spaces where minorities can express themselves better and create their own platforms, without too much exposure to censorship, at least not more than the mainstream media. For example, regarding the rights of gay people or women, they should create platforms where they can express their own problems, and create an environment where they can express the problems that are actually experienced and that people in these groups are exposed to, apart from the hate speech directed at them in the mainstream. A media where they can express themselves despite the content in the mainstream. For such communities, alternative media is a positive tool, especially as activist journalism, as it can resonate more widely."

The majority of interviewees agreed that alternative media should have oppositional content. Censorship is one of the most prominent concepts that emerged when comparing the content of mainstream and alternative media. M4 expressed his views on the content of alternative media as follows:

> "I think it should definitely have oppositional content. I think that's what separates it from the mainstream. The situation of the mainstream media right now is very clear.

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[2]A paid subscription based, twelve-page, independent electronic newspaper published daily in pdf format in Turkey.

There are six or seven newspapers, but it is as if there is only one newspaper. One identical voice comes out of all of them. They always have a positive outlook. There is an economic problem, but they reflect it in such a way that everything looks like a bed of roses. I'm not saying that there is no censorship in alternative media. They also censor themselves, but there's more space in print than in broadcast. At least if you share some news that will be censored on social media, it can still reach many people, and they can apply censorship later. At least it reaches people, the masses hear it. But there is more censorship in the mainstream. Since it is blocked by the editors at the very beginning, the rose-tinted aspect is reflected to us directly. I definitely think that alternative media should be critical and oppositional. I don't know how we can reach accurate, real news in another way, it is very difficult."

During the discussions, two interviewees objected that alternative media should have oppositional content. F5 criticized the general use of discriminatory language by the media in Turkey and stated that the ideal alternative media should use an inclusive language, rather than an oppositional one:

"I do not think that alternative media should necessarily be oppositional. I support a type of media where the news and the commentaries are broadcast without using any discriminatory language. No matter how much I am oppositional to the government in my own life, I don't like to read only opposition newspapers; because there is a division among people in the country, those who read Cumhuriyet, Sözcü on one side, and those who read Yeni Şafak and Yeni Akit or those who watch A Haber, on the other[3]. In the middle of it, there is no media inclusive of these two. I think that this is what alternative media should offer, since there is no newspaper that can be there and can give the news as it is without really reflecting the ideologies of both sides. There should be no divisive language, no hate speech" (F5).

M1, on the other hand, stated that alternative media does not need to be a media against the government, and that a media organization that supports the government can of course be called alternative media:

"I think that alternative media should not be just oppositional. I don't think there is such an obligation. There may be an alternative media that supports the ruling side. In a different way, it can be a pro-government channel, or it can present news in a neater format that doesn't use such divisive language. A few examples came to my mind, for example there is a person named Ejder Malik, he founded a news agency called EHA[4]. They broadcast in so many different languages; there is EHA technology, EHA politics, EHA culture and art. I do not know of a big media organization that can spread news to such a wide variety of people. Again, I don't

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[3]Cumhuriyet and Sözcü are daily newspapers identified with their advocacy of secularism and anti-government stance. Yeni Şafak and Yeni Akit are also daily newspapers identified with their hard-line support of the government and are known as conservative, Islamist publications. A Haber is a pro-government TV news channel known for its support to current government, Justice and Development Party.
[4]A pro-government but small scaled news agency.

think TRT, Habertürk and CNNTürk[5] can do what these media do. Maybe it is worse in terms of news content, but I think they are much more influential in terms of being able to mobilize people, in terms of impact."

Sphere of Influence of Alternative Media

Another sub-theme that came to the fore in the discussions was the field of influence of alternative media. Interviewees frequently stated that they think that alternative media reach a narrower audience compared to the mainstream media, but still have a greater impact. It has been stated that alternative media have the ability to create an agenda by presenting content that is not broadcast in the mainstream media, and that it sometimes influences the mainstream media by bringing such content onto the mainstream's agenda. F1 said "Alternative media organizations are more independent, have a limited audience but they can stir up society in a moment." F4 said "Television is of course the most effective media, but the audience that alternative media reaches is a pioneering audience that can affect society. It has a high range of influence. Even if it reaches one person, that one person will tell it to a hundred people and ensure that the truth reaches them".

M1, on the other hand, describes the influence of EHA, which he defines as a pro-government alternative media, as follows:

> "I think that the alternative media of the ruling side really do more business than the big, corporate pro-government channels. I think they are more effective in every sense. I noticed something like this. There was such propaganda on EHA during these military operations[6] that I don't think TRT could do this, even with billions of dollars. I think it's even more ineffective. In this respect, I think it is very important" (M1).

Here, it is thought that the dissatisfaction and distrust towards the mainstream media in Turkey is the reason behind the thought that the media, which the interviewees define as alternative media, has a greater influence than the mainstream media. People who seek different perspectives and have a certain attention in terms of media literacy are increasingly turning to digital news sources and social media (Newman, 2021). Especially after 2013, the mainstream media started to keep up with the government's line, reflecting both commercial interests and legal and financial penalties. This has created an increasingly polarized media atmosphere. In such a media system, some journalists have increasingly resorted to social media in order to share news and information and express critical views (Yeşil and Sözeri, 2017).

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[5]The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) is the national public broadcaster of Turkey; HaberTurk is a corporately owned national news channel and CNNTürk is the localised variant of American channel CNN that broadcasts exclusively for Turkey.

[6]The operations mentioned here was a cross-border military operation that took place between January 2018 and August 2019 and that was conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and Syrian National Army in the Kurdish Afrin District of northwest Syria, against the People's Protection Units of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Alternative Media and Social Media

The focus groups discussions revealed that participants follow alternative media mostly through social media. According to M4, alternative media outlets broadcasting on social media platforms can thus create their own communities:

"I think the biggest difference of alternative media is that they use social media more; I can even say that social media is the biggest part of it. There are a lot of news channels on YouTube and Twitter. Even former journalists switch to YouTube because they can't find a job in the mainstream media, because they are unemployed due to the situation of the media. There is a more relaxed, more uncensored environment on social media. They can express themselves more easily. There are more options. A person in every field can open a YouTube channel and create his/her own audience. It can create diversity. It is not dependent on anyone. For example, television has patterns, [social media] goes beyond those patterns. It broadcasts things that cannot be televised because not everyone has to watch it, but certain people do. It doesn't have to set a limit just because that's that way. It creates its own community."

M2, on the other hand, points to a paradox in the alternative media's broadcasting from social media. While alternative media is generally defined as a non-corporate, small-scale media, he brought forward that social media platforms are also international giant companies and that this situation poses serious risks for alternative media:

"YouTube and Twitter are perhaps the states of the digital world. The paradox that puzzles me is that alternative media is generally produced and used by critical people or people who cannot be heard in conventional media, but since its sphere of influence is wider, its reach increases over time. There are also some problems in the digital environment. For example, YouTube was banned in Turkey for almost two years. One day, for example, YouTube may say that they would not publish something, and it then becomes very important how alternative media will find a path [to their audience]. Alternative media right now, we say, is different from corporate media, but YouTube, through what it broadcasts, is a giant company, bigger than any corporate media company that we are criticizing. I do not think that alternative media can continue its broadcasting independently of these social media giants because they do not have the means of production."

During the focus group, when the participants were asked about the alternative media sources they were following, it was noticed that the interviewees evaluated a wide range of media as alternative media. Participants stated that the "web sites of Cumhuriyet and Sözcü newspapers" (F2); "Halk TV, Fox TV and Onedio" (M1), "BBC Turkish" especially on health, technology and science (M4); "Sputnik on foreign news" (F5), "Deutsche Welle Turkish" (F3) are media organizations that they follow. They mostly follow these media on social media, especially on Youtube and on Instagram. According to the Digital News Report of 2021, prepared by the Reuters Institute, the publications of these international organizations in Turkey are followed with increasing interest on social media.

According to the report, these organizations are so popular because they publish stories about youth poverty and fundamental rights that have been largely ignored in traditional media (Newman, 2021). Another reason may be that some experienced journalists, who used to be in the mainstream media, broadcast on these platforms.

Another alternative media source specifically mentioned by the interviewees is the journalist Cüneyt Özdemir's Youtube channel[7]. His broadcasts on YouTube were mentioned by many participants, and it was stated that Cüneyt Özdemir's broadcasts "really reflect alternative media" (F6). Interviewees also defined 140Journos and the news verification site teyit.org as alternative media organizations. Identifying such a variety of media, including corporate ones, may seem paradoxical because alternative media is generally defined as non-corporate, non-hierarchical and non-profit media. But producing critical content, against the dominant structure or bringing up issues that are ignored by the mainstream media without having the formal features of alternative media could be sufficient to be considered as alternative media (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2015). Users of alternative media, similar to the researchers of alternative media, have different features in mind for identifying a media as "alternative" and like the researchers in the field they don't have a common way to define alternative media.

Conclusions

The starting point of this empirical research was to understand what alternative media means for its users, which John Downing considers to be a major deficiency in alternative media studies. This research was carried out with a qualitative focus group interview method, since it is thought that this was appropriate for establishing direct contact with the subject group, addressing theoretical questions about alternative media, and having direct interaction to understand alternative media users. One of the main purposes was to determine the parallels and oppositions between researchers' and users' definitions of alternative media. It should be remembered that the findings of this research should not be considered to cover all alternative media users or all journalism students; the findings are limited to the selected micro sample, and the time and place where the interviews took place.

The first conclusion of the research is that, just like researchers working in the field, users of alternative media cannot completely agree on a definition of alternative media. However, in the interviews, it can be said that the content of alternative media outweighs its form in terms of being the element that makes it alternative. Participants, although they raise issues such as being small-scale, not acting with commercial motivations, being independent from capital, having a horizontally organized structure and having a form that allows interaction with users, do not attach as much importance to these issues as some researchers in the

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[7]Cüneyt Özdemir is a Turkish journalist who besides his career on mainstream media (CNNTürk) has a YouTube channel with more than 1.3 million subscribers where he broadcasts about world agenda.

field. Participants were able to evaluate a commercial organization or an institutional structure as alternative media solely because it has oppositional or critical content, or brings up issues that are not brought up in the traditional media. The point that all participants agree on is that alternative media should be a media that broadcasts on the internet, mostly using social media platforms.

Another result of the research is that participants describe alternative media in relation to their dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. At this point, content comes to the fore. Participants brought up issues such as how alternative media should attach importance to diversity in content, should use inclusive language rather than a discriminating one, should offer a different perspective from the mainstream media, and should represent under-represented segments, unlike the mainstream media. Although most participants agreed that alternative media should produce critical or oppositional content, one of the participants stated that there can be alternative media platforms that are pro-government, provided that they remain independent from capital. Participants were of the opinion that due to the form of alternative media, they can produce relatively independent content and that they are less affected by censorship compared to the mainstream media.

Contrary to some researchers in the field of alternative media, such as Rodriguez (2001), the participants did not think of alternative media as a kind of citizen or community media, and even expressed the opinion that it gives more confidence if it is carried out by professional journalists. Similarly, only a single opinion was expressed about the necessity of alternative media to have an activist aspect (like Downing, 2003), while the other participants did not dwell on this quality. The interviewees brought up the subject of the influence of alternative media and underlined that the alternative media is more effective than the mainstream media in mobilizing society, has the potential to create its own community, whose borders are determined not by the media bosses, but by the users who follow it. The potential to mobilize society is in line with the views of theorists who think that alternative media can prioritize social transformation (Downing, 2001; Hamilton, 2001; Atton, 2002; Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010).

Another result of the research is that the use of social media by alternative media platforms is positively evaluated in terms of increasing their sphere of influence, facilitating access and reaching more people. However, one of the issues that came up in the discussion is that these platforms are themselves corporate structures and their survival is strongly dependent to these profit oriented companies. For alternative media organizations that criticize media structures that act with corporate and commercial motivations; being able to do "free" broadcasts through social media platforms, which constitute larger and more commercial structures than many media conglomerates, was called a paradoxical situation by some interviewees, and this situation was evaluated as an existential threat for alternative media.

This study focused on how interviewees highlighted various aspects of the concept of alternative media, and how these aspects differed among interviewees and in relation to leading academic theories. The contribution that this research presents in the context of alternative media studies is the possibility of comparing users' and theorists' ways of making sense of alternative media. It should be

repeated that the representativeness of this study is limited not only to the micro sample participating in the focus group interviews, but also to the time and place where it took place. In order to gain a deeper understanding of alternative media users, conducting comparative studies with many different samples, supporting them with in-depth interviews and discourse analysis, and diversifying the method with a series of surveys with broad participation will be significant steps forward.

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