YouTube as an information source on politics and current affairs: Supply- and demand-side perspectives

by Maud Reveilhac

Abstract
This study examines YouTube channels reporting on French news and current affairs. After identifying the relevant channels, the study identifies the top 10 viewed videos of each channel during the year 2023. Manual annotation has been conducted for content, presentation format, engagement style, and position regarding the government and mainstream media. Each channel has also been coded for its business and communication strategies. Correspondence analysis is used to extract the most emblematic news content and presentation styles, while hierarchical clustering is used to categorize the channels into clusters of different genres. From the demand-side perspective, the study also examines the network of users commenting on the top 10 videos to assess the audience overlap between the identified clusters. Five clusters of alternative news channels are identified, differing in presentation, style, and partisanship. Network analysis showed audience overlaps, notably between satire, alternative, and re-information clusters. Most channels earn revenue through branding and cross-media activities, occasionally supporting each other. These clusters act as mediators between politics, entertainment, and re-information, serving diverse audiences. Uncertainty remains regarding future dynamics and competition with established news outlets.

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1. Introduction
To date, scant scholarly attention has been directed toward YouTube as a news source. While opinion surveys offer insights into the extent of YouTube consumption (Vraga and Tully, 2021), our comprehension of the actual news content people consume, especially in terms of opinionated information created by opinion YouTubers and alternative channels covering news about politics and current affairs, remains limited. Although traditional media retains influence due to its extensive reach, credibility, and commitment to journalistic standards, the line between traditional news channels and alternative news channels is blurring.

Alternative news channels refer to a variety of channels that offer alternative perspectives on current events, often diverging from mainstream narratives. These channels typically cover a wide range of topics, including politics, social issues, and international affairs, and they may present viewpoints that are critical of traditional media or government narratives. Alternative news channels on YouTube often appeal to audiences seeking diverse viewpoints and aim to (or claim to) propose a deeper analysis beyond what is provided by mainstream news sources. These alternative news channels are gaining credibility and becoming professionalized, thus increasing their ability to captivate audiences with counter-mainstream and audience-engaging content (Fischer, et al., 2022). A survey conducted by Pew in 2020 showed that about a quarter of all U.S. adults (26 percent) get news on YouTube (Stocking, et al., 2020). While relatively few of these people say it is their primary news source, most say it is an important way they stay informed.

What types of alternative channels and content particularly capture the YouTube audiences seeking news on politics and current affairs? This study seeks to answer this question by delineating and analyzing YouTube channels reporting on French news and current affairs. YouTube occupies an important place in the general media diet of citizens in France, since around 70 percent of Internet users regularly visit YouTube (Statista, 2023). France is a relevant case study for the investigation of alternative news channels on YouTube. Indeed, the popularity of opinion YouTubers and alternative news channels in France can be attributed to a combination of factors, with one of the most important ones being the centralization of traditional media around a few major media conglomerates. Other factors include the accessibility of YouTube compared to that of traditional news sources, the engagement of younger generations on the platform, and the diversification of
The proposed study has the potential to enhance our comprehension of how citizens can critically assess the content they consume to foster well-informed opinions. This is especially vital as the information landscape on YouTube exhibits substantial variation, ranging from official news channels to counter-information or disinformation sources (Schwarzenegger, 2021).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. News content visibility and popularity on YouTube: The supply-side perspective

From a supply-side perspective, the rise of mainstream news channels on YouTube and the parallel growth of alternative news channels on this platform have reshaped features of the news landscape. For instance, some channels were born on YouTube before becoming institutionalized media or TV channels, and radio channels have turned to YouTube with a mix of real-time and podcast versions of their content. Moreover, the news content on YouTube is generally shorter and includes entertaining elements, and channels have a strong incentive to adapt to their audiences’ expectations and feedback in terms of comments, views, and likes. Another important difference compared to traditional news media is the role that algorithms play in determining what content is most likely to be visible to users. Most notably, YouTube’s architecture encourages individuals to build audiences and to support specific channels, ideas, or worldviews. Visibility also goes hand in hand with the monetization logic. For instance, monetized videos that generate high engagement signal to the algorithm that the content is valuable to viewers. Furthermore, monetized videos with ads contribute to increasing the viewing time.

YouTube’s decision to give greater prominence to mainstream media sources successfully reduced misinformation (Nicas, 2020). From the perspective of mainstream media, videos on YouTube also represent an additional source of revenue (which depends, among other things, on user engagement, experience, reputation, and video quality), as well as a means of generating greater traffic on their content. Similarly, Santín and Álvarez-Monzoncillo (2020) discuss the consequences of the management of six Spanish newspapers’ YouTube channels. Results showed that YouTube videos essentially increase a newspaper’s brand position in search engine results. Alternative channels have also professionalized in terms of how they present their content and how they generate revenue (Hou, 2019; De Jans, et al., 2019). This not only includes providing space for paid advertisements (e.g., sponsored content and product promotion), but also includes the promotion of their own merchandise (e.g., coffee mugs and t-shirts, subscriptions to special outlets or TV channels). Beyond raising funds through merchandise sales, some channels also call for direct fundraising through different subscription options or single donations.

The producers of news content on YouTube are highly varied and bring together mainstream media (e.g., national broadcasts and television programs), alternative news channels (e.g., independent channels established primarily on YouTube), as well as individual YouTubers developing their own channels. Other channels may also position themselves regarding political affairs, but their main aim is not to make news available (e.g., political actors, NGOs, universities, experts, etc.). Since the 2010s, YouTube has tended to concentrate its audience on a small number of “star” channels, a strategy which seems to mainly benefit “comedy”, “entertainment”, and “gaming” channels. News and political channels do not (or more rarely) benefit from this effect, except for periodic events such as elections. In addition, the “YouTuber” figure has asserted itself in the “people and blogs” category, which goes hand in hand with the development of channels of individual expression in the fields of politics and current affairs commentary.

The definition of what constitutes “information” represents an important issue, particularly in view of the cohabitation of professional publishers and numerous amateur or semi-amateur content creators producing opinions, analyses, and descriptions. Concerning information about politics and current affairs, mainstream news channels benefit from a verification badge that indicates the authenticity of the channel as a news provider, thus distinguishing official channels from potentially misleading or fake ones. In reaction to the strategic positioning of YouTube regarding disinformation and hateful content (especially since 2019), some YouTubers have developed strategies aimed at re-publishing videos under another title, on another channel, or on another network. These channels comment on political news by adopting different postures, which may include “citizen journalism,” “humor,” “political opinion,” or “re-information,” as well as their unique ability to fuse the roles of creator and audience (Bowyer, et al., 2017), underscore their impact. Alternative news channels thus exert a substantial influence on opinion formation (Edgerly, 2017).

Against this background, the present study analyzes the most popular videos from identified alternative news channels on YouTube during the year 2023 in France. After identifying YouTube channels that frequently cover news and current affairs, the top 10 viewed videos emitted by these channels during the year 2023 were selected for manual annotation of their content, presentation format, engagement style, and explicit position against the government and mainstream media. Most of the manual categories are inspired by the study of Fischer, et al. (2022) about the business strategies and content characteristics of videos from political influencers on YouTube. Each channel has been coded to account for its communication and business strategies. The annotation of the videos enables us to get a sense of the type of news watched by the largest number of YouTube alternative news consumers. This study also explores audience overlap between the identified alternative news channels. To do so, it relies on the user comments on the top-10 videos and uses this information as a proxy for audience attention. This enables us to categorize the users’ consumption patterns of alternative news videos.

The proposed study has the potential to enhance our comprehension of how citizens can critically assess the content they consume to foster well-informed opinions. This is especially vital as the information landscape on YouTube exhibits substantial variation, ranging from official news channels to counter-information or disinformation sources (Schwarzenegger, 2021).
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2.2. Consumption of alternative news media: The demand-side perspective

Numerous scholarly discussions have proposed distinctions between mainstream and alternative media. For instance, Rauch (2015) has differentiated between organizational alternatives (e.g., amateurism or professionalism, for-profit or non-profit orientation) and content alternatives (media offering opposing, neglected, or underrepresented views or topics, as well as giving space for criticism and political engagement). Similarly, Holt, et al. (2019) have defined alternative media by taking into account the content and style as well as the content producers (e.g., focusing on publishing routines, market orientation, funding forms, and reach). These studies also suggest considering alternative and mainstream categories not in the absolute but in relation to changing media landscapes and (counter-)public discourses (Holt, 2018; see also Schwarzenegger, 2023). Holt, et al. (2019) have also proposed to interpret alternative and mainstream media as strictly contextual and relational because these categories make sense only “in regard to.”

This study investigates whether there is an audience overlap between the different types of alternative news channels. To meet the growing demand for news on YouTube, some channels choose to deliver up-to-date information using relatively short formats (e.g., short videos, zapping, press reviews), while others choose to provide in-depth analyses of topics (e.g., process of policy reforms, background of political events, development of a mobilization) with a lower posting frequency. Importantly, collaborations between these actors also exist; for instance, online conferences and roundtables with special guests and journalists are popular formats (e.g., Lichtenstein, et al., 2021; Hutchinson, 2021). In this respect, audiences of alternative news channels might be exposed to and gain interest in channels sharing similar viewpoints. The community of alternative news views further expands beyond YouTube as activities (e.g., branding activities, content sharing, activism) are happening on diverse (social) media platforms and channels (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Twitch, newsletters, external websites) but also events (e.g., conferences, spectacles, and meetings).

From a demand-side perspective, it is important to keep in mind that consumers of YouTube content can keep their preferences hidden, which might be an important motivator to consume and engage with content that one would not engage with where interactions are visible (Kadushin, 2012). The consumption of news on YouTube relies on a similar logic as that of the consumption of news through other media channels and is often mediated by the source’s trustworthiness and the credibility of the channels (Chung and Cho, 2017). While there are a variety of news channels with different formats, political views, and objectives, there might be some overlap in the audiences of alternative news channels.

To assess this overlap, comments from the consumers of videos are used as a proxy measure. This enables us to assess which consumption patterns of alternative news videos are prevalent, thus complementing qualitative studies categorizing YouTube consumers based on the role that alternative media plays in their media diet. For instance, Schwarzenegger (2023) presented a typology of alternative media users, including “awakened infowarriors,” “critical curators,” “completestis,” “reconnaissance users,” and “community seekers.” Drawing from a similar perspective, the extent to which audience overlap exists between different types of alternative news channels is assessed. Therefore, the second research question asks:

\[ RQ2: \] What is the audience overlap surrounding French alternative news media channels on YouTube?

3. Data and method

This study of French alternative news channels and the content of their videos on YouTube is not intended to be representative of the consumption of the population of French Internet users. Above all, it is a question of exploring which popular topics and presentation styles are put forward by alternative news channels. The selected alternative news channels all share the characteristic of being self-described alternative media that do not claim a left-wing nor a right-wing radical ideology. Their primary focus is to offer an alternative view than that of mainstream media and political elites.

3.1. Data collection in four steps

This study has identified alternative news channels that have specified France in the “location” field of their channel description. First, a narrow list of channels was relied upon, which was then expanded by looking for “French news channel” as a search query and by getting exposed to increasing alternative news accounts under the influence of the YouTube algorithm when clicking on videos. After repeating this operation several times, the final list of channels contained 50 alternative news channels active in 2023 (a few additional channels were identified but did not publish videos in 2023).

While no validity and reliability tests on the operationalization of alternative news media identification were conducted, there was consistency in the selection process with respect to the fact that the corpus of channels reflected existing literature on alternative media in the French context (de Dampierre, et al., 2021). Figure 1 displays the evolution of views, likes, and comments by the number of accounts over time. A general trend points towards the rising popularity of the channels. The spike in the share of views and videos in 2012 could be attributed to the presidential elections in France, generating heightened interest and engagement from viewers seeking alternative news sources. The subsequent decline in views could be due to a variety of factors, such as changes in audience preferences, shifts in content production or quality, or changes in YouTube algorithms. Additionally, videos from the identified channels were sometimes demonetized, thus making them less visible. Furthermore, YouTubers were less professionalized at the time. As for the convergence between views and likes in 2022, it suggests a potential shift in audience behavior or content strategy among alternative news channels. This could be linked to improvements in content quality, increased engagement efforts by creators, or changes in YouTube’s algorithm favoring content with higher engagement metrics. Alternatively, it could reflect a broader trend in audience trust and affinity towards specific channels or types of content, leading to more consistent engagement patterns.
Information about each of the identified channels was retrieved, including the date of creation, number of followers, number of videos, and number of total views. Information about the other communication channels employed by each channel and its current business or funding strategy was also gathered. All video information for each of the identified channels was also retrieved, including the title and description of each video, the number of views, likes and comments, and the date of the video’s publication.

Based on the number of views, the top 10 videos posted by each channel during 2023 were selected. Using the top 10 viewed videos from each channel to build a typology of alternative news channels on YouTube can offer a snapshot of each channel’s content. However, there are limitations associated with focusing solely on the top 10 videos. Indeed, these videos may not fully represent the breadth of content nor of viewer engagement across different channels. To address this concern, supplementary analyses were conducted, including examining the broader communication and business strategies of each channel. Beyond manageable data collection and analysis, there are further arguments supporting the coding of top-viewed videos to build a typology. First, the most-viewed videos are likely to have a significant impact on audience perception and may therefore be important indicators of channel influence and reach. Second, despite variations in viewership and video performance across different channels, analyzing the top-viewed videos enables us to identify patterns and trends that may be indicative of broader channel strategies and audience preferences. The top 10 videos were manually annotated on the following dimensions according to a framework that was adapted from Fischer, et al. (2022):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Coding remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Coverage</td>
<td>National versus international</td>
<td>Accounts for the focus of the video</td>
<td>Binary coding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Topic (binary coding)</td>
<td>e.g., Europe, foreign politics, education, health, etc.</td>
<td>Account for the main topic(s) of the video</td>
<td>Mention up to five topics maximally (can happen for news zapping and press reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Format style</td>
<td>explanatory videos</td>
<td>Accounts for the eyewitness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>news recycling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1:** Evolution of views (left y-axis), likes, and comments (right y-axis) divided by the number of accounts in the corpus (indicated with ‘n’) over time.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Format of the video.</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(binary coding)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— special guest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— politainment</td>
<td></td>
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<td>— partisan commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>— satire</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Presentation style</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— interactivity</td>
<td>Accounts for the presentation style.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— mobilization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— personal view</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— emotionality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— episodic narration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— partisanship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Video format</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— short</td>
<td>Binary coding.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— documentary-like</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Opposition style (binary coding)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— opposed to government</td>
<td>Accounts for the opposition of the video to the government, mainstream media, and YouTube policies.</td>
<td>Binary coding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— opposed to mainstream media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— opposed to YouTube</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— YouTube advertising</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— shop model</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— TV presence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— donation call</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— merchandise sales</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Communication strategy (binary coding)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Twitter</td>
<td>Accounts for the communication strategy of the account.</td>
<td>Binary coding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Facebook</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Instagram</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Snapchat</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— TikTok</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— personal Web site</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Twitch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Discord</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Other</td>
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</table>

These categories are not mutually exclusive.

Interactivity, mobilization, and partisanship are coded as binary variables. Personal view contains three categories (impersonal, mixed, personal). Emotionality has three categories (negative, neutral, positive). Episodic narration has three categories (episodic, mix, thematic).
Correspondence analysis using coded information is used to visually identify the most prevalent differences between the features of dimensions 1–6. The dimensions 7–8 are used as supplementary variables that do not affect the shape of the correspondence map. To conduct correspondence analysis, the function `CA()` from the R package `FactoMineR` was used. The function relies on a dataframe where the columns are the channels and the rows are the dimensions. The cells are the proportion of videos matching the dimension for each video.

The position of each channel on the two first dimensions of the map was retrieved. Based on this information, hierarchical clustering was conducted to identify clusters of channels using the function `hclust()` from the `stats` R package. The best number of clusters was assessed visually (with cut-tree) and examined for plausibility. Based on interpretation, five was retained as the best number of clusters. Each cluster was then described in light of the coded dimensions and given an interpretative label.

To assess the audience overlap between these clusters of channels, comments from the top 10 annotated videos were retrieved. This information was then used to construct a network between the alternative news channels and used as a proxy for audience overlap. Each channel was colored according to its clusters to visually identify the comment overlaps. While it is true that not all viewers leave comments, those who do are often more actively engaged with the content and may represent a vocal subset of the audience. Analyzing user comments can provide valuable insights into the perspectives, opinions, and reactions of this segment of the audience, helping to deepen our understanding of viewer dynamics and community interaction.

### 4. Results

The results from the analysis are displayed in Figures 2–4. Figure 2 shows the results of correspondence analysis based on dimensions 1–6 as active variables (coverage, topic, format style, presentation style, video format, and opposition style) and dimensions 7–8 as supplementary variables (business and communication strategies). Correspondence analysis is a first step in answering RQ1 as to whether it is possible to identify clusters of alternative news channels and what their distinguishable features are. The factors that mostly differentiate between clusters of channels are the presentation views (whether the channel emphasizes personal or impersonal views, in brown squares on the map), the narrative style (whether the channel emphasizes episodic or thematic narration, also in brown squares), but also the politainment and partisan component of the videos (whether it includes partisan commentary or defends a political view, in orange squares). Furthermore, the critical target of a video is important, whether it is the government, mainstream media, or YouTube that is criticized (in violet squares). Moreover, the main coverage of the video (transnational or national) is also a differentiation factor. Thus, coverage, format, and presentation, as well as opposing styles, are important factors to differentiate the supply of the most popular videos.

Both hierarchical clustering and visual interpretation confirm that the best number of channel clusters is five. Based on the distribution of the coded dimensions in Figure 3, the clusters were labeled as follows: “satire/entertainment” channels (in red), “alternative” channels (in blue), “neutral/eye-witnessing” channels (in green), and “re-information” channels (in orange), “re-information” channels (in green), and “zapping” channels (in orange). Each cluster has specificities in terms of the coded dimensions:

For instance, “satire/entertainment” channels are more inward (national) oriented, focus on entertaining their audiences about national politics, and are critical of the government. They generally offer personal views, which they mix with news recycling. The narration style is a mix of episodic and thematic elements. These channels rely heavily on donations and have also developed shop models to finance their channels. It is also interesting to note that the social media platform Discord is more associated with this cluster. This can be of interest for future studies focusing on this cluster of channels.

“Alternative” news channels are entering into a real competition with mainstream media, which they consider to be biased. These channels often welcome special guests and have longer video formats (e.g., debates and conferences) to expose their views on specific events and also on societal themes, both from a national and transnational focus. The main aim of the videos is to offer new perspectives and educate their audiences in an explanatory style. These channels also heavily rely on donations from their audience to support their channel.

“Neutral/eye-witnessing” channels are more outward-looking but also cover events (e.g., mobilizations) at the national level. “Short” videos are a popular format. The viewpoint in this format is more often impersonal compared to the other channels, as some videos are not commented on but just eye-witnessed events, and others are neutrally commenting on the topic without endorsing a particular perspective. The narration is thereby focused on episodic (rather than thematic) narration. There is also a clear association between cooperation and human aid related topics and “eye-witnessing” channels. Videos from this cluster trigger on average more views than the videos from other clusters, although they receive fewer comments.

The cluster with “re-information” channels mainly offers an educational perspective to its audiences and involves a mix between news recycling and the invitation of special guests to inform or comment about current affairs. These channels tend to promote a personal view and focus more on episodic narration. They are also very present on other social media platforms. Topics related to immigration and asylum, gender issues and discriminations, as well as employment, are more often covered by the “re-information” cluster of channels.

The fifth cluster is composed of a few channels that propose “zapping” videos, that are commented on in entertaining and sarcastic ways. The videos are essentially employing episodic narration, and a lot of their content emphasizes negative events. Videos from the channels in this cluster trigger on average more comments than the other clusters but have on average fewer views.

In regard to the business model strategy, there is little difference between the identified alternative news channels, as most of them rely on demand from their followers for funding activities. Only a few of the channels have also developed their own brand or proposed additional products, such as magazines and special outlets. Concerning the communication strategy, most channels foster their presence on additional (social) media platforms, for instance, to give access to long-format videos or videos that were removed from YouTube. Finally, a lot of channels have their own web sites, which can be an effective means of increasing one’s popularity and giving more background information, and these Web sites are rarely used for revenue purposes.

In a second analytical step, the study assesses what audience overlap exists between the different channels. Figure 4 focuses on the channels that shared more than one percent of the commenters on their top 10 videos. The same cluster colors from Figure 2 were manually added to assess the audience overlap surrounding the alternative news media channels. From Figure 4, we can gain a sense of the audience’s attention to the different clusters of alternative news media. For instance, there is an overlap between the channels from the “satire/entertainment,” “alternative,” and “re-
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information” clusters. This finding regarding the audience perspective can also be confirmed by the manual annotation of videos, especially when focusing on special guests and citation sources. There is also an overlap between the “eye-witnessing” and “alternative” clusters. This finding can also be supported by the manual analysis of the references made in the videos.

Figure 2: Correspondence map illustrating the utilization of dimensions 1–6 as active variables and 7–8 as supplementary variables.

Note: Larger version of Figure 2 available [here](https://example.com).

Figure 3: Visual representation of alternative news clusters categorized based on coded dimensions. Clusters are derived from hierarchical clustering on the coordinates of the first two dimensions obtained from correspondence analysis.
5. Discussion of the main findings and concluding remarks

The aim of the present study was to identify what types of alternative news channels on YouTube trigger audience attention on politics and current affairs based on the content of their most popular videos, presentation format, engagement style, position regarding the government and mainstream media, as well as their communication and monetization strategies. These categories were inspired by the study of Fischer, et al. (2022) about the business strategies and content characteristics of videos from political influencers on YouTube. Furthermore, the study aimed to assess whether audience overlap exists between the different alternative news channels.

Correspondence analysis and hierarchical clustering showed that five distinct clusters can be identified: “satire/entertainment,” “alternative,” “neutral/eye-witnessing,” “re-information,” and “zapping” channels. These clusters were differentiated by factors like presentation views, narrative style, politainment, and partisan components in videos. This research also delved into the thematic emphasis of each cluster, their business models, and communication strategies. The identified clusters offer a variety of presentation formats and information aims that can facilitate access to political issues and public affairs for politically attentive audiences, and also to audiences that would not closely follow the news from any other source (Stocking, et al., 2020). The findings also corroborate previous studies showing a transition from the predominance of entertainment-focused YouTube channels to a hybrid political-commercial space (Rauch, 2025), with both amateur YouTubers and professionalized channels.

Network analysis based on the comments of top-videos reveals the audience overlap between the identified clusters of channels. Most notably, the connection between the “satire/entertainment,” “alternative,” and “re-information” clusters is the strongest. There was also some overlap between the “eye-witnessing” and “re-information” clusters. These findings are also supported by the manual analysis of video references and special guests. These findings highlight how these alternative news clusters serve as mediators between information about politics and current affairs, entertainment, and re-information, thereby catering to audience segments with varying levels of engagement in diverse communities and information-sharing networks.

Interestingly, most of the identified channels generated economic revenue, mainly based on branding activities and additional services (such as magazines and special outlets) and built their reputation through cross-media activities. Furthermore, some of these channels also support each other, for instance, by referring to each other’s videos and inviting special guests. These patterns may continue to change over time. How many of these alternative news channels will want to and/or manage to enter in competition with more established/mainstream news media is unknown.

The present study has several limitations. An important limitation lies in the sampling technique used to identify alternative news channels. This investigation relied not only on reference channels from already identified channels but also on the (selective) exposure to similar channels as proposed by the YouTube algorithm. This issue was mitigated by adopting other collection strategies.
checking whether relevant channels could be missing in the corpus. An additional strategy was to set the geographical preference to France and use the search tools with the keywords "news" (in French: "nouvelles" and "actualités") while enabling the identification of channels that contain this keyword in their description. No missing channel could be identified. Another strategy implemented was to subscribe to the list of identified channels, which generated personalized recommendations, helping the discovery of related channels. However, this strategy carries the risk of limiting a researcher’s exposure to specific viewpoints and discourses. An “incognito/private” mode which has limited personalization, potentially leading to less relevant results, was not used. Furthermore, partisan, and political channels were excluded from the selection, although some of these channels also offered occasional commentary on current affairs. Other channels, such as activist channels, had irregular contributions and could, therefore, not be classified as “news and politics.” Another limitation of the sampling procedure is that it included only French channels. Moreover, the sample of videos used for correspondence analysis and audience overlap only includes the top 10 videos of each channel. Therefore, from the perspective of the generalizability of the findings, caution is advised, as the results can only speak for the most influential channels and videos.

Beyond the topic of this study, more research is needed to understand the impact of YouTube on news consumption, highlighting concerns such as the emergence of opinion bubbles, increased visibility of extreme content, and the spread of misinformation. Debates persist regarding whether the recommendation algorithm favors extremist content or directs users toward the most popular channels (Munger and Phillips, 2022; O’Callaghan, et al., 2015; Ribeiro, et al., 2020). This research topic is also very interesting in the context of alternative news channels, as it may shed light on whether alternative news consumers are likely to be exposed to more critical or partisan channels over time. In a similar vein, future studies could investigate the role of alternative news channels, and their close network, in spreading or contesting conspiracy beliefs [see cross-platform study by Theocharis, et al. (2021)] and misinformation (Kessler and Humphrechts, 2023). These future studies are important to understand how exposure to alternative news videos can hinder collective action and trust in the “mainstream” media and elites, particularly among sub-groups of news consumers. Qualitative insights from interviews, as proposed by Schwarzenegger (2023), and non-representative opinion surveys are fruitful methods to achieve such endeavors.

Such investigations are critical for elucidating the nuanced mechanisms through which alternative news consumption shapes societal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, thus informing strategies for promoting media literacy and fostering informed public discourse in the digital age. The study contributes both theoretically and empirically to understanding audience engagement with alternative news channels on YouTube. It identifies five distinct clusters of channels based on presentation format, engagement style, and thematic emphasis, shedding light on the underlying mechanisms driving channel popularity. It also reveals audience overlaps between these clusters, highlighting shared preferences and engagement patterns within the YouTube ecosystem.

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Conflicts of interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

Data collected for this study is original and stems from YouTube. The results of the coded videos can be accessed upon request to the author.

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Not applicable.

Note
1. The rank correlation between the rankings in terms of comments and views is 0.7. Thus, it makes sense to use the comments as a proxy for audience attention since YouTube does not allow for the retrieval of personal information of viewers of videos or followers of channels.

References


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