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# Taking Political Alternative Media into Account: Investigating the Linkage Between Media Repertoires and (Mis)perceptions


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## ABSTRACT

In most studies on news repertoires and the linkage between media use and (mis)perceptions of social and political matters, the use of political alternative media has not been included. In this paper, we therefore investigate how people combine both traditional and political alternative media into different media repertoires, and how these media repertoires are related to misperceptions. We rely on a two-wave panel survey, conducted in 2020 and 2021, with a probability-recruited sample of the Swedish population. Measures on the use of a wide range of media, including political alternative ones, are used to conduct a Latent Profile Analysis. This analysis distinguishes five media repertoires in the data. The results show that these repertoires coincide with different levels of misperceptions, with those dominated by TV use showing higher levels of misperceptions and those with higher newspaper and alternative media use showing lower levels of misperceptions. Results also show that media repertoires do not affect over-time *changes* in misperceptions.

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## Introduction

One key aspect of the last decades transformation of media environments is the increasing supply of different types of information sources. Next to traditional media sources such as newspapers, television and online news sites, recent times have witnessed the rise of political alternative media (Benkler et al., 2018; Heft et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2019; Newman & Kalogeropoulos, 2018). Although the degree of alternativeness differs (Holt et al., 2019), a key difference between these types of media is that political alternative media are governed by political rather than journalistic values (Benkler et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2022a). Another characteristic is that they are often highly critical of mainstream media (Holt, 2018; Nygaard, 2021). In particular, this holds for right-wing alternative media, where mainstream news media are often accused of being leftist, politically correct, and deceitful (Cushion et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2019; Holt, 2018). People choose to rely on alternative media for a variety of reasons. In some instances, people are driven by strong feelings of discontent with political elites, social establishment and traditional media. Other users see alternative media as complementary to traditional media and consider it as a useful way to get a more complete picture of an issue (Schwarzenegger, 2021). A recent study in Sweden demonstrates that alternative media users are younger, lower educated and more likely to be male than other news consumers, hold less favorable views toward politics and media, but are also highly interested in news and often consume a lot of traditional media as well (Andersen et al., 2022).

Alongside the increased supply of alternative media, the last decade has allegedly also witnessed an increasing prevalence of misinformation and misperceptions in society (Benkler et al., 2018; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Conceptually, misinformation refers to false and misleading information, whereas misperceptions refer to perceptions that do not align with the best available information (Flynn et al., 2017). Although it is hard to quantify (changes in) the prevalence of misinformation, research suggests that exposure to misinformation leads to misperceptions and that both misinformation and misperceptions are widespread across societal domains (Flynn, 2016; Flynn et al., 2017; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Several studies have also shown that false, misleading, and biased information is more prevalent in political alternative media and that use of such media contributes to misperceptions (Benkler et al., 2018; Garrett et al., 2016, 2019; Hmielowski et al., 2014; Hutchens et al., 2021; Kull et al., 2003).

Thus far, most studies in this area have however focused on the United States and misperceptions closely related to partisan politics, such as whether former President Barack Obama was born in the United States (Garrett et al., 2016). Hence, it is not clear whether findings apply beyond

the U.S. context and to issues that are less closely linked to partisan politics. The lack of research on the latter is problematic, as the degree of party politicization of an issue may impact the extent to which partisan motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) or cheerleading (Bullock & Lenz, 2019) is triggered when people are questioned about their factual beliefs (Peterson & Iyengar, 2021). Another problem is that there are few studies on how people combine their use of political alternative and mainstream media (e.g., Edgerly, 2015). In contemporary, high-choice and hybrid media environments (Chadwick, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017), people increasingly form their own media repertoires (Bos et al., 2016; Castro et al., 2021; Leonhard et al., 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2018), but thus far, our knowledge about the effects of people's media repertoires on the extent to which they hold misperceptions is virtually non-existent.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to investigate (a) the use of traditional news media *and* political alternative media to both the left and the right, (b) what media repertoires can be identified, and (c) the effects of different media repertoires on misperceptions. In terms of misperceptions, we will focus on five issues that vary in the degree of politicization and salience in the political debate: climate change, immigration, medicine and vaccinations, genetically modified organisms, and crime. Empirically, we will focus on Sweden, a country that has traditionally had quite widespread and overlapping media use, and where political alternative media during the last decade have become more important (Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2018; Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2021; Newman & Kalogeropoulos, 2018). In our analyses, we rely on a specific differentiation between levels of misperceptions, answering the question whether people with different media repertoires differ in their levels of misperceptions. Additionally, we look at changes in misperceptions over time and investigate whether people with different media repertoires also have different trajectories of increasing or decreasing levels of misperceptions.

## **Distinguishing different types of media**

One key aspect of the rise of digital media and the transformation from low-choice to high-choice media environments is that the concept of media has become blurred, both theoretically and from an audience perspective (Bauer et al., 2022; Klawier et al., 2021; Steppat et al., 2023). Traditionally, the terms media and news media were often used interchangeably, but such practices are not tenable in contemporary media environments (Chadwick, 2013; Strömbäck et al., 2022b) with their mix of legacy news media, political alternative media, online-only media, niche media, social media, fake news media, and a host of businesses, foundations, and non-governmental organizations running their own online media.

From a political communication perspective, of particular importance is the distinction between mainstream news media and what is sometimes called non-mainstream, political alternative, or partisan media. While the distinction is not clear-cut and the degree of alternativeness differs among alternative media (Holt et al., 2019; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022), a distinguishing feature of mainstream news media is that they function not just as single organizations but as an institution (Cook, 2005). There are thus great similarities across mainstream news media in terms of how news work is organized, the operating routines for seeking out, checking, and publishing news, the logic by which they operate, and the applied criteria of newsworthiness (Cook, 2005; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). Research also shows that journalists across the world hold highly similar role conceptions, even though the contexts in which journalism is produced differ (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). With respect to mainstream news media, key journalistic values are hence seeking the truth, verifying before publishing, reporting things as they are, impartiality, detachment, and acting as a watchdog against political power (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Political alternative media, in contrast, seek to function as a corrective toward what they perceive as more or less corrupt mainstream news media (Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2019; Holt, 2018; Holt et al., 2019; Nygaard, 2019). These are perceived as being in the pockets of and acting mainly in the interests of certain elites rather than of ordinary people. Media skepticism—defined as a sense of “alienation and mistrust toward mainstream media” (Tsftati, 2003, p. 67)—is thus an important feature of political alternative media and their users (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021; Schulz et al., 2020; Schulze, 2020), and they often accuse mainstream news media of concealing and distorting information that is not deemed “politically correct” by dominant elites (Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2019; Holt et al., 2019). In Europe and the United States, this holds in particular for right-wing political alternative media.

Like fake news sites—which provide false and misleading information, dressed up as journalism (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018)—the motives behind political alternative media can be political or financial, or a blend thereof (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Either way, a distinguishing feature of their alternativeness is that they seek to provide news content based on their political orientation (Holt et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2013; Strömbäck et al., 2022a). Their unique selling point is to deliver news that conforms with certain political or partisan values, thereby confirming corresponding political beliefs, attitudes, and identities (Benkler et al., 2018).

There are thus several reasons why political alternative media are more likely to provide false and misleading information (Benkler et al., 2018;

Garrett et al., 2016; Hmielowski et al., 2014; Hutchens et al., 2021; Kull et al., 2003; Waisbord, 2018), although mainstream media are not innocent in this respect (Tsfati et al., 2020). First, political alternative media tend to compete and seek validation by providing partisan-consistent and identity-conforming news rather than by providing verified, unbiased, and impartial news. Second, these media are more prone toward blending facts and opinions. Third, they often neither have the same motivation nor the resources and routines for verifying the news. Fourth, they are more likely to believe in false and misleading information that casts a bad light on opponents (Benkler et al., 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2022a; Tsfati et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2018) and be skeptical of or even hostile to “facts and truth determined by knowledge-producing elites such as scientists and experts” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 19).

### **The use of political alternative media**

Even though the distinction between mainstream news media and political alternative media is not clear-cut, evidence shows that political alternative media have become more popular. This holds true not only in the United States, but also in other countries (Newman et al., 2018). In the United States, these include websites such as Breitbart and Daily Caller, in Germany Junge Freiheit and Compact Online, in Spain Libertad Digital and Periodista Digital, in the United Kingdom The Canary and Westminster, and in Sweden Fria Tider and Nyheter Idag (Newman & Kalogeropoulos, 2018; Newman et al., 2018). In many countries, right-wing political alternative media are more prominent than left-wing political alternative media, and many of them began as anti-immigration alternative media (Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2018; Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2021).

While the audience share for political alternative media in most cases might be quite small compared to mainstream news media (Newman et al., 2018), they may still be important for parts of the population, and news from them often circulate through social media and thereby reach larger audiences (Sandberg & Ihlebaek, 2019). The effects of political alternative media thus deserve scholarly attention. In some countries, political alternative media have furthermore proven to be quite successful. Apart from U.S. examples such as Breitbart, many countries nowadays have political alternative media that are rather widely used (Newman et al., 2018). One of these countries is Sweden, where some online right-wing political alternative media have become relatively prominent and successful (Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2018; Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2021; Newman et al., 2018, 2020). In general, they can be classified as anti-immigration, right-wing populist anti-establishment and anti-mainstream media (Holt, 2018; Ihlebaek & Nygaard, 2021; Theorin & Strömbäck,

2020). According to the Reuters Digital News Report, two of these—Nyheter Idag and Fria Tider—are used at least weekly by about 10% of the online population (Newman et al., 2020).

However, little is known about how people combine the use of mainstream news media and political alternative media—in particular beyond the U.S. case. While many have raised fears that the increasing prevalence of political alternative media, algorithms and political selective exposure will lead people to enclose themselves in echo chambers (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Pariser, 2011), research also shows that there is great overlap with the use of major mainstream news media (Bos et al., 2016; Castro et al., 2021; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Thus, while the term *alternative* suggests that people use political alternative media instead of mainstream news media, research showing that exposure to these different media overlaps suggests that people use political alternative media as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, mainstream news media. This is what Edgerly (2015) found in her study on news repertoires in the US, which included political alternative media. However, she found one group—“conservative only”—that almost exclusively used conservative media. As there are only few studies following a media repertoire approach and that include political alternative media, it is however unclear how far the results can be replicated in other contexts. This leads to our first research questions, which will be addressed in a Swedish context:

**RQ1:** Accounting for the use of both mainstream news media and political alternative media, what media repertoires can be identified in the public?

**RQ2:** Is there a media repertoire that is dominated by the usage of political alternative media?

## Effects of media use on (mis)perceptions

As suggested by many studies, misinformation and misperceptions are significant and likely growing problems (Benkler et al., 2018; Damstra et al., 2023; Flynn, 2016; Flynn et al., 2017; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019), with several studies showing that misperceptions are widespread across societal domains (Flynn, 2016; Flynn et al., 2017; Kull et al., 2003; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). In terms of explaining misperceptions, the most important factors seem to be exposure to misinformation in combination with directional motivated reasoning and confirmation bias (Flynn et al., 2017; Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013). More specifically, research shows that people have an innate tendency to prefer information which confirms their already held beliefs and attitudes, and this influences both their exposure to and avoidance of different information sources and their processing of information (Flynn et al., 2017; Garrett et al., 2013;

Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998). Another key factor is laziness, in that people are cognitive misers that often rely on partisan cues and heuristics instead of engaging in more analytical and critical thinking (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

However, the role of media and media use should not be underestimated. For most people, most of the time, different types of media constitute the most important source of information about politics and society (Mutz, 1998; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014), and the connection between media use and the learning and internalization of political information and knowledge has been repeatedly substantiated in communication research (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Price & Zaller, 1993). Research also shows that media use has an impact on the extent to which people are informed versus uninformed (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Eveland, 2000; Fraile & Iyengar, 2014; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021; Shehata et al., 2015). Hence, media use should have an impact also on the extent to which people are misinformed (Damstra et al., 2023; Kuklinski et al., 2000).

Jamieson and Cappella (2008) have documented differences in the facts reported by different partisan media in the US and have termed this phenomenon “the balkanization of political knowledge.” They find that listeners to conservative talk radio “and, by implication, the audiences to other partisan sites, whether liberal or conservative, can come to hold specific knowledge largely unshared by those unexposed to these or similar outlets” (p. 191). Additional research shows that “use of ideological media is consistently associated with holding misperceptions” (Garrett et al., 2016, p. 341). Feldman et al. (2012), for example, found not only that Fox took a more dismissive tone toward climate change than CNN and MSNBC, but also that watching Fox was associated with less acceptance of climate change. Along the same lines, Hmielowski et al. (2014) found that conservative media use decreases certainty that global warming is happening, while Garrett et al. (2016) found that the use of liberal and conservative websites promotes ideologically consistent misperceptions (see also Garrett et al., 2019).

Despite the above findings, research on the effects of media use on misperceptions is limited, both in terms of the number of studies, the fact that most research has been done in the United States, and that most studies have focused on a limited number of issues such as global warming and perceptions of presidential candidates. Flynn et al. (2017, p. 140) thus conclude their review of research on misperceptions that “little is known more generally about ... what effects misleading media coverage has on public opinion.”

The limitations in knowledge of the effects of media use on misperceptions holds true both when it comes to mainstream news media and political alternative media use. In fact, using both types of media may



lead to misperceptions, although mainstream media are supposed to provide only verified information. To begin with, research suggests that many learn about fake news from mainstream media (Tsfati et al., 2020). While for mainstream media, the purpose of covering false and misleading information may be to fact-check or debunk it (Graves, 2016). Yet, when doing so, they repeat the false and misleading information and thereby help to disseminate it (Tsfati et al., 2020). Second, as the main arena for debates about politics, mainstream news media are bound to disseminate false and misleading information from different sources. One reason for this is that mainstream news media do not have the time or resources to check the veracity of information from external sources, while another is their tendency to satisfice with reporting both sides of a political controversy (Pingree et al., 2014). Third, when politicians say things that are false, mainstream media might consider the very fact that a politician uttered a falsity as a news that should be reported (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

However, how often mainstream news media feature false and misleading information is not clear. Political alternative media, on the other hand, can be expected to select and frame issues based on how they align with their political motivations rather than based on factual correctness. Hence, the use of both types of media may impact the prevalence of misperceptions among their audiences. Most important, however, is not the use of single media or media types, but the effects of different media repertoires on misperceptions. First, accounting for the effects of different media repertoires gets closer to how people actually use various types of media. Second, if the effects of using one type of media differ from the effects of using another, then the total media effect is better captured by investigating the effects of media repertoires than of using specific media or media types (Strömbäck et al., 2018).

As we do not yet know what media repertoires exist among Swedish news audiences, it is difficult to be more precise in terms of the effects of different media repertoires on the extent to which citizens hold misperceptions. However, following the reasoning above, we expect that the degree to which different media repertoires includes mainstream news media versus political alternative media use matters. Therefore, we address the following research question:

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between different media repertoires and levels of misperceptions?

While there might be a direct relationship between media use and levels of misperceptions, a related question is whether the same is the case for changes in misperceptions. Knowledge acquisition is a dynamic process and levels of misperceptions might differ over time as the information

a person encounters incrementally influences their knowledge and understanding of the world around them. To address this, we formulate the following research question:

**RQ4:** What is the effect of different media repertoires on changes in levels of misperceptions?

## Case selection, data and methodology

To address our research questions, we will focus on the case of Sweden. This case was selected for several reasons. First, within the family of established Western democracies, Sweden constitutes a most different case compared to the United States where most research in this area has been done. For example, Sweden represents a prototypical case of the democratic-corporatist model of media and politics, in contrast to the United States, which represents a prototypical case of the liberal model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Second and relatedly, Sweden represents a *media welfare state*, with extensive and overlapping use of mainstream news media and strong public service broadcasting (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Also important is that all mainstream news media are politically independent and that their news coverage is not systematically biased neither to the left or the right (Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019). Third, in recent years, Sweden has become one of the European countries where online political alternative media have become most successful in terms of audience reach. This holds particularly for right-wing, political alternative media (Heft et al., 2020; Holt, 2018; Newman et al., 2018).

### Panel survey

Data was collected by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE), the Swedish Ethical Review Authority within the University of Gothenburg reviewed and approved the study (ID number 1016–18). The panel survey is web-based, with a probability sample of Swedish residents ages 18-years or older. The first panel wave was in the field between February 24 and March 25, 2020, and the second between February 25 and March 30, 2021. The net sample size was 5,223 residents. Of these, 3,329 completed the questionnaire in Wave 1, resulting in a net participation rate of 63.7%. Out of those, 2,337 also participated in Wave 2, resulting in a total cooperation rate of 45.7%. Not all respondents answered all questions, yielding a sample of around 1,800 for our multivariate analyses that span both waves.

To identify media repertoires, we rely on a range of media use questions asked in the first panel wave. These questions include the use of all mainstream national news media in a typical week, as well as the use of a range

of alternative media. These were chosen based on a pilot study and include the 20 most used alternative media at the time. For mainstream media, scores range from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*seven days a week*). For alternative media, the scores range from 0 (*never*) to 8 (*seven days a week*), including an additional category 1 (*less than once a week*). A list of the included media can be found in [Table 1](#).

We use the eight national mainstream media and the 19 other media as measured in the first wave as input for a latent profile analysis which helps us to identify different clusters or subgroups in the population (i.e., media repertoires). This type of approach is useful to identify latent classes based on interval variables (see Geers & Vliegenthart, 2021 for a similar approach). We rely on the *GSEM* module in STATA. Previous research has demonstrated that in Sweden, and in comparable countries such as the Netherlands, typically four types of media repertoires can be identified (Andersen et al., 2022; Bos et al., 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2018).

Our dependent variable is the degree to which people hold misperceptions. The measurement was repeated in Wave 1 and Wave 2. Misperceptions are defined as beliefs that are inconsistent with the best available evidence. We focus on five policy issues that have been subject to

**Table 1.** Mainstream news media and alternative media outlets included.

Title	Type	Mean	SD
Aftonbladet*	National newspaper	2.40	2.82
Expressen*	National newspaper	1.58	2.46
Dagens Nyheter*	National newspaper	1.29	2.33
Svenska Dagbladet*	National newspaper	0.78	1.82
Rapport i SVT*	Television news	3.43	2.75
Aktuellt i SVT*	Television news	2.91	2.62
Nyheterna i TV4*	Television news	2.59	2.61
Ekot Sveriges Radio*	Radio	2.65	2.76
Nyheter24	Sensationalistic online newspaper	0.74	1.38
Fria Tider	Alternative right	0.32	1.14
Samhällsnytt	Alternative right	0.33	1.18
Nyheter idag	Alternative right	0.35	1.21
Ledarsidorna.se	Alternative right	0.51	1.60
Dagen	Alternative christian	0.11	0.53
Dagens arena	Alternative left	0.10	0.50
Aktuellt i Politiken	Alternative left	0.12	0.62
Arbetaren	Alternative left	0.12	0.51
Arbetet	Alternative left	0.16	0.67
ETC	Alternative left	0.40	1.13
Expo	Alternative anti-racism	0.21	0.67
Interassist, men	Alternative anti racism	0.20	0.79
Kurera.se	Alternative medical	0.09	0.46
Klimatupplysningen.se	Alternative climate skeptic	0.08	0.57
Kvartal	Alternative center-right	0.16	0.82
Dagens industri	Economic newspaper (niche)	1.19	1.79
Göteborgs-Posten*	Local newspaper	1.47	2.39
Sydsvenskan*	Local newspaper	0.62	1.53

*N* = 3,107; \*mainstream news media.

varying levels of public debate in the Swedish case: climate change, vaccination, crime, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and immigration. For each topic, respondents are asked to indicate whether four factual statements are correct, with response options running from (1) (*very certain it is false*) to 5 (*very certain it is true*). For each topic, two of the statements are compatible with the best available evidence (research and official statistics), while two of the statements represent misperceptions; not being compatible with the best available evidence. We have carefully created issue and statement combinations for which a high degree of expert consensus exists (Damstra et al., 2023; Vraga & Bode, 2020). Items were recoded so that the response categories of all items run from 1 (*strong misperception*) to 5 (*strong accurate perception*). Appendix B in the online materials provides more information on the statements and demonstrates remarkably similar descriptive statistics for Wave 1 and Wave 2. It also demonstrates that not all items for the separate issues form a reliable scale. However, combined, the 20 items form a reliable scale with an alpha of .75 (Wave 1) and .77 (Wave 2). Here, we are interested in the general patterns and do not focus on issue-specific misperceptions. Consequently, for each respondent, the scores of the 20 items were summed, generating an overall score between 20 (*100% misbeliefs*) to 100 (*100% accurate beliefs*). We normalized and recoded this score to run from 0 (*lowest possible misperceptions*) to 1 (*highest possible misperceptions*).

Control variables were all measured in the first wave. First, to account for alternative ways in which people may inform themselves, we include a measure tapping into news consumption through social media. Respondents are asked how often, in a typical week, they come across news or discussions about politics and society through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. The response categories range from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*several times a day*) ( $\alpha = .58$ ;  $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). We also include the frequency with which respondents talk about politics, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very often*) ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ).

Second, considering Zaller's (1992) argument that more engaged audiences are more likely to receive political messages and internalize them, we control for political interest, which is measured in a straightforward way. Respondents are asked: "Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?," with response categories ranging from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 4 (*very interested*) ( $M = 2.05$ ;  $SD = 0.76$ ). Next, we also control for a measure for "textbook" political knowledge, another indicator of high engagement with and interest in politics, that also quite logically relates to our dependent variable. Political knowledge was measured as a summative index of four questions related to basic political facts ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Given previous research connecting trust in media and accurate political perceptions (Ladd, 2011), we also control for media trust by asking:

“Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media in Sweden?” with response categories ranging from 1 (*do not trust at all*) to 7 (*trust completely*) ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). Ideological self-identification is measured by the question: “In politics, people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?” ( $M = 4.99$ ;  $SD = 4.99$ ). Finally, we include basic demographic characteristics: age (six groups,  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) and education (nine categories,  $M = 5.66$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ) and gender (52% female).

To answer our third research question, asking about the relationship between media repertoires and misperceptions, we conduct regression analyses where we predict misperceptions in Wave 1 based on media repertoires and control variables from Wave 1. To answer RQ4, we predict misperceptions in Wave 2 based on media repertoires and control variables from Wave 1, while also adding misperceptions in Wave 1 (lagged dependent variable) as a control variable to the model. We repeat those analyses for the separate issues that jointly compose our misperceptions index to assess the stability of our findings.

## Results

Turning to the findings, we first present the results of our Latent Profile Analysis. Based on fit statistics, we find a solution with five clusters to have the best model fit compared to models with fewer clusters (log likelihood =  $-36378.02$ ; AIC =  $73034.04$ ; BIC =  $73895.45$ ).<sup>1</sup> Based on average use per medium, these five clusters are labeled and presented in Table 2 (for more elaborate information, see Table A1 in Appendix A in the online supplemental materials). Hence, the answer to RQ1 is that five media repertoires can be identified. The labels summarize the main orientation within each repertoire but are inherently a simplified description. The largest media repertoire, by far, is television users, which comprise almost half of respondents at 49.9%. Thereafter follows traditional omnivores, 21.6%; news minimalists, 11.6%; television avoiders, 11.3%; and online users, 5.5%.

RQ2 asked if there are any media repertoires dominated by usage of political alternative media. The straightforward answer is no. There is

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<sup>1</sup>We additionally tested models with more clusters—some of them demonstrated slightly better model fit, which might not be surprising given the high number of media variables included in the models. However, in terms of interpretation, the additional clusters did not represent any clear-cut unique additional media repertoire. A six-cluster solution, for example, reveals an additional small group that mainly relies on a single newspaper (*Dagens Nyheter*), but furthermore resembles the five-cluster solution.

**Table 2.** Media repertoires.

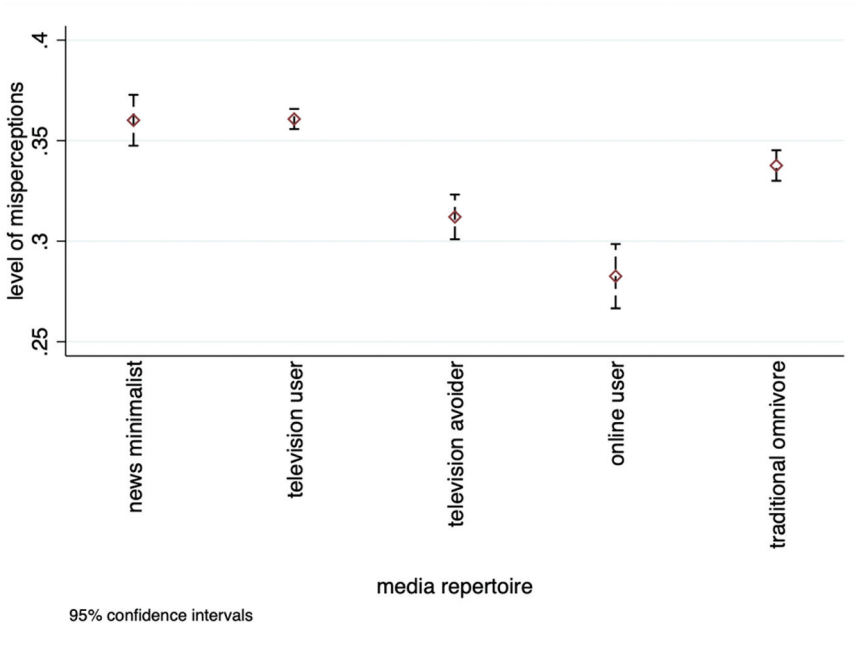
Class	Label	Percentage	N
1	News minimalists	11.6	422
2	Television users	49.9	1,812
3	Television avoiders	11.3	411
4	Online users	5.5	201
5	Traditional omnivores	21.6	785

one media repertoire—online users—with individuals who use alternative media to a considerable degree, but they do this in conjunction with other, more traditional online media. It should also be noted that the share of respondents in this cluster is quite limited, which suggests that the use of political alternative media might be less widespread than suggested by the Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020).

In all other categories, respondents mainly use mainstream media. There, however, exist some nuanced differences in the supplementary use of alternative media. Among news minimalists and television users, the use of alternative media is close to absent, while in the television avoiders cluster and among traditional omnivores, we do find low, yet noticeable use of alternative media such as *Fria Tider* (an anti-immigration online newspaper) and *Interasist, men* (an anti-racist website that scrutinizes the far-right political party Sweden Democrats) by television avoiders and *Samhällsnytt* and *Ledarsidorna.se* (both far-right websites) by traditional omnivores. An additional analysis demonstrates that the correlation between the usage of various national mainstream media and alternative media is on average slightly positive ( $r = .02$ ), which indicates that alternative media do not function as a replacement for mainstream media. This underlines the findings of the LCA that alternative media are used in conjunction with other media.

A key question in this study—addressed by RQ3—is the relationship between different media repertoires and levels of misperceptions. The initial findings are displayed in [Figure 1](#), which shows that news minimalists (1) and TV users (2) hold the highest degree of misperceptions, followed by traditional omnivores (5) and television avoiders (3). Somewhat remarkable, online users, the media repertoire where alternative media use (4) is considerably higher than in other repertoires, hold fewest misperceptions. Overall, it should however also be noted that levels of misperceptions are relatively low, with average scores around .3 on a 0 to 1 scale.

For a more stringent test, [Table 3](#) presents the association between news repertoires and misperceptions found in a multivariate analysis, controlling for a range of individual background characteristics. These results show that not all the differences in the mean comparisons presented in [Figure 1](#) remain significant.



**Figure 1.** Level of misperceptions per media repertoire (wave 1), mean values.

**Table 3.** Predicting misperceptions in wave 2.

Misperceptions (Wave 2)	B	p	SE	β
<i>News repertoires<sup>1</sup></i>				
Television users	.010	.112	.007	.056
Television avoiders	−.023**	.005	.008	−.079
Online users	−.029**	.003	.010	−.077
Traditional omnivores	.001	.937	.007	.003
Political talk	−.005**	.002	.002	−.079
Political interest	.010**	.003	.003	.081
Trust in media	−.016***	.000	.002	−.228
Left-right	.002*	.032	.001	.046
Textbook political knowledge	−.017***	.000	.002	−.172
Age	.004**	.002	.001	.070
Education	−.009***	.000	.001	−.202
Female	−.028***	.000	.004	−.151
Constant	.535***	.000	.020	
R2			.268	

*N* = 1,834, \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

Taking our control variables into account, those in the media repertoires television avoiders and online users hold the lowest degree of misperceptions, while television users score highest on misperceptions.

Overall, these results only partially demonstrate a negative association between mainstream media use and misperceptions: while newspaper use (particularly present among television avoiders and omnivores) in general comes with lower levels of misperceptions, this is not the case for television use. We do not find evidence for a positive association between alternative media use and holding misperceptions, as has often been found in previous research in the U.S. context.

The results also show that the control variables affect misperceptions in significant ways, but, while the effects are significant in many instances, effect sizes are relatively small, with  $\beta$  coefficients only indicating small changes in absolute levels of misperceptions. For example, interpersonal communication, trust in media and political knowledge are associated with lower levels of misperceptions, while political interest is, maybe surprisingly, positively associated with misperceptions. Higher educated, younger people, and females hold lower levels of misperceptions as well.

An additional analysis where we replace the media clusters with summative indexes for different types of media including TV, national newspapers, local (online) and niche outlets (economic newspaper *Dagens Industri*) and alternative media confirm the findings, but also provides additional insight in relation to RQ3 (see Table A2 in Appendix A in the online supplemental materials). Results demonstrate that newspaper use indeed is negatively associated with misperceptions, while TV use has a positive association. The results also show that local media use is negatively associated with misperceptions, while alternative media use as such does not have a significant relationship with levels of misperceptions. An additional noteworthy finding is that the explained variances do not substantially differ across models. The model using the media repertoire approach explains 26.8% of the variance in misperceptions; the explained variance in the model using the more traditional exposure measures is comparable: 27%. Thus, while repertoires provide a useful distinction in understanding the patterns in media use, they do not provide additional explanatory leverage for understanding misperceptions. A replication of the lagged dependent variable with indexes for different types of media resemble the findings reported in Table 3 (see Table A3 in Appendix in the online supplemental materials), with no substantial effects of media use on misperceptions.

We also investigate whether results are similar across different issues that underlie the misconceptions index. Results of an issue-by-issue analysis (see Table A4 in the Appendix in the online supplemental materials) demonstrate that this is largely the case. We do see that misperceptions for some issues are more strongly affected by news use than others (e.g.



immigration), but we did not find significantly different effects of news profiles or misperceptions in any of those instances.

Turning to the final research question (RQ4), we are interested in the dynamic nature of misperceptions and, more specifically, in the effect of different media repertoires on changes in levels of misperceptions. Table 4 presents the same analysis as was presented in Table 3 but adds a lagged dependent variable, thus focusing on over-time changes in misperceptions that might be related to media use.

The answer to RQ4 is straightforward: there are no differences in levels of misperceptions between the news repertoires when controlling for initial levels of misperceptions. This indicates that levels of misperceptions are stable, which is also reflected in the large effect of the lagged dependent variable in the model. Because of this, the room for media effects is very limited. An analysis with different types of media confirms the absence of media use effects. Again, we also consider issue-specific effects. Table A5 in the online appendix reports the findings. Also, when we consider misperceptions per issue, we see little effects of news repertoires, with one noteworthy exception. With the issue of immigration, we see that online users and traditional omnivores have decreasing misperceptions over time. In both clusters, alternative media play some role, which further underlines that alternative media use in reality does not contribute to growing misperceptions.

**Table 4.** Predicting misperceptions in wave 2, lagged dependent variable model.

Misperceptions (Wave 2)	B	p	SE	$\beta$
Misperceptions (Wave 1)	.664	.000	.017	.689
<i>News repertoires<sup>1</sup></i>				
Television user	-.001	.855	.005	-.005
Television avoider	-.007	.219	.006	-.026
Online user	-.009	.196	.007	-.024
Traditional omnivores	-.003	.519	.005	-.016
Political talk	-.001	.319	.001	-.019
Political interest	.004	.137	.003	.030
Trust in media	-.006***	.000	.001	-.089
Left-right	.001	.360	.001	.014
Textbook knowledge	-.004*	.011	.002	-.041
Age	.002*	.026	.001	.038
Education	-.002**	.001	.001	-.053
Female	-.004	.219	.003	-.019
Constant	.148***	.000	.018	
R2			.607	

N = 1,796, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Recent scientific and public debates have devoted ample attention to the prevalence of misinformation and misperceptions, and the potentially harmful consequences of political alternative media that are more

likely to spread mis- and disinformation and thereby foster misperceptions among citizens (Strömbäck et al., 2022a). In this study, we put some of the widely shared concerns to an empirical test. Our analysis of media use and misperceptions among the Swedish population provides surprisingly little reason for concern. First, the use of political alternative media is limited, and few people use political alternative media. If they use them, it is usually in conjunction with other media that can be found online. In addition, people that have political alternative media in their diet seem to hold lower levels of misperceptions, probably because political alternative media are only a small part of their media consumption, or they use them just to know what is available.

In more general terms, we find that traditional media still dominate people's news use in Sweden and the different media repertoires we find reflect those media. The media repertoires we found are also quite similar to what previous studies in Sweden have found, even though the number of media included differs (Andersen et al., 2022; Strömbäck et al., 2018). We find that the use of television news is positively associated with levels of misperceptions, while additional analyses of the use of various types of media revealed that newspaper use is associated with lower levels of misperceptions. Overall, it is important to emphasize that differences in misperceptions across different media repertoires are limited in absolute terms. Additionally, misperceptions are stable over time, with high correlations between the level of misperceptions in the two waves, collected a year apart, and media repertoires do not add much to the explanation of changes between the waves. We do find some more issue specific effects and they confirm that media repertoires that include alternative media use do not yield more misperceptions either.

While not the main focus of the current contribution, some of the findings for the control variables are worth noting. The negative associations between misperceptions and textbook political knowledge in all models are consistent with previous research (Garrett et al., 2016), with Zaller's (1992) arguments and, hence, indirectly can be viewed as evidence supporting the construct validity of the current misperceptions measure. The negative association between media trust and misperceptions, also consistent with previous research (Ladd, 2011), also carries important implications. The fact that trust in media reduces political misperceptions indirectly provides implicating evidence that the news media indeed play an important part in shaping these perceptions. This stands in some contrast to the positive effect of television-based diet on misperceptions, especially given that television emerges from the data as the most frequently used source of news.

Despite these findings, some caveats should be noted. First, while we carefully created and used statement combinations for which a high degree of expert consensus exists and included five different issue domains, we do not

know the extent to which our results on the effects of media use are sensitive to how misperceptions are measured and whether results would have been different if other issue domains are included. Thus, future research should explore the relationship between media use and misperceptions using different types of issue domains and ways of measuring misperceptions (see also Lindgren et al., 2022). Second, while general media use patterns are informative, and people using certain media might be more prone to misperceptions than others, future research should delve more into the actual content of political news and combine (changes in) perceptions with the content people are exposed to (De Vreese et al., 2017). Additionally, in this study we focused on Sweden, in many respects a most different case within the family of Western democracies compared to the United States (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In neither case is it clear how sensitive findings are to the context of their country. Hence, systematic and cross-national research on the relationship between media repertoires and misperceptions is warranted. It might well be that Sweden, with its relatively strong newspaper market and public broadcasting is an exceptional case, and that the use of political alternative media in other contexts is more consequential. Finally, the time lag in our study was one year, which may be too long. More longitudinal research covering other, and multiple, time spans is hence warranted to explore this relationship further.

Nevertheless, two key take-aways are that media repertoires do matter for levels of misperceptions, but that the use and effects of political alternative media is quite limited. Hence, while sometimes alarmist accounts of the negative consequences of political alternative media are widely present, they should not be taken over blindly. As with the use and effects of all other types of media, the use and effects of alternative media are context dependent and require empirical assessments.

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