

Mainstream News Media Trust, Countermedia Attendance, and Political Learning

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Abstract: Using a two-wave panel dataset, this study set out to better understand the relationship between mainstream news trust, countermedia attendance (i.e., the use of informational sources that directly criticize, oppose, and challenge the mainstream news media), and political knowledge. The results of a lagged autoregressive path model indicated that mainstream news media trust was negatively associated with countermedia attendance and that countermedia attendance was negatively associated with political learning. An additional cross-lagged panel model estimating reciprocal effects between mainstream news trust and countermedia attendance suggested that frequent attendance to countermedia sources is also supportive of diminished levels of trust in the mainstream news media.

Keywords: *countermedia, mainstream news media trust, political knowledge, political learning*

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Contemporary concerns over the propulsion of ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan, and factually incorrect information into the public sphere are widespread. As so-called advanced democracies around the globe continue engage in a pattern of democratic backsliding (e.g., Abramowitz & Repucci, 2018), one critical issue of our times pertains to the acquisition of a better understanding of relationship between a fragmented and remediated public informational sphere and the emergence of worrying democratic trajectories. It is, is of course, important to acknowledge that the ongoing legitimization of anti-democratic, populist, nativist, and identarian sentiment in mainstream political apparatuses is not singularly a product the contemporary information ecosystem, but also linked in fundamental ways to widespread material inequalities, the failure of liberalized public policy, and cultural systems that produce and reproduce norms of exclusion. Having said that, it seems also straightforward to note that non-democratic actors have—against this backdrop of political inefficiency and social problems—seized upon the diffusion of emergent digital platforms as a means of cultivating ideologically useful public opinion.

In light of the foregoing, this study explored the relationship between trust in the mainstream news media, countermedia attendance, and political knowledge. Countermedia are digitally-based informational sources that (1) provide alternative (via-a-vis the mainstream news media) renderings of reality while (2) while also directly challenging, opposing, and criticizing the traditional press (Hopp et al., 2020; Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2019; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). In this way, countermedia seek to undermine the epistemic standing of the mainstream press in the public sphere (Hopp & Ferrucci, 2020), and, in so doing, create and recreate informational conditions hospitable to democratic disengagement. We link the use of countermedia to both

trust in the mainstream press and to political learning outcomes to more fully understand the potential antecedents to and consequences of regular attendance to social and political information that is characterized by a hostility to the norms, practices, and outputs of the mainstream press.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we note Anderson et al.'s (2023) recent demonstration of a negative linkage between mainstream news media trust and attendance to alternative media in the context of Swedish information consumers. In some ways, this project serves as an attempt to replicate these findings in the US news environment. However, and additionally, this project seeks to connect mainstream news media trust to a *specific type* of alternative media, namely countermedia, which, in addition to providing alternative information also attempts to challenge, oppose, criticize, and, ultimately, delegitimize the mainstream press' epistemic standing within the public sphere. Second, this study seeks to understand if regular use of the countermedia has implications for mainstream news media trust. As Slater (2007) previously noted, the relationship between motivated content consumption and content effects is often complex in nature insofar as "media selectivity and media effects form a reciprocal, mutually influencing process" (p. 283). Third, this study links countermedia attendance to political knowledge gain. Concerns over the extent to which consumption of digital, alternative, and other non-traditional sources of political and social information has the potential to produce an underinformed electorate are pronounced; however, scholarship in this area has produced a variety of mixed, inconsistent effects (e.g., see, for instance, Hopp & Kazmi, 2023, for review). One potential explanation for this lack of clarity may be related to the current literature's tendency to focus on channel (e.g., newspaper, broadcast news, cable news) or platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram) usage frequencies rather than attendance to

specific content types (e.g., countermedia). A particularized focus on the relationship between attendance to countermedia and political learning is critical as democratically relevant knowledge acquisition in high-choice media environments is a central question for the disciplines of political communication and journalism studies (e.g., Holbert, 2005).

Literature Review

Political Knowledge and Political Learning

The relationship between news media use and political knowledge states is a frequently studied topic in the scholarly literature (e.g., Dimitrova et al., 2014; Kaufhold, et. al, 2010). The society-wide diffusion of political knowledge—defined as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long term memory” (Delli Carptini & Keeter, 1996, p. 10)—is generally understood to be a requirement for democratic efficiency (e.g., Dimitrova et al., 2014; Hopp et al., 2023; Kaufhold, et. al, 2010; Kleinberg & Lau, 2019). Building on the baseline definition of political knowledge, political learning refers to the (1) over-time (2) acquisition of (3) previously unknown political facts.

Because attendance to the mass media is a primary way that people acquire non-experiential knowledge about the surrounding world, research has reliably shown that consumption of news media artifacts from the traditional media is a predictor of political knowledge acquisition (e.g., Culbertson & Stempel, 1986; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Moeller & De Vreese, 2015). Less is known about how attendance to alternative news media and information sources may contribute to political knowledge. This lack of clarity is likely due to several reasons, including the relative novelty of alternative digital media and the multiplicity of forms and content that together comprise the “alternative media.” In the space below, we discuss a particular type of alternative media, the countermedia.

Countermedia

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the term *fake news* became a national lexical fixture. The presence of so-called fake news within the news ecosystem affected media credibility and catalyzed a wave of journalistic paradigm repair, discourse essentially distancing professional journalism from fake news as a whole (McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2018). This should not, necessarily, be surprising considering evidence suggesting that the factually incorrect or otherwise contextually distorted narratives disseminated via social media were overwhelmingly supportive of Donald Trump, and, as such, may have played some role in his ascendancy to the office of the President of the United States (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Yet while fake news became a ubiquitous social term, scholars quickly started to note the numerous implicit difficulties with the concept (Hopp et al., 2020). Tandoc Jr et al. (2018), for example, illustrated how contemporary representations of fake news served as a catch-all categorization scheme for a wide variety of both new and old forms of social information types. Moreover, normative holdings of the fake news concept evoke the notion of intentionality, or the idea that content production is rooted in a deliberate attempt to affect pre-determined political or social outcomes. While, of course, actors may deliberately generate and spread false information, communicator intent is challenging to reliably ascertain, and, in many cases, communication behaviors may be rooted in knowledge gaps or factual misinterpretations (e.g., Lazer et al., 2018). From a constitutive perspective, the linking of the words “fake” and “news” implies a connection to normatively objective journalistic content, which then means that audiences may have difficulty distinguishing the difference between actual journalism and false political information (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Finally, from a perhaps broader philosophical vantage, there often exists reasonable debate over the nature, character, and interpretation of “the facts.”

Accordingly, scholars have previously argued that “fake news is defined more by partisanship and identity politics than misinformation and deception” (Mourão & Robertson, 2019, p. 2091).

In light of difficulties pertaining to the reliable, precise, and accurate use of the fake news frame, scholars have posed alternate means of understanding the social preponderance of false, hyper-partisan, and distorted political information. Perhaps the most widely used alternative framing is that of *mis and disinformation* (e.g., Fallis, 2016; Wardle, 2020). In this conceptualization, information can be classified based on pre-existing communicator intentional goals and knowledge states. In cases where factually incorrect or substantially distorted information is shared for the purposes of deliberately incurring harm, one might conclude that that disinformation has been produced. Alternately, in scenarios where incorrect information is unknowingly produced and/or disseminated, a classification of misinformation is invoked (Wardle, 2020). While this approach avoids undesirable connotative linkages between low-quality and/or factually incorrect information and normatively objective journalistic reporting, it broadly fails to provide a useful means of actually and accurately ascertaining communicator intentions (Hopp et al., 2020). Moreover, the mis and disinformation schema also serve as a sort of aggregated classification mechanism (e.g., Wardle, 2020) that struggles to address the oft-blurred lines between truth and inaccuracy. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, the mis and disinformation lens offers limited perspective on the media ecosystem that feeds the modern public sphere. Factually incorrect, grossly distorted, and hyper-partisan information are produced and distributed via a wide array of means and by a plethora of different actors. Failing to account for this cascading array of background factors results in a diminished ability to understand intent, and, therein, presents challenges for media researchers seeking to understand how colliding forms of social and political information do and do not affect the contemporary public discourse.

Given the foregoing challenges, researchers in the areas of journalism studies, mass and public communication, sociology, and the computational social sciences have sought to explicate and develop a theoretical notion of the *countermedia*. For the purposes of this work, the countermedia can be defined as digitally oriented information providers that, as a key positional attribute, “tend to explicitly oppose ‘the (mainstream) media’ as well as the establishment” (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 1). In short, countermedia providers generate a rendering of reality that is foundationally and explicitly oppositional to the depictions of reality found in the mainstream media. While countermedia providers often (but not exclusively) spread inaccurate, distorted, or hyper-partisan information, their primary objective is to weaken the traditional media’s standing in the public sphere as a means of advancing a specified ideological or socio-political project (Hopp et al., 2020; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Frequently, countermedia sites take on the informational format and linguistic structures of the mainstream press while simultaneously disengaging with practices of objectivity, verifiability, and context provision which normatively govern typical journalistic practice (Noppari et al., 2019). This ultimately means that countermedia characteristically produces narratives that actively challenge depictions of reality that do not fit within the countermedia site’s ideological knowledge framework. The goal, then, for countermedia is not to strengthen democracy or inform the citizenry, but, instead, to undermine key democratic principles related to truth, fairness, and inclusivity (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). As such, countermedia is inherently anti-democratic.

Recent literature has examined how countermedia operates and, therein, has explored its effects (intended and otherwise) on modern political discourse. Hopp and Ferrucci (2020), for instance, argued that the pollution of the normative public sphere via the inclusion of countermedia content can distort, challenge, and undermine the democratic practices used by

journalists to facilitate an informed and tolerant citizenry. Similarly, Ihlebæk and Figenschou (2022) contend that countermedia sources are “characterized by their antagonistic position” (p. 27) and seek to move the boundaries of acceptable discourse. For citizens, the presence of countermedia can, in some cases, reinforce their belief systems and lead them to share ideological extreme or inaccurate content through social media, which, in a way, reinforces the alleged legitimacy of this material within certain groups (Ferrucci et al., 2020; Shin & Thorson, 2017). Moreover, Toivanen et al. (2022) argued that the countermedia has a mutualistic dependency on the mainstream news media insofar as “countermedia do not exist in a void, but through remediation, they interact with mainstream media sources and are an integral part of the hybrid media environment” (p. 2146). In this sense, observable intent of countermedia is not necessarily to misinform people, but rather challenge mainstreamed mechanisms of knowledge production via the admission of *deviant information* (Hallin, 1989) into the mainstream public sphere (Haller et al., 2019).

Trust in the Mainstream News Media

Audience trust in the mainstream news media (however defined) plays a critical role in relationship between news consumers and providers, and, in extension, has extensive implications for how citizens understand the political and social worlds within which they are embedded. The decline in mainstream news media trust has been well-documented, with various studies tracing its trajectory across time (e.g., Jones, 2018). Tsfati and Ariely (2010), Fletcher and Park (2017), and Strömback et al (2020) have highlighted complex relationships between informational content consumption and trust in the press, suggesting that while diminished levels of trust in the mainstream news media is generally predictive diminished levels of news media attendance, this relationship is both modest and contextual (e.g., Strömback et al, 2020; Tsfati &

Cappella, 2005). From a slightly different perspective, research has shown that distrust is the mainstream news media drives the selection of and attendance to alternative information sources, specifically such that “decreasing trust in mainstream media is related to increasing alternative news orientation” (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 846).

From a definitional perspective, it is important to note that trust in the mainstream media has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Typical constitutive definitions, according to Strömbäck et al (2020), center on individual-level judgements pertaining to the extent which the mainstream news apparatus is trustworthy and credible. Operationally speaking, however, scholars have used a wide range of approaches to measurement trust in the media. Some of these measures have used single-item measures to probe confidence in the mainstream press (e.g., Jones, 2018; Guess et al., 2018), while others have deployed multi-dimensional approaches tapping into a variety of attribute-level perceptions of news media performance (e.g., Abdulla et al., 2005; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Yale et al., 2015; see Strömbäck et al 2020 for a complete overview of operational approaches to mainstream news media trust operationalizations). In this particular study, we draw upon Kohring & Matthes’ (2007) conceptualization of mainstream news media trust. Initially conceptualized as a multidimensional scale, the Kohring & Matthes’ (2007) mainstream news media trust measure assesses the extent to which citizens trust the mainstream press’ ability (1) to select and report on the most important/relevant topics; (1) to select and provide the most important/relevant facts; (3) to depict situations and scenarios in a verifiable manner; and (4) to provide appropriate commentary on social happenings. Taken as whole, this inventory provides insight into the perceived trustworthiness of journalistic actors and organizations. While the initially identified factor structure of the Kohring and Matthes (2007) measure not been consistently observed in replication studies (Prochazka, & Schweiger,

2019), we note that the inventory is “the only scale being grounded in extensive theoretical work on trust and journalism and tested in validation studies” (Prochazka, & Schweiger, 2019, p. 29), and, therein, that there exists somewhat straightforward empirical evidence that the unidimensional application of the inventory provides a good approximations of overall levels of citizen trust in the mainstream press. In other words, as Strömbäck et al (2020) noted, “while it theoretically makes sense to conceptualize news media trust as consisting of different subdimensions,” empirically speaking, trust in the mainstream news media should be “considered a higher-order factor that need[s] to be measured by multi-item scales but not different dimensions” (p. 142).

The Present Study

Building on the foregoing literature, the first hypothesis associated with this work pertains to the relationship between trust in the mainstream news media and countermedia attendance. Prior research has shown that those who mistrust the mainstream media are motivated to turn to alternative sources of news and news-related information. For example, Anderson et al. (2023) found that those who distrusted the mainstream news media were more likely to use alternative media sources, or news sources that “have strong ideological profiles, representing anti-system and anti-elite attitudes” (p. 835) and “provide alternative perspectives on societal issues” (p. 840). Likewise, Fletcher and Park’s (2017) cross-national study found that those exhibiting low levels of news-related trust were comparatively likely to turn to social media, blogs, and other forms of non-traditional news content providers. Accordingly:

Hypothesis 1: *Trust in the mainstream news media will be negatively associated with countermedia attendance.*

Patterns of exposure and media effects tend to be reinforcing in nature (Slater, 2007). In the present case, application of this logic suggests that while those who distrust the mainstream news media might conceptualize the countermedia as an attractive informational alternative, regular attendance to the countermedia (which, again, seeks to criticize, challenge, oppose, and delegitimize the mainstream press; Hopp et al., 2020) should also negatively affect levels of mainstream news media trust. Prior empirical work has observed reciprocal effects between news media choice and perceptive factors. Anderson et al. (2023), for example, observed reciprocity in the relationship between alternative news orientation and news media trust, noting that when audiences are consistently “exposed to the narrative that mainstream media cannot be trusted, a natural consequence will be declining media trust” (p. 838).

Hypothesis 2: *Countermedia attendance will be negatively associated with trust in the mainstream news media.*

While there exists reasonably strong empirical evidence in support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, it is less clear if the trust → countermedia and countermedia → trust linkages will differ in magnitude. Notably, the relational dynamics between audience selectivity and effects factors has been a key point of discussion in the media effects literature for decades (e.g., Sherry, 2009; Valkenburg et al., 2016). In the present research context, there exist plausible arguments for either a magnitude disparity (e.g., trust/distrust in the mainstream press is accumulated over time [e.g., Ladd, 2012], and therefore acts a stable and powerful baseline for subsequent exposure-produced effects; alternately, diverse informational flows may lead to incidental exposure to countermedia content [e.g., Borah et al., 2022] and therefore may stimulate a learned predisposition to distrust the news media) or magnitude equality (e.g., reinforcing processes are mutually supportive and will over time become indistinguishable). Accordingly:

Research Question 1: *Do the reciprocal paths interrelating countermedia attendance and mainstream news media trust differ in magnitude?*

While countermedia content is *not necessarily or exclusively* factually incorrect, it is characteristically distorted, ideologically extreme, and emotionally confrontational (e.g., Hopp et al., 2020; Hopp & Ferrucci, 2020; Mourão & Robertson, 2019; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). This informational posture confers benefits in terms of both audience building and the epistemic delegitimization of the mainstream press (Hopp & Ferrucci, 2020; Toivanen, et al., 2022; Waisbord, 2018) via the promulgation of *counterknowledge*, or knowledge that “rejects fundamental facts forwarded by established experts, pointing [instead] toward a populist antagonism between ‘deceptive’ elites and ‘truth-deprived’ people” (Hamaleers & Yekta, 2023, p. 19). In short, while countermedia content may necessarily advance an entirely or even substantively fabricated version of reality, choices related to information selection, sourcing, framing, and contextualization starkly contrast the normative production practices of the mainstream press. And, because the normative information selection and production practices of the mainstream media were established, at least in part, with respect to the needs of democracy (e.g., Christians et al., 2009), it stands to reason that the countermedia’s rejection of elements foundational to multi-perspective, multi-cultural democratic enactment will result in a diminished potential for political learning:

Hypothesis 3: *Countermedia attendance will be negatively associated with political learning.*

Finally, a second research question related to reciprocity in the relationship between political knowledge and countermedia attendance was explored. Research on the mainstream news suggests the possibility of a spiral (Moeeler & De Vreese, 2019) of political learning insofar as mainstream news media use stimulates political learning, and also that politically knowledgeable citizens are increasingly likely to attend to the news (e.g., Atkin, Galloway, &

Nyman, 1974; Moeller & de Vreese, 2019). The extent that such a pattern is relevant in the context of countermedia is unclear. That being said, it seems plausible that low-knowledge citizens might increasingly turn to alternative sources such as countermedia when seeking to learn about the surrounding political and social worlds.

Research Question 2: *Is there a reciprocal relationship between countermedia attendance and political knowledge?*

Method

The present study employed a two-wave online survey. Data collection was managed by Dynata (<https://www.dynata.com>), a national first-party data broker. To participate in the survey, respondents needed to be in the United States and 18 years or older. Additionally, to better ensure sample conformity with US-level population estimates, quotas were employed for biological sex and racial/ethnic identity at the first point of data collection (T1). T1 data was collected in September of 2023. A follow-up survey (T2) was administered in October of 2023. A total of 1,805 complete and valid responses were collected at T1. At T2, 722 complete and valid responses were received, resulting in a retention rate of 39.9%.

Measures

Countermedia Attendance

A countermedia attendance inventory was developed specifically for this study. The inventory contained five items: (1) *How often do you consume news and information from sources that exist outside of the mainstream media?*; (2) *How often do you consume news and information from sources that criticize the mainstream media?*; (3) *How often do you consume news and information from sources that oppose the mainstream media?*; (4) *How often do you consume news and information from sources that challenge the mainstream media's reporting?*; and (5) *How often do you consume news and information from sources that seek to offer an alternative*

to the mainstream media? Each question was linked to a seven-point scale where 1 = *Never* and 7 = *Very frequently*. Countermedia consumption was assessed at both T1 ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.77$, $\alpha = .95$) and T2 ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.77$, $\alpha = .95$).¹²

Trust in the Mainstream News Media

Participant trust in the mainstream news media was measured using twelve items, all taken from Kohring and Matthes (2007). Items assessed the extent to which participants trusted the mainstream news on issues of topical selectivity (example item: *The mainstream news media gives necessary attention to important issues*), factual selectivity (example item: *Mainstream news media reports include all the important facts*), reporting accuracy (example item: *The information in mainstream news media reports is true*), and assessment capabilities (example item: *Criticism is expressed in an adequate manner by the mainstream news media*). All items were on seven-point scales where 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*. Trust in the mainstream news media was assessed at T1 ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.55$, $\alpha = .98$) and T2 ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.54$, $\alpha = .98$).³

Political Knowledge

Political knowledge was measured using 4 multiple choice questions at both T1 and T2. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Cacciatore et al., 2018; Hopp & Kazmi, 2023), knowledge items were selected on the basis of being basic political facts that a reasonably knowledgeable US citizen might be expected to know. These questions focused specifically on current event aspects related to the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of the US Federal Government. Therein, each of the questions pertained to an actor, set of actors, or scenario that was of enhanced political saliency within the period of the study (e.g., CNN, 2023; Demirjian, 2023; Hudson, 2023; Millhiser, 2023). Specifically, respondents were asked if

they knew which political party controlled the House of Representatives (the Republican Party), if they knew who the current Senate Majority Leader was (Chuck Schumer), if they knew the name of the current Secretary of State (Antony Blinken), and if they knew who Sonia Sotomayor is (a Justice on the US Supreme Court). All questions had five possible answers, including a *Don't Know* option. Following prior work (e.g., Dimitrova et al., 2014; Hopp et al., 2023), all questions had a 20 second time limit; if the respondent was unable to provide a response within this window, the survey automatically advanced to the next question. Correct answers were coded as 1, while incorrect answers or auto-advanced non-responses were coded as 0. Responses were summed to form a measure of political knowledge (scale range 0-4). Political knowledge was measured at T1 ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.52$) and T2 ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.51$)

News Source Evaluations

To descriptively understand participants' perceptive location of "mainstream" news outlets, respondents were asked to indicate the degree that various news/informational content providers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Post*, *NPR*, *ABC News*, *MSNBC*, *Fox News*, *Slate*, and *InfoWars*) were or were not part of the mainstream news media apparatus. Understanding this information as deemed especially important in light of the news trust and countermedia attendance measures' focus on the so-called mainstream media. Eight-point scales were employed. The first point on each scale allowed participants to indicate a lack of familiarity with the named provider while the latter seven scale points ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Mainstream news media perceptions were assessed at T1.

Socio-Demographics, Political Variables, and News Consumption

The T1 survey instrument assessed biological sex, race/ethnicity (*Asian/Asian-American*, *Hispanic*, *Non-Hispanic Black/African-American*, *non-Hispanic White/Caucasian*, *Multiple*

Races or a Racial/Ethnic Group Not Named), age (in years), educational obtainment (*Less than a High School Degree, A High School Degree, Some College, A Two-Year Degree, A Four-Year Degree OR a Four-Year Degree with Some Graduate School, A Master's Degree or Higher*), estimated annual income (1 = \$0 - \$25,000, 7 = Greater than \$200,000, political party identification (*Democrat/Lean Democrat, Republican/Lean Republican, Independent, Affiliated with Another Party*), political ideology (1 = *Very liberal*, 11 = *Very conservative*); and ideological extremity (a recoded version of the political ideology measure where scores near the scale poles were coded high), and political interest (*I'm interested in politics*; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) were measured. Additionally, the survey instrument accounted for newspaper (online or hardcopy) use, broadcast news use, and cable news use.

Sample Description

The analytic sample was 49.7% female. In terms of racial/ethnic identification, the sample was 70.2% non-Hispanic White/Caucasian, 13.6% Hispanic, 9.2% Non-Hispanic Black/African-American, 5.0% Asian/Asian-American, and 2.1% multiple races or a racial/ethnic group not named. As it pertained to educational obtainment, 1.3% of the sample reported having less than a high school degree, 19.6% reported having a high school degree, 21.6% reported having some college, 10.3% reported having a two-year degree, 31.1% reported having a four-year degree or a four-year degree with some graduate school, and 15.6% of the sample reported having a master's degree or higher. The average age of the sample was 54.13 years (SD = 16.11 years). On the income measure, 15.8% reported earning between 0 - \$25,000, 19.4% reported earning between \$25,001 and \$50,000, 20.5% reported earning between \$50,001 and \$75,000, 19.7% reported earning between \$75,001 and \$100,000, 15.5% reported earning between \$100,001 and \$150,000, 5.2% reported earning \$150,001 and \$200,000, and 3.7% reported earning more than

\$200,000 annually. Taken as a whole, the sample overrepresented (relative to the US population) non-Hispanic whites and was more educated.

In terms of political and partisan factors, 40.4% were Democrats or leaned towards the democratic party, 32.9% were Republican or leaned Republican, 26.6% were independents or identified with a non-major political party. The mean scored on the political ideology scale (conservatism high) was 6.28 (SD = 2.86) while the mean score on the political extremity scale was 2.14 (SD = 1.92). Finally, the mean score on the political interest measure was 4.75 (SD = 1.82).

In terms of the media use factors, mean scores on the news use, broadcast news use, and cable news use measures were 4.03 (SD = 2.23), 4.83 (SD = 2.07), and 4.03 (SD = 2.17), respectively. Outlet-level perceptions of mainstream media belongingness are shown in **Figure 1**. Generally speaking, large traditional news brands such *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Fox News* were perceived to be a part of the mainstream news media.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Results

Hypotheses 1 and 3

To test Hypotheses 1 and 3, a lagged autoregressive path model was estimated using the *R*-based package *lavaan*. Robust maximum likelihood (MLM) estimation was employed; as such, model fit statistics were scaled and the statistical significance of model-derived parameter estimates were derived using robust (i.e., Huber-White) standard errors. The estimated model assessed the effect of trust in the mainstream news (T1) on countermedia attendance (T2), controlling for the effect of T1 countermedia attendance (**Hypothesis 1**), and the effect of countermedia attendance (T1) on political knowledge (T2) after controlling for initial levels (T1) of political knowledge

(Hypothesis 3). The effects of the socio-demographic (biological sex, race [non-White = 0 /White = 1], educational attainment, age, income), political (party identification [contrast group = Democrat], political ideology, political extremity, political interest), and media use (newspaper use, broadcast news use, cable news use) on the endogenous variables of primary interest were controlled for. Exogenous variables were allowed to freely covary while the covariance between T2 countermedia attendance and T2 political knowledge was fixed to 0.

The estimated model was good fit for the data, $\chi^2(df)_{\text{scaled}} = 1.82(3), p = .61$; $CFI_{\text{scaled}} = 1.00$; $SRMR_{\text{scaled}} = .00$. Looking at the model coefficients, we found evidence of negative relationship between T1 mainstream news media trust and T2 countermedia attendance, $b = -0.12, se = 0.04, p < .01$, **supporting Hypothesis 1**. Turning next to the relationship between countermedia attendance and political knowledge, we found negative and statistically significant relationship between T1 countermedia attendance and T2 political knowledge, $b = -0.04, se = 0.02, p < .05$. This finding suggested that those who accumulated additional political knowledge across waves were those who, generally speaking, did not consume countermedia content. As such, **Hypothesis 3 was supported**. These results are visually depicted in **Figure 2**.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Hypothesis 3 Robustness Check

We noted that at both T1 and T2, a substantial number of participants answered all the political knowledge questions correctly (27.7% and 30.8%, respectively). As it pertains to the T2 measure of political knowledge, this indicated that the present data may be right censored in nature. As such, to assess the robustness of the results reported directly above, we estimated an additional lagged autoregressive Tobit model (see Long, 1997) in which T2 political knowledge was set as the criterion variable. This model controlled for the effects of the socio-demographic, political,

and media use factors, T1 political knowledge, and T1 countermedia attendance. Model estimation was accomplished using the *AER* package for *R*. Robust standard errors were employed. The results of this model ($Wald = 1557.53$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$; McFadden pseudo $R^2 = .32$; right censored observations = 222) indicated the presence of negative and statistically significant effect interrelating T1 countermedia attendance and T2 political knowledge, $b = -0.07$, $se = 0.03$, $p < .01$.

An alternate means of conceptualizing the political knowledge variable was to treat it as an ordered categorical outcome. To that end, we, in addition to the above-described Tobit model, estimated a lagged autoregressive ordered logistic regression model using the *MASS* package for *R*. This model was specified in an identical manner to the Tobit model. This model (Lipsitz goodness of fit test: likelihood ratio = 5.86, $df = 9$, $p = .75$; Ugba & Gertheiss pseudo $R^2 = .75$) again suggested the presence of negative and significantly significant relationship between T1 countermedia attendance and T2 political knowledge, $b = -0.11$, $se = 0.05$, $p < .05$; OR = 0.90.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 suggested that countermedia attendance and news trust would be reciprocally related to one another. To test this contention, a cross-lagged autoregressive path model (CLPM) was estimated. This model assessed the effect of T1 countermedia attendance on T2 mainstream news trust (controlling for T1 mainstream news trust) and the effect of T1 mainstream news trust on T2 countermedia attendance (controlling for the effect of T1 countermedia attendance). As in the prior path model, the full complement of socio-demographic, political, and news media use variables were controlled for, and the model was generated using *lavaan*'s MLM estimator. Covariances between exogenous factors was freely estimated while the residual covariance

between T2 mainstream news media trust and T2 countermedia attendance was fixed to 0 for identification purposes.

The results of this model ($\chi^2[df]_{\text{scaled}} = 0.16[1]$, $p = .69$; $CFI_{\text{scaled}} = 1.00$; $SRMR_{\text{scaled}} = .00$) suggested the presence of a negative, and statistically significant relationship between T1 countermedia use and T2 mainstream news trust, $b = -0.05$, $se = 0.02$, $p < .05$, and a negative and statistically significant relationship between T1 mainstream news media trust and T2 countermedia attendance, $b = -0.19$, $se = 0.04$, $p < .001$. This finding is generally **supportive of Hypothesis 2's prediction** of a reciprocal (i.e., mutually supportive) relationship between mainstream media use and countermedia attendance. **Figure 3** provides a visual depiction of the model used to test Hypothesis 2.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Research Question 1

The research question was interested in the extent to which T1 mainstream media news trust $\rightarrow$ T2 countermedia attendance and T1 countermedia attendance $\rightarrow$ T2 mainstream media news trust paths were equivalent in magnitude. To assess this question, we re-estimated the model used to test Hypothesis 2. However, in this model, the T1 mainstream media news trust $\rightarrow$ T2 countermedia attendance and T1 countermedia attendance $\rightarrow$ T2 mainstream media news trust paths were constrained to equality. The resulting model was a reasonable fit for the data ($\chi^2[df]_{\text{scaled}} = 6.95[2]$, $p = .03$; $CFI_{\text{scaled}} = 1.00$; $SRMR_{\text{scaled}} = .01$). That being said, a Satorra-Bentler (2010) scaled chi-square test indicated that this constrained model fit the data significantly worse than the unconstrained model (i.e., the model used to test Hypothesis 2), $\Delta\chi^2 = 8.50$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .01$. Given this result, and in light of the observed magnitudes of the retrogression slopes (T1 mainstream media news trust $\rightarrow$ T2 countermedia attendance: $b = -0.19$

vs. T1 countermedia attendance $\rightarrow$ T2 mainstream media news trust: $b = -0.05$), the data suggests that while regular countermedia attendance may be associated with declines mainstream news media trust, this effect is meaningfully smaller than the relationship between mainstream news media distrust and attendance to countermedia.

Research Question 2

To explore the second research question, a final CLPM was estimated. The estimation method and specification approach were identical to the model that was used to test Hypothesis 2, although given the Research Question 2's focus, the primary variables of interest were the T1 and T2 measures of countermedia attendance and political knowledge. The model demonstrated good fit for the data, $\chi^2(df)_{\text{scaled}} = 0.21(1)$, $p = .88$; $CFI_{\text{scaled}} = 1.00$; $SRMR_{\text{scaled}} = .00$. As seen in prior models, the relationship between T1 countermedia attendance and T2 political knowledge was negative and statistically different from zero, $b = -0.04$, $se = 0.02$, $p < .05$. The relationship between T1 political knowledge and T2 countermedia use was not, however, statistically significant, $b = 0.00$, $se = 0.03$, $p = .90$.

Correlations and Cross-Sectional Associations

To better contextualize the findings related to Hypotheses 1-3 and Research Questions 1-2, **Table 1** provides the bivariate correlations between the variables of primary interest while **Table 2** summarizes a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) describing cross-sectional relationships between the variables of primary interest. The OLS models controlled for the same set of socio-demographic, political, and media use variables used in the analyses described above. Robust standard errors were used to assess the statistical significance of the model coefficients.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

This study set out to better understand the association between trust in the mainstream media, countermedia attendance, and political knowledge. The results were generally in-line with the *a priori* expectations guiding the project insofar as we observed a reciprocal relationship between (dis)trust in the mainstream news media and countermedia attendance, and, furthermore, a negative relationship between countermedia usage and political knowledge. The implications of these findings are discussed below.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this study pertains to the negative relationship between countermedia attendance and political learning. We hypothesized that regular exposure to informational outlets that regularly and characteristically present perspectives that are both alternative and hostile to the depictions of reality found in the mainstream mass media would present diminished political learning potential. The results supported this prediction, indicating that the regular use of countermedia content was negatively associated with political knowledge levels (and, therein, that this result was stable across modeling approaches). Notably, these effects depart from some prior findings on the relationship between alternative media exposure and political knowledge. Reiter and Matthes (2023), for example, used a two-wave study to explore the relationship between media consumption habits and Austrian citizens' political knowledge. While the authors observed a negative relationship between alternative exposure to platforms such as *Kontrast.at* and *Zackzack.at*, statistical tests failed to indicate that the effect was significantly different from 0. More broadly, numerous studies have failed to find any discernable connection between digital platform use for news (e.g., social media platforms, blogs) and political knowledge outcomes (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017; Martin & Sharma, 2023).

One factor that might explain why the current results differ from some prior findings may pertain to our specific focus on the countermedia. There are many *types* of alternative and non-traditional content and content providers (e.g., Downing, 2001; Rauch, 2014). In some cases, the provision of information found in the mainstream press is important and can be used by those in sub-altern spaces to generate public interest on and around issues of genuine democratic importance (Hopp & Ferrucci, 2020; for a tangible example, see Quelly, 2024). While this type of content may sometimes question the news routines and values of the mainstream press, its goal is typically to improve or supplement mainstream press performance rather than the delegitimization of epistemic standing of the mainstream news apparatus (e.g., Haas, 2006; Hopp & Ferrucci, 2020). In short, we dispute the notion that alternative media is necessarily disharmonious with the mainstream media, as alternative news information *can* confer a range of social and journalistic benefits (e.g., Downing, 2001).

Building on the foregoing, we wonder if journalism studies might benefit from a more specific handling of the so-called alternative media. We note, with some frequency, tensions between the rhetorical and operational handlings of the alternative news media. For example, in Andersen et al. (2023), the authors rhetorically position alternative media as “providing a platform for viewpoints usually ignored” (p. 835) while also possessing “strong ideological profiles, representing anti-system and anti-elite attitudes” (p. 835). Operationally speaking, however, the employed measure of alternative media attendance *only* addressed informational incongruity, leaving the notion of mainstream media hostility in a state of implication (see Footnote 2). Because countermedia content is characteristically different than the content appearing in the mass media, such a measure will roughly capture the countermedia attendance. However, and perhaps obviously, theoretical and operational granularity confers a host of social

benefits to the study of social phenomena. As such, we suggest that there are two related-but-independent dimensions that may be worth attending to when investigating alternative media content and platforms. The first of these dimensions pertains to the mere presentation of information not found in traditional news reporting. As described above, there are a scenarios in which the discussion of under-reported topics can supplement (and potentially improve or otherwise inform) mainstream news reporting, while, in other cases, such alternative information is anti-democratic in nature and has been ignored for good reason (i.e., classified as unsuitable for legitimate debate; Hallin, 1986). In addition to distinguishing between alternative media content that does and does not advance democratic values, it is also relevant to make ascertainties around an alternative media outlet's posture relative to the mainstream press. Such postures can theoretically exist on a continuum ranging from openly and characteristically hostile (i.e., countermedia) to positively supplemental. This is an important to distinction to make in future work pertaining to alternative media. As noted, in recent years journalism studies research has exhibited a tendency to singularly group all media sources outside the (often loosely defined) "mainstream." But beyond alternative media's posture relative to the mainstream press, it also remains vitally important to distinguish based on the practices of content producers. For example, while alternative newsweeklies in the United States have a rich history of critiquing the mainstream press' reliance on hegemonic news frames (Benson, 2003), and of providing different views of traditionally covered stories and typically considered alternative media (Jenkins & Wolfgang, 2017), the journalists employed by these organizations characteristically have the same training and views on news as journalists for traditional media; this involves potentially bypassing norms such as objectivity, but most definitely strongly adhering to verification as a principle (Forde, 2008). This is decidedly not the case of countermedia.

While it may seem generally obvious, these results have implications for news literacy. Our findings illustrate the polluting potentialities of countermedia consumption. Citizens who regularly attend to this type of content not only lack trust in normatively produced objective news providers, but also have a limited potential for learning about political issues. Creating a robust news literacy program across education can have a significant, positive effect in helping people understand the differences between traditional news and countermedia (Vraga et al., 2021). There exist numerous pieces of evidence that a large-scale, properly calibrated news literacy education can help, for example, undergraduates evaluate and analyze content and distinguish between real news and content coming from outlets such as countermedia (e.g., Fleming, 2014).

There are several limitations associated with this study. First, there is not a widely agreed upon method of measuring political learning, and, as such, construct measurement requires researchers to make any number of subjective decisions about both content and form (e.g., what questions are asked, what response options are provided, what types of knowledge are assessed, the extent to which responses should be temporally bound). In our particular case, we focused on the acquisition of basic, current-events knowledge about the US Federal government. We note that such an approach taps into only a single kind of political knowledge, and that other approaches (e.g., the measurement of structural or civics-oriented knowledge) might yield different results. Second, although we took steps to match our sample to the general characteristics of the US population, patterns of attrition led to our final sample over-representing non-Hispanic whites and highly educated respondents. Finally, as Thomas et al. (2021) point out, the modeling approach employed in this study does not provide a “pure” (p. 197) representation of within-persons processes, leaving open questions pertaining to

interindividual vs. intraindividual effects. Due to such uncertainties, in this study we have taken care to avoid the use of explicitly causal language, and our results should be understood as depictions of plausible causal relationships rather than *prima facie* evidence of casualty.

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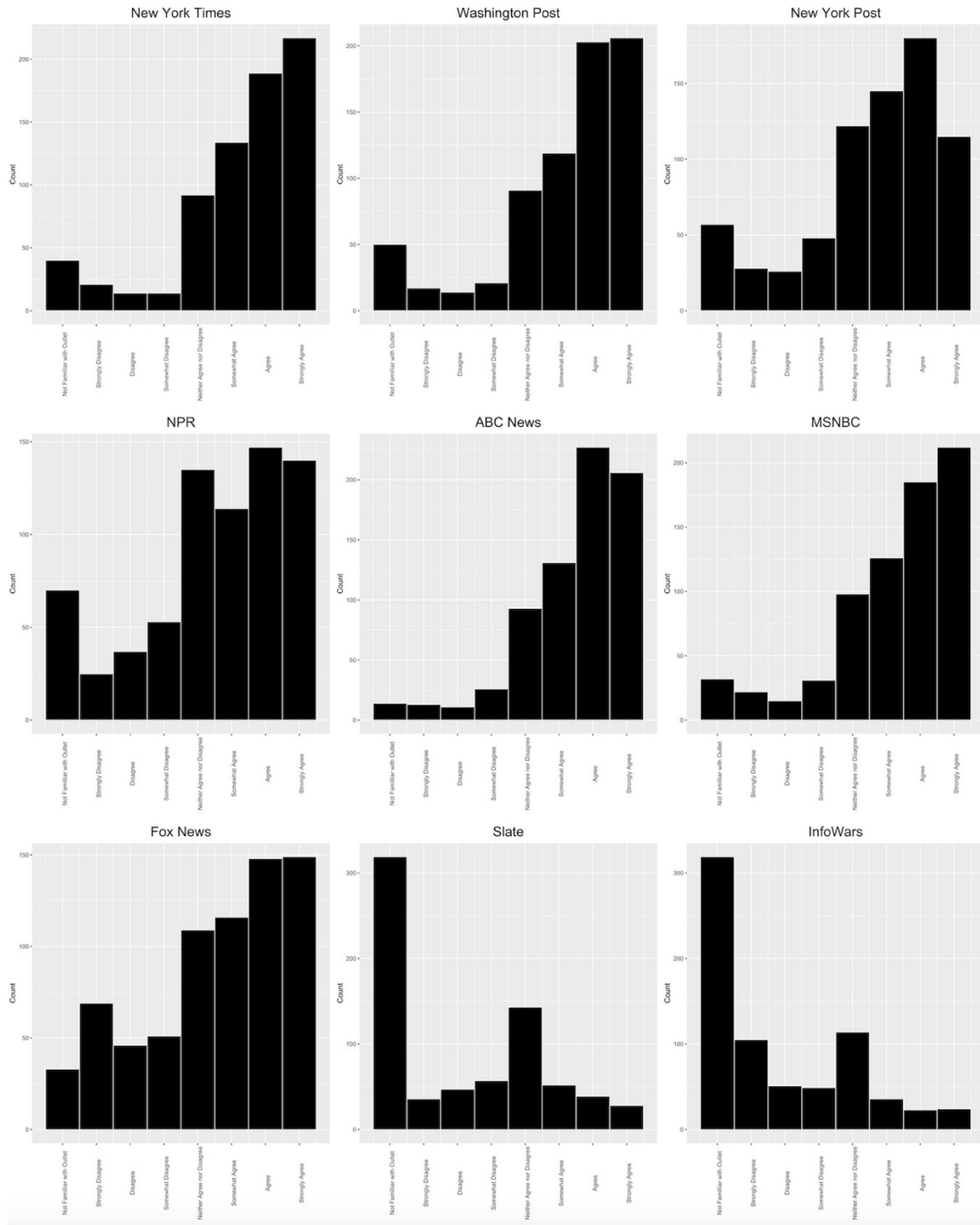


Figure 1. Participant perceptions of content provider-level mainstream media belongingness

Note: Responses indicate the extent which participants did or did not agree that the named content provider was a part of the mainstream media

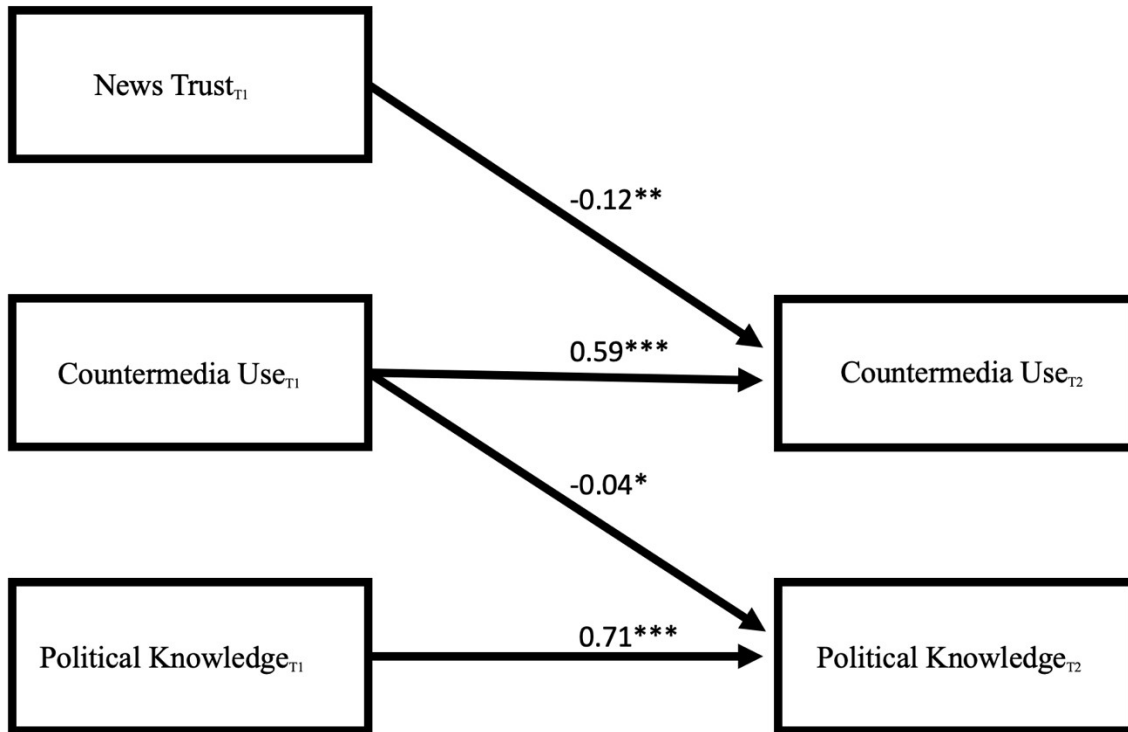


Figure 2. Lagged autoregressive path model displaying associations between mainstream news media trust, countermedia attendance, and political knowledge.

Note: Unstandardized path estimates displayed; * $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

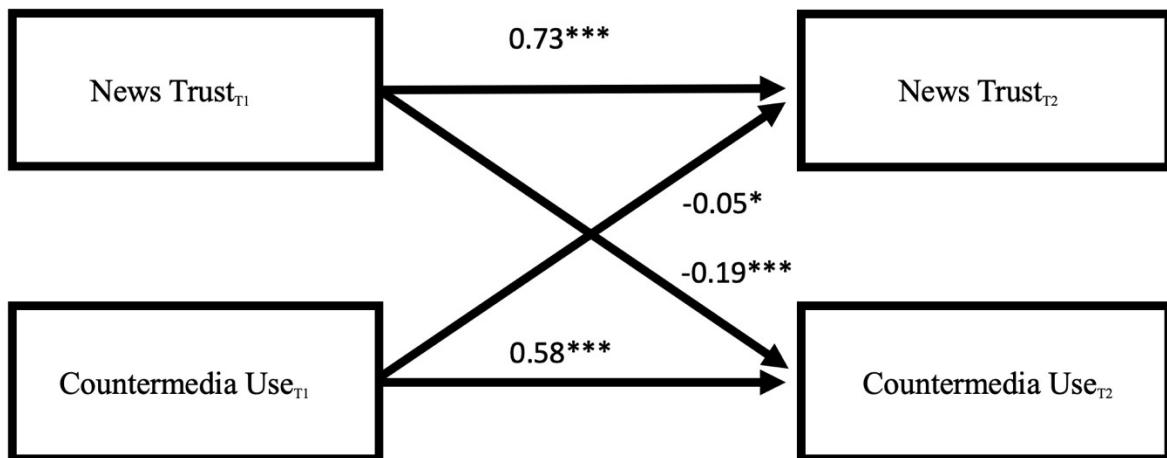


Figure 3. Cross-lagged autoregressive path model displaying associations between mainstream news media trust, countermedia attendance, and political knowledge.

Note: Unstandardized path estimates displayed; * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Table 1*Bi-variate correlations between study variables of primary interest*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
T1 Mainstream News Media Trust (1)	---	.84***	-.23***	-.24***	-.13***	-.08*
T2 Mainstream News Media Trust (2)		---	-.20***	-.26***	-.09*	-.03
T1 Countermedia Attendance (3)			---	.72***	.03	.00
T2 Countermedia Attendance (4)				---	.02	.00
T1 Political Knowledge (5)					---	.82***
T2 Political Knowledge (6)						---

Notes: autocorrelations highlighted; *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 2

Summary of ordinary least squares regression models describing cross-sectional relationships between variables of primary interest

	T1 Mainstream News Media Trust	T2 Mainstream News Media Trust	T1 Countermedia Attendance	T2 Countermedia Attendance	T1 Political Knowledge	T2 Political Knowledge
T1 Mainstream News Media Trust			-0.43 *** (0.05)		-0.21 *** (0.04)	
T2 Mainstream News Media Trust				-0.42 *** (0.05)		-0.13 *** (0.04)
T1 Countermedia Attendance	-0.27 *** (0.03)				-0.10 *** (0.03)	
T2 Countermedia Attendance		-0.27 *** (0.03)				-0.09 ** (0.03)
T1 Political Knowledge	-0.19 *** (0.04)		-0.15 *** (0.04)			
T2 Political Knowledge		-0.12 ** (0.04)		-0.13 ** (0.05)		
F-statistic	39.73	38.47	25.26	24.76	29.57	29.64
df	15	15	15	15	15	15
p-value	***	***	***	***	***	***

Notes: standard errors are heteroskedasticity robust; *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Notes

¹ Parallel analyses (see Hayton, Allen, & Scarpello, 2004) performed independently on the T1 and T2 countermedia attendance measures indicated that the measures were unidimensional in nature.

² To illustrate the notion that countermedia is a specifically *press-hostile form* of alternative media, we direct users to contrast the employed inventory items with those used by Anderson et al (2023): *How often do you use online news websites or social media to follow...* (1) *News about societal issues not reported by the traditional media*; (2) *News that provide an alternative view on societal issues than traditional media*; *How often do you use online news websites or social media to follow news that provide an alternative view than the traditional media on the following topics:* (3) *news on crime*, (4) *news about climate and the environment*, (5) *news about integration and immigration*.

³Consistent with prior observations (e.g., Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020), parallel analyses performed independently on the T1 and T2 mainstream media news trust measures indicated a unidimensional factor structure.