

Alternative Media: InfoWars

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It seems the term “fake news” has been circulating throughout the media now more than ever. The public has always relied on journalists to provide them with information, but is this information in their best interest, or is it fake? Fake news could be considered a false story, or just the reasoning behind covering a certain topic, event, or person. At one time, citizens relied solely on mainstream media, television, radio, or newspaper, to become an informed citizen. However, the advancement of technology, and the capabilities of the internet, have allowed citizens themselves to become journalists. The goal in whatever media is consumed: Transparency, or an organization's openness and accountability. It will be argued that alternative media, like InfoWars, and citizen journalists provide more transparency than the mainstream media.

Alternative Media and its Consumers

If they're not becoming journalists themselves, some citizens are turning to alternative media for its content. Alternative media has been described as noncommercial with a focus in social responsibility (Rauch 2015). Rauch's (2015) *Exploring the Alternative-Mainstream Dialectic: What 'Alternative Media' Means to a Hybrid Audience* details what alternative media consumers are looking for in their outlets, by examining their common values and practices. Rauch (2015) notes previous research that found alternative media watchers are more likely to participate in political protests, as opposed to mainstream media watchers.

Rauch's (2015) study looked deeper into the audience's thoughts on alternative media. Rauch (2015) surveyed consumers of two opposing alternative media outlets, the liberal *Nation* weekly magazine and the conservative *Human Events*. A majority of the participants agreed that

alternative media should “be devoted to issues and events not discussed elsewhere (91.2%), allow a wide range of people to express their voices and opinions (91.2%), and encourage people to get involved in civic life (90.7%) (Rauch, 2015, p. 133).” Corporate ownership, commercial interests, and profit motives were some of the top problems with mainstream media... (Rauch, 2015, p. 134).”

The Alternative Media that is InfoWars

Alternative media gives a home to the citizen journalist. Goode (2009) describes citizen journalism as a “a range of web-based practices whereby ‘ordinary’ users engage in journalistic practices. Citizen journalism includes practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events (p. 1288).” InfoWars is an alternative media outlet that is fronted by citizen journalist, Alex Jones. According to infowars.com, Jones is “a unique voice that sifts through the information and exposes the underlying intentions.”

Jones entered the media field at the age of 20. He began with an access television show, and shortly became the host of a highly rated radio show in Texas. Two decades later, InfoWars is home to the Alex Jones show, which is syndicated nationally over 160 stations. The organization went through convergence throughout the years. Not only does InfoWars’ audio stream 24/7, but videos of the InfoWars studio, employees, such as additional hosts, reporters, and production workers, are uploaded to YouTube and InfoWars.com. The media outlet also releases articles on their website.

InfoWars sends reporters to cover protests, and many other events, around the country. Reporter, Owen Shroyer, was sent out to cover the event SXSW on March 16, 2018. The video

Infowars Invades SXSW Live In The Middle Of The Madness gained over 200 thousand views on YouTube. Shroyer's mission was to cover this event in particular, but in general, his goal is to get real opinions from real citizens. The video runs one hour and a half, and there are no edits. InfoWars is open to any political leaning dialogue, but their only censorship comes when obscenities are used, as they pride themselves in being a family-friendly show.

According to their website, InfoWars is not " beholden to advertisers." InfoWars is supported and funded by the listeners and viewers. InfoWars sells and distributes health products and merchandise in order to fund themselves. They like their audience to have a physical good in return for monetary support. InfoWars commonly refers to its fans as the "resistance," meaning they are seeking the truth, or in this case, alternative media.

InfoWars has received negative and positive coverage from other media outlets, mainstream and alternative. Koppelman (2017) of CNN discussed the reputation of Alex Jones and InfoWars in the article *The case for why InfoWars' White House press pass is a good thing*. The byline of the article reads, "InfoWars is the fringe right-wing outlet best known for spreading 9/11 Truther theories, the scurrilous idea that the massacre at Sandy Hook was a hoax, and a founder who has ranted about malevolent forces conspiring to put things in the water to "turn the freaking frogs gay. (Koppelman, 2017)."" Though Koppelman (2017) may have disagreed with InfoWars receiving a press pass, based on his description of the media outlet, he explains it was for the better. InfoWars is able to secure a press pass, just like any other outlet, no matter how big, small, or indifferent. This relates to the idea that the White House has no right to exclude any media outlet, even InfoWars.

Alex Jones' work has been highlighted by The Rolling Stone in the article *Meet Alex Jones*. Zaitchik (2011) writes, "by disseminating such theories over the airwaves and online, where followers can get the word out faster than any film distributor, Jones can draw a million viewers within days for a documentary like his *The Obama Deception*." An article by Hart (2013), published by The Daily Texan, includes a quote from UT Professor Randolph Lewis, saying Jones is "one of the most important political media figures in the country..." Lewis noted that Jones discussed the issues of drones in America, as well as "purifying water, adopting silver as currency, nutrition supplements, and non-genetically modified food (Zaitchik, 2013)."

Alex Jones has received praise from patriotic Americans, including musicians Ted Nugent and Dave Mustaine, and even President Trump. Stahl (2016) details the call Jones received from President Trump after the 2016 election in his article *Donald Trump Thanks Alex Jones, Set to Appear on This Crazy Person's Show Again*. President Trump called Jones to thank him and his listeners for their support and "standing up" for what was right (Stahl, 2016).

Discussion

InfoWars and Transparency

According to Plaisance's (2014) *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice: Volume 2*, "if ethics is all about struggling to find rational ways to balance competing interests and values, the concept of transparency assures us that all the players, or stakeholders, are speaking the same language (p. 71)." In the case of InfoWars, its fans are the players and stakeholders, because they provide funding and content. They are advancing what they believe to be real news, and weakening the power of the mainstream media.

“There are obvious reasons why we are so dependent on communication: to get information we need to live our daily lives, to participate in our culture, and, indeed, to understand our place in society and develop meaningful relationships with others. But there is another critical but often implicit ingredient of human communication: trust (Plaisance, 2014, p. 71-72).” InfoWars provides that information for daily lives by offering extended, unedited coverage on serious events around the country. InfoWars celebrates the western culture and its values. InfoWars builds a community for its fans, the ones who are looking for more transparency and alternative media.

Trust becomes a key factor in transparency and the reputation of InfoWars. Some media outlets have represented the news organization in negative ways. The title of the article *Donald Trump Thanks Alex Jones, Set to Appear on This Crazy Person's Show Again* easily sums up the controversy involved in InfoWars and alternative media in general. Many sources have long condemned InfoWars and Alex Jones for participating in conspiracy theories, his commitment to the second amendment, and the show's libertarian values. Someone who has never watched InfoWars themselves may only rely on secondary sources, whether they be positive or negative. Taking all of this into consideration, there is no denying that InfoWars has a massive following based on its listens, views, and relevance in the mainstream media. This suggests that InfoWars supporters do have trust in the media company.

When it comes to transparency, how and why are news stories presented? Some may be turned off by mainstream media, because this outlet is often submissive to advertisers. Therefore, it is ethical to seek alternative media sources. In the case of InfoWars, it seems Jones is so transparent and passionate, that it often leads to controversy. Some theories and

conspiracies expressed by InfoWars may be unethical, but it is the show's outright explanation of topics and emotion that allows its possible fallacies to be scrutinized by the public.

If an individual watching InfoWars, or any media, can research and form their own opinions, then most circumstances remain ethical. Even though we live in a society where not everyone has the ability to do this, the research describing an alternative media consumer's political involvement and desire for more choices suggests that alternative media is ethical. Someone seeking alternative media may be an individual who can think for themselves.

Both mainstream and alternative media can be guilty of agenda setting. However, it is within mainstream media, that professionals are often schooled in the ethics of journalism. When it comes to professionals covering the news, however, what determines a professional? Some media figures have been through a communication studies program, while others have relied on natural talents, devotion to a political affiliation, or just an interest in general. Overall, the idea that anyone can spread unethical information leads to the idea that it is up to the consumer to decide what is ethical.

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