

Portuguese Alternative Media in the Platform Era: Complexity and Innovation in *Fumaça* and *Divergente*

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Abstract

This article examines the structural innovation of Portuguese alternative media by analyzing the complexity of content and form in two standout projects: *Fumaça* and *Divergente*. Building on a previous mapping of alternative media in Portugal (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024), this study narrows its focus to those outlets that most distinctly diverge from mainstream practices through their innovative approaches to storytelling and journalistic formats. Using qualitative content analysis, we assess how these projects embody the concept of alternative media as theorized by Sandoval & Fuchs (2011), with particular attention to narrative depth, multimedia integration, and thematic diversity. Our findings show that *Fumaça* and

Divergente leverage digital affordances to produce in-depth, investigative, and narrative journalism that amplifies under-represented voices and explores topics often overlooked by traditional media. But in the ever-changing platformization landscape, these innovations also present new challenges, such as audience reach and sustainability. This paper contributes to a better understanding of how alternative media actors in Portugal are redefining the parameters of journalistic practice and addressing the more general issues of the platform era by analyzing the interaction between structural complexity, innovation, and the limitations of the digital ecosystem.

Keywords: Alternative media, Portugal, innovation, platformization, *Fumaça*, *Divergente*.

Média Alternativos Portugueses na Era das Plataformas: Complexidade e Inovação no *Fumaça* e *Divergente*

Resumo

Este artigo examina a inovação estrutural dos meios de comunicação alternativos portugueses, analisando a complexidade do conteúdo e da forma em dois projetos de destaque: *Fumaça* e *Divergente*. Com base num mapeamento prévio dos meios de comunicação alternativos em Portugal (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024), este estudo centra-se nos meios que mais se distinguem das práticas convencionais através das suas abordagens inovadoras à narrativa e aos formatos jornalísticos. Recorrendo a uma análise de conteúdo qualitativa, avaliamos a forma como estes projetos incorporam o conceito de meios de comunicação alternativos, tal como teorizado por Sandoval & Fuchs (2011), com particular atenção à profundidade narrativa, à integração multimédia e à diversidade temática. Os

nossos resultados demonstram que a *Fumaça* e a *Divergente* exploram as possibilidades digitais para produzir jornalismo aprofundado, investigativo e narrativo, que amplifica vozes sub-representadas e explora temas frequentemente negligenciados pelos meios de comunicação tradicionais. Contudo, no contexto da constante transformação das plataformas digitais, estas inovações também apresentam novos desafios, como o alcance do público e a sustentabilidade. Este artigo contribui para uma melhor compreensão de como os atores dos media alternativos em Portugal estão a redefinir os parâmetros da prática jornalística e a abordar as questões mais gerais da era das plataformas, analisando a interação entre a complexidade estrutural, a inovação e as limitações do ecossistema digital.

Palavras-chave: Media alternativos, Portugal, inovação, plataformação, *Fumaça*, *Divergente*.

Data de submissão: 2025-06-26. Data de aprovação: 2025-10-02.

Revista Estudos em Comunicação é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *LabCom – Comunicação e Artes*, UIDB/00661/2020.

Introduction

The Portuguese media landscape has undergone significant change as a result of the proliferation of digital technologies and the rise of new journalistic actors (Bastos, 2018). Alternative media outlets have positioned themselves as crucial venues for critical thinking, creative experimentation, and the amplification of marginalized voices, even as mainstream media organizations continue to control the public sphere (Subtil et al., 2024). These changes are a part of a larger global revolution in journalism, where digital platforms have upended conventional news production and distribution models, posing advantages and disadvantages for media outlets and journalists (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2011).

Portuguese alternative media initiatives have attempted to set themselves apart from mainstream media in this changing environment by tackling subjects that traditional journalism usually disregards and experimenting with innovative storytelling techniques (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024). The funding, resources, and structural pressures of platformization—a process whereby digital infrastructures and platform logics increasingly shape the sustainability, visibility, and editorial strategies of media initiatives—mark the limited environment in which these efforts take place (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Actors in alternative media must therefore negotiate a challenging environment where the demands of economic survival and digital visibility frequently conflict with their vital missions.

Alternative media, as a concept, is still controversial and complex. Sandoval and Fuchs (2011) offer a critical, dialectical framework that highlights the structural and innovative aspects of alternative media in order to distinguish it from both commercial and state-controlled outlets. Their strategy emphasizes the value of critical communication, media experimentation, and independence from prevailing political and economic interests rather than concentrating only on oppositional content or participatory practices. Recent research in Portugal has started to map out this emerging field, highlighting the variety of projects and the differing levels of complexity and inventiveness in their content and organizational structures (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024).

Notwithstanding this expanding corpus of work, little is known about how Portuguese alternative media react to the structural complexity brought about by platformization. The majority of the literature currently in publication tends to concentrate on either the technological affordances of digital platforms or the normative ideals of alternative media, without thoroughly examining which these forces interact in real-world situations. To close that gap, this article looks at how two of Portugal's most well-known alternative media initiatives, *Divergente* and *Fumaça*, deal with the difficulties and paradoxes of the platform era while embodying structural innovation in both form and content.

This study assesses the degree of complexity in *Fumaça* and *Divergente*'s journalistic outputs using qualitative content analysis, paying special attention to thematic diversity, multimedia integration, and narrative depth. The analysis considers how these outlets use digital tools to create thorough, investigative, and narrative journalism that amplifies voices often unheard and covers issues the mainstream media often disregards. It also examines the constraints that come with using platforms, such as control over content, financial stability, and reaching audiences. By looking at these two cases, we can better understand how Portuguese alternative media are reshaping journalism in today's digital world. These examples engage with more general conversations about innovation, platformization, and the future of journalism while illuminating the dynamic relationship among structural complexity, impactful content, and the changing digital environment.

1. Concepts and Critical Frameworks for Alternative Media

Alternative media are vital to the media landscape, mainly because they offer alternative narratives and critical viewpoints that aim at contesting the dominance of commercial, state-run, or mainstream outlets (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). Notwithstanding, their importance extends beyond simply pro-

viding a voice to underrepresented groups; they also act as catalysts for social change, promote democratic engagement, and spark public debates (Fuchs, 2010; Bailey et al., 2008). However, even with their recognized significance, the idea of alternative media is still a contentious and complicated subject that includes a range of organizational structures, content strategies, and practices (Rauch, 2015; Holt et al., 2019).

The concept of alternative media traces back to early forms of oppositional media, such as underground presses, community radio, and activist pamphlets. These initiatives emerged to fill the voids left by mainstream media (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002). They were marked by their grassroots structure, a culture that fostered involvement, and a strong determination to confront established power structures. They were frequently closely associated with political causes, labor unions, or social movements (Atton, 2002; Rodríguez, 2001). Atton (2002) emphasizes the variety of alternative media, including magazines, activist blogs, community radio, and digital platforms. The commitment to democratizing media production and elevating marginalized voices unites these media. Downing (2001) refers to these outlets as radical media and emphasizes their role in establishing public spaces that are not dependent on hegemonic institutions.

The nature of alternative media has changed along with media systems. The distinctions between mainstream and alternative media have become increasingly hazy, especially in the digital age. According to Rauch (2015), there is now a continuum of these categories, with many organizations exhibiting varying degrees of “alternativeness” in terms of content, management, and audience engagement. Additionally, Holt et al. (2019) point out that while legacy media are increasingly experimenting with alternative formats and voices, digitalization has allowed alternative media to embrace professionalized practices. In order to capture the diversity and dynamism of the field, this hybridity necessitates more complex, multifaceted frameworks and complicates oversimplified definitions.

Critical theory and the dialectical approach put forth by Sandoval and Fuchs (2011) represent a substantial theoretical contribution in the study of alternative media. They contend that the hallmark of alternative media is their dedication to critical content that opposes dominance, exposes stifled potential, and promotes social change, rather than concentrating only on organizational structure or participatory practices (Fuchs, 2010; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2011). They frame alternative media as places for communication that encourage innovation, disruption, and democratic imagination, based on the idea of the counter-public sphere (Negt & Kluge, 1993). Sandoval and Fuchs (2011) state that experimentation with media forms and formats, the creation of diverse and critical content, and structural independence from commercial or state interests are some ideal-typical characteristics that set alternative media apart. Significantly, they contend that alternative media can function within, against, or even for capitalism in a dialectical relationship with mainstream media and larger power structures. This dynamic partnership recognizes the conflicts and concessions that arise when maintaining alternative projects, especially when it comes to financing, visibility, and the demands of digital platformization.

Alternative media’s mission has been both made easier and more difficult by the emergence of digital platforms. Digital tools, on the one hand, have made it easier to reach a wider audience, reduced barriers to entry, and encouraged storytelling innovation (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Holt et al., 2019). However, the growing platformization of media, in which visibility and sustainability are mediated by algorithms, infrastructures, and platform policies, presents serious obstacles to the independence and long-term sustainability of alternative projects (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Due to these factors, alternative media frequently have to function in a setting where their aspirations for critical and innovative content are constrained by resource scarcity, economic pressures, and digital platform logics.

The variety of contemporary alternative media is highlighted by empirical research. While some groups embrace hybrid models that combine critical content with professionalized production and distribution methods, others maintain strong oppositional identities and grassroots structures (Holt et al.,

2019; Rauch, 2015). Independent digital media have risen to prominence in Portugal and other Southern European countries for their investigative efforts and dedication to social justice, but they continue to struggle with funding, audience reach, and sustainability (Ferreira & Ganito, 2024; Bailey et al., 2008).

This means that the current alternative media scene is characterized by conflicts and contradictions. These platforms can boost democratic involvement and amplify the voices of underrepresented groups. However, as they try to grow and reach stability, they might end up being co-opted, commercialized, or watering down their essential purpose (Bailey et al. 2008; Holt et al. 2019). The role of alternative media is further complicated by the spread of false information and disinformation in digital spaces, which calls into question credibility, trust, and the lines separating journalism from activism (Rauch, 2015; Fuchs, 2010).

Alternative media faces evolving challenges and opportunities because global platforms reshape the digital environment at an accelerated pace. This evolution creates multifaceted challenges that affect mainstream and alternative entities while altering visibility, funding mechanisms, and audience engagement.

An in-depth examination of platformization tactics and outcomes in journalism is essential to grasp how alternative media navigate this dynamic landscape shaped by algorithmic selection processes and data-driven approaches while pursuing continual innovation. The following section analyzes these dynamics alongside their future implications for alternative media while examining how platformization alters journalism's structural complexities.

2. Platformization and Structural Complexity in Journalism

An era where platforms like Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube have emerged as key infrastructures for the creation, dissemination, and consumption of news has been brought about by the digital transformation of the media landscape. Widely known as platformization, this phenomenon signifies a significant restructuring of the logics, structures, and power dynamics that support modern journalism and goes beyond a simple technological change (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Platformization is the process by which digital platforms' economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions permeate web and app ecosystems, radically changing the environment in which media companies function (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Platforms are socio-technical assemblages that actively mediate interactions between users, content creators, and advertisers rather than just acting as passive conduits for content. The algorithms, data flows, and platform-specific architectures that control these assemblages determine what is profitable, visible, and prioritized in the media landscape (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2021).

The structural complexity of journalism has significantly increased due to the emergence of platforms. A multitude of channels and formats, each with unique affordances, audience expectations, and algorithmic logics, have become the landscape that news organizations must now traverse (Hallin, 2020). Journalists must now manage analytics, modify their content for various platforms, and react quickly to changing news consumption trends since they are no longer limited to a single medium. In addition to being technological, this complexity is organizational as well, requiring new workflows, coordination methods, and skills in newsrooms (Deuze & Witschge, 2018).

Furthermore, the lines separating professional and non-professional actors in the journalism industry have become hazier due to platformization. Audiences can now participate in, influence, or even start news narratives thanks to the combination of social media and user-generated content (Seuri et al., 2022). This participatory dynamic can democratize information flows and increase participation, but it also brings with it new problems with editorial control, misinformation spread, and verification (Ekström et al., 2020; Morais & Jerónimo, 2023). Thus, in the platform era, journalists' traditional gate-keeping role is both challenged and redesigned.

Platform logic has also promoted innovation in news formats and narrative, driven by datafication, automation, and algorithmic curation. News organizations are increasingly experimenting with data journalism, interactive storytelling, multimedia integration, and artificial intelligence tools to stand out in a crowded digital landscape and attract viewers. These advancements are a part of a larger trend toward data-driven narrative and journalist-technologist cooperation (Radcliff & Lewis, 2021). The way news is created and distributed is changing as a result of algorithmic journalism, which includes automated content creation and optimization (Kotenidis & Veglis, 2021). Furthermore, artificial intelligence (AI) tools like machine learning-based curation and natural language generation are improving journalistic efficiency and opening up new avenues for narrative expression (Amponsah & Atianashie, 2024; Sonni et al., 2024). Recent studies have shown that innovation in journalism is typically not an end in and of itself, but rather a strategic reaction to structural and economic forces like audience shifting and sustainability issues (Nunes & Canavilhas, 2020; Pedersen, 2024). Platform metrics like clicks, shares, and engagement rates are closely linked to the need to innovate, and they can occasionally encourage sensationalism or shallow content at the expense of in-depth, public-interest journalism (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018).

The new types of precarity and dependency that platformization brings to news organizations are a significant side effect. A small number of powerful platforms' opaque algorithms and policy choices are increasingly affecting the visibility and financial sustainability of media outlets (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2022). Traffic, revenue, and audience reach can all be severely impacted in real time by changes to platform algorithms or terms of service. Since media companies may feel under pressure to adapt their content to platform preferences rather than to journalistic standards or public needs, this dependency may compromise editorial independence (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

Additionally, platformization is not a consistent process; its effects differ depending on the local and national context. According to research, local market structures, cultural norms, and regulatory frameworks influence how dependent and integrated media systems are with global platforms (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). In certain situations, platforms may present new avenues for visibility and interaction for independent and alternative media, while in other situations, they might find it difficult to match the resources and audience of more established players.

Rethinking traditional media models is necessary, particularly considering the structural complexity brought about by platformization. Our comprehension of stable, cohesive systems is challenged by the media landscape's growing fluidity and fragmentation, claims Hallin (2020). In order to adapt to the demands of the market and new technological developments, journalism today operates within dynamic, interconnected networks. This complexity presents a challenge to established practices and business models, but it also creates new opportunities for creativity, collaboration, and the development of new journalism genres.

Platformization has drastically altered the structural complexity of journalism by affecting newsroom organization, editorial independence, content creation, and audience-journalist interaction. Analyzing how alternative media, like *Fumaça* and *Divergente*, negotiate the opportunities and limitations of the digital ecosystem requires an understanding of these shifts. The wider logics of platformization, which are constantly redefining the boundaries of journalistic practice in the twenty-first century, are intricately linked to their capacity to uphold critical and inventive practices in this context.

3. *Fumaça* and *Divergente* as Case Studies

By performing a comprehensive empirical analysis of *Fumaça* and *Divergente*, two of Portugal's most inventive alternative media initiatives, this section expands upon the theoretical frameworks and

contextual analysis provided in the prior sections. These case studies serve as crucial illustrations of how alternative media navigate the opportunities and constraints of the platform era while operationalizing structural complexity and innovation in their journalistic practices.

The purpose of this analysis is to highlight which *Fumaça* and *Divergente* differ from traditional media, utilizing innovative storytelling styles and addressing overlooked issues in Portuguese society. By systematically examining their content, formats, and organizational methods, we can gain insight into their distinctiveness. The study also points out the challenges these initiatives encounter in sustaining their operations, engaging with viewers, and preserving their editorial independence in a media world that is increasingly influenced by platforms.

The structure of this empirical investigation is as follows: Section 3.1 details the methodological strategy we used for collecting and analyzing data. In Section 3.2, we explain why we chose *Divergente* and *Fumaça* as our case studies. A detailed analysis of each outlet is given in Sections 3.3 and 3.4, which look at their creative methods, content strategies, and interactions with digital platforms. We then compare the two projects in Section 3.5, pointing out their parallels and divergences. Finally, the wider ramifications of our findings for the investigation of alternative media are examined in Section 3.6.

3.1 Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of media outputs from *Divergente* and *Fumaça*, two well-known alternative journalism initiatives in Portugal. Within the larger framework of alternative and platformized media, the objective is to methodically investigate the characteristics, themes, and creative practices that set these outlets apart.

The analysis looks at several aspects, drawing from well-established frameworks in alternative media and digital journalism research (Bailey et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2019): the variety and depth of topics covered; the incorporation of multimedia components like audio, video, and photography; the use of creative storytelling formats and techniques; and how the content reflects or reacts to the affordances and pressures of digital platforms.

All significant published works by *Divergente* from 2014 to 2024 and *Fumaça* from 2018 to 2024 are included in the content chosen for analysis. This temporal scope makes sure that the results show how editorial strategies have changed over time for each outlet, as well as recent developments. Within these parameters, every project's published work was thoroughly examined and coded using the aforementioned criteria. The use of transparency or participatory practices, the intricacy of narrative structures, and the uniqueness of themes were given special consideration. The study also looked at how *Fumaça* and *Divergente* experiment with novel storytelling techniques and audience interaction, as well as how they address topics that are frequently ignored by mainstream media.

The research provides insights into the changing landscape of Portuguese alternative media by comparing the editorial output of *Fumaça* and *Divergente* and identifying both common and unique approaches. Although we believe that it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the qualitative content analysis employed in this study. While this method provides a robust framework for systematically examining the formal and thematic characteristics of journalistic outputs, it offers a view of the final published product, not the complex processes that led to its creation. This methodological choice necessarily brackets the internal dynamics of the newsroom, including the editorial debates, resource allocation decisions, and the day-to-day negotiations with platform affordances that undoubtedly shape the final form of the content produced by *Fumaça* and *Divergente*. Our analysis can describe the outcomes of their innovative strategies, but cannot fully explain the organizational or individual motivations behind them.

Furthermore, a content-focused approach cannot make empirical claims about audience reception or impact. Our study can identify and analyze the narrative depth, multimedia integration, and participatory affordances embedded within the journalistic works of these outlets. However, it remains outside the scope of this research to determine how audiences actually interpret, engage with, or are influenced by this content. We can analyze the intended meaning and potential for critical engagement within a piece, but we cannot know if this potential is realized by the readership. Consequently, any conclusions regarding the real-world democratic function or community-building success of these outlets are inferential, based on the textual evidence rather than direct observation of audience practices.

This study also focuses exclusively on the journalistic content itself, which means the broader political-economic context in which these outlets operate is primarily treated as a backdrop rather than a direct object of analysis. While we situate our findings within the literature on platformization and economic precarity, this methodology does not allow for a deep investigation into the specific relationships with funders, the influence of grant requirements on editorial agendas, or the precise nature of their interactions with platform companies. These are significant factors that influence the sustainability and autonomy of alternative media, and they represent important avenues for future research.

Despite these limitations, the content-focused approach was deliberately chosen as the most effective method for achieving the specific aim of this paper: to map and compare the concrete formal and thematic innovations that distinguish *Fumaça* and *Divergente* within the Portuguese media landscape. By providing a detailed and systematic account of their journalistic outputs, this study lays the essential groundwork for subsequent research. Future studies employing ethnographic methods in the newsroom or qualitative audience research could build directly upon our findings to explore the very questions of production and reception that the scope of this paper has necessarily set aside.

3.2 Case Selection

Fumaça and *Divergente* were chosen as case studies because of their acknowledged notoriety and uniqueness in the Portuguese alternative media market. Recent research has emphasized both publications as exemplary instances of independent, creative journalism that deviates from conventional methods through the use of novel formats, editorial independence, and thematic depth (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024).

In Portugal, *Fumaça* has become a prominent producer of long-form audio journalism and investigative podcasts since 2018. Its editorial goals are to examine power dynamics, elevate marginalized voices, and promote in-depth public discussion on topics that are frequently ignored by the media. *Fumaça* has established itself as a benchmark for critical journalism in the digital age thanks to its transparent editorial procedures, openness, and readiness to tackle contentious subjects (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024).

Since its inception in 2014, *Divergente* has become well-known for its creative storytelling and multimedia reporting. The outlet focuses on social justice, human rights, and the stories of marginalized communities, delivering immersive, long-form narratives that integrate text, photography, audio, and video. A key aspect of *Divergente*'s editorial strategy is its dedication to collaboration, both within the organization and with outside partners, along with a strong drive to explore innovative formats and platforms (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024).

Divergente and *Fumaça* have both won prizes and been invited to take part in international media innovation forums in recognition of their outstanding journalism on a national and worldwide scale. Examining how Portuguese alternative journalism handles the opportunities and difficulties of platformization and structural complexity is made possible by their consistent output, editorial transparency, and clear positioning as alternatives to mainstream media.

Comparative analysis is also made possible by the selection of these two examples, as each publication exemplifies a unique alternative media strategy: *Divergente*'s multimedia, narrative-driven model and *Fumaça*'s emphasis on audio journalism. Combined, they offer a wealth of empirical data for examining the changing dynamics of Portugal's alternative media production.

3.3 Data Analysis – *Fumaça*

Since launching in 2018, *Fumaça* has quickly made a name for itself as one of Portugal's most innovative platforms for alternative journalism. It is particularly known for its focus on critical perspectives and engaging storytelling. *Fumaça* has consistently tackled issues and viewpoints that mainstream media often disregards, such as racism, migration, housing, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, climate justice, and the misuse of institutional power. The platform's goal is to highlight the voices and experiences of those affected while exploring the systems and individuals that contribute to social injustice, a theme that has been prevalent in its content from 2018 to 2024.

Fumaça's distinctive style comes from its serialized, long-form audio journalism. The investigative podcast series, including *Palestina: Histórias de um país ocupado* and *Desassossego*, unfolds over multiple episodes, offering firsthand accounts, expert perspectives, and detailed field reporting. This unique approach allows it to delve into tough topics with emotional resonance, creating a sense of intimacy that is uncommon in Portuguese media. Additionally, *Fumaça* complements its podcasts with written articles, transcripts, images, and interactive content to boost accessibility and strengthen its connection with listeners.

Fumaça's commitment to editorial independence and transparency is a core part of its identity. The newsroom team frequently shares financial reports, editorial reasoning, and behind-the-scenes insights, showcasing their remarkable openness about how they operate. To uphold this transparency, which they believe is crucial for staying free from commercial and political pressures, they use a funding model that relies on grants, crowdsourcing, and voluntary donations. While there are still challenges with sustainability, this approach is a deliberate effort to preserve the objectivity and integrity of their journalism.

Fumaça takes a thoughtful approach to using digital platforms. They make sure that their content is accessible to everyone by distributing it through well-known podcast platforms, social media, and their own website. They prioritize editorial independence and the public good over simply following algorithmic trends or chasing viral moments. Their commitment to in-depth reporting and critical analysis reflects a careful balancing act with the needs of various platforms, rather than just following the latest trends or metrics.

Fumaça is a remarkable case of how alternative media has successfully established its own space within the Portuguese media scene. It not only questions the prevailing narratives but also employs creative audio storytelling and focuses on thought-provoking themes. Its steadfast dedication to independence and transparency exemplifies how alternative journalism can enhance democratic discussions and encourage public involvement in today's rapidly shifting, platform-oriented media environment.

3.4 Data Analysis – *Divergente*

Divergente was established in 2014 and has since become a major force in the Portuguese alternative media landscape thanks to its dedication to narrative journalism, which aims to break down barriers and offer insightful, in-depth viewpoints on difficult social issues. The editorial ethos of *Divergente* consciously rejects divisive or oversimplified interpretations of reality in favor of a thoughtful, multidimensional strategy that elevates underrepresented voices and underreported subjects.

Divergente's 2014–2024 content shows a strong focus on multimedia storytelling, fusing text, audio, video, and photography to produce compelling journalistic experiences. The stories' accessibility and narrative impact are enhanced by this multimedia integration, which is more than just decorative. Thematic series and long-form reports frequently examine environmental issues, human rights, social justice, and the lived realities of communities that are usually ignored by the media.

The narrative style of *Divergente* is distinguished by its ethical storytelling, contextualization, and meticulous attention to detail. To enhance its coverage and promote participatory journalism, the outlet regularly uses collaborative reporting techniques, interacting with activists, experts, and members of the community. This strategy increases the legitimacy and impact of their work and is consistent with a larger trend in alternative media toward audience participation and co-creation.

Divergente successfully uses social media and digital tools to spread its content and develop a devoted following in terms of platform engagement. *Divergente* prioritizes sustained audience engagement through quality and depth, in contrast to some outlets that place more emphasis on quick content turnover or viral potential. This helps to build a readership that values in-depth reporting and critical reflection. Their rejection of oversimplified narratives and dedication to promoting educated public discourse are consistent with this approach.

Financially, *Divergente* operates through a mixed model of grants, crowdfunding, and partnerships, which supports its editorial independence and allows it to maintain a critical stance free from commercial pressures. This funding approach, while challenging, is consistent with the entrepreneurial and mission-driven ethos that characterizes much of Portugal's alternative media sector (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024).

Overall, *Divergente* is a prime example of how alternative media can use ethical storytelling, multimedia innovation, and participatory techniques to create journalism that subverts prevailing ideologies and makes a significant contribution to democratic discourse. It is positioned as an essential player in the changing Portuguese media ecosystem due to its unwavering dedication to quality, depth, and social relevance.

3.5 Comparative Analysis

The diversity and adaptability of Portuguese alternative media are evinced by a comparison of *Fumaça* and *Divergente*. The comparison also brings to light a number of values and concerns shared in the Portuguese media landscape. Given their commitment to editorial independence, both news organizations share a desire to draw attention to topics and points of view that are not well-represented in the mainstream media. Their regular work, which is always centered on topics like migration, social inequality, institutional responsibility, and ecological justice, encourages democratic debate and critical thinking in society.

And yet their editorial identities and narrative techniques can be shown to represent alternative journalism in different ways. *Fumaça* has earned a reputation for serialized audio investigations that combine personal testimonies, investigative reporting, and expert interviews. These multi-episode podcasts tackle complex topics such as systemic racism in Portugal or the Israeli Palestinian conflict. *Fumaça*'s commitment to audio storytelling leverages the distinctive qualities of the podcast format, fostering a sense of direct connection between narrator and listener. Because of the narrative intimacy this technique fosters, viewers can relate to the material on a personal level. This encourages long-term engagement by increasing the likelihood that listeners will become consistently interested in the content.

Since its founding, *Divergente* has taken a multimedia approach, incorporating text, audio, video, and photography into its reporting. As demonstrated by initiatives like *Os Invisíveis*, this multifaceted format enables audiences to interact with social issues from a variety of angles. Their narrative style

is often thoughtful and inquisitive, encouraging readers to consider the ambiguities and complexity of lived experiences. *Divergente*'s approach is consistent with a facilitative model of journalism, which emphasizes the establishment of forums for discussion and critical thought, as opposed to promoting a rigid point of view.

Both projects demonstrate a strong commitment to these core principles, even though they employ different approaches to achieve transparency and participation. For instance, *Fumaça* regularly publishes editorial explanations and makes its financial reports publicly available to foster an environment of accountability and trust with its audience. *Divergente*, on the other hand, ensures a variety of perspectives in its stories by involving community members, activists, and subject-matter experts in its reporting. In addition to giving their reporting more credibility, these collaborative techniques are a great illustration of the democratic values that support alternative media.

Divergente and *Fumaça* both deal with the challenges of a platform-driven media landscape, running into both notable benefits and major roadblocks. *Fumaça* distributes its content through popular social media channels and podcast platforms. Although it prioritizes editorial independence and nuanced content over algorithmic demands and the chase of viral metrics, it deliberately avoids these temptations, even at the price of quick audience growth. In contrast, *Divergente* invests in a visually sophisticated website and maintains a consistent online presence. This strategy is designed to foster a dedicated readership that values comprehensive reporting and critical inquiry. Both organizations are engaged in an ongoing negotiation between expanding their reach and preserving core editorial values. This tension is evident in their public statements and strategic decisions, reflecting a broader struggle within independent journalism to balance growth with integrity.

For both projects, financial sustainability remains a major obstacle. They to remain independent from commercial and political influences because they rely on grants, partnerships, and crowdfunding. However, this funding model requires constant community outreach and fundraising. Although financial instability persists, their editorial approaches have received validation through awards and public recognition, which has enhanced their legitimacy within the broader media landscape.

Examining *Divergente* and *Fumaça* provides a compelling lens for the intricacies and potential of Portugal's alternative media sector. Both outlets exemplify a clear commitment to investigative depth, editorial independence, and transparency, attributes that remain essential as traditional media face mounting structural challenges in the digital era. Their distinct organizational frameworks and storytelling approaches underscore the sector's diversity and capacity for innovation. Importantly, despite navigating an unpredictable and rapidly evolving media environment, these platforms persist in carving out vital spaces for public debate and democratic engagement. Their efforts highlight how alternative journalism, through varied models and strategies, can play a substantive role in fostering informed discourse and participatory citizenship, even amidst considerable uncertainty.

3.6 Discussion

A complex picture of the changing landscape of alternative media in Portugal and, consequently, in modern democracies influenced by platformization is provided by the comparative analysis of *Fumaça* and *Divergente*. Both media outlets show how independent journalism can subvert prevailing narratives, encourage democratic engagement, and try out novel storytelling techniques. However, their experiences also highlight the enduring conflicts and systemic difficulties that characterize the field today.

Their interactions with digital platforms are a key factor influencing both *Divergente* and *Fumaça*. News organizations' methods for creating, disseminating, and making money from content have been drastically changed by the emergence of platformization, as theorized by Nieborg and Poell (2018) and expanded upon by van Dijck et al. (2018). In order to reach and develop audiences that might otherwise be neglected by mainstream media, *Fumaça* and *Divergente* have skillfully used podcast platforms,

social media, and their own websites. Nonetheless, their editorial approaches are distinguished by a critical understanding of the dangers presented by algorithmic logic and the unrelenting quest for virality. Both publications make deliberate editorial decisions that put the development of devoted communities, narrative depth, and complexity ahead of click-driven metrics or popular subjects. This position is consistent with the findings of Holt et al. (2019), who contend that the distinctive characteristic of alternative news media is their capacity to preserve editorial independence and critical distance while adjusting to the commercial and technological demands of the digital era.

There are two sides to this negotiation with platform logics. *Divergente*'s immersive multimedia reports and *Fumaça*'s serialized investigative podcasts are just two examples of how digital platforms have allowed both projects to break through traditional gatekeepers, reach younger and more diverse audiences, and pioneer new formats. However, the risk of content deprioritization, the instability of platform algorithms, and the difficulty of creating long-term revenue streams in an attention economy are still constant threats. These conflicts are not specific to Portugal; rather, they reflect the global platformization of journalism, which blurs the lines between editorial autonomy and business interests (Nieborg et al., 2022).

Innovation and participation are at the heart of both outlets' editorial identities. By combining first-hand accounts, professional analysis, and immersive sound design, *Fumaça*'s serialized audio storytelling approach—best demonstrated by shows like *Palestina: Histórias de um país ocupado*—has raised the bar for investigative podcasting in Portugal. Projects from *Divergente*, such as *Os Invisíveis*, blend audio, photography, and long-form text to produce multi-layered, multisensory narratives that encourage viewers to consider social issues from a variety of angles. A deeper dedication to democratizing journalism and encouraging audience participation is reflected in these editorial decisions. Both outlets involve community members, activists, and subject-matter experts in the reporting process, aligning with the facilitative and radical roles of alternative media described by Bailey et al. (2008). Transparency is also central: *Fumaça*'s publication of editorial rationales and financial reports, and *Divergente*'s collaborative production processes, serve to build trust and accountability with their audiences.

Nevertheless, there are drawbacks to the alternative media's growing professionalization. Alternative media agencies risk losing the distinctions that once distinguished them from mainstream journalism as they embrace professional standards like open governance, strict editorial standards, and varied funding (Holt et al., 2019). This conflict can be seen in both *Fumaça* and *Divergente*'s efforts to maintain their critical edge and participatory ethos while simultaneously pursuing impact and sustainability, which calls for some institutionalization. According to Cushion (2023), there is a constant risk of mainstreaming alternative practices, which calls for constant critical reflection and organizational resilience.

For both projects, economic sustainability is still a top priority. Their use of hybrid funding models, which combine grants, crowdfunding, and partnerships, is indicative of broader trends in alternative media, where autonomy is frequently accompanied by economic precarity (Bailey et al., 2008; Ganito & Ferreira, 2024). Greater editorial independence is made possible by this strategy, but it also exposes outlets to the erratic nature of public support and the competitive grant funding market. To balance the demands of mission-driven journalism with the pragmatic realities of organizational survival, *Fumaça* and *Divergente* must both consistently innovate their approaches to fundraising and community engagement. The fragility of their funding models is not completely eliminated, but recognition for journalistic excellence—through awards and public accolades—has helped to validate their editorial strategies and enhance their legitimacy within the larger media ecosystem.

Divergente and *Fumaça* have an effect that goes beyond their target audiences. *Divergente*'s multimedia reports have influenced public debate and policy discussions on migration and social exclusion, while *Fumaça*'s investigative series has spurred national conversations on topics like institutional racism and police violence. Their impact demonstrates how, even in comparatively small and consolidated media markets like Portugal's, alternative media can influence public opinion and hold those in positions

of authority accountable (Ganito & Ferreira, 2024). By combining a dedication to social justice with creative uses of digital technology, *Fumaça* and *Divergente* clearly share a lot with other well-known alternative outlets in Europe and Latin America when viewed from a wider comparative perspective (Cushion, 2023). The opportunities and limitations faced by independent journalism are shaped by the unique characteristics of the Portuguese context, which include civic activism, media concentration, and a tradition of skepticism toward dominant institutions.

The lines separating mainstream journalism from alternative journalism are also becoming more hazy. Alternative outlets run the risk of embracing some of the customs and conventions they initially aimed to question as they become more professional and pursue wider legitimacy (Holt et al., 2019). Additionally, as outlets expand and encounter new demands from funders, audiences, and the larger media ecosystem, there is always a chance of burnout, mission drift, or co-optation. These dangers highlight how crucial it is to continuously engage in critical reflection, build resilient organizations, and foster vibrant, values-driven communities.

Recognizing this study's limitations is also crucial. The newsroom dynamics, audience experiences, and the larger political economy of alternative media are all beyond the scope of content analysis, despite the fact that it offers insightful information about editorial tactics and narrative practices. To better understand the changing role of alternative journalism, future research could benefit from audience studies, ethnographic approaches, or cross-national comparisons.

Overall, *Fumaça* and *Divergente*'s experiences show the potential and intricacy of alternative journalism in the digital era. Their work exemplifies how independent media can be creative, subvert prevailing narratives, and encourage democratic engagement. Their experiences also highlight the constant negotiating needed to maintain critical journalism in a platformized media environment that is changing quickly. The long-term survival of alternative media in Portugal and elsewhere will rely on their capacity to uphold their critical mission, adjust to changing circumstances, and foster resilient, involved communities as the limits of journalism continue to change.

Conclusion

As the media landscape becomes more fragmented and platformized, this study has examined the organizational dynamics, editorial strategies, and narrative innovations of two prominent Portuguese alternative media outlets: *Divergente* and *Fumaça*. The research has shed light on how these outlets manage the intricate relationship between autonomy, sustainability, and audience engagement while attempting to carry out vital democratic duties through a qualitative content analysis and comparative study.

Divergente and *Fumaça* are prime examples of Portugal's alternative journalism's dynamism and flexibility. Both media outlets challenge prevailing narratives and broaden the public conversation by elevating underrepresented voices and underreported issues. They are in line with the fundamental ideals of alternative media as forums for critical analysis and democratic empowerment because of their editorial independence, dedication to openness, and support of participatory practices. However, their unique narrative and format choices—*Divergente*'s immersive multimedia storytelling and *Fumaça*'s groundbreaking serialized audio investigations—highlight the alternative sector's pluralism and the variety of ways that innovation can be used to meaningfully engage audiences.

The results also highlight the conflicting function of digital platforms. Platforms have increased accessibility and distribution for a larger group of people, but they have also introduced new limitations and demands. Finding long-term funding in a volatile economic environment, balancing editorial integrity and visibility, and navigating platform algorithms are just a few of the ongoing challenges. In

response, *Divergente* and *Fumaça* have both shown strategic resilience by embracing hybrid funding models, cultivating active communities, and deliberately defying the reductive logics of click-driven metrics and virality.

This study adds to the expanding corpus of research that challenges oversimplified distinctions between mainstream and alternative media. A range of journalistic practices and organizational structures is demonstrated by the experiences of *Fumaça* and *Divergente*, where professionalization and innovation coexist with critical distance and oppositional intent. Their paths mirror more general global trends in alternative journalism, such as the erasure of distinctions, the growth of platformization, and the pursuit of long-term models that balance economic realities with mission-driven journalism.

Furthermore, this study also emphasizes how crucial context is. The Portuguese media environment shapes the opportunities and limitations faced by alternative outlets due to its unique history, market size, and civic culture. For those interested in the dynamics of alternative journalism in smaller or less resourced media markets around the world, as well as for scholars of Portuguese media, the cases of *Fumaça* and *Divergente* provide insightful information.

The ability of alternative media to innovate organizationally and editorially while upholding their vital mission will determine their long-term viability and influence. By using ethnographic and longitudinal techniques to document the changing nature of these outlets, future research should expand our understanding of newsroom cultures, audience dynamics, and the political economy of alternative media. Additionally, media professionals and policymakers should recognize the vital democratic role of alternative media and consider policies that support their survival without compromising their independence.

In summary, *Fumaça* and *Divergente* serve as compelling examples of how alternative journalism can thrive despite structural barriers by contributing perceptive, provocative, and innovative ideas to the public discourse. Their cases demonstrate the continued importance of independent media in advancing social justice and democratic engagement in the digital era.

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