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Roel Roscam Abbing, Robert W. Gehl

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WHAT IS 'ALTERNATIVE' ABOUT ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA?

Roel ROSCAM ABBING
Malmö University, Sweden
roel.roscam-abbings@mau.se

Robert W. GEHL
York University, Canada
rwg@yorku.ca

ABSTRACT

What are alternative social media (ASM)? What is it that makes social media ‘alternative’ and how can one approach their study? Rather than attempting to answer these questions in order to provide a precise and stable definition of alternative social media, this paper will offer a working definition of ASM. Building on an archive of alternative social media scholarship (n=127), we problematize ‘alternative’ as an analytical category and how it has been configured thus far. Based on this work, we conclude that ASM scholarship should analyse ASM as relational, emergent, and dynamic. In addition, we argue ASM scholars must use a situated perspective. In doing so, scholars working in the field will be able to ask sharper questions both about ASM as well as mainstream social media.

Keywords: alternative social media (ASM), social media, alternative, configuration, fediverse, science and technology studies (STS).

After years of criticism of social media companies, there is an increasing interest in *alternatives*, not only from prospective users but also among researchers. But what are alternative social media? What is it that makes social media “alternative,” and how can one approach their study?

Rather than answering these questions with a precise and stable definition of alternative social media (ASM), this article draws on a literature review and reflects on ASM studies as the field has evolved since the late 2000s. As two scholars working within this field, we are invested in the notion of alternative social media, not in the sense of a shorthand used to point to a difference between well known social media and lesser known ones, but because the concept allows us to ask more interesting questions and advocate for more just digital communications. Instead of accepting “big tech,” corporate-controlled social media as the only possible option, focusing on alternative social media illustrates other sociotechnical paths that can be taken. For us, the concept of alternative social media adheres to the motto of fields such as science and technology studies: *it could be otherwise* (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2015, p. 465).

ASM and its scholarship has evolved, changing direction over time, with some programs ending and others going through twists and turns. We problematise “alternative” as an analytical category and how it has been wielded thus far. However, we do so not to reject prior work – after all, that includes our own work! Instead, we draw on the field to show what the term “alternative” can do for future research. We will ultimately offer a working definition of ASM, with an emphasis on “working”:

Alternative social media are social media developed in complex relation to mainstream social media. ASM are marked by high interpretive flexibility as they emerge. As dynamic systems, they never totally stabilize. The best approach to their study is for the scholar to be situated.

Scholars of alternative social media must account for these factors. In doing so, they will be able to ask sharper questions both about ASM as well as mainstream social media.

METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A classic approach to tracing how concepts are developed in academic discourse is the literature review (e.g., Ronzhyn, Cardenal & Batlle Rubio, 2023; Wuyckens, Landry & Fastrez, 2022).

Most literature review studies are based on specific databases using keyword searches and then sifting those results via some selection criteria (e.g., Loecherbach & van Atteveldt, 2020; Shibuya, Hamm & Cerratto Pargman, 2022; Sommier, 2014). Our approach differs from this. As part of the Network of Alternative Social Media Scholars, we have been collecting peer-reviewed, academic research focusing on alternative social media. This bibliography began in 2014¹. To build the bibliography, we regularly search academic databases, use keyword alerts in Google Scholar, engage in snowball sampling by following citations, and import bibliographies from similar projects.² As of this writing (July, 2025), we have collected 127 peer-reviewed academic articles, edited collections, conference proceedings, and graduate theses related to alternative social media spanning from 2008 to 2025.³

We have developed this corpus in order to support our own contributions to the study of alternative social media (e.g., Roscam Abbing, Diehm & Warreth, 2023; Gehl, 2015). Here, we take a step back to reflect on the field as a whole as well as our positions within it. While our approach does not replicate the standard literature review, it echoes media studies literature reviews in focusing on a specific concept (Ronzhyn, Cardenal & Batlle Rubio, 2023; Loecherbach & van Atteveldt, 2020; Sommier, 2014; Wuyckens, Landry & Fastrez, 2022). We focus on how “alternative social media” has been conceptualized since the late 2000s. As Sommier argues, academic publications “create and validate certain meanings that

1. It is publicly available at <https://www.socialmediaalternatives.org/bib.html>.

2. See for example Fediverse Observatory (https://www.zotero.org/groups/4861035/fediverse_observatory/library) and Investigación sobre el Fediverso (<https://www.pedrolr.es/research/infonomy2024/fediverseresearch.html>).

3. In opting to focus on peer-reviewed items and theses (which are themselves reviewed by graduate supervisors), we thus exclude some documents, including white papers, reports, blog posts, and pre-prints.

progressively become the norm and can, as such, easily pass as natural instead of constructed and contingent” (Sommier, 2014, p. 3). While such concepts appear to be natural, “knowledge expressed in academic discourse is... not objective but is, like any other form of knowledge, ‘situated’ – that is, produced by and for particular interests, in particular circumstances, at particular times” (Sommier, 2014, p. 4).

We further frame our understanding of ASM by building on Lucy Suchman’s (2012) use of *configuration* as a theoretical framework. We interpret both ASM as a field and specific ASM projects as simultaneously co-constituted by material objects, practices of use and development, and cultural imaginaries. Configuration draws attention to how the different parts of any given artefact or object are figured together and how those separate parts shape each other to form something new. Suchman sees two uses for configuration:

First, as an aid to delineating the composition and bounds of an object of analysis, in part through the acknowledgement that doing so is integral not only to the study of technologies, but to their very existence as objects. And second, in drawing our analytic attention to the ways in which technologies materialize cultural imaginaries, just as imaginaries narrate the significance of technical artefacts (Suchman, 2012, p. 48).

Just as Sommier argues that academic concepts naturalize understandings, Suchman sheds light on how configurations create new units of definition. In the process of configuration, things become “figured” as something. The “figure... holds the material and semiotic together in ways that become naturalized over time” and is also simultaneously “a mode of production, as the circulation of figures implies their recontextualization, multiplicity and at least potential transformation. So figuration comprises both a method through which things are made and a resource for their analysis and un/remaking” (Suchman, 2012, p. 49).

Rather than accept concepts as “natural,” literature reviews allow for tracing the contingencies of conceptualization. Configuration then, can extend this method to encompass both concepts and technical objects as contingent and mutually constitutive. For our specific purposes, we have examined the 127 ASM publications, asking: how do scholars produce the object

called “alternative social media”? What does that production look like in relation to the developers, activists, or organizations making alternative social media? How are scholars doing this work situating themselves in relation to their object of study?

Our analysis shows chronological progression as both the field of alternative social media studies and its object have developed over time. In the next section, we trace the history of the field of alternative social media studies, and then in the following sections we critically consider the concept “alternative social media.”

HISTORY OF ASM RESEARCH

ASM as an object arguably starts in the late 2000s, when at least a dozen computer science papers were published in conference proceedings.⁴ Predominantly, these papers focused on the topology of Internet technologies, such as the newly emerging corporate social media systems Facebook and Twitter. The papers drew on the concept of the “social graph” to suggest that a better social graph system would be decentralized – ideally, peer-to-peer – rather than controlled by a central corporation (e.g., see Yeung, Liccardi, Lu, Seneviratne & Berners-Lee, 2009; Buchegger & Datta, 2009; Ackermann, Hymon, Ludwig & Wilhelm, 2008; Freitas, 2013). Notably, the earliest instance of the use of “alternative” in the sense we are pursuing here appears in 2008 in the conclusion of Doris Schöberg’s 2008 thesis, which was a study of PeerSON, a potential “privacy saving *alternative* for Facebook, Orkut, StudiVZ, etc” (Schöberg, 2008, p. 44, our emphasis).

Critical academic research on alternative social media was soon to follow. If we consider alternative social media scholarship as the critical analysis of social media built to explicitly challenge mainstream social media, one origin for the field is arguably the *Unlike Us* series of conferences. Inaugurated by Geert Lovink and Korinna Patelis in 2011, *Unlike Us* held three events and published a collection of essays (Lovink & Rasch, 2013).

4. See Narayanan et al. 2012 for an overview.

Four of the 31 chapters of the *Unlike Us* reader explicitly focus on alternative social media, and many other chapters gesture towards alternatives. Chapters from Lonneke van der Velden (2013), Sevignani (2013), and Barocas et al (2013) engage in comparative analysis of multiple alternatives. As Sevignani argues, while Facebook was gaining esteem due to its ostensible role in the Arab Spring, concerns over “exploitation and alienation” by Facebook requires us to explore “meaningful alternatives” (Sevignani, 2013, p. 324).

For such chapters to exist, authors had to have something they could reasonably refer to as “alternative social media.” As Lovink and Patelis note, in the early 2010s there was a “small explosion of alternative options currently available” (Lovink & Patelis, 2013, p. 370). *Unlike Us* authors referenced several systems – particularly diaspora*, Lorea, Crabgrass, and GNU social. Lorea, a system closely tied to the 15M social movement in Spain, is discussed in an *Unlike Us* chapter by several of its activist user/developers (Cabello, Franco & Haché, 2013). Lorea, GNU social, and diaspora* were all designed to be decentralized, self-hosted social media. This reflected the ideas found in the computer science research of the late 2000s. Overall, as Ganaele Langlois explains, both ASM developers and scholars are “focused on the politics and rights of users, with special attention to rebuilding privacy on social networks, from the right to anonymity to re-empowering users to be able to decide what kind of data can be collected on them and for what purposes” (Langlois, 2013, p. 51).

A field of scholarship was thus well established by the time scholars such as Gehl (2015) and Fuchs and Sandoval (2015) articulated “alternative social media” with larger histories of alternative media. Drawing on alternative media theory, Gehl suggested that alternative social media carries on the goals of older alternatives, such as citizens’ radio, underground newspapers, and web forums: they mix democratic production with “radical, progressive, socialist, anarchist, feminist, queer, or anti-racist” content (Gehl, 2015, p. 2). Likewise, Fuchs and Sandoval contrasted capitalist media with the political economy of alternative media, arguing that the latter can contribute to social democracy, but only if they are funded and used by social activists.

In doing so, Gehl, Fuchs, and Sandoval were following an implicit thread from *Unlike Us*: the idea that alternative social media would be aligned with the politics of the left. However, these scholars had a blind spot. As Holt (2020) demonstrates, alternative media can just as easily be deployed by the political right. As Gow (2022) argues, this includes alternative social media. Particularly after the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit campaign in the UK, many alternative social media scholars have turned attention to the rise of “alt-tech” or “alt-right” social media (Zuckerman & Rajendra-Nicolucci, 2021; Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022; Kor-Sins, 2023). Deplatforming became a concern, particularly when emboldened far-right actors were removed from Twitter, Youtube, or Meta properties in violation of hate speech rules (Rogers, 2020; Shaughnessy, DuBosar, Hutchens & Mann, 2024). New alternatives, such as Parler, Rumble, and Gab, marketed themselves as free speech havens for those who were removed from mainstream social media (Jasser, McSwiney, Pertwee & Zannettou, 2021).

Thus, in stark contrast with earlier ASM scholarship, which tended to assume that the alternatives would be progressive, the alt-tech scholarship tended to reduce “alternative social media” to “alt-right social media” (Stocking, Mitchell, Matsa, Widjaya, Jurkowitz, Ghosh, Smith, Naseer & Aubin, 2022; Gehl, 2022). However, while reductive, this shift has a hidden benefit. It introduces another aspect of ASM largely missing in the earlier literature: governance. Much of the earliest scholarship focused on how technical elements such as free and open source software (F/LOSS) and decentralized architectures would shift power away from corporate social media to end users, but had less to say about how those users might govern themselves. The second stage of scholarship – including studies of deplatforming and the alt-right – began to explore how the technologies of alternative social media would be used not just for disseminating political speech, but for *organizing* political movements, both left and right.

These concerns tend to play out through content moderation. Contrasting visions about allowing for free speech versus strong content moderation in ASM has flourished with the rise of ActivityPub-based federated social media. Particularly due to Mastodon, many fediverse servers articulate the technical structure of decentralization with the cultural practice of codes of conduct (Gehl & Zulli, 2022). In contrast to alt-right alternative social media which tout individual freedom of speech, fediverse

communities often collectively develop content moderation standards that eschew hate speech. Observing this, Mansoux and Roscam Abbing note that the fediverse relies on “neither the model of privacy where technically inclined individuals are in full command of their own communications, nor the model whereby the multitude believes they have ‘nothing to hide’ simply because they have no say nor control over the systems they depend on” (Mansoux & Roscam Abbing, 2020, p. 133). Instead, Mansoux and Roscam Abbing argue the fediverse has a “a social understanding of privacy” rather than a technical one, which makes the fediverse into “a working laboratory in which questions of social organization and governance can no longer pretend to be decoupled from software” (Mansoux & Roscam Abbing, 2020, p. 134).

Scholarship exploring social organization and governance on federated social media has blossomed in the past few years, particularly after the purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk in late 2022 (e.g., Struett, Sinnreich, Aufderheide & Gehl, 2024; Roth & Lai, 2024; Cramer, Maxam III & Davis, 2025). This line of inquiry has also been extended to other alternative systems, such as Scuttlebutt (Mannell & Smith, 2022). Related work on how alternative social media may prevent or contribute to the spread of misinformation is also emerging (Frost-Arnold, 2024; Failla & Rossetti, 2024).

Thus, the field of alternative social media broadly tracks two key eras in Internet history: the Web 2.0 period of 2005 forward and the rise of algorithmically-sorted social media in the mid-2010s on. Earlier alternative social media development and scholarship was a reaction to the Web 2.0 business model of exploiting user-generated content (e.g., Kennedy, 2013) – particularly the mapping of social relations – and the attendant centralization and surveillance this required. Later, as questions of governance come to the fore, much ASM development and scholarship focuses on mitigations against and perceptions of algorithmic power (e.g., Mannell & Smith, 2022; Siapera, 2023).

ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY

We draw on this history of ASM scholarship, as well as our own scholarship in this area, to propose three necessary dimensions ASM scholars should attend to in future scholarship. The three dimensions are: *relationality*, or the complex relations between ASM and mainstream social media; *emergence*, which considers how ASM design and use emerges within a broader media context; and *dynamism*, where researchers must account for continuous change and evolution in ASM as well as mainstream social media. While these might seem generic and applicable to many objects, this particular assemblage of concepts emerges out of our understanding of ASM as configurations where materiality, use and imaginaries co-constitute sociotechnical systems. We are not arguing that these three elements are missing from previous scholarship (nor, for that matter, that they are only applicable to ASM scholarship, or that they cannot travel to other areas of inquiry). Rather, we find them to be core to ASM and argue ASM scholars should systematically attend to them.

Relationality

The claim that some social media are alternative implicitly rests on the assumption that other social media are “normal” or “mainstream.” ASM are always in relation to a referent, usually an existing commercial platform. For example, the aforementioned *Unlike Us* book (Lovink & Rasch, 2013) is subtitled “social media monopolies *and* their alternatives.” Following Suchman, we can understand ASM as configured by the existing affordances, use cultures and imaginaries that have come to shape mainstream social media. In order to be recognizable as “social media,” ASM must have affordances (e.g., friend or follower relationships, profiles, and status updates) that also appear in corporate social media. Without those affordances, the alternative would not be recognized as “social media.” And yet, the alternative must distinguish itself from the mainstream. One job of the ASM scholar, then, is to fully trace the complex differences and similarities between ASM and mainstream social media.

Indeed, much ASM scholarship has focused on difference. Authors have traced differences by looking at different economic models (Gehl, 2015;

Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015; Mannan, Schneider & Merk, 2024), topologies and affordances (van der Velden, 2013; Zulli, Liu & Gehl, 2020; Anderlini & Milani, 2022; Niederberger, 2023; Dunbar-Hester, 2024) and governance practices (Rogers, 2020; Caelin, 2022; Theophilos, 2024). Rather than understand these differences through market logics, where competing entities offer different features in attempts to gain market share, ASM scholars have often understood these differences as acts of opposition to mainstream social media.

However, merely understanding alternatives through difference is not enough. A relational view also requires understanding *similarities*. For example, pointing out how ASM are differentiated by the fact that they are largely built around F/LOSS misses the fact that mainstream social media are as well. While it is not possible to run a copy of Facebook the way one might do with Mastodon, Facebook’s interface framework React is open source and widely used for building interfaces, including Mastodon’s. In fact, most of the internet – whether corporate and mainstream or grassroots and alternative – increasingly rests on F/LOSS (O’Neill, 2021). So while F/LOSS is often an important factor in the making of ASM, it is not completely the differentiating factor – their relationship is much more complex. This raises questions about what it means to call for F/LOSS as a solution, as was often done in early ASM scholarship (e.g., Narayanan, Toubiana, Barocas, Nissenbaum & Boneh, 2012).

Aside from F/LOSS, open standards such as interoperability protocols have been considered as a differentiating factor. However, here their relation is also complex. Historically upstarts in the computing industry relied on and promoted open standards for market share (Kelty, 2008; Russell, 2014). ASM use open standards to challenge proprietary platforms, but they are not the only ones using them. In the internet engineering’s multi-stakeholder model, standards and protocols are used by different actors, resulting in collaborative, competitive, as well as oppositional relationships. When commercial entities embrace those standards ASM rely on (e.g., ActivityPub), responses range from collaboration to opposition (Theophilos, 2024). Standards further reveal the ways in which ASM and commercial platforms are interdependent: Halpin (2019) argues that open standards contributed to monopolization of social media. Jamieson, Yamashita & McEwen argue that, infrastructurally, ASM and their

standards co-exist with or rely on corporate platforms (2022). Van Dijck, de Winkel & Schäfer show how ASM's governance practices can rely on similar mechanisms as corporate platforms (2021, p. 9-11). Finally, as ASM are configured by design patterns of mainstream social media, they can, by design, perpetuate CSM's more subtle dynamics in terms of governance structures (Schneider, 2021) or the way possible interactions are encoded in interoperability protocols (Stadler, 2023, p. 38-40).

In advocating for a relational understanding, we take some lessons from research on alternative organizations. There, researchers have argued that work on alternative organizations has overly focused on “a preference for taxonomies and dualisms” such as “alternative/mainstream,” at the expense of conceptualizations that see “alternatives as evolving processes rather than fixed economic categories” (Jonas, 2013, p. 29). Consequently, others have used such relational understandings to underscore how such alternative organizations are entangled and dependent on mainstream processes but also how different conceptualizations of alterity exist. Alakavuklar distinguishes between three nuances: *alternative additional organizations*, which align with capitalist principles and offer additional choices. *Oppositional alternative organisations* pursuing more radical practices that “seek autonomy from the state and follow non-market practices to challenge the mainstream.” *Alternative substitute organisations* “are considered a last resort and coping mechanism for meeting needs at the local level” (Alakavuklar, 2024, p. 1599).

Such a relational understanding that can accommodate different organizational nuances also allows us to see how self-proclaimed alternatives like Ello (2014-2023), Gab (2016), Parler (2018), Truth Social (2021), or Post News (2022-2024) were alternatives in the sense that they framed themselves in competition with mainstream social media, but shared many similarities in either the revenue models, funding, or governance. Whereas scholars in the field of alternative organizations ground notions of alterity in emancipatory and anarchist political thought (Parker, Cheney, Fournier & Land, 2014b, p. 629), for ASM this is harder to do: ASM scholars have to contend with the fact that the same Mastodon codebase simultaneously enables non-profit and progressive causes as well as underpinning platforms like Gab and Truth Social. They have to contend with ASM not only as practices and narratives, but as software which can be run, studied

and modified for any purpose – including for reactionary or mainstream, corporate use.

Thus, considering alternative social media in relation, both through difference and similarity, researchers can raise more interesting questions and investigations into *both* regular social media *and* their alternatives. But, as the examples of self-proclaimed alternatives show, how a project or an ASM community understands itself as an alternative can both be understood from their perspective as well as from an outside perspective. A question therefore is whether one retains skepticism towards particular claims to alterity from ASM and their communities, or whether to follow them in those claims – a question ethnographers of technology have long dealt with (Woolgar, 1998, p. 444). This question can be resolved, we argue, through tracing those complex relations.

Emergence

While alternatives are always in relation to something else, that relation can shift quickly, particularly at moments of emergence. When alternatives are created, they often have a high degree of interpretive flexibility.

For ASM specifically, emergence can be seen in how ASM, as technical projects, often start from a position of an analogous alternative but then become something else in use. In these cases, ASM closely mirror affordances of proprietary systems while reconfiguring some elements such as topology. In other words, they tend to start as “Facebook, but decentralized,” “Discord, but open source,” “Twitter, but free speech.” As such, they can be considered as configured, in Suchman’s terms, by the referent. Over time however, these analogues become something else when developers and users alike discover the specific properties of those ASM, as they develop and (ab)use them.

For example, Mastodon was innovative in ASM as it emphasized visibility controls of posted content (features otherwise broadly supported by mainstream social media) and the possibility to “defederate” from other federated ASM. These innovations responded to both an early embrace by marginalized users and to the incumbent GNU Social which did not

respect the visibility controls those marginalized users relied on (Gehl, 2025). Thus, rather than the outcome of a plan, defederation emerged out of early interactions between different communities using ASM and how those interactions were configured by different ASM software. Such changes emerged early on as the software was being used and developed.

This observation comports with empirical research on the use and design of computational systems, which has shown that these systems are neither static nor predetermined: “rather than fixed objects that prescribe their use, artifacts – particularly computationally based devices – comprise a medium or starting place elaborated in use” (Suchman, 2006, p. 278). Once people start using systems, they quickly start to use them differently than intended. Configuration then highlights that usership and use of systems themselves are contingent but ultimately so is their design. Emergence thus highlights how use can influence the design of systems and how the development of ASM can radically alter over time. Configuration can alert us to how shifting expectations, use patterns and cultural imaginaries play a role.

Dynamism

Closely related to emergence are the fact that alternative social media are marked by dynamism. In a general sense this is true of all social media, which were preceded by *social networking sites* that aimed at establishing a *social graph* by connecting people. Social media emerged out of social network sites to emphasize the circulation of *media* (“content”) through those social graphs (Bogost, 2022). In 2025, rather than relying on those social graphs, most social media have come to rely on algorithms measuring personal interaction to determine what content to circulate, following a design popularized by TikTok. In doing so they emphasize the *media* over *social* and redefine what is colloquially understood as the conjunction of “social media.”

One core tenet that could have been argued as a constant in ASM is their focus on being alternative in terms of topology. That is, ASM have explored different configurations for decentralising core functions of social media

and thereby changing the relation between infrastructure and users⁵. However, even this seemingly stable aspect of ASM appears to be changing in part due to a renewed regulatory fervour at the start of the 2020s on both sides of the Atlantic. In the European Union, this took the form of EU Digital Markets and Digital Services Acts. In the US, this took the form of more proactive antitrust.⁶ In 2025, social media incumbents such as Meta, through their Threads product, have at least partially embraced interoperability and decentralization through open protocols (Davis, 2024). The startup Bluesky, though now an independent company, initially started as a project within Twitter to investigate how it might become interoperable and is now developing an open protocol, ATProto. It’s not yet clear whether these corporations strategically embrace open protocols in an effort to extinguish ASM – “embrace, extend and extinguish” (Simcoe & Watson, 2019) – or if they merely do so as a reaction to the shifting regulatory environment. Regardless, simply suggesting “alternative social media are decentralized” is no longer a viable criterion, even if it once was. This underscores how both the social media landscape, and its alternatives, are dynamic and configured by processes both internal and external to them.

SITUATING RESEARCH IN RELATION TO ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA

The facts that ASM always stand in relation to something else and that they have emergent properties which change over time ultimately demands a specific approach from researchers. The claim that some social media are alternative implicitly rests on the assumption that other social media are “normal.” While different social media have different degrees of usership and brand recognition, normalcy is nonetheless a normative assumption and contextually situated. Normativity simultaneously informs notions of what is normal and what is alternative, and is ultimately based on the standpoint from which a researcher looks at the problem.

5. For an overview of different approaches see Roscam Abbing, Diehm & Warreth (2023); Zulli, Liu & Gehl (2020); Mannell & Smith (2022).

6. For an overview see the introduction in Knapstad (2023)

Therefore, we argue that researchers need to consider how they are situated in relation to the object. What assumptions does the researcher bring to bear? What politics or ethical assumptions? How does one's work relate to that of ASM developers, moderators, or members? And how does the researcher's own identity shape their perspective? Taking a situated approach asks of researchers to articulate from what perspective they claim something being alternative (or normal). The larger issue here is that the researcher's values inevitably affect what they are able to see. Indeed, we apply this advice to ourselves as we pursue ASM scholarship.

For example, earlier work on ASM focused specifically on alternative social media being non-commercial and standing in opposition to commercialization (Lovink & Patelis, 2013; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). Following this, one of us defined alternative social media against commercial social media (Gehl, 2015). While this view has merit, as it stresses a crucial *difference*, it also overlooks similarities in an effort to argue specifically for a politically left – and noncommercial – social media space. Thus, Gehl's paper ignored the fact that one of the earliest iterations of ASM which laid the foundations for later initiatives, both in terms of the protocols for interoperability, and the software itself, was StatusNet, a venture-capital backed commercial enterprise (Prodromou, 2010; Kincaid, 2009). Furthermore, commercial entities of different kinds remain involved in alternative social media ecosystems to this day, either in the guise of politically-motivated enterprises such as Gab and Truth Social or in the guise of corporate players such as Wordpress and Flipboard adding support for ActivityPub to their platforms. Our analysis of ASM scholarship shows that focusing only on the democratic and progressive transformational potential of social media alternatives underemphasizes how alternative social media have also been embraced and developed as much, if not more, by those with reactionary politics or those acting for commercial gain. Conversely, the same can be said of scholarship which understands ASM only in terms of their association with reactionary politics.

None of these perspectives are false – they shine their light on specific aspects of a larger whole. They are thus partial and situated perspectives. Yet the situated perspective not only pertains to claims to something being alternative; what is considered normal rests on the researcher's perspective and locality. In some societies, platforms such as Telegram might be

considered alternative because of their limited use and notoriety, whereas in others they are deeply enmeshed with peoples' everyday lives. Users of social media themselves interpret social media as being "for them", or not, based on their own positionality in a matrix of gender, class, caste, or geographic region (Costa, 2016, p. 37-42; Venkatraman, 2017, p. 51). Recognizing both ASM and the researcher's perspective as situated helps develop a more profound understanding of the nature of those alternatives, their users, as well as their relation to society at large. In contrast, essentializing alternative social media along perspectives privileged by researchers obscures those richer and more complex understandings.

For this argument, and our understanding of ASM as a research object more generally, we draw on insights from feminist technoscience scholars who show how knowledge is partial and that research subjects are *situated* in particular social contexts (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004). Situatedness ultimately impacts the questions that researchers can or will ask and the way they do so. This is not to question objectivity, but rather the universalising "view from nowhere." Feminist standpoint theory understands marginalized perspectives as those that can contribute to knowledge in more profound ways, turning "a social and political disadvantage [...]" into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage" (Harding, 2004, p. 7-8). Standpoint theorists however argue that marginality does not afford such privileged perspectives automatically, but rather a standpoint needs to be "achieved" through politisation. In other words, ultimately one needs to understand and appreciate the power relations involved.

To be sure, we do not equate ASM with nonoptional social marginalizations such as womanhood, racialization or disability that feminist theorists write from. Rather, we argue that the perspective of something being alternative from a mainstream can put ASM scholarship in conversation with other traditions that attempt to understand phenomena from a perspective of opposition, marginality or alterity (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020; Parker, Cheney, Fournier & Land, 2014a; Gibson-Graham, 2008).

This brings us to our final point. Whereas we approach ASM from the perspectives of ethnography (Gehl) and design research (Roscam Abbing) and have focused primarily on the fediverse, we do not suggest those perspectives on ASM are final or more valid. Au contraire. In pursuing our literature

review, it is difficult to overlook the way different academic disciplines have both drawn from and contributed to ASM research. Thus we suggest that ASM ultimately functions as a boundary object (Star, 2010) at the centre of different types of inquiry, scholarly or otherwise. For some, ASM have progressive potential. For others they represent a potentially dangerous fringe development. Simultaneously, ASM have also allowed for boundary work in how they allowed for collaboration without consensus across different research disciplines and their respective methods and epistemologies.

This is reflected in the way ASM have been discussed across disciplines such as internet policy and safety engineering (Roth & Lai, 2024; Cramer, Maxam III & Davis, 2025), law (Rozenshtein, 2022) as well as computational social sciences (Bin Zia, Raman, Castro, Hassan Anaobi, De Cristofaro, Sastry & Tyson, 2022; Zia, He, Raman, Castro, Sastry & Tyson, 2023). Furthermore, as Gow (2022, p. 11-16) argues, there are several ways in which it is not only possible to do research *about* ASM but *with* ASM. ASM researchers have been reflexively doing so as researchers and ASM activists since the very beginning (Cabello, Franco & Haché, 2013; Anderlini & Milani, 2022). This extends to our own work as both scholars of ASM and practitioners (both of us have held admin roles on Mastodon instances). Gow points to participatory methods where researchers work together with users of ASM in particular, but this can be extended to experiments with ASM software itself. Laser et al. (2022) use ASM to explore issues of environmental sustainability. Others have used or studied ASM software as building blocks in participatory research into platform alternatives (Wessalowski & Karagianni, 2023; Bettega, Masu, Hansen & Teli, 2022; Roscam Abbing & Light, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a broad survey of the past fifteen years of ASM research. We conclude that ASM should be understood as *relational*, *emergent*, and *dynamic*. The relational aspect underscores that ASM are always alternative in relation to a referent. ASM relate to that referent both by difference and congruence. They differ from the referent in key ways, including oppositional ways, but in order to be an alternative they also have to share similarities – even moments of collaboration – with the referent

social media. Both the differences and similarities might be subtle and not immediately legible, as in the case of revenue models. We have also focused on the ways ASM are emergent. Our focus on emergence highlights two aspects. First is that the alternatives themselves emerge in relation to prior media – their developers use metaphors and other evocative devices to make them legible, while combining the familiar with the new. Second is that their design and use emerges through use – this is to say that users take advantage of the affordances of systems that the developers did not necessarily intend. ASM scholarship should take these moments of emergence into account. Finally, even well after emergence, ASM can change due to their dynamism – this object is not fixed, nor is its context. ASM might even become the new mainstream social media.

In undertaking this review, we have also reviewed our own prior contributions against those of others, and, through that, gained an understanding of how ASM researchers – including the two of us – are situated. Thus, we also argue ASM scholars should be reflexive. In doing so, ASM scholarship can enter in conversation with other scholarship that attempts to understand phenomena from opposition or alterity.

Our analysis prevents us from offering a precise and stable definition of what ASM are, but the working definition we have offered above is flexible enough for this moving target: *Alternative social media are social media developed in a complex relation to mainstream social media. ASM are marked by high interpretive flexibility as they emerge. As dynamic systems, they never totally stabilize. The best approach to their study is for the scholar to be situated.* We suggest this working definition not as a way to limit the field, but to orient future work in this area of scholarship. Not only is ASM as an object configured, but also the field of inquiry itself is subject to configuration.

This is why we insist on the qualifier “alternative.” One might argue that we might do well to just call our enterprise the study of social media, with a specific focus on those with a different topological arrangement or non-proprietary code. We hope this paper makes it clear why we stick to the term “alternative.” Looking from the vantage point of alternatives (and what alternatives problematize, prioritize, emphasize) tells us as much about the alternatives as it does about dominant social media – and thus

about social media in general. Furthermore, using the qualifier of alternative connects us to the quotidian reality of the demand for and impetus to make alternatives – a demand made by activists. ASM scholars, in turn, can contribute to this demand. In doing so, ASM scholarship helps show how the world could be otherwise.

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