Alternative as Mainstream? Interrogating Informality in Non-Western Media Economies

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Abstract

This article interrogates the notion of informality in media through the prism of the conceptual dualities "mainstream-alternative" and "legitimacy-legality", which are often used to define media activity that at least partly happens outside of legal, officially regulated spaces. It has become common to refer to such practices, often colloquially termed 'piracy', as alternative ways to distribute and access content. Yet, alternativity implies the existence of another, more hegemonic media access provider. Markets where 'piracy' is the only known and the only available option to acquire content, therefore, beg the question about what exactly these informal media are viewed as alternatives to. To address this question, I put mainstream, alternative, legitimacy, and legality – rather widely used and seemingly straightforward concepts – into dialogue with each other by exploring the intertwined discourse around them. I find that the main reason why informal media continue to be approached as alternative, even when there is ultimately nothing to be alternative to, is that researchers sometimes take for granted Western perceptions of the media economy and, more specifically, of what is a 'widely accepted' practice. I highlight the inherently contextual, even subjective nature of informality and related concepts of mainstream, alternative, and legitimate, emphasising the need to be more explicit and reflective in the research around informality. I argue that this framing of informality as alternative can be problematic, potentially leading to a downplaying of the role informal practices play in certain, especially non-Western contexts.

Introduction

The idea for this article emerged from my ongoing research into the informal practices within the Ukrainian screen media industry. To conceptualise these practices, I have adopted a theoretical approach, proposed by Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas in *The Informal Media Economy* (2015). Lobato and Thomas (2015), aiming to challenge the dominance of marginalising views on various media distribution practices existing beyond formally regulated spaces – e.g., peer-to-peer file sharing, sales of counterfeited DVDs, or any practices

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commonly termed 'piracy.'[2], – and instead to highlight their integral position within the media environment, introduce the so-called "spectrum of formality". As detailed further, this model emphasises an inseparable, almost co-dependent relationship between formal media businesses and their aforementioned informal counterparts, thus bringing to light an equally important role of informality in the media environment. However, applying this de-facto relational framework to the Ukrainian context, where formal actors in this relationship are a minority or, in some instances, absent entirely, begged the question about the specifics of this formal-informal relationship in the contexts, where informality might be the only existing form of media. Further prompted by the recent calls for reconsidering existing approaches and theories in media studies to incorporate non-Western perspectives and experiences, I ask whether the spectrum, as a framework that originated in Western scholarship, sufficiently acknowledge specificities of other, non-Western contexts; and if not, what limitations may this lead to?

The "spectrum of formality": A universal model?

Although defining a formal activity, as I discuss further, is not a straightforward task, it can very broadly be understood as an activity that is regulated – most commonly by a state or by industry (Lobato, Thomas and Hunter, 2011; Lobato and Thomas, 2015; Marinescu and Valimăreanu, 2018). Accordingly, the term "informal" is generally used to refer to activities that are not regulated or controlled in a way that the formal ones are. The primary role of the spectrum of formality is to encourage us to think differently about these two kinds of activities. Being more specific, as opposed to viewing formal, legal, major media businesses as having nothing in common with informal 'pirates' or amateurs, the spectrum suggests considering the two in a continuous relationship with each other. As Lobato and Thomas (2015) explain, the terms "formal" and "informal", rather than referring to the two separate, binary categories, point to a degree of formalisation, i.e., where a specific practice sits on the line between "formal" and "informal". At the "formal" extremity of this spectrum, Lobato and Thomas (2015) place such major media corporations as *BBC* and *CBS*. The other "informal" end of the spectrum is represented by downright 'pirates', e.g., *The Pirate Bay* (ibid.). The territory in the middle, therefore, encompasses such actors of the media economy as, for example, *Plex* – a service, which provides legal, official access to screen content (films, TV shows, live TV), whilst also functioning as a media server that offers a convenient, "Netflix-like" way to organise personal (including 'pirated') files (Maxwell, 2021). To determine *how* formal (or informal) a practice is – in other words, its location on the spectrum – one needs to assess the formality of the various aspects of this practice, e.g., ease of entry, quality control, centralisation, taxation (ibid.). As Lobato and Thomas (2015) note, in reality, very few, if any, practices or businesses are actually entirely formal or informal; when a practice is placed at the formal edge of this spectrum, it is likely that the *majority* – rather than *all* – of its components are characterised by a high degree of formality. To illustrate this point, Lobato and Thomas (2015) point out that *BBC* is known to have used amateur, unlicensed footage in

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[2] *'Piracy'* is an equivocal, rather problematic term, which does not have a single, established definition. For many, it is used interchangeably with the term *informal media* (e.g., Hutchins, Li and Rowe, 2019), whereas others argue that 'piracy' implies biased connotations (e.g., Mirghani, 2011). However, despite the controversy behind it, its use as a colloquial name for (potential) copyright infringement has become almost unquestionable. In this article, 'piracy' is used to refer to those, who do not obtain a licence, or any permission for that matter, from the copyright owner of the films they acquire or distribute (Yar, 2005; Yung, 2008).

their broadcasts, while many torrent trackers, such as *The Pirate Bay,* have certain requirements – regulations – for the way 'pirate' files must be named, thus highlighting a presence of informal elements even in some of the most formal media businesses and vice versa.

On the one hand, this complex in/formal nature of the varying practices that constitute the media environment and, consequently, a far from insignificant role of informality within the latter are increasingly recognised in the field, including in the works concentrating on the more formal media. For example, Evans et al. (2016, p. 412), despite focusing on legal video-on-demand services, do not undermine the role of the informal online viewing networks. The reason why they chose to pay attention to the more formal actors of the media markets they study is explained by their interest in the effect regulatory and industry policy has on online viewing in those markets. This means that Evans et al. (2016) make it explicit that they recognise a considerable presence of the more informal, illegal media activities along with the more formal ones in the markets they explore. Similarly, there are works highlighting the value and significance of the practices, which can be placed somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. For instance, Carter (2018) and Lim (2019) both focus on a distinct third, liminal space between formality and informality to describe fan enterprises and self-distribution, respectively. Carter (2018) puts forward the idea of an "alternative economy", emphasising not only cultural but also an economic role of fan practices, the legality of which is difficult to define. Lim (2019, p. 208) suggests that such a semi-formal, intermediary-free route as self-distribution allows independent filmmakers to overcome the struggles of the formal, still largely "oligopolistic film distribution system". Research focusing on the media activity situated at the "informal" extreme of the spectrum, or 'piracy', have also been moving away from exclusively evaluating its arguably negative effects on the formal industry to exploring its role in providing access to content (Mattelart, 2016).

However, despite this considerably less marginalising approach to informality within the media environment, there is a tendency to view informal media ultimately as an alternative to the formal ones. As I argue in this article, the framing of informality as alternative to formality can be problematic, potentially leading to a downplaying of the role informal practices play in some, specifically non-Western contexts. Consider, for example, this recent blog post of a Russian travel blogger (Travel po Planete, 2019). The post describes what is an evidently surprising find for the blogger – the availability of DVDs for sale in one of the bookshops in Austria. The blogger genuinely did not expect that people in Austria were still buying DVDs because, in Russia, the primary, most normal and usual way to watch films is by downloading them from file-sharing sites for free. This blog post is essentially dedicated to explaining to the readers in Russia why people pay to watch films; and based on the hundreds of comments to the post, many indeed appear to recognise file-sharing as one of the main film distribution channels in the country. Similarly, such studies as Mattelart (2009; 2012) and Karaganis (2011), which explore the role and reasons behind 'piracy' in a wide range of non-Western economies, clearly demonstrate not simply an important but the central role of 'pirate' media for audiences in these countries. In other words, for them, 'piracy' is effectively the only "alternative". Concretising my earlier question about the spectrum, I specifically ask *what exactly these informal media practices are seen as alternatives to? Is it valid to apply the same scope of the spectrum to different media economies around the world? If, in a certain context, the "formal" end of the spectrum is effectively absent, does analysing this media economy through the lens of the 'full', "informal-formal" range limit our ability to fully understand the role informal practices play in it?* To address these questions, I now turn to examining the conceptual

dualities *legality-legitimacy* and *mainstream-alternative*, which are commonly used to define and evaluate an activity's in/formal status and how they interrelate.

A note on method

This is a theoretical, conceptual piece, focusing on interrogating the terms in question through the discourse around them within anglophone academic works. I am particularly interested in the discourse around the defining aspects of (in)formality and the marginalised perspectives within it (van Dijk, 1993). I should acknowledge that excluding non-English publications from a discussion, especially the one centred around multinational contexts, is a significant limitation (Neimann Rasmussen and Montgomery, 2018). Yet, as Albuquerque (2020) observes, it is the anglophone research that remains at the forefront of theory building and that is faced with the calls for 'de-Westernisation'. With this in mind, I complement the discussion with examples of the relevant discourse from non-academic, non-English sources. I now move on to a logical starting point in exploring the concept of informal media, that is, the concept of informality.

In/formality: A subjective concept

As noted earlier, defining informality is not as straightforward as it may seem. After all, nearly five decades of research did not manage to provide the notion of the informal economy with a single, universally accepted definition (Marinescu and Valimăreanu, 2018; OECD, 2018). As Portes and Haller (2005) put it, the idea behind the informal economy is both simple and complex. On the one hand, it is rather common for the concept to be explained as the one that refers to any economic activity happening outside of the control of the formal regulatory system (Adom and Williams, 2012). All existing ways of defining the informal economy in one way or another point out that what unites the wide range of practices that it encompasses is their inability to meet certain criteria, which would otherwise grant them the formal status (Williams, 2015). These criteria typically include firm registration and tax payment, the existence of legal contracts and licenses, or officially guaranteed remuneration for the work, e.g., minimum wage (Williams and Nadin, 2010; Lobato et al., 2011; Siqueira, Webb and Bruton, 2016; Sutter et al., 2017). In other words, as Efendic, Pasovic and Efendic (2018) explain, informal activities contribute to the official gross domestic product – as do the formal ones – but they are not being declared to the official institutions which would otherwise formally regulate such activities. What this means is that although the processes within the informal economy are not compliant with all of the relevant laws and industry regulations, the final products of these processes are legal in their nature (Henley, Arabsheibani and Carneiro, 2009; Efendic et al., 2018); or, as Webb et al. (2009) put it, "informal" refers to a practice that is "*illegal yet legitimate*".

"Illegal yet legitimate" implies that the informal status of a practice is directly dependent on the two characteristics – its (il)legality and (il)legitimacy. The former, legality, is a concept that describes an activity's status in relation to the law and legal institutions (Berkowitz, Pistor and Richard, 2003). Legitimacy, on the other hand, is a more complex notion, which is often contrasted with legality. If a certain practice is deemed legitimate, it means that this practice

is "morally justified", "appropriate", "socially acceptable" (Black, 2008; Roberts, 2008; Palmås, Andersson Schwarz and Larsson, 2014; Mayntz, 2016). The juxtaposition of legality and legitimacy is essentially the juxtaposition of "formal" and "social", "formal" and "moral", where the former refers to a precise, clearly defined set of permitted actions. At the same time, the latter describes a much more flexible, wider range of practices (Roberts, 2008). Put differently, the law itself can have a different degree of legitimacy. Legitimacy is an attitudinal concept (Roberts, 2008), which suggests a certain recognition and acceptance of a legal institution or a regulator as rightful (Black, 2008). Consequently, legitimacy is rather closely related to the degree of compliance with a certain law, as it effectively "serves as a 'rationale' or 'motivation' […] to 'comply'" (dos Reis and Kessler, 2016, p. 107). Yet, a crucial difference between legality and legitimacy for the purposes of this discussion is the ability to identify the authority behind each clearly. Whereas in the case with legality, the authority can be easily identified, who determines the legitimacy is unclear (Roberts, 2008). As the concept of legitimacy relies on effectively subjective beliefs, defining its exact scope in a universally recognised way is impossible and instead is rather easily manipulable depending on one's standpoint and ideological views (Guerguil, 1988; Roberts, 2008; Mayntz, 2016). The question that arises, therefore, is who decides whether a practice is legitimate? And what does this mean for the notion of in/formality?

Formality suggests that the views, beliefs, and principles that underlie legitimacy and legality are congruent, i.e., what is permitted by law is also recognised as appropriate by society (Webb et al., 2009). The informal economy then emerges when a practice perceived as acceptable and normal by large groups within a society is not seen as such by the law (Cannatelli, Smith and Sydow, 2019). This happens when the boundary between what is legal and what is not is unclear; often fuelled by a lack of legitimacy of the law or legal institutions in the first place, "what is formally illegal may become accepted everyday practice" (Mayntz, 2016, p. 5). Indeed, a commonly posited reason why informality in non-Western, less developed economies is generally more widespread and embedded in the national industries, compared to the Western ones, is a relatively weaker, less established, or less effective legislation and regulatory system in the former (Mead and Morrisson, 1996; Gërxhani, 2004; Schneider and Williams, 2013; La Porta and Shleifer, 2014; De Giorgi, Ploenzke and Rahman, 2018). For instance, in Ukraine, unlike in major Western countries that advocate the most for intellectual property (IP) rights protection (Mirghani, 2011), 'piracy' is a clearly defined legal term[3]. Yet, as in many developing countries, Ukrainian formal structures, including enforcement agencies, are less advanced (Schneider and Williams, 2013; USTR, 2020), it is rather easy not to comply with some of the IP regulations. It is worth noting, however, that defining (il)legality in practice is not easy no matter the geographical context. Even for the most developed, legitimate legal institutions, it can take time to provide unambiguous and up-to-date laws when it comes to, for example, technology. For instance, in the context of film 'piracy', copyright laws in major countries such as the US are yet to define unauthorised streaming – which is otherwise is currently one of the most popular ways of consuming screen content (Burroughs, 2017) – as infringement (Barrett, 2019). As Krawczyk, Tyrowicz and Hardy (2020) explain, whereas streaming implies that a potential 'pirate' does not actually acquire

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[3] According to the Law of Ukraine *On Copyright and Related Rights*, piracy is defined as "publication, reproduction, importation into the customs territory of Ukraine, exportation from the customs territory of Ukraine, and distribution of counterfeit specimens of works (including computer software and databases), phonograms, videograms, illegal broadcasts of the programs of broadcasting organisations, camcording, card sharing, as well as Internet piracy, i.e., any actions that, according to this law, are recognised as an infringement of copyright and(or) related rights using the Internet.

copyrighted content, existing copyright laws are still largely based around copying and acquisition rather than access as it is the case with streaming. Nevertheless, if legality – a concept based on the relatively precise and straightforward criteria – is still often difficult to assess, legitimacy is even more complex of an issue.

As it is now evident, whether an activity is defined as in/formal depends not only on what is allowed by the legal system but also on the subjective, often ideological beliefs of large groups within a society on whether this activity is tolerable. Indeed, as the earlier example of DVD sales and file-sharing in Russia and Austria demonstrates, the very perception of and attitude towards informality is distinct in Western and non-Western countries. As Palmås et al. (2014) note, legitimacy involves, to an extent, approaching a certain activity as in line with 'a natural order'. Resonating with this perspective, Borocz (2000) offers an explanation why for West European and North American economies formality is seen as relatively more natural than for the other ones. Borocz (2000) uses the term "moral predominance of formality" in relation to these countries, which implies that formality there is seen as a social norm. This, in turn, is seen by Borocz (2000) as a result of the rapid emergence of the large-scale formal capitalist structures of the state and the industrial enterprises. Although developing economies have also undergone this industrial capitalism stage, the capital shortages, which these countries experienced, led to a smaller size of industrial organisations (Borocz, 2000). The latter has led to the high levels of formalisation being less of a necessity than in the Western economies (ibid.). Put simply, in non-Western economies, these socio-historical conditions not only slowed down the formalisation but changed the perspective on the reasoning behind it whatsoever, resulting in "informality-as-a-way-of-doing-things" (Bandelj, 2016, p. 90), i.e., informality itself being a more justified option, a social preference (Gordon and Li, 2009).

Hillebrand and Zademach (2013, p. 9) term those informal, 'socially preferred' activities "alternative economic practices" – economic systems that are considered "alternatives to mainstream capitalism". According to Hillebrand and Zademach (2013), "alternative" in this case can mean both that a practice operates in a similar to the capitalist way, still having profit as at least a small part of the motivation behind it – e.g., fan enterprises studied by Carter (2018) – as well as that a practice exists completely beyond the notion of capitalism – e.g., file sharing, which could be viewed as an example of the economy based on reciprocal arrangements, or sharing economy (Braid, 2018). What this means is that when one refers to 'piracy', or any other media practice for that matter, as alternative (e.g., Dent, 2012; Rauch, 2015), they are effectively highlighting a divergence of the way this practice operates from what *they* consider to be a standard, acceptable, legitimate way of operating. Put differently, 'pirate' media should only be considered alternative if there exist more legitimate 'non-pirate' media. To illustrate this point, I return the discourse around informal media practices, in particular to the cases where they are termed alternative.

"Unboxing" the *mainstream*

As mentioned earlier, one of the most common perspectives on 'piracy' regards it as an alternative way to access the desired content. More specifically, such unauthorised distribution channels are often seen as a cheaper, faster, more convenient, or simply the only available option to watch films in some markets (Leonard, 2005; Mattelart, 2009; Klinger, 2010; Karaganis, 2011; Meissner, 2011; Mangahas, 2014; Mattelart, 2016). Whether

disregarding copyright merely to avoid expenses and time involved in officially acquiring films for distribution purposes or as the result of an inability to officially distribute specific films in a particular market, e.g., due to government censorship, 'piracy' effectively performs the role of "an alternative [...] channel for cultural circulation and consumption" (Li, 2012, p. 543). Let's consider some specific examples. Mendes Moreira de Sa (2015) discusses an "alternative" distribution system in Brazil, namely an online community on Orkut, a now-closed social networking platform, where fans of American TV shows would be able to find links to downloadable episodes almost immediately after they had been broadcasted in the US. Other informal communities would translate the dialogues and create subtitles for the new episodes (Mendes Moreira de Sa, 2015). Mendes Moreira de Sa (2015) clearly states that she juxtaposes this informal distribution system consisting of online file-sharing communities and amateur subtitling groups with what she describes as formal, standard, traditional distribution system of TV shows in Brazil, i.e., television networks. In her later work, Mendes Moreira de Sa (2016) describes the practice of using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access content from Netflix catalogues that are only available is a limited range of countries, i.e., to circumvent geoblocking. She refers to it as "an alternative system of TV viewing" (Mendes Moreira de Sa, 2016, p.159). Jacobs et al. (2012, p. 958) focus on digital piracy in the Netherlands, referring to this practice as an "alternative film-distribution method", juxtaposing it essentially with the formal film and music industry distributors. Similarly, Meissner (2016, p. 69) views informal media economies as spaces for alternative, independent cultural voices; spaces "outside of mainstream media's established processes". One thing that is evidently common for each of these examples is that they all position – some more explicitly than others – various informal practices of accessing content as alternatives to the legal industry practices. The latter, in turn, are more often than not referred to as *mainstream,* a concept commonly applied as an antipode of alternativity (Przylipiak, 2018). Therefore, what needs to be addressed here is, considering that informality is seen as an alternative, is whether informal can be mainstream. To put it differently, are all mainstream practices necessarily formal?

To answer this question, it is logical first to address the definition of "mainstream". Yet, the latter is a rather tricky task. Whereas the aforecited works use the term in question effectively to explain what an informal activity is not, none of them identifies the defining characteristics of "mainstream" in the first place. The reason for that is, as Hájek and Carpentier (2015, p. 365) observe, that "mainstream media are usually understood as a monolithic category with a set of given characteristics that are never questioned". Hájek and Carpentier (2015) argue that the concept of mainstream media has become "*black boxed*", i.e., turned into a no longer challenged notion, the practical raison d'être of which has been largely reduced to help develop the theory of alternative media. Indeed, as Kenix (2011) notes, distinction from the mainstream has been central to the definition of alternative media. This means that one has a better chance to understand what mainstream *is* by taking a closer look at what it *is not,* i.e., at the notion of alternative media.

Alternative, first and foremost, is a relational term, meaning that its use for one activity necessarily implies the existence of another, more dominant one (Just, De Cock and Schaefer, 2021). According to Spracklen (2018), those practices described as alternative are practices that exist on the margins. One of the earliest and most radical connotations of alternativity is related to deviance and activism. Spracklen (2018) explains that this is the result of the research on alternativity being funded mainly by governmental organisations attempting to control or prevent any 'unorderly behaviour'. Some of the (earlier) research on 'piracy' sits well

with this perspective, pointing out an activist nature of this practice. For instance, Lindgren and Linde (2012) provide an example of file sharing as a form of subpolitics, which implies that downloading films from torrents is a way some people express their resistance to large, profit-driven companies that attempt to force unnecessary consumption on society. However, today, as Sinnreich et al. (2020) argue, very few 'pirates' have such idealistic, ideological, 'anti-copyright' aims underlying their activities. Instead, Sinnreich et al. (2020) suggest that currently, a far more practical approach to copyright and, accordingly, to 'piracy' dominates in the world, the underlying interest of which is situated simply in being able to share and access creative and cultural works. Echoing this more neutral view on some of the fundamental aspects of informal media (i.e., copyright), Spracklen (2018) notes that a different, more recent approach to alternative cultures is similarly more pragmatic, viewing them ultimately as a diverse range of neo-tribes, some of which all of us belong to. In other words, alternativity does not necessarily refer to something radical and diametrically oppositional to whatever is identified as mainstream in a given context; instead, the term "alternative" primarily emphasises a certain *difference* from the more widespread, widely accepted phenomenon – from the mainstream.

In line with this approach to alternativity, "mainstream" can be seen essentially as synonymous with *"widely accepted"*, *"conventional"*, *"standardised", "popular", "recognised", "established", "normal"* (Przylipiak, 2018; Draganova, 2020). Przylipiak (2018, p. 28), attempting to identify at least some more specific characteristics of the notion of the mainstream in cinema, suggests that the concept can be narrowed down to the two core properties – "wide acceptance by people and normality/conventionality". "Wide acceptance", according to Przylipiak (2018), relates to society. The higher the number of people who accept, recognise a certain practice as 'valid', the more mainstream it is. What Przylipiak (2018) effectively talks about here is *legitimacy*. Therefore, it can be concluded that what unites both mainstream and formal (and informal) is that the activities these terms refer to are perceived by a society as justifiable, effective, rational in a given context. The second property, "normality/conventionality", suggests that a specific practice is typical, meaning the most frequently appearing, the most similar to the majority of other practices in a range (Romney, Brewer and Batchelder, 1996; Przylipiak, 2018). As Przylipiak (2018) notes, typicality is a rather complex notion that could vary significantly depending on what a practice is assessed as similar. To illustrate this point, he uses blockbusters as an example of a type of films commonly – almost unquestionably – considered mainstream. However, as Przylipiak (2018) argues, it is exactly the *dis*similarity of these films from others that makes them blockbusters in the first place. Therefore, he suggests that it might, in fact, be more appropriate to evaluate the typicality of a practice not in relation to other, similar practices but in relation to the society's perception, i.e., what people see as typical, as the most frequently 'practised' one. In other words, mainstream refers to the most usual, most frequently practised, normal activity. So, what can be concluded from this in relation to the mainstream-(in)formality-alternativity-(il)legitimacy system?

Shifting the focus to the context

One major conclusion is that legality is not one of the fundamental characteristics of the mainstream. Legality is only a necessary attribution for formality. This means that formal media businesses are not mainstream by default, while it is also not theoretically impossible for informal media to have the status of the mainstream. Indeed, on the one hand, how the majority of researchers use the term "mainstream" does create an impression that it unequivocally refers to a formal practice. For instance, in their study of an Australian file-sharing community, Beekhuyzen, Von Hellens and Nielsen (2015) contrast this unauthorised form of distribution with the music recording industry, which is what they refer to when they use the word mainstream. For Dent (2012), "mainstream" implies economic activities that are, first and foremost, permitted and recognised as legal (and legitimate) by the powerful institutions on the market, e.g., the International Chamber of Commerce. In fact, even Lobato (2012), despite recognising the ubiquity and popularity of many informal, potentially copyright-infringing practices around the world, still occasionally uses the notion of mainstream as a counterterm for informal distribution. The dominance of such discourse can easily mislead one to assuming that it is both legitimacy *and* legality that are fundamental to the concept of the mainstream. Yet, for example, the Hollywood studio system, which is widely perceived as mainstream, is rather commonly juxtaposed with independent – though still very much formal – film producers and distributors (e.g., Crisp, 2015). It is important to add here that in practice, the notions of (il)legality, as well as mainstream and alternative/independent, are perhaps even more intertwined than in theory. For one thing, Hollywood has had weighty influence not only on the content of the copyright laws in the US but also on the place of copyright protection in the US international relations (Mattelart, 2012), which means that at the very least legality, if not all the other notions, are also defined by existing power relations and negotiations in the industry and more broadly politics. In fact, Lobato and Thomas (2015) note that such negotiations are often the ones that determine the aspects distinguishing formality from informality in the first place.

Nevertheless, Lobato and Thomas (2015, p. 17) also note that "sometimes this informal economy dwarfs its legal counterpart, effectively becoming the norm". In other words, informal can be mainstream, especially in contexts where legal options are non-existent. For example, in my currently ongoing research, I find that in Ukraine, official representatives of specific rightsholders, e.g., HBO, are either absent entirely or, more commonly, simply do not wish to sell the rights to the Ukrainian broadcasters (Interviewee B, 2021). As the result, the most common and, in fact, the only possible way for the Ukrainian audiences to watch many foreign TV shows is via illegal – though very much legitimate and typical – means. Furthermore, many major Ukrainian news sources, providing an overview of the country's latest streaming services, tend to explicitly stress whether they are talking about legal services specifically or about all – including informal – services (e.g., volynnews.com, 2020). Another interesting example of the discourse around in/formal media is from an article informing about the premiere of the new season of a major TV show – "The streaming service [Netflix] has released all episodes of season 3, so it is there where you can watch new episodes legally. [...] You can also watch the third season of "Stranger Things" on various pirate sources..." (maximum.fm, 2019[4]). the narrative in these news articles appears to be effectively based on the idea that unofficial, illegal sources of content are equally accepted by people with the legal ones. In fact, I would argue that it is the unofficial platforms that are seen as the norm, the

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[4] For the purposes of preserving the anonymity of these 'pirate' sources, I do not include the precise details of the article where this quote, translated from Ukrainian, is taken from.

benchmark, the traditional way of accessing films and TV shows since it is often only when the material focuses exclusively on legal media that the legality aspect is specified.

Therefore, the most important point that this discussion makes is the inherently contextual nature of the concepts in question. If we approach the question of what is considered the normal way of distributing or watching films from the perspective of, for instance, traditional film studies, then 'the norm' would refer to the Hollywood studio system and the distribution channels it officially recognises, e.g., cinemas (Lobato, 2012; Crisp, 2015; Przylipiak, 2018; Lim, 2019). Accordingly, file sharing, although it would be recognised as a widely used means of distribution, would not be deemed conventional or normal. However, if we look at the issue from the point of view of the audiences, for the majority of whom accessing films via file-sharing sites is the only affordable or available way, then such 'pirate' practices become both socially acceptable and typical i.e., mainstream. The conceptual difference here lies in the varying perception of what is widely acceptable and the most typical, most normal. Since these beliefs are different among countries, regions, and cultures, one needs to be cautious of unthinkingly reducing the notion of mainstream exclusively to legal, formal activities. It is important to identify the context in question and be explicit about what is used as a reference point for alternativity. Indeed, as Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur and Ostrom (2006) note, "formal" and "informal" can be thought of as metaphors that need to be adapted to a specific case, thus highlighting a predominantly functional, inconstant meaning behind the terms.

Consequently, it can be argued that the tendency to associate mainstream with formality essentially comes from the fact that a considerable majority of studies on informal media in both Western and non-Western settings are insufficiently explicit about this reference point, which a practice is termed alternative against. Often using Western perspectives on the typicality within the media economies, and more broadly, Western social norms and beliefs as a benchmark, such works risk limiting our understanding of a distinct role, nature, and scope of informality in non-Western contexts. This limitation has been spotlighted by the calls for de-Westernisation of media and cultural studies, which, as I noted earlier, served as an additional premise for this piece. Therefore, prior to concluding this discussion, I briefly highlight what appears to be a twofold rationale behind such calls and its relation to the complexities considered here.

Firstly, as Alacovska and Gill (2019) note, the value in studying contexts beyond the dominating Western one lies in their ability to present a different, "ex-centric" perspective, e.g., the one that could indeed allow to re-think the established, effectively Western perspective on the mainstream within the media studies, as argued in this article. Put differently, taking a closer look at the non-Western informality prompts to test the "universal validity of West-based empirical findings" (Alacovska and Gill, 2019, p. 198). As this discussion demonstrates, even when the ubiquity and centrality of the role 'piracy' plays in many less developed countries are recognised, informal media practices often continue to be approached as marginal, as an alternative to an effectively non-existent within a given context 'dominant'. Hence it is crucial to be more open and reflexive when framing a phenomenon as alternative by being explicit about what it is seen as alternative to.

Yet, it is worth emphasising that the calls for de-Westernisation of the media studies, particularly the views on informality within them (Alacovska and Gill, 2019), are not grounded simply in the desire to increase the size of the sample of informal practices by widening the scope of countries chosen as the geographical context for the research. As Cheruiyot and

Ferrer-Conill (2021) observe, the issue today is indeed not so much with the number of works exploring non-Western economies but with the extent to which the findings from these Majority countries are incorporated in theory development. As Hillebrand and Zademach (2013) put it, exploring such non-Western perspectives on informality and, more generally, on alternative economic activity has become increasingly common, in fact to the extent that it effectively made studying such alternatives the new mainstream in academia. Consequently, as Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2021) clarify, the proper way to de-Westernise the media studies is actually to *de-contextualise* them. Simply put, whilst there is an increasing number of works looking beyond the developed countries' context, the perspectives they discover generally retain the status of alternative, whereas Western approaches not only remain central but, as Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2021) put it, are "pigeonholed to the core". The latter is reflected in the desire to prove the 'exoticism' of a specific non-Western context that is being studied (ibid.). For example, if the focus of a publication is on a non-Western region, it is common to observe an overly thorough description of the general facts about a country under study (ibid.). In addition, it is a commonplace practice to use contextual data, e.g., the name of the (non-Western) country in the title, whereas research focusing on the Minority-country context mainly uses "generalised titles" (Albuquerque, 2020). This, in turn, suggests that there is a certain pressure to justify the value of considering this particular context in the first place. What all this means for the purposes of this discussion is that the assumptions, which are deeply, often unconsciously rooted into the terms in question, may effectively lead to a biased view of the media economies beyond the West.

Conclusion

In this discussion, I aimed to bring into dialogue the two conceptual dualities that are fundamental for defining informal media, namely *mainstream-alternative* and *legality-legitimacy.* The main goal here was to explore the intricacies and distinct nature of the notion of informality in the context of informal media economies outside the dominant Western settings, thus also responding to the recent calls for de-Westernisation and de-contextualisation of the media studies. Unpacking the meanings and discourse behind each of the terms highlighted a certain degree of assumptions that appear to have become embedded in them. More specifically, as my interrogation of these concepts demonstrated, "mainstream" tends to incorporate a Western understanding of the 'socially acceptable' and the 'typical' – the two fundamental properties of the mainstream. This, in turn, leads to an almost universal (within the anglophone research) association of the term with formality. Yet, getting to the core of the discussions around the concepts in question as well as using some examples from a non-anglophone and non-Western context, I demonstrate that equation of the notions of mainstream and formality – and accordingly, alternative and informality – is not always valid, as these concepts are inherently contextual. In other words, one should be cautious when framing informal media as alternative – an ultimately marginalising category, as it implies the existence of another, more hegemonic order in the context that is being studied. If an informal way of accessing a certain type of content is the only one available and is considered perfectly acceptable by and typical for the majority in a given society, then it may easily be termed mainstream.

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