

Article

Code Pink: Leverage Social Media Platforms to Bypass Traditional Media Gatekeepers and Construct Alternative Public Narratives

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Abstract

The contemporary media landscape has sustained a substantial transformation with the rise of AI-driven algorithmic platforms that enable activist organizations to produce and disseminate their own forms of political communication and campaigns. This study examines the YouTube channel of Code Pink, a prominent U.S.-based anti-war and social justice organization, to explore how activist media practices intersect with contemporary forms of journalism. Over a one-month period, video transcripts from the organization's YouTube channel were analyzed using NVivo 15, employing a hybrid qualitative approach that combined inductive and deductive coding. Deductive codes were informed by sustained observation of the channel over one year (short and long videos on YouTube, TikTok, and X), supplemented by engagement with relevant news coverage, while inductive coding followed grounded theory principles, allowing themes to emerge directly from the transcripts. Large Language Models (LLMs) were employed as exploratory analytic tools to support AI-assisted qualitative analysis, complementing manual coding processes. The analysis focuses on how Code Pink frames political events and U.S. foreign policy through confrontational interviews, protest documentation, and the dissemination of commentary to online audiences. Findings suggest that the organization's video content operates simultaneously as political activism, protest performance, and quasi-journalistic reporting. Activists frequently adopt journalistic techniques—including interviewing political figures, providing on-the-ground commentary, and framing narratives around public accountability—while also advancing explicit ideological positions that challenge dominant media narratives. The study highlights how platform-based activist media blurs the boundaries between journalism, advocacy, and political performance, contributing to the construction of alternative public narratives in the digital age.

Keywords: digital media; alternative media; YouTube; social media; fringe movements; qualitative; anti-war; peace movement; anti-imperialism; large language models



Academic Editor: Andreu
Casero-Ripollés

Received: 19 March 2026

Revised: 20 April 2026

Accepted: 24 April 2026

Published: 30 April 2026

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1. Introduction

The recent war with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)—the world's top rated state that supports international terrorism and has attacked more than a dozen peaceful neighboring Gulf and Muslim states since coming to power via a coup in the 1970s—to further prevent a potential nuclear weapons and continental ballistic missile development (something that was neglected with North Korea in the early 2000s), and the United States (US) operation in Venezuela to arrest its leader, allegedly accused of international narco-terrorism, have

ignited political activism against the US military interventions via alternative media activists, often described as leftist, but also some alternative right-wing podcasters described as isolationists (Jozaghi, 2025b; Samet, 2026; Smith, 2026; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Within this broader activist media landscape, the organization Code Pink, or CODEPINK, serves as an illustrative example and case study of how grassroots movements leverage digital platforms to shape political discourse and public opinion against US foreign policy, national interests, and international rule-based order (Romaniuk et al., 2017). Founded in the early 2000s (e.g., 2002) by Jodie Evans, Medea Benjamin, Starhawk, and Diane Wilson, Code Pink branded itself as a women-led grassroots peace organization mobilizing opposition to the US' invasion of Iraq and broader U.S. "militarism" (Romaniuk et al., 2017). Since its formation, the organization has become widely known for combining feminist activism, anti-war advocacy, and theatrical protest tactics designed to attract media attention, challenge political authorities, or shift public opinion (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007; Featherstone, 2003; Goss & Heaney, 2010). These tactics have included disruptive demonstrations at political events, confrontational engagements with policymakers, hackling, and highly visible public performances intended to dramatize opposition to U.S. foreign policy (Rohrer, 2009; Romaniuk et al., 2017).

Scholars examining Code Pink frequently situate the organization within the broader tradition of feminist anti-war activism and peace movements (Rohrer, 2009; Feinman, 2016). Research suggests that women's anti-war mobilization has historically drawn upon gendered narratives that frame women as caregivers, mothers, and moral guardians advocating for peace and social justice (Goss & Heaney, 2010). Code Pink reflects this traditional branding while simultaneously adapting feminist activism and "anti-imperialism" branding to contemporary media conditions (Goss & Heaney, 2010; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007). In particular, the organization employs a hybrid repertoire of protest strategies that combines maternal symbolism, egalitarian feminist rhetoric, and expressive performances of femininity—such as the prominent use of pink and theatrical protest imagery—to attract attention and mobilize supporters (Goss & Heaney, 2010; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007). These strategies illustrate how feminist movements can blend symbolic performance and political messaging to construct new forms of grassroots activism (Goss & Heaney, 2010; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007).

The role of performance within Code Pink's activism has been widely documented in the literature on feminist protest movements (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007; Rohrer, 2009). Feminist performance activism often utilizes theatrical elements—including costumes, satire, symbolic imagery, and staged confrontations—to challenge dominant political narratives and attract media attention (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007). Such performances operate simultaneously as political protest and mediated spectacle, targeting both physical audiences at protest sites and broader publics reached through mass media coverage (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007; Papacharissi, 2015). In this context, protest performances are designed not only to communicate political grievances but also to generate visibility within competitive media environments where movements must compete for public attention (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007). Although earlier research has focused primarily on Code Pink's street-based activism and feminist protest strategies, relatively little scholarly attention has examined how the organization's communication practices have evolved within contemporary platform-based media environments. In recent years, Code Pink has expanded its use of digital platforms—particularly YouTube and TikTok—to document protests, conduct confrontational interviews with political figures, hackling, and disseminate commentary on international political events. These digital practices allow the organization to bypass traditional news media while constructing alternative narratives about global politics, U.S. foreign policy, and international conflicts.

1.1. Literature Review

The contemporary media environment is increasingly shaped by platformed infrastructures in which visibility, circulation, and legitimacy are mediated through algorithmic systems rather than institutional gatekeeping (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Digital platforms such as YouTube, X, TikTok, and podcasting networks have not simply expanded the number of content producers; they have reconfigured the conditions under which political communication acquires authority and reaches audiences (van Dijck et al., 2018; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Burgess & Green, 2018). In this context, emerging actors—including activist organizations, influencers, and hybrid media collectives—operate alongside legacy news institutions, competing within what has been described as an “unbounded journalistic field” (Eldridge II, 2019). Rather than deriving legitimacy from institutional affiliation, these actors increasingly rely on platform metrics, audience engagement, and identity-based trust to establish credibility (Lichtenstein et al., 2021; Jozaghi, 2025a).

This shift has prompted renewed scholarly attention to hybrid media actors that adopt journalistic formats while pursuing advocacy, ideological, or movement-based objectives (Eldridge II, 2019; Chadwick, 2017; Hanusch & Löhmann, 2023). Existing research shows that such actors routinely appropriate journalistic conventions, including interviewing, field reporting, and documentary-style storytelling, while simultaneously engaging in meta-journalistic discourse that critiques mainstream media authority (Dowling et al., 2022; Eldridge II, 2019). However, these practices raise fundamental questions about what constitutes journalism in platform-based environments. To address this, scholars increasingly emphasize core criteria such as epistemic authority (claims to truth and knowledge), verification (evidence and sourcing practices), accountability (responsibility to audiences and subjects), and public service (commitment to informing the public interest) (Hanusch & Löhmann, 2023; Carlson, 2017). These criteria provide a framework for assessing how nontraditional actors engage with, reinterpret, or strategically depart from journalistic norms.

Within this framework, hybrid actors often exhibit selective alignment with journalistic standards. For instance, they may adopt the aesthetics of reporting—such as on-the-ground footage, confrontational interviews, or hackling—to signal epistemic authority, while relying on movement-based narratives rather than systematic verification practices (Eldridge II, 2019; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). Similarly, accountability may be oriented toward supporters and audiences rather than institutional oversight, reflecting a shift from professional regulation to participatory legitimacy (Carlson, 2017; Chadwick, 2017). These dynamics suggest that platform-based media do not simply erode journalism but rather reconfigure its boundaries, producing new forms of communication that blend reporting, commentary, and advocacy (Eldridge II, 2019; Hanusch & Löhmann, 2023).

One domain in which these transformations are particularly visible is activist media. Historically, activist communication relied on alternative print media, community radio, local posters, postcards, local newspapers, and grassroots video production to challenge dominant narratives and mobilize publics (Atton, 2003; Downing, 2000; Castells, 2025). In contemporary digital environments, however, activist organizations increasingly operate as digital-native media producers, using platforms to document protests, disseminate commentary, and construct alternative interpretive frameworks (Castells, 2025; Burgess & Green, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). These practices are shaped by platform affordances, including algorithmic amplification, real-time distribution, and interactive audience engagement, which incentivize emotionally resonant and visually compelling content (Burgess & Green, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015).

YouTube has become a central site for such activity. Its audiovisual format enables the integration of multiple communicative modes—interviews, commentary, documentation,

and performance—within a single content stream (Burgess & Green, 2018; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). At the same time, recommendation algorithms extend the reach of political content beyond immediate networks, facilitating the formation of issue-based and identity-driven audiences (Bucher, 2018; Munger & Phillips, 2019). Research on digital-native journalism shows that YouTube-based actors frequently adopt performative reporting styles, including immersive “on-the-ground” coverage and direct-to-camera address, to establish authenticity and engagement (Lichtenstein et al., 2021; Peer & Ksiazek, 2011). These practices often serve as substitutes for institutional credibility, reinforcing perceptions of proximity, immediacy, and responsiveness (Lichtenstein et al., 2021; Papacharissi, 2015; Carlson, 2017).

Within this evolving landscape, the distinction between journalism, activism, and protest becomes increasingly difficult to sustain analytically (Eldridge II, 2019; Chadwick, 2017). When activist organizations conduct interviews, provide real-time commentary, and document political events, they engage in practices that resemble journalism while remaining embedded within movement logics (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022; Lichtenstein et al., 2021). At the same time, these actors may prioritize narrative coherence, ideological alignment, and audience resonance over pluralistic sourcing or verification, reflecting tensions between journalistic and movement-oriented forms of communication (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). These tensions are not necessarily indicative of a departure from journalism but rather of a reconfiguration of journalistic roles within platformed media systems.

Despite a substantial literature on alternative media, digital journalism, hybrid media, and hybrid actors, there remains a need for fine-grained qualitative analysis of how specific activist organizations operationalize these dynamics in everyday media production. Limited attention has been paid to how activist groups use YouTube to combine journalistic techniques with protest practices and political advocacy, and how these practices relate to broader transformations in digital journalism and hybrid media. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how Code Pink leverages YouTube to construct political narratives, engage audiences, and brand/position itself within the evolving boundaries of journalism.

1.2. Research Rationale and Research Questions

This study contributes to the substantial growing body of work on digital journalism and activist media by examining how Code Pink leverages YouTube to communicate political narratives and engage audiences outside traditional media structures. Through qualitative content analysis of YouTube video transcripts using NVivo 15, the study explores how the organization combines elements of journalism, activism, and political performance/protests within its digital communication practices. By analyzing how Code Pink frames political events, conducts confrontational interviews, and documents protest activities, this research seeks to clarify how activist organizations use platform-based media to challenge traditional news institutions, dominant narratives, and media, and to construct alternative public narratives in the digital age. In particular, the following research questions are explored:

- (i) How does Code Pink perform and construct journalistic authority on YouTube, particularly in relation to epistemic authority, verification practices, accountability, and public service?
- (ii) What dominant themes and interpretive frames structure Code Pink’s representation of political events and U.S. foreign policy in its YouTube content?
- (iii) How are journalistic practices—such as interviewing, on-the-ground reporting, and commentary—combined with activist and protest-oriented communication strategies, fall within Code Pink’s platform-based media?

- (iv) How does Code Pink’s use of YouTube contribute to the construction and circulation of alternative public narratives that challenge or reinterpret dominant media representations?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Source and Ethical Considerations

This qualitative study relies exclusively on publicly available YouTube video content and therefore did not require institutional research ethics approval. Consistent with established ethical guidelines for digital media research, the analysis draws only on publicly accessible audiovisual material that creators voluntarily posted on an open platform. No interaction occurred with content creators or audience members, and no personal or private data beyond what was publicly disclosed in the videos was collected or analyzed.

The empirical concentration of this study is the YouTube channel of Code Pink (@codepinkaction), a U.S.-based anti-war, feminist, community action, and social justice organization that produces platform-native political commentary, protest documentation, and confrontational interviews with political actors. The organization has increasingly utilized social media, including YouTube, to disseminate political messaging, livestream protest events, and frame international political developments outside traditional news institutions, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Social media impact of Code Pink[®].

Social Media Name	Subscribers/ Followers	Posts	Likes/ Views
Facebook	300,000	N/A	N/A
Instagram (@codepinkalert)	285,000	5346	N/A
TikTok (@codepinkalert)	419,600	N/A	12,300,000
X (@codepink)	150,500	84,700	N/A
BlueSky(@codepink.bsky.social)	12,400	2200	N/A
YouTube (@codepinkaction)	258,000	3229	129,563,073
X: Medea Benjamin (@medeabenjamin)	213,700	46,200	N/A
TikTok: Medea Benjamin (@medeabenjamin)	292,800	N/A	9,300,000
YouTube: Medea Benjamin(@medeabenjamin6562)	5670	773	1,511,748
Instagram (medea.benjamin)	198,000	2339	N/A
Facebook (Medea Benjamin)	46,000	N/A	N/A
Total	2,181,670	144,787	152,674,821
$\bar{x}$	198,334	20,684	38,168,705
σ	131,000	34,500	76,000,000

[®] The data collected on 18 March 2026.

As shown in Table 1, the Code Pink action group has generated over 1,883,200 subscribers/followers across all social media platforms, along with 144,014 posts and 141,863,073 likes. As a long-time activist, author, and co-founder of Code Pink, Medea Benjamin has built a long-term media following and currently operates a multi-million-dollar fund that has granted money to many anti-Israeli groups in America (NGO Monitor, 2024). Medea Benjamin routinely travels to countries with strained relations with the US and Western countries, including IRI, Cuba, Venezuela, Yemen, North Korea (demilitarized zone) and others (CODEPINK, n.d.). YouTube was selected as the primary data source because of its central role in contemporary digital political communication, particularly its algorithmic capacity to amplify activist narratives and alternative political discourse (Burgess & Green, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015; Eldridge II, 2019).

2.2. Data Collection

The dataset consisted of publicly available YouTube videos published on Code Pink’s official YouTube channel over a defined sampling window spanning February through March 2026 (7 February to 7 March), as seen in Table 2. This time frame was purposefully selected during the time when Israel and the US attacked the IRI through preemptive strikes to further illustrate the role of Code Pink’s narrative framework and alternative messaging during heightened Middle East conflict, as it was formally established during the Iraqi invasion in 2003.

Table 2. The YouTube videos from Code Pink for 1 week using NVivo 15[®].

Date	Short Title	Time Total (min. s)	Comments	Likes	Views
7 February 2026	WTF: The Donroe Doctrine vs. Mexico	35.45	28	327	3258
10 February 2026	Our Grief is Not a Cry for War: Book Club with Jeremy Varon	57.04	1	35	229
19 February 2026	Cooperation vs. Individualism: Local Peace Economy Gathering	49.09	2	35	201
21 February 2026	WTF Argentina and the Region’s Political, Economic & Military Move	32.17	7	98	597
26 February 2026	Episode 340: CODEPINK’s People-to-People Diplomacy in Latin America	56.17	4	57	290
27 February 2026	The Kill Line: How China is Relearning Poverty in America	66.39	7	47	358
27 February 2026	China Report Back: Experiencing Modern Socialist Development	77.07	3	39	263
1 March 2025	Here’s what Iranian Americans are really saying	3.10	145	1600	10,527
2 March 2026	UK-US Bases on Cyprus: How We Shut Them Down	69.56	5	93	575
5 March 2026	Planting Seeds of Peace Local Peace Economy	42.46	1	30	160
7 March 2026	Venezuela: Asymmetrical Negotiation in the Aftermath of January 3	38.26	6	42	309
Total	N/A	528.60	209	2403	16,767
$\bar{x}$	N/A	48.05	19.00	218	1524
σ	N/A	20.86	42.46	466	3115

[®] The data collected on 17–18 March 2026.

As seen in Table 2, the Code Pink action group has generated 11 videos, 2403 likes, 209 comments, and 16,767 views in a single month, demonstrating its outreach on YouTube. This period was selected because it coincided with the escalation of geopolitical tensions between the US and IRI, and with its neighbouring peaceful Arab and Gulf Nations, during which Code Pink intensified its media activities, including protest coverage, commentary on U.S. foreign policy, and confrontational interactions on political issues. Sampling during a period of heightened geopolitical conflict enabled the analysis to capture how activist media organizations frame international crises and mobilize audiences through digital platforms.

All videos published during the sampling window were downloaded or transcribed using YouTube’s automated transcript function. Transcripts were manually reviewed and corrected where necessary to ensure accuracy. In addition to textual transcripts, each video was watched in full to capture contextual elements, such as tone, visual symbolism, protest performance, and audience engagement cues, which are often central to activist media communication.

Analytic memos were recorded during the viewing process to document recurring narrative frames, symbolic imagery, and emotional cues embedded in the videos. Screenshots were also captured when necessary to document key moments, visual symbolism, or protest performances that complemented the textual transcript analysis. These materials were subsequently imported into NVivo 15 (Lumivero, LLC, Denver, USA) to support systematic qualitative coding and thematic analysis. NVivo software has been widely used in qualitative media studies to manage large textual datasets, facilitate coding, and identify

thematic patterns in audiovisual material (Wong, 2008; Franzosi et al., 2013). Its ability to integrate textual transcripts, memos, and visual documentation makes it particularly suitable for analyzing digital media content such as YouTube videos.

2.3. Analytical Approach

This study employed a hybrid qualitative content analysis combining inductive and deductive thematic coding, supported by Large Language Models (LLMs) as exploratory analytic tools. Hybrid approaches are frequently used in qualitative media research because they allow researchers to identify emergent themes from the data while also examining patterns predicted by prior theoretical frameworks (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

LLMs were used during the preliminary stages of analysis to assist with data familiarization, transcript summarization, and initial pattern identification across large volumes of textual material. Specifically, transcripts were input into an LLM to generate descriptive summaries and candidate thematic groupings. These outputs were treated as provisional analytic prompts rather than final interpretations, consistent with recent research suggesting that LLMs can support—but not replace—qualitative thematic analysis (Yang et al., 2024; Castellanos et al., 2025; Mathis et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

To ensure methodological rigour, LLM-generated outputs were systematically evaluated through a manual verification process. First, all LLM-identified themes were verified against the original transcripts to confirm that they accurately reflected the data. Second, discrepancies, omissions, or overgeneralizations in LLM outputs were identified and corrected through iterative reading and coding. Third, LLM-derived summaries were compared with inductively generated codes within NVivo 15 to assess consistency and refine thematic categories.

The integration of LLM outputs into the analytical process was therefore bounded and selective. LLMs were used only to support early-stage pattern recognition and did not determine coding decisions, theme development, or final interpretations. All coding was conducted manually in NVivo, and themes emerged through an iterative process of inductive coding and deductive comparison with relevant literature. This approach ensured the analysis stayed grounded in the data while leveraging the efficiency of LLM-assisted exploration.

To avoid overreliance on automated interpretation, several safeguards were put in place. These included maintaining an audit trail documenting how LLM outputs were used and applying reflexive memoing (e.g., documenting how you interpret the data, why certain coding decisions were made, and how assumptions may influence the analysis). to identify potential biases introduced by automated summaries, and conducting a code–recode procedure to ensure consistency across manually generated themes. In all cases, the coder retained full interpretive control, and LLMs were treated as assistive tools rather than analytic authorities. This bounded integration enhances the transparency and replicability of the method, demonstrating how LLM-assisted qualitative analysis can be incorporated into traditional coding workflows while maintaining established standards of qualitative rigour.

2.4. Inductive Coding

The first phase of analysis employed inductive thematic coding guided by grounded theory principles. Transcripts were analyzed line by line to identify recurring concepts, narratives, rhetorical strategies, and patterns of meaning (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initial codes were generated from repeated phrases, political narratives, symbolic references, and protest-framing patterns observed across the transcripts, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Inductive codes with examples and theme explanation.

Theme	Explanation	Examples
Emotional testimony and lived experience	This theme captures the use of personal narratives and emotional testimony to convey the human impact of conflict and political events.	“We cannot get a hold of our family in Iran. . . watching our people being bombed in real time”; “Our mothers carrying the grief. . . our fathers lifting the rubble.”
Moral framing and language of justice	This theme reflects the use of moral and ethical language to evaluate political actions as right or wrong.	“This was predictable. This was avoidable”; “This is not a defense strategy. . . this is the consequence. . .”
Collective identity and solidarity	This theme captures how speakers construct a shared identity through collective language, emphasizing unity and common struggle.	“We are not all going to agree. . . but we know the history”; “When we stand together. . . we create that future.”
Protest as performance and public engagement	This theme reflects how protests, hackling, demonstrations, and public actions are framed as visible, performative acts intended to engage audiences.	Protest speeches delivered in public spaces with emotive language and audience appeal; References to demonstrations, rallies, events, and visible activism across contexts
Critique of media and information control	This theme captures skepticism toward “mainstream” media and claims that dominant narratives obscure or misrepresent reality.	“We will not fall for their propaganda”; References to “Western media” narratives being misleading or incomplete
Global comparisons and cross-national framing	This theme reflects the use of comparisons across countries to interpret political, economic, and governance systems, as well as development.	Comparisons between PRC and the United States in infrastructure, economy, and development; Linking Gaza, IRI, Venezuela, and other regions within shared narratives
Alternative knowledge production (“Witnessing”)	This theme captures how speakers emphasize firsthand observation and experience as a source of knowledge and legitimacy.	“We went. . . to see for ourselves. . . what is happening”; Descriptions of travel, observation, and “report back” narratives
Future-oriented vision and hope	This theme reflects discourse focused on envisioning alternative futures centred on peace, cooperation, and social change.	“A better world is possible. . .”; “We are creating that future.”
Political education and mobilization	This theme captures efforts to educate audiences and encourage participation in their political or activist movements.	Invitations to join campaigns, attend events, or engage in activism; Structured discussions, webinars, and “report back” sessions from the congress, public hearings, protests, or international missions

These preliminary codes were then grouped into higher-level thematic nodes using NVivo’s node classification tools. This iterative process involved constant comparison between codes, allowing the researcher to refine themes and identify broader patterns of meaning within the dataset. Inductive coding emphasized sensitivity to narrative framing, political storytelling, and emotional language, recognizing that digital political discourse often communicates meaning through affective narratives and symbolic associations rather than formal policy arguments (Boyatzis, 1998).

2.5. Deductive Coding

Following the inductive analysis, a deductive coding phase was conducted to examine how the data reflected the theoretical concepts identified by the researcher with prior engagement with Code Pink’s YouTube (short and long videos), TikTok, X, and BlueSky channels for more than a year, as well as other alternative fringe media (e.g., the People’s Forum and the ANSWER Coalition). Deductive coding was also supported by NVivo’s Word Fre-

quency Query, which identifies frequently occurring words and phrases within the dataset. Such queries are commonly used in qualitative research to detect discursive patterns and recurring rhetorical structures within textual data (Feng & Behar-Horenstein, 2019).

Based on word-frequency analysis and insights from previous viewership in alternative media ecosystems, several deductive nodes were developed to capture theoretically informed themes, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Deductive coding, examples, and theme explanations.

Theme	Explanation	Examples
Militarism and war	This theme captures how content frames military action and conflict, including critiques of war as a systemic and ideological process that prioritizes state power and produces human, political, and social consequences.	“Wars do not bring liberation. All they bring is devastation”; “Where human life comes before endless military budgets. . .our taxes fund our communities, not bombs.”
Humanity and love	This theme reflects a discourse that emphasizes empathy, compassion, human dignity, and collective care as central values guiding social, economic, and political action.	“It is always our people’s blood soaking the ground. . . our mothers carrying the grief”; “Love, peace, and liberty”; “The human is where the power is. And we say people power. . .not structure power.”
Peace economy	This theme reflects discourse promoting alternative economic and social systems centred on community well-being, cooperation, and the reallocation of resources.	“The local peace economy. . . community and culture. . . the things that have been ripped from us by the war economy”; “There’s a war economy. . . extractive, destructive. . . how do we get through it? The local peace economy.”
Zionism, fascism, Gaza	This theme captures discourse linking the conflict in Gaza to broader ideological frameworks such as Zionism and fascism, often framing both Zionism and fascism as systems of oppression, violence, and state power.	References to “apartheid,” “genocidal regime,” and systemic violence by Israel in relation to Hamas control of Gaza; “This is the consequence of militarism, imperialism, and Zionism.”
Nicholas Mudura and Venezuela	This theme captures discourse surrounding Venezuela and Nicolás Maduro’s arrest, including representations of U.S. foreign policy, sovereignty, sanctions, and political narratives about the Venezuelan government.	References to U.S. intervention and “the Bolivarian Revolution” or socialism as resisting external control; “Venezuela must be a sovereign country, not a colony of the United States”; Venezuela positioned alongside IRI, Cuba, and other states within critiques of U.S. foreign policy.
US out of the Middle East	This theme reflects discourse advocating the withdrawal of the U.S. military presence and intervention in the Middle East, emphasizing anti-war, anti-imperialist, sovereignty, and non-interventionist principles.	“Stay out on these streets. . . demand that better world we all deserve”; Calls to shut down “UK–US bases” used in regional operations; Characterization of U.S. military actions as “illegal war” and calls for war disengagement with the IRI regime.
Feminism and Resistance	This theme reflects discourse that frames political activism through feminist perspectives, emphasizing women’s leadership, gendered experiences, and resistance to war, oppression, and injustice.	“We are women. . . our legacy inspires. . . to continue walking our paths”; “Grandmothers, mothers, daughters. . . our blood pulses. . .”; Connections between women’s experiences and broader systems of violence and inequality linked to the “war economy.”
Free Cuba and Palestine	This theme reflects discourse advocating for the political liberation and sovereignty of Cuba and Palestine, often framed within broader anti-imperialist and anti-colonial narratives.	References to supporting Cuba and Palestine against external intervention and control via the Palestinian and Cuban flags at marches, including the Palestinian scarf (keffiyeh), by many speakers, presenters, and protestors. Discussions of blockades, sanctions, and external pressures affecting both Cuba, controlled by communists and Gaza, controlled by Hamas.

These included patterns such as confrontational interviewing, protest documentation, anti-establishment framing, and narratives challenging institutional media authority. These

discursive strategies are often described in media research as forms of “coded vernacular” or “dog-whistle” communication, which signal ideological positions to audiences while maintaining rhetorical ambiguity (López, 2015; Tuters & Burton, 2021). NVivo’s Node Explorer was used to refine these categories before re-coding the transcripts, ensuring consistency across the dataset and allowing comparison between inductively generated and theoretically informed themes (Wong, 2008).

2.6. Validity, Reflexivity, and Reliability

Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalizability, methodological rigour was maintained through systematic documentation, reflexive analysis, and coding transparency. An audit trail was sustained throughout the analysis, including records of coding decisions, theme development, analytic memos, and revisions to the coding framework. Such documentation enhances transparency and allows researchers to trace the relationship between raw transcripts and interpretive conclusions (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). Reflexivity was also central to the analytic process, particularly given the material’s politically sensitive nature. Ongoing self-reflection was used to identify and mitigate potential researcher biases, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than normative assumptions about activist organizations or political ideologies (Nicmanis, 2024).

Reliability was assessed through intra-coder consistency using a code–recode procedure. The entire dataset was coded twice at different time intervals, and the results were compared to ensure consistency across coding decisions. Code–recode analysis is a well-established method for assessing qualitative reliability content analysis (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). Finally, the use of LLM-assisted exploratory analysis provided an additional layer of triangulation. While LLMs were used only for descriptive and pattern identification, comparing LLM-generated thematic suggestions with human coding helped confirm the robustness of recurring patterns in the dataset. Importantly, LLMs did not replace human interpretation but served as analytic support tools within a reflexive qualitative framework.

3. Results

The qualitative analysis of 11 YouTube videos published between 7 February and 7 March 2026, reveals four interrelated thematic repertoires that structure Code Pink’s digital communication: (1) anti-imperialism as a master interpretive frame, (2) witnessing and counter-narration against dominant media discourse, (3) prefigurative peace politics and the construction of a local peace economy, and (4) collective political education and movement-building. These themes emerged through iterative inductive coding and were subsequently refined through deductive comparison with existing literature on activist media, alternative journalism, and feminist anti-war movements. Together, they demonstrate how Code Pink’s YouTube content operates simultaneously as political critique, epistemic intervention, and movement infrastructure.

3.1. Theme 1: Anti-Imperialism as the Organizing Interpretive Frame

Across the dataset, anti-US-imperialism functions as the central interpretive lens through which global events are understood and narrated. Rather than treating geopolitical conflicts—such as tensions involving IRI’s proxy hegemony in Gaza, Lebanon and the Gulf, or the Latin American socialist movement—as discrete or context-specific crises, Code Pink consistently situates them within a broader structure of militarism, colonialism, and U.S.-led imperial power takeover and hegemony. This framing transforms individual events into symptoms of a larger systemic condition, thereby producing a coherent narrative that links war, sanctions, media discourse, and economic exploitation.

Speakers repeatedly articulate this perspective in explicit and moralized terms. For instance, one presenter asserts that “wars do not bring liberation. All they bring is devastation,” reframing military intervention as inherently destructive rather than protective, restoring rule-based order, or harm reduction by preventing greater tragedies. Similarly, another speaker states that “this is the consequence of militarism, imperialism, and Zionism,” positioning contemporary violence by religious autocratic groups (e.g., Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and IRI) against the Jewish state as the predictable outcome of entrenched global power structures. In a more direct attribution of causality, another contributor concludes that “the culprit here is US imperialism,” reducing complex geopolitical dynamics to a single explanatory framework. In the context of ongoing military tensions involving the IRI, including efforts by the US and Israel to constrain its nuclear and continental ballistic capabilities, the analyzed YouTube videos predominantly frame the conflict through a de-escalatory and anti-war lens. The content frequently emphasizes calls to halt military engagement, including advocacy for the closure of UK military bases in Cyprus and coverage of protest activities. For example, one video features an Iranian American protester wearing a keffiyeh who characterizes the conflict as an “illegal war” and calls for an end to U.S. military involvement in the region. This contrasts with existing research and reporting, which suggests that segments of the Iranian diaspora have supported U.S. and Israeli actions against the IRI regime, often framing these interventions as facilitating regime change, liberation, or political transformation (Gumbel, 2026). These representations illustrate how the organization frames the conflict within a broader anti-war narrative at all costs rather than through strategic or security-oriented perspectives.

This discursive strategy aligns with broader patterns observed in alternative media ecosystems, where structural explanations are simplified into morally legible narratives centred on identifiable systems of power of us, the people, against them, the US imperialist hegemony. Importantly, the analysis suggests that Code Pink’s discourse is not merely oppositional to specific wars but rather organized around a system-level critique of the international rule-based order established after the Second World War, which they frame as “US empire,” in which militarism, foreign policy, and global inequality are interconnected. This master frame provides interpretive coherence across otherwise diverse topics, enabling audiences to understand disparate geopolitical events as part of a unified narrative of “domination” by Western countries and “resistance” by the newly rising powerful nations (e.g., People’s Republic of China (PRC), and South American countries) and traditional anti-US block (e.g., IRI, Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea, Yemen, and many others). It is not surprising that many speakers had flags of Venezuela, a photo of the socialist dictator, Hugo Chavez, and Spanish phrases of “Lucha Victoria,” which translates to “struggle until victory.”

3.2. Theme 2: Witnessing and Counter-Narration Against Dominant Media Discourse

A second dominant theme involves the use of firsthand witnessing, testimony, and counter-narrative construction to challenge mainstream media representations. Code Pink’s videos frequently rely on report-back formats, interviews, participation, and experiential accounts to position the organization as an alternative source of truth. This reflects a broader effort to contest the epistemic authority of legacy media institutions while constructing a counter-public grounded in movement knowledge and lived experience. Speakers emphasize the importance of direct observation and independent verification in rejecting dominant narratives from the US and Western media. For example, one participant states that “the Chinese people do not want war with us,” directly contradicting prevailing geopolitical framings in the South China Sea and Korean Peninsula. Another emphasizes the intentional concealment of information by the mainstream media, noting the impor-

tance of “finding out the information that they want to hide from us.” In a similar vein, a speaker explicitly frames the content as corrective, stating, “let’s just debunk that right here and now.”

These statements illustrate how Code Pink constructs its authority not through institutional legitimacy, but through epistemic resistance—the claim that official narratives are incomplete, misleading, or deliberately distorted by militaristic misinformation. This aligns with scholarship on meta-journalistic discourse, where alternative actors’ appropriate journalistic practices (e.g., interviews, fact-checking, on-the-ground reporting) while simultaneously challenging the credibility of mainstream media. Importantly, this theme demonstrates that Code Pink’s YouTube content functions as more than political advocacy; it also operates as a site of knowledge production, where movement actors reinterpret global events and invite audiences to adopt alternative interpretive frameworks. In doing so, the organization contributes to the construction of parallel information ecosystems that exist alongside, and often in opposition to, traditional news media.

3.3. Theme 3: Prefigurative Peace Politics and the Local Peace Economy

While much of the content focuses on critique, a third theme highlights the organization’s emphasis on constructing alternative social and economic arrangements, often described as a “local peace economy.” This theme reflects a shift from oppositional politics to prefigurative practices, in which activists seek to model the relationships and systems they advocate. Across multiple videos, speakers emphasize relationality, community, and collective agency as foundational principles for social transformation. One participant asserts that “the human is where the power is,” reframing political power as rooted in human relationships rather than institutions and economic efficiencies. Another expands on this idea by stating, “you’re not an activist. You’re a protagonist in the future,” positioning individuals as active agents in shaping alternative futures rather than passive participants in protest movements. Similarly, a speaker emphasizes that “the shift is relational, not transactional,” contrasting community-based systems with market-driven or militarized logics.

This theme aligns with feminist and anti-war traditions that emphasize care, cooperation, and social reproduction as alternatives to systems of domination of capitalist economies. Speakers routinely used photos of flowers, peace signs, the V Sign (Hand Gesture), and love while actively pursuing the utopian goal of peace through alternative socialist economies. However, in the context of digital media, these ideas are not only articulated but also performed and circulated through platform-based communication. The videos themselves function as spaces where these alternative values are rehearsed, discussed, and normalized. Analytically, this theme is significant because it demonstrates that Code Pink’s media practices are not solely reactive but also constructive and future-oriented. Many speakers, while highlighting poverty in the US by titles “relearning poverty in America,” highlighted the rapid rise and growth of the PRC as a global superpower based on socialist ideals of the communist party, by showcasing photos of Chairman Mao, the sickle and hammer, and the Panda, and articulating visions of a utopian peace, socialist economy and relational politics. The organization extends its critique beyond the liberal economic system to include the symbolic construction of alternative utopian worlds beyond the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, and many Pacific nations.

3.4. Theme 4: Collective Political Education, Solidarity, and Movement-Building

The fourth theme centers on the role of YouTube content as a tool for collective political education and movement infrastructure. Rather than functioning solely as a broadcast medium, the platform is used to cultivate community, sustain engagement, and facilitate

ongoing political learning among supporters. Speakers frequently emphasize the importance of participation in collective structures and sustained engagement with movement activities. For instance, one contributor states that “joining an organization is incredibly important,” highlighting the necessity of collective action, community organization, and action-oriented goals. Another underscores the affective dimension of participation, noting that “when we invest in building the community, it rewards you.” A third statement frames activism in future-oriented terms, asserting that “we are creating a future.”

These narratives position activism not as episodic protest but as an ongoing process of community formation, community action, and political education. Using YouTube enables this process by providing a space for continuous interaction, knowledge sharing, and identity construction. This aligns with research suggesting that digital platforms transform audiences from passive consumers into active participants who engage with, reproduce, and amplify movement narratives. Importantly, this theme illustrates how Code Pink’s media practices contribute to the reproduction of the movement itself. Through webinars, discussions, and educational content about Venezuela, IRI, PRC, and other countries in Latin America that are often on a collision course with the US, the organization builds and sustains a network of engaged participants who are both consumers and producers of activist discourse at various demonstrations and anti-war protests. In this sense, YouTube functions not only as a communication tool but also as a movement infrastructure that supports long-term engagement, ideological cohesion, and the spread of alternative facts.

4. Discussion

This study examined how Code Pink leverages YouTube to produce and circulate political narratives outside the institutional structures of traditional journalism. To examine the first research question linked to the construction of journalistic authorities, the findings indicate that the organization exercises authority through a combination of epistemic positioning, selective evidentiary practices, audience-oriented accountability, and public-facing advocacy. However, these dimensions diverge from conventional journalistic norms. Rather than relying on institutional verification procedures or editorial oversight, epistemic authority is constructed through firsthand witnessing, experiential claims, and interpretive framing, positioning the organization as an alternative source of knowledge within a platform-based media environment. This supports broader arguments that digital media has produced an “unbounded journalistic field,” in which nontraditional actors appropriate journalistic forms while redefining their function and legitimacy (Eldridge II, 2019; Dowling et al., 2022).

To address the second research question on dominant themes and interpretive frames, the findings demonstrate that Code Pink’s content is structured around stable thematic repertoires, most notably anti-imperialism, counter-narration, prefigurative politics, and movement-building, which together provide interpretive coherence across diverse geopolitical contexts. These themes, derived through both inductive and deductive analysis, illustrate how narrative consistency functions as an organizing mechanism for interpreting complex global events. The prominence of anti-imperialism as a master frame illustrates how activist media can organize complex global events into simplified and morally legible narratives. Political developments involving IRI, Gaza, Venezuela, and PRC are consistently interpreted through a lens that foregrounds U.S. militarism and global power asymmetries. As noted in research on alternative media ecosystems, reliance on recurring thematic repertoires can reinforce ideological alignment and audience resonance, shaping how information is interpreted and circulated (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). In this case, coherence is achieved through narrative consistency rather than pluralistic sourcing, highlighting the tension between journalistic logic and movement-oriented communication.

In relation to the third research question on the integration of journalistic and activist practices, the analysis shows that Code Pink integrates journalistic practices—such as interviewing, on-the-ground reporting, and commentary—with activist and protest-oriented communication strategies. These hybrid practices are particularly evident in confrontational interviews, protest documentation, and livestream-style reporting, which combine elements of journalism with performative activism. While these techniques resemble traditional reporting formats, they are embedded within explicitly advocacy-driven narratives, reflecting a hybrid communicative model in which journalism functions as a tool for political engagement rather than neutral information delivery. This finding aligns with scholarship on hybrid media actors, which emphasizes how nontraditional actors selectively adopt journalistic conventions while adapting them to movement objectives and platform dynamics (Eldridge II, 2019; Lichtenstein et al., 2021).

The findings also provide insight into the fourth research question, demonstrating how Code Pink's use of YouTube contributes to the construction of alternative public narratives that challenge dominant media representations. The themes of witnessing and counter-narration illustrate how the organization positions itself in opposition to mainstream media by emphasizing the exposure of "hidden" or "misrepresented" information or agendas. This form of epistemic resistance reflects broader patterns in digital political communication, where legitimacy is increasingly performed through claims of authenticity, proximity, and experiential knowledge rather than institutional verification (Papacharissi, 2015). In this sense, alternative narratives are not only opposed but also constitutive of parallel interpretive frameworks through which audiences engage with global events. At the same time, this strategy may shape the range of perspectives presented, particularly when complex geopolitical dynamics are interpreted through a single explanatory framework.

These dynamics become particularly salient when considering how anti-imperialist narratives intersect with broader geopolitical discourses circulating within digital alternative media environments. External reporting has suggested that, in some cases, protest mobilizations and advocacy campaigns may intersect with transnational political interests or funding networks associated with state and non-state actors. While this study does not seek to verify or evaluate such claims, their mention highlights the complexity of contemporary information ecosystems, where activism, media production, and geopolitical processes may overlap in ways that are not always fully transparent. Within this context, simplified interpretive frames may influence how global conflicts are understood, potentially foregrounding certain actors, experts, gatekeepers, or forms of power while offering more limited engagement with the broader range of perspectives present in international relations.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that Code Pink's communication practices extend beyond critique to include the articulation of alternative social and political imaginaries. The emphasis on relational politics, community-building, and the "local peace economy" reflects a prefigurative orientation in which activism is not only oppositional but also constructive. These narratives position individuals as agents of change and emphasize cooperation, collective responsibility, and care as alternatives to "militarized" and "market-driven" systems or economies. Within platform-based media environments, such ideas are not only communicated but also performed, contributing to the symbolic construction of alternative futures not based on capitalism.

The role of YouTube as a platform is central to these processes. Platform affordances—including algorithmic recommendation systems, audiovisual storytelling, and participatory engagement—shape both the production and reception of activist content (Burgess & Green, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). Code Pink's use of emotionally resonant narratives, performative protest, and direct audience engagement aligns with these affordances, enhancing visibility

and fostering audience participation. As prior research suggests, such dynamics can transform audiences from passive observers into active participants who engage with and reproduce movement narratives (Tuters & Burton, 2021). In this sense, YouTube serves not only as a distribution platform but also as a movement infrastructure that supports community formation, sustained engagement, and monetization.

Taken together, these results contribute to the growing body of work on digital journalism and activist media by demonstrating how platform-based communication reshapes the boundaries of journalism. Code Pink exemplifies how activist organizations can appropriate journalistic forms, construct alternative public narratives, and operate within hybrid media logics that blur distinctions between reporting, advocacy, and political performance. At the same time, the study highlights ongoing tensions over epistemic authority, verification, and narrative plurality in platformed media environments. Comprehension of these dynamics is fundamental for assessing how digital media transforms the production of knowledge, the circulation of political narratives, and the functioning of democratic discourse in the contemporary era.

5. Limitations

This study relies on a relatively limited, temporally bounded sample of 11 YouTube videos collected over a one-month period (February–March 2026). While this timeframe was selected to capture discourse during heightened geopolitical tensions involving the U.S. and IRI, it may overrepresent conflict-driven narratives and does not fully reflect Code Pink's broader communication strategies across time. In addition, the analysis focuses exclusively on YouTube and therefore does not capture how messaging may differ across platforms such as X, BlueSky, TikTok, Instagram, or livestream events, where audience dynamics and content formats vary. The study relies primarily on video transcripts supported by the researcher's observation, which may not fully capture the visual, performative, and affective elements central to activist media.

In addition, Code Pink produces various short YouTube Videos (less than 60 s) that are also shared across its platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, X, BlueSky), which were neglected in this research due to a lack of transcripts. Furthermore, in a qualitative thematic analysis, the findings emphasize interpretive depth rather than generalizability, and coding decisions may be influenced by the researcher's interpretation despite efforts to ensure rigour through reflexivity and code-recoding procedures. The use of Large Language Models (LLMs) supported pattern identification but did not replace human analysis. Finally, the study does not examine audience reception, engagement metrics, or the broader impact of the content, focusing instead on content production. It also treats the material as discursive practice rather than evaluating the factual accuracy of claims. Future research would benefit from longitudinal, cross-platform, and audience-centred approaches to better understand how activist media shapes public discourse within digital journalism ecosystems.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates how Code Pink leverages YouTube to operate as a hybrid actor at the intersection of political performance, activism, and journalism. Through qualitative analysis, the findings show that the organization constructs coherent and recurrent thematic repertoires of alternative public narratives grounded in anti-imperialist framing, counter-narration, prefigurative politics, and collective movement-building. These four interrelated themes—anti-imperialism, witnessing and counter-narration, prefigurative peace politics, and political education—illustrate how activist media practices are systematically organized rather than episodic or ad hoc. By adopting journalistic techniques while advancing explicit advocacy goals, Code Pink exemplifies how activist media can bypass

traditional gatekeepers and reshape how political events are interpreted and communicated in the digital age.

At the same time, the study highlights the broader implications of platform-based media for contemporary journalism and public discourse. While such practices expand opportunities for alternative voices and grassroots mobilization, they also introduce tensions related to selective framing, narrative simplification, and ideological reinforcement. The findings further suggest that platform affordances, particularly algorithmic amplification and audiovisual storytelling, perform a central role in constructing how these narratives are produced, circulated, and sustained within digital environments.

As digital platforms continue to redefine the boundaries of journalism, understanding how activist organizations construct, circulate, and sustain political narratives remains critical for assessing the evolving relationship between media, power, and democratic communication. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how hybrid qualitative approaches that combine inductive and deductive coding with bounded LLM-assisted analysis can enhance transparency and analytical depth in digital media research, while maintaining researcher-led interpretive control.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable because this research used the publicly accessible data.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data unavailable due to YouTube's original content and copyright restrictions. However, the raw transcripts can be downloaded from the Code Pink's YouTube accounts directly.

Conflicts of Interest: Nothing to declare in terms of conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
LLM	Large Language Model
PRC	People's Republic of China
US	The United States

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