

**Understanding Asymmetries:
Distinct Qualities of Media Distrust Between Conservative and Progressive
Americans and their Implications for the Future of News Media in the United
States**

Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde
der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Heidelberg

vorgelegt von:
Aleksandra Joanna Polińska-Nestmann

Erstgutachter: PD Dr. habil. Martin Thunert
Zweitgutachter: Prof. Dr. Sebastian Harnisch

21.06.2021

Acknowledgments

This is a slightly revised version of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Philosophy at Heidelberg University in June of 2021.

During the exciting, enlightening and humbling a journey that this project took me on, I was fortunate to be accompanied by many extraordinary individuals whom I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart.

To my supervisor, PD Dr. habil. Martin Thunert, I am indebted for his political science expertise and countless hours of riveting discussions that shaped and enriched this project in so many ways. His guidance, encouragement, and patience throughout the research process, particularly during its most difficult moments, could not be overstated. To Prof. Dr. Sebastian Harnisch, I am deeply grateful for inspiring perspectives and insightful questions and critiques that benefited this project from the very beginning.

I extend my sincerest gratitude to the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA), and the GKAT research training group “Authority and Trust in American Culture, Society, History, and Politics (GRK 2244) for investing their trust in me and granting me the amazing research opportunity of which this project is a fruit. I thank my fellow doctoral researchers for their wisdom and friendship. Special thanks to Aline Schmidt for all the walks and talks that brought so much to both my project and my life, and to Kristin Berberich for showing me what it means to have an unbreakable spirit.

Finally, I am indebted to my family. To Joanna and Adam Chodowski, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for their generosity, unwavering trust in me, and the intellectual and emotional support that shaped me as a person and researcher over the years. To my parents Katarzyna and Krzysztof and sister Agata, heartfelt

thanks for their unending enthusiasm. And to my dearest friend and husband Markus,
I am deeply grateful for all the love, laughter, and always believing in me.

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Conservative distrust of the mainstream media.....	16
2.1.	The development of the 'liberal media bias' claim.....	18
2.2.	Understanding the 'liberal media bias'.....	22
2.3.	Conservative media distrust and "cultural backlash".....	34
2.4.	Conservative media trust and ideological congruence.....	39
2.5.	Conservative media dis/trust and disinformation.....	42
2.6.	Conclusions.....	44
III.	Progressive distrust of the mainstream media.....	46
3.1.	The problem with the "corporate media:" shaping media distrust on the left.....	47
3.2.	The media's representative problem.....	51
3.3.	Compromised: the media's quality and integrity.....	53
3.3.1.	Tabloidization of news.....	53
3.3.2.	Conflicts of interest.....	57
3.4.	When the watchdog becomes a lap dog: covering American actions abroad.....	61
3.5.	"Faux objectivity," "false equivalences," and "bothsiderism:" the overcommitment to the professional code.....	66
3.6.	Struggle for regulations and public media.....	71
3.7.	Conclusions.....	80
IV.	Asymmetrical distrust? A case study of conservative and progressive responses to the mainstream media coverage of climate change.....	83
4.1.	Methodology and results.....	83
4.2.	Findings.....	86
4.2.1.	The "liberal" media.....	86
4.2.2.	Bias and one-sidedness.....	90
4.2.3.	The media are not (for the) right.....	96

4.2.4. Out of touch: the media’s disconnectedness.....	99
4.2.5. In the name of power: the media’s lies and deception.....	101
4.2.6. Faithfully secular.....	109
4.2.7. ‘Skepticism’ allowed: the consequences of the ‘balanced’ debate.....	111
4.2.8. Connection not found.....	115
4.2.9. Coverage drought: invisibility of climate change in the news.....	118
4.2.10. No atmosphere of seriousness for climate change.....	120
4.3. Assessing the potential for the revival of trust.....	122
4.4. Conclusions.....	128

V. Ever asymmetrical distrust? A case study of conservative and progressive responses to the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic..... 131

5.1. Methodology and results.....	131
5.2. Findings.....	134
5.2.1. The liberal anti-Trump media.....	134
5.2.2. Unfair media: biases and double standards.....	148
5.2.3. Disconnected and hostile: the mainstream media against the American people.....	156
5.2.4. Pandemic dishonesty: hysteria, inaccuracies, and lies....	160
5.2.5. Friendly coverage of the “Chinese virus”.....	165
5.2.6. The left’s muted criticism.....	173
5.3. Assessing the potential for the revival of trust.....	175
5.4. Conclusions.....	181

VI. Rebuilding trust: the path(s) ahead..... 184

6.1. Increasing commitment to accuracy, unbiasedness, and transparency.....	185
6.2. Countering disinformation, polarization, and exclusion.....	190
6.3. Adopting new funding models.....	199
6.4. New(s) literacies: public contribution to the revival of media trust.....	204

6.5. Conclusions.....	208
VII. A short outlook on future research.....	209
Bibliography.....	212

List of Tables

Table 1 The selection of Fox News programs included in the climate change case study.....	85
Table 2 The selection of Fox News programs included in the COVID-19 pandemic case study.....	133

CHAPTER I

Introduction

In September 2016, less than a month before the US general election, an analytics and advisory company Gallup reported that the level of Americans who had “a great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in the mass media—newspapers, radio, and television—“to report the news fully, accurately and fairly” had dropped to 32 percent. While this number was the lowest since the organization had begun to keep a record in 1972 (Swift 2016), Americans’ trust in the mainstream news media had already been on decline since the second half of the twentieth century. Ladd (2012) points to the early 1970s as the beginning of the decline while Gronke and Cook (2007) place it in the mid-1980s. According to Gallup, the year 2004 was the first to have witnessed the level of public trust in the mass media drop below fifty percent, where it has remained consistently since 2007 onwards (Swift 2016). Although it increased after 2016 (Brenan 2019; Jones 2018), Americans’ mass media trust remained below the fifty percent threshold as of 2020 (Brenan 2020). This development has triggered a renewed sense of urgency to explore the causes of and forces behind public distrust of the established news outlets in the US, particularly due to the fact that a strong majority of Americans continue to consider the news media to be “critical” or “very important” to a functioning democracy (Brenan and Stubbs 2020).

A number of explanations have been put forward to provide a better understanding of the reasons for the American public’s distrust of the mainstream news media. According to Jones (2005), the lowly stature “may stem more from general political malaise than many of shortcomings of contemporary news coverage” (p. 255). This, however, is contested by Liu and Bates (2009) who point to the different trajectories of the declining levels of public and media trust as well as Gronke and

Cook (2007) and Liu (2012) who indicate distinctive paths for the decline in political and media confidence. Another proposed reason for the erosion of media trust is the “media malaise” thesis that, as explained by Jones (2005) and Müller (2013), refers to the increasing negativity in reporting. However, Ladd (2012) finds no detectable effect of news negativity on the American public’s depressed media evaluations.

More recently, changes within the broader information system, especially the impact of technological processes, have been indicated as responsible for the decline of trust in the mainstream news in the US. This includes the fragmentation of the media landscape and the proliferation of new, alternative information sources—first offline and later also online—that challenge the dominant position of the more established outlets (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019; Ladd 2012). In particular, the advent and subsequent popularity of online social networks have received a great deal of attention as the likely culprits of the growing distrust of the mainstream news media. Shaped by algorithms, bots, and artificial intelligence, social media platforms have been claimed to have changed the patterns of news consumption by locking their users in increasingly one-sided “echo chambers” that reinforce preexisting biases by delivering only the ‘likeable’ content and ‘filtering out’ any disconfirming information, including from mainstream sources (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). This and other features of social media platforms are believed to have also created a fertile ground for domestic and foreign disinformation efforts, including political “clickbait” and “fake news.”¹ Among all of the actors, Russia has been considered the most notorious in its attempts to use social media platforms to spread false information and conspiracy theories designed to both disrupt the electoral

¹ As explained by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), the term “clickbait” refers to “media items that [are] designed to trigger an affective response from a user that leads them to click on the item—be it an image, a video, or a headline—because the click itself generates revenue for the clickbait purveyor” (p. 9).

processes abroad as well as instill confusion about what sources of information are authentic and trustworthy (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019). Furthermore, with the majority of Americans considered to be accessing the news via social media, social networks have been believed to act as intermediaries between the mass media and their audiences. Such “media disintermediation” has been argued to obscure the identities of major publications vis-à-vis less substantial ones, leading to the overall loss of trust in the news (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019).

However, although widely popular an explanation, the leading role of the Internet and social media in the decline of public trust in the mainstream media does not remain uncontested. Firstly, explanations that cast the Internet and social media as the main culprit fail to account for the decline of trust that had occurred before Americans began to access their news online. In a similar vein, the attribution of the rise of echo chambers, and thereby the subsequent decline of trust in the mass media, to the recent technological developments obscures the fact that the phenomenon of echo chambers is not exclusive to the online realm as it had already existed before the Internet and social media platforms introduced the algorithmic news curation. This is best exemplified by the US conservative media system and its self-protective informational enclave—created over the years by conservative talk radio, Fox News Channel, and the *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages, to name a few—that Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella analyze in their 2008 book suggestively titled *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Furthermore, in line with research by Bruns (2019) who argues that the influence of online filter bubbles has been overstated, Fletcher (2020) finds that people who use social media and search engines for news actually end up with more and more diverse

sources than those who rely on self-selection and direct access. While those findings might seem contrary to popular beliefs, Fletcher points to the fact that not only has media research actually found only weak or, at best, mixed evidence of filter bubbles, but also that “[t]here are almost no studies that find a very strong evidence of these kinds of effects.” Another similarly overstated aspect of the online realm appears to be “fake news.” Research by Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2019) and Guess et al. (2019) shows that despite the persistent fears about the scope and spread of fake news—understood as false or misleading material published by dubious sources online—relatively few Americans consumed this form of content directly during the 2016 presidential campaign and even fewer did so before the 2018 mid-term elections. Moreover, it was just about 10 percent of Americans with most conservative news diets who accounted for the entire sixty percent of all of the visits to fake news websites in 2016 (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2019). Furthermore, in their research on the origins and mechanisms of America’s epistemic crisis, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) encourage caution around popular narratives alleging the extensive influence of the Russian disinformation campaign. While the scholars do not at all deny the fact that those efforts took place, they emphasize “the difference between proof of the existence of [such] efforts and proof of their impact” (Ibid.: p. 236). Their extensive analysis of news stories as well as Twitter and Facebook shares throughout the 2016 presidential election cycle reveals that a number of dominant false narratives—including the “deep state” theory, the claims of voter fraud, the Seth Rich murder conspiracy, and the Clintons’ alleged involvement in pedophilia—although all entertained by Russian propagandists, were fed and sustained primarily by the Republican political leadership and the leading conservative media outlets. (The idea of voter fraud and stolen election dates all the way back to the 1996 Bob Dole

presidential campaign against Bill Clinton.) As such, rather than introduce disinformation, Russian propagandists “[jumped] on bandwagons already hurtling full-tilt downhill and [cheered] on a process entirely made in America” (Ibid.: p. 43). Finally, the widely held belief in the dominance of social media as a source of news for Americans has been similarly overstated. Although many analysts and popular pundits have often cited the 2018 Pew survey for the claim that 68 percent of adult Americans got their news on social media (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019), the frequently overlooked fact is that this number includes 21 percent who said that they accessed their news there “hardly ever.” This reduces the number of surveyed Americans who consumed news on social platforms “often” (20 percent) or “sometimes” (27 percent) to the total of 47 percent (Shearer and Matsu 2018). Even in 2020, out of 52 percent of Americans who got their news digitally (vis-à-vis 35 percent who did so on television), the majority was still more likely to access it directly on news websites or mobile news apps rather than on social media (Shearer 2021). While the number of Americans who get their news on social media might increase in the following years, it is important to remember that those platforms remain highly distrusted as a source of news, even among their frequent users and across the political spectrum (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020).

The popular technology-focused explanations of the decline of trust in the mainstream media have also proven limited in their ability to account for the existent partisan and ideological differences. This is best illustrated by the fact that although the fragmentation of the media landscape has resulted in the creation of alternative news sources *across* the American electorate (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019; Ladd 2012), this development has not had the same impact on conservatives and progressives and their distrust of the mainstream media. As

Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) find, the media ecosystem is not divided between the right and the left, but between “the right and the rest” (p. 73). More specifically, while those on the right are indeed vastly distrustful of the mainstream media and instead invest their trust in alternative conservative news sources that form a highly insular, one-sided and self-referential information system (or an echo chamber), those on the left remain interconnected and integrated with the established news sources as the progressive alternative outlets complement rather than replace the mainstream ones (Ibid.). Similar asymmetries have characterized the consumption of fake news (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2019) and the exposure to online, pro-Russian disinformation (Hjorth and Adler-Nissen 2019), both of which, although generally of minor impact as discussed above, appear to be more prevalent on the right than on the left in relative terms. This is not to say that the Internet, social media, and online disinformation efforts do not matter or do not play a role in the dynamics of media distrust in the US. However, it is crucial to recognize the fact that “technology does not determine outcomes or the patterns of its own adoption” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 22). Instead, the role played by technological developments in the current crisis of media trust ought to be understood as the one of the amplifiers of the pre-existing trends and dynamics rather than their creators.

This leads to an important question about the *asymmetrical nature* of media distrust in the United States: Could the ideological and partisan divergencies exposed above be indicative of the existence of diverse reasons motivating the decline of trust in the mainstream news on the American right and left? Lacking a relevant comparative analysis, current research on media distrust in the US does not provide an answer to that question, instead offering overwhelmingly universal explanations and theories concerning trust decline as the ones mentioned above.

Such an approach likely stems from the broader and long-dominant scholarly preference for generality and neutrality when discussing issues pertaining to American democracy (Mann and Ornstein 2012). However, as illustrated by the growing—albeit still scant—political research on the country’s asymmetries, this tendency risks obscuring crucial trends and facts about the US reality. For example, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) show how the current epistemic crisis, even though of “inescapably partisan shape” (p. 20) and with “the stark partisan asymmetry at [its] root” (p. 16), has been most often treated with the “normatively unproblematic, nonpartisan explanations” (p. 11) such as fake news, Russians, Facebook algorithms, and online echo chambers. Likewise, committed to the “unified theories of American parties intended to apply equally to Democrats and Republicans,” contemporary political analysis has largely assumed the “simple account of symmetrical partisan polarization” in the US despite the country’s partisan and ideological imbalance (Grossman and Hopkins 2016: p. 13, 42, 128; Mann and Ornstein 2012), with the GOP being “the main driver of the chasm between the parties” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: p. 222). Republican Party’s role as “the vehicle of a conservative ideological movement” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 14) has been unmatched by the Democratic coalition which resists devoting itself to a specific ideological cause, instead remaining more “centered and diverse” (Mann and Ornstein 2012: p. 103). Within the GOP, conservative ideological beliefs have served not only as a strong unifying force and base on which to forge partisan ties, but also an enduring lens through which to conceptualize and evaluate politics. The GOP’s “deeply ideological nature” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 107) and “tolerance of extreme ideological beliefs and policies” (Mann and Ornstein 2012: p. 185) have rendered it an “obstructionist force” in American politics (as well as “a consistent outlier” in

international comparisons) (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 16, 107) and, consequently, moved the party much further to the right than Democrats have shifted to the left (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mann and Ornstein 2012).

Similarly stark asymmetries between the country's two main political coalitions have applied to the realm of information and news media. Whereas Republicans have been "more likely than Democrats to consume media that are openly aligned with their political orientation" and that "reinforce appeals to ideology," Democrats have relied on information sources that stress policy analysis (Ibid.: p. 132). For example, whereas the overwhelmingly Republican viewers of Fox News Channel acknowledge that they enjoy news that "shares their personal views," a Democrat-dominated group of Americans who watch broadcast networks and CNN prefer news with "in-depth interviews" (Ibid.: p. 162). So far, however, the scholarly exploration of asymmetries in the United States has not included the issue of media distrust. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) find that those on the American right distrust any sources of information that challenge their beliefs and are not dedicated to a right-wing view, which, in line with the above-mentioned tendencies and dynamics shaping the US political landscape, strongly suggests the ideological nature of conservative media distrust. However, as the scholars constrain left-wing criticism of the mainstream media to the academic and activist domain and focus on the fact that the majority of the Democratic electorate *trust* the established press, they leave some important questions about the nature of progressive distrust and how it compares to the conservative distrust unanswered: Is progressive distrust of the mainstream media also of ideological character? If not, what is its nature? Since left-wing alternative media, unlike their conservative counterparts, remain interconnected with the

established outlets as opposed to isolated from them, what are the motives for progressive distrust of the mainstream press? Although it is true that the American left is not as distrustful of the established news sources as the right is, left-wing distrust of the mainstream media does exist and deserves a close examination, especially in the face of the recently increased presence of progressives on the US political scene.

In order to address the existing gap in research on media distrust in the US, this project builds on the current understanding of the American media landscape as well as ideological and political asymmetries and proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Distrust of the US mainstream news media on the American right and left is of an asymmetrical nature and driven by distinct forces.

Furthermore, as the “pragmatic attitude of most Democratic elected officials is widely shared by the activists [and] interest groups” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 323), it is likely that this pragmatism among the progressive party members also encompasses their attitudes towards the mainstream media, including distrust.

Therefore, this project further hypothesizes that

H2: Progressive distrust of the mainstream news media is more pragmatic and empirical when compared to the more ideological and fundamental distrust among conservatives.

The proposed concept of ‘pragmatic’ and ‘empirical’ distrust on the American left builds on Democratic coalition’s documented broader tendency to remain “respectful of empiricism and expertise,” foster “a relatively pragmatic, results-oriented style of politics,” emphasize practical solutions and outcomes over doctrinal devotion (Ibid.: p. 323); and favor compromise over deadlock (Mann and Ornstein 2012). As such, the notion of pragmatic and empirical media distrust signals its more practical nature, meaning distrust that is motivated and shaped largely by forces that are concerned

with concrete, demonstrable—often empirically verifiable—occurrences and/or conditions rather than fixed abstract beliefs and/or ideas.

Following a similar deductive path, the concept of ‘ideological’ and ‘fundamental’ distrust on the American right extends from research findings that determine Republicans’ “deeply ideological nature” (see page 7) and a long-standing preference for “doctrinal purity” over pragmatic dealmaking and realistic legislative initiatives (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 52), and that characterize the coalition as “ideologically extreme; (...) scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition” (Mann and Ornstein 2012: p. xiv). Hence, the notion of ‘ideological’ and ‘fundamental’ distrust indicates its more ideologically rigid nature, signaling distrust that is rooted in and driven by forces motivated by a particular set of ideological ideas and/or convictions rather than more practical premises.

Based on these conceptual definitions as well as the available research on political asymmetries, it is also expected that:

H3: The potential for the revival of media trust differs between conservatives and progressives and the difference can be found on the continuum between ‘very ideological/fundamental’ and ‘not very ideological/pragmatic.’

This doctoral dissertation explores the nature of conservative and progressive distrust of the mainstream media by investigating its drivers, likely consequences, and possible ways to reduce it. As such, Chapters II and III will analyze the history of media criticism as well as the emergence of alternative media—themselves a manifestation of mainstream media distrust—on the American right and left, respectively. Chapter II will discuss the reasons for conservative distrust of the mainstream media with the

help of secondary sources. Addressing the current gap in scholarly literature, Chapter III will include an analysis of largely primary sources and present a detailed account of the motives behind progressive distrust. The focus of the analyses in Chapters II and III will be on developing a detailed understanding of how conservative and progressive Americans perceive and interpret bias and accuracy in the media. This is dictated by the fact that both bias and accuracy rank among the most important factors to influence the levels of media trust and distrust in the US (Gallup and Knight Foundation 2018a).

By inverting the famous concept developed by Anthony Giddens (1991), the study will also employ 'ontological *insecurity*' as an analytical tool to interpret the dynamics of conservative and progressive distrust of the mainstream media. Giddens defines "ontological security" as "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Ibid.: p. 92). This sense of order and continuity about one's experiences and self, he argues, also plays a powerful role in establishing meaning to one's life. Furthermore, Giddens stresses the relevant link between ontological security and trust when he writes that "[a] sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security" (Ibid.: p. 92). As the news media remain among the main, if not the most crucial, sources of information, they assist individuals in learning about and interpreting the world. In doing so, however, they might provide information that will be deemed inconsistent with, and even a threat to, one's sense of ontological security, resulting not only in a feeling of ontological in-security, but also a distrusting stance toward the supplier of the disconfirming information, i.e., the media. As such, the concept of ontological insecurity offers a helpful lens through which to look at media distrust and its dynamics

across political and ideological lines. Its applicability in the analysis of the hypothesized asymmetries further rests on research findings which point to relevant differences between those on the right and left with regard to personality, cognitive style, and motivation needs, all of which are pertinent to the feeling of ontological in/security. According to Grossmann and Hopkins (2016), “*ideological thinking* plays a more important role in shaping the political orientations of Republicans than those of Democrats” (p. 24, emphasis added). Moreover, while conservatives exhibit higher need for order, structure, and stability; greater “intolerance of ambiguity” and need for predictability and “cognitive closure”; as well as “dogmatic thinking style,” and “resistance to change,” those on the left manifest greater “curiosity,” “creativity,” and “flexibility” as well as “openness to experience” and change (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Jost et al. 2007). The issue of self-identity, central to the concept of ontological in/security, also displays dissimilarities, with the “unique importance of conservative self-identity” as a binding force within the Republican Party and the lack of its equivalent on the left (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Given those right/left divergencies in epistemic and existential needs, this work will rely on ontological insecurity as well as ontological security seeking in the analysis of media distrust on both the right and left and critically reflect upon the plausibility and sustainability of the respective tools over time.

To test this work’s hypotheses and deepen the analysis outlined in the preceding chapters, Chapters IV and V will present the findings of two original case studies that comparatively analyzed the ways in which selected conservative and progressive alternative media outlets responded to the mainstream media coverage of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively. The selection of climate change as a case study focus was based not only on the issue’s enormous existential and

political significance, but also on the fact that—as the following chapters will make evident—its mainstream media coverage has long garnered criticism on both the right and the left. This makes the subject of climate crisis an ideal backdrop for a detailed analysis of the development of the hypothesized media distrust asymmetries over time. Moreover, given the gravity of established knowledge on climate change, the analysis of the topic’s media coverage and its reception among the citizenry also provides valuable insights into the status of facts, data, and analysis in political and civil discourse. The relevance of this matter for the issue of dis/trust has been stressed not only by researchers (Kavanagh and Rich 2018), but also media professionals, including Filipino-American journalist and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize co-laureate Maria Ressa who said upon accepting the award that “a world without facts means a world without truth and *trust*” (BBC 2021, emphasis added).

The understanding of the concepts of ‘fact’ and ‘truth’ in this project—and thereby also the related ‘pragmatism’ and ‘empiricism’—does not rely on categorizations of ‘universality’ or ‘ultimateness,’ but rather on what at the *current* moment in time and based on the available knowledge and evidence is determined to be factual, accurate, and true. While what is considered factual and true generally ought to remain open to debate and potentially also recalibration, it should happen so only if enough valid evidence exists to back a novel claim or position. Advocating for and maintaining the status and integrity of objective facts as well as tools and mechanisms used to discern and establish them is of particular significance at a current time when even the most basic facts are being baselessly challenged with staggering ease and grave consequences. Especially over last several years, it has become evident, both in and outside of the US, how corrosive for societal cohesion and deliberation as well as the

functioning of democratic processes it can be when the public loses the common factual ground.

As the subject of the other case study serves the COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic. Its selection was dictated by its status as a global event of the utmost urgency and grave seriousness that was underway at the time of this writing. While the two qualities are also shared by climate change, the pandemic differs in its novelty as well as the more pronounced immediacy of its threat and disruption to everyday life, thereby offering an interesting comparative case. It also provided a great opportunity to observe how audience responses, and particularly the distrusting ones, to media coverage of a novel and rapidly developing situation were forming in real-time. Given the issue's recency, the body of facts relating to the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet as broad and firmly established as in the case of climate change. Nevertheless, due to the advanced state of knowledge in the field of medical science overall, a number of facts about the coronavirus pandemic have already been determined and are relied on in this work.

The decision to use the content of alternative news media outlets on both sides of the political spectrum in order to better illustrate distrust of the mainstream media is dictated by two reasons: first, the existence of alternative media is itself the manifestation of mainstream media distrust—if the established outlets were trusted, there would be no need for alternatives. Second, the survivability and popularity of alternative media implies the resonance of and support for their messages among audience members. As alternative media satisfy the needs and expectations of audiences unfulfilled by the mainstream press, it is possible to assume that the criticism of the established media voiced in those outlets is shared by, and thus can be considered reflective of, their conservative and progressive followers.

The importance of the issue of mainstream media distrust, and thereby its scholarly exploration, has been made evident by the number of potential remedies and solutions aimed at alleviating the crisis of media trust that have been proposed so far, especially in the last few years. However, since none of those measures addresses or takes into account the asymmetrical nature of media distrust discussed in this work, Chapter VI will reevaluate the existing recommendations in light of this project's empirical work and findings. Such an analysis constitutes a necessary step in order to increase the chances of an effective response to the media trust crisis.

In their 2016 book *Asymmetric Politics*, Matt Grossman and David A. Hopkins write that “[r]ecognizing the distinct styles of each party can produce better explanations for political events and trends, including contemporary polarization and dysfunction” (p. 20). In agreement with this outlook, this project takes it one step further and argues that the same observation applies to the issue of distrust of the mainstream news media in the United States.

CHAPTER II

Conservative distrust of the mainstream media

A Republican presidential nominee once said:

We've got to stop the liberal bias in this country. Don't read the stuff. Don't watch television. You make up your own mind. Don't let them make up your own mind for you. We are not going to let the media steal this election. The country belongs to the people, not the *New York Times* (West 2001 in Ladd 2012: p. 79).

Given the familiar opposition to the established news media in general and the *New York Times* in particular, along with the accusations of liberal bias and electoral fraud, the quote could be easily attributed to former President Donald Trump. However, the person in question is a fellow Republican politician Bob Dole who uttered the words on the campaign trail in 1996, twenty years before Trump's electoral victory.

Conservative opposition to and distrust of the established news media have a long history in the United States. While Trump's remarkably vitriolic attacks on the press received a lot of attention and condemnation during his time in office, he was neither isolated in his attacks (Coppins 2017), nor had he been the first conservative figure to vilify the mainstream media as "the enemy of the people." In 2000, the late conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh referred to the media as the enemy when talking to the freshman class of Republican members of Congress (Jamieson and Cappella 2010). Seven years later, he reiterated the point when he noted that "[t]he Republican base considers the media to be part of the *enemy* that has to be defeated and overcome" (Ibid.: p. 72, emphasis added).

The main driving force behind American conservatives' opposition to and distrust of the mainstream news media—showcased in Dole's above-quoted statement—has been the perception and accusations of "liberal bias." In 2009, when

interviewed on conservative *Fox News*, Lamar Smith, a Republican representative from Texas, went as far as to say that the greatest threat (note implied enmity) to the United States was not another economic recession or even a terrorist attack, but the “liberal media bias” (Frick 2009).

Even though media research has not proven any “significant or consistent partisan or issue favoritism” in the content of the American mainstream news (Lee 2005: p. 44), the idea of the liberal media bias has been long embedded in the conservative conventional wisdom (Major 2015). As a proof of the existence of the media’s leftward slant, conservatives have argued, serves the fact that mainstream journalists are more likely to vote Democrat than Republican, which translates into the dominance of a liberal perspective in reporting (Lee 2005; Alterman 2010). However, while it is true that journalists are more likely to be aligned with the left on social matters, most of them lean right on economic issues (Alterman 2010). Even more importantly, “[t]he prevalence of liberals in the journalistic profession does not itself demonstrate that news coverage is biased toward liberal viewpoints,” as noted by Grossmann and Hopkins (2016: p. 135). This is echoed by Lee (2005) who observes that “a link between reporters’ political beliefs and news coverage has never been convincingly established” (p. 44). The conservative argument about the journalistic profession’s systematic dominance by liberal Democrats has been further destabilized by the fact that—as illustrated by a 2013 Indiana University survey—while just seven percent of journalists identified as Republicans, a whole 50 percent identified as Independents, 15 percent as “Other,” and 28 percent as Democrats (Willnat and Weaver 2014). In the absence of supporting evidence, the conservative critique of the ‘liberal’ press has been considered “more rhetoric than reality” (Major 2012: p. 456) and “irrationality” (Major 2015: p. 484). Nevertheless, “[c]riticism of the so-called liberal

news media continue[d] to be an essential part of conservative politics in the 2010s” (Gillis 2013: p. 254), as made evident by former Republican Senator Rick Santorum who, while on *Fox and Friends*, claimed that “[i]f you haven’t cursed out a *New York Times* reporter during the course of the [2012 presidential] campaign, you’re not really a real Republican” (Saenz 2012). It is therefore of no surprise that “conservatives and Republicans are more likely than their ideological and partisan counterparts to perceive a media bias” (Lee 2005: p. 55), particularly against their party, and to characterize press coverage as “unfair” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 140).

The belief in the media’s liberal bias, however, has not always been part of the right-wing outlook. Between the 1930s and 1960s, Republicans largely viewed the news as fair (Major 2012, 2015). Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) position the beginning of the conservative dissatisfaction in the mid-twentieth century, writing that “Republicans broadly perceived newspapers to be fair until the 1950s” (p. 138). According to Bauer and Nadler (2018), it was by the 1960s that media criticism had become “a mainstay of conservative political discourse.” This shift, as the following will illustrate, coincided not only with the emergence of the network of conservative alternative media, but also the onset of numerous social and political movements, most notably civil rights, gay rights, and feminism.

2.1. The development of the ‘liberal media bias’ claim

The advent of the ‘liberal media bias’ traces back to the right-wing magazine *Human Events* (Hemmer 2016). Founded in 1944 by opponents of the US entry into World War II, the publication became a major voice in the rise of the American conservative movement throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Convinced of the mainstream press’ coordinated effort against conservatives and their

causes, *Human Events* became adversarial toward the established media beginning in 1961 (Major 2015). The magazine was soon joined by other conservative outlets that similarly opposed the mainstream media's perceived leftward slant. In 1951, with the "express purpose of fighting putative news bias against his nascent, contemporary-conservative worldview," rich oil executive H. L. Hunt launched *Facts Forum* radio and television broadcast (later replaced by *Life Line*) that further "popularized a skeptical conservative disposition toward the press" (Bauer and Nadler 2018). Both *Human Events* and *Facts Forum* contributed to the rise to prominence of William F. Buckley Jr., the founder of the *National Review* opinion magazine (Major 2015; Bauer and Nadler 2018). Established in 1955 against "the delinquencies of the Liberal press" (Bauer and Nadler 2018), *National Review* soon became "the *sine qua non* of conservative media" (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 316). Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, "a distinctive multimedia conservative infrastructure was burgeoning" (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 147) and the antipathy toward the institutional news media became a "defining characteristic" of the conservative movement (Ladd 2012: p. 74). By the 1970s, the claim of the liberal news media bias had become "fundamental to the political and cultural worldview of conservatives" (Gillis 2013: p. 2).

Beginning in the late 1980s, "a sustained critique of the 'liberal' bias of the mainstream media" was adopted as the "central mission" of the then-newly launched the *Rush Limbaugh Show* (Jamieson and Cappella 2010: p. 145). Conservative talk radio soon featured other vocal critics of the established press including Mark Levin, Glenn Beck, and Sean Hannity (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). In 1993, to counter the perceived liberal bias of the existing television networks, conservative activist Paul Weyrich formed the National Empowerment Television (NET) network (Meagher

2012). Despite its short existence which ended in 2000, the NET did pave the way for the groundbreaking Fox News Channel (FNC). Established in 1996 by Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes, FNC has similarly “long promoted itself in opposition to the liberal media” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 139). By adopting slogans such as “fair and balanced,” “we report, you decide,” and “no-spin,” it has consistently evoked contrast with the mainstream competitors and implied their one-sidedness. Numerous media studies have found that the accusations of mainstream media bias are more common in conservative outlets than in progressive ones (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). The volume of conservative criticism of the ‘liberal media’ has continued to grow following the rise of the right-wing blogosphere and social media (Bauer and Nadler 2018).

The charges of the mainstream media’s liberal bias have also been popularized by many politicians and other prominent figures of the conservative movement. Aversion toward the institutional news media became “one of the basic characteristics of Goldwaterism” (Ladd 2012: p. 74) and the Nixon administration, with the latter infamously conducting “widespread wiretapping and other surveillance of journalists” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: p. 141). In the 1971 memo to his Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, then-President Nixon himself wrote that “the discrediting of the press must be our major objective” and the confrontation should target the media’s “total support of ultra-liberal causes” (Brock 2005: p. 24). An opportunity came with the 1971 release of *The News Twisters* penned by a *TV Guide* writer Edith Efron. In the book, Efron analyzed network coverage of, among others, the last several weeks of the 1968 presidential race between Nixon and Hubert Humphrey and attempted to prove the reporting’s liberal bias in favor of the latter (Light 2018). Although Efron’s methodology had been repeatedly questioned, the book was widely advertised in conservative outlets such as the *National Review* (Hemmer 2016) and, as ordered by Nixon, made

into the *New York Times* best seller after Special Counsel Charles Colson had used five thousand dollars from a Watergate-related slush fund to purchase a sufficient number of copies (Ladd 2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, Nixon's Vice President Spiro Agnew, the administration's strongest voice of mainstream media criticism, also regularly accused the established press of liberal bias and the lack of neutrality (Gillis 2013). It was around that time that criticism of the established news media became "a fixture of the conservative movement and Republican political strategy" and "played an important role in eroding the news media's stature" (Ladd 2012: p. 78). Conservative antipathy towards the media decreased somewhat during the first term of President Ronald Reagan only to pick up in 1986 due to the disillusionment with the news coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal and the Reagan administration's central role in it (Ladd 2012). Throughout the 1992 election cycle, George H. W. Bush and Dan Quayle also frequently accused the media of liberal bias and unfair treatment, with their campaign even popularizing the "Annoy the Media, Re-elect Bush" bumper sticker (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Ten years after his father's ultimately unsuccessful bid for reelection, George W. Bush, too, endorsed the idea of the media's liberal bias when he appeared in front of press photographers with a copy of Bernard Goldberg's book *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distorts the News* (Ladd 2012). In the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, Sarah Palin also frequently echoed the shared belief in the liberal bias of, what she called, the "lamestream media" (Major 2012). In order to further address the perceived leftward slant of the established press, several Republican politicians led by the above-mentioned Rep. Lamar Smith launched the Media Fairness Caucus (Noyes 2009). Other prominent voices of media criticism on the right have included the House Committee to Combat Bias in Broadcasting created by the American Conservative Union as well as the watchdog organization

Accuracy in Media established in 1969 by Reed Irvine with the goal to monitor the perceived media bias (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). The Media Research Center, started in 1987 by Leo Brent Bozell III, likewise adopted the effort to “expose and neutralize the propaganda arm of the Left: the national news media” as its “sole mission” (Media Research Center 2016).

Due to its decades-long prevalence and resonance, the conservative belief in the liberal media bias has played a significant role in the decline of trust in the mainstream press on the American right (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Ladd 2012). Thus, when former President Donald Trump first began to wage his attacks against the ‘liberal’ mainstream media and their perceived tendency to publish ‘fake news,’ he was not creating a narrative; rather, he was using and expanding on the already existing one. Given the influence of the liberal media bias claim as the main driver of the right-wing distrust of the mainstream news outlets, it is essential to discuss what exactly conservatives have considered to be the media’s leftward slant.

2.2. Understanding the ‘liberal media bias’

Crucial to the understanding of the right’s belief in the mainstream media’s liberal bias and the resulting media distrust is the context of the broader conservative movement, the Republican Party, and the postulates they have adopted.

The modern American conservative movement emerged in the postwar period as a “three-legged stool” that integrated three, previously discrete, schools of conservative thought: moral or religio-cultural traditionalism, libertarianism or free-market capitalism, and anti-communism along with hawkish approach to national

defense (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Bauer and Nadler 2018). Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) provide a more detailed description of the movement's components:

First, cultural conservatism encompassed Judeo-Christian religiosity, the defense of Western traditions, and opposition to social change. Second, libertarianism and neoliberal versions of laissez-faire economics provided the intellectual architecture for business-sector conservatism, which increasingly evolved as the movement progressed from emphasizing balanced budgets to prioritizing tax cuts and regulatory relief. Third, staunch anticommunism and neoconservatism emphasized national security and patriotic conceptions of America's role as the world's leading power (p. 82).

By the 1960s, due in no small part to the *National Review* magazine, the fusionist effort between the three strands had led to the emergence of a "coherent, comprehensive political philosophy" that "[became] the core of the Republican Party" (Ibid.: p. 76).

The rise of postwar conservatives coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, and it is this pivotal moment in US history that the growth of conservative distrust of the 'liberal' mainstream media traces back to. With an increase in the ownership of television sets, more Americans became exposed to the media coverage depicting the plight of African Americans in the South. In the eyes of many conservatives, particularly white Southerners, this meant that television news "was disrupting the system" and reporters became "outside agitators—and enemies" who forced integration upon the South (Major 2012: p. 457). These sentiments grew in strength and continued into the 1970s when "racial resentments were critical in the conservative backlash against the allegedly liberal news media" (Gillis 2013: p. 23). Skeptical of "race-conscious liberalism," many postwar conservatives considered media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement to be unfair and unobjective. They criticized the mainstream press for its biased coverage of court-ordered busing and affirmative action, initiatives that some conservatives considered as both "civil rights gone too far" (Ibid.: p. 7) and "an

unconstitutional exercise in social engineering and an unprecedented violation of free-market meritocracy” (Ibid.: p. 5).

At the root of this resistance to the ‘liberal’ media coverage was the conservative movement’s own broader opposition to civil rights and integration. This stance is illustrated by the actions of William F. Buckley Jr., who, upon founding *National Review*, “aligned conservatism with opposition to civil rights activists” (Bauer and Nadler 2018). The success of “Southern Strategy” employed by GOP Senator Barry Goldwater and then-presidential candidate Richard Nixon to increase Republican political support among southerners and white backlash voters (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016) likewise accentuated the power of racial appeals and distinguished the “white-identity pillar” of the Republican coalition (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). It was the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act by Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson that prompted the long-term partisan realignment, as a result of which the Republican Party became “the party of racial status quo” and “the home for white racial conservatives” whereas the Democratic Party developed as “the party of civil rights” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: p. 169). In addition to Black enfranchisement, it was the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act—similarly signed by Johnson—and the subsequent demographic changes that further strengthened the status of the Republican Party as “almost entirely a party of whites” as opposed to Democrats’ “party of ethnic minorities” (Ibid.: p. 171). The continuous “visible influence of white racism” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 127) among conservatives was evident not only in the xenophobic attitudes that characterized both Trump’s candidacy and presidency as well as coverage in popular conservative outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart, but also the right’s opposition to Obama’s presidency (Ibid.; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) and the popularity of the “birther” conspiracy.

Allegations that the former president Barack Obama was not born in the United States but in Kenya, and thus was ineligible to hold office, first circulated in the blogosphere during Obama's 2004 Senate campaign and resurfaced four years later during his first presidential bid (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Eventually, the false claims reached the upper ranks of the Republican Party as illustrated by the words of former Colorado Representative Mike Coffman who in 2012 said: "I do not know if Barack Obama was born in the United States of America...But I do know this, that in his heart, he's not an American" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: p. 160). The conspiracy went on to find further endorsement among Republican officials including Senators Roy Blunt, James Inhofe, Richard Shelby, and David Vitter, 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, 2012 presidential candidate Mike Huckabee and, finally, former President Donald Trump. Beginning in 2009, many Fox News personalities including Sean Hannity, Greta Van Susteren, Steve Doocy, and Jeanine Pirro also regularly cast doubt on then-President Obama's citizenship by frequently pressing for the issuance of his birth certificate (Mast 2016). Racial attitudes continued to play a role in the 2016 election and Donald Trump's ultimate victory. As argued by Kreiss (2018), it was "white cultural and social anxiety and racism [that] lay at the root of the president's appeal as the representative of a white political party (a claim for which there are mountains of evidence)" (p. 96).

Racially motivated opposition to civil rights, integration, and demographic changes was hardly the only component of the emerging belief in the liberal bias of the mainstream news media. Anticommunist ideology was another factor that played an important role in the rise of both the early right-wing antipathy toward the established press as well as the movement as a whole. According to conservatives, the mainstream media betrayed their left-wing bias by being "soft on communism," the verdict that referred to the critical coverage of Republican senator Joseph McCarthy

and his actions (Gillis 2013: p. 9). McCarthy himself accused CBS's Edward R. Murrow of Marxist affiliations and questioned his patriotism after Murrow, in his 1954 program, had exposed the false nature of McCarthy's indictments against alleged communists in and outside the American government secretly working for the Soviet Union (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Light 2018). Conservatives further argued that the mainstream press had "failed to report the truth about communist agitation" in the United States which, they believed, was the actual force behind "urban disorder, campus unrest, racial conflict, and the antiwar movement" (Gillis 2013: p. 12). The right considered the media coverage of the Vietnam War as not only "soft on communism" and thus liberally slanted, but also un-American. The famous 1971 publication of the "Pentagon Papers" by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*, too, faced conservative charges of anti-Americanism and aiding communist enemies. In fact, as some right-wing voices argued, the mainstream media were "active communist conspirators" and "dupes of 'Reds'" (Ibid.: p. 6).

Anticommunist ideology often overlapped with the opposition to civil rights, as illustrated by conservative allegations that "the civil rights movement was a communist conspiracy designed to foment violence and unrest" in the United States (Ibid.: p. 10). Among those who subscribed to this view were Christian conservatives such as Billy James Hargis, an evangelist and the founder of the newspaper *Christian Crusade Weekly*. As he considered both civil rights and antiwar movements to be communist conspiracies, Hargis criticized the mainstream media for never recognizing this 'truth' and attributed the perceived failure to the media's alleged status as "agents in a communist conspiracy to destroy the Christian United States" (Ibid.: p. 3). According to the *Christian Crusade Weekly*, the media were culpable for "brainwashing" the American public with "liberal propaganda" such as the legitimacy of the United

Nations—the organization that the publication regarded as a “socialistic form of world government” and a communist conspiracy (Ibid.: p. 194). Portraying itself as an antidote to the ‘liberal’ and ‘communist’ news media, *Christian Crusade Weekly* promised its readers “Christian truth and the ‘pro-American facts’” and praised other conservative broadcasters and outlets—including Carl McIntire of *Christian Beacon*, Dan Smoot of the *Dan Smoot Report*, and Clarence Manion of *Manion Forum*—for providing the public with “conservative and anti-communist truths from a strictly pro-American viewpoint” (Ibid.: p. 186, 198).

Christian conservatives also opposed the mainstream press for what they believed to be its “secular spin” (Diamond 1998: p. 27), expressions of “humanist ideas,” and mockery of Christian principles (Lambert 2008: p. 215). The perceived “liberal propaganda” and misinformation circulated by the mainstream media in the 1970s “threatened traditional sites and sources of information and authority” and “undermined the moral absolutes” of God, the Bible, the church, the family, and parents (Gillis 2013: p. 186). In 1971, Hargis wrote in *Christian Crusade Weekly*,

Satan controls the airwaves, and a great many of the programs spoon-fed the American people by CBS, NBC, and ABC television are anti-God, antichrist, anti-moral, anti-American, and anti-truth. Both network radio and television are used to undermine young people’s faith in God and their country, to destroy parental respect, to encourage immorality, to discredit Bible virtues and to hypnotize youth with the satanic beat of music that undermines their rationale and builds anti-heroes such as the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and their ilk (Ibid.: p. 196).

In order to track the media’s perceived excesses, Rev. Donald Wildmon created the National Federation of Decency, later known as the American Family Association. Launched in 1977, the Federation considered itself to be a media watchdog that stood “on guard against gratuitous displays of sexuality and positive portrayals of homosexuality” in the established press (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: p. 93).

This perception of and opposition to the 'liberal' media was closely reflected in conservative Christians' overall disapproving approach toward a number of significant socio-cultural changes that began in the country in the mid-twentieth century. Lambert (2008) explains that "it was the radical politics of the sixties that most disturbed conservative Christians" (p. 189) with the "culture that had turned its back on moral values grounded in God's immutable laws" (p. 193). Lambert goes on to say that conservative Christians

were appalled at the cultural assault on the nation's Christian heritage that was mounted in the 1960s when a radical countercultural movement attacked what conservatives deemed sacred while embracing that which they held to be a sacrilege. In supporting the civil rights struggle and protesting the Vietnam War, young insurgents attacked the nation's moral authority and its white, male, upper-class culture. Feminists exposed American culture as a convenient structure erected by males for males, and their critique extended to the Judeo-Christian faith, which, they pointed out, rested on a firm patriarchal structure. Marriage itself came under attack by those who saw it as an exploitative institution that held women in subordination. The counterculture viewed the sexuality and sexual behavior promulgated by the Judeo-Christian culture as violating the right of all individuals to express themselves with freedom, unencumbered by ancient customs and patriarchal authority (Ibid.: p. 189).

Conservative Christians took issue with the "secular bias" and "a war against Christianity" that they perceived in the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions officially banning prayer and daily Bible reading in public schools. The right feared the consequences of young people's exposure to the culture that had become captive to "secular humanism" represented by the public education's growing emphasis on science rather than faith in God as the key to human progress as well as the introduction of evolution and sex education classes (Ibid.). Conservative Christians' opposition was also aimed at the growing movements for feminism and gay rights and their perceived violation of the "divinely determined" gender roles as well as "[willful distortion of] the natural order of life and the national order of politics" (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: p. 71, 95). The belief in America's "godless drift" was further solidified by

the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion—the ruling which the right has opposed ever since (and ultimately helped overturn in 2022). Eventually, in 1979, Baptist minister Jerry Falwell created Moral Majority (later replaced by the Christian Coalition), a political organization with the goal to “take America back from liberals who had denounced its Christian heritage and desecrated its moral values” and to transform the United States into a “Bible-based republic” (Lambert 2008: p. 191, 215). Moral Majority opposed abortion as well as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) due to its perceived “definite violation of Holy Scripture.” The organization also stood against homosexuality. This became evident in Falwell’s 1978 public appearance, during which he proclaimed that the murder of San Francisco’s first openly gay city supervisor Harvey Milk as well as the city’s mayor George Moscone had been “simply God’s judgment against homosexuals” (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: p. 94). Falwell continued to stress his organization’s postulates in 2005 when he spoke about the need to “take back our children...take back our schools...take back our government...[and] take back our Judeo-Christian culture” (Lambert 2008: p. 184). Those sentiments were shared by another prominent figure of the Christian Right, now former Southern Baptist minister and Republican presidential candidate Pat Robertson. Echoing Falwell, Robertson frequently stressed the need to “reclaim America,” “restore our Christian heritage,” and “take back our nation” (Ibid.: p. 204). In 1960, Robertson created a platform for Christian conservative views when he established the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). A prominent voice of televangelism, the network has produced news programs such as *CBN NewsWatch*, *Christian World News* and, most famously, *The 700 Club* which clearly “distinguishes itself as a conservative Christian alternative to the network news” (Diamond 1998: p. 21). Many other religious media alternatives followed. In 1973, Jim and Tammy Faye

Bakker, formerly of the CBN, started the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) which has brought programs such as *Praise the Lord* (Kruse and Zelizer 2019). A year later, Coral Ridge Ministries began to produce *The Coral Ridge Hour*, a television program which combined “Bible preaching with alerts about homosexuals, the ACLU, Planned Parenthood, and other dangerous liberal organizations” (Ibid.: p. 38). Around the same time, Dr. James Dobson, the founder of the Christian conservative organization Focus on the Family (1977), launched his magazine *Citizen*. In it, he argued that the fight over homosexual rights, abortion, and public education would require Christians to “serve as footsoldiers” in “a new civil war of values” (Ibid.: p. 2). Although televangelism suffered a decline in viewership following a number of scandals in 1987, “Christian broadcasting remained an important and distinguishing element of the right-wing media ecosystem” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 320).

A turning point in conservative Christians’ “civil war of values” came with the 1980 electoral victory of Ronald Reagan, to which the Moral Majority claimed to have contributed and which “spectacularly altered” the American political landscape (Lambert 2008: p. 190). This moment cemented a position of evangelical Christians as a mainstay of the Republican Party (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). The synergy formed throughout the 1980s and 1990s when the GOP “embraced the Christian Right and adopted increasingly pro-evangelical positions, including opposition to abortion, support for school prayer, and (...) opposition to gay marriage” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: p. 171) while “evangelical authorities likewise advocated Christian worldview that encompassed conservative positions on economics and foreign policy as well as culture and morality” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 90). Despite those gains, conservative Christians’ antipathy toward the ‘liberal’ mainstream press continued throughout the 2000s and was characterized by the “under siege” attitudes and

accusations of “Christian persecution.” According to former Alaska governor and Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, “the media’s investigations of her” served as “an example of persecution rather than reporting,” the views that were shared and further popularized by Michael Continetti in his book *The Persecution of Sarah Palin: How the Elite Media Tried to Bring Down a Rising Star* as well as Glenn Beck on his Fox News and radio shows (Butler 2012: p. 646). Such a critique of the media closely mirrored the broader “narratives of political, cultural, and theological oppression [that] are popular in evangelical communities” (Noble 2014). This includes a “war on religion” allegedly waged by President Obama, the persecutorial theme that has been shared by Republican politicians such as Rick Perry, Rick Santorum, and Mitt Romney (Butler 2012). Drawing on this premise, Fox News has created and popularized the ideas of the annual “war on Christmas” and “war on Easter” (J. P. Jones 2012), both of which have been considered part of the bigger “secularist plot” and “liberal agenda” aimed at “[getting] religion out” and implementing the “secular progressive programs like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, (...) gay marriage,” and universal healthacare (Cassino 2016: p. 142). Fox News has been among the conservative outlets that “have made a name for themselves by selectively highlighting cases of alleged persecution of Christians” (Noble 2014). Other outlets that have spread the persecution narrative include CitizenLink. Founded in 2004, CitizenLink has been a public-policy arm of the above-mentioned organization Focus on the Family (Ibid.).

The religion-related criticism of the ‘liberal’ mainstream media has also been voiced by antifeminist, “pro-family” cultural conservatives whose political activism intensified in the 1970s. Most famous and influential among the early activists was Phyllis Schlafly who frequently indicted television for threatening the authority of

parents, the family, the church, and the Bible. Cultural conservatives' further opposition to mainstream news and entertainment media formed against the perceived "radical feminist" and "women's lib" propaganda (Gillis 2013: p. 151). Conservatives accused the 'liberal' media of threatening "traditional families and their children" by legitimizing the ERA, the passing of which would "lead to unisex toilets, require women to serve in the military, (...) promote abortions and lesbianism" (Ibid.: p. 152-153) and same-sex marriage. Alternative outlets such as the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* warned against dangerous and antifamily programs on television networks. The "liberal, permissive, and un-American" content included sex education as well as "immoral, perverted sexual behavior such as premarital sex and homosexuality" (Ibid.: p. 153). Another "pro-family" activist Anita Bryant—infamous for regarding homosexuals as "human garbage" and homosexuality as a "life-style that is both perverse and dangerous" (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: p. 84)—condemned the media for supporting gay rights as she praised journalists who dismissed homosexual rights as a legitimate concept (Gillis 2013). Concerned about "moral decay and the poisoning of children's minds and souls," cultural conservatives perceived the content of the mainstream media as "the work of a communist conspiracy designed to weaken the moral fiber of American youth" (Ibid.: p. 153). This offers yet another example of the overlap between anticommunism and cultural traditionalism that was present in both the right-wing criticism of the mainstream media as well as the conservative movement as a whole. The continued salience of these issues among conservatives and Republicans was evident when former President Donald Trump promised to "work hard to roll back abortion rights and to defend the ability of Christians to discriminate against LGBTQ people on religious grounds" (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: p. 338).

Beginning with *Human Events*, conservative criticism of the ‘liberal’ mainstream media has also included accusations of bias against Republican politicians and favoritism toward Democratic ones. In the 1960s, the magazine argued that this one-sidedness was particularly evident in media coverage of Senator Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential bid (Major 2012). Moreover, *Human Events* accused the mainstream outlets of management and manipulation of the news by presidential administrations, the criticism that interestingly appeared only after the 1961 election of John F. Kennedy and continued throughout the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, but was nowhere to be found during the earlier Eisenhower presidency (Major 2015). Beginning in 1972, the mainstream media also faced right-wing criticism for their “unfair” coverage of the Watergate scandal and “their wish to destroy the United States of America” by exposing Nixon’s wrongdoings (Gillis 2013: p. 13). Some conservatives perceived the Watergate reporting by the “liberal” *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and CBS as an effort to “get” Nixon and his subsequent resignation as a “coup” orchestrated by the mainstream media (Gillis 2013; Light 2018). Conservative media programs such as the *Rush Limbaugh Show* and outlets such as Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* have continued to sustain the argument that “the ‘liberal’ media are both biased against conservatives and liberal and, as a result, untrustworthy” (Jamieson and Cappella 2010: p. x). The accusations of the media’s favoritism towards Democrats were reiterated during the 2015 Republican presidential debate when Florida Senator Marco Rubio declared that “the Democrats have the ultimate ‘super PAC’; it’s called the mainstream media” (Light 2018).

Right-wing disapproval of the ‘liberal’ media has also been voiced by those devoted to the libertarian component of the conservative movement, including the *New York Herald Tribune* business and financial editor, Donald Rogers. In the 1960s,

Rogers claimed that the *Washington Post* was “the journalistic flagship of the New Frontier” and that it “rallie[d] behind anything that [was] advocated or even suggested” by the Kennedy administration while the “liberal” *New York Times* “support[ed] most of the Welfare-State program” (Major 2015). This sentiment reflected a broader conservative opposition to Democratic initiatives such as the New Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). As explained by Major (2012), “[t]he New Frontier and Great Society were viewed with disdain by conservatives as it meant more government intervention and regulation of racial, political, and economic inequality” (p. 468), the changes that the conservative movement has opposed.

2.3. Conservative media distrust and “cultural backlash”

The history of alternative media and media criticism on the right demonstrates how the right-wing distrust of the ‘liberal’ mainstream press has been rooted in conservative movement’s ontological insecurity sparked by the country’s changing reality beginning in the 1950s and 1960s.

Since the mid-twentieth century, critique of the established media has served as a way for conservatives to articulate their discomfort with the trajectory of the country’s political and socio-cultural order (Major 2015). That is why the media coverage of climate change has systematically faced right-wing accusations of liberal bias (Benson, Powers, and Neff 2017). At the root of this judgment lies the conservative movement’s long coordinated denial of the seriousness, or even existence, of anthropogenic climate change and the supporting scientific evidence (McCright and Dunlap 2011; for more see Ch. IV). Because “social realities reported in the news, such as wrongdoings in the government and large corporations, or poverty and pollution, appear liberal or even

radical to conservatives” (Lee 2005: p. 44), the news coverage of those issues is perceived by conservatives as inherently liberally biased, regardless of whether or not the reporting is neutral. This tendency is illustrated by an episode from 1976 involving two newspapers—*Louisville Courier–Journal* and *Louisville Times*—which despite receiving prestigious Pulitzer Prize awards in recognition of their coverage of busing were nevertheless accused of unfair, distorted, and dishonest reporting by conservative busing opponents (Gillis 2013). Media reporting on perceived “liberal trends” such as growing numbers of women and racial minorities in politics and interracial marriages is likely to also result in the conservative treatment of the press as the enemy in a “culture war” (Lee 2005: p. 56). This would help to explain why former president Donald Trump’s often repeated assertions characterizing the mainstream media and journalists as “the enemy of the people” were supported by 63 percent of Republicans in the first year of Trump’s presidency (Ekins 2017).

This palpable opposition to liberalism and liberal policies has constituted a unifying force in the conservative movement from its inception (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). According to an intellectual historian of conservatism George Nash,

[t]o the libertarians, modern liberalism was the ideology of the ever-aggrandizing bureaucratic, welfare state. If unchecked, it would become a totalitarian state, destroying individual liberty and private property—the wellsprings of a prosperous society. To the traditionalists, liberalism was a disintegrative philosophy which, like an acid, was eating away at the ethical and institutional foundations of Western civilization, creating a vast spiritual void into which totalitarian false gods would enter. To the Cold War anti-Communists, modern liberalism—rationalistic, relativistic, secular, anti-traditional, quasi-socialist—was by its very nature incapable of vigorously resisting an enemy on its left (in Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 77).

Those anti-liberal sentiments have been echoed and promoted also in conservative media outlets. In *Human Events*, one of the magazine’s contributing editors

characterized liberalism as “a creed profoundly hostile to American freedom,” thus implying that “anything liberal should be viewed with hostility” (Major 2012: p. 461). Conservative social and political commentator and syndicated columnist Ann Coulter, who wrote for *Human Events* between 1998-2003 and has regularly appeared on Fox News and conservative radio talk shows, wrote in her 2003 book *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* that anti-Americanism is “intrinsic to [liberals’] entire worldview” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: p. 156). Conservative outlets such as the *Rush Limbaugh Show*, Fox News, and the *Wall Street Journal* have identified liberalism as their shared enemy due to its “high taxes, entitlements, and intrusive antimarket regulations” as well as “judges who read new rights into the Constitution” (Jamieson and Cappella 2008: p. 59). In Limbaugh’s view, liberalism is the enemy as it embraces a “culture of death,” that is abortion, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia; “bar[s] God and faith;” and “opposes gun rights and the war in Iraq, supports activist judges, and is ill disposed to protect the individual against crime” (Ibid.: p. 65). Those are conservatives’ feelings of “[marginalization] by the social upheaval and the disruption of the status quo” (Major 2012: p. 459) that have prompted them to develop their own media outlets which, in turn, have served as a platform for the “conservative counter-sphere” (Major 2012; 2015) in which criticism of the ‘liberal media’ has flourished. Conservatives have also developed alternatives to conventional journalism schools, including the National Journalism Center established in 1977. Run by the Young America’s Foundation, the Center is a political organization whose alumni include above-mentioned Ann Coulter.

Such initiatives have not been limited to the realm of the media, however, and their true extent illustrates the wide-ranging conservative backlash against the ‘liberal’ mainstream. Meagher (2012) shows how the conservative perception of a liberal bias

within some of the established organizations such as the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Council on Foundations led to the emergence of their right-wing alternatives—the Heritage Foundation (1973), the Council for National Policy (1981), and the Philanthropy Roundtable (1987), respectively. As part of its broad alternative political networks, the right has also created conservative think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute (1938), the Cato Institute (1977), the Manhattan Institute (1979), and the Heartland Institute (1984). Right-wing alternatives to the ‘liberal’ mainstream have also included advocacy organizations such as the Family Research Council, whose mission is to “advance faith, family, and freedom in public policy and the culture from a biblical worldview” (Family Research Council 2019); government and public affairs training programs; legal organizations such as the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy; academic watchdog groups such as Accuracy in Academia; conservative colleges and universities, including religious schools such as Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University; and academic research centers such as Stanford University’s Hoover Institution. Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) observe how “the conservative movement has long attacked academia as excessively liberal, secular, and disrespectful of social institutions and America’s exceptional history” (p. 143) despite the fact that “Republican academics are much more common in applied fields like business, engineering and health” than Democrats are (p. 136). Nevertheless, conservatives have continued to create their “alternative authorities” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016) and alternative information and “knowledge production systems.” It is through those means that the right has “engaged in a ‘war of ideas’” (Meagher 2012) against—what Rush Limbaugh once termed—“The Four Corners of Deceit,” that is “government, academia, science, and the media” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 183).

As such, as conservatives have experienced the weakening of their ontological security due to the social, cultural and political changes that began in the 1950s and 1960s, their trust in the mainstream media that reflect this reality—and thus contribute to conservatives’ feeling of ontological insecurity—has declined as well. As illustrated by the sentiments expressed in conservative media outlets such as *Human Events*, the mainstream media began to be perceived as

contributing to the decline of traditional political, social, and racial order. (...) [W]hether [they were] supporting labor unions, Democrats, or civil rights, the media [were] undermining the national interests and values of America (Major 2012: p. 461-462).

In the eyes of conservatives, the mainstream press has “degenerated the principles of America.” One 1960s *Human Events* editorial “castigated the mainstream media for its undermining of the free enterprise system in particular and American values more broadly,” the critique that “is still standard among right-wing commentators” today (Major 2015: p. 489).

The feeling of “the continuity of self-identity”—central to ontological security—among conservatives has also been interrupted over the years, including during the 2016 presidential election when Trump’s rise was fueled by

the deep cultural anxiety that many whites feel over pluralistic, multicultural American society and their own standing in it (...). Many whites fear changing demographics and the loss of their perceived, and deeply nostalgic, “American way of life” and their rightful place at the center of it (Kreiss 2018: p. 97).

Faced with the changing reality of which it has disapproved, the “Republican base” has “[felt] and [seen] itself as being under siege by various multicultural liberal agendas” (Filimon 2016: p. 216). In the wake of the Supreme Court decisions allowing abortion and gay marriage; the federal welfare system supporting “the idle;” fewer Americans being “churched;” and the “[politically correct] amnesia concerning the heroism of the young boys who died for the South,” conservatives have seen “the better aspects of

the past” disappear and began to feel like “strangers in their own land” (Hochschild 2018: p. 158). As explained by Bauer and Nadler (2018), many on the right “feel strongly that their personal identity, as conservative, is under assault by liberals and liberal institutions”—including the mainstream media—and those sentiments are further amplified by conservative media and their “[focus] on stories that reinforce” those beliefs.

Given the extent, depth, and characteristics defining the drivers of conservative ontological insecurity and the resulting perception of media’s “liberal bias”, right-wing distrust of the mainstream press appears to be embedded in and sustained by conservatives’ ideology-tied dissatisfaction with the shifting trajectory of the country, or what Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019) refer to as a “cultural backlash” against the changing values.

2.4. Conservative media trust and ideological congruence

The power of ideological convictions in the forming of conservatives’ relations with the media is evident not only in the context of media distrust, but also media *trust*.

Although vocally opposed to the mainstream outlets’ perceived violation of the journalistic profession’s rules of unbiasedness and fairness, conservatives did *not* adopt those reigning ideals as they started to create their own media. Citing research by Hemmer (2016), Bauer and Nadler (2018) write that beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, conservatives “developed a news judgment and style of their own” and “advanced a conception of journalism” according to which truth was determined by “ideological integrity.” Indeed, whereas in the early 1960s *Human Events* declared in its editorial preamble that it was objective because “it aims for accurate presentation of facts,” the magazine also added that it

looks at events through the eyes that are biased in favor of limited constitutional government, local self-government, private enterprise and individual freedom. These principles represented the bias of the Founding Fathers. We think the same bias will preserve freedom in America (Major 2012: p. 461).

This quote reveals two important facts. First, despite their strong objections to the mainstream media's perceived liberal bias, the editors of *Human Events* appeared to *not* oppose media bias as a journalistic practice in general, but only when they perceived it to be against conservative views. When in favor of these views, media bias was to be accepted. Second, the editors regarded conservative values as supreme, considering them "synonymous with American values because it is only conservatives that understand the original intent of the Framers" (Major 2015: p. 488-489). In 1953, two years before he founded *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr. declared that "an objective reading of the facts tends to make one conservative and Christian" (Hemmer 2014), a view that most likely had an impact on the influential journal he went on to launch. In 1992, in his speech at the Heritage Foundation, Leo Brent Bozell III of the Media Research Center also presented his vision of the desirable state of the media when he encouraged his audience to imagine

a future wherein the media willfully support the foreign policy objectives of the United States. A time when the left can no longer rely on the media to promote its socialist agenda to the public. A time when someone, somewhere in the media can be counted on to extol the virtues of morality without qualifications. When Betty Friedan no longer qualifies for "Person of the Week" honors. When Ronald Reagan is cited not as the "Man of the Year," but the "Man of the Century" (Bozell 1992).

Such a perspective has been maintained by Fox News which has argued that "it should be trusted because it [is] right, and because it [is] right-wing" (Hemmer 2016: p. 270). In response to their overwhelming feeling of ontological insecurity as well as, what Richard Hofstadter once termed, "status anxiety" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), conservatives have created media alternatives that offer "angry, ideologically pure

messages that [express] a shared sense of outrage and loss in the fast-moving, fast-changing world” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 382). Indeed, throughout the 2016 presidential election cycle, Fox News fulfilled conservatives’ needs for not only “a very real emotional release from the fetters of political correctness that dictated they respect people of color, lesbians and gays, and those of other faiths,” but also “the hope that they would be restored to their rightful place at the center of the nation” (Kreiss 2018: p. 94). The channel, as well as other conservative outlets such as Breitbart, have been successful and influential on the right “precisely because they understand their role in terms of identity, not information” (Ibid.: p. 98). The appeal of Fox News has relied on the “network’s willingness to explicitly entwine reporting and opinion in the service of Republican, and white, identity” (Ibid.: 98), which in turn has earned it its long-standing status as conservatives’ most trusted news source.

The alternative media system developed by the right has created a desired environment in which conservatives’ ontological security is preserved and nurtured and ideology is cherished. Conservatives exhibit high trust in identity-confirming news sources and distrust disconfirming outlets (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018), which is clearly illustrated by the fact that “[t]he only outlets collectively trusted by conservatives” are Fox News Channel, the *Wall Street Journal*, the radio programs of Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and Glenn Beck, *Breitbart*, the *Drudge Report*, and *TheBlaze* (Beck’s website and television channel) (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: 143). According to some on the right, “[t]he news is very pro-liberal except Fox News” (Ladd 2012) and “Fox News keeps it fair, CNN tells us left-wing lies” (Bilton 2017). Writing about conservative talk radio, Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) stress how “[t]he only thing conservatives appear to demand from their talk show hosts is that they be conservative” (p. 154). Moreover, as observed by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018),

“[c]onservative audiences tend to focus their attention more on fewer sources, which are purely conservative, and to trust these sources much more than liberals do” (p. 98). Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) also note how “Republicans disproportionately rely on ideological media, whose reach and content are unmatched by Democratic outlets” (p. 157). The power of ideology is also implied by Fox News viewers themselves who acknowledge that the news they enjoy most is that which “shares their personal views” (as opposed to largely Democratic audiences of broadcast networks and CNN who prefer news with “in-depth interviews”) (Ibid.: p. 162). The content of right-wing media likewise “reinforce[s] appeals to ideology among Republicans” (as opposed to specialized policy analysis in sources Democrats rely on the most) and so does “the rhetoric of conservative media personalities” which likewise is “broadly ideological” (Ibid.: p. 132). Those are the news sources that “[deliver] stories, whether true or false, that protect the team, reinforce its beliefs, attack opponents, and refute any claims that might threaten ‘our’ team from outsiders” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 93) that enjoy the highest levels of trust among conservatives.

2.5. Conservative media trust and disinformation

The ideological nature of both conservative media distrust and trust helps to explain the fact that the right-wing media system has been identified as the main purveyor and disseminator of disinformation in the United States. Writing in the context of the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) find that

[t]he right wing of the American media ecosystem has been a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and disinformation, and a significant point of vulnerability in our capacity, as a country and a democracy, to resist disinformation and propaganda (p. 354).

With their media trust and a way of discerning truth driven by ideological congruence, conservatives have created an “iron-clad” media system (Hemmer 2016)

that has largely isolated them from dissimilar views and ideologically inconvenient facts. Jamieson and Cappella (2010) write that conservative media network “distances listeners, readers, and viewers from ‘liberals,’ in general, and Democrats, in particular,” locking audiences in an ideological, self-reinforcing and self-referential informational bubble. Moreover, “by the mid-2000s, *truthiness* had become a dominant mode of communication within conservative and Republican circles” (Hemmer 2016: p. 275, emphasis added), heralding the subsequent popularity of “alternative facts.” Coined in 2005 by comedian Stephen Colbert, the concept of “truthiness,” as explained by Colbert himself, denotes “sort of what you want to be true, as opposed to what the facts support” (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: p. 283). When occasionally confronted with opposing views, the conservative media system “enwraps [its audiences] in a world in which facts supportive of Democratic claims are contested and those consistent with conservative ones championed” (Jamieson and Cappella 2008: p. x). Facts that are not identity-consistent are considered reflective of bias rather than the product of professional objective norms. As such, conservative audiences lower their trust in sources of external criticism or even fact-checking to reduce the cost of disconfirmation (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). The state of the conservative media has occasionally been of concern even to some on the right including Julian Sanchez of the libertarian Cato Institute. In 2010, when writing about the right’s “epistemic closure,” Sanchez noted that any information that conflicts with the reality as defined by conservative media

can be dismissed out of hand because it comes from the liberal media, and is therefore *ipso facto* not to be trusted. (How do you know they’re liberal? Well, they disagree with the conservative media!) This epistemic closure can be a source of solidarity and energy, but it also renders the conservative media ecosystem fragile (in Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 354).

Hemmer (2016) observes that whereas the structure of the conservative media might be “good at times, for movement cohesion and organized outrage,” it is “not so good when reckoning with the real world” (p. 274-275). As explained by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018),

[e]xisting in a media ecosystem dominated by media whose role is to confirm your preconceptions and lead you to distrust any sources that might challenge your beliefs is a recipe for misinformation and susceptibility to disinformation (p. 328).

Exhibiting “high insularity, susceptibility to information cascades, rumor and conspiracy theory” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 73), the conservative media sphere has therefore become an “information cocoon” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), and “echo chamber” (Jamieson and Cappella 2008) in which disinformation can spread easily and freely.

2.6. Conclusions

Since the rise of the postwar conservative movement, the perception of “liberal bias” in mainstream news reporting has constituted the main driving force behind the right-wing distrust of the established media. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, conservatives considered the mainstream coverage of a number of pivotal events including the New Deal, Civil Rights Movement, gay rights movement, feminism, the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers, and the Watergate scandal as indicative of the established press’ leftward slant. With conservative movement’s ontological insecurity sparked and motivated by the country’s changing political and socio-cultural order, the mainstream reporting reflective of that reality has been resisted as ‘liberally biased’ and the press regarded as the accomplice of Democrats and the left in the push for the ‘liberal agenda.’ As such, right-wing distrust can be understood as a byproduct of conservatives’ cultural backlash against the ‘liberal’ mainstream and the perceived

danger posed to conservative ideology and identity. As it has been deeply embedded in and driven by conservatives' fundamental, ideologically motivated unease about contemporary US culture and politics, right-wing distrust of the mainstream media appears to be ideological in nature. Furthermore, given the fact that in their efforts to fulfill their need for ontological security conservatives seem to trust the news sources based solely on their ideological congruence, right-wing distrust of the mainstream media may prove very hard to remedy.

Based on the analysis of conservative distrust of the mainstream media, this chapter expands upon Hypothesis 3 introduced in Chapter I and proposes the following

H3a: Conservative distrust of the mainstream news media appears to be on the very ideological/fundamental end of spectrum and thus seems very difficult to negotiate.

In order to understand whether, and if so how, distrust of the mainstream media among conservatives differs from media distrust on the left, it is necessary to first address the current lack of a comprehensive analysis of progressive distrust of the mainstream media. To fill this research gap, the following chapter will examine the history of progressive alternative media and media criticism and provide a better understanding of the rationale for and nature of distrust of the mainstream news media on the American left.

CHAPTER III

Progressive distrust of the mainstream media

As discussed in the preceding chapter, since the mid-twentieth century, right-wing distrust of the American mainstream news media has been driven by conservatives' wide-ranging ideologically driven opposition to the country's changing political and socio-cultural reality. Right-wing distrust appears to be ideological and more fundamental in nature and as such highly difficult to negotiate. In order to address Hypothesis 1 (see Chapter I) and verify whether, and if so how, the nature of distrust of the mainstream press differs between conservatives and progressives, it is necessary to first explore the dynamic of and rationale for the media distrust on the American left. Therefore, this chapter conducts a detailed examination of the criticism of the mainstream media voiced by prominent left-wing voices including Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky, Ben Bagdikian, Robert W. McChesney, and Victor Pickard as well as left-wing news outlets such as *The Nation*, *The Intercept*, *Mother Jones*, *Common Dreams*, *AlterNet*, and *Democracy Now!*.

The analysis reveals that, unlike on the right, progressive distrust of the mainstream media is more pragmatic. The left's criticism of the media rests primarily on premises that are more tangible in nature, in a sense that they are concerned with concrete and independently demonstrable occurrences and/or conditions. The assertion about progressive distrust's more practical and pragmatic character is further supported by the fact that a number of the arguments raised by media critics on the left have been—albeit mostly indirectly—empirically validated by media research and/or media outlets themselves. Consequently, with its detailed analysis of

progressive distrust of the mainstream media, this chapter both tests and initially confirms Hypotheses 1 and 2.

3.1. The problem with the “corporate media:” shaping media distrust on the left

The main driving force behind progressive distrust of the mainstream media has been the opposition to the news organizations’ overwhelmingly corporate and for-profit structure.

Since its creation, the American media system has been shaped primarily by policies oriented toward market fundamentalism or “corporate libertarianism” (Pickard 2013). With the passage of the Communications Act in 1934 (Pickard 2017), Congress officially codified a dominant commercial model of the American media as it declared that the US broadcasting would be primarily privately owned and financed by advertising revenues (Pickard 2013). Since then, the overwhelming majority of news media outlets in the US have been owned by large for-profit corporations and operated according to the market logic. Both the radio spectrum (McChesney 2004) and later also television (Pickard 2017) have become nearly monopolized by commercial broadcasters. In fact, as of 2020, only five companies—Comcast, The Walt Disney Company, AT&T, Fox Corporation, and ViacomCBS—controlled the overwhelming majority of the US media (Media cross-ownership in the United States n.d.). The same applies to the Internet, where big media companies have likewise dominated with the most visibility and attention (McChesney 2004; Dahlberg 2005, 2006; Aaron 2011; Benson 2011, 2017; Cushion 2012; Ladd 2012).

Progressive opposition to the commercialization of the mainstream media has been building since the system’s very inception in the 1930s (Pickard 2013). During this decisive period, educators and progressive activists frequently expressed

disapproval of the commercial control of the media, citing its perceived inability to provide adequate educational programming (Pickard 2017). Throughout the following decade, social movement groups, progressive religious organizations, and intellectuals joined the resistance to the commercial press due to the media monopolies, intrusive advertising, and the lack of local accountability (Pickard 2015). The labor movement contested the perceived censorship of pro-labor views and voices by the business-friendly commercial news outlets and sought a fairer media representation; African Americans protested media content that fostered bigotry, disenfranchisement, stereotypes, and racial misconceptions, which they attributed to commercial outlets' "structural biases—especially labor and economic relations" (Pickard 2012: p. 8). Despite their diversity, various progressive groups frequently expressed mutual concerns about the media's perceived pro-Nazi, racist and xenophobic content as well as the under- or misrepresentation of racial and religious minorities and labor unions. Other commonly voiced critiques included the neglect of minority groups in hiring practices; the avoidance of controversial subject matters in programming; entertainment's appeal to the lowest common denominator with the goal to maximize audience size and profits; the influence of advertisers that led radio to be solely concerned with selling unnecessary and trivial products; and radio programming's overall failure to serve society's democratic needs (Pickard 2012). Among few political figures to share those concerns was Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes who similarly bemoaned private monopolistic ownership, the role of advertising, and the exclusion of nonelite groups from adequate treatment (McChesney and Nichols 2011).

Distrustful of the commercial press, the first wave of postwar progressive media critics undertook many attempts to create their alternative news outlets and other

media-focused projects. In 1946, Lewis Hill and E. John Lewis launched the ad-free, non-profit, listener-supported Pacifica Radio (Pickard 2017)—the first, and currently the oldest, public radio network in the country.² Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, educators, too, undertook a number of media-related efforts. This included the creation of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, the Institute for Education by Radio, and the FM Educational Radio Institute. In 1945, the progressive chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Clifford Durr secured a 20-channel band in FM radio for noncommercial educational programming. Seven years later, Durr’s successor Frieda Hennock likewise played a crucial role in reserving a number of television channels for noncommercial educational purposes (Pickard 2017). Among other, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, progressive initiatives was the 1944 People’s Radio Foundation (PRF). It included trade union leaders, labor activists, women’s leagues, African American groups, veteran associations, editors, publishers, writers, artists, and many leading intellectuals. The PRF sought to establish a radio network that, unlike the mainstream commercial broadcasters, would air uncensored labor and progressive views. Its programming was intended to explore and raise awareness about a number of issues, including anti-Semitism, racism, the history of feminism, labor, and African Americans as well as music and theater. Proposed were also experimental children’s programs and fora devoted to engaging local high schools in political discussions. Cautious about the media’s commercialism, the PRF embraced a strict approach to advertising. It did not allow advertisers any editorial influence and permitted only those commercials that avoided superlatives and exaggerations and instead focused on facts in their product promotion. However,

² Although lacking broad national influence, Pacifica Radio continues to operate today and has become known for programs such as *Free Speech Radio News* and *Democracy Now!* (the latter became independent in 2002).

despite considerable support, the PRF's campaign for a broadcast license ended with a rejection from the FCC. Hindered by powerful interests including the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Chamber of Commerce, the PRF was also classified as a communist organization by the Attorney General and subsequently dissolved (Pickard 2012).

Despite the fact that many of the postwar media initiatives were marginalized or subdued due to the Cold War-era anticommunist sentiments (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018), the first wave of progressive media critics and the postulates they embraced played a crucial role in the shaping of distrust of the mainstream media on the American left. In the following years, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), just as those before them, became vocal critics of the mainstream press' tendency to prioritize profit-making imperatives over the responsibility to provide quality news to the public. Several years later, Robert McChesney (2004) echoed the long-standing progressive concerns when he observed that, due to its commercialism and dependence on advertising, the American media system was set up to maximize profits for news media companies rather than create good journalism required for informed self-government. The sentiment was subsequently shared by Janine Jackson (2011) of the progressive media watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) who argued that, as corporations decided to get involved in the news media primarily as a profit opportunity, their overall interests were not necessarily in line with those of the public. Subscribing to this view, Jon Schwarz (2017) of progressive *The Intercept* concluded that "the corporate media [don't] have a soul. [They] just [have] a balance sheet," while Victor Pickard (2011) contended that "a healthy press should not be overly dependent on market relationships" (p. 90).

In order to better understand the nature of progressive distrust of the mainstream news media, it is necessary to take a closer look at the reasons for the left's opposition to the media's corporate and for-profit structure. As the following will illustrate, progressive opposition to the mainstream press has been defined by four major themes, all of which focus on the media's corporate ownership and commercialism as the main culprit.

3.2. Media's representative problem

Left-wing criticism of the leading news media has long centered on their perceived failure to reflect and address the country's diversity, in both reporting and the newsrooms.

According to progressives, most of the leading newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s, in both the North and the South, downplayed or ignored the seriousness of the emerging Civil Rights Movement (Bagdikian 2004). The left has argued that the mainstream press played a key role in facilitating racial segregation (McChesney and Nichols 2011), a sentiment that finds some indirect validation in media research.³ In addition to the Civil Rights Movement, discontent with the mainstream media's representative failure throughout the 1950s and 1960s grew among other marginalized cultural groups including antiwar activists (Pickard 2015), environmentalists (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), gays, lesbians, and feminists (Kruse and Zelizer 2019). In the following decades, left-wing criticism continued to address the media's under- and/or misrepresentation of African American and Latino communities as well as problems facing the working class, the poor, and the homeless (McChesney 2004;

³ Gillis (2013) finds that although most of the American newspapers opposed racial violence in the South during the Civil Rights era, their pages did nevertheless reflect racial biases.

Bagdikian 2004). In 2011, progressive FAIR's Janine Jackson (2011) criticized the nightly network broadcasts for their continuous underrepresentation of women and African Americans and the near invisibility of Latinos, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and Asian Americans as sources of news. She further observed how despite America's twelve percent poverty rate, corporate representatives appeared as news sources much more frequently than their labor counterparts or the poor.

According to those on the left, guilty of such reporting shortcomings has been the media's "class bias" (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. 51). More specifically, motivated by their corporate desire to attract audiences that are most wanted by advertisers, the commercial media have aimed their coverage primarily at the middle- and upper-class consumers with disposable income (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004; Pickard 2011; Cooper 2011), while neglecting the poor and the working class, including racial and ethnic minorities (McChesney and Nichols 2011). Determined to satisfy the needs of the advertisers, the media have also deliberately avoided discussing controversial or contentious social and political topics due to such content's potential to reduce the overall "buying mood" (Herman and Chomsky 1988) and the "selling atmosphere" (Bagdikian 2004) or repel the profit-generating audiences who disagree with the discussed viewpoints (Cooper 2011). As a result, progressives have argued, the commercial media have marginalized or excluded discussions about issues such as homelessness, poverty, the roots of slavery, or abortion (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004).

Progressive criticism is supported, albeit indirectly, by media research which demonstrates how "commercial media tend to be exposed to pressure to prioritize high-spending audiences in order to maximize advertising revenue," which can result

in “low-income groups receiving less attention and, even in exceptional cases, being deliberately shunned” (Curran et al. 2009: p. 19). Studies have also confirmed that media markets “tend to systematically ignore or downplay viewpoints and criticisms from the poor, minorities (...), as well as critical examinations of deep-seated cultural problems” (Benson 2011: p. 318). As an example of the influence that advertising incentives can have on media content serves the *Rolling Stone* magazine which, after “briefly [serving] as a countercultural institution merging music and political content” during the 1960s, decided to abandon its activist messages in order to gain advertisers (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016: p. 155).

3.3. Compromised: media’s quality and integrity

3.3.1. Tabloidization of news

Another long-standing and consistent theme in the progressive criticism of the mainstream press has focused on the corrosive effects that the commercial structure of the media has had on the quality of reporting.

The most prevalent critique has addressed the mainstream media’s tabloid-like coverage characterized by sensationalism, simplicity, triviality, and spectacle. According to those on the left, the news media tend to decrease the amount of investigative, in-depth, and substantial “hard news” in favor of “soft news” stories focused on crime, violence, and show business, simply because the production of such content is cheaper (McChesney 2004). It is therefore the corporate demands, as progressives have argued, that explain the mainstream media’s preoccupation with superficiality, materialism, blandness, and escapism (Bagdikian 2004).

Left-wing criticism of sensationalist, trivial and simplistic reporting has also included election coverage and its strong focus on “the ‘spin’ politicians deploy,

endless analyses of polls, and predictions of winners rather than issues” (McChesney 2004: p. 126). In support of their position, progressives have cited organizations such as the Project for Excellence in Journalism (now Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project), whose studies have found that as much as 93 percent of the presidential campaign stories aired on mainstream US television during a single election cycle can become dominated by “horse race” and “tactics of the campaign” as opposed to discussions of candidate’s platforms and positions on important issues (McChesney 2004). Echoing this long-standing criticism during the 2015 CNN presidential debate, progressive candidate on the Democratic ticket Bernie Sanders decried the established media’s sensationalist coverage for its constant focus on Hillary Clinton’s emails instead of issues such as poverty, inequality, trade policies, corruption, and the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision. The mainstream media’s subsequent treatment of Sanders’ remarks itself became a subject of left-wing criticism after CNN and MSNBC had decided to entirely edit out the unfavorable comments from their debate recaps (Fang 2015). Progressives have also charged the media’s profit-incentivized reliance on scandal with creating “the Trump phenomenon” (Fang 2016b). In *The Intercept*, Lee Fang (2016a) criticized major media executives for welcoming the candidacy of Donald Trump due to the political advertising revenues that a contentious presidential campaign was expected to generate. Fang directed particular attention to CBS’s now former chairman and CEO Leslie Moonves who, having witnessed his network’s boosted ratings and profits, not only encouraged then-candidate Trump to “bring it on,” “go ahead,” and “keep going,” but also admitted that although Trump’s candidacy “may not be good for America,” it was “damn good for CBS.” In his retrospective reflections on the mainstream coverage of the 2016 election, *The Intercept*’s Jon Schwarz (2017) attributed the media’s perceived reporting failures

to their commercial structure, explaining that serious political discussions, being both time-consuming and expensive, are considered unprofitable by the commercial media and thus often absent from their reporting.

Media research corroborates the connection between the commercial structure of the media and their increasing receptiveness to “soft news” (Fairclough 1995; Carper 1997; Fog 2004; Hamilton 2004; Cushion 2012; Ladd 2012). To thrive on the conditions of the free market economy, the corporate news outlets in the US have had to continuously attract audiences that are broad enough to generate profitable advertising and subscription revenues. Consequently, by focusing their reporting on the most attention-catching themes such as gossip, sex, fear, danger, crime, and violence, the American news media have been more entertaining and sensationalist than informative (Fog 2004; Ladd 2012; Müller 2013). Helping to define ‘a big story,’ scandal has been among the most popular topics, especially across the cable news networks, while entertainment—as admitted by *Time*’s reporter Margaret Carlson herself—has served as a criterium in the journalistic decision-making process (Kruse and Zelizer 2019). Due to its prevalence in the US news media, this type of coverage has become internationally known as “Americanized” (Cushion 2012: p. 98). According to economist James Hamilton (2004), the incentives of the US commercial media system tend to change even further as the ownership of news organizations begins to shift to conglomerates without any history of journalistic involvement. Their primary objective being profit maximization as opposed to public responsibility, media corporations increasingly focus on producing the news as cheaply and fast as possible. Consequently, as they have deliberately kept their newsrooms understaffed, American mainstream news organizations have sacrificed their most time-consuming

and costly function—investigative journalism (W. L. Bennett and Serrin 2007). With their prioritization of speed and profit over quality and reliability being reminiscent of the fast-food industry, the media have contributed to the so-called “McDonaldization” of news values (Franklin 2005 in Cushion 2012: p. 2).

Echoing progressive criticism about the media’s performance during the 2016 presidential race, a number of studies have also demonstrated that election coverage in the major news outlets indeed failed to provide information about substantive policy issues such as healthcare, immigration, taxes, and economic policy, and instead focused primarily on ‘horse race’ and scandals (Patterson 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Watts and Rothschild 2017). Pointing to the reporting’s preoccupation with strategies and horse race, media critic and journalism professor Jay Rosen has stated that the mainstream media’s typical election coverage had no clear purpose and failed to serve the needs of voters (Rosenberg 2019). Research by political scientist Thomas E. Patterson (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) illustrates how journalists’ needs for outrageous and scandalous stories allowed then-presidential candidate Donald Trump to dominate the major news media throughout the entire election cycle. As Trump enjoyed the equivalent of \$5.2 billion-worth of free airtime from earned media, major news outlets witnessed the surge in their ratings and profits (Pilkington 2016). Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, being less scandalous and dramatic than her opponent, received significantly less media coverage (Kruse and Zelizer 2019). This contrast is best illustrated by an episode in May of 2016 when the cable news networks decided to not air Clinton’s major address during which she revealed new details of her campaign, and instead carried a live shot of an empty podium where Trump was supposed to appear (Ibid.). As further argued by Patterson, the mainstream news coverage did

indeed help Trump’s nomination (2016b), making him “arguably the first bona fide media-created presidential nominee (2016c).”

3.3.2. Conflicts of interest

Left-wing criticism of the mainstream media’s commercialism and corporate ownership has further focused on the more direct ways in which the news organizations’ structure has affected the integrity of their reporting.

According to progressive critics, due to the fact that the commercial press must cater to the interests and desires of its investors, advertisers, and corporate owners, its reporting tends to convey information in a way that is biased in favor of those interests (Herman and Noam Chomsky 1988). This includes the propensity to engage in self-censorship (McChesney 2004) as when the now defunct *Washington Star* decided to discontinue its 1980 series about the pros and cons of shopping coupons out of fear that the content could deter the advertisers to whom the paper had sold the space for such coupons (Bagdikian 2004). Decades later, Sharon Lerner (2019) of progressive *The Intercept* voiced similar disapproval of advertising’s impact on media content. Her criticism targeted a piece published in the *Washington Post* which accentuated the limitations of solar and wind power while touting natural gas—a fossil fuel and a greenhouse gas—in the midst of the climate crisis. This, as Lerner pointed out, stemmed from the fact that the ‘article’ had been paid for by the American Petroleum Institute and its appearance in the *Post* had resulted from the paper’s reliance on native advertising.⁴ Lerner went on to direct similar criticism at the *New York Times* and its brand marketing unit T Brand Studio for having produced similar

⁴ Native advertising is a type of advertising that, almost unrecognizably, blends with the native content of the source in which it appears.

article-like native advertising for major oil and gas companies including Chevron, ExxonMobil, and Shell.

As further claimed by left-wing voices, due to its inherent inclination to protect corporate power and serve the interests of large profit-driven companies, the American mainstream media system has neglected the public's vital interests and weakened its ability to understand the powerful forces that shape the country (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004). Following the 2001-2002 scandals that witnessed a number of US companies declare bankruptcy and trigger major corporate collapses, Robert McChesney (2004) accused the leading media enterprises such as the *New York Times* and Viacom of missing the series of fraudulent and corrupt activities that had preceded the crisis. He argued that the press had "failed utterly in its role as an early alarm system for social problems" (Ibid.: p. 90) due to its own business ventures with companies involved in the scandal, including Enron and WorldCom. According to McChesney, the mainstream press' reluctance to scrutinize the corporate scandal was further explained by the fact that, by 2002, the major media companies such as Disney, News Corporation, Charter Communications, and Vivendi Universal had themselves become subject of criminal investigation over their "questionable accounting practices that had inflated profit expectations and fleeced workers" (Ibid.: p. 93). Progressive disapproval of the corporate media continued in the wake of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath. Robert McChesney and John Nichols (2011) criticized the mainstream press for not only focusing its reporting mainly on "[t]he economic perspective of corporations and investors, rather than that of workers and consumers" but also ignoring the "defects in the financial system and the overall economy" (p. xiv). According to McChesney (2004), the mainstream media's tendency to avoid discussions about the institutional and structural causes of such crises has stemmed

from their own vested interests in the corporate community, to which they are “closely linked” through business relations, shared investors, and interlocking directors. It is this membership status, McChesney has argued, that “pushes the news media (...) to ‘paint as rosy a picture of the economy as possible’” (Ibid.: p. 93).

In the eyes of progressives, the media’s corporate membership has also been responsible for their avoidance of topics and views that are critical of corporations and capitalism in general. According to Bagdikian (2004), the mainstream coverage has obscured ideas, views, and programs that “go beyond those of established power centers” (p. xi) due to the media’s “biases in favor of the status quo” (p. xvii). McChesney (2004) has likewise argued that the press generates a political culture that is “enthusiastic about capitalism and suspicious of capitalism’s critics” (p. 23) as he has pointed to the coverage of Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader during the 2000 election cycle. As claimed by McChesney, the news media “mostly ignored or trivialized” Nader because, as “part of commercial organizations who hold a distinct stake in the existing order,” they have “no desire to publicize candidates that rock the boat” (Ibid.: p. 134). Similar sentiments were echoed in the progressive outlets following the 2016 presidential election. Writing about the corporate media’s treatment of then-Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, Mark Hertsgaard (2017) of progressive *The Nation* criticized the press for barely covering Sanders’ policies such as tuition-free college, health care for all, and fighting climate change. Moreover, Hertsgaard argued, after initially downplaying the prospect of Sanders’ victory despite polls consistently showing he was doing better than Clinton later would against Trump, the news outlets such as the *Washington Post* moved on to repeatedly cast Sanders as “ignorant,” “unrealistic,” and “reckless.” Left-wing disapproval of the mainstream media continued into the 2020 election cycle. In progressive *Common Dreams*, Jeff Cohen

(2019) criticized leading commercial news outlets including CNN and MSNBC for regularly representing only the “corporate Democratic side” of the 2020 presidential race while merely alluding to the party’s progressive wing, a tendency that he attributed to “the powerful economic forces that own and sponsor mainstream news.”

Media research has indirectly validated progressive claims about the corrosive effects that the structure and mechanisms of the commercial press have had on the integrity of its reporting. Benson (2011) writes that advertising funding indeed “tends to dampen, to say the least, critical reporting of business” while businesses that own the media “tend to push (subtly or not so subtly) for news that will avoid causing offense or disturbing the status quo” (p. 317). Blasco and Sobbrío (2012) also confirm that advertisers who seek favorable news reports may exert pressure on the media to suppress information that casts their products in a bad light, which risks compromising reporting’s accuracy. A much studied example of such “commercial media bias” is the coverage of smoking (Germano and Meier 2013). After the overwhelming evidence of health hazards posed by smoking had been announced by the American Cancer Society in 1954, the US media outlets that depended on advertising by tobacco companies remained silent for decades. On the other hand, the few publications that had decided to report on the link between tobacco and serious health risks faced retaliation from tobacco companies which quickly withdrew their ads (Blasco and Sobbrío 2012). Scholars have observed similar tendencies in the media coverage of climate change. Despite the overwhelming consensus on the anthropogenic nature of global warming that scientists reached in the mid-1990s, the majority of the US media have long presented this matter as controversial and debatable. Such reporting, as explained by Ellman and Germano (2009), results from the fact that the advertisers on

whom the media have come to rely the most include some of the major contributors to climate change, such as the automotive industry.

3.4. When the watchdog becomes a lap dog: covering American actions abroad

Progressive criticism of the established press has long addressed the perceived link between the media's commercial structure and their tendency to propagandize in favor of the country's foreign policy and national security.

According to those on the left, media companies' focus on profit-maximization has diminished the production of costly international news (McChesney 2004; Pickard 2011) by gradually reducing the number of correspondents with expertise on foreign politics and cultures permanently stationed in foreign capitals (Bagdikian 2004). Consequently, in the absence of original foreign news reporting, the commercial media have become heavily dependent on official sources for information about the US foreign policy (Bagdikian 2004) and increasingly unable to independently review the quality, or even veracity, of such information (McChesney 2004).

During the Cold War, as argued by progressives, the mainstream coverage largely failed to both challenge Joseph McCarthy and "report the futile tragedy of the Vietnam War" (Bagdikian 2004: p. 86). It also inaccurately reported on or entirely ignored a number of repressive and subversive acts that the US government supported or itself perpetrated in Central and South America (Ibid.: p. 85-6; 96). In the following years, left-wing criticism continued to target the media's uncritical approach toward US foreign policy objectives. Progressives accused the press of failing to question the legality of the Vietnam War while at the same time unhesitatingly condemning the Soviet-Afghan War as an act of communist aggression. Similar criticism targeted the mainstream coverage that denounced genocide in unfriendly

Kosovo while barely noticing the brutal occupation of East Timor by allied Indonesia as well as the reports that negatively treated legitimate elections in enemy countries such as Nicaragua, yet spoke favorably about fraudulent elections in allied El Salvador and Guatemala (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the left accused the media of failing the crucial test of their place in democracy after they had uncritically accepted and repeated the Bush administration's false claims alleging a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda as well as Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Bagdikian 2004). McChesney (2004) bemoaned "the breakdown of even rudimentary standards for journalism in the United States" (p. 120) as he argued that "the news coverage of the Iraq war buildup, invasion, and occupation rank among the very darkest moments in U.S. journalism history" (p. 122). Over the next years, progressives frequently accused the mainstream press of repeating its past reporting mistakes. In his 2019 piece for *The Intercept*, Mehdi Hasan (2019) criticized news outlets including the *New York Times* for propagating the Trump administration's "myths and lies" about Iran's purported nuclear weapons build-up in the same way they had previously spread inaccurate claims about Iraq's alleged possession of WMDs. According to Hasan, it was the continued "blind faith" and "stenographers"-like approach toward the US officials that had, once again, led the media to propagate claims that stood in stark contrast to the opinions of international experts. Such journalistic negligence, Hasan argued, was especially disconcerting given America's "long history of starting, or escalating, conflicts on the basis of fraudulent threats and provocations" as well as the troubled relationship between the Trump administration and facts. The mainstream media faced similar criticism for their coverage of the tensions between Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his opponent Juan Guaidó. In *The Intercept*, Glenn Greenwald (2019) condemned CNN

and other mainstream outlets for uncritically spreading false claims made by Republican Senator Marco Rubio, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and then-National Security Advisor John Bolton—all of whom had been “agitating for a regime change in Venezuela”—that President Maduro’s forces had set fire to trucks carrying humanitarian aid into Venezuela. Greenwald observed that, even though the evidence clearly indicated that those were, in fact, the *op*-ponents of Maduro who bore responsibility for the incident, the mainstream news outlets repeated the false claims on more than one occasion. Although he did recognize the *New York Times* for its “good and necessary journalism” following the paper’s reports accurately relating the incident, Greenwald criticized the media’s dominant tendency to not allow “dissent on U.S. foreign policy, particularly when it comes to false claims about U.S. adversaries.” According to him, just as those questioning the rationale for the Iraq invasion were once cast as pro-Hussein and sidelined by the mainstream media, those probing the American government’s official claims and foreign policy toward Venezuela were now dismissed as “Maduro apologists.” Similar points were soon echoed on progressive news program *Democracy Now!* (*Democracy Now!* 2019a) and in *The Nation*, where Michael Fox (2019) criticized the media’s numerous reporting errors and the misleading and exaggerated portrayal of the Guaidó-led and US-supported opposition and failed coup.

According to progressives, the heavy reliance on official sources have also led the media to internalize and promote a misleading assumption that “the United States is invariably a force of good in the world, determined to bring freedom and democracy to the planet” (McChesney 2004: p. 74). For example, as argued by left-wing voices, the media’s reporting on the “dubious American involvement” in Central and South America during the Cold War created “the impression that these moves were either

spontaneous or beneficent,” which in turn led most Americans to assume “that their country did not condone the use of torture of subversive revolutions in other countries” (Bagdikian 2004: p. 95-98). Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, similar sentiments were echoed on *Democracy Now!* where major outlets such as the *New York Times* faced criticism for not only continuously relying on official sources and their assertions that the war was going well, but also marginalizing voices of opposition as well as information about casualties, so as not to make ‘the coalition of the willing’ look bad (*Democracy Now!* 2003b). Criticism continued in the face of the 2010 and 2011 WikiLeaks release of the US government documents that progressives believed “had the potential to open great debates” about foreign policy and secrecy of the United States, but which the media either ignored or chose selectively “so as to offer an absurdly flattering portrayal of U.S. diplomacy” (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. xxiv).

Media research lends some legitimacy to progressive criticism of the news organizations’ corporate and commercial structure and its impact on the coverage of American foreign policy. As discussed by McLeod (2009), the media’s desire for economic efficiency dictates not only their reliance on official sources for “information subsidies,” but also the “transmission belt” delivery of this information without investigating its veracity and pursuing alternative perspectives. Other aspects of the media’s commercialism have also been implicated. Writing about the Iraq war coverage, Cushion (2012) attributes the media’s lack of any sustained criticism of the US foreign policy to their reliance on advertisers who “did not want to be associated with any programming that could potentially offend American sensibilities at a highly sensitive political moment” (p. 200). Opposition to the war was marginalized in the

mainstream media because, as one CNN producer admitted, to do otherwise “would have been ratings killer” (Najjar 2014: p. 24). Indeed, after NBC executives had concluded that “it’s war that sells” (Cockburn and St. Clair 2004: p. 329), then-MSNBC’s liberal talk show host Phil Donahue known for frequently inviting guests skeptical of the Bush administration’s pro-war motives was fired on the eve of the invasion and his nightly program replaced with a segment called *Countdown: Iraq* (Kruse and Zelizer 2019). Furthermore, as noted by Cushion (2012), “none of the major broadcasters adequately scrutinized the government’s response to 9/11, the existence of WMD and the reason for military action in Iraq” (p. 148). The international news coverage on American television almost exclusively replicated the government line, with over 90 percent of the stories emanating from the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department. At the same time, voices of anti-war, independent and grassroots groups as well as opposition Democrats, experts outside the military, and the broader international community were barely heard (Najjar 2014), receiving minimal airtime on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox, and PBS (Cushion 2012). When occasionally featured, voices of domestic skeptics were isolated or marginalized (McLeod 2009; Najjar 2014). The Iraqi perspective was conveyed almost exclusively by the Middle Eastern news channels (Cushion 2012) such as Al Jazeera as well as alternative progressive websites and blogs in the US (Najjar 2014). Citing Kramer and Michalowski (2006), Klein and Lavery (2011) observe that the media’s failure to perform their watchdog role helped the Bush administration to “preserve public support for its Iraq policy” (p. 304). A viewer of the American media, McLeod (2009) argues, was likely to “think that the world was solidly behind U.S. intervention in Iraq” (p. 125). Scholars have argued that the media’s reporting on Iraq both constituted “a dereliction of duty” (McLeod 2009: p. 113) and confirmed Herman and Chomsky’s “propaganda

model” (McLeod 2009; Klein and Lavery 2011). Echoing progressive concerns over journalists’ ‘stenography to power,’ Najjar (2014) has characterized the US media as “megaphones for official views” and a “lap dog” (p. 20-23). Due to their faithfulness to the official line and the tendency to marginalize or even ridicule any alternative interpretations, the media have indeed sustained the “national narrative” (Handley and Rutigliano 2012) or the “master narrative” (Najjar 2014) that has cast US foreign policy in exclusively positive light.

3.5. “Faux objectivity,” “false equivalences,” and “bothsiderism:” the overcommitment to the professional code

The final theme that has characterized progressive criticism of the mainstream media focuses on the impact that the commercial model has had on the misapplication of professional journalistic norms, particularly balance and neutrality, and its potential to obscure facts.

According to those on the left, as the media’s business models have relied on appealing to as large and broad audiences as possible, mainstream journalists have sought to avoid any appearance of bias and partiality in their reporting. In doing so, they have often picked up, amplified, and legitimized numerous bogus right-wing conspiracy theories, such as those alleging that the late White House aide Vince Foster was murdered by the Clintons or that former President Obama was born in Kenya (Hertsgaard 2017). To avoid offending portions of their profit-generating audiences, the overwhelmingly commercial US media have adopted the “facile he-said-she-said” and “both sides do it” balance that has often led them to merely record positions and claims expressed by different sites without determining whether or not information is accurate (Bauerlein 2018). As an example of this practice’s negative

effects progressives have cited the media's tendency to grant equal attention to the overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change on the one hand, and the handful of climate change opponents on the other. In their piece for progressive *Mother Jones*, Rebecca Leber and Jeremy Schulman (2017) criticized the *Washington Post*, CNN, ABC, CBS, and *USA Today* for featurring, and in the case of NBC and the *New York Times* also hiring, some of the "climate misinformers" in an effort to appear 'balanced.' According to Leber and Schulman, such a practice had not only amplified and legitimated the minority of contrarian voices allied with the fossil fuel industry and trade associations, but also falsely equated them with independent climate scientists. This, in turn, had resulted in a confusing and mistaken impression that the scientific community lacked consensus on the issue of man-made climate change.

Progressives have expressed similar criticism in the context of political reporting. In the midst of the 2016 presidential race, Glenn Greenwald (2016), then of *The Intercept*, criticized the mainstream media's lenient treatment of then-candidate Trump despite his "toxic rhetoric" and "dishonest and destructive behavior" throughout the campaign. Greenwald argued that the media were not sufficiently critical in their coverage of Trump due to their veneration of "*faux* objectivity" (emphasis in original) and compelled "neutrality-über-alles framework," according to which to "denounce Trump, or even sound alarms about the dark forces he's exploiting and unleashing" would have been considered opinion, activism, or bias. According to Greenwald, at the root of this neutrality-focused approach were the media's corporate and commercial interests which dictated that the reporting avoid offending anyone and instead appeal to as big profit-generating audiences as possible. For all those reasons, Greenwald declared the mainstream media ill-equipped to face "Trumpism or any other serious menace." Progressive criticism of the media's misapplication of

professional journalistic norms continued after the 2016 election. Amidst the fallout from the August 2017 white-supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Natasha Lennard (2018) of *The Intercept* accused the mainstream press of “drawing false equivalencies between racism and fascism, on the one hand, and those who oppose it, on the other.” Citing a study by progressive FAIR, Lennard noted that

[i]n the month following the 2017 Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ rally, six of the most prominent American newspapers ran 28 opinion pieces condemning anti-fascist action (...), but only 27 condemning neo-Nazis and white supremacists.

Such “bothsiderism” in the mainstream media faced further criticism from Nancy LeTourneau (2019) of left-leaning *AlterNet* who condemned journalists’ tendency to falsely equate then-President Trump’s defense of his totalitarian tendencies with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s criticism by referring to the disagreements between the two figures as mere “partisan war of words” or “partisan food fights.”

Media research lends credibility to the critical claims directed at the mainstream media by progressives. According to McCright and Dunlap (2011), the media’s efforts to appear impartial and balanced in their climate coverage have indeed allowed conservative think tanks and their “allied climate change contrarians” to successfully achieve “a level of media visibility incommensurate with the limited scientific credibility of their claims” (p. 159). Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) find that the ‘balanced’ climate reporting by the mainstream outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* has tended to provide “‘balanced’ coverage of a very unbalanced issue” (p. 133) and has therefore been “problematic in practice when discussing the human contribution to global warming and resulting calls for action to combat it” (p. 134). Writing about “the continuous juggling act journalists engage in” and how it “often mitigates against meaningful, accurate, and urgent coverage of the issue

of global warming,” the scholars further remark that “balanced coverage does not (...) always mean accurate coverage” (Ibid.: p. 125-6). Indeed, as pointed out by Brüggemann and Engesser (2017), “[v]arious studies have shown the detrimental effects of ‘balanced’ media coverage that depict climate change as an open debate between ‘skeptics’ and ‘warners’” (p. 58). In addition to balance, research has pointed to journalistic norms of dramatization and novelty as equally problematic in the context of climate change reporting. Boykoff and Boykoff (2007) argue that the journalistic need for drama risks covering climate change only in the face of catastrophes or otherwise dramatic events, which emphasizes crisis over continuity and downplays more complex matters of importance. The media’s “predilection for novelty” likewise prioritizes the new over the systematic, resulting in the marginalization of long-term causes and consequences of climate change. This explains why the consistent issuance of reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), being perceived as “regular” and “therefore losing its novelty appeal,” has often failed to garner ample and steady media coverage (Ibid.: p. 1200).

In the context of political reporting, media research has likewise confirmed that the misapplication of the journalistic norms of neutrality, balance, and impartiality can result in a flawed and disadvantageous coverage. In *Columbia Journalism Review*, professor of journalism and media studies David Greenberg observes how being “[b]ound by professional strictures, news reporters can wind up giving a lie the same weight as the truth” (in McChesney 2004: p. 82). Writing about the media’s treatment of Donald Trump during the 2016 election, Zelizer (2018) argues that by “[using] moderate, euphemistic language,” the mainstream press “failed to call things by name” (p. 147). She observes how “[i]nstead of taking clear steps to confront outrage, journalists set up false equivalences, themselves a form of untruth,” as they equated

“Trump’s conflicts with Hillary Clinton’s emails,” and “the claims of right-wing ideologues with truth-based news and opinion” (Ibid.: p. 147). Moreover, as noted by Kruse and Zelizer (2019), in order to appear unbiased against Trump, the media “went overboard trying to give him fair coverage and making sure his surrogates received ample airtime” (p. 336). Striving to appear even more objective, journalists also “often felt the need to downplay [Trump’s] outlandish behavior by pointing to the existence of comparable extremism on the Democratic side” (Ibid.: p. 336) as when they “emphasized negative coverage and focused heavily on scandals in their coverage of Clinton, particularly on emails and the Clinton Foundation” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: p. 40). While this might have helped the media to avoid the appearance of anti-Trump bias “in that their coverage of two candidates was equally hard-hitting and tough,” the practice also resulted in false equivalencies between the two “highly unbalanced” candidates (Ibid.: p. 196). Echoing progressive critics, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) identify the “misapplication of the objectivity norm as even-handedness or balance, rather than truth seeking” as “a core driver of the email focus” and the resulting coverage (p. 196). Their research further validates left-wing criticism as it finds that the journalistic need “to publicly perform balance” (Ibid.: p. 196) and demonstrate neutrality with the help of “the ‘one side says x, the other side says y’ model of objectivity” risks amplifying and legitimizing propagandists as well as conspiracy theorists (Ibid.: p. 379). That is why, according to Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), professional journalism should

revisit how it performs its commitment to objectivity—shifting from neutrality among competing views to a more scientific sense of provisional assertions of ‘objective’ truth based on fairly disclosed and framed best evidence as the fundamental touchstone of that commitment (p. 104).

The mainstream press, the scholars urge, should practice objectivity “as an open, self-correcting pursuit of truth irrespective of its partisan spin or orientation” (Ibid.: p. 196) and shift from “demonstrative neutrality” to “accountable verifiability” (Ibid.: p. 379).

3.6. Struggle for regulations and public media

The history of the left-wing criticism of the mainstream media demonstrates that progressives’ distrusting positions toward the established press stem from their feeling of ontological insecurity triggered by the societal consequences of the country’s capitalistic and neoliberal tendencies. The left has been vocally critical of and opposed to economic inequality, corporate indulgence and greed, social injustice, and the US hawkish foreign policy, to name a few. The mainstream media, due to their predominantly corporate and commercial structures as well as status of multinational conglomerates, have been seen by progressives as not only the facilitators but also the very participants of the capitalist, neoliberal community and its actions. Consequently, given the threat to the left’s ontological security posed by the commercial and corporate media’s perceived incompatibility with Fourth Estate’s democratic responsibilities, progressive media critics have long called for the creation of both a noncommercial, non-profit, publicly funded media sector on the one hand, and a robust regulatory framework on the other.

Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, progressives sought to establish a media system that “holds the powerful accountable, is responsive to local community needs, and reflects a diverse array of public opinion on important social issues” (Pickard 2011: p. 91). Their efforts were inspired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as well as a similar media reform movement in Canada that had prompted the creation

of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) (McChesney 2004). The American left believed that “the air belonged to the people” and that the broadcasting spectrum “was a crucial public resource that should be protected from commercial interests” (Pickard 2015: p. 123). Echoing those sentiments years later, Pickard (2013) argued that “journalism is not merely a commodity bought and sold like shoes or cars; rather, it is an essential public service with social benefits that transcend its revenue stream” (p. 338). Progressives have not, however, intended for the public service media to replace the existing corporate system, but rather to complement it. As explained by McChesney (2004), a truly democratic media system includes both “a large, well-funded, structurally pluralistic, and diverse nonprofit and noncommercial media sector, as well as a more competitive and decentralized commercial sector” (p. 11). Echoing this point, Pickard (2011) has argued that such a mixed system can help to “[restore] balance between profit-making and democratic imperatives and is better able to withstand dramatic shifts in the market” (p. 90). Moreover, according to progressives, a viable public media system, with its high-quality journalism, can also act as a benchmark for commercial media and prompt them to become more responsible when serving the public (McChesney 2004; Pickard 2017).

The first major opportunity to realize the progressive vision of an American nonprofit public media option came in 1934 when the Wagner-Hatfield amendment to the Communications Act recommended that 25 percent of all radio frequencies be reserved for nonprofit broadcasting (Pickard 2017). However, faced with strong opposition from the radio lobby, the amendment was ultimately defeated on the Senate floor. With the dominant commercial media model officially sanctioned by Congress, media activists, as well as some progressive policy makers, began to campaign for policy interventions and public interest directives for commercial news organizations

(Pickard 2013). Their support for the government's proactive role in securing the media's public service responsibilities was reinforced by the 1945 Supreme Court antitrust ruling against the Associated Press which "legitimated an interventionist role for government to protect a diverse press system" (Pickard 2011: p. 79; see also McChesney 2004; McChesney and Nichols 2011). Subsequent progressive initiatives included the 1946 FCC's "Blue Book" which, having recognized the lack of diversity in radio programming, "outlined broadcaster's public service responsibilities, advocated for more local news, public affairs, and experimental noncommercial programming" (Pickard 2015: p. 119-120); the 1947 Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press—a panel of experts that "established democratic benchmarks for journalism;" and the 1949 Fairness Doctrine that "defined broadcasters' basic public interest obligations" (Pickard 2012: p. 343).

However, largely due to the postwar rightward shift in American politics as well as "a corporate backlash that used Cold War politics to red-bait and silence reformers," most of the early left-wing efforts failed or were ignored (Pickard 2015: p. 123). The opponents of regulations and governmental involvement proposed by progressives included the representatives of newspaper and broadcast industries as well as conservatives who regarded such initiatives as antibusiness, inherently nefarious and un-American (Pickard 2013). The "Blue Book" was contested as a socialist attempt to "BBC-ize" American radio and suppress broadcasters' First Amendment free speech rights (Pickard 2013; 2017) while the Fairness Doctrine, one of only few successful undertakings, was ultimately revoked in 1987 during the generally deregulatory presidency of Ronald Reagan.⁵ Left-wing proposals became even more unlikely in the

⁵ As frequently pointed out by progressives, despite its staunch opposition to the left's media initiatives, the American government did, in fact, establish a generously funded noncommercial broadcasting system in the 1940s. It was, however, directed abroad as exemplified by the Voice of America (VOA),

face of further deregulation. The Telecommunications Act, passed in 1996 under President Bill Clinton, removed the existing ownership restrictions for commercial media and communication companies (Cushion 2012). Allowing media cross-ownership, the Act faced left-wing criticism for facilitating the creation of overpowering media giants (Bagdikian 2004) with concentrated ownership over communications and little possibility for regulations in the name of public interest (McChesney, 2004).

Progressive concerns have been indirectly supported by media research. Cushion (2012) finds that “enhanced deregulation and the influx of market-driven media have coincided with a deterioration in the quality of journalism” (p. 199) while Germano and Meier (2013) determine that media concentration (e.g. through mergers) risks a failure to provide adequate reporting on matters of significance to society at large. Scholars have also linked the deregulatory move to repeal Fairness Doctrine in 1987 to the rise of partisan and ideological talk radio shows such as those hosted by Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity (Ladd 2012; Sambrook 2012; Patterson 2013).

Despite the many obstacles, progressives did register one major success in their postwar struggle for the noncommercial, non-profit public media in the US. In 1967, with the passing of the Public Broadcasting Act, Congress established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and, eventually, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1969 and National Public Radio (NPR) in 1970. Over the years, the left acknowledged American public broadcasters as “principled and dedicated public

Radio Free Europe (RFE), and Armed Forces radio and television (McChesney and Nichols 2011). Today, overseen by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), American international broadcasting services operate also in Cuba, Asia, and the Middle East and enjoy a federal budget in hundreds of billions of dollars (Powers 2011). Directly after World War II, the US government also funded and supervised the creation of public media systems in Germany and Japan. This included the provision of loans and distribution of direct subsidies to the media outlets as well as the establishment of license fees paid by radio and TV owners in order to guarantee the media’s independence from government and advertisers (McChesney and Nichols 2011). Those actions and support they received are particularly noteworthy given the strong opposition directed toward the very similar initiatives that progressive media critics and reformers were proposing in the US at the same time.

servants who have done wonders” with their local and children’s programming (McChesney 2004: p. 248). NPR in particular gained recognition for avoiding both “the bombast of talk radio” and “tendency toward the sensationalism, triviality and idiocy” typical of commercial television (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. 198).

Nonetheless, the US public media have not escaped criticism among progressive Americans. In line with their broader media disapproval, those on the left have linked the perceived shortcomings of public broadcasting to its funding scheme and related structural constraints. As argued by McChesney and Nichols (2011), the “independent funding mechanism” of the public media “was sabotaged” (p. 194) upon the system’s creation, when the original idea of an excise tax on the sale of television sets was excluded from the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act. Had it been implemented, the tax would have brought billion-dollar capital which, once placed in a dedicated trust fund, would remain beyond the control of politicians of any party. However, with their federal funding instead sourced from general tax revenues and granted via annual direct government appropriations, the American public media have not only ‘starved financially,’ but also become highly susceptible to shifts in political landscape, especially when compared to other industrial nations (McChesney 2004; McChesney and Nichols 2011; Pickard 2011). Faced with financial precariousness, the public broadcasting has become increasingly dependent on corporate “underwriting”—a euphemism for advertising—as well as middle- and upper-middle class “pledge drivers.” This, according to progressives, has led the public media to increase the production of business and high-culture content and turn away “from their original commitment to experimental programming and serving marginalized and poor audiences” (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. 195). Progressives have also criticized the public media for often “[adopting] a staid version of conventional professional

journalism, with its over-reliance on people in power—still mostly wealthy white men—to set the agenda and range of legitimate debate” (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. 198). As claimed by McChesney (2004), the public media’s increasing similarity to commercial outlets has been especially evident in discussions on sensitive matters such as the economy and the U.S. role in the world. The latter point has been echoed by Lucas Koerner (2019) of progressive FAIR who, in 2019, criticized NPR’s reporting on Venezuela for being little different from its mainstream corporate counterparts and filled with “omissions and blatant factual distortions [that] compromise[d] its accuracy and completeness.”

Media research lends credibility to progressive claims professing the overall superiority of public media over their market-driven counterparts. A number of studies focused on media systems in Western democracies have proven that a well-resourced public media model, combined with robust regulatory structures, sustains higher quality journalism compared to the commercial deregulated system (Benson 2011; Cushion 2012). Elaborating on this point, Newton (2016) writes that

public service news is generally more professional and politically neutral than other news sources and has higher standards of journalism. It generally delivers more substantive hard news about events, policies, and issues, rather than soft news of a more superficial nature about personalities, political images and styles. Its news programmes are usually longer and more detailed than those of commercial channels (p. 32).

Cushion (2012) likewise argues that the public media system “most reliably serves citizens in a democracy” (p. 206). He notes how public broadcasters, with their regular supply of international news and other hard news topics, not only report more news and cover more policy-related stories during election time, but also “reflect a more diverse and in-depth picture of the world than their commercial counterparts” (Ibid.: p.

205; see also Benson 2017). Those differences, as explained by Curran et al. (2009), stem from the fact that while “the primary goal of commercial media is to make money, (...) that of public service organizations is to ‘serve society’ in ways that are defined in law and regulation” (p. 19). Further echoing progressive voices, studies also find that public broadcasters, with the support of the regulatory framework, do indeed have a positive “knock-on” effect, in that their journalistic values “rub off” on and raise the bar for their privately-owned commercial rivals (Cushion 2012). This “rainmaker” effect has been proven to also benefit the entire media system and the society, regardless of individual media habits, “via [the public media’s] impact on the general culture of a society and the assumptions and ways of thinking of their populations as a whole” (Newton 2016: p. 35).

Just as it empirically verifies progressive arguments in favor of publicly funded non-profit broadcasting, media research also validates left-wing claims that are critical of the public media system adopted in the US. Benson, Powers, and Neff (2017) explain how public broadcasters whose subsidies are derived from the general tax revenues and who “must compete with other general-tax-supported programs in the national budget” (p. 6) are left vulnerable to unstable and insufficient funding. By receiving their federal funding via “direct government appropriations, especially those set annually,” the public media in the US are also put in a “more precarious position vis-à-vis government influence” since the funding can be used to express approval or disapproval of specific programs (Ibid.: p. 4). This is best exemplified by conservative congressional critics and their “[frequent use of] the annual appropriations process to complain about public broadcasting’s supposed liberal bias” that they perceive in the mere act of airing programs about global warming. Such practices have had “a chilling effect on PBS’s and [NPR]’s capacity to produce independent, critical reporting of

government and politics” (Ibid.: p. 8). For comparison, in countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom, robust public media systems are funded by license fees set specifically for that purpose. While per capita spending on public broadcasting in those countries ranges from \$100 to \$177, in the US it is \$4 (Benson, Powers, and Neff 2017). A license fee, especially when set for multiple years, has also been “broadly recognized as a guarantor of both autonomy [from the government] and civic accountability” (Ibid.: p. 6). It is so because funding derived from a license fee or public grant tends to exert “enormous pressure [on the public media] to connect to all sections of society in order to justify their continued public funding” (Curran et al. 2009: p. 19). In the United States, on the other hand, the public media’s increased reliance on charitable contributions has created pressures to orient programming toward the more educated and affluent “elite subpopulation” (Benson, Powers, and Neff 2017). According to Chávez (2017), by catering to the “almost exclusively upscale audience of baby boomers,” American public broadcasters have often appeared “woefully out of the touch with nation [they] [purport] to represent.” Their growing dependence on commercial underwriting and philanthropy has likewise exerted “pressures to skew content to meet demands of major donors” (Benson, Powers, and Neff 2017: p. 7). For example, PBS’s corporate funders, who “often hold power in final editorial decisions,” have “refuse[d] to fund programs deemed unfit or threatening to their individual and collective interests” (Ostertag 2010: p. 608). Drawing on Sirota (2014), Benson (2017) points to several funding scandals surrounding PBS, including its 2012 “multipart series on the US economy sponsored by Dow Chemical that closely tracked the company’s major business interests,” the 2013 documentary about drones funded by drone manufacturer Lockheed Martin, and the 2014 series *Pension Peril*

about the problems caused by public employee pensions, funded by a billionaire investor's personal foundation that is, by its own account, pushing state and local legislators across the US to 'stop promising a (retirement) benefit' to public employees (p. 7).

Further echoing progressive critics, Ostertag (2010) links the funding structure of the American public media to their "considerable over-reliance on governmental, corporate and other status quo sources, compared with a virtual absence of other voices (e.g. labor, environmental, social justice)" (p. 609). Acknowledging PBS's critical characterization as "establishment-led," Cushion (2012) likewise points to *PBS NewsHour's* on-air sources and their dominance by governmental, journalistic, academic, think tank and corporate representatives with the minor presence of grassroots organizations. He further observes how by "drawing primarily on a narrow group of elites" and delivering a "top-down view of the world" (Ibid.: p. 79) rather than engaging "a wider constituency of actors that could add greater breadth and depth to the interpretation of politics and public affairs (Ibid.: p. 91), *PBS NewsHour* "lacked diversity in interpreting everyday news." This tendency was probably most evident and consequential in the face of the Iraq invasion when the public broadcaster, in a manner reminiscent of commercial outlets, drew heavily on official sources while remaining "reluctant to give regular access to opponents of the Iraq War" (Ibid.: p. 130). NPR likewise "did not meaningfully depart from the commercial line which largely accepted the existence of WMD" based on the false allegations promoted by the Bush administration (Ibid.: p. 134). In a rare instance of direct cross-validation, Scott, Chanslor, and Dixon (2010) confirm the findings by progressive FAIR which determined *PBS NewsHour's* "elitism" and a lack of diversity in its programming and sourcing. By contrasting the public broadcaster with the alternative progressive newscast *Democracy Now!*, the researchers find that *PBS NewsHour* delivered less foreign and environmental news, and significantly more consumer-oriented content—

likely due to the increased corporate sponsorship—than the alternative newscast. At the same time, *Democracy Now!* offered “five times more exposure” to “public interest advocates,” “relied significantly less on governmental or ‘establishment’ sources,” and “had more than double ‘non-White’ news sources” than the *PBS NewsHour* (p. 335). As such, the study argues, with its commitment to representing minorities and diverse viewpoints, *Democracy Now!* fulfilled the PBS editorial guidelines “much more faithfully” than the *PBS NewsHour* itself (Ibid.: p. 335).

3.7. Conclusions

Since the inception of the American media system, progressive criticism of the mainstream press has continuously focused on how its commercialism and corporate ownership affect its performance and ability to fulfill its democratic role. Left-wing distrust of the mainstream news outlets has grown in response to their perceived failure to include all members of society; present a broad range of informed opinions and viewpoints on important social matters; distinguish facts from lies; and act as a watchdog of those in power and those who aspire to it. Progressives have also directed their criticism toward the public broadcasters who, due to their increased reliance on non-public funding, have been subject to similar corrosive influences as their mainstream counterparts. Distrust of the “commercial” and “corporate” mainstream media is reflected in the left’s feeling of ontological insecurity amid the country’s capitalist and neoliberal order and its societal, economic and political implications. Americans on the left have distrusted the mainstream press due to its perceived tendency to prioritize the financial and commercial prosperity of media companies and other corporate entities over its responsibility to provide the American public with honest and reliable information.

While the postulates that define left-wing distrust are reflected in progressives' ideological convictions, they are not sustained exclusively by those convictions. More specifically, critical premises at the heart of progressive distrust of the mainstream media exist also independently from it, as demonstrated by their—largely indirect—empirical validation by numerous academic studies or even media outlets themselves. This not only attests to the more pragmatic nature of progressive distrust and distinguishes it from the ideology-tied distrust among conservatives, but it also indicates that the expectations of the media held by Americans on the left do not significantly differ from the more broadly understood and defined role of the democratic press. Progressive ontological security seeking exercised through calls for more fair, honest and inclusive news media likewise constitutes a more practical and sustainable approach when compared to the conservative ideology-aligned media sought-after and trusted by those on the right. The nature and characteristics of left-wing media distrust as well as ontological security seeking suggest that the mainstream press has a chance to successfully respond to and reduce distrust among progressives by amending and prioritizing its commitment to the public interest as well as accurate and reality-faithful reporting. In fact, some critics on the left have been openly voicing their approval of the media's improved coverage of matters such as civil rights, feminism (McChesney 2004), and climate change (*Democracy Now!* 2019b; Hymas 2019), thereby suggesting that progressive distrust is likely manageable. Furthermore, by recommending the ways in which the media could enhance their performance and avoid promoting unhelpful, often error-ridden, narratives like the one formerly exercised by Trump administration towards Iran (Fenwick 2019; Hasan 2019), other progressive critics have signaled their continuous faith in the media's possible improvement, which suggests that left-wing distrust is likely negotiable.

With its comprehensive analysis of progressive distrust of the mainstream media, this chapter grants a possibility to compare media distrust on the American right and left. The exercise demonstrates significant ideological dissimilarities, with conservative distrusting positions towards the established media running much deeper and being much more fundamental than the issues and grievances animating progressive distrust. As such, the chapter provides initial confirmation of Hypotheses 1 and 2. It also expands upon Hypothesis 3 introduced in Chapter I and proposes the following

H3b: Progressive distrust of the mainstream news media appears to be on the not very ideological/pragmatic end of spectrum and thus seems to be negotiable and manageable.

To further test this work's hypotheses, the following two chapters are going to comparatively analyze the conservative and progressive responses to the mainstream media coverage of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively. This investigation will not only provide a detailed illustration of the reasons for distrust of the mainstream media on the right and left, but also determine the potential to restore trust in the mainstream media among Americans on both sides of the ideological spectrum.

CHAPTER IV

Asymmetrical distrust? A case study of conservative and progressive responses to the mainstream media coverage of climate change

The two preceding chapters have outlined this work's main argument, namely that the distrust of the mainstream news media between conservative and progressive Americans is of an asymmetrical nature. It has been argued that distrust on the right, being more hardened and embedded in an ideologically motivated and sustained unease about the country's contemporary culture and politics, is ideological and more fundamental than on the left and thus appears very difficult to negotiate. Progressive distrust, on the other hand, being animated and shaped by dissatisfaction with how the established press' corporate status and pursuit of financial interests result in its demonstrable failure to faithfully represent the country's reality, appears more empirical in character. Given its qualities, left-wing distrust also offers a greater promise of negotiability and recovery.

In order to test those assumptions, this chapter presents the findings of a case study that analyzed the ways in which selected conservative and progressive alternative media outlets responded to the mainstream media coverage of climate change. The analysis is intended to provide a more detailed illustration of the disparate qualities of media distrust among conservative and progressive Americans. The study confirms the hypotheses put forward in this work.

4.1. Methodology and results

Climate change serves as the focus of this case study due to the issue's enormous existential and political significance. Moreover, as signaled in this work's previous

chapters, mainstream media coverage of climate change has motivated criticism on both the right and the left, which makes this subject an ideal candidate for a more detailed analysis of the hypothesized asymmetries.

The decision to use the content of alternative news media outlets on both sides of the political spectrum in an effort to better illustrate distrust of the mainstream media was dictated by two reasons: first, the existence of alternative media is itself the manifestation of the mainstream media distrust; second, the survivability and popularity of alternative media implies the resonance of and support for their messages among audience members. As such, it is possible to assume that the criticism of the mainstream media voiced in those alternative outlets is shared by, and thus can be considered reflective of, the respective conservative and progressive audiences. Fox News serves as the most suitable representative of alternative media on the right due to this channel's immense popularity and resonance among conservative Americans. Progressive alternative media are represented by *Mother Jones* and *Democracy Now!*, both of which have long maintained stable audiences. This is made evident by the fact that the two outlets, both of which are noncommercial and nonprofit and as such depend on voluntary audience donations, have continued to operate incessantly for more than 20 years.

The time frame of the period of analysis was set between 01.01.2000 and 31.01.2020 to capture the period during which climate change became a matter of both increased attention and urgency.

The news transcripts from Fox News were accessed through the *Nexis Uni* database. The search with keywords *mainstream media* and *climate change* within the mentioned time frame rendered 427 results and for *mainstream media* and *global warming*, 339 results. After manually scanning all the results, only those that offered

the assessment of the mainstream media’s coverage of climate change and global warming were selected for the analysis. Accounting for the duplicative results, the final number of Fox News transcripts included in this case study is 73. The detailed selection is illustrated in the table below

Table 1 The selection of Fox News programs included in the climate change case study

Name of the Program	Number of Results Included in the Study
<i>Hannity</i>	17
<i>The Five</i>	14
<i>Fox News Watch</i>	10
<i>The O'Reilly Factor</i>	7
<i>Beck</i>	7
<i>Tucker Carlson Tonight</i>	5
<i>The Kelly File</i>	2
<i>The Story with Martha MacCallum</i>	2
<i>Media Buzz</i>	2
<i>Life, Liberty, Levin</i>	1
<i>Hannity & Colmes</i>	1
<i>Hannity's America</i>	1
<i>Your World with Neil Cavuto</i>	1
<i>Fox News Specialists</i>	1
<i>Fox News @ Night</i>	1
<i>Special Report with Brit Hume</i>	1
Altogether	73

The articles from *Mother Jones* and the news transcripts from *Democracy Now!* were accessed through the archives available on the outlets' respective websites, as neither of the two news sources was included in the *Nexis Uni* database. The search for *Mother Jones* with the keywords *mainstream media* and *global warming* within the mentioned time frame rendered 104 results and for *mainstream media* and *climate change*, 122 results. In the case of *Democracy Now!*, the search with keywords *mainstream media* and *global warming* rendered 64 results and for *mainstream media* and *climate change*, 143 results. After manually selecting only these items that offered the assessment of the mainstream media's coverage of climate change and global warming as well as accounting for the duplicative results, the final number of items included in this case study was 15 for *Mother Jones* and 20 for *Democracy Now!*. With 35 results altogether, the number of relevant items in the 'progressive' search was much smaller compared to the 'conservative' one. This appears to correspond to the earlier research findings, according to which distrust of the mainstream media among progressives is not as widespread as it is among conservatives. Subsequently, all the results were grouped into dominant themes and analyzed in detail.

4.2. Findings

Part I: Conservatives

4.2.1. The "liberal" media

Throughout the examined time span, one of the dominant and overarching themes of conservative criticism of the mainstream media's climate change coverage is the perceived left-wing bias and Democratic favoritism.

According to right-wing voices, by covering the “liberal issue” and “leftist myth” and of the “so-called” climate change, mainstream media outlets such as the *New York Times*, CNN and MSNBC promoted a “left-wing” and “social activism agenda,” “push[ed] propaganda for the progressive ideology,” and “[embraced] the radical left and the Democratic Party” (*Hannity 2019b, 2019d; Life, Liberty, Levin 2020c; The O’Reilly Factor 2011, 2014*). The “conspiracy channel” NBC News likewise “used” climate change “to guilt people into socialism” by allegedly asking its viewers to make anonymous “climate confessions” and “[express] their guilt” about insufficient climate action (*Hannity 2019g*). MSNBC “[pushed] the green agenda” even further when it hosted environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and allowed him to “spew his climate change crap” on air (*Beck 2010b*).

In the eyes of conservatives, the “slobbering, obsequious mainstream media” continued to betray their liberal bias and Democratic favoritism as they “[hyped] [Bill] Clinton’s global warming initiative” (*The O’Reilly Factor 2006*).⁶ The “left-wing media conspiracy” also “aided” former Democratic Vice President Al Gore in his efforts to “scare” people about global warming with his then-new documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (*Hannity & Colmes 2006*). By reporting about the dangers of rising sea levels, melting glaciers, as well as the resulting vulnerability of animals such as polar bears, “Gore’s friends” in the “liberal” media “jumped on the global warming bandwagon” with the former Vice President (*Hannity’s America 2008*). As the right-wing voices considered climate change’s anthropogenic nature to be “Al Gore and Barack Obama’s version” of the environmental crisis—rather than a scientifically established fact—they characterized its mainstream media coverage as the evidence

⁶ Although Michelle Malkin did not specify which Bill Clinton’s initiative the mainstream media were “hyped” as she made the accusation on Fox News’ *The O’Reilly Factor*, she was most likely referring to the 2006 cooperation between the Clinton Foundation and the Large Cities Climate Leadership Group.

of Democratic “cheerleading” and an act of help to the 44th President to “advance his energy agenda” (*The O’Reilly Factor* 2009a). Consequently, by reporting on the cautionary climate predictions published in the 2014 federal National Climate Assessment, the mainstream “megaphones” media not only “[helped] (...) Obama to push his primary agenda,” but also proved their “incestuous bond” with the then-President (*The Five* 2014b). Some years later, after the *New York Times*’ editorial board had expressed their support for the Green New Deal and pointed out the risks that unmitigated climate change posed to coral reefs, fisheries, and ice reserves in Antarctica, conservatives included the paper among Democrats’ “friends in the hate Trump media mob” who supported “radical socialist views” and presented “a full on American socialism” as the only solution to the climate crisis (*Hannity* 2019e). Given all that, according to Fox News’ Mark Levin, most of the “so-called journalists in the modern media” were almost indistinguishable from the Democratic Party and the left (Creitz 2019).

This approach toward the mainstream media is deeply rooted in and ought to be understood in the context of the conservative movement’s broader confrontational stance toward the issue of anthropogenic climate change. The American right has long coordinated in its efforts to delegitimize climate change due to the perceived threat that global environmentalism has posed to the spread of neoliberal economic policies worldwide. Being a negative environmental consequence of industrial capitalism, climate change has challenged the conservative belief—and thereby the feeling of ontological security—that this economic system is “the desirable and inevitable path to progress” (McCright and Dunlap 2011: p. 160). Furthermore, since environmental protection usually necessitates governmental intervention into markets, constraints on

property rights, and participation in internationally binding treaties, climate change mitigation has also posed a direct threat to conservatives' key goals—individual freedom, sustained economic growth, the spread of free markets, the maintenance of national sovereignty, and the continued abolition of governmental regulations (Ibid.: p. 160)—and by the same token to their ontological security. Even among conservatives who do recognize ecological and climate damage, the prospect of governmental involvement has acted as a stronger deterrent than the—often deadly—environmental pollution (Hochschild 2018). The right-wing opposition to climate change and mitigation measures has also been shaped by evangelical Christian beliefs. Based on the Bible, and particularly the book of Revelation, extreme weather events are perceived as an anticipated occurrence leading up to an end-time event upon which all Christian believers ascend to Heaven (“the Rapture”), while non-believers remain on earth which, engulfed in fire, becomes “Hell.” After the “End Times,” however, Christ will create the world anew (which is expected to “happen pretty shortly”), which is why human-caused environmental destruction and climate mitigation do not really matter (Ibid.: p. 53, 124-125). Furthermore, according to the shared spokesman for the top leaders of the evangelical churches Dr. Calvin Beisner, the Bible, in fact, *invites* human activities such as mining and extraction of fossil fuels. In making his point, Dr. Beisner evokes the book of Genesis in which God tells people to “[b]e fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Ibid.: p. 123). Dr. Beisner is an adjunct fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, a think-tank founded “on the basis of ten Core Principles, integrating Judeo-Christian Truths with Free Market Principles” (The Acton Institute 2021) and financially supported by various corporations, including ExxonMobil (Hochschild 2018: p. 123-124). The need

for climate change mitigation has also been challenged in conservative news outlets, including Fox News, where right-wing voices have claimed that higher temperatures increase the length and quality of human life and are thereby desirable (Hannity 2019g; The Five 2012).

With climate change mitigation considered either a threat to the industrial free market capitalist system and limited government, or a meaningless human effort in the face of the upcoming “End Times,” the right’s rejection of the significance of anthropogenic climate change has been motivated by the ideologically driven desire to uphold conservative values and protect the threatened feeling of ontological security. At the same time, with the overwhelming majority of Democrats and left-leaning Americans expressing support of both climate science and the need for climate change action (Kennedy 2020; Kennedy and Johnson 2020), conservatives have perceived the environmental crisis as a Democratic and leftist issue.

As such, it is conservatives’ ideologically motivated stance on the reality of the environmental crisis that has motivated and sustained their accusations of Democratic and left-wing favoritism in the mainstream coverage of climate change and the resulting media distrust.

4.2.2. Bias and one-sidedness

Next to the allegations of the “liberal bias,” right-wing critics also regularly focused on the mainstream media’s perceived environmental favoritism.

According to conservatives, the mainstream press was “silly” (*Fox News Watch* 2012), biased (*The Five* 2015; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2017) and involved in “outright advocacy” (*Fox News Watch* 2013) to push “global warming agenda” (*Hannity* 2015b)

as it reported on manmade climate change and connected it to extreme weather events such as tornados and (winter) storms. By pointing out the cyclical nature of hurricane seasons in the US and their likely link to climate change, CNN's Jim Acosta not only "[tried] to force an argument," but also engaged in "politically opportunistic," "dishonest," and "anti-science" behavior (*The Five* 2017a). The mainstream media's treatment of U.N. climate change reports as "a dire call for action" and an "urgent new warning" likewise constituted "global warming hysteria" and "propaganda" (*The Five* 2014c) At the same time, as Glenn Beck argued, the leading news outlets failed in their watchdog role as they exposed neither the perceived global warming "indoctrination" in schools, nor climate change mitigation's "incredible" cost to the economy (*Beck* 2009e).

Over the years, conservatives also charged the mainstream media with "[stifling] debate" (*Hannity & Colmes* 2006) and "[trashing] objectivity when it comes to Mother Nature" by "cheerleading" environmental awareness (*Fox News Watch* 2010b) and treating manmade global warming as an established fact (*Beck* 2009d; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2017). They claimed that the press was not fair and balanced in its coverage of climate change because it did not provide "the other point of view" (*Hannity* 2016c) and "diversity of intellectual thought" on the issue (*Hannity* 2019d). More specifically, the mainstream media consistently ignored "scores of scientists all over the world" who claimed that not only did human activities not contribute to the "global warming hoax," but that the earth might, in fact, soon face a period of "global cooling" (*Hannity's America* 2008) following a significant decrease in temperatures (*The O'Reilly Factor* 2009a). Considered to be favoring climate "alarmists" over "rationalists" (*Beck* 2009e), the leading news sources reportedly failed to represent climate change "skeptics" and acknowledge the existence of "two sides to [the climate

change] story,” both of which, conservatives claimed, “[had] legitimate scientists arguing their point” (*The O’Reilly Factor* 2009a). The press did not only marginalize climate skeptics (*Hannity* 2016b), but also “intellectually [bullied]” (*The Five* 2014b) and “smear[ed]” them (*The Five* 2018) by calling them “deniers” (*Fox News Watch* 2009a; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2017), “truthers,” “flat earthers,” “delusional” (*The Five* 2012, 2014b; *The O’Reilly Factor* 2009a), and “Looney tunes” (*The Kelly File* 2014) or even “treat[ing] [them] like a leper” (*Fox News Watch* 2010e; *The Five* 2014b). Implying their own victimization, conservatives frequently claimed that “people in the media” had called for the imprisonment of climate change skeptics (*The Five* 2017c), including an anonymous “lady on the radio” who considered them dangerous and wanted to “silence” them (*Hannity* 2019f). As conservatives claimed, by not including skeptics in the reporting while simultaneously insisting on the factuality of manmade climate change, mainstream journalists proved to be not only “one-sided” (*Beck* 2009d) and “not open to opposing views” (*Fox News Watch* 2010d), but also guilty of “journalistic malpractice,” “disservice to the American people,” and “propaganda” that was seemingly dictated by reporters’ own judgment rather than science (*Hannity* 2019c; *The O’Reilly Factor* 2009a). This included biased “activist” journalists at the *New York Times* who, lacking “an open mind,” “saturated” Americans with stories that asserted the veracity of manmade climate change and prompted “crazy people” to do pro-environment “crazy stuff” such as not using a refrigerator (*Beck* 2009d).

Further implying the existence of the media’s pro-climate change bias, conservatives repeatedly rebuked mainstream news outlets for first ignoring and then downplaying the so-called “Climategate” controversy (*Beck* 2009b; *Fox News Watch* 2009b, 2009a; *Hannity* 2009a; *The O’Reilly Factor* 2009b), also referred to as “global warming papers” and “global warming gate” (*Hannity* 2016a). Following the 2009

hacking of a server at University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit, thousands of emails and documents related to climate change research were anonymously published online. They included exchanges between scientists that contained specialist terminology such as an effort to "hide the decline" which refers to a well-discussed research method for dealing with complications in tree-ring data, known as "the divergence problem" (Skeptical Science 2015). In the eyes of conservatives, however, "hiding the decline" signified an attempt by the scientists to conceal the alleged decline in global temperatures, which amounted to the falsification of results, dishonesty, the "intent to defraud" the public (*Hannity* 2009a), "a possible farce" (*Fox News Watch* 2009b), a "scam," and a "conspiracy" (*Beck* 2009b). The hacked documents supposedly "shed serious doubts on" (*Hannity* 2009a) and "[denied] some of the science and substance" of climate change (*Fox News Watch* 2010c) and "[showed] disagreement" among the scientists (*Fox News Watch* 2010e). Glenn Beck claimed that the leaked information constituted proof that "researchers behind the global warming hysteria" had been "cooking the books" (*Beck* 2009b), even though a number of investigations into the matter found no evidence of fraud or scientific misconduct (Climatic Research Unit email controversy n.d.). To conservatives, the press' perceived failure to cover "Climategate" was a proof of its unwillingness "to debunk global warming at any level" (*The O'Reilly Factor* 2009b). This, they argued, stemmed from the media's commitment to and defense of the "liberal agenda" (*The O'Reilly Factor* 2009b) and their "[heavy investment]" in climate change (*Hannity* 2009a). As they condemned news outlets such as the *New York Times* for refusing to report on "Climategate" despite having previously covered "the Iraq leaks" (*Fox News Watch* 2010c) and numerous scandals involving then-candidate Donald Trump (*The*

Kelly File 2016), right-wing voices further implied bias, double standards, and hypocrisy in the media's climate reporting.

Comparably to the perception of the mainstream press' liberal favoritism, the right-wing belief in one-sidedness and environmental bias in the climate coverage stems from conservatives' broader disputatious approach to the science of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body that brings together world's most reputable climatologists, has repeatedly asserted with "a remarkably high level of scientific consensus" that global warming is a serious problem of anthropogenic nature that must be addressed immediately (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, 2007) due to the serious risks it poses to human societies and natural ecosystems (Hmielowski et al. 2014). In the United States, all major scientific bodies have echoed the IPCC, with experts such as Dr. Donald James Baker, who served as the administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), stating that "[t]here's a better scientific consensus on [global warming] than on any issue I know—except maybe Newton's second law of dynamics" (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004: p. 125). However, the emergence of this consensus was quickly met with a coordinated effort by a network of conservative think tanks (CTTs), right-wing foundations and media as well as the fossil fuel industry to undermine the scientific evidence of manmade climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; McCright and Dunlap 2011). The CTTs in particular have long proliferated and amplified a "denial discourse" falsely claiming that global warming is not scientifically provable or that it is not a serious issue (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007). As climate science has "[highlighted] the deleterious consequences of industrial capitalism" for the environment (McCright and Dunlap 2011: p. 160), conservatives have worked to discredit unwelcome

scientific evidence that conflicts with their ideological beliefs and threatens their feeling of ontological security. The movement has systematically undermined nonpartisan scientists and their research as well as scholarly journals and scientific institutions by portraying them as self-interested, biased and untrustworthy (Hmielowski et al. 2014). Simultaneously, it has not only promoted a handful of climate change contrarians and CTT representatives as ‘objective experts,’ but also advanced the non-peer-reviewed and largely debunked studies—which have been funded almost exclusively by CTTs—that “purport to demonstrate the benefits of deregulation and challenge existing empirical evidence highlighting the risks of global warming” (Hmielowski et al. 2014: p. 868). Such ‘environmental skepticism’ and ‘uncertainty’ have been further popularized by conservative media such as Fox News. By offering a platform to those claiming that the IPCC knowingly publishes “false reports” and that “there’s no proof of man-made global warming” (*The Five* 2014c), the channel has helped to perpetuate the myth of the lack of scientific consensus on the reality of anthropogenic climate change. News Corporation, the parent company of Fox News, has, too, characterized climate science as a form of “orthodoxy” and climate ‘skeptics’ as “brave dissidents against an oppressive set of beliefs” (Hmielowski et al. 2014: p. 868, 870).

What becomes evident once again is that it is the right’s ideologically inspired opposition to the scientific establishment and its pronouncements on climate change that drives conservative allegations of media’s one-sidedness and environmental bias, and thus renders media distrust ideological in nature.

4.2.3. The media are not (for the) right

Closely related to the conservative perception of the media's "liberal bias" and one-sidedness is the idea that, in its reporting on and approach to the issue of climate change, the mainstream press has been anti-conservative and anti-Republican.

As argued by Fox News' Neil Cavuto, leading news outlets betrayed their hostile disposition toward the right when they blamed the GOP for hindering the efforts to mitigate the climate crisis and referred to the party as "those Neanderthal Republicans" (Cavuto provided no direct quote or other evidence to back the latter claim) (*Your World with Neil Cavuto* 2014). The press further proved its readiness to "dirty up Republicans," as conservative media pundit Ann Coulter implied, when mainstream journalists, in the role of debate moderators, simply questioned the GOP presidential candidates about the issue of global warming (*Hannity* 2015c). After the *Los Angeles Times* published an article titled "Marco Rubio says human activity isn't causing climate change," Bill O'Reilly—then the most watched host on Fox News—accused the paper of "[attacking]" the Republican senator, 'ignoring the context,' 'playing up the accusation,' and "[marginalizing] anyone with strong opinions." According to him, the *Times* headline misrepresented Rubio's following statement

I don't agree with the notion that some are putting out there, including scientists that somehow there are actions we can take today that would actually have an impact on what's happening in climate. Our climate is always changing (*The O'Reilly Factor* 2015).

While those words indeed do not prove Republican senator's disbelief in manmade climate change but rather demonstrate his doubts about the proposed mitigation measures, the original *Los Angeles Times* article also quoted Rubio as explicitly saying

I do not believe that human activity is causing these dramatic changes to our climate the way these scientists are portraying it (Bennett 2014).

This fact, however, was not mentioned by the Fox News host. Moreover, O'Reilly himself referred to Rubio as “a political candidate [who] is skeptical of climate change,” thereby not only contradicting himself but also—rather unintentionally—validating the *Los Angeles Times* headline. Nevertheless, O'Reilly went on to characterize the mainstream press as both “overwhelmingly left” and “simpatico (...) with the uber-liberal thought” and accused it of “branding” conservatives as “kooks and extremists” and “brutally [assaulting]” those skeptical of climate change (*The O'Reilly Factor* 2015). As implied by another Fox News host Sean Hannity, the “mainstream liberal media” further proved their anti-Republican bias when they engaged in “vicious attacks” against GOP Senator and 2016 Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz and probed his electoral bid due to his rejection of the scientific consensus on climate change. Claiming that the press not only did not allow Cruz to “have an opinion” but also “[went] after” other ‘skeptical’ Republicans, one of Hannity’s guests criticized the media as “First Amendment” and “free speech deniers” who apparently “[had] to paint” anyone opposed to climate science as “psychotic” (*Hannity* 2015a). Following Trump administration’s 2017 decision to withdraw the United States from the landmark Paris Agreement, the “upset” and “hysterical” mainstream media (*The Story with Martha MacCallum* 2017) continued to face right-wing criticism for their “overwhelmingly sort of crushingly negative” coverage of the then-President (*Media Buzz* 2017a). After the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* referred to Trump’s decision as “isolating,” conservatives targeted the papers for using “a dirty word in the journalistic lexicon” and claimed that the President should have instead been characterized as “taking different position” and “challenging these other countries” (*Media Buzz* 2017b). Falsely claiming that there was “little proof that the Paris deal could save us from climate catastrophe,” Fox News’ contributor and Republican strategist Mercedes Schlapp

criticized the media for inquiring about President Trump's belief in climate change and argued that his decision on the Paris Agreement should be understood not in the context of science, but rather his dissatisfaction with "the economics" of the deal (*The Story with Martha MacCallum* 2017). Echoing this point, conservative commentator Katie Pavlich similarly complained about the media's both excessive focus on Trump and perceived lack of "substance and context to what the [Paris] agreement actually was." Pavlich argued that the media "attacked" the President, called him "a climate denier," and supposedly accused him of "an act of treason against the American people and the world," when they should have been questioning why the United States signed the Paris Agreement in the first place, what the deal meant for the country, what obligations and "binding factors" it imposed, and how it affected the economy (*Media Buzz* 2017a). In the eyes of conservatives, the mainstream media "once again [challenged] Trump administration" with their "climate change mania" when their coverage pointed to the connection between the climate crisis and the 2017 hurricanes Harvey and Irma (*The Five* 2017a).

In order to protect their ideological beliefs and safeguard ontological security, the majority of Republicans, both the elites and the general public, have opposed the fact that human activities lead to global warming or that such a warming occurs at all (Hmielowski et al. 2014; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Pew Research Center 2016). Among those denying the validity of climate research is Republican Senator James Inhofe who stated during a 2003 floor debate that

[t]he claim that global warming is caused by manmade emissions is simply untrue (...) and not based on sound science. (...) [W]ith all the phony science, could it be that manmade global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people? It sure sounds like it (Grossman and Hopkins 2016: p. 193).

In 2015, Inhofe also brought a snowball onto the Senate floor in an effort to disprove global warming (Grossman and Hopkins 2016). The same year, a fellow Republican Senator Ted Cruz rejected scientific consensus on climate change when he falsely claimed that “the scientific evidence [didn’t] support global warming.” He further added that the satellite temperature measurements had allegedly demonstrated that the planet had not experienced any significant warming in eighteen years (*Morning Edition* 2015). Another GOP Senator Marco Rubio has also repeatedly disputed the expert understanding of climate change, once saying “I don’t think there’s the scientific evidence to justify it” (Kliegman 2014). Embracing the same position, President Trump has admitted to not being “a big believer” in man-made climate change (Post Opinions Staff 2016).

It is this contrarian outlook that explains the right’s characterization of news outlets that question or fact-check GOP politicians against the science of climate change—which does not itself constitute bias, but rather an evidence-based reporting practice of a watchdog press—as biased against them. This, in turn, demonstrates once more the ideological nature of conservative distrust and how the distrust-driving perception of the anti-conservative and anti-Republican media results from the right’s ideologically motivated oppositional stance on the reality of manmade climate change.

4.2.4. Out of touch: the media’s disconnectedness

Over the years, right-wing voices maintained that by focusing on climate change, “the penguins and the polar bears and the ice caps and so on” (*Fox News Watch* 2008), the mainstream media were becoming disconnected from American people’s actual concerns. While Missouri Republican Senator Josh Hawley implied that by wondering

“whether cows contribute to climate change” the media overlooked the working people in rural America (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020a), Fox News’ Tucker Carlson argued that due to its focus on the “suffering of poor people in other countries” mainstream climate coverage ignored Americans altogether (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2016). Following reports by CBS’ Margaret Brennan in which she had observed how another 2016 major climate summit was being overshadowed by terrorism, conservatives bemoaned her “whining” and characterized her “stunning remarks” as “disconnected” from the actually “urgent, (...) pressing problems.” Responsible for this reporting failure, Fox News’ Kimberly Guilfoyle argued, was the media’s perceived “mindset” and “ideology” which prevented them from “[dealing] with the threat of terror” and “[calling] it radical Islamic terrorism” (*The Five* 2016a). According to conservatives, the mainstream press devoted “more coverage than is merited” to the issue of climate change, especially vis-à-vis more attention-deserving topics such as “radical Islamic terror.” CNN in particular faced conservative rebukes for pointing out the fact that lightning is statistically more harmful than terrorism, which constituted “an absurd argument” since, as explained by Fox News’ Greg Gutfeld, “lightning isn’t intent on destroying your culture” (*The Five* 2017b). Other issues that conservatives believed had been disregarded by the “liberal” media due to their focus on climate change ranged from Americans’ “livelihood and jobs and commutes,” to the rising gas and oil prices (*Fox News Watch* 2008), veterans, opioid crisis, homelessness (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2019a), to energy policy, immigration, and “public sector union pensions that are bankrupting all these states” (*Hannity* 2015c). The media’s perceived detachment was further implied by Fox News’ Sean Hannity who mockingly stated that, by pointing out the connection between pollution and energy consumption required for laundry, the *New York Times* apparently “[wanted] you to strip down, naked, all of you” in order

to help curb global warming (*Hannity* 2009b). The paper faced further criticism for one of its op-eds which suggested that slowing climate change could save more lives and advance human health to a greater degree than improving health insurance could. This, as Fox News commentator Kristen Soltis Anderson implied, was entirely disconnected from the voters who regarded health care, not climate change, as their priority (*The Story with Martha MacCallum* 2019). The *Washington Post* also found itself among the detached, far-left mainstream outlets for publishing an editorial that, as conservative *Washington Times* columnist Kelly Riddell claimed, “[blamed] climate change on the electoral college” (*The O’Reilly Factor* 2016). While the opinion piece did indeed make a connection between climate change and the electoral college and questioned the latter’s suitability, it did not, in fact, blame it for the environmental crisis itself. Instead, the editorial criticized the electoral college for appointing—contrary to the popular vote—presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump, whose denial of and inaction on climate change during their time in office “very likely had profound impacts on [America’s] actions to address the challenge” (Cort 2016).

Reflective of right-wing criticism’s broader pattern, it is conservatives’ ideology-driven dismissal of the seriousness of climate change that lies at the root of the mainstream press’ perceived disconnectedness from the needs of American citizens, thereby signaling resulting distrust’s ideological character.

4.2.5. In the name of power: the media’s lies and deception

Next to the allegations of bias, one-sidedness, and disconnectedness, conservatives also frequently criticized the mainstream climate coverage for its dishonesty and inaccuracy.

According to right-wing voices, the “liberal mainstream media” had “turned a very blind eye to real fake news”—global warming—“for years” (*Hannity* 2016b) as they failed to report on “climate change lies” and “scare tactics” of “fake global warming scientists” (*Beck* 2009c). Instead, the press “climbed into bed with assumptions” about climate change that were based on “deeply flawed” climate models (*The Five* 2014b) and perpetuated “lies” and “falsehoods” such as those alleging that “global warming is killing polar bears” (*The Five* 2016b). As they provided mainstream platform to “junk science studies” on global warming (according to Fox News’ Jesse Watters, the invalidity of climate studies could apparently be proved by “a simple fact-check”), outlets such as the *New York Times* and CNN had to be constantly scrutinized by conservative media which were the only ones “basically saving [the] country” and “doing God’s work” (*The Five* 2019). Charlie Rose, then of PBS, faced right-wing rebukes for “pushing the panic” and spreading “unsupported assumptions” as he “[wondered] (...) if this polar vortex is the cause (...) of global warming.” In fact, what Rose and his guest discussed was the potential *connection*, not the causality, between polar vortex and global warming. Nevertheless, conservatives criticized the reporting as “not fair to the people at home because it’s not true” (*The Five* 2014a). As they supposedly adopted “doom-and-gloom posturing,” and “scare tactics on global warming” (*Fox News Watch* 2010e), the mainstream media were met with further conservative criticism for “[not] know[ing] what they’re talking about” and exaggerating the threat of climate change as they discussed the rising temperatures’ impact on the growing number and severity of various extreme weather events (*The Five* 2012). In making this point, right-wing voices often referred to a handful of stories that had appeared in the *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines in the 1970s and that “were wrong” to warn Americans about “global cooling” and the coming “ice age,” a perceived

mistake for which the outlets “never apologized” (*Fox News Watch* 2010e; *Hannity* 2015b, 2016b, 2019g; *The Five* 2012; *The O’Reilly Factor* 2009a).⁷ The 1977 cover of *Time* magazine titled “The Big Freeze” along with the corresponding article were likewise cited by conservatives as yet another example of the media’s past fearmongering over global cooling (*The Five* 2012), despite the fact that the said *Time* article did not mention global cooling at all and the “big freeze” referred to the singularly cold winter of 1977 (Kasprak 2017). Nevertheless, conservatives often referenced the 1970s reporting in an effort to challenge the reliability of the media’s subsequent climate change coverage. For the same reason, they repeatedly emphasized the change in terminology used by the leading news outlets when discussing the environmental crisis, namely a shift from “global warming” to “climate change” (*Hannity* 2015b, 2016b, 2019g; *The Five* 2012). Although the two concepts are, in fact, intrinsically connected and often used interchangeably—with global warming being a major aspect of climate change⁸—conservatives claimed that the linguistic change offered further evidence of mainstream climate coverage’s unreliability and uncertainty.

⁷ This episode centers around a one-page article published in *Newsweek* in 1975 in which its author, Peter Gwynne, reported on an emerging theory that projected the continuation of a gradual decline in global average temperatures as a result of the increase of aerosol levels in the atmosphere. Similar stories were published in *Time*, the *New York Times*, and *National Geographic*. Unlike today, the 1970s research on the impact of climate change and aerosol pollution on global temperatures was still in its early stages, which is why the proposed theory could not be immediately verified. The researchers behind the theory also admitted that their projections were just preliminary. However, it took scientists only until the early 1980s to determine with certainty that, as a result of the emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, the atmosphere was warming and Earth’s average temperature was actually rising (Bump 2015; Struck 2014; Walsh 2013). This theory has been supported by research and the overwhelming majority of climatologists around the world ever since. However, the 1970s episode continues to be cited by conservatives in an effort to undermine both the decades of the scientific consensus on climate change as well as its news media coverage.

⁸ While global warming refers specifically to the rise of Earth’s average temperature that results from “the warming of the Earth’s surface and oceans stemming from the increased accumulation of greenhouse gases in the Earth’s atmosphere,” climate change “connotes all forms of climatic variability” introduced by such warming (McCright and Dunlap 2011: p. 180).

In 2017, conservative charges of dishonesty also befall the *New York Times* after one of its front-page articles accused the Trump White House of trying to suppress the publication of a federal scientific climate change report even though the report had already been available online for months (*Hannity* 2018; *The Fox News Specialists* 2017). In its August 7 story, claiming to have obtained a draft of the report that had been *leaked* by scientists concerned about the potential suppression efforts, the *New York Times* implied that the report had not been made public as a result of the Trump administration's alleged failure, or refusal, to publish. This turned out to be false, as the draft report had already been available online since January. The inaccurate implication faced criticism not only on Fox News, but also in the *Washington Post* and among the scientists involved in writing the report. As a result, the *New York Times* issued a correction in which it explained that what the report authors were actually concerned about was whether Trump administration was going to release the draft *formally* as an *official* report (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018).⁹ In the eyes of conservatives, however, the *New York Times'* article constituted an attempt to "whip up climate change hysteria and undermine the Trump administration." Although rightfully criticized, the *New York Times'* reporting negligence served as an argument for conservatives to disregard the legitimate scientific report as "alarmist" and "hysterical" (*The Fox News Specialists* 2017).

According to right-wing voices, the mainstream media propagated falsehoods about climate change not only in an active, but also more passive way. Citing the conservative Media Research Center, Jon Scott of *Fox News Watch* argued that the

⁹ While the Trump administration did officially release the report in November 2017, the publication date—Black Friday—was widely perceived as an attempt to bury the document. Moreover, the administration questioned the report's credibility directly after its publication. The document was rebuked as fraudulent or exaggerated, with then-White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders stating that it was "not based on facts" (Waldman 2018).

“networks generally hide the decline of credibility of claims of climate change” (*Fox News Watch* 2010b). As stated by Glenn Beck, the leading news outlets failed to expose the ‘real’ intention behind measures such as the cap and trade which was “to help progressives achieve their goal” of “[p]ower, control, [and] money.” Arguing that the ‘truth’ behind the environmental policies had to be revealed by conservative media instead, Beck compared the entire situation to “the days of Nixon and Watergate” (*Beck* 2010a). Conservatives further criticized the mainstream coverage for failing to expose Al Gore’s perceived falsehoods about climate change, supposedly because the media’s own “assumptions match[ed] those lies” (*The Five* 2017d). In 2018, right-wing voices also accused the leading US news outlets of downplaying the French “yellow vests” protests against the proposed increase of taxes on gas and diesel because the step was intended to fight climate change (*Fox News @ Night* 2018). In other words, conservatives implied, the American mainstream media had deliberately underreported the French protests in order to conceal public opposition to policies designed to address the climate crisis. According to Fox News’ Greg Gutfeld, the US press likewise downplayed the role that arson had played during the devastating 2019-20 Australian bushfire season and instead focused on climate change. The reason behind this, Gutfeld explained, was the media’s determination to “blame [the fires] on climate skeptics.” He further implied that the press was itself to blame for the fires since the supposedly high number of arsons—“just like mass shootings”—were “encouraged” by the “spectacle” in the news (*The Five* 2020d). Despite Gutfeld’s assertions, climate and fire experts found arsons to have had little impact during Australia’s “Black Summer” and their extent exaggerated by those attempting to undermine the link between the fires and climate change. On the other hand, numerous Australian scientific bodies including the Australian Academy of Science

included factors such as drought, heat, and climate change among the most likely contributors to the extent and severity of the fires (2019–20 Australian bushfire season n.d.).

The right-wing perception of the mainstream climate coverage’s insincerity and deceptiveness is closely reflected in conservatives’ broader conviction about the disingenuous nature of the issue of climate change and its exploitation by the Democratic Party and the left.

Frequently dismissing the warming of the atmosphere by one degree Celsius as “not a crisis” and considering snowfall and low temperatures as a proof against the warming of the planet, conservatives have repeatedly disregarded climate change as “hysteria about the atmosphere” and “liberal lunacy” (*Beck* 2009c; *Fox Special Report with Brit Hume* 2008; *Hannity* 2019a; *The Five* 2014a). Appearing on *Hannity* in 2019, climate change contrarian and former Republican political aide Marc Morano characterized assertions about both the negative environmental impact of carbon dioxide emissions as well as benefits of the corresponding governmental legislation as “the most absurd medieval witchcraft we’ve ever been exposed to.” As explained by another guest on the show, the late Herman Cain, this climate change “witchcraft” was part of the Democratic “agenda” and served as a “fear tactic” to “scare people to death” and “vote for [Democrats]” (*Hannity* 2019a). To conservatives, climate change was “a lie” and “fearmongering” designed by the left to not only “[exploit] people” (*Hannity* 2019g), but also wage a “war on coal [and] fossil fuel” (*The Five* 2014b) and “[get] rid of capitalism” (*Hannity* 2019a). Claiming that the environmental movement was really “the old ‘Red’ movement” in disguise, Fox News’ Mark Levin spoke of climate change as an “ideology” that was not only deceptive, but also communist

(Creitz 2019). The actual purpose of the climate ‘agenda,’ as right-wing voices repeatedly argued, was to bring about “what liberals want[ed]” (*The O’Reilly Factor* 2009b) and to make “everything free,” introduce new taxes (*Hannity* 2019f), as well as increase government’s power and control over corporations, including the way they conduct their business and “what kind of fuel they use” (*The O’Reilly Factor* 2009b). Conservatives maintained that it was the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through which Democrats, hungry for control over the economy and jobs, had “imposed a liberal orthodoxy” (*Hannity* 2016b). Referring to MSNBC host Al Sharpton’s suggestion that climate change is also a civil rights issue given its impact on young people of color, Fox News’ Tucker Carlson further implied climate change’s dishonesty when he claimed that “[g]lobal warming isn’t really about the environment [but] about racism” and that whoever disagreed with the solutions proposed to address “the supposed environmental problem” was branded racist. Subscribing to this mistaken perception, a guest on Carlson’s show Chadwick Moore explained that “environmental racism [was] a way for the Democratic Party to get a group of people who really ultimately [did] not care about the climate change” and whose ‘real’ mission was the advancement of state power, or “statism” (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2019b). This was reflective of a broader right-wing narrative that cast climate change as “the ultimate tool for running the country” employed by the left to gain control over every aspect of Americans’ lives (*Fox News @ Night* 2018; *Hannity* 2019f; *The Five* 2014a, 2014c). On Fox News’ *Hannity*, Joe Bastardi implied the dishonesty of climate change when he explained how the urge to save the planet was “almost always a *false face* for the urge to rule it” (*Hannity* 2019g, emphasis added). Sean Hannity himself elaborated on this point when he argued that the ‘real’ intention behind “the left’s climate change agenda” was to

[control] every aspect of your life, every aspect of the economy, basically [take] away all your choice and your freedoms in exchange for false security, from what car you're allowed to drive, what type of house you can live in, to what days you're allowed to eat meat, if at all, what type of straws you can use (*Hannity* 2019g).

The sentiment was echoed by Republican politicians including Senator Ted Cruz who explained how

climate change [was] the perfect pseudoscientific theory for (...) big government (...) liberal politicians who want government power over the economy, the energy sector and every aspect of our lives (*Morning Edition* 2015).

Right-wing voices further alleged climate change's corruptive qualities by repeatedly describing it as a financial opportunity. On Fox News' *The Five*, Eric Bolling explained the media's "alarmist" and "provocative" climate change "propaganda reports" as a way to attract the viewers and, consequently, profits (*The Five* 2014c). Glenn Beck similarly implied how NBC's support for the cap and trade program proposed by the Obama administration to reduce the emissions of pollutants was connected to the profits the regulation would supposedly bring to the network's then parent company—and "the largest supplier of wind turbines in the U.S."— General Electric (*Beck* 2009a). As believed by conservatives, climate change served as the possibility to make financial gains also outside of the news industry. Right-wing voices repeatedly claimed that "global warming is a lot more about industry than science" and that "there are billions if not trillions of dollars to be made on this" (*Beck* 2009b). This "massive wealth redistribution scheme" was meant to transfer billions of dollars from "wealthy individuals in the western world" to poorer nations in "the third world and elsewhere," in an apparent effort by the left to take control of "fossil fuels and natural gas and pipelines." Among those allegedly benefiting from the global warming "farce" were not only politicians such as Al Gore—who had become "a billionaire because of manmade global warming" (*Hannity* 2016b)—but also scientists who received

between “\$50 (...) to \$75 million a year full of money [sic] that goes to finance research (...) offices, (...) [and] exotic travel” (*The Five* 2014c). As such, conservatives implied, climate scientists had *invented* the environmental crisis (*The Five* 2014b) and “[propagated] that lie” out of their financial interests (*The Five* 2014a, 2014c).

In an effort to further protect their ontological security, conservatives have rejected the legitimacy of climate change and environmental action, portraying it as a tool of the left’s hidden agenda to gain ultimate control over the country. It is this ideology-tied contrarian approach to the reality of climate change that accounts for the right’s perception of the media’s deceitfulness and dishonesty and, as such, its media distrust’s ideological nature.

4.2.6. Faithfully secular

The last theme in conservative criticism of climate coverage focuses on global warming as a matter of “religious doctrine” and environmentalism as “the great faith of the secular liberal media” (*Fox News Watch* 2009b).

On *Fox News Watch*, Cal Thomas proclaimed that the mainstream media “[attacked] religious faith” as they “[embraced] the secular faith of global warming” and remained undeterred in their “worship of the earth” (*Fox News Watch* 2010a). According to those on the right, the leading news outlets did not only demand others to “worship the trees” (*Fox News Watch* 2010b), but also treated anyone who did not share their “faith” of global warming as “a heretic” (*Fox News Watch* 2010d).

The perception of the apparent sacralization of climate emergency was not limited to the mainstream news sources but encompassed progressivism more

generally as conservatives declared climate change to be “the new religion of the left” (*Hannity* 2019g; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2017). They characterized global warming as “the crazy (...) cult of Al Gore” (*Fox News Watch* 2010b)—who had himself become “the apostle of climate change” (*Fox News Watch* 2009b)—and progressives as self-appointed “saviors” and “priest[s]” of global warming “religion” who “[controlled] everyone else’s life” and decided “what to drive, how to eat, how to live” (*The Five* 2017a). This group also included climate scientists who, according to Republican Senator Ted Cruz, not only approached climate change as a “theology,” but also treated ‘climate skeptics’ as “heretics” and “blasphemers” (*Morning Edition* 2015). As “part of the secular progressive agenda,” global warming was intended to “turn the environment into God” and “[separate] Americans and westerners from God and organized religion” (*Hannity* 2016b), an ontological security-threatening development deemed unacceptable to conservatives due to its perceived contribution to the diminishing role of religion in the American society (Lambert 2008).

In the face of their increasing ontological anxiety propelled by religion’s declining status, conservatives sought ontological refuge in a belief that the unwanted societal and cultural shift had been brought about by the left and its new “secular faith” of global warming. It is this ideological conviction that contextualizes and explains conservatives’ perception of the mainstream media’s embrace of ‘climate religion’ and thereby the nature of resulting media distrust.

Part II: Progressives

4.2.7. 'Skepticism' allowed: the consequences of the 'balanced debate'

Among progressive Americans, the most prevailing criticism of the mainstream environmental coverage has focused on its tendency to “balance out” the overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change with a handful of ‘skeptical’ voices, thereby rendering the public “misinformed” about the state of climate science (Drum 2011).

Voices on the left criticized the mainstream press for not only granting “a great deal of coverage” to those “who believe that climate change is not happening,” but also doing so despite such individuals’ financial ties to the fossil fuel industry and lack of relevant expertise (*Democracy Now!* 2003a). To make matters worse, progressives argued, the media produced the reporting while being fully aware of the oil industry-sponsored climate misinformation campaign. This was exemplified by a 1998 *New York Times* article which had documented how companies such as ExxonMobil and Chevron Corporation had devised a tentative plan aimed at developing an alternative to the IPCC and increasing the impact of contrarian views on Congress, the media, and “other key audiences” (Leber and Schulman 2017).¹⁰ Among other campaigns similarly meant to “reposition global warming as theory (not fact)” was the 1990s initiative undertaken by a \$400 million coal cooperative Western Fuels. As observed by *Mother Jones*’ Ross Gelbspan (2005), the plan included \$1 million to be paid over a three-year period to a handful of skeptics who would speak about the uncertainty of man-made climate change to the press and the public around the country. With those

¹⁰ In the 1990s, Exxon and Chevron, together with trade associations and conservative policy research organizations, created a \$600,000 media-relations budget focused on science writers, editors, columnists, and television network correspondents that was intended to help “raise questions about and undercut the ‘prevailing scientific wisdom’” on climate change. To work out their strategy, the parties to the plan met at the American Petroleum Institute in Washington DC (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004: p. 133).

and other similar “astroturf” efforts designed to protect corporate interests (*Democracy Now!* 2009), the left criticized the mainstream media for facilitating various climate misinformation campaigns despite being aware of their backgrounds and goals. This included a “fact-challenged op-ed” published in *USA Today* which contested the IPCC and falsely claimed that the Earth had not witnessed any warming in fifteen years. The author of the piece Joseph Bast was at that time the president of the Heartland Institute—a conservative and libertarian think tank that had received funding from fossil fuel companies. The *Washington Post* faced similar progressive rebukes after one of its articles had featured criticism of climate modeling voiced by Myron Ebell from the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI). As *Mother Jones*’ Rebecca Leber and Jeremy Schulman (2017) observed, the CEI is “a conservative think tank that is closely associated with climate change denial and [had] also received funds from Koch-backed groups and other fossil fuel groups over the years.” (According to an investigation by *Mother Jones*, by 2005, the CEI had received \$1,380,000 out of at least \$8 million that Exxon had spent to fund a network of groups focused on challenging climate change (*Democracy Now!* 2005)). Progressives further criticized the mainstream press for frequently quoting contrarian voices including Joe Bastardi who has “regularly questioned the science of global warming” (*Democracy Now!* 2010a) and Marc Morano, the founder of the climate change denial website ClimateDepot.com (Sheppard 2011). In addition to featuring criticism of the IPCC voiced by a number of well-known climate opponents, the *New York Times* also misrepresented those opponents as “mainstream scientists,” as disapprovingly observed by left-wing voices (Sheppard 2010). ABC’s *This Week* was singled out for failing to challenge Rick Santorum—then running for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination—after he had called global warming “junk science,” while Sunday shows

faced disapproval for not quoting a single climate scientist as they gave voice to Republicans criticizing the efforts to address climate change (Gitlin 2013). Further progressive criticism focused on the media's tendency to refer to climate change disbelievers as "skeptics." On *Democracy Now!*, Mark Hertsgaard of *The Nation* acknowledged the fact that "[g]enuine skeptics are invaluable to science," but stressed that they can also be "persuaded by evidence." On the other hand, Hertsgaard explained, those who disbelieve climate change "have made up their minds for economic (...) or ideological reasons" and therefore were not 'genuine' skeptics and should not be presented as such (*Democracy Now!* 2011). Left-wing disapproval of the mainstream media's "scientists say this, but skeptics say this" model of coverage continued in the wake of the "Climategate" email controversy (Sheppard 2011). According to progressives, after they had "complied" with conservative Media Research Center's demands that the story be covered, the major broadcast networks featured a number of contrarian voices that relied on the controversy to further call climate science into question. Among the print outlets, the *Washington Post* in particular faced rebukes for both publishing an op-ed by Sarah Palin who "falsely claimed that the emails revealed that scientists had 'manipulated data' to 'hide the decline' in global temperatures" (Leber and Schulman 2017) and quoting CEI's Myron Ebell as saying that the leaked messages had exposed an "alarmist political agenda." The *New York Times* likewise received criticism for its front-page story which featured skeptical voices inaccurately claiming that the emails had "show[ed] that climate scientists conspired to overstate the case for a human influence on climate change." As argued by progressives, the media "overblew" the controversy with their "obsessive—and often inaccurate—coverage of the emails" and allowed "Climategate"

to play “an outsize role” in news reporting despite the scandal’s role as “a convenient talking point for those seeking to block climate action” (Leber and Vicens 2018).

Progressives also addressed the more active cooperation between the leading news outlets and climate change opponents. *Mother Jones* criticized the *Washington Post* for including George Will, “one of media’s most consistent voices of climate science denial,” among its regular columnists, as well as the *New York Times* for hiring Bret Stephens who characterized climate change as an “imaginary enemy” and questioned climate models that predicted the significant rise in global temperatures. NBC was likewise met with left-wing criticism after the network had decided to hire both Will and Stephens as its contributors (Leber and Schulman 2017).

According to those on the left, it was the media’s “misguided application of journalistic balance” that was responsible for the repetitive practice of including the voices of climate change opponents (Gelbspan 2005). As it “[adored]” the “balance” (Engelhardt 2013) and “[bent] over backward to prove its ‘objectivity’” (Gitlin 2013), the press embraced the “he-said-she-said” and “both sides do it” type of reporting when covering the climate emergency (Bauerlein 2018; *Democracy Now!* 2005, 2010c; Engelhardt 2013; Leber and Schulman 2017; Sheppard 2011). Consequently, the media created “false equivalencies” (*Democracy Now!* 2019d; Leber and Schulman 2017) between the vast majority of climatologists and a fringe of “scientifically unsubstantiated points of view” (Ghorayshi 2012), which resulted in an inaccurate image of an ongoing “debate” on anthropogenic climate change (*Democracy Now!* 2009). According to progressives, it was this mainstream media’s fixation on ‘balance’ that “climate deniers” leveraged in order to “grab equal time with the scientific consensus” (Bauerlein 2018) and spread the “propaganda of the fossil fuel industry”

inaccurately claiming that “the science isn’t clear” on climate change (*Democracy Now!* 2019d). The mainstream climate coverage, left-wing voices argued, constituted a proof of “how pervasive the campaign of disinformation and deception” had become (*Democracy Now!* 2005).

With its focus on how the reporting practice of including contrarian and mostly nonexpert voices into the conversation resulted in the misrepresentation of the actual state of climate science and climate change itself, progressive criticism of the mainstream media’s ‘balanced’ approach to covering climate change proves to be pragmatic in nature. This assessment is further supported by progressive criticism’s empirical validation in media research that demonstrates how ‘balanced’ reporting on climate change can indeed result in an inaccurate, and even detrimental, coverage (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Brüggemann and Engesser 2017; McCright and Dunlap 2011; see also 3.5.).

4.2.8. Connection not found

Another common theme in progressive criticism of the mainstream media focused on the persistent absence of the link to climate change in the coverage of extreme weather events.

According to those on the left, whether they talked about the record heat waves in the US and Europe (*Democracy Now!* 2003a) or the series of hurricanes that hit Florida in 2004, “most of the commercial networks,” both on television and the radio, failed to mention the connection to climate change or global warming in their weather reports (*Democracy Now!* 2004, 2007a; Engelhardt 2004). When in 2005 southern California experienced extreme rain, snow, and lethal mudslides, *Mother Jones*’ Ross

Gelbspan reprimanded the media for overlooking the role played by climate change “even though virtually all climate scientists agree that the first consequence of a warmer atmosphere is a marked increase in extreme weather events” (Gelbspan 2005). Over the years, this perceived inability of the “corporate media” to “connect the dots” continued to face progressive criticism in the wake of the increasing number of various extreme weather events both in the US and abroad (*Democracy Now!* 2010b, 2010a, 2012, 2015, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d; Engelhardt 2009; Gitlin 2013; Solnit 2013). On *Democracy Now!*, Dr. Joseph Romm—a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a Senior Fellow at the liberal Center for American Progress, and former Acting Assistant Secretary of the US Department of Energy—complained that the press often described extreme weather events merely as “regular weather maybe gone a little wacky” despite their consistency with long-standing scientific predictions about the consequences of global warming (*Democracy Now!* 2008). According to progressives, although the *New York Times* did sometimes establish the connection between rising temperatures and extreme weather, the paper tended to relegate the rare pieces to the back pages and generally acted as “a major aider-and-abettor in the process” of ignoring global warming. The *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* likewise received left-wing rebukes after it had denied the link between climate change and extreme weather altogether (Engelhardt 2004).

According to voices featured in the progressive outlets, one of the reasons behind the mainstream media’s failure to link extreme weather to climate change was too small a number, or even the absence, of interviewed or quoted scientists (*Democracy Now!* 2019b; Engelhardt 2004). As argued by Allison Fisher from progressive Public Citizen’s Climate and Energy Program, the major TV news programs and papers had included the voices of experts only “very rarely” and by

doing so deprived the public of the possibility to learn “what the scientific community [wanted them] to know” (*Democracy Now!* 2019c). The perceived reporting failure was further attributed to the media’s corporate ownership. Interviewed by *Democracy Now!*, George Monbiot from *The Guardian* maintained that the news organizations in the United States—the majority of which are owned by corporations—did not tell the truth about climate change as this would collide with the financial interests of their corporate owners, among whom are oil and energy companies and car manufacturers (*Democracy Now!* 2003a). Echoing this point, another *Democracy Now!* guest the late Dr. Paul Epstein—then of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School—explained how the absence of the connection between extreme weather and climate change in the media coverage likely stemmed from a “corporate agenda” and a “well-orchestrated, well-funded campaign to keep up this drumbeat of doubt about climate change” and steer the discussion “off track” (*Democracy Now!* 2010a). Also on *Democracy Now!*, the founder of Weather Underground Dr. Jeff Masters attributed the mainstream media’s informative failure to “a disconnect between the research community and TV meteorologists,” arguing that many weather reporters had been “seduced” by the fossil fuel industry’s “propaganda” into skepticism about the anthropogenic nature of climate change (*Democracy Now!* 2010b).

As left-wing critics targeted the media reporting’s demonstrable failure to communicate the existing connection between extreme weather and climate change and attributed it to media’s known corporate make-up and commercial interests, progressive distrust, once again, proves to be of more empirical and pragmatic nature.

4.2.9. Coverage drought: invisibility of climate change in the news

Throughout the analyzed period, left-wing criticism of the media also repeatedly addressed the perceived “climate silence” in the mainstream coverage (*Democracy Now!* 2019d).

According to progressives, the issue of climate change generally received “relatively little attention” in the leading news outlets (*Democracy Now!* 2005) despite it being “one of the biggest stories of this century” (Gelbspan 2005). Relying on the data from the Pew Research Center, *Mother Jones*’ Azeen Ghorayshi complained that environmental stories had made up “a miniscule fraction of mainstream news coverage in the US”—with only 2 percent in 2010 and 1 percent in 2011. Citing the Project for Improved Environmental Coverage (PIEC), Ghorayshi further remarked that climate stories that did appear in the media were too often delegated to separate “environment sections” instead of being integrated into the more visible ‘main news’ (Ghorayshi 2012). In her piece for *Mother Jones*, Lisa Hymas’ continued left-wing criticism of the “abysmally low” amount of climate coverage when she pointed to the mere 142 minutes that the national broadcast networks had spent covering climate change in 2018 despite that year’s

horrific extreme weather (...), the harrowing climate science reports released by the United Nations and 13 US government agencies, the Trump administration’s ongoing assault on climate protections, and the ever-increasing urgency of the climate crisis (Hymas 2019).

According to left-wing voices, the leading news outlets neglected the issue of climate change also during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles, both in their coverage as well as debates they moderated (*Democracy Now!* 2017; Hymas 2019). Media criticism in the progressive outlets was also voiced by those opposed to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). In their view, the mainstream press ignored not only climate change and the DAPL protests, but also Native American tribes and other

individuals already affected by climate change and afraid of further environmental degradation likely to follow the oil pipeline's construction (*Democracy Now!* 2016, 2017). In the eyes of progressives, the press' failures also included its approach toward the issue of renewable energy sources given its scarce attention to both energy efficiency and the country's possibilities to generate solar and wind power (*Democracy Now!* 2011). After a landmark energy bill—the American Clean Energy and Security Act—had been approved by the House of Representatives in 2009, the *New York Times* faced criticism for granting the bill only a limited mention on its Caucus blog (Harkinson 2009). On *Democracy Now!*, the insufficient amount of climate coverage was also condemned by the authors of the 2007 documentary *The 11th Hour* about global environmental crisis and its impact on human life as well as the creators of the Indigenous Rising Media project, all of whom attributed the launching of their initiatives to the mainstream media's disappointing performance (*Democracy Now!* 2007c, 2017).

According to progressives, among the factors responsible for the climate coverage deficiency was media conglomeration. With shrinking newsrooms and reduced staff, left-wing voices argued, the mainstream news outlets had fewer reporters and less time to research and cover issues as complex as climate change (*Democracy Now!* 2007a; Gelbspan 2005). This included outlets such as the *New York Times* which had closed both its environmental desk and the Green blog, and CNN which had decided “to get rid of its entire structure for reporting on science and environment” (*Democracy Now!* 2014; Gitlin 2013). Other progressive explanations for the absence of “serious discussion of climate change” in the media included the news organizations' own financial interests, specifically advertising revenues. On *Democracy Now!*, Peter Dykstra—who used to cover environment and weather for

CNN—criticized mainstream broadcasting’s “massive, irresponsible journalistic failure” as he explained how “all that money coming from oil and coal ads” had exerted an editorial impact on the content of the news, particularly on television networks (*Democracy Now!* 2014).

With left-wing criticism focused on the discrepancy between the real impact and scale of climate change on the one hand and its proportionately insufficient coverage in the ‘corporate’ news on the other, progressive distrust once again demonstrates its more empirical and pragmatic nature. This assessment is further—albeit indirectly—supported by media research which has verified progressive claims about the influence of the media’s business models and interests on climate reporting by pointing to, among others, advertising by car manufacturers as a reason behind the commercial media’s inadequate and insufficient coverage of climate change (Blasco and Sobbrío 2012; Ellman and Germano 2009; Germano and Meier 2013; see also 3.3.2.).

4.2.10. No atmosphere of seriousness for climate change

The final theme that characterized progressive criticism of the mainstream media climate coverage focused on its perceived ‘tabloidization’ and politicization.

According to those on the left, the leading news outlets, being owned almost exclusively by “major corporations and faceless investors,” were governed by “marketing strategy” rather than “news judgment.” This, as *Mother Jones*’ Ross Gelbspan explained, frequently led to the replacement of climate reporting with sensationalist celebrity coverage (Gelbspan 2005). As an example of this practice served Reuters and its decision to not address the American Clean Energy and Security Act—perceived by progressives as “the most important piece of environmental legislation ever”—upon its approval by the House of Representatives,

but instead focus on the deaths of Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett a day earlier (Harkinson 2009). Years later, left-wing voices similarly claimed that by “[spending] too much time talking about [President Trump’s] magic marker” and his controversial comments about extreme weather, the media deflected away from discussing “the critical issue of climate crisis” and failed to actually hold Trump accountable for his climate inaction (*Democracy Now!* 2019c). The left further rebuked the mainstream media for “seldom [giving] us the scale of the news or a real sense of the proportional importance of one thing compared to another.” This, progressives argued, often allowed “a minor controversy or celebrity (...) [to] loom bigger than the planet.” The *New York Times* was among the recipients of this criticism after it had devoted a nearly equal amount of coverage to both a newly released IPCC report and the last episode of the popular television series *Breaking Bad* (Solnit 2013). To the left, such a practice appeared reflective of a broader reporting pattern. According to *Mother Jones*’ Todd Gitlin, the mainstream media “seldom treated” the issue of climate change as an “urgent (...) existential threat” and instead “frequently covered [it] as a topic for special interests” (Gitlin 2013).

This connects directly to another “pitfall” perceived by progressives in mainstream climate reporting, namely the “narrow, horse race-style coverage” of climate legislation. Cited in a *Mother Jones* piece by Lisa Hymas (2019), numerous left-wing voices complained how the major television networks “superficial[ly] and narrowly focus[ed]” their coverage of the Green New Deal on “whether [the proposed legislation package] [would] cause intra-party fighting among Democrats or end up helping Republicans.” According to progressives, instead of focusing on the political aspects of the climate plan (“Is it gonna pass? Does Pelosi like it? What did Trump tweet about it?”), the mainstream media should have explored the actual policy ideas included in

the plan, discuss whether they offered “good approaches for fighting climate change,” and explain how the Deal might work. CNN and MSNBC faced particular criticism for not only treating the Green New Deal as a “political football,” but also entirely overlooking the issue of climate change in some of their segments on the proposed plan. With environmental coverage’s main focus being attention-catching problems and controversies, progressives also considered the media ineffective in helping the public understand the relationship between the environment and other issues, including climate change’s impact on everyday life (Ghorayshi 2012).

As progressives focused their criticism on the media’s reductionist coverage of climate change—which either lacked seriousness and thoroughness or narrowed climate change down to a political issue—and attributed the perceived failure to media’s corporate ownership and priorities as well as resulting reporting practices, their distrust of the established press once more proved to be of more empirical and pragmatic character.

4.3. Assessing the potential for the revival of trust

So far, this case study has detailed the distinctiveness of the reasons behind conservative and progressive distrust of the mainstream media and verified their ideological and pragmatic character, respectively. In order to further test the hypothesized asymmetrical nature of media distrust—specifically the assumption that conservative distrust is highly difficult to negotiate and remedy whereas progressive distrust is more negotiable and manageable—this analysis also identifies *positive* mentions of the mainstream media climate coverage in the collected data and scrutinizes the context in which they appeared. With positive remarks posing a challenge to mainstream media distrust by signaling approval and the possibility of

trust, examining how the remarks are introduced and received in the alternative outlets helps to determine the nature of distrust.

The case study reveals that positive or approving remarks heard on conservative Fox News were introduced almost exclusively by left-leaning discussants and in defense of the mainstream media against right-wing criticism. Furthermore, the remarks were either interrupted, disputed, or ignored by conservative interlocutors, even if doing so contradicted the existing research and evidence. This allowed the overall criticism of the mainstream media to prevail and signaled the great difficulty of negotiating conservative media distrust, which confirms Hypothesis 3a.

After conservatives had criticized the *New York Times* for not publishing the “Climategate” emails, the late liberal political commentator Alan Colmes explained the paper’s decision as he pointed out the fact that the leaks were “unsubstantiated,” “taking things out of context,” and “against decades of science.” This, however, was directly disputed by Fox News regular James Pinkerton who insisted that the circumstances mentioned by Colmes actually offered “[a]ll the better reason to publish [the emails]” (*Fox News Watch* 2010c). As conservatives had further alleged that the *Times*’ refusal to cover the climate emails proved the paper’s double standards vis-à-vis its reporting on then-candidate Trump’s numerous scandals, Fox News’ Howard Kurtz took an untypical stance and defended the *New York Times*. However, as soon as he had admitted that the *Times* had actually devoted a front page to the Climategate story, Kurtz immediately shifted focus to the “greater hypocrisy” and criticized the paper for not having paid taxes in 2014 (*The Kelly File* 2016). In another rare instance of conservative defense of the mainstream media, Pinkerton admitted that mainstream outlets such as CNN had not “overhype[d]” 2012 hurricane Sandy, since the storm had “actually lived up to its hype.” His remark, however, remained unacknowledged and

instead was directly followed by statements from Jon Scott who implied the existence of the media's "agenda" and their readiness to "trot out climate change as the reason behind the storm" and other extreme weather events. In response to Richard Grenell's complaint that "yet again there is a big hype about an oncoming storm," liberal Colmes observed that "[i]t wasn't the media," but New York Governor Andrew Cuomo who "was the one [to] actually [bring] this up." Colmes' remark, however, was subsequently rejected by Grenell with a disapproving "I mean come on" (*Fox News Watch* 2012). After Bob Beckel expressed his support for the mainstream coverage of the federal National Climate Assessment report and called the idea that the press "got together with Obama to fake global warming" as "absolutely ridiculous," Eric Bolling replied by characterizing the report itself as "agenda-driven and a total distortion of data," thereby also implying the dishonesty of its concurring media coverage. Despite the evidence to the contrary, Bolling also alluded to a shift in media narrative from "global warming" to "climate change" as suspicious. In response to Beckel's defense of the media, Kimberly Guilfoyle also implicated the mainstream outlets by claiming that the federal climate report they publicized was part of the "political agenda" and "the whole war on coal (...) and fossil fuel" and supposedly not backed by science and facts. When asked by Beckel whether she really believed that the scientists, the media, and others supportive of the report were "making this up," Guilfoyle answered affirmatively (*The Five* 2014b). Elsewhere, when supporting Charlie Rose and his reporting on the potential connection between polar vortex and global warming, Beckel was interrupted by Andrea Tantaros who immediately shifted focus to the supposed "global warming push" which she criticized as intended to control people's lives with the use of tax dollars (*The Five* 2014a). The defense of mainstream coverage of climate change and extreme weather was also disputed by Fox News' Bob Gutfeld who, claiming that "it's

[sic] been warmer and warmer before there were SUVs,” challenged the entire premise of anthropogenic global warming and thereby the rightness of its media coverage (*The Five* 2012).

The fate of positive mentions of mainstream climate change coverage in the progressive outlets was prominently different. Never directly disputed or rejected, the approving remarks focused primarily on the perceived improvements in the media’s ability to accurately and faithfully reflect reality of climate change. This indicates progressive distrust’s potential to be managed and remedied and thereby confirms Hypothesis 3b.

According to some voices featured in the progressive media, the amount of mainstream media attention to global warming had “gone on this dramatic curve upward” (*Democracy Now!* 2007b). They approvingly observed that “for the first time in a while the environmental story is big news. Climate change is big news, and that’s an overarching storyline for a lot of environmental issues” (*Democracy Now!* 2007a). As a result of progressives’ self-proclaimed readiness to “offer congratulations where it’s due,” mainstream magazines *National Geographic* and *Business Week* received recognition for “[stepping] out of line and [making] cover stories of global warming” (Engelhardt 2004). Other outlets that were met with similar praise for their coverage of climate change and extreme weather included *the San Francisco Chronicle*, Michigan Radio, *the New York Times*, *the Miami Herald*, and *PBS NewsHour* (*Democracy Now!* 2019b; Ghorayshi 2012; Hymas 2019). Described as providing “consistent reporting” on climate change, the Weather Channel also earned a positive mention after it had hired an on-air climate expert and began to include references to climate change in its weather reports (Gelbspan 2005). Reuters, the Associated Press,

and *The Guardian* were all recognized for each publishing more than a thousand stories on climate change in 2013 (*Democracy Now!* 2014). Showcasing “informative and constructive” coverage, the *Washington Post* received praise for its reporting on the Green New Deal after it had “dedicate[d] five consecutive days of editorials to substantive discussion of [the] comprehensive climate plan.” The progressive recognition for the increased amount of climate change coverage was also granted to the major Sunday morning political shows and prime-time cable television channels such as MSNBC whose Chris Hayes earned praise for hosting a special event with Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the Green New Deal’s main sponsors (Hymas 2019). Covering the Hurricane Sandy, *Bloomberg Businessweek* received a positive mention for its “apt headline” that read “It’s Global Warming Stupid” and by which the magazine not only established an explicit connection between the hurricane and the environmental crisis, but also proved that journalistic conventions such as balance could be “bent” and “reconsidered” (Gitlin 2013). After the *Washington Post* published a piece by George Will in which he attempted to undermine manmade climate change, some of paper’s journalists received left-wing praise for “[taking] the unprecedented step of criticizing their colleague’s column” and calling him out on presenting “misleading climate science information that conflicts with what scientists know” (Leber and Schulman 2017). The perceived improvement in the media’s application of journalistic norms was also registered on *Democracy Now!* where *The Nation*’s Mark Hertsgaard admitted that “false balance” in the media was “fading” (*Democracy Now!* 2019d).

Furthermore, the instances of ‘advice-giving’ expressed in progressive outlets signaled the continuous belief in the further improvement of mainstream media climate coverage, which suggests that progressive distrust is not final and further confirms

Hypothesis 3b. In her piece for *Mother Jones*, Lisa Hymas explicitly acknowledged the fact that the mainstream media “can do better” and advised them on how to improve their reporting. She wrote that

[the media] need to cover the Green New Deal and climate change more often, to provide a counterweight to the bunk coming from the right. And they should cover it not as a political story (...), but with substantive reporting and discussion about how to implement climate policies that are fair, effective, and commensurate with the enormous size of the problem (Hymas 2019).

Through its interview with Dr. Michael Mann of the Earth System Science Center at Pennsylvania State University, *Democracy Now!* also signaled the possibility of the improved mainstream media climate coverage. As explained by Dr. Mann, by providing broadcast meteorologists with “the tools and the training so that they can integrate climate change into their nightly discussions of weather,” the mainstream media could increase the visibility of the connection between extreme weather and climate change. After complimenting John Morales of NBC Miami for his “wonderful job in making those connections for his audiences,” Dr. Mann also advised other meteorologists to follow Morales’ example, and in doing so signaled that improved coverage was possible (*Democracy Now!* 2019b). Also on *Democracy Now!*, Mark Hertsgaard of *The Nation* acknowledged the fact that a number of major news sources had joined a global initiative organized by *The Nation* and *Columbia Journalism Review* aimed at “[improving] global coverage of the climate crisis.” Outlets including Bloomberg, CBS News, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *the Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *the Seattle Times*, and *the Philadelphia Inquirer* were now recognized as those attempting to “break the climate silence” and bring about a “fundamental transformation” in the media sector (*Democracy Now!* 2019d).

The negotiability of progressive distrust was also implied in statements that, at least partially, attributed the media's perceived shortcomings to outside pressure and intimidation. Some voices in the progressive outlets maintained that the mainstream media often did not point out the connection between climate change and extreme weather in order to avoid "attacks" and retaliation from those skeptical of climate change and opposed to climate action (*Democracy Now!* 2008). *Mother Jones'* Ross Gelbspan observed how, after it had suggested the existence of the said connection, one network was met with threats of "a withdrawal of oil and automotive advertising" (Gelbspan 2005). The mainstream coverage's inattentiveness to climate change was also linked to the media's apparent fear that examining the environmental crisis and the dangers it poses could be seen by some as "politicization" and as such have a polarizing effect on the audiences (*Democracy Now!* 2019c). On *Democracy Now!*, CNN's avoidance of "talking seriously about climate change," as the network's former employee explained, stemmed from the fear of offending "a huge portion of the country that really, really wants to ignore the science and deny that climate change is happening" and potentially "driving [them] to Fox [News]" (*Democracy Now!* 2014).

4.4. Conclusions

By examining the ways in which selected alternative news outlets responded to mainstream media coverage of climate change, this case study has verified the asymmetrical nature of media distrust among conservatives and progressives in the United States, thereby confirming Hypothesis 1.

The analysis has shown that media distrust on the right, being rooted in and shaped by the broader ideology-tied adversarial stance on the reality of climate change, is of ideological character. The ideologizing perception of climate change as

a liberal issue—rather than a scientific, objective fact—led those on the right to criticize mainstream climate coverage as biased against conservatives and Republicans and favorable toward liberals and Democrats. Opposed to the science of anthropogenic climate change, conservatives found mainstream climate coverage, even when reflective of research and evidence, as one-sided and activist. As they considered the environmental crisis to be a lie propagated by scientists to receive research funds; exploited by Democrats to gain power and realize their political goals; and used by the left to curb the presence and influence of organized religion, those on the right condemned mainstream climate reporting, even when factually accurate, as dishonest and deceptive. As such, rooted in and motivated by conservatives' ontological security-preserving opposition to the reality of climate change, right-wing criticism of mainstream climate coverage has proven nearly immune to reconsideration, even when challenged by facts. Consequently, conservative distrust of mainstream media proves to be very difficult to negotiate and remedy, which confirms Hypothesis 3a.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, progressive distrust of the mainstream media visibly stems from the left's dissatisfaction with the media's performative failure to faithfully capture and reflect upon the known reality of climate change. Progressives repeatedly criticized the mainstream media's overcommitment to the journalistic norm of balance for falsely equating climate scientists with—mainly nonexpert—contrarians and, consequently, misrepresenting the reality of climate research and the environmental crisis itself. They also repeatedly targeted mainstream journalism's failure to follow the scientific evidence and clearly connect extreme weather with climate change, which they attributed to media's corporate ownership as well as related interests and influences. The conglomeration of the overwhelmingly corporate mainstream media as well as their for-profit nature were also considered at

fault for both the insufficient amount of serious reporting on climate change as well as the coverage's politicization and tabloidization. The premises on which progressive distrust rests are not ideology-exclusive and, finding empirical validation and support in available research and evidence, extend beyond left-wing affiliation. This observation indicates the pragmatic nature of left-wing distrust and thereby confirms Hypothesis 2. Given this pragmatism, progressive criticism of the mainstream media has proven both open and receptive to major outlets' reporting improvements or their possibility. The mainstream media were either acknowledged for or advised on the increased attention to and more substantive coverage of climate change as well as the more frequent mentions of the connection between extreme weather and climate change. Progressive criticism has also proven somewhat flexible by shifting, at least partially, the blame for the media's performative failures to outside forces and actors. As such, progressive distrust of the mainstream media seems negotiable and manageable, which presents recovery potential and thus confirms Hypothesis 3b.

In order to test the hypotheses proposed in this work even further, the next chapter presents the findings of another case study.

CHAPTER V

Ever asymmetrical distrust? A case study of conservative and progressive responses to the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic

The previous chapter confirmed the hypotheses put forward in this work by demonstrating the ideological and pragmatic nature of conservative and progressive distrust of the mainstream media, respectively. In order to further test the proposed postulates, this chapter presents the findings of another case study that analyzed the ways in which selected progressive and conservative alternative news outlets responded to mainstream media coverage of, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is similarly intended to provide a more detailed illustration and deepen the analysis of disparate qualities of media distrust among progressive and conservative Americans. Although it reveals some caveats, the study generally confirms this work's hypotheses.

5.1. Methodology and results

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, serves as the focus of this case study due to its status as a global event of the utmost urgency and grave seriousness. While the two qualities are also shared by the subject of the other case study, the pandemic differs from climate change in its novelty as well as the more pronounced immediacy of its threat and disruption to everyday life. With COVID-19 global death toll at 3,941,411 and the American lives lost numbering 599,089—the highest in the world—upon the finalization of this case study at the end of June 2021 (Pan American Health Organization 2021), the undeniable gravity of the coronavirus pandemic makes its mainstream news coverage and its reception among Americans important, if not necessary, a subject of this case study.

The alternative news outlets chosen for this study as well as the rationale for their selection remain the same as in the previous chapter (see p. 84 for details). Conservative media are represented by Fox News and progressive outlets by *Democracy Now!* and *Mother Jones*. The time frame of the period of analysis was set between 01.02.2020 and 31.08.2020 to capture the most critical and decisive period of the pandemic. The news transcripts from Fox News were accessed through the *Nexis Uni* database. The search with keywords *mainstream media* and *coronavirus* within the mentioned time frame rendered 151 results, with *mainstream media* and *COVID* 129 results, and with *mainstream media* and *pandemic* 134 results, although the last search entirely overlapped with the results from the first two. After manually scanning all the results, only those that offered the assessment of mainstream media's coverage of the pandemic were selected for analysis. Accounting for the duplicative results, the final number of Fox News transcripts included in this case study is 73. Interestingly, this amount is the same as the final number of results analyzed in the climate change study, despite the much longer time frame of the latter, which demonstrates the higher frequency of conservative attention to the mainstream news coverage of the pandemic than climate change. This could be attributed not only to the more pronounced immediacy of the pandemic vis-à-vis climate change, but also the fact that the pandemic occurred the same year that former President Donald Trump sought reelection and his performance throughout the crisis became one of the measures with which to evaluate his leadership. The detailed selection of the news transcripts is illustrated in the following table

Table 2 The selection of Fox News programs included in the COVID-19 pandemic case study

Name of the Program	Number of Results Included in the Study
<i>Hannity</i>	15
<i>Ingraham Angle</i>	10
<i>The Five</i>	9
<i>Fox News @ Night</i>	9
<i>Media Buzz</i>	9
<i>Tucker Carlson Tonight</i>	4
<i>Watters World</i>	4
<i>Justice with Judge Pirro</i>	4
<i>Life, Liberty, Levin</i>	2
<i>The Greg Gutfeld Show</i>	2
<i>The Story with Martha MacCallum</i>	1
<i>The Next Revolution</i>	1
<i>Your World with Neil Cavuto</i>	1
<i>Special Report with Bret Baier</i>	1
<i>Fox and Friends</i>	1
Altogether	73

The articles from *Mother Jones* and the news transcripts from *Democracy Now!* were once again accessed through the archives available on the outlets' respective websites, as neither of the two news sources was included in the *Nexis Uni* database.

The search for *Mother Jones* with keywords *mainstream media* and *coronavirus* within the mentioned time frame rendered 24 results, with *mainstream media* and *COVID* 11 results, and with *mainstream media* and *pandemic* 16 results. In the case of *Democracy Now!*, the search with keywords *mainstream media* and *coronavirus* rendered 7 results, for *mainstream media* and *COVID* 4 results, and for *mainstream media* and *pandemic* 7 results. After manually selecting only those items that offered the assessment of mainstream media's coverage of the pandemic as well as accounting for the duplicative results, the final number of items included in this case study was 3 for *Mother Jones* and 2 for *Democracy Now!*.

All the results were subsequently grouped into dominant themes and analyzed in detail.

5.2. Findings

Part I: Conservatives

5.2.1. The liberal anti-Trump media

Between February and August 2020, conservative criticism of the mainstream news media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic was dominated by the perception of the anti-Trump bias as well as the familiar liberal bias.

According to right-wing voices, "the media mob" failed to acknowledge Trump's "seriousness" (*Fox News @ Night* 2020e) about the coronavirus outbreak as well as his administration's "unprecedented" (*Hannity* 2020n) and "aggressive" (*Hannity* 2020b) response. It did not give him "fair coverage," or credit for "ventilators, (...) flattening the curve" (*The Five* 2020f), "building those hospitals for New York" (*Hannity* 2020n), sending the Navy ships and medical supplies in "record time" (*Hannity* 2020e),

and his “bold action” to temporarily suspend immigration for individuals seeking green cards (*Hannity* 2020n). The “left-wing” media did neither recognize the Trump administration’s success regarding the availability of coronavirus testing and its subsequent “surge” (*Hannity* 2020c; *Media Buzz* 2020c), nor did they give the then-President credit (*Hannity* 2020f), “he deserve[d]” (*Hannity* 2020o), for his decision to impose travel restrictions on China. The lack of admission that the “travel ban was great” (*Hannity* 2020f) and a “right step” (*Media Buzz* 2020g) that “saved a lot of lives” (*Hannity* 2020a) prompted conservatives to not only conclude that “Trump can do nothing right,” but also accuse the mainstream news outlets of intellectual dishonesty, “disservice,” and “irreparable damage” (*Hannity* 2020o). The media apparently refused to “find a single good thing to say” about Trump’s “[b]iggest medical mobilization ever” because of their “hatred” of the President and their “goal” to “destroy” and “[tear] him down” (*Hannity* 2020a, 2020n, 2020o). As explained by Fox News contributor and former White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders during an interview on *Hannity*:

[n]o matter how great of a job Donald Trump does, no matter how many lives he saves, no matter how many livelihoods he protects, it will never be enough for the mainstream liberal media. They really want to do nothing but destroy him (*Hannity* 2020n).

In the eyes of conservatives, by critically evaluating the President’s handling of the pandemic, “the very left-leaning media” were playing “the stupid blame game” against the Trump administration (*Hannity* 2020d; *Media Buzz* 2020i). The press “used” and “politicized” the health crisis to “bludgeon” the President when it observed that the government was ill-prepared and slow to respond to the coronavirus outbreak and that Trump lacked the credibility to lead as he “[struggled] to accept the reality of the situation” (*Hannity* 2020d, 2020i, 2020e; *Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020d; *Media Buzz* 2020i). The *New York Times* “weaponized” the virus when it published its

“reckless, (...) irresponsible, (...) dangerous,” “unhinged,” and “easily the stupidest” an opinion piece headlined “Let’s Call it Trumpvirus” about the White House’s incompetence in the face of the outbreak (*Hannity* 2020d, 2020i, 2020c, 2020e). Such criticism of the administration’s response to the pandemic was unjust, conservatives argued, after the media had themselves “distracted” the President from the health crisis by “piling” on him throughout the “hoax impeachment” and “[making] him worry about his own historic legacy” (*Hannity* 2020f). Despite that, the press continued to “obsess” over Trump’s refusal to wear a mask (*Media Buzz* 2020c) and “hammer [the President]” without ever “[giving him] a break” following his public handshake that violated social distancing measures (*Fox News @ Night* 2020f). Similar conservative accusations of the “constant pounding” of the President followed NBC’s Chuck Todd’s critical comments about Trump’s persistent denials, dismissals, and distractions about the pandemic (*Media Buzz* 2020h). As part of its anti-Trump “smear campaign,” right-wing voices maintained, the “left-wing” press also “bludgeoned,” “blasted,” and “brutalized” the President for the travel restrictions he had imposed on China (*Hannity* 2020f, 2020n, 2020o; *Ingraham Angle* 2020j). Outlets including “fake news CNN” and the *New York Times* faced conservative criticism for calling Trump and his actions “racist” and “xenophobic” and stating that his decision risked stigmatizing people of Asian descent (*Fox and Friends* 2020; *Hannity* 2020i, 2020c, 2020e, 2020n; *Ingraham Angle* 2020j). Following Trump’s subsequent mid-pandemic decision to suspend funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), the mainstream press similarly “spewed” and “imploded” over the move instead of investigating, what conservatives perceived to be, the needlessness of the American support for the “abysmal inept” organization “notorious for abuse” (*The Five* 2020e; *The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020b). Right-wing voices maintained that the media’s “[refusal] to see that [through his

decision] Trump [was] just initiating a process” aimed at “forcing [the WHO] to do a better job” was caused by their apparent tendency to immediately like what the President disliked and dislike what he liked (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020b).

The mainstream press’ hostility toward the President also involved “lies, conspiracy theories, [and] the psychotic anti-Trump rage” that conservatives perceived in the “despicable,” “political,” and “hoax” news coverage that referred to the pandemic as “Trump’s Katrina” and “Trump’s Chernobyl” and compared it to the challenge once posed to President Jimmy Carter by the Iran hostage crisis (*Hannity* 2020i, 2020c, 2020h). Further anti-Trump lies included the media’s “mantra” of “the disaster on testing” (*The Next Revolution* 2020), claims that the President called coronavirus a hoax (*Media Buzz* 2020i), and implications that the children of Trump supporters might pose increased risk of coronavirus transmission to their schoolmates, given their parents’ behavior and faith in the President over facts and science (*Hannity* 2020i).

As the further examples of the media’s perceived anti-Trump bias conservatives also considered the willingness among some of the MSNBC and CNN “liberal pundits” to abandon live coverage of the White House Coronavirus Task Force briefings and instead air only the most relevant fragments. Although the journalists explained that the move had been motivated by Trump’s troubled relationship with truth and facts (*Hannity* 2020h; *Media Buzz* 2020g), conservative columnist Gayle Trotter instead attributed the decision to the media’s perceived desire to provide “continued hostile commentary” about the then-President (*Media Buzz* 2020g). Citing conservative Media Research Center’s NewsBusters project, Sean Hannity also implied the media’s hostility toward Trump by criticizing the “fake news” CNN for skipping seven hours of White House briefings in two weeks (*Hannity* 2020m). When they did report on Trump’s briefings, including their tendency to offer an excessively optimistic picture of

available COVID-19 testing and therapy as well as downplay the severity of the pandemic in the US, the mainstream media apparently “denigrated” the President and his attempts to “communicate factual information about the virus” (*Watters World* 2020a). As they covered the administration’s efforts to discredit Dr. Anthony S. Fauci—the nation’s top public health expert and a leading member of the coronavirus taskforce—the media faced conservative criticism for “[obsessing] over the supposed infighting” (*Ingraham Angle* 2020j) and “trying to build up this Fauci versus Trump kind of situation” (*Fox News @ Night* 2020d). As argued by Susan Ferrechio of conservative the *Washington Examiner*, the press “pitted” the then-President against Dr. Fauci and “openly rooted” for the latter in order to hurt Trump’s November 2020 reelection chances (*Media Buzz* 2020e).

Right-wing critics also found the “far left fake news media” (*Fox News @ Night* 2020b; *Media Buzz* 2020b) guilty of anti-Trump double standards, “sick” and “pathetic hypocrisy,” and “COVID-shaming,” as their coverage “ripped” the then-President for holding rallies during the pandemic and endangering his supporters, but at the same time “rarely raised the virus risk” of the nationwide protests over police racism and brutality. As conservatives explained, the press had “no COVID problems with” the mass demonstrations “because [it] mostly supported the cause” (*Fox News @ Night* 2020b; *Hannity* 2020k; *Media Buzz* 2020d, 2020b; *The Five* 2020c). On the other hand, the news “hysteria” (*Fox News @ Night* 2020i) over Trump rallies was caused not only by the mainstream media’s apparent “personal animus” to conservative criticism of the coverage’s “manipulation and lies” voiced during the rallies (*The Five* 2020c), but also their alleged determination to “scare” a lot of Trump supporters from attending those events. In fact, conservative voices implied, weeks of “scary

headlines” in the mainstream press did lead to a lower turnout during one of Trump rallies (*Media Buzz* 2020b).

The right-wing voices further condemned the media for “[trying] to pin the COVID-19 death toll” on the President (*The Five* 2020a) with their “childish” and “stupid” coverage that associated the increase in US coronavirus infections and deaths with the administration’s denials of the pandemic’s severity, attacks on international health organizations, and the overall lack of preparedness (*Hannity* 2020i; *Ingraham Angle* 2020c). To those on the right, the news outlets including CNN, MSNBC, and the *Boston Globe* waged political attacks against the President by reporting on his administration’s “incompetence,” “inaptitude,” and the “lack of leadership” and proclaiming that Trump “[had] blood on his hands” (*Hannity* 2020n, 2020e; *The Five* 2020b, 2020j). *New York* magazine’s Olivia Nuzzi received a label of a “moron” following her “hostile,” “absurd,” “stupid” and “ridiculous gotcha question” in which she asked the President about his reelection and if he deserved it given the rapidly increasing number of coronavirus deaths in the US and the fact it had surpassed the death toll of the Vietnam War in only six weeks (*The Five* 2020a). Fox News’ Sara Carter further condemned the “Trump-hating media” for indicating that those who “[follow] [the president] closely” might have considered drinking Clorox bleach as an effective treatment against the coronavirus (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e). While the President might have never mentioned Clorox by name, he did suggest that injecting disinfectants could treat COVID-19, prompting the manufacturers of household cleaning supplies, including Clorox and Lysol, to issue official statements urging against the ingestion or injection of their products (Evon 2020). Nevertheless, Carter went on to accuse the media of “[twisting] [Trump’s] words whenever they can” (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e). According to Fox News’ Mollie Hemingway, the press also

misunderstood and misrepresented Trump's words when he referred to the then 1.5 million coronavirus infections in the US—the highest in the world—as a “badge of honor.” The media's subsequent criticism of the President's words was unfair, Hemingway implied, since “it was pretty clear to understand” that by celebrating the high number of infections Trump actually meant to emphasize America's apparently better testing capacity (*Media Buzz* 2020c).

As repeatedly argued by conservative voices, the mainstream media's perceived hostility toward the then-President also included their “bizarre assault on” (*Ingraham Angle* 2020j), a “passionate fight,” and “vitriol” against hydroxychloroquine—a drug frequently touted by Trump as an effective treatment for COVID-19. According to right-wing voices, the leading news outlets (together with “many academics”) became political in “trying to malign” the use of hydroxychloroquine (*Ingraham Angle* 2020g). They neither reported on the drug's “positive effects” nor did they “want any good news” and “anything discussed about” it (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e; *Media Buzz* 2020a). After the President had announced he was taking hydroxychloroquine as a preventive measure, Sean Hannity described the mainstream media as “[p]redictably (...) hyperventilating” over the decision and accused them of “waging [an] unhinged, nonstop, never-ending PR campaign against [Trump].” He further criticized the media for “[calling Trump] reckless and irresponsible” and allegedly casting the President's “hope and optimism about the drug” as “some type of mortal sin” (*Hannity* 2020j). Fox News' Howard Kurtz complained that the press had hardly ever covered Trump's decision to take hydroxychloroquine as “a really good idea” and instead treated it as “[defiance of] a scientific consensus.” A fellow Fox News reporter Mollie Hemingway considered the media's “enormous criticism” of the President's decision “very weird” given their usual

insistence on the confidentiality of the patient-doctor decision making, as in the case of abortion (*Media Buzz* 2020c). As conservatives explained, the reason why the mainstream press “immediately discounted” hydroxychloroquine as well as any other “bit of good news or treatment” (including Trump’s claims that “sunlight” and “summer heat” could cure the coronavirus) was its “gut reaction” to “instinctively disagree” with anything Trump said or endorsed (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e; *Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020c; *Media Buzz* 2020a), rather than the lack of scientific evidence. On his Fox News show, Greg Gutfeld also labeled MSNBC’s Mika Brzezinski as “stupid” and “half an idiot” for her “idiotic premise” that the President’s push for hydroxychloroquine might have been motivated by his investment in the drug’s manufacturing. After similar criticism had targeted CNN’s Jim Acosta, Fox News contributor Katherine Timpf confirmed Trump’s financial interests in a company producing the drug, but quickly downplayed them as “likely less than \$1,000.00” and criticized the *New York Times*’ article on the matter for “[treating] [the subject] as a bombshell” (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020a).¹¹ Given such “nasty, divisive, anti-Trump madness and hysteria,” Sean Hannity—one of Fox News’ most-watched hosts—condemned the media for “purposefully [distorting], [lying], [misinforming],” and “weaponizing” the pandemic to “attack” the President (*Hannity* 2020h) and “make him into a villain” (*Hannity* 2020n). Asserting that “any president (...) would find great difficulty in dealing with a pandemic of this magnitude,” conservative voices claimed that the media could not be taken

¹¹ The right-wing criticism of the mainstream coverage of hydroxychloroquine extended beyond the allegations of the anti-Trump bias. In response to news reports citing experts and observing that hydroxychloroquine does not work against COVID-19 and can actually cause dangerous side effects, conservatives accused the “partisan and stupid” media of not only spreading “wrong information” and “misinformation,” but also embracing a “Middle Age’s position on science” aimed at “suppressing free inquiry” and risking “health consequences” for the American people (*Media Buzz* 2020c; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020c).

seriously in their assessments of Trump's handling of the health crisis since they "[portrayed] everything [he] [did] as evil" (*Media Buzz* 2020h).

The perception of the anti-Trump bias in the mainstream media pandemic coverage stems from and thus should be understood in the context of conservatives' broader and generally erroneous view of the reality of former President Trump's response to and performance throughout the health crisis. Contradicting the vast majority of expert opinion that the administration mismanaged the pandemic and failed to contain the virus (Li 2020), conservatives praised Trump's White House for its "unprecedented aggressive action to slow the disease (...) save lives and prevent Americans from contracting the disease" (*Hannity* 2020c). Although the Trump administration never developed a comprehensive plan to fight the pandemic (Kristof 2020)—with a notable exception of the Operation Warp Speed aimed at facilitating the swift development of COVID-19 vaccines¹²—right-wing voices celebrated its response as "the largest and fastest medical mobilization in the history of the world" (*Hannity* 2020a). Despite the slow federal reaction and lack of management, marked by ignored official warnings (Li 2020) and testing failures (Keith 2020; Yen 2020), conservatives claimed that the US "rose to the occasion" due to the leadership of the President and his administration (*Hannity* 2020o). They credited Trump not only with taking "one bold action after another to protect American lives," but also providing the states with critical

¹² Then-President Donald Trump officially announced Operation Warp Speed (OWS) on May 15, 2020. The public-private partnership, through a number of billion-dollar grants, helped to fund the development of most of the ultimately approved COVID-19 vaccines (with the exception of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine) (Operation Warp Speed n.d.). Although the Operation was the Trump administration's big success in the otherwise much-criticized pandemic response, Republicans paradoxically did not appear to share the enthusiasm about the research achievements. In mid-April of 2021, "both willingness to receive a vaccine and actual vaccination rates (...) were lower, on average, in counties where a majority of residents [had] voted to re-elect (...) Donald J. Trump in 2020" (Ivory, Leatherby, and Gebeloff 2021). As stated by Dr. Fauci around the same time, vaccine hesitancy among Republicans was "working against" the efforts to lift pandemic restrictions (Luscombe 2021).

resources “in a big way” (*Hannity* 2020n), even as medical staff across the country had to improvise personal protective equipment (PPE) from snorkel masks, pool noodles, and trash bags (Ankel 2020) and plead for PPE supplies on social media (Padilla 2020). Even after the President himself had been diagnosed with the novel coronavirus, one of his supporters explained that “Trump’s willing to accept that risk to win for the American people” (unlike Trump’s then-presidential opponent Joe Biden who was “sitting in his basement”) (Khazan 2020). The percentage of Republicans who considered Trump to be doing an excellent or good job responding to the virus outbreak reached 73 percent at the beginning of August 2020 (Gramlich 2020) and 82 percent in November 2020 (Bycoffe, Groskopf, and Mehta 2020). According to some of the participants of the 2020 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the criticism of the President’s handling of the pandemic was really part of Democrats’ “next game” to “politicize” the crisis and hurt Trump’s reelection chances (*Hannity* 2020d).

In their widespread support of the President, conservatives repeatedly praised his move to restrict travel from China as “pretty amazing” (*Hannity* 2020a) and “the single best decision” (*Hannity* 2020c). They often emphasized the effectiveness of Trump’s “China travel ban” by claiming that it had saved American lives in the number they laxly defined as “incalculable,” “a lot” (*Hannity* 2020a), or “2.2 million” (*Fox and Friends* 2020; *Hannity* 2020f). This enthusiasm, however, has not been shared by public health experts who have stated that the scientific evidence is lacking to make such a determination (Braun, Yen, and Woodward 2020; Farley 2020; Robertson 2020). Moreover, papers published in *Science* (Chinazzi et al. 2020) and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (Wells et al. 2020), to name a few, have found only modest effects of such travel restrictions on the epidemic trajectory.

Individuals exposed to the novel coronavirus were likely to have already been traveling internationally undetected before Trump’s “ban” took effect on February 2, 2020 (Chinazzi et al. 2020), which has cast doubt on restrictions’ limited focus on China. This is best exemplified by the fact that many early cases in New York State, the early epicenter of the pandemic in the US, have been traced back to Italy (Travel from Europe was not limited until March 13, 2020, when major outbreaks there had already been underway.) (Davis 2020; Robertson 2020). The effectiveness of the “China travel ban” has been further challenged by a number of exemptions that allowed more than 8,000 Chinese and foreign nationals and 27,000 Americans returning from mainland China to enter the US up to three months after the restrictions had been put in place (Braun, Yen, and Woodward 2020). Although required to undergo screenings, many of the infected travelers might have gone undetected if they did not yet exhibit COVID-19 symptoms upon their arrival to the US, American scientists have said (Wells et al. 2020). To make matters worse, the US officials lost track of more than 1,600 of the travelers supposed to be monitored for virus exposure (Braun, Yen, and Woodward 2020).¹³

Many prominent conservatives also continued to agree with President Trump’s persistent refusal to wear a mask, even after the early uncertainty about facial coverings’ effectiveness against the novel virus had been dispelled by scientific studies (Chu et al. 2020; Hou et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2020; Prather, Wang, and Schooley 2020; Stutt et al. 2020; Ueki et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020). As once explained by Fox News’ Molly Hemmingway, “left” criticism of Trump’s decision to not wear a mask was not a matter of science as much as it was “a proxy for a bigger

¹³ In addition to being “a less-than-effective tool for controlling the spread of the coronavirus” (Davis 2020), the travel restrictions on China have also been contested due to their potential to not only stigmatize people of Asian descent but also antagonize the Chinese leadership and thereby undercut international efforts to fight the outbreak (Ollstein 2020).

debate” about politically contested issues such as the reopening of the economy (*Media Buzz 2020c*). According to the channel’s Laura Ingraham, the evidence proving “the effectiveness of universal masking of healthy people in the community to prevent infection with respiratory viruses, including COVID-19” did not even exist.¹⁴ The Fox News host further undermined the justification for universal mask-wearing when she falsely claimed that those infected with coronavirus rarely “shed detectable virus in respiratory droplets or aerosols” (*Ingraham Angle 2020i*). Also on Ingraham’s show, free-market policy analyst and advocate Phil Kerpen similarly argued that the majority of Americans would not benefit from the regular mask-wearing. Although he did recognize masks’ effectiveness, he misleadingly claimed that only the minority “trained” in mask-wearing and in possession of “real medical masks” could effectively protect themselves and others against the coronavirus (*Ingraham Angle 2020b*). While research in both medicine and economic policy has concluded that nationally mandating face masks could have prevented hundreds of thousands of deaths from COVID-19 in the US (Chernozhukov, Kasahara, and Schrimpf 2020; Reiner et al. 2020), many conservatives considered such measures as “restrictions on freedoms” (*Ingraham Angle 2020i*) and cited “the freedom to not wear a mask” as one of the reasons for their approval of Trump’s pandemic performance (Khazan 2020).

The freedom to not wear a mask was often exercised during Trump campaign rallies held amid the pandemic in the lead-up to the November 2020 presidential election. This, along with the lack of social distancing (sometimes due to the Trump

¹⁴ This statement is inaccurate in two ways. Firstly, by the time Ingraham made this statement, the effectiveness of masks in reducing the spread of the novel coronavirus had already been scientifically proven. Secondly, the name “COVID-19” does not stand for a virus, as stated by Ingraham, but a disease (coronavirus disease 2019) caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) (Coronavirus disease 2019 n.d.).

campaign itself¹⁵), constituted “a severe public health threat,” health officials warned (Suderman 2020). According to researchers from Stanford University’s Department of Economics, “[t]he communities in which Trump rallies took place paid a high price in terms of disease and death,” with more than 30,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 700 deaths traced back to 18 of Trump rallies (Bernheim et al. 2020). On the other hand, the nationwide mass demonstrations against systemic racism and police brutality—often mentioned by the Trump campaign as both the justification for the President’s rallies (Suderman 2020) and a proof of hypocrisy and double standards in the “left” media coverage—have not contributed to the significant increase in coronavirus cases, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research (Dave et al. 2020).¹⁶

Despite the lack of supporting scientific evidence (Meyerowitz et al. 2020; Yazdany and Kim 2020), many prominent conservatives also joined then-President Trump in celebrating the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19. They continued to do so even after the President’s repeated praise for the drug had proven to have tragic consequences.¹⁷ After the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had cautioned against the use of hydroxychloroquine for COVID-19 outside of the hospital setting or a clinical trial “due to risk of heart rhythm problems” (FDA 2020), Laura Ingraham expressed her “surprise” about the FDA’s

¹⁵ Before the June 20, 2020 rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Trump campaign ordered the removal of stickers intended to promote social distancing from the seats around the venue (Partlow and Dawsey 2020).

¹⁶ This difference stems from the fact that not only did all of the protests take place outdoors, but also that the participants wore masks and spent most of their time in motion (thereby creating mobile rather than stationary a crowd), all of which decreases the risk of virus transmission (Beer 2020; Jha 2020).

¹⁷ In March 2020, directly prompted by President Trump’s repeated mentions of hydroxychloroquine as effective in the fight against COVID-19 during his White House briefings, an Arizona couple ingested the aquarium cleaner that contained chloroquine and that they mistakenly assumed was the same “stuff they’re talking about on TV.” The form of chloroquine the couple consumed, however, was poisonous and not the same as the one found in the drug touted by the then-President. After having been rushed to the hospital, the man died and the woman was placed under critical care (Shepherd 2020; Vigdor 2020).

“dismissiveness” of the drug and doubted if the agency really had “the facts” on the matter. Her guests further contradicted the FDA and undermined its authority as they pronounced the agency’s recommendations about the restricted use of hydroxychloroquine as “really schizophrenic” (*Ingraham Angle 2020e*). Some months later, during which time the FDA revoked the emergency use authorization for hydroxychloroquine based on its review of the scientific evidence, Ingraham continued to call the FDA warning “complete bunk” and “a mistake” and suggested that the Trump administration rescind it. With her guests arguing that the evidence cautioning against the use of hydroxychloroquine was “not true at all” and part of the “propaganda war against the medical facts” (*Ingraham Angle 2020c*), Ingraham also cast decisions made by the authorities around the country to restrict the distribution of the drug as inspired by “the leftist media,” rather than science (*Ingraham Angle 2020f*).

With the seemingly unconditional support of “their” President in the face of the increasing public disapproval, the overwhelming majority of those on the right continued to praise Trump’s response to and behavior during the pandemic even as the reality of the situation was pointing to the contrary and the growing number of public health officials and experts were criticizing the administration’s mishandling of the crisis. Conservative response was also marked with anti-intellectual and anti-expertise tinge and determination to protect ideologically cherished individual rights and freedoms from their perceived violation by recommended coronavirus measures. It is this contrarian perspective and its embrace among conservatives that explains why so many on the right perceived the news coverage reflective and critical of the administration’s failures as unfairly biased against the President. As such, it is conservatives’ partisanship- and ideology-driven disagreement with the reality of

administration's performance during the pandemic that appears to be at the root of their perception and criticism of the mainstream media's anti-Trump bias.

5.2.2. Unfair media: biases and double standards

According to right-wing voices, President Trump was not the only target of the hostility of the mainstream media's pandemic coverage. "[O]bsessed with (...) destroying anyone around [Trump] in his administration" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e), the media "transferred" their hate of the President to the Coronavirus Response Coordinator Dr. Deborah Birx (*The Five* 2020a). They also "attacked" the "credentials" and "opinions" of Dr. Scott Atlas following his calls for the reopening of schools and resumption of college sports during the pandemic (*The Story with Martha MacCallum* 2020). A radiologist by training, Dr. Atlas was selected by Trump to serve as an advisor on COVID-19 despite his lack of expertise in public health and infectious diseases.¹⁸ Both CNN and MSNBC also encountered conservative backlash after they had criticized "Trump media allies," including Fox News, for their "irresponsible" defense of the President's persistent downplaying of the pandemic (*Media Buzz* 2020i). Citing the media reports correctly stating that he had called coronavirus a "hoax," Sean Hannity accused "the dishonest press" of "a complete and total lie," falsely claiming that "from

¹⁸ Dr. Scott Atlas is a senior fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution and he joined the Trump administration in August 2020 as an advisor on the White House Coronavirus Task Force. Throughout the pandemic, Dr. Atlas propagated misinformation about COVID-19, claiming that masks and social distancing were not effective in slowing the spread of the coronavirus (Abutaleb et al. 2020) and that children "[had] virtually zero risk of dying and a very, very low risk of any serious illness from this disease" (Sherman 2020). Contrary to expert advice, he also advocated against universal testing (Avlon, Warren, and Miller 2020) and pushed for establishing "herd immunity" and a faster reopening of schools and business (Cook 2020). Dr. Atlas' statements prompted the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Robert Redfield to state that "everything [Atlas] says is false" (McCarthy and Greve 2020) and more than 70 of his former colleagues at the Stanford Medical School to openly criticize him for his "falsehoods and misinterpretations of science." The Stanford University Faculty Senate followed with a resolution that condemned Atlas for his numerous statements and actions "[promoting] a view of COVID-19 that contradicts medical science" (Chesley 2020).

day one” his program “[had] taken this virus extremely seriously” (*Hannity* 2020h).¹⁹ Hannity also falsely alleged that the *New York Times*’ Ginia Bellafante had “willingly, maliciously, [and] purposefully” taken his words “completely out of context” and “accused [him] of murder” (*Hannity* 2020e). In her piece entitled “A Beloved Bar Owner Was Skeptical About the Virus. Then He Took a Cruise,” Bellafante tells a story of Joe Joyce who died from COVID-19 following his trip to Europe amid the pandemic. After quoting the deceased man’s daughter as saying “[my father] watched Fox, and believed [the virus] was under control,” Bellafante refers to Hannity’s “hoax” comment to contextualize the daughter’s words as well as reflect the channel’s overall tendency to downplay the severity of the pandemic (Bellafante 2020). However, according to Hannity and his guests, Bellafante “politicized” and “exploited a man’s tragic death” in order to “smear” and “vilify” the Fox News host and blame him for the man’s death, which amounted to a “slander” and “libel.” Conservative voices also alleged that Bellafante had “attempted to twist this story to make a cheap political point” and cast President Trump in negative light (*Hannity* 2020e), despite the fact that it was Joyce’s daughter who suggested that “[i]f Trump had gone on TV with a mask on and said, ‘Hey this is serious,’ I don’t think [my father] would have gone [on the trip]” (Bellafante 2020). Nevertheless, Hannity claimed that the media “hate all things Trump, all things conservative” and were interested only in “bludgeoning enemies,” including President Trump and his supporters. With Bellafante considered a “hack” and the *New York Times* characterized as a “disgraceful organization,” Hannity declared journalism to be “dead and buried” (*Hannity* 2020).

¹⁹ Sean Hannity called coronavirus a “hoax” during his Fox News show *Hannity* on March 9, 2020 (*Hannity* 2020i).

Right-wing voices further implied the media's anti-Republican and anti-conservative bias by accusing the press of hypocrisy and double standards in its pandemic coverage of Republican and Democratic politicians. Conservatives maintained that the "liberal media" proved their hypocrisy (*Media Buzz* 2020a) when they treated New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo "differently" than they did President Trump, with the former facing "a far less hostile mob in the media" (*Hannity* 2020n). Characterizing Cuomo as "the grandma killer" whose "policies got thousands of seniors [in New York nursing homes] killed," right-wing voices condemned the "leftist media" for "giving [the Governor] a pass" to "protect him from serious allegations or (...) investigation" while simultaneously "launching disgusting allegations against President Trump" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020h).²⁰ The media's "pounding" of Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis for his decision to not close the beaches vis-à-vis the lack of equally "critical coverage" of Governor Cuomo was likewise indicative of the media's "tremendous amount of bias and (...) inaccuracy" (*Fox News @ Night* 2020c, 2020a; *Fox Special Report with Bret Baier* 2020). In the eyes of conservatives, the media showed similar unfairness and "liberal

²⁰ On March 25, 2020, New York State's Department of Health issued a directive requiring New York's nursing homes to admit new or returning residents discharged from hospitals regardless of their COVID-19 status. The policy was dictated by "an urgent need to expand hospital capacity" (Khim 2020) and prevent the state's hospital system from becoming overwhelmed in the face of surging infection numbers. The directive, as observed by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo himself, followed the Trump administration's guidance (Condon, Peltz, and Mustian 2020), specifically the March 13, 2020 memorandum from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) stating that "[n]ursing homes should admit any individuals that they would normally admit to their facility, including individuals from hospitals where a case of COVID-19 was/is present" (Ruiz 2020). The state's directive was met with mixed reactions. On the one hand, the Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine (AMDA) declared that the order posed "a clear and present danger" to nursing home residents and that, in fact, it had contributed to more than 5,000 deaths. On the other hand, Northwell Health—New York State's largest healthcare provider—welcomed the policy saying that it helped some of its "overtaxed" hospitals to "relieve pressure" that had previously forced them to place some ICU patients in hallways. Furthermore, some nursing homes maintained that it was their staff rather than residents who might have made the bigger contribution to the rise in COVID-19 cases in their facilities (Condon, Peltz, and Mustian 2020). In the mainstream media, the state policy was described as "much criticized" (Khim 2020) and "controversial" (Condon, Peltz, and Mustian 2020). On May 10, 2020, Gov. Cuomo announced a new policy prohibiting hospitals from discharging COVID-19 positive persons to nursing homes, thereby effectively reversing the original directive (Ruiz 2020).

bias” in the context of the reopening efforts across the country which they “politicized” by “writing critically” about and “attacking” only the Republican governors but not the Democratic ones (*Fox News @ Night* 2020a; *Hannity* 2020l; *The Five* 2020f). As they “bludgeoned” and “skewered” Georgia’s Governor Brian Kemp but not his Colorado Democratic counterpart Jared Polis, the mainstream media proved to be not only “hopelessly and profoundly biased,” but also “richly deserving” of the “fake news” moniker (*Fox News @ Night* 2020a; *Hannity* 2020l).

Conservative claims of the mainstream media’s double standards and unfairness also repeatedly referenced the news coverage of the previous health crises that had occurred during the Obama-Biden presidency. Unlike in the face of the ongoing coronavirus crisis, conservatives maintained, the media “didn’t have the death count” during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, which showed the media’s “bias” and pro-Democratic “protection” (*Hannity* 2020g). Falsely claiming that “it took six months (...) and 1,000-plus deaths” until the Obama administration responded to the flu pandemic, Lara Trump criticized the press for overlooking Obama’s alleged failures and delays and as such declared mainstream news coverage of Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic to have “no credibility” (*Hannity* 2020c).²¹ Misleadingly implying that the insufficiency of PPE during the coronavirus crisis was the responsibility of the Obama-Biden administration who had “never even replenished the stocks,” Donald Trump Jr. criticized the media coverage for the “flagrant disregard”

²¹ In the face of the criticism of the Trump administration’s handling of the novel coronavirus, conservative voices—including President Trump, his administration’s officials and supporters, and Fox News—often drew comparisons to the actions of the Obama-Biden administration during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic. According to conservatives, whereas Trump’s response was “one of the best” and enjoyed “the highest on record” approval ratings, the response of the previous administration was “one of the worst on record” (Valverde 2020) and a “full scale disaster” (McDonald and Robertson 2020). Despite the fact that both administrations declared public health emergencies *before* the first reported deaths, conservatives falsely claimed that Obama had not made the decision until millions of Americans had been infected and over one thousand passed away (Fichera 2020).

of the previous administration's failure and accused the press of trying to put the blame for the equipment shortage on the Trump administration instead (*Life, Liberty, Levin* 2020a).²² Similarly, after Vice President Mike Pence was put in charge of the coronavirus response, the *New York Times* faced conservative criticism for "going after" his appointment, even though—as it was falsely claimed by a former Reagan administration official Jeffrey Lord—it had "never mentioned a word" about the appointment of then-Vice President Biden's Chief of Staff Ron Klain as the response coordinator during the 2014 Ebola crisis (*Hannity* 2020d).²³

Further alleging the mainstream press' bias and hostility towards them, right-wing voices repeatedly accused the "leftist" and "state-run" (*Hannity* 2020i, 2020o, 2020a) media of Democratic and liberal favoritism. Often with the use of original monikers such as "MSDNC" (*Hannity* 2020i, 2020o, 2020n), they branded the leading news outlets as the "allies" of the Democratic Party (*Hannity* 2020a) who "spin for Pelosi" (*Hannity* 2020n) and "[peddle] fanfiction [and] stories they know not to be true" but that "radical leftists want to read and (...) watch" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e). According to conservatives, news coverage that reported on the Trump administration's slow response, lack of leadership, and "chaos" in the face of the pandemic was "in sync" with the "left-wing narratives" and "almost impossible to tell (...) apart from the lefties" (*The Five* 2020h). It was the media's perceived "fusion" with the progressive movement and the Democratic Party that allegedly explained the

²² While it is true that the federal stockpile of N95 respirator masks was largely depleted and not replenished after the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the Trump administration did not restock the supplies either, as it had "ignored indications that the [Strategic National Stockpile] remained understocked and the country was ill-prepared for a pandemic in the years leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak" (Palma 2020).

²³ Although he claimed to have been "doing some research," Jeffrey Lord was mistaken to state during his *Hannity* interview that the *New York Times* had "never mentioned a word" about Ron Klain's appointment as the Ebola response coordinator. In fact, in her *New York Times* article published on the 18th of October, 2014, a day after Klain's appointment, Julie Hirschfeld Davis—citing congressional Republicans—wrote that Klain "[had] no record or expertise in Ebola specifically or public health in general" (Hirschfeld Davis 2014).

reluctance of outlets such as NBC, ABC, CNN, MSNBC, PBS, and NPR to challenge “the worst record about the virus” apparently held by New York’s Governor Cuomo (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020d). The media’s opposition to the premature reopening of schools as well as the lack of reporting on “coronavirus cases going down” were both caused, as conservatives explained, by the press’ “cheerleading” and support for Trump’s then-presidential opponent Joe Biden (*Life, Liberty, Levin* 2020a; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020e; *Watters World* 2020b). To right-wing critics, the news reports that remarked on the positive environmental effects of the coronavirus pandemic (such as the considerable decline in air and water pollution due to the global reduction in human activity) likewise constituted a disguised attempt by the “dumb people” in the mainstream media to “use coronavirus as (...) a cold, calculated political weapon to advance [the] radical agenda” of the “extreme Democratic socialist party,” including proposals such as the Green New Deal (*Hannity* 2020a).

At the root of the perception of the media’s anti-conservative bias and double standards lies the broader attitude toward the pandemic—often contradictory to official public health recommendations—embraced by many Republican politicians and voters. States with Republican governors were generally much slower than those led by Democrats to address the pandemic and impose restrictions on their residents (Brownstein 2020). Led by a Republican Governor Mike Parson, Missouri was among the states that had taken the fewest actions to restrict public gatherings and restaurant service and failed to order masks obligatory in public spaces (Brownstein 2020; McGreal 2020). Likewise, South Dakota’s Republican Governor Kristin Noem not only decided against a mask mandate and stay-at-home order, but also advertised her state as “the land of the free” in a commercial that aired on Fox News mid-pandemic

and encouraged people to visit the state (Barbaro 2020). Furthermore, although often cited as the exception among Republican states for imposing a mask mandate (Brownstein 2020), Ohio still allowed wedding receptions to take place indoors (Barbaro 2020) despite their high potential to become superspreading events (Kaplan 2020). Several Republican elected officials also actively encouraged people to frequent bars and restaurants at the time when federal public-health officials were urging Americans to stay home (Brownstein 2020; Padilla and Montague 2020). On the other hand, the majority of the states that responded to the pandemic the earliest and most dramatically were led by Democrats. The contrasting attitudes about the pandemic between the two parties forced a number of Democratic-run cities in the GOP-led states to try to locally impose their own rules and restrictions in the face of the statewide inaction (Brownstein 2020). The partisan divisions played out probably most strikingly in Michigan where Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer's efforts to close schools, restaurants, pubs, bars, and gyms were met with strong criticism from the Republican-controlled legislature. Critical voices included the accusations of the Governor's "contempt" as well as calls for her impeachment and for people to "rise up" against the restrictions (Barbaro 2020).

Although not made exclusively by Republican officials, the reopening efforts also displayed some partisan differences in the handling of the health crisis. In Colorado, the first Democratic-run state to reopen from a lockdown in late April 2020, Governor Jared Polis embraced a "slow and methodical," step-by-step reopening process that lasted throughout May and was characterized by the limitations on the reopening of businesses, the strict social distancing measures, the emphasis on mask-wearing, and the prohibition of gatherings over ten people. On the other hand, in Republican-led Utah and Arizona, businesses were allowed to reopen earlier than

Colorado and without the implementation of similar protective measures (Goldberg 2020).

Sentiments among the GOP officials were shared by their voters. Republicans consistently expressed much less concern about the virus than Democrats and were much less likely to adjust their behavior to the new reality. Much fewer Republicans than Democrats declared their readiness to avoid large gatherings, dining out, or traveling during the pandemic (Brownstein 2020). In the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, only 24 percent of Trump supporters considered the coronavirus outbreak as a “very important” voting issue, compared to 82 percent of Biden voters (Dunn 2020). The overwhelming majority of counties with the highest number of new coronavirus cases per capita around the time of the presidential election voted for Trump (Johnson, Fingerhut, and Deshpande 2020).

As such, it was the nonchalance about the pandemic embraced by so many Republican politicians and voters that led to their perception of the unfair bias and hostility against them in the news coverage critical of the indifference and lack of professionalism in the face of the crisis. With the effective response to the pandemic necessitating measures that conservatives perceived as a threat to their individual rights, freedoms, and economic well-being, it became ontologically secure to downplay the threat posed by the new reality. Moreover, with Republican attitudes strongly contrasted by Democrats who overwhelmingly acknowledged the severity of the crisis and officially complied with the pronouncements of public health officials and scientists, conservatives charged the news coverage reflective of those partisan divergencies with hypocrisy, double standards and bias. This illustrates how conservatives’ perception and allegations of the media’s anti-Republican and pro-

Democratic biases are rooted in and shaped by their own ideologically driven opposition to the reality of the pandemic.

5.2.3. Disconnected and hostile: the media against the American people

In addition to the pandemic coverage's antagonism towards conservatives and Republicans, right-wing critics also alleged the mainstream press' hostility towards the reopening efforts as well as disconnectedness from and disrespect towards working Americans.

According to conservatives, the media were “trying to create this backdrop” and “counterpoint” to the reopening efforts when they reported on the predictions made by the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Homeland Security (DHS) about an increase in coronavirus infections and deaths in the US (*Media Buzz* 2020f). Conservative voices claimed that the mainstream press had allegedly “[kept] on moving the goal post” in its coverage from mortality rates to hospital capacity to the number of cases (*The Five* 2020f) as it “[wanted] to keep everything shut down” (*Media Buzz* 2020a). Fox News' Greg Gutfeld doubted that the press would “tabulate,” “graph,” or “even identify” the “suffering from the shutdown” in the same way it had approached the subject of the virus. He also alleged that the mainstream coverage characterized those posing “adult questions” about “how to get the economy back” as “[wanting] people to die” (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020a). The channel's Laura Ingraham singled out the mainstream media for joining “the medical establishment” in “invoking science” in an apparent effort to silence those who questioned restrictions and lockdowns aimed at curbing the coronavirus (*Ingraham Angle* 2020g). She implied MSNBC's hostility toward the owners of temporarily shut-down nonessential businesses in Georgia after the channel's Al Sharpton had questioned the feasibility

of maintaining social distance at barber shops and beauty parlors upon their reopening. Ingraham also mockingly described Donald McNeil, then of the *New York Times*, as being able to “see into the future” and “[knowing] exactly apparently what’s going to happen with this virus” after he had warned that the premature reopening of businesses in states like Georgia risked another virus surge (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e). In the eyes of Fox News’ Sara Carter, the mainstream media lacked compassion as they “lashed out” at those who wanted to reopen their businesses and protested the restrictions (*The Next Revolution* 2020). On her Fox News show, Jeanine Pirro complained that the mainstream media had not “ever even talked about anything near 50,000” participants of the “Operation Gridlock”—the right-wing demonstration held on April 15, 2020 in Lansing, Michigan in protest of the coronavirus restrictions and in defiance of Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s ban on public gatherings. This alleged reporting negligence, however, did not surprise Pirro’s guest and co-organizer of the Lansing protest Meshawn Maddock who explained that the “the fake news media [loved] to spin” (*Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020a). After the “elite, out-of-touch members of the mainstream media mob” had criticized a similar anti-lockdown protest in Ohio, Pirro accused the press of “trying to create class divide” by “[calling] those who want to go back to work, those who are protesting and exercising their constitutional right (...) the virus deniers” (*Hannity* 2020a). According to thriller novel author Alex Berenson, who was praised by Fox News’ Tucker Carlson for his “relentless skepticism in the face of disruptive China-style coronavirus lockdowns” and hailed as “one of the last real reporters left on this subject,” the mainstream media were not providing Americans with “the facts” and “data” about the pandemic and related restrictions. In fact, as Berenson claimed, the only sources to do so were Fox News and far-right, pro-Trump One America News Network (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020b).

Conservatives' general confrontational stance toward a number of official emergency measures aimed at containing the coronavirus pandemic, including the shutdown of nonessential businesses, is central to the understanding of their criticism of the mainstream press' opposition to the premature reopening efforts as well as its alleged hostility toward American workers and businesses.

One month after the WHO had declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and many countries around the world had begun to implement protective measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and the closures of nonessential businesses, Fox News' Greg Gutfeld urged Americans to "start prepping for [the] comeback" and "get people back to work" (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020a). As early as the beginning of May 2020, fellow Fox News host Jesse Watters proclaimed that "most states [had been] past their [coronavirus] peaks" and the "total isolation phase [had been] over." Arguing that the country had enough PPE, hospital capacity, and ventilators, Watters criticized decisions to close beaches as "draconian measures" and "bad ideas" (*The Five* 2020f). On her show, Laura Ingraham questioned the justification and need for social distancing, masks, and lockdowns and challenged the scientific predictions about the incoming 'second wave' of coronavirus infections (*Ingraham Angle* 2020g). She further undermined the validity of coronavirus response as she characterized digital contact tracing efforts proposed in the US and implemented in many other countries as "a threat to our rights" and "civil liberties" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e). In the eyes of conservatives, the decisions to close schools across the country were based on "lies" and constituted "fear-mongering" and "hysteria" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020i; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020e). Echoing the anti-restrictions sentiment while on *The Ingraham Angle*, economist Dr. David Henderson of conservative Hoover Institution spoke against social distancing and "shelter-in-

place” measures and instead advocated a major reopening of the country (*Ingraham Angle* 2020a).

Beginning in mid-April 2020, conservative anti-lockdown sentiments were also evident during a number of protests held around the country. Demonstrators, who included Republican legislators and voters, far-right groups, and armed militia, and many of whom did not wear masks, demanded the reopening of nonessential businesses and the return of personal activity. In Michigan, the opposition to Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s restrictions on personal movement and economy led to “Operation Gridlock”—one of the first of the many anti-lockdown protests held around the country. According to Meshawn Maddock, a co-organizer of the Michigan protest (and the wife of Republican state representative Matt Maddock), demonstrators wanted to “let [the] Governor know that [they were] ready for some of [their] rights back.” Moreover, as Maddock explained to Fox News’ Jeanine Pirro, Governor Whitmer’s decision to implement restrictions was not honest as it was actually a politically opportunistic attempt to “grandstand and put herself in the spotlight” as she was rumored to be under consideration for Joe Biden’s running mate (*Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020a). The staunch opposition to Governor’s policies was on full display at the beginning of October 2020, when the FBI announced that six people with links to a right-wing militia group had been charged with a foiled plot to kidnap Whitmer (Bryant 2020). At the beginning of December 2020, the majority of Republicans continued to believe that a national mask mandate and “stay-at-home” order were “a bad idea” (Montanaro 2020).

Loyal to their ideology-tied disapproval of government regulation and intervention (see Chapter II and IV), conservatives strongly opposed the

implementation of emergency measures intended to curb the pandemic and questioned the severity of the health crisis. As they considered the economy's vitality and prosperity to be the absolute priority and regulations such as social distancing and masks as a violation of their individual rights and liberties, and thereby ontological security, those on the right rejected the need for an economic shutdown and a set of restrictions on personal activity. These are such ideologically driven oppositional attitudes toward the pandemic response that explain conservatives' both criticism of the media's resistance to the premature reopening efforts as well as the perceived hostility towards American business owners and workers.

5.2.4. Pandemic dishonesty: hysteria, inaccuracies, and lies

Conservatives repeatedly alleged and criticized the mainstream media's "tendency to hype any sort of danger" (*Media Buzz* 2020i), resulting in the perceived "mass hysteria" (*Hannity* 2020i) over the coronavirus. In a mocking and minimizing language, Fox News' Jeanine Pirro condemned the media's "doomsday reporting" according to which "it's time to buy the family burial plot, visit the cemetery where the dirt is definitely cleaner than your kitchen counter or your bathroom handles" (*Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020d). Other right-wing voices echoed this sentiment by claiming that "the media and the left (...) [were] putting the country into a panic (...) for no reason" (*Watters World* 2020d) and they "want[ed] to scare the living daylight out of you" (*Hannity* 2020g). According to conservatives, the media "[instilled] fear" and proved their "disservice" and "sensationalism" when they reported on one million confirmed coronavirus cases in the US and observed that the number had surpassed the death toll of the Vietnam War (*The Next Revolution* 2020). Similar accusations of the media's "[help] to scare the hell out of the country" followed the *New York Times'* coverage of the federal

projections forecasting an increase in coronavirus infections and deaths in the US (*Media Buzz* 2020f). In the face of the virus' surge, Fox News' Laura Ingraham spoke of "the media's *hyperventilation* about rising hospital numbers" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020i, emphasis added). As they allegedly "[made the virus] sound like it is 5, 10, 20, or even 100 times riskier than it is," the media were "really all about hype" and thus unable to relate the "accurate understanding" of risks associated with the new virus (*Media Buzz* 2020c). Right-wing voices maintained that the press, apparently overly focused on infection rates, abandoned the inquiry into "another side of the story," namely mortality rates, age, population density, "island versus not island, or living situations in general" as well as the sickness' severity and the danger it posed to children (*Fox News @ Night* 2020d; *Media Buzz* 2020h). As he considered only the low COVID-19 mortality rates among children and overlooked their potential to transmit the virus to the more vulnerable, Fox News' Tucker Carlson complained about the "*alarmist* articles about how 97,000 children have tested positive for the Wuhan virus" and characterized such reporting as "hysteria over the coronavirus" (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020e, emphasis added). Consequently, conservatives argued, the leading news outlets exposed the public to "a lot of conflicting information" and overstated the direness of the pandemic (*Fox News @ Night* 2020d). Referring to the media criticism of Trump's remarks declaring parts of the country virus-free and urging the governors to continue reopening, Fox News' Mollie Hemingway postulated that "panic is inherent in media coverage." She argued that not only was there not enough "media coverage about how much is going well and how capable we are to handle [the pandemic]," but the "panic-inducing" media were "almost, like, rooting for the virus to win over and against America" (*Media Buzz* 2020a). Complaining that the media "[promoted] doom and gloom" (*The Next Revolution* 2020), conservatives maintained that "it can't just be all

COVID all the time” (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e) and “it’s ok to once in a while report positive developments to a nation desperately seeking some” (*Fox News @ Night* 2020c).

Entirely contradicting their own perception and disapproval of the exaggerated pandemic coverage, a number of conservative voices also criticized the mainstream media for “[playing] down” or even “ignoring” the virus and pandemic (*Hannity* 2020e; *Media Buzz* 2020h). To those on the Right, the “jackasses” (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020a) in the media “missed the outbreak” (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020b) as they “had their head up impeachment’s butt” (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020a) and were “too busy smoking the crack pipe of impeachment” (*The Five* 2020e). In addition to their preoccupation with “impeachment porn” (*The Greg Gutfeld Show* 2020b), right-wing voices maintained, the media “practically abandoned” the coverage of coronavirus in favor of the nationwide protests against racism and police brutality (*Media Buzz* 2020d). As such, given its alleged “lack of (...) interest” (*Media Buzz* 2020d) in the pandemic, the press not only allowed “the virus [to sneak] up on” the nation (*The Five* 2020f), but also “[sent] a signal to frustrated Americans that the pandemic was (...) over” (*Media Buzz* 2020d).

Conservatives also charged the mainstream coronavirus coverage with spreading inaccuracies and falsehoods about the pandemic. Right-wing voices questioned whether the press was relating “the right stuff about coronavirus” and whether the public was “getting the real story.” On Fox News show *The Five*, Greg Gutfeld proclaimed that it was “super healthy” to not trust the media coronavirus reporting. (He then went on to add that one of then-President Trump’s “big achievements” was to “put a scar across the face of media” for everyone to see “for the rest of their lives,” which was “super important.”) (*The Five* 2020g) Citing

conservative Heritage Foundation, Fox News' Shannon Bream stated that the mainstream news portrayals of the overwhelmed US healthcare system were "far from true" (*Fox News @ Night* 2020h). As he advocated for the resumption of college sports during the pandemic and falsely claimed that "young people are not at risk for a serious disease from [coronavirus]," Dr. Scott Atlas expressed his "frustration" with the media's criticism of his position, claiming that their coverage was "completely contrary to the data" (*The Story with Martha MacCallum* 2020). Similarly lacking relevant expertise and echoing the false claim that college students were in "next to no risk from SARS-CoV-2," thriller novel author Alex Berenson criticized the media during his appearance on *The Ingraham Angle* for "obscuring what the risks really are here" and overstating the threat of the new virus by "focusing on a minuscule handful of outlier cases." Berenson then further implied the unreliability of mainstream media coronavirus reporting by claiming that "the only people who [understood] any of this [were] the people watching Fox News" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020b).

The perception of the deceptive and exaggerated nature of the mainstream coronavirus coverage has its roots in conservatives' generally indifferent approach toward the pandemic, characterized by the repeated denials or understatements of the crisis' severity despite the evidence to the contrary.

Early into the pandemic, many on the right—including President Trump and the officials in his administration, numerous Republican politicians as well as conservative media personalities—continued to argue that the novel coronavirus did not pose a significant risk and the situation was under control even as the infections and mortality rates throughout the United States continued to rapidly grow. This position, which contradicted the pronouncements of public health officials including the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), was often informed by error-ridden publications such as those produced by legal scholar Richard A. Epstein of the conservative Hoover Institution (Chotiner 2020). While some on the right undermined the pandemic by describing it as a “hoax” and a frenzy generated by the left and the mainstream media to impeach or otherwise “destroy” the President (Costa 2020), others understated its severity as they compared the coronavirus to the flu or even a basic cold (*Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020; Costa 2020) and prognosed a speedy end to the health crisis (*Watters World* 2020d). During one of his campaign speeches in late September 2020, President Trump continued to downplay the severity of the pandemic by claiming, without evidence, that the coronavirus “affected virtually nobody” as those were only elderly people with preexisting conditions who were at risk (Summers 2020). At the end of October 2020, when the number of US coronavirus casualties was nearing one thousand a day, the President further disputed the lethality of the outbreak by claiming that “you don’t see death.” Echoing his father, Donald Trump Jr. similarly referred to the daily COVID-19 death toll as “almost nothing” (The Guardian Staff 2020). The indifference to the pandemic’s severity among some conservatives continued to be on full display in late December 2020. At the time when the daily US coronavirus death toll averaged three thousand (the equivalent of 9/11), New York City’s Whitestone Republican Club organized an indoor Christmas party which resulted in several more infections and hospitalizations (Moore 2020).

Although not everyone in conservative circles subscribed to such a view of the pandemic (Burns, Martin, and Haberman 2020; Costa 2020), dismissiveness dominated among Republican officials as well as voters. In March 2020, multiple polls indicated that Republicans largely perceived the threat posed by the coronavirus as exaggerated as they expressed the overall low levels of concern about the new

pathogen (Bump 2020). This outlook had not changed by early October of 2020 when the majority of Republicans still believed that the coronavirus outbreak had been blown out of proportions (Jurkowitz, Mitchell, Shearer, and Oliphant 2020).

As such, it is the right-wing dismissiveness of the pandemic's severity that lies at the root of and explains the conservative perception of the mainstream news coverage's apparent hysteria and deceptiveness in the face of the health crisis. With their feeling of ontological security threatened by pandemic measures on the one hand, and Trump's recent impeachment that undermined his standing on the other, conservatives found ontological solace in embracing a differing perception of the health crisis. This, once more, demonstrates how the right-wing distrust of the mainstream media stems from conservatives' own ideologically motivated opposition to the known reality of the pandemic.

5.2.5. Friendly coverage of the “Chinese virus”

The final theme that characterized conservative criticism of mainstream coverage of the pandemic focused on the reporting on China and the US media's allegedly favorable and protective treatment of the regime.

Right-wing voices alleged that the media “[rushed] to China's defense” and “[had] no credibility whatsoever” when, citing public health professionals, they questioned Republican Senator Tom Cotton's statements in which he implied that the coronavirus outbreak had originated in a Wuhan biochemical laboratory—either as a biological weapon or an accidental release (*Fox News @ Night* 2020g; *Ingraham Angle* 2020d). Conservatives characterized the press as insufficiently critical of China and condemned it for ignoring a brief article published on ResearchGate.net in

February 2020 in which two researchers from South China University of Technology entertained the idea of the virus' accidental escape from a laboratory (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020c). Although the article was soon withdrawn by its authors who admitted that they lacked evidence to substantiate their claims (Kelly and Cahlan 2020), Fox News' Tucker Carlson complained about the media's unwillingness to address the "rational conclusions presented in the Chinese paper" (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020c). The sentiment was shared by Republican Senator Ted Cruz who, during his interview on *Hannity*, argued that most of the mainstream media "[did not] want to acknowledge [that] the question [of the laboratory accident] exists" (*Hannity* 2020m). Considering the laboratory-origin theory to be "[looking] pretty accurate," conservatives explained the media's reluctance to "tell the truth" about the virus by arguing that "the villain being foreign just isn't a top media narrative for our press" (*The Five* 2020i). In fact, right-wing voices argued, the mainstream media were involved in a "sick game" and "basically joined forces" with "the brutal Chinese communist regime" to "mount a massive cover-up" intended to shift the responsibility for American deaths away from China and to President Trump in order to "damage [him] politically" (*Watters World* 2020c). Echoing this allegation during his interview on *Hannity*, Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy in the Trump administration Peter Navarro criticized the "commentariat over at the fake news media" for not having "a word of ill towards China" and instead blaming President Trump for the "Wuhan virus" (*Hannity* 2020n).

The label "Wuhan virus" itself became a subject of conservative criticism of the mainstream media. Right-wing voices condemned the press for hypocritically "calling out" those referring to the novel coronavirus as a "Wuhan virus," "Chinese virus," or "foreign virus" after some leading outlets, including CNN, had themselves briefly used the same terminology in January 2020 (*Fox News @ Night* 2020f; *Hannity* 2020m,

2020e; *Watters World* 2020d). While the mainstream media's subsequent February 2020 decision to abandon the use of the said vocabulary in favor of neutral "coronavirus" and "COVID-19" was motivated by the official recommendations from numerous experts, including the WHO and the CDC (Chiu 2020; Farzan 2020), Fox News' Jesse Watters speculated that the terminological shift had actually been dictated by the "orders from the Chinese communists" (*Watters World* 2020d). Following the remarks by then-the *New York Times*' science and health reporter Donald McNeil about how President Trump's persistent use of terms such as "Chinese virus" might negatively affect the relationship and cooperation between the two countries, Fox News' Laura Ingraham spoke of the "pro-China elites in the press" who apparently "see China as an example to emulate," do not consider it "a threat to [American] freedom and security," and call for "[s]ome respect to our Chinese overlords" (*Ingraham Angle* 2020e).

Critical voices on the right also repeatedly alleged that the mainstream media were "passing on Chinese propaganda and lies" (*Hannity* 2020h), "[spinning] for" (*Hannity* 2020e), and "praising China" (*The Five* 2020f). Citing conservative Media Research Center's NewsBusters project, Fox News' Sara Carter stated that the press had "spent little time questioning China and what has happened since the outbreak." The "media mob" spared "China's virus lies" scrutiny and instead was "willing to spin for Beijing, communist Chinese and spread [the] propaganda of this oppressive Chinese dictatorship" (*Hannity* 2020h). Without providing any specifics or concrete examples, Fox News' Mark Levin claimed that China's "major disinformation campaign" aimed at blaming the United States for the virus "[seemed] to be effective with some media personalities" in the US (*Life, Liberty, Levin* 2020b). Sean Hannity criticized CNN for "[publishing] (...) Chinese propaganda," after the network had

discussed *and questioned* the recent claims made by the Chinese government that the Chinese military, unlike the US armed forces, had not recorded any coronavirus cases among its serving members (*Hannity 2020m*). In a similar vein, Jesse Watters charged the leading outlets with “[parroting] Chinese communist propaganda without a second thought” after they had matter-of-factly reported on China’s material help to Italy, the speedy creation of additional hospitals in Wuhan, and the reopening of the city of Wuhan after a 76-day lockdown (*Watters World 2020c*). Included among those “doing China’s bidding” was also the *Washington Post* after it had reported on the Trump administration’s order to close the Chinese consulate in Houston, Texas (*Your World with Neil Cavuto 2020*). Quoting Cornell University expert on China’s foreign relations Jessica Chen Weiss, the *Post* wrote that the move did “not appear to be part of a coherent strategy to deter or compel China to alter its behavior” but rather a “strategy to distract U.S. voters from the Trump administration’s disastrous response to the pandemic” (Fifield et al. 2020). Commenting on the article as well as misleadingly claiming that the American paper “takes money from *China Daily*” to distribute its content²⁴, former member of the G.W. Bush and Trump administrations and a senior fellow at the conservative Center for National Interest Christian Whiton declared the *Post* to be “a propaganda organ of the Chinese government” (*Your World with Neil Cavuto 2020*).

The conservative perception and criticism of the mainstream media’s alleged pro-China sentiments are strongly rooted in the broader erroneous beliefs about the origins and nature of the novel coronavirus embraced by many on the right.

²⁴ While it is true that in 2011 the *Washington Post* began to include “China Watch” advertising supplements provided by and paid for by the English-language state-owned *China Daily* newspaper, it abandoned the practice in 2019 (Waterson and Jones 2020).

After the first known human infections with SARS-CoV-2, now believed to have its natural reservoir in horseshoe bats (Burki 2020; Morens et al. 2020), had been reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, the local Huanan wild animal market quickly became considered as the most likely origin of the new pathogen and its transmission from animals to humans. Conclusive evidence, however, has been lacking to support this theory, with some experts claiming that the novel coronavirus “came into the market before it came out of the market” (Kelly and Cahlan 2020) and that it might not have even first emerged in Wuhan, but elsewhere in China (Beaumont 2020). It has also been suggested that the virus might have actually originated *outside of China* and that the focus of future research into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic should include other parts of southeast Asia (Mallapaty 2020). The continuing scientific uncertainty about the source and mechanics of the virus outbreak, coupled with the Chinese government’s much-criticized response and lack of transparency, have contributed to the emergence of numerous alternative explanations of the pandemic, including conspiracy theories. In the United States, many conservatives entertained the unsubstantiated idea of the virus’ origin being one of Wuhan’s laboratories. First rumored to have been engineered and deliberately released as a biological weapon, the virus was later argued to have accidentally escaped from either of Wuhan’s two biolaboratories known to be studying bat coronaviruses—the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Hernández and Wee 2021). The speculation of the virus’ laboratory escape was promoted by a number of Republican officials including Senator Tom Cotton (*Ingraham Angle* 2020d) and Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy in the Trump administration Peter Navarro (*Hannity* 2020n) as well as the conservative media personalities. In April 2020, Fox News’ Jesse Watters discussed the theory with

its proponent Steve Mosher, whom Watters misleadingly introduced as “an internationally recognized authority on China” and an “acclaimed American anthropologist.”²⁵ Claiming that the virus had “accidentally jump[ed] from bats to a lab worker” who then carried it out of the laboratory, Watters attributed the alleged accident to China’s negligence and carelessness in its “race to outperform American scientists and enhance [its] national prestige” (*Watters World* 2020c). A number of right-wing voices also argued that there was “increasing confidence” and even “evidence” among the U.S. intelligence officials that the novel coronavirus had originated in a Wuhan laboratory (*Hannity* 2020e; *The Next Revolution* 2020; *Watters World* 2020c). However, despite being pushed by top Trump administration officials such as then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to link the coronavirus to Chinese laboratories (Mazzetti et al. 2020), the U.S. intelligence community has so far declined to back up any such connection (Beaumont 2020), saying it has not detected any distress inside the Chinese government expected to accompany an accidental leak of a deadly virus (Lipton et al. 2020). Moreover, according to the Pentagon’s top general, the “weight of evidence” has pointed to the virus’ “natural” origin (Borger 2020), the position that has been shared by the majority of the scientific community. Pointing to the lack of supporting evidence, scientists have doubted the virus’ laboratory origin scenario and characterized it as highly unlikely (Beaumont 2020; Boseley 2020; Taylor 2020).²⁶ However, many conservatives remained unconvinced, with Fox News’ Tucker

²⁵ Steve Mosher is the president of the Population Research Institute (PRI), a ‘pro-life’ organization that advocates opposition to abortion and hormonal contraception and denies the reality of human-driven climate change. Both Mosher and the PRI have questioned the scientifically agreed upon natural origin of COVID-19 and argued that the apparently exaggerated concerns over the virus, referred to as “COVID Panic Porn,” were actually “[m]eant to suppress Trump vote” in the run-up to the 2020 election (Mosher 2020). A holder of master’s degrees in East Asian Studies and Anthropology, Mosher has not obtained further academic credentials following his expulsion from Stanford University’s doctoral program in 1985 for the “lack of candor” over his use of research data on China (Butterfield 1985).

²⁶ Given the continuous uncertainty about the source of the novel coronavirus, along with the Chinese government’s overall lack of transparency, in late May 2021, US President Joe Biden ordered a 90-day intelligence review of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the effort to seek a “definitive

Carlson claiming that the “academic research [was] *designed* to show that the coronavirus absolutely could not have been engineered in a Chinese lab” (emphasis added). Carlson also accused the National Institutes of Health (NIH) of “running political interference for hostile foreign governments,” after its director had dismissed the idea of the lab-engineered coronavirus as “outrageous.” Further undermining public trust in and the authority of scientists and public health experts, Carlson encouraged his viewers to “stay skeptical (...), remain rational [and] gather your own evidence to come to your own conclusions” about the pandemic and its origins (*Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020c). According to conservatives, one of the reasons for the perceived “holdback to the story” about the virus’ purported laboratory origin was “China’s control of some big elements like PPE” (*Watters World* 2020c) after the country had initially “vacuumed up all the world’s masks, gloves, [and] goggles” and made the rest of the world dependent for supplies (*Hannity* 2020n).

Many on the right also remained persistent in their use of labels such as “the Wuhan virus” or “the Chinese virus” when referring to the novel pathogen (*Hannity* 2020c, 2020m, 2020e, 2020n; *Justice with Judge Pirro* 2020b; *Tucker Carlson Tonight* 2020e; *Watters World* 2020d, 2020a). Public health experts and medical historians have criticized such nicknames for their racist and xenophobic overtones as well as their defiance of the WHO protocols issued in 2015 that prohibit the naming of diseases for geographic locations and animals to avoid stigmatization and discrimination (Chandra 2020; Chiu 2020; Farzan 2020; Rogers, Jakes, and Swanson 2020; Vazquez 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, scores of Asian

conclusion” on how the pandemic started, the investigation was to scrutinize the laboratory leak accident theory. Most scientists, nevertheless, continue to argue that, as in the case of every previous disease known to infect humans, the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, too, followed a zoonotic spillover event in which the virus was transmitted from animals to humans (Brumfiel 2021; Schneider 2021). As admitted by Robert Garry, Tulane University microbiologist who has studied the genome of the coronavirus, “I’m more convinced than ever that this is a natural virus” (Brumfiel 2021).

Americans have reported being victim of verbal and physical attacks perpetrated by those considering China to be the cause of the novel virus (Chiu 2020; Itkowitz 2020; Rogers, Jakes, and Swanson 2020). In response, the WHO, the CDC, and many medical professionals have urged the use of official scientific names “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” (short for “coronavirus disease 2019”), including in the media, when referring to the novel virus and the disease it can cause (Chiu 2020; Vazquez 2020). The WHO has deliberately chosen the neutral name “COVID-19” in order to avoid stigmatization of a specific place or group of people (Farzan 2020; Itkowitz 2020). Also encouraging the use of neutral terms, experts on China have argued that labeling the virus as one ethnicity risks exacerbating the already tensed relation between Beijing and Washington (Rogers, Jakes, and Swanson 2020). Nevertheless, in defiance of the official guidelines, many prominent conservatives including then-President Donald Trump, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, as well as Fox News personalities, continued to use the nonneutral terms, regardless of their potential to do harm (Chiu 2020).

As such, those were conservatives’ mistaken beliefs about the source and nature of the novel coronavirus that explain their perception of otherwise matter-of-fact reporting as pro-China. Given its long-running antagonism toward the communist regime of China, strong belief in Trump’s reliable and successful performance during the pandemic, and the characteristic anti-science and anti-expertise sentiments, the right proved reluctant to accept the still undetermined nature of the virus’ origins, particularly at the time when Trump administration was being held responsible for the worsening state of the pandemic throughout the nation. This, yet again, proves how the right-wing distrust of the mainstream media is rooted in and sustained by

conservatives' ideologically driven confrontational stance toward the reality of the pandemic, which in turn, proves distrust's ideological character.

Part II: Progressives

5.2.6. The left's muted criticism

From February to August 2020, the progressive criticism of the mainstream news coverage of the coronavirus pandemic was virtually nonexistent. The single voices of disapproval on the left alleged that the mainstream news media and their reporting practices failed to reflect the reality of the pandemic in a sufficiently accurate way.

According to progressives, the “corporate” mainstream media overlooked the role of human agency and manmade phenomena such as the climate crisis in the outbreaks and spread of infectious diseases, including the COVID-19 pandemic. On *Democracy Now!*, an investigative science journalist Sonia Shah criticized the media's tendency to frame disease outbreaks “as something foreign” and people “as sort of these passive victims.” This, she explained, overlooked the fact that the manmade climate crisis, including problems such as deforestation, was making the outbreaks of infectious diseases more common due to the destruction of natural animal habitats and the changes in migration patterns that bring humans and wildlife into increasing contact, thus making the spread of new zoonotic diseases more likely. According to Shah, the media's reporting on the pandemic “obscured what [people's] own role is” in both the contribution to as well as potential prevention of pandemics (*Democracy Now!* 2020a).

The link between human degradation of nature and pandemic risk, including the COVID-19 outbreak, mentioned by Shah has been scientifically discussed and documented. In a UN-backed report published in late October 2020, international

experts stressed the fact that the emergence of COVID-19 has indeed “been entirely driven by human activities” including “[c]hanges in the way we use land; the expansion and intensification of agriculture; and unsustainable trade, production and consumption,” and their impacts on the environment (United Nations 2020).

The left-wing criticism of the mainstream media also focused on the editorial decisions made by news outlets such as the *New York Times* and their impact on the coverage’s ability to deliver clear and honest information about then-President Trump’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. Although he recognized the *New York Times* for “[doing] some of the best reporting in the country,” Kevin Drum of *Mother Jones* accused the *Times* of “[screwing] up their front page way more often that they should.” According to Drum, the layout of one mid-March frontpage did not capture the perceived unreliability of Trump’s messages about the pandemic clearly enough, with the information about the President’s declaration of national emergency and an aid package receiving the main headline at the top of the page, but his “false claims about his response to the coronavirus” being relegated to a separate and smaller headline found only below many others. Moreover, as argued by Drum, to even better reflect the reality of Trump’s pandemic response, the *Times* reporter Linda Qiu also “could have added that the entire press conference,” during which the President had made the false claims and generally “misled the public over and over,” itself violated the coronavirus safety measures such as social distancing with the President extending many handshakes and the participants gathering in a close crowd (Drum 2020).

Furthermore, in line with progressives’ broader criticism of the media’s representative failures (see 3.2.), *Mother Jones*’ Fernanda Echavarri (2020) and the interviewed historian Dr. Kami Fletcher spoke about the “death denial culture” in the US as they criticized the “mainstream society,” including the media, for not “public mourning” the

disproportionately African American, Hispanic, and Native American COVID-19 victims. As claimed by Dr. Fletcher, the lack of public acts of mourning in the media and the society more generally at the time that the country had recorded 100,000 coronavirus deaths stemmed from the mainstream “mentality” which apparently perceived “Black and Brown people [as] just kind of [bringing] [death] on themselves” with a lifestyle characterized by smoking and drinking. Implying the racial aspect of the mainstream pandemic coverage, Echavarri wondered whether the country’s collective mourning and the media’s conversation about the COVID-19 deaths would have looked differently had most of the victims been white. Dr. Fletcher appeared to agree with this position as she pointed to a more general trend in the mainstream society and the media which took the connection between African Americans and death “for granted” and treated “Black bodies [as] disposable” as opposed to white people who were regarded as “authority figures.”

Although scarce, the left-wing criticism of the mainstream media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic is noticeably focused on how the media’s reporting practices—in this case, the way they narratively and visually frame discussed issues—affect their ability to reflect the reality of the health crisis accurately and faithfully. This, in turn, speaks to its more pragmatic character and distinguishes it from the ideological nature of conservative criticism.

5.3. Assessing the potential for the revival of trust

In line with the findings in Chapter IV, this case study has confirmed the postulated distinctiveness of the reasons behind conservative and progressive distrust of the mainstream media and verified its ideological and pragmatic character, respectively.

To further test the hypothesized asymmetrical nature of media distrust—and specifically the assumption that conservative distrust is highly difficult to negotiate and remedy whereas progressive distrust is more manageable and negotiable—this study also identifies positive mentions of the mainstream media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in the collected data and analyzes the context in which they appeared. Since such remarks pose a challenge to mainstream media distrust by signaling approval and thus the possibility of trust, the examination of the ways in which the remarks are introduced and received in the alternative outlets helps to determine the nature of distrust.

The analysis reveals that the positive or approving remarks heard on Fox News were introduced by both non-conservative (*Media Buzz* 2020g, 2020c, 2020e, 2020a) as well as conservative discussants. Among the right-wing voices was Fox News' contributor Dr. Marc Siegel who, albeit indirectly, justified the media's critical coverage of Republican Senator Tom Cotton's false claims that the novel coronavirus originated in a Chinese weapons laboratory. By claiming that the Chinese would have made the virus "more deadly and spread it even more easily than this one" if they had indeed created it as a bioweapon, Siegel challenged the substance of the conspiracy and thereby indirectly vindicated the news media's critical reporting on Senator Cotton's allegations (*Fox News @ Night* 2020g). Another Fox News correspondent Kristen Soltis Anderson justified, also indirectly, the media's criticism of the Trump administration's shifting position on the pandemic when she spoke about "a risk if the messages are getting mixed" and stressed the importance of the leadership's "clear messages" and advice in a time of crisis. A fellow Fox News contributor Katherine Timpf cast CNN's Chris Cuomo in a positive light when she spoke of the interviews he had conducted with his brother New York Governor Andrew Cuomo during the

Governor's daily televised briefings on the pandemic. Timpf admitted that the friendly exchanges between the two brothers had provided an opportunity to "laugh when everything [was] so sad." Asked by Fox News' Howard Kurtz whether she thought Chris Cuomo had "cross[ed] a line" when he had worn a cap featuring the name of his show during the interview, Timpf replied negatively, claiming that "[n]othing normal [applied]" in the "different" and "weird times" of the pandemic (*Media Buzz 2020g*). The presence of those remarks stands in opposition to the findings in Chapter IV which did not demonstrate any instances of conservative approval of the mainstream media. The remarks suggest the potential negotiability of conservative distrust and the existence of possible venues to rebuild trust in the leading news outlets among those on the right.

However, this potential is directly restricted by the fact that most of the positive remarks heard on Fox News were met with conservative challenge. Some of the positive remarks were weakened by direct criticism that appeared to stem from the confrontational stance towards the known reality. This is illustrated by Mollie Hemingway who defended the media against President Trump's inaccurate claims that they "[had not] covered" the "changing story" and testimony of a federal scientist and whistleblower Rick Bright, only to immediately shift focus to and criticize the mainstream reporting on another, not coronavirus-related, whistleblower complaint. Alleging the media's lack of scrutiny of the informant in the Trump-Ukraine scandal, Hemingway went on to accuse the perceived "media-led frenzy" of "[causing] damage" and leading to the President's first impeachment (*Media Buzz 2020c*). Similarly, even though he admitted that many of the outdoor happenings that the media had warned about—such as the reopening of beaches during the pandemic—had turned out to be superspreading events, Ben Domenech of conservative *The Federalist* quickly went

on to agree with Vice President Mike Pence's *Wall Street Journal* op-ed arguing that the media tried to "scare" Americans with their "fear-mongering" about the coronavirus (*Media Buzz* 2020b). Asked by Fox News' Howard Kurtz whether the press "[distracted] from the battle against COVID-19" by "overplaying" Peter Navarro's *USA Today* op-ed attacking Dr. Anthony Fauci, Guy Benson of Fox News and conservative *Townhall* disagreed, claiming that he "[did not] see how [Navarro's attacks] [were] helpful to anyone involved." However, Benson's defense of the media came in tandem with his criticism of their alleged "narrative of Trump versus Fauci" that they "fueled (...) even with the thinnest rule" (*Media Buzz* 2020e).

Other positive mentions of the mainstream media were ignored or altogether disputed, which further weakens the prospect of the negotiability and recovery of the right-wing trust in the mainstream media. After Fox News' Howard Kurtz implied that the mainstream media's criticism of the President might be warranted given his numerous inaccurate statements about the pandemic, conservative columnist Gayle Trotter entirely disregarded Kurtz's point and instead criticized the press for the insufficient coverage of Trump's perceived seriousness and actions during the crisis (*Media Buzz* 2020i). In another exchange, Kurtz appeared to defend *PBS NewsHour's* Yamiche Alcindor against the allegations made by President Trump that she had posed a "threatening" question when she asked him about a past statement he had made on *Hannity*. Characterizing the question as "respectful," Kurtz observed that Alcindor had "accurately quoted" the President when she recalled his remarks doubting the growing need for medical ventilators around the country. Despite that, Kurtz's assessment was once again opposed by Trotter who criticized Alcindor's "hostile gotcha question" and incorrectly charged it with "misrepresenting" the former President's words (*Media Buzz* 2020g). Kurtz also defended the media coverage of President Trump's remark calling

the Democratic criticism of his pandemic response a “hoax.” Following the President’s allegations that “disreputable” CNN and other cable news networks were “doing everything they [could] to instill fear” by suggesting it was the coronavirus—and not the Democratic criticism—that Trump had referred to as a hoax, Kurtz argued the opposite by claiming that “on substance (...) the press [had] been relatively restrained” in its coverage. However, his explanation was left unacknowledged by Susan Ferrechio of conservative *the Washington Examiner* who instead, echoing Trump’s bigger point about the fear-driven mainstream news, criticized the media’s “hyped” pandemic reporting for apparently ignoring the seemingly low COVID-19 fatality rate (*Media Buzz* 2020i). Elsewhere, following Trump’s incorrect allegations that children are immune to COVID-19, Kurtz also appeared supportive of the subsequent media criticism of the President as he pointed to the CDC data denying the revelation. This, however, was contradicted by Ben Domenech who argued that the President “obviously was talking about the death rates” and not immunity among young children and “used the word immune as opposed to vulnerable or something like that.” Despite his initial sentiment, Kurtz himself went on to lessen the seriousness of President’s false ‘immunity’ remarks when he implied their metaphorical quality and explained that, to Trump supporters, the comments were really about “countering a lot of media exaggeration about the magnitude of the pandemic” (*Media Buzz* 2020h). Fox News’ Juan Williams also faced opposition when he indirectly justified the media’s coverage critical of Trump’s move to cut the funding to the WHO. Williams argued that the decision, especially in the midst of the pandemic, risked self-destructive consequences for the United States given the lack of a “replacement” agency equally capable of “[helping] [the US] deal with this crisis at the moment.” However, this point was quickly disputed by a fellow Fox News host Jesse Watters who, claiming that the

WHO “[is] not there to cure pandemic,” but rather to “prevent” it, argued that the agency “blew it” and “[was] useless now” (*The Five* 2020e).

On the left, the number of positive voices was scarce, which, together with the similarly low amount of criticism, appears to suggest progressives’ broader refrainment from evaluating media performance during the health crisis. Nevertheless, the few positive mentions of the leading news outlets’ coverage of the pandemic that did appear remained unchallenged and signaled the left’s appreciation of the mainstream reporting. This confirms progressive distrust’s hypothesized negotiability as well as its potential to be managed and remedied.

The left-wing approval of the mainstream media took the form of their defense as when David Corn (2020) of *Mother Jones* sided with the leading news outlets following a March 2020 email sent out jointly by the Trump campaign and the Republican National Committee (RNC) that had cast the media as “unhinged,” “fake news,” “totally insane,” pro-Democrat, “truly the Enemy of the People,” and determined to “take [President Trump] down.” Corn defended the media against the vilification attempted by Trump and the RNC as he stressed the press’ vital role in “[keeping] the public informed about a national emergency that has the potential to turn into a national disaster.” He also argued that the attempts to discredit the press in the midst of the pandemic were particularly dangerous as they “could well lead to Americans ignoring sound advice and taking actions that place them at risk and worsen the situation.” Other approving remarks recognized the media more directly. Frequently featured on *Democracy Now!*, an Indian author and political activist Suzanna Arundhati Roy praised the “heartwarming” reporting in the *New York Times* for “creating solidarity between people in the U.S.” She spoke of a video featuring public

gratitude to a Pakistani doctor who had found a way allowing a single medical ventilator to support more than one patient at the same time. Roy's appreciation of the *Times* reporting was made even more evident as she contrasted it with the solidarity-lacking mainstream pandemic coverage in her native India and its narrative tendency to propagate concepts such as "corona jihad" and blame Muslims for the pandemic (*Democracy Now!* 2020b). Recognition of the *New York Times* was also echoed in *Mother Jones*. In an interview by Fernanda Echavarri, historian Dr. Kami Fletcher, although generally critical of the mainstream media treatment of the disproportionately non-white coronavirus victims, singled out the *Times* and spoke approvingly of its front page published in May 2020 that featured one thousand names of Americans lost to COVID-19. According to Dr. Fletcher, the front page "[brought] humanity" and "human connection" to the victims as it created a needed space in which to collectively process mass death amid a crisis marked by social and physical distance and the lack of typical acts of public mourning (Echavarri 2020).

5.4. Conclusions

By the careful analysis of the ways in which the selected alternative news outlets responded to the mainstream media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic, this case study has verified the asymmetrical nature of media distrust among conservative and progressive Americans hypothesized in this work. It has also largely confirmed the findings outlined in Chapter IV.

The analysis has once again shown that media distrust on the right, being rooted in and shaped by the broader ideology-tied adversarial stance on the reality of the health crisis, is more ideological and fundamental in nature. As they considered Trump's response to the pandemic to be a great success—an assessment

diametrically different to the one expressed by most public health officials and experts—conservatives regarded the mainstream reporting on the administration’s mishandling of the pandemic as unfair and biased against the President. Their lack of concern about the growing crisis and the contrasting approach embraced by their political rivals led those on the right to charge the coverage critical of the inaction amid the pandemic with anti-conservative sentiments and pro-Democrat double standards. It was conservatives’ general indifference to the new health threat and the resulting opposition to the implementation of emergency safety measures that explain why they perceived the media reporting reflective of the reality of the pandemic as not only dishonest, deceptive and hysterical, but also hostile toward those affected by the temporary economic shut-down. Moreover, due to their unsubstantiated belief that the novel coronavirus originated in a Wuhan biolaboratory, many Republican officials and conservative personalities accused the media of pro-China sentiments for not supporting the narrative.

Some voices on the right did express their appreciation or approval of the leading news outlets, which at first sight might hint the promising possibility of negotiating and managing distrust of the mainstream media on the right. However, this potential appears heavily limited, as most of the positive evaluations of the media were either weakened by simultaneous criticism or disputed altogether, even if doing so happened to contradict the available evidence.

On the left, distrust of the mainstream media once again proves its more pragmatic character as it stems from the left’s disapproval of the media’s performative failure to faithfully capture and reflect upon the reality of the pandemic.

Although hardly present in the progressive outlets, the few voices critical of the mainstream pandemic coverage alleged the media's perceived omission of the real role played by humans in the outbreaks of pandemics as well as the reporting's failure to both fully reflect the fallibility of President Trump's messages about the health crisis as well as public mourn the disproportionately non-white COVID-19 victims. With its pragmatic character, left-wing criticism of mainstream media's pandemic coverage displays consistency with the qualities of the progressive distrust of the leading news in other contexts, including climate change coverage discussed in Chapter IV.

Generally restrained in their media evaluations throughout the analyzed period, those on the left did not offer many positive remarks about the media pandemic coverage. However, the few ones that were voiced did not encounter dismissal or challenge, which again supports Hypothesis 3b and the assumption that progressive distrust is negotiable and manageable.

The ways in which the media distrust asymmetries demonstrated in this work play out with regard to potential solutions aimed at alleviating the crisis of media trust will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI

Rebuilding trust: the path(s) ahead

Both in and outside of academia, the conversation about the mainstream media's loss of public trust has focused not only on the forces and mechanisms driving the decline, but also the ways in which to address and respond to it.

Some scholars have suggested that in Western democracies such as the United States the decrease in media trust does not constitute a problematic development in need of a response. According to Gronke (2002), the decline of Americans' trust in institutions, including the news media, "may represent the rise of a public that is healthily skeptical of many forms of power" (p. 17). Subscribing to this view, Müller (2013) adds that high levels of public trust in the news media are characteristic of authoritarian rather than democratic regimes. Others, however, consider media distrust worrisome and argue that this development is weakening democratic processes. Citing Crawford (2006), Liu (2012) writes that "[p]ublic distrust of the news media is one of the most hazardous political challenges now facing Americans" (p. 2). This point of view is shared by Jones (2005) who stresses the media's "crucial role in sustaining a democracy made of informed citizens" (p. 243) as he cites Dautrich and Hartley (1999), who explain that

without a trustworthy source of information, the public is left without the ability to discern the important issues of the day, the differences between candidates in elections, and whether what the candidates and advertisers are telling them is accurate (Jones 2005: p. 243).

As argued by Kavanagh and Rich (2018), the decline of trust in the media to provide accurate and honest information has been a core part of "Truth Decay"—the diminishing role of facts, data, and analysis in American public and political life. Indeed, according to Bennett and Livingston (2018), the declining confidence in the

mainstream press has been at the root of the much-feared spread of disinformation. Against this backdrop, Knight Foundation has declared the decline of media trust in the United States “unacceptable” (Askenazi 2018) and symptomatic of a “crisis in democracy,” and its calls to “[renew] trust in America” (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019) are now reflective of what has become a dominant narrative in discussions about media distrust.

A number of voices across academia, think tanks, and the press itself have proposed various measures that could help alleviate the crisis of media trust. The recommendations focus on a wide range of issues, including the practices of news reporting, the approaches to news production and distribution online, the structures and business models of news organizations, as well as the public-focused educational initiatives aimed at cultivating the so-called “new literacies.” However, since the proposed measures have not addressed or taken into account the asymmetrical nature of media distrust discussed in this work, their reevaluation is necessary in order to more realistically gauge the chances of an effective response to the media trust crisis. To fulfill that need, this chapter will introduce the existing recommendations and discuss their remedying potential in light of this project’s empirical findings, further literature, and relevant developments on the US political scene.

6.1. Increasing commitment to accuracy, unbiasedness, and transparency

In 2017, the *Washington Post* columnist Margaret Sullivan (2017) advocated for “more facts” as a way for the media to “regain the public’s trust.” As she remarked that “there’s renewed hunger for truth-seeking reporting” and the majority of Americans wanted “journalists to call out falsehoods—lies—clearly,” Sullivan

suggested that by “holding government accountable, emphasizing accuracy and standing firm for factual reality, [the media could] regain some of what’s lost.” Soon after that, in her address at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, NPR’s then-public editor Elizabeth Jensen also spoke about the need to “[restore] public trust in the media.” Echoing Sullivan, Jensen observed how American citizens “simply wanted the basic facts to be accurate” and stressed the importance of accuracy and transparency as the crucial elements of a trustworthy journalistic practice. As she speculated that rebuilding trust might really be “as simple as improving [the media’s] accuracy,” Jensen painted a promising vision of a “pretty easy fix” that required “[putting] in some quality control” and “[getting] back to basics” (Jensen 2017). The sentiment has been further shared by organizations such as Gallup and Knight Foundation (2018a), whose joined investigation of media distrust has similarly concluded that “attempts to restore trust in the media among Americans may be fruitful, particularly if those efforts are aimed at improving accuracy, enhancing transparency and reducing bias” (p. 2). This, they have argued, would “[give] Americans more confidence in the media’s ability to carry out its democratic responsibilities” (Gallup and Knight Foundation 2018b: p. 2). According to Jensen (2017), the media that seek to regain public trust ought to adhere to a set of “best practices,” including “an ethics code,” “a clear corrections policy,” transparency about the source of funding and leadership, admission to and explanation of a potential advocacy voice in reporting, as well as disclosure of the fact-checking process. Commitment to “radical transparency” should also involve journalists’ discussions about their sources and methods (Tilis 2018), including the disclosure of the ways they collect, report, and disseminate the news (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019).

The validity of the conviction that the news media seeking to rebuild their public trust ought to confront citizens' concerns about the lack of accuracy, fairness, and transparency in reporting is grounded in the fact that those very elements rank among factors with the most influence on media trust among Americans (Gallup and Knight Foundation 2018a). However, as the earlier chapters of this work have shown, the understanding of what is in/accurate, un/biased, or un/true and what constitutes a fact varies greatly among Americans, particularly in terms of their ideological and political affiliation. Thus, even when understood as reliance on and prioritization of the best and most complete evidence available, journalists' increased commitment to accuracy and fairness might still be able to only partially address the problem of media distrust among Americans. On the one hand, the practice could succeed among progressive audiences whose criticism of the press has very much focused on media's demonstrable misrepresentation or omission of facts and evidence as in the case of climate change coverage or foreign policy reporting, to name a few. Indeed, whenever showing improvement, the mainstream media have received recognition and appreciation from progressives, which further indicates that the effective implementation of the recommended reporting practices has a potential to induce trust-building on the left. On the other hand, more factual and accurate reporting is not equally likely to increase the levels of trust in the established media among conservatives. With the right wing repeatedly challenging the facts and scientific evidence of phenomena such as climate change or the coronavirus pandemic and considering their media coverage "liberally biased" or favorable toward Democrats (see Chapters IV and V), increasing the presence of facts and expertise in reporting—while generally a laudable effort—is not necessarily going to rectify the conservative perception of inaccuracy and bias and thus decrease the right's distrust in the

mainstream news outlets. This does not mean that those on the right are unanimous in their opposition to fact- and evidence-based reporting. As Chapter V has shown, some conservatives were ready to defend accurate coverage of the coronavirus pandemic against the onslaught of ‘alternative facts,’ even when it required challenging fellow right-wing voices or even occasionally vindicating the mainstream news outlets. As a proof of the right’s willingness to produce serious and fact-based journalism may also serve online magazine *The Dispatch*. Launched in 2019 by a handful of *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard* expats, *The Dispatch* intends to produce “serious, factually grounded journalism” and provide its conservative audience with “information and context” rather than “catharsis” and “relentless partisan pressure” typical of most of the conservative media. However, *The Dispatch* seems to be in minority, and the need for journalism represented by the magazine appears scant among those on the right. This is best exemplified by the fate of a plea made by Tucker Carlson during the 2009 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in which he encouraged his fellow conservative reporters to emulate the professional journalistic values of the established news outlets such as the *New York Times*. As the crowd booed the remarks, Carlson further urged the right-wing media to “not just interpret things they hear in the mainstream media, but gather news themselves.” Turning his words into action, Carlson went on to cofound the right-wing news and opinion website *The Daily Caller* the following year. Yet despite its “old-fashioned journalistic mission,” the website has since allowed the publication of stories that have disputed the existence of climate change or channeled the outlooks of their white-supremacist authors (Coppins 2020), thereby revealing the true nature of incentives and preferences that dominate the conservative media and their audiences. The right’s inclination to reject facts in favor of conformity manifested itself

yet again in the wake of the 2020 presidential election. After some of Fox News' reporters had recognized President Joe Biden's electoral victory over Donald Trump, the channel experienced a wave of resentment from its majority-conservative viewers, some of whom subsequently switched to pro-Trump Newsmax and One America News Network (OANN) (Folkenflik 2020). With just a quarter of Republicans accepting the outcome of the legitimate election (Montanaro 2020), Newsmax and OANN enjoyed ratings growth due to their weeks-long refusal to formally designate Biden as the winner of the national race. Unlike Fox News that purportedly "[censored] actual reporting" by calling the race for Biden, OANN "[delivered] the truth" when it updated the nation on the then-president-elect's alleged "hijacking of [the] democratic process" (Winkie 2021). Although still unable to match Fox News' popularity, Newsmax had become the fourth-highest-rated cable news channel in the country—after Fox, MSNBC, and CNN—by the end of November 2020, affecting Fox's ratings in the process (Folkenflik 2020).

Given the stark contrast between the ways in which the right and the left appear to conceptualize what constitutes fact and falsehood, the recommended commitment to accuracy, fairness, and transparency appears much more complicated a trust-building tool than the "pretty easy fix" once envisioned by Jensen and echoed by others. Future discussions of and attempts at the media's increased commitment to accuracy, fairness, and transparency should therefore factor in the palpable asymmetries that characterize the understanding of those very concepts on the right and the left as made evident in this work.

6.2. Countering disinformation, polarization, and exclusion

Following the announcement by the US intelligence community acknowledging the Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, found themselves at the center of the disinformation debate. The platforms' reliance on multiple algorithms combined with minimal content oversight allowed the emergence of thousands of fake accounts, often purporting to be Americans, that spread fabricated articles and disinformation. Some of this activity included the dissemination of pro-Trump "fake news" and political "clickbait" for purely financial benefit, as in the case of a group of Macedonian teenagers who, while hardly interested in American politics, produced hyperpartisan stories that received enough social media engagement from Trump supporters to generate advertising dollars (Silverman and Alexander 2016). Other fake news fabricators included American citizens such as a California man who "got into fake news around 2013 to highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right" by "showing how easily fake news spreads" within the alt-right echo-chambers (Sydell 2016). Yet the most attention in the post-2016 election debate has been paid to the disinformation campaign ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin and carried out by the Saint Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA). With the purpose of harming the campaign of Hillary Clinton while boosting the candidacy of Donald Trump, the Russian disinformation efforts included, among others, the creation of fake social media accounts that expressed support for radical political groups in the US in order to manipulate the public opinion and increase political and social discord (Carroll 2017).

Ever since, the need to counter disinformation online has become not only a subject of numerous Congressional hearings aimed at investigating the leading social

media companies (Borger, Gambino, and Siddiqui 2017), but also one of the recommended steps on the path to restore public trust in the media. Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019) has urged both journalists and technology companies to continue to work together to identify and address suspicious online content with the help of tools such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, natural language processing, distributed annotation to detect misinformation or disinformation, and fact-checking (p. 99). Similarly stressing the need for the latter, Firestone (2016) points to “story and source verification” as another “[step] toward rebuilding trust in the media.” This relies on fact-checkers such as Snopes to identify whether or not a particular website is trustworthy, and mainstream news sources to correct or verify the facts. According to Firestone, “reforming social media” might also provide an answer to the problematic spread of disinformation and fake news and should therefore be further debated as a possible step. Citing Newman and Fletcher from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Bilton (2017) echoes the need for involvement from both media and technology companies in “fixing the trust problem” as he writes that journalism must distinguish itself better from the vastness of information available online while social media should commit more to identifying trustworthy news sources on their platforms.

Another way, proposed by Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019), in which to increase public trust in the media is to counter political polarization. Believed to be strongly reinforced by social media’s “filter bubbles” and resulting “echo chambers,” the divide manifests itself in Americans’ decreasing exposure to competing viewpoints and ideas. To break the public out of such “ideological cocoons,” the Commission recommends that reporters represent the variety of voices while editors ensure the accuracy of published information. Those

steps are envisioned as *deliberate* efforts by the media to fight polarization by “[exposing] their readers, viewers and users to diverse viewpoints” (p. 100).

The need for the variety of viewpoints is closely related to another recommended trust-building measure, namely increasing diverse representation and inclusion in the media. According to Jensen (2017) and Bilton (2017), news organizations need to hire more staff with diverse backgrounds across ethnicity, race, geography, age, gender, economic outlook, and political thought. Echoing the call for diverse staff, Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019) also urges the media to increase diversity of owners as well as covered stories, considered viewpoints, and quoted authorities, all of which is intended to “[b]uild a news and information ecosystem that reflects the diversity of individual communities and our nation” (p. 101).

Since all of the proposed solutions aim at remedying the problems of great urgency, it is imperative that the potential obstacles to their implementation and/or effectiveness are swiftly recognized and discussed. One problematic matter likely to arise in the fight against disinformation is that, similarly to the proposed improvement in the media’s accuracy, fairness, and transparency, the success of the recommended efforts is heavily dependent on how Americans understand what constitutes false information that is shared deliberately in order to deceive and manipulate. Whereas the majority of researchers, analysts, and commentators attribute its origin to non-professional websites that falsely present themselves as real and factually accurate news sources, other observers, including former Republican member of the Tennessee House of Representatives James Van Huss, consider “fake news” to be the product of news outlets such as CNN and the *Washington Post*

(Evelyn 2020).²⁷ The latter stance, also popularized in recent years by former President Donald Trump, his administration, and voters, is very likely to undermine the effectiveness of the recommended anti-disinformation measures, especially those that rely on the participation of the mainstream news outlets.

Another challenge is posed by the fact that the promoted step to reform social media, with its focus predominantly on major platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, has so far largely failed to stem the flow of disinformation. After Facebook and Twitter, having overcome their initial reluctance, began to moderate their content—by applying warning labels to misleading and disputed claims, removing groups spreading falsehoods and baseless conspiracy theories, and fact-checking false statements made by politicians including Donald Trump—many conservatives criticized the measures as unjust “censorship” of “forbidden knowledge” as they flocked to niche social media such as Parler (Bond 2020; DiResta 2020). This Twitter-like social networking alternative—whose co-founder and former CEO John Matze declared that content curation and fact-checking in major social media “[introduced] bias”—was founded in 2018 as “the world’s premier free speech platform” (Bond 2020) where users can “speak freely and express [themselves] openly, without fear of being ‘deplatformed’ for [their] views” (DiResta 2020). With few restrictions on what its users can post (Bond 2020), Parler has attracted, among others, those who subscribe to the baseless ideas of the 2020 presidential election theft and voter fraud and incorrectly consider Donald Trump the winner of the race as well as individuals such as Roger Stone, Alex Jones, Laura Loomer, and leading QAnon acolytes whose accounts on major social media have been suspended due

²⁷ In February 2020, Van Huss “introduced an amendment to a resolution that would recognize CNN and the *Washington Post* “as fake news” which is “part of the media wing of the Democratic Party” (Evelyn 2020).

to the terms-of-service violations (DiResta 2020). Among the platform's enthusiasts are also prominent conservative media personalities such as Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Mark Levin as well as Republican politicians including Representative David Nunes and Senators Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Mike Lee (Bond 2020; DiResta 2020; Newhouse 2020). Following reports that it had failed to police violent content related to the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol, Parler went offline having its hosting services canceled by Amazon Web Services for around a month (Nicas and Alba 2021) only to come back online in February 2021. Although nowhere near as popular as Facebook or Twitter, Parler reportedly had 20 million users prior to its temporal absence in January 2021 (CNBC 2021). The story of Parler shows that for the recommended social media reforms and regulations to have an intended effect, their scope might need to be expanded beyond the major social networking platforms and focus on the niche ones as well. Perhaps even more importantly, the episode points to the potential weaknesses of the currently dominant tactic that heavily depends on social media's 'self-regulation.' The exclusive reliance on the *willingness*, often delayed or altogether absent, of the social networking platforms to moderate false or misleading posts is what made it possible for those targeted by the anti-disinformation measures on Facebook and Twitter to continue to spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, as well as anti-Semitic and white nationalist content in the laxly restricted environment of alternative platforms such as Parler, Gab, or MeWe.

Yet probably the greatest obstacle to the effectiveness of the existing recommendations aimed at countering disinformation is their heavy focus on the Internet, particularly social media, as the main culprit in the spread of conspiracy theories and falsehoods framed as facts. Such a perception is challenged by the

findings in political communication research indicating how online filter bubbles, fake news, and Russian disinformation, although very real and warranting a response, have had much less impact on America's current information disorder than is popularly believed (Bruns 2019; Fletcher 2020; Guess et al. 2019; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2019). While it is not disputed that Russian propagandists have helped to spread false claims on social media, their efforts nevertheless "appear to have mostly amounted to little more than jumping on a bandwagon already well underway," according to Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018: p. 385). The scholars apply a similar observation to "political clickbait" which they characterize as "a side entertainment, not a driver of discourse, opinion, or changes in beliefs at a population level" (Ibid.: p. 385). Their comprehensive analysis of news stories as well as Twitter and Facebook shares throughout the 2016 presidential election cycle reveals that the most prevalent false narratives at that time—the "deep state" theory, the claims of voter fraud, the Seth Rich murder conspiracy, and the Clintons' alleged involvement in pedophilia—were fed and sustained primarily by the Republican political leadership and the leading conservative media outlets. As Benkler, Faris, and Roberts conclude, it is "[t]he right wing of the American media ecosystem [that] has been the breeding ground for conspiracy theory and disinformation, and a significant point of vulnerability in our capacity, as a country and a democracy, to resist disinformation and propaganda" (Ibid.: p. 354; see also Chapter II). As this work has also demonstrated, Fox News—which remains the most trusted news source among Republicans (Jurkowitz et al. 2020)—has alone long propagated a number of false and conspiratorial claims including those that inaccurately dispute the existence of anthropogenic climate change and cast it as a left-wing plot to overtake the country or that undermine the severity of and danger posed by the coronavirus pandemic

claiming it was unleashed deliberately to hurt former President Trump at the polls. Also, within the first two weeks following the 2020 presidential election, the channel's opinion hosts as well as news anchors made baseless accusations of voter fraud and cheating on 774 separate occasions, thereby undermining the accuracy of official results certifying Joe Biden's victory (*On the Media* 2021). Conservative media's continued promotion of conspiracies alleging that voting equipment companies Dominion Voting Systems and Smartmatic rigged the election results to hurt Donald Trump in key states eventually led to billion-dollar defamation lawsuits filed by the two firms against "disinformation campaign" waged by Fox News and Newsmax (Birkeland 2021; Chappell and Folkenflik 2021).

The popular belief in social media's primary role in the spread of disinformation has been further challenged by the developments regarding the far-right QAnon conspiracy. Disproven, discredited, and commonly called a cult, QAnon has alleged that "a secret cabal of Satan-worshiping cannibalistic pedophiles [is] running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotted against former U.S. president Donald Trump while he was in office" (QAnon n.d.). After its followers were reported to have engaged in a number of violent incidents, including the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol, major social media platforms began to more aggressively moderate the content disseminated by accounts promoting the conspiracy. Yet the online crackdown has not prevented QAnon's resonance and spread. The conspiracy and its adherents have been defended by conservative media figures such as Fox News' Tucker Carlson (Bond 2020; *On the Media* 2021) and, as evident in the person of Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, elected to the US Congress on the Republican ticket (Levin 2020). The Capitol insurrection, in which a number of QAnon supporters as well as GOP officials reportedly participated (Mathias 2021), has, too,

become the subject of conspiracies propagated offline. As claimed by Michigan's highest ranking Republican Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey during a meeting with the party's officials in Hillsdale County, the January 6 attack, which claimed lives of five people and injured over one hundred officers, was "staged," a "hoax," and not carried out by Trump supporters (Diaz 2021; Hendrickson and Boucher 2021). The sentiment has been shared by the executive committee of the Oregon Republican Party whose resolution passed on January 18, 2021 characterized the storming of the Capitol as a "false flag" operation aimed at discrediting Trump and "[advancing] the Democrat goal of seizing total power" (Berman 2021).

Besides challenging the effectiveness of the existing anti-disinformation efforts, the prevalence of falsehoods and conspiracy theories within the ranks of one of the two main political coalitions in the US might also complicate the application of the proposed trust-enhancing steps aimed at combating polarization and exclusion in the media. Advised to better reflect the diversity of the country's communities and viewpoints in their reporting as well as newsrooms, news organizations need to develop awareness of the asymmetrical impact that the implementation of the said measures is likely to have on the American public. As demonstrated in this work's earlier chapters, when the press increases the visibility of scientist and expert voices in its reporting on matters such as climate change, it is likely to receive recognition from and improve its standing among progressives. Simultaneously, however, the very same step is not equally likely to gain appreciation from and remedy the low levels of media trust among conservatives who, with their tendency to discredit climate scientists and their research, oppose such reporting as inaccurate, "alarmist" and propagandist. On the other hand, when news reporters, seeking to reflect the viewpoints popular on the right, decide to increase the presence of voices that deny

the science of climate change, the press may receive appreciation among conservatives but is very likely to lose confidence on the left. Moreover, such a step would also compromise other recommendations intended to rebuild public media trust, particularly the increased commitment to accuracy in reporting. The media's inclusion of unsubstantiated assertions that undermine climate science risks the further spread and amplification of not only the inaccurate claims themselves, but also "false equivalencies" between the majority of scientists and a handful of the so-called 'climate contrarians,' resulting in a highly misleading image of the reality of climate science and climate change. Yet if, out of commitment to increased accuracy in reporting, climate coverage fact-checks the voices representative of the climate "denial discourse" (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007) or does not include them at all, the press is likely to lose trust among conservatives who, not seeing their viewpoints represented in the news, consider it biased, one-sided and left-wing. Such asymmetries, applicable also to the coverage of issues other than climate change (see Chapter V), should therefore be factored in by those attempting to counter polarization and disinformation by increasing the presence and visibility of diverse viewpoints in the media. Future trust-boosting efforts should also take into account the prospect that introducing people to diverse views and voices, especially in a virtual setting, might not necessarily lead to a decrease in political polarization. In fact, as determined by Bail et al. (2018), exposure to opposing viewpoints on social media can be counterproductive and *exacerbate*, rather than reduce, political polarization among the users. Such "backfire effects" are also characterized by asymmetries as they are "not statistically significant" among Democrats but have an impact among Republicans who become "substantially more conservative posttreatment" (Ibid.: p. 9216). Additionally, the findings challenge the currently popular narrative that points

to the *lack* of exposure to opposing views among the users of social media as the main driver of political polarization.

As made evident by the obstacles and challenges discussed above, developing realistic responses to the crisis of media trust will require a more nuanced understanding of the problem of disinformation. Too narrow a focus on the novel and technological as the main source of the information disorder risks more misdiagnoses of both the problems and adequate responses. Future attempts to restore trust in the mainstream media by countering the epistemic crisis should, therefore, be based on the improved understanding of how disinformation is perceived and interpreted by the public, what its real sources and drivers are, and how it interacts with other problematic phenomena such as political polarization.

6.3. Adopting new funding models

In the wake of major global events such as the 2008-2009 market crash and the bloom of the online sphere, the American media industry, which is dominated by corporate and for-profit entities, has faced numerous financial challenges that have severely affected news organizations' very survivability. With the number of journalists and media outlets in decline, the resulting harmful cuts in or even the complete lack of original professional reporting has left many communities, especially at the local level, in the so-called "news deserts." Moreover, faced with financial problems, the profit-driven media have been reducing or altogether cutting the expensive and time-consuming quality coverage in favor of less demanding content. Given the evident vulnerability of American news media system, Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019) has declared that "market solutions alone cannot provide the level

of consistent, reliable quality news and information for people to be informed and engaged with their communities.” In its discussions on the ways in which to restore public trust in the media, the Commission observes that “[n]ew business models are needed to ensure the survival of quality journalism at both the national and local level” (Ibid.: p. 90). The recommended steps, aimed at “[i]ncreasing] support for quality journalism,” advocate nonprofit and public benefit models, including Community News Organizations (CNOs), Community Information Corporations (CIC), and Public Benefit Corporations (Ibid.: p. 91-92). According to the Commission, a significant role “in advancing the future practice of journalism” and “[h]elping] ensure the development of news outlets in underserved communities as well as at the national level” should be played by foundations and their philanthropic investments (Ibid.: p. 90). Citing Newman and Fletcher from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, NiemanLab’s Bilton (2017) similarly advocates the need for a change in the media’s funding mechanisms, but points to a different model. Focusing mainly on the digital realm, he advocates “[a] shift away from digital advertising and toward more reader-supported business models.” According to him, such a change “could help news organizations focus less on click generation and more on deeper investigations,” which in turn would “help them build trust with readers.”

Recommendations that advocate the freeing of news organizations from the pressures and forces of the market appear to have a real chance of successfully responding to decline in confidence in the mainstream media among progressive Americans. As shown throughout this work, opposition to the US media system’s overwhelmingly corporate and for-profit structure, and particularly its impact on the quality of produced reporting, has been the dominant rationale for left-wing distrust of

the mainstream press. Moreover, progressives have systematically stressed the need for, and even attempted to implement, a nonprofit model of the US press since the current commercial structure was officially codified with the passing of the 1934 Communications Act (see Chapter III).

However, although oriented toward the same goal, left-wing voices have long pointed to the insufficiency of solutions such as those proposed by Bilton and Knight Commission. The audience-supported model, while generally welcome, has been perceived as restricted by “an upper limit that is far below the money [that is] needed” to push the American media landscape in the nonprofit, public service direction (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. 86). Likewise, although not entirely opposed by progressives, the foundation-funding model has also been questioned as a realistically stable source of revenue for the next generation of journalism. Although capable of “keeping a newspaper afloat” in individual cities, foundations—with their grants to nonprofit news organizations systematically amounting to only a fraction of what a *single* major newspaper, such as the *New York Times*, actually requires for its annual operation—have been considered unable to provide a “viable replacement for the broad network of commercial support of newspapers in the United States” (McChesney and Nichols 2011: p. 87-88). Given the shortcomings of the ‘foundation solution,’ progressive voices have advocated “a more systemic approach” to the problem of “failing commercial models of the press,” namely “policies that remove or minimize market pressures on news media” (Pickard 2011: p. 79, 84). While progressives do recognize foundations’ role in the rise of “[p]romising nonprofit news experiments like ProPublica, The Intercept, and the Marshall Project,” they nevertheless urge the United States to “join the rest of the democratic world by funding a strong public media system” (Pickard 2017: p. 209). Even though the Congress did

pass the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, the established public media infrastructure has been “grossly underfunded” (Pickard 2011: p. 87), especially when compared to other developed nations (McChesney and Nichols 2011; see also Chapter III). According to left-wing voices, “funding for public media should be both guaranteed over the long term and carefully shielded from political pressures” (Pickard 2011: p. 87), conditions that are not sufficiently fulfilled by the existing infrastructure. To provide the US public media system with economic and political autonomy as well as adequate resources, its funding should be “[removed] from the congressional appropriation process” (Pickard 2011: p. 87) and raised to \$30-35 billion dollars annually (McChesney and Nichols 2011; Pickard 2020). Such a sum, a substantial increase compared to \$445 million in federal appropriations in 2020 (Corporation for Public Broadcasting n.d.), would bring the US public media budget closer to what much smaller countries such as Finland and Denmark spend in the form of public media subsidies (McChesney and Nichols 2011). As envisioned by progressives, the money would ideally come directly from the US Treasury or a dedicated trust supported by multiple revenue streams. Some possible sources of funding, inspired by solutions adopted in other western nations, might include license fees similar to those in Britain, Japan, and Germany as well as levies on electronics and devices such as those adopted in Denmark (Pickard 2011). Other possible funding options include “tax vouchers, repurposing international broadcasting subsidies, proceeds from spectrum sales, and taxing platform monopolies such as Facebook and Google” (Pickard 2020). With businesses currently being allowed to deduct the cost of advertising from their taxable income, progressive voices have also introduced the idea of a sales tax on advertising. If set at 2 percent, such a tax could generate between five to six billion dollars each year that could be allocated to support public media and other nonprofit,

nonmarket news organizations (McChesney and Nichols 2011). While acknowledging the extent of the media investment they advocate, progressive voices have characterized it as a *requirement* in a representative democracy. Warning of “the enormous costs to society if [the US] continue[s] without a functioning press system,” Pickard (2020) speaks of professional quality journalism as a social “necessity,” not a “want,” and characterizes the roughly 30 billion dollar budget proposal as “actually a modest [one],” particularly when compared to “the outlays for recent tax cuts and military expenditures.” In addition to funding, the broader structural reform advocated by progressives would also focus on, among others, “breaking up media conglomerates,” “blocking mergers to prevent monopolies and oligopolies from forming,” as well as “installing federal, state, and local regulations that prevent commercial imperatives from unduly shaping the form and dissemination of news and information” (Pickard 2018: p. 199; see also Bagdikian 2004; McChesney and Nichols 2011). As believed by those on the left, such steps would allow the American public to enjoy a nonprofit, nonmarket, public-oriented media system that is not only free from commercial pressures, but also universally accessible and representative.

As such, while increasing the philanthropic and charitable support for the nonmarket models of the media has a potential to resonate among progressives and positively impact their levels of trust in the mainstream press, it is most likely to be considered just the first of many steps required to push the American media landscape in the nonprofit, public service direction in an impactful way.

Unlike on the left, it is more challenging to envision how the proposed foundation- and individual donation-based solutions could be effective in restoring confidence in the mainstream press among conservative Americans. The issue of the media’s business models and their impact on the quality of reporting has neither been

among the causes of conservative distrust of the established media, nor has it constituted an obstacle to trust-building on the right where the most trusted news source has long been the corporate-owned, commercial, and for-profit Fox News Channel. Furthermore, the remedying potential of the proposed changes in the mainstream news organizations' financial structures appears limited also by the very nature of right-wing media distrust. Hardened and deeply rooted in conservatives' fundamental unease about contemporary US culture and politics (see Chapters II, IV, and V), right-wing distrust has been ideologically motivated and as such beyond the media's direct control. Therefore, it is quite unlikely that recommendations focused on business models and financial structures of news organizations could effectively address distrust that originates *outside of* the realm of media and journalism.

As indicated above, the adoption of philanthropy- and charity-based funding schemes by news organizations would most likely have a positive impact on the levels of public trust in the mainstream media. However, those attempting to implement the proposed measures are advised to reckon with different levels of effectiveness that the step is likely to have among progressive and conservative Americans. Specifically, while among the former, the recommended steps might be effective only partially, among the latter they might have no effect at all.

6.4. New(s) literacies: public contribution to the revival of media trust

In the face of the rapid evolution of the news media landscape, particularly since the advent of the Internet and social media, discussions about the crisis of media trust have given much attention to the issue of literacy. As explained by Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019), “[t]he fundamental literacies of the 21st

century,” also known as “new literacies,” include information, digital, news, media, and civic literacies, all of which “begin with basic literacy skills in reading and writing” (p. 134). To restore public trust in the news media, many believe that the levels of new literacies among Americans need to be improved. According to NPR’s former public editor Elizabeth Jensen (2017), the need for investments in news literacy is made evident by the fact that “some listeners have no idea how stories come together, the rigor with which reporters approach a topic, the fact checking, [and] the levels of editing.” The sentiment is shared by Gallup’s Brandon Busteed who similarly advocates “new civic education in media (...) and news [literacies]” that “would include lessons on how to be smart consumers of news,” “how to be critical thinkers,” and “how to do things like identify news sources.” According to Busteed, education in new literacies “should start at the K-12 level and continue through higher education” (Tilis 2018). The need to improve the levels of digital literacy has also been addressed by Knight Commission (2019), which has urged state and local educational authorities to provide their citizens with skills necessary to “access, analyze, and act on digital information” and “navigate online safely and responsibly” (p. 9). As argued by the Commission, individuals who lack new literacies are both “easier to harass, mislead or defraud online” and “less able to assess the reliability of information sources in order to tell fact from fiction, and are thus less likely to trust institutions based on facts” (Ibid.: p. 135). Therefore, in its proposal for the “moonshot goals for media and digital literacies,” the Commission recommends that

[a]ll young people, even before the legal age of 13 for participating in social media, should know enough about digital literacy to conduct themselves safely on social media platforms. Specifically, young users need to know the fundamentals of cyber safety, spam and hoaxes; understand the difference between news and advertisements, and news and opinions; and be able to question the accuracy of news and information they find online—and offline. All individuals should be ‘digitally literate citizens’ by the time they reach voting

age. Accordingly, by the age of 18, individuals should be able to find and make use of the information necessary to be knowledgeable voters (Ibid.: p. 135).

The need for voters to be knowledgeable is likewise stressed by Firestone (2016), who points to building civic literacy as one of the “steps toward rebuilding trust in the media.” Stressing the currently insufficient “discretion” on the part of citizens whose “responsibility” it is “to understand the basics of American civics, and to educate themselves on the candidates and issues,” Firestone argues that improving the levels of civic literacy might need to precede media literacy on the path to the revival of media trust.

The advancement of solutions such as media literacy education has not, however, remained unchallenged among scholars. As argued by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), there is little evidence “that improvement on the ability to answer test or classroom media literacy questions actually translates into adoption of critical viewing and listening when students consume media in the real world.” In addition to the “dearth of evidence,” the scholars caution that media literacy training might actually have *negative* implications, including for the future of media trust. Their observation is based on findings by technology and social media scholar danah boyd who, after years of research with youth in media, has hypothesized that “media literacy efforts have trained media consumers to be *distrustful* of all media and in a perverse way *less discerning* about what is credible and what is not” (Ibid.: p. 378, emphasis added). However, given not only the relative novelty of educational initiatives aimed at the advancement of media literacy, but also lack of their consistent and integrated implementation nationwide (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy 2019), perhaps more and more long-term research is needed in order to determine

with greater confidence whether or not the premise of media literacy education ought to be discouraged altogether.

Efforts to increase the levels of new literacies among Americans, if successfully implemented and pursued, could benefit not only the news media, but also the overall democratic process itself. The improved understanding of the government, governing principles, and citizen responsibilities would help the public to become more knowledgeable voters and could encourage increased civic engagement. Together with the advancement of news, digital, and media literacies, such knowledge could help Americans to not only better understand the intricacies of the constantly evolving media landscape, but also better shield themselves against information abuse and manipulation, both online and offline. Perhaps the greatest asset of the new literacies approach, especially when compared to other proposed solutions aimed at rebuilding media trust, is that it offers a real chance to elevate the status of facts, expertise, and empirical evidence that has been tarnished over the years, most visibly in the ‘post-truth’ era. When introduced as early as kindergarten, the teaching of critical thinking and the skills needed to assess the reliability of information and discern what is and is not true might help to gradually weaken the dangerous spread of “alternative facts” and “truthiness.” Since the fact-determining tendency that favors ideological congruence over evidence is among the factors driving media distrust in the US, particularly on the right (see Chapters II, IV, and V), the advancement of educational measures intended to cultivate and strengthen the evidence-based pursuit and understanding of facts could have a positive impact on the levels of public trust in the news media. It could also help to rebuild the lost common informational ground and shared understanding of reality, which, in turn, could increase the chances of the

effective implementation of other proposed media trust-building measures, in particular those aimed at increasing news organizations' commitment to accurate reporting and fighting disinformation (see 6.1. and 6.2., respectively).

6.5. Conclusions

In the face of the public's depressed media evaluations, the search for potential ways in which to reverse the trend has become an urgent matter. The current recommendations intended to restore Americans' confidence in the mainstream press address a variety of significant issues and developments, ranging from the quality of the news coverage and the fight against disinformation and political polarization, to the financial structure of news organizations, to the levels of new literacies among the public.

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, the effectiveness of some of the recommended measures is likely to be challenged by partisan and ideological asymmetries that define both media distrust as well as the broader political landscape. While this should not discourage the enactment of the proposed trust-building solutions, expectations for their effectiveness might need to be adjusted. Moreover, future discussions about distrust of the mainstream media in the US need to recognize its asymmetrical nature and further potential solutions to rebuild media trust should be developed accordingly. It is only when the full extent of the problem is understood and accounted for that the most adequate solutions can be developed, and their effectiveness realistically assessed.

CHAPTER VII

A short outlook on future research

This doctoral project provides a new understanding of distrust of the mainstream news media in the United States and makes an important contribution to the fields of media studies and political science. The dissertation offers the first comprehensive analysis of progressive distrust of the mainstream media as well as the first comparative analysis of distrust of the mainstream media on the American right and left. By exposing the asymmetries that define distrust of the mainstream media among conservative and progressive Americans, the project accentuates the need to move beyond the unified theories of media distrust. This has important implications particularly for the current and future efforts aimed at restoring public confidence in the US media, in that once the asymmetrical nature of distrust is broadly recognized, solutions to the trust crisis can be developed, assessed, and implemented accordingly.

Prompting further questions pertaining to media dis/trust, the project and its findings also point to other important research paths worth pursuing in the future. The first subject that invites further investigation deals with the impact of distrust of the mainstream news media on the vitality of democracy. More specifically, what is a particular level at which distrust of the mainstream media becomes dangerous to democracy and the overall societal development in a country like the United States? Can it be quantified in percentage points? Although the declining levels of media trust have caused much concern among many scholars, analysts, and commentators, a substantive and comprehensive examination of the 'trust threshold' has yet to be conducted. Furthermore, while the quantity of distrust has attracted a lot of attention, its quality has not. Such an omission has led the debate on public distrust of the mainstream media to overlook the possibility that the danger posed to the democratic

order by media distrust might be definable not only by its levels, but also—if not more so—its nature and depth. The very high levels of trust in the mainstream media are hardly desirable a condition in a democratic society. Given the US media's history of misrepresenting the facts, even in the most pivotal and consequential moments in history (e.g., the invasion of Iraq), a dose of skepticism that keeps the public alert and prompts it to occasionally fact-check the media is not only understandable, but also healthy. In the face of such a dynamic, however, the 'danger' of distrust can be somewhat averted. As this project has shown, if the mainstream media commit themselves to producing coverage that accurately and dependably reflects reality—a condition of indisputable value in a healthy democracy—they can (re)gain at least some public trust. The same, however, does not seem to apply to distrust that is shaped by ideology-driven and non-media-related forces. With its most influential factor being ideological conformity, such distrust is heavily limited in its remedying potential and poses danger to democracy as it exacerbates the epistemic crisis and information disorder within the society. Stressing the need for further exploration of those issues, this doctoral project encourages further research on the quality and the substantive character of distrust as well as closer and more frequent collaboration between empirical media and communication studies and democratic theory, including normative democratic theory.

Another matter worthy of future research focuses on how distrust of the American mainstream media compares to distrust of other pillars of American democracy. Declining levels of trust have been recorded across the US institutions, but how exactly does distrust of the media compare to distrust of the government, science, and other expert-based institutions? Is the distrust logic and dynamic among those entities alike or different? Do the asymmetries that define distrust of the

mainstream media also characterize distrust of other institutions or not? To pursue those and further questions, this project calls for more cross-sectional research.

Despite the project's exclusive focus on the United States, its findings provide new and valuable insights that could inspire similar research in other countries and contexts, particularly those experiencing political and ideological polarization. This is especially important in the face of the growing authoritarian tendencies in many democracies around the world, which makes the further investigation of media distrust even more pressing an issue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "2019–20 Australian Bushfire Season." *Wikipedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2019%E2%80%9320_Australian_bushfire_season&oldid=1021544638
- Aaron, Craig. 2011. "Public Media to the Rescue?" In *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, eds. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard. New York: New Press : Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 340–50.
- Abutaleb, Yasmeeen, Philip Rucker, Josh Dawsey, and Robert Costa. 2020. "Trump's Den of Dissent: Inside the White House Task Force as Coronavirus Surges." *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-den-of-dissent-inside-the-white-house-task-force-as-coronavirus-surges/2020/10/19/7ff8ee6a-0a6e-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d_story.html
- Alterman, Eric. 2010. "What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News." *Sacred Heart University Review* 22(1): Article 2.
- Ankel, Sophia. 2020. "Photos Show How Shortages Are Forcing Doctors and Nurses to Improvise Coronavirus PPE from Snorkel Masks, Pool Noodles, and Trash Bags." *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/photos-show-doctors-nurses-improvising-due-to-lack-of-ppe-2020-4>
- Askenazi, David. 2018. "How Americans Really Feel about the Media." *Knight Foundation*. <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/how-americans-really-feel-about-the-media>
- Avlon, John, Michael Warren, and Brandon Miller. 2020. "Atlas Push to 'slow the Testing down' Tracks with Dramatic Decline in One Key State." *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/29/politics/atlas-desantis-testing-covid-florida/index.html>
- Bagdikian, Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bail, Christopher A. et al. 2018. "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(37): 9216–21.
- Barbaro, Michael. 2020. *Why Europe Is Flattening the Curve (and the U.S. Isn't)*. The Daily. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/podcasts/the-daily/coronavirus-second-wave-us-europe.html>.
- Bauer, AJ, and Anthony Nadler. 2018. "Conservatives Trust Conservative Media. Here's Why." *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/conservatives-trust-conservative-media-heres-why.php
- Bauerlein, Monika. 2018. "It's Time for Journalism to Stand for Something." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2018/09/journalism-that-stands-for-something/>

- BBC. 2021. "Nobel Peace Prize: Journalists Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov Share Award." *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58841973>
- Beaumont, Peter. 2020. "Where Did Covid-19 Come from? What We Know about Its Origins." *The Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/01/could-covid-19-be-manmade-what-we-know-about-origins-trump-chinese-lab-coronavirus>
- Beck. 2009a. April 23, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2009b. December 2, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2009c. December 7, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2009d. February 5, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2009e. March 10, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010a. April 29, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010b. May 10, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Beer, Tommy. 2020. "Research Determines Protests Did Not Cause Spike In Coronavirus Cases." *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/07/01/research-determines-protests-did-not-cause-spike-in-coronavirus-cases/>
- Bellafante, Ginia. 2020. "A Beloved Bar Owner Was Skeptical About the Virus. Then He Took a Cruise." *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/nyregion/coronavirus-jjbubbles-joe-joyce.html>
- Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, Brian. 2014. "Marco Rubio Says Human Activity Isn't Causing Climate Change." *The Los Angeles Times*.
<https://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/politicsnow/la-pn-rubio-denies-climate-change-20140511-story.html>
- Bennett, W Lance, and Steven Livingston. 2018. "The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions." *European Journal of Communication* 33(2): 122–39.
- Bennett, W. Lance, and William Serrin. 2007. "The Watchdog Role of the Press." In *Media Power in Politics*, ed. Doris A. Graber. Washington, D.C: CQ Press, 326–36.
- Benson, Rodney. 2011. "Public Funding and Journalistic Independence: What Does Research Tell Us?" In *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, eds. Robert W.

McChesney and Victor Pickard. New York: New Press : Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 314–19.

———. 2017. “The New American Media Landscape.” In *The Death of Public Knowledge? How Free Markets Destroy the General Intellect*, ed. Aeron Davis. London: Goldsmiths Press, 69–85.

Benson, Rodney, Matthew Powers, and Timothy Neff. 2017. “Public Media Autonomy and Accountability: Best and Worst Policy Practices in 12 Leading Democracies.” *International Journal of Communication* 11: 1–11.

Berman, Russell. 2021. “How a ‘False Flag’ Cry Has Divided Republicans in Oregon.” *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/02/republicans-oregon-capitol-riot-false-flag/617988/>

Bernheim, B. Douglas, Nina Buchmann, Zach Freitas-Groff, and Sebastián Otero. 2020. *The Effects of Large Group Meetings on the Spread of COVID-19: The Case of Trump Rallies*. Department of Economics: Stanford University.
https://sebotero.github.io/papers/COVIDrallies_10_30_2000.pdf.

Bilton, Ricardo. 2017. “Why Don’t People Trust the News and Social Media? A New Report Lets Them Explain in Their Own Words.” *Nieman Lab*.
<https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/11/why-dont-people-trust-the-news-and-social-media-a-new-report-lets-them-explain-in-their-own-words/>

Birkeland, Bente. 2021. “Election Defamation Lawsuits Open New Front In Fight Against Disinformation.” *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/2021/03/27/981683224/election-defamation-lawsuits-open-new-front-in-fight-against-disinformation>

Blasco, Andrea, and Francesco Sobbrío. 2012. “Competition and Commercial Media Bias.” *Telecommunications Policy* 36(5): 434–47.

Bond, Shannon. 2020. “Conservatives Flock To Mercer-Funded Parler, Claim Censorship On Facebook And Twitter.” *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/2020/11/14/934833214/conservatives-flock-to-mercero-funded-parler-claim-censorship-on-facebook-and-twi>

Borger, Julian. 2020. “US Military Chief: ‘Weight of Evidence’ That Covid-19 Did Not Originate in a Lab.” *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/covid-19-origin-lab-general-mark-milley>

Borger, Julian, Lauren Gambino, and Sabrina Siddiqui. 2017. “Tech Giants Face Congress as Showdown over Russia Election Meddling Looms.” *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/22/facebook-google-twitter-congress-hearing-trump-russia-election>

Boseley, Sarah. 2020. “Origin Story: What Do We Know Now about Where Coronavirus Came From?” *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/12/where-did-coronavirus-come-from-covid>

- Boykoff, Maxwell T, and Jules M Boykoff. 2004. "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the US Prestige Press." *Global Environmental Change* 14(2): 125–36.
- . 2007. "Climate Change and Journalistic Norms: A Case-Study of US Mass-Media Coverage." *Geoforum* 38(6): 1190–1204.
- Bozell, Leo. 1992. *Why Conservatives Should Be Optimistic About the Media*. Washington DC, USA: the Heritage Foundation.
<https://www.heritage.org/node/10022/print-display>
- Braun, Stephen, Hope Yen, and Calvin Woodward. 2020. "AP FACT CHECK: Trump and the Virus-Era China Ban That Isn't." *AP NEWS*.
<https://apnews.com/article/d227b34b168e576bf5068b92a03c003d>
- Brenan, Megan. 2019. "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Edges Down to 41%." *Gallup.com*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>
- . 2020. "Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media." *Gallup.com*.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx>
- Brenan, Megan, and Helen Stubbs. 2020. "News Media Viewed as Biased but Crucial to Democracy." *Gallup.com*.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/316574/news-media-viewed-biased-crucial-democracy.aspx>
- Brock, David. 2005. *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy*. Reprint edition. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Brownstein, Ronald. 2020. "How Republicans and Democrats Think About Coronavirus - The Atlantic." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/03/how-republicans-and-democrats-think-about-coronavirus/608395/>
- Brüggemann, Michael, and Sven Engesser. 2017. "Beyond False Balance: How Interpretive Journalism Shapes Media Coverage of Climate Change." *Global Environmental Change* 42: 58–67.
- Brumfiel, Geoff. 2021. "'Lab Leak' Probe Welcomed But Many Scientists Still Believe It's A Natural Virus." *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/05/28/1001319014/many-scientists-still-think-the-coronavirus-came-from-nature>
- Bruns, Axel. 2019. *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press.
- Bryant, Miranda. 2020. "Six People Charged in Plot to Kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us->

news/2020/oct/08/six-people-charged-plot-kidnap-michigan-governor-gretchen-whitmer

- Bump, Philip. 2015. "Ted Cruz Compares Climate Change Activists to 'Flat-Earthers.' Where to Begin? - The Washington Post." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/03/25/ted-cruz-compares-climate-change-activists-to-flat-earthers-where-to-begin/>
- . 2020. "Analysis | Trump's Efforts to Play down Risk Posed by Coronavirus Have Worked — on Republicans." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/11/trumps-efforts-downplay-risk-posed-by-coronavirus-has-worked-on-republicans/>
- Burki, Talha. 2020. "The Origin of SARS-CoV-2." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 20(9): 1018–19.
- Burns, Alexander, Jonathan Martin, and Maggie Haberman. 2020. "As Trump Ignores Virus Crisis, Republicans Start to Break Ranks." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/19/us/politics/republicans-contradict-trump-coronavirus.html>
- Butler, Anthea. 2012. "From Republican Party to Republican Religion: The New Political Evangelists of the Right." *Political Theology* 13(5): 634–51.
- Butterfield, Fox. 1985. "STANFORD PRESIDENT UPHOLDS DOCTORAL STUDENT'S EXPULSION." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/02/us/stanford-president-upholds-doctoral-student-s-expulsion.html>
- Bycoffe, Aaron, Christopher Groskopf, and Dhrumil Mehta. 2020. "How Americans View The Coronavirus Crisis And Trump's Response." *FiveThirtyEight*. <http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/coronavirus-polls/>
- Carper, Alison. 1997. "Marketing News." In *Politics and the Press: The News Media and Their Influences*, ed. Pippa Norris. Boulder, Colo. [u.a.]: Rienner, 45–66.
- Carroll, Lauren. 2017. "Four Things to Know about Russia's 2016 Misinformation Campaign." *Politifact*. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/apr/04/four-things-know-about-russias-2016-misinformation/>
- Cassino, Dan. 2016. *Fox News and American Politics: How One Channel Shapes American Politics and Society*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group.
- Chandra, Ravi. 2020. "Calling COVID-19 a 'Chinese Virus' or 'Kung Flu' Is Racist." *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-pacific-heart/202003/calling-covid-19-chinese-virus-or-kung-flu-is-racist>
- Chappell, Bill, and David Folkenflik. 2021. "Election Tech Company Sues Fox News, Giuliani And Others For \$2.7 Billion." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/04/964097006/election-tech-company-sues-fox-news-giuliani-and-others-for-2-7-billion>

- Chávez, Christopher. 2017. "Why America's Public Media Can't Do Its Job." *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/why-americas-public-media-cant-do-its-job-75044>
- Chernozhukov, Victor, Hiroyuki Kasahara, and Paul Schrimpf. 2020. "Causal Impact of Masks, Policies, Behavior on Early Covid-19 Pandemic in the US." *Covid Economics* (35). <https://cepr.org/content/covid-economics-vetted-and-real-time-papers-0>
- Chesley, Kate. 2020. "Faculty Senate Condemns COVID-19 Actions of Hoover's Scott Atlas." *Stanford News*. <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/11/20/faculty-senate-condemns-actions-hoover-fellow-scott-atlas/>
- Chinazzi, Matteo et al. 2020. "The Effect of Travel Restrictions on the Spread of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak." *Science* 368(6489): 395–400.
- Chiu, Allyson. 2020. "Trump Has No Qualms about Calling Coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus.' That's a Dangerous Attitude, Experts Say." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/20/coronavirus-trump-chinese-virus/>
- Chotiner, Isaac. 2020. "The Contrarian Coronavirus Theory That Informed the Trump Administration." *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-contrarian-coronavirus-theory-that-informed-the-trump-administration>
- Chu, Derek K. et al. 2020. "Physical Distancing, Face Masks, and Eye Protection to Prevent Person-to-Person Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *The Lancet* 395(10242): 1973–87.
- "Climatic Research Unit Email Controversy." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Climatic_Research_Unit_email_controversy&oldid=1022534446
- CNBC. 2021. "Social Media Platform Parler Is Back Online on 'Independent Technology.'" *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/15/social-media-platform-parler-back-online-after-being-banned-by-major-tech-companies.html>
- Cockburn, Alexander, and Jeffrey St. Clair, eds. 2004. *Imperial Crusades: Iraq, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia: A Diary of Three Wars*. London ; New York: Verso.
- Cohen, Jeff. 2019. "Corporate Media Bias on 2020 Democratic Race Already in High Gear." *Common Dreams*. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/01/14/corporate-media-bias-2020-democratic-race-already-high-gear>
- Condon, Bernard, Jennifer Peltz, and Jim Mustian. 2020. "AP Count: Over 4,500 Virus Patients Sent to NY Nursing Homes." *AP NEWS*. <https://apnews.com/article/health-us-news-ap-top-news-weekend-reads-virus-outbreak-5ebc0ad45b73a899efa81f098330204c>

- Cook, Nancy. 2020. "Trump Elevates Scott Atlas, a Doctor with a Rosier Coronavirus Outlook." *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/17/trump-scott-atlas-coronavirus-doctor-396741>
- Cooper, Mark. 2011. "The Future of Journalism: Addressing Pervasive Market Failure with Public Policy." In *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, eds. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard. New York: New Press : Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 320–39.
- Coppins, McKay. 2017. "The Deep Republican Roots of Trump's Media Bashing." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/trump-press-crackdown/542670/>
- . 2020. "The Conservatives Trying to Ditch Fake News." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/01/dispatch-tries-sell-real-news-right/605860/>
- Corn, David. 2020. "Trump's Media Attacks Are Always Shameful. But in the Middle of the Coronavirus Crisis, They're Dangerous." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/03/trump-campaign-email-attacks-media-coronavirus/>
- "Coronavirus Disease 2019." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Coronavirus_disease_2019&oldid=987294572
- Corporation for Public Broadcasting. "CPB Operating Budget." <https://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials/budget>
- Cort, Todd. 2016. "The Electoral College Is Thwarting Our Ability to Battle Global Warming." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/12/19/the-electoral-college-is-thwarting-our-ability-to-battle-global-warming/>
- Costa, Robert. 2020. "As Much of America Takes Drastic Action, Some Republicans Remain Skeptical of the Severity of the Coronavirus Pandemic." *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-much-of-america-takes-drastic-action-some-republicans-remain-skeptical-of-the-severity-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/2020/03/17/f8b199c8-6786-11ea-b313-df458622c2cc_story.html
- Creitz, Charles. 2019. "Mark Levin: Mainstream Media Doesn't 'follow' the Democratic Party, They 'Lead' It." *Fox News*. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/mark-levin-media-democratic-party-leaders>
- Curran, James, Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund, and Inka Salovaara-Moring. 2009. "Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study." *European Journal of Communication* 24(1): 5–26.

- Cushion, Stephen. 2012. *The Democratic Value of News: Why Public Service Media Matter*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dahlberg, Lincoln. 2005. "The Corporate Colonization of Online Attention and the Marginalization of Critical Communication?" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 29(2): 160–80.
- . 2006. "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7(1): 0–0.
- Dave, Dhaval M. et al. 2020. *Black Lives Matter Protests, Social Distancing, And Covid-19*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w27408>
- Davis, Rebecca. 2020. "Did China Travel Ban Save Lives?" *NPR Visuals*. <https://apps.npr.org/liveblogs/20201007-debate/#did-china-travel-ban-save-43>
- Democracy Now!* 2003a. August 15, 2003. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2003/8/15/george_monbiot_climate_change_threatens_the
- . 2003b. April 2, 2003. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2003/4/2/target_iraq_what_the_news_media#transcript
- . 2004. August 16, 2004. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2004/8/16/global_warming_and_extreme_weather_hurricane
- . 2005. April 22, 2005. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2005/4/22/report_exxonmobil_spends_millions_funding_global
- . 2007a. September 6, 2007. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2007/9/6/how_does_the_media_cover_global
- . 2007b. July 11, 2007. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2007/7/11/storm_world_hurricanes_politics_and_the
- . 2007c. August 16, 2007. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2007/8/16/the_11th_hour_hollywood_documentary_takes
- . 2008. June 16, 2008. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2008/6/16/extreme_weather_global_warming_floods_in
- . 2009. October 20, 2009. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2009/10/20/pr_executive_james_hoggan_on_james

- . 2010a. December 28, 2010. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2010/12/28/from_snowstorms_to_heat_waves_how
- . 2010b. August 10, 2010. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2010/8/10/meteorologist_record_heat_wave_in_russia
- . 2010c. November 30, 2010. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2010/11/30/noam_chomsky_on_the_economy_us_midterm_elections_climate_change_haiti_and_more
- . 2011. April 15, 2011. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2011/4/15/as_congress_slashes_epa_climate_funding
- . 2012. July 20, 2012. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2012/7/20/climate_parents_for_kids_future_m_ark
- . 2014. January 7, 2014. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2014/1/7/from_sandy_to_haiyan_year_of
- . 2015. October 5, 2015. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/5/naomi_klein_avi_lewis_climate_change
- . 2016. October 24, 2016. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2016/10/24/meet_the_journalist_facing_45_years
- . 2017. April 29, 2017. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/live/coming_up_on_april_29th_democracy
- . 2019a. May 2, 2019. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2019/5/2/a_debate_on_maduro_two_venezuelans#transcript
- . 2019b. July 24, 2019. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2019/7/24/michael_mann_climate_crisis_media_coverage
- . 2019c. September 9, 2019. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2019/9/9/hurricane_dorian_climate_change_link_underreported
- . 2019d. September 16, 2019. New York City.
https://www.democracynow.org/2019/9/16/covering_climate_now_media_project

- . 2020a. February 27, 2020. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/2/27/climate_crisis_coronavirus_infections_disease_outbreaks
- . 2020b. April 16, 2020. New York City. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/4/16/arundhati_roy_coronavirus_india
- Diamond, Sara. 1998. *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*. New York ; London: Guilford Press.
- Diaz, Jaclyn. 2021. "Michigan's Top Republican Falsely Calls U.S. Capitol Attack A 'Hoax.'" *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966207859/michigans-top-republican-calls-u-s-capitol-attack-a-hoax>
- DiResta, Renée. 2020. "Right-Wing Social Media Finalizes Its Divorce From Reality." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/right-wing-social-media-finalizes-its-divorce-reality/617177/>
- Drum, Kevin. 2011. "Views Differ on Shape of Earth, Climate Edition." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2011/09/views-differ-shape-earth-climate-edition/>
- . 2020. "The New York Times Needs to Be More Honest about Trump and the Coronavirus Pandemic." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2020/03/the-new-york-times-needs-to-be-more-honest-about-trump-and-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- Dunn, Amina. 2020. "Only 24% of Trump Supporters View the Coronavirus Outbreak as a 'Very Important' Voting Issue." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/21/only-24-of-trump-supporters-view-the-coronavirus-outbreak-as-a-very-important-voting-issue/>
- Echavarri, Fernanda. 2020. "The Coronavirus Has a Disparate Impact on Black Mourning, Too." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/05/the-coronavirus-has-a-disparate-impact-on-black-grief-too/>
- Ekins, Emily. 2017. "63% of Republicans Say Journalists Are an 'Enemy of the American People.'" *Cato Institute*. <https://www.cato.org/blog/63-republicans-say-journalists-are-enemy-american-people>
- Ellman, Matthew, and Fabrizio Germano. 2009. "What Do the Papers Sell? A Model of Advertising and Media Bias." *The Economic Journal* 119(537): 680–704.
- Engelhardt, Tom. 2004. "Xtreme Weather Meets Xtreme Media Bubble." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2004/09/xtreme-weather-meets-xtreme-media-bubble/>
- . 2009. "Nobody Knows How Dry We Are." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2009/02/nobody-knows-how-dry-we-are/>

- . 2013. “Why It’s So Hard to Protest Climate Change.” *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/03/forward-on-climate-change-protests/>
- Evelyn, Kenya. 2020. “Tennessee Republican Bids to Classify CNN and Washington Post as ‘Fake News.’” *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/12/tennessee-republican-cnn-washington-post-fake-news>
- Evon, Dan. 2020. “Did Trump Suggest Injecting Disinfectants as COVID-19 Treatment?” *Snopes.com*. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-disinfectants-covid-19/>
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Media Discourse*. London: Arnold.
- Family Research Council. 2019. “Family Research Council.” <https://www.frc.org/mission-statement>
- Fang, Lee. 2015. “Cable News Edits Out Rousing Sanders Attack on Vapid Media Coverage.” *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2015/10/14/cable-news-edits-out-rousing-sanders-attack-on-vapid-media-coverage/>
- . 2016a. “CBS CEO: ‘For Us, Economically, Donald’s Place in This Election Is a Good Thing.’” *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2016/02/29/cbs-donald-trump/>
- . 2016b. “Media Executives See Huge Payday Fueled by Donald Trump’s Campaign.” *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2016/06/06/media-execs-trump/>
- Farley, Robert. 2020. “The Facts on Trump’s Travel Restrictions.” *FactCheck.org*. <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/03/the-facts-on-trumps-travel-restrictions/>
- Farzan, Antonia Noori. 2020. “Is It Racist to Call Coronavirus the ‘Wuhan Virus’? GOP Congressman’s Self-Quarantine Tweet Sparks a Debate.” *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/09/coronavirus-wuhan-virus-gosar/>
- FDA. 2020. “FDA Cautions against Use of Hydroxychloroquine or Chloroquine for COVID-19 Outside of the Hospital Setting or a Clinical Trial Due to Risk of Heart Rhythm Problems.” *U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)*. <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/fda-cautions-against-use-hydroxychloroquine-or-chloroquine-covid-19-outside-hospital-setting-or>
- Fenwick, Cody. 2019. “Why the Media Is at Risk of Repeating Its Iraq War Mistakes as the Trump Administration Zeroes in on Iran.” *AlterNet*. <https://www.alternet.org/2019/05/why-the-media-is-at-risk-of-repeating-its-iraq-war-mistakes-as-the-trump-administration-zeroes-in-on-iran/>
- Fichera, Angelo. 2020. “Flawed Comparison on Coronavirus, H1N1 Emergency Timelines.” *FactCheck.org*. <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/03/flawed-comparison-on-coronavirus-h1n1-emergency-timelines/>

- Fifield, Anna, Carol Morello, Ellen Nakashima, and Shane Harris. 2020. "China Pledges to Retaliate after U.S. Orders Closure of Its Consulate in Houston." *The Washington Post*.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-vows-to-retaliate-after-us-orders-closure-its-consulate-in-houston/2020/07/22/41e5c6ea-cbf1-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b_story.html
- Filimon, Luiza-Maria. 2016. "Politics and Magical Thinking: How Falsehoods, Showmanship and Hawkishness Became Trademarks of Republican Presidential Electoral Campaign." *British and American Studies* 22: 211–26.
- Firestone, Charles M. 2016. "5 Steps Toward Rebuilding Trust in the Media." *The Aspen Institute*. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/five-steps-toward-rebuilding-trust-media/>
- Fletcher, Richard. 2020. "The Truth behind Filter Bubbles: Bursting Some Myths." *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/truth-behind-filter-bubbles-bursting-some-myths>
- Fog, Agner. 2004. "The Supposed and the Real Role of Mass Media in Modern Democracy." Working Paper. Retrieved from
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/250629133_The_Supposed_and_the_Real_Role_of_Mass_Media_in_Modern_Democracy_-_an_Evolutionary_Model.
- Folkenflik, David. 2020. "Newsmax Rises On Wave Of Resentment Toward Media — Especially Fox News." *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/2020/11/30/939030504/newsmax-rises-on-wave-of-resentment-toward-media-especially-fox-news>
- Fox and Friends*. 2020. July 24, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Fox, Michael. 2019. "Once Again, Mainstream Media Get It Wrong on Venezuela." *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/venezuela-coup-media-guaido/>
- Fox News @ Night*. 2018. December 3, 2018. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020a. May 22, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020b. June 15, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020c. May 20, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020d. July 13, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020e. July 24, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020f. March 13, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020g. February 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

- . 2020h. July 31, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020i. June 19, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Fox News Watch*. 2008. June 21, 2008. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2009a. December 19, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2009b. November 28, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010a. April 3, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010b. April 24, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010c. December 4, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010d. February 13, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2010e. November 27, 2010. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2012. November 03, 2012. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2013. *May 11, 2013*. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Fox Special Report with Bret Baier*. 2020. May 22, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Fox Special Report with Brit Hume*. 2008. December 24, 2008. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Frick, Ali. 2009. "Rep. Lamar Smith: 'The Greatest Threat to America Is a Liberal Media Bias.'" *ThinkProgress*. <https://thinkprogress.org/rep-lamar-smith-the-greatest-threat-to-america-is-a-liberal-media-bias-47c83722a760/>
- Gallup, and Knight Foundation. 2018a. *Indicators of News Media Trust*. Washington, D.C. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/indicators-of-news-media-trust/>.
- . 2018b. *Perceived Accuracy and Bias in the News Media*. Washington, D.C. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/perceived-accuracy-and-bias-in-the-news-media/>.
- Gelbspan, Ross. 2005. "Snowed." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2005/05/snowed/>
- Germano, Fabrizio, and Martin Meier. 2013. "Concentration and Self-Censorship in Commercial Media." *Journal of Public Economics* 97: 117–30.
- Ghorayshi, Azeen. 2012. "Americans on Environment News: We Want More!" *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/04/news-coverage-environment-huffington-post/>

- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *The Consequences of Modernity*. 1st paperback ed. Cambridge, [U.K.]: Polity Press.
<http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?SOTH;S10023877>
- Gillis, William. 2013. "Say No To The Liberal Media: Conservatives and Criticism of the News Media in the 1970s." Doctoral Dissertation. School of Journalism, Indiana University. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/17960>
- Gitlin, Todd. 2013. "Is the Press Too Big to Fail, or Has It Been Failing for Decades?" *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/04/media-tinsel-age-climate-change-failure/>
- Goldberg, Dan. 2020. "What Colorado Is Getting Right about Reopening." *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/16/colorado-coronavirus-reopen-324390>
- Graham, Jesse, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek. 2009. "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96(5): 1029–46.
- Gramlich, John. 2020. "Americans Give the U.S. Low Marks for Its Handling of COVID-19, and so Do People in Other Countries." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/21/americans-give-the-u-s-low-marks-for-its-handling-of-covid-19-and-so-do-people-in-other-countries/>
- Greenwald, Glenn. 2016. "The Rise of Trump Shows the Danger and Sham of Compelled Journalistic 'Neutrality.'" *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2016/03/14/the-rise-of-trump-shows-the-danger-and-sham-of-compelled-journalistic-neutrality/>
- . 2019. "NYT's Exposé on the Lies About Burning Aid Trucks in Venezuela Shows How U.S. Government and Media Spread Pro-War Propaganda." *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/10/nyts-expose-on-the-lies-about-burning-humanitarian-trucks-in-venezuela-shows-how-us-govt-and-media-spread-fake-news/>
- Gronke, Paul. 2002. "Disdaining the Media in the Post 9/11 World." In Berlin, Germany.
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.19.6337&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Gronke, Paul, and Timothy E. Cook. 2007. "Disdaining the Media: The American Public's Changing Attitudes Toward the News." *Political Communication* 24(3): 259–81.
- Grossmann, Matthew, and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190626594.001.0001>
- Guess, Andrew et al. 2019. "Fake News, Facebook Ads, and Misperceptions: Assessing Information Quality in the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election Campaign." <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2018.pdf>

Guess, Andrew, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2019. *Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 U.S. Election*.
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf>.

Hamilton, James T. 2004. *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.

Handley, Robert L, and Lou Rutigliano. 2012. "Journalistic Field Wars: Defending and Attacking the National Narrative in a Diversifying Journalistic Field." *Media, Culture & Society* 34(6): 744–60.

Hannity. 2009a. December 3, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2009b. June 30, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2015a. March 25, 2015. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2015b. January 27, 2015. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2015c. May 19, 2015. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016a. October 3, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016b. December 5, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016c. October 24, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2018. January 17, 2018. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019a. September 20, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019b. January 22, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019c. May 17, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019d. June 5, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019e. February 25, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019f. September 6, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019g. September 19, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020a. April 22, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020b. February 26, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020c. March 10, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020d. February 28, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020e. April 20, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

- . 2020f. March 31, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020g. March 27, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020h. March 23, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020i. March 9, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020j. May 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020k. June 16, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020l. May 15, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020m. April 16, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020n. April 21, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020o. April 14, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

Hannity & Colmes. 2006. May 17, 2006. New York City: Fox News Channel.

Hannity's America. 2008. May 11, 2008. New York City: Fox News Channel.

Harkinson, Josh. 2009. "Climate Debate Begins: Republicans Lie, NYT Yawns, TV Jackos Off." *Mother Jones*.
<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2009/06/climate-bill-debate-begins-republicans-lie-nyt-yawns/>

Hasan, Mehdi. 2019. "Four Simple Steps the U.S. Media Could Take to Prevent a Trump War With Iran." *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2019/05/17/us-media-journalists-iran-coverage/>

Hemmer, Nicole. 2014. "The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-conservative-war-on-liberal-media-has-a-long-history/283149/>

———. 2016. *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hendrickson, Clara, and Dave Boucher. 2021. "Shirkey Falsely Claims US Capitol Attack Was Staged, Not Carried out by Trump Supporters." *Detroit Free Press*.
<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2021/02/09/mike-shirkey-insurrection-hoax-trump/4455506001/>

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Hernández, Javier C., and Sui-Lee Wee. 2021. "W.H.O. Experts Who Are Investigating the Origin of the Virus Visit a Lab in Wuhan. - The New York

Times.” *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/who-wuhan-lab.html>

Hertsgaard, Mark. 2017. “Progressives Need to Build Their Own Media.” *The Nation*.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/progressives-need-to-build-their-own-media/>

Hirschfeld Davis, Julie. 2014. “Before Ebola, New Czar Handled Political Crises - The New York Times.” *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/18/us/ron-klain-chief-of-staff-to-2-vice-presidents-is-named-ebola-czar.html>

Hjorth, Frederik, and Rebecca Adler-Nissen. 2019. “Ideological Asymmetry in the Reach of Pro-Russian Digital Disinformation to United States Audiences.” *Journal of Communication* 69(2): 168–92.

Hmielowski, Jay D. et al. 2014. “An Attack on Science? Media Use, Trust in Scientists, and Perceptions of Global Warming.” *Public Understanding of Science* 23(7): 866–83.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2018. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York, London: The New Press.

Hou, Yixuan J. et al. 2020. “SARS-CoV-2 Reverse Genetics Reveals a Variable Infection Gradient in the Respiratory Tract.” *Cell* 182(2): 429-446.e14.

Hymas, Lisa. 2019. “Here’s How Badly the Mainstream Media Has Been Covering Climate Change.” *Mother Jones*.
<https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2019/04/heres-how-badly-the-mainstream-media-has-been-covering-climate-change/>

Ingraham Angle. 2020a. June 16, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020b. August 14, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020c. July 20, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020d. February 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020e. April 24, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020f. July 29, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020g. May 28, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020h. June 26, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020i. July 15, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020j. April 6, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

Itkowitz, Colby. 2020. “CDC Director Rejects Label ‘Chinese Virus’ after Trump, McCarthy Tweets.” *Washington Post*.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/cdc-director-rejects-label-chinese-virus-after-trump-mccarthy-tweets/2020/03/10/58bd086c-62e5-11ea-b3fc-7841686c5c57_story.html

Ivory, Danielle, Lauren Leatherby, and Robert Gebeloff. 2021. "Least Vaccinated U.S. Counties Have Something in Common: Trump Voters." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/17/us/vaccine-hesitancy-politics.html>

Jackson, Janine. 2011. "A Better Future for Journalism Requires a Clear-Eyed View of Its Present." In *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, eds. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard. New York: New Press : Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 202–8.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N. Cappella. 2008. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Jensen, Elizabeth. 2017. "Looking To The Future: Restoring Public Trust In The Media." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2017/05/15/528158488/looking-to-the-future-restoring-public-trust-in-the-media>

Jha, Ashish. 2020. "Why Protests Aren't as Dangerous for Spreading Coronavirus as You Might Think | Ashish Jha." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/18/anti-racism-protests-coronavirus-rise-covid-19-cases>

Johnson, Carla K., Hannah Fingerhut, and Pia Deshpande. 2020. "Counties with Worst Virus Surges Overwhelmingly Voted Trump." *PBS NewsHour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/counties-with-worst-virus-surges-overwhelmingly-voted-trump>

Jones, David A. 2005. "Shooting the Messenger: Explaining Public Discontent with the News Media." *Politics & Policy* 33(2): 242–62.

Jones, Jeffrey M. 2018. "U.S. Media Trust Continues to Recover From 2016 Low." *Gallup.com*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/243665/media-trust-continues-recover-2016-low.aspx>

Jones, Jeffrey P. 2012. "Fox News and the Performance of Ideology." *Cinema Journal* 51(4): 178–85.

Jost, John T. et al. 2007. "Are Needs to Manage Uncertainty and Threat Associated With Political Conservatism or Ideological Extremity?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33(7): 989–1007.

Jurkowitz, Mark, and Amy Mitchell. 2020. "Republicans and Democrats Distrust Social Media Sites for Political and Election News." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/29/an-oasis-of-bipartisanship-republicans-and-democrats-distrust-social-media-sites-for-political-and-election-news/>

- Jurkowitz, Mark, Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, and J. Baxter Oliphant. 2020. "Republicans' Attention to COVID-19 News Had Declined Before Trump Tested Positive." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/10/07/before-trump-tested-positive-for-coronavirus-republicans-attention-to-pandemic-had-sharply-declined/>
- Jurkowitz, Mark, Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, and Mason Walker. 2020. "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>
- Justice with Judge Pirro*. 2020a. April 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020b. March 14, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020c. April 11, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020d. March 7, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Kaplan, Karen. 2020. "Super-Spreading Wedding Party Demonstrates COVID-19 Risk Posed by Holiday Gatherings." *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-11-12/covid-19-spread-at-thanksgiving-holiday-gatherings-could-be-like-maine-wedding>
- Kasprak, Alex. 2017. "Is This Time Magazine Cover About 'Global Cooling'?" *Snopes*. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/time-magazine-cover-global-cooling/>
- Kavanagh, Jennifer, and Michael D. Rich. 2018. *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica, California: RAND.
- Keith, Tamara. 2020. "Timeline: What Trump Has Said And Done About The Coronavirus." *NPR.org*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/21/837348551/timeline-what-trump-has-said-and-done-about-the-coronavirus>
- Kelly, Meg, and Sarah Cahlan. 2020. "Was the New Coronavirus Accidentally Released from a Wuhan Lab? It's Doubtful." *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/01/was-new-coronavirus-accidentally-released-wuhan-lab-its-doubtful/>
- Kennedy, Brian. 2020. "U.S. Concern about Climate Change Is Rising, but Mainly among Democrats." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/16/u-s-concern-about-climate-change-is-rising-but-mainly-among-democrats/>
- Kennedy, Brian, and Courtney Johnson. 2020. "More Americans See Climate Change as a Priority, but Democrats Are Much More Concerned than Republicans." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/28/more-americans-see-climate-change-as-a-priority-but-democrats-are-much-more-concerned-than-republicans/>

- Khazan, Olga. 2020. "Why Many White Men Love Trump's Coronavirus Response." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/10/white-men-coronavirus-trump-approval/616780/>
- Khimm, Suzy. 2020. "New York Will No Longer Require Nursing Homes to Take COVID-19 Patients from Hospitals." *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-york-will-no-longer-require-nursing-homes-take-covid-n1204586>
- Klein, Josh, and Cathy Lavery. 2011. "Legitimizing War by Victimization: State-Corporate Crime and Public Opinion." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 56(3): 301–17.
- Kliegman, Julie. 2014. "Has Marco Rubio Backtracked on Climate Change?" *Politifact*. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2014/may/14/has-marco-rubio-backtracked-climate-change/>
- Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. 2019. *Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America*. Washinton D.C.: The Aspen Institute. https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/283/original/Knight_Commission_Report_on_Trust_Media_and_Democracy_FINAL.pdf
- Koerner, Lucas. 2019. "NPR Shreds Ethics Handbook to Normalize Regime Change in Venezuela." *FAIR*. <https://fair.org/home/npr-shreds-ethics-handbook-to-normalize-regime-change-in-venezuela/>
- Kreiss, Daniel. 2018. "The Media Are About Identity, Not Information." In *Trump and the Media*, eds. Pablo J. Boczkowski and Zizi Papacharissi. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 93–99.
- Kristof, Nicholas. 2020. "Opinion | America and the Virus: 'A Colossal Failure of Leadership.'" *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/22/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-united-states.html>
- Kruse, Kevin M., and Julian E. Zelizer. 2019. *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Ladd, Jonathan M. 2012. *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lambert, Frank. 2008. *Religion in American Politics: A Short History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Leber, Rebecca, and Jeremy Schulman. 2017. "Yes, the Mainstream Media Does Publish Fake News." *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2017/07/timeline-climate-denial-news/>
- Leber, Rebecca, and A. J. Vicens. 2018. "7 Years before Russia Hacked the Election, Someone Did the Same Thing to These Scientists." *Mother Jones*.

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/12/climategate-wikileaks-russia-trump-hacking/>

- Lee, Tien-Tsung. 2005. "The Liberal Media Myth Revisited: An Examination of Factors Influencing Perceptions of Media Bias." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49(1): 43–64.
- Lennard, Natasha. 2018. "After Last Week, There's No Hope That the Media Will Ever Abandon False Equivalencies With the Far Right." *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/31/pittsburgh-shooting-anti-semitism-media-bias/>
- Lerner, Sharon. 2019. "How the Media Lauanders Fossil Fuel Industry Propaganda Through Branded Content." *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/03/branded-content-fossil-fuel-companies/>
- LeTourneau, Nancy. 2019. "Why the Mainstream Media Won't Be Able Ot Stop Trump from Dragging Us to Totalitarianism." *AlterNet*. <https://www.alternet.org/2019/05/why-the-mainstream-media-wont-be-able-to-stop-trump-from-dragging-us-to-totalitarianism/>.
- Leung, Nancy H. L. et al. 2020. "Respiratory Virus Shedding in Exhaled Breath and Efficacy of Face Masks." *Nature Medicine* 26(5): 676–80.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. First edition. New York: Crown.
- Li, Shirley. 2020. "The COVID-19 Documentary All Americans Need to See." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/10/totally-under-control-essential-pandemic-documentary/616729/>
- Life, Liberty, Levin*. 2020a. August 30, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020b. April 5, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020c. January 12, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Light, Larry. 2018. "How Did Republicans Learn to Hate the News Media?" *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/first_person/republicans-media.php
- Lipton, Eric et al. 2020. "He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump's Failure on the Virus." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>
- Liu, Tao, and Benjamin J. Bates. 2009. "What's behind Public Trust in News Media: A Comparative Study of America and China." *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2(3): 307–29.
- Liu, Yang. 2012. "Explaining Media Trust from Partisanship, Ideology and Their Interaction." In *Annual Conference of World Association for Public Opinion*

Research, Hong Kong.
<https://wapor2012.hkpop.hk/doc/papers/ConcurrentSessionsI/IF/IF-3.pdf>.

Luscombe, Richard. 2021. "Fauci: Republican Vaccine Deniers Are Hurting Efforts to Lift Covid Restrictions." *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/18/coronavirus-anthony-fauci-republican-vaccine-deniers-restrictions>

Major, Mark. 2012. "Objective but Not Impartial: Human Events, Barry Goldwater, and the Development of the 'Liberal Media' in the Conservative Counter-Sphere." *New Political Science* 34(4): 455–68.

———. 2015. "Conservative Consciousness and the Press: The Institutional Contribution to the Idea of the 'Liberal Media' in Right-Wing Discourse." *Critical Sociology* 41(3): 483–91.

Mallapaty, Smriti. 2020. "Investigation into COVID Origin Begins but Faces Challenges." *Nature* 587.

Mann, Thomas E., and Norman J. Ornstein. 2012. *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*. New York: Basic Books.

Mast, Nina. 2016. "Flashback: How Fox News Promoted Trump's Birtherism." *Media Matters for America*.
<https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2016/09/16/flashback-how-fox-news-promoted-trumps-birtherism/213152>

Mathias, Christopher. 2021. "57 GOP State And Local Officials Were At The Capitol Insurrection | HuffPost." *Huffpost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/57-gop-officials-at-capitol-insurrection_n_6026e5e2c5b6f88289fb90a6

Mazzetti, Mark, Julian E. Barnes, Edward Wong, and Adam Goldman. 2020. "Trump Officials Are Said to Press Spies to Link Virus and Wuhan Labs." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/us/politics/trump-administration-intelligence-coronavirus-china.html>

McCarthy, Tom, and Joan E Greve. 2020. "CDC Director Takes Aim at Trump's Covid Adviser: 'Everything He Says Is False.'" *The Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/28/covid-coronavirus-cdc-director-robert-redfield-trump-adviser-scott-atlas>

McChesney, Robert W. 2004. *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

McChesney, Robert W., and John Nichols. 2011. *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again*. New York: Nation Books.

McCright, Aaron M., and Riley E. Dunlap. 2011. "The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52(2): 155–94.

McDonald, Jessica, and Lori Robertson. 2020. "Trump's H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic Spin." *FactCheck.org*. <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/03/trumps-h1n1-swine-flu-pandemic-spin/>

McGreal, Chris. 2020. "'It's a Hoax. There's No Pandemic': Trump's Base Stays Loyal as President Fights Covid." *The Observer*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/03/donald-trump-base-stays-loyal-president-fights-covid-19>

McLeod, Douglas M. 2009. "Derelict of Duty: The American News Media, Terrorism, and the War in Iraq." *Marquette Law Review* 93(1): 113.

Meagher, Richard. 2012. "The 'Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy': Media and Conservative Networks." *New Political Science* 34(4): 469–84.

Media Buzz. 2017a. June 4, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2017b. July 9, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020a. August 2, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020b. June 21, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020c. May 24, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020d. June 14, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020e. July 19, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020f. May 10, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020g. April 5, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020h. August 9, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020i. March 1, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

"Media Cross-Ownership in the United States." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_cross-ownership_in_the_United_States

Media Research Center. 2016. "Media Research Center." *Media Research Center*. <https://www.mrc.org/about>

Meyerowitz, Eric A. et al. 2020. "Rethinking the Role of Hydroxychloroquine in the Treatment of COVID-19." *The FASEB Journal* 34(5): 6027–37.

Montanaro, Domenico. 2020. "Poll: Only Quarter Of Republicans Accept 2020 Election Results." *NPR.org*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome>

Moore, Elena. 2020. "Multiple Coronavirus Cases After Republican Christmas Party In New York." *NPR.org*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/30/951267532/multiple-coronavirus-cases-after-republican-christmas-party-in-new-york>

- Morens, David M. et al. 2020. "The Origin of COVID-19 and Why It Matters." *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 103(3): 955–59.
- Morning Edition*. 2015. "Scientific Evidence Doesn't Support Global Warming, Sen. Ted Cruz Says." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/09/459026242/scientific-evidence-doesn-t-support-global-warming-sen-ted-cruz-says>
- Mosher, Steven W. 2020. "COVID Panic Porn Is Meant to Suppress Trump Vote, But It May Do the Opposite." *Population Research Institute*. <https://www.pop.org/covid-panic-porn-is-meant-to-suppress-trump-vote-but-it-may-do-the-opposite/>
- Müller, Jan. 2013. *Mechanisms of Trust: News Media in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes*. Frankfurt [u.a.]: Zugl.: Bremen, Jacobs-Univ., Diss., 2011.
- Najjar, Orayb. 2014. "The American Media and the Iraq War at Its Tenth Anniversary: Lessons for the Coverage of Future Wars." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 8(1): 15–34.
- Newhouse, Alex. 2020. "Right-Wing Users Flock to Parler as Social Media Giants Rein in Misinformation." *PBS NewsHour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/right-wing-users-flock-to-parler-as-social-media-giants-rein-in-misinformation>
- Newton, Ken. 2016. "Public Service and Commercial Broadcasting: Impacts on Politics and Society." *The Political Quarterly* 87(1): 31–38.
- Nicas, Jack, and Davey Alba. 2021. "Amazon, Apple and Google Cut Off Parler, an App That Drew Trump Supporters." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/technology/apple-google-parler.html>
- Noble, Alan. 2014. "Why Do Evangelicals Have a Persecution Complex?" *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/the-evangelical-persecution-complex/375506/>
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press.
- Noyes, Rich. 2009. "Republicans Form 'Media Fairness Caucus' to Fight Liberal Bias." *NewsBusters*. <https://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/nb/rich-noyes/2009/06/04/republicans-form-media-fairness-caucus-fight-liberal-bias>
- Ollstein, Alice Miranda. 2020. "Coronavirus Quarantine, Travel Ban Could Backfire, Experts Fear." *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/04/coronavirus-quarantine-travel-110750>
- On the Media*. 2021. *Slaying the Fox Monster*. WNYC Studios. <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/on-the-media-slaying-fox-monster>

“Operation Warp Speed.” *Wikipedia*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Operation_Warp_Speed&oldid=1022254397

Ostertag, Stephen. 2010. “Establishing News Confidence: A Qualitative Study of How People Use the News Media to Know the News-World.” *Media, Culture & Society* 32(4): 597–614.

Padilla, Mariel. 2020. “‘It Feels Like a War Zone’: Doctors and Nurses Plead for Masks on Social Media.” *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/us/hospitals-coronavirus-ppe-shortage.html>

Padilla, Mariel, and Zach Montague. 2020. “Nunes Encourages People to Dine Out as Experts Urge Them to Stay Home.” *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/us/stay-home-go-out-coronavirus.html>

Palma, Bethania. 2020. “Was Obama Responsible for N95 Masks Shortage?”

Snopes.com. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/obama-coronavirus-masks/>

Pan American Health Organization. 2021. *COVID-19 Daily Update: 30 June 2021*.

<https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/54468>.

Partlow, Joshua, and Josh Dawsey. 2020. “Workers Removed Thousands of Social Distancing Stickers before Trump’s Tulsa Rally, According to Video and a Person Familiar with the Set-Up.” *The Washington Post*.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/workers-removed-thousands-of-social-distancing-stickers-before-trumps-tulsa-rally-according-to-video-and-a-person-familiar-with-the-set-up/2020/06/27/f429c3be-b801-11ea-9b0f-c797548c1154_story.html

Patterson, Thomas E. 2013. *Informing the News: The Need for Knowledge-Based Journalism*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House LLC.

———. 2016a. *News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters*. Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School. <https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/>.

———. 2016b. *News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Primaries: Horse Race Reporting Has Consequences*. Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School. <https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-presidential-primaries/>.

———. 2016c. *Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump’s Rise, Sanders’ Emergence, Clinton’s Struggle*. Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School. <https://shorensteincenter.org/pre-primary-news-coverage-2016-trump-clinton-sanders/>.

Pew Research Center. 2016. “Americans’ Views on Climate Change and Climate Scientists.” *Pew Research Center Science & Society*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2016/10/04/public-views-on-climate-change-and-climate-scientists/>

- Pickard, Victor. 2011. "Can Government Support the Press? Historicizing and Internationalizing a Policy Approach to the Journalism Crisis." *The Communication Review* 14(2): 73–95.
- . 2012. "'The Air Belongs to the People': The Rise and Fall of a Postwar Radio Reform Movement." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30(4): 307–26.
- . 2013. "Social Democracy or Corporate Libertarianism? Conflicting Media Policy Narratives in the Wake of Market Failure: In the Wake of Market Failure." *Communication Theory* 23(4): 336–55.
- . 2015. "Media Activism from Above and Below: Lessons from the 1940s American Reform Movement." *Journal of Information Policy* 5 (2015): 109–28.
- . 2017. "A Social Democratic Vision of Media: Toward a Radical Pre-History of Public Broadcasting." *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 24(2): 200–212.
- . 2018. "When Commercialism Trumps Democracy: Media Pathologies and the Rise of the Misinformation Society." In *Trump and the Media*, eds. Pablo J. Boczkowski and Zizi Papacharissi. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- . 2020. "We Need a Media System That Serves People's Needs, Not Corporations'." *Jacobin*. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/01/corporate-media-system-democracy>
- Pilkington, Ed. 2016. "Did Trump's Scorched-Earth Tactics Mortally Wound the Media?" *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/trumps_tactics_wound_the_media.php/
- Post Opinions Staff. 2016. "A Transcript of Donald Trump's Meeting with The Washington Post Editorial Board." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/03/21/a-transcript-of-donald-trumps-meeting-with-the-washington-post-editorial-board/>
- Powers, Shawn. 2011. "U.S. International Broadcasting: An Untapped Resource for Domestic and Ethnic News Organizations." In *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, eds. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard. New York: New Press : Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 138–50.
- Prather, Kimberly A., Chia C. Wang, and Robert T. Schooley. 2020. "Reducing Transmission of SARS-CoV-2." *Science* 368(6498): 1422–24.
- "QAnon." *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=QAnon&oldid=1015540541>
- Reiner, Robert C. et al. 2020. "Modeling COVID-19 Scenarios for the United States." *Nature Medicine*: 1–12.

- Robertson, Lori. 2020. "Trump's Snowballing China Travel Claim." *FactCheck.org*.
<https://www.factcheck.org/2020/04/trumps-snowballing-china-travel-claim/>
- Rogers, Katie, Lara Jakes, and Ana Swanson. 2020. "Trump Defends Using 'Chinese Virus' Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism." *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>
- Rosenberg, Paul. 2019. "Elizabeth Warren, the Democrats and the Real Problem with the 'Fake News Media.'" *Salon*.
<https://www.salon.com/2019/01/06/elizabeth-warren-the-democrats-and-the-real-problem-with-the-fake-news-media/>
- Ruiz, Joe. 2020. "Cuomo Says New York Followed Federal Guidelines When Sending Coronavirus Patients to Nursing Homes." *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/23/politics/cuomo-new-york-nursing-homes-coronavirus-patients/index.html>
- Saenz, Arlette. 2012. "Santorum Defiant After Lashing Out At Reporter." *ABC News*.
<https://abcnews.go.com/http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/03/santorum-defiant-after-lashing-out-at-reporter>
- Sambrook, Richard. 2012. *Delivering Trust: Impartiality and Objectivity in the Digital Age*. Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-11/Delivering%20Trust%20Impartiality%20and%20Objectivity%20in%20a%20Digital%20Age.pdf>.
- Schneider, Avie. 2021. "Why The U.S. Thinks A Lab In Wuhan Needs A Closer Look As A Possible Pandemic Source." *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/27/1000780650/every-possible-explanation-for-covid-19-should-be-investigated-expert-says>
- Schwarz, Jon. 2017. "Hillary Clinton Doesn't Understand Why the Corporate Media Is So Bad." *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/16/hillary-clinton-doesnt-understand-why-the-corporate-media-is-so-bad/>
- Scott, David, Mike Chanslor, and Jennifer Dixon. 2010. "FAIR and the PBS NewsHour: Assessing Diversity and Elitism in News Sourcing." *Communication Quarterly* 58(3): 319–40.
- Shearer, Elisa. 2021. "86% of Americans Get News Online from Smartphone, Computer or Tablet." *Pew Research Center*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>
- Shearer, Elisa, and Katerina Eva Matsa. 2018. "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018." *Pew Research Center*.
<https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/>
- Shepherd, Katie. 2020. "A Man Thought Aquarium Cleaner with the Same Name as the Anti-Viral Drug Chloroquine Would Prevent Coronavirus. It Killed Him."

Washington Post.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/24/coronavirus-chloroquine-poisoning-death/>

Sheppard, Kate. 2010. "NYT's Skeptic Embrace." *Mother Jones*.

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/02/nyt-gives-skeptics-platform-lambast-ipcc/>

———. 2011. "Climategate 2.0: Will the Media Do Its Job This Time?" *Mother Jones*.

<https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2011/11/climategate-20-will-media-do-its-job-time/>

Sherman. 2020. "Trump's False Claim That Children Are 'Almost Immune' to COVID-19." *Politifact*. <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/aug/06/donald-trump/children-are-almost-immune-disease/>

Silverman, Craig, and Lawrence Alexander. 2016. "How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News." *BuzzFeed News*.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>

Skeptical Science. 2015. "Clearing up Misconceptions Regarding 'Hide the Decline.'" *Skeptical Science*. <https://skepticalscience.com/Mikes-Nature-trick-hide-the-decline.htm>

<https://skepticalscience.com/Mikes-Nature-trick-hide-the-decline.htm>

Solnit, Rebecca. 2013. "Why Doesn't Climate Change Get the Attention It Deserves?" *Mother Jones*.

<https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2013/10/climate-change-media-attention/>

Struck, Doug. 2014. "How the 'Global Cooling' Story Came to Be." *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-global-cooling-story-came-to-be/>

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-global-cooling-story-came-to-be/>

Stutt, Richard O. J. H. et al. 2020. "A Modelling Framework to Assess the Likely Effectiveness of Facemasks in Combination with 'Lock-down' in Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Proceedings of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 476(2238): 20200376.

Suderman, Alan. 2020. "Health Officials Seek to Block Trump Rally in Virginia." *PBS NewsHour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/health-officials-seek-to-block-trump-rally-in-virginia>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/health-officials-seek-to-block-trump-rally-in-virginia>

Sullivan, Margaret. 2017. "More Facts, Fewer Pundits: Here's How the Media Can Regain the Public's Trust." *Washington Post*.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/more-facts-fewer-pundits-heres-how-the-media-can-regain-the-publics-trust/2017/01/29/9c0232ba-e4a7-11e6-a453-19ec4b3d09ba_story.html

Summers, Juana. 2020. "Timeline: How Trump Has Downplayed The Coronavirus Pandemic." *NPR.org*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/latest-updates-trump->

covid-19-results/2020/10/02/919432383/how-trump-has-downplayed-the-coronavirus-pandemic

Swift, Art. 2016. "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low." *Gallup.com*.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>

Sydell, Laura. 2016. "We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here's What We Learned." *NPR*.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs>

Taylor, Adam. 2020. "What Caused the Coronavirus? A Skeptical Take on the Theories about the Outbreak's Chinese Origin - The Washington Post." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/16/what-caused-coronavirus-skeptical-take-theories-about-outbreaks-chinese-origin/>

The Acton Institute. 2021. "Our Mission & Core Principles." *Acton Institute*.
<https://www.acton.org/about/mission>

The Five. 2012. April 11, 2012. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2014a. January 7, 2014. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2014b. May 7, 2014. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2014c. April 1, 2014. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2015. April 24, 2015. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016a. June 30, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016b. December 5, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2017a. September 11, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2017b. February 7, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2017c. June 6, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2017d. June 5, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2018. June 13, 2018. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019. September 18, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020a. April 28, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020b. April 9, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020c. June 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020d. January 13, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020e. April 15, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020f. May 4, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020g. February 25, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020h. April 22, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020i. April 16, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020j. April 1, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

The Fox News Specialists. 2017. August 8, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

The Greg Gutfeld Show. 2020a. April 11, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020b. April 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

The Guardian Staff. 2020. "Donald Trump Jr and Father Play down Covid Deaths as Daily Toll Nears 1,000." *the Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/30/donald-trump-coronavirus-deaths-don-jr>

The Kelly File. 2014. October 27, 2014. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016. October 3, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

The Next Revolution. 2020. May 3, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

The O'Reilly Factor. 2006. September 25, 2006. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2009a. July 1, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2009b. December 7, 2009. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2011. June 20, 2011. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2014. March 12, 2014. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2015. May 11, 2015. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2016. December 19, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.

The Story with Martha MacCallum. 2017. June 2, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2019. October 28, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.

———. 2020. August 13, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.

- Tilis, Elizabeth. 2018. "Taking Steps to Restoring the Public's Trust in Media." *Medium*. <https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/taking-steps-to-restoring-the-publics-trust-in-media-5e60717d477c> (March 25, 2021).
- Tucker Carlson Tonight*. 2016. November 17, 2016. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2017. September 18, 2017. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2019a. September 16, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2019b. September 23, 2019. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020a. January 1, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020b. June 4, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020c. March 31, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020d. August 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020e. August 10, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Ueki, Hiroshi et al. 2020. "Effectiveness of Face Masks in Preventing Airborne Transmission of SARS-CoV-2." *mSphere* 5(5). <https://msphere.asm.org/content/5/5/e00637-20>
- United Nations. 2020. "Reduce Risk to Avert 'Era of Pandemics', Experts Warn in New Report." *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1076392>
- Valverde, Miriam. 2020. "PolitiFact - Fact-Checking Trump's Attacks on Obama-Biden Swine Flu Response." *Politifact*. <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/mar/15/donald-trump/fact-checking-trumps-attacks-obama-biden-swine-flu/>
- Vazquez, Marietta. 2020. "Calling COVID-19 the 'Wuhan Virus' or 'China Virus' Is Inaccurate and Xenophobic." *Yale School of Medicine*. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/23074/>
- Vigdor, Neil. 2020. "Man Fatally Poisons Himself While Self-Medicating for Coronavirus, Doctor Says." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/us/chloroquine-poisoning-coronavirus.html>
- Waldman, Scott. 2018. "Trump White House Tried to Bury U.S. Climate Report. That Has Only Generated More Attention." *Science*. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/11/trump-white-house-tried-bury-climate-report-has-only-attracted-more-attention>
- Walsh, Bryan. 2013. "Sorry, a TIME Magazine Cover Did Not Predict a Coming Ice Age." *Time*. <https://time.com/5670942/time-magazine-ice-age-cover-hoax/>

- Wang, Yu et al. 2020. "Reduction of Secondary Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in Households by Face Mask Use, Disinfection and Social Distancing: A Cohort Study in Beijing, China." *BMJ Global Health* 5(5): e002794.
- Waterson, Jim, and Dean Sterling Jones. 2020. "Daily Telegraph Stops Publishing Section Paid for by China." *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/14/daily-telegraph-stops-publishing-section-paid-for-by-china>
- Watters World*. 2020a. July 25, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020b. August 22, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020c. April 18, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020d. March 14, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Watts, Duncan J., and David M. Rothschild. 2017. "Don't Blame the Election on Fake News. Blame It on the Media." *Columbia Journalism Review*.
<https://www.cjr.org/analysis/fake-news-media-election-trump.php>
- Wells, Chad R. et al. 2020. "Impact of International Travel and Border Control Measures on the Global Spread of the Novel 2019 Coronavirus Outbreak." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(13): 7504–9.
- Willnat, Lars, and David H. Weaver. 2014. *The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Key Findings*. Bloomington, IN: School of Journalism, Indiana University.
<http://archive.news.indiana.edu/releases/iu/2014/05/2013-american-journalist-key-findings.pdf>.
- Winkie, Luke. 2021. "Trump's Presidency Is Ending. Is the Reign of Newsmax and OAN Just Beginning?" *Nieman Lab*.
<https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/01/trumps-presidency-is-ending-is-the-reign-of-newsmax-and-oan-just-beginning/>
- Yazdany, Jinoos, and Alfred H.J. Kim. 2020. "Use of Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine During the COVID-19 Pandemic: What Every Clinician Should Know." *Annals of Internal Medicine* 172(11): 754–55.
- Yen, Hope. 2020. "AP FACT CHECK: Trump's Inaccurate Boasts on China Travel Ban." *AP NEWS*.
<https://apnews.com/article/0dc271ad7f7917374a5a0cfb49273783>
- Your World with Neil Cavuto*. 2014. May 6, 2014. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- . 2020. July 23, 2020. New York City: Fox News Channel.
- Zelizer, Barbie. 2018. "Resetting Journalism in the Aftermath of Brexit and Trump." *European Journal of Communication* 33(2): 140–56.