

## **Ideology, Racial Resentment, and the Mass Media**

Jeffrey M. Berry  
James M. Glaser  
Deborah J. Schildkraut

Department of Political Science  
Tufts University

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 1, 2019. Corresponding author: [jeffrey.berry@tufts.edu](mailto:jeffrey.berry@tufts.edu)

## ABSTRACT

It may appear that the mass media is in decline as subscribers and viewers have dropped in number and new forms of competition online have created an upheaval in the media industry. Yet the situation is not what it seems. It is true that there have been profound changes in the industry and that competition is fiercer than ever. Yet we offer some contrasting perspectives. Beginning with an analysis of trust, we show that despite aggregate measures demonstrating distrust, trust in the media that people actually use is extremely high. In short, people trust *their* media. We then examine the relationship between partisan media consumption and public opinion. When it comes to preference for politicians sticking to principles rather than choosing to compromise, ideology plays a much stronger role than cable TV usage. Turning to racial resentment, however, our findings show that liberals who watch MSNBC and conservatives who watch Fox demonstrate distinctive patterns. That is, partisan news consumption is related to racial resentment even after controlling for ideological orientation. Together, these findings correct the conventional wisdom on trust in the media and illustrate the ongoing potential for what such trust can do.

Politically speaking, one of the few things Americans agree on these days is that the media performs abysmally and serves democracy poorly.<sup>1</sup> This complaint is hardly new, especially the contention that individual media are biased in favor of one political party or the other. It was not until 1900 that even half of the nation's newspapers chose to be an independent organ instead of a partisan mouthpiece (Hamilton 2004, 36-70). Although objectivity would become a strong professional norm in the media business, belief in that standard began to erode in the 1960s. President Nixon was strikingly different than his predecessors who nurtured cozy relationships with reporters. Nixon publically seethed at CBS News, and his claim of unfair treatment by the media became part of his powerful narrative about how the Eastern Establishment ignored the "forgotten American." "The press is the enemy," Nixon told Henry Kissinger (Ladd, forthcoming).

In this paper we examine the interplay between the mass media and public opinion by analyzing a number of common generalizations in our collective understanding of how Americans view the media and how they are affected by it. We begin with an analysis of trust, demonstrating that despite the widespread belief that we distrust the media, Americans have enormous trust in the media they watch, read, or listen to. We then look at media consumption patterns and norms of civility, finding that ideology is of paramount importance. Next we turn to racial resentment, showing that liberals who watch MSNBC and conservatives who watch Fox demonstrate distinctive patterns. That is, partisan news consumption is powerfully related to racial resentment even after controlling for ideological orientation. Together these findings cast a different light on the role of the mass media in contemporary America.

## Modern Mass Media

Although fervent criticism by one or both parties of the media has become a constant in American politics since Nixon labeled it the enemy, it surely seems as though we've entered a new phase in this controversy. Gallup's measure of trust in the mass media declined from 72 percent in 1976 to a record low of 32 percent in 2016 (Jones 2018). President Trump has attacked the press like no other president, frequently lambasting it for what he terms "fake news." This is a view that resonates loudly with his base. Like Nixon, much of Trump's ire is directed at the establishment press, including the "failing *New York Times*." Cable television is also a Trump target, even occasionally including Fox despite its fawning coverage of him. Cable news, with its rampant incivility, is a favorite target of more temperate critics, too. Tom Rosenstiel, Director of the American Press Institute, calls cable television "birthing centers for polarizing rhetoric" (Sullivan 2019).

Amid the decline is a notable continuity: Republicans are considerably more distrusting of the media than are Democrats (Ladd 2012, 88-91). Recent measurements by Pew show the divide between partisans has only grown since President Trump took office. Eighty-six percent of Republican identifiers believe news organizations "tend to favor one side" while only about half of Democrats answer the same way. This differential between the two sides has increased sharply from 20 percentage points in 2016 to 34 percentage points in 2018. The same pattern is found for questions asking about fairness in news coverage and on the effectiveness of the media's watchdog role (Gottfried, Stocking, and Grieco 2018).

Continuity and discontinuity are often difficult to distinguish in a rapidly changing media environment. The dramatic changes in technology and the emergence of entirely new forms of news delivery have created a sense of a revolution in what was once a staid and stable industry. Newspapers, for example, have suffered from the collapse of their advertising base, leading to revenue loss even the closing of some local papers. And yet the decline of newspapers is, well, a misleading headline. Local papers have generally declined but the national newspapers (the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*) are thriving and getting stronger. The *Times* continues to hit new circulation highs with 4 million paid subscribers now, 3 million of them digital only (Peiser 2018). Understanding the implications of these contrary trends for local news coverage is a challenge and one development seems to be a nationalization of the news that is offered through local media outlets (Martin and McCrain 2019).

The Internet and all the news and opinion sites it spawned initially appeared to herald a fundamental shift in the news industry. There was talk of a new journalism and of a different way of organizing the very production of news. In terms of political coverage what arose with the most visibility were political opinion blogs, not sites that reported on the news in the traditional sense. The production of news on the Internet turned out to be extremely expensive even without having to print a physical paper and deliver it to homes. Opinion blogs persist, of course, but generally speaking they are financially weak and this holds them back from gaining readers who are not ideologues. As for the reporting of their own originated news online, the dominant sites are the establishment players, especially the *Times*, the *Post*, the three broadcast networks, and CNN.

Cable news networks have been an economic success, largely because of the carriage fees that local providers must pay to the networks. Cord cutting by those dissatisfied with the cost of cable and the growth in the number of young consumers who have never been “corded” and do not even own a TV, suggest a harsh future for media companies in the television business. Critics point out that companies marketing programming primarily aimed at people sitting around a television, are trapped in the past. This is wrong, too. Cable news ratings are higher than they have ever been (Katz 2019a; Katz 2019b). One final example is talk radio, which seems positively last century. Yet it endures and its daily audience is far greater than the three cable news networks combined (Berry and Sobieraj 2014, 13).

The news business is not all old school, of course. Social media truly is revolutionary—any individual can be their own news commentator. Even here, though, content from the national media is intertwined in what ricochets around the ether through posts and tweets to others in one’s network. Unraveling the interaction between mass media content and social media commentary is no small challenge for scholars and remains elusive.

### **Lines of Inquiry**

Broadly, it is within this context of change and continuity that we examine the mass media. *When it comes to news, they are still the show.* Before detailing our own research, we begin here with an overview of what we know from previous research. Political scientists, communications scholars, and other academic experts have built an impressive literature examining a range of research questions that stem from the development and ever-changing

evolution of the mass media. At least four major strands of research have emerged from this scholarship.

A foundation of this work is the research on *bias*, the ways and means of misperception of objective facts. To what degree do different media sources stick closely to a standard of “just the facts” as opposed to interpretation and even deliberate efforts to shade the truth? Slanted news presentation can shape one’s perception of reality by such methods as selective presentation of content, inflammatory prose, choice of visualizations, and exaggerating what experts actually found in their research (Garrett, Weeks, and Neo 2016; Lau et al. 2017; Shin and Thurson 2017).

Bias can also take many forms beyond the presentation of shaded information. Editorial judgments as to what constitutes the most important stories influences what viewers, readers, and listeners regard as the most important news (Iyengar and Kinder 2010). One of the most interesting problems is to accurately distinguish the bias we bring with us when we interact with media from the bias that media directs toward its audience through its editorial judgments. In other words, is bias largely a matter of self-selection where we choose what we want to hear through our choice of media outlet, or is it something imposed on us (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2011)?

Alternatively, whatever our starting point in what we know, in what ways are we moved from these positions when we are exposed to new information acquired from media sources (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013; De Benedictis-Kessner et al., forthcoming)? This perspective asks about *persuasion* and has become particularly pressing in the current age

of partisan news. If someone listens to Rush Limbaugh on a regular basis, do their views remain the same or is there some likelihood that they will be influenced to move closer to Limbaugh's positions? Even though listeners are very likely to be conservative before they ever tuned in to Limbaugh, not every issue will evince an initial intuitive response as to what the true conservative position is. President Trump's recent belligerence expressed toward Iran, for example, divided media conservatives. Did some Fox viewers choose their hosts' dovish position on Iran over President Trump's?

Paths for persuasion may not be as direct as exposure to a program or blog post catalyzing a new position. The classic notion of a two step communication flow identified forms of indirect influence (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Personal discussion where media content is repeated is a potent route for influence (Druckman, Levendusky, and McClain 2018). News coverage of partisan media content is another route. Not a lot of Washington policymakers take time out of their day to listen to Limbaugh's three hour radio program but they will occasionally see articles about what he has to say in mainstream outlets like *Politico*. A major research focus in this regard is analyzing the mix of pro- and counterattitudinal sources in consumers' media diet (Anson 2016; Warner 2018).

A third major area of scholarship involves *trust*. The erosion of trust in the media is central to the study of democracy. As Jonathan Ladd argues, "Media distrust is consequential. It changes the way people acquire information and form political preferences" (2012, 7). A major line of research tries to assess the impact of an ever widening array of media alternatives (Prior 2007). The nation has transitioned from print newspapers and the nightly news on the three

broadcast networks, to easy access to media that agrees with one's own point of view. Arceneaux and Johnson note the centrality of cable news in this discussion and the need for scholars to evaluate the widespread belief that it "diminishes confidence in political and social institutions" (2013, 3).

Fourth and finally, considerable research has been conducted on *polarization* and *incivility*. Polarization—the hardening of political views among opposing parties—has emerged as a central focus of the entire American government field. In this area, as on many other topics in media studies, researchers often utilize experimental designs to test the impact of exposure to different versions of a single story (Garrett et al 2014; Hasell and Weeks 2016; and Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). A recent emphasis in the discipline centers on affective polarization, the dynamic by which identity influences attitudes. Increasingly, Americans define themselves in ways that distinguish themselves from those who they are critical of (Mason 2018). Increasingly, Americans do not want to have anything to do with the other side.

One approach in this research is to determine the boundaries of acceptable rhetoric. These boundaries have certainly shifted to a more permissive range but it is not entirely clear what is permissible as there is sharp debate over civility and political correctness. Still, Iyengar and Westwood find that Americans are not hesitant to speak in harsh terms about the other side and "face no social repercussions from [this] open expression of these attitudes" (2015, 692). Another line of research looks at the business side of polarization. Berry and Sobieraj (2014) describe an "outrage industry" composed of media firms that have monetized incivility.

This has not been a comprehensive review of relevant media research and the strands of research we have identified certainly overlap. In our study, we try to integrate these different perspectives into a broader conceptualization of media impact on public opinion. In the analysis that follows, we look at the interrelationships of media habits, civility, ideology, and racial resentment.

### **Data Analysis**

We explore a series of questions relating to this literature primarily through analysis of the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is a standard instrument for political scientists and we utilized the common content along with questions of our own that we placed on the platform.<sup>2</sup> Our set of questions focused on political discussion, emotional responses to political debate, mass media consumption and trust, social media behavior, and attitudes toward compromise. The completed survey includes 1,000 respondents.<sup>3</sup> We also make use of a second data set of our own that incorporates a content analysis of prime time programs on Fox Cable News and MSNBC.

At the center of our inquiry are questions we asked about eleven of the nation's most prominent media outlets. This alone is noteworthy as it is more often the case that public opinion surveys ask respondents about generic "media" and "news." As we will show, asking people about particular programming can produce a very different picture relative to what one sees when looking at generic results. First, a simple frequency distribution has much to teach us about the modern media environment (Table 1). First we presented respondents with a list of 11 programs and asked if they had "watched, listened to, or read" any programming on 11 media

sources over the past month. We then asked subjects the degree to which they trusted each of these media sites. Finally, we asked them the degree to which they believed each was accurate.

Most revealing, perhaps, is the reach of the three cable networks. During the preceding month CNN was watched, even if infrequently, by 45 percent of the public. Fox, with its provocative conservative orientation, was watched by 4 in 10 Americans. Critics often note out how small the audiences are for cable by pointing to the nightly Nielsen ratings. The highest rated cable news show, Fox's "Hannity," has just 3 million viewers, relatively small for television. But the nightly audience seems to be a misleading indicator of overall frequency of cable watching. In addition to loyal viewers apparently there are a lot of people who watch once in a while and still others who are inveterate channel flippers.

[Table 1 Here]

Considering that they have pay walls, the reach of the two newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, is impressive as well. Fully a third of population has read one or more stories from them. Of course, a substantial number of readers avoid the paywall when they come across stories posted on Facebook or Twitter. Talk radio consumption is lower in our survey but the audiences are still imposing. Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity can each be heard on any of the 600 or so stations that syndicate their programs. Limbaugh has 13 million listeners a week and Hannity only a little bit less (Epstein 2016).

Local television news remains preeminent among news sources while social media continues to increase in importance as a means of acquiring news (Pew 2019). Yet the figures

here offer clear evidence of a national news media that remains front and center in the public's aggregate news feed.

*Reinterpreting Trust.* The popularity of the national news media is evident; less clear is what it means. In particular, how do we square such large audiences with data that show such a lack of trust in the media? If the media are considered largely unreliable, it may be of little consequence that that these media are widely followed. Perhaps the only thing that matters is the ideological predisposition of consumers who, in end might simply choose to believe what they want to believe. To delve further into this question we turn to the questions about trust and accuracy and in Table 2 we break down those responses by whether people consume the media source in question or not.

[Table 2 Here]

The results stand in stark contrast to the low level of trust in the mass media in general. Disaggregated by users and non-users, the pattern is one of enormous trust in media that respondents utilize. Eight of the eleven sources are trusted a lot or some by more than 80 percent of their users. Among those who do not read, watch, or listen, the trust scores are considerably lower. The same pattern is found in the survey responses about accuracy. For ten of the eleven sources, over 80 percent of people who use them feel that they are either very or somewhat accurate. Eighty-nine percent of listeners to Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity regard them as accurate. Surely no dispassionate panel of experts would say the same about the accuracy of these programs' content. The people who listen, however, judge these programs by their own sense of where the truth lies.

What are we to make of the extremely high levels of trust in the truth and accuracy in these eleven of the nation's most important media outlets? It seems evident that there is a severe self-selection influence as people gravitate to those outlets they trust while, at the same time, they regard the media they do not use as deeply flawed. The question that Gallup and others ask about the media in general evinces a response that is weighed heavily by respondents' sense that the *other* media—the media they do not use—is the problem. This divergent pattern of my media and other people's media calls to mind Richard Fenno's famous dictum about Congress: we hate Congress but we love our congressman (1975). In short, the prevailing story line that we mistrust the media is highly misleading. Instead, we have a very high degree of trust in the media we utilize. What is to be determined is how consumption of news from these sources and the trust that people place in them may condition other attitudes and behavior.

*Incivility and Polarization.* Talk radio and cable television are widely assumed to be a major cause of growing incivility. Berry and Sobieraj (2014) argue that the very business model of talk radio and cable television is to be provocative and to test the boundaries of what is permissible to say publically. The outrage industry's assessments of those on the other side of the partisan divide are incendiary, with hostile language a norm. Tucker Carlson of Fox has gained a great deal of notoriety of late by his racialized story lines. Railing against immigration, for example, Carlson told his audience that liberals tell us that "We have a moral obligation to admit the world's poor . . . even if it makes our own country poor and dirtier and more divided" (Wemple 2018). Thinking about Fox or any other media source, we ask how incivility is linked to media selection. In the next section we'll look at the specific issue of race in this context but here we will first consider behavioral norms related to polarization and compromise.

Our CCES respondents were asked to read the following statement along with two choices as to how to finish that sentence: “Thinking about politics and elections, would you say that personally insulting political opponents is . . .” One alternative to finish the sentence was that it is “sometimes fair game” to insult a political opponent. The other was that it is “never fair game.” In Table 3 we cross tabulate those responses by media source. The media outlets are grouped into three categories: conservative sources include Fox, Sean Hannity radio, and Rush Limbaugh; mainstream media includes the *Post*, the *Times*, the three broadcast networks, CNN, and NPR; and by itself MSNBC represents liberal media, as there are no liberal talk radio hosts with significantly sized audiences.

[Table 3 Here]

The results among the three groupings are revealing. Just over a quarter of MSNBC and mainstream media consumers believe that it is appropriate to insult political opponents. This number is lower than those who did not watch MSNBC and the same pattern is true for mainstream consumers. For conservative media, the reverse is true, with about 41 percent of users approving of this tactic while non-users are only at about 25 percent. Given the similarity of the scores between MSNBC and seven mainstream media outlets, it is fair to conclude that MSNBC watchers do not depart from the broader societal norm that it is generally unacceptable to insult politicians. Those who use conservative media deviate from the norm, though by itself this table does not reveal much more than that. This is consequential as policymakers are sensitive to public opinion and those from conservative districts and states are clearly finding support for a refusal to compromise.

In Table 4 we cross tabulate the three media source groupings with respondents' preference for politicians "who make compromises with people they disagree with," as opposed to politicians "who stick to their position." Compromise is seen by many scholars as critical to the functioning of government. "Compromise is difficult," write Guttman and Thompson, "but governing a democracy without compromise is impossible" (2012, 1). Even so, many rank-and-file Americans believe that the good society will be achieved only when politicians show backbone and stand up for what they believe (Glaser, Berry, and Schildkraut, forthcoming).

[Table 4 Here]

The patterns are stark. For the general groupings we find that among all consumers, those who use both MSNBC and mainstream media, are less likely to prefer politicians who stick to their principles, the non-compromisers, than those who did not utilize the same media. Among those who frequent the conservative media sources, the pattern is reversed. Not only are the scores higher for politicians who stick to their principles, but they are higher than for those who do not use such media.

By controlling for ideology, differences stand out in even sharper relief. Here we systematically contrast the views on compromise versus principle by those who describe themselves as very liberal, moderate, or very conservative. Among the very liberal and moderates, users were less likely to choose principle over compromise than non-users. Thus, their consumption of those media is associated with the norm of the necessity of compromise in the governmental process. None of the scores for very liberal or moderate users of MSNBC or mainstream media is above 50 percent for the non-compromise option. Conservatives show a

different pattern. What is most noticeable, whether it be for mainstream media or conservative media, is that all results for conservatives show that at least 80 percent believe that principle should take precedence over compromise (for more on the tendency of conservatives to disdain compromise, see Glaser and Berry 2018). There is no consistent pattern between very conservative users and non-users.<sup>4</sup>

Tables 3 and 4 tell us a lot about modern conservatism. In the realm of politics and policymaking, conservatives are more unyielding in their contempt for the other side. The impact of media is less clear. Conservative media users and non-users alike have an extremely high level of antagonism toward compromise with liberals and Democrats. Moreover, for respondents in all in these analyses, the question of self-selection looms. Are political views affected by an ideological media diet? We turn to a battery of questions about race to try to determine if there is added impact through media consumption.

### **Racial Resentment**

In so many ways race continues to be a fault line in American politics and these divisions are amplified in both partisan and mainstream media. Analysts have placed race at the center of the explanation of Donald Trump's upset victory in 2016 (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018). White identity is linked to racial resentment as many whites believe that minorities gain unfair advantages from both norms and public policy (Jardina 2019).

*Personal Responsibility?* To gain some insight into the link between media consumption and racial resentment we utilized a battery of four CCES questions that were designed to

measure such sentiments on race. As a set, these questions point to personal responsibility for one's own condition. They tap resentment by suggesting that blacks do not work hard enough to better themselves and, implicitly, rely on government to help them move forward. The conventional liberal position, posed in two of the questions, rejects this reasoning and acknowledges discrimination as a barrier to a better life. These are the questions:

1. Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
2. Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
3. Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
4. It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough, if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

Assessing persuasion is complicated because of the strong self-selection bias that underlies partisan news consumption. We are unable to remove the impact of self-selection through our survey instrument but our strategy is instead to embrace self-selection on both the left and right. In the regressions in Table 5 we first restrict our sample to those who told the CCES that they regard themselves as liberal or very liberal; we then do the opposite by utilizing only those respondents who said they're conservative or very conservative. The virtue of this approach is that it allows us to see if liberals who watch MSNBC differ from those who do not and if conservatives who watch Fox News differ from those who do not.

Respondents were presented with a five point agree/disagree racial resentment scale and the responses to all the questions have been aggregated into a single measure.<sup>5</sup> In these regressions a negative sign indicates reduced racial resentment and a positive sign represents more resentment. The first column in Table 5 reveals a highly significant negative coefficient for watching MSNBC. Education is also associated with less resentment for liberals while age and race (white vs. nonwhite) are not significantly tied to the resentment battery. The subsample of conservatives shows the opposite: Watching Fox is associated with increased racial resentment. Education is negatively associated with resentment and statistically significant; race (white) is statistically significant while age is not.

[Table 5 Here]

We reran these tests for both liberals and conservatives by substituting trust in MSNBC and trust in Fox instead of the watching variables. The intention behind using trust is to gain an even stronger self-selection bias by isolating more habitual watchers. The results (not shown here) for both the liberal and conservative only subsamples are largely the same. Trust in MSNBC among liberals reduces resentment (albeit by a smaller magnitude than watching) as does education. The other variables are insignificant. Trust in Fox increases resentment among conservatives; all other variables are insignificant. All these tests show that watching an ideologically compatible cable network intensifies racial resentment attitudes. This supports Levendusky's (2013) finding from his experimental work that exposure to partisan media hardens the attitudes of those who were polarized to begin with.

To explore this further we also used the moderate choice on the ideological self placement question to make another comparison. By moving away from those who are more ideological, we may gain some insight into the impact of cable on those whose views are less inveterately in agreement with one of the network's point of view. We ran these tests in four different ways: separately for watching each network, separately for trusting each network, jointly (both networks) for watching, and jointly for trusting each network. It turns out that these particulars do not matter, and we find consistency across these tests. For moderates who watch MSNBC, there is a substantial and highly significant impact (lower resentment) from watching the network and a somewhat smaller but still highly significant association for trust. For Fox only, watching and trusting Fox significantly increased racial resentment. These results are illustrated in our combined model, which we show here in Table 5 with both MSNBC and Fox included together. It shows that moderates who watch MSNBC are less racially resentful while moderates who watch Fox are more racially resentful, all else the same.<sup>6</sup> Similar results are obtained with trust substituted for watching. Across all the tests for moderates, education was consistently and significantly associated with less resentment. Race (white) was positively and significantly associated with resentment across all the tests.

Our findings on moderates appear to support experimental research that demonstrates that those who have less interest in partisan media are more persuadable than those who like to consume it (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013, De Benedictis-Kessner et al., forthcoming). Our test is not directly comparable as it is not experimental and we cannot equate moderates in this survey with media preference in the experiments. Still, our survey reflects real world habits and

what we can say is that moderates who watch partisan media differ substantially from moderates who do not.

### **Race on Fox and MSNBC**

What is it about the content of these networks that might yield these results? To address this question we drew on a rather simple methodology: we sat down and watched these shows and took detailed notes. Later, we coded what we recorded. More specifically, to understand their content, we watched the prime time shows (8:00-11:00 pm) on each. At this writing we are about 90 percent done and thus the figures cited here are close to what the final numbers will be.<sup>7</sup> The full results of this data collection will be reported separately when we conclude this work.

There is so much antagonism toward minorities on Fox that it may seem too obvious to spend time documenting it. How many times does Tucker Carlson have to say that cities are dirty to understand that such material represents an editorial and business decision by the parent corporate entity, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox? From the other side of the ideological spectrum, MSNBC, a division of Comcast, has a distinct point of view that it holds to with great consistency. Still, our goal was to accurately and fully document these shows' content, and we proceeded with an array of indicators designed to measure race related viewpoints.

The unit of analysis is a single segment of a show, which was defined as any period of more than three minutes between commercials. All segments in a show were coded and shows were randomly selected over a period of now close to one year. The structure of a segment is typically a narrative about an urgent and disturbing issue that is current that day. As such, segments are stories about good and evil. One of the codes we used was to identify the villains in

the segment, the people who represent the evil side of the story. We coded up to three villains per segment and if there were more, the first three introduced in the story were the ones included.

In the 280 segments we have coded so far, split roughly even between MSNBC and Fox, the story lines representing evil are quite different. On MSNBC the proportion of villains who are nonwhite is just 5 percent. This seems logical as there are few minorities of note in the Trump administration or on the Republican side in Congress. On Fox, however, 41 percent of the villains are people of color. The favorite targets of ridicule, criticism, and contempt are Maxine Waters, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Al Sharpton, and Frederica Wilson. This is way out of proportion to the number of people of color in leadership positions in either the Democratic party or the liberal side of American popular culture and especially so for women of color. It also seems no coincidence that Fox villains are largely women.

The stories on Fox that were race related covered a variety of topics but more than anything else dealt with the Southern Border. Thematically there were variations on a theme of imminent danger: the caravans were enormous; the caravans were full of criminals; people were committing a crime by crossing the border where there was no government station; these would-be immigrants were going to end up in cities where they would create problems; or the Democrats were for open borders and that was a prescription for anarchy. The villainous people of color were often the foils in this story but they were also foils in stories that were not about race per se. In looking at our raw notes we see segments summarizing the narratives as “AOC is a fool,” “Congresswoman Omar hates America.” The message on the prime time Fox shows was

clear: *These people are a problem. These people are a threat.* The contempt and the harsh language are normalized in formats that are both entertaining and infuriating.

The stories that involve race on MSNBC are also largely about immigration and the southern border. Of course, they are sympathetic to those trying to enter the United States and the visuals are of cages, children crying, or individuals pleading. The MSNBC 10:00 pm host, Lawrence O'Donnell, mocked the Trump administration one evening by telling viewers that the administration claimed in court that “they can provide safe and sanitary conditions for the children without providing the children with soap or toothbrushes or toothpaste and that it is perfectly safe and sanitary to sleep on concrete floors.”<sup>8</sup> One of the villains, invariably, is President Trump, and the other villains tended to be officials in the administration or Republicans in Congress. Many of the narratives have the same message: *this is inhumane; this is not who we are as a people.*

We have offered but a brief overview of some of the cable content data and, again, we will report on them more fully at a later date. Nevertheless we can conclude that the intent of the two networks' business strategy is to make viewers absolutely infuriated at what they see. And the content needs to be so disturbing and compelling that the viewers come back the next night. On Fox in particular, this strategy results in a heavy dose of racial antagonism. Thus, there is a logic, an evidentiary basis, to what we documented earlier in the statistical analysis: watching these shows will affect viewers' opinions as the programs' content primes existing feelings with emotional, anger inducing coverage the politics of race.

## **Conclusion**

For all the changes in the media landscape, the business upheavals in the media landscape, and the changing habits of American readers, viewers, and listeners, there is also continuity. What we have documented here is the persistent centrality of American mass media. The broadcast networks, newspapers, and radio continue to be vigorous and followed by large audiences. Cable news is younger but already thought to be part of a declining media establishment; yet it has never been more popular and never so deeply imbedded in American political culture.

Perhaps what is most misleading about popular images and impressions of mass media is that it is widely mistrusted. Yes, the *other* media, what the *other* people use, are mistrusted, but what *we* use we trust indelibly. That trust may lead us to being moved by what we regard as the truth. This is of particular interest in considering talk radio and the two ideological cable networks with their constant diet of inflammatory content.

What is perhaps most striking in our data analysis is the sharp differences between liberals and conservatives. Of course they hold different views on policy but what we want to emphasize here is that they are also fundamentally at odds about appropriate behavior in a democratic society. Conservatives are more likely to believe it is acceptable behavior to insult a political opponent and considerably more likely to prefer politicians who do not engage in compromise. There is no clear pattern, however, tying use of conservative opinion media and such attitudes. Our results suggest that mainstream media does seem to have a moderating impact on support for compromise and opposition to gratuitous insults. Given how routinely the media are criticized, we think this is an important finding.

When we examined racial resentment, increasingly the defining issue of the Trump years, we do see a sharp differential in the association of cable consumption and public opinion. Through a series of tests we see liberals who watch MSNBC to be linked to less racially resentful attitudes while conservatives who watch Fox are more racially resentful. Moderates who watch either of the channels appear to be influenced in the direction of consumption as well. Our analysis of actual episodes of cable programs provides ample evidence of content that is designed to inflame opinion. The multivariate statistics and the cable content analysis match up and provide insight into why these shows are structured the way they are. In a polarized America cable keeps throwing gas onto the fire.

We are all too aware of the shortcomings of our study. Since we have used survey data we cannot be as confident of causation as the scholars who have used experimental designs to isolate the impact of the consumption of shaded content. We are not able to make comparisons across time, which hampers our ability to draw out the distinctiveness of the Trump era and the increased role cable has played with its significantly higher ratings. It was beyond the scope of this paper to integrate what we have found with the large and imposing literature on polarization in American politics. We hope to contribute more to that debate in the larger project of which this paper is a part.

What we have found is important and, we think, persuasive: opinion media matters, particularly on television. It did not create racial resentment but it primes deep-seated values that lie at the core of American ideology. The business model of talk radio and cable television suggests that the patterns we have observed are likely to continue.

**TABLE 1**

**MEDIA DIET**

*Please indicate if you have watched, listened to, or read any of the following in the past month*

	<u>Percent Yes</u>
Fox Cable	40.0
MSNBC	32.2
CNN	44.9
CBS	35.3
NBC	36.4
ABC	33.7
Rush Limbaugh	14.3
NPR	24.8
New York Times	33.7
Washington Post	33.1
Hannity (radio)	16.6

**TABLE 2****BELIEF IN THE TRUST AND ACCURACY OF MEDIA SOURCES***Please indicate how much you **trust** each of the following**Please indicate how **accurate** you think each of the following is*

	<u>Trust a lot + Trust some</u>		<u>Very Accurate + Somewhat Accurate</u>	
	Used past month		Used past month	
	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Fox Cable	75.2%	19.9%	77.7%	25.8%
MSNBC	83.9	29.2	87.5	37.8
CNN	74.4	26.6	81.9	33.3
CBS	83.6	42.4	87.1	51.9
NBC	81.4	40.1	85.5	48.4
ABC	78.2	43.5	84.8	51.2
Rush Limbaugh	88.1	19.7	89.2	26.0
NPR	87.2	41.2	89.2	52.6
New York Times	81.5	36.5	86.2	46.4
Washington Post	84.5	37.9	87.1	44.1
Sean Hannity (radio)	88.6	20.2	89.2	27.2

**TABLE 3**

**MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND APPROVAL OF INSULTING POLITICIANS**

*Thinking about politics and elections, would you say that personally insulting political opponents is . . .*

		Mainstream	Conservative
<u>% Yes, Sometimes Fair Game</u>	<u>MSNBC</u>	<u>Media</u>	<u>Media</u>
Use past month	27.5	28.2	40.8
Didn't use past month	33.8	40.6	24.8
X <sup>2</sup>	sig. .064	sig. .001	sig. .000

N=264

**TABLE 4**

**PREFERENCE FOR PRINCIPLED POLITICIANS BY MEDIA DIET WITH CONTROLS FOR IDEOLOGICAL SELF-PLACEMENT**

*Please indicate if you have watched, listened to, or read any of the following in the past month*

*Which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right:*

- 1. I like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with*
- 2. I like elected officials who stick to their position*

*Ideology (5 point scale)*

	<u>MSNBC</u>	<u>Mainstream Media</u>	<u>Conservative Media</u>
<u>% Like pol. who stick to position</u>			
All/use past month	35.7	44.3	56.3
All/didn't use past month	55.1	62.7	49.7
Very liberal/used	44.4		
Very liberal/didn't use	48.1		
Moderates/used	33.3		
Moderates/didn't use	48.8		
Very liberal /used		44.7	
Very liberal /didn't use		60.0	
Moderate/used		38.1	
Moderate/didn't use		59.4	
Very conservative/used		84.8	
Very conservative/didn't use		82.1	
Moderate/used			43.2
Moderate/didn't use			44.4
Very conservative/used			80.0
Very conservative/didn't use			90.5

N Very liberal (117); moderate (273); very conservative (131)

**TABLE 5, CABLE CONSUMPTION AND RACIAL RESENTMENT ATTITUDES**

	Liberals	Conservatives	Moderates
Watching MSNBC	-.371*** (.111)		-1.023*** (.143)
Watching Fox		.252* (.106)	.533*** (.144)
Education	-.168*** (.037)	-.104*** (.031)	-.104* (.048)
Age	.000 (.003)	.001 (.003)	.008* (.004)
White	-.105 (.122)	.277* (.134)	.450** (.145)
Constant	2.915*** (.212)	3.897*** (.236)	2.868*** (.297)
N	248	295	225
R-Sq	.131	.075	.305

\*p ≤0.05; \*\*p≤0.01; \*\*\*p. ≤0.001. Standard errors in parentheses.

## WORKS CITED

- Anson, Ian G. 2016. "Just the Facts? Partisan Media and the Political Conditioning of Economic Perceptions." *Political Research Quarterly* 69(3): 444-456.
- Arceneaux, Kevin, and Martin Johnson. 2013. *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berry, Jeffrey M., and Sarah Sobieraj. 2014. *The Outrage Industry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- De Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Matthew A. Baum, Adam J. Berinsky, and Teppei Yamamoto. Forthcoming. "Persuading the Enemy: Estimating the Persuasion Effects of Partisan Media with the Preference-Incorporating Choice and Assignment Design." *American Political Science Review*.
- Druckman, James N., Matthew S. Levendusky, and Audrey McClain. 2018. "No Need to Watch: How the Effects of Partisan Media Can Spread Via Interpersonal Discussion." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(1): 99-112.
- Fenno, Richard. 1975. "If as Ralph Nader Says, Congress Is 'The Broken Branch,' How Come We Love Our Congressmen So Much?" In *Congress in Change*, ed., Norman J. Ornstein. New York: Praeger.
- Garrett, R. Kelly, Brian E. Weeks, and Rachel L. Neo. 2016. "Driving a Wedge Between Evidence and Beliefs: How Online Ideological News Exposure Promotes Political Misperceptions." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21(5): 331-348.
- Garrett, R. Kelly, Shira Dvir Gvirsman, Benjamin K. Johnson, Yariv Tsfati, Rachel Neo, and Aysenur Dal. 2014. "Implications of Pro- and Counterattitudinal Information Exposure for Affective Polarization." *Human Communications Research* 40(3): 309-332.
- Glaser, James M., and Jeffrey M. Berry. 2018. "Compromising Positions: Why Republican Partisans Are More Rigid than Democrats." *Political Science Quarterly* 133(1): 99-125.
- Glaser, James M., Jeffrey M. Berry, and Deborah J. Schildkraut. Forthcoming. "Education and the Curious Case of Conservative Compromise." *Political Research Quarterly*
- Gottfried, Jeffrey, Galen Stocking, and Elizabeth Grieco. 2018. "Partisans Remain Sharply Divided in Their Attitudes About the Media." Pew Research Center. <https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/25/partisans-remain-sharply-divided-in-their-attitudes-about-the-news-media/>. Accessed July 9, 2019.

- Hamilton, James T. 2004. *All the News That's Fit to Sell*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hasell, A., and Brian E. Weeks. 2016. "Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses." *Human Communications Research* 42(4): 641-661.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Kyu S. Hahn. 2009. "Red Media, Blue Media." *Journal of Communication* 59(1): 19-39.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald R. Kinder. 2010. *News That Matters*, updated edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. "Affect, not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76(3): 405-431.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean J. Westwood. 2015. "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines." 2015. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 690-707.
- Jones, Jeffrey M. 2018. "U.S. Media Trust Continues to Recover From 2016 Low." *Gallup Poll* <https://news.gallup.com/poll/243665/media-trust-continues-recover-2016-low.aspx>. (October 12). Accessed July 9, 2019.
- Epstein, Ethan. 2016. "Is Rush Limbaugh in Trouble?" *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/is-rush-limbaugh-in-trouble-talk-radio-213914>. (May 24). Accessed July 11, 2019.
- Guttmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 2012. *The Spirit of Compromise*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Katz, A.J. 2019a. "2018 Ratings." *TVNewser*. <https://www.adweek.com/tvnewser/2018-ratings-fox-news-is-the-most-watched-network-on-cable-for-the-third-straight-year/387943/>. (January 2). Accessed August 8, 2019.
- Katz, A.J. 2019b. "The Top Cable News Programs of January 2019 Were . . ." *TVNewser*. <https://www.adweek.com/tvnewser/the-top-cable-news-programs-of-january-2019-were/392622/>. (January 30). Accessed August 8, 2019/
- Katz, Elihu, and Paul Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal Influence*. New York: Transaction.
- Ladd, Jonathan M. 2012. *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ladd, Jonathan M., and Alexander R. Podkul. Forthcoming. "Sowing Distrust of the News Media as an Electoral Strategy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Persuasion*, eds., Elizabeth Suhay, Bernie Grofman and Alex Trechsel. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lau, Richard R., David J. Anderson, Tessa M. Ditonto, Mona S. Kleinberg, and David P. Redlawsk. 2017. "Effect of Media Environment Diversity and Advertising Tone on Information Search, Selective Exposure, and Affective Polarization." *Political Behavior* 39(1): 231-255.

Levendusky, Matthew. 2013. *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Martin, Gregory J., and Joshua McCrain. 2019. "Local News and National Politics." *American Political Science Review* 113(2): 372-394.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peiser, Jaclyn. 2018. "New York Times Tops 4 Million Mark in Total Subscribers." <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/business/media/new-york-times-earnings-subscribers.html>. (November 1). Accessed August 8, 2019.

Pew Research Center. 2019. *State of the News Media*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/state-of-the-news-media/> (June 25). Accessed July 11, 2019.

Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schaffner, Brian F., Matthew Macwilliams, and Tatishe Nteta. 2018. "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism." *Political Science Quarterly* 133(1): 9-34.

Shin, Jieun, and Kjerstin Thurson. 2017. "Partisan Selective Sharing: The Biased Diffusion of Fact-Checking on Social Media." *Journal of Communication* 67: 233-255.

Sides, John. Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2018. *Identity Crisis*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stroud, Natalie Jomini. 2011. *Niche News*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sullivan, Margaret. 2019. "'Birthing centers for polarizing rhetoric': The outsize influence of Fox, CNN and MSNBC." *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/birthing-centers-for-polarizing-rhetoric-the-outsize-influence-of-fox-cnn-and-msnbc/2019/05/23/2bcc429a-7cbe-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4a505f98f151](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/birthing-centers-for-polarizing-rhetoric-the-outsize-influence-of-fox-cnn-and-msnbc/2019/05/23/2bcc429a-7cbe-11e9-8ede-f4abf521ef17_story.html?utm_term=.4a505f98f151). (May 27). Accessed July 9, 2019.

Warner, Benjamin. 2018. "Modeling Partisan Media Effects in the 2014 Elections." *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly* 95(3): 647-669.

Wemple, Erik. 2018. "Tucker Carlson Said Immigration Makes America 'Dirtier.' So an Advertiser Took Action." [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/15/tucker-carlson-said-immigration-makes-america-dirtier-so-an-advertiser-took-action/?utm\\_term=.e02fd3912cc3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/15/tucker-carlson-said-immigration-makes-america-dirtier-so-an-advertiser-took-action/?utm_term=.e02fd3912cc3) (December 15). Accessed July 12, 2019.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> We appreciate the assistance of Tufts student, Alexis Tatore, on this paper and on other parts of our project.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup> All computations here use the CCES teamweight option to adjust the sample to the nation's demographics.

<sup>4</sup> We do not have tests for opposites, either very conservative using MSNBC or very liberal using conservative media because there were too few respondents who fell into those categories.

<sup>5</sup> The scale uses the Alpha command in Stata, which added up the scores for each of the racial resentment questions respondents answered and then divided them by the number of racial resentment questions the respondents answered.

<sup>6</sup> All the statistical results referenced but not show here are available from the corresponding author.

<sup>7</sup> These shows are Tucker Carlson Tonight, Hannity, and the Ingraham Angle on Fox, and All in with Chris Hayes, the Rachel Maddow Show, and the Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell on MSNBC. The data collection will end this September and will cover the span of a single year.

<sup>8</sup> The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell, June 24, 2019. <https://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/watch/lawyer-gives-eyewitness-account-of-kids-conditions-in-border-facility-62604869584>