



ROBERT FARIS • JUSTIN CLARK • BRUCE ETLING • JONAS KAISER
HAL ROBERTS • CAROLYN SCHMITT • CASEY TILTON • YOCHAI BENKLER

POLARIZATION AND THE PANDEMIC: AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

MARCH-MAY 2020

PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN THE U.S. 2020 ELECTION



This report is the product of a collaboration between the Public Discourse in the U.S. 2020 Election project at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society and the Technology and Social Change project at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. The project was funded by grants from Craig Newmark Philanthropies, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Societies Foundations.



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Perspectives and data sources	5
The Politicization of the Pandemic	7
Political Public Discourse, March-May 2020	12
Democratic Primary Draws to a Conclusion	12
March 2020	13
Open web media links	13
Facebook	25
Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts	28
April 2020	32
Open web media links	32
Facebook	38
Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts	41
May 2020	47
Open web media links	47
Facebook	51
Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts	53
Conclusions	57

Executive Summary

By the middle of March, the Democratic primary had effectively ended, and the enormity of the Covid-19 pandemic and its human and economic cost began to sink in. The response to the pandemic had already been thoroughly politicized several weeks earlier such that news and information about the pandemic were mediated by political media systems.

While the rest of the American media ecosystem focused on describing the pandemic, its economic costs, and criticizing the president for his response, conservative media presented a thoroughly partisan view of events and proactively defended and supported the actions and inactions of the president. For audiences of conservative media, information about the pandemic was communicated not through politically neutral public health authorities but was instead filtered and propagated through media channels shaped by many decades of partisan politics. The mainstream media coverage of the pandemic that got the most attention was highly critical of the president's response, which may have deepened the politically-rooted differences in perspectives on the pandemic. Compared to conservative media, there was far greater deference among media sources on the center and left to views and perspectives of public health authorities and experts.

This report, based on an ecosystem-wide analysis of political media coverage, spans the period of March, April, and May, when the spread and magnitude of the pandemic in the United States became clear and the response of the government was communicated to the public and debated in the media. In March, coverage of the pandemic dominated political media on both sides of the political spectrum, though significantly less so on the right. The proportion of media attention to the pandemic diminished in April and May on the left. On the right, attention to the pandemic dropped off steeply. In April, conservative media and their audiences devoted substantial attention to coverage of the allegations of sexual harassment by Tara Reade against Joe Biden. In May, there was far more attention in conservative media to relitigating the origins of the Russia investigation under the banner of Obamagate than to the pandemic, which had already exacted a terrible cost and was nowhere near being under control. The collective judgement of the conservative media ecosystem was that this largely unsubstantiated storyline rooted in grievance politics was more deserving of the attention of the American public. For Biden supporters, the drop in attention to Covid-19 was picked up by negative coverage of the Trump administration on other issues. Sanders supporters followed a similar path until the death of George Floyd at the end May took up their attention. This was not replicated in the Biden set. Consistent with our findings in January-February, at the peak of the primaries season, Sanders supporters here too appear more focused on progressive issues, while Biden supporters are largely focused on criticism or rejection of Trump.

The basic asymmetric and polarized structure of American political media has changed little over the past several years, and this time period is no exception. The potent role of conservative media in the

election victory of Trump in 2016 rested on two distinct factors: first, Trump’s success in securing favorable coverage and strong support in conservative media, and second, the success that conservative media had in influencing media coverage outside of conservative media. The willingness of conservative media and audiences to defend and support Trump is clearly evident during these months. Trump continued to receive strong support in conservative media, which acted to divert, deflect, and reframe negative coverage, despite the rash of negative coverage criticizing the administration’s response to the pandemic. The evidence also points to a further isolation of conservative media in American political discourse and a system less able to shape discourse and coverage outside of its own confines, leaving Americans in more starkly divided epistemic worlds. The administration-friendly narratives about the pandemic and Obamagate got little to no traction outside of conservative media. This finding matches what we found in a prior report in which we describe the inability of conservative media to shape coverage of the Hunter Biden scandal outside of right-wing media during January and February 2020, a pattern that is repeated in October 2020.

Neither President Trump nor conservative media have lost their ability to influence the media agenda. For example, in a recent report we describe how Trump was able to create a controversy about mail-in voter fraud that prompted media coverage across the political spectrum.¹ The sexual harassment allegations lodged by Tara Reade against Joe Biden ultimately got a public airing—something conservative media pushed hard on. Despite the fact that the impetus to address this topic came also from the left, the media attention garnered in conservative media was not matched in the center and left. The key difference is that while President Trump and conservative media can still make news, their power to interpret and frame the narrative around key events beyond conservative media is more constrained than in 2016. The asymmetric credibility gap between conservative media and the rest of the media ecosystem appears to have deepened. And professional media seem to succumb less readily to the “bias of balance” problem that had bedeviled much of mainstream coverage of Hillary Clinton’s campaign in 2016.²

There is plentiful evidence of disinformation in political discourse among partisan media and on social media. The problem is far more acute on the right than the left and considerable attention on the far right is tied to the growing QAnon conspiracy. This development is a troubling symptom of the state of political discourse in the United States and translates into real-world costs. However, the impact of top-down propaganda and disinformation is still a greater problem in the United States, particularly so in relation to Covid-19, as tens of millions of Americans have taken unnecessary risks and helped spread the pandemic because they were misinformed about the dangers of contracting the disease and

¹ Benkler et al., “Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign,” <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2020/Mail-in-Voter-Fraud-Disinformation-2020>

² Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, Chapter 6, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.001.0001/oso-9780190923624-chapter-6>.

the value of measures deemed effective by public health authorities in reducing the chance of infection, such as social distancing or mask wearing.

Many people, including public health specialists and the general public, have come to the conclusion that compared to the relative successes of other countries in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic, the United States response has been a failure, costing innumerable lives and leaving tens of thousands with long-term health problems, while deepening and extending the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.³ A large minority of Americans fundamentally disagree with this assessment.⁴ These divergent worldviews, the symptom of a larger epistemic crisis in the United States tied to asymmetrically polarized media systems, greatly complicate efforts to effectively meet such collection action challenges and undermine democratic governance. In this paper, we describe how American media ecosystems are able to sustain such different worldviews and contribute to the mishandling and miscommunication of the pandemic. This report is the second in a series of reports that cover the months running up to the November election.

³ Nuzzo, Bell, and Cameron “Suboptimal US Response to COVID-19 Despite Robust Capabilities and Resources,” <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2770891>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/21/americans-give-the-u-s-low-marks-for-its-handling-of-covid-19-and-s-o-do-people-in-other-countries/>; Schneider, “Failing the Test — The Tragic Data Gap Undermining the U.S. Pandemic Response,” <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmp2014836>; https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-08-07-20-intl/h_18b9e65f4636a09713c4beed7822ca8e

⁴ Approximately two-thirds of Republicans and those that lean Republican believe that the government is doing as much as can be done to control the pandemic, compared to 11% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning <https://www.journalism.org/2020/10/07/before-trump-tested-positive-for-coronavirus-republicans-attention-to-pandemic-had-sharply-declined/>. This divide extends to perceptions about the relative level of threat to public health. For example, more than half of Republicans surveyed in August reported that it was somewhat safe or very safe for schools to reopen compared to 15% of Democrats, via Baum et al., “The State of the Nation: A 50-State Covid-19 Survey,” <https://kateto.net/covid19/COVID19%20CONSORTIUM%20REPORT%2011%20SCHOOL%20AUGUST%202020.pdf>

Introduction

By mid-March, coverage of the coronavirus outbreak had subsumed American political discourse. Given the magnitude and seriousness of the pandemic, this was inevitable. This coverage also fed into the profound dysfunction of media ecosystems in the United States and torpedoed chances of a coordinated and effective national response. In this report, we describe and detail how the asymmetrically polarized American media system failed to adequately inform the country at large of the costs and consequences of different courses of action. Rather than holding leaders accountable for their actions and forcing them to make better decisions and course corrections, media coverage devolved into political theater, hobbling the power of the press.

In this study, we conduct large-scale analysis of political media spanning more than 400,000 stories published over a three-month period from March through May, in addition to tracking the sharing of these stories among different political communities on Twitter. To better understand the contours and function of these media ecosystems we conduct analysis from several perspectives. We analyze the linking patterns between more than 15,000 media sources to assess which stories and media sources got the most citations from other media sources. This serves as a measure of prominence among media producers, journalists, and editors of stories and topics across the system. We also track the linking patterns coming from different segments of the media ecosystem so that we can compare, for example, what is more influential on the right or left. As a complement to this media-centric approach, we also document the media sharing practices of political cohorts on Twitter based on their retweeting of Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and Bernie Sanders. None of these views accurately reflect the interests and perspectives of the general public, whether media consumers, citizens, or voters, but they do offer insights into the interests and activities of the most influential and politically engaged media actors.

Perspectives and data sources

In the report, we contrast and compare the attention to political media coverage from several different perspectives. One perspective is based on the linking patterns of media sources to one another, which gives us a view into the interests and attention of media producers. In addition to tracking aggregate links to media sources and stories, we also separately track the behavior of media sources on the left and right. Drawing on data from CrowdTangle,⁵ we tabulate and compare attention to stories on Facebook based on two metrics: the number of accounts that post links to a story and the total number of interactions associated with stories. We also track the sharing of stories on Twitter for three samples of users aligned with Trump, Biden, and Sanders.⁶

⁵ Data from [CrowdTangle](#), a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

⁶ Further details on these methods are described in a companion report that covers January and February 2020:

<https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2020/partisanship-impachment-and-democratic-primaries-american-political-discourse>

Cross-media linking patterns among media outlets

Frequency of links to each open web story coming from:

- All media sources
- Media outlets in the left
- Media outlets in the right

Story metrics on Facebook

- Number of accounts that post a link to each story
- Total interactions associated with each story

Story sharing patterns of Twitter users by user cohort

Number of users that share a story in the:

- Trump cohort
- Biden cohort
- Sanders cohort

Tracking attention to topics in the open web and on social media

For each of the eight perspectives described above, the top 100 stories are hand-coded and assigned to a topical category, e.g. Covid-19, campaign.

The Politicization of the Pandemic

Turning the clock back to February, we see that several weeks before the pandemic would fully consume the full attention of the nation, the key narratives about the outbreak and related political positioning had already taken shape. While some will argue that media coverage in January and February did not fully and adequately communicate the risks of Covid-19 to the American public, the argument at the time in conservative media was that mainstream media coverage was alarmist and overestimating the threat to American lives. Others, including the president, argued that coverage of the outbreak was another attempt to damage the president. These two themes have remained at the core of right-wing coverage of the pandemic since they were articulated in February.

A two-pronged narrative in mainstream media that developed during this time was that the Trump administration was underselling the severity of the risks and was failing to respond adequately. The most cited article on the novel coronavirus in February is a January 31 article written by the Pulitzer prize winning science journalist Laurie Garrett (*Trump Has Sabotaged America's Coronavirus Response*).⁷ The article chronicles the alarms raised over the prior two years by public health advocates who argued that it was only a matter of time until the next pandemic would hit and that the United States was woefully under-funded, under-staffed, and under-prepared to meet the inevitable challenge. She presciently noted: "The next epidemic is now here; we'll soon know the costs imposed by the Trump administration's early negligence and present panic." This article is also far and away the most shared story in February among the sample of Biden- and Sanders-aligned users on Twitter that we track. This same tone has been replicated across mainstream media coverage of the pandemic for the duration of the crisis.

There are no signs in our analysis that conservative media ever treated the outbreak as anything but another political fight to be fought. The instinct in conservative media to defend the president against negative coverage and to treat mainstream media as a political opponent was established by the end of February. Prime examples are the narratives pushed by Rush Limbaugh on February 24, when he served up a stew of disinformation including the conspiracy theory that the origin of the virus is a bioweapon and the misguided argument that the risks of the disease are comparable to the common cold. He also clearly articulated a framing of the debate that was to become a touchstone for right-wing coverage: "It looks like the coronavirus is being weaponized as yet another element to bring down

⁷ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/31/coronavirus-china-trump-united-states-public-health-emergency-response/>

Donald Trump.”⁸ This same narrative track has been followed by conservative media ever since: reframing and deflecting media coverage from the center and left as overselling the risks of the pandemic and being overly critical of the Trump administration response. Limbaugh has been working for many decades to foster distrust in mainstream media and to prime his audiences to disregard news and information coming from media sources outside of the conservative media sphere. We show in this report that this type of stoking the partisan fires has overshadowed attempts to seriously engage with the risks of the disease and to grapple with and communicate the necessary steps to protect the country.

The four coronavirus-related stories in February that received a significant number of links from conservative media were to mainstream media coverage and were cited not in affirmation of the coverage but to dispute the emerging storylines from mainstream media. The article on Covid-19 most cited by right-wing media in February was a fact check in the AP entitled “Democrats distort coronavirus readiness.” The fact check called Democrats’ claims that Trump cut pandemic readiness funds and failed to offer leadership “false” because, first, while Trump in fact tried to cut funds, Congress refused his requests, and second, because “The public health system has a playbook to follow for pandemic preparation — regardless of who’s president or whether specific instructions are coming from the White House.”⁹ While the underlying AP report was hardly laudatory of Trump’s pandemic response, its core message that Democrats were distorting coronavirus readiness in ways that were unfair to Trump resonated powerfully on the right. Another story cited by conservative media was an opinion piece by Gail Collins (Let’s Call It Trumpvirus) that questioned the credentials of the Trump administration officials being charged with responsibility to lead the response amounting to a vote of no confidence in the administration’s ability to meet the challenge.¹⁰ This story received more attention from media sources on the right than other segments and was condemned by some in conservative media for politicizing the response to the pandemic.¹¹

A February 26 New York Times article that was cited on the right reported that all future coronavirus communications would be controlled by Vice President Pence and that statements by public health officials such as Dr. Fauci would have to be cleared in advance.¹² This story was most highly cited not by the right but by the left and center-left. The citations from the right were to dispute the statement that Dr. Fauci had been muzzled.

⁸ <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2020/02/24/overhyped-coronavirus-weaponized-against-trump/>

⁹ <https://apnews.com/d36d6c4de29f4d04beda3db00cb46104>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/26/opinion/coronavirus-trump.html>

¹¹ See for example: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/new-york-times-ripped-trumpvirus-column-coronavirus>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/us/politics/us-coronavirus-pence.html>

AP FACT CHECK: Democrats distort coronavirus readiness

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and CALVIN WOODWARD February 26, 2020

An AP fact check that resonated strongly with conservative audiences

A Politico article that received attention from the right covered President Trump's remarks at a rally in South Carolina on February 28; he said:

Now the Democrats are politicizing the coronavirus, you know that right? Coronavirus, they're politicizing it. We did one of the great jobs. You say, "How's President Trump doing?" They go, "Oh, not good, not good." They have no clue. They don't have any clue. They can't even count their votes in Iowa. They can't even count. No, they can't. They can't count their votes.

One of my people came up to me and said, "Mr. President, they tried to beat you on Russia, Russia, Russia." That didn't work out too well. They couldn't do it. They tried the impeachment hoax. That was on a perfect conversation. They tried anything. They tried it over and over. They'd been doing it since you got in. It's all turning. They lost. It's all turning. Think of it. Think of it. And this is their new hoax.¹³

WHITE HOUSE

Trump rallies his base to treat coronavirus as a 'hoax'

At a South Carolina rally on the eve of the Democratic primary, the president also sought to manage expectations about the White House's response to the outbreak.



Fact checkers weigh in on Politico's coverage of a Trump rally in South Carolina

¹³ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/28/trump-south-carolina-rally-coronavirus-118269>

The title of the article (Trump rallies his base to treat coronavirus as a ‘hoax’) was criticized by conservative media as a distortion of Trump’s words.¹⁴ Trump’s speech, and the different reactions to his speech, encapsulated the state of the debate at the time and presaged the trajectory for at least the next eight months. At a time when experts were coming out more forcefully and more publicly, and the threat of a severe health crisis was becoming a reality, Trump was publicly seeking to downplay the outbreak and conservative media provided validation and support. This invited criticism from the media and Democrats, which Trump supporters would be able to see as yet another manifestation of behavior and reasoning dictated by a visceral dislike of the man, a phenomenon dubbed as Trump derangement syndrome.¹⁵ We now know from the audio tapes of his February 7 conversation with Bob Woodward that Trump appeared to be fully aware of the severity of the threat and chose to downplay it.¹⁶



Fox & Friends lament the politicization of the coronavirus outbreak on February 29¹⁷

The last week of February marked a turning point in crisis and the government response as it had become increasingly clear to many experts that a serious health crisis in the United States was on the horizon. On February 26, the CDC reported the first case of community spread in the United States.¹⁸ A watershed moment in public messaging came a day earlier when Dr. Nancy Messonnier, Director of

¹⁴ Reporting and political advertising based on Trump’s speech that day were the subject of fact checking which we describe in a later section.

¹⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-next-pandemic-trump-derangement-syndrome-11594336574>

¹⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bob-woodward-rage-book-trump/2020/09/09/0368fe3c-efd2-11ea-b4bc-3a2098fc73d4_story.html

¹⁷ <https://www.foxnews.com/media/trump-campaign-media-coronavirus-hoax>

¹⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/s0226-Covid-19-spread.html>

the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, publicly warned that the spread of the novel coronavirus in the U.S. was inevitable.¹⁹

“It’s not so much of a question of if this will happen anymore but rather more of a question of exactly when this will happen.” She said that cities and towns should plan for “social distancing measures,” like dividing school classes into smaller groups of students or closing schools altogether. Meetings and conferences may have to be canceled, she said. Businesses should arrange for employees to work from home. “We are asking the American public to work with us to prepare, in the expectation that this could be bad,” Dr. Messonnier said.

The stock market dropped soon after this announcement and Trump was reportedly infuriated by the public announcement.²⁰ Messonnier was sidelined and Pence put in charge of overseeing administration communications related to the outbreak. It would be another two weeks before coverage of the pandemic would dominate American political discourse.

President Trump and his supporters accused the left of politicizing public discourse related to the pandemic, throwing mainstream media into the same camp. The barrage of negative coverage of the Trump administration’s response to the crisis would only increase in the coming weeks and contribute to deepening the political divide in the types and sources of information that would shape the beliefs and perspectives of Americans about the severity and best response to the pandemic. Mainstream media would continue to do their job. In a similar measure, conservative media would take up the role that it has evolved to play.

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/health/coronavirus-us.html>

²⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/25/trump-is-reportedly-furious-with-the-plunging-stock-market-due-to-coronavirus-fears.html>

Political Public Discourse, March-May 2020

Democratic Primary Draws to a Conclusion

The Democratic primary race was effectively over several weeks before Bernie Sanders suspended his campaign for the Democratic nomination on April 8 after Biden scored decisive wins on Super Tuesday and the rest of the field bowed out except Sanders, leaving Joe Biden as the presumptive nominee to face President Trump in November. Bloomberg, Klobuchar, and Buttigieg all dropped out the first week of March and quickly endorsed Biden. Warren also dropped out the first week of March but held her endorsement of Biden until mid-April.

This marked a quick end to a race that had developed slowly over the prior year. After many months with a crowded field of candidates, Sanders had emerged in February 2020 as a front-runner after a strong showing in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada. The Democratic primary race then took a sharp turn on the last day of February when Biden, riding on the endorsement of James Clyburn, won South Carolina by a large margin. Only a short number of days earlier the Biden campaign appeared to be on its last legs. After his electoral prospects were given new life in South Carolina, Biden went on to win 10 of the 14 Super Tuesday primaries a week later. At that point, the Sanders path to victory had narrowed enough that the race was effectively over. The Democratic primary was settled just as the spread of Covid-19 would overshadow all else in the political realm.

The most cited stories related to the campaign from the left in March were polling numbers and the departure from the campaign of Elizabeth Warren²¹ and Pete Buttigieg.²² The attention from the right was directed at a range of targets on the left. One is a fact check by the Washington Post calling out a political ad from the Biden campaign for manipulating video of Trump at the South Carolina rally.²³ A second is a story in Politico about the “growing legal morass” of the business ventures of Joe Biden’s brother James (A mysterious FBI raid. New allegations from former executives. Questions are swirling about the business dealings of Joe Biden’s brother.).²⁴ A third is a New York Times article that reports on Bernie Sanders’ quest in the 1980s to find a sister city for Burlington, Vermont, where he was mayor at time, and how the Soviet Union sought to translate his efforts into pro-Soviet propaganda.²⁵

Coverage of the primary election would drop off sharply after the first week of March and occupy a modest portion of the media agenda over the following three months (Figure 1).

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-drops-out.html>

²² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/us/politics/pete-buttigieg-drops-out.html>

²³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/13/biden-ad-manipulates-video-slam-trump/>

²⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/09/james-biden-health-care-ventures-123159>

²⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/world/europe/bernie-sanders-soviet-russia.html>

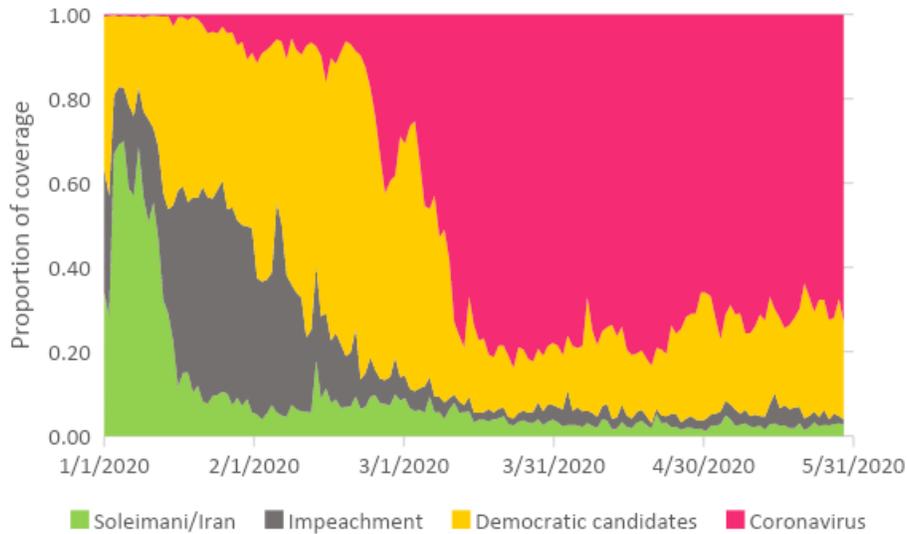


Figure 1. Relative proportion of media coverage to four major topics January through May 2020

March 2020

In a dramatic shift from the coverage of the Democratic primary election in February and early March, by the middle of March the focus of media attention shifted almost entirely to Covid-19. The most prominent coverage from the center, center-left, and left was directed at the failures of the Trump administration to address the coronavirus pandemic, including the missed opportunities in January and February, the lack of a comprehensive national response, and the failure to properly communicate the severity of risk. Conservative media recounted an entirely different story, one in which the left exaggerated the severity and risks of the pandemic and one in which the Trump administration successfully met the challenges.

Open web media links

In the month of March, 18 of the 20 most cited stories (as measured by hyperlinks from stories by other media organizations) were about the coronavirus outbreak. (The other two were about Elizabeth Warren dropping out of Democratic race²⁶ and a story about Tara Reade in the Intercept.²⁷) Several stories covered the sale of stock by a group of senators including Kelly Loeffler²⁸ and Intelligence Chair Richard Burr who had been briefed on the potential severity of the virus.²⁹ The first article in the Daily Beast focused on Loeffler as the “second known senator to sell off large stock holdings between that Jan. 24 briefing and the dramatic drop in stock-market.” They mention Burr as the other. The story by

²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-drops-out.html>

²⁷ <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/24/joe-biden-metoo-times-up/>

²⁸ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/sen-kelly-loeffler-dumped-millions-in-stock-after-coronavirus-briefing>

²⁹ <https://www.propublica.org/article/senator-dumped-up-to-1-7-million-of-stock-after-reassuring-public-about-coronavirus-preparedness>

National Security

U.S. intelligence reports from January and February warned about a likely pandemic



Critical coverage the Trump administration's response to the pandemic has garnered much attention

The contentious relationship between Trump and Fauci — and the clash between political expediency and science — was on full display in March, a visible manifestation of the politicization of the public health crisis that has undermined efforts to communicate the complexities, the uncertainties, and the full extent of the risks to the American public. An interview in *Science* with Dr. Fauci that highlights his frustrated efforts to insert evidence and science into the government response was highly cited by media from the left.³⁶ A New York Times coronavirus tracking map was also among the most linked-to resources.³⁷ The popularity of this purely informational site is unusual; the vast majority of popular resources have a strong partisan tilt. Note that the partisan tilt in itself does not constitute evidence that there is a bias in the reporting. Even investigative reporting that faithfully recounts only the available facts takes on a distinct partisan hue when critical of political leaders.

³⁶ <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/i-m-going-keep-pushing-anthony-fauci-tries-make-white-house-listen-facts-pandemic>

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>

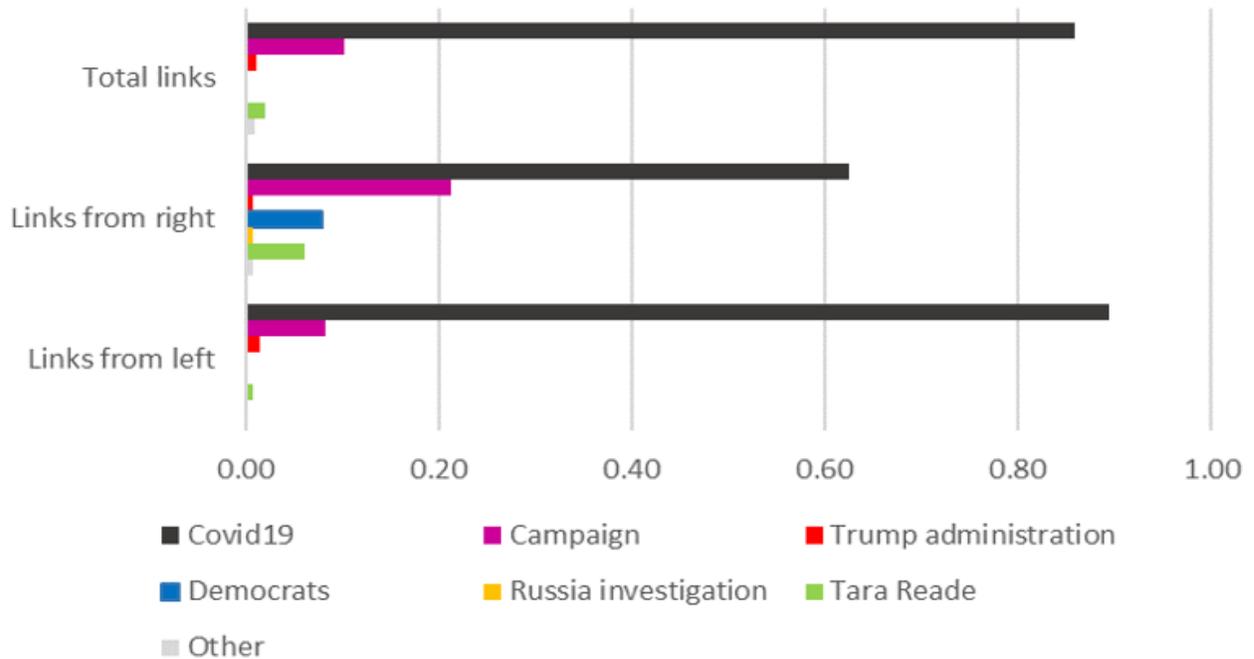


Figure 2. Proportion of coverage by topic for 100 most linked to stories (total links, links from media sources on the right, and links from media sources on the left), March 2020.

In Figure 2, we show how the linking patterns to major topics differ between media sources on the left and right. Stories about the Covid-19 pandemic received a substantially larger proportion of citations from sources on the left than the right in March. The right devoted considerably more attention to campaign-related topics, criticism more broadly of Democrats, and coverage the sexual harassment allegations lodged against Joe Biden by Tara Reade. When not defending the administration against the negative coverage about their handling of the pandemic, right-wing media redirected attention to topics more favorable for conservatives, in this case amplifying the allegations of sexual harassment against Joe Biden.

The Covid-19 stories most cited by media sources from the right display a sharply partisan orientation. The most highly cited story is a Daily Caller article based on the allegation that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wished to overturn the Hyde Amendment restricting the use of federal funds for abortion as part of the stimulus plan.³⁸ Another highly cited story by media outlets on the right wrote of Democratic plans to “go bigger and broader than the already massive economic stimulus package offered by Senate Republicans to blunt the coronavirus pandemic.”³⁹

³⁸ <https://dailycaller.com/2020/03/12/donald-trump-nancy-pelosi-coronavirus-stimulus-hyde-amendment-abortion-funding-white-house-allegations/>

³⁹ <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/488543-house-democrats-eyeing-much-broader-phase-3-stimulus>

EXCLUSIVE: White House Officials Allege Speaker Pelosi Pushed To Include Hyde Amendment Loophole Into Coronavirus Stimulus Plan



A Daily Caller article popular among media sources on the right

Among the articles most cited by the right in March was New York Times coverage of a March 16 press briefings led by the president.⁴⁰ Reading from a statement, President Trump announced the release of new guidelines designed to check the spread of the disease, which included avoiding social gathering of more than 10 people, avoiding bars and restaurants, and working and schooling from home if possible.⁴¹ This marked an important and relatively short-lived change in the tone and approach of the Trump administration directed at slowing the spread of the pandemic. The attention from the right to this New York Times article was not because of the new restrictions described in the reporting but was linked to coverage of a phone call earlier in the day between Trump and a group of state governors and a quote from the call attributed to Trump tweeted out by Mara Gay,⁴² a member of the New York Times editorial board:

Trump told governors this morning they are on their own:

“Respirators, ventilators, all of the equipment — try getting it yourselves,” Mr. Trump told the governors during the conference call, a recording of which was shared with The New York Times.

Some took issue with the suggestion that governors were told “they are on their own” and that part of Trump’s quote was left out of the tweet: “We will be backing you, but try getting it yourselves. Point of sales, much better, much more direct if you can get it yourself.” A response from the Washington Examiner was more generous in its interpretation of Trump’s words:⁴³ “President Trump did not tell the governors they are on their own. He told them they can streamline their respective responses by taking specific actions at the state level. He also made sure to tell them they have the support of the White House.” The response went on to say: “There is no other way to characterize her tweet than to call it ‘fake news.’ It is intentionally false information, disseminated broadly on social media with the

⁴⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/world/live-coronavirus-news-updates.html>

⁴¹ https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/03.16.20_coronavirus-guidance_8.5x11_315PM.pdf

⁴² <https://twitter.com/MaraGay/status/1239603785275670529>

⁴³ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/new-york-times-editorial-board-spreads-fake-news-about-the-white-houses-response-to-covid-19>

explicit intent of misleading people. The only real difference between Gay's tweet and the sort of stuff the Russians pumped onto social media during the 2016 presidential election is that Gay is an American citizen.” The point of this is not that conservative media never reported on the costs and consequences of the pandemic and the measures that would be needed to arrest its spread. The point is that such substantive coverage was not what was most amplified, most cited, and most shared by conservative media and their politically engaged audiences. For them, this was a partisan war of words and their efforts were directed at defending their president who is subject to attacks from what the president has called dishonest media.



OPINION

New York Times editorial board spreads fake news about White House response to COVID-19

Countering mainstream media is an essential component of conservative media coverage of the pandemic

The patterns we describe in March follow through into later months as well; the coverage of the health crisis that enveloped America that received the most attention in conservative media emphasized the political battle and sought to delegitimize the reporting from media on the center and center-left, and since the coverage of mainstream media relied on the guidance of public health officials and experts, these voices were seen as part of the effort to take down the president.

The pattern of negative polarization we observe means that favorable news coverage is generally less popular and cited less often. We do see two examples of positive coverage in the form of polling data cited by conservative media outlets. A March 24 story in Gallup reports on new polling results with approval ratings for Trump hitting an all-time mark at 49% while 60% rated the president positively on his response to the pandemic.⁴⁴ Similarly, a popular March 20 ABC News story reported that 55% of the country rated Trump's handling of the crisis positively.⁴⁵ These numbers would fall over time such that by October only 37% approved of the president's handling of the crisis while 59% disapproved.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/298313/president-trump-job-approval-rating.aspx?>

⁴⁵ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/coronavirus-upends-nation-americans-lives-changed-pandemic-poll/story?id=69696172>

⁴⁶

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-coronavirus/trumps-handling-of-coronavirus-pandemic-hits-record-low-approval-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN26T3OF>

Negative coverage of Democrats highly cited by the right includes a piece in the Daily Mail recounting treatment of the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair in a documentary about Hillary Clinton,⁴⁷ the firing of an employee at a cancer research and treatment center in Buffalo, New York for anti-Trump posts on Facebook,⁴⁸ a GQ magazine article describing “long history of sexist comments and behavior” by Chris Matthews from MSNBC (who retired three days later),⁴⁹ and another story about Hillary Clinton on Fox News: “Federal judge orders Hillary Clinton deposition to address private emails: ‘Still more to learn’”.⁵⁰

A human interest story that garnered attention from both the left and right was the death of a man who along with his wife had ingested chloroquine phosphate, which is used to treat parasites in fish, in the belief that it would protect him from Covid-19.⁵¹ This story came at a time when Trump was under attack for promoting the use of hydroxychloroquine despite a lack of evidence that it was a safe and effective treatment for the disease and against the consensus view of doctors. Some on the left used this tragic story to make a broader point about the potentially negative consequences of Trump promoting treatments that may entail serious side effects and have not been adequately studied. Media sources on the right that cited the story pointed out that Trump was promoting a drug that has been used to treat malaria for many years, not medicine for treating fish. The larger problem is partisan media seeking to pass off isolated stories and anecdotes as evidence of broad trends, a problem that we see repeatedly in partisan coverage of Covid-19 and several times in stories about hydroxychloroquine. Needless to say, individual testimonials are no replacement for large scale clinical trials, a fact that irresponsible media is willing to overlook.

Essentially all of the media coverage amplified on the right served to deflect and reframe damaging coverage of the president and his allies by downplaying the validity of negative coverage, deflecting attention to the other side, attacking the motives and reliability of the sources, and reinforcing distrust in media outside of conservative media and to invoke a strong partisan framing to activate political identity. In the case of the pandemic, and given the stance that the president had taken to downplay the pandemic, public health reporting that was intended to communicate the severity and risks of the pandemic contradicted the president’s assessments and was viewed not as the politically neutral guidance of experts but as partisan attacks against the president.

The sources cited by media sources on the left represents a familiar set of mainstream and left-leaning media outlets: the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, Politico, NBC News, ABC News,

⁴⁷

https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8078733/Bill-Clinton-says-having-sex-Monica-Lewinsky-manage-anxieties.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490

⁴⁸ https://buffalonews.com/news/local/roswell-park-yp-fired-over-anti-trump-facebook-posts/article_c2ef3800-1cb8-5255-aa09-e2b2923f8573.html

⁴⁹ <https://www.gq.com/story/chris-matthews-experience>

⁵⁰ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/federal-judge-orders-hillary-clinton-deposition-to-address-private-emails-there-is-still-more-to-learn>

⁵¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/man-dies-after-ingesting-chloroquine-attempt-prevent-coronavirus-n1167166>

NPR, the Daily Beast, ProPublica, Reuters, Vox, the Miami Herald, the Guardian, the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, The Intercept, and Foreign Policy, among others. The New York Times and Washington Post alone account for 45 of the most cited 100 stories from media sources on the left. These media sources form the core of an integrated cluster of media sources that span the center, center-left, and left (Figure 3). The conservative media cluster is anchored by Fox News.⁵²

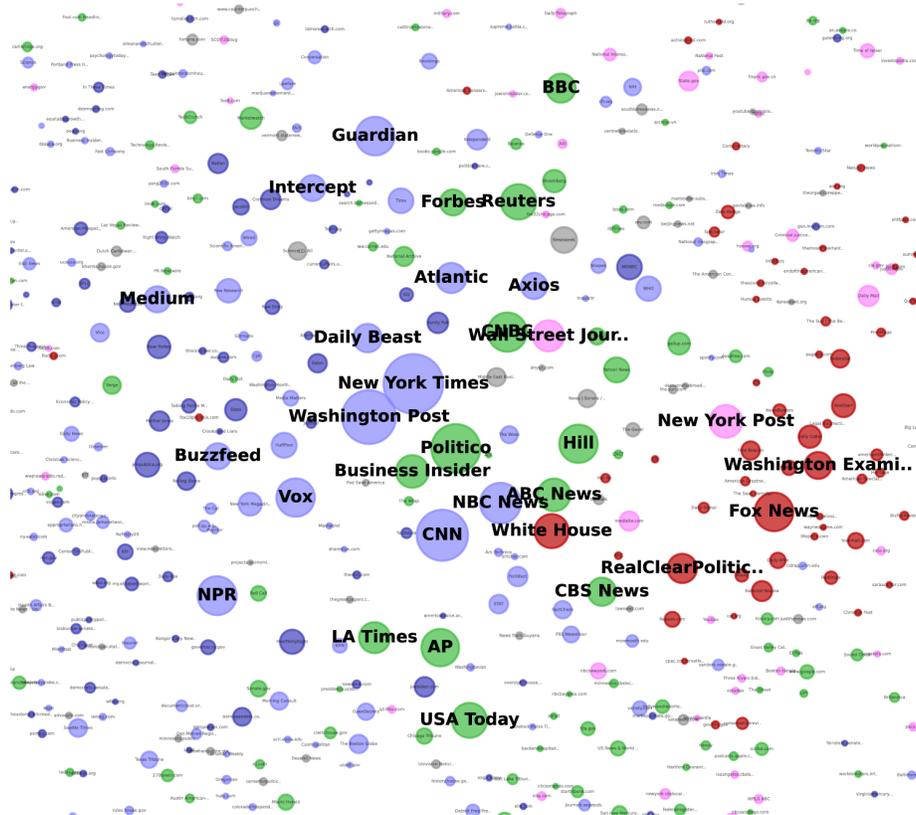


Figure 3. Network map of media sources based on media links

Media on the left do not frequently link to conservative media sources. A February 7 oped by Senators Alexander and Burr reassuring Americans of the “Coronavirus prevention steps the U.S. government is taking to protect you” is the one story from Fox News in the top 100 by inlinks from media outlets on the left.⁵³ They wrote:

The public health preparedness and response framework that Congress has put in place and that the Trump Administration is actively implementing today is helping to protect Americans. Over the years, this framework has been designed to be flexible and innovative so that we are not only ready to face the coronavirus today but new public health threats in the future.

⁵² The methodology used to create this media source map is described in a prior report:

<https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2020/partisanship-impeachment-and-democratic-primaries-american-political-discourse>

⁵³ <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/coronavirus-prevention-steps-the-u-s-government-is-taking-to-protect-you-sen-alexander-and-sen-burr>

The interest on the left to this op ed was driven by later coverage of Senator Burr that revealed that he had issued dire warnings about the growing threat in a private setting but had not warned the public in similar terms.⁵⁴

OPINION · Published February 7

Sen. Alexander & Sen. Burr: Coronavirus prevention steps the U.S. government is taking to protect you

Media sources on the left bring attention to a Fox News opinion piece by Senators Alexander and Burr

The media sources most commonly cited by the right includes most of the same mainstream media organizations. Media sources from the center, center-left, and left account for more than half of the most cited stories by media sources from the right, alongside a number of conservative outlets, for example the New York Post (Joe Biden promises to put Beto O'Rourke in charge of gun control),⁵⁵ Daily Caller, Free Beacon, Daily Mail, PJMedia (Fact-Check: Obama Waited Until 'Millions' Infected and 1000 Dead in U.S. Before Declaring H1N1 National Emergency),⁵⁶ Judicial Watch (Judicial Watch Victory: Federal Court Orders Deposition of Hillary Clinton on Emails and Benghazi Attack Records),⁵⁷ and John Solomon's new media venture after leaving the Hill, Just the News (FBI's Russia collusion case fell apart in first month of Trump presidency, memos show).⁵⁸ Again, we see the manifestation of negative polarization in political media and a penchant in conservative media to go after a set of traditional targets that are likely to elicit strong partisan sentiments.

The range and diversity of stories and outlets that are picked up by sources on the right demonstrates how efficiently this media system works to identify and curate articles of interest and salience for conservative audiences from a wide variety of sources.

By looking at the citations patterns of media sources across the political spectrum, the centrality and importance of reporting from media outlets located in the center and center-left stands out.

⁵⁴

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sen-burr-offered-a-dire-warning-about-the-coronavirus-at-a-private-luncheon-three-weeks-ago/2020/03/19/faf91a0-69f6-11ea-abef-020f086a3fab_story.html

⁵⁵ <https://nypost.com/2020/03/03/joe-biden-promises-to-put-beto-orourke-in-charge-of-gun-control/>

⁵⁶

<https://pjmedia.com/news-and-politics/victoria-taft/2020/02/28/fact-check-obama-waited-until-millions-infected-and-1000-dead-in-u-s-before-declaring-h1n1-emergency-n381835>

⁵⁷

<https://www.judicialwatch.org/press-releases/judicial-watch-victory-federal-court-orders-deposition-of-hillary-clinton-on-emails-and-benghazi-attack-records/>

⁵⁸ <https://justthenews.com/accountability/political-ethics/fbis-russia-collusion-case-fell-apart-first-month-trump-presidency>

Approximately one in seven links from stories in media outlets on the right are to other right media outlets and just under one in ten go to center-right publications (Table 1). More than two-thirds are to media sources in the center and center-left. Overall, articles published in center and center-left publications receive about four out of five inlinks. There is an asymmetry though in that the left is no more likely to link to sources on the left than those in center-left and center. This linking pattern is generally consistent with other time periods we have studied reflecting the stability in the overall structure of American media ecosystems.

Source	Target				
	Left	Center-left	Center	Center-right	Right
Left	0.07	0.59	0.27	0.02	0.05
Center left	0.07	0.54	0.28	0.03	0.08
Center	0.07	0.53	0.30	0.03	0.07
Center right	0.05	0.46	0.36	0.04	0.09
Right	0.05	0.42	0.34	0.05	0.14

Table 1. Proportion of media links by quintile, March 2020

The dominance of large center and center-left media outlets in reporting the news is partly based on the size and reach of the larger traditional media organizations. They are better funded, better staffed with professional reporters, and more likely to get to stories first. It also reflects the tendency of media outlets to cite these organizations as authoritative sources, even among media outlets on the right. Three-quarters of the links from media sources on right are to center and center-left publications. One in seven are to other media sources on the right.

Another dynamic in play with media outlets on the right is preferential linking to stories that help to bolster conservative narratives. This cherry-picking is clearly evident in the choice of fact-checking articles most cited by the right in March. A number of the most cited stories by the right are fact checks consistent with conservative perspectives. The most popular is the AP fact check that “Democrats distort coronavirus readiness” that was discussed earlier.

Other fact checks cited by conservative media revolve around Trump’s use of the word “hoax” during the February 28 rally in South Carolina that has been the source of much controversy. A popular article on the right by CheckYourFact, the Daily Caller’s fact checker, evaluated the question “Did Trump call the coronavirus a ‘hoax’ at his South Carolina rally?” in response to the Politico story mentioned earlier that ran under the title: “Trump rallies his base to treat coronavirus as a ‘hoax.’”⁵⁹ They concluded that this was false.

⁵⁹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/28/trump-south-carolina-rally-coronavirus-118269>

The Biden campaign used Trump’s words from the South Carolina rally as part of a political ad. They edited Trump’s remarks to make it sound that Trump was calling the very existence of a coronavirus outbreak a hoax, which Politifact deemed false.⁶⁰ FactCheck.org concluded that “the overwhelming bulk of the ad is on target. But the beginning is deceptive.”⁶¹ Snopes assessed the question, “Did President Trump Refer to the Coronavirus as a ‘Hoax?’” and concluded the answer was mixed; Trump had not directly referred to the virus as a hoax but “also seemed to downplay the severity of the outbreak, comparing it to the common flu.”⁶² The first reported death from Covid-19 in the United States occurred the day after the South Carolina rally.

Partisan selection of salient stories is very much at work: conservative media did not cite to the same extent other fact checks that called out Trump for misleading and false statements. This pattern of preferential linking and cherry-picking occurs on the left as well, a key difference being that it is much less common for media sources outside of conservative media to link to articles there.

It is not the case that conservative media ignores any and all coverage from mainstream media that is critical of the Trump administration and other Republican leaders. One pattern that we observe is that a selection of highly influential articles critical of the Trump administration are cited and rebutted by conservative media to offer an interpretation and reframing that is more favorable rather than leaving the framing to the original authors. A prominent example from March is the highly cited Washington Post article “U.S. intelligence reports from January and February warned about a likely pandemic.” Among the 80 media outlets that linked to this story in our data, 11 are right media sources and another 4 are center right.

Trump defends action in early days of coronavirus crisis, blames China for being 'secretive'



Defending the administration's actions against negative coverage

⁶⁰ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/mar/15/joe-biden/ad-watch-biden-video-twists-trumps-words-coronavir/>

⁶¹ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/04/democratic-ad-twists-trumps-hoax-comment/>

⁶² <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-coronavirus-rally-remark/>

Fox News linked to this story while providing President an uncritical airing and platform to rebut the story “Trump defends action in early days of coronavirus crisis, blames China for being 'secretive'”⁶³

“It’s so insulting when they write phony stories that they know are fake news because they’re not insulting me. They’re insulting everybody, these incredible people that have worked so hard, so long that are thinking about nothing other than this invisible enemy,” he said.

The Daily Caller also covered the Washington Post story while shifting the emphasis to leaders of both parties and calling out that the intelligence briefs offered neither a prediction of when the virus would spread in the U.S. nor a containment and mitigation plan:⁶⁴

Members of Congress and the Trump administration were receiving the reports even as high-level members of both the Republican and Democratic parties were downplaying the disease. Critically, however, the reports did not make any estimates of when the virus might spread to the U.S., or make suggestions for how to prepare, according to WaPo, which accepted money from the Chinese government for advertising inserts.

The Washington Examiner cites the Washington Post story while reframing the narrative to foreground the steps that the Trump administration has taken and China’s failure to alert the world sooner.⁶⁵ Focusing on China’s culpability in the spread of the virus has been a core narrative strategy in right-wing media to deflect criticism of the Trump administration’s haphazard response to the crisis.

We see from this example and others that partisan media ecosystems are not hermetically sealed from outside news and influence; they are sophisticated systems that collectively curate and filter the news, and create an interpretive lens for news sources and stories that together form and sustain a narrative that incorporates and parries critical coverage.

The dynamics of media in March, April, and May follow a familiar pattern. Investigative journalism and reporting, primarily from large center and center left media organizations, produce news stories, often focusing on the activities and performance of public and private individuals and institutions, thereby providing the informational basis for promoting accountability in public life which is vital for democracy and governance. Partisan media, a primary consumer of this reporting, amplifies coverage that is favorable and offers counter narratives to blunt the impact of damaging news. These counter narratives take the form of stories to deflect the reporting such that it can be seen in a more favorable light or stores that distract and redirect attention to other more favorable news. Taken together, these stories that deflect and distract weave a narrative tapestry that provides Trump supporters assurance that his administration is capably governing the country and that the Democrats are pointed in the wrong direction, which at times is framed as a mix of incompetence and corruption brought about by their hate of America and misguided liberal thinking. The prevalence of negative polarization is strong on both sides, and just as media coverage from the center and left is focused on the misdeeds of the

⁶³ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-coronavirus-crisis-blames-china>

⁶⁴ <https://dailycaller.com/2020/03/21/intelligence-reports-warned-coronavirus-pandemic-trump-admin/>

⁶⁵ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/us-spy-agencies-warned-trump-that-china-was-lying-about-coronavirus>

Trump administration, a large proportion of right-wing media coverage is devoted to the errors and hypocrisy of the Democrats and to describing how liberal media misstate and distort the record of the Trump administration.

Facebook

In line with the media inlink top stories, posts and articles on Facebook were primarily about Covid-19. We analyze Facebook data using both the unique links and total interactions metrics. The unique links metric is based on the number of accounts that post a link to a given story. The total interactions measure is the sum of all interactions to posts that contain a story. Combined, both metrics lend insight into public discourse on Facebook.

Although both data from unique links and total engagements focused on Covid-19, the top links have varying emphasis. For instance, videos are more prevalent in the engagement data. More specifically, videos from Occupy Democrats pleading with audiences to take the virus seriously, from the perspective of a patient⁶⁶ and a doctor,⁶⁷ surface in the top 20 links by engagement data.

In contrast, only two videos are in the top 20 for unique links; one, an Occupy Democrats video,⁶⁸ and the other, posted by conservative talk show host Todd Starnes.⁶⁹ Notably, this Starnes' video is shared in the top 20 links of both Facebook metrics and is illustrative of the distrust of pandemic coverage from mainstream media among conservative audiences.



A popular video posted on Facebook films the outside of a hospital to support the claim that mainstream media is exaggerating the severity of the pandemic in New York City.

⁶⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/videos/151272939433947/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/videos/555766918479128/>

⁶⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/videos/294165428233564/>

⁶⁹ https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2465228077063594&ref=watch_permalink

The video, originally recorded live in Brooklyn, NY and narrated by Starnes, films the exterior of a hospital, which appears quiet and without people outside, to show the “reality” that “there are not thousands of people trying to get into the hospital as the mainstream media has been telling us,” and thus that the mainstream media is “overblowing” the situation. He uses this as the basis for questioning the lockdown; “why is an entire city of eight million people on lockdown, and there’s nobody in line waiting to get tested?” He calls the mainstream media “shameful,” and takes it upon himself to share “the facts you need.”

One theme within the prevalent Covid topic that emerges is Trump’s response to the pandemic. Articles shared range from early travel restrictions to the Gallup poll boasting a 60% approval rating for Trump. But other articles, particularly from the top 100 articles by unique links, emphasize Trump’s failure to respond to the pandemic thus far. For instance, the top article among unique links proclaims “The Trump Presidency is Over,” and slams Trump’s pandemic response:

the president and his administration are responsible for grave, costly errors, most especially the epic manufacturing failures in diagnostic testing, the decision to test too few people, the delay in expanding testing to labs outside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and problems in the supply chain. These mistakes have left us blind and badly behind the curve, and, for a few crucial weeks, they created a false sense of security. What we now know is that the coronavirus silently spread for several weeks, without us being aware of it and while we were doing nothing to stop it. Containment and mitigation efforts could have significantly slowed its spread at an early, critical point, but we frittered away that opportunity.⁷⁰

This article exemplifies some of the criticism towards Trump’s response. Similar critiques are repeated in other links across the Facebook data as well, including by Nancy Pelosi,⁷¹ Chris Cuomo⁷² and Don Lemon on CNN,⁷³ and backed by reporting showing early knowledge of the pandemic.⁷⁴ This analysis suggests that among the stories that resonate highly on Facebook, a lot of them are stories that criticize Trump.

⁷⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/peter-wehner-trump-presidency-over/607969/>

⁷¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=209433417032056>

⁷² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=513975129283227>

⁷³ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/03/18/don-lemon-president-trump-politicizing-coronavirus-ctn-vpx.cnn>

⁷⁴

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-intelligence-reports-from-january-and-february-warned-about-a-likely-pandemic/2020/03/20/299d8cda-6ad5-11ea-b5f1-a5a804158597_story.html

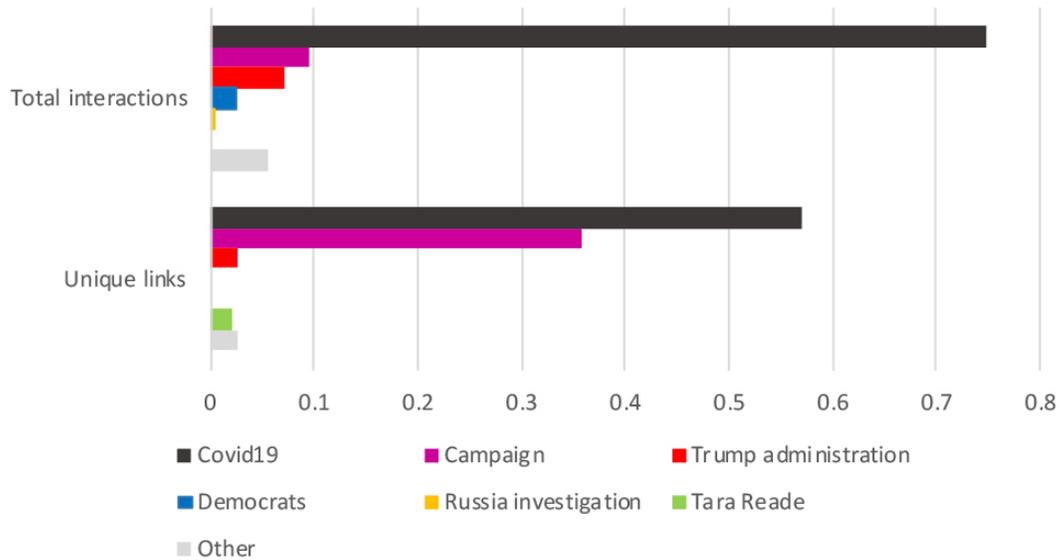


Figure 4. Facebook total interactions and unique links by topic for top 100 stories, March 2020

Campaign coverage trails Covid, particularly in the unique links category. This aligns with the swift emergence of Biden as the forerunner for the Democratic party as Bloomberg, Buttigieg, Sanders, Steyer, and Warren end their bids for the presidency. These campaign endings are reflected in the campaign category. Other articles report on the California primary,⁷⁵ where Sanders emerged the winner, and the Massachusetts primary, which went to Biden.⁷⁶

One common video that surfaced in the campaign category targets Biden by claiming he will go against the second amendment. The video, which reverberated through both Facebook metric lists and ranks 15th in the engagement list, boasts the title: “WATCH: Union Worker’s Response to Joe Biden Threatening Him With “AR-14” Confiscation is PERFECT.” The video was shared from various pages, including the National Rifle Association.⁷⁷

Additionally, whereas the right focused on Tara Reade and other topics against Biden, articles about Tara Reade are absent from the top engagement articles, and only two links from the unique links dataset cover the allegation. The Intercept published an article entitled, “Time’s Up said it could not fund a #MeToo allegation against Joe Biden, citing its nonprofit status and his presidential run,”⁷⁸ and the second link is to an interview with the Katie Halper show on Soundcloud in which “Tara Reade, Joe Biden’s accuser, finally tells her full story.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/12/21156258/california-primary-winner-bernie-sanders>

⁷⁶ <https://tdmsresearch.com/2020/03/04/massachusetts-2020-democratic-party-primary/>

⁷⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/NationalRifleAssociation/videos/228325828309617/>

⁷⁸ <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/24/joe-biden-metoo-times-up/>

⁷⁹ <https://soundcloud.com/katie-halper/joe-bidens-accuser-finally-tells-her-full-story>

Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts

The sharing patterns of Twitter users offers another view of the manner in which asymmetrically polarized media ecosystems operate and a point of comparison for the media-centric observations above. In this section we describe the story sharing patterns of three cohorts of Twitter users selected based upon their retweeting of three political leaders: Trump, Biden, and Sanders. While it is interesting to track aggregate behavior on Twitter, it is difficult to understand how different political factions are contributing to the aggregate picture. This approach is designed to isolate and summarize the activities of different political factions on Twitter.

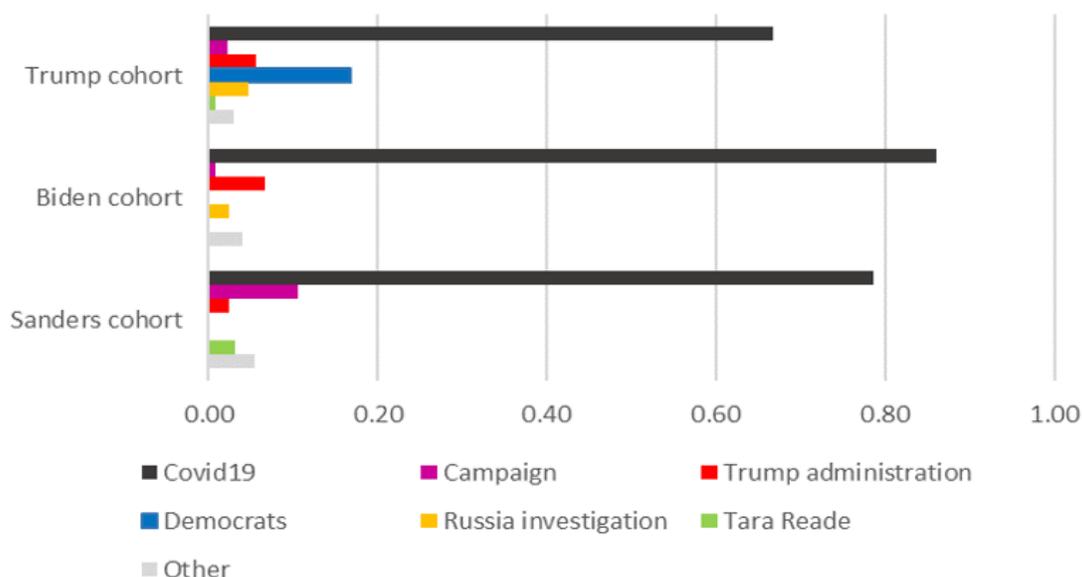


Figure 5. Proportion of attention by topic for the 100 most shared stories on Twitter by cohort, March 2020

The attention to the major topics is similar to the media citations patterns described earlier. The Biden and Sanders cohorts were focused more on Covid-19 than the Trump cohort, although the Sanders campaign reserved more attention to campaign-related matters (Figure 5). As we might expect, the emergence of the Tara Reade story was shared among Sanders supporters.⁸⁰

The Biden cohort was almost single-mindedly focused on pandemic. Of the top 50 stories, 43 are about Covid-19, and among those, the large majority is negative coverage of the Trump administration's handling of the crisis. The non-Covid-19 stories popular with the Biden cohort

⁸⁰ <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/joe-biden-faces-sexual-assault-181441242.html>

included a CNN story about Jim Jordan (Six former wrestlers say Rep. Jim Jordan knew about abusive OSU doctor),⁸¹ the financial benefits of the presidency for the Trump family,⁸² Erik Prince's involvement in Project Veritas,⁸³ a stinging critique of the Roberts' court in a resignation letter by a member of the Supreme Court bar,⁸⁴ and an article reporting on a judge's rebuke of Attorney General William Barr's handling of the Mueller report (Judge Calls Barr's Handling of Mueller Report 'Distorted' and 'Misleading').⁸⁵ The common thread running through the most popular stories for the Biden cohort is the negative polarization reflected in the focus on anti-Trump stories.

The sharing pattern of the Sanders cohort displays a similar focus on Covid-19 stories and the critiques of Trump's poor management of the crisis. The Sanders cohort however shows greater interest in campaign and policy issues, including a story on Medicare-for-all (favorable to Sanders),⁸⁶ a story on Social Security (attacking Biden's record),⁸⁷ and the Nation's March 2 endorsement of Sanders.⁸⁸

The media sources shared by the Biden and Sanders cohorts is a collection of the usual suspects, spanning from the center to left. There are several examples of stories from hyperpartisan outlets, e.g. Raw Story articles, but the great majority are from center and center-left traditional media outlets. There are no outlets from the right in either set. The Biden set contains two stories from sources on the center right, both articles about trauma related to Covid-19: one from the Wall Street Journal (The New Front-Line Coronavirus Workers: Grocery Clerks, Delivery Drivers)⁸⁹ and another from the New York Post (Worker at NYC hospital where nurses wear trash bags as protection dies from coronavirus).⁹⁰

The stories shared by the Trump cohort also gravitate towards negative coverage of the opposition, a feature they share with the Biden and Sanders cohorts. A key difference, however, is that stories and media sources in the Trump cohort feature many more extreme, hyperpartisan sites. Whereas the media and story choices of the Biden and Sanders cohorts are very similar to the citation patterns of media outlets on the left, the Trump cohort favors media sources and articles that receive few or no inlinks from media outlets on the right. The Gateway Pundit, for example, rarely receives mention by other media outlets and Breitbart receives relatively few inlinks, even from their right-wing media counterparts, which make up a majority of the inlinks they receive.

⁸¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/06/politics/jordan-osu-wrestlers-strauss-invs/index.html>

⁸² <https://www.msnbc.com/am-joy/watch/do-trump-kids-financially-benefit-from-trump-in-white-house-80237637729>

⁸³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/politics/erik-prince-project-veritas.html>

⁸⁴ <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/03/judge-james-dannenberg-supreme-court-bar-roberts-letter.html>

⁸⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/us/politics/mueller-report-barr-judge-walton.html>

⁸⁶

<https://www.newsweek.com/bernie-sanders-medicare-all-would-likely-increase-wages-create-jobs-new-economic-analysis-shows-1490800#Echobox=1583437612>

⁸⁷ <https://theintercept.com/2020/01/13/biden-cuts-social-security/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/endorsement-2020-bernie-sanders/>

⁸⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/unexpected-heroes-on-the-frontlines-of-americas-coronavirus-lockdown-11585058205>

⁹⁰ <https://nypost.com/2020/03/25/worker-at-nyc-hospital-where-nurses-wear-trash-bags-as-protection-dies-from-coronavirus/>

Trump cohort	Media Inlink Rank	Biden cohort	Media Inlink Rank	Sanders cohort	Media Inlink Rank
foxnews.com	8	nytimes.com	1	nytimes.com	1
breitbart.com	41	washingtonpost.com	2	washingtonpost.com	2
nypost.com	16	cnn.com	3	theguardian.com	9
thegatewaypundit.com	104	politico.com	4	cnn.com	3
nytimes.com	1	nbcnews.com	5	theintercept.com	30
dailymail.co.uk	52	thehill.com	10	bbc.com	24
washingtonexaminer.com	27	thedailybeast.com	25	bloomberg.com	45
thehill.com	10	theatlantic.com	21	politico.com	4
dailycaller.com	44	rawstory.com	118	thehill.com	10
cnn.com	3	huffpost.com	34	nbcnews.com	5

Table 2. Top 10 domains by number of sharers in each Twitter cohort in March, compared with the ranking of each domain by total media inlinks received in March. Highlighted cells emphasize media sources outside of the top 10 in media inlinks received in March.

The most popular story among the Trump set in March is from the Gateway Pundit, a media outlet renowned for propagating right-wing conspiracies. CBS was caught using footage from an Italian hospital on a segment about New York City.⁹¹ CBS apologized for the ‘editing error’ after repeating the error a second time. The popularity of this story is notable both for the fact that a source known to publish disinformation would get so much traction among the Trump supporters and that the error by CBS would resonate as much as it did. This story played a higher purpose though by bolstering the position that mainstream media cannot be trusted.

The second most widely shared story among the Trump cohort was an anecdotal New York Post story about a man in Florida who claimed that hydroxychloroquine saved his life.⁹² A popular opinion piece in the Washington Post rebutted other reports that Trump closed the pandemic response office,⁹³ which included an opinion piece in the Washington Post several days earlier⁹⁴ and a tweet by Joe Biden.⁹⁵ The fact checkers at the Washington Post declined to rate the stories saying of the dueling narratives that neither is “entirely incorrect.”⁹⁶ A Reuters fact check came to a similar conclusion and called the claim that Trump had fired the entire pandemic response team: “Partly false: The Trump

⁹¹ <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/03/cbs-news-caught-using-footage-from-an-italian-hospital-to-describe-conditions-in-new-york-city-video/>

⁹² <https://nypost.com/2020/03/22/florida-man-with-coronavirus-says-drug-touted-by-trump-saved-his-life/>

⁹³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/16/no-white-house-didnt-dissolve-its-pandemic-response-office/>

⁹⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70de09c-6491-11ea-acc8-80c22bbee96f_story.html

⁹⁵ <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1240646710021537792>

⁹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/20/was-white-house-office-global-pandemics-eliminated/>

administration disbanded the “pandemic response” team, but some of the team members were reassigned to roles that included pandemic response.”⁹⁷

Two highly shared stories criticized the contents of the stimulus package sought by the Democrats, taking aim at the partisan fights over how to best respond to the economic crisis. A Fox News story reported that “Republicans say Dems blocking coronavirus relief over ‘ideological wish list’.”⁹⁸ Breitbart countered with “Nancy Pelosi Proposes 1,400-Page Coronavirus Bill Stuffed with Special Interest Goodies.”⁹⁹ The Washington Examiner defended the Trump administration by shifting blame towards the Obama administration in a story that explained how the federal stockpile of masks was depleted by the Obama administration.¹⁰⁰

Another popular story from the Gateway Pundit defended Fox News anchor Trish Regan who lost her show and job after airing a show that accused the Democrats of exploiting the coronavirus crisis to impeach the president. “FOX Business Network Fires Trish Regan for Telling the Truth About How Liberal Media Was Using Coronavirus to Take Down Trump.”¹⁰¹ This show¹⁰² came just several days before Fox News coverage shifted dramatically from downplaying the outbreak to acknowledging the severity of the crisis.¹⁰³

Separate from coverage of Covid-19, a substantial portion of the attention among the Trump cohort is on the Democrats. Six of the 100 most shared articles were about Hillary Clinton who continues to be a reliable target of scorn. This included several widely shared stories about a judicial victory requiring Clinton to appear for a deposition about her emails.¹⁰⁴

97

<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-trump-fired-pandemic-team/partly-false-claim-trump-fired-entire-pandemic-response-team-in-2018-idUSKBN21C32M>

98 <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/republicans-say-dems-blocking-coronavirus-relief-over-ideological-wish-list>

99 <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/03/23/nancy-pelosi-proposes-1120-page-coronavirus-bill-stuffed-with-pork/>

100

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/los-angeles-times-and-bloomberg-news-federal-stockpile-of-n95-masks-was-depleted-under-obama-and-never-restocked/>

101

<https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/03/breaking-fox-business-network-fired-trish-regan-for-telling-the-truth-about-how-liberal-media-was-using-coronavirus-to-take-down-trump-video/>

102 <https://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/trish-regan-coronavirus-trump-fault-democrats>

103 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifKbwDF51bA&ab_channel=WashingtonPost

104 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/02/hillary-clinton-email-deposition-118800>

<https://www.judicialwatch.org/press-releases/judicial-watch-victory-federal-court-orders-deposition-of-hillary-clinton-on-emails-and-benghazi-attack-records/> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/federal-judge-orders-hillary-clinton-deposition-to-address-private-emails-there-is-still-more-to-learn>

<https://www.judicialwatch.org/press-releases/judicial-watch-fbi-finds-new-clinton-emails-including-discussion-about-benghazi-and-additional-classified-material/>

<https://www.judicialwatch.org/press-releases/judicial-watch-lawyers-for-hillary-clinton-ask-appeals-court-to-overturn-order-for-her/>

<https://truthuncensored.net/breaking-state-dept-releases-phone-transcript-of-hillary-admitting-she-knew-benghazi-was-planned-attack-2/>

April 2020

By early April, Covid-19 cases in the United States were greater than any other country, exceeding two hundred thousand cases, while millions had lost their jobs.¹⁰⁵ Stay-at-home directives were in place for a large majority of the country but some states resisted putting restrictions in place. President Trump had stated in March that he hoped to reopen the country by Easter, April 12. This target turned out to be unrealistic but pressure was mounting from some constituencies to reopen the country while many public health officials were advocating the extension of measures until the outbreak was brought under control. Dr. Fauci pushed for a national stay-at-home order and was quoted as saying “I just don’t understand why we’re not doing that.”¹⁰⁶ By the middle of the month, President Trump would be tweeting out support for protesters who took part in protests calling for the lifting of restrictions in several states.¹⁰⁷ Disagreement about how to proceed was firmly entrenched along political lines.

Open web media links

In April, the share of attention among media sources on the left continued to be focused predominantly on the coronavirus outbreak. Coverage of the pandemic accounted for more than 90% of citations to the top 100 stories from media outlets on the left (Figure 6). On the right, attention to the pandemic declined from March to April from 62% to 54%. The partisan divide in attention to the pandemic was growing larger over time.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/business/economy/coronavirus-unemployment-claims.html>

¹⁰⁶

https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/03/fauci-endorses-national-stay-at-home-order-162794?fbclid=IwAR0fm_Svqus6dWbNET_EhfaNqlqNMsbP-qtflkSUC5q7J45B2j2VP0ygbO4

¹⁰⁷ See, for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-governors.html>

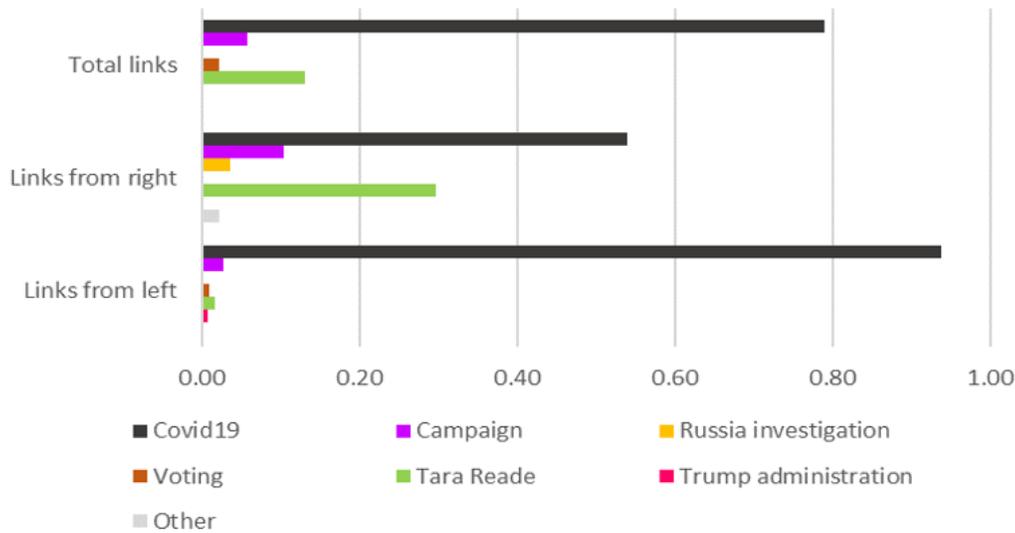


Figure 6. Proportion of coverage by topic for 100 most linked to stories (total links, links from media sources on the right, and links from media sources on the left), April 2020.

The attention from the left continued to point primarily to negative coverage of the Trump administration: the slow and inadequate federal response, the persistent problems with testing infrastructure, Trump getting far in front of the science in touting hydroxychloroquine as a potential ‘game-changer’ in treating Covid-19, Trump’s role in promoting anti-lockdown protests, and the debate over when the country could begin to safely open up again.

The most highly cited story in the month was an April 11 article ‘He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump’s Failure on the Virus’ in the New York Times that described “six long weeks before President Trump finally took aggressive action to confront the danger the nation was facing — a pandemic that is now forecast to take tens of thousands of American lives.”¹⁰⁸ The March 20 story about early warning from the intelligence community continued to be cited frequently,¹⁰⁹ as was a Washington Post article that surveyed the institutional failures that hamstrung the response (The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged).¹¹⁰ A popular New York Times article detailed the “Lost Month: How a Failure to Test Blinded the U.S. to Covid-19”.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>

¹⁰⁹

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-intelligence-reports-from-january-and-february-warned-about-a-likely-pandemic/2020/03/20/292d8cda-6ad5-11ea-b5f1-a5a804158597_story.html?

¹¹⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/04/04/coronavirus-government-dysfunction/?arc404=true>

¹¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/us/testing-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

Trump's questionable promotion of hydroxychloroquine was the topic of several critical highly cited articles. Axios reported on this (Inside the epic White House blowup over "game-changer" hydroxychloroquine)¹¹² as did the New York Times (Trump's Aggressive Advocacy of Malaria Drug for Treating Coronavirus Divides Medical Community).¹¹³ A frequently shared AP article reported on a study that cast doubt on the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine (More deaths, no benefit from malaria drug in VA virus study).¹¹⁴



Politics and science collide after the president promotes the use of hydroxychloroquine

The smaller number of stories cited by media outlets from the left unrelated to Covid-19 include an article in the Guardian characterizing comments that Trump had made on Fox & Friends as Trump admitting that “making it easier to vote in America would hurt the Republican party,”¹¹⁵ a New York Times story reporting concern among Republicans that Trump's erratic handling of the pandemic might result in the GOP losing not only the presidency in November but the Senate as well,¹¹⁶ and a link to the video of Barack Obama's endorsement of Joe Biden.¹¹⁷

The political media landscape looked very different as seen by citations from media on the right. The three most cited articles from the right in April are stories about Tara Reade's allegation against Joe Biden in the New York Times, the Intercept, and Business Insider.¹¹⁸ Among the 100 most cited stories by the right in April, close to one quarter (22 out of 100) of the stories are about the allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Joe Biden. These stories were from a mix of outlets from the right

¹¹² <https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-hydroxychloroquine-white-house-01306286-0bbc-4042-9bfe-890413c6220d.html>

¹¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-malaria-drug.html>

¹¹⁴ <http://apnews.com/a5077c7227b8eb8b0dc23423c0bbe2b2>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/30/trump-republican-party-voting-reform-coronavirus>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/us/politics/trump-election-briefings.html>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-s3ANu4eMs&feature=youtu.be>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/us/politics/joe-biden-tara-reae-sexual-assault-complaint.html>

<https://theintercept.com/2020/04/24/new-evidence-tara-reae-joe-biden/>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/former-neighbor-corroborates-joe-bidens-accuser-2020-4>

and from mainstream media. The pandemic was not a favorable topic for the Trump administration and the degree to which it has occupied the media agenda damaged the political position of the president. The coverage of Tara Reade and the traction it got from conservative audiences shows a preference in conservative America to focus less on the pandemic and more on topics that tilt in their favor.

Examining Tara Reade's Sexual Assault Allegation Against Joe Biden

Ms. Reade, a former Senate aide, has accused Mr. Biden of assaulting her in 1993 and says she told others about it. A Biden spokeswoman said the allegation is false, and former Senate office staff members do not recall such an incident.

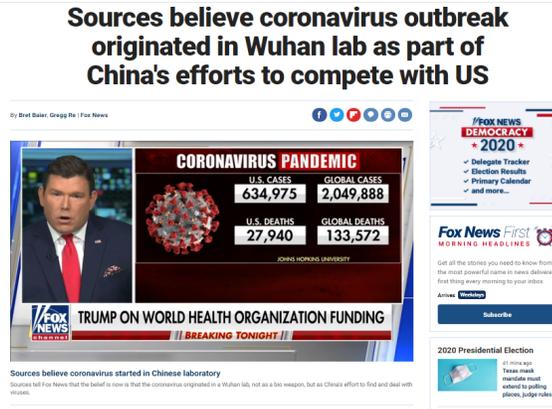


Allegations of sexual harassment against Joe Biden, as reported by center-left media, gain traction on the right

The resources related to the pandemic most cited by the right highlight the daily briefings from President Trump and his task force and the administration's plan to reopen the country.¹¹⁹ Other prominent articles speculated that the origin of the virus could have been a Chinese lab, for which there is still no evidence. These included Fox News (Sources believe coronavirus originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US) and the Washington Post (State Department cables

¹¹⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses).¹²⁰ Other stories cited by the right placed blame on China for withholding information on the severity of the outbreak, including an AP story “China didn’t warn public of likely pandemic for 6 key days”¹²¹ and an article in the National Review: “The Comprehensive Timeline of China’s COVID-19 Lies”¹²²



Emphasizing China’s role in the outbreak to deflect attention on the Trump administration response

Media on the right also pushed coverage that supported the notion that hydroxychloroquine could be an effective treatment for Covid-19 following President Trump’s premature and unsubstantiated public pronouncements on the efficacy of the drug. For example, a Detroit Free Press story featured the story of a Michigan state representative who asserted that hydroxychloroquine saved her life (Detroit rep says hydroxychloroquine, Trump helped save her life amid COVID-19 fight).¹²³ Another story targeted the Democratic governor of the state (Gov. Whitmer reverses course on coronavirus drugs, is now asking feds for hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine).¹²⁴ A story highly cited by the right in the New York Post reported that “An international poll of thousands of doctors rated the Trump-touted anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine the best treatment for the novel coronavirus.”¹²⁵

Several right-wing media outlets cited the April 11 ‘He could have seen it coming’ story in the New York Times that was highly critical of Trump.¹²⁶ Chris Wallace had pointed to the New York Times

¹²⁰ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/coronavirus-wuhan-lab-china-compete-us-sources>
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/state-department-cables-warned-safety-issues-wuhan-lab-studying-bat-coronaviruses/>

¹²¹ <https://apnews.com/68a9e1b91de4ffc166acd6012d82c2f9?>

¹²² <https://www.nationalreview.com/the-morning-jolt/chinas-devastating-lies/>

¹²³

<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2020/04/06/democrat-karen-whitsett-coronavirus-hydroxychloroquine-trump/2955430001/>

¹²⁴

<https://www.metrotimes.com/news-hits/archives/2020/03/31/gov-whitmer-reverses-course-on-coronavirus-drugs-is-now-asking-feds-for-hydroxychloroquine-and-chloroquine>

¹²⁵ <https://nypost.com/2020/04/02/hydroxychloroquine-most-effective-coronavirus-treatment-poll/>

¹²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>

article on Fox News Sunday asking: “How much did those lost weeks cost us?”¹²⁷ which may have prompted Trump’s attacks on Wallace and Fox News more generally via Twitter later that day.¹²⁸



Trump takes on the 'so fake' media

The New York Post cited the New York Times story when it reported on a highly contentious White House briefing in response to the New York Times article in which Trump “lashed out at the press,” “repeating his oft-used refrain that the media is ‘so fake’ and then forcing the press to watch a campaign-style video defending his response to the outbreak.”¹²⁹ The tenor of the New York Post article was not to seriously engage with the merits of the New York Times reporting and counternarrative from Trump, but to highlight the conflict between the sides. In a deeply polarized world, emphasizing that attacks are coming from the other side is a form of defense regardless of the substance of the conflict.

Rush Limbaugh defended the president by framing this as part of the “ongoing effort to sabotage Donald Trump” pointing the finger at the “Drive-By Media, the Democrat Party, the health and medical elites.”¹³⁰

They continued to smear Donald Trump, and to this day they continue to smear Donald Trump by saying he wasn’t prepared for coronavirus, when he was, and was the first... It was Fauci and others — as you will hear in a moment — who in January, February, March were assuring everybody there was nothing to fear. This effort to portray Trump as unprepared is as bogus as the Steele dossier. It’s as bogus as the phone call to Ukraine’s president. It’s as bogus as anything involving Stormy Daniels, the Trump-Russia collusion bogus hoax — which is a silent coup. They all knew.

¹²⁷ <https://www.mediaite.com/trump/trump-goes-after-chris-wallace-in-continued-attacks-on-fox-news-worse-than-sleepy-eyes-chuck-todd/>

¹²⁸ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1249424452477235200>

¹²⁹ <https://nypost.com/2020/04/13/trump-makes-so-fake-media-sit-through-hits-reel-during-briefing/>

¹³⁰ <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2020/04/13/the-ongoing-effort-to-sabotage-donald-trump/>

Liz Harrington writing in Townhall explained the critical coverage as another manifestation of liberal media bias.¹³¹

Interest in the Russia investigation was rekindled on the right in April after handwritten notes by FBI officials agents prior to the interview with Michael Flynn were released at the end of April led some to question the motives of the FBI in interviewing Flynn.¹³²

A Senate Intelligence Committee report was also released on April 21 that confirmed that the Russian government had interfered in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump, which served as a rebuke for a March 2018 Republican-led House report that came to a different conclusion instead blaming “significant intelligence tradecraft failings that undermine confidence in the [assessment’s] judgments regarding Russian President Vladimir Putin’s strategic objectives for disrupting the U.S. election.”¹³³ An opinion piece published by Fox News backing the 2018 GOP report gained traction on the right.¹³⁴

An article in Just the News went after a familiar target, Adam Schiff, for not sharing witness transcripts with the Trump team.¹³⁵

Facebook

Covid-19 also dominated political discourse on Facebook in April (Figure 7), and on the platform, videos were once again a popular source of content. More than 30% of the links by the engagement metric (like, love, care, etc.) were to videos. While in March we saw that unique links to videos accounted for a small portion of the links, in April we saw more links to video content. The most popular link by engagement, which is also in the top 10 links by unique shares, is a parody video called “The Liar Tweets Tonight,” set to the tune of “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” from The Lion King. The video pokes fun at Trump’s response to Covid-19 and his obsession with ratings and Twitter. This post is followed by a video from NowThis Politics on the unique shares list, which features clips from shutdown protests and people denying the reality of the pandemic, many of whom sport Trump merchandise or flags.¹³⁶ The video is couched in facts about the severity of the pandemic.

¹³¹ <https://townhall.com/columnists/lizharrington/2020/04/16/they-could-have-seen-what-was-coming-but-the-medias-bias-gets-in-their-way-n2567069>

¹³² <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/michael-flynn-fbi-handwritten-notes-get-him-lie-fired>

¹³³ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/senate-intel-report-confirms-russia-aimed-to-help-trump-in-2016-198171>

¹³⁴ <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/house-senate-russian-meddoing-dueling-reports-fred-fleitz>

¹³⁵ <https://justthenews.com/accountability/russia-and-ukraine-scandals/how-adam-schiff-secretly-thwarted-efforts-bring>

¹³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/NowThisPolitics/videos/1127148407638080/>



A clip of anti-lockdown protests popular on Facebook

In contrast, Covid-19 conspiracy theories are among top unique links – including the most posted link. The top unique link features an interview with conspiracy theorist Rashid Buttar who blames Fauci for the pandemic and falsely suggests he predicted the pandemic. Other videos draw from this interview to further spread conspiracy theories, including debunked claims about funding the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China. The videos are no longer available on YouTube and Facebook, but archives exist on the Wayback Machine.¹³⁷ This conspiratorial rhetoric, particularly against Fauci, is in line with what we saw from the Trump cohort on Twitter, discussed in detail below.



Rashid Buttar takes aim at Fauci in a popular interview shared on Facebook

¹³⁷ <https://archive.org/web/>

Additionally, as we saw in the March Facebook analysis, many stories cover Trump’s failed response to manage the pandemic. Trump’s April 23 comment about “injecting” disinfectant to treat Covid-19 was similarly met with criticism and appeared in the top 10 lists from unique shares and engagements, as well as throughout each list. For example, an NBC News article reports on the remark and rebuts it with statements from medical professionals and a response from Lysol is the third most shared article by unique links;¹³⁸ a video showing Deborah Birx’s reaction to Trump’s statement during the daily briefing is the seventh link by engagements.¹³⁹

Notable also in the Facebook data is that articles about Tara Reade’s sexual harassment allegations were limited to the unique links metric. Articles accounted for only 3 of the top 100 articles. These articles cover a corroboration of Reade’s story;¹⁴⁰ a criminal complaint;¹⁴¹ and “new evidence” claiming to confirm her story.¹⁴²

Coverage of the campaign was second to Covid-19, and mostly covered the Democratic primaries, such as Sanders dropping out of the race,¹⁴³ and Obama,¹⁴⁴ Sanders,¹⁴⁵ and The Lincoln Project endorsing Biden.¹⁴⁶ Other campaign links cite Vernon Jones’s endorsement of Trump¹⁴⁷ and point to Biden, Trump, and Sanders campaign websites.

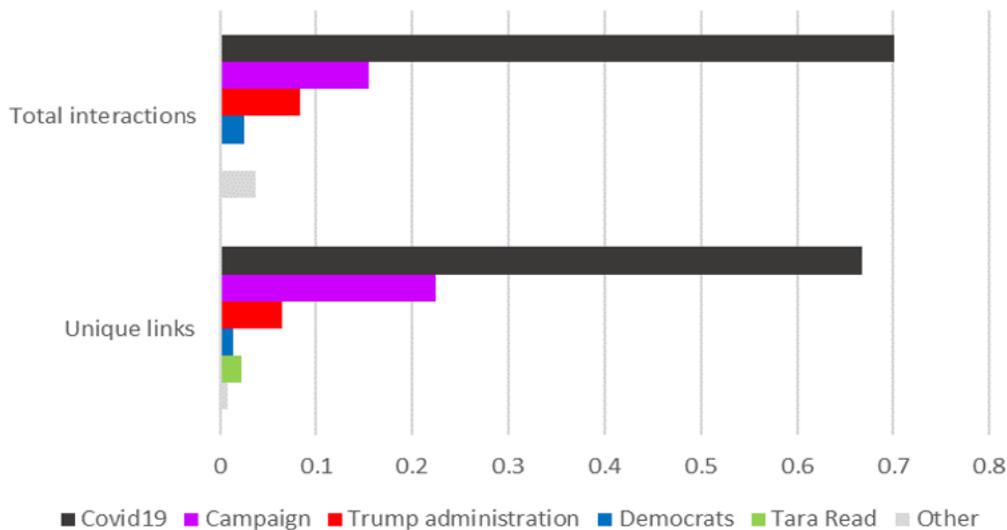


Figure 7. Facebook total interactions and unique links by topic for top 100 stories, April 2020

¹³⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-suggests-injection-disinfectant-beat-coronavirus-clean-lungs-n1191216>

¹³⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=169439887625261>

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.businessinsider.com/former-neighbor-corroborates-joe-bidens-accuser-2020-4>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/tara-rea-de-files-criminal-complaint-against-joe-biden-2020-4>

¹⁴² <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/24/new-evidence-tara-rea-de-joe-biden/>

¹⁴³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/08/politics/bernie-sanders-drops-out/index.html>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/barackobama/videos/260393752927375/>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/13/politics/bernie-sanders-endorses-joe-biden/index.html>

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/15/weve-never-backed-democrat-president-trump-must-be-defeated/>

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/RyanAFournier/photos/a.169053113430241/1172353476433528/?type=3>

Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts

Both the Biden and Sanders cohorts continued to focus a majority of their attention on the pandemic (Figure 8). They shared many of the same articles and media sources as media on the left and followed the same storylines. Both cohorts also directed more attention to negative coverage of Trump unrelated to the pandemic. Three anti-Trump articles were among the most shared for both cohorts. A Politico article reported on loans from China that Trump had taken for his business that draws into question Trump's personal financial interests in China. The original article was entitled "Trump owes tens of millions to Bank of China - and the loan is due soon" and was later amended to "owed" after Politico was contacted by the Bank of China USA informing them that they no longer held the loan.¹⁴⁸ The original version of the story was popular on the left; the correction of the story was shared on the right.



WHITE HOUSE

Trump owes tens of millions to the Bank of China — and the loan is due soon

The president's financial dealings with the state-owned bank complicate his attacks on Biden.

WHITE HOUSE

Trump owed tens of millions to Bank of China

The president's financial dealings with the state-owned bank complicate his attacks on Biden.

Politico has to walk back reporting on Trump debt

Two opinion pieces sharply critical of the president were popular, one in the Washington Post by Max Boot entitled: "Worst President. Ever."¹⁴⁹ and another opinion piece co-authored by another set of conservatives, George Conway, Reed Galen, Steve Schmidt, John Weaver, and Rick Wilson who wrote:¹⁵⁰

We are in a transcendent and transformative period of American history. The nation cannot afford another four years of chaos, duplicity and Trump's reality distortion. This country is crying out for a president with a spine stiffened by tragedy, a worldview shaped by experience and a heart whose compass points to decency. It is our hope that when the next president takes the oath of office in January, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. will be the president for a truly united America. The stakes are too high to do anything less.

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/27/politicos-reporting-on-president-trump-and-the-bank-of-china-214107>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/05/worst-president-ever/>

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/15/weve-never-backed-democrat-president-trump-must-be-defeated/>

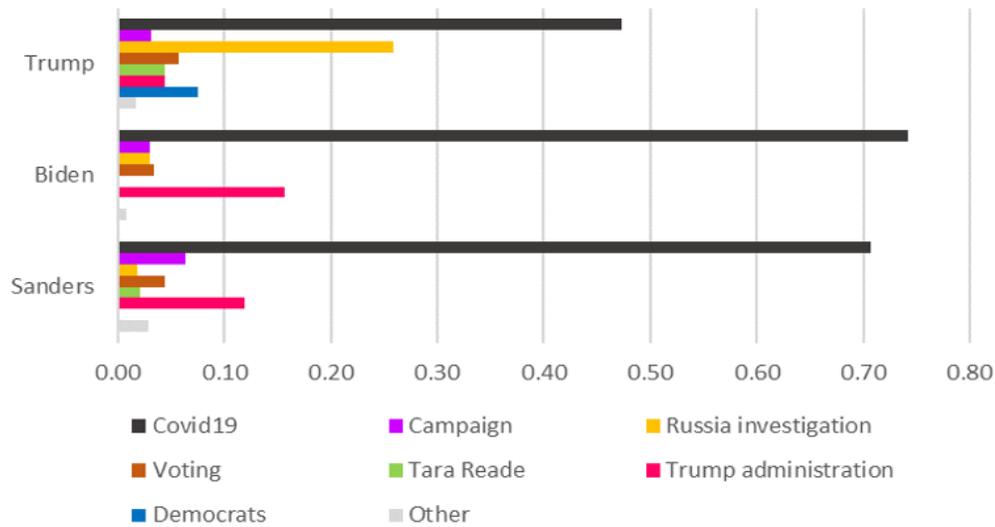


Figure 8. Proportion of attention by topic for the 100 most shared stories on Twitter by cohort, April 2020

The sharing patterns of the Trump cohort displays the proclivity of a significant portion of this cohort to share conspiracy-minded content untethered from reality, and highlights the lack of effective mechanisms on the right to tamp down rumors and false information. The most popular resource shared by the Trump cohort in April was the conspiracy film *Out of Shadows*,¹⁵¹ described by the Daily Beast as the “Bonkers Hollywood-Pedophilia ‘Documentary’ QAnon Loves.”¹⁵² The film alleges that behind the scenes Hollywood is run by a satanic pedophilia ring. Featured in the film are segments promoting the long-dunked and ridiculed Pizzagate and spirit cooking conspiracies. The film is careful to never mention QAnon, although the conspiracy theories espoused in the film are popular among QAnon communities. Just under 10% of Twitter users in the Trump cohort (89 of 1000) shared a link to this film, which has been viewed more 18 million times. The account that posted the video has since been removed from YouTube, although the video can still be found on the platform.

Most of the attention drawn away from the pandemic in the Trump cohort is directed at the Russia investigation and impeachment. This includes an AP story that appeared in the New York Post based on an interview with Fox News in which Attorney General William Barr asserted that the Russia investigation was started without basis and was intended to sabotage the Trump presidency.¹⁵³ Another article on thegreggjarrett.com entitled “Newly Declassified Documents Show John Kerry’s State Department Spread Russia Collusion Narrative”, citing an Aaron Klein article in Breitbart that is

¹⁵¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY8Nfzcn1qQ&ab_channel=outofshadows

¹⁵² <https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-out-of-shadows-the-bonkers-hollywood-pedophilia-documentary-qanon-loves>

¹⁵³ <https://nypost.com/2020/04/09/william-barr-says-russia-probe-was-started-without-basis/>

based on FISA documents released by Lindsey Graham.¹⁵⁴ An editorial from the Wall Street Journal went after Adam Schiff asking: “Why is he sitting on declassified interviews in the collusion probe?”¹⁵⁵



Stories that depict the Russia investigation as meritless and politically motivated continue to be popular among Trump supporters

The coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in the Trump cohort relies heavily on hyperpartisan content and is filled with disinformation.

The most shared article about Covid-19 told the story of Detroit state representative that credits hydroxychloroquine and President Trump for saving her life,¹⁵⁶ and the second most shared article related the news that the 13th Congressional District Democratic Party Organization would censure her for appearing with President Trump.¹⁵⁷

A popular story in the Trump cohort was an article with an embedded video interview on an ABC affiliate station in Bakersfield, California with two doctors and owners of Accelerated Urgent Care, Dan Erickson and Artin Massihi, recommended that the shelter-in-place order in effect in the state be lifted.¹⁵⁸ The reach of their message brought swift condemnation by public health officials and doctors. The American Academy of Emergency Medicine (AAEM) and the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) issued a “Joint Statement on Physician Misinformation”:¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ <https://thegregjarrett.com/newly-declassified-documents-show-john-kerrys-state-department-spread-russia-collusion-narrative/>

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/schiffs-secret-transcripts-11587769594>

¹⁵⁶

<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2020/04/06/democrat-karen-whitsett-coronavirus-hydroxychloroquine-trump/2955430001/>

¹⁵⁷

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2020/04/23/democrats-plan-censure-lawmaker-whitsett-credited-trump-covid-19-recovery/3010947001/>

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.turnto23.com/news/coronavirus/accelerated-urgent-care-doctors-recommend-lifting-shelter-in-place-order>

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.aaem.org/resources/statements/joint-endorsed/physician-misinformation>

These reckless and untested musings do not speak for medical society and are inconsistent with current science and epidemiology regarding COVID-19. As owners of local urgent care clinics, it appears these two individuals are releasing biased, non-peer reviewed data to advance their personal financial interests without regard for the public's health.

Accelerated Urgent Care doctors recommend lifting shelter-in-place order



Alternative views on the lock-down are amplified by Trump supporters on social media in April

Dan Erickson would reappear in the news at the end of July at a press conference organized by a group affiliated with the Tea Party Patriots that called themselves America's Frontline Doctors.¹⁶⁰ The event gained notoriety for the false claims they promoted at the event and because President Trump retweeted portions of the press conference posted by the group on Twitter. The content was removed by social media platforms for spreading disinformation about Covid-19.¹⁶¹

A pair of Gateway Pundit stories were among the top stories in the Trump Twitter cohort. One challenged the CDC's guidance on reporting on Covid-19 deaths (Hospitals to List COVID-19 as Cause of Death Even if It's "Assumed to Have Caused Or Contributed to Death" – Lab Tests Not Required).¹⁶²

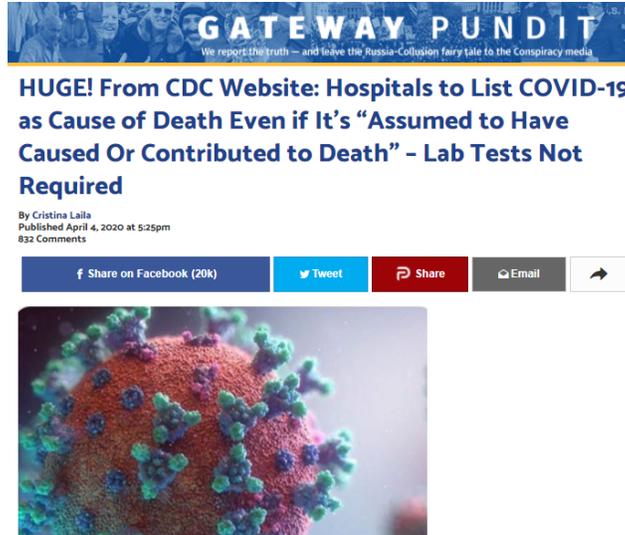
¹⁶⁰

<https://www.kget.com/health/coronavirus/controversial-bakersfield-doctor-back-in-national-spotlight-after-aligning-with-group-downplaying-covid-19-reat/>

¹⁶¹ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/07/trump-promoted-covid-video-removed-by-twitter-and-facebook.html>

¹⁶²

<https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/04/cdc-tells-hospitals-list-covid-19-cause-death-even-assumed-caused-contributed-death-lab-tests-not-required/>



Raising doubts about the accuracy of Covid-19 statistics to downplay the severity of the pandemic

The other article includes a link to a video of Dr. Fauci in 2017 saying that there would be a surprise outbreak during the Trump presidency.¹⁶³

One of the low points in the contentious relationship between President Trump and Dr. Fauci occurred in April when the president retweeted a message calling for the firing of Fauci.¹⁶⁴



Dr. Fauci became a target for some in right-wing media

¹⁶³ <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/04/whoa-dr-fauci-2017-president-trump-will-challenged-surprise-global-disease-outbreak-video/>

¹⁶⁴ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1249470237726081030>

A Breitbart article often shared on the right reports on a CNN interview by Jake Tapper with Dr. Fauci, leaving it to viewers to draw their own conclusions.¹⁶⁵

Rounding out the top 20 most shared articles is a True Pundit article that hits several conspiracy notes at once with anti-vaccine activist Robert Kennedy describing a sinister deal between Dr. Fauci and Bill Gates to cash in by forcing harmful vaccines on the public (Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Drops New Bombshell — Bill Gates' Coronavirus Vaccine Will Pay Out BILLIONS in Profits to Dr. Fauci's Agency).¹⁶⁶



The data is in — stop the panic and end the total isolation

BY DR. SCOTT W. ATLAS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 04/22/20 12:30 PM EDT
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

16,579 COMMENTS

An opinion piece by Dr. Scott Atlas in May

Dr. Scott Atlas wrote an opinion piece published in The Hill on April 22 laying out his argument for ending the shutdown and promoting herd immunity.¹⁶⁷ Experts estimate it would require about 70% of the U.S. population, or about 200 million people to have had the virus. At a mortality rate of just 1 or 2%, that is millions of deaths. In a letter published in the Lancet, a group of researchers called the herd immunity approach “a dangerous fallacy unsupported by scientific evidence.”¹⁶⁸ Dr. Atlas, whose medical expertise is neuroradiology, is now one of Trump’s key advisors on coronavirus policy.¹⁶⁹

May 2020

By May, more than one million Americans had tested positive for Covid-19. Several states, including Georgia and Texas, were pushing forward with reopening despite the protests of public health officials that this would inevitably increase the number of cases and reduce the chances of bringing the pandemic under control. Attention to media coverage shows the signs of pandemic fatigue as other topics crowded out coverage of the pandemic.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2020/04/12/fauci-obviously-if-trump-had-listened-to-our-recommendations-we-could-have-saved-lives/>

¹⁶⁶

<https://truepundit.com/exclusive-robert-f-kennedy-jr-drops-new-bombshell-bill-gates-coronavirus-vaccine-will-pay-out-billions-in-profits-to-dr-faucis-age-ncy/>

¹⁶⁷ <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/494034-the-data-are-in-stop-the-panic-and-end-the-total-isolation>

¹⁶⁸ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32153-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32153-X/fulltext)

¹⁶⁹ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/herd-immunity-and-coronavirus/art-20486808>

Open web media links

As measured by the proportion of media links, the focus on the pandemic declined significantly in May (Figure 9). We also see the greatest disparity yet in the topics most cited by media on the right and left. Citations to stories about Covid-19 dropped to just under 60% of total among sites on the left from around 90% in April. On the right, citations to Covid-19 stories fell to less than 20%. The linking patterns on the right show a remarkable shift in attention to stories about the Russia investigation, with a focus on the case against Michael Flynn. This topic took up more than twice the attention of Covid-19 in May. On the right, citations to stories about Tara Reade were almost as great as stories about Covid-19.

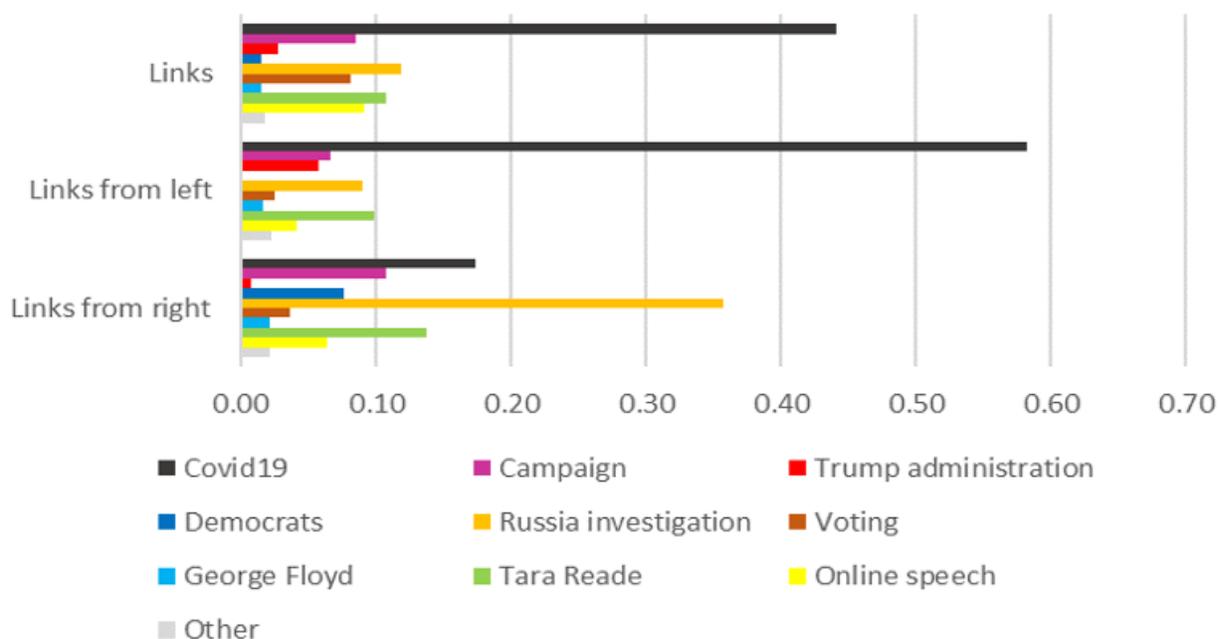


Figure 9. Proportion of coverage by topic for 100 most linked to stories (total links, links from media sources on the right, and links from media sources on the left), May 2020.

The most cited stories on the left about the pandemic continue to center on criticism of the handling of the crisis by the Trump administration. These included articles written many weeks earlier, for example, the Politico article from the end of March that describes how the Trump administration had failed to follow a National Security Council pandemic response playbook produced specifically to address the supply line issues that the country continued to face.¹⁷⁰ Two highly critical articles from April continued to be cited frequently in May: the April 4 Washington Post article (‘The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged’)¹⁷¹ and the April 11 New York Times article (‘He

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/25/trump-coronavirus-national-security-council-149285>

¹⁷¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/04/04/coronavirus-government-dysfunction/?arc404=true>

should have seen it coming’).¹⁷² The flow of critical coverage continued in May. A May 2 story in the Washington Post, “34 days of pandemic: Inside Trump’s desperate attempts to reopen America,” detailed the Trump administration’s internal debates in April over reopening the economy, the dire economic numbers, and continuing problems in expanding testing capacity.¹⁷³ Consistent with other reporting, the article depicted a president consumed more by politics and public perceptions than understanding and addressing the health crisis. Also in the first week of May, the AP reported that the Trump administration had decided to bury a guide created by the CDC with detailed advice for state and local authorities for safely opening up businesses.¹⁷⁴ For partisans on the left that are drawn to negative coverage of Trump, there is a seemingly endless supply of stories that describe the Trump administration’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic as callously inept.

Politics

34 days of pandemic: Inside Trump’s desperate attempts to reopen America



Critical coverage of the Trump administration’s handling of the crisis continues to capture attention in May

In May, a greater shift occurred in right-wing media; the citation pattern in conservative circles shows the signs of a media ecosystem eager to change the topic and to focus on different partisan wars. The persistent public health and economic crises presented a difficult challenge for conservative media, and in this environment providing a supportive narrative for their side was proving to be extremely difficult.

The pivot for conservative media began in late April with a focus on the release of documents related to the Michael Flynn interview by the FBI that ultimately led to Flynn pleading guilty to perjury.¹⁷⁵ On May 7, the Department of Justice moved to drop charges against Michael Flynn. At about the same

¹⁷² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>

¹⁷³

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/34-days-of-pandemic-inside-trumps-desperate-attempts-to-reopen-america/2020/05/02/e99911f4-8b54-11ea-9dfd-990f9dccc71fc_story.html

¹⁷⁴ <http://apnews.com/7a00d5fba3249e573d2ead4bd323a4d4>

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/michael-flynn-fbi-handwritten-notes-get-him-lie-fired>

time, conservatives began pushing the term Obamagate following on a retweet by Trump of a tweet that included the term. A recording of private remarks by Obama to ex-members of his administration was obtained by the media and reporting on. Obama criticized the move by the Justice Department to drop charges against Flynn and called “an absolute chaotic disaster.”¹⁷⁶ For most observers outside of conservative media, Obamagate appeared to be a concocted controversy intended to distract attention.¹⁷⁷ Trump himself was not able to articulate the scope and basis for Obamagate when asked.¹⁷⁸ None of this prevented it from becoming a focal point for conservative media coverage in May.

The most cited story by media on the right in May is a Yahoo! News article about Obama’s remarks on the Department of Justice move to drop charges against Flynn – Obama said the “rule of law is at risk” – and his comment about Trump’s handling of the pandemic (“an absolute chaotic disaster”).¹⁷⁹

Other highly cited stories include a Fox News article that seeks to link Obama and Biden to the investigation of Flynn (Obama knew details of wiretapped Flynn phone calls, surprising top DOJ official, new docs show)¹⁸⁰ and an article in the Federalist about a January 5, 2017 meeting in the oval office (Obama, Biden Oval Office Meeting On January 5 Was Key To Entire Anti-Trump Operation).¹⁸¹

Coverage from the center and center-left was also cited, for example an interview with Attorney General Barr,¹⁸² the move to declassify Obama officials involved in unmasking,¹⁸³ and a 2017 article by David Ignatius questioning “Why did Obama dawdle on Russia’s hacking?”¹⁸⁴

Among the smaller number of stories about the Covid-19 pandemic widely cited by the right in May is a Daily Caller article about the undercounting of nursing home deaths in New York (EXCLUSIVE: New York Admits Knowingly Undercounting Nursing Home Deaths After Quietly Changing Reporting Rules).¹⁸⁵ Partisan battles over the methods for keeping track of cases and deaths have been raging throughout the crisis.

¹⁷⁶<https://news.yahoo.com/obama-irule-of-law-michael-flynn-case-014121045.html>

¹⁷⁷<https://www.vox.com/2020/5/15/21257299/obamagate-trump-flynn-unmasking-conspiracy>
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/obamagate-birtherism-all-over-again/611692/>
<https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/what-obamagate>

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/05/trump-russia-investigation-obamagate-nor-conspiracy-theory/>

¹⁷⁸<https://www.vox.com/2020/5/11/21255214/trump-obamagate-philip-rucker-coronavirus-press-conference>

¹⁷⁹<https://sports.yahoo.com/obama-irule-of-law-michael-flynn-case-014121045.html>

¹⁸⁰

<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/obama-knew-details-of-wiretapped-flynn-phone-calls-surprising-top-doj-official-new-docs-show>

¹⁸¹<https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/08/obama-biden-oval-office-meeting-on-january-5-was-key-to-entire-anti-trump-operation/>

¹⁸²<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/attorney-general-william-barr-on-michael-flynn-obamacare-and-coronavirus-restrictions-transcript/>

¹⁸³<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/acting-dni-seeks-declassify-obama-officials-involved-flynn/story?id=70624372>

¹⁸⁴

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-did-obama-dawdle-on-russias-hacking/2017/01/12/75f878a0-d90c-11e6-9a36-1d296534b31e_story.html?utm_term=.06a5f138e924

¹⁸⁵<https://dailycaller.com/2020/05/15/new-york-coronavirus-reporting-nursing-home-deaths-undercounting/>

Another Covid-19 story cited by the right is an April 29 Atlantic article with the provocative title “Georgia’s Experiment in Human Sacrifice.”¹⁸⁶ Controversially, Georgia was one of the first states to reopen in late April despite the prevailing opinion among medical experts that this would inevitably lead to a sharp rise in cases.¹⁸⁷ Georgia became a flash point in the debates over timing and protocols for the reopening of America. This article has been held out as a classic example of alarmist reporting by left-leaning media outlets and ending up getting more attention from the right than the left.

All Georgians can do now is try to protect themselves as best they can. If social distancing decreases because lots of businesses reopen, another deluge of COVID-19 cases could be inevitable. Because of how infections tend to progress, it may be two or three weeks before hospitals see a new wave of people whose lungs look like they’re studded with ground glass in X-rays. By then, there’s no telling how many more people could be carrying the disease into nail salons or tattoo parlors, going about their daily lives because they were told they could do so safely.

When a predicted spike in cases did not materialize in May, several voices called out for public apologies from those who predicted dire consequences, for example in articles in the Daily Wire,¹⁸⁸ Blaze,¹⁸⁹ Dan Bongino,¹⁹⁰ and Resurgent.¹⁹¹ Others sought to understand why the data did not show the anticipated spike in cases.¹⁹² Unfortunately, cases in Georgia increased in the summer months.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁶ https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/why-georgia-reopening-coronavirus-pandemic/610882/?utm_source=feed

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/4/23/21231256/georgia-reopening-plan-brian-kemp-hair-salons-bowling-coronavirus>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/opinion/georgia-coronavirus-reopening.html>

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.dailywire.com/news/watch-atlanta-mayor-admits-she-was-off-about-georgia-re-opening-but-wont-say-she-was-wrong-to-republican-governor-as-she-promised>

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.theblaze.com/news/georgia-gov-brian-kemp-celebrates-record-low-covid-19-numbers-after-media-dems-predicted-disaster>

¹⁹⁰ <https://bongino.com/despite-media-gaslighting-georgia-is-doing-just-fine-after-reopening>

¹⁹¹ <https://theresurgent.com/2020/05/14/where-does-brian-kemp-go-for-an-apology/>

¹⁹² <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/4/21267769/georgia-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-cases-deaths-data>

¹⁹³ <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>

Facebook

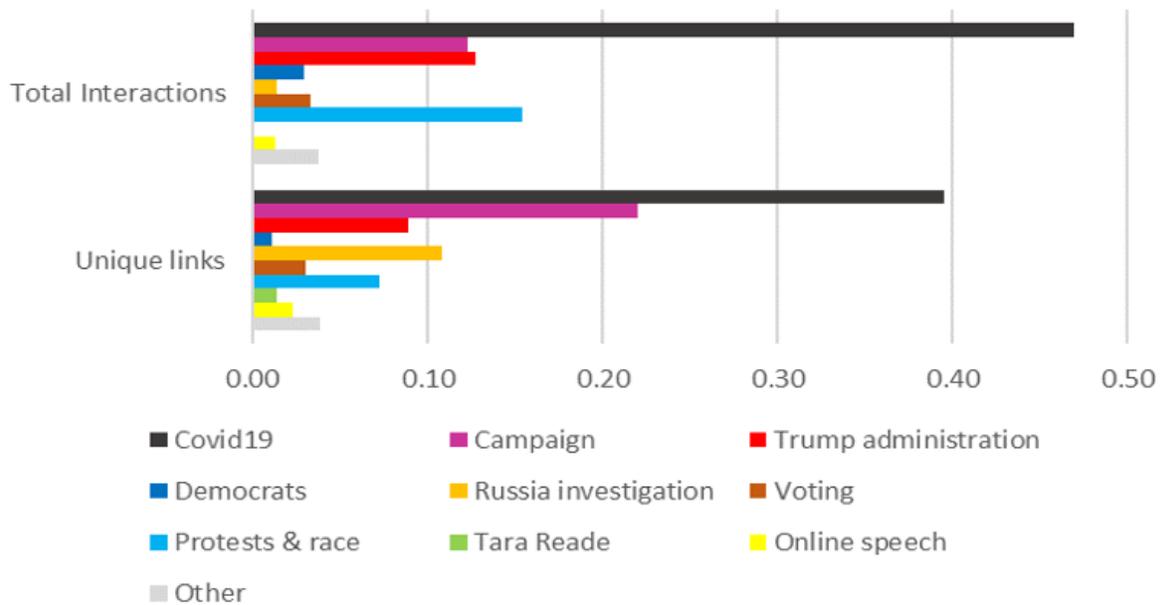


Figure 10. Facebook total interactions and unique links by topic for top 100 stories, May 2020

In May, the patterns of attention on Facebook were similar to media linking patterns on the open web and on Twitter. Covid-19 remained the most popular topic, but with a smaller share of overall attention than in March or April (Figure 10). The link that received the most engagements in May was to a webpage under the Médecins Sans Frontières domain reminding readers that Covid-19 must not jeopardize the fight against the deadly measles epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁹⁴ The majority of covid-related articles and Facebook posts were highly critical of the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic.¹⁹⁵ Occupy Democrats, a left-wing Facebook page responsible for over 15 percent of the stories in the top 100 stories ranked by total interactions, posted a widely-shared video in which a baby with a digitally generated Trump face is “confronted with his Coronavirus lies.”¹⁹⁶ Fox News covered Trump’s announcement that houses of worship are “essential” and that he would call on governors to open them up.¹⁹⁷

Despite the fact that George Floyd was killed on May 25, stories about the protests over that killing were the second most popular topic ranking among the top stories ranked by total interactions for the

¹⁹⁴ <https://msf.exposure.co/measles-in-drc>

¹⁹⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/Za00d5fba3249e573d2ead4bd323a4d4>

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-administration-coronavirus-vaccine-researcher-covid-19-cure-60-minutes/>

¹⁹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/videos/270300780815665/>

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-announces-that-houses-of-worship-are-essential-calls-on-governors-to-open-them-up>

entire month. A video from comedian Kevin Hart in which he shares his thoughts about George Floyd’s murder and racism in the U.S received significant engagement.¹⁹⁸ Other stories receiving attention include several posts by Occupy Democrats that amplified messages in support of the protestors and the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁹⁹ The proportion of attention to stories about the protests was much smaller in the list of stories ranked by unique links; however, related stories that were in the top 100 focused not on supporting the protestors but on coverage of Trump’s Twitter announcement that the U.S would be “designating ANTIFA as a terrorist organization.”²⁰⁰

Over 20 percent of the top 100 list ranked by unique links were stories related to the Trump and Biden election campaigns, most of which were negative coverage of Biden, attack ads against Biden shared by right-wing Facebook pages,²⁰¹ and videos of support for Trump’s re-election.²⁰² Two articles covered the backlash Biden received due to his comment made during an interview that if African American voters are having trouble deciding whether to vote for him or Trump, they “ain’t black.”²⁰³ Several days later, Trump’s Facebook page posted an attack ad that included a clip of Biden’s interview followed by a clip of the popular “dancing pallbearers” meme with Biden’s campaign logo superimposed on the coffin.²⁰⁴



A popular post on Donald Trump’s Facebook page

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/washingtondcpres/videos/252039095896972/>

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/videos/1621623251337196/>;

[https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/photos/a.347907068635687/3839228536170172/?type=3](https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/photos/a.347907068635687/3839228536170172/?type=3;);

<https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/photos/a.347907068635687/3835200573239635/?type=3>

²⁰⁰ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-announces-u-s-to-designate-antifa-as-terrorist-organization-following-violent-protests>

²⁰¹ <https://www.facebook.com/dan.bongino/videos/582128975994393/>

²⁰² <https://www.facebook.com/realCharlieKirk/videos/244101960025803/>

²⁰³ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/biden-torn-him-and-trump-aint-black-in-dust-up-with-charlamagne-tha-god>

²⁰⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump/videos/1129672777392645/>

Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts

The attention patterns among political partisans on Twitter shows trends that are similar to the media linking patterns, only more pronounced. The proportion of sharing directed at Covid-19 stories dropped for all of the cohorts. While the proportion for Biden and Sanders cohorts hovered around 40%, the proportion for the Trump cohort dropped to less than 20%. The shift in attention for the Trump cohort was dramatic. The aggregate shares of stories related to Michael Flynn, the Russia investigation, and ‘Obamagate’ are triple those related to Covid-19 (Figure 11).

The Biden and Sanders cohort filled in the agenda with more sharing of stories critical of the Trump administration unrelated to the pandemic. For the Sanders cohort, the protests that erupted following the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police took up more than a fifth of their attention in May, even though this occurred towards the end of the month on May 25. For the Sanders cohort, the four most shared resources were two stories about the events and two calls for fundraising.²⁰⁵ A May 30 CNN story reported on the protests expanding across the nation.²⁰⁶ A story in Slate in described the violent response to the nation-wide protest by police.²⁰⁷ The remarkable difference in attention to the protests following the death of George Floyd between the Biden and Sanders cohorts is consistent with patterns we describe in an earlier report. Compared to the Biden cohort, which is highly focused on negative coverage of the president and his administration, the Sanders cohort displays a much higher interest in stories about progressive issues such as social justice.

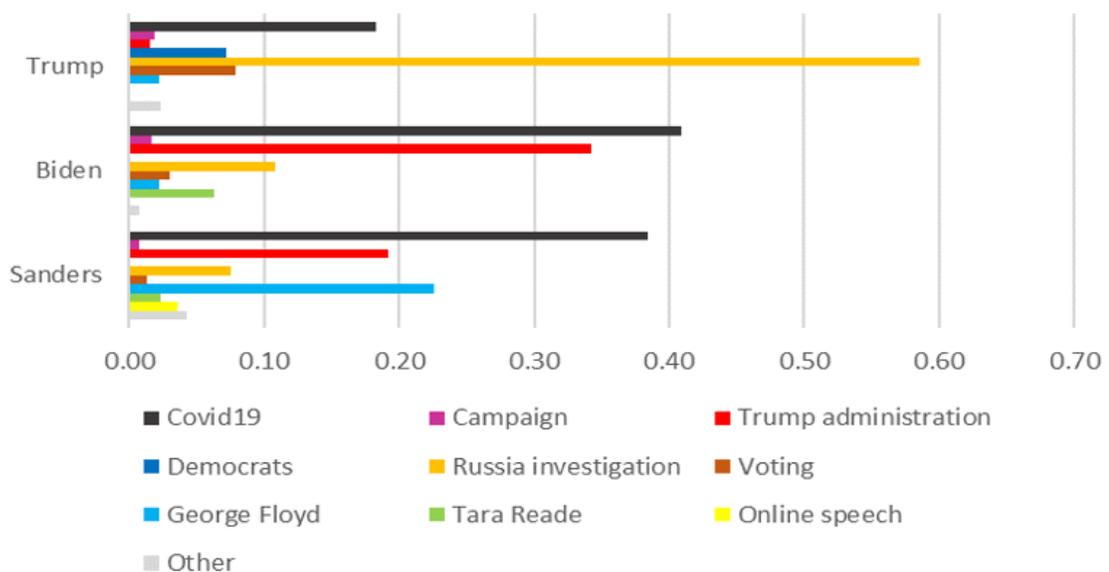


Figure 11. Proportion of attention by topic for the 100 most shared stories on Twitter by cohort, May 2020

²⁰⁵ <https://minnesotafreefund.org/donate>; <https://www.gofundme.com/f/georgefloyd>

²⁰⁶ https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/george-floyd-protest-updates-05-28-20/h_4ed08403663fa4ed3518221d0f2a1552

²⁰⁷ <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/05/george-floyd-protests-police-violence.html>

The Biden cohort shared a range of negative stories about the Trump administration, covering topics such as the taxpayer funded dinners hosted by Secretary of State Pompeo,²⁰⁸ Howard Stern’s comments to Trump supporters (“He hates you. So do I.”),²⁰⁹ Trump’s removal of a government watchdog who reported on critical medical shortages,²¹⁰ and Jared Kushner’s refusal to rule out a postponement of the November election.²¹¹ Another popular article was an opinion piece by Kara Swisher in the New York Times (Twitter Must Cleanse the Trump Stain) calling on Twitter to enforce its content moderation rules after President Trump tweeted an unfounded murder allegation against Joe Scarborough to the distress of the victim’s family.²¹²

The most popular article about the pandemic in the Biden cohort is a Joe Biden oped in the Washington Post that is sharply critical of Trump’s management of the crisis. Other popular articles included a 60 Minutes report that the Trump administration was jeopardizing a possible cure for Covid-19 by cutting funding for a coronavirus researcher who had collaborated with the Wuhan Institute of Virology,²¹³ a Washington Post article describing how the government had refused in late January a manufacturer’s offer to produce many million N95 masks in the United States,²¹⁴ a CNN story about how the White House has interfered in the work of the CDC and prevented them from offering sound evidence-based advisories to the public,²¹⁵ and an article about a study of hydroxychloroquine that showed higher risk of death among coronavirus patients who had taken the drug (this study was later retracted).²¹⁶

Unlike prior periods, in May the Biden cohort shared stories on the Tara Reade allegations against Biden. The reason for this shift is Biden’s long awaited response to the allegations. In an appearance on MSNBC and in a Medium post on May 1 he denied the allegations.²¹⁷ David Axelrod came to Biden’s defense the same day in an opinion piece in CNN (Obama team fully vetted Biden in 2008 and found no hint of former aide’s allegation).²¹⁸ An AP story the next day shared by the Biden cohort based on an interview with Reade reported that she had “filed a limited report with a congressional personnel office that did not explicitly accuse him of sexual assault or harassment.”²¹⁹ Reporting later in the

²⁰⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/pompeo-s-elite-taxpayer-funded-dinners-raise-new-concerns-n1210746>

²⁰⁹ <https://www.nydailynews.com/snyde/ny-howard-stern-trump-hates-supporters-20200512-k3z6fmgqgbbrxjyocj46mtvse-story.html>

²¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/us/politics/trump-health-department-watchdog.html>

²¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/12/us/politics/kushner-election-november.html>

²¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/opinion/trump-scarborough-twitter.html>

²¹³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-administration-coronavirus-vaccine-researcher-covid-19-cure-60-minutes/>

²¹⁴

https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/in-the-early-days-of-the-pandemic-the-us-government-turned-down-an-offer-to-manufacture-millions-of-n95-masks-in-america/2020/05/09/f76a821e-908a-11ea-a9c0-73b93422d691_story.html

²¹⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/20/politics/coronavirus-travel-alert-cdc-white-house-tensions-invs/index.html>

²¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/22/hydroxychloroquine-coronavirus-study/>

²¹⁷ <https://medium.com/@JoeBiden/statement-by-vice-president-joe-biden-7a9593bd3012>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/joe-biden-denies-he-sexually-assaulted-a-former-senate-aide/2020/05/01/08d59662-8b39-11ea-9dfd-990f9d9c71fc_story.html

²¹⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/01/opinions/biden-tara-reade-allegations-2008-vetting-axelrod/index.html>

²¹⁹ <https://apnews.com/acc7beb03e9e0e0e6e3c58111293e0ea>

month shared by users in the Biden cohort stated that “A number of those who crossed paths with Biden’s accuser say they remember two things: She spoke favorably about her time working for Biden, and she left them feeling duped.”²²⁰ The sharing of these stories suggests satisfaction among Biden supporters that this was an effective response and that it could help to put the allegations behind him. This turned out to be true as after May these allegations against Joe Biden were no longer an important part of the media agenda.

The Trump cohort of Twitter users fully embraced the shift in attention to refocusing on the origins of the Russia investigation and the ongoing turmoil related to Michael Flynn, which pulled attention away from the politically damaging public health and economic crises in the nation.

The most shared article is a piece by Mollie Hemenway in the Federalist: Obama, Biden Oval Office Meeting On January 5 Was Key To Entire Anti-Trump Operation.²²¹ Barack Obama was also the target of other popular articles, for example on Gregg Jarrett’s site (Obama Sends Private Letter to National Archives Claiming ‘Confidentiality’ To Not Release Biden-Ukraine Docs),²²² on Fox News (Obama knew details of wiretapped Flynn phone calls, surprising top DOJ official in meeting with Biden, declassified docs show),²²³ and on David J. Harris Jr.’s site (New Document Releases Seem to Point to Obama Running the Scam Investigation).²²⁴ Two other Federalist articles were well circulated, one focused on Susan Rice²²⁵ and the other on Evelyn Farkas.²²⁶

Among the top 15 is an article in the National Review defending the legitimacy of Obamagate.²²⁷

Obamagate Is Not a Conspiracy Theory

By DAVID HARSANYI | May 12, 2020 5:46 PM



Obamagate gains traction in May but only in conservative media

²²⁰ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/15/tara-reade-left-trail-of-aggrieved-acquaintances-260771>

²²¹ <https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/08/obama-biden-oval-office-meeting-on-january-5-was-key-to-entire-anti-trump-operation/>

²²² <https://thegregjarrett.com/obama-sends-private-letter-to-national-archives-claiming-confidentiality-to-not-release-biden-ukraine-docs/>

²²³ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/obama-knew-details-of-wiretapped-flynn-phone-calls-surprising-top-doj-official-new-docs-show>

²²⁴ <https://davidharrisjr.com/steven/new-doc-releases-seem-to-point-to-obama-running-the-scam-investigation/>

²²⁵ <https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/19/breaking-declassified-susan-rice-email-confirms-michael-flynn-was-personally-targeted-in-oval-office-meeting/>

²²⁶ <https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/08/obama-defense-official-evelyn-farkas-admitted-she-lied-on-msnbc-about-having-evidence-of-collusion/>

²²⁷ <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/05/trump-russia-investigation-obamagate-not-conspiracy-theory/>

A Fox News story cited an unnamed administration official as saying that Adam Schiff was in “panic mode” over the forthcoming release of transcripts that would show that efforts to establish collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia had come up empty.²²⁸ Other popular articles include a Daily Wire piece on the declassification of the list of Obama administration officials involved in unmasking,²²⁹ a Gateway Pundit article linking John Podesta and Hillary Clinton to the financing of the Steele dossier,²³⁰ and Eli Lake’s article in Commentary on the railroading of Michael Flynn.²³¹

The Covid-related articles shared by the Trump cohort take a familiar partisan tone but also veered into conspiracies. A Breitbart article that summarized an interview with Representative Reschenthaler: “House Speaker Nancy Pelosi would rather investigate President Donald Trump again than focus on the actual origins of the Chinese coronavirus and U.S. tax dollars that went to the Wuhan Institute of Virology from which intelligence officials increasingly believe the virus leaked.”²³² An article in True Pundit reported that Dr. Fauci was aware of the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine 15 years ago and suggested that given this knowledge no one should have died from Covid-19.²³³ A CDC page was shared by users in the Trump cohort based on a mistaken interpretation of the data tweeted out by Dinesh D’Souza, who claimed that the CDC had suddenly revised downward the number deaths due to Covid by 37,000.²³⁴ A fact check explains that the CDC regularly updates its death statistics based on two different methods, one based on confirmed and probably cases and the other based on the collection of data from death certificates that lags by a week or two and is therefore a lower figure.²³⁵ Underlying this error is the suspicion among many supporters of the president that officials are exaggerating the toll of the pandemic and cooking the books to make it look worse than it is.

²²⁸ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/russia-transcripts-collusion-schiff-panic-mode-sources>

²²⁹ <https://www.dailywire.com/news/breaking-u-s-officials-have-declassified-list-of-obama-officials-who-were-involved-in-unmasking-general-flynn>

²³⁰ <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/05/now-know-john-podesta-admits-testimony-dnc-hillary-campaign-split-cost-bogus-trump-russia-dossier-lau-nched-coup/>

²³¹ <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/eli-lake/michael-flynn-gets-railroaded-by-the-fbi/>

²³² <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/05/03/congressman-nancy-pelosi-blocking-investigation-chinese-coronavirus-origins/>

²³³ <https://truepundit.com/cover-up-fauci-approved-chloroquine-hydroxychloroquine-15-years-ago-to-treat-nobody-needed-to-die/>

²³⁴ <https://twitter.com/DineshDSouza/status/1256641587708342274>

²³⁵ <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/05/cdc-hasnt-reduced-covid-19-death-toll/>

Conclusions

Political discourse in the United States has concentrated on the Covid-19 pandemic since the middle of March, when the threat of unchecked community transmission became clear and the country began to shutdown to limit the spread of the disease. Mainstream media and media outlets from the center to the left focused attention on the spread of the pandemic and leveled blistering criticism at the Trump administration's response to the crisis. Conservative media defended the president's performance and supported his position that his opponents were exaggerating the severity of the pandemic in order to weaken the president politically. These core themes define the principal narratives adopted and amplified by mainstream media and their conservative counterparts, and by the politically engaged supporters of Democrats and Republicans, that have shaped the contours of public discourse since February.

The response of conservative media in the early months of the pandemic is entirely consistent with the practices and strategies we and others have documented before. Right-wing media came to the defense of the president as he sought to downplay the significance and severity of impending pandemic, a trend that has continued to this day. The media coverage that resonated most strongly with audiences outside of conservative America was focused on the shortcomings and missteps of the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic as well as the need to implement a more concerted and aggressive national strategy to limit the spread of the virus. Conservative media employed the tactics that have been developed and honed over several decades: sowing distrust of mainstream media coverage, deflecting and diverting attention away from negative coverage, and re-emphasizing the partisan divide. This approach was manifest in coverage that attacked the credibility of sources of information such as Dr. Fauci, questioned the validity of data on the pandemic collected and published by the CDC, and promoted marginal voices with administration-friendly opinions. As the crisis wore on in April and May and good news was scarce, attention in conservative media was diverted to a set of scandals collectively dubbed Obamagate or Russiagate, which are generally viewed skeptically outside of conservative circles.

The evidence we present in this report, based on the tracking of attention to media from a variety of perspectives, all points to the coexistence of two very different interpretations of what we might have naively considered a shared American experience. In one world, the United States is heading towards a public health calamity due in large part to the failure of the government to muster an effective response. In the other, the country is ready to move beyond a crisis thrust upon it by a foreign country and exacerbated by opponents that overstate the severity of the risks and are interested primarily in undermining the president not in the wellbeing of the public.

These two divergent worldviews correlate closely with the reported views of Americans. In July, 85% of Democrats saw the pandemic as a major threat to the health of the U.S. public compared to only 46% of Republicans.²³⁶ In October, a survey by the Pew Research Center found that 68% of American adults who identify as Republican or lean Republican believe that the government has done as much as it could have to control the pandemic while only 11% of Democrats held the same view. Among the Republicans, 66% say that the outbreak has been made a bigger deal than it really is, an opinion held by 15% of Democrats.²³⁷ In another recent poll, 78% of Republicans approve of the president's handling of the pandemic compared to 29% of independents and just 7% of Democrats. Among Republicans who trust Fox News the most for television news, 94% approve of the president's handling of the crisis.²³⁸

The accumulated experiences, evidence, and knowledge of the past eight months appear to have had little influence over the beliefs of political partisans. The ability of conservative media to sustain and defend the core narratives related to the pandemic in the face of unrelenting negative coverage from mainstream media is a testament to its enduring power within its core constituency. There are signs, however, that its influence outside of its core audiences is waning. One example of this is the declining approval numbers for the president's management of the pandemic.

One interpretation of the dynamics we describe in this report is two political media ecosystems talking at one another and frequently forcing a response from the other side, but having little to no influence over the core beliefs and positions of the other side. It is unclear to what extent the efforts of media in the center and left to hold the Trump administration accountable for their actions and inactions related to the pandemic have had an impact over the past eight months. There was a course correction in March when the Trump administration promoted a set of measures to reduce the spread of the virus. This appears to be a relatively short-lived phenomenon. The core approach to downplay and look past the pandemic that was embraced in February is largely intact today. One explanation for this is that conservative media, as we show in this report, has served as insulation against negative coverage that might otherwise induce changes in course, and that conservative media serves to blunt efforts to hold the president and his administration accountable for their choices. There are simply no examples that emerge in this work of conservative media attempting to hold the administration accountable in a way that resonated in the conservative media sphere. That is not to say that none tried, only to point out that those that may have tried did not succeed in shifting the discourse. The picture that emerges is a system in which a key facet of our democracy, the accountability of journalism, is hobbled, at least when conservatives are in power. The one remaining mechanism for accountability and course

²³⁶

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/22/republicans-remain-far-less-likely-than-democrats-to-view-covid-19-as-a-major-threat-to-public-health/>

²³⁷ <https://www.journalism.org/2020/10/07/before-trump-tested-positive-for-coronavirus-republicans-attention-to-pandemic-had-sharply-declined/>

²³⁸ <https://www.prii.org/research/amid-multiple-crises-trump-and-biden-supporters-see-different-realities-and-futures-for-the-nation/>

correction is the ballot box, suggesting a brittle political system with few checks on power between elections.