THE DISINFECTANT DIVERSION: FRAMING STRATEGIES OF PARTISAN MEDIA IN INTERPRETING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Storytelling, Identity and News Media

Our study sits at the intersection of two streams of communication research. The older of these has made clear, over several decades, that news media convey meaning to audiences through framing processes: making certain issues, or attributes of issues, more salient than others (e.g. Entman, 1993). A more recent line of work has developed theories relating to the nature of identity and political affiliation in the 21st century, especially as a way to understand the surprising results of the 2016 election (e.g. Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016). The latter has particularly pointed to the importance of narratives, such as Hochschild's "deep story," in organizing citizens' understandings of the political system, their place in it, and the actions and interests of other actors.

Some work has begun to knit together these sets of work. Kreiss (2018), for example, details how Breitbart presents language oriented toward audiences who identify with white, Christian American identities. The use of such narratives in interpreting ongoing news events allows Breitbart to serve as "cultural communes" (Castells, 2011): reactionary and defensive spaces for publics who perceive themselves to be ostracized by mainstream political society.

The proliferation of online news and social media has clearly fostered the propagation of these patterns of what we might call "identity narratives" (Polletta & Callahan, 2019). We contend that, especially on the American political right, the deep story now infuses the interpretation of news on a wide variety of topics.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that both the political and media systems in the United States rapidly polarized in their responses to the crisis. Our goal is to understand how narratives about the constitution of the American polity (such as the "deep story") and signals to social and political identities, were called upon by news media to make sense of the pandemic.

Method

We employ quantitative data exploration to provide context and guide a focused qualitative analysis examining how media outlets constructed topics related to COVID-19. In this paper, we specifically focus on news coverage surrounding the April 23, 2020 White House COVID-19 Task Force press briefing, during which Trump mused about the effectiveness of sunlight and disinfectant injections in combating the virus, an event that sparked a small and very polarized "media storm" (Boydstun et al., 2014). We use the case as an opportunity to explore the diverging meanings partisan media derived from a common event.

We focus our analysis on six national news media outlets spanning the political spectrum: Fox News, Breitbart News, USA Today, New York Times, CNN and Vox. We gathered all articles concerning the COVID-19 pandemic published by these six outlets from Mediacloud from April 23, 2020 – April 26, 2020. Because of Mediacloud's limited collections of cable television content, we also drew content from Fox News and CNN from the Internet Television Archive. During this time, we identified 115 articles and 87 television segments for qualitative analysis. To understand how these outlets framed their coverage of the April 23rd press briefing on social media, we also performed a qualitative analysis of the 41 Facebook posts regarding the press briefing issued by these outlets. Data was collected using CrowdTangle.

In terms of analysis, all articles and clips were analyzed by the first author. Similar to the work of Benziman (2020) and Chadwick (2017), the present analysis utilizes a grounded theory approach to identify recurrent themes utilized within media coverage. Following this approach, themes were compared to find similarities and differences among the ways in which each outlet relied on narratives in their coverage of the April 23rd press briefing.

Discussion

Our results reveal a significant lack of editorialization utilized in online news coverage. With the exception of Breitbart News, the majority of articles displayed techniques that removed the reporter's voice and opinion from the coverage. Many of these articles relied on direct quotes from the president and avoided any sort of incensed or valanced language. It was only through our analysis of cable television did we observe what has been described in the existing literature (Kreiss, 2018; Polletta & Callahan, 2019), where political pundits instructed viewers how to interpret other channels' coverage as well as the outright villainization of the media and opposing viewpoints. Through these narratives, cable news pundits and commentators instill heuristics that audiences can adopt and apply to future viewings.

The overarching narratives used within the centrist and leftist outlets focused heavily on the tendency of the right-wing to ignore science in favor of personal opinion or bias. In contrast, the segments from the conservative outlets rally around the argument that the media "hates Donald Trump" and is constantly willing to "twist his words whenever they can at the expense of the American people." These narratives all contribute to the overarching frame concocted by Fox News and other conservative outlets that mainstream and liberal sources cannot be trusted - further propelling the toxic notion of "fake news." While this may not appear to overtly connect to the concept of identity, we believe that these narratives appeal to a deeper identity narrative where conservative media seeks to drive an "us versus them" mentality. While the overarching use of identity narratives appears to be more implicit in the partisan coverage, this provides further evidence of cultural communes.

Considering the widespread ramifications of COVID-19, and what could be considered as universal concerns regarding a global health crisis, we would expect to see balanced and fair reporting from a healthy media system. However as illustrated, rather than being objectively critical of the president's dangerous comments on April 23rd, the right-wing media was quick to rush to his defense and criticize the liberal media for attempting to "twist his words." In contrast, the same anger can be observed in left-wing media, however, it is predominantly directed to the president himself rather than the right. These findings present further evidence to support existing work that illustrates the importance of storytelling and narratives to Trump's supporter base. As evidenced, these narratives - while effective at rallying the right - have clearly driven a deep wedge between Democrats and Republicans.

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