



# Partisanship, Impeachment, and the Democratic Primaries: American Political Discourse, January - February 2020

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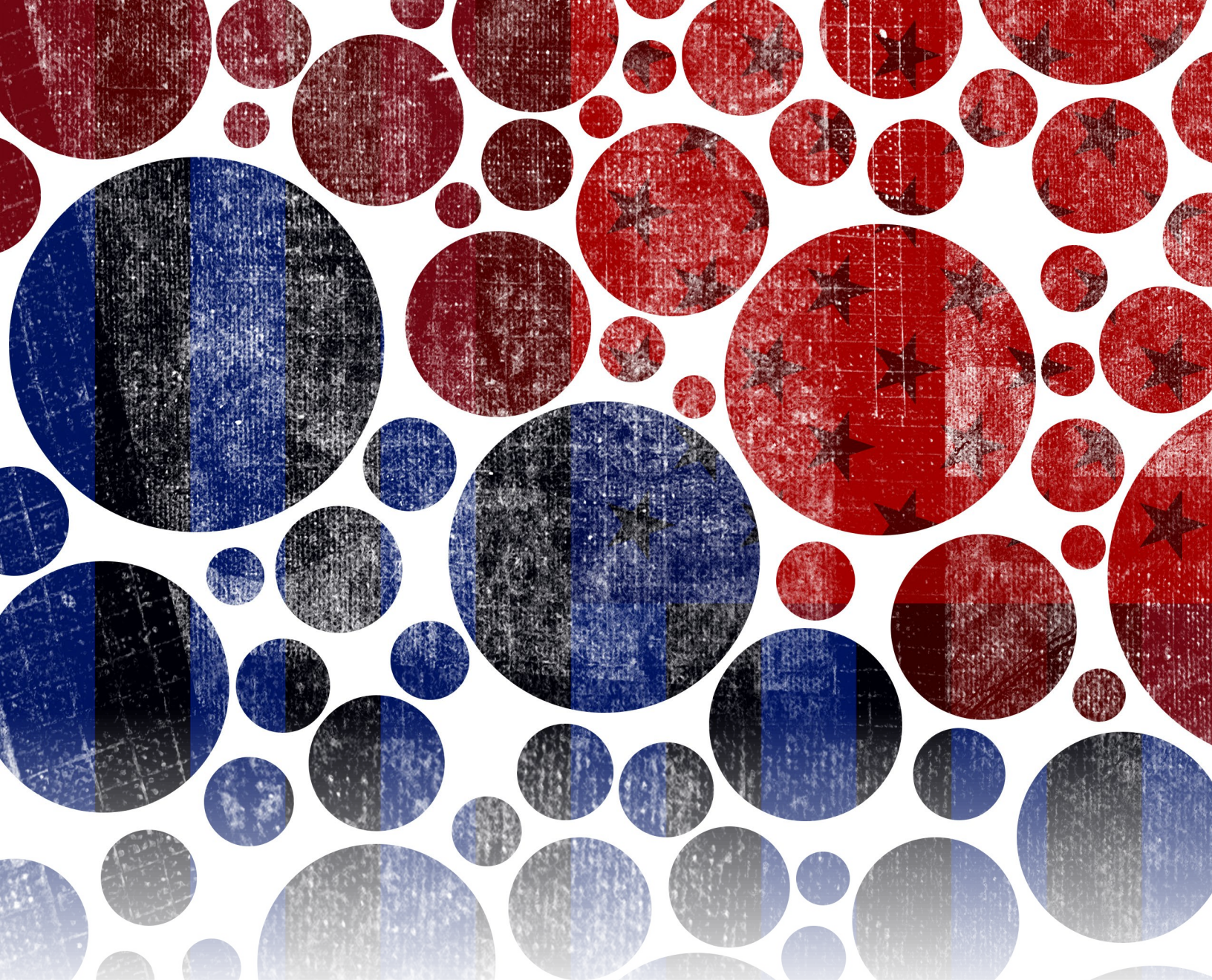
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# **PARTISANSHIP, IMPEACHMENT, AND THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES: AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2020

PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN THE U.S. 2020 ELECTION



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# Executive Summary

The decisions voters will make at the ballot box on November 3, 2020 will be influenced in no small part by the media coverage of the candidates and issues, including the reporting by journalists, the media personalities and pundits on radio and television, text messages and campaign phone calls, podcasts, political ads, and for many, the incessant flow of social media posts of friends and family. In this report, the first of a series of reports that cover the months running up to the November election, we track political discourse in the United States for January and February of 2020, the period of time just before (Covid-19) began to dominate political discourse. We also describe the longer-term structure of political media ecosystems in the United States that shape public discourse by curating, amplifying, and propagating political stories and narratives to distinct political audiences.

The agenda of political media in January and February 2020 centered on the impeachment of the president, the Democratic primaries, and the killing of Qasem Soleimani. This agenda was picked up throughout the media ecosystem, but there were stark differences across the media camps in the framing and narrative contours applied to these topics, presenting radically different depictions of the underlying evidence, facts, and interpretation of events. These differences between media spheres that often extend beyond spin and emphasis reflect and reinforce the depth and strength of the divide in American politics.

Mainstream media described in great detail the rationale for impeaching the president, while in right-wing media the ‘call was perfect’ and the impetus for impeachment was a concocted charade, a witch hunt, to illegitimately overturn the 2016 election. Mainstream media described a rash decision by President Trump to order a missile strike on General Soleimani that was then sold to the American public on the false pretenses of a clear and imminent threat of attack against United States embassies. Conservative media hailed the killing as a decisive strike against adversaries that has unquestionably increased American security and standing in the world.

While mainstream media coverage devoted similar levels of attention to the Democratic primaries and the impeachment of the president in January, and a majority of their attention to the primary race in February, politically engaged users on social media were more focused on partisan one-upmanship. For Democrats, attention was directed at the impeachment and the missteps of Trump and his administration, and in February, the intervention of Attorney General Barr and the Department of Justice in the sentencing of Roger Stone. Republicans, in turn, focused their attention on time-honored political foes: Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic leadership, Hillary Clinton, and the hostile and biased mainstream media. The patterns of attention on both sides are consistent with a view that negative partisanship plays a dominant role in American politics. Trump supporters on

Facebook provided an exception to the pattern of negative coverage where celebratory videos of appearances and events of Trump were popular.

Negative polarization spilled over into the Democratic primary race, which came down to a battle between progressives pursuing a platform of aggressive action on healthcare, climate change, and social and economic justice versus those that put regaining the White House above all else and saw a moderate candidate as a better bet. The media coverage promoted by Sanders supporters placed major focus on the candidate and his policy positions. In contrast, Biden supporters were oriented towards negative coverage of Trump. The outcome of the Democratic race is in keeping with the tenet that negative partisanship dominates American politics.

Conservatives in America appear to have survived the barrage of negative coverage from mainstream media with their partisan perspectives and belief systems intact. This is not because conservative media erected an impermeable barrier against negative coverage from the center and left. Politically engaged conservatives were informed of the damaging coverage, but were unfailingly offered a reinterpretation and reframing of events and a plausible alternative narrative designed to preempt any second thoughts about allegiance to party and president. In deflecting and reframing negative coverage, the tactics employed by conservative media follow a well-developed pattern: downplay the validity of the story; deflect attention to the other side; attack the integrity and motives of sources; reinforce distrust in media outside of the right wing; and invoke a strong partisan framing to activate political identity.

The formidable narrative crafting power of conservative media is employed not as a mechanism for accountability among its participants and leaders and not to police against disinformation and substandard reporting. Instead, it is wielded as a buffer against external influence and against deviance from the party line. This leaves the system vulnerable to misleading and false reporting and to those propagating conspiracies, such as the Gateway Pundit and True Pundit. Hyperpartisan media sources, which thrive on outrage and frequently misinform their audiences, play a prominent role in conservative media. On the left, partisan and hyperpartisan outlets play a much smaller role and less frequently propagate stories unconfirmed by mainstream media.

The biggest change we observe in these first two months of 2020 compared to the election cycle of four years ago is the degree to which conservative media activists have shaped mainstream media coverage. In 2016, right-wing media activists succeeded in influencing mainstream coverage of Hillary Clinton, particularly on the unsubstantiated allegations of wrongdoing associated with the Clinton Foundation, which exacerbated and fed upon coverage of her emails and fueled suspicions of corruption and dishonesty. In the current election cycle, conservative media activists rolled out the same playbook that was so successful in 2016. This time, the corruption allegations were focused on Joe Biden, his son Hunter, and their dealings with Ukraine and China. This story was picked up by mainstream media in 2019, but the core allegation—that Joe Biden pressured Ukraine to remove a prosecutor in order to protect his son—fell apart under scrutiny. By January 2020, while conservative

media continued to push out exaggerated and false claims, the dominant mainstream framing of this story had shifted to Donald Trump's abuse of his presidential power for his own political gain, which overshadowed the well-established and misguided actions of Hunter Biden to cash in on his father's name. The discredited allegations of corrupt dealings by Joe Biden were getting no play in mainstream media. While conservative media continues to exhibit a remarkable capacity for reframing news coverage to align with the beliefs and perceptions of its core audiences, in January and February of 2020, its power to shape mainstream media coverage was diminished compared to 2016. This is the most notable change we observe and has the potential to alter the electoral calculus in the November election.

# Introduction

In November 2020, voters in America will decide whether Donald Trump is elected to a second term as president or whether the office is turned over to Joe Biden. Also at stake is control of the two houses of Congress. The decisions voters will make at the ballot box are shaped in no small part by the media coverage of the candidates: the reporting by journalists, the media personalities and pundits on radio and television, text messages and campaign phone calls, podcasts, political ads, and for many the incessant flow of social media posts of friends and family.

In this report, the first of a series of reports that cover the months running up to the November election, we track political discourse in the United States for January and February of 2020. Here, we describe the structure of political media ecosystems in the United States and cover the period ending just before the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) fundamentally reshaped public debate and the nature of the election, and capture the dynamics of the Democratic primaries leading up to the emergence of Joe Biden as the Democratic candidate. Our future reports will include substantial coverage and focus on Covid-19, and in particular, how competing political narratives shape discussion of the pandemic and the economic collapse it has wrought. By February, we are already seeing that discussion and interpretation of the pandemic is highly polarized and asymmetric breaking along political lines, consistent with our observations about the 2016 election and the first year of the Trump presidency in our earlier work. In this report, we bring our understanding of the shape of the political media ecosystem up to date, and anchor our future reports in a picture of the American political media ecosystem just before the pandemic. We show that, consistent with our observations of the past several years, political narratives, facts, and falsehood are propagated through the asymmetrically polarized American media ecosystems. The empirical basis for this report is the analysis of approximately 3.8 million stories published on more than 116 thousand media sources in addition to analyzing more than 12.6 million Facebook posts and 1.8 million tweets. We monitor the cross-linking behavior of these many media sources and track the attention they garner by politically engaged audiences on Twitter and Facebook.

We show that the highly polarized and asymmetric political and media structures in the United States continue to demonstrate remarkable stability and resilience. We describe how partisan media is able to create and sustain political narratives that deflect and reframe bad political news, no matter how blatant or damaging, and how conservative media created sufficient cover for Trump to withstand impeachment. In the current structures of political discourse in the U.S., with one side ruled by the propaganda feedback loop, facts and evidence are no match for partisanship.

The political coverage in January and February revolves around two axes of contention. One axis lines up two alternative paths for the Democratic Party: one focused on finding the most electable candidate



to maximize the chances of winning in November, and the other to run on an ambitious progressive platform to transform U.S. policy on health care, climate change, and social inequality. We know now that the just-beat-Trump approach, embodied in the Biden campaign, won over the progressive revolution approach, which was manifest most clearly in the Sanders campaign. The second axis of contention, oriented around the Democratic and Republican contest in November, had already taken shape while the Democrats worked through their primaries. For the Democrats, this took the form primarily as a referendum on the job performance of President Trump. The Republican approach appears so far to be a faithful replication of the 2016 election: disqualification of the Democratic candidate as corrupt, scandal-plagued, and in failing health.

In the deeply fractured American political landscape, partisans on both sides see this election as a make-or-break battle for the future of the country. Many conservatives see this as a repeat of the “Flight 93 Election”—a last chance to save America from the radical left. For liberals and progressives, the election seems like a battle to prevent further deterioration of democracy in America and a slide into authoritarianism. As we will show in the patterns of media attention among politically engaged Americans, the political fractures of the United States continue to be characterized more by negative polarization—a deeply held dislike and distrust of the other side—than enduring loyalty to political leaders and party.

Looked at from our current vantage point many months into the Covid-19 pandemic that has taken more than 200,000 lives and thrown the country into a severe recession, the first two months of the year seem tame. Yet the events of the first two months of 2020 represent an extraordinary time in the American political sphere: the impeachment and eventual acquittal of President Trump; the killing of Qasem Soleimani and the threat of war with Iran; the rapid acceleration and apparent resolution of the Democratic primaries; and as February progressed, American political attention turning to the emergence of what would turn out to be the worst public health crisis in a hundred years.

There have been two constants throughout: the irreconcilably partisan interpretation and reporting on events from the disparate reaches of the media ecosystem, and the obsessive attention trained on the antics of President Trump.

While the world has been turned on its head in 2020, the political and media systems that create, filter, amplify, and propagate political news operate in the same manner they have for many years. For the past five years, media coverage and political discourse in the United States have revolved around Donald Trump, beginning with his heterodox but ultimately successful campaign for presidency. The investigations into the interactions between Russia and the Trump campaign and the efforts to obstruct these investigations had already begun when Trump took office in early 2017 and consumed the next two years, culminating in the release of the Mueller report in the spring of 2019. Several months later, in September of 2019, at a time when political attention would normally be dominated by the run-up to presidential primary elections, details emerged about the July 2019 phone call

between President Trump and President Zelensky of Ukraine in which Trump asked for Ukraine to open an investigation into Joe Biden and his son Hunter. The apparent abuse of office dissolved the reluctance of House Democrats and Speaker Pelosi to initiate impeachment proceedings without GOP support. The impeachment inquiry was launched by the House of Representatives on September 24. Trump would eventually be acquitted by the Senate in early February, but this ensured that he would be at the center of the stage in the political drama.

We are now many long months into the coronavirus pandemic that has overturned normal political and social life around the globe. The bitter debates over the impeachment of President Trump that filled the airwaves and news columns in the fall and winter are a distant memory, as is the January 3 U.S. airstrike that killed Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iranian Quds Force, and the retaliatory strike on a U.S. airbase in Iraq that brought the U.S. and Iran dangerously close to war. The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) has also overshadowed the presidential election cycle for much of 2020 at a time when political attention has been usually fixed on the race for the White House. A constant in these extraordinary times is the omnipresent Trump as the center of attention, as the lightning rod of hope and fear over navigating a course through this crisis, and as a source and target of political partisanship and vitriol. Another constant is the intertwined political and media systems that have provided parallel, alternative semiotic filters for these events that offer very different interpretations of political events, facts, salience, impact, and consequence. These parallel systems have so far weathered events unchanged, made possible by the onslaught of critical coverage of President Trump from traditional media and the epistemic closure of the right, the orientation and actions of each sphere serving to reinforce the bipolar structure of American media systems.

# Asymmetric Polarization and the Structure of Media Systems in the U.S.

The mapping and analysis of political media ecosystems in the United States that we present here extends and updates work that we carried out around the 2016 presidential election and the first year of the Trump presidency.<sup>1</sup> Our findings, many of which carry through to today, build upon the core observation that American media is not only polarized but is highly asymmetric. The structures and practices of conservative media, which have evolved over many decades to reach their current state, are fundamentally different from the integrated media system that includes media sources from the center to the left. The majority of attention from conservative audiences is to media sources that play by partisan rules and serve primarily conservative audiences, resulting in what we call the propaganda feedback loop. Attention from the left gravitates towards traditional media sources and is grounded in the standards and practices of professional journalism.

In order to study the complex interactions of media in the United States, we collect data on the interactions between media sources and employ network analysis tools to assess and visualize the underlying structure of these systems. And while there is no single perspective that can fully capture the nuances and dynamics of media, we combine several approaches that together offer a more complete picture.

A key step that we draw upon throughout the analysis is the estimation of the position of media sources on the ideological scale as measured by the sharing patterns of Twitter users.<sup>2</sup> As a feature of the network maps we present later, we assign each media source to one of five quintiles according to their estimated ideology score: left, center-left, center, center-right, and right. And in describing the distribution of attention to media across the political spectrum, we divide media sources into 20 bins. To estimate these media ideology scores, we start by calculating the relative position on the political spectrum of approximately 15,000 Twitter users that were active between January 2019 and June 2019. This estimation technique produces a continuum of ideology scores but no internal point of reference to help us ascertain how these scores align with common understandings of political valence, e.g., where the center point is or how one might distinguish users on the right and left from those in the center. In order to do so, we divide users into two groups, right of center and left of the center. The center point is derived from the intersection of users that self-identify in their profile as being either liberal or Democrat on one side and conservative or Republican on the other. The final step is to

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<sup>1</sup> Benkler et al., “Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda” <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>; Faris et al., “Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election” <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/08/mediacloud>; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda* <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/network-propaganda-9780190923631?cc=us&lang=en&>

<sup>2</sup> Media ideology scores are available to download at <https://cyber.harvard.edu/research/2020-election-study-resources-data>

tabulate the sharing of media sources by users on the right and compare that to users on the left to generate a continuous metric on a -1.0 to 1.0 scale. The center point, 0.0, denotes an equal share of users on both sides sharing a media source in a month. A score on the far left, -1.0, means that a media source is shared only by users on the left, and a score of 1.0 would denote shares only by users on the right. These proportions are used to create quintiles, which we use to describe the ideological position of media sources and to color media sources on maps. For media sources in the center, stories are shared at similar rates by users from the left and right, the center-right and center-left are shared at 2:1 and 1:2 ratios of right to left, respectively, and the right and left are stories that are shared at at least ratios of 4:1 and 1:4. Reuters, for example, has a score near 0.0 and is therefore in the center. The NYT has a score of -0.27, putting it in the center-left. The Wall Street Journal has a score of 0.21, which places it just inside the threshold for in the center-right. Fox News is on the right with a score of 0.75. Mother Jones and the Daily Kos, which have scores of -0.87 and -0.88, respectively, are in the left bin. On the hyperpartisan left are Occupy Democrats (-0.96) and PoliticusUSA (-0.90). On the hyperpartisan right, Breitbart (0.93), the Federalist (0.96), and the Gateway Pundit (0.97). We define hyperpartisan media sources as those that almost entirely serve only one side of the spectrum. The media ideology scores we use in the report are based on data compiled for the first six months of 2019, taking the average of the six monthly periods of sharing data. The ideology position of a selection of major media outlets is shown in Figure 1, plotted against the number of media outlets that have cited the media source in the 15 month period January 2019 through March 2020.

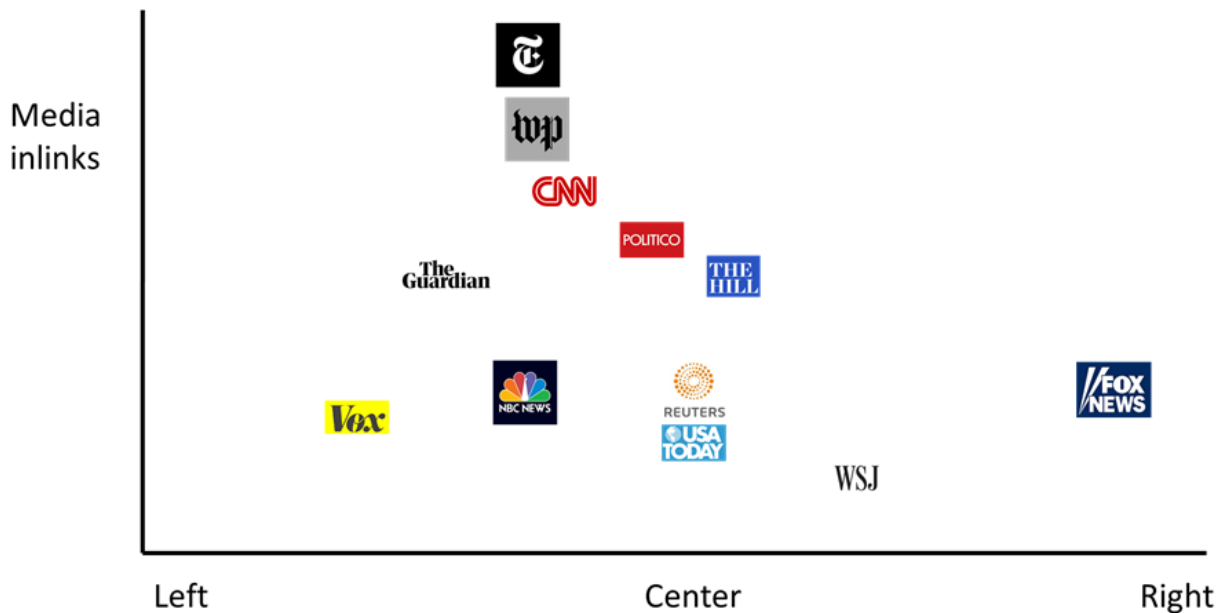


Figure 1. Position of media sources on ideological spectrum

We next turn to the analysis and mapping of stories related to the election on the open web. The data collection, analysis, and network maps were developed using the Media Cloud platform. Media Cloud is an open platform for the analysis of online media that provides free access, through code, web tools, and data, to over one billion stories from about 60,000 regularly crawled sources.<sup>3</sup> We start by compiling a corpus of more than 3 million election-related stories published starting January 1, 2019 using Media Cloud. The story collection process begins by running a seed query on the Media Cloud archive for stories that include the name of any of the major candidates and mention of Republicans or Democrats.<sup>4</sup>

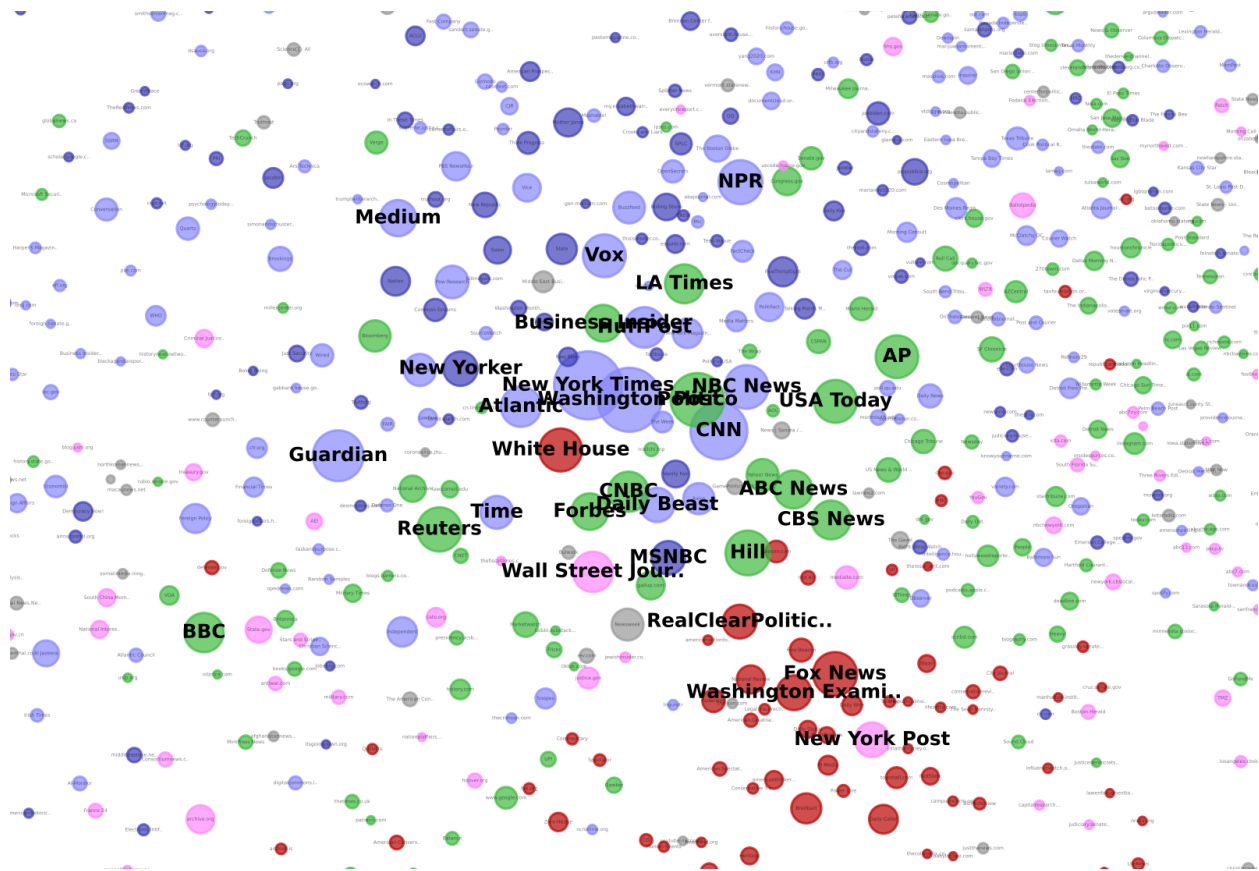
In addition to these stories from the Media Cloud archive, we included all stories collected via a separate process from Twitter that matched the same query. Building on this initial set of stories, we then followed all the links from within the substantive text of these stories using an automated spider and added stories that matched the same query. This recursive spidering process continued for 15 iterations, at which point an insignificant number of new stories were found. This corpus of stories served as the basis for analysis and is used to study the linking patterns among the more than 100,000 media sources. These open web media sources include a broad range of media sites, campaign sites, nonprofit organizations such as think tanks and advocacy organizations, government sites, company sites, and blogs.

The first network map we create is based on the cross-linking between media sources that cover politics in the United States (Figure 2). The nodes in this open web map are media sources, and the size of the nodes represents the number of media sources that link to each media source over the time period. The relative prominence of media sources on these open-web network maps is a function of the judgments by online media producers about which sources are worthy of citation. The architecture of the open web map is based on the linking pattern between the media sources. For any pair of media sources, the greater the number of other media sources that link to them both, the closer they are drawn together by the model. The colors applied to the nodes on the map are based on the media source ideology scores described earlier. Red denotes right; pink is center-right; green is center; light blue is center-left; and dark blue is left.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mediacloud.org/>

<sup>4</sup> The query used to identify relevant open web stories, tweets, and Facebook posts is: trump OR clinton OR obama OR repub\* OR democrat\* OR biden OR ( sanders AND ( bernie OR senator ) ) OR ( harris AND ( senator OR kamala ) ) OR ( warren AND ( elizabeth OR senator ) ) OR buttigieg OR beto OR booker OR ( castro AND ( julian OR julián ) ) OR ( gabbard AND ( tulsi OR representative ) ) OR ( yang AND andrew ) OR klobuchar OR gillibrand OR ( bullock AND ( steve OR governor ) ) OR ( bennet AND ( michael OR senator ) ) OR blasio OR inslee OR hickenlooper OR ( delaney AND ( john OR representative ) ) OR ( ryan AND ( tim OR representative ) ) OR ( williamson AND marianne ) OR ( bloomberg AND ( michael OR mike OR mayor ) )



*Figure 2. Network map of media sources based on media links*

Media ecosystems in the United States include two interconnected but distinct spheres. This is visible when we observe the cross-linking behavior of media sources, as shown in Figure 2. The largest nodes in this network map—each node represents a media source—are the sources that are most cited by other media sources. Together, they produce a network structure that is guided by the decisions of authors and editors: a distinctly media-driven view of these ecosystems and, in that sense, more authoritative than other perspectives we will show that are based on the sharing behavior of social media users. The physical location of media sources in this map is dictated by the commonality in the inlinks from other media sources. Those nodes that receive inlinks from the same media sources are drawn closer together; media sources decide which other media sources belong together.

The largest cluster of nodes sits on the left-hand side of the map and includes media sources from the center, center-left, and left quintiles. The New York Times, Washington Post, and CNN are the most prominent, followed by Politico, The Guardian, The Hill, and Reuters. Fox News anchors a cluster on the right-hand side of the map and consists of media sources that are predominantly from the right quintile.

Compared to the center-left, there are very few media sources that belong to the center-right quintile. A defining feature of the American media ecosystem is the stunted center-right; compared to the other segments, it is smaller and less prominent. By media inlinks, the Wall Street Journal is the top center-right publication and is in the top 20 overall just after the AP, HuffPost, and Atlantic. The unmistakably conservative orientation of the Wall Street Journal’s editorial board serves audiences on the right, while its reporting—often critical of the Trump administration—caters more to the left than the right. The location of the Wall Street Journal in the center-right is primarily a function of serving the right and left with different products, not by publishing stories and perspectives that cut down the middle. The New York Post, the other anchor of the center-right, although farther right than the Wall Street Journal, is more popular on social media with its sensational tabloid journalism. Moreover, the map shows that the New York Post has moved substantially to the right from the position it occupied in the 2016 election in similar maps. While its engagement patterns on Twitter still mark it as a center-right outlet, the patterns of linking from the other side have shifted its geographic location on the map from somewhere between Fox News and the mainstream, and pulled it ever deeper into the right-wing part of the ecosystem. When we investigate the top stories in January and February, it becomes clear that the NY Post has published some highly partisan false narratives, such as the Hunter Biden Burisma conspiracy or the “Deep State Snakes slither back into swamp” story attacking witnesses at the Trump impeachment hearings. In contrast, the location of the Wall Street Journal on the map shows it to be more closely embedded with media on center and center-left than the right. The location of Real Clear Politics reflects the links to its coverage of polls coming from all sides, despite its designation as a right media source based on Twitter sharing practices, which reflects the orientation of the articles that they curate on the site.

Overall, the ideology scores are aligned with the architecture of this link-based network with a few interesting anomalies. One is the White House, which by Twitter sharing patterns appears conservative but occupies a central location in the map as media outlets link to the site as a primary source of news from the executive branch. MSNBC is another media source that appears in an unexpected location. MSNBC is located in a central location in the network as it not only serves the partisan left but also acts as a source of legitimacy when its stories resonate with the right. Two relevant examples of the latter are James Carville expressing pessimism over the prospects of Democrats winning back the White House after the Iowa primaries<sup>5</sup> and a 2014 story describing the unabashed and deeply troubling racism of President Lyndon Johnson.<sup>6</sup>

Shifting our perspective to that of social media, we see broad similarities in the asymmetric polarization of the ecosystem but a greater separation between the sides and greater influence of partisan and

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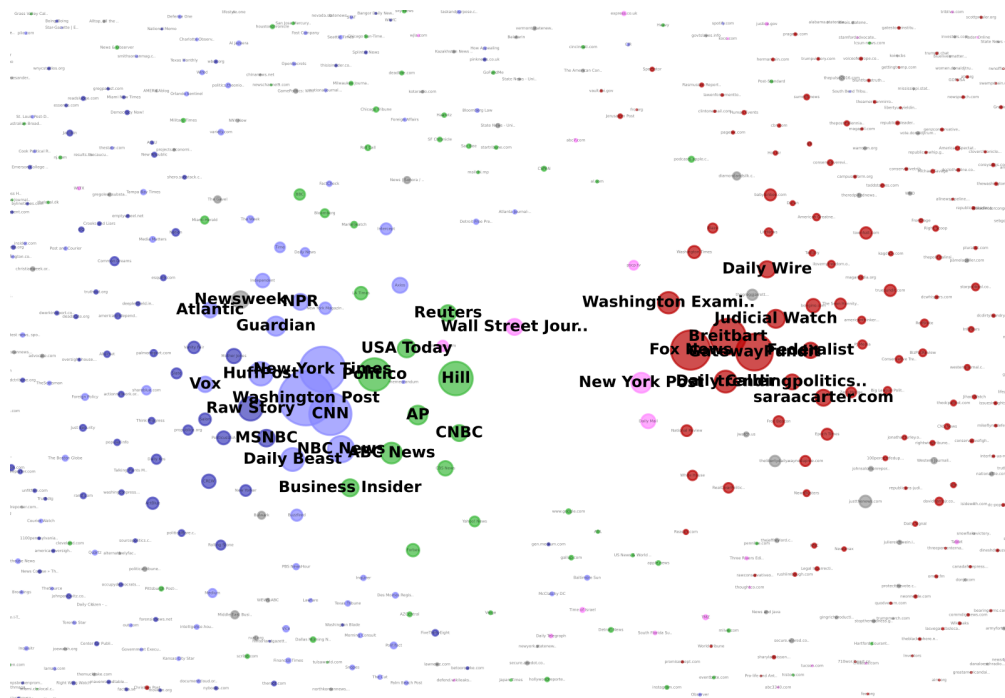
<sup>5</sup>

<https://www.msnbc.com/the-beat-with-ari/watch/-wake-up-dem-ver-calls-for-party-to-be-more-relevant-diverse-after-iowa-chaos-78129221946>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/lyndon-johnson-civil-rights-racism-msna305591>

hyperpartisan media sources. In the Twitter map (Figure 3), the size of the nodes represents the number of users that share stories from that site. The edges, or links between the nodes, which determine the structure of the network, represent the relationships among the nodes and are based on the sharing patterns of Twitter users. We create a link between two sites each time a single Twitter handle shares a story from each of those two sites on the same day. If a user shares stories from Breitbart and the Daily Caller on the same day, or Vox and Slate, this signals shared attention to the two media sources. The proximity of any two media sources on the map is determined by the number of accounts that share both sites on the same day. The map is based on a sample of 1.8 million tweets that matched the same query used for selecting open stories.

The asymmetric polarization is more pronounced when we view the media ecosystem based on activity patterns on social media platforms. The attention patterns of social media users offer a distinctly different vantage point of media preferences, removed from the standards and practices that influence the linking patterns of media sources. Although not representative of the electorate at large, the attention patterns of social media users offer some insight into audience interests, particularly politically engaged users. Not only is the relative prominence of many media sources different on social media, but the separation of the two media spheres is much starker and more pronounced.



*Figure 3. Network map of media outlets based on Twitter shares*

The architecture of political activity on Facebook is represented by four different types of network maps. Two network maps show the relationship of media sources, which appear as nodes on the maps. In one map, the size of the nodes is based on the sum of all interactions to stories from these media



sources (Figure 4). In the other map, the size of the nodes is based on the number of accounts that share a link to stories from these media outlets (Figure 5). Two other maps depict the location and prominence of the Facebook accounts that post content with which users interact, for example liking, sharing, or commenting upon a post. In these maps, each node is an account. In one version, the sizing of the nodes is based on total interactions (Figure 6). In the other, by number of subscribers (Figure 7).

We generate Facebook media source maps using a method similar to that of the Twitter maps. We start by collecting all Facebook public posts from Crowdtangle that include the set of election topic terms described above.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, we rely on over 12.6 million Facebook posts from over 386,000 accounts that were gathered between January 2019 and September 2020 that include at least one link and that are also in English. We include data from both groups and public pages. Public pages include popular media outlets, brands, and high profile individuals. These pages or groups typically have over 10,000 interactions but can include public pages or groups that Crowdtangle users have added. We refer to these pages and groups collectively as “accounts” in this report. The Facebook entities that account for the largest number of user interactions are the public pages of media outlets. The edges in the data set, which reflect the relationship between media sources and determine the architecture of the map, are accounts that link to any two media sources. To reduce the number of edges, we only include those that occur on the same day (e.g., an account that includes posts that link to USA Today and Bloomberg on the same day). We also remove obvious foreign language content and then limit the set of posts to only those that include a link in the post.

We then convert the two-mode network of Facebook accounts and media source domains to a one-mode network of media sources, where domains are close to one another on the network when they have shared audiences on Facebook. In other words, the map shows overlap in media source citation by accounts such that media sources that have similar audiences are grouped together.

As shown in Figures 4 and 5, the Facebook media source maps follow similar structural contours to the link-based maps. Media sources from the center, center-left, and left comprise an integrated cluster that gravitates towards the large traditional media outlets of the center-left. The right occupies a separate region with Fox News as the principal node in the cluster. The two most influential media outlets of the center-right on Facebook, the New York Post and Daily Mail, are adjacent to the right-wing cluster. On Facebook, the Wall Street Journal is less prominent than the Daily Mail. The sizing of the nodes in the overall network, and within each cluster, vary substantially across the two media source maps. With nodes sized by total interactions (Figure 4), the right appears more active on Facebook, and the Daily Wire emerges as a major node of activity just after Fox News. The other view with nodes sized by the number of accounts that link to a given media source (Figure 5), the center-left is more prominent in a pattern that is closer to the open web linking map shown earlier, although conservative media still represents a stronger counterbalance to the media on the left and center-left in the Facebook map.

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<sup>7</sup> Data from [CrowdTangle](#), a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

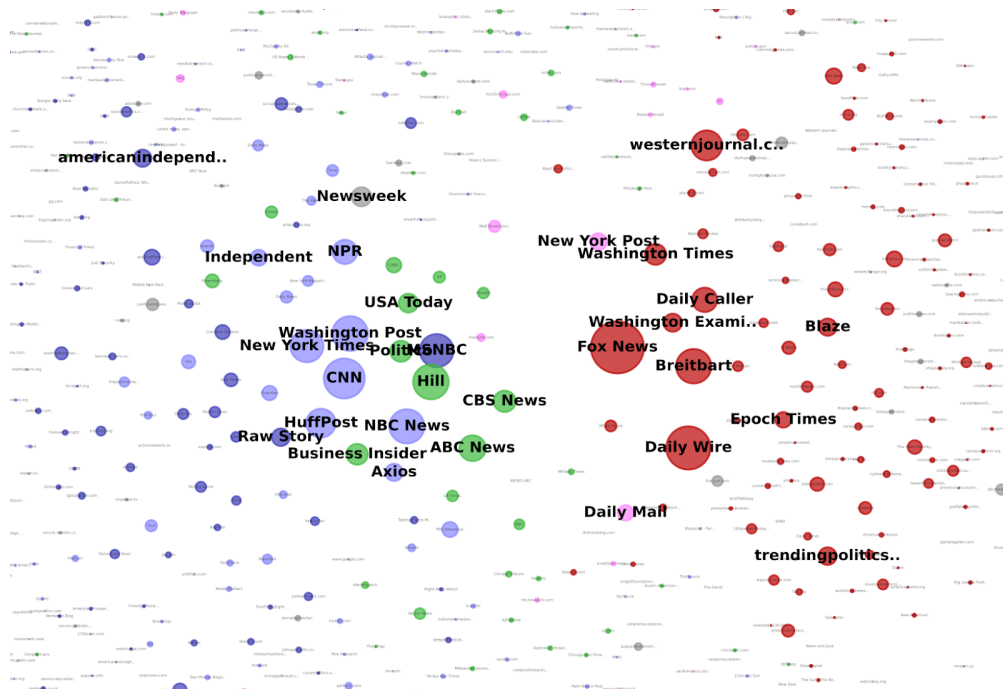


Figure 4. Map of media sources based on total interactions on Facebook

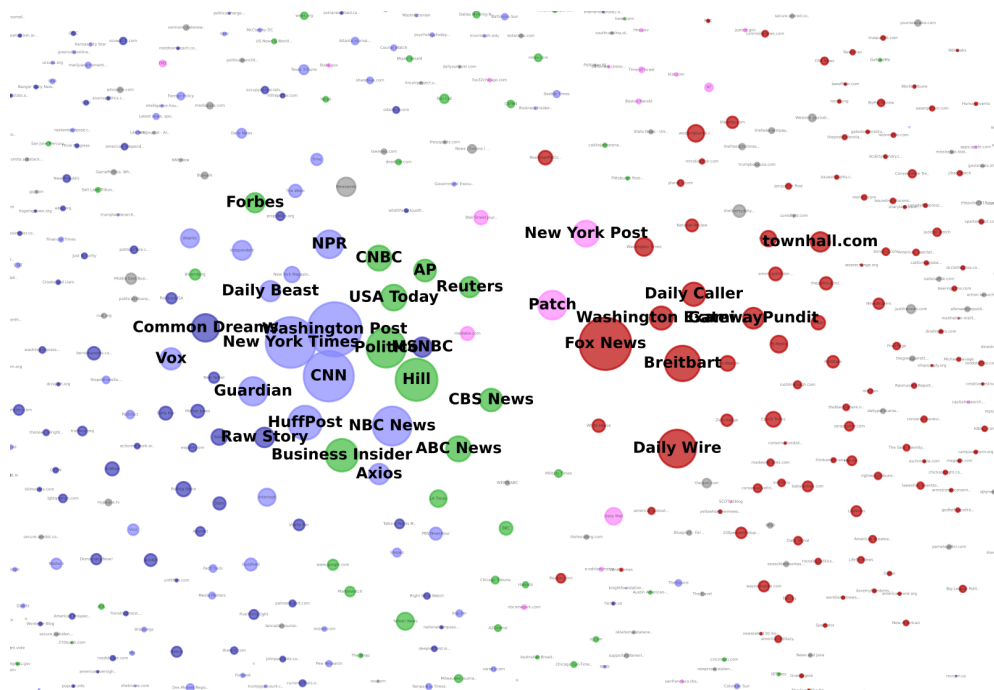


Figure 5. Map of media sources based on unique links on Facebook

The Facebook accounts maps (Figures 6 and 7) are created in a similar fashion to the media sources map. We take the same set of election-related Facebook posts from Crowdtangle that include links to media sources in their posts and transform that two-mode network of accounts and media sources into a network where Facebook accounts are nodes and an edge is created between accounts each time two accounts link to the same media source. Accounts that frequently link to the same media sources are drawn closer together in the network. In the accounts maps, nodes are sized in two ways: by total interactions to each account's posts and by number of subscribers to the account. Nodes are colored based on louvain community detection.<sup>8</sup>

Both accounts maps show a familiar pattern of polarization seen in the other maps. In the version with nodes sized by total interactions (Figure 6), Fox News, along with Ben Shapiro and Breitbart, anchors the right cluster, and the Occupy Democrats Facebook page anchors the left cluster, along with a handful of official accounts from more mainstream news sources. The large number of interactions on the public pages of Fox News, Ben Shapiro, and Breitbart is concentrated on content produced by the respective media outlets. The account pages effectively serve as cheering sections for the stories and videos put out by Fox News, Breitbart, and the Daily Wire. A substantial portion of the interactions on the Occupy Democrats page is also in reaction to their own content, including the affiliated site Washington Press. Unlike their conservative counterparts, the Occupy Democrats page also curates and posts content from other media sources, which in turn garner a sizable number of interactions from the more than 10 million followers of the Occupy Democrats page. This explains why Occupy Democrats is both a primary location of activity on the left but not among the top sites in the media source maps.

The accounts map with nodes sized by the number of subscribers reshuffles the inferred prominence of accounts on Facebook. Donald Trump's account is a major node on the right sites but sits apart from Fox News, the anchor of conservative media. On the left, CNN is the principal node followed by other mainstream media organizations: the New York Times, ABC News, NBC News, and the Washington Post. There is no single authoritative measure for assessing influence and reach on Facebook, which looks different according to the measure of influence one chooses to use.

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<sup>8</sup> Blondel et al., "Fast Unfolding of Communities in Large Networks." <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-5468/2008/10/P10008>

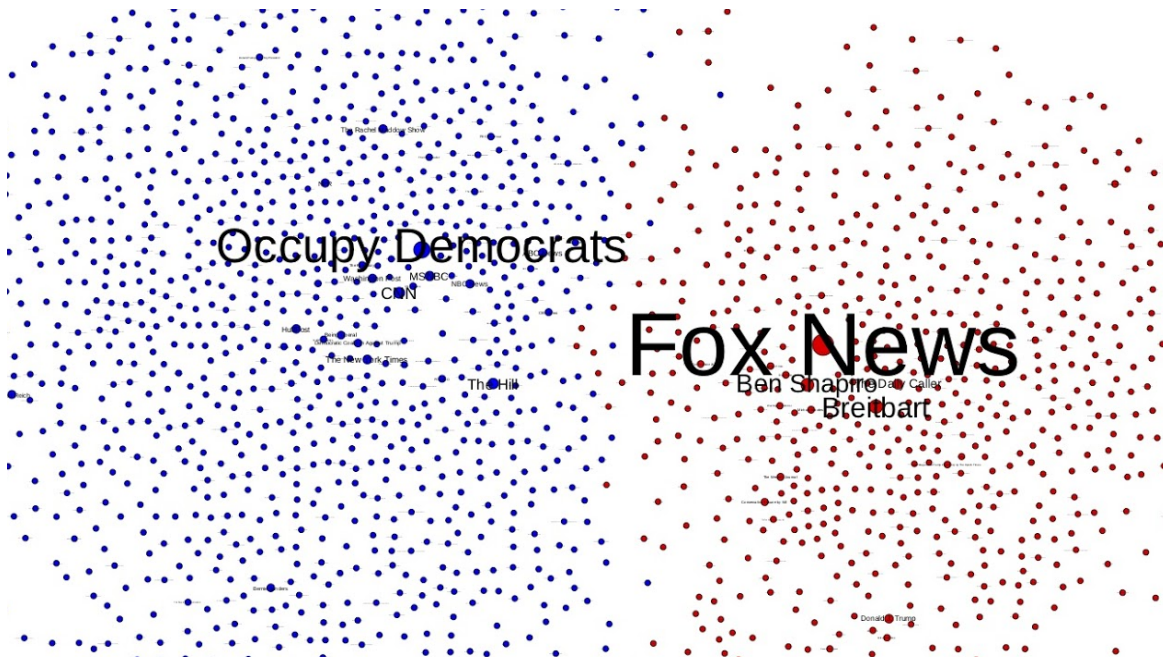


Figure 6. Map of Facebook accounts, nodes sized by total interactions

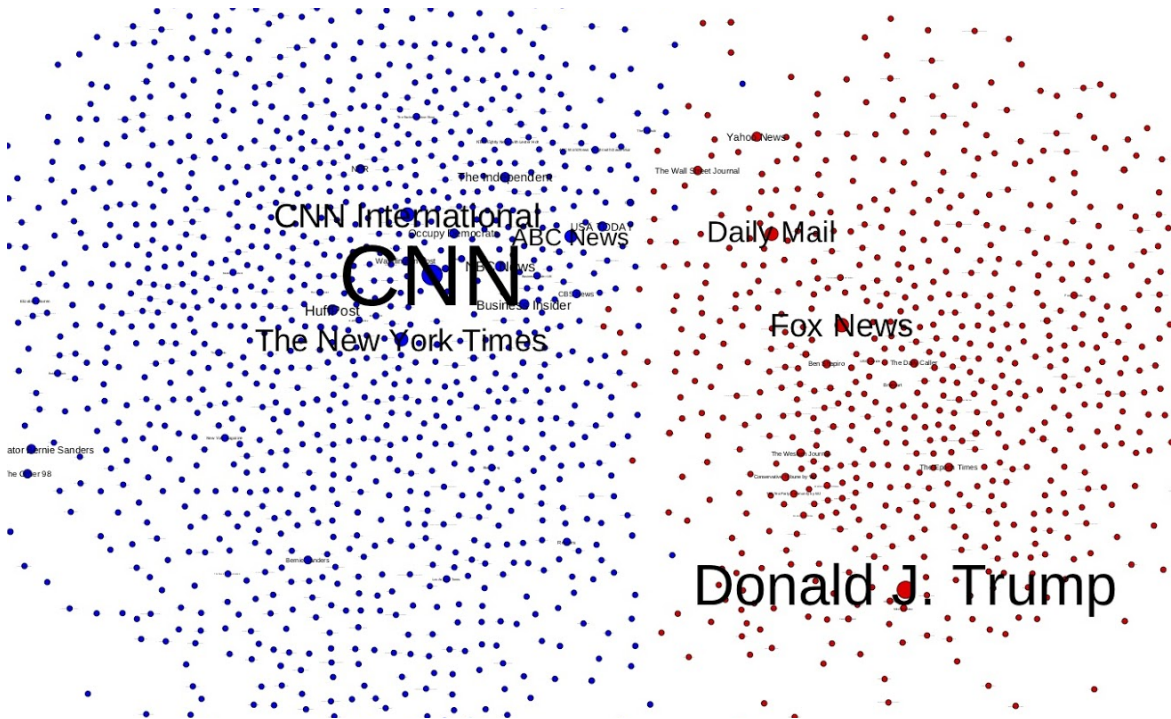


Figure 7. Map of Facebook accounts, nodes sized by subscribers

Assessing activity on Facebook is complicated not only by the array of ways in which users interact with content and one another on the platform but also by data limitations. Our visibility into Facebook is based on the data provided through CrowdTangle. Developed as an independent tool for tracking activity on Facebook, CrowdTangle was acquired by Facebook and is available free of charge to news publishers and academic researchers.<sup>9</sup> The data provided through the CrowdTangle web site and API is limited to activity on public pages and groups. A CrowdTangle browser plug-in also provides metrics that aggregate public and private activity, giving us the ability to compare the overall level of private and public activity. CrowdTangle tabulates metrics on the various types of interactions with posts on public pages and groups: likes, shares, comments, and affective responses (love, sad, angry, wow, haha, cares). These different types of engagement are summed up into an aggregate total called interactions. The most common way in which researchers and digital media watchers report on Facebook activity is total interactions. This sums up all the engagements by users associated with the posts across different accounts that include a given resource, which might be the URL to a particular story or text that matches a search query. As an example, a popular story on October 9, 2020, according to CrowdTangle data, is a Fox News story about House Speaker Nancy Pelosi proposing legislation that would create a commission enabling Congress to remove a president based on the 25th Amendment. The story had accrued just over 313,000 total interactions on public groups and pages and a total 450,000 interactions when accounting for both public and private spaces. A majority of the public interactions occurred on Facebook pages belonging to Fox News, contributing about 270,000 of the 313,000 interactions. This includes the main Fox News page and its more than 18 million followers and Fox & Friends with more than 2 million followers. Other major sources of interactions were the Facebook pages of Ami Horowitz, a documentary filmmaker and right-wing activist, accounting for 11,000 interactions, and Bret Baier, supplying another 4,000 interactions. The distribution of interactions from different pages are highly concentrated towards a handful of pages, a pattern that is consistent for stories on Facebook. Interaction data reflect primarily the enthusiasm among fans and loyalists of the pages pushing out content. For media stories, the single biggest source of interactions is typically the media outlet's main Facebook page, followed by any other pages affiliated with the outlet. The number of interactions with a Fox News story, for example, is driven primarily by the interactions that occur on their several affiliated pages. The same appears true of most media sources. The total interactions metrics say less about the spread of the story across the platform (the number of unique accounts linking to a story) and more about the level of interest, excitement, or outrage it engendered among the media sources followers.

The numbers of interactions to posts on Facebook are impressive. However, we are unable to look more deeply into these numbers with Crowdtangle. The source of engagements on the platform is essentially a black box. Like all other researchers using these metrics to make assertions about the popularity of influence of different sites on Facebook, we have no idea how many accounts are

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<sup>9</sup> <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/4201940-about-us>

responsible for these engagements, how many of them reside in the United States, and how many of them are humans with enough genuine interest in a story about Nancy Pelosi and the 25th amendment to move their mouse and engage with the content. Smart media promoters are doing what they can to boost these numbers working either within or outside of the rules of the platform, and Facebook is doing its best to counteract efforts to artificially inflate this type of activity on their platform. We don't know who is winning. That doesn't completely negate the usefulness of this data, but it does mean we need to be cautious in the conclusions we draw from it.

Another way to assess the popularity of a story, video, or image on Facebook is to monitor how many different Facebook pages and groups post the content. We use this approach as a complement to the interaction data. This metric will better reflect the extent to which a story spreads across the Facebook platform outside of the places that core supporters frequent. The metric we use is based on unique posting of story links, such that each page or group only counts once even if they post a story many times. This metric deliberately discounts the intensity of activity on the pages of media outlets. In this study, we report both of these metrics. While both of them—total interactions and unique links—tell us interesting things about Facebook activity, we don't believe that either of these metrics alone fully and accurately captures attention to news items on the platform.

In Table 1, we see that there is a common core of key media sources that are important in the link economy and on social media as well, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, Fox News, Politico, The Hill, The Guardian, and NBC News. Another set, for example Vox, Reuters, NPR, and The Atlantic, rank high among their peers (by inlinks) but lose ground on social media. Others gain visibility on social media, notably Breitbart and the Daily Caller, two mainstays of conservative media that are rarely cited in the link economy. The Gateway Pundit and Raw Story do well on Twitter while Newsweek, the Daily Wire, Western Journal, and Common Dreams fare better on Facebook.

Rank	Media links	Twitter links	Unique	Facebook Total interactions	Facebook Unique links
1	New York Times	Washington Post		Fox News	New York Times
2	Washington Post	New York Times		Daily Wire	Washington Post
3	CNN	CNN		CNN	CNN
4	Politico	Fox News		The Hill	Fox News
5	Guardian	GatewayPundit		Washington Post	NBC News
6	Hill	Breitbart		Breitbart	The Hill
7	Reuters	Hill		NBC News	Politico
8	Fox News	Politico		MSNBC	The Guardian
9	NBC News	NBC News		New York Times	NPR
10	NPR	Raw Story		Western Journal	Business Insider
11	Vox	HuffPost		HuffPo	HuffPo
12	White House	Daily Beast		ABC News	USA Today
13	USA Today	Daily Caller		Daily Caller	Newsweek
14	AP	Washington Examiner		NPR	Breitbart
15	HuffPost	ABC News		CBS News	New York Post
16	Atlantic	New York Post		Politico	CNBC
17	Wall Street Journal	Guardian		Washington Times	CBS News
18	CNBC	AP		Business Insider	MSNBC
19	BBC	Judicial Watch		Newsweek	AP
20	LA Times	USA Today		Conservative Opinion	Daily Wire
21	CBS News	Newsweek		USA Today	Forbes
22	ABC News	Business Insider		Washington Examiner	Common Dreams
23	Business Insider	MSNBC		Trending Politics	Independent
24	Forbes	Daily Wire		Raw Story	Washington Examiner
25	Washington Examiner	CNBC		The Blaze	Western Journal
26	Daily Beast	saraacarter.com		American Independent	Bloomberg
27	New York Post	Wall Street Journal		Axios	Reuters
28	New Yorker	NPR		Liker	Raw Story
29	RealClearPolitics	Reuters		New York Post	Axios
30	MSNBC	Vox		News and Guts	Atlantic
31	Time	Trending Politics		IJR	Washington Times
32	Pew Research	Atlantic		Independent	Daily Mail
33	Intercept	Axios		Epoch Times	Vox
34	Newsweek	Federalist		Daily Mail	ABC News
35	Buzzfeed	CBS News		CNS News	Wall Street Journal
36	Yahoo! News	Mother Jones		The BL	LA Times
37	Axios	Daily Mail		Bongino	Gateway Pundit
38	Bloomberg	Independent		Political Flare	Daily Caller
39	Slate	bongino.com		PBS	Daily Beast
40	Breitbart	CREW		CNBC	BBC

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■ Center-right  
■ Right

Table 1. Media sources ordered by media inlinks, unique links on Twitter, total interactions on Facebook, and unique links on Facebook

There is a marked difference in the order of media sources based on the two Facebook metrics. Using the unique links, the distribution of outlets and dominance of center and center-left publications is more similar to the media inlinks perspective. However, the total interactions data depict a media system with conservative media playing a more important role led by Fox News and the Daily Wire with Breitbart and Western Journal also in the top ten. One does not need to doubt the enthusiasm among conservative media audiences to be skeptical of this result. To take the interaction data at face value suggests that levels of conservative engagement are substantially higher on Facebook than on other platforms and that Facebook serves as a special vector for right-wing political energy that is not replicated in its full effect on other digital venues. We do not have access to data that would allow us to confirm or disconfirm this. In the absence of better data, and noting the importance of Facebook in political discourse, we will report both metrics in this report.

Our data from the 2016 election showed a relatively high proportion of hyperpartisan clickbait on Facebook, even compared to Twitter. This has changed significantly since then, with a decline in the prominence of clickbait sites on Facebook but without diminishing the presence of conservative media on the platform. Since 2016, Facebook has taken actions to reduce the amount of junk news on the platform, and one of the results of this purge is that media sources on the platform have to work within tighter guidelines. Some partisan media outlets have made accommodations in order to stay relevant on Facebook. One example is Western Journal that was heavily penalized by Facebook and has since made enough concessions to Facebook to remain on the platform.<sup>10</sup> One of the media sources on the top engagements lists, The BL, was removed from Facebook in December 2019 for running a network of more than 600 accounts that artificially promoted content from the Epoch Times.<sup>11</sup>

As described in prior work,<sup>12</sup> these asymmetrically polarized media structures have evolved over many decades to the current state in which red and blue America have segregated themselves into functionally separate media worlds, one side informed primarily by large legacy media companies such as the New York Times and major broadcast networks, CBS, NBC, ABC, NPR, and the other's worldview informed by Fox News and a range of conservative media sites such as Breitbart, Daily Caller, and Gateway Pundit.

The measures of media attention we report in this study align with survey-based perspectives on media consumption patterns and trust in media. A recent Pew study shows the strong reliance of those who identify with the Republican Party on Fox News as a source of trusted news.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/us/facebook-disinformation-floyd-brown.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-says-pro-trump-media-outlet-used-artificial-intelligence-create-n1105951>

<sup>12</sup> Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*;  
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/network-propaganda-9780190923631?cc=us&lang=en&>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>



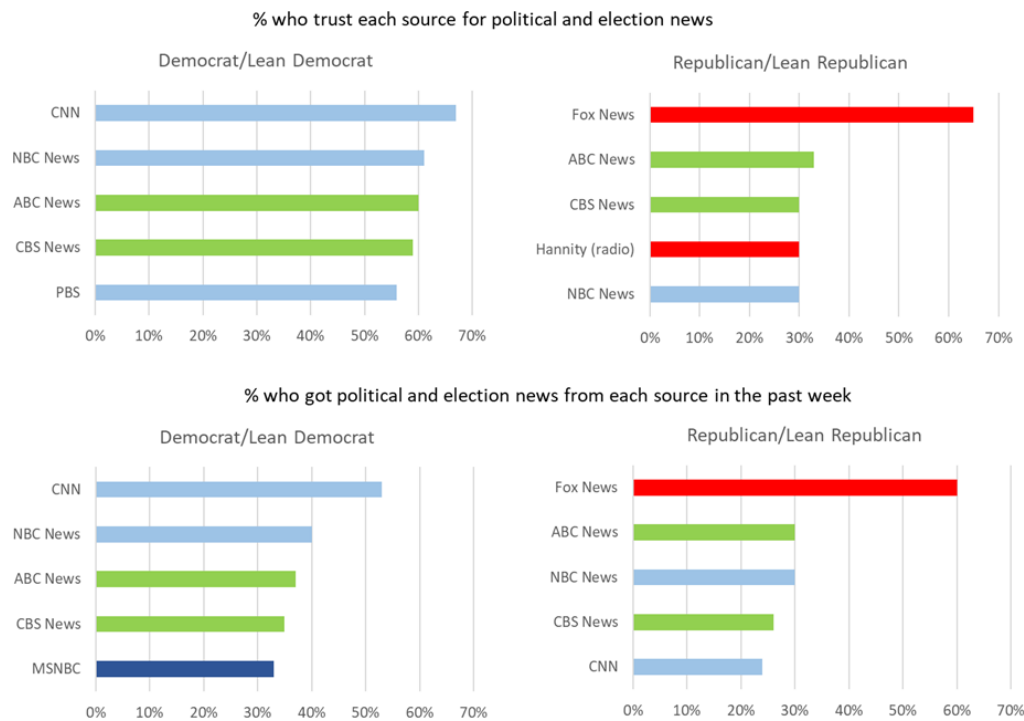


Figure 8. Trust and reliance on media by political identity. Source: Pew Research Center<sup>14</sup>

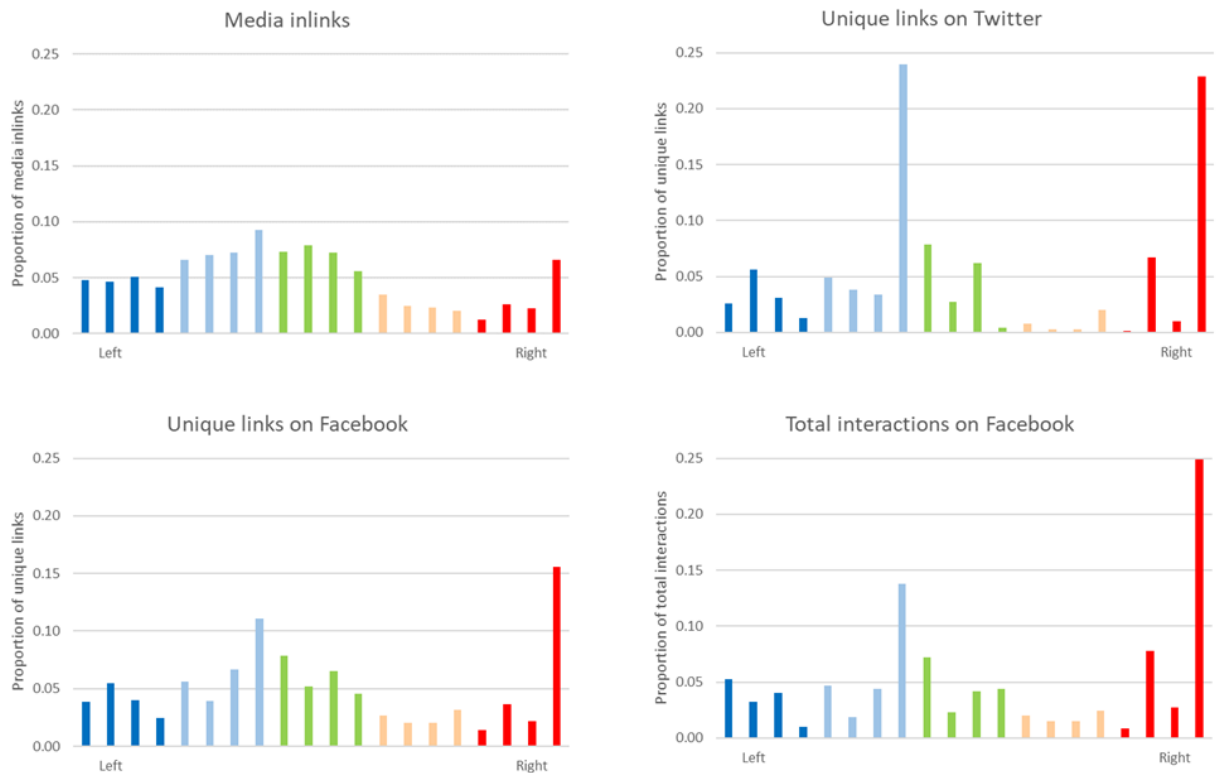
The distribution of attention to media sources across the political spectrum reveals the asymmetry in U.S. media ecosystems, a pattern that is consistent across the link economy, Twitter, and Facebook.

Our earlier work has shown that media outlets' strategies and reporting are shaped by the media ecosystem within which they operate.<sup>15</sup> Partisan media oriented toward conservative audiences function in a media ecosystem in which outlets compete for attention by serving identity-consistent narratives and policing each other for deviation from that line. Partisan media on the left, because they operate in a single larger media ecosystem with center-left and centrist outlets, operate in a media ecosystem functioning under a "reality check" dynamic, where they compete for audiences in part by offering identity-consistent narratives, but they are more constrained to fact-based reporting by the competitive pressures from other outlets in the same media ecosystem. This dynamic characterizes all media in this larger part of the ecosystem, with different outlets trading off identity consistent narrative and framing for practices consistent with mainstream professional journalistic ideals to different extents and drawing different mixes of attention. Because of their prominence and capacity to legitimate whatever they report, media sources occupying middle portions of the spectrum produce reporting and opinion that gets attention from all sides of the spectrum. While always far from perfect,

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>

<sup>15</sup> Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*; <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/network-propaganda-9780190923631?cc=us&lang=en&>

media organizations that follow standard journalistic practices and operate in a media ecosystem where their deviations from fact are policed by their direct competitors tend to report news more accurately and offer a firmer grounding in facts to hold political leaders accountable for their actions and statements. Partisan media on the right operates more consistently on a model that at best is reserved for opinion pieces and editorials in the rest of the media ecosystem, and at worst functions in a completely different framework, more akin to propaganda outlets in non-democratic countries than to media, including media outlets with clear political affiliation, in democratic countries. There are left-oriented outlets in the United States that try to replicate this model, but they do not occupy a similar standing in the center left portion of the media ecosystem as do their counterparts on the right.



*Figure 9. Distribution of attention to media sources by ideological position by media inlinks, unique links on Twitter, unique links on Facebook, and total interactions on Facebook.*

Figure 9 shows how attention to media sources is distributed across the political spectrum using four different metrics of attention: media links, unique shares on Twitter, unique shares on Facebook, and total interactions on Facebook. In each of the four figures, the attention that accrues to each media source is associated with the location of the media source on the ideology spectrum, divided into 20 bins, and attention is then summed across the media sources that occupy each bin. In the upper left figure, we see that the distribution of media inlinks follows an asymmetric pattern. The eighth bin, the center-left bin closest to the center, has the greatest number of media inlinks. The New York Times,

Washington Post, and CNN—the top three recipients of media inlinks—are located in this bin. Among the bins on the right, the greatest number of total media inlinks is in the farthest right bin, which is occupied by Breitbart, Daily Caller, and the Federalist, among many others. Fox News, the single largest target of media inlinks on the right is in the bin that is third from the right. The asymmetric pattern holds when tracking link sharing on Twitter and Facebook, and interactions on Facebook. On social media, the distribution of attention is more polarized and more asymmetric. In each of the views, we see that conservative media is dominated by partisan sites. This includes many hyperpartisan sites: media sources that cater almost entirely to one side. The center of attention and focus for the rest of the media ecosystem is on media organizations governed by professional standards or partisan media. There are some partisan media sources that primarily serve left-oriented audiences, for example, Raw Story. Others fall into the hyperpartisan class, such as PoliticusUSA and Occupy Democrats, as their attention draws almost exclusively from the left. An important difference in partisan media on the left and right is that partisan media generally, and hyperpartisan media in particular, plays a less important part of the media diet of liberals and Democratic supporters. Partisan media on the left, by virtue of being a minor player in a broader system of media sources including traditional center and center-left media, are subject to the same systems of accountability. Their stories are scrutinized by fact-checkers and other media outlets that have the respect and attention of their audiences. By contrast, audiences on the right pay less attention to fact checking sites and tend to cite favorable fact checks while ignoring those that are unfavorable.<sup>16</sup> As a result, fact checking appears to exert practically no effect on the reporting of sites in that media ecosystem, a fact that helps to explain why hyperpartisan sites can thrive in that media ecosystem in a way they have not managed to thrive on the left.

This is the media architecture in the U.S. that has permitted one side to be convinced that Donald Trump abused his office in his 2019 dealing with Ukraine and obstructed the House inquiry into his conduct, while the other side concluded that this was a legitimate expression of presidential power. These media structures inform and justify not only key public policy decisions but also the political decisions of the electorate. In today's public health crisis, these personal decisions impact personal health and economic wellbeing, in some cases, literally life and death decisions. We show in the following sections how the asymmetry polarized media in the U.S. propel public discourse related to the 2020 election and guide collective understanding of current events.

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<sup>16</sup> We show evidence of this pattern in a companion report that covers March through May 2020.

## Media Attention Among Political Partisans

**A**s we described earlier, the attention patterns of social media users offer insights into the interests and preferences of politically and digitally active audiences and provide an important alternative perspective not captured by the linking patterns of media outlets. In order to track the attention of different political cohorts as another vantage point on political discourse, we created sets of Twitter users that align with specific candidates. To delineate these user cohorts, we rely on their retweeting of candidates, which is a strong signal of political affinity. Drawing on data collected during the month of October 2019, we randomly selected a set of 1000 users that had retweeted Biden, Sanders, Trump, or Warren at least twice during the month, respectively, to generate four cohorts of Twitter users. Monitoring the media source sharing patterns of these user cohorts, we see how attention to media sources differs between Trump supporters on Twitter and those of the major Democratic candidates.

Table 2 shows which media sources are most commonly shared among the different user sets. There is a common set of media sources from the center and center-left that are among the most shared by all groups on Twitter. Also on that list is one media source from the center-right: the New York Post. Another set from the center, center-left, and left are not in the Trump list but are found in common among the Sanders, Biden, and Warren sets, including NPR, AP, HuffPo, the Daily Beast, and Vox (Table 3). The Trump set devotes much of its sharing to conservative news sites, outlets that receive scant attention from the left. The concentration of attention from the politically engaged on the left is primarily to center and center-left media sources and much less to sites on the left; moreover, the sites identified as “left” to which Sanders or Warren supporters pay attention are action sites (berniesanders.com; ActBlue) or ProPublica, joined in the case of Sanders supporters by the Nation. Another interesting observation is that Biden supporters follow MSNBC more often than Warren supporters, and Sanders supporters rarely tweet MSNBC stories. Observationally, this seems to confirm that Sanders supporters perceived MSNBC as supportive of the mainstream of the Democratic Party and opposed to Sanders. More broadly, media attention on the left is firmly embedded in the reporting and journalism of the center and center-left, with a small portion of attention devoted to hyperpartisan sites at the extreme end of the spectrum. Among the Biden, Sanders, and Warren cohorts, there are strong similarities in their media choices, but there are also a few notable differences. The least surprising difference is the strong showing of The Intercept among the Sanders cohort as The Intercept has consistently provided coverage supportive of Sanders. The Intercept is the fifth most popular media source in the Sanders cohort. Biden and Warren supporters were far more likely than Sanders supporters to share stories from PoliticusUSA, one of the only hyperpartisan sites to gain significant attention among the Democratic cohorts.

Rank	Sanders	Biden	Warren	Trump
1	New York Times	New York Times	New York Times	Fox News
2	Washington Post	Washington Post	Washington Post	Breitbart
3	Guardian	CNN	CNN	New York Post
4	CNN	Politico	Politico	GatewayPundit
5	Intercept	NBC News	Daily Beast	New York Times
6	BBC	The Hill	Guardian	DailyMail
7	Bloomberg	Daily Beast	NBC News	Wash Examiner
8	Politico	The Atlantic	HuffPost	The Hill
9	The Hill	RawStory	The Atlantic	Daily Caller
10	NBC News	HuffPost	The Hill	CNN
11	Newsweek	MSNBC	NPR	Just the News
12	CNBC	Guardian	CNBC	Washington Post
13	Daily Beast	Bloomberg	Vox	BBC
14	Vox	CNBC	Bloomberg	Politico
15	LA Times	NPR	RawStory	Federalist
16	HuffPost	Vox	LA Times	DailyWire
17	NPR	AP	AP	Bloomberg
18	bernieanders.com	ActBlue	ActBlue	Wall Street Journal
19	AP	LA Times	Propublica	CNBC
20	Independent	ABC News	Reuters	Washington Times
21	The Atlantic	Reuters	BuzzfeedNews	NBC News
22	ABC News	Propublica	MSNBC	Guardian
23	Business Insider	New York Post	ABC News	Reuters
24	Reuters	USAToday	RollingStone	Free Beacon
25	Vice	BusinessInsider	BusinessInsider	CDC
26	New York Post	Newsweek	USAToday	ABC News
27	Time	PoliticusUSA	Newsweek	Judicial Watch
28	ActBlue	RollingStone	New York Post	National Review
29	Propublica	Wall Street Journal	Time	Sara Carter
30	Nation	BuzzfeedNews	CBS News	whitehouse.gov

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*Table 2. Top media sources by candidate cohort*

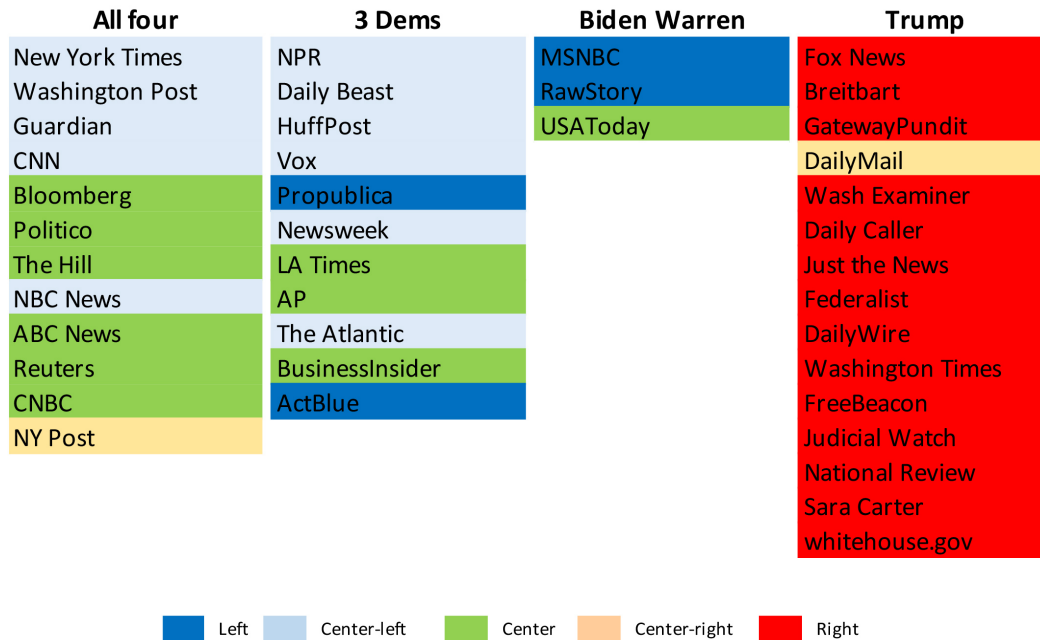


Table 3. Top media sources by candidate cohort

Our observations are certainly consistent with the complaints of supporters of Senator Sanders that MSNBC was aiming for the mainstream of the Democratic Party at the expense of its left candidates: both Sanders and Warren supporters paid less attention to MSNBC than did Biden supporters. The most striking observation here, though, is that Biden supporters paid more attention to Internet-native hyperpartisan sites than either Sanders or Warren supporters, and PoliticusUSA, a hyperpartisan site founded in 2008, is found in the top 30 only among the Biden supporters. The latter observation appears, on first sight, surprising. But when we describe later in this report the ways in which the candidates were discussed during the primary season, it becomes clear that Biden drew his support from voters moved by negative partisanship,<sup>17</sup> those Democrats whose primary motivation was opposition to Trump, while Sanders and Warren were focused more heavily on programmatic policy proposals. It is perhaps not surprising that hyperpartisan sites would find a more attentive audience among those Democrats whose primary focus was negative partisanship and on finding the best anti-Trump candidate. The progressive weekly news magazine, *The Nation*, is more popular among Sanders supporters, although even among the Sanders cohort, it is only the 30th most shared media source. Despite these notable differences in the media diets of different segments of the liberals in the U.S., the commonalities are much greater. The overall distribution of attention to media sources across the spectrum for Biden, Sanders, and Warren supporters on Twitter is very similar and stands in sharp contrast to the distribution of attention among Trump supporters to media sources on the far right (Figure 10). In the same manner as Figure 9 above, Figure 10 shows how the sharing of media sources

<sup>17</sup> Abramowitz and Webster, “The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century” <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.11.001>

among the four candidate-aligned cohorts is distributed across the ideological spectrum according to the frequency and ideological location of the media sources being shared. Among Trump supporters, approximately one-third of their media sharing attention is to sources on the far right, far more than any other segment of the media spectrum, while attention among supporters of the Democratic candidates is more evenly divided across the center, center-left, and left, with less than one-tenth of their attention going to media sources on the far left.

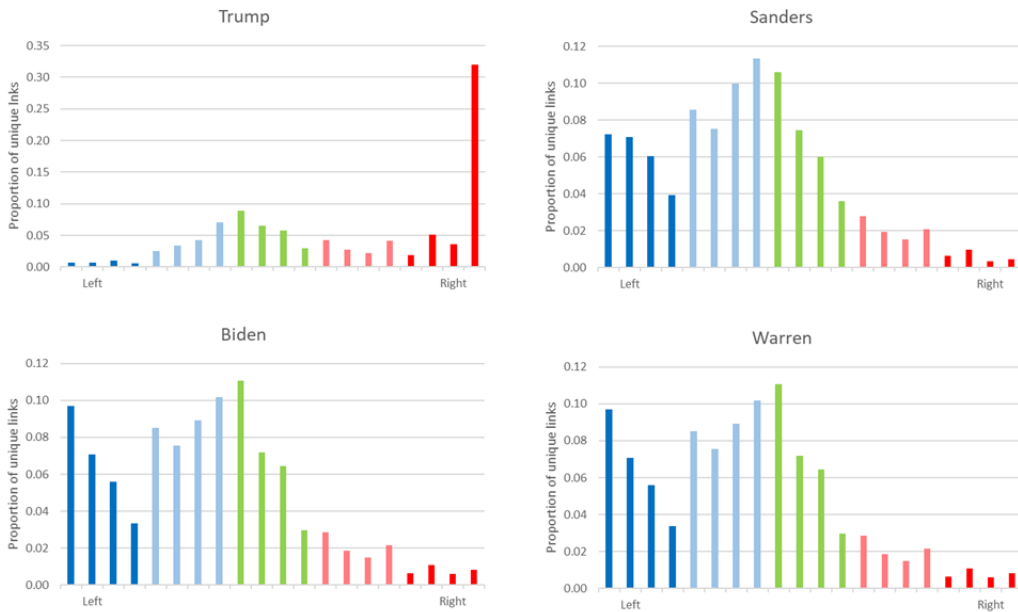


Figure 10. Distribution of unique links shared on Twitter by ideological position of media sources for each of four cohorts aligned with candidates.

# Political Public Discourse, January - February 2020

In the following sections, we assess how different segments of the media ecosystem collectively curate, filter, and highlight coverage in January and February.<sup>18</sup> This goes beyond tracking the production of articles by media sources to focus on how this coverage is shared and cited by different actors, including journalists and editors themselves, as well as social media users aligned with different political leaders. Although constrained by the supply side, this approach focuses more on the demand side of the market for political news reporting and acts as a window into the political interests and attention of these groups. We observe the stories and media sources that are most frequently amplified by others in their respective media ecosystems. By employing this systemic approach to assessing media, we are able to track and summarize the product of this collective curation and amplification, an endeavor which is fueled by the work of media outlets but also lies somewhat outside of their control as their peers and politically engaged citizens choose which stories to cite, share, and amplify across their networks. These disparate actions contribute to producing a coherent system, the network public sphere, which is populated by a myriad of actors with different backgrounds and interests that contribute to this collective filtration and amplification of stories and perspectives.<sup>19</sup> In American political discourse, this system is characterized by two distinct interacting spheres.

## Perspectives and data sources

The analysis to follow is based on tracking the stories, topics, and narratives that garnered the most attention across different segments of the media ecosystem in January and February 2020. This relies on the following perspectives and data sources.<sup>20</sup>

### I. Cross-media linking patterns among media outlets

Based on hyperlinks found in open web media stories. Provides a view of influence and prominence of articles based upon the linking choices of online media producers.

For each media source, we empirically estimate its location on the political spectrum based on sharing patterns of Twitter users. Media sources are divided into five categories. We then compare the citation (linking) patterns of media sources in the right-most category (hereafter ‘right’) and left-most category (hereafter ‘left’).

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<sup>18</sup> A companion report covers the period from March to May 2020: <https://cyber.harvard.edu/projects/public-discourse-us-2020-election>

<sup>19</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1njknw>

<sup>20</sup> The story-level data analyzed in this report are available at <https://cyber.harvard.edu/research/2020-election-study-resources-data>



- a. Frequency of links to open web stories from all media sources - number of media sources that link to a given story
- b. Frequency of links to open web stories coming from media outlets in the left
- c. Frequency of links to open web stories coming from media outlets on the right.

## **II. Article sharing patterns of Twitter users**

Based on the sharing of political stories by structured samples of Twitter users. Provides a view of influence and prominence of articles based on the sharing choices of politically engaged Twitter users. The story sharing patterns of three cohorts of 1000 users each are tabulated. The cohorts are created by taking a random sample of users who retweeted each respective candidate at least twice in October 2019.

- a. Frequency of story shares for users in the Trump cohort - number of user accounts that share a given story
- b. Frequency of story shares for users in the Biden cohort
- c. Frequency of story shares for users in the Sanders cohort

## **III. Interaction with and sharing of stories on Facebook**

We assess the activity of Facebook users on public pages and groups using the analytics platform CrowdTangle. We tabulate total interactions associated with posts that contain politically relevant stories, videos, and images. This includes likes, comments, shares, and the set of emotive responses (wow, haha, love, angry, sad, care). We understand this interaction metric as a measure of the intensity of response to content shared on Facebook. We also track the number of accounts that post a link to a story, video, or image, which we call ‘unique links.’ We interpret this metric to be a measure of the reach of stories across public pages and groups and not reflective of the intensity of response within devoted fans and core audiences on Facebook.

## **IV. Summarization of attention to topics among media outlets and Twitter cohorts**

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

## January 2020

In January 2020, three topics competed for media attention: the impeachment, the killing of Soleimani, and the Democratic primary race. Figure 11 provides a timeline to visualize these three topics from January through the Democratic primaries. As pictured in Figure 12, attention to the airstrike that killed Soleimani was most intense in the early part of January and then dissipated to a lower, but still significant, level for the next several weeks. Attention gradually shifted away from impeachment after the Senate acquittal in early February in favor of the Democratic primary race. Media coverage of the growing coronavirus crisis ramped up in late February.

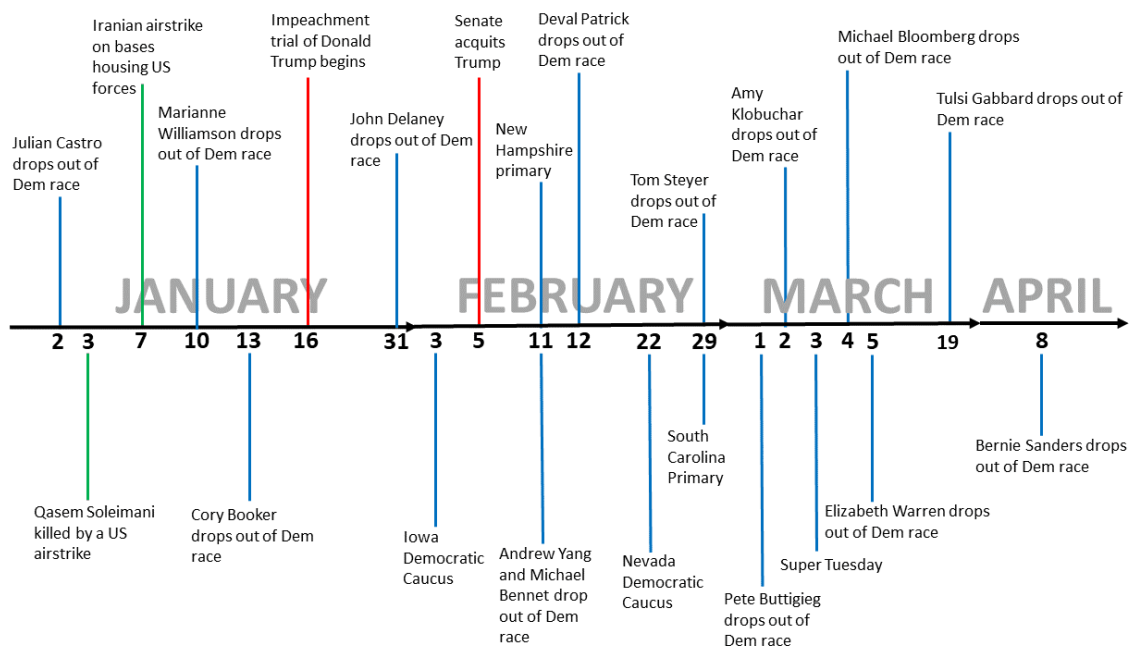


Figure 11. Timeline of key events related to the Democratic primaries, the impeachment of the president, and killing of Soleimani

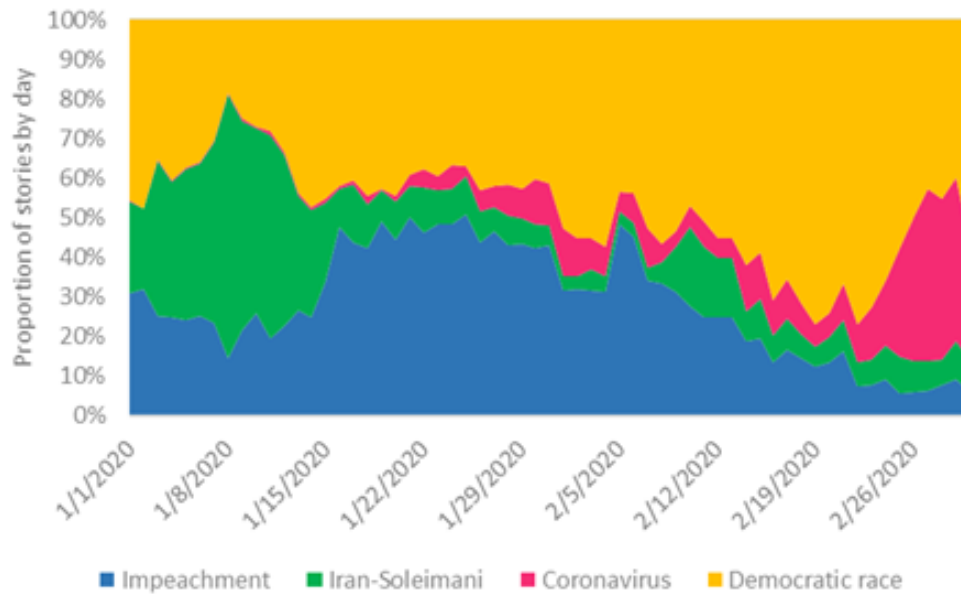


Figure 12. Relative proportion of stories on four topics in January and February 2020

### Open web media links

The stories with the most inlinks from other media sources in January are primarily center-left media organizations, the New York Times in particular, which accounts for eight of the top 20 stories.<sup>21</sup> From this media-centric perspective, the New York Times is indeed the paper of record. Real Clear Politics is also heavily cited for their candidate tracking polls.

A January 26 story in the New York Times received the most inlinks in January and reported on a pivotal point in the impeachment debate: in a pre-publication draft of John Bolton’s book, *The Room Where it Happened*, acquired by the New York Times, Bolton claims that Trump explicitly linked aid to Ukraine in exchange for an investigation of the Bidens by Ukraine, the quid pro quo that was at the core of impeachment proceedings, a claim that Trump and his defenders vehemently denied.<sup>22</sup> Also among the most cited resources was a Twitter thread from Trump denying this claim:

“I NEVER told John Bolton that the aid to Ukraine was tied to investigations into Democrats, including the Bidens. In fact, he never complained about this at the time of his very public termination. If John Bolton said this, it was only to sell a book. With that being said, the... ..transcripts of my calls with President Zelensky are all the proof that is needed, in addition to the fact that President Zelensky & the Foreign Minister of Ukraine said there was no pressure and no problems. Additionally, I met with President Zelensky at the United Nations...  
 ...(Democrats said I never met) and released the military aid to Ukraine without any conditions or investigations -

<sup>21</sup> See January\_inlinks\_all\_media.csv here: <https://cyber.harvard.edu/research/2020-election-study-resources-data>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/us/politics/trump-bolton-book-ukraine.html>

and far ahead of schedule. I also allowed Ukraine to purchase Javelin anti-tank missiles. My Administration has done far more than the previous Administration.”<sup>23</sup>

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The New York Times

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### ***Trump Tied Ukraine Aid to Inquiries He Sought, Bolton Book Says***

Drafts of the book outline the potential testimony of the former national security adviser if he were called as a witness in the president’s impeachment trial.



*The most highly cited story in January*

The second most cited story for the month is an interview in the Hollywood Reporter with Hillary Clinton about a documentary series release that included the incendiary remark about Bernie Sanders: “Nobody likes him, nobody wants to work with him, he got nothing done.”<sup>24</sup> Also high on the list was an analysis in Just Security, an online national security policy publication based at New York University School of Law, that detailed the legal concerns within the Pentagon over Trump’s dealings with Ukraine based on unredacted government documents they obtained.<sup>25</sup> An editorial by Mark Galli in Christianity Today that called for Trump’s removal from office was also highly cited.<sup>26</sup> This article was particularly notable in that it broke with the loyal support for Trump in many Christian communities.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1221663763138588672>

<sup>24</sup>

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/hillary-clinton-full-a-fiery-new-documentary-trump-regrets-harsh-words-bernie-1271551>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.justsecurity.org/67863/exclusive-unredacted-ukraine-documents-reveal-extent-of-pentagons-legal-concerns/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html>



## Hillary Clinton in Full: A Fiery New Documentary, Trump Regrets and Harsh Words for Bernie: "Nobody Likes Him"

by Lacey Rose

January 21, 2020, 4:00am PST



*Hillary Clinton remains a key figure in conservative media*

Approximately half of the 100 most cited stories in January followed the race for the Democratic nomination. These campaign stories accounted for approximately 40% of the media inlinks to top 100 stories (Figure 13), significantly more than stories about impeachment or the killing of Soleimani. A well-documented feature of election-time media coverage is a major focus on horse race journalism that reports on the latest polls, public appearances of candidates, debates, and dust ups between the campaigns. For media outlets, horse race coverage<sup>27</sup> is relatively inexpensive to produce and a compelling product for politically-minded readers. A CNN story reporting that “Bernie Sanders told Elizabeth Warren in private 2018 meeting that a woman can’t win” was the third most cited article,<sup>28</sup> while a Politico story reported that the Sanders campaign had started to go after Warren as a ‘candidate of the elite’, which ended what was effectively a non-aggression pact.<sup>29</sup>

Stories related to the airstrike on January 3 that killed Soleimani and the aftermath account for approximately a quarter of the most-linked-to stories.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example: Patterson, “News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Primaries: Horse Race Reporting Has Consequences”; <https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-presidential-primaries/> and Benoit, Stein, and Hansen, “New York Times Coverage of Presidential Campaigns”; <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200208>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/13/politics/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-meeting/index.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/11/bernie-quietly-goes-negative-on-warren-097594>

As shown in Figure 13, we also track the stories that received the most citations from media sources on the left and right. Unlike the most cited stories overall, which are heavily influenced by the linking patterns of media sources from the center-left to center-right, the stories most cited by the left and right are a clearer signal of the interests and attention of partisan media on both sides. The distinct differences in media behavior on the left and right and asymmetry of media ecosystems are underscored when viewed from this perspective.

The stories that receive the most links from media sources on the right sheds light on a conservative media system that is tied to and responsive to reporting by mainstream media sources while emphasizing coverage and frames crafted to produce identity-confirming news for conservative audiences.<sup>30</sup> The continued obsession with Hillary Clinton is evident. Despite the impeachment hearings and military clash with Iran, the most cited story by conservative media in January is the Hollywood Reporter interview with Hillary Clinton. In addition to her harsh words about Bernie Sanders, the interview included questions about her long association with Harvey Weinstein, to which she responded “How could we have known?” Many of the articles from conservative sources linking to the Hollywood Reporter story critically highlighted this portion of the interview.

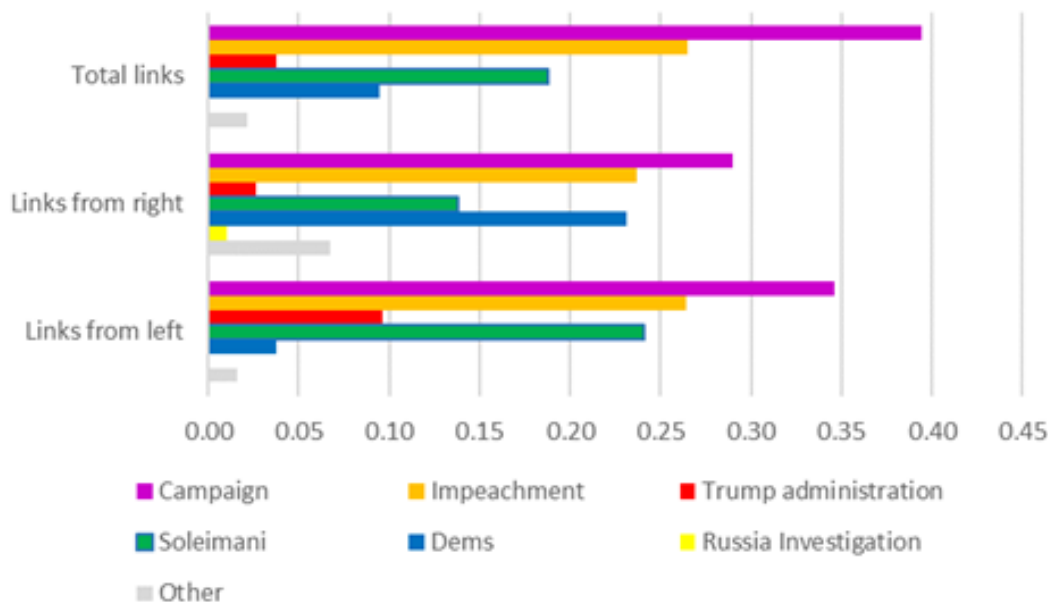


Figure 13. Media inlinks by topic for top 100 stories, January 2020

There is significant overlap between conservative and mainstream media, both in the focus on impeachment, elections, and Iran, and the stories most cited by conservative media include some of the

<sup>30</sup> The story-level data analyzed in this report are available at <https://cyber.harvard.edu/research/2020-election-study-resources-data>

same mainstream media stories even though some are not favorable to the Trump administration. The prominent New York Times article with allegations that Trump enlisted Bolton’s help in trying to convince Ukraine to open an investigation of the Bidens in exchange for releasing military aid is also highly cited by conservative media as it played a key role in the final stages of the Senate impeachment trial and the debate over the calling of new witnesses. However, conservative media coverage offered a narrative that refuted the reporting of the New York Times. Coverage in Fox News cited the New York Times story but focused uncritically on Trump’s full-throated denial of the allegations.<sup>31</sup> Coverage in the New York Post followed the same line. Breitbart likened the Democrats effort to call Bolton as a witness to recount his experience under oath as bad faith partisan politics in the same manner as the Kavanaugh hearings:<sup>32</sup>

The new Bolton “revelations,” as they are called — though no one knows what he actually wrote, since even the New York Times failed to quote him — are like the new Kavanaugh “accusers.” Now Democrats want to call new “witnesses” who never spoke up during the inquiry. These calls have nothing to do with finding the truth.

Within conservative media, the impeachment proceedings were painted as just another attempt by Democrats to illegitimately overturn the results of the 2016 election, although in this episode with an unlikely ally in John Bolton.



*Fox & Friends with guest Stephanie Grisham responding to New York Times reporting on January 28*

The attention paid by the right to this story highlights one of the core functions of conservative media: responding to and reframing critical coverage from the center and left to defend the Trump administration rather than risk leaving the interpretation of key news events to non-conservative

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/leaked-bolton-claims-fuel-fiery-new-clash-over-impeachment-testimony>

<sup>32</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/01/27/trump-denies-telling-john-bolton-ukraine-aide-was-tied-to-biden-probe/>

media. The pattern that we see suggests that some negative coverage is ignored by the right, but major stories that are part of the news cycle trigger an immune response from the right-wing media ecosystem. In this case, the efforts were focused on a complementary set of techniques we commonly observe in similar cases: reinforcing distrust in media outside the right wing; invoking a strong partisan framing of the story; and attacking the integrity of the source. A constant refrain that serves to lessen the impact of negative coverage is the reminder for conservative audiences that mainstream media is biased against conservatives and cannot be trusted to fairly and accurately report the news. Countering unfavorable coverage also serves to remind conservative audiences that they inhabit a deeply partisan world and that they are under attack from the left. Parrying the specific allegations being made by Bolton invoked another familiar response: discrediting the source of the damaging information. In conservative media circles, Bolton was quickly dispatched as a turncoat and portrayed as being interested solely in selling books and hence willing to fabricate the notion that he had direct personal knowledge of a quid pro quo. A similar strategy was employed against another key actor in the impeachment saga, the government official who filed a whistleblower complaint about the July 2019 phone call between President Trump and President Zelensky of Ukraine. In this case, conservative media attempted to undermine his motivations for coming forward, and some sought to unmask his identity. The second most cited story on the right in January related to the impeachment was an article by Paul Sperry that painted the whistleblower as an Obama administration holdover intent on removing Trump from office, citing unnamed sources.



*Discrediting a source of damaging revelations that led to the impeachment of President Trump*

Throughout the saga, conservative media reframed the coverage of the impeachment proceedings and the preceding events to defend the president. This provided motivation and cover for the 52 Senators who voted to acquit. Geraldo Rivera may have given Sean Hannity personally too much of the credit, but he was basically right about the central role conservative media played in protecting Trump when



he told Hannity in October 2019: “You know, if it wasn’t your show, Sean, they would destroy him absolutely. You are the difference between Donald J. Trump and Richard Nixon.”<sup>33</sup>

A key feature of this two-sided media ecosystem is that there is a notable paucity of stories among the top stories in the link economy from established conservative media organizations. Part of this is a function of the greater investments in investigative journalism and original reporting by large media organizations in the center and center-left. In addition to that, the same storyline delivered by the New York Times, Washington Post, or Politico carries more weight than if reported by Fox News or the New York Post.

		Target - total links				
		Left	Center-left	Center	Center-right	Right
Source	Left	211	1487	796	80	124
	Center-left	282	1720	941	112	236
	Center	170	1009	668	264	153
	Center-right	35	311	213	106	38
	Right	174	1223	1100	217	594
	Total	872	5750	3718	779	1145

		Target - proportion of total links from each quintile				
		Left	Center-left	Center	Center-right	Right
Source	Left	0.08	0.55	0.30	0.03	0.05
	Center-left	0.09	0.52	0.29	0.03	0.07
	Center	0.08	0.45	0.30	0.12	0.07
	Center-right	0.05	0.44	0.30	0.15	0.05
	Right	0.05	0.37	0.33	0.07	0.18

*Table 4. Sources and targets of media links by quintile, by links and by proportion of total links from each quintile. Note that even from the right, 70% of all links go to center and center-left sources*

The most cited story on the killing of Soleimani was the New York Times, which describes the “chaotic days” prior to the missile strike and that military leaders were “stunned” that Trump had selected the most extreme option presented to him to respond to recent violence in Iraq that was supported by Iran.<sup>34</sup> This story was also the most cited by conservative media on the topic. The editorial board of the New York Post responded six days later that the reporting was a “disgraceful smear of America’s top defense officials.”<sup>35</sup> A few days later, David Harsanyi, writing in the National Review, pointed to reporting from several mainstream outlets that suggested different timelines for Trump’s decision on the airstrike. Harsanyi used this as an example to more broadly assert that media such as the New York

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/geraldo-rivera-tells-hannity-you-are-difference-between-donald-j-trump-and-richard>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/04/us/politics/trump-suleimani.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/01/10/the-times-disgraceful-smear-of-americas-top-defense-officials/>

Times cannot be trusted at all: “In general, though, one could trust that the underlying facts and framing were basically correct. The past four years have made even that impossible.”<sup>36</sup> Both the Daily Wire and Daily Caller wrote very similar stories that called out the New York Times for relying on anonymous sources for the reporting and the differing narratives about the timing of the decision taken by Trump in various media outlets.<sup>37</sup> The date and time on the byline suggest that National Review was published first, though neither the Daily Wire nor the Daily Caller cites the National Review story. This general reporting-response pattern shows up repeatedly in political reporting: investigative journalists from the center or center-left lead with a story, conservative media refutes the story and asserts that reporting from the center and center-left is so hopelessly flawed and biased that it cannot be trusted at all. As if watching a foreign movie with subtitles, much of what conservative media audiences learn about political news is mainstream reporting translated for a conservative audience.

## We Can't Trust the Media to Report Honestly on Iran

By DAVID HARSANYI | January 13, 2020 11:53 PM



### TOP STORIES

1. Trump's Outrageous Pressure Campaign against Bill Barr  
THE EDITORS
2. Elie Mystal's Cruelty and Amy Coney Barrett's Grace
3. Four GOP Governors, Including Chris Sununu of New Hampshire, Do Not

### *Reinforcing distrust in media*

Among the most cited stories by conservative media, there is also an evident preference for stories that reveal internal troubles and conflict among the Democrats, for example, the dispute between Sanders and Warren. A number of the popular stories unrelated to the top issues exhibit the hallmarks of partisan media, such as scoring points on opponents. There are articles that go after the political villains of the right. A story in Fox News describes how Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has angered her fellow Democrats by helping to fundraise for progressive candidates.<sup>38</sup> The Blaze reports Ilhan Omar was under FBI scrutiny for “what could be the worst-ever crime spree by an elected US official.”<sup>39</sup> A blog made the case that Omar had married her brother.<sup>40</sup> The conservative obsession with Hillary

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/we-cant-trust-the-media-to-report-honestly-on-iran/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.dailywire.com/news/media-using-anonymous-sources-have-presented-4-separate-narratives-surrounding-trump-and-soleimani>

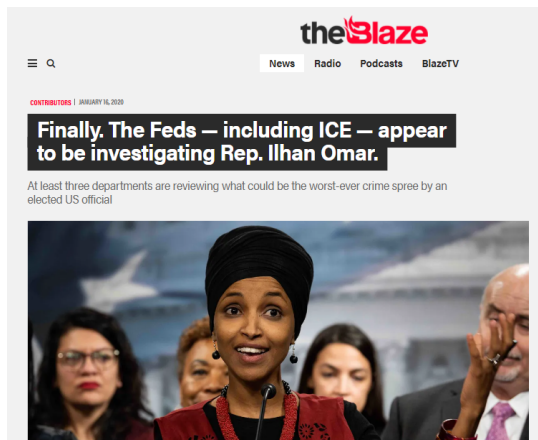
<https://dailycaller.com/2020/01/13/media-outlets-anonymous-stories-soleimani-death/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/aoc-riles-dems-by-refusing-to-pay-party-dues-bankrolling-her-colleagues-opponents>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.theblaze.com/contributors/the-feds-appear-to-be-investigating-ilhan-omar>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2019/07/david-steinberg-tying-up-loose-threads-in-the-curious-case.php?>

Clinton was fueled by a defamation lawsuit filed against her by Tulsi Gabbard after Clinton had described her as a Russian asset.<sup>41</sup> The New York Post's coverage of the lawsuit was among the top ten most cited articles by right media in January.<sup>42</sup>



*Familiar targets of conservative media*

The composition and rank of stories most cited by the left are very similar to the most-cited stories overall and show a pattern of attention that is directed primarily at the large traditional media sources of the center and center-left. Although the most salient feature about the attention of media sources on the left is their alignment and reliance upon outlets from the center and center-left, there are a handful of stories that are notably more popular with media outlets on the left compared to the entire set. Among the stories that receive a large proportion of total citations from media sources on the left and relatively few from other segments is a Washington Post story describing the results of the Justice Department inquiry initiated by Attorney General Sessions into possible corruption involving the Clinton Foundation Hillary Clinton. 44% of the links came from the left.<sup>43</sup> The inquiry found nothing worth pursuing and was touted by the left as yet another instance of exoneration for Hillary Clinton. Another example is a story in the Intercept (Fact Check: Joe Biden Has Advocated Cutting Social Security For 40 Years) that received half of its links from the left.<sup>44</sup> These examples notwithstanding, the linking patterns from sources on the left indicate that the more partisan elements on the left are not pushing an alternative agenda so much as drawing upon and contributing to the coverage and narratives of the center and center-left.

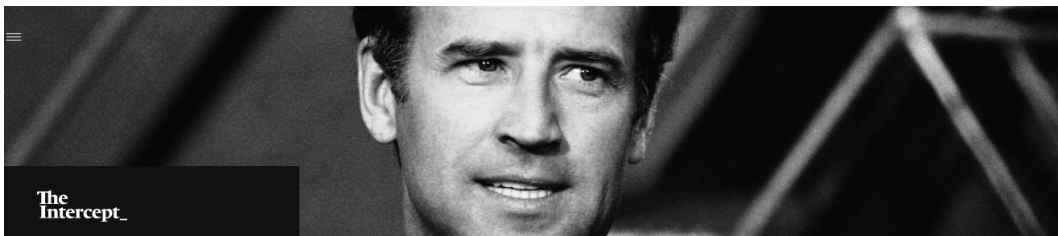
<sup>41</sup> <https://www.tulsi2020.com/press/2020-01-22-rep-tulsi-gabbard-files-lawsuit-against-hillary-clinton-over-defamatory-statements>

<sup>42</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/01/29/hillary-clinton-refuses-to-be-served-tulsi-gabbards-defamation-lawsuit/>

<sup>43</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/justice-dept-winds-down-clinton-related-inquiry-once-championed-by-trump-it-found-nothing-of-consequence/2020/01/09/ca83932e-32f9-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/justice-dept-winds-down-clinton-related-inquiry-once-championed-by-trump-it-found-nothing-of-consequence/2020/01/09/ca83932e-32f9-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776_story.html)

<sup>44</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2020/01/13/biden-cuts-social-security/>

Justice Dept. winds down Clinton-related inquiry once championed by Trump. It found nothing of consequence.



Then-Sen. Joe Biden before his appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" in Washington, D.C., on April 20, 1984, a year he was facing reelection to the Senate. Photo: Charles Taini/AP

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**FACT CHECK: JOE BIDEN HAS ADVOCATED CUTTING SOCIAL SECURITY FOR 40 YEARS**

"I tried with Senator Grassley back in the 1980s to freeze all government spending, including Social Security, including everything," Biden said in 1995.

Ryan Grim  
January 13 2020, 9:00 a.m.

*Stories highly cited by left media in January 2020*

## Facebook

We used two separate metrics to track political discourse on Facebook: total interactions - the sum of all shares, comments, and reactions a post on Facebook receives period on public Facebook pages, and unique links - the sum of unique accounts that posted the link at least once during the time period. We review and categorize the most popular stories using each of these metrics, which portray significantly different dynamics on the platform.

The top 100 stories in January ranked by total interactions were dominated by impeachment coverage, reporting of the Soleimani strike and its aftermath, general coverage, both positive and negative, of the Trump administration, and the Democratic primary campaign (Figure 14). Over 80% of the stories in the top 100 are focused on Trump, which indicates that Facebook users have a greater focus on Trump compared to the linking patterns of media outlets and on Twitter. Of the set of stories focused on Trump, only 20% contain explicitly unfavorable coverage of Trump, while over 55% contain favorable coverage. Examples of unfavorable coverage of Trump include a Yahoo! News story describing the exorbitant cost of his frequent golf trips<sup>45</sup> and a New York Times report examining Trump's willingness to make cuts to Medicare and other social safety-net programs.<sup>46</sup> Examples of positive coverage include right-wing sources and Facebook pages defending the Soleimani strike,<sup>47</sup> several stories about Trump's positive reception during his appearance at the NCAA championship football game,<sup>48</sup> and multiple links to videos and photos of Trump campaign rallies.<sup>49</sup>

The level of engagement with video is far greater on Facebook than on the open web and Twitter. Over a third of the stories ranked by total interactions are links to embedded Facebook videos or photos, the overwhelming majority of which were shared by right-wing sources or media personalities. The Facebook pages for the White House, the Trump campaign, Fox News, Dan Bongino, and Ben Shapiro shared videos boosting Trump's reelection campaign, defending his position in the impeachment trial, and supporting his actions in the Soleimani strike. For example, the story that received the second most interactions is a video shared by Fox News of Representative Mike Kelly praising Trump ahead of the House vote on a resolution that limits Trump's military action against Iran.<sup>50</sup> The proportion of interactions aimed at stories related to impeachment and Soleimani is similar to that seen in the stories most cited by media outlets.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://news.yahoo.com/trump-golf-trips-millions-thanksgiving-221349040.html>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/us/politics/medicare-trump.html>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/videos/761701337669245/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/photos/a.184044921335/10158909002536336/?type=3>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump/videos/504954320422862/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/videos/1025605047799865/>

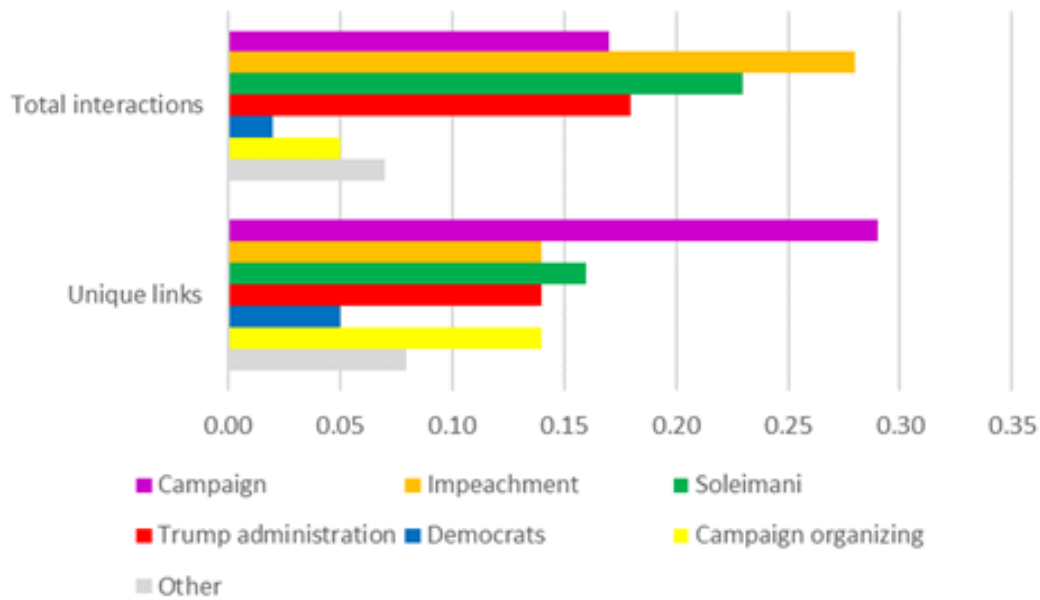


Figure 14. Facebook total interactions and unique links by topic for top 100 stories, January 2020

The topic breakdown is markedly different in the top 100 stories ranked by unique links compared to the breakdown by total interactions. More than one fourth of the stories are coverage of the Democratic primaries, many of which are favorable to Bernie Sanders bolstered by the strong presence of Sanders supporters on Facebook. For example, the top two campaign-related links in the list are a pro-Sanders campaign video on Youtube<sup>51</sup> and an opinion article published by The State arguing that African American voters should choose Sanders over Biden.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, approximately one in ten of the links are to pages within BernieSanders.com. There are multiple stories covering the impeachment trial, Soleimani strike, and other Trump administration events, but in smaller numbers compared to the top stories ranked by total engagements. Another feature of this perspective is the significant number of campaign organizing resources that accrue links from many accounts.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjmT-zx4nyI>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OythsfCi6JA>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.thestate.com/opinion/article239206718.html>

## Candidate-aligned Twitter Cohorts

The stories favored by partisans on Twitter show how selective media attention among the most politically engaged can sustain such starkly different realities. Here we compare the media sharing patterns of different cohorts of Twitter users identified by their retweeting of particular candidates. Compared to media linking patterns described above, the cohort of Biden users focused more of their attention on impeachment and Ukraine (Figure 16). This included the Bolton story, the treatment of the former ambassador to Ukraine, Maria Yovanovitch, and an opinion piece in Fox News by legal analyst Andrew Napolitano (‘Judge Nap’) detailing why Trump’s actions are clear grounds for impeachment “What is required for removal of the president? A demonstration of presidential commission of high crimes and misdemeanors, of which in Trump’s case, the evidence is ample and uncontradicted.”<sup>53</sup> This argument put out by Napolitano was an unusual break with the typically unified support for Trump among Fox News commentators. This story got a lot of traction on the left and was mostly ignored on the right.

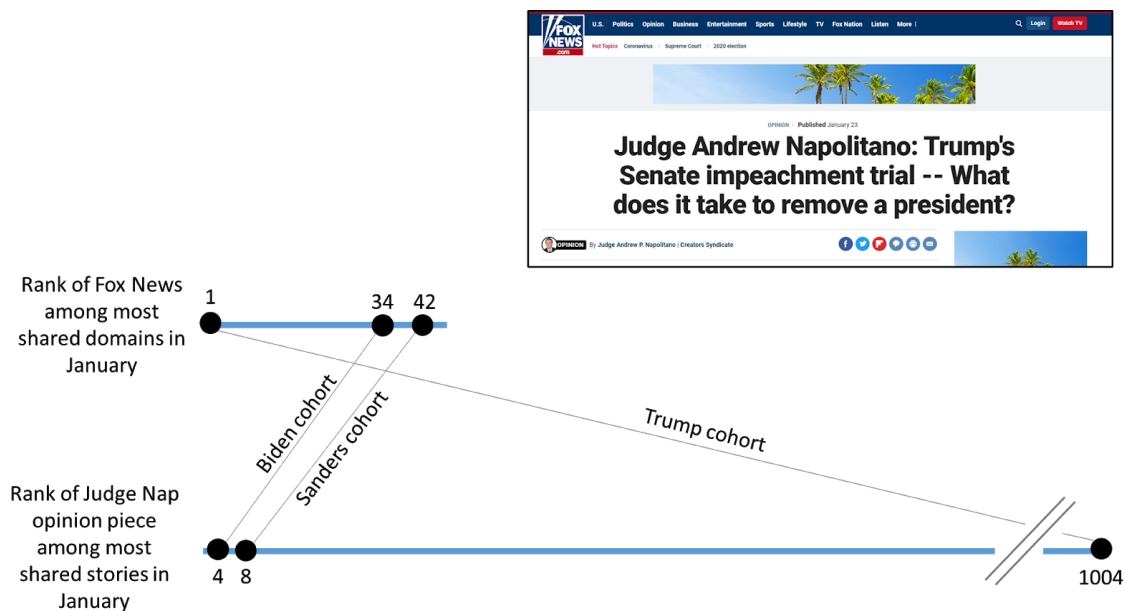


Figure 15. An opinion piece by a rare dissenting voice in conservative media on the impeachment of Trump draws attention from the left and is ignored by the right.

Other popular stories among the Biden set include an unsubstantiated story published by Forensic News that Trump’s business loans are guaranteed by Russia.<sup>54</sup> Although not debunked—we are not

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/trumps-senate-impeachment-trial-judge-andrew-napolitano>

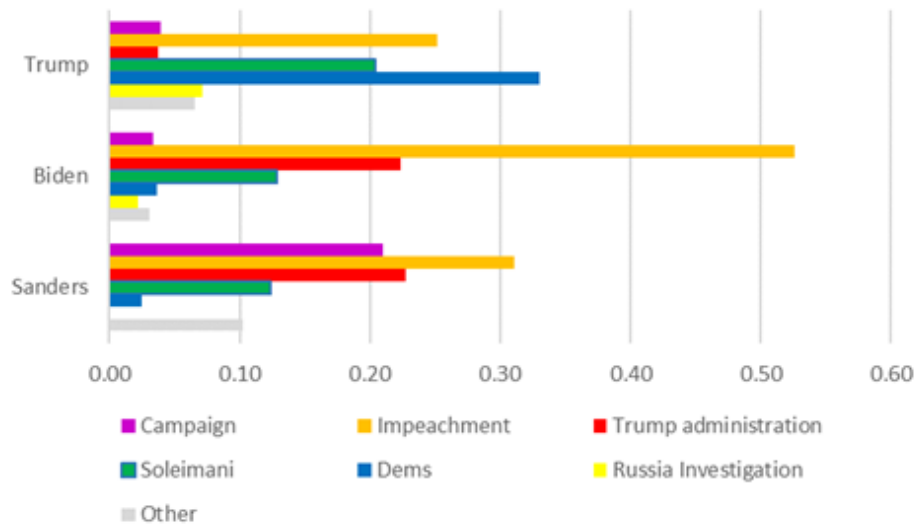
<sup>54</sup> <https://forensicnews.net/2020/01/03/trump-deutsche-bank-loans-underwritten-by-russian-state-owned-bank-whistleblower-told-fbi/>

aware of publicly available evidence to confirm or debunk this story—this type of story that is both highly cited and unconfirmed by major media sources is relatively uncommon on the left.



*A popular story unconfirmed by mainstream media, a rarity on the left*

Another story reported that the Justice Department had wrapped up its investigation into Clinton’s emails and concluded that there is no basis for locking her up.<sup>55</sup> A popular editorial in the Biden cohort from the Sacramento Bee took on Trump ally Devin Nunes: “Devin Nunes’ Ukraine lies are a betrayal. Voters in his district deserve better.”<sup>56</sup> There is a central theme to the stories shared by the Biden cohort; they are uniformly critical of Trump and his administration. None of the most popular stories in January are about Biden himself, his campaign, or policy proposals.



*Figure 16. Stories most shared by Trump, Biden, and Sanders cohort on Twitter by topic, January 2020*

<sup>55</sup>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/justice-dept-winds-down-clinton-related-inquiry-once-championed-by-trump-it-found-nothing-of-consequence/2020/01/09/ca83932e-32f9-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/justice-dept-winds-down-clinton-related-inquiry-once-championed-by-trump-it-found-nothing-of-consequence/2020/01/09/ca83932e-32f9-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776_story.html)

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.sacbee.com/opinion/editorials/article239465588.html>



The most popular stories among Bernie Sanders supporters in January demonstrate a similar focus on stories that go after the Trump administration with many of the same stories shared across the Biden and Sanders lists. The Sanders cohort devotes much more attention to campaign-related coverage compared to the Biden set. There is also a key qualitative difference in the Sanders list in that it includes several links specific to the Sanders campaign. This is consistent with the common observation that there is a personal connection and enthusiasm for the candidate among Sanders supporters not matched among the other Democratic candidates. The Sanders set also shows interest in issue-based politics that is largely absent in the Biden cohort. This includes coverage of the Australian wildfires and climate change; entitlement programs; racial discrimination; and the treatment of immigrants.<sup>57</sup>

LIFE AFTER WARMING | DEC. 31, 2019

## Global Apathy Toward the Fires in Australia Is a Scary Portent for the Future

By David Wallace-Wells

CRIME AND JUSTICE | JANUARY 22, 2020

### Immigrant Kids Were Restrained to Chairs With Bags Over Their Heads at a Juvenile Hall in Virginia

The purpose of their detention, a group of district attorneys argues, should be "protect them from harm, not to punish them."

### Glenn Greenwald Charged With Cybercrimes in Brazil

Mr. Greenwald is accused of being part of a "criminal investigation" that hacked into the cellphones of prosecutors and public officials.

PUERTO RICO

## How to Help Puerto Rico After Deadly Earthquake

Here are some organizations involved in relief efforts in Puerto Rico that you can help.

## 60 MINUTES INVESTIGATES THE DEATH OF JEFFREY EPSTEIN

Jeffrey Epstein was a convicted sex offender and a wealthy financier with powerful friends. 60 Minutes examines the circumstances surrounding his death in a Manhattan federal jail cell. Warning: This report contains graphic images.

*Stories popular among the Sanders cohort outside of the primary topics*

Compared to the Democratic contender cohorts, the Trump cohort of Twitter users orients towards a polar opposite worldview, similar only in the degree of partisanship and dislike of the other side. The most shared stories focus on negative coverage of political opponents including Joe Biden, the

<sup>57</sup> <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/12/new-south-wales-fires-in-australia-the-worlds-response.html>; [https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jan/29/guardian-to-ban-advertising-from-fossil-fuel-firms-climate-crisis?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jan/29/guardian-to-ban-advertising-from-fossil-fuel-firms-climate-crisis?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other); <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/us/politics/medicare-trump.html>; <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2020/01/23/rf-bank-race-discrimination-case-sauntore-thomas/454619902/>; <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/01/district-attorneys-raise-concerns-about-treatment-of-migrant-teens-at-a-virginia-juvenile-hall/>

whistleblower, the New York Times, CNN, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Hillary Clinton, Ilhan Omar, John Kerry, Puerto Rico, Adam Schiff, Andrew McCabe, the Obama administration, David Kris, Bernie Sanders, and John Bolton. The stories draw from a broad range of media sources: Fox News, Breitbart, the New York Post, and the Washington Examiner; CNN, CBS News, and Foreign Policy; the Gateway Pundit and True Pundit, both known to publish false stories; and a range of far right sources. Compared to the Biden and Sanders supporters, who gravitate to a core set of center and center-left media sources complemented by a lesser amount of attention to sources on the left, the Trump set is more eclectic in their tastes, drawing from mainstream media, both conservative and not, and fringe sites on the far right.

Three of the most popular stories for the Trump cohort, including the most shared story, “How five members of Joe Biden’s family got rich through his connections,”<sup>58</sup> are based on a book by Peter Schweizer: *Secret Empires: How the American Political Class Hides Corruption and Enriches Family and Friends*. The use of a Peter Schweizer book to attack the Democratic front-runner is a cut-and-paste tactic from four years earlier following on the success by the right in leveraging Schweizer’s 2015 book, *Clinton Cash*, to portray Hillary Clinton as a corrupt, insider-dealing, and self-serving politician. This approach was highly effective in 2015 and 2016, as we have described in great detail,<sup>59</sup> aided particularly well by the successful baiting of mainstream media to cover the allegations of corruption, but also fueled by the swirling allegations related to Clinton’s handling of emails and the release of hacked emails by Wikileaks, which all fed into a (largely unfounded) narrative of shady dealings and illegal activity. This narrative continues to resonate on the right, and Donald Trump apparently still wants to lock up Hillary Clinton.<sup>60</sup> The same tactic has had little to no traction in this election cycle despite repeated and strenuous efforts by the Republican Party over the past two years to get the allegations of wrongdoing by Joe Biden and his family to stick. This may prove to be among one of the most—if not the most—consequential storylines in the 2020 election tied to media coverage and public opinion formation.

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<sup>58</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/01/18/how-five-members-of-joe-bidens-family-got-rich-through-his-connections/>

<sup>59</sup> Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*;  
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/network-propaganda-9780190923631?cc=us&lang=en&>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/07/trump-demands-barr-arrest-foes-427389>

## How five members of Joe Biden's family got rich through his connections

By Peter Schweizer

January 18, 2020 | 3:02pm | Updated



Former Vice President Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden (right)  
REUTERS

*Replicating a strategy from the 2016 election, conservative media activists seek to portray Joe Biden as a corrupt politician*

Also among the top stories is a conspiracy-minded True Pundit exclusive: “Top FBI Agent Died After Uncovering Hillary Clinton Funneled Billions of Tax Dollars from State Dept. to Clinton Foundation and Cronies.” Big League Politics picked up this story as well: “Report: FBI Agent Commits ‘Suicide’ After Allegedly Discovering Clinton Foundation Looted Billions From Treasury. Time to add another name to the Clinton kill count?” This obsessive repetition of familiar fear and loathing tropes against Clinton still finds an engaged audience in January of 2020.

**TRUE PUNDIT**

HOME PAGE, POLITICS, SECURITY — JANUARY 24, 2020

## EXCLUSIVE: Top FBI Agent Died After Uncovering Hillary Clinton Funneled Billions of Tax Dollars from State Dept. to Clinton Foundation and Cronies

*Conspiracy theories resonate with a substantial portion of Trump supporters on Twitter*

As part of the effort to discredit John Bolton, a story linking him to a Ukrainian oligarch circulated in the Trump cohort.<sup>61</sup> The Gateway Pundit connected dots between Adam Schiff and two companies involved in the “\$7.4 Billion Burisma-US-Ukraine Corruption Case.”<sup>62</sup> This allegation earned the ‘pants on fire’ distinction from Politifact.<sup>63</sup>



*The Gateway Pundit makes false allegations about two common targets of conservative media*

Two stories about the Australian wildfires were among the top twenty-five stories for the Trump cohort; both focused on the role of arson in spreading the fires, which had been part of a counter-narrative to the reporting that linked the unprecedented severity of the fires to climate change.<sup>64</sup> This same framing has more recently been applied to the worst fire season in California in recorded history to redirect attention away from the linkage between climate change and towards deliberate human activity.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> <https://nationalfile.com/john-bolton-took-six-figures-from-ukrainian-oligarch-clinton-foundation-donor/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2019/11/revealed-adam-schiff-connected-to-both-companies-named-in-7-4-billion-burisma-us-ukraine-corruption-case/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2019/dec/09/one-america-news/pants-fire-claim-adam-schiff-under-investigation-b/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://summit.news/2020/01/06/nearly-200-people-arrested-across-australia-for-deliberately-starting-bushfires/>  
<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/bushfires-firebugs-fuelling-crisis-as-arson-arrest-toll-hits-183/news-story/52536dc9ca9bb87b7c76d36ed1acf53f>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/business/media/wildfires-conservative-media.html>

## February 2020

### Open web media links

After the Senate acquitted President Trump on February 5, political attention shifted more towards the Democratic race and the fallout from the impeachment. The Democratic primary race was the subject of the majority of the top stories by media inlinks in February. Seven of the ten most cited stories in February were polling and election results. The third most-linked-to story in February is a February 4 Gallup poll that showed Trump's approval rating at an all-time high of 49% on the eve of his acquittal.<sup>66</sup> Approval among Republicans was at 94% and among Democrats was 7%. Among the links to the top 100 stories in February, more than 60% were campaign related (Figure 17). This included coverage of Sanders' lead in the polls and coverage of Mike Bloomberg's attempts to use his personal fortune to launch himself onto the leader board, circumventing more established routes into presidential politics and skipping Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina.<sup>67</sup> The biggest story out of the Iowa caucuses was the failure of the app used to tabulate results and designed by a firm with ties to the DNC that delayed the release of results.<sup>68</sup> As in January, Real Clear Politics was the most cited source of campaign-related polling data. Center and center-left media outlets accounted for the large majority of the other most cited media stories in February.

The specter of renewed Russian interference in the 2020 election garnered much attention in February after intelligence officials briefed the House Intelligence Committee on February 13 about their assessment of the threat. This incident precipitated a falling out between President Trump and the acting Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maquire, who would formally resign his position a week later.<sup>69</sup> The intelligence assessment indicated that the Russians were seeking to intervene in favor of President Trump, and in the Democratic primary election, in favor of Bernie Sanders. Stories on the topic published by the New York Times and Washington Post were the fourth and fifth most cited articles in February, respectively.<sup>70</sup>

The first story on the coronavirus outbreak to be among the most widely cited was published on February 27 with the New York Times reporting that all communications related to the outbreak would be handled by Vice President Pence.<sup>71</sup> Two days earlier, Dr. Nancy Messonnier, Director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, had warned the public about the likely

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<sup>66</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/284156/trump-job-approval-personal-best.aspx>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/us/elections/michael-bloomberg-spending.html>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/style/michael-bloomberg-memes-jerry-media.html>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/us/politics/iowa-caucus-app.html>  
[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iowa-caucus-app-shadow\\_n\\_5e390191c5b687dacc722824](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iowa-caucus-app-shadow_n_5e390191c5b687dacc722824)

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/politics/joseph-maquire-director-of-national-intelligence/index.html>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/politics/russian-interference-trump-democrats.html>  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/bernie-sanders-briefed-by-us-officials-that-russia-is-trying-to-help-his-presidential-campaign/2020/02/21/5ad396a6-54bd-11ea-929a-64efa7482a77\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/bernie-sanders-briefed-by-us-officials-that-russia-is-trying-to-help-his-presidential-campaign/2020/02/21/5ad396a6-54bd-11ea-929a-64efa7482a77_story.html)

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/us/politics/us-coronavirus-pence.html>

spread of the coronavirus in the U.S., a warning that spooked the stock market and reportedly infuriated the president.<sup>72</sup> It would be another two weeks until the growing pandemic dominating political discourse in the United States.<sup>73</sup>

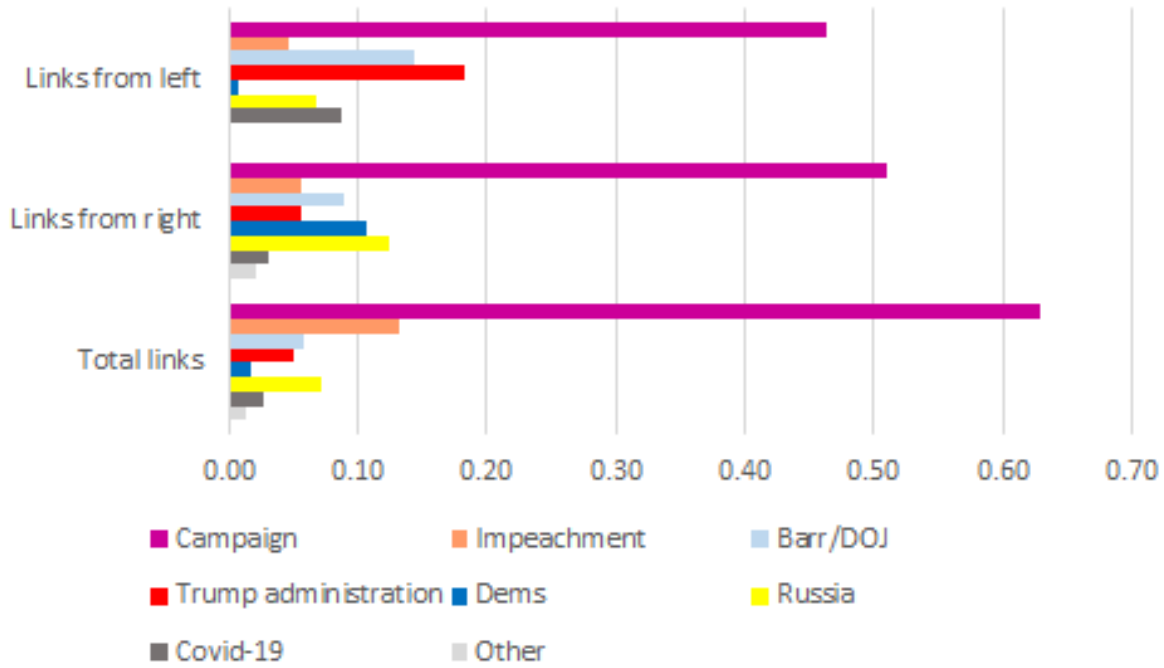


Figure 17. Media inlinks by topic for top 100 stories, February 2020

Soon after the acquittal of President Trump on February 5, several related political firestorms broke out, starting with Trump removing from his administration two key players in the impeachment proceeding, Alexander Vindman and Gordon Sondland, just two days after Trump was acquitted by the Senate. Both men had angered Trump by testifying in the House impeachment hearings. A few days later, after federal prosecutors recommended that Roger Stone receive a sentence of seven to nine years, Trump inserted himself into proceedings by tweeting out on February 11: “This is a horrible and very unfair situation. The real crimes were on the other side, as nothing happens to them. Cannot allow this miscarriage of justice!”<sup>74</sup> The Justice Department then took the unusual and controversial step of overruling their prosecutors to recommend a lighter sentence for Trump’s longtime ally. The actions of Trump and Attorney General Barr broke strongly held norms that the decisions of the Justice Department should be walled off from political considerations, particularly from the executive branch. The prosecutors working the Stone case promptly resigned, and many called for the resignation of Barr, which he ignored. Trump’s February 11 tweet was the most highly cited resource

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/25/trump-is-reportedly-furious-with-the-plunging-stock-market-due-to-coronavirus-fears.html>

<sup>73</sup> A companion report covering this period will be available at <https://cyber.harvard.edu/projects/public-discourse-us-2020-election>

<sup>74</sup> <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1227122206783811585>

on the matter, followed by an ABC News interview with Attorney General Barr, who was quoted as saying that the president had never asked him to intervene in a criminal case but that the president's tweeting was making it "impossible to do my job."<sup>75</sup> The third most cited piece on the imbroglio was a statement posted on Medium and signed by now more than 2500 Department of Justice alumni which stated: "Each of us strongly condemns President Trump's and Attorney General Barr's interference in the fair administration of justice."<sup>76</sup>

The stories with the most inlinks from conservative media cite many of the same stories as the wider set, including the election polling numbers, the Gallup poll that set Trump's approval at his highest point at president (49%), and the New York Times article that reported renewed interest by Russian in interfering in U.S. elections. However, the response to this article in conservative media was harshly critical of the national intelligence work behind the story and the reporting of it. One response in the New York Post described the scene as "Deep State snakes slither back after FBI, CIA swamp draining."<sup>77</sup> The first reports claiming new evidence of Russian interference appear to have been exaggerated as described in a story by CNN that threw cold water on some of the earlier claims.<sup>78</sup> Neither of these stories gained traction outside of the right.



*Tabloid journalism repeats the deep state narrative used to discredit government officials*

In response to the removal of Vindman and Sondland in early February, which enraged many on the left, the Washington Examiner unapologetically crowed that Trump was making good on his promise to "drain the swamp": "Bigger than Vindman: President Trump Scrubs 70 Obama Holdovers From the National Security Council."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/barr-blasts-trumps-tweets-stone-case-impossible-job/story?id=68963276>

<sup>76</sup> <https://medium.com/@dojalumni/doj-alumni-statement-on-the-events-surrounding-the-sentencing-of-roger-stone-c2cb75ae4937>

<sup>77</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/02/22/deep-state-snakes-slither-back-after-fbi-cia-swamp-draining-goodwin/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/23/politics/intelligence-briefer-russian-interference-trump-sanders/index.html>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/washington-secrets/bigger-than-vindman-trump-scrubs-70-obama-holdovers-from-nsc>

OPINION: WASHINGTON SECRETS

## Bigger than Vindman: Trump scrubs 70 Obama holdovers from NSC

by Paul Bedard, Washington Secrets Columnist | 📧 | February 10, 2020 08:14 AM

### *Elimination of political opponents framed as draining the swamp*

Following his strong showing in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada, conservative media devoted more attention to Bernie Sanders and the moves by Democratic Party leaders to avoid a Sanders nomination. Among the most popular campaign-related stories on the right was a Vox interview with James Carville following his rant about the direction of the Democratic Party on MSNBC three days earlier: “‘We’re losing our damn minds’: James Carville unloads on the Democratic Party”.<sup>80</sup> In the interview infused with his usual colorful language, Carville makes the case for putting victory in November above progressive policies and backing a moderate Democratic candidate. He said of Bernie Sanders:

Bernie Sanders isn’t a Democrat. He’s never been a Democrat. He’s an ideologue. And I’ve been clear about this: If Bernie is the nominee, I’ll vote for him. No question. I’ll take an ideological fanatic over a career criminal any day. But he’s not a Democrat.

Another popular campaign story on the right follows the same theme, though this time an NBC News article that John Kerry was concerned that Bernie Sanders was “taking down the Democratic Party.”<sup>81</sup>

The outcry over the interventions of President Trump and William Barr into the sentencing of Roger Stone drew a defensive response from conservative media. Fox News and the Daily Caller stories often cited by the right reported on the anti-Trump views and social media activism of the jury foreperson in the Stone trial.<sup>82</sup> Conservative media reframed the conviction of Roger Stone and his sentencing as a miscarriage of justice that was politically motivated, a view well encapsulated by Tucker Carlson on his show on February 12 when he argues that: “This is a pure political hit. Roger Stone is facing prison because he is a high-profile Trump supporter. It’s that simple.” This framing provided cover for President Trump’s eventual commutation of Roger Stone’s sentence that would come in July. At a more general level, the efforts to create an identity-confirming narrative about the Roger Stone case for conservatives served as another opportunity to fuel the partisan fires and discredit mainstream media reporting coming from the center and center-left.

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/2/7/21123518/trump-2020-election-democratic-party-james-carville>

<sup>81</sup>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/john-kerry-overheard-discussing-possible-2020-bid-amid-concern-sanders-n1128476>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/roger-stone-juror-justice-department-anti-trump-social-media>;  
<https://dailycaller.com/2020/02/12/roger-stone-jury-foreperson-democrat/>





*Tucker Carlson decrying the treatment of Roger Stone*

The petition from the Department of Justice alumni calling on Attorney General Barr to resign elicited a defensive response from conservative media. They used a standard tactic of painting the effort as an attack on the Trump administration fueled solely by partisan antipathy. For the Daily Caller, the headline was “CNN And MSNBC Analysts Sign Petition Urging William Barr To Resign”, noting that eight of the signatories served as analysts for cable news stations and that the organization that organized the petition, Protect Democracy, is “staunchly opposed to President Donald Trump.”<sup>83</sup> The National Review followed a similar line: “Eight legal analysts for CNN and MSNBC are among the signatories of the letter. The petition was compiled by anti-Trump non-profit Protect Democracy.”<sup>84</sup> Fox News published an article online highlighting a segment of Fox & Friends featuring the conservative pundit Dan Bongino entitled: “Dan Bongino on media analysts reportedly signing petition urging Barr to resign: ‘The left is psychotic’”.<sup>85</sup> It is not unusual for foxnews.com to publish articles that summarize and promote Fox News cable segments with videos of the segment embedded. Although Fox News clearly designates some of its online articles as opinion, this article makes no mention of opinion, blurring the distinction between opinion and reporting.

Stories that depict bad behavior by Democrats are a staple of conservative media. In February, coverage of Nancy Pelosi ripping up the text of Donald Trump’s state of the union speech in the New York Post asserted that Pelosi had pre-ripped the pages “so that her speech-ripping moment could go off without a hitch.”<sup>86</sup> In other often cited stories, Fox News reported on the arrest of a man for assaulting a Trump supporter at a polling site, and the Republican Party of Duval County Florida tweeted out the targeting of six Trump campaign volunteers.<sup>87</sup> Law Enforcement Today wrote about the death of Philip Haney, “the DHS whistleblower that dropped the hammer on the Obama administration regarding the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS,” implying that his death might be an act of retribution.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> <https://dailycaller.com/2020/02/16/cnn-msnbc-analysts-petition-resign-barr/>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/over-1000-ex-doj-officials-call-on-ag-barr-to-resign-following-roger-stone-sentencing/>

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/media/dan-bongino-media-analysts-signing-petition-bill-barr-resign>

<sup>86</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/02/05/nancy-pelosi-pre-ripped-pages-of-trumps-sotu-speech-video-shows/>

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/new-hampshire-man-arrested-after-allegedly-assaulting-pro-trump-teen-polling-site>

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.lawenforcementtoday.com/sources-dhs-whistleblower-on-obama-administration-found-dead/>

## Facebook

We find that ranking the top 100 stories in February by total interactions reveal findings similar to that of January. Stories about the Trump administration and the Trump campaign drew the majority of interactions. Most of the stories categorized as Trump administration were coverage of Trump’s State of the Union Address.<sup>89</sup> News coverage and Facebook videos of Trump campaign rallies and public appearances shared by right-wing news organizations,<sup>90</sup> the Trump campaign,<sup>91</sup> and conservative pundits<sup>92</sup> received significantly more engagement than the comparatively small set of stories about the early Democratic primaries in the top 100.<sup>93</sup>

In stark contrast to the stories with the most total interactions, there are many more stories highly ranked by unique links that cover the 2020 Democratic primaries. This view of Facebook more closely tracks with the linking patterns of media outlets. There are also multiple links to campaign sites and fundraising websites for Bernie Sanders, Pete Buttigieg, Andrew Yang, and Tulsi Gabbard.

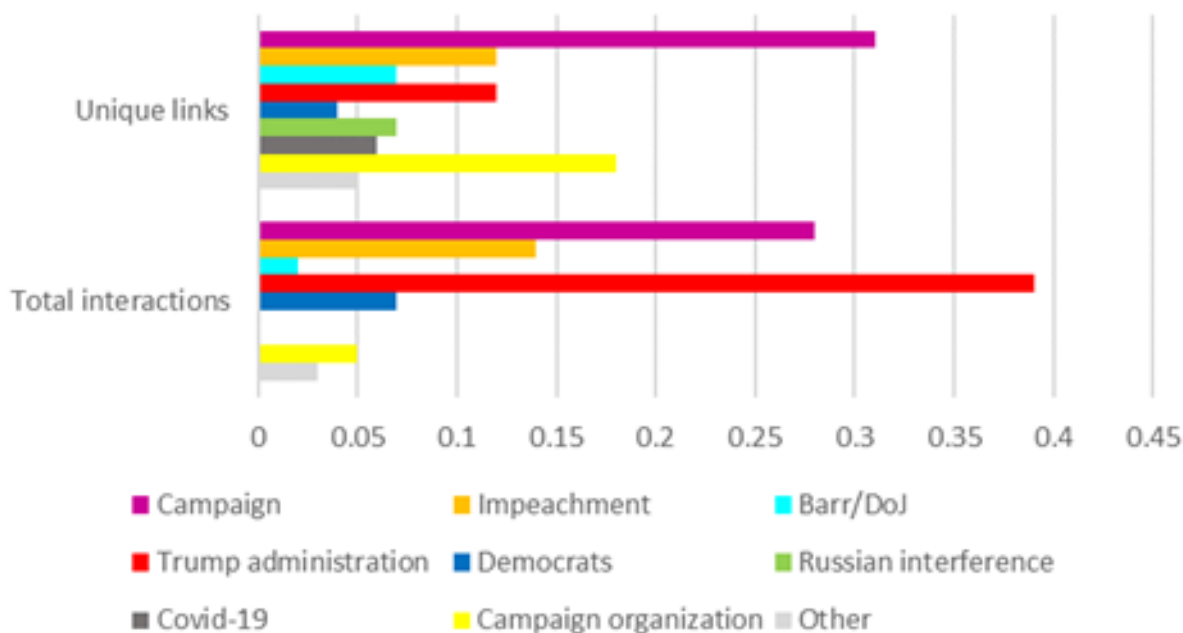


Figure 18. Facebook total interactions and unique links by topic for top 100 stories, February 2020

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump/videos/223224738837116/>

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/videos/222470955813348/>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/officialteamtrump/videos/221656989235660/>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/dan.bongino/videos/191279625453685/>

<sup>93</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/democrats-face-off-abc-debate-hampshire-chaos-mars/story?id=68796454>

## Candidate-aligned Cohorts on Twitter

The focus of Biden supporters on Twitter was targeted primarily on the fallout from the impeachment trial and the responses by the Trump administration—firing Vindman and Sondland—and the Department of Justice intervention into the sentencing of Roger Stone. The anti-Trump focus among Biden retweeters is unmistakable. On the impeachment trial, the most popular stories are an opinion piece by Sherrod Brown (In Private, Republicans Admit They Acquitted Trump Out of Fear),<sup>94</sup> a CNN story describing how the Trump administration has blocked the release of emails about the Ukrainian aid freeze that set off the impeachment of the president,<sup>95</sup> and an opinion contribution from Marie Yovanovitch marking the end of her foreign service career.<sup>96</sup> She writes: “This administration, through acts of omission and commission, has undermined our democratic institutions, making the public question the truth and leaving public servants without the support and example of ethical behavior that they need to do their jobs and advance U.S. interests.” The most coverage of the hullabaloo over the Roger Stone sentencing tracked mainstream coverage of the topic: the resignation of prosecutors in the case,<sup>97</sup> federal judges calling an emergency meeting over the matter,<sup>98</sup> and the campaign by former Justice Department lawyers urging Barr to resign.<sup>99</sup> Other stories shared frequently by users in the Biden cohort criticized the exorbitant rates paid by the Secret Service for rooms in Trump properties,<sup>100</sup> coverage in the Miami Herald of Trump fidgeting during the national anthem at the Super Bowl,<sup>101</sup> and an article in the Washington Post reporting on the impact of President Trump’s rhetoric on the behavior of school children.<sup>102</sup>

Since Trump’s rise to the nation’s highest office, his inflammatory language — often condemned as racist and xenophobic — has seeped into schools across America. Many bullies now target other children differently than they used to, with kids as young as 6 mimicking the president’s insults and the cruel way he delivers them.

As we saw in the January data, there is a conspicuous absence of pro-Biden stories and resources among the most shared articles among the Biden cohort.

Sanders supporters shared a similar range of stories, many of them the same as the Biden cohort, but also shared stories that aligned with the rallying points of the Sanders campaign. Compared to the Biden cohort, there is greater attention to the ongoing campaign, and this attention was trained on

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<sup>94</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/opinion/trump-senate-acquittal-impeachment.html>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/01/politics/trump-ukraine-aid-emails-omb-justice-department/index.html>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/opinion/trump-senate-acquittal-impeachment.html>

<sup>97</sup>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/justice-dept-to-reduce-sentencing-recommendation-for-trump-associate-roger-stone-official-says-after-president-calls-it-unfair/2020/02/11/ad81fd36-4cf0-11ea-bf44-f5043eb3918a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/justice-dept-to-reduce-sentencing-recommendation-for-trump-associate-roger-stone-official-says-after-president-calls-it-unfair/2020/02/11/ad81fd36-4cf0-11ea-bf44-f5043eb3918a_story.html)

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/02/17/roger-stone-sentence-judges-worried-political-interference/4788155002/>

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/16/us/politics/barr-trump-justice-department.html>

<sup>100</sup>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/secret-service-has-paid-rates-as-high-as-650-a-night-for-rooms-at-trumps-properties/2020/02/06/7f27a7c6-3ec5-11ea-8872-5df698785a4e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/secret-service-has-paid-rates-as-high-as-650-a-night-for-rooms-at-trumps-properties/2020/02/06/7f27a7c6-3ec5-11ea-8872-5df698785a4e_story.html)

<sup>101</sup> <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article239913588.html>

<sup>102</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/school-bullying-trump-words/>

both campaign issues and organization sites for the Sanders campaign. After the Russian election interference story, the second most shared story was an academic article describing the cost savings of Medicare for all.<sup>103</sup> Another story described how Sanders would pay for his plans.<sup>104</sup> Other stories questioned Bloomberg’s record on sexism,<sup>105</sup> climate change,<sup>106</sup> and superdelegates.<sup>107</sup> The pattern we observed in January continued in February; while the attention of the Biden cohort was almost entirely concentrated on negative coverage of Trump and his administration, the Sanders cohort devoted a significant portion of their focus on promoting the candidacy of Bernie Sanders and on coverage of progressive issues such as health care and climate change. The Sanders cohort also demonstrated a willingness to attack Mike Bloomberg not seen in the Biden cohort.

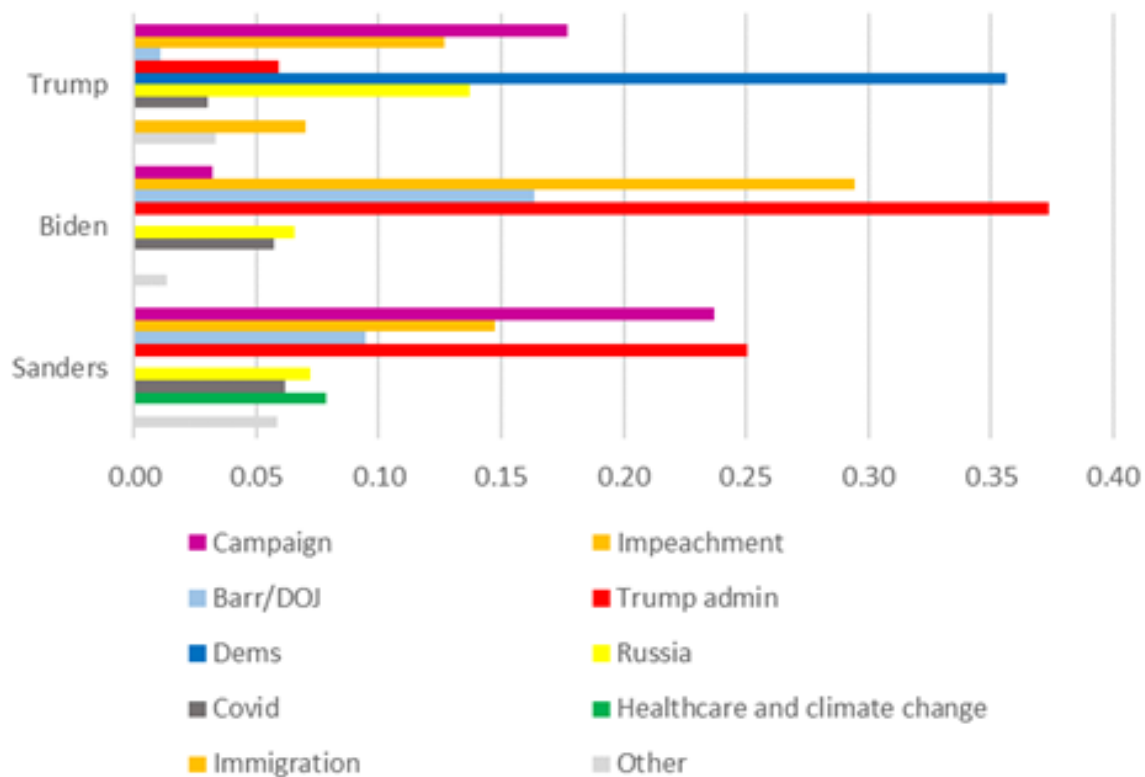


Figure 19. Stories most shared by Trump, Biden, and Sanders cohorts on Twitter by topic, February 2020

In February, the sharing of stories by the Trump cohort on Twitter was concentrated far more on negative coverage of Democrats than any other category. The most shared story was an article in the Daily Mail suggesting that Ilhan Omar had married her brother to allow him to stay in the country.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)33019-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)33019-3/fulltext)

<sup>104</sup> <https://berniesanders.com/issues/how-does-bernie-pay-his-major-plans/>

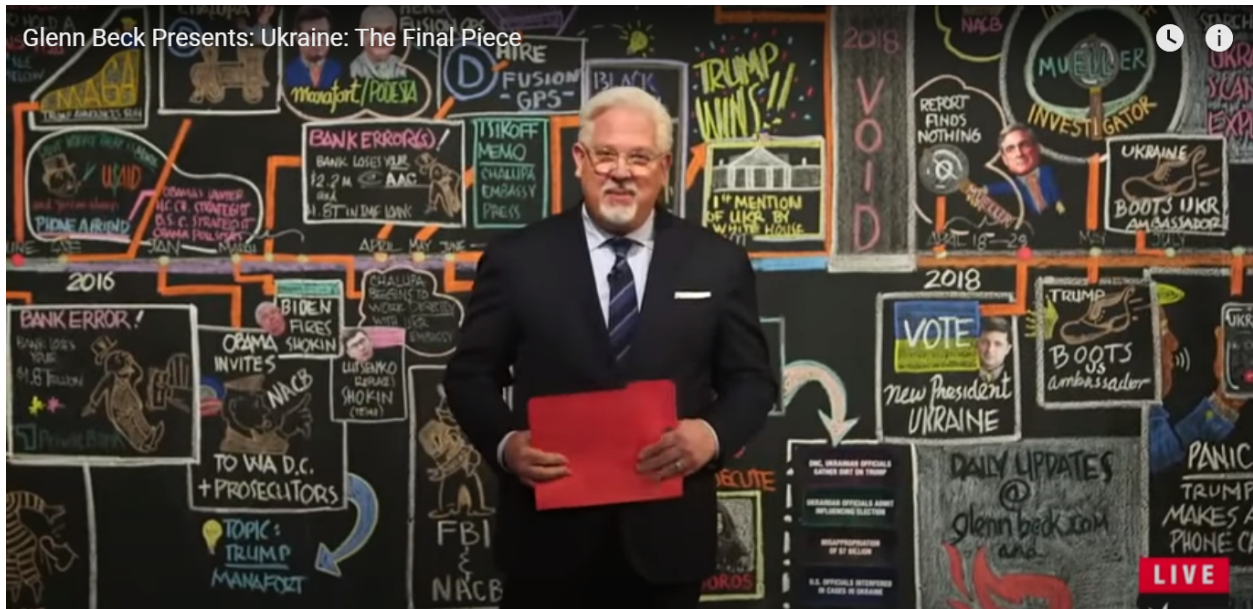
<sup>105</sup> <https://www.gq.com/story/bloomberg-sexism>

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/02/super-potent-methane-in-atmosphere-oil-gas-drilling-ice-cores/>

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/31/dnc-superdelegates-110083>

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8013283/Ilhan-Omar-DID-marry-brother-reveals-Somali-community-leader.html>

After the two stories mentioned above—the CNN story on Russian interference being exaggerated and Nancy Pelosi’s ripping up the state of the union text—the next most shared story among the Trump cohort is about Mitt Romney, the newest bete noire of Trump and his supporters after he voted to convict the president on the charge of abuse of power. Trending Politics reported that Mitt Romney had been a recipient of \$17,500 in support from a group funded by George Soros and that this was perhaps why he voted to impeach President Trump.<sup>109</sup> Mitt Romney’s personal wealth is estimated to be \$250 million.<sup>110</sup>



*Glenn Beck connects the dots on the Ukraine scandal and reveals the final piece to the puzzle*

Fox News reported on the death of Philip Haney without explicitly calling out the suspicions among some conservative readers that he was murdered for political reasons.<sup>111</sup> The comment thread to the article, however, is rife with conspiracy theories suggesting that the dog whistle came through loud and clear. The Gateway Pundit also covered the death.<sup>112</sup> This follows a tradition in far-right media of spreading conspiracy theories when someone with ties to Democrats faces a violent death. This dates back at least as far as the death of Vince Foster and was repeated more recently with Seth Rich.

Unlike the linking patterns of conservative media, the Trump cohort has a strong preference for far-right content. Twice among the top stories in the Trump cohort is Just the News, the new online media outlet run by conservative pundit John Solomon, who was instrumental in propagating misinformation related to Biden and Ukraine when working for The Hill. One story promotes the

<sup>109</sup> <https://trendingpolitics.com/mitt-romney-is-a-top-2-recipient-of-funding-by-george-soros-lobbyist-group/>

<sup>110</sup> <https://fortune.com/2019/12/31/richest-members-of-congress-2019-net-worth/>

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/us/philip-haney-dhs-whistleblower-during-obama-era-found-dead-police-say>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/02/dhs-whistleblower-against-obama-administration-found-dead-shot-and-killed/>

notion that the Ukrainian ledger showing payments to Paul Manafort was a fabrication: the source, Manafort's former partner Rick Gates.<sup>113</sup> The other story goes after familiar right-wing targets James Comey and Andrew McCabe.<sup>114</sup> Other stories popular with the Trump cohort focus on immigration. One is a report on the Trump administration's battle with sanctuary cities.<sup>115</sup> Another is a Tucker Carlson segment in which he promotes the narrative that "criminals would be protected from deportation under [a] bill AOC and other House Democrats back."<sup>116</sup> This touches on several of Carson's favorite themes: immigration, the radical agenda of leftist Democrats, and members of The Squad.

The Daily Wire propagates the claim of Alan Dershowitz that he has proof that Obama, during his presidency, prompted a federal investigation at the request of George Soros.<sup>117</sup> Glenn Beck, who has fallen in and out of favor with conservative media, makes the list with allegations that the Obama administration ran an elaborate money laundering operation in Ukraine.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> <https://justthenews.com/accountability/political-ethics/key-witness-told-team-mueller-russia-collusion-evidence-found>

<sup>114</sup> <https://justthenews.com/accountability/political-ethics/key-witness-told-team-mueller-russia-collusion-evidence-found>

<sup>115</sup>

<https://saraacarter.com/court-says-trump-admin-can-withhold-federal-grants-from-sanctuary-cities/>

<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/barr-announces-new-sanctuary-policies>

<sup>116</sup>

<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-criminals-would-be-protected-from-deportation-under-bill-aoc-and-other-house-democrats-back>

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.dailywire.com/news/dershowitz-i-have-proof-obama-ordered-fbi-investigation-at-request-of-george-soros/>

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCSwqca8KXU>

## Teflon Joe and the Long Shadow of Burisma

President Trump has been saddled with historically low approval numbers throughout his presidency. This is not new. As a candidate in 2015 and 2016, he was unpopular with a majority of Americans, and his path to victory in the electoral college in 2016 relied upon doing all he could to ensure that more voters dislike Hillary Clinton, and for those that had an aversion for them both, prompting them to dislike her more. Although Clinton won the popular vote, this strategy worked well enough to win Trump the oval office. Throughout his presidency, Trump has not taken steps to expand his base of voters and has instead pursued policies tailored to give critical elements of his base wins: the “Muslim Ban” and the policy of separating children from their parents in order to punish and deter undocumented immigrants were designed to give his core constituencies that responded to his nativist and racist identity politics strong signals that he meant business; his tax cuts and anti-regulatory executive action were designed to keep faith with the GOP’s business base; and his aggressive judicial appointments practice served both his business wing and his Evangelical base. He complemented these with various signals to his more extreme base, whether it was the “very fine people on both sides” response to Charlottesville or his most recent refusal to disavow white supremacy or QAnon, and a daily diet of poking his opponents in the eye to the delight of his supporters. As a result, he has retained the large supporter base almost unchanged while utterly failing to expand his voter appeal to anyone outside this sizable minority of voters.

Trump’s best prospects for winning the electoral college again in 2020 are, therefore, to apply the same strategy he used in 2016: disqualifying his opponent in the eyes of enough marginal voters in swing states to carry the electoral college. No one should be surprised that Trump’s supporters, both activists and conservative media, dusted off the 2016 playbook and applied it to Joe Biden, the most likely Democratic frontrunner, once his intention to run became known in the spring of 2019. A key piece in the right-wing campaign to saddle Hillary Clinton with allegations of corruption in 2015 was the book, *Clinton Cash*. The author, Peter Schweizer, produced another book for the new election cycle, *Secret Empires: How Our Politicians Hide Corruption and Enrich Their Families and Friends*, which was released in 2018 and includes several chapters on the Biden family. The promotion of the book led with allegations of corruption by the Bidens in China, not Ukraine.<sup>119</sup> The book included a chapter on Ukraine concluding with:

Despite the enormous evidence of corruption and criminal activity involving Burisma, Devon Archer remained involved with the company through the end of 2016, while Hunter Biden as of this writing still serves a member of the board and provides legal assistance. They have never disclosed their compensation. And the more than \$1 billion that disappeared from their business partner’s bank has never been recovered.

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<sup>119</sup> <https://nypost.com/2018/03/15/inside-the-shady-private-equity-firm-run-by-kerry-and-bidens-kids/>  
<https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2018/03/15/secret-empire-joe-biden-john-kerry-billion-dollar-deal-chinese-government/>

The book received relatively little attention in 2018, as did the troubling allegations that Joe Biden used his position as Vice President to help his son avoid legal difficulties stemming from his involvement with Burisma. This changed in the spring of 2019 when it became clear that Biden would be running for the Democratic nomination. Dan Bongino started tweeting about Burisma in February and March.<sup>120</sup> The turning point in the campaign came when John Solomon, who at the time worked as an “opinion contributor” for The Hill, started filing stories with the veneer of investigative journalism in the early spring of 2019. In one of many columns on the topic, John Solomon wrote an April 1, 2019 story (Joe Biden's 2020 Ukrainian nightmare: A closed probe is revived) based on an interview with Ukraine's General Prosecutor Yuriy Lutsenko, asserting that Biden had pressured Ukraine to fire a prosecutor to end an investigation into his son's activities related Burisma.<sup>121</sup>

But Ukrainian officials tell me there was one crucial piece of information that Biden must have known but didn't mention to his audience: The prosecutor he got fired was leading a wide-ranging corruption probe into the natural gas firm Burisma Holdings that employed Biden's younger son, Hunter, as a board member.

Solomon's columns for The Hill, which were seen as “a central part of a smear campaign against former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch”, came under scrutiny during the impeachment of the president.<sup>122</sup> The Hill took the unusual step to convene working panels to review Solomon's opinion columns for The Hill and issued a report in February 2020 in which they concluded that “Solomon failed to identify important details about key Ukrainian sources, including the fact that they had been indicted or were under investigation. In other cases, the sources were his own attorneys.”<sup>123</sup> The ‘Ukrainian nightmare’ article cited above now has an editor's note appended to it:

Editor's note: Subsequent to the publication of this op-ed and the election of a new president in Ukraine, Yuriy Lutsenko was removed from office and criminal proceedings opened against him for possible abuse of power; he also subsequently told the Los Angeles Times that he'd seen no evidence of wrongdoing by the Bidens.

During impeachment testimony, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs George Kent said there was the “possibility of a perception of a conflict of interest” regarding Hunter Biden's role at Burisma and then-Vice President Biden's role in Ukraine affairs for the Obama administration.

In the spring of 2019, the allegations against Biden were taken up by mainstream media; the smear campaign against Joe Biden succeeded in enticing center and center-left media into covering the story.

Ken Vogel and Iuliia Mendel wrote an influential May 1 article in the New York Times entitled: Biden Faces Conflict of Interest Questions That Are Being Promoted by Trump and Allies.<sup>124</sup> Vogel

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<sup>120</sup> <https://twitter.com/dbongino/status/1096753865989521410>

<https://twitter.com/dbongino/status/1109447208129187840>

<sup>121</sup> <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/436816-joe-bidens-2020-ukrainian-nightmare-a-closed-probe-is-revived>

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/19/hill-john-solomon-failed-disclose-details-115976>

<sup>123</sup> <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/483600-the-hills-review-of-john-solomons-columns-on-ukraine>

<sup>124</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/us/politics/biden-son-ukraine.html>



promoted the story on Twitter, accompanied by tweet text that underscored the scandal and buried the headline's attempt to underscore that the story was being pushed by Trump's allies:



*Ken Vogel promotes his influential New York Times article on Joe and Hunter Biden in Ukraine*

The prominence of this article in the New York Times gave the scandal credibility it would not have had otherwise. The article was subject to immediate criticism that it failed to clearly debunk a false claim that was metastasizing,<sup>125</sup> particularly in conservative media. The impact of the story lingered for many months as conservative sources linked to the story to validate the scandal. Buried deep into the story in the 19th paragraph is the statement:<sup>126</sup>

No evidence has surfaced that the former vice president intentionally tried to help his son by pressing for the prosecutor general's dismissal. Some of his former associates, moreover, said Mr. Biden never did anything to deter other Obama administration officials who were pushing for the United States to support criminal investigations by Ukrainian and British authorities — and potentially to start its own investigation — into Burisma and its owner, Mykola Zlochevsky, for possible money laundering and abuse of office.

Over the course of 2019, much ink was spilled over the Burisma story. In July, the Washington Post published, “As vice president, Biden said Ukraine should increase gas production. Then his son got a

<sup>125</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2019/05/10/rumors-joe-biden-scandal-ukraine-absolute-nonsense-reformer-says/>

<sup>126</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-new-york-times-reporter-dug-into-ukraine-and-the-democrats-critics-are-still-howling/2019/11/15/4fb97812-0661-11ea-ac12-3325d49eacaa\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-new-york-times-reporter-dug-into-ukraine-and-the-democrats-critics-are-still-howling/2019/11/15/4fb97812-0661-11ea-ac12-3325d49eacaa_story.html)

job with a Ukrainian gas company.”<sup>127</sup> Adam Entous wrote a piece in the *New Yorker* that is still being cited on Hunter Biden’s potential impact on Joe Biden’s political fortunes.

Beyond the false allegations being peddled by John Solomon, Rudy Giuliani, and others, there is an underlying fact that Hunter Biden has cashed in on his father’s name<sup>128</sup>, and while not illegal, it is still appropriately a problem for the Biden campaign that Ezra Klein described as a form of “soft corruption that voters find loathsome.”<sup>129</sup> In October 2019, Klein was making the case that the financial entanglements of Joe Biden’s family needed a full airing, so they do not become a liability in the general election as Hillary’s emails had been in 2016.

By January 2020, the framing of the Burisma saga in mainstream media had changed from a politically damaging conflict of interest story involving Joe Biden’s son to an abuse of presidential power at the heart of the impeachment of President Trump. In an ironic twist, Trump’s mission to force Ukraine to publicly announce a corruption investigation into Biden deflated the scandal that had dogged Biden in 2019. Although conservative media continued to push the discredited version of events—that Biden had pressured Ukraine to fire its head prosecutor to end an investigation of his son Hunter—mainstream media coverage was careful to highlight the unfounded nature of the allegations. The most cited story in January about Burisma reports on Russian efforts to hack into the energy company and describes the events as another attempt by the Russians to help Trump in the 2020 election.<sup>130</sup> The second most cited story, also in the *New York Times*, is an interview with Joe Biden. The first question was about Burisma and started: “I want to start — you fought corruption in Ukraine. There is no indication that you or your son did anything wrong or were part of any corruption in Ukraine.”<sup>131</sup> When the *Washington Post* reported on the negotiations over witnesses in the Senate impeachment trial and the possibility of a witness deal that might include one or more of the Bidens in exchange for Bolton, they say of the Burisma story: “Trump and his personal lawyer Rudolph W. Giuliani have promoted an unfounded allegation that Biden tried to stop a corruption investigation in Ukraine to protect his son, who is no longer on Burisma’s board. Hunter Biden was not accused of wrongdoing.”<sup>132</sup> Another highly cited *Washington Post* article recounts Republican efforts to ensure that Bolton does not testify at the impeachment trial. Of Burisma, they write: “Hunter Biden served on the board of Ukrainian gas company Burisma, and Trump and his personal lawyer Rudolph W. Giuliani have promoted an unfounded theory that Joe Biden, while vice president, tried to stop a corruption investigation of the company to protect his son. Hunter Biden is no longer

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<sup>127</sup>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-vice-president-biden-said-ukraine-should-increase-gas-production-then-his-son-got-a-job-with-a-ukrainian-gas-company/2019/07/21/f599f42c-86dd-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-vice-president-biden-said-ukraine-should-increase-gas-production-then-his-son-got-a-job-with-a-ukrainian-gas-company/2019/07/21/f599f42c-86dd-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb_story.html)

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/will-hunter-biden-jeopardize-his-fathers-campaign>

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2020-presidential-election/2019/10/16/20916760/joe-biden-hunter-biden-democratic-debate-trump-2020>

<sup>130</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/us/politics/russian-hackers-burisma-ukraine.html>

<sup>131</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/17/opinion/joe-biden-nytimes-interview.html>

<sup>132</sup>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-democrats-privately-mull-biden-for-bolton-trade-in-impeachment-trial/2020/01/21/e73b971a-3c71-11ea-baca-eb7ace0a3455\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-democrats-privately-mull-biden-for-bolton-trade-in-impeachment-trial/2020/01/21/e73b971a-3c71-11ea-baca-eb7ace0a3455_story.html)

on Burisma's board."<sup>133</sup> Politico's coverage of the tussle over impeachment trial witnesses includes: "There's no evidence Biden used his position as vice president to benefit his son's work with Burisma."

<sup>134</sup>

The innuendo that gained such prominence eight months earlier had been replaced by January with a clear debunking of the false claims coming from the right. Conservative media, of course, continued to push the false claims that helped to justify Trump's actions in Ukraine long after they were debunked, but they had lost their sway in center and center-left media. A key facet of Trump's 2016 election campaign appears to have been defused in 2020.

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-lawyers-senate-gop-allies-work-privately-to-ensure-bolton-does-not-testify-publicly/2020/01/20/cbc67ef0-3bae-11ea-8872-5df698785a4e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-lawyers-senate-gop-allies-work-privately-to-ensure-bolton-does-not-testify-publicly/2020/01/20/cbc67ef0-3bae-11ea-8872-5df698785a4e_story.html)

<sup>134</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/25/josh-hawley-biden-schiff-subpoena-votes-104610>

## Conclusions

**T**he three major topics in the media agenda for January and February—the impeachment of the president, the Democratic primaries, and the killing of Soleimani—were taken up across the media ecosystem. Yet the differences in emphasis and spin across the different political camps speaks volumes about the depth, persistence, and resilience of the asymmetric divide in American politics and the ability for the two sides to maintain narratives about political events that are so wildly divergent. Media devoted more attention to the Democratic primary, particularly in February. In January, the impeachment of the president received a comparable level of attention. Politically engaged users on social media exhibited a far greater appetite for partisan coverage. On the Democratic side, this focused largely on negative coverage of Trump and his administration, and on the impeachment proceedings and actions by Attorney General Barr and the Department of Justice to intervene in the sentencing of Roger Stone. For the Republicans, negative coverage of the Democrats took up much of their attention. The common thread from right and left is that the other side is a threat to the American way of life. The exception to the predominantly negative tone of popular coverage is on Facebook, where supporters of President Trump engaged with more celebratory videos about Trump.

In January and February, the divergent interests and media attention of Biden and Sanders supporters reflected the underlying battle for the Democratic party: the progressives that sought to push the party more decisively towards a platform of social and economic justice and of universal healthcare and environmental stewardship versus those that saw a moderate path as the best bet for reclaiming the White House in November. The narratives that emerged from the two camps suggested less of a two-sided debate over the future of specific policies—for example, whether Medicare for All or a more gradualist approach to healthcare policy was better—than two sides taking up different strategic approaches to the election. The Biden camp displayed a more focused anti-Trump orientation characterized by negative polarization. As is the general rule in political affairs in the United States, it appears that partisanship, negative partisanship, in particular, won out over nuanced coverage of topics and issues.

For Trump supporters, these two months would have felt like an onslaught of negative coverage of the presidency, and in that sense, this time period was like all others over the past several years. The daily missteps by the Trump administration offered a rich target for accountability journalism and resulted in a cornucopia of reporting for Democrats and liberals that is not only informative of the most important news of the time and grounded in meticulously detailed journalism but also resonant with the partisan appetite for identity-confirming news coverage. For audiences of media coverage from the center to left, it would be difficult to draw any conclusion other than that the Trump administration has been unfortunate for the United States and the world.

Conservative America, spanning the Trump administration, right-wing media, and politically engaged Trump supporters, appears to have weathered the media storm and come out with their partisan perspectives and belief systems intact. They have done so while largely following the same topics and stories as the rest of the country and tracking the coverage of mainstream media. The principal distinction is the reframing of the news into terms that support a narrative in which Trump is the protagonist. The job of investigative journalism is still in the hands of traditional media organizations outside the right-wing media ecosystem. One of the primary functions of conservative media, in turn, is to recast the coverage of mainstream media: to soften, to parry, to deflect, and to distract. In the Trump-dyed reality, the ‘call was perfect,’ the impeachment was a witch hunt, and there is no question whether the killing of Soleimani strengthened the hand of the United States internationally and made the country safer. It would be wrong to conclude that conservative audiences are shielded from the critical coverage of center and center-left media outlets. Conservative media audiences are reminded every day of the negative coverage coming from outside their media sphere. They are provided with an interpretive lens that casts all reporting as a partisan exercise. A critical element of this is the discrediting of traditional journalism and the consistent reminder that we live in a partisan world in which the other side is acting in bad faith and cannot be trusted. Sustaining this narrative is a collective endeavor that cannot be pinned entirely on Trump, conservative media, or their audiences. All are willing participants, a fact that contributes to the stability and resilience of the system. Prominent dissenters are often smeared and bounced out of the club. In these two months, we saw both John Bolton and Mitt Romney discredited and sent into exile. Others are simply ignored, as we saw with Judge Nap after he penned a compelling case why President Trump was deserving of impeachment.

The narrative shaping power of conservative media was clearly in evidence in the first two months of 2020. However, compared to 2016, we saw less right-wing influence on the reporting of mainstream media in January and February. The efforts to tarnish the public’s perception of Joe Biden with the stain of corruption, which succeeded so well when applied to Hillary Clinton in 2015 and 2016, did not fare as well on Biden. The same dynamics were at play in 2019 when mainstream media amplified and provided credence for the false and exaggerated versions of the Burisma scandal, but by the opening months of 2020, the framing in mainstream media had shifted enough that the principal storylines in mainstream media were the false claims being promoted by Trump and his allies and the abuse of presidential power associated from Trump’s efforts to pressure Ukraine into opening an investigation into Biden. Although it would be premature to pronounce that mainstream media is now immune to manipulation from the right, mainstream media and their audiences appear to be more conscious, and to some degree, less susceptible to propaganda from the right in 2020 than they were in 2016.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> In another report, we provide a detailed analysis of disinformation related to mail-in voter fraud. There we find that the mainstream press was much less able to resist a more direct, political elite-led disinformation campaign. Benkler et al., <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2020/Mail-in-Voter-Fraud-Disinformation-2020>

Another key difference from 2016, when Trump succeeded not only in attracting a major share of media attention but also in setting the agenda, Trump was more frequently thrust into a defensive posture in the first two months of 2020. Apart from coverage of the Democratic primaries, Trump was the primary focus of attention but frequently in a position of deflecting the negative press associated with impeachment.

In a world in which good news is hard to find, conservative media audiences are more susceptible to and willing to engage with false reporting and conspiracies. This is evidence in the linking patterns of conservative media and even more pronounced on social media. In a media sphere designed to produce identity-confirming narratives, the mechanisms for accountability are trained not on sources of substandard reporting and disinformation but on deviance from the party line. It is this environment that serves as fertile ground for the Gateway Pundit, True Pundit, and the like to spread conspiracies among partisan audiences. As we saw with Pizzagate and now see with the tangled web of QAnon, there seems to be no manner of disinformation that is beyond the pale if in service of partisanship.

There is a devoted audience for conservative media: those primed to defend a president who by October would be described by the New York Times editorial board as “a racist demagogue presiding over an increasingly diverse country; an isolationist in an interconnected world; a showman forever boasting about things he has never done and promising to do things he never will.”<sup>136</sup> In January and February, these dedicated supporters tuned in to a self-reinforcing propaganda system that helped to ensure that President Trump survived impeachment and provided both pressure upon, and cover for, the Senators who acquitted him, but had largely lost its ability to influence public perceptions outside of the confines of the right-wing media system. In the next report, we describe the interplay of dueling media ecosystems and their coverage of the coronavirus outbreak starting in March.

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<sup>136</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/10/16/opinion/donald-trump-worst-president.html>