Fall 2020

Conservative Media's Coverage of Coronavirus on YouTube: A Qualitative Analysis of Media Effects on Consumers

Michael J. Layer

Recommended Citation

Layer, M. J.(2020). *Conservative Media's Coverage of Coronavirus on YouTube: A Qualitative Analysis of Media Effects on Consumers.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/6133

CONSERVATIVE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF CORONAVIRUS ON YOUTUBE:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA EFFECTS ON CONSUMERS

by

Michael J. Layer

Bachelor of Arts
Goucher College, 2017

_____

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Mass Communications

College of Information and Communications

University of South Carolina

2020

Accepted by:

Linwan Wu, Director of Thesis

Leigh Moscowitz, Reader

Anli Xiao, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

To the wonderful creators on the internet whose parasocial relationships have taught me so much about the world and myself - namely Olly Thorn, Philosophy Tube; Carlos Maza; Natalie Wynn, Contrapoints; Lindsey Ellis; Bryan David Gilbert; Katy Stoll and Cody Johnson, Some More News; and Robert Evans, Behind the Bastards - thank you.

To Dr. Linwan Wu - I am profoundly grateful for your understanding, guidance, and patience. I was not prepared for how demanding 2020 would be and I am thankful there are people like you in this world who make it easier.

To my parents, Frank and Debra Layer, thank you for who you are and who you have raised me to be.

ABSTRACT

As of late November 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic killed more than 250,000 people in America despite having early warning of the virus' lethality and some of the world's best public health institutions. In today's media landscape, conservative commentators have an enormous influence on President Donald Trump as well as American political discourse broadly. This study focused how the top conservative commentators on YouTube influenced their audience by their coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. By examining over 1,600 YouTube comments from videos from February to July 2020, this paper investigates who conservative media consumers principally blamed, the socio-political influences behind those criticisms, and how commenters interacted in the comment section.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the outset, many expected the United States of America to be able to contain the novel coronavirus like it had handled previous pandemics. Other comparable countries like New Zealand, Iceland, Australia, Brunei, China, Taiwan and Thailand were able to successfully manage its spread largely through strict lockdowns, mask ordinances, clear risk communication strategies, and a national unity to accept momentary inconveniences for the common good (Bremmer, Jun. 12, 2020). As of September 2020, the U.S. is still the global leader of both coronavirus cases and deaths and in late July, White House coronavirus advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci testified that it is unlikely Covid-19 will ever be eradicated (Lovelace, Jul. 22, 2020). How did it get this bad? As the American Federal Government failed to muster a sufficient national response to contain the coronavirus, and would later shift responsibility away from the federal level, local governments took steps to implement new laws to contain the spread of the coronavirus. What some might not have expected would be the significant resistance from their own citizens from measures that would keep them safe in the long run. On June 23rd, Florida's Palm Beach County council heard testimony from agitated activists who believed that their own government was conspiring against them.

"You literally cannot mandate somebody to wear a mask, knowing that that mask is killing people. It literally is killing people. We, the people, are waking up… and every single one of you [lawmakers] who are obeying

the Devil's laws [by mandating mask ordinances in public spaces] are going to be arrested. You, doctor, are going to be arrested for crimes against humanity… Every single one of you are going to be punished by God. You cannot escape God not even with the mask [ordinance] or the six feet [social distancing recommendation] ... All of you are practicing the Devil's laws. What happened to Bill Gates? Why isn't he in jail? Why is Hillary Clinton not in jail? Why are all these pedophiles that are demanding you to listen to their rules, why are they not in jail? Is it because you're a part of them? Are you a part of the deep state?"

While her testimony was subsequently mocked online, her misunderstanding of the public health crisis was emblematic of something more: The American public is not only reckoning with a media landscape rife with misinformation (Orlowski, 2020), but are so politically motivated that many reject information that is counter to their preconceived worldview (Uscinski et al., 2020; Kahan, 2017).

According to a March GallupPoll, people's opinions about whether it is easier or harder to be informed are strongly related to their attitudes about the media. Seventy percent of those who have a positive opinion of the media say it is easier to be informed, while 64 percent of those with a negative opinion of the news media say it is harder (Ritter, Apr. 9, 2020). These numbers would fall even harder along partisan lines a month later. In April, 85 percent of Democrats said the Trump administration was a main source of misinformation about the virus, but only 4 percent of Republicans agreed. For 75 percent of Republicans, mainstream national news was the main source of virus misinformation, but only 2 percent of Democrats agreed.

We have yet to know the final global impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic but the delays, denials, and misinformation about COVID-19 have exacerbated its spread and slowed pandemic response across the world, particularly in the U.S. (e.g., Abutaleb et al., 2020). Americans are divided about many political issues, but how did the severity of the coronavirus become a partisan fight? An August YouGov poll found that nearly three-fourths of Republicans approved of how the U.S. was responding to coronavirus, while 75 percent of self-identifying liberals said the U.S. response was very bad. Ten percent of registered Democrats and 33 percent of registered independents believe that the 185,000 coronavirus deaths were acceptable. Among registered Republicans, 57 percent believed those deaths were an acceptable amount (Salavanto et al., Aug 23, 2020).

While the role that misinformation played in slowing the American's federal government's response to COVID-19 is better understood, less is known about what role the media played in spreading that misinformation.

Americans' attention to the news has increased from early December 2019 to March 2020 (Ritter, Apr. 9, 2020) but where they would go to get accurate information about the coronavirus depended on a number of factors. According to the April Gallup/Knight Foundation poll, younger people (18-34) were more likely to consult health professionals or official health organization websites directly while older people (55+) were more likely to get information from the one or two news sources they trust most (Jones, May 11, 2020).

Polling from the early stages of the pandemic suggests that many Americans were misinformed about COVID-19 from the beginning. In early March 2020, a poll

conducted by YouGov and The Economist found that 13 percent of Americans believed the coronavirus was a hoax, 49 percent believed the coronavirus was man made, and 44 percent believed the threat of coronavirus was being exaggerated for political reasons (Economist, 2020). A mid April Gallup/Knight Foundation poll found that 58 percent of US adults say they are well-informed about the virus while 36 percent say they're overwhelmed by all of the information going around (Jones, May 11, 2020).

This divide seems to be consequential - as the decisions that Americans made to learn about the virus informed their beliefs about the virus and their behavior. A March 1st Civiqs poll found 68 percent of Democrats were moderately or extremely concerned about COVID-19, but only 21 percent of Republicans expressed moderate or extreme concern (Badger and Quealy, 2020). Another Quinnipiac University poll released early in March found that roughly 6 in 10 Republican voters were not especially concerned that the coronavirus would disrupt their lives (Quinnipiac University/Poll, 2020; Russonello, 2020a). Further, there have been considerable partisan gaps with respect to how citizens were responding to the crisis, such as washing their hands, working from home, or changing their travel plans (Stecula, 2020).

The variation in media coverage of the pandemic in its early stages may help explain these partisan differences. Some American media, particularly popular right-leaning outlets and pundits, spouted hoaxes and conspiracy theories behind the pandemic: Sean Hannity said the virus was a fraud by the "deep state" trying to spread panic, manipulate the economy, and suppress dissent; Rush Limbaugh suggested the virus was a plot hatched by the Chinese to harm the U.S. economy; and Fox Business anchor Trish Regan told viewers that the worry over coronavirus "is yet another attempt to impeach

the president" (Peters and Grynbaum, 2020). As denial and disinformation exploded on right-leaning media outlets, many conservative elites correspondingly downplayed concern about the virus (Abutaleb et al., 2020; Badger and Quealy, 2020; Peters and Grynbaum, 2020; Russonello, 2020b; Warzel, 2020).

Previous academic research has demonstrated that people accept factually incorrect information as true if it originates from trusted sources or affirms their political and social worldviews (Kahan, 2017). Considerable evidence also suggests that political identity leads people to engage in motivated conspiracy endorsements that damage their political rivals (Flynn et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2016). These motivations may be amplified in an environment where the pandemic is highly politicized and trusted opinion leaders also endorse dubious COVID claims (Stecula, 2020). As a result, even seemingly innocuous denials or false claims from relied-upon media sources may lead individuals either into a false sense of security or lead others to ignore government recommendations.

The spread of misinformation about COVID-19 could be particularly problematic if misinformed people are subsequently less likely to trust advice from experts or medical professionals. Previous research has found that misinformation about vaccine safety is associated with increased skepticism about the role medical professionals play in the policy-making process (Motta et al. 2018) and also with noncompliance with expert-backed health behaviors (such as wearing sunscreen or vaccinating children) (Oliver and Wood, 2014). The highly partisan nature of early media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic had important public health consequences. The relative prominence of COVID misinformation shared by right-leaning media may have contributed to the spread of

misinformation about COVID and subsequently undermined support for information from public health experts.

Across multiple media channels, conservative media (Fox News, Breitbart, Daily Wire, Lowder with Crowder, and PragerU) regularly discussed misinformation about COVID-19 during the early stages of the pandemic. Further, nationally representative survey data suggest that people who consumed right-leaning media during that time were more likely to endorse COVID-19 misinformation (Uscinski et al., 2020). Misinformed people were more likely to believe that the CDC exaggerated COVID's health risks, suggesting that media coverage of the virus in the early stages of the pandemic may have had important public health consequences. While previous studies (Brigman et al., 2020; Uscinski et al., 2020) have examined the relationship between conservative media coverage and misinformation, this article will take a closer look at how conservative media audiences responded to conservative media coverage of the coronavirus.

The author decided to focus the attention on media effects from YouTube because it is tremendously influential as a popular social media platform, but its moderation of politically motivated conspiracy theories has been lax in recent years (Lewis, 2018). In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, more than a quarter of Americans get their news from YouTube (Stocking et al., Sept. 28, 2020). However, researchers have pointed out problems with YouTube's algorithm (Lewis, 2018; Orolowski, 2020), that promote controversial and shocking content because it is engaging rather than factual and explanatory content that can be trusted. Because of YouTube's low standards of content moderation, misinformation garners a wide audience and spreads quickly - embroiling the video hosting platform in a number of scandals. For example, the platform was

responsible for promoting conspiracy videos about the mass shooting in Las Vegas (Levin, Oct. 4, 2017), facilitated disinformation on such a scale that may have swayed the 2019 election in Brazil (Fisher and Taub, Aug. 11, 2019), and being the platform used most by fascist groups in the US to indoctrinate others into their far-right world view (Evans, 2018). While previous studies (Brigman et al., 2020; Uscinski et al., 2020) have examined the relationship between conservative media coverage and coronavirus misinformation on television and on Twitter, this article will focus specifically of conservative news coverage on YouTube.

In this article, the author will be examining how the conservative coverage of the coronavirus on YouTube affected its audience by examining user comments across three channels: a total of more than 1,500 user comments (the top 30 comments from over 50 videos). This study will be examining the subject of these comments: how much of the audiences' ire was focused on external threats, how their internal processes were influenced by social biases, and how the comment section became a virtual space to engage with a like-minded community.

This article exists at the nexus of several disparate fields of study in mass communication. Particularly, it relies on previous studies of conservative media (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Hopkins and Ladd, 2014) and explores the history of conservative media as it adapts to new technologies. As it relates to social media and participatory culture, this article relies on recent studies on the kinds of influence that YouTube has on its audience (Orlowski, 2020; Lewis, 2018 & 2019). Finally, this article seeks to expand on coronavirus misinformation studies (Brigman et al., 2020; Uscinski et al., 2020) that seeks to understand why lawmakers and their citizens would not adopt

simple public health measures to slow the spread of coronavirus. Media practitioners

should use this study to reflect on the impact that political influencers, particularly on

YouTube, can have on spreading misinformation about the politicized pandemics. This

article will expand on the existing study of social media's facilitation of the spread of

misinformation and examine the kinds of relationships consumers have with conservative

news media.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 HOW SCIENTIFIC CONSENSUS IS POLITICALLY UNDERMINED IN
THE MEDIA

In the wake of the World Health Organization declaring that the coronavirus
pandemic would be a world catastrophe, they launched a platform designed to combat the
spread of misinformation (Zarocostas, 2020). This platform, EPI-WIN, was supposed to
combat the spread of misinformation around the virus and prevent the ensuing 'info-
demic,' a portmanteau of the word 'information' and 'pandemic' used to describe the
wealth of misinformation and conspiracy theories that would be widely available on the
internet. While many world leaders would describe the virus as a common enemy that
divided factions must unite to combat (Oprysko and Luthi, Mar. 18 2020), that did not
insulate the response effort from being highly politicized to suit certain American
political goals. In fact, the scientific consensus around taking governmental action and
acting in the favor of public health, has a long history of being undermined politically in
American media (Oreskes and Conway, 2010).

This history of undue skepticism about scientific consensus has an impact on the
public trust in scientific experts and public health officials (Motta et al. 2018; Oliver and
Wood, 2014). Despite the severity of the coronavirus and the need for immediate,

decisive action to contain its spread, the necessary public health measures were not immediately followed because of certain political interests and entrenched media dynamics suited to cater to those interests.

Skepticism around scientific consensus has been a main feature of American conservative ideology since 1965. This kind of undue skepticism about scientific consensus has been a major factor in a number of public health problems: smoking, asbestos, the hole in the ozone layer, fracking, second hand smoke, GMOs, acid rain, CFC's, climate change, and now around the government response to coronavirus.

In their 2010 book *Merchants of Doubt*, authors Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway documented the use of sowing doubt around scientific consensus as a political tactic they call the Tobacco Strategy. Historically, this process of preventing scientific consensus from becoming regulatory policy begins not with finding facts, but fighting them (Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

A crucial first step in this process involves finding highly visible scientists who can produce a public study that does not accord with the scientific consensus. For example, in February 1988, Philip Morris International hired scientists deliberately outside of the smoking industry to "be able to produce research or stimulate controversy" around the scientific consensus and create the illusion of a continued scientific debate, when in actuality there was none (Schwartz, May 9, 1997). This parallel can be seen 23 years later when Fox News host Sean Hannity read a letter on March 23 from an unidentified doctor "in the New York area" about the effectiveness of treating coronavirus with hydroxychloroquine (Media Matters, Mar. 23 2020). It can also be seen over a month later when Dr. Daniel Erickson and Dr. Artin Massihi went viral for

publishing a study comparing the virus' severity to the flu, garnering over 4 million views, and a lengthy interview with Fox News' Laura Ingram on April, 28, 2020 (Times of San Diego, Apr. 28, 2020). In both cases, those scientists' credentials were leveraged by public affairs people, including those on social media and in the news.

The Tobacco Strategy relies on scientists, public relations experts, partisan media, and lawyers to "maintain the controversy" and "keep the debate alive" in the court of public opinion in order to avoid governmental action (Losovitz, Feb. 25, 2017). A second important step in the Tobacco Strategy is the desire for a continuous public debate between the two sets of scientists (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). In fact, the presence of the two sets of scientists are designed to conflate the posturing that happens in political discourse with robust scientific debate. In the context of a debate, the scientists' credentials are used as a way of concealing possible political motivations and thus the disagreement is interpreted as a scientific debate rather than a political one. Because of this, the scientific consensus of one side can appear to be in dispute if the opposing argument comes from another scientist. As long as the opposing side can engage in a vociferous debate in the public eye, the 'consensus' is perceived to be still up for consideration and not yet worthy of immediate action.

In the context of coronavirus, as conservative media and right wing politicians in America resisted immediate and strict public health measures, largely by following the Tobacco Strategy. It is important to note that these lawmakers and media figures delineated slightly from the Tobacco Strategy as they did the majority of the debating on behalf of the doctors, rather than having the doctors do it themselves. Media Matters for

America, an organization that monitors right-wing disinformation across multiple channels, published almost over 850 stories about coronavirus misinformation from conservative media as of September. In a brief overview of their published stories, few of the stories' headlines contain scientists or medical professionals - with a majority of the misinformation coming from reactionary figures of rightwing media channels.

Regardless, the Tobacco Strategy appears to mirror the coronavirus response. Despite having politically motivated and often unscientific research, the opposing side can appear to be equal to the best scientific opinion as a public disagreement gives the impression of a serious debate, whose merits are worthy of discussion. Because scientists' credentials are so heavily used in this public discussion, artificially inflated doubt can be conflated with healthy scientific skepticism. It creates the impression that everything is unresolved and thus nothing can be done yet: "Doubt is our product" ran the infamous memo written by one tobacco industry executive in 1969, "since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the minds of the general public" (Oreskes and Conway, 2010 pg. 34; Smoking and Health Proposal, 1969).

Regardless of their credibility or credentials, when each 'side' is given equal time, their arguments are perceived to be of equal importance, and thus the matter is ongoing and undetermined. The presence of this debate can be further complicated when there are multiple, possibly politically motivated sources who can repeat the unscientific claim and appear to give it corroboration. In our modern media ecosystem, of media bubbles and echo chambers, news media networks and prominent social media profiles can reach thousands of people and can even unintentionally give oxygen to misinformation and conspiracy theories by making the two narratives appear to be equally worthy of

consideration (Orlowski, 2020). Even though public health measures have the backing of scientific rigor and scholarship, and the other doesn't, something patently false like anti-vaccination conspiracies can appear to be true if it has enough public salience (Jang et al., 2017; Maza, May 9, 2019).

Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) developed a measure to understand how humans perceive truth and developed the Coherence Test to determine whether a fact-claim can be accepted as true (Christian, 1998). According to the Coherence Test, a claim can only be accepted as true if it coheres with facts that have already been accepted as true. For example, consider the following fact claim: There are no sharks in Lake Murray. Under the Coherence Test, one can compare this claim to other accepted facts like 1) Lake Murray is freshwater, 2) most sharks live in saltwater, 3) the Saluda Dam closes the lake off to the ocean, 4) Freshwater sharks cannot swim past the dam, and 5) no one has ever reported being bitten by a shark at Lake Murray.

However the Coherence Test has a serious flaw as it relies on a previous set of assumptions that are believed to be true, whose veracity also largely depends on public salience. In fact, Ciuk and Yost (2016) found that people's willingness to adopt policy-relevant information instead of partisan cues depends on the salience of a particular issue. While this body of research is expanding, Yeyati et al. (2020) found that partisan elites can have degrees of influence on public opinion. According to their research, the endorsement of ideas from party elites can polarize public opinions when no prior polarization exists. Using partisan and leader cues prove of little use in bridging opinion gaps and building policy support in political climates that are not already polarized.

2.2 HOW CONSERVATIVE MEDIA BEGAN AND HOW IT OPERATES

The emergence of partisan news - as well as political media that presents itself as news - broadly emerged after the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. The policy, aimed at mandating newscasters to give equal time to two sides of a controversial issue, was broadly aimed at making sure that Americans were uniformly informed about 'both sides' of an issue to prevent individual media groups from having an outsized influence on American political discourse. At the time, explicitly conservative media was relegated to William F. Buckley's The National Review and the monthly American Spectator (Anderson, Sep. 2017). When the Fairness Doctrine was repealed in 1987, Rush Limbaugh launched his national right-wing radio show a year later and inspired others across the country. In the 90's Rupert Murdoch conceived of a conservative alternative to CNN and, with the help of Nixon aide Roger Ailes, launched the Fox News Channel which joined the airwaves in 1996 (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005).

In June 2011, the Nixon presidential library resurfaced a 318 page memo from Ailes outlining his plans in 1970 to be "Putting the GOP on TV News" (Cook, Jun. 30, 2011). Ailes' plan was "to provide pro-administraiton, videotape hard news actualities to the major cities of the United States" in order to circumvent the gatekeeping of conventional news media. Ultimately, Ailes' strategy was to undermine conventional journalistic reporting and set a new media agenda, one that was always favorable to Nixon and the Republican party. In the memo, he envisioned having a media organization designed to disseminate interviews with pro-Nixon Republicans directly to their constituency so that they could directly influence public opinion without "the censorship, the priorities, and prejudices of network news selectors and disseminators."

With a fawning media organization, Republicans and the Nixon White House

would be able to control the agenda setting power of the news media to its advantage.

This plan to create a pro-Republican media organization specifically relied on television

because "television news is watched more often than people read newspapers, than

people listen to the radio, than people read or gather any other form of communication.

The reason: People are lazy. With television you just sit—watch—listen. The thinking is

done for you." Thus when Ailes later launched Fox News, it differentiated itself from

other major television news networks as being "balanced" and "fair," and painted

conventional news networks as deceitful and illegitimate.

Because technology at the time was slowly advancing and the vast

communications infrastructure that exists today was still being built, the Fox News

Channel was not broadcasted across the country at the same time. Initially, the company

had to negotiate with individual cable companies and would take until the mid 2000s to

be accessible to the entire country. Due to the incremental layout, researchers were able

to determine that the individual media markets that aired the Fox News Channel

increased turnout among Republican voters and induced independents to vote for George

W. Bush in 2000 (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Hopkins and Ladd, 2014). Additionally,

Clinton and Emamordo (2014) found evidence that the congressional representatives of

the areas where Fox News aired marginally reduced their support for President Bill

Clinton.

A significant aspect of how partisan media works is what Kahan (2017) refers to

as identity-protective cognition, which describes a tendency of culturally diverse

individuals to selectively credit and dismiss evidence in patterns that reflect their

preconceived worldview. He found that people can accept factually incorrect information as true if it originates from trusted sources or affirms their political and social worldviews. Broadly, the existence of partisan media allows audiences to choose the narrative about an event that they agree with, rather than subjecting themselves to mainstream coverage that could contain narratives that disagree with their preconceived notions and expose the audiences to the possible identity-threatening feelings that may arise from reconciling the two (Kahan, 2020).

Considerable evidence also suggests that political identity leads people to engage in motivated conspiracy endorsement impugning their political rivals (Flynn et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2016). These motivations may be amplified in an environment where the pandemic is highly politicized and trusted opinion leaders also endorse dubious COVID claims (Stecula, 2020). As a result, even seemingly innocuous denials or false claims from relied-upon media sources may lead individuals either into a false sense of security or lead others to ignore public health recommendations.

The success of conservative media cannot be overstated. Fox News is the most watched cable news network in the country and has been for a while. In both June 2020 and July 2020, Fox News was the highest-rated television channel in the prime-time hours of 8 to 11 p.m. The average live Fox News viewership in those hours outstripped cable rivals like CNN, MSNBC and ESPN, as well as the broadcast networks ABC, CBS and NBC, according to Nielsen (Grynbaum, Aug. 9, 2020). In short, there was nothing more popular on television than Tucker Carlson Tonight, Hannity, and The Laura Ingraham Show - for better or worse, Fox News Programming is primetime television (Grynbaum, Aug. 9, 2020).

As a whole, the channel generates an estimated $2.7 billion for its parent company 21st Century Fox (Mayer, Mar. 11, 2019), and its influence on American politics is unparalleled. President Donald Trump is not only a frequent guest for interviews, he also regularly consults with its programmers, and employs many former Fox News staffers in his administration (Mayer, Mar. 11, 2019). The President spends much of his time in office watching television (Haberman et al., Dec. 9, 2017; Gertz, Jan. 05, 2018). His tweets regularly follow the Fox News programming that he consumes so closely that experts claim he "prefers to rely on conservative cable news hosts to understand current events" rather than the federally funded information gathering apparatus designed to help the American executive branch (Gertz, Jan. 5, 2018).

In fact, Fox News has catered to the political right for so long, that they now basically operate as a media arm for the Republican party, according to its own employees. In the wake of numerous layoffs in Fox News' fact-checking team, an anonymous current Fox News employee told the Daily Beast "It looks like Fox is more like an extension of [the Trump] administration, insead of a news network" (Falzone and Grove, Sept. 28, 2020). Even under oath, lawyers for Tucker Carlson Tonight, one of the most watched shows on television at the moment, referred to its own news program as "hyperbolic opinion commentary," and explicitly not "sober factual reporting." Fox News attorney Erin Murphy even questioned that "would a reasonable viewer be coming here [to Tucker Carlson Tonight] and thinking, 'this is where I'm going to be hearing the news of the day?' raising doubt that one of the most watched shows on the Fox News Network has audiences that do not believe that Tucker Carlson would tell the truth about the news (Pierce, Jun 21, 2020).

In addition to the words from Fox News' own employees, the actions of both media figures and Republican politicians raise questions about the right-wing news media. Numerous Fox News hosts have broken traditional norms of journalistic objectivity as they often campaign with the president and for the Republican party (Mayer, Mar. 11, 2019; Maza, Nov. 26 2018). Numerous politicians have gone on Fox News multiple times and received political benefit from campaign donations or governmental contracts because of it (Derysh, May 20, 2020; Merchant, Aug. 3, 2020; Caputo, Aug. 29, 2018).

As an example of conservative media's influence, Fox News is the most watched cable news program and its impact on electoral politics in America is unlike any other. Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) found that if the channel had never existed, the Republican presidential candidate's share of the two-party vote would have been 3.59 points lower in 2004 and 6.34 points lower in 2008. That means that John Kerry would have been the 2004 popular vote winner, and in an alternative 2008, Barack Obama's victory would have turned into a 60% landslide victory. Arceneaux et al. (2016) found that Fox News was so powerful at influencing congressional lawmakers, even Democrats increased support for Republican party positions on divisive votes in the months before an election.

Fox News and conservative media also affects individuals in subtler ways. Ash and Poyker (2019) found that "exposure to conservative news causes judges to impose harsher criminal sentences... Fox News viewership increases incarceration length, and the effect is stronger for black defendants and for drug-related crimes." Vargo et al., (2017)

also found that partisan media is incredibly susceptible to consume and disseminate misinformation and fake news.

The success of conservative media coincided with the emerging technological platforms as well. The huge success of Limbaugh inspired a wide variety of conservative radio shows and without any substantial media regulation, created a vast network of conservative media airing misrepresentations, misinformation, and sometimes outright conspiracy theories (Williamson and Steel, Sept. 7, 2018). More media channels, including on television, the radio, and eventually on the internet, led to media a 'narrowcast' (Hamilton, 2005), resulting in media channels catering to different segments of the population. Partisan news networks emerged from this fragmented media environment (Webster, 2005), giving rise to individualized 'media bubbles' as opposed to the uniform broadcasting of the past (Stroud, 2011).

This narrowcast becomes even more challenging in the era of social media. According to a 2020 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 1 in 5 Americans get their news primarily from social media, less likely to closely follow major news stories, and less informed about the events themselves (Pew Research, Jul. 30 2020). The ability to curate one's source of information based on their appetite for news, political affiliation, or interest in newsworthy topics directly impacts their real-world response to their political reality (Orolowski, 2020). Bridgman et al. (2020) found that exposure to social media is associated with misperceptions about basic facts about COVID-19 while the inverse is true for news media.

Orolowski's (2020) *The Social Dilemma* outlines the effect that social media has on Americans' perception of their political reality. Because social media giants like

Facebook are so adept at collecting their users' data, they determine which users are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories and feed them conspiratorial content. In fact, they can find users who are susceptible to being radicalized by sensational political content and market that content directly to those users. Content producers can essentially target their audience with content they are sure to enjoy. Producers of political content on social media especially have perverse incentives as they will make more money based on how much attention they garner. There are financial incentives for these political social media influencers to make bold statements and calamitous predictions. Lewis (2018) found that these dynamics happen especially on conservative YouTube channels, whose coverage pushes their audience to political extremes on YouTube's platform.

2.3 CONSERVATIVE MEDIA IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

YouTube is among the most popular video-streaming platforms in the world and, because of its popularity, it has elevated certain content creators to celebrity and financial success. These content creators are able to amass huge platforms as its most popular creators can rival the celebrity of superstar athletes and traditional media figures (MorningConsult, 2019). Numerous media scholars have looked into how influential YouTubers are on their viewers (O'Calagahan el al., 2015; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Ferchaud et al., 2017; Lewis, 2018).

An important element of the research on YouTube has focused on the illusory social interactions (Horton and Wohl, 1956) that exists between the YouTube creator and their audience. These interactions, called parasocial relationships (PSR), can mimic the two-way relationships people have offline: through features on the platform, viewers can

20

communicate to creators and other viewers through comments or upload videos responding to other videos. Jung, Youn, and McClung (2007) found that these communicative features allow users to become active gratification seekers in similar ways as they would on other social networking platforms .

All of this is to suggest that a key factor in studying PSR is the perception of authenticity. Rubin and Rubin (1985) found that the perceived realism of a soap opera positively related to the audience's parasocial interaction of its characters. Levy (1979) found that one of the most common parasocial indicators of newscasters is that they "are almost like friends you see every day" (p.180). These PSRs are powerful as viewers find YouTube content creators to be credible and trustworthy (Rasmussen, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Ault, 2014). Several quantitative analyses have found similar results (Chapple and Cownie, 2017; Morris and Anderson, 2015), with some investigating the perceived intimacy between YouTube creators and their audiences (Berryman and Kavka, 2017).

This perceived authenticity is a key aspect of the popularity of YouTube influencers, conservative political influencers use that both as a marketing tool and rhetorical technique (Lewis, 2019). In this way, by using subtle techniques and emphasizing "relatability, authenticity, and accountability" viewers feel like they can have a closer, less polished connection to the conservative YouTuber that doesn't exist on television. Lewis (2018) outlines how YouTubers and their audience have a feedback loop relationship where they are both shaped by the coverage and the source of its demand - elevating influencers not based on their adherence to journalistic norms but on who can best cater to their expectations.

When YouTube was created in 2005, it was conceived as a video library that contained trivial videos that wouldn't have significant effects on American political discourse, but as the platform grew and its users became more savvy, it became tremendously influential on political discourse. In the past three years alone, the now Google owned company has faced a number of high profile public relations scandals: including promoting conspiracy videos about the mass shooting in Las Vegas (Levin, Oct. 4, 2017), facilitating disinformation on such a scale that may have swayed the 2019 election in Brazil (Fisher and Taub, Aug. 11, 2019), and being the platform used most by fascist groups in the US to indoctrinate others into their far-right world view (Evans, 2018; Lewis, 2018).

In 2011, former conservative radio host Dennis Prager wanted to harness new technologies and create a conservative media channel on YouTube. This new channel would be made in opposition to a "Liberal Media" conspiracy (which we'll examine later) that he sees as dominated by liberal political activists who have infiltrated every level of knowledge production, namely in the news media and universities. The channel's concept is giving the viewer a short, digestible conservative perspective about conventional political topics that are designed to be in place of a semester long college course on the subject:

> "Our kids aren't learning that America is a land of opportunity, a defender
> of freedom around the world, a source of pride. They're learning that
> America is land of inequality and racism and imperialist power,
> something to be ashamed of. Is there a way to undo this damage? There

is: it's called PragerU, a totally new concept in education " ("The Mission

of PragerU," Aug. 24, 2015).

The channel has grown since 2011 and is now a 501(c)(3) that accepts online

donations through its website. Although portraying itself as a university, as well as Prager

admitting to Mother Jones that it was created as a virtual university (Oppenheimer, Mar.

2018), the channel's website says it is not an accredited university and does not claim to

be [anymore]. In fact, PragerU is largely funded by fracking billionaires Dan and Farris

Wilks, who were supportive of Prager's attempt to mass-produce conservative narratives

in the trappings of an academic work (Shea, Apr. 30, 2015; Oppenheimer, Mar. 2018;

Johnston, May 7, 2018).

In a similar way, former Canadian voice actor and Fox News guest Steven

Crowder wanted to make a conservative alternative to political comedy shows. In 2009,

he began uploading comedy bits on YouTube and attracted the attention of PJ Media who

molded his burgeoning comedy career with his future as a political commentator. After

YouTube, he was hired by Fox News and then transitioned into his own show on

YouTube hosted by Glen Beck's BlazeTV (Dickinson, Jul. 11, 2017). Crowder has more

of a diversified revenue stream as he has one of the top political YouTube channels

(second to the liberal The Young Turks' 4.9 million subscribers), and regularly gets more

than 100,000 views per video. In addition to his affiliation with BlazeTV and ad revenue

from YouTube, he sells merchandise, and has an exclusive subscription service called his

"MugClub."

Crowder's videos present themselves to be the conservative version of political

comedy shows, but are filmed like sports radio shows as the host often bounces

conversation off of his co-hosts behind the audio controls. Crowder sometimes does segments that interact with the public. Some of his segments involve man on the street interviews, character sketches that involve the public, or debate requests with the public to "change his mind" about political subjects. His channel is influential as he has more than 4.5 million subscribers on YouTube, nearly twice as big as PragerU's 2.7 million subscribers or The Daily Wire's 2.2 million.

The Daily Wire, like the other conservative flavors of pop culture, is a news and opinion site that does not do any original reporting and its articles are often less than 500 words (Legum and Zekeria, Jun. 25 2020). It was founded in 2015 by Jeremy Boreing and Ben Shapiro, former editor of Brietbart.com. Shapiro, who initially wanted a writing job in Hollywood, transitioned into conservative commentary after graduating from Harvard Law School. Shapiro, like Crowder, prides himself on his skills in debate but sticks more towards a straightforward conservative media format.

Despite having a small news site that does not do original reporting, The Daily Wire is incredibly popular on social media, vastly overperforming traditional news media like The New York Times, CNN, The Washington Post, and HuffPost on Facebook (Legum and Zekeria, Jun 25. 2020). An investigation by the Popular Information newsletter found that a vast network of popular conservative pages on Facebook exist to promote Daily Wire content (Legum, Oct. 28, 2019). Leaks from Facebook employees to NBC News revealed that the site regularly shields conservative media sites like PragerU and The Daily Wire from persistent misinformation infractions (Solon, Aug. 7, 2020).

Despite having cozy relationships with Facebook, The Daily Wire does not appear to have a financial relationship with the social media giant. The Daily Wire appears to

have a diverse revenue stream, taking an initial investment from the Wilks fracking

billionaires, an exclusive subscription service, in addition to Shaprio accepting regular

speaking fees with various Koch Foundation groups (Nguyen, Dec. 9, 2018; Johnston,

Jun. 25 2019).

The three channels operate in similar ways and exist in the same media ecosystem

as they often host the creator of another channel onto their show (Lewis, 2018). The

YouTube algorithm also pushes viewers of one channel to watch videos from another

channel; thus while the three channels post different levels of views and engagement, it is

conceivable that they share many of the same audience (Lewis, 2018). PragerU brands

itself as being educational and being able to explain complex situations from a

conservative perspective into short digestible videos. While the channel features longer

discussion videos, they often cover a wide range of unrelated topics. Unlike PragerU's

shorter explanatory videos, Lowder with Crowder is centered around host Stephen

Crowder who claims to be a conservative comedian and discusses various news items

with his cohosts. He often does skits that involve mocking the public in some way and

likes to engage with the public in debates. Finally, the Daily Wire can be seen as more of

a traditional news network, or at least wraps itself in the trappings of a news broadcast.

The show is usually hosted by one person who gives a conservative slant on the news and

appears more to inform about subjects in the news rather than explain complex issues or

make jokes. It is important to acknowledge that while these channels present themselves

as authoritative, they do not produce original reporting.

In fact, it is the effect that these channels have on their audience that motivates

this inquiry. By examining audience comments, this article seeks to explore how the

coronavirus was understood by the audiences of the largest conservative YouTube channels. Particularly, this article seeks to explore the perspectives of the conservative YouTube audience about the coronavirus by asking three questions.

Q1: Who were conservative YouTube audiences wanting to blame?

By examining the external objects that commenters were concerned about, the author intends to gain a greater perspective on the entities or groups that they paid attention to during the pandemic. As previously mentioned, conservative groups were less likely to be concerned with the virus itself and this paper seeks to explore what they and the media they consumed paid attention to instead. In addition to focusing on the external objects, this article seeks to explore the socio-political ideologies that may inspire their worldview or their fascination with conservaitve YouTube. It is the author's hope that by examining these socio-political processes, researchers can better understand why conservative media audiences were less likely to adopt simple public health measures to control the spread of the virus.

Q2: What were the socio-political influences that commenters resonated with in conservative YouTube's coverage of the coronavirus pandemic?

Finally, this article seeks to do a more focused analysis on the YouTube medium itself. By investigating what the commenters reveal about themselves and how they speak to others, the author intends to explore the context of how the comment section connects its users.

Q3: What message does the medium of the comment section provide for its users?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This author selected the three most subscribed conservative media channels on

YouTube. They include "The Daily Wire" which has 2.13 million subscribers, "PragerU"

which has 2.7 million subscribers, and "Lowder with Crowder" which has 4.6 million

subscribers. In addition to their popularity on the platform, the channels represent a range

of overlapping conservative viewpoints that reject progressivism and wider social justice

movements, brand themselves in opposition to the "Liberal Media," and an adoration for

Republican politicians and conservative thinkers. The three channels also appear in

Lewis' (2018) 'Alternative Influence Network,' defined by mutual appearances in the

content of related conservative influencers. Finally, they fit similar conservative flavors

of popular media, as the Daily Wire mimics a conservative newscast, Lowder with

Crowder mimics a conservative political comedy show, and PragerU mimics a

conservative educational video.

Then the author went through all of their video archives on June 29th, 2020 and

looked at the title of the videos that contained the word 'virus,' 'coronavirus,' or

'COVID-19.' The author then only considered videos with 100,000 views or more

bringing the total from 104 to 54. Each video was ordered chronologically so that it

would be easier to understand the progression of their coverage. Then the author relied on

YouTube's top comment feature, which relies on YouTube's engagement metrics, copied and pasted the top 30 comments into a separate file, and were examined in that order. While each video was not watched in their entirety, all the 1,620 unique comments were examined critically.

This article looked at the comments from over 50 videos across a time period from February to the end of June. During this five month period, most Americans were learning about the novel coronavirus for the first time and how it would impact their lives. Further, the author believed this time was an important reference point as it would not be drowned out by more important news stories. During this time, the national attention would be mostly on COVID-19 as the 2020 Presidential election in early November was still four months away.

The subject of selected videos' coverage of COVID-19 mimicked the conventional legacy media coverage, often discussing major developments such as the implementation of public health measures or controversies in the conservative media echo-chamber. The timeframe for considered videos started in mid-February and ended before August. As one can imagine, the subjects of the comments were usually tied to the content of the video. For example, top comments were talking about New York Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the videos where she was prominently featured ("AOC Says Coronavirus Causing Racism…," "Greta & AOC use COVID19 to Push Climate Change…,"). While the majority of comments appeared to be supporting many conservative talking points about the virus, it is not accurate to say all of them agreed with the creator. Creators got pushback especially on coverage that downplayed the severity of COVID-19 and comparisons to the seasonal flu. While these comments

were interesting, they won't be considered for further examination in this analysis as they were not numerous enough and should be considered for further scholarship.

This analysis used a grounded approach to assign various themes to the comments under each video. After copying and pasting all of the comments in a separate file, they were then reviewed in chronological order. As the subject of the videos changed from video to video, the author looked for any connections between the comments from one video to the next. The author settled on the themes of external enemies, internal processes, and social processes as a way of categorizing the comments as it relates to the individual commenter. In addition, the author consulted similar studies that examined right-wing coronavirus coverage and compared the comments to existing trends in the relevant literature.

While the researcher did not watch all 54 videos, he did examine the top 30 comments from each of them. Videos were viewed when the subject of the comments deviated wildly from the previous video or when the author wanted to know what the commenters were referring to in their messages. The commenters' profiles remained anonymous in this article but can be seen in the appendix section. While the author struggled with anonymizing them in the appendix, the comments are publicly available on the original YouTube video.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In investigating this article's research questions, the author wanted to provide the reader with a brief overview of the findings. The external section will examine the external groups that were almost uniformly criticized by the commenters. The internal section will seek to understand the context of the comments and examine the processes involved in understanding the commenters' worldview. Finally, the social sections will examine how the commenters relate to others and identify themselves. Table 1 outlines the various themes and subsections of this article.

Table 4.1 Outline of Subsequent Analysis

I. <u>External</u>	II. <u>Internal</u>	III. <u>Social</u>
A. China	A. Overriding Suspicion	A. Talking to Host
B. The "Liberal Media"	B. Contempt for the Weak	B. Talking about "me"
C. Democrats	C. Change as unmasculine	C. Talking about "us"

4.1 CONTEMPT FOR EXTERNAL ENEMIES

This section will be discussing the top external entities that were almost uniformly criticized by both the commenters and the video hosts themselves. The first subtheme will focus on the contempt for China, the roots of 'yellow peril' discourse, and how that manifested in the

coronavirus comments. The second subtheme will discuss the "Liberal Media" conspiracy, the origins of the conspiracy, and how their criticisms echo old antisemitic conspiracies. Finally, the last subtheme will discuss the commenters' contempt for Democrats, how negative partisanship has shaped conservative media coverage, and its implications on how citizens perceive their political reality.

4.1 CHINA

The Covid 19 pandemic began in late 2019 as the virus was zoonotic in form and jumped from bats to humans in the city of Wuhan, China. Although it was unknown at the time, the virus was contracted by humans and spread asymptomatically in an open-air market, eventually becoming a super spreading event. It would take researchers another two months before realizing that the virus could be from people spread without obvious symptoms. From there, infected travelers went around the world spreading the virus to other parts of China as well as Europe in late December 2019.

In early January, the World Health Organization announced a mysterious coronavirus related pneumonia, but they would take until the end of the month to declare a global health emergency. From there, skeptics and political opportunists, including tabloid news sites The Daily Mail and The Washington Examiner, spread conspiracy theories falsely claiming that the virus could be a man-made biological weapon from China. Research suggests that during times of national crisis, but especially during pandemics, minority groups are historically scapegoated (Keil and Ali, 2006; Rohleder, 2007; Monson, 2017; White, 2020).

For years, the United States has had an adversarial relationship with East Asian countries, but specifically China. While economic ties have improved diplomatic relations over the years, Americans' cultural attitudes about East Asian countries and

31

their people have remained tragically regressive. Scholars referred to these biases and attitudes about East Asian groups as "Yellow Peril" and are characterized by the use of tropes as "dishonesty, disease, invasion, as well as cultural and political inferiority (Del Visco, 2017). These tropes are a major feature of Americans' perspective on the global east and have had a lasting impact on conservative attitudes of nationalism, anti-communism, and anti-immigration (Del Visco, 2017).

Yellow peril, much like other forms of racialization of ethnic groups in America, is not static. Instead, "Yellow Peril is a fluid designation that has been used alternatively to label various East Asian people as the 'enemy' of Western civilization and to signify 'invasion and infection of civility by an inferior culture'" (Lyman 2000, 684). While these tropes can be traced back centuries ago, these 'yellow peril' tropes largely still exist in conservative spaces today. As China has increased its influence over the global economy, President Donald Trump has exacerbated existing 'yellow peril' ideologies by worsening economic relations between the two countries and using them as a scapegoat to shirk responsibility for allowing the coronavirus to spread. Thus, it comes as no surprise that yellow peril fears appear in many of the comments of conservative media's coverage of coronavirus.

As outlined in Del Visco (2017), many comments castigate perceived dishonesty by the Chinese: "China lying is nothing new," "It's from China it's their fault… China messed up," "China is lying about the coronavirus," [the virus] "was man made in China," "why do you trust the Chinese numbers? They have never given any reason to believe them," "China is lying about the death rate. It's much higher than what they are pointing out, "You can NEVER trust the media OR the CCP!" The perceived dishonesty

32

of China is a main feature of the yellow peril attitudes in the coronavirus comments. Stemming from the condemnation of Chinese dishonesty is a major feature of yellow peril: invasion.

As Del Visco outlines, the fears of Chinese invasion can be through expansion and ideology. The expansion fear appears very prominently in the coronavirus comments in a number of ways. The first echoes fears of America having a reduced impact on the global economy as China has gained a greater position in recent years. The second can be seen in many of the commenters' desire to punish China for the coronavirus economically. For example, "Something should be done to China. Sanctions?," "Why do we continue to buy products from them. Bring our work home!!!! Trump 2020," "China should be sued," "China makes all our masks and medications. Brilliant Globalists.," "China released this virus as a biological weapon, with the intent to tank the world and the US economies, thus leading to Trump losing the election."

While many non-partisan public health experts tried to avoid the racial stereotyping that follows global pandemics, that did not prevent political elites and conservative media from using the coronavirus to exploit white racial resentment politics through yellow peril tropes. Although yellow peril tropes have existed in culturally conservative spaces in America long before COVID-19, they absolutely show up in a prominent way in the comments. These fears of Chinese dishonesty, disease, and invasion are a main feature of commenters' concern. While many of their fears of China appeared to be related to economics, commenters were also worried of an ideological invasion. They fear that the ideological infiltration has already reached American shores, particularly through their perception of the "liberal media."

4.2 THE "LIBERAL MEDIA"

A common feature of conservative media is the contention of a vast "Liberal Media"' that exists outside of the conservative media echo-chamber. The allegation, which has become a common talking point in much of contemporary conservative media, characterizes a vast and interconnected conspiracy by political activists to deceive the public by infiltrating and populating almost all of American knowledge production. This "Liberal Media" is purported to exist as a monolith, united in their opposition to conservatives and Republican politicians, and is often conceived as a single entity and not numerous organizations that exist independently from each other.

The allegation of a "Liberal Media" has its origins in the late 1950's and early 60's (Greenberg, 2008). At the time, national journalists covered the Civil Rights Movement, portraying black activists as fighting for their right to vote against brutalism from the police. Segregationists saw their coverage as evidence of losing the battle for public opinion, which inspired the white supremacist Alabama Governor George Wallace to adopt the populistic idiom of the existence of vast conspiracy of an elite, left-leaning Northeastern media were distorting the news to fit their politics - an idea that soon, under President Nixon, became conservative dogma (Greenberg, 2008).

The term's usage in contemporary discourse can be best outlined by Rush Limbaugh who described the "Liberal Media" conspiracy as upheld by four corners of deceit:

"We really live, folks, in two worlds. There are two worlds. We live in two universes. One universe is a lie. One universe is an entire lie. Everything run, dominated, and controlled by the left here and around the

world is a lie. The other universe is where we are, and that's where reality

reigns supreme and we deal with it. And seldom do these two universes

ever overlap. … The Four Corners of Deceit: Government, academia,

science, and media. Those institutions are now corrupt and exist by virtue

of deceit. That's how they promulgate themselves; it is how they

prosper."

The allegation of a vast "Liberal Media" is very powerful as it allows for the

conservative audience to anticipate a discrepancy between mainstream and conservative

media coverage. The term, especially when conflated with the allegation of 'fake news,'

primes conservative media consumers to be sensitive to criticisms of conservative

political figures and inspires a lowered ability to identify credible news (Van Duyn and

Collier, 2018). While mainstream journalism relies on legitimized sources of knowledge

production in its coverage, the term allows the conservative media audience to re-imagine

these legitimized sources as 'deceitful.'

Additionally, the term acts as a way to insulate conservatives from bad press.

Credible claims of sexual misconduct (Givas, Sep. 17, 2019), abuse of power (Gainor,

Jan. 25, 2020), or a slow federal response to the coronavirus outbreak (Graham, Jul. 18,

2020) are re-imagined as public attacks by political operatives and thus must be

disregarded as partisan and illegitimate. The conspiracy is 'self-sealing' as the believers

don't have to critically examine why conservative politicians are receiving bad press or

why conservative media coverage is different, because any evidence that points out those

problems is re-imagined as further evidence supporting the conspiracy (Lewandowsky

and Cook, 2020).

Rhetorically, the term can be used both defensively and offensively to explain why the conservative coverage of a news story varies from the most of the other media's coverage.

Even though the "Liberal Media" conspiracy supposedly taints so much of the knowledge production in American life, conservative media cannot do their job without relying on it. While conservative media often feel that they are not treated fairly outside of their specific media ecosystem (Nadler et al., 2020), they still rely on the use of mainstream journalism to guide their coverage. For example, PragerU, Lowder with Crowder, and the Daily Wire all do not do original reporting, they incorporate mainstream media coverage of an event as an important feature of their coverage (Legum and Zekeria, Jun. 25, 2020).

However because of the salience of the "Liberal Media" conspiracy, the conservative YouTube audience is rarely encouraged to consume the specific coverage themselves and thus creates an uneven knowledge gap between the conservative news producers and their audience. This can lead to a game of telephone where the YouTuber is not only politically motivated but twists valuable information about the coronavirus into an opportunity to make a certain political point. In much of the early coronavirus coverage, mainstream news sources were cited and then discredited in the same video (The Coronavirus Crisis is Worse Than We Thought…).

This knowledge gap becomes a problem where the conservative YouTube audience relies on the show host to accurately explain what the original reporting means rather than outlining what it says. This could explain why mainstream print media consumption led to more accurate beliefs and closer adherence to CDC guidelines

(Jamieson and Albarracin, 2020) and why exposure to social media is associated with misperceptions about the coronavirus (Bridgman et al., 2020).

Before examining the various themes about the media seen in the comments, they appear to echo longstanding antisemitic conspiracies about Jewish people seeking to destroy the Western world with liberal policies and their purported control of the news media. Jewish heritage and history scholars have found origins of this antisemitic conspiracy theories in the 1903 Russian story *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Zipperstein, Aug. 25, 2020; Klug, 2003). Levine and Newman (2018) outlines how the conspiracy has evolved to fit different narratives and different political contexts, but especially in anti-communist, religious, and conservative spaces in America.

As we can see in the comments about coronavirus, the users feel persecuted by the news media which they believe to be deceitful, left-wing political activists seeking to harm the country. To the commenters, they believe the media is maliciously conspiring against them, the president, and the country: "the 'journalists'... are attacking our president," they don't inform the public in order to make "their president look bad," "We're in a panic because that's exactly what the [mainstream media wants] ... to happen. The stock market is crashing and that's exactly what they want!!!! They believe this will help them in November," "Now they tell people to freak out and panic all the while trying to blame it all on the President."

In addition to being nefarious and malicious, the commenters believe the news media is deceitful: "And they wonder why everyone calls them fake news and doesn't trust them," "The [mainstream media] need to find something else to complain about," "these smug reporters are never asking constructive questions for the benefit of the

general public," "Today's reporters are merely actors playing to their respective audience," "We have a press that cries wolf all day," "The media sells you a crisis."

Finally, the comments echo the last part of the antisemitic conspiracy that the news media is comprised of left-wing political activists. Rhetorically, we can see this in the ways that the news media, Democrats, and all left-wing ideologies are lumped together as working together in the same plot. "You can NEVER trust the media or the [Chinese Communist Party]!," "the [mainstream media] are worried about offending the Chinese Government," "political activists disguised as reporters," "today's reporters are merely actors playing to their respective audience," "The media is complaining about retractions??!! That's rich. Such hypocrisy. I can't stand the left," "the press and democrats are not helping… the left does what it wants… we have a press that cries wolf all day," "the media told people not to panic, now they tell people to freak out… Liberals 'never let a crisis go to waste,'" "the media sells you a crisis, politicians sell you a solution," "the fact is left wing media panics instantly and spreads like wildfire," "This is what happens when 'Truth-in-Journalism' is substituted for rabid ideology," "I'd add that it's not just the schools but the media pushes a leftist agenda."

As we can see, nearly all of the commenter's criticisms of the media fall onto antisemitic tropes of being malicious, deceitful, political activists who want to see the demise of the Christian world in America. In the commenter's characterization of how the media operate outside of their conservative media bubble, they rhetorically combine the news media institution, Democrats, and all the different ideologies on the left as working together on the same plot against them. It is curious how conservative media networks (Fox News, Breitbart, or the channels on YouTube) are never included in their

criticisms - perhaps because they tacitly acknowledge that conservative media will never tell them something that will contradict their worldview or ask them to reconsider their political alliances. "Yep. Mainstream media is imploding on itself. It's up to YouTube journalists to give us the real facts and truth," one commenter wrote.

4.3 DEMOCRATS

One of the most common enemies of both the commenters and the conservative YouTube hosts are Democrats or anyone on the left. While their contempt for their political rivals can be understood merely in opposition to their political goals, it does not explain the degree of their difference in opinion. According to Pew Research Center (2014), Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines than they have been in over 20 years. A key factor in that study asked participants not just if they disagreed with their enemies, but whether the opposition party is a threat to the nation's well-being. In 2014, 27 percent of Democrats believed Republicans threatened America - over a 10 point increase from 1994. Among Republicans, over a third of participants believed Democrats were a threat to America - more than doubling what it was in 1994.

This polarization is no-doubt in part due to the prevalence of partisan media and the ability for social media feeds to curate echo-chambers (Pew Research, 2014), but, more critically, the competition between the two parties puts each other at odds. Since most elections in American are determined by a winner take all system, many voters can be motivated to cast their ballots in opposition to a candidate rather than for one they like. This phenomenon, of voting for a party not because of your support for their platform, but because of your opposition to its opponent, is called negative partisanship. Through negative partisanship, voters can be mobilized not through their support of a certain

policy, but in opposition to their rival's agenda (Abramowitz and Webster, 2015; See also: Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Greenberg, 2004; Jacobson, 2007; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2013, 2015; Abramowitz, 2015; Huddy et al., 2015).

Abramowitz and Webster (2015) found that negative partisanship was responsible for an increase in straight-ticket voting, a steep decline in the advantage for incumbents, and a closer alignment between the results of presidential elections and the results of House, Senate and even state legislative elections. Pew Research (2020) found that 83 percent of Amercians believe it 'really matters' who wins the presidency, a more than 30 point increase since 2000. This hatred for the other side doesn't just impact how voters vote, but how politicians govern themselves. In Congress, the ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans in both the House and Senate is now larger than at any time in the past century (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Theriault, 2008; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Mann and Ornstein, 2013; Kraushaar, 2014). Party unity on roll call votes has increased dramatically in both chambers in recent years (Izadi, 2014; McCarty et al., 2008; Theriault, 2008; Sinclair, 2006). Moreover, the party divide in Washington is not limited to the elected branches of government. On the Supreme Court, the justices now divide along party lines on major cases with greater frequency than at any time in recent history (Clark, 2009; Bartels, 2015; Stone, 2014).

Because there are enormous incentives to motivate your voters' support by demonizing your enemy, this could explain why conservative media describes both moderate and progressive Democrats with the same extreme language. In 2017, YouTube channel PragerU host Dennis Prager said "defeating the left is as great of a moral urgency as defeating islamism" (Rubin Report, Jan. 18, 2017). Ahead of the 2018 midterm

elections, Sean Hannity joined President Trump at a political rally and attacked

Demcratic candidates in critical races across the country, calling former Missouri Senator

Claire McCaskill a "Liberal, radical, leftist," Arizona Senate challenger Kyrsten Sinema

as "radical, leftist," and Florida governor challenger Bill Nelson as "Democratic, do-

nothing, Shumer Democrat" (Maza, Nov. 26, 2018).

While using negative partisanship in conservative media coverage is not new, its

influence on their conservative media audience is real and powerful (Martin and

Yurukoglu, 2017; Arceneaux et al., 2016). Because conservative media describes

Democrats in this way, it inspires their audience to describe them as "vipers," "leftists,"

"miserable people," "spreading disinformation about the coronavirus," "[praying] for

World War III, Virus Epidemic, & Recession," "demon rats," wanting something to

destroy civilization, "don't even understand basic reality," and "inanimate objects [who]

don't have personalities."

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

SOCIAL INFLUENCES DETERMINING PERCEPTION OF RISK

> *The second section will examine the social influences that motivate how conservative media consumers perceive the new political reality dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. The first subtheme of this section will discuss the overriding suspicion that motivates conspiratorial thinking and the perception of the coronavirus pandemic. The second subtheme will discuss the contempt for the weak, a hallmark of contemporary conservatism. Finally, the third subtheme will discuss how the gendered resistance to change was a major factor in the global response to coronavirus, but also how it impacted citizens and world leaders in largely the same ways.*

5.1 OVERRIDING SUSPICION THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG

A consequence of branding your news show in opposition to a vast "Liberal Media" conspiracy that infiltrates almost all of American knowledge production, is what Lewandowsky and Cook (2020) refer to as an 'overriding suspicion' about the official record or account of a major news event. They outline this 'overriding suspicion' as a nihilistic degree of skepticism towards the official account: "this extreme degree of suspicion prevents belief in anything that doesn't fit into the conspiracy theory."

In the conservative coronavirus coverage on YouTube, this overriding suspicion resulted in creators raising a number of specific conspiracy theories about the origins or official narrative surrounding the virus. Daily Wire host Andrew Klavan suggested that the virus could be a Chinese bioweapon in mid-February (The Coronavirus Crisis is Worse Than We Thought…). In late February, another Daily Wire host Michael Knowles

suggested that the virus was no more a threat to global health than the seasonal flu and that media reports about the severity of the virus in other countries are evidence of coordinated effort by political activists in the media to harm the economy before the 2020 election (Coronavirus Kills The Economy…). In early April, Lowder with Crowder host Steven Crowder suggested that the official death rates in America were overinflated because people die from complications like respiratory failure, pneumonia, or ARDS and not the virus itself (The REAL COVID-19 Numbers...).

In their 2017 report, the Council of Europe outlined frameworks to understand false information and how it spreads online. Particularly they describe how often true information can be said in such a way to imply something false. In their videos, the conservative content creators can raise the idea of a conspiracy theory (like coronavirus being a manmade bioweapon or that the government is overinflating death rates) without using the exact words to explicitly spell it out. Alternatively, creators can still endorse conspiracy theories despite equivocating or rhetorically distancing themselves by claiming ignorance or drawing connections by 'just asking questions.' These rhetorical strategies insulate the creators from legal consequences while inferring connections in the minds of their audience. These unfounded conspiracy theories become even more problematic when the shows present themselves in the trappings of conventional news shows, with authoritative speakers with various credentials, talking about topics in the news in an accessible way that is easy to understand. These factors contribute to worldview around an overriding suspicion that appears to trickle down into the audience.

Keeley (1999) finds that the overriding suspicion involved in both the conspiracy theories raised by the content creators and the same ones that appear in the comments,

depends on a desire to hold onto notions of an ordered universe. "By supposing that

current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theorists entail that

such events are capable of being controlled… On this view, there is some hope that

humans can understand, predict, and conceivably control the course of human events.

This the conspiracy theorists believe, only they further believe that the wrong folks are at

the helm" (p.123-124).

The author reveals that this 'overriding suspicion' perfectly exemplified in late

March, April, and early May with the often repeated talking point in the conservative

coronavirus coverage that the 'media refuses to talk about the positives' of the

government's response. The allegation goes that the mainstream media has been

deliberately focusing negative aspects of the coronavirus outbreak instead of framing

their coverage that paints the Trump administration in a more positive light. Daily Wire

host and Founder Ben Shapiro outlines that particular talking point in "Ben Shapiro

Provides Positive Updates on Coronavirus; SLAMS Mainstream Media"

> "Listen to the questions there. It's terrible. The members of the media
>
> who are spending all their time asking 'is [the federal response] enough?',
>
> 'is it enough?' They're looking for bad news at this point. How about this,
>
> when a Democratic governor of a state says that the Feds are doing their
>
> best in providing help, you say 'oh that's good news!' instead of 'is it
>
> enough?' [or] 'what more can you get out of them?'

The attempt to castigate the media for 'not focusing on the positives' is a veiled

attempt to reconcile the severity of the coronavirus without assigning blame to the Trump

Administration's slow federal response. Under this framing, there is a clear villain behind

why the virus is perceived to be as bad as it is and further suggests that there is reason to be suspicious of the official narrative as the media could be exaggerating.

5.2 CONTEMPT FOR THE WEAK

In the wake of the controversial election of 2016, media figures and scholars have attempted to explain the basis of support for Trump. Some in the media saw his support as a result of 'economic anxiety' from white people of all economic backgrounds (Semuels, Dec. 27 2016). Others laid the blame on the growing right-wing populism of the Republican Party, racism, sexism, and a desire for fascism (e.g., MacWilliams, 2016; Rahn and Oliver, 2016; Schaffner et al., 2017; Sides and Farrell, 2016; Wayne et al., 2016).

Perhaps most importantly, analysts have focused on Trump's appeal to white Americans who harbor animosity toward "undeserving" racial minorities. Trump's lack of support among people of color and his popularity among nearly every white subgroup suggest that support for his candidacy was rooted in racial hostility (Luttig et al. 2017). Moreover, Trump's call for law and order in the context of discussing urban unrest is reminiscent of previous racial appeals in American politics, including George HW Bush's Willie Horton ad (Mendelberg, 2001) and Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" (Hillygus and Shields, 2008). More diagnostic still are studies showing that variables measuring white in-group favoritism and those measuring bias against racial and ethnic out-groups strongly correlate with support for Trump (e.g., Cohen et al., 2016; Gest, 2016; Nteta and Schaffner, 2016; Schaffner et al., 2017; Tesler, 2015, 2016a; Wood, 2017; Luttig et al. 2017).

One of the most provocative essays about the energy behind President Donald Trump is written by Adam Serwer of The Atlantic, titled "The Cruelty is the Point" (Serwer, Oct. 3 2018). In his essay, he describes how Trump does not lose support for the harsh and nativist actions he takes as president of the United States, but in fact is because he inflicts suffering onto those marginalized groups, who are deemed to be enemies: "It is that cruelty, and the delight it brings them, that binds his most ardent supporters to him, in shared scorn for those they hate and fear: immigrants, black voters, feminists, and treasonous white men who empathize with any of those who would steal their birthright."

These elements could explain not only the sexism and racism found in some of the comments, but also the irreverence and enjoyment of those same remarks. However these comments don't come out of nowhere: the YouTubers play a critical role as well. In addition to spreading racist ideologies, the content creators play an important role in shifting the definition of racism from a system of advantage based on race (Wellman, 1977) to a much narrower one that includes intentionality and a desire for easily identifiable universal signals of discriminatory language and action. In these ways, creators can incentivize racist behavior while commenters can believe that they are actually not being racist as their actions do not meet this narrower definition.

Trump's support, especially around his desire to punish demographics of people determined to be enemies, has been named many things (Sheparrd and Jones, Oct. 5, 2017) and often reflect key identifiers of fascism (Paxton, 2004; Harris et al., 2017; Robinson, 2019). As Historian Umberto Eco outlined in *Ur-Fascism* (1995) a key element of fascism is a 'Fear of Difference' that often results in a popular sentiment of

'us vs. them.' This popular sentiment is rooted in a chauvinistic, ultra-nationalism that favors the country over all else and the perceived inferiority of outsiders (Johnston, Jul. 19, 2018). Eco outlines that these beliefs often translate into a form of 'popular elitism,' where citizens believe they are the best citizens of the world and contrast those beliefs with a strong contempt for the weak (Eco, 1995).

This contempt for classes of people deemed to be foreign and weak often appears in sexism and misogyny. Even in covering coronavirus, the YouTubers made several videos talking about the 'irrationality' and 'stupidity' of female Democratic lawmakers as well as climate activist Greta Thunberg. In the context of Coronavirus, the YouTubers relentlessly mocked these women for claiming that coronavirus exacerbates existing inequalities. However, the YouTubers and the commenters' misogyny did not translate into a uniform hatred of all women: Former Governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley and Dr. Deborah Birx were interviewed by Daily Wire Host Ben Shaprio in late March and early April - and were largely praised by the commenters.

Philosopher Kate Manne describes this reaction of criticizing dissenters and praising advocates in her book Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny (2017) as being wholly consistent with the logic of misogyny. She theorizes that because of the nature of patriarchies, women are born into an "unofficial service industry" that requires "a masked quality about it: it is supposed to look amicable and seamless, rather than coerced. Service with a smile, not a grimace, is the watchword" (Manne, Jul. 11, 2016). Because of this 'service position,' misogyny acts as a form of enforcement: to punish the disobedient and to praise the obedient whose actions uphold the patriarchal order. Under her framework, misogyny isn't purely a hateful reaction. While hateful and hostile

reactions are directed at women who challenge men's power and authority, misogyny can also take the form of paternalism and high praise.

> "Misogyny can afford to be selective because its fundamental goal is enforcement. Women who know their place do not need to be put in it… Trump also has high praise for some of the women who love and revere him, such as his daughter Ivanka… By saying that her father supported her career ambitions, as well as those of his women executives, Ivanka missed the point that she and they represent no threat to her father and are thus unlikely to come under fire. It is primarily women who challenge Trump's power and preeminence who suffer his comebacks" (Manne, Jul. 11, 2016).

For example, Manne's framework for misogyny is evident in how the commenters perceive Haley as "awesome" and someone who "just says it how it is." To them, she is someone who would get enthusiastic support from nearly everyone in the comment section if she were to run for president. Haley is praised as she is supportive of their ideological interests and does not threaten patriarchy. On the other hand, Democratic Congresswoman from New York Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, are the victims of intense hatred and scorn from the comment section. They are labeled as ignorant, childlike, and weak: "She is ignorant to almost everything, speaks rambling sentences, and when she does convey an idea, it has little to no relevance. Yet she expects people to take her seriously." "When is someone with some cred going to tell Warren that she is truly insane and needs help… to her face?," "She is a child in an old woman's body." Through the logic of misogyny, the disobedient women

are not just child-like figures to be ignored, but insolent children in need of discipline and punishment. "We are essentially living through the societal equivalent of 'spare the rod, spoil the child,'" one comment reads.

However, it also must be acknowledged that even positive praise for a person is not without its racial underpinnings. Bill Richmond is a recurring character on Lowder with Crowder, which he and the commenters lovingly refer to as "half-Asian lawyer Bill Richmond." While some ethnic minorities are racialized in a negative sense, some are racialized in a positive sense. As the result of postwar American government propaganda efforts, east-Asian people are perceived to be extraordinarily smart, hardworking, polite, and particularly adept at math (Burns and Yu, May 29, 2018.) In this context, Richmond is a 'model-minority,' who recognizes his place as subordinate and is unthreatening to the white supremacist hegemony and thus deserving of praise: "Crowder's bringing out the heavy artillery. Half-Asian Lawyer, FULL Asian Doctor," "I'm starting to think you only hire Asian professionals. That's either racist, or very, very smart."

Rhetorically, the constant labeling of Richmond as 'half-Asian lawyer Bill' serves as a constant reminder to Richmond and the audience that he is from a different racial category than Crowder's other white guests. The constant reminders not only reinforce his racial otherness, but also becomes one of the most prominent features of his identity and his reputation. The audience mimics Crower's persistent labeling of being 'half-Asian lawyer Bill,' but likely interprets the Crowder's persistent labeling as a compliment because of the model-minority myth.

Perhaps it is because of the commenters' contempt for the weak that dampened the willingness for conservatives to adopt communitarian public health measures. From

their perspective, it would be an unacceptable reality to disrupt their daily lives to protect the marginalized groups whom they despise.

5.3 TOXIC MASCULINITY AND CHANGE AS VULNERABILITY

While the coronavirus was affecting large parts of the world, most authoritarian leaders resisted implementing the public health measures necessary to prevent its spread (Rachman, Apr. 20, 2020). In May, as many countries in Europe and New Zealand were seeing a slow spread and steady decline in coronavirus cases, many commenters in the media saw comparisons between the high number of cases in countries with strongman, authoritarian world leaders (America, Britain, Brazil, Russia, Iran, Italy, Hungary, and Belarus) and the low number of cases in countries with female world leaders (Germany, New Zealand, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Taiwan) (Taub, May 15, 2020; Cox Apr. 13, 2020). While the comparisons are interesting, and presents a significant opportunity to increase female representation of leaders on the world stage (Piazza and Diaz, 2020), the evidence suggests that gender had an influence on not just political decision making, but also willingness for citizens to adopt public health measures.

British Journalist Gideon Rachman interpreted the reluctance for the countries with strongman, authoritarian leaders to quickly adopt public health measures as evidence of their "refusal to be intimidated by a mere disease." Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who would later contract the virus multiple times, said on March 29th that the country would "tackle the virus but tackle it like fucking men – not like kids" (Phillips, Mar. 30, 2020). Belarusian Dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who would later contract the coronavirus, continued to hold public appearances without a mask, continued to play hockey, and was interviewed in late March in full hockey gear and said, "It's better to die

standing, than live on your knees" (Evans, Aug. 20, 2020). British Prime Minister Boris

Johnson, who would also later contract the virus, minimized the severity of the virus by

saying that he "wouldn't need to worry" about the virus because of his "history as an

athlete" (Cottle, Mar. 27, 2020). After four months of refusing to wear a mask, repeatedly

undermining his own public health agency's guidelines, and mocking his political

opponent for wearing one, American president Donald Trump told aides that wearing a

mask would "send the wrong message," according to one administration and two

campaign officials not authorized to publicly discuss private conversations (Associated

Press, May 7, 2020). It would take until July for Trump to wear a mask for the first time

publicly, who was flanked by military generals at the time and was praised by aides on

Twitter for being 'patriotic.' He would later test positive for the coronavirus.

The desire to promote strength and dominance by resisting public health

measures, reflects what Johnathan Metzel describes in his book, *Dying of Whiteness:*

How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland, as "an assumption

of a kind of invincibility that is tied to this idea of white masculinity" (North, May 12,

2020). Glick et al. (2018) outlines how showing weakness contradicts a core element of

contemporary masculinity. He later found that "Leaders who are more concerned with

preserving a macho public image put our lives at risk as they prove their manhood by

showing resistance to experts' opinions, hypersensitivity to criticism and constant

feuding with anyone who seems to disagree with them" (Glick, Apr. 30, 2020).

The stereotype of contemporary masculinity as an invincibility and reluctance to

show vulnerability plays out in other adherence to public health measures. Global Health

50/50 suspected that an explanation for why men were dying from coronavirus at higher

levels were because of a higher likelihood to smoke, consume alcohol at higher rates, and lower likelihood to wash their hands than women (Global Health 50/50, 2020; American Cleaning Institute, 2010). Men were also more likely to spread the virus as Capraro and Barcelo (2020) found that they were less likely to wear a mask as well.

The reluctance to accept simple public health measures from both political leaders and from their citizens directly played into a slow response to coronavirus. This reluctance played out in both conservative media coverage as well as in the comments. While many YouTubers were downplaying the severity of the virus, many commenters found that their lives did not have to change significantly. This reaction appeared to take many forms as some claimed that there was no reason to worry "zero concern," that public health measures can be easily accommodated in their lives "you mean I shouldn't bug out to the Rockies, I do that every summer," and that Trump's comparisons to the flu over the recommendations from the YouTuber assuaged them from taking action "sorry ben, but trump stating the average flu stats calms my fears."

Finally, because people can live in can construct media bubbles where through the severity of the coronavirus is portrayed only in one way, even best efforts to communicate risk were never taken seriously as their audience was primed to ignore reports from the "Liberal Media," health experts or others.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS

COMMUNITY OF THE LIKEMINDED

The last section of this analysis will discuss how consumers of conservative YouTube use the medium to interact with the host, themselves, and each other. The first subtheme will discuss how users talk to the host as if they were friends, giving both praise and criticism. The second subtheme will examine how commenters used the medium to talk about themselves, especially using ethnic identity labels as a way to denounce something mentioned in the media coverage. Finally, the last subtheme will examine how the users talk to each other through in-jokes and a community of shared ideologies.

6.1 NAVIGATING PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH HOST

Lewis (2019) outlines the various ways that conservative YouTube creators inspire connections with their audience. She relies on a definition of these creators as 'micro-celebrities,' who have developed highly engaged niche audiences by constructing a public person to be consumed by others and "use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans" (Marwick, 2015). Lewis (2019) found that the conservative YouTubers can inspire powerful parasocial relationships with their viewers by using micro-celebrity strategies not only as a business strategy but also a political stance that positions them as more credible than mainstream media.

Specifically, she looked at conservative YouTubers Tim Pool, Dave Rubin, and Blaire White and examined how they weaponized "relatability, authenticity, and accountability" to establish credibility with their audience. Worse, she outlines that these

relationships can inspire an "authoritarian potential" that destabilizes their audiences'

worldviews by using anti-progressive viewpoints to castigate mainstream media and

"serve as an entryway into other alternative information sources" (Lewis, 2019).

Thus the dynamics of the parasocial relationship between the creator and audience

are even more slanted. The content is not only entertainment but one of the sole sources

of 'true' information in opposition to a vast and interconnected "Liberal Media"

conspiracy. Perhaps this media effect, coupled with existing parasocial relationships,

could explain the positive comments between the commenters and host.

Some of the positive comments involved being proud of the guests that were

interviewed by Ben Shapiro. Over the 4 month period that this study looked at, The Daily

Wire's guests have included Former Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, top

public health official Dr. Deborah Brix, and Vice President Mike Pence. These guests

were universally praised as a success, as many of the comments seemed to be praising

Shapiro and the Daily Wire for having such high profile guests, rather than engaging with

what they said or the implications of their warnings of the coronavirus. Negative

comments did not appear in the top comments under these videos.

While many envision the conservative media audience to be uniform, who exist

largely in an echo chamber who believe the same things, the number of negative

comments prove otherwise. On Steven Crowder's "Leftist Coronavirus Lies

DEBUNKED" on March 9, seven of the top 30 comments pointed out how this video

coverage would not age well. On several occasions, commenters posted lengthy rebuttals

about the severity of the coronavirus. Others wrote longer essay style responses to the

hosts, castigating them for politicizing the virus response or criticizing the president's slow federal response.

Others criticized the programming decisions of Steven Crowder. In his March 17th video, "PRANK CALL: Nike's Racist Coronavirus Policies!," Crowder calls Nike to complain to one of their customer service employees about a number of Nike official policies in an offensively exaggerated asian accent. In the video, Crowder badgers the customer service employee about Nike's decision to close stores in America, whether stores are open in Asia, and differing prices between certain shoes. Despite the customer service employee being very composed in his responses, Crowder aggressively tries to put him into a corner, asking him about his personal opinion about shoe prices and then conflating that with the official position from Nike. Nearly half of the top 30 comments disapproved of the segment or praised the customer service employee for having to deal with Crowder's harassment.

The comments appear to be a way for the audience to give their feedback to the show, both the good and the bad. Many of the comments were directed at the host as a singular person, rather than the entire program staff. This could be evidence of a parasocial relationship and an imagined personal connection with the host.

Finally as evidence of a personal connection, some comments were made as an attempt to a joke at the hosts' expense. A common joke against Daily Wire host Ben Shaprio refers to his constant mention that his wife is a doctor. While most of the conservative YouTube channels appear to be non scripted - as the show hosts don't appear to be reading anything and occasionally use verbal crutches like 'um' - the joke

can be evidence of the audience's awareness of common talking points and the repetitive nature of conservative media.

6.2 USE OF IDENTIFYING LABELS WHEN TALKING ABOUT "ME"

An interesting series of comments were involving several self disclosures. These types of comments tended to be longer and revealed a number of facets into their lives. While it is impossible to determine the veracity of the personal information, much of this information was intended to give anecdotal accounts. It is important to acknowledge that these comments are giving a first person account in a media environment dedicated to skepticism about the official narrative of the coronavirus.

During the months of February to June, public knowledge of the coronavirus has developed and sometimes shifted. The virus can be spread by people who do not exhibit obvious symptoms, a fact that was first disputed by the WHO in February and later clarified in June. Masks are an important and cost effective way to reduce the spread of coronavirus through droplets in the air. People who leave the safety of their own homes should wear them in public to prevent the spread of the virus. While the production of personal protective equipment like masks was overwhelmed and medical practitioners were running on short supply, some officials told Americans to not buy them to allow doctors and nurses to have them. As mask wearing became an important aspect of the public health response, the issue became politicized and fodder for conspiracy theories.

As consumers of conservative media, who are often told not to believe official reporting, government authorities, or academic studies, these first person accounts give a brief window into the lives of these individuals. Many of them involve identifying themselves with a label: "as a Christian" "I'm Chinese" "As a Mexican American" "I am

an immigrant" "As a Latino man" "As we say in Texas." While profiles on YouTube have less identifiable information than most social media platforms, the preference for identifying labels in their comments is curious and echoes previous scholarship on ethnic identity (Brittian et al., 2014; Morrison and Chung, 2011).

Most of the comments that feature ethnic identity labels appear to be forms of denouncement. For example, "As a Latino man… I can't help but wonder why anyone would vote for AOC. She is ignorant to almost everything," "I am an immigrant… luckily didn't do school here," "As a Mexican American… It makes me sick how other citizens of Mexican descent complain about supposed injustices," "I'm Chinese and i'm sorry for the tragedy my country brings you… I sincerely apologize to you all." While it is impossible to determine the veracity of their ethnic identity labels, it is curious that these labels appear in the context of conservative media, whose audience is conventionally perceived to be uniformly white. Future studies of the conservative media audience should look at how these self-disclosed labels of ethnic identity are used to denounce various objects of contempt in conservative media.

Another feature of these self-disclosure comments do not reflect lives of privilege. In fact, many self disclosures included descriptions of difficult upbringings and precarious economic situations. "I'm VERY poor (becoming homeless is a very possibility in my life)" , "My childhood was nothing but pain and suffering, from the hands of my own father, and as a ward of the State of Connecticut… I had my share of other problems, including 18 months in jail" , "I'm making deliveries all over town for people" , "I work in customer service" , "life can be [pain]" , "As someone who works in a pizza place."

While some of these kinds of comments were denouncing something, ("I pity the 'trophy generation'"), many of them were telling others to resist large changes in their lives because of coronavirus: "it's not the virus itself that's scaring them," "[Coronavirus is] letting me appreciate what I already have," "this chat was comforting and reassuring," "I've been 'self-quarantining' for the past 39 years, this is great news."

This is to say, the many communicative features that YouTube facilitates, through its comment section and PSRs, found that these communicative features allow users to become active gratification seekers in similar ways as they would on other social networking platforms (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Jung et al., 2007). In addition to the audio and visual simulation of the company that videos provide, YouTube users can provide avenues for communication among other conservative media consumers. These features allow users to explore both personal and social identities with other people they see as like them.

6.3 TALKING TO OTHERS

Taken together, the comments reflect a range of reactions to conservative media's coverage of coronavirus. The comment section appears to be a way for audience members to communicate directly with the host. From the audience's perspective, it can also be used to communicate with other audience members who are likely likeminded individuals. One of the primary ways that users talked to others in the comment sections were through a series of repetitive jokes. These jokes provided a social role, in order to build a connection with other audience members through their shared perspective on a topic. These jokes ranged in creativity and appeared to closely follow the subject of the video.

Several jokes were insensitive and often repeated. While the nature of humor sometimes involves taboo subjects, the jokes' repetitiveness grew the simple joke into more of an internet meme. While the memes involve different subjects, like the apparent suicide of celebrity sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein or comparing coronavirus to cheap Chinese manufactured goods, they had similar effects. Their repetitive nature signaled a shared set of values that the jokes reflect - in the case of Epstein, that we should be skeptical of the official narratives, and in the case of Chinese goods, that foreign goods are lesser in quality than American products.

Many of the comments also reflect a shared community around many of the same fears: of a Chinese conspiracy, a "Liberal Media" conspiracy, or of Democrats gaining political power. This feature of conspiratorial thinking in both the conservative coronavirus coverage on YouTube, as well as in the comments, echo a threatened way of life - and conservative media appears to offer audience members a safe haven to express shared in-jokes, fears, and sometimes personal anecdotes.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Previous studies looked at the correlation between conservative media coverage and their audience's likelihood to follow public health guidelines or have misinformed beliefs about coronavirus. This study looked at the audience of conservative media and their actual responses to content. While a few commenters pushed back on the misinformation and misrepresentation in the coronavirus coverage, most did not. Many echoed the conspiracy theories raised by the hosts and many shared similar sentiments about the virus.

While these YouTube channels were likely not to be the only form of news this audience was consuming, the channels were incredibly popular and shaped how hundreds of thousands of Americans saw the pandemic. With their unique attachment to their audience, influencers were able to circumvent traditional norms of journalism and sometimes elevate conspiracy theories about the virus. Yet viewers saw these YouTube influencers in opposition to the media organizations that exist outside of the conservative media ecosystem, the few beacons of truth among a vast ocean of lairs. This paper argues that the way conservative YouTubers covered the coronavirus had lasting effects on their audience and undermined critical health communications by using their agenda setting capabilities to shift their audience's attention toward external enemies, fueled by division and contempt.

The first section of this discussion examined how much of the content creators and the commenters' ire was focused on external enemies. These enemies were not unfamiliar characters in conservative media as there is a long history of demonizing China, the "Liberal Media," and the Democrats. Many of the China comments fell into familiar 'yellow peril' tropes, blaming them for disease and afraid of an invasion. Many of these fears resulted in a desire to primarily punish China economically as a way to prevent further prominence in the world economy. The second subtheme examined the contempt for the "Liberal Media" that commenters felt were conspiring against conservatives. The "Liberal Media" trope was not only powerful but the subject of intense scrutiny from commenters. Finally, the last subtheme examined contempt for Democrats and how negative partisanship influenced their perception of the new political reality under coronavirus.

The second section of this discussion looked at the social influences that shaped how conservatives perceived the coronavirus pandemic. The first subtheme of this section looked at the overriding suspicion that guided conspiratorial thinking and why commenters were willing to raise doubts over the origins of the virus or simple public health measures to prevent its spread. The second subtheme examined how a contempt for the weak was not only a feature of contemporary conservatism but a common re-occurrence in the coronavirus comments. Finally, the last subtheme examined how the gendered resistance to adopt public health measures was a factor in the global response to coronavirus, but also a part of the comments.

Finally, the last section of this discussion looked at the social aspect of the comment section. The first sub theme examined how the parasocial relationship between

the audience and the producer influenced how commenters spoke to the host in a familiar tone. The second subtheme addressed how users spoke about themselves, notably using ethnic identity labels to denounce things in the coverage. Finally, the last subtheme looked at how the commenters spoke to other commenters, demonstrating a familiarity between commenters based on shared values and interests.

This work expands on the literature of Oreskes and Conway (2010) and their book *Merchants of Doubt* especially in terms of understanding how interconnected right wing media is, especially with regards to being a part of an 'Alternative Influence Network' as described in Lewis (2018). Specifically, this article contributes to the existing body of research that has looked into the origins of conservative media and how it has adapted to various technologies and in numerous political contexts. Finally, it understands how this type of political content functions and the kind of effects it has on its audience, particularly with regards to the spread of COVID-19 misinformation on social media.

This work expands on the existing communications research into conservative media, online misinformation, and coronavirus health communication. While previous studies like Brigman et al. (2020) and others at the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review looked at broader COVID-19 misinformation across social media platforms, this study focused more specifically at how users responded to slanted and politically motivated coverage of the coronavirus on YouTube. This work also expands on Lewis (2018) who pioneered how theorists understand the influence of conservative media on YouTube consumers. Further research in this field should examine the correlation between the consumption on conservative media on YouTube and voting behavior or willingness to adopt public health measures to prevent the spread of

coronavirus. Media practitioners should use this study to reflect on the impact that political influencers, particularly on YouTube, can have on spreading misinformation about the politicized pandemics. This article will expand on the existing study of social media's facilitation of the spread of misinformation and examine the kinds of relationships consumers have with conservative news media.

REFERENCES

Abutaleb, Y., Dawsey, J., Nakashima, E., & Miller, G. (2020, April 4). *The U.S. was beset by denial and dysfunction as the coronavirus raged*. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f% 2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fnational-security%2f2020%2f04%2f04% 2fcoronavirus-government-dysfunction%2f%3farc404%3dtrue&arc404=true

Abramowitz, A. I., & Webster, S. W. (2018). Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans. *Political Psychology*, 39, 119–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12479

Andersen, K. (2020, April 3). How America Went Haywire. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/

Arceneaux, K., Johnson, M., Lindstädt, R., & Wielen, R. J. (2015). The Influence of News Media on Political Elites: Investigating Strategic Responsiveness in Congress. *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(1), 5–29. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12171

Ash, E., & Poyker, M. (2019). Conservative News Media and Criminal Justice: Evidence from Exposure to Fox News Channel. *Columbia Business School Research Paper*. https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/37 6887/CLE_WP_2019_06.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Associated Press. (2020, May 7). *Trump tells allies his wearing a mask would "send the wrong message," make him look ridiculous*. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-tells-allies-his-we aring-mask-would-send-wrong-message-n1202001

Badger, Emily, and Kevin Quealy. 2020. *Red vs. Blue on Coronavirus Concern: The Gap Is Still Big but Closing*. The New York Times, March 21. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/21/upshot/coronavirus-public-opinion.html?searchResultPosition=1

Bremmer, I. (2020, June 12). The Best Global Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic. Time Magazine. Https://Time.Com/5851633/Best-Global-Responses-Covid-19/.

Bridgman, A., Merkley, E., Loewen, P. J., Owen, T., Ruths, D., Teichmann, L., & Zhilin, O. (2020). The causes and consequences of COVID-19 misperceptions: Understanding the role of news and social media. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, n/a. https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-028

Brittian, A. S., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Derlan, C. L. (2013). An examination of biracial college youths' family ethnic socialization, ethnic identity, and adjustment: Do self-identification labels and university context matter? *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 19(2), 177–189. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029438

Brooks, C. (2019, December 20). *Numbed with Fear: Chinese Americans and McCarthyism.* American Experience | Official Site | PBS.

https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/mccarthy-numbed -with-

fear-chinese-americans/

Burns, R., & Yu, L. (2018, May 29). The Chinese Exclusion Act | American

Experience | PBS.

Https://Www.Pbs.Org/Wgbh/Americanexperience/Films/Chinese-Exclusi on-

Act/.

Caparo, V., & Barcelo, H. (in press). The effect of messaging and gender on

intentions to wear a face covering to slow down COVID-19 transmission.

PsyArXiv Preprints.

https://psyarxiv.com/tg7vz

Caputo, M. (2018, August 29). *How Ron DeSantis won the Fox News primary*.

Politico.

https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/29/ron-desantis-fox-news-florida

governor-primary-800706

Cook, J. (2019, August 27). *Roger Ailes' Secret Nixon-Era Blueprint For Fox

News Revealed*. Business Insider.

https://www.businessinsider.com/roger-ailes-blueprint-fox-news-2011-6?i

nternational=true&r=US&IR=T

Cottle, M. (2020, March 30). *Boris Johnson Has Coronavirus. He Handled It

Badly*. New York Times.

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/opinion/boris-johnson-coronavirus. html

Del Visco, S. (2017). Yellow peril, red scare: race and communism in National

    Review. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(4), 626–644.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1409900

Derysh, I. (2020, May 20). *Construction firm lands $1.3 billion border wall*

    contract after repeatedly wooing Trump on Fox News. Salon.

    https://www.salon.com/2020/05/20/construction-firm-lands-13-billion-border-

    wall-contract-after-repeatedly-wooing-trump-on-fox-news/

Dimock, M., Doherty, C., Killy, J., & Oates, R. (2014, July). *Political Polarization*

    in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan

    Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life. Pew Research Center.

    https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/06/6-12-20   14-

    Political-Polarization-Release.pdf

Evans, R. (2018, Oct. 11). *From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were*

    'Red-Pilled'. Bellingcat, October. Retrieved from

    https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2018/10/11/memes-infowars-7   5-

    fascist-activists-red-pilled/

Evans, R. (2020, August 20). Listen to the Behind the Bastards Episode - Part Two:

    Alexander   Lukashenko: The   Dictator   of   Belarus   on.   IHeartRadio.

    https://www.iheart.com/podcast/105-behind-the-bastards-29236323/episod e/part-

    two-alexander-lukashenko-the-dictator-70416626/

Falzone, D., & Grove, L. (2020, September 28). *Fox News Lobotomizes its Brain*

    Room, Cuts Fact Based Journalism. The Daily Beast.

https://www.thedailybeast.com/fox-news-lobotomizes-its-brain-room-cuts   -fact-based-journalism?via=twitter_page

Ferchaud, A., Grzeslo, J., Orme, S., & LaGroue, J. (2018). Parasocial attributes and YouTube personalities: Exploring content trends across the most subscribed YouTube channels. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 80, 88–96. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.041

Fisher, M., & Taub, A. (2019, June 3). *On YouTube's Digital Playground, an Open Gate for Pedophiles*. New York Times. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/world/americas/youtube-pedophiles.html

Gainor, D. (2020, January 25). *Dan Gainor: In impeachment trial coverage, liberal media heap praise on Schiff and Democrats prosecuting Trump*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/dan-gainor-in-impeachment-trial-coverage-liberal-media-heap-praise-on-schiff-and-democrats-prosecuting-trump

Gertz, M. (2018, January 5). *I've Studied the Trump-Fox Feedback Loop for Months. It's Crazier Than You Think*. POLITICO Magazine. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/05/trump-media-feedba   ck-loop-216248

Givas, N. (2019, September 17). *NYT's Brett Kavanaugh story is "just another liberal media mob hit," says Sen. Thom Tillis*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/media/brett-kavanaugh-accusations-nyt-tillis

Glick, P. (2020, April 30). Masks and Emasculation: *Why Some Men Refuse to Take Safety Precautions*. Scientific American Blog Network.

https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/masks-and-emasculation -why-
some-men-refuse-to-take-safety-precautions/

Glick, P., Berdahl, J. L., & Alonso, N. M. (2018). Development and Validation of
the Masculinity Contest Culture Scale. *Journal of Social Issues*, 74(3), 449–476.
https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12280

Global Health 5050. (2020a). *Men, sex, gender and COVID-19* | Global Health
50/50.

https://globalhealth5050.org/covid19/men-sex-gender-and-covid-19/

Global Health 5050. (2020b). *The Sex, Gender and COVID-19 Project* | Global
Health 50/50.

https://globalhealth5050.org/covid19/sex-disaggregated-data-tracker/

Graham, T. (2020, July 18). *Tim Graham: Coronavirus double standard -- liberal
media declare protests more sacred than church.* Fox News.
https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/coronavirus-double-standard-liberal-media-
protests-church-tim-graham

Greenberg, D. (2008). The idea of "the liberal media" and its roots in the civil
rights movement. *The Sixties*, 1(2), 167–186.
https://doi.org/10.1080/17541320802457111

Haberman, M., Thrush, G., & Baker, P. (2018, August 7). *Inside Trump's
Hour-by-Hour Battle for Self-Preservation*. New York Times.
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/09/us/politics/donald-trump-president. html

Hamel, L., Kearney, A., Kirzinger, A., Lopes, L., Munana, C., & Brodie, M.

    (2020, September 11). *KFF Health Tracking Poll – September 2020: Top Issues*

    in 2020 Election, The Role of Misinformation, and Views on A Potential

    Coronavirus Vaccine. Kaiser Family Foundation Poll.

    https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-s

    eptember-2020/

Harris Interactive. (2010, August). *A Survey of Handwashing Behavior*. Cleaning

    Institute.

    https://www.cleaninginstitute.org/sites/default/files/assets/1/AssetManager

    /2010%20Hand%20Washing%20Findings.pdf

Harris, J., Davidson, C., Fletcher, B., & Harris, P. (2017). Trump and American

    Fascism. *International Critical Thought*, 7(4), 476–492.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2017.1357491

Hemmer, N. (2014, January 17). The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a

    Long History. The Atlantic.

    https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-conservative-war-on-

    liberal-media-has-a-long-history/283149/

Horn, H. (2010, September 10). *Is the Right Wing Anti-Science? Prominent*

    journal Nature calls out conservative commentators and politicians. The

    Atlantic.

    https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/09/is-the-right-wing-anti-

    science/344226/

Ingram, M. (2020, August 8). *The myth of social media anti-conservative bias refuses to die*. Columbia Journalism Review. https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/platform-bias.php

Jang, S. M., Mckeever, B. W., Mckeever, R., & Kim, J. K. (2017). From Social Media to Mainstream News: The Information Flow of the Vaccine-Autism Controversy in the US, Canada, and the UK. *Health Communication*, 34(1), 110–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2017.1384433

Johnston, C. (2018, July 19). *Trumpism Is Just A Synonym For Fascism* - SOME MORE NEWS. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIN8oxnw__I

Johnston, C. (2019, June 25). *Perhaps Ben Shapiro Shouldn't Be Taken Seriously By Anyone About Anything* - SOME MORE NEWS. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDMjgOYOcDw&t=1417s

Jurkowitz, M., Mitchell, A., Shearer, E., & Walker, M. (2020, January 24). *U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided*. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-20 20-election-a-nation-divided/

Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of Conspiracy Theories. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3), 109. https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659

Kleefeld, E. (2020, August 4). *Right-wing media struggle to handle Trump's train wreck Axios interview*. Media Matters for America. https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/right-wing-media-struggle-handle-trumps-train-wreck-axios-interview

Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(12), 5753–5760. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.171

Legum, J. (2019, October 28). Facebook allows prominent right-wing website to break the rules. PopularInfo Newsletter. https://popular.info/p/facebook-allows-prominent-right-wing

Legum, J., & Zekeria, T. (2020, June 25). The dirty secret behind Ben Shapiro's extraordinary success on Facebook. PopularInfo Newsletter. https://popular.info/p/the-dirty-secret-behind-ben-shapiros

Levin, S. (2017, October 4). *Las Vegas survivors furious as YouTube promotes clips calling shooting a hoax*. The Guardian. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/oct/04/las-vegas-shooting-yo utube-hoax-conspiracy-theories

Levine, E., & Newman, M. Z. (2018, July 2). *Jewish Media Power: Myth and Reality*. Association for Jewish Studies. http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-oldnew-media-issue/jewish-media-power -myth-and-reality/

Lewis, R. (2018). Alternative influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on

    YouTube. *Data & Society*, 18.

Lewis, R. (2019). "This Is What the News Won't Show You": YouTube Creators

    and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity. *Television & New Media*, 21(2),

    201–217.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879919

Limbaugh, R. (2013, April 29). *The Four Corners of Deceit: Prominent Liberal*

    *Social Psychologist Made It All U*p. The Rush Limbaugh Show.

    https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/04/29/the_four_corners_of_de

    ceit_prominent_liberal_social_psychologist_made_it_all_up/

Linzer, D. (2020, September 2). *Civiqs*. Civiqs poll.

    https://civiqs.com/reports/2020/9/2/report-americans-pessimistic-on-time-frame-

    for-coronavirus-recovery

Losovitz, L. (2017, February 25). *Climate Change Deniers — How they do it Part I: The*

    Tobacco Strategy. GetPop. https://getpop.org/en/posts/climate-change-deniers-

    how-they-do-it-part-i-the-tobacco-strategy/

Lovelace, B. (2020, July 22). *Dr. Anthony Fauci warns the coronavirus won't ever be*

    eradicated. CNBC. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/22/dr-anthony-fauci-warns-

    the-coronavirus-wont-ever-be-totally-eradicated.html

Manne, K. (2019, February 13). *The Logic of Misogyny*. Boston Review.

    http://bostonreview.net/forum/kate-manne-logic-misogyny

Marwick, Alice. 2015. "You May Know Me from YouTube: (Micro-)Celebrity in Social

    Media." In A Companion to Celebrity, edited by P. David Marshall and Sean

    Redmond, 333–50. Chichester: John Wiley.

Mayer, J. (2019, December 6). *The Making of the Fox News White House*. The New

    Yorker.

    https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/11/the-making-of-the-fox-news-

    white-house

Maza, C. (2018, November 26). *Fox News keeps breaking its own rules*. YouTube.

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cijh3bdxwmE&t=380s

Maza, C. (2019a, April 3). *Why Tucker Carlson pretends to hate elites*. YouTube.

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNineSEoxjQ

Maza, C. (2019b, May 9). *How "neutrality" is making us dumber | Carlos Maza |*

    TEDxCUNY.

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OoaS-GdgPY&feature=emb_logo

McCrummen, S., Reinhard, B., & Crites, A. (2017, November 9). *Woman says Roy*

    Moore initiated sexual encounter when she was 14, he was 31. Washington Post.

    https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/woman-says-roy-moore-

    initiated-sexual-encounter-when-she-was-14-he-was-32/2017/11/09/1f495878-

    c293-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0_story.html

McDermott, M., & Samson, F. (2005). *White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United*

    States. Annual Review of Sociology, 31(1), 245–261.

    https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122322

Media Matters Staff. (2020, March 24). *Sean Hannity reads Mike Pence a letter from unidentified doctor detailing a drug "regimen" the doctor claims prevents coronavirus deaths*. Media Matters for America. https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/sean-hannity-reads-mike-pence-letter-unidentified-doctor-detailing-drug-regimen-doctor

Merchant, N. (2020, August 3). *Builder pitched to Trump wins new border wall contract*. Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/mexico-kevin-cramer-donald-trump-texas-laredo-2f617a0f7c5c6ebdd5a175144c5cb1fb

Mitchell, A., Jurkowitz, M., Oliphant, J. B., & Shearer, E. (2020, July 30). *Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project.* https://www.journalism.org/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/

Motta, M., Stecula, D., & Farhart, C. (2020). How right-leaning media coverage of COVID-19 facilitated the spread of misinformation in the early stages of the pandemic in the US. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. Revue Canadienne de science politique, 1-8. https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge core/content/view/6B0EB93F6BA17608D82B4D23EDA75E50/S0008423920000 396a.pdf/how_rightleaning_media_coverage_of_covid19_facilitated_the_spread_ of_misinformation_in_the_early_stages_of_the_pandemic_in_the_us.pdf

Nguyen, T. (2018, December 10). *"Let Me Make You Famous": How Hollywood Invented Ben Shapiro*. Vanity Fair. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/12/how-hollywood-invented-ben-shapiro

O'Callaghan, D., Greene, D., Conway, M., Carthy, J., & Cunningham, P. (2014). Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems. *Social Science Computer Review*, 33(4), 459–478. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439314555329

Oppenheimer, M. (2020, March). *Inside the right-wing YouTube empire that's quietly turning millennials into conservatives*. Mother Jones. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/03/inside-right-wing-youtube-turning-millennials-conservative-prageru-video-dennis-prager/

Oprysko, C. (2020, March 29). *Trump labels himself 'a wartime president' combating coronavirus*. Politico. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/18/trump-administration-self-swab-coronavirus-tests-135590

Orlowski, J. (2020). The Social Dilemma. [Video file] Retrieved from https://www.netflix.com/search?q=social%20&jbv=81254224

Ostrov, B. F. (2020, April 28). *2 Bakersfield Doctors Go Viral with Dubious COVID-19 Test Conclusions*. Times of San Diego. https://timesofsandiego.com/politics/2020/04/28/2-bakersfield-doctors-go-viral-with-dubious-covid-19-test-conclusions/

Pew Research Center. (2020, August 13). *Election 2020: Voters Are Highly Engaged, but Nearly Half Expect To Have Difficulties Voting*. Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/13/election-2020-voters-are-highly-engaged-but-nearly-half-expect-to-have-difficulties-voting/

Phillips, T. (2020, July 1). *Brazilian left demands Bolsonaro resign over coronavirus response*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/tp-captain-corona

Piazza, K. S., & Diaz, G. (in press). *Light in the Midst of Chaos: COVID-19 and Female Political Representation*. World Development. http://gustavodiaz.org/files/research/wd_covid_gender.pdf

Pierce, S. D. (2020, June 21). *Scott D. Pierce: Fox lawyers admit Tucker Carlson doesn't always tell the truth*. Salt Lake Tribune. https://www.sltrib.com/artsliving/2020/06/21/scott-d-pierce-fox/

PragerU. (2015, August 24). The Mission of PragerU. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1jdBmQcwnw

Quinnipiac University/Poll. 2020. "Biden Crushes Sanders in Democratic Race, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; More Disapprove of Trump's Response to Coronavirus." March 9. https://poll.qu. edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=3657

Rachman, G. (2020, April 20). How strongman leaders will exploit the coronavirus crisis. Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/4cb87988-82df-11ea-b555-37a289098206

Ritter, Z. (2020, September 29). *Amid Pandemic, News Attention Spikes; Media Favorability Flat*. Gallup Poll.

https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/307934/amid-pandemic-news-attention-spikes-media-favorability-flat.aspx

The Rubin Report. (2017, January 18). On Religion, Science, and Secularism (Pt. 1) | Dennis Prager | POLITICS | Rubin Report. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LStvBYQsPoQ

Russonello, G. 2020a. "Afraid of Coronavirus? That Might Say Something About Your Politics." New York Times, March 13.

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-polling.html

Roberts, D. (2012, December 10). *The right's climate denialism is part of something much larger*. Grist.

https://grist.org/article/2010-09-09-the-rights-climate-denialism-is-part-of-something-much-larger/

Salvanto, A., De Pinto, J., Backus, F., Khanna, K., & Cox, E. (2020, August 23). *Republicans see U.S. as better off now than 4 years ago ahead of convention — Battleground Tracker poll*. CBS News.

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/republicans-economy-coronavirus-opinion-poll-cbs-news-battleground-tracker/

Schwartz, J. (1997, May 9). PHILIP MORRIS SOUGHT EXPERTS TO CLOUD ISSUE, MEMO DETAILS. Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2farchive%2fpol

itics%2f1997%2f05%2f09%2fphilip-morris-sought-experts-to-cloud-issue-memo-details%2f17f42ecd-ec47-4046-b372-80ea4fb1157f%2f

Semuels, A. (2016, December 28). *It's Not About the Economy In an increasingly polarized country, even economic progress can't get voters to abandon their partisan allegiance*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/its-not-the-economy-stupid/511634/

Shea, B. (2015, April 30). *Fracking Titans Spend Millions Proselytizing School Children*. Rewire News Group. https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2015/04/30/conservatives-spend-millions-proselytizing-school-children/

Smoking and Health Proposal, 1969, BN: 680561778, Legacy Tobacco Documents Library; see also 'Doubt of Tobacco Hazard, Ads Goal." Indianapolis Star, July 7, 1981, BN: 69834753, Legacy Tobacco Documents Library; Press Query, 2 July 1981 BN: 170012852, Legacy Tobacco Documents Library, and discussions in Michaels, Doubt is Their Product.

Shepard, A., & Jones, S. (2017, October 5). *How Ed Gillespie Became a Trumpist*. The New Republic. https://newrepublic.com/article/145186/ed-gillespie-became-trumpist

Solon, O. (2020, August 7). *Sensitive to claims of bias, Facebook relaxed misinformation rules for conservative pages*. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/sensitive-claims-bias-facebook-relaxed-misinformation-rules-conservative-pages-n1236182

Stecula, D. (2020, April 6). What do we know about misinformation during the

    coronavirus outbreak? Mischiefs of Faction.

    https://www.mischiefsoffaction.com/post/what-do-we-know-about-

    misinformation-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak

Stocking, G., Van Kessel, P., Barthel, M., Matsa, K. E., & Khuzam, M. (2020, September

    28). *Many Americans Get News on YouTube, Where News Organizations and*

    Independent Producers Thrive Side by Side. Pew Research Center's Journalism

    Project.

    https://www.journalism.org/2020/09/28/many-americans-get-news-on-youtube-

    where-news-organizations-and-independent-producers-thrive-side-by-side/

Stroud, N. J. (2011). *Niche news: The politics of news choice*. Oxford University Press

    on Demand.

Taub, A. (2020, August 13). *Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better With Covid-*

    19? New York Times.

    https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html

Uscinski, J. E., Enders, A. M., Klofstad, C., Seelig, M., Funchion, J., Everett, C.,

    Wuchty, S., Premaratne, K., & Murthi, M. (2020). Why do people believe

    COVID-19 conspiracy theories? *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation*

    Review, n/a.

    https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-015

Van Duyn, E., & Collier, J. (2018). Priming and Fake News: The Effects of Elite

    Discourse on Evaluations of News Media. Mass Communication and Society,

    22(1), 29–48.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1511807

The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board. (2019, June 5). Democrats and the Border

    Children. Wall Street Journal.

    https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-and-the-border-children-11559776643

The Washington Post. (2016, July 21). *Laura Ingraham waves goodbye as she exits the*

    GOP convention stage. Washington Post.

    https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-

    consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fvideo%2fnatio

    nal%2flaura-ingraham-waves-goodbye-as-she-exits-the-gop-convention-

    stage%2f2016%2f07%2f21%2f3b5b00e0-4f47-11e6-bf27-

    405106836f96_video.html

Wardle, C., & Derakshan, H. (2017, September). INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward

    an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making (Council of

    Europe report DGI(2017)09). Council of Europe.

    https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77

Webster, J. G. (2005). Beneath the veneer of fragmentation: Television audience

    polarization in a multichannel world. Journal of Communication, 55(2), 366–382.

    https://www.communication.northwestern.edu/sites/default/files/utopia-

    imports/programs/phd_media_technology_society/publications/Webster_2005.pdf

Williamson, E., & Steel, E. (2018, September 7). *Conspiracy Theories Made Alex Jones Very Rich. They May Bring Him Down*. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/us/politics/alex-jones-business-infowars-conspiracy.html

Yeyati, E. L., Moscovich, L., & Abuin, C. (2020). Leader over Policy? The Scope of Elite Influence on Policy Preferences. *Political Communication*, 37(3), 398–422. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1698681

Zarocostas, J. (2020, February 29). How to fight an infodemic. The Lancet. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014067362030461X

Zipperstein, S. J. (2020, September 11). *The Conspiracy Theory to Rule Them All*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/08/conspiracy-theory-rule-them-all/6155

APPENDIX A

FULL LIST OF COMMENTS CAN BE FOUND AT FOLLOWING LINK

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NNPwnrku-yhfBHO0BawNKUfYtRqPuUPakO-

Vo2Yfovs/edit?usp=sharing

APPENDIX B

CONSIDERED VIDEOS CAN BE FOUND AT FOLLOWING LINK

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EEspIpXpF_ON71NZCkrVhvV_twVjBqgKlWQe

A8a6YaM/edit?usp=sharing