

An Audience in Search of Bad News: The Present & Future of Right-Wing Media

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Abstract In the aftermath of the 2016 and 2020 elections, the GOP has a demand-side problem: because Trump was great for ratings and voter mobilization, right-wing media and Republican politicians must keep feeding the base voters who have grown dependent upon the angry, grievance-laden politics they were served by Trump and magnified by the right-wing media. These outlets are entirely dependent upon this audience who are addicted to the kind of dystopian, tribal politicking that is more entertaining than informative, and bend to their will. GOP elected officials are electorally reliant on upon these voters for re-election and thus acquiesce to their beliefs. As the country careens toward midterm elections where many contests are predicated on a complete fabrication believed by 1/3 of the public, the potential consequences of this upside-down, reinforcing relationship are devastating for the future of American democracy.

Donald Trump earned enough attention during the 2016 presidential campaign to receive \$6 billion in free media coverage. (Sultan 2017) This is a staggering amount for any candidate, no less a candidate campaigning against more than a dozen far more seasoned politicians, and yet Trump managed to hold captive the American public's attention, from supporters and opponents both, and knock out all of his competition. He was able to accomplish this thanks to a steadfastly loyal right-wing media circle that closed ranks around him, providing cover and encouragement for Trump as it provided his supporters a perpetual feed of Trump-positive/ opponent-negative programming. Even in electoral victory, right-wing pundits positioned themselves and their audiences as victims of an alleged enemy and targets of a perceived threat. These pundits crafted narratives where Trump had the answers to problems that they had defined and had all the defenses that were required. The audiences accepted these narratives with certainty and stayed attentive to their right-wing media, as long as their media remained loyal to Trump. The audience grew in number because of their fandom for Trump, and with this growth the consumers of right-wing media became the core of the Republican Party: their most active, reliable voters.

This paper argues that in the wake of the 2016 and 2020 elections, the GOP now has a demand-side problem: because Trump was great for ratings and voter mobilization, right-wing

media and Republican politicians must keep feeding the base voters who have grown dependent upon the angry, grievance-politics they have been fed by Trump and amplified by the media. The right-wing media are financially dependent upon this audience and bend to their will, GOP elected officials are electorally dependent upon these voters for re-election and thus acquiesce to their beliefs. Since Trump's appeal for his supporters is predicated less on policy positions than on grievance politics and out-group animosity, his assistance from right-wing media outlets is reflective of this animus. There exists now a strong, reinforcing relationship between three dominant groups within the Republican Party: Right-wing media actors who are desperate for ratings, elected officials who are fixated with attention, and base voters who are hooked on the kind of dystopian, tribal politicking that is more entertaining than informative. Some of the more traditional roles of the political parties included providing the kinds of attention that the modern political media now offer, but the new laws of political gravity mean that politicians can eschew the parties all together in their electoral and political pursuits. This leaves little room for the traditional party leaders and activists who valued their roles as intermediators between elected officials and the voting public unless they too yield to the demands from Mar-a-Lago.

Maintaining a steady stream of emotion is a successful strategy for media outlets whose financial imperatives demand large audiences. Hying up the American public's partisan polarization to the point of hysterical frenzy, however, is irresponsible, undemocratic, and dangerous. This paper examines Donald Trump's appeal as a political figure, the right-wing media circle that reinforces him and encourages comparable conduct among conservative politicians, and the effect on American politics of a media system that continues to reward performative rage as it amplifies American intolerance.

### *Trump's America: How Did He Do That?*

Much ink has been spilled trying to determine how Trump so effectively usurped the Republican Party, won the presidency, and took hold of American politics as he did. It was hypothesized that Trump's economic and immigration policies were appealing, that his celebrity status gave him an advantage in a highly mediated era, and that his plain-spoken rhetoric was appealing to voters in the heartland who felt ignored by coastal elites. Regardless the explanation, the receipts were in: data proved that the political media covered Donald Trump *far* more than it covered his opponent, Hillary Clinton. In a congested primary field, they covered him far more than they covered all the other Republican primary candidates combined. The media gave Trump ample airtime and print space because he was, as former *CBS* Chairman Les Moonves said, a "bomb thrower" and Americans want to watch explosions. Ratings were up and so was the ad revenue, and Moonves said about the 2016 campaign: "The money's rolling in and this is fun.... Sorry. It's a terrible thing to say. But bring it on, Donald. Keep going." (Bond 2016) This helps to explain why people paid attention to Donald Trump but does not exactly speak to his support.

Recent research finds that much of Trump's political support was, and remains, predicated on attitudes more ignoble than the usual partisan politicking or ideological posturing; several papers came to similar conclusions that one common thread running between Trump supporters is a distrust of Americans from marginalized groups, specifically African Americans, Hispanics, Muslims, and members of the LGBTQ community. This should not be surprising, as Trump campaigned in 2016 using overtly xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, and authoritarian language, and this was a siren call to those who sympathetic to this kind of appeal. One study from Mason, Wronski, and Kane examined voter data from the Democracy Fund's Voter Study

Group surveys from 2011, 2016, 2017 and 2018. These authors found that: “People who felt strong animosity toward Blacks, Hispanics, Muslims, and LGBT people in 2011 were significantly more likely to be fond of Trump once he appeared on the political scene.” (Mason 2021) Further, Mason *et al* found that “rather than generating such feelings in the electorate, Trump acted more as a lightning rod, attracting those who were already harboring animus toward Democratic aligned groups.” (Mason 2021) Trump had tapped into an existing animus and used it to his political advantage, something that more traditional political candidates have been loath to do in modern times.

Similarly, Enders and Uscinski found that Trump’s appeal was greatest among voters whom the authors identified using a profile that was: “an amalgamation of attitudes about, for example, racial groups, immigrants and political correctness – that rivals partisanship and ideology as predictors of Trump support and is negatively related to support for mainstream Republican candidates.” (Enders 2021) In an email exchange with *The New York Times*’ Thomas Edsall, Enders further described this profile as apt for voters who were attracted to Trump’s:

Relatively explicit appeal to xenophobia, racial prejudice, authoritarianism, sexism, conspiracy thinking, in combination with his outsider status that gives him credibility as the anti-establishment candidate. The Trump voter profile is a constellation of social-psychological attitudes — about various racial groups, women, immigrants, and conspiracy theories — that uniquely predict support for Donald Trump. (Edsall 2021)

In other words, several existing social-psychological factors coalesce to produce a profile of a voter who would be specifically attracted to Trump, one who was not necessarily drawn to other GOP candidates. Trump used explicitly racist and xenophobic appeals and this, combined with his well-known history of conspiracy theorizing, attracted a specific kind of anti-establishment

voter. Like Mason's findings, Enders and Uscinski found that these voters already had these beliefs. Writes Enders and Uscinski: "Facing a crowded primary field, it was entrepreneurial for Trump to activate existing attitudes among the mass public that other candidates avoided." (Enders 2021) Americans have held these beliefs throughout history, but when a presidential candidate embraced these beliefs and was lauded by right-wing media for his "plain spoken" messaging, what had once been taboo in American politics became normalized.

One piece of connective tissue for Trump support, then, was hostility and rancor. This was Les Moonves' bomb throwing, and it was good for the media business. It was especially good for the right-wing media outlets that provided fawning coverage of Trump that only grew more obsequious after he won the presidency. Even after the election fight was over, there were still enemies to battle. Whereas a typical president assumes power victorious, Trump came to Washington and continued his grievance-laden tirades of victimization. He claimed, without evidence, that the 2016 election was stolen from him because Hillary Clinton received illegally obtained votes. He claimed that he had the largest Inauguration crowd size in American history when Park Police metrics showed this to be demonstrably false. He stoked resentment and continued to act as if he were campaigning, taking to Twitter to fire staffers, to mock opponents, and to insult people with whom he had been meeting just moments before. He continued the performative anger that his supporters had found so enticing on the campaign trail; they stayed transfixed, and as such also stayed tuned into right-wing media and rewarded Trump-loyal pundits and Republican politicians.

Republican lawmakers have taken note of Trump's showy, wrathful style and have tried to emulate it. Florida Congressman Matt Gaetz, known more for his outlandish behavior on the

House floor than for any policy position, wrote in the 2020 book *Firebrand: Dispatches from the Frontlines of the MAGA Revolution*:

Politics, they say, is show business for ugly people. The real question is who writes the scripts and produces the acts. You are governed by the theater geeks from high school, who went on to make it big booking guests on the talk shows. Ignore them and they'll ignore you, and you'll go nowhere fast. The hairdressers and makeup ladies and cameramen pick our presidents. As well they should. They are closer to the viewers and therefore the voters. Why raise money to advertise on the news channels when I can make the news? And if you aren't making news, you aren't governing. (Gaetz 2020)

Some would argue that Gaetz is no Trump, and that he is unable to capture the magic that the former president seemingly has. Others might argue that Gaetz is not emblematic of the entire Republican Party, but is instead a meagre, noisy outlier who has garnered too much attention relative to his position and standing. Both arguments may hold water, but the problem is that Trump's success has spawned imitators and Gaetz is not alone. Today there are many Republican lawmakers making names for themselves in a similar "firebrand" manner because the notice they have garnered and the money they have raised from this interest is extraordinary.

Jonathan Last of *The Bulwark* explained the reason and impact of these new motivations on Washington's elected officials: "The incentive structure has changed. The job now attracts the unserious, and the parts of the job that get you noticed are the things that the unserious people do. It's Madison Cawthorn staffing entirely with Comms people, and Marjorie Taylor Greene thinking that it doesn't matter that she's not on a committee, because her job isn't to be on a committee. Her job is to be on *Fox*." (Krstol 2021) This shift from governing to performance is a

substantial move from the textbook purpose of political parties; the increasing reliance upon the right-wing media for political leadership has encouraged this change.

The Republican Party not only allowed all of this to occur but encouraged it by acquiescing to Trump at almost every turn while abdicating many of their conservative philosophical positions along the way. Charlie Sykes characterized this in *Politico* as a “head-shaking display of ideological malleability that seems like a rejection of every principle that conservatives held dear.” (Sykes 2021) The GOP’s compliance was illustrated most starkly when the Republican Party announced, during the 2020 Party convention (held with an astonishing break in protocol at the White House, absent most Republican elected officials), that it did not need to continue the traditional process of crafting a platform. (Wheeler 2020) This, according to Sykes, was further evidence that the Republican Party was not functioning as a political party should, but rather as a vehicle to carry the complaints and grievances of its driver and, accordingly, of its members: “There is no legislative agenda here, only a new form of highly theatrical posturing that has replaced what was left of substantive conservatism in the GOP.” (Sykes 2021) The Republican Party supports this, arguably, because its members support it, and polling data support this fact. Asking Republican-leaning voters in July 2021 whether they considered themselves to be a supporter of Donald Trump or the GOP first, Echelon Insights found that 50% of those polled said they supported Trump over party, versus 42% who supported the Republican Party over Trump. (G. P. Insights 2021)

None of this would be possible were it not for the unwavering and unquestioning support of the right-wing political media that became Trump’s greatest marketing tool and grew to be the Republican Party’s greatest anchor. Right-wing media audiences grew addicted to the anger, and so they tuned in and demanded more. The financial imperatives of media outlets mandated that



they maintain the fury to feed their audience's addiction. Forced to cater to its audience's thirst for fearmongering and emotionally charged programming, the right-wing media provide intolerant and revanchist narratives that elected officials must adhere to, lest they be deemed insufficiently conservative (at best) or socialist (at worst).

The modern Republican Party has abdicated its role in governing because of the dominance of the right-wing media. No longer interested in policymaking, the GOP now is more than happy to be the party that throws shade at the Democrats, trolls the libs, and performs the outrage demanded by their voters. In this manner, the GOP has an inverted power dynamic where the voters are supercharged and raging, having mainlined fury and anxiety for so long they are now demanding swift action to solve a host of problems that may or may not be real. Republican politicians are afraid to do anything against their base, because being called "insufficiently conservative" by the infotainment pundits on *Fox News* and *Newsmax* is enough to lead to electoral defeat. Chasing attention and money, the right-wing media foment distress in their audience, the audience looks to Republican politicians for answers to questions that are not made in good faith to begin with, and these politicians bend to the will of the people.

Shifting away from substance to performative fury is good for the media business even as its effects are destructive for the rest of democracy.

### *Political Media*

The Trump years were a boon for reporting and journalism, and legacy journalism/establishment media outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* saw record-breaking readership and subscription numbers. The chaos and unpredictability that characterized the Trump administration drove many Americans into smartphone addiction, desperate to stay connected to the daily assault of news, outrage, and information.

It was also a successful time for the partisan political outlets, as Trump sowed division and enflamed anger across the political divide. Liberal outlets were furious and right-wing outlets were incensed; all at different things, of course, but the rage machines were operating at max-capacity and business was booming. During this time, a right-wing media circle that had been developing and growing for years solidified and gelled. What had begun as a “conservative alternative” to a perceived liberal media with talk radio in the 1980s and *Fox News* in the 1990s turned into an ideologically driven, opinion-based system during the Trump years that is now, frequently, selling fanfiction and complaint to an audience in search of validation.

The American political media that exists today is erroneously seen by many as simply bifurcated, a system divided evenly between the right-wing media and the liberal media. This is an incorrect assessment of an expansive system with ideological and partisan media outlets, mainstream journalistic organizations, and a good deal of garbage spread all around. Previous work on the development (Dagnes, 2019) and consequences (Benkler, *et al.* 2019) of this asymmetrical partisan media system explain the significance and impact of modern conservative messaging. For this writing, rather than explain the growth of the right-wing media, which has been done elsewhere, I define and explain a circle that encompasses the most significant right-wing media outlets in modern American politics. I characterize the qualities of these outlets to help distinguish them from other political media organizations, use three independent media rating sites to determine partisan bias, and then use ratings and unique visitor data to compare channels and programs to establish dominance. After this has been done, it should be clear that the right-wing media in America operate differently than other media, functioning less as news sources and more as a political operators. As a result, the right-wing media, *Fox News* in

particular, play an outsized role in American politics today, supplanting many of the functions of the traditional Republican Party.

The distinctive qualities of the most important right-wing media outlets are those where they break from the journalistic standards set by the profession. According to the *Code of Ethics* as established by the Society for Professional Journalists, the four tenets of those in the newsgathering business are as follows: “Seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, be accountable and transparent.” (Journalists 2014) The most influential right-wing media outlets have gained power and notoriety by acting in direct opposition to those norms.

Most notably, these outlets are specifically ideological, clearly stating their conservative leanings, and openly oppositional to those on the left. Three independent news rating organizations, Ad Fontes, All Sides Media, and News Guard rate news outlets for information value, reliability, and for ideological bias. They examine the content of different news organizations and assess them to gauge how much original fact reporting they do, and whether the outfit skews left or right. Each rating site relies on a variety of expert opinions and assessment methods to determine the value of a news source, including whether the source publishes false content, whether they make corrections if they do present misinformation, and whether they promote ideological ideas. Interestingly, all three media rating sites are careful to separate the news side of *Fox News* from the pundit side of the house and give *Fox* journalism better marks for original reporting. Their punditry does not fare as well, earning criticism for bias and misleading information. The remainder of the programs, personalities, and outlets within the right-wing media circle as I have defined it are confirmed to be rated “biased” toward the right. This is not surprising, as all these outlets proclaim in their mission statements that they are

proudly conservative and aim to present a counterpoint to the liberal biases of the rest of the mainstream media.

Almost all the right-wing outlets, with the exceptions of *Fox News* and the *Washington Examiner* rate low for reliability, and this goes to their product which is, generally, not journalism, but punditry. (Fontes 2021) Most outlets within the right-wing media circle do far less reporting than they do commentating, which is how they are able to skirt the rules of professional journalism as they do. *Fox News* is the exception to this rule, but in general right-wing outlets provide commentary and analysis much more than they provide would be considered verifiable, fact-finding journalism. Matthew Sheffield, founder of the right-wing site *Newsbusters* explained how right-wing media figures see their own place in the media landscape:

They don't see journalism the way that more traditional journalists do. They see what their media enterprise is as about activism and about supporting whoever is the top Republican. That's what they see as their duty. ... From the very beginning of conservative media in this country, it has been heavily linked to political electioneering. And that's continued down to this day that so many current right-wing media outlets were created by political organizations or people who had political motives. (Bauman 2020)

Or, as Ben Howe wrote in *The Daily Beast* in 2018: “Dear Conservative Media: Do some more damn reporting.” (Howe 2018)

Finally, even though these political media organizations compete against one another for ratings and clicks, they tend to reinforce their shared narratives and arguments. In other words, if *Fox News* sets an agenda about Mr. Potato Head, the other outlets within the right-wing media circle do not denounce the messaging, but instead support it with attention of their own. This helps to perpetuate and reinforce the themes the right-wing outlets determine to be essential.

There are fewer specifically right-wing media outlets than there are mainstream and purposely left-wing outlets, and this is one key to the success of the right-wing media. Those on the right argue that everyone outside their circle is already liberal, and the small number of specifically right-wing outlets afford them a David and Goliath narrative: they are small in number, fighting to provide a counterpoint to the mainstream press. This gives the right-wing media outlets a very different purpose than the journalistic outlets they stridently oppose. While the news media are charged with fact finding journalism, most of the right-wing outlets provide little news and a good deal of political commentary. This is not a bad thing necessarily, but it does highlight important differences between journalism and punditry, as well as the dissimilar financial incentives of political media organizations.

The monetization of news organizations, versus those of ideological or partisan media outlets, is based upon fact-finding and reliability. A journalistic outfit loses credibility and their audience when they report something false. As a result, it is vital that a real news organization report the truth because there is a great deal to lose if they play fast and loose with the facts. Conversely, the opinions of talking heads on cable news or on partisan websites are constricted only by the legal defamation suits levied against them; if pundits play between the lines of defamation, they can push the envelope, and doing so is good for ratings. The louder and more incendiary the talk, the more entertaining the pundit, the larger the audience, the more revenue for the business. Understanding these financial imperatives helps to appreciate the how fundamentally different these outlets really are: their goals, and therefore their methods, are entirely unlike.

The right-wing media circle as I have defined it here helps to illustrate how distinctive these outlets are in their purposes and actions. It also demonstrates how they see themselves: as surrounded by an oppositional force they are fighting against. (see Chart 1)



(Chart 1)

### Most Powerful Right-Wing Media Channels and Outlets

*Fox News* is at the center of the right-wing media circle because, with one very short four-month exception in 2021, the network has been the #1 rated cable news channel (often, the #1 rated cable channel, period) for more than 20 years. (Rupar, *Fox News's* post-Trump slump, explained 2021) Thanks to the fame and influence of its' pundit hosts, the strength of *Fox News* extends beyond cable television to radio and to the internet. Their greatest strength today is their ability to define alarming storylines for their pundits that will rile the base and maintain their

audience, and then keep the rest of the GOP on-message. A description of *Fox News* stories from the 2019 film *Bombshell*:

You have to adopt the mentality of an Irish streetcop: the world is a bad place, people are lazy morons, minorities are criminals, sex is sick but interesting. Ask yourself, what would scare my grandmother or piss off my grandfather? And that's a *Fox* story.

(KateMcKinnon 2019)

Back in reality, the Hollywood description is not that far off. Matt Gertz, who writes about *Fox News* for the left-leaning *Media Matters for America*, describes the cable channel as thus:

*Fox* exists in part to manufacture dissent, disrupting such consensus with narratives that are more palatable to its right-wing audience .... *Fox* isn't in the business of telling its viewers what happened. It's in the business of telling them what they should think about what happened. (Gertz 2021)

The power of *Fox News* cannot be overestimated due to its popularity on television and its reach into other medium. The fact that an ideologically targeted news channel garners a regular daily audience twice that of the more widely produced *ESPN* sports network is indicative of something. (Adweek 2021).

There are two other conservative television news outlets, *Newsmax* and *OAN*, who simply cannot compare to the dominance of *Fox News*, though not for lack of trying. *OAN*, as a streaming service, does not earn ratings at all. Depending on the month, *Newsmax* normally stays around the low 50s out of the top 100 cable channels, in the region of *FXX* and *TruTV*.

According to Aaron Rugar in *Vox*, their appeal lies directly in the fact that they are not news networks: “*Newsmax* and *OAN* have carved out niches as networks especially willing to spread right-wing conspiracy theories and misinformation.” (Rugar, Why Newsmax is failing 2021)

Unlike *Fox News*, *Newsmax* and *OAN* are entirely rooted in opinion without existing journalistic backstops. *Newsmax* has offices in New York City and Washington DC but is headquartered in Boca Raton, Florida and is “planning” to open three new news bureaus in Miami, Los Angeles, and London. (Man 2020) *OAN* is headquartered in San Diego with staffers in DC and airs pay-for-play “movies” that need disclaimers at the beginning so that the network does not get sued. (Poniewozik 2021) In short, these are not news-heavy organizations. The greatest service that *Newsmax* and *OAN* provide for consumers of right-wing media is a possible alternative to *Fox News*, as well as an additional outlet to underscore a narrative: “I heard it on *Fox* and on *OAN* and so it must be true.”

*Fox News*, divided into two by their journalistic and opinion sides of their network, has a news backstop that has, generally, prevented them from full pundit fantasy. The network has bureaus in ten American cities, three international cities, and is headquartered in a massive skyscraper in New York. It employs reporters who cover news adhering to journalistic standards. And on Election Night in 2020, its “Decision Desk” featured consistently well-respected, data driven information. (Brueggemann 2021)

During the evening hours, however, the famous names that make most of the money for the network entertain audiences with far-flung opinions rooted less in fact and more in partisan bias. Starting at 8pm with “Tucker Carlson Tonight” (the #1 rated cable news program) through 9pm with “Hannity” (the #2 rated cable news program), to 10pm with 10pm “The Ingraham Angle” (#5) and wrapping up at 11pm with “Gutfeld!” (#9), *Fox News* rakes in ad revenue by airing seven out of the top ten cable news programs, and all of them are pundit shows. (Q2 2021 Cable News Show Ranker 2021) The network defends their punditry by claiming that their two-sided approach allows the wildly popular opinion programming to fund their factual journalism.



Indeed, *Fox News* journalists are featured prominently throughout all of *Fox News*' distribution, from their pundit shows to their website to their streaming service "Fox Nation." Without doubt, however, the force and authority of *Fox* lies in their pundit line up.

Because of the size, power, and reach of *Fox News*, the overlap between the network and other right-wing media outlets is notable. Right-wing media figures from other outlets are featured on *Fox*, network personalities have their own radio shows and websites apart from their work there, and the connections between *Fox News* and other right-wing media outlets are myriad. This is one explanation for the uniformity of conservative messaging today: a narrative or talking point is repeated and reinforced across different platforms, sometimes by the same person on several different shows.

On the radio, the skillsets of radio talk show hosts and cable pundits are almost identical, which means that the intersection of personalities is almost inevitable, given the preponderance of conservative voices on talk radio. Of the top five talk radio hosts in America, four are conservative, and three are helmed by *Fox News* TV hosts. (Editors 2021) The #1 talk radio show in America, according to *Talkers Magazine*<sup>1</sup>, is hosted by *Fox News* host Sean Hannity (who also hosts "Hannity," the #2 rated show on cable news). Mark Levin, *Fox News* host of "Life, Liberty, and Levin" on Sunday nights, is ranked as *Talkers* #3, and Brian Kilmeade, one of the stars of the morning show "Fox and Friends" is #4. There's a bench for future *Fox* stars, and Dan Bongino sits on it. He is the host of the *Fox* show "Unfiltered with Dan Bongino" which airs on Sunday nights, and Bongino also hosts "The Dan Bongino Show" on talk radio which hits the *Talkers*' list at #35. (Editors 2021)

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<sup>1</sup> *Talkers* is the radio industry magazine, and each year it ranks what it calls the "Heavy Hundred" listing of the "most important radio talk shows in the country."

The strength of *Fox News* and other right-wing media websites continues online. The British media observer *The Press Gazette* monitors the most trafficked news sites in the U.S., and found that for June 2021, the number of monthly visitors for *FoxNews.com* was 257 million, placing the website third behind *CNN.com* (392.5 million) and *TheNewYorkTimes.com* (257.5 million). (Majid 2021) *Newsmax* ranks 29<sup>th</sup> on this list with 39.5 million visitors per month, which may sound small compared to *Fox*, but is still ahead of the websites for *ABC News*, *CBS News*, the *Associated Press*, and *Reuters*. And the *Daily Wire* website is ranked 46<sup>th</sup> with 18.7 million visitors, but it still is ahead of the websites for *US Magazine* and *Vox*. (Majid 2021)

On his website *TheRighting*, Howard Polskin aggregates data on the most popular conservative websites using unique visitor numbers. Polskin lists the top 20 conservative websites as gauged by unique monthly visitors, and again, the *Fox News* primacy on the right is evident, ranking #1 with 79 million unique monthly visitors, which is on par with the number of unique monthly visitors to *The New York Times*. Following *FoxNews.com* are *The Blaze*, *Daily Wire*, *Newsmax*, and *Epoch Times* in the top five, with a combined total of just under 25 million unique monthly visitors. (Polskin 2021) As with television and radio, *Fox News* is the sun in the center of the right-wing media universe. This is not to say that the stars that orbit around *Fox News* are unimportant, as each of these outlets contribute to the dedicated followers of the right-wing media audience, just that *Fox News* is central.

The overlap between these individuals and organizations is not coincidental and adds to the strength of the entire ecosystem. When a message goes around the right-wing media circle and is reinforced at every turn, the audience receives it multiple times and the message hardens into public opinion. It also gives a powerful, unified megaphone to someone who has captured the favor and attention of the right-wing media.

This is best exemplified by the way in which 32% of the American public became convinced of the incorrect belief of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

### **Case Study: The *Fox News* Backstop**

For months prior to Election Night in 2020, former President Trump spread falsehoods about the legitimacy of American election systems and stoked anger on the right, insisting that the only way he could lose re-election was if the election was stolen from him. His followers believed him, in no small part because the right-wing media supported these falsities. Yet on Election Night, the journalistic side of *Fox News* had to adhere to the norms of the profession, even as the opinion-side of the house screamed foul. The news backstop held: several personalities within *Fox* defended the truth of the election outcome, even though this ran counter to what the *Fox News* audience (to include the former president) wanted to hear. According to exclusive reporting from *The Washington Post*, Election Night at the White House was initially calm, and the former president believed he was going to pull out another victory:

Then *Fox News* called Arizona for Biden.

“He was yelling at everyone,” a senior administration official recalled of Trump’s reaction. “He was like, ‘What the hell? We were supposed to be winning Arizona. What’s going on?’ He told Jared to call [News Corp. Executive Chairman Rupert] Murdoch.”

Efforts by Kushner and others on the Trump team to persuade *Fox* to take back its Arizona call failed. Trump and his advisers were furious, in part because calling Arizona for Biden undermined Trump’s scattershot plan to declare victory on election night if it looked as though he had sizable leads in enough states. (Rucker 2020)

The White House efforts to ask *Fox News* to rescind the Arizona call ultimately failed, and of course, there were consequences. After so many months of being primed for deceit, Trump supporters refused to believe the facts of the election results when they disproved the

narratives spun by Trump and supported by other right-wing pundits, opting instead to trust the lie that the election was stolen by Joe Biden. Many *Fox* viewers bolted for *Newsmax* and *OAN* which continued to report the Trump-supporting fabrications that confirmed their existing beliefs. Giddy with surging viewership, *Newsmax* and *OAN* plunged forward and continued their assault on reality until credible (and expensive) defamation lawsuits stopped them from continuing to state the “Big Lie” outright, but both networks maintained their fervent pro-Trump stand, airing his rallies live and featuring him on call-in shows at his request.

*Fox News* suffered a monthly ratings nosedive, placing third in a three-way cable news race (between *Fox News*, *CNN* and *MSNBC*) for the first time in two decades. The consequences for this turn of events were swift. Several *Fox News* personnel, including some who were responsible for Election Night coverage, were fired. The network bowed to audience pressure and started making changes to lessen the size and role of their journalistic backstop, leaning instead more heavily toward the pundit side of the house, moving the tone more to the right.

In the end, this maneuver was successful for *Fox*, if not for reality. Much of the audience that had migrated to *Newsmax* and *OAN* returned, and *Fox*'s ratings were back up. *Fox News* once more sat at the top of the ratings chart at #1, as their audience again received the programming they wanted: the kind of news that confirmed their worst fears, but news that was tinged with conspiracy. Moving toward opinion and away from journalism allowed the network to sow doubt on the results of the election and stay in line with the “Big Lie” that was being reinforced around the right-wing media. As a result, the right-wing audience had a series of fortifying messages that maintained the accusation of widespread voter fraud, all without any evidence provided. The resulting polling data from Monmouth shows the absolute consistency of this belief, which directly relates to the reliability of the right-wing audience. (See Chart 2)

23. Do you believe Joe Biden won the 2020 election fair and square, or do you believe that he only won it due to voter fraud?

TREND:	June 2021	March 2021	Jan. 2021	Nov. 2020
Fair and square	61%	62%	65%	60%
Due to voter fraud	32%	32%	32%	32%
(VOL) Biden won't be declared	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	2%
(VOL) Don't know	7%	6%	3%	6%
(n)	(810)	(802)	(809)	(810)

**(Chart 2)**

Were it not for the right-wing media’s need for an audience, and their resulting adherence to Trump and the “Big Lie,” there would not be an unwavering 32% of the American public who believe Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election through fraud. As a result of this steadfast 32%, Republicans first refused to acknowledge Joe Biden as the elected president in November, then 147 GOP House members objected to the certification of the Electoral College votes in January, even after an armed insurrection effort by Trump supporters at the U.S. Capitol. As a result of this resolute 32%, Republican are passing “election reform laws” in state legislatures around the country because their voters are demanding it. Suspicious “election audits” are being conducted trying to prove that Donald Trump actually won the election, almost a year later. And GOP lawmakers at all levels of government have begun campaigning for office in 2022 and 2024 on the false premise of widespread voter fraud. When a Republican politician pushes back on any claim of voter fraud they are roundly denounced and criticized, regardless of their conservative bonafides, because the stolen election narrative has taken hold so thoroughly and effectively.

This case also shows the power of the right-wing media audience. This is, in no small part, because they have become enmeshed with Trump. The very personal nature of Trump’s

style and the coverage he receives expands outward, and as a result the audience sees politics as an extension of themselves. According to *CNN*'s Brian Stelter, this is (again) not by accident, and in particular *Fox News* continues this personalization to keep their audiences tuned in: “[the audience] believe they are part of *Fox News*. An attack on *Fox News* is an attack on them. Just like Trump. It is a part of identity, a part of a way of life.” (Stelter, The Bulwark Podcast 6/14/2021)

The *Fox* storylines that spread throughout the right-wing media render an apocalyptic, alarmist, and dystopian conception of America where everything is unravelling. It is at once a projection and an inflammation, as it sets a narrative and then angers its audience into belief. In this narrative, where threats are pervasive, scenarios call for a hero to fight on behalf of the audience, and here the right-wing media uphold the perception that Trump is a fighter. (Gabriel 2020) As Trump stoked animus toward specific groups of people, the right-wing media did the same, crafting descriptions of fights by “real” Americans struggling to preserve “real” history. Rooted in real demographic changes that will culminate in a minority-Caucasian U.S. population by the mid-Twenty First Century, the constant framing of a fight for the “future” of America is pervasive. This is best exemplified by a statement from former *Fox News* personality Kimberly Guilfoyle during the 2020 Republican Convention who said about Democrats:

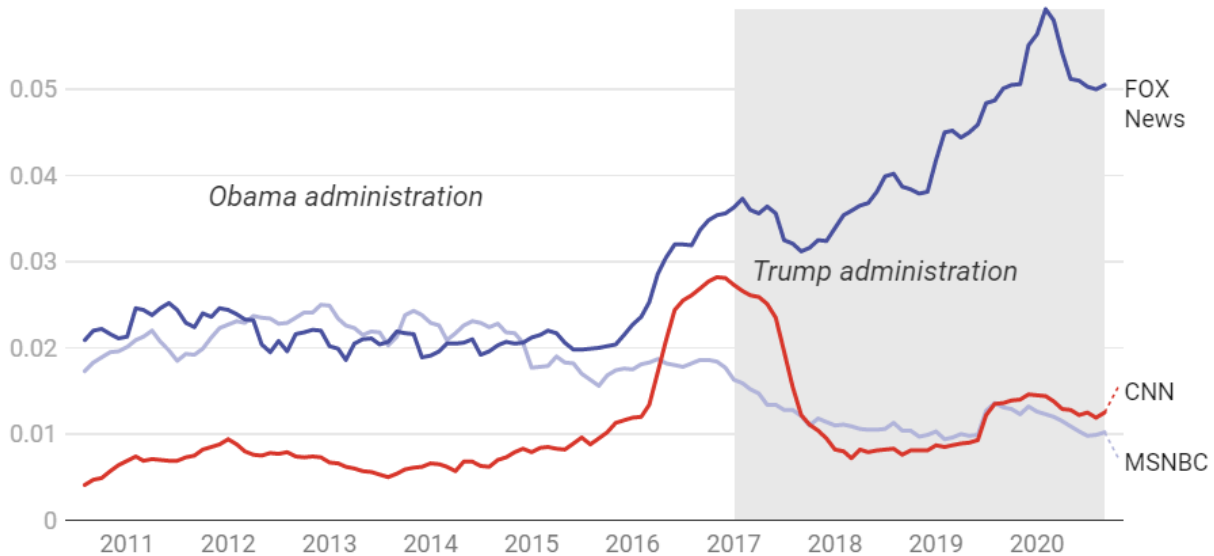
They want to steal your liberty, your freedom. They want to control what you see and think and believe so that they can control how you live. They want to enslave you to the weak, dependent, liberal victim ideology to the point that you will not recognize this country or yourself. (Garber 2020)

Statements like “they are coming for us” are commonplace on right-wing media, and use the term “they hate” to describe “mainly Democrats, liberals, political elites, and the media,”

according to research conducted by *The Conversation* (Chart 3)

## Fox says 'they hate' way more than CNN or MSNBC

Since 2011 all three major cable news channels used the phrase "they hate" in their evening newscasts (between 6 and 11 p.m.). But starting with the 2016 Clinton-Trump race, FOX News has done so far more often than CNN and MSNBC.



Numbers on vertical axis represent the % of news segments mentioning “they hate”; horizontal axis is the year  
Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: [Television News Archive](#) • [Get the data](#)

(Chart 3)

This manufactured battle between professed heroes and adversaries moves political programming from coverage of policy to analysis of a near constant state of combat. This makes for more entertaining programming for the right-wing audience, but it also serves to solidify hostile feelings toward opposing factions. As researchers from *The Conversation* found, this is especially visible on *Fox News*:

*Fox* has constructed two imagined communities. On the one side: Trump along with good folks under siege. On the other: nefarious Democrats, liberals, the left and mainstream

media. Research confirms that repeated exposure to polarized media messages can lead news consumers to form firm opinions and can foster what's called an "in-group" identity. The us-versus-them mentality, in turn, deepens feelings of antipathy toward the perceived "out-group." (Knupfer 2020)

On *Fox News*, these in-group/ out-group dynamics are most clearly seen in the fights about who constitutes a "real" American, and frequently this debate centers on race.

A common fear being sown in right-wing media today is that America is being taken over by people who look and think differently than the predominantly older, Caucasian audience. This presents itself in varying ways, sometimes in coded language and sometimes more plainly. One more obvious example is the 2021 explosion of discussion around critical race theory, a legal philosophy that few people outside of academia discussed until it became a talking point, first on *Fox News* and then across right-wing media. An article in *The Washington Post* included an interview with Kathleen Hall Jamieson from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, who said that critical race theory had become a culture-war shorthand, even though the theory itself was practically irrelevant in public education. Because it became a talking point, critical race theory was something to fear, and if it was frightening then it would be a popular topic on right-wing media: "[If] you are on high alert to threats to your identity, then if it's happening in any place, it's worrisome to you.... It works. It holds audiences. The goal is sustaining viewership." (Barr 2021)

It works because the mere threat of critical race theory taps into the existing prejudices of that aforementioned population segment that was prone to social animus, the Trump voters who became the adherent right-wing viewers. To keep this audience glued to right-wing media, the outlets realized that they had to continue this kind of programming. *CNN* media analyst Oliver



Darcy writes that stoking the racial animus of their audience both sustains their attention and upholds the fundamental tenets of Donald Trump's appeal:

The examples are too numerous to count. Every day there is a new villain, a new avenue to stoke racial tension, a new target to attack and fuel the outrage machine. One day it is Black Lives Matter. The next day it is Vice President Kamala Harris. The day after it is Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot. On and on it goes...And while the issues might seem disparate, the topics convey a singular message, one that is clear, consistent, and always present: People who don't look like you are threatening your way of life and the country as we know it. (Darcy 2021)

Even though this kind of dog-whistle politicking has become more foghorn in its volume, the size and power of the audience provides little incentive to force right-wing media to stop this kind of programming. With so much money at stake, the financial gains of maintaining the angry programming simply outweigh any call for decency. The dedication of the *Fox News* audience is such that angering the audience is unthinkable from a business perspective. According to Brian Stelter in *The Atlantic*: "No cable operator has ever seriously flirted with dropping *Fox* to save money, because, among other reasons, they believe the right-wing backlash would cripple their business." (Garber 2020)

Thus, the audience of right-wing media, led by *Fox News* but including the other outlets within the circle, is driving much of the decision making for the GOP today. The Republican Party apparatchiks can be ignored because the relationship between the right-wing media, the politicians, and the base voters is so fortifying and seemingly successful. It is, however, not without cost, which comes at the expense of the political system, the voters, and the broader ideals of democracy.

## *Conclusions*

Since Trump left office, the nation seems to have taken a collective breath and political media outlets are feeling our relaxation. What had been termed the “Trump Bump” of high ratings and newspaper/magazine/ newsletter subscriptions during the Trump presidency has slid into the “Trump Slump” in the Biden years. Trump himself predicted that without him, the political media would be hurting for business: “Newspapers, television, all forms of media will tank if I’m not there because without me, their ratings are going down the tubes,” (Farhi 2021) He was not wrong: In May of 2021, the cable news ratings showed that all three networks were down significantly from the year before: “In primetime, Fox News averaged 2.17 million viewers, down 37% from the same period a year earlier; MSNBC posted 1.49 million, down 22%; and CNN drew 913,000, down 45%.” (Johnson 2021)

The downward turn in ratings is likely for several reasons, not the least of which is the absence from office and from social media of Trump, a human tsunami of chaotic self-absorption. The relaxation of Covid directives after a year of pandemic concerns, the politics-as-boring style of the Biden presidency, all have combined to allow Americans to unwind from the fatigue of four years of the Trump Show. This has been the case across the board for the media, from left leaning to right-wing to mainstream outlets. *Axios* reported in June 2021 that since Donald Trump left office, every media organization was taking a hit. The changes in monthly traffic in the months before and after Trump left office have noted a precipitous downturn for all outlets. Far left political sites were down 27.3%, the mainstream journalism orgs were down 18.3%, and the far-right sites and outlets were down 43.8%. (Fischer, *Axios: Trump bust hits partisan media* 2021)

While the calming effect of a post-Trump existence has been beneficial for many Americans' mental health, it has been detrimental for the bottom lines of political media organizations. The financial imperatives of the media rest entirely on the attention from the viewing/ reading/ listening public, and accordingly they must find new ways to get that audience back. Mainstream news organizations have started adding more puzzles, games, and pastimes to attract an audience, others have integrated Instagram slides and Twitter cards to "make stories more digestible." (Tameez 2021) They are doing this to appeal to the most people as possible, to attract a wide audience, and to make money. Right-wing media's divisive and affective programming, where they continue to stir up their audience and keep them tuned in, is their way to try and maintain a steady revenue stream as the profits have been deflating. It is obvious as right-wing media orgs ratchet up the rage, they are doing so to keep their audiences tuning in, even if Donald Trump is no longer in office.

Another way to combat the "Trump Slump" is to find a worthy successor to Trump himself, someone to fill his shoes. This is no easy task, but already the search is on, and a recent report found that *Fox News* asked Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to appear on the network 113 times between November 2020 and February 2021, approximately once a day. (Contorno 2021) Whether DeSantis will benefit electorally from his visibility on *Fox* remains to be seen, but he is certainly benefitting financially: The governor has a political action committee that in his first two years in office received 135 out-of-state contributions. According to reporting from the *Tampa Bay News*, in the first half of 2021 DeSantis had more than 10,000 out-of-state donations and his war chest was up to \$48 million. (Contorno 2021) The national exposure and force of *Fox* was beneficial for his political brand.

Getting this campaign funding used to be a function of the political parties but is now a benefit of media attention. With a tightly closed and reinforcing circle of ideologically supportive outlets to back and encourage favored politicians, this makes it possible for Republicans to work outside the Party and raise enough cash to run their own campaigns. To that end, even out of office, Donald Trump had more than \$100 million in political cash after first six months of 2021. (Stanley-Becker 2021)

There are other financial effects of this system. According to *Axios*, outlets within the right-wing media circle and political candidates have found a mutually beneficial fundraising relations where ideologically-driven news outlets provide their subscribers' email address to candidates and charge campaigns to fundraise from them:

The financial incentives for both the news sites and their email advertisers are obvious. But the arrangement also encourages each party to rile up readers with more divisive content. That keeps eyeballs on the news sites and builds a politically enthusiastic readership more valuable to potential political advertisers. For the advertisers, indulging the same outrage that drove them to subscribe to a partisan news site's email list is a great way to boost grassroots donations. (Markay 2021)

In other words, there is little financial incentive for right-wing media to moderate their tone or alter their tactics.

And yet there is profound harm of this system for the viewers, listeners, and readers of right-wing media, and for the broader America public. For the right-wing media audience, the only news they hear is news that confirms their existing beliefs, which means that they will only believe these stories, regardless of their imprecisions. Additionally, because these audiences are consistently led to believe that all other news sources are lying, viewers develop a deep distrust

of the institutions that provide fact-based information and analysis and cannot be convinced of the veracity of facts, even to the point of their own injury. All of this has reinforced cynicism and institutional doubt that is dangerous in a democracy where systemic trust is imperative for the future.

There are benefits to having a large and accessible media: it is democratizing as it allows a plethora of voices to be heard and it breaks down the authority mandates that can stifle free speech. The technological advancements that allow us all to walk around with tiny computers, phones, cameras, and information sources in our pockets do bring us together. Citizens can access their elected officials more easily and can even run for office more easily than they could in the days when the political parties had such a heavy hand in politics. The media allows all of this to happen.

At the same time, the media have supplanted many of the most important roles of the political parties, and in doing so weaken the entire political system. When there are no guard rails provided by a party to weed out the more fringe figures, then it is far more likely that the crazies run. And when the crazies run and win, they make the parties crazy too. This is most evident in the party primaries, where the most devoted party members tend to vote more frequently and make the most extreme ideological demands on the candidates. These primary fights are exactly where the input from the political parties is needed the most, because without it, the worst impulses of the most die-hard voters will run amok and then the worst candidates will be chosen as the parties' nominees. As Jonathan Rauch writes:

Without professional input, the nominating process is vulnerable to manipulation by plutocrats, celebrities, media figures, and activists. As entertainment, America's current primary system works pretty well; as a way to vet candidates for the world's most

important and difficult job, it is at best unreliable—and at worst destabilizing, even dangerous. (Rauch 2019)

The problem for the Republican Party today is that its success, financial and electoral, rests on a fragile arrangement between a politician who tapped into the worst instincts of many Americans, and the media and elected officials who gained from this appeal. Because there is too much money to make from this arrangement, and too many elections for the GOP to win, there are few incentives to change the course or adjust tactics. The Republican Party as an entity has relinquished their power position to stay “winners” among the likeminded. Contrary to their belief, the losers in the deal are not the Democrats, but rather their voters, those who are led to believe untruths and invectives against their fellow Americans, all in the name of ratings and votes. Sowing anger and negative partisanship may work in the short run but inevitably drives the Party into a cul-de-sac without an exit.

Listening to the voters is important, of course, but not when the voters are making decisions based on out-group hatred and entertainment programming concomitantly. At some point, a Party has to encourage actual governing.

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