

# Red and Blue Realities: Political Discourse and the 2020 Election

November 17, 2020

Hello everyone and good afternoon. Welcome to 'Red and Blue Realities; Political Discourse and the 2020 Election,' which we're still in, I guess, election season. But we have two distinguished guests who will be talking to us today about their research that they've done and then we'll get into some questions. So please feel free to put questions in the Q and A at the bottom of your Zoom screen. First, we have Robert Faris and then we have Yochai Benkler who worked with a team of researchers related to communication, media, elections and misinformation. And we're really happy to have them here today. So with that, I'll give it to Rob.

I'm delighted to be here today. Robert Faris, I'm a researcher at the Shorenstein Center and also an affiliate at the Berkman Klein Center.

Great, I'm Yochai Benkler. I'm a faculty here at Berkman. Thanks Jasmine for being willing to lead us in this and comment and think together. Let me just lay things out for a couple of minutes and then transfer it to Rob and then take it back. And let me start with just a little bit of background. After the 2016 election, we invested a lot of time in work on trying to understand in a large scale, data analysis, what the shape of political communication in the United States is. And we came out with several reports but ultimately, this book 'Network Propaganda.' And at the highest level, the most powerful finding we had was that the American political system was not polarized but asymmetrically polarized. That there was a tight, insular right wing and the rest of the media ecosystem from the center-right, all the way to the left, that was centered on professional media. That was the big finding. The second finding was in our work, that it seemed like the Russians and Cambridge Analytica were less important and really that Fox News and the mainstream media played a much larger role than most conversation at the time gave them credit. As we moved the same team and expanded with somewhat new and expanded techniques for defining polarization, et cetera, we found a series of very similar stabilities. Asymmetric polarization continues in the same shape. If anything happened, the mainstream centrists sites grew in importance, like the AP, USA Today, ABC, NBC, CBS. We saw some and that's probably because the negative partisanship of people on the left was fed by the continuous fact-checking, of the string of lies coming from the White House. And we saw some shift in specific outlets like the New York Post or real clear politics that moved further to the right. And we saw this more extremely when we look at Twitter, very similar to what we saw from 2015 to 2018. When we look at Facebook and again, we developed here now a new measure that we'll be happy to go into when we talk about it in Q and A. But basically the same structure, if you look at total engagement, you get one set of super big players. If you look at the range of pages that are sharing, you get another but the overall point is; the structure is very similar, it's asymmetric and major mainstream media continued to be

important and Fox continues to be important. I think Rob now will take it over and talk about a lot of what we saw about the actual strategies and techniques.

Super, thank you, thank you so much Yochai. I'm going to share my screen. Wonderful, so I'm going to highlight some of the findings from two recent reports we have. I wanna say that this is a work of a great team. All blame and credit should be shared with Justin and Bruce and Jonas and Yochai and Hal and Carolyn and Casey, who did amazing work. If you wanna try this at home, get these seven people in a few months and you'll be good to go. These two reports cover January through May of this year. The January period included the impeachment and its aftermath, the killing of general Soleimani and the beginning of the end of the democratic primaries. By the middle of March, coverage of the pandemic had taken over political discourse in the United States and that's what I'm gonna focus on here. Amongst the questions that we're trying to answer in this, is how these media ecosystems operate both kind of within these given media spheres and also between the two of them. So I'm gonna be talking about that. An important place to start and important thing to understand about this is that the vast amount of reporting on politics in the United States is taking place in media sources in the center-left and the center. So by and large, media sources such as the New York Times The Washington Post, CNN, USA today, et cetera, I'm describing this as if you know how we do this but in the reports and in prior work, we have techniques that assign media sources to different segments of the political spectrum based upon the observed behavior of partisan Twitter users. So for each media source, we know where it is on the political spectrum. So what this table shows us is the distribution of linking patterns by media sources. So for example, all of the media sources that are been determined to be on the left, approximately 60% of their links go to media sources on the center-left. 7% to media sources on the left, 5% on the right. You can see the center-left and center media dominated across the board, even on the right. So media sources on the right, 75% of their links are to media sources that occupy the center-left or the center. One in seven of the links are to other media sources on the right. So for conservative media, this is a media ecosystem where the reporting is weighted heavily towards the center and center-left. And it's a fairly hostile media environment for them. So for media sources that have taken up the mission of defending the Trump administration for partisan media, we observe in these reports, several tactics and strategies that repeat over and over again. One is to divert attention to news that is more favorable to your side in the face of bad news. Another is to rebut and reframe negative coverage coming from the center and the center-left. Another is to discredit sources of negative information, whether it be individuals or institutions. Don't trust media, don't trust academic institutions, et cetera. And there's one overarching frame that kind of serves as an umbrella for all of this is reminding audiences that this is political warfare and there's people on our side and people not on our side. In doing these reports with, one of the things we do is we take several analytical perspectives to understand the patterns of attention coming from different segments of the media ecosystem. One is based upon linking behavior. So in the following slides, I'm gonna show how the linking patterns from media outlets on the left compared to the linking patterns of media outlets on the right. We also have another perspective, which is based upon the attention patterns of Twitter users. So we've created three cohorts of Twitter users, according to their alignment with different candidates; Trump, Biden and Sanders. What we did is we drew a very large sample of users that retweeted either

Trump, Biden or Sanders at least two times in October 19th. And from those large samples, we chose a sample of 1,000 users for each that we've now tracked over time to see what they have paid attention to. So in the following slides, we're gonna show how these media attention patterns vary across these different perspectives, by coding the top 100 stories for each by the topics that are covered. So as I mentioned in March, coverage of the pandemic took over political discourse in United States. If we start by looking at the top stories, by links, we see that this gray bar, which is pandemic coverage accounts for about 90% of the attention from media sources on the left. We already see a difference between media sources on the left and the right. The attention from media sources on the right is just over 60%, in second place is campaign coverage in purple. So already, we see a quantitative difference in the amount of attention being paid to the pandemic in March. When we look at the cohorts of partisan users on Twitter, there's also a big difference here. So the Biden and Sanders cohorts paid more attention to the pandemic than the Trump cohort. There was of course, not only a quantitative difference in these attention patterns. There's also a qualitative difference in the cover, in the attention. So the media stories that got the most traction on the left, both from media sources on the left and their linking patterns. And in the Biden and Sanders cohorts on Twitter, was very critical of the Trump administration's response to the pandemic. So a lot of bad news coming from the center and center-left, directed at the Trump administration in March. The stories that got the coverage, that got the most traction on the right, both media sources linking to things as well as the Trump cohort had a very different pattern of attention here. One of the tactics was to divert attention, focus attention on the Democrats instead. Another tactic of course, is to call the news coming from the center and the center-left; false reporting. The other thing we see very clearly here is that there is a distinct effort to rebut and reframe coverage coming from the left. This article in Fox News, is Fox news providing Trump with an uncritical platform to rebut coverage coming from the left. This story here is a response to this story on the Trump administration's efforts to downplay the pandemic. There's this kind of this folksy version of echo chambers where echo chambers prevent bad news from entering into their echo chambers. That's just wrong. The conservative media in particular, is acutely aware of the coverage that's coming from the outside and there's a distinct pattern of rebutting and reframing that coverage. Another thing that's occurring at the same time period is, there's almost a cottage industry of people that are out looking for evidence that mainstream media is overselling the extent of the pandemic. So this is people looking for evidence of exaggerated coverage by looking for the lack of activity in parking lots at hospitals. In April, we see a growing divide. The attention from media sources on the left is well over 90% still. On the right, I'm trying to get my mouse to work here. On the right, attention to the pandemic is just over 50% now in April. So a big divide between the center and the right. A lot of the difference in the attention is coverage of Tara Reade. Similar patterns in the Trump cohorts. So the Biden and Sanders cohort, a little bit less attention to the pandemic than we saw in March. That's been filled by attention to other Trump administration stories. Negative coverage, yes indeed, but less on the pandemic. The Trump cohort, much less attention to the pandemic and instead of the Tara Reade story, they are reopening the debate over the origins of the Russia investigation. Again, coverage from the left and the center-left in the center, deeply negative coverage of the Trump administration's response to the pandemic. Those stories that got the most traction on the right, are deflecting, diverting attention from those. rebutting and reframing the coverage

that's coming from the center and the center-left. And also, focusing on Tara Reade and the origins of the Russia investigation. On social media, we see that the Trump cohort is particularly eclectic, adventuresome in their media. They're promoting a lot of disinformation, essentially. That the pandemic is overblown, that public health authorities are cooking the numbers, that there are conspiracies against the Trump administration. One of the things that's very interesting in this is that when we look at the patterns of attention on the left, the Biden and the Sanders cohorts, their attention patterns align very closely with the same patterns that we see with media sources coming from the left. There's a weight towards authoritative sources on the center and the center-left. On the right, there's a greater diversity of attention patterns between the Trump cohort and media sources on the right. So the last month we'll look at is May and there is a dramatic turn here. If you look at the attention patterns from media sources on the left, almost 60% is still focused on the pandemic though there's a little bit of fatigue at work here. The patterns from the right are radically different. There's a 3:1 ratio of attention to stories related to the origin of the Russia investigation, compared to the pandemic. They haven't completely moved on from the pandemic but they have largely moved on. Less than 20% of the attention from the right is now to the pandemic and this set of stories kind of under the rubric of Obama gate, has overtaken attention from the right. That's even more true when you look at the attention patterns amongst the Trump cohort. The Biden and Sanders cohort, still a lot of attention to the pandemic, a lot of attention to the Trump administration. There's a notable difference that we need to look more closely into as we pick up the story in June and July, is that the Sanders cohort in particular, paid a lot of attention to the killing of George Floyd and the resulting protests out of that, much more so than the Biden cohort. So you can tell, there's way more to talk about than we actually have time to address in this time. Again, the qualitative differences are also important. The mainstream media coverage of the Trump administration is deeply negative. The coverage coming from media sources on the right that got the most attraction is talking about Obama gate. So they've changed the topic in a marked way. So those are some of the highlights. We see over and over again as we go through this, referral to the same topics, it's the same tactics and strategies in the partisan media playbook. Again, I wanna highlight that the partisan framing that comes through this is really an important part of this and these all work in a complimentary way, which is to discredit others. And that there are a set of kind of from very specific claims about facts and evidence to a more general framing; that this is partisan warfare and you should not trust sources outside of this media system. I wanna turn it back over to Yochai but leave you with two overriding thoughts from this. One is just the strength of partisan framing in this media ecosystem. That facts are just no match for partisanship. And that for me, it's hard to accept so I always have this optimism that in the end, the truth will win out. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that no partisanship wins. If it's facts or partisanship, partisanship wins. The other thing that stands out from this as the key difference between 2016 and 2020, instead in 2016, as we documented in 'Network Propaganda' is that right wing media and conservative activists had a lot of the success in setting the agenda across the media ecosystem. First looks at particularly related to impeachment and Hunter Biden and Ukraine conspiracy, suggests that this is no longer true, at least, not to the same extent in 2020 that mainstream media was much more wary of a keynote, the talking points coming from the right. So I'm gonna turn it back to you, Yochai, thank you so much. I look forward to questions and discussion.

Great, thanks Rob. There was a request to come back to the names of the reports. Most generally, you can look for us on the Berkman site, under election misinformation and the media democracy and public discourse program and all our reports are up there. Again, the same amazing team. We've been holding hands and running together for many months now. It's really been a pleasure to work with this whole team. Couple of highlights. The overall topic that Rob was describing covers about three and a half million stories. Around the summer, we saw that mail-in voter fraud disinformation has become and is becoming the central propaganda question of the election. And obviously now after the election, that's become even clearer. We dug into a subset, 55,000 stories from March to the end of August, that focused on mail-in voter fraud or ballot or rigged election. About 5 million tweets, 75,000 Facebook posts, trying to understand the shape specifically of this one major strategic focus. And what we identified at the highest level, is that Trump was central to this campaign but not alone. And that this was primarily an elite-driven propaganda campaign carried on directly through mass media and social media was secondary, as opposed to now. Let me unpack that a little bit. This is a map of In-Links, similar to the ones Rob showed you, but specifically only among the stories about mail-in voter fraud. We also created a Trump Twitter outlet, just using Trump's handle as the Twitter outlet. And what's very clear here by location and size is that Trump's Twitter handle is the central media source for mail-in voter fraud propaganda. And its location on the map strongly suggests that it is linked to as much, if not more, by mainstream media as by the right. So he's really setting the agenda through his Twitter handle but as we'll see in a minute, it's not just through his Twitter handle. When we look at Facebook itself, at public Facebook groups using CrowdTangle, we see a highly bifurcated system, with two large clusters on the left and a large central cluster on the right. But when we actually looked, something like 90% of these stories, of these posts linked to stories outside. And when we look at the news outlets as organized, essentially the network here, the size of the nodes is how often stories from them about mail-in voter fraud were shared on public Facebook pages. Their location on the map is how often they were shared by the same groups, next to each other. Things that come out very powerfully. The New York Post comes to play a major role and this is something we saw in the overall as well. It's moved over to the right, relative to before. It's still shared as you see from its color, it's still shared by less uniquely right wing users, still more mixture of centrist and left people of sharing that tabloid particularly. But it's central and Fox News and Breitbart and real clear politics as well. Today's story in the New York Times actually tells some of the backstory for what we found in the data about real clear politics moving right. Here's the anchor to understanding what we did. We took essentially, all of the open web stories, all of the tweets and all of the Facebook posts that mentioned some combination of rigged election associated with mail-in ballots or mail-in voting and put them on a histogram to see when the stories spiked. And then we went into each and every one of these spikes and we said; what was the first story on the open web? What was the first tweet? What were the tweets with the most retweets, with the most reach? What were the Facebook pages with the most shares, with the most interactions? What we found consistently, is that using Fox News television interviews, using the daily Corona virus briefings and using his Twitter account, Donald Trump consistently sets the agenda across the media ecosystem. That's one thing. The second thing is that there's a coordinated attack that includes the Republican party. So here's the Ronald McDaniel, the RNC,

the National Republican Congressional Campaign. There's a consistent, coordinated attack by the President as leader, by his campaign staff and by the major organs of the party against mail-in voter fraud as a source of election tampering. So that's the critical finding, is that this was a elite-driven strategy, replicated. a elite-driven strategy, replicated. What happens with these, and this is essentially what this teaches us. What happens essentially is that when Trump tweets, it doesn't generally circulate around the network and then get to CNN or the Washington Post or the New York Times. He's the President, what he said is outrageous. It directly feeds into the practices of mainstream media, so that it becomes news immediately. And so he's using it more like a press release than like a social network dynamic and we'll go into what that means. Other critical strategies is that this entire framework of actors is trolling the web for stories that provide powerful anecdotes. Whether it's a mail carrier in West Virginia, whether it's a report that comes out of a right wing think tank that overstates how many ballots, mail-in ballots are lost and then gets tweeted by Trump. Or whether it's in Patterson, New Jersey, local city council election, where 800 ballots are thrown out. In each of these cases, what we see is local media report on some anomaly. Atlanta, Georgia, Fox affiliates finds two people who got a registration form for their dead dog or dead cat. That then becomes the story. And then, of course, we have the Republican National Committee itself providing another peak and this major peak here, with respect to the post. I'm happy to go into any of these later but I want us to have a lot more time for conversation. So I wanna identify at the high level, a couple of points. First of all, our standard model of what a social media campaign is, suggests that social media dominates. In other words, social media consumers are out there in the world. They encounter Russian trolls, Cambridge Analytica, memes, et cetera and they suddenly change their views and they become social media producers and circulators. The story is anchored in social media, its origin is social media, it's circulation is social media. A second model is that mass media producers are still really important but social media leads and mass media follows. This is the situation where people generate stories on social media. The newspaper reporters are constantly trying to figure out what's going on in social media, they get influenced. They produce stories which then feed both their mass media consumers and social media consumers who recirculate. What we found actually, in the case of mail-in voter fraud, is very different. It's a mass media leads and social media secondary model, where political and media elites directly produce for mass media and where social media recirculates these mass media products. And when we look at surveys, actually probably most of the content reaches people as mass media, rather than as social media consumers. Critically important, all of the various bad actors that we've so focused on so much in the last four years; the Russians, the trolls, the Cambridge Analytics, depending on us at least living in a model of mass media, of social media leads if not social media dominates. But here we see something very, very different. So one of the things we tried to do was try to understand what mainstream media were about and we used text analysis to look for stories that were identical, which we flagged essentially as syndication. And we found essentially four groups. One is the Associated Press through local newspaper, Gannet USA Today Network, local TV using AP or group content like CNN, NPR and Wicked Local. What's interesting is, if you remember this map, if you take this map and you size the nodes without moving anything, you size the nodes based on how prominent syndicated media are, this is what the map looks like. So when you think of all of the people, based on surveys who tell us they watch local news, who tell us they read regional

newspapers. This map is almost completely unavailable for people who only study Twitter or only study CrowdTangle on Facebook. And so how many are these? This is the most recent Pew report on this question of distribution of media. And what you see here is that the analysis always focuses on the large number, almost one in five Americans use social media. But the truth is, news and websites or apps, cable TV, local TV, and network TV, each are almost as large, one is larger and the others are almost as large as social media. So that's a massive amount of attention that people declare, this is where they get their news. And the question then becomes; how do these players whom no one pays attention to, report? And here I think a critical change we saw in mail-in voter is from the beginning of the campaign to the end. At the beginning of the campaign, the disinformation campaign, this is a May 5th story from the Associated Press. This follows a crazy Trump tweet; don't allow rigged election, a lot of people cheat and he's recirculating a think tank story that had already been debunked by May 2nd or 3rd by ProPublica. by May 2nd or 3rd by ProPublica. And yet the way in which the AP at this stage of the campaign was describing it was, a bitterly partisan debate unfolding on whether more Americans should cast their vote through the mail, et cetera. We already know this from the research on climate reporting. We saw this balance is bias, happening early on. However, later in the campaign as things began to mount up, we saw even the Associated Press change its framing. And we saw this in the times, in the APM. It's not always but consistently much more. Trump opposes us postal service money that would help vote by mail. Trump also claimed and new, falsely that Democrats were pushing, et cetera. So explaining the partisan context, sandwiching the false hood in a truth sandwich to say that it's false. Much more active debunking in the process and this loss of even the Wall Street Journal And more recently after the campaign, we even had this phenomenon of Kabuto cutting off McAneny as she was trying to state the lies without basis. We've seen possibly after the campaign, the Murdoch-owned properties pull back from the central role that they played in disseminating. But there's a real tear between the news side and the opinion side. So where do we come to, from all of this? Mail-in voter fraud propaganda is elite-driven, through mainstream media. It's not just Trump, it's not one narcissist with a big ego. It is a partisan strategy, designed to prevent and suppress the vote. It is supported on the most highly trusted news media, Sean Hannity on the right, by chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, by the Senate majority leader. What we're seeing is a much more traditional propaganda system, where a major party is engaged in false disinformation. Combining it with institutional actions to suppress and depress the vote in critical States, in order to overcome their basic electoral limitation. They have not won a popular vote, except once since 1988. In order to succeed in controlling or retaining power despite minority position. And that basic political economy needs to be central to our understanding, rather than just thinking specifically about network disinformation, particularly if we focus only on social media.

Great, thank you, Rob and Yochai. Just gonna take a moment to admonish the folks in the audience. Please, if you have questions, please drop them in the Q and A feature that's at the bottom of your Zoom screen. But because I'm moderator, I get the prerogative to ask the first question of both Yochai and Rob. What do your findings mean for the elite media? Within this spectrum of the campaign season, the election season, a lot of focus has been on social media specifically,. But what does it mean for the mainstream media and particularly, for newsroom

patterns or newsroom culture and the professionalization or professional journalists working in this space, covering all of the related campaign and extra campaign kinds of information and possible propaganda that you all noted?

So thank you, Jasmine. Go ahead, Rob, you were going to come in.

No you start, go ahead.

So thank you Jasmine for that question. I think that's exactly the right question. Perhaps the most depressing conclusion of our book in 2018 was that the only real intervention that could matter and could be done constitutionally is to change patterns of reporting in the mainstream press. And that's what I tried to do here and it's very difficult. It turns out to be extremely difficult for newsrooms to adapt their behavior. They're used to following the flashy headline. They're used to trying to attract people to read them. They're used to being balanced. It's much easier to say it's a partisan debate than to say; this side is lying, that isn't and we're not being partisan, we're just telling you the truth. There's a real need for re-assessing the role of the editor, for not separating out fact checking from the main reporting but actually putting the fact checking in the headline, in the lead, in order to educate the audience from the very start that what you're hearing is a lie. It's an intentional propagandist campaign. Here are its political necessities, and that needs to happen in local TV, that needs to happen in regional newspapers, that needs to happen in the Associated Press. We somewhat quantified it on mail-in voter fraud, we're gonna need to look at it going backward when we read things going forward. But impressionistically, at least since September, it seems to be that that message has sunk in. And we have seen a little bit, not even a little bit, a significant shift. Just as Rob, maybe he'll talk about the Hunter Biden story but we've seen it also in mail-in voting as well. They're beginning to overcome their educated, deeply professionally instilled commitment to balance, even if balance is false and to becoming more aggressive in debunking right as they're telling the story.

I'll pile on that. First of all, I agree with all of that. It would be a lot easier I think, if we lived in a symmetric world, the asymmetries in media just make things very, very awkward and for researchers, for media, for everybody. We can't ignore the asymmetries but taking them on honestly and openly is problematic as well. I think we see in these studies, we see both the strengths and the limitations of elite media. We see the limitations in that it's almost impossible to pierce the armor of loyal partisans. Not that we shouldn't try and continue to hold the truth but I don't think that that's gonna be where we see a big impact. I do think that we've seen progress in avoiding the foibles, the being played by political operatives. The Hunter Biden example is I think key to this. By January, we had seen that mainstream media, the frame that they adopted around the Hunter Biden innuendos and rumors and conspiracies that were being pushed out was that this was an attempt to smear Joe Biden and that we needed to act on that cautiously. That played through until October. We haven't finished looking at the data there but conservative media was pushing this hard drive story very, very hard. And we will debate for many months in the future, whether mainstream media did the right thing in pushing this story back and ignoring it. It was clearly a chapter out of the 2016 playbook that they wanted to repeat and mainstream media largely said; no thank you, we're not playing that game again. I

think the one area that Yochai's discussion points to is that an area that I think, where we might see the biggest changes is on the margins, not in getting very partisan people to change their mind and be more open to alternative things. But is the impact that large media has on independents and moderates. I think if we're gonna see changes in media ecosystem, it's probably gonna happen there on the margin. So there is a very important and key role for elite media moving forward. So their job is, if anything, more important than it was before.

Right, thank you and one more question. What has the loss in local news outlets and local news spaces but also the concentration of local news, say television stations, meant for this kind of a transmittal of disinformation? And as you talked about, the elite-driven nature of this. But what does it mean when there's a lack of different local places that people can go to get news?

You want to go or shall I?

I'll throw out a couple ideas. I mean that's huge, huge, big topic. It has been and is deserving of more research than has been paid to it. There's a nationalization of politics, which I think is deeply worrying that moves people's importance towards more partisan issues that are harder to grok and harder to understand in an immediate sense. So that's one of the problems. Another problem is that as local newspapers disappear, there's a void being filled by junk news, which is filling out the scene there. So that's another problem. And the other problem is that the feedback loops with local news is much stronger. It's very hard to make up lies about the local school committee because for people, that's a very lived experience. Whereas as things get more complicated and more abstract, it's easier to push disinformation on to people.

So this also ties to one of the questions in the queue asking about Sinclair and local news, Jasmine. So I think I'll try to combine the two together. To me, the biggest takeaway is that we don't know. There's this massive amount of really important communications that are happening and we've lost our ability to understand it. There was a generation of media scholars who really understood TV and really looked at TV and didn't know about data science and didn't know about studying in the network. And now there's a decade or 15 years worth of people who've become really, really good at data analysis and looking at quantitative and qualitative work online, but who've lost the taste and training to look at TV. And I think part of what's coming out here is that we as a field, need to build that combined muscle again. We need to build new data sets to be able to see, what's going on on TV? Occasionally somebody will come out with that brilliant thing about how Sinclair repeated over and over again, the same news coverage. But we actually need to get the ability to do what we're doing online, ingest huge amounts of TV data and then analyze it both quantitatively and qualitatively. We now do some of this cross work, using our own eyes as it were and ears. We're better able to do it for cable news, much less so for local news. It's impossible that it's not important. Part of what we tried to do with the syndication work is to try to exercise those muscles of trying to understand. But to me, it's more; yes this is absolutely central, we need these. And to just throw in a response to another one of those comments and we need the same thing in all of these other countries. I don't know that there's been anything. There's an interesting study that Ethan Zuckerman did with colleagues at Sian-Spore on France. There's an interesting version of

this that Jonas Kaiser, one of our collaborators, has done on Germany. There's the beginning of working of similar work in other countries but to my taste, the primary lesson both for the local and for the international is that we're building a set of techniques that are allowing us to see things differently than what we've seen with techniques from the last decade. And we just need to ramp those off and both focus in on the local and replicate globally.

Great, I'm gonna go into the Q and A and ask a few questions. So one participant asks; on the asymmetry, between the left and the right, the asymmetry makes sense but have you seen any evolution between 2016 and the 2020 on the left? E.g. toward an increasingly polarized and radicalized left or something altogether different? But let me combine that with this other one, which talks about the conservative shift away from Fox towards OANN and Newsmax and from Twitter and Facebook to Parlay. How do you see this affecting the media ecosystem?

Yeah, so I would say one of the surprising things to me is how central the rest of the media ecosystem has been. If anything, we've seen less of a distinctly left echo sphere and more of everybody outside of the Trump sphere just focusing on mainstream media. Now this may be biased by the fact that we were focused on the general election topic and the COVID topic, rather than for example, on racial justice, where we might, I would expect if we did, particularly this summer of all summers, we might've seen actually distinct left emerging, and that's a real field. But as we're looking at this broad population level election topic, the most surprising thing that happened on the left was that it became more mainstream not less. And I see you nodding Rob, I take it you agree with me?

Yeah I mean, I completely agree. And I think one of the explanations for this is that for partisans on the left, you can read the New York Times and the Washington Post and that will satisfy your need for negative polarization in a big way. You need not go any further than the pages of New York Times to get your fix of why Trump is destroying the world. Where on the right, you need to go other places.

But I do wanna pick up that second question that you raised Jasmine, from one of the things. Whoa, who knows, Trump TV is on its way. No, I'm actually not kidding. We know he wants money. We know he needs money. We know he needs attention. We know that OAN, he's already started to get angry at Fox for not supporting him, for calling Arizona early. He needs to find a way to monetize this rage because that combination of making money and getting his ego stroke just drives the man. So we should expect to see a Trump TV. Fox and the Murdoch family have two equally plausible strategies. One is to try to imagine that there's a center-right audience that they can lean in on Chris Wallace and lean away from Hannity. But part of what we found in our work as we were trying to look at the political economy over the last 40 years, is that the outrage industry is very hard to segment. There's this deep, large plurality audience of Christian nationalists who really want their outrage fix. And so it's gonna be very hard to find the slice between that and something else. Maybe the Wall Street Journal still can because it's got a unique product. But I'm not sure Fox news can, in which case, we're gonna see on the media ecosystem, the same dynamic we saw in the Republican party where the center of the party just gets shaved off and the whole center of gravity moves to the right. We saw it in the

party. I worry that it's gonna be the Chris Wallace's who will be dumped rather than the Sean Hannity's on Fox and that's where that's going.

I think I agree with that. Can I just add to that? I think one of the things that we have seen over the past several years is that this asymmetric system is both stable and resilient. We may see a shift in prominence amongst media sources on the right. That doesn't mean we're gonna see a change in tone or function on the right.

Okay, great. A question from the chat; Anne Applebaum's new book suggest that it might be interesting to compare your results with similar analyses in the UK, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, et cetera. Do you know of any data of a similar nature from these countries?

That was the question I was trying to refer to earlier when I said about these other studies. We don't have it. These were the studies I mentioned about France and Germany. Certainly, different countries are gonna be very different. India is going to be particularly difficult to study because even where social networks are concerned, it's WhatsApp that's being considered to be the most important. There's also a lot of vernacular TV, that's gonna be hard to study. Possibly, possibly Hungary and Turkey will be the next obvious task but we haven't done it. I don't know of work that tries to use our cross-platform, large-scale data and qualitative work. And it's hard, it's hard where you don't have the collection. It's hard wherever you're gonna see private messaging services playing a large and important role and that's many places outside of the US. It's hard where you don't capture a lot of TV content, as at least you have here for the major networks.

I'm taking a few more questions. So considering that disinformation in mainstream media and social networks are commonly overlapping, would you agree there is an increased difficulty in establishing a causal relationship between the author of false information and real life consequences? And if so, could this scenario complicate mainstream media accountability for disinformation due to the legal safe harbors that are meant for social networks, like section 230?

I'm not sure I understand that, do you understand the question Yochai?

I'm reading the text of it so as to make sure that I respond to it because it's a complex, complexly structured question. Let's start with the original premise. We have no idea that any online campaign effected any behavior, that's before we bring in mainstream media. The evidence just isn't there as a matter of impact. However, however, the data exists. If we had a regulatory system that appropriately demanded access to social media data, in a publicly governed data set to which accredited researchers could have access under appropriate legal protections of the kind that healthcare researchers have when they access private health data. To look at specific events, you can study who got exposed to what, what their interactions were before, what their interactions were later, did they vote, didn't they vote? This is fraught with privacy violation potential. It's a real problem, I'm not saying this is easy but it's possible to do. In which case, you can try to look at people who watch the same TV shows, et cetera and

try to control for that. It's not going to be that easy. Mainstream accountability for disinformation only doesn't exist at least in the United States, legally because of the way in which the first amendment has been very aggressively interpreted. For good, for bad, you can have an argument about whether it's a good idea or a bad idea. We're not gonna have mainstream accountability for disinformation if what you mean is legal accountability. What we could have and what we do have in the mainstream but not on the right, is accountability for going false by criticism between the media. That's what we call the reality check dynamic. But that doesn't happen with the mainstream media on the right because they only police each other for identity consistency. They don't police each other at all for falsehood.

Okay, I think we have time for one question. Or has your data shown any effects on independence?

So this is to me a major lesson and it's actually not our data as much as the survey data, when we projected back onto our data. First of all, independence is a really complicated category that almost nobody really understands and surveys properly. So there are lean Republicans who behave like Republicans and there are lean Democrats who behave like Democrats but they don't like the identity and they kind of split the difference and it's not clear to anyone how many people there are really in the middle. What came I think, very clearly to us in the process particularly of looking at mail-in voter fraud, is that there's a segment that's not so much independent as disconnected from politics. Just doesn't really want to focus so much on politics. They don't spend that much time on it. Those are the people who are in the balance and can affect, at least at the electoral level or at the trust level, can affect the overall shape. So they don't actually exist in the crazy propaganda system. They're the ones that are the target and ought to be the target of the corrective work of particularly local television as seems to be the primary, primary mechanism of reaching those disconnected or disaffected audiences. And they're very important but again, as I said, that's a large opacity. We just don't know enough about that and part of what comes out of our research now is that we need to learn. We need to learn who those people are. We need to learn where they get their news. We need to learn what those outlets are doing. We need to build completely new systems to understand those because our current systems blind us to their preferences and to their media diets.

Great, thank you Rob and Yochai and thank you to all the participants in this lunch seminar, luncheon seminar. Again, please visit the [cyber.harvard.edu](http://cyber.harvard.edu) website where you can find these reports and others. If you wanna get more information and encounter all the other cool kind of things that are happening at the Berkman Klein Center. Have a great day.

And thank you for your moderation and insights here.

Thank you Jasmine, thank you Yochai.