THE ERA OF “FAKE NEWS:” THE RISE OF POLITICAL SENSATIONALIST JOURNALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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This thesis examines the role of sensationalist journalism in American politics as well as its societal and political implications on the American public. This research seeks to define the differences between objective and sensationalized journalism and document the historical shift from objective-style reporting to sensationalism, explain the impacts of sensationalism during the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, sensationalist journalism is devoted to audience targeting, distorting events, and evoking emotional responses from viewers whereas objective journalism is committed to fact distribution, fairness, and neutrality in reporting. The thesis presents an empirical survey conducted on a sample of the American public to determine reactions to sensationalized articles and how they correlate to personal attitudes. Chapter 1 briefly introduces my research question and explains the necessity for this research. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a historical look at objective and sensationalized journalism, as well as the networks utilized for the survey, FOX and CNN. Chapter 4 explains the methodology used in the survey, then Chapters 5 and 6 reveal and analyze the results. The final chapter concludes with an examination into the accuracy of my initial hypotheses, the limitations of my research, and an outlook on the future of journalism. Ultimately, this thesis found that the way in which the media frames specific affect attitudes towards scientific phenomenon, which prompts further research on this topic. Scholars can further this topic in widening the scope of the research, publishing the survey to a larger sample size participant group, or modifying the questions within the survey itself.
Table of Contents

Title Page.........................................................................................................................
Blank Page.........................................................................................................................
Abstract............................................................................................................................ii
Table of Contents...............................................................................................................iii
List of Figures......................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgements............................................................................................................v
Chapter 1...........................................................................................................................1
Chapter 2...........................................................................................................................12
Chapter 3...........................................................................................................................27
Chapter 4...........................................................................................................................36
Chapter 5...........................................................................................................................48
Chapter 6...........................................................................................................................62
Chapter 7...........................................................................................................................70
Appendix A (Articles used from CNN).............................................................................79
Appendix B (Articles used from FOX)................................................................................86
Appendix C (Survey Materials)........................................................................................92
  a. Survey Articles.........................................................................................................92
  b. Survey Questions.....................................................................................................94
Appendix D (Works Cited)...............................................................................................97
List of Figures

Figure 1 ................................................................. 39
Figure 2 ................................................................. 42
Figure 3 ................................................................. 51
Figure 4 ................................................................. 51
Figure 5 ................................................................. 51
Figure 6 ................................................................. 53
Figure 7 ................................................................. 54
Figure 8 ................................................................. 55
Figure 9 ................................................................. 56
Figure 10 ............................................................... 58
Figure 11 ............................................................... 59
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Carrigan English
Chapter 1: Introduction

The way people receive information reflects the culture in which they live and how they interact with those around them. Society is composed of different discourses, which define how people are perceived and discussed. These discourses come from how information is spread throughout society, and who has power over what is heard. In today’s society, the mass media, defined as “the principal factor in the social construction of political public opinion,” has unprecedented influence over this diffusion due to individuals’ growing reliance on quick access to information (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000).

In theory, one would assume that with this amount of power, these networks, such as CNN and FOX, would demonstrate caution on how their stories are chosen, written, and published to their audiences. However, this does not seem to be occurring in practice.

When one turns on the television, it is almost normal to see raised voices, shouting about who has the correct answer to the issue being addressed. This is also seen in written content as well. Reading headlines such as “Four Pinocchios” to describe Hunter Biden’s emails seem to incorporate this same subjectivity as in the talking heads on television (Flood, 2021). These words are framed in a way to evoke an emotional response from a viewer, a concept known as sensationalism. There seems to be an increase of this type of writing across the media’s information publication, and this stands in stark contrast to the 20th century. There was once an era of objective-based, investigative journalism (a period including the early 1900s until the 1970s) where it was common journalistic practice to provide the full story in its proper context (Aucoin, 2007). Writers adhered to specific rules about gathering sources and evidence before breaking a large-scale story in an objective manner, which allowed these networks to
achieve their fundamental goal: informing the American audience. There was a sense of pride in uncovering misconducts throughout society, with no specific partisan agenda. However, the current political atmosphere and civil discourse in the U.S. suggests changes to this method have occurred, as seen in a few of today’s major networks, such as FOX and CNN. Thus, it is only natural to assume a correlation between this change in practice and an increase in partisan political attitudes.

Statement of Research

As a result of the phenomena mentioned above, I am studying the rise and fall of objective and investigative journalism within the framework of political news media because I wish to discover the reasons why and how the media has fallen into subjective practices as well as its subsequent effects on domestic political opinion construction. These subjective practices are demonstrated in several ways, such as hyperbolized language use, targeted story choice, and manipulation of specific facts and information with the intent to attract a larger audience. I hypothesize that the United States has experienced a rise of sensational media and decline in objective journalism since the 1990s, which has affected the way individuals form their political opinions and beliefs (Hachten, 2005; Wiltenburg, 2004; Bennett, 2016; Bolsen et al., 2014; Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018; McCombs, 2020; Mutz, 2006; Ashley et al., 2018). Fragmented, sensationalized news pieces, both in print and broadcast, are perceived as legitimate information, which reinforce the binary political system through publication of framed material. Thus, these narratives become dominant, yet divisive discourses within society. In my study, I wish to support this hypothesis in four ways:
• define the differences between objective and sensationalized journalism, both in theory and in practice (Feldstein, 2009; Benson, 2008; Houston, 2010; Aucoin, 2007; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; McQuail, 2010; Hachten, 2005; Wiltenburg, 2004; Abdenour and Riffe, 2019; Bennett, 2016; Hendriks Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018; McCombs, 2020; Ashley et al., 2018)

• outline the influence of objective journalism on civil discourse (Feldstein, 2009; Benson, 2008; Houston, 2010; Aucoin, 2007; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; McQuail, 2010)

• document the historical shift from objective-style reporting to a reliance on sensationalism (Hachten, 2005; Wiltenburg, 2004; Abdenour and Riffe, 2019; Bennett, 2016; Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018; McCombs, 2020; Ashley et al., 2018)

• explain the political and societal impacts from the rise in sensationalism, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lippman, 1922; Wier, 2017; Bolsen et al., 2014; Kahan, 2015; Arceneaux et al., 2012; McCombs, 2020; Mutz, 2006)

In studying major national media outlets, I hope to raise awareness on this phenomenon and to ensure that citizens are more informed about their media sources and the information they are given in their daily lives.

Methodology

The first component of my hypothesis addresses whether there has been a true decrease in objective reporting. The scope of my original, empirical research focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic (specifically from March 2020 to December 2020), while the
secondary research conducted on the history of journalistic practices will span from the 19th century until today. While the media sources examined will include national networks, the individuals surveyed will come from across the United States. The Coronavirus pandemic is a key choice for this analysis in that is not inherently political in nature, but it has since become a very divisive topic amongst Americans. I can accurately document a shift in the mass media from objective to sensationalized reporting and how this practice functions today (online news articles). My research looks at more than just journalistic practices, as many factors shape the change within a network. To name a few, I analyzed changes in power structures, economic discrepancies, and administrative shifts. The empirical research pertaining to this study looks at specific articles, which I categorize as collection of secondary data, from my two primary news sources, CNN and FOX, and determine if their stories were sensational or objective in nature. To come to a primary conclusion, I created a list of qualities that characterize a traditional, investigative story and attributes common in sensationalized articles based upon historical, scholarly research. This list of qualities encompassed journalistic choices such as information manipulation, story selection, and audience targeting. My principal aim with this list was to establish a trend towards sensationalism and away from objectivity.

In order to evaluate the second component of my hypothesis, discovering the causal factors behind the movement away from objective journalism, I must combine theoretical aspects of communication studies as well as political science methodologies. This objective was fulfilled through the study of secondary data, which included a close historical analysis of not only journalistic practices, but ownership changes, public opinion, finances, and other factors contributing towards changes in content. This
analysis served as an extension of the works mentioned in the literature review as well as many other scholarly studies. I also tracked the passage and repeal of legislation that held significant ramifications on these practices, such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the Fairness Doctrine. This information was used to create concrete definitions of both objective and sensationalized journalism. These initial factors provided me with a strong foundation upon which I can then prepare and conduct an analysis on the stark shift in practices, and its subsequent effects on the general population.

After I have obtained definitive background knowledge of objective journalism as well as each of the two news sources through secondary research, I began collecting my own original data, which seeks to answer the final component of my hypothesis: how the fall of objective journalism has impacted social and political attitudes, if at all. First, I outlined many psychological effects imposed by the media on the public and highlight the most pressing social and political ones. These effects include mythmaking, priming selective attention, selective exposure, creation of a pseudo-environment, and motivated reasoning (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Bolsen et al., 2014; Kahan, 2015; McCombs, 2020; Meltzer, 2019; Mutz, 2006). With this background information, I then collected information from the archives of both FOX’s and CNN’s websites, which each provided a database holding previously published online news articles. I analyzed various articles from these sources to determine if they promoted specific arguments and manipulated information to frame their reporting, especially the COVID-19 towards a specific audience. From this point, I generated charts for each source and listed examples of how both FOX and CNN demonstrated sensationalism through story selection, information manipulation, and audience targeting/narrowcasting.
Once I had outlined these definite characteristics of each news source, it was important to determine how they would affect the public around me. I composed a "story" for each source that resembles the data that I compiled from my primary sources. Then, due to the assistance of Newcomb-Tulane College, I put these articles into a survey generated by Qualtrics and submit them to a sample of 1,000 people across the nation. To conduct this survey, I first received an approval/exemption from Tulane University’s Institutional Review Board. The questions within the survey assisted in determining which story had a greater any partisan effect, if any, if one story better relayed information, as well as other factors. This information, when compiled, helped me determine the implications of a lack of objective journalism. My results were measured using a series of charts to showcase popularity of answers for specific questions. The sections are first separated by the stories themselves, then I measured if there is any difference among gender identity (male, female, non-binary, transgender, and other), political party affiliation (using the five-point nomination system), and age range, information which will be given by each participant who agrees and consents to completing the survey. My analysis was drawn from specific answers given by the participants, such as if they felt an emotional response to either story or how the stories correlated with their personal beliefs. By comparing this data, I was able to draw definitive conclusions to each of my hypotheses outlined above. Finally, with these methods, it was my objective to pinpoint causal agents behind the rise in sensationalism in the mainstream mass media, determine how it has affected socialization of the American people, and explain how it impacts the future of democracy.
Statement of Importance

Scholars, such as Kirsten Weir, have discovered that people will always gravitate towards information that reinforces their opinions rather than participate in open debate with other viewpoints, a phenomenon known as “motivated reasoning” (Weir, 2017). This is the exact practice one sees within the media today, and it is detrimental to the well-being of society. With the "narrowcasting" structure of CNN’s and FOX’s political media today, executives such as Rupert Murdoch and Jeff Zucker, carefully broadcast or publish fragmented information to fit the ideologies of their publics. They publish in a way that reinforces the beliefs of their targets, so they can achieve a loyal and paying audience base. If the public only receives one opinion, however, then this way of thinking becomes the dominant discourse. This side is the only "factual" side, and thus all other opinions are invalid. Open and intriguing debate soon becomes a thing of the past.

In my opinion, this is where the acceptance of “sensationalism” begins: with the increased dissatisfaction among communities with opposing viewpoints. When media networks began to see this polarization reaching unprecedented levels, rather than attempting to ameliorate these relations, they used it as a source of profit. If someone is led to believe that only one narrative is true (which is the practice in society today), it naturally leads to increased disagreements. Individuals are tearing one another down for simply holding certain beliefs or even subscribing to a specific news channel, such as FOX or CNN, which can be considered two of the current most polarizing stations. While disagreements are not bad in general, the focus on only demonstrating one side of the story blurs the line of what the “truth” is. If two outlets are giving different narratives of the same story, it will become extremely difficult to determine which is more accurate,
thus increasing disagreements in potentially harmful circumstances. As one can see with COVID-19 and the concept of mask-wearing, certain media outlets, based upon the way networks manipulate information, are creating polarizing sides in a discussion that should not be up for debate. This study will show that the lack of objective journalism is harmful to the American public and future of the country rather than achieving its fundamental goals: informing the public and protecting democracy. One can assume that these practices may be occurring across the world, yet for the scope of this research, only American-based networks and those within the American public will be analyzed. Even if objective-style journalism is unsuccessful in changing the mind of individuals, at least it will provide a platform by which citizen can effectively make informed decisions about crucial elements and events in their lives. It is for this reason, especially during a worldwide pandemic, that this study is conducted at this time. If we can understand these harmful implications associated with a lack of accurate information diffusion, then we will be able to make substantive change before we are unable to turn back.

Outline of Next Chapters

Over the course of this work, my aim is to determine how investigative journalism has been replaced by sensationalism and its subsequent effects on a segment of the population. While it is beneficial to have debates within society and opposing viewpoints, we must not let political views deter us from seeing one another as human beings and truly informing ourselves. The following chapters will strive to achieve this goal. The next chapter will outline the extensive history of political journalism, outlining the variation of journalistic styles throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This
historical background will examine a series of practices and scholarly viewpoints by which one can determine an accurate definition for the concept “objective journalism,” as explained by Aucoin, Feldstein, and McQuail. I will then present the opposing phenomenon rising in journalism, sensationalism, as defined by Ashley et al., Hachten, McCombs, Sparks and Tulloch, and Wiltenburg. The chapter will begin to define what qualities compose this specific type of journalism and how it differs from investigative journalism. I will then return to a historical background to discuss the factors that caused investigative journalism to decline, then end with providing contemporary context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter further illustrates the societal changes, such as legislation, that allowed sensationalism to emerge as a practice and obtain legitimacy. Finally, the chapter will conclude by outlining psychological phenomena, such as political motivated reasoning, priming selective exposure, and Walter Lippman’s pseudo-environment theory, that impacts how individuals form opinions, which will demonstrate the necessity of this study today. This context will provide the proper foundation needed to better understand the components mentioned in my empirical research.

Chapter 3 will take a closer look into the written material itself. It will present an analysis of the history of FOX and CNN, and I elaborate further on the qualities that compose a “sensationalist” news piece. In tracking the history of both media structures, one can begin to see how the competitive nature of the media industry has made sensationalism inevitable. It will then turn to how sensationalism has affected other public health crises, such as climate change. In looking at the specific choices made by authors and keeping in mind the larger societal structures in place, one can comprehend how contemporary news is formed and why there is a necessity for this study.
Chapter 4 will begin a discussion of my empirical research. It will outline my study and survey in detail. I will first explain my choice in a Qualtrics survey and how this method best serves to answer my research question. I will outline the survey broadly before giving more detail on my composition process. Thus, having defined the qualities of a sensationalist news piece in chapters 2 and 3, I will provide a brief discussion as to the articles I selected as a model for my personal article. I will present a series of brief charts outlining how both FOX and CNN present its reporting in a sensationalized manner, and I will use these charts to describe how I wrote the stories included in my survey: my research process, my central argument, and my overall objective with writing the story. In modeling two of the most popular political networks: FOX and CNN (Business Wire, 2020), I hope to make the political binaries clear in the writing and editing of the story (displaying sensationalist qualities demonstrated on each end of the spectrum without disclosing it directly). The goal with the survey is to have the participants read each story, then answer a series of questions relating to the material they read. These questions asked participants what story resonated with them most, which they agree with more, and why do the disagree with the other story. The survey concluded with general questions regarding which news sources they consume most frequently, why they chose these sources, and if they would trust a news source that would clearly explain both sides of the political spectrum in a non-partisan, investigative manner. The results of this survey seek to answer the latter two components of my hypothesis.

Chapter 5 will discuss the choice in participants themselves, before revealing the results of the survey. The participants of the survey were collected in using the Lucid
Platform¹, a distribution service for that allows me to “reach online audiences to participate in [my] research” (Luc.id, 2021). This service assisted me in obtaining a nationally representative sample of the American public. I obtained consent from all participants, as per instruction from Tulane’s Institutional Review Board. This chapter will conclude with results of the survey. These results will be presented through a series of charts as well as Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma and Lambda Tests, as conducted through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. I first created charts signifying the participants themselves based on age, gender, and political party affiliation, then follow with a series of charts of comparing each category to specific questions within the survey, such as which article did you agree with more or do you find FOX or CNN to report more accurate information? However, this chapter merely seeks to provide the data and a surface-level analysis into its broader meaning.

Chapter 6 will elaborate on and analyze the results more closely. This analysis will provide measurable conclusions to my research question and examine the qualitative components of my survey. Finally, my concluding chapter will further discuss the validity of my hypothesis while proposing alternative methods to my research. I will describe the limitations to my research, such as time, population, and funding, and how these can be ameliorated in future research. It will conclude with a discussion on the current state of journalism and the future implications of these practices if change is not made. It is vital, especially during this time, to determine the most effective way to inform our citizens without furthering polarization or violence in this country.

¹ https://lucidtheorem.com/
Chapter 2: Literature Review

What is objective reporting?

To better comprehend the deviance from objective journalism, I discovered it is vital to understand what is meant by “objective” and how it was carried out in practice. This term has been highly debated over the past 25 years, yet at a fundamental level, objectivity is the “traditional notion that information must be checked and verified and balanced with opposing views before it can be disseminated to the public,” as to allow the public to form their own opinions from the news (Hachten, 2005). McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory states that there are three components to objectivity: “neutrality, fairness, and truth” (2010). Truth is exemplified in a journalist’s commitment to information. Neutrality is defined as a “position of detachment from the story,” thus not giving one’s own perspective or analysis, merely the facts (McQuail, 2010). Finally, fairness correlates to the concept of telling the “whole story,” not just one side or fragments of the story. Fairness is yet another essential quality to objective journalism. In order to maintain adherence to the facts, the proper context to an event must be given, and all sides of the story must be given. If a journalist “[gives] people the whole story in one package or a series, they really understand it,” and the audience can determine the truth for themselves without the influence of commentary (Aucoin, 2007).

I found that objective journalism is also strongly rooted in Rodney Benson's social responsibility theory, which highlights the necessity of objectivity and balancing of viewpoints within reporting. He defines this theory by explaining journalism as “clearly upheld the US journalistic ideal of objectivity, which stresses factual (especially investigative) reporting over commentary, [and] the balancing of opposing viewpoints”
(Benson, 2008). For the purposes of my hypothesis, I will be using this definition provided by Benson. To place this theory in today’s context, many reporters provide a specific angle or argument to the story instead of presenting the facts in a neutral manner. One example of this is found in FOX’s reporting of the COVID-19 vaccine approval by the FDA (Nelson, 2020). Although the overall story presented facts to the viewer, the primary argument was that the vaccine was completed “on a historic timeline because of President Trump” (Nelson, 2020). Therefore, in this case, I find that the viewpoints are not balanced because if they were, the journalist would include statements from other participants that contributed to the development and approval of the vaccine such as the Federal Drug Administration, Center for Disease Control, and legislators. Thus, the primary condition of objective journalism is to put the facts before storytelling, something that I do not find in the case above (Feldstein, 2009). This touches base with the roots of this kind of journalism, which would seek to achieve the whole story.

However, I must note that the term “objectivity” itself is currently under debate within the field of journalism. As mentioned above, objectivity is renowned as one of the cornerstones of objective journalism, yet some scholars, such as Li, argue that this is impossible for the human to accomplish (2020). No one person can be completely objective or neutral when reporting, as all people are subject to their own innate biases. Thus, objectivity becomes an impossible requirement for journalists. Moreover, other scholars add to this argument in stating that showing all sides of a story may also be harmful to viewers, as it can “give false equivalence to ideas that do not deserve equal amounts of time” (Driftwood, 2016). Eric Louw (2005) further explains how the focus on “objectivity” forces journalists to become a sort of “stenographer,” and that journalism
needs to be a symbiotic blend between the journalist’s writing and the information to be distributed. Journalists must be allowed to express themselves in writing, and objectivity limits them from accomplishing this initial goal. However, other scholars argue that the implications of eradicating objectivity can lead to “confirmation bias,” where citizens are exposed to merely distorted articles and engage only with those who share the same opinions. In my role as a researcher, I agree more with this viewpoint stated above, as the purpose of this research seeks to determine the political and social implications of the lack of objectivity in reporting. Thus, “rather than seeking out neutral stories and connecting with people unlike themselves, they become entrenched in their beliefs and estranged from others” (Williams and Stroud, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to remain cognizant of this ongoing debate and current shortcomings over this term.

**Brief History of Objective Journalism**

With this understanding of how objective journalism functions in practice, I must also mention its historical development. The evolution of objective journalism is illustrated through two phases: investigative journalism and critics of “yellow” journalism. In the following section, I will demonstrate how each phase introduced and incorporated important elements that are crucial to objective journalism even today.

First, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, objective journalism was most clearly demonstrated through investigative journalism. Investigative journalists were known as “muckrakers,” a term coined by former president Theodore Roosevelt (Feldstein, 2009). They were writers whose goal was to expose the “muck” in society. These individuals “targeted corporate wrongdoing, government misbehavior, and social
injustice” (Feldstein, 2009). The utmost ideal promoted by this form of journalism was the role of objectivity, which “demanded that reporters and editors not only excise personal opinions but also exclude evaluative statements” (Aucoin, 2007). Thus, investigative journalism was embodied by individuals who desired to obtain the facts and disseminate them, without added analysis, to the public. These fundamental shared values allowed for the practice of objectivity to take root during this time.

However, this period ended with the end of the 19th century and the beginning of World War I, as news media took on a different role: sensationalism and propaganda. First, yellow journalism took hold during this time, as journalists such as Robert Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst began competing amongst themselves to see who could receive more readers (Örnebring and Jönnson, 2004). Yellow journalism, in essence, “presents little or no legitimate well-researched news and instead uses eye-catching headlines to sell more newspapers” (Kuznetsova, 2012). “This type of journalism strongly mirrors that which characterizes sensationalism today: competition for viewers, hyperbolic language, and focus on evoking emotional responses from an audience (Kaplan, 2008). The term “yellow” was utilized as a derogative and negative label to this type of journalism, demonstrating how it appealed to cheap, sensationalist tactics in the spirit of competition and profit-seeking (Kaplan, 2008).

I also discovered that during this time, World War I made propaganda necessary to entice citizens into approving the war. George Creel explains the government’s use of media networks for the purposes of achieving public opinion in favor of the war. Creel called the strategies “a fight for the minds of men” (1920). Thus, the objective was no longer to inform the American public and expose corruption, but to create a sense of
nationalism against the enemy. Opposing opinions were censored to a greater degree than before, yet they were disguised in a way that seemed like they were informing the audience (Creel, 1920). Finally, scholars such as Walter Lippman and Pulitzer himself saw the need to bring credibility back to the field of journalism and began to restore the practice across the country in the early 20th century (Holbert and Zubric, 2000).

After World War II, journalists feared they had become too partisan in their coverage, which led to the institution of the Commission on Freedom of the Press. Otherwise known as the Hutchins Commission, Kuypers (2013) explains the group of journalists gathered to write a set of ethics, which obliged journalists to put society first when reporting news. These ethics became known as the “social responsibility” principles noted in the previous section, which asked journalists to “provide full access to the day’s intelligence” (Kuypers, 2013). This commission promoted the values of objectivity, which revived objective journalism once again after yellow journalism.

Aucoin (2007) describes another “golden age” of objective journalism within the 1960s, during the Vietnam War. Once again, I found that journalists were instilled with sense of rebellion and sought to expose true stories to the American public, such as Watergate. Furthermore, these journalists sought to regain their reputation after the phase of “yellow” journalism, which made it seem business interests came before the public’s interest (Ward, 2009). These attitudes propelled investigative journalists to conduct time-consuming and in-depth investigations with the purpose of protecting democracy and inspiring reform. Aucoin sums up each of the above qualities to explain the ultimate goals of both objective journalism:
“The evolution of modern investigative journalism has progressed as journalists have sought the internal goods peculiar to investigative journalism. [...] They must be willing to fulfill the practice’s standards of excellence, which include having the courage to confront the powerful, being independent, documenting their assertions, doing a thorough job of reporting, presenting their findings vividly and in proper perspective, and doing follow up stories” (2007).

While the historical perspective above outlined a few of the qualities associated with objective journalism, such as objectivity, public importance/pertinence, and goal of projecting information, the goal of objective journalism is to use adherence to fact and impartiality towards political party to restrain a free press that was increasingly sensational (or “yellow”) and dominated by business interests (Ward, 2009). In the next section, I will explain how objective journalism began to subside with the rise of “yellow journalists” and sensationalism.

Sensationalized Journalism: Deviance from information towards opinion

After the “golden age” of objective journalism, sensationalism and “yellow journalism” began to emerge as the media industry began to shift (Hachten, 2005). How did the United States reach this point? First, I must define the practice of sensationalism and how it has gained popularity amongst contemporary media. Sensationalism is understood as “the purveyance of emotionally charged content” to a large audience (Wiltenburg, 2004). Sparks and Tulloch describe this type of media as a focus on entertainment, commentary, and scandal, rather than remaining fair and accurate in its reporting (2000). They explain that “hard news reporting has been eroded by the
growing opinion-shaping power of the punditry” (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). In terms of politics and political reporting, the regard for facts has become “infotainment,” which most accurately describes the type of reporting major networks such as CNN and FOX today (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000).

Infotainment is the careful selection of a story, the facts within a story, and publication to obtain a large audience – thus placing finances before facts (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). For example, when someone reads a story pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, FOX and CNN seem to attach a particular agenda to the article that caters to a particular audience. During my analysis of national media archives, I discovered a story from May 2020 by FOX News which posed the argument that there was great debate among scientists over the effectiveness of mask-wearing, yet I found that the journalist only reported on one opposing viewpoint to make this broad statement (Carbone, 2020). CNN, on the other hand, promoted the negative implications of not wearing a mask and focused on the Republican legislators who refuse to wear a mask (Liptak et al., 2020). Again, in both articles, while there is an event being reported, the way in which the article is composed does not give effective and useful information to the public, which needs this knowledge to make decisions about their personal health and safety.

As the 1960s paved the way for the re-emergence of objective journalism, this growth was slowed in the 1970s and eventually halted in the 1990s. A study by Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus demonstrate the gradual deviance from objective journalism towards sensationalism beginning in the 1970s until the 1990s (2001). Networks began to see opportunities for profit by making stories that evoked emotional responses from viewers, even if they “do little to help consumers make sense of current events” (Slattery,
Doremus, and Marcus, 2001). The study found a distinct increase in sensational stories during this time, marking a shift in the type of news coverage (Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus, 2001). However, this period was merely preparation of what was to come in the 1990s.

The 1990s signaled the switch to sensationalized articles as news networks “seemed to erupt with stories of sensationalism, bad taste, and lurid scandal” (Hachten, 2005). The traditional role of the media as a “gatekeeper” and “guard dog,” ensuring framed information is not given to the public, has been cast aside. I found that one reason for this occurrence was the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, a piece of legislation that mandated “ample play for the free and fair competition of opposing views” (Perry, 2017). Thus, with the repeal of the legislation that regulated fairness across media platforms, stations could begin publishing more one-sided material.

Another reason for this abrupt change is the growing conglomerations of media networks and ownership. I studied that concentration of ownership is one of the major reasons for this phenomenon. As fewer networks have unprecedented power over the content released to the public, these networks are consistently competing with one another to achieve the largest audience, the highest ratings, and the largest profit (Hachten, 2005). The Telecommunications Act of 1996 eliminated the cap on national media network ownership, thus allowing many networks to be bought by conglomerates (Federal Communications Commission, 2014). From 1983 to 1992, the number of network owners decreased from 20 to 11 (Hachten, 2005). This legislation had major subsequent effects on the type of reporting in which the network engaged.
W. Lance Bennett discusses the pressures reporters faced to comply with this change in legislation and the pressures to standardize their pieces. Thus, a homogenous reporting practice emerges, sensationalistic reporting that focuses dramatizing events and promoting specific viewpoints rather than informing them about the whole story (Bennett, 2016). One example of this change is the rise of political talk shows. Hachten demonstrates that these shows “draw in the big bucks,” and they are driven purely by commentary rather than factual reporting (Hachten, 2005). Thus, “the more news organizations are dependent on advertising revenues (commercial vs. public service stations), the more sensationalist news stories they produce” (Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018). Therefore, this adds to my claim that news networks have become primarily focused on money, and this shift in perspective is a “disservice to serious journalism” (Hachten, 2005).

To understand how this type of journalism deviates from objective journalism, I should also highlight the qualities of sensationalism. Though the goal of promoting sensationalism is to obtain a large profit, as stated above, networks obtain these goals efficiently through careful story selection, information manipulation, and targeted audience selection (Ashley et al., 2018; McCombs, 2020; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018). Where objectivity and neutrality were two cornerstones of objective reporting, sensationalist networks evade these practices in hopes to “define themselves as the preferred source for niche groups of partisan voters” (Ashley et al., 2018).

First, the choice in which stories reach the public must be carefully chosen by both the journalist and typically approved by an executive or editor (Ashley et al., 2018).
This quality also is embodied in the typical newsroom saying, “if it bleeds, it leads,” which demonstrates that the most alluring and dramatized stories will be the ones that reach the audience (Hendriks Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018).

The second quality comes into play when writing the story itself. Journalists engage in “information manipulation” when they carefully select the material and components of the story that would be most appealing to the audience. Also known as “distortion,” information manipulation normally is employed to advocate a specific partisan agenda by manipulating the story at hand to fit this agenda (McCombs, 2020). Information manipulation can occur in two primary ways: the content and the language. With content, the journalist chooses which information to include or exclude, thus distorting the information received by the viewer (Ashley et al. 2018). The words, such as verbs and adjectives, chosen by the author also could evoke an emotional response from a viewer (Kaplan, 2018). However, the primary way to manipulate information is through promoting a specific argument within the article, one that focuses on a particular partisan agenda rather than informing the audience. With this tactic, the journalist has the power to shape a story to achieve a specific response from viewers.

Finally, the third quality associated with sensationalist reporting is the act of targeting specific audiences, known as narrowcasting (Smith-Shomade, 2004). In theory, narrowcasting is beneficial to the audience as it allows for specific audience groups to choose artistic materials based on their interests. However, in the case of news broadcasting, it allows for only one narrative to be told and focuses on the increased profitability for the network (Smith-Shomade, 2004). Thus, these three defining qualities of sensationalism demonstrate how both the network and journalists contribute to
sensationalist programming, which then draws people to “seek out information of interest
to them rather than general enlightenment” (Hachten, 2005).

Moreover, I do not mean to conclude that objective journalism is without the three qualities mentioned above. The practice of journalism is to select stories to investigate and disclose to a specific audience. However, the key difference between objective journalism and sensationalism are the goals each practice is attempting to achieve. With objective journalism, the journalist is aiming to write a story “to present factual information to best inform the public; to protect the public from duplicitous or biased journalism; to eschew emotional or slanted reporting; and to raise credibility of the profession of news reporting” (Holbert and Zubric, 2000). In essence, objective journalism prioritizes facts so that people could form conclusions and inform themselves with no external influence. Sensationalism, on the other hand, focuses on “story-telling,” (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). Sparks and Tulloch clearly explain that “telling the story involved equating experience to simple narrative requirements,” which may not reflect the accuracy of the actual event (2000). While objective journalism is also written in a manner to tell a story, the focus of the article is on the education of the public, without elaborate embellishments to attract audiences and drive profit margins. Thus, a sequence of events is shaped into an enticing story that an audience would want to read, rather a story that will allow the audience to fully understand the context of what is reported.

*Psychological effects / Societal impacts of Sensationalism*

The phenomenon I described above is only one of the societal and psychological implications of sensationalism. On a general level, Arceneaux et al. find that citizens trust
news media less and less due to its sensationalist and partisan reporting styles, which means that citizens are seeking alternate forms of enlightenment (2012). However, the national media does still maintain some sense of legitimacy, and it is recognized as one of the primary ways for individuals to politically educate themselves (McCombs, 2020). With this understanding of how much influence the media has over an average citizen today, I must make an important distinction between news reporting and editorials.

Editorials, when read by a consumer, typically have a disclaimer near the headline stating “opinion,” or the article is filed under the designated opinion section. Editorials, as defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, are “newspaper or magazine articles that gives the opinions of the editors or publishers” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Sensationalist reporting, however, is found within the “news” section, under the guise of objective, factual reporting. I will analyze solely “news” coverage in this study, not what is demonstrated as “editorial” and “opinion.” Thus, when citizens read sensationalized news stories, they are not aware of opinion and commentary embedded in the article, as with an editorial, and they “educate” themselves based on commentary and framed information. Therefore, for those that still use national media as a fundamental form of education, scholars such as McCombs, Ashley et al, Sparks and Tulloch, Mutz, and Arceneaux et al., have explained the societal and psychological implications on an individual level.

First, I have already established that networks broadcast to a targeted audience. This audience is created through the formation of public opinion by the media. Walter Lippman’s (1922) pseudo-environment theory plays into the major psychological implications of sensationalism. Lippman argues that the information we receive in our lives correlate to how we view the outside world. McCombs (2020) furthers this point in
explaining that the “pictures in our heads” that one receives from the media shape the way in which one views the world. Sensationalism, therefore, can impact the way in which one understands new information. With the utilization of alternative facts and increase of personalized pieces, this theory supports my argument that the way in which the media presents a specific issue can have a significant impact on one’s education process, and a viewer will begin to associate this issue or event with the attitude presented by the media (McCombs, 2020). Thus, if a network only presents a distorted view of a story through sensationalized practices, I argue that individuals will then trust that information as the “truth.”

This phenomenon is known as “priming selective attention of the public,” where media networks can distort information to force the audience to focus on specific segments of a story (McCombs, 2020). I also find this argument presented by Mutz (2006) as “selective exposure,” meaning that media networks choose to expose its audience to a limited number of opinions. The reception of the manipulated information creates one’s “pseudo-environment,” thus impacting the way in which they believe the information and implement it into their lives. Mutz also finds that selective exposure has led to the increase of specific loyalties of individuals to news sources, typically ones that coincide with their political leanings (2006). For this reason, I argue that distinct partisan loyalties to networks such as FOX and CNN are created (Mutz, 2006). After the individual’s loyalty and attention has been obtained, it is very difficult to sway them to another opinion.

Once the opinion of a particular audience has been primed by a network, I found that the subsequent effects on one’s behavior become more apparent (McCombs, 2020).
Once this information is solidified as “fact” in one’s head, Ashley et al. (2018) find that any opposing information supports this belief rather than further enlightening someone. These individuals become so loyal to their information that they believe all opposing opinions are incorrect. This psychological phenomenon is known as “politically motivated reasoning,” which “refers to the tendency of individuals to unconsciously conform assessment of factual information to some goal collateral to assessing its truth” (Kahan, 2015). In a political sense, I discovered that “individuals weigh information consistent with their existing beliefs or social identities more heavily than contradictory information when motivated by a directional goal in forming an evaluation” (Bolsen et al., 2014). Thus, individuals inherently trust information that comes from sources that support their beliefs over those that oppose them. It is for this reason that Mutz (2006) finds that these loyalties have increased political polarization since the 1990s amongst Americans, and it is the goal of my research to see if these implications have continued in today’s journalistic coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Gaps in current research**

Ashley et al. (2018) claim that journalism is the cornerstone from which individuals draw their political information; is this why major news networks are not engaging in objective journalism? The information and research above reinforce my argument that sensationalist reporting is increasing and that it has contributed to political polarization. Since the 1990s, I have discovered that there has been a clear shift from objective based journalism that focused on informing the public to a sensationalist, “yellow” style journalism that prioritizes profits. After documenting this clear shift in
priorities, the only question that is not addressed by current research is how can one understand the practices and their implications today? It is for this reason that my research is necessary. I can illustrate this trend towards sensationalism in clearly documenting its usage in practice and illustrating its effects on a broad population: the two goals of my empirical research. Overall, I wish to now supplement the historical analysis provided above with empirical research regarding the political and social implications of sensationalism during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Chapter 3: Analysis on CNN and FOX

How are these news sources examples of sensationalism?

For the purposes of this study, I have selected two major news networks which are commonly associated with presenting a partisan preference in their news coverage (Ensor, 2018). FOX is associated with presenting the right agenda while CNN’s reporting pertains to the left agenda. While each source has distinct “editorial” and “opinion” sections in their networks, this study focuses solely on what is labeled as “news” coverage, and how this title is misleading to casual viewers. The difference between “news” and “opinion” may not be recognized by citizens. As I indicated in the previous chapter, both FOX and CNN have blurred the lines between these two distinct categories to obtain larger audiences.

As these two networks are constantly competing to obtain the largest audience possible, I can assume that they have also fallen victim to sensationalist practices, notably in their reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a recent example of this phenomenon is each network’s response to the COVID-19 vaccination process. FOX News promotes a more cautionary agenda when discussing if one should receive the vaccine, even citing a transcript from Dr. Fauci in May 2020 that the vaccines may not be effective (FOX News Transcript, 2020). CNN, on the other hand, pushes for its viewers to not hesitate in obtaining the vaccine, which could bring normalcy back to the country by summer or early fall (Renton et al., 2020). These discrepancies are also apparent in topics such as mask-wearing and social distancing, which were discussed in Chapter 2. Thus, in these cases, it is apparent that there is conflicting information given by the
networks, which does not provide adequate information to the public on this new issue. However, this are not isolated instances.

After careful review of articles from FOX and CNN, I have found that each source attempts to promote only one narrative of the virus – the one that fits their agenda, with little to no recognition of the other side’s viewpoint. However, I must first outline how each source reached this point before discussing their current reporting practices. This chapter will break down the history of both FOX News and CNN and document the implementation of practices that contribute to sensationalism: the hierarchy/network control, story selection, information manipulation/distortion, and audience targeting. It will conclude by describing the subsequent impacts of this type of reporting from on psychological behavior, which have since allowed for public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic to become major partisan issues.

FOX News Network – The Right’s Mouthpiece?

FOX News has been long imprinted as Donald Trump’s spokes-network, rarely giving a voice outside of the conservative opinion. Although its catchphrase reads “Fair and Balanced,” I question the accuracy of this statement today. FOX News began broadcasting just as sensationalism became popular amongst television news: 1996 (DellaVinga and Kaplan, 2007). Under the established reputation for political television news set by CBS and NBC in the 1960s, FOX News first presented itself as a source of legitimate information with no partisan leaning (Swint, 2008). As an offshoot channel of the FOX broadcasting corporation, Rupert Murdoch introduced one of the first twenty-four-hour cable news channels (DellaVinga and Kaplan, 2007). Under this guise of
“objectivity,” the network gained popularity across the country. The early years of broadcasting included this continued stream of news accompanied by local affiliates with FOX. By 2000, almost 20% of households had access and viewed FOX News, signaling the beginning of its increase of popularity (DellaVinga and Kaplan, 2007). Although it presented itself as objective news reporting and a network to balance the left slant of CNN, FOX News clearly promoted its agenda with shows such as The O’Reilly Factor and Hannity and Colmes (Jaramillo, 2006; Hopkins and Ladd, 2013). It consistently published more commentary and a strictly conservative perspective of the news (Hopkins and Ladd, 2013; Groseclose and Milyo, 2005). Groseclose and Milyo (2005) find that FOX News was the most conservative outlet, only rivaled by The Washington Times.

This was made possible through political operative and CEO of FOX News, Robert Ailes. In following his personal motto, “image is everything-perception is reality,” he was able to mold, frame, prime, and slant stories to fit a conservative agenda and target his specific audience (Swint, 2008). His primary focus was on performance, which prompted more commentary-based reporting and “crowd pleasing original programming,” rather than informative, factual-reporting (Swint, 2008). With this strategy, Ailes and Murdoch were able to climb to the top of the market and obtain large profits (Swint, 2008). With these differing elements of FOX News brought to light, in addition to temporal correlation, it becomes clearer that this station bears resemblance to the elements of sensationalism, with the goal to manipulate information that correlates with the conservative agenda to appease its audience-base.
Cable News Network (CNN) – The Voice of the Left?

As one of Donald Trump’s culprits of spreading “fake news,” Cable News Network (CNN) poses a challenge to the conservative ideology by broadcasting the left-leaning point of view. Founded in 1980, the network faced immediate competition for viewers and higher ratings from ABC’s news channel: Satellite News Channel (SNC) (Jaramillo, 2006). CNN provided a style of rotating stories, one that would comfort the audience as opposed to SNC’s perspective, which constantly updated individuals on breaking news and occurring events (Jaramillo, 2006). CNN finally begin to gain popularity after merging with Time Warner in 1996 then with AOL in 2001, leading to a wider national presence (Jaramillo, 2006). During this time frame, new measures were implemented to make the network more appealing: more vibrant hosts (like FOX), brighter graphics, and better lighting. These vibrant hosts would grab and hold the audience’s attention, whether it was through their personalities, their voices, or how they “told the story.”

Since the 1990s, CNN has battled FOX for higher ratings and larger audiences. It seemed as if a partisan battle was occurring between two seemingly “objective” news sources. To obtain its audience, CNN catered to a more left-leaning opinion in its coverage (DellaVinga and Kaplan, 2007). To promote this agenda, CNN almost doubled its use of commentary and opinion from 2007 to 2013 (Zhu and Dukes, 2015). These changes were most noticeable in its on-screen reporting, and they were documented as “more round tables, more horse-race politics more talking heads, more interviewers and interviewees yelling at each other” (Tamkin, 2019). I found that these changes, as well as a greater emphasis placed on lighting and demographics, solidify the network’s priority
of providing entertainment over information. The foundation of the network pushed CNN to attempt to always remain on top, especially when competing for viewers against FOX. A key example of sensationalism I found within this network is through the “CNN Effect.” In theory, the CNN effect exemplifies that news can create policy (Robinson, 1999). The way in which CNN frames a specific story, notably one focusing on foreign affairs, can have a significant effect on public opinion and government foreign policy.

First documented with the Gulf War, CNN was able to shape American citizens’ views of the war by altering the story to fit their agenda (Gilboa, 2005). Gilboa explains that CNN, in its daily reports on the Gulf War, focused on the “graphic portrayal of human tragedy and the victims’ belief in Western leaders” and that it was the responsibility for the Western leaders to assist in this situation (Gilboa, 2005). CNN focused on evoking sympathy for the humanitarian crisis through graphic images of the victims, information manipulation of the actual events, and identifying the crisis as a “serious threat to international peace and security” (Gilboa, 2005). This, in turn, had drastic effects on the way in which people not only perceive the participants in the war, but it imposed a sense of agency and evoked the sentiment that they must act to assist in the situation. This precedent forces me to wonder if the CNN effect plays the same role in determining domestic policy and swaying public opinion on American soil as well?

*How does each source publish scientific materials?*

As of 2019, FOX News and CNN are the two most consulted news sources for adults (Grieco, 2020). This means that many Americans are choosing one of these two sources to gather their information, which in turn affects their view of the nation. As I
noted in the previous chapter, media networks have a greater effect when the audience does not have any knowledge about the subject prior to reading an article. This effect is even stronger when reporting on matters of science and public health (Ashley et al., 2018). I can infer that this correlation contributed to the partisan response of the COVID-19 outbreak in early March 2020. In turning to partisan outlets with different agendas, I presume that individuals received different viewpoints on the virus, which in turn shaped their attitudes towards not only the virus, but also towards one another.

This assumption posed above is supported by a Pew Research study conducted in March 2020, where Jurkowitz and Mitchell find that Americans do perceive the outbreak differently based on which news source they view. In asking a series of survey questions, like my empirical research, Jurkowitz and Mitchell find that there were “strikingly different” responses among participants and their approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2020). For example, among those that viewed FOX News the most, “roughly eight-in-ten say the media slightly or greatly exaggerated the pandemic,” which counteracts the 58% among those who view CNN (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2020). In addition, when asked questions about the origin of the virus, the respondents provided very different answers depending on their specific news source. For those who viewed CNN, over half of respondents believe that the virus came about naturally, which stands in contrast to the 37% among those who viewed FOX. Moreover, while this information provides a foundation for FOX’s and CNN’s effects during the COVID-19 pandemic, I also discovered that this is not the first time the media has influenced a scientific phenomenon.
An example of the media’s impact on a scientific occurrence is climate change. Huertas and Kreigsman (2014) describe the major divide amongst the most popular news channels, such as CNN and FOX, in describing the climate change crisis. In a 2014 Union of Concerned Scientists study analyzing each of these sources, FOX was accurate only 28% of the time, since it was “more likely than those of other networks to disparage the study of climate science and criticize scientists” (Huertas and Kreigsman, 2014). FOX would regularly engage in conversations about climate change and emphasize rejections to the phenomenon. Sean Hannity, in a one nightly broadcast, stated that he “[doesn’t believe that this global warming nonsense is real,” and disregarded the credibility of scientists whose work had already been affirmed (Huertas and Kreigsman, 2014).

CNN was more accurate than FOX, yet its misleading coverage was derived from a reliance on debates among established scientists rather than effectively displaying the information to its audience. One example of this tactic was during a debate on *Piers Morgan Tonight*, where Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, attempted to debunk climate change by stating that the same scientists claiming the rise of global warming today also advocated that “global cooling” occurred in the 1970s (Huertas and Kreigsman, 2014). However, there was no scientific research conducted or published during this period regarding “global cooling” (Huertas and Kreigsman, 2014). This approach “suggests established climate science is still widely debated among scientists, which it is not” (Huertas and Kreigsman, 2014). While it is important to showcase all sides of the story for an investigative article, I must make an important distinction for the case of science and public health issues. In cases where there is not much debate amongst scientists, a network cannot create a debate to induce higher
ratings; adequate information must be relayed to the viewers, for their own health and safety. Thus, there is a wide partisan divide on the issue of climate change today, and I can infer that this sensationalist approach held some effect on this polarization.

Furthermore, with this precedent set in 2014 on the issue of climate change, it is vital to determine the subsequent effects today with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the documentation of the first COVID-19 case in early 2020, I determined that the public has received differing messages from news sources such as FOX and CNN, who target their audience (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2020). For example, FOX has presented a more relaxed approach to the virus, in promoting former President Donald Trump’s direction over Dr. Fauci’s and the CDC’s guidelines, whereas CNN focused on the direction from Democratic leaders and the missteps of Donald Trump (Hart et al., 2020). These practices have created misguidance on topics such as mask-wearing, gathering sizes, and vaccine administration. As a result, I have found that the virus has become a highly partisan issue, due to the fact networks seek to “highlight conflict and dramatize issues” (Hart et al., 2020). Hart et al. find that the virus became politicized from the onset of the threat, which highly shaped how individuals approached handing the virus in their personal lives, thus highlighting the need for my study today (2020).

**Necessity for analysis of these two sources**

It is for these reasons that my study of these two sources is essential today. As two highly viewed sources, many Americans receive their information from CNN and FOX daily. Thus, the way in which they view the world is shaped by this information, especially in matters unknown to them, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. If the same
information manipulation is occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic to remain competitive in national ratings, then it would demonstrate a sizable effect of sensationalism on the public. Rather than choosing to inform the audience about the COVID-19 pandemic, I must determine if CNN and FOX have been targeting their partisan audiences, which could provide an explanation to the major partisan divide in reacting to the virus (Bolsen et al., 2014). Therefore, determining if sensationalism has contributed to a specific reaction to the pandemic would provide an explanation to the final component of my statement of research: explain the political and societal impacts from the decrease of investigative journalism and rise in sensationalism.
Chapter 4: Methodology

Type of Survey – Qualtrics Survey

My research seeks to understand the effect of sensationalism on the American public. To achieve this objective, I generated a survey hosted with the Qualtrics software and submitted it to 1,000 participants (a nationally representative sample of American adults). The survey, administered through the Qualtrics and Lucid platforms, contained two original articles and a series of questions. The two articles mirrored the styles of FOX and CNN, which were written after careful review of articles spanning 2020. I selected three articles from both FOX and CNN to highlight their use of sensationalism, and these articles are listed in Appendices A and B. Although these articles do not fully capture the previous nine months entirely, the articles provide a basis for my fundamental argument: there has been a rise of sensationalism in FOX and CNN.

After reading the two original articles, the participants began answering the survey questions. The survey began with introductory questions, then led into subjects pertaining to news consumption, reactions to the articles, and opinions on the political atmosphere today. These questions can be found with further detail in Appendix C (pages 75-79). With the responses provided, I created three categories of participants: age, gender, and political party affiliation. To be specific, the individuals were asked their political party affiliation based on the 5-point party system used in Political Science research. These categories helped me determine if there are specific correlations within one age group, political party, or gender and a particular news outlet (FOX or CNN).
Articles

To conduct original research on a previously reviewed topic, it was imperative to write personal online articles in the style of CNN and FOX for review by the survey participants. The subject of these articles was the COVID-19 pandemic, and a few were focused on the 2020 presidential election. For further clarification, each of the articles chosen for review were listed under the “news” section. There was no indication that there was opinion or commentary included in the story, and there was no interface with the “editorial” section of the websites. In this section, I will present an outline of the articles from which the survey is derived and demonstrate how they exemplify sensationalism as outlined in Chapter 2. I must note that the choices made below are derived from the research cited in Chapter 2, yet I am also bound by personal biases and what language I find to fit in each category. The charts found below are small segments from a series of articles by CNN and FOX which best exemplify the qualities of sensationalism discussed in Chapter 2: story selection, information manipulation, and narrowcasting/audience targeting.²

² The charts will include references to full length articles, all of which can be found in the Appendix (Sections A & B).
Figure 1: Sensationalism Chart – FOX³

| Article: “Biden says ‘we’re all in this together’ as Dem politicians keep getting caught breaking rules” | Primary Argument Presented: The primary argument the story is attempting to promote is that many members of the Democratic party are hypocrites in terms of their approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. While they promote strict regulations to curb hospitalizations and deaths, many of these leaders themselves are still attending large events. This article merely seems to push the agenda that even Democrats are unable to abide by the rules, thus undermining their authority and attacking their legitimacy. | Story Angle/Who are the Sources? The angle of the story is that while President Joe Biden is promoting that everyone works together in order to combat COVID-19, his colleagues and own party members are not in compliance with this regulation. It attempts to argue that the same individuals who promote regulating COVID-19 are unable to abide by the rules themselves. The story draws from a number of examples from prominent members of the Democratic party, such as Gavin Newsom’s photos dining at restaurants, Muriel Bowser attending Biden’s victory speech, and Lori Lightfoot attending large crowds celebrating Biden’s presidential victory. | Can it be considered informative to an audience? At first glance, the story itself seems “investigative” in nature: it does expose the wrongdoing of specific members of society. However, it does not adequately inform citizens about their health and safety. It merely points the finger and seeks to shift the blame to the Democratic party rather than report on information that will assist the public. |
| “California’s Newsom says coronavirus provides” | The primary argument promoted in this article is that Gov. Newsom is willing to profit off of the information given in this article does not inform the public. |


| “opportunity” to push progressive agenda” | COVID-19 pandemic in order to create lasting changes within the state of California. The information is altered within the article to seem as if Gov. Newsom sees COVID-19 as an “opportunity” to shift the political atmosphere in the United States. | advantage of the situation at hand to promote his personal agenda. The sources for this article include a virtual press conference given by Gov. Newsom and a 2008 interview with Mayor Rahm Emanuel. | public about ongoing events within the United States. It merely seeks to paint Gov. Newsom in a critical light and expose his “true” intentions. Moreover, published near the beginning of the pandemic, it is clear this article sought only to evoke a specific emotional response from viewers. |
| “After attacking Trump’s coronavirus-related China travel ban as xenophobic, Dems and media have changed tune” | The primary argument of the article is that former President Trump was wrongfully attacked by both major media outlets as well as members of the Democratic party for his actions regarding the Chinese border at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also promotes the argument that these same individuals were quick to find another point of critique on the administration, without showcasing a voice of defense within the article. The only defense provided was from those that agreed with the argument of the article and defended the administration. | The angle of the article is to defend former President Trump’s actions to close the border to China in the early stages of the pandemic. It also seeks to shine a critical light on the hypocritical nature of news outlets/politicians that heavily critique and oppose the administration. The sources for this article cover in-house coverage from “Hannity” (an interview with former President Trump), articles from The New York Times, Vox, The Washington Post, The Heritage Foundation, Buzzfeed News, STAT, The Associated Press, The Verge, and CNN. | The nature of this article is very defensive and argumentative. It does not seek to provide information to the public; instead, it merely seeks to defend the Trump administration and cast blame on the Democratic party and national media. |
Discussion of Chosen Articles – FOX

In reviewing these articles, I wanted to understand the degree to which they employed the three qualities of sensationalism I derived in Chapter 2: careful story selection, information manipulation, and audience targeting. In evaluating these tactics against the articles outlined above, it is clear they employ sensationalism to promote a specific agenda or angle to the story. For example, in terms of careful story selection, each article pertains to the wrongdoing of prominent Democratic party members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it was not abiding by regulations or taking advantage of the devastating situation for political gain, the topic of the article was not about the severity of the pandemic, but it was to cast the blame on the opposing party. This is furthered in the second criteria for sensationalism: information manipulation. Each article also promoted a specific argument, as outlined above. This argument, as with the topic of the story, promoted the wrongdoings of Democratic figures and how they seemed to become hypocrites in their words and actions. These arguments are supported by direct interviews and articles that merely promote the primary argument stated, rather than giving a voice to those being criticized in the article. If there was an alternative viewpoint/argument given, it typically supported that of the primary argument, as in the article covering former President Trump and his plan to close the Chinese border. Thus, in promoting these specific arguments without true education, I find that these articles seek to target a specific portion of the population that would support these ideas. The audience being targeted, therefore, is a group of citizens who also believe that the
prominent Democrats are taking advantage of the pandemic for personal gain without regard to their personal regulations. Finally, none of the articles provided adequate information regarding the pandemic and how citizens could protect themselves from COVID-19. These articles sought to persuade the reader of the wrongdoings of the other party, thus further politicizing the pandemic rather than giving new information on case numbers, new regulations, or even a solution to the ongoing issue. I conclude that the three articles above are prime examples of sensationalism as it is defined in my research.

Figure 2: Sensationalism Chart – CNN

| Article: “Democrats and Republicans see coronavirus differently” | Primary Argument Presented: Mask-wearing is now a wide partisan divide, with those who identify as a Democrat being more likely to wear a mask than Republicans. It also assumes and promotes the argument that former President Trump is the reason why there is this partisan divide amongst American citizens. The journalist does not give another possible option | Story Angle/Who are the Sources? The story focuses on the partisan divide between mask-wearing among Democrats and Republicans. The sources used are surveys conducted by Axios/Ipsos, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and a Marist College poll. The angle of the story focuses on the key differences between Republicans’ and | Can it be considered informative to an audience? While the formatting of the article, which includes a series of studies and empirical data, does not give any new information regarding COVID-19 and how one can protect |

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for this divide, or if he does, he dismisses it as not valuable.

Democrats’ attitudes towards wearing a mask. In using data to only showcase Republican reluctance to mask-wearing, the article seems to glorify the actions of one party and critique the actions of the other.

themselves. It simply pushes the argument that Trump is to blame for the current partisan divide, without mention of a solution.

| “Biden urges America to mask up for 100 days as coronavirus surges” | The primary arguments included in the article create a key divide among the outgoing and incoming administrations. The journalist creates a “heroic” image of President Biden and his plan for the first 100 days. The Trump administration is briefly mentioned (as it is not the complete focus of the article), yet the coverage is negative and merely touches on the outcome of the election rather than his previous COVID-19 actions. The journalist mentions that the new administration will be a return to “continuity and science-based policy-making,” leading the viewer to believe all policy decisions made by the former administration were made without the use of science. | The story focuses on the efforts of President Biden to attempt to curb COVID-19’s spread during his first 100 days in office. The journalist compares him to previous leaders who faced hardships, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, and promotes the idea that he will also succeed just as these figures before him.

The article is derived from an interview involving both President Biden and Vice President Harris after the election. | The article is informative in that it gives information regarding President Biden’s first 100 days, which is new information revealed to the public. However, the first few sections of the article clearly create an emotional effect towards Biden before giving this information, thus revealing the overall angle and argument of the article. |

| “Trump mixes his coronavirus messages - again” | The article presents the argument that former President Trump is unable to come to a clear stance on a stimulus package for the American public. The journalist | The angle of the story is to showcase former President Trump as an ill-fit individual to make decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on his inability to | The article merely gives one piece of “information;” former President Trump did approve a |
demonstrates the idea that this stimulus package is key for citizens across the nation, yet the President himself, who was recently infected with the virus, is prolonging the process. The argument of the article focuses solely on the negative implications of the hesitation for the stimulus package passage, rather than considering other positive effects of continuing the debate within the Legislature.

decide on a stimulus package, his recent recovery from the virus itself, and a refusal to participate in a virtual debate with current President Joe Biden. The article pulled from an interview with former President Trump and talk show host Rush Limbaugh and a comment from the country’s Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell. $1.8 trillion stimulus package. Aside from this one piece of information, the remainder of the article focuses on Trump’s missteps, his infection, and the implications on the American public for his actions.

Discussion of Chosen Articles – CNN

In the three articles analyzed above, I find that there are key examples of story selection, information manipulation and narrowcasting. Story selection is generated on a higher level, with decisions made amongst the journalist and the media network about which articles to publish. In all three cases, the subject of the article pertained to not only the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was written in a manner that would grab the attention of the audience. The selection of the articles is also due to how the information was used in writing the article. In all three cases, there were several seemingly objective sources used, such as direct interview transcripts and survey data, yet the way in which these sources were implemented into the story promotes a specific argument, which represents information manipulation. Although the three articles had differing primary arguments, the journalists typically attempted to promote the actions of President Biden and those within the Democratic party while criticizing former President Trump and individuals within the Republican party. These tactics allow the journalist to reach a targeted
audience, which represents narrowcasting, and as demonstrated in the previous chapter, this audience are those who cater towards the Democratic party and ideology. Finally, there were very few instances where information was able to be taken from the article. Aside from the outline of Biden’s first 100 days in office, the three articles were full of emotionally charged content, which promotes entertainment and persuasion rather than education. Therefore, as they cater to the primary qualifications of sensationalism outlined in Chapter 2, I can conclude that the three articles above are key examples of sensationalist journalism.

*Overall Analysis of Chosen Articles:*

As demonstrated above, both FOX and CNN display qualities similar to sensationalist practices described in Chapter 2. They both carefully choose and frame their stories to align with their partisan agenda. In terms of a small stylistic point, I found in Chapter 2 that specific language can also be used to evoke a response from the reader. In these cases, I found that the journalists use hyperbolic nouns, adjectives, and verbs, such as “slew,” “galvanizing,” and “overwhelmingly.” While these choices do not directly make the story sensationalist as the arguments described above, this type of language does not match the characteristics of objective journalism mentioned in Chapter 2. There is a clear deviance from the level of objectivity, impartiality, and devotion to putting facts before storytelling. By highlighting these tactics, I understand that the objective of this type of writing is to persuade the audience to agree with their stories, not to inform them about ongoing events and provide the full, proper context of the story.
Process of Writing Original Articles

After reviewing each of these articles above, I concluded that they would provide a firm foundation upon which I could write my original articles. I understood that I would also have to implement a specific primary argument in my articles and refer to sources that would support this argument. I would also have to angle the story in a manner where it would evoke an emotional response from the viewer. I also had to ensure that I did not give “adequate” information within the story, as none of the examples above provided educational content for the readers. Thus, I kept all these prerequisites in mind while writing the articles. I also referred to the articles themselves to utilize some of the same language and style so that I could clearly mirror each source.

For my CNN style article, my primary argument was that former President Trump was incapable of providing stable leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. I focused on examples of his missteps since the beginning of the pandemic, such as disbanding the National Security Council’s Pandemic Response Team and his refusal to wear a mask, to support this argument. I also included sources which furthered this idea, such as an interview with Dr. Fauci stating that changes should be made to ameliorate the severity of the virus. I used this interview as a pathway into President Biden’s upcoming inauguration and his current plan to combat COVID-19. I included key points about his plan, which seemed to provide education to the audience, yet it merely reinforced the argument that Trump is an unfit leader to guide the United States through the pandemic.

I catered to these same tactics for my article written in the style of FOX. This article sought to argue that former President Trump had been a capable leader during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the upcoming administration will merely use the pandemic as
an opportunity to push forth their personal political agenda. This argument was reinforced by an interview with Trump himself, who advocated for the passage of a stimulus bill as soon as possible, as well as the virtual conference with Gov. Newsom where he stated that the pandemic is an “opportunity.” My goal with this article was to mirror the idea presented in the above FOX News articles: shift the blame from the Republican party to the Democratic party. This article, as with the CNN one, did not present new information to the public. It briefly mentioned the new variant within the United States, yet this information was utilized to put agency on the Democratic party and inquire about their tactics to save the country. It also discussed debate over the stimulus bill, but again, this information was implemented to paint former President Trump in a positive light (promoting the argument of the article). Therefore, the writing in both my CNN and FOX style articles catered to the three qualities of sensationalism demonstrated in the article above.

Choice in Survey Questions

The first section of my survey asked for the participants’ age, gender identity, and political party affiliation. As stated above, there will be no indication of the person’s name, address, or other major identifying information. In the second section, I asked about their network preferences – how and where they consume news daily vs. how and where they consumed daily news when growing up. I chose to include these questions to allow participants to reflect on their media consumption throughout their life (their “pseudo-environment”) before continuing to answer the following questions, their attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic, and if they believe the media is truthful in
their reporting and their opinions on mask-wearing. The final section discussed my written articles and how the participants react to reading these articles. Participants were simply asked if they agree or disagree with each article and to provide a brief explanation to their answer. I also asked if participants would regularly read articles written in this style. The survey concluded with the participants choosing one article and their personal descriptions of the political state of the United States today. With these three clear sections, my survey was intended to determine if there are correlations among those who regularly watch CNN vs FOX and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic as well as relationships between a source preference and a particular gender/political party affiliation/age, or if there are no correlations within the data at all.
Chapter 5: Empirical Research and Presentation of Results

This chapter will discuss the results accumulated from the Qualtrics survey. I will begin with a description of how the participants were selected for the survey. This chapter will continue by breaking down the number of individuals in the survey, based on age, gender, and political affiliation. It will conclude with a presentation of the results of the survey and a brief discussion of the findings before in-depth analysis is presented in the following chapter.

Qualtrics Survey: Participants

I chose a sample size of around 1,000 American adults within the United States. These participants were drawn from Lucid’s platform system, which ensures that those contacted to complete the survey are a nationally representative sample of American adults. Furthermore, before their participation in the survey, each person was asked to complete an informed consent form, as approved by Tulane’s Institutional Review Board. This form notes that their answers can be used for the purposes of this research and the identity of all members will be protected, with no names or major identifying characteristics named. After this approval was obtained, the individuals were asked to read both articles and complete the survey, both of which can be found in Appendix C. Finally, to analyze not only the number of individuals in each sub-category, but also to determine correlations among different sub-groups, I input the data into the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. In this program, I first ran frequency analysis to determine my sub-groups of participants. Then, I determined if the data I compiled was statistically significant and the degree to which the variables were
associated with one another in conducting a series of Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma and Lambda tests. In the field of political science, these tests are used to determine if two specific variables are related to one another, and if I can improve predictive ability between my dependent and independent variables. In my research, the dependent variables were the survey questions regarding article preference (Article A or Article B) as well as source preference (FOX or CNN), and my independent variables were my three categories: age, gender, and political party affiliation.

The Gamma tests were used to determine if there was a relationship between age/political party affiliation and preferences to news sources, and the Lambda test was used to determine if a relationship between my dependent variables and different genders. There were two conditions needed to satisfy the argument presented in my third hypothesis: 1. The data must be found to have statistical significance (having an approximate significance of less than 0.05) and the Gamma/Lambda value should be above 0.0. If the data satisfy these two conditions, I could assume there was a relationship between the variables tested, which would confirm my hypothesis that there has been at least one political and societal impact from sensationalist reporting. These tests allowed me to conduct the multivariate analysis further detailed in this chapter and chapter 6. Below, a series of charts and graphs will display the participants based on age, gender, and political affiliation.
Charts of Participants

Total Number of Individuals who completed survey: 994

Figure 3: Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-30 years old</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-50 years old</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51+ years old</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Preferred Gender Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary/Third Gender</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Political Party Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong Republican</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very strong Republican</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very strong Democrat</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Democrat</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brief Analysis of Participants

Based on the numerical values listed above, I find there are equal distributions of participants across all categories and sub-categories. For example, there is almost equal distribution among male and female gender identities (48% and 49% respectively), yet there is also representation from transgender (0.5%) and non-binary individuals (0.9%). Within the age groups, the most common age of a participant was between 31 and 50 years old, totaling 41.2% of the participants. The age group with the least participation was those between 18 and 30 years old, totaling 22.3% of the participants. Although the survey was diffused across the nation, I was surprised to find that a group which became very active in political affairs recently is not represented to the same extent as the other two age groups. Finally, almost half of the participants identified as Democratic (47.8%), whether the participant was a “Strong Democrat” or “Not very strong Democrat.” This was a stark difference from those who identified as Republican (27.0%), which almost matched the number of Independents (23.3%). Thus, with this distinct inequality among political parties, it is vital to see reactions to the survey among this group, as well as among age and gender categories as well. The charts below will illustrate the frequency of answers to two of the survey questions: 1. Which article did the participant prefer? And 2. Does CNN or FOX provide more authentic information? These two questions were chosen due to their direct links to my hypothesis and statement of research indicated in Chapter 1, and they will provide insight as to how sensationalism impacts political opinion-formation, if at all.
Charts of Results and Analysis

Figure 6: Age and Article Preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Preferred FOX Article (Article 2/B)</th>
<th>Preferred CNN Article (Article 1/A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-30 years old</td>
<td>102 (10.3%)</td>
<td>120 (12.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-50 years old</td>
<td>148 (14.8%)</td>
<td>261 (26.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51+ years old</td>
<td>179 (18.0%)</td>
<td>184 (18.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6a: Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma Test for Preference of Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symmetric Measures</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Asymptotic Standard Error&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Approximate T&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Approximate Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinal by Ordinal</td>
<td>Gamma</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>1.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td></td>
<td>994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Analysis

In briefly analyzing the data above, I find that there is preference for the CNN style article among all three age groups. However, the divide between FOX and CNN is not wide among those below the age 30 and above 50, and the greatest difference between article preference is among those 30–50-year-old participants. Nevertheless, as Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma test demonstrates, there is not a strong relationship among article preference and a specific age group. Moreover, the data produced a significance of p > 0.05, which means that it is not statistically significant. The Goodman and Kruskal test reveals to me that there is no relation between a specific age group and
article preference in my survey. In the final section of this chapter, I will speculate various reasons that could have led to this occurrence.

**Figure 7: Age and Choice in more Authentic Source**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>FOX is more authentic source</th>
<th>CNN is more authentic source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-30 years old</td>
<td>103 (10.4%)</td>
<td>119 (12.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-50 years old</td>
<td>205 (20.5%)</td>
<td>205 (20.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51+ years old</td>
<td>158 (16.0%)</td>
<td>204 (20.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7a: Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma Test for More Authentic Source**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symmetric Measures</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Asymptotic Standard Error</th>
<th>Approximate T</th>
<th>Approximate Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinal by Ordinal</td>
<td>Gamma</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| a. Not assuming the null hypothesis. |
| b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis. |

**Analysis**

After analyzing the data above, I find the same conclusion as indicated by the previous dataset. Again, I discovered that all three age groups find CNN as more authentic source. However, the divide between FOX and CNN is greatest among those who are over 50 years old. Akin to the previous dataset, Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma test reveals that there is not a strong relation between this survey question and a specific age group. Moreover, this data also produced a value of p > 0.05, which means that it is not statistically significant. The Goodman and Kruskal Gamma test reveals to me that
there is no relation between a specific age group and source preference in my survey, meaning that one’s age will not assist me in determining if they are more likely to have a specific loyalty to CNN or FOX. Therefore, this category does not provide sufficient evidence towards the third component of my hypothesis, and I turned to the other sub-categories to determine patterns among responses.

Figure 8: Preferred Gender Identity and Article Preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Preferred FOX Article (Article 2/B)</th>
<th>Preferred CNN Article (Article 1/A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>176 (17.7%)</td>
<td>305 (30.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>245 (24.6%)</td>
<td>250 (25.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Binary/Third Gender</td>
<td>4 (0.4%)</td>
<td>5 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>3 (0.3%)</td>
<td>2 (0.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Prefer not to say)</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
<td>3 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8a: Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test for Preference of Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directional Measures</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Asymptotic Standard Error</th>
<th>Approximate T</th>
<th>Approximate Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominal by Nominal Lambda Symmetric</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>2.373</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your preferred gender identity? Dependent</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>2.341</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which article did you agree with/like more? Dependent</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.655</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
   a. Based on chi-square approximation
Analysis

Within this section, there was almost a unanimous preference for the CNN style article. The only exception to this finding were among those who identify as “transgender,” with one more participant preferring FOX’s article to CNN’s. In analyzing the Lambda test performed for this section of data, the symmetric value is 0.060, so I can assume that there is not a strong positive relationship between gender and article preference. However, the data in this section was found to be statistically significant, when analyzing the symmetric value listed above. Thus, while the data can be trusted at face value, the deeper meaning of the Lambda test suggests that there is no direct effect on gender as an independent variable. The final section of this chapter will also present possible reasons why gender is not displaying direct results of this phenomenon.

Figure 9: Preferred Gender Identity and Choice in more Authentic Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>FOX is more authentic source</th>
<th>CNN is more authentic source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>255 (25.7%)</td>
<td>226 (22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>208 (20.9%)</td>
<td>287 (28.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Binary/Third Gender</strong></td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>9 (0.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transgender</strong></td>
<td>2 (0.2%)</td>
<td>3 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other (Prefer not to say)</strong></td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
<td>3 (0.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 9a: Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test for More Authentic Source

**Directional Measures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominal by Nominal Lambda</th>
<th>Symmetric</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Asymptotic Standard Error(^a)</th>
<th>Approximate T(^b)</th>
<th>Approximate Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>1.997</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is your preferred gender identity? Dependent</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>2.190</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which network do you believe provides more authentic information? Dependent</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>1.323</td>
<td>.186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(a\). Not assuming the null hypothesis.
\(b\). Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
\(c\). Based on chi-square approximation

**Analysis**

The data and findings derived from this sub-section almost mirrors the findings within the previous section. This time, there was a unanimous preference for the CNN’s level of authenticity among every gender represented. Moreover, in analyzing the Lambda test performed for this section of data, the symmetric value is 0.079, so I can arrive at a similar conclusion as with the previous section: there is not a strong positive relationship between gender and source preference. However, the data in this section was found to be statistically significant, when analyzing the symmetric significance value listed above. Therefore, as with the case before, the data can be trusted at surface value, yet the broader purpose and meanings of the Lambda test suggest that there is no direct effect on gender as an independent variable. However, it is important to keep in mind that these effects can still express themselves in different manners, such as partisanship and political party affiliation, which will be analyzed in the following section.
Figure 10: Political Party Affiliation and Article Preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Preferred FOX Article (Article 2/B)</th>
<th>Preferred CNN Article (Article 1/A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong Republican</td>
<td>76 (7.6%)</td>
<td>103 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very Strong Republican</td>
<td>53 (5.3%)</td>
<td>36 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>103 (10.4%)</td>
<td>128 (12.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very Strong Democrat</td>
<td>53 (5.3%)</td>
<td>69 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Democrat</td>
<td>133 (13.4%)</td>
<td>220 (22.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11 (1.1%)</td>
<td>9 (0.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10a: Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma Test for Preference of Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symmetric Measures</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Asymptotic Standard Error(^a)</th>
<th>Approximate T(^b)</th>
<th>Approximate Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinal by Ordinal Gamma</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>-1.965</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{a}\) Not assuming the null hypothesis.

\(^{b}\) Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Analysis

After numerous cases where the data was not found to be significant, this set of data yielded more promising results. However, as demonstrated above, there is a unique finding among this section. Among those who identify as “Strong Republican,” more individuals preferred CNN’s article to that of FOX’s. However, among the rest of the data, there is a loyalty/preference to the article which caters to that specific political party’s agenda. Moreover, for those what identify as Independent, more participants
preferred the CNN style article, and for those who identify as “Other,” more participants preferred the FOX style article. In my opinion, I believe that a slight negative Gamma value (-0.091) is derived due to the “Strong Republican” outlier. Nonetheless, the Gamma test demonstrates that there is not a strong measure of association between the two variables, yet it does provide a reasoning behind the outlier of “Strong Republican.” Moreover, the data in this set was found to be statistically significant (p < 0.05), meaning that I can be confident in the findings this data provides, which (aside from the Strong Republican outlier) reinforces my hypothesis that there is a political effect on the population due to sensationalism. In this case, I find that there are loyalties to specific news sources created based on one’s political party.

Figure 11: Political Party Affiliation and Choice in more Authentic Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>FOX is more authentic source</th>
<th>CNN is more authentic source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong Republican</td>
<td>142 (14.3%)</td>
<td>37 (3.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very Strong Republican</td>
<td>53 (5.3%)</td>
<td>36 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>104 (10.5%)</td>
<td>127 (12.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very Strong Democrat</td>
<td>28 (2.9%)</td>
<td>94 (9.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Democrat</td>
<td>131 (13.2%)</td>
<td>222 (22.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8 (0.8%)</td>
<td>12 (1.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 11a: Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma Test for More Authentic Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symmetric Measures</th>
<th>Ordinal by Ordinal</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Asymptotic Standard Error</th>
<th>Approximate T</th>
<th>Approximate Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gamma</td>
<td>.404</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>9.338</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Analysis

The final dataset shown above does provide evidence towards the third component of my hypothesis and furthers the point made in the previous section. At face-value, each political party is more likely to find the source that promotes their partisan agenda more accurate. For those who identify as Republican (strong or not very strong), more participants found FOX to be a more authentic source. I found the same pattern among those who identify as a Democrat. There was almost an even split among Independents and “Other,” yet with more participants finding CNN more authentic in both categories. These findings are supported by Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma test, which found the data to be significant (p < 0.05). In finding the data to be significant, the test revealed a Gamma value of 0.404, which means there is a moderate positive relationship between political party affiliation and source loyalty and trust. In combining this finding with that of the previous section, I can assume that there is a political effect on the public from the use of sensationalism in reporting. It is important to keep this finding in mind when analyzing other aspects of the survey, such as COVID-19 reactions and trust in COVID-19 coverage, both of which will be discussed in the following chapter.
Surface-Level Takeaways

While the data did not yield promising values in all three categories, there are a few key findings that do allow me to preliminarily conclude that my third hypothesis was indeed fulfilled. First, with the case of age, I was unable to find a relationship between this independent variable and each of my dependent variables (Article Preference/Source Authenticity). However, this finding could have resulted from a sample size that is too small, meaning a sample size that is more representative of the whole population would yield more conclusive results. If there is no positive relation at all, I find that there are a few possible reasons for this occurrence. One possible reason could be the rise of alternative forms of media, and individuals of all ages are choosing to use social media with less of a reliance on CNN and FOX. Another, more plausible reason for the lack of a relationship is that generational influence and socialization can lead to similar ways of thinking within families. When individuals are raised in a like-minded family that caters to a specific new source, the younger generations can be influenced by this way of thinking and coincide with similar beliefs. Thus, the divide begins to emerge more based on the family’s political leaning, rather than generational separations, a finding that was supported in the data above.

The same conclusion can be derived to explain the data within the gender category. As I found above, there is no distinct independent effect on gender, yet it is important to keep in mind that individuals’ sentiments can manifest in different ways. Thus, the effect from sensationalism and the emergence of specific loyalties can be exposed through political party affiliation, rather than one’s gender. Furthermore, as shown above, the data regarding political party affiliation and source preference
(authenticity) and article preference is found to be both statistically significant and have a positive relationship between the two variables. This ultimately means that I can moderately associate one’s political party to the type of coverage/source they will prefer. This finding supports there are loyalties to specific sources created based on one’s political party and the agenda promoted by that source, which supports my argument that there is at least one political effect from sensationalist coverage in the United States. However, the next chapter will more definitively determine if there are other political or social implications from sensationalism that can be derived from the results of my survey.
Chapter 6: Analysis of Survey Results

Summary of Results

The goal of the survey was to determine if sensationalism has any political or societal effects on the public, if individuals maintain party lines when consuming different media sources, and if these sources influence how citizens understand scientific information. While many of the datasets above (Figures 6-9a) did not yield correlations among specific genders or ages, I did discover correlation among political party identification and source preference (in terms of authenticity). The findings listed above in Figures 10-11a demonstrate loyalties to news stations, which illustrates the concept of “politically motivated reasoning” as explained in Chapter 2. Moreover, the numerical values calculated in the previous chapter only give a surface level glimpse into media consumption and participants’ initial reactions to the articles. This chapter will further analyze qualitative responses given by participants, such as why they chose a particular article, if they view COVID-19 pandemic as a threat in the United States, and their personal level of trust in contemporary media sources.

Creation of a New Pseudo-Environment?

The focus of my empirical research was on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I wrote each article as a critique on the way the Presidential administration (former and present) approached or is currently approaching the pandemic. Many scholars, such as Hart et al., have found that media sources have impacted the way in which people approach the pandemic. My survey sought to also determine this same outcome, which would provide an answer to the “social impact” portion of my third hypothesis. When asked their opinions of the pandemic, 86% of participants believed that
there was a need for a mask mandate and the pandemic was a public health issue, whereas 14% chose that the pandemic was not a public health issue and masks are not necessary. As discovered in the previous chapter, when breaking the larger numbers down among political party lines, one finds correlations among specific choices.

Focusing on those that expressed that the pandemic was not a public health issue (14%), many of these decisions came from those who are above 30 years old (76.5%), identify as one of the two binary genders (more negative responses from females) (98.5%), and identify as a Republican (Strong or Not Very Strong) (54.4%). These sentiments also match with categories which found FOX as a more authentic source, thus reinforcing the idea of politically motivated reasoning, which advocates a loyalty and trust in one source’s information as accurate and other opinions as discredited. However, I must note that participants were not required to provide a reasoning response for this question.

Therefore, I can assume there is some relation among attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic and preferred news source based on the 2020 study by Jurkowitz and Mitchell, yet there could be other influences that led the 14% to respond in this manner.

One other method of comparison that can demonstrate the level to which individuals approached the COVID-19 pandemic are among those who found CNN/FOX more authentic in their reporting. Among those that found CNN more authentic, 93.5% believed the pandemic was a public health issue, and among those that chose FOX as more authentic, 78.1% believed that COVID-19 was a public health issue. These numbers reinforce my statement in the previous section: strong loyalties to one source (either by childhood socialization or political leanings) can impact the way in which one approaches partisan topics.
However, it is also important to determine if individuals even trust the information that they receive from their chosen news sources. As explored in Chapter 3, this is not the first occurrence where news stations have driven the narrative of a public health issue. Has trust in these sources lessened since the emergence of the climate change issue, or does trust remain the same? When asked if they believed CNN and FOX provide any accurate information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, 71% indicated yes, while 29% indicated no. For those that stated no, they were asked to provide a brief explanation for their choice. A few responses are recorded below:

“I believe in the beginning, they were misleading due to the information coming from the White House. Since then, with the allegations about Gov. Cuomo altering the number of cases and death in the nursing homes in his state, I believe there are many more stories like this that are being buried.”

“I think the news media has ventured from reporting facts and has created an atmosphere of fear surrounding the actual virus. They have used more emotion than facts when reporting.”

“I feel I can't really trust any of the news sources. They don't seem to be impartial anymore. It is frustrating to figure out what the truth is.”

“Most stories seem to just to stir up emotions and not based in hard facts.”

From the statistics regarding trust in a particular news outlet mentioned above and the above qualitative responses, one can derive a primary conclusion: many participants (almost three-fourths of the sample) believe that the information they receive from their news source is accurate and truthful. This information reinforces their pseudo-
environment created by these sources. Thus, if an issue such as COVID-19 becomes partisan, the differences among reporting styles will begin to demonstrate themselves among the public.

*Focus on FOX – What did this survey reveal?*

This section will break down the individuals who preferred both FOX as an authentic source and those who preferred the FOX-style article to that of CNN. Overall, the participants who preferred this article typically identified as Republican, as seen in the results presented in Chapter 5. However, it is important to understand the underlying motivations behind this preference in FOX News. For those that agreed with the FOX-style article, the reasoning given by a few participants was that it provided “less opinion” and more facts. Thus, when the story correlated with their beliefs, the article appeared to have a stronger basis in fact. When asked their opinion of the CNN article, the same respondents blamed the “leftist” media for tarnishing Former President Trump’s reputation. This finding demonstrates a reliance on information that coincides with sentiments propelled by sensationalist news stories. One of my survey questions asked why participants chose the FOX style article over the CNN article. I asked these questions to determine if the participants believed the story to be sensationalism or not. A few of the responses of participants are outlined below:

| “This is a departure from media puff pieces that seek to paper over Biden's incompetence and failings.” |
| “It looks at things more objectively and praises President Trump for things he indeed did accomplish.” |
What effect does this have on the public? Drawing from the statistic above, 78.1% of individuals who preferred FOX believed the COVID-19 pandemic was a public health issue to Americans. Although it is not a particularly low number, it demonstrates an effect of FOX’s style of reporting on the “pseudo-environment” of unaware citizens. This means that when citizens are exposed to new information about COVID-19 based on trust in FOX, they came to understand the pandemic as a phenomenon that is not a great threat to their lives. As noted in Chapter 4, FOX News presented the pandemic as a way for the Democratic leaders to take advantage of the situation or push their personal agenda rather than an issue of public health and safety. This information became solidified in their minds, thus impacting their “pseudo-environments,” or the way in which they view the world. In taking these articles as accurate, this information held more “truth” value over other credible, scientific sources such as the Center for Disease Control. Many individuals also responded that they did not trust the incoming administration (Biden’s administration) and would attempt to resist their policies pertaining to COVID-19 regulation. These responses became normalized due to the information given at the onset of the pandemic, and this diffusion of information demonstrates an effect on political socialization.
Focus on CNN – What did this survey reveal?

This section will mirror that of what the previous section revealed regarding FOX, as it will analyze responses from those who indicated that CNN was the more authentic source/preferred the CNN style article. Among those who chose CNN over FOX, the primary pattern was found among those who identify as a Democrat. When asked for reasoning for their choice in the CNN article, many of the responses included reasons pertaining to other missteps taken by Trump during the pandemic and their lack of trust in him as a leader. Other responses described the article as “the truth” and “this is my opinion.” A few of the responses are outlined below:

“The truth is that Trump botched the entire pandemic. First, from his refusal to acknowledge the seriousness of the matter to offering up his own remedies like drinking/injecting bleach, to his dismissal of Dr. Fauci’s recommendations. He put this Country in the position that it is in right now and he holds ALL accountability for ALL of the American deaths from Covid-19.”

“I felt like the article was truthful and reliable. The article used facts about what happened in the months prior and was very accurate.”

“I felt that it was presented very accurately and without sensationalism.”

“I think this article took a slightly more neutral stand and looked at both handleings of the crisis.”

One respondent stated: “I rely on what I read,” thus clearly demonstrating a reliance on the information diffused by this source to make judgements about people and everyday events. For example, many of the respondents also mentioned negative attitudes
towards the former president, while those who chose FOX as more accurate saw him as more of a fit and able leader. In addition, over 90% of individuals who found CNN most accurate found the COVID-19 pandemic to be a public health crisis within the United States. This stark difference in opinion towards the former President from different choices in coverage. In choosing to appeal to a specific demographic (partisan leaning), media networks will in turn present differing information, leading to disagreements over what the “truth” really is. Yet how have these differences and conflicting narratives effected people’s outlook on the current political atmosphere?

Overall Takeaway

With the analysis provided above, I have determined that current journalistic practices have at least some impacts on individual’s perceptions of truth and accuracy, especially when the reporting caters to a political party’s agenda. As indicated in both Chapter 5 (Figure 11 and 11a) and this chapter, many participants indicated that they trusted their news sources and the accuracy of their coverage, meaning that whatever information is given to them is trusted as fact. These results display confirmation of inferences made in Chapter 3 (trusting in specific sources can hinder one’s full ability to understand a new subject). The results of these practices have led to entrenched opinions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the past administration, and the current administration due to conflicting narratives given by both news sources. How have the results of these practices impacted the politics today?

When asked to state their opinion of today’s political atmosphere in one word, individuals gave a range of answers. Many indicated that they felt “hopeless” or
“worried” while others said the climate was “dangerous,” “chaotic,” or “divided”.

However, one response that stood out amongst the rest was “misguided.” This word captures the entirety of the power held by media companies such as FOX and CNN and their ability to frame and shape public opinion based on what they see fit. It also represents how the practice of sensationalism has a clear and direct effect on the way people understand the world around them. The media, which normally has the role of educating and informing the public, now has the authority to misguide them for their own personal profit and benefit. The result of their recent practices has brought about a misguided nation, conflicted about what is the “truth” in today’s society.
Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks, Limitations, and the Future of Journalism

Summary of Empirical Results

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, sensationalism has held specific societal and political effects on citizens within the United States. Many participants in the survey indicated that they trusted their news sources, especially in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. In correlation to cases mentioned in Chapter 3, this level of trust has a significant impact on how individuals learn new, scientific information, and the case is no different for the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who preferred one source over another, I also find that there was a distinct difference in their personal approaches towards the pandemic. For those who found FOX more authentic than CNN, the COVID-19 pandemic did not pose a threat as a public health crisis to the United States, and many mentioned it was sensationalized to make the former administration seem unprepared. In addition, for those who found CNN more authentic than FOX, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major public health crisis, and the majority criticized the former administration’s approach to the virus. These discrepancies in attitudes and approaches were formed from a trust and reliance on the information received at the beginning of the pandemic, thus creating a new “pseudo-environment” from this new phenomenon.

Thus, what do these results reveal about current sensationalist practices in the United States? As mentioned in Chapter 2, media conglomeration creates an unparalleled amount of influence over the public, a phenomenon demonstrated through the results above. In manipulating stories to achieve a specific audience and a profit, many individuals do not understand the full context of the phenomenon. These practices leave citizens not only in conflict with one another, but it places many in danger when it comes
to their health and safety. However, due to the reinforcement of certain beliefs by this type of broadcasting, one is led to believe all other opinions are invalidated, and it is difficult to change the mind of others after this information has been presented in a certain way. Overall, my results reveal the necessity for the media, especially major networks such as FOX and CNN, to understand their impact on society and be more aware of their type of reporting, especially in cases of public health and safety. It also calls upon the public to be more active in their consumption of media and understand how contemporary journalistic practices influence the way in which they understand the world.

Accuracy of Hypotheses

The overall purpose of conducting this research was to determine the factors leading to the rise of sensationalized journalism and if this type of reporting has affected political and societal attitudes within the United States. It is also vital to look at the entirety of this research to determine which, if any, of my initial hypotheses were fulfilled, and which of my primary assumptions were correct. In general, I have determined that most of these hypotheses were proven correct, and there has been a clear deviance from objective journalism towards sensationalism. Moreover, while I found that sensationalism does not affect the general population among specific age or gender groups, there are harmful political and social implications of this type of reporting across political party lines, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. These implications are only measured domestically in this research, yet I can assume that similar implications could be occurring across the world. This section will break down the three hypotheses and
statements made in Chapter 1 and connect them to the research, results, and analysis provided in throughout the rest of the work.

My first hypothesis was that there was a distinct separation between objective and sensationalist journalism, both in theory and in practice. In tracking both styles historically, one can see that journalism has faced many different trends throughout history. Since its inception, there has always been a clear definition of how “objective” journalists should conduct their practices: focus on the facts, include little emotional/subjective language, and include the entire context so individuals are given the opportunity to draw conclusions for themselves (Aucoin, 2007; Benson, 2008; Feldstein, 2009). This point draws in the second objective outlined in my hypotheses: to evaluate the influence of objective journalism on civil discourse. As explored in Chapter 2, there was no negative impact of this type of journalism on the public. It allowed individuals to make decisions for themselves based on the full context of the story, which is contrasted to the resulting effects of sensationalism on the way individuals perceive the world.

Objective journalism was the primary form of reporting until the late 19th century, when the rise of “yellow” journalism took the place of objective reporting. Sensationalism has been hereby defined by its tactics of information distortion, emotional language, and audience targeting (Ashley et al., 2018; Hatchen, 2005; Smith-Shomade, 2004). This type of reporting has the intention of revealing segmented information to specific audiences to create emotional responses to specific stories, with the goal of driving profits and rating upwards. The clear focus of this practice was and continues to be “story-telling,” with less regard towards fact-finding and investigation and more emphasis on how the story is told to the audience. These phenomena were further
highlighted with the establishment of FOX and CNN in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, which marked the most recent and most stark transition back to sensationalism.

The two transitions mentioned in the previous paragraph, the first of which occurring in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and the other beginning in the 1970s (until today), highlight the third portion of my hypothesis, which seeks to document the historical shift from objective-style reporting to a reliance on sensationalism. As explored in Chapters 2 and 3, the desire to remain in a competitive, capitalist-driven market has driven executives and journalists to make specific reporting decisions about certain stories. As the market has become saturated with more news outlets, those with the most ecstatic and embellished stories and reporters gain viewers’ attention. This phenomenon thereby explains the frequency of headlines including harsh or striking language, as well as the reason why citizens gravitate towards outlets such as FOX and CNN, which are known for their commentators such as Anderson Cooper and Sean Hannity. Then, through analyzing recent FOX and CNN news articles pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic in Chapter 4, I demonstrated that these qualities are utilized in practice today. In pairing the practices of information distortion with embellishing stories, it represents a clear deviance from the values of fairness, neutrality, and fact-focused reporting represented in objective journalism.

The final point described in my initial hypothesis introduces the quantitative and empirical work conducted in the latter chapters of this research. In trying to explain the subsequent impacts of sensationalism on the general population, it was vital to understand the citizenry’s point of view. My survey found that citizens’ opinions are typically informed by their preferred news outlet, with a high level of trust that the
information they are receiving is factual. Citizens also gravitate towards and trust a specific outlet due to their political party affiliation (not based on age or gender). With the articles mirroring the practices of FOX and CNN documented in Chapter 3 and 4, it was clear that each article only provided a framed and partisan view of a certain topic (Trump vs. Biden administration and the COVID-19 pandemic). When asked to explain their survey answer choices, many answers relied on partisan beliefs which were reinforced by their preferred article. Although I did find a few shortcomings in my research, such as the age and gender datasets not providing significant data, these findings allowed me to reflect on other potential reasons for this occurrence. These speculations merely solidified my finding that political party affiliation is a key reason behind one’s reliance on a specific source. Therefore, I must conclude that there can be cases where sensationalism is reflective of political polarization in the United States, and others where it is not completely reflective of this phenomenon.

Moreover, the questions pertaining to the COVID-19 reveal the societal impacts of this form of reporting, thus further confirming the hypothesis. As explained by psychologists and communication scholars in Chapters 2 and 3, when someone receives information on a subject unknown to them, it informs their “pseudo-environment,” and it influences their attitudes pertaining to that topic. Thus, in evaluating individuals’ perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic in correlation to which news source they felt was more truthful (FOX or CNN), it gives one a clear idea of the societal impacts of sensationalized reporting, and as shown above, this trust in a particular news outlet led to a specific way of approaching the COVID-19 pandemic. This, in turn, provides an answer
to my initial research question: what are the subsequent effects of sensationalism on domestic political opinion construction?

Limitations of the Research

Although this study found most of my initial hypotheses to be correct, it is not without major limitations. First, as an undergraduate honors thesis, the research itself was limited in scope. I am very grateful to have received a grant from Newcomb-Tulane College to cover my Qualtrics survey, yet this amount was not enough to fund more than a small sample size for my survey. With limited funding from the home institution, the survey was only able to reach a sample size of 1000 people. However, it did cover a national audience, with participants responding from across the country, yet it was still a small sample in number. While it does provide a foundation to the overall hypothesis, it does not provide a full look into the entirety of the population of the United States.

The research was also limited in time. While it did receive an exception from Tulane’s Internal Review Board, the span of one academic year to formulate, conduct, and analyze the research necessary for this study is not enough to fully comprehend the gravity and the necessity of this study. If drawn out over a longer period, other manipulations could be conducted to better understand the results of the survey. Furthermore, I must admit that I have limited knowledge that if the participants who responded put forth truthful and honest responses. In my survey, I asked for authentic answers to all questions, yet I do not have a way of truly knowing that if the responses provided were their personal opinions.
Moreover, this research can be varied on multiple levels to achieve different goals. Fundamentally, one can maintain the same methods and merely increase the sample size to achieve a more accurate representation of the American public. There are also several external factors that could be manipulated as well. For example, one could change the sources analyzed and choose NewsMax or MSNBC to measure if these sources are sensationalized and if they have the same social and political effects. The research could also increase in scope and compare outlets across different countries, such as the United States and United Kingdom, such as BBC and CNN. Finally, one could analyze different types of news. This research focused solely on online news programming, and one could vary this to examine television news, print news, or even social media. The same methodology can be utilized in any of these cases, yet with minor adjustments made to the written articles and the survey questions. Overall, this research can be expanded and further developed in several ways to answer my fundamental research question and hypothesis.

*Future of Journalism? A trend towards objective or subjective reporting?*

What does this research say about the current state and future of journalism? As of now, this study reminds the public that it is important to recognize these practices to fundamentally be aware of the information one receives. It has become clear that the media’s sensationalist practices have demonstrated clear deviances from the concepts of neutrality, fairness, and truth. These choices clearly represent how citizens have come to find that American political atmosphere is “misguided.” Now, the priorities are to obtain the largest audience possible by manipulation of information and audience targeting, and
the audiences believe the broadcasts to be factual and truth-telling with little to no
hesitation. If audiences continue to gather information blindly and passively with
complete trust in their news sources, the results from this study have proven that political
and social implications will continue to occur.

Therefore, the longer these practices are present in journalism and in politics, the
more commonplace they will become. Due to the fragmented and embellished pieces
currently present in the media, citizens cannot even fully educate themselves on specific
events without referring to multiple (even more than two) news outlets. One day,
“sensationalism” could become the normal type of reporting, with full disregard towards
objectivity and little knowledge on how this practice is conducted. It could become very
difficult, if not impossible, to learn the whole context of a story due to the priorities set
by the media networks. Thus, if sensationalism is left untouched by journalists and the
American public, it can completely eradicate the association with “news” and “facts”
altogether. While this evaluation might seem hyperbolic in nature, this study
demonstrates that this disassociation is already occurring in sensationalism, and it can
continue to progress in the future.

Thus, what should be done to signal a return or reemergence of objective
journalism? I believe that media networks should begin to rethink and reframe their type
of reporting to ensure citizens are able to derive information from a story. It is vital that
citizens are still able to turn to the news for a key source of education, rather than merely
entertainment. In order to achieve this goal, journalists and media networks should begin
to examine their practices and see to what extent useful information can be taken from
their stories, and if these stories will provide a positive impact on the public as a whole,
not merely a sub-section of the whole population. This is a starting point to return to a point in journalism that could be more “objective” in nature, but it specifically ensures that its audience understands the proper context to a story and can derive their own conclusions without arguments leading them towards a specific narrative(s) or mindset.

As a result of these practices, this study has also determined that many individuals now have a more negative outlook on politics. Using language such as “dysfunctional,” “toxic,” and “doomed,” it leads one to wonder if these feelings will represent the foreseeable future of American politics? If there is an established correlation with media practices and political attitudes, it is apparent that an increase in sensationalism can propagate these sentiments into the future, if not worsening the current political climate. Thus, one question remains: can this country make concrete change to lessen the partisanship in the media? The precedent has already been set, yet now it is the responsibility of both journalists and citizens to carry out these practices. There is a hope for a less “dysfunctional” political future, but the agency is now on the American public to make this opportunity into a reality.
Appendices:

Appendix A: CNN Articles reviewed for Survey

1. Headline: “Democrats and Republicans see coronavirus differently”
   Published: July 15, 2020

Text:
This weekend, President Donald Trump allowed the White House press corps to see him wearing a face mask for the first time. Trump, of course, has been hesitant to wear a mask, and he has retweeted criticism of former Vice President Joe Biden for doing so.

The importance of Trump wearing a mask cannot be understated. Perhaps by doing so, the President can help close an unnecessary partisan gap on how Americans view them and the coronavirus pandemic in general.

The latest Axios/Ipsos poll bears out well how there really is a Democratic and Republican America when it comes to dealing with the coronavirus.

Jodi Lewis is growing her custom wall decal business on Amazon Handmade from her home in rural Idaho. Small businesses selling on Amazon.com have created 1.1 million jobs.

Overall, 62% of Americans say they wear a mask at all times when they leave the home. This is the highest percentage ever recorded by Axios/Ipsos since they started asking this question in April.

Digging down further, you see that 78% of Democrats say they wear a mask at all times. Just 45% of Republican answered the same way. This is a 33-point partisan gap.

While this isn't the type of partisan difference you'd see on a question asking about Biden or Trump, it's still quite big. It makes you wonder whether such a gap has been apparent from the start, or whether it came about because Democratic politicians were more pro-mask than Trump.

There's a good case the partisan gap came about because of the actions of politicians. When Axios/Ipsos first put this question to Americans in early April, the partisan gap on masks was significantly smaller. Back then, 38% of Democrats said they were wearing them at all times when leaving the home. This compares to 24% of Republicans, which makes for only a 14-point partisan difference.

If you go back even further, there were no partisan differences on masks in February. This was when coronavirus was not a top news story in America. Asking a slightly different question, the Kaiser Family Foundation discovered that 8% of Democrats and 6% of Republicans said they had worn or bought a mask because of the coronavirus outbreak.

5 Highlighted segments were to highlight points where the piece seemed subjective, thus creating examples of sensationalism after which the two survey articles could be modeled.
The widening partisan gap on masks mirrors the widening partisanship gap on coronavirus overall.
Democrats and Republicans were about equally worried in February about a coronavirus outbreak. About 26% of Democrats said they were very concerned compared to 24% of Republicans in that Kaiser poll. That's what you'd expect given that this is a virus, not something with baked-in partisan priors like taxes.
But today, Democrats and Republicans are in different worlds. According to Axios/Ipsos, 80% of Democrats are now extremely or very concerned about the coronavirus pandemic. Among Republicans, it's just 41%.
Now, it would be easy to say that this gap has developed simply because Democratic areas have struggled with the virus more than Republican areas. Early on in the pandemic, that was certainly the case. In late March, counties that voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 had three times as many cases per 1,000,000 residents as those that voted for Trump, per an analysis by economist Jed Katko. More recently, however, Democratic and Republican counties have had about as many new cases.
As I've noted previously, it's difficult to know exactly why some counties and states are seeing more cases now than previously. There are a lot of confounding variables. We do know, though, that mask wearing does prevent the spread of coronavirus and there was a correlation between which states were more likely to wear masks and where the virus was spreading the fastest.
Indeed, the actions of politicians can be quite important. Compare the positive tests over the last week to the same week last month. Most states saw an increase in positive tests (in part because there have been more tests administered). Yet, the average state requiring people to wear masks when out in public by June 1 saw an increase of about 10% as large as the states where there was no mask rule in effect.
But no matter what state you live, the partisan gap in mask wearing is apparent.
Consider New York, which has suffered the most devastation from the virus and where mask usage is among the highest in the country.
A recent NBC 4 New York/Marist College poll found that 74% of New York state residents said they always wear a mask when they leave home. Democrats, though, are more likely to wear a mask at 82% to Republicans' 61%. This 21 point difference is nearly three times as large as the regional differences within the state (78% in New York City compared to 70% upstate).
Big differences between Democrats and Republicans within a state is not uncommon. It's the norm. There's a nearly 30-point gap in Texas, for example.
This partisan breakdown is probably why the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Robert Redfield said on Tuesday that he needs Trump "to set the example" when it comes to mask wearing. That way, the country might be able to close the gap.
President John F. Kennedy urged Americans to ask not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country. When he takes the same oath of office next month, Joe Biden will effectively beseech the nation to do exactly the same thing, if in more prosaic terms, with an appeal for every American to wear a mask for his first, symbolic 100 days in office.

The President-elect revealed the galvanizing, altruistic, first national rallying call of his administration in an exclusive CNN interview on Thursday with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, previewing a sharp change of direction when he succeeds President Donald Trump.

"Just 100 days to mask, not forever. One hundred days. And I think we'll see a significant reduction," Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper, implicitly acknowledging that the coronavirus could be raging at even more intense levels when he takes office than its current alarming spike.

Ever since President Franklin Roosevelt took office in the dark days of the Great Depression in 1933, the first 100 days have marked the apex of a new US leader's power and often the most prolific period for policy wins.

During the interview Thursday, Biden referenced the steep challenges Roosevelt confronted when he was first elected, noting that the current circumstances are "not unlike what happened in 1932."

"There was a fundamental change, not only taking place here in the United States, but around the world," Biden told Tapper. "We're in the middle of this fourth industrial revolution," he noted. With all the changes in technology, he said, Americans are wondering, "Will there be a middle class? What will people be doing? ... There's genuine, genuine anxiety."

FDR told Americans in his first inaugural address that "the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself," steeling a demoralized citizenry to hold firm amid a banking crisis that threatened to destroy an already devastated economy.

Biden will take office amid the most extreme domestic circumstances of any president since Roosevelt, with sickness and death rampant and millions of Americans unemployed, hungry or at risk of losing their homes.

Like his Democratic forbear, he will use the iconic opening moments of his term to summon an exhausted people to unite, in common cause -- with the help of new vaccines -- this time to beat the virus and save the economy.

There is a question, however, whether Biden's calls for national unity will resonate among people who didn't vote for him after Trump's relentless attacks on the legitimacy of his victory in the presidential election. But Biden's call to action may carry greater urgency now that the virus is taking hold in rural areas of the heartland with comparatively rudimentary health care systems, which escaped the first wave of infection that concentrated in many cities that tend to vote for Democrats.
Biden's interview -- his first since the election that also included Harris -- underscored a complete course correction from Trump's attitude towards the virus. The pandemic has never been worse than it is now in the United States. One American is dying every 30 seconds amid record fatality figures and hospitalizations. Doctors and nurses are exhausted after months inside overflowing under-resourced Covid wards. More than 276,000 people have now died from coronavirus in the United States and the nation set a new record for hospitalizations on Thursday with more than 100,667 people being treated for Covid-19.

Yet the current President is ignoring the carnage, as he pursues his fantastical lies and claims the election that he lost by a comfortable margin was stolen. Trump has frequently mocked the wearing of masks. He is holding holiday parties inside the White House in defiance of his own government's health recommendations. When he returned home after his bout in military hospital with Covid-19 he famously turned to the cameras and ripped off his mask.

By contrast, and if past behavior is any guide, it is conceivable that one of Biden's first acts after delivering his inaugural address in 47 days will be to put his mask back on.

**Biden asks Fauci to stay in his current role**

Biden said he asked Fauci to stay on and be a chief medical adviser in his administration. In another sign of a fresh approach to the pandemic, Biden said in the interview he had asked Dr. Anthony Fauci, who Trump has marginalized and insulted, to continue his current role as the nation's top infectious diseases specialist in Biden's administration and announced an effective promotion for the globally respected expert. Fauci told NBC on Friday that he immediately accepted.

"I asked him to stay on the exact same role he's had for the past several presidents, and I asked him to be a chief medical adviser for me as well, and be part of the Covid team," Biden told Tapper, in a gesture that implies a return to continuity and science-based policy-making after Trump's wild presidency.

Biden emphasized that he and Fauci spoke about the fact that "you don't have to close down the economy" if Americans are following through with other safety protocols to prevent the spread of the virus. And he noted that even before they spoke, Fauci has been speaking regularly with Ron Klain, Biden's incoming chief of staff, and the two forged a close working relationship during the Ebola outbreak. The President-elect also said during the interview that he would get the vaccine publicly to show the public his confidence in it.

"When Dr. Fauci says we have a vaccine that is safe, that's the moment in which I will stand before the public and say that," Biden said. People have lost faith in the ability of the vaccine to work. Already the numbers are really staggeringly low, and it matters what the president and vice president do."

Earlier this week, former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama all pledged to get the vaccine in public view to help combat vaccine skepticism. Biden said his three predecessors "have set the model as to what should be done."

**Aid to states and struggling Americans**

Capitol Hill talks intensify over Covid-19 relief deal but major sticking points remain
The President-elect said it is already clear to him from his conversations with governors across the country, as well as 50 Democratic and Republican mayors, that they will need a significant amount of money to get the vaccine where it needs to go.

"It's one thing to get the vaccine delivered -- in cases, some frozen, some not -- and another thing to get the vaccine to move from the case to a vaccination in someone's arm. That's the really complicated piece," Biden said, noting that governors and mayors told him they need far more financial assistance to get the vaccine delivered, which he described as "an incredibly expensive proposition."

"That's why we're continuing to hope that the Senate does something and responds to the immediate need to provide dollars. But we're going to need a lot more" once in office, Biden said. "It's going to cost literally billions of dollars to get this done. We can keep schools open. We can keep businesses open. But you have to be able to get the vaccine distributed."

The President-elect noted that the Trump administration has been "cooperating with us of late" and looping them in on the plans for how they are going to deliver on the vaccine, but he said, "There's not any help getting out there."

"Look at all the businesses that are being hurt so badly," he said. "No money to help them. Come Christmas time, there's going to be millions of people see their unemployment run out. So, there's a whole range of things that have to be done."

Biden called the $900 billion framework for a congressional aid package proposed by a bipartisan group of members "a good start," but said more aid would be needed and he urged members to focus on what struggling Americans need most.

"What's immediately needed is relief for people in their unemployment checks; relief for people who are going to get thrown out of their apartments after Christmas because they can't afford to pay the rent anymore; relief on mortgage payments; relief on all the things that are in the original bill the House passed," Biden said. "People are really hurting. They're scared to death."

Biden's diametrically different Covid strategy, particularly his call for Americans to mask up in the first 100 days, is already being welcomed by medical experts who are watching in horror as daily Covid deaths soar over 2,500 per day even before the feared escalation in infections following Thanksgiving travel.

"President-elect Biden, and his leadership and listening to scientists, believe that if we all wore our masks for 100 days, we would have a significant reduction in the transmission of the virus," said Rick Bright, a former Trump administration vaccine expert who resigned after warning the administration ignored warnings about the early spread of Covid-19.

"The science shows that wearing a face mask reduces the spread. I think it would have a huge impact," Bright, who now sits on Biden's coronavirus advisory board, told CNN's Wolf Blitzer.

Hospitals in California were treating 2,066 patients with Covid-19 in intensive care units, breaking a record for the highest number of Covid cases since the start of the pandemic. California's Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom warned that most regions of the state will soon cross the threshold he has set for a three-week stay-at-home order, which is triggered once ICU beds fall to 15% capacity in that region.
Biden says Harris will be a full partner
Harris on her working relationship with Biden: 'We are full partners in this process'
While Biden and Harris had differences on an array of issues when she was running for president -- from their health care plans to her desire to see the Justice Department prosecute Trump after he leaves office -- she and Biden showed their policy alignment during the interview, which also offered some clues into her role and portfolio as vice president.

"We are full partners in this process," Harris said.
Since the first day Biden asked her to join him on the ticket, she said he has been "very clear with me that he wants me to be the first and the last in the room" on major decisions. "So on every issue that impacts the American people, I will be a full partner to the President-elect and the President."
She mirrored Biden's position, for example, on how the administration would treat any potential investigations into Trump's conduct after he leaves office, even though it is different than the tone she used toward Trump during her campaign.
Biden told Tapper that his Justice Department will operate independently, and that he would not direct them on how or who to investigate: "I'm not going to be saying go prosecute A, B or C -- I'm not going to be telling them," Biden said. "That's not the role, it's not my Justice Department it's the people's Justice Department."
Harris, a former prosecutor who served as California's attorney general, echoed that call for independence for the Justice Department, drawing a bright line between the Biden administration's approach and Trump's.
"We will not tell the Justice Department how to do its job. And we are going to assume, and I say this as a former attorney general elected in California -- and I ran the second largest Department of Justice in the United States -- that any decision coming out of the Justice Department, in particular the United States Department of Justice, should be based on facts, it should be based on the law, it should not be influenced by politics, period," Harris told Tapper.
When Tapper asked Harris what her portfolio would be as vice president -- whether she would head a Covid-19 task force, for example, as Vice President Mike Pence has -- Biden interrupted to say he would answer the question. He said he planned to enlist Harris on whatever the most urgent need was at a given moment, much as he did for President Barack Obama as vice president.
"Whatever the most urgent need is that I'm not able to attend to, I have confidence in turning to her," Biden said, noting that was dissimilar from former Vice President Al Gore's approach, which was to handle an entire issue portfolio like the environment.
"Look, there's not a single decision I've made yet about personnel or about how to proceed that I haven't discussed it with Kamala first."
After scuttling talks for an economic stimulus deal by tweet, then signaling interest in resuming those talks, President Donald Trump has muddied the waters on Capitol Hill yet again.

Shortly after negotiators announced Trump had OK'd a $1.8 trillion deal -- which was still short of Democrats' $2 trillion ask -- Trump told talk radio host Rush Limbaugh that "I would like to see a bigger stimulus package than either Democrats or Republicans are offering."

Trump's confusing stance on a coronavirus stimulus package, which seemingly changed by the hour, follows his return from Walter Reed by helicopter on Monday night after his Covid-19 diagnosis.

The stakes are high -- for the US economy, the nation and the Covid-19 positive President himself.

Health officials are warning the country is in a precarious position as we enter the colder months, with real economic implications. This week, the country's Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell warned a second wave of coronavirus could "more significantly limit economic activity, not to mention the tragic effects on lives and well-being."

Trump made his only public appearance of the week during that trip back home, when he landed at the White House, walked up a flight of stairs, took off his mask and posed for a photo op. Trump has, however, appeared in a number of videos posted directly to his Twitter account, and called into multiple conservative, friendly TV and radio shows, including a lengthy two hours with Rush Limbaugh midday Friday.

The home-bound Trump this week refused to participate in the reconfigured upcoming debate on October 15 -- now virtual, in-part due to Trump's own Covid-19 diagnosis. Trump said, "I'm not going to waste my time on a virtual debate," though Friday's interview with Limbaugh outlasted a 90-minute debate window.

Of course, like the stimulus negotiations, that all could change (multiple times). For his part, Democratic nominee Joe Biden has already made other plans for the night: He'll participate in an ABC News town hall on October 15.

**The Point:** Despite Trump's rosy projections, the coronavirus is still very much an issue for both the nation and the President.
**Appendix B: FOX Articles reviewed for Survey**

4. **Headline:** “Biden says ‘we’re all in this together’ as Dem politicians keep getting caught breaking rules”  
**Published:** November 25, 2020  

Text:
President-elect Joe Biden on Wednesday appealed for unity in fighting the coronavirus pandemic, telling Americans “we’re all in this together.” Yet his plea comes as his fellow Democrats continue getting busted for breaking the same rules that they continue to preach.

Biden’s Thanksgiving eve address to the nation comes amid a surge in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations. The former vice president called on Americans to take precautions to try to stem the tide of the virus, by wearing masks and practicing social distancing.

"Each of us has a responsibility in our own lives to do what we can to slow the virus," he said in remarks in Wilmington, Del. While he said the federal government has "vast powers" to combat the virus, "the federal government can't do it alone."

Biden said that until there's a vaccine, wearing masks, social distancing and limiting the size of gatherings "are our most effective tools to combat the virus."

"This is the moment when we need to steel our spines, redouble our efforts and recommit ourselves to this fight," Biden said. "We're all in this together."

But the president-elect has been curiously silent on the increasingly long list of his fellow Democrats who had made headlines for flouting coronavirus rules – despite a nationwide surge in cases.

Earlier this month, California Gov. Gavin Newsom drew outrage after photos emerged of him dining at one of the state’s most exclusive fine-dining restaurants in violation of his own coronavirus orders. The Democratic governor acknowledged he attended a birthday party with a dozen friends on Nov. 6 at the posh French Laundry in wine country north of San Francisco.

On the East Coast, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser has been widely condemned for attending Biden’s presidential victory speech in Delaware – despite the Diamond State being on the mayor’s own list of high-risk states. One of her staff members defended the trip as “essential travel” and “excepted” under Bowser’s order.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot has also been accused of hypocrisy for implementing a new round of lockdown orders just days after she joined large crowds celebrating Joe Biden’s election victory. She defended the celebrations by saying: “There are times when
we actually do need to have relief and come together, and I felt like that was one of those times. That crowd was gathered whether I was there or not.”

More recently, high-profile Brooklyn Democrats came under fire for attending a birthday party where many of the attendees were pictured without masks and not practicing social distancing – despite the rising number of coronavirus cases in New York City.

Though Biden has campaigned on taking a tougher approach to combat the pandemic and has suggested he will work with local and state leaders to enforce face mask requirements nationwide, he has been silent on these Democratic rulebreakers. Furthermore, he has not addressed concerns that some mass celebrations of his victory may have contributed to this spread of the virus.

Hospitalizations, deaths and the testing positivity rates for the coronavirus are up sharply as the nation approaches Thanksgiving, and public health experts have warned that the large family gatherings expected for the holiday are likely to extend and exacerbate the surge.

Biden has said turning the tide of the pandemic will be the top priority of his administration once he takes office in January, and he's made multiple public remarks urging Americans to embrace mask-wearing and social distancing guidelines to combat the spread.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

5. **Headline:** “California’s Newsom says coronavirus provides ‘opportunity’ to push progressive agenda”
   **Published:** April 2, 2020
   **Hyperlink:** [https://www.foxnews.com/politics/california-newsom-coronavirus-opportunity-progressive-agenda](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/california-newsom-coronavirus-opportunity-progressive-agenda)

Text: California Gov. Gavin Newsom sees an “opportunity” to use the coronavirus outbreak to usher in new progressive policies in his state and elsewhere in the country, he said Wednesday.

“Absolutely, we see this as an opportunity reshape the way we do business and how we govern,” he said during a virtual press conference.

The remark came near the end of a long, winding answer to a question about whether he saw “the potential” in the crisis for “a new progressive era” in state and national politics.

“That shouldn’t put shivers up the spines of one party or the other,” he said. “I think it’s an opportunity anew for both parties to come together and meet this moment and really start to think more systemically, not situationally, not just about getting out of this moment.”
In the course of giving his answer, Newsom specifically referred to growing income inequality and a squeeze on the middle class as issues “we’ve long been struggling to address.”

“Something was fundamentally flawed in that global context, manifested quite acutely here in the state of California, the richest and the poorest state,” he said.

In terms of the measures he’s taken to respond to the coronavirus so far, Newsom was among the first governors to issue a statewide shutdown in a bid to slow the spread, and he called on all states to do so.

Like governors across the country, he’s issued a slew of executive orders in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. They range from a stay-at-home order to measures to address the needs of individuals and businesses struggling to stay afloat during the crisis -- including a moratorium on evictions. Still, Newsom’s answer appears reminiscent of an infamous comment former Obama adviser and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel made in a 2008 interview about the economic crisis with the Wall Street Journal: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that, it's an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”

Emanuel repeated that remark again two weeks ago as lawmakers were mulling how to respond to the coronavirus crisis, although in a different context.

“Never allow a crisis to go to waste,” he said in an appearance on “This Week” on ABC.

“Start planning for the future. This has to be the last pandemic that creates an economic depression. We're going to have more pandemics, but this has to be the last economic depression.”

Fox News’ Andrew O’Reilly and Tyler Olson contributed to this report.

6. **Headline:** “After attacking Trump’s coronavirus-related China travel ban as xenophobic, Dems and media have changed tune”

**Published:** April 1, 2020

**Hyperlink:** https://www.foxnews.com/politics/dems-media-change-tune-trump-attacks-coronavirus-china-travel-ban

**Text:**

Within hours of President Trump's decision to restrict travel from China on Jan. 31, top Democrats and media figures immediately derided the move as unnecessary and xenophobic -- and they are now beating a hasty retreat from that position as the coronavirus continues to ravage the economy and cause scores of deaths.

Democratic presidential contender Joe Biden led the way, quickly attacking what he called Trump's "record of hysteria, xenophobia and fear-mongering" after the travel
restrictions were announced, and arguing that Trump "is the worst possible person to lead our country through a global health emergency." Biden, on Wednesday, didn't criticize the travel ban in any way, and instead accused Trump of "downplaying" the virus early on in remarks to Fox News.

"I had Biden calling me xenophobic," Trump told Fox News' "Hannity" on March 26. "He called me a racist, because of the fact that he felt it was a racist thing to stop people from China coming in."

In March, another Democratic presidential candidate, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., conspicuously insisted at a Fox News town hall that he wouldn't consider closing the U.S. border to prevent the spread of coronavirus, before condemning what he called the president's xenophobia. The Vermont senator has since taken to promoting "Medicare-for-All" and workers' rights amid the outbreak, while deferring to health experts on border closings.

For many news outlets, the about-face has been stark. A Jan. 31 article in The New York Times quoted epidemiologist Dr. Michael Osterholm as saying that Trump's decision to restrict travel from China was "more of an emotional or political reaction."

Weeks later, though, the paper reported that dozens of "nations across the world have imposed travel restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus," and did not criticize any of them for the move.

The Washington Post ran a story quoting a Chinese official asking for "empathy" and slamming the White House for acting "in disregard of WHO [World Health Organization] recommendation against travel restrictions."

In March, The Post finally acknowledged that critics accused China and WHO of "covering up or downplaying the severity of an infectious disease outbreak."

A week earlier, Vox confidently declared that "The evidence on travel bans for diseases like coronavirus is clear: They don’t work." The article originally referred to the "Wuhan coronavirus" in its headline, before left-wing journalists and Democrats argued that terminology was racist.
Vox also tweeted on Jan. 31: "Is this going to be a deadly pandemic? No." On Mar. 24, Vox deleted that tweet, writing that it "no longer reflects the current reality of the coronavirus story."

The Heritage Foundation's Lyndsey Fifield identified numerous other instances of prominent media outlets criticizing the travel ban, in many cases without issuing any kind of correction. For example, The Verge cautioned that Trump's policies "contradict advice from the World Health Organization (WHO), which said yesterday that countries should not restrict travel or trade in their response to the new virus."

BuzzFeed News asserted that "barring foreign travelers from China, along with making U.S. citizens self-quarantine at home ... likely violated civil rights laws, without leading to any real lowered risk of a U.S. outbreak," citing "global health law expert" Lawrence Gostin of Georgetown University.

STAT, a health and medicine news site, reported that the travel ban was similar to calls from "conservative lawmakers and far-right supporters of the president," even as "public health experts ... warn that the move could do more harm than good."

On Jan. 15, when the first American with coronavirus returned from China, House Democrats were ceremoniously carrying their articles of impeachment against Trump to the Senate. (The president was acquitted overwhelmingly on each article of impeachment.)

Nevertheless, this week, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., accused Trump of endangering lives by wasting time. “As the president fiddles, people are dying,” Pelosi told CNN's Jake Tapper.

“The president, his denial at the beginning, was deadly," she claimed.

Media outlets and Democrats have also retreated from their previous talking points that Trump was recklessly proposing an antimalaria drug as a possible coronavirus treatment. The FDA has since approved the drug on an emergency basis for coronavirus treatment.
In recent days, the Biden team and other Democrats have moved on to other lines of attack, including claiming that Trump once referred to the coronavirus as a "hoax." That claim has been refuted by numerous fact-checkers, including The Post's, which found that Trump was clearly referring to Democrats' efforts to blame him for the pandemic, not the virus itself.

Additionally, numerous Democrats, including Biden, have falsely claimed that the president cut the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) budget. The Associated Press has noted that those claims "distort" the facts, largely because Congress blocked planned cuts.

Fox News has reported that the Obama administration also sought hundreds of millions of dollars in funding cuts to the CDC.

"Many in the scientific community beclowned themselves because their hatred for Trump blinded them -- and does to this day," Fifield said.

Meanwhile, even some prominent left-wing Democrats have come to the president's defense. "This is not time to bicker," California Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom said Wednesday on CNN. “Let me just be candid with you. I’d be lying to you to say that [Trump] hasn’t been responsive to our needs. He has. And so, as a sort of an offer of objectivity, I have to acknowledge that publicly."

Newsom added: "The fact is, every time that I've called the president, he's quickly gotten on the line. When we asked to get the support for that [USNS] Mercy ship in Southern California, he was able to direct that in real-time. We've got 2,000 of these field medical sites that are up, almost all operational now in the state, because of his support. Those are the facts."
Appendix C: Empirical Journalistic-style survey: articles and questions

a. Article in CNN Style

Over the past few months, President Donald Trump has proven that he is incapable of handling and leading a country through a public health crisis. From disbanding the National Security Council’s Pandemic Response Team to not consistently wearing a mask, the United States is in desperate need of change to curb the recent spike in coronavirus cases.

The United States reigned in 2021 with record high cases, with California calling for emergency services to conserve oxygen and make heart-breaking decisions about survival cases, even with the vaccine finally being accessible to seniors and healthcare workers. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, expressed on January 3 that a major change is needed to curb the rise in cases.

“There's no running away from the numbers. It's something that we absolutely got to grasp and get our arms around and turn that inflection down by very intensive adherence to the public health measures, uniformly, throughout the country, with no exception.”

It seems as if this change may be on the horizon, as President-elect Joe Biden takes office on January 21st. His inauguration will mark a sharp change in approaching the virus and may follow suit with countries such as the United Kingdom and Scotland, who both announced national lockdowns on January 4.

Biden has discussed his priorities to be vaccinating frontline health care workers and senior residents, as well as a plead to the American people to wear masks.
throughout his first 100 days in office. While he will not require Americans to wear masks everywhere by law, he will mandate them in specific spaces such as federal buildings and interstate travel (planes, trains and busses).

He has also pledged to make the vaccine available to educators as soon as possible, who have faced extreme difficulties and stressors throughout the past few months. In following this promise, president-Elect Biden believes that his “team will work to see that a majority of our schools can be open by the end of my first 100 days.”

From little to no strategy to a detailed plan on combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, hope could be on the horizon for many Americans. A new leader is set to take the stage on January 21st, and the nation could be leaving behind one of the most polarizing administrations in history. A new chapter will begin, with a galvanizing, altruistic leader at the helm.

b. Article in FOX Style

The past few months have proven to be trying times for Americans. From a chaotic election to a new variant of the coronavirus to even highly debated stimulus plans, Americans cannot seem to get a moment of repose. As president-Elect Joe Biden is poised to take the reigns on January 21st, many Americans are left wondering what is to become of this country with a new administration.

The Covid-19 variant, known as B.1.1.7, was first confirmed in the United States on January 5th, marking a new major development in the ongoing pandemic. This highly contagious mutation could send the country back to stay at home orders and put millions more out of work. The major question that remains is how the newly unified Democratic
government will respond to this issue. After taking control of the Senate on January 8th, the Democratic party will now face the pressure on how to protect the country, after a heroic attempt by outgoing president Donald Trump.

With only a few weeks left in office, the President has pushed to give Americans more relief aid, calling on Congress to approve $2,000 stimulus checks to be sent to households across the country. This well-intended action was then rejected by his own party. Now, it is up to the Democrats to determine the future of the country.

“I am also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation, and to send me a suitable bill, or else the next administration will have to deliver a covid relief package, and maybe that administration will be me,” Trump said in a video message on Dec. 22.

How will this party “seize his new opportunity?” As stated by California Governor Newsom at a virtual press conference in December, “Absolutely, we see this as an opportunity reshape the way we do business and how we govern.” How will these changes effect hard-working Americans across the country? Which agendas will be pushed at the expense of countless jobs? These questions remain unanswered as President-elect Joe Biden has yet to address the mutation of the coronavirus or describe any plan to address this pertinent situation.

Where will Americans be in a month from now? Back inside? Becoming vaccinated? Larger stimulus checks? Only time will tell. This time, it will be up to the Democrats and the unified government to find a solution to this pandemic.
c. Survey Questions:

I. What age are you?
   i. 18-30 years old
   ii. 31-50 years old
   iii. More than 50 years old

II. What is your gender identity?
   i. Male
   ii. Female
   iii. Non-Binary/ Third Gender
   iv. Transgender
   v. Other (please list here) _______________

III. What is your political party affiliation?
   i. Strong Republican
   ii. Not Very Strong Republican
   iii. Independent
   iv. Not Very Strong Democrat
   v. Strong Democrat
   vi. Other (please list here) ___________

IV. How do you consume daily news?
   i. Television
   iii. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
   iv. Print Newspapers

V. Please list the two news sources you most regularly visit to receive information (National level only – FOX, CNN, New York Times, Washington Post, etc.)
   i. ______________
   ii. ______________

VI. How did you consume news when you were growing up?
   i. Television
   iii. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
   iv. Print Newspapers

VII. Please list the two news sources you most regularly visited to receive information when you were growing up (National level only – FOX, CNN, New York Times, Washington Post, etc.)
   i. ______________
   ii. ______________

VIII. Which network do you believe provides more authentic information?
   i. FOX
   ii. CNN

IX. What is your current attitude towards the COVID-19 Pandemic?
   i. Public health crisis / Mask mandate for all
   ii. Not dangerous / Masks are not necessary
X. Do you believe your media sources have been truthful with information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic?
   i. Yes
   ii. No
XI. If no, explain why here: ______________________________
XII. After reading article A, please circle the sentiment that most resonates with your feelings towards the story
   i. Agree / Pleased with the story
   ii. Disagree / Dissatisfied with the story
XIII. Please briefly explain why you chose this sentiment:
   i. ______________________________
XIV. Is this a story you would regularly read to inform yourself about American politics?
   i. Yes
   ii. No
XV. Why did you choose the above answer?
   i. ______________________________
XVI. After reading article B, please circle the sentiment that most resonates with your feelings towards the story
   i. Agree / Pleased with the story
   ii. Disagree / Dissatisfied with the story
XVII. Please briefly explain why you chose this sentiment:
   i. ______________________________
XVIII. Is this a story you would regularly read to inform yourself about American politics?
   i. Yes
   ii. No
XIX. Why did you choose the above answer?
   i. ______________________________
XX. Which article did you agree with/like more?
   i. Article A
   ii. Article B
XXI. Please briefly explain your choice.
   i. ______________________________
XXII. To conclude, please explain in one word your current feelings towards the United States’ current political atmosphere.
   i. ______________________________
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