THE RHETORICAL PRICE OF FREEDOM:
THE IMPACT OF OUTSOURCED CRITICAL THINKING ON DELIBERATIVE
DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

THE RHETORICAL PRICE OF FREEDOM: THE IMPACT OF OUTSOURCED CRITICAL THINKING ON DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

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In contemporary media ecologies, news consumers delegate the generation of political opinion to trusted outside entities. Consumers trust these purported experts, media personalities, or news outlets because their affect, values, ethos, or party positioning appeal to them in a way that confirms their own thoughts and opinions. This deferral of opinion to a source perceived to have greater authority and experience has potential consequences for democracy. For-profit news outlets—broadcast, print, and digital—court audiences and encourage exclusivity and loyalty in their attention. In so doing, they deliver to viewers a tranche of beliefs articulated together and carefully maintained through partisan discourse and blockage of outside ideas. This process cultivates an exclusive rhetorical ecology that functions as a closed system and impoverishes the discursive environment in which democracy—by way of compromise—flourishes. This study forwards the idea of *outsourcing* as a way to account for the complex rhetorical and ethical issues surrounding such an ecology. To describe the theory of rhetorical outsourcing, I draw on scholarship in rhetorical ecologies, rhetorical circulation studies, deliberative rhetoric, political theory and communication, rhetorical and organizational ethics, systems theory, and media studies. This study includes analysis of recent data from the Pew Research Center on the habits of both news consumers and producers as well as analysis of certain news media, applying

current rhetorical theory and scholarship to disentangle participation in media ecologies. I argue that the creation and maintenance of closed systems created by media ecologies raises ethical dilemmas for news producers and preys on consumers who trust them with the cultivation and protection of political identities. These closed systems lead to further political polarization and impoverish discursive potential, having a negative impact on deliberative democracy as power shifts away from citizens and into the hands of the media who control the messaging.

Chapter One: An Introduction to Outsourcing Theory

I spent one morning last summer at a long dental appointment for my daughter. In anticipation of an extended wait, I brought with me Sharon Crowley's book *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, a text I was reading in preparation for comprehensive exams. The office manager noticed my reading material and asked me about it. I explained a little about my program and course of study. I had gotten to the part in Crowley where she discusses the idea that engaging in conversation with people whose views are different than yours is a risky behavior because an active mind can always be changed by new information. Before I could even get through a brief sketch of this concept, the office manager was talking over me, recognizing in herself the "fundamentalist" mindset Crowley describes. "Oh, that's me, I'm on *Newsmax* every morning. I don't even read all the stories, only the headlines, and my daughters think it's just awful." I was worried I had offended her, but instead, what came about was a very frank and open discussion about how approaching political conversations with an open mind puts you at risk of encountering a new perspective that could alter your position.

A few months ago, I called that office, and the office manager, now my new friend, happened to answer the phone. Before she would let me reschedule my son's appointment, she had to tell me first that our conversation from a few months before had sparked discussions in her family that led to more open and positive attitudes about finding common ground on fraught issues. Her exact words were: "You changed my life! I think you should teach a class for old people on how to talk about hard things without getting mad at each other!"

After these interactions, during which it had become very clear we stand on different sides of the political divide, I began to wonder: what leads people—myself included—to select

their trusted sources? Every day, sometimes before I even get out of bed, I read historian Heather Cox Richardson's newsletter "Letters from an American," which she has been writing daily since Trump's election in 2016. I trust her because she's a highly educated and trained scholar who carefully cites primary sources and provides in-depth analysis of current issues. But I also trust her because what she says *feels right* to me, indicating an affective component to my loyalty. From a rhetorical standpoint, I have delegated a measure of my critical thinking to her, acknowledging her expertise—and my lack.

As I continued my studies, I came to recognize that what's happening is not so different from the kind of evaluative trust we place in scientific experts, whose task in the context of complex communication, described by Jean Goodwin, is "'outsourced' reasoning" (28). I realized that people don't just outsource their opinions to experts on scientific matters, but they—we—outsource the very task of critical thinking. In this study, I define **outsourcing theory** to explain that when some news consumers delegate the formulation, protection, and maintenance of political opinion to a trusted external entity or network of entities, they are outsourcing the task of critical thinking. Audiences may outsource the formation of political values and identities to purported experts, media personalities, or media outlets whose affect, values, ethos, or party positioning appeal to them in a way that confirms their own thoughts and opinions. The application of outsourcing among those who engage in it will vary from person to person; however, in general, audiences will select—or be selected into—media systems that encourage exclusivity. Audiences may go all-in on one source, or a handful of politically aligned sources. They may watch only Fox News, or never miss *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. They may visit the *Daily Kos* or *National Review* website every morning or read a hard copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. They may also combine a few sources across print, digital, and broadcast spaces,

especially those that are similarly aligned to a political party. As I will explore here, the practice of outsourcing results in audiences who are more polarized, more deeply aligned with the most extreme factions of their party, and less willing to engage in deliberation with anyone who holds a different position.

Outsourcing occurs when a consumer adopts the assertions and conclusions of a trusted source rather than thinking critically for themselves. In practicing outsourcing, consumers enter a rhetorical ecology that encourages exclusivity and loyalty by delivering a tranche of articulated beliefs protected from exposure to conflicting ideas. The bundled beliefs they adopt become recalcitrant and resistant to influence from outside sources, resulting in blocked deliberation.

In the political context of partisan media, rhetorical ecologies become like closed systems, with narrow established channels for new information to enter the system. These channels are not controlled by the audiences who consume them. Rather, the media outlets, personalities, or perceived experts to whom audience members outsource the formation of their political beliefs control not only the flow of information, but also quality, content, tenor, tone, and spin. Through the control of information, they determine what issues become important to their audience, often casting political theater in the light least flattering to the opposing side while simultaneously dismissing or outright ignoring the failings of elite partisans in their own ranks.

The idea of outsourcing as a practice audiences engage in feels, to me, immediately pertinent and recognizable as a phenomenon that existed before it was observed and named. The idea brings to mind John Poulakos's description of the sophistic rhetors and their kairotic responsibility: "By voicing the possible, the rhetor discloses his vision of a new world to his listeners and invites them to join him there by honoring his disclosure and by adopting his

suggestion" (45). Every new observation re-orders the world as new ideas gain traction and recognition as applicable and pertinent. This study aims to call attention to a practice in which audiences already engage and consider that practice from a rhetorical perspective. As I observe outsourcing theory in the world and reflect on the audience practices I see, I'm making a move toward affecting change in how we talk about politics and deliberate in our democracy. I am also calling out the practice as something that could entrench unhealthy patterns of thinking and potentially damage our democracy. I invite readers to consider the prevalence and weight of outsourcing as a practice. Who engages in outsourcing? What motivates people to engage in outsourcing? What is the impact of the practice of outsourcing? And how can we talk about it?

Methodology

Because outsourcing as a practice involves so many moving pieces and individual participants, I found it necessary to clarify my approach to the rhetorical situation in question. Outsourcing is a rhetorical practice that can be situated within current rhetoric theory, which lays a solid foundation of breadth and application. Publics are called up by—and interact differently in—the climate of new media as they are both impacted by and respond to media output that is more accessible, more reactive, and more ubiquitous, meaning we need a working definition of rhetoric that encompasses the particularities of our current situation.

Defining Rhetoric

The concept of rhetorical invention guides rhetoricians in discovering and naming emerging cultural trends and perceptions, as I have done with outsourcing theory here. The ongoing process of invention requires the timely attention of rhetoric scholars as we build on older definitions to arrive at new ways of describing and understanding rhetorical practices and phenomena in a contemporary context. Theories of rhetorical invention emerge as rhetoricians

observe emerging phenomena and are driven to both look back to explain where they came from and look forward to predict the trajectory of human communicative agency. In the generation of new concepts and definitions of rhetoric, rhetoric scholars both *reflect* the world they attempt to describe and *effect* change in that world by calling attention to emerging thought patterns and ways of being.

The sophists provide our earliest model of rhetoric as an inventive practice. As Susan Jarratt explains, the sophists "believed and taught that notions of 'truth' had to be adjusted to fit the ways of a particular audience in a certain time and with a certain set of beliefs and laws" (Jarratt xv). She expounds further: "The sophists found it both impossible and unnecessary to determine any single Truth about appearances; more important is negotiating useful courses of action for groups of people given their varying perceptions about the world" (50). As a framework for developing rhetoric theory, this is an excellent place to start: as a useful, generative practice that, instead of striving for universal truths, seeks to connect people socially, relationally, and culturally to each other and to ideas and active frameworks most likely to work for their individual circumstances.

Definitions of rhetoric help us understand how these frameworks operate. Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott define rhetoric by how it "organizes itself around the relationship of discourses, events, objects, and practices to ideas about what it means to be 'public'" (3). In a social structure, every discourse has an audience, every event calls up publics, every object exists in a network of users, and every practice interfaces between individual participants. "The contexts within or against which [rhetoric] interprets discourses, events, objects, and practices are multiple," Blair, Dickinson, and Ott explain, "ranging from the historical accretion of various symbols to immediate political interests, to social norms, to

available generic prototypes and cultural predispositions" (4). To this we can add Angela Haas's definition of rhetoric as "the negotiation of cultural information—and its historical, social, economic, and political influences—to affect social action (persuade)." Haas articulates the idea that "rhetoric seeks engagement with and participation in effective and responsible civic discourse" because "rhetoric is always already cultural" (287). Rhetoric is always already reflective of the culture engaging in it.

By its very existence, before we can even describe it, rhetoric is already effecting change in those who encounter it, meaning rhetoric is not only interventional but also performative. "As ancient rhetors such as Gorgias and Cicero argued in theory and personified in practice," Sharon Crowley asserts, "any art of practice entitled to be called 'rhetoric' must intervene in some way in the beliefs and practices of the community it serves" (27). Rhetoric that remains only within the tight circle of academic discourse fails to reach its potential as an agent of change in communities and in the lives of real people negatively impacted by societal structures. Crowley continues, "a theory is itself a performance, a doing, or an act…[a] rhetorical invention…as a means of opening other ways of believing and acting" as it "articulates and disseminates alternative strategies of invention into the culture at large" (28). This rhetoric, the rhetoric of questioning cultural structures and articulating a pathway to change, is inventive and productive.

Rhetoric, then, exists in the suggestion of the possible and, acknowledging that definitions of rhetoric have been written and rewritten for thousands of years, I propose the following definition as a grounding for outsourcing theory: Rhetoric is the inventive use of language to generate, connect, and affect audiences and practices, intervening through the negotiation of cultural contexts, networks, and relationships. Using that definition, I define outsourcing theory in rhetoric as invention, ecology, circulation, affect, and identity.

Outsourcing as Invention

If outsourcing theory is itself an invention, formulated in response to explain rhetorical practices in a contemporary context, it is also a *tool* of invention for audiences. Rhetoric solidifies relationality among members of a society, and outsourcing theory bears this up as it describes how politically interested actants privilege and grant importance to some perspectives and establish cultural norms within their exclusive discourse communities. These cultural norms might also be understood as issue templates which are constantly in negotiation, morphing into mainstream ideas associated with group identities. They function like recognized genres in the outsourced public as they take in-group talking points and apply them to new situations. In Carolyn Miller's discussion of genre, she says, "By 'defining' a material circumstance as a particular situation type, I find a way to engage my intentions in it in a socially recognizable and interpretable way" (158). Outsourced audiences engage in invention, then, every time they use the positions they've adopted from their chosen expert(s) to explain new information in compliance with their worldview. Understanding outsourcing as invention establishes a foundation for using a rhetorical ecologies framework to explain inventive interplay among audiences, rhetors, and the networks they inhabit.

Outsourcing as Ecology

The interaction of audience with a rapidly changing climate of digital culture can be better understood using Jenny Rice's definition of rhetorical ecologies. Approaching rhetoric from an ecological standpoint, Rice says, acknowledges that any situation "emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field" and "might manage to infect and connect various processes, events, and bodies" (Edbauer 14). In other words, when audiences watch, read, listen to, or otherwise participate in news media, what Rice calls "a

mixture of processes and encounters" (Edbauer 13) they are jumping into an already flowing river of information, images, ideologies, and ideas, all impacted, amplified, and accumulated by the social situation of the moment.

Rhetorical ecologies can also be seen as rhetorical *systems*. Chris Mays defines a rhetorical system as "one person's network of beliefs, meanings, commonplaces, and texts that shapes their knowledge and understanding of the world." He explains further that systems require boundaries and "for a system to exist in the first place there must be an 'inside' and an 'outside' to it." Individual systems of belief, then, are bounded systems through which one filters new information. Applied more broadly, individual systems are informed by the larger systems in which audience members engage when seeking new information. Looking at media ecologies as systems gives us a vocabulary for describing an audience's reasons for outsourcing and a means of understanding how the practice of outsourcing can have a material impact on the world.

Outsourcing as Circulation

Circulation becomes dynamic—both receptive and distributive—as audiences participate in the spread of ideas when they take in new information and then use it as inspiration for inventive activities. Invention brings about change, and audience engagement in a media ecology amplifies the possibility of change in the material world. Laurie Gries uses her theory of rhetorical actancy to explain the magnified potential of rhetors and audience in "a dynamic assemblage of hybrid actors" she calls "actants." These actants "begin to circulate and create new and more rhetorical actors, both in human and nonhuman form, which, in turn generate[d] even more rhetorical actancy" in a process of "rhetorical becoming in which both humans and our material counterparts are mutually transforming and being transformed." Ideologies become both the product of actancy, as audiences participate in the media ecologies they frequent, and

the agents of change, as citizen-media-ideology actants "co-construct our material realities" (86-87). Gries asserts that "rhetoric is always produced from the dance of various actants engaged in intra-actions within various assemblages" which can—and often do—include non-human entities such as networks, ideologies, images, algorithms, and media systems (81). The circulated combination of human and non-human makes actancy more powerful.

Circulation in media, however, can impact audiences in other ways: circulation can amplify certain ideas and bury others. Circulation can also be manipulated to ensure that audiences receive only the information powerful rhetors and media systems want them to see. Manipulation has become a more accessible media tool in the last several decades as the use of algorithms to drive content has become a standard practice. Algorithmically driven circulation can contribute to the proliferation of extremist views and polarized publics, isolation from differing perspectives, and audience overwhelm and exhaustion. As Jonathan L. Bradshaw notes, "[a]nything that circulates—quickly or slowly—necessarily depends on acts of amplification," going on to explore rhetorical exhaustion as "the strategic use of communication to wear down audiences so that they disengage, defer, or drop participation (thus, deliberation) all together" (3). Combined with Bradshaw's explanation of accumulation as "a strategy for persuasive amplification" (7), it's the deferment I believe to be important when it comes to outsourcing theory. Audiences can be effectively worn out—exhausted—by overexposure to accumulated information of such magnitude that they opt out of their own political agency. Rice refers to "archival magnitude: *more* information, *more* sources, *more* research" and the idea that "the act of constructing and maintaining archives may also be read separately from any particular claims those archives are used to support" (27). This archival magnitude increases exponentially every day in the internet age as more and more content is added to the web, reflecting a vastly changed

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media landscape than audiences would have experienced just a few decades ago. Circulation, in the context of outsourcing, establishes means whereby media organizations can manipulate their audiences more efficiently and reinforce the importance of the ideas allowed into the system.

Outsourcing as Affective Confirmation

In addition to the manipulation of intentionally circulated media, publics also rely on affective responses to guide their willingness to engage with new material. Catherine Chaput describes this as "unchallenged identifications" through avoidance of "thoughtful deliberation" (3). She refers to Dana Cloud's work on the affected public:

> The affected public demonstrates all three of these features: It is an irrational artificial social construct that enforces emotional identification over heterogeneity and dissent. An affected public—a public artificially constructed in terms of shared affect rather than shared interests or shared reasoning—is potentially a distorted and imperiled one. (12)

Affected publics are not brought together by the deliberative process, nor through in-person party cohesion. Instead, they are called up by the cultivated social constructs of the media ecologies to which they delegate their critical thinking and through which they avoid exposure to ideas perceived as dissenting.

The very idea of "dissension" sets audiences on a path of in-group narratives that effectively cast the out-group as rhetorical enemies. By vilifying any public representing a contrary view as morally inferior and irreconcilably different, opposing sides can maintain their ideological separation regardless of the actual difference between their positions on issues, which may be far more similar than either party is willing to believe. Instead, they cast one another as rhetorical enemies, which exist, as James Jasinski explains, "to personify issues, giving concrete form to abstract problems and institutional structures" (203). This creation of a shared enemy

establishes affective solidarity among those who, even if they don't agree on everything, at least know who the bad guys are. They rely on Doris Appel Graber's condensation symbols—"a name, word, phrase, or maxim which stirs vivid impressions involving the listener's most basic values" (289)—to demonize or otherwise vilify anyone perceived to be different, setting a defensive exigence followed closely by in-group adherents.

Outsourcing as Identity Formation

By casting the out-group as enemies and establishing a defensive stance, audiences can simplify their decision-making processes based on identity politics, effectively defraying the risks and responsibilities of freedom. The wrongness of the other party matters more than the rightness of their own, demonstrating their enculturated insecurity and worry over the damage which could be inflicted by the out-group if they are in power. Patricia Roberts-Miller, in her work on demagoguery, quotes Erich Fromm and his commentary about Nazism: "As Fromm said…, people who feel helpless and insecure are 'ready to submit to new authorities which offer…security and relief from doubt.' That relief is exactly what demagogues offer." Demagoguery relieves the insecurity of an indeterminable situation by subsuming choice into identity, allowing adherents to opt out of choice by opting into an ideologically defined group. Roberts-Miller goes on to describe how mistakes are "the opportunity and responsibility of freedom" but that possibility is "so frightening for many people that they look for a way to escape freedom itself" (465). This comports with John Poulakos's assertion that "things with which we are familiar condition our responses and restrict our actions" (44). Sticking with the familiar means audiences (and individuals) are not challenged by new perceptions of the world, nor are they required to act in accordance with new, deeper understandings which may come with exposure to different ideas. Instead, audiences can rely on what Cushman calls "solidarity"

manifesting as "common threads of identity" (18), which can be as tenuous as a single firm

conviction regarding the Second Amendment, immigration policy, or abortion rights. However,

often these beliefs are packaged together as party ideology, referred to by Sharon Crowley as

"densely articulated beliefs" (79) that, when bundled, are difficult to dislodge. Fundamentalism

plays a role here, as these densely articulated beliefs are often tied closely to identity, and to

remove one stick from the bundle would likely result in disarticulation of the entire package.

Disarticulation can be traumatic for individuals deeply enmeshed in fundamentalist communities

because it has the potential to damage or ruin relationships with friends and family or even

displace someone from the community if they dissent.

Methods

As I've considered how to study the phenomenon of outsourcing, I've realized there are

three vital components to my methods: (1) I must surface my own positionality and participation

in the described ecologies; (2) I must acknowledge the qualities of an unfixed situation; and (3) I

must minimize bias toward or against political ideologies.

It would be easy to skew this inquiry to only examine one side of the political spectrum,

and I'll admit that when I first observed this phenomenon, I thought it might be confined to the

extreme ideological right. That was before I recognized that outsourcing is a process in which I

engage myself, requiring me to surface and acknowledge that I'm not writing about this

phenomenon from the outside looking in. Instead, I am also participating in the system, and my

study of it benefits my own political opinion-forming process. At the same time, "both sides"

counterarguments can be dangerous in the way they potentially minimize the consequences of

rhetorical actions by equating them with inequivalent actions from the opposite political position.

This requires me to honestly call out findings regardless of their affiliation with any political

ideology, be it one I claim myself, one about which I am ambivalent, or one which I hold abhorrent.

Additionally, rhetoricians must sometimes make a cut when it comes to limiting the scope of a project, and that's no less true here. The circumstances which motivate news consumers to participate in media ecologies through outsourcing are constantly shifting, and it's possible that as I've made a cut to define my scope, my research will be less pertinent by the time it's completed. While it does not make practical sense to continually reevaluate the political/rhetorical landscape I'll be studying, paying close attention to what is current will make the outcome more likely to be useful.

To that end, I examine results from several Pew Research Center studies on news media: a study from 2016 entitled "The Modern News Consumer"; and a 2014 study on "Political Polarization & Media Habits"; and another 2014 study, "Political Polarization in the American Public". I analyze the data from these studies and use current scholarship to develop frames for how outsourcing theory can perhaps explain some of the polarized climate of our current political situation and give us an awareness of and a vocabulary for recognizing the impact of these interactions on deliberative democracy. This calls forth my own rhetorical-ethical commitment as a researcher, a commitment I believe to be foundational to my study.

I apply these rhetorical frameworks to data from existing research studies as well as to instances of rhetoric in the public which I observe through intentional consumption of partisan news media from across the political spectrum. Because there are so many unique media systems available for observation, I have selected partisan media ecologies to observe via cable news as well as content found on the web. I have selected these sources using the Ad Fontes Media Interactive Media Bias Chart, which rates news outlets based on both their right- or left-lean and

their reliance on factual reporting. In addition to the partisan qualification, I will select outlets that meet two other criteria: first, they must have a comparatively large audience, and second, they must fall outside of the "most reliable" box on the Ad Fontes Media Interactive Media Bias Chart. I will also look at a few outlets that fall inside the "most reliable" box, examining how these organizations differ from more partisan-aligned outlets. Through these methods, I'll gain a greater understanding of the overall media climate and more specific media ecologies and systems that arise around partisan media outlets.

Overview of Chapters

In the chapters that follow, I will explore how the practice of outsourcing manifests in the world, what motivates audiences to engage in it, how it impacts deliberative democracy, and some potential remedies for dealing with negative consequences. Chapter Two uses a deep analysis of data from Pew research studies and other scholarship to establish an understanding of the current state of the partisan political system in the United States. Chapter Three examines specific examples of media produced by partisan media outlets across the political spectrum from both broadcast and digital spaces, performing a rhetorical analysis and connecting them to outsourcing theory. Chapter Four presents outsourcing theory, explaining why and how some consumers of news engage in the practice. Chapter Five concludes this study with a discussion on how outsourcing impacts deliberative democracy in both positive and negative ways, some promising methods through which we could remedy problems that arise from its use, and ideas for future study.

Chapter Two: Outsourcing Theory and the Media

I have proposed the idea of outsourcing theory to explain the phenomenon of consumers going all-in on a limited number of sources. In this chapter, I will analyze media offerings in the context of outsourcing theory. But for that analysis to make sense, we must first look closely at the current political climate in the United States by examining political polarization, the current state of partisanship, and the mechanisms of polarization, especially as they relate to the practice of outsourcing in closed media ecologies.

Political Polarization and Partisan Affiliation

Political polarization has increased sharply over the past two decades, according to The Pew Research Center, which has tracked the phenomenon in their survey "Political Polarization and the American Public" every ten years since 1994. The most current survey, which was administered in 2014, before the hyper-polarized presidential election cycles of 2016 and 2020, still indicates that "[t]he overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled" (6). Even if polarization has not increased further since the 2014 survey, an unlikely proposition, this shift to ideological extremes merits further study because of the measurable impact it has on political discourse.

Defining Polarization

Polarization is more than just strength of party and the loyalty it inspires in adherents. In 1996, sociologists Paul Dimaggio, John Evans & Bethany Bryson defined polarization as "both a state and a process," the "extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum" and "the increase in such opposition over time" (693). But this definition only accounts for polarization on specific issues. Party affiliation, I'll demonstrate, plays a much

bigger role in cultivating the polarized political climate we find ourselves in today. Sociologists Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman emphasize that "those who are politically active or identify themselves with a party or ideology tend to have more extreme positions than the rest of the population" (410), and those extreme views may also be held by those who serve in public office. In fact, elected officials may be pushed to those more extreme positions by vocal constituents who may or may not accurately represent the broader views of their electorate.

The connection of polarization to party affiliation becomes especially clear when we acknowledge that political distance on some issues has stabilized or even converged. Take, for example, the case of marriage equality: a 2019 Pew Research Study found that attitudes have changed significantly since 2004, when 31% approved of same-sex marriage and 67% opposed its legalization. By 2019, those numbers had essentially reversed, with 61% of Americans supporting marriage equality ("Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage"). The percentage of Republican and Republican-leaning US adults who favored same-sex marriage in the 2019 survey (44%) is about the same as the percentage of Democratic and Democratic-leaning respondents who favored same-sex marriage in 2004 (45%). This change indicates that even on an issue that has been historically divisive and polarizing, views have converged significantly. Still other issues maintain even broader popularity among Americans regardless of party affiliation, such as support for the maintenance of Social Security and Medicare, demonstrating that it is possible to find common ground between the parties.

For our purposes, we must define political polarization using two components: the state of holding opposing views on specific issues, especially when partisans do not believe reconciliation is possible; and the institutionalization of out-group antipathy members of one party feel towards the other. In other words, polarization, which begins with issue-specific

opposing opinions, has become so conflated with partisan identity that distrust, disrespect, even hatred for the other side is now encoded in political party DNA. Party differences in perception and media consumption habits and are explored in recent Pew Research Center studies, Gallup polls, and other data sources, shedding light on the current political makeup of the United States and clarifying what separates the two major political parties attitudinally and behaviorally and in how they consume media differently. These observed differences in patterns of consumption will demonstrate that audiences vary across the political spectrum, requiring media outlets to tailor their offerings accordingly.

Changing Composition of the American Electorate

A comprehensive state-by-state analysis of voter registration data is beyond the scope of this project, but reliable polling data from multiple sources indicates that the populace of the United States remains predictably split between the two major political parties. Gallup has been conducting polls at least monthly since January 2004, asking respondents if they identify as Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Any respondent who identifies as Independent is then asked to choose which way they lean, yielding a four-way categorization of Republican, Republican-Leaning Independent, Democratic-Leaning Independent, and Democratic. In the almost twenty years they've been conducting the survey, those affiliated with the Republican party have ranged from a low of 20% of respondents to a high of 39%. Affiliations with the Democratic party have ranged, similarly, from a low of 24% to a high of 39%. Respondents who denied strong affiliation with a party reported similar results when asked towards which party they lean.

In 2022, an average of the eleven Gallup polls taken throughout the year revealed that 25.2% of respondents identified as Republican while 28.3% identified as Democratic. Over the

past two decades, party identifications have trended up and down, responding, for a time, to contemporary politics, but the general distribution has stayed largely the same: Around a quarter to a third of the electorate, occasionally more, occasionally less, identifies with each of the two major parties, locking Republicans and Democrats in what is often a dead heat, especially in areas with a mix of ideologies represented in the populace. Though these numbers are somewhat stable, it's clear that the US electorate has never been static. It will remain a dynamic and unique rhetorical ecology, both responding to and bringing about change. I contend that outsourcing theory can explain the trend of polarizing to the extremes: although a predictable split between the two most popular political parties is desirable and assures political stability, that stability is undermined when the gulf between the parties widens.

The 2014 Pew Research Poll "Political Polarization in the American Public" demonstrates a decline in the number of respondents who identify as having "mixed" views. While the Gallup poll mentioned above sorted respondents into three categories and then further into four, the Pew Research Poll gave respondents more options, using broader nomenclature: Consistently Liberal, Mostly Liberal, Mixed, Mostly Conservative, and Consistently Conservative. Their findings indicate that the mountain of people in the middle with mixed views who, in the past, have stabilized the electorate, is somewhat flattening, spreading to the extremes of right and left with a greater divide between them. Audiences don't have to move all the way to the *most* extreme position to become *more* ideologically extreme than they were before, and the decrease in the number of people in the center means that those who are already more polarized gain more power. Unaffiliated voters should be the most powerful portion of the electorate, the ones most likely to change their opinions—and their votes—based on what they encounter during election season and therefore the ones to whom politicians should pitch their

campaigns most intensely. But when party affiliation compels voters into more extreme positions, suddenly the loudest voices least representative of the general electorate control the conversation. For example, Pew Research Center found that those strongly affiliated with a political party, regardless of which side, and who view the other party with animosity are more likely to participate in democracy, as voters, campaign workers, rally attendees, and campaign donors ("Political Polarization and the American Public" 74). Acts of democratic participation amplify the voices of the actors, giving them greater access to and impact on the elected officials who represent not only their interests but the interests of all constituents. Though the amplification happens on both sides, we can see it expressed differently through the ways party-affiliated audiences consume media.

Party Differences in Media Consumption

The Pew Research Center's 2016 Report "The Modern News Consumer" notes differences between parties in ways not related to either policy or issue. The survey asked respondents a series of questions about their consumption of news media as well as demographic questions. The survey structure allowed researchers to sort the data by a number of factors, including party affiliation. They found that among the nearly 70% of Americans who regularly watch, read, or listen to the news, Democrats are more likely to trust news media. Democratic audiences are also likely to believe (73%) that media organizations "tend to favor one side," though not as likely as Conservative Republicans, 87% of whom believe news organizations are biased. And if audiences believe the media is biased, they become themselves biased against mainstream news sources and the information they present, finding themselves mistrustful and fearful of exposure to "radical" ideals espoused by no-longer trustworthy media organizations perceived to be in collusion with political enemies.

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Attitudinal Differences: Affective Embodiment

The affective embodiment of this belief in media bias results in audience members seeking out sources that are ego-justifying, which John T. Jost, Delia S. Baldassarri, and James, N. Druckman define as designed to "maintain or enhance cognitive consistency and congruence among beliefs, opinions, and values" (563). An example of this is seeking for confirmation bias and avoiding news coverage that does not comport with deep-seeded opinions, beliefs, and values. *If it's going to be biased anyway*, the thinking goes, *it may as well make me feel good about the opinions I already have.* Further, audiences also seek out media that is group-justifying, which Jost defines as "encouraging partisans to engage in various forms of motivated reasoning" by "in-group favouritism and out-group derogation." This practice leads both parties to be equally—and highly—likely to find the opposing party unfavorable to the point that they believe the other side threatens the well-being of the United States. They also avoid being around those with whom they disagree, even in making such everyday decisions as choosing a community in which to live, a person to befriend, a church to attend, or a business to patronize ("Political Polarization in the American Public" 47, 48, 52). This avoidance persists in all types of interactions, and I believe it has become more prevalent as the in-group's perception of threat posed by the out-group has increased.

As Democrats shift farther left, Republicans, at a more rapid rate, shift farther right, and the politicians representing each party are, in many cases, more polarized than the majority of their constituents. In both major American political parties, these more extreme members—including those holding political office—drive the conversation, speaking out more vocally against the opposition and speaking openly about politics with greater frequency: In Pew's study "Political Polarization in the American Public" 32% of those who identify as "consistently

conservative" and 21% who claim to be "consistently liberal" reported that they discuss government and politics "nearly every day." While this does not seem like a lot, only 8% of those with mixed views report talking about politics with the same frequency (51). Additionally, respondents in the middle groups (mostly conservative, mixed, mostly liberal) are less likely to share political views with their friends—or even know what their friends believe politically, while 63% of consistent conservatives and 49% of consistent liberals report that most of their friends share their political values. As Pew reports, "Not only do many of these polarized partisans gravitate toward like-minded people, but a significant share express a fairly strong aversion to people who disagree with them" (53). Antipathy for the other side, then, has become a party characteristic and more predictably present in party ideology than a position on any given issue.

Skewed Partisan Perceptions

The us-vs-them narratives promulgated among their adherents lead both major American political parties to extremes of misperception that are surprisingly similar. Michael H. Pasek et al.'s research indicates that both sides believe the other side doesn't value core democratic characteristics, though when surveyed directly, members of both parties hold the same degree of appreciation of and reverence for democratic values, such as accessibility to free and fair elections and a lack of abuse of executive orders. Consistently, the in-group underestimates the out-group's valuation of core democratic values and believes that "pro-democratic views are non-normative among political opponents" (2). Pasek et al.'s study reveals that each party believes the out-group:

- is motivated by hate
- hates "us" more than "we" hate "them"

- dehumanizes their opposition

- endorses anti-democratic behaviors

- has no overlap with the in-group on issue positions

- commits partisan violence

- has exaggerated negative perceptions about the in-group

- does not value core democratic ideals

- should be the ones to give when the political arena calls for compromise in law and policymaking

Because the political party has become a social identity, the in-group exclusively ascribes to itself all favorable qualities with no room for respect, appreciation, compromise, or even conversation with members of the out-group.

Refusal to engage with the out-group can lead the in-group to make excuses when their own party is guilty of anti-democratic behavior. Especially when committed by political elites who, due to prominence, position, or power have greater access to audiences, these anti-democratic behaviors can "have an outsized influence on democratic norm erosion and shape opinion more broadly" (Pasek et al. 6). This list of in-group beliefs about the out-group gives us a place to start when defining tactics a partisan news media outlet might deploy to encourage audience members to engage in outsourcing: fearmongering, derogation, exclusivity, calling attention to its difference from the "mainstream." As an outsourced audience is subjected to—or *opts in* to—news coverage designed to demonize the opposite side, they may either have their prior low opinions of the other side confirmed, or slip into the prescribed in-group attitude towards out-group partisan counterparts.

Behavioral Impact

Additionally, polarization feeds itself as in-groups use their misperceptions of out-group motivation and perceived disregard for core democratic ideals to justify their own engagement in anti-democratic practices, especially among Republicans. Pasek et al. demonstrates a positive correlation between how little the in-group perceives the out-group to value democracy and in-group willingness to engage in anti-democratic practices (2, 3). Anti-democratic practices could include institutional policies implemented by party-led legislatures, such as gerrymandering and voting rights restriction, as well as individual acts which subvert the democratic process, such as voter fraud.

While it's not surprising that there are differences in Republican and Democratic attitudes towards "group-based hierarchies" and authoritarian practices, there are more striking differences between the parties. For example, liberals overwhelmingly want politicians to compromise: 82% of those who identify as consistently liberal and 64% of those who identify as mostly liberal "like elected officials who compromise," opposed to 32% of those who identify as consistently conservative and 48% of those who identify as mostly conservative. Instead, conservatives "like elected officials who stick to their positions" ("Political Polarization in the American Public" 59). This difference in political expectations for elected officials recalls Pasek's assertion, discussed earlier, that the in-group believes the out-group should be the ones to give and comports with Crowley's work on fundamentalism. Crowley posits that adherents to fundamentalist ideologies believe their positions to be God-given and incontrovertible. As such, to compromise at all would be to diminish the rightness of the position (161). If one's politics *are* informed by one's faith, as many conservatives' politics are, the very idea of compromise is offensive to them—perhaps offensive enough for them to engage in obstructionist or anti-democratic behaviors and justify their affective polarization as the moral outcome.

When the status quo is the preferred party position, their motivations become system-justifying, which Jost, Baldassarri, and Druckman define as "the (not necessarily conscious) system-serving tendency to defend, bolster and legitimize aspects of the societal status quo." System-justification can push in-groups toward fundamentalism, recognizing ideologies that could disrupt the status quo as dangerous. Those who adhere to liberal ideologies often advocate for marginalized groups for whom the status quo is not working, which means that system-justification perpetuates unjust hierarchical social structures. Conservatives, then, are more likely to engage in system-justification because changes to the system threaten the status quo (565). The tendency towards fundamentalism, which can lead to the practice of self-justification, also diminishes the potential for the two necessary dimensions of democracy to be fully exercised: "(1) the possibility of public contestation; and (2) broader rights to participate in elections and serve as elected officials" (Pasek et al. 1). They go on to assert,

> For democracy to work in practice, there must be a balance between these two
> dimensions so that the intensity of contestation does not compromise rights. …Indeed,
> the essential function of democratic norms is to ensure the ability for those who are out of
> power to fairly contest to regain it. To the degree that people come to believe that their
> opponents have no regard for such norms, the prospect of political loss becomes
> untenable and anti-democratic behaviors may come to be perceived as justified, even
> necessary (1).

In other words, democratic norms cannot act as guardrails for governance when those participating in it do not trust one another to comply. Outsourced publics are vulnerable to this kind of degraded trust through their participation in closed media systems.

Degradation of Trust

A wide majority—almost three-quarters—of all Americans surveyed believe that news

outlets tend to favor one ideological side over the other. While they believe the news to be

biased, Americans are attitudinally (51%) and behaviorally (76%) loyal to their chosen sources

("Modern News" 12). A further 2014 Pew Research study, "Political Polarization and Media

Habits," finds that "those with the most consistent ideological views on the left and right have

information streams that are distinct from those of individuals with more mixed political views—

and very distinct from each other" (1). The study asked respondents to rate the trustworthiness of

popular news outlets. Those who identified as consistently liberal overwhelmingly trusted more

media sources (28 of the 36 about which they were surveyed) while those who identified as

consistently conservative only found eight of the 36 sources trustworthy. Of those eight sources

deemed trustworthy by consistent conservatives, only one of them—*The Wall Street Journal*—

rates well among media bias watchdog sites such as *Ad Fontes Media* and *All Sides*, evaluated as

both factual and not overly biased ("Political Polarization & Media Habits" 5). It is notable,

however, that *The Wall Street Journal* is published by Dow Jones & Co., a subsidiary of News

Corp, the sister company of Fox Corporation, both of which are chaired by Rupert Murdoch and

his son, Lachlan Murdoch ("About Us," *WSJ)*. The seven remaining sources, including *Fox

News*, *The Drudge Report*, *The Blaze*, *Breitbart*, and *The Sean Hannity Show*, range from biased-

but-mostly-factual to poorly rated in both factuality and bias ("Interactive Media Bias Chart").

All seven of these outlets remain outside the range of what should be acceptable to consumers in

both factuality and bias.

On the other hand, liberals do at times lend their trust to outlets that fail at reporting

accurately and/or with little bias. However, they are also more willing to give their trust to

outlets that fall firmly within the category of good reporting: factual with little bias, with opinion

clearly delineated and separate from informative reporting. Media outlets such as *NPR*, *BBC*,

PBS, and *USA Today* are among the outlets trusted by those identifying as consistently liberal, as

well as organizations such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* ("Political

Polarization and Media Habits"). The only outlet likely to be trusted by both extremes of the

political spectrum is *The Wall Street Journal*. Though ideologically opposite partisans mostly

disagree on which outlets can be trusted, they mostly agree on which outlets qualify as part of the

mainstream media, though respondents are far more likely to believe a particular outlet is part of

the mainstream media if it's an outlet they consume regularly (Shearer and Mitchell).

Additionally, trust in media declines as ideology moves across the spectrum from left to

right, until the consistent conservatives are left with few sources they trust to report news the

way they want it to be reported. Their trust is concentrated in only a few sources, most notably

Fox News, which tops ratings charts for both cable television viewership and internet traffic

(Katz, Watson). Because they trust so few sources—and the ones they do trust are of poor

quality—conservatives have effectively placed themselves in a tall ideological silo that functions

as a closed echo chamber, denying even the possibility of productive conversations with those

whose views are incongruent with their own.

Mechanisms of Polarization

These observed differences in patterns of consumption demonstrate that audiences vary

across the political spectrum. It is possible, then, that media organizations deploy different tactics

depending on the audience they're trying to attract. Mechanisms of polarization bear

examination so we may recognize them when we see them being deployed.

Partisan Fundamentalism and Political Isolation

Sharon Crowley delineates some of the strategies engaged by polarized political sides to motivate and retain adherents. Noting that fundamentalism can take root at any ideological point but is most commonly found in the extremes, Crowley defines *fundamentalist* strategy as "a particular strategy (and tone) that permeates defenses of political and religious belief systems: a desire to preserve one's own founding beliefs from threat at any cost." Potential costs could include degradation of relationships with friends and family, sacrifice of some ideals or beliefs in favor of others held more favorably by the hierarchical structure of the party, and atrophy of critical thinking skills as party adherents engage in outsourcing by adopting tranches of what Crowley calls "densely articulated" beliefs from their chosen personality or expert (78). Fundamentalist strategies act as a web, keeping participants in a media system from examining too closely the positions they've adopted because the risk of dismantling their belief system is too great.

Fundamentalist voices on the left tend to, in general, resort to "rendering opposing claims unworthy for consideration" while those on the right are more likely to engage in "excoriating the character of people who disagree with one's founding claims" (Crowley 14). This speaks to a difference in both ethical focus and ethical privilege: liberals privilege the claim itself—and its quality—as the source of credibility and, when faced with a contrary argument, are more likely to criticize the reason with which it has been constructed. In this way, they attack not the character of the opposing spokesperson, but the intelligence. A poorly constructed argument can be refuted regardless of its source, one would think, but in this way, liberals and conservatives are not even having the same conversation. Conservatives tend to privilege the credibility of the speaker, leading them to ignore claims from the opposing side and instead criticize the character of the spokesperson. This allows rhetors on the right to undermine the claim from an ethical

stance because a poisoned tree cannot produce good fruit, disregarding any logical flaw on their own side or superior reasoning on the other. From either ideological extreme, the instinct to protect one's beliefs from perceived attack by the opposite side can push individual adherents deeper into the protected partisan stable, where polarization is fed by bundled beliefs that are more difficult to dislodge because of their connection to one another.

Outsourcing allows audiences in media systems to be isolated from out-group ideas since exposure to them is perceived as potentially damaging and pollutive. Take, for example, the publicized internal communications among Fox News personalities and executives, recently released in filings pertaining to Dominion Voting's suit against the media company. The communications surround Fox News personalities' on-air embrace of the false narrative that Donald Trump rightfully won the 2020 Presidential election despite their personal beliefs that Biden had won the election fairly. While MSNBC and other left-leaning outlets use the emails to demonstrate that Fox News reported information they knew to be false and thus condemn the entire network as willing to lie to their audience for profit (Benen), Fox News itself remains silent on the issue. Certainly, this is at least partly for legal reasons, but their failure to address the claims being made against them contrasted with liberal media's embrace of the worst-case scenario narrative provides a stark example of the kind of polarization that can easily take hold. At the point of polarization, outsourcing has already occurred. Audiences have absorbed the positions of their chosen exemplars and begun mirroring the very same derogatory tone and inflammatory, biased content put forth by the personalities they follow and trust with their political lives. And in the case of Fox News, it's possible their audience members, siloed as they are into their chosen media system, don't even know of the claims being made against Carlson, Murdoch, and others—personalities they watch every day.

Impact on Media Systems

It's interesting to note, however, that while media organizations seem to be the ones setting the agenda, they are also limited by the expectations of their audience. This is illustrated, again, by Fox News personalities' promotion of then-President Donald J. Trump's stolen election narrative after his loss in 2020. Internal communications indicate that the reason they continued to embrace the false claims put forth by Trump was closely tied to their loss of market share to *Newsmax*, a competing outlet perceived to be more extremely conservative than even Fox News. "Fox executives made an explicit decision to push narratives to entice their audience back," the filing says. One Fox executive texted to another, "…we will highlight our stars and plant flags letting the viewers know we hear them and respect them" (Dominion v. Fox News 26) and another executive referred to the crisis as a "brand threat" (27). Audiences were so entrenched in the views cultivated in them by the closed media system of Fox News that the system itself had to promote information known to be false to keep the public from defecting to another system altogether.

The participants in the system, both consumers and producers, have consented to a spiral of tightening ideologies, a true rhetorical ecology where all parties both reflect and effect change in the material world. Having encouraged their audience to outsource the formation of their political beliefs, Fox News became concerned about the tyranny of a public seeking confirmation bias. They effectively reported themselves into a corner, and the only way to move forward without alienating the outsourced base so carefully cultivated was to tell them what they wanted to hear.

Media Tactics: How to Encourage Outsourcing

After watching and reading many hours of content and spending time in digital spaces affiliated with media outlets across the political spectrum, I observed a range of tactics that could be seen as encouraging the practice of outsourcing. Many of these tactics are unique to only one partisan affiliation, but many of them are deployed from every political perspective. Some of these tactics can be seen as good marketing practices because they successfully encourage audiences to participate in media ecologies. For example, all these outlets are active not only in their chosen medium—television, digital, print, or a combination—but also across the major social media feeds, using other platforms to drive traffic to the primary access point for their content. Minutes after a show has aired on *MSNBC*, they will post clips to their *YouTube* channel. The page for that clip will include buttons for quickly linking it into other social media outlets, allowing viewers to share to Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, or to text or email it directly to a friend. The multimodal approach to circulation and delivery ensures the proliferation of the audience they've already captured and perhaps reaches new viewers, who are then potentially driven back to the original source of the clip: the live broadcast.

Some outlets give access to "exclusive" content only to paid subscribers, a straightforward means of inviting audience members into the system. Others claim exclusive access to content or personalities, also a straightforward offering that may entice some audience members to engage. Some exhaustively cite primary sources when possible, offering comprehensiveness in their reporting so audience members don't feel the need to seek news or information elsewhere. Still others link primarily to sources internal to the media system, keeping audience members in the family by only rarely directing them outside the organization. A few outlets make their journalistic ethics and practices prominent and easy for audiences to find, while others bury or make inaccessible their guiding ethical principles.

However, the methods used most often—and with, I believe, the most effect—are tactics designed to lob offensive and defensive volleys from one extreme political pole to the other. The outlets engaging in these tactics usually acknowledge their bias, naming their intended audience from the outset, but for many, there lies the limit of journalistic integrity. These outlets may play to partisan stereotypes by presenting quotes and videos without context. They may report false information that appears damaging to the other side and engage in hyperbole. They may use inflammatory language designed to stir up fear and hate among their audience and through this, especially, confirm the biases already present in their audience members, thereby justifying polarization from and avoidance of the other side and the content put forth by their media avatars. They may attack the character or intelligence of the opposition while ignoring the wrongdoing, illegitimacy, or missteps of their own side. Some outlets may use clickbait headlines; others may use catchphrases, buzzwords, and condensation symbols which when strung together, seem almost like a secret language comprehensible only to their audience members. When taken together, and when consumed regularly, these tactics have the combined effect of encouraging individual audience members to outsource their critical thinking into a closed media system—a community, some would say—that discourages engagement with outside information, thereby ensuring longevity and financial solvency for the content-generating organization.

In the next chapter, I will carefully examine the tactics I've described here through direct analysis of broadcast and digital media. As established, partisan media outlets are aware of their audiences and which tactics work on them. By analyzing them directly, I will be able to more carefully assess their impact.

Chapter Three: Media Analysis

Through direct analysis of partisan media outlets representing both sides of the political divide, I hope to demonstrate which tactics each outlet engages in and how they might be effective in encouraging audiences to engage in outsourcing. Because it is beyond the scope of this project to exhaustively evaluate everything produced by media organizations, I opted to limit material in two ways: first, for broadcast media, I evaluated material related to two major news events that occurred in the second week of February 2023: the incursion into US airspace of a Chinese 'spy balloon'; and President Joseph R. Biden's 2023 State of the Union Address. Both events received broad coverage from broadcast news outlets, providing ample material for analysis of varied personalities, positions, time slots, and ideologies. Additionally, I analyzed digital media outlets without limiting it to articles related to specific events, looking instead at more general journalistic practices.

Deep Dive into Partisan Media

Representing cable news network television, I evaluated material from: Fox News, *Tucker Carlson Tonight* and *Jesse Watters Primetime*; Newsmax, *Rob Schmitt Tonight*; and MSNBC*, The Rachel Maddow Show* and *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell*. These outlets were selected using the *Ad Fontes Media Interactive Media Bias Chart*, which scores media outlets on accuracy of reporting (y-axis) and bias (x-axis). Ad Fontes rates every articles, news show episode, and podcast episode evaluated using real people who self-identify as left, right, and center. They have evaluated more than 36,000 individual articles and news show episodes, and the aggregated ratings of a network or outlet's output comprise the rating of the overall media organization. The chart below (Fig. 1) demonstrates the degree of partisan lean and

accuracy of these five shows, and it's interesting to note that the cable news show on the

ideological right rank significantly lower for accuracy than the shows on the left. In fact, I could

not find any hyper-partisan media on the left with the same degree of accuracy that also met my

other criteria: a large audience.
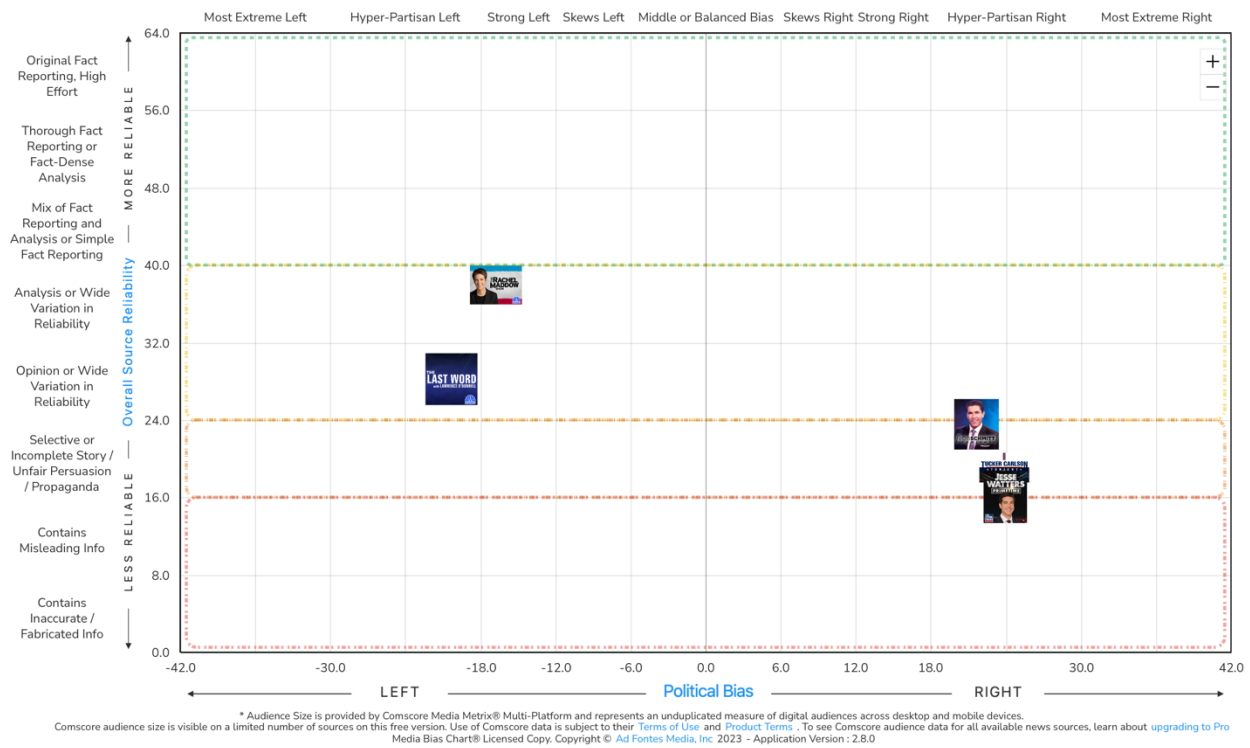
Fig. 1: Ad Fontes Media, Inc., Customized Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart, April 10, 2023.

Additionally, I'll evaluate online news outlets representing a broad selection of the

political spectrum, left, right, and center, including *Vox*, *HuffPost*, *Slate*, *NewsMax*, *The National

Review*, *The Federalist*, *All-Sides, The Hill, The Wall Street Journal*, and *Axios*. These outlets

were also selected using the *Ad Fontes Media Interactive Media Bias Chart*. The chart below

(Fig. 2) plots the listed outlets according to the same criteria as the cable news chart.
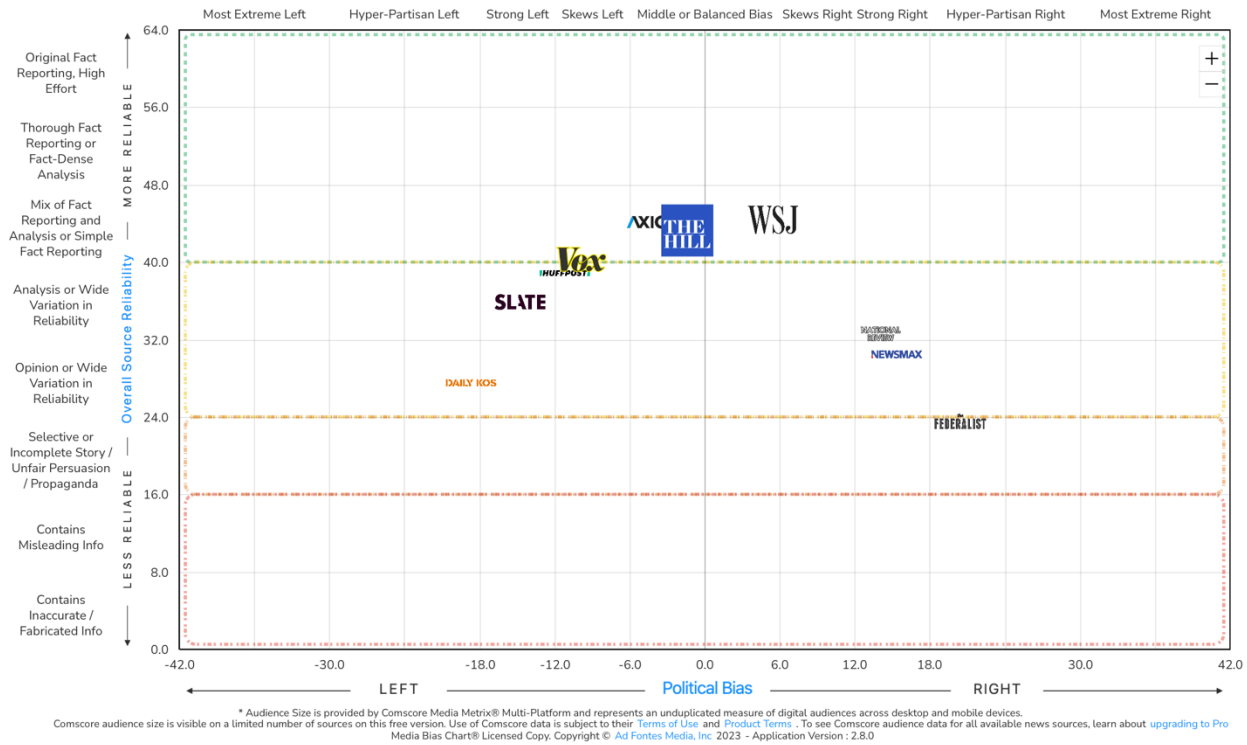
Fig. 2: Ad Fontes Media, Inc., Customized Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart, April 10, 2023.

Right-Wing Media: Tucker Carlson Tonight

Of the top twenty highest-rated American cable news shows, fourteen of them currently air on Fox News (Nielsen), and *Tucker Carlson Tonight* consistently tops the list. The show airs every evening at 8 p.m., though clips and full episodes are available online through various outlets. On the show, Carlson monologues about current political news and hosts guests, including politicians and political insiders, with whom he discusses current hot-button issues. Viewers can access his show through their cable or satellite provider, or through YouTube, where audience data and comments are available to any interested viewer. Currently, Fox News has 10.3 million subscribers on YouTube, and within a few hours of a new clip from *Tucker Carlson Tonight* dropping, a video could have almost 250,000 views and thousands of comments.

Tucker Carlson presents what viewers assume to be his personal opinions about current political theater. As is usual when he is discussing the policies of the Biden administration, Carlson affects a folksy but derisive tone, using a sing-song cadence and up-talk and looking directly at the camera with familiarity. When he brings up the Chinese 'spy balloon', as he did on the February 3, 2023 episode of his show, he is immediately critical, questioning the decision to let the balloon drift across Alaska and the entire continental United States before shooting it down. Carlson's criticisms do not just call out what he perceives to be policy missteps but go further, giving viewers reasons to mistrust the government. For example, he implies that while an

Fig. 3: Still from *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, February 3, 2023, image of US military installations in proximity to Chinese balloon over US airspace.

ordinary citizen in restricted airspace would likely have been shot down by the military, the Chinese government's relationship with the White House means they have free reign to violate American sovereignty and spy on our nuclear facilities, which he highlighted on a map (Fig. 3), demonstrating their proximity to the flight path of the balloon.

Carlson also claims that a Russian spy balloon would have been shot down without hesitation, indicating this double standard exists because Putin has never sent cash to "Joe Biden's crackhead son" (2:17). These claims relate to accusations made against President Biden's son Hunter by Republican Congressional members surrounding his involvement in deals to sell natural gas to corporations owned by Chinese nationals. They are accompanied by an

Fig. 4: Still from *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, February 3, 2023, photoshopped image of Hunter Biden with balloons.

image of Hunter Biden wearing only sunglasses, a feather boa, briefs, and socks, attached to thousands of balloons, superimposed over a blue sky (Fig. 4). Carlson continues, in the 6:26-minute clip, to imply the government is keeping information from citizens and that Ukraine's sovereignty is more important to the Biden administration than that of the United States. He repeatedly pits citizens against the government and presents information in an inflammatory manner, seemingly designed to fire up viewers into a deep mistrust of those in power.

In this segment alone, Carlson presents videos clips without context, painting the Biden administration in the least flattering light possible. He uses nothing but inflammatory language and pushes his audience to be fearful of the Democratic regime currently in power. He attacks

Biden's character—and the character of his family—and engages in hyperbole without providing any way for audience members to verify what he's saying. His cadence is fast, one rapid-fire insult after another, and his tone is almost incredulous, like he can't believe what our country has come to, all to be laid at the feet of our inept executive branch and their socialist aims. Though it seems to be rambling, he is very intentional in the way he ties these beliefs together, articulating them as dependent branches of the same tree.

Carlson's response to Biden's State of the Union address, which aired February 8, 2023, is even more inflammatory, starting off by accusing the president of being "held together by Botox and enough amphetamines prescribed by White House doctors for him to be able to read the slogans written for him by unelected Obama acolytes who actually run the government" (0:12). In one rambling sentence, he insults President Biden's appearance, mental state, and leadership ability, connecting his presidency directly to Obama's through, he implies, un-elected personnel who have worked for both administrations and are really controlling the government without the mandate of the people. His claim about un-elected officials underscores his performed conviction that the left does not value democracy, since they allow policy decisions to be made by those who have not passed muster through the electoral process.

Carlson cherry-picks clips from Biden's speech, calling it a "steaming pile of word puree" (3:08) even though Biden's language, as shown in the clips, is clear and comprehensible. But Carlson has given his audience the opinion he wants them to adopt before he shows the clip. He goes on to use video of clapping Democrats in the audience to demonstrate that they are nothing but "trained seals" (3:50), effectively othering through dehumanization those politically opposed to Carlson's purported positions and those of his viewers. Carlson goes on to utilize a laundry list of tactics, including the equation of abortion with human sacrifice; a reference to a

discredited quote falsely attributed to Ashley Biden, President Biden's daughter; calling back to

Hunter Biden's drug issues with mention of his crack pipe; and a dismissal of the recent death of

Tyre Nichols as "not racist" since the cops who killed him were also Black, leading to an

indirectly racist statement about how the quality of policing has declined since all the "normal

people" have quit.

Carlson cultivates an everyman persona, which belies his privileged upbringing, and a

direct presentation style that relies heavily on enthymeme. He seems to have established a kind

of cultural shorthand easily recognized by regular viewers. New audience members might be lost

at the mention of "Joe Biden's crackhead son," but a quick search—maybe including Carlson's

name as one of the search terms, since he works hard to keep the story alive—will turn up

information about Hunter Biden's history of drug abuse and addiction as well as speculation

about business dealings that President Biden's political enemies would love to be true. The

presentation is intentionally hyperbolic, insulting to those upon whom he turns his vitriol, and

targeted to stand as embodied symbols of the rhetorically created enemy.

If ratings and YouTube views of his clips are to be believed, Carlson has hit on a winning

strategy. His combination of personality-driven presentation style and repeated use of partisan

stereotypes establishes a particular kind of ethos with his audience—one that reassures them the

positions they already hold are the moral choice, that they are not racist, rather, abortion is the

real hate crime. He welcomes them into the Fox family and assures them they will not get this

kind of access and inclusion from any other outlet. And it's working.

Right-Wing Media: Jesse Watters Primetime

Similar to Carlson's show, reliance on enthymeme seems to run through the other Fox

News show I watched, *Jesse Watters Primetime*. The first analyzed episode aired on February 3,

2023. Watters's commentary about the spy balloon is even more inflammatory than Carlson's, delivered in a derisive and at times hateful tone, stoking fear in viewers. He relies on enthymeme to pull viewers into what feels like an exclusive circle of understanding, saying things like "cut him a check like you did for COVID" (1:31) (in reference to the potential for someone to be injured by falling debris had the spy balloon been shot down over land and injured someone) and telling readers that maybe they could qualify to have access to information about the balloon if they had top secret clearance or "access to Joe's garage" (5:27) (referring to the classified documents found in the garage of President Biden's Delaware residence). He stirs up fears in

Fig. 5: Still from *Jesse Watters Primetime*, February 3, 2023, image of farmland Watters asserts is being bought by China.

viewers, wondering if the spy balloon was "watching your wife change" (2:12). He further feeds fears when he wonders if the spy balloon, which had not yet been shot down at the time of airing, contains bioweapons or "another virus" since "[t]heir virus [COVID] killed a million of us" and "they're buying up all our farmland" (7:28) (Fig. 5). Watters, like Carlson, clearly wants viewers to feel alienated from the current administration, disgusted at Biden's failure to lead decisively, and fearful of the future. This is a complicated rhetorical move because through his commentary, he enables viewers to both feel like they are the persecuted out-group, intentionally excluded by

the government they're supposed to own, and like a privileged in-group, privy to select information not accessible to those who aren't smart enough to have entered into the Fox News media ecology.

Jesse Watters Primetime also aired on February 8, 2023, in direct response to President Biden's State of the Union address. The entire segment hinged on Watters's claims that Biden plagiarized the populist ideas espoused in his speech from Trumpian rhetoric. "I'm Joe Biden and I approve Trump's message" (9:50) he says, after showing clips from Biden's speech juxtaposed with clips of Trump making similar claims on the campaign trail and in his State of the Union addresses. His aim is to make Biden appear to be a lesser leader—less intelligent, less skilled, less savvy, less honest—than Donald Trump. Watters's tone is more aggressive than Carlson's, more confrontational, and more angry. He ends the segment with man-on-the-street style interviews, speaking with seemingly random people outside Fox News studios who claim both to have not watched the speech and to already believe Biden is bad at his job. This is key: though they pretend at having looked for people who may have something good to say about Biden, they must continue to pretend to their viewers that those people don't exist, which serves to reinforce their position that Biden is bad and everyone lucky enough to have tuned into the Fox News media ecology knows it. The questions are presented by unnamed Fox News reporters—questions like "Joe Biden says the state of the union is in great shape. What do you think?" (10:20)—and the answers are strangely uniform, clearly having been selected to confirm the bias that viewers already have, which is reflective of the tone projected by Jesse Watters himself on his show.

Again, we have a laundry list of partisan offense/defense tactics. Watters questions the character of the opposition, embodied by President Biden. His fiery language stirs negative

emotion towards anyone on the left as he criticizes the reasonability of claims Biden made during his speech and engages in hyperbole. He also confirms the biases his believes his audience to already have by speaking directly to them and including them as both subjects and objects in many of his sentences. For example, when Watters is talking about the 'spy balloon', he stokes fear by making it personal, saying the balloon is "watching your wife change" (Watters 2/6/2023 2:12). Watters appeals to fear, trying to stoke in his audience the worry that China is spying not just on the country at large or, as Tucker Carlson asserted, military installations around the country, but on *them*, individually. This has the potential effect of personalizing the claims he makes against the other side as his audience is called to embody the put-upon populace unwillingly subjected to and put at risk by Biden's poor leadership.

In both Fox News offerings analyzed, there is an undercurrent of discontent, a sort of wink-wink reference to Biden's illegitimacy as a president. Neither Carlson nor Watters mentions outright, in the episodes I analyzed, the 2020 election or the contention, widely reported on Fox News, that Trump's victory was stolen from him through election fraud. However, their tone towards Biden, the derision with which they speak of his every action and demean his leadership, indirectly stokes those flames, an enthymeme so well understood that they need only say the president's name with a particular tone and the audience knows exactly what they mean. When Tucker Carlson brings up Hunter Biden, he wants his audience to remember potential connections to Ukraine and China. When Jesse Watters brings up COVID, he wants his audience to remember that their civil liberties were stolen when the government required them to get vaccinated. When either one of them mentions Donald Trump, they want the audience to remember that the 2020 election was "stolen" from him and things would be better if Biden were not "illegitimately" in office.

Additionally, both Carlson and Watters talk to the audience as though they are sitting across from one another, with close perspectives and language that includes viewers in the conversation. In reality, viewers have very little access to either personality. Comments sections on YouTube, the easiest platform for viewing clips if you didn't catch it live on air, were active but unmoderated, full of vitriolic mirroring of hosts in both tone and content, and after the Dominion Voting lawsuit filings were released, comments sections were closed altogether. Full episodes may be found, but the most common content comprises clips and segments, which effectively divides the commenting audience into non-communicative sectors where they can talk only to each other. Out-group opinions are rare and quickly attacked by in-group voices. And Carlson and Watters are in no way present—because they don't need to be. Their most direct feedback from viewers is in the ratings and corresponding advertising revenue their shows earn for Fox News and themselves.

Right-Wing Media: Rob Schmitt Tonight

Rob Schmitt, on his Newsmax show *Rob Schmitt Tonight*, engages in the same kind of sensationalist and hyper-partisan style used to great effect by Fox New presenters. But while Carlson and Watters both mention Trump in the episodes I analyzed, Schmitt's entire theme in his February 6, 2023 broadcast hinges on how Trump would have "delighted in firing a rocket into that balloon." He accuses the "panic media" of "saving Biden from scrutiny" (0:26) by propping up his choice to wait until the balloon was over open water to call on the military to shoot it down. He also accuses other media outlets (read: liberal) of engaging in "gotcha journalism" (1:42) against Republicans because they dropped the information that 'Chinese spy balloons' incurred into American airspace three times during Trump's administration. Schmitt then pivots from there to a criticism of two of Trump's secretaries of defense, continuing to look

backwards to previous administrations as a means of criticizing things as they are now. He claims, as does Tucker Carlson, that the US is in decline, partly because Washington is run by unelected officials who are "immune from accountability to the people" (2:50) and uses sexist language to criticize Biden's resolve, stating "in today's America, testicular fortitude is considered a liability" (3:23).

Schmitt's tone is friendly and sarcastic, ending the 5:47 segment with, "You should be happy. Democracy is back. The country is better" (5:26). In other words, *they* (the out-group) think you are dangerous and bad for democracy, but we know it's the Democrats who are the real threat. He connects American exceptionalism with the former administration and works hard to make claims that play to partisan stereotypes and confirm the biases of his audience. He engages

Fig. 6: Still from *Rob Schmitt Tonight*, February 6, 2023, image of Donald Trump.

in hyperbole, exaggerating both Trump's accomplishments and Biden's failures. It almost feels like an extended campaign piece for Trump's 2024 presidential run, as he extols the virtues of the former president and calls out what Trump would have done in the same situation, all presented with an image of Trump in the background (Fig. 6).

Newsmax's sophistication lies in how it picks up audiences for whom Fox News is not conservative enough—although it's interesting to note that Schmitt ranks as slightly less partisan

and slightly more accurate in his reporting than either Carlson or Watters on the Media Bias

Chart I included earlier. However, overall network rankings, taken in aggregate, indicate a

farther right and less accurate bias for Newsmax, as demonstrated in the chart below (Fig. 7)

with media organizations plotted rather than individual shows.
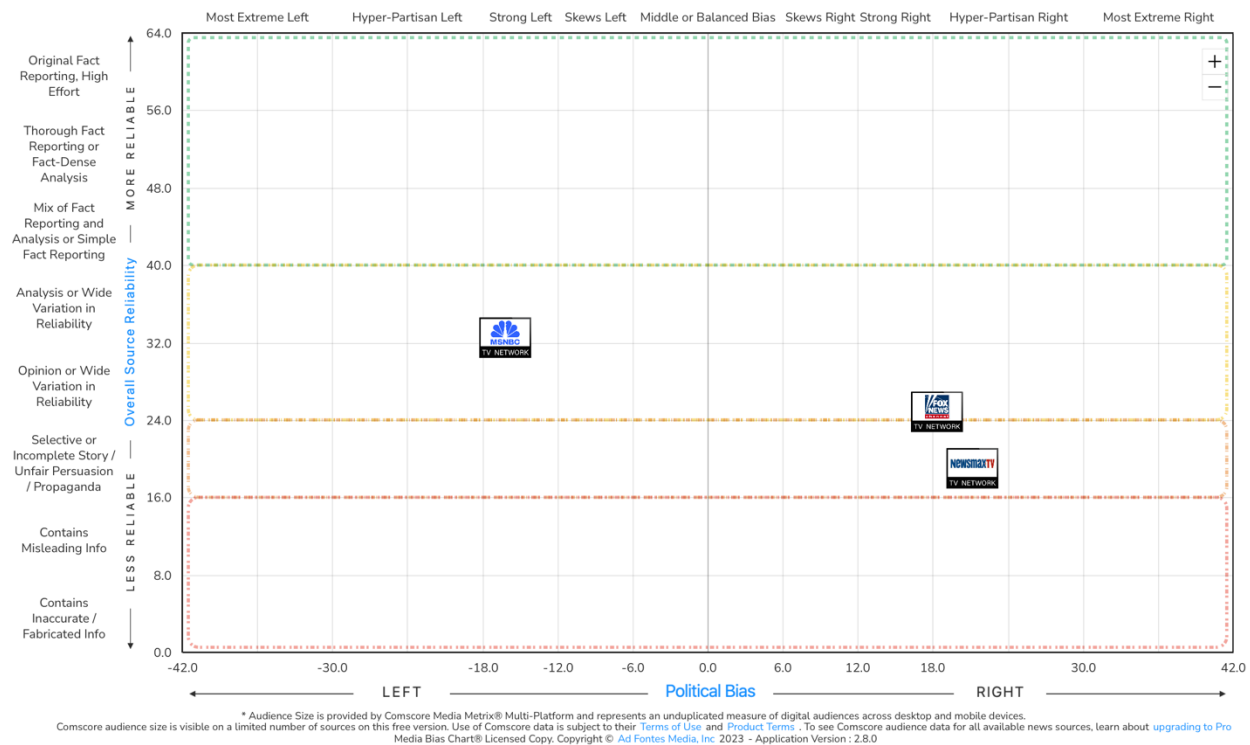
Fig. 7: Ad Fontes Media, Inc., Customized Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart, April 10, 2023.

Newsmax has carved out a niche, drawing in viewers and readers through clickbait

headlines from their position deeper into the extreme right than most other news outlets. The

more polarized conservatives become, the more of a threat Newsmax becomes to Fox News, as

viewers, dissatisfied with Fox's failure to confirm their biases, defect to more extreme pastures.

In fact, Dominion voting filings revealed that threats to viewership from Newsmax were one of

the main reasons Fox News personalities, including Carlson, continue to push the stolen election

narrative despite their personal beliefs about Trump's loss (*Dominion vs. Fox News Network,*

LLC). Newsmax's courting of pro-Trump audiences doesn't push viewers further right—it pulls them.

Other Right-Leaning Online Media Organizations

Online media outlets have a different ethical burden than broadcast media. Because it's harder for the written word to draw in audiences with personality-driven offerings, digital and print media outlets must establish their credibility with audiences using more traditional means.

Fig. 8: Screen shot of *Newsmax* "Politics" headlines, demonstrating the common headline format, 29 March 2023.

For example, *Newsmax*, which was established as a conservative website long before offering cable news, publishes "exclusives" with politicians and personalities who do not speak to other outlets, including many legislators from the US House of Representatives. A common headline follows the pattern "Rep. _____ to Newsmax: Something Derogatory about Biden" (Fig. 8). They promise exclusivity and access to people close to power in Washington, giving their audience a reason to check in and engage. If they're covering Biden—in fact, they cover almost nothing *but* Biden, with a negative slant—readers have no reason to go outside of the ecology to learn what's happening from another perspective.

Like *Newsmax*, *National Review* declares its bias as conservative even in the tagline of its search engine listing, not pretending otherwise. *The Federalist* operates the same way, though the website is organized by topic rather than chronology. For the reader interested in researching a particular topic, this means of organization could be enticing. What's missing from most of these outlets is links to primary sources. Every article I studied, regardless of the topic, failed to link to sources, and instead of scanning like straight journalism focused on reporting the facts of a situation, they read as one-sided and biased with no nuance or consideration of the possibility that someone from a different point of view might be worth listening to. Some outlets, like *The Federalist*, work hard to capitalize on the rhetorical ecologies cultivated by other ideologically similar media producers: their "Videos" page links almost exclusively to clips from Fox News broadcasts (Fig. 9). The purpose, then, is not persuasion to take a particular position based on
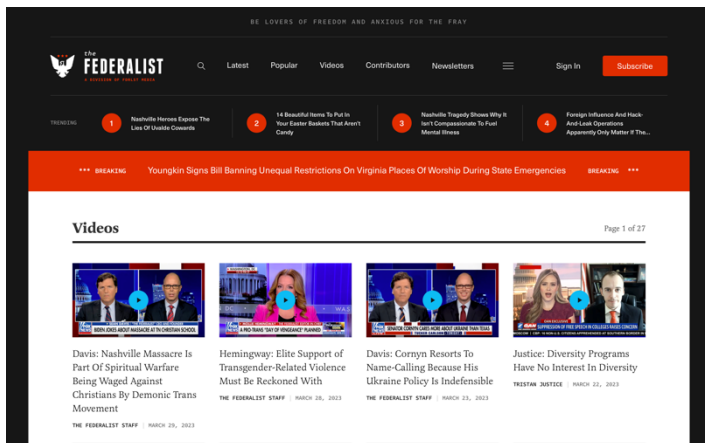

Fig. 9: Screenshot of *The Federalist* "Videos" page, showing links to Fox News and OAN-produced media, 29 March 2023.

well-reasoned arguments and ample information. Rather, each of these organizations, *Newsmax*, *National Review*, and *The Federalist*, works hard to persuade audiences to stay plugged in to the established media ecology—to remain, in essence, engaged in outsourcing.

Left-Wing Media: The Rachel Maddow Show

Rachel Maddow hosts the flagship political opinion hour of the MSNBC week. Her show, which used to air nightly, now inhabits the plum primetime spot of Monday night at 9 p.m. Ratings aggregators lump Maddow together with Alex Wagner, the presenter in the 9 PM slot the other nights of the week, and combined, they consistently rank in the top twenty cable news offerings. Highlight compilations from each episode are also available on YouTube on the MSNBC channel, which at the time of writing has 5.5 million subscribers. Full episodes are only available through digital subscription to MSNBC or by logging in online through a viewer's cable provider. However, full episodes are not available indefinitely. The episodes analyzed here were taken down from MSNBC and could not be retrieved at the time of writing, so analysis is based on extensive notes taken with no time stamps.

Maddow's coverage of the Chinese 'spy balloon' aired February 13, 2023. She spends no time criticizing Republican response to the Chinese 'spy balloon'. Instead, Maddow inquires about an "info gap" between what the government knows and what the American public knows, wondering sarcastically, "Do we *have* a balloon program?" She seems to almost not take the event seriously. Instead of calling out Republican pundits and politicians, she asks, "What does the government owe us?" After having watched so much coverage of the balloon on right-wing outlets, her coverage seems to downplay the threat in comparison.

Maddow's show is decidedly personality-driven, and her tone is not so different from that of her conservative counterparts: derisive, at turns incredulous or condescending, insulted or insulting. If conservative media would convince their viewers that the left believes them to be dangerous to democracy, Rachel Maddow does not disagree: she spends a lot of time in her broadcasts demonstrating that she *does* believe current Republican policy aims and positions to

be anti-democratic. While I cannot speak to motives, Maddow does seem to perceive her job to be to call out disenfranchisement and mistreatment of marginalized groups: in another segment of the same episode, she refers to the right's authoritarian bent playing out in attempts by some states to limit LGBTQIA+ rights as "stoking moral panic." Where generally it's the right that engages in character assassination based on questioning the character of the rhetor, here Maddow questions the morality of the conservative position and accuses them outright of intentionally misrepresenting the potential consequences of acknowledging LGBTQIA+ personhood.

Maddow's claims are designed to spur her audience to action and instill some degree of fear that policies that are currently permissive for marginalized populations might change if Republicans have their way. While her presentation style is certainly biased against conservative points of view, her presentation fails to deliver some of the most striking characteristics of the broadcasts I examined from right-wing media: very little hyperbole or exaggeration and far less inflammatory language. This demonstrates my prior assertion that liberal audiences require different tactics to be motivated into outsourcing to an exclusive media system.

Left-Wing Media: The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell

Lawrence O'Donnell is currently MSNBC's most popular television personality, ranked as high as 14th among cable news media in 2022 (Nielsen). His show airs nightly at 10 p.m. and, like *The Rachel Maddow Show*, highlights of each episode are posted to YouTube and accessible to the general public, but full episodes are only available to subscribers.

O'Donnell addressed the Chinese 'spy balloon' on his show airing February 6, 2023. Rather than responding to the actual event itself, O'Donnell spends more airtime in counterresponse to far-right media commentary. His analysis claims Republican obsession with

Fig. 10: Still from *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell*, February 6, 2023.

the balloon diverted attention from the debt ceiling, which was in the news at the same time and which, O'Donnell says, presents a real threat to the United States. "The single greatest threat to the United States last week and tonight and next week," O'Donnell says, "is a group of Republican members of Congress who are ready, willing, and able to force the United Stated of America, for the first time in history, to default on the national debt" (6:21) (Fig. 10). He goes on to state that those same members of Congress have "spent last week and this weekend pointing to the sky" (6:45) as they decry the Chinese 'spy balloon' as the biggest threat to our country. O'Donnell's tone is measured and careful if somewhat incredulous, but he simmers under the surface, clearly outraged that Republicans have succeeded at driving the narrative and using the spy balloon as a distraction from our impending debt default, an issue he contends is a far more dangerous existential threat to the United States.

O'Donnell's rebuttal to the Republican response grows in intensity as he calls out what he perceives to be hypocrisy and asks them to point to the place on the map where it would have been safe for the Biden administration to shoot down the balloon. "The balloon," he states, "was no threat as long as it was in the air—unless a Republican president shot it down" (10:05). O'Donnell is careful to tie that hypocrisy directly to party affiliation, not calling them "the right"

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or "conservative," only "Republican," which reinforces party stereotypes and inflames antipathy towards them. In the climax of the segment, his vitriol and disregard for Republican Congressional leaders nearly boils over as he says, "Most republicans now operate in a fog of rank ignorance, astonishing stupidity, and relentless lying…" (12:19). He ties their focus on the balloon to their unwillingness to be honest with the American people, effectively stirring up anger against the common enemy. This is not so different from the fearmongering tactics prevalent in right-leaning partisan media: O'Donnell's explicit linking of the debt default to the Chinese balloon and then directly to Republicans who, he claims, are blocking the raising of the debt ceiling sets up viewers to feel deep and justified antipathy towards the other side. Like his counterparts on the right, he names specific politicians (Marjorie Taylor Greene, for example), calling out their lack of intelligence and accusing them of lying to the American people. Note that O'Donnell puts more emphasis on the failed logic of Republican positions and the "stupidity" displayed by the way they responded to the spy balloon, bearing out the assertion that different political ideologies engage in and respond to different affective manifestations.

Other Left-Leaning Media Organizations

In analyzing media on the left, I spent time on *Vox*, *Huffpost*, *Slate*, *Axios*, and *Daily Kos* websites. These digital media outlets represent some of the best and worst reporting practices I encountered in the research process, utilizing many different tactics which could encourage audiences to engage in outsourcing. *Vox* provides an example of sound practices: they surface their journalistic principles for their audience, providing a link in the footer which takes readers directly to a page labeled "Ethics and Guidelines at Vox.com" (Fig. 11). *Axios* also has an easy-

Fig. 11: Screenshot of *Vox* "Ethics and Guidelines" page, 29 March 2023.
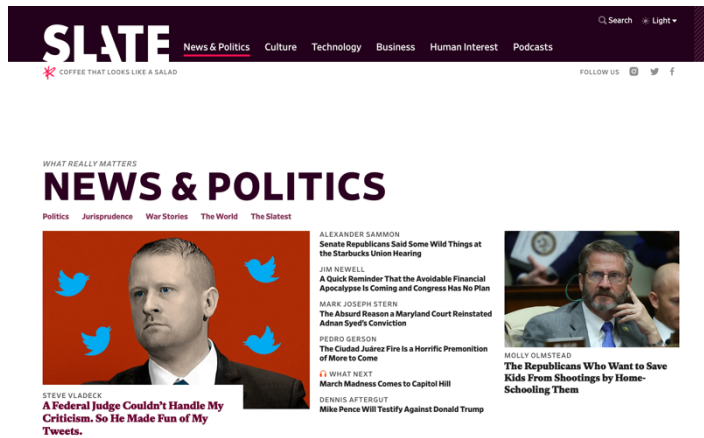
Fig. 12: Screenshot of *Slate* "News and Politics" page, 29 Mar 2023.

to-find "about" page that includes a mission statement. But neither of these organizations

acknowledges their bias in the same way as *National Review* and *The Federalist* on the right and

Daily Kos on the left. *Slate* comes close to stating their bias on their "About Us" page when they

mention their "strong editorial voice and witty take on current events," but in general, the

publications I analyzed from the left relied on editorial presence to convey their progressive

slant. On *Slate*, that "strong editorial voice" amounts to news stories reported with a partisan bias

without any sequestration or even clear labelling of pieces considered opinion versus straight

reporting (Fig. 12), though in their "About Us" they only claim to offer "analysis and commentary" rather than news.

Another tactic that seems designed to trap consumers on the website is *HuffPost*'s practice of connecting news stories to other *HuffPost* stories through looping links. These links rarely take viewers away from the *HuffPost* website, instead trapping them in a spiral of commentary rather than leading them to primary sources—a sort of forced outsourcing by way of enmeshment in the online interface. Ad revenue is based on clicks, after all. *Vox*, on the other hand, provides links to many primary sources, and this seems to line up with their stated mission to "explain the news." They claim to be focused on the audience and want their readers, viewers, and listeners to "walk away from our journalism feeling like your curiosity has been satisfied." In providing such comprehensive coverage, *Vox* seeks to eliminate the need for their audiences to look elsewhere for more content, promoting themselves as a kind of one-stop shop for all their news needs.

Comparative Analysis

These clear differences in media presentation styles from opposite political positions reflect Crowley's ethical priorities: while the right spends time and energy destroying the character of political figures on the left, the left focuses on undermining the arguments and claims put forth by the right (14). Each side understands what their audience demands and delivers it, ensuring continued participation in their respective media ecologies.

While it's possible I'm leading with my own bias here, it seemed difficult for me to find sources on the right that did not resort to extreme tactics to engage their audience. Conservative media ecologies resort to predatory practices with alarming abandon, burying their journalistic ethics deep in their websites if they have them at all, hiding their funding sources, and resorting

to inflammatory language, clickbait headlines, and buzzwords as callbacks to ideas that galvanize the partisan base. This reflects the political right's susceptibility to affective displacement and the way they privilege moral integrity and emotional resonance over intellectual validation.

On the other hand, liberal/progressive media organizations make a point of surfacing their ethical principles and making sure their audiences have access to information about who funds them. I realized that this is itself a tactic—that liberal audiences, who value intellectual validation over emotional connection and community, are less likely to outsource based on affective embodiment.

The deployment of such tactics by media organizations of all political stripes illustrates clearly that an outsourced audience is a loyal audience—and a loyal audience is a lucrative one. All these websites earn revenue from impressions and clicks on ads posted on their sites, which establishes that media systems have a motive for encouraging audiences to exclusively engage in—outsource to—the rhetorical ecologies news providers both present and control. I have described the current state of political polarization and how partisan media works to encourage audiences to outsource the formation of their political beliefs and values, and I have explored the interplay of polarization and outsourcing. With that understanding clearly established, I move forward to a deeper dive into outsourcing theory.

Chapter Four: Outsourcing Theory Defined

The analysis of partisan media representing positions across the political spectrum leads us to the conclusion that *something* is happening in the realm of journalism and infotainment that encourages audiences to limit the sources with which they're willing to engage. Through the analysis in the last chapter, I have demonstrated that media organizations engage in a variety of tactics designed to enmesh audiences in a closed media system, controlling which issues are important to them, what information reaches them, and how to think about those issues within the framework of party ideology. While these external influences certainly encourage audiences to engage in outsourcing, internal affective states can also motivate an individual to go all in on a handful of politically aligned sources. In this way, media ecologies are complex interactions of individual history, affect, and ideology in constant negotiation with the ever-flowing river of information delivered by content creators.

In some ways, the practice of outsourcing indicates a positive marker in audiences: those who are not looking for ways to participate in a deliberative democracy do not go to the trouble of seeking information about politics or the issues at stake in an election cycle. When audiences want to participate in governance and exercise their voting rights, they seek information—from friends and family members, network and cable news, and print and digital media. And the overwhelm is real—how are publics to make good choices when selecting news sources, especially when there are so many options, all varying in quality and party affiliation?

Audiences are unprepared for the kind of rhetorical analysis I performed in the last chapter, which was a concentrated scholarly endeavor based on a graduate-level course of study and included institutional access to information. The level of detail, time, and attention is clearly

beyond the scope of what should be expected of the general public. Lacking even the most basic education in the tools of media analysis and perhaps still believing that personalities who have platforms must have done something noteworthy to earn them, it's easy for publics to fall into granting trust to a polarizing closed media system based on affect and confirmation bias.

If I can now, having seen the effects, assert that outsourcing is happening, I must now turn to why audiences engage in outsourcing, including by internal and external motivators. Once we understand what drives a viewer or reader to limit their exposure to out-group media, we can look closely at how outsourcing impacts deliberative democracy.

Why—and How—Audiences Outsource

As early as 2005, scholars of journalism began to note a shift in journalistic practices from "the journalism of verification" where "journalists are concerned first with trying to substantiate the facts" to a "journalism of assertion, where information is offered with *little time* and *little attempt* to independently verify its veracity" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, quoted in Harsin, 210). The shift to a climate of publish first, retract later—or don't retract at all, just move past to the news of the current moment—has a particularly significant impact on those who are used to old-school journalism. Audiences are left with the task of verification and evaluation, and few have time for the commitment required to check sources—or even know how to access them, not to mention the persistence of inaccurate information in the online space.

Audiences, News Evaluation, and Rhetorical Persistence

Many audiences recall and expect a different journalistic contract, one in which news outlets were counted on to do the work of verification for their viewers and readers. Considering the audience tendency to trust what they encounter in media spaces, especially if they have transferred their attention to a polarized media ecology, it's not a stretch to say many are likely to

believe something before they can even know if it is true. Once a position or issue stance has been incorporated into a personal network of beliefs or into the ideology espoused by a larger networked media ecology as party proxy, it is likely to become difficult to dislodge even if proven to be unequivocally false after initial reporting.

We see this in the persistence of the Green New Deal as a talking point on the right: even though it was a legislative resolution and not a tax package with enforceable costs to taxpayers, conservatives and Republican party proxies continue to refer to it as a stand-in for the eco-conscious policies the Democrats have tried to run through Congress with special association with NY Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Though President Biden's climate plan does draw on its details heavily, the Green New Deal is not now and probably will never be an enacted policy with material reality (Roberts). However, pundits and politicians on the right—and the publics who mirror their assertions—remain fixed in their opposition to it, demonstrating the difficulty of dislodging a closely held position regardless of its relationship to reality. Even though direct mention of the Green New Deal from those who would put it forward has dropped off since its last failed passage, right-leaning media organizations continue to invoke it as a means of denigrating climate initiatives. For example, a February 7, 2023 post on *The National Review* website asserts the ridiculousness of the "'transition' to electric vehicles" and presents it as a great business opportunity for China (Stuttaford). Another story published on *The Federalist* on September 7, 2022 claims, jokingly, that "California is already experiencing the effects of the Green New Deal," a resolution which was not passed by Congress (Harsanyi). He goes on to denigrate the very idea of green energy, stating that "[d]ecarbonization is objectively immoral" (Harsanyi). In both cases, the Green New Deal is invoked to intentionally aggravate and inflame

right-wing audiences, casting it as being forced upon constituencies who do not want it and who object to it on a moral level.

News providers who publish first and verify later contribute to the overabundance of unverified content, pushed to audiences quickly and via multiple channels, which overwhelms audiences with disparate voices competing for their attention and for their engagement in the rhetorical economy surrounding each cultivated ecology. The hyper-reactivity and persistence of the internet as a medium exacerbates the overwhelm, especially within algorithmically curated social media sites, where a constant stream of material is strategically presented with virality in mind. As Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle DeVoss explain, digital culture complicates this remixing of content as "more elements and others' elements become much more readily available to mix, mash, and merge," and furthermore, "processes of mixing are valued across these spaces." Images and ideologies gain materiality when audiences use their ubiquity and connection to content creators—say, a clip from a cable news segment, an article posted on social media by a news outlet, or a tweet by a prominent political figure or media personality—as a reason to trust and engage in a particular media ecology.

Community, Affective Embodiment, and the Comfort of the Familiar

Audiences could intentionally look for reporting that represents multiple views on an issue but still develop loyalty towards sources that match their worldview and confirm their preexisting opinions and biases. Though outsourcing most commonly occurs among those in polarized ideological positions, it may also occur in the space between casual interest and full commitment, often occupied by unaffiliated voters and political centrists. Delegation of this type is an understandable choice, because if an individual engages in outsourcing, they only have to

exercise critical thinking—and agency—a handful of times instead of deciding whom to trust every time they turn on the television or open a news app.

Outsourcing also lowers the standards for individual rhetorical competence. The outside source becomes the responsible party, which may have the effect of making members of an audience who are less risk-averse feel more secure and removed from the impact of negative consequences. After all, if you've delegated the formation of your opinions to someone else, the only work left for you to do is to incorporate the resulting ideological positions you've been handed into your existing worldview. The appeal to fear presented by many media personalities exacerbates more extreme worldviews by surfacing and confirming their convictions that difference equals enemy rather than, as Iris Marion Young asserts, difference being a resource.

At the same time, outsourcing requires some sort of evaluation of the source, some process that results in the personality or outlet as having been deemed a worthy recipient of the outsourced responsibility. As Jennifer Merceica asserts, "the people know themselves not to be in power, yet the people want to *believe* that they are in power" (448). So though outsourcing requires the exercise of critical thinking with far less frequency, the illusion of deliberative agency can still be preserved.

In avoiding risk and responsibility through outsourcing, outsourced publics are also seeking comfort in the familiar. Outsourcing can make adherents perceive themselves to be part of a community united by party identity in a closed, exclusive system. The sense of community stands even if—or maybe especially if—the media organization to which they've outsourced only represents a narrow partisan categorization. Benefits of membership include defined discursive practices that avoid dissent, denigrate the out-group and ridicule their representatives, and establish a general hierarchy of superiority for the in-group. However, this feeling of

community is an illusion, at best. The political elites whose opinions are being adopted by the outsourced public rarely, if ever, interact with their acolytes. They instead remain sequestered far away from contact with the public—though the maintenance of this "community" is of course necessary for the continued existence of the closed media system empire over which they reign.

Additionally, this false sense of community can lead audiences to perceive the group as larger than it really is, lending legitimacy to positions that, in mainstream media, may be on the ideological fringes. When those extreme voices, often representing points of view that in most venues would not gain traction, are amplified, they become more strongly held by audiences who may not have ever voiced such distasteful or even abhorrent ideologies had they not found themselves in a more permissive community. Whitney Phillips describes how "extremist fringe groups launder information through more palatable channels, with the goal of appealing to and ultimately radicalizing people, particularly young people, within the mainstream" (7). Internet trolls accomplish this by hijacking the narrative as it's told in media outlets across the political spectrum. This oxygen of amplification can add fuel to the extremist flame no matter the tenor of the coverage, since even unfavorable coverage from the opposite political position can add to the accumulated presence of memetic viral extremism.

In the outsourced public, a sense of community can quickly arise as adherents pick up ideologies, positions on issues and policies, and even vocabularies. Community information pathways and defined discursive practices solidify individual association with the chosen source—and the concomitant party affiliation—as identity-forming and inclusive. The casual participant, then, eventually becomes a die-hard believer. As they engage more exclusively with a media ecology, the beliefs they pick up become harder and harder to dislodge, articulated as they are to the other positions put forth by their chosen media ecology. Recalling Laurie Gries'

theory of rhetorical actancy, ideologies, as both actants and products of actancy, can gain further materiality when engagement in a media ecology impacts the way an individual communicates with friends and family members, contributes monetarily to or otherwise engages with a political campaign, votes in an election, or, to the benefit of the media producer, patronizes the advertisers affiliated with the media ecology. Even the most ephemeral medium still has the potential to effect behavior and have real-world impact, and the level of impact is directly connected to the level of audience engagement.

Media systems that encourage exclusivity and benefit from outsourcing control what new information flows into the system and guide interpretation, as Chris Mays says, within "an already-existing network of beliefs." Those who have given their attention exclusively, effectively outsourcing the formulation of their political positions, only interpret new information in a way that makes sense in the context they are given by the personalities creating content in the system, with little exposure to or even opportunity to hear different perspectives. Additionally, the preferences of the source become the preferences of the viewer, reader, or listener, and the news organizations audiences choose to give their attention to tend to shut out information that doesn't comport with the overarching worldview. Regardless of the medium, consumers, then, are choosing to participate in exclusive media ecologies—and as we have seen in the data, they are doing so with some degree of loyalty.

Amplification and Accumulation

The constant stream of content available now from every medium—through the 24-hour news cycle, the ever-increasing number of content producers, and the way outlets push content out to audiences from multiple entry points—amounts to an accumulation of persuasive material all targeted to increase engagement. In other words, the sheer volume of material available on

cable news channels and partisan news websites—and the ways in which they are delivered—has

the potential to overwhelm consumers with too much variety in options, voices, perspectives, and

tones. The archival magnitude contributes to increased quantity, but there is no corresponding

increase in the quality of information to which audiences have access.

Audiences who engage in outsourcing, then, can be seen as both opting out—of the

broader landscape of partisan political discourse—*and* opting in—to a more exclusive media

ecology, thereby diminishing their exposure to the accumulated amplified content of new media.

The intentionally narrowed exposure to sources with which someone is more likely to agree can

be seen as an act of self-care, not unlike what Bradshaw refers to in his work on rhetorical

exhaustion, lending a kind of affective comfort as someone avoids the potential for cognitive

dissonance they may encounter if exposed to perspectives too different from their own. Affective

embodiment, which audiences feel when they have opted into a system whose ideals match their

own, maintains a very specific kind of persuasive energy as it reinforces such destructive

mindsets as in-group/out-group hierarchies and privileges the status quo over change.

In-group/out-group hierarchies can be a powerful tool in motivating audiences to engage in

outsourcing and remain in the ecology once they have become entrenched.

However, engaging in media ecologies dominated by elite voices means audiences are

taking on the deliberative outcomes of their trusted personalities without actually engaging in the

deliberative process, removing responsibility for what Gerard A. Hauser calls "rhetorical

competency" and delegating it to someone else, effectively outsourcing it. Hauser explains,

"Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and now the internet substitute for reflective

deliberation in which average people play a part. Often these substitutions are staged political

exchanges that displace traditional rhetorical processes for forming public opinion and instilling

a sense of community." As audiences become less rhetorically competent, they become more entrenched in the tightly held political beliefs put forth by their chosen sources and thus more polarized in their partisanship and, as we have seen, even less willing to engage in person-to-person deliberation and the potential of a changed mind.

Recalcitrance, Blocked Systems, and Rhetorical Decay

Even though these media systems are constantly in flux, moderating which information can be admitted and applying the appropriate party slant, they are also sometimes difficult to change. Chris Mays calls them "stable systems that are also inherently unstable" because they "tenaciously persist while also on the move, and are blocked while on the verge of destabilization" ("From 'Flows' to 'Excess'"). Part of the reason closed media systems are "blocked" relates to Holly Fulton-Babicke's idea of rhetorical decay. Rhetorical decay prevents outsourced publics from engaging in meaningful political discourse through impeding "the production of new knowledge—consensus, well-defined dissensus, or simply new understandings of a problem—by means of distracting and energy-wasting conversational gambits" (276). Rhetorical decay became a prominent tactic in use against Hilary Clinton's campaign in the 2016 US presidential election, when the refrain from the right, regardless of the current topic of debate, became, "But what about Hilary's emails?" Deliberation cannot continue when there is no stasis, no agreement on what parties are even arguing about, and invoking Hilary's emails effectively shut down all conversation and thus any productive debate on any other substantive topic pertinent to the actual work of campaigning and governing.

The Impact of Outsourcing

Taken together, we have evidence that outsourcing is a practice audiences engage in for a variety of reasons, though it's important to note outsourcing theory does not explain *all* the ways

political opinions can be formed. There are certainly publics who do not engage in outsourcing at all. Political opinion formulation can arise from research on individual issues, through experiences that shape views and change paradigms, or through exposure to news ideas from friends, family, or a variety of other sources. Additionally, there are entire sectors of the population who either don't have—or care to voice—political opinions or do not participate in our deliberative democracy at all. However, outsourcing theory does describe one way in which political opinions may be formed—a way that seems to be growing in popularity as the number of sources increases and the divide between polarized political opposites continues to widen. Now that we have established that outsourcing happens, what motivates audiences to engage in it, and how media organizations encourage them to do so, we must examine the impact the practice has on all involved parties—individuals, media systems, and deliberative democracy at large.

Consequences to Individuals

In outsourcing the formulation of political ideals to external entities, audiences are also, to an extent, delegating their agency. Perhaps this loss of agency is unintentional, because audiences are not necessarily aware of the power they grant media organizations when they outsource to them. While the personalities who represent a media organization may have some interests aligned with audiences, the interests of the organization itself will always hold sway and rarely align with those of their viewers or readers. Once someone is engaged in the closed system offered by the news provider, it is in the interest of the media organization to trap them into exclusivity. We've examined these tactics in detail and seen how they lead audiences to be motivated by hatred for and fear of the out-group, which in turn leads to more deeply entrenched party polarization. And polarization further feeds the partisan beast since the most extreme

political ideologies produce the constituents most likely to vote, volunteer for campaigns, attend campaign events and rallies, and make monetary campaign donations.

Toxic discourse pushes extreme views as audiences mirror the tone and content of the messages they consume in the news, possibly leading to radicalization. As we learn from Matthew Levendusky, polarizing effects are more effective on the already polarized, which keeps people engaged—outsourced—into the closed media system (620). He also refers to the "spiral of silence theory," which states that people are more likely to share with those perceived to be in the in-group. This is further supported by research from communications scholars Shira Dvir-Gvirsman, R. Kelly Garrett, and Yariv Tsfati who found that "perceived public support for one's opinions was associated with political outspokenness and politically meaningful acts" (126). Taken together, we find, then, that people feel silenced when around the out-group and emboldened when with the in-group, leading to feelings of community and identity when they are with those whose political ideals are congruent with their own.

The development of political identity through outsourcing has some parallels with media cultivation theory. Chance York defines media cultivation theory as "a gradual process by which heavy television viewers come to view objective reality as closer to the 'television reality' depicted on screen" and applies it to the news, tracking how users perceive reality based on its depiction in media outlets (111). His research indicates that "the political reality portrayed on cable television news likely appears more uncivil to viewers than the political reality" and has the potential to "influence perceptions of reality" in viewers. These skewed perceptions do the work of Jasinski's creation of rhetorical enemies, mentioned earlier, and widen the gulf between publics on opposite sides of the political divide, cultivated by content creators working hard to inspire audience loyalty.

When polarized, outsourced audiences refuse to even talk politics, much less deliberate over issues, the skill of arguing civilly atrophies and deliberation stalls in rhetorical decay. Polarized worldviews also lead audiences to a diminished faith in democratic institutions and a conviction that the fate of our country depends on the in-group being in power (Skinnell 254). This is evidence of loss of rhetorical competency, a skill Hauser claims is necessary for the persistence of free speech (24), and further degrades discursive practices while undermining the potential for fruitful relationships across party lines.

Consequences to Media Systems

Media systems, the biggest encouragers of outsourcing, are not immune to detrimental effects of the practice. As we've seen in plaintiff filings in the Dominion Voting lawsuit against Fox News, Fox executives and personalities feared audience defection to a more conservative outlet if they did not embrace the false narrative of Trump having had the 2020 presidential election stolen from him. Audiences clearly have power—enough to make demands on a media system and change the way news is reported, leaving news outlets vulnerable to harsh consequences if they don't comply with the partisan position. They are held hostage by the audiences they work so hard to court, mutually engaged as they are in closed systems. Additionally, media organizations are courted by—and then beholden to—politicians who recognize outsourced audiences for what they are: deliverable voting blocs.

Take, for example, Donald Trump's access to Fox News during his presidency, including in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. He called in to various shows on Fox News more than sixty times in the four years he was president, and with good reason (Hutzler). He spent time courting and cultivating network relationships because of their access to a very Trump-friendly sector of the electorate. In turn, the network delivered to their audience near-exclusive

access to then-President Trump, reinforcing the importance of maintaining a relationship with him so they could continue to deliver what the people demanded. As Hauser says, "[t]his ritual betrays an attitude more attuned to commercial ratings than to critical opinion" (24). The self-sustaining system, a snake eating its own tail, degrades the free press to the point that reporting according to any standard of journalistic ethics receives lower priority than responding to market pressures or maintaining the relationships that give them power and make them wealthy.

Impact on Deliberative Democracy

If partisan media cannot be trusted to report accurately, they are failing to provide one of the things we rely on the press for the most: monitoring government. The impact on deliberative democracy is further illustrated in how easily, in this environment, misinformation campaigns gain traction until they grow too big to manage. "Political disinformation campaigns," says researcher Amelia Acker, "attempt to influence civil discourse, erode democracy with mistrust, meddle with elections, and even attack the public sphere…" in politically motivated manipulation designed to push audiences farther to the fringes of ideology (4). Many of these mis- and disinformation campaigns are created and deployed by malicious actors, as in the case of Russian interference in the 2020 presidential election, but they gain greater traction with buy-in from partisan media outlets and via social media as they repeat, remix, or otherwise promulgate manipulative postings that comport with their ideological mandate.

Many partisan media organizations do not even pretend at impartiality, instead defining their editorial positions reflexively in response to the offerings of other media systems. For example, the Fox News Media website "About" page calls itself "an alternative to the left-of-center offerings of the news marketplace," and the Daily Kos "About Us" page claims they write "about hard-hitting issues that matter to progressives." While surfacing their bias up front can be

seen as an expression of journalistic ethics, it also reflects the polarized climate we all inhabit, when media organizations eschew impartiality in favor of partisanship—and claim to be justified in doing so.

Considering the close relationships between political elites—those who through personality, position, and power gain access to audiences—and media systems, agendas are set not from the bottom up as the voice of the people is expressed in response to an issue, but from the top down. Hauser asserts, referencing Kathleen Jamieson, "since the message citizens receive is heavily influenced by the manner in which news reports tell these stories, vested parties exert considerable effort to control the images and symbols associated with public figures and events" (26). This reverses the impetus of governance: instead of elected officials taking up issues important to their constituents, audiences—especially ones who have outsourced their political agency—attach themselves to issues given prominence by the media organizations to which they give their attention, granting additional power to the relationship those same media organizations have with political actors.

Often, those political actors contribute intentionally to a polarized political situation, failing to reach a point of stasis with their counterparts on the other side. Crowley describes this state of failure to agree about the topic of deliberation: "…if stasis is not achieved, each side may generate all the evidence in the world to support its claims and yet never engage in argument" (29). And when stasis is not achieved, we may end up with a stalemate between sides, resulting in blockage or even stoppage of the work of governing. Ideological opponents conflate compromise with consensus when, in reality, legislators need not reach consensus to arrive at a compromise: one can negotiate policies to arrive at terms all parties can live with while not requiring "the collective unanimous opinion" ("consensus") connoted by consensus. As Ryan

Skinnell says, "democratic institutions formalize difference and dissent even as they stabilize and regularize governance" (254). Because no party can reasonably expect to set the agenda and win out on every issue, the demands made by extremist factions within the legislative body deny the internal limits encoded in the design of democratic institutions. But they are only acting in response to the combined impact of publics outsourced into powerful media ecologies that see compromise as a demonstration of weakness.

The result is degraded trust at every level: individual citizens, especially those polarized and siloed into closed media systems, do not trust the government to work for them and even contend that the survival of our democracy depends on the out-group *not* having power; members of Congress rely more heavily on in-group power rather than forging relationships and seeking compromise with legislators who represent opposing ideological positions; and conflicts arise between polarized state and local governments. As publics become more polarized through the practice of outsourcing, the outlook seems grim. However, I assert that the issue is not necessarily that people outsource their deliberative work to outside entities. The issue is the quality of the organizations they choose to trust with the formation of their political identities: someone's party politics should not be as important as the quality of the sources they use to inform them.

In describing outsourcing as both a cause and a consequence of political polarization, I am naming a rhetorical move that already exists, used widely by people across the political spectrum. While we have explored in great detail the potential negative consequences, I also believe the practice of outsourcing can be present in healthy deliberative practices, especially if audiences act consciously when they opt into a media ecology. While we've dwelt in the negative impact of the practice of outsourcing, let's turn now to the remediation of unhealthy

practices, addressed in the final chapter. I believe change is possible as in surfacing outsourcing as a phenomenon and engaging in it more purposefully in the selection of news organizations worthy of time and attention.

Chapter Five: Remedies, Conclusions, and Opportunities for Further Study

In a recent meeting of my church women's group, I led a group discussion about skills people are interested in learning together. The participants, about 35 women of all ages, eventually started a list of topics people feel prepared and qualified to teach—like starting tomatoes from seed, quilting, basic auto maintenance, poetry, and writing. Each of these suggestions was met with enthusiasm and sparked new ideas until we had quite a list of resources. As a sort of social experiment, I volunteered to teach media literacy skills, which I explained as "how to evaluate the news you consume to make sure you are choosing sources that deliver good information." And I got exactly what I expected: crickets. No one, except for my dear friend who had many a conversation with me about the ideas I put forth in this very study, expressed any interest at all. No one asked follow-up questions. No one expressed interest in learning about how the media works.

There are probably a lot of mental processes at play here: People think the topic is boring. People like to be comfortable. People don't like to be wrong. People are afraid of confrontation. People are maybe afraid of being shown-out as engaging in practices they know are unhealthy for them and for our deliberative democracy. People don't want to talk politics with others if they aren't sure they're in the same camp. And people are afraid of change—which does not usually come about when other people are watching. Rather, change happens as individual consumers of media encounter something that catalyzes the process of learning something new.

As rhetors, we will always have obstacles to reaching audiences, who in addition to being in tension with cohorts who have differentiated political values also exist within a similar tension in their internal lives: comfort vs. growth. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is incumbent on

rhetors to continue to try, to engage people with the hope that eventually, something will push audiences out of familiarity to find they can be comfortable from a new perspective as well.

The central questions on my mind as I've studied rhetoric theory, new media, and the current conditions of our deliberative democracy revolve around how to cultivate an engaged, aware public. Is it possible to reverse polarization? Can we retrain deeply ingrained cognitive patterns and instead encourage intentional engagement in the media? How can we motivate people to even examine their own media habits critically? If the study of polarization has taught me anything, it's that in-groups tend to only acknowledge what the out-group is doing wrong, overlooking their own failures with a persistent shortsightedness. The potential for further damage to our democracy motivates me to keep trying to arrive at workable solutions to improve deliberative practices, and there is a lot of room for further research on this topic. I put forth here ideas for how to surface and call attention to the practice of outsourcing and its potential consequences to those who engage in it. I'll first address the power of the audience and describe a quick heuristic for individuals to evaluate media sources; then I'll address broader ideas of public pedagogy and advocacy, all of which have the potential to inspire incremental change in the ways audiences consume media.

The Power of the Audience

We have established that while media organizations often set the agenda by manipulating the audiences and only selectively exposing them to alternative views; we have also seen that audiences can exert power, especially when they seem to be trying to leave a closed media system. This research would be complimented by a study of people who left a closed rhetorical ecology. Such a study could teach us about their reasons for exiting and give us a way to understand what can motivate a captured audience to change. However, in the absence of that

scholarship, we can only acknowledge that the audience grants power to the media system when they opt in and can recall it when they opt out. Audiences may opt out if they begin to feel the loss of agency from accepting someone else's deliberative conclusions. And they may opt out if they encounter an easy heuristic that encourages them to consider the way they consume media. To that end, I propose the following criteria for evaluating news sources:

1. Does your source clearly surface its journalistic ethics?

2. Does your source clearly delineate editorial content from reporting?

3. Does your source link directly to primary sources whenever possible?

While there are of course other characteristics which prove the trustworthiness of news outlets, these three, I believe, reflect certain values that speak to a deeper commitment to producing quality content and are also the easiest for inexperienced audiences to test. Let's take a look at these evaluative criteria in greater detail.

Sources that Surface Their Journalistic Ethics

Organizations that define and surface journalistic practices demonstrate a commitment to providing content according to an ethical framework centering their audiences. These organizational values, commitments, and ethical declarations should be easily found on websites and should include such things as editorial stance, organizational ownership and funding sources, and revenue models. For example, *Axios* makes what they call their "Mission and Manifesto" easily navigable, just a click away from any other page on the website (Fig. 13). Their journalistic ethics include editorial guidelines as well as an open declaration of how they generate revenue. By declaring their ethics to audiences, these organizations raise their own professional stakes by increasing their accountability to those who consume what they produce.
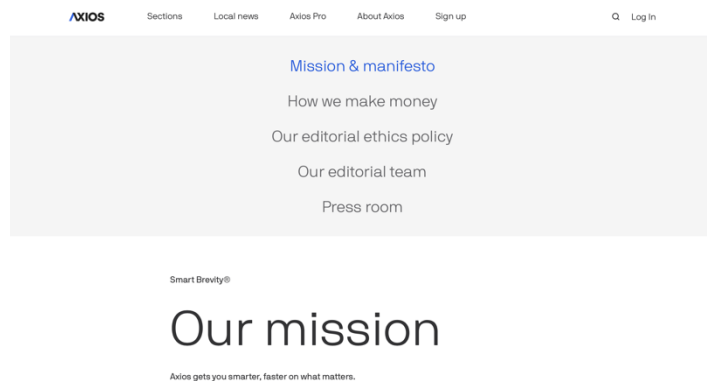
Figure 13: Screenshot of *Axios* "Mission & manifesto" page

Organizations that bury their ethical stance deep in their website or do not include it at all are likewise sending a message to their audiences. In failing to present journalistic practices for scrutiny, they disrespect the audience and all but ensure their reporting will always serve the interest of the organization over the interest of the those watching, listening, or reading.

Sources that Clearly Delineate Editorial Content from Reporting

Especially on partisan news broadcast networks, factual reporting about events and issues is often presented intertwined with host commentary. This makes it harder for viewers to parse the facts of a situation from what may be a biased opinion designed to persuade or otherwise manipulate audiences. On the other hand, if reporting is clearly sequestered from opinion, audiences go in with their eyes open and clear expectations about the journalistic contract in which they're participating, and again, these organizations raise their professional stakes, especially if they have declared in their "About Us" page that separation of editorial content from straight reporting is one of their defining principles. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* gives readers clear instructions on their website for how to determine if the piece they are reading is opinion or reporting (Fig. 14). This kind of declaration and instruction gives readers

2. Why is the Journal's newsroom separate from the editorial department that publishes Opinion pieces? ⌃

The Wall Street Journal separates news and opinion. The news department, led by Editor in Chief Emma Tucker, operates independently of the opinion pages, led by Editorial Page Editor Paul Gigot. Both report to Dow Jones CEO Almar Latour. This longstanding practice is designed to allow both departments to flourish. The news pages offer readers the highest standards of rigorous, factual, impartial news reporting, while the opinion pages offer a panoply of contributors who add to societal debate in the U.S. and elsewhere, promoting the principles of free people and free markets. The Journal is committed to clear labeling, so readers know when they are reading an editorial or opinion piece, as opposed to a news article.
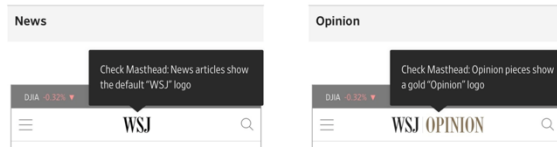
News

Check Masthead: News articles show the default "WSJ" logo

DJIA -0.32% ▼

☰   WSJ   ⚲

Opinion

Check Masthead: Opinion pieces show a gold "Opinion" logo

DJIA -0.32% ▼

☰   WSJ OPINION   ⚲

Fig. 14: Screenshot of *The Wall Street Journal* "About Us" page, close-up of their policy on editorial reporting

tools to understand what they're reading, empowering them to consciously adopt positions on issues they've researched rather than receiving tightly articulated beliefs without engaging in the deliberative process.

Sources that Link to Primary Sources

Part of the problem with television news viewing is that presenters rarely provide access to the material they've used to inform their content, a fact that prejudices me against using TV—especially partisan network outlets—as a source for legitimate news. They may use a screen shot of a tweet or a photograph of a document as a background visual as part of their monologue, but that is a far cry from providing a direct link to primary source material. Many online news platforms provide hyperlinks in reported stories, which is admittedly a good marketing tactic, but those can be misleading as well. For example, some news organizations primarily provide links that loop back to sources within their website. This keeps readers engaged in their media ecology instead of sending them outside of the system for more information and potentially increases their ad revenue, which is usually based on click rates and page views. The most trustworthy
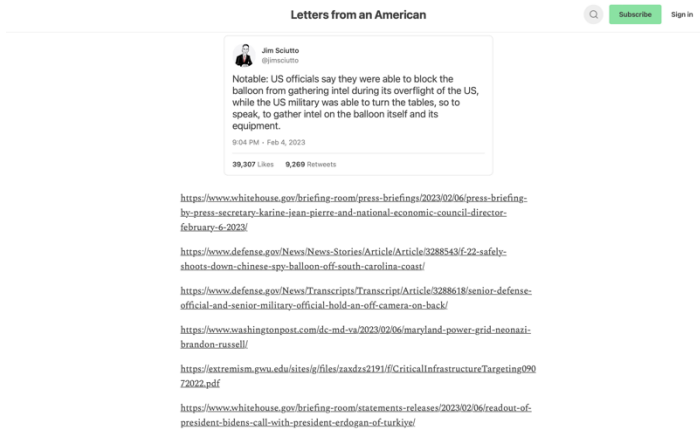
Fig. 15: Screenshot of *Letters from an American*, Heather Cox Richardson's Substack newsletter, detail of notes linking to primary sources

sources link readers directly to the primary source material, which should have the effect of increasing audience confidence in the information they're reading. For example, my own favorite source, Heather Cox Richardson links directly to tweets, government communications and briefings, and original commentary whenever possible (Fig. 15). This practice indicates, again, a commitment to a certain ethical stance, one that highly values the audience experience and privileges the promulgation of quality, accurate reporting over all other mandates.

Taken together, these three criteria can give audiences a framework for evaluating the media they've been consuming. Perhaps, once they recognize that the organization to whom they've outsourced the formulation of their political ideals doesn't really care about factual reporting, they'll look for another news outlet and more intentional choices about the media they consume. For this heuristic to be effective, rhetors presenting it to publics must emphasize the non-partisan basis. These criteria are not designed to persuade anyone who embraces any political ideology to convert to the other side. Rather, they are designed to help people invest in their educational process as an informed, engaged member of the public. With the institution of media literacy initiatives, the potential remains for audiences to exert market pressures on the

sources they frequent, leading to widespread change in media reporting practices in response. Rhetoric exists in the possibilities, and I remain hopeful that, rather than vilify media literacy initiatives, media organizations might respond better to audience pressure to clean up their ethical practices than they would to some government watchdog organization.

Public Pedagogies and Advocacy Initiatives

We cannot expect individual members of audiences to engage in the evaluative work of their news sources without something beyond the heuristic outlined above, something more formal and long-term with concrete goals in mind: public pedagogies built for varied audiences in diverse venues and outlets.

Redefining Democracy

I believe these public pedagogies and advocacy initiatives must first begin by redefining the way we talk *in* and *about* democracy. Patricia Roberts-Miller, in her scholarship on demagoguery, states, "[t]he more that the public has the ability to argue together about issues of common concern, the more that the polis approaches the goal that political theorists have called 'deliberative democracy'" (459). In practicing outsourcing and isolating in partisan silos, audiences have forgotten that to *deliberate* means to *argue*. Deliberation is more than just talking, more than yelling at each other across the vast ideological expanse of partisan difference. Deliberative democracy requires argument and compromise and messiness. It requires people who hold different opinions to come together united in their purpose—and both of those pieces are necessary for the process to work. In other words, we must be okay with disagreeing, and then we must do it in a respectful and productive manner. Likewise, we must learn to live with uncertainty and recognize that it's nearly impossible to accurately predict political outcomes. As Catherine Chaput says, "[w]hile a given rhetorical exchange can be located and bound, the

rhetorical energy circulating within that situation cannot…energy flows from speaker to text to audience, binding them together through an ongoing and fluid process that transgresses rather than adheres to boundaries" (13). We cannot know where these affective energies will flow, nor can we predict the outcomes they may inspire, motivate, or incite. They may even lead to productive places. For instance, Shi et al. found that in cooperative situations where group members were required to collaborate, "polarized teams consisting of a balanced set of ideologically diverse" members produced a higher quality work product (329). From this, we see that the potential exists, even for publics who have outsourced the formation of their political values to trusted sources, to put affective energies to productive use.

Vulnerability and Relationships

Unpredictability leaves audiences in a place of vulnerability, an uncomfortable position for many. Learning to live in this state, if not outright embracing it, can help audiences develop skills of healthy disagreement and deliberation, including the careful cultivation of daily social engagements with friends and family. Arabella Lyons asserts the idea of remonstration: "If what matters is action, then speech that cannot affect action is not simply redundant; it also uses energy best placed elsewhere and potentially diminishes relationships by creating tensions." She goes on to say, "If one is unrelenting, unable to be silent, unable to respect neighbors and their actions, one will lose them, and in doing to, one loses the chance to speak again and even the opportunity to be human" (138). An alienated public cannot be a persuasive public. We see this in the way polarized publics avoid interaction with those on the opposite pole—and they avoid interaction at every level. They are less likely to want their children to marry someone from the other side ("Political Polarization in the American Public" 48). They are less likely to want them as neighbors, and they are more likely to distance themselves from family members who do not

hold the same political values. Polarized publics effectively dehumanize the other side, and perhaps the re-humanization of rhetorical enemies should be a tool in the public pedagogy arsenal for combating and re-establishing the art of disagreement and productive conversation.

Further, we can examine communication as dialogue instead of monologue. In dialogue, both parties become more vulnerable to change due to exposure to a different perspective. In monologue, parties may be talking *at* each other, but they are not having a conversation if neither is open to the possibility of change. Theresa Enos says, about dialogical perspectives, that "attitudes toward each other among participants in communication are an index of the ethical level of that communication. Dialogical attitudes are held to be more fully human, humane, and facilitative of self-fulfillment than are monological attitudes" (237). With this kind of vulnerability present in dialogue, even among ideological opposites, we create meaning together. As Enos says, these conversations are characterized by:

> …authenticity, inclusion, confirmation, presentness, mutual equality, honesty, concern for the welfare of others, trust, openmindedness, respect, humility, lack of pretense, nonmanipulative intent, sincerity, encouragement of free expression, and acceptance of others as persons with intrinsic worth regardless of differences over belief or behavior. … Communication as dialogue flowers most naturally in private, two-person, face-to-face oral communication settings that extend, even intermittently over lengthy periods of time (237-38).

Note these conversations are not happening in the comment sections of partisan media clips posted to YouTube. Nor are they happening on Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media. As commenters monologue for an audience, a performance of their fixed ideologies, they further

degrade the potential for change and compromise, both of which are necessary for a healthy deliberative democracy to thrive.

Corporate Responsibility

With the exception of public media organizations, news outlets operate as for-profit entities whose interests will often be adversarial to the interests of the audiences they court. However, ethical standards should guide organizations, especially since audiences have an unspoken expectation that rhetors believe what they are saying to be true. As Theresa Enos says, "In most public and private rhetoric, a fundamental implied contract or unspoken assumption is that words can be trusted and people will be truthful" but that "rhetors must decide on an appropriate ethical position between their idea in its pure form and that idea modified to achieve maximum impact with an audience" (236). In the case of the false narrative of the 2020 election, we see that Fox News personalities violated that contract by saying on air things about Trump's loss that they did not personally believe to be true (Peters and Robertson), which presents us with two distinct issues. It's one thing for news presenters and the organizations they represent to intentionally manipulate audiences into holding certain political positions if they themselves also believe them; it's a much more pernicious undertaking to manipulate audiences using narratives they know to be false, all to achieve or maintain market share, ratings, powerful relationships with governmental elites, or ad revenue.

We should not stand for this kind of financially driven manipulation and the low-trust environment that results. I believe that because many media are ephemeral and because there are so many different outlets, media organizations are not easily monitored or regulated. But the best regulator in a capitalist system is the market. If audiences were to demand journalistic ethics, this may have an impact on news producers. Additionally, research by Yiping Xia et al. shows the

promising potential of journalists to have a moderating, even civilizing, effect in online spaces (565). The combined force—actancy, if you will—of audiences, individual news producers, and corporate media organizations has the potential to change the polarized political landscape from one of strained communication and rancor to one of respect, cooperation, and compromise.

Between the Dental Office and the Church Group

I hear my friend from the dental office and her exclamation as a repeating mandate in my head all the time. "You changed my life!" she said. "I think you should teach a class for old people on how to talk about hard things without getting mad at each other!" What she was asking for was exactly the kind of public pedagogy initiative I offered to the women in my church group—and which none of them expressed interest in attending. But the difference is that I was already having a conversation—a one-on-one, respectful, humanizing, relationship-building conversation. In one conversation, we built enough of a rapport that now, every time I go to the office—which, with four kids in varying stages of orthodontic progress, is often—we engage about politics because of the baseline acknowledgement we had on day one that exposure to new information can—*should*—hold the potential to change your mind.

As a scholar of rhetoric, my responsibility is particularly acute—as is the responsibility of all rhetors—because I have cultivated a deep well of knowledge about healthy deliberative practices and obstacles to productive engagement. It is my mandate to share what I know, to teach it to my children and my students, to gently and carefully have one-on-one conversations with anyone willing to engage with me.

In addition to demonstrating the power of stasis and respect, that conversation with my friend gives me hope that more widespread change is possible, and that in naming outsourcing

theory as the acknowledgement of a rhetorical phenomenon already happening, we can

understand its effects and work to positively impact the fraught and polarized political landscape

the persists in America today.

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