

Department of Political Science

Bachelor's Degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics

Chair of Political Sociology

Media Impact on Electoral Disinformation: 2020 U.S. Elections

Prof. Michele Sorice

SUPERVISOR

Elisa Giordano, 088192

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2020/2021

Ai miei genitori

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: Media and Elections	
1.1 What the American Constitution says about the Freedom of Press	6
1.2 Are media trustworthy?	8
1.3 Political role of the media	11
1.4 Media's role in elections	13
1.5 Are media biased?	15
1.6 Media and electoral disinformation	18
1.7 Disinformation and the 2020 US Elections	20
Chapter 2: Television and disinformation in 2020 Elections	
2.1 Is television biased?	22
2.2 Television and disinformation	26
2.3 Television and 2020 Elections	27
2.4 CNN	31
2.5 Fake News Awards	34
2.6 Fox News	35
Chapter 3: Social media and disinformation in 2020 Elections	
3.1 Social media, information and disinformation	41
3.2 Social media disinformation and 2020 U.S. Elections	43
3.3 Facebook	47
3.4 Twitter	50
3.5 Section 230	51
Conclusion	55
Bibliography	57
Abstract	64
Ringraziamenti	70

Introduction

2020 has been a tough year. The crisis between Iran and the United States after the killing of General Soleimani, the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic, the death of George Floyd and the flow of protests against police brutality on Black people will be remembered in the future as situations that have left a footprint on post-modern history. Another 2020 event that will be recalled by posterity is without any doubt the United States Presidential Election, particularly peculiar for the context in which it took place, but also for the waves of disinformation surrounding it. On one side the Republican President Donald Trump, who had already been in office for one term; on the other one the Democratic Joe Biden, former Vice-President of the country under the Obama Administration. After the unexpected success of Trump in 2016, who had entered into the White House as an outsider to the old and corrupted world of American politics with his “pox-on-them-all” attitude, many expected the unconventional Republican candidate to get re-elected. However, the outbreak of the pandemic, along with the ability of Joe Biden and his staff to address Trump’s inefficiency in handling it, which he had put at the center of his political campaign, managed to turn the tide of the electoral results.

The reason why I have chosen to analyze the 2020 elections lies in the particular context it took place: in the middle of a global pandemic, where the face-to-face contact among individuals was limited and human interactions mainly occurred through the aid of technology. In a year in which screen pixels played a main character role, the importance of media in people’s daily lives increased ever more. Television and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, in 2020 more than ever, were the central instrument of a fiery electoral campaign on both sides. That is when disinformation enters the scene. While television networks are required to be impartial in their narration of news to the audience, they can still present political biases. There is in fact a variety of mainstream television outlets, especially among cable news channels, that have been accused of modelling the news to favor of the political candidate they lean towards to. Moreover, social media more than television present the danger of serving as a vehicle for the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The advent of the digital revolution and the rise of citizen journalism has allowed everyone owning an internet connection of expressing their own opinion on political matter on online platform, as well as become a source of information themselves. The inevitable consequence would hence be an expanding danger of an eventual spread of false information among one’s online friends and followers, leading thus to an unstoppable chain of shares of unreliable news.

Already in 2016, U.S. citizens started getting familiar with the term “fake news”, which had previously been almost unheard of, since it was incorporated into Trump’s daily vocabulary. In the last four years, the so-called fake-news phenomenon became so worrying that it can be said that the 2020 Presidential Elections revolved around it. Disinformation about the electoral process itself shared by the President himself on his official accounts have led to confusion among the electorate, and it was uselessly tried to be stemmed by the platforms themselves through the different escamotages of debunking, fact-checking and correction. On the other hand,

also Republicans' accusation of social media platforms as well as mainstream cable news channels, of being biased against them and wanting to apply censorship in order to influence the elections to favor the Democratic candidate should be taken into account.

Hence, the main question that this dissertation tries to give an answer to is: how did fake news stemming from media affect the 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections? Did they somehow have an impact on the electoral result of the victory of Joe Biden?

Through a narration starting from what the American Constitution states about the freedom of speech, this dissertation will start by analyzing media bias in the United States, as well as the political role that media play during elections in general, only to apply the observations obtained to the more specific case of the 2020 Election. In particular, media bias and electoral disinformation in television, with a focus on the comparison between CNN and Fox News, and in the social network platforms of Facebook and Twitter will be at the center of this dissertation. In order to get a more accurate picture of the 2020 America, demographic data and surveys will be taken into account.

The final aim is to find a correlation between the fake news diffused by media and voting behavior, as well as the electoral result in an era of increasing overall levels of distrust towards political institutions and the media system in general.

1. Chapter 1: Media and elections

1.1 What the American Constitution says about the Freedom of Press

As John Naisbitt, a famous American author, said, “*we are drowning in information, but starving for knowledge*”. And, since we are catapulted in this chaotic, frenetic and dynamic world in which we are bombarded with information of all kinds on all fronts, it is often confusing for individuals to filter every knowledge they come across. How do people get to know what happens daily in their country? What informs and influences them?

Apart from family, education, friends and religion, the main instrument used for the delivery of information is the news, which provides people with whatever they need to know about anything. In the last decades, the importance of the media has grown a lot. Media are defined by Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly (2009) as instruments of communication that deliver information to an audience, such as television, radio, newspapers or magazines and, of course, the internet.

The web has in fact known a huge explosion in the last decades, and this has encouraged the spread of information especially thanks to the high use of social networks, like Facebook, Twitter and afterwards with the advent of Instagram and Tik Tok, which have helped the youngest part of the population to have a better understanding of society, accompanied by a deeper and more precise knowledge of political and social matters. Before the huge spread of social networks that has recently occurred, for many people the official news was the only source from which they derived information. It comprehended both political and non-political matters, such as, for instance, crime news, sport and entertainment.

Since the news’ aim is to inform the population in the most objective way possible, it is expected that it dispenses knowledge on what happens in a completely unbiased manner. For what concerns politics, in fact, when we watch television or read for instance an article on the Financial Times, the information we get is mainly given to us without the intervention of an external point of view. The reader usually does not look for the opinion of the journalist, but they are only interested in the accurate depiction of that event or in the explanation of a certain concept. However, even if viewers learn about facts in the most unbiased way possible, their ideas and opinions still obviously differ from one another, as every single person has their own mind and their cultural and ideological background.

If this discourse has to be transferred into the political field, the question that should be asked is the following one: why do people believe what they do about politics?

As it is written above, one’s beliefs are shaped by their life background, thus education and family, but nonetheless the role of the news media in the last decades has gained importance and, as a consequence, so has the debate regarding whether sources of information are trustworthy or not. According to Peter Beattie (2019), the trustworthiness of the origin of information is determined by the nature of the media system that is provided to us. For instance, regarding the case that will be analyzed here, citizens of the United States can consider themselves lucky to say that they live in a constitutional republic. This means that the executive

power, or the President, since they are organized in a Presidential form of government, must govern within a constitution in order to protect citizens' rights. Due to the democratic nature of the regime and to the presence of an existing constitution, Americans are able to safely affirm that the majority of information they are offered is trustworthy. On the other hand, in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, like in China or North Korea, what citizens get to know is completely rigged and controlled by the government, making information opaque. After all, in democratic nation states, the press is not subjected to any active censorship by the central government and those who work in the field of information are asked to be objective.

The American Constitution expresses itself clearly for what concerns this point. Through the First Amendment, it affirms that:

“The Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” (U.S. Const., Amend. 1.3.1)

Thus, the First Amendment can be seen as an addition to the Constitution with the aim of granting freedoms regarding religion, expression and petition. In fact, it prevents the US Congress from promoting one religion instead of another and of forbidding religious practices to citizens, but what actually interests us is to examine the part concerning the liberty of speech and the press. When talking about freedom of expression, the right to freedom of speech can be considered as its most important feature. The employment of Freedom of speech is granted by article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which identifies it as a human right. It permits individuals to express what they actually think without any problem of interference and censorship from the government. On the other hand, the right to freedom of the press written in the First Amendment is actually very similar to the right to freedom of speech. It gives individuals the right to openly communicate with the means of both publication and dissemination. Furthermore, it does not grant members of media companies any special rights or privileges not already given to other citizens in general.

Al Neuharth, the founder of USA Today, has said in a speech: *“We in the media have to remind the public that the First Amendment is not just for our protection, but for theirs”*. (Neuhart 1998) This means that, in order to have a Free Press, the presence of a Fair Press is necessary. Free Press is guaranteed by the First Amendment, while what the public asks for is to have a Fair Press. As a consequence, in order to combine the both of them, the journalists' task is to accurately deliver information, as to grant the correct circulation of information to the audience for the supreme aim of having a trustworthy media system.

Hence, the fact that the freedom of press was established in the First Amendment does not necessarily mean that there is an unregulated media system. There are in fact many regulations of broadcast law that permit a fair broadcasting in the country by avoiding any discrimination. One of them was the Communication Act of 1934. This act is particularly important as it led to the creation of the Federal Communications Commission, whose aim was to *“regulate interstate and foreign commerce in communication by wire and radio so as to make available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States, without discrimination on the basis*

of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex, a rapid, efficient, Nationwide, and worldwide wire and radio communications service". (Communications Act of 1934)

It also had also the jurisdiction of making "*such regulations not inconsistent with law as it may deem necessary to prevent interference between stations and to carry out the provisions of the Act*". (Federal Communications Commission 2008, p. 7)

1.2 Are media trustworthy?

Although the statements in the previous paragraph are true, there still are doubts on the complete trustworthiness of the media system; if the delivery of news is structured within a perfectly unbiased mechanism, why does disinformation exist and how does it affect voters? In short, how does the media affect electoral disinformation? More specifically, what was their impact on the 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections?

Since the Western media system is constituted by journalists who have embraced the freedom of speech and have received an appropriate professional formation in valid universities and schools of journalism, and since there is no governmental censorship, there is no proof that a faction of powerful journalists who use the media to create confusion and misleading information to misinform citizens exists.

However, as a matter of fact, Beattie (2019) argues that the media system is often affected by some unintentional trails of pressures that can be of both political and economic nature, and by culture and ideology of media companies as well, establishing favorable conditions for the production of bias. For example, Lewandowsky, Stritze, Freund, Oberauer and Krueger (2013, p. 489), write that during the U.S. war on Iraq, the American audience was more inclined than the rest of the world to believe that the conflict was legitimate, as American media had embraced the orientation of the government on that matter, while other countries saw the case through more objective lenses.

As a consequence, the strength of news media resides in the fact that it is able to influence what its audience believes: by deciding what to cover and what not to talk about, media companies have the power of shaping the outcome of a political election. Even if citizens are active thinkers and do not trust everything they read on newspapers or listen to on television, as they can choose whether to believe in someone or not, they cannot embrace or reject information and ideas they have never seen or heard about. This is why the media is so influential and powerful that it is also called the "fourth power". Media coverage has the ability of strongly influencing individuals' perception of both politics and society. In particular, in the United States, because of the for-profit nature of the media system, its power has increased even more.

Americans are divided on the issue of trustworthiness of the news media. What determines whether an American citizen trusts them or not?

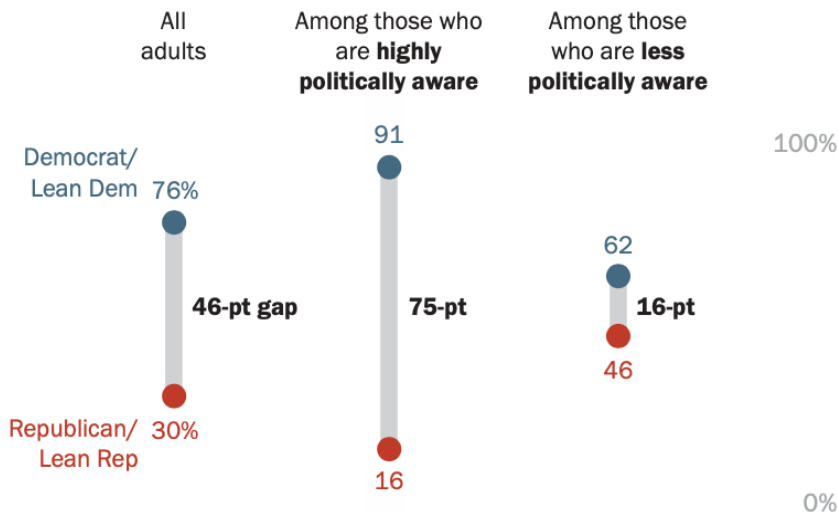
First of all, partisan dynamics. According to a research made by the Pew Research Center (2019), which collected data between 2018 and 2019, consisting of more than 50 different surveys added to an analysis of

more than 100 questions measuring possible factors determining trust in the news media, demonstrates that political party identification represents the first element influencing trust in the media system. In particular, Republicans are more skeptical than their Democratic counterparts. Individuals who identify as “consistent conservatives”, says the Pew Research Center study (2014), in addition to being skeptical towards the media in general, also tend to be loyal to their top source of information. The outcome is that they will inevitably cluster around a single news media outlet, as affirmed by Graves (2018).

This result has also been influenced by the statements of President Trump, who has repeatedly criticized in public the country’s news organizations and the journalists who work for them, accusing them of being biased. The relationship between the audience’s approval of Trump and the view they have of the news media can be seen in the evaluations of journalists’ ethics; in fact, around the 31% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents affirm that journalists have low ethical standards, whereas only the 5% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning agree with this statement. Trump’s most fervent approvers are even more suspicious: the 40% of Republicans who strongly support Trump’s performance as President agree that the journalists’ ethics are very low.

Another factor linked to partisan dynamics that influences the consideration that citizens have of the media is the individual engagement with national politics. In fact, highly engaged partisans are highly polarized in their view. Pew Research Center (2019) data show that 76% of Democrats and Leaning Democrats believe that journalists will eventually keep in mind that their duty is to do their job for the public, so doing what is best for them. On the other hand, Republicans and Leaning Republicans have a much lower percentage, of 30%. There is in fact a 46-percentage point gap between the two poles, which is high. This value jumps to a 75-point gap between those who are highly politically aware and identify themselves with one of the two parties: 91% of highly politically aware Democrats and 16% of highly aware Republicans. The survey demonstrating that highly engaged partisans are very polarized in their trust in media and journalists is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Note: The somewhat politically aware are not shown.
Source: Surveys conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018, and Feb. 19-March 4, 2019.
"Trusting the News Media in the Trump Era"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The awareness by the public of the power that media companies hold has led towards an increasing lack of trust in information, aided by the fact that the sources available are various, as an outcome of this multiplicity can be confusion. Moreover, the rise of citizen journalism, which allows the general public to collect information through the internet, has added a further pinch of uncertainty amongst the audience.

In addition to partisan dynamics, there are other elements which determine whether Americans find media trustworthy: the overall trust in others and demographic characteristics. However, Pew (2019) data tells us that their influence is not as strong as the former.

It can be said that those who have more confidence and trust in others overall also tend to have faith in the media. These individuals have higher chances of trusting the information coming from journalists and media organizations, as they believe their aim is to be in service of the public good.

Lastly, differences in race, ethnicity, age, educational attainment, religious affiliation and residency in urban or rural areas play an important role. Generally speaking, Black Americans tend to trust the news media more than white Americans. Data tell us that 41% of blacks affirm that news organizations are fair when covering political and social issues, while only 22% of white Americans think the same. Speaking about age, older Americans feel more connected to their usual news sources than the youngest part of the population. The difference between them is 22 percentage points, with almost 50% of citizens older than 65 putting trust into their source of news, compared to only the 27% of their younger counterparts aged between 18 and 29. Education further influences the level of trust in information, as those with a college degree, thus with a higher

educational attainment, demonstrate they have more faith in news organization than those with just a high school degree. For what concerns residency, citizens living in rural areas are more skeptical than their urban counterparts, with the 48% of the former with a great confidence in the news media organizations, compared with the 63% of residents in urban areas. Finally, also religion is a major factor, since Evangelical Protestants believe less in journalists than Catholics and those who are unaffiliated.

Citizens' trust in the media system as a whole is particularly important because it has an impact on elections, in particular on the electorate's motivation to go to the polls and cast a ballot. Darling, Crigler and Gatz (2018) have collected interesting data about this influence: more than the 30% of Democrats affirm that the news they hear from trustful sources make them feel more motivated to vote, while 70% affirmed the same about news coming from unreliable sources. Contrarily, for Republicans the percentages for the same variables are 30% and 61%.

1.3 Political role of the media

About the political role that mass media play, it can be said that they represent a sort of portal through democracy and as a fundamental device through which politicians and political candidates can reach the rest of the population. Now more than ever, "*the media are politics and politics are the media*". (McNair 2002, p. 29)

First, television embodies a powerful tool for information accessible to everyone. Since its invention, happened almost a hundred years ago, and its spread to the public in the 1950s, television has been a pillar presence in the houses of those citizens who own it, just like a family member. While at the beginning it assumed a rather pedagogic role, with the intent of informing, educating and teaching something precise to its viewers, nowadays its main function is to entertain. With the large-scale diffusion of television, its programming inevitably started undertaking the path towards a standardized homogenization, whose target is the large and general market, becoming thus mainstream. In today's society, it is unthinkable to establish a political dialogue with citizens and the electorate without taking into consideration the active role that television, the mass media tool par excellence, plays. Despite the new political role of social networks, television remains the dominant source of political information for Americans. In fact, the government and politicians need to communicate their daily plans, activities and programs to the audience and the best instrument to achieve this task is television. Talk shows, especially evening panel discussions where they are invited as guests, help politicians conveying their message to the public, making them feel closer to citizens, as they have the chance to publicly clarify the highlights of their campaign. What politicians want is to convince electors and non-electors through the media; on the other hand, what the media often looks for is to assume the role of a watchdog in the political field, in order to safeguard democracy.

With the advent of the so-called “digital revolution”, even social media, also called “the new media”, have turned into a tool through which politicians can deliver their political messages to the electorate. The main advantage of social networks is that they are fast and they allow politicians to post texts, pictures and videos addressed to everyone online without the aid of traditional mass media. Gjyljije Rexha (2014, p. 56) claims on this matter that communication becomes more direct and the control over the message is easier to be managed by the communicator.

Social media, defined by Paul Lee, So, Francis Lee, Leung and Chan (2018) as a subaltern public sphere, play a major democratic role: in fact, they offer alternative platforms in which the audience can derive information and share personal viewpoints on political matters. In particular, when referring to their subaltern character, Fraser (1990, p. 60) allude to the benefits they bring to minorities and to the marginalized categories. In fact, they are particularly important for those minority groups who want to distance themselves from the mainstream standpoint seen in television and for those who want to look for other perspectives in the public sphere, where they can confront each other, exchange opinions and share similar beliefs and life experiences. Due to the fact that they directly allow individuals to spread political information without the intermediary of official institutional gatekeepers, Owen (2018, p. 108) says that these new media have led to a growing instability and unpredictability in political communication.

Despite that, not everything about social media leads to advantages in the democratic sphere. As a matter of fact, the **echo chamber phenomenon** constitutes an effect that can be somehow harmful to democracy: many scholars, such as Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson (2014), argue that social networks embody the danger of creating echo chambers reinforcing the already established ideas and opinions of their users. This occurs because individuals tend to choose what to read online based on their positions and the planned algorithms of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are responsible for further showing them content linked to their original likes and interests, without the possibility of broadening the horizons and approaching opposing views. For instance, if a certain Facebook user follows the official pages of Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Kirsten Gillibrand and Elizabeth Warren, the algorithm will tend to show them in the dashboard posts related to their political preferences, avoiding those of Republican congressmen like Marco Rubio and Mitt Romney. As a consequence, Lee, So, Lee, Leung and Chan (2018, p. 1950) suggest that the echo chamber phenomenon might accelerate the passage to a “post-truth” era, where objective facts will have less influence in the shape of public opinion.

A study conducted by three scholars from the College of Communication at Boston University analyzed the echo chamber effect and opinion leadership on Twitter during the previous US presidential elections in 2016, by taking into account around 50 million tweets regarding the two presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. What emerged from this study was that certain famous individuals and organizations, called opinion leaders, were responsible for the creation of groups of Twitter users, characterized by a consistent homogeneity. Opinion leaders have more access to news and information, since they are usually bloggers,

official sources of news, influential Twitter accounts or famous individuals with a large following. So, because of their privileged position, the role they play is to diffuse and filter information to their followers. A significant difference in the level of political homogeneity and opinion leadership occurs in these groups, paving the way for polarized stances, as Guo, Rohde and Wu (2020) write. The phenomenon here described is due to the fact that persons sharing similar ideas are likely to be grouped together, as they tend to enjoy associating with those congruent to their beliefs, whereas they experience negative feelings when in contact with opposing opinions, as Festinger's (1962) Cognitive Dissonance Theory affirms. Thus, users will purposefully choose between all media channels the ones that best align with their political orientation.

Nonetheless, for Johnson, Kaye and Lee (2017, p. 193), the exposure and avoidance of content in social media are not strong indicators of political polarization, as, even if the echo chamber effect should not be ignored while studying the political role of social networks, the role that they play in the building of polarized positions is not that influential. Instead, factors such as political orientation, demographic data and the use of mass media are more useful in the tracing of political polarization.

1.4 Media's role in elections

The media play a major role during elections, as they manage in shaping public opinion and influence voters in their decision-making process. As a matter of fact, for what concerns elections, the role that the media assume in this case is of fundamental importance, as candidates need to reach the broadest section of the electorate possible in order to get more votes and win the elections. Here, journalists and media companies have a huge power within their hands, since they are those who decide which candidate to cover and how much and this can be fatal in determining the outcome of an election, in an era in which the media are able to shape a person's ideas through their storytelling. The bigger the space given to a candidate, the more the general public will have a better knowledge of their public persona, of their political program, but also of their personal life.

The first major broadcasting law in the United States dates back to 1927, with the Radio Act. It comprehended the equal opportunity provision, according to which political candidates had to be treated equally when it came to air-time in television and radio programmes; US legislators were in fact worried that if candidates did not have equal opportunities of time, some broadcasters could attempt to rig elections. Some years later, in order to guarantee fair coverage of controversial issues in television and radios, the Federal Communication Commission embraced the idea of station licensees as public trustees are obliged to air opposing opinions on public controversial matters to make the audience have a balanced 360-degree view on those topics.

To better understand how people vote and what actually makes them decide to vote in favor of one political candidate or party over the other, the coverage of candidates by the media during electoral campaigns must be considered. Specifically on this topic, there is a process that helps explain why the persistent focus on issues

particularly leads to benefits within the audience and, consequently, to more votes. This procedure is called **agenda-setting** and it is a psychological process whereby the media insistently covers an issue so that people will think that it is of vital importance. This theory states that one can determine the factors leading to the taking of a decision. In fact, talking about national elections, it can be said that voters' decisions are determined on a specified set of factors that emphasize above all other factors that could possibly influence decisions.

For example, when one has to purchase a phone or a computer, the factors they usually look at before choosing the perfect model are for instance the hard disk space, the RAM, the quality of the camera, and so on. These features represent the factors on which both the purchaser and the industry focuses on, since buyers base their purchase decision-making process on them. Thus, in order to buy a laptop or a phone, one need not be an expert in informatics or a computer engineer.

In the same way, one need not be a political scientist to vote. For what concerns politics, the feature influencing citizens in their electoral decisions are offered not in this case by industries that produce goods which will be sold, but they are offered to the audience by media and political parties. In particular, the media are dominating in this field today. They are able to select some issues that voters consider important, such as employment, economic growth, national security and civil rights.

During the electoral campaign, candidates are nominees for their own party. They have to attend public debates, which are transmitted live on the main big four channels: ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC. Those who usually participate in these debates are candidates from the Republican and Democratic parties, but also third independent party candidates can attend them if invited. During the discussion, nominees are expected to answer the moderator's question in order to better present their political program. The number of electoral debates' viewers is huge every year; Nielsen Holdings plc (2020) tells us that in 2016 those who turned their TV on to watch Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump debating live were 84 million, while the 2020 viewership was a little bit lower, of around 73.1 million. The data collected for the 2020 elections are represented in Figure 2, which shows the number of viewers for the First Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden on September 29, 2020. Data demonstrate that the viewership was high, with the highest rate among individuals aged above 55.

Presidential nominees organize electoral campaigns across the country to present their political program and views and elucidate their views to citizens, in order to convince voters and get contributions, as the win of swing states is essential for the positive outcome of the election.

It can be said that, now more than ever, American news media are interested in the horse-race aspects of the presidential campaign: this means that what journalist tend to include in their coverage of electoral campaigns is mainly related to the strategic aspect of the campaign and to the approach of campaign strategists rather than keeping the focus on the actual political programs of nominees and issues considered important for voters.

Figure 2

Sept. 29, 2020		
	Rating	No. of Viewers
All Households	40.2	48,581,000
Persons 2+	23.7	73,132,000
Persons 18-34	12.0	8,420,000
Persons 35-54	25.5	20,292,000
Persons 55+	42.7	40,496,000

Source: Nielsen.

NOTE: Out-of-home viewing as well as connected TV (CTV) viewing are included in the 2020 total figures for this advisory. Contribution coming from CTVs can be as much as 11% for televised political events.

Data above is inclusive of broadcast and cable networks, as well as PBS member stations. Debate 1 coverage of ad-supported networks only was 71.5 million viewers among persons 2+.

2020 Networks Included:

Debate 1 – ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, TEL, UNI, PBS, CNN, CNNe, Fox Business Network, FOXNC, MSNBC, Newsmax, Newsy, VICE and WGNA.

Copyright © 2020 The Nielsen Company (US), LLC. All Rights Reserved.

1.5 Are media biased?

When readers and viewers try to inform themselves of what is happening in the world, they aim at getting the most objective perspective possible, as they do not want to be influenced by journalists’ opinions. However, since the corporations which own news media influence them through the company’s ideology, it is highly plausible that they become biased, and, as their influence has significantly grown in the past years, so has the risk of media bias.

As a matter of fact, media risk to become skewed when they deform the information they report for their own interest, giving a distorted and subjective view of it. This often happens in order to positively influence the reputation of their corporate owners. However, bias may also occur when media tend to focus on some specific hot topics, choosing not to cover other types of matters. In the U.S., media biases are frequent when outlets distort the information they share, reporting facts in a way that comes into conflict with the objective standards of journalism, or favoring some sort of political agenda when they are not required to do it. Of course, the outcome is harmful towards democracy.

Even social media, which allow everyone to express their opinions on political matters, can present media bias: despite the fact that they are seen as promoters of democracy and of the confrontation between a broad range of perspectives, as it was previously analyzed, the echo-chamber phenomenon might trap online users into these filter bubbles constituted by people who share similar ideas only.

The media bias issue started being broadly discussed before the election of the former president of the United States Donald Trump, making the term “fake news” more and more frequent to be heard, from the moment he started his electoral campaign for the presidency. Although he accused them of wanting to rig the election with their Democratic influence, what is really interesting is that he was the one that profited the most from media attention. In the opinion of Gregor (2016, p. 18), in 2016, Trump was the most successful Republican candidate at standing out from the crowd and having the spotlight all for himself. Social Media have been a pillar during the 2016 and the 2020 elections, as it is believed that they nourish and favor the spread of fake news.

When talking about media bias, there are two different kinds of biases that can be distinguished: there are intentional biases, which outlets and other involved parties intentionally apply in order to achieve a particular aim, and unintentional ones. What drives intentional bias are ideology and spin: an ideological bias occurs when a source of information influences articles to favor a specific idea on a topic. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002, p. 2) affirm that, contrarily, a spin bias is present when that source wants to create an original and incredible story.

Other definitions of media bias are the ones concerning coverage and gatekeeping. As claimed by D’Alessio and Allen (2000, p. 136), media bias are linked to the agenda setting theory, as the former is related to the visibility of for instance a political candidate or a topic in media coverage, and the latter is related to the stories the media actually choose to talk about and which ones they choose instead to ignore.

But how do media outlets align themselves in their political affiliation? Since the political spectrum of media companies is very broad, there is in fact a difference between conservative bias and a liberal bias, showing thus the increasing polarization of the two-party system. Indeed, as stated by Hamborg, Donnay and Gipp (2019), one of the effects of media bias, other than a powerful influence on voters and on electoral outcomes, is the growing polarization of public opinion.

Generally speaking, while online platforms usually present both biases, in the United States news companies and their owners tend to be more conservative leaning. On the other side, print media is more likely to exhibit liberal-leaning bias. However, this mainly concerns commentaries and opinions on newspapers, while actual news reporting in the mainstream media tends to remain unbiased. Furthermore, in order to fight media biases, fact-checking to assess them has been growing lately.

NPR (2017) reports that liberal bias was studied in 2013 by two professors of journalism at Indiana University, who conducted a survey addressed to more than 1000 American journalists. According to this study, 28.1% of them identify as Democrats, while 7.1% as Republicans. Another 50.2% claimed they were independent.

Another report, this time of the Pew Research Center (2017), showed that 62% of articles in 2017 on Trump during his first 60 days as President had a negative assessment, a huge percentage if compared to the ones with a positive outlook, which constituted only the 5%. These data differ a lot from the ones coming from the same

identical research made on the articles during the first 60 days in office of President Obama, a Democrat, who mainly received positive feedback.

Despite this, Hassel, Holbein and Miles (2020) did not find any strong evidence of the presence of liberal bias in the media: it is indeed true that a large percentage of journalists identify themselves as democrats, which increases the propensity towards liberal bias, but their political preferences do not lead them to ideological gatekeeping biases. The research affirms that there is no evidence of liberal influence in what journalists decide to cover, even if media outlets are mainly liberal.

The major liberal sources of information, according to Allsides (2017), are The New York Times and the Washington Post, which are labeled as “Lean Left”. Instead, the Huffington Post and Mother Jones are rated as “Left”.

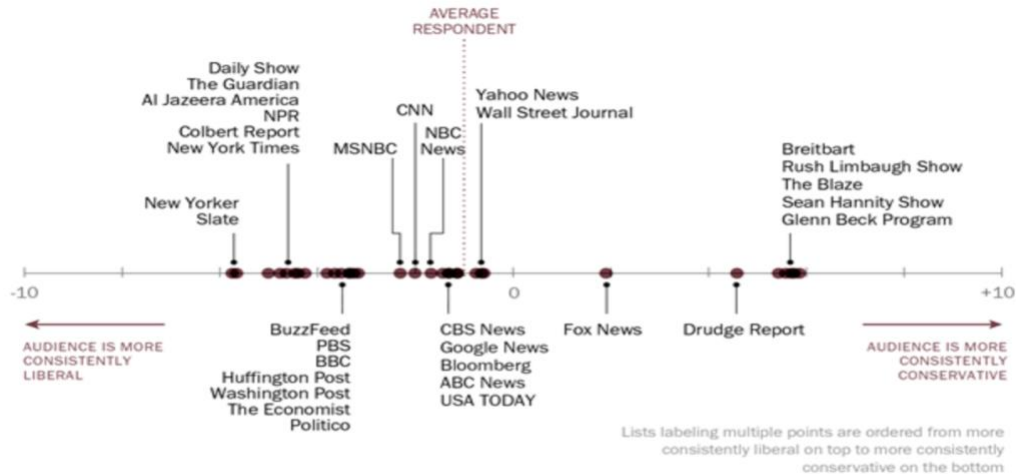
Conservative biases also exist next to liberal ones. The main problem with conservative leaning media outlooks is that their viewers and readers are a lot more faithful to them and, as a consequence, become less likely to derive information from mainstream sources too. This leads to the creation of a conservative echo-chamber effect. This type of sources of news are likely to be distrusted by liberal voters, but they are more trusted than distrusted by the following categories: mixed, mostly conservative, and consistently conservative individuals.

The most prominent example of a conservative network is without any doubt Fox News. It is a common belief that Fox News plays an important role in elections, as it has increased the share of Republican votes in the past and, according to researchers, continues to do it, especially by influencing the political positions of Republican and independent voters. It was also found that *"Fox News increases Republican vote shares by 0.3 points among viewers induced into watching 2.5 additional minutes per week by variation in position."* (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017)

Other sources of news which are considered conservative are The Blaze / Glenn Beck Program and the Drudge Report, labeled as “Right” sources by Allsides (2017). The ideological placement of the main sources of political information in the United States is represented in Figure 3 in the following page.

The most liberal outlets are located on the extreme left of the graph, while the ones with the most conservative readers and viewers, namely the Sean Hannity Show and Breitbart News Network, are placed on the right.

Figure 3



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22. Based on all web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details.) ThinkProgress, DailyKos, Mother Jones, and The Ed Schultz Show are not included in this graphic because audience sample sizes are too small to analyze.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

1.6 Media and electoral disinformation

In the last decade, electoral campaigns have evolved in order to adapt themselves to the new means of information. Both the Republican and the Democratic parties have employed new strategies of information circulation which include the use of new platforms such as social media in order to get more followers and reach a broader slice of the electorate. Thanks to social media and to the internationalization of the news, political information spread faster than ever before, helping create a favorable environment for the diffusion of disinformation.

First of all, the distinction between **disinformation**, **misinformation** and **malinformation** should be cleared up.

Misinformation is false information; it contains false connections and misleading content. Malinformation is harmful, as it comprehends leaks, harassment and hate speech. Finally, disinformation is both false and harmful: its content can be either false, imposter, manipulated and fabricated.

Until some years ago, misinformation was the most studied one among the three of them, as it was easier to analyze if compared to the more complex concept of disinformation. This is because news constituting the disinformation field need not to carry with them a malicious purpose, but they just have to be false and potentially misleading. The situation changed with the 2016 elections, after which the interest in the term “disinformation” sparkled.

Moreover, after the increase of their usage among the population, social media have become the primary source of political news in the United States. Yet their users are constantly exposed to inaccurate content, such as

conspiracy theories, clickbait titles, hyper-partisan articles and even to the so-called “**fake news**”, which are considered to be a type of disinformation. It is no surprise that disinformation coming from low quality sources has almost taken over: the partisan benefits it gives to favor political and electoral propaganda are significant. Even if media outlets can present political biases, by being either left or right aligned, it is wrong to believe that they promote disinformation. It is true that the media has problems: this is a time where politics is increasingly polarized and where politicians see media conglomerates through a “with us or against us” optic. There is no middle ground. Neutrality is falling off. This crisis involves print journalism as well, with the growing partisanship of newspapers and the shape of articles and facts around politics. However, blaming this crisis only, stating that the media cause disinformation, is rash and imprecise. Part of the problem derives from social networks. As it was previously analyzed, echo chambers represent the nest in which a stagnancy in polarization is located, making social media the perfect environment for the spread of fake news, either intentionally or unconsciously. In particular, Twitter has been used by several citizens to collect information on presidential candidates, and yet it has been far from being immune to the dangers of disinformation. The accounts that shared false and misleading news were almost completely cut off from the fact-checking procedure and they mutually and exclusively retweeted each other, forming a sort of dense network similar to an echo chamber. This situation worsened even more in 2020 with the Covid-19 Pandemic, as people have been forced to stay home and had more spare time, which led them to watch more television and greedily consume news online.

In the report of Kelly Garrett, Daniel Sude and Paolo Riva (2020), ostracism, which is the feeling of social exclusion within a group, is depicted as able to push towards the endorsement of partisan falsehood. Thus, those who were made feel socially excluded online, in the social media environment created by the research, showed to be more vulnerable to partisan falsehood in election-related matters, even if they were exposed to evidence of the contrary. In this way, it was proved that ostracism plays a major role in what voters believe, showing that it can be one of the reasons why politics is so polarized today. For instance, it worsens partisan contrasts even more for what regards the trust in matters about which political parties strongly disagree. In an era of excessive dependence on social media as the main source of political information and in which politics is full of hostility towards the political outgroup, the way ostracism influences partisan bias should be taken into account.

On the other side, Fabian Zimmermann and Matthias Kohring (2020) directly examine the effects of disinformation on voting behavior through the use of a panel survey, resulting in the finding that those who generally present low degrees of confidence in the political system and in media outlets tend to be the victims of disinformation.

While during the 2016 electoral campaign it was believed that fake news could be fought or that they would eventually go away, right now, as the 2020 US Elections show, what voters have to do is to individually check the legitimization of those sources from which they derive information before sharing it.

Since the analysis of disinformation is still a virgin land, as it is a relatively new field of study in the area of political communication, there still are unanswered doubts about it, such as which other subpopulations are more vulnerable to its influence.

1.7 Disinformation and the 2020 US Elections

It can be said that disinformation, often consisting of unfair tricks, has always been employed to mislead voting citizens in history, but what happened in 2020 was especially notable as 159 millions of Americans, the largest vote-turnout and the first time ever that more than 140 individuals voted in US history, casted their ballot in an until-the-end controversial election.

The US 2020 Elections are also particularly worthy of being studied because they took place in the midst of a pandemic. Here, because of the confusion that this new situation had brought, the spread of disinformation was huge and amplified and it affected the Presidential Elections as well. Because of the wide-ranging disinformation during the electoral campaign, efforts by election officials and advocates were made in order to combat it and avoid the turn out from the voting process of discouraged citizens.

Along with the word “Covid-19”, one of the most often heard word in 2020 was “fake news”. As Jesse Littlewood, the Stopping Cyber Suppression program for Common Cause leader, said, *"2020 has been a year like no other because not only have we seen a higher volume of online mis and disinformation, we have also changed a lot of processes about our society, including the way we administer elections"*. (Littlewood 2020)

Littlewood also identified that the way was paved for a brand-new wave of disinformation after the shift towards the mail-in voting procedure caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. One of these fake claims was in fact that this procedure was actually dangerous and that mail-in votes would not be valid and could lead to rigged election results or to the tracking of personal information in order to make anti Covid-19 vaccine compulsory. It is usually a difficult task to clearly identify the source of disinformation, even if it seems to come from a variety of groups and individuals with different purposes. Some of them want to lead individuals of the opposite party towards the abstention, while other sources' aim is to disrupt US elections and undermine the electorate's confidence in the system. However, it does not matter what the source is, as what actually allows the spread of disinformation everywhere is social media, which can pick false information up and make it travel around even further.

Since disinformation can take many forms, an example of it can be the case of a fake Democratic voting guide at early polling sites in Palm Beach County, FL, which listed Laura Loomer, a far-right Republican candidate to Congress, instead of her Democratic counterpart. This fake information can further expand through online platforms. For instance, some Facebook posts have claimed that votes will be considered not valid if voters put a mark on the ballot, even if it is requested in many states. This false claim has led many election officials to officially directly address this issue, by taking action to avoid further disinformation.

To sum up, disinformation can come from many sources for different reasons, but what actually encourages their diffusion, leading to an actual impact of elections is the media. In fact, since these new tools of information have recently become the main political instruments used in the electoral campaigns of presidential candidates, their mediatic power is unmatched. Potential voters absorb everything from them and they elaborate the information they get in order to make the best possible decision for them in the voting procedure. The role that television, especially Democratic and Republican leaning networks, and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, play here is going to be analyzed in the next few chapters.

2. Chapter 2: Television and disinformation in 2020 Elections

2.1 Is television biased?

Television news differs from newspapers articles: while the latter focus on an event that needs to be described within some paragraphs, the stories narrated by the former do not tend to have a discursive framework. Television's aim is to have a clearly defined narrative, with an introduction, a middle and a conclusion that can sparkle the viewer's interest, or the risk is that they will switch to another channel and another programme. For this reason, TV news needs to develop a theme to carry on throughout the story. The key figure in this process is the one of the journalists, who abandons their impersonal disguise, proper of newspapers, as their personality and charisma is fundamental for the success of the report. Furthermore, news in television tends to be more interpretative if compared to print news. For instance, during an electoral campaign, the difference would be that while newspapers will mainly focus on the events, such as a rally, television will prefer to cover much more general trends and campaign dynamics, showing a propensity towards the explanation of what goes on underneath. As a result, the content of these reports is likely to be repetitive. In addition, just like Paul Weaver (1972) writes, the coverage of electoral campaigns on television can be biased, as it is affected by the way reporters interpret what is actually going on beneath the campaign.

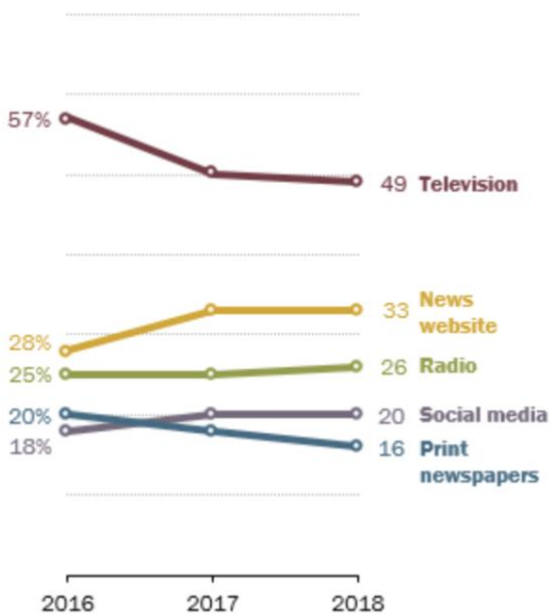
Walter Cronkite, a CBS famous journalist and former anchorman for the CBS Evening News, would say that journalists' job is to tell the audience what happens, and the public's job is to decide whether to trust their political representatives. As previously analyzed in the first chapter, media can sometimes be biased, even if they are required not to. The distinction between unintentional and spin biases was clarified and it was also stated that media outlets can be conservative or liberal leaning. Hence, the fact that media bias exists should not be a surprise at this point. In fact, journalists and their editors are human beings, and it is inevitably natural that they have their personal thoughts about political, social and economic matters and preferences towards candidates that somehow influences the way they report the news. Furthermore, media coverage, which is a market product and a fundamental instrument in partisan politics, can also be affected by economic and political factors. As a matter of fact, these elements make media biases hard to be noticed, even if, as time passes, Americans have increasingly started to perceive the media as politically sided and their trust towards the whole system has significantly decreased if compared to the past. Their struggle to find news resources that are trustworthy and completely objective is real. A Gallup (2018) report shows that the average scores of trust in the media system is 37, on a scale which goes from 0 to 100. U.S. adults believe that 62% of the news coming from newspapers, television and radio is not objective, but biased. Despite the fact that they perceive most information as accurate, in their opinion 44% of news is still imprecise. In addition, more than a third of the information they get from these channels is actually misinformation — false or inaccurate information presented as if it was true.

Statistically speaking, the ones that perceive the media as biased, inaccurate and as a potential source of misinformation are mainly Republicans, while Democrats appear to be more trustworthy in general.

Despite the decline of trust in the media system as a whole, television still plays a leading role in the daily lives of Americans. It represents the top platform from which US citizens derive the news, according to a Pew Research Center (2018) survey. Television was in fact the main source of news for 50% of them in 2018, while online platforms were the first information tool for just the 33% (Figure 4).

Figure 4

More Americans get news often from social media than print newspapers
% of U.S. adults who get news often on each platform



Note: The difference between social media and print newspapers in 2017 was not statistically significant.
Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

But what are the biases present in television?

When politicians accuse a channel of being politically impartial, those claims should not be immediately considered as true, but they should be taken with a grain of salt. There are several reasons for this: first of all, candidates could get benefits from the fact that a precise source of news is considered as biased against them, even if that source eventually turns out as unbiased. In fact, when a source of news is labelled as politically sided and makes negative comments about a politician, the audience pays less attention to them as they see it as impartial. On the contrary, for Groeling (2008, p. 632), positive comments on that same candidate are seen as particularly believable. For this reason, Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998, p. 119) declare that, at the same

way, partisans might purposefully choose to assert that there is a bias against them in order to arouse a sympathetic partisanship in their own party, even when that bias does not actually.

Determining whether a news information is biased or not is a hard task. There are several media watchdog organizations, such as the Media Research Center, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting and the Center for Media and Public Affairs, yet they often disagree on the presence, seriousness and frequency of media biases when analyzing content. This is a clear demonstration that determining the presence of political influence in the delivery of news in television is not an easy job, with the main difficulty lying first of all in the definition of what actually represents a **media bias**. In fact, recognizing the presence of a political inclination in a media content is different from attributing this inclination to an actual politically biased stance in the media. It could be true that that media coverage is just a transparent reflection of reality. For instance, if it is observed that in the 80% of cases a news programme announces bad news concerning a presidential candidate, it does not necessarily imply a political bias against that politician; a plausible alternative can be that that candidate is only making the right electoral proposal in their political program 20% of the time. If this is the case, then that 80% negative media coverage against that particular candidate accurately reflects their political campaign's performance.

Other problems that the study of media bias has are its **subjectivity** and its **selection**. In fact, first of all a news can be either positively or negatively interpreted. For instance, CNN (2020) reported in February 2020 that the Trump Administration wanted to cut the healthcare and security budgets in their article "*Trump budget includes deep cuts to health care and safety net programs*". From this headline his decision could be seen as a negative one: what the President was going to do was proposing large cuts in Medicaid, the federal aid program helping citizens with a low income, which would cause many millions losing coverage. However, if choosing to carefully read the changes that the Trump Administration is looking to implement, the adjustments that will be brought would not be exceptional: this cut would not effectively affect citizens' benefits from Medicare and Medicaid, but mainly their providers, such as hospitals. For Fox News (2020) and for many Republicans, this proposal paves the way for a balanced budget.

Second of all, by listening only to those news reports that are transmitted on television, one cannot establish whether that report objectively depicts the reality of facts or if it reflects the journalist's ideas. If this is the case, studies based only on content analysis of those reports lack important data coming from other sources, which can offer a more complete picture. Hence, the question would be: how can one evaluate the representativeness of a news sample if there also are stories which cannot be considered and observed as they were never reported?

In order to solve these problems, a good method that sociologists have tried to employ was to minimize the methodological difficulties by focusing only on stories that reported the public's judgement, in this case the public's perception of the presidential candidates' performances. Thus, if a candidate's approval rating decreased, it meant that there was bad news, otherwise, if it increased, it constituted good news.

In order to better study and understand TV biases in the United States, the main three TV networks of the country – **ABC**, **NBC** and **CBS** – and their respective editions of the evening news will be taken into account. These “Big Three” networks have a long history of broadcasting and they have a generally broader public than the one of CNN and Fox, which are cable news, so just devoted to the broadcast of news. It can thus be said that ABC, NBC and CBS are also less biased than CNN and Fox, which, on the other hand, are invested in the fame of being politically lined up. As a result, Americans see national television channels as more trustworthy than cable news networks in the delivery of news. This helps explaining why the “Big Three” constitute a better sample to analyze bias in television. In addition, the evening edition of the news will be taken into consideration because they generally have a broader audience than editions in other time slots; Pew Research Center (2018) proves that only in 2018, the average number of viewers for the evening news of ABC, NBC and CBS was 5.3 million.

Tim Groeling, professor of Communication Studies at UCLA, conducted in 2008 a study on television bias that showed that there is substantial evidence for the presence of bias in the choice of news in the “Big Three”, and in some instances they surprisingly seem to be stronger than the ones in Fox News. The research’s findings show evidence for the presence of bias in the media, which has often been a reason for the protests and concern of politicians. In particular, the difference between the networks at the time the research was conducted lied in the gap between different partisan stereotypes: on one hand, ABC, NBC and CBS all seemed to report good news for Clinton and bad news for Bush, whereas Fox News, on the contrary, seemed to do the opposite. A pro-Democratic bias on CBS and NBC and a milder proof of a pro-Republican bias on Fox News thanks to his analysis of the coverage of change in the presidents’ approval rate was in fact found by Groeling (2008, p. 652).

An interesting question is: how would Americans react if they knew their top news resource, in this case television news, as data show, altered its coverage in order to favor a political party or candidate instead of another? The answer is shown in Figure 5 below. Many researchers have demonstrated that the main cause of complaint that people have towards the media is the presence of political bias. For this reason, they tend to choose as their trusted source of news television channels that they find fair and politically unaligned, so that they are not influenced when listening to reports. The 45% of U.S. citizens think that their top source is unbiased towards both parties, but the remaining 55% affirms that their preferred channel still shows some political alignment. Among them, the majority is convinced it supports the Democratic Party, pointing to a perception of liberal bias on television, while the minority is sure it favors Republicans.

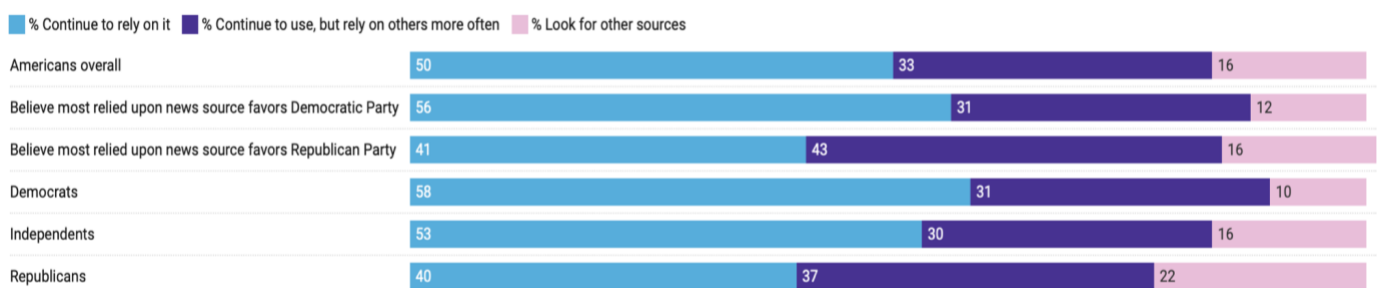
To answer to the previous question, if the question is structured by asking the interviewees *“if the news source you use most often decided to change its reporting and commentary to try and convince people it does not favor one party over the other, would you: 1) continue to rely on it most often for news; 2) continue to use it,*

but use other sources more often; 3) no longer use it and find other news sources to rely on for news?”, the Gallup/Knight Foundation (2020) concludes that around 50% of Americans say they would still keep following their top news source if they changed their coverage, while the remaining half is split between saying that they would continue using that source but also using other sources and that they would definitely abandon it. Distinctions should be made between Democratic and Republican electors: while the former would stick with it if it changed its coverage, the latter are more inclined than democrats to rely also on other channels as well. It is a fact that the news source with the highest percentage of preferences among conservatives is Fox News: taking into account those whose mainly follow it, thus Republicans, 40% of them claims they would still follow it, while 37%, which is a very close percentage to it, would rely to other sources more often and around 20% would definitely abandon it.

Figure 5

Americans' Response If Their Top News Source Altered Its Coverage to Not Favor a Political Party

If the news source you use most often decided to change its reporting and commentary to try and convince people it does not favor one party over the other, would you – continue to rely on it most often for news; continue to use it, but use other sources more often; or no longer use it and find other news sources to rely on for news?



No answer percentages not shown

Source: GALLUP/KNIGHT FOUNDATION, Nov. 9-15, 2020 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

2.2 Television and disinformation

The spread of disinformation in television is far less frequent than the one online. Because of the stricter control that television networks employ towards the stories they tell the audience, fake news are less likely to be told. Contrarily, information check is not that rigid on online platforms, making the internet environment the perfect place for the diffusion of untrue stories. Although this is undoubtedly true, television and disinformation continue being connected one another.

It has been said that, since the 2016 elections, fake news have played an important role in political campaigns. They are defined as “*stories that are provably false, have enormous traction in the culture, and are consumed by millions of people*” (Radutzky 2017). Furthermore, they comprehend satire or parody, sloppy journalism, misinformation, misleading headlines and media and audience bias. So, there is evidence that the diffusion of

fake news is a phenomenon incorporated not just within social media and online journalism, but in television as well.

However, while online platforms and social networks such as Google, Facebook and Twitter have recently faced much pressure to restrain the spread of disinformation, due to the uncontrolled spread of political lies during the 2016 presidential elections, cable TV providers did not go through the same harsh process. Oliver Darcy, a CNN reporter, argues that providers “*have escaped scrutiny and dodged this conversation*”, even if they keep “*lending their platforms to dishonest companies that profit off of disinformation and conspiracy theories*” (Darcy 2021).

It can be said that it is evident that disinformation does not happen exclusively online. Nevertheless, while social media companies have managed to tackle false news, including President Donald Trump’s own tweets, the same cannot be said for what concerns television. Fox News has in fact increasingly been criticized for having both staff and guests supporting right-wing conspiracy theories, which included the fake theory claiming that the voting by mail procedure and the machines that counted votes were rigged and would steal the elections, making Joe Biden win. Eventually, these accusations were properly addressed by the Dominion Voting System for \$1.6 billion over false election fraud information. Despite having shown a conservative leaning bias, Fox News has still lost viewers to other farther-right networks, such as One American News Network.

The duty of determining whether communication platforms are at the service of the public interest was in the past given to public entities, such as the Federal Communications Commission. Furthermore, as both the Federal Court and Supreme Court decided in the past that when the Federal Commission reviewed television’s content in order to decide whether to renew their broadcast license or not, it did not violate their free speech right, as established in the First Amendment of the American Constitution. These measures are instead necessary for the protection of public interest against disinformation. On the other hand, cable channels such as Fox News and CNN, do not use public airwaves, as they are private companies, and the content they share is decided by their owners, whose final aim is not the promotion of public interest, but rather profit. However, it has been discussed that such networks should be controlled under a principle according to which content creators would not be owned by them like the distribution system is, so that they can decide not to engage with those who contribute to the diffusion of provocative lies. Another measure can be a self-regulation measure of cable networks that can help them in the establishment of an independent panel specialized in the examination of issues such as the spread of disinformation.

2.3 Television and 2020 Elections

2020 was probably the most bizarre year of this generation. It was characterized by an increasing political polarization and contrasting divisions, by a pandemic, which has led to a public health crisis, by numerous

concerns about the voting procedure, which many claimed was rigged, and by left and right accusations of disinformation. On the other side of the coin, as it has already been stated in the previous chapter, the 2020 elections hold the record as the largest total voter turnout in American history, with almost 160 million people who went to the polls. Political participation in 2020 was surprisingly high and many citizens claimed they were politically well-informed about the presidential candidates.

On this matter, a research carried out between September and November of that same year by Gallup (2020), which takes part in the Knight Foundation's Trust, Media and Democracy series, has discovered that, even if most people think American news media and democratic institutions have succeeded in the challenges of the latest electoral campaign, there still is mistrust among citizens, especially among Republicans. In particular, the survey has shown that Americans felt much more prepared if compared to past elections for the upcoming elections, as along the year and during the electoral campaign, they have followed national news, especially on television and their confidence about being able to make the right decision in the voting process grew. Thus, it can be said that in general they believed the media handed them all the necessary information they needed in order to make a conscious decision. This comprehends guidance on how to vote and details about the candidates.

Nevertheless, there are differences in the way supporters of the Republican Party and supporters of the Democratic Party believe the elections functioned: 55% of U.S. citizens are sure that the electoral process went well. Of this 55%, the 92% is made of Democrats, while nine over ten Republicans think the elections were not handled well. Partisan differences concern also how people think the media covered the campaign. *"Almost 60% of Americans think that the news media are responsible for their report of the election results and outcome"* (Knight Foundation 2020). In fact, 63% of Americans believed television projections were true when they projected the Democratic candidate Joe Biden as the winner of the elections. Only 17% of Republicans believed it, while the majority of them were Democrats.

There are three main categories of sources of information on television: **national network news**, **local news** and **cable news**. First of all, national network news comprehends the entertainment companies of Walt Disney Television, CBS Entertainment Group, and NBCUniversal Television and Streaming. Each one of them has its own news divisions, which respectively are ABC News, CBS News and NBC News, which in turn are divided into different programs based on the time slot. For instance, the corresponding weekend morning editions are named America This Morning on ABC, CBS Morning News on CBS, and Early Today on NBC, whereas on evenings ABC World News Tonight with David Muir, CBS Evening News with Norah O'Donnell, and NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt air. Local news, instead, are part of local broadcast television stations, which produce their own newscasts regarding mainly matters happening in those regions where they are located and whose targets are local citizens. Thus, the local news stories focus primarily on domestic issues that are relevant to local inhabitants. This does not mean that local news do not cover national or international

matters, as they do, but they are seen through local lenses. Finally, cable news channels such as MSNBC, owned by the NBCUniversal News Group, and Fox News Channel and CNN are TV networks entirely dedicated to the broadcast of TV news.

When analyzing the difference between Republicans and Democrats on their judgement over how their favorite news source covered the 2020 campaign, conservatives sour on cable news: around 80% of the interviewed claim they are satisfied with the coverage of their most used news source, which in the majority of cases is a national or a local television network. Also in this case, liberals are generally more satisfied, while voters of the Republican Party give a lower rating to the coverage, especially for what concerns cable television news. National news represents the top choice as a source of information for the electorate in 2020. More precisely, 49% of citizens paid great attention to national news in a pre-election survey especially for what concerns domestic matters, while interest towards international politics remained low. The level of attention towards television, however, grew right after the elections, as the election results were not immediately known because of the large amount of votes by mail, and people kept checking the national news for this reason. Also in this case, cable TV represents the main formal news source, as the 64% of the population used it to keep themselves informed about the election outcome, followed by national television news, while local TV was less used.

Among them, Americans value the election coverage of national networks and local TV news as the best one. On the other hand, opinions of cable TV channels' coverage differed due to partisan divisions: while conservative judgement decreased, going from a 45% excellent pre-election rating to a 29% one right after the election day, Democrats' rating of cable news coverage of the elections moved upwards, increasing from 61% to 73%.

As previously stated, television is not immune from political bias. In 2020 in particular, the electorate worried about disinformation and the spread of fake news. Almost the totality of Americans believe they were exposed to fake news during the electoral campaign, even more than during the 2016 elections. Another striking data on this matter should not be ignored: the 60% of US citizens, most of them Republicans, are sure that misinformation, defined as made up or inaccurate stories that are presented to viewers as if they are precise, has somehow had an impact on the outcome of the 2020 elections. In particular, *“both Republicans and Democrats are 15% more likely to believe headlines that are ideologically aligned”* (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, p. 213), meaning that supporters of both parties tend to cluster around their top cable news source and mainly believe information coming from it.

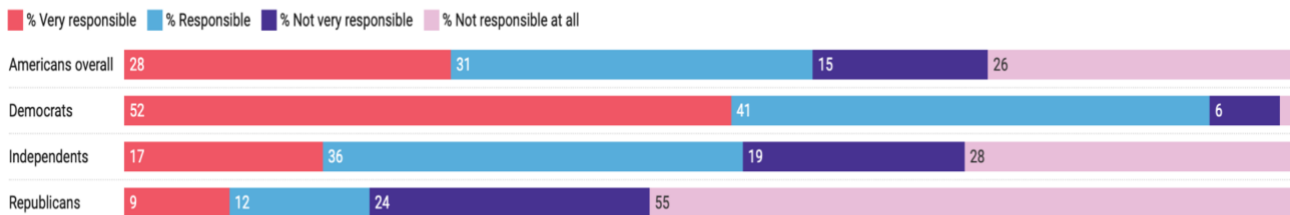
Despite this, the Gallup/Knight Foundation (2020) tells us that a small majority still affirms that news media have generally covered election results well, with 59% of citizens saying the media were responsible, even though Republicans do not agree, claiming that they were not responsible at all. The differences between

Democrats, Republicans and Independents concerning their judgement over news media coverage of the 2020 election results are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Opinions of News Media Coverage of the 2020 Election Results and Outcome

How responsible do you think the news media overall was in its reporting of the election results and outcome – very responsible, responsible, not very responsible or not responsible at all?



Values under 5% not displayed and "No answer" percentages not shown

Source: GALLUP/KNIGHT FOUNDATION, Nov. 9-15, 2020 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

More generally speaking, when analyzing people’s opinion on media coverage of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump’s electoral campaigns, Gallup/Knight (2020) data show that U.S. citizens find the coverage of Biden’s campaign as generally fairer than the one of his Republican counterpart. 53% of Republicans believe media coverage of Biden’s electoral campaign was consistently fair, while a much lower percentage, the 13%, says the same about Trump. The reason behind it is very simple and it is linked to the fact that Republicans tend to view the media ensemble as biased against them, whereas Democrats value the coverage of the two candidates’ campaigns in the same way. As previously stated, a greater percentage of Republicans does not trust media outlets and, in a study carried out by the Pew Research Center in late 2019, they expressed distrust rather than trust towards 20 of the 30 sources they were asked about. Jurkowitz, Mitchell, Shearer and Waker (2020) confirm that there were only a few media outlets that generated trust among Republican voters, and one of this is unsurprisingly Fox News.

But how did Americans really perceive their exposure towards misinformation? Another Gallup/Knight Foundation (2020) survey conducted in November comprehended a series of questions regarding their awareness towards misinformation. The results showed that almost the totality of those who were interviewed thought they came across a great deal of misinformation in that same year. Among them, 92% of Republicans said so, demonstrating a higher percentage than Democrats (80%). In particular, Americans think that the main source of misinformation along with social media is in fact television, especially cable television news. How come? The reason lies in the fact that major internet companies handled the spread of misinformation and disinformation in a different way by acting with the label of fake news as such in order to avoid a large-scale diffusion. The view of television as a source of fake news is mostly shared by supporters of the Republican party, who are more likely than their Democratic counterpart, not just to believe false information, but they are also more likely to believe they came across it on television, including national network TV and cable

television news. This explains why electors of the Republican Party have a low level of trust in mainstream media.

In the following paragraphs a comparison between two opposing media outlets that have often entered into conflict, CNN and Fox News, will be made and their attitude towards the 2020 US Presidential Elections will be explained.

2.4 CNN

CNN, which stands for Cable News Network, is one of the most important news-based television channels in the world. It is part of CNN Worldwide, a WarnerMedia News & Sport division of AT&T's WarnerMedia, and it is based in Atlanta. Founded in 1980, it was born as a non-stop cable news channel, so, after its launch, it became the first television channel that offered 24-hour news coverage to its public. CNN is now one of the major networks worldwide, with around 90 million television households as subscribers in the U.S., which represent almost 98% of households with cable television in the country. For Forbes (2019), its popularity is behind only to networks such as MSNBC and Fox News, which instead holds the biggest prime time rating.

What CNN is particularly famous for, apart from its breaking news live coverage, is the criticism under which it was exposed, as many have accused the network of trying too hard not to be partisan and it was subjected to allegations of party bias, in particular of leaning towards Democrats.

In order to understand if CNN effectively favors the Democratic Party through its coverage of daily news, those who watch it and the groups they belong to – Republicans, Democrats or Independent; young or old; White or Black or Latino – should be analyzed first. The typical CNN's audience persona is a woman with a university degree aged between 25 and 54, who is more inclined towards the political left, but at the same time is looking for a neutral source of information and prefers keeping herself informed through a national news portal rather than a local or an international one. Hashmi, Humphries, LaForge and Song (2021, p. 2) argue that the majority of the network's public is composed of upper-income individuals who have completed their education with a college degree.

A 2019 Pew Research Center survey clearly shows that, among the interviewees, the majority of subjects whose main political news source is CNN declared to be democrats or leaning democrats (79%), like Figure 7 in the following page illustrates. Contrarily, only 17% of them are republicans or leaning republicans and the remaining 4% is made of independents. This clearly proves that the network prevalently has a left-sided audience.

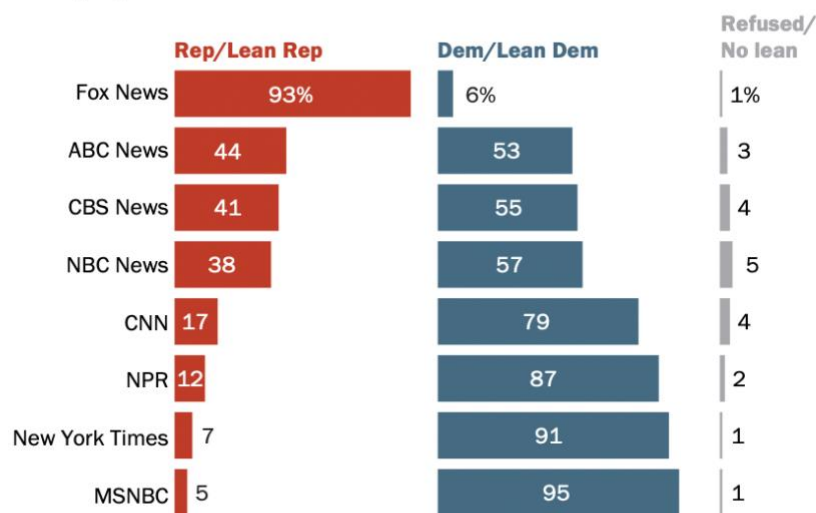
Looking at the average age, it has the highest percentage of young people compared to all other television networks, with 20% of the public aged 18-29, confirming itself to be the top TV source of news for young individuals who want to keep themselves informed of the political situation of the country.

For what concerns ethnicity, the Kaiser Family Foundation (2019) shows that 52% are white, 21% are black and 15% are Hispanic. These data reveal that CNN’s audience is heterogeneous enough, as around 60% of the total US population is made of white people, while black and Hispanic individuals are way less numerous, being respectively 18.5% and 12.2%. It is also important to note the fact that, among all networks of the survey, CNN is the source having the lowest percentage of white audience, being thus the most ethnically diverse.

Figure 7

U.S. adults who name Fox News or MSNBC as their main political news source are equally partisan

% who say they identify as ___ among those who name each as their main source for political and election news



Note: Main source asked as an open-ended question. Outlets mentioned by less than 2% as main source not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

About its approach in deciding what and how to cover, “CNN is often described as the odd man out in the cable news wars. Unlike Fox and MSNBC — whose prime-time programming is dominated by ideological hosts who tilt right and left respectively—its prime-time programming does not feature a dominant ideology” (Pew Research Center 2010) As a consequence, one may hypothesize that the outlet’s strength lies in its news agenda in terms of coverage, since it presents itself as a totally unbiased network.

However, CNN has still often been subjected to allegations of party bias during the years. For instance, the network was accused of contrasting treatment towards Republican and Democratic candidates during the 2007 presidential primaries. In fact, Shorenstein Center on Media (2007) demonstrates that the outlet had shown a tendency to cast a negative light on Republican candidates, with 40% of stories providing negative feedback on them, and only 14% were positive.

Nonetheless, the controversies did not end here: this was just the beginning. During the 2016 Presidential election, in April 2016, hundreds of Bernie Sanders supporters reunited outside CNN's Los Angeles headquarter in order to protest against how they handled the elections. In fact, they claimed CNN did not give enough airtime to Sanders in their stories, damaging his political campaign on purpose while favoring the other Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton. Other accusations of bias include the one linked to the WikiLeaks case, which published a series of emails proving that Donna Brazile, a CNN contributor, handed the questions to the team of Clinton for the CNN-sponsored presidential debate.

On January 14, 2020, in the middle of the Democratic Party presidential primaries debate that was being moderated by CNN, the network had to handle another controversy for political bias: many media experts and supporters of senator Sanders' electoral campaign argued in fact that the debate's moderators were visibly showing a bias against him in how they structured their questions. The network was accused of employing a rather centrist position, instead of remaining neutral, like Common Dreams (2020) reports. In fact, *"again and again, CNN anchors substituted centrist talking points for questions—and then followed up predictable responses with further centrist talking points, rarely illuminating any substantive disagreements between the candidates or problems with their policy positions"*. (Carter 2020)

Moreover, it is also believed that the network spread false news according to which an anonymous source confirmed that Bernie Sanders told Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren that it was impossible for a woman to become president. CNN came under fire for spreading this story, and Sanders responded by firmly denying the event, while Warren's staff chose not to give any further comment on the matter. The fact that CNN had chosen to deliver this story just before the presidential debate, in the opinion of many journalists, confirms the fact that the network is clearly politically biased, and that they tried to depict Sanders as a misogynist in order to favor other candidates whose political positions were more central.

Again, other newspapers and media outlets have noticed the CNN alignment against Sanders. *"The big loser of the night was the network that hosted the event. CNN was so consistently aligned against Bernie Sanders that it compromised its claim to journalistic neutrality"* (Heer 2020). Many magazines have consequently written articles where they argue that the cable news network was without any doubt politically biased against Sanders at the 2020 Democratic debate. Nonetheless, the consequences for his electoral campaign could also not be negative. As a matter of fact, the way CNN treated Bernie reflects a major problem that he had to face until when he suspended his campaign in April 2020: some of the major outlets in the mainstream media were clearly bold enough to cover him in a one-sided manner. This does not automatically mean that the electorate is inevitably influenced, as what Sanders tried to do was to mobilize his base, using these biases to fundraise and trying to find the support of his base in order to overcome the consistent negative media bias by networks such as CNN.

For what concern the CNN coverage of the Republican nominee, President Donald Trump, the relationship between the two has never been one of the most peaceful. Already in 2017, Trump said at a press conference

that the network was spreading fake news and refused to answer its reporter's questions with the following words: *"Your organization is terrible, I am not going to give you a question, you're fake news"* (Trump 2017). This happened as CNN had claimed that there was a dossier with documents that proved Russian interference in the American 2016 presidential elections.

Again, during the electoral campaign, the network's coverage of President Trump's administration was negative. A Harvard study that analyzed the main newscasts on CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC showed that 80% of CNN coverage of the former president's administration was negative, and just 20% positive. Furthermore, services comparing Trump and Trumpism to something close to a fascist social and political movement and addressing his son, Donald Trump Jr., appeared very frequently on the outlet's website, such as the one by Cillizza (2020), where he addressed the President's son, Donald Trump Jr., as doing the vilest work for his father's electoral campaign.

But did this so-called "CNN propaganda" against Trump eventually succeed? Fox News (2021) has claimed that a CNN staffer revealed that their political aim for the 2020 presidential elections was to remove the former President from the White House and favor the settlement of Joe Biden. If this were true, then the so-called CNN leftist propaganda has undoubtedly succeeded.

2.5 Fake News Awards

When Donald Trump was still president of the United States in 2017, he created the Fake News Awards with the aim of underlining which were the news outlets that, according to him, were responsible for damaging his image through the spread of false reports before and during his term of office. This idea was criticized by liberal media, such as the centre-left British newspaper The Guardian (2018), which highlighted its inconsistency, since they claimed the president was the one who constantly pushed conspiracy theories from the Oval Office. The winners were announced on January 17, 2018 and the list included reports comprehending also some comments made by journalists on their social media accounts and articles and reports that were eventually corrected. Before listing all the winners, a post appeared on the website on which the awards took place, saying: *"2017 was a year of unrelenting bias, unfair news coverage, and downright fake news. Studies have shown that over 90% of the media's coverage of President Trump is negative"* (GOP 2018).

One of the most cited sources was, of course, CNN, which won four awards. Much of the topics that were the object of fake news, according to the former US President, revolved around the investigations on Russian influence on the 2016 presidential elections, in particular about Russia's ties with the Trump electoral campaign, something that he has repeatedly denied throughout the years.

It is interesting to note the way CNN, for its part, covered this Fake News Awards news: they decided not to focus on how the President was referring to them as a corrupted and biased source of news, and thus unreliable, but instead they chose another type of narrative. Services talking about late night American comedians

renaming Trump's media awards #TheFakies and making their own sketches to get a nomination were the ones that the cable company chose to air. In addition, what many centre-left sided media networks criticized was the fact that Trump put in the list even those mistakes that journalists had immediately corrected and apologized for, listing them as disinformation and fake news.

MSNBC (2018), which politically tends to the left, called the ceremony “*boring*”. Moreover, they argued that there was no evidence of corruption and that the President's aim was to attack the free press, as it is no secret that he had labeled the press as the enemy of Americans.

The electorate reacted with great interest to these awards, especially the president’s base. The Guardian (2018) further reports that, while US citizens were relatively split on whether they trusted the media, with Democrats more likely to trust them, while Republicans being more diffident and aware of the presence of media bias, his electors had immediately rallied for Trump’s “*extraordinary assault on the first amendment*”.

2.6 Fox News

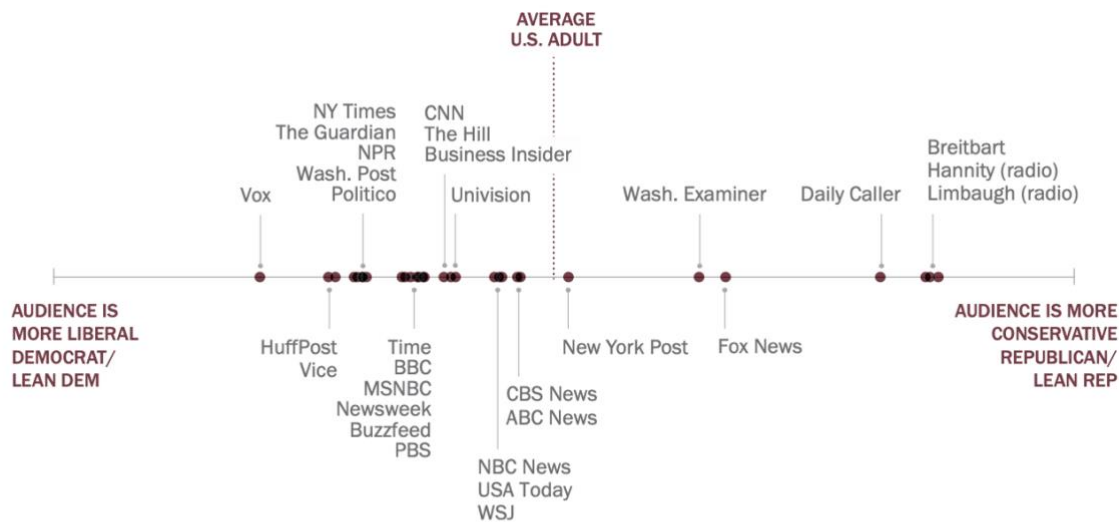
Fox News, whose original name is Fox News Channel (FNC), but also commonly known as Fox, is an American cable news television channel, whose headquarters are located in New York City. The network is known to be conservative and often compared to CNN. Fox News is property of Fox News Media, which in turn is owned by the Fox Corporation. The company is known worldwide, as it provides services to 86 countries, with international broadcasts as well.

FNC was founded in 1996 by Rupert Murdoch, a famous media mogul, in order to attract a more conservative audience. The initial audience was of 17 million cable tv subscribers, but the network further grew during the decades, reaching in 2018 around 87 million households, which compose more than the 90% of total television subscribers, being for a long time the “*ratings leader among cable news channels in the United States, ahead of CNN, MSNBC, and CNN Headline News*” (Calabrese 2005, p. 160). As their official website states, they dominated cable news in 2020, being once again for the fifth year straight the most-watched cable network since that their audience has followed them for the latest news about the election and the Covid-19 pandemic. Fox has often been at the center of many debates revolving around its hypothetical political bias favoring the Republican Party and its politicians and candidates, in particular towards the George W. Bush and the Donald Trump administrations, while depicting the Democratic Party under a negative light. It was criticized many times for spreading a pro-corporate and nationalistic propaganda and believed to be detrimental for the overall integrity of news. To these accusations, Fox News journalists have replied by saying that they deliver information in an independent and unbiased manner. In fact, the official network’s position towards their policy is that they operate “*independently of its opinion and commentary programming*” (Memmott 2004).

Especially during President Donald Trump’s term in office, FNC has been accused of being the Republican President and his administration’s spokesman, spreading propaganda that would favor him.

Also in this case, just like it was done some pages before with CNN, before analyzing the cable channel’s coverage of the 2020 Elections, a look should be given to its audience, making a comparison to the one of CNN. Who is the typical Fox News viewer? Ideologically speaking, the average Fox News’s audience persona is located at the right of the average American adult, but it is important to specify that it is not as far to the right as the audiences of some other outlets (Figure 8).

Figure 8



Note: Lists labeling multiple points are ordered from outlets with more liberal Democrat/lean Democratic audiences on top to outlets with more conservative Republican/lean Republican audiences on the bottom. Order of outlets does not necessarily indicate statistically significant differences. See methodology for details.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. “U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The Pew Research Center (2019) carried out a research through the ensemble the audiences of 30 news outlets on a scale based on the partisanship of those who claimed to have gotten political news from them. Based on this scale, the typical Fox News viewer tends to be conservative and a supporter of the Republican Party if compared to the average U.S. adult citizen, even though there are networks that are located even more at the right than Fox. About those who cite Fox News as their top political information, their average age is higher than the national average, while, concerning ethnicity, they tend to be white. Thus, while CNN is the top choice for millennials and the youngest part of the population for news concerning national and international politics, Statista (2021) data show that 57% of adults between 55 and 64 years old declare that they watched Fox News in 2017. In addition, the male percentage of the network’s audience is larger than the female one.

Pew Research Center (2020) concluded that, among the cable tv channel's audience, almost nine-in-ten are white: 87% identify their race and ethnicity as non-Hispanic white, a huge percentage if compared to the one of CNN, where white people composed the 52% of the total audience.

On the other hand, about the political orientation of Fox News audience, the Pew Research Center's Election News Pathways Project, an investigation conducted between 2019 and 2020 about what Americans know, hear and perceive about the latest presidential election, offers some interesting insights. For instance, about the rate of trust towards the network, the survey reveals that around 40% Americans trust Fox News, whereas nearly the same share does not. In particular, 43% of adults say they look at Fox News for political and election information, a share which is close to the ones that CBS and PBS have. On the other side, around 40% of U.S. adults as well do not trust Fox News, finding it politically biased and not objective enough. This percentage represents the highest share among all the 30 media outlets present in the survey, even ahead of CNN (32%). Since Fox News was born as a cable television channel addressed to a conservative public, it would be obvious that the majority of its viewers support the Republican Party, since the latter's ideology embraces American conservatism. Republicans trust Fox News more than any other television channel, while Democrats distrust it more than any other source, since they see it as inaccurate. Those who tend the most to trust Fox News are Conservative Republicans, so those who value individual liberty, oppose gun control and abortion, and support free-market economic policies, as around 75% of them say this. Contrarily, only the 51% of liberal or moderate Republicans, who are conservative on the economic perspective and more moderate-liberal on social matters, trust Fox News. The percentages of trust of both Republicans and Democrats towards CNN, Fox News and other networks is shown in Figure 9 on the next page.

What do those who say that Fox News is their first source of political news stand out on the main issue of the country? For what concerns President Trump, Fox News consumers tend to have a particularly positive opinion of the president, but this is no surprise, since the majority of those who name the channel as their top source of political news identify as Republican or leaning Republican. For instance, 63% of the network's public believes that the president has done an excellent job in handling the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, FNC viewers have a negative opinion of Democratic politicians and candidates. It is interesting what Gramlich (2020) notices in his report: Fox's public tends to give a low rating to the Democratic Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and to the Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

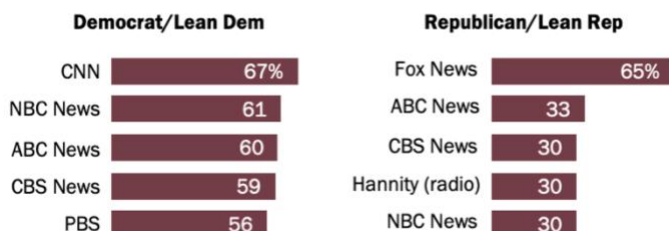
As easily imaginable, Fox has often been accused of political bias favoring the Republican Party, especially to manipulate the news in order to ease the re-election of Trump. For example, it was cited many times for actively using its right-wing position at the core of the conservative media ecosystem to support him, especially regarding one of the allegations that the president had to face: the accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 elections. What Fox News did was airing a story about another alleged scandal involving Hillary Clinton, saying that *"the BIG Russia story is the fact that Bill and Hillary Clinton, because of her position as Secretary*

of State, were able to cash in on one of the largest scandals that have ever involved the United States” (Fox News 2017).

Figure 9

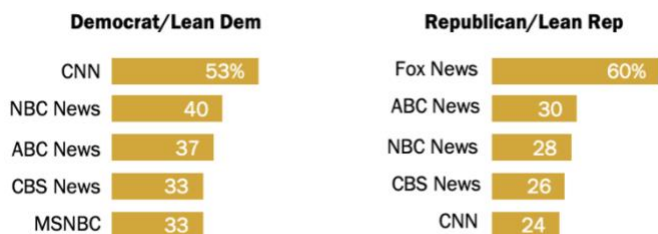
Republicans place trust in one source, Fox News, far more than any other ...

% who trust each source for political and election news (first 5 shown)



... and rely on Fox News far more for political news

% who got political and election news from each source in the past week (first 5 shown)



Note: Order of outlets does not necessarily indicate statistically significant differences.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

"U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Attacks to the network claiming that it has contributed to the spread of fake news for the re-election of the Republican president have also been very frequent. In particular, CNN has more than once argued that Fox was misleading their public about Trump’s actual chances of winning, arousing a “tsunami of misinformation”. CNN claims in fact that the right-wing outlet is so full of pro-Trump commentary and coverage that its public feels that a Biden win would be a fraud. Brian Stelter (2020) has enlisted for CNN a series of ways through which Fox has encouraged its Trumpist propaganda:

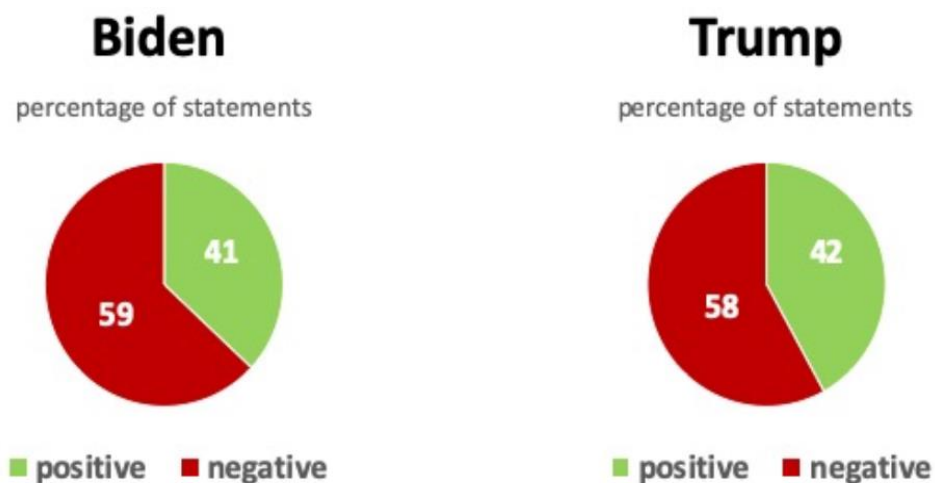
- Fox News shows have portrayed Joe Biden as sleepy, corrupt and crooked and Kamala Harris as an anti-American, unelectable radical (Fox News 2020; Sigman and O’Reilly 2020)
- Fox News shows have constantly claimed that a minority of people are actually the "silent majority."
- The network has also emphasized state polls that are irregular
- Fox News has ignored the disinformation coming out from the President’s mouth

CNN also depicts as an example of misinformation brought by Fox News a banner during Tucker Carlson's special Sunday hour, which stated *"BIG ENTHUSIASM FOR TRUMP DESPITE CONFLICTING POLLS"*. This was not an isolated case, as other FNC shows had similar headings such as *"MASSIVE ENTHUSIASM FOR TRUMP"* and *"TRUMP CLOSING THE GAP IN KEY BATTLEGROUND STATES"*. (Fox News 2020) For this reason, many worried about the network's coverage of the election night, fearing that they would refuse to call states for Biden and that it would not recognize a Democrat win.

Objectively speaking, their overall coverage was surprisingly closer to the normal coverage of recent presidential candidates. Biden's coverage by Fox was divided between a 59% negative one and a 41% positive one, while Trump's one split 58% negative to a positive 42%. It may be surprising what Patterson (2020, p. 7) denotes: even for the Republican nominee, the negative percentage is higher than the positive one, but the truth is that no presidential candidate, except for Barack Obama, has received more favorable than negative coverage. Figure 10 clearly illustrates this situation.

In addition, the percentage of negative statements towards Trump by Fox is still much lower than the one of other networks, such as CBS, for instance, which records the 95%.

Figure 10



Source: Media Tenor, weekday evening newscasts from June 22-November 3, 2020. Excludes statements that had no clear tone, which accounted for roughly half of all statements.

Let us now focus on the coverage of Donald Trump's impeachment process. The New York Times (2021) notices a difference in the way media outlets have narrated it: while cable networks such as MSNBC and CNN have depicted it as a *"very powerful"* scene, for the conservative network it was *"irrational"* and *"asinine"*, suggesting through the careful use of words that the whole situation was bizarre.

Murdoch's network was also attacked for its coverage of Joe Biden's electoral campaign, spreading the fake news that the Democratic nominee's electoral program for climate comprehended the reduction of red meat, in particular hamburgers, as reported in an article for the Independent by Graziosi (2021). Fox was also the creator of services denouncing the mainstream media's cooperation with Biden, such as the one at the Tucker Carlson Tonight, which called other networks "*disgusting*" and the "*most dishonest institution in the U.S.*" (Carlson 2021). This was due to the fact that, according to the presenter, those networks had started a love affair with the blue candidate. Other stories which damaged Trump's opponent's electoral campaign were the ones concerning his son Hunter Biden, accused by the network of industrial-scale levels of corruption. When asked about the allegations, Joe Biden replied that it was a just a "*smear campaign*" and, in fact, no criminal activity was proved and there has been no evidence of the accusations so far, according to what BBC (2021) reports. However, Americans were still influenced by the matter and, for Fox News (2020), people were starting to reassess the whole Biden Campaign.

Although Fox had to face numerous negative judgements of being too much politically sided, the heaviest allegation was the one that the Dominion Voting System sent it. What had happened was in fact that a FNC host, Jeanine Pirro, promoted some baseless allegations accusing both Dominion Voting System and Smartmatic, two companies that had provided the voting machines necessary for the 2020 elections, of being rigged and having conspired against Trump to make Biden win. Thus, NBC News (2021) reports that Dominion filed a \$1.6 billion defamation lawsuit against the network in 2021, claiming that Murdoch's company had spread conspiracy theories about them, allowing hosts and guests to make disinformation about the company.

The Fox News information about presumed rigged elections had a huge impact on the electorate, especially on Trump supporters. As a matter of fact, the conservative channel was the last one to make the call about Biden's win, 16 minutes after all the other major networks had projected the actual President as the winner, and many argue that it has influenced the wave of pro-Trump protests after the Election Day, such as the one that occurred in Washington DC in January 2021.

3. Chapter 3: Social media and disinformation in 2020 U.S. Elections

3.1 Social media, information and disinformation

As stated in Chapter 1, the so called “digital revolution” has allowed the mass spread and consumption of the Internet, letting social media develop as a tool accessible to everyone. Through its use, politicians can in fact deliver messages to the population, making them acquire a public function, so that they have quickly turned into a political instrument. Every politician has their own Facebook, Twitter and Instagram account where to make announcements and updates. Van Dijck (2013) and Kannasto (2020) say that their presence on social media is necessary, since the electorate plays the part of consumers and politicians, party and policies are instead the products that need to be sold to them. Candidates often build a certain public persona image, just like a personal brand, in order to increasingly gain popularity among citizens and consequently get more votes. Some of them might do it through the use of controversies, for instance.

Moreover, because of more direct communication, social media are ideal places for the spread of information and the delivery of news as well. All the major newspapers, television channels and news agencies operate online too. Articles are not printed just on paper, but they are also posted online, assuming the characteristics that are proper of the digital world: they have to be immediate, but also do not have to lack the depth of paper news. But online newspapers are not the most innovative feature of the new information wave. As a matter of fact, thanks to social media, everyone can now be a journalist. How many times did we see posts with an informational aim when scrolling through Instagram stories, for instance, concerning American racial issues or police brutality? This new form of journalism allows ordinary people to play an active role in the delivery of news, by collecting information through pictures, videos and words and by offering their analysis on what is happening. All this is possible thanks to the new media technology, which, differently from mainstream media outlets, has let everyone have a voice and a platform. This is citizen journalism. It can be defined as *“when the audience employs the press tools it has in its possession to inform one another”* (Rosen 2008). Citizen journalism has been useful many times, especially when reporters could not immediately reach some areas where a specific event was occurring. For instance, in the case of an earthquake or a terrorist attack, situations in which professional journalists cannot immediately reach the place of events, those who are already there, and thus become eyewitnesses, can report what is happening much more quickly. Moreover, about the spread of citizen journalism, this rhetoric question is particularly interesting: *“After all, when citizens’ trust of journalism was so low and when they were soon going to have access to liberating new digital platforms, why would they confine themselves to the traditional news organizations’ initiatives led by professional journalists?”* (Min 2016). The overall distrust in mainstream media outlets has in fact played a major role in the rise of this type of news diffusion.

However, citizen journalism, along with information spreading on social networks, might be heavily opinionated and thus biased. In fact, as previously stated in chapters 1 and 2, if even official television and newspapers, which are supposed to be completely objective, can be biased and thus have destabilizing effects

on the electorate, the risk of relying on inaccurate information, whose correctness has not been verified when counting on news read on social media, is even higher. It is no surprise then that fake news is an increasing problem online.

According to a Pew Research Center (2016) survey, 23% of Americans had intentionally or unintentionally shared a fake story. In addition, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the study showed that it was on social networks, mostly Facebook, that fake news were more widely shared. On the other hand, Silverman (2016) argues that the most popular authentic and verified stories were not as much shared as their popular fake news counterpart. Parkinson (2016) further adds that this is why many political scientists have insinuated that disinformation on social media has actually had an impact on the outcome of the 2016 elections.

Social media disinformation has been defined as *“false information that is purposely spread to deceive people”* (Lazer et al. 2018, p. 2). It thus comes from news articles that are purposefully fake and misleading and that has the aim of deceiving online users who come across them. This is much different from misinformation, which had been defined some pages before as an unintentional spread of false information that has no intent to be harmful. Since the majority of people who use social networks have no intention of contributing to the diffusion of untrue data and facts, as noted by Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli (2020), misinformation in some way is more popular than disinformation, but it is also even more dangerous, as deviant news in this case are unknowingly shared and their impact might be greater. Additionally, the creation of echo-chambers – social media bubbles inside which everyone is like-minded and shares the same opinion, leading to a space where there is just one common view and individuals tend to distrust those who are on the outside – and epistemic bubbles, where users are just focused on their own feed and are not exposed to other opinions, has increasingly favored social media to exposure to disinformation. What one would need for Nguyen (2020, p. 154) is exposure to excluded information. In fact, if, for instance, a Republican has a Twitter feed made of just posts of Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, along with those of other Republican users, it is unlikely that they will come across posts of politicians, blogs and outlets of a different political orientation. Differently from the mainstream media outlets analyzed in Chapter 2, then, social media disinformation is primarily driven by single users, who inaccurately report facts that, in most cases, are not subjected to fact-checking.

Both Twitter and Facebook, one with 330 million and the other one with more than 2.5 billion active users every month, represent the most important online platforms for political information. In particular, Facebook was defined on the New York Times Magazine as the *“largest and most influential entity in news business, commanding an audience greater than that of any European or American television news network, any newspaper or magazine in the Western world and any online news outlet”* (Manjoo 2017).

It has also been argued that some political forces and entities have taken advantage of the facility through which news flow and spread on social media to deliberately manipulate information, with the aim to affect the political opinion of the electorate. In particular, deviant agents organize the fake news they want to spread by

copying reliable sources in order to disguise unsuspecting individuals and make them believe them. The online flow of fake information can take many forms: fake news can be organized in a text, but it can also take the form of images, videos or audios.

This issue has been studied by many researchers from countless perspectives. For example, the difference between the online diffusion of fake and true news has drawn attention and has been an object of study by many communication scholars. One of the most urgent questions concerning fake news is the one referring to the motivations lying behind these deviant agents. As previously stated, they can take political profits from it, but they can also have economic, financial and ideological motivations. The main parties that move round online disinformation in North America were identified by Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018): parties linked to the Russian government, right-wing bodies, peer-to-peer networks and campaigns that employ marketing tools. However, also foreign States' governments are also involved in their manufacture, such as Iran and China, along with the previously cited Russia, for their interests in the international asset.

How can the phenomenon of online fake news and disinformation be mitigated? The answer lies in fact-checking, which verifies the truthfulness of news. While in classic journalism fact-checking implies the control of the information before they are published or made available to the audience, the same process for online fact-checking occurs after the post has gone public and it is often done by independent checkers. Thus, more than a prevention, it is a mechanism of investigation. An operation that contributes to the verification of online information by exposing disinformation is debunking, which is a recent practice of usage of scientific methods in order to refute claims that do not have factual bases. Debunking is today used to dismantle made-up stories in political communication and might then result in re-corrected statements. These corrections may be helped by social media themselves, which, thanks to their algorithms but also thanks to other users, can help in rectifying untrue assertions.

Nonetheless, what actually helps social media users as their guideline towards online disinformation are the comments of others. In fact, according to a research made by Jonas Colliander (2019), other users' attitude and reaction towards fake news appear to be more effective than actual disclaimers.

The problem with online disinformation is that, while they have managed to become a threat for democracy in a very short amount of time due to the explosion of the digital revolution, eradicating them is neither easy nor quick. Moreover, Iosifidis and Nicoli (2020) conclude that, as liberal democracies start familiarizing more and more with online disinformation, they will find out further solutions and ways to combat it.

3.2 Social media disinformation and 2020 U.S. Elections

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the term "fake news" has gained popularity, becoming also President Trump's favorite catchphrase. In particular, the narrative that during the months prior to the election day social networks, especially Facebook, were filled with fake news stories aimed at changing the electoral

outcome was known to everyone, causing an “informational moral panic”. This concept is strictly linked to the definition by Matt Carlson (2020) of moral panic as a form of public anxiety that a social menace will bring to declining quality. Concerning online fake news, this public anxiety is directed to the enlargement of informational spaces, which has been occurring thanks to social media. On Twitter, 25% of the tweets analyzed by a media outlets’ clarification were guilty of spreading either untrue or extremely biased information. Another interesting finding was that, like Bovet and Makse (2019) notice, while top influencers that were sharing mainly center and left leaning news had mostly influenced Hillary Clinton voters, this causal relationship was reversed for what concerns fake news: Trump supporters had instead influenced the dynamics of the top disinformation spreaders.

It can be said that, four years later, the pattern has stayed the same. Specifically, theories about alleged fraud in mail-in voting for the November elections, which made Americans believe their democracy was dangerously exposed to threats and manipulation, were supported and spread online by Republicans for the most part through tweets or Facebook posts. The former President had in fact posted countless warnings both on Twitter and Facebook on the matter, which were later retweeted and shared by his followers. This fraud narrative had begun some months before Election Day on the two previously cited social networks, with texts denouncing the fact that mail-in ballots cast for the Republican President had been thrown in dumpsters or rivers. Thus, according to these online posts, Democrats were trying to rig the 2020 presidential elections in order to make Joe Biden win. The theory was supported by Trump’s own campaign and by his supporters, but it did not have any impact on the outcome of the election: despite claims of problems with signatures, envelopes and postal marks on votes through mail as well as lost ballots, the legal challenges filed by Trump were rejected by the Court.

Even after the closure of electoral polls, these theories continued to swarm on social media, reaching millions and millions of people who keep believing that the final results and Biden’s victory are actually a fraud. For example, a social post by Eric Trump, Donald Trump’s son, inaccurately affirmed that in Wisconsin, the number of votes exceeded the number of American citizens registered to vote, suggesting the rigged elections option. Consequently, *“tweets and retweets with terms such as “steal”, “fraud”, “rigged” and “dead” referring to the election spiked more than 2,800% from Nov. 2 to Nov. 6”* (Seitz, Klepper and Ortutay 2020). Despite the claims, there was no evidence of fraud in the 2020 presidential elections, as international observers and both Republican and Democrat voting officials have checked the truthfulness of the ballot counting process and, thus, confirmed that there had not been any serious anomaly.

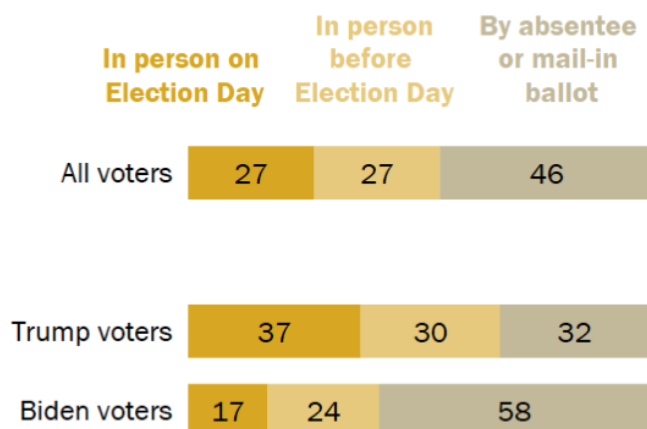
While voting results were not altered by this flow of disinformation about the voting procedure, voters’ behavior was nonetheless affected. How was the voting experience in 2020? An answer to this question can be given by the graph in Figure 11 below. The image shows the voting pattern differences between Biden and Trump voters and the respective percentages of in person or mail-in voting. The Pew Research Center (2020) confirms that 67% of those who voted for Trump declared they voted in person, compared with 41% of Biden

voters. The difference between the two percentages is notable. Moreover, 37% of Trump voters casted their ballot in person on Nov. 3, the Election Day, whereas only 17% of Democrats did the same.

Figure 11

Biden voters nearly twice as likely as Trump voters to say they voted by mail

% who voted ...



Notes: Based on voters. No answer responses not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 12-17, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Even the percentage of those who voted in person before Election Day is higher among Trump voters than among Biden supporters. How come?

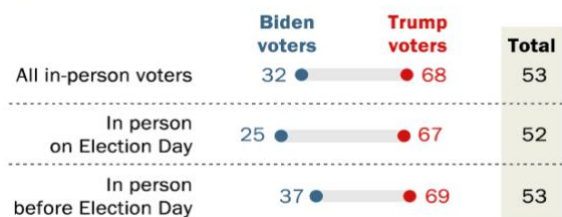
Among those who voted in person, 68% of Trump supporters claim they casted their ballot in presence due to worries about the voting by mail procedure. In contrast, a tinier percentage of in-person Biden voters (32%) voted in person for the same reason. If we further split into categories those who voted in person among early voters and voters on the election day, the same pattern can be observed: between in-person Election Day voters, the gap between Democrats and Republicans with the same motivation is even larger, as Trump supporters are more likely than Biden voters to say that concerns about the voting by mail process were a major reason for voting the way they did (Figure 12).

On the other side, more than the half of those who voted for Biden decided to vote by mail because of the Covid-19 situation, while only 20% of Trump supporters did it for the same reason. The gap further enlarges if the category of those who voted in person prior to the Election Day is taken into account. Here, 27% of Biden voters, opposed to just 6% of Trump voters, said they chose the anticipated voting procedure due to Covid-19 concerns.

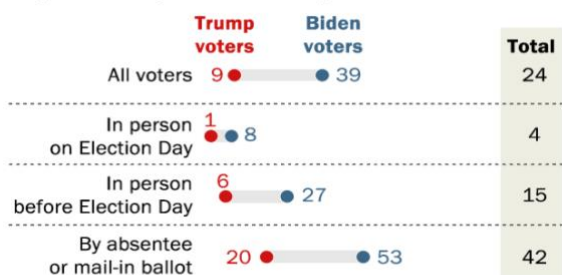
Figure 12

Most Trump voters who cast ballots at a polling place say concerns about voting by mail was a major reason for doing so

Among in-person voters who voted _____, % who say concerns about voting by mail were a major reason for why they voted using the method they did



Among those who voted _____, % who say concerns about the coronavirus were a major reason for why they voted using the method they did



Notes: Based on voters. Only voters who voted in person were asked whether concerns about voting by mail were a reason for their decision to vote in person.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 12-17, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Prof. Kate Starbird, expert of online misinformation, claims that these fake claims will probably carry on for some years. Moreover, due to the echo-chamber phenomenon and to epistemic bubbles, users who believed these theories were only exposed to one single version of facts and saw those who did not believe in the manipulation of the ballots as untrustworthy. In fact, social media algorithms have been designed in such a way that individuals are grouped together in these digital rooms, making them victims of their own internet surfing habits. As a result, they tend to reject everything situated outside their own bubbles, polarizing partisanship affiliation and opinions on political and social matters even more, from the 2020 elections to the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic or racism. This is even worsened by the so-called “boomerang effect”, according to which when you tell someone that they are wrong, their belief further strengthens instead of toning down.

For Garramone (1985), the boomerang effect also causes the possibility that negative advertising will eventually

boomerang against previously candidates that were previously favored. Thus, it could have been possible that attacks by news media towards Trump would rebound on him and affect the elections outcome leading to a Republican win.

In the following sub-chapters, the role that two of the most used social media sites in the United States, Facebook and Twitter, have played concerning disinformation and the spread of fake news that have affected voters’ behavior in the 2020 elections will be analyzed. These two platforms are particularly important in the study of disinformation is 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections because, if on one hand some Democrats argued that the flow of pro-Trump misinformation took place especially online, and most precisely through Facebook posts and official tweets by the president himself, some Republicans talk back saying that both outlets are politically biased and leaning towards Biden, as they have tried to apply censorship on the authentic warnings they were sharing.

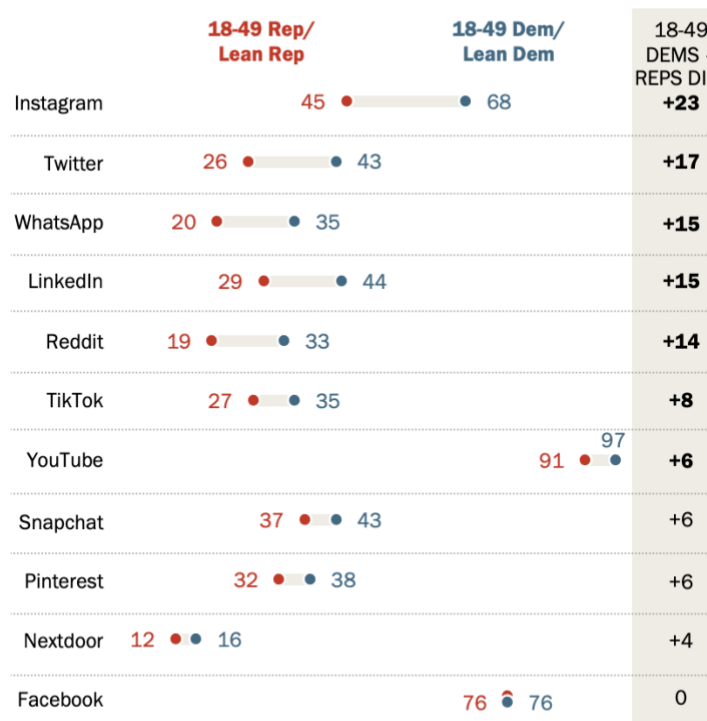
3.3 Facebook

With 2.7 billion monthly active users, Statista (2021) cites Facebook as the most popular and used social network in the world. As Figure 13 demonstrates, while Democrats and Leaning Democrats are more likely than Republicans and Leaning Republicans to often use social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, partisan differences in the use of Facebook are absent (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that supporters of both parties, most precisely the 76%, constantly log into Facebook.

With that many consumers, each one of them with the power to write and share whatever they find interesting, it is not unusual for people to come across some news that turn one’s nose up, such as new and bizarre voting procedures, or the fact that the Pope would support Trump for the presidency or even that George Soros was actually the “bad guy” manipulating the outcome for his own interests. They mainly come from pages, which allow the sharing of posts to everyone, but also from Facebook groups, which can be either public or private and, in the latter case, they are more difficult to be found and corrected.

Among adults under 50, large partisan gaps in use of Instagram, Twitter

% of U.S. adults ages 18 to 49, by political party, who say they ever use ...



Note: Statistically significant differences in bold. The DIFF values shown are based on subtracting the rounded values in the chart. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25–Feb. 8, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 13

Many criticize Facebook, saying that it could have prevented the spread of countless fake news regarding the Presidential Elections that had later received billions of views. In particular, the social network was accused of “*creating the conditions that swept America down the dark path from election to insurrection*” (Bergengruen and Perrigo 2021, p. 4), referring thus to the post-election chaos caused by those who kept claiming the falsification of electoral results. Bergengruen and Perrigo (2021) continue by saying that Facebook could have prevented around 10 billion views on the platform’s most well-known pages that had frequently shared false information during the electoral campaign. For instance, along with the previously cited examples, during summer 2020, at the peak of Black Lives Matter protests and increases of Covid-19 cases, the report showed how

the 100 most popular spreaders of misinformation obtained millions more interactions than the top classic 100

American media pages all combined. These are huge numbers, but the most alarming factor is that the data do not include Facebook Groups sharing misinformation, so that the real number is even bigger.

However, it has to be said that Zuckerberg’s company has done a lot to tackle the issue, probably more than any other social media outlet. One week before Election Day, the social network temporarily stopped all political ads. The aim was to “*protect the integrity of the American elections by fighting interference, misinformation and voter suppression*” (Facebook 2020). Furthermore, between March and the Election Day, Facebook started adding warning labels to more than 180 million posts that were spreading false information about the American elections, trying to stem misinformation and disinformation. In addition to flagging this kind of posts, the platform further added captions with correct information about voting procedure as well as links that led to electoral information coming from trusted sources. Moreover, like Danielle Abril (2020) writes on Fortune, the platform also managed to remove around 265,000 posts both on Facebook and Instagram – the two of them are owned by Zuckerberg – for policy violation against voter suppression.

Below, some Facebook posts of former president Donald Trump will be examined in order to fully illustrate the outlet’s measures against misinformation.

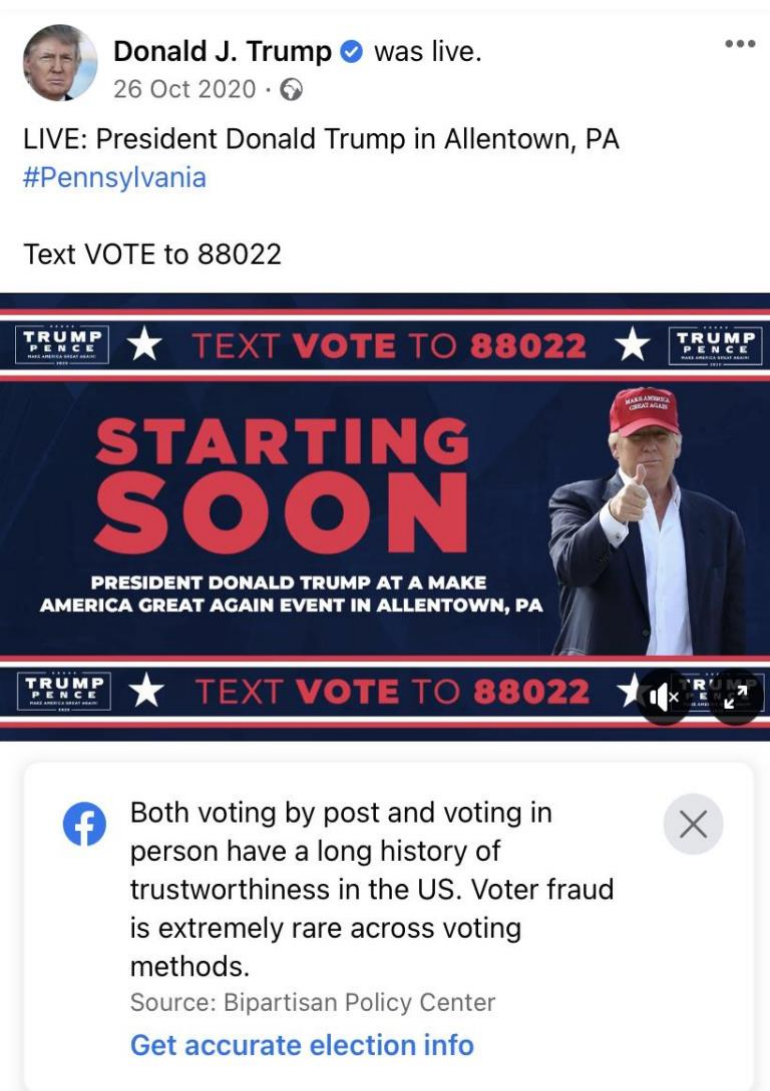


Figure 14

In Figure 14, Donald Trump posted on October 26, 2020 a live video of an electoral campaign rally in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Under the live stream video, Facebook had put a heading, flagging the post with a warning for its users and specifying that “*both voting by post and voting in person have a long history of trustworthiness in the US. Voter fraud is extremely rare across voting methods*” (Facebook 2020). With this caption, along with the text in bold “*get accurate election info*”, a correction about what Trump had said in the video was made, pointing also to the Bipartisan Policy Center as an accurate and reliable source of political information about the upcoming elections.

Similarly, in Figure 15, below a post by the Republican President claiming that Covid-19

cases were increasing only because the percentage of tested individuals on total population was up as well, Facebook put another disclaimer stating that users have various options to safely cast their vote even in times of pandemic. Also in this case, the post refers to a link leading to reliable Bipartisan Policy Center information.

Figure 15

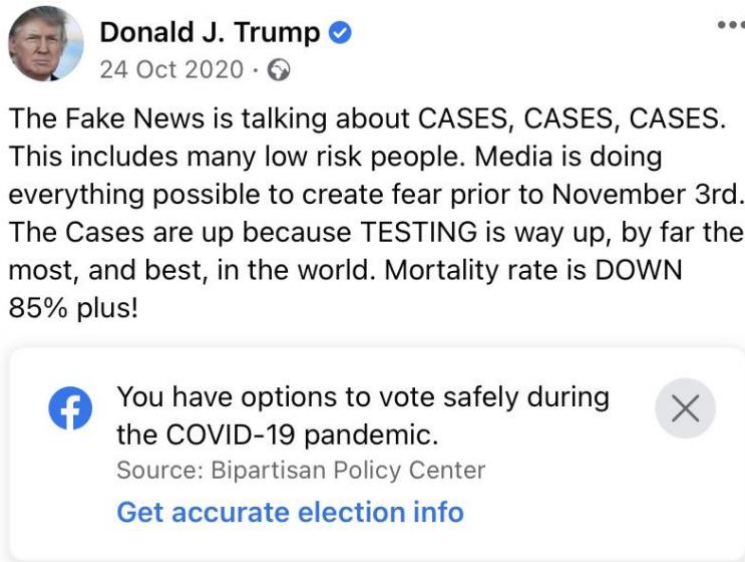
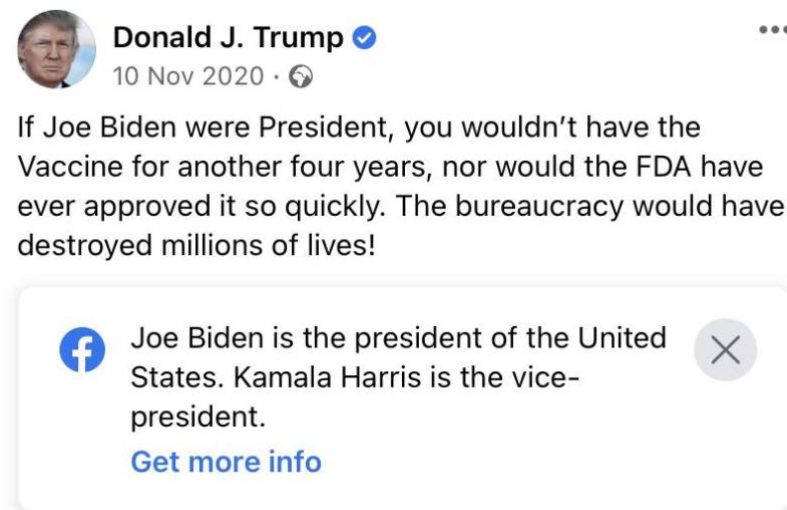


Figure 16



Finally, in Figure 16, Facebook added a caption to a post where Trump questioned Biden's victory, underlined by the phrase "*if Joe Biden were president*". It dates back to Nov. 10, thus after Election Day and after all projections had confirmed the Democratic candidate's election on Nov. 7. In this banner, Zuckerberg's platform specified that Biden was, in fact, President-Elect.

However, despite the fact that Facebook has done a demanding work for identifying misinformation, the accurate number of how many election-related fake news it did not manage to reach is unknown. As a consequence, whether those 180 million flagged posts represented a solid majority on the total lies scattered around the social network or not. have any numbers for how many election-related lies that it missed.

While Democrats are not completely with Facebook's fact-checking work, saying that it did not do enough to avoid the huge flow of mis and dis-information, Republicans remark that the platform was unjustly biased against conservatives, flagging only posts by them and leaving the fake news spread by Democrats out of their censorship policy.

3.4 Twitter

With around 192 million daily active users, according to data by Statista (2021), Twitter is in the top 10 of the world's most popular social network platforms. It is used by almost a quarter of American adults.

As an important social network and a powerful tool that lets everyone voice their opinions, Twitter plays a critical role in strengthening the democratic conversation: by guiding civic participation, making political debates easier, and enabling citizens to hold those who are in power accountable for their actions, the “bird app” proves to be the main platforms on which politicians and their electors meet. This adoption of social media outlets by public political personas as an instrument of political conversation with the electorate is likely to generate new and more modern forms of communication and dialogue that allow a more accurate intertwining of interactions, as a direct dialogue between a political candidate or politician can personally interact with their followers.

Moreover, Twitter can also be a tool to increase one's popularity and thus, besides having more closeness with electors, politicians use it to try to expand their supporters. Popularity on twitter is usually linked to the “rich-get-richer” effect, explained by Enjolras (2014): those who already have it, manage to increase it even more. In fact, one's influence on Twitter is positively related to their degree of interactive usage and the popularity level.

As it was previously expressed, Twitter might allow a more direct dialogue between presidential candidates, politicians and citizens and a more immediate way to get information concerning national politics. However, this first-hand interaction and this critical online dialogue needs to be protected by every attempt trying to undermine it, which can be either domestic or foreign. Consequently, Jack Dorsey's platform followed Facebook's footsteps and introduced captions that were flagging some tweets as inaccurate and misleading as well.

On Election Night, the platform updated its policy, stating: *“We do not allow anyone to use Twitter to manipulate or interfere in elections or other civic processes, and recently expanded our civic integrity policy to address how we'll handle misleading information surrounding these events. Under this policy, we will label*

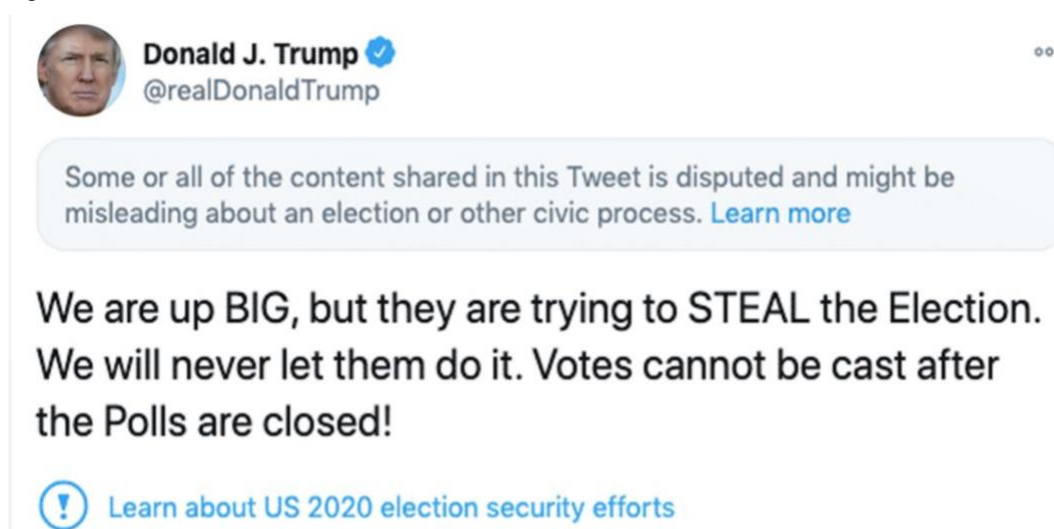
Tweets that falsely claim a win for any candidate and will remove Tweets that encourage violence or call for people to interfere with election results or the smooth operation of polling places.” (Twitter 2020)

Twitter has also worked to protect the correct functioning of the 2020 Elections since the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election. Among the measures they have done there is the creation of a hub that comprehended reliable news and different resources to clarify the voting procedure, as well as the institution of labels, warning users of the presence of potentially harmful and ambiguous contents. As a result, the “quote tweeting” function of flagged tweets – where users could add their commentary to the original tweet – diminished, since they might be contributing to the spread of misleading news.

The company’s team has also underlined some actions concerning the Elections that they would not permit: for instance, platform’s users, including candidates for office, could not claim an electoral win before it was effectively called. This call had to be made by either State election officials or by a public projection coming from at least two reliable and official national news media outlets. Thus, premature calls were not allowed nor recognized by the social network, which provided to flag all misleading tweets with incorrect electoral results, including those of President Trump himself, similarly to Facebook.

In Figure 17, a tweet by Donald Trump declaring that Democrats were trying to steal the Election has been flagged by Dorsey’s platform. Above it, there is a heading, saying that the tweet’s content is misleading, while under it the caption “*learn about US 2020 election security efforts*” is accompanied by an exclamation mark, in order to make Twitter’s new policies for the elections more visible.

Figure 17



After having described the measures that both Facebook and Twitter have applied in order to limit the circulation of fake news, it is now time to answer the following question: how were vote shares affected?

A study from Princeton University carried out by Fujiwara, Müller and Schwarz (2021) has affirmed that exposure to Twitter has in fact slightly lowered the Republican vote share in the 2020 Election. In fact, Twitter's relatively liberal content might have played a major role in convincing those who had centrist or moderate political ideas not to vote for Donald Trump. The result is thus congruous to the idea that the bird app's liberal orientation has the power to persuade voters to alter their political position. This is seen by many as a consequence of the enormous media influence on political polarization, which might lead to an involuntary harm to democracy by social networks, while others insistently claim that social media outlets are politically sided with Democrats, and thus biased against Republicans.

They are not all wrong: the content on social networks, especially on Twitter, tends to be left leaning. A Pew Research Center (2019) analysis demonstrates that, even though a cluster of right-wing groups exists, 60% of Twitter users identify as Democrats, whereas only 35% say they are Republicans. Even during Trump's presidency, 26% of American citizens subscribed on Twitter kept following former President Barack Obama, while only 19% were following Trump. Thus, Twitter has mainly a Democrat nest of users who disapprove the former Republican President's politics.

Despite the fact that social media platforms allow users to decide which content they see on their feed, it can be said that the content that is on Twitter tends to lean towards the Democratic Party, together with the fact that Democratic politicians are usually more popular than their Republican counterparts.

3.5 Section 230

Section 230 is a piece of Internet legislation in the United States that was introduced in 1996 as part of the Communication Decency Act, in a period of time when Internet was spreading all over the world, and a digital revolution without precedents was occurring. It grants immunity for internet websites from content posted by third parties. In fact, if someone posts misleading or harmful posts on Facebook or Twitter, according to Section 230, the two outlets cannot be held accountable for it and sued, but only private users will be prosecuted for what they posted on online spaces. Social media outlets can however remove all contents they find offensive or violating their rules and policies.

Nonetheless, after President Trump had first received a warning for a tweet of him, which was flagged by the platform as misleading and inaccurate, he decided to legally act, by signing an executive order that asked for the change of Section 230. The tweet was reported because it contained insinuations concerning the voting by mail process, accused by Trump of being controlled by Democrats in order to rig the elections and favor Joe Biden. After his tweet was labelled as misleading, Twitter further added a link that redirected users to an article by CNN, a cable channel accused multiple times of being liberally biased, to clarify the mistakes. As a result, the former President accused Twitter of wanting to interfere with his electoral campaign, along with denouncing big social media companies of being all aligned against him. Consequently, what he did was to

ask for a modification of Section 230, concerning the “too strong protection” that social media enjoy thanks to it. Still, this choice was not positively welcomed by a large part of public opinion: journalists, scholars and lawyers such as Eliza Bechtold (2020) and have accused the President of wanting to kill the most important law regulating online free speech. Trump was accused of wanting to censor any critics to his Presidency by using the excuse of protecting national security, through the repeal of Section 230, an action considered by many as an attempt to get rid of the sacrosanct right of criticizing those in power by citizens of a democratic country.

However, if Trump was right in his claiming that social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter are biased against him, and so that they should be held accountable for the amount of disinformation posted on their platforms, what would actually change?

If Section 230 were modified and then repealed, social networks would indeed become more constraining: before one is able to post something online, the platform would have to check the possible legal risks they could find themselves in front of. Hence, not everyone would be able to post and have an online voice.

Yet, the paradox is that while Trump has criticized Section 230 because, in his view, social media platforms were abusing of it in order to damage his electoral campaign by restricting free speech, implying that Zuckerberg and Dorsey are politically leaning towards the Democratic Party, on the other hand, through its removal, Trump himself was the one trying to limit the voice of citizens.

Even Sen. Ron Wyden, one of the co-authors of the piece of legislation, has declared: *"Section 230 is not about neutrality. Period. Full stop. 230 is all about letting private companies make their own decisions to leave up some content and take other content down."* (Wyden 2019)

But was Trump right when he underlined the question of strong and unjust Democrat bias in social media? If he were right, then his move of trying to change 230 would make sense, if he wanted to be re-elected. In fact, if online communities were a priory lined up against him, it would be impossible to efficiently conduct a political campaign on social networks and this could have easily led to a loss, since internet has revealed to be a key element for gaining political support in the past decade.

This seems not to be the case. A NYU study, conducted by the Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, argues that anti-conservative bias *"is itself a form of disinformation: a falsehood with no reliable evidence to support it"* (Barrett and Grant Sims 2021, p. 1). The criticism endorsed by Donald Trump and other right-wing politicians, such as Ted Cruz, to social media companies would be false information, since not only there is no evidence of bias when they have deleted misleading tweets regarding the elections, but their algorithms seem also to promote the expansion of conservative voices.

Despite this, all those attempts made in Court to damage tech companies such as the previously analyzed Facebook and Twitter for presumed anti-conservative positions, which would have turned into an anti-Trump bias that would have influenced the election result for the Republican President, have not been successful. The attempted measures against Section 230 did not lead to anything concrete.

In May 2020, a legal action started by the non-profit Freedom's Watch in 2018 against Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Apple, accused for having used their power to create anti-Republican censorship, was then rejected by the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals. The D.C. judges have in fact stated that that provision can only be addressed to the state: censorship only applies to First Amendment rights blocked by the American government, not by third private parties.

Conclusion

The objective of this dissertation was to deepen our knowledge in the way media favor the circulation of fake news both generally speaking and in the case of the 2020 American Elections.

At first, we have seen that, even if news-making requires journalists to be totally and absolutely objective, this goal is a utopia, since news reporters are human beings and, hence, they do have their own opinions, which are reflected in their narration of stories to the audience. In a post-modern era in which overall levels of trust towards both politicians and journalists are very low, social media are catching on as the main political instrument used by politicians and candidates to the presidency. Along with the positive change they have introduced, such as a quicker, easier and more direct communication between the electorate and their representatives, they represent the perfect environment for the viruses of disinformation and misinformation. In fact, social network's algorithms allow the formation of echo-chambers that restrict the view that users might have on certain topics, favoring instead a narrow online space composed by people who share the same identical opinions on the same matters.

In particular, what emerged from this dissertation was that, despite the fact that in 2020 the United States have had the largest total voter turnout in American history and citizens felt to be on one hand more prepared than ever, they were still confused by the storm of fake news circulating online.

The presidential electoral campaign was conducted both through television, which still is the main tool through which political information is derived by U.S. citizens, and social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter. In the dissertation, it was shown that television presents degrees of political bias in its news report, and that both Republicans and Democrats tend to believe ideologically aligned headlines, before analyzing the contrasts between two cable news channels: CNN and Fox News. In particular, the differences between the way they have handled the electoral campaign of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump were taken into account. The former outlet is said to be leaning towards the left, while the latter is an historically conservative network. As a consequence, supporters of both parties are inclined to cluster around their main source of information and principally believe information flowing from it. Having taken into consideration the characteristics of the average viewers for both channels – ethnicity, gender, average age, education and political affiliations were considered in this analysis – we have come to the conclusion that Republicans, whose preferred source of information is Fox News, perceive a greater media bias in the political portrayal of both candidates, whereas Democrats value the portrayal of both candidates' as more or less equally handled by the media. Furthermore, the presence of political bias in both networks has been confirmed in this paper through the comparison of their headlines on the same identical news.

For what concerns social media, fake news here are even more frequent than in mainstream television. They can be purposely spread to trick voters, even if in the majority of cases they take the form of misinformation. In order to limit its flow, this dissertation argued how debunking, fact-checking and the measures introduced

by Facebook and Twitter such as reporting misleading posts and tweets had been necessary in order not to further confuse voters. Moreover, many online posts on Facebook and Twitter by former president Trump were examined, in order to understand first of all the type of information he was spreading, which later had become widespread among his electors, and secondly, the fact-checking expedient that Zuckerberg and Dorsey's platforms had employed. Last but not least, it was described how the exposure to Twitter, a mainly liberal social media platform, has in fact slightly lowered the Republican vote share in the 2020 Election.

This thesis' introduction claimed that its final aim was to find a correlation between the fake news diffused by media and voting behavior as well as the electoral result, in an era of increasing overall levels of distrust towards political institutions and the media system in general. Eventually, it was concluded that media actually affected voting behavior, in particular making some electors, mainly Trump supporters, prejudiced about the electoral result, as they were convinced the elections were rigged even before the voting process started. The level of overall confidence in the Election was thus influenced, determining also to the voting procedure – in person or by mail – that U.S. citizens have chosen.

Nonetheless, there are no actual proofs that voting results were in practice affected., even if it is argued that Twitter's relatively liberal content might have played a major role in convincing those who had centrist or moderate political ideas not to vote for Donald Trump. In fact, as previously stated in the thesis, Twitter's liberal orientation has the power to persuade voters to alter their political position due to the enormous media influence on political polarization, a concept that has been at the center of this dissertation.

After having read this paper, a question might spontaneously come up: should journalism then, in order not to turn into a vehicle of disinformation and political bias, become neutral until reaching total inexpressiveness? The personal answer I would give is no. What truly matters is the fact that they should not turn into propaganda work. The role of a journalists who places the news in the right place is fundamental. However, for what concerns both mainstream and citizen journalism through social media, not falling into the disinformation trap remains the most important duty and responsibility towards a more and more distrustful and polarized audience.

Bibliography

- Abril, D. (2020) Facebook reveals that massive amounts of misinformation flooded its service during the election. *Fortune* [Online] November 19. Available at: <https://fortune.com/2020/11/19/facebook-misinformation-labeled-180-million-posts-2020-election-hate-speech-prevalence/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]
- Allcott, H. and Gentzkow, M. (2017) Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2). p. 211–236.
- Barrett, P. M. and Grant Sims, J. (2021) False Accusation: The Unfounded Claim that Social Media Companies Censor Conservatives. *NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights*.
- Bergengruen, V. and Perrigo, B. (2021) Facebook Acted Too Late to Tackle Misinformation on 2020 Election, Report Finds. *TIME* [Online] March 23. Available at: <https://time.com/5949210/facebook-misinformation-2020-election-report/>
- Bovet, A. and Makse, H.A. (2019) Influence of Fake News in Twitter during the 2016 US Presidential Election. *Nature Communications*, 10(7).
- Calabrese, A. (2005) Casus Belli: U.S. Media and the Justification of the Iraq War. *Television & New Media*, 6(2). p. 153–175.
- Carlson, M. (2020) Fake News as an Informational Moral Panic: The Symbolic Deviancy of Social Media During the 2016 US Presidential Election. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(3). p. 374-388.
- Carlson, T. (2021) Tucker Carlson: The mainstream media's disgusting, corrupting love affair with Joe Biden. *Fox News* [Online] February 16. Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-mainstream-media-love-affair-with-joe-biden> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]
- CNN (2020) Analysis: Fox News is misleading its audience about Trump's election chances [Online]. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/02/media/murdoch-fox-news-donald-trump-reliable-sources/index.html> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

CNN (2020) Donald Trump Jr.'s doing what he always does: The vilest dirty work of his dad's political campaigns [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/17/politics/donald-trump-jr-pedophile-biden-instagram/index.html> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

CNN (2020) Expert compares Trump's politics to fascism [Online]. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/media/2020/08/30/compares-trump-politics-to-fascism-rs-stelter-vpx.cnn> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

CNN (2020) Trump budget includes deep cuts to health care and safety net programs. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/10/politics/trump-budget-health-care-safety-net/index.html> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

CNN (2021) Analysis: TV providers should not escape scrutiny for distributing disinformation. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/08/media/tv-providers-disinfo-reliable-sources/index.html> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Colleoni, E., Rozza, A. and Arvidsson, A. (2014) Echo chamber or public sphere? Predicting political orientation and measuring political homophily in Twitter using big data. *Journal of Communication*, 64(2). p.317–332.

Colliander, J. (2019) “This is fake news”: Investigating the role of conformity to other users' views when commenting on and spreading disinformation in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 97. p. 202–215.

D'Alessio, D. and Allen, M. (2000). Media Bias in Presidential Elections: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 50(4). p. 133–156.

Dalton, R. J., Beck, P. A. and Huckfeldt, R. (1998) Partisan cues and the media: information flows in the 1992 presidential election. *American Political Science Review*, 92(1). p. 111-126.

Darling, J., Crigler, A. and Gatz, M. (2018) Trump's Boomerang Effect on Trust and Motivation. *University of Southern California* [Online]. Available at: <https://healthpolicy.usc.edu/evidence-base/public-experiencing-deep-distrust-of-president-trump-as-a-source-of-unbiased-and-truthful-information/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Forbes (2019) Fox News Ends 2019 With Biggest Prime Time Ratings Ever [Online] Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2019/12/11/fox-news-ends-2019-with-highest-rated-prime-time-ratings-ever/> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Enjolras, B. (2014) How politicians use Twitter and does it matter? The case of Norwegian national politicians. *International Conference Democracy as Idea and Practice*.

Fox News (2020) Trump budget touches off new battle over spending cuts [Online]. Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-budget-touches-off-new-battle-over-spending-cuts> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Fox News (2020) Trump unloads on 'sleepy' Joe Biden, 'vicious' Kamala Harris as Democratic convention begins. [Online] Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-minneapolis-biden-harris-democratic-convention-begins> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Fraser, N. (1990) Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*, 25(26). pp. 56-80.

Gallup/Knight Foundation (2018) Americans: Much Misinformation, Bias, Inaccuracy in News [Online]. Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/235796/americans-misinformation-bias-inaccuracy-news.aspx> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Gallup/Knight Foundation (2020) In Election 2020, how did the media, electoral process fare? Republicans, Democrats disagree [Online]. Available at: <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/in-election-2020-how-did-the-media-electoral-process-fare-republicans-democrats-disagree/> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Garramone, GM. (1985) Effects of Negative Political Advertising: The Roles of Sponsor and Rebuttal. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 29(2). p.147-159.

Garrett, R.K., Sude, D. and Riva, P. (2020) Toeing the Party Lie: Ostracism Promotes Endorsement of Partisan Election Falsehoods. *Political Communication*, 37(2). p. 157-172.

Graziosi, G. (2021) Fox News admits pushing false claim Biden was planning to target hamburgers under climate plan. *Independent* [Online] April 27. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/fox-news-false-claim-biden-hamburgers-b1837906.html> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Gregor, M. (2016) Rise of Donald Trump: media as a voter-decision accelerator. In: Lilleker, D., Jackson, D., Thorsen, E. and Veneti, A. (Eds.) *US Election Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign*. Pool: Bournemouth University.

Groeling, T. (2008) Who's the Fairest of them All? An Empirical Test for Partisan Bias on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38(4). p. 631-657.

Guo, L., Rohde, J. A. and Wu, H. D. (2020) Who is responsible for Twitter's echo chamber problem? Evidence from 2016 U.S. election networks. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(2). p. 234-251.

Hamborg, F., Donnay, K. and Gipp, B. (2019) Automated Identification of Media Bias in News Articles: An Interdisciplinary Literature Review. *International Journal on Digital Libraries*, 20. p. 391-415.

Hassell, H., Holbein, J. B., and Miles, M. R. (2020) There Is No Liberal Media Bias in which News Stories Political Journalists Choose to Cover. *Science Advances*, 6(14)

Heer, J. (2020) CNN Has It In for Bernie. *The Nation* [Online] Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/sanders-warren-cnn-debate/> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Hsu, T. and Robertson, K. (2021) You Can Barely Tell It's the Same Trial in Cable Impeachment Coverage. *The New York Times* [Online] March 11. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/business/media/cnn-fox-news-msnbc-impeachment-trial.html> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Johnson, T., Kaye, B. K. and Lee, A. M. (2017) Blinded by the Spite? Path Model of Political Attitudes, Selectivity, and Social Media. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 25(3). p. 181-196

Kannasto, E. (2020) Personal Brand of a Politician in an Election Campaign – Political Personas on Facebook. *Persona Studies*, 6(1). p. 12-14.

Kurtzleben, D. (2017) Study: News Coverage of Trump More Negative Than For Other Presidents. *NPR*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/02/555092743/study-news-coverage-of-trump-more-negative-than-for-other-presidents> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

- Iosifidis, P. and Nicoli, N. (2020) *Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation*. London: Routledge.
- Lazer, D. M. J., et al. (2018) The Science of Fake News. *Science*, 359(6380). p. 1094-1096
- Lewandowsky, S. (2013) Misinformation, Disinformation, and Violent Conflict: From Iraq and the ‘War on Terror’ to Future Threats to Peace. *American Psychologist*, 68(7). p. 489-501.
- Martin, G.J. and Yurukoglu, A. (2017) Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. *American Economic Review*, 107(9). p. 2565-99.
- Memmott, M. (2004) Fox newspeople say allegations of bias unfounded. *USA Today*.
- Min, S. (2016) Conversation through journalism: Searching for organizing principles of public and citizen journalism. *Journalism*, 17(5). p. 567–582.
- Mullainathan, S. and Shleifer, A. (2002) Media Bias. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. [Online] Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=335800 [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]
- Neuharth, A. H. (1998) The First Amendment and Free Press: Fairness, Freedom and Accuracy. *Vital speeches of the day*, 64(17). p. 530-32.
- Nguyen, C. (2020). Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles. *Episteme*, 17(2). p. 141-161.
- Owen, D. (2018) The New Media’s Role in Politics. In: Several Authors. *The age of perplexity: Rethinking the world we knew*. Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial.
- Parkinson, H. J. (2016) Click and elect: How fake news helped Donald Trump win a real election. *The Guardian* [Online] November 14. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/14/fake-news-donald-trump-election-alt-right-social-media-tech-companies> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]
- Patterson, T. E. (2020) Tale of Two Elections: CBS and Fox News’ Portrayal of the 2020 Presidential Campaign. *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy* [Online]. Available at: <https://shorensteincenter.org/patterson-2020-election-coverage/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2014) Political Polarization & Media Habits. From Fox News to Facebook, How Liberals and Conservatives keep Up with Politics [Online]. Available at:
<https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2016) Many Americans believe fake news is sowing confusion [Online] Available at:
<http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2019) Network News Fact Sheet [Online]. Available at:
<https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/network-news/> [Last accessed: 28/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2019) Trusting the News Media in the Trump Era. Partisan dynamics overshadow other factors in Americans' evaluations of the news media [Online]. Available at:
<https://www.journalism.org/2019/12/12/trusting-the-news-media-in-the-trump-era/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2020) 5 facts about Fox News. [Online] Available at:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/five-facts-about-fox-news/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2020) U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided. [Online] Available at: <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Pew Research Center (2021) Partisan differences in social media use show up for some platforms, but not Facebook. [Online] Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/07/partisan-differences-in-social-media-use-show-up-for-some-platforms-but-not-facebook/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Rexha, G. (2014) The role of media in political communication: the case of Kosovo. *UBT International Conference*. [Online] p. 53-57. Available at: <https://knowledgecenter.ubt-uni.net/conference/2014/all-events/30> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Seitz, A., Klepper, D. and Ortuta, B. (2020) False claims of voting fraud, pushed by Trump, thrive online. *AP News* [Online] November 10. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-politics-media-1bf96bf3910bdcbe0f125958357c8f1a> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Silverman, C. (2016) This analysis shows how fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook. *Buzzfeed News* [Online] November 16. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Statista (2021) Number of monetizable daily active Twitter users (mDAU) worldwide from 1st quarter 2017 to 1st quarter 2021 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/970920/monetizable-daily-active-twitter-users-worldwide/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

The Federal Communications Commission (2008) *The Public and Broadcasting: How to Get the Most Service from Your Local Station*. Washington, D.C.: The Media Bureau.

Van Dijck, J. (2013) You have one identity: Performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2). p. 199-215.

Vasoughi, S., Roy, D. and Aral, S. (2018) The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359 (6380). p. 1146-1151.

Weaver, P. (1972) Is Television News Biased? *Public Interest*, 26. p. 57–74

Wemple, E. (2016) Opinion: Then-CNN contributor Donna Brazile to Clinton camp: Sometimes ‘I get the questions in advance’. *The Washington Post* [Online] Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2016/10/11/then-cnn-contributor-donna-brazile-to-clinton-camp-sometimes-i-get-the-questions-in-advance/> [Last accessed: 29/05/2021]

Zimmermann, F. and Kohring, M. (2020) Mistrust, Disinforming News, and Vote Choice: A Panel Survey on the Origins and Consequences of Believing Disinformation in the 2017 German Parliamentary Election. *Political Communication*, 37(2). p. 215-237.

Abstract

L'obiettivo di questa tesi è approfondire il modo in cui i mass media – mainstream e non – favoriscono la circolazione delle cosiddette “fake news”, sia in generale, che nel più specifico caso delle elezioni americane del 2020, in cui l'allora in carica presidente Repubblicano Trump ha sfidato il democratico Joe Biden. La domanda che a cui si è cercato di rispondere è la seguente: che effetto ha avuto la disinformazione proveniente dai media sul comportamento degli elettori e sul risultato elettorale? Vi è stata in qualche modo una correlazione tra queste variabili?

Per provare a rispondere a questa domanda, la candidata è partita dall'analisi della natura del sistema mediatico americano: esso può essere definito come complessivamente affidabile, dal momento che essa è influenzata anche dalla forma di stato del Paese. A differenza di regimi autoritari o ibridi come la Corea del Nord e la Cina, in cui le informazioni distribuite ai cittadini sono completamente controllati dal governo, gli Stati Uniti sono una democrazia, e, pertanto, gli Americani possono affermare che la maggior parte dell'informazione che viene offerta loro è affidabile. In particolare, la libertà di stampa e quella di libera espressione sono garantite dalla Costituzione Americana tramite il Primo Emendamento. Vi sono tuttavia delle crepe nella completa affidabilità del sistema mediatico: esso è non intenzionalmente influenzato da tracce di pressioni di natura politica ed economica, ma anche dalla cultura e dalle ideologie proprie delle aziende mediatiche, che possono stabilire condizioni favorevoli per la presenza di bias politici. Inoltre, decidendo cosa includere nella narrazione e cosa invece tralasciare, i mass media hanno il potere di influenzare la percezione del pubblico su determinate questioni e, nel caso delle elezioni, anche di modellare l'opinione pubblica giocando un ruolo importante sul risultato finale.

Avendo constatato che gli Americani sono nettamente divisi sull'affidabilità dei media, è stato esaminato cosa determina se un cittadino americano ha fiducia o meno in essi. Il risultato è il seguente: le dinamiche di partito, dunque l'affiliazione ai Partiti Repubblicano e Democratico – generalmente gli elettori Repubblicani sono più scettici – e la partecipazione politica individuale sono determinanti. Altre variabili che influiscono sul grado di fiducia nei media sono la fiducia negli altri – coloro che tendono a fidarsi del prossimo, dal momento che credono che l'obiettivo delle testate giornalistiche sia il bene comune, hanno anche più fiducia nell'informazione mediatica – e caratteristiche demografiche, come differenze di etnia, fascia d'età, educazione, affiliazione religiosa e residenza in aree rurali o urbane.

In seguito, la candidata si è soffermata sul ruolo politico dei media e su quello che svolgono nelle elezioni. In quest'ultimo contesto, in particolare, essi plasmano l'opinione pubblica e influenzano gli elettori nel processo decisionale. I candidati alle elezioni, infatti, devono raggiungere la più ampia fetta possibile dell'elettorato per ottenere il più voti possibile e i media possono essere di grandissimo aiuto in questo, tramite il loro “agenda setting”, sapendo che più spazio essi danno ad un candidato e più il pubblico acquisirà familiarità con il suo programma politico, ma anche con la sua persona. Un'enorme occasione per l'audience di conoscere meglio i

candidati è data dai dibattiti presidenziali, trasmessi in diretta dalle maggiori emittenti del Paese: ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC.

Successivamente, si è analizzata la disinformazione, sempre più dilagante proprio perché la sua diffusione è favorita dal sempre più frequente uso dei nuovi mezzi di informazione e comunicazione per fare politica e propaganda elettorale. Dopo aver spiegato la differenza tra disinformazione, misinformazione e malinformazione, ci si è focalizzati sulle cosiddette “fake news”, termine esploso nel 2016 e ormai entrato nell’uso comune. Le fake news sono ancora un terreno poco esplorato nello studio della disinformazione e della comunicazione politica, pertanto vi sono ancora molti dubbi su di esse, ma degli studi hanno confermato come coloro che presentano elevati gradi di sfiducia verso il sistema politico e quello mediatico tendono ad esserne maggiormente vittime. Si è concluso che la disinformazione può provenire da molte fonti per diversi motivi, ma ciò che di fatto ne favorisce la diffusione, causando un impatto sulle elezioni, sono i mass media. Infatti, dal momento che questi nuovi mezzi di informazione sono recentemente diventati gli strumenti più usati dai politici e dai candidati alla presidenza nelle loro campagne elettorali, il loro potere mediatico è in continua crescita. Gli elettori assorbono informazioni da loro e le elaborano per prendere la migliore decisione possibile per la procedura di voto. Ecco perché la candidata ha analizzato il ruolo che la televisione, soprattutto le più seguite reti con tendenze democratiche e repubblicane, e i social media, come Twitter e Facebook, hanno avuto nelle Presidenziali americane del 2020. La campagna elettorale presidenziale è stata difatti condotta sia attraverso la televisione, che tuttora è lo strumento principale attraverso il quale gli Americani derivano l'informazione politica, sia attraverso le piattaforme social.

Per quanto riguarda la televisione, principale strumento di informazione per il 50% degli Americani, si è innanzitutto approfondita la presenza di bias in essa. Si è definito come l’obiettivo della televisione sia quello di avere una narrazione chiara e limpida, che possa catturare l’attenzione dello spettatore senza farlo annoiare. Ecco perché la figura del giornalista, o del reporter, è di vitale importanza. Ciò nonostante, anche se ai giornalisti è richiesta assoluta obiettività, questa è un’utopia, dal momento che i cronisti sono esseri umani e dunque hanno le loro opinioni, che vengono riflesse nella loro narrazione. Questo determina perché le news della televisione tendano ad essere molto più interpretative di quelle dei giornali: ad esempio, durante una campagna elettorale, mentre i giornali si soffermeranno molto di più sugli eventi, come i comizi, la televisione cercherà di coprire trend per lo più generici e dinamiche di campagna, che i giornalisti cercheranno di interpretare. Avendo constatato che le emittenti televisive possono essere affette da bias, è stata trattata l’influenza del bias sui candidati e sull’attitudine degli elettori. Infatti, i candidati possono ottenere benefici dal fatto che un’emittente sia considerata politicamente schierata contro di loro, anche se ciò si dovesse poi dimostrare falso. Questo avviene perché quando una fonte è etichettata come politicamente prevenuta, gli spettatori la considereranno di meno, vedendola come imparziale. Lo stesso accade quando i sostenitori di un partito affermano ci sia una sorta di pregiudizio dei media contro di loro, per suscitare una maggiore faziosità e sostegno nei confronti del loro partito.

A questo punto, la candidata ha cercato di spiegare come si può determinare se una fonte televisiva sia prevenuta. Innanzitutto, occorre specificare che si tratta di un compito difficile. La principale difficoltà risiede infatti nella definizione di cosa rappresenti effettivamente un bias mediatico. Riconoscere la presenza di un'inclinazione politica in un contenuto mediatico è diverso dall'attribuire tale inclinazione a una reale posizione politicamente distorta del media in sé. Potrebbe essere infatti vero che quella posizione sia solo un riflesso della realtà. Ad esempio, se si osserva che nell'80% dei casi un telegiornale assuma posizioni di critica nei confronti di un candidato presidenziale, questo non implica necessariamente un pregiudizio politico nei confronti di quel politico; un'alternativa plausibile può essere che quel candidato stia facendo la giusta proposta elettorale nel suo programma politico solo il 20% delle volte. Pertanto, se così fosse, quell'80% di copertura mediatica negativa contro quel particolare candidato riflette accuratamente le prestazioni della sua campagna. Per avere una più chiara delucidazione sul bias televisivo, i principali network americani sono stati presi in considerazione. Essi sono: ABC, NBC e CBS, canali nazionali, chiamati anche i "Big Three", e CNN e Fox News, che sono invece canali di notizie via cavo. Mentre i "Big Three" vengono solitamente definiti più affidabili perché non schierati politicamente, anche se da uno studio di Tim Groeling emerge che una leggera presenza di bias nello scegliere le notizie è presente anche in essi, Fox News e CNN sono da sempre contrapposti come il canale conservativo e quello liberale per eccellenza. In particolare, entrambi sono stati accusati nel corso del 2020 di diffondere notizie false. Fox News è una emittente storicamente conservativa, che ha creato un giornalismo di tipo partigiano tendente alla destra, mentre la CNN è nota per essere nettamente schierata contro l'allora presidente in carica Trump, con cui ha avuto non pochi dissidi nel corso del suo mandato. Di conseguenza, i sostenitori di entrambi i partiti sono inclini a raggrupparsi attorno alla loro principale fonte di informazioni – Fox per il 93% degli elettori di Trump e CNN per il 79% dei Democratici – e a credere principalmente alle informazioni che provengono da essa. È stato difatti constatato come sia i Repubblicani che i Democratici tendano a credere maggiormente a titoli e a servizi ideologicamente allineati. Nell'analisi tra le divergenze tra i due canali di notizie via cavo CNN e Fox News, sono state prese in considerazione le differenze tra il modo in cui hanno gestito entrambe le campagne elettorali, sia di Joe Biden che di Donald Trump. Tenendo conto delle caratteristiche dei telespettatori medi per entrambi i canali – etnia, sesso, età media, istruzione e appartenenza politica – si è giunti alla conclusione che i Repubblicani, la cui fonte di informazione preferita è Fox News, percepiscono un maggiore pregiudizio mediatico nella rappresentazione politica di Trump e Biden, mentre i Democratici vedono la rappresentazione di entrambi i candidati come gestita più o meno equamente.

La presenza di pregiudizi politici in entrambe le reti è stata qui confermata tramite un confronto tra i titoli che Fox e CNN avevano dato alle stesse identiche notizie. Considerando ad esempio il processo di impeachment a Trump, da una parte CNN lo definì come "una scena molto potente", mentre per Fox News era semplicemente "irrazionale" e "asinino".

È stato successivamente visto come CNN sia stata accusata prima di aver fatto in modo di danneggiare Bernie Sanders al dibattito presidenziale democratico e poi di aver portato avanti una campagna anti-Trump, con una copertura negativa l'80% delle volte, comprendendo servizi molto sfavorevoli anche verso il figlio dell'ex presidente, culminata infine con la vittoria di Biden alla presidenza.

Allo stesso modo, è stato esaminato come anche Fox News sia stata accusata di un forte bias politico tendente a favorire il presidente Trump. In particolare, la rete è stata criticata per aver rappresentato il Democratico Biden come un "sonnolento, corrotto e sbilenco" e Kamala Harris come inadatta alla vicepresidenza perché antiamericana e una radicale inleggibile. Altre critiche mosse all'outlet conservativo sono state il fatto di aver costantemente alluso al fatto che i sostenitori di Trump fossero una "maggioranza silenziosa" e che i sondaggi fossero irregolari. La maggiore accusa è stata però quella di aver ignorato la disinformazione perpetrata dal Presidente.

Le informazioni di Fox News sulle presunte irregolarità elettorali hanno avuto grande impatto, specialmente sulla fetta di popolazione che ha votato per Trump. L'emittente conservativa è stata infatti l'ultimo canale ad aver annunciato la vittoria di Biden, ben 16 minuti dopo gli altri maggiori network del Paese. Per quanto riguarda invece CNN, la cosiddetta "campagna pro-Biden" che avrebbero portato avanti secondo fonti conservatrici avrebbe funzionato.

Dopo aver analizzato il ruolo della televisione nelle elezioni 2020, la candidata si è soffermata sui social media e sulla disinformazione online. Le *fake news* sono qui sono ancora più frequenti e pericolose. Esse possono essere diffuse di proposito per ingannare gli elettori, anche se nella maggior parte dei casi assumono la forma di disinformazione. Inoltre, la creazione di echo-chamber che, a causa degli algoritmi delle piattaforme social, permettono un feed di utenti e contenuti simili e pertanto politicamente vicini ai propri, porta ad un cluster di informazioni che si diffondono ad altissima velocità. Al fine di limitare il loro flusso, si è notato come pratiche di debunking, e fact-checking e le nuove misure introdotte da Facebook e Twitter nel 2020 per arginare lo tsunami di disinformazione sulle piattaforme, sono state necessarie per non confondere ulteriormente gli elettori. Da un lato, i Democratici hanno rimproverato ai social media l'inadeguatezza delle misure adottate per prevenire la disinformazione, dall'altro i Repubblicani hanno recepito una tendenza anti-conservativa contro di loro.

Sono stati forniti esempi e dati sulla dilagante disinformazione online e sulla loro influenza sugli elettori: ad esempio, su Twitter, il 25% dei tweet analizzati da uno studio diffondevano informazioni false o estremamente distorte. Inoltre, mentre i top influencer che condividevano principalmente notizie di centro e di sinistra avevano influenzato maggiormente gli elettori di Hillary Clinton, questa relazione causale si è invertita nel 2020 per quanto riguarda le fake news: i sostenitori di Trump hanno invece influenzato le dinamiche delle maggiori fonti di disinformazione presenti sui social.

La candidata ha poi preso in osservazione alcuni post online del presidente Trump su Facebook, piattaforma che, con 2.7 miliardi di utenti attivi, rappresenta il social più popolare al mondo, e Twitter. Questa indagine è

stata fatta capire, in primo luogo, il tipo di informazione e disinformazione che stava divulgando, specialmente tra i suoi elettori, e, in secondo luogo, l'espedito di fact-checking che Zuckerberg e Dorsey hanno impiegato per arginare la loro propagazione. I tweet e i post di Trump presi in considerazione concernevano specialmente la questione dell'inaffidabilità del voto per posta. Il presidente affermava come gli avversari stessero cercando di rubargli la presidenza. È stato poi notato come entrambe le piattaforme sono ricorse a metodi di fact-checking tramite delle didascalie e link per correggere le false informazioni riportate. Si è in seguito affrontato come il candidato Repubblicano abbia affermato che i principali social di fossero politicamente schierati contro di lui, e come abbia cercato di modificare la Sezione 230 per renderli responsabili legalmente dei contenuti pubblicati da terzi.

Infine, è stato descritto come i social avrebbero influenzato le elezioni e il comportamento degli elettori. L'esposizione a Twitter, network prevalentemente liberale, ha di fatto leggermente abbassato la quota di voti repubblicani nelle elezioni del 2020, convincendo specialmente quegli elettori tendenti verso posizioni centriste a votare per Biden. Si tratta per molti di una conseguenza dell'enorme influenza dei media sulla polarizzazione politica, che potrebbe portare a un danno involontario nei confronti della democrazia da parte dei social. Per altri, invece, i social sono politicamente schierati con i Democratici, e quindi prevenuti contro i Repubblicani. Resta tuttavia vero il fatto che internet ha dato un enorme contributo anche alla circolazione delle idee Repubblicane, specialmente nei gruppi tra utenti su Facebook.

All'inizio di questo elaborato, si è affermato come il suo scopo finale fosse quello di trovare una correlazione tra le fake news diffuse dai media e il comportamento degli elettori – tenendo conto anche del risultato elettorale – in un'epoca in cui la sfiducia verso le istituzioni politiche e il sistema mediatico in generale è sempre maggiore. Alla fine, si è concluso che i media hanno effettivamente influenzato il comportamento di voto, in particolare fornendo alcuni elettori, principalmente sostenitori di Trump, pregiudizi sul risultato elettorale. Essi erano infatti convinti che le elezioni fossero state truccate anche prima dell'inizio del processo elettorale. Il livello di fiducia complessivo nell'elezione è stato così influenzato, determinando anche la procedura di voto – di persona o per posta – che i cittadini statunitensi hanno scelto.

Tuttavia, non ci sono prove concrete che i risultati del voto siano stati in pratica influenzati, anche se si sostiene, come precedentemente scritto, che il contenuto relativamente liberale di Twitter potrebbe aver giocato un ruolo importante nel convincere coloro che avevano idee politiche centriste o moderate a non votare per il candidato repubblicano.

Al termine di questa analisi, una domanda potrebbe sorgere spontanea: il giornalismo dovrebbe allora, per non trasformarsi in veicolo di disinformazione e di faziosità politica, diventare neutrale fino a raggiungere la totale inespressività? La risposta personale che darei è no. Ciò che andrebbe evitato a tutti i costi è che i media non devono assolutamente trasformarsi in opere di propaganda. Il ruolo di un giornalista che sia in grado di mettere le notizie al posto giusto è fondamentale. Tuttavia, per quanto riguarda sia il giornalismo classico che il citizen journalism che ha luogo attraverso i social media, il dovere più importante e la responsabilità maggiore verso

un pubblico sempre più polarizzato, diffidente e sfiduciato verso la classe dirigente e il sistema mediatico è quello di non cadere nella trappola della disinformazione e tentare di arginare il sempre più frequente fenomeno delle fake news con tutti gli strumenti di fact-checking e debunking necessari.

Ringraziamenti

Al termine di questo elaborato, vorrei dedicare uno spazio a tutti coloro che mi hanno supportata non solo in questi tre mesi di stesura della tesi, ma anche, chi in un modo e chi nell'altro, mi è stato accanto per tutta la durata della triennale.

Ringrazio innanzitutto il mio relatore, il prof. Michele Sorice, che mi ha seguita con entusiasmo e attenzione e mi ha guidata capitolo dopo capitolo con immensa disponibilità in qualsiasi momento.

Ringrazio la LUISS, che mi ha fatta sentire a casa già dal primo giorno di Orientamento.

Ringrazio i miei genitori, a cui dedico questo elaborato. Grazie per avermi incoraggiata nelle decisioni giuste, per avermi supportata moralmente, per aver mostrato concreto interesse in ciò che ho studiato ed imparato e per non avermi mai messo pressione, né per un voto, né per altro.

Ringrazio le mie nonne: nonna Rong, che, anche se con 10.548 chilometri di distanza, mi è sempre vicina con il suo affetto, e nonna Elisa, che, ne sono sicura, sarebbe tanto orgogliosa di questo traguardo.

Un grazie speciale va alle mie amiche Gaia, Ludovica e Rebecca per aver condiviso tutto di questo percorso con me. Grazie per la complicità, per ogni posto occupato a lezione per me tutte le volte in cui arrivavo in ritardo, per tutte le risate e le ansie condivise nell'attesa di un esame. Non mi avete mai fatto sentire sola.

Per ultima, ma non per importanza, ringrazio Aro. Grazie per tutto il sostegno che ci siamo date in questi tre anni. Tu sai.