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Yunkang Yang

The Political Logic of the Radical Right Media Sphere in the United States

Yunkang Yang

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Reading Committee:

W. Lance Bennett, Chair

Matthew J. Powers

Kirsten A. Foot

Adrienne Russell

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

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Abstract

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Yunkang Yang

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
W. Lance Bennett
Department of Communication

Democracy in America is threatened by an increased level of false information circulating through online media networks. Previous research has found that radical right media such as Fox News and Breitbart are the principal incubators and distributors of online disinformation. In this dissertation, I draw attention to their political mobilizing logic and propose a new theoretical framework to analyze major radical right media in the U.S. Contrasted with the old partisan media literature that regarded radical right media as partisan news organizations, I argue that media outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart are better understood as hybrid network organizations. This means that many radical right media can function as partisan journalism producers, disinformation distributors, and in many cases political organizations at the same time. They not only provide partisan news reporting but also engage in a variety of political activities such as spreading disinformation, conducting opposition research, contacting voters, and campaigning and fundraising for politicians. In addition, many radical right media are also

capable of forming emerging political organization networks that can mobilize resources, coordinate actions, and pursue tangible political goals at strategic moments in response to the changing political environment. By tracking how major radical right media in the U.S. responded to various political threats during the Trump administration, I show that these political organization networks can emerge from different lines of internal media cueing, external politician cueing, and ideological alignments and divisions among various radical right groups. I also demonstrate that radical right media are more than just a propaganda arm operating in the interests of the GOP or the Trump administration. Funded by right-wing activist donors such as the Mercer Family and the Koch brothers, many radical right media have tried to influence the agendas of the GOP and its leaders. I argue that radical right media can erode and weaken American democracy by diminishing the role of facts in self-governance, breaking the democratic norm of mutual tolerance, and undermining democratic institutions.

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Chapter 1. RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA AND ORGANIZATIONAL HYBRIDITY

In December 2016, a young man fired his assault rifle in the Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington, D.C. with the belief that he was saving children abducted by Hillary Clinton's sex trafficking ring in the basement of the pizza parlor. In fact, there was no child sex trafficking ring and the pizzeria did not even have a basement. The conspiracy theory that led the gunman to fire his weapon to save his imagined children is called "Pizzagate", a notorious false story that took the Internet by storm in 2016.

The "Pizzagate" story, which claimed that Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman John Podesta were running a child sex trafficking ring in a pizza parlor, started from WikiLeaks' release of Podesta's emails. On July 14, 2016, WikiLeaks received John Podesta's private emails from a Russian agent named Guccifer 2.0. and held onto these emails until October 7th 2016. At around 11 a.m. on that day, the *Access Hollywood* tape recording of Donald Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women was leaked. Within less than one hour, WikiLeaks dumped John Podesta's emails (Geller, 2018). In the following days, social media users on 4chan, Twitter, and Reddit analyzed these emails and focused on his conversation about pizza. Around October 30, they conjured up the theory that John Podesta was using coded language to discuss a child sex trafficking ring in the basement of the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria. In early November, the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory spread to high-traffic media sites such as Infowars and reached large audiences just days before the Election Day.

How should we make sense of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory? Is it just an isolated moment of extreme absurdity or is it part of an organized information flow aimed at undermining

political opponents and in this case defusing political threats to a presidential candidate through strategic deception? In an interview at the bookstore Politics and Prose in September 2017, Hillary Clinton drew attention to the curious timing of Pizzagate.

“(On) October 7th ... [top U.S. intelligence officials stated that Russia was behind the hacks of emails] ... the Hollywood Access tape broke a few hours later and within one hour such an amazing coincidence [happened]. WikiLeaks dumped all of John Podesta’s personal emails... One of these really I consider evil people in the media world and in the online world, out of whole cloth, made up the story that John Podesta and I are running a child trafficking ring in the basement of the Comet Pizza Parlor... It was meant to be believed to influence voting.” (Politics and Prose, 2017)

Clinton’s observation was validated by the special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of the link between Russia and the Trump campaign in the 2016 election. According to the Mueller Report, WikiLeaks’ release of emails was designed and timed to undermine the Clinton campaign (Popken, Zadrozny, & Collins, 2019). It occurred at the most optimal time for Donald Trump to shift public’s attention away from the *Access Hollywood* tape scandal that almost put his campaign on the brink of collapse.¹ The Pizzagate story that followed WikiLeaks’ release of emails is a case of disinformation, defined as “intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 124).

However, releasing Podesta’s emails was only the first step. To achieve the strategic goal of distracting publics from Trump’s scandal and undermining Hillary Clinton, WikiLeaks relied on a myriad of online socio-technical actors including platforms, social media users, online

¹ Then Speaker of the House Paul Ryan demanded the RNC remove Trump from the race, Trump’s running mate Mike Pence was considering dropping out, and the RNC chair Reince Priebus told Trump that “either you’ll lose in the biggest landslide in history, or you can get out of the race and let somebody else run who can win” (Alberta, 2019, p.373).

websites, and foreign agents, which collectively contributed to the organization of the Pizzagate disinformation campaign in the absence of a central organization to assign tasks and coordinate actions. Online social media crowds, for instance, functioned as potential investigators to dig up dirt from these emails. They analyzed these emails in the “see for yourself” and “do it yourself” style on 4chan and Reddit. Other political actors that aided these efforts include domestic political operatives, Russian agents, and most importantly a sprawling network of what I call “radical right media” in the U.S. (Aisch, Jon & Kang, 2016; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Robb, 2017).

By radical right media, I mean a specific group of right leaning media organizations, websites, and personalities that mobilize and organize in pursuit of tangible political goals at strategic moment. Operating by this political mobilizing logic, radical right media often blend journalism formats with intentional falsehoods, conduct various kinds of political operations, and form emerging amplification networks that can function as political organizations to mobilize resources, coordinate actions, and pursue tangible political goals such as defeating political opponents and defending political allies. As my later analyses show, many major right leaning media organizations in the U.S. such as Fox News, Breitbart, and the Daily Caller fit this conceptual category. The Pizzagate story offers a telling glimpse at the ways in which radical right media engaged in political organizing work at a strategic moment. Firstly, some radical right media personalities successfully predicted the release of Podesta’s emails and kept the Trump campaign abreast of it. Jeremy Corsi, a conspiracy theorist that worked for Infowars in 2016 (Roig-Franzia & Helderman, 2019), told Trump’s former campaign advisor Roger Stone that “word is friend in embassy plans 2 more dumps. One shortly after I am back 2nd in Oct. Impact planned to be very damaging” (Schechter, 2018). Three days before the Oct.7 email

release, Stone told then Trump campaign CEO Steve Bannon the upcoming email dump through the Breitbart editor Matthew Boyle. Figure 1.1 shows the email exchange between Steven Bannon, Matthew Boyle, and Roger Stone on October 3 and 4, 2016.

<p>Monday, October 3, 2016 FROM: Matthew Boyle TO: Roger Stone EMAIL:</p> <p>Assange — what's he got? Hope it's good.</p> <p>—</p> <p>Thanks,</p> <p>Matthew Boyle Washington Political Editor, Breitbart News http://twitter.com/mboyle1 http://www.breitbart.com/Columnists/matthew-boyle</p>	<p>Monday, October 3, 2016 FROM: Matthew Boyle TO: Steve Bannon EMAIL: You should call Roger. See below. You didn't get from me.</p> <p>Monday, October 3, 2016 FROM: Steve Bannon TO: Matthew Boyle EMAIL: I've got important stuff to worry about</p> <p>Tuesday, October 4, 2016 FROM: Matthew Boyle TO: Steve Bannon EMAIL: Well clearly he knows what Assange has. I'd say that's important.</p>	<p>Tuesday, October 4, 2016 FROM: Steve Bannon TO: Roger Stone EMAIL:</p> <p>What was that this morning???</p> <p>Tuesday, October 4, 2016 FROM: Roger Stone TO: Steve Bannon EMAIL: Fear. Serious security concern. He thinks they are going to kill him and the London police are standing done.</p> <p>However —a load every week going forward.</p> <p>Roger stone</p>
--	---	---

Figure 1.1: Email correspondence between Steve Bannon, Matthew Boyle, and Roger Stone about WikiLeaks's upcoming release of damaging information about Hillary Clinton (Schmidt, Mazzetti, Haberman, & LaFraniere, 2018).

Moreover, once the Podesta emails were dumped, many radical right media fed in and out of the social media ecology and provided social media crowds with guidance and informational resources. For instance, the most cited email in Pizzagate revolved around John Podesta's pizza-related handkerchief (Aisch et al., 2016); and as Figure 1.2 shows, Breitbart was drawing attention to Podesta's handkerchief as early as October 20, about ten days before social media users started to link pizza to pedophilia. The Twitter co-link network² in Figure 1.3 shows the top websites that Twitter users referenced in their conversations about Pizzagate are, with the exception of Youtube, Facebook and WikiLeaks, mostly radical right media.

² The Twitter co-link network of Pizzagate-related tweets was generated based on a 10,000 random sample between 10/31/2016 and 11/06/2016 drawn from Crimson Hexagon. Crimson Hexagon is a social media analytics platform that provides "firehose" historical Twitter data. It preserves the metadata for all tweets captured by the search terms and allows users to export random samples of tweets that were not deleted. The Boolean search terms for my Pizzagate monitor were: Pizzagate OR (Comet AND ping AND pong) OR (pedophilia AND podesta) OR (child AND sex AND podesta) OR (pedophilia AND podestaemails23) OR Pedogate OR #spiritcooking OR (Podesta AND spirit AND cooking) OR (pizza AND podestaemails13) OR (pizza AND sex AND child) OR (pizza and pedophilia). The total number of posts is 950,014.

Top Retweets

@BreitbartNews (Breitbart News) 80+

At one time John Podesta owned a handkerchief with a "pizza-related" map on it
<https://t.co/shCNakhiol> #PodestaEmails13

Oct 20, 2016 Favorite Retweet Reply

Explore Retweets

@HeroAssange (HeroAssange) 40+

Cut off my broadband, I will cut off your Presidency. Winner winner chicken dinner
#PodestaEmails11 #PodestaEmails12 #PodestaEmails13

Oct 18, 2016 Favorite Retweet Reply

Explore Retweets

@FiveRights (Philip Schuyler) 20+

@RedGRoselynd On March 10th, 2016, Hillary PAID to have people at Trump rally BEATEN (see #PodestaEmails13). Next morning she said this:

Oct 22, 2016 Favorite Retweet Reply

Explore Retweets

Figure 1.2: Top 3 retweets in the conversation about Podesta's handkerchief email on Twitter (10/31-11/6). Data credit: Crimson Hexagon.

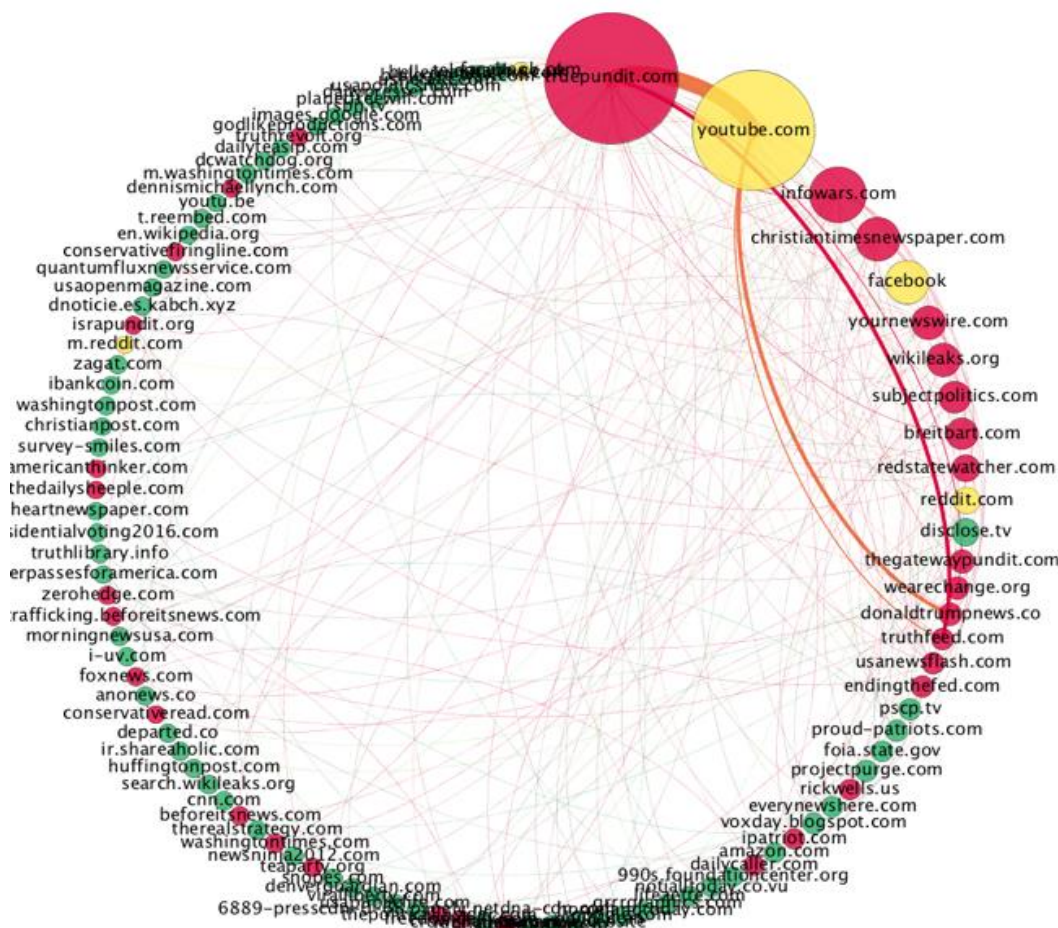


Figure 1.3: Twitter media sharing network based on Pizzagate-related conversations (10/31-11/6).³ The sample size is 10,000. Nodes were ordered by the number of times being cited in tweets and arranged in a circular clockwise layout. Edges were weighted by the times that two sites were cited by the same Twitter user. Social media were colored in yellow, right-wing media in red, and others in green. The classification of right-wing partisanship followed the method in Farris et al., (2017). Data credit: Crimson Hexagon.

As Figure 1.3 shows, radical right media such as truepundit.com, Infowars, and Breitbart were among the most cited websites in Pizzagate-related Tweets. The dense links among top

³ I created a link between two sites each time a single Twitter account shared a story from each of those sites. The interpretation is that if two sites are often shared by the same user, then these two sites likely draw a common set of audiences. This network of websites derived from tweets gives us the structure of attention among politically motivated social media users.

cited sites show that many top radical right sites provided informational resources in the form of links to a common set of social media users. In addition, radical right media also amplified Pizzagate from social media. The open web hyperlink network in Figure 1.4 was extracted from a total of 425 pizzagate-related articles published by 155 media sources during the first week. It shows that radical right media frequently cited tweets in their Pizzagate-related stories.

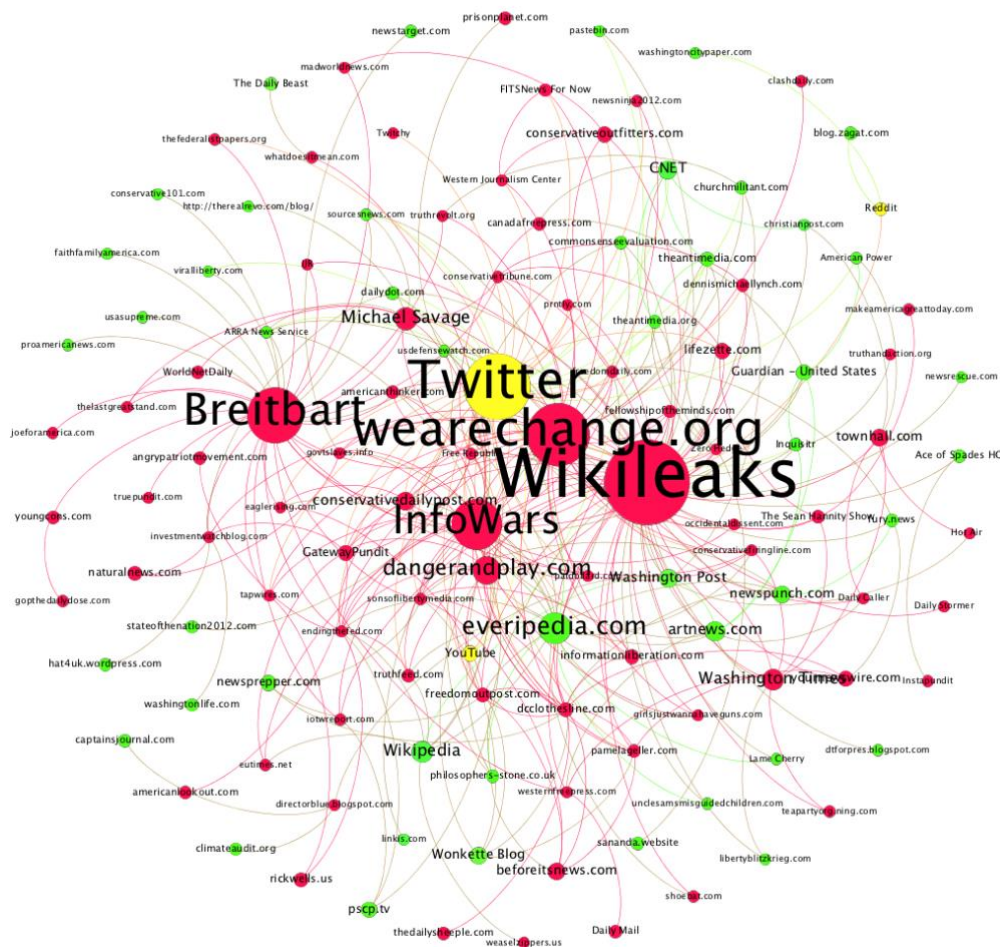


Figure 1.4: Open web hyperlink network of Pizzagate-related articles (10/31—11/6). $N = 425$. Nodes were sized by the number of unique media in-links. Social media were colored in yellow, right-wing media in red, and others in green. The classification of right-wing partisanship followed the method in Farris et al., (2017). Data credit: Media Cloud.⁴

The Pizzagate story reached much larger audiences as it moved from Twitter to radical right media sites such as Infowars that boasted millions of monthly visitors in late 2016. It is fair

⁴ Media Cloud is an open source platform that tracks millions of stories published online. It has the most comprehensive collection of online articles published by online media outlets. Media Cloud's search for articles follows two steps – first, it identifies relevant articles (i.e., the original set) according to a specified time frame, a set of search terms, and a specified set of media collections and second, it includes the articles that were linked by the original set of articles. I used the same set of Boolean search terms and the time frame as I did in Crimson Hexagon to identify Pizzagate-related articles in Media Cloud. The media collections I specified in Media Cloud for the search include BuzzFeed Hyper-partisan Source Right, Center Right, Right, and US Political Blogs Conservative.

to say that without the amplification by radical right media Pizzagate most likely would not have gained such huge traction. From predicting the release of the Podesta emails to assisting the analyses of the emails to amplifying Pizzagate from social media, radical right media played an important role in the emergent political organization of the Pizzagate disinformation campaign.

Pizzagate might be an outlandish case, but it reflected a recurring pattern of organized efforts by radical right media in digital networks to bring about a desired political outcome through strategic deception at moments when Donald Trump was in trouble. Many scholars have found that Fox News, Breitbart, and other radical right media have strategically timed the publication of fabricated or extremely misleading stories to protect Donald Trump (Benkler et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017). Such intentional falsehoods aimed at achieving a tangible political goal were not what we understand as news. They weren't intended to inform citizens. Instead, they were designed to manipulate people's beliefs and actions for political purposes. It is this departure from journalism that motivates this dissertation project to explore some of the fundamental questions about an emerging category of radical right media in the U.S.

How do we make sense of the nature of such media organizations that conduct political operations? Are they news enterprises or political organizations? Or both? How do they mobilize and organize in digital networks to accomplish political goals? What are some of the important mechanisms involved in connecting different radical right media sites into coherent political organization networks?

In this dissertation project, I propose two main theoretical arguments. First, radical right media as individual entities are hybrid organizations that can function simultaneously as quasi-journalism organizations, disinformation producers, and political organizations that aim at shaping public attention and action. In addition to reporting news and giving news a partisan

spin, they can also mobilize strategic disinformation resources and participate in a wide range of political activities to achieve strategic goals. Their organizational functions can morph over time as they switch among different organizational repertoires and adjust their goals and targets in response to emerging challenges and opportunities in the political environment.

Second, radical right media can form fluid networked organizations that work with other similarly purposed media sites and interact with social media networks to advance similar political goals in response to external conditions. The Pizzagate disinformation campaign, for instance, was not organized by one single organization. Instead, it was a product of networked interactions among a diverse set of actors including radical right media, social media crowds, bots, and Russian agents in digital networks. These hybrid networks may combine and recombine in various liminal forms, as they cohere around one problem and then move to the next. The organizing principles involved in connecting these different media actors into coherent political organization networks vary across different situations.

I highlight three key organizational mechanisms that operate either separately or in combination to help explain the political organizational logic of these evolving hybrid organization networks. They are media cued political organizing, politician-cued political organizing, and ideologically contested political organizing. Media cued political organizing refers to the organizing process in which particular media organizations take the lead to concoct and spread narratives to other radical right media sites so as to accomplish a tangible political goal. Politician-cued political organizing refers to the organizing process in which radical right media sites take cues from GOP party leaders, becoming something of a party/Trump propaganda network. Ideologically contested political organizing refers to the organizing process in which radical right media exploit the existing ideological divisions within the GOP or the

Trump administration to influence party/leader agendas. As I will elaborate later, these three mechanisms highlight the major dynamics that shape networked content flow within the radical right media sphere.

This chapter brings in key literature to set up these two core theoretical arguments. I first explain why the predominant partisan media framework has become inadequate to account for the emerging category of radical right media. Then I draw on the “hybrid organization” perspective to make a case for re-conceptualizing radical right media as hybrid organizations. I use Breitbart as an example to show how Breitbart as a hybrid organization can sometimes function as a political organization. Next, I focus on the networked aspect of radical right media. Drawing on recent scholarly work on hybrid media system, connective action, and networked gatekeeping and framing, I propose that radical right media can activate as emerging organization networks.

1.1 BEYOND PARTISAN MEDIA

Many scholars have found that misinformation and disinformation were much more rampant on the political right than on the left in the U.S. 2016 Presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018; Narayanan, Barash, Kollanyi, Neudert, & Howard, 2018). This asymmetric distribution of falsehoods across the ideological spectrum, as Benkler et al., (2018) noted, reflects fundamentally different logics of the radical right media sphere and the rest of the media sphere. According to Benkler et al., (2018), the right-wing media ecosystem in the U.S., a media sphere similar to what I call the radical right media sphere (RRMS), centers around Fox News and Breitbart; it operates by the logic of “a propaganda feedback loop”, which means that media sites are rewarded for promoting disinformation that confirms their audiences’ partisan identity and penalized for truth-seeking behavior. The rest of the media sphere including

both professional and non-profit news organizations largely follows a reality-check logic – they’re rewarded for following truth-seeking norms and penalized for dishonesty and lying, while still having some degrees of freedom to support partisan issues and actors (Benkler et al., 2018).

A fundamental question following from Benkler et al., (2018)’s pioneering work is what kind of organizations Fox News and Breitbart are. If they are not bound by the basic journalistic norm of facticity and are instead rewarded for lying, are they still news enterprises? To address this question, we need to first revisit the partisan media framework, a prevailing analytic lens through which many political communication scholars have viewed right-wing media in the past decade.

What is partisan media? To most scholars, it is the slant or one-sided messages that define partisan media. According to Levendusky (2013a), partisan media are opinionated media – “they present the facts in such a way to support a particular conclusion” (p.7). They not only provide news but also offer a coherent ideological point of view (Levendusky, 2013b). Partisan media’s opinionated news coverage is usually manifested in two ways. The first is called news selection bias or partisan filtering. Partisan media tend to filter stories for ideological reasons – they devote more attention to stories or topics that favor their side and downplay those that harm their viewpoints. The second is reframing news with conservative news frames. When covering the same stories as mainstream media do, partisan media reframe the stories and focus on “a set of facts that is most congenial to their side” (Levendusky, 2013a, p.566). They also employ a common set of vocabulary and arguments to make the understanding of news compatible with the conservative ideology (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

Right-wing media have largely been studied as partisan media with a focus on either selection bias or conservative news frames. Much of past research was built upon case studies that analyzed the content of a handful of right-wing media outlets such as Fox News, Rush Limbaugh's show and the Wall Street Journal (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Peck, 2019). For example, scholars found that Rush Limbaugh and the Wall Street Journal often discredited and displaced mainstream interpretations of news events by providing alternative frames for their audiences (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Fox News was found to often cover stories that favored Republicans (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

However, since the advent of Rush Limbaugh's talk radio program and Fox News, there has been a rapid expansion of online right-wing media in recent years. According to BuzzFeed's partisan media database, during the first ten years of the 21st century only 85 online right-wing media sites were founded. But within the first eight years in the second decade, 357 more were founded (Silverman, Lytvynenko, Vo & Singer-Vine, 2017). Among all online right-wing media sites that were founded since the 1990s, 40% were founded in only two years – 2016 and 2017. The world of right-wing media is no longer a small cluster of conservative media establishment bound by a shared "ideological disposition towards politics, a set of presuppositions about morality and core values, and a common view of other media" (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 77). Instead, it's become a radical right media sphere that operates differently than traditional partisan right news organizations (Benkler et al., 2018). This radical right media sphere is led not only by extremist sites such as Infowars but also by the so-called "news organizations" such as Fox News and Daily Caller which claim to follow journalistic norms but in fact often engage in disinformation and propaganda. More important, radical right media outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart outperformed many moderate conservative opinion media such as the National

Review in the competition for the public's attention between 2012 and 2016 (Faris et al., 2017). The behavior of both individual organizations and networks in this sphere are fluid, in the sense of which organizations may play critical roles in different political situations. In addition, key organizational actors rise and fall over time, as political backers change strategies, as business models lose traction, or tech companies ban sites deemed dangerous to public safety.

The development of hybrid radical right media organizations and their networking activities presents serious challenges to two critical assumptions of the partisan media framework. The first assumption is facticity. The principle of presenting facts or some documentary support of claims, even with a partisan spin, is considered as an essential characteristic of a partisan news organization. According to Levendusky (2013a), partisan media are media outlets that “present the facts in such a way to support a particular conclusion” (p.7). And because right-wing media were largely seen as partisan media capable of presenting the facts in an ideologically coherent way, scholars contended that these media outlets can encourage political engagement and help audiences make sense of new information (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Jamieson, Hardy, & Romer, 2007). While this assumption is still valid for some conservative news outlets, it does not hold water for many radical right media that have engaged in deliberate and strategic deception. For instance, Bill Sammon, then Fox News's Washington deputy managing editor who on multiple occasions claimed that Barack Obama was drawn to Marxism, privately admitted that he spread what he had believed to be far-fetched speculation (Hananoki, 2011). Fox News host Sean Hannity deliberately spread the Obama Birther conspiracy (claiming that he was not born in the US, and thus was not a legitimate president) even though he did not believe that the issue was legitimate (Green, 2011). We know that these Fox News' employees deliberately spread falsehoods, as they admitted their intentions either

privately or publicly. Deliberate deception, as such, is no journalism. It is a form of distorted and dysfunctional communication that confuses and misleads people instead of helping them make sense of new information, and undermines democratic self-government and democratic institutions (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018; Friedland, Hover, & Rojas, 2006).

The second assumption of the partisan media framework is that partisan right-wing news enterprises select stories from the same universe of news events as mainstream media do. Comparing MSNBC and Fox News, Levendusky (2013a) wrote that “while they have the same potential universe of stories, given their priors, they select very different ones to cover” (p.30). This point of view suggests that the principles which define the news of the day for mainstream media should also apply to partisan media and that the only difference is that partisan media apply an extra selection criteria, namely ideology, to filter out stories that don't favor their side. Nonetheless, many radical right media do not always select stories from the same universe of news events. Rather, they manufacture or create “news” by running sting operations to lure political opponents into media traps (Dreier & Martin, 2010). For example, Breitbart's claim to fame was the 2009 ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) story, which was based on a series of sting operations run by conservative activists James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles who posed as a pimp and a prostitute to lure ACORN staff into talking about how to open a brothel (Dreier & Martin, 2010).

Many radical right media have gone well beyond what we understand as partisan journalism. Besides running disinformation and propaganda campaigns, they've engaged in a wide variety of political activities such as micro-targeting voters on digital platforms during elections (Kim, Hsu, & Bankston, 2018), killing stories to protect politicians (Stelter, 2018), fundraising and campaigning for political candidates (Brock & Rabin-Havt, 2012), orchestrating

the tea party movement (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011) and conducting opposition research (Brock, 2015). Labeling these radical right media as partisan news organizations not only ignores their multifarious political functions but also diminishes the value of real journalism.

There are a few scholarly attempts at going beyond the partisan media label when characterizing radical right media. For example, Bennett and Livingston (2018) used the label “alt right media” to refer to “sites and platforms that produce and distribute disinformation in order to advance partisan agendas and to destabilize opponents and institutions.” (p. 125). Others used the label “hyper-partisan” to signal a stronger degree of partisanship (Tucker et al., 2018). Some used the term “junk news” to refer to partisan media that publish extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, masked commentary, or fake news (Narayanan et al., 2018).

These new labels reflect a shared view that the old framework of partisan media has become inadequate to explain what many radical right media do. While new labels are useful to highlight these media’s “extra-journalistic” practices, we need a broad theoretical framework that can integrate these insights with the old partisan media perspective. Many radical right media, such as Fox News, Breitbart, and the Daily Caller, sometimes still do cover partisan news, but they also push out disinformation from time to time.

To dichotomize these media outlets into either partisan news organizations or disinformation sites perhaps misses the point. As my analyses demonstrate later, these organizations can switch among disinformation, journalism, and a host of other organizational repertoires in response to different political situations. It is hard to pin them down because they are moving targets capable of changing their political functions and repertoires. At one moment, they may function as the media arm of a social movement (Skocpol & Williamson, 2016). At

another, they may function as a campaign website for a political candidate (Nuzzi, 2017). Hence, it is perhaps more useful to conceptualize them as a type of boundary-crossing hybrid organizations that are flexible enough to draw on different norms and repertoires, and fulfil different informational and political functions in various situations. In the following sections, I will first draw on existing scholarly work on hybrid organizations, and then illustrate with empirical examples how the concept of hybridity can help us better understand Breitbart, a major radical right media in the U.S.

1.2 HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS

Hybrid media organizations engage in repertoires of action that do not fit neatly into fixed traditional categories such as news organizations, social movement organizations, political parties, or interest groups (Chadwick, 2007). Rather, they may act at times as all of those types of organization. Repertoires, as Tilly (1995) succinctly put, refer to “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice” (p.26). As Chadwick (2007) noted, repertoires sustain collective identity within an organization, reflect its values and goals, and shape its organizational forms. Hence, they tend to characterize various kinds of traditional organizations. Political parties are often associated with election campaigning; interest groups are known for their involvement in lobbying and consultation; social movements often engage in mass protests; and news organizations collect facts, identify sources, and publish news of the day.

However, the boundaries between traditionally fixed organizational categories are blurring in the political field. As Chadwick (2007) observed, established political parties and interest groups have increasingly adopted digital network repertoires such as online petition and donation that are typically associated with social movements; and Internet-mediated

organizations such as MoveOn that cannot exist without the Internet have also emerged. These organizations, which Chadwick termed “hybrid organizational types” (2005) or “hybrid organizations” (2007), defy fixed categories as they employ diverse modes of organizing and mobilizing to achieve their respective goals. Other scholars in the field of collective action studies have also echoed this “organizational hybridity” perspective. For instance, Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2012) found that the Internet has helped many organizations blend different modes of engagement ranging from “impersonal” to “institutional” with modes of interaction ranging from “personal” to “impersonal”.

Moreover, in the media field, news making in such hybrid media organizations has increasingly taken place outside the institutional boundary of professional journalism, challenging the old hierarchies of news production, distribution and consumption and making the lines among professional journalism and other forms of journalism such as social media journalism porous (Papacharissi, 2015). Indeed, these changes have also fed back into the ways in which traditional journalism is changing. For example, many professional news organizations are incorporating audience metrics and social media into their journalistic routines as they adapt to the participatory culture of digital media (Anderson, 2011; Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). On the other hand, many amateur journalism content producers such as blogs have adopted formal organizational forms (Lowrey, Parrott & Meade, 2011) and developed into semi-professional news organizations that integrate commentary with investigate journalism (Chadwick, 2017). In their study of the framing of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Bennett, Segerberg and Yang (2018) noted the softened boundaries among different media types and journalistic genres.

“It often becomes difficult to separate the roles of different types of media (e.g., legacy vs. social) and content formats (e.g., journalism vs. activist reports). It is also difficult to neatly identify system boundaries or hierarchies of functions, as ordinary citizens, journalists, elites, and other actors all become entwined in the construction and distribution of both attention and meaning” (p. 662).

As distinctions between fixed categories blur in both the political field and media field, many organizations have learned to shift among different organizational repertoires in various situations. This often makes it hard to ascertain the nature of such organizations just based on what they do at one point in time. In their studies of multiple large-scale protests, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) found that some organizations moved from being a more hierarchical and mission-driven NGO in one context to being a facilitator of engagement networks in another context. “Depending on when, where, and how one observes an organization, it may appear differently as an NGO, INGO, TNGO, NGDO, an interest advocacy, group, a political network hub, and so on” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p.758). Organizational fluidity, namely the ability to switch among different organizational repertoires in response to various external conditions, constitutes an essential aspect of hybrid organizations (Chadwick, 2017).

1.3 RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA AS HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS

The idea of “hybrid organizations” captures the fluid behavior of many radical right media that function as journalism producers, propaganda outlets, and political organizations. As noted above, media outlets such as Breitbart have employed a diverse range of organizational repertoires such as news reporting, disinformation, and propaganda that are not typically associated with one fixed organizational category. In one situation where political goals such as winning an election take priority, radical right media may switch to the repertoires characteristic

of political organizations and may function as political organizations. In another situation where development within established news-making political institutions dominates the news cycle, radical right media may switch to news reporting routines and function more like a news enterprise.

The analytical benefits of applying the hybridity concept to radical right media are three-fold. First, it transcends the tunnel vision of the partisan media framework which limits our attention to journalistic practices. Viewing radical right media as fundamentally boundary-crossing in nature allows us to observe a wider range of actually occurring actions and better evaluate the implications of their actions in shaping the US public communication system. Second, it foregrounds the fluidity of radical right media's organizational repertoires and emphasizes how contextual factors such as emerging political threats may drive radical right media's behavior as they switch among different repertoires to pursue various goals. Third, it draws attention to the tension in the constant negotiation of different norms that may run into conflict with one another within such hybrid organizations and invites new research questions such as when different norms clash and how such conflicts are resolved.

Therefore, I propose to understand individual radical right media as hybrid organizations that perform two fundamental functions -- one is informational and the other is political. The informational function is akin to the journalistic function of partisan news organizations -- offering ideologically consistent and accurate information through informational programming to help audiences better make sense of news (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Its aim is to get people to consider facts and ideas that might not be available in mainstream media. The political function, however, is aimed at influencing people and moving them to a particular position so

that a strategic political outcome can be accomplished, even if that involves manufacturing or spreading falsehoods intentionally.

In the following section, I use Breitbart, one of the most prominent radical right media in the U.S. during 2016 and 2017 (Faris et al., 2017; Bolyard, 2017), as an example to illustrate the hybrid organizational nature of radical right media. Since radical right media's political function is an area of particular interest for this dissertation project, my following analysis focuses on the political aspect of Breitbart. It not only shows that Breitbart resembles a political organization in many aspects but also demonstrates that Breitbart's political functions morphed and evolved over time as it responded to changing conditions and emerging problems in the political environment.

1.4 HOW BREITBART FUNCTIONED AS A POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

I draw on Bimber, Cynthia, and Flanagin (2009)'s work and provisionally define a political organization as a formal entity that provides mechanisms through which political targets are determined, resources are mobilized, and methods and tactics are selected to achieve pre-determined political goals. We can grasp the political nature of a political organization by focusing on the following two common characteristics of a political organization -- seeking political outcomes and mobilizing resources through political activities.

A political organization first and foremost seeks to advance political goals. These goals may vary across different types of political organizations. Some seek to advance specific policy goals and others aim to create chaos and confusion. Nonetheless, whatever form it takes the *raison d'être* of any political organization is to achieve political outcomes. The goal of a political party is to form a national government and the goal of an interest group is to achieve policy outcome in its favor.

Secondly, to achieve political goals, political organizations need to mobilize resources and participate in political activities that may range from mass protest to strategic deception. Resource mobilization, the capacity to “produce, allocate, and utilize material and symbolic goods that enable recurring patterns of collective action to occur” (Bennett, Segerberg & Walker, 2014, p. 234), is accomplished by and further enables continued political activities. For example, a political party is associated with activities such as election campaigning and a social movement is characterized by mobilizing mass protests.

How does Breitbart function as a political organization? First, Breitbart has unapologetically pursued political goals since its founding in 2007. Founder Andrew Breitbart once commented that he was committed to the “destruction of the old media guard” (Gilson, 2011). That commitment was carried on after his death in 2012. In a speech given at the Heritage Foundation in 2017, Matthew Boyle, the political editor at Breitbart that helped inform the Trump campaign of WikiLeaks’s release of hacked emails, proclaimed that the goal of Breitbart is “the full destruction and elimination of the entire mainstream media” (Wemple, 2017). This radical mission arguably stems from Andrew Breitbart’s deep-seated distaste for what he called the “Democratic-Media Complex” (Taranto, 2009) – the Democratic Party, Hollywood, academia, and above all the news media (Hylton, 2017).

Soon after Steve Bannon took over Breitbart as its executive chairman, he unabashedly turned the organization into a tool for his political ambition. In an interview in July 2016, he announced that Breitbart is the platform for the “alt-right” (Posner, 2016). As he joined the Trump campaign in 2016, he turned Breitbart into Trump’s mouthpiece with the clear goal of electing Trump to the White House. When one of its own reporter, Michelle Fields, accused Trump’s campaign manager Corey Lewandowski of manhandling her, Breitbart turned against

its own reporter and challenged the veracity of Fields' account (Barbaro & Grynbaum, 2016).

This outright political advocacy of Breitbart under Bannon's leadership led to a series of resignations of top reporters and editors. As Kurt Bardelle, a former spokesman for Breitbart put it, Breitbart transformed into "Trump's de facto 'super PAC'" (Barbaro & Grynbaum, 2016).

Second, Breitbart engaged in a wide range of political activities to pursue these goals. To attack left-wing organizations, it ran hit pieces that were based on sting operations. For instance, as mentioned before, Breitbart became known because of its promotion of the ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) story in 2009, which stemmed from a series of sting operations ran by conservative activists James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles who posed as a pimp and a prostitute to lure ACORN staff into media traps. To promote certain political candidates, it joined their political campaigns and attacked their political opponents. During the Republican primaries in the 2016 presidential election, Breitbart launched continuous attacks on Trump's GOP opponents such as Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Jeb Bush. In 2017, then CEO of Breitbart Steve Bannon openly campaigned for the controversial GOP candidate Roy Moore who was accused of child molestation. Bannon turned Breitbart into a political apparatus for Moore's campaign: it churned out a multitude of articles that are almost all favorable to Moore when very few conservative news outlets gave the candidate any positive coverage (Nuzzi, 2017); it even attacked Moore's accusers who claimed they were sexually assaulted by him as teenage girls.

Moreover, Breitbart has constantly adjusted its priorities, targets, and repertoires in response to emerging opportunities and challenges in the political environment, reflecting organizational fluidity as a fundamental feature of hybridity. In 2015 and 2016, Breitbart's political priorities were largely about helping elect Donald Trump. When Trump became the

U.S. President and Bannon joined the White House as the Chief Strategist who continued to serve as the “de facto editorial director” of Breitbart⁵ (Reed, 2017). Breitbart’s priorities seemed to shift towards assisting Steve Bannon in his power struggle in the White House (Gertz, 2017). As Breitbart adjusted its political priorities, we can also observe the shift of Breitbart’s major political targets moving from Trump’s GOP opponents in Republican primaries in 2015 and early 2016 to Trump’s opponent Hillary Clinton in the general election in mid-2016 and to Steve Bannon’s political opponents within the Trump administration such as Trump’s senior advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner and Trump’s second National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster in 2017 (Gertz, 2017; Gray, 2017). Meanwhile, as Breitbart developed into a major right-wing publication with institutional access and deep connections to the Trump administration in 2017, we can see its political repertoires expand from amplifying fringe ideas from social media and alt-right sites in its early years to coordinating leaks with insiders in the White House in its campaign to oust H.R. McMaster in 2017 (See Chapter 5).

The shift of political priorities, targets, and repertoires in different contexts means that the relationship that Breitbart built with other right-wing media and political actors are also subject to change. Converging strategic goals or common interests may bring them together while diverging interests can break them apart. For example, during the 2016 election primaries, Breitbart attacked Fox News for being cozy to Google and Facebook, hostile to Trump, and soft on immigration (Faris et al., 2017). But Breitbart’s attacks abated as Trump locked down the nomination and mended fences with Fox News’ host Megyn Kelly (Hemmer, 2018). By the end of the 2016 general election, both Breitbart and Fox News rallied behind Trump by focusing attention on negative stories about Hillary Clinton. This joining of forces with other media sites

⁵ Thanks to an ethics waiver granted by the Trump administration which allowed him to communicate with editors at Breitbart, Steve Bannon functioned as Breitbart’s de facto director during his tenure at the White House in 2017.

will become an important part of the story about how radical right media form emerging networked organizations to advance political agendas – in this case, mobilizing support for Trump’s election and attacking opponents such as Hillary Clinton.

As my case studies in Chapter 3, 4 and 5 will show, the size and coordination of these networks and their capacity to change organizational patterns in response to various threats and opportunities makes them different from partisan organizations that continue to operate on the conservative end of the mainstream media sphere. If we view Breitbart through the fixed category of a conservative news organization, then it becomes hard to understand why it attacked GOP candidates in elections, why it attacked other right-wing media outlets such as Fox News, why it attacked Trump’s political appointees in the White House, and why it went from being fully supportive of Trump during the 2016 election to being occasionally critical of Trump in 2017.⁶ However, if we approach Breitbart as a type of hybrid organization that pursues shifting goals, capitalizes on emerging opportunities, and blends different organizational repertoires and adjusts them in response to changing external conditions, we can have a better grasp on the logic and reasons behind its changing behavior.

Due to limited space, my illustration of the concept of organizational hybridity focuses on Breitbart. Later analyses will show that the conceptual framework of radical right media as hybrid organizations is of considerable relevance to many radical right media including Fox News, the Daily Caller, and so on. I think readers will find striking parallels between Breitbart and Fox News in terms of the hybrid and fluid nature of their organizational repertoires. For instance, in 2015 and early 2016, Fox News was largely critical of Donald Trump, but in mid-2016 it went to great lengths of killing a story to protect candidate Trump from negative

⁶ For instance, Breitbart repeatedly criticized President Trump’s order of missile strikes in Syria in 2017 and 2018; it also criticized him for defending his national security advisor H.R. McMaster in August 2017.

publicity (J. Mayer, 2019) and initiated a disinformation campaign in 2017 to protect President Trump from the Russia probe (See Chapter 3). In short, the wide range and the shifting nature of radical right media's repertoires suggest that any fixed traditional organizational category would not likely do a good job at explaining what they do. Treating them as boundary-crossing hybrid organizations must be a first step towards understanding their logic and assessing their actual political functions and impact.

By now, I've made a case for applying "hybridity" to individual radical right media organizations. This framework helps us better grasp the hybrid and fluid nature of their activities. However, to understand how radical right media as a whole exert their political influence such as disorienting their audiences or shaping mainstream media's agendas, it is important to bring the networked aspect of radical right media to the fore in the analysis and investigate the logic behind their networked interactions that often elevate their collective political impact. As Benkler et al., (2018) observed in their studies of the 2016 election, the pernicious effect of radical right media's propaganda did not come from one single source – rather, it was a result of networked interactions among a broad set of sources that collectively added credibility to and reinforced recall of false information. Hence, we need a theory that transcends individual units of radical right media and illuminates the mechanisms involved in connecting different radical right media into coherent politically organized networks. In the following section, I propose the thesis that radical right media organizations can form large networks to accomplish political goals in response to external conditions. Key to this theoretical perspective is the understanding that political organizing can take place in digital communication networks.

1.5 NETWORKED ORGANIZATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL HYBRIDITY

According to the sociologist Walter Powell, social relations and actions are organized in three major ways, namely hierarchies, markets, and networks (Powell, 1990). He found that networks, contrasted with the other two mechanisms that rely on either authority or formal exchange agreements, can organize actions among organizations based on reciprocity and trust (Powell, 1990). To go even further, many scholars found that digital communication networks can organize collective action without the presence of formal organizations (Bennett, Segerberg & Walker, 2014; Shirky, 2008). As Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2012) noted, collective action requires organizing but organizing can occur without an organization. At the heart of this perspective is the understanding of communication as constitutive of organization. Organizing involves “identifying interested people and their concerns, contacting them for purposes of developing common identity or trust or for purposes of sending appeals and requests, establishing agendas, and coordinating action or engagement” (Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl, 2012, p. 79), which are all fundamentally informational and communicative. Hence, communication networks that identify participants and resources and facilitate information exchanges in collective action can be the central agent of organizing. Networks as such that assume organizational capacities on the basis of communication are organization networks. These networks are often established and scaled through various kinds of digital technologies such as social media that allow organizing to take place with or without the presence of formal organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Many digitally enabled organizational networks are self-organizing in the sense that they steer clear of formal organizations. These communication networks usually form around the self-motivating sharing practices among distributed individuals who take actions based on personal expression or self-validation. In place of formal organizations that mobilize resources, coordinate

actions, and broker differences, socio-technical architectures such as recommendation algorithms, reputation systems, and moderation routines that are built into digital platforms often play prominent roles in structuring networked sharing practices and relations among participants (Benkler, 2006; Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014).

Scholars found self-organizing networks in various kinds of collective action ranging from peer production projects to news making to social protests. In peer production projects, networked participants volunteered their free labor to collectively create informational public goods such as knowledge and security (Benkler, Shaw, et al., 2015; Livingston & Walter-Drop, 2012). In the area of news making, Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) drew attention to what they termed as “networked framing” and “networked gatekeeping”. In the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, they found that popular news frames and influential gatekeepers were crowdsourced to prominence by both elites and online crowds through Twitter’s address markers such as hashtags. Twitter’s socio-technical architecture allowed ordinary participants to engage in the decision-making processes of news making such as providing information, determining what is newsworthy and relevant, and supplying verification that were traditionally organized by professional news organizations. In large-scale digitally enabled social protests, Bennett et al., (2014) found that stitching technologies such as Twitter can thread together a network of networks and enable online crowds to produce elemental organizational capacities such as resource mobilization.

This is not to say that all digitally enabled organization networks are self-organizing networks. The interaction between digital technologies and non-technological factors such as participation norms has led to a variety of organizational forms in digital networks including both hierarchical control by formal organizations and de-centralized coordination among

individuals (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014; Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl, 2012; Kreiss, 2012). The traditional logic of organizationally-brokered organizing that is often associated with hierarchical control can be reproduced in many online political campaign or issue advocacy networks, as formal organizations with strong agendas merely seek to leverage the affordances of digital technologies such as reduction of cost so that they can more efficiently manage participation and organize actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012a; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Foot & Schneider, 2006).

In the middle between self-organizing networks on one end and organizationally brokered networks on the other are many action networks that take on hybrid forms. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) found in many economic justice and environmental movements what they termed “organizationally enabled networks”, a hybrid type of organization networks where formal or quasi-organizations operated in the background as they deployed digital technologies to enable networks to form around personalized action frames without imposing collective identity or projecting strong agendas. This organizing form is hybrid in the sense that it sits between two extremes and involves hybrid motivations, behaviors, and norms. For instance, in organizationally enabled networks, organizing is often co-produced by both self-motivated individuals and goal-driven formal organizations that build the digital infrastructure to encourage personalized participation.

Nevertheless, the theoretical purchase of “hybridity” goes beyond the specific hybrid model of “organizationally enabled networks”. In a broad sense of hybridity, many action networks enabled by digital technologies in the real world are hybrid. This is not only because these networks tend to involve a heterogeneous set of actors including humans and nonhumans that both act as agents to generate power and meaning (Latour, 2005; Chadwick, 2017), it is also because that in the real world, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) noted, various action logics (e.g.,

self-organizing vs organizationally-enabled) may co-exist, layer, and overlap in the same action space. For instance, in one digitally enabled protest, there could be multiple self-organizing sub-networks embedded within a larger organizationally enabled network.

The concept of hybridity also offers a theoretical purchase on the dynamic aspect of networks. Change and flux in the processes of combining and recombining elements of different logics are at the heart of the notion of hybridity (Chadwick, 2017). Hybrid organization networks are evolving networks-- they combine and recombine from one form to another as they respond to changing external conditions in the political environment. As networks morph, different participants come and go, partnership and linkage dissolve and re-assemble, and new organizing mechanisms emerge in place of old ones. This dynamic process is akin to DeLanda's concept of an assemblage -- "a liminal fusion of organizations, quasi-organizations, technologies, norms, and practices that cohere around a problem or issue, only to dissolve and reassemble in a new variation around a new problem" (Livingston, Davis & Nassetta, 2019, p.4).

1.6 RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA AS HYBRID POLITICAL ORGANIZATION NETWORKS

How do the concepts of organization networks and hybridity help us understand the political logic of radical right media as a whole? The first step is to transcend individual media organizations and consider radical right media in network terms. Yochai Benkler and his research team were among the first to stress the network aspect of right-wing media. They noted that it is the networked practice of repetition and validation by various right-wing sites that lend credence to and reinforce recall of false information (Benkler et al., 2018). In other words, the power of right-wing media's disinformation campaigns, which they called "network propaganda", in distracting and disorienting audiences comes from the digital communication networks that enabled them to easily cite, copy, and repeat each other.

Having established that radical right media bend information to serve political strategies, I also argue that radical right media networks can activate as political organization networks with their own political agency and organizational capacity. In other words, these networks can assume organizational capacities to achieve political outcomes at certain moments. Just as digitally enabled action networks can mobilize and organize towards achieving collective action goals in the absence of central control by formal organizations, radical right media networks can also -- in their unique ways -- accomplish organizational tasks such as resource mobilization and action coordination for political purposes in a distributed manner. In the Pizzagate example, organizing work such as the identification of resources and production of narratives were accomplished by networked interactions among various radical right media -- along with social media crowds and other actors -- to distract publics from Trump's scandals. In the absence of a central organization to set goals or manage participation, radical right media entered into an emergent assemblage of myriad actors who gathered around John Podesta's emails, identified useful materials, and wove them into a coherent disinformation narrative that resonated with broad audiences. The organizing process of the Pizzagate disinformation campaign took place entirely in digital networks and relied on the digital architectures such as Twitter's address markers, hashtags, and hyperlinks to build coherent organization.

Moreover, these political organization networks are often hybrid. They often involve a heterogeneous set of actors such as think tanks, social media users, algorithms, foreign agents, and politicians that work towards similar political outcomes. These actors may accomplish different tasks in the organizing process with each contributing a small part towards a common project. In the Pizzagate case, we can see the division of labor among a diverse group of actors. Russian agents hacked Podesta's emails, WikiLeaks delivered hacked emails to the public, social

media users investigated the emails, and radical right media amplified the story to wide audiences.

There are various mechanisms involved in connecting radical right media networks into coherent political organization. For instance, organizing in the Pizzagate case first started with foreign agents hacking and dumping Podesta's emails, then shifted into the hands of social media users who assembled materials into narratives, and eventually culminated as radical right media amplified disinformation narratives to large audiences. But in other cases we might observe a different mechanism or a different sequence of events that contributes to coherent political organization within radical right media networks. The key point here is that the organization networks of radical right media are fluid – they shift and adapt over time to accommodate different political circumstances. From Chapter 3 to Chapter 5, I will illustrate three mechanisms involved in connecting various a majority of radical right media into coherent organization networks at strategic moments.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

In the next chapter “The Political Roots of Major Radical Right Media in the U.S.,” I’ll explain why radical right media have engaged in strategic political activities in the past. I focus on one important factor that was often neglected by much of existing literature on radical right media, namely how partisan funding has influenced radical right media’s political activities. I will show that even though major radical right media are for-profit companies that seek to maximize profits, a significant number of them have relied on partisan funding to develop a viable business model, weather financial difficulties, and cover operational cost. The funders of radical right media include some of the most influential GOP donors in the U.S. such as the Koch brothers and the Mercer family who funded and influenced radical right media as part of their strategy to

advance partisan agendas. Dependent on the largess of these funders, radical right media often did their bidding by engaging in strategic political activities.

The following three chapters illustrate three different mechanisms that drove radical right media to form emerging organization networks in response to various political conditions. I focus on three cases that represent different political threats and opportunities, and show how radical right media networks emerged along different lines of internal media cueing, external politician cueing, and ideological alignments and divisions among radical right groups. Chapter 3 “Media Cued Political Organizing: How Fox News Mobilized the Radical Right Media Sphere to Protect Donald Trump” introduces the first organizing mechanism, namely media cued political organizing. As I mentioned before, it refers to the organizing process that is initiated internally within the radical right media sphere by one or a small number of media outlets from which similar frames spread to other radical right media sites. I use the Seth Rich disinformation story to illustrate this organizing process. The Seth Rich disinformation story is an intentional false narrative that claimed that it was a DNC (Democratic National Committee) employee named Seth Rich, not Russian hackers, that gave WikiLeaks the stolen DNC emails to help elect Donald Trump in 2016. Fox News promoted this narrative in May 2017 to exonerate Donald Trump from potential charges of collusion with Russia that interfered in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election by proving that Russia did not hack the DNC to influence the election. This case shows how a majority of radical right media quickly joined a disinformation campaign cued by Fox News to counter a serious threat to President Donald Trump.

Chapter 4 “Politician-cued Political Organizing: How GOP Politicians Cued Radical Right Media to Save a U.S. Supreme Court Nominee” introduces the second organizing mechanism, namely politician cued political organizing. As mentioned above, it refers to the

process in which external partisan cueing by prominent Republican politicians structured radical right media's behavior. I use the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy as a case to illustrate this mechanism. The Kavanaugh-Ford controversy involves a sexual assault scandal that emerged two months before the 2018 mid-term election. Christine Blasey Ford accused Trump U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of attempting at raping her when they were high school students in the early 1980s. Worried that questioning an alleged sexual assault victim might alienate women voters in the upcoming election, prominent Republican politicians strategically avoided interrogating Christine Ford, which prompted most radical right media to refrain from personal attacks against Christine Ford. This case shows how most radical right media followed the cues from GOP party leaders and functioned as a de facto propaganda network for the GOP.

Chapter 5 "Ideologically Contested Political Organizing: How Radical Right Media Pressured Donald Trump to Fire his National Security Advisor" introduces the third organizing mechanism, namely ideologically contested political organizing. As I mentioned before, it refers to the process where radical right media exploit the existing ideological divisions within the GOP or the Trump administration to influence party/leader agendas. I use anti-McMaster campaign as a case to illustrate this process. In late July 2017, as the ideological dispute between the establishment wing and the anti-globalist wing within the White House intensified, Trump's then National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster fired a series of anti-globalist officials. As a response, major radical right media sites such as Breitbart launched a widely coordinated anti-McMaster campaign to pressure Trump to fire his National Security Advisor. Radical right media's push to fire McMaster continued even when Trump came out in defense of McMaster. This case shows

how radical right media utilized the internal ideological conflict within the Trump administration to influence Trump's agendas.

I chose these three cases because they represent three important logical types of the radical right media sphere during the Trump administration. Under different political conditions, radical right media may take the lead to counter threats to party leaders (Chapter 3), or follow the cues from party leaders and function as a de facto propaganda network for the party (Chapter 4), or exploit ideological divisions within the party to influence party agendas (Chapter 5). There are probably other types, but I believe these three cases together provide a relatively comprehensive view of the different political dynamics shaping networked content flows within the radical right media sphere. I believe these three logical types will recur in various forms and instances so long as a Republican president is in office. Under a Democratic president, radical right media's focus might shift to attacking Democrats, but I still expect these patterns to hold.

Moreover, I believe these three cases taken together can help clarify the role of radical right media in American politics and correct some misconceptions. For example, there is a common notion that radical right media such as Fox News are simply the propaganda arm for the GOP or the Trump administration. While the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy shows the subtle ways in which radical right media may have functioned as GOP's propaganda network, the anti-McMaster campaign demonstrates the political agency of radical right media to influence the party/leader agendas. In other words, unlike a state-media system where the political party has full control over media, neither GOP nor President Trump can fully control radical right media. They both try to manage each other while drawing support from their mutual relationship.

These three organizing mechanisms can co-exist, compete or interact with each other in different ways. In situations where there exists united, strong, and clear partisan cueing from

right-wing politicians, media cued disinformation narratives that contradict politicians' cueing will likely have little effect. In Chapter 4, I will demonstrate that many media cued disinformation narratives about Christine Blasey Ford emerged but failed to gain traction because they contradicted with more dominant cues by Republican Senators and the White House. In addition, politician cued political organizing may manifest itself differently if it co-exists with ideologically contested political organizing. In Chapter 5, I will show that when political organizing was driven by ideological contestation among various radical right groups, many right-wing politicians secretly leaked documents and talking points behind the veil of anonymity instead of providing cues publicly.

As I argued before, this model based on three ideal type political organizing mechanisms is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of all possible organizing mechanisms in radical right media networks. Rather, it offers a first step towards understanding how a majority of radical right media were mobilized to pursue tangible political goals at strategic moments in the past. The real world is of course much messier than the model. In some cases, we may observe, to varying degrees, multiple mechanisms at play at the same time. In still other cases, we may see the organizing mechanism shift from one type to another over time. The three logics are distinct but real-world cases may include a combination of these three organizational mechanisms. Hence, my intention here is not to impose static, fixed, or abstract categories on empirical cases. Rather, it is to draw attention to three distinct mechanisms of political organizing within the radical right media sphere and illustrate with the examples how these mechanisms may manifest themselves in the real world.

In Chapter 6 Conclusion: Radical Right Media and Democracy in America, I'll first summarize my research findings and clarify four popular views that have clouded much of our

current understanding of radical right media in the U.S. Then, I will discuss radical right media's implication for American democracy. I argue that their strategic use of disinformation, their extremist language to describe political opponents, and constant attacks on the press and civil officials erode and weaken democracy by diminishing the role of facts in democratic self-governance, delegitimizing democratic institutions, and breaking the democratic norm of mutual tolerance.

To understand how radical right media mobilize and organize at strategic moments to pursue political goals, we must first ask how they come to develop these political goals. Aren't they all commercial enterprises that must entertain their audiences first in order to make money? How do they develop political objectives when their main goal is supposedly maximizing profits come what may? The next chapter traces the political roots of radical right media and provides an important context for answering these questions.

Chapter 2. THE POLITICAL ROOTS OF MAJOR RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA IN THE U.S.

Shortly after ending his tenure as the Chief Strategist at the White House, Steve Bannon returned to Breitbart as its executive chairman. “Now I’m free.” Bannon told the *Weekly Standard* in an interview. “I’ve got my hands back on my weapons I’ve built a fucking machine at Breitbart. And now I’m about to go back, knowing what I know, and we’re about to rev that machine up.” (Boyer, 2017)

Steve Bannon indeed turned Breitbart into a political weapon. To many observers, Breitbart’s unabashed promotion of political candidates such as Donald Trump, for instance, made it look like a political apparatus rather than a news enterprise (Barbaro & Grynbaum, 2016; Nuzzi, 2017). Nonetheless, Bannon got one thing wrong -- the weapon of Breitbart did not actually belong to him. As a hired hand, Bannon was eventually pushed out of Breitbart in early 2018 after the major funder of Breitbart – the Mercer family – cut ties with him (Pramuk, 2018).

As it turned out, the real influence over Breitbart came from Robert Mercer and Rebekah Mercer who poured 10 million dollars into Breitbart in 2011 (Mayer, 2017b). As the major owner of Breitbart, the Mercer family not only controlled Breitbart’s personnel, they also decided what kind of stories it needed to cover (Gray, 2017). Rebekah Mercer, for instance, provided specific guidance for Breitbart’s daily operations. She suggested areas of coverage, read every story, and even called when she found grammatical errors (Mayer, 2017b). Besides funding Breitbart, the Mercer Family also donated tens of millions of dollars to support various right-wing causes and organizations. Their massive political donations have made them a formidable political force behind the GOP and the Trump presidency.

Breitbart is one of several top radical right media that are kept afloat by wealthy partisan donors. The Daily Caller, the Washington Free Beacon, and the Daily Wire, for instance, were all born of lavish political underwriting by rich partisan donors.⁷ Many of these donors such as the Koch brothers had already amassed extreme wealth in the oil or financial industry long before they started supporting radical right media. For them, funding radical right media is not so much about making more money as about exerting political influence and pursuing political goals. Foster Friess, the funder and largest shareholder of the Daily Caller, said that he wasn't worried about Daily Caller not turning profits because the Daily Caller was "breaking great stories and changing the discussion" (Fang, 2013, p. 195).

In this chapter, I examine the political roots of radical right media by investigating the background of their partisan funders. I show that the major donors of many radical right media are right-wing power brokers who have supported a vast network of brick and mortar political organizations to advance their partisan agendas. Having received significant funding in sponsorship fees or seed money from these donors and their political organizations, radical right media interacted with this political network in many important ways and played a crucial role in advancing their common agendas.

My political mode of analysis adds an important angle to the current media industry literature that focuses on the commercial aspect of radical right media. This body of literature exemplified by Berry and Sobieraj (2014) and Peck (2019) explains how right-wing media have turned huge profits by developing successful audience strategies and corporate brands. These studies provide important insights into the ways in which economic imperatives drive much of radical right media's content and style. However, missing in this body of literature is the

⁷ The fledgling Breitbart, the Daily Wire, and the Daily Caller all received a significant amount of seed money from partisan donors at their inception. The Washington Free Beacon started off as a project of the non-profit Center for American Freedom that relied on partisan funding.

recognition that not all radical right media are entirely commercial enterprises with the sole purpose of maximizing profits. Media industry studies cannot adequately explain why many radical right media have engaged in political activities at strategic moments that have little to do with economic imperatives. Chapter 2 fills this gap by conducting a systemic analysis of top radical right media's partisan funding sources and illustrating the ways in which radical right media helped advance the political goals of their funders.

The examples I use in this chapter come from a top 20 radical right media list that I compiled based on three web metrics, namely open web in-links, social media shares, and online traffic in 2016 and 2017. It includes both digital native sites (e.g., Breitbart, Daily Caller and Daily Wire) and those that belong to a larger media organization which exerts editorial control over content (e.g., Fox News, Washington Times, Washington Examiner, and New York Post). The details of how I compiled this list can be found in the Appendix.

2.1 RIGHT-WING MEDIA AS A PROFITABLE BUSINESS

Over the second half of the 20th century, right-wing media in the U.S. became commercially viable in the late 1980s when Rush Limbaugh gained national syndication for his conservative talk radio program (Hemmer, 2016). The success of Limbaugh popularized his personality-driven, overtly partisan, and provocative style, which was emulated by a slew of right-wing cable TV programs, talk radio shows, and political websites in the 1990s and early 2000s. Cable TV has so far been the most profitable sector with Fox News at the top making tens of billions of dollars every year (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). Conservative talk radio programs host by the most well-known personalities such as Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and Michael Savage are also multi-million dollar businesses (Cuccinello, 2018). Digital native sites, given the low barrier of entry and highly competitive market, are comparably less profitable (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). But the

most trafficked right-wing sites such as Drudge Report can make as much as \$30 million a year (Silverman, 2019).

Media scholars have referred to these commercially successful outlets and personalities as the second-generation right-wing media. What sets them apart from the first generation (e.g., *Human Event* and *National Review*) is their ability to generate immense profits by entertaining their audiences. Rather than offering serious debate or thoughtful analyses, the second generation right-wing media entrepreneurs are adept at using emotionally embodied performance and visceral language to trigger their audiences' emotions and appeal to their cultural sensibilities, taste, and identities (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Hemmer, 2016; Peck, 2019). These audience strategies enabled them to cultivate a loyal brand community, which in turn provided them with huge profits mainly in the forms of ads revenue, sales of products, and subscription fees.

The commercial success of right-wing media became possible not only because of the business acumen of visionary media entrepreneurs such as Rupert Murdoch, but also because of a set of conducive social, political, and technological conditions that paved the way for the burgeoning right-wing media industry. The declining distrust of mainstream media among the American public since the late 1980s created a high demand for alternative information sources. As political polarization intensified in the 1990s and 2000s, audiences who turned away from mainstream media sought information that could confirm their partisan identity (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Meanwhile, technological advancement such as cable TV and the Internet in the 1990s broke down the barrier for media entrepreneurs to enter the media market and also made it possible to appeal to niche partisan market (Benkler et al., 2018; Hemmer, 2016). At last but certainly not the least, government's deregulations – especially the elimination of the fairness

doctrine – paved the way for right-wing media to use highly polarizing language to appeal to their audiences (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Levendusky, 2013a).

The rise of social media platforms has breathed new life into many radical right media sites.⁸ With no original reporting and a small team of editors and writers who oftentimes simply made up stories, many radical right media sites were able to generate immense ad revenue by relying on Facebook to distribute their content to millions of its users. For instance, Western Journal, a prominent radical right media site that offered no original reporting, earned as many Facebook engagement reactions as the combined total of 10 top news organizations in America between 2016 and 2019 (Confessore & Bank, 2019). Its immense popularity on Facebook brought millions of social media users to its website, which sharply increased its ad revenue. Thanks to the traffic from Facebook, Lifiable Inc., the parent company of Western Journal, garnered a billion page views in the run-up to the 2016 election and made more than \$16 million dollars in 2016 (Confessore & Bank, 2019).

While Western Journal strived to cultivate a corporate brand and a loyal audience, clickbait fake news media sites were mainly interested in making quick money. Two of the top radical right media sites in my sample, namely Ending the Fed and Truth Feed, both lasted less than three years.⁹ Clickbait media's business model relied on social media's social recommendation systems, which often prioritize audience engagement metrics such as "likes" over media firm reputation in their distribution of content. As it turned out, a large number of social media users didn't care much about media firm reputation when consuming content on

⁸ Before the advent of social media, many digital native radical right media sites generated immense ad revenues by engaging in dubious techniques such as spammy backlinking to game Google's algorithms (Hindman, 2018; Berry & Sobieraj, 2014).

⁹ Based on ICANN's database, both Truth Feed and Ending the Fed were registered in March 2016. Based on data from SimilarWeb, Ending the Fed became defunct in early 2018 and Truth Feed in early 2019.

social media. They were drawn to clickbait articles, which made it possible for little-known clickbait sites to turn quick profits in 2015 and 2016 (Munger, 2019).

While it is important to study how radical right media have turned huge profits and become popular, the current literature of media industry studies overlooked the strategic aspect of radical right media's political activities. As seen in Chapter 1, Breitbart carefully timed the release of the movie *Clinton Cash* on the eve of the Democratic convention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and made its intention very clear that this action was designed to damage Hillary Clinton at the convention (Faris et al., 2017). Through 2017 and 2018, Breitbart also targeted several incumbent GOP politicians and promoted anti-establishment political candidates such as Roy Moore who would promise to vote against GOP's Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell (Darcy, 2017). These political activities aimed at achieving tangible political goals at strategic moments cannot be simply ascribed to the economic imperatives of attracting audiences or making content entertaining (Rosenfeld, 2017).

Missing in the literature is the recognition that many top radical right media outlets in the U.S. are not entirely commercial enterprises with the sole purpose of maximizing profits come what may. Breitbart, Daily Caller, and Daily Wire were all funded by private conservative donors such as the Mercer family, the Koch brothers, and the Wilks brothers that supported radical right media as part of their strategy to advance political agendas (Mayer, 2017). And as a result, they developed political objectives. These media outlets were kept afloat at least during their early years by maintaining a clientelistic relationship with their financiers and oftentimes served as a political tool to achieve political goals,¹⁰ whether they were about defeating a certain

¹⁰ Many partisan-funded radical right media sites such as the Daily Caller and Breitbart are private for-profit companies. But it is not clear to what extent these outlets are making profits. The Daily Caller was losing money by February 2011 (Fang, 2013). While Breitbart may be profitable for short period of time, it lost 90% of advertisers in early 2017 (Bhattarai, 2017).

political candidate, promoting a particular political organization, or running opposition research on investigative journalists and climate scientists (Dwyer, 2016; Mayer, 2017a; Robbins, 2016). We cannot grasp the logic behind these political operations and strategic activities without understanding who these funders are, what their partisan agendas are, how they advocated their agendas, and what role radical right media played in advancing these agendas.

In the following sections, I'll first identify the major partisan donors of top radical right media in my sample and their partisan agendas. Next, I'll show how these power brokers advanced their agendas by operating in brick and mortar political organizations such as PACs, think tanks, and grassroots agitation groups. Last, I'll explain how radical right media networks advanced their patrons' political interests and interacted with right-wing political organizations.

2.2 MAJOR RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA'S PARTISAN FUNDING

All the 20 top radical right media in my sample are for-profit companies. Yet, at least nine have received significant partisan funding in the past. Based on SEC filings, FEC filings, media reports, and research materials from watchdog organizations, I identified the partisan donors that have funded these nine radical right media. As my data is based on publicly available records, my estimate of the number of partisan donors and the amount of funding is likely to be more conservative than the actual numbers. Table 2.1 shows the amount, sources, and year of funding for nine top radical right media.

Table 2.2. Major Radical Right Media's Partisan Funding

Media	Amount	Source	Year
Breitbart	\$10 million	The Mercer family	2011

Daily Caller	\$ 3 million	Foster Friess	2010
	\$ 1,830,000 to DCNF	Charles Koch Foundation	2016-2017
	\$746,250 to DCNF	Charles Koch Foundation	2018
	\$800,000 to DCNF	Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund	2015
	\$100,000 to DCNF	National Christian Foundation	2017
	\$ 130,000 to DCNF	Donor Trust	2014-2015
	\$ 100,000 to DCNF	Bradley Foundation	2014
	\$ 260,000 to DCNF	Searl Freedom Trust	2014-2015
Daily Wire	Undisclosed amount	Dan and Farris Wilks	2015
Blaze	\$41,906 to Mercury Radio Arts	Charles Koch Foundation	2017
	\$7500 to theblaze.com	Charles Koch Foundation	2017
	\$726,060 to Glenn Beck	FreedomWorks	2011
	\$859,099 to Glenn Beck	FreedomWorks	2012
	\$40 million	Undisclosed donors	2013
Free Beacon	An undisclosed amount	Paul Singer	NA

Washington Examiner	1 million	Phil Anschutz	2009
Western Journal & Conservative Tribune	\$150,000	William Donner Foundation	1997-2002
	\$25,000	Armstrong Foundation	1997-2002
	\$98,500	Castle Rock Foundation	1997-2002
	\$3000	Roe Foundation	1997-2002
WND	\$4.5 million	Undisclosed donors	NA

(Source: Politico, Center for Public integrity, Center for Media and Democracy, and Sludge)

Even though these nine top radical right media have other sources of income, partisan funding is crucial to cover their daily operational cost – this is especially true for media sites such as the Daily Caller that actually hired reporters and dispatched them to gather news. The majority of Daily Caller’s content comes from its NGO affiliate the Daily Caller News Foundation (DCNF), which entirely relies on partisan funding for its daily operations. The Koch brothers, for instance, contributed almost 40% of all DCNF’s revenue in 2017. Partisan funding also provided crucial support when they faced financial difficulties. For instance, following an advertiser boycott organized by a group of tech executives, Breitbart lost 90% of its ad revenue in just three months by May 2017 (Dennis, 2019). Then CEO of Breitbart Steve Bannon admitted that he had to rely on private donations to get through the financial difficulty in 2018 (Ellefson, 2019).

My following analyses focus on five major individuals and families, namely Charles and David Koch who funded the Daily Caller and the Blaze, Robert and Rebekah Mercer who funded

Breitbart, Paul Singer who funded the Washington Free Beacon, Farris and Dan Wilks who funded the Daily Wire, and Foster Friess who funded the Daily Caller. Not only have these individuals and families long supported radical right media, they are also among the most influential power brokers in the GOP and the wider right-wing movement.

2.3 THE PARTISAN AGENDAS OF RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA'S FUNDERS¹¹

All these five funders have endorsed the principle of small government and free market. This broad agenda includes privatization, market deregulation, tax cut, the elimination of government agencies, and cut-back on social welfare. These policies not only align with their personal beliefs but also benefit them financially.

For instance, Charles and David Koch (David is deceased) held the view that government should be reduced to a skeleton function of protecting individual and property rights (MacLean, 2017). To achieve such a goal, they advocated the elimination of all forms of social welfare, the removal of government agencies such as the FEC and regulations such as campaign finance laws, and the abolition of all income and corporate taxes (Mayer, 2017a). As an ardent supporter of the Koch brothers' efforts to push forward these agendas, Robert Mercer once remarked that he wanted the U.S. government to be shrunk down to the size of a pinhead (Mayer, 2017b). The other three donor families, namely Paul Singer, Foster Friess, and the Wilks brothers, have all donated millions of dollars to free market organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the State Policy Network, and the American Enterprise Institute.

¹¹ Most of my data on the political views and interests of partisan donors of radical right media comes from media reports and academic work that draw on these donors' public statements, private conversations, interviews, and archives. It should be noted that even though my analyses strive to be inclusive, the goal is not to map their view on every possible issue; rather, the goal is to best reflect, according to available data, each donor's issue focus areas where they prioritize their political activities.

Climate change denial is another issue where these donors have found common ground. In the Wilks brothers' words, climate change is God's will, not a man-made disaster (Conlin, 2015). Likewise, Foster Friess praised President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, casting doubt on the effects of human activity on climate change (Friess, 2017). For the Koch brothers, government climate change regulations directly affect their bottom line -- their company Koch Industries is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions that caused global warming. Hence, they have invested millions of dollars to spread skepticism about climate change (Brulle, 2014; Mayer, 2010). In 2013, they pushed many federal lawmakers to sign the "No Climate Tax" pledge that promised to vote against legislations on climate change via the organization Americans for Prosperity (Mayer, 2013). Their efforts to attack the scientific consensus on climate change were joined by Paul Singer and the Mercer family who funded major climate change denial organizations such as Lomborg's Copenhagen Consensus Center and the Heartland Institute (Hirji, 2018; Readfearn, 2015).

Foreign policy is another important area of shared political interest. As a pro-Israel foreign policy hawk, Paul Singer has supported many pro-Israel groups and neo-conservative organizations. For instance, he funded the pro-Israel organization the Center for Security Policy, the Defense of Democracies, and the Israel Project (Weiss, 2018). Singer also made himself a board member of Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the neo-conservative media *Commentary*, and the Republican Jewish Coalition (Clifton, 2015). It is reported that he and others pushed President Trump to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, a policy that was opposed by many hard-right pro-Israel groups (Clifton, 2018).

Compared to Paul Singer, Foster Friess is not so much pro-Israel as anti-Islam. He once commented that radical Islamic terrorism is one of the most important issues in America (Swan,

2016). Friess not only funded various anti-Islam groups such as the Center for Security Policy and Terrorism Awareness project but also supported political candidates that advocated regime change in the Middle East (Peck, 2012; Rushe, 2012). Likewise, the Mercer family also held a strong anti-Islam agenda. In 2011, Robert Mercer financed ads against the “Ground Zero mosque” in New York; and In 2016, he donated 2 million dollars to the anti-Islam organization Secure America Now in 2016, which spent several millions stoking fear about Muslims in targeted ads in the 2016 presidential election (Tazamal, 2018).

Yet, despite their common interests, there are important political fault lines around issues such as gay marriage and immigration. As economic libertarians, the Koch brothers supported gay rights, even though this issue has never been at the center of their political advocacy (Fischer, 2019). Having a gay son, Paul Singer is an ardent supporter of gay rights. He once said that same sex marriage will be seen as a profoundly traditionalizing act one generation from now (Fuller, 2014). Between 2010 and 2014, he spent more than \$10 million pushing states to legalize same-sex marriage and recruiting Republicans to join the cause (Fuller, 2014). Singer’s advocacy for gay rights stood in stark contrast with the Christian conservatives Wilks brothers. Farris Wilks once compared homosexuality to bestiality and said that his goal is to bring the Bible back and counter the gay agenda in schools (Montgomery, 2014; Berkowitz, 2014).

Immigration has also become a wedge issue among these donors. While the Koch brothers supported immigration, the Mercers were against not only illegal immigration but also legal immigration. Rebekah Mercer reportedly pushed the 2016 Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz to propose a 180-day suspension on all H1-B visas during his campaign and pushed President Donald Trump to launch the Muslim travel ban in early 2017 (Ward, 2016; Mayer, 2017b). Because of the Mercers’ view on immigration, they eventually broke with the Koch

brothers after years of contributing to Koch's political networks and bankrolled various anti-immigration candidates to unseat moderate GOP politicians in 2016 (Timmons, 2017; Ward, 2016).

As shown above, these five right-wing power brokers have important common interest as well as ideological differences. Their agendas converge in some issue areas and diverge in others. The convergence and divergence of various political and ideological interests is a common thread that undergirds various political organizing dynamics within the radical right media sphere that I'll illustrate in the next three chapters. But for now, it is sufficient to recognize that the major funders of radical right media are political activists with strong personal beliefs. To understand how they advanced their agendas, we need to examine their offline political organizing work that spans from campaign finance to policy development to grassroots mobilization.

2.4 ACTIVIST DONORS' POLITICAL ORGANIZING ACTIVITIES

As Charles Koch himself put it, "ideas do not spread themselves; they spread only through people, which means we need a movement" (Mayer, 2017a, p. 66). The Koch brothers pioneered the efforts in setting up a vast offline political organizing network that brought different right-wing activists together to pool resources and coordinate actions. This sprawling network includes many brick and mortar political organizations such as donor seminars, PACs, Super PACs, think tanks, and grassroots agitation groups. All the other four major radical right media donors have participated in or contributed to the Koch brothers' political network.

Since it's beyond the scope of this chapter to cover the full spectrum of their offline political organizing work, I will highlight three general interrelated areas of activities that are both relevant to this dissertation and essential for these donors to achieve their agendas. They are

influencing elections, promoting partisan agendas through research, and mobilizing grassroots support.

These five donors influenced elections mainly through financing GOP candidates through the vehicles of PACs, Super PACs, and non-profit groups, although some of them unsuccessfully ran for office themselves.¹² In 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on Citizens United and other related court rulings allowed private donors to pour unlimited amount of money into Super PACs and the so-called "dark money" 501 (c) non-profit groups. Since then, all the five top donors have donated large sums of money in support of GOP politicians in both state and federal elections. The Mercers' Make American Number One PAC, Paul Singer's Our Principles PAC, and the Wilks' Keep the Promise PAC were only some of many influential Super PACs in the 2016 presidential race. These political organizations, which supported a wide array of GOP candidates such as Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio, were essential to organize campaign related activities such as ads buying, fundraising, polling, data modeling, and consulting.

The second area is the production of ideas and research materials to promote partisan agendas. This type of work is mainly within the purview of academic institutions and think tanks, although some campaign organizations have also occasionally engaged in such work during election cycles. Activist donors such as the Koch brothers were particularly keen in sponsoring scholars and university programs. Since the late 1970s, Charles and David Koch have consistently funded free market intellectuals such as James Buchanan and academic groups such as the Mont Perelin Society. By 2015, they have sponsored free-market programs in 307 higher education institutions in the U.S. (Mayer, 2017a).

¹² In 1980, David Koch ran as the vice-presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party and financed almost 60% of the campaign's entire budget (Mayer, 2017). In 2018, Foster Friess ran for Wyoming governor but lost in the Republican primary.

Besides directly funding ideas production in universities, activist donors also supported a wide array of think tanks to finance research and develop policies or legislative agendas. These right-wing think tanks regularly publish books, reports, articles, journals, and amicus briefs to shape court decisions, the appointment of civil officials, legislations, and policies. For instance, the Manhattan Institute financed Charles Murray's book *Losing Ground* to cast doubt on welfare policies in America (Medvetz, 2012); the Heartland Institute, hosted at least 12 conferences and financed dozens of books to sow doubts about climate change (Oreskes & Conway, 2011); and the Kochs-funded American Legislative Exchange Council regularly organized informal meetings to bring corporate representatives and legislators together to draft model bills (Graves, 2011).¹³

Furthermore, activist donors have also funded many grassroots agitation groups to mobilize public support.¹⁴ In 1984, Charles Koch co-founded Citizens for a Sound Economy, a grassroots agitation group which later split into two separate organizations in 2004 -- one is FreedomWorks with funding from the Mercer family and the other is Americans for Prosperity (AFP) continuously with funding from the Koch brothers (Staff, 2020). The Wilks brothers also donated to a grassroots agitation organization called American Majority (Montgomery, 2014). Part of these organizations' work is to exploit existing public anger and guide it towards partisan agendas. For instance, during the Tea Party movement in 2009 and 2010, FreedomWorks helped orchestrate town hall protests, co-sponsored Tea Party rallies, and coached activists on what issues to protest (Mayer, 2017; Skocpol & Williamson, 2016); American Majority hosted about

¹³ The bills it's drafted almost all center Koch Brothers' agendas such as shrinking government (e.g., privatizing of education), removing regulations on corporations (e.g., fighting climate change regulations), and making it harder for citizens to collectively influence government (e.g., breaking unions and passing voter ID laws). Many of its bills were signed into law in states such as Wisconsin, Texas, and Ohio (Graves, 2011).

¹⁴ It is important to note that these agitation groups often combine different methods including ads buying, lobbying, public relations, and media campaigns, but here I focus on their grassroots mobilization activities.

400 workshops to train participants how to manipulate online platforms (Fang, 2013); and AFP placed its own speakers in local Tea Party meetings to promote ideas against environmental regulation (Skocpol & Williamson, 2016).

Besides taking advantage of spontaneous grassroots movements, many grassroots agitation groups have built a vast organizational infrastructure that enables them to organize demonstrations and issue campaigns on a regular basis. AFP, for instance, has set up a vast network of grassroots directors in its local branches, which allows it to maintain regular contact with activists and mobilize them to attend demonstrations at legislative hearings from time to time (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). AFP claimed that it had more than 2.5 million activists nationwide and that it offered more than 116 workshops and boot camps in 26 states to train community organizers and activists between 2015 and 2016 (Armiak & Bottari, 2016).

2.5 THE ROLE OF RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA IN POLITICAL ORGANIZING

Many radical right media have interacted with these brick and mortar political organizations in important ways to help them achieve their goals. In the area of election campaigns, some worked closely with campaign organizations such as Super PACs to help political candidates win elections. According to FEC filings, the Trump-backing SuperPAC Great American PAC paid NewsMax at least \$77844, WND \$2000, and Washington Times \$925 for conducting “online voter contact” in 2016¹⁵; during the 2016 and 2018 elections, Breitbart regularly sent emails to its readers asking them to support anti-establishment GOP candidates and their Super PACs; Daily Caller rented its email list to the 2016 Trump campaign for an estimated amount of \$150,000 in 2016 (Bonazzo, 2017); and Western Journal’s parent company Lifiable Inc. helped

¹⁵ See FEC filings at <https://docquery.fec.gov/cgi-bin/forms/C00608489/1098788/se>

its owners' pro-Trump PAC American Fighting Back organize email solicitations in 2018 (Confessore & Bank, 2019).

There is also evidence that some radical right media took direct orders from politicians to write hit pieces on their political rivals in elections. According to a Newsweek report, Stephen Miller, a political operative who joined the Trump campaign in January 2016, directed Breitbart to attack his future boss's GOP rival Senator Marco Rubio in July 2015 (Kwong, 2019). Stephen Miller emailed the Breitbart editor Katie McHugh a study by the think tank Center for Immigration Studies and instructed her to hit Rubio on immigration. Once McHugh's anti-Rubio article was out, candidate Donald Trump tweeted her story and Miller told McHugh to continue attacking Rubio every day (Kwong, 2019).

Outside electoral politics, right-wing think tanks and grassroots agitation groups have hired radical right media personalities to do their bidding. The Kochs funded think tank Cato Institute hired the Fox News host Tucker Carlson as a senior fellow to help promote libertarian agendas in 2009. Other think tanks and grass-agitation groups paid radical right media personalities to read "live-reads" or "embedded ads" to help them fundraise, recruit new members, spread messages, or attack opponents. For instance, Americans for Prosperity paid Mark Levin -- a conservative radio host who works with Glenn Beck at the Blaze -- to attack climate scientists such as Michael Mann (Mayer, 2017a). FreedomWork gave millions of dollars to Glenn Beck to say nice things about it on the air, and three months after its first deal with Beck in 2010, it saw a significant spike in its online traffic and new email sign-ups (Barr, 2010). Likewise, the Heritage Foundation also paid Fox News hosts Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham to help with recruitment, which resulted in an increase of tens of thousands of new members in 2010 (Vogel & Mccalmont, 2011).

Radical right media have also promoted these right-wing political organizations free of charge when their political goals were aligned. It was a win-win for both of them -- right-wing political organizations got earned media exposure while radical right media received free opposition research materials. As I will illustrate in Chapter 5, in order to dig up dirt on Trump's then national security advisor H.R. McMaster, Breitbart was happy to cite seven right-wing groups ranging from anti-Islam grassroots agitation groups such as Secure American Now to hard right pro-Israel groups such as the Zionist Organization of America.

Radical right media's unique ability to reach millions of people has made them a powerful weapon for right-wing political organizations to wage political warfare. That's why radical right media have played an instrumental role in helping campaign organizations, think tanks, and grassroots agitation groups fundraise, spread messages, recruit new members, and attack political opponents. Yet, it's important to note that radical right media don't necessarily need to coordinate with brick and mortar political organizations in order to advance their common causes. As hybrid organizations, they themselves can perform many functions of these political organizations. For instance, they've conducted or brokered opposition research on political opponents on behalf of their funders, functioning much like strategic intelligence firms. When Paul Singer financed the Our Principle PAC to defeat candidate Donald Trump in Republican primaries in 2016, his media outlet Washington Free Beacon was organizing opposition research on Donald Trump. Another example is Daily Caller. After the journalist Jane Mayer published her investigative work into the Koch brothers, the Koch brothers organized a smear campaign against her and hired former law enforcement officials to dig up dirt (Mayer, 2017a). At the center of the smear campaign was the Daily Caller, a Kochs-funded radical right media site that sought to discredit Mayer by accusing her of plagiarism (Horn, 2017). After

initially considering running a hit piece on Mayer, the Daily Caller eventually decided to drop it for the lack of any credible evidence.

2.6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I've shown that nearly half of top U.S. radical right media in my sample and many popular Fox News hosts have received significant funding from some of the most influential GOP donors and their political organizations. These donors are right-wing political activists – they financed political candidates and funded a sprawling network of campaign organizations, think tanks, and grassroots agitation groups. These formal political organizations have accomplished important political organizing work, and radical right media have assisted their efforts in many important ways and sometimes even performed their political functions.

Hence, to understand why radical right media have engaged in strategic political activities, we need to look beyond mere commercial imperatives. It is true that most radical right media in the U.S. are capitalist enterprises that need to entertain their audiences. It is also true that politically motivated disinformation could be good for businesses if it appeals to audiences' identity or taste. Nevertheless, we should not always presume turning profits as the primary goal of radical right media. Nor should we relegate political motivation as only secondary to the importance of corporate bottom line for every radical right media.

This is not to say that radical right media with no partisan funding do not develop political objectives. On the contrary, they can. For instance, both Fox News and Sinclair Broadcast Group have political agendas of their own. As I will show in the next chapter, Fox News reinvented and spread a conspiracy theory at a strategic moment with the sole political purpose of protecting President Donald Trump. Given the fact that Donald Trump has been a significant booster of Fox News's ratings – for instance, Fox News' ratings dropped whenever

Fox News hosts said something negative about Donald Trump (Drezner, 2018), it is in Fox News' business interest to pursue such a political goal. The same thing can be said about Sinclair too. For political blogs such as the Gateway Pundit that relies entirely on ads revenue, promoting powerful politicians or their agendas can bring coveted access, influence, and power. That's likely the reason why Gateway Pundit has tried and failed multiple times to run smear campaigns against political opponents such as the 2020 Democratic candidate Pete Buttigieg and the special counsel for the Russia probe Robert Mueller.

The interests of these various radical right media outlets overlap in some areas but diverge in others. The convergence and divergence of their interests affect the degree of alignment in their networked organizations as well as which organizations may take on a more prominent role in different political situations. As I will elaborate in the Chapter 3, radical right media's common interest in protecting Donald Trump in his early presidency in May 2017 explains why a majority of radical right media quickly coalesced around Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign to shield him from potential collusion charges. As seen in Chapter 5, many self-described anti-globalist media that had ideological differences with McMaster assumed a prominent organizational role in the anti-McMaster campaign while Fox News functioned more or less as a neutral bystander inviting both sides (i.e., pro-McMaster and anti-McMaster) to argue for their case.

Without working inside these radical right media organizations, we cannot be sure about the exact reason behind radical right media's every decision to engage in political activities. It could be a direct order from their partisan funders or powerful politicians. Or it could come from the desire to pursue influence and fame. Whatever their exact motivations are, radical right media have proven to be commercially viable and politically effective at the same time.

This chapter provided a context for understanding why individual media organizations such as Breitbart and Daily Caller have engaged in political activities. It showed that these radical right media can accomplish important political organizing work and interact with formal political organizations such as Super PACs in important ways. The next three chapters examine radical right media's political organizing dynamics at a higher network level. I will illustrate how different media outlets within the radical right media sphere can activate as emerging organization networks by following distinct organizing mechanisms in response to various political threats.

To better integrate my theorization of radical right media with my case studies, I combined my original top 20 radical right media list with top 10 most linked radical right media in each case study that were not on my original list. This produced a total of 46 radical right media outlets which served as a proxy for the radical right media sphere for the analyses in the next three chapters. This sphere is largely an online sphere, but it includes a few prominent TV, print media, and talk radio programs that had an online presence. I consistently tracked how these 46 radical right media addressed different political threats over my three case studies. Information about how I selected the 46 sites can be found in the Appendix.

Chapter 3. MEDIA CUED POLITICAL ORGANIZING: HOW FOX NEWS MOBILIZED THE RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA SPHERE TO PROTECT PRESIDENT TRUMP

In late June 2016, the Russian intelligence agency GRU transferred the Democratic National Committee (DNC)'s emails to WikiLeaks (Nakashima & Harris, 2018). To achieve maximal political impact on Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, WikiLeaks dumped more than 20,000 DNC emails on July 22, only three days before the 2016 Democratic National Convention. This series of events prompted the DNC and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to initiate an ongoing investigation in June and July 2016, which found that Russian intelligence was behind the cyberattack on the DNC.

During the same month when Russia's interference in the U.S. election was being investigated, a former DNC staffer named Seth Rich was killed in a botched robbery in Washington D.C. His death immediately spawned various conspiracy theories online in mid-July, most of which linked Rich's death to Hillary Clinton. For instance, one conspiracy theory claimed that he was killed because he was on his way to meet the FBI and inform on voter fraud by Hillary Clinton ("DNC staffer Seth", 2016); another claimed that Rich was a Bernie Sanders supporter and was killed because he was against Hillary Clinton's campaign's use of a voter database that targeted Sanders' supporters.¹⁶ Seeing Rich' death as an opportunity to undermine Hillary Clinton's campaign, various domestic and foreign political actors such as Trump's political operatives and Russian intelligence agencies promoted these conspiracy theories in the following month. For instance, according to Yahoo News, the Russian intelligence agency SVR

¹⁶ See https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/comments/4sejv7/the_death_of_seth_rich/

even circulated a fake intelligence report to bolster the narrative that Hillary Clinton ordered the assassination of Rich (Isikoff, 2019).

On August 9th 2016, about one month after Rich's death and two weeks after WikiLeaks' release of the stolen DNC emails, WikiLeaks publicly suggested that Seth Rich was its source and announced a \$20,000 reward for information about Rich's death.¹⁷ WikiLeaks' thinly veiled disinformation campaign fueled a new conspiracy narrative that Rich was assassinated at the order of the DNC or the Clinton campaign for leaking DNC emails to WikiLeaks. This false narrative not only served to undermine the Clinton campaign but also provided political cover for WikiLeaks and Russia. Hence, it was later aggressively promoted by Russia's troll farm the Internet Research Agency, Russia-backed media such as RT and Sputnik, political operatives such as Roger Stone, and radical right media such as Infowars in 2016 (Bump, 2019; Isikoff, 2019).

However, despite sustained efforts by foreign and domestic political actors to promote the Seth Rich conspiracy theory, societal attention to Seth Rich tailed off over the following ten months after Rich's death. To trace the flow of public attention to the murder of Seth Rich, I look at three indicators of attention: Google search trends, the number of online articles published by media sources that covered the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Benkler et al., 2018), and the volume of tweets. All three indicators suggest that societal attention to Seth Rich gradually declined after an initial spike at the time of WikiLeaks' announcement until mid-May 2017 when it suddenly peaked.

¹⁷ Contrary to Yahoo News' Isikoff (2019)'s misleading claim that WikiLeaks first floated the idea that Seth Rich was the source of its DNC emails on August 9, 2016, my analyses show that this idea can be at least dated back to a July 25th tweet posted by @Corporatocrazy, which reads "WikiLeaks says their source for #DNCCleak was a DNC staffer. Was it Seth Rich who got murdered last week?". In a July 29th article, wearechange.org cited this tweet to associate Rich's death to WikiLeaks.



Figure 3.1: Google search trends in the United States about Seth Rich, July 2016 to July 2017.¹⁸ Source: Google Trends.



Figure 3.2: The number of online articles about Seth Rich published by media sources that covered the 2016 Presidential election, July 2016 to July 2017.¹⁹ Source: Media Cloud.

¹⁸ Google Trend indicates search interest in Seth Rich on a 100-point scale. The numbers are normalized to represent search interest relative to 100 – the maximum search interest for a certain topic during a certain time. The search term is “Seth AND Rich”.

¹⁹ I tracked the number of online articles published by about 70,000 media sources that were included in Media Cloud’s 2016 U.S. election collection used by Benkler et al., (2018) to study election coverage in 2016. This collection includes large traditional newspapers, news agencies, government sources, research institutions, think tanks, campaign websites, political blogs, mass media outlets, and the online outlets of cable news and radio talk show (Benkler et al., 2018). It was built through iterative processes that expanded from several existing Media Cloud’s source collections such as U.S. Top Online New used by Yochoai Benkler’s previous studies on networked

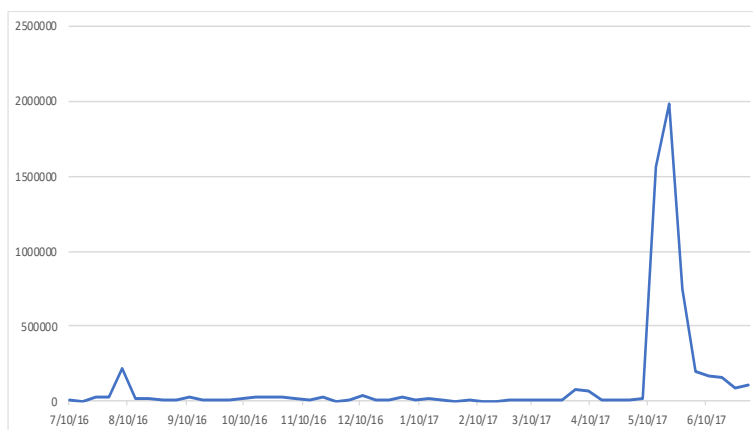


Figure 3.3: The volume of tweets about Seth Rich, July 2016 to July 2017.²⁰ Source: Crimson Hexagon.

Public attention to Seth Rich drastically resurged in mid-May 2017, almost ten months after his death. This is due to a series of disinformation stories published by Fox News and its affiliate Fox5DC on May 15, which falsely claimed to have found evidence that Seth Rich leaked the DNC emails to WikiLeaks. Fox News' false stories quickly spread to a majority of major radical right media in a matter of days despite the fact that they were immediately debunked by both government authorities and the mainstream media. Fox News was eventually forced to retract these stories on May 23, 2017, but its short-lived 9-day disinformation campaign mobilized societal attention on a massive scale that was unparalleled in the previous 10 months period.

In this chapter, I use the evolving Seth Rich conspiracy theory as a case to illustrate what I consider to be one of several organizing mechanisms of the radical right media sphere, namely

public sphere to include new sources identified in election stories. More details about the identification of media sources can be found in Faris et al., (2017).

²⁰ The data came from Crimson Hexagon with the search string Seth AND Rich.

media cued political organizing. This mechanism refers to the process in which one radical right media organization or a small number of radical right media organizations concoct and spread a (dis)information narrative that may be repeated, shared, and amplified by other radical right media, social media, political actors, and other similarly purposed websites. I expect media cued political organizing to work most effectively in mobilizing the radical right media sphere under the following four conditions: 1) there is an imminent external threat that endangers a widely shared right-wing political agenda; 2) right-wing politicians' reactions to the threat are largely absent, ambiguous, divided, delayed, unpredictable, or inconsistent; 3) the media organization(s) that provides cueing commands attention within the radical right media sphere; and 4) the (dis)information narrative has prior familiarity and doesn't contradict right-wing politicians' cues.

In this chapter, my analyses demonstrate that when an external threat endangers a widely shared political agenda and right-wing politicians' reaction to that threat is largely inconsistent, a leading radical right media outlet with the ability to command attention can respond to that threat by spreading a familiar disinformation narrative on a massive scale that is politically useful to most other radical right media. By comparing Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign that swept the radical right media sphere in 2017 with the early varieties of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory that failed to take off in 2016, I highlight the powerful role of the leading radical right media Fox News in connecting various radical right media into coherent political organization networks.

The analyses will first outline the initial phase of the evolving Seth Rich conspiracy theory, namely the 10-month period before Fox News' disinformation campaign in May 2017. As Figure 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 show, the most notable uptick of societal attention during this period

is around August 9, 2016 when WikiLeaks announced a \$20,000 reward for information about Rich's death and implied that Rich was its source. Hence, my analyses will focus on the entire pre-WikiLeaks period (July 10 – August 8, 2016) and WikiLeaks' disinformation campaign around August 9. The analysis will then focus on the crucial 9 days of Fox News' disinformation campaign (May 15, 2017 – May 23, 2017), a far shorter window which nonetheless turned out to be far more consequential in shaping overall societal attention than the previous ten months combined. In this section, I explain why Fox News, the most watched cable network in the U.S. revived a 10 months old conspiracy theory that was neither factual nor new at the particular juncture of May 15, 2017. In addition, by tracking the content flow between Fox News and the rest of the radical right media sphere, I demonstrate that Fox News' disinformation campaign quickly mobilized a majority of the radical right media sphere at an incredible velocity that was unseen in the previous ten-month period. Lastly, I discuss the mechanism of media cued political organizing and examine its network properties.

3.1 THE PRE-WIKILEAKS PERIOD

To track how conspiracy theories surrounding Seth Rich's death first emerged and then moved through complex media networks, I relied on "firehose" historical Twitter data and online news articles that were accessed respectively through Crimson Hexagon and Media Cloud. For the roughly one-month period between 7/10/2016 and 8/8/2016, I retrieved historical population level Twitter data, namely all 57,386²¹ tweets that mentioned Seth Rich (except for any subsequently deleted tweets)²² by maximizing a data export function in Crimson Hexagon²³ and

²¹ Crimson Hexagon keeps the metadata for all posts captured by search strings, but the content of deleted tweets was removed from its database. More details can be found at www.crimsonhexagon.com. The total volume of historical tweets about Seth Rich between 7/10/2016 and 8/8/2016 is 74,169.

²² The Boolean search terms used to extract relevant tweets about Seth Rich were #sethrich OR (Seth AND Rich).

502 online articles about Seth Rich that were either published or referenced by right-wing publications through Media Cloud.²⁴

Contrary to Yahoo News' Isikoff (2019)'s claim that the Seth Rich conspiracy theory originated from the July 13 intelligence report by Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the result of my analysis concurs with the observation of Washington Post's Philip Bump (2019): conspiracy theories linking Rich's death to Hillary Clinton in social media and radical right media sites predated the July 13 intelligence report. For instance, as early as July 11 a Twitter account named "Berniecrat Squadron" posted multiple tweets linking Rich's death to Hillary Clinton. Here are two examples.

"All #HRC's negative ratings 'll worsen after ASSASSINAION of #DNC's DIC., VOTER EXPANSION DATA."

"Millions of Americans want to see what #SethRich was working on before he was ASSASSINATED. @HillaryClinton@RepDWStweets@TheDemocrats"

On July 12, @HillaryClinton became the second most mentioned Twitter handle in Seth Rich related tweets. In addition, tweets that linked Rich's death to Hillary Clinton made their way into the top 5 retweet list on the same day. It's fair to say that the Seth Rich conspiracy theory already became a popular way to talk about Rich's death on Twitter on July 12.

Conspiracy theories also appeared on radical right media sites before July 13. To find the earliest online article about the Seth Rich conspiracy theory, I triangulated the Media Cloud data

²³ The bulk export function allows users to extract a sample of 10,000 tweets for any given window. Because the daily volume of tweets about Seth Rich between 7/10/2016 and 8/8/2016 all fell below the threshold of 10,000, using the bulk export function on a daily basis allowed me to download population level Twitter data.

²⁴ The Boolean search terms used to extract relevant articles about Seth Rich were Seth AND Rich. Media Cloud took the following two steps to collect relevant articles: first, it searched through its inventory of articles published by right-wing media sources in its five collections (i.e., U.S. Conservative Political Blogs, U.S. Top 25 Conservative Political Blogs, Center Right, Right, and BuzzFeed Hyper-partisan Sources) and collected those "seed articles" that met the search requirements; second, it harvested the hyperlinks in "seed articles" and collected hyperlinked articles if they also met the search requirements. For more details, see www.mediacloud.org.

with an analysis of hyperlinked articles embedded in tweets. Based on these two sources of data, I found that the earliest online article about the Seth Rich conspiracy theory was published by the defunct website heatst.com at 8:00 a.m. on July 12, titled as “Beloved DNC staffer Seth Rich Shot Dead in the back in DC, just hours after calling for Dallas unity; conspiracy theories abound”. This article, which cited several July 12 tweets, later fed back into the Twitter ecology with @heatstreet being pushed to the top mention list on July 12.

Therefore, the Seth Rich conspiracy theory mostly likely first emerged on social media. But how far did it spread in the radical right media sphere in the first month following Rich’s death? How did various radical right media cover the Seth Rich story? Based on Media Cloud’s data, I analyzed every article published by the radical right media sites in my sample (n=45) during the first month (the pre-WikiLeaks period) and found that these media sites reacted to Rich’s death in three ways: about 56% of sites did not cover any story about him, about 17% covered his death in a way that focuses on established facts such as the location of his death without suggesting any conspiracy, and about 27% included conspiracy theories in their stories. Figure 3.4 shows the cumulative percentage of the radical right media sphere that was “infested” by the conspiracy theories each day.

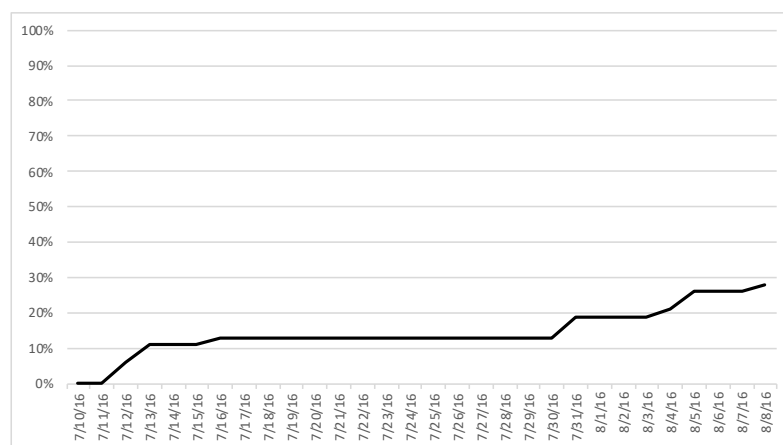


Figure 3.4: Propagation of Seth Rich conspiracy theories in the radical right media sphere.

Figure 3.5: Sourcing patterns of radical right media's first articles about Seth Rich. (July 10 – August 8, 2016). Source: Media Cloud.

Figure 3.5 demonstrates that the eight sites which did not include conspiracy theories in their first article overwhelmingly cited institutional sources such as the DNC and the metro police or mainstream media sources. Their articles focused on established facts about Rich's death and reactions from his families and politicians. The majority of the 13 sites that spread conspiracy theories, nonetheless, cited Heat Street as their source, a News Corp owned website launched in April 2016 and shuttered in August 2017. Through repeatedly publishing articles that summarized conspiratorial speculations about Rich's death on Twitter, Heat Street played the central role of pumping social media conspiracy theories into the radical right media sphere.

In sum, despite Russia's propaganda efforts and Heat Street's role in amplifying conspiracy theories from social media, the majority of the radical right media sphere was unaware of Rich's death during the first month. And among those that paid attention, eight sites steered clear of conspiracy theories and focused on established facts. Radical right media's overall apathy during the first month came to an end when WikiLeaks made a foray into the investigation of Rich's death.

3.2 WIKILEAKS' AUGUST 9TH DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

On August 9, 2016, WikiLeaks announced on Twitter a \$20,000 reward for information about Rich's death but said in a statement sent to Washington Times that "this should not be taken to imply that Seth Rich was a source to WikiLeaks or to imply that his murder is connected to our publications." (Noble & Blake, 2016) On the same day, founder Julian Assange said the following in an interview with the Dutch TV Nieuwsuur.

“Whistleblowers go to significant efforts to get us material and often very significant risks. As a 27-year old, works for the DNC, was shot in the back, murdered just a few weeks ago for unknown reasons as he was walking down the street in Washington.” (Rantingly, 2017)

WikiLeaks’ coy posturing over Rich’s death was a thinly veiled disinformation campaign that mostly like intended to exploit online conspiracy theories about Rich’s death by suggesting that Rich could be its source. It successfully raised the public profile of Rich’s death and brought it to the attention of many radical right media that did not cover Seth Rich in the previous month. However, not every radical right media that covered WikiLeaks’ message was willing to spread its disinformation. There were three main types of response to WikiLeaks’ actions that immediately followed WikiLeaks’ disinformation campaign on August 9th. The first type, namely propaganda, promoted WikiLeaks’s disinformation. They saw WikiLeaks’ action as confirming existing speculations and conspiracy theories about Rich’s death²⁵. They repeated WikiLeaks’ message and cited other materials to support it, often without providing any counter evidence. For instance, some media outlets such as Infowars juxtaposed WikiLeaks’s claim with the “Clinton body count” conspiracy theory, which claimed Hillary and Bill Clinton ordered the killing of their aides. Others such as therightscoop.com commented that WikiLeaks’ announcement made them believe that the Seth Rich conspiracy theory is true. The second type provided counterevidence in conjunction with the coverage of WikiLeaks’ claim Fox News, for instance reacted by 1) reporting WikiLeaks’ announcement of the reward, 2) drawing attention to the counter evidence from the police, and 3) asked the police to comment on WikiLeaks’ actions²⁶. This type resembled many mainstream media’s coverage that balanced WikiLeaks’

²⁵ This includes therightscoop.com, pamelageller.com, yournewswire.com, thedailyshieple.com, townhall.com, washingtonexaminer.com, western journalism center, truthfeed.com, govtlaves.info, infowars, WND, Gateway Pundit, Conservative Tribune, Zero Hedge, and Michael Savage.

²⁶ See <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/assange-implies-murdered-dnc-staffer-was-wikileaks-source>

politically loaded message with counter evidence from institutional sources. The third type, which I call straight news reporting, simply covered WikiLeaks' actions without providing any materials to support or challenge WikiLeaks' claim.

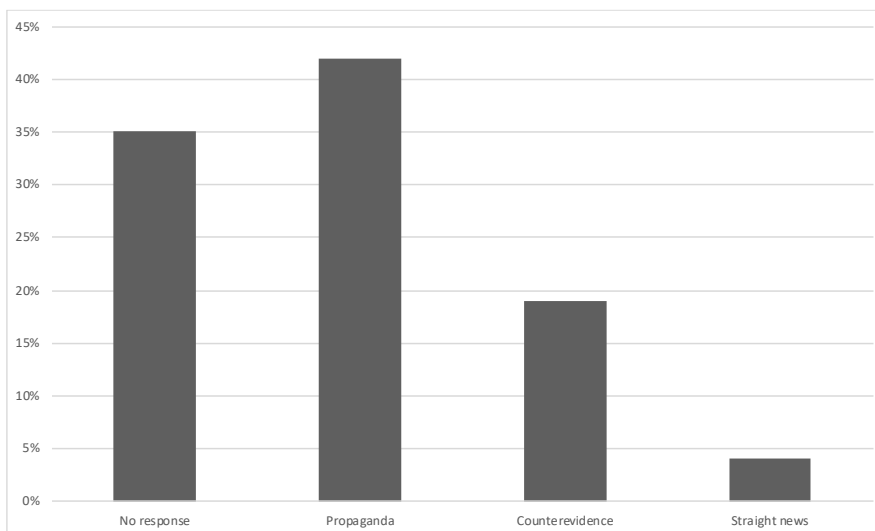


Figure 3.6: Radical right media's response to WikiLeaks' disinformation on August 9th, 2016

About 65% radical right media responded to WikiLeaks' actions within two days. But as Figure 3.6 shows, their responses were divided. Around 40% acted like propaganda outlets that helped WikiLeaks fuel the Seth Rich conspiracy theory, but another 25% (the counterevidence and straight news types combined) behaved more like news organizations that provided straight news reporting or counterevidence to balance WikiLeaks' claim. For instance, while *pamelageller.com* (propaganda type) fully embraced WikiLeaks' message and titled its article as "Julian Assange: Murdered DNC staffer was WikiLeaks' source" (Geller, 2016), Hot Air (counterevidence type) cautioned their readers by pointing out that WikiLeaks had a history of acting as a propaganda outlet for Russia (Sexton, 2016b). The following paragraph is an excerpt from an article by Hot Air that questioned WikiLeaks' intention.

"Assange appears to be capitalizing on a family's personal tragedy to distract from the unpleasant truth that his DNC material was not a leak from an idealistic whistleblower. In fact,

the material was likely stolen by Russian hackers engaged in international espionage. That's not the sort of thing WikiLeaks wants to admit it is involved with." (Sexton, 2016a)

To conclude, WikiLeaks did bring Rich's death to the attention of a larger number of radical right media sites. However, it failed to quickly connect a majority of radical right media into coherent networked political organization -- there were still 35% that did not respond to WikiLeaks' August 9th disinformation campaign and 25% that functioned more or less as news organizations with somewhat balanced coverage or straight news reporting. The next 9-month period hardly had any significant bump in public attention to Rich's death. It was interspersed with various episodes in which different political actors such as the GOP lobbyist Jack Burkman and the Russian hacker(s) Guccifer 2.0 tried to exploit Rich's death, but none of them were much successful in driving societal attention. Radical right media's divided response to the Seth Rich conspiracy theory came to an end when the most watched cable network in the U.S. Fox News decided to push out its own Seth Rich disinformation.

3.3 FOX NEWS' SETH RICH DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

In May 2017, the Trump administration was facing a looming political crisis. On May 9th, Donald Trump dismissed then FBI director James Comey who was spearheading the investigation of the link between Russia and the Trump campaign in the 2016 Presidential election. The dismissal was initially justified by Trump as acting on the recommendation of the Justice Department, but shortly afterwards emerging evidence suggested that Trump had already decided to fire Comey before contacting the Justice Department. This raised the question of whether the firing of the FBI director constituted obstruction of justice and prompted the FBI to open a counterintelligence inquiry into whether Donald Trump was secretly working on behalf of Russia against U.S. (Goldman, Schmidt, & Fandos, 2019). Meanwhile, more than a hundred

lawmakers in Capitol Hill called for an independent special counsel to oversee the Russia probe, drastically raising the political stakes in the investigation that may derail Trump's presidency.

Republican senators' initial reactions to Trump's firing of Comey were largely ambiguous and divided. 10 GOP senators supported Trump's firing of Comey, 16 opposed it, and 21 did not express any opinions. Yet, only a small number of GOP senators initially supported an independent investigation, as the 16 GOP senators who opposed Trump's firing of Comey fell short of supporting an independent investigation. Nonetheless, as the Justice Department decided to appoint a special counsel, many GOP senators changed their stance on this issue quickly. For instance, the Republican U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell who initially opposed the independent investigation, expressed his support on May 17. Other GOP senators such as Richard Burr and Ben Sasse followed suit and changed their position as well.

As most GOP Senators' came to support the appointment of the special counsel, Donald Trump was all but certain to face the looming prospect of a potential collusion charge from the Russia probe. When then attorney general Jeff Sessions informed Donald Trump of the appointment of the special counsel in May, Trump was petrified. "Oh my God. This is terrible. This is the end of my presidency. I'm fucked." said Mr. Trump (Mueller, 2019). At such a difficult time for Donald Trump, the Seth Rich conspiracy theory turned out to be a useful narrative to protect him. The Russia probe was largely based on the intelligence that Russia had interfered in the 2016 Presidential election to help elect Donald Trump. One piece of important evidence of Russia's election-meddling and possible collusion with the Trump campaign is that Russian operatives hacked the DNC and delivered hacked emails to WikiLeaks to help Trump win the 2016 election (Nakashima & Harris, 2018). However, if the Seth Rich conspiracy theory

were true that the DNC emails were delivered to WikiLeaks by Seth Rich rather than the Russian hackers, then this important evidence of possible collusion would be defeated. If enough people believed the Seth Rich conspiracy theory, then the special counsel might be pressured to shift his focus away from Russia and Trump.

According to court documents including documentary evidence such as phone calls, emails, and text messages, Fox News' fabrication of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in May 2017 was a politically motivated attempt at protecting Donald Trump. In March 2017, a private investigator named Rod Wheeler was first hired by Ed Butowsky, a friend of Trump and a contributor of Fox News, to investigate Seth Rich's death. In April, Wheeler and Butowsky met then White House spokesman Sean Spicer to keep the administration abreast of their ongoing investigation. One day after Trump fired James Comey, Butowsky and the Fox News employee Malia Zimmerman allegedly notified Rod Wheeler that they had identified a FBI source who confirmed the email exchange between Seth Rich and WikiLeaks (Bump, 2017). On May 14, Butowsky told Wheeler that Donald Trump just read the article and wanted the article out immediately. In an email Butowsky sent to Fox News producers and hosts, he stated that "one of the big conclusions we need to draw from this is that the Russians did not hack our computer systems and ste[a] emails and there was no collusion like Trump with Russians". In less than two hours, Zimmerman posted the story on Fox News affiliate Fox 5 D.C., sparking a wide-spread disinformation campaign within the radical right media sphere.

Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation stories survived only one week. Not only did law enforcement, Seth Rich's family, and the mainstream media immediately debunk these false stories, the private investigator Rod Wheeler himself backtracked on his statement about Rich's death shortly. As a consequence, Fox News was forced to issue a retraction on May 23, 2017.

However, during this one week, Fox News mobilized a majority of radical right media to amplify its disinformation stories.

3.3.1 *Fox News' disinformation stories*

Disinformation about Seth Rich was first released in five articles by Fox News on two channels – one is Fox 5 DC, a Fox owned-and-operated TV station, and the other is foxnews.com. On May 15th, Fox 5 DC published the first article titled as “Family’s private investigator: There is evidence Seth Rich had contact with WikiLeaks prior to death”. This article claimed that there is evidence to link Seth Rich to WikiLeaks and implied that the DNC, the D.C. police department, and D.C. mayor were all involved in a cover-up. In the early morning of May 16, Foxnews.com published the second article that echoed many claims in the first article. A few hours later a third article came out from Fox News and promoted the claim from an anonymous source that 44,053 emails were transferred from Seth Rich to WikiLeaks’ MacFadyen.²⁷ This article was later quoted in a fourth article from Fox 5 DC in early afternoon.²⁸ By the time when Fox published its fifth article titled as “Family of slain DNC staffer Seth Rich blasts detective over report of WikiLeaks link” in late afternoon, the FBI, D.C. Mayor,²⁹ the police department, and Rich’s family had all denied the allegations in Fox News’ previous reports (Lanard, 2017). But this fifth article continued to push the same message that Seth Rich was linked to WikiLeaks. It even

²⁷ It also stated that both Metropolitan Police and the FBI’s national office declined to comment. Only at the end of the article did Fox News include a sliver of denial from Rich’s father written as “he didn’t believe his son would leak emails”.

²⁸ It also included a series of denials – the D.C. mayor Muriel Bowser called the claim about the stand-down order preposterous, a spokesperson for the FBI’s Washington field office denied that the FBI was involved in the case, and Rich’s family denied that Seth Rich is linked to WikiLeaks.

²⁹ DC Mayor said in the morning of May 16 that the Wheeler’s claim of the stand-down order is preposterous.

doctored the police department's statement³⁰ to create the false appearance that whether Seth Rich was linked to WikiLeaks is still considered as an unsettled issue by the police department.

It is worth noting that it is Fox News' supposedly "news" division that first published the Seth Rich disinformation stories. In the following days, these stories were repeated by many on-air guests and hosts in both Fox News' "news" programs and opinion programs (Gertz, 2019b, 2019a). By May 23rd, it became clear that Fox News' only source for its Seth Rich stories was fabricated, and on that day Fox News put out a retraction statement claiming that the stories did not meet its high editorial standards. However, Fox News host Sean Hannity who is closely tied to Donald Trump continued to pursue the story even after the retraction.

3.3.2 *Reactions in the Radical Right Media Sphere*

Fox News' disinformation quickly spread to the rest of the radical right media sphere. Among the 41 radical right media sites that reacted to Fox News, 40 repeated, amplified, linked, or reposted at least one of its disinformation stories before the retraction on May 23rd. This included several media outlets such as Washington Times and Real Clear Politics that did not fall prey to WikiLeaks' disinformation campaign in August 2016. However, when faced with Fox News' disinformation stories that were masked as news, many media organizations turned into propaganda outlets for Fox News.

To examine various radical right media's responses to Fox News' disinformation, I analyzed the 146 articles published by the 41³¹ radical right sites between May 15 and May 23. I

³⁰ The police's statement released on May 15 reads "The assertions put forward by Mr. Wheeler are unfounded. The Metropolitan Police Department's (MPD) Homicide Branch is actively investigating Mr. Rich's murder and we continue to work with the family to bring closure to this case as we do with all homicide investigations. If there are any individuals who feel they have information, we urge them to call us at 202-727-9099 or text us at 50411. The department is offering a reward of up to \$25,000 for information on this case that leads to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible." When citing the statement, both Fox News and wnd.com omitted the first sentence.

coded each article’s position and classified it in one of two categories – propaganda or rebuke. The propaganda category includes reposts of Fox’s reports or any articles that repeated Fox’s conspiracy theory without providing any counter evidence to debunk it. The rebuke category includes articles that criticized the Seth Rich conspiracy theory. Finally, I aggregated my findings at the media site level: a media outlet was coded as “propaganda” if it published at least one article in the propaganda category; and a media outlet was coded as “rebuke” if it published at least one article in the rebuke category and published no articles in the propaganda category. Figure 3.7 shows radical right media’s reactions to Fox News’ Seth Rich disinformation campaign between May 15 and May 23.

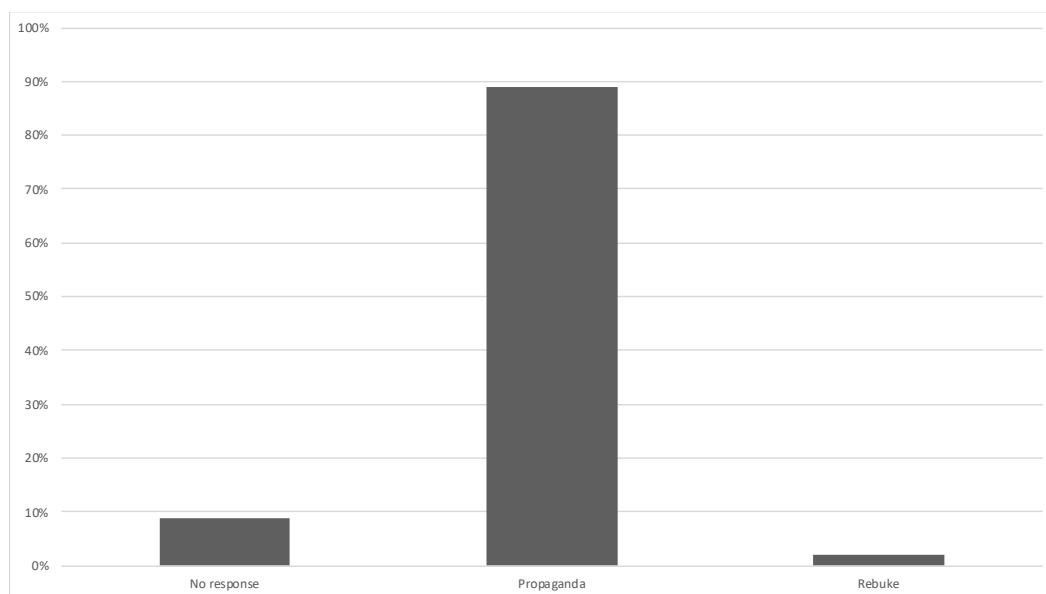


Figure 3.7: Radical right media’s response to Fox News’ disinformation. (May 15th – May 23rd, 2017).

As Figure 3.7 shows, about 90% of radical right media propagated Fox News’ disinformation. Most of them repeated and reposted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory during the

³¹ In May 2018, endingthefed.com was defunct and mcmasterleaks.com was not set up yet. Two other sites, namely thefederalist.com and spectator.org, did not respond to Fox News’ Seth Rich stories.

first two days, though some later switched their positions and cast doubt on the veracity of Fox's stories.³² There is no evidence to suggest that this initial collective propagation of Fox News' disinformation is a result of deliberate coordination. It is unlikely that Drudge Report's Matt Drudge, Fox News' Rupert Murdoch, News Max's Chris Ruddy, Breitbart's Steve Bannon, and Blaze's Glenn Beck all formally met to decide how to promote the Seth Rich conspiracy theory together. Then what was the mechanism involved in connecting radical right media sites into coherent networked political organizations that amplified Fox News' disinformation?

3.4 MEDIA CUED POLITICAL ORGANIZING

The most likely answer is that Fox News' disinformation stories diffused to the rest of radical right media sphere as other radical right media that were watching Fox News saw the value of promoting the Seth Rich stories. By May 2017, Fox News was at the center of the radical right media sphere. According to Benkler et al., (2018), it received most open web in-links in 2017 among all major right-wing sites. Not to mention the fact that Fox News was also the most watched cable network in the U.S. at that time. Disinformation stories cued by high visibility media can more easily attract attention than those that originated from less visible places such as social media.

In addition, the political agenda behind Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign, namely protecting Trump from the Russia probe, was widely shared among many radical right media. At the time of Fox News' disinformation campaign, President Trump had broad support from various radical right media outlets (Berger, 2018). In May 2017, many radical right media not only continued to promote the President on a regular basis, they also deepened their ties with

³² There were five media sites that later switched their positions. They are the Daily Wire, the Daily Caller, Hot Air, the Right Scoop, and Washington Examiner.

the Trump administration. At the time of Fox News' disinformation campaign, Breitbart's former CEO Steve Bannon was working for Trump in the White House; Newsmax's CEO Chris Ruddy was serving as an unofficial advisor to Trump (Gray, 2017); Drudge Report's Matt Drudge was a frequent visitor to the White House (Eberhardt, 2017); and Sinclair had just hired a former Trump campaign spokesman as its chief political analyst who created the "must-run" pro-Trump segments for Sinclair's local stations (Vogel, 2018). Even some of the never-Trump people such as Washington Free Beacon's funder Paul Singer began to align with the President in 2017 (Severns, 2018). As the majority of radical right media sites aligned with Trump, the Seth Rich disinformation campaign designed to protect Trump can easily find broad resonance in the radical right media sphere.

Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign suggests that large-scale political organizing can quickly emerge in the radical right media sphere if it is cued internally by a top radical right media organization that pushes a widely shared political agenda at a strategic moment. I call this process media cued political organizing. If we compare it to the previous two episodes of the evolving Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2016 – first a social media cued process (July 10 – August 8, 2016) that slowly spread the conspiracy theory to about 30% of the radical right media sphere and second a WikiLeaks-cued process (around August 9th, 2016) that triggered divided responses from various radical right media sites, we can see that media cued political organizing is far more impressive at both quickly spreading disinformation on a large-scale and integrating different radical right media sites into coherent political organization networks. Yet, to understand why this mechanism could be so effective, the next section examines the specific network properties of media cued political organizing in Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign.

3.5 NETWORKED PROPERTIES OF MEDIA CUED POLITICAL ORGANIZING IN THE SETH RICH CASE

The diffusion of Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation in the radical right media sphere followed a highly centralized pattern. Figure 3.8 shows the hyperlink network of the media sites that participated in Fox's disinformation campaign between 5/15 and 5/23. Nodes were sized based on the number of un-weighted media in-links. Figure 3.9 shows the distribution of in-degree centrality for all the nodes in the network.

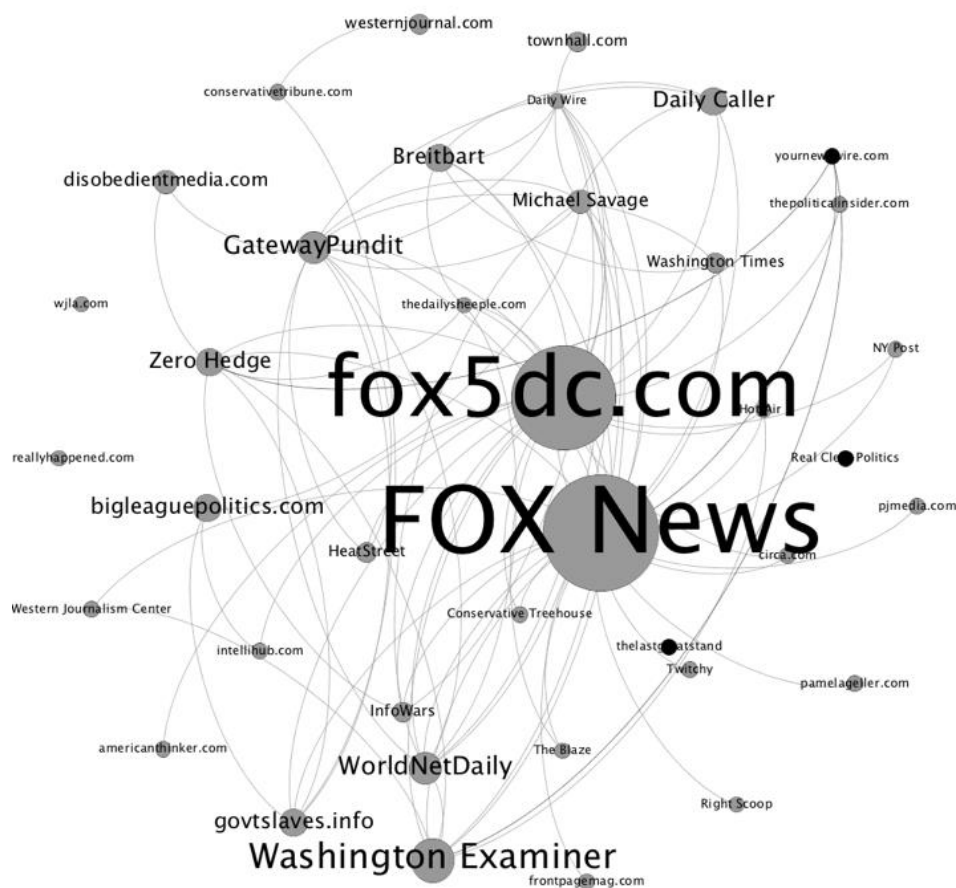


Figure 3.8: Hyperlink network of media sites that joined Fox News' disinformation campaign. The nodes were sized based on the number of in-links. Source: Media Cloud.

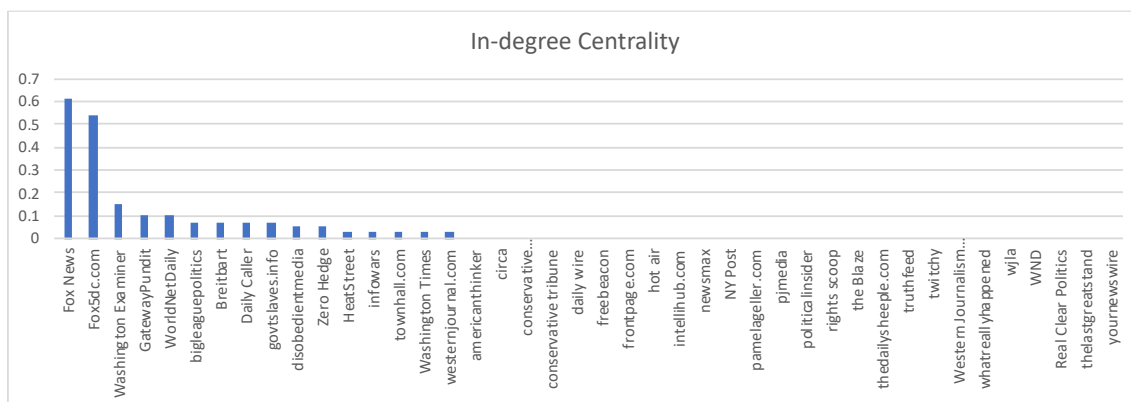


Figure 3.9: Distribution of in-degree centrality in the radical right media amplification network.

As Figure 3.9 shows, Fox News and its affiliate fox5dc.com were the most central nodes in the hyperlink network. Their positions in the network are so critical that if these two nodes were removed, 47% of all nodes would disappear and the density of the network would drop by 50%. Similarly, Figure 3.10 demonstrates Fox News and Fox5dc.com's dominance in the network. The next most central node, namely Washington Examiner, is 73% less central than Fox5dc.com. The radical right media amplification network is characterized by a highly centralized structure with Fox News and Fox5dc.com at the center and 40 other radical right media at the periphery.

A closer look at the sourcing behavior in the amplification network reveals a highly centralized diffusion pattern that approximates a star network. I first identified radical right media sources in all articles that repeated or amplified Fox's stories. Instances of sourcing include both mentions and hyperlinks that indicated the origin of information. Then, I mapped the sourcing patterns on a daily basis. In Figure 3.11, nodes were sized based on the number of times they were mentioned or hyperlinked as sources of information; and the arrows point to the direction where information flowed through sourcing.

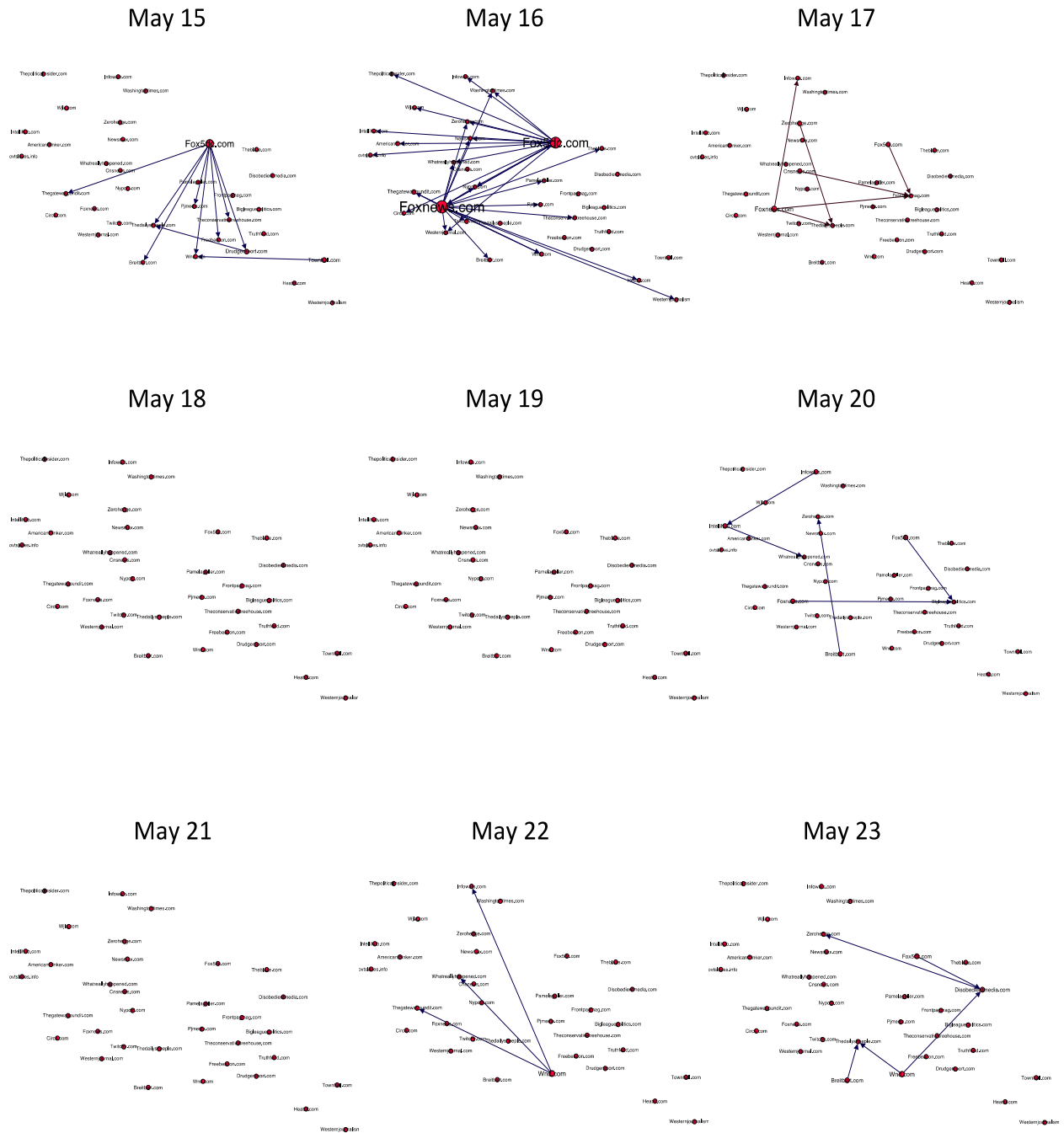


Figure 3.10: Sourcing patterns in the radical right media amplification network.

As Figure 3.10 demonstrates, sourcing followed a highly centralized pattern that approximates a star network on the first two days. On May 15, information was sourced from the star, namely Fox5dc.com, to eight unique radical right media sites. On May 16, sourcing activities were structured in the form of two star-shaped networks with Fox5dc.com and Fox News at the center pushing the Seth Rich stories to 24 other radical right media sites. On May 17, 20, 22, and 23, a few more sites such as Zero Hedge, Breitbart, and WND became sources for the conspiracy theory as well. But the number of times they were sourced pales when they're compared with Fox News or Fox5dc.com.

Star networks are the most centralized networks because the star, namely the node at the center, is the only node that holds the network together. Without the star, the network would disintegrate. Star networks are the star's most effective diffusion networks because it can directly reach all other nodes by only one step. Hence, the highly centralized sourcing pattern in the form of a star network within the first two days most likely significantly contributed to the coherence of the radical right media amplification network.

3.6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I've traced how radical right media reacted to the evolving Seth Rich conspiracy theory between July 2016 and May 2017. My analysis of the three important episodes or periods, namely the first month following Rich's death, WikiLeaks' disinformation campaign, and Fox News' disinformation campaign, reveals that only the third episode, which I characterized as a case of media cued political organizing, successfully connected radical right media sites into coherent political organization network -- in this case a disinformation amplification network. It shows that a top radical right media site with the ability to command attention can quickly mobilize a majority of radical right media to work towards their shared political agendas at a

strategic moment. The star-shaped sourcing pattern among radical right media sites may have significantly contributed to the coherence of the radical right media amplification network.

Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign is a case of media cued political organizing. In this specific case, the organizing mechanism occurred internally from within the radical right media sphere and produced centralized diffusion pattern, which helped the emerging organization network achieve coherence. However, not every act of cueing among radical right media sites can rise to the level seen in the Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign. The salience, longevity, pattern, and scale of media cued political organizing may vary significantly across cases depending on the specific political context. Fox News' disinformation campaign occurred when there was a lack of consistent, united, and clear politicians' cues to protect President Trump; it also likely benefited from a combination of favorable conditions such as the previous familiarity of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory within the radical right media sphere and the urgency to deal with an external threat that endangers the common political agenda of protecting Donald Trump. But Fox News' campaign also fell apart quickly because 1) it was immediately debunked by government authorities, Rich's family, and the mainstream media, and 2) its own investigator that helped concoct the conspiracy theory backtracked on his statement shortly afterwards.

Perhaps more interesting, the evolving Seth Rich disinformation story gives us some clue about when individual radical right media organizations may switch to the political mode and activate as networked political organizations. WikiLeaks' Seth Rich disinformation story looked very similar to that of Fox News – the only difference is that WikiLeaks implied that Rich was its source while Fox News stated that Rich was WikiLeaks' source. However, WikiLeaks largely failed to turn a majority of radical right media into its propaganda outlets but Fox News

succeeded. When WikiLeaks promoted the disinformation story that gave itself political cover for colluding with Russia to meddle in the U.S. election, many radical right media provided journalistic reports that either steered clear of WikiLeaks' politically loaded message or balanced it with counter evidence. Some such as Hot Air and PJ Media even questioned WikiLeaks' intention or alerted their readers to WikiLeaks' history of misleading the public. However, when Fox News pushed out its Seth Rich disinformation stories in May 2017, none of the radical right media that had previously provided journalistic reporting of WikiLeaks questioned Fox News' motive or alerted their readers to Fox News' history of deliberately misleading the public. Instead, they willingly or unwittingly turned into networked propaganda outlets for Fox News.

This is not to say that Fox News can always control the narrative and command the engagement from other radical right media outlets. This specific case took place when supporting President Trump was a common political objective among many radical right media. And when such an objective was clearly threatened by the appointment of special counsel, Fox News took the lead to promote a story designed to distract attention to Trump's firing of Comey and provide Trump with political cover should he face collusion charges in the future. It's not surprising that other radical right media followed Fox News' cueing, because it was in their common interests to protect Donald Trump.

Fox News' Seth Rich disinformation campaign shows the capacity of radical right media to come up with a solution to help Republican elites solve their problems. Yet, as I will show in the next chapter, when prominent Republican politicians already had a winning strategy to handle an emerging political threat, radical right media were able to follow such a strategy, functioning as a de facto propaganda arm for the GOP. Chapter 4 introduces the second

mechanism that organized the radical right media sphere, namely politician cued political organizing.

Chapter 4. POLITICIAN CUED POLITICAL ORGANIZING: HOW GOP POLITICIANS CUED RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA TO SAVE A U.S. SUPREME COURT NOMINEE

In mid-September 2018, a sexual assault charge was brought against President Trump's U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh amid his confirmation hearing in the U.S. Senate. Christine Blasey Ford, a former schoolmate of Kavanaugh, alleged that Kavanaugh attempted to rape her when they were both high school students in the early 1980s (Brown, 2018). Democratic politicians quickly rallied around Ford and pushed for a thorough investigation of the U.S. Supreme Court nominee (Shesgreen, Berry, Gaudiano, & Collins, 2018). Kavanaugh's confirmation, which had once seemed all but certain to succeed under a Republicans-controlled U.S. Senate, suddenly hung in the balance (Stolberg, 2018).

Ford's allegation of sexual assault posed an imminent threat to conservatives' political agendas. What is at stake is not only that Republicans may have to cancel Kavanaugh's confirmation if Ford's allegation were found true, but that they may not have another chance to tip the ideological balance of the U.S. Supreme Court rightward for years (Caldwell, 2018). The allegation emerged only two months before the 2018 mid-term election. If Republicans lost the control of the Senate and failed to fill the Supreme Court vacancy before the new Congress was sworn in, they would not be able to confirm any Trump's Supreme Court nominees without the support of Senate Democrats before 2020.

The Kavanaugh-Ford controversy is a case of another high-stake political event that threatens a widely shared partisan agenda on the political right, namely putting a conservative judge in the U.S. Supreme Court. It provides a window into the ways in which the radical right media sphere was mobilized to address a political threat. As the previous chapter shows, at a

time of crisis radical right media can follow the cues of a top radical right media and promote a common strategic disinformation narrative. How did most radical right media respond to the political threat, namely Christine Blasey Ford, in the Ford-Kavanaugh controversy?

Many radical right media rallied around Kavanaugh in the wake of Ford's allegations. They praised the judge's character and blasted Democrats for exploiting the controversy for partisan gain (Link, 2018). It stands to reason that radical right media behaved in this way, as partisanship predetermines the support of Kavanaugh and the antipathy towards Democrats. Yet, what is puzzling about this case is that, most radical right media in my sample shunned attacking Christine Ford, even though many of them are known for slandering private citizens to solve political problems. Some of Fox News' coverage of Ford even struck a compassionate tone -- so did Daily Wire and several other radical right media (Schwartz, 2018). The question is how did most radical right media come to adopt a restrained stance on Christine Ford when it had all seemed a good strategy to defend Kavanaugh by attacking Ford's credibility – for instance by calling her a liar?

The answer turns out to involve a high degree of cueing from prominent Republican politicians, primarily Republican senators who didn't want to risk having the optics of publicly humiliating an alleged victim of sexual assault in the "Me Too" era. With a mid-term election approaching, many Republican politicians were worried that openly questioning Ford's credibility can alienate women voters and hence hurt the GOP (Alberta, 2019; Stoddard, 2018). Therefore throughout the controversy, besides giving regular updates on hearing and voting procedures, Republican senators focused on praising Kavanaugh and attacking Democrats (Kane, 2018). When commenting on Ford, they claimed that they believed in Ford as a victim of sexual assault without conceding that Kavanaugh did it (Werner, 2018). This strategy allowed

Republican politicians to exonerate Kavanaugh without running the risk of alienating women voters in the 2018 election.

As my analyses later show, most radical right media in my sample followed Republicans' cueing in their reports. As a consequence, they avoided attacking Christine Ford in general. Even though many of them had meager resources, very little original reporting, and no direct access to Republican politicians, they were able to easily access those cues through Twitter, mainstream media, a few resource-rich radical right media, and other public channels. Following Republicans cues, these media sites focused on reporting voting and hearing procedures, attacking Democrats, and defending Kavanaugh, which resulted in an overall low level of attention given to vetting or questioning Ford's credibility and motive.

The Kavanaugh-Ford controversy shows that different radical right media can follow a common strategic response to a political threat based on the cueing of Republican politicians. I call this process politician-cued political organizing. When partisanship or political ideology does not easily offer a pre-determined position or stance from which to frame the political threat, the formation of a strategic response among various radical right media may rely on active cueing from information sources. Situated in a position to handle the political threat, Republican politicians can provide important cues that help line up different radical right media behind a common strategy.

In a multi-media ecology characterized by porous information flows across different networks (Bennett, Segerberg, & Yang, 2018), Republican politicians are not the only information source for radical right media's selective uptake. There are a plethora of content producers ranging from social media to think tanks to grassroots organizations. When a political threat emerges, these actors also like to offer different narratives and approaches to addressing

the threat, which may run into conflict with those offered by GOP politicians. Throughout the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy, the political right had two major competing approaches to addressing Ford – one is to attack her and the other is not.

4.1 TO ATTACK OR NOT TO ATTACK: TWO DIVERGING RESPONSES

Ford's allegation posed a credible threat to the confirmation of Kavanaugh. She had mentioned the sexual assault, though without identifying the name of the perpetrator, to her husband, therapist, and friends long before Kavanaugh was nominated by Donald Trump (Brown, 2018). She also passed a lie detector in July 2018 and named several potential witnesses (Brown, 2018). Once her allegation came out, at least three Republican Senators, namely Jeff Flake, Lisa Murkowski, and Susan Collins, declared that they won't vote on Kavanaugh until the allegation is fully examined (Allen, 2018). Without these three swing votes, Republicans wouldn't be able to confirm Kavanaugh if all Democrats were to vote no.

However, as is common with most sexual assault survivors, there are significant gaps in Ford's memory. For instance, she couldn't remember where the assault took place and how she got home after the assault happened (Brown, 2018). Throughout the controversy, two diverging strategies to deal with Ford emerged on the political right. The first strategy is to attack her credibility by portraying her as a person with ulterior motives. In this narrative, Kavanaugh is innocent because his accuser is a fraud. The second strategy is to acknowledge Ford as a true victim of sexual assault but deny that Kavanaugh did it. In this case, both Ford and Kavanaugh are victims. Ford is a victim of sexual misconduct who misidentified the perpetrator, and Kavanaugh is a victim of Democrats' ploy to derail the confirmation of Trump's U.S. Supreme Court nominee.

Many content producers from fringe conspiracy sites, social media, and right-wing NGOs pursued the strategy of personal attack. For instance, whatdoesitmean.com conjured up the theory that Ford was a CIA operative who acted on behalf of the deep state to undermine Donald Trump. Grabien, another conspiracy site, falsely claimed that Ford was a mad and troubled professor (Collins, 2018). On social media, some claimed that Ford made up the story to carry out a personal vendetta against Kavanaugh whose mother allegedly foreclosed Ford's parent's house; others declared that Ford was paid by the abortion pill industry to block the confirmation of a conservative judge; and still others promoted the falsehood that Ford hypnotized herself into false memories (Wilson, 2018). While fringe sites and social media users pushed out disorganized disinformation narratives to slander Ford, some right-wing NGOs penned op-eds to besmirch her credibility. For instance, Lisa Boothe from the conservative NGO Independent Women's Voice played up minute inconsistencies in Ford's account and argued that Ford should not be trusted.

Concerned that attacking Ford could hurt the GOP badly in the upcoming election (Alberta, 2019), prominent Republican senators and the Trump White House pursued the "no attack" strategy. For instance, the White House counselor Kellyanne Conway, who stressed that Ford should be heard and respected, is reportedly to have told the petulant U.S. President Donald Trump that "you cannot – absolutely cannot – attack Christine Blasey Ford." (Alberta, 2019, p.526). Driven by electoral incentives, Republican senators were careful at handling Ford. Once Ford's allegation was out, nearly all Republican members of the Senate Judiciary Committee said that they wanted to hear Ford out. They also hired a female prosecutor to question Ford during her testimony to avoid the optics of having the victim interrogated by a few old white male politicians (Shabad, Przybyla, Caldwell, & Hillyard, 2018). After Ford's testimony, nearly

all Republican Senators on the Judiciary Committee described her as credible, believable, or sincere (Werner, 2018). Even President Trump who is known for his penchant for personal attacks stayed on message at first, calling Ford's testimony compelling and credible (Staff, 2018). When he digressed and mocked Ford during a rally on October 2, many Republican senators immediately criticized his behavior (Choi, 2018)

Republicans sympathetic gesture towards Ford is by no means a full embrace of her allegation. To ensure that Kavanaugh be confirmed, they refused to organize hearings for other accusers and significantly limited the scope of the FBI investigation into the conservative judge. However, their strategic response to Ford, which avoided raising questions about her motive or credibility, was a stark contrast to those that engaged in the politics of personal destruction. When many offered up false narratives or dumped opposition research about Christine Ford, Republican politicians tried to project a disciplined message in public and rein in among their rank and file the freewheeling and no-holds-barred discourse against Ford that may backfire in the election.

The question of which strategy did most radical right media adopt to cover Christine Ford is related to the type of sources they selected in their coverage. The selection of sources is part of radical right media's strategic decision on what information to include and what viewpoints to advocate. Hence, the use of sources should underly their stance on the Christine Ford. Previous research suggests that professional news organizations usually turn to official sources for authoritative representation of reality in the coverage of political news (Sigal, 1973; Tuchman 1978; Bennett 1990). The reason behind the reliance on officialdom is that government sources are relevant, authoritative, accessible, and should be credible (Cook, 2005). Past research also found that journalists may include NGOs, media, activists, and social media users as sources in

political news coverage (Powers, 2018; Nielsen & Schroder, 2014; Weaver & Rich, 2000), but these sources are in general less prominent than official sources.

However, I've cautioned against using journalistic framework to understand radical right media's behavior. When covering political news, a conservative news organization may exhibit the same pattern of relying on officialdom for information (perhaps more reliant on Republican sources), but a radical right media outlet may depend on hearsay on social media or opposition research to pursue its strategic goals. Although there is no research that systemically investigates how right-wing media such as Breitbart, Daily Caller, and the Blaze use sources in their coverage of political events, there have been case studies that showed radical right media citing a wide range of sources including themselves, GOP politicians, think tanks, foreign actors, social media users, and mainstream media (Benkler et al., 2018; Meagher, 2017). Unlike professional news organizations that have established institutional norms and routines around sourcing, radical right media's sourcing behavior may depend on the specifics of the political problem they try to solve, reflecting fluidity as a fundamental feature of their political organizing dynamics.

This chapter seeks to answer the following questions. First, which strategy did radical right media adopt to deal with the political threat Christine Ford? In other words, what stance did radical right media take on Ford? Second, among various types of information sources, which was most cited by radical right media? Third, to what extent did the most cited source provide the cueing that contributed to radical right media's stance on Ford? Fourth, how did the cueing work to shape radical right media's stance?

The next four sections detail a four-part analysis that answers the above research questions. The first part presents descriptive statistics to show that most radical right media's coverage avoided personal attacks against Ford. The second part shows that the most cited

sources in radical right media's coverage are GOP politicians. In the third part, I test the hypothesis that the more an article uses GOP sources the less likely it attacks Ford. In the fourth part, I analyze the content of quoted speech by GOP sources in radical right media's reports and investigate how GOP politicians' cueing worked.

My data was sampled from Media Cloud. I used the key words "Christine Blasey Ford" to search for articles about the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy. As the controversy started on September 16 when Christine Ford went public with her allegation and ended on October 6, 2017 when Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court, I limited the search to this period. 15 media sites in my top radical right media sample were excluded from this case study for one of the following reasons: they did not produce any relevant articles; they were defunct at the time of the controversy; their RSS feeds were not correctly collected and indexed by Media Cloud at the time of the controversy; or their coverage wasn't in the format of articles. The remaining 30 radical right media on my top radical right media list produced 3794 articles between September 16 and October 6, 2017. I constructed my sample (n=381) by randomly drawing 10% articles from each one of the 30 media outlet.

4.2 RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA'S STANCE ON FORD

For the purpose of this chapter, I define the stance on Ford in terms of whether it engages in personal attacks on her. Using the article as my unit of analysis, I coded each article in terms of whether it attacks Christine Ford. I considered an article as engaging in personal attack if the article ridicules Ford, questions her motive, or portrays her or her legal team as having ulterior motives. Articles that focused on personal attacks took various forms. Some are disinformation stories or opposition research that mimicked the format of straight news reporting. They usually adopted an impersonal tone but spread false information that was presented as factual statements

or created misleading impressions by changing the context of facts. Some are editorials and op-eds that mixed exaggeration, speculation, ridicule, or sarcasm with false or misleading information. Table 4.1 provides four examples of stories that focused on personal attacks.

Table 4.1: Examples of stories that focused on personal attacks

Media	Story title
Gateway Pundit	Christine Blasey Ford published eight studies about abortion pill and works for company that produces it.
Big League Politics	Huge: Blasey Ford co-authored paper on creating artificial situations via hypnosis to retrieve memories.
Conservative Treehouse	The goal is to delay: Kavanaugh accuser demands FBI investigation prior to testimony.
Geller Report	Another Ford lie: Long-term boyfriend of Ford witnessed her coaching friend how to take a lie detector test.

I considered an article as not engaging in personal attack if it met the following criteria. First, if the article is written in the format of a straight news report, to be considered as not engaging in personal attacks, it must not use any materials that undermine Ford's credibility alone. This means that an article would be considered as engaging in personal attack if it only quotes sources that attack Christine Ford without presenting a counter viewpoint. Second, if the article is an opinion piece, to be considered as not engaging in personal attack, it must not raise questions about Ford's credibility, motive, or character. Yet, an article that simply pointed out the gaps in Ford's memory or argued that Ford's account lacks corroborating evidence without questioning Ford's credibility was not considered as engaging in personal attacks. A second coder was trained to code the stance of articles. After two rounds of training, disagreement was

resolved in discussion. The coder then analyzed a random 10% sample of all 381 coded articles. Inter-coder reliability was established at 0.92 (Cohen’s Kappa).

The result shows that 85% of coded articles did not attack Christine Blasey Ford. To understand how each radical right media responded, I aggregated the finding at the media level and found that only eight radical right media sites focused on attacking Ford. Figure 4.1 plotted the percentage of “attack articles” against the total number of articles published by each radical right media. It demonstrates that a majority of radical right media sites did not focus on attacking Christine Ford.

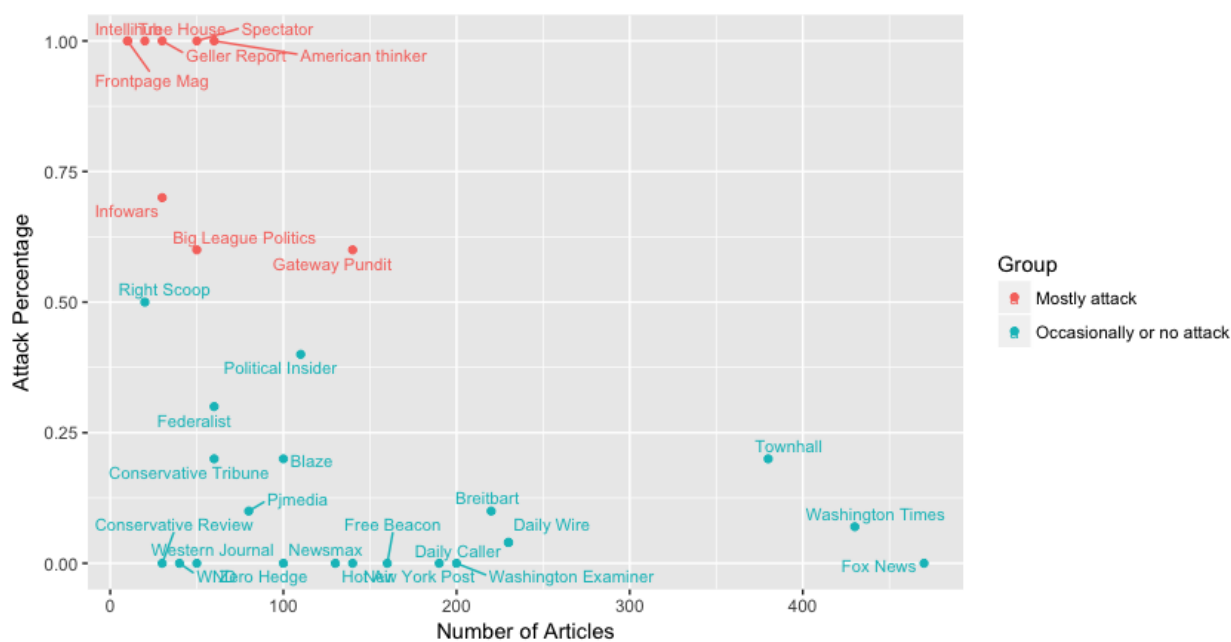


Figure 4.1: Radical right media’s stance on Ford.

In Figure 4.1, radical right media whose “attack articles” are over 50% were categorized as “mostly attack” while others were categorized as “occasionally or no attack”. It shows that the three most prolific radical right media such as Townhall, Washington Times, and Fox News produced less than 25% “attack articles”. This suggests that the majority of “no-attack” coverage

is likely a result of two factors – that a majority of radical right media did not focus on personal attacks and that the most prolific radical right media did not focus on personal attacks.

4.3 GOP POLITICIANS AS THE MOST PROMINENT SOURCE

To identify the most prominent type of source, I counted the number of unique original sources in different source categories in each article. Original sources were defined as people or organizations which were cited as the origins of direct or indirect quotes. In cases where the author of an article cites an original source (e.g., politicians) through an intermediary (e.g., mainstream media), only the original source was coded and categorized. For instance, Twitter often served as an intermediary for radical right media to get quotes from politicians. For original sources cited through tweets, I checked the description of the source’s Twitter account and categorized the source according to his or her organizational affiliation. Based on my sampled data, I identified 10 major source categories.

The first source category is **Republican politicians** (including their staff and spokespersons). Prominent Republican sources in the sample include President Donald Trump, the eleven Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee, and the Republican senators who were considered as swing votes. The second category is **Democratic politicians**. Prominent Democratic sources are those that sat on the Senate Judiciary Committee. The third category is **non-partisan government sources**, which includes non-partisan government officials and institutions. Prominent non-partisan government sources are the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, the prosecutor who was hired by the Senate Judiciary Committee to question Ford, and the FBI. The fourth category is **mainstream media**. This category includes media outlets that were categorized as center, center left, or center right in Faris et al. (2017)’s study.

Professionals that worked for these media organizations were also categorized as mainstream

media sources. The fifth and sixth categories are **right leaning media and left leaning media**, which include media outlets that were respectively categorized as right and left in Faris et al. (2017)'s study. The seventh category is **non-governmental organizations**, which includes right-wing think tanks, PACs, and grass root organizations such as Turning Point USA. The eighth category is **social media users**, which mostly includes Twitter users who are not associated with any organizations as discernible in their Twitter profiles. The ninth category is **involved parties**, which includes Ford or Kavanaugh's past or present romantic partners, friends, classmates, schoolmates, and colleagues. The tenth category is **other**, which includes former politicians and elected officials, protesters, former law enforcement officials, political candidates for office, and voters.

Because the controversy was about Kavanaugh and Ford, it is expected that radical right media cited these two sources very often. For the purpose of my study, it is not necessary to include them in my coding scheme. A second coder was trained to identify sources and classify them in the above source categories. After two rounds of training, disagreement was resolved in discussion. The coder then analyzed a random 10% sample ($n=38$), and recorded the count of unique original sources in each source category for each article. Inter-coder reliability was established above 0.7 (Cohen's Kappa).

Table 4.2 displays the descriptive statistics for source types at the article level. It shows that Republican politicians are the most prominent source type, which accounts for about 40% of all sources with each article citing roughly one Republican politician on average. This suggests that radical right media were clearly following the cueing of Republicans much more so than any other sources. Democratic politicians are the second most cited source, but they only account for 15%. Right leaning media as original sources only ranked in a distant 7th place, which suggests

that internal media-cueing from within the radical right media sphere played a negligible role in the organization of radical right media coverage in this case.

Table 4.2: Count of original sources at the article level (n=381).

Source types	Range	Mean	SD	Count total
GOP	(0,6)	0.93	1.25	356 (40%)
DEM	(0,4)	0.35	0.66	135 (15%)
Government	(0,2)	0.08	0.3	32 (4%)
Mainstream media	(0,6)	0.23	0.59	88 (10%)
Right leaning media	(0,5)	0.12	0.42	45 (5%)
Left leaning media	(0,1)	0.02	0.15	6 (1%)
Involved parties	(0,7)	0.19	0.7	73 (8%)
NGO	(0,1)	0.02	0.15	9 (1%)
Social media	(0,5)	0.09	0.47	34 (4%)
Other	(0,6)	0.27	0.68	104 (12%)

Likewise, I aggregated the count data at the media level. I found that 63% of radical right media sites used GOP politicians as their primary source. Moreover, radical right media that focused on attacking Ford exhibited a different sourcing pattern than those that didn't. None of the "mostly attack" radical right media used GOP politicians as their primary source but 90% of those that did not attack Ford and those that only occasionally attacked Ford did. This suggests

that there might exist a relationship between the use of GOP sources and the stance on Christine Ford.

4.4 STANCE ON FORD AS A RESULT OF GOP POLITICIANS' CUEING

I choose to model the relationship between stance and the use of GOP sources at the article level for two reasons. First, the article is a natural unit of observation for my case because media sites usually publish information in the unit of articles. Second, as King, Keohane and Verba (1994) suggested, one should consider selecting the unit of analysis at a lower level if the number of observations at the higher level is too small to generate enough statistical power. Modeling the relationship at the article level enables me to take advantage of the statistical information captured in all 381 articles instead of only 30 media sites. Third, although analyzing the data at an even lower level such as the paragraph level or the sentence level may allow for more statistical power, I believe that 381 observations at the article level already suffice.

Based on the descriptive statistics mentioned above, I propose the hypothesis that the more an article uses GOP sources the less likely it attacks Ford. I used a logistic regression model to estimate the effect of GOP sources (Independent Variable) on the probability that the article attacks Ford (Dependent Variable). Also included in the model as independent variables are 9 other aforementioned source types, as well as a binary control variable, namely whether the article was written in the format of straight news or opinion.³³ The reason for including the control variable is that an article's format is associated with both stance on Ford and the number of GOP sources,³⁴ which can result in omitted variable bias if not included.

³³ The coding of article format is rather straightforward. If the article employs an impersonal tone and only presents provable statements of facts, it is then coded as straight news. Otherwise, it is coded as an opinion piece.

³⁴ The chi-square test on stance and format shows that these two variables are significantly related. Running a logistic regression of 'format' on 10 different types of sources shows that 'format' is statistically related to GOP sources and right leaning media sources. Hence, format was included as a control variable.

Since my data has two levels with articles at the individual level and media sites at the group level, I followed Gelman and Hill (2008) and used a multilevel model where I fit random intercepts for each media site to account for group-level variation in estimating individual-level coefficients. In other words, I construct a logistic regression with 381 data points predicting the probability of an article attacking Christine Ford given individual-level predictors in the article and with an intercept that can vary by media site. The following equation demonstrates the form:

$$\Pr(y_i=1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha_{j|i} + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \beta_2 X_{2i} + \dots + \beta_{11} X_{11i}), \text{ for } i = 1, \dots, n$$

$$\alpha_j \sim N(\mu_\alpha, \sigma_{2\text{media}}), \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, 30$$

where $\Pr(y_i=1)$ is the probability of the presence of personal attacks; n is the number of articles and j is the number of media sites; $X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5, X_6, X_7, X_8, X_9,$ and X_{10} are the count of GOP politicians, Democratic politicians, non-partisan government sources, mainstream media, right leaning media, left leaning media, social media users, NGO, involved parties, and other; X_{11} is the control variable article format; and α_j is the varying intercept for media sites that follows a normal distribution with mean μ_α and standard error σ .

Table 4.3 presents the result of the model. It shows that the use of Republican sources decreases the probability of personal attacks while the use of right leaning media sources increases it. This model provides strong support for my hypothesis that the more an article cites Republican politicians the less likely it engages in personal attacks against Ford. The use of other sources did not display a statistically significant relationship with the stance of the article.

Table 4.3: Table of the fitted multilevel logistic regression model with varying intercepts for media sites. The unit of analysis is the article. Positive coefficients are interpreted as an increase in the likelihood that an article engages in personal attacks. (n=381)

	Coefficients (SD)
(Intercept)	-0.17 (0.7)
Republican	-2.38*** (0.64)
Democrat	-0.91 (0.54)
Non-partisan government	0.71 (0.94)
Mainstream media	-0.25 (0.42)
Right leaning media	1.33** (0.46)
Left leaning media	1.87 (1.57)
Social media users	1.01 (0.54)
NGO	-0.7 (1.09)
Involved parties	0.5 (0.28)
Other	0.18 (0.33)
Opinion (Format)	3.1*** (0.74)

*** p<0.001, ** p<.01, *p<.05.

To facilitate interpretation, I followed Adolph (2016) and created two plots of predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals to quantify the effects of GOP sources. The effect of right leaning media is also included to provide a point of reference. In Figure 4.2, the left panel shows their marginal effects on opinion pieces and the right panel shows the effects on articles written in the straight news format. The Y axis indicates the probability of personal attack while the X axis shows the number of sources.

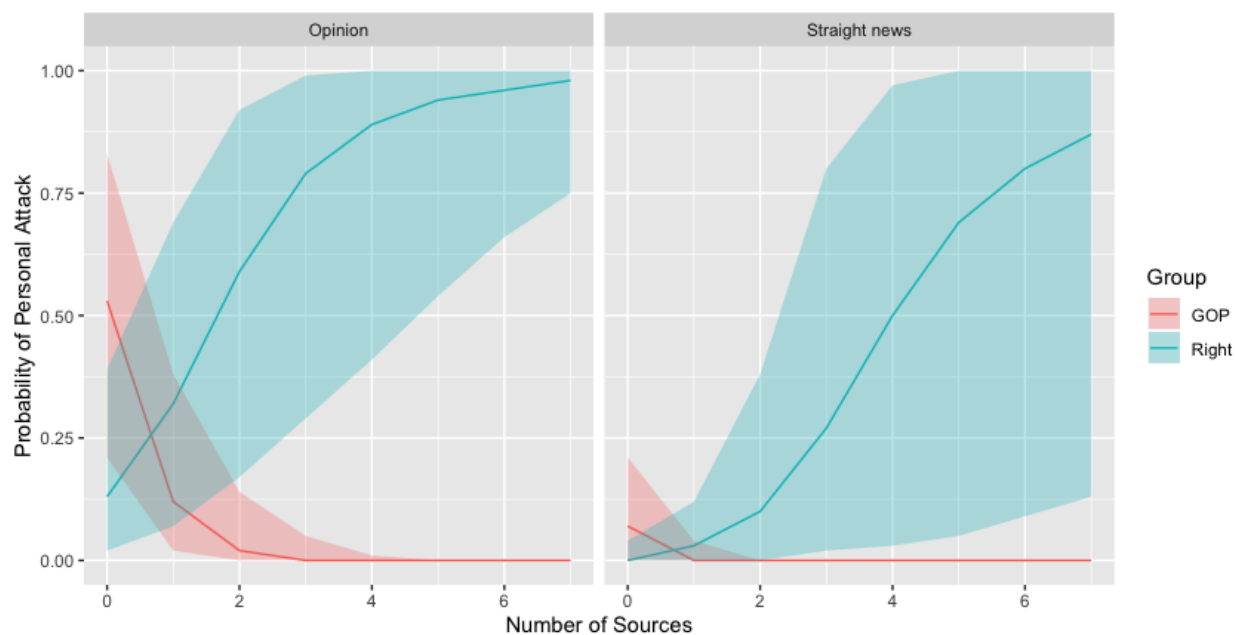


Figure 4.2: Plots showing predicted probabilities for articles with varying number of sources holding all other variables at sample means. The graph also includes 95% confidence intervals for the marginal effects using the methods and tools described in Adolph (2016). The legend “GOP” stands for GOP sources and the legend “right” stands for right leaning media.

As shown in the left panel in Figure 4.2, if an opinion piece uses no GOP sources, the probability of it attacking Christine Ford is roughly a coin toss for radical right media sites on average. Yet, adding one GOP source significantly reduces the probability to 12.5% and adding one more reduces it to almost zero. If an article is written in the straight news format, the probability of it attacking Ford is very low on average. Adding one GOP source would reduce the probability to almost zero. The effect of right leaning media on increasing the probability of personal attacks is less certain, as it is characterized by wider confidence intervals. This positive

effect is a result of a small number of radical right media citing a small number of right-leaning media that published disinformation about Ford.

4.5 HOW REPUBLICANS' CUEING WORKED

To understand how Republicans' cueing worked to influence radical right media's stance on Ford, I analyzed the content of quoted speech (including both direct and indirect quotes) from Republican politicians. The majority of quoted speech in my sample focused on four areas, namely providing updates on procedures, attacking Democrats, defending Kavanaugh, and evaluating Ford. First, Republicans were quoted to show how the Senate Judiciary Committee would investigate Ford's claims, how it would arrange hearings for Kavanaugh and Ford, how the confirmation process may proceed, and how Republicans senators would vote. The second area of quoted speech focused on Republicans' criticism of Democrats. The third area centers on defending Kavanaugh – this includes praising his qualifications, vouching for his integrity, or sympathizing with the trouble he experienced in the controversy. The fourth area is the evaluation of Ford's allegation and her testimony. Table 4.4 lists the examples for each category.

Table 4.4: Examples of quoted speech from Republican politicians

Categories	Examples
Procedures	“If the committee is to hear from Ms. Ford, it should be done immediately so the process can continue as scheduled,” Mr. Graham said Sunday afternoon.
Democrats	President Trump said Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California, the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, created the mess by receiving Ms. Blasey Ford's letter containing the accusations in July but not acting on them

until last week.

Kavanaugh	But after Kavanaugh’s opening statement, this Republican said the 53-year old judge might have rescued his confirmation, proclaiming: “He’s knocking it out of the park.”
Ford	Mr. Trump said he watched her testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee and felt she was ” a very fine woman, a very credible witness.”
Others	"You’re talking about history," Graham said. "We’re not looking back. We’re looking forward.”

I focused on quoted speech at the sentence level from the articles (n=50) that mentioned at least 3 unique GOP sources and coded all sentences (n=243) that fall into one of the categories mentioned above. I found that 58% of quoted speech from Republicans focused on procedures, 13% on Democrats, 10% on Ford, 10% on Kavanaugh, and 9% on other topics. Figure 4.3 demonstrates the proportion of these five categories in relation to top Republican sources.

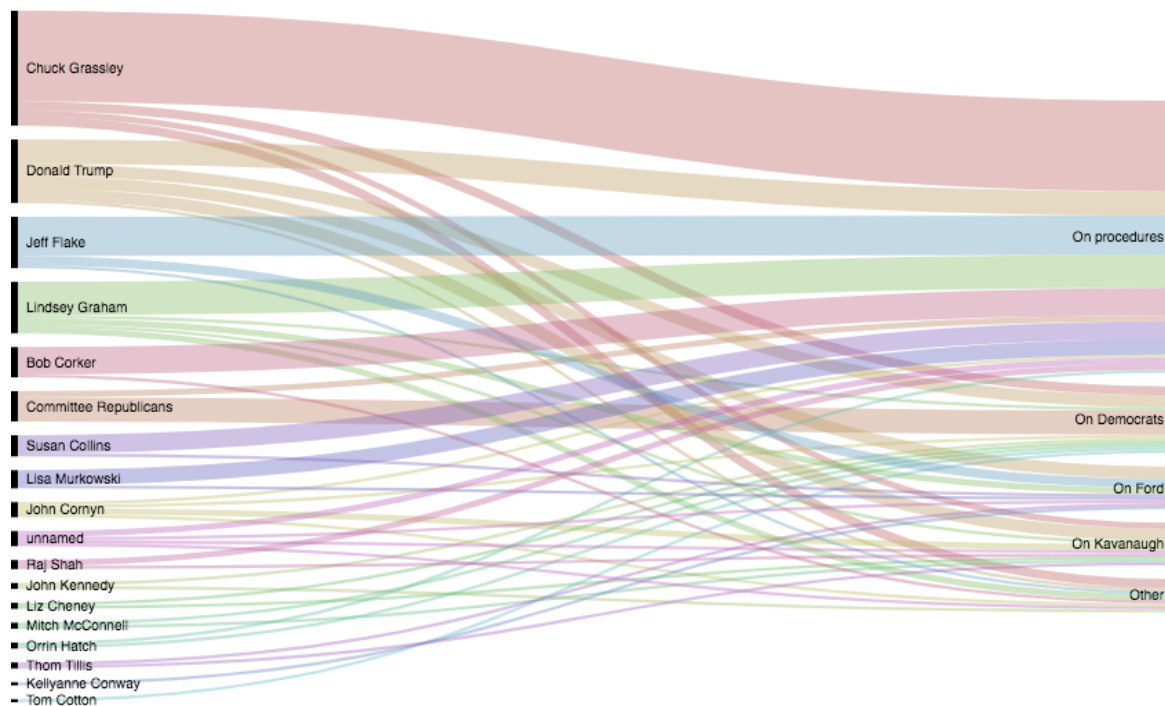


Figure 4.3: Top Republican sources and their quoted speech at the sentence level.

Figure 4.3 shows that the most cited Republican sources are the U.S. President Donald Trump, Republican members of the Senate Judiciary Committee (e.g., Chuck Grassley, Lindsay Graham, and Bob Corker), and swing vote Republicans (e.g., Jeff Flake, Susan Collins, and Lisa Murkowski). Quoted speech from Republican members of the committee and swing vote Republicans overwhelmingly focused on procedures while those from Donald Trump were roughly split among procedures, Ford, Democrats, and Kavanaugh.

Figure 4.3 suggests that Republicans' cueing worked primarily by directing attention away from Ford. Radical right media paid much less attention to Republicans' comments on Ford than their updates on procedures and talking points about Democrats. Hence, their avoidance of personal attack on Ford is less a result of deliberately channeling Republicans' sympathetic views about her than shifting their focus to procedures and Democrats.

4.6 DISCUSSION

The above four-part analysis shows that the majority of radical right media's coverage avoided personal attacks on Ford. There were a few sites such as Infowars and Geller Report that focused on attacking Ford. But they were small in number and not as productive as those that refrained from attacking Ford. Radical right media's overall avoidance of personal attacks is strongly associated with their reliance on GOP sources, primarily prominent Republican senators who decided not to attack Ford out of the concern that attacking an alleged victim of sexual assault may hurt the GOP in the upcoming election. More interesting, even though Republicans made it clear that they believed in Ford, their comments about Ford were much less quoted than those about procedures or Democrats. To the extent that their cueing resulted in radical right media's moderate stance on Ford, it worked mostly in a way that directed radical right media's attention away from evaluating Ford and focused their attention on Democrats, and voting and hearing procedures.

The Kavanaugh-Ford controversy shows the power of prominent GOP politicians in shaping radical right media's response to a threat that endangered a common partisan goal. Republican politicians' cueing was able to organize radical right media's coverage because they were in an authoritative position to handle the threat and they had a coherent strategy in terms of avoiding attacking Ford and focusing attention on Democrats and procedures. There were attempts by the likes of Infowars and Gateway Pundit at generating disinformation to attack Ford, but the size of internal media cueing within the radical right media sphere was insignificant. Radical right media only account for 5% of original sources in the coverage of the controversy.

Both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 showed that radical right media came to the rescue of Republican elites when they were in trouble. Yet, do radical right media always operate in the interests of prominent Republican politicians? Are they nothing more than a propaganda network for Donald Trump or the GOP? Chapter 2 suggests that radical right media funded by rich right-wing activists such as the Koch brothers and the Mercer family have promoted agendas beyond Donald Trump or the GOP. In other words, unlike a state media system where the party or party leaders have full control over their propaganda outlets, the radical right media sphere in the U.S. is not simply a propaganda network for political elites. As the next chapter shows, radical right media have also contested the power of Republican elites. And one avenue to find such a contestation was when Republican elites themselves were divided along ideological lines. In Chapter 5, I will introduce the third organizing mechanism, namely ideologically contested political organizing, which shows that radical right media actively exploited ideological divisions among Republican elites to influence party/leader agendas.

Chapter 5. IDEOLOGICALLY CONTESTED POLITICAL ORGANIZING: HOW RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA PRESSURED PRESIDENT TRUMP TO FIRE HIS NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

The previous two cases show that radical right media rallied around powerful Republican politicians to serve their interest at times of crisis. When Donald Trump was in trouble in May 2017, Fox News reinvented the Seth Rich conspiracy theory and lined up other radical right media to protect the President. When Trump's supreme court nominee Brett Kavanaugh was in trouble in September 2018, radical right media followed the cueing of prominent Republican politicians to save the conservative judge. In both instances, radical right media quickly complied with the wish or command of powerful Republican politicians to help further their political interests.

These two cases may create an impression that radical right media serve as an extension of the GOP or the Trump administration that operate in the interest of powerful GOP politicians. In fact, this understanding is popular among media practitioners and scholars. David Brock, for instance, described right-wing media as GOP's noise machine operating under the cover of journalism. He argued that the loyalty of the likes of Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and the Washington Times was not with the standards or norms of journalism but with the Republican party (Brock & Rabin-Havt, 2012). In a similar vein, Fang (2013) detailed how right-wing media outlets served as a channel for prominent Republican politicians to coordinate with right-wing grassroots movements. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) pointed out that right-wing media performed a crucial function for the GOP, namely vetting Republican candidates for office.

During Donald Trump first term in office, many viewed radical right media as an extension or part of the Trump administration. For instance, some noted the close relationship Sean Hannity had with President Trump and described Hannity as Trump's shadow chief of staff (Rich, 2018). Others brought attention to the fact that many former Fox News employees such as Bill Shine and Hope Hicks actually went to work at the Trump White House (Gertz, 2019). Alarmed by the great lengths to which Fox News went to do Trump's bidding, which includes killing a negative story for him and tipping him off about debate questions during the 2016 presidential election, Mayer (2019) suggested that Fox News had become a propaganda arm of the Trump administration.

This perspective is insightful in pointing out the important role of radical right media in advancing the political interest of the GOP and the Trump administration. However, it assumes that the GOP or the Trump administration is a homogenous political entity with clearly defined interest. Moreover, it relegates radical right media to a secondary role, namely a political tool operating in the interests of Donald Trump or other Republican politicians. In this chapter, I argue that the Trump administration is not always a politically homogenous identity. Rather, it is oftentimes fraught with factional infighting that reflects larger ideological struggles on the political right. This requires us to think carefully about the conditions under which we treat the GOP or the Trump administration as a unified political entity in our analyses. I also argue that radical right media are more than mere political tools for Donald Trump. In this chapter, I show that when Republican politicians were divided over ideologically dispute, many radical right media did not simply follow the ultimate authority of Donald Trump who arbitrated the dispute. Nor did they take a passive role to "index" their reports to the range of views and opinions expressed by opposing factions. Instead, many of them advanced their own ideological agendas

by mobilizing resources both from within and outside the Trump administration to contest the power of President Donald Trump.

I advance these two arguments by illustrating the third organizing mechanism in the radical right media sphere, namely ideologically-contested political organizing. It refers to the organizing process that is driven by the clash of ideological interests among various factions on the political right. This organizing process may entail a certain amount of media-cueing and politician-cueing behavior, but the underlying logic that activates it is different from the previous two mechanisms. As Chapter 3 and 4 showed, both media cued political organizing and politician-cued political organizing were activated as a response to an external political threat that endangered common partisan interest. Yet, one missing piece towards understanding the political logic of the radical right media sphere is how radical right media mobilized to address internal disputes and conflicts. And this chapter shows how ideological disputes among various right-wing factions can drive political organizing within the radical right media sphere.

5.1 THE ASSUMPTION OF IDEOLOGICAL COHERENCE

The popular notion that right-wing media are the extension of the GOP or the Trump administration rests on the premise that the GOP, the Trump administration, and right-wing media are more or less ideologically coherent and politically homogenous entities. Without such a premise, one can only speak of specific right-wing media outlets in relation to specific factions within the GOP or the Trump administration. In their seminal book *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*, Jamieson and Cappella (2008) wrote about an ideologically coherent echo chamber of conservative media. As they so vividly put, conservative opinion media are “cousins with a shared commitment to Reagan conservatism, a common ideological ancestry, and a network of related kin” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p.42).

And “binding these dissimilar media figures and venues into a conservative media establishment is their embrace of the tenets of Reagan conservatism” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p.6).

Jamieson and Cappella (2008) made it clear that it is Reagan conservatism, the ideological underpinning for the GOP, that gave coherence to various right-wing media in the United States. Reagan conservatism, which is commonly referred to as a three-legged stool of limited government, social conservatism, and a strong national defense, brought together a winning political coalition for the GOP in much of the 1980s and early 2000s. This broad political coalition consisted of economic conservatives that favored free trade and open immigration, social conservatives that subscribed to Christian values, and national security conservatives who wanted to project American values around the world. With the GOP grounded in these three key constituents, mainstream Republican politicians advocated foreign interventions, free trade, and open immigration policies during these years and produced many electoral victories as vindication of Reagan conservatism (Farber, 2010).

By promoting the same values, worldviews, and policies of Reagan conservatism championed by the GOP, right-wing media extended GOP’s interests as they disseminated its talking points, mobilized political participation, and tightened its ties to their audiences. The Fox News host Sean Hannity and talk radio show host Rush Limbaugh, for instance, both proudly identified themselves as Reagan conservatives, stressing that it is Reagan who brought an end to the Cold War, restored America’s leadership in the world, and revived the American economy through “trickle-down” economics (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). During the time where both the GOP and right-wing media were more or less ideologically anchored in Reagan conservatism, it makes sense to consider right-wing media as an extension of the Republican party.

However, political coalitions are fragile. They can quickly dissolve as political elites and key voting blocs change their issues positions (Carmines & Stimson, 1986). Vowing to “drain the swamp” of the Washington establishment, Donald Trump brought in new right-wing factions such as economic nationalists to the Republican party and challenged the orthodoxy of Reagan conservatism on key issues such as trade, immigration, and foreign policy. For instance, on the issue of trade, Trump raised massive tariffs against American’s major trading partners; on immigration, Trump imposed the Muslim travel ban and the “zero tolerance” policy that resulted in separating children from their families; and on foreign policy, Trump threatened to withdraw from NATO and proposed massive cuts on foreign aid. Commenting on the transformation of the GOP under Donald Trump, the outgoing Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan lamented in early 2019 that Reagan conservatives are beaten by the Trump wing within the Republican party (Alberta, 2019).

“I’m a traditional conservative, and traditional conservatives are definitely not ascendant in the party right now ... And the paleoconservatives were kind of what you have now: isolationist, protectionist, and kind of xenophobic, anti-immigrant ... The Reagan Republican wing beat the Rockefeller Republican wing and now the Trump wing beat the Reagan wing” (Alberta, 2019, p. 596).

Even the Trump administration is rife with ideological conflicts among warring factions. Since Trump took office in 2017, he has brought into the White House an ideologically diverse group of people. The former chief strategist Steven Bannon and his allies represented the anti-establishment wing. They were fiercely against free trade agreements such as NAFTA, the Iran nuclear deal, America’s military involvement in Afghanistan, and tax cut for the rich.³⁵ To push forward their political agendas, they repeatedly clashed with more moderate officials such as

³⁵ Bannon reportedly pushed for a 44 percent tax rate for those making \$5 million and above a year (Grim, 2017).

Trump's former economic council director Gary Cohen over trade, senior advisor Jared Kushner over health care reform (Lemire & Lucey, 2017), and former national security advisor H.R. McMaster over foreign policies in Syria and Afghanistan in 2017 (Prokop, 2017).³⁶ Some of these clashes spilled over into open conflicts, resulting in a remarkable number of leaks, resignations, and firings in the early years of Trump's first term (Woodward, 2018).

Given the continuous infighting within both the GOP and the Trump administration, we should be specific about the conditions under which the GOP or the Trump administration is analyzed as a unified entity. When an external threat pushes the GOP to form a united front, as seen in the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy in Chapter 4, it makes sense analytically to treat the GOP as a coherent political entity. Yet, when an internal ideological conflict rises within the GOP or the Trump administration, it becomes problematic to still hold that assumption about political coherence.

The media sphere on the political right has also gone through tremendous changes over the past decade. Not only has the radical right media sphere vastly expanded, it's also become arguably less homogenous. While 31% of radical right media in my sample describe themselves as conservative media outlets in the About page of their websites, 24% defy the traditional left and right cleavage and position themselves as correctives to a perceived establishment. The mission of two prominent radical right media Breitbart and Infowars, for instance, is not about providing conservative viewpoints. Rather, it is to challenge or destroy the entire political and media establishment (Hylton, 2017) including other right-wing media outlets such as the Wall Street Journal and Fox News (Johnson, 2017). It's even less clear to what extent those that ten years ago were considered as conservative opinion media are still conservative. After all, there

³⁶ On trade, he "engaged in a fight every day" with former national economic council director Gary Cohn; on healthcare reform, he clashed with Trump's senior advisor Jared Kushner and called him a "globalist"; and on foreign policy, he fiercely opposed McMaster's view on Afghanistan and Iran (Suebsaeng, 2017).

was nothing conservative about Fox News attacking the U.S. intelligence community or killing a story of Trump's extramarital affairs with a porn star (Benkler et al., 2018; Mayer, 2019). Given these recent developments, we should caution against treating radical right media as an echo chamber anchored in a coherent political ideology.

By now I have established that it is problematic to always regard the GOP, the Trump administration, and the radical right media sphere as politically homogenous entities. The notion that radical right media are simply an organization network for the Trump administration or the GOP neglects the important internal dynamics within these political entities, and therefore should be better qualified. Missing in the current literature is a lack of understanding about radical right media's role in the internal conflicts among powerful Republican elites. Do radical right media adopt the journalistic practice of "indexing" (Bennett, 1990) the different views according to the range of views expressed by prominent officials from different Republican factions? Or do they function as a Trump organization network and simply follow his stance if he came out to arbitrate the infighting? Or do they engage in the conflict and align themselves with one faction, even if it means going against the will of Donald Trump? To answer these questions, I examine the controversy involving Trump's second national security advisor H.R. McMaster in 2017.

5.2 THE CAMPAIGN TO OUST H.R. McMASTER

Trump's former national security advisor H.R. McMaster's firing of "anti-globalist" officials offers an ideal case to explore these questions. In late July 2017, McMaster started consecutive firings of three national security officials, namely Rich Higgins, Derek Harvey, and Cohen-Watnick who were allies of then chief strategist Steve Bannon in the White House (Winter & Groll, 2017). This series of firings was a showdown between McMaster and Bannon's anti-

establishment wing who had long fought over foreign policies in the Middle East and Afghanistan since April (Gray, 2017). Backed by radical right media outlets and powerful lobbying groups such as the Zionist Organization of America, the anti-establishment wing fought back and launched a coordinated campaign to oust McMaster. In the next two weeks after the initial firing of Rich Higgins on July 21, multiple leaks targeting McMaster appeared almost simultaneously on radical right media sites such as Circa, Breitbart and Free Beacon. Numerous opposition research dumps and opinion pieces also quick circulated through a significant part of radical right media networks. Yet, as Steve Bannon was forced out on August 18, the anti-McMaster campaign died off and McMaster continued to serve in the Trump administration for another 9 months.

What makes this case interesting is that President Trump intervened in the middle of the controversy and came out to publicly support his national security advisor McMaster. On August 3, Trump sent the New York Times a statement to praise McMaster, claiming that he is a good man and very pro-Israel (Berger, 2017). Trump's intervention can be regarded as a condition in a quasi-experiment to test if radical right media are truly just an organization network for Donald Trump. Under normal circumstances where we only observe radical right media following Trump, it's difficult to ascertain if that is because radical right media are loyal to Trump or because they just happen to share a common political agenda with Trump. Yet in this case, with many radical right media already taking a stance against McMaster and Trump later coming out to contradict that stance, we can observe how anti-McMaster radical right media reacted to Trump's intervention. If they stop publishing anti-McMaster articles or changed their stance, then a strong case can be made that their loyalties truly lie with Trump -- not with their own political agendas. Therefore, this case not only offers us a chance to examine radical right

media's role in factional infighting among Republican elites, it also puts to test the popular notion that radical right media are simply Trump's organizations. In the following sections, I will explore the following four questions in this case study. First, what are the ideological differences that drove the infighting between Steve Bannon's anti-establishment wing and H.R. McMaster within the White House? Second, what are the major themes in the anti-McMaster campaign that helped organize a broad opposition against McMaster? Third, how did radical right media mobilize against McMaster? Fourth, how did radical right media react to Trump's announcement of support for McMaster?

5.2.1 *Ideological Dispute in Foreign Policies*

What stood behind the open conflict are long-simmering tensions between McMaster and Bannon over their ideological differences in foreign policies (Beauchamp, 2017; Brannen, 2017; Gray, 2017). Bannon's anti-establishment wing called their foreign policy philosophy "America First", a term that was associated with Pat Buchanan's isolationist and protectionist approach to international affairs. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the details, but suffice it to say that the anti-establishment wing were against committing troops and investments in areas where they thought America had little strategic interest (Keefe, 2018). For instance, they were skeptical of transnational organizations such as NATO, free trade agreements such as NAFTA, and costly military interventions such as the War in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Compared with the anti-establishment wing, McMaster's approach to foreign policy is more in line with established practices in previous administrations (Keefe, 2018). Hence, he repeatedly clashed with the anti-establishment wing led by Bannon. According to news reports about the infighting between McMaster and Bannon, their conflict centered on three issues, namely the war in Syria, the war in Afghanistan, and the Iran nuclear deal. This is not to suggest

that Bannon and McMaster agreed on all other issues, they did not – for instance their approach to Islam was significantly different. But I believe, based on the sources that were privy to their conflict, that their ideological dispute was mainly driven by these three issues.

Their earliest dispute dates back to April 7, 2017 when Trump decided to launch missile strikes in Syria in response to Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens. McMaster advocated the missile strike while Bannon opposed it on the grounds that such a reaction betrays Trump's America First campaign pledge (Sherman, 2017). Donald Trump sided with McMaster who removed Steve Bannon from the National Security Council shortly (Keefe, 2018). This action reportedly provoked Bannon -- his political allies Jack Posobiec, Lee Stranahan, Mike Cernovich, and Alex Jones started an online campaign with the hashtag #FireMcMaster calling for the removal of McMaster in April.

Bannon continued to clash with McMaster on two other foreign policy issues. On the war in Afghanistan, Bannon pushed for a withdrawal of troops while McMaster convinced Donald Trump of committing more troops to help stabilize the region. They reportedly shouted at each other with McMaster calling Bannon "a liar" (Keefe, 2018). On the issue of the Iran nuclear agreement, Bannon wanted a complete withdrawal whereas McMaster successfully dissuaded Trump from completely jettisoning the agreement.³⁷

Even though the power struggle between McMaster and Bannon within the Trump administration was largely driven by ideological differences over Syria, Afghanistan, and the Iran nuclear deal, radical right media did not belabor policy debate or ideological arguments in the fight against McMaster. Instead, they relied on three narratives or themes, namely that McMaster is anti-Trump, that McMaster is anti-Israel, and that McMaster is a globalist, to

³⁷ McMaster also held a more mainstream and moderate view of Islam than Bannon. While Bannon was known for his Islamophobic comments such as "Islam is a religion of submission" (Kaczynski, 2017), McMaster urged Donald Trump to avoid using the phrase of "radical Islamic terrorism" in February 2017.

organize their campaign against McMaster. These three narratives were likely designed to mobilize a broad political coalition against McMaster.

5.2.2 *Three Major Organizing Themes against McMaster*

I used the key word combination “McMaster” AND “National Security Advisor” in Media Cloud to search for relevant articles published by radical right media outlets in my sample between July 21 and August 18, 2017. Then, I filtered out those that weren’t about the controversy involving McMaster’s firings of anti-globalist officials and kept a total of 218 articles published by 36 radical right media sites with metadata such as in-links and out-links. After closely examining the content of these articles, I found three major interrelated themes that helped organize radical right media against McMaster.

The first major organizing theme is that McMaster is a globalist. According to Benkler et al., (2018), the term “globalist” was a veiled reference to a global anti-Semitic conspiracy about Jewish bankers. It was popularized by Breitbart and its then CEO Steve Bannon to denote and denigrate political opponents (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Perhaps the most vilified target of radical right’s anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about rich and powerful Jews working behind the scenes to control the world is George Soros, a billionaire who funded many liberal causes (Welch, 2018). He has been accused by the political right of being Obama’s puppetmaster (Wilson, 2010), paying protesters to harass Republican senators in the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy (Tamkin, 2018), and overthrowing the US government (Brown & Steinblatt, 2017). Radical right media exploited the same trope to attack McMaster. Mike Cernovich, an alt-right political operative known for promoting the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, set up the website McMasterleaks.com (defunct) to fish leaks and opposition research (Gray, 2017). The main page of the website showed a cartoon of the Jewish banking family Rothschilds controlling a George

Soros puppet which in turn controlled a H.R. McMaster puppet. Another example is Breitbart's opposition research on McMaster, which claimed that McMaster worked at a think tank funded by George Soros (Klein, 2017). By tapping into anti-Semitic tropes and associating McMaster with the familiar villain of George Soros, anti-McMaster media sites tried to depict McMaster as a common enemy for the political right.

The second theme focuses on portraying McMaster's firings as subversions of Donald Trump instead of factional infighting within the Trump administration. This includes referring to the officials fired by McMaster as Trump loyalists, implying that McMaster secretly helped Trump's political opponents, and claiming that McMaster's agendas were at odds with Donald Trump. This narrative was likely designed to create a schism between McMaster and Donald Trump. It was also aimed at mobilizing broad support from pro-Trump media such as Infowars whose audience may not be well versed or interested in the minute details of foreign policy debates.

The third major theme is that McMaster is anti-Israel. The power struggle between Bannon and McMaster had nothing to do with America's policy in Israel, but the anti-Israel angle was useful to help Bannon mobilize the powerful hard-right Israeli network he had long cultivated at *Breitbart*. *Breitbart* started out as an unabashedly pro-Israel website with its founder Andrew Breitbart stating that one of its goal is advocacy for Israel in 2012 (Hylton, 2017). Interestingly enough, even though Bannon appropriated the anti-Semitic trope about globalists from far-right sites such as VDARE as a business strategy to attract anti-Semitic readers to *Breitbart* (Mackey, 2016; Benkler et al., 2018), he courted hard-right pro-Israel individuals and groups such as Pamela Geller, David Horowitz, and the Zionist Organization of America (Mackey, 2016; Neiwert, 2016). By pivoting the anti-McMaster campaign on the anti-Israel

angle, Bannon gave the Israeli hard-right network a reason to join his fight against McMaster (Beauchamp, 2017). The Israeli hard-right group Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), which had deep ties to Bannon, published several reports attacking McMaster's position on Israel. And the funder of ZOA Sheldon Adelson, a casino mogul and one of the biggest donors to the GOP, also gave his initial support for Bannon's campaign against McMaster (Beauchamp, 2017).³⁸

5.2.3 *The Two-tier Pattern of Political Organizing*

To understand the scale of the anti-McMaster campaign within the radical right media sphere, I coded each article in terms of its stance on McMaster. For opinion pieces, I coded the article as "negative" if it criticized McMaster or called for his resignation, "positive" if it defended McMaster or criticized those involved in the campaign to oust him, and "neutral" if it included two opposing views about McMaster without having a conclusion of its own. For articles written in the straight news format, I coded the article as "negative" if the materials it used were one-sided and portrayed McMaster in an unfavorable or compromising light. I coded the article as "neutral" if it framed the controversy as a factional fight within the White House or presented materials from both sides. I coded the article as "positive" if it only used materials that praised or supported McMaster. A second coder was trained to code a sample (n=22) and intercoder reliability was established at 0.9. I assigned each negative article, neutral article, and positive article respectively a score of -1, 0, and 1, and aggregated the scores at the media level to represent radical right media's stance on McMaster. I considered sites with an average score above 0 as pro-McMaster sites, those at 0 as neutral sites, and those below 0 as anti-McMaster sites.

³⁸ According to email exchanges between the president of ZOA and Adelson, Adelson gave his support of the anti-McMaster campaign. However, Adelson later disavowed his support.

Figure 5.1 plots each radical right media's stance on McMaster on the X axis and the number of media in-links on the Y axis. The number of media in-links is the count of unique media in-links each radical right media received from other radical right media given all the articles it published on McMaster. I used it as a measure of media influence within the radical right media sphere. Figure 5.2 shows the hyperlink network of radical right media's coverage in the McMaster controversy.

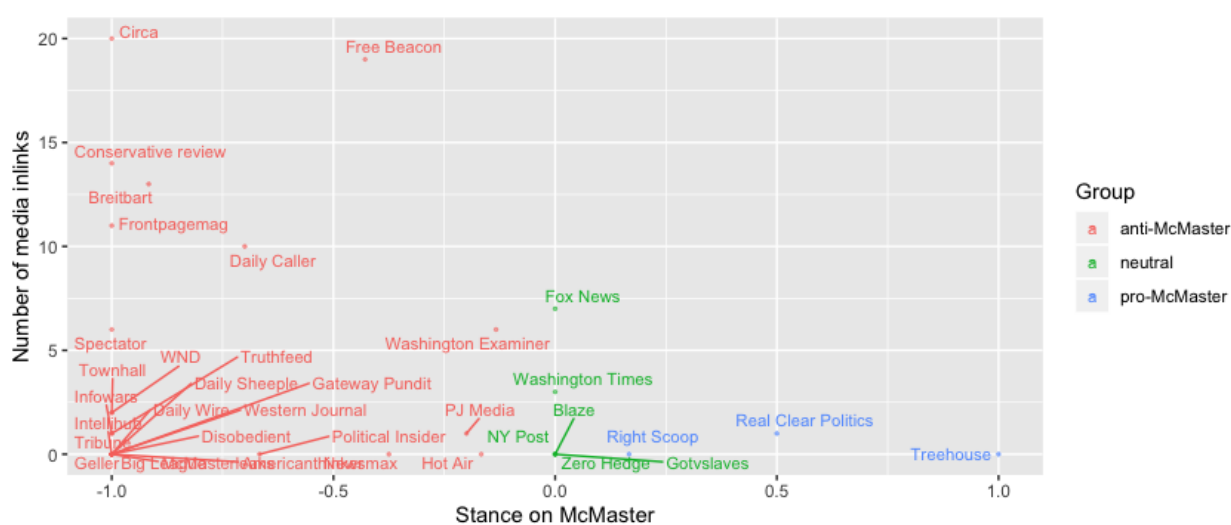


Figure 5.1: Radical right media's stance on McMaster and their influence within the RRMS.

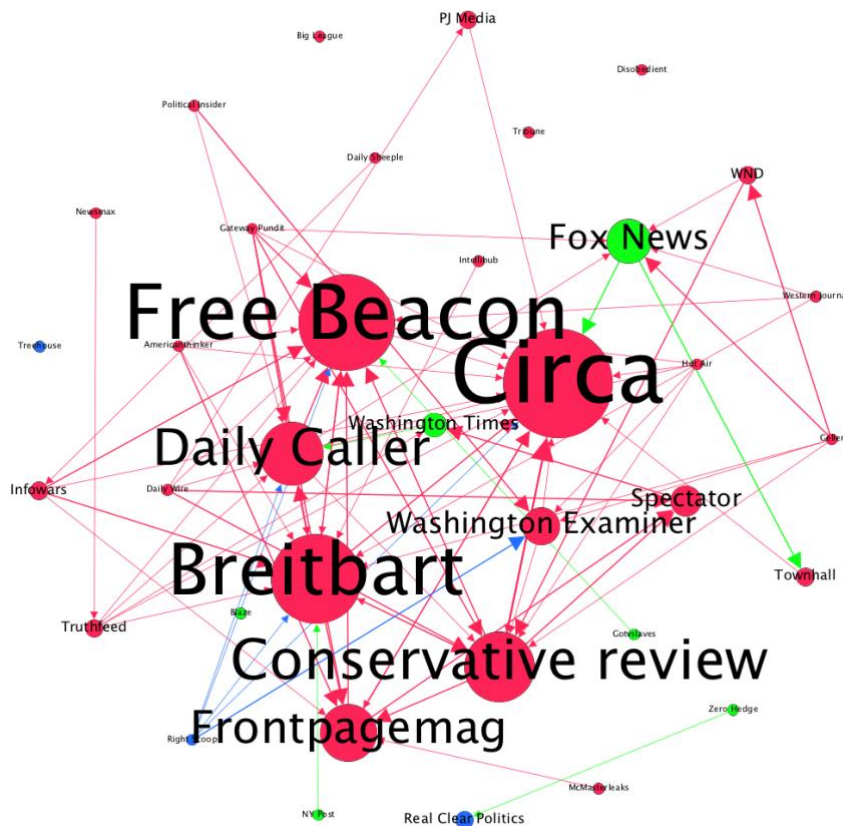


Figure 5.2: Hyperlink network of radical right media's coverage of the McMaster controversy between 7/21/2017 and 8/18/2017 (Nodes represent radical right media sites and edges represent hyperlinks. Anti-McMaster sites were colored in red, neutral sites in green, and pro-McMaster sites in blue. Nodes were sized according to the number of unique media in-links. Arrows indicate the direction of hyperlinks and were colored based on their origin).

Source: Media Cloud.

As Figure 5.1 shows, among the 36 radical right media sites that covered the controversy, twenty-seven were anti-McMaster, three were pro-McMaster, and six were neutral. The top six most influential radical right media sites are all anti-McMaster sites. Their total media in-links ($n=87$) is about three times the number for all 30 other radical right media combined. In Figure

5.1, we can also observe that there is one cluster of six³⁹ high-influence anti-McMaster sites with at least 10 in-links per site – they are the Daily Caller, Frontpage Magazine, Breitbart, Circa, Free Beacon, and Conservative Review; and there is a cluster of 19 low-influence anti-McMaster sites with fewer than 5 in-links per site. This suggests that the organization of the anti-McMaster campaign within RRMS (Radical Right Media Sphere) was likely structured in two tiers with distinct roles of political organizing for each tier. The hyperlink network in Figure 5.2 shows two more interesting patterns. First, the first tier anti-McMaster sites only sent out a small number of links, and the links they sent out were all towards other first tier sites. Second, the second tier anti-McMaster sites received very few links and sent many links to first tier sites.

To further understand the different organizing roles of these two tiers of anti-McMaster radical right media, I coded each anti-McMaster article in terms of whether it relied on other media sources⁴⁰ to get information or access other sources. I found that all six first tier anti-McMaster sites had first-hand access to non-media sources such as right-wing politicians and right-wing NGOs. Yet, among the 19 second tier anti-McMaster sites, 13 depended entirely on other media sources (primarily first tier anti-McMaster sites) to get information or access other sources⁴¹ in all of their anti-McMaster articles. The remaining six second tier anti-McMaster sites had access to non-media sources, but they also promoted the articles produced by first tier anti-McMaster sites.

These findings suggest that a great deal of information resources were mobilized at the first tier by radical right media sites that built original reporting on non-media sources, and these

³⁹ The six media outlets are Daily Caller, Breitbart, Free Beacon, Conservative Review, and Frontpage Magazine.

⁴⁰ By media sources, I mean media organizations that provide news coverage or commentary. They include right leaning media, left leaning media, and mainstream media.

⁴¹ For the other second tier anti-McMaster sites, their immediate sources mixed media sites, NGOs, political operatives, and officials inside the White House.

resources were then passed on to the second tier. This two-tier pattern with attention flowing from six leading sites to other sites is less centralized than the case of Seth Rich conspiracy theory in which resources were mobilized at Fox News and then distributed to the rest of the RRMS. After closely examining the content of all 218 articles, I found that the first tier anti-McMaster sites engaged in two main organizing activities, namely coordinating leaks from within the White House and mobilizing outside political groups.

5.2.4 *Coordinating Leaks from Within the White House*

In the aftermath of H.R. McMaster’s firing of the third NSC official Cohen-Watnick on August 2, multiple anonymous sources inside the White House leaked damaging information about McMaster to five leading anti-McMaster media outlets, depicting McMaster as an anti-Trump official. Table 5.1 lists the top five most linked stories within the radical right media sphere. All of them cited compromising information about McMaster.

Table 5.1: Most Linked Stories Published by Radical Right Media

Title	Date	Media	Source	Selected quotes from anonymous sources
A letter from H.R. McMaster said Susan Rice will keep her top-secret security clearance.	8/3/17	Circa.com	Anonymous “White House officials” including “a senior West Wing official” and “an intelligence official”.	“Basically, this letter which was signed in the last week of April undercuts the president’s assertion that Susan Rice’s unmasking activity was inappropriate”
McMaster has “list” of White House officials he plans to fire. They’re all key Trump allies.	8/3/17	Freebeacon.com	More than six anonymous “Trump administration insiders”.	“McMaster’s agenda is different than the president’s”; “He’s purging the people who came up with Trump and are genuinely loyal to him”; “they’re taking out people who were chosen to best implement the president’s policy”
NSC Purge: McMaster “deeply hostile to Israel and to Trump”	8/3/17	Breitbart.com	Caroline Glick who cited anonymous “senior officials”.	No direct quotes.
Exclusive: Trump loyalist Ezra Cohen-Watnick fired from national security council, sources say	8/2/17	Conservativereview.com	Two anonymous “senior administration officials who are not authorized to discuss	No direct quotes.

			personnel matters”.	
Exclusive: Everything the President wants to do, McMaster opposes, former NSC official says	8/3/17	Dailycaller.com	Two anonymous “senior NSC officials”; BuzzFeed, Politico, The Atlantic, and The Weekly Standard.	“Everything the president wants to do, McMaster opposes”; “I know that the president isn’t a big fan of what McMaster’s doing ... I don’t understand why he’s allowing a guy who is subverting his foreign policy at every turn to remain in place”

(Source: Media Cloud)

As Table 5.1 shows, one day after the firing of Cohen-Watnick, five reports emerged in five first tier anti-McMaster outlets all citing very similar talking points from anonymous sources that McMaster was against Donald Trump. There is clear evidence that the most linked story, namely *Circa*’s “A letter from H.R. McMaster said Susan Rice will keep her top-secret security clearance”, is a product of active coordination between *Circa* and Cohen-Watnick, the disgruntled anti-establishment official who was just fired by McMaster (Warren, 2017). After being fired, Cohen-Watnick reportedly leaked to *Circa* a pro forma letter that McMaster sent to Obama’s national security adviser Susan Rice notifying her of the extension of her security clearance, implying that McMaster gave Trump’s political opponent unfettered access to classified information(Warren, 2017).⁴² This misleading story became the major evidence in support of the narrative that McMaster was anti-Trump, and later circulated to more than 20 radical right media sites.

The other four top stories exhibited the same pattern of radical right media relying on one-sided talking points and citing anonymous sources inside the White House to paint McMaster as an anti-Trump official. Based on the titles of these articles, we can observe that all these stories strategically framed the officials fired by McMaster as Trump loyalists instead of Bannon’s allies. By coordinating with McMaster’s opponents in the White House and fashioning

⁴² Susan Rice was considered by Donald Trump as a political opponent that sought to undermine him through unmasking identities of his associates in a surveillance program by US intelligence agencies.

leaks and their talking points into propaganda pieces that simulated straight news format, Breitbart, Conservative Review, Circa, Free Beacon, and Daily Caller functioned as a de facto mouthpiece for the anti-establishment faction within the White House.

5.2.5 *Mobilizing Outside Political Groups*

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, some radical right media sites such as Breitbart had deep ties with right-wing political groups including think tanks, political foundations, and lobbying groups. Apart from coordinating with the anti-establishment wing within the White House, the first tier anti-McMaster sites also mobilized a broader effort against McMaster by joining forces with these groups. Breitbart, in particular, provided a platform for at least five right-wing political groups to publish their anti-McMaster research materials and talking points. Table 5.2 lists the selected quotes by seven political groups that were cited by radical right media in my sample and the major funders of these political groups.

Table 5.2: Right-wing Political Groups Cited by Radical Right Media

Right-wing political groups	Selected quotes	Major funders
Americans for Limited Government	<p>“If the president does not take some action against McMaster, given everything that’s come out, then the president owns everything that he is doing.” (Richard Manning on freebeacon.com)</p> <p>“it is incumbent upon President Trump to remove the National Security Adviser from office.” (Richard Manning on Foxnews.com)</p>	Howard Rich, Koch-founded Donor Trust,
Center for Security Policy	<p>“Want to drain the Swamp, Mr. President? Start with McMaster.” (Christopher Hull on the Daily Caller)</p> <p>“If McMaster isn’t fired after all that he has done and all that he will do, we’re going to have to reconsider Trump’s foreign policy.” (Caroline Glick on Breitbart)</p> <p>“President Trump must treat such incompetence as a firing offense” (Frank Gaffney on Breitbart)</p>	The Scaife Foundation, the Bradley Foundation, Becker foundations and Charitable Trust, Fairbrook Foundation, William Rosenwald Fund, Middle Road Foundation, and Abstraction Fund, Alan and Hope Winters Family Foundation
Zionist Organization of American	<p>“National security advisor McMaster opposes Trump’s anti-Iran, pro-Israel, radical-Islamist-terrorism-fighting policies; he should be reassigned to a position unrelated to these vital issues” (ZOA report on Breitbart)</p>	Sheldon Adelson, Becker foundations and Charitable Trust
Freedom Center	<p>“The National Security Council is becoming a national security threat.” (Daniel Greenfield on frontpagemag.com)</p>	The Olin Foundation, the Bradley Foundation, the Scaife Foundation, Becker foundations and Charitable Trust, Fairbrook Foundation, William Rosenwald Fund, Middle Road Foundation, and Abstraction

		Fund.
Investigative Project on Terrorism	[McMaster's refusal to] "condemn radical Islamic terrorism by name is a threat to our national security." (Steve Emerson on Breitbart)	The Bradley Foundation, Richard Mellon Scaife, Becker foundations and Charitable Trust, Fairbrook foundation, William Rosenwald Fund, Middle Road Foundation, and Abstraction Fund.
Gatestone Institute	"... the president would do well to re-examine whether his national security advisor is serving either his interest or those of the United States." (Wnd.com)	Robert and Rebekah Mercer
Secure America Now	"You have a situation where the president's policies are not being put forth by the national security adviser." (Allen Roth on Breitbart)	Robert Mercer, Brad Anderson, Richard Schulze, and Ronald Lauder.
Act!ForAmerica	"It is very clear that McMaster is on a completely different track than what President Trump promised the American public." (Brigitte Gabriel on Breitbart)	Fairbrook Foundation, Becker foundations and Charitable Trust, Alan and Hope Winters Family Foundation.

Due to limited space, it's impossible to fit all the anti-McMaster materials provided by these various political groups in one table. Suffice it to say that they range from the Zionist Organization of America's three-thousand-word report to a few punchy quotes by Brigitte Gabriel from Act!ForAmerica. Unlike the White House sources who attacked McMaster behind the veil of anonymity, these "outside" political groups publicly pressured, if not overtly threatened, Donald Trump to fire McMaster.

These groups had significant influence in American right-wing politics (MacLean, 2017; Mayer, 2017b; Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). Funded by powerful donors such as the Mercer family, the Koch brothers and the Scaife family, they held significant sway over Donald Trump's political appointment and policy initiatives. For instance, Michael Flynn, McMaster's predecessor, was a former board member of the anti-Muslim hate group Act!ForAmerica; John Bolton, McMaster's successor, was a former chairman of the think tank Gatestone Institute and a board member of Secure America Now (Tazamal, 2018); and Sheldon Adelson, the major funder of the Zionist Organization of America and the biggest donor to Trump's inauguration, pushed Donald Trump to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem (Peters, 2018).

The appointment of H.R. McMaster, who was recommended by establishment GOP politicians such as John McCain (Baker & Gordon, 2017), frustrated many anti-Islam groups,

Jewish hard-right groups, and the anti-establishment groups. Radical right media offered these groups important publicity to stake out their opposition and exert pressure on Donald Trump. Even though the funders of some of these political groups had direct contact with President Trump -- Sheldon Adelson, for instance, had regular in-person meetings and phone conversations with the president (Peters, 2018), publicity became an important way to exert influence when behind closed doors influence peddling failed to work.

Moreover, radical right media also played an important role in connecting various political groups into an emergent anti-McMaster network. Previous literature suggests that there were various networking events for various right-wing political groups and power brokers to coordinate and strategize (Mayer, 2017a). However, in the immediate wake of McMaster's consecutive firings that warranted a quick response, coordinating offline to identify political allies and strategize actions was not feasible. Radical right media served as a central point of connection where communication flows that linked in and out of these various groups helped them identify each other, synthesize their anti-McMaster research materials and talking points, and display a broad political coalition against McMaster.

5.2.6 *Increasing the Reach of Message*

By linking to the first-tier sites, the nineteen second tier anti-McMaster sites increased the potential exposure of their anti-McMaster messages. While the leading anti-McMaster sites mobilized resources from both within and outside the White House, the second tier, which included many resource-poor organizations such as Infowars, Gateway Pundit, and Western Journal, increased the potential reach of anti-McMaster messages. Based on SimilarWeb's web traffic data in 2017, I found that the six first tier anti-McMaster sites had a total of 87,485,000 monthly visits with an average of 14,580,833 per site. The 19 second tier anti-McMaster sites

had a total of 98,144,000 monthly visits with an average of 5,165,473 per site. The strength and usefulness of the second-tier sites lie in their group size. Even though they had much smaller web traffic on average, they were a much bigger group. They helped more than double the potential exposure of anti-McMaster messages by linking to six first tier sites.

The above analyses suggest that radical right media sites played different roles in the anti-McMaster campaign. Those that had access to the White House helped channel messages from McMaster's political opponents, those that had connections to outside political groups helped mobilize a broad coalition against McMaster, and those that may lack these resources helped increase the potential reach of anti-McMaster messages.

5.3 REACTING TO PRESIDENT TRUMP'S INTERVENTION

Donald Trump's intervention did little to quell radical right media's anti-McMaster campaign. The number of anti-McMaster articles actually increased after Trump's announcement of support for McMaster on August 3. During the 14 days between 7/21 and 8/3, radical right media published a total of 47 articles to attack McMaster. During the following 14 days, they published 72 anti-McMaster articles. Among the 27 anti-McMaster media outlets, six started attacking McMaster only after Trump's intervention, 15 sites that initially attacked McMaster continued their attacks, and six stopped attacking McMaster after Trump's intervention.

The majority of anti-McMaster sites did not cover Trump's announcement of support for McMaster, two denied the authenticity of Trump's announcement, and six criticized Trump. None that initially attacked McMaster switched their stance after Trump's intervention. Here are a few examples of radical right media's criticism of Trump: Conservative Review called Trump's defense of McMaster indefensible (Horowitz, 2017), Free Beacon cited a right-wing think tank claiming that Trump will have to suffer consequences if he continues to support

McMaster (Crabtree, 2017), American Thinker called Trump's loyalty to McMaster misplaced (Sobieski, 2017), and Breitbart criticized Trump for defying his base (Shaw, 2017).

5.4 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I've illustrated the third political organizing mechanism within the radical right media sphere, namely ideologically contested political organizing. Compared with the previous two organizing mechanisms, namely media cued and politician cued political organizing, ideologically contested political organizing highlights the internal ideological struggle among various right-wing factions as another fundamental feature of the political logic of the radical right media sphere. In other words, besides external threats that endangered common partisan goals on the political right, ideological contestation among various right-wing factions can also activate radical right media as emerging organization networks.

Moreover, ideologically contested political organizing foregrounds the political agency of radical right media. It shows that radical right media were not simply a political tool that came to the rescue of prominent GOP politicians when they were in trouble. Rather, they sought to actively influence the Trump administration with their own agendas, even if such agendas clashed with the interest of President Trump. In the McMaster controversy, radical right media did not passively index the range of views and voices among different right-wing factions. Nor did they follow Trump's stance on this matter. Rather, they coordinated with McMaster's political opponents inside the White House, amplified the voices of outside political groups that also opposed McMaster, and mobilized a majority of the radical right media sphere to spread anti-McMaster narratives in open defiance of President Donald Trump.

I should note that ideologically contested political organizing events within the radical right media sphere may entail a certain degree of media cueing and politician cueing behavior.

As seen in the McMaster controversy, behind the veil of anonymity McMaster's political opponents within the White House secretly passed their cues to the first tier of radical right media, which later packaged and distributed these cues along with other materials further to the second tier. This worked differently than the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy where prominent Republican officials provided their cues publicly which every radical right media can directly access. It also worked differently than the Seth Rich conspiracy theory where Fox News concocted and distributed its own disinformation narrative to the rest of the radical right media sphere.

By far, I have illustrated three organizing mechanisms in the radical right media sphere, namely media cued political organizing, politician cued political organizing, and ideologically contested political organizing. They reveal the ways in which a majority of radical right media were activated to form emerging political organization networks in pursuit of tangible political goals under different political circumstances. These three types of mechanisms emerged inductively from my case studies, which means that there are probably other types. But I believe that they provide a relatively comprehensive view of the complexity, contingency, and fluidity of the political logic of radical right media sphere. This strategic information system is not simply a propaganda network that passively pass down cues from Republican elites. Rather, they can invent political solutions to help party/leaders solve their problems or even shape party/leaders' agendas by exploiting divisions among Republican elites. A lingering question is what does the radical right media sphere mean for American democracy? The next chapter concludes this dissertation by discussing four popular misunderstandings about radical right media and assessing their impact on democracy in the U.S.

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION: RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

In this dissertation, I've drawn attention to an important aspect of major radical right media in the U.S., namely their ability to mobilize and organize in pursuit of tangible political goals at strategic moments. This political mobilizing logic, which oftentimes entails weaponizing strategic falsehoods to mislead and confuse publics, sets them apart from most news organizations. It challenges our conventional understanding of right-wing media as partisan news organizations and demands a new theoretical framework to think about radical right media.

I propose that we think about radical right media as hybrid organizations in political organizational terms. This means that we should consider their primary activity, namely information production, as a mobilizing vehicle to deliver political results rather than a journalistic practice to inform the citizenry. Although many radical right media claim to be news organizations, they've repeatedly violated basic journalistic norms and produced (dis)information to punish political opponents and protect political allies. Moreover, considering radical right media in political organizational terms also means that we should look beyond the modus operandi of information production and pay attention to their hybrid organizational repertoires that often went under the radar. For instance, radical right media have pursued political goals not by producing information but by first catching information and then withholding it from the public eye. This is commonly known as the "catch and kill" tactic.

Besides catching and killing stories, they also brokered opposition research, rented out email lists to political campaigns, and organized offline protests.⁴³

An even stronger support for why radical right media should be considered in political organizational terms is that many of them were bought and funded by right-wing power brokers such as the Mercer family and the Koch brothers. These power brokers are political activists – they operated in many brick and mortar political organizations such as campaign organizations, think tanks, and grassroots agitation groups to advance their partisan agendas. Supporting and influencing radical right media has been part of their strategy to assist these efforts. As Chapter 2 shows, radical right media interacted with these right-wing political organizations in many important ways to assist their political organizing work.

Compared with brick and mortar right-wing political organizations,⁴⁴ radical right media boast the unique power to quickly reach millions of people in online networks. Through the low-cost networked practices of hyperlinking, reposting, and remixing in the online environment, a political narrative can spread widely and rapidly across radical right media networks. This network feature made radical right media especially well-suited to engage in the kind of political organizing work that demands a quick response to an emerging political threat. We have seen that at times of political crises radical right media quickly formed amplification networks to distract public attention, protect political allies, or defeat political opponents. Hence, in this dissertation I have also argued that radical right media networks should be considered as emerging organization networks that can parallel the activities of conventional political

⁴³ For instance, Fox News host Glenn Beck launched his 9-12 project, which included organizing group gatherings and protests to disrupt town hall meetings. For instance, Fox News host Glenn Beck launched his 9-12 project, which included organizing group gatherings and protests to disrupt town hall meetings.

⁴⁴ To exploit the organizational fluidity of media networks, many formal right-wing political organizations set up their own online media arms. For instance, the think tank Heritage Foundation founded townhall.com in 1995 and launched dailysignal.com in 2014.

organizations in terms of mobilizing resources, coordinating relations, and matching action to political goals.

From Chapter 3 to Chapter 5, I focused on the question of what drives the formation of organization networks within the radical right media sphere. By closely examining how radical right media responded to different political threats in the case of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory, the Kavanaugh-Ford controversy, and the anti-McMaster campaign, I showed that different radical right media can form strategic amplification networks around a top radical right media that commanded attention, prominent Republican politicians that responded to political threat with a coherent strategy, or an ideological faction within the GOP. These three chapters taken together foreground the importance of Fox News, prominent Republican politicians, and ideological differences on the political right in driving the formation of radical right media amplification networks, and show that these networks were fluid enough to adapt to different kinds of political situations.

In the following sections, I'll summarize four popular views about radical right media that are tied to my later discussion about their impact on democracy. These four views seep into much of academic and popular writings, and underlie publics' behavior towards radical right media. Despite their popularity and to a certain extent their usefulness in addressing some aspects of radical right media, I argue that they should be better qualified.

6.1 VIEW 1: RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA ARE NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

The first popular view regards radical right media in the U.S. as simply news organizations. There are of course different models of journalism, and journalism itself as a historical and social construct is subject to change. Nevertheless, radical right media have often been referred to -- in the current U.S. context -- as partisan news organizations, a subcategory of news organizations

that also include venerable conservative publications such as National Review and left-wing media outlets such as MSNBC. Fox News, for instance, has been compared to MSNBC in the same analytical framework of partisan media by many scholars (Groeling & Baum, 2013; Levendusky, 2013b, 2013c). However, a purely journalistic organization should at least abide by basic journalistic norms. As the American journalism historian Michael Schudson argued, reporting facts has become the center of journalism in America since the 1820s (Schudson, 2018). The pursuit of accuracy, presentation of evidence, use of reliable sources, and adherence to facticity are basic journalistic norms. A partisan news organization should adhere to these norms and practices.

However, as I've documented in this dissertation, many radical right media repeatedly violated these norms. Their transgressions include making up stories, fabricating sources, and manufacturing evidence. Such actions complicate the simplistic view that radical right media are simply news organizations. I've argued that we should instead view radical right media as hybrid organizations that can activate as political organizations. On the face of it, radical right media have the organizational trappings of a news organization as opposed to a political organization -- they hire anchors instead of campaigners and they pursue ad revenue instead of membership fees. Yet, for radical right media, anchors can also campaign with politicians -- for instance, Fox News anchors Jeanine Pirro and Sean Hannity campaigned for Donald Trump in a rally in 2018; radical right media can also diversify their revenue streams by working directly for politicians -- for example, WND, NewsMax, and Washington Times were all paid to do online voter contact work for the Trump campaign in 2018.

Yet, the popular view of radical right media as news organizations continues to persist in academia. In the 2019 book "News on the right: Studying conservative news cultures", Nadler

and Bauer lumped together Breitbart and the venerable publication National Review under the same study of conservative news culture. Treating radical right media as partisan news organizations, Nadler and Bauer (2019)'s study focused on four exclusively news related areas such as news production and news consumption, thereby ignoring radical right media' strategic political activities that are not journalistic practices. There is little doubt that the cultural aspect of radical right media is an important one, but scholars should be careful about assuming the difference between radical right media and mainstream media as primarily about news culture. After all, making up stories or fabricating sources is not just another way of doing journalism in a different news culture.

The question of whether radical right media are news organizations is not just an intellectual exercise. The rise of radical right media was fueled by powerful social media platforms, which during the 2016 presidential election largely treated the content from radical right media as no different from legitimate news organizations. According to the investigative reporter Lee Fang, both Western Journal and Conservative Tribune were certified as news providers by Facebook in 2016 (Fang, 2016). This allowed radical right media to reach millions of social media users, spread disinformation, and reap immense profits from social media traffic.

To its credit, Facebook has put in place several initiatives to fight misinformation since 2017, which resulted in declining web traffic for some radical right media. Nevertheless, to the detriment of such efforts, it continued to problematically label popular radical right media as news organizations. In October 2019, Facebook launched a news section on its flagship mobile app to combat the spread of misinformation. This news section was supposedly designed to help promote high quality journalism by featuring news articles from 200 selected news organizations. Facebook also promised to pay these news organizations between \$1 million to \$3

million for featuring their articles every year (Julia, 2019). However, Breitbart, one of the most prominent purveyors of politically-motivated misinformation in the U.S., was on Facebook's list of conservative news organizations. When questioned by the New York Times journalist Marc Tracy about this decision, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg defended it by saying that Facebook needs to include a diversity of views and represents different perspectives (Newton, 2019).

If social media companies continue to treat radical right media as news organizations, then radical right media will continue to be able to spread disinformation to millions of social media users. Yet, arguing from a position to promote a free market of ideas, Mark Zuckerberg based his defense on the notion that a conservative viewpoint should be included in the public discourse. It is true that both conservative and liberal voices are important for an inclusive and well-functioning democratic public sphere. But to what extent do radical right media actually provide a conservative perspective?

6.2 VIEW 2: RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA ADVOCATE A CONSERVATIVE VIEW

As I showed in Chapter 5, 24% of radical right media in my sample defied the traditional liberal vs. conservative cleavage in their self-description and positioned themselves as anti-establishment media. For those that still prefer the "conservative" label, the values they promoted do not necessarily reflect Reagan conservatism that used to be the hallmark of mainstream American conservatism. For instance, many Fox News hosts abandoned traditional Reagan conservatives' positions on immigration and foreign policy and instead promoted what used to be fringe right-wing ideologies such as islamophobia, white nationalism, racism, and isolationism. One may justifiably argue that within the radical right media sphere there is a certain level of continuity in a few signature conservative themes such as abortion and free

markets, but there is little doubt that the very meaning of conservatism is being contested by various radical right media and right-wing political groups. The ideological conflict between the anti-globalist wing and the establishment wing within the Trump administration, as I illustrated in Chapter 5, is just one of many examples of various political factions competing to define what conservatism means during the Trump era.

It is true that the meaning of conservatism constantly evolves as multiple social groups compete to define what conservatism is (Gross, Medvetz, & Russell, 2011). Historically, there were periods of consolidation when different political factions reached a consensus on the core principles of conservatism; there were also periods of contestation when various groups struggled over who got to define what conservatism is. During periods of contestation such as the one we're experiencing now, there is a danger that the label of conservatism, which was historically bestowed with political legitimacy, was used as euphemism for hate speech against racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. Social media platforms should be especially cognizant of this danger and stop justifying the inclusion of media outlets such as Breitbart as simply promoting conservative viewpoints.

6.3 VIEW 3: RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA ARE IDEOLOGICALLY HOMOGENOUS OR SEAMLESSLY COORDINATED

The third popular view posits that radical right media are ideologically homogenous or seamlessly coordinated. This view not only underpins the partisan media literature that regards most right-wing media as conservative media but also drives the more recent literature on online propaganda that focuses on large-scale politically motivated disinformation flows. For both literatures, the repetition and amplification of (dis)information flows among various right-wing

media is driven by either a shared commitment to conservative principles or a shared strategic goal such as defeating political opponents or protecting political allies.

As I mentioned before, the radical right media sphere is no longer anchored in a coherent ideology that used to bind dissimilar right-wing media together. In the many years that proceeded 2008 when Jamieson and Cappella published their book *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*, it was Reagan conservatism that gave various right-wing media ideological coherence. There were, of course, right-wing sites that subscribed to alternative ideologies. But these sites were at the fringe. However, many far-right sites have taken center stage in the right-wing media ecosystem since 2015; and Fox News, the leading right-wing media that used to echo mainstream conservative principles, has drifted to the far right on issues such as immigration during the same period (Benkler et al., 2018). My case study of the anti-McMaster campaign also shows the important role of anti-establishment sites in driving networked (dis)information flows within the radical right media sphere.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, there were also significant political fault lines around issues such as gay rights and immigration among the different owners and funders of radical right media. Their strategic goals and political objectives do not always align with each other. For instance, when Mercer-backed Breitbart was promoting candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 Republican primaries, the Singer-backed Washington Free Beacon hired the opposition research firm Fusion GPS to dig dirt on him. The split among radical right media extends beyond the backing of different political candidates during elections. In the year of 2020 alone, Trump's impeachment, the killing of the Iranian general Qassim Soleimani, and the corona virus outbreak in the U.S., all sparked opposite reactions not only among different radical right media outlets but also sometimes even within the same media outlet (Ellison, 2019; Epstein, 2020; Shephard,

2020). The radical right media sphere is by no means always seamlessly coordinated. As old political fault lines disappear and new partisan schisms emerge, different radical right media are in a constant state of aligning and realigning themselves with each other.

6.4 VIEW 4: RADICAL RIGHT MEDIA ARE PRESIDENT TRUMP'S PROPAGANDA ARM

The fourth popular view is that radical right media are propagandist organizations for President Donald Trump or the Trump administration. The view was advanced first and foremost by Benkler et al. (2018)'s acclaimed book *Network Propaganda*, and widely shared in academia. To be fair, it has two merits. First, it recognizes that radical right media's strategic communication activities are qualitatively different from journalism. Journalism respects individuals' autonomy by providing factual information for citizens to engage in reflection and deliberation. Propaganda, as a form of "communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with political goals of the propagandist" (Benkler et al., 2018, p.29), violates it. It is designed to move audiences to a position that they would not otherwise have reached if they were fully aware of the intent and techniques of the propagandist. Second, it also avoids the pitfall of the second popular view. Seeing radical right media as propagandist organizations draws attention to their political goals without the misleading presumption that these goals must reflect ideological principles.

However, the problem with this view is that it oversimplifies the symbiotic relationship between radical right media and the current administration as one-directional with the former serving the interests of the latter. There is little doubt that radical right media often echoed and amplified Donald Trump's talking points. Nevertheless, claiming that radical right media only

operate in Donald Trump's interest and serve as his propaganda machine ignores their influence on the U.S. President to pursue their own far-right agendas. Radical right media are located within a broader political network promoting far right politics long before Donald Trump's ascension to power. Both the radical right media sphere and the political network it is tied to are much bigger than the current administration and have successfully influenced Donald Trump since he took office.

Take the Koch network for instance. Despite its dispute with Trump over trade and immigration, the Koch network has significantly tilted the Trump administration's policies and legislative agendas in its favor. Trump worked with many Kochs-backed Republican politicians in Congress. And many high rank officials within his inner circle had deep ties to the Koch network. Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos have all either received donations from or contributed to the Koch network (Frost & Merelli, 2019). According to political scientist Theda Skocpol, the Koch brothers got 85% of their agendas done out of the Trump presidency, which included appointing free-market judges, loosening environmental regulation, cutting taxes for corporations, and weakening unions (Edsall, 2018).

Many radical right media owners and personalities also held significant sway over President Trump. The Fox News host Sean Hannity, for instance, was known as Trump's "shadow" chief of staff (Rich, 2018). He regularly advised the president on policy making and messaging. So did Rush Limbaugh, Matt Drudge, and Rupert Murdoch (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019; Savransky, 2017; Waldman, 2020). A good example to show how radical right media successfully pressured Donald Trump is the 2018-2019 US federal government shutdown. In late December 2018, President Trump refused to back off from his demand for boarder wall funding,

which resulted in a 35-day shutdown of the federal government, the longest government shutdown in the U.S. history. As a matter of fact, Donald Trump was initially going to sign the appropriation bill without wall funding, which had already been passed unanimously by the Republican-controlled Senate (Klein, 2018). Yet, after the news came out that Trump planned to sign the bill, Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and several Fox News hosts offered blistering criticism of his plan, calling it “a retreat”, “less than nothing”, or “a joke” (Darcy, 2019; Klein, 2018). As a consequence, Trump reversed his initial position and eventually decided to shut down the government (Johnson & Everett, 2018).

Both radical right media and President Trump stood to gain from their mutual relationship. While radical right media can provide an important channel for Donald Trump to reach millions of his potential supporters, Trump can use his popularity and the office of the US presidency to help boost radical right media’s ratings and accomplish their partisan agenda. However, this does not mean that they always supported each other or reinforced each other’s positions. There were times when their interests clashed. As I showed in Chapter 5, many radical right media tried to oust Trump’s national security advisor H.R. McMaster in 2017. When Donald Trump defended McMaster, they criticized him and continued to spread disinformation about his national security advisor.

The fact that radical right media have promoted agendas beyond Donald Trump suggests that their influence on American politics will persist for a long time. The next U.S. president might be a more serious politician who spends less time watching Fox News. But radical right media will in all likelihood continue to command a sizable audience that vote for the GOP, continue to try to influence Republican politicians with their radical agendas, continue to engage in attacks on climate science, and continue to spread disinformation about their political

opponents. I believe these actions have long-lasting impact on the viability of democracy in America. Hence, I conclude my dissertation by reflecting on their implications for American democracy.

On the surface, radical right media's political activities may strike as playing hardball politics. They may be even portrayed as efforts to invigorate democracy by using emotional and colorful language to engage GOP voters. Yet, I argue that radical right media's strategic use of disinformation, their extremist language to describe political opponents, and their attacks on democratic institutions can destabilize and erode American democracy in the long term. These actions diminish the role of facts that is necessary for democratic self-governance, undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions, and violate the norms and spirit of democracy.

6.5 DIMINISHING THE ROLE OF FACTS IN DEMOCRACY

Radical right media's strategic use of disinformation weakens democracy by diminishing the role of facts in democratic self-governance. A viable democracy depends on a well-informed citizenry to learn about the political reality, arrive at reasonable judgements about public affairs, and take political actions based on these judgements. Facts are essential for people to carry out sensible political discussions, evaluate political candidates, and hold elected officials accountable. When citizens evaluate political candidates based on factually dubious information, they are likely to elect incompetent, demagoguery, or even authoritarian leaders. When citizens cannot access factual information to hold elected officials accountable, democracy becomes vulnerable to the abuse of power and corruption in government. In short, a misinformed citizenry is prone to producing bad government.

Yet, the assault on facts can also erode democracy by simply creating chaos and confusion among citizens. To weaken democracy, anti-democratic forces don't have to convince

a majority of citizens that voting for an authoritarian leader is in their best interest. As history shows, oftentimes they only need to create enough confusion among voters or produce enough chaos in society to make citizens so doubtful and government so dysfunctional that electing a demagoguery strongman becomes inevitable to restore social order and bring back a sense of belonging. As Hannah Arendt argued in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “the ideal subjects of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” (Arendt, 1951, p.474) The distinction between lying and telling the truth does not matter for citizens who believe that all politicians lie. This means that there is little cost for a politician to be found lying as long as he or she can speak the “emotional truth” that makes voters feel good. This is not to say that most U.S. citizens no long think facts are important. But a concerning trend in the U.S. is that correcting false statements made by politicians, despite reducing people’s belief in the misinformation, has no effects on candidate evaluations or vote choice (Nyhan, Porter, Reifler, & Wood, 2019; Swire-Thompson, Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Brinsky, 2020). In other words, the value of truth decays in voters’ political decisions -- voters do not change their feelings or attitudes towards their preferred politicians even when they are found lying.

An equally dire consequence of the effect of the diminishing role of facts, which RAND refers to as “truth decay” (Kavanaugh & Rich, 2019), is the erosion of confidence in the democratic process. The spread of falsehoods does not only affect those that are receptive to factually dubious information. Citizens who are not influenced by falsehoods may become less committed to the overall democratic process if they believe that the election outcome is unfairly driven by prevalent false beliefs among a large number of voters who fall prey to foreign

propaganda and domestic disinformation campaigns. The 2016 U.S. presidential election, for instance, was plagued by wide-spread foreign and domestic propaganda to help elect Donald Trump. While the majority of Americans have not yet come to question the integrity of that election,⁴⁵ a Harvard-Harris poll shows 68% of voters didn't believe that Democrats accepted Trump as a legitimate president in 2017 (Easley, 2017). This popular perception of Democrats rejecting the 2016 election result is not entirely baseless. Nearly 70 Democratic lawmakers refused to attend Trump's inauguration ceremony in 2017, and several leading or former democratic politicians such as Hillary Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and John Lewis openly called President Trump illegitimate.⁴⁶ Democrats' rejection of President Trump in 2017 was of course based on several grounds, but Russia's disinformation campaigns amplified by many radical right media that tilted the 2016 election in Trump's favor remained as a crucial factor (Foran, 2017; Jamieson, 2018; Viebeck, 2017).

6.6 UNDERMINING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

What is perhaps equally concerning is the fact that radical right media also attacked many democratic institutions. Democratic institutions, which include both organizations such as the press, political parties, and the courts, and rules or formal mechanisms such as the Constitution, are formal political arrangements. Each performs a unique role for democracy to function. For instance, the Constitution stipulates the rules, the courts interpret the rules, law enforcement agencies enforce the rules, and the press serves as a watchdog over the government. As the

⁴⁵ A Gallup poll shows that 84% of Americans and 76% of Democrats considered the election result as legitimate in 2016 (Jones, 2016).

⁴⁶ Democrats' rejection of President Trump was based on several grounds in 2017, but Russia's disinformation campaigns that were amplified by many radical right media remained as a crucial factor (Foran, 2017; Viebeck, 2017).

foundations of a healthy democracy, these institutions need to be protected, supported, improved, and strengthened.

Yet, since Donald Trump took office, radical right media often attacked these democratic institutions, portraying them as subversive forces seeking to undercut the Trump administration. Their targets include major democratic institutions that provided important check on President Trump's power, namely the press, law enforcement agencies, the intelligence community, and the courts. Major news organizations have been under constant attack by radical right media since Trump took office. They were called "fake news", "the lying press", "foreign propaganda", or even "the enemy of the people". In an election rally in Cape Girardeau in 2018, Fox News host Sean Hannity appeared on the stage with President Trump, pointed at journalists in the back, and told the roaring audience that "all those people in the back are fake news" (I. Stanley-Becker, 2018). Some radical right media even associated the press with foreign propaganda and encouraged President Trump to limit their access to White House press briefings. During a White House briefing on the corona-virus outbreak on March 19, 2020, Chanel Rion from One America News Network asked Trump a question designed to prod him into blocking major news organizations from press briefings. "Is it alarming", Rion asked, "that major media players, just to oppose you, are consistently siding with foreign state propaganda, Islamic radicalism, Latin gangs and cartels, work right here at the White House with direct access to you and your team?" (Mackey, 2020). When Trump responded by calling the press very dishonest, Rion prodded further – "but more than dishonest, they are siding with state propaganda overseas" (Mackey, 2020).

These attacks are different from criticisms of mainstream media for failing to fulfil their democratic ideals. Mainstream media have long been criticized for providing balanced but biased

reporting, engaging in gotcha journalism, indexing truth to power, sensationalizing news events, offering superficial horse race coverage, or promoting perceived liberal bias. Such criticisms aim at improving the press' performance to better fulfil its democratic role. They do not delegitimize the role of press in democratic self-governance. Yet, radical right media's attacks do. By suggesting that major news organizations were working in alliance with a foreign government to promote foreign propaganda, One America News Network sought to delegitimize the press by portraying them as siding with the enemy. This message was designed to work in very much the same way as Trump's accusation of the press as "the enemy of the people" did in 2019 (Samuels, 2019). Both sought to paint the press as subversive and treacherous.

Radical right media also defended and assisted President Trump's attacks on what Ziblatt and Levitsky (2018) called the "referees" -- democratic institutions that serve as neutral and independent arbiters to investigate wrongdoings, enforce rules, and prevent cheating. They include intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies, the courts, and regulatory agencies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Democracies will be in danger if these institutions are captured by authoritarian leaders as political weapons to punish political opponents and protect political allies. As Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) argued, the capture of these institutions is usually done by removing civil officials and replacing them with loyalists. President Trump demonstrated strong inclinations of doing just that to shield himself from investigations, protect his political allies, or advance his agendas. And radical right media assisted his efforts by attacking the civil servants who remained independent and refused to pledge loyalty to President Trump.

Four months into President Trump's presidency, Donald Trump fired the former FBI director James Comey who had been in charge of the Russia probe and refused his order to drop investigations into his political ally Michael Flynn in May 2017. Trump's actions raised questions

of potential obstruction of justice and prompted Congress to call for an independent counsel to investigate Trump campaign's Russia ties. Rather than alert the audience to Trump's dangerous action to capture the FBI, Breitbart, Fox News' Tucker Carlson, Truth Feed, and the New York Post all defended and celebrated Trump's firing of Comey. Fox News host Sean Hannity in particular called Comey a national embarrassment (Peltz, 2017). In addition, many radical right media also helped Trump attack special counsel Robert Mueller, who was viewed by Trump the biggest threat to his presidency (Stracqualursi, 2018). Fox News' Sean Hannity, for instance, called for Mueller's resignation, firing, or recusal more than 44 times between May and December in 2017, citing evidence of conflict of interest that did not exist (Alderman, Bennett, Fernandez, & Radtke, 2017). The Gateway Pundit went even further. In a failed attempt at smearing Mueller, its writer Jacob Wohl tried to pay women and frame Mueller with false sexual assault accusations (Darcy, Scannell, & Shortell, 2018).

Radical right media also attacked the courts that ruled against Donald Trump. Some even urged him to openly defy court rulings, fire judges, or put term limits on the U.S. Supreme Court. In the aftermath of the 9th Circuit Court's ruling that upheld an injunction to block Trump's executive order which would bar US entry for people from seven majority-Muslim countries in February 2017, Fox News' Sean Hannity called the court's decision "part of radical left's plan" to undermine Trump; the American Spectator claimed that the court was "pro-terrorists" and "hates America"; Conservative Review's Mark Levin called the ruling "judicial tyranny"; Rush Limbaugh called the court "the 9th Circus" (Limbaugh, 2017); Fox News host Eric Bolling even urged Trump to defy the ruling (Mast, 2017). In June 2019, when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected Trump's proposal to add a question about citizenship to the 2020 census, Gateway Pundit called Chief Justice John Roberts nutty, insane, and a disgrace, and urged Trump to put

term limits on the U.S. Supreme Court (Hoft, 2019). Kurt Schlichter from Town Hall even suggested that Trump should fire anyone who gets in his way (Hagle, 2019).

6.7 VIOLATING THE DEMOCRATIC NORM OF MUTUAL TOLERANCE

A less obvious transgression than direct attacks on democratic institutions -- but perhaps no less serious a threat to democracy -- is radical right media's extremist language that breaks the democratic norm of mutual tolerance. Democratic norms are shared unwritten codes of conduct that are widely accepted, respected, and acted upon in the political process by members of a democratic community. They range from calling Senate colleagues "my friend" to arranging regular White House press briefings to not questioning the motives of one's political opponents. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) called them "the soft guardrails of democracy". Since formal democratic rules with their inevitable ambiguities and gaps cannot prescribe how to behavior in every possible scenario, all successful democracies have relied on informal democratic norms to function (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Among all the norms, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) specifically highlighted the importance of "mutual tolerance", which is particularly relevant in the context of radical right media.

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), mutual tolerance refers to the acceptance of one's political opponents as having equal rights to exist, compete, and govern if they abide by the rules of democracy. It means that while political rivals can debate policy differences, they should not question each other's motive or treat each other as enemies. Breaking the norm of mutual tolerance, for instance by calling political rivals un-American or un-patriotic, erodes democracy in at least two ways. One is that it can easily lead to government deadlock. Given the constitutional design of checks and balance, compromise and cooperation among political rivals are necessary to make government function. In a divided government where rival parties control

different branches of government, partisan fights can easily grind the government to a halt if both sides view each other's gain as their inevitable loss. The other is that it may lead to extreme political polarization in which each side engages in a no-holds-barred and win-at-any-cost conflict. This can put democracy at risk if politicians openly defy rules or even break laws in order to defeat their opponents. As Nixon's Watergate scandal in 1972 and Trump's Ukraine scandal in 2019 both showed, when political leaders view their political rivals as their nemesis, they may resort to extraordinary measures or even criminal activities to just stay in power.

As I mentioned before, many radical right media described the press and other democratic institutions as a disgrace, the enemy of the people, pro-terrorist, or "hates America". They also used the same extremist language to denigrate their political opponents, most notably President Barack Obama and the 2016 Democratic Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton. In 2008 and 2009, the Drudge Report and talk radio show hosts Glenn Beck and Michael Savage compared President Obama to a fascist; and for Beck and Drudge in particular, Obama was both a communist and a fascist at the same time (Brinker, 2015; Corn, 2008). In an attempt to depict Obama as un-American, Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, and Pamela Geller suggested that he is a secret Muslim (Uwimana, 2010); to push the claim even further, media personalities such as Fox News' Sean Hannity and Lou Dobbs, Rush Limbaugh, and Michael Savage promoted the birther conspiracy theory, which claimed that Obama was not born in the U.S. The various attacks against Hillary Clinton by radical right media tried to depict her as a pervert or a criminal. One of the most well-known conspiracy theories against her is that she is a murderer. WND, Big League Politics, Infowars, and News Max's Chris Ruddy have all suggested in their articles that Hillary Clinton killed people. In addition, Clinton was also depicted as a child sex

trafficker, a pedophile, or a sexual deviant by Drudge Report, Gateway Pundit, Infowars, Fox News, Washington Times, Western Journal, WND, and so on in 2016.

Radical right media's extremist language combined with disinformation fundamentally challenges the legitimacy of prominent democratic politicians by portraying them as un-American, deviant, or criminal. For those that believed in these personal attacks, Barack Obama cannot legitimately govern as President because he was not a real American; and Hillary Clinton cannot legitimately compete in the election as a political candidate because she was a murderer. Radical right media have trampled on the norm of mutual tolerance that is necessary for democracy to function, and fueled hatred, fear, disgust, and resentment among their audiences towards Democrats. Their daily bombast normalizes the demonization of political opponents and further exacerbates mutual hostility in the political environment that makes it very difficult for political rivals to work together.

6.8 WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The ecosystem of radical right media commands the attention of roughly one-third of the U.S. population (Benkler et al., 2018). Many radical right media personalities such as Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh have tremendous influence on the GOP and the Trump administration. Hence, their assault on facts, democratic institutions and norms should be a cause of concern for all citizens who care about the health of American democracy. To deal with radical right media's corrosive political impact, some proposed to limit their reach by focusing on the intermediaries such as social media platforms and search engines that gave radical right media tremendous

exposure.⁴⁷ Others advocated media literacy education and fact-checking to equip citizens with the necessary skills and knowledge to better identify falsehoods. Based on my findings in this dissertation, I offer the following suggestions.

First, politicians should stop legitimating radical right media as simply news organizations. They should be especially careful about the ways in which they interact with Fox News. As of this writing, Fox News is the most watched cable TV in the U.S., and as I showed in Chapter 3, has a tremendous influence within the radical right media sphere. Yet, a significant part of its influence comes from its coveted access to politicians that generate political news on a regularly basis. By giving access to Fox News, politicians not only helped legitimate Fox News but also sustained its influence and status. While it's almost unimaginable that any Republican politicians would defy Fox News, Democratic politicians should take the step to deny its access. This should involve refusing its interviews, refusing to appear on its shows, and refusing to participate in other events it organizes. In the 2020 Democratic primaries, we saw two divergent reactions to Fox News from leading presidential candidates. While Pete Buttigieg and Bernie Sanders both appeared in Fox News' interviews and townhall events, Elizabeth Warren refused to do so and publicly called Fox News a "hate-for-profit" racket. Given Fox News' role in the disinformation campaign against the presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden, the Biden administration – if Biden were elected in 2020 -- should and will probably take a much firmer stance against Fox News than Buttigieg or Sanders.

Second, social media companies such as Facebook should also think twice about partnering with radical right media. As I've mentioned, Facebook problematically included Breitbart in its News curation program in 2019. It also included the Daily Caller's subsidiary

⁴⁷ Twitter, for instance, banned the Federalist for suggesting that the medical community should consider intentionally infecting people with Covid-19 virus to slow its spread in March 2020; Facebook and YouTube also banned Infowars respectively in 2019 and 2018.

“Check Your Fact” to its list of fact-checking partners in 2019 (Molloy, 2020). As the time of this writing, Facebook agreed to partner with Fox News to host a virtual town hall about the coronavirus outbreak in April 2020. Yet, Fox News has spread various misinformation and conspiracy theories about the coronavirus since February 2020, putting public health in danger. Sean Hannity in particular called the coronavirus a “hoax” that Democrats used to “bludgeon” President Trump. A study showed that Sean Hannity’s dismissal of the outbreak in its early stage helped spread the virus (Bursztyn, Rao, Roth & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2020). While Facebook’s joint town hall with Fox News was billed as an effort to help citizens adhere to social distancing guidelines and “stay-at-home” orders, it glossed over Fox News’ early misinformation about the outbreak and helped Fox News whitewash its brand.

We also need a more systemic approach that goes beyond fixing this strategic information system alone. There are deeper structural problems and social conditions that made it not only possible but also popular for radical right media to attack facts, attack democratic institutions, and promote intolerance. It is important to recognize that the rise of major radical right media (e.g., Fox News and Drudge Report in the 1990s, and Breitbart and Daily Caller around 2010s) took place in the larger context of democratic breakdown and political polarization in the U.S. General Social Survey data from 1973 to 2004 suggests that the American public’s confidence in the press started to decline steadily in the late 1980s (Gronke & Cook, 2007); starting from the late 1980s, such a decline also accompanied a decline of trust in other democratic institutions (Gronke & Cook, 2007). Public’s declining trust in these institutions created the condition for radical right media to attack facts and further undermine the legitimacy of these decaying institutions. Facts depend on authority. The declining trust in the press, which served as an important authority to provide the public with facts, pushed people

away from mainstream news organizations and into alternative forms of authority -- for instance radical right media personalities – that peddled falsehoods. The public’s existing skepticism towards other democratic institutions such as Congress also provided fertile ground for radical right media to attack and further weaken these institutions.

Political polarization has also accelerated since the 1980s. Cross-party cooperation on legislative agendas in the House started to decline in late 1980s (Andris et al., 2015). Likewise, the U.S. Senate became polarized in the 1990s and 2000s (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). Polarization among party elites and activists from late 1980s can be traced back to the party realignment in the 1960s and 1970s, when Southern Democrats began to move to the Republican party. It is reasonable to believe, based on research findings on voter’s responsiveness to party leaders’ cues, that elite polarization likely led to mass polarization among the American public. Although studies on mass polarization showed mixed results, it is clear that the American public have polarized affectively since the early 2000s. Using affect as an indicator of mass polarization, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) found that among the American public Democrats and Republicans increasingly dislike each other. “The mere act of identifying with a political party”, as Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) argued, “is sufficient to trigger negative evaluations of the opposition.” (p.407) The high level of polarization has triggered the endemic of norm breaking and provided fertile ground for radical right media to portray political opponents as un-American, criminal, enemies, and terrorists.

The fact that radical right media have thrived on attacking facts, democratic institutions, and norms reflects deeper problems such as Americans’ declining faith in democratic institutions and intensified political polarization. To rein in radical right media’s corrosive impact on American democracy, we must address the structural problems and social conditions that gave

rise to radical right media. Hence, besides platform regulation, media literacy education, and fact-checking, we must revive democratic norms such as mutual tolerance in civic life, make democracy work better for ordinary citizens, and restore publics' trust in democratic institutions.

6.9 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this dissertation, I've shed light on the political and strategic aspect of radical right media in the United States. My main argument is that these media outlets can follow a specific set of mechanisms to activate as political organization networks in pursuit of tangible political goals at strategic moments. As I've argued, radical right media are hybrid – they can be journalism producers and disinformation manufacturers at the same time. What I haven't devoted much attention to is their journalistic side, and the performance of their journalistic identity. Many radical right media such as Fox News, Breitbart, and the Washington Examiner have tried various ways to build or perform a journalistic identity. For Fox News, it was about the slogan of “fair and balance” and hiring professional journalists such as Bret Baier and Shepard Smith; for post-Bannon Breitbart, it was about getting rid of the old self-imposed label “platform for the alt-right” and deceptively linking to mainstream media's news articles as support of its racist and xenophobic arguments when in fact the content of these linked articles often turns out to have nothing to do with the viewpoints Breitbart advocates; for Washington Examiner and Daily Caller, it involved fact-checking more fringe radical right media such as Gateway Pundit. What functions do these performances serve? How successful are such efforts in convincing their audiences, tech intermediaries such as Facebook and Google, and political power holders that they're legitimate news organizations? How do radical right media manage the tension between building a journalistic identity and promoting deliberate falsehoods? Future research should address these unanswered questions.

Another fruitful area of future research is to examine the strategies that radical right media used to couple politically motivated disinformation that achieves strategic goals with culturally resonant narratives that are deeply meaningful to their audiences. Hillary Clinton is perhaps one of the most targeted politician by the political right since 1990s. Despite all kinds of ludicrous conspiracy theories against her, no one on the political right attacked her by questioning her citizenship. Yet, many questioned Barack Obama's citizenship in 2011, and as it turned out, the false narrative that Obama was not born in the U.S. was deeply meaningful to Republican voters. As late as 2016, a majority of Republican voters still doubted Obama's citizenship (Savransky, 2016). Hence, to understand why certain disinformation narratives on the political right are particularly effective, we must examine radical right media's rhetorical strategies that tap into the taste, identity, and emotions of their audiences. Meanwhile, we must also recognize that fact not every disinformation narrative can be easily grafted onto a familiar cultural frame such as racism. For instance, it seems unclear how Fox News' attack on the U.S. intelligence community in 2017 can appear meaningful or emotionally engaging to its conservative audiences. This makes it all the more important to study the cultural frames radical right media evoked to promote disinformation, and the ways in which they adapted and reinvented these frames to respond to new political situations.

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APPENDIX

As this dissertation focuses on web-based media and print/TV/radio media that publish text-based materials online, I compiled my original top radical right media list based on three web metrics, namely open web in-links, social media shares, and online traffic in 2016. I first identified major right-wing media in the U.S., and then selected from them the ones that were consistently flagged by scholars, media practitioners, and watchdog organizations as violating basic journalistic norms.

My top right-wing media list was built on four existing lists compiled by media scholars and practitioners. The first three existing lists came from the study of the 2016 presidential election coverage by Faris et al., (2017). They analyzed right-wing media's election coverage in 2016 and identified top ten most linked right-wing media in the open web (list 1), top ten most shared right-wing media on Facebook (list 2), and top ten most retweeted right-wing media on Twitter (list 3). These three lists combined included 18 unique media sites.

Faris et al., (2017)'s partisanship classification method was based on the retweet patterns of people who either retweeted Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump in the 2016 election. While we should expect that the retweeters of right-wing sites on average are more likely to retweet Donald Trump than Hillary Clinton, not every site that drew Trump's retweeters was right-wing media. To correct for this potential classification error, I validated the partisanship of these 18 top media sites by referencing BuzzFeed News' 2016 list of right-wing media⁴⁸ and filtered out 3 non right-wing media sites.

⁴⁸ BuzzFeed classified the partisanship of media based on content. It manually reviewed the content and the About pages of some 600 partisan sites and found that more than 400 right-wing media either self-identified as right-wing or conservative media or published content that reflected a right-wing slant (Craig Silverman, Lytvynenko, Vo, & Singer-Vine, 2017).

Faris et al., (2017)'s top right-wing media lists were based on social media shares and open web links. To include online traffic as another important indicator of online prominence, I consulted PJMedia's top conservative media list. PJMedia⁴⁹ compiled a list of top conservative media sites based on averaged web traffic rankings from Alexa, Quantcast, and SimilarWeb in 2017. I added five more sites from PJMedia's top 10 list that were classified as right-wing media by both BuzzFeed News and Faris et al., (2017). The above steps produced my original top 20 radical right media sites.

I defined radical right media as right-wing media that were consistently flagged as violating basic journalistic norms by fact-checkers, watch-dog groups, or journalists. I relied on existing research materials and media reports to determine whether a top right-wing media on my list is radical and found that all twenty media outlets were consistently flagged for using dubious sources, promoting political campaigns and candidates, spreading hate speech, fabricating sources, making up stories, promoting conspiracy theories, suppressing stories for political purposes, or twisting facts. These twenty media outlets are Breitbart, Fox News, New York Post, Washington Times, Daily Caller, Washington Examiner, Free Beacon, Gateway Pundit, Right Scoop, Infowars, Conservative Tribune, Truthfeed (defunct), Western Journalism,⁵⁰ Political Insider, Ending the Fed (defunct), Drudge Report, Zero Hedge, Daily Wire, the Blaze, and WND. Chapter 2's analysis was based on this top 20 radical right media list.

To increase my sample size and better integrate my theoretical framework with my case studies, I combined my original top 20 list with 26 more radical right media sites in my case studies. I selected these extra 26 sites by following this step: for each case, I identified the top 10

⁴⁹ PJMedia's ranking was based on the average rankings from Alexa which ranks websites by a combined measure of unique visitors and pageviews, Quantcast which ranks websites by the number of U.S. monthly visits, and SimilarWeb which ranks websites by the number of monthly visits (Bolyard, 2017).

⁵⁰ Western Journalism was rebranded as Western Journal in 2018 (Confessore & Bank, 2019).

most linked radical right media that were not on my original list. This means that I kept adding new radical right media sites until I identified the 10th new radical right site for each case. The data was collected in 2017 and 2018. As of this writing in March 2020, nine sites have become defunct. In Table 1, I specified where each one of the 46 sites came from and sketched their past transgressions.

Table 7.1: Top 46 Radical Right Media Sites in My Sample

Media	Sample	Transgression
Fox News	Original	1 It purposefully twisted facts to smear Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton (Y. Benkler et al., 2018; Brock & Rabin-Havt, 2012). 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 3 It killed a story to protect Donald Trump (J. Mayer, 2019) .
Breitbart	Original	1 It promoted the false Pizzagate story (See Chapter 1). 2 It spread the false Seth Rich conspiracy story (See Chapter 3). 3 It spread racism and hate speech against Muslims.
Daily Caller	Original	1 It promoted the false Seth Rich conspiracy story (See Chapter 3). 2 It helped Trump's 2016 campaign fundraise by lending its email list for an estimated amount of \$150,000 in the months leading up to the general election so that the campaign can privately send co-branded emails to Daily Caller followers and ask them for money (Sloan, 2017).
Free Beacon	Original	1 In the 2016 presidential election, it conducted opposition research on Hillary Clinton and retained the firm Fusion GPS to dig up dirt on Donald Trump. 2 It spread the false Seth Rich conspiracy story (See Chapter 3).
Conservative Tribune	Original	1 It promoted the false Seth Rich conspiracy story (See Chapter 3). 2 It spread false stories about Barack Obama.
Western Journal	Original	1 It promoted the false Seth Rich conspiracy story (See Chapter 3). 2 It spread various versions of the disinformation that Hillary and Bill Clinton ordered the assassination of their associates.
WND	Original	1 It promoted the Obama birther conspiracy theory. 2 It spread various versions of the disinformation that Hillary and Bill Clinton ordered the assassination of their associates.
Gateway Pundit	Original	1 It falsely claimed that the 2020 democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg sexually assaulted a 21-year-old man. 2 It falsely accused the special counsel Robert Mueller of sexual misconduct. 3 It promoted the disinformation that Christine Blasey Ford went after Kavanaugh only to protect the abortion industry's special interest (See Chapter 5).
Drudge Report	Original	1 It promoted the "birther" disinformation (Newbold, 2012) in 2012. 2 It promoted the false Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 3 It resurfaced a false story in the 2016 presidential election which itself debunked in 1999 that Bill Clinton had an illegitimate child.
Zero Hedge	Original	1 It promoted the "Pizzagate" disinformation story in 2016. 2 It falsely claimed that Saudi Arabia funded 20% of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. 3 In 2017, it promoted the false Seth Rich conspiracy theory.

		4 In 2018, it falsely accused Christine Ford of being a secret CIA operative (See Chapter 5).
Infowars	Original	1 It spread the false claim that the special counsel for the Russia probe Robert Mueller is a child molester. 2 It promoted the false claim that the U.S. government used chemicals to turn people gay. 3 It promoted the “pizzagate” disinformation story.
The blaze	Original	1 It promoted various disinformation against Barack Obama, most notably by associating him with communism. For instance, it suggested that Obama’s 2012 presidential campaign’s typeface was inspired by communists in Cuba and that Obama’s mentor Frank Marshall Davis is a communist. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory.
Daily Wire	Original	1 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 2 It falsely claimed that leftists were digging up Confederate graves in the aftermath of the Neo-Nazis rally at Charlottesville. 3 It falsely claimed that Democratic lawmakers refused to stand for a Navy SEAL’s widow in 2017.
Political Insider	Original	1 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 2 It promoted the disinformation that Bill Clinton went to “Orgy Island” retreats.
Right Scoop	Original	1 It promoted the “pizzagate” disinformation in 2016. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
New York Post	Original	1 It reportedly killed a story about a sexual-assault allegation against Donald Trump in 2019. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Washington Examiner	Original	1 It promoted the false claim that the Democratic politician Ilha Omar described America as a ‘rotten country’ in 2019. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Washington Times	Original	1 It promoted the false claim that that 5.7 million illegal immigrants might have voted in 2008. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Truth Feed (defunct)	Original	It is on Fackcheck.org’s fake news site list.
Ending the Fed (defunct)	Original	1 It promoted the Pizzagate conspiracy theory in 2016. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Heat Street (defunct)	Case 1	1 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2016 and 2017. 2 It promoted the false claim, which was later cited by President Trump, that Barack Obama wiretapped Donald Trump in 2017.
McMasterLeaks (defunct)	Case 3	The website was set up to fish damaging information about H.R. McMaster.
Whatreallyhappened	Case 2	1 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 2 It promoted the false claim that Hillary Clinton and Bill Clinton ordered the assassination of their aides.
Circa (defunct)	Case 3	1 It participated in a political campaign to oust H.R. McMaster. 2 Circa was owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group, which ordered nearly 200 local stations to read the same pro-Trump script.
Conservative Review	Case 3	It participated in a political campaign to oust H.R. McMaster.

WJLA	Case 1	1 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 2 WJLA is owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group, which ordered nearly 200 local stations to read the same pro-Trump script.
Fox5 DC	Case 1	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Michael Savage	Case 1	1 It promoted the false claim that Christine Ford was a secret CIA operative who was on a mission to destroy Kavanaugh. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Frontpage Mag	Case 3	1 It participated in a political campaign to oust H.R. McMaster. 2 It has a history of spreading hate against Muslims.
Twitchy	Case 2	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Conservative Treehouse	Case 2	It is on Factcheck.org's fake news site list.
Big League Politics	Case 1	1 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017. 2 It heavily relies on Alex Jones and Roger Stone – two conspiracy theorists – as sources.
Disobedient Media (defunct)	Case 1	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
American Thinker	Case 2	1 It has a history of spreading hate against Muslims and the LGBTQ community. 2 It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
The Federalist	Case 2	It implied that Christine Blasey Ford hypnotized herself into believing Brett Kavanaugh assaulted her.
Hot Air	Case 2	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
American Spectator	Case 3	It was paid to conduct opposition research into Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton in the 1990s.
Intellihub	Case 1	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Govtslaves (defunct)	Case 1	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Townhall	Case 2	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Daily Sheeple (defunct)	Case 1	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
PJ Media	Case 1	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
News Max	Case 3	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Pamela Geller (Geller Report)	Case 3	1 It has a history of spreading hate against Muslims and the LGBTQ community. 2 It is on Factcheck.org's fake news site list.
Real Clear Politics	Case 2	It promoted the Seth Rich conspiracy theory in 2017.
Yournewswire (defunct)	Case 2	It is on Fackcheck.org's fake news site list.

VITA

Yunkang Yang is a PhD Candidate from the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. He also holds the Social Science Statistics Certificate from Center for Statistics and the Social Sciences at the University of Washington. His publications have appeared on leading academic journals in the field of communication including *Journal of Communication*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Asian Journal of Communication*. Yunkang Yang has also worked as a data/statistics consultant at the Center for Social Science Computation and Research for four years and taught three undergraduate-level courses as Instructor of Record. He and his partner Ran Deng were the first runner-up in the 2009 National English Debate Competition in China and represented China to compete in the 2010 World Universities Debating Championship in Botswana.