



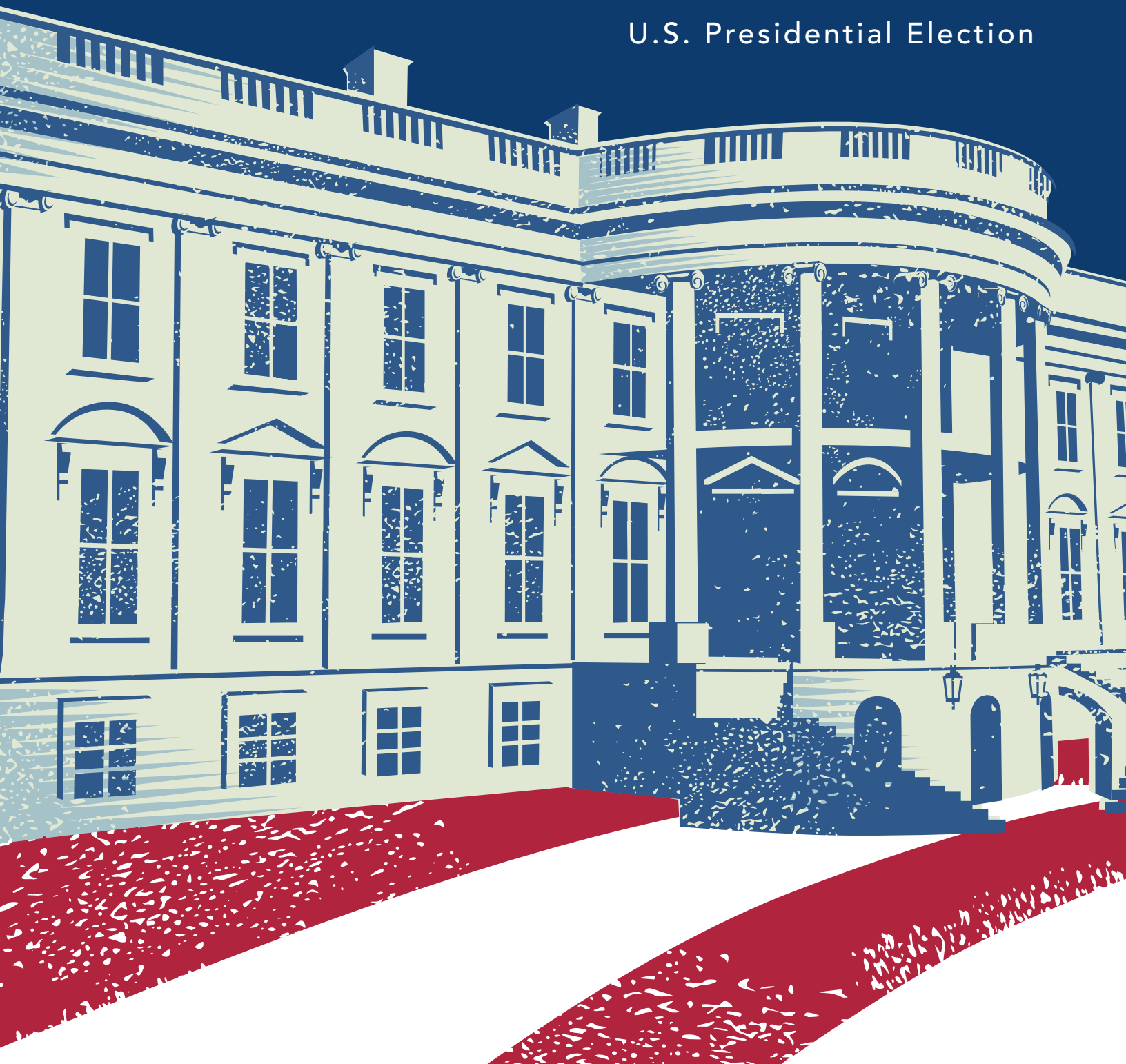
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# PARTISANSHIP, PROPAGANDA, & DISINFORMATION

Online Media & the 2016  
U.S. Presidential Election



## Introduction

In this study, we analyze both mainstream and social media coverage of the 2016 United States presidential election. We document that the majority of mainstream media coverage was negative for both candidates, but largely followed Donald Trump's agenda: when reporting on Hillary Clinton, coverage primarily focused on the various scandals related to the Clinton Foundation and emails. When focused on Trump, major substantive issues, primarily immigration, were prominent. Indeed, immigration emerged as a central issue in the campaign and served as a defining issue for the Trump campaign.

We find that the structure and composition of media on the right and left are quite different. The leading media on the right and left are rooted in different traditions and journalistic practices. On the conservative side, more attention was paid to pro-Trump, highly partisan media outlets. On the liberal side, by contrast, the center of gravity was made up largely of long-standing media organizations steeped in the traditions and practices of objective journalism.

Our data supports lines of research on polarization in American politics that focus on the asymmetric patterns between the left and the right, rather than studies that see polarization as a general historical phenomenon, driven by technology or other mechanisms that apply across the partisan divide.

The analysis includes the evaluation and mapping of the media landscape from several perspectives and is based on large-scale data collection of media stories published on the web and shared on Twitter.

## Overview of Methods

- Cross-linking patterns between media sources offer a view of authority and prominence within the media world.
- The sharing of media sources by users on Twitter and Facebook provides a broader perspective on the role and influence of media sources among people engaged in politics through Twitter and Facebook.
- The differential media sharing patterns of Trump and Clinton supporters on Twitter enable a detailed analysis of the role of partisanship in the formation and function of media structures.
- Content analysis using automated tools supports the tracking of topics over time among media sources.
- Qualitative media analysis of individual case studies enhances our understanding of media function and structure.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

Donald Trump succeeded in shaping the election agenda. Coverage of Trump overwhelmingly outperformed coverage of Clinton. Clinton's coverage was focused on scandals, while Trump's coverage focused on his core issues.

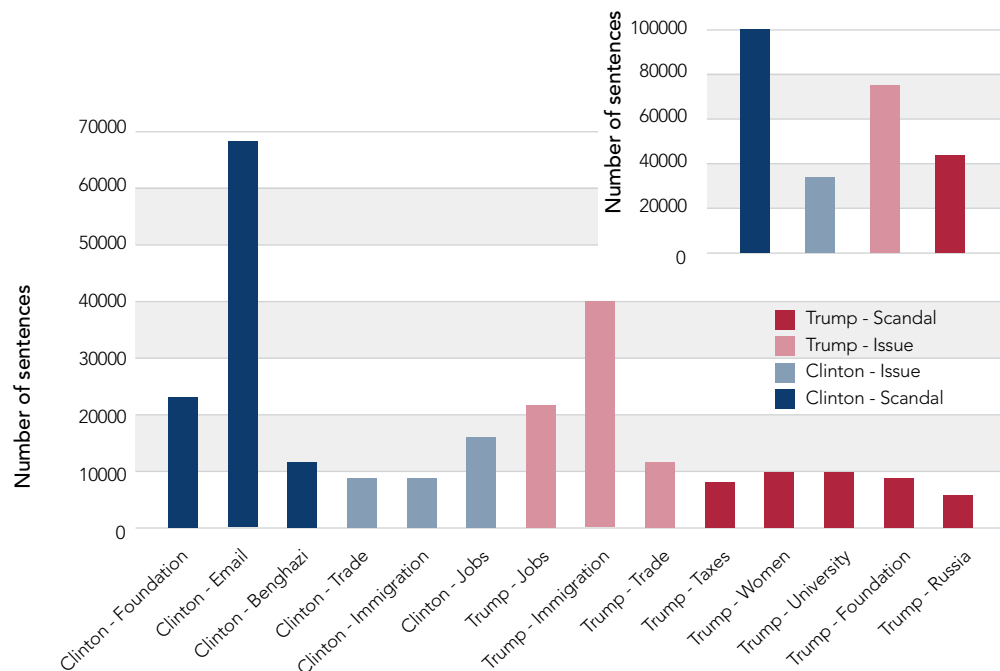


Figure 1: Number of sentences by topic and candidate from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016

Attempts by the Clinton campaign to define her campaign on competence, experience, and policy positions were drowned out by coverage of alleged improprieties associated with the Clinton Foundation and emails. Coverage of Trump associated with immigration, jobs, and trade was greater than that on his personal scandals.

Immigration and Muslims/Islam were the two most widely covered substantive issues of the campaign.

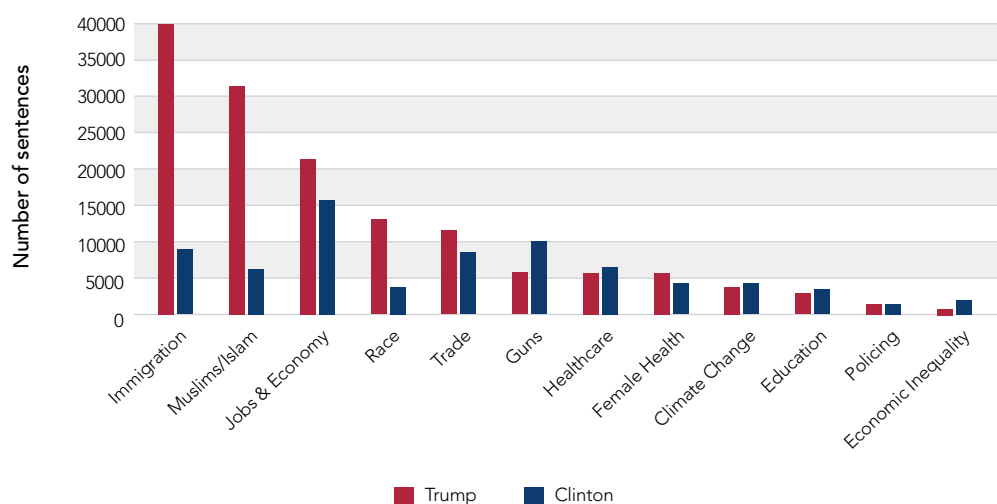


Figure 2: Number of sentences by substantive topic and candidate from media on the open web

Immigration emerged as the leading substantive issue of the campaign. Initially, the Trump campaign used a hard-line anti-immigration stance to distinguish Trump from the field of GOP contenders. Later, immigration was a wedge issue between the left and the right. Pro-Trump media sources supported this with sensationalist, race-centric coverage of immigration focused on crime, terrorism, fear of Muslims, and disease.

While coverage of his candidacy was largely critical, Trump dominated media coverage.

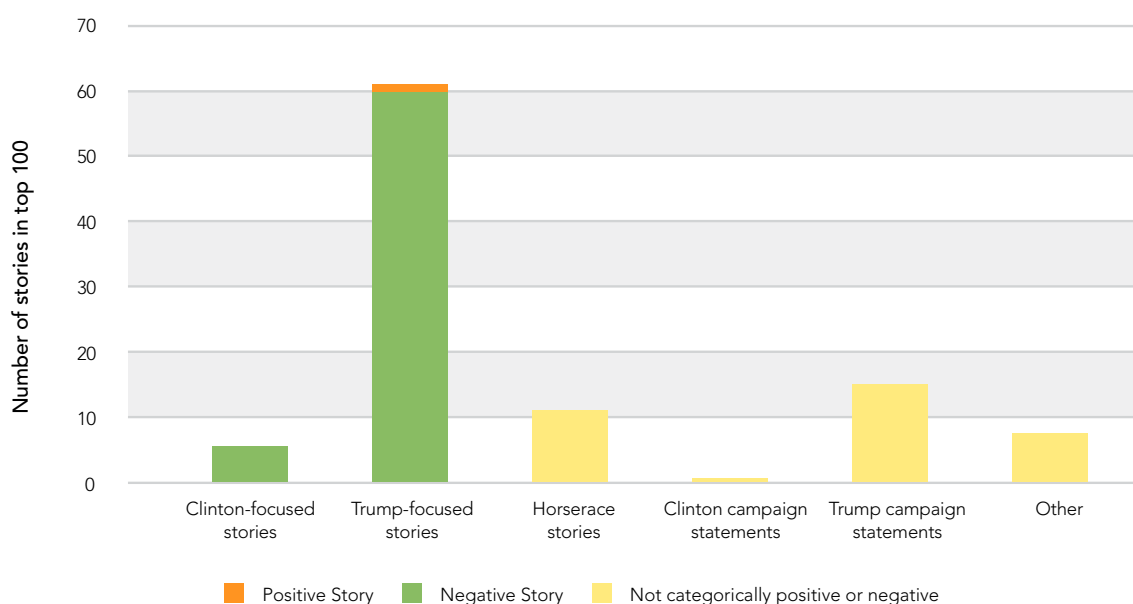


Figure 3: Valence and focus of the 100 most linked-to stories. Stories were hand-coded for topic and tone.

## The media landscape is distinctly asymmetric.

The structure of the overall media landscape shows media systems on the left and right operate differently. The asymmetric polarization of media is evident in both open web linking and social media sharing measures. Prominent media on the left are well distributed across the center, center-left, and left. On the right, prominent media are highly partisan.

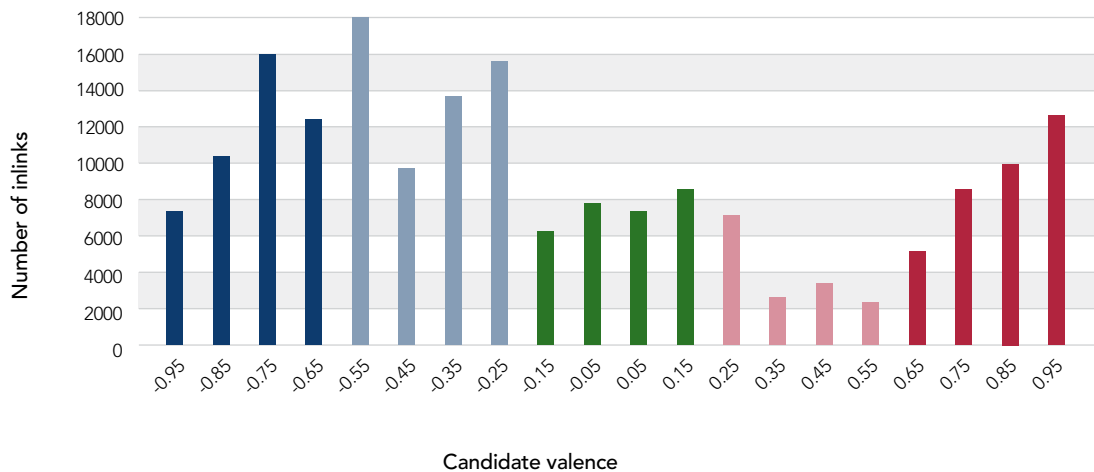


Figure 4: Partisan distribution of top 250 most-linked-to media sources by total inlinks\*  
\*"Inlinks" refers to the incoming cross-media hyperlinks to stories and media sources.

Twitter is a more partisan environment than the open web media landscape.

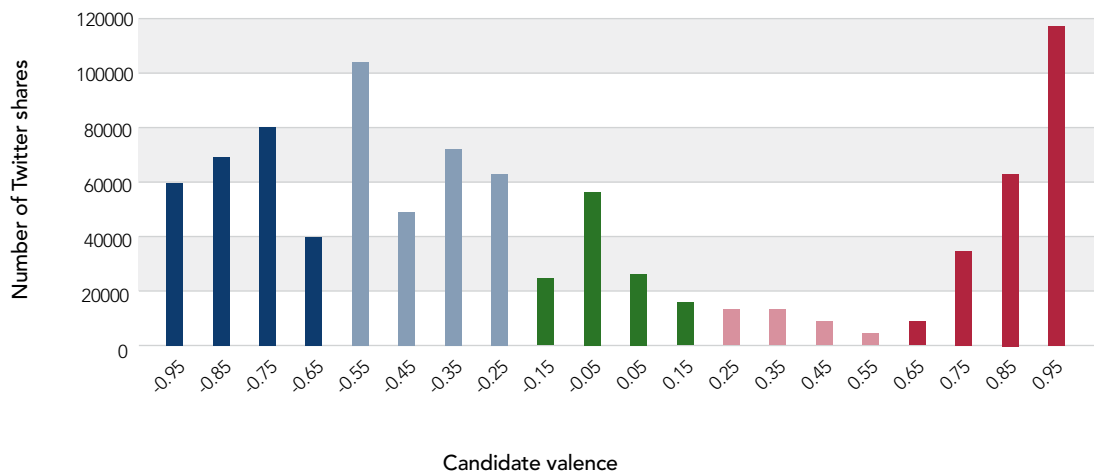


Figure 5: Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Twitter shares

Facebook is more partisan than Twitter.

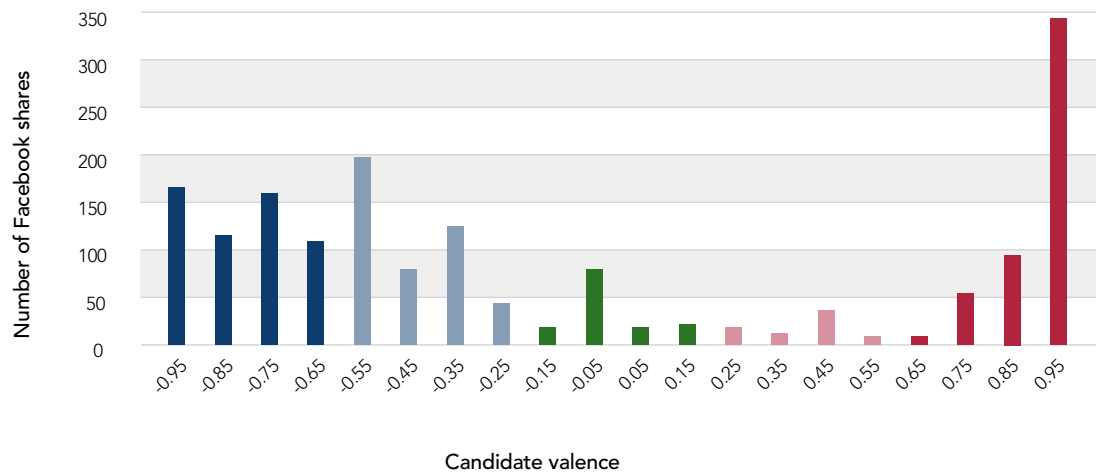


Figure 6: Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Facebook shares

From all of these perspectives, conservative media is more partisan and more insular than the left.

The center-left and the far right are the principal poles of the media landscape.

The center of gravity of the overall landscape is the center-left. Partisan media sources on the left are integrated into this landscape and are of lesser importance than the major media outlets of the center-left. The center of attention and influence for conservative media is on the far right. The center-right is of minor importance and is the least represented portion of the media spectrum.

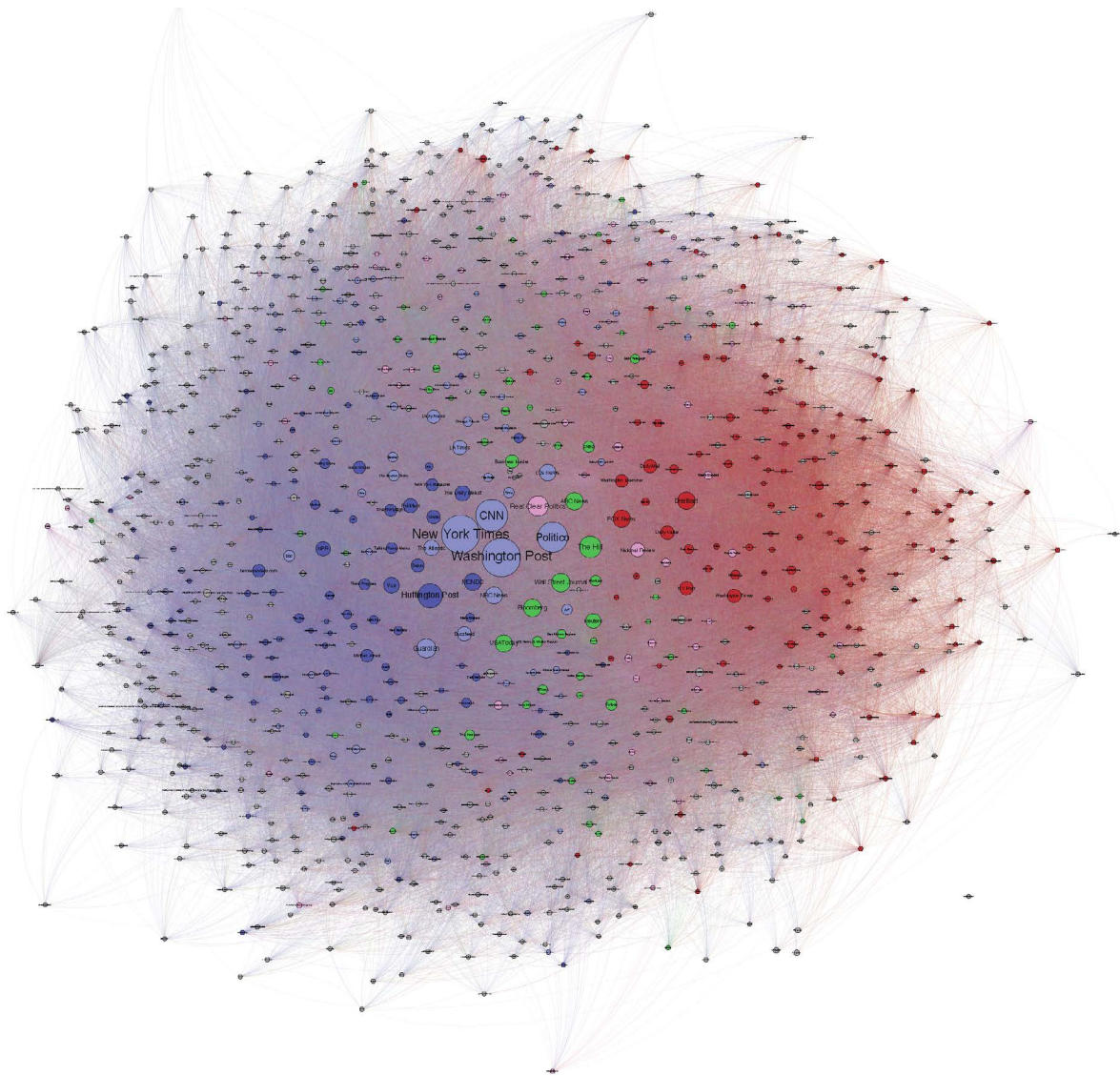


Figure 7: Network map based on open web media from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016  
([explore this map in higher resolution](#); warning, file is large)



## Conservative media disrupted.

Breitbart emerges as the nexus of conservative media. The Wall Street Journal is treated by social media users as centrist and less influential. The rising prominence of Breitbart along with relatively new outlets such as the Daily Caller marks a significant reshaping of the conservative media landscape over the past several years.

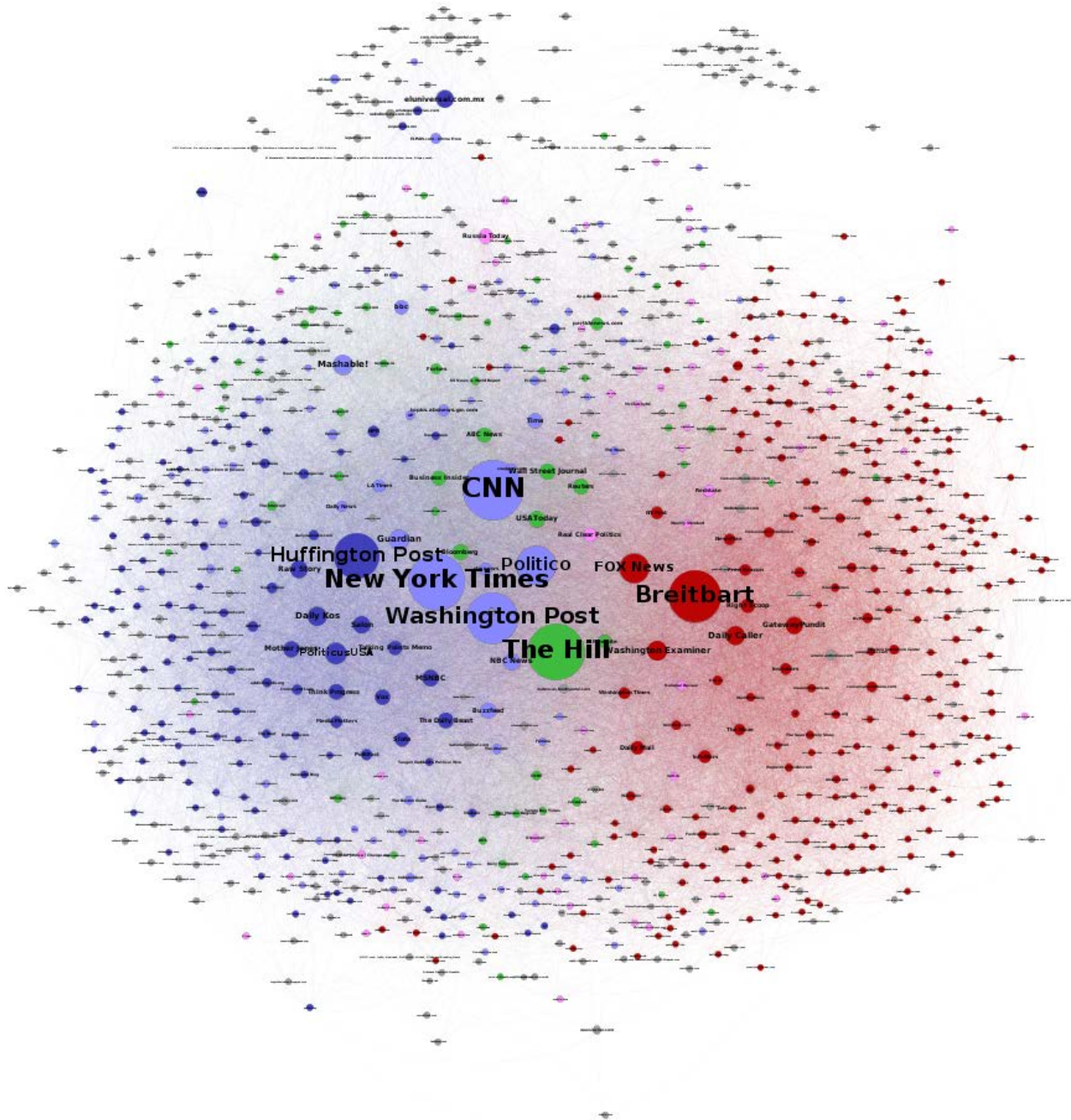


Figure 8: Network map based on Twitter media sharing from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016 with nodes sized by number of Twitter shares ([explore this map in higher resolution](#); warning, file is large)



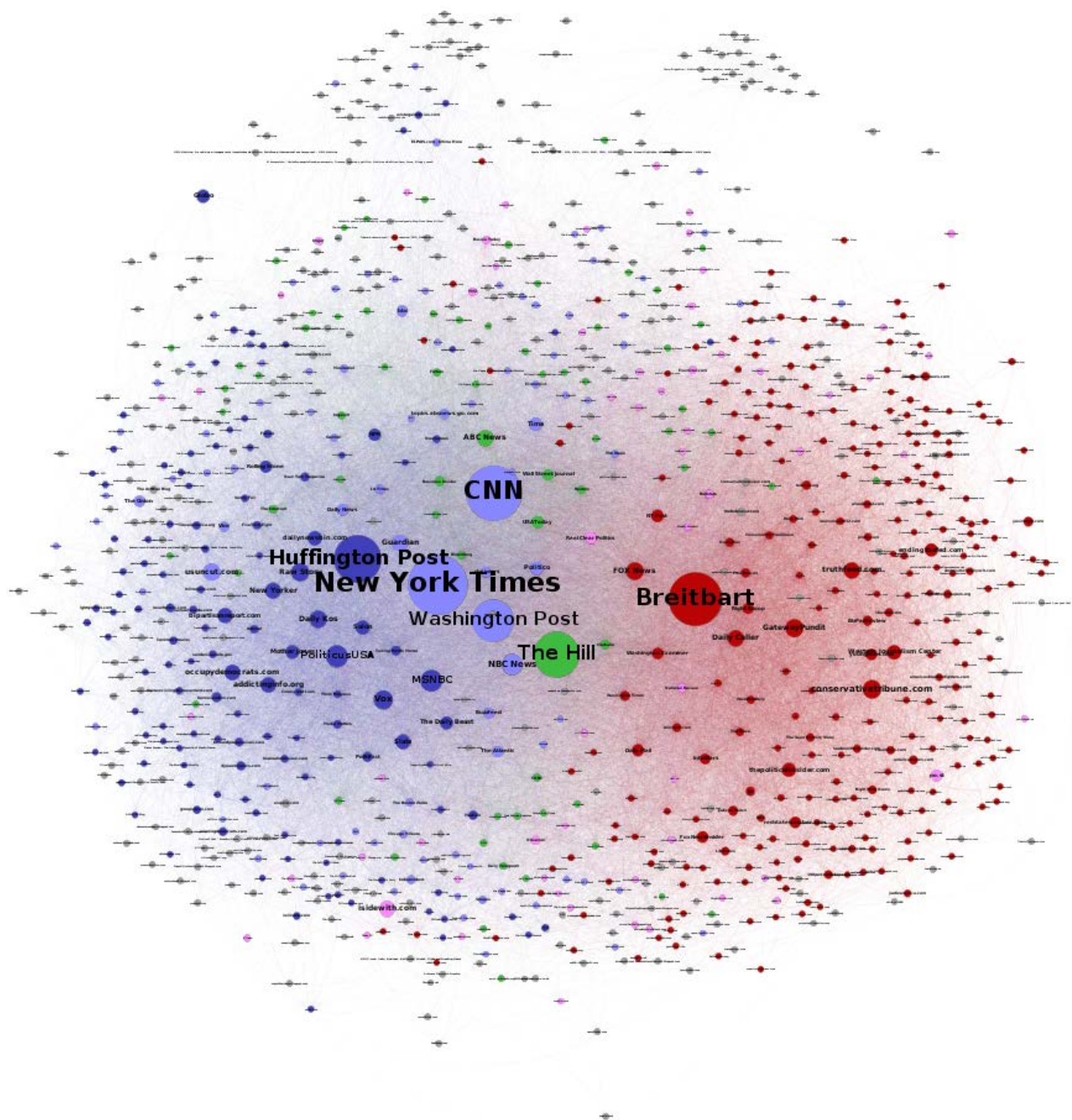


Figure 9: Network map based on Twitter media sharing from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016 with nodes sized by number of Facebook shares ([explore this map in higher resolution](#); warning, file is large)

**On the partisan left and right, the popularity of media sources varies significantly across the different platforms.**

On the left, the Huffington Post, MSNBC, and Vox are prominent on all platforms. On the right, Breitbart, Fox News, the Daily Caller, and the New York Post are popular across platforms.

	Inlinks	Twitter	Facebook
1	Breitbart	Breitbart	Breitbart
2	Fox News	Fox News	Conservative Tribune
3	donaldjtrump.com	Washington Examiner	Gateway Pundit
4	NY Post	Daily Caller	Fox News
5	Washington Times	Gateway Pundit	Daily Caller
6	Daily Caller	Right Scoop	Truthfeed
7	Daily Mail	Daily Mail	Western Journalism
8	Washington Examiner	InfoWars	Political Insider
9	WikiLeaks	NY Post	EndingtheFed
10	Free Beacon	Washington Times	NY Post

Table 1: Most popular media on the right from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016

	Inlinks	Twitter	Facebook
1	Huffington Post	Huffington Post	Huffington Post
2	MSNBC	PoliticusUSA	PoliticusUSA
3	Vox	Daily Kos	MSNBC
4	The Daily Beast	Raw Story	Vox
5	hillaryclinton.com	Salon	Raw Story
6	NPR	MSNBC	Daily Kos
7	PolitiFact	Mother Jones	New Yorker
8	Slate	Think Progress	Occupy Democrats
9	Salon	The Daily Beast	Addicting Info
10	berniesanders.com	Vox	Bipartisan Report

Table 2: Most popular media on the left from May 1, 2015, to November 7, 2016

On the most widely covered topic of the election, immigration, Breitbart was the most prominent site. On Twitter, Breitbart is far above the rest.

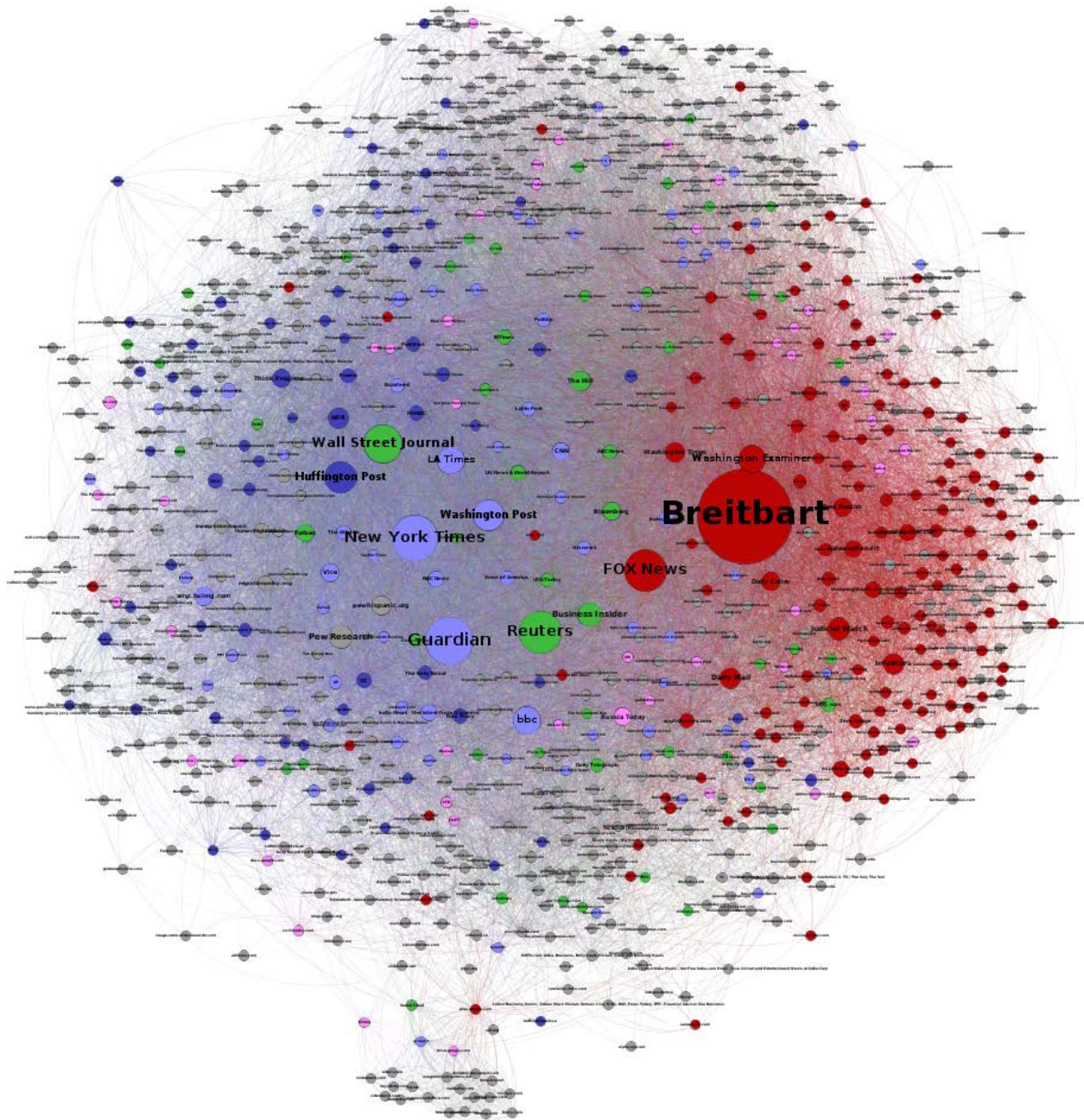


Figure 10: Network map based on Twitter sharing for the topic of immigration ([explore this map in higher resolution](#); warning, file is large)

Breitbart's key role in the media landscape during the election was particularly pronounced in coverage of immigration. On Twitter, Breitbart stories on immigration were shared more than twice as often as stories from the Guardian, which ranked second.



## Disinformation and propaganda are rooted in partisanship and are more prevalent on social media.

The most obvious forms of disinformation are most prevalent on social media and in the most partisan fringes of the media landscape. Greater popularity on social media than attention from media peers is a strong indicator of reporting that is partisan and, in some cases, dubious.

Among the set of top 100 media sources by inlinks or social media shares,<sup>1</sup> seven sources, all from the partisan right or partisan left, receive substantially more attention on social media than links from other media outlets.

These sites do not necessarily all engage in misleading or false reporting, but they are clearly highly partisan. In this group, Gateway Pundit is in a class of its own, known for “publishing falsehoods and spreading hoaxes.”<sup>2</sup>

BizPacReview  
Breitbart  
Daily Kos  
Gateway Pundit  
PoliticusUSA  
Raw Story  
Right Scoop

Table 3: Seven media sources that receive substantially more attention on social media than they receive inlinks from open web media

## Disproportionate popularity on Facebook is a strong indicator of highly partisan and unreliable media.

A distinct set of websites receive a disproportionate amount of attention from Facebook compared with Twitter and media inlinks. From the list of the most prominent media,<sup>3</sup> 13 sites fall into this category. Many of these sites are cited by independent sources and media reporting as progenitors of inaccurate if not blatantly false reporting. Both in form and substance, the majority of these sites are aptly described as political clickbait. Again, this does not imply equivalence across these sites. Ending the Fed is often cited as the prototypical example of a media source that published false stories. The Onion is an outlier in this group, in that it is explicitly satirical and ironic, rather than, as is the case with the others, engaging in highly partisan and dubious reporting without explicit irony.

Addicting Info  
Bipartisan Report  
Conservative Tribune  
Daily Newsbin  
Ending the Fed  
Occupy Democrats  
Political Insider  
Red State Watcher  
The Onion  
Truthfeed  
US Uncut  
Western Journalism  
Young Cons

Table 4: 13 media sources that receive more attention from Facebook than on Twitter or through open web media inlinks

<sup>1</sup> This list can be found in Appendix 3.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/fake-news-gateway-pundit-white-house-trump-briefing-room-214781>

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 3.

## Asymmetric vulnerabilities: The right and left were subject to media manipulation in different ways.

The more insulated right-wing media ecosystem was susceptible to sustained network propaganda and disinformation, particularly misleading negative claims about Hillary Clinton. Traditional media accountability mechanisms—for example, fact-checking sites, media watchdog groups, and cross-media criticism—appear to have wielded little influence on the insular conservative media sphere. Claims aimed for “internal” consumption within the right-wing media ecosystem were more extreme, less internally coherent, and appealed more to the “paranoid style” of American politics than claims intended to affect mainstream media reporting.

The institutional commitment to impartiality of media sources at the core of attention on the left meant that hyperpartisan, unreliable sources on the left did not receive the same amplification that equivalent sites on the right did.

These same standard journalistic practices were successfully manipulated by media and activists on the right to inject anti-Clinton narratives into the mainstream media narrative. A key example is the use of the leaked Democratic National Committee’s emails and her campaign chairman John Podesta’s emails, released through WikiLeaks, and the sustained series of stories written around email-based accusations of influence peddling. Another example is the book and movie release of *Clinton Cash* together with the sustained campaign that followed, making the Clinton Foundation the major post-convention story. By developing plausible narratives and documentation susceptible to negative coverage, parallel to the more paranoid narrative lines intended for internal consumption within the right-wing media ecosystem, and by “working the refs,” demanding mainstream coverage of anti-Clinton stories, right-wing media played a key role in setting the agenda of mainstream, center-left media. We document these dynamics in the Clinton Foundation case study section of this report.