Red Media vs. Blue Media: Social Distancing and Partisan News Media Use during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Porismita Borah, Shreenita Ghosh, Juwon Hwang, Dhavan V. Shah & Markus Brauer


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2023.2167584

View supplementary material

Published online: 23 Jan 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Red Media vs. Blue Media: Social Distancing and Partisan News Media Use during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Porismita Borah\textsuperscript{a}, Shreenita Ghosh\textsuperscript{b}, Juwon Hwang\textsuperscript{c}, Dhavan V. Shah\textsuperscript{b}, and Markus Brauer\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA; \textsuperscript{b}School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA; \textsuperscript{c}School of Media and Strategic Communication, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, USA; \textsuperscript{d}Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

ABSTRACT
Political polarization surrounding the COVID-19 health crisis has been on the rise since the beginning of the pandemic. We combine prior research on motivated reasoning, selective exposure, and news framing to understand the association between partisan media use and social distancing behavior related to COVID-19. To do so, we collected media content data and national survey data during the onset of the pandemic. We employed structural topic modeling (STM), dependency parsing, word co-ocurrence, and manual coding to examine the media coverage. Next, we analyzed survey data collected with a Qualtrics panel from a sample of U.S. residents for factors explaining social distancing behaviors. Results reveal coverage from the right leaning outlets downplayed the virus and highlighted the consequences of lockdowns on the economy. Our survey findings show that even after accounting for a range of demographic, political orientation, and COVID-19 awareness variables, conservative media use was linked, although modestly, with a lower likelihood of social distancing behavior. Our findings echo past research on media framing of pandemics and their association with public attitudes and behavior.

On a per capita basis, the U.S. has among the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths among wealthy countries (WHO, 2021). The situation has been traced, in part, to the highly politicized turn the pandemic has taken in the U.S. (Grossman et al., 2020). Political polarization surrounding the public health crisis has been on the rise since the beginning of the pandemic, with conservatives and liberals expressing different concerns and strategies in response to the pandemic (Rothgerber et al., 2020). Politicians differed in these reactions, as well. For instance, former President Trump referred to the pandemic as a hoax several times (Pollino, 2020) and multiple conservative politicians repeatedly downplayed the pandemic (Grossman et al., 2020). Moreover, conservative media outlets such as Fox News amplified voices that COVID-19 was a “fraud” (Pollino, 2020; Rupar, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020).

The politicization of the pandemic is no small matter, since everyone had a role to play in keeping the virus under control. The behavioral adaptations at the individual level such as social distancing and masking were critical factors to slowing the transmission of COVID-19, with or without the vaccine (Green et al., 2020). But these behaviors are successful only with wide scale adoption of the preventative guidelines. Often, individuals do not engage in protective health behaviors unless endorsed by members of their political party (e.g., Kahan et al., 2011).

In such a politicized situation, partisan media use can play a critical role. With the increasing number of media choices, including those online, individuals have multiple options that present fragmented information (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). With the growth of 24-hour news channels, talk radio programs and social media platforms, news consumers are equipped with greater number of choices of news. Moreover, individuals often choose to consume media content that align with their partisan ideology (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011). People turn to media platforms that are consistent with their political preferences. As such, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that people would rely on partisan media and trust misinformation based on their political orientation (Stecula, 2020). Indeed, Motta et al. (2020) found that people often ignored beneficial advice from healthcare experts and followed their preferred partisan media outlets. We use data from a content analysis and a U.S. national survey to understand the association between partisan media use and social distancing behavior related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary purposes of the study are to examine 1) the partisan media coverage and framing of the COVID-19 pandemic related to social distancing, and 2) the association between partisan media use and social distancing behavior.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, several health behaviors have been recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with social distancing emphasized as a critical health behavior in the early stages of the pandemic when personal protective equipment (PPE), like masks, were unavailable (Grossman et al., 2020). Consequently, at the time when this study was conducted (late March to early April 2020), social distancing was considered the most effective preventive measure. While strongly
recommended, this practice was a novel and unfamiliar behavior to Americans. A behavioral category that may be related to political ideology or partisanship, as regulations differed in different states depending on the governor of the state.

**Politicization of health**

“Health issues are increasingly becoming politicized” (Fowler & Gollust, 2015, p. 155) and the COVID-19 pandemic is one recent reminder of the increased politicization of health issues. Past research on politicization of health issues has examined various topics such as mammography screening (Fowler & Gollust, 2015); HPV (Fowler & Gollust, 2015) and COVID-19 related health behavior (May, 2020; Motta et al., 2020; Stroebel et al., 2021; Van Scoy et al., 2021). The consensus from these studies is that politicization can impact health attitudes and behavior in critical ways. For example, in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Stroebel et al. (2021) used panel survey data from the U.S. to show that political orientation was a predictor of risk perceptions and health-protective behaviors over time. Van Scoy et al. (2021) analyzed qualitative responses to open-ended questions from a sample in Pennsylvania. The authors found that distrust of the government and concerns about politicization of COVID-19 were among the public’s top generators of anxiety around health messaging. Participants were also worried about media slant and misinformation from government officials. This demonstrated that people are aware of the politicization of the pandemic, which was related to distrust and anxiety around COVID-19 health communication messages.

May (2020) discusses the decline of scientific trust around vaccines and how that has been exacerbated in case of the COVID-19 vaccine. Another relevant study to this discussion is (Motta et al., 2020) research on partisan media content and misinformation about COVID-19. Using a content analysis and an online survey, the researchers found that right-leaning news sources were more likely to discuss COVID-19 misinformation and right-leaning media viewers were more than twice as likely to endorse this misinformation compared to non-right-leaning media viewers.

Beyond COVID-19, Fowler and Gollust (2015) studied the changes that occurred in public opinion related to mammogram screening guidelines and mandatory HPV vaccines for middle school girls as those issues became politicized. Their study added a new dimension to politicization and health research which tends to focus on static cases rather than dynamic changes. The researchers used content analysis and a survey to understand how quickly an issue can become politicized and how the public reacts to that politicization. They found that health issues can become politicized in less than a year and the trends showed an evolutionary development of politicization. They also found that trust in medical institutions decreases as issues become politicized, which could affect behavioral intentions around those health issues. These studies show the grave consequences of politicization of health issues. In the current study we use a content analysis and survey data to better understand the partisan media coverage and its impact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Partisan media use: Theoretical considerations**

Previous studies have provided evidence that people tend to select biased information that confirms their preexisting beliefs and attitudes (Lee, 2020; Southwell & Thorson, 2015). Scholars explain two types of motivations for people to select and trust news information (Kunda, 1990; Lee, 2020); accuracy goal and directional goal. When pursuing an accuracy goal, people are motivated to find and use information in order to arrive at accurate conclusions. When having a directional (e.g., partisanship) goal, individuals are motivated to select and process information that is aligned with their preexisting attitudes and political views. This motivated reasoning may often result in trusting biased information. Hence, people may choose to expose themselves to news congruent with their political preferences (Stroud et al., 2018) but dismiss news incongruent with their preexisting attitudes (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). To minimize cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), people may consume news and information supportive of their preexisting attitudes and those that they would agree with. As such, individuals who hold strong political preferences are likely to view and consume news content aligned with their views (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

Past research show that having more information may not always lead to public opinion being consistent with science (Goedel et al., 1997; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Nisbet, 2005; Nisbet & Goedel, 2007). Motivated reasoning can “act as a perceptual screen” (Hart & Nisbet, 2012, p. 703). The notion that partisans are often motivated to process news and information in a way that would reinforce their preexisting values and attitudes is motivated reasoning and can work across multiple issues and contexts (Kunda, 1990).

A common way to get information consistent with one’s predistortions is to self-select partisan news (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). This purposeful selection of information that “matches one’s predispositions” (Stroud, 2007, p. 416) is known as selective exposure (see Stroud et al., 2018). There is an extensive literature showing the relationship between individual’s beliefs and their decisions to choose certain news media (Barlett et al., 1974; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Stroud, 2007). Although some studies have not found a direct relationship to support selective exposure (Cotton et al., 1985; Freedman, 1965), other scholars have shown that beyond self-selection (Stroud, 2007, 2018), customization of digital information purposely and algorithmically make selective exposure easy (Dylko, 2016).

One commonly cited rationale for purposely seeking information that is consistent with one’s predisposition is to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Individuals can feel uncomfortable when exposed to contradictory information, and like-minded information selection can help reduce that undesirable feeling (Festinger, 1957). Individuals may seek news and information from media sources which are politically partisan in nature, aligned to their predispositions (Butterfuss et al., 2020). This is where partisan media use plays an important role. Research shows that people oftentimes adopt
heuristics to assess the quality and trustworthiness of the information (e.g., Van Boekel et al., 2017). Partisan media may report scientific and healthcare information in a way that slants the information to take political sides. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, conservative sources such as Fox News have downplayed the pandemic and called it a fraud (Pollino, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020). Since media consumers focus on news reported by their preferred partisan media sources and process the information filtered through their preexisting political orientation (Motta et al., 2020), such media consumption could have critical consequences.

**Partisan media and framing pandemics**

People often learn about scientific information such as healthcare from mainstream news sources as well as via social media (e.g., Butterfuss et al., 2020; Dunwoody et al., 2014). The dissemination of complex scientific knowledge is usually simplified by journalists and editors before publishing, so that the information becomes more easily comprehensible by the audience (e.g., Butterfuss et al., 2020). Prior research posits that even “nonpartisan” public health issues increasingly face partisan polarization in part due to the media framing and coverage of partisan media (Baum, 2011).


**Partisan media and COVID-19**

The outbreak of coronavirus has threatened and wreaked havoc to healthcare and economic prosperity around the world. In the U.S., the rate of COVID-19 infections and deaths has been among the highest compared with other countries (Dong et al., 2020). The orders on maintaining social distancing, as well as the limitations regarding social gatherings are related to decreasing the rates of infection. Besides the regulations imposed by the governmental bodies, effective control of the virus also depends on peoples’ willingness to change their personal behaviors and adhere to social distancing and mask wearing practices (Green et al., 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic became a highly polarized issue in the U.S., people were likely to perform health-related behaviors which are in accordance with their individual political affiliations (Kahan et al., 2011), which are often repeated in the partisan media outlets of their choice. Therefore, partisan media can play a critical role in healthcare behaviors against the COVID-19 virus. With the use of message framing (Druckman, 2001; Edelman, 1993) specific aspects of the healthcare topics such as COVID-19 can be emphasized, while other aspects can be diminished from the publics’ attention.

Romer and Jamieson (2020) found that selection and reliance on liberal news sources can strengthen concerns regarding COVID-19 and therefore lead to the tendency to adopt healthcare preventive measures against the virus. On the other hand, consumption and reliance on conservative media sources (e.g., Motta et al., 2020) can lead people to disregard the severity of the pandemic and develop resistance against different healthcare measures (Chan et al., 2017). Similarly, Moon et al. (2021) demonstrated that conservative media use was directly associated with COVID-19 preventive behavior avoidance, whereas liberal media use was indirectly related to preventive behavior. To examine how partisan media covered the issue of social distancing we propose the following research questions and hypotheses.

**RQ1.** What were the main topical focuses of partisan media coverage of the issue of social distancing related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

**RQ2.** What were the primary frames present in the media coverage?

**H1.** Partisan media will frame the COVID-19 pandemic in accordance with the narratives used by their political affiliations.

**H2.** The liberal media will highlight the impact of COVID-19, while the conservative media will downplay it.

**Consequences of using partisan media**

Studies in the past demonstrated that people tend to select partisan media which reports one-sided information and are aligned with their original attitudes and beliefs (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). In the context of health information, consumption of one-sided and partisan news could result in critical healthcare consequences. The negative implications are amplified in the case of a pandemic such as COVID-19, where individual behavior impacts everyone in the community. In a recent study Gollwitzer et al. (2020) used geo tracking data to show that between March and May of 2020, consumption of Fox News was related to lower social distancing. Similarly,
Zhao et al. (2020) demonstrated that health behavioral responses to COVID-19 was indicated by partisan media consumption. To examine the association between partisan media use and social distancing behavior, we propose our last hypothesis:

**H3.** Higher use of conservative media will be associated with lower social distancing behavior.

**Methods**

In the research reported here we use a content analysis and a survey to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses listed above. We examine differential framing of COVID-19 through data-driven findings as well as a manual content analysis. We employ structural topic modeling (STM), dependency parsing, and word co-occurrence and collocation. Next, we use survey data to examine the association between conservative media use and liberal media use, and the engagement in social distancing.

**Analysis of national news coverage**

**News dataset**

Our news coverage dataset consisted of daily counts of articles appearing across fifteen U.S. news outlets between January 1, 2020, and April 1, 2020, as well as the full text of the articles scraped from their websites. Using Media Cloud’s (https://mediacloud.org/) news archive and keyword search, we extracted any article containing a word starting with corona or COVID (e.g., coronavirus, COVID-19, COVIDVirus). We used rvest package in R to scrape the original article data and deleted any foreign language articles (e.g., French from Huffington Post, and Spanish from New York Times and CNN).

We used data from fifteen widely consumed news outlets that reflected the liberal and conservative discourse on COVID-19. To classify these news outlets into their partisan slants, we used (Faris et al., 2017) partisanship scale scores. Faris’s et al. (2017) analyzed the 2016 U.S. election reweet sharing patterns of presidential candidates Trump or Clinton and scored the news sources on a −1.0 to +1.0 partisanship scale. In our study, we classify outlets scoring less than −0.60 in partisanship as clearly left-leaning and those greater than 0.60 as clearly right-leaning. The left-leaning news outlets used in this study include Daily Kos, Raw Story, Vox, Huffington Post, Slate, Daily Beast, NPR and MSNBC. The right-leaning news outlets include Washington Examiner, Fox News, The Daily Caller, InfoWars, Breitbart, Gateway Pundit and Washington Times. This approach yielded 17,322 articles from left-leaning and 21,820 articles from right-leaning media (see Appendix A for details).

**Structural topic modeling**

To understand the topics covered in the articles and their relative proportions in the left and right leaning outlets, we conducted STM of the articles (Roberts et al., 2013). Structural topic modeling was chosen for this study due to its flexibility, and its ability to include metadata information about documents to the corpus prior to analysis (Reich et al., 2015). Based on a “bag-of-words” approach relying on word cooccurrence, the inclusion of metadata in the model helps researchers conduct comparisons including the influence of covariates on topical prevalence (proportion of a document focusing on a topic) and topical content (frequent word usage in a topic; Roberts et al., 2013). We conducted text pre-processing and removed non-English articles. Based on the tenets of journalistic writing, we extracted the first 5 lines as a proxy for including the lead and the nut graph of the article which is supposed to reflect the most newsworthy section of the article.

Following Kuhn (2018) the number of topics selected for the STM in this study is based on the semantic coherence and exclusivity of the topic model. Semantic coherence provides internal coherence of a specific topic and exclusivity helps topics to be different. After comparing models with topic numbers k (2–50), based on coherence exclusivity plot and qualitative analysis of the actual topics, we decided on a 16-topic structure (see Appendix B for selection criterion and Appendix C for topic details).

**Dependency parsing**

Dependency parsing is a popular computational linguistics technique of analysis of texts into logical syntactic components of natural language based on the theoretical tradition of dependency grammar (Nivre, 2010). Using UDPipe, an end-to-end open-source tool used for text segmentation, tokenization, Parts of Speech (POS) tagging, lemmatizing, and dependency parsing, we extracted the verbs and adjectives closest to proper names “Trump,” “Biden,” “Fauci” and nouns “COVID/corona.” The language usage associated with these words in the partisan media sources gave insights about the differential framing of the pandemic and policies.

**Content analysis of a random sample of articles**

Next, we conducted a content analysis of the full text of a random 600 sample of news articles published by the fifteen U.S. news outlets. The purpose of the manual content analysis was to understand the media content in-depth and to complement the computer assisted analysis and not so much as a stand-alone content analysis. We had chosen 600 articles as a convenient sample and used sample () function in r to generate a random sample of articles from our corpus. The content analysis helped us validate our data as well as take a deeper dive into the content and analyze the language and frames used. In the manual content analysis, we included multiple variables such as whether the articles mentioned Trump, the political slant of the article, and topics such as covering COVID-19 behavioral guidelines and symptoms. Besides, we included both consistent and unique frames. Consistent frames such as episodic (stories that were event specific) vs. thematic (stories that gave a broader perspective to the pandemic) and strategic (stories that covered the pandemic as a “horse race,” a political win or loss) vs. issue frames (stories that highlighted the issues associated with the pandemic) were included for a broader understanding of the coverage. We also added frames that were specific to the pandemic, such as risk frame (stories that highlighted or downplayed the risks from the virus) and the
“othering” frame (stories that highlighted the pandemic in countries other than the U.S and/or blamed other countries for the pandemic). We included the six frames with the help of the literature (Iyengar, 1991; Monson, 2017) as well as after two of the authors carefully read a sample of the articles. Our intercoder percentage agreement was 95% and the average Krippendorff’s Alpha was 0.89.

**Survey data**

Responding to widespread “community transmission” within the U.S. (the virus being transmitted by individuals with no travel history) in mid-March 2020, a survey was rapidly assembled and collected by a cross-disciplinary team of researchers at a large Midwestern university. Data were collected from March 26 to April 1 2020, using a Qualtrics panel, a sample of U.S. residents based on a pre-recruited pool of panelists (N = 2,251). This sample also contained a probability sub-sample of residents of the Midwestern state in which the sponsoring university is located. The U.S. sample was also a probability subsample. Its demographic composition matched that of the U.S. population. Data were collected after receiving exempt status from the Human Subjects Board of the University. All participants provided informed consent before data were collected. Participants had a mean age of 46.6 (SD = 17.0), 58.2% were female, and 68.9% were White. In terms of education, 22.4% had some high school or a high school diploma, 21.4% had some college but no degree, 35.8% had an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, and 20.4% had an advanced degree.

**Measures**

**Social distancing.** Social distancing behavior was measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they engage in social distancing using a battery of eleven questions (M = 4.41, SD = .79, α = .92) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = all the time).

**Partisan media use.** Partisan media consumption was measured using two items related to conservative media use (M = 2.32, SD = 1.28, α = .82) and two items related to liberal media use (M = 2.24, SD = 1.20, α = .81).

**Political orientation.** Political orientation was assessed with two items: party I.D. (1 = Democrat: n = 837, 56.2%, 2 = Republican: n = 652, 43.8%) and institutional trust (M = 3.81, SD = .89, α = .89).

**COVID-19 awareness.** Considering the important role of knowledge and awareness in shaping preventative health behaviors, we included two COVID-19 awareness indicators: perceived effectiveness of social distancing (M = 4.27, SD = .77, α = .83) and knowledge of COVID-19 transmission (M = 4.56, SD = .74, α = .76).

**Control variables.** Lastly, in order to control for potential confounds, we included four demographic variables in this analysis: age, race, gender, and education. Details about the survey instrument can be found in the online supplementary materials in Appendix D.

**Results**

**Analysis of media content**

Research question 1 examined the main topical focuses of the coverage. Appendix E shows the relative attention of partisan media outlets to coronavirus in their overall coverage. Further, plots also show the relative attention to other COVID-19 related behavioral guidelines by the left leaning and right leaning outlets. The right and the left give very similar amounts of attention to different guideline keywords during the first three months of 2020. However, we see a sharp difference in the relative attention to social distancing keywords between the left and the right with the left focusing more on social distancing and crowd-related behaviors.

Structural topic modeling revealed 16 topics and themes covered by partisan media (Table 1). We used the topic’s top words (highest probability to be included in the topic), top FREX words (the words that are both frequent and exclusive, thereby distinguishing topics), and representative texts to generate labels for all topics (Roberts et al., 2013). Additional details are provided in Appendix C. The STM results show highest focus on articles Self-Care (9.6%), International News (9.2%), Stimulus Bill (8.1%), Guidelines and Shutdowns (7.7%), Hospitals (7.6%), Economy (6.9) and Anti-Trump (5.3%). Through the topic network map (Table 1) which shows the topics as labels, the topic proportion as size of labels and topic correlations as edge weights, we see a high degree of association between articles on stimulus bills and economy. Further, topics on COVID-19 statistics (numbers), guidelines and shutdowns, hospitals and science too show a high degree of association. The plots in Figure 1 show the effect of a media ideology covariate on the structural topic model topics and demonstrate a clear difference between the partisan coverage of COVID-19. The results show that left slanted media covered topics with anti-Trump discourse (Topic 2), stimulus bill (Topic 10), and self-care (Topic 9) in greater proportion than the right slanted media. Right leaning outlets, in turn, focused on international news (topic 14) and the topics on business or economy (Topic 8, 11) and sports (Topic 13). Most of the other topics were covered in similar proportions by both sides.

To take a deeper dive into the language used in association with Trump, the government, corona virus and hoax, we conducted dependency parsing (See Appendix F). We observed a clear difference in the language usage between the left and right. While we saw a difference in the nouns, adjectives, and verbs used in the entire corpus, the biggest difference was in the valence of verbs associated with the words “trump” and “biden” in the left and the right. The right showed Trump in a positive light and being in control and used verbs like announce, handle, approve, declare etc. more frequently for him. The left does not show as much confidence in Trump and used negative verbs like claim, attack, downplay, argue frequently. The verbs and adjectives which frequently co-occur with coronavirus or COVID-19 in the left and right also had significant differences. While the right portrays COVID-19 as “under control,” the left
highlights the virus and portrays it as a major threat which is out of control via phrases like “COVID crisis.” Lastly, we also saw both the right and the left using language like coronavirus hoax and fake news. However, our content analysis showed that the left used those terms to critique Trump and right-wing media’s usage of these terms.

To answer research question 2, we examined the primary frames present in the media coverage. The content analysis of 600 news articles from the corpus demonstrated the association between media ideology and framing. Our findings show that a majority of the articles used an episodic frame (54.1%). The right leaning media using episodic frame more often than the left ($\chi^2 = 5.487, df = 1, p < 0.01$). The thematic frame was used in 30% of the news articles, and the left leaning media used thematic frame more often than the right ($\chi^2 = 7.774, df = 1, p < .005$). Though we saw a sporadic use of issue frame (10.6%) and strategic frame (10.8%), issue frame had no statistically significant association with partisanship ($\chi^2 = 3.390, df = 1, p = 0.07$) while strategic frame had a mild association with partisanship such that the left leaning media used strategic frame more often than the right leaning media ($\chi^2 = 4.040, df = 1, p < .05$). We observed a significant association between media ideology and the portrayal of Donald Trump ($\chi^2 = 83.675, df = 3, p < .001$). As hypothesized (H1), the right leaning media depicted Trump positively and in control of the situation, while the left leaning media critiqued him heavily. Partisan media did support their own political parties ($\chi^2 = 55.286, df = 5, p < .001$). While the left leaning media reported social distancing behavior and guidelines more often than the right leaning media ($\chi^2 = 5.379, df = 1, p < .01$), both the right and the left leaning media had sparse coverage on the symptoms of COVID-19. H2 was also supported. Examining the “risk” frame, the content analysis showed that while the right leaning media downplayed the virus ($\chi^2 = 25.768, df = 1, p < .001$), the left leaning media was more prompt at
highlighting the risks associated with COVID-19 \( (\chi^2 = 137.861, \text{df} = 1, p < .001) \). Further, there was a clear difference in the portrayal of COVID-19 crisis in the U.S. The left leaning media depicted the pandemic as “out of control” while the right leaning media seemed to depict the virus as “under control” \( (\chi^2 = 181.548, \text{df} = 3, p < .001) \).

Survey

Appendix E provides the demographic characteristics of the sample. To test our last hypothesis, we ran hierarchical regression analysis (see Table 2) employing the media use variables to predict the extent to which respondents engaged in social distancing. Among the demographic factors, older people \( (b = .068, p < .001) \) and females \( (b = .093, p < .01) \) were more likely to engage in social distancing, as were the more educated \( (b = .068, p < .001) \) and non-whites \( (b = .083, p < .01) \). Moreover, higher institutional trust was associated with higher engagement in social distancing \( (b = .115, p < .001) \). Further, our results revealed that the greater exposure to right leaning media was associated with lower level of engagement in social distancing, albeit weakly \( (b = -0.066, p < .05) \). On the other hand, left leaning media was not related to engagement in social distancing \( (b = .023, p > .05) \). In terms of the COVID-19 awareness variables, respondents who perceived social distancing as effective were more likely to engage in social distancing \( (b = .303, p < .001) \), as were those with knowledge of COVID-19 transmission \( (b = .204, p < .001) \).

Discussion

The findings from the content analysis show that partisan media coverage of COVID-19 was different between conservative and liberal media outlets, which supports our hypotheses. Our study echoes and adds to findings from past research on media framing of pandemics and their association with public attitudes and behavior. The findings support our hypothesis that partisan media will turn the seemingly unpoltical issue of a pandemic into a partisan showdown. Our topic modeling
shows a clear prevalence of anti-Trump discourse (topic 2) in liberal media while the conservative media seems to follow the other common framing of pandemic- distancing through the prevalent coverage of international news (topic 14), where they primarily highlight the pandemic in other countries or blame China for the situation. This finding was validated in our manual content analysis where we found that “othering” frame was used by the conservative media to highlight the pandemic in other countries and to blame China for the virus. “If China acted earlier, coronavirus cases could have been cut by as much as 95%” (Ciaccia, 2020) is an example from Fox news.

Further, the dependency parsing, and word co-occurrence study demonstrates that the left does not show any confidence in Trump’s handling of the pandemic and uses negative verbs more frequently. In contrast, the right depicts Trump in a positive light and as being in control of the situation. For instance, this quote from Mr. Rush Limbaugh notes, “it looks like the coronavirus is being weaponized as yet another element to bring down Donald Trump” (Bowden, 2020), a sentiment that was frequent in the conservative coverage. The conservative media also discussed how the virus impacts only people with preexisting conditions and the elderly. For example, many of the Fox news articles that “the coronavirus has caused only mild or moderate symptoms … but, for a few, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it could trigger more severe illnesses…” (Aaro, 2020). On the other hand, liberal media often emphasized the dangerous nature of the virus and often blamed Trump for his inaction.

The strategy frame was evident in many topics. Both the left and right media discussed certain issues as a political win or loss. These include the media discourse around stimulus bill (topic 10), guidelines and shutdowns (topic 6) and economy (topic 8). The framing of all three topics differs significantly as a function of the outlets’ partisan affiliations. The narrative surrounding stimulus bill in right media often highlighted the Democrats as impeders in the process and the Republicans as doing a good job. Breitbart reports “Nancy Pelosi Proposes 1,400-Page Coronavirus Bill Stuffed with Special Interest Goodies” (Spiering, 2020). The left leaning media who side with Democrats reported “Top Democrats and administration officials said they were optimistic about finalizing a compromise on a $2 trillion economic package after agreeing to add oversight for a bailout fund” (Cochrane & Fandos, 2020). Hence, the discourse surrounding stimulus bill has been framed frequently as a partisan battle. Similarly, the topic, shutdown and guidelines, were also seeped in deeply partisan language with the right actively against shutdowns and highlighting their economic impact and effects on personal freedom, “Coronavirus 'Lockdowns' Are Ultimately Assaults on Freedom” (Church, 2020) as well as blaming the democrats for their positions “Fact Check: Joe Biden Did Not Call for Country to Be Shut Down One Week Earlier” (Reutters, 2020). The left, on the other hand, supported the shutdowns and actively advocated for them "Lockdown Delays Cost at Least 36,000 Lives, Data Show” (Glanz & Robertson, 2020). In other words, our study supported our hypothesis that partisan media framed COVID-19 in accordance with the narratives used by their political affiliations.

The findings from our quantitative analysis demonstrated the broad picture of the partisan media coverage of COVID-19 during the first few months of the pandemic. The structural topic modeling revealed 16 topics (Appendix C). These patterns show that the conservative media’s coverage of topics such as the shutdowns, numbers of COVID-19 cases, and the international stories were higher than the liberal media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block1: Control variables</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (Minority = 1)</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Female = 1)</td>
<td>.093</td>
<td>.002***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block2: Political variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party I.D.</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional trust</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block3: Partisan news media use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Media</td>
<td>−.066</td>
<td>.025*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Media</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td></td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block3: COVID-19 related variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td>.303</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total R²</td>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All the coefficients are standardized. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
approach allowed us to go deeper and probe the coverage in-depth. For example, although the right leaning media covered shutdowns intensely, it was primarily to criticize these restrictions and make them a political issue. Similarly, the coverage of international stories was mainly to highlight COVID-19 cases in other countries and condemn China for the virus.

In general, the findings from the content analysis reaffirm the political nature of COVID-19 (Rothgerber et al., 2020) and how the partisan media displayed this political showdown in their coverage. Due to the changes in the media ecology, the current media landscape in the U.S. consists of extreme partisan media organizations (Frisby, 2018). In general, the news from partisan media outlets is “framed, spun, and slanted so that certain political agendas are advanced” (Jamieson et al., 2007, p. 26). In the case of COVID-19, our findings show that due to the conservative political agenda, coverage from right leaning outlets downplayed the virus with possibly dangerous consequences.

We observed the association of this conservative coverage with behavior in our survey findings. Our survey findings showed that even when accounting for a range of demographic, political orientation, and COVID-19 awareness, conservative media was linked, modestly, with lower social distancing behavior. Research has shown that people may not engage in health behaviors if they are not endorsed by the political leaders of their preferred party (e.g., Kahan et al., 2011). Indeed, our research demonstrates this effect in the case of COVID-19. Moreover, prior research has shown that exposure to conservative media strengthens individuals’ misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2019). This is true in case of COVID-19 where sources such as Fox News have been found to have spread misinformation about COVID-19 (Allassan, 2020). As a result, this combination of partisan coverage downplaying the virus and false information about the virus being a hoax (Pollino, 2020) is likely to influence people to disregard behavior such as social distancing; this is a dangerous ramification of the exposure to conservative media, which is hinted in our findings.

Our study has direct implications for health communication researchers and practitioners. In line with past research, our findings showed that partisan media’s coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with people’s COVID-19 related preventive behavior (Moon et al., 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). Health communication researchers need to pay attention to this interplay of politics with health, as public health issues such as a pandemic can become politicized. As shown in our findings, the politicization of a pandemic is related to preventive behavior, which also includes vaccination (Killgore et al., 2021). To better understand health decision making, communication researchers need to pay more attention to political factors such as partisan media use, political ideology, and partisanship. As a result of this politicization, public health messages will need to be tailored to reach audiences with different political ideology, partisan ID, gender, or age. Recent research has shown individuals’ reaction to different message frames and the moderating role of partisan media use in case of the COVID-19 vaccine (see Borah, 2022). Health practitioners should target messages to specific audiences, so that the information will resonate with them.

Our study is not without limitations. The content analysis covers media productions until April 2020. Future research should examine the media coverage for a longer period. The manual coding used a convenience sample of 600 articles, which means these results are not generalizable. Future research may examine these concepts with a larger sample. Our survey is cross-sectional and was conducted during a narrow window at the start of the pandemic. As a result, the findings from the survey are not causal but correlational, and the connection to the content analysis is implicit. The partisan media measures in the survey included two items each, which may not be representative of the media landscape. Future research could include more items with other partisan media outlets as examples to generalize the results to the entire population of media outlets. Moreover, we analyzed social distancing as a sole outcome. While we aimed to focus on the most common preventive behavior at the time this study was conducted, there were missed opportunities to examine other preventive measures such as vaccination, wearing masks, or washing hands. Future research should take an integrative perspective to examine the association between partisan media use and other preventive measure behaviors. Most importantly, the findings from our study do not allow for any causal conclusions. We use a content analysis and survey data to understand the associations between partisan media use and social distancing behavior. Future research could use experimental design to test the hypotheses and establish causal relationships. The experimental manipulations can be based on the content analysis, which will help to understand these associations clearly. Future research can also examine the role of moral reasoning to the understanding of health behavior. Despite some of these limitations, our study used multiple methodologies to examine the interplay between partisan media use and social distancing behavior. Our study is a crucial step for understanding the role of partisan media, in particular, conservative media’s function in COVID-19 related behavior and the impact of politicization of health on the public.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.
ORCID
Porismita Borah http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1140-4233

References

Ciaccia, C. (2020, April 14). If China acted earlier, coronavirus cases could have been cut by as much as 95 percent: Former FDA chief. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/science/if-china-had-acted-earlier-coronavirus-cases-could-have-been-cut-by-as-much-as-95-percent-study-says


