More than "Fake News"? The Media as a Malicious Gatekeeper and a Bully in the Discourse of Candidates in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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Abstract: While the debate around the prevalence and potential effects of *fake news* has received considerable scholarly attention, less research has focused on how political elites and pundits weaponized *fake news* to delegitimize the media. In this study, we examine the rhetoric in 2020 U.S. presidential primary candidates Facebook advertisements. Our analysis suggests that Republican and Democratic candidates alike attack and demean the news media on several themes, including castigating them for malicious gatekeeping, for being out of touch with the views of the public, and for being a bully. Only Trump routinely attacks the news media for trafficking in falsehoods and for colluding with other interests to attack his candidacy. Our findings highlight the ways that candidates instrumentalize the news media for their own rhetorical purposes; further constructing the news media as harmful to democracy.

Keywords: Fake News; 2020 U.S. Election; Social Media; Trump

1. Introduction

The term *fake news* has been the subject of substantive public debate since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Scholars have argued that *fake news* is used by journalists, politicians, and pundits in ways that harm public understanding of what they are talking about (Van Duyn and Collier 2019). Researchers have focused on *fake news* as a *genre*—referring to concepts, such as misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, partisan news, biased news, etc., and discussed the boundaries of what is "fake" (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). Less research has focused on *fake news* as a label "describing the political instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media" (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). To address this gap, we study how political elites talk about the media to investigate whether the term has been instrumentalized by candidates during elections.

We focus on candidates discourse about the news media during the 2020 U.S. presidential election primaries. Given that the term *fake news* has been a feature of President Donald Trump's rhetoric (Meeks 2020), we examine how the candidates discuss the media in their paid advertising, and whether their references to the news media differ from Trump. While it is possible that Democrats contrast themselves with Trump by defending the media from his attacks, they may also attack the media given long-standing tensions between candidates and journalists (Stromer-Galley and Bryant 2011).

We conducted a thematic analysis to investigate 2020 U.S. presidential primary candidates' Facebook and Instagram ads that referenced the media. Our sample includes 9 Democrats' and Trump's ads that ran between June 26, 2019 and April 8, 2020. We find that the attacks on the news media come from both sides. Although Trump stands out for his hostile tone, Democrats use similar strategies—in particular, portraying the media as a "malicious gatekeeper" that is "out of touch" with the electorate. Although characterizations of the news media as fake are restricted to Trump's discourse, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, two top Democratic candidates, also attack the news media for having biased coverage. These findings indicate that the instrumentalization of the news media for political gain is conducted by candidates on both sides, but Trump's rhetoric against the news media is distinctive in its vilification and antipathy of the institution.

2. **The Evolving Concept of Fake News**

The news media plays a critical function in democracy by supporting the imperative of an informed electorate (Blumler and Cushion 2014). Journalism performs a crucial role insofar as it informs and educates citizens about what is happening and gives publicity to the actions of governmental and political institutions ("watchdog"). It also provides a platform for political discourse, and serves as a channel for the advocacy of political viewpoints (McNair 2017).

The democratic role of the media is challenged by widespread decline in trust in the press, the willingness of the public to believe in news content (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Trust in journalism relies on the expectation that the media performs its functions. Although scholars have argued that institutional trust is shaped by prior performance or is an extension of social trust, Hanitzsch and colleagues (2018) argue that polarization undermines trust in the press insofar as strong partisans perceive biases in otherwise neutral stories—the "hostile media effect"

(Tsfati and Cohen 2012). Another explanation to the decline of media trust is the "trust nexus"—the idea that distrust in journalism is connected to widespread disdain and mistrust in all institutions (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). When citizens are unsure if they can trust the institutions that uphold democracy, populist discourses can leverage hostile attitudes against the "establishment" and the news media (Schulz, Wirth, and Müller 2020).

Candidate and then President Trump has exhibited extreme hostility towards the news media. When he launched his presidential bid in the spring of 2015, he relied heavily on the news media to propel his candidacy, yet, ironically, he aggressively attacked the media (Lakoff 2017; Mercieca 2020). Scholars find evidence that elite discourse that characterizes the news as *fake* may have detrimental effects on the public, for instance, leading to lower levels of trust in the media and to confusion about whether information is real or fake (Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

It is in this context that the discussion around *fake news* dominates current public and scholarly concern. The concept of fake news, however, has taken on different usages and meanings over the past two decades. Before its current meaning, the term was used to describe satirical news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, whose content was factual but irreverent and comical (Baym 2005). When Colbert began hosting *The Colbert Report*, he coined the term *truthiness* in 2005 to capture the Republican and conservative propensity to construct an ideologically desirable knowledge system for political purposes, regardless of the veracity of that knowledge system. *Truthiness* might be juxtaposed conceptually with *lies* and *bullshit*. *Lies* constitute an understanding and deliberate misrepresentation of the true state of affairs, while *bullshit* is unconcerned with accuracy, representation, or misrepresentation of reality; its primary goal is to affect people on an emotional level, bypassing the need for truth (Frankfurt 2005). The wielding of the term *fake news* is closer to the notion of bullshit than lying. We can say that "fake" information is not in direct opposition to "truth," but something more complex. Fake news as a rhetorical phenomenon is best conceptualized, not merely as institutional mistrust, but as ambivalence toward, and even contempt for, empirical knowledge; it's bullshit.

Concern about deceptive information has taken on renewed urgency over the past four years for several reasons. The first is the reporting of actual efforts by foreign governments to undertake systematic disinformation campaigns targeted at the United States with the effort of sowing discord and dissent (Jamieson 2018), as well as the concerns with regular citizens spreading false or misleading information on social media (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019). The

second is the repeated and aggressive efforts by President Trump and his supporters to attack the legitimate news media as fake news. Apropos our current context, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) distill the concept of *fake news* into two dimensions: genre and label. The fake news genre is the production and research pertaining to the construction of news that aims to deceive. The fake news label is the effort to delegitimize the news media. The analysis in this article will focus on the second dimension, highlighting the ways that political elites have sought to undermine the function and importance of journalism in the 2020 US presidential election.

3. The Discursive Power of the Fake News Frame

Much has already been written and researched with regard to the genre of fake news. Studies have examined the production, the diffusion (Brummette et al. 2018; Ross and Rivers 2018; Bovet and Makse 2019), and the attitudinal and behavioral effects of exposure to fake news and fake news frames (Lee and Hosam 2020; Tamul et al. 2020; van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Roozenbeek 2020). Scholarship in this genre also examines the role of digital media affordances, especially social media platforms, in facilitating the spread and uptake of this problematic information (Bakir and McStay 2018; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). Less has been written to date about the weaponization of *fake news* to delegitimize the news media and its function in democracy.

Donald Trump, in particular, has wielded the label of "fake news" extensively. According to Lakoff (2017), Trump and his team deployed the label at the start of his presidency as a way to describe and delegitimize any news that is not reported on by the alt right media sphere. Anderson (2020, 235) describes Trump's use of the label as a co-optation of the phrase from efforts to "mislead or to deceive" to "describe any news he doesn't like". As Keener (2019, 137) highlights, Trump uses the label to discredit the media for not abiding "his personal narrative of truth". In other words, it is bullshit, not lies that Trump is intimating in his constant attacks on the news media.

Although some have argued that the label has functioned as a "floating signifier" in that different communities wield the term in different ways (Farkas and Schou 2019), we align ourselves with the view argued by Mercieca (2020) that the label is being actively used as a weapon against the news media. Koliska, Chadha, and Burns (2020, 1499) caution that Trump's rhetorical attacks "not only undermine traditional claims of factual and accurate truth-telling and journalism's democratic role that underpin the institutional myth of American journalism[,] but

also insinuate a disconnect between institutional values and journalistic practices on the one hand and societal expectations on the other, suggesting a lack of institutional legitimacy and authority".

This emerging area of concern is the "weaponization" of the term "fake news" by politicians, pundits, and journalists—that is, when political elites accuse others (news organizations, journalists, politicians, scientists, etc.) of fakeness, even when the information is verifiably true, or when false or misleading information is unintentionally reported and later corrected (Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019). The rhetorical phenomenon of "fake news" has invaded discussion across many arenas, but its most apparent use, and the focus of this study, is in the discourse of politicians.

While Trump has received heightened focus by scholars for his use of the "fake news" label, we seek to understand whether his rhetorical tactics are unique to him, and whether his Democratic opponents not only refrain from similar delegitimizing attacks, but possibly even defend the news media. Moreover, studies that focused on Trump tend to lend heavily either on his Tweets or his public speeches. Those tend to circulate to the already-converted—those who align themselves to Trump's candidacy or the Republican Party more broadly. We expand the analysis to look at paid advertisements by the candidates on social media. Paid ads on platforms like Facebook reach mass-targeted audiences, with the hope of reaching past supporters as well as potential supporters (Stromer-Galley 2019).

4.   "Fake News" on the Campaign Trail

Prior scholarship has focused on public social media posts—particularly on Twitter— to analyze the rhetoric of Donald Trump. For instance, Meeks (2020) analyzed how Trump used Twitter to refer to the news media and found substantive negativity, either in the form of direct attacks towards the news media or as claims of biases, and those attacks rose substantially during his first year in office when compared to the campaign trail. In this paper, we turn our attention to advertising on Facebook and Instagram. Social media advertisement is one of the main venues adopted by political campaigns to reach supporters in the United States (Stromer-Galley 2019). Campaigns leverage the affordances of social media, such as the ability to micro-target, reach specific publics, test different messages, and deliver cost-effective messages to mobilize voters (Kreiss 2016). In the run up to the 2020 presidential election, the Trump and the Biden campaigns have spent over US$ 217 million on Facebook and Instagram alone (Stromer-Galley et al. 2020).

While public posts on Twitter may serve the function to set the media agenda and raise awareness to political arguments and issues, social media ads may serve a distinct rhetorical and strategic function insofar as it allows candidates to reach specific audiences—as well as potentially convert the undecided. Campaigns leverage microtargeting to run several adverts with tweaks in language and style to reach specific demographics and to appeal to distinct segments of the electorate. Unlike public tweets, which are often picked up and amplified by the news media, ads are not readily visible to the broader public.

Finally, campaign advertisement has been the focus of political communication scholarship for several decades, but until the 2016 U.S. election there has been little awareness of, and attention to, social media advertising. Researchers had been primarily exploring the use of public posts on social media, but controversies around microtargeting advertising practices in 2016 raised attention to the need for transparency and accountability around digital ads. Several reports have uncovered nefarious practices, such as voting suppression and foreign influence, that leveraged the affordances of social media to target vulnerable segments of the electorate, leading to public inquiries, hearings in the US Congress, and public debate around the role of social media in elections (Jamieson 2018).

Given the relevance of social media advertising in contemporary political campaigns, this study contributes to the emerging literature around the weaponization of fake news rhetoric by analyzing campaign ads on Facebook and Instagram during the 2020 US presidential primaries. Our analysis aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1) When candidates talk about the news media in their social media ads, do they frame them as having a positive or negative role in the campaign?

RQ2) What are the main themes used to describe the role of the media in the election?

RQ3) What are the differences and similarities between how Democrats and Trump talk about the media in social media ads?

5. Methods

We analyzed the text of the ads that the presidential candidates ran on Facebook and Instagram from the first Democratic debate on June 26, 2019 until April 8, 2020 when Sanders dropped out, making Joe Biden the presumptive nominee. Ads were collected using the Facebook Ad Library

API. We focused on the primaries for a set of reasons: while the general election receives more attention from researchers, the primaries offer a unique opportunity to analyze discourse patterns both between and within parties.

We built a lexicon—a list of words— to identify ads that talked about the news media. The lexicon included common words referring to the media, names of major news outlets, as well as a set of references to the news media commonly made by Donald Trump, (e.g. lamestream media, coastal elites, mainstream media, MSM). These words were selected based on a post-hoc analysis of ads in our database, as well as searching for media references in the "Trump Twitter Archive" (2020).

Using this approach, we identified 504 ads. Upon a closer analysis, only 98 ads referenced the news media, as some of the words in the lexicon were associated with false positives (*e.g.,* time was a term that captured both the news magazine and chronos). The sample included nine Democratic candidates (Amy Klobuchar, Andrew Yang, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Mike Bloomberg, Pete Buttigieg, Tom Steyer, and Tulsi Gabbard) and one Republican (Donald Trump).

We first identified the valence of the ads as were positive, negative or neutral towards the news media. Negative messages use adjectives to reference the media in a derogatory or hostile way. Neutral messages reference the news media without adjectives or descriptors. Positive messages praise the media or highlight its positive impact. The co-authors conducted this analysis independently, and then adjudicated the results.

After this categorization of valence, we conducted a thematic analysis following a two-cycle coding process (Saldaña 2009). In the first cycle, three researchers examined each ad and inductively assigned themes. Then, the researchers met and discussed the common topics emerging from the analyses, identifying six main themes (Legitimizing Gatekeeper, Malicious Gatekeeper, Out of Touch, Purveyor of Falsehoods, Collusion, and Bully) and one generic category, "Others". In the second cycle, two researchers independently re-coded the ads using these themes, and then adjudicated disagreements. Given the emergence of a common theme in the "Other" category, a new theme was created (Media Appearance/Endorsement). Themes were not exclusive, meaning that an ad could fall into multiple themes.

6. Analysis

As Table 1 indicates, ads that referenced the news media in negative terms came predominantly from four candidates: Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Tulsi Gabbard, and Donald Trump. No ads referenced the news media in a positive light, nor did any candidates defended the news media against the attacks by President Trump, answering our first question.

The most common theme was the media as a malicious gatekeeper, as purveyor of falsehoods, and as "out of touch". To a lesser extent, candidates sought being legitimized by the media, and posted ads highlighting media appearances or endorsement. Ads flagged as "other" referred to 'buying media', that is, asking for donations to support ad buys.

Table 1 - Valence of Ads per Candidate

	Number of Ads	Negative	Neutral
Amy Klobuchar	1	0	1
Andrew Yang	2	0	2
Bernie Sanders	19	17	2
Donald Trump	48	43	5
Elizabeth Warren	10	7	3
Joe Biden	7	0	7
Mike Bloomberg	2	1	1
Pete Buttigieg	2	1	1
Tom Steyer	4	2	2
Tulsi Gabbard	3	3	0

Table 2 presents the counts of themes per candidate. The numbers are higher than each candidates' total ads because one ad could contain several themes. In what follows, we investigate how these themes were used and examine tendencies between and within parties.

Table 2. Themes by Candidate

	Collusion	Legitimizing gatekeeper	Malicious gatekeeper	Fake	Out of touch	Bully	Appearances	Other
Amy Klobuchar	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Andrew Yang	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Bernie Sanders	0	0	14	0	11	9	0	0
Donald Trump	20	12	22	37	7	25	0	1
Elizabeth Warren	0	3	5	0	5	4	1	1
Joe Biden	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	1
Mike Bloomberg	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Pete Buttigieg	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Tom Steyer	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0
Tulsi Gabbard	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0

6.1 The Media as a Gatekeeper

References to the function of the media as a gatekeeper, selecting information to reach the public, was present in several ads. The tone of these ads was negative, claiming that the media was making decisions based on obscure intentions or was unfairly prioritizing some candidates. There was also a legitimizing gatekeeping frame, with candidates expressing a desire for the media to acknowledge them so as to advance their candidacy.

The malicious gatekeeper theme appeared alone eight times and was also associated with the idea that the media was out of touch, a bully, or a purveyor of falsehoods. The theme was common in Trump's, Sanders's and Warren's ads. There are relevant differences, though, in how these candidates referred to malicious gatekeeping practices.

Democrats implied that the "mainstream" or the "corporate" media was not covering the campaign fairly. They framed the media as disregarding the candidate while giving attention to

others, a combination of malicious gatekeeper and "bully". Warren and Sanders used this theme along with claims that the media was "out of touch" with the electorate.

Warren's malicious gatekeeping references characterized the media as not giving her the same amount of airtime as her opponents. In one ad, she complained that "The night of the Iowa Caucuses, CNN didn't air Elizabeth's full speech. But they aired the speeches of the other candidates she beat." She does not directly attack the media but rather frames them as being unfair and counting her out. Another ad on the same theme claims: "After the Nevada caucuses, CNN and MSNBC cut away in the middle of Elizabeth speaking", proceeding to cast doubts on the fairness of gatekeeping practices.

Sanders framed the news media as elitist, aligned with interests that were unfavorable to his candidacy, leading to malicious gatekeeping practices. One ad declares: "We are taking on the Democratic establishment. We are taking on billionaires, super PACs, the corporate media, and the whole damn 1 percent. And so far we are winning." A theme that ran in multiple ads urged targets to donate so as to "help us report a number that will shock the corporate media and political establishment". Such claims construct the media as a malicious gatekeeper that does not give his campaign credit, justifying the need for donations to serve as proof of popular support. Like Warren, Sanders portrays the news media as unfair. Some ads ask targets to donate to help get his message to the public because "We can't rely on the corporate media to do it." Ads ran around a Democratic debate emphasizing that targets need to contribute because "the political establishment and the corporate media no doubt will be looking for any excuse to write us off." The news media thus serves as a foil that Sanders must best.

Trump's ads are distinctly different. Some ads attack the news media in the context of getting targets to give money to his campaign to "ensure we get our positive America First message past the FAKE NEWS." This message was encapsulated in a set of ads targeted at "loyal supporters like YOU". These ads either attacked the news media using the label of fake news or claiming the existence of a "Liberal media filter" to attack the credibility of the coverage and the media's gatekeeping practices, while also positioning the campaign as trustworthy news source. One ad targeted at the rhetorically constructed audience of "Trump supporters like you" urges contributions "to let the fake news know what Real Americans think", implying malicious gatekeeping as well as falsehoods.

While all ads by Warren and Sanders urged supporters to donate, focusing on "grassroots" support and on demonstrating the "strength" of the campaigns, Trump focused on different calls to action: from claims that "We will need extensive funding to fight the Fake News filter, and I need YOUR help to make that happen" to urging supporters to take surveys, including the "Mainstream Media Accountability" survey ("That's why I need you to FIGHT BACK and hold the mainstream media accountable."), his belligerent tone constructed the media as the real enemy to his candidacy.

Despite the malicious gatekeeping frame being the most common, thirteen Trump ads and three Warren ads referred to the media as a "legitimizing" gatekeeper, wherein the candidates seem to want the media to acknowledge their candidacies or their popular support. In Trump's ads, the legitimizing theme surfaced in messages asking targets to help "send a message to them" around key events (*e.g.* the New Hampshire primary). While these ads also attacked the media, they urged supporters to prove something to the news media, as if coverage was needed to legitimize campaign efforts: "Patriots, like you, have to turn out so we can show them we want to keep America GREAT."

Warren's ads calling for the media to legitimize her campaign urged supporters to act to "show the pundits and skeptics the strength of this movement." These messages were focused on donations (before a FEC deadline and Super Tuesday) to "prove" to the media that she enjoyed grassroots support. Warren's references to the news media are not as belligerent as Trump's—instead of generalizing her criticism, she only refers to "pundits and skeptics" and provides evidence to claim that the media coverage was unfair.

Tulsi Gabbard also framed the news media as having a powerful gatekeeping influence. The campaign used both frames: One ad declared: "When CNN decides who gets to have a voice, the American people lose", implying malicious gatekeeping—while another ad highlighted concerns around securing paper ballots and called on the news media to help protect the elections: "If our leaders & media want to protect our elections, not just score political pts, first & most important thing we must do is institute b/up paper ballots by passing my Securing America's Elections Act so no one can manipulate our votes & hack our elections."

6.2 The Media as a Purveyor of Falsehoods

The second most frequent theme was "the media as purveyor of falsehoods", which appeared exclusively in Trump's ads. In most of these ads, "Fake News" was a generalization, not in reference to specific outlets or stories. For instance: "The FAKE NEWS media has spent the last two years LYING to the American people and trying to take me down". These ads also had a belligerent tone, such as "We need to let the mainstream media know that we are FINISHED putting up with their constant lies and attacks." Another ad attacking the media claims that "They are so blinded by their anti-Trump agenda that they have decided to completely disregard FACTS and instead choose to continue peddling their lies and conspiracy theories. They are truly a threat to our Democracy." These examples also demonstrate how Trump's claims that the media was spreading falsehoods were combined with framing the media as a "bully".

CNN was the only news outlet singled out by Trump: "Outlets like CNN can't accept the fact that the WITCH HUNT they pushed for two years turned out to be a total farce.", and urging targets to complete the "Official Mainstream Media Accountability Survey" to let "the FAKE NEWS know that we won't stand for their blatant lies." In this theme, Trump urges supporters to help him "fight back" or "stand up" against "nasty attacks and deceptions" by the news media, evoking the language of conflict.

6.3 The Media in Collusion

Ads within this theme argue that the media colluded with opponents against a candidacy. Only ads by Trump featured this theme, claiming that the media was colluding with Democrats, "coastal liberals", "Hollywood Elites", or "socialists". These ads give great agency and power to the news media, not only as a gatekeeper but as an actor involved in determining the results of the election. While most ads associate the media with Democrats and "liberals", one Trump ad claims that the media is colluding with the Democratic National Committee against Sanders as well: t "It's obvious that the Fake News is trying to RIG the Election against Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. They're using the Crooked DNC to do everything they can to make sure Bernie is NOT the Democratic Nominee." The ad constructs the image of the news media as a powerful force that is operating outside of the bounds of democracy to decide the election outcome.

Other calls for supporters to complete surveys also hint at collusion, for instance, one ad urges targets to complete the "Official Democrat Corruption Accountability Survey" and names Joe Biden, as well as representatives Adam Schiff and Nancy Pelosi, as "corrupt politicians" who

"can't hide behind their friends in the FAKE NEWS forever." Claims of collusion were accompanied by other themes—malicious gatekeeper, purveyor of falsehoods, out of touch, or "bully".

6.4 The Media as a Bully

Trump often portrayed himself as a 'victim' of the news media, constructing them as a bully. In an effort to sell merchandise, one ad declares: "President Trump has been working TIRELESSLY since he took office, with CONSTANT attacks from the radical left and mainstream media." Another ad emphasizes that "Despite the LIES and ATTACKS from the Mainstream Media and Do Nothing Democrats," Trump will "win BIG" in the election. In these ads, the news media is constructed as an abuser that is pushing Trump to have to fight back with the help of his supporters.

A few of the ads exclusively attack the news media. One ad claims "The mainstream media have never been more dishonest than they are today. Stories have been reported that have absolutely no basis in fact. They have no boundaries or principles. They only seek to undermine and insult anyone associated with my administration and our great movement." Along with claiming that the media spreads falsehoods, the message frames Trump as the victim, who only cares about his supporters. Another ad declares "The FAKE NEWS media are so blinded by their anti-Trump agenda that they have decided to completely disregard FACTS and instead choose to continue peddling their lies and conspiracy theories."

Several of Trump's ads referring to "media bullying" urge supporters to take surveys—the "Official Mainstream Media Accountability Survey", the "Official Trump Acquittal Poll", the "Trump vs Democrat Poll", and even an "Official Petition to be on the list of American Patriots" that stand against "UNPRECEDENTED obstruction and harassment from the Liberal Mob and the Fake News". The focus on these thematic surveys could reveal a two-fold strategy: along with getting voters' opinions and testing campaign messages, the reference to campaign surveys as "official" and the choice of topics contributes to create an alternative narrative: in response to media bullying, the campaign uses polls to claim they are listening to "real Americans" and unveiling the "truth".

Sanders and Warren adopted similar rhetoric to imply that the mainstream news media was at odds with their campaign from the start, a strategy that highlighted their position as 'underdogs' running against the establishment. Sanders ran several ads claiming that "In case you haven't

noticed, we are under attack - from the corporate media, from the Democratic establishment, from Buttigieg and Biden's super PACs, and from the corporate media [sic]. And that is because they are getting very nervous that we are going to win", to urge targets to contribute to the campaign so he could "fight back". Warren's campaign also used this theme to argue that the media was unfairly dismissing her campaign over others, exemplified in the malicious gatekeeping theme, which provided evidence that CNN favored Biden's speech over hers, claiming that "Elizabeth knows what it's like to be counted out early, because it happened before", posing the media as both bully and as an unfair gatekeeper. Unlike Trump, however, their rhetoric lacks the intensifiers and extreme language to attack and debase the media.

6.5 The Media as Out of Touch

The last negative take on the media framed it as "out of touch", either because it was aligned with corporate or mainstream interests (Sanders), unfairly representing the campaign (Warren), or ignoring "real Americans" (Trump); It was a common refrain in their ads. Claims that the media was out of touch appeared in association with all other negative themes, as well as on its own.

This theme appeared most frequently in Bernie Sanders' ads, in which he declares that the media would do "everything they can to stop" his campaign from winning. While the ad does not explicitly call the media "out of touch", it implies that these interests are going against the will of the public. A similar claim is made when Sanders argues he is "under attack" from the corporate media (and others), and says that "the truth is, we are in a very good position to win"—hinting that the media is not telling the truth. Another way the media is framed as out of touch is in ads that urge supporters to contribute before a fundraising deadline to "shock" the media.

The media was portrayed as "out of touch" by several Democratic candidates: Warren had several ads that claimed, "We can't count on the media to cover our campaign fairly, so we're taking our case directly to voters." — at times referring to the coverage of specific speeches, but also with general statements: "The last few weeks have proven that we can't count on the media to cover our campaign fairly." Tom Steyer framed the media as being out of touch with the electorate by saying that "We're surging in the polls. The media is surprised, but we're not. Voters know I'm the outsider who can clean up Washington, tackle the climate crisis, and beat Trump on the economy." Buttigieg also referred to his campaign being "a movement the cynics scoffed at; a coalition the pundits didn't think could come together." What all these ads have in common is a

view of the media as being out of touch with the level of support that self-proclaimed political outsiders enjoyed. With the exception of Steyer, all Democratic ads asked targets to donate to the campaigns.

Trump's use of the out of touch frame is notably different. His ads often reinforced the message by calling for supporters to participate in polls to show what "REAL Americans" think or arguing that the views of the media are not the views of "hard working American Patriots like YOU". Some ads juxtapose elites and the news media to urge targets to vote, claiming that "The Mainstream Media and Hollywood Elites are out of touch with America". Another ad frames the targets as victims: "The Radical Left wants to silence you." The ad then urges targets to sign the Official Stand with Trump Petition so as to "let the FAKE NEWS know what REAL AMERICANS think."

Some of Trump's "out of touch" ads refrained from using derogatory language about the news media and were classified as neutral, instead highlighting the need for targets to give money to help the Trump campaign draw the news media to attend to a priority issue for the Trump administration. For example, the campaign ran an ad around the need to "FINISH THE WALL"— the border wall with Mexico--framing the imperative as a "CRISIS at our Southern Border," and declaring that "The Democrats and Media need to know where REAL AMERICANS stand."

6.6 Media Appearances / Endorsement and Others

The narrative structure of neutral ads tended to refer to the candidates appearing on the news or being endorsed. Eventual Democratic presidential nominee, Joe Biden, ran only neutral ads in reference to the news media. His ads either referenced his standing in public opinion polls, or provided quotes from news sources. Andrew Yang, for example, ran an ad that urged targets to "Join the NHYang Gang at Stark Brewing Company to watch Andrew Yang on CNN's Town Hall." Amy Klobuchar ran an ad highlighting that the *New York Times* endorsed her, and featured a quote from the endorsement in the ad.

7. Discussion

Since the early days of campaigning and throughout his presidency, Donald Trump has adopted belligerent rhetoric to attack the mainstream media of being unfair, dishonest, biased, and of operating against the interests of the American public (Meeks, 2020). In the 2020 campaign,

Trump continuously attacked the media for spreading falsehoods. Our analysis suggests, however, that "fake" is only one of the labels adopted by Trump. As the incumbent, Trump constructs the media as a malicious gatekeeper, one that purposefully fails to cover his track-record. His ads often juxtapose the media's bad intentions with his "hard work", posing the media as out of touch with the needs of voters. While the claim that the media is "fake" is unique to Trump, we find that some Democratic candidates also denigrate the media in their advertising—a strategy more common among self-proclaimed underdogs like Sanders and Warren, but also used by moderate candidates (Steyer, Buttigieg) . The media does not appear with a positive light in any of the ads.

It is relevant to note that the attacks towards the news media appear in varying degrees of negativity, which may reflect the campaign's attempt to leverage microtargeting to appeal to different demographics with a distinctive tone. The ability to adjust messages to appeal to voters in different regions as well as with varying degrees of interest and engagement with the candidate allows the campaign to test the effectiveness of different formulations, particularly when the main goal is to engage supporters and ask for donations.

Despite similarities in the themes adopted by Trump, Warren, and Sanders, the Republican is distinctively more belligerent in his accusations. In his ads, the media is portrayed as the real enemy in the election, and the majority of references to the media as fake were not connected to particular events—showing that instead of being a label to disqualify stories and outlets disliked by the president (Anderson 2020; Mercieca 2020), fake news is used widely to undermine the news media altogether.

This study has limitations. First, we only analyzed the text, but most adverts also contain images or videos, and it is possible that these elements change how targets interpret ads. Second, it is possible that the nature of the primary stage leads to different discursive dynamics about the news media than the general election. Despite its limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the understanding of how politicians are instrumentalizing attacks on the news media as part of their image-construction. Importantly, our study shows that even though these trends might be more salient in the discourse of some politicians—such as Trump, who has been vastly scrutinized by prior research—, it is important to go beyond a single case-study and candidate to understand how the anti-media rhetoric permeates current political debates.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the weaponization of fake news goes beyond a single candidate or political ideology, and can perhaps be seen as both a symptom and a consequence of the decline of institutional and media trust (Hanitzch et al. 2018).

While it may be surprising that Democrats did not try to differentiate themselves from Trump by defending the news media, prior research on uncivil rhetoric such as lying accusations and name-calling suggests that candidates are not penalized by their supporters for such strategies (Herbst 2010; Mutz 2015). Even if Sanders and Warren did not go as far as to say that the media was fake, their campaigns leveraged the hostile environment against the media for their own political gain to further position themselves as political outsiders. These dynamics suggest that ability to target specific demographics may also mean that candidates have more freedom to go negative, with reduced risk of being penalized by the electorate, because they are able to target those who are already sympathetic to their ideas and rhetoric. As explained by Herbst (2010), incivility is instrumentally used by politicians to rally supporters against a shared enemy. Candidates from both sides of the political spectrum pin the media as the enemy of their campaign—and, at times, as the enemy of American democracy.

Moreover, candidates in the 2020 US primaries were not only rhetorically misrepresenting a true state of affairs--lying--but go even further to bullshit--to construct a reality that is based on emotion and antipathy (Frankfurt, 2005). Their rhetoric actively functions to trigger hostile media perceptions in its targets by repeatedly arguing that the media is unfair or biased against them or, in the case of Trump, a national threat. The instrumentalization of the media as a "a pawn in a big chess game of an information war" (boyd 2017) puts journalism at the mercy of populist discourses as the enemy, instead of an ally, of democracy. When the media is the target of attacks from both sides of the aisle and is defended by none, it becomes even more challenging to reestablish the role of journalism as an essential pillar of democracy.

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