

## Supplemental Notes to Lecture 8: The State of the Media

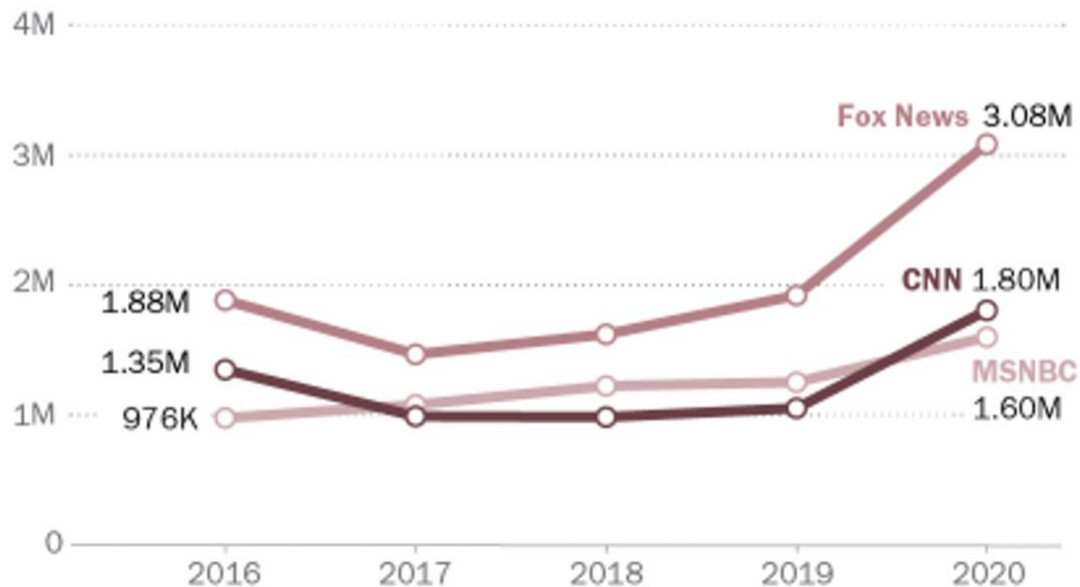
### I. Polarization, Cable News, and the Rise of Independent Media

This past summer, the Pew Research Center updated its [biennial report](#) on the U.S. news media industry. According to the report, the popularity of cable TV shows soared in 2020, as Fox's prime time average audience increased by 61 percent, while CNN's increased by 72 percent. (The average audience for network nightly news, by contrast, increased by a mere 12 percent.)

In terms of raw numbers, this means that, on average, Fox News has 3.08 million nightly viewers for its prime-time news shows.

#### Average audience for cable TV prime news

*Average number of TVs tuning to news programming during the prime news time slot for CNN, Fox News and MSNBC*



However, we should note that Joe Rogan, a former comedian, “Fear Factor” host, and Ultimate Fighting Championship commentator, gets *twice as many* listeners to his podcast per day than Fox News, which indicates that the loss of trust in the legacy media discussed in Lecture 8 has

led many to turn to independent media personalities [whose appeal derives to a great extent from their critiques of the mainstream media.](#)

Indeed, as reported this summer by the news website, Axios, “new media personalities have gained enormous traction over the past year by catering to individuals who feel disillusioned by the mainstream press.”

While Rogan does not have a background in journalism (which doubtless explains in part why he is such a reviled figure among many mainstream journalists, who fault the [“absence of curation or any discernible editing”](#) on his show), many independent media figures do, such as Bari Weiss, Glenn Greenwald, Matt Taibbi, and Matthew Yglesias, as well as Krystal Ball and Saagar Enjeti, the co-hosts of *Breaking Points*, currently the second highest rated political podcast in the country (the Clay Travis and Buck Sexton show is in first place).

*Breaking Points* is a bit unusual in that the co-hosts seem to have opposing ideologies: Ball previously hosted a show on MSNBC while Enjeti worked previously for the *The Daily Caller*, a right-wing news and opinion website.

And yet, their show is based upon the premise that the traditional left-right dualism is unduly restrictive and makes coalition building impossible. *Breaking Points* sets out to demonstrate that right-wing and left-wing populists not only share some common ground but also are capable of joining forces in order to generate a widespread following.

As Enjeti put it in his promotion of the show’s first episode:

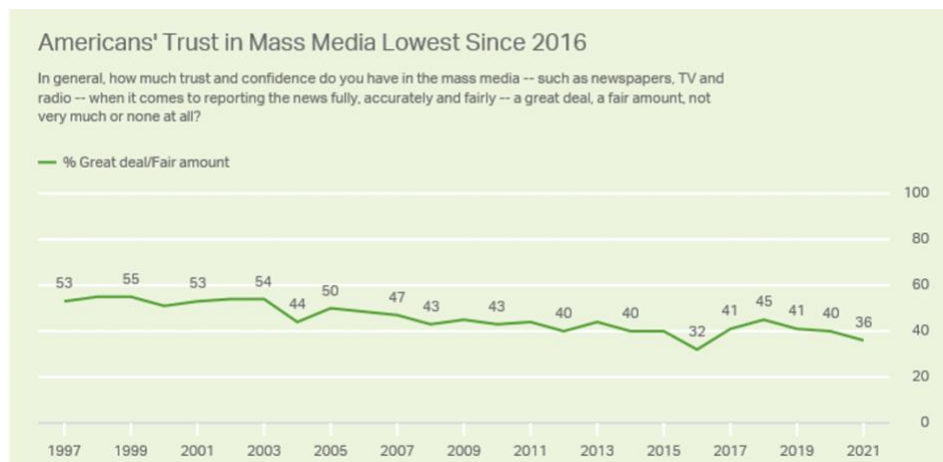
CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC are ripping us apart and making millions of dollars doing it. We don't have soulless billionaires or corporations backing our high-end TV production, but we do have YOU. We took a big risk going independent and we need your help to fulfill our mission of making everyone hate each other LESS and the corrupt ruling class MORE (emphasis in original)

Ball and Enjeti take aim at both the legacy media and the culture war that it perpetuates. However, writing for the *Atlantic*, [Helen Lewis](#) argues that shows like *Breaking Points* will succeed primarily in *opening new fronts in the culture war*.

According to Lewis, using new platforms to attack the beleaguered corporate media could indeed intensify political polarization.

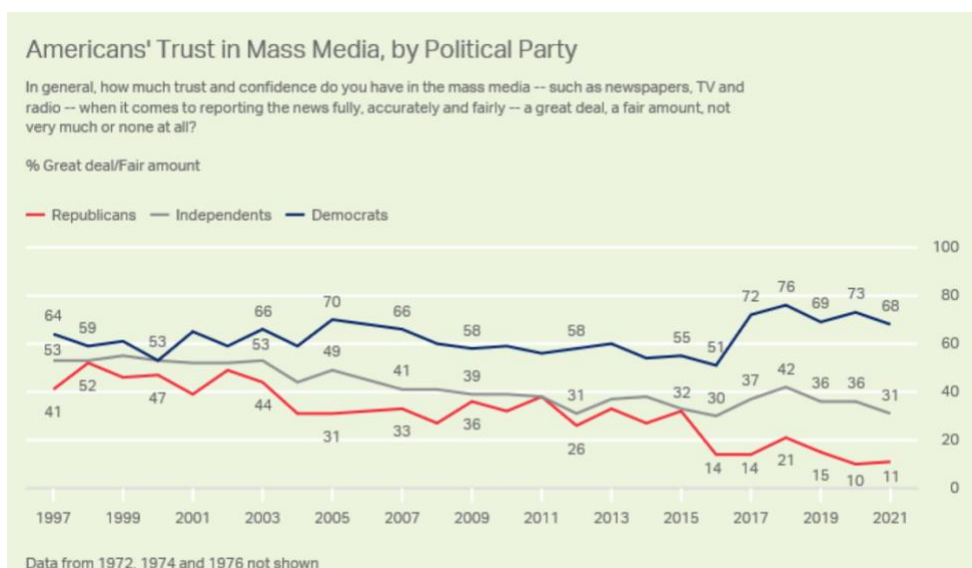
## II. A Closer Look at the Gallup Tracking Poll Measuring the Public's Trust in the Mass Media

As stated in Lecture 8, the results of the Gallup survey released on October 7 found that a mere 7 percent of U.S. adults say they have "a great deal" of trust and confidence in newspapers, television, and radio news reporting. (29% claim to have "a fair amount" of trust in those sources.)



These statistics become much more significant when they are broken down along partisan lines.

While Gallup did not specify which media sources respondents did or did not trust, it did ask those surveyed to name their political affiliation. As a result, it can be readily discerned from studying the [Gallup report](#) that “partisans' trust in the media continues to be sharply polarized.”



Currently, 68% of Democrats, 11% of Republicans and 31% of independents say they trust the media a great deal or fair amount.” We must then ask: how to account for that 57-point gap separating Republicans and Democrats? Do such figures suggest the corporate media is

dominated by a liberal bias not recognized as such by journalists, as Nathan Robinson (who is quoted in Lecture 8) suggests?

Have conservative outlets like Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* successfully convinced their readers that they are somehow *not* part of the corporate media?



### III. A “Philosophy of News”

In January of 2020, *Harpers Magazine* published a heterodox analysis of the state of the media by author Greg Jackson. Here is an excerpt from that piece, which I will include among this week’s Supplemental Materials:

In his 1962 book *The Image*, Daniel J. Boorstin explains, “There was a time when the reader of an unexciting newspaper would remark, ‘How dull is the world today!’ Nowadays he says, ‘What a dull newspaper!’” The first American paper, Benjamin Harris’s *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, committed to appearing only once a month—or “oftener ‘if any Glut of Occurrences happen.’” Clearly, things have changed. “We need not be theologians,” writes Boorstin, “to see that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman.” The chief tool in this new labor is the pseudo-event.

What is a pseudo-event? They are everywhere; we hardly notice. Some familiar examples: the speech, the rally, the press conference, the briefing, the ribbon cutting, the political announcement, the political response, the interview, the profile, the televised debate, the televised argument, the televised shouting match, the televised roundup of other televised events, the official expression of outrage, remorse, righteousness, fear, sanctimony, jingoism, smarm, or folksiness. The talking point is its handmaiden. News analysis is a second-order pseudo-event, not an event per se but the dissection of pseudo-events: that is, theater criticism. It is not that pseudo-events are always uninteresting or meaningless but that they are always *not news*. They only exist to be reported on. To supply a format. To make up for the non-glut of occurrences. Take away the pseudo-event and what is left to fill the news?

To meet our demand for newness and stimulation, we refashioned public life as a ritual sequence of pseudo-events. This transformed politics from an industry of policy and legislation into an industry of emotion and entertainment. If the news covered only the proposal and passage of specific legislation—or the proposal and enactment of specific policy—we would have little news, and audience interest would quickly fade. But the work of politicians might become the work of governing. As things are, the job of politicians is to feed the emotional-entertainment industry that we call “news,” which is accomplished by grandstanding and self-promotion. Reporters and pundits cover politics by analyzing how politicians succeed and fail as spokespeople and media figures. Interest shifts, by turns, to how the game is played, how the media fits into this game, and, eventually, how journalists do their jobs. The news today, properly understood, is about the careers of politicians and journalists. It is career drama.

**Quiz Question 5 has two parts: first, what immediately comes to mind when you hear the name, Joe Rogan? Second, briefly reflect on how your ideology may have shaped your response to the first part of this question.**

**Quiz Question 6: In your view, how might we explain the 57-point gap that appears in the Gallup poll results discussed in Section II of these Supplemental Notes?**

**Quiz Question 7: What does Greg Jackson mean when he characterizes the kind of news analysis that we see on cable TV as “theater criticism”?**