

# COVID時代のアメリカにおける政治コミュニケーション

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# American Political Communication in the Time of COVID

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The COVID-19 pandemic arguably has been the most pressing global news story in recent times. The pandemic was a complex story that unfolded quickly and in unexpected directions. Journalists in the U.S. faced major challenges when reporting on COVID-19 as the public clamored for information. When the pandemic took hold, news organizations downsized and many reporters lost their jobs or were furloughed (Hare, 2020). Most reporters lacked sufficient expertise in covering medical and public health issues. The virus manifested differently across the country, and state and local government actions varied greatly. Coverage of the national government's handling of the pandemic was hampered by the vacillating response and mixed messages from the White House (Bierman and Megerian, 2020). Information from medical experts and official government sources was inconsistent. False "facts" were rampant and spread rapidly through news sources and social media as the public lost faith in the press and political leaders.

American political communication during COVID-19 shifted as the pandemic evolved, other big stories competed with the virus for a place on the media agenda, and the presidency changed hands. To date, three major phases of media coverage of the pandemic in the U.S. can be identified. The mainstream media first began covering COVID-19 in late 2019, when the virus was a distant problem emerging in China. In mid-March, it became evident that the pandemic had reached the U.S. and there was cause for concern. News coverage greatly increased. Stories initially focused intensively on providing the public with reports about the virus, the spread of the infection, the government response to the pandemic, and the effects of COVID-19 on daily life during lockdown. The second phase of media coverage began in June of 2020, when journalists turned their attention to covering two major events that coincided with the pandemic—the presidential campaign and racial unrest culminating in Black Lives Matter protests. The pandemic was a major campaign issue as the spread of the virus surged. Candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump staked out strongly divergent positions. In the immediate aftermath of the presidential campaign, pandemic

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coverage was overshadowed by Trump's erroneous claims that Biden had stolen the election which contributed to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. The inauguration of Biden as President in January of 2021 marked a third major shift in political communication. The Biden administration sought to defeat COVID-19 by vaccinating the country. Biden's policy-focused, low-key, and restrained approach to media relations was an abrupt transition from Trump's personalized, sensational, and ubiquitous style. The polarizing political rhetoric and actions around the pandemic intensified as factions favoring vaccinations and mitigation measures were pitted against pandemic-deniers and anti-vaxxers.

In the U.S., the pandemic not only has affected the public's health and daily lives, it also has had grave political implications. When examining the trends in pandemic communication, it is important to consider the current media context. Changes in the media landscape have transformed the information environment in ways that increase the flow of misinformation and propaganda, generate interpersonal and political distrust, and heighten political polarization. Massive amounts of information—and misinformation—have been disseminated by legacy news organizations, alternative ideological news outlets, and social media. The mainstream media, consisting of legacy news organizations that still adhere to some semblance of journalistic norms, emphasize reporting the facts, and engage in investigative reporting, now constitute only a portion—perhaps half—of the media sources to which Americans turn for information. During the Trump presidency, ideological alternatives to the mainstream media gained large, devoted audiences that rival the mainstream media in size. These alt-media shun established journalistic practices and instead operate as mouthpieces supporting extreme political agendas. Right wing alt-media, especially, communicate strong partisan messages directly to their Republican base (Chait, 2021). It is within this complex and divided media environment that the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded.

We begin by discussing three major phases of American communication during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) early coverage of the virus; 2) the pandemic and the 2020 presidential election; and 3) the pandemic during the Biden administration. We then examine several overarching trends that characterize all three phases of pandemic communication: 1) diminishing trust in the media, public officials, and health scientists; 2) media-defined heroes and villains of the pandemic; 3) the proliferation of pandemic misinformation; and 4) the pandemic's role in increasing political polarization.

## **Phase I: Early Coverage of the Virus**

The first phase of coverage roughly spanned the period from December of 2019 to May of 2020. The earliest news reports of COVID-19 by American media occurred in late 2019. Stories recounted the appearance of a mysterious disease in China. The initial coverage was scant even as the virus spread beyond the Chinese border in January 2020. Most stories downplayed the threat. They portrayed the

possibility of a deadly pandemic as distant and stated that Americans should be more concerned about the seasonal flu (Hemingway, 2020). A persistent storyline in the U.S. press speculated about whether the virus originated in animals in outdoor markets in China or in a laboratory in Wuhan and if the virus was genetically engineered as a biological weapon (National Intelligence Council, 2021). The coronavirus story was eclipsed at this stage by other news, including the first impeachment trial of Donald Trump for soliciting foreign interference in elections and the death of basketball star Kobe Bryant in a helicopter crash.

The first known case of COVID-19 in the U.S. was reported in Washington state on January 20, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a). On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified the proliferation of COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. News organizations began to report that the virus had reached U.S. soil and was infecting American passengers on cruise ships, some of which were held out at sea for weeks. On March 11, the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic. By mid-March, the virus had gained a strong foothold in the U.S., including New York City, and its effects were quickly affecting public health. COVID-19 was declared a national emergency on March 11 and most states had imposed stay-at-home orders by the end of March (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). The rate of infection and the death toll rose rapidly (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka, 2020). Over 1.8 million Americans had been infected and 100,000 had died of the virus by the end of May 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020b). These developments opened the floodgates for COVID-19 stories that would dominate the news agenda for months.

Early news stories about COVID-19 primed public perceptions about the pandemic and had a lasting impact. After its initial cavalier treatment of coronavirus, the press quickly shifted to crisis coverage mode (Hemingway, 2020). Reports focused heavily on the medical aspects of the pandemic, including methods for mitigating the spread of the virus, such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders. The shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), like surgical masks, N95 respirators, gloves, and gowns, that was available to medical personnel was a persistent story line (Jacobs, 2020). Daily tallies of the number of sick, hospitalized, and deceased Americans were accompanied by harrowing accounts of the experiences of doctors and nurses treating the seriously ill (Gerberg, 2020). Nursing homes were especially vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19, and much news coverage highlighted the country's overburdened health care system (Levere, Rowan, and Wysocki, 2021). Schools were closed, sporting events were cancelled, and businesses shut down. The spread of the virus, both at home and abroad, and the toll it took on first responders, medical personnel, and front-line workers, such as grocery clerks, made headlines. Essential workers were hailed as heroes in the press who were honored with days of recognition, parades, concerts, awards, and gifts (Marcus, 2020; Bevis, 2020). The overwhelmingly dire news about the pandemic was tempered by some uplifting stories of survival, neighborliness,

and caring (Wurzburger, 2020).

At the same time, the federal, state, and local government responses to the pandemic became a catalyst that intensified the Trump era political strife. Press coverage presented a polarizing, often bifurcated, picture of a health crisis that became a deeply divisive political issue. Media spin reflected distinct partisan and ideological dispositions even within news stories that ostensibly offered objective information about the pandemic. Trump's initial handling of the crisis, his press conferences, and his March 11 Oval Office address to the nation were criticized by the mainstream media. The first official pandemic-related action of the Trump administration was to impose a travel ban on visitors from China on January 31. The mainstream media's initial reaction was to condemn the travel ban as too harsh of a response, implying that the Trump administration targeted average Chinese citizens in a move that could be interpreted as racist and xenophobic (Parmet and Sinha, 2020). In March, Trump announced that travelers from continental Europe would not be allowed to enter the U.S. By this time, the press' negative view of the China travel ban had moderated with the increasing severity of the pandemic. The closing of U.S. borders was lauded as a necessary step in curbing the reach of the virus.

Right-wing media coverage in the early stages of the pandemic was fixated on spreading hoaxes and conspiracy theories, a trend that has persisted. Websites followed by millions of Trump supporters, such as the *Daily Caller* and *American Thinker*, insisted that COVID-19 was a plot by opponents of Trump to sabotage his chances of reelection. Sean Hannity, a conservative commentator for *Fox News*, called the virus a fraud created by the "deep state" —an alleged "shadow government" of intelligence officers, government officials, and leaders of financial institutions who sought to undermine the Trump administration by spreading panic and destroying the U.S. economy (Motta, Stecula, and Farhart, 2020). Even as the virus ravaged American communities and stressed the health care system to the breaking point, right-wing media declared that the situation was improving each day due to Trump's leadership. Many stories demonized Democrats, including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Democratic state governors, and blamed them for creating fear among the public (Polskin, 2020).

From the outset, Trump attempted to downplay the severity of COVID-19. The White House Coronavirus Task Force was formed in January of 2020 to respond to the virus and provide the public with regular briefings. However, the Task Force was hampered, as Trump sought to curb the flow of bad news by limiting what could be said during briefings. At one point, Trump famously suggested on national television that his top medical officials look into injecting bleach into the human body to fight COVID-19. Dr. Deborah Birx, his coronavirus response coordinator, watched silently (McGraw and Stein, 2021). Trump also repeatedly claimed that the drug hydroxychloroquine could prevent or treat COVID-19 despite a lack of evidence or assurance that taking it was safe. Trump's statements led to people across the country ingesting bleach and

seeking prescriptions for hydroxychloroquine (Kravitz, 2020).

A persistent theme of the Trump administration was to assign blame for the outbreak by targeting China. Trump and other Republican politicians would regularly use disparaging language to describe COVID-19, calling it “China virus” and “Kung Flu” (Guardian Staff, 2020), terms that were disseminated widely via his official Twitter account @realDonaldTrump and trended on Trump-friendly social media. These phrases were associated with anti-Asian sentiments, including boycotting of Asian-owned businesses and hate crimes against Asian Americans (Hswen, et al., 2021; Chou and Gaysynsky, 2021). In response, legacy media outlets, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and cable news networks, especially CNN and MSNBC, adopted a social justice perspective in their reporting. They condemned Trump for his use of this language and published human interest stories documenting the adverse effects of this rhetoric on average people (Yam, 2020).

## **Phase II: The Pandemic and the 2020 Presidential Election**

The second phase of reporting on the pandemic took place from June of 2020 to January of 2021. Rarely in American history have there been so many consequential events taking place concurrently that impacted the communication environment. Media coverage of the pandemic was both influenced and overshadowed by the 2020 presidential election. News also was prevalent about demonstrations opposing systemic racism against Black citizens sparked by the murder of George Floyd by police and an economic crisis that impacted millions of people. These interlocking stories dominated the media conversation during this period.

The COVID-19 pandemic loomed large in the 2020 elections during both the nominating campaign and the general election. It changed the dynamics, as well as the logistics, of the presidential campaign radically and on short notice. Public health messages were cast in political terms, as candidates took strong positions. The glut of volatile and conflicting messages about COVID-19 circulating at the time of the 2020 campaign exacerbated an already intensely polarized political climate. The WHO argued that it was fighting a “massive ‘infodemic’” alongside the virus itself, as rumors and conspiracy theories undercut its public health messaging (Jacobs, 2020).

The pandemic created substantial challenges for states and localities charged with running elections. The rules governing elections are complicated and are determined by state and local laws and political party practices. The administration of elections during the primaries and the general election came under fire as many districts turned to mail-in balloting or early voting with drop-off boxes due to stay-at-home orders. Polling places were relocated, consolidated, or closed entirely. Democratic primaries and caucuses were delayed in 18 states as were a handful of Republican primaries due to legal actions challenging the legitimacy of the voting process. Stories about improper handling of ballots, voting machine malfunctions, and problems with vote counting were

prominent across media sources. Alt-right platforms, including *One America News* and *Newsmax*, spread patently false stories alleging election fraud designed to undermine the integrity of the electoral process and lay the groundwork for challenging the results if their candidates lost (Lambe, 2021). Unverified reports told of election officials tossing out ballots (Brumback and Joffe-Block, 2020), trays of absentee ballots found in a ditch in Wisconsin (Ibrahim, 2020), and postal workers discarding ballots (Gstalter, 2021). Charges of voter suppression were brought in several states where eligible voters claimed that their right to cast a ballot had been denied (Finn, Imiola, and Ledger, 2021). The lives of election officials overseeing the balloting were threatened (So and Szep, 2021).

The general election campaign was like no other, as the national nominating conventions, presidential debates, and campaign events were affected by the pandemic. The press pointed out the stark differences between the Democrats and Republicans in their approach to the pandemic as illustrated by these events. The Democratic National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was primarily a virtual meeting showcasing speeches by prominent Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans. The convention had a large social media presence and a multi-episode podcast. A highlight of the convention was a virtual roll call nominating Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the presidential ticket where each state submitted a short video. Rhode Island's video stole the show by adding some humor while proclaiming itself the "calamari comeback state," referring to a popular appetizer (Kole, 2020). The Republican National Convention was held in Charlotte, North Carolina, after Trump cancelled the scheduled convention in Jacksonville, Florida, as the number of COVID-19 cases prohibited an in-person event. While billed as an in-person convention to contrast with the Democrats' virtual meeting, most events had limited attendance and were live-streamed from a variety of locations, such as Fort McHenry in Baltimore, a national park where campaigning is prohibited by law. Trump gave his nominating speech from the White House to a live crowd where social distancing was not enforced. The politicization of the White House in this manner was widely criticized. In fact, *CNN* cut away from a convention speech Trump made earlier on the first day, with anchor Anderson Cooper calling it, "the most recent greatest hits and false statements" (Johnson, 2020).

Trump and Biden took strong, divergent positions in their approaches to dealing with the pandemic that figured prominently in campaign discourse. They sparred openly and often about the appropriate strategy for handling the virus. Biden strongly supported mitigation measures, such as masking and social distancing, while Trump openly violated these orders. Trump generated significantly more media attention than Biden due to his outrageous Twitter rants, attacks on both friends and foes, and firing of officials in his administration for perceived disloyalty. He held large in-person campaign rallies that became super-spreader events. He contracted COVID-19 in October and was treated at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. He was widely

criticized by the mainstream press for taking a ride in an SUV to greet supporters during his treatment (Restuccia, 2021). In contrast, Biden followed pandemic safety guidelines, and conducted much of his campaign virtually from the basement of his Delaware home and through drive-in rallies. An analysis of candidate coverage in eleven major U.S. newspapers found that for every ten candidate mentions, eight were about Trump and two were about Biden. The imbalance was twice as large as the margin in candidate coverage over the last 40 years, and was apparent across media outlets (Soroka, 2020).

Presidential debates long have been signature events of American presidential contests. The 2020 debates were unprecedented media spectacles. The first debate between Biden and Trump fed the media narrative focusing on conflict and incivility in the campaign as the debate went down as the worst in American history. Rather than discuss the issues, the candidates brawled and constantly interrupted one another. They argued about who was able to best handle the pandemic by trading barbs rather than offering solutions. Biden became exasperated when Trump would not let him speak, and snapped, “Will you shut up, man? You’re the worst president ever” (Breuniger and Wilkie, 2020). The second presidential debate was held as separate televised forums, with Biden appearing on *ABC* and Trump on *NBC*, as Trump refused to comply with COVID-19 precautions. Biden recovered from the first debate debacle by addressing the issues. Trump, in contrast, refused to denounce QAnon and white supremacists and failed to answer questions about his health following his bout with COVID-19. Biden attracted over 15 million viewers to Trump’s 13 million viewers (Grynbaum and Koblin, 2020).

The virus was the dominant issue on many voters’ minds (Jaffe 2020). Some voters’ presidential choice was influenced by the candidates’ responses to the pandemic (Whiteley, et al., 2020; Owen, Major, and Bacakoglu, 2021). There is evidence to suggest that the pandemic tipped the outcome of the election in favor of Biden (Baccini, Brodeur, and Weymouth, 2021; Medina and Russonello, 2020). However, it may not have been as strong a determining factor as some press pundits’ election post-mortems proclaimed (Avina and Sevi, 2021).

Following confirmation of Biden’s victory in the election, the pandemic was temporarily sidelined from the media agenda. A misinformation campaign fueled by Trump, right-wing media, and conservative political influencers went into high gear to challenge the outcome of the election. Through tweets, press conferences, and televised interviews on *Fox News*, Trump spread the falsehood that the election had been stolen from him. Trump’s claims were disseminated widely on niche conservative sites, like *Parler*, *MeWe*, *Gab*, and *Rumble*. Trump’s son, Eric, posted a request on Facebook that his followers report cases of voter fraud using the hashtag #StoptheSteal. Within a week, there were over 3.5 million posts referencing #StoptheSteal, which became a catalyst for rallies leading to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Frenkel, 2020).

Mainstream news coverage of the insurrection was jarring to the American people, who

witnessed violent rioters infiltrating the hallowed halls of government. Live video of the siege was played on the cable networks. Initial coverage departed markedly from traditional news framing of protests and demonstrations as public nuisances that interrupt daily life (DiCicco, 2010). Instead, the press labeled the episode a “terrorist action” and an “insurrection carried out by a mob” (Bauder, 2021). Images documented the strong presence of Trump supporters wearing MAGA gear and carrying banners. Reports also highlighted the lack of a strong police presence to control the breach of the Capitol as lawmakers fled to safety (Kilgo, 2021). In the aftermath of the insurrection, right-wing media, including Tucker Carlson of *Fox News*, sought to shift the narrative by portraying the rioters as “patriots” who were fighting for their country. Ashli Babbitt, a woman who was shot and killed by law enforcement as she broke into the Capitol, was portrayed as a martyr for the cause (Papenfuss, 2021).

### **Phase III: The Pandemic During the Biden Presidency**

The third phase of pandemic communication began with the inauguration of Joe Biden as president. Some pundits have referred to this period of reporting as the “vaccine era” and the “booster era” as the narrative shifted to the emphasis on getting people vaccinated to curb the pandemic. The Biden administration’s strategy for dealing with the pandemic was vastly different from that of the Trump administration. Since Biden had run for election on the position that he would control COVID-19 so that the country could return to normalcy, he lost no time in getting his plan off the ground. He instituted mask mandates on federal government property and called for vaccine requirements in government, the military, and businesses. When Biden first took office, communication about the pandemic was hopeful and coincided with a brief honeymoon period that the mainstream press granted to the newly installed president. The first COVID-19 vaccines had been administered in mid-December of 2020 (Mihalcik, 2020), and they were steadily becoming more widely available to the public. Stay-at-home orders were lifted, people went back to their workplaces, restaurants reopened, large sporting events and concerts were held, and children returned to school.

A Pew Research Center study of the first one hundred days of the Biden administration found that two-thirds of news coverage dealt with Biden’s policy agenda compared to three-quarters of news stories that focused on Trump’s character and personality during the same period in his administration. The pandemic continued to be a pervasive aspect of news coverage and was included in over 70% of stories about the Biden administration. While most mainstream news stories about Biden were neutral, those taking a position were slightly more negative than positive. News coverage continued to be highly polarized ideologically. Only 19% of news reports on Biden in outlets with left-leaning audiences, such as *MSNBC*, and mixed ideological audiences, such as *CNN*, were negative compared to 78% in outlets with right-leaning audiences, like *Fox News*

(Pew Research Center, 2021b).

The relatively neutral coverage of Biden by the mainstream media was short-lived. Biden's controversial decision to pull American troops out of Afghanistan and the problems executing the withdrawal sparked widespread critical coverage. His presidential popularity began to plunge. At the same time, Biden overestimated the public's willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19 as the more aggressive delta variant of the virus spread nationwide. The push to get the population vaccinated became a highly divisive political issue. Anti-vaxxers, many of whom had been Trump supporters in the election, viewed refusing the shot as a way of expressing their opposition to Biden. The alt-right media circulated unfounded rumors that the vaccine caused infertility, altered a person's DNA, and had infected people's arms requiring amputation. Studies indicated that the politicization of vaccinations coupled with the flood of misinformation contributed significantly to vaccine hesitancy (Ullah, et al., 2021).

Uncertainty and confusion have plagued messaging about COVID-19 during the Biden administration. While the medical community was proclaiming the high efficacy of the vaccines, press reports focused heavily on rare severe breakthrough infections among the vaccinated. The death of high-profile Americans who were vaccinated from COVID-19 exacerbated misunderstandings. The passing of General Colin Powell, who was vaccinated, from COVID-19 stoked fears and generated misinformation about the effectiveness of the vaccine. In fact, Powell was fighting cancer and Parkinson's disease that compromised his immune system and made it difficult for him to fight the virus even when vaccinated (O'Donnell, 2021). Biden administration officials expressed concerns that the media messaging was leading people to believe that vaccinated individuals were as likely to get infected and spread the virus as the unvaccinated which contributed to vaccine hesitancy (Darcy, 2021). Recommendations about whether vaccine boosters were necessary and who should get the booster also were unclear and shifted quickly prompting debates in the media. At first, boosters were recommended only for people over the age of 65, those who were immunocompromised, and those who worked in conditions that placed them in close contact with other people. Eventually, boosters were recommended for all adults 18 and older. Further confusion has surrounded whether a single booster would be enough or if boosters would become a way of life (LeBlanc, 2021).

Biden at times has struggled to gain mainstream media attention. His formal press appearances have been more limited than those of his predecessor. His low-key, no drama style does not conform to the expectations of a press that had become accustomed to non-stop sensational stories emanating from the White House. On the other hand, Trump received considerable press coverage after Biden took office. Several books with salacious revelations about his time in office were published that were covered extensively by the press. Breaking with the tradition where former presidents respect the sitting Commander-in Chief, Trump has been an outspoken critic of Biden.

Heading into the 2022 midterm elections, Trump returned to “Make America Great Again” rallies where he endorsed and berated candidates for local, state, and national office, including those in his own party.

## **Overarching Trends Related to Pandemic Communication**

We now will discuss four overarching trends related to pandemic communication that span all three phases. Over the course of the pandemic, trust in the media, public officials, and health scientists diminished. Related to this point, the mainstream and alternative media personalized their pandemic stories by created heroes and villains of key actors. The proliferation of misinformation and the associated rise in political polarization—while not initially caused by pandemic media—worsened during this period.

### ***Diminishing Trust in the Media, Public Officials, and Health Scientists***

Trust in the press, public officials, and healthcare experts eroded significantly over a six-month period leading up to the 2020 presidential election (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021) and continued to decline over the course of the pandemic. Trust in the media (Edmonds, 2021) and government institutions (Pew Research Center, 2021a), which already was diminished, approached historic lows. Public faith in information from health care professionals and government health agencies, which typically had been solid, waned (Peterson, et al., 2019; Latkin, et al., 2020). Political worldviews are strongly associated with trust in public health institutions. At the time of the 2020 election, approval of Trump was more robustly associated with trust in health institutions than party identification (Shepherd, MacKendrick, and Mora, 2020).

This low point in institutional trust came at a time when public confidence in leaders and experts was essential as the pandemic reached crisis proportions. Several explanations account for the decline in trust. The public was receiving mixed cues from a wide range of sources which led to confusion and frustration. Media reports allowed the public to witness science and public policy processes at work in real time as leaders struggled to deal with the virus. Political scientist Kathleen Hall Jamieson described the situation as “watching the sausage being made,” which was disconcerting and fear-inducing to many people as they got a first-hand view of the acrimony and infighting surrounding policy decisions (Borenstein and Fingerhut, 2020).

### ***Heroes and Villains of the Pandemic***

A standard strategy of journalists, especially when covering a long-running situation that is difficult to convey to the public, is to identify individuals who become the face of that story. Political leaders also point to key individuals as either heroes or scapegoats when explaining their positions to constituents. The strategy of praising and vilifying people was standard practice

for Trump and was adopted by other politicians during the pandemic, especially those on the right. In constructing the narrative around the pandemic, the press and politicians elevated some individuals to hero status and decried others as villains. The treatment as hero or villain was highly partisan, with the legacy press mostly giving positive coverage to people who supported masking, social distancing, and vaccinations while the right-wing media demonized these same individuals. Two examples of prominent individuals who became faces of the pandemic are former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Andrew Cuomo became the face of the competent, wise, and benevolent public servant during the first phase of the crisis. He held daily briefings that were covered in their entirety by news media, including CNN, where they became must-watch TV for many people in and outside of New York state. Cuomo's appearances gave the impression that he was being frank and candid about the pandemic situation, while also conveying his personal side with stories about his childhood and experiencing the pandemic with his daughters. His performance conveyed that he was tackling the crisis directly, which stood in opposition to Trump, who was seen as downplaying, if not avoiding, the pandemic (Berman, 2020). Cuomo was rewarded with a prime-time appearance at the Democratic National Convention where Joe Biden was nominated as the presidential candidate. Eventually, the reality of Cuomo's handling of the pandemic was exposed. His initial response was to COVID-19 was slow and he blocked collaboration between state and local health officials that would have stabilized the spread of the virus sooner. His decision to return sick COVID-19 patients in hospitals to nursing homes endangered the lives of a highly vulnerable population (Condon and Peltz, 2021). On August 10, 2021, in a stunning turn of events, Cuomo resigned as governor after sexual harassment allegations emerged and he faced impeachment (Gregorian and Finn, 2021).

Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was the most prominent face of the medical response to COVID-19. He was cast as a hero or a villain of the pandemic depending on the political perspective of the beholder. He had a well-established portfolio and international reputation for being a public health advocate for diseases, including HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Zika. He was one of the first members selected to serve on the White House Coronavirus Task Force. Following his controversial stint on the Task Force, Fauci served as President Biden's chief medical advisor.

More than any other figure, Fauci came to personify the political divisiveness surrounding the pandemic (Yang, 2021). Fauci was lauded by Democrats as the epitome of scientific expertise. Yard signs in neighborhoods with Democratic constituencies proclaimed, "We love you, Dr. Fauci" and "Thank you, Dr. Fauci." Republicans accused Fauci of manufacturing a nonexistent crisis and manipulating the public. Right-wing Republican leaders and commentators labeled him "demon doctor" and derisively referred to the COVID-19 vaccine as the "Fauci Ouchie." (Lee, 2021). Fauci got off on the wrong foot in his role as a scientific expert. In March of 2020, as the virus was

spreading rapidly, he stated that it was not necessary for the public to wear masks to offset a shortage of masks in hospitals. He reversed course soon after, but his initial pronouncement about masks became a justification for his opponents to undercut his authority going forward (Vallier, 2020).

While Fauci initially sought to work cooperatively with Trump on the Task Force, the two came to blows in May of 2020, as Trump falsely asserted that the outbreak was contained as he focused on his presidential election campaign. Fauci attempted to correct misinformation that Trump and his surrogates were propagating by doing live television interviews. Trump countered by denying him the podium at Task Force briefings, forbidding Fauci to meet with the press unless the interview was cleared by him, and threatening at campaign rallies to fire Fauci (Wong, 2021). Trump, his supporters, and QAnon followers spread on social media the rumor that COVID-19 was genetically engineered in a lab in China that was supported by funding from Fauci's institute. The fierce attacks on Fauci from the right-wing continued during the Biden administration (Doheny, 2021). In October of 2021, Fauci was inundated with thousands of harassing messages just as the campaign to vaccinate young children was about to begin based on a false report amplified by a right-wing echo chamber that he had funded cruel experiments on beagles (Abutaleb and Reinhard, 2021).

### ***Misinformation***

Misinformation about COVID-19 was ubiquitous from the outset of the pandemic. The circulation of some misinformation was unintentional and was due to the ambiguity of reports from the scientific community and evolving information about the virus that led to misinterpretation of the facts. Knowledge about COVID-19 changed as the medical community learned more about the virus and how it behaves. Policy makers gained a better sense of the types of mitigation methods and economic strategies that were effective and those that were unnecessary.

However, much of the misinformation consisted of deliberate falsehoods spread on alternative and social media. These sources sought to widen political divides by peddling made-up stories and conspiracy theories (Hamel, et al., 2021). Compelling evidence suggests that misinformation resulted in government officials failing to take action as they delayed crafting and implementing public policy initiatives. Misinformation fueled controversies over mitigation measures and vaccinations that hindered the American response to the pandemic (Abutaleb, Dawsey, Nakashima, and Miller, 2020; Motta, Stecula, and Farhart, 2020). Bias in media exposure was found to be related to COVID-19 infection rates. A study found that a 1% increase in exposure to left-wing media resulted in a .2% decrease in the probability of a positive test for the virus as these sources emphasized the need for protective behavior and vaccinations (Spiteri, 2021).

It was difficult for even media savvy members of the public who got their news from reliable

sources to avoid being misled by false facts. A November 2021 Kaiser Family Foundation Vaccine Monitor survey found that 78% of Americans had heard and believed at least one of eight prominent fake stories about COVID-19. Common misperceptions about the pandemic that were blatantly untrue included the belief that the government exaggerated the number of deaths from COVID-19, the government hid deaths from the vaccine, and ivermectin—a drug given to cattle to treat parasites—was a safe and effective COVID-19 treatment. People who got their information primarily from social media and conservative sources, including *Fox News*, *One America News*, and *Newsmax*, and who were unvaccinated were the most likely to believe false stories (Hamel, et al., 2021).

### ***Political Polarization***

Political polarization, or the amount of division in political attitudes, has been on the rise in the U.S. for well over a decade. Differences in viewpoints among people based on partisan affiliation were exacerbated throughout the pandemic. In fact, political polarization over the pandemic was greater than for any other divisive issue during this time, including climate change (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka, 2020). The sources of polarization due to the pandemic can be traced to several factors. There were stark partisan conflicts over how to handle the pandemic. Democrats were concerned about the health consequences of the virus, protecting workers, and taking concrete steps, like vaccinations, to end the pandemic. Republicans opposed the limitations government imposed on personal freedom and COVID-19's negative impact on the economy due to lockdowns, mask requirements, and social distancing.

Elite political communication was highly correlated with polarization. Even without the pandemic, Donald Trump was a polarizing personality whose loyal supporters embraced his extreme positions and amplified his contentious rhetoric. The political discourse of Democrat and Republican leaders emphasized their divergent perspectives on the pandemic by creating a “we versus them” mentality (Jungkunz, 2021). There was little cross-party elite consensus about how to handle the crisis. Despite Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell advising all Americans to get vaccinated, many of his Republican colleagues either remained silent or condemned McConnell for forcing people to do something that Democrats favored against their will (Bobic, 2021).

Mainstream press coverage and messaging in alternative and social media were politically charged from the earliest days of the pandemic and served to reinforce and intensify existing partisan cleavages. Studies indicated that where people got information about the pandemic accounted for differences in the perception of risk from COVID-19. Democrats were most likely to get news from *MSNBC* and *CNN*, where the messaging supported the government taking proactive measures to contain the virus and mandating protective behaviors for the public. Republicans were heavy consumers of *Fox News* where commentators opposed government intervention, such

as companies requiring employees to be vaccinated and having students wear masks at school. Independents were the least likely to pay attention to pandemic news, and their views were not consistently aligned with those of either party (Hart, Chinn, Soroka, 2020; Bruine de Bruin, Saw, and Goldman, 2020; and Jungkunz, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Americans wanted and needed clear, accurate information so that they could make knowledgeable decisions about their lives during the pandemic. Instead, many people were overwhelmed by the abundance of news that they found difficult to follow or trust. Two common sayings about news in America are “bad news sells” and “if it bleeds it leads.” The media’s treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic lives up to this reputation. A study led by an economist at Dartmouth College found that the tone of articles in major U.S. media outlets about COVID-19 was far more negative than news stories about the pandemic in other countries. The negative tone of the stories persisted even when the conditions surrounding COVID-19 were improving. It was not necessarily that the information disseminated by the press was wrong; rather, the facts that journalists decided to report cast the pandemic in the harshest light (Sacerdote, Schgal, and Cook, 2021).

Overly negative, sensational news coverage in the mainstream press stoked people’s fears about their personal well-being and the fate of the nation. It increased distrust of political leaders, scientists, health policy officials, and other citizens. At the same time, alternative media, amplified by social media, deliberately spread misinformation and fueled divisiveness. This combustible combination of mainstream and alternative media forces has contributed to a troubling state of political affairs. Extreme partisanship has increased animosity toward people with opposing viewpoints, reduced the possibility for compromise, and made it more difficult for elected officials to govern. It has led to extreme behavior epitomized by the storming of the U.S. Capitol by insurrectionists seeking to undo the results of a free and fair election.

The importance of a functional communication environment to a healthy democratic polity cannot be underestimated. Trust in the media is inextricably linked to the public’s awareness of the government’s implementation of productive policies and public compliance with these measures (Devine, et al., 2021). People who believed that information about the pandemic was mostly accurate were more likely to follow the recommendations of health officials and government leaders to mitigate the spread of the virus (Ognyanova, et al., 2020). Renewing trust in media and the information they convey is essential for recovery and moving to life beyond the pandemic.

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