

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Voices of outrage: Online partisan media, user-generated news commentary, and the contested boundaries of American conservatism during the 2016 US presidential election

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis presents a qualitative account of what affective polarisation looks like at the level of online user-generated discourse. It examines how users of the American right-wing news and opinion website TheBlaze.com articulated partisan oppositions in the site's below-the-line comment field during and after the 2016 US presidential election. To date, affective polarisation has been studied from a predominantly quantitative perspective that has focused largely on partisanship as a powerful form of social identity. This contributes to a growing recognition of the central role of partisan identity in the evaluation of politics by publics within the American two-party system. However, analyses of partisan identification in the US have also shown how negative affect towards opposing partisans has led some people to dislike the other party more than they like the one with which they identify. This establishes a pivotal relation between affective polarisation and so-called negative partisanship. At the same time, the election of Donald Trump as US president has led to a new interest in the content and articulation of American conservative identity, particularly as this relates to the role of hybrid partisan media in the production and negotiation of group boundaries. Against this backdrop, my thesis concentrates on the construction of self/other distinctions in partisan news commentary. It employs a conceptual framework which integrates constructionist thematic analysis with an articulation approach grounded in the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Articulation is here viewed as the ongoing struggle to "fix" meaning – including the meaning of society and identity – in ways that exclude other meanings. This highlights the essentially political dimensions of articulation as the mechanism via which the social is produced through discursive acts of opposition and exclusion. My analysis reveals how the boundaries of American conservatism are contested through the public performance of antagonism; how characterisations of political difference are performed with reference to the political and economic significance of hybrid partisan media; and how the use of partisan media is rhetorically related to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation via antagonistic imaginaries of American past, present, and future – processes which are claimed to threaten America's survival as a manifestation of divine providence encoded in the US Constitution.

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Chapter 1: Introduction – contextualising American conservative outrage online

Since every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not, identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference. One is a Bosnian Serb to the degree to which one is not a Bosnian Moslem or a Croat; one is a Gush Emmunim settler in the West Bank to the extent that one is not a secular Zionist; one belongs to the “European anthropological-cultural community” to the degree that one is not from the Maghreb, the Middle East, or Asia. What is shocking about these developments is not the inevitable dialectic of identity/difference that they display but rather the atavistic belief that identities can be maintained and secured only by eliminating difference and otherness.

Seyla Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 1996

Political life concerns collective, public action; it aims at the construction of a ‘we’ in a context of diversity and conflict. But to construct a ‘we’ it must be distinguished from the ‘them,’ and that means establishing a frontier, defining an ‘enemy’.

Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 1993

1.1 Introduction

This is a thesis on the subject of affective polarisation in the United States. Through a focus on how users of the American right-wing news and opinion website TheBlaze.com articulated partisan oppositions in a below-the-line comment field in the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, I seek to offer a qualitative account of what affective polarisation looks like at the level of online user-generated discourse. In so doing, I present an analysis that focuses on one side of the polarised political culture in the US. Concentrating on the construction of self/other distinctions in right-wing partisan news commentary, my conceptual framework integrates constructionist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with an articulation approach grounded in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (e.g., Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Articulation is here viewed as the ongoing struggle to “fix” meaning – including the meaning of society and identity – in ways that exclude other meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), highlighting the essentially *political* dimensions of articulation as the mechanism via which the social is produced through discursive acts of opposition and exclusion. Normatively speak-

ing, affective polarisation is for the most part viewed as problematic (Reiljan, 2020). Seen by some as a major impediment to idealised models of democratic engagement, e.g., rational deliberation (see Sunstein, 2009), there is nevertheless a significant ongoing debate regarding the social, cultural, and political implications of affective polarisation. My research speaks to this debate by focusing on how partisan media users actively contest categories of political opposition in a below-the-line comment field.

Affective polarisation has heretofore been studied from a predominantly quantitative perspective, one which has employed a social identity approach to conceptualising the power of partisanship (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). Affective polarisation differs from ideological polarisation insofar as it refers to the propagation of negative affect towards the opposition – i.e., political parties, politicians, and partisans – as opposed to the entrenchment of disagreement over policy preferences. This reflects a growing recognition of the central role of partisan identity in the moral evaluation of politics by publics, particularly in the context of the American two-party system (Kreiss, 2017). However, analyses of partisanship in the US have shown how negative affect towards opposing partisans has led some people to dislike the other party more than they like the one with which they identify (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). This so-called “negative partisanship” is defined as “the phenomenon whereby Americans largely align *against* one party instead of affiliating *with* the other” (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018, p. 119). The rise in negative partisanship coincides with an entrenchment of other forms of social divisions, including racial, geographical, and ideological distinctions, that Abramowitz (2018) terms “the great alignment.” This concept describes a “growing alignment of partisan identities with deeper divisions in American society and culture” (Abramowitz, 2018, p. x).

At the same time, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 has prompted a significant interest in contemporary American conservatism. Trump’s election has been portrayed as the outcome of economic hardship as well as “status threat felt by the dwindling proportion of traditionally high-status Americans (i.e., whites, Christians, and men)” (Mutz, 2018, p. E4330). Trump’s election has therefore created a new impetus to study the ar-

tication of conservative identity (Kreiss, Barker, & Zenner, 2017), particularly among the American white working class, as well as the qualitative “identity content” of both liberalism and conservatism (K. Hanson, O'Dwyer, & Lyons, 2019). Identity content is an important element of self-categorisation theory that has been under-explored. This is important because it has been shown that beliefs around what people think it means to be a member of a group have been demonstrated to have an impact on attitudes towards the other (K. Hanson et al., 2019), reflecting a more discursively oriented concept of identity as a relational construct (Benhabib, 1996; Hastings & Manning, 2004b; Mouffe, 1993). In that regard, a significant challenge for future research, according to Chadwick (2019, p. 7), is the fact that digital politics scholarship has gravitated towards “cases that are progressive or pro-liberal democratic.” Indeed, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (2017) likewise highlights the manner in which analyses of Trump require engaging with communities that have heretofore largely been shunned by academics.

Studying the articulation of American conservative identity in the aftermath of the rise of Donald Trump raises a number of central concerns relating to discourses of race and, specifically, whiteness. Alongside a growth in affective polarisation and negative partisanship, there has also been a marked increase in levels of racial resentment among white Republican voters (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018). Numerous scholars have already demonstrated the relation between Trump support and racial resentment (e.g., Austermuehl, 2020; Drakulich et al., 2020). This racial resentment is linked in important ways to colour blind approaches to racial inequalities, which promote a “business as usual” attitude to racial inequalities (Mueller, 2017, p. 220). Such approaches have been described by King and Smith (2014) as a “critical ideational development” that materially benefited Republican and conservative political agendas whilst indirectly contributing to polarisation and gridlock in the decades that followed the election of Ronald Reagan. Whilst overt commentary on race has become largely implicit, it has nonetheless been seen as rooted in attempts to maintain white hegemony (Drakulich et al., 2020).

Whiteness is itself a construction that emerges from historically situated discourses of power and domination, with shifting and contingent boundaries of

inclusion and exclusion that bridge class and capital (Olson, 2008). In that regard, it has been argued that colour blind approaches facilitate white ignorance and, in so doing, reproduce mechanisms by which established power structures are rendered invisible and persistent (Mueller, 2017) – processes by which whiteness is “masked as a category” that is social constituted through discursive strategies that enable the dominance of the “colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness” (Dyer, 1988, p. 46). Constructions of whiteness in this sense function metonymically via what Dyer (2005, p. 10) calls “white racial imagery” – i.e., the racial imagery of white people themselves.

In this regard, Hochschild (2016) offered a view on the feeling among white conservatives that racial minorities are receiving preferential treatment in the US – that they are cutting in line on the path to the American dream – shading the formative imaginaries of American nationhood with racial connotations. Relatedly, Lakoff (1995) proposed an interpretation of the functioning of discourses of morality, authority, and self-reliance through the metaphorical deployment of images of the strict father, a strategy that has been shown to be more prevalent among Republicans (Ohl et al., 2013). Lakoff (2016) has more recently returned to this theme to argue that the moral framework of the strict father provides a perfect mechanism for understanding support for Trump, particularly among white Evangelicals. In the contemporary US, discursive constructs align ideas about governance with antagonistic understandings of racial and political identities, linking images of crime, irresponsibility, and danger with non-whites and non-conservatives (King & Smith, 2014; Abramowitz & Webster, 2018), labelling “white” and “male” as “good” through discursive acts of opposition (Applebaum, 2016; Lakoff, 2016). These metaphors at once saturate and animate the distinctions between conservatives and their opponents, populating the characterological frameworks of partisanship with moralistic images of race, religion, class, and gender.

In the context of a growing interest in the social, cultural, and political positioning of white Christian conservatism, Kreiss, Barker, and Zenner (2017, p. 475) argue that more studies are required in order to address the question of how these religious, class, and gender identities are “articulated, made salient, maintained, and linked to partisanship and political issues, through media and inter-

personally.” They argue that, whilst the current focus on partisanship and partisan identity is welcome, we still know little about the ways in which “partisan identity is constructed, communicated, and maintained, and how it is linked to race, perceptions of moral worth, and social status” (Kreiss et al., 2017, p. 475). Providing an account of how this process of the discursive production of difference operates in user-generated online political talk is one of the key goals of my research.

At the same time, a research agenda that seeks to examine the discursive production of partisan distinctions can be situated within the context of a broader push towards a more qualitative approach to political communication (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen, & Powers, 2015). This is a key motivation for my own work, which examines the discursive production of partisan oppositions within a right-wing media ecosystem that is characterised, it has been argued, by misinformation, radicalisation, and social division (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). A qualitative analysis of these phenomena may help to reveal their dynamic and contested character (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013).

Rather than seek to offer a measure of affective polarisation in the US context, or to trace its causes or effects, then, my thesis aims to provide a qualitative account of how affective polarisation is performed in the online political talk of a right-wing partisan media audience. I do so by examining how the users of the conservative news and opinion website TheBlaze.com employ the public performance of antagonism to articulate the boundaries of American conservatism in “below-the-line” (Graham & Wright, 2015) news commentary. As will be discussed in greater detail in section 1.2.2 (see also Chapters 5 and 6), TheBlaze.com was a notable outlier in a conservative media ecosystem that was predominantly characterised by support for Donald Trump’s candidacy during the 2016 US presidential election cycle. Audience response to this stance animates my data sample. Insofar as my analysis centres on how users contest the meaning of political opposition as well as oppositional media in responses posted to TheBlaze.com, the embeddedness of partisan media in the contemporary struggle to define the meaning of American conservatism is the primary focus of my research.

To the extent that my research focuses on the discursive production of antagonistic frontiers (Laclau, 2000) – i.e., self/other distinctions – in a partisan media environment, my analysis also considers how users draw on a variety of discursive “resources” (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O’Loughlin, 2018a) in giving voice to outrage on political platforms. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, these heterogeneous elements may include rhetorical genres and contentious media content, amongst other resources. In so doing, I will examine the ways in which outrageous representations of political opposition are woven together with other forms of political talk in user-generated below-the-line commentary. Insofar as the concept of a “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2013) also highlights the manner in which discursive authority is contested in contemporary media, articulation theory will provide a framework for thinking about the opportunities users have not only to reproduce but also to resist dominant or hegemonic significations.

By drawing on the work of Mouffe and Laclau, my thesis orients towards the essentially political dimensions of articulation as the mechanism via which the social is produced through discursive acts of opposition and exclusion. In so doing, I propose antagonism as a key concept with which to grasp the dynamism of the categories of distinction on which affective polarisation operates. Whilst Reiljan (2020) argues that levels of affective polarisation in the US are in fact exceeded by those found in a number of European democracies, a significant body of research now exists which focuses on affective polarisation among American partisans. Given the extensive public and scholarly interest in affective polarisation in the US, I argue it is reasonable to focus on the US for the purposes of a qualitative case study. In focusing on processes of affective polarisation as discursive phenomena, however, my specific interest lies in exploring the role of contemporary media in the production of identity/difference distinctions.

My empirical analysis of user-generated below-the-line comments at TheBlaze.com demonstrates the ways in which the boundaries of American conservatism are contested through the public performance of antagonism. It shows that the characterisations of self and other on which the contested meanings of conservatism rest are articulated not only with reference to political parties,

politicians, and partisans. Rather, through the classification of congruence and oppositionality, they are also mapped onto representations of media outlets, figures, and content. In addition, my analysis reveals how characterisations of political opposition are performed with reference to the political economy of hybrid partisan media, presenting media choice as something that has both political and economic significance. Lastly, my analysis establishes how the use of partisan media is rhetorically related in user-generated content to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation via antagonistic imaginaries of American past, present, and future. Media choice is in this sense discursively linked to actions that are claimed to threaten the survival of America and American nationhood, each viewed as manifestations of divine providence encoded in the US Constitution.

This first chapter, however, serves as an introduction to my thesis. First, I describe the context of my research – focusing first on the broader background before outlining my particular case study. Here, I offer an account of a number of relevant transformations in the US media environment over the past several decades that have seen the emergence of forms of media that are at once more participatory and more partisan. This is followed by an introduction to the work of the American conservative media figure Glenn Beck, including an overview of TheBlaze.com, the empirical focus of my research, which was founded by Beck in 2012. I conclude this contextual overview by outlining how focusing on TheBlaze.com as a contested space in the context of the 2016 US presidential election will help to reveal not only important insights into the fractures and fissures that typify American conservatism but also how those schisms are negotiated discursively. Second, I offer a general overview of my doctoral research project. This includes outlining some of my primary aims, objectives, concepts, and methods. Here, I also briefly sketch out some of the main gaps in the literature to which I address my arguments. Third, I present a chapter-by-chapter outline of my thesis, which briefly sketches out my conceptual framework as well as some of my main findings.

1.2 Context

In a general sense, this thesis examines the role of partisan media in American political life. As argued by Bateman (2017), when one is seeking to produce an analysis of the changing role of media in society, it is imperative that one develops a solid conceptual account of what one means by the term “media.” In what follows, I provide some contextual information that highlights and disambiguates two distinct models of “media” that will appear throughout this thesis. First, focusing on transformations in the American political media environment, I will offer an overview of how communications scholars conceptualise contemporary media. In particular, in consideration of the participatory dimensions of media, I will focus on Chadwick’s (2013) concept of media hybridity, which foregrounds the uneven interaction between older and newer media in the redistribution of power that characterises contemporary media in the US. Second, focusing on the specific case of TheBlaze.com, which I relate to the broader partisan media operations of the site’s initial owner, conservative media figure Glenn Beck, I will describe the emergence of a populist concept of media-as-antagonists. In describing these phenomena, I will introduce some of the fears that have been expressed regarding the implications of media that are at once increasingly participatory and partisan. Third, I will describe how taking TheBlaze provides an opportunity to reveal the fractures and fissures that characterise the contemporary American right.

1.2.1 Transformations in the political media environment in the US

A discussion of the social role of media is fundamentally a discussion of power. Media power has been theorised in a variety of ways. Chouliaraki (2008), for example, argues that the ability to produce and perform the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as well as to orient the audience towards these categories defines the power of mediation. Couldry and Curran (2003, p. 4), on the other hand, define media power as “*an emergent form of social power in complex societies whose basic infrastructure depends increasingly on the fast circulation of information and images*” [emphasis in original]. They argue that struggle over control of representational resources figures centrally in many conflicts, even when not

explicitly centred, calling to mind Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, i.e., the "power to construct reality" (1979, p. 79).

This notion of contestation constitutes a fundamental characteristic of Chadwick's (2013) concept of a hybrid media system, which conceptualises a media environment that is "far more diverse, fragmented, polycentric" than conceived of in older models of the relation between media and their publics. Moving on from a model of the audience as passive consumers beholden to powerful mass media, Chadwick sets out an image of porous boundaries between newer and older media constituted through the productive forces of audiences and institutions. He argues:

Power in a hybrid media system is exercised by those who are successfully able to create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable or disable others' agency, across and between a range of older and newer media settings. (Chadwick, 2013, p. 207)

This model goes some way to addressing Bennett and Iyengar's (2010, p. 38) exhortation that "communication theory needs to adjust to the new conditions in the sender–receiver–audience paradigm" that characterise current media.

The contemporary proliferation of digital communication technologies has seen media institutions and publics assume competing roles as producers and "producers" (Bruns, 2006) of mediated political discourse, challenging traditional regimes of political and media power. This introduces some important challenges to established concepts of not only the audience-media interface, but also the ontology of the media text. Afforded expanded abilities to produce media texts themselves, users of newer media can not only avoid anxieties around engaging in political conversations in face-to-face contexts, as described by Sobieraj et al. (2013, pp. 414-415); so, too, can some motivated participants actively challenge traditional media agendas through participatory practices of citizen journalism and other modes of content production (Chadwick, 2013, p. 21).

Insofar as in a hybrid media system the power of publics comes up against the continuing power of political and media elites, Chadwick (2013, p. 210) argues, there are important constraints on the power of audiences to produce media

discourse. Competition and contestation are thus central features of Chadwick's model. He writes:

If media are best seen throughout history as bundles of cultural, social, economic, and political practices, these practices are shaped by competitive yet interdependent processes of hybridization involving multiple actors operating in and across diverse settings. (Chadwick, 2013, p. 26)

An important distinction to consider here is that which is theorised to obtain between alternative and mainstream media.

Alternative media are defined by Couldry and Curran (2003, p. 7) as "media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations." Fuchs (2010) supports a similar contention with his proposal that alternative media constitute *critical* media. In that regard, alternative media have been shown to play a role in cultivating political activism and counterpublics (Leung & Lee, 2014). This has traditionally been deemed to entail both collective rituals and the collective production of political messages (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). However, hybrid media are characterised by varying levels of user participation that have different degrees of political import, whilst also drawing on collective engagement in ways that differ significantly from more traditional forms of political organisation.

Television maintains a degree of dominance, even in the context of media that are seen as increasingly participatory. In that sense, Chadwick argues, "[t]elevision retains its primacy in the mediation of politics, though it is now accompanied by a panoply of online media activity, some of which is facilitated by broadcasters themselves" (2013, p. 59). Television's "remarkable endurance," he proposes, is "reinforced by emerging patterns of online news consumption" that employ remediated television content as a focal point (Chadwick, 2013, p. 52). The relationship between older and newer forms of media is thus foregrounded, thus highlighting the relationship between television and newer forms of participatory media.

A focus on the role of social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook is central to recent work on political activism in an international context, particularly left-wing political activism (Poell, 2014; Postill, 2013). Poell's analysis reveals "a media world that places the mass media at the margins and elevates purveyors of social technology from NGOs to Flickr to prominent roles" (2014, p. 718). This line of inquiry fits with a model of "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which is contrasted with older forms of collective organising, identification, and mobilisation. In this model, connective action is thought to no longer necessarily revolve around the "formation of collective identities," but is rather "based on the sharing of easily personalized ideas, such as 'we are the 99%,' through social media technologies" (Poell, 2014, p. 718) – public words (Vidali, 1996) that circulate through so-called small media to potentially mass audiences.

For Poell, it is "clear that activist communication is undergoing a profound transformation" (2014, p. 728). Nevertheless, the notion of "politically significant behaviours" (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018b) encompasses a broad spectrum of participatory forms in a hybrid media system. This may entail the organisation of political engagement through horizontal communication networks, as in the case of protest movements such as *Occupy* and *Indignados* (Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth, & García-Albacete, 2015). However, political participation in a hybrid media environment may also take the form of user-generated commentary. For example, Anstead and O'Loughlin (2011) show how synchronous forms of commentary are becoming a prominent feature of participatory politics, contributing to the development of what they term the "emerging viewertariat." These practices are related to second or dual screening, which research has shown to be a notable predictor of online political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, & McGregor, 2015). Indeed, the combination of political media consumption with participatory practices such as live-commenting has been positively correlated with political engagement (Vaccari, Chadwick, & O'Loughlin, 2015).

In a hybrid media system, older distinctions between media production and consumption are variously being broken down and reformulated. Chadwick writes:

When such large numbers of bloggers are now integrated into professionalized or semi-professionalized news production, when citizen activists are integrated into news-making assemblages through their participation as bloggers or Twitter or Facebook users, and when the vast majority of older media organisations have moved into the online environment, it is not always accurate to counterpose an online participatory culture against a centralized, top-down, broadcast media culture. (2013, p. 57)

Indeed, publics may sometimes occupy the same participatory environments as political and media elites (Chadwick, Dennis, & Smith, 2015). Nevertheless, some of these spaces serve to reproduce older distinctions between elites and publics, even whilst drawing on rhetorics of participation and user empowerment.

In that regard, the focus of my research is on user-generated below-the-line commentary on an American right-wing news and opinion website. So-called *below-the-line* comment fields refer to “comment and debate spaces opened up underneath news articles and blogs,” providing an opportunity for “audiences to discuss news content with each other and with journalists” (Graham & Wright, 2015, p. 319). Thus, in the context of hybrid media, this framing of comment fields can be seen to demarcate a clear distinction between user-generated content and the formal outputs of journalists and other professional staff (Graham & Wright, 2015), with control of the news production process retained by media organisations (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011). Nevertheless, below-the-line comment fields are an important and popular form of user-generated content in the context of news media (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

Below-the-line comment fields provide a public mechanism for users to openly discuss their response(s) to the content of both above-the-line and below-the-line media. However, they also increasingly constitute an important venue for internet-mediated political discussion (Reich, 2011; Walker et al., 2012). An increasing level of attention is thus being paid to the democratic role and social impacts of participatory media, including the potential for below-the-line comment fields to serve as a space for deliberation (Dahlberg, 2011), widely viewed as a normative ideal of democratic participation. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 (see section 2.3 pp. 60-75).

At the same time, below-the-line comment fields are also the focus of growing concerns regarding the implications of incivility in American political talk (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013). The incidence of incivility in American political discourse is a theme that has been studied extensively (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Herbst, 2010; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; York, 2013). Forms of incivility in user-generated content have likewise received scholarly attention. For example, focusing on online discourse, Hardaker (2010, p. 238) defines *trolling* as attempts to “cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of [a user’s] own amusement,” a practice that may rely on subterfuge and deception (Donath, 2002). Hmielowski et al. (2014, p. 1197), on the other hand, focus on *flaming*, which they define as the “use of aggressive language in an online context.” These concepts share a number of discursive features with the concept of outrage outlined by Berry and Sobieraj (2013), including the prevalence of *ad hominem* attacks on opponents.

Whilst research has shown the use of aggressive language in online political discussions to be common (Papacharissi, 2004a), empirical studies of comment fields demonstrate contradictory findings. For example, research by Gardiner (2018) reveals *ad hominem* attacks to be a common feature of comments posted to the below-the-line comment field at TheGuardian.com. In contrast, research by Canter (2013) shows levels of incivility to be more limited than assumed by many commenters, whilst for Halpern and Gibbs (2013), highly contentious topics are more likely to produce uncivil responses. Likewise, levels of civility have been shown to differ depending on degrees of anonymity (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), for example when users comment in response to Facebook posts versus in below-the-line comment fields on a news website, e.g., The Washington Post (Rowe, 2015). Existing research thus demonstrates variations in levels of incivility that are tied not just to the content of news items but also to the context within which comments are made. Following Chen (2017), then, it is not a simple either/or question of incivility or deliberation, but rather a matter of how they co-occur in online news comments.

Aside from concerns about the deliberative quality of user-generated below-the-line commentary, the wide availability of partisan media in a high-choice media

environment is cited as a concern regarding the democratic function and deliberative quality of media discourse more broadly speaking (Mansbridge et al., 2012). This was not always the case. In the US, for example, the professional ideal of objectivity became a defining characteristic of American journalistic practice from the early 20th century (Kperogi, 2013, pp. 51-52). For the past number of decades, however, significant structural transformations in the global media environment have laid the groundwork for a growing prevalence of partisan media outlets in the US (Levendusky, 2013a; Prior, 2013). Partisan media saliently privilege particular ideological perspectives and affective judgments about perceived opponents through a number of mechanisms, including the use of politically biased reporting (Groeling, 2013) and uncivil discourse (Gervais, 2014), for example. Partisan media tend to frame the news as a struggle between two opposing camps, i.e., Republicans and Democrats in the US context (Levendusky, 2013a). In that regard, Levendusky argues, partisan media “shape how viewers see the “other side” because they powerfully invoke viewers’ partisan (social) identities” (2013a, p. 567)

The prevalence of uncivil discourse in partisan media is a matter of interest among scholars of political communication (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Gervais, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Yet incivility, Sobieraj and Berry argue (2011, p. 20), no longer serves as an adequate model for the propensity towards conflict that is the mark of contemporary political media in the US. Instead, they note the rise of an “outrage industry” (J. M. Berry & Sobieraj, 2013) that spans media formats including cable television, talk radio, and political blogs. Outrage-based political opinion media, they argue, boast audiences that are both “impressive and unprecedented” (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 35). Most importantly, however, they are typified by a specific rhetorical form that they term “outrage discourse.” Whereas political incivility is characterised by “gratuitous asides that show a lack of respect and/or frustration with the opposition” (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 5), outrage discourse goes beyond incivility to encompass rhetorical efforts to provoke “visceral responses” of fear, moral righteousness, anger, and indignation from audiences through the use of “overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, *ad hominem* attacks, and partial truths about opponents” (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 19).

However, it is seen not so much as a mode of affect as it is a commercially strategic deployment of antagonistic rhetoric. Although outrage discourse is to be found in both liberal and conservative media, it is argued to be notably more prevalent among right-leaning outlets (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), constituting a potent force in contemporary American conservatism.

Berry and Sobieraj (2013) look to a series of formative regulatory, political, and technological transformations that laid the foundations for the development of the outrage industry. Whilst some of these transformations have had global reach and impact, including technological changes of various kinds, it is important to understand those dimensions that are specific to the US context. For example, significant changes in US media regulations enabled newer forms of media ownership that facilitated the emergence of cable news in the 1990s and talk radio even earlier (Aufderheide, 1990, 1999). These changes have contributed to a reshaping of the US media environment that has powerful implications for American politics in general (Levendusky, 2013a). The rise of the outrage industry should thus be understood in the context of the more generalised growth in partisan media outlets over the past several decades.

Whilst the circulation of media formats more traditionally viewed as reliable sources of political information is declining (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007), audience figures for outrage-based content are steadily growing (J. M. Berry & Sobieraj, 2013). In order to explain this contrast, Sobieraj et al. (2013) suggest that outrage-based media may be bringing about new modes of political conversation, constituted through "parasocial" (D. C. Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956) interaction with media figures. By permitting audiences to avoid cross-cutting political discussion, they argue, these new modes of political discussion may allow conservatives, in particular, to alleviate fears that their views will be perceived as intolerant (Sobieraj et al., 2013, p. 428). Such fear of stigmatisation in cross-cutting political talk has indeed been posited as central to the culture of avoidance that is seen to characterise American political talk (Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2006a). As discussed above, however, newer media have introduced novel tools that can be utilised by audiences in order to engage in political discussion.

In that regard, a growing hybridisation in the production and circulation of media content introduces some important challenges to the notion that outrage can be viewed purely as a business strategy of commercial media, problematising the relationship between the outrage discourse of institutional media and the outrage voiced by those who engage with them. For example, the occurrence of incivility in below-the-line comments has been linked to contextual factors, such as article topic, article author, and sources cited in the article (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). This is an indicator that partisan cues are important for news audiences (N. J. Stroud, 2011). In that sense, it is important to consider not only the kinds of content with which audiences are engaging, but also how they are being utilised as resources.

A variety of distinctions define the intersection of professional and user-generated outputs in online news, speaking to enduring variations in terms of how institutional producers and audience “producers” (Bruns, 2009) generate content. As noted above, below-the-line comment fields reproduce this distinction between elite and public discourse. However, news media also provide an array of resources for citizens to express political agency in the everyday spaces of social media (Chadwick et al., 2018b), speaking to Stroud’s (2011) argument that news audiences respond to partisan cues. Although their strategies may differ, outrage-based political opinion media and audience producers can draw on similar discursive resources in their characterisation of both political opponents and oppositional media. However, those resources are not evenly distributed, both in terms of the uneven partisanship of the US media environment and in terms of the differential access to discursive authority enjoyed by elites and publics in a hybrid media system.

1.2.2 Glenn Beck and TheBlaze

This thesis presents a case study of TheBlaze.com, the alternative media outlet developed by conservative media figure Glenn Beck and his production company, Mercury Radio Arts. Glenn Beck came to prominence in the late 2000s as a conservative talk radio and television host and is now constituted as the focal figure in an expansive media production enterprise entailing internet, television, radio, books, magazines, and speaking tours. A message on the Mercury Radio

Arts homepage describes Beck as a “radio and TV personality, bestselling author, producer, filmmaker, clothier, entrepreneur, constitutionalist, curator, and humanitarian.”

Beck styles himself as “the fusion of entertainment and enlightenment” — a claim that appears repeatedly throughout the years in interviews, press releases, and even formerly as a motto on his website prior to the rebranding of his radio show and website as “Glenn” in 2017. This characterisation speaks openly to the increasingly “porous boundaries” between so-called hard news and entertainment (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). At the same time, Beck’s style is recognised as confessional, catastrophic, and frequently paranoid. In that regard, numerous commentators have situated Beck’s rhetoric in terms of Richard Hofstadter’s (1964) seminal essay ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ — an analysis that has also frequently been applied to the Tea Party movement with which Beck has been associated (Courser, 2012). Above all, Beck’s style is framed as conservative, revelatory, and explicitly Christian.

Glenn Beck’s outputs represent a particular mode of affective media production (Jutel, 2018). He narrates a universe in which apocalypses political, social, and economic are foretold as a matter of course (Kelly, 2012). However, revealing the threat posed to the American nation by those who would seek to destroy it from both within and without is portrayed as a dangerous act. The very act of discussing the threat to American sovereignty and nationhood is rhetorically posited as a threat to Beck as a speaker. This frames Beck’s outputs in terms of what Foucault (2001) referred to as “fearless speech” or *parrhesia* — i.e., “speaking truth to power despite danger” (Jutel, 2018, p. 377). Whilst *parrhesia* in Foucault’s model is presented as the very antithesis of demagogic rhetoric, Beck assumes the rhetorical form of *parrhesia* in his specific style of affective performance. Nevertheless, Beck’s truth-telling is frequently underscored by pedagogical and didactic metaphors, through these performing evidence of truths revealed to his audience (Kelly, 2012). However, the apocalyptic imagery which typifies Beck’s rhetoric is also frequently accompanied prominently by product advertising (e.g., survivalist tools, gold coins) that seeks to monetise fears engendered regarding the coming apocalypse (McNaught, 2013).

Having joined Fox News Channel in 2009, Beck became a prominent figure in American conservatism. At the same time as Beck became a prominent figure at Fox News Channel, he likewise made a name as a figurehead within the outwardly leaderless Tea Party movement. Indeed, so embedded in Tea Party politics did Beck become that many local chapters even named themselves after his “9/12 Project,” whose stated aim was to rediscover Americans’ sense of national togetherness and purpose on the day after 9/11 (The Blaze Staff, 2017). For example, in September 2009, Beck figured centrally in the “Taxpayer March on Washington,” which itself emerged from Beck’s 9/12 project and was nationally coordinated by a number of organisations, including FreedomWorks, Tea Party Patriots, and the Patriot Action Network (Courser, 2010).

As noted by Chadwick (2013, p. 55), Beck was also able to leverage the horizontal online networks that had been established by the Tea Party movement when he organised the “Restoring Honor” rally on the National Mall in Washington DC in August 2010. These examples raise the question of how Beck can be seen to “reanimate” left-wing modes of protest and organisation from the post-war era (Our Literal Speed, 2010, p. 387) at the same time as he draws on modes of rhetoric associated with the civil rights movement (C. A. Young, 2019).¹ According to Jutel (2018), these rallies formed part of a broader affective media apparatus via which Beck’s media enterprise was enabled by the “free labour” (Terranova, 2000) of both his audience and Tea Party movement activists.

After comments claiming President Barack Obama was a “racist with a deep-seated hatred of white people and white culture” (Kavanaugh, 2009), Beck’s Fox News Channel show was subjected to an advertising boycott orchestrated by left-wing activists (McNaught, 2013) – a successful example both of what McNaught (2013) refers to as “free-market censorship” or what Neilson (2010) terms “political consumerism.” Beck left Fox News Channel in 2011 and launched his eponymous internet television project, GBTV. It was only after a number of consolidations that in 2012 GBTV became TheBlaze, integrating with

¹ Berlet and Lyons (2000, p. 2) argue that right-wing populist movements frequently borrow “political slogans, tactics, and forms of organization from the Left, but harness them to rightist goals.”

TheBlaze.com, which had been launched in 2010, to create a “single multi-platform media company” (Weprin, 2012).

TheBlaze offers a mix of news and opinion pieces, with user-generated content following the model of TheGuardian.com’s “Comment is Free” section. In fact, it has been claimed that TheBlaze is specifically designed in the model best exemplified by the liberal-leaning alternative media outlet The Huffington Post (Rose, 2010). TheBlaze is particularly notable for its multi-platform, “transmedia” (Jansson & Lindell, 2015) characteristics. Whilst captures of Beck’s daily radio talk show are available in back catalogue on Soundcloud and via podcast through iTunes, shows can be reached not only via the website itself, but also via Facebook Live.

At the time of its launch, Beck commented on his motivations in creating TheBlaze. He wrote:

Too many important stories are overlooked. And too many times we see mainstream media outlets distorting facts to fit rigid agendas. Not that you’ve ever heard me complain about the media before. Okay, maybe once or twice. But there comes a time when you have to stop complaining and do something. And so we decided to hire some actual journalists to launch a new website — The Blaze. And we moved fast. We built the team and the site in just two months. We want this to be a place where you can find breaking news, original reporting, insightful opinions and engaging videos about the stories that matter most. The Blaze will be about current news — and more. It’s not just politics and policy. It’s looking for insight wherever we find it. We’ll examine our culture, deal with matters of faith and family, and we won’t be afraid of a history lesson. (G. Beck, 2010)

Whilst in the previous section, I outlined a concept of media rooted in the outputs of communications scholarship, here I draw attention to a more antagonistic model in which mainstream media are portrayed as agents of duplicity and deceit, which forms the basis of my analysis in Chapter 5 (see section 5.2 pp. 155-165).

Haller and Holt (2019a) note a prominent tendency among populist figures to characterise mainstream media in antagonistic terms, through the use of the term “Lügenpresse” – i.e., “lying press” – recontextualising a term notably associated with Nazi rhetoric regarding press criticism (Prince, 2018). As Haller and

Holt highlight, however, with reference to the example of PEGIDA² in Germany and Austria, this is a practice that continues today. As argued above, in the context of partisan media, particularly outrage-based political opinion media, antagonistic frontiers between mainstream and right-leaning alternative media are also produced discursively as a rhetorical strategy by media figures (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012).

Jutel (2013) identifies both Beck and Fox News Channel as major proponents of such antagonistic rhetoric, although Beck's approach is presented as exceptional. Beck, Jutel remarks, "engaged in seeming revolutionary exposition in consecrating a populist community across media space, unified by a transgressive dehumanization of its enemy" (2018, p. 376) – a mode of performance which had a profound impact on American political discourse in general. Indeed, Young (2019) contends that Beck's specific brand of populist rhetoric laid the groundwork for the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States – a matter of some irony, considering Beck's notable anti-Trump stance during the 2016 US presidential election cycle.

Insofar as audiences are likely to draw cues from trusted sources (Ladd, 2010a), how audiences engage with this kind of content is important. Nevertheless, evidence indicates that audience engagement with Glenn Beck and his media enterprise is somewhat fraught. This speaks to Beck's difficulties in terms of the "new political economy of the media field" (Jutel, 2013), in which movement populism and media exist in a state of symbiosis. In spite of Beck's erstwhile status as a media darling of populist conservatism (Rich, 2009), TheBlaze is widely discussed as a struggling endeavour. Beck has frequently spoken openly about the financial problems he has personally faced as a result. For a number of years, it has also been a topic of conversation amongst other right-wing media figures. To give a sense of the transformation, TheBlaze laid off 20 percent of its employees in August 2017 (Rothstein, 2017). Further layoffs in 2018 reduced the company staff to less than 50, at a time when talks regarding

² PEGIDA emerged as a populist street movement in 2014 (Dostal, 2015). PEGIDA is the abbreviated form of "Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes" (Çakir, 2016), which translates as "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident" (Haller & Holt, 2019b).

a sought-after bailout from the owners of conservative media figure Ben Shapiro's website, The Daily Wire collapsed (Tani & Grove, 2018).

It should be noted that since the period during which my data sample was produced, TheBlaze has undergone a merger with another conservative media outlet, CRTV, led by Mark Levin (Concha, 2018). Both Levin and Beck were noteworthy during the 2016 Republican primaries for their explicit NeverTrump³ stance. Whilst Levin eventually came out in support of Trump, Beck maintained his position through the election and beyond. Declining viewership and financial conditions have been tied to Beck's eventual support for President Donald Trump, which he expressed in May 2018, publicly stating he would support Trump's 2020 re-election bid whilst donning a red "Make America Great Again" hat (Gallagher, 2018). Whilst Beck would later express his own support for President Trump, the way commentators discuss Beck's attitude towards Trump as the Republican candidate and later President of the United States animates my data sample in ways that, I argue, demand significant scholarly attention.

1.2.3 TheBlaze as a site of contestation during the 2016 election

My position here is that selecting TheBlaze as a contested space during and after the 2016 US presidential election can offer some profound insights regarding the fractures and fissures that define contemporary American conservatism. Whilst there are numerous examples of prominent right-wing media outlets that would provide more mainstream spaces within which to study the contemporary conservative media ecosystem (e.g., Breitbart, Fox News), the role played by TheBlaze was singular during 2016, as one of the only major right-wing partisan media outlets to refuse to support Trump's candidacy.. Here, I outline this position in greater detail, situating TheBlaze in terms of this ecosystem.

Faris et al. (2017) show how the political media landscape in the US is not only asymmetrically characterised by higher levels of polarisation and partisanship on the right, but that it is also an ecosystem that is undergoing significant trans-

³ For a detailed discussion of the NeverTrump phenomenon, see Johnson, McCray, and Ragusa (2018a). The relation between Levin and Beck, including their status as prominent "NeverTrump" media figures, is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

formations at the present time. This echoes the work of Berry and Sobieraj (2013), cited above, who demonstrate a greater prevalence of conservative outlets, with a noted dearth of liberal outrage media, particularly in terms of talk radio. Research on partisan media in the US has focused on the outsized role of Fox News Channel (J. M. Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Hochschild, 2016). For Hochschild (2016, p. 126), Fox News exerts a “powerful influence” on its viewers; it “stands next to industry, state government, church, and the regular media as an extra pillar of political culture all its own.... To some, Fox is family.” In defining politics, it provides an affective framework for how people should emotionally relate to politics. For Berry and Sobieraj (2013) and, later, Hochschild (2016), Fox News is seen as the dominant source of political information among conservatives. However, it is also seen to have “outsized importance in shaping political identity, attitudes about government, and beliefs” (Kreiss et al., 2017, p. 474).

More recently, research has focused on the significant role played by Breitbart (Benkler et al., 2018). Faris et al. (2017, p. 9) argue, for instance, that during the 2016 US Presidential Election cycle, Breitbart emerged “as the nexus of conservative media,” a fact which represented a “significant reshaping of the conservative media landscape over the past several years.” In a New York Times profile of Breitbart and its elusive former editor Steve Bannon, Hylton (2017) wrote of Breitbart’s iconographic character, which has seen Breitbart constituted as dangerous media through media discourse. Nevertheless, such discourse constructions risk overplaying Breitbart’s importance. Republican politics throughout the 2016 election cycle were noteworthy for prominent resistance to Trump’s candidacy, even amongst Republican members of Congress (Johnson, McCray, & Ragusa, 2018b). In asserting Breitbart’s dominance in setting the tone of conservative media in 2016, media outlets, critics, and commentators risk downplaying or even erasing that factionalism. Likewise, many media organisations today are affected by large-scale economic pressures (M. T. Boykoff & Yulsman, 2013). By discussing Breitbart in terms of its precipitous success, the challenges facing both traditional and alternative media organisations as they attempt to navigate the vagaries of the US political media landscape are somewhat neglected.

The intense but also in many respects limited focus on the social role and status of Breitbart – and the Alt-Right as the social movement to which it has been related in public discourse (Heikkilä, 2017)(Heikkilä, 2017)(Heikkilä, 2017) – creates an image of uniformity within a right-wing media ecosystem. However, based on my articulation approach to the relation between media and affective polarisation in the US context, I argue this media environment is best understood as characterised by struggles over the power and authority to define the nature, shape, and extent of contemporary American conservatism and other right-wing political ideologies and identities. The dearth of treatments of other right-wing media outlets that results from such a singular focus is a gap in the current crop of analyses. This is one of the key reasons why I have chosen not to focus on either Breitbart or Fox News as my case study.

Comparatively speaking, TheBlaze.com operates on a significantly smaller scale than Breitbart.com. For example, as of 27 December 2019, Breitbart.com was ranked #283 in global internet engagement by the web analytics platform Alexa⁴ (based on certified data), whereas TheBlaze.com was ranked #6,477 during the same timeframe (based on estimated data). Similarly, whilst TheBlaze.com had 7,334 sites linking in, Breitbart.com had 40,650. Although it may not receive the same visitor traffic or generate as much public interest, I argue TheBlaze.com nevertheless presents a challenging case study, insofar as it provides a rich empirical basis for exploring the *dynamics* of right-wing partisan media, as well as the factionalism of right-wing politics in the US.

A number of factors appear pertinent. First, how commenters respond to explicit and implicit partisan alignments can offer a perspective on how categories of oppositionality and likemindedness are constituted dynamically in user-generated discourse through the same articulatory processes as self/other distinctions and other forms of antagonism. Second, audience engagement also speaks to some of the pressures facing contemporary media, particularly in terms of the

⁴ Alexa is a subsidiary of Amazon. The site provides search engine optimisation and web analytics data. Site ranking is based on certified or estimated data. According to Alexa.com, “global traffic rank is a measure of how a website is doing relative to all other sites on the web over the past 3 months. The rank is calculated using a proprietary methodology that combines a site's estimated average of daily unique visitors and its estimated number of pageviews over the past 3 months.”

relationship between audience activity and advertising revenue in the production of partisan news and opinion content. As advertising boycotts of right-wing media figures and outlets become a highly visible protest technique, TheBlaze.com offers a view not only on how media figures and the organisations with which they are associated respond to such tactics, but also how audiences conceptualise the significance of their own choice to tune in and tune out. Third, user-generated commentary posted to TheBlaze.com can also serve as a pertinent example of how a partisan media audience respond to a perceived shift in the partisan stance of their preferred media. This represents a challenging case study insofar as there is a dearth of literature dealing with audience responses to such dynamic transitions. The below-the-line comment field at TheBlaze.com thus presents a compelling space in which the boundaries of American conservatism get contested in relation to publicly articulated feelings regarding the political and economic significance of partisan media.

My contention, as I have argued elsewhere (see Kelly, 2020), is that the public negotiation of Trump support in 2016 offers a compelling case study in how American conservative identities have been contested within a hybridised outrage media ecology. Whilst there are numerous prominent alternatives to Breitbart and Fox News, including Daily Caller, Infowars, and The Daily Wire, none of these stood against Trump in 2016. The result is that nowhere was this particular form of contestation more prominent in 2016 than among the audience of TheBlaze. By offering a view on the kinds of oppositionality and outrage Trump's 2016 candidacy engendered among a right-wing partisan media audience, this space can help to reveal a great deal about the articulation of conservative identity, but it also serves as a potent case study in the kinds struggles that define the market for conservative viewpoints. In 2016, all other prominent right-wing media eventually fell in line behind Trump as the representative of the Republican party and, by extension, of American conservatism. By refusing to voice his support for Trump, Beck became an outlier in a crowded field of conservative voices. He was joined in this controversial stance by only a subsection of his audience. The public contestation over the acceptance of Trump in 2016 is a story that has thus far not been told in a way that rigorously depicts the affective dynamics of these processes. That is the story that I tell in this thesis.

1.3 Project overview

My analysis focuses on user-generated below-the-line commentary, which I conceptualise as a form of discursive performance through which meanings are publicly articulated. In particular, I am interested in how this pertains to the discursive construction of self/other distinctions in user-generated comments posted to TheBlaze.com. This presents an opportunity to conduct a qualitative analysis of how affective polarisation manifests at the discursive level, with a particular focus on the role of right-wing partisan media in the production of antagonistic oppositions.

With this thesis, I address four key objectives. First, I seek to explore how commenters use the public performance of antagonism to contest the boundaries of American conservatism in their online political talk. Second, I seek to examine how commenters perform their characterisation(s) of media in relation to publicly contested partisan antagonisms. Third, I seek to describe how commenters relate their use of partisan media to political and economic factors. Fourth, I seek to offer an account of how commenters relate their partisan media use to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation, particularly in terms of imaginaries of political past, present, and future. These main objectives are explicitly reflected in my four research questions, which I present at the end of Chapter 2.

My approach integrates constructionist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with an articulation paradigm grounded in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). Empirically, my PhD data consist of a corpus of 5,288 user-generated below-the-line comments posted to the conservative news and opinion website TheBlaze.com. These data are drawn from a sample of articles posted to the site during a six-month period around the 2016 US presidential election. My approach to sampling will be outlined in greater detail in Chapter 3 (see section 3.3 pp. 98-110).

Importantly, through my focus on the performance of self/other distinctions, my conceptual framework distinguishes between attitudes and discourse. That is, I focus on the performance of partisan oppositions through user-generated con-

tent without making claims as to the authenticity of the positions that may underlie them. In so doing, I follow Hedrick, Karpf, & Kreiss (2018) in problematising the assumption of an “earnest internet,” orienting instead towards the potential “ambivalence” of online engagement (W. Phillips & Milner, 2018). My methodological approach is suited to this kind of ontology, insofar as my constructionist thematic analysis will not construe the words of users as a transparent window onto their views and attitudes. In the context of a growing prevalence of bots and other forms of automated content production, this is an approach that appears judicious. However, in this respect, my framework views the critical analysis of online political talk as a valuable endeavour in its own right.

This is a relatively limited data set drawn from a single website during a bounded timeframe characterised by a presidential election and immediately following a contentious Republican Party primary. As such, any claims made herein must be understood in terms not only of their limited generalisability but also their politically exceptional features. Whilst I will speak in more detailed terms about the limitations of my research in Chapter 8 (see section 8.4 pp. 268-272), I believe it is important to note from the outset these foundational limitations of my project. Nevertheless, even in its narrow focus on a single case study, my thesis seeks to make a series of contributions to scholarship in four principal areas. Some of these have been noted above, although I list them here explicitly for clarity. I will reflect on the extent to which my research achieves these contributions in Chapter 8 (see section 8.3 pp. 263-268).

First, affective polarisation has been conceptualised from a primarily quantitative perspective through the lens of a social identity approach. As has been argued by Jackson and Sherriff (2013), however, the “messy” complexity of real-world inter-group relations can usefully be revealed through qualitative analysis, including the production and significance of self/other distinctions. It should be noted that this is not an either/or proposition. A qualitative examination of affective polarisation should thus be seen as contributing to a more expansive, mixed-methods perspective on the development and expression of negative affect towards the (perceived) opposition.

Second, and relatedly, a social identity approach has also been applied to the study of hostile media phenomena. As with processes of affective polarisation, an examination of hostile media perceptions and the expression of oppositional media hostility will likewise benefit, I argue, from a qualitative reappraisal. The relation between affective polarisation and hostile media perceptions is important, insofar as in a partisan media environment that primes affective judgments about political opponents, attitudes towards political organisations and agents may become bound up in attitudes towards media.

Third, Berry and Sobieraj's concept of the outrage industry views outrage as a business strategy. However, audiences can draw on similar generic frameworks in producing their responses to partisan media content (Kelly, 2020). It is therefore important to conceptualise outrage in a manner that can account for a multiplicity of audience voices. In that regard, my analysis focuses on the diversity of subject positions represented in a complex right-wing media ecology, contributing to a body of research that seeks to apply Berry and Sobieraj's concept of outrage to studies of incivility in user-generated content (e.g., Chen, 2017; Gervais, 2015b; Rao & Haina, 2017).

Fourth, the site I have chosen serves as a case study that not only reveals extreme competition within the right-wing partisan media market; it also speaks to the complex political economy of media ownership and participation in a hybrid media system.

My thesis examines how audiences respond to perceived shifts in alignment with media outlets, figures, and content. In a high-choice media environment in which partisan selection of media is thought to have important political and non-political implications, this appears to be a phenomenon of some significance. However, as far as I have been able to establish, it has not as of yet been dealt with in the literature. My research examines how such reactions are articulated in user-generated below-the-line commentary, as well as how they are mapped onto affective judgments about politics and identity, thus contributing to an understanding of audience engagement with partisan media as a phenomenon that is both active and performative. At the same time, with this thesis, I seek to develop an approach to analysing the discursive dynamics of affective polarisa-

tion that has broader relevance beyond the context of my specific case study. This is a matter which I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 8 (see section 8.3 pp. 263-268)

1.4 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of eight chapters. This current chapter serves as an introduction, providing important contextual information on my research area and case study, an overview of my research approach, and an outline of my thesis structure.

In **Chapter 2**, I outline my theoretical framework by focusing on three overarching concepts that are directly relevant to my analysis: polarisation, participation, and articulation. In each case, I contextualise each key concept in ways that highlight its relation to media and media-related practice. First, I outline arguments pertaining to four specific forms of polarisation: elite, mass, ideological, and affective. Noting the quantitative basis of much work on affective polarisation, I propose a qualitative approach that recognises the dynamic, discursive character of self/other distinctions. Second, I examine a number of models of participation, particularly as this relates to normative debates about idealised forms of democratic engagement. Here, I examine some arguments regarding the democratic role of deliberation as well as some of the democratic implications of political consumerism in the context of hybrid media. Third, I outline my articulation approach, drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001). Conceptualising the production and performance of collective identities as an outcome of the ongoing struggle to fix meaning, I expand on my argument that antagonism serves as a useful conceptual tool for developing a qualitative account of affective polarisation.

Building on the outline of my articulation approach, in **Chapter 3** I set out my methodological framework. First, following the model outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I offer a critical overview of my specific approach to constructionist thematic analysis, which focuses on the sociocultural conditions of discourse. Here, I also outline the “hybrid” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) character of my framework, insofar as my approach features the inductive and deductive

generation of both semantic and latent themes. Second, I give an overview of my approach to sampling, data gathering, and thematic coding. Here, I also reflect on some of the materials and methods that were discarded in the process of refining my methodological framework. Third, I reflect on some ethical considerations, particularly as this pertains to working with online user-generated comments and issues surrounding the analysis of disagreeable content.

Having presented my theoretical and methodological approach, I discuss my main findings in four empirical chapters. **Chapter 4** focuses on user-generated characterisations of US political parties, politicians, and partisans. Here, I start with a focus on some postulations of social identity theory regarding the kinds of content that should be present in my data sample. In particular, social identity theory proposes the presence of positive in-group characterisations and negative out-group characterisations. However, here I discuss a further form notable in my data: contestatory characterisations. This third form, I argue, helps to reveal the productive role of conflict and dissensus in the construction of identity/difference distinctions. This chapter demonstrates how even in the context of deeply partisan media, dissenting voices persist.

Whereas Chapter 4 focuses on the antagonistic characterisation of political parties, politicians, and partisans, **Chapter 5** applies this approach to an analysis of media figures, outlets, and content. I first examine the emergence of the concept of the “mainstream media” in right-wing political discourse before focusing on the occurrence of antagonistic claims of media bias in the online political talk of commenters. Lastly, I show how the construction of American conservative identity is bound up in contested notions of likeminded and counterattitudinal media. This chapter demonstrates the manner in which definitions of likeminded and counterattitudinal media are performed through online political talk.

Expanding on the analysis set out in Chapter 5, **Chapter 6** examines audience commentary on media choice. I begin with an exploration of the shifting relation between TheBlaze and its audience before turning to a discussion of how commenters present a metacommentary on their media use, relating this to the boycott/boycott distinction (M. Friedman, 1996). Lastly, I focus on how commenters depict the political economic impact of their practices of media use, highlighting

the utility of the concept of “political prosumption” (Hershkovitz, 2012) in the analysis of media selectivity. Here, I once again demonstrate how judgments about media are fundamentally intertwined with claims regarding politics and identity. This chapter also concentrates on how commenters actively constitute the target(s) of their antagonistic rhetoric.

Moving away from a more explicit focus on media, **Chapter 7** considers how commenters deploy imaginaries of American past, present, and future for rhetorical purposes. First, I examine user-generated commentary on the theme of divine providence, which situates the authoring of the US Constitution and the emergence of the American nation in terms of metaphysical temporality. Second, I focus on the present political climate by examining user-generated commentary on the binary nature of the 2016 election. Lastly, I relate the discussion of past and present to visions of the future as expressed through antagonistic and apocalyptic rhetorics of decay and degradation. In so doing, I offer an account of a specifically polarised vision that foregrounds a perceived existential threat to the very existence of American nationhood.

Finally, **Chapter 8** concludes my thesis. Here, I review the main claims I make in the foregoing chapters. However, I also outline some further conclusions that can be drawn from my analysis. I also highlight some of the contributions I believe my project makes to the literature on polarisation, political communication, and participatory media. In conclusion, I present some of the limitations to my approach, whilst offering an overview of some suggestions for potential avenues for further research, which I argue can make an important input into a truly mixed-methods framework for understanding affective polarisation, particularly in its relation to broader processes of political differentiation.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced my doctoral research agenda. In so doing, I presented some background information on the context within which my research is situated, an overview of the approach I have taken to completing my investigation, and an outline of my thesis. My interest lies not only in examining media that is increasingly participatory, but rather in exploring how this inter-

sects with the kinds of transformations that have resulted in forms of media that are increasingly partisan. I see this is as the main context of my research.

Here, I have proposed that the concept of antagonism can usefully be employed as a conceptual tool in the qualitative analysis of affective polarisation, which includes attitudes towards opposing partisans and media. In so doing, I have taken the example of TheBlaze.com, the alternative media outlet developed by conservative media figure Glenn Beck and his production company, Mercury Radio Arts. Based on a qualitative analysis of online political talk in user-generated below-the-line commentary, in the following chapters I will examine how political antagonisms are articulated by commenters, as well as how those antagonisms are mobilised rhetorically.

Chapter 2: Theory – polarisation, participation, articulation

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines my theoretical framework, which conceptualises the discursive production of self/other distinctions in user-generated online partisan news commentary through the lens of articulation theory. As argued in Chapter 1, affective polarisation, defined as negative attitudes towards opposing partisans, features increasingly prominently in analyses of political polarisation in the US (Iyengar et al., 2019). However, it has heretofore primarily been studied from a quantitative perspective. In order to produce a qualitative account of affective polarisation that recognises the dynamic nature of categories of partisan opposition, I propose an articulation approach grounded primarily in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). Viewed as the ongoing struggle to “fix” meaning in ways that exclude other meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), articulation is here conceived as the mechanism via which the social is produced through discursive acts of opposition and exclusion – i.e., “antagonistic othering” (Herschinger, 2012). It is thus viewed as an inherently political process. Focusing on how affective polarisation manifests at the level of online user-generated discourse, I establish my theoretical framework through a focus on three key concepts: polarisation, participation, and articulation.

First, I offer a conceptual definition of polarisation as it is employed in this thesis. In so doing, I focus primarily on three main themes. I begin with an examination of the various models of polarisation that figure prominently in scholarly debates in contemporary American political science. Here, I focus specifically on the concept of affective polarisation, which has come to the fore in recent years, arguing for a qualitative approach that can offer an account of the dynamic, discursive production of self/other distinctions. I then continue by outlining some contemporary understandings of partisanship and transformation in the bases for partisan alignments in the US context. Having established the concept of polarisation and its relation to partisan alignment, I then discuss some of the ongoing debates regarding the relationship between media and polarisation in the US context. Here, I expand on the related concepts of hostile

media perceptions and oppositional media bias, relating these to debates around the relation between political homophily and partisan selective exposure.

Second, I outline the concept of participation as it pertains to my analysis. Here, I focus on three major dimensions of participation. I begin by discussing normative debates around idealised forms of political talk in democratic theory, introducing some important critiques of deliberation, which has become a dominant model of democratic legitimisation. Here, I pay specific attention to issues relating to questions around rhetoric and voice, as well as how they pertain to social identity. Having introduced a concept of political talk that extends beyond rational deliberation, I proceed to define the concept of online political talk, before proceeding to outline a further mode of politically significant behaviour that has relevance to my research: political consumerism. Here, I relate political consumerism to contemporary practices of political communication and suggest the concept of “political presumption” as a means of conceptualising the political and economic significance of user-generated content, including below-the-line comments.

Third, I define my articulation approach, which is grounded in the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I begin by outlining the concept of articulation as employed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), setting out its political dimensions. Here, I introduce the concept of hegemony and suggest the concept of antagonism as a framework for conceptualising the ontology of oppositional identities through the lens of articulation theory. I then move on to examine how articulation can be used to explore the production and performance of collective identities. Finally, insofar as my thesis conceptualises below-the-line commentary as a practice of political communication which occurs in a hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2013), I here formulate an approach which views the articulation of meaning through the production and circulation of user-generated content as a practice that is shaped by a variety of constraints operating at various levels.

2.2 Polarisation

Political polarisation has become a matter of significant public and scholarly debate in recent years, particularly in the US context. As remarked by Lelkes (2016), this debate is marked by confusion over what constitutes polarisation amongst media commentators as well as disagreements regarding how it should be defined amongst academics (Lelkes, 2016). In the US, political scientists have argued at length about who exactly is polarised as well as to what extent (see Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006). Likewise, American media today talk more about polarisation than they did in the past (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Some degree of polarisation is important in the context of party competition (Barber & McCarty, 2015). Nevertheless, normatively speaking, it is for the most part viewed as problematic (Reiljan, 2020) – even dangerous – and is seen by some as a major impediment to idealised models of democratic engagement, e.g., rational deliberation (see Sunstein, 2009). In that regard, polarisation and the heightened partisanship with which it is associated are implicated in significant fears regarding the stability of the very foundations of representative democracy (Iyengar et al., 2019). Polarisation, in short, is widely viewed as a matter of considerable import. Taking these conditions as a starting point, in this section I outline a definition of affective polarisation, relating it to analyses of forms of partisanship and the implications of media selectivity.

2.2.1 Forms of polarisation

Here, I focus on a number of key definitional issues that characterise the ongoing debate regarding the nature and extent of political polarisation in American political life, primarily examining the distinction between elite and mass polarisation, on one hand, and the distinction between ideological and affective polarisation, on the other.

Political polarisation has been conceived in the academic literature as a primarily ideological phenomenon (Reiljan, 2020), focusing predominantly on issue positions and perspectives on matters of policy amongst voters and political elites

(Knight, 2006). Although there is general agreement that some degree of ideological polarisation of political elites has taken place, there is notable disagreement regarding the extent to which this applies at the mass level (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). Thus, for some authors, there is little evidence that the American electorate are polarising on moral, social, and economic policy issues (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). For others, however, the sorts of divisions that characterise a polarising political elite are to be found among the general voting public, with the most profound divisions to be found among those who are most interested, informed, and active (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008).

As noted by Lelkes (2016), the first argument – that polarisation in the US is limited to political elites – is typified by the work of Morris Fiorina, Jeremy Pope, and Matthew Levendusky (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006), whilst the second argument – that polarisation exists at the mass level – is typified by the work of Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders (e.g., Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Saunders & Abramowitz, 2004). Here, I outline the bases for both arguments before I introduce Lelkes' (2016) problematisation of the distinction.

First, the argument that polarisation is limited to political elites. Fiorina and Abrams (2008) argue there is little evidence to suggest that American citizens have grown more polarised, highlighting instead the role of a so-called “polarisation narrative” promulgated by media and political commentators on American politics since the early 1990s. In their analysis, they draw specific attention to the role of Pat Buchanan’s declaration of a “culture war for the soul of America” in a speech given at the 1992 Republican national convention⁵ (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008, p. 564). The elite polarisation argument is also supported by Baldassarri and Bearman (2007, p. 784), who assert that, generally speaking, “on moral, social, economic, and foreign-policy issues, there is little evidence of increasing polarization.” In the case of the elite polarisation argument, the public is viewed as essentially moderate with a thin layer of polarised activists and a growing “disconnect” palpable between the represented and those who purport to represent them (Fiorina & Abrams, 2012; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006).

⁵ See also analysis of comment 4.14, pp. 134-135

Furthermore, Fiorina and Levendusky (2006) argue that prominent qualitative and quantitative studies of polarisation in the late 1990s reveal little evidence that the American public is particularly polarised. Related to this position, Fiorina and Abrams (2008) propose that a reliance on indicators and analytical tools that are incapable of measuring polarisation has resulted in an academic discourse that to some extent mirrors the polarisation narrative propounded by the commentariat. A major explanatory factor in the putative misapprehension of the polarisation phenomenon, according to Fiorina and Levendusky (2006), is that “the media” have failed to sufficiently grasp the important distinction between the mass public and political elites.

However, media are also seen to play another role in this process. Insofar as political elites constitute the public face of politics, their positions receive media attention and are thus portrayed as the norm (Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006). That tendency is made more prominent by a media predilection for “stories that stress conflict over agreement” (Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006, p. 52). This has potentially broad implications in terms of political engagement, insofar as it has been argued that “[a]ppeals that emphasize threats and fear are more effective at motivating mass political activity than a positive agenda” (Kimball & Vorst, 2013, p. 21).

Second, the argument that polarisation is taking place within the mass public. As noted above, there is widespread agreement that political elites have polarised in ideological terms. This contrasts with the proposition that “most ordinary voters have less knowledge about politics, care less about it, and are largely non-ideological,” a claim which is further underlined by the assertion that those who are most active in politics tend towards more extreme positions (Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006, p. 52). Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) argue that Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) present arguments that are in keeping with a seminal paper on public opinion and voting behaviour, ‘The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics’ (Converse, 2006), originally published in 1964. Converse’s paper argued that “the sort of ideological thinking common among political elites was confined to a small minority of the American public” (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, p. 542). Converse’s view, reflected in Fiorina, Abrams, and

Pope (2006), contends that ordinary voters “showed little evidence of using an ideological framework to evaluate political parties or presidential candidates and very limited understanding of basic ideological concepts such as liberalism and conservatism” (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, p. 542).

Notwithstanding the fact that ideological thinking and sophistication are not necessarily coextensive with the capacity to categorise either according to specific camps or traditions, Abramowitz and Saunders contend that a series of dramatic shifts have taken place in American politics and the American electorate since the 1950s that “might lead one to expect an increase in the prevalence of ideological thinking in the public” (2008, p. 542) – a fact they remark that Converse himself has acknowledged. Yet, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) depict a mass politics that looks much like the context originally described by Converse. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008, p. 543) claim this argument is “contradicted by a large body of research by political scientists on recent trends in American public opinion,” which shows that “political and cultural divisions within the American public have deepened considerably since the 1970s. Contrary to the assertions of Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006), then, Abramowitz and Saunders (2008, p. 543) argue that the sorts of divisions that characterise elected officials and activists also typify the mass public, with “the deepest divisions ... found among the most interested, informed, and active members of the public.”

However, alongside disagreement on who exactly is polarised, there is also significant disagreement on how polarisation is to be defined. In that regard, Lelkes (2016) highlights how the distinction between elite and mass polarisation maps onto a further distinction in terms of how polarisation is conceptualised in the two bodies of research. His response is to identify four distinct manifestations of polarisation in the literature: “ideological consistency, ideological divergence, perceived polarization, and affective polarization” (Lelkes, 2016, p. 393). These distinct conceptualisations of polarisation must be borne in mind when attempting to grasp the broader implications of the polarisation debate.

For example, Lelkes (2016) proposes that Abramowitz and Saunders focus on consistency, whilst Fiorina and his colleagues focus on divergence, thus indicat-

ing not only their focus on distinct manifestations of polarisation but also the fact that a more nuanced definition indicates support for both arguments. Lelkes thus argues that re-orienting the debate according to his revised categories leads to a number of important conclusions regarding the actual prevalence of polarisation in American political life. He surmises, “Americans at the mass level have not become more consistent ideologically, nor have they diverged, but partisans have; perceptions of polarization have increased among partisans; and partisans increasingly dislike one another” (Lelkes, 2016, p. 393). This framework explicitly foregrounds the important role that partisans play in processes of polarisation. Reflecting on this proposed centrality of partisans, it is to the fourth form of polarisation identified by Lelkes, i.e., affective polarisation, that I now turn.

Whilst ideological or issue polarisation has long been the primary focus of scholarship on the topic of political polarisation in the US context, the concept now has been expanded to include hostile feelings towards opposing partisans (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). This model of polarisation, which focuses on “partisan animosity” (Reiljan, 2020) or “attitudes toward the opposition” (Levendusky, 2013a), has been termed *affective polarisation*. It has become a matter of some prominence in the literature on political polarisation, particularly in the US (see Garrett et al., 2014; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Lelkes, 2019; Levendusky, 2018; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Whilst acknowledging the importance of existing research on ideological polarisation, this thesis draws specifically on the concept of affective polarisation.

The relationship between affective polarisation and other forms of polarisation is a matter of some disagreement (Lelkes, 2019). Research has shown affective polarisation to have its origins in the particular potency of partisanship as a social identity (Iyengar et al., 2019). Whilst some scholars (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012) maintain that a growth in affective polarisation is not necessarily linked to a rise in policy (or ideological) polarisation, Webster and Abramowitz (2017) argue that affective polarisation has a number of important ideological foundations. Whatever its origins, affective polarisation has been shown to have a powerful impact on judgments and behaviours that go beyond the domain of the political (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Its potential implications are thus far-

reaching, with demonstrated consequences that touch on social interaction, economic behaviour, and labour market distortion, in addition to political engagement (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Affective polarisation heretofore primarily has been conceptualised according to a social identity approach, which entails social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) and self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). This framework focuses on the distinction between in-group and out-group, highlighting positive feelings towards one's own party that are accompanied by hostility towards the out-party (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). The maintenance of a positive social identity is one of the defining stipulations of the social identity approach. In that regard, group members must "differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity" (Turner et al., 1987, p. 42). However, according to Jackson and Sherriff, a number of strategies can be employed in order to achieve this goal. They argue:

in intergroup settings when social identities are salient, individuals will adopt comparative strategies to enhance differences between groups in ways that favor the in-group over the out-group and which can have positive consequences for self-concept. Such socially competitive strategies may include in-group favoritism (e.g., in-group loyalty), out-group derogation (such as prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behavior to out-group members), or a combination of both. (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013, pp. 260-261)

Positive social identity, in other words, can be achieved both through positive reinforcement of in-group characteristics and denigration of out-groups.

Although the social identity framework extensively has been shown to be a reliable tool for quantifying and mapping patterns of intergroup tension and conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Jackson and Sherriff (2013, p. 259) argue it is nevertheless limited by its primarily quantitative articulation in the context of post-positivist research methods and approaches – restricting its utility in terms of analysing the "messy" complexity and nuance of real-world intergroup relations.

Thus, regarding existing applications of social identity theory, Huddy asserts, "social identity theorists' disinclination to examine the sources of social identity

in a real world complicated by history and culture has placed serious limits on the theory's application to political psychology" (2001, p. 129). In that regard, Jackson and Sherriff (2013, p. 260) argue that a qualitative approach to inter-group relations can help to "tease out" the manner in which "intergroup relations are produced, experienced and understood." In this thesis, I take that argument and apply it to the use of a social identity framework in the study of affective polarisation. However, my analysis focuses on the role of discursive articulations in the constitution and performance of partisan identities.

2.2.2 Party identification, negative partisanship, and ideological realignment

Partisanship and party identification are central factors in definitions and examinations of affective polarisation. However, they assume specific forms in the context of the American two-party system. As with examinations of polarisation, discussed above, related analyses of partisanship and party identification also draw on the distinction between identity and policy preference. For example, early approaches to party identification focusing on a sense of personal attachment (e.g., Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954) are contrasted with approaches focusing on electoral behaviour and voter choice (e.g., Fiorina, 1981). However, Thomassen and Rosema (2009, p. 44) critique Fiorina's (1981) definition of party identification as a "running tally of retrospective evaluations," arguing that it is difficult "to see how this results in an enduring psychological identification between self and party." It is, they argue, a concept that appears to be primarily rooted in cognition as opposed to affect (J. Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). For the purposes of this research, given my focus on the discursive production of partisan identity, I will work with a notion of party identification that foregrounds so-called "partisan self-image" (Butler & Stokes, 1969).

Party identification is important because research indicates not only that it is more stable than other political attitudes but also that it exerts a notable influence on those attitudes (Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998). Much work on the polarization of American politics and publics has focused on important transformations in the nature of party identification in the US. This research deals with the related concepts of ideological realignment (Abramowitz & Knotts, 2006;

Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998; Layman & Carsey, 2000; Putz, 2002; Saunders & Abramowitz, 2004; Schreckhise & Shields, 2003) and party sorting (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

Party sorting refers to the process by which the political parties in the US have become more distinct, which is tied to an increasing correlation in terms of Americans' policy positions (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). This creates "a close relationship" between partisan and ideological identifications (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008, p. 578). Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) similarly note a transformation in the racial, regional, and ideological bases of the two major parties since the 1970s that have brought identity and ideology into increasing alignment. The two approaches introduced here differ in the role they attribute to the public in these changes. The result is that an expanding gulf is seen to be opening up between those who identify as Democratic and Republican voters, although in Abramowitz and Saunders' approach this applies to more than an elite layer of activists.

It is important to note, however, that such realignments are not abnormal. On the contrary, research demonstrates that the period of relative consensus that followed the Second World War is the aberration. As noted by Fiorina and Abrams (2008, p. 577):

Historical research in particular faces an insuperable problem. Scholars have pointed out that contemporary levels of elite polarization look unusual compared to those of the mid-twentieth century but not compared to those of the late nineteenth century.

This point is echoed in the work of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006), whose data show a distinct pattern of congressional partisanship fitting this assessment. This stance resonates with the elite polarisation argument introduced in the previous section.

Nevertheless, Abramowitz (2018, pp. 1-2) argues the particular forms of partisan conflict that are characteristic of American political life today indicate that the US has "entered a new age of partisanship" in which significant transformations in American society and culture have fostered major divisions at the level of the mass public. These transformations coincide with what he terms "the

great alignment,” which involves a “growing alignment of partisan identities with deeper divisions in American society and culture” (Abramowitz, 2018, p. x). It is claimed this so-called great alignment has transformed the American two-party system and is linked in important ways to a rise in negative affect towards opposing partisans. As already highlighted in Chapter 1, some authors have pointed to the important racial dimensions of these trends, particularly issues related to white resentment (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018) or *ressentiment* (Olson, 2008), i.e., a deep anger at the loss of social status and white advantage. Indeed, Olson (2008, p. 706) has argued that, given the dominant voting practices of Black voters, who tend to overwhelmingly vote Democratic no matter their income level, polarisation can itself be seen as a largely white phenomenon.

Abramowitz and Webster (2016) relate the increasing negative affect towards opposing partisans that is characteristic of affective polarisation to this growing alignment, identifying a tendency which they term *negative partisanship*. Negative partisanship is defined as “the phenomenon whereby Americans largely align *against* one party instead of affiliating *with* the other” (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018, p. 119). Negative partisanship doesn’t merely lead some people to dislike the opposing party more than they like the one which they identify (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018); it also has the capacity to strongly influence voter decision-making (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). For example, research on Canadian voter behaviour reveals dislike for opposing parties to be a motivator of political behaviours beyond simply casting a vote (Caruana, McGregor, & Stephenson, 2015). Taken together, negative partisanship and affective polarisation are seen to play a significant role in perpetuating a deepening partisan divide in the American electorate (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018). Importantly, such negative attitudes are thought to be further reinforced by exposure to likeminded partisan media (Levendusky, 2013b; Mutz, 2006b).

Thus, whilst there is disagreement over the historical patterning and specific origins of these trends in the ideological alignments of partisans, one thing that is certain is that media markets have emerged that capitalise on these political topographies as they exist today (Hopkins & Ladd, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Levendusky, 2011). In this thesis, I am interested in the discursive articulation of

these alignments of ideology and identity, particularly in the context of the below-the-line commentary of partisan media users. These particular alignments of media and partisanship – and the relationship between media and polarisation – will be the focus of my discussion in the following section.

2.2.3 Media hostility, selective exposure, and political homophily

If the nature and extent of polarisation in American political life is still a matter of debate, the role played by media in this process is similarly the subject of considerable disagreement. In discussing the role played by media in political polarisation, two key considerations are the related processes of media fragmentation and audience segmentation (Mancini, 2012). That is, as media choices proliferate, “patterns of consumption become more widely distributed” (J. G. Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, p. 39). Whilst Webster and Ksiazek (2012) focus on fragmentation in terms of the contemporary growth in digital media, authors such as Mutz (2006b) underline the fact that the phenomenon of fragmentation pertains to a much wider range of media forms.

Evidence increasingly indicates that selective exposure to likeminded media is associated with a growth in affective polarisation in the US (Garrett et al., 2014; Tsfaty & Nir, 2017). Some authors have also demonstrated a link between a rise in extreme attitudes towards out-groups and exposure to the content of ideological news and political opinion-media (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). In the domain of internet-mediated communication, initially viewed optimistically as a potential site for deliberative collaboration (Dahlberg, 2001) and rational communication (Fuchs, 2014), these trends towards increasing partisanship and polarisation of media choices are particularly pronounced, leading some to argue that partisan media are at the root of a growing “cyberbalkanization” in a fragmented media environment (Brainard, 2010; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996, 2005). These processes have been theorised to be at the root of hostile media perceptions (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012), particularly among partisan identifiers (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998). Here, I will first discuss fragmentation and selective exposure before moving on to explore their relation to hostile media perceptions and oppositional media hostility.

Of particular relevance to the question of polarisation is the expansion of Americans' news choices. "Partisan news programs," according to Levendusky, "are less about simply conveying information and more about helping viewers make sense of the world given particular dispositions" (2013a, p. 566). Prior (2013) argues that the question of ideologically one-sided news exposure is most relevant in terms of a small but highly involved and influential segment of the population.

For Hollander, the fragmentation of media audiences has produced a distinct patterning in the distribution of partisan media viewership, with less partisan viewers resorting to more "entertainment-based" media: "the rapid diffusion of cable television and the Internet in U.S. homes has drawn precious audiences away from news content to a huge buffet of entertainment programming" (2008, p. 23). This point echoes the work of Prior, who similarly draws attention to the ways in which this choice between centrist and partisan media is avoided entirely, arguing that a significant proportion of Americans "simply avoid news altogether" (2013, p. 120). Furthermore, for Sobieraj et al. (2013, p. 427), this distinction between news and entertainment is problematic, offering outrage-based media as an example of how "deeply the two can be intertwined."

Partisan selective exposure figures centrally in debates regarding the relationship between media and political polarisation. Partisan media which favour one side over the opposition have become a prominent feature of what Prior (2005) terms a "high-choice media environment." Insofar as the transition to a high-choice media environment has significant implications in terms of the kinds of political information to which individuals have access (Van Aelst et al., 2017), media selectivity is viewed as an important factor to be considered (Hollander, 2008; N. J. Stroud, 2010).

That being said, the abundance of choice also presents opportunities to tune out political content. In that regard, media choice simultaneously has been implicated in processes of political polarisation *and* political disengagement (Prior, 2007). Thus, a fragmented media environment means audiences have "ample opportunities to tune out news outlets with which they disagree as well as the

news altogether” (Arceneaux et al., 2012, p. 174). Nevertheless, media choice has been correlated with the propensity to select likeminded media (N. J. Stroud, 2008), with the practice of partisan selective exposure most apparent among the most interested partisans (Hollander, 2008; Prior, 2013). This is a matter of significant import, insofar as the role of highly motivated partisans in primary elections has also been shown to shape the choices put to the electorate in general elections, with the most interested partisans thus playing a major role in promoting partisan change and polarisation (Charnock, 2018), even in the context of what Thomassen and Rosema (2009, p. 45) refer to as a “stable two-party system.”⁶

Whilst the concept of selective exposure had for a time come to be viewed as “passé” in the study of political communication (Mutz & Martin, 2001), evidence now indicates that partisan selective exposure is widespread in the contemporary fragmented media environment (Sobieraj et al., 2013). It has been suggested that partisan selective exposure may have important political implications by contributing to more extreme positions on social and political issues (Hollander, 2008). It has likewise been argued that partisan media exposure has an impact on attitudes towards the opposition (Levendusky, 2013a). Thus, in spite of ongoing difficulties in demonstrating the impact of media choice on audience attitudes, there is growing concern regarding the outcomes of practices of “selective exposure” that put audiences in contact with fervently populist or ideological rhetoric (Prior, 2013). This concern is codified in a number of related concepts.

Whilst Pariser’s (2011) concept of algorithmically defined “filter bubbles” focuses on the manner in which data-driven processes of personalisation and automation isolate social media users from cross-cutting political talk, other schol-

⁶ Drawing on the work of Mason (2018), Charnock (2018) argues that affective polarisation driven by the alignment of personal and partisan identities is fundamental to understanding Donald Trump’s popularity among Republicans. She argues that whilst Trump is far-removed from Republican orthodoxy in policy terms, he nevertheless appeals to the personal and social identities of partisans (Charnock, 2018). With reference to Fiorina’s elite polarisation argument (see Fiorina et al., 2006), Charnock also highlights, however, that the involvement of highly motivated partisans in primary elections doesn’t necessarily indicate greater mass polarisation more generally speaking.

ars have focused on a more agentic model. For example, Jamieson and Cappella (2008, p. 76) propose the metaphor of an “echo chamber” to describe the manner in which “messages are amplified and reverberate through the conservative opinion media.” Sunstein (2002) argues that practices of selective exposure will lead to “enclave deliberation” between groups of likeminded people and that has the capacity to drive group polarisation. This proposed process has otherwise been termed “cyberbalkanisation” (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996), referring to the digitally-driven process via which virtual spaces are divided to accommodate special interest groups. These concepts seek to account for the particular forms of partisanship in which media selectivity is enmeshed, highlighting a putative link between media and polarisation, with fears regarding the polarising effects of selective exposure in the digital domain being particularly prominent.

The validity of such proposals has, however, been contested. For instance, Webster and Ksiazek (2012) present data that is at odds with Sunstein’s analysis. Their results indicate “high levels of audience overlap” in the use of a diverse range of media and that the media repertoires of users are varied (J. G. Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, pp. 50-51). Likewise, Dubois and Blank (2018) argue that online echo chamber effects are overstated, with politically interested individuals tending towards diverse media diets in a high-choice media environment. Furthermore, Nelson and Webster (2017) find that the audiences for partisan news sites tend to be ideologically diverse, whilst Farrell (2012) questions Sunstein’s proposition that cyberbalkanisation leads to opinion polarisation, arguing there is insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis.

At the same time, Mansbridge (1994) has shown enclave deliberation to have several positive functions and outcomes, including in providing protected spaces for the articulation of oppositional discourse. However, the import of enclaves goes beyond the level of information, with protected enclaves providing a safe space for identity politics (V. Taylor, 1989), an argument supported by Sunstein (2002, p. 177). “Even the most just societies,” Mansbridge (1994, p. 63) argues, “need these enclaves of protected discourse and action.” In this sense, even if they do not produce echo chambers, studying the social implications of partisan media in terms of their relation to affective polarisation nevertheless

appears to be a potentially fruitful research topic in the context of contemporary changes in digitally mediated practices of political communication.

In that regard, insofar as they are associated with the avoidance of cross-cutting political conversation, outrage media have been implicated in processes of political polarisation (Sobieraj et al., 2013). Notably, as I will argue in Chapter 5, the self/other distinctions on which this business model operates apply not just directly to political parties, politicians, and partisans. Rather, the discursive construction of “antagonistic frontiers” (Laclau, 2000) between mainstream and partisan media is a rhetorical strategy utilised by media figures (Arceneaux et al., 2012). Characterisations of political opposition thus may likewise refer to media figures, outlets, and content.

A central issue is not only the manner in which partisan media attack the opposition (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), but also how audiences respond to those attacks. In that regard, Domke et al. (1999, p. 36) refer to “the rising public perception of a liberal news media.” Research suggests that this perception of liberal bias can be explained in part by the hostile media phenomenon (P. A. Beck, 1991; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), which occurs “when opposing partisans perceive identical news coverage of a controversial issue as biased against their own side” (Feldman, 2012, p. 449). The hostile media phenomenon has been observed in response to both balanced and biased coverage and has actively contributed to what Lee (2005) terms the “liberal media myth.”

However, perceptions of media bias are not evenly distributed. For instance, Republicans have been shown to be more likely than are Democrats to perceive a hostile media bias (Eveland Jr & Shah, 2003). Although the notion of a “liberal media” has now gained broad traction in the US context (Major, 2012), it has been argued that the emergence and development of this antagonistic vision of the US media environment has specific historical origins in right-wing media discourse (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). As Major (2012) argues, the notion of a news media with a liberal bias is a populist concept solidified in what he calls the “conservative counter-sphere.” The concept of media hostility thus has an important role to play in the study of right-wing media.

One suggested explanation is that criticism of institutional news media is central to the performances and personae of right-wing media figures such as Rush Limbaugh (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Arceneaux et al. (2012) have postulated that partisan media figures espouse views which are ideologically and affectively coherent with their intended in-group target audience. At the same time, they also actively oppose the positions of their counterparts (Arceneaux et al., 2012), whilst criticising so-called mainstream media for their supposed biases (Perloff, 2015). By serving as "sources of negative affect toward news media" (Arceneaux et al., 2012, p. 184), partisan media arguably contribute to what Arceneaux et al. term "oppositional media hostility." This term refers to increasing suspicion of news media among media users, "driven by reactions to media outlets that represent political viewpoints contradicting to their own" (Arceneaux et al., 2012, p. 175). Insofar as out-party media come to be associated with opposing parties and partisans, the reputations of media outlets are bound up in processes of affective polarisation (Peterson & Kagalwala, 2019).

As with analyses of affective polarisation, however, research on the topic of both hostile media perceptions and oppositional media hostility has been primarily quantitative – relying predominantly on experimental approaches – and oriented towards measuring media effects. For instance, the concept of oppositional media hostility articulated by Arceneaux et al. (2012) is based on an experimental model. Likewise, a social identity approach has become paradigmatic in studies of hostile media phenomena (Matheson & Dursun, 2001; Reid, 2012; Tsfati, 2007). As noted earlier, the dominant concept of social identity has also been developed in the context of a post-positivist research framework (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013). My approach, by contrast, focuses on how media users dynamically construct categories of opposition in user-generated discourse.

Many of the arguments about the sources of hostile media perceptions were made at a time when politicians relied heavily on journalists and traditional news media as part of their communications strategies. However, this situation has changed dramatically since the concept was first introduced. Today's media environment is characterised to a significant extent by the pervasive capacity of

audiences to interact in complex ways with political information (Perloff, 2015), enabling them to become active participants in what Chadwick (2011) has termed the “political information cycle.” As pointed out by Perloff (2015), alongside the growth of partisan media and the proliferation of social media, the very character of perceptions of bias have also changed over the three-decade history of research on hostile media perceptions.

More recent research has thus sought to understand how the phenomenon translates to the context of newer media, including participation in political blogs (Borah, Thorson, & Hwang, 2015) and discussion in homogeneous social networks (Hart, Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2015). Thus, although audiences may be growing more cynical regarding the trustworthiness of news (Ladd, 2010b), they are also afforded new possibilities to express those frustrations in the context of a media environment that increasingly features tools for audience participation in the production and dissemination of media discourse (Deuze et al., 2007), notably in the form of below-the-line commentary (Gardiner, 2018; Graham & Wright, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015).

Insofar as partisan media aiming at ideological persuasion have been shown to contribute to political behaviour and preferences (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017), partisan selective exposure is an important phenomenon that requires scholarly attention. Partisan media messaging may employ the derogation of oppositional sources and opposing partisans as a discursive strategy, as noted above. However, in a hybrid media system characterised by the contested and uneven distribution of media power between older and newer media (Chadwick, 2013), the messaging of media institutions and their audiences may be in conflict.

In that regard, Ladd (2010a) argues that audiences are likely to take cues regarding media hostility from trusted media figures. Whilst a growing body of research deals with the problems posed by increasing access to both likeminded and attitude-discrepant media (Garrett et al., 2014), as well as the potentially de-polarising role of counterattitudinal content in the repertoires of partisans (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012), I have been unable to identify any qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods accounts of how audi-

ences respond to partisan media when they perceive those media to undergo a shift from an attitude-consistent to an attitude-discrepant stance.

Likewise, although analyses of the ongoing transformation of political communication provide important insights into the political implications of selective exposure to partisan media, they seldom offer an account of how media users interpret and represent the relevance and outcomes of their own media use. This speaks to Prior's (2013) assertion that examinations of the relationship between media and polarisation must move beyond questions of selective exposure to include, for example, selective processing and counter-arguing of attitude inconsistent information. It is important, in that regard, to conceptualise the forms of participation in which media users are actually engaging. This is a topic which will be discussed in detail in the following section.

2.3 Participation

Selective exposure provides one of the dominant frameworks for talking about the relation between media selectivity and the wide availability of likeminded media. However, as a model of media use, selective exposure does not provide a comprehensive account of what people actually do with media, including what they do when dealing with counterattitudinal content. Numerous scholars writing on the theme of selective exposure articulate their fears with reference to a specific normative ideal of democratic participation: deliberation (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014; Niemeyer, 2014). However, as highlighted in Chapter 1, the prevalence of political discussion in online spaces demands a specific re-conceptualisation of deliberation and political talk. Whereas in Chapter 1, I spoke in terms of fears expressed regarding the impact of incivility in online political talk (Anderson et al., 2013), in what follows I outline various characteristics of online political talk as well as how it is related to other participatory practices, such as political consumerism. Following Chen's (2017) contention that it is not a simple either/or question of incivility or deliberation, but rather a matter of how they co-occur in online news comments, I situate these forms of participation within the context of a theoretical moment that privileges deliberation.

2.3.1 Voice, rhetoric, and deliberation – conceptualising political talk

In recent decades, a deliberative model has come to dominate democratic theory, to the extent that deliberation “now inhabits a central position in normative accounts of political legitimacy” (Sass & Dryzek, 2013, p. 5). Gutmann and Thompson’s *Democracy and Disagreement* (1998), labelled by Iris Marion Young as “the most complete theory of deliberative democracy yet developed” (1999, p. 151), is one prominent example. In its most fundamental sense, Gutmann and Thompson argue elsewhere, “deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives” (2009, p. 3). Central to deliberative models of democracy is a focus on the constitutive role of specific modes of political talk. For example, to mention two examples cited in section 2.2.3 (above), Mansbridge (1994) focuses on the role of deliberation in resolving conflict between competing interests, whilst Sunstein (2001, 2002) recognises deliberative democracy as a traditional American aspiration, contrasting this ideal with the potentially polarising impact of discursive practices associated with digital media.

The deliberative view is often contrasted with interest-based conceptions of democracy, which “consider democracy primarily as a process of expressing one’s preferences and demands, and registering them in a vote” (I. M. Young, 1996, p. 121). Critics of this model see it as irrational whilst promoting a “privatized understanding of the political process” (I. M. Young, 1996, p. 121). In the deliberative model, by contrast, “through public deliberation citizens transform their preferences according to public-minded ends” (I. M. Young, 1996, p. 121), a task that is ideally achieved through reasoned debate targeted at the common good. This distinction in terms of the place of private interest versus the common good is, according to Young (2000), a false dichotomy.

Nevertheless, dominant understandings of processes of justification within the deliberative model tend to privilege particular readings that focus on the central role of rational argument in the legitimation of democratic decision-making. Such readings draw to a large extent on the foundational work of Habermas (1991), particularly his focus on communicative rationality as a means of achieving consensus through deliberation. The public sphere is seen as funda-

mental. It is both “a space constituted by critical communication” (Dahlberg, 2004, p. 3) and the space within which such communication occurs.

In Habermas’ (1991) model, the public sphere is conceived as open and accessible to all, with private interests and identities bracketed for the purpose of deliberating on the definition of the common good through rational argument. This vision of the public sphere remained an ideal, with Fraser remarking Habermas’ own contention that “the full utopian ideal of the bourgeois public sphere was never realized in practice” (1992, p. 59). Further critiques were levelled at Habermas’ vision, in particular the notion that social inequalities could ever be bracketed in any practical sense (Fraser, 1992, p. 64), as well as the implicit opposition of reason and emotion in the model of communicative rationality as action oriented towards consensus (Lunt & Stenner, 2005).

For many deliberative theorists a focus on such rational forms of discourse serves as an insufficient framework for understanding the kinds of political talk in which people are actually engaging in contemporary democracies. One central problem here is the gap obtaining between idealised models of participation, particularly those equating deliberation with rational argumentation, and actually existing practices of political communication. A central problem is the manner in which various theories set out universalizing claims about the rational characteristics of the deliberative model of political communication. On the contrary, far from being a universal feature of democratic speech, Young (1996, p. 123) argues, this model “derives from specific institutional contexts of the modern West—scientific debate, modern parliaments, and courts.” As Dahlberg (2004, p. 5) notes, Habermas himself now concedes that this model places “too much faith in historically contingent norms and value orientations manifested in specific institutions”.

For Chantal Mouffe (1996), pluralism *qua* the acceptance of difference is both constitutive of modern liberal democracy and its defining characteristic. Nevertheless, she argues, various forms of violence are disguised through universalizing appeals to rationality and neutrality that define more critical-rationalist models of deliberation. Not only do such claims inflict violence through hegemonic relations of power, such acts of erasure also constitute a significant risk

to democracy. “To negate the ineradicable character of antagonism and aim at a universal rational consensus” she writes, “this is the real threat to democracy” (Mouffe, 1996, p. 248).

For Sass and Dryzek, it is important for deliberative theorists to note that “communicative acts which are not deliberative in intention can be deliberative in effect” (2013, p. 8), and thus a more encompassing definition of deliberation is required. With this perspective in mind, a number of approaches to the limitations of this model of deliberative argumentation are notable.

On one hand, one can appreciate attempts to broaden the definition of what constitutes public reason. For example, Mansbridge remarks of Gutmann and Thompson’s argument that one of its primary aims was “to widen the scope of public reason” (1999, p. 212), although she maintains they do not go quite far enough. On the other hand, one can remark attempts to refute dominant claims that deliberation can or should be based solely or primarily on rational-critical argumentation. Themes of rhetoric and voice are important considerations in each case, both of which will be the focus of discussion for the remainder of this section.

“Rhetoric’s association with reason,” according to Dryzek, “is complex and contested” (2010, p. 320). For Young (2000), for example, they are not set in opposition. Instead of a model of deliberation predicated primarily on the public deployment of rational-critical discourse in search of the common good, she argues, deliberative talk has a number of dimensions. In particular, she argues for the need to recognise the role of public address/greeting, rhetoric, and narrative in deliberative talk. In this view, rhetoric isn’t merely something to be counteracted through discursive practices of public reason, but is rather a fundamental feature of effective argumentation. Rhetoric in Young’s model includes “the affective dimensions of communication, its figurative aspects, and the diverse media of communication” (2000, p. 7).

Likewise, Dryzek (2010, p. 327) argues that rhetoric is in fact a necessary outcome of the very existence of representative democracy and deliberative systems. For Dryzek, it is nevertheless important to distinguish between defensible

and undesirable uses of rhetoric. He posits that “Rawlsians and Habermasians can and do allow that rhetoric may be useful in stimulating reasoned reflection and interchange” (Dryzek, 2010, p. 322). Rather than a simple enemy of reason, then, for Chambers, “deliberative rhetoric makes people think, it makes people see things in new ways, it conveys information and knowledge, and it makes people more reflective” (2009, p. 335). Dryzek’s position further states, however, that in spite of claims by Rawlsians and Habermasians that the non-*logos* aspects of rhetoric can never substitute for reason, “such substitution can sometimes be fruitful” (2010, p. 322).

Garsten (2009) similarly writes about the role of rhetoric in distinctly positive terms, arguing for a “politics of persuasion” by challenging the intellectual roots of suspicion of persuasive rhetoric, laying the groundwork for an understanding of deliberation in which rhetoric plays an integral role. In such a model, persuasive rhetoric need not be limited to political and media elites. On the contrary, research indicates important points of hybridisation of elite and public discourse. For example, Vaccari (2012) argues that indirect persuasion through interpersonal communication can have an impact on reception of campaign messaging. This is an important factor that should also be considered in the context of on-line user engagement.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to the positive reading of the role of rhetoric in political talk. For instance, Dryzek’s notion of the engagement of discourses is seen as potentially susceptible to non-democratic forces. He argues:

The engagement of discourses and its provisional outcomes are democratic to the degree they are under dispersed influence of competent actors, as opposed to manipulation by propagandists, spin doctors, and corporate advertisers. (Dryzek, 2005, p. 224)

Insofar as it focuses on various forms of manipulation, this is a claim that has distinct implications for how one might understand outrage-based political opinion media and other forms of partisan content oriented towards ideological and affective persuasion. This argument once more raises questions regarding the polarising impact of political homophily, discussed in section 2.2.3. However, in that regard, Bird (1998, p. 33) warns us against seeing audiences as overly

passive recipients of whatever journalists put in front of them, arguing instead that we should see audiences as actively engaging not just in terms of consuming content but in actively shaping the media environment.

Fears about the effects of political homophily in the context of media use should thus be measured against an actual understanding of how audiences use media as resources (Chadwick et al., 2018b). In that sense, this analysis also potentially applies to below-the-line commentary, insofar as it has been argued that “user-generated comments can not only significantly impact readers’ perceptions of public opinion, they can also change readers’ personal opinions” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 467). The relevance of rhetoric in the context of partisan media must thus be properly explored with reference to a broader definition of deliberative practice. In particular, an account must be offered of the rhetorical dimensions of user-produced content in the context of hybrid partisan media.

For Laclau, rhetoric is a central feature of politics. Whilst rhetoric did feature in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), the work to which I refer in setting out my articulation approach, Thomassen (2016) argues that Laclau’s later work focused more explicitly on the political role of rhetoric. Remark- ing on Laclau’s notion of rhetoric, he contends, “given that politics is about the construction of collective identities, politics has an inherently ‘rhetorical’ aspect” (L. Thomassen, 2016, p. 167). This builds on Laclau and Mouffe’s contention that all language and thus all political discourse is inherently rhetorical (L. Thomassen, 2016) – a claim which links to their concept of hegemony, specifically as this pertains to the relation between hegemony and rhetoric in the formation of collective identities. In that regard, Laclau (2005, p. 19) argues, “far from being a mere adornment of a social reality which could be described in non-rhetorical terms, [rhetoric] can be seen as the very logic of constitution of political identities.”

A variety of rhetorical frameworks have been theorised as playing a central role in American civic life and public discourse. For example, the notion of the outrage industry proposed Berry and Sobieraj (2013) presents “outrage discourse” as a mode of rhetoric that primes in-group/out-group thinking. Furthermore, je-

remiad rhetoric has been identified as a key dimension of assertions of American identity over the course of several centuries.⁷ Jeremiad rhetoric is rooted in specific forms of “temporal narrative” (Brophy, 2016), projecting images of past greatness onto prophetic visions of future decline (Murphy, 2009). Indeed, Marcus (2006) highlights this specific link between prophecy and the American voice in his examination of the manner in which acts of prognostication suffuse American popular culture.

These few examples briefly demonstrate the relevance of rhetoric to the analysis of American political talk. However, each of the above examples centres on the role of rhetoric in various forms of elite discourse. For instance, Berry and Sobieraj’s model focuses on outrage discourse as a commercial strategy. By contrast, my analysis examines how outrage makes its way into the outputs of users.

Whilst foregrounding the role of rhetoric, the above examples also demonstrate how research on user-generated content – particularly an approach that focuses on the discursive construction of identity/difference distinctions – might benefit from conceptualising voice and its performative functions. In the domain of political talk, the relation between voice and rhetoric is an important dimension of the discursive mechanisms via which political viewpoints are encoded and embodied. Voice is thus conceived in ways that link it meaningfully to claims to political authority. For Couldry (2010), for example, voice is one mechanism via which power is rendered accountable. In that sense, voice (rather than simply deliberation) can be seen as fundamental to processes of democratic legitimisation.

A conceptualisation of political talk which looks beyond deliberation to account for the role of rhetoric and the centrality of social identity is an important step towards providing an account of participation that focuses on the production and reproduction of difference. In that regard, media operate with respect to established conventions around who and what is heard (Dreher, 2009). Within a

⁷ The reliance of partisan media users on established modes of rhetoric, e.g., jeremiad rhetoric, that is evidenced in my data sample will be a topic of discussion in Chapter 7.

hybrid media system, in which discursive authority is simultaneously more broadly distributed and more deeply contested, those conventions are somewhat upended, opening up new possibilities for speaking and being heard.

Engaging in “dialogue across difference” (Dryzek, 2005) is frequently seen in deliberative theory as fundamental to democratic engagement. However, research on the topic of voice highlights the need not only for dialogue across difference, but also listening (Dreher, 2009). This draws attention to what gets spoken as well as to “who is heard, and to what end” (Burgess, 2006, p. 203). In that regard, as noted by Couldry (2009, p. 580), “a mere claim by particular individuals or groups to ‘voice’, without any practice of listening, is contradictory, or at best incomplete.” As such, a concept of voice is proposed which entails “practices of both speaking and listening, based in a practice of mutual recognition” (Couldry, 2009, p. 580). Nevertheless, a notion of voice underpinned by a principle of recognition is problematised by forms of antagonistic opposition that deny the legitimacy of opponents (Mouffe, 2005), contrasting partisan antagonism with an agonistic pluralism that moves beyond the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction.

However, voice is accorded a variety of meanings throughout the literature. Thus, treatments of voice in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, for example, also focus on its role in the performance of social personae (Agha, 2005) as well as how the voices of others are represented through various forms of imitation and discursive recycling across participation frameworks (Agha, 2010; Steve Coleman, 2004; Shoaps, 1999). Such analyses consider how identity is represented through a variety of voices and discourses (Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2006). The notion of voice in this sense has a great deal to do with social identity and its socially and historically situated production and performance.

Furthermore, dominant theories of voice in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis also integrate Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia, i.e., the manner in which individual speakers speak with multiple voices. Speakers thus position themselves within the social world by engaging not only in acts of identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), but also acts of alterity – i.e., by drawing on and performing the voices of both self and other (Hastings & Manning, 2004b). Hast-

ings and Manning (2004a, p. 300) are explicit on this point, noting “voice is precisely an area where anthropological linguistics has shown clearly that a category seemingly transparently related to expressive identity is instead shot through with alterity.” This concept of multivocality creates an image of a plurality of voices engaging an array of rhetorical and discursive resources in the assertion of political identities.

Indeed, such “polyphony of voices” is central to the vision of radical democratic struggle envisioned by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), with a particular focus in the work of both Mouffe (1993, p. 5) and Laclau (1990, p. 172) on the repression and elimination of voices against consensus. Likewise, Hall’s definition of articulation entails both the sense of “to give voice to” and “to connect” (J. Clarke, 2015), highlighting the relation between voice as utterance and social formations as complex unities (J. Clarke, 2015; Grossberg, 1996). The approaches to articulation of Laclau, Mouffe, and Hall will be discussed in greater detail in section 2.4, below.

Integrating a notion of voice and rhetoric into the conceptualisation of political talk problematises the kinds of perspectives and worldviews that get voiced by users in the production of below-the-line commentary. Analysing such contributions requires examining forms of political talk and participation that extend beyond the domain of formal deliberation.

2.3.2 Participation through online political talk

“An extraordinary feature of the literature on deliberative democracy,” argues Saward, “has been its unwillingness to take an encompassing view of democratic sites, institutions and procedures” (2003, p. 166). However, numerous theorists do indeed propose a broader definition of deliberation than that suggested by Habermas. For example, in her exploration of the function of rhetoric in public discourse, Chambers (2009) draws on the important distinction between *democratic deliberation* and *deliberative democracy*, whilst Fraser (1992) sets out a distinction between strong and weak publics in order to offer an account of the gap between decision-making, in the sense of parliamentary sovereignty, and opinion-formation, more generally speaking. Similarly, a number of authors ar-

que for a conception not of deliberative democracy per se but of *deliberative systems* within societies (Dryzek, 2009; Mansbridge, 1999). This approach "opens up the permissible space for deliberation by arguing that political talk emerges in a variety of forms and spaces across society" (Edwards, 2017, p. 318).

Introducing the notion of a "full" deliberative system in order to counteract more restricted conceptualisations of politically significant speech practices, Mansbridge (1999, p. 211) argues:

Through talk among formal and informal representatives in designated public forums, talk back and forth between constituents and elected representatives or other representatives in politically oriented organisations, talk in the media, talk among political activists, and everyday talk in formally private spaces about things the public ought to discuss – all adding up to what I call the deliberative system – people come to understand better what they want and need, individually as well as collectively. The full deliberative system encompasses all these strands.

Here, it is possible to appreciate echoes of Fraser's distinction between strong and weak publics, but one is also reminded that it is only through such "weak" deliberations and discussions that strong publics can be held to be legitimate.

Drawing on this distinction between formal deliberation and other modes of politically significant speech, Mansbridge (1999, p. 210) presents everyday political talk as a fundamental underpinning of deliberative democracy:

One can trust formal governmental decisions to reflect the considered will of the citizenry only insofar as that will has gone through a process of effective citizen deliberation—in the everyday talk of homes, workplaces, and places where a few friends meet, as well as more formal talk in designated public assemblies.

Through it "citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy" (Kim & Kim, 2008, p. 51). In that regard, casual conversation is classed as an important form of political participation (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999).

However, the model of everyday political talk has now been extended to include online contexts of communication, a shift that challenges Mansbridge's framing of everyday talk as something taking place in formally private spaces. Building on Mansbridge's (1999) focus on the political function of everyday talk in deliberative systems, the concept of "everyday political talk online" has been used in the examination of the "below-the-line" comments that are the empirical focus of my research (see Graham & Wright, 2015). In that regard, in Chapter 1 I established that below-the-line comment fields are increasingly seen to constitute an important venue for internet-mediated political discussion (Graham & Wright, 2015; Reich, 2011; Walker et al., 2012).

Political discussion and deliberation in online environments have been conceptualised using a variety of approaches, many of which have focused on the deliberative potential of online political discussion (Stephen Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004b; Wilhelm, 1998a). For example, Graham (2015, p. 248) examines everyday political talk in the internet-based public sphere, based on the premise that informal political talk is a process through which citizens "become aware of other opinions, discover the important issues of the day, test new ideas, and develop and clarify their preferences." Importantly, this work draws attention to an inclusive definition not only of the kinds of spaces in which political discussion can take place, but also the various forms political discussion can take.

Whilst the notion of everyday political talk online plays an important role in speaking to a more inclusive and informal form of political discussion, many authors choose to avoid referring to the everyday dimensions of this mode of political communication, focusing instead on "online political talk" (Stromer-Galley, 2002). For example, Graham and Wright frequently draw on this phrase in their discussions, referring to the shifting contexts of online political talk (S. Wright, 2012) and highlighting the propensity of studies of online political talk to focus on a Habermasian model of rational deliberation (S. Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2016). Stromer-Galley's (2002) use of the phrase is oriented specifically towards examining the US context, where political conversation is viewed by many as taboo in a majority of social settings (Eliasoph, 1998). It is also a term employed by Gervais (2015a) in his examination of incivility in online political

discussions. In sum, online political talk is widely used terminology for analysing political discussion in online environments. In this thesis, for the purposes of clarity, I thus refer primarily to *online political talk*, which is seen as an increasingly important form of participation in the context of liberal democratic systems.

2.3.3 Online political talk and political consumerism

Whilst participation is a topic that is central to understanding the functioning of contemporary representative democracy (Teorell, Torcal, & Montero, 2007), a variety of modes of participation have targets that extend beyond traditional political actors and institutions. A key example is political consumption or political consumerism, a practice which intersects in important ways with online political talk in my data set.

Baek (2010, p. 1066) defines political consumption as a “consumer’s decision either to punish (i.e. boycott) or reward (i.e. buycott) private companies by making selective choices of products or brands, based on social, political or ethical considerations.” The growth in political consumerism has been correlated with diminishing public engagement with formal electoral politics, with so-called “citizen-consumers” increasingly drawn towards consumerist methods of political participation (Kyroglou & Henn, 2017). Political consumerism has been presented as a practice that is motivated by the perceived failure of political systems to respond to the individualised claims of citizen consumers with respect to the forces of neoliberalism (Kyroglou & Henn, 2017). This is related to a crisis of voice that Couldry (2008) attributes to some neoliberal democracies. However, research also indicates that people are motivated to engage in acts of political consumerism in order to engage in both individually-oriented value expression and group oriented social identification (Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017).

Mirroring a broader focus on progressive issues noted in Chapter 1, there is a propensity in the literature on political consumerism to present it as an essentially progressive practice, or one oriented towards progressive social and political outcomes. In that regard, some definitions of political consumerism equate it with progressive political concerns. For example, Micheletti (2010, p. 182) defines political consumerism as directed towards the “issues and values associ-

ated with the politics, ethics, and environmentalism of products.” Others demonstrate an empirical focus on progressive political advocacy and action. For example, Becker and Copeland (2016a) examine LGBT Americans' response to the conservative politics of a popular fast-food chain. And yet, conservative objectives can also be the target of political consumerist actions and advocacy. In the context of my research, this includes the ways in which partisan media audiences attribute significance to the use of right-wing partisan media.

If political consumerism can be thought of as a politics of products (Micheletti & Stolle, 2012), then it is a practice that also encompasses news and opinion media, particularly in the case of subscription services, given their status as media products (Chyi, 2005). However, political consumerism is linked to media and media-related practices in other ways that are pertinent to the current analysis. For example, Micheletti (2010) examines discursive forms of political consumerism, which can entail various forms of politically-oriented content production. Furthermore, Becker and Copeland (2016a) relate political consumerism to political communication, proposing that “political consumerism may be a function of the ability of social media use to create networked publics, or groups of individuals who come together online to connect across areas of shared interest” (Becker & Copeland, 2016b, p. 23).

The proliferation of digital media technologies thus broadens the communicative repertoires of political consumers (de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013a) at a time of increasingly widespread distrust of political institutions (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). In this sense, political consumerism can be understood as existing in the same domain as other participatory responses to fragmentation and individualisation, such as emerging forms of so-called “connective action” identified by Bennett and Segerberg (2013). An important factor to be considered is thus the manner in which online political talk can be conceptualised in terms of the production of user-generated content within the framework of political consumerism.

In that regard, the concept of “prosumption” (Fuchs, 2013a; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), drawing on Toffler’s (1981) image of the “prosumer,” was coined to ac-

count for the distinctive coming together of practices of consumption and production that characterises the increasingly blurred boundaries between consumers and producers in the creation and dissemination of consumer goods. In a participatory media environment, however, this also applies to the communicative repertoires of political consumers, who can both contribute and consume various forms of content. This broadening of possibilities is accounted for in HersHKovitz's concept of "political prosumption," which seeks to "export" the concept of prosumption to the political sphere (2012, p. 512). A growing use of the term has seen its meaning shift from the more specific uses of Toffler, which foregrounds (corporate) producer and (private) consumer, to refer more broadly to "user-led content creation" (Bruns, 2016). Bruns' (2006) notion of produsage is designed as an alternative to prosumption (Bruns, 2016), counteracting associations between prosumption and exploitative modes of "digital labour" (Fuchs, 2013b). Although my analysis draws on the notion of prosumption in order to highlight the relation between corporate media institutions and an active audience, I do so whilst recognising these limitations. At the same time, highlighting their role in content creation, I refer in this thesis to commenting users as producers, as opposed to prosumers.

In a hybrid media environment, in which media users increasingly have opportunities to publicly and reflexively comment on their own use of media, the production and consumption of media content can be attributed political significance by audiences. However, it has been suggested that the production of user-generated content may also serve as a gateway to more conventional forms of participation (Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017).

Nevertheless, the political-civic potential of political consumption has been challenged by a number of leading social theorists. For example, based on the contention that consumption practices are driven by largely individual rather than democratic interests (Gitlin, 1995), the critical view posits that acts of consumption are motivated by private concerns that lack democratic potential, insofar as consumerism entails the "privatisation of human problems and of the responsibility for their resolution" (Z. Bauman, 1991, p. 261). Further critiques have addressed the possibility that acts of political or ethical consumption may "crowd out" more meaningful or impactful political activity (Rössel & Schenk, 2017). For

instance, Szasz (2012, p. 79) proposes that, “rather than inspiring additional action, ethical consumption is more likely to silence the internal voice that urges us to do more.”

In spite of these critiques, research does indicate political consumerism to be both a meaningful mode of political-civic engagement and, contrary to the “crowding out” thesis, positively correlated with other forms of political participation (Rössel & Schenk, 2017). In that regard, political consumerism and, specifically, acts of political prosumption can be considered alongside other “politically significant behaviors” (Chadwick et al., 2018b) that connect politically significant speech with other forms of meaningful action. This resonates with research, introduced above, that explores the correlation between the contributions of users engaging in dual or second screening practices and other modes of political-civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2015; see Vaccari et al., 2015).

Reflecting on these matters raises the question of the implications for political participation if, beyond the realm of academic debate, people nonetheless view their media choice as politically significant behaviour in addition to its economic implications. In that regard, my interest in this thesis is targeted at exploring how partisan media users articulate meanings in below-the-line commentary. This includes the significance users attribute to their chosen forms of participation. Participation, then, provides a means of thinking about politically significant and otherwise meaningful action. Whilst contemporary theories of democracy prioritise certain forms of participation over others – i.e., deliberation – an analysis of actual practices can help to reveal both the variety of approaches to political-civic engagement and participation that exist and the meanings they are attributed by those who engage in them.

In sum, when one looks more closely at what people are actually doing and saying regarding politics and how they talk about political-civic engagement, it becomes clear that a lot of the work of participation is also about the production and performance of identities – the same identities that are operationalised in affective polarisation and foregrounded by partisan media. In the following section, I will propose the concept of articulation as a framework for thinking about

how meanings and identities emerge through discursive acts of contestation and conflict, relating these processes to affective polarisation.

2.4 Articulation

My approach in this thesis progresses from the stipulation that the production of meaning is not only the site of political struggle, but that it is also constitutive of the social world. In that regard, I draw on the concept of articulation to examine how meanings are created and contested. Articulation is a performative concept about the ordering of matter and meaning (Stormer, 2004, p. 257), one which entails the privileging of some meanings over others (Kumar, 2014), whilst also creating linkages between those meanings (Slack, 1996). The concept of articulation has also been used to describe the manner in which imaginaries are constructed (Lawson, 2011), as well as accounting for the creation of publics and counterpublics (Richards, 2016). In the context of my thesis, I am interested in the manner in which articulation has been used as a way of explaining the formation of collective identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Two dominant approaches to articulation are notable in the field of cultural studies: the approach of Laclau and Mouffe and the approach of Hall. Here, I outline how I conceptualise articulation based on the existing literature, noting that I will draw primarily on Laclau and Mouffe's approach in this thesis.

2.4.1 Antagonism, hegemony, and the political – aspects of articulation

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, specifically as formulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001[1985]) integrates a number of important concepts from the work of Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Lacan, and Gramsci – amongst others. I draw on their work whilst recognising the manner in which it has produced a perception of a single authorial identity – Laclau and Mouffe. As highlighted by Wenman (2003, p. 582), this has led to the tendency to view the work of both Mouffe and Laclau as a "coherent unity, obscuring the distinctions which characterise their individual contributions, both prior to and following the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*." In outlining the concept of articulation as it pertains to the work of Mouffe and Laclau, I will thus refer to their co-authored work as well as their individual contributions.

In the work of Mouffe and Laclau, the concept of articulation is itself articulated in the context of a particular normative vision of democratic life in the form of radical pluralism. In *Hegemony and Socialist strategy*, articulation is defined as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105). Articulation, in this sense, “positions signs in relation to other signs in order to give meaning” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 28). As a practice, articulation thus entails:

enunciating elements (e.g. beliefs, values, individuals, organizations, technologies, practices, discourses, etc.) and then linking those elements into a ‘unity’, which often has the effect of empowering certain ways of seeing, being, and acting while disempowering or constraining others. (Lawson, 2011, p. 43).

The principle of unity or totality is important. Insofar as articulation is both the outcome and the process of political and historical struggle, DeLuca (1999) distinguishes between articulation as the process and discourse as its outcome. For Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. 105), however, discourse refers to the “structured totality” that is the outcome of articulatory practice.

A fundamental dimension of Laclau and Mouffe’s approach is that articulations are contingent, i.e., “possible but not necessary” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 25). The goal of discourse analysis, in this sense, is to “map out the processes in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 25). However, it is also oriented towards the manner in which certain concrete fixations of meaning come to be naturalised through convention (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For Laclau (1990, p. 100), “every social configuration is meaningful,” and articulation is the mechanism via which that meaning is produced. These are the basic principles of Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to articulation, although there are a number of key elements that they propose. Here I discuss antagonism, hegemony, and Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of the political.

Notably, Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) account of articulation employs the concept of "antagonism" to explain the role of conflict in producing categories of identity and difference. They employ a concept of antagonism that is animated by the notion of friend/enemy distinction they derive from Schmitt (1976). The concept of articulation thus speaks to the production of antagonisms that differentiate self and other. It is the process through which identity/alterity distinctions are performed. Insofar as analysing the construction of these distinctions is my stated aim in producing a qualitative account of affective polarisation, I propose that antagonism can serve as a useful analytical tool for this purpose. Whilst Laclau (1990) posits that antagonism is not a teleological end of identity construction, certain rhetorical frameworks do serve to produce this outcome.

For example, in Laclau's (2000) analysis of populist rhetoric, he presents the concept of "antagonistic frontiers," which divide "us" from "them." Through discursive acts of "antagonistic othering" (Herschinger, 2012), categories of self and other are constructed, and these form the basis of assertions of identity. However, antagonistic frontiers are not objective phenomena but are rather discursively contested formations, which are articulated from different perspectives within the context of rival hegemonic projects (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Laclau, 2005, p. 131; Wullweber, 2019). In that sense, antagonisms only exist as discursive effects (L. Thomassen, 2005) – as the outcome of hegemonic struggles. Articulation and hegemony are thus seen to be fundamentally entwined in Laclau and Mouffe's account.

Second, hegemony. Insofar as certain articulations, and the discursive unities that result from their linkage, either empower or constrain by fixing meanings in particular ways, they can be said to have a hegemonic character. In the work of Laclau and Mouffe, the concept of hegemony is drawn from Gramsci. Hegemony entails the articulation of contingent relationships and is the mechanism through which both politics and economy are constituted (L. Thomassen, 2016). However, hegemony is also fundamentally implicated in the production and performance of identities. In that regard, Wenman (2003, p. 589) writes, hegemonic

practices are “understood as the strategic means by which competing social sectors...seek to construct new collective social identities.”

For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony can be defined as “the articulation of identities in the context of antagonistic social relations” (Leggett, 2013, p. 302). In this view, according to Leggett, “all social relations and identities are the outcomes of acts of power” (2013, p. 302). This comes to the fore when considering the relations obtaining between classes. For example, Laclau (1977, p. 161) writes:

A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized.

Whilst antagonism may be an unavoidable dimension of social life, it is the function of hegemony to seek to erase the tensions that antagonism presupposes. Thus, whilst articulation is a process of creating connections, it does so by allowing certain meanings to prevail over others. Nevertheless, insofar as the forms of totality which hegemony seeks to create are in Laclau and Mouffe’s model impossible, Wenman (2003, p. 589) argues, “each hegemonic formation necessarily encounters ‘frontier effects’ with other articulatory practices.”

In that sense, Slack (1996, p. 115) reflects on hegemony not as domination per se, but rather “the process of creating and maintaining consensus or of co-ordinating interests.” She continues: “The process of hegemony as ideological *struggle* is used to draw attention to the relations of domination and subordination that articulation always entails” (Slack, 1996, p. 119). Hegemonic struggle as a process aims at fixing meanings in order to produce society as a “determinate object” (Laclau, 1990) – what Wenman (2003) refers to as “society-as-totality” – but it can only ever do so temporarily. Thus, what is viewed as objective is in fact a political outcome – a temporary sedimentation of contingent meanings, which have been conventionalised so as to appear natural (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These temporary sedimentations can be conceived of as “partial fixations” which “bind the flow of differences temporally and allow for orientation of action” (Herschinger, 2013, p. 188). Viewing hegemony as a process of ideological struggle highlights “the relations of domination and subordination that

articulation always entails” (Slack, 1996, p. 119). In this regard, the notion of conflict and the political are further dimensions of Laclau and Mouffe’s model.

Laclau and Mouffe’s approach in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is termed post-Marxist in the sense that it addresses the privileging of class in Marxist analyses. Instead, they draw on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as a means of opening up the domain of political analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, in contrast with Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe seek to conceptualise the political constitution of the economy. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, politics is defined as “a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 153), although this disguises the fact that Mouffe and Laclau each takes a distinct approach to the political articulation of social relations (Wenman, 2003).

For Slack (1996, p. 122), the anti-reductionist turn in cultural studies, of which Laclau is an exemplar, “rendered it possible and necessary to re-theorize social forces such as gender, race and subculture as existing in complex — articulated — relations with one another as well as with class.” Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of class is here pertinent: rather than essential, objective groups, economic classes are viewed instead as the product of “political, discursive processes” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) — i.e., articulations. Articulation, in this sense, provides a mechanism for thinking about the ways in which social categories are linked together in order to produce transient formations that are open to contestation.

One of the primary critiques of Laclau and Mouffe’s approach is the manner in which it centres on an open field of discursivity. This model of a field of discursivity that is inherently open is drawn from Derrida’s conceptualisation of semiosis as “an infinite play of signification which precludes the fixing of meaning” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 125). The notion of radical openness raises a further critique of Laclau and Mouffe’s approach, raised by Slack. She argues that Laclau and Mouffe do not “*intend* to leave behind politics” (Slack, 1996, p. 121), yet this is a possible outcome of their theorisation of radical openness of the social, which renders society a “totally open discurs-

sive field” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 146). This is a point to which I will return in section 2.4.3, below.

However, a further dimension to be noted is the manner in which all social practices are conceived as articulations. Thus, unlike Fairclough’s approach to discourse, which theorises the dialectical relation between the discursive and the material (e.g., Fairclough, 2013), Laclau and Mouffe’s approach instead conceptualises all social practices as fully discursive (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Insofar as all social practices are viewed in this model as articulations, it is possible to analyse a variety of modes of participation through the lens of articulation theory. This includes, for example, not only acts of political consumerism, but also discussions about their significance.

Central to Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory is the notion that certain key signs function as “nodal points” around which meanings are partially fixed – or around which collective identities “coalesce” (L. Thomassen, 2016). Examples include definitions of “democracy” in political discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 26). In addition, Laclau and Mouffe use the term “floating signifiers” to refer to signs that are the object of struggle across competing discourses, proposing that discourse analysis is the practice of examining how competing ascriptions seek to fix the meaning of certain signs in various ways. My analysis in this thesis centres on the struggle to fix the meanings of relevant categories of identity and alterity – e.g., progressive, liberal, Democrat, Republican – although I focus in particular on how these contribute to the contested definition of contemporary American conservatism.

In sum, articulation is here viewed as the ongoing struggle to “fix” meaning – including the meaning of society and identity – in ways that exclude other meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This highlights the essentially *political* dimensions of articulation as the mechanism via which the social is produced through discursive acts of opposition and exclusion. It is this sense of contestation that will play a fundamental role in how I seek to examine the production of conservative identity, focusing of contestatory performance (Fuoss, 1993) as a means of challenging dominant power relations and foregrounding the productive role of acts of “antagonistic othering” (Herschinger, 2012) in the articulation

of contemporary American conservatism. This will require outlining the process of identification and its role in the articulation of collective identities, a topic which is dealt with in the next section.

2.4.2 Identification and the articulation of identity/alterity distinctions

Qualitative approaches to the construction of identity/alterity distinctions have demonstrated that in-group/out-group boundaries do not necessarily function purely as predefined categories but are rather produced dynamically through discursive interaction and performance (Benhabib, 1996; Mouffe, 1993). For both Mouffe and Benhabib, identity is a relational concept, defined against some external other. Benhabib (1996), for example, describes not only the processes of exclusion via which identities are constituted, but also the elimination of difference via which they are secured. Likewise, speaking of the “constitutive outside” that she sees as fundamental to the articulation of each collective identity, Mouffe (2005, p. 19) argues the “constitution of a specific ‘we’ always depends on the type of ‘they’ from which it is differentiated.” Insofar as all social identities – or ‘subject positions’ – are articulated in terms of this constitutive outside, which exists as an enduring threat to any attempt to fix meaning, social identities can be said to be intrinsically relational (Wenman, 2003).

Whilst Bennett and Segerberg (2013) note that emerging forms of individualised “connective” action are being facilitated by digital technologies, Laclau and Mouffe’s model proposes that all politics is about collective identities (L. Thomassen, 2016). As with all articulations, identities are the product of contingent processes, thus forming part of the discursive struggle that characterises articulation (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). As argued above in section 2.4.1, whereas earlier works in the Marxist tradition, including Gramsci, had centred on class as the organising logic for the production of collective identities, Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis focuses on hegemony in order to explain the relations between social elements (L. Thomassen, 2016). Unlike essential economic class identities, this model posits that group identities “are always created in political, discursive processes” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 33). Underlying this concept of identity is a performative notion of articulation as hegemonic interven-

tion, which is seen at once as contingent and realising social relations (Laclau, 1996). This thesis likewise conceptualises identity in terms of such hegemonic acts of exclusion, understood as performative attempts to override and dissolve antagonisms.

Laclau and Mouffe's model proposes that both collective identities and subjects emerge from the process of articulation. As DeLuca (1999, p. 339) writes:

Far from being the fully conscious source and sovereign of discourse, then, the subject is the ongoing effect of social discourses, a product constituted within the matrix of linguistic and material social practices. In this sense, the subject is not a content, but a performance, a happening born, existing, and transformed in social discourses.

Although Laclau and Mouffe draw on Gramsci in order to produce a revised concept of hegemony as a means of explaining the processes via which collective identities are produced, their approach to collective identity also draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis. That is, they focus on processes of identification rather than stable, objective identities, where identification is conceptualised as “an ongoing and always incomplete process” (L. Thomassen, 2016, p. 166).

This approach fits with a constructivist model of identity, which sees identity as something one *does* rather than something that one *has* (Hastings & Manning, 2004b). This position is also reflected in Bucholtz and Hall, who propose “a framework for the analysis of identity as constituted in linguistic interaction” (2005, p. 586). Those authors arrive at a definition of identity which sees it as “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586).

In that regard, Hastings and Manning (2004a, p. 293) write, “it is remarkable how often we talk of identity as if it were absolute and not relational”. Yet, there is no identity without alterity. As argued by Benhabib, “every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not” (1996, p. 3). The only way an individual's sense of self enters the social world might be “via some form of discourse” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 587), yet “even those linguistic resources that people may eventually employ in marking ‘acts of identity’ have their origins

in the mouths of others” (Hastings & Manning, 2004b, p. 300), highlighting the relation between the performance of alterity and the notion of voice.

On this matter, reflecting on constructivist approaches to identity, Hastings and Manning draw attention to what they portray as a key oversight. They argue:

identity performances are relational with respect to different dimensions of alterity, involving objectification of subjectivity, delineating stances both with respect to others against whom one defines oneself, the audiences before which performance occurs, as well as the relationship between this performance and others one might engage in. (Hastings & Manning, 2004b, p. 294)

Indeed, the concept of negative partisanship discussed in section 2.2.2 (see pp. 50-53) effectively highlights the power of a focus on otherness as an organising logic. Whilst negative partisanship and affective polarisation alike both rest on negative affect towards opposing partisans, the concept of negative partisanship in particular foregrounds the strength of such a relational focus on the so-called “constitutive outside” (Derrida, 1974) – i.e., an opposed “them.” My theoretical framework proposes antagonism as a way of conceptualising this kind of negative affect.

In Laclau and Mouffe’s approach, antagonism is viewed as a fundamental aspect of politics, one which must therefore be accounted for in democratic theory (L. Thomassen, 2016). However, according to Laclau (2005, p. 81), populism and populist rhetoric rest on a particular form of antagonism in which a “frontier of exclusion” divides the social into two opposing camps. In this model, whilst “the people” are composed of something less than the totality, “it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality” (Laclau, 2005, p. 81). Populism is thus distinguished from liberal conceptions of society, insofar as it contrasts a homogenous social whole with a pluralism of individual citizens protected by individual rights (L. Thomassen, 2016). With reference to populist constructions of difference, identities are seen as contingent and as such can be articulated around the figure of “the people” rather than necessarily around class. This opens up a space for the articulation of collective identities around other factors, including race and gender.

Wenman (2003, p. 589) argues that hegemonic practices are those in which different social sectors seek to construct collective social identities in such a way that the specific “concrete demands” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 120) of one social sector are articulated so as to be seen as contiguous with the “object society-as-totality.” This is a goal which is itself unachievable, given the impossibility of fixing or closing society in this manner. That is to say, as with all articulations, the meaning of society can only ever be but a temporary fixation.

In terms of Laclau and Mouffe’s normative claims regarding radical political agendas, Thomassen (2016, p. 165) writes, “the task for the Left is to articulate identities together in a way so as to create a collective subject of change.” Here, the social sectors envisaged include “feminism, anti-racism, the gay movement, etc.” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 132). However, there is a dearth of treatments of right-wing movements in the literature. I argue that this conception of populism can equally contribute to an examination of how conservatives discursively constitute a partisan image of the people whilst articulating antagonisms between conservatives and perceived opponents.

In a divided society, Dryzek (2005) argues, assertions of identity tend towards mutual contradiction. As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, however, they also rely fundamentally on acts of “antagonistic othering” (Herschinger, 2012). By examining the contested definition of conservatism within the below-the-line comment field of an American conservative news and opinion website, I focus in this thesis on particular competing claims to fix its meaning in antagonistic terms. Insofar as the articulation of collective identities can be viewed in the context of hegemonic struggle, these competing claims can be seen to have a political character that is of fundamental relevance to the study not only of affective polarisation but also American politics more broadly speaking.

Focusing on the struggle to define the character of conservatism will allow my analysis to highlight what Herschinger (2013, p. 186) terms the “contingency of collective identity-building processes.” In that regard, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 37) argue, “knowledge, identity and social relations are all contingent: at a given time, they all take a particular form, but they could have been – and can become – different.” Focusing on this dimension of contingency and possi-

bility will foreground the dynamic and contested character of partisan oppositions. In the context of my thesis, this will be used as a means of broadening the existing approach to affective polarisation. Nevertheless, conceptualising articulation as a process that is simultaneously open and constrained by structural conditions serves as a reminder that there are factors that must be considered in terms of how discursive acts of articulation occur in the context of a hybrid media system. This is a topic to which I will now turn.

2.4.3 Articulation in a hybrid media environment

As noted by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 38), “[m]eanings are never completely fixed, but nor are they ever completely fluid and open.” Struggle and constraint are thus two concepts that are fundamental to an understanding of articulation. As noted earlier, theories of articulation are typified by two dominant approaches. On one hand, there is the framework set out by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). On the other hand, there is the model set out by Hall (see Grossberg, 1996). Here, I briefly compare the two approaches in terms of their treatments of constraint, before moving on to relate Laclau and Mouffe’s model of articulation to Chadwick’s (2013) model of media hybridity through a discussion of struggle and constraint.

For Hall, articulation is “the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions” [emphasis in original] (Grossberg, 1996, p. 141). As with Laclau and Mouffe’s approach, Hall’s model recognises the contingent and temporary character of articulations, insofar as “the so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of distinct, different elements, which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 141). The two approaches thus share some important features. According to Featherstone (2011, p. 140), however, Hall’s account of articulation is “emphatically more situated than either Althusser’s interventions or Laclau and Mouffe’s account of articulation as constituted through the formation of discursive frontiers.” Hall’s model, that is, provides a greater prominence to the role of context and history. Articulation is in this sense viewed as a situated practice that is fundamentally shaped by the fact of its situatedness.

Contingency refers to the non-determinism and openness of articulations. Whilst Chouliaraki and Fairclough integrate Laclau and Mouffe's concept of articulation into their own analysis, they nevertheless critique Laclau and Mouffe by highlighting that there are certain structural constraints on what meanings can be articulated and by whom. In that regard, they argue, "the degree and the form of the contingency of the social depends upon how persons and practices are positioned within social structures," with class, gender, race, and age relations affecting the contingency of the semiotic in particular (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 125). Contingency, in other words, is "structurally constrained" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 126). Here, "structure" is understood as some form of "relative permanence – open to change but with relative stability" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 125). Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 56) echo Chouliaraki and Fairclough when they stress that, "in a given situation, not all possibilities are equally likely and not all aspects of the social are equally open." In this thesis, I orient towards this question of constraint on speaker agency. However, I do so in the specific context of user-generated content production.

In that regard, as with Laclau and Mouffe's concept of articulation, struggle is central to the concept of hybrid media put forward by Chadwick (2013). In a hybrid media environment the struggle over meaning is mirrored in a struggle over control of the resources through which meaning is produced. As Chadwick (2013, p. 208) argues, "hybridity empowers and it disempowers." Contrary to normative ideals of deliberation, the struggles that underlie the hybridity described by Chadwick also introduce a fundamental dissonance to public sphere discourse (Pfetsch, 2018). For example, in Chadwick's 2017 edition of his book *The Hybrid Media System*, he looks to the polarised struggle between Trump supporters and Clinton supporters in the context of the 2016 US presidential election. This empirical example leads Chadwick to ask: who has the right to assert conclusions regarding matters of contestation in a hybrid media system? Indeed, this is something which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7 (see section 7.3 pp. 233-241). However, as shall be seen in later chapters, this struggle also played out between conservatives who were supportive of Trump's candidacy and those not. This tension points to the need for a model of partisan

opposition which takes into account forms of antagonism that occur both within and between groups.

Chadwick's (2013) model of media hybridity also focuses attention on the constraints that shape forms of participation in the struggle for discursive authority that characterises contemporary media. Drawing on Chadwick's writings, Lünenborg (2019, p. 34) argues, "the coexistence of traditional media institutions and personalized networked media establishes conflicting settings of articulation." An analytical framework based on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and Chadwick's concept of media hybridity has recently been applied by Hatakka (2019) in his doctoral research on populist radical right counterpublics. Hatakka's research focuses on struggle, which is also central to my own approach. However, I also seek to situate articulations in a hybrid media environment in terms of structural constraint.

Whilst drawing on the work of Mouffe and Laclau in formulating my approach to articulation, my framework thus orients towards criticisms that have seen this model as insufficiently heeding of the structural conditions that help to shape the production of meanings in the context of the ineradicable dissonance of real-world publics. It is towards this dissonance and disagreement that I will turn in my empirical analysis. This notion of constraint will thus serve as an important facet of my analysis of how users talk about politics in user-generated below-the-line commentary at TheBlaze.com.

2.5 Conclusion: giving voice to self and other online

In this chapter, I have set out my theoretical framework through a review of key literature. I did so by examining and defining three key concepts: polarisation, participation, and articulation.

First, I outlined how I will conceptualise polarisation for the purposes of this thesis. I began by outlining two distinctions in the literature on polarisation, namely elite versus mass polarisation and ideological versus affective polarisation. Affective polarisation, which refers to negative affect towards opposing partisans, was outlined as the focus of my research. I identified the primarily quantitative

treatments of affective polarisation as a gap in the literature, arguing instead for a qualitative account that captures the dynamic nature of partisan oppositions. Affective polarisation was then related to various trends in the conceptualisation of partisanship, including the notion of negative partisanship. Having established the relation between negative partisanship and affective polarisation, I then moved on to consider their relation to media hostility and selective exposure. Here I argued that a rigorous examination of the relationship between media and affective polarisation must focus on actually existing practices of political talk and their relation to patterns of media use. In the context of contemporary media, I contend, this necessarily demands a more detailed focus not only on partisanship, but also participation.

Second, I defined the notion of participation as it pertains to my research agenda. I began by discussing and critiquing the deliberative model of participation and legitimation that has come to dominate democratic theory. Rather than a model of rational critique, I instead looked to models of political talk that account for the role of voice and rhetoric in political communication. The role of social identity was thus foregrounded. I then moved to outline the concept of online political talk, before discussing the relation between online political talk and political consumerism, demonstrating how forms of participation extend beyond deliberative modes of political-civic engagement. In sum, it was shown that deliberation serves as an insufficient model for describing how people actually talk about politics. Instead, a space was opened up for thinking about the kinds of society that people imagine and how they do so through their political talk. With reference to my discussion of affective polarisation, a central question becomes how those imagined social formations are attributed a specifically partisan character.

Third, I proposed an articulation approach as a framework for conceptualising how the boundaries of American conservative identity get contested. I introduced the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, particularly their joint work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), on which I draw in devising my approach. Focusing on their definition of articulation, which is a fundamentally relational concept, I defined other key concepts, including antagonism, hegemony, and politics. Antagonism, I suggested, provides a

framework for thinking about the ontology of partisan oppositions as contingent and shifting significations, with articulation providing a means of describing the struggle over the meaning of conservatism as well as how partisan oppositions are discursively produced and populated with content. Articulation was thus related to the performance of identity/alterity distinctions, with a focus on opposition providing a means of revealing how polarised imaginaries are articulated. Here, I drew on Laclau's concept of populism as a way of conceptualising hegemonic attempts to assert certain kinds of partisan interests. Lastly, considering some key critiques of Laclau and Mouffe's approach, I examined the notions of struggle and constraint, situating these concepts in terms of Chadwick's (2013) model of a hybrid media system. Here, hybridity was proposed as a mechanism for conceptualising the hegemonic struggle to define American conservatism in the context of participatory media.

Insofar as they provide a space within which polarised attitudes towards media and politics can be articulated publicly, hybrid media are empirically and theoretically consequential. My research proceeds on the premise that hybrid media provide spaces within which media users can themselves voice hostile attitudes towards their perceived opponents. In a media environment in which media outlets, figures, and content are habitually attributed partisan leanings by both media and their audiences, this potentially includes both opposing partisans *and* media (i.e., media perceived as opposing partisans). If, as Matthews (2013) argues, partisanship has an impact on how people respond to political messages, including partisan attacks, it is a matter of some interest when perceived partisan attacks occur in media that heretofore have been seen as proattitudinal.

In summary, viewed through the lens of articulation theory, affective polarisation is seen to rest on the articulation of antagonisms in the form of partisan oppositions. This thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of affective polarisation by describing it as a discursive outcome of the social production – i.e., articulation – of meaning. As noted in Chapter 1, the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 created a new interest in the articulation and content of American conservative identity. In this chapter, I have outlined an ontology of antagonism in the context of a hybrid media system which draws on the concept of ar-

tication in order to examine the contested boundaries of contemporary American conservatism.

Insofar as articulation can be seen as part of a move towards a theory of contexts (Grossberg, 1993), in the following chapter I set out a methodological framework rooted in the method of constructionist thematic analysis, which seeks to describe and analyse the sociocultural contexts of discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.6 Research questions

The following research questions for the most part map onto the breakdown of my four empirical chapters. Starting from an initial interest in the ways in which partisan media users characterise partisan opposition in their online political talk, these questions were devised iteratively in the process of familiarising myself with my data sample and developing a coding framework for my constructionist thematic analysis. The process via which the sample was produced is dealt with in detail in the following chapter. My research questions address four specific themes, each linked in various ways to my objective of presenting a qualitative account of affective polarisation through the lens of articulation theory:

RQ1: How do commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their online political talk?

RQ2: How do commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their characterisation(s) of media?

RQ3: How do commenters situate their media choice discursively in terms of the political and economic significance of partisan media?

RQ4: How do commenters relate their partisan media use to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation?

Chapter 3: Methodology — constructionist thematic analysis

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines my methodological framework, which integrates constructionist thematic analysis with an articulation approach grounded in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). In the previous chapter, I argued that antagonism constitutes an important analytical tool for developing a qualitative account of affective polarisation. In that regard, my thesis employs the concept of antagonism as a framework for conceptualising the ontology of oppositional identities through the lens of articulation theory. Taking the discursive construction of contemporary American conservatism in online partisan media as a case study, I seek to demonstrate how identity/alterity distinctions are performed dynamically through user-generated online discourse. In order to do so, however, it is important to identify and analyse patterns (i.e., themes) in how commenters articulate those distinctions, particularly how they do so by drawing on an array of discursive resources, some of which are made available through media. The aim of this chapter is thus to establish how I operationalised my conceptual framework, outlined in Chapter 2, in the form of a specific process for generating, collating, and analysing data. In what follows, I will therefore demonstrate the value of taking a constructionist thematic analysis approach to the question of how commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their online political talk.

First, I will provide an overview of thematic analysis, paying specific attention to its application as a constructionist method that focuses on the relation between discourses and social reality. In so doing, I will assert the relevance of constructionist thematic analysis to the study of discursive articulations. Here, I will also discuss the important distinction between inductive and deductive (i.e., theoretical) thematic analysis, the difference between manifest and latent themes, and the proven deployment of thematic analysis in the study of online user-generated content. Second, I will describe the specific approach taken in generating and analysing my data sample, including my “hybrid” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) process of establishing a coding frame using deductive and

inductive reasoning, one which was furthermore based on the analysis of manifest and latent themes. Whilst I will here focus on the steps taken in selecting and gathering my data, I will also briefly outline some of the methods and approaches that were considered but eventually excluded for various reasons in the elaboration of my research design. Third, I will outline some of the ethical factors I considered in developing my particular methodological framework. Here, I will pay particular attention to the ethical implications of using so-called “public” user-generated content as research data. However, I will also argue for the value of a reflexive approach to research ethics that centres both research subject and researcher.

3.2 Thematic analysis as a qualitative research method

My thesis utilises the definition of constructionist thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis, broadly defined, is a qualitative research method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This is achieved through a process of “careful reading and re-reading” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258), which allows the researcher to get close to the data in order to become sensitive to emergent patterns (Sullivan, 2003, p. 88). As argued by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78), thematic analysis offers a flexible approach to conducting qualitative research, one which can be applied in conjunction with a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks. This is because, unlike other qualitative methods, it is not tied to any one particular theoretical or epistemological position (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). In that sense, thematic analysis can be viewed as a method, as opposed to a methodology. The openness and flexibility of thematic analysis, whilst recognised as advantages, are at the root of Braun and Clarke’s definitional project. Here, I provide an overview of my conceptualisation of constructionist thematic analysis, which I argue is an appropriate tool for exploring the struggle over the creation of meaning in online user-generated content.

3.2.1 Constructionist thematic analysis — defining my approach

Insofar as it provides an array of core skills, and given its capacity to structure and organise rich data, Braun and Clarke argue thematic analysis “should be

seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis” (2006, p. 78). Nevertheless, their paper represents an attempt to clearly demarcate thematic analysis in order to provide the kind of conceptual tools that will enable those who employ it as a method to make theoretically and methodologically sound choices (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). In so doing, they set out a six-phase process that I applied in a slightly modified form. The six phases are: 1) familiarising oneself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). For the purposes of this project, the sixth phase will entail the production of a set of 4 empirical chapters, with the six phases themselves set within the broader framework of the doctoral research process. Having outlined the meaning of constructionist thematic analysis here, my specific approach will be described in greater detail in the following section.

One of Braun and Clarke’s main contributions is a clearly delineated six-phase process that ideally can be reproduced by any qualitative researcher wishing to conduct a rigorous and empirically valid thematic analysis. However, in so doing, they also distinguish between an array of approaches that can be taken. Given that thematic analysis comes in a variety of forms, it is therefore important to distinguish between these various iterations of the method in order to choose the most appropriate approach in the context of a given set of research questions. Based on Braun and Clarke’s formulation and the research questions I outlined at the end of Chapter 2, three particular distinctions appear to be most relevant here: essentialist versus constructionist, inductive versus deductive, and semantic versus latent.

First, the distinction between essentialist and constructionist thematic analysis. The capacity for thematic analysis to take either form is tied to its flexibility and openness as a method. Whereas the pairing of thematic analysis with an essentialist (or realist) paradigm is suited to reporting “the experiences, meaning, and the reality of participants,” its deployment as a constructionist method allows the researcher to examine “the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Constructionist thematic analysis is oriented more towards theorising the sociocultural conditions of discourse, including the

social production and reproduction of meaning, than offering an account of individual psychological motivations (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Relatedly, this mode of thematic analysis does not “treat people’s talk of experience as a transparent window on their world” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 95). In that regard, constructionist thematic analysis is primarily geared towards the search for implicit or latent themes. This will be discussed below.

Second, the distinction between inductive and deductive thematic analysis. This distinction refers to the manner in which themes are identified or generated by the researcher. DeSantis and Ugazirra (2000, p. 362) define a theme as “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations.” In their view, a theme “captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000, p. 362). In that regard, Boyatzis (1998) distinguishes between the inductive and deductive generation of themes. Inductive themes are generated from raw data, whereas deductive themes are produced with reference to theory and/or prior research (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p. 8). Importantly, a successful theme must capture “something important in relation to the overall research question” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). This centring of specific research questions in the design and conduct of thematic analysis indicates that the selection of an individual case study is supported (Graham & Wright, 2015, p. 321).

Third, the distinction between semantic and latent themes. This distinction arises in the work of Boyatzis (1998), although Boyatzis refers rather to the distinction between *manifest* and latent themes. The analysis of manifest themes refers to that content which is explicitly expressed (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 16). It can therefore be viewed as the study of explicit semantic form (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This mode of analysis involves a primarily descriptive approach. However, Braun and Clarke argue that an ideal research process entails a progression from description of patterns to interpretation. With interpretation comes “an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Whilst a focus on manifest themes is important, therefore, it is through the exploration of both manifest *and* latent (i.e., implicit) themes that relations with the broader context can best be understood (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 166).

Yet, the definitional work required in demarcating an approach to thematic analysis must go beyond a focus on these distinctions. Insofar as the flexibility inherent in thematic analysis can lead to “inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes derived from the research data” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2), it is imperative to explicitly apply a coherent epistemological framework to support one’s empirical claims (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

As outlined in the previous chapter, the conceptual focus of my research is what Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 47) term the “*struggle* over the creation of meaning” [emphasis in original], with an empirical focus on how a partisan media audience use online political talk to contest the meaning of American conservatism in user-generated below-the-line commentary. In Chapter 2, I argued that a qualitative approach focused on the way people talk about identity and alterity can help to reveal some of the messy complexity and nuance of real-world intergroup relations (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013), thus contributing to a qualitative account of affective polarisation. In so doing, I proposed an articulation framework as a means of evaluating and mapping how commenters struggle to fix the meaning of conservatism in their online political talk.

Articulation is both “a process of production of reality and an analytical practice” (Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2012, p. 6). It is a concept which facilitates a conceptual focus on the manner in which the symbolic and material are interwoven. In that regard, articulation can be viewed as a constructionist concept, e.g., in the case of Laclau and Mouffe’s orientation towards the construction of objectivity through discourse. Considering Jørgensen and Phillips’ assertion that it can be fruitful to supplement Laclau and Mouffe’s approach with other methods (2002, p. 24), I contend that constructionist thematic analysis presents an appropriate means of exploring the constitutive power of discursive articulations and the various struggles over meaning by which they are characterised.

Braun and Clarke’s definitive overview of thematic analysis serves to solidify the method and fix some of its boundaries. By creating an image of a six-phase process, they establish a model that can be followed by researchers in order to ensure rigour and validity of findings. Nevertheless, although it is presented as

a linear process, it is in fact “an iterative and reflective process that develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between phases” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4). This iterative character permits what Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) term a “hybrid approach” to thematic analysis that deploys inductive and deductive reasoning at various stages, based on the analysis of both manifest and latent themes. This allows for the development of both the theory-driven codes described Crabtree and Miller (1999) and the data-driven codes described by Boyatzis (1998). Taken together, the approach I employ is thus a hybrid constructionist model. Such a hybrid model is well suited to the analysis of social constructions that are manifest explicitly in discourse as well as those that are encoded implicitly, e.g., public articulations of race and gender, particularly in the case of so-called “colourblind” approaches to racial inequalities (King & Smith, 2014).

3.2.2 Constructionist thematic analysis of below-the-line commentary

In the previous two chapters, I established the conceptual relevance of below-the-line commentary in the context of increasingly hybrid forms of “participatory” media and emerging modes of political-civic engagement. In so doing, I outlined some of the main approaches that scholars of media and communications have taken to conceptualising how people talk about politics in online spaces, e.g., online political talk (Stromer-Galley, 2002; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015), online political discussion (Papacharissi, 2004a; Wilhelm, 1998b), and everyday political talk online (S. Wright et al., 2016). My conceptual framework foregrounds the concept of online political talk, whilst my empirical focus is oriented towards how such talk occurs in the context of a below-the-line comment field of an American right-wing partisan news website, TheBlaze.com.

A number of other methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, have been taken to the analysis of below-the-line comments. For example, some large-scale analyses of below-the-line comments, such as Gardiner et al’s (2016) study of 70 million user-generated comments posted to *The Guardian*’s website, have used a quantitative approach. Similarly, Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett and Taylor (2017) employed a quantitative content analysis in their study of newspaper and blog coverage of the Snowden revelations, which included a

selection of user comments posted in response to blog posts. Although quantitative methods have been demonstrated in this field of research, a number of other approaches to qualitative analysis have been shown to be appropriate to the study of online discourse. For example, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been applied to the occurrence of hate speech in online news comments (Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012). Cammaerts (2009) also examines racist discourse in online news commentary from a critical qualitative perspective.

Thematic analysis is an established method in the qualitative study of user-generated content. It is a method which is particularly well-represented in the study of user contributions to online support groups. For example, Sullivan (2003) discussed the concept of gendered cybersupport through a thematic analysis of online cancer support groups. Similarly, Elwell, Grogan and Coulson (2010) employed thematic analysis in their examination of the use of online support groups among adolescents living with cancer. Malik and Coulson (2008) employed thematic analysis in their study of an online fertility support group focusing on the male experience of infertility, whilst Hanna and Gough (2017) did so in their examination of men's experience of infertility in intimate partner relationships. Rodham et al (2013) conducted a thematic analysis of online representations of self injury. Finally, Gibson and Trnka (2020) use thematic analysis to identify young people's motivations for engaging support through social media. This non-exhaustive list of examples demonstrates the viability of the method in the analysis of user-generated content. However, it should be noted that many of the examples presented here are based on an array of approaches, including some which adhere to a purely deductive and essentialist paradigm.

Whilst thematic analysis has a proven track record in the study of some forms of online user-generated content, as evidenced above, it has had a more limited deployment in the study of both below-the-line commentary and user judgments about media. In that regard, Dochterman and Stamp (2010) have used thematic analysis to explore web users' judgments about websites, although their approach entailed the transcription and analysis of focus group conversations. Giles et al (2015) employed thematic analysis in their exploration of reader responses regarding the acceptability of financial incentives for breast feeding.

Furthermore, Graham and Wright's (2015) methodological approach to analysing below-the-line comments mirrors the approach I outline here in a number of important ways. Whilst theirs is described as a qualitative content analysis of below-the-line comments, it follows Mayring (2000) in using both deductive and inductive techniques to develop a coding scheme.

Although constructionist thematic analysis has been infrequently utilised in the study of partisan news commentary, the particular demands of my research agenda indicate its relevance here. Constructionist epistemologies foreground the relational character of knowledge (Kikooma, 2010, p. 41), i.e., its social construction. As argued both above and in Chapter 2, Laclau and Mouffe's model of articulation focuses on the political dimensions of this process, insofar as it focuses on the struggle inherent in the production of meaning. However, insofar as "articulation necessarily materializes," it is also a fundamentally performative concept (Stormer, 2004, p. 265). Thus, whilst constructionist thematic analysis targets potentially obscure processes of meaning production, integrating this approach with an articulation paradigm emphasises both its contestatory and performative dimensions.

In addition to the conceptual factors outlined in section 3.2.1, these examples support the practical suitability of thematic analysis in the study of below-the-line commentary, particularly in the context of a set of research questions which focus on the emergence of social understandings through processes of discursive conflict. Drawing on the framework so established, in the following section I describe my specific approach to sampling, data collection, and thematic coding.

3.3 Sampling, data collection, and thematic coding

My project data consist of user-generated "below-the-line" comments posted in response to web articles at TheBlaze.com. In Chapter 1, I outlined my reasons for choosing this site as the basis for a case study: briefly, a right-wing partisan media outlet in a state of transition, one which is notable both for its anti-Trump stance during the 2016 election and for public expressions of alignment and misalignment with its perceived message. On a methodological level, a re-

search design focused on an individual case study can help to ensure a researcher has the time to undertake a rich analysis that is refined in terms of a specific set of research questions (Graham & Wright, 2015, p. 321). Similarly, the rich, detailed analysis that is characteristic of qualitative case studies can help to produce important insights about how media function (Faris et al., 2017).

To begin the sampling process, a preliminary set of site searches was conducted using an array of key terms via Google's search engine. The most numerous results were returned for parameters based on named political and media figures. It was thus decided that three case sets grounded in US presidential politics would be chosen to serve as guides for the data sampling process. For the purposes of manageability, I produced a time-limited set of results covering stories focusing on Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama from 20/07/2016 to 21/01/2017. This placed the empirical focus of my analysis on presidential politics, centring on a roughly six-month period leading up to and including President Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017. This period notably encompassed the 2016 US presidential election. Data gathering was completed in November 2017.

3.3.1 Creating a corpus of user-generated below-the-line comments

In order to avoid the algorithmic limitations of using a single search engine to gather results, time-limited site searches of TheBlaze.com were conducted for each month within the sample timeframe using both Bing and Google. The terms used were: "Trump," "Clinton," and "Obama." Seven searches (i.e., July through January) were conducted for each search term via each search engine and results were exported directly to a comma-separated values (CSV) file using Scraper, a simple web-scraping extension for Google Chrome. In the first instance, an Excel workbook was produced for each set of search results (i.e., each case set) using the CSV output files from Scraper. Each of these three workbooks consisted of three worksheets: Bing results output, Google results output, and a combined results output produced from collating and cleaning the results lists (i.e., removing duplicates and results referring solely to family members).

Although Google produced consistently fewer results per search, it was found that the smaller number of results found for each search via Google was not simply a subset of the larger number found via Bing. As such, I have combined the two sets, deleting duplicates from the Google results in the first instance. After filtering out results that focused solely on family members (i.e., Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton, Chelsea Clinton, Melania Trump, Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr, Eric Trump, Barron Trump), this left me with the following sets of search results: Obama (n = 322), Clinton (n = 578), Trump (n = 1492).

Those numbers in themselves are quite interesting, but they also raised a number of questions in terms of how I would distribute my focus. For example, should I focus equally on all three, or should there be a weighted distribution based on relatively how frequently a term appears (e.g., 1:2:5)? As a qualitative study, my aim in this thesis is to present an analysis of the ways in which users talk about political opponents, rather than providing a comparison of how the appearances of different actors in the sample are weighted relative to each other. As such, it was decided that each case set would be given equal weighting, with 10 items to be randomly selected from each set in order to produce a total of 30 web articles to be included in the dataset.

Each of the cleaned results lists was then added as a separate worksheet to a final results workbook. Each entry in this final spreadsheet was given two individual identifiers: Rank ID, based on where an item appeared in the search results, with Bing results first and Google later; and Rand ID, which is the `=rand()` value produced by Excel. After assigning each entry a Rand ID, these were ordered in ascending value to randomise the sample. This dual identification ensures the results sets are reversible, although the original listings themselves are not chronological, but rather ranked according to the algorithms of each particular search engine.

In terms of building the actual dataset from the sample selection, I highlighted the first 10 results under each case set based on ascending Rand ID. Opting for an even distribution across case sets (i.e., n=30 web articles) produced a cor-

pus consisting of 5,288 user-generated comments: 1348 from the Clinton case set, 1819 from the Obama case set, and 2121 from the Trump case set.

Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Data files were produced within Google's Chrome browser using the NCapture browser extension, which was developed by the developer of NVivo, QSR as a means of capturing web data for analysis using NVivo. NCapture creates a copy of target web pages and outputs them as NVivo NCapture data files, with file extension *.nvcx*. Complete filenames feature the webpage title and website name, as well as capture date and time.⁸ These data files were then imported, uncompressed, directly to the NVivo project, where they are archived in PDF format.

Although there are some minor issues with the output files when using NCapture (e.g., visual artefacts of the PDF transposition), it is a tool that greatly facilitates the collection of digital web page data. A “print to PDF” function would not have worked in this case due to display issues with the website. As such, it is a valuable means of avoiding what would otherwise have been an extremely time-consuming data collection process involving the programming languages JavaScript and Python. This would also have produced highly decontextualised textual data and metadata featuring none of the visual richness or structure of the actual website. Nevertheless, PDF is an open standard that will ensure data files can be read and transferred reliably when necessary. It will also ensure long-term access to data. However, I worked with the files within NVivo for the duration of the project in order to ensure version control. The PDFs can be exported as and when required now that analysis via NVivo is complete. The UK Data Service’s online repository, ReShare will be used for the long-term preservation and sharing of the dataset. Project data will be retained and preserved for a minimum of seven years, as stipulated by the LSE Research Data Policy. I will also keep a password protected copy of project data indefinitely.

⁸ For example: “Federal judge orders unsealing of search warrant at center of Clinton email probe – TheBlaze 2017-11-09 11-27-55Z.nvcx”

Each data file constitutes both a case and a source, and all are organised within NVivo according to the three specific case sets which served as the basis of the sample selection: Clinton (n= 10), Obama (n= 10), and Trump (n= 10). I have produced a source classification sheet featuring the following attributes: Reference Type, Title, Set Description, URL, Reporter, Period, Source, Rank ID, Rand ID, Comment Count, Publication Date.⁹ In the context of this particular study, the unit of analysis is individual user-generated comments, whilst each web article constitutes a case.

3.3.2 Developing a “hybrid” coding framework

Once the sample was created, I began the iterative process of creating a hybrid coding framework that combines inductive and deductive approaches to the extraction and generation of both semantic and latent themes. In so doing, I aimed to follow Braun and Clarke’s six phase process for conducting a thematic analysis (2006, p. 87).

In the first phase, I conducted a close reading and re-reading of the data. This entailed reading user-generated comments, both in NVivo and via physical printouts of each “case.” The question of transposition is fundamental to the first phase. This is especially true in the case of research designs that involve the transcription of verbal data. As argued by Braun and Clarke, the central concern is that “the transcript retains the information you need, from the verbal account, and in a way which is ‘true’ to its original nature” (2006, p. 88). Insofar as my analysis is conducted on digital exports of the website itself, including its visual structure, I work with material that already achieves this aim.

When it comes to the examples I present in this thesis, I follow the approach taken by Rodham et al. (2013) and Gibson and Trnka (2020). That is, comments are included verbatim, with no correction for spelling or grammar, in order to “retain the specificity of textual communication” (Gibson & Trnka, 2020, p. 240). Thus, whilst I do not employ screen grabs for ethical reasons (i.e., anonymisation), the textual transposition of content adheres as closely as pos-

⁹ The classification metadata for all sources is to be found in the Appendix (see p. 277).

sible to the manner in which comments were composed and posted by users. One downside of textual data is that one misses out to a certain extent on the close reading that comes with the process of transcription, thus more time is required familiarising oneself with the data in the first phase in the case of textual content (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

In the second phase, I generated an array of initial codes although, as expected, this step produced a set of codes that was unwieldy both in terms of the number of “nodes” I produced *and* the depth of parent and child nodes that this number entailed. Given that I wanted to ground my analysis primarily in the data, I entered this phase with an underdeveloped theoretical framework. In this sense, my approach shares some important features with the method of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2007). Coding in this phase was thus primarily inductive, i.e., data-driven. Nevertheless, my analysis was guided by my broad interest in the way in which political identities were represented in the corpus. In this phase, I also coded in a more granular manner than in later phases, focusing on coding words and phrases rather than entire comments. Nevertheless, following Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 89), I coded data inclusively in order to maintain a sense of the context. This means that phrases within comments were coded in order to give an impression of how coded terms appeared in the data.

Having established an initial framework, in the third phase I used these initial codes to identify a preliminary set of themes, based on both semantic and latent patterns. Themes identified in this phase are usually broader than the codes identified in the second phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). I thus produced a coding frame that was scaled back to three broad parent themes: 1) Characterisation, 2) Media, and 3) Politics. Each of these parent themes was one child-node deep. As with the phase two process, the phase three process was informed by my interest in how people talk about political identity and difference. The “Characterisation” theme was broken down into a set of three relevant oppositions: self/other, left/right, and implicit/explicit. This third opposition was designed to account for the inclusion of semantic and latent elements. From my emerging sense of the data, in this phase I included a code to account for representations of political and media agency as sub-themes (see Figs. 3.1 - 3.3).

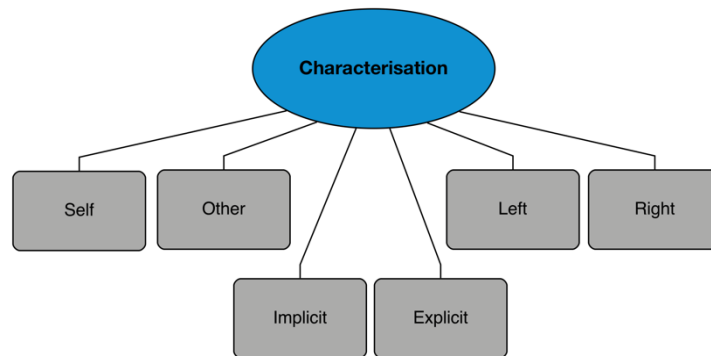


Fig 3.1 “Characterisation” thematic coding map (Phase 3)

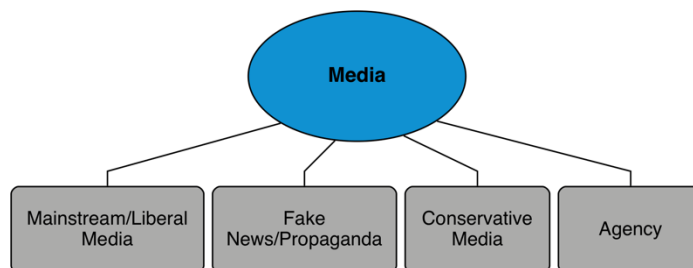


Fig 3.2 “Media” thematic coding map (Phase 3)

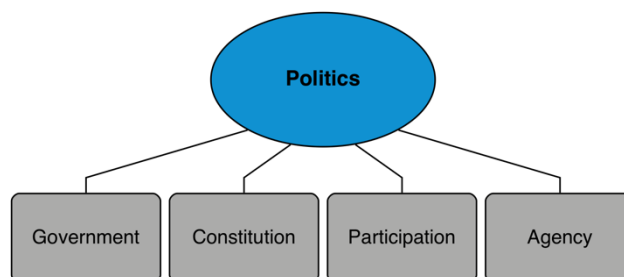


Fig 3.3 “Politics” thematic coding map (Phase 3)

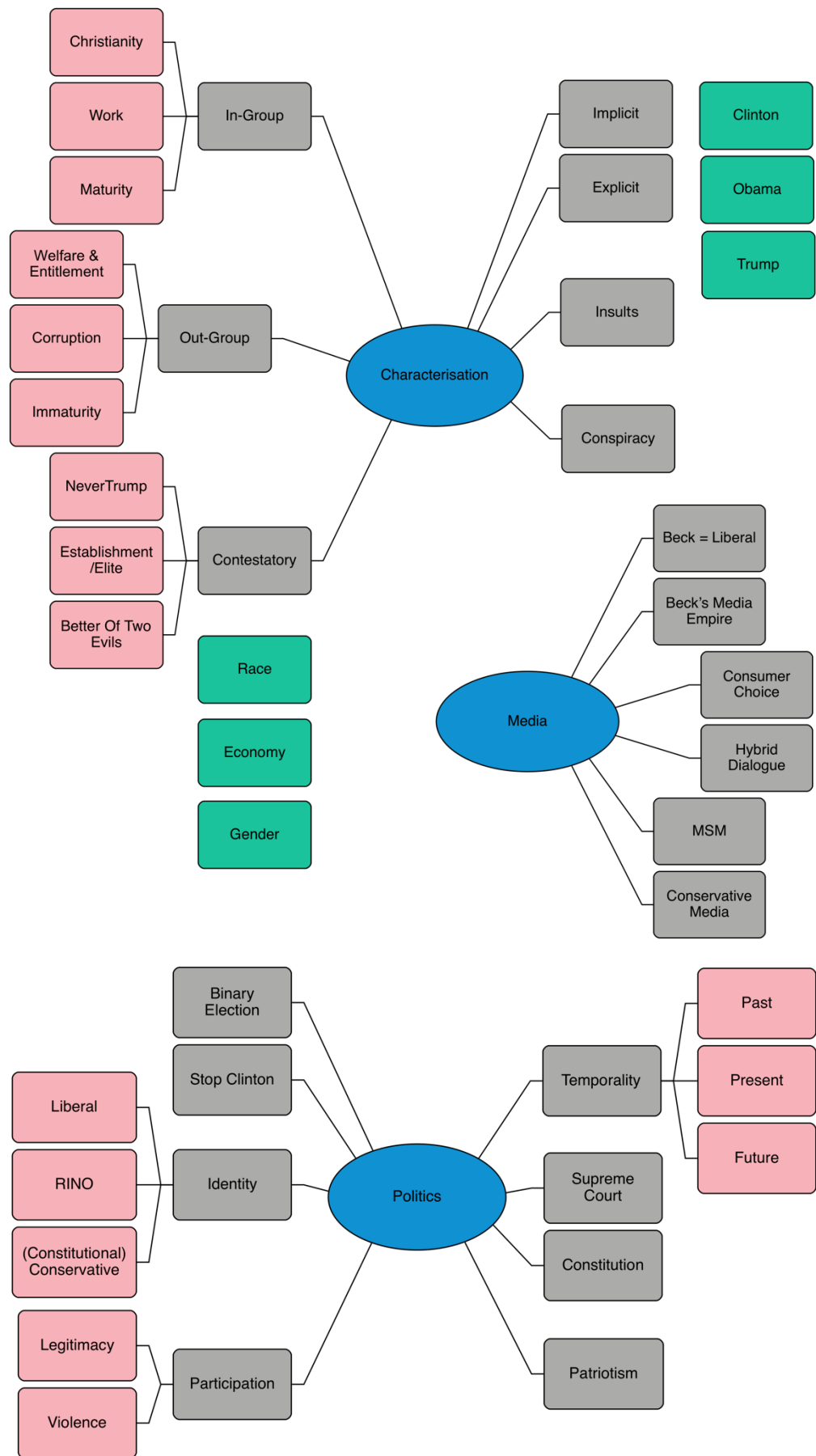


Fig 3.4 Final thematic coding map (Phases 4-6)

It was in the final three phases (Phases 4-6) that the “iterative” (Nowell et al., 2017) character of the coding process came to the fore. In the fourth phase, I began to review the themes I had produced in the third phase. This was done in conjunction with developing and refining my theoretical framework. During this recoding process, my theoretical framework was established through an iterative and largely inductive approach. As I developed my theoretical focus on the articulation of antagonisms based on the constructions of opposition that characterised my data, key ideas fed into my thematic analysis, constituting it as a hybrid process. Thus, although the coding process was largely data-driven, it was inflected at a number of points with theoretical insights external to the data. This was particularly true of the fourth phase.

Braun and Clarke identify the fifth phase as the point at which themes are defined and named. In my approach, I draw on the thematic codes produced during Phase 4, which are then mapped onto the chapter breakdown of my thesis (Phase 6, described below). In order to formalise relationships between themes, which then served as the basis for a set of four empirical chapters, I created a set of node matrices in NVivo. These node matrices were used to identify particular concentrations in the data that spoke to my theoretical interests, although relying on codes that were for the most part themselves inductively drawn from the data.

Whereas coding was more granular in earlier phases, in this phase I established individual comments as the unit of analysis. Thus, from this point forward, all codes were applied at the comment level, rather than to words or phrases. Whilst the formulation of intermediary themes during Phase 3 produced a limited set of broad categories, the final thematic map I produced was more comprehensive, encompassing a greater array of thematic nodes, including an extra sub-theme layer in a number of cases. Please see Fig 3.4, above, for a visual representation of my final thematic coding. This final thematic coding map encompasses Phases 4-6.

According to Braun and Clarke’s framework, the sixth and final phase entails presenting a research report. The current act of outlining the coding process and of presenting my data analysis in later chapters constitutes the sixth phase

in the process. In my case, Phase 6 is thus shaped by the particular demands of the PhD examination, including the structural conventions of the thesis. In that sense, Phases 4-6 in particular, but also the entire analytical process more broadly speaking, took shape according to those requirements.¹⁰ Indeed, some of the final themes were identified during the writing process and have been iterated over and alongside foregoing coding. The final three phases were thus characterised by what Nowell (2017, p. 4) calls a “constant moving back and forward between phases,” rather than a simple linear progression from one phase to the next.

Having outlined the coding process in detail, I now turn to two final points regarding the selection of themes for inclusion and the presentation of data in the thesis before moving on in the next section to a discussion of the materials and methods discarded in refining my approach.

Drawing on the work of Chadwick, Vaccari, and O’Loughlin (2018b), one of the central arguments in my thesis is that media users draw on media as discursive resources in a variety of ways. In that regard, it is essential to note that my sampling choices certainly had an impact on the kinds of themes that were identified in the research and therefore which examples made their way into my thesis. For example, the fact that an article focusing on Hillary Clinton’s stance regarding gun control (Schallhorn, 2016) featured amongst the 30 news items randomly selected for inclusion in the corpus, as well as the fact that this piece had 158 user comments posted in response, had an important influence on the fact that gun control appears as a theme, as opposed to another culturally contested issue, such as reproductive rights. At the same time, I sought to maintain a sense of how “personal biases could impact the analysis” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 88). This is an important matter that I will return to in section 3.4.2, below. The coding framework I developed, and the analysis to which it contributed, should be considered according to these caveats.

¹⁰ In my view, this differs somewhat from the production of an individual report, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), insofar as decisions I made about how to structure a multi-chapter thesis were affected by and simultaneously fed into the process of thematic analysis. This is a minor point, to be sure, but it is nevertheless noted.

Finally, a brief practical note on how I integrate the data into my thesis. The below-the-line comment field at TheBlaze.com features a “reply” function that structurally produces nested subthreads within the main comment field. This function visually signals that certain responses or groups of responses constitute sets of comments and replies. Through this functionality, users can explicitly address themselves towards other commenters in the content of their comments. Although many of the comments presented as part of my analysis are individual comments, I also draw in a number of instances on such replies and nested sub-threads. As discussed below (see section 3.4.1, below), I do not include screen grabs for ethical reasons. I opt instead for verbatim quotations, for reasons discussed at the beginning of this section. However, in my empirical chapters, I have sought to recreate to a certain extent the structure of comments and responses through the use of indentation to mimic the three levels of reply capability permitted by the website. I also use an approach to labelling comments that likewise reflects these levels. My aim in so doing is to reproduce some of the contextual features of the below-the-line comment field.

The discussion featured in the four empirical chapters of this thesis is based on the analysis of 110 individual contributions from 97 distinct users across 16 source articles. Of the 97 distinct users whose contributions are featured, 3 user accounts posted 3 comments (sometimes in response to replies to their own comments) and 8 user accounts posted 2 comments, whilst 86 user accounts posted no more than 1 comment. This indicates there is little overlap in terms of the user accounts represented in the discussion. However, it is important to note two matters. First, taking into account contemporary discussions of so-called “dark participation” online (Frischlich, Boberg, & Quandt, 2019), it is not necessarily clear from this sampling process who or what is behind any given user account. Second, as discussed in Chapter 1 (see section 1.3 pp. 35-38) the aim of this thesis is not to reveal the experience or attitudes of individual users but rather to highlight and examine practices of discursive articulation.

3.3.3 Materials and methods discarded – refining my approach

The approach here described represents the culmination of a lengthy process of refinement and reappraisal in which numerous key decisions were made to

limit the scope and focus of my research. For example, my original plans when I began this project entailed a period of embedded ethnography with Tea Party movement adherents in the US. My aim would have been to examine the social circulation of media discourse (Vidali, 1996) by looking at the way informants use and, specifically, talk about partisan media. As my project progressed, however, a number of factors led me to reconsider this focus. In particular, I became increasingly interested in the question of how audiences use and engage with online partisan media. However, the decision to adjust my focus was also affected by the dwindling visibility of the Tea Party movement as a political force in the US, as well as how it was arguably superseded by a successor movement under the guise of Trumpism, at least to a certain extent (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2017).

The American political landscape has undergone significant transformations since I began my project in 2013. My revised research agenda seeks to offer a snapshot of this moving target. Having taken TheBlaze.com as the object of my research, yet more decisions needed to be made. At first, I intended to create a data sample that included comments posted to TheBlaze.com and to TheBlaze's Facebook page. I spent a number of weeks developing a complex set of strategies for extracting data from each source. This entailed working towards creating two specific coding processes: one for the website and one for Facebook.

The website-specific process would utilise JavaScript as a means of accessing the full set of below-the-line comments attached to each news item included in the random sample. Python would then be used to "clean" the data and order them in a CSV file according to a set of predefined categories. The Facebook process would entail exporting comments via the Facebook Graph API Explorer, use of which requires the creation of a Facebook developer account. In order to extract comments from a post, both the post ID and page ID are required. This outputs in JSON format. The resulting code would be copied to a text editor (e.g., TextWrangler), where it can be saved as a self-contained file. This file would then be imported as a TXT file into a converter. Finally, those textual data would be parsed as a JSON file and output to a CSV under a set of predefined categories.

This proposed process of data gathering was highly complex and technically demanding. Aside from its technical difficulty, it would also have produced a massive data set of highly decontextualised textual data and metadata. This would have worked against my aim of producing an account of the context of right-wing political talk. Furthermore, the creation of a dual dataset of website comments and Facebook comments would also have introduced a comparative element to the analysis that would have rendered the process even more difficult. Furthermore, working with Facebook data raised a number of significant ethical issues tied to LSE's emerging stance on conducting research using social media data, particularly in terms of dealing with the terms of service of online platforms.¹¹ In consideration of these factors, it was decided that the simplified process using NCapture (outlined above) represented a more amenable and workable approach. Nevertheless, it is clear that these decisions imposed a number of limitations on my research and my findings. Those limitations will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8 (see section 8.4 pp. 268-272).

3.4 Ethical considerations

The decision to limit my empirical focus to user-generated content also raised an array of ethical concerns in terms of studying online media. The user-generated content that is so characteristic of contemporary online participation takes many forms and does so in a variety of digital contexts. Here, I discuss my approach to research ethics, which draws primarily on a series of recommendations presented by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), as well as other discussions of ethical issues related to the study of online user-generated content. Ethical practices regarding the use of user-generated data diverge. The discussion that follows in section 3.4.1 constitutes a reflection on this significant, ongoing debate. Following on from this, in section 3.4.2, I also discuss the central role of reflexivity in conducting ethical research.

3.4.1 An ethics of care in the study of online user-generated comments

¹¹ This stance has not yet been codified in official documentation but is rather presented as ethical guidelines to researchers by LSE's Research Ethics Committee.

Following Markham and Buchanan (2012) and McKee and Porter (2009), in particular, I applied a processual, case-based approach to research ethics for the purposes of this project. Two of the central considerations for my research raised by Markham and Buchanan (2012) are the tensions between text and personhood that manifest in user-generated content online and the relevance of the “human subject” concept in internet-related research. Another central problematic dealt with in their AoIR guidelines is the public/private distinction. I will briefly address all three here.

On the matter of the relation between text and personhood in online content, Kantanen and Manninen (2016, p. 91) argue, “research use of spontaneous conversations, gathered in a publicly accessible venue is not human subjects research.” This argument draws directly from the work of Kozinets (2010). It likewise mirrors the arguments of Walther (2002, p. 207), who states:

the analysis of Internet archives does not constitute an interaction with a human subject, and since it avails itself of existing records, then for IRB purposes, it may be no different than research using old newspaper stories, broadcasts, the Congressional Record, or other archival data.

Such claims have been shown to be problematic by a number of scholars of internet-mediated communication.

In contrast, for example, the AoIR Ethics Working Committee guidelines argue that because “all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the data” (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 4). Likewise, Sormanen and Lauk (2016, p. 64) state that public data “available on any social media site, does not automatically mean it has an unproblematic availability for research.” These competing claims have a number of implications in terms of data collection and management, as well as ethics.

Social network profiles can in certain respects be seen as an extension of the self. In my earlier research exploring an online social network targeted at gay users (Kelly, 2013), I deployed the concept of “semiotic prosthesis” to provide a

metaphor for the relationship between text and personhood. Such relations are rendered explicit in specific social network site settings. Facebook, for instance, goes to great lengths to ensure profiles are seen as bound to users' "real" identities. The economic imperatives for doing so are substantial.

But TheBlaze.com is not Facebook. It does not feature any direct link to a user profile or the putative "real" identity of users. Providing contact information is in fact disallowed by the site's Terms of Use.¹² I believe the likelihood of sharing personal information is therefore significantly lower than on Facebook. Considering this distinction between TheBlaze.com and online social networking practices more broadly defined, I shall avoid thinking about user comments in this data context as simply semiotic prostheses. I will rather conceive of them as complex cultural artefacts that are primarily public in nature.

Thinking specifically about the distinction between public and private, comments posted to TheBlaze.com form a part of texts that are situated within a clearly defined "Public Area" of the website. In fact, users agree to the public character of their comments in the site's Terms of Use. LSE's stated position on the relevance of user agreements seems to indicate that informed consent is not necessarily required here. And yet the focus placed on Terms of Service in LSE's position on researching social media is also ethically problematic, insofar as empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that users do not particularly engage with such agreements (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020; Steinfeld, 2016). A further factor to consider is that all project data will be secondary, given that articles and comments are already published and publicly available online (i.e., no sign-in is required to view user comments).

One might even ask if the public/private distinction applies at all. In defining what is public and what is private, for example, Berry (2004, pp. 323-324) posits that privacy is "a misleading and confusing concept to apply to the Internet," arguing instead for an "open source" approach animated by an ethics of care. As noted by McKee and Porter (2009, pp. 90-91), another approach is that taken by Cubbison, who distinguishes between "posts intended for personal conver-

¹² See <https://www.theblaze.com/terms>.

sation and posts intended for broad publication.” I argue this is a model that is suitable here, as it fits with a conceptualisation of my sources as hybrid artefacts synthesising more institutional media outputs with content produced by users. In their thematic analysis of online representations of self-injury, Rodham et al (2013, p. 175) arrive at a similar ethical conclusion, arguing that observational research featuring public domain data does not raise contentious ethical considerations. Nevertheless, in considering these texts as hybrid cultural products that are produced through digitally mediated social interaction, I have endeavoured to adhere to ethical principles of avoiding harm and protecting the privacy of authors of all user-generated content included in my dataset.

At the same time, there remains the question of ownership and copyright, as well as the need to provide credit to content producers for their work. For example, blogs can be seen as officially in the public domain (McCullagh, 2008) or one’s focus could instead be directed towards protecting copyright of authors (Pitts, 2004). In formulating ethical approaches to social media data, it is important to be careful not to erase the authors’ own judgments, which can be achieved through both anonymisation and more concerted forms of disguise, such as paraphrasing. According to Bruckman, anonymisation is one of the most difficult issues when it comes to online data. She argues, “one of the thorniest problems concerns how to disguise names of people and sites” (2006, p. 91). For this purpose, Bruckman (2002) proposes a continuum from no disguise, through light disguise and moderate disguise, to heavy disguise.

For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, Moreno et al. (2013) argue that direct quotations should not be used. However, my research could be seen as being of minimal risk. That is:

the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical examinations or tests. (45 CFR §46.102, 2009)

Nevertheless, one must maintain a sense of the fact that unseen risk may emerge from the nature of digital content. For example, the fact that digital content is interconnected in complex ways poses some problems. As such, identifiers such as usernames can appear across multiple contexts, and researchers

can follow content producers' movements across the web (Kurtz, Trainer, Beresford, Wutich, & Brewis, 2017). Likewise, a motivated reader of research outputs can do the same.

In consideration of these concerns, following Bruckman's (2002) model, I will use light disguise, knowing that whilst usernames and other clearly identifiable information will be cleaned from the data, it would still be possible for a keen reader to locate the original public posts. Yet this choice speaks to just one phase in the research process. Through a process approach to research ethics, however, further ethical concerns raised by the research had to be dealt with as the project progressed. For example, I had to decide what is and is not included when it comes to publication of the thesis. I will have to replicate this process when it comes to the dissemination of research findings. This provides many opportunities to further anonymise content as appropriate.

For these reasons listed, I concluded that it was not an ethical requirement to seek informed consent from authors. Besides, gaining informed consent from users for their user content to be included in my dataset is not technically possible within the iteration of the site architecture that existed at the time of data collection – that is, without a disruptive and intrusive approach that would require public exchanges with users. Whilst in the research design phase, it was possible to message any user directly in response to a comment on the site, at the time of data collection this was no longer possible.¹³ In that regard, a further related fact to consider is that whilst Madge (2007) argues that ethical research should be shared with the community studied in order to correct any errors or address any other issues, this will not be possible in this case.

3.4.2 Reflexivity and the analysis of disagreeable content

¹³ Indeed, soon after I compiled my dataset, the below-the-line comment feature at TheBlaze.com was entirely disabled in favour of comment facilities provided via TheBlaze's Facebook page. Whilst the site's terms of use have yet to be modified to account for this major structural transition, the action itself highlights the enduring power of media institutions in a hybrid media system, as well as the potential ephemerality of user contributions in a system characterised by the struggle over discursive resources.

If it can be considered best practice, following Berry (2004), for a researcher to apply an ethics of care when dealing with research subjects, then the same could be said to hold true for how such a principle might best be applied to the researcher themselves. In that regard, it is imperative that qualitative researchers "develop a practical and visible process of reflexivity" (Malacrida, 2007, p. 1329). Whilst such an approach has important epistemological implications in terms of offering an account of how a researcher's positions can shape their research agenda and outputs (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), it also provides an opportunity to protect the emotional safety of the researcher (Malacrida, 2007, p. 1330). Reflexivity, in other words, "is closely connected with the ethical practice of research" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, pp. 273-274).

The notion that research can have an emotional impact on the researcher is well established. An edited volume by Stamm (1995), for instance, discusses the issue of secondary traumatic stress. The principle of transference raised in these discussions indicates how research content can impact a researcher's affective experience, both in the research context and beyond. Whilst I do not wish to claim that my experience conducting this research counts as trauma in any grand sense, engaging with the content of my data was a difficult and emotional undertaking. As I engage reflexively with the research process, I do so in recognition of the potential impacts this research might have on me as a researcher, as well as the possible implications of my response to my data on the quality of my work.

For Myerhoff and Ruby, reflexivity is a practice which pervades the research process. They write:

Being reflexive means the producer deliberately, intentionally, reveals to an audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused the formulation of a set of questions in a particular way, the seeking of answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally the presentation of the findings in a particular way. (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, p. 5)

In that regard, the broader approach taken in this chapter constitutes an important form of reflexivity in which an account has been offered of the mechanisms and frameworks via which my thesis data have been gathered and analysed. However, Georgakopoulou argues that there is also a specific value in the re-

searcher “being reflexive about their own ideological and political stance” (2017, p. 3). It is through practices of self-reflexivity that a researcher can reveal those political and ideological agendas that can be “hidden” in one’s writing (Hertz, 1996, p. 7). This kind of reflexive practice is demonstrated by Back (2002a) in his account of interviewing Nick Griffin, the former leader of the British National Party – a party that is associated with white nationalism and right-wing populism in the UK. Insofar as my aim in conducting this research is to provide an account that is rigorous, theoretically rich and, above all, fair, it is therefore important for me to highlight my own ambivalent relation with the material I present. It should be noted that I found the material in many cases to be disagreeable and distasteful. Nevertheless, I was guided in the research and writing process by my aim to produce a factual and scrupulous account of right-wing online political talk.

In the context of these ethical considerations, particular attention was paid therefore to the potential benefits of the research. I see this project and its outputs contributing to a significant ongoing debate about the nature and extent of polarisation in American political life. However, in the context of contemporary transformations in practices of political communication that are afforded a global reach through platform technologies (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018), this is a debate that has broad implications, both in the US context and elsewhere. As such, the need to engage critically and reflexively with my data was paramount in order to ensure the production of a rigorous account of how American conservatives define themselves through online partisan media. For this reason, I believe it is of the utmost importance that I maintain a reflexive awareness of how I am impacted and affected by the material with which I am working throughout the research process. By offering this account, I aim to make explicit my recognition of the way in which my own attitudes and sentiments might have shaped not only the conduct of this research but also its outcomes.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined and critically assessed my methodological approach. By demonstrating the benefits of integrating my articulationist conceptual framework with an open and flexible methodology, I argued that construc-

tionist thematic analysis serves as an appropriate method with which to address my research questions, in particular the central question of how commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their online political talk. As a reflexive appraisal of my approach, this chapter has focused on three key dimensions of methodological reflection.

First, I introduced thematic analysis as a qualitative research method, based primarily on the widely-cited definition set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). In defining my specific approach to thematic analysis, I drew on a set of three key distinctions discussed by Braun and Clarke: essentialist versus constructionist, inductive versus deductive, and semantic versus latent. I highlighted how constructionist thematic analysis entails an orientation towards theorising the socio-cultural conditions of discourse, including the social (co-)production of meaning. I also examined the distinction between inductive and deductive reasoning as it applies to conducting thematic analysis. Here, it was shown that a deductive approach to thematic analysis draws more heavily on literature and theory, whereas an inductive approach is more data-driven in establishing categories of analysis. The distinction between latent and semantic themes was also discussed. Drawing on Boyatzis (1998), I argued that a mix of semantic and latent themes is required in order to relate online political talk to the broader social context.

In my discussion, I established that my approach would draw on a constructionist paradigm whilst taking a hybrid approach that employs both inductive and deductive reasoning, as well as the generation and extraction of both semantic and latent themes. However, I also noted the need for a researcher to outline a clear epistemological framework, given the flexibility and openness of thematic analysis as a method. Here, I underlined the centrality of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) concept of articulation to my research and asserted the affinity between the concept and my constructionist approach to thematic analysis.

Drawing on a brief overview of various methods and methodologies that have been used in the study of user-generated content, I also argued that constructionist thematic analysis represents an appropriate approach to the study of below-the-line commentary.

Second, I outlined in detail my approach to sample selection, data gathering, and thematic coding. In the first instance, I gave an overview of the process of limiting my sample of user-generated news comments posted to TheBlaze.com, which entailed opting for a specific focus on the 2016 US presidential election. Narrowing my focus to American electoral politics allowed me to limit my sample to news items discussing Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Here, I gave a detailed account of the process via which I produced the corpus of user-generated comments. However, I also outlined how I deployed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis to produce a hybrid coding frame that relied on inductive and deductive reasoning and focused on generating and extrapolating both semantic and latent themes.

In this section, I also presented some of the materials and methods that were discarded in the process of establishing my eventual research design. In particular, I discussed having to reassess the empirical focus of my PhD due to the changing political environment in the US, as well as the choices I made in refining my sampling process, which for various reasons included opting against including comments posted to Facebook in my sample.

Third, I set out an ethical approach based on a principle of care and assessed some further ethical concerns regarding researcher reflexivity. In the first instance, I examined some of the ethical implications of conducting research on user-generated content online. In so doing, I drew specifically on a set of AoIR recommendations regarding the conduct of ethical online research. Here, I briefly discussed a number of key issues, including the tension between text and personhood, the concept of the "human subject" in internet research, and the central problematic of the public/private distinction, specifically as these matters pertain to the question of informed consent. In my discussion, I established that the status of my data meant it was neither necessary nor possible to seek informed consent from users at TheBlaze.com. Nevertheless, I confirmed that I have anonymised all data in order to protect the identities of participants, due to the demands of an "ethics of care" approach to research ethics. In that regard, usernames are scrubbed from all materials excerpted from the corpus.

I also discussed the matter of reflexivity, which I approached from two angles. On one hand, I argued an ethics of care approach also necessitates a reflexive focus on the wellbeing of the researcher, particularly when working with difficult or disagreeable content. On the other hand, reflexivity also entails taking into account the potential impact of a researcher's own political and ideological stances on the research process. Here, I asserted my aim of engaging in a rigorous, theoretically rich, and fair analysis of below-the-line commentary in order to produce a factual and scrupulous account of American right-wing online political talk

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Laclau and Mouffe have been criticised by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 125) for their failure to account for the structural limitations on what meanings can be (re)articulated and by whom. As newer forms of media emerge, relations of media power are shifting, becoming more hybrid (Chadwick, 2013). This has a transformative impact on who can say what and where. My thesis seeks to offer an account of how these transformations are operationalised by partisan media users in the process of developing new forms of political-civic engagement and participation. It also reflects on how this reorganisation of practices of political communication is related to affective polarisation and negative partisanship.

Considering this background, this chapter has focused on how I implement Laclau and Mouffe's concept of articulation via a constructionist thematic analysis. In the chapters that follow, I will employ this framework to explore how the boundaries of American conservatism are contested through the public performance of antagonism, how characterisations of political difference are performed with reference to the political and economic significance of partisan media, and how the use of partisan media is rhetorically related to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation via the public production of imaginaries of American past, present, and future – processes which are claimed to threaten the very survival of America and American nationhood.

Chapter 4: Characterising political parties, politicians, and partisans

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on characterisations of US political parties, politicians, and partisans in order to explore the discursive construction of identity/difference distinctions in below-the-line commentary at TheBlaze.com. As discussed in Chapter 2, recent research shows both instrumental and expressive bases for affective polarisation and partisan affiliation in the United States, revealing a role for orientations towards protecting party status *and* advancing ideology (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015; S. Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). In that regard, my data feature prominent commentary not only on the policy positions and ideologies of political actors from across the political spectrum. Rather, the user-generated commentary in my data sample also explicitly focuses on their personal moral character. In this first empirical chapter, I focus on how such characterisations draw on and contribute to the discursive articulation of “antagonistic frontiers” (Laclau, 2000) between conservatives and their opponents. In what follows, I argue that antagonistic characterisations of political difference are important stylistic features of the contemporary performance of partisanship in “online political talk” (Stromer-Galley, 2002). The performance of antagonism is here seen as integral to technologically mediated processes of affective polarisation, specifically as this applies to the US context.

In this chapter, I will focus on empirical examples that help to animate an understanding of public discourse which sees it as constitutive of categories of political opposition, thereby contributing to a qualitative account of affective polarisation. In the process, I will draw on examples that I class under three primary headings: 1) positive in-group characterisations, 2) negative out-group characterisations, and 3) contestatory characterisations. I argue that although each mode serves to actively constitute distinctions between self and other, it is through acts of “contestatory performance” (Fuoss, 1993) that the productive role of “antagonistic othering” (Herschinger, 2012) is best revealed. Insofar as my approach to constructionist thematic analysis focuses on both semantic and latent themes, as outlined in the previous chapter, I will here draw on examples

of oppositional rhetoric that feature both implicit and explicit forms of characterisation. The themes I identify are rarely discrete elements but rather frequently intersect in a variety of ways. They are also sometimes contradictory, a fact which can be revealed not only by the presence of dissenting voices in the data, but also by the presence of conflicting “antagonistic strategies” (Laclau, 1999) used to articulate the boundaries between conservatives and their perceived opponents.

4.2 Positive in-group characterisations

As outlined above, one of the core propositions of the social identity approach is the drive to define one’s identity in positive terms vis-à-vis some out-group (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013, p. 260). As such, it can be expected that characterisations of one’s in-group will be primarily positive, due to the desire for positive self-evaluation (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). It is not surprising therefore to find that in-group characterisations of Republican voters and conservatives largely follow this model. In this section, I will outline some features and key themes that emerge from the data in terms of positive in-group characterisations. What is notable, however, is the fact that explicit characterisations of this kind are notably infrequent when compared with the number of negative out-group characterisations, a theme that will be dealt with in section 4.3. Likewise, the relation between the Republican Party and conservatives is problematised in the contestatory performances described in section 4.4

Whilst the boundaries between in-group and out-group are complex, particularly in the context of shifting alignments of partisan identity and ideology, certain positive images are nonetheless palpable. Here, I introduce the core claim that Trump supporters and conservatives are primarily if not solely responsible for economic productivity. One of the clearest examples of this is visible in comment 4.1, which was posted in response to a story discussing the fact that three times as many bus permits had been issued for the Women’s March on Washington¹⁴ than for the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2017 (Garcia, 2017). The comment reads:

¹⁴ The Women’s March on Washington took place on 18 January, 2017 – the day following the inauguration of President Donald Trump.

Most trump supporters have jobs they have to go to. [sic]

Comment 4.1 15 January, 2017

Here, it is proposed that getting out and protesting would be difficult for most Trump supporters, as they have jobs to go to. This was a recurring theme in comments on that story, highlighting the manner in which news media serve as cues (N. J. Stroud, 2011) or resources (Chadwick et al., 2018b) for their audiences, a topic to which I will return in Chapter 6. In terms of the formal content of such claims, this mode of commentary serves as a pertinent example of the strict father metaphor discussed by Lakoff (1995, pp. 191-192), which sees the strict father as head of the nuclear family providing support and sustenance whilst embodying the kind of moral leadership that demonstrates how to be “self-disciplined, industrious, polite, trustworthy, and respectful of authority.”

A variant form is seen in comment 4.2, posted in response to the same story. The comment reads:

We don't need buses we're grown adults who can afford a car or taxi. [sic]

Comment 4.2 14 January, 2017

Already it is possible to appreciate an important set of oppositional claims: conservatives are economically productive and grown adults who don't require bus permits in order to travel. Implicit in these claims is the notion that political opponents are neither economically productive nor mature enough to afford their own mode of transport, two themes that will be discussed in more explicit terms in the next section. As argued by Edge (2009), such conservative discourses of productivity have distinct racial connotations – an argument which will also be discussed further in the following section.

If these examples appear glib, comment 4.3B offers a more thorough typology that sets out a complex set of relations between “4 Americas.” Comments 4.3A and 4.3B were posted in response to a story outlining then-FBI Director James Comey's reasoning for reopening the Clinton email investigation in advance of

the November 2016 election date (Goins-Phillips, 2016a). Posted as replies to an earlier user comment, the contributions read:

Despite all of the evidence, all of the testimony, and everything incriminating she herself has said, in just over a week, millions of Americans will still vote for one of the most, if not THE most, corrupt politicians in our nation's history to be the president. A tyrannical government couldn't be more pleased with how quickly the sheep have fallen in line. They were playing the long game, they had decades to make this happen, but it's almost complete. Tyranny is returning to America thanks to the mindless blind who would rather be lead with a choke collar than be free. [sic]

Comment 4.3A

29 October, 2016

If I thought I was going to get everything free while I sat on my couch, I might vote for Mrs. Claus too. There are now 4 Americas: 1. Citizens who work, 2. citizens who take from the people who work, 3. illegals who break the law and get everything free from the people who work, and 4 the elite who have cushy jobs, do nothing, and promise the last 2 they will get goodies they take from THE CITIZENS WHO WORK.(#1) ? #5 (dead people who rise up like the walking dead during elections and vote for # 4) [sic]

Comment 4.3B

29 October, 2016

Comment 4.3A puts forward the notion that Americans were about to vote for “one of the most, if not THE most, corrupt politicians in our nation’s history” and that tyranny “is returning to America thanks to the mindless blind who would rather be lead with a choke collar than be free.” Reflecting on the choice to vote for Hillary Clinton, user 4.3B outlines in response an imagined model of the makeup of American society that categorises economic participation according to four distinct categories. Relating economic activity to voter behaviour, a fifth category is added, i.e., “dead people who rise up like the walking dead during elections” in order to vote for political elites. This raises the spectre of electoral fraud, discussion of which entails a form of conspiratorial thinking that figures prominently in American right-wing media discourse linking Democratic electoral successes with illegal voting behaviours, especially those involving “illegal” immigrants (see Musgrove, 2018). Claims of voter fraud were repeated by President Donald Trump after the 2016 election and were broadly recirculated by an array of right-wing and conservative media outlets (Phillip & DeBonis, 2017).

Orthographic modifications to the shape of text perform important signifying functions, contributing to the emergence of what Androutsopoulos (2011, p. 155) calls a “‘new’ digital vernacular” in computer-mediated communication. For example, as Sobieraj and Berry (2011, p. 40) note of text-based communication, “the deliberate use of uppercase letters, multiple exclamation points, enlarged text, and so on” constitutes “shouting.” This highlights the manner in which stress can be performed by speakers in computer-mediated environments. In this case, the phrase “THE CITIZENS WHO WORK” is foregrounded in a striking manner. Here, it is asserted that the “citizens who work” are a partisan in-group, linking themes of personal responsibility with conservative social identity. This is a theme that I will raise in more detail in the following section as an important factor related to the negative characterisations of political opponents.

Claims within this partisan media space which reflect positively on the partisan in-group do not necessarily go unchallenged. On the contrary, whilst dissenting voices are relatively rare, they are nevertheless a visible feature of the user commentary. In some cases, such dissent emerges through contestation between rival conservative stances (to be discussed in section 4.4, below). Other times, however, the dissenting voices are clearly those of opposing partisans, as is the case in the following examples. In particular, a few prominent users are notable in the data sample, comments from two of whom are present in the comments seen in the following exchange (i.e., 4.4B.1 and 4.4B.2). These comments are once again drawn from Carlos Garcia’s (2017) article discussing the Women’s March on Washington:

Could be most Trump supporters have a job and don’t have time for this sort of nonsense. [sic]

Comment 4.4A 13 January, 2017

I thought they voted for Trump because they didn’t have jobs. [sic]

Comment 4.4B.1 14 January, 2017

All that matters is they didn’t vote for Hillary!! [sic]

Comment 4.4C.1 14 January, 2017

Ha! And all those rubes that went to his rallies were hard working people who called in sick? It cuts both ways. Are you ditching work to go to a rally or to protest? [sic]

Comment 4.4B.2 13 January, 2017

The protest is on Saturday, not a weekday. [sic]

Comment 4.4B.3 13 January, 2017

In response to another claim that Trump supporters simply don't have time for protest because they have jobs to go to, user 4.4B.1 asks, "I thought they voted for Trump because they didn't have jobs," drawing attention to the contradiction between the economic logic frequently cited for Trump support and attendance numbers at Trump rallies. Similarly, user 4.4B.2 highlights the contradiction between claims that attendance at the Women's March on Washington is an indicator of economic indolence whilst attendance at Trump rallies is viewed as politically legitimate.

Whilst the first several examples focus on economic and political participation, comment 4.5 raises two further key themes in positive in-group characterisations: Christianity and the US Constitution. The user in this case was responding to a comment on a story about Jimmy Fallon "wrecking" Donald Trump's hair in a 2016 interview (Goins-Phillips, 2016e). The comment reads:

....although widely trashed on theBlaze site for switching from my primary candidate to a Trump supporter and attempting to show the hypocrisy of Glenn (Alinsky on parade), I have never wavered in my foundational love and concern for Glenn...I pray that he may right his ship, learn from his mistakes, review the lessons taught and grow... I AM a "2" Corinthians Christian and "Constitutional" Conservatives will need ALL the Christians that they can muster in the future to save America, her sovereignty and preserve her founding documents to save Humanity during the perilous near future that we face... [sic]

Comment 4.5 16 September, 2016

The original off-topic post remarks, "Ironical that Glenn Beck Wrecked his media empire trashing Trump," before linking to a *Politico* article titled "Glenn Beck's 'Bad Bet on Ted Cruz'" (Vogel & Gold, 2016). A number of themes highlighted in this comment will be dealt with in greater detail later in this thesis. For instance, the topic of audience alignments with Beck will be dealt with in Chapters 5 and

6, whilst both the religious dimensions of this comment and the relevance of the US Constitution will be analysed at greater length in Chapter 7 (see section 7.4 pp. 241-252).

In the context of the current discussion of positive claims to group identity, however, one can remark the assertion of Christian identity as well as the important role that is being foretold for Christians in their future alignments with constitutional conservatives to “save America.” By distinguishing between constitutional conservatism and other forms of conservatism, as well as between “2’ Corinthians” Christianity and other forms of Christianity, this comment thus highlights the multiple levels on which distinctions between self and other get produced.¹⁵ This is a theme I will return to in my discussion of the contested boundaries of group identities in section 4.4, below. Before I turn to that topic, I will first outline some notable characteristics of negative out-group characterisations in the below-the-line commentary of users.

4.3 Negative out-group characterisations

As earlier discussed, alongside the occurrence of positive in-group characterisations, maintaining positive social identity also entails negative out-group characterisations, i.e., “out-group derogation” (Brewer & Brown, 1998), defined as “exaggeration of the negative characteristics of relevant out-groups, thereby also making one’s in-group seem superior” (Greene, 2004, p. 138). Such negative characterisations are pervasive in my data. In fact, I would argue that negative characterisations of opponents is one of the defining features of the online

¹⁵ The meaning of “constitutional conservatism” is a matter of debate. From the perspective of academic scholarship, constitutional conservatism “puts liberty first and teaches the indispensableness of moderation in securing, preserving, and extending its blessings” (Berkowitz, 2013, p. 1). In so doing constitutional conservatism actively seeks to conserve the US Constitution. Berkowitz (2013) furthermore sees constitutional conservatism both as a means of uniting social and limited government conservatives and counteracting the two greatest challenges that conservatives face today: the rise of so-called “big government” and the sexual revolution. For Kersch (2011), constitutional discourse in conservative political thought began to assume populist, elitist, and anti-judicial qualities from the mid-1950s and a commitment to “originalism,” evidenced in the founding of such institutions as the Federalist Society in 1982, only from the late 1970s. After 1980, Edelman (1988, p. 37) argues, originalism became a “term that excites the imagination of large numbers of people and also helps to organise and discipline them as a potent political instrument.”

political talk in my sample. These characterisations are often uncivil and in many cases share important features with characterisations of political opponents that typify outrage discourse, as defined by Berry and Sobieraj (2011).

One of the most important ways in which speakers display an outrageous rhetorical style is through the use of name-calling, targeted at political parties, politicians, and partisans alike. The data are marked by partisan name-calling through the creative use of portmanteau terms and other forms of slang. Hos-sain, Tran, and Kautz (2018, p. 612) refer to this phenomenon as “creative political slang,” defined as “a recently-coined, non-standard word that conveys a positive or negative attitude towards a person, a group of people, an institution, or an issue that is the subject of discussion in political discourse.” Comments, drawn from responses to a number of articles, are presented in comments 4.6-4.9:

Obummer is too narcicistic to blame himself so he blames Russia even with absolutely no proof. Obummer said his legacy was on the ballot and one candidate would advance his failed policies and another apposed it and the one that apposed him won by a landslide. He said, “If you care about our legacy ... my name may not be on the ballot but our progress is on the ballot ... there is one candidate on the ballot that will advance those things and there is another candidate whose defining principle, the central theme of his candidacy is opposition to all that we have done.... I will consider it a personal insult, an insult to my legacy if this community lets down its guard.” [sic]

Comment 4.6 16 December, 2016

Get off the Russian hacker story, already. Find a Dimocrat official, or a Hitlerly campaign spokesman, who will state for the record that they probably shouldn’t have been lying, covering up, insulting, and plotting to usurp the election process themselves. Had they not, Russian or (you name it) hackers would have had nothing to hack!! [sic]

Comment 4.7 16 December, 2016

barry obamaRamaLamaDingDongCornholio is nothing more than a piece of dog Shi-t. He wanted to leave a parting shot at Israel & that’s just what he did. Bath House barry will go down as the worst president or should I say community organizer in the history of our great nation. I pray that the Good Lord will guide President-Elect Trump in his quest to Make America Great Again. Our mooselem president & his democrapts are still in shock over the election. How sweet it is. God Bless America. [sic]

Comment 4.8 27 December, 2016

People are energized to reclaim their country from the barbarians that have controlled it. The carrier politicians who think they, and they alone run the country, along with then libtards who assumed they could simply change this country into just another third world socialist crap heap, without the people having anything to say about it [sic]

Comment 4.9 2 December, 2016

Firstly, comment 4.6 features the claim that “Obummer is too narcissistic to blame himself [for the election loss] so he blames Russia.” The user in this case draws attention to the idea that the 2016 election had been a referendum on Obama’s legacy, citing Obama himself. Comment 4.7, features the terms “Democrat” and “Hitlery” as well as the conspiratorial claim that the purported Russian hacking of the 2016 US presidential election was merely continuing work already being carried out by the Clintons and the Democratic Party.¹⁶ Comment 4.8 features an array of portmanteau terms as well as other forms of name-calling. Alongside the portmanteau “democraps” are a number of other examples, including “barry obamaRamaLamaDingDongCornholio” and “Bath House barry.”¹⁷ This comment also features the claim that Barack Obama is secretly a muslim. Finally, comment 4.9 features one of the more prominent portmanteau insults directed at the liberal left: “libtards.” This is a term that has a vibrant social life beyond the context of this particular data sample.

¹⁶ Reports indicate wide agreement among US security services that Russian operatives interfered in the 2016 US presidential election (Sanger & Schmitt, 2016). In contrast with the claim made in comment 4.8, a leaked NSA report “concluded with high confidence that the Kremlin ordered an extensive, multi-pronged propaganda effort to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency” (Cole, Esposito, Biddle, & Grim, 2017). However, this consensus would later be disparaged by President Donald Trump (Fidler, 2016).

¹⁷ The phrase “bath house barry” refers to the right-wing conspiracy that Barack Obama is gay and that he secretly “frequented gay bath houses in Chicago along with his former chief of staff and current Chicago mayor, Rahm Emanuel,” propounded in particular by journalist Wayne Madsen in his eponymous newsletter (Gabler, 2012). When Obama would later come out in support of marriage equality in the US – a topic that I discuss in Chapter 7 (see section 7.4 pp. 241-252) – this was taken as evidence that he was now “out of the closet,” with Fox News Channel host Greg Gutfeld remarking of Obama: “He’s officially gay for class warfare” (Frum, 2012).

As noted by Ebner, in the US context, *libtard* is a “derogatory term used by the Alt-Right – combining the words liberal and retard – to describe left leaning liberals” (2019, p. 169). Whilst Hossain, Tran, and Kautz (2018, p. 612) refer to the term as a form of creative political slang, Gao, Kuppersmith, and Huang (2017) classify it as a hate slur term in their analysis of hate speech on Twitter following the 2016 US presidential election. Shin and Doyle (2018) have related the use of the term to judgments regarding group identities in online political discourse. Although certainly used by the Alt-Right in the manner by Ebner, the term has a broader usage. For example, the page dedicated to explaining the term on the science, criticism, and skepticism community site RationalWiki (n.d.) posits that it is used more generally to describe “anyone not sufficiently conservative.” Whilst the RationalWiki entry must be understood in terms of its critical stance regarding use of libtard, in this sense of its usage the term can be seen to construct an antagonistic frontier between conservatives and those judged not to live up to certain tacit standards against which the moral standing of conservatives is to be measured. That is to say, the term libtard, as well as other such terms, can be used to articulate self/other distinctions by allowing speakers to perform various forms of alignment with specific in-groups and out-groups.

Whilst portmanteaus and other forms of slang present a relatively open framework for producing partisan insults, other articulations are more thematically constrained. For example, the relation between Hollywood figures and liberals is a focus of commentary. Comments 4.10 and 4.11 offer two variant perspectives on this discourse. Comments 4.10A-4.10B.2 were posted in response to an article outlining Donald Trump’s claim that a Hillary Clinton win in 2016 would lead to the US becoming “another Venezuela” (Goins-Phillips, 2016d). They read:

Venezuela, so when is Michael Moore and Sean Penn going to fly down there and tell the world again it is the greatest place in the world? Its Government is ‘really’ for the people like all Governments should be striving for. When are they going to set up shop, after all it has the best Health Care system ever according to the LibTards. [sic]

Comment 4.10A 9 September, 2016

“They had the fastest care, THE BEST CARE, and it cost nothing.” – Michael Moore http://www.democracynow.org/2007/6/18/an_hour_with_michael_moore_on [sic]

Comment 4.10B.1 10 September, 2016

Nobody ever said it was the best health care system. Wow, you people don't even try to cover up your lies anymore. [sic]

Comment 4.10B.2 10 September, 2016

User 4.10A asks, “Venezuela, so when is Michael Moore and Sean Penn going to fly down there and tell the world again it is the greatest place in the world?” The user reminds readers of putative claims by “LibTards” that Venezuela has the best healthcare system in the world. User 4.10B.1 responds with a quote from a Democracy Now interview with Michael Moore claiming Venezuela had the fastest and best care. User 4.10A’s comment clearly questions not just the role of government in provision of healthcare but also the role of Hollywood figures in publicly talking politics and expressing instrumental preferences. As can be seen in comment 4.10B.2, however, the argument is resisted in antagonistic terms, constructing a distinction between the speaker and addressee through reference to the dishonesty and lies of “you people.” This demonstrates the role of delegitimising language in characterisations of perceived opponents.¹⁸

Comment 4.11A demonstrates a more conspiratorial tone, with the suggestion that corporate welfare for Hollywood is a *quid pro quo* by California Democrats in return for political donations. Posted in response to a story detailing Hollywood actress Natalie Portman’s claim that Donald Trump’s election had energised people “in a new way” (Munsil, 2016), the comment reads:

Bear in mind that Hollywood receives \$330 MILLION PER YEAR in corporate welfare thanks to California’s Democrat-controlled Legislature. In turn, Hollywood donors return a kindly portion of that taxpayer-funded windfall to Democrat candidates inside California and throughout the nation. This is what democratic socialism (a.k.a. crony capitalism) looks like. [sic]

Comment 4.11A 2 December, 2016

“corporate welfare”.....Tell that to the taxpayers of Indiana [sic]

Comment 4.11B.1 2 December, 2016

¹⁸ It should be borne in mind that in this thesis I focus on user-generated discourse. I cannot speak of the provenance of such outputs or of their relation to the intentionality of speakers.

Applying for California actors guild welfare, requires getting casting call on your knees. "C'mon! How bad you want it!" (Forcibly Grabs back of her head). [sic]

Comment 4.11B.2 2 December, 2016

In the previous section, I offered examples of positive characterisations of conservative economic productivity, e.g., Trump supporters have jobs. The flip side is that political opponents – Democrats, liberals, progressives – are here framed as an economic drain on conservative productivity. Here, I include examples of a pair of converse themes: government spending and progressives as consumers of welfare. All three examples offered here are drawn from a report titled "Here's how much the Obama family has spent on vacations over the last eight years" (Goins-Phillips, 2016c):

BO and MO act like welfare entitled leeches. I am sure Iran and the Saudis will be more than happy to pay for their future vacations..???? [sic]

Comment 4.12A 5 December, 2016

They're just another black family in government housing anyway. Might as well play the stereotype to the hilt, 'eh? [sic]

Comment 4.12B 5 December, 2016

The examples presented in comments 4.12-4.14 all feature comments referring to Barack Obama or the Obamas variously as "welfare entitled leeches" (comment 4.12A), "just another black family in government housing" (comment 4.12B), "First Entitlement Family" (comment 4.13B), and "welfare rats in the ghettos" (comment 4.13B), with President Obama himself referred to as "nothing more than a welfare thief" (comment 4.14). Here, making reference to "another black family in government housing" performs an important representational function: it stabilises images of whiteness through opposition. On this matter, Kaufman (2002) highlights how the image of the "black thief" functions to stabilise the image of the good citizen, encoded as white. It is important to note here that open discussions of race were almost non-existent in the data. Comment 4.12B is one of the most prominent exceptions to this. Nevertheless, treatments of gun rights discourses and discourses on the moral status of welfare, for example, point to the ways in which these matters function metonymi-

cally to refer to white (and frequently male) identities. Whereas discourses of whiteness primarily function metonymically, here the racial dimensions of commentaries on welfare are explicit. This theme will be expanded on in my analysis of the next pair of comments.

Simultaneously establishing a commentary on welfare receipt and a critique of Democratic governance, comment 4.13B compares the number of “recreational outings” by the Obamas, referred to as the “First Entitlement Family,” to the “unreasonable” expectations of “welfare rats in the ghettos”:

A solvable Problem for any President in Office... Let Congress Stop this abuse of the Tax Payers Dollar... Regardless of who is our President...we as American Citizens should not be responsible for their Vacations! Never! [sic]

Comment 4.13A 6 December, 2016

By law, Presidents are required to pay the cost for themselves, their families and guest at all non-state events such as vacations, dinners and such. But the security and all the expenses involved are at our expense. The excess of recreational outings by the First Entitlement Family is exactly what we see with the welfare rats in the ghettos and their expectations of someone else supporting their unreasonable demands. [sic]

Comment 4.13B 6 December, 2016

According to Teles (1996, p. 16) welfare politics in the US has been “exceptionally dominated by issues of morality,” whilst the notion of personal responsibility is a core element of conservative perspectives on the moral dimensions of economic activity, as introduced briefly in section 4.2, above. Discourses of personal responsibility play an important role in judgments regarding those experiencing poverty (Henry, Reyna, & Weiner, 2004). Indeed, personal responsibility figures centrally in the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996* (PRWORA). Signed into law by President Bill Clinton, it led to a major reorientation of the American welfare state according to an ideologically conservative worldview (O'Connor, 2001). Indeed, Drakulich et al. (2020, p. 375) highlight Clinton’s positioning as tougher on the “racialized dog whistle” issue of welfare fraud than even conservative Republicans.

By drawing on themes touching on welfare and entitlement and relating them to economic productivity, users can draw on cultural narratives and stereotypes regarding the moral character of work, particularly the ways in which such moral characteristics are distributed along both partisan and racial lines. The deployment of such strict father metaphors, as discursive acts of articulation, serve to assert not only the morality of entrenched relations of domination but also their necessity. In the case of 4.15B, it is possible to appreciate the specifically racialised features of such boundary work. In the American context, welfare has long been stereotypically associated with African-Americans (G. C. Wright, 1977). The characterisation of Obama as a “welfare thief” also speaks to such broader discourses of race and entitlement which, as Hochschild (2016) notes, animate the feelings of resentment felt by many white conservative Americans, who see themselves as waiting patiently on the American dream whilst others receive preferential treatment.

Neither these discourses nor sentiments are a recent development. Racialised rhetorics seeking to woo racially conservative white Democrats have been employed by Republicans for decades (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018). King & Smith (2014) identify even more explicitly the character of the opposition that is mobilised here with respect to colour blind approaches. They write:

Conservative public intellectuals have associated race-conscious policies meant to aid nonwhites with social disarray, welfare dependency, and drug addiction, sexual licentiousness, military weakness, and criminality, while linking color-blind policies with self-reliance, hard work, law-abidingness, sexual morality, national service, and personal merit. (King & Smith, 2014, p. 967)

In this sense, claims regarding Obama’s “expectations” of support mirror use of the “affirmative action candidate” trope, which saw conservative media figures use racial markers to stigmatise Obama during the 2008 US presidential election cycle and, indeed, afterwards (Edge, 2009). However, as discussed in Chapter 1 (see section 1.1 pp. 11-17) arguments foregrounding the ideological role of colourblind approaches in buttressing white supremacy (Mueller, 2017) should be borne in mind here. The relationship these comments imply between fears regarding race as a factor in American politics and the racialised elements

of contemporary constructions of the American Dream will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

In characterising Barack Obama, “President of the United States of America, Commander in Chief, Leader of the Free world” as “nothing more than a welfare thief,” comment 4.14 goes further, drawing on revolutionary themes to raise the spectre of violence against the ruling elite:

President of the United States of America, Commander in Chief, Leader of the Free world...and still you are nothing more than a welfare thief. - We paid for your presidency, we paid for all those years of your lavish vacations...not by choice... they took it from us. We didn't have a say in it. You just took it. "Let them eat cake?" You need to learn the harsh reality of history, and so do the rest of you progressives. There comes a breaking point. [sic]

Comment 4.14

6 December, 2016

Whereas radical right-wing movements historically have been viewed as isolated from the American mainstream (Kaplan, 1995), the situation has changed notably in recent years, with the mainstreaming of radical and populist right-wing sentiments (Mudde, 2017). Political violence has been used as an ideological tool by right-wing wing movements in the US context, with motivators including government overreach, economic grievances, and resistance towards greater social inclusion of minorities (Piazza, 2015).

The imagery of violent uprising resonates with other themes that characterise conservative discourse during the Obama era, particularly widespread claims about the need to "take America back" through whatever means necessary (Mudde, 2017) – a trope which resonates significantly with the “Culture Wars” narrative promulgated by conservative commentator and broadcaster Pat Buchanan in his 1992 address to the Republican National Convention in Hous-

ton, Texas.¹⁹ However, whereas the previous two examples framed the loss of resources to those who hadn't earned it as a problem with the Obamas, comment 4.14 underlines the fact that the prospective correction is a harsh lesson to be learned also by all progressives. Indeed, the growing threat of violence from the extreme right was already recognised by the US Department of Homeland Security in a report which examines the impact of the economic and political climate on radicalisation and recruitment to right-wing extremism, published more than a decade ago (2009).

Keeping with the themes of government spending and welfare, comment 4.15 sets out the judgment that having people out of work and on government supports is an apparent goal of Democrats, raising once again the notion that there is a productive segment of American society (i.e., conservatives) that is paying for a group of unproductive, freeloading others. Posted in response to Goins-Phillips' (2016d) article discussing Trump's statements regarding the US becoming "another Venezuela," the comments read:

In truth, I believe that it will be much worse. I see whole segments of our society decide that they no longer have a need to earn their way. Why should they? The Democrats seem to want more and more people out of work and on the government doles, so what would happen if half of the population that is working were to suddenly walk off the job because they are tired of paying others not to work, and wanted to sit back and collect government funds and welfare that they have paid into for so many years. Within six months, the government will be broke and will be required to increase taxes from people that no longer have any income to tax. This forces a continuation of tax increases to offset the continual drop of taxpayers, until even the government can not afford to pay their own workers and must shut down and limit access to more government funds that rely on taxpayers that keep decreasing in numbers. The more the government spends, the more it needs to borrow until America is no longer the land of

¹⁹ The "Culture Wars" narrative postulated secular humanism as the motor for a perceived erosion of the Christian bases of American nationhood (Berlet, 2012). In this view, social and cultural transformation were portrayed as the product of a leftist conspiracy. I here include a short excerpt from Buchanan's speech: "There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton and Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side ... we must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and *take back our country*" [emphasis added] (Buchanan, 1992). Chapter 7 will feature further discussion of what is perceived to be at stake in the preservation of Christian conservative values and how this relates to specifically conservative constructions of American national identity.

the free, but the land of the freeloaders, until it can no longer defend themselves from any act of war against it. But then, isn't that exactly what the Democrats require, peace at any cost as long as they still get their free crap. [sic]

Comment 4.15A 10 September, 2016

Either way it goes it will not be peacefull. You can count on Soro's \$bil-lions to keep fueling the flames. Hitlery is our Hugo Chavez. We can't let that happen. And her mob will not go quietly. Confirm your zeroes children. [sic]

Comment 4.15B 10 September, 2016

A cycle is imagined in which the half of the population that work to pay for the other half suddenly decide that they too want “to sit back and collect govern-ment funds and welfare.” This cycle is seen to develop into a feedback loop of increasing taxation and borrowing, which will lead to an eventuality in which “America is no longer the land of the free, but the land of the freeloaders.” Echoing my earlier discussion of conspiracy narratives involving Democrats and illegal immigrants,²⁰ this is claimed to be “exactly what the Democrats require.” To this claim, user 4.15B responds: “Either way it will not be peaceful. You can count on Soro’s \$billions to keep fueling the flames” [sic]. Once again, alongside claims about government spending, the threat of violent upheaval appears in response. Such imagined futures as the one presented here are a theme that I will return to in greater detail in Chapter 7 (see section 7.4 pp. 241-252). No-tably, this comment also introduces the notion that billionaire George Soros is bankrolling the protest upheaval. I will return to this matter in my analysis of comment 4.18, below.

Themes of protest and patriotism are also prominent in the data, particularly in responses to Carlos Garcia’s previously mentioned article discussing the Women’s March on Washington (2017). Comment 4.16, for example, suggests that protestors should redirect their efforts towards being “patriotic Americans” in order to allow America to “become great again.” The comment reads:

²⁰ See analysis of comments 4.3A and 4.3B pp. 122-124; for further discussion, see analysis of comment 7.10 pp. 241-244.

If these folks would divert their effort into trying to be patriotic Americans rather than sorry trouble makers, our nation could start to become great again. All these protests do is drag the nation down and make us a mockery among the rest of the world. I am embarrassed by and ashamed of them. Captain Jim Green, Veteran and Patriotic Constitutionalist [sic]

Comment 4.16

14 January, 2017

The legitimacy of not only the Women's March on Washington but also protest as a tool of democratic participation are here called into question. It is thus asserted that protest is not patriotism, which takes some other unnamed form. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, political civic engagement assumes a variety of forms and takes shape under an array of social conditions. Importantly, however, it has been shown that beliefs about the legitimacy of protest activity are related to ideas about conflicting group objectives and thus at least partly rooted in judgments about shared ethnic and group identity (Bobo, 1988).

Continuing my focus on representations of protest and participation, comment 4.17 features an example that is less bold in its criticism of the protest in question:

So let them protest peacefully. Cover it once and NO more. Quit covering the tantrums, protests, and bulling agenda we voted out over and over. Start covering what the American people voted were important to us Now. [sic]

Comment 4.17

14 January, 2017

In this comment, the legitimacy of peaceful protest appears to be accepted at least to some extent. However, user 4.17 goes on to exhort the media to "Cover it once and NO more." Whilst the protestors may be entitled to their right, the comment asserts the media should not be covering it. Rather, they should be giving a platform instead to the positions expressed in the election. Whilst accepting that protest is a legitimate mode of engagement, this comment nevertheless situates the source of democratic legitimacy in electoral outcomes.

A primary means of questioning the legitimacy of the protest – in principle – and the protestors – as political agents – was to claim that both were being funded by billionaire financier George Soros. The notion that Soros is funding the pro-

gressive political agenda was already seen above in comment 4.15B and is repeated here in comment 4.18:

George Soros is paying and 90% of these idiots are living in their parents basement. Those of us not going to support Mr. Trump need to be at work that day to support the protesters and the Illegals children. [sic]

Comment 4.18

14 January, 2017

Claims that Soros was bankrolling the movement and even directly funding protestors became commonplace in the lead-up to the Women's March, drawing on the popular conspiracy theory that Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilise American government – i.e., the “Soros myth” (Kalmar, Stevens, & Worby, 2018). Based on four nationally representative surveys, Oliver and Wood (2014) have shown this to be one of the most popular conspiratorial narratives in the US, although notably it has strong ideological (i.e., conservative) dimensions when compared to other popular conspiracy theories, such as chemtrails conspiracies²¹ or conspiracies regarding the financial crisis.²² Beck himself has presented Soros as one of the most significant threats to America (Dreier & Zaitchik, 2011). Commentary on the so-called “Soros myth” frequently highlights its anti-semitic elements (e.g., Kalmar et al., 2018), with common anti-semitic tropes including references to “globalists” (Levine Daniel, Fyall, & Benenson, 2019) and claims of worldwide Jewish conspiracy (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018).

Whilst the Soros conspiracy has been classed as a right-wing or conservative conspiracy (Oliver & Wood, 2014), conspiratorial thinking historically has been pervasive in American public discourse and political thought (Hofstadter, 1964). Indeed, focusing on the prevalence of apocalyptic imagery in conspiratorial narratives, Barkun (2013) demonstrates the cultural dimensions of conspiracy in the US context. This links conspiracy narratives to another historically dominant

²¹ According to Cairns (2016, p. 71), chemtrails conspiracies “describe the belief that the persistent contrails left by aeroplanes provide evidence that a secret programme of large-scale weather and climate modification is ongoing, and is having devastating ecological and health consequences worldwide.”

²² Financial crisis conspiracies posit that the 2008 financial crisis was “secretly orchestrated by a small group of Wall Street bankers to extend the power of the Federal Reserve and further their control of the world’s economy” (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 956). In Oliver and Wood’s (2014) analysis of the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking in the US, the financial crisis conspiracy was the most widely endorsed conspiracy theory.

mode of rhetoric that likewise imagines American apocalypse, the *jeremiad* (Bercovitch, 2012), which will be the focus of my analysis in Chapter 7. Interestingly, the discourse of astroturf political mobilisation was prominent in responses to Tea Party movement mobilisation when it was at the height of its public visibility (Courser, 2010). In left-wing and mainstream narratives, however, the Koch brothers were presented as the ones paying for the appearance of a political movement (J. Boykoff & Laschever, 2011), alongside “the usual group of right-wing billionaires” (Krugman, 2009).²³

Comment 4.19 makes the claim that protest is not so much illegitimate as it is a sign of immaturity:

When you mimic like parrots and spout the Leftist terminology (such as “fascist”) when such terms do not apply in the least, and intensely protest THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE of this country as far as the results of the election, you expose to all just how out of touch you really are. Donald Trump is not even in office, and yet these lunatics are accusing the man of complete nonsense. Where were you when Obama and the DemoRATS were passing unConstitutional legislation and executive orders to bypass Congress? This is the same children who grew up getting their way in everything, or else they would have a temper tantrum; with no discipline from the parents. .
Grow up, kiddies. [sic]

Comment 4.19

14 January, 2017

This comment raises a number of themes that were prominent in responses to the Women’s March article (Garcia, 2017), including the illegitimacy of protest and the immaturity of political opponents. Insofar as this comment ends with the exhortation “Grow up, kiddies,” it relates directly although inversely to examples of positive in-group evaluations presented in the previous section. Positive in-group characterisations drew on claims about the economic productivity of Trump voters. Here, it can be seen how claims regarding the social role of personal responsibility, as discussed in comment 4.13, are not limited to economic factors. Rather, they are also mapped onto claims about political and civic engagement, both in terms of partisan modes of political discourse (i.e., “spout the Leftist terminology”) and forms of political participation and governance.

²³ It should be noted that the role and impact of oligarch spending and corporate lobbying in US politics is part of a broader public and scholarly debate (Warf, 2019).

Still on the topic of protest, comment 4.20 features lengthy comments from two users. Both comments focus on the hypocrisy of protestors demonstrating against Trump's "little mistake in making a stupid joke" – referring specifically to the now infamous recording of Trump's conversation with the TV personality Billy Bush in which Trump discusses using his fame to grope women (Jacobs, Siddiqui, & Bixby, 2016) – and "Hillary's enabling and standing behind her sexually addicted and rapist husband" – referring to rape and sexual assault allegations that have also been made against President Bill Clinton (D. Matthews, 2017). The comments read:

Screaching their dismay at Trump's little mistake in making a stupid joke just amazes me and makes me realize how blinded by reality these progressives are. They go into hysterics over a joke and turn a blind eye to Hillary's enabling and standing behind her sexually addicted, rapist husband. Further, Seymour Hersch's book, The "Dark Side of Camelot" reveals torrid sexual encounters with the Democratic icon, JFK who was also an extreme sex addict. These two men were the worst of the worst when it comes to preying on women daily. That's conveniently glossed over while all hell breaks loose over a stupid, (never should have been said), joke. It's not about the joke people, it's about progressives losing. They're whipping these lemmings into a frenzy and it could get dangerous! George Soros!!!! [sic]

Comment 4.20A 15 January, 2017

I must agree, How can they hold Trump to Task for some Minor indiscretions, Yet they would much rather have a Woman who is clearly a Megalomaniac Sociopath!. She HAS NO CONSCIENCE what so ever, in that she Enabled Billy Boy to carry on his sexual Escapades, on the Lolita Express and in the Oval Office. She obviously Looks upon the Nation as below her, she hate's America and Americans She Clearly had NO platform going Forward for this Nation, she Had both the DOJ and FBI in her Back pocket, she clearly Broke the Law concerning National Security Several Times and somehow she got away with it, Her Pay to Play Scenario, Broke the RICO Laws. Did not save the Four US Citizens in Benghazi, when all involved know they could have been extracted, and she actually believes she is innocent of any wrong doing....This woman is mentally very ill! Yet all these protesters and Bleeding heart liberals from Martha's Vineyard, to the Hollywood Hills would see her in the White House as if she was the perfect C&C...this to me is madness! MSM selling out their Journalistic Ethics, and Integrity, along with NOT pointing the Finger at the Real culprits Like George Soros, and his Cohorts, the NWO, and Yes even the Vatican, has led to this divisiveness and what is truly Terrifying is this has all been planned by the Globalist who stand to lose their Strangle hold on Washington if Trump should Drain the Swamp. I fear for the mans life

as it is certain there is as target on his back...I pray to my lord God that he is NOT JFK'D... [sic]

Comment 4.20B 15 January, 2017

Whilst user 4.20A refers to this as “Trump’s little mistake” and a “stupid, (never should have been said), joke,” user 4.20B.1 refers to Trump’s “minor indiscretions.” In both comments, Trump’s behaviour is discounted or otherwise minimised, particularly when compared with what is presented as the more egregious harms of Democrats.

In comment 4.20A, it is remarked that JFK and Bill Clinton – two Democrats – “were the worst of the worst when it comes to preying on women daily.” User 4.20B’s comment, on the other hand, highlights the contradiction between attacking Trump’s “minor indiscretions” and support for a “Woman who is clearly a Megalomaniacle [sic] Sociopath” with “NO CONSCIENCE what so ever.” User 4.20B’s comment further outlines a litany of greater misdemeanours and threats that are conveniently ignored by progressives, ignoring the “Real culprits” [sic]. In this comment one can appreciate claims of a conspiracy of globalists, who “stand to lose their Strangle hold on Washington if Trump should Drain the Swamp.” This speaks to claims discussed earlier regarding the putative role played by George Soros in pushing a globalist agenda that threatens America and the American way of life, whilst also recycling Trump’s campaign slogan referring to ending Washington corruption.

In the final example of negative out-group characterisations, the user 4.21A admits, “Trump may not be perfect but he isn’t a Marxist/Socialist like the candidates the Neo Democrat Party produces these days.” These comments were posted in response to Tré Goins-Phillips’ (2016b) article discussing Beck’s dis-appointment in Ted Cruz:

Trump may not be perfect but he isn't a Marxist / Socialist like the candidates the Neo Democrat Party produces these days [sic]

Comment 4.21A 24 September, 2016

Thank you Captain Obvious. Now get this message through to the nevertrump idiots. [sic]

Comment 4.21B.1

24 September, 2016

Screw the never trumpers! They are meaningless. Their numbers are a pittance and are not worth wasting breath over. Now on the other hand, the congressional never trumpers should be afraid, vewy afraid of what their constituents will do to them in the next cycle, if we last that long! [sic]

Comment 4.21B.2

24 September, 2016

The threat of socialism is a common theme, which seems to typify the central threat to the American way of life, liberty, and freedom. The historical roots of such constructions are complex. For example, fear of communist spies in the US State Department animated the McCarthyism of the 1950s, led by Republican senator Joseph McCarthy (Fitzgerald, 2006). Such fears were deeply embedded in conservative Cold War politics (Crouse, 2002). However, they did not end there. Indeed, Skoll and Korstanje (2013) relate these so-called “red scares” to a contemporary obsession with terrorism, arguing that ideas about both are fundamentally embedded in an American culture of fear that has been actively manufactured throughout the latter half of the 20th century, continuing to this day.

Comment 4.21A also serves as an example of the kinds of connections that are articulated between partisan affiliation, ideological perspectives, and moral characteristics in the sample. In this case, even if Trump is viewed with a degree of ambiguity, he is nevertheless not like the candidate offerings of the Democratic Party. The comment here sets out a classification as Marxist or Socialist as an extremely negative feature of Democratic, progressive, or liberal partisanship and personhood.²⁴ This set of comments provides a key example of the contested support for Trump during the 2016 US presidential election cycle.

²⁴ Given my specific methodological approach, which relies on user-generated content, it is not possible to decipher from my data how users conceptualise the relationship between these different forms of partisanship, i.e., how particular political ideologies or stances (e.g., progressivism) are seen to relate to partisan affiliation (e.g., Democrat). That is, my data do not reveal audience attitudes towards or understandings of the limits and extent of “partisan sorting” (Huddy et al., 2015), discussed in Chapter 2 (see section 2.2.2 pp. 50-53). What is palpable is the manner in which such distinctions appear to be collapsed in the below-the-line commentary of users. Terms like “liberal” and “progressive” thus appear to be used interchangeably with labels like “Democrat.”

Such contestations will be a central focus of my analysis in the following section.

4.4 Contestatory characterisations

In chapter 2, I outlined some of the key features of the ongoing polarisation debate in American political science. Here, I problematise the manner in which most prominent models of polarisation in the United States – whether elite (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), mass (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008), ideological (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006), or affective (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Levendusky, 2013a) – posit a bipolar vision of partisan opposition that mirrors the make-up of the American two-party system. As discussed in Chapter 2 (see section 2.2.2 pp. 50-53), partisan sorting (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008) and ideological realignment (Saunders & Abramowitz, 2004) align policy positions, parties, and partisan identities in a variety of ways. In studies of partisanship in the US context, partisan identities are also largely accorded to relatively neat categories of Republican and Democrat. According to Thomassen and Rosema (2009, p. 45), this is a sensible approach insofar as “history and the plurality electoral system have produced a stable two party system.”

However, prominent challenges to the existing political party order in the form of anti-establishment movements and populist discourses introduce some disruption to this model. Such disruption is here considered under the framework of “contestatory performance” (Fuoss, 1993), a concept which focuses on the political dimensions of performance as something which makes things happen – something which has, in Austin’s (1962) terminology, “illocutionary force.” Performance studies do not situate the power of performance merely in the formal features of utterances, focusing instead on the dynamic use of language and its role in the social construction of reality (R. Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Here, I focus on the role of contestatory performance in the articulation of antagonistic frontiers between in-group and out-group in the online political talk of commenters.

Conflicting attitudes and orientations towards Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency among Republican voters and conservatives are one example that points to the existence of significant contestation of partisan alignments in the contemporary US. Trump is a deeply ambiguous character, looked upon ambivalently by many, whilst enjoying the backing of a consistent "base" of supporters (Stolee & Caton, 2018). Trump's support among his base, it has been argued, derives from the manner in which he addresses public intolerance of uncertainty and ambivalence regarding social complexity (see Korostelina, 2016, Chapter 5). However, Donald Trump is not the only indicator of such conflicting sentiments, and a number of examples of such public contestation that problematise the relationship between the Republican Party and conservatism will be discussed here, particularly as this relates to ideas about the Tea Party movement and so-called RINOs, i.e., Republican In Name Only.

In the previous section, I presented a number of examples of name-calling being used as a means of denigrating political opponents. In those examples, opponents were Democrats, progressives, and liberals. In comment 4.22, however, I present an example that shows the use of name-calling and insults to refer to a more complex array of characters. Drawn from Goins-Phillips' (2016d) article discussing Trump's claims about the US becoming "another Venezuela," mentioned above, the comments read:

Watch out for the Orange goon squad if you speak poorly of Don the Con... [sic]

Comment 4.22A

So I take it your voting for Hillary?... [sic]

Comment 4.22B

I am not voting for the Giant Douche or the Turd Sandwich [sic]

Comment 4.22C.1

Again, another trumpanzee who cannot keep his mind off of hillary! Did I say I was voting for Hillary, or even mention her? Nope. You did. You also proved my point! [sic]

Comment 4.22C.2

Examples include “the Orange goon squad,” “Don the Con,” “trumpanzee,” and “Giant Douche or the Turd Sandwich.”²⁵ What is appreciable in this example is the prominent claim that the failure to vote for Trump is a vote for Hillary Clinton: “So I take it your voting for Hillary?...” Such claims recur throughout the sample and were particularly common in the context of comments responding to an article discussing Glenn Beck voicing disappointment at Ted Cruz’s decision to support Donald Trump, posted to TheBlaze on 23 September 2016 (Goins-Phillips, 2016b).

Tré Goins-Phillips’ (2016b) article discussing Beck’s disappointment in Ted Cruz resulted in a huge a response from site users and produced a large body of comments. Although the article was one of 30 that were included in my sample, it accounts for some 19% of all comments. Some of the comments were glib or outrageous interjections, others were clear examples of “trolling” (Hardaker, 2010), but many were comparatively reflective and lengthy contributions which nevertheless frequently featured certain outrageous elements, such as insulting language, name calling, character assassination, and ideologically extremising language (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Comments 4.23-4.26 were all posted in response to Goins-Phillips’ article.

Comment 4.23, for example, shows one such contribution reflecting on Cruz finding it “in his heart to forgive the awful thing that Trump said about him and his family,” after Donald Trump had insulted Cruz’s wife and publicly accused his father of assisting in the assassination of JFK:

There is a time and a place to forgive. I think, finally, Ted Cruz found it in his heart to forgive the awful things that Trump said about him and his family. Tearing people down is Trump’s way of winning, but now I hope – once he wins – that he will work closely with those in office who can help turn things around. If Trump surrounds himself with our Constitutionals – Ted Cruz, Mike Lee, etc., we will have a fighting chance of maintaining our freedoms. If Hillary wins, we will all soon be wearing Mao suits. We know

²⁵ The final entry in this list refers to the animated show South Park’s treatment of the choice being presented to voters in the 2016 US presidential election. The episode highlights the “near-zero value of an individual vote, the intrinsic value individuals place on the act of voting itself, problems arising when voters must choose amongst undesirable candidates rather than issues, and the role of political campaigning” (Hoffer & Crowley, 2013).

for a fact that she is a lover of the Alinsky doctrine, Soros puppet, and will suck up to anyone who funds her Clinton Foundation, and our health insurance will finally all go to a one-payer – crappy – system. Trump may spend up the debt, however, I fear Hillary will spend us far more into oblivion. There is no way out but to vote for Trump. Ted did NOT sell out. He is trying to save this country by staying close to Trump and working with him. Glenn, I am sorry, too, but we need to pray that Hillary does not win, and then get in that voter box and vote for Mr. Trump. Ted will be around to fight another day, and I will still always thank God for people like Ted Cruz. [sic]

Comment 4.23

23 September, 2016

The user who posted this comment can be seen elsewhere in the data, e.g., comment 4.24B, discussing the possibility of Trump being guided by and learning from “ardent constitutionalists,” such as Ted Cruz and Mike Lee, presenting this as a means of ensuring “we will have a fighting chance of maintaining our freedoms.” Constitutionalists are thus charged with maintaining American freedoms, and their greatest opportunity exists in working with Donald Trump in spite of his personal failings as a candidate. The alternative: “If Hillary wins, we will all soon be wearing Mao suits.” The role of the US Constitution in safeguarding the future of America and American nationhood will be a central topic in Chapter 7.

Comments 4.24A and 4.24B continue this theme of Trump being the “best of two evils,” with a particular focus on Cruz’s stated support for his candidacy:

Although I have been an ardent Cruz supporter from the beginning, a vote for Trump has and will never depend on a Cruz endorsement. Cruz vouching for Trump will not help Trump; it only diminishes Cruz because I already know everything I need to know about Trump and it isn’t good. All it means is an endorsement from Cruz no longer has value, something on which one can no longer rely. Ultimately if I do end up voting for the best of two evils, I will carry my vote to the booth in a brown paper-sack, never admitting to the dirty deed. Trumpumpkins believe that Trump can save the country from the abyss, but I believe that is simply wishful thinking. The country is proceeding headlong into another civil war, a civil war which no politician can prevent, not even Sen. Ted Cruz. And a win for Trump may delay or accelerate the inevitable. Anyone who tells you they know for certain which one of the two outcomes will occur is a liar or a fool. Reality check: patriots, be prepared to fight for your freedom. [sic]

Comment 4.24A

23 September, 2016

However, why not have Ted Cruz work alongside Trump and perhaps be a mentor. I would rather have the likes of Ted Cruz being invited to the White House by The Donald, whereas Obama spent most of his time with Trumka, among other undesirables. Cruz is vouching for Trump for reasons only he and Trump know. Trump is a quick learner and why not have him learn from those that are ardent Constitutionalists. It truly is time to throw away the bitterness and let Ted work with Trump. Look at it this way – Trump needs to learn the intricacies of DC dialogue and how to deal with those on the inside for our sake. May Ted sway him from the RINOS, Amen [sic]

Comment 4.24B

23 September, 2016

User 4.24A, for example, highlights the fact that, in spite of being “an ardent Cruz supporter from the beginning, a vote for Trump was never dependent on a Cruz endorsement.” In fact, Cruz’s endorsement of Trump “only diminishes Cruz.” Voting for Trump is something that will be done grudgingly, and anyone who thinks that Trump will serve as the country’s saviour is misguided. That outcome takes the imagined form of “another civil war, a civil war which no politician can prevent.” The threat remains, and patriots must be prepared to “fight” for their freedom.

User 4.24B looks more favourably on the circumstance: “Trump needs to learn the intricacies of DC dialogue and how to deal with those on the inside for our sake.” This claim foregrounds Trump’s positioning as an outsider to the political establishment, which had boosted Trump’s populist bona fides (Donovan & Bowler, 2018). However, even whilst expressing support for Trump, user 4.24B admits that he will require some guidance on operating in such close quarters to the Washington establishment, invoking protection for Trump in the form of a prayer: “May Ted sway him from the RINOs, Amen.”

Whilst ambivalence towards Trump features centrally in the contested articulation of conservative identity within the sample, divergent attitudes towards the Republican Party are likewise important. The RINO – Republican In Name Only – is thus also a key figure in the contestation of the boundaries of conservatism, one which draws on an institutional critique of the Republican Party establish-

ment and their congressional agenda.²⁶ The author of comment 4.24B invoked a prayer to sway Trump from their influence. In comment 4.25, however, we see a more critical stance on what Cruz's endorsement means: further empowerment for RINOs, Establishment Republicans, Alt-Right, Unprincipled evangelicals, and Reince Priebus, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee who was later to become President Donald Trump's first Chief of Staff:

What the Cruz endorsement of trump means: RINOs further Empowered Establishment Republicans-Empowered Alt Right-Empowered Unprincipled evangelicals-Empowered Reince Priebus-Empowered Liberty loving, constitutional conservative, grassroots that put Cruz on the map-just got jack-slapped across the face. When will we ever learn and become Never Republican and get a viable third party on the move? [sic]

Comment 4.25

23 September, 2016

What this means for the "Liberty loving, constitutional conservative grassroots that put Cruz on the map" is a jack-slap "across the face." This comment sets out a fairly inclusive set of key intragroup oppositions that distinguishes between key elements of the 2016 Republican platform and a liberty loving, constitutional grassroots. The comment asks, "When will we ever learn and become Never Republican and get a viable third party on the move?"

In these incantations of a third party battle against a disconnected Republican establishment and a set of Republican agents who fail to live up to the moral and ideological expectations of conservative voters, the shadow of the Tea Party movement looms large. The following comments are a key example of this:

I am a Constitutional Conservative and people like me (and Ted) have been defeated by populists, many of whom claimed to be Constitutional Conservatives. Ted has chosen to pick up and fight as much of the fight as he can with the half way crowd until the Constitutional Conservatives have greater success. I support Ted. He is still exactly who he said he was. Trump has been all things to many people and we don't know who he would be as president because he is a liar. All that we know is that he will not be Hillary. I suspect that Trump will win by a wide margin and we will know that on election eve who will win. I don't trust Trump. I like some of

²⁶ It has been argued that engaging in primary challenges of RINOs was a primary strategy of Tea Party movement candidates, with the aim of "overthrowing" establishment elites in the Republican Party (Libby, 2015).

the people around him, but is their judgement at its best this year? I am so glad that I did not run for county Republican committee this year. I would not be able to campaign for Trump. In a few weeks, the election will be over and we will have to focus on whatever crap Obama tries to advance before he leaves. After that, we may need to get the old TEA Party buses loaded again if wither candidate wins and can't see the Constitution from the white house. After seeing the rise of Trump though, I have to assume that less people than ever even care about that liberty securing document when their preferred candidate becomes President. [sic]

Comment 4.26A

23 September, 2016

Tea Party endorsed Trump, so be happy. Or are you bummed out that Hildabeast won't win? [sic]

Comment 4.26B

23 September, 2016

[user 4.27B] does indeed spew proper political speak, but the TEA Party is a large group of individuals who joined as a voice for specific principles and to oppose specific legislation like Obamacare. There were a few TEA Party organizations that rose up from it and if one or two of those organizations endorsed Trump from their little office of several people, they did not speak properly because Trump also has a government paid healthcare plan and wants to put the federal government into daycare, which are in complete opposition to the 10th amendment and the TEA Party. Any new government entitlement program is un constitutional and a tool for Progressives to populate, corrupt and use in propaganda against Republicans who later want to reign it in. As for your Hillary comment, it tells me that you can't defend your candidate with any accountable, provable credibility, so you need to resort to the Alinsky diversion process.. [sic]

Comment 4.26C.1

24 September, 2016

David Duke endorsed deceiving don, too. What's your point? [sic]

Comment 4.26C.2

24 September, 2016

In this exchange, for instance, user 4.26A presents as a "Constitutional Conservative" [sic] who has been "defeated by populists, many of whom claimed to be Constitutional Conservatives." As someone who doesn't "trust Trump," once the election is over user 4.26A remarks, "we may need to get the old TEA Party buses loaded again if wither [sic] candidate wins and can't see the Constitution from the white house." Whilst recognising a shift in the movements that define contemporary conservatism, a more authentic alternative is imagined.

The US Constitution is here characterised as the source of all freedoms, insofar as it is referred to as “that liberty securing document.”²⁷ When another user replies stating that the “Tea Party endorsed Trump, so be happy,” user 4.26A proceeds to outline in detail the complex character of the movement as something composed of “a large group of individuals who joined as a voice for specific principles and to oppose specific legislation like Obamacare.” From those origins, it is not possible for any “Tea Party” to speak for those who align with the movement, but it is seen as a possibility that a movement which had enjoyed substantial visibility and a considerable amount of influence in terms of shaping the agenda of Republican conservatism for a period of time (see Skocpol & Williamson, 2012) could reform and challenge the new status quo embodied by Trump.

Whilst the notion that Trump would invariably be a better choice for President than Hillary Clinton, even given his failings, formed part of an aggressive legitimization of support for his candidacy, there are those who profess so-called “NeverTrump” leanings,²⁸ even if voting for Trump would mean keeping “Killery out of the white house” (comment 4.27B). This position is noted in the final example, posted in response to Schallhorn’s (2016) article discussing an argument made by Hillary Clinton in support of stricter background checks for gun owners. The comments read:

Trump agreed to “no fly, no buy”, which EVEN THE STINKIN’ ACLU OPPOSES. But I guess it’s ok to deny people due process as long as it makes America great again. If we’re honest with ourselves, we should acknowledge that this guy got his a\$\$ kicked last night. No...I am not a Hillary troll and I am not progressive. I am, however, a person who can objectively analyze a debate. [sic]

Comment 4.27A 27 September, 2016

²⁷ The relationship between conservatism and the US Constitution will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6 (see section 6.2 pp. 184-194 and section 6.4 pp. 203-214) and throughout Chapter 7.

²⁸ NeverTrump is a movement of Republican, Democratic, and Independent voters whose initial stated aim was preventing Donald Trump from acceding to the office of President of the United States of America. The movement entailed the #nevertrump hashtag which grew in prominence during the 2016 election cycle and which is currently still active. See Johnson, McCray, & Ragusa (2018a) for a discussion of the Never-Trump phenomenon.

@[user 4.28A] – Don't expect any Trump supporter to come out in his defense on this subject or your post. Having said that I totally agree with you. Voting for Trump to keep Killery out of the white house reminds me too much of something Churchill once said. "An appeaser is someone who feeds a crocodile hoping it will eat him last". Both of these two knuckleheads are going to destroy this county all that is left is for the American people to choose the path they want to be led down to get there. [sic]

Comment 4.78B 27 September, 2016

The tensions between those expressing full support for Trump, those expressing qualified support (i.e., better of two evils), and those who fundamentally resisted his candidacy animate the data sample, particularly in the context of Beck's reported attitude regarding Cruz's shift in stance towards supporting Trump. Beck's position as one of the most prominent conservative media figures to publicly stand against Trump's candidacy and nomination cast him as a solitary figure in a media environment that was characterised by near unanimous support once Trump had secured the Republican Party nomination. Varied responses to Beck's position help to illuminate debate over the proper role of media in the political process, as well as commenters' publicly negotiated understandings of their own role as both consumers and producers of media discourse in the context of a hybrid media system.

4.5 Conclusion: contesting the boundaries of conservatism

In this chapter, I have focused on characterisations of US political parties, politicians, and partisans as a means of demonstrating the performative co-construction of political opposition in the online political talk of commenters. In so doing, I set out examples under three key categories: negative out-group characterisations, positive in-group characterisations, and contestatory characterisations. In the first category, I showed three key in-group characterisations as economically productive, Christian, and conservative. In the second category, I outlined a further set of themes, which characterised the out-group as welfare consumers, immature, and participants in illegitimate protest and an astroturf movement. Under this category, I also explored a variety of examples of insults and name-calling. Here, I drew attention to the specifically racial connotations of such ar-

tulations in which Christianity is coded as white, with both implicit and explicit characterisations of welfare as a non-white, non-conservative concern. Finally, in the third category, I focused on contestatory performance and set out examples of the dissensus surrounding what constitutes conservative identity that are typical of the data in my sample. In this case, important considerations were the figure of the RINO, memories of the Tea Party movement, and the role of NeverTrumpers in contesting the boundaries of contemporary conservatism.

This initial analysis indicates that even in a deeply partisan media space, there is the persistence of dissenting voices, which demonstrate ongoing vibrant contestation over what it means to be a conservative in the context of contemporary social and political transformations, as well as the social tensions those changes engender. Within this domain of self/other distinctions, speakers are not only opposed as “conservative” Republican voters to Democrat, but also to other Republicans – e.g., RINOS and establishment Republicans – who fail to live up to the standards of conservatism that are contested – i.e., articulated – in the digital domains of internet-mediated discourse and elsewhere. This is an important finding in itself, particularly in the context of arguments positing deliberative enclaves as the direct response to the fragmentation that typifies the public spheres that are constituted through the use of online media (e.g., Sunstein, 2009).

The third category of contestatory characterisations further indicates that it is insufficient to analyse affective polarisation in the contemporary US in terms of a simple binary opposition between two party identifications. My findings indicate a dynamic, multipolar model of nested or recursive opposition may provide a more suitable approach to the phenomenon of affective polarisation, particularly in the context of contemporary challenges to the constitution and functioning of established political parties (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). I see this not just as a means of empirically challenging some prominent arguments about the prevalence of political homophily – and thus the role of social identity – in online participation in deliberative systems, but also as a tool for understanding the discursive articulation of complex forms of oppositional illegitimacy in the context of digitally mediated partisanship in the contemporary US.

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of how US parties, politicians, and partisans are characterised by users in ways that may reference potent metaphors of race and gender. As demonstrated, those characterisations are frequently marked by incivility, sharing many characteristics with outrage discourse as defined by Berry and Sobieraj (2013). Here, I have shown how categories of partisan opposition are articulated in antagonistic terms, demonstrating the dynamic and contested character of self/other distinctions in the below-the-line commentary of users. In the following chapter, however, I will examine how those oppositions are mapped onto the contemporary media landscape by revealing how commenters use below-the-line commentary to voice their opposition to a perceived hostile media and, in the process, discursively contest the very definition of both oppositional media and American conservative identity online.

Chapter 5: Antagonism and the media environment in the US

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the “antagonistic strategies” (Laclau, 1999) employed by commenters in their articulation of an oppositional definition of “liberal” and “mainstream” media in user-generated below-the-line commentary. In the previous chapter, I drew on the definition of outrage discourse set out by Berry and Sobieraj (2013) in their exploration of the rhetorical strategies of commercial partisan media that have become prominent in the US. In so doing, I used the notion of outrage as a way of talking about the role played by characterisations of social, political, and cultural difference in partisan news commentary online. I have argued that discursive strategies of “antagonistic othering” (Herschinger, 2012) are central to digitally-mediated processes of affective polarisation. However, at a time of a growing integration of media and politics (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) and a hybridisation of forms of media power and genres of political communication (Chadwick, 2013), partisan antagonisms are expressed not only with reference to political parties, politicians, and partisans. Such notions of oppositionality are also performed in attitudes towards media outlets, figures, and content. In that sense, the kinds of “antagonistic frontiers” (Laclau, 2000) discussed in Chapter 4 can also be mapped onto publicly negotiated attitudes towards media and shared practices of media use. Reflecting on the relation between these phenomena and affective polarisation, in what follows, therefore, I will focus on how commenters define media as “oppositional” (Arceneaux et al., 2012) through the performance of antagonism.

First, I will draw on empirical examples to give an overview of how notions of “the media” are constructed in right-wing media discourse. Outrageous characterisations of an untrustworthy mainstream media which is biased towards liberal ideologies and viewpoints will here be presented as attempts at a particular fixation of meaning that acquire political significance within a field of hegemonic struggle, as described in Chapter 2 (see section 2.4.1 pp. 75-81). Second, I will relate these figurative constructions of media to hostile media perceptions (Valone et al., 1985) and oppositional media hostility (Arceneaux et al., 2012), re-

lated concepts discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Here, I will outline some of the discursive mechanisms via which partisan antagonisms are mapped onto a media environment characterised at once by the proliferation of means of participation and a significant growth in the availability of partisan media resources, online and elsewhere. In so doing, I will outline how commenters use the rhetorical figure of a “liberal media” (Major, 2012) that has become dominant in conservative thought to articulate partisan antagonisms. Finally, I will further demonstrate the dynamism of classifications of opposition in the context of user-generated below-the-line commentary, revealing how, in defining media as oppositional, commenters re-articulate outrageous models of personhood and agency for their own ends. As with my focus on the discursive construction of political difference in the previous chapter, the role of contestatory performance is here understood to figure centrally in attempts to classify both media and identity in partisan terms.

5.2 The figure of “the media” in American right-wing media discourse

Within right-wing media discourse, the notion emerges over the past several decades of “mainstream” as a pejorative reference, a slur suffused with an array of cultural judgments (Domke et al., 1999; Major, 2012). As I argued in Chapter 1 (see section 1.2.2 pp. 26-31), partisan media figures articulate antagonistic frontiers between mainstream and right-leaning alternative media as a rhetorical strategy (Arceneaux et al., 2012), with Glenn Beck named as a major proponent of such antagonistic rhetoric (Jutel, 2013). In recent years, for example, a variety of prominent political and media figures on the right have drawn on metaphorical constructions of “the media” for rhetorical and strategic ends. Examples of this trend include: former Alaska Governor and 2008 Republican Vice-Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin’s use of the term “lame-stream media”; conservative talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh’s use of the term “drive-by media”; even President Donald Trump’s use of the term “fake news media” and, more recently, “lame-stream media” exemplifies this tendency.

This crystallisation in the conservative vernacular of an oppositional notion of “the media” as “mainstream” or “liberal” is contemporaneous with the kind of

technological, economic, and political transformations that Berry and Sobieraj (2013) propose contributed to the emergence of the outrage industry. The mainstream is articulated as a figure of alterity against which to plot the frontiers of in-group and out-group. As discussed earlier, as an antagonistic strategy, this construction of a “liberal media” shares important features with populist characterisations of mainstream media (Haller & Holt, 2019b). However, my data also demonstrate a persistent focus on the antagonistic othering of media and media-related practice(s) by commenters. Bearing in mind this background, in this section I will outline the construction of “the media” in the online political talk of commenters, noting some dominant discursive characteristics.

The first example in this chapter, comment 5.1A, features an important element, which is the characterisation of “the media” as an agent. The pair of comments presented here (5.1A and 5.1B) were posted in response to a story discussing Donald Trump’s choice of Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson as a potential nominee for the position of Secretary of State (Enloe, 2016a). The comments read:

Trump is using the Media in ways no one else thought possible! It’s making the unhinged even angrier and showing their cards sooner than usual, while his staff is taking notes. M A G A ! [sic]

Comment 5.1A 11 December, 2016

He also is “zeroing” in on a pick that is hugely in favor of common core and carbon taxes. I’m amazed at the people digging their heels to defend these type of picks. [sic]

Comment 5.1B 11 December 2016

The notion of media agency does figure in communication research, especially around the development of political attitudes and sensibilities, e.g., the idea that media can serve as an agent of political socialisation (Chaffee & Yang, 1990; McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010; Moeller & de Vreese, 2013). Vidali further argues that Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation (1999) likewise entails a notion of an agentive media, insofar as “it tends to frame the issue as primarily about relations between media, as if media are actors independent of people, rather than about the interpretive work of social actors who use and produce media” (Vidali, 2010, p. 373). In the above case, “the Media” are portrayed as an agent that is susceptible to being strategically gamed by conservatives, with

this particular commenter presenting an image of Trump campaign staff strategising around the affective states of audiences. In this case, it can be deduced that “the Media” refers to responses by mainstream media outlets to Trump’s use of Twitter and other media, thus highlighting an explicit understanding on the part of commenters of the “hybrid” (Chadwick, 2013) relation between newer and older media in contemporary political communication.

Furthermore, the idea that Trump’s use of “the Media” [sic] could make “the unhinged even angrier” calls to mind the concept of “owning the libs.”²⁹ This inflammatory tactic, designed to generate partisan outrage, has its roots in a 2015 tweet by Proud Boys founder, Gavin McInnes,³⁰ in which he included a photo of himself laying face-down in a dumpster in order to generate liberal outrage (Peyser, 2018). This quickly became a meme that grew increasingly prominent during the 2016 election cycle. To “own the libs” became an end in its own right. Whereas more recent research on the influence of media on political attitudes accommodates the fact that audiences actively integrate media content in practical ways that contribute to developing political positions (Buckingham, 1997), this figure of emotional reactivity creates an impression of liberal hypersensitivity tied to media use.

Whilst the comment ends with an acronymic incantation of Trump’s campaign slogan, i.e., Make America Great Again, it should be highlighted here that not all users appeared to share in this positive appraisal of Trump’s tactics. In that re-

²⁹ The phrase “own the libs” draws on the digital vernacular term “own” to refer to the domination and humiliation of “libs,” i.e., those on the political left (Peyser, 2018). It entered mainstream political discourse in 2018 via a speech by then US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley. Haley remarked at the time: “I know that it’s fun and that it can feel good. But step back and think about what you’re accomplishing when you do this — are you persuading anyone? Who are you persuading? Real leadership is about persuasion, it’s about movement, it’s bringing people around to your point of view. Not by shouting them down, but by showing them how it is in their best interest to see things the way you do” (Lora, 2018). As demonstrated by Haley’s remarks, even if some view owning the libs as an end in its own right, that outlook is not always shared by conservatives.

³⁰ McInnes was himself eventually scheduled to host a show titled *Get Off My Lawn* as part of the later merger of TheBlaze’s television arm with Mark Levin-owned CRTV’s subscription video arm, which formed the new company Blaze Media. However, it was announced via Twitter less than a week after the merger took place that McInnes was no longer working for Blaze Media. The company tweeted, “Blaze Media no longer has a relationship with Gavin McInnes” (Bowden, 2018).

gard, comment 5.1B highlights notable issues with Trump's cabinet picks, particularly those in favour of "common core³¹ and carbon taxes" – two policy stances resisted by conservatives and others on the far right in the US (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014).

Whilst comment 5.1A presents an introduction to the notion that the media can be considered as a singular intentional agent, this second example takes the case of the 2016 Wikileaks revelations to present the claim that the media are to be viewed as "untrustworthy." Comment 5.2 was posted to a story focusing on former FBI Director James Comey's decision to publicly announce his plans to review the Hillary Clinton email investigation 11 days prior to polling day in 2016 (Goins-Phillips, 2016a). The comment reads:

The FBI didn't say it was lying Hillary's friend wieners emails! I've heard the media say so! But as we all know they are untrustworthy ! He said it was new information pretaining to another case! PHello , the media's inside sources said so! I don't think so! With all the information coming out about clinton's aid by wiki leaked are may I say "pertaining" to Lying Hillary's emails! Hello the media is in propaganda mode! Do you think maybe due to all of these truth being exposed by wiki leaks have anything to do with them opening a new case! Yes! The fact is these But don't worrie amerca wiki leak emails are so damaging to the FBI reputation there a rebellion going on within the FBI ! Look the media doesn't want to give any credit to the wikileak emails! So our elites in the media will point the finger at anything except the wiki leak emails! The wiki leaks keep on coming and we have been told in the near future they will leak the truth about how corrupt our government is and Lying Hillary emails she destroyed will expose her and will be enough that even the FBI can't cover for lying Hillary! Stay tune these elites running our country are radicals and will do and say any lie to protect there corrupt government ! It all about the elites getting power and money. Let there be no douth about it ! God bless America ! We are one! [sic]

Comment 5.2 29 October, 2016

With references to "our elites in the media" and "the elites running our country," the comment draws on an explicitly populist trope that situates the people in an

³¹ Common Core State Standards "identify the literacy and math skills that children in every public school should master at each grade level" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014, p. 5). However, critics of the common core present it as a "plan to indoctrinate young children into 'the homosexual lifestyle,' a conspiracy to turn children into 'green serfs' who will serve a totalitarian 'New World Order'" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014, p. 5).

antagonistic relation with “the power block” (Laclau, 2005). In this case, this is achieved by making claims about the actions of a radical and corrupt elite establishment, as well as positing the relation between this governing elite and the behaviour of the media, which is claimed to be “in propaganda mode.” In contrast with an untrustworthy media, comment 5.2 claims that Wikileaks will “leak the truth about how corrupt our government is.” In this view, Wikileaks are cast as the agents of truth, in opposition to the radical elites in the media, who “will do and say any lie to protect there corrupt government” [sic].

Throughout the sample, whilst characterised by critique of mainstream media, few references are made to media that can be trusted. One exception to this is the numerous references that refer to the conservative media figure Mark Levin (see section 1.2.2 pp. 26-31 and Chapter 6 for further discussion of Levin’s relevance). Notably, even some references to other conservative media are negative, drawn into the struggle over how to define what contemporary American conservatism should actually look like as a feature of the media environment.

Notably, the comment also makes a claim to civic discourse through the use of religious language in the form of the blessing “God bless America” which, according to Kaylor (2013, p. 93), represents America’s civil religion “more than any other phrase.” The comment likewise closes with the exclamation “We are one!” In the case of traditional newscasting, the use of the pronoun “we” plays an important role in personalising mediated participation frameworks and creating a generic sense of a listening/viewing audience (Scannell, 2000; Tolson, 2006). However, in this example, the linguistic act of public construction – what Lee (2001) terms “performing the people” – draws on exclusionary forms of alignment that map out the antagonistic frontiers between in-group and out-group. Here, trustworthy and reliable media are characterised as those that support a conservative agenda, thus excluding more mainstream outlets, figures, and content.

Whilst “the media” were presented in comment 5.2 as merely untrustworthy, the third and fourth examples highlight the failure of media to report on matters of importance. Comment 5.3 was posted in responses to an article focusing on claims made by Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu’s spokesman to

have “ironclad” evidence of Barack Obama’s involvement in the crafting of an “anti-Israel” United Nations resolution (Enloe, 2016b). The comment reads:

For many years the U.N. has been a cesspool where Arab nations repeatedly are ganging up on Israel. Upon his departing his post as U.N. Sec’y Gen., bin-moon admitted that there is great bias against Israel. U.N. condemned Israel of over 200 violations in last few years, while they condemned Syria only about 50 times. Outrageous in light of Syrian killings among themselves. Meanwhile, Israel has provided medical assistance to thousands of Syrians. Why isn’t that reported on mainstream news? [sic]

Comment 5.3

26 December, 2016

Focusing on the perceived bias of the UN against Israel, the third example questions the failure of “mainstream news” to report on Israel’s provision of “medical assistance to thousands of Syrians.” This comment thus highlights the idea that mainstream media are actively concealing the true nature of reality.

A more strident position is presented in comment 5.4, where the comment author points to the media’s active refusal to “report the truth.” The comment reads:

Sorry but I always picture the rioters and looters during another one of his legacy race riots.... Opportunistic! Oh yea, we gonna get ours while we’re in this presidency! Took total advantage! I don’t want to hear a word about Bush going to Crawford TX. That was a working White House, already staged, secure and CHEAP! This family are the jaunts around the globe! Michael and the girls, Aspen, Africa, Spain and on and on..... We forget all the trips, sending a jet to pick up the dog? The mother in law in tow for all? These people have left a stain on this office, it’s just too bad the media REFUSE to report the truth about this vile family and their contempt for America(S) May Manchele has one more skit trip to Aspen before it’s all over? Good ridenence! [sic]

Comment 5.4

6 December, 2016

This fourth comment was posted in response to a story outlining the cost of the Obama family’s vacations over the course of Barack Obama’s 8-year presidency (Goins-Phillips, 2016c). This commenter addresses the distinction between Barack Obama and his predecessor, George W Bush, both of whom were the object of partisan criticism for the amount of vacation time they accrued during their respective presidencies (Robertson, 2014), particularly regarding the costs incurred by the taxpayer. In this case, the claim is made that the two are in fact

incomparable, given that the Bush family ranch in Crawford, Texas was “a working White House, already staged, secure and CHEAP!” By contrast, the Obama family vacations are characterised as “jaunts around the globe” by “Michael and the girls.” This masculinisation of Michelle Obama’s name is repeated once again later in the comment when the comment author suggests “Manchele” might make one final “trip to Aspen before it’s all over.”³²

“These people,” it is asserted, “have left a stain on this office.” And yet “the media REFUSE to report the truth about this vile family and their contempt for America.” This deeply antagonistic depiction of Barack and Michelle Obama, as well as their family, highlights once more the role of outrageous characterisations of political difference in setting out key distinctions between conservatives and non-conservatives, i.e., characterisations that demonstrate features of outrage discourse as defined by Berry and Sobieraj (2011), already discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 4. Here, however, the media are factored in as a central force in keeping the public uninformed through either their failure (comment 5.3) or refusal (comment 5.4) to report on matters of common concern.

The previous two examples focused on related contentions regarding an abdication of duty on the part of the media, as a social agent, to keep the public well informed. In comment 5.5, rather than being a matter of a lack of information, the claim is made that the mainstream media are instead “falsely painting a picture of Trump as a racist, crazy time bomb.” In that regard, this comment, posted in response to an article discussing Hillary Clinton’s debate stage argument for stricter background checks on prospective gun owners (Schallhorn, 2016), portrays the media as purveyors and disseminators of disinformation. That is, intentional forms of misleading content (Farkas & Schou, 2018). The comment reads:

No he didn't have to convince voters that he was prepared, qualified and trustworthy. That's what Hillary had to do and she probably gave some

³² Alongside conspiracy narratives claiming that Barack Obama is gay (see section 4.3 pp. 126-143), right-wing media figures have also claimed that Michelle Obama is a “transsexual.” Infowars host Alex Jones in particular has propounded this narrative, referring to Michelle Obama as “Michael” in a 2017 attack in which he claimed photographic evidence that she has a penis constituted “the final proof” that the former First Lady is “a man” (Farand, 2017).

confidence to some wobbly Dem voters in that regard. He just had to show up and not look crazy like the Mainstream Media has painted him. By falsely painting a picture of Trump as a racist, crazy time bomb, the Mainstream Media created the low expectation hurdle Trump had to cross, and he did that. He came off as an unpolished, somewhat arrogant, and very aggressive non-Washington insider. He came off as being capable of identifying problems and solving them. He came off as being just as disgusted with failed American foreign policies as the failed policies of generations of Dem politicians in our big cities - now little better than those in the third world. If you are a voter looking to drop a wrench in the "business-as-usual" Washington gears, you probably found your candidate. If you are an independent who is tired of politics as usual and really see no difference between Democrats and most Republicans, you probably found your candidate. Me, I'm a NeverTrumper who is going to vote for Trump because Hillary, unlike Obama, does have a working knowledge of the levers of government and will be capable of doing even more damage to our country than Obama. At least theoretically, a Trump administration might be susceptible to its policies being influenced in the direction of smaller government and conservative principles. [sic]

Comment 5.5

27 September, 2016

In this case, the comment author asserts that by creating this false image of Donald Trump, the mainstream media are establishing a "low expectation hurdle," which Trump is able to cross. Comment 5.5 thus posits that, whilst the mainstream media are engaging in a partisan and biased character assassination of Trump, they are in effect creating the very conditions under which he can succeed.

Alongside this characterisation of the mainstream media as a force for disinformation, however, this comment also features a number of further elements that relate it to a series of broader trends in right-wing media discourse that have already been discussed in this and earlier chapters. For instance, as with example 5.2 above, this comment deploys a number of explicitly populist tropes. The image of a "voter looking to drop a wrench in the 'business-as-usual' Washington gears" in particular calls to mind the opposition between the people and those in power in Laclau's (2005) account of populist rhetoric. It also raises the spectre of anti-establishment sentiment (Schedler, 1996), particularly among the Republican voter base. Similarly, the notion of "an independent who is tired of politics as usual," likewise draws on populist antagonisms, but manages to do so in a way that sidesteps partisan identities. Finally, in the claim that Donald Trump had actually benefitted from his debate appearance, it is also revealed

that Hillary Clinton was being held to a different standard. Here, it is proposed that Clinton needed to convince voters that she was “prepared, qualified and trustworthy,” which this commenter suggests she may have achieved with her performance, whilst Trump “just had to show up and not look crazy like the Mainstream Media has painted him.”

A further theme, then, is the presumption that Hillary Clinton is a danger to the United States. In this case, it is not because of her inexperience, but rather due to her admittedly extensive knowledge of the mechanics of government that Clinton is seen as a risk. Here, Clinton is compared to Obama, whose legitimacy was frequently questioned in 2008 by referring to him as the “affirmative action candidate” (see section 4.3 pp. 126-143) and minimising his preparedness for office by derogating his experience as a community organiser (see, for example, Malkin, 2008). Through her “working knowledge of the levers of government,” Clinton putatively will be able to inflict damage of which Obama was incapable. The related themes of Clinton as threat and the binary nature of the election will be raised in greater detail in Chapter 7 (see section 7.3 pp. 233-241).

The sixth and final example in this section explicitly presents the idea of a “liberal media.” Posted in response to a story describing a trip made by Barack Obama to Florida for reasons other than dealing with the aftermath of the Ft Lauderdale shooting of 8th January 2017, which had taken place one day prior (Urbanski, 2017), the comment reads:

Democrats: Why would we ever halt celebrations or the ass-kissing for our leader because of a few dead people? And, of course, the liberal media is covering up that this attack was yet another Muslim hate crime. [sic]

Comment 5.6 9 January, 2017

This comment constitutes an example of what Coleman (2004) terms *personation* – that is, “a metapragmatic practice featuring the creation of [an] utterance (or other communicative action such as dance and musical style) explicitly or implicitly voiced as that of another” (Steve Coleman, 2004, p. 382). This use of transposition in the voicing of others’ speech is a stylistic approach that similarly characterises Rush Limbaugh’s on-air performances (Shoaps, 1999). In this ex-

ample, the comment author addresses an issue highlighted in the story and, performatively occupying the voice of “Democrats,” asks: “Why would we ever halt celebrations or the ass-kissing for our leader because of a few dead people?” The comment author further claims that the “liberal media” are engaged in a cover up of the fact that “this was yet another Muslim hate crime.” This comment renders even more explicit than examples 5.3 and 5.4, above, the liberal bias that is claimed to be revealed in the media’s failure to accurately report the news. In this case, it is not merely a failure or refusal to report, but rather a liberal media conspiracy to engage in a cover-up of the facts. Here, the Islamophobic dimensions of the partisan attack are palpable.

In these examples, some specific trends are notable. For instance, “the media” are here portrayed as an untrustworthy social agent that either fails or refuses to truthfully report on matters of public importance, thereby creating a false picture of events or, worse, engaging in a liberal coverup. As with the examples in the previous chapter, however, characterisations focusing on partisan dimensions tend to be rhetorically outrageous. That is, they are characterised by “elements of malfeasant inaccuracy and intent to diminish” (Sobieraj et al., 2013, p. 408). Insofar as research has demonstrated a greater prevalence of outrage discourse and outlets on the political right than on the political left (Sobieraj et al., 2013), the prominent deployment of outrage discourse by audiences for right-wing media is not unexpected. However, a central issue is the manner in which user-generated content contributed by commenters appears to deploy outrageous characterisations in order to collapse both mainstream and liberal media within the tropic category of “the media.”

Some media are measurably in opposition to right-wing attitudes and perspectives and can be demonstrated to have a left-leaning, oppositional slant (Meraz, 2011). Yet, user commentary indicates all non-conservative media mentioned in my sample are categorised under the trope of an untrustworthy and biased liberal media, one which is fundamentally enmeshed in hegemonic power structures and establishment politics. This articulation problematises the very conditions of possibility of an impartial media, as viewed from a conservative perspective. In that regard, based on an analysis of US press coverage from 1992 to 2002, McChesney (2004, p. 110) argues, “references to the liberal bias of the

news media outnumber references to a conservative bias by a factor of more than seventeen to one.” In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will present this conservative critique of the “liberal media” in terms of hostile media perceptions (K. M. Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004) and oppositional media hostility (Arceneaux et al., 2012). However, in keeping with my qualitative approach, I will also draw on further empirical examples in order to suggest a more qualitative framework for analysing claims of media bias and expressions of hostility towards oppositional media.

5.3 Performing antagonism through partisan news commentary

The examples outlined in the previous section serve as an introduction to the particular fixation of meaning that is the dominant definition of “the media” in American right-wing media discourse — a partisan concept which collapses distinctions between mainstream and liberal outlets, figures, and content through discursive acts of antagonistic othering. In so doing, it also presents a first impression of what Domke et al (1999, p. 36) refer to as “the rising public perception of a liberal news media.” Research suggests that this perception of liberal bias can be explained in part by the hostile media phenomenon (P. A. Beck, 1991; Vallone et al., 1985), introduced in Chapter 1 and discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 (see section 2.2.3 pp. 53-60), which occurs “when opposing partisans perceive identical news coverage of a controversial issue as biased against their own side” (Feldman, 2012, p. 449). Insofar as my research focuses on discourse as opposed to attitudes, rather than focusing on perceptions of media hostility my discourse-centred analysis proceeds through an examination of how commenters, as active producers of media discourse, style media as hostile and oppositional through their user-generated commentary.

Taking up on the theme of how audiences talk about their perceptions of media bias, example 5.7 was posted in response to an article discussing Obama’s response to Russian interference in the 2016 election (Morse, 2016). The comment reads:

It’s okay for Soros, the MSM, Black Panthers to strong arm ,voters, send paid minions to disrupt opposition rallies, actively raise monies for their

campaigns from ME countires, and use dummy foundations to peddle the elections by quid quo schemes, but let ANYONE. Dare to publish the undisputed communications by the democrapts ooooooh now that's beyond the pale...bwh [sic]

Comment 5.7

16 December, 2016

This comment raises a number of key themes discussed in Chapter 4, particularly the role of George Soros in creating political unrest in the US, as well as the role of his “paid minions” in illegitimate protest and disruption of opposition rallies (see section 4.2 pp. 121-126). Alongside the political function of supposed “dummy foundations”, e.g., The Clinton Foundation, these remarks serve as an overview of some of the insidious things Democrats putatively get up to, both in the public eye and behind closed doors. This commenter situates the mainstream media (“MSM”) as a central force not just in the kind of perversion of democracy that frequently gets attributed to Soros and his putative followers but also as a central cog in the ongoing hypocrisy of claims regarding Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Commenter 5.8 draws on the fake news trope, equating fake news with “professional analysis”. This eighth example was posted in response to a story about the number of bus permits issued for the Women’s March on Washington, a protest which took place in Washington DC on the day following Trump’s inauguration (Garcia, 2017). The comment reads:

[User]: Let’s not allow “Fake News” to dominate, or as they prefer to call it now, “professional analysis” So let’s not put the cart in front of the horse. We do that by considering the REAL numbers and not the “doom and gloom” of media obfuscation. In effect, I predict the vast majority of bus riders will be Trump supporters! But just like the giant campaign crowds for Mr. Trump, the MSM will once again turn the camera’s away. They will show 150 protestors and block our view of the nearly 400,000 “Trump Patriots!” Mark my words! Happy New Year!!! [sic]

Comment 5.8

14 January, 2017

Fake news had by then become a focal point of media critiques of conservative and right-wing political and media discourse. However, the term had also been co-opted by the same right-wing partisan media it was largely designed to describe. It was also prominently adopted by Donald Trump, during his time as a

candidate and, later, as President. This co-optation of the term by opposing political projects renders it, according to Farkas and Schou (2018, p. 300), a floating signifier within a struggle between rival hegemonic projects to (re-)define the parameters of contemporary politics. The claim here being made is that the “doom and gloom of media obfuscation” will result in the circulation of false numbers, disguising the true size and makeup of those traveling to Washington by bus. A further link is made regarding the MSM deliberately downplaying the size of Trump’s “giant campaign crowds” which, it is suggested, were obscured by a deceptive mainstream media. This is an example of how users claim insight into the underlying patterns that are disguised or otherwise obscured by media.

This comment further demonstrates a specific mode of “contestatory performance” (Fuoss, 1993), exemplified in Chapter 4 (see section 4.4 pp. 143-151), which entails performance oriented towards the subversion of established relations of power. In the case of the phrase “Mark my words,” the user asserts both the authority and capacity not only to comment on media, but rather to decipher the hidden truths and meanings that are obscured by establishment institutions. On this basis, the user can contest more than the semantic content of news reports. Rather, the user can also call into question and challenge the pragmatic structures of media power that define mediated participation, even in a hybrid media system. Such contestatory performances are essential to the discursive processes I seek to describe.

As with the second example, comment 5.9 comment features a prominent reworking of a key talking point from the 2016 election cycle. This ninth example was posted in response to a story about MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski critiquing Hillary Clinton for blaming her loss on “fake news” (Jon Street, 2016a). The comment reads:

The Alt Left, which now controls the Democrat Party, were the originators of ' fake news. ' They started all of this which such journalistic gems as calling Obama a ' biracial uniter ' and christening their health con job as Ó Affordable ! ' They created an earlier fake / con when they christened their economic bomb : the ' Affordable ' Housing Act ! Oh, the Alt Left is quite skilled at creating fantasy news ! We used to call these things lies ..back

when Christian morality was still in vogue with Democrats politicians and the MSM. [sic]

Comment 5.9

9 December, 2016

Comment 5.9 speaks of the “Alt Left which now controls the Democrat Party” [sic], mirroring mainstream media commentary on the role of the so-called Alt-Right in reshaping the trajectory of Republican Party politics (Hawley, 2017; Mudde, 2017).³³ According to this comment, it is the Alt Left who are in fact the original purveyors of fake news, a strategy deployed in media prevarication around the coverage of Obama-era policies and politics. Here, mainstream media content is explicitly categorised as “fantasy.” However a question is also raised regarding the ways in which mainstream media discourse has transformed, with a retroprojective (Lenclud, 1987) reference to a putative time “when Christian morality was still in vogue with Democrats politics and the MSM” [sic], something which is thus inferred to no longer be the case. The role of historical perspective in the articulation of conservative identity is a central theme in Chapter 7 (see section 7.2 pp. 219-233).

Whilst oppositional hostility towards mainstream media is broadly characteristic of the sample, it is also common to see more targeted attacks focusing on specific outlets that are judged to be biased against conservatives and the right. CNN, the focus of the comment seen in example 5.10, is a notable example. The tenth example was posted in response to a story dealing with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s spokesman’s claim to have access to information confirming Barack Obama’s involvement in crafting an anti-Israel resolution passed by the United Nations Security Council in December 2016 (Enloe, 2016b). The comment reads:

This is an interview on CNN! The Clinton News Network and one of the biggest propaganda platforms of the Obama administration and the arrogant greedy Rothschild’s, Bilderberger group, Rockefeller’s, CFR and their military industrial complex. This is yet another ploy by these Fascist lying greedy thugs. Obama’s been kissing that Fascist murdering Netanyahu’s butt his entire administration. Just now a ploy to stir the cauldron of chaos

³³ Whilst the term “Alt-Right” entered popular usage during and following the 2016 US presidential election, the term “Alt-Left” is much more contested and is used in a primarily pejorative sense by those on the right to refer to “Antifa” (i.e., anti-fascist) and other left-wing activists (Fuller, 2018).

and unrest they've been doing since their candidate in HRC lost the election. People need to wake up and execute every one of these greedy murderous corrupt parasites. [sic]

Comment 5.10

30 December, 2016

Here, CNN is referred to as the “Clinton News Network” and is claimed to be “one of the biggest propaganda platforms of the Obama administration.” This claim is combined with conspiratorial assertions about the hidden collusion between CNN, the Obama administration, and prominent wealthy Americans. Conspiracy tropes are taken further, however, by the contention that Obama’s critique of Netanyahu is a ruse to disguise the fact that “Obama’s been kissing that Fascist murdering Netanyahu’s butt his entire administration.” The purpose here is simple: this is done in the interest of creating chaos and unrest. Once more, the comment asserts the power of the audience as critical interpreters of the evidence of their senses.

As in comment 5.8, above, comment 5.10 thus entails another important example of a specific kind of contestatory performance that characterises the data in my sample. This comment also establishes the role of the audience in uncovering the nefarious acts of a corrupt political establishment, with whom the “liberal media” are frequently seen to collaborate (Major, 2012). In this sense, the audience are tasked with sifting through the signs to reveal the hidden truth underlying the claims of those in power. Importantly, this framework has been central to Beck’s particular mode of affective performance since his time at Fox News Channel – a framework in which his audience has long been invited to participate (Jutel, 2018). It is thus useful to note that the revelation of hidden truths shares important features with both the parrhesiastic rhetoric discussed in Chapter 1 (see section 1.2.2 pp. 26-31) and the jeremiad rhetoric discussed in Chapter 7.

These performative acts of interpretation and contestation highlight the role of the audience in uncovering the machinations of the powers that be – in this case, revealing the Obama administration’s conspiratorial attempts to “stir the cauldron of chaos.” The comment ends by raising the spectre of violence against the assumed perpetrators of this conspiracy, a theme which weaves its

way through the sample in sometimes subtle and sometimes much more explicit ways (see, for example, section 4.3 pp. 126-142): “People need to wake up and execute every one of these greedy murderous corrupt parasites.”

Alongside CNN, discussed in the previous example, The Washington Post and MSNBC are likewise extensively portrayed as two stereotypically liberal and biased media outlets. They are discussed in the eleventh example, which was posted in response to a story which stated that Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were virtually tied in a poll conducted by CNN/ORC between September 1st and September 4th 2016 (Jon Street, 2016b). The comment reads:

Gee, the Washington Post! A bastion of conservative leanings, NOT! I believe my comment history will reflect I predicted this would come. When CNN and MSNBC show Trump either ahead or tied, as well as other liberal outlets showing the same or not far behind I can guarantee the killary camp is in panic mode. Trump is digging into the demoncrats Black and Hispanic vote as well. Never a compete Trump fan doesn't mean I can't read the tealeaves. All you Soybots owe me an apology for all your ass thumbs. [sic]

Comment 5.11 6 September, 2016

This comment focuses primarily on how to interpret the fact that liberal media outlets are discussing polls that reflect positively on Donald Trump, showing him either ahead or tied with Hillary Clinton in the final months before the November 6th election. This comment reveals some of the same ambivalence regarding Donald Trump that was notable in the previous chapter. Just because this commenter was never a complete fan of Donald Trump does not mean they “can't read the tealeaves.” Alongside claims of access to hidden realities presented in comment 5.8 and 5.10, this notion of prognostication and prediction is something that features heavily in the data sample. It will form a central component of my discussions in Chapter 7 (see section 7.4 pp. 241-252).

As with the comment 5.9, the twelfth example was posted to a story about MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski critiquing Hillary Clinton for blaming her loss on “fake news” (Jon Street, 2016a). Unlike the other examples offered in this section, however, this comment was posted as a reply to a comment by another

user, although the initial comment is here omitted for brevity. Comment 5.12 reads:

Amen [user]. You hit every button. All I can add is that what Hillary did was worse than the media who spread the fake news. News outlets like MSNBC were guilty of both advocating for Hillary while representing themselves as journalists (that's fraudulent and deserving of contempt), but they were only the messenger. Hillary's actions were more nefarious – each fake story she fabricated was intended to work directly to her advantage, either selfaggrandizement or for purposes of CYA. The media hucksters deserve to be ignored – and that seems to be more and more their fate every day. For the pay-to-play Clinton Foundation and lying to Congress, if not the email breaches of national security, Hillary deserves a fair trial. [sic]

Comment 5.12 10 December, 2016

The comment raises a number of issues that have been discussed above, particularly the correspondence between the actions of media organisations, on the one hand, and political figures and institutions on the other. However, it also explicitly draws attention to the ideological constitution of journalistic practice as a domain typified by objectivity and distance, which has featured centrally in analyses of American journalism, particularly in the 20th century (Kperogi, 2013; Schudson, 2001). On this matter, the notion that a news outlet would advocate for a political candidate is described as “fraudulent and deserving of contempt.” At the same time, the comment does not mention the partisan character of the space within which this comment is made. This is a point of interest that raises the question of what kind of content gets styled by commenters as neutral or congruent. As I shall demonstrate in the following section, the definition of congruence is deeply contested in the sample.

In all, it is possible to appreciate a number of broad themes in the above examples, themes which indicate both audience perceptions of media bias by mainstream outlets and audience hostility towards those same outlets which are perceived to be biased against conservatives. First, alongside references to the mainstream media or “MSM,” there is a metacommentary regarding media organisations that are classed as liberal – a metacommentary that is present across the data sample. However, notably less is said here about which media are to be viewed as reliable. Second, following on from examples presented in

the previous section, there is the idea that the media are engaged in clear acts of obfuscation that need to be revealed by the audience. Third, such acts of concealment, once uncovered, are argued to be motivated by powerful partisan alignments between media organisations and political elites. These alignments manifest not merely in blatant acts of suppression, but rather in far-reaching conspiracy against the conservative opposition, challenging the very idea that the liberal media might be capable of engaging in objective journalistic practice. Each of these key themes contributes to the construction of a publicly negotiated definition of oppositional media in which notions of identity and alterity are important factors.

5.4 Contesting the boundaries of conservative media and identity

Following Jackson and Sherriff (2013), I earlier proposed that a qualitative approach can help to reveal some of the complexity and nuance of real-world intergroup relations. In so doing, I proposed a focus on the performance of antagonism as a way of thinking about the dynamic articulation of distinctions between self and other. Here, I will focus on the definition of oppositional media as another such form of rhetorical performance. Whilst media provide resources for politically significant behaviours (Chadwick et al., 2018b), audiences are free to work with those resources in ways that may confound the intentions of institutional media. In this section, I will discuss how commenters articulate the boundaries between likeminded and oppositional media via the appropriation and redeployment of the archetypes of agency and identity that are characteristic of right-wing outrage discourse.

Comment 5.13 is exemplary insofar as it draws together a number of discourses — i.e., economic, populist, religious — that are prevalent throughout the sample. It was posted in response to a story highlighting Glenn Beck's disappointment in Cruz's decision to support Donald Trump (Goins-Phillips, 2016b). The comment reads:

Glenn is in financial straits and he's bought and paid for by the establishment, Look at who remains of the never Trumpers, The Bushes, Nancy Graham, Romney, McCain, Dole, Boehner, and the whole NE power corri-

dor of R Senators, and yet some of the good folks on this site can't see farther than their adoration for Beck that he has put them on the side of their own enemies. Even Mark Levin had a crisis of conscience and had to say the Hillary, the preferred candidate of the R and D establishment, needed to be stopped, and now he would vote Trump. You will know them by their fruits, the fruits of the never Trumpers is poison, eat of it at your own risk. [sic]

Comment 5.13

26 September, 2016

In the first instance, attention is drawn to the precarious financial status of Beck's media empire, e.g., "Glenn is in financial straits." This is a recurring theme. Here, however, the author proposes that these financial issues indicate that Beck is "bought and paid for by the establishment." The "adoration" of some of Beck's audience blinds them to the fact that "he has put them on the side of their own enemies." In that regard, Beck is contrasted with Mark Levin, another prominent conservative media figure.³⁴ Levin, who appears as foil for Beck throughout the sample, had also taken a notable anti-Trump stance, only to later reassess that position. In this case, the comment author remarks that Levin had a change of conscience regarding Trump when faced with the prospect of a Hillary Clinton presidency.

Clinton is portrayed here as "the preferred candidate of the R and D establishment." This comment further exemplifies the populist antagonism, noted earlier, which characterises the sample. Here, the establishment is seen as both Republican and Democrat, calling to mind the figure of the RINO, or Republican In Name Only, who have been the focus of conservative uprisings by the Tea Party movement and libertarians, as well as a panoply of other groups and individuals on the right (Hawley, 2016; Mudde, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 4 (see section 4.4 pp. 143-151), RINO is a term used to describe a Republican who strays too far from conservative principles. Beck is here placed within this grouping, in comparison to Mark Levin, who merely had a "crisis of conscience." Lastly, the comment closes by drawing on biblical imagery through citation of the bible verse Matthew 7:16: "You will know them by their fruits." For those who identify with the Never Trump viewpoint, their fruit is "poison." The stakes of the choice

³⁴ Beck and Levin would later merge their respective media endeavours, TheBlaze and CRTV, to create Blaze Media in December 2018 (Concha, 2018). See Chapter 1 (section 1.2.2 pp. 26-31) for further discussion of the context within which this occurred.

facing voters are here presented in biblical terms. This is a choice with which the media commentators to whom voters align through media selectivity must likewise wrestle.

Posted in response to the same story as comment 5.13, which discussed Glenn Beck's response to Ted Cruz's support for Trump (Goins-Phillips, 2016b), comment 5.14 also focuses on the putative impact of financial factors on Beck's political allegiances, which are to be appreciated by the audience through his partisan performances. The comment reads:

glenda has milked the conservative cow and now that that cow is running dry glenda's started flirting/milking the liberal cow. For glenda its all about the benjamins! [sic]

Comment 5.14 24 September, 2016

Bearing in mind Beck's formerly prominent role in anti-establishment conservative politics, this comment suggests that Beck has "milked the conservative cow" and so is reorienting towards "flirting/milking the liberal cow." Notably, the comment feminises Beck's first name — Glenda instead of Glenn — calling to mind the masculinisation of Michelle Obama's name in example 5.4, above. For "glenda," the commenter concludes, "its all about the benjamins."³⁵ This highlights once more the idea that Beck is beholden to financial interests, indicating an inauthentic or staged engagement with conservative politics and principles.

In that regard, both comment 5.13 and 5.14 point to a critique of the financial motivations of individuals, including the implications of such motivations in terms of authentic conservatism. This critique appears elsewhere in the data, as it does in my analysis. This brief point also prefigures my discussion in Chapter 6, where I analyse how users describe the political and economic significance of their media choice, particularly in terms of the effects it is imagined that choice will have on both Beck's media operations and his status as a conservative commentator.

³⁵ In this case, "benjamins" is a slang reference to the US one hundred dollar bill, which features the image of American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin. The phrase "It's all about the Benjamins" is thus synonymous with the phrase "It's all about the money."

As with the previous example, the theme of inauthentic conservative posturing appears prominently in comment 5.15. This comment was posted in response to the same story discussing the results of a CNN/ORC poll mentioned in example 5.11, which showed Trump and Clinton in tied position (Jon Street, 2016b). The comment reads:

The Blaze is a Progressive website CEO'd by the former president and CEO of The Huffington Post that's why. Glenn Beck is a progressive Leftist despite all of his fraudulent lies about the Constitution and being a Conservative. 2008 Glenn Beck against John McCain 2012 Glenn Beck goes on a Jihad to keep people at home and not voting and success Obama re-elected. 2016 Glenn Beck is outright campaigning for Hillary Corrupt Clinton. The man is NOT a Conservative never has been and never will be. [sic]

Comment 5.15 6 September, 2016

In this case, however, both TheBlaze and Glenn Beck are the target of antagonistic characterisation. In the first instance, attention is drawn to TheBlaze's corporate structure with the claim that TheBlaze is a "Progressive website CEO'd by the former president and CEO of The Huffington Post." Alongside TheBlaze, Beck is likewise portrayed as a "progressive Leftist despite all of his fraudulent lies about the Constitution and being a Conservative." Here, Beck is portrayed as guilty of wrongdoings that are seen to characterise more "liberal" media.

As with other examples presented here, this critique is rooted in Beck's anti-Trump position. Critical audience commentary characterises this stance not merely as a vote for Clinton, but rather as "outright campaigning for Hillary Corrupt Clinton." Regarding Beck's conservative bona fides, then, the comment author is quite specific that Beck has never been a conservative and "never will be." Unlike the previous commenter, therefore, the author of this comment asserts that Beck has never been a conservative, suggesting instead that Beck's talk of the constitution and his conservative identification was rather a case of Beck inhabiting a conservative persona rather than being an actual conservative. This is one explanation proffered for Beck's anti-Trump stance. Another is discussed in my analysis of comment 5.16, below. Nevertheless, as discussed in the previous chapter (see section 4.4 pp. 143-151), expectations regarding

what qualifies a person as a conservative, including ideas about the electoral candidates they should support, are a matter of disagreement and contestation.

Likewise commenting on Beck's divergence from conservative standards, the comment in example 5.16 focuses on the wayward path of TheBlaze under Beck's ownership. Posted in response to an article discussing late night host Jimmy Fallon's interview with then-candidate Donald Trump (Goins-Phillips, 2016e), the comment reads:

Lame, good link and good post! Perhaps one of the Trump children, or even Ailes, should purchase it from Beck and company. Then, put it back on a conservative even keel. Wouldn't that be ironic. Hope Glenn turns it around, but think his anti-Trump psychosis needs to end. Now! Whereas, we know full well Hitler is totally evil, it's time to say give Trump a chance. Beck needs to have humility and confess he may be wrong. Then, if Trump turns out as bad as he says, then he can have bragging rights to scream he was right about him. However, I think Glenn is wrong on Trump, and it's for a number of reasons. Is he perfect? Nope! Interestingly, it certainly seems this is what is being demanded. Rather self defeating in my estimation. Trump is the only viable candidate. Bottom line is #never-hitler; so, I am gladly voting Trump. Sorry, Glenn, you need to repent [sic]

Comment 5.16 16 September, 2016

In order to "put it back on a conservative even keel," the comment suggests, TheBlaze should be purchased by one of Trump's children or even Roger Ailes.³⁶ Once again, Beck's anti-Trump stance – here termed "his anti-tTrump psychosis" [sic] – is identified as a root cause of the perceived transformation of Beck and TheBlaze, as well as audience attitudes towards both. Likewise, this comment draws attention to what is at stake if Beck maintains his anti-Trump position. Two folk theories are thus apparent in the data that seek to explain the transformation of Beck and TheBlaze: one arguing that Beck was in fact never a conservative, but rather merely posed as one; and another which sees current conditions as a reaction to Trump – an example of what would come to be known as "Trump derangement syndrome," usually attributed to those on the left (Hargreaves, 2018).

³⁶ Now deceased, but who at the time the comment was posted had recently resigned as Chairman and CEO of Fox News Channel (amongst other Fox subsidiaries) following a series of high-profile allegations of sexual harassment by female staff members.

This comment notably features an example of the different standard to which Trump and Clinton were being held, a topic raised earlier in my analysis of comment 5.5 (pp. 160-162). In this case, whereas Trump deserves a chance, “we know full well Hitler is totally evil” [sic]. This view of Hillary Clinton is given further stress towards the end of the comment: “Bottom line is #neverhitler; so I am gladly voting Trump.” This latter provides a key perspective on support for Trump: given that Hillary Clinton poses a grave threat to the United States, Trump becomes the only viable alternative. Support for Trump thus can be seen not so much to consist of a positive identification with Trump as a candidate, but rather a vehement and frequently vitriolic rejection of his opponent, Hillary Clinton. I will return to this theme in Chapter 7. Religious discourse is again palpable when it is suggested that Beck must both “confess” his errors and “repent.”

Like a number of the preceding comments, the penultimate and final examples were both posted in response to a story discussing Beck’s reaction to Ted Cruz publicly expressing his support for Donald Trump’s candidacy (Goins-Phillips, 2016b). The comments reads:

Have to agree with a poster above, Beck is now deemed despicable. I rate him now even lower than Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Bakker and Tammy Fay. It was easy to see coming-when Glenn started sporting the tailored suits you knew he succumbed. For practical purposes he’s on Hillary’s payroll but don’t forget the payola scandal with Mark Levin et. al. We chide the senators and congressmen for not opposing POTUS but Beck is effectively working for the left now. His empire is collapsing now, that’s what you get when you sell your soul. [sic]

Comment 5.17 25 September, 2016

Of course Beck is disappointed. He dedicated his whole show to defeating Trump, and said some downright horrible things about Trump. I am a Cruz fan as Beck is. I am not a Trump fan but he is our ONLY hope. If we can elect Trump and hold his feet to the fire, we have a chance of moving this country back to where it needs to be. Hillary as POTUS would be the end I’m afraid. At least with Trump we have a chance. I quit listening to Beck because his Gandhi phase quickly turned into out-right HATE of Trump. It got old and so negative I couldn’t listen anymore. How can anyone claim so much to hear from God and yet vilify his fellow man so much? Does Beck really trust in God, when he goes off the deep end when his political candidate loses? I think Beck trusts in gold and his political candidates more than he trusts in God. It’s really sad, because I used to be a HUGE Beck supporter. I still visit this site often and comment sometimes, but I will

probably never listen to Beck again, let alone watch the Blaze channel that I have access to. [sic]

Comment 5.18 23 September, 2016

Comment 5.17 features a number of thematic elements already encountered above. For instance, the notion that Beck is “on Hillary’s payroll” or that he is “effectively working for the left now.” Related to claims seen earlier that financial incentives govern Beck’s and TheBlaze’s editorial decision-making and political position, the idea of “payola” is introduced, which is defined as “undisclosed payments (or other inducements) which are given to bring about the inclusion material in broadcast programs” (Coase, 1979, p. 269). This comment asserts that “Beck is now deemed despicable,” with the comment author stating, “I rate him now even lower than Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Bakker and Tammy Fay” [sic].³⁷

The collapse of Beck’s media empire, of which TheBlaze was one component, was a matter of open debate in the data sample. It was also frequently an object of derision. The collapse of his empire is raised again here, with the explanation: “that’s what you get when you see your soul.” This comment thus serves as a further example of how critique of Beck centres on his financial motivations. However, by claiming a hidden meaning to Beck’s tailored suits, it also serves as an indicator of the role assumed by users as readers of signs and portents that reveal a deeper reality that is not only hidden beneath the content of media but which is also inscribed on media figures.

This final example, comment 5.18, speaks in frank terms about the sizeable shift that has taken place in the author’s alignment with Beck and his message. As with the other examples in this section, the comment draws attention to Beck’s anti-Trump position, although this commenter identifies Beck’s “Gandhi phase” as the origin of Beck’s eventual “out-right HATE of Trump.” Again, the

³⁷ Jimmy Swaggart is an American pentecostal televangelist, who was defrocked by Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal Christian denomination in the US. Jim Bakker is American televangelist, convicted felon, and former Assemblies of God minister. Tammy Faye Messner (formerly Bakker) was co-host of televangelist program The PTL Club with former husband, Jim Bakker. Bakker’s indictment and conviction brought notoriety for Messner.

stakes of electing Hillary Clinton are made clear: “Hillary as POTUS would be the end.” The apocalyptic imaginaries which animate the attested electoral stances of users will be a focus of discussion in Chapter 7.

Whilst these are common themes, which have already been discussed at length, I suggest this final example is particularly notable for its elision of terminology from the fields of media, politics, and sport to discuss followers of both media figures and politicians, e.g., “I am a Cruz fan as Beck is” and “I used to be a HUGE Beck supporter.” It is not simply a question of listening to Beck’s radio show or watching TheBlaze. Rather, one is a supporter of a media figure, as one might support a team or athlete. Likewise, one is a fan of a politician, as one might be a fan of a musician or celebrity. This transformation in forms of engagement with politics has been put forth as an explanatory factor for affective attachments to political parties (Sandvoss, 2013). Here, the importance of “parasocial” (D. C. Giles, 2002) factors is palpable, a matter that will be explored further in Chapter 6.

Insofar as the comment makes explicit reference to the impact that Beck’s political stance has had on the commenter’s viewing habits, one can appreciate the way in which media use here is attributed political dimensions, thereby foregrounding media choice as a mode of political action. As TheBlaze increasingly is presented as oppositional media, this blending of consumer and political discourses in user-generated narratives around engagement with TheBlaze becomes a matter of growing relevance. This is an issue I will explore further in the following chapter.

On review, a number of key themes are notable. First, Glenn Beck and TheBlaze are under financial pressure, which is having an impact on editorial policy and decision-making. Underlying this is the assumption that Beck exercises editorial decisions that shape the institutional content of TheBlaze. Second, Glenn Beck is an accessory to the establishment and is motivated by money, whether due to the aforementioned financial pressures or for other reasons. Third, Beck’s prominent anti-Trump stance is reflected more broadly in TheBlaze content, and this is having an impact on audience engagement at a time when Trump’s status in the Republican party became evermore established and dom-

inant. Here political perspectives are discussed in terms of consumer behaviour such that, in the context of an increasingly partisan media environment, patterns of media use acquire political significance. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6. Finally, Beck's anti-Trump stance has important political implications in terms of the possibility of electing Hillary Clinton. What is at stake is not merely a single election but the fate of the entire nation. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

The data in this section show that, just as conservative identity is open to contestation and negotiation in user-generated media discourse, as discussed in Chapter 4, so too are the audience capable of debate and disagreement over the very distinction between oppositional and congruent media. In particular, commenters have the capacity to appropriate the rhetorical frameworks of outrage discourse and redirect them at media they view as insufficiently conservative. In the final examples presented here, for example, Beck and his media empire are re-articulated as the target of oppositional media hostility. Whilst Arceneaux et al (2012) have postulated that media figures support ideological positions that are attractive to their target audience, a gap emerges in the context of a divisive and contested primary, like the one that took place during 2016. Appropriating and redeploying the rhetorical frameworks of outrage is one means via which commenters can seek to assert their own role within the hegemonic struggle to define contemporary American conservatism. In the following chapter, I will discuss this transformation of audience attitudes in greater detail, relating the shifting views of commenters about Beck and TheBlaze to their explicitly expressed understandings regarding their own media use.

5.5 Conclusion: performing audience opposition to "hostile" media

In this chapter, I have sought to further my argument that affective polarisation usefully can be viewed as a discursive product and manifestation of antagonism (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005). Insofar as antagonism provides a framework for thinking about the ontology of oppositional identities, I see it as an important analytical tool for articulating a qualitative account of affective polarisation. As discussed in the previous chapter, a focus on participa-

tion in “real-world” interactions can help to draw out some of the dynamic and contingent elements of identity/alterity distinctions. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the same holds true for characterisations of media outlets, figures, and content. In so doing, I have focused on three central problematics.

First, I outlined how a notion of “the media” is articulated through a focus on the discursive collapse of various categories of media by commenters and right-wing media figures. Focusing specifically on the elision of mainstream and liberal media, I argued that by collapsing the categories of oppositional and neutral media under such figures as “the media” and “liberal media,” perceptions of media bias apply in broad terms. The discursive construction of “the media” was also demonstrated to rely on populist themes deriding a corrupt establishment – what Laclau (2005) terms “the power block” – thereby catalysing an anti-political-establishment movement (Schedler, 1996) within the Republican party and its voter base.

Second, this collapse of categories was explained with reference to the concept of hostile media perceptions, in which all media apart from congruent media are viewed by strong partisans as hostile. By focusing on specific claims of media bias in user-generated commentary, I argued that a qualitative approach drawing on the concept of antagonism can help to illuminate the dynamic character of oppositional media hostility. In that regard, through my discussion of the manner in which commenters present themselves as qualified interpreters of media obfuscations, I here demonstrated the central role of contestatory performance in articulating a definition of oppositional media.

Third, I argued that the boundaries of what constitutes counterattitudinal and likeminded media are contingent and discursively constituted figurations. As such, these categories are open to public negotiation in the online political talk of commenters. In a hybrid and high-choice media environment, a variety of actors vie for dominion in defining the boundaries of contemporary American conservatism. This includes media figures and media users alike. Thus, whilst audience approaches to defining media as oppositional may share generic characteristics with the content of outrage-based political opinion media, insofar as they similarly draw on outrageous characterisations of difference, it is also pos-

sible for them to be articulated in contradictory ways. Thus, whilst Glenn Beck and TheBlaze may articulate an antagonistic frontier between conservative media and the so-called “liberal media” or mainstream media, they are themselves the focus of outrage voiced by users. In this way, ostensibly congruent media can be classified under the terms of opposition for the political and participatory ends of commenters.

In Chapter 2, I referred to Bird’s (1998) contention that audiences should be viewed as active participants in producing markets for media content. Here, my analysis has revealed how commenters participate not only in building a market. Rather, their participation in partisan media also contributes formatively to contesting the boundaries of American conservatism. However, as has been shown, the ways in which commenters engage with antagonistic models of identity and associated partisan media bias, as well as the tropes on which those models rest, are complex and nuanced.

Whilst media selectivity may induce fears regarding the effects of political homophily in a digital media environment, as discussed in Chapter 2, those fears should be set against actual empirical explorations of how audiences use media as “resources” (Chadwick et al., 2018b). This is a topic to which I will turn in the next chapter, as I examine how commenters attribute political and economic significance to their choice of media.

Chapter 6: Audience commentary on media choice

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on how commenters imbue media choice with political and economic significance in user-generated below-the-line commentary. In the previous two chapters, I discussed some of the ways in which commenters use the public performance of antagonism to discursively contest the boundaries of American conservatism in a high-choice media environment that is characterised by the wide availability of partisan content (Prior, 2007). In so doing, I showed how the antagonistic characterisations of political parties, politicians, and partisans I outlined in Chapter 4 are also expressed in attitudes towards media outlets, figures, and content. In Chapter 5, I further established that commenters actively participate in the disputed redefinition of TheBlaze and Glenn Beck as oppositional. My analysis demonstrated the role of affective factors in expressions of perceived media bias, particularly the centrality of identity to the contested definition of oppositional media. Employing the concept of political consumerism (de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013b; Stolle et al., 2005), outlined in greater detail in Chapter 2, I here further this analysis by looking in greater depth at how commenters use below-the-line commentary to discursively construct their media use as a mode of political-civic engagement through commercialised partisan media.

First, I will offer an overview of how commenters' relation with Glenn Beck and TheBlaze is seen to undergo a significant transformation, particularly in the context of Beck's failure to support Donald Trump's candidacy in the 2016 US presidential election. Here, I will highlight the manner in which participatory media facilitate the public expression of attitudes towards – and judgments about – media in user-generated below-the-line commentary. Second, I will demonstrate how Beck's contentious stance regarding Trump serves as a potent resource for user commentary on the decision to engage with or disengage from both Glenn Beck and TheBlaze. Finally, I will outline some of the imagined political and economic outcomes users attribute to their media choice. Here, I will relate motivated *tuning out* of users to other prominent actions targeting rightwing media

figures and outlets. In so doing, I will frame the political significance of selective exposure to – and participation in – partisan media in terms of the boycott/boycott distinction (Baek, 2010; M. Friedman, 1996; Neilson, 2010). Driven by the data, this chapter refers to the related concepts of political consumerism and political prosumption as a framework for understanding how media users publicly discuss their choice of media. However, by focusing on the partisan production of user-generated content, it also considers how audience producers (Bruns, 2009) constitute the meaning of their actions in computer-mediated discourse.

6.2 The changing relation between TheBlaze and its audience

As has already been established, the empirical focus of this thesis is the below-the-line comment field at TheBlaze.com, where “below-the-line” is industry terminology for “comment and debate spaces opened up underneath news articles and blogs” (Graham & Wright, 2015, p. 319). As discussed in Chapter 1 (see section 1.2.1 pp. 18-26), Graham and Wright (2015) posit that this framing of comment fields can be seen to demarcate a clear distinction between user-generated content and the formal outputs of journalists and other professional staff.³⁸ Nevertheless, media serve as resources upon which audiences can draw in the production of user-generated content (Chadwick et al., 2018b). Indeed, as argued earlier, the above-the-line outputs of professionals can serve as motors for uncivil responses by audiences (Coe et al., 2014).

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (see sections 1.2.1 pp. 18-26, 2.3.2 pp. 68-71, and 2.3.3 pp. 71-75), an increasing level of attention is being paid to the democratic role and social impacts of participatory media, including the potential for below-the-line comment fields to serve as a space for deliberation (Dahlberg, 2011) and other modes of political-civic engagement, such as political consumerism (Gotlieb & Cheema, 2017). However, at the same time as be-

³⁸ Whilst Beck has sought to characterise TheBlaze as a journalistic enterprise (see section 1.2.2 pp. 27-32), this distinction between users and professionals is somewhat problematised in this case by its status as a cross-platform media enterprise that relies in important ways on audience labour, as well as the labour of conservative political movements and activists (see Jutel, 2018).

low-the-line comments fields increasingly constitute an important venue for internet-mediated political discussion they also provide a public mechanism for users to openly discuss their response(s) to the content of both above-the-line and below-the-line media. In this section, I will discuss the use of the comment field as a means for users to offer a critique of media by focusing on the transformation in the relation between TheBlaze and its audience.

Examples offered in the previous chapter primarily referred to Beck in the third person. However, a significant portion of the sample shows users frequently addressing Beck in the second person, implying a two-way conversation. All the examples presented in this section demonstrate this mode of address. In that regard, it is worth bearing in mind the structure of TheBlaze as a multi-platform media outlet, which I outlined in greater detail in Chapter 1. Glenn Beck plays a prominent role in his eponymous *The Glenn Beck Program*, which at the time of data collection was broadcast daily via TheBlazeTV and as a radio broadcast. Beck also frequently links to news and opinion items from TheBlaze.com via his own website GlennBeck.com. However, Beck is seldom listed as an author of articles on TheBlaze. In fact, none of the items in my sample are listed as authored by Beck.³⁹ The examples presented in this section, and this chapter, should be construed in the context of this framework.

I begin my discussion of how users depict their changing relation with Beck and TheBlaze with a comment posted to an article discussing James Comey's decision to publicly announce the reopening of the Clinton email investigation in October 2016 (Goins-Phillips, 2016a). The comment reads:

Glenn Beck you're a disgrace! I listened to your radio show today and it was more of a Hillary Clinton campaign infomercial than even CNN & MSNBC combined. Everything in the first 1 1/2 hours was Hillary Clinton campaign talking points. So now according to Beck the 'TeaParty' are a bunch of racists, Ted Cruz is a racist, alt right this and alt right that and if you don't agree with Beck's clearly LEFTIST talking points that he received directly from the HRC campaign then you're a right wing racist. Glenn Beck you're NOT a Conservative, you're a LIAR, a phony, a fraud , a fake and a charlatan. You're everything that is wrong with the media in this country. You're a committed Democrat Leftist and an uber Progressive. It amazes me that anyone that may have been a Conservative or a

³⁹ See source classification sheet in the Appendix (p. 277).

right winger in their thinking prior to meeting Glenn Beck can possibly still be listening to this dangerous brainwashing snake oil salesman. You ought to be ashamed of yourself Glenn Beck fighting for and supporting such a corrupt crook in Hillary Clinton that has sold 20% of our strategic uranium stockpiles to Vladimir Putin's Russia of all people. Go ahead and down vote me all you want but one day you will see I was 100% correct. [sic]

Comment 6.1

29 October, 2016

This comment once again highlights a number of themes that were already raised in the previous chapter – primarily the notion that Beck and TheBlaze are operating on behalf of Hillary Clinton. In this case, the author asserts that Beck is serving the ends of Clinton's campaign to a greater extent than traditionally left-leaning outlets or those characterised as "liberal" within right-wing discourses, classing Beck's radio show as "more of a Hillary Clinton campaign infomercial than even CNN & MSNBC combined." As in the previous chapter, collusion between the "liberal media" and Clinton's campaign is portrayed as an established fact.

Whilst this comment explicitly and effusively sets out an antagonistic frontier between conservatism and its opponents, it also openly criticises Beck for the way in which his commentary supposedly performs a similar antagonistic function. In the case of Beck, however, it is asserted that his position is critical of the right, noting Beck's "clearly LEFTIST talking points." In this way, the comment author sets out a deeply critical appraisal not only of Beck's electoral stance, but also the political character of his role as a prominent media figure. At the same time, however, the antagonistic dimensions of the comment author's own contribution are neither highlighted nor discussed. This comment is notable for its hyperbole, a key dimension of outrage discourse as defined by Berry & Sobieraj (2013).

In the previous chapter, examples were presented to demonstrate how Beck and TheBlaze are being re-cast by commenters as oppositional media. This trend is further evidenced here. In the case of comment 6.1, Beck is not merely claimed to be a "LIAR, a phony, a fraud, a fake and a charlatan," but also "everything that is wrong with the media in this country," as well as "a committed Democrat Leftist and an uber Progressive." Beck's role in promoting Clinton's candidacy is stated firmly with the declaration that Beck "ought to be ashamed"

for “fighting for and supporting” Hillary Clinton’s candidacy. Clinton is here classed as a “corrupt crook,” with the explanation being that she has “sold 20% of our strategic uranium stockpiles to Vladimir Putin's Russia of all people.”⁴⁰

The user ends the comment with a shift away from Beck to address the audience directly. Foreseeing a negative response to their highly critical comment, they write: “Go ahead and vote me all you want but one day you will see I was 100% correct” [sic]. This shift in “footing” (Goffman, 1981) is illuminating. Research has shown that a notion of the audience and its makeup is salient in the minds of users when they are online (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2016). In this case, that awareness is encoded in computer-mediated discourse, highlighting the fact that the comment is indeed directed towards the audience as active (yet largely imagined) participants in the exchange. What is notable in this case, however, is that the comment author indicates their assumption that the audience will be against them, thus indicating an expectation of a misalignment between audience and user. Whilst for the most part the comment is scripted as though directed at Beck himself, this final sentence indicates a salient conceptualisation of the “participation framework” (Goffman, 1981) of the exchange on the part of participants. Furthermore, the theme of prognostication indicated in this final sentence is an important feature of the sample that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

As with all the remaining examples in this section, comment 6.2 was posted in response to a September 2016 article discussing Glenn Beck’s reaction to Ted Cruz stating his public support for Donald Trump’s candidacy (Goins-Phillips, 2016b). The comment reads:

Yes, Glenn, by all means "Go to the Mountains for a while." Shame on you for being so HARDNOSED AND UNFORGIVING. I am extremely disappointed in you and your LIES. You have once again proven you are not for LOVE AND FORGIVNESS. YOU ARE NOT CHRISTIAN, Jesus instructed

⁴⁰ This refers to a widely circulated claim that Hillary Clinton was involved in a conspiracy to sell “roughly 20 percent of America’s uranium supply to Russia in exchange for \$145 million in donations to the Clinton Foundation” (Putterman, 2018). Whilst PolitiFact have labeled this claim “mostly false” (Putterman, 2018), the conspiracy was propagated extensively by right-wing media (Dagnes, 2019). This reference highlights the manner in which media discourse beyond the current discourse context can serve as a resource for audiences.

is asserted that Beck is the referent of this verse, implying that Beck's stance is damnable. Whilst in example 6.1 the central point being made was that Beck is not a conservative, here the more specific claim is rather that Beck's talk about politics indicates that he is not in fact a Christian. The articulation of American conservatism as fundamentally Christian, which I outlined in Chapter 4, is here noteworthy. In both cases, however, Beck is admonished for the shame that he should feel as a result of his anti-Trump positioning.

Whereas the two previous examples situate the problem with Beck's position in terms of the 2016 election cycle, example 6.3 proposes a more long-term trend in Beck's orientation towards the political establishment in presidential campaigns. The comment reads:

Glenn - your chickens have come home to roost! For 2 presidential runs you mocked constitutional candidate Ron Paul and supported establishment candidates - John McCain and then Mitt Romney! You also had a brief affair with Sweater Vest candidate - Rick whats-his name⁴¹.... sheesh - you really pick the dumbest people! I feel bad for you but this is a bed you made! [sic]

Comment 6.3 23 September, 2016

A distinction is here drawn between a "constitutional candidate" and "establishment candidates." In this case, Ron Paul is characterised as a constitutional candidate who was purportedly "mocked" by Beck for "2 presidential runs." On the other hand, the comment author asserts that Beck "supported establishment candidates" John McCain and Mitt Romney, who were the Republican candidates during the two presidential campaigns immediately prior to 2016, as well as Rick Santorum, who was an unsuccessful candidate for the Republican nomination on more than one occasion. Drawing on this opposition between constitutionalists and the establishment,⁴² the comment highlights Beck's propensity to stump for the wrong candidate: "sheesh - you really pick the dumbest

⁴¹ This comment refers to former Republican Senator and presidential hopeful Rick Santorum. Santorum became widely known for wearing sleeveless sweaters, with Rick's sweater vest at one point going "viral," with dedicated parody accounts on Twitter and Tumblr (Gross, 2012).

⁴² See Chapters 4 and 5 for further discussion of how the opposition between conservatism and the political establishment is represented.

people!” The centrality of the US Constitution to the contested definition of American conservatism will be a primary focus of my analysis in Chapter 7.

Whilst example 6.3 draws attention to a broader timeframe for Beck’s misjudgments, comment 6.4 situates the user’s contemporary shift in attitude towards Beck in the context of a set of milestones in Beck’s career since leaving Fox News Channel in 2011. The comment reads:

Glenn From the day you left fox I subscribed to the Blaze and when the channel came on Dish I also supported you through that also But you have lost me now I turn it on and all I hear is Trump bashing from you Stu and Pat I don’t like Trump or love Trump but it is all I have It is a binary election only 2 choices now and I am definitely not voting for Hillary Trump is not even close to Cruz which is also whom I voted for but my God you have really lost it At least he has a couple of good things anti abortion and immigration right she has nothing right I remember when your show was about God and not about bashing Trump was about the Constitution the people Looks like Mark Levin is my new Glenn Beck he at least is rational about the situation You have lost me [sic]

Comment 6.4 23 September, 2016

Here, again, there is a noted ambivalence regarding Donald Trump’s candidacy: “I don’t like Trump or love Trump but it is all I have.” However, the characterisation of the election as “binary” is important. The comment author asserts, there are “only 2 choices now and I am definitely not voting for Hillary,” even if “Trump is not even close to Cruz.” This notion of a binary election calls to mind the antagonisms that have been the focus of this and preceding chapters. It will constitute a central focus of Chapter 7 (see section 7.3 pp. 233-241). Similarly, the assertion “I remember when your show was about God and not about bashing Trump was about the Constitution the people” foregrounds some of the key features of Beck’s productions that attracted the user: God, the Constitution, and the people. This comment once again highlights the relation between Christianity and conservatism. However, with its focus on “the people,” it also features important populist elements.

One of the more significant factors to consider here is the claim that Beck’s “Trump bashing” is having an impact on the user’s engagement, such that Beck’s anti-Trump stance, as a media figure speaking through the cross-plat-

form constellation of media that is TheBlaze, is foregrounded not only as a key factor in a transformation of the user's perception of Beck and his colleagues and co-hosts (i.e., "you Stu and Pat" [sic]), but also in a stipulated shift in their stated rituals of media use: "Looks like Mark Levin is my new Glenn Beck." It is noteworthy that the user characterises Mark Levin as "rational about the situation," given Levin's conspicuous switch from being a one-time prominent Never-Trump voice to a reluctant supporter once Trump had secured the Republican nomination.⁴³ In the context of the comment author's explicitly articulated loyalty as a supporter and a subscriber (i.e., consumer/prosumer but also, crucially, customer who has paid for these services), this statement regarding a change in media choice acquires greater weight. The comparison of Beck to Mark Levin will receive greater attention in the following section.

The comment in example 6.5 also highlights Beck's relation with Pat Gray and Stu Burguiere⁴⁴ who, at the time, served as co-hosts of *The Glenn Beck Program*. The comment reads:

This is so Funny - your mind control of Pat and Stu has been abruptly interrupted by Ted Cruz's endorsement. Glenn what are you going to report to the Hillary camp now? Lots of replies on this story - Glenn give it up. [sic]

Comment 6.5 23 September, 2016

Here, it is suggested that Beck's continued resistance to Trump's candidacy in the context of Ted Cruz's endorsement of Trump has "abruptly interrupted" Beck's "mind control of Pat and Stu." The use of the term "mind control" here is

⁴³ Levin's statement of support for Trump's candidacy on September 6, 2016 also deployed the figure of a binary election. He stated: "I think this is a binary election – at least for the country – that either Trump or Clinton will be president of the United States. I happen to think despite the CNN poll and so forth there is a lot of work to do to make up ground, particularly in battleground states. But Hillary is so awful I just don't know. I'm not in the prediction business so it doesn't matter. So I'm going to vote for Donald Trump" (I. Schwarz, 2016). More recently, both Beck and Levin have been more effusive in their support for Trump. However, the dynamics of that development are beyond the scope of this discussion and this thesis.

⁴⁴ Pat Gray and Stu Burguiere were Beck's co-hosts on *The Glenn Beck Program*. Gray served as co-host from 2009 until 2017. Burguiere continues to serve as executive producer, head writer, and occasional co-host of *The Glenn Beck Program*. Both Gray and Burguiere were also formerly joint co-hosts of *The Pat & Stu Show* on TheBlazeTV, which was cancelled in January 2017.

telling, insofar as it indicates some understanding on the part of the user that Beck is actively shaping not only his own performance, but those of his colleagues. That is also the kind of influence that was the focus of a number of examples in the previous chapter when discussing audience understandings of Beck's impact on the editorial policies and decision-making practices that shape the various forms of content produced and circulated by TheBlaze.

The first example in this section demonstrated a shift in alignment from Beck to the audience, indicating a set of speaker assumptions regarding the participation frameworks of below-the-line commentary. Even when explicitly addressed to Beck, comments can thus be read as implicitly oriented towards the audience. In this example, the comment author also highlights the role of the audience. However, in this case, the focus is not on the audience as an explicit object of address but rather as active producers of commentary themselves, e.g., "Lots of replies on this story." Bearing in mind that this single comment thread constitutes more than 20 percent of the sample, this comment stipulates what that level of response signifies, i.e., Beck needs to change course regarding his anti-Trump viewpoint: "Glenn give it up."

This section's final comment is another important example of a user highlighting a transformation in their perception of Beck by drawing attention to their history as a follower of his productions. The comment reads:

Glenn Beck let me explain to you why people like me who followed you and trusted yhou for years now despise you: 1). You claim to be standing alone against Trump "to supposedly save the country". You do not stand alone and are not trying to save anything but Hillary Clinton's campaign. You stand with the Republican establishment, the Democrat party establishment, the media MSM establishment, Ben Sasse, Jeff Flake & Mittens Romney (the poorest excuse for a human being ever invented). You stand with 99.9% of Leftist Hollywood NYT, HuffPost, ABC, NBC, CBS, NPR, Washington Post, MSNBC, and the worst of them all CNN and the list goes on and on and on and on. And you want to know what all of those groups and people you stand with have in common? We the voters despise them, we despise them all, we despise their LIES, we despise their political correctness scam, we despise their Leftist "Progressive" policies & ideology we despise them And you stand with ALL of them and then some. So figure it out yourself once you wiped the sticky Cheetos off of your face. [sic]

This comment makes clear that it is not merely a case of shifting alignments but rather one of broken trust between Beck and his audience.⁴⁵ Whilst Beck may present himself as “standing alone against Trump ‘to supposedly save the country,’” the user refutes this claim, arguing “You do not stand alone and are not trying to save anything but Hillary Clinton’s campaign” – a statement which echoes an antagonistic characterisation of Beck that is prevalent throughout the sample and which was outlined in greater detail in the previous chapter in my discussion of the role of commenters in defining the boundaries of likeminded and counterattitudinal media.

Rather than standing alone, the user claims, Beck is instead aligned with an array of “establishment” individuals, groups, and organisations. The comment characterises these individuals, groups, and organisations in strident terms, rhetorically asking, “And you want to know what all of those groups and people you stand with have in common?” Here, the comment author provides an affect-laden depiction of their commonalities, as well as audience sentiment: “We the voters despise them, we despise them all, we despise their LIES, we despise their political correctness scam, we despise their Leftist “Progressive” policies & ideology.”

One of the more notable features of the comment is the element “We the voters.” The expectations this statement demonstrates regarding the constitution of the audience differs starkly from the example provided in comment 6.1, where the user asserted themselves an outlier and not of a mind with the audience that were expected to engage with the comment. In the context of the opening sentence of comment 6.6, which claims to align the user with a purportedly disaffected audience, “We the voters” has the effect of aligning that audience with the voting citizenry. This rhetorical act situates the audience’s media choice in terms of democratic participation, thereby underlining its political significance. The content of the story as well as the messaging of Beck’s broader productions thus serve as resources for the comment author’s attribution of meaning to their behaviour as media users.

⁴⁵ A counterpoint will be presented in the following section, with an analysis of some comments expressing support for Beck’s position.

In closing, the comment provides a further example of media being used as a resource, with the user writing, “So figure it out yourself once you wiped the sticky Cheetos off of your face.” This refers to a segment of the 29 April 2016 episode of *The Glenn Beck Program* during which Beck and his co-hosts coated their faces in crushed Cheetos in order to mock Donald Trump’s skin tone. This comment thus presents its author as a skilled and knowledgeable acolyte of Beck’s outputs, thus lending weight to their critique.

To underline the relevance of these data in the context of the current argument, one of the main indications is the manner in which Beck’s contentious stance regarding Trump’s candidacy serves as a potent resource for below-the-line contributions posted by commenters. However, these comments are not limited to a focus on the democratic role of Beck’s position – and, by extension, the democratic role of TheBlaze. Rather, they also serve as a resource for arguments around the implications of Beck’s stance in terms of declared transformations in commenters’ media practices, i.e., their choice to engage with or disengage from both Beck and TheBlaze. These changing media practices are frequently linked directly to Glenn Beck/TheBlaze’s perceived shift towards a counterattitudinal stance in the context of the 2016 election – a shift which is presented as fundamental to the contested redefinition of Glenn Beck and TheBlaze as oppositional media. The impact on users’ media practices will be the focus of my analysis in the following section.

6.3 Tuning in and out of hybrid media

As noted above, media selectivity is a salient feature of commentary within my data set, with a preponderance of material explicitly focusing on the choice of users both to tune in and to tune out of various kinds of media. Media choice is presented in explicitly partisan terms. Whilst the literature on selective exposure that was discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 currently provides the dominant framework for analysing the political implications of media selectivity, thematic analysis of user-generated commentary demonstrates that commenters also attribute economic significance to their media use. The concept of political consumerism thus also offers a means of examining how users talk about their

choice choice to engage with specific media outlets, figures, and content. Furthermore, in a hybrid media environment, this is something that can be explicitly encoded in user-generated commentary. In this section, I focus on the ways in which users draw on media as a resource in discussing the significance of their own media use, demonstrating the relevance of the concepts of political consumerism and political prosumption in the context of my dataset.⁴⁶

The first two comments presented as examples in this section serve as a counterpoint to the predominantly negative appraisals of Beck and TheBlaze that have thus far been presented and discussed. The first example follows on from the examples offered in the previous section by addressing Beck in the second person. The comment reads:

Love you Glenn; love you all like brothers (yes, you too, Jeffy). And Cruz/Carson, to me, would've been the perfect ticket, but it wasn't to be. It's politics, and I will vote for the Republican nominee. I respect the will of the people, who went out in droves to vote for Trump. I respect that; I trust it. Period. I am also a man of principle, but I have a hard time squaring your decision not to support Trump with reality. But I'll keep listening to you, as I've done for years; as I said, like brothers. [sic]

Comment 6.7 23 September, 2016

As with example 6.1, however, the post simultaneously targets Beck and the broader audience in an explicit, albeit highly gendered, manner: "love you all like brothers." Whilst the user is not entirely happy about Trump's selection ("Cruz/Carson, to me, would've been the perfect ticket, but it wasn't to be"), their expressed electoral stance is nevertheless shaped by the strength of their attachment to the Republican ticket: "It's politics, and I will vote for the Republican nominee." Many commenters express this perspective, framing a Clinton win as unconscionable and demanding any necessary tactic in order to stop her. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 7. However, whilst voicing support for the Republican nominee because "it's politics," many commenters are nonetheless extremely critical of the Republican establishment, speaking to an ap-

⁴⁶ This current discussion focuses on how users articulate the meaning of media choice. See section 2.3.3 pp. 71-75 for a critique of political consumerism as a mode of participation.

parent rupture between conservatism and Republican elites that has already been highlighted elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapters 4 and 5).

In the case of Ted Cruz, the relation with the Republican establishment appears somewhat fraught, given his status as a notable anti-establishment conservative and a key figure in the Tea Party movement, who was elected to the US Senate in the 2012 elections thanks in part to the work of Tea Party activists.⁴⁷ The conflict between support for an established “anti-establishment” candidate and a newly entrenched establishment stance (i.e., support for Trump) is downplayed. The statement “It’s politics” highlights the need to come to a decision, once more raising the theme of a binary election, although implicitly.⁴⁸ In this case, that decision is to revert to the Republican offering. Here, an opposition is set out between principle and reality-based reason. Whilst the user identifies as “also a man of principle,” the implication is that more important considerations are in play than mere principle, and this requires alignment with the Republican agenda. Beck’s failure to follow this logic leaves the user confounded: “I have a hard time squaring your decision not to support Trump with reality.”

Nevertheless, in spite of this stated disagreement in terms of Beck’s continued anti-Trump stance, the user’s expressed choice to tune in is not affected: “I’ll keep listening to you, as I’ve done for years.” In terms of the boycott/buycott distinction, this stated support for Beck can be seen as a form of boycott, i.e., “supporting businesses that exhibit desirable behaviour” (Neilson, 2010, p. 214), in spite of the user’s stated ambivalence regarding Beck’s logic in refusing to support Trump. Indeed, a central argument in this chapter is that the practice of selective exposure to likeminded commercial media can be construed in

⁴⁷ Cruz has been widely referred to as a “Tea-Party favourite” (Koppel, 2012).

⁴⁸ By way of comparison, previous Republican candidates for the Presidency are mentioned in the data, although no such comments indicate how a user viewed the candidate at the time or how they voted. For example, John McCain is quoted in an article from my data set which outlined Donald Trump’s choice of Rex Tillerson for the role of Secretary of State (Enloe, 2016a). This quote serves as a prompt for an array of responses from users, many of them echoing Donald Trump’s own attack on McCain, in which he claimed he was “not a war hero,” as he had been captured (Schreckinger, 2015). One commenter speaks in deeply antagonistic terms about McCain, arguing that his failure to “vanquish a mere Senator who had no executive leadership experience whatsoever” in the 2008 election was due to his fear of being labelled a racist for criticising then-candidate “Barack The Hussein” Obama.

terms of this key distinction in the literature on political consumerism. As noted above, this is a conceptual choice that is motivated by the data.

In that regard, the author of comment 6.8 questions why a user who expresses a negative view of Beck would engage with his material through an array of media practices across platforms and modalities. This comment highlights the “transmediality” (Bateman, 2017) of Beck’s operation as well as the engagement of his audience. The comment reads:

If you hate Glenn Beck so much, why do you spend the time on his site, listening to his show, reading his posts, etc? Why? Go post happy thoughts on Breitbart or Hannity's site. Be happy there instead of angry here. But I have a feeling you'll continue to troll away, cause that's what you do. Weak. [sic]

Comment 6.8 25 September, 2016

The opening sentence highlights, in the first instance, the kinds of media and information repertoires (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Reagan, 1996; Yuan, 2011) that obtain in the cross-platform behaviours that are characteristic of the contemporary media environment. An alternative media choice is offered, one which elaborates a partial classification of the right-wing media ecology within which TheBlaze is seen to operate: “Go post happy thoughts on Breitbart or Hannity's site.”⁴⁹ By admonishing another user to be “happy there instead of angry here,” the comment author seeks to patrol the affective character of user-generated discourse on the site. In effect, this comment serves to question why a user would choose to engage in selective exposure to what Knobloch-West-erwick (2015, p. 973) terms “attitude-discrepant messages.” Importantly, whilst there is little mention in the data of positive, congruent media, this comment explicitly focuses on other right-wing media in negative terms.

⁴⁹ At the time comment 6.8 was posted to TheBlaze.com, Breitbart News was notably aligned with the Trump campaign, with co-founder Steve Bannon being named Chief Executive Officer of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign in August 2016. Bannon would later join the Trump administration as Trump’s Chief Strategist, making Bannon a Senior Advisor to the President. Likewise, the Fox News Channel and conservative talk radio personality Sean Hannity was a noted supporter of Trump, both during the election and throughout Trump’s eventual presidency.

Nevertheless, the user doubts this admonishment will have any impact, suggesting the user being addressed will “continue to troll away, cause that's what you do. Weak.” This statement delegitimizes the target’s contributions to the comment thread. Furthermore, by referring to speech as “trolling” (Hardaker, 2010), the comment author highlights the problematic nature of negative or uncivil contributions.⁵⁰ This comment thus articulates a set of judgments not only around forms of participation, but also their proper place on the site as well as within the broader landscape of American conservative media. In so doing, it publicly sets out claims not only about who should and should not be tuning in, but also who should and should not be participating in the production of user-generated content.

Whilst comments 6.7 and 6.8 served as an illustration of the ongoing support that Beck enjoyed among some audience segments, comment 6.9 once more demonstrates an antagonistic reading of Beck’s electoral stance and media content. As with many earlier examples, Beck is characterised in outrageous terms using insulting language, with the user describing him as “not a good human” and “a shill for the Globalists.” The comment reads:

Seriously you give Beck the benefit of the doubt. Beck is not a good human and he's a shill for the Globalists... If you listen closely over the past several years his big issue is tolerance and promoting a so called brotherhood of mankind which some refer to as Babylonian Multiculturalism. Beck is a degenerate. Listen to his prideful rant today in which he takes the Lord's name in Vain.. Just sickening to watch. [sic]

Comment 6.9

26 September, 2016

In the previous section, my analysis focused on the temporality of commenters’ engagement with Beck. Here, again, a timeframe is introduced in order to evidence a transformation in Beck’s content and stance that is at the root of the user’s shifting perception of Beck. Whilst Beck was widely known for his right-wing leanings (Jutel, 2018), this comment draws attention to a shift away from traditionally conservative issues that, it is claimed, has been taking shape over

⁵⁰ See section 1.2.1 pp 18-26 for a discussion of trolling and other forms of online incivility.

a number of years. In particular, the author of comment 6.9 focuses on the multicultural character of Beck's messaging as a key legitimization of this claim.

The rejection of multiculturalism is a prominent feature of right-wing populist discourse (Han, 2015; Rydgren, 2005). Presumably as a result of his purported support of multiculturalism, Beck is characterised as a "degenerate," once again using insulting language to refer to Beck in outrageous terms. Similarly, Beck's deviation from Christian ideals of comportment underline this characterisation, including "his prideful rant" and taking "the Lord's name in Vain." This latter is forcefully described as "sickening to watch."

Here, engagement with Beck's content and the issues to which it pertains are set out in terms that explicitly reference media as a practice, e.g., "If you listen closely," "Listen to his prideful rant," "Just sickening to watch." In this way, the comment integrates a number of discourses in its articulation of a reading not only of Beck's content, but also of commenters' engagement and participation as producers and, more importantly, Christian conservatives.

Whilst, as noted earlier, there is little explicit reference made to media deemed acceptable, a number of comments assert the availability of agreeable content. In that regard, the conservative commentator Mark Levin was raised as a topic of discussion in Chapter 5 as well as the previous section of the current chapter. In examples 6.10 and 6.11, Levin is once again presented as a valid alternative to listening to Glenn Beck or subscribing to TheBlaze. The comments read:

I used to love hearing Glenn Beck for years but I feel he has become a useful idiot ! Listen to Mark Levin! It is where its at people .. [sic]

Comment 6.10 23 September, 2016

Yes, I subscribe to Levin TV. Mark Levin really does a great job of covering the important issues of the day. I prefer him to Trump pompom promoters Rush and Hannity, and Trump basher Glenn. I still subscribe to the Blaze, but usually find only about 1/3 of Glenn's shows interesting anymore. [sic]

Comment 6.11 23 September, 2016

Firstly, in example 6.10 a timeline of engagement is presented that situates the comment author's choice to listen to Beck: "I used to love hearing Glenn Beck

for years.” This reflects comments made by a number of other users in the sample and clearly indicates a significant shift in audience perceptions of Beck, perceptions which have transformed over time and, in others, much more abruptly. As already noted, presenting oneself as an acolyte or subscriber lends a degree of authority to one’s claims regarding Beck’s perceived transformation. For the author of comment 6.10, Beck has now changed: “I feel he has become a useful idiot !”

Whilst many of the comments presented as evidence in this chapter and the preceding chapter identify Beck as an intentional supporter of the Clinton campaign, the use of the term “useful idiot” here indicates a less purposive action.⁵¹ Rather than continue to tune into Beck’s content, the comment author instead directs the audience to choose Mark Levin: “Listen to Mark Levin! It is where its at people” [sic]. The author of comment 6.11 also indicates their preference for Levin: “Yes, I subscribe to Levin TV.” A simple explanation is offered: Levin effectively covers “the important issues of the day.” In the context of this statement of support for Levin, identifying Beck as a “Trump basher” serves to highlight a key dimension of effective coverage for the user: congruence.

It is important to note that the vitriol and criticism directed towards Beck and TheBlaze are not always matched by an equal but opposite level of support for Trump. As has been seen in many of the foregoing examples, both in this chapter and elsewhere, support for Trump is qualified by a number of important provisos and caveats. The most important of these appears to be the overriding need to oppose Hillary Clinton above all other considerations, including long established principles. The same is true of user 6.11’s measured support for Levin, which once again sets out a classification of the right-wing media ecology within which media figures and their associated outlets are seen to operate. Speaking of Levin, the user writes, “I prefer him to Trump pompom promoters Rush and Hannity, and Trump basher Glenn.” Whilst finding a listenable alterna-

⁵¹ According to Landes, the origin of the term derives from Lenin. Lenin, he reports, “allegedly referred to Western intellectuals who so supported the Communist experiment that they disguised its horrors from the West, as ‘useful idiots’” (Landes, 2013, p. 621).

tive to Beck hasn't yet resulted in the user unsubscribing from TheBlaze, the user nevertheless asserts they find Beck's content increasingly uninteresting.

The timeframe for Beck's perceived transformation has already featured in my analysis. Comment 6.12 once again presents a timeline for the user's evolving perception of Beck and the resulting change in media habits that ensued. The comment reads:

I used to like Glenn Beck, but I had to tune him out about three years ago when he became preachy and a shock jock. Every show was being advertised as extremely important to be recorded by you. Then the peddling of gold, which was supposed to be \$2000 by two years ago and by now you'd be a multi- millionaire, then MLK became his hero when I remember MLK and he was just a rabble-rouser. That he didn't surprise me for his lack of support for the nominee, it's obvious. I had already turned him off by that time. Even the Blaze today is getting sensationalistic. Soon I will stop coming here, also. It's a pity because his message was good, but he has made all the money he needs and now is becoming a minimalist. Glenn realizes that if Hillary wins, he will still have a program. The best thing that happens to these people in order to bitch and moan about the guy in the WH. Oh well, really I miss the old Glenn. [sic]

Comment 6.12 23 September, 2016

This user locates Beck's transformation three years prior to the date on which the comment was posted in September 2016. Interestingly, the user highlights a number of notable features of Beck's productions that involved Beck becoming "preachy and a shock jock," which in turn led to a shift in their attitude towards him. In addition, Beck's advertising practices are highlighted. Attention here is drawn to "the peddling of gold" as indicative of Beck's content.

Comment 6.12 differs somewhat from other examples insofar as it sets out a clear distinction between Beck and TheBlaze. Thus, whilst the author situates Beck's transformation into a "shock jock" three years previously, it is remarked that TheBlaze "today is getting sensationalistic." It is claimed that this will have an impact on the user's media choice in the near future: "Soon I will stop coming here, also." As has been seen in many of the preceding examples, clandestine motives are once more attributed to Beck and his electoral stance – motives to which only insightful listeners and viewers are privy. Whilst Beck's "message was good," something has changed. There is a calculation attributed

to Beck, insofar as “his lack of support for the nominee” – i.e., Trump – is “obvious”: “Glenn realizes that if Hillary wins, he will still have a program,” thus explaining his supposed tacit endorsement of Clinton in terms that foreground Beck’s role as a commercial media figure. As noted earlier, financial motives are an explicit point of critique used to explain Beck’s divergence from a shared partisan outlook.

The user concludes: “Oh well, I really miss the old Glenn.” This highlights the strength of the user’s affective engagement with Beck. Thus, whilst users may indeed be tuning into Beck’s shows as well as TheBlaze in order to encounter specific kinds of desired content, there is also a question of the various kinds of emotional attachment they are developing with media outlets, figures, and content. Whilst audience relations with media figures have been theorised under the rubric of parasocial relations and interaction (D. C. Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956), the participatory affordances of below-the-line commentary provide a mechanism via which users are given the impression of active engagement with the objects of those affections.

The transformation in the relation between Glenn Beck/TheBlaze and their audience is shaded acutely by this parasociality. In that regard, and as has been demonstrated, users display a conceptualisation of the complex participation frameworks that are implicated in the use of media, whether implicitly or explicitly. But the transformation in the relation between Glenn Beck/TheBlaze and their audience is also bound up in an array of user judgments regarding not only the kinds of content one can expect from conservative media but also an array of expectations regarding the forms of subjectivity that are deemed appropriate for conservative media figures.

It is worth noting that in spite of the varied insistence by users of their choice to “boycott” Glenn Beck for his perceived counterattitudinal stance, they are nevertheless continuing to actively post on TheBlaze, a fact which has distinct political economic implications in terms of users’ “digital prosumption labour” (Fuchs, 2013b). How commenters portray the intended and imagined impacts of their media choice will be the focus of the following section.

6.4 Partisan media choice and the collapse of Beck's media "empire"

Whereas this chapter argues that selective exposure can be conceptualised as a form of boycott, especially in the case of subscription media, boycotts also have a well established relevance in the study of right-wing partisan media. A number of prominent advertiser boycotts in recent years have had some level of impact on the programming and staff makeup of right-wing and conservative partisan media outlets. For example, Glenn Beck was himself the subject of a major advertising boycott during his time at Fox News Channel, following comments he made as a guest on the show *Fox & Friends* in which he referred to President Barack Obama as a racist with "a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture" (Calderone, 2009). Similarly, Rush Limbaugh was the target of an effective advertising boycott in response to statements he made about Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke's public advocacy seeking healthcare coverage for contraception in which he referred to Fluke as a "slut" (Wheeler, 2012). These are just two examples, with an array of more recent boycotts targeting a variety of Fox News Channel staff as well as other prominent right-wing media figures serving as further examples of this trend.

The difference in this case is the manner in which commenters, many of whom profess a long-standing affective and commercial engagement with Beck and TheBlaze, choose to punish them for both their perceived anti-Trump stance (a position that is characterised as counterattitudinal in a significant proportion of comments in my data sample) and divergence from conservative principles. Nevertheless, the portrayal of an anti-Trump perspective as oppositional, whilst dominant, is also deeply contested. Thus, whilst the majority of the examples in this section focus on the imagined impacts of the decision to disengage from Glenn Beck and TheBlaze, they also include a number of responses from users who disagree with the tactic.

In the first example, there is once more a collapsing of the distinction between Glenn Beck and TheBlaze, a factor that has been a common feature of the sample. The comment reads:

Glenn is sacrificing whole business He is not being rational at all He has lost it and I have been a big supporter of him until now it is the Trump bashing network and I for one am sick of it Trump is not my cup of tea but better than the communist alternative [sic]

Comment 6.13 23 September, 2016

As a further response to Beck's reaction to Ted Cruz's support of Donald Trump, this comment once again engages with the contentious issue of oppositionality. As with many of the previous examples, the user expresses a major shift in their perception of Beck – from a position of support to one of aversion that is specifically rooted in TheBlaze's perceived critique of Trump. In this case, the projected outcome of resistance to Trump is the loss of Beck's business. TheBlaze is here referred to as "the Trump bashing network," drawing a clear set of relations between an array of factors that bridge political and economic domains through a commentary on media practice. The opposition between the partisan viewpoints of commenters and Glenn Beck/TheBlaze are set in relief.

At the same time, the implications of this oppositionality are framed in terms not only of economic collapse but also of electoral outcomes. Glenn Beck is seen to be sacrificing his business, but his lack of support for Trump also raises the spectre of electoral success for "the communist alternative." This notion of communist alternative highlights the sense of the polarised choice being presented to voters. However, it articulates the distinction in a specific manner that draws on "red scare" rhetoric discussed in Chapter 4 (see section 4.3 pp. 126-143).⁵²

The next set of examples forms a triad composed around an initial comment and two subsequent responses. Each of the comments was posted on September 6, 2016 in response to a story discussing a poll conducted by CNN/ORC between September 1 and September 4, 2016 showing Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton to be virtually tied in the lead-up to the election (Jon Street, 2016b). The comments read:

⁵² Attacks of this manner are referred to as "red-baiting," described as a "McCarthyite tactic of disqualifying someone's ideas by the allegation that he or she was a Communist or sympathetic to Communism" (Beverley, 2004, p. x).

Read the Milo article. <http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2016/09/06/glenn-beck-socialjustice-warrior/> I was a member here since it was GBTV. The collapse of the Blaze is sad but not unexpected given the "Never-Trump" meme. To most thinking people this means either directly or indirectly support for Hillary. You can't have it both ways. [sic]

Comment 6.14A 6 September, 2016

Glenn shutdown American Dream Labs over the weekend (I'd post a link from the Daily Beast but the Blaze will delete my post) his "empire" is collapsing all around him. [sic]

Comment 6.14B.1 6 September, 2016

[User 6.14b]...your statement implies that anyone who shuts down a business is a failure. Does that include Trump bankrupting businesses and shutting down his own university? [sic]

Comment 6.14B.2 6 September, 2016

The initial comment (6.14A) opens by directing readers towards an article authored by Milo Yiannopoulos,⁵³ who at that time was a senior editor at Breitbart News. In this article it is claimed that Beck is a “social justice warrior.” This pejorative term, prevalent in online right-wing discourse, has a particular association with the so-called “Alt-Right” (Massanari & Chess, 2018). It denotes “a person who generally enforces an overly aggressive and incendiary style of discussion while promoting socially progressive views including civil rights, multiculturalism, feminism and identity politics” (Schofield & Davidson, 2017, p. 56) and entails both gendered and racial dimensions (Brock, 2015). Usage of the term – and the associated initialism *SJW* – spiked after the so-called GamerGate⁵⁴ harassment campaign targeting a number of women working in the video game industry in August 2014. The term has fundamentally antagonistic connotations in its popular usage, insofar as “#Gamergate supporters often used ‘SJW’ as a term to describe the ‘opposition’ that they faced” (Massanari & Chess, 2018, p. 527). In this regard, the use of the term to refer to Glenn Beck is a further indi-

⁵³ Milo Yiannopoulos would later resign from Breitbart in February 2017 within 24 hours of losing a speaking slot at a major conservative conference and having a book deal canceled over what a New York Times article described as “glib remarks about pedophilia by Roman Catholic priests and his endorsement of sexual relations with boys as young as 13” (Peters, 2017).

⁵⁴ The events of GamerGate are analysed in greater detail by Massanari (2015) in terms of their relation to online antifeminist activism and what she terms “toxic technocultures.”

cation of the antagonistic character of public attitudes towards him. However, its use in this specific instance must be understood not only in the context of the opposing positions of Breitbart News and TheBlaze regarding Donald Trump, but also in Yiannopoulos' personal status as a so-called "right-wing provocateur" (A. Phillips, 2019, p. 158).

The reference to the Breitbart News article precedes the user confirming their membership of TheBlaze, tracing their membership back to the time of the inception of GBTV.⁵⁵ As in comment 6.6, above, this allows the speaker to assert a certain degree of authority as a commentator. The user speaks of the "collapse" of TheBlaze, which it is remarked is "sad but not unexpected given the 'Never-Trump' meme." As in previous examples, the user interprets Beck's anti-Trump stance in binary terms. Whilst many of the comments containing this feature portray Beck's stance as intentional, the author of 6.14A is less forceful, characterising it as either direct or indirect support for Clinton. However, they nevertheless assert: "You can't have it both ways." Here, the putative collapse of TheBlaze is explicitly linked to the company's stance regarding Trump.

The first response to this comment, presented in 6.14B.1, takes up on the theme of collapse by drawing attention to the fact that Beck had shuttered his film and television venture, American Dream Labs (ADL) on September 5, 2016. ADL was a division of TheBlaze's parent company, Mercury Radio Arts, which was built around a partnership with American filmmaker, screenwriter, and painter Ben McPherson. This was a move which Beck termed a "'good' divorce" in a statement posted to his website on September 2, 2016.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, an

⁵⁵ GBTV was Beck's web-TV venture, which was launched on September 12, 2011 following Beck's departure from Fox News Channel in spring 2011. One year later, TheBlaze was formed by Mercury Radio Arts on June 28, 2012 from the merger of GBTV with TheBlaze.com (the news and opinion website which had been launched by Mercury Radio Arts on August 26, 2010) and Markdown.com (an online marketplace launched by Mercury Radio Arts in May 2011). This had the effect of creating a "single multi-platform media company" (Weprin, 2012).

⁵⁶ In his statement announcing the separation of TheBlaze and American Dream Labs, Beck stated: "ADL wanted to be in Los Angeles where it could be more than "Glenn Beck's side project."

article in The Daily Beast dated September 5, 2016 described the decision as “Glenn Beck’s financially troubled media empire” taking another hit.⁵⁷

This September 5 article from The Daily Beast is explicitly drawn on as a resource by the author of comment 6.14B.1, particularly through the use of the term “empire” in scare quotes, which may imply not only a direct reference to the use of the term in the quoted piece but also pejoratively to its dubitable use in reference to Beck’s operations. Here, the comment author offers an explicit metacommentary on their decision not to provide a link to The Daily Beast, highlighting their supposition that this would result in the post being deleted by moderators at TheBlaze. As with the first comment in the triad, this user also sees Beck’s so-called empire in a state of collapse.

It is important to note once more, however, that Beck’s stance regarding Trump was deeply contentious. Thus, whilst it prompted a huge response from commenters, not all of this was negative. As such, the meaning of Beck and TheBlaze maintaining such a position is openly contested in the data sample. Comments 6.7 and 6.8, presented in the previous section, demonstrate that some level of support still existed for Beck and TheBlaze among commenters during the timeframe represented in the data sample. Comment 6.14B.2 further demonstrates the manner in which the implications of Beck’s stance are openly contested in below-the-line commentary, with the user addressing the author of comment 6.14B.1 directly and asking if their judgments around failing businesses apply equally to Donald Trump.

The above exchange demonstrates succinctly the existence of competing voices on the significance of Beck’s electoral stance. This kind of disagreement is

⁵⁷ The full opening paragraph reads: “Glenn Beck’s financially troubled multimedia empire took another hit over Labor Day Weekend as Beck announced that Mercury Radio Arts, his privately held umbrella company, has abruptly stopped producing scripted film and television projects under his once-cherished subsidiary American Dream Labs” (Grove, 2016b). Notably, the opening sentence links to another piece by the same author dated April 28, 2016 that reports on an estimated 40 layoffs taking place at various office locations, which it is claimed took place “in order to satisfy the requirements of a multimillion-dollar bank loan taken out recently to keep Beck’s revenue-challenged enterprise running” (Grove, 2016a).

further demonstrated in the pair of comments provided in example 6.15A (original comment) and 6.15B (reply). The comments read:

Beck: "Profoundly sad day for me." Nooooooooo---not even close. What really happened was that the top of Glenn's head exploded and a half ton of confetti shot out. Then he rolled around on the floor thrashing about, throwing a tantrum.... "Whaaaaaaaaaaaa! Whaaaaaaaa!" --like a petulant five year old child who's just had his Play-Station taken away from him. Glenn--get ready to close down The Blaze soon. It's going into the toilet, along with you. Also... soon your radio audience will be a pathetic shell of what it once was. Can't wait! Goodie! Goodie! It will look like the Hindenburg--I wish I could have a camera standing by to see the look on your face. Advice: in your next lifetime--try getting on the correct side of the issues. Thus spake [User 6.15A]. [sic]

Comment 6.15A 23 September, 2016

SO [User 6.15A], you're a fascist communist? You want The Blaze shut down? Freedom of the press denied? Your narrative is the only one allowed? You're a book burner? You want free speech and opposition points silenced? Beck IS on the right side of the issues. The Liberty side. The constitution side. The Accountable government side. He's entitled to his opinion and free speech. They are his right and property. Advice; In your next lifetime, if by miracle God deems you worthy of a second chance or deems that we need to be punished with your reintroduction, learn this; The Blaze is spelled with a Z.

Comment 6.15B 24 September, 2016

The first of the two comments, 6.15A, draws explicitly on the content of the news report to which it is responding (i.e., Goins-Phillips, 2016b) by citing Beck's statement that Ted Cruz's expression of support for Trump as the Republican candidate represents a "profoundly sad day" for him. However, the comment rejects this by offering an alternate reading of Beck's reaction that characterises Beck as a "petulant five year old child who's just had his Play-Station taken away from him" [sic]. Beck's reaction is immediately related to economic factors, with the user asserting – putatively addressing Beck – that The Blaze is "going into the toilet, along with you." The viability of TheBlaze is here linked directly to the size of Beck's radio audience, which it is claimed will soon be "a pathetic shell of what it once was." In this case, not only is the relation between Beck's anti-Trump stance and the failure of his business implied; Beck's performance is also characterised as childish and melodramatic. In closing the

comment, all of this is tied to Beck's apparent failure to get "on the correct side of the issues," linking Beck's supposedly erroneous political viewpoints to the series of economic impacts on his media enterprise.

The manner in which the user addresses Beck directly appears important. In the literature on parasociality, the concept of empathetic interaction refers to behavioural/affective response on the part of the audience, e.g., verbally addressing a media figure (D. C. Giles, 2002, p. 282). This is something that is facilitated to a certain extent by hybrid media. Insofar as this comment is addressed towards Beck in the second person, it is notable for its incivility. The user seemingly delights at the apparent collapse of TheBlaze as well as Beck's listenership, likening these to the Hindenburg disaster.⁵⁸

However, the response in comment 6.15B explicitly contests user 6.15A's interpretation through an antagonistic reading of their response. This comment takes the preceding statements regarding the collapse of Beck's media endeavours and reframes them as deeply anti-conservative through the opposition set out between user 6.15A and Beck. Beck, it is here claimed, is on the side of liberty, the Constitution, and accountable government. By contrast, the author of comment 6.15B posits that user 6.15A's reaction implies they are a "fascist communist" who supports the silencing of free speech and opposition, the denial of freedom of the press, and the burning of books. This comment once again exemplifies the tactic of red-baiting. However, it also demonstrates the way in which "communism," as an epithet, is articulated with other forms of political philosophy and practice – in this case, fascism.

In examples 6.15A and 6.15B, an explicit expression of the partisan antagonisms described in Chapter 4 is palpable. However, in this case, these antagonisms are not only mapped onto the media environment, as shown in Chapter 5. Rather, they are also portrayed in terms that integrate discourses of political and economic legitimacy, insofar as the focus here is placed not just on the status of both participating users and Glenn Beck as conservatives but also on the

⁵⁸ The Hindenburg disaster of 1937 is notable for its use as a reference point, insofar as it serves as a cultural touchstone for the voicing of catastrophe (Torres, 2012) and a powerful visual metaphor of shock and destruction (Baird, 2007).

way in which the qualities of conservatism are bound up fundamentally in the political economy of (partisan) media. Thus, whilst user 6.15A sees Beck's perspective as validating the collapse of his business, user 6.15B proposes the challenge that, in fact, Beck's stance exemplifies conservative ideals.

In the previous chapter, I presented a number of examples which used claims about Beck's financial dependence and partnerships in order to articulate a definition of Glenn Beck and TheBlaze as oppositional media. In many cases, users made claims about the clandestine and illicit character of Beck's financial motivations, particularly his imagined dealings with the Clinton campaign. The comment in example 6.16 similarly draws on these themes. The comment reads:

My guess is Mr. Beck had to go to "other sources of funding" to keep his operation afloat . . . consequently, he may just be another "owned" personality. He's had to lay off dozens of employees and the reason for this is quite simple . . . fewer folks watch and listen to him, so his Advertisers are dropping him, or cutting back on their spending with his organization. This is what happens in a Free Enterprise System . . . something quite foreign to Socialists and a majority of obamba and "the rodham's" Lemming. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/02/03/why-glenn-beck-s-media-empireis-burning-down.html> [sic]

Comment 6.16 23 September, 2016

Here, the user proposes that Beck's reliance on alternative sources of funding, assumed to be necessary in order to maintain his media operation, implies that he "may just be another 'owned' personality." The comment outlines an explicit reading of the economic structures and relations implied in practices of media production. A direct relation is thus set out not only between Beck's declining audience figures and a reduction in advertising revenue; the comment also relates this reduction to the fact that Beck had at that time been reported to have laid off "dozens of employees." The logic of this series of events is spoken of in reductive terms as simply "what happens in a Free Enterprise System."⁵⁹ Through the characterisation of Beck as an "owned personality," this comment thus portrays the difficulties facing Glenn Beck and TheBlaze at once as a mat-

⁵⁹ Free enterprise figures centrally as an ideological commitment of fiscal conservatism and libertarianism (Collomb, 2014). It has been cast in opposition to both Communism and state capitalism as something which is impeded by so-called "big government" (Loayza, 2003).

ter of partisan inauthenticity and a matter to be resolved by the dynamics and logics of the market. Once again, a user is seen to directly reference *The Daily Beast* as a resource.⁶⁰

In the previous sections, a number of examples were presented which explicitly addressed the audience as both participants in a mediated exchange and, more specifically, producers of media discourse. Likewise, it was shown that comment authors maintain a sense of the kinds of users who are engaging with their content. This provided support to Dvir-Gvirsman's (2016) claim that a concept of the audience is salient in the minds of media users. For Dvir-Gvirsman, shared identity is a key factor in media selection practices, one which she argues explains "media-audience homophily" or "one's preference for partisan media websites catering to a homogeneous, likeminded consumership" (2016, p. 1072). However, my analysis demonstrates a vision of the audience that is both divided and contested. In the following examples, I will examine this further.

The comment in example 6.17, posted in response to a story discussing Donald Trump's claim that the US would become "another Venezuela" if Hillary Clinton was elected President (Goins-Phillips, 2016d), serves as a further example of this mode of metacommentary on the composition of the audience. Posted in response to an earlier user comment, the comment reads:

[user], no, though reason, and it's working out pretty well judging by the collapse of GB's market share and empire (300 laid off, share down 50%) and the increasing relative number of Trump supporters who come here to take a dump in the NeverTrump saboteur punchbowl, without whom GB's share would be down 90%. I don't expect to reach dunces, committed shills or the sock puppets and meatheads who voted you up 18 times, but I'm not writing for you. That would not be rational. [sic]

Comment 6.17 12 September, 2016

Here, it is possible to appreciate two dominant themes. In the first instance, the comment author references the collapse of Beck's empire in response to his anti-Trump stance, which is seen to be evidenced by a claimed 50% decrease

⁶⁰ Notably, as with the examples of *The Daily Beast* references presented earlier, the cited article was authored by the journalist Llyod Grove.

in share value, as well as the supposed layoff of 300 staff. In the second instance, a distinction is articulated in terms of the makeup of the audience. The user suggests that the composition of TheBlaze's readership consists largely of a growing relative number of Trump supporters who are visiting the site to – following Hardaker's (2010) definition – "troll" NeverTrumpers. Without these users, it is claimed, the decrease in Beck's share value would be even more pronounced. However, the user here explicitly outlines to whom their analysis is not addressed: those "dunces, committed shells or the sock puppets and meat-heads" who indicated their agreement with the earlier statement by upvote.

In this example, there is thus evidence presented not only for an explicit awareness of the emergence of major divisions in audience alignments that are intrinsically linked to a contested electoral stance. The comment also provides support for the argument that the audience conceptualise the implications of those shifts in audience composition not only with regard to electoral outcomes but also in terms of the economic status of Glenn Beck and TheBlaze.

Whilst example 6.17 demonstrates a reading of the composition of the audience that implies an understanding of their hidden motives, the final example claims special insight into Beck's intentions. Posted in response to a story focusing on comedian Jimmy Fallon tousling Donald Trump's hair (Goins-Phillips, 2016e), the comments read:

Ironical that Glenn Beck Wrecked his media empire trashing Trump Politico: Glenn Beck's 'Bad Bet on Cruz' a Crushing Blow to His Media Empire <http://www.breitbart.com/2016-presidentialrace/2016/09/15/politico-glenn-becks-bad-bet-cruz-crushing-blow-media-empire/>

Comment 6.18A 16 September, 2016

I've got to go read that. I've caught 3-4 minutes of Glenn on radio several times in the past week or so. Every time, he's been working on rehabbing his image, to the listeners... Or, still trying to justify his actions, to himself. And, maybe trying to find a way to re-re-reinvent himself. Kinda sad. [sic]

Comment 6.18B 16 September, 2016

Comment 6.18A features a succinct statement noting the irony of an anti-Trump position having negative economic repercussions and a link to a Breitbart News

article discussing the connection between Beck's support for Ted Cruz and its impact on his "media empire."⁶¹

The theme of Beck's clandestine motives is common in the sample and has been discussed already in this chapter and elsewhere in this thesis. In the case of comment 6.18B, Beck's understanding of his listenership is foregrounded as a driving force in a shift in Beck's messaging the comment author claims to have perceived through sporadic engagement with Beck's radio show over a period of roughly one week. In this regard, whilst "trashing Trump" is once again presented as an explanation and legitimation for the "wrecking" of Beck's "empire," it is also here suggested that Beck is not only aware of the impact of his anti-Trump stance but is potentially actively working to recalibrate his messaging to address and potentially remedy his perceived oppositionality.

By focusing on the relation between so-called "Trump bashing" and the collapse of Beck's media operations, users foreground the intended and imagined outcomes of their choice of whether to tune in or out. As seen in the preceding set of examples in this section, commenters maintain an explicit awareness of how their media choice assumes political and economic significance, demonstrating the relevance of the concept of political consumerism to my discussion of user-generated commentary. However, as seen in the examples presented in this section, audience attitudes towards Glenn Beck and TheBlaze demonstrate the importance of judgments about identity in the context of perspectives on divisive politics. This includes publicly articulated ideas regarding the impact of partisan content on the composition of the audience.

6.5 Conclusion: from boycott to boycott

In this chapter, I have argued that commenters use below-the-line commentary to attribute political and economic significance to their choice of whether or not to engage, as simultaneous consumers and producers of media discourse, with

⁶¹ Notably, the linked article (Breitbart News, 2016) reproduces another article from Politico authored by Kenneth Vogel and Hadas Gold (2016). The Breitbart News version changes the title from "Glenn Beck's bad bet on Ted Cruz" to "Politico: Glenn Beck's 'Bad Bet on Cruz' a Crushing Blow to His Media Empire," stressing the economic dimensions of Beck's support for Cruz.

Glenn Beck and TheBlaze. Building on the empirical analyses of previous chapters, the public contestation of oppositional identities was here foregrounded as a prominent factor in shaping not only practices of media choice but also public understandings of the impacts of selecting to engage with particular forms of media. In my analysis, I focused on three central problematics.

First, I outlined how commenters discuss a transformation in their relation to Glenn Beck and TheBlaze. I framed this transformation in terms of a perceived shift from a proattitudinal to a counterattitudinal stance that largely appears to animate the response of commenters. In so doing, I identified the varied timeline put forth for Beck's redefinition as oppositional media, although Beck's highly contentious anti-Trump stance during the 2016 US presidential election here was seen as a key moment. It was established that it is not enough for Beck and TheBlaze to be judged to be on the "right side" of the issues; they must also fulfil a variety of expectations around being seen to be authentically conservative. In that regard, it was shown that users express an awareness of the participation frameworks of below-the-line commentary that manifests in shifting alignments with participants, both real and imagined, as well as social judgments about the composition of the audience. In many cases, comments were seen to be characterised by incivility.

Second, I discussed the salience of media choice as a topic of user-generated discussion in below-the-line commentary at TheBlaze.com. Insofar as users demonstrate an explicit focus on the political and economic impacts of their actions, here I argued that political consumerism serves as a viable framework for conceptualising how commenters represent their own media-related practices as well those of other users. I thus discussed media choice in terms of the boycott/boycott distinction, drawn from the literature on political consumerism. The data indicate that the contested definition of Glenn Beck and TheBlaze as oppositional media is integrated into the discursive articulation of conservative identities through explicit metacommentary by commenters on media selectivity. In that regard, whilst user contributions exemplify the kind of "privatised consumer orientation" that is critiqued by deliberative theorists (for discussion, see I. M. Young, 1997), it also highlights the central role of identity in shaping pat-

terms of media use that simultaneously are seen to assume political and economic significance.

Third, I examined how users attribute political and economic meaning to the intended and imagined outcomes of their media use, relating practices of media disengagement to other boycotts targeted at right-wing media figures and outlets. My data show a distinct focus on how user behaviour, shaped in response to perceived oppositional bias on the part of Glenn Beck and TheBlaze, is construed in terms of its impact on the economic viability of Glenn Beck's media operations. This was shown to take place in the context of a broader public focus on the collapse of Beck's so-called "media empire." The qualities of conservatism were shown to be viewed frequently in political and economic terms, with issues related to partisan inauthenticity and political misjudgment presented as resolvable through market mechanisms. Once again, I noted the central role of imaginaries of audience composition in expressions of alignment with media outlets, figures, and content.

Some users draw on outrageous characterisations of political difference in order to situate their relation to Beck in terms of the antagonism between "authentic" American conservatism and its multiple opponents, real or imagined. In that sense, as argued in the preceding chapter, user-generated contributions by commenters share a number of generic characteristics with outrage discourse, as defined by Berry and Sobieraj (2013). Given the particular methodological approach applied here, the question of intent remains open in the case of user generated content, but this element of intentionality – of deliberate attempts to provoke reactions – is central to Berry and Sobieraj's definition. In the previous chapter, I showed how models of personhood circulated in outrage media can also be deployed by their audiences. In this chapter, too, my analysis has focused on how media can be seen to serve as resources for ways of seeing and speaking about politics online. This is not a case of passive reception but rather one of active contestation, opposition, and discursively articulated antagonisms that are mapped onto the social world with reference to both ideological and affective factors.

My data offer a clear indication of the manner in which acts of media use are construed by commenters in terms that align both political impacts and economic outcomes. Content generated by users can thus be seen as a form of “political prosumption” (HersHKovitz, 2012) in which commenters actively engage in modes of media production. In that regard, I am reminded of Silverstone’s (2002) assertion that audiences, if they are to be viewed as active, must also be seen as morally culpable. Likewise, I call to mind Dahlberg’s (2010, p. 349) exhortation that “rather than cybersubjects understood as duped by a spectacle, we need to explore how to deal with users who very much know what they are operating within,” thus highlighting the role of audiences in perpetrating and propagating hegemonic agendas.

In this chapter, I have focused on the intended and imagined outcomes of media practice primarily in terms of Beck’s media operations. In the next chapter, I will focus instead on how commenters situate their own actions and those of politicians and media figures in terms of an idealised political past and imagined political future.

Chapter 7: Imagining America's past, present, and future

7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how commenters characterise political action and identification by drawing on antagonistic visions of an idealised political past and imagined political future. In so doing, it pays particular attention to the role of imaginaries of American apocalypse in the online political talk of commenters. In the preceding chapters, I have sought to develop a qualitative account of how commenters contest the boundaries of American conservatism in below-the-line commentary. For instance, Chapter 4 examined antagonistic portrayals of partisanship at the level of political parties, politicians, and partisans. Chapter 5, on the other hand, demonstrated how these antagonistic representations are also mapped onto the US media environment, whilst Chapter 6 elaborated on this argument by showing how antagonistic constructions of partisanship feature in public discussion of the political and economic implications of media choice. However, commenters also use below-the-line commentary to assert broader claims about the significance of partisan antagonism by making reference to the specifically *conservative* (i.e., white conservative) foundations of American society, culture, and identity – employing “temporal narratives” (Brophy, 2016) that frequently cite the origins of American political institutions and their contemporary evolution, whilst also prophesying their ultimate destiny. In what follows, I analyse the discursive role of such narratives of social and political transformation in the online political talk of commenters, including how they rhetorically serve to both remake and reinforce the complex “antagonistic frontiers” (Laclau, 2000) on which they are predicated.

First, I will address an explicit focus by commenters on the historical role of the Constitution of the United States in shaping American social and political life. Here, I will pay particular attention to the manner in which users impute intentions to a variety of political actors and historical figures, particularly the Founding Fathers of the United States – seen as both framers of the Constitution and progenitors of American civil society. Second, I will examine how commenters debate contemporary political concerns, particularly the putative threat posed

by a Hillary Clinton presidency and the impact it is imagined such an outcome would have on the composition of the Supreme Court of the United States. In so doing, I will pay specific attention to constructions of the “binary” nature of the 2016 US presidential election. This is a topic that briefly was raised in preceding chapters. Here, I will examine how the notion of a binary election – a heavily data-driven theme – is situated relative to broader claims regarding what is at stake in the ballot. Finally, I will relate these discussions of the past and the present to an array of comments that speak in manifestly prophetic terms about the future of the United States of America, foregrounding apocalyptic images of decay and destruction of American society, culture, and identity. In so doing, I will examine a set of millenarian and eschatological tropes prevalent in the user-generated content contributed by commenters, with a particular focus on the ways in which apocalyptic imagery and vatic pronouncements are together deployed as rhetorical strategies in the performance of political antagonism through online partisan media.

By focusing on the themes of national birth and death that I identify in my data, this chapter relates the online political talk of commenters to a historically significant mode of rhetoric rooted in contrasting images of greatness and degradation – namely, the jeremiad tradition introduced in Chapter 2. The jeremiad has been theorised as central to the articulation of American national identity (Bercovitch, 2012). However, it is a form of discourse and a style of speech that is usually attributed to political and religious leaders, as opposed to the political talk of everyday speakers. Insofar as jeremiads “build their visions of the future on understandings of the past” (Murphy, 2009, p. 169), I argue that jeremiad rhetoric serves as a potent framework for conceptualising the function of temporal narratives in the performance of conservatism. I do so by focusing on the discursive role of prophecy and prognostication in the online political talk of commenters. However, extending the argument I have set out in previous chapters, I also show how these rhetorical structures and strategies are related in practice to the deeply antagonistic portrayals of personhood and agency that commenters use to contest the boundaries of American conservative identity online.

7.2 Past – America as divine providence

As outlined in Chapter 2, the jeremiad is a rhetorical form that has played a perennial role in assertions of American identity from the time of Puritan New England (P. Miller, 1953). Murphy (2009) argues jeremiad rhetoric deploys visions of moral decline as a rhetorical device by looking to the past. In so doing, it draws on a conservative imaginary of America's origins which is rooted in a number of key claims about the nation's founding documents as well as the aims of its Founders. My data indicate this mode of rhetoric figures heavily in commenters' discussion of the implications of political action and identification, including a pervasive focus by commenters on the US Constitution and its role in shaping American society, culture, and identity. This section focuses on how such historical visions are situated relative to an array of partisan antagonisms that are articulated by commenters.

My discussion begins with a comment posted to Goins-Phillips' (2016b) report on Beck's reaction to Ted Cruz's sport for Trump. The comment reads:

Sir or madam, let me explain something to you. You are the problem, not Glenn. You say you followed him; and, if you did you know that he has been right at every turn. Now because he won't fall into lock step with the man whose followers say that we will be "bowing" to the Donald, you turn on him and decide that he has changed sides. He has changed nothing. You have, if you were ever a listener of Mr. Beck. Glenn stands as the Founders did with reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence. You have bought into the line of a "snake oil" salesman who refuses to release his tax records, a man who brags about being a serial adulterer, a man who has never done anything that he feels like he must ask forgiveness for...there was only one man on earth that was without sin and it isn't Donald Trump, a man who has proven that if you don't agree with him he will destroy you, a man who is a bully and a liar and has ABSOLUTELY no idea about policy nor has he ever said that he believes in the Constitution of the United States being the "Law of the Land". A man who only a year ago stated that Hillary Clinton had been a "great" Secretary of State and would make a great POTUS. I find it remarkable that you could possibly support this charlatan who has been a lifelong Democrat and is not a conservative, let alone a Constitutional Conservative. So keep your name calling to yourself because you are the one who has become a leftist and are following anger and not God. [sic]

Comment 7.1

23 September, 2016

This comment sets out a clear contrast between Glenn Beck and Donald Trump. It suggests that if one were a follower of Beck, one would know that he “stands” with the Founding Fathers in terms of his support for the “Protection of Divine Providence.” This providential notion of an America set apart by some divine plan has important historical origins in the Puritan roots of American nationhood (Bercovitch, 2012), but it also figures centrally in the jeremiad rhetoric of more recent heroes of American conservatism, such as Ronald Reagan (Johannesen, 1986).⁶² Comment 7.1 thus articulates an important alignment between Glenn Beck and the Founding Fathers. Furthermore, by linking Beck and the Founding Fathers to the claim that America is the outcome of God’s grace, it also establishes the Christian character of American society, culture, and identity.⁶³

Whilst Donald Trump received wide support from evangelical conservatives in 2016 (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018), comment 7.1 presents a negative view of Trump. Here, Trump is classed as a “snake oil salesman,” a “serial adulterer,” a “lifelong Democrat,” and a “charlatan.” He is set in opposition not only to Glenn Beck and the Founding Fathers, but also to Christ. Whilst a number of examples in the previous chapter proposed that Beck’s resistance to a Donald Trump candidacy and presidency indicated he was anything from a tacit sup-

⁶² As noted by Cynthia A Young (2019, p. 86) in her analysis of the right-wing appropriation of civil rights rhetoric, Beck explicitly invoked divine providence during his “Restoring Honor” rally, which took place at the Lincoln Memorial on 28 August, 2010 – the forty-seventh anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. In his address Beck stated: “My challenge to you today is to make a choice. Does America go forward and the American experience expands or does the experiment fail with us? Make the choice. And then if you answer as I do, look to the top of the Washington Memorial – the Washington Monument, praise be to God. My favorite line in the Declaration of Independence is ‘With firm reliance on divine providence we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.’ Let that phrase be our guide.”

⁶³ This articulation is related to the public deployment of rhetorics of “Judeo-Christian values,” which have been widely used to differentiate America from foes both real and imagined since the 1950s (Haynes, 2017). The notion of a unified Judeo-Christian tradition originated earlier, in the late 1800s (Hartmann, Zhang, & Wischstadt, 2005). Judeo-Christianity, Haynes (2017) posits, implies “rejection both of secular values and those of different faiths, including Islam.” In this sense, it is a term that is “defined by exclusion” (Haynes, 2017, p. 69). Most recently, its usage by President Donald Trump and his allies articulates a concept of Judeo-Christianity that unifies it with a benign form of capitalism (Haynes, 2017, p. 70). See p. 224 (this chapter) for further discussion of Judeo-Christian values.

porter of Hillary Clinton to being on the payroll of her campaign, comment 7.1 highlights a number of claims about Donald Trump's own earlier support for Clinton – not only in her role as Secretary of State, but also in statements he is claimed to have made that she would make a "great" President of the United States. This is presented as a sign of Trump's unprincipled character and thus his standing relative to the Founding Fathers. A number of other negative characteristics are foregrounded, including the claim that Trump is a "bully" and a "liar" who has "ABSOLUTELY no idea about policy," adding further stress to the critique.

Notably, the comment draws attention to the claim that Trump has never expressed a belief that the Constitution of the United States represents the "Law of the Land." Likewise, the comment stipulates a distinction between being a "conservative" and a "Constitutional Conservative" [sic]. By highlighting both Trump's failings of character and his failure to verbalise his belief in the transformative power of the Constitution, the comment thus sets out not only a number of important characteristics of constitutional conservatism⁶⁴; it also stipulates some of its performative features. In particular, insofar as it establishes some form of verbal test, this comment formulates a model of constitutional conservatism that rests on a key relation between action and utterance, constituting a "metapragmatic" (Lucy, 1993) theory of conservative action and identification.⁶⁵ In this view, a constitutional conservative becomes identifiable through explicit discursive alignments that signal support for the Constitution.

In the context of this differential modelling of American conservatism and its relation to both the Constitution and its authors, continuing support for Trump is seen by the commenter as "remarkable." In that regard, this failure of judgment on the part of the user to whom this comment is explicitly addressed is taken as an indication that they have "become a leftist and are following anger and not God" [sic]. Here, "leftist" can thus be seen to collapse a variety of contrasts and

⁶⁴ For an overview of what is meant by the phrase "constitutional conservatism," see footnote 15 p. 126 (Chapter 4).

⁶⁵ Here, metapragmatic discourse is understood to be that special mode of reflexive discourse, either implicit or explicit, that seeks to comment on and contextualise the appropriate use of language (see Lucy, 1993, p. 17).

distinctions into one antagonistic opposition between conservatives and leftists, one which is articulated with reference to a particular kind of historical analysis that situates the origins of the United States and its Founding Documents, as well as the actions of its Founders, in Christian mythical time. Nevertheless, by articulating a further opposition between conservatives and constitutional conservatives, comment 7.1 also highlights the role of factions in contestation over the boundaries of a notionally “pure” conservatism that is dedicated to maximum consistency – i.e., “orthodoxy” or the maintenance of a “stable set of practices or beliefs” (Brophy, 2016, p. 123) – through time. This is a point to which I will return in the following section.

A number of the above themes also appear in comment 7.2A, below. This comment forms part of a set of three comments, which consists of an initial comment and two replies. The comments were posted in response to a story focusing on a statement by Kellyanne Conway, who had served as Donald Trump’s campaign manager, in which she implied that President Barack Obama “didn’t love the country enough to stop his feud over Russia’s alleged election interference” (Garcia, 2016).⁶⁶ The comments read:

I see nothing wrong with what Conway has stated. There are many who believe that President Obama “dislikes” America (to many this is a harsh way of putting it so you can replace with a word that makes you feel better). There are many examples. Examples by President Obama himself. Wasn’t their his initial speech about “fundamental transforming The United States of America”? Well, why would you “fundamentally” want to change something if you liked it. Another reason was his first term apology tour. Now, why would you go around the world and apologize for the existence of your country if you liked it? Also, when ever there has been a terrorist attack in America, the President’s first inclination is to apologize to muslims and warn American citizens not to attack muslims. He lectures the people of America as if we are a bunch of idiots. At every step of he and his administration have done whatever they could during his tenure as President to chip away and at moments have cut out big chunks of this na-

⁶⁶ Donald Trump named Kellyanne Conway his campaign manager on 17 August, 2016 (Altman & Miller, 2016). She had joined his campaign as a senior adviser weeks beforehand. Prior to joining the Trump campaign, however, Conway had worked with Keep the Promise 1, a super political action committee (SuperPAC) created to support Trump’s main primary opponent, Ted Cruz (Altman & Miller, 2016). She would later serve as Counselor to the President upon Trump’s inauguration on 20 January, 2017. Later again, Conway would serve as Senior Counselor to the President from 9 February, 2018 following the departure of Steve Bannon from that role. At the time of writing, Conway still serves in this role.

tions Foundation. He is supposed to be a Constitutional scholar. Well, to me he has not acted as such. This nations Founding was on the Creator and Natural Law. You may not believe it or agree and that is fine. But, if you have read your history, and the words of the Founders themselves, there is no doubt. Yet, he has done all he can to do away with America's traditions, and the like. So, I agree These are just a few. There are more, but I believed these are on the top of the list and you get the idea. [sic]

Comment 7.2A 16 December, 2016

So we, forget Obama, should just ignore Russia's meddling on our election and colluding and helping one of the candidates? Trump was well aware of the hacking. (Remember his "I hope they find those 30,000 emails) You losers and Kelly can spin all you like, But those are the facts and BOTH the CIA and the FBI are now coming to that conclusion. Does the phrase: "GROW UP" mean anything to you kiddies? [sic]

Comment 7.2B.1 16 December, 2016

great comment! sadly, your well thought out ideas contain too much logic for the irrational liberal mind to comprehend. all they can wrap their brains around are dishonest ideas that can be easily chanted angrily in one of their hateful protests. [sic]

Comment 7.2B.2 16 December, 2016

The first of the above comments, 7.2A, opens by expressing agreement with Conway, with the comment author asserting that they see nothing wrong with her statement. It is posited that many people feel the same way and that their feelings are supported by numerous examples. First and foremost is Obama's stated intention to fundamentally transform the United States of America.⁶⁷ The user asserts that Obama and his administration made good on this aim by variously "chipping away" at – and at times cutting out "big chunks" of – the nation's "Foundation" over the course of his Presidency.

The user here qualifies what is meant by the "nations Foundation" [sic]: by highlighting Obama's status as a Constitutional scholar, the role of the Constitution is set in relief. Likewise, the comment asserts that America was founded on "the Creator and Natural Law," which entails a strong reading of the intentions of the

⁶⁷ The user labels this as one of President Obama's initial speeches. In fact, Obama made the comments in a speech made in Columbia, Missouri on 30 October 2008, which was five days prior to the 2008 US Presidential Election. On that occasion, Obama declared: "We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America" (V. D. Hanson, 2013).

Founding Fathers and their aims in terms of giving form to American civil society. It is asserted that one may infer the Founding Fathers' intentions not only from the text of the Constitution, which entextualises the will of the Founders as well as the will of the people; one may also look at other expressions of their aims and intent, including their own words. The comment asserts that these words leave one in no doubt as to the Founding Fathers' objectives in terms of asserting the divine basis of the American nation.

However, whilst oriented towards a past that is situated simultaneously in both historical and mythical time, this particular conservative religious reading of American civil society's organising structures also generates a political project for conservative Christians, who are summoned to "re-create a national culture that matches natural law" (Kintz, 1998, p. 7). In this activist articulation of conservatism, natural law is conflated with the biblical law of the Ten Commandments and its encoding of specifically "Judeo-Christian cultural values" (Kintz, 1998, p. 7). In Kintz's view, this conservative Christian mobilisation aims to return US culture to "its true identity as God's unique experiment in human history, with its divinely inspired Constitution" (1998, p. 7). In that sense, the Constitution can be seen not only as a textual embodiment of the intentions of the Founding Fathers and the citizenry for whom they spoke. Rather, it acquires its significance to conservative Christians insofar as it is also viewed as a direct manifestation of God's will on earth. As such, American conservatism is articulated specifically as an orientation towards preserving God's will throughout time – i.e., a form of orthodoxy, according to the definition employed by Brophy (2016), introduced above.

Comments 7.2B.1 and 7.2B.2 were both posted in direct response to 7.2A. The former expresses clear disagreement with the propositions set out in Conway's reported statement, which intimated an anti-American motivation in Obama's focus on Russian interference in the 2016 election. This first of the two responses claims access to "the facts" regarding the reality of Russian interference, as confirmed by both the FBI and CIA, proposing that the hacking was something Trump was "well aware of." Comment 7.2B.1 thus demonstrates a form of contestatory performance that was noted in Chapter 5, i.e., presenting oneself as privy to the hidden truth underlying dominant political and media nar-

ratives. In so doing, whilst addressing “You losers and Kelly” [sic], it also draws on themes of childishness through the use of insulting language: “Does the phrase: ”GROW UP” mean anything to you kiddies?” Comment 7.2B.1 thus calls into question the capacity of the author’s opponents to engage in public discourse at an adult level. However, it draws on manifestly conspiratorial themes whilst doing so.

By contrast, comment 7.2B.2 indicates support for the initial comment whilst also using insulting language that refers to the rational capacities of liberals. In commending the initial comment, 7.2B.2 sets out an antagonistic characterisation of the liberal mind as “irrational” and incapable of comprehending the logic of the well thought out ideas and arguments presented in user commentary. In so doing, however, it presents a metacommentary on the poetics of protest discourse and the language of political activism, remarking not only on the deftness with which an utterance can be recycled and recirculated in the context of protest and dissent, but also on the inherently “dishonest” character of liberal political talk. This comment thus serves as a further instantiation of claims regarding the corruption and deviousness of political opponents discussed in Chapter 5.

Comment 7.2B.2 thus can be seen to articulate an antagonistic frontier between liberals and conservatives through a metapragmatic focus on practices of political communication. That is, it offers a highly partisan commentary on how political talk is to be judged. In that regard, it is important to note that this latter of the two responses sets forth the user’s support for the analysis presented in the initial comment, including its postulations regarding the Founding Fathers’ intentions and the role of divine providence in shaping the emergence of American nationhood. This comment thus points to the relevance of jeremiad rhetoric to my analysis.

Amongst scholars of jeremiad rhetoric, providence serves a focal point in the emergence of an American identity (Murphy, 2009, p. 11). In a related manner, it also figures centrally in Taylor’s (2002) analysis of the development of modern social imaginaries. Insofar as they entail visions of the moral order of society, social imaginaries can be viewed as crystallisations of hegemonic discourse.

Taylor argues that with the development of modern social imaginaries, the notion of providence is reframed in distinctly economic terms (C. Taylor, 2002, p. 102). The concept of providence as it pertains to American origin myths is thus deeply inflected by notions of both material productivity and mutual interdependency, which insinuate a commentary on “economic venture within a larger spiritual narrative” (Bercovitch, 2012, p. xiii). If the move towards a more economic notion of providence is fundamental to the emergence of modern social imaginaries, in the US that transformation can be seen to be at least in part facilitated by jeremiad rhetoric, which is animated by the opposition it articulates between profanation and (re-)sanctification.

Comment 7.1, above, employs a set of key contrasts to articulate a series of oppositions and alignments between Glenn Beck, Donald Trump, the Founding Fathers, and Jesus Christ. Comment 7.2A, on the other hand, sets out an array of contrasts between Obama and the Founding Fathers in order to support a set of claims about their imagined intentions – in this case set out as fact. Following on from these examples, comment 7.3 demonstrates both the use of contrast as a rhetorical device and prominent claims about the aims and intentions of America’s Founders.

Posted on 27 September, 2016 in response to a story detailing statements made by Hillary Clinton indicating her support for stricter background checks for gun-owners (Schallhorn, 2016), comment 7.3 reads:

The founders of this nation, being fresh out of a revolutionary war and life under an oppressive regime, guaranteed the right to keep and bear arms with the intent that every citizen be a part of a standing militia to protect us from oppression by the federal government of the United States of America. The Constitution created a series of checks and balances to limit the federal government's ability to oppress American citizens. The right to keep and bear arms is the final check on the power of politicians. That is exactly why liberal politicians are trying to take away guns. They don't care about murder victims, they want to be able to reign supreme and to usurp all of the people's power without fear of retribution. 500 million guns in the hands of Americans will even make Hillary think twice about screwing over America. [sic]

Comment 7.3

27 September, 2016

As in both prior examples, comment 7.3 articulates an antagonism between the Founding Fathers and contemporary political figures – in this case “liberal politicians.” As was demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6 regarding audience perspectives on media content, the comment also asserts special insight on the part of the comment author by advancing an interpretation of the aims and intentions of the Founding Fathers that links the Second Amendment to the traditional checks and balances of the US government – i.e., separation of powers, etc.

Here, it is declared that the objective of these acts was to “protect *us* from oppression by the Federal Government of the United States of America” [emphasis added], thus articulating an antagonistic relation between government and citizenry. However, by presenting the claim that liberal politicians “don’t care about murder victims,” the comment also re-articulates an array of ideas regarding partisan attitudes towards political and moral questions of law and order, whilst simultaneously reproducing “good guy with a gun” narratives that are linked to hegemonic notions of masculinity in the context of American gun culture (A. Stroud, 2012). In this view, it is not the presence of guns that is a threat, but rather their absence. This comment presents attitudes towards law and order in populist terms that portray liberals not only as oppressors but also as morally culpable in their perceived disregard for the physical safety of the American citizenry.

There are important racial undertones to such claims. “As recently as the 2008 election,” Drakulich et al. (2020, p. 375) write, “a strong connection remained between implicit racial antipathy and support for law-and-order rhetoric and policies.” Law and order discourse can be seen in this sense to map structural issues onto street crime. Murakawa (2012) addresses this issue with reference to Stuart Scheingold’s (1984, p. 68) notion of the “myth of crime and punishment,” which viewed the politics of law and order as the “projection of personal insecurities into the policy arena.” She argues, “insecurities about seemingly intractable structural problems are condensed onto street crime, where harsh punishment to the individual lawbreaker provides a much-needed illusion of control” (Murakawa, 2012, p. 1010). This further relates to the rhetorical strategies of racialising danger and couching threat in partisan terms discussed by

Abramowitz and Webster (2018), raised in Chapter 4 (see discussion of comments 4.13A and 4.13B pp. 132-134).

Insofar as the intended function of the Second Amendment remains a matter of public and historical debate, beliefs about gun ownership and its regulation can be seen to have a partisan character. Gun rights advocates assert that gun rights are natural rights, supported by the Constitution, and subject to an agreement with government, which may renege on that agreement (Lunceford, 2015, p. 335).⁶⁸ In this context, comment 7.3 stipulates the Founding Fathers' intent that "every citizen be a part of a standing militia," with the aim of limiting the federal government's ability to oppress citizens. On this point, Lunceford (2015, p. 335) highlights the widespread belief that the Second Amendment affirms and guarantees the right to rebel against government tyranny, which he characterises as a myth that figures centrally not only in right-wing gun rights discourse, as promoted by the National Rifle Association (NRA), but also in children's stories, such as *My Parents Open Carry* (Jeffs, Nephew, & Bergman, 2011, p. 10).

By contrast, comment 7.3 infers that liberal politicians can be judged in terms of their purported intention to "take away guns," the aim of which is to "reign supreme and to usurp all of the people's power without fear of retribution." This assertion is accompanied by a powerful image of "500 million guns in the hands of Americans" serving as a check on Hillary's intention to "screw over America." This statement infers that political disagreements are resolvable through guns, which are further seen to guarantee a citizen's capacity to resist oppression. This comment thus closes with an allusion to "Second Amendment remedies," a rhetorical strategy which draws on the proposition that "any American with a gun can take up arms against his or her government" (Lunceford, 2011, p. 37).

Comment 7.3 demonstrates a view of the relation between past, present, and future that is deeply rooted in a specifically conservative reading of the Constitution and the objectives of America's Founders, particularly on the issue of gun

⁶⁸ It should be noted that a "states' rights" interpretation views the Second Amendment as granting rights to states, as opposed to individuals (Reynolds & Kates, 1994). The meaning is thus contested.

rights. Yet, it should be noted that gun rights have not been universally enjoyed, even in the context of the Second Amendment. Throughout the history of the United States, various groups have been denied access to owning firearms, frequently on the basis of race (Winkler, 2011, p. 116). This argument is underlined by Burbick (2006, p. 23), who further recognises a gendered dimension of this limited access to gun ownership:

By making the gun debate rest on individual rights alone, we have torn the debate from the historical struggle of minorities and women to gain the protection of the government.

Burbick (2006) here highlights how gun rights discourse historically downplays the cultural importance of the disarming of African-Americans to many white Americans. Contemporary re-tellings of American origin myths should be understood not only in the context of such competing claims but also in terms of the constructions of whiteness on which those claims to rights rest.

In that regard, according to Friedman (1992), both history and discourse about its production are positional phenomena. That is history, as a discursive construct, is at once socially constituted and constitutive of the spaces within which identity is articulated. As can be seen in comment 7.3, the particularly conservative construction of an idealised political past built around the aims of the Founding Fathers serves to occlude a variety of historical transformations in the application of Constitutional protections. Indeed, this also speaks to broader processes of cultural forgetting in which myths of the Founding of America erase nuances regarding not only the religious attitudes of the Founding Fathers,⁶⁹ but also the fact that gun laws have always been applied in an uneven manner (L. L. Miller, 2010).

Moving on from questions of gun rights, comments 7.4A and 7.4B also demonstrate a particular vision of the Constitution and the intention of the Founding Fathers. The pair of comments were posted in response to a story about the cost to the taxpayer of Barack Obama and his family's vacation time throughout his Presidency (Goins-Phillips, 2016c). They read:

⁶⁹ See Harris and Kidd (2011) for a historical overview of the individual religious attitudes of the Founding Fathers.

This is simply unconscionable. Federal overreach and misappropriation of monies, the federal debt... The Founding Fathers meant for most of the power to reside in the states. However they knew a day would come when the federal government would become too powerful. Therefore they wrote Article V of the Constitution to allow We the People to petition the state legislatures to call for a Convention of States to propose amendments to rein in the federal government and return power to the states. Learn more and sign the petition at <http://www.conventionofstates.com> [sic]

Comment 7.4A

8 December, 2016

Don't be foolish enough to allow yourselves to be tricked into opening up the Constitution to changes. It won't stop at Federal Overreach folks! This WILL set a precedence for changing the Constitution! [sic]

Comment 7.4B

28 December, 2016

As with comment 7.3, above, comment 7.4A portrays the Constitution as a check on the power of the federal government. Furthermore, the comment similarly claims insight into the subjective states of the Founding Fathers. In this case, however, the focus is on how the framers of the Constitution intended “most of the power to reside in the states.” A further tension is foregrounded here: the opposition between states’ rights and the power of the federal government.

States’ rights have been a key tenet of American conservatism throughout its history (Chemerinsky, 2005), but they also figure centrally as a trope in more recent political discourse. Amongst the Tea Party movement, for example, arguments privileging states’ rights have been shown to be rooted primarily in fears about overreach by the federal government as well as its failure to represent the people, amongst other factors (Courser, 2012). In that regard, there are significant similarities between the populist claims made by Tea Partiers and those made by Donald Trump throughout his 2016 campaign (Rohlinger & Bunage, 2017). In much the same way, Glenn Beck is likewise seen to have helped to create some of the rhetorical conditions for Donald Trump’s rise to power (C. A. Young, 2019, p. 109). In both cases, states’ rights have continued to constitute a core feature of assertions regarding the Constitutionally-assured limits of governmental authority.

If comment 7.4A looks to the past to create a sense of the political present, it does so by asserting an image of the Founding Fathers' supposed vision of their own political future – the certain arrival of a day when “the federal government would become too powerful.” This fear of an inevitable infringement of the rights of the states is proposed as the motivating factor for the authoring of Article V of the Constitution. Comment 7.4A thus argues Article V permits “We the People” to call a Convention of States in the interest of proposing Constitutional amendments. The aim of such action is explicitly outlined: “to rein in the federal government and return power to the states.”⁷⁰ A tension is here palpable between the suggestion that an amendment is necessary to safeguard the states from government overreach and the need for the original text of the Constitution to be preserved in perpetuity.

The relation between Christian theology and understandings of the Constitutional basis of American government and civil society must here be remarked. The maintenance of orthodoxy, which characterises conservative Protestantism, relies on the anticipation of future threats (Brophy, 2016). Building on the analysis presented in foregoing chapters and the empirical data of the current chapter, that threat is seen to be articulated in antagonistic terms that map along partisan lines. In its articulation of American nationhood as fundamentally Christian and divine, conservatism operates on a specific temporal projection of the past into present and onto the future, sharing key elements of “temporal narrative” (Brophy, 2016) with jeremiad rhetoric. At the same time, the past of Christian conservatism is not timeless but is rather discursively rooted in the moment of the Founding, which transposes the mythical time of the Bible to the historical time – i.e., “literal chronological history” – of American civil society (Smith, 1971, p. 138).

Recalling public contention over the origins of the Second Amendment, the objectives of Article V are also a matter of debate and disagreement. Whereas comment 7.4A proposes Article V's role in ensuring that states and “We the people” can act against oppression by the federal government, scholars of

⁷⁰ Notably, Article V of the Constitution of the United States entails two methods for proposing amendments. Whilst a Convention of States is one mechanism, the Constitution also affords the same power to the US Congress (Rogers, 2007).

Constitutional law also highlight its relation to the framers' simple recognition of the imperfection of their work (see for example Levinson, 1995). The public contestation of the meaning of Article V thus also assumes a partisan character, as with disagreement regarding the aims and extent of the Second Amendment.

In this case, the user's explicit support for a Convention of States was expressed numerous times throughout the comment thread, with multiple comments posted calling for this course of action, each time linking to the same on-line "convention of states" petition. As comment 7.4B demonstrates, however, this position was not necessarily supported by other users, with the author of this reply warning against opening the Constitution to changes. This response thus entails not only a particular orientation towards the past, but also indicates a specific image of the future, as evidenced in fears expressed about what "WILL" happen if one sets a precedent for permitting Constitutional amendments. By presenting their vision of a future in which precedent opens the Constitution to further review, and highlighting the perceived threat this would entail, this comment draws attention to the fact that the question of Constitutional amendment remains fraught amongst those who demonstrate the kind of performative alignment with Constitutional principles that was seen as diagnostic of constitutional conservatism in example 7.1, above.

Examples in this section have demonstrated the rhetorical role of contrasts between key political actors, both historical and contemporary. At the root of these oppositions is the contested imaginary of a society founded on divine providence, a notion that is powerfully inflected with both economic and religious elements. The Constitution is understood in this context as an expression of God's will towards a materially productive bounty, as much as it is seen to entextualise both the intentions of the Founding Fathers and the will of the people. At the same time, discussion of the Founding Fathers encodes a particular construction of the Founders' intentions that views them as actively seeking to thwart the federal government. Against this background, one can begin to analyse how commenters construct the choices available to conservatives in the political present.

7.3 Present – 2016 as a “binary” election

It has been established that party identification has a direct bearing on how voters understand the nature of the political choices that are available to them.⁷¹ Party identification is likewise implicated in processes of partisan polarisation, both ideological and affective. The American two-party system thus has important theoretical and methodological implications for this research. At the same time, it is clear that Trump, widely recognised as “not a politician” (John Street, 2018), entered the Republican primaries as a party outsider (Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2016). In so doing, he benefitted from and actively sought to resonate with a wave of anti-establishment sentiment (Schrock et al., 2018). In that regard, claims about the binary nature of the 2016 US presidential election and the polarisation of choice it represents have been a prominent theme throughout this thesis, one which was raised specifically in my analysis of comments 6.4, 6.7, and 6.14A in the previous chapter. Here, I will further develop this analysis by examining user-generated commentary on the role of the US Supreme Court in protecting the legacy of the United States’ Founding Documents and forestalling the perceived threat posed by non-conservative politics.

To begin, comment 7.5 was posted in response to a previously-cited story reporting on Trump’s Venezuela claims (Goins-Phillips, 2016d). The comment reads:

Thanks [user] for the insulting tone. Maybe you should take those crayons and color in your coloring book. You are wrong as all you third party people are. And, I agree with Sean Hannity. You guys own everything Hillary does if she becomes president. All her supreme court nominees, and higher taxes, and America's decline. You guys own it. Don't damn insult me. Your guy didn't win; so, you act like freaking little children and whine and cry. Sick of it. [sic]

Comment 7.5 10 September, 2016

Like the first example presented at the start of this chapter, comment 7.5 is explicitly addressed to another user. In this case, however, the addressed user is classed amongst a broader group of “third party” voters to whom the comment

⁷¹ See, for example, my discussion of Thomassen and Rosema (2009) in Chapter 2 (see section 2.2.2 pp. 50-53).

is also addressed, as indicated by the rebuke “You are wrong as all you third party people are.” Whilst speaking to the aftermath of the contentious Republican primary process, this comment clearly establishes the binary nature of the Presidential election. In that sense, the admonishment “Your guy didn’t win” refers to Ted Cruz, Trump’s erstwhile rival for the Republican nomination, who was, as seen in the previous chapter, the primary candidate for whom Glenn Beck had expressed explicit support. The choice is thus either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump.

Underlining the ramifications of a Clinton win, comment 7.5 postulates a set of specific outcomes, including “her supreme court nominees, higher taxes, and America’s decline.” These will be the fault of those who vote for a third party candidate, with the comment stressing, “You guys own it” – not “us”, not “we the people.” Considering these potential outcomes, discursively constructed as certainties, this comment highlights the perceived childishness of resistance to Trump, e.g., “act like freaking children,” “take those crayons and collar in your colouring book” [sic]. As noted above, this occurs in the aftermath of the Republican primary process.

In the literature on political polarisation in the US, primary elections have been proposed as an important indicator of the ideological movement of both the Republican and Democratic parties (Boatright, 2017, p. 4). In that regard, anti-establishment forces can have a powerful impact on party agendas. In the case of the Republican Party, this had already been demonstrated by the substantial effect of Tea Party movement support on Republican primary contests during the 2010 congressional midterm elections (Karpowitz, Monson, Patterson, & Pope, 2011, p. 304). This vulnerability to “extreme factions” was further illustrated with the creation of the House Freedom Caucus in 2015, which formalised an effective voting bloc within the House of Representatives, further pushing Republican policy to the right through the entrenchment of a conservative agenda (A. J. Clarke, n.d., p. 21). Horwitz (2013, p. 2) even goes so far as to claim that the “‘anti-establishment’ right wing now defines American conservatism.” Nevertheless, the 2016 primaries and the NeverTrump movement they inspired demonstrate that important cleavages still exist.

With reference to such factionalism, comment 7.5 articulates a set of nested intra- and extra-party oppositions that have direct relevance to the discursive construction of conservatism. Republican voters are exhorted to unify and move past the factional rivalries that are seen to constitute a real and present danger to the American way of life. This calls to mind other instances of demands to disregard long-established principles encountered in the data (see, for example, comment 6.7 pp. 195-197).⁷² Such exhortations could be viewed as conflicting with demands to preserve orthodox conservative practices and beliefs from the past into the future.

Another domain where the conservation of past into the present and future is considered vital is the selection of judges for the Supreme Court. In that regard, the argument presented in comment 7.5, above, stipulates that disagreement must be stopped and conservatives must get in line, considering the implications of voter behaviour on the Court's composition. In the following set of comments, it is similarly suggested that whilst the 2016 US presidential election may be binary in nature, one issue predominates: the Supreme Court. The comments read:

I'm a one issue voter: The Supreme Court. Trump will appoint for sure 1, if not two in his first term. It's a no brainer for me who to I'm voting for. [sic]

Comment 7.6A 23 September, 2016

yup, and hillary will appoint anti-Constitutional judges, thats 100% certain. [sic]

Comment 7.6B.1 23 September, 2016

Thank God in heaven, you are one of the few who get it. Unfortunately there Will be 3 maybe 4 New Ginsburgs on the court within The first 4 years if she wins...They will rule 6-3 for 35 years. [sic]

Comment 7.6B.2 23 September, 2016

⁷² The intra-group conflict of which these debates are symptomatic are indicative of a factionalism that would also have an impact on how Donald Trump would govern after his election, insofar as "a president's relation to factions within his party ... shapes his policy priorities, strategies, and governing tactics" (DiSalvo, 2012, p. 114). This speaks to the lamination, i.e., layering, of oppositions that are deployed in the formulation of conservative subject positions, as discussed in Chapter 4.

yup, and under a hillary appointed SCOTUS, the liberal states will start complete gun bans for ALL their citizens. As its unconstitutional to ignore the second amendment, it will get taken to the supreme court, where hillary's judges will allow it. once a few states have done gun bans (and had their bans allowed under hillary's SCOTUS) hillary will take gun bans nationwide. and just like that, hillary will defeat the second amendment for good (and the rest of our freedoms will soon follow). the USA will be nothing more than a european-style socialist democracy ruled by the elite class in only a few years if hillary wins. [sic]

Comment 7.6C

24 September, 2016

Generally speaking, it is understood to be the case that the appointment of a new Supreme Court justice can “move constitutional doctrine and judicial policy-making in new directions” (Baugh, Smith, Hensley, & Johnson, 1994, p. 2). In that regard, it is not entirely surprising that the capacity of an individual judge to affect the Court’s interpretation of the Constitution figures centrally in statements made by commenters pertaining to their fears about what a future Supreme Court might look like – in this case the idea that Clinton will appoint “3 maybe 4 New Ginsburgs on the court” during her first term.⁷³ This is particularly so when one considers the potentially generational character of a Supreme Court justice’s term. The relationship between voter behaviour and the composition of the Supreme Court articulated by commenters underlines the perceived long-term impact of the choice to be made by voters during the 2016 Presidential election. In that regard, comment 7.6B.2 envisages the court ruling “6-3 for 35 years.”

To provide some context to anxiety about transformations in the composition of the Supreme Court, it might be useful to refer to an example from recent history, when conservative fears about “activist,” i.e., empathetic (Hess & Sobre-Denton, 2014, p. 11), judges characterised the confirmation hearings of Justice

⁷³ Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was appointed to the Court by President Bill Clinton. She assumed office on 10 August, 1993 as the first Supreme Court Justice appointed by a Democratic President since the nomination of Justice Thurgood Marshall by President Lyndon Johnson in 1967 (Baugh et al., 1994, p. 3). Over the course of her time on the Court, Justice Ginsburg has demonstrated a distinctly liberal voting pattern (Daneshvar & Smith, 2017). However, at the time of her appointment, Ginsburg portrayed herself as a moderate. This position was supported by her performance as an appellate judge (Baugh et al., 1994, p. 7). Justice Ginsburg died on 18 September, 2020 and was succeeded on the Court by President Trump's nominee, Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

Sonya Sotomayor. Justice Sotomayor was appointed to the Court by President Barack Obama in 2009 at a time of pervasive, if somewhat premature, claims that America had entered a post-racial era (Dawson & Bobo, 2009; Halewood, 2009). During the confirmation process, Justice Sotomayor was famously enjoined by Republican senators to “set aside” her gender and ethnicity in order to ensure her impartiality (Hess & Sobre-Denton, 2014, p. 11). Likewise, press coverage of Justice Sotomayor has been shown to have negatively focused on race and gender, whilst her intellectual abilities and experience were downplayed (Towner & Clawson, 2016). The Sotomayor hearings thus set in relief public perceptions linking white masculinity with neutrality and, consequently, impartiality and objectivity (Hess & Sobre-Denton, 2014).

These notions of neutrality can be understood in terms of what critical whiteness literature terms the invisibility of whiteness (Dyer, 2005). There are fundamental power dynamics that animate this process of erasure of whiteness as a marked category. As argued by Dyer (1988, p. 44) “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular.” “The claim to power,” he later proposed, “is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (Dyer, 2005, p. 10) – that is, *hegemony*, in Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) terms. Nevertheless, the invisibility of whiteness is an ineluctably a racial position (Dyer, 2005, p. 11), albeit one which seeks to define itself as coextensive with and indeed characteristic of the human condition. The hegemonic dimensions of such struggles to define the content of neutrality (i.e., partisan, racial) are revealed in powerful ways when viewed in the context of contestation over “control” of the US Supreme Court.

Comment 7.6C is more specific again, speaking in terms of specific legislative outcomes. The comment predicts an outright ban on guns, driven initially by the liberal states, but bolstered by a Supreme Court shaped by Clinton appointees. It is thus claimed that the election of Hillary Clinton would signify the defeat of the Second Amendment, which is portrayed as a bulwark against other forms of government oppression – i.e., as a means of protecting “the rest of our freedoms.” The imagined ramifications are stark: the USA will quickly become a “european-style socialist democracy ruled by the elite class” [sic]. Comment 7.6C thus gives an indication of the kinds of imaginaries of ideal politics that are be-

ing articulated by commenters, defined negatively against the (imagined) model of European-style socialism.

Comment 7.7 demonstrates a similar anxiety over the fate of the Supreme Court. As with comment 7.5, above, this comment was also composed both as a direct response to a user who wrote critically of Donald Trump and as a more general address to others. Posted in response to Goins-Phillips' (2016d) article reporting Trump's claim that the US would become "another Venezuela," the comment reads:

[User], and all others. People are projecting what Trump may do. "Your Fear"...That's just it. We know without a doubt if Hillary wins there goes SCOTUS as the article says. There is no turning back. Please people re-think this. This election is about ONE THING ONLY. SCOTUS. We can find someone after Trump. But not if Hillary wins because that is GAME, SET, And MATCH! [sic]

Comment 7.7 10 September, 2016

Whilst the comment fails to offer unqualified support for Trump's candidacy, it does propose a key distinction between Trump and Clinton: when people talk about what Trump will do as President, they are projecting based on fear, whereas people can speak "without a doubt" about what Hillary Clinton will achieve. That is, her election will lead to the remaking of the Supreme Court and, by extension, the Constitution. It is furthermore asserted that whilst any damage done by Trump could be rectified once he leaves office, Clinton's impact would be enduring. Once again, whilst there is a binary choice to be made, it is claimed the election is about "ONE THING ONLY": the Supreme Court. In making this argument, the comment draws on the notion that Clinton's election would be a catastrophic turning point for America, one which must be avoided at all costs.

Of course, the 2016 US presidential election didn't lead to a Clinton presidency. Donald Trump was elected on 9 November, 2016 and was inaugurated on 20 January, 2017. The following day, TheBlaze staff writer Sarah Lee (2017) wrote of "two Americas" meeting in Washington, moving the discussion from the notion of a binary election to a pair of antagonistic factions that needed uniting post-inauguration. The final examples in this section were posted in response to

Lee's article. They consist of a pair of comments (i.e., a comment and response) followed by a separate individual comment. They read:

I find the title TWO Americas very disturbing. There are not two Americas. Blaze you need to get your S..t together! [sic]

Comment 7.8A 21 January, 2017

There is the real America and the fake Americans who are going to get their ass kicked over and over again. I think these liberal losers have awoken a sleeping tiger. [sic]

Comment 7.8B 22 January, 2017

"But he'll have to do some uniting of the two Americas" – I have reservations about the statement "Two America's". There is only one America. The civil America which holds the Constitution as its law of the land. That "other America" isn't America at all. Its some deep dark perversion of socialism and anarchism or something. I'm not quite sure what to call it, but I do know it isn't "American". [sic]

Comment 7.9 21 January, 2017

In the first instance, comment 7.8A reacts negatively to the story, focusing directly not on the claim per se but on the manner in which it is produced as a media output. The comment thus begins with a commentary on the title of the story, which is found to be "very disturbing," rather than the claim itself. On the matter of the claim, the user simply expresses that there are not two Americas, before admonishing TheBlaze regarding its editorial and journalistic standards with the declaration: "Blaze you need to get you S..t together!" [sic]. Comment 7.8B responds somewhat less resolutely, engaging to a greater extent with the actual notion that there might be two Americas. Nevertheless, there is some pushback. Rather than two Americas, the comment proposes, there is a "real America" and "fake Americans." This distinction is attributed distinctly partisan dimensions through the link it establishes between "fake Americans" and "liberal losers" who, it is claimed, have "awoken a sleeping tiger" through their opposition to Donald Trump's candidacy and, later, presidency. In this case, the election of President Trump is portrayed as an indicator of some sort of significant recalibration in American political life, marking the end of the Obama era and eight years of Democratic control of the Executive branch of government.

Whilst also expressing unease regarding the claim that there are two Americas, comment 7.9 is nevertheless forceful in its interpretation of how Lee's notion of two Americas might be read. The distinction is thus clarified to obtain between the "civil America," built around a set of beliefs regarding the fundamental role of the Constitution, and some "other America" that "isn't America at all." In this comment, it is possible to appreciate a mapping of key antagonisms onto a reading of the social and political implications of democratic processes – in this case the election of President Donald Trump. Socialists and anarchists who oppose President Trump – i.e., Clinton voters, by the logic of a binary election – are here cast as Other. This is a discursive act that articulates a particular vision of an authentic America, one which explicitly reproduces the antagonistic frontiers that have been the focus of my analysis throughout this thesis. In that regard, it is important to note the manner in which this comment portrays American politics not as a struggle between legitimate alternatives but as motivated solely by the preservation of the Constitution, once again highlighting the role of orthodox temporal narratives in the performance of conservative identity in my dataset.

The temporal narratives of American conservatism resonate deeply with rhetorical structures of the jeremiad. For Murphy (2009), jeremiad rhetoric has the capacity to reshape American politics. However, at the heart of the jeremiad is a set of judgments, rooted in the past, about "what counts as authentically American" (Murphy, 2009, p. 169). Whilst deploying a jeremiad framework, the above examples present a vision of American past, present, and future that excludes a plurality of political ideologies, in the process representing conservatism as *the* legitimate worldview. By implication, opposing viewpoints are deemed to be illegitimate. This indicates the perception of a "relation of antagonism" (Mouffe, 1998, p. 16), one which is established with regard to political opponents, both real and imagined.

The Supreme Court of the United States plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of the US Constitution, but it also figures centrally in contestation over "a more acceptable constitutional future" (Levinson, 1999, p. 211). It is in this context that the examples in this section focus heavily on the strategic value of the US Supreme Court. In these examples, one can appreciate the manner in

which current political conditions and concerns, here predominantly presented in terms of a binary election, are conceived not only with reference to the American past but also an imagined future. This discursive orientation towards the future will be the focus of the following section.

7.4 Future – apocalyptic rhetorics of decay and degradation

Thus far in this chapter, I have focused on how readings of the past draw on temporal narratives that see it as fundamental to the political present. However, I have also introduced the notion that projections into the future similarly play a role in presenting what is at stake in preserving the American way of life. This orientation towards futurity will be the focus of this section. I begin this discussion by noting the online political talk of commenters is characterised in part by frequently dramatic claims about the impending destruction of America and the American way of life. For Dunmire, “the future is an important site of political, ideological, and material contest” (2019, p. 2), one which constitutes an important element of American national identity. However, research also demonstrates that the way in which people imagine the future animates social practice in the present (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013).

According to Ritter (1980, p. 169), exhortations to “view the present in terms of myths of the American past and American future” are characteristic of jeremiad rhetoric. Although the jeremiad is a form of rhetoric associated with American religious and political leaders, this chapter seeks to examine how elements of jeremiad rhetoric pervade the online political talk of commenters. The rhetorical deployment of antagonistic imaginaries of national apocalypse and repentance will therefore be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

Comment 7.10 was posted in response to Goins-Phillips’ (2016b) article discussing Glenn Beck’s reaction to Ted Cruz’s public statement of support for Trump’s candidacy. Responses to this article feature prominently in my empirical analysis and constituted a significant proportion of my data. The comment reads:

Glenn it is called Settling, coming to terms with a choice that involves the lesser of two evils, one very great evil Globalist Witch vs. a vindictive megalomaniac oligarch type who could give a wit about the US Constitution. In the end if the oligarch wins, the US will likely survive with or without its Constitution intact. If the Globalist Witch wins, the US will be An-schlussed into global government within four years. If the oligarch wins, the US will resist the worldwide pressure to establish global government. So I choose the oligarch/ Caudillo orange haired guy. Is this the end of America as a Republic? Time will tell. So head for the lake or the mountains on November 9th after voting for the vindictive megalomaniac oligarch. Pray that America's Manchurian lame duck President does not have him killed during the transition. [sic]

Comment 7.10 24 September, 2016

Comment 7.10 represents another example of the propensity for users to address themselves directly to Glenn Beck. As with many of the previous examples I have presented, this comment is also formulated as an admonishment that Beck must make a difficult but unavoidable choice – in this case between a “vindictive megalomaniac oligarch” (i.e., Trump) and a “very great evil Globalist Witch” (i.e., Clinton). Insofar as it has already been established that invocations of Beck as a participant also serve to simultaneously target the broader audience (see analysis of comment 6.1 pp. 185-187), this can also be viewed as a rebuke to Beck’s supporters and followers, insisting that they, too, must make a similar choice.

Such reprovals can be understood in the context of publicly contested claims regarding the binary nature of the 2016 election and the demands such a perceived polarisation of choice places on the voter, a matter that was explored in the previous section. In this case, the user elaborates on the binary choice between Trump and Clinton by stipulating a set of propositions regarding what will happen as a result of each candidate’s possible election. As was demonstrated in a number of earlier examples, the outcomes of the election are once again depicted in somewhat uneven terms: the effects of a Trump presidency are in the realm of possibility, whilst the effects of a Clinton presidency are in the realm of certainty. Insofar as the user proposes a choice that “involves the lesser of two evils,” it is claimed to be unclear whether America will continue as a Republic, whatever the outcome of the election.

On one hand, electing Trump is seen to indicate the likely survival of the US, “with or without its Constitution intact.” On the other hand, it is asserted that electing Clinton will result in the US being “Anschlussed into global government within four years.” Within the context of claims being made in this comment regarding the kind of threat posed to the US by a Clinton presidency, use of the term “Anschlussed” appears important. The term *Anschluss*, from German, most notably refers to the annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938. Its use thus evokes a historically-loaded image of forced integration and wartime expansion of political entities and movements.⁷⁴ However, given its martial referent, the term also has connotations of violent resistance and conflict.

This comment is notable for the manner in which it presents the US as having been subjected to the forces of globalisation, rather than being one of their key architects and beneficiaries. Here, “global government” is articulated as a visceral threat to the US Constitution, one which draws on an image of “shadowy groups” engaging in a socialistic plot (Potok, 2003, p. 59).⁷⁵ This particular image resonates in significant respects with the Soros myth introduced in Chapter 4, although it should be noted that outside of conspiratorial narratives, George Soros is recognised as a powerful proponent of global capitalism (George E. Marcus & Powell, 2003).

The political economic implications of the reference to “global government” are thus palpable. In that regard, Kintz (1998) notes that whilst the United States played a key role in propagating a “postwar liberal international order” (Stokes, 2018, p. 133) by exporting North American-style neoliberal market democracy, this process of expansion has had devastating consequences on American workers. Following Chomsky, Kintz (1998, p. 5) suggests that political economic analysis demands that one recognises the fundamental distinction between the

⁷⁴ Despite longstanding resistance throughout the 1930s, it is important to note there was a shift in Austrian public opinion towards Nazi support, including support for the *Anschluss* in 1938 (R. Schwarz, 1982).

⁷⁵ According to Potok (2003, p. 59), the emergence of fears regarding the creation of a “socialistic global government” is contemporaneous with the formation of United Nations in 1948, although President George W Bush labeled this notional global government the “New World Order” – a phrase which quickly gained currency among the extreme right.

general population and the “principal architects of policy” (a term Chomsky himself borrowed from the work of Adam Smith). This distinction is explicitly centred in Donald Trump’s rhetoric of economic nationalism, with its focus on American industry (Stokes, 2018). It is thus not surprising to find an intended Trump voter, however hesitant, assert that only through the election of Donald Trump as President can the forces seeking to “establish global government” effectively be resisted.⁷⁶

However, if the threat to the Constitution manifest in the spectre of global government can be seen to entail economic elements, there is nonetheless more at play in fears about the transnational distribution of power than purely economic forms of anxiety. For example, the shift towards protectionism, which was primed by the Trump campaign, has been shown to be mediated by other demographic factors, including “race, diversity, education, and age” (Noland, 2020, p. 33). Indeed, Mutz (2018) has argued that such factors are associated with anxieties over perceived threats to group status amongst white voters, indicating that attitudes towards globalisation may also have racial dimensions.

On the matter of racial conflict, by articulating the concept of a “new Supreme Court that allows mass illegal amnesty,” comment 7.11 raises several themes that I have already outlined earlier in this chapter. It also speaks to some of the same issues of status threat discussed immediately above. The comment reads:

He ain't wrong on this one, how are you going to beat the Dems once the new Supreme Court allows mass illegal amnesty? You think they're ever going to vote conservative when all the programs will be set up to make sure they know to "vote for the party comrade, we keep you employed and fed." And if you think congress is actually going to stand up to her, they've had 6 years to stand u to Obama, we've gotten Gay Marriage, Obamacare, and how many other fundamental transformations under that strategy. We lose here, the United States of America won't be coming back. [sic]

Comment 7.11

11 September, 2016

⁷⁶ This articulation of conservative positioning can be seen as distinct from earlier attempts to deflect public anger away from “job exporters and rich tax dodgers” and to direct it instead at “at ‘welfare cheats’, women, gays, blacks and immigrants” in the form of the Iraq War (Hochschild, 2003, p. 181).

Whilst in the previous section, my analysis focused on how the Supreme Court figured in constructions of a binary election, here the future implications are more explicitly outlined in terms that relate a prophesied fate to recent political history. A contrast is here established between the Supreme Court as it currently exists and an imagined version of the Court that would be the outcome of a Clinton victory in 2016. The comment offers examples of key changes that came about under Obama's leadership as evidence of what could be expected from a Clinton presidency, including marriage equality⁷⁷ and the Affordable Care Act.⁷⁸ These changes are tied discursively to Obama's policy agenda through the use of the term "fundamental transformation," discussed in the previous section (see analysis of comment 7.2A pp. 222-226).

First and foremost, however, the comment articulates a vitally important conspiratorial link between the Democratic Party and so-called illegal immigration through the claim that a Supreme Court shaped by Clinton appointees would permit a "mass legal amnesty." This imagined outcome is attributed to cynical electoral calculus on the part of the Democrats that would remake American demographics in order to ensure the Democratic Party cannot be beaten at the polls.

⁷⁷ This comment attributes the provision of marriage equality in the US to an Obama-era policy agenda. More specifically, marriage equality was ultimately achieved through constitutional litigation (Eskridge, 2013). This was made possible through the Obama administration's decision not to defend the Defence of Marriage Act (DOMA) in two pending DOMA cases, due to their judgment that it represented a violation of the principle of equal protection established in the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution (Johnsen, 2012, p. 599). DOMA had been passed by the US Congress "in response to concerns that Hawaii and other states might recognise same-sex marriage" (J. S. Jackson, 2016, p. 1). It was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on 21 September, 1996 and was eventually struck down in response to a 2013 ruling by the US Supreme Court.

⁷⁸ The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), colloquially known as "Obamacare," was passed by the US Congress in March 2010. Obamacare has been an ongoing target of Republican political manoeuvring and a perennial focus of conservative rhetoric ever since. For example, during the 2016 presidential election campaign, Trump declared his intention to "repeal and replace" the ACA (McCarthy, 2016). Nevertheless, at the time of writing, attempts by the Republican Party to either repeal or defund Obama's signature health reform law have been largely unsuccessful.

Fears regarding the impact of immigration on the demographic makeup of American society, discussed in Chapter 4, were a prominent motor of shifting public attitudes throughout the twentieth century, with such anxieties predominantly manifesting in the form of anger directed towards illegal immigrants (Galston, 2017, p. 26). Such fears continue to characterise American conservatism today (Gries, 2016). For instance, Williamson and Skocpol (2011) argue that concern about immigration was central to Tea Party ideology (if the movement could be said to have had a unifying ideology), provoking distinctly emotional reactions from their survey respondents. In the Trump era, furthermore, attitudes towards immigration have been linked to both racist nativism and white supremacy (Huber, 2016).

Insofar as the comment ends with the definitive claim that if this election is lost, the “United States of America won’t be coming back,” it appears that such anxieties are still prevalent today. As in comment 7.7, above, losing the election is thus portrayed as an irreversible turning point for America. Given the comment’s focus on mass illegal amnesty as a key tactic of Democrats, this imagined transformation appears to be shaded by distinctly nativist undertones. Here, the relation between America and whiteness is rendered implicitly through reference to “illegal amnesty”, with the related role of Democrats in disrupting the coherence of American nationhood presented explicitly.

Comments also draw on religious themes in articulating an image of a projected future. Comment 7.12 is a key example of this.⁷⁹ The comment reads:

....although widely trashed on theBlaze site for switching from my primary candidate to a Trump supporter and attempting to show the hypocrisy of Glenn (Alinsky on parade), I have never wavered in my foundational love and concern for Glenn...I pray that he may right his ship, learn from his mistakes, review the lessons taught and grow... I AM a "2" Corinthians Christian and "Constitutional" Conservatives will need ALL the Christians that they can muster in the future to save America, her sovereignty and

⁷⁹ The invocation of the parasocial relation between Glenn Beck and his audience in below-the-line commentary is one of the central themes in my analysis. That theme is once again prominent in comment 7.11. Whereas comment 7.10, for example, demonstrated a more specific form of empathetic interaction, i.e., second-person address, comment 7.12 speaks about Beck in the third person, rather than addressing him directly.

preserve her founding documents to save Humanity during the perilous near future that we face... [sic]

Comment 7.12 16 September, 2016

One of the more notable features of this comment is the manner in which it explicitly identifies the author as a “‘2’ Corinthians Christian,” thus invoking the Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians.⁸⁰ This is a form of talk that is associated specifically with Evangelical Christianity (Martí, 2018). The comment therefore features a number of specific assertions of identity that establish notable connections between Christian subject positions, support for Donald Trump, and critical “concern” for those who continue to resist his candidacy. Given the particular racial faultiness that typify African American Christianity and White Evangelicalism (Nikides, 2013), such distinctions can also be viewed in racial terms.

Whilst identifying as a “‘2’ Corinthians Christian,” the author of comment 7.12 also asserts that Christians will be necessary allies of constitutional conservatives.⁸¹ Here, it is claimed that Christians and conservatives must work together to deal with a perceived threat to America’s “sovereignty” and “her founding documents.”⁸² Those Founding Documents are here attributed an almost divine power as a fundamental mechanism for saving humanity in the context of an

⁸⁰ Whilst a central theme in the Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians is that of “crisis,” it also focuses heavily on the notion of “new creation” that is brought about by the will of God. The idea of “new creation” is described by Hafemann as “a prophecy of redemption in which a ‘light will shine’ upon those dwelling in darkness” (1998, p. 249). Thus, to identify as a “‘2’ Corinthians Christian,” whilst signalling Evangelical Christianity, appears to be closely linked to the practice of prognostication, particularly as this relates to imaginaries of corruption and salvation.

⁸¹ This is not a novel proposition. The Christian Right has for several decades been indispensable to the Republican Party’s electoral strategy and has played a fundamental role in strengthening a conservative political movement in the US (Diamond, 1995, p. 6). Wilcox (2016, p. 107) argues that since its inception as a political force, long established “truths” regarding the nature of the Christian Right, widely accepted by political scientists, have been turned on their head—including the notion that the Christian Right are political “purists.” This is no longer seen to be the case. For example, white evangelical support for Trump, during the 2016 election and beyond, has puzzled many social scientists (Martí, 2018, p. 1).

⁸² The Founding Documents of the United States of America include the US Constitution, the Bill of Rights (which entails the first ten amendments to the US Constitution), the Declaration of Independence, and the Federalist Papers (Congress.gov, n.d.).

undefined “perilous near future.” Unlike other examples I have presented, the nature and extent of that threat is not specified in this case. Nevertheless, the threat is portrayed as existential, menacing the very survival of America. The comment thus adds not only to public contestations over the relation between institutional media and user-generated content, on the one hand, and political action, on the other; it also asserts their more elemental role vis-à-vis the discursive production of imaginaries of American apocalypse.

In the eschatological images of decay and degradation that are emphasised in numerous prophetic readings of the outcomes of a Clinton presidency, it is possible to appreciate prominent elements of jeremiad rhetoric. In that regard, Aamodt (2002, p. 3) argues: “Because the apocalypse is so closely tied to the concept of the Last Judgment, it is related to jeremiad rhetoric, with its tendency to call for repentance and to predict dire consequences if the warning is ignored.” Here, repentance can be achieved through political strategy – by embracing Trump and renouncing Clinton, including those who stand for her and the threat they represent. This is presented as the duty of conservatives and Christians alike. Such visions of collapse serve to re-articulate antagonistic frontiers through the deployment of jeremiad rhetoric, which discursively aligns imaginaries of past, present, and future.

However, as argued by Mutz (2018), support for Trump in 2016 was also tied in important ways to status anxiety that had both racial and gender dimensions. The specifically white imaginaries of American apocalypse put forward in my sample are shaded in powerful ways by this hegemonic struggle over social positioning. This white status anxiety contrasts in important ways with the images of futurity, transformation, and Black empowerment that characterised the jeremiad rhetoric of figures such as James Baldwin (Dean, 2016).

Like comment 7.10, above, the final example in this chapter was posted to Tré Goins-Phillips’ (2016b) article discussing Glenn Beck’s reaction to Ted Cruz’s shifting Trump stance. In particular, the comment seizes on Glenn Beck’s claim,

drawn from the Facebook post that featured centrally in Goins-Phillips' report, that "America is an idea, not a country" (G. Beck, 2016).⁸³ The comment reads:

America is an idea, not a country. - This shows the fundamental flaw in Beck (and many others) thinking. It is one thing to support an idea, it is another to protect a nation built on that idea. Beck would cede the nation to those bent on its destruction in order to protect the 'idea'. The problem is that failing to protect the nation will see the 'idea' destroyed along with it. As those like Clinton and her Globalist ilk gain greater power, you will see the 'idea' destroyed or relegated to the dustbin of History. It is no longer taught in schools and never mentioned in media. That is by design. Beck and those like him preach the idea but fail at every turn to do what is needed to protect it and the nation it gave birth to. When the jackboots are permitted free reign and history is re-written to appease the socialists there is no longer an 'idea', only an agenda. You either fight to preserve the nation and thus the idea that spawned it or you surrender and forget the idea ever existed. Beck and company would rather surrender and forget than fight. They would rather gather at the trough while claiming ever higher 'principles' while the nation burns than do what is needed to save it. They would sacrifice the nation for their own 'principles' and in doing so destroy the very 'idea' they say they wish to protect. They are both selfish and clueless, but above all they are cowards. Run to the mountains Beck, running is all you know. [sic]

Comment 7.13 24 September, 2016

Focusing on the "fundamental flaw" in Beck's and others' contention that America is an idea, this comment establishes a tension between that idea and the practical conditions in which it exists. Here, it is asserted that the idea of America gave birth to a nation. In that regard, it is something which preceded the founding. Bercovitch situates the development of this idea in the "supernatural legitimacy" the Puritans accorded to "the Protestant work ethic in the New World" (2012, p. xiv). Jeremiad rhetoric played an important role in legitimating a new imaginary of society. "It became the office of the jeremiad," he argues, "to ritualise that configuration of spiritual and worldly ends into an identity for an emergent modern country" (Bercovitch, 2012, p. xiv). At the root of this national

⁸³ In his Facebook post, Beck also invoked the Founding Fathers. Like numerous examples presented in this chapter, Beck used his post to proclaim a special understanding of what the Founding Fathers meant when they spoke. I here present a small snippet of the post to give a greater sense of the context: "America is an idea, not a country. When we discuss the destruction of our country, that is vastly different than the destruction of an idea. I fear the idea is already lost, due to the panic of losing ones comfort and country. There are many things that I believe that I will never say, but I shall never say the things I do not believe. Come what may. The founders meant it much differently when they said: join or die" (G. Beck, 2016).

identity was a particular capitalist way of life that became encoded as the American Dream – where “‘dream,’ as prophecy, held a material promise (‘golden opportunity’), and where ‘America,’ as *this nation*, represented the last best hope of mankind” [emphasis in original] (Bercovitch, 2012, p. xiv).

However, this formulation can also be seen to have specifically racial dimensions. The curious coalescing of spiritualism and capitalism that animates the American Dream relates primarily to white forms of Protestantism (Bercovitch, 2012, p. 200). Critical scholars of race have drawn attention to the role of the American Dream in perpetuating the invisible power of whiteness (e.g., Shome, 2000). This process is thus also related in powerful ways to colour blind approaches to racial inequality, insofar as the American Dream has been presented as the first attempt at producing structures of colour blindness (Tran & Patterson, 2015). Indeed, James Baldwin famously argued that the “American Dream is at the expense of the American negro” in a 1965 debate with William F. Buckley Jr. (Buccola, 2019).

The theme of promise and eventuation that is embedded in the notion of the American Dream also figures centrally in conceptualisations of American exceptionalism. In that regard, McCrisken (2003, p. 8) proposes that America is exceptional “not for what it is, but what it could be.” The antagonistic reading of the contemporary political environment presented in comment 7.13, and which was likewise prominent elsewhere in my data, presents an image of that promise under threat. Comment 7.13 establishes a vision of a battle between those who would “fight to preserve the nation and thus the idea that spawned it” and those who would “surrender and forget the idea ever existed.” At risk in this apocalyptic battle is not just America and the American way of life, but rather the very future of humanity. If the notion of the American Dream, as a founding myth of American nationhood, can be seen to encode whiteness, then that threat to the idea from which America emerged can likewise be viewed in implicitly racialised terms.

These are the stakes of political participation in the partisan landscape articulated by commenters: victory or apocalypse. Which is to say, from the perspective of a notionally pure conservatism oriented towards the preservation of

modes of agency and subjectivity entextualised in the US Constitution, to lose the “American idea” literally would be to witness the death of the American nation and so see its end in time. Insofar as American nationhood is presented as a worldly incarnation of the word of God in historical time, the prophesied loss of the Constitution is thus presented as as much an apocalypse as the end of time in Christian eschatology. These are the stakes of the opposition between conservatives and their opponents performed in user-generated below-the-line commentary.

This comment sees Beck featuring centrally in this imagined conflict. At the same time, the comment centres on the perceived inauthenticity of political claims being made by certain partisan media figures and their followers. In that regard, there is some confusion in terms of the motivations attributed to Beck. At points, it is hinted that Beck’s stance comes from a principled, albeit misguided, engagement with an idea. Later it is suggested that “Beck and company” merely claim principles whilst “gathering at the trough,” i.e., personally benefiting, monetarily or otherwise from a performative political posture. This can be contrasted with Trump’s perceived authenticity as parrhesiastes (Foucault, 2001), i.e., truth-teller speaking truth to power, a mantle earlier claimed by Glenn Beck himself.⁸⁴

The invocation of a time when “jackboots are permitted free reign and history is re-written to appease the socialists” [sic] presents a striking and notably dystopian vision of America’s imagined future, one which draws on a key antagonistic figure in the form of socialism. In the context of a narrative founded on existential conflict between those who would protect America and those who would destroy it, the discussion of appeasement alludes to surrender – acceding to the demands of an enemy. Likewise, use of the word jackboot similarly entails military allusions, drawing on a powerful metaphor for fascist oppression

⁸⁴ As discussed in Chapter 1 (see section 1.2.2 pp. 26-31), Glenn Beck’s outputs have long portrayed him as the bearer of untold and hidden truths. When GBTV was launched in 2011, Beck’s production company, Mercury Radio Arts filed a trademark for its tagline: “The Truth Lives Here” (Weprin, 2011).

and authoritarian rule.⁸⁵ This comment thus articulates left-wing fascism as a genuine threat.

This expressed attitude towards authoritarianism is somewhat challenging. According to MacWilliams (2016, p. 718), authoritarianism was one of only two factors that predict support for Trump among likely Republican voters during the 2016 US presidential election, with the other being “fear of personal threat from terrorism.” Similarly, adherence to Christian nationalist ideology has also been shown to be “a robust predictor of voting for Trump,” one which is “related to, but not synonymous with, reducible to, or mere reflection of economic anxieties, sexism, racism, Islamaphobia, or xenophobia per se” (Whitehead et al., 2018, pp. 147-148). There is thus an important tension palpable between the imagery featured in the user’s comment (i.e., Trump as a corrective for authoritarianism) and the broader political context within which that comment was articulated (i.e., support for Trump predicted by authoritarianism). The comment nevertheless encodes a vision of the kind of America that is idealised by the user. This is achieved largely by connotation, through a focus on a perceived moment of national crisis and the consequences the user imagines this crisis will have for the future of American society, culture, and identity.

As noted above, a central dimension of jeremiad rhetoric is its focus on the tension between profanation and (re-)sanctification, destruction and rebirth. In drawing on a jeremiad framework that exalts past greatness whilst exhorting against cataclysm borne from electoral choices, it is possible to appreciate how commenters attribute responsibility for the coming collapse according to partisan judgments. In that regard, my analysis demonstrates how apocalyptic imagery and vatic pronouncements are together deployed as rhetorical strategies in the performance of political antagonism through a variety of temporal narratives. Imaginaries of American apocalypse can thus be seen to reproduce and reassert the antagonistic frontiers that are the focus of this thesis.

⁸⁵ This trope has been employed in intra-group conflict on the right. For example, Potok (2003, p. 48) recounts the case of a National Rifle Association (NRA) fundraising letter circulated in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City Bombing which claimed that “jack-booted government thugs” had the permission of the government to “harass, intimidate, even murder law-abiding citizens,” prompting former President George H W Bush to resign from the organisation in a letter dated 3 May, 1995 (Raymond, 1997).

7.5 Conclusion: the shape of things to come

In this chapter, I have argued that commenters discursively construct political action and identification by drawing on visions of an idealised political past and imagined political future. In so doing, the online political talk of commenters draws on a framework of jeremiad rhetoric that has been dominant in the discursive articulation of American nationhood since the era of New England Puritanism. This rhetorical tradition affords a primary import to the role of prophecy in asserting American identity. However, its deployment by users articulates temporal narratives that typify an approach to the performance of conservatism in my data. My analysis centred on three principal topics, modelled on the way in which user comments draw out relations between past, present, and future.

First, I explored how commenters discuss the political past. My data demonstrate a key focus on the Founding Fathers and the US Constitution, as well as other Founding Documents. I demonstrated how users impute a variety of intentions to America's Founders, including their aims for the Second Amendment and Article V of the US Constitution. Whilst the nature of these intentions are open to ongoing public debate, my analysis also showed how they can be mapped onto user-generated commentary on contemporary politics. This commentary further entails a metacommentary on the meaning of political language and the intentions underlying the performance of politics through talk. This metacommentary is used to legitimate particular conservative interpretations of the US Constitution as a foundation of American society, culture, and identity. However, my analysis also reveals how American political history can be situated in Christian mythical time, by stipulating the US Constitution (and thereby American nationhood) as a product of divine providence. Insofar as God's will is thus framed as a focal point in the emergence of American nationhood, it simultaneously draws on and animates a particular vision of moral order of society, i.e., social imaginary. This moral order is here seen to rest on an array of discursively constructed oppositions, articulated with reference to antagonistic articulations of political agency outlined throughout this thesis.

Second, I examined how commenters discuss the political present, with a particular focus on how users draw on images of the political past whilst orienting

towards the political future. I once again raised the theme of the binary nature of the 2016 US presidential election, which briefly had been raised in previous chapters. In the context of perceived polarisation of choice in the American two-party system, users spoke in explicit terms about the existential threat to America posed by Hillary Clinton's candidacy. This is perceived as a threat so great that voting for third party candidates on principle is precluded. The fact that the online discussions in my sample took place in the immediate aftermath of a contentious primary highlights a variety of intra- and extra-party oppositions that complicate my analysis. In the context of the Republican Party, specifically, anti-establishment politics are seen to gain a strong foothold whilst users contest the meaning of what it means to be a conservative, including how that manifests at a discursive level. Although there was resistance to the notion that the 2016 election revealed a schism between two Americas, users nevertheless debated what counts as authentically American. In this debate, conservatism was represented as the legitimate worldview. This is a position which was further mapped onto commentary on the fundamental role of the US Supreme Court in shaping an American future, thus recognising its role as a site of political struggle.

Third, I analysed how commenters discuss the political future. Whilst a notion of future threat was already apparent, the orientation towards futurity is even more pronounced in the examples presented here, featuring more thoroughly developed antagonistic imaginaries of national collapse. Taking into account such explicit acts of prognostication, prophecy here was presented as an important element of American and, specifically, conservative self-definition. In this perspective, the future is viewed as an important locus of conflict in an ongoing struggle to assert competing models of American nationhood – or, more precisely, the will of politicians to preserve into the future the nation as it exists now. A variety of imagined outcomes of a Clinton presidency were presented, including mass illegal immigration and expansion of gun control efforts enabled by Democrats. These outcomes were explicitly portrayed as invariably leading to the destruction of America. Threat was here construed in distinctly partisan terms. I posited that a narrative of existential conflict between those who would protect America and those who would destroy it serves to re-articulate an antagonistic frontier between conservatives and non-conservatives. However, I

also argued that commenters' understanding of that threat may entail racial dimensions that are rooted in perceptions of group membership.

Imagines of decay and degradation are central to the tradition of jeremiad rhetoric that for centuries has played a formative role in asserting American nationhood. Such rhetorical structures here have been shown to feature prominently in the online political talk of commenters. Insofar as they are deployed in the context of deeply partisan interpretations of political action and identification, imagines of American apocalypse serve to reproduce the antagonisms between conservatives and non-conservatives which are the focus of this thesis.

Drawing on antagonism as a conceptual tool, my analysis in foregoing chapters has built towards the contention that commenters are active participants in the hegemonic project of defining American conservatism. In that regard, partisan attributions of responsibility for an imagined American apocalypse can likewise be seen to have a hegemonic character, insofar as they are mapped onto imagines of an ideal moral order that is specifically conservative in nature. This chapter has sought to illuminate what form it is imagined that apocalypse would take, i.e., the end of the "American idea" as the erasure of God's will on earth.

Based on these principles, partisan media figures to whom commenters profess longstanding parasocial attachments can be seen to play an important mitigating role in the context of a perceived – or, at least, performed – threat to the very existence of American nationhood. As my analysis demonstrates, however, they can likewise be seen to exacerbate that threat, based on shifting audience attitudes regarding media congruence. Whilst commenters assume some degree of discursive authority in the context of a hybrid media environment, they nonetheless recognise the enduring power of partisan media figures to shape political strategies and media agendas, whilst creating meaningful relationships with their audiences.

In the previous chapter, my focus was on how commenters conceptualise the political and economic significance of their media choice. Here, the focus is

broadened to encompass reflections on how voter choice and media practice might come together to impact the entire system of American political institutions, including the linguistic and discursive frameworks on which they are founded. The online political talk of commenters can thus be seen to articulate a set of perceived links between media practice, political-civic engagement, and the very future of America.

My thesis aims to offer a qualitative account of affective polarisation through an empirical focus on the discursive construction of partisan antagonism on one side of the polarised political culture in the US. This chapter contributes to that goal by providing an analysis of the various ways in which the online political talk of commenters perform antagonistic imaginaries of an ideal American future founded on a specifically conservative moral order. These imaginaries articulate at the intersection of an array of oppositions that attribute powerful significance to factors including economy, race, and gender. They reveal whiteness to be in many cases an implicit but deeply rooted framework for the performance of apocalyptic images of decay and degradation as well as imaginaries of American origin and destiny.

However, my analysis also reveals how acts of imagining an American future are achieved through historically significant forms of rhetoric that have the capacity to drive transformations in American society, culture, and identity. These are also forms of discourse that seek to define what counts as authentically American. They thus entail conspicuous evaluations of idealised social personae voiced by commenters. My data indicate that such judgments about valued forms of personhood remain a matter of public contestation, as do the imagined futures in the interests of whose performance they are exploited.

Chapter 8: Conclusion – contesting the boundaries of American conservatism online

8.1 Introduction

My aim in this thesis was to present a qualitative account of what affective polarisation looks like at the level of online user-generated discourse. My empirical focus was on how users of the American right-wing news and opinion website TheBlaze.com articulated partisan oppositions in a below-the-line comment field in the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election. I developed my approach with regard to three conditions that have specific theoretical, methodological, and empirical relevance in terms of my research objectives.

First, a noted rise in so-called negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016), in which some partisans dislike the other party more than they like the one with which they identify, was linked to the phenomenon of affective polarisation. Distinguished from ideological polarisation, affective polarisation was defined as negative affect towards opposing partisans, i.e., attitudes towards the opposition (Levendusky, 2013a). Heretofore, it has largely been studied from a quantitative perspective using a social identity approach (Iyengar et al., 2019). Nevertheless, drawing on Jackson and Sherriff (2013), it was asserted that a qualitative approach to social identity could help to reveal the dynamic processes through which categories of opposition are constituted in the context of real-world intergroup relations.

Second, the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 has prompted a new interest in the articulation and qualitative content of American conservative identity (K. Hanson et al., 2019; Kreiss et al., 2017), a focus which has drawn attention to relevance of factors such as race, class, and gender. This shift has underlined not only my own interest in right-wing political movements; it has also provided new impetus for studying political communication from a qualitative perspective. Such a drive also aligns with my aim of producing a qualitative account of how affective polarisation manifests in the online political talk of users of an American right-wing partisan media website.

Third, the articulation of partisan identities in online user-generated commentary takes place under conditions of media hybridity (Chadwick, 2013), which is marked to a certain extent by a struggle over access to and control of representational – i.e., discursive – resources on the parts of media elites, political elites, and publics. Thus, whilst partisan media users have the capacity to participate as “producers” (Bruns, 2006) in the articulation of partisan oppositions in below-the-line comment fields, the hybridisation of relations of power that typify older and newer media points to important limits on the kinds of meanings that can be articulated by users, whether via institutional practices of moderation and content management or other structural mechanisms.

In order to address my overarching objectives, I specified four research questions that map largely onto the breakdown of my empirical chapters. I asked: How do commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their online political talk? How do commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their characterisation(s) of media? How do commenters situate their media choice discursively in terms of the political and economic significance of partisan media? And how do commenters relate their partisan media use to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation?

To address these questions, I employed an articulation approach grounded in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau, 1999, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 1996), which views articulation as the ongoing struggle to “fix” meaning – including the meaning of society and identity – in ways that exclude other meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). I integrated this theoretical framework with a constructionist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of online political talk in user-generated “below-the-line” commentary (Graham & Wright, 2015), basing my analysis on a corpus of 5,288 user-generated comments posted to TheBlaze.com during the period 20 July 2016 to 21 January 2017.

Reflecting on the propositions and conclusions of foregoing chapters, this final chapter serves as a conclusion to my thesis. First, with reference to my stated objectives and research questions, I review the main findings and implications of my empirical analysis. Second, I set out four of the key contributions this the-

sis makes in addressing the broader literature on partisan media and political identity in the US. In so doing, I offer a reflection on the significance of these findings in terms of developing a qualitative account of affective polarisation. Here, I also discuss some of the broader implications of my research, including some of the key achievements of my thesis as a contribution to an ongoing debate around deeply contentious politics. Third, I outline some of the main limitations of my approach and detail some possible future directions in which to take my research, focusing specifically on how my research could be strengthened by integrating an ethnographic perspective on networked meaning-making through computer-mediated discourse.

8.2 Towards a qualitative account of affective polarisation

In this section, I review the findings of my empirical analysis. I begin with Chapter 4, which addressed the question of how commenters articulate partisan oppositions in their online political talk. Here, I demonstrated how the boundaries of American conservatism were contested through the public performance of antagonism. The prevalence of negative characterisations of political difference was noted. The concept of negative partisanship helps to account for the notable lack of positive identity content. The content of conservative identity was shown to be articulated with reference to partisan opposition – through a focus on characterising opponents in negative terms rather than a positive focus on what makes a conservative “conservative.” However, articulations of opposition were also deeply contested and were thus typified by a variety of voices: some spoke of Trump in explicitly positive terms; some deemed him merely acceptable in the face of the threat posed by Hillary Clinton; yet other so-called NeverTrump responses viewed him in starkly negative terms, in much the same way as negative attitudes towards Clinton.

Based on the presented examples, I argued that a more qualitative theory of identity is required in order to adequately conceptualise and understand the discursive practices that underlie processes of affective polarisation. This speaks both to conceptualisations of polarisation in political science as well as understandings of the implications for deliberation of increasing audience frag-

mentation in the contemporary media environment. Whilst a social identity approach allows for the existence of internal conflict within groups, it doesn't offer an account of the ways in which such conflicts manifest through discursive practices of various kinds. Likewise, a social identity approach doesn't provide a discursively-grounded means of explaining some of its more pertinent predictions in the context of intensifying partisan identity, e.g., the vilification of internal dissenters (Huddy et al., 2015, p. 15).

My analysis shows that whilst implicit and explicit reference to forms of personhood are a central feature of user-generated commentary at TheBlaze.com, it is predominantly through an explicit and routinely derogatory focus on defining the characteristics of political alterity – that is, direct characterisations of difference – that nuanced categories of self and other emerge in the online political talk that constitutes my data. The characterisations that typify my data are pervasively negative, often uncivil, and frequently outrageous in nature, mirroring other research findings which show a growing incidence of uncivil (Hmielowski et al., 2014) and outrageous (J. M. Berry & Sobieraj, 2013) political discourse in the contemporary media environment that maps along the lines of partisan identification. The denigration and derogation of out-groups is one means of achieving positive social identity, which is a defining feature of the social identity approach (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013). However, contrary to arguments positing the growth of deliberative enclaves of likeminded others in an age of online media (Sunstein, 2001), my data nevertheless outline a space not of consensus but rather of “contestation” (Dahlberg, 2007) regarding the proper alignment between ideology and identity, even in the context of highly partisan participation.

Chapter 5 demonstrated how categories of partisan opposition are mapped onto the media landscape by analysing how media figures, outlets, and content are discussed in ways that reproduce the partisan antagonisms discussed in Chapter 4. Antagonistic depictions of media were related to hostile media perceptions and oppositional media hostility (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Matheson & Dursun, 2001; Vallone et al., 1985). Perceptions of media hostility can have important implications, particularly insofar as hostile media perceptions have the capacity to negatively impact attitudes towards mainstream media institutions as well as trust in democracy (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Oppositional media hostili-

ty, then, can be discerned in attitudes towards outlets, figures, and content (Arceneaux et al., 2012). However, media choice tempers the development and entrenchment of oppositional media hostility by providing an opportunity to “blunt media distrust and other hostile perceptions” by providing an opportunity to change the channel (Arceneaux et al., 2012, p. 179). Whilst the small selection of contributions presented in Chapter 5 demonstrated many of the themes already outlined in Chapter 4, they can also be seen under the rubric of a broad swathe of participatory practices that are characteristic of contemporary models of political communication and engagement. And yet, whilst media may provide archetypes of agency with which audiences engage, the audience are free to work with those “resources” (Chadwick et al., 2018b) in ways that may confound the intentions of institutional media.

Chapter 6 examined how characterisations of political difference are performed with reference to the political and economic significance of hybrid partisan media. My analysis revealed how media choice is portrayed as something that has both political and economic significance. In this chapter, I outlined how the sometimes-contradictory acts of “antagonistic othering” (Herschinger, 2012) that characterise the audience’s online political talk are deployed in discussions of media and media-related practice. I argued that these discussions can be construed at once as forms of political-civic engagement *and* consumer behaviour. Thus, whilst the choice to engage with likeminded media can be conceptualised in terms of selective exposure, it can also be conceptualised as a mode of political consumption (Atkinson, 2015) or political prosumption (Hershkovitz, 2012), introduced in Chapter 2 as alternative modes of political participation and expression.

The implicit and explicit understanding of the participation frameworks of below-the-line commentary demonstrated in users’ contributions appears important – specifically changes in footing involving shifts in alignment from Glenn Beck to the audience. Thus, addressing Beck directly, particularly in contestatory modes, can be seen to have significant performative dimensions in which commenters express not only their reaction to Glenn Beck and TheBlaze’s perceived transformation from proattitudinal to counterattitudinal media; they also

perform alignments with idealised models of personhood through competing assertions of identity.

In that regard, the move from buycott to boycott indicated in user-generated commentary illuminates an array of shifting judgments about appropriate ways of being conservative. Thus, the contested characterisation of Beck/TheBlaze as a failing business (in a free market context) is bound up in the articulation and re-articulation of the boundaries of conservative identity – demonstrating both implicitly and explicitly the forms of talk and comportment that are deemed appropriate for conservative persons, whilst also outlining appropriate viewpoints on issues of political importance to conservative voters. Nevertheless, although antagonistic, these claims about the oppositional status of Glenn Beck and TheBlaze are the site of forceful public contestation. In the context of arguments relating cyberbalkanization to polarisation (Sunstein, 2009), the fact that my data reveal how such factors are contested provides a useful case study into the actual dynamics of these processes in below-the-line commentary on a partisan news website.

In Chapter 7, I demonstrated how the use of partisan media is rhetorically related to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation via antagonistic imaginaries of American past, present, and future. Through a focus on the integration of “temporal narratives” (Brophy, 2016) into the contributions of commenters, I set out how various discourses and discursive elements are drawn together – i.e., articulated – in contestatory assertions of identity. As a central dimension of jeremiad rhetoric (Bercovitch, 2012), imaginaries of decay and degradation were drawn on by commenters in order to articulate antagonisms between conservatives and their perceived opponents. However, as in foregoing chapters, the nature and extent of that opposition was seen to be a matter of public contestation. Audience commentary privileged images of the destruction of America and its Constitution, with commenters positioning Beck, his media operations, and his audience relative to these narratives of decline. However, commenters were also seen as active participants in the hegemonic project of defining American conservatism.

Through a focus on the production and performance of temporal narratives, my analysis in this final empirical chapter was attuned to describing the kinds of future imagined by American conservatives as well as the array of rhetorical resources they draw on in giving voice to outrage online. I demonstrated how commenters perform a vision of American apocalypse in which the end of the “American idea” acquired its particular significance from its portrayal as the erasure of God’s will on earth. Partisan media were shown to be positioned centrally in audience commentary on the mechanisms of such eschatological outcomes. Whereas in Chapter 6, my focus was on how commenters relate the political and economic significance of partisan media, in Chapter 7 my focus was placed more squarely on how judgments about valued forms of personhood are bound up in performed fears regarding the ultimate destiny of not only the entire system of American political institutions, but also American nationhood.

The above framework points to the benefits that might accrue from conceptualising the critical perspective of users in terms that are distinct from some of the more progressive normative stances of critical theory, in which deliberation is set forth as a benchmark against which the value of political discourse should be measured. By assuming a qualitative empirical focus on right-wing partisan media, it becomes possible to ask what kinds of politics actually are being envisaged and enacted in the digital spaces of online partisan media, rather than judging content for its relative closeness or distance from deliberative ideals. Thus, my focus instead was directed towards forms of discourse that are animated by variant – i.e., “conservative” – imaginaries of an ideal social world performed through digital participation.

8.3 Contributions and achievements

This thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in four key respects. First, whilst affective polarisation has been conceptualised from a primarily quantitative perspective through the lens of a social identity approach, the qualitative content of identity is also important (K. Hanson et al., 2019). Social identity theory has been shown to be a reliable tool for mapping patterns of group conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As a theory articulated in the context of primarily quantitative paradigms, it is well-suited to measuring identity characteristics according to

predefined scales, e.g., strong partisan, weak partisan, etc. Yet, a more qualitative model is required in order to theorise the communicative practices by which group boundaries come to be defined in the first place (Huddy, 2001; C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013). Although the social identity approach, particularly self-categorisation theory, provides a set of analytical tools for analysing intragroup tensions, the post-positivist methodological articulation and deployment of the approach limits its utility in the description of such “messy” real-world dynamics (C. Jackson & Sherriff, 2013). This gap is addressed through a qualitative analysis of real-world contexts within which group identities are rendered particularly salient.

My analysis reveals how, as a mode of discursive practice, these characterisations allow participants to produce complex, nested, and shifting orders of partisan opposition, allowing speakers to express alignments of various kinds with an array of either socially sanctioned or proscribed forms of personhood. I contend that these discursive practices have broad implications in terms of normative claims that frame the public sphere as a space constituted through rational deliberation. But they are also pertinent to models of political polarisation that rely on operationally pre-defined classifications in order to map patterns of identity/difference rather than categories of opposition emergent in discourse.

Second, and relatedly, my thesis examines how audiences respond to perceived shifts in alignment with media outlets, figures, and content. I have argued that a qualitative approach can help to illuminate the dynamic nature of hostile media perceptions whilst at the same time providing an empirical grounding for further explorations of audience understandings of media. I contend that a rigorous account of hostile media perceptions and their role in processes of affective polarisation would benefit from including such qualitative insights as to their dynamism and changing nature.

As with affective polarisation, a social identity approach has also been applied to the study of hostile media phenomena. The study of hostile media perceptions has thus taken place largely within a post-positivist, experimental effects paradigm, also frequently drawing on social identity theory as an explanatory mechanism (Matheson & Dursun, 2001). My data point to ways in which exper-

imental approaches that place media outlets, figures, and content in predefined categories of liberal, conservative, etc. can be enhanced through a focus on user-generated discourse.

A focus on below-the-line commentary, actively contributed by the audience, demonstrates that those categories are, in actuality, publicly contested in online political talk. In this way, categories of likeminded and oppositional media are seen to be discursively articulated by the audience in sometimes outrageous and contrary manners. Through such acts of opposition, antagonisms are performed – that is, they are called into being through discourse (R. Bauman & Briggs, 1990) – in which select media are rendered “other.” The dynamic nature of definitions of hostile media underlines the value of a qualitative analysis that can reveal their contested character. At the same time, a qualitative focus on these phenomena demonstrates the variety of tactics available to audiences in their response to pro- and counterattitudinal content. This challenges pervasive narratives regarding the relationship between political homophily and partisan selective exposure, whilst situating the categorisation of partisan and mainstream media in terms of broader political struggles.

Third, applying an articulation approach, Berry and Sobieraj’s (2013) concept of the outrage industry can be seen to view outrage as a business strategy that rests on the performance of partisan antagonisms. My research reveals that both media and audience have the capacity to define the parameters and targets of those antagonisms. The question remains as to whether or not audience comments can be seen as authentic representations of political attitudes or if they are more usefully to be viewed as “merely” grounded in the performance of outrage as a genre of political discourse. A definition of outrage discourse that takes into account both user-generated content and audience motivations would go some way to addressing this concern. In that regard, I return once more to Bird’s (1998, p. 33) warning against seeing audiences as overly passive recipients of whatever journalists put in front of them. Instead, she argued, we should see audiences as engaging not just in terms of consuming content but in actively shaping the media environment through their choice of media. In a period characterised by hybrid forms of media engagement (Chadwick, 2013), this claim is even more relevant. At the same time, the relation between elite and

public discourse in a hybrid media environment must be properly accounted for, as Chadwick (2019) argues.

Fourth, the site I have chosen serves as a case study that reveals extreme competition within the right-wing partisan media market. In a general sense, one of the contributions my thesis makes as a limited case study is in providing a detailed snapshot of one aspect of the American right-wing media ecosystem at a particular historical moment. It therefore contributes to a body of research that seeks to understand the particular dynamics of this media environment and its broader impact (e.g., Benkler et al., 2018). By focusing on TheBlaze, however, my thesis speaks to some of the pressing challenges faced by partisan media figures and outlets as they navigate the shifting and sometimes antagonistic alignments of partisan media audiences. My case study thus reveals some of the ongoing trials of right-wing partisan media at a time when Breitbart was in its ascendancy, at the same time as it provides a qualitative account of what people are doing with media.

More broadly speaking, however, this thesis makes a more targeted contribution that is at once intellectual and political in nature. As discussed in section 3.4.2 (see pp. 114-116), one of the key motivations for this research was my desire to produce an account that is rigorous, theoretically rich and, above all, fair. For Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), the critical analysis of discourse is a political practice that entails taking a principled stance on the production of public spaces within which dialogue across difference can take place. This is a contention that I bear in mind as I engage with my own approach to the discursive articulations of the American right. More than two decades ago, Lakoff (1995, p. 177) wrote that “[c]onservatives regularly chide liberals for not understanding them.” This particular censure was directed broadly to liberals at large, but it is possible to appreciate here how such a statement applies to the relationship between practices of academic discourse production and issues of cultural marginalisation discussed by Hochschild (2016).

In this sense, there is a distinct relationship here to the institutional dynamics of academia. As argued by Gusterson (2017, p. 211):

Those of us who teach in universities must grapple with the fact, emphasized in Katherine Cramer's (2016) study of the Wisconsin Tea Party, that our institutions—which we often see as the vanguard of a liberal pluralistic 21st-century culture—are seen by those outside the gates as alien citadels of class superiority and elitist prejudice toward those who work with their hands.

Such potential acts of exclusion serve to underline the need, as highlighted by Gusterson (2017) to study nationalist populism, given the fundamental connection he identifies between the rise of nationalist populism and the cultural and economic outcomes of neoliberalism, which have deeply affected in profoundly negative ways those who supported Trump in 2016 — and, it should at this point be noted, again in 2020. If there is something to be critiqued in these ideologies and identities, then it should be done from a standpoint of being empirically and theoretically informed, motivated by a desire to critique from a position of understanding as opposed to judgment. What I have recounted in this thesis is in this view a story that surely must be told, whether or not we want to tell it and especially, now more than ever, whether or not we want to hear it. Indeed, with this in mind, I view my approach here as a moral and ethical responsibility in the context of the global spread of reactionary and exclusionary politics.

In a further sense, then, I argue one of the central achievements of this thesis is how it demonstrates an approach that can be applied beyond the specific case study chosen here. Reiljan (2020) has made an important intervention in this regard, drawing attention to the fact that affective polarisation is common beyond the US political system, even in multiparty European contexts. The articulation approach I have demonstrated here represents a powerful tool in this regard, insofar as it seeks fundamentally to provide a mechanism for examining and illuminating the dynamism of categories of opposition that underlie processes of affective polarisation and to reveal their discursive and, more specifically, contingent character. Because it focuses on the discursive production of difference, rather than purely on predefined analytical categories, this approach can work just as well, I argue, in the context of entrenching populist discourses in Poland, the UK, and elsewhere.

However, I do not seek to claim this approach should serve as a replacement for more quantitative treatments of affective polarisation and negative partisan-

ship. Rather, I seek to broaden the theoretical and empirical toolkits available to those who seek to explore the processes by which sameness and difference get produced by media elites, political elites, and publics. In so doing, this thesis is designed as a contribution to a conversation that seeks remedies to the social issues linked to deepening polarisation, based on a rigorous exploration of the phenomena in question.

8.4 Limitations and future research

The analyses presented in this thesis entail a number of limitations that point to productive paths for future research. Some limitations were necessitated by fundamental resource restrictions, whilst others were the outcome of theoretical and methodological choices made in the interests of ensuring the coherence of my arguments.

For instance, my analysis focuses on a single website during a limited time-frame following a contentious Republican Party primary (Yates, 2019) and in the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of an election that was notably polarised (Blair, 2017). As a result, I do not seek to make any claims regarding the generalisability of my analysis. This is particularly true when one considers the fact that TheBlaze.com is but one component in a multi-platform media operation, which is now owned and controlled by Blaze Media following the merger of TheBlaze and CRTV in 2018. As argued in Chapter 3, drawing on Graham and Wright (2015), limiting one's focus to an individual case study is a means of ensuring that a researcher is able to undertake a rich analysis that explores a specific set of research questions. My decision to focus on an individual website, whilst methodologically justified and to a certain extent demanded by other practical factors (see section 3.3.3 pp. 108-110), means that digital platforms are insufficiently accounted for in this thesis. This is a key limitation in the context of a growing recognition of their increasing power as ecosystems that play a significant role in shaping social life at various scales (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018).

In that regard, the specific role of Facebook as a mechanism for the participation of TheBlaze's users has been strengthened by the removal of TheBlaze.-

com's below-the-line comment field. In addition, TheBlaze and its current parent company Blaze Media should be viewed as but one node within a networked right-wing media ecosystem (Benkler et al., 2018). Whilst small-scale qualitative case studies are useful when it comes to providing nuanced analysis of this media landscape (Faris et al., 2017), more broad-ranging comparative data would contribute to a more holistic analysis of the place of right-wing media within a hybrid media system. A focus on the networking of publics via platforms (e.g., Langlois, Elmer, McKelvey, & Devereaux, 2009) may also introduce a greater diversity of voices, considering the extensive transmedia affordances of digital platforms. Such voices might also offer a view on the networking of racist and specifically white supremacist discourses (e.g., Back, 2002b). However, considerations of media hybridity indicate that these voices may not necessarily be those of users, with explorations of platform media demonstrating not only the moderation of content by digital platforms but also its selection and curation (Gillespie, 2018).

An expanded research agenda oriented towards the role of digital platforms would benefit from the inclusion of more quantitatively oriented data and analysis, e.g., network analysis and hyperlink analysis (see, for example, Kaiser, Rauchfleisch, & Bourassa, 2019), that can illuminate the kinds of networks of meaning that digital platforms can either enable or impair. This would have the added benefit of allowing me to develop the coding skills necessary to apply methods set aside during the course of my PhD research. However, a focus on the role of platforms must also pay heed to the implications of “big data” not only in terms of emerging practices of political campaigning (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015), but also as regards new techniques of political communication research (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2015). Indeed, an expanded research agenda should likewise provide an account of the presence of non-human voices on digital platforms (e.g., Bessi & Ferrara, 2016), one factor that has led to a heightened sense that some of the underlying assumptions of communication scholarship are in need of fundamental complication (Hedrick et al., 2018).

In that regard, limitations linked to my empirical focus on user-generated comments mean that I have concentrated in this thesis on discursive performance rather than the attitudes of audiences. In the context of an emerging recognition

of the potential “ambivalence” of online engagement (W. Phillips & Milner, 2018), as well as accounts of so-called “dark participation” in online user commentary (Frischlich et al., 2019), there are undoubtedly numerous issues with attempts to represent earnest or “authentic” (Evans, 2010) expressions of self online. Whilst I have established that the detailed analysis of user-generated discourse is a useful objective in its own right, I nevertheless argue that my research would also benefit from employing a broader array of qualitative methods, such as interviews and participant-observation, that would allow me to engage in a more substantive way with commenting users of partisan media about the meanings they personally attribute to their online political talk, as well as with non-commenting users regarding their decision(s) not to participate as “producers” (Bruns, 2006) of user-generated commentary online. Such methods would contribute to developing a more detailed picture of how media discourse is animated and reanimated by audiences through practices of commentary and citation, i.e., how media discourse is socially circulated (Vidali, 1996), as well as the implications of these practices in terms of the articulation of group boundaries.

In Chapter 1, I looked to the case made by Karpf et al. (2015) for a more qualitative approach to political communication research and noted this as a central motivation for my own work. In spite of some notable exceptions (e.g., Nielsen, 2012), ethnography thus far has not been used extensively as a methodological framework in the study of political communication from a qualitative perspective. Nevertheless, two notable works make the case for just such an approach, i.e., Vidali and Peterson (2012) and Luhtakallio and Eliasoph (2014). I contend that my research would benefit significantly from a more thoroughly ethnographic rearticulation, one which could offer important insights into the kinds of relations that obtain between the digitally-enabled articulation of polarised political identities and other expressions of identity/alterity, online and offline.

Effective online ethnography, in particular, can be attuned to both “the mobility of discourse across media platforms” (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 3) and the “multisited” (George E Marcus, 1995) character of networked meaning-making. Ethnography, including online ethnography, thus represents an important methodological tool for the study of the production of meaning through comput-

er-mediated discourse in a networked right-wing media ecosystem. An ethnographic framework would also provide a set of qualitative tools for investigating the ways in which alignments between race, gender, ideology, and partisan identity (see Abramowitz, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2017) are articulated and re-articulated by media and political elites as well as publics. Such an analysis would contribute more thoroughly to an understanding of articulation as socially situated meaning production.

Nevertheless, as noted in the previous section, one of the main contributions my thesis makes as a limited case study is in providing a detailed snapshot of one aspect of the American right-wing ecosystem at a particular historical juncture. In that regard, it remains to be seen how political oppositions were articulated by right-wing partisan media users during the 2020 US presidential election. As I wrote this concluding chapter early in 2020, several months prior to the election, a number of key shifts were notable that set that moment in contrast with the period represented in my data; namely, the absence of a contentious primary within the Republican Party; President Donald Trump's highly polarised approval ratings, with roughly 90 percent approval among Republicans compared to roughly 10 percent approval among Democrats (Gallup, n.d.)⁸⁶; Glenn Beck's vociferous support of Trump, donning a MAGA hat in May 2018 (Leach, 2018); the merger of TheBlaze with Mark Levin's CRTV to form Blaze Media, also in 2018; and the removal of TheBlaze.com's below-the-line comment feature in favour of comments made via TheBlaze's Facebook page, mentioned above.

The contrast between conditions in 2020 and conditions in 2016 raises a number of important questions. For instance, what does the online political talk of TheBlaze's users look like now? Are the contributions of users marked to a similar extent by expressions of outrage as they were in 2016? What is the significance of TheBlaze and Blaze Media in the American right-wing media ecosystem today? How is conservatism being articulated in other partisan media spa-

⁸⁶ Whilst Gallup polling reveals Trump's job approval rating among Republicans and Democrats to be highly polarised, his approval among Independents is more in line with his general approval rating. For the period 2-15 January 2020, Trump's job approval rating was 44%. According to the same data, Trump's maximum job approval rating to date was 46%, whilst his lowest approval rating to date was 35%.

ces that are perhaps more relevant to conservative politics in 2020? And how does the online political talk of users relate to other forms of user-generated content, as well as to the discourses of various political and media elites in a hybrid media system? A further topic of interest that is implied in my focus on right-wing media is the extent to which my analysis could be broadened to include the articulation of partisan identities across the political spectrum. The relevance of my current analysis to such a question is a matter that remains to be explored.

Finally, it has been noted that the growing popularity of social media after the late-2000s has led to a sidelining of the role of elite cues in analyses of audience engagement with media (Chadwick, 2019). Although my analysis does seek to recognise the role of elite cues through the integration of a media-as-resources perspective (see Chadwick et al., 2018b), this thesis lacks a comprehensive focus on the ways in which audiences creatively recontextualise resources from their broader media diets. There is thus significant scope for a more thorough examination of how user-generated content is situated relative to elite outputs. By theorising the formative role of structure and constraint, I have nevertheless sought to reflect on the limitations that exist in terms of the kinds of meanings that can be articulated by users. The tensions between user agency and elite persuasion is an important element of this dynamic.

For Chadwick (2019, p. 11), an important task for future research is to “identify the elite origins of affectively charged misinformation and the conditions under which it spreads online.” My research could in this sense give greater consideration to the hybrid affective and information ecologies within which users articulate the boundaries of political identity and alterity. As my findings indicate, however, there exists the enduring question of how partisan media users, especially self-identifying conservatives, engage with elite cues from multiple sources when they see themselves as empowered diviners of truth in the face of perceived duplicity and hostility, particularly in the context of antagonistic rhetorics that portray media not only as untrustworthy but also as “enemies of the people” (M. McKee & Stuckler, 2017). Building on the analyses presented in this thesis, an expanded research agenda would be wise to pay significant heed to such critical acts of positioning amongst politically motivated audiences.

8.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the main conclusions presented in my thesis, an account of some of the key contributions of my doctoral research, and a reflection on some possibilities for future study. The main points are summarised briefly here.

In terms of responding to my research questions, my empirical analysis demonstrated, first, how the boundaries of American conservatism were articulated in my dataset through the public performance of antagonism, revealing how group boundaries were contested through a specific focus on negative characterisations of political difference. Second, I showed how these categories of partisan opposition were also mapped onto the media landscape. Media figures, outlets, and content were discussed in my data set in ways that reproduced antagonistic depictions of political opponents. Third, insofar as characterisations of political difference were performed with reference to the political economy of hybrid partisan media, media choice was shown to be viewed as something that has both political and economic significance. And finally, fourth, the use of partisan media was rhetorically related to broader historical processes of social, cultural, and political transformation through antagonistic imaginaries of American past, present, and future. In this sense, performative visions of an imagined American apocalypse provide justifications for negative affect towards opposing partisans, whilst revealing the discursive logics underlying the contested performance of partisan antagonisms that characterise my sample.

My thesis makes four key contributions to the existing literature. First, by taking a qualitative approach to what affective polarisation looks like in a real-world context, my research contributes to an examination of the articulation and content of American conservative identity. Second, and relatedly, through a focus on the dynamic nature of categories of identity and alterity, my thesis examines how audiences respond to perceived shifts in alignment with media outlets, figures, and content. This discussion of the dynamic and contested nature of definitions of hostile media underlines the value of a qualitative analysis. Third, whilst Berry and Sobieraj's concept of the outrage industry views outrage discourse as a business strategy, the various ways in which audiences deploy out-

rage in user-generated below-the-line commentary demonstrates not only that both media and audience have the capacity to define the boundaries of in-group and out-group, but also that those articulations may themselves be in conflict. Fourth, even as a limited case study, my focus on TheBlaze.com provides a detailed snapshot of one aspect of the American right-wing media ecosystem at a particular historical moment. In so doing, my research reveals not only a field of ongoing competition and potential financial peril, but also an explicit awareness on the part of commenters of their relation to the political economy of partisan media.

Finally, in terms of limitations and directions for future research, I noted a number of key constraints that can be addressed by broadening my research agenda. Including a greater focus on platforms could help to highlight further tensions between media and users that are characteristic of hybrid media. Continuing to write against the presumption of authenticity, future research would also be more attuned to the presence of non-human voices and forms of dark participation. Likewise, greater attention to the relationship between the discourses of elites and publics could help to reveal points of engagement and of resistance. In a more immediate sense, however, a pressing opportunity exists to examine how conservative identity is being contested in the context of the 2020 US presidential election. The inclusion of new data would help to take my research in a more comparative direction. Methodologically, whilst orienting to the benefits of mixed methods approaches, an interest in the embeddedness of partisan media in online and offline experience indicates the value of grounding my research in an ethnographic framework.

Arguments regarding the implications of partisan selective exposure have dominated analyses of the relationship between media and affective polarisation. Whilst the role of partisan media audiences in the articulation of partisan identities was here my central focus, my analysis shows how other frameworks that foreground media as a practice can help to highlight how media users actually use and characterise media. Political consumerism was presented as a means of conceptualising how audiences attribute meaning to their media choice, whilst counter-arguing and source-denigration were introduced as ways of describing how partisan media users respond to disagreeable content. More

broadly, my thesis has shown how users integrate affective responses to media and politics into antagonistic articulations of partisan identity and alterity in user-generated below-the-line commentary.

By presenting a qualitative account of what affective polarisation looks like at the level of online user-generated discourse, I have sought to demonstrate the value of an approach to affective polarisation that provides a sense of how deeply contested categories of partisan opposition can be. In order to progress this research agenda, it will be necessary to explore further the diverse relations obtaining between users and institutional media as well as to problematise this dialectic in the context of a hybrid media system. Such research must remain open to the possibility that the kinds of futures imagined by internet users are not solely animated by the progressive visions that have characterised much existing work on the liberatory potentials of digital politics.

Whilst this thesis has focused on one facet of polarised political culture in the US, I recognise the broader global reach and implications of processes of affective polarisation, particularly in the context of evolving modes of and frameworks for digital participation. Indeed, in this thesis I have sought to develop an analytical framework that can be applied more broadly, in the US and elsewhere. Examining these broader contexts can help to reveal not only how affective polarisation is tied to the socially situated articulation of partisan oppositions but also how such discursive practices of meaning-making are nested within and animated by transnational infrastructures that enable new forms of antagonism. My hope is that my research will contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which those infrastructures are animated by frequently competing voices of outrage.

In the context of ongoing partisan and racial tensions in the US, developing a rigorous understanding of these phenomena is, I argue, an important step towards developing empirically-grounded responses to the diverse and shifting challenges posed by processes of affective polarisation. Developing a rigorous sense of how the boundaries of contemporary American conservatism — specifically white conservatism — are contested through discursive acts of antagonism is an important part of this process. However, beyond the US context, this

thesis should be viewed as a contribution to a much broader but no less pressing discussion around how to remedy through deepening understanding the social issues that are simultaneously motors for and the outcome of the discursive production of opposition and exclusion.

Appendix

Source classification metadata is provided for each item included in the sample:

Title: Title of item as it appears on TheBlaze.com

Reporter: Listed author of item

Publication Date: Listed in the format DD Month YYYY

URL: Web address of item

Comment Count: Number of user-generated comments

Set Description: Describes which of 3 case sets the item belongs to, #1-10

Period: Searches conducted in 7 monthly periods Jul 2016–Jan 2017

Source: Set of search results in which item appeared

Rank ID: Ranking for item based on search engine outputs

Rand ID: Attributed in Excel and used as a means of randomising sample

1	Title	Rick Perry: Khizr Kahn 'Shouldn't Get a Free Ride' on Trump Criticism Because His Son Died In Combat	Set Description	Trump 9
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	August
	Publication Date	16 August 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/08/16/rick-perry-khizr-kahn-should-nt-get-a-free-ride-on-trump-criticism-because-his-son-died-in-combat/	Rank ID	79
	Comment Count	141	Rand ID	0.0068

2	Title	Trump, Clinton Virtually Tied in New Poll	Set Description	Clinton 10
	Reporter	Jon Street	Period	September
	Publication Date	6 September 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/09/06/trump-clinton-virtually-tied-in-new-poll/	Rank ID	210
	Comment Count	155	Rand ID	0.028

3	Title	Trump: The U.S. Will Become 'Another Venezuela' if Clinton Wins in November	Set Description	Clinton 4
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	September
	Publication Date	9 September 2016	Source	Google
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2016/09/09/trump-the-u-s-will-become-another-venezuela-if-clinton-wins-in-november/	Rank ID	120
	Comment Count	313	Rand ID	0.0121

4	Title	Bill Clinton: Hillary Has Experienced Dehydration Problems 'on More Than One Occasion'	Set Description	Clinton 3
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	September
	Publication Date	12 September 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	https://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/09/12/bill-clinton-hillary-has-experienced-dehydration-problems-on-more-than-one-occasion	Rank ID	188
	Comment Count	130	Rand ID	0.0076

5	Title	Watch Jimmy Fallon Completely Wreck Donald Trump's Hair	Set Description	Trump 10
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	September
	Publication Date	16 September 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/09/16/watch-jimmy-fallon-completely-wreck-donald-trumps-hair/	Rank ID	218
	Comment Count	189	Rand ID	0.0071

6	Title	Glenn Beck voices disappointment in Cruz's decision to support Trump	Set Description	Trump 8
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	September
	Publication Date	23 September 2016	Source	Google
	URL	https://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/09/23/glenn-beck-voices-disappointment-in-cruzs-decision-to-support-trump/	Rank ID	1406
	Comment Count	1031	Rand ID	0.0065

7	Title	Clinton argues for stricter background checks as 'police are outgunned' in certain communities	Set Description	Clinton 1
	Reporter	Kaitlyn Schallhorn	Period	September
	Publication Date	26 September 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/09/26/clinton-argues-for-stricter-background-checks-as-police-are-outgunned-in-certain-communities/	Rank ID	195
	Comment Count	158	Rand ID	0.0017

8	Title	WikiLeaks email: Clinton campaign chief acknowledged Planned Parenthood videos 'do hurt'	Set Description	Clinton 5
	Reporter	Kate Scanlon	Period	October
	Publication Date	20 October 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/10/20/wikileaks-email-clinton-campaign-chief-acknowledged-planned-parenthood-videos-do-hurt/	Rank ID	282
	Comment Count	13	Rand ID	0.0124

9	Title	FBI Director James Comey explains why he is reviewing Clinton email investigation	Set Description	Clinton 7
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	October
	Publication Date	28 October 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/10/28/fbi-director-james-comey-explains-why-he-is-reviewing-clinton-email-investigation/	Rank ID	225
	Comment Count	307	Rand ID	0.0227

10	Title	Gary Johnson asks CNN host if FBI re-opening Clinton email investigation helps him	Set Description	Clinton 8
	Reporter	Jon Street	Period	October
	Publication Date	28 October 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/10/28/gary-johnson-asks-cnn-host-if-fbi-reopening-clinton-email-investigation-helps-him/	Rank ID	345
	Comment Count	70	Rand ID	0.0234

11	Title	RNC Chairman Reince Priebus: If Donald Trump wins Michigan then 'it's all over' for Clinton	Set Description	Clinton 6
	Reporter	Chris Enloe	Period	November
	Publication Date	6 November 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/11/06/rnc-chairman-reince-priebus-if-donald-trump-wins-michigan-then-its-all-over-for-clinton/	Rank ID	408
	Comment Count	75	Rand ID	0.0191

12	Title	Slate writer: Trump's victory is proof positive that 'America hates women'	Set Description	Trump 7
	Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	November
	Publication Date	10 November 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/11/10/slate-writer-trumps-victory-is-proof-positive-that-america-hates-women/	Rank ID	753
	Comment Count	89	Rand ID	0.0058

13	Title	Vladimir Putin moves missiles closer to Europe, while Donald Trump and Gen. Mattis disagree on NATO	Set Description	Trump 2
	Reporter	Sarah Lee	Period	November
	Publication Date	21 November 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/11/21/vladimir-putin-moves-missiles-closer-to-europe-while-donald-trump-and-gen-mattis-disagree-on-nato/	Rank ID	595
	Comment Count	67	Rand ID	0.0009

14	Title	Yes we cran': Obama unleashes slew of dad jokes during final turkey pardoning	Set Description	Obama 8
	Reporter	Leigh Munsil	Period	November
	Publication Date	23 November 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/11/23/yes-we-cran-obama-unleashes-slew-of-dad-jokes-during-final-turkey-pardoning/	Rank ID	120
	Comment Count	55	Rand ID	0.0247

15

Title	Actress Natalie Portman: People are 'energized in a new way' after Trump win	Set Description	Trump 3
Reporter	Leigh Munsil	Period	December
Publication Date	2 December 2016	Source	Bing
URL	https://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/02/actress-natalie-portman-people-are-energized-in-a-new-way-after-trump-win	Rank ID	1029
Comment Count	58	Rand ID	0.002

16

Title	Here's how much the Obama family has spent on vacations over the last eight years	Set Description	Obama 9
Reporter	Tré Goins-Phillips	Period	December
Publication Date	5 December 2016	Source	Bing
URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/05/heres-how-much-the-obama-family-has-spent-on-vacations-over-the-last-eight-years/	Rank ID	139
Comment Count	307	Rand ID	0.0287

17

Title	Liberal TV host criticizes Hillary Clinton for blaming her loss on 'fake news'	Set Description	Clinton 2
Reporter	Jon Street	Period	December
Publication Date	9 December 2016	Source	Bing
URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/09/liberal-tv-host-criticizes-hillary-clinton-for-blaming-her-loss-on-fake-news/	Rank ID	517
Comment Count	87	Rand ID	0.002

18	Title	Obama vows to take action for Russian interference in election	Set Description	Obama 2
	Reporter	Brandon Morse	Period	December
	Publication Date	10 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/15/obama-vows-to-take-action-for-russian-interference-in-election/	Rank ID	196
	Comment Count	326	Rand ID	0.0085

19	Title	Obama vows to take action for Russian interference in election	Set Description	Trump 4
	Reporter	Chris Enloe	Period	December
	Publication Date	11 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/11/donald-trump-explains-why-he-zeroed-in-on-exxon-mobil-ceo-as-potential-secretary-of-state-nominee/	Rank ID	1134
	Comment Count	117	Rand ID	0.003

20	Title	Kellyanne Conway implies Obama doesn't love the country enough	Set Description	Obama 7
	Reporter	Carlos Garcia	Period	December
	Publication Date	16 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/16/kellyanne-conway-implies-obama-doesnt-love-the-country-enough/	Rank ID	191
	Comment Count	83	Rand ID	0.0211

21	Title	President Obama uses Trump's favorite phrase to complain about alleged anti-Clinton media bias	Set Description	Obama 5
	Reporter	Sara Gonzales	Period	December
	Publication Date	16 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/16/president-obama-uses-trumps-favorite-phrase-to-complain-about-alleged-anti-clinton-media-bias/	Rank ID	176
	Comment Count	151	Rand ID	0.0131

22	Title	Obama roasts Russia in press conference: 'They are a weaker country'	Set Description	Obama 1
	Reporter	Leigh Munsil	Period	December
	Publication Date	16 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/16/obama-roasts-russia-in-press-conference-they-are-a-weaker-country/	Rank ID	212
	Comment Count	78	Rand ID	0.0015

23	Title	Federal judge orders unsealing of search warrant at center of Clinton email probe	Set Description	Clinton 9
	Reporter	Chris Enloe	Period	December
	Publication Date	20 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/20/federal-judge-orders-unsealing-of-search-warrant-at-center-of-clinton-email-probe/	Rank ID	498
	Comment Count	40	Rand ID	0.027

24	Title	Netanyahu spokesman: We have 'ironclad' info. that Obama 'helped craft' anti-Israel resolution	Set Description	Obama 10
	Reporter	Chris Enloe	Period	December
	Publication Date	25 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/25/netanyahu-spokesman-we-have-ironclad-info-that-obama-helped-craft-anti-israel-resolution	Rank ID	186
	Comment Count	426	Rand ID	0.0336

25	Title	New Judicial Watch documents: Obama spent taxpayer money campaigning for Hillary Clinton	Set Description	Obama 6
	Reporter	Leigh Munsil	Period	December
	Publication Date	29 December 2016	Source	Bing
	URL	https://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/12/29/new-judicial-watch-documents-obama-spent-taxpayer-money-campaigning-for-hillary-clinton/	Rank ID	424
	Comment Count	221	Rand ID	0.0207

26	Title	Day after deadly Ft. Lauderdale mass shooting, Obama traveled to Florida for different reason	Set Description	Obama 4
	Reporter	Dave Urbanski	Period	January
	Publication Date	9 January 2017	Source	Google
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/01/09/day-after-deadly-ft-lauderdale-mass-shooting-obama-traveled-to-florida-for-different-reason/	Rank ID	437
	Comment Count	109	Rand ID	0.0123

27	Title	Meryl Streep finds Trump sickening, but applauds child rapist Roman Polanski	Set Description	Trump 6
	Reporter	bishopdave	Period	January
	Publication Date	10 January 2017	Source	Google
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/myvoice/politics/meryl-streep-finds-trump-sickening-but-applauds-child-rapist-roman-polanski/	Rank ID	1406
	Comment Count	9	Rand ID	0.0056

28	Title	Millions migrated to states with right-to-work laws and no income tax during Obama's presidency	Set Description	Obama 3
	Reporter	Brandon Morse	Period	January
	Publication Date	11 January 2017	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/01/11/millions-migrated-to-states-with-right-to-work-laws-and-no-income-tax-during-obamas-presidency/	Rank ID	289
	Comment Count	63	Rand ID	0.0098

29	Title	There are three times as many bus permits for this Trump protest, than for his inauguration	Set Description	Trump 1
	Reporter	Carlos Garcia	Period	January
	Publication Date	13 January 2017	Source	Bing
	URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/01/13/there-are-three-times-as-many-bus-permits-for-this-trump-protest-than-for-his-inauguration/	Rank ID	1235
	Comment Count	326	Rand ID	0

30

Title	When two Americas met in Washington, D.C.: The inauguration of Donald Trump	Set Description	Trump 5
Reporter	Sarah Lee	Period	January
Publication Date	21 January 2017	Source	Bing
URL	http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/01/21/when-two-americas-met-in-washington-d-c-the-inauguration-of-donald-trump/	Rank ID	1184
Comment Count	94	Rand ID	0.0039

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