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Tweets, Distrust, and Bias: The Impact of President Donald Trump on the Media Landscape	
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Tweets, Distrust, and Bias: The Impact of President Donald Trump on the Media Landscape

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of the first three years of the presidency of Donald J. Trump on the relationship between the American president and the media outlets in the United States, and on the existence of partisan bias within the media landscape. It focuses on the president's communication strategy he employs against media outlets which cover him negatively to discredit them and deny negative coverage. It also focuses on the level of partisan bias displayed by three selected media outlets representing the contemporary ideological spectrum.

The theoretical foundation of this thesis is formed by two sources of information. Firstly, the analysis is guided by concepts from media and communication studies, specifically media roles, the ideal of objectivity in journalism, partisanship in journalism, media bias, and framing. The thesis applies the definitions of these concepts to analyze the contemporary media landscape. Secondly, the thesis utilizes existing sources on the presidential campaign and the first two years of presidency of Donald Trump. With its contemporary focus, the thesis aims to supplement their findings by analyzing contemporary data.

The thesis sets two hypotheses and uses the method of quantitative content analysis to analyze empirical data from two sources. Firstly, the thesis analyzes tweets sent out by the president via his personal Twitter account between January 20th, 2017, and April 19th, 2020. There are 939 tweets included in the sample the topic of which is the reaction of President Trump to the coverage of four media outlets – *Fox News, CNN, The New York Times,* and *The Washington Post.* The aim is to confirm or deny the first hypothesis that there is an ongoing bias in the Twitter communication of the president aimed at individual outlets as he displays affinity towards *Fox News* and hostility towards *CNN, The Washington Post,* and *The New York Times*. Secondly, the thesis analyzes online articles published by three outlets across the ideological spectrum – *Fox News* representing the right, *The New York Times* representing the

center, and *The Washington Post* representing the left. There are 116 articles included in the sample, originating between 19th and 25th September 2019 and focused on the topic of the whistleblower complaint against the president and the impeachment. The aim is to confirm or deny the second hypothesis that there is partisan bias within the articles, with *Fox News* expressing positive bias towards the president, and *The Times* and *The Post* expressing negative bias towards the president.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter the thesis discusses the conduct of the Nixon administration towards the hostile press, especially during the Watergate scandal, and finds six patterns of behavior which define the communication strategy – distrust towards the press and the conviction they are biased against the president; denial of negative coverage; the use of direct channel of communication to avoid distortion of messages by the media; direct and personal attacks; limiting activity of the media by restricting their access or through legal action; and the prominent role of the press secretary in the hostile relationship.

The thesis applies the patterns to the analysis of the communication strategy of President Trump and it finds that as all of them are applicable, his conduct is a direct continuation of the trend of hostile relationship to the media. However, there has been escalation in the recent year in all aspects of the communication strategy. The thesis confirms the first hypothesis as it finds there is negative bias displayed in the president's tweets against *CNN, The Times* and *The Post*, and positive bias towards *Fox News*, even though there has been increased tension in the recent year. The thesis finds two major changes from the Nixon case. First is Trump's use of Twitter as not only a direct communication channel but also as means to attack and discredit hostile media outlets and deny negative coverage. Second is the increasing trend of restricting the access of journalists to information by withholding daily press briefings, the tendency to take away White House passes from journalists of hostile media outlets, and lawsuits against these outlets. The thesis thus finds a threat to the democratic

principles of the country – as the president attacks individual journalists and outlets, he attacks freedom of press guaranteed by the Bill of Rights and takes further steps to restrict opposing media.

The thesis also confirms the second hypothesis – after the analysis of gatekeeping, coverage and statement bias, and the partisan use of headlines, it finds there is partisan bias within all analyzed outlets. The coverage in *Fox News* shows distinct positive bias towards the president and the coverage in *The Post* shows distinct negative bias. The latter is visible in *The Times* as well, however, the thesis finds this outlet to be the most balanced, and the most committed to the ideal of objectivity. The presence of partisan bias also challenges the definitions of media roles and conduct in society. The thesis also finds two reasons motivating the partisanship in outlets. It is economically profitable to cover the president which can lead to both abundance of positive partisan coverage and lack of coverage for other important topics. Ideological and political motivations of the journalists and their aligned audience then threaten the possibility of objective reporting and create vicious circle of outlets providing biased coverage for partisan audience that demands it.

The thesis concludes that the presidency of Donald Trump has left several significant impacts on the relationship with the media. There are links between the president's communication strategy, especially tweets, and coverage in the outlets – bias expressed by the president and the outlets is aligned, and by tweeting, the president fuels bias in the outlets by providing further material and creating feedback loop. The president also set precedents for further administrations, especially in his use of social media to carry out the communication strategy, and his threats to the freedom of the press and democracy by restricting the activity of opposing journalists. The divisive nature of the presidency has also heightened partisan tendencies in the outlets, specifically motivated by their own economic interests and ideological and political motivations. This then threatens the objectivity of the media landscape

as it creates imbalance in coverage and a vicious circle of indulging instead of challenging partisan views of the people.

Table of contents

Introduction

It has been almost four years since the American public last voted for their new president. Several months prior to the election, the primary race was already pointing that it would be Donald Trump, a real-estate magnate and a reality TV celebrity, who would be the Republican candidate for the next president. The mainstream media in the country had mainly united in the negative coverage of the candidate and his policies:

> For example, a mock front page created by the *Boston Globe* during the US presidential campaign in April 2016 carried the date of April 9, 2017. Using snippets of Trump's own words, the *Boston Globe* envisioned how the front page of the newspaper would look under a Trump presidency. The lead story, "Deportations to Begin," reported on a televised address by President Trump in which he called on Congress to fund a "massive deportation force." (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 113, original italics)

A front page such as this "was aimed at preventing this envisioned future" (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 113), but it arguably carried an element of disbelief on the side of the mainstream media outlets on whether such an election result would be truly possible. Yet despite the media's efforts and steadfast predictions against this outcome, Donald J. Trump became the unlikely 45th president of the United States. His election significantly impacted, among other things, the media landscape in the country – firstly, it brought about arguably the most strained relationship between the president and the media in decades; and secondly, the presidency seems to have served as a clear reflection of the current partisanship which has developed in the American media landscape.

The adversarial attitude of the president to a multitude of media outlets in the country "is a culmination of trends that have been occurring for several decades" (Delli Carpini 18) -

however, the enmity between Trump and most of the media landscape seems to be of particular gravity. Following his controversial inauguration with a disputed number of attendees, the very first days of his presidency were already spent in a major media conflict as the newly-inaugurated President stated: "I have a running war with the media. They are among the most dishonest human beings on Earth" ("Donald Trump Warns Journalists"). However, Trump's announced media war was selective in its targets, with the president tweeting: "Congratulations to @FoxNews for being number one in inauguration ratings. They were many times higher than FAKE NEWS @CNN – public is smart!" (@realDonaldTrump, "Congratulations"). This highlights his use of Twitter which quickly became the trademark of the president who carries out much of his communication not via his official account as the @POTUS – an acronym for President of the United States – but his personal account @realDonaldTrump which he retained after his election. The complex relationship of the president to the media outlets of the country can be therefore characterized by a great animosity displayed towards a significant number of media outlets in the country, and an equally great affinity towards a minority of media outlets, especially *Fox News*. This distinction largely affects the president's communication strategy and overall conduct towards the media.

Such distinction also signifies the presence of partisan divide in the media landscape - despite the fact "that the media should be unbiased or objective, particularly in their treatment of politics and public issues" (Lichter 404), the media coverage of President Trump, his administration and policies over the previous three years differed based on the particular outlet. This implies that there is a significant partisan divide between the right of the ideological spectrum, which is represented mostly by *Fox News*, and the center and left of the spectrum, most significantly represented by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The coverage of Trump by *Fox News* has consistently been more positive than that of mainstream centrist or leftist newspapers as "Fox's worldview and Trump's understanding of his political appeal to

his base are closely allied" (Herbert et al. 110). On the other hand, the outlets on the other side of the ideological spectrum have published investigative articles – especially *The Post* which "has rediscovered its Watergate mojo" (Benson 216) in covering the investigation into the Russia collusion and the whistleblower complaint which started the impeachment process.

The aim of this thesis is thus to examine the impact of the presidency of Donald J. Trump on the relationship between the administration and the media, and on the partisan conduct of the media. The thesis will analyze the patterns of the communication strategy Trump employs to discredit hostile media and deny negative coverage. Furthermore, it will examine the level of current partisanship and how it manifests in the articles by three selected outlets in the media landscape.

Literature review

There appears to be discord in the debate on the current state of partisan divide in the American media landscape. In the 2018 book *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Benkler et al. conclude that

> the American media ecosystem consists of two distinct, structurally different media ecosystems. One part is the right-wing, dominated by partisan media outlets that are densely interconnected and insular and anchored by Fox News and Breitbart. The other part spans the rest of the spectrum. It includes outlets from the left to historically center-right publications like the *Wall Street Journal* and is anchored by media organizations on the center and center-left that adhere to professional standards of journalism. (75, original italics)

Benkler et al. argue that there is a difference in the journalistic conduct of the two parts. The outlets on "the right tend to reinforce partisan statements, irrespective of their truth, and to

punish actors . . . who insist on speaking truths that are inconsistent with partisan frames and narratives dominant within the ecosystem" (75). However, they do not equate the rest of the spectrum with the ideal of objectivity – yet the outlets "were able to adhere to truth-seeking norms because their audience, in turn, was ready and able to distinguish truth from falsehood and reward the former" (98) and while there is still "plenty of room for partisanship— in agenda setting and topic selection, in perspective and framing— . . . it appears to significantly constrain disinformation" (98).

On the other hand, in the 2014 book *Partisan Journalism: A History of Media Bias in the United States,* Jim A. Kuypers claims there has long been a presence of a liberal or progressive bias in the mainstream media which was only balanced by the arrival of conservative voices: "Finally, Fox News appeared in 1996, offering for the first time a competing set of images as well as commentary that presented viewers with new perspectives" (3). He claims that the liberal disposition of the majority of journalists in the moment "leads to templates of how one views the news, with the tendency to adopt such templates" (187) in the absence of competition, and the "templates provide an easy mechanism for injecting bias into regular news offerings" (187).

The relation of the American media to the election and the first two years of presidency of Donald Trump have similarly been analyzed quite considerably in the recent sources. In the 2018 collection of essays *Trump and the Media,* edited by Pablo J. Boczkowski and Zizi Papacharissi, they debate the role the social media and news had in the election of the current president:

> [T]here is a certain sense that the media played an important role in this extraordinary turn of events. This applies to both the news and social media individually, and even more so to the combination of them. From the apparent

disconnect of the agenda-setting media with a vast segment of the American voters to the deluge of fake news circulating on social media, and from the intensity of the confrontation between President Trump and these media to his constant use of Twitter to promote alternative—and often unsupported by facts—narratives. (1)

Happer et al., in their 2019 collection *Trump's Media War,* then focus on Trump's employment of fake news to distort the legitimacy of American journalists and mainstream media, his usage of social media (most notably Twitter) to not only gain political points but also provoke a reaction of media outlets, and they debate the relevance of traditional media outlets in the previous decade.

The thesis aims to elaborate on the findings of these sources which focus mainly on the election and the first two years of Trump's term by supplementing them with the study of the later years of the presidency via the analysis of tweets and more contemporary articles.

Data and method

The empirical data which will be analyzed for the thesis come from two sources. The first source will be the private Twitter account of Donald Trump. The focus will be on tweets sent out between the inauguration day and the time of the research with the topic being the president's reaction to press coverage and individual media outlets on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Secondly, the analysis of the media coverage will be conducted on online articles published in three selected media outlets in the United States on the Trump impeachment in the first seven days since the media first reported on the content of the whistleblower complaint. The outlets – *Fox News*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* – aim to be representative of the ideological divide in the media climate. The thesis will use quantitative content analysis of the selected tweets and articles to prove or disprove two

hypotheses which will help in the overarching analysis of the presidential conduct against the media in the country, and the current partisanship of the media. Both the methodology and the factors affecting the selection of data will be described in more detail in the methodological section.

Thesis outline

Following the introduction, a theoretical section will provide a brief definition of concepts from the study of media which will be significant as a foundation for the discussions in the thesis; and a methodological section will explain the selected method of analysis and the process of selection of data. The first chapter will then provide the historical background to the topic as it will describe the early months of the Watergate scandal with a specific focus on the role of the media in the process and on the patterns which can be identified in the presidential pushback against the investigative efforts of the press. The second chapter will build on the patterns of Nixon's conduct identified in the first chapter, using them to inform the analysis of the attitude and communication strategies employed by President Trump and his administration to navigate their relationship with the mostly hostile mainstream media in the country, and to counter their negative coverage of the administration. This discussion will be supplemented by the analysis of the president's tweets aimed at media outlets positioned at different parts of the ideological spectrum. The third chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the contemporary media climate in the United States – through the lens of the analysis of articles by three selected media outlets covering the impeachment process, the chapter will discuss the current partisanship of the mainstream media, debate the reasons for the existing bias, and discuss how it affects the media landscape and definitions of theoretical concepts.

Definition of concepts

The theoretical foundation of this thesis will consist of several key concepts originating in the field of media and communication which will be instrumental in informing the analysis in the subsequent chapters, especially the third chapter. This section will offer a comprehensive definition of these concepts, providing the overview of their developments in the history of American journalism and the academic debate surrounding them when applicable.

Media roles

Christians et al. define four general social roles of the media in society – monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative role. The monitorial role "is that of vigilant informer, which applies mainly to collecting and publishing information of interest to audiences, as well as distributing information on behalf of sources and clients that include governments, commercial advertisers, and private individuals" (30). The facilitative role allows media to use their position of "the main channel of public information" and they "are relied on by other institutions for certain services in many areas, including politics, commerce, health, education, and welfare" (31). On the other hand, the radical role "is a clear departure from collaboration with authority. The media enact this role when they provide a platform for views and voices that are critical of authority and the established order. They give support for drastic change and reform" (31). Finally, the collaborative role implies "the relationship between the media and sources of political and economic power, primarily the state and its agencies" and is today utilized "in defence of the social order against threats of crime, war, terrorism, and insurgency, as well as natural emergencies and disasters" (31).

Out of these four roles, it is the monitorial role which is regarded as the most representative of the activity of the press, and

it varies according to involvement of the media in society. It can range from the more or less passive channeling of information to carrying out a watchdog role ostensibly on behalf of the public. However, this role stops short of partisan advocacy and is restrained by precepts of professional journalistic practice, in particular those that require opinion and attitude to be distinguished from facts that can be supported by evidence. (Christians et al. 125-6)

Even at the most active end of the spectrum – the watchdog fulfillment of the monitorial role – there is a clear differentiation from the radical role. Even though the media, when acting as a watchdog, are undoubtedly critical of authority, the aim is not to carry out a revolutionary transformation but merely to reform and improve the system in place (181-2).

Closely related to the definition of normative media roles is the trichotomy of spheres of journalism proposed by Daniel C. Hallin. He divided the world of journalism into three spheres, "each of which is governed by different journalistic standards" (*The "Uncensored War"* 116). The inner sphere is the sphere of consensus and "it encompasses those social objects not regarded by the journalists and most of the society as controversial" on which "the journalist's role is to serve as an advocate or celebrant of consensus values" (*The "Uncensored War"* 116-7). The second sphere is the sphere of legitimate controversy which Hallin describes as

the region of electoral contests and legislative debates, of issues recognized as such by the major established actors of the American political process. The limits of this sphere are defined primarily by the two-party system—by the parameters of debate between and within the Democratic and Republican parties—as well as by the decision-making process in the bureaucracies of the executive branch. Within this region,

objectivity and balance reign as the supreme journalistic virtues. (*The "Uncensored War"* 116)

Yet beyond this sphere is a third one – the sphere of deviance in which the journalist "plays the role of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus" (*The "Uncensored War"* 117). According to Hallin, which sphere is the prevalent one in the media landscape largely depends on the current climate in the country – however, more than one can be active at the same time, creating considerable variation in the conduct of journalists of different media outlets (*The "Uncensored War"* 118). The activity of the media can be then placed anywhere on the spectrum of roles ranging from "a straight recitation of official statements" (*The "Uncensored War"* 117) to an "ideal of the journalist as an independent investigator who serves to check the abuse of power" (*The "Uncensored War"* 118).

The third chapter will use the definitions of the four general social roles media can assume in societies as well as the three spheres of journalistic activity, and apply these general concepts to the conduct of the three analyzed outlets. The aim of this process will be to determine what roles do the American media – represented by the selected outlets – fulfill in the American society, and whether nuances in their activity warrant for a debate within the established definitions of the concepts.

Objective journalism

The concept which can be traced within these discussions is the ideal of objectivity in American journalism which is "at once a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing" (Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm" 149). As Hallin states, a "modern concept of objectivity developed in the period between the two world wars" (*The*

"Uncensored War" 65) – objectivity has thus displaced the value and opinion-driven journalism of eighteenth and nineteenth century which was largely partisan by asserting that "the roots of objectivity lay in the notion that fact and value are radically separate" (*The "Uncensored War"* 65). By the 1920s, the norm of objectivity "became a fully formulated occupational ideal, part of a professional project or mission . . . [and] a moral code" (Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm" 163) which was taught in journalism courses and was embedded in codes of ethics. Hallin introduces three components of objective journalism:

- independence, or being "independent of political commitments and free of 'outside' pressures, including pressures from government and other political actors, advertisers, and the news organization itself as an institution with economic and political interests" (*The "Uncensored War"* 68);

- objectivity, or "journalist's basic task . . . to present 'the facts,' to tell what happened, not to pass judgment on it. Opinion should be clearly separated from the presentation of news" (*The "Uncensored War"* 68);

- balance, or the fact that "[n]ews coverage of any political controversy should be inpartial (*sic*), representing without favor the positions of all the contending parties" (*The "Uncensored War"* 68).

The practice of the ideal is complex. Christians et al. state that "[i]t is tempting, when interpreting the work of journalism, to focus on the central activity of collecting and disseminating reliable information about real-world events—and to equate this with the monitorial role and with the idea of journalistic objectivity" (142). However, while the monitorial role of the media seems to be best suited to fulfill Hallin's requirements of independence, objectivity, and balance, Christians et al. draw several objections to the claim that all journalism, while acting in the monitorial role, is inherently objective – there is a selection process present "which inevitably opens the door to subjectivity. It is hard to gather

and publish information without making value judgments or applying criteria of relevance that have no objective basis" (142). What is more, the further end of the scope of monitorial role is the media acting as a watchdog of democracy and carrying out investigative reporting which requires "active search for evidence rather than simply collecting and disseminating what is readily available. This can hardly be accomplished without personal engagement and without deploying some clear value judgments, even if not advocating them" (142). This sentiment was echoed in Hallin's theory of three journalistic spheres as it implied that "journalists' commitment to objectivity shifts, depending on the material they are covering" (Meikle 100) – whether it is a celebration of consensus, legitimate contest, or deviance of consensus. While embracing the overarching ideal of objectivity, "news incorporates political values, which arise from a range of influences, from routines of information gathering to recruitment patterns of journalists and shared ideological assumptions of the wider society" (Hallin and Mancini 26).

The third chapter will use the concept of objectivity as the frame of reference for the manner in which reporting should be done. It will use the definitions of its scope as to determine which activity carried out by the three outlets is within the limitations, and which activity crosses over into the territory of biased coverage.

Partisanship

The autonomy of American journalism is granted by three elements – freedom of press guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, the professionalization of journalism, and the fact that "media . . . not only are privately owned but are large and profitable commercial institutions . . . [and] therefore economically autonomous" (Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"* 64) so they are not in need of subsidies from the political sphere. Objective journalism which should be enabled by these elements "is upheld specifically against partisan journalism in which newspapers are the

declared allies or agents of political parties and their reporting of news is an element of partisan struggle" (Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm" 150). This tendency, which Hallin and Mancini also term "political parallelism" (28), can manifests itself in the content of the reporting but also "in the *partisanship of media audiences*, with supporters of different parties or tendencies buying different newspapers or watching different TV channels" (28, original italics).

While objective journalism is something largely considered an ideal in American media landscape and scholarship, it has not been a constant – throughout much of its history, journalism in the United States has been partisan (Kuypers 4). In the nineteenth century, this was challenged by several factors – economic motivation, Civil War, progressive political reforms, and professionalization. This prompted the move towards the ideal of objectivity which was successful as it was firmly established in American journalism by the end of the Second World War (27-55).

However, the postwar years in the United States can be characterized by economic prosperity which largely extended to the newspapers as well, and "[p]rofits lulled the press into complacency" (Aucoin 43). What is more, because of the established status of journalists as professionals,

> the American press had taken its place as an integral part of the governing process . . . Journalists were regularly taken into the confidence of government officials . . . [and they] came to rely on those officials as their primary source of information, to focus on their activities as the basic subject matter of news, to share their perspectives, and often to cooperate with them, though the principles of objectivity limited this more direct kind of relationship. (Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"* 69)

According to Aucoin, the principles of objectivity which developed in the interwar period "established professional conventions that insulated government and business leaders from

routine criticism and challenge" as they "demanded that reporters and editors not only excise personal opinions but also exclude evaluative statements about the institutional pronouncements and policies, unless the reporter was quoting a source of equal status" (45). Yet this status quo began to change due to decrease in consensus in politics, society, and the trust in public authorities. These circumstances, combined with the rise of television as a more direct channel, contributed to a relationship of the government with the press which was "more adversarial, less bound by a sense of reciprocal obligations" (Hallin, "The Passing" 17). This development meant the turn from over-relying on official sources "to a more active, mediated, journalist-centered form of reporting" (Hallin, "The Passing" 18) which was more independent from the government sources.

Kuypers presents a different views on the developments of the 1960s onwards – according to him, the standards of objectivity eroded in the 1960s, and "[t]his post-objective phase press existed virtually unchallenged from the 1960s to 1980" (10) as their control of the majority of mainstream media outlets meant that "the left controlled the interpretation of the news" (10). This was only disrupted in the 1980s – "the rise of . . . alternative sources of news did not so much mark a return to the partisan press, but rather a return to a *competitive* press" (10, original italics) which challenged the dominance of the mainstream media he considers to have a liberal bias. On the other hand, according to Hallin and Mancini, "American newspapers are not significantly differentiated in their political orientations. The principle of neutrality is particularly strong in American journalism today" (209).

While discussing the involvement of the media, especially of *The Washington Post,* in the Watergate scandal in the first chapter, the thesis will operate with the characterization of the press as more objective, more independent from the government entities, and pursuing a more active approach to reporting and uncovering issues. It will thus reject Kuypers's description of a post-objective press with a liberal bias. However, as the thesis will analyze the

selected articles from the three outlets, it will operate with a hypothesis that there is an existence of both liberal and conservative bias in the contemporary media. The thesis will therefore reject Hallin and Mancini's theory of neutral American journalism, and base the hypothesis closer to Kuypers's claims of competitive media landscape.

Media bias and framing

The discussion of partisanship in American media is highly linked to the concept of media bias which is in direct opposition to the notion of objective journalism – while the latter is defined by independence, objectivity, and balance, partisan bias in the media is "a significantly distorted portrayal of reality that systematically and disproportionately favors one party over the other" (Groeling 133). Differences can be found in alternative reports covering the same topic as "while they are factually correct, they convey very different messages and stimulate radically different impressions about the events. This is achieved by selective omissions and differing emphasis" (Xiang and Sarvary 611).

D'Alessio and Allen identify three types of partisan media bias. The first type is the gatekeeping bias which operates on the principle of "writers and editors select[ing] from a body of potential stories those that will be presented to the public and, by extension, also 'deselect[ing]' those stories of which the mass audience will hear nothing" (135). The second type is coverage bias which is based on "the physical amount of coverage each side of some issue receives" (136) – an example being a two-party political system where the coverage should be proportionately distributed between the two parties. The third type is the statement bias which consists of journalists "interject[ing] their own opinions into the text of the coverage of an issue" (136) which may result in the text appearing favorable or unfavorable towards the issue.

The theory of news framing has a significant role in the study of partisan media bias as it is an "influential way that the media may shape public opinion . . . by framing events and issues in particular ways" (de Vreese 51). This may have a significant effect on "how audiences can interpret an issue or event. In fact, news frames can exert a relatively substantial influence on citizens' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors" (Tewskbury and Scheufele 19) which serves the media outlets striving to present the news in the version which fits their narrative or agenda. Framing does not concern itself with the selection of different topics or reporting on different events – rather, it "is concerned with the presentation of issues" (de Vreese 53), highlighting some aspects or facts.

The framing process of news items consists of two parts – frame building and frame setting. Frame building "refers to *the process of competition, selection, and modification of frames from elites or strategic communicators by the media*. This process is influenced by forces that are internal to the newsroom and news organizations, as well as by external forces" (Lecheler and de Vreese 12, original italics). According to Tewskbury and Scheufele, there are five elements or actors "that could potentially influence how journalists frame a given issue: larger societal norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, external pressures from interest groups and other policy makers, professional routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists" (23). Frame setting, then, focuses on the relationship between the way news articles have been framed, and the cultural context and knowledge of the audience (Lecheler and de Vreese 13). Framing is also highly connected to the use of language by the journalists, for example "arranging words and phrases in a text . . . the orderly sequencing of events in a text . . . the presence of words such as 'because,' 'since,' and 'so'; and *rhetorical structures* that subtly suggest how a text should be interpreted" (Hallahan 207-8, original italics) which include marked language such as metaphors.

The third chapter will use the definitions of media bias and especially of the three types of media bias along with the definition and methods of framing to create such media bias in order to determine its presence and characterize the nature of the bias in the selected articles by the three outlets.

Data and method

Apart from the use of theoretical sources, the thesis will employ the method of quantitative content analysis. Klaus Krippendorff defines it as "*a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use*" (18, original italics). This thesis will use a content analysis design which will compare similar aspects of differing texts – coming from the same source but aiming the message at a different subject in the case of the first set of data, and coming from differing sources but covering the same event in the case of the second set of data (93).

Krippendorff identifies a framework for content analysis which constitutes of the following elements:

- A body of text, the data that a content analyst has available to begin an analytical effort
- A research question that the analyst seeks to answer by examining the body of text
- A context of the analyst's choice within which to make sense of the body of text
- An analytical construct that operationalizes what the analyst knows about the context
- Inferences that are intended to answer the research question, which constitute the basic accomplishment of the content analysis
- Validating evidence, which is the ultimate justification of the content analysis. (29-30)

A research question in content analysis "is analogous to a set of hypotheses . . . [and] must be answered through inferences drawn from texts" (31) without further generalizations.

They assist with efficiency of the research by helping analysts "proceed more expeditiously from sampling relevant texts to answering given questions" (32). In this design, however, the thesis has selected to set two hypotheses instead to better suit the quantitative nature of the analysis. The thesis has two main areas of focus – the patterns in the conduct of the administration and of President Trump towards hostile media outlets, and current partisan bias within three selected outlets. There are therefore two main hypotheses which the thesis aims to prove or disprove by the means of content analysis as they can support the overarching analysis of the thesis:

- H1: There is an ongoing bias in the Twitter communication of President Trump aimed at individual outlets as he displays affinity towards *Fox News* and hostility towards *CNN, The Washington Post,* and *The New York Times.*

- H2: There is prevalent partisan bias within the coverage of media outlets positioned differently on the ideological spectrum, with *Fox News* (representing the right) displaying positive bias towards the president, and *The New York Timed* (representing the center) and *The Washington Post* (representing the left) displaying, on various levels, negative bias towards the president.

Data "are the starting point of any empirical research" (30). The thesis will draw from two sources of empirical data in the form of texts. However, the texts are not a stand-alone entity – they exist within a context which needs to be provided as it "specifies the world in which texts can be related to the analyst's research questions" (33). Analytical constructs then "operationalize what the content analyst knows about the context, specifically the network of correlations that are assumed to explain how available texts are connected to the possible answers to the analyst's questions and the conditions under which these correlations could change" (34-5). The selection of the texts and the discussion of the context and the factors which guided it will be the focus of the following paragraphs.

The first set of data which will be analyzed for the thesis is the archive of the tweets of President Trump to inform the analysis of the president's approach towards the media outlets in the country. While Trump, after his inauguration in January 2017, received access to the recently wiped-clean official presidential account with the handle of @POTUS, he retained the use of his personal account under the handle @realDonaldTrump. In the first three years of his presidency, Trump seemed to have preferred to share his thoughts on the personal account, and most content on the official presidential account consisted of retweets from the personal account. The personal account was therefore selected as a source of data for the thesis rather than the official presidential account for two reasons. Firstly, Trump's Twitter account is a significant channel for the president in his efforts to communicate his thoughts and messages directly to people. It could be argued that the highly-used personal account is a better reflection of this approach to communication as it provides a higher number of original tweets of the president. Secondly, the decision to maintain an active personal account rather than using an official account which is available to incumbent presidents is a factor which needs to be taken into consideration while discussing the media strategy and relationships of the Trump administration and the president himself.

Two factors informed the selection of the analyzed tweets – time frame and topic. As far as the time is considered, the tweets which will be considered were sent out between January 20th, 2017 – the inauguration day – and April 19th, 2020 – the time of research. This time frame was selected to map the developments of the president's reactions to the press coverage from various media outlets in the United States in the approximately three years of his presidency. The purpose of this thesis is to build, with a more contemporary analysis, on the body of sources covering the campaign and the first year of Trump's term. The thesis will thus highlight the recent tweets to study the conduct and reactions of President Trump to the activity of the media

outlets and their coverage especially from September 2019 in the months leading up to the start of the impeachment process.

With regard to the content of the tweets, the data set will only include those in which the president addresses the media outlets, their individual journalists, and their press coverage of himself and his administration. The following categories of tweets will be taken into account. Note that some of the tweets mention more than one topical category, and therefore there is a degree of overlap in the numbers:

- 552 tweets mentioning *Fox News*

- 150 tweets mentioning *CNN*

- 158 tweets mentioning *The New York Times*

- 79 tweets mentioning *The Washington Post*

The analysis of the selected tweets will focus on the content of the tweets aimed at different outlets and determine what portion of them was positive, neutral, or negative. It will look at using recurrent adjectives associated with unreliability or dishonesty in different groups of the selected tweets. Overall, the analysis will seek the confirmation of the first hypothesis by comparing the language of the different bodies of texts to inform the discussion of the president's bias towards the individual media outlets. Firstly, the focus on the difference in language and overall attitude of tweets mentioning *Fox News* on one side of the spectrum, and tweets mentioning *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *CNN* on the other side will help analyze the president's personal attitude towards the different media outlets. Secondly, focusing on the content of the tweets mentioning *The Times*, *The Post* and *CNN* will help informing the discussion of the strategies the president employs in reaction to negative press coverage.

The second set of data is the online article archive of three media outlets in the United States – *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Fox News* – in order to inform the discussion of the partisan nature of the media in the United States in the present day. These three outlets – two newspapers and one TV channel – were selected in attempt to best map the current media landscape in terms of the position of the outlets on an ideological spectrum. It could be argued that *The Washington Post*, combined with their legacy of investigative reporting and continuing significance in this field of journalism, is a major mainstream newspaper which best represents the left-centrist position of the media spectrum in the United States. While the centrist pool of media outlets is broad, this thesis selected *The New York Times* as the newspaper to represent this fraction as it consistently ranks among the first in the list of outlets with the highest digital subscription, and therefore also influence and reach towards the American public.

A sample of three newspapers would be the ideal as it would eliminate factors such as the difference between TV reporting and reporting in the press, and the difference between the outputs of a TV station on air and in the form of online reporting. However, the thesis decided not to opt for *The Wall Street Journal*, arguably the most notably mainstream conservative newspaper in today's United States, and instead select *Fox News* and their online articles due to the relationship President Trump and members of his administration have with the channel. It could be argued that as Donald Trump seems to have a personal preference for this channel and displays highest engagement with their coverage and journalists, selecting *Fox News* as the third outlet for the analysis would be significant and beneficial for the analysis.

The same two factors influenced the selection process of the analyzed articles – the content and the time frame. As far as the content of the articles is concerned, the main focus will be the very beginning of impeachment process. The data set was selected by searching for the word "whistleblower", and only includes articles which are focused on the impeachment

and have been placed in the "Politics" section, as is the case with *The Times* and *The Post*, or in both "Politics" and "U.S." section, as is the case with *Fox News*. All articles from the "Opinion" section were excluded from the analysis as they are subjective by nature.

Regarding the time frame, the articles which will be considered were published between September 19th, 2019, and September 25th, 2019[2]. Firstly, as the overall purpose of the thesis is to analyze the more recent developments in the press coverage and the state of the media landscape, it aims to focus on materials not already covered in the existing sources. Secondly, the seven-day period in September 2019 was selected as it was the week during which first reports providing the details of the whistleblower complaint were published, and official start of the impeachment inquiry was announced. The following articles will then be considered:

- 31 articles published by *The New York Times*

- 48 articles published by *The Washington Post*

- 37 articles published online on the website of *Fox News*

The content analysis of the selected articles will focus on the presence of partisan bias in order to confirm or reject the second hypothesis. It will focus on the presence of gatekeeping bias, aiming to determine what portion of the analyzed articles reinforces the narrative of the particular outlet. It will also analyze the selection and order of the sources and how it strengthens the bias. Lastly, it will focus on the use of marked language and subjective comments in the articles, and of different types of mitigating expressions in the headlines to evaluate how the outlets use these techniques to display bias. The analysis will help inform the discussion on the contemporary divide between media outlets which are positioned differently

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[2] An exception is an article by *The Post* about the release of the call transcript from early hours on 26th September (Barrett et al.) as it was required for contrastive analysis.

on the ideological spectrum, and help determine the presence of bias over the ideal of objective

journalism.

1. Post v. Nixon: The President and the Press

Watergate has come to represent perhaps the most defining political scandal of the twentieth century as it involved one of the biggest documented instances of the misuse of presidential power and a rare instance of impeachment. It was also a significantly trying period in the relations between the press investigating the ties of the White House to the break-in and the cover-up, and the Nixon administration. *The Washington Post* was the first to investigate the possibility of the involvement of the administration in the break-in, and, according to its editors, was the first on the line of the presidential pushback: "White House attacks on newspapers and television quite literally forced the reader and listener to choose between the White House and the press" (Simons and Bradlee ix). However, Watergate was not the first instance of the media fulfilling their role of a watchdog of democracy, an institution bringing information to the American public on the activities of the public administration, during the Nixon era – nor was it the first instance of presidential pushback and Nixon's negative approach to the media.

This chapter will analyze the attitude of President Nixon towards the mainstream press in the country and the subsequent pushback against negative coverage provided by investigative efforts of the media with a special focus on the role of *The Washington Post* – as arguably the most important outlet in the affair – in the first months of the Watergate scandal. It aims to discover patterns within the conduct of the Nixon administration. Operating on the hypothesis that the two cases show significant similarities, the patterns will then be applied on the case of the current administration of President Donald Trump in the following chapters. The aim of this chapter is then to serve as a foundation for the subsequent analysis of Trump's relationship with the press.

1.1.   Early Enmity

According to Keogh, Richard Nixon came to the White House with an already formed distrust or even disdain towards the mainstream media in the country – as a President-elect, Nixon warned the members of the future cabinet to be wary of the press: "Always remember, the men and women of the news media approach this as an adversary relationship. The time will come when they will run lies about you, when the columnists and editorial writers will make you seem to be scoundrels or fools or both" (2-3). It could be argued that such attitude towards the press of the nation is in agreement with two of the sentiments Nixon carried with him throughout his political career up until his years in the White House – the sense of betrayal he felt due to the lack of support from the establishment he served, and his inclination for isolation and deeply-rooted belief in being alone (Berkowitz 13-16).

Cannon offers a contradictive narrative of Nixon's initial relationship with the press of the country: "Nixon, unlike some politicians, wasn't so distrustful of the press that he wasn't willing to associate, make friendships and make use of them" (196). Nevertheless, it is rather the lack of trust which came to be characteristic of Nixon's presidential style. His assumption of the media's hostility then guided his communications strategy – he "believed . . . that the best way to communicate with the people was to appear on live television and speak directly to them" (Keogh 39). This belief was not based on his charisma or oratory style – it could be argued that his performance on television was not consistently one of his strengths. While his famous Checkers speech during the Eisenhower campaign in 1952 restored his reputation, his televised debate with John F. Kennedy in 1960 did not tilt the scales to his favor. Television was rather a direct channel to the people of the country while the press, whom he, in vain, "wanted . . . to act as neutral conduits" (Morgan 159), was not. With this strategy, Nixon was "going over the heads of the newsmen so that what was said would not be strained through their political bias" (Keogh 39).

The first pattern which can be identified in the approach of Richard Nixon to the media is his distrust towards the press and a cemented belief that they will approach him negatively with an aim to discredit him. This pattern then subsequently informs the second pattern – the need to communicate with the population through as direct a channel as possible to avoid the distortion of information the president wishes to distribute.

The mistrust between the media and the president, according to Keogh, was two-sided as Nixon arrived at the office "not only without the support of most" journalists in the country "but with their active opposition" (7). However, Nixon and his administration often accelerated this adversarial relationship to a higher level with direct attacks or interventions:

> [J]ournalists whose criticisms angered the President found themselves excluded from the White House press pool or Air Force One. Journalists suspected of receiving information via unauthorized government leaks . . . had their phones tapped. Orders were given for income tax audits of owners of unfriendly newspapers. (Morgan 159-60)

Despite these instances of war against the press of the country, the first truly major open conflict in the strained relationship erupted one year before the Watergate scandal, in the 1971 press release of what came to be known as the Pentagon Papers – a highly classified "government study on American involvement in Vietnam" (Robertson). Daniel Ellsberg, formerly a strategic analyst for the Department of Defense, lost faith in the American progress in the war and decided to share the contents of the study with the American public by photocopying the documents and sharing them with *The New York Times*. They moved on to publish their first report on the contents of the Pentagon Papers on June 13, 1971, and continued with their coverage the following day (Chokshi, "Behind the Race").

While the actions of the Nixon administration were not covered in the Papers, they decided to urge the newspaper to stop publishing the documents. After the second report was published, the outlet received a telegram from the U.S. Attorney General who "asked The Times to stop publishing information from the top-secret report, arguing that the newspaper was in violation of a law prohibiting disclosure of government secrets" (Chokshi, "Behind the Race"). As *The Times* continued to publish their articles covering the contents, "the U.S. Department of Justice obtained in U.S. District Court a temporary restraining order against further publication of the classified material" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica), basing it on the fear that the articles would be detrimental to the defense of the United States. *The Washington Post* was the second newspaper – eventually of many – to receive a copy of the Pentagon Papers and decided to pick up the mantle of publishing the sensitive information as *The New York Times* were temporarily restrained by the courts. *The Post* was similarly approached by the authorities to cease their publishing activities, and they joined *The Times* in "their legal war against the administration" (Chokshi, "Behind the Race"). This culminated in their appeal to the Supreme Court – in a swiftly manner, with "a 6-3 decision, the Court dissolved the restraining order and allowed the *Times* to continue with publication" (Robertson, original italics).

This arguably represented a landmark decision. The freedom of the press was embedded in the Bill of Rights in the form of the first amendment which states that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press" ("The Bill of Rights"). This set the precedent for the status of the media in the relation to legislative power. The 1971 decision also protected the freedom of press against executive power. It elevated the right to publish even sensitive materials if it is in the public interest, and with it also elevated the right of the American public to information about the activities of their executive powers. What is more, it set a concrete example for the media's role as the fourth estate of democracy which it served

in a significant way during the Nixon administration. While the president tried to curb the activity of the press, the result of the attempt was the very opposite as the decision of the Supreme Court decision "endowed these newspapers with a new confidence and sense of legitimacy to investigate any wrongdoing by the Nixon administration" (Morgan 160), arguably strengthening the position of the press in the country.

The third pattern of behavior of the administration which can be determined from the Nixon case is the attempt of the administration to curb the activity of the press covering them in a negative manner. This manifests itself in two major ways – either as limiting which access to the president, the White House or the press conferences, or as taking legal action.

1.2.   The Watergate Coverage and Pushback

The sense of legitimacy credited to the press by the Pentagon Papers court decision proved useful the very next year with the Watergate investigative reporting. However, it could be argued that the chain of events that led to Nixon's premature exit from office began with his reaction to the Pentagon Papers and their release in the press as "in the week following, Nixon approved the creation of the 'Plumbers'" (Mankiewicz 172), a special unit which was supposed to prevent the leaks of sensitive information. Their course of action was to break into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist to acquire discrediting information (Liebovich 36). The connection to the Nixon administration was strengthened in the beginning of 1972 when "James McCord, the Security Director of [Committee for the Re-election of the President], was lured into the web" (Mankiewicz 180) and joined the special unit. While the Ellsberg discreditation attempt was not directly connected to the Watergate scandal, this method of defaming the adversaries of the administration arguably set the precedent. This is then the fourth pattern which can be

observed in the Nixon case – the use of personal information and direct attacks to discredit an opponent, whether a political one or one coming from the media landscape.

The method of a break-in was utilized again in early summer of 1972. According to Reeves, Nixon was worried about his Democratic opponent in the upcoming presidential election, George McGovern, as he felt that "[t]he Eastern Establishment media finally has a candidate who almost totally shares their views" and they are "frantically doing everything they can to clean him up and make him a respectable candidate" (498). Nixon's response to this perceived threat was to order a "around-the-clock surveillance of McGovern until the election" (Reeves 499). However, a different course of action was taken by the Plumbers which, on June 17th, resulted in "a security guard discover[ing] a burglary-in-progress in the offices of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate complex in Washington. The Metropolitan Police arrested five burglars" (Kutler 31), McCord among them. This was a second attempt to place taps and gain intelligence as the previous break-in did not work (Reeves 499).

The second failed burglary and the arrest were a focus of the media attention the following day. It was a front-page story in *The Post*; however, the details were still unclear and the story, at first, did not appear of particular significance to them – as "it was a local burglary on a weekend, the paper had assigned the story to two junior reporters" (Reeves 502), Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. However, the fact that McCord was amongst the arrested burglars was discovered by the young duo two days after the burglars were arrested. They also reported that "[t]he suspects had extensive photographic equipment and some electronic surveillance instruments capable of intercepting both regular conversation and telephone communication" (Woodward and Bernstein). Yet despite McCord's connection to the president, the Nixon administration – and Nixon himself – denied any involvement of the White House in the burglary. In the five press conferences the president held between the burglary

and his November reelection, Nixon either did not receive any questions regarding Watergate, or he repeatedly denied involvement, claiming the results of their internal investigation proved this, and that the "charges that his administration was corrupt were political" (Liebovich 65).

The fifth defining pattern of behavior which can be used to inform further analysis is the constant denial of involvement by the president or his administration in reaction to implicating press coverage despite its persistence.

In spite of their repeated denial of involvement or responsibility, "[t]hroughout the summer and fall, The Washington Post followed the trail of money from the burglars back to the Nixon reelection committee and into the White House" (Meyer 74). The next significant finding came at the beginning of August 1972 when the duo Bernstein and Woodward reported that

> [a] $25,000 cashier's check, apparently earmarked for President Nixon's re-election campaign, was deposited in April in a bank account of one of the five men arrested in the break-in . . . The check was made out by a Florida bank to Kenneth H. Dahlberg, the President's campaign finance chairman for the Midwest. ("Bug Suspect")

Even though Dahlberg denied any involvement or knowledge about how the check got to the bank account of the arrested man, the story by *The Post* was a development in the case as it was a connection to the campaign funds. Another scoop came at the end of the September when the two reporters ran a story which reported that "John N. Mitchell, while serving as U.S.Attorney General, personally controlled a secret Republican fund that was used to gather information about the Democrats" (Bernstein and Woodward, "Mitchell Controlled"). The article found a further connection to the Nixon as it reported that other people were

> authorized to approve payments from the secret fund . . . Two of them were identified as former Secretary of Commerce Maurice H.Stans, now finance chairman

of the President's campaign, and Jeb Stuart Magruder, manager of the Nixon campaign before Mitchell took over and now a deputy director of the campaign. (Bernstein and Woodward, "Mitchell Controlled")

However, while the reactions to the previous articles remained in the sphere of denial by the administration or other officials, when the reporters approached Mitchell for a comment on the story, he threatened the publisher of the newspaper: "All that crap, you're putting it in the paper? It's all been denied. Jesus. Katie Graham . . . is gonna get caught in a big fat wringer if that's published. Good Christ. That's the most sickening thing I've ever heard" (Bernstein and Woodward, "Mitchell Controlled").

The last big story by Bernstein and Woodward before the November election came on October 10 when they tied the break-in at Watergate to a larger structure of disruptive campaign activity and reported that "FBI agents have established that the Watergate bugging incident stemmed from a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage conducted on behalf of President Nixon's re-election and directed by officials of the White House and the Committee for the Re-election of the President" (Bernstein and Woodward, "FBI Finds"). This effort was aimed at discrediting the Democratic presidential candidates. They also reported that lawyer Donald Segretti "had been in charge of recruiting fifty young operatives who went around the country trying to disrupt the lives and campaigns of Democrats" (Reeves 531).

What Nixon proposed in reaction to this story was a lawsuit to cast a shadow of doubt over the reporting of Bernstein and Woodward (Reeves 531-2). The reaction to the October article, however, also brought a massive wave of pushback and direct attacks on the newspaper by the members of the Nixon administration. Simons and Bradlee give an account of the criticism and cite several statements which aimed to discredit them – the director of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President claimed that *The Post* was "[u]sing innuendo,

third-person hearsay, unsubstantiated charges, anonymous sources and huge scar headlines" to "give the appearance of a direct connection between the White House and the Watergate . . . a charge which The Post knows, and half a dozen investigations have found . . . to be false" (viii). The President's spokesman furthermore called the story "based upon the shabbiest journalistic techniques . . . This matter has reached the level of unbelievable absurdity" (viii-ix).

The sixth and final pattern which can be determined from the conduct of the Nixon administration is the significant position of the White House press secretary in the pushback against the negative coverage of the administration by the nation's press, and direct attacks on the credibility of the selected media outlets.

According to Cannon, *The Washington Post* was displeased that other media outlets in the country did not join their reporters in uncovering the Watergate scandal: "I heard Ben Bradlee explain that he wished television had picked that story up in September and October. But it was really hard to get the Watergate story picked up. People didn't want to look like they were hounding a President who was going to win big and besides, they had no evidence" (198). However, a research conducted by Liebovich concluded that *The Post* may have been the most dominant press outlet in the affair, but it was far from the only one. He selected a sample of 15 newspapers that were representative of the country, and after analysis concluded that in the six months after the break-in in 1972,

> [s]taff news stories in that time frame published in the *Washington Post* and mostly written by Woodward and Bernstein totaled 201. Articles written by reporters from the fourteen other newspapers, including those written by the huge Washington Bureau staff of the *New York Times*, totaled 315, with 99 coming from just the *New York Times*. (67, original italics)

Quantitative analysis also showed that the more liberal media outlets covered the Watergate break-in significantly more than newspapers which were more conservatively leaning (Liebovich 68). However, while quantitative analysis puts *The Post* only into a slight numeral advantage, qualitative and content analysis Liebovich conducted speaks to the magnitude of the investigative work *The Post* carried out in the six months:

> Many of the *Washington Post* stories were carried on page one. After the initial few weeks following the break-in, Watergate stories appeared on page one in most of the other newspapers only occasionally. The *Washington Post* articles were often investigative in nature, even after the 1972 election . . . Other newspapers rarely carried their own enterprise stories. Often when they did carry such articles, the thrusts were superficial, misleading, or just plain wrong. (68, original italics)

The coverage of the Watergate scandal by *The Washington Post* and other outlets in the country help identify two concepts or factors which then can aid the analysis of the state of the media landscape in the country in the following chapters. Firstly, it is the concept of the solidarity of various outlets in the case of negative pushback against one or several of them, and the determination to carry on the coverage. Secondly, it is the existence and prevalence of the ideological bias and partisan divide among the media outlets, and mainly the way it influences the coverage of the administration.

1.3. Media, the Biased Watchdogs?

The Watergate scandal coverage saw a massive escalation of the hostility displayed by the Nixon administration towards the press in the country, and *The Washington Post* especially. Based on the general mistrust the president held against the media and the numerous accounts of the attempts of the Nixon administration to curb the activity of the press, the chapter could

identify a series of patterns in place in the administration's attitude towards the press in the United States.

According to Morgan, the president operated with "a dangerous credo that built the media into an enemy to be fought by fair means or foul" (159). Several techniques which aimed to fight the press have been identified in the present chapter – Nixon's communication strategy was largely based on televised speeches in order to curb the possibilities of the press to distort his message, and there were efforts to limit their activity by legal means or restricted access. Nixon's administration and other public officials also aimed to use personal information and direct attacks to discredit opponents, and his press secretary was a major figure in the process of attacking and questioning the credibility of the press on top of the administration denying the truth of the reports. It can be concluded that these patterns of behavior stem from the very approach of Richard Nixon to the media which was distrustful and influenced by the belief they aimed to discredit him. These determined patterns from the Nixon case will be used as parameters that will inform the analysis of Trump's relationship with the press in the next chapter.

However, as the research conducted by Liebovich concluded, the coverage of Watergate also confirmed the existence – and prevalence – of the role partisanship and ideological divide of media outlets in the country play in the coverage of presidents and their affairs. The chapter also identified the solidarity between outlets as another concept which will be used to analyze the media landscape during the Trump administration.

2. Enemy of the People: Trump, Tweets, and the Media

Even though more than four decades divide Richard Nixon and Donald Trump, there are many similarities which the two men share in their role as presidents. Boczkowski and Papacharissi argue that there are "deep historical roots of key tendencies and tensions in the relationships between Trump and the media" which "have long occupied a certain place in the media and political landscape" (4). The most obvious similarity is that they were both subject to the impeachment process – even though Nixon himself was never impeached but it did prompt his premature exit from the office, and Trump was impeached in late 2019 but was acquitted not two months later. Yet arguably the biggest similarity these two presidents share is their negative approach towards the media in the country, especially their pushback against the outlets which cover them and their administration negatively.

The previous chapter established, through the analysis of Nixon's approach to the press and the administration's strategies of pushback against negative coverage of the Watergate scandal, a series of the following patterns in the conduct of the administration and the president:

1. The president's distrust towards the press combined with a belief that the aim of the press is to use negative coverage to discredit him.

2. The strategy of constant denial of negative coverage.

3. The president's communication strategy based on direct channel in order to avoid the possibility of the press distorting the message.

4. The use of direct and personal attacks with the aim to discredit an opponent.

5. The attempt to limit the activity of the press via legal means or restricted access.

6. The prominent role of the press secretary in the discreditation of the press.

By applying these patterns, the aim of this chapter is to analyze the communication strategy employed by Trump and his administration to decrease the credibility of hostile media outlets

and to limit and counter the negative coverage. It will accentuate the evolution of the strategy in the past year. As much of the strategy is carried out online via Twitter, the discussion will be aided by the analysis of the president's tweets aimed at *Fox News, The New York Times, The Washington Post* and *CNN.*

## 2.1.   Public Enemy Number One: Meet the Press

As the previous chapter concluded, the relationship between President Nixon and the media has been guided by a deep distrust on the side of the president and his belief the media aimed to discredit him with negative coverage. Yet President Trump himself denoted the journalists as the literal enemies, arguably starting the war between the administration and most media outlets in the country, with his personal Twitter account being his most frequent weapon of choice.

However, this hostility does not extend to all of them as Trump displays a clear preference for the coverage of *Fox News,* a network which generally tends to report on him in a more positive light than the majority of outlets in the country[3]. The first hypothesis which has been set in the methodological section was the proposal that there is an ongoing bias visible in Trump's tweets, with affinity displayed towards *Fox News* and hostility displayed towards *CNN, The Washington Post* and *The New York Times.* During the analysis of the tweets, they have been sorted into three groups – positive, neutral, and negative tweets. Tweets aimed at the outlets are considered positive if they include a direct agreement with or acknowledgement of the outlet or a person within it. Tweets which are considered neutral consist of mentions

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[3] A 2017 research conducted by Pew Research Center concluded that "[o]ver half of all stories by Fox News (55%) and all other outlets with a right-leaning audience (56%) were neither positive nor negative, but positive assessments for each (30% and 32%) outweighed negative (15% and 12%) by about two-to-one" (Mitchell et al. 55). This is significantly more positive than coverage by outlets on the center and the left – as an example, more than "half of CNN's coverage was negative (56%) while almost four-in-ten stories (38%) were neither positive nor negative" (Mitchell et al. 57).

unrelated to the president or his program, or include a headline or a part of a quote from the outlet or a person within it without any further comment, acknowledgement or agreement from the president. Lastly, the tweets aimed at the outlets which are considered negative include a direct attack on or a disagreement with the outlet or a person within it.
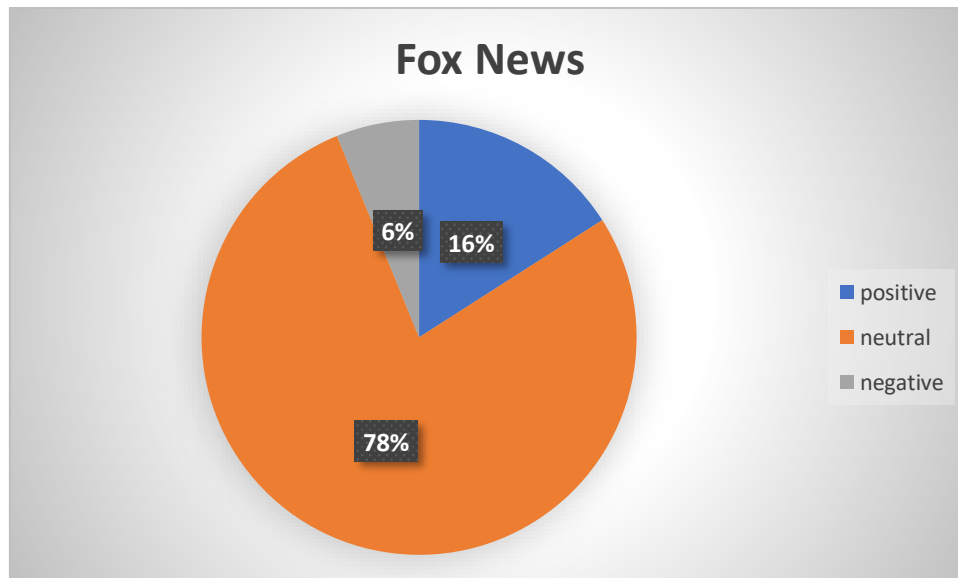
The analysis of the tweets aimed at *CNN, The New York Times,* and *The Washington Post* confirmed the initial hypothesis as significant majority of them were negative. Out of 150 unique tweets aimed at *CNN*, only six were neutral, and only two of them were positive. With *The Times,* out of the total 158 tweets, ten of them were neutral, and eight of them were positive – even though two of them still included the expression "failing" next to the handle of *The Times*, mitigating the positive meaning of the tweet. Finally, with *The Post*, out of the total 79 tweets, one was neutral and four can be considered positive. From the disproportion of the three groups strongly in favor of the negative tweets, it can be concluded that there is a visible negative bias against networks on the center and left of the ideological spectrum from the president as shown by the hostility he displays towards these three outlets. Furthermore, it appears that *CNN* is the most frequent target of the president's attacks as the imbalance was the greatest of all outlets.

The Washington Post

■	positive
■	neutral
■	negative

CNN

|	
■	positive
■	neutral
■	negative
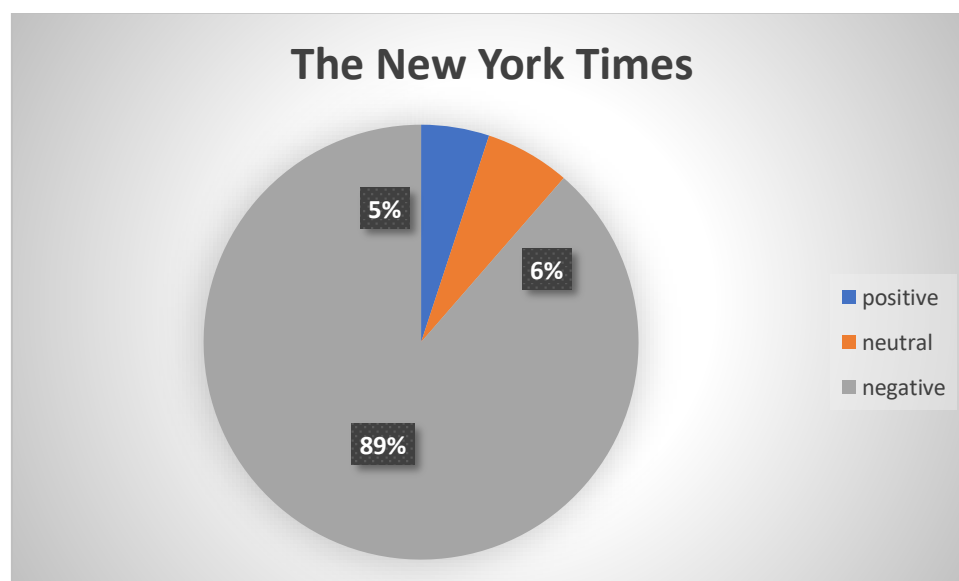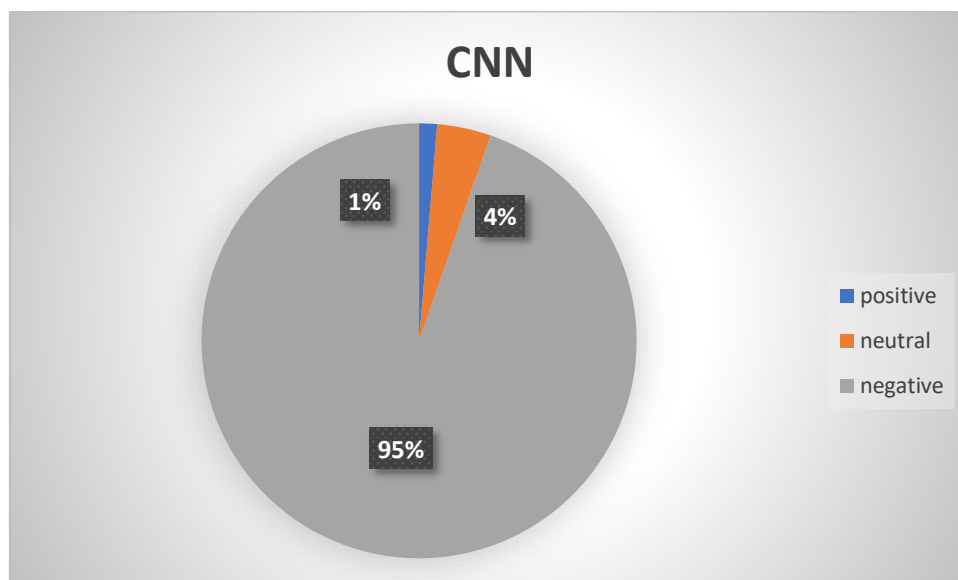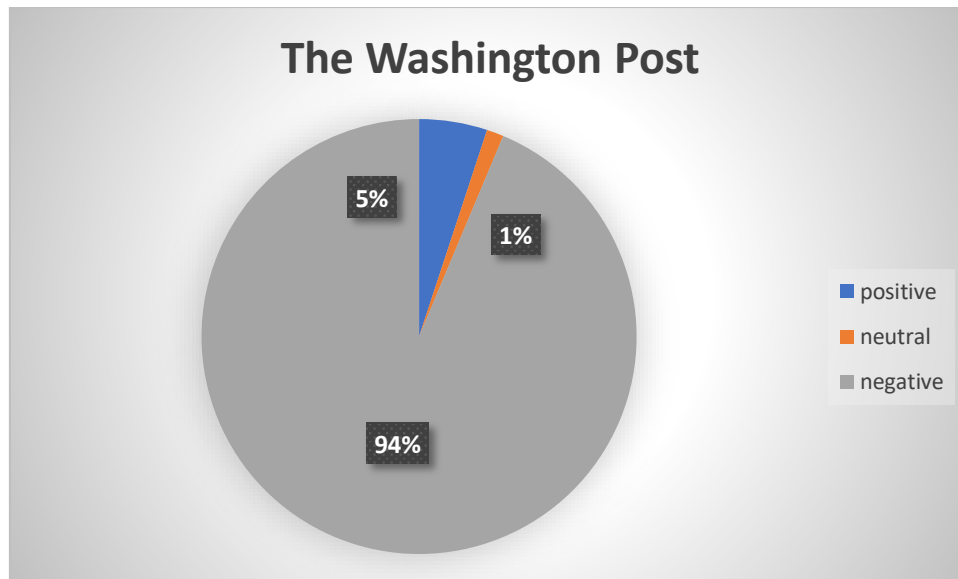
The analysis of the tweets aimed at *Fox News*, based on the numbers, also confirms the hypothesis. Out of the total 552 tweets, 34 are negative, 88 were decidedly positive, and of the remaining tweets, while considered neutral as per the definition set at the beginning of this section, many included quotes or headlines from the network which were directly in support of the president, even though he himself has not commented any further on the coverage in the tweets. It can thus be preliminarily concluded that along with negative bias, the president also displays a strong positive bias towards this network. This manifests itself in the proportion of positive, neutral and negative tweets, and the sheer number of total tweets aimed at the network

which confirms the amount of attention the president gives them. This is a significant difference from the relationship of Nixon with the media during his presidency – while he shared the hostility both he and Trump display towards the majority of the outlets, he did not display such a preference to any of the newspapers or networks.

However, it could be argued that the analysis of tweets aimed at *Fox News* over the course of time reveals a possible challenge to the confirmation of the hypothesis as a growing pattern of disapproval of *Fox News* by the president is emerging. The tweets from 2017 and 2018 contained no negative mention of the network – the first negative tweet was sent out in January 2019, two years after the inauguration. From July 2019 onwards, the negative tweets were sent out more densely and in a higher number – while the first six months of the year saw only five negative tweets, the number increased to 21 negative tweets in the second half of 2019. It seems that this trend will continue in 2020 as well as by 19th April, Trump has already tweeted negatively about *Fox News* eight times. There are three topics Trump addresses most often – criticism of anchors, criticism of the guests *Fox News* invites to their shows, and criticism of unfavorable polls the network publishes. However, he also criticized the direction the network has taken in the past months which the president deemed unfavorable to him

several times. It can thus be concluded that while an overwhelming majority of the *Fox News* tweets is still positive, there is an increasing trend of tension between the president and his preferred network as he is less satisfied with the coverage of him. In the next chapter it will be analyzed whether this tendency to cover Trump more negatively is reflected in the online articles on the *Fox News* webpage.

FOX NEWS - NEGATIVE TWEETS

2017	2018	2019/1	2019/2	2020
0	0	5	21	8
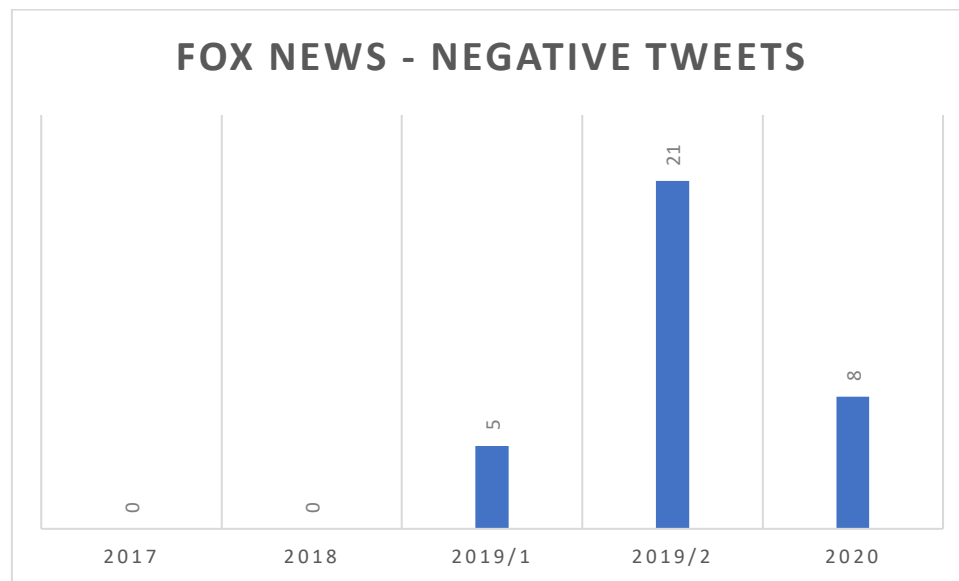
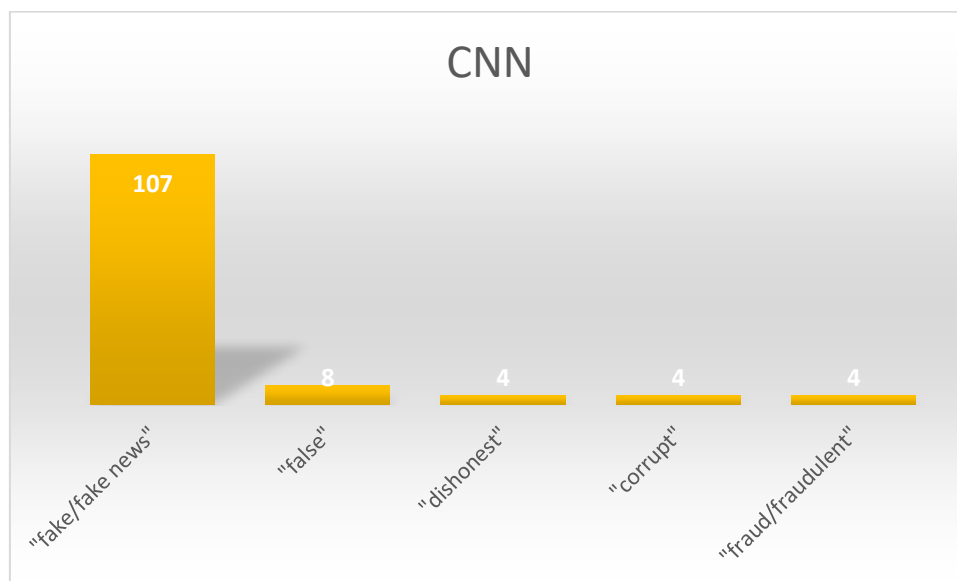## 2.2.   **Denial and Distrust: Dual Motivation for Hostility**

According to Zelizer, "[e]nmity is instrumental in political discourse, used by political leaders to help articulate who they are by defining what they are not. . . . Central to enmity are dichotomies, which reduce complex, unmanageable, and often indecipherable realities into binaries between 'us' and 'them'" (9-10). While in the American context, this enmity is arguably represented by the Democratic-Republican divide of the political sphere, the entrance of Donald Trump to the political stage brought an additional layer – the hostile relationship of the president with many media outlets in the country.
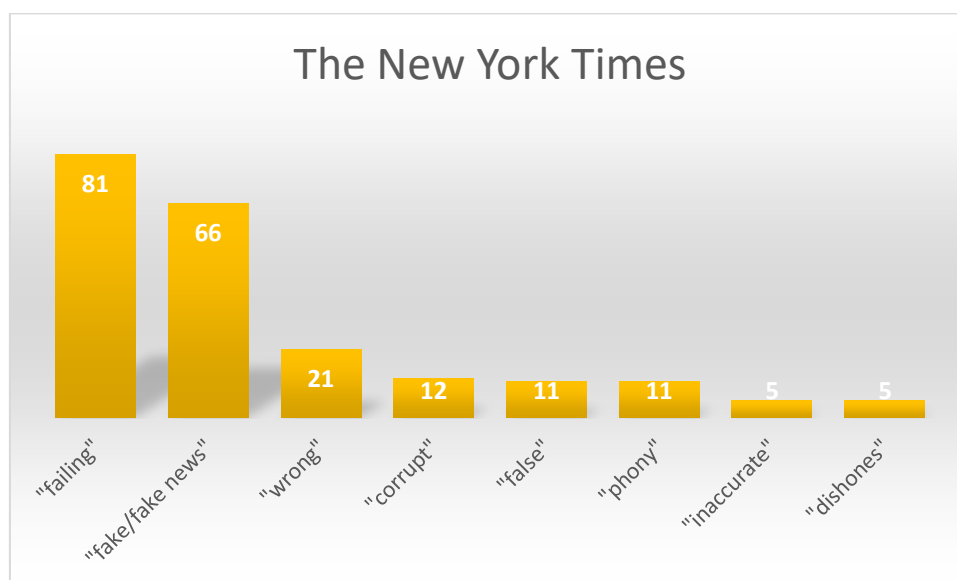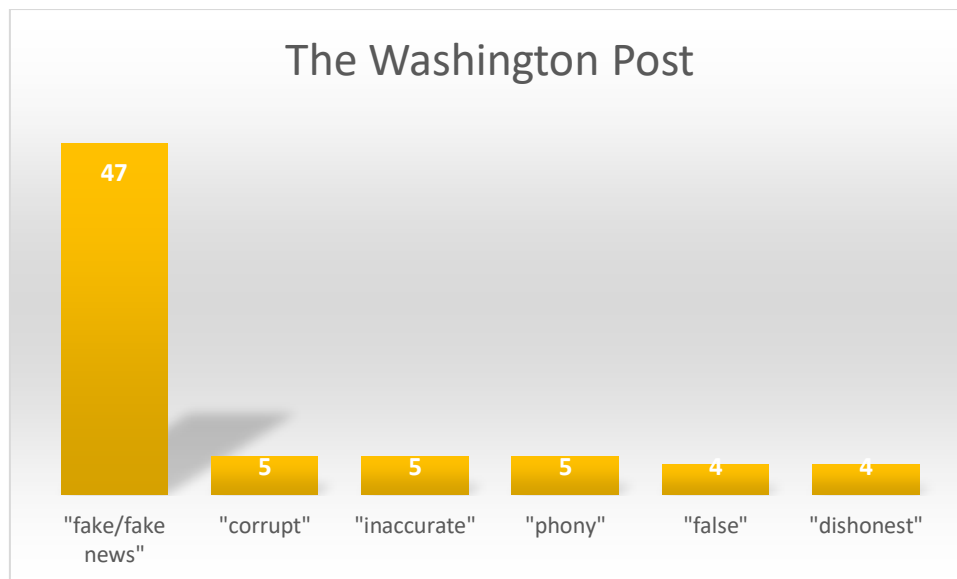
It could be argued that the adversarial relationship between Trump and the majority of the media landscape is fueled by two motivations. The base strategy behind the continuous

attacks on the media outlets which consistently cover the president negatively seems to be clear – to decrease their credibility in the eyes of the American public and facilitate their shift towards other outlets which are aligned with the president's viewpoint and cover him considerably more positively. According to Bitecofer, this strategy was built on a tradition in the American society as "[b]y tapping into the Republican electorate's distrust of the mainstream media, Trump was able to discredit them and neutralize any damage that might have resulted from some of his more outlandish behaviors" (42). The manifestations of this strategy have been visible from the beginning of the presidency – for example, in a tweet from the first month states that "[t]he FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!" (@realDonaldTrump, "The FAKE"). This tweet seemingly fulfills two purposes. Firstly, it establishes a clear idea of which outlets belong to the un-American, enemy side of the conflict which creates a well-defined binary. This definition firmly establishes them as "them" in Zelizer's dichotomy – however, not just for the supporters of President Trump as this particular tweet seeks to increase its own credibility by bridging the partisan divide to assert that the coverage of the singled-out outlets is harmful to every American. Secondly, by using capital letters, it highlights a key adjective used in the president's tweets – fake – to underline the main message of the media being untrustworthy and their coverage of the presidency unreliable.

Most of the negative tweets aimed at the media imply that their motivation is to discredit the outlets covering the president negatively. Analysis of the selected tweets has shown that the prevalent words which are used recurrently in the tweets against *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *CNN* all carry the connotation unreliability. As far as the tweets aimed at *CNN* are concerned, 107 of them – approximately two thirds of the total number – used the expression "fake news" to comment on their coverage, or applied the adjective "fake" to the network or their stories. Among the other – notably less used – adjectives and nouns were

"false", appearing eight times, and "dishonest", "corrupt" and "fraud/fraudulent", appearing four times each. The expressions "fake news" or "fake" were similarly most prevalent in tweets aimed at *The Washington Post* – Trump used them 47 times. Other adjectives were "corrupt", "inaccurate" and "phony", appearing five times each, and "false" and "dishonest", appearing four times each. The most common adjective used to attack the credibility of *The New York Times* was "failing", used 81 times – which is more than half of the analyzed tweets – and almost exclusively attached to the handle of the newspaper as a direct attribute. As with the previous two outlets, "fake news/fake" were frequent expressions, used 66 times. Among the most used adjectives were "wrong", used 21 times, "corrupt" used 12 times, "false" and "phony", used 11 times each, and "inaccurate" and "dishonest", used five times each.

The Washington Post

"fake/fake news"	"corrupt"	"inaccurate"	"phony"	"false"	"dishonest"
47	5	5	5	4	4

The New York Times

"failing"	"fake/fake news"	"wrong"	"corrupt"	"false"	"phony"	"inaccurate"	"dishones"
81	66	21	12	11	11	5	5

This strategy of undermining the reliability and attacking the credibility of hostile outlets in tweets thus fulfills the ultimate purpose – Trump's constant denial of negative coverage aimed at him. According to Bitecofer, "[e]very time the media pushed back against his misstatements of fact or controversial statements, he used the negative media coverage as evidence that the mainstream media had it out for him" (43). Rather than simply addressing the issue which is covered negatively and defending his own statements and actions, the president also moves into offensive against the credibility and professionality of the outlet, often claiming they purposefully print or broadcast a false negative story in order to discredit him.

An example of this approach is a tweet aimed at *The New York Times:* "When will the Failing New York Times admit that their front page story on the the (*sic*) new Mexico deal at the Border is a FRAUD and nothing more than a badly reported 'hit job' on me, something that has been going on since the first day I announced for the presidency!" (@realDonaldTrump, "When will"). The triple pattern of reaction is visible in this example – the president moves from denying the truth of the coverage to attacking the reliability of the outlet, and to asserting that this is evidence for the media bias against him as the stories were purposely false. Trump used similar tactics on *The Washington Post* which he accused of publishing a story which "is made up garbage" and "just another hit job" (@realDonaldTrump, "The Washington Post"). It can thus be concluded that this triple pattern of denial is thus most visibly employed towards *The Times* and *The Post* as while Trump frequently attacks the credibility of other media and denies their coverage, it is with these two newspapers that he most often employs the third aspect of the strategy – claiming the outlets published the supposedly false stories on purpose with the aim of discrediting the president.

However, the analysis also showed a different strategy during what was arguably the biggest crisis of Trump's presidency – the impeachment process. Trump continued denying the reports by tweeting out his indignation over the accusations and allocated the blame to "fake news" media. However, this was not reflected in an increased number of tweets which would be attacking the coverage by the individual media outlets he deems hostile. On the contrary – the tweets aimed at *The Times, CNN* and *The Post* only include several mentions of the accusations and charges. Yet starting in September 2019, the president sent out a significant number of tweets with headlines and quotes from *Fox News* and their analysts and contributors who were defending Trump's conduct. These tweets were arguably meant to support his narrative of being a victim of a partisan attempt to remove him from office. It can be argued that this increased activity of sharing supportive coverage represents a double conflict. Firstly,

it is at odds with the usual strategy of attacking specific media outlets which cover the president negatively in order to decrease their perceived credibility – instead, during the impeachment process, Trump mostly insulated himself with positive reports and quotes from *Fox News*. Secondly, it clashes with the growing tension between the network and the president from the second half of 2019 which was documented in the previous section.

The analysis also unveiled a second, more personal motivation to attack the media and be in constant denial of negative coverage – Trump's own feelings of distrust and insecurity that the aim of the negative coverage of the media is to discredit him. While the president claims that the media is not his enemy, there are other instances in his tweets from the past three years which signal that he feels that the opposite is true. One of the cases was *The Washington Post* which, according to Trump, "has gone crazy against [him]" (@realDonaldTrump, "The Amazon"). Returning to Zelizer's quote on enmity, the rhetoric utilized in these particular tweets reframes the binary opposition of "us" and "them", with President Trump taking the position of "us" in place of the larger American public who he claims is the victim of fake mainstream journalism. The president also claimed several times that the coverage of his policies and decisions has been deliberately biased to be negative in order to frame him as a less competent president – tweets such as "It's hard to read the Failing New York Times or the Amazon Washington Post because every story/opinion, even if should be positive, is bad!" (@realDonaldTrump, "It's hard") and "the Amazon Washington Post do nothing but write bad stories even on very positive achievements - and they will never change!" (@realDonaldTrump, "...and the Amazon") imply the president's personal disappointment and resentment over the negative coverage he believes is undeserved.

The pattern of distrusting the media and branding them as the enemy seems to be a significant factor in the overall media strategy of President Trump. It can be concluded that the primary, more visible motivation underneath the strategy is a calculated decision – a

proclaimed distrust towards the media outlets which cover him negatively which aims to discredit the outlets and the negative coverage as a false story which is motivated by the bias of the media outlets against Trump. This is done by the frequent use of adjectives which carry the connotations of dishonesty, and by creating a clear "us" versus "them" binary division between the media as the enemy and the American public as the victims of unreliable reporting. The president thus seems to combine the first pattern – distrust towards media – with the second pattern – constant denial of negative coverage – and puts the hostile media outlets into the position of the unreliable enemy in order to discredit them and deflect bad coverage. However, there also appears to be a secondary, more personal motivation which has not been reflected in the six patterns introduced in the beginning of this chapter – the feeling of disappointment in and resentment of negative coverage that is, in his opinion, uncalled for. In some tweets, he utilizes rhetoric which singles him as the target of the biased and unfair reporting, claiming that all he can perceive from the "fake" mainstream media "is hatred of [him] at any cost" (@realDonaldTrump, "I watch"). This personal distrust and resentment thus represent a sub-pattern in the overarching strategy of framing the media as the public enemy which cannot be trusted.

2.3.   Twitter: A Direct Way into the Hearts and Minds

As was documented in the previous section, the core of the communication strategy of President Trump is to attack the credibility of the media outlets which cover him negatively – this appears to be both a calculated decision to discredit outlets which he perceives as hostile, and a personal distrust and insecurity that the media are biased against him. According to a tweet aimed at some of these outlets, "[t]hey use a small portion of a sentence out of a full paragraph in order to demean" (@realDonaldTrump, "Such Fake") – and this distrust that his

message will pass through the gatekeepers without any distortion has arguably shaped the channels through which Trump communicates with the public.

As was argued in the previous chapter, Nixon, who shared similar distrust towards the media and their unbiased reporting, preferred televised speech to bypass the agenda of the journalists. Trump, too, "has invested heavily in a communication strategy that allows him to reach out and speak directly to the American people, and in particular his base of core supporters" (Herbert et al. 105). However, there is one significant difference in the way they approached communication without interference – for President Trump, Twitter is the main direct channel he uses "to bypass and/or influence traditional gatekeepers and speak directly to, motivate, and mobilize his followers" (Delli Carpini 20). Based on the analysis of the selected tweets, it can be concluded that while Twitter has been a constant in his strategy throughout the entire presidency, Trump has used his personal account significantly more often in 2019. The number of tweets aimed at media outlets has doubled compared to the previous years – with *The New York Times,* it increased from 34 in 2017 and 33 in 2018 to 71 in 2019; with *CNN*, it went up from 31 in 2017 and 36 in 2018 to 63 in 2019; with *The Washington Post*, it increased from 16 in 2017 and 18 in 2018 to 37 in 2019; and finally with *Fox New,* the number rose from 79 in 2017 and 115 in 2018 to 261 in 2019.
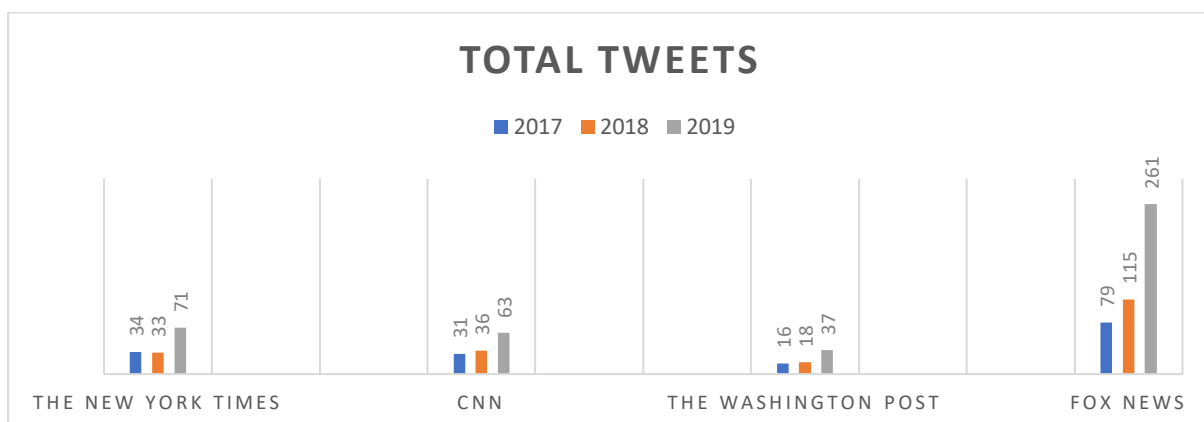
The president's use of Twitter, arguably novel in itself, brings innovative aspects to the presidential communication strategy – according to Herbert et al., "responsiveness is . . . key" as "[h]is tracking of what is being said about him often leads to immediate responses to any slight or negative headline" (112). The engagement with and responsiveness to media outlets as a core of Trump's communication strategy has been discussed in the previous section. Personalization is another innovation Herbert et al. identify in the president's Twitter usage as "[e]quipped with his phone, Trump personally guides and often implements his administration's communications strategy. His hands-on approach reflects his belief that he is the best person to run what he regards as the most important part of his presidency" (112). This is underscored by the fact that the majority of significant tweets originate in his personal Twitter account which highlights his connection to his supporters who already "feel they are . . . involved in TrumpWorld when they get pinged and receive his tweets" (Kellner 51).

However, the public are not the only ones engaged by Trump's tweets – despite the claim that the main goal of such direct communication is the bypassing of the media, "Twitter brought in new ways of circumventing yet engaging the news media . . . Because the tone and content of his tweets were often highly controversial (and ratings bait), the press provided him an entirely new level of free media by reporting nearly all of his tweets" (Douglas 138). According to Herbert et al., the coverage Trump received from the mainstream media because of his tweets was not an unexpected byproduct but a manifestation of his "need to dominate media coverage at all times" (112). While the media coverage of President Trump may be mostly negative, "he knows full well the importance of it to his presidency. He thus consciously and frequently attempts to manipulate and win coverage from it. He provides material for headline-grabbing stories and utilizes his social media posts to leverage more coverage in the conventional press" (111). This was proved by Chadwick in his research on the interconnections between the volume of tweets by Trump, and the volume of news coverage –

the results "showed that Trump was more likely to post tweets during periods when his news and blog coverage was relatively quiet, confirming the theory that he used Twitter to stoke the fires of coverage" (262).

Furthermore, the need for as much coverage as is possible is, among other factors, aided by the tweets in which Trump uses what Douglas calls "incendiary insults" (138) – direct and personal attacks against his adversaries. According to Waisbord et al., "Twitter [is] the perfect platform for Trump's signature blunt and combative communication style" (29) – this is documented by the fact that beyond the lack of professionality, credibility and accuracy, Trump also attacks journalists and outlets on a more personal level. Apart from attaching attributes to the names of the newspapers and networks – in the case of the outlets selected for this thesis, it is "failing" for *The New York Times*, "fake/fake news" for *CNN*, and "Amazon" for *The Washington Post* – which are then repeated frequently in the tweets, Trump also singles out individual journalists and attaches unfavorable characteristics to their names. While the president has been using the established unfavorable nicknames for the outlets since the beginning of his presidency, the tendency to turn on individual journalists showed more significantly from 2019 – he called a columnist from *The Times* "a weak and pathetic sort of guy" (@realDonaldTrump, "Thomas 'the Chin'"), or dubbed a *CNN* reporter "the dumbest man on television" (@realDonaldTrump, "CNN's Don Lemon").

It can thus be concluded that the president's use of his personal Twitter account is the prevalent pattern out of the six introduced in the beginning of the chapter. Apart from using it to avoid the distortion of his messages by the gatekeepers, to stay responsive and manipulate the news coverage, and to personalize his communication style, it allows him to carry out other patterns of conduct which were already discussed in this chapter – to display his distrust towards the hostile media, to deny negative coverage, and to attack and discredit opponents. Furthermore, this increased personalization of attacks seems to be in line with the overall

escalation of warfare against hostile media outlets and journalists which will be detailed in the following sections where the last two patterns will be discussed.

2.4.   White House Denied: Restrictions and Legal Battles

The president's dichotomic relationship to media outlets similarly translates into his attempt to curb the activities of the outlets whose questions aimed at him tend to be critical and their coverage negative. Trump has taken active steps in his proclaimed war on the media as he "has restricted journalistic access to the White House in ways no other modern president has, seldom holding public press conferences and limiting the number of on-camera press briefings by White House spokespeople" (Mendelson 59). One of the most significant signs of the warfare was the unprecedented number of journalists who had their White House credentials revoked or who had been denied access to events held by the president or the administration. This conduct could carry significant consequences. The restriction of access to the White House could have heavy democratic ramifications if continued on a larger scale as it arguably threatens the first amendment since, by limiting the access of individual journalists, it by implication limits the freedom of the press as a whole. As the journalists who have their credentials revoked work for the media which are generally hostile towards the president – which will be documented in this section – the attempt to curb their access to the president can therefore be seen as an attempt to curb their negative coverage. This then not only threatens the balance of the media landscape – it also threatens the democratic system as a whole as the freedom of press is one of the most significant pillars supporting it, and such restrictive activity is then reminiscent of authoritarian regimes instead.

The tendency to restrict access of journalists to the White House started in the second year of Trump's presidency when, in July 2018, a *CNN* White House reporter Kaitlan Collins

was banned from an event for reasons which largely differed on the two sides of the conflict. She was expelled by the deputy chief of communication and the press secretary as they claimed the reporter asked questions which were "inappropriate for that venue" (Stelter) and her conduct was unfit as she was shouting. This claim was opposed by Collins herself and other reporters present at the event, and *CNN* countered with a stating that the administration is infringing on the freedom of the press: "Just because the White House is uncomfortable with a question regarding the news of day doesn't mean the question isn't relevant and shouldn't be asked . . . This decision to bar a member of the press is retaliatory in nature and not indicative of an open and free press" (Stelter). As was noted before, the infringement on the freedom of press is not only significant because it creates imbalance within the media landscape and bolsters coverage which is positively biased towards the president and the administration, it can be also seen as a threat to the democratic system of the country as a whole. While Pearce argues that "while Donald Trump has tried to discredit media opposing him, and he does engage in a number of the same goals as authoritarian leaders, the fact that he has not eliminated the media is a core difference between him and authoritarian leaders" (121), the fact that the administration took an active approach to ban the members of hostile media outlets and therefore restrict the opportunities of critical press to cover the powers that be could be considered a milder version of the elimination of the opposing media.

The Collins incident was the beginning of a distinct pattern in the conduct of the president and his communication staff of similar altercations between the press secretary and the rest of the administration, and individual journalists or, in some cases, entire newsrooms or networks which had their access to the president limited. This can be seen as an infringement on the freedom of press – according to Karpf, this development in the White House press relations is moving into the opposite direction as would be beneficial as "[t]here are reasonable arguments for expanding press access beyond the traditional members of the White House press

corps. But if GatewayPundit and Breitbart are receiving exclusives while CNN and the Washington Post are having their press access revoked, then there is cause for serious alarm" (226) as it upsets the ideological balance and supports partisan coverage. It could be argued that by giving the right-wing, non-mainstream outlets exclusive information and access, the administration uses them as propaganda tools to spread their message among its supporters which are traditionally more aligned with similar outlets. The exclusivity could also legitimize their standing within the media landscape.

However, the July 2018 case was arguably also a statement to the existence of solidarity between media outlets. The reporters present at the event in question supported Collins's version, and the ban was met with widespread opposition from other media outlets, including *Fox News*. This incident dates before the emerging erosion of the affinity Trump displays towards the network – yet, the president of *Fox News* issued a statement claiming that they are "in strong solidarity with CNN for the right to full access for our journalists as part of a free and unfettered press" (Stelter). It could be argued that this act highlighted the severity and unprecedent nature of such decision by bridging the partisan divide between the network and majority of media outlets.

However, a widespread opposition of the decision against the *CNN* reporter did not halt the conflict between the president and the reporters from the network as only four months later, Donald Trump had a heated exchange on a press briefing with a *CNN* correspondent Jim Acosta which resulted not only in a single-event ban but also a complete revoking of a press pass into the White House. This incident then gave rise to another pattern of media conduct in the Trump administration – a tradition of the media outlets using legal means to fight back against the decisions to limit the access of journalists to the president. Following the Acosta incident, *CNN* decided to sue the Trump administration. The lawsuit demanded the credentials back as such "wrongful revocation of these credentials violates CNN and Acosta's First Amendment rights

of freedom of the press, and their Fifth Amendment rights to due process" (CNN Business and Stelter, "CNN Sues"). In *CNN v. Trump*, the judge ruled to restore the credentials, and the network dropped the lawsuit after receiving a promise from the administration that Acosta would have his pass returned if he fulfills the rules set for reporters at the White House press briefings (Farhi and Flynn).

It can be argued that this decision marks a precedent for the protection of journalistic access to the president and his administration by the courts during the Trump presidency, building on the tradition of the judicial branch in the United States upholding the freedom of the press which was established in the previous chapter. Similarly, the lawsuit strengthened the solidarity across the ideological spectrum as *Fox News*, as was the case with the Collins incident, supported CNN in the decision to sue the administration while also announcing the decision to "file an amicus brief with the U.S. District Court" as "Secret Service passes for working White House journalists should never be weaponized" (Flood, "Fox News"). This supports the notion of free access to information and of a free press which is guaranteed by the Bill of Rights to all the citizens of the United States – and therefore has historically been non-partisan.

The pattern of restricting journalistic access continued to have a significant role over the following year and half. August and September 2019 brought another legal battle over revoked credentials – A *Playboy* correspondent and a *CNN* analyst Brian Kamer had his pass suspended for thirty days after exchanging loud insults with a *Breitbart* reporter Sebastian Gorka. However, this decision was once again overruled by the ruling of a federal court who ordered the restoration of the pass (Farhi, "Judge Orders"). The following months saw an even bigger escalation of this trend as there were two instances of bans for an entire media outlet – in December 2019, the Trump re-election campaign decided to restrict the access of *Bloomberg* journalists to events following the decision of the outlet not to cover the then Democratic

presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg, the owner of the newspaper, and other Democratic candidates (Smith), and February of this year saw the latest instance of the president's pushback against *CNN* as the anchors of the network were the only ones not invited to an annual off-record lunch with journalists preceding the State of the Union address (CNN Business and Stelter, "White House").

The account of the incidents with journalists losing their passes or being expelled from White House or re-election campaign events yields an observation about the partisan characteristics of the journalists impacted. All reporters – or, in some cases, entire newsrooms or networks – who had their access to the president restricted were from the media outlets on the center or left of the ideological spectrum. The most significant case which shows this tendency to prefer the outlets on the right is the Brian Kamer incident. Even though the *Playboy* correspondent and *CNN* analyst was involved in a verbal altercation with Sebastian Gorka, the *Breitbart* reporter was not penalized in any way while the *CNN* analyst had his pass suspended for 30 days. It can thus be argued that the pattern of restricting access of journalists to the president is a significant aspect in his overall strategy to decrease the credibility of the center or leftist media outlets which he calls "fake" by discrediting them through direct and personal attacks aimed at individual outlets or journalists. The pattern of restrictions thus strongly reflects the personal preference of the president and his administration as it appears to be strongly in favor of conservative outlets. This can be seen as an attempt to avoid unpleasant questions and curb possible negative coverage from hostile outlets and to increase the ratio of positive coverage.

However, it could be argued that this strategy of restricting journalistic access was not beneficial for the overall goal. On the contrary, the trend of solidarity across the ideological spectrum in reaction to the restrictions brought additional negative media coverage of the administration even from the outlets which generally report on the Trump presidency favorably

– especially *Fox News*. This pattern of solidarity against the restriction of freedom of journalists echoes the 1970s when other newspapers picked up the mantle of *The New York Times* after they were temporarily stopped from publishing the Pentagon Papers. Furthermore, the media outlets counteracted several times with a lawsuit against the administration and the courts ruled in their favor – it could be argued that the strategy to use the expulsions and revoked passes in an attempt to decrease the credibility of the media was not successful either as the decisions of the court, in contrast, upheld the freedom of press and their right to be present at the White House briefings and events, therefore confirming their credibility and status in the democracy.

However, the administration also filed lawsuits against individual newspapers and networks and sought more systematic changes to the freedom of the press. According to Karpf, "we should pay particular attention to regulatory and legal threats to news organizations coming both from the Trump administration and from his network of allies. To date, President Trump has spoken frequently about loosening libel laws" (226). The warfare of the president against the media escalated further in the first months of 2020 – the re-election year – as Trump moved his complaints against the negative coverage from Twitter to the courts. In a quick succession at the end of February and the beginning of March, the president's re-election campaign sued *The Times, The Post* and *CNN* for defamation and libel over their opinion pieces on the Russian interference into the 2016 election (Strauss). The lawsuits are similar in nature and in the reasoning behind them – as an example, in the lawsuit against *The Times*, the campaign stated that the newspaper was "well aware when it published these statements that they were not true" (CNN Business and Darcy). The decision to sue and the rhetoric which underlies it can be seen as a continuation of the strategy to discredit the media outlets which tend to cover the president and the administration negatively – by suing the outlets already labeled as fake is arguably the next step to decreasing their credibility among the American public. This is, then, another difference within a pattern shared with the Nixon presidency –

while his legal battles were based on the foundation of national security, in Trump's case, they seem to serve a partisan objective.

There is prevailing consensus in the reactions to the lawsuits that they will be unsuccessful "because libel laws extend a high degree of protection to published material about public figures and to opinion articles" (Farhi, "Trump Campaign"). Such legal protection of the freedom of the press dates back into the 1960s – in the 1964 case *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan,* as far as defamation regarding public officials is concerned, the Supreme Court ruled that "the First Amendment requires that the plaintiff show that the defendant knew that a statement was false or was reckless in deciding to publish the information without investigating whether it was accurate" ("New York Times Co. v. Sullivan"). The Trump re-election campaign would have to prove actual malice in the conduct of the three media outlets – to "prove the publisher actually knew the material was false, or at least had a 'high degree of awareness' of its 'probable falsity' and recklessly disregarded that danger" (Kenyon 713).

It can thus be concluded that in the three lawsuits filed against *CNN, The Post* and *The Times,* the courts will, with high probability, uphold the rights of the media. What is more troubling is the possibility of creating "an environment in which powerful elected officials try to use the courts to intimidate the press" (Wise) which can result from such instances of a more systematic attack on the majority of the media in the United States by the president. It could be argued that this move, similar to the restriction of access of journalists, would create a serious threat to the upholding of the freedom of speech and of the press – the first amendment to the Bill of Rights – and move the development of the freedom allocated to the American media, strengthened by the 1964 and 1971 decisions of the Supreme Court, back more than five decades. However, it would also severely threaten the autonomy of American journalism as one of the pillars it stands on in the society is precisely the guaranteed freedom of press.

President Trump has repeated several times during his campaign and presidency that he would like to amend the libel laws, claiming that, in their current state, they are "a sham and a disgrace and do not represent American values or American fairness" (Grynbaum). However, it can be argued that in at least two cases – January and September 2018 – Trump was motivated to call for a change of the defamation law as a reaction to unfavorable book coverage, first by Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury*, and then by Bob Woodward's *Fear* (Pearlstine). The aspiration to open up the libel laws thus seems as a momentary pushback against negative coverage – this would then fit his tendency to attempt to discredit the adversary media and curb their activity which is a significant pattern in his proclaimed war on the media.

2.5.   The Supreme Press Secretary

A key figure in conducting press relations and mediating the president's message to the world is the White House press secretary, a "senior U.S. official who oversees the communication of the executive branch of the U.S. government and who communicates on behalf of the U.S. president across print, broadcast, and Internet channels" and "is appointed by the president" (DeRosa). The list of the responsibilities of the White House press secretary includes, among others,

> communicating with the White House press corps (the group of correspondents, journalists, and other reporters who are based at the White House). The press secretary holds a daily press briefing, attended by the press corps, to report on actions and events concerning the president and the president's administration. (DeRosa)

There have been, to this date, four press secretaries serving in the White House under the presidency of Donald Trump – however, as Kayleigh McEnany was only appointed in April 2020, at the time of the writing of the thesis it was too early to analyze the strategy she

employed in the relationship with the press. Therefore, this section will focus only on Sean Spicer, Sarah Sanders, and Stephanie Grisham. While there was one notable similarity in the conduct of the three staffers – adversarial relationship to journalists – the three press secretaries arguably chose a different approach to carrying out their duties. It then resulted in three considerably different strategies for the relationship with the press – a proactive strategy of Spicer, a reactive strategy of Sanders, and an avoidant strategy of Grisham.

The six-month tenure of Sean Spicer as the White House press secretary was tumultuous and active from the beginning as he "accus[ed] the media of deliberately underestimating the size of Donald Trump's inauguration crowd" (Delli Carpini 17). Despite the photographic and statistical evidence that the inauguration audience did not reach the number of President Obama's, Spicer insisted that "[t]his was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration -- period -- both in person and around the globe. . . . These attempts to lessen the enthusiasm of the inauguration are shameful and wrong" (Cillizza, "Sean Spicer"). According to Chadwick, the accusations were a highly unexpected move which "left professional media organizations shellshocked. Here was the new administration—in its very first opportunity to engage media" (246) – and the new press secretary almost immediately used it to accuse the media of publishing false information

Spicer "was ordered by the President to . . . lambast the media for coverage of the size of the crowd" (Klein and Kelly) which set the tone for the upcoming relationship with the press as Spicer announced the administration's intentions: "There's been a lot of talk in the media about the responsibility to hold Donald Trump accountable. And I'm here to tell you that it goes two ways. We're going to hold the press accountable, as well" (Cillizza, "Sean Spicer"). This has been a precedent for his entire six-month tenure as his relationship with the journalists was tense:

He was a consistent defender of Trump's term, and was prone to attacking the

media itself for its focus on the Russia investigation as well as Trump's tweets. His

press conferences were often contentious, as reporters pressed him on some of Trump's

statements and how they squared with past remarks and other evidence. (Johnson)

In contrast to his two successors, Spicer held daily press briefings, assuming an active and visible role in the administration and engaging with journalists regularly. It can thus be claimed that his strategy of carrying out the duties of the press secretary was proactive. This can also be applied to his relationship with the journalists and the nature of their interactions – he was often the first to address the media and attack their shortcomings during his speeches at the press conferences. The criticism of the media outlets was thus frequently unprovoked. It can be concluded that the active role of Spicer in conveying the president's message is both consistent and inconsistent with the overall strategy of communication of the administration. While the active role of the press secretary goes against the principle of the president assuming reins of the communication via a direct channel, Spicer's notable role in the criticism of media is in line with the overall goal of discrediting media outlets who cover the administration negatively, and dismissing the unwelcome coverage.

When Spicer was replaced by Sarah Sanders in July 2017, it represented a notable shift in the conduct of the press secretary in two major areas. Firstly, as was detailed in the previous section, her tenure marked the beginning of the pattern of restricting the access of journalists into the White House and revoking their passes. While Spicer's relationship with the journalists was already tense and their interactions combative, the era of Sanders arguably saw an escalation in this sphere which is best represented in her strained relationship with Jim Acosta from *CNN*. Several months before Acosta's often challenging presence in the White House resulted in his temporary ban and a subsequent lawsuit, he prompted the press secretary to publicly acknowledge she does not agree with the president's accusation of the media as the

enemy of the country, which she refused. Instead, she called the position of the journalists "ironic" as "the media attack the president for his rhetoric when they frequently lower the level of conversation in this country. Repeatedly, repeatedly the media resorts to personal attacks without any content other than to incite anger" (Flood, "Sarah Sanders"). It can thus be argued that the strategy employed by Sanders in her function was largely reactive as the communication staff of the White House under her tenure took restrictive action towards individual journalists after their behavior and manner of questioning were deemed inappropriate by the press secretary.

Similar reactive strategy was visible in the second major shift from Spicer's era – the sharp decline in the number of daily press briefings held by the press secretary. The end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019 saw a new trend of creating new records for the longest period without a press briefing with a period of 40 days followed by a period of 41 days (Cillizza, "The Last 'Daily'") and finally, a period of 94 days between her last briefing and her exit from the position (Diamond and Collins). According to the president's tweet, he ordered the stop of the daily briefings: "The reason Sarah Sanders does not go to the 'podium' much anymore is that the press covers her so rudely & inaccurately, in particular certain members of the press. I told her not to bother, the word gets out anyway! Most will never cover us fairly" (@realDonaldTrump, "The reason"). However, it can be concluded that the stop was in direct reaction to Sanders, her take on the press secretary duties, and most notably the tense relationship she fostered with the correspondents attending the briefings.

The omitting of the daily press briefings was significantly accelerated when Sanders resigned, and a third White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham was appointed by Trump to start in July 2019. In the 281 days in this function, Grisham held no press briefings – the third tenure thus heightened the stark difference between the communication staff of the Trump presidency and the previous presidencies as, "[i]n utter contrast to the Reagan team's 'message

of the day,' or Bush's tightly coordinated PR machine, there was no disciplined messaging at all" (Douglas 139). The strategy of the third press secretary could thus be characterized as avoidant since her contact with journalist was largely diminished. When asked for the reason of the cancelled tradition, Grisham, echoing Trump's tweet during Sanders's tenure, transferred the blame on the journalists attending the briefings: "To be honest, the briefings have become a lot of theater. And I think that a lot of reporters were doing it to get famous" (Nguyen). Apart from the non-existent briefings, Grisham was equally invisible on the mainstream networks as "[o]utside of appearances on Fox News, the One America News Network and the Sinclair Broadcast Group, she rarely goes on TV" and "is virtually unknown to the public" (Grynbaum and Rogers).

It could be argued that the conduct of the second and the third press secretary serving under Donald Trump is in line with the overall communication strategy presented in the chapter in two ways. Firstly, as was documented in the previous section, despite the strategy of avoidance of the daily press briefings which started with Sanders and was perfected by Grisham, the time they spent in the White House as the press secretary saw an escalation of individual journalists or entire networks and newspapers having restricted access to the White House. The eventual complete loss of the daily press briefings could similarly be considered a breach of the rights of journalists to gain information and access to the White House communication team. What is more, this strategy has been framed to further attack the credibility of the journalists as the omitting was justified by their misconduct. It can thus be concluded that the more recent tenures of the press secretaries brought an escalation to the warfare with journalists. Secondly, by being reluctant in direct contact with journalists and, in Grisham's case, in appearing on live TV apart from more conservative networks, the conduct of the two press secretaries supported Trump's communication strategy of a direct channel. By holding press sessions and tweeting out of his personal account, Trump thus not only bypasses

the journalists in order to convey his message directly to the people without it passing through the gatekeepers who may distort it – he also bypasses the members of his own administration directly tasked with relaying his message.

2.6.   The Increasing Warfare?

This chapter argued that the overall goal of the communication strategy the president employed towards the hostile media was to attack them and decrease their credibility in the eyes of public to deny or curb negative coverage. It can be concluded that the patterns identified in the first chapter in the communication strategy of the Nixon administration are all applicable to the strategy of the Trump administration. However, Trump used Twitter as the direct channel of communication rather than a televised press conference. The analysis of the selected tweets concluded that there was a significant increase in his use of Twitter to address media outlets in 2019 as the number of tweets doubled in this year. This is paralleled by the emergence of personalized attacks on individual journalists and contributors as while there were instances in the preceding year, 2019 marked a significant increase.

As far as the relationship between the president and individual outlets from different ends of the ideological spectrum is concerned, the analysis of the selected tweets aimed at *Fox News* and at *The New York Times, The Washington Post* and *CNN* confirmed the existence of a positive bias towards the former, and a negative bias towards the three latter sources. However, there was a visible shift in the second half of 2019 in the president's relationship towards *Fox News* as negative tweets emerged for the first time in which Trump criticized this network, and thus there were signs of the erosion of affinity which was unchallenged in the years before that. The following chapter will examine the possible reasons for this shift by analyzing the online articles by *Fox News* in the concurrent time.

The analysis of the tweets proved that the strategy behind attacking news outlets on Twitter aims to discredit them to deny negative coverage and shift the attention to outlets covering the president in a more positive light. This is done by the frequent use of adjectives and expressions with negative connotations of inaccuracy, and by employing the "us" versus "them" mentality and placing the hostile media into a position of enemy who deliberately produces false coverage to discredit the president. However, at the start of the impeachment process, Trump rather opted for increased tweeting of quotes and headlines from outlets which supported his side, as if to insulate himself from negative coverage. Furthermore, the analysis revealed a personal motivation for attacking the hostile media – a personal resentment on the side of the president and his conviction that the media do not report on him as well as they should.

The chapter also found an increasing trend of restricting the access of journalists and outlets to the president and the White House events starting in 2018 but escalating in 2019 and early 2020. However, it can be concluded that this attempt to decrease the credibility of the selected outlets and limit negative coverage was not successful. Firstly, the restrictions were followed by a trend in solidarity between the outlets – even *Fox News* – criticizing the acts and therefore prompting more negative stories. Secondly, the outlets which decided to appeal these decisions in court were all granted victory which upheld their rights instead of proving misconduct on their side. The escalation of the warfare between the White House and the journalists was visible in the strategies of the three press secretaries analyzed in the chapter. While Spicer's proactive strategy of combative interactions with journalists at frequently held press briefings still meant an accessible White House, Sanders and most notably Grisham from the second half of 2019 brought an escalation to the conflict which manifested itself in restricting access of journalists into the White House and in seldom-held or no press briefings.

It can be concluded that by leading a war against individual journalists and outlets – which is most significantly visible within the restricting of access to the White House and lawsuits against outlets, but also within frequent Twitter attacks – the president is attacking the freedom of press and freedom of speech in its entirety, which are freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, one of the most significant documents upholding the democracy of the United States. While Trump does not eliminate opposing media – which is one of the signs of an authoritarian regime – such attacks and restrictions in attempt to curb the hostile coverage are only a few steps away.

One more general conclusion which can be drawn from the chapter is that there was a notable escalation in the patterns of the employed communication strategy in the most recent year of the Trump presidency. The thesis has set a hypothesis which could be instrumental in explaining this intensification in this period – that there is significant media bias and partisanship in the three selected outlets. The thesis will attempt to confirm or disprove this hypothesis in the next chapter by analyzing selected articles from the outlets across the ideological spectrum from the beginning of the impeachment process, and subsequently aim to explain some of the patterns and trends which were the products of this chapter.

3. Left, Right or Objective: Current Media Bias

The previous chapter confirmed, by analyzing selected patterns in the presidential communication strategy and the president's tweets aimed at three media outlets from different ends of the ideological spectrum, that the overall goal of this strategy is to decrease the credibility of the outlets which cover the president negatively, and to limit their activity to curb hostile coverage. This strategy also seems to have escalated from the second half of 2019. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that President Trump displays positive bias towards outlets on the right (namely *Fox News,* although the affinity is not as undiluted as in the beginning of his term), and negative bias towards outlets on the center and on the left of the ideological spectrum.

However, it could be argued that this communication strategy was influenced by the media landscape and their coverage of the president and his administration. During the Trump administration, the media seems to be more critical than towards his predecessors: "About six-in-ten news stories about Trump's first 60 days (62%) carried an overall negative assessment of his words or actions. That is about three times more negative than for Obama (20%) and roughly twice that of Bush and Clinton (28% each)" (Mitchell et al. 34). This was not reflected in the coverage of *Fox News* – as the second chapter stated, their coverage of Trump is more positive than of other outlets.

The aim of this chapter is then to confirm or deny the second hypothesis which has been set in the methodological section – whether there is prevalent media bias and partisanship in the media outlets positioned differently on the ideological spectrum, with *Fox News* (representing the right) displaying positive bias towards the president, and *The New York Times* (representing the center) and *The Washington Post* (representing the left) displaying, on various levels, negative bias towards the president. The chapter will examine how the media coverage

of the administration and the president is influenced by the fact that the media outlets on the right seem to largely adhere to Hallin's sphere of consensus, and that outlets which are embedded in the center and on the left of the ideological spectrum seem to be operating in the sphere of legitimate controversy, both described in the theoretical section. The discussion in the chapter will be guided by the analysis of selected articles from the three aforementioned outlets dating from the first seven days of the impeachment controversy as arguably the biggest crisis of the Trump presidency. The selection of the outlets and the articles has been explained in the methodological section. The analysis of the articles will focus on various aspects of media bias which were described in the theoretical section – gatekeeping, coverage, and statement bias, and framing in terms of the purposeful use of headlines.

3.1.   The Trump Impeachment: A Brief Background

The presidency of Donald Trump marks only the third time the impeachment efforts proceeded into a trial in the Senate. The alleged misconduct of the president was brought to light by a whistleblower, an intelligence official who filed a complaint with the intelligence general in August 2019. A month after it had been filed, *The Washington Post* revealed that the complaint "involves President Trump's communications with a foreign leader" which "included a 'promise' that was regarded as so troubling that it prompted" (Miller et al.) the complaint. The following day, *The Post* was similarly the first to report that the foreign leader in question was the newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (Nakashima et al.). Finally, *The Wall Street Journal* reported a day later that the focus of the call was on the pressure to investigate the son of Joe Biden, Trump's opponent in the presidential election of 2020 (Cullison et al.), in exchange for temporarily frozen military aid for Ukraine, along with a request to investigate the possible influence on the 2016 presidential election. Trump acknowledged he discussed Biden in the call but denied pressuring Zelensky, and there was

seemingly no explicit quid pro quo situation apparent in the transcript of the call even though it was not released verbatim.
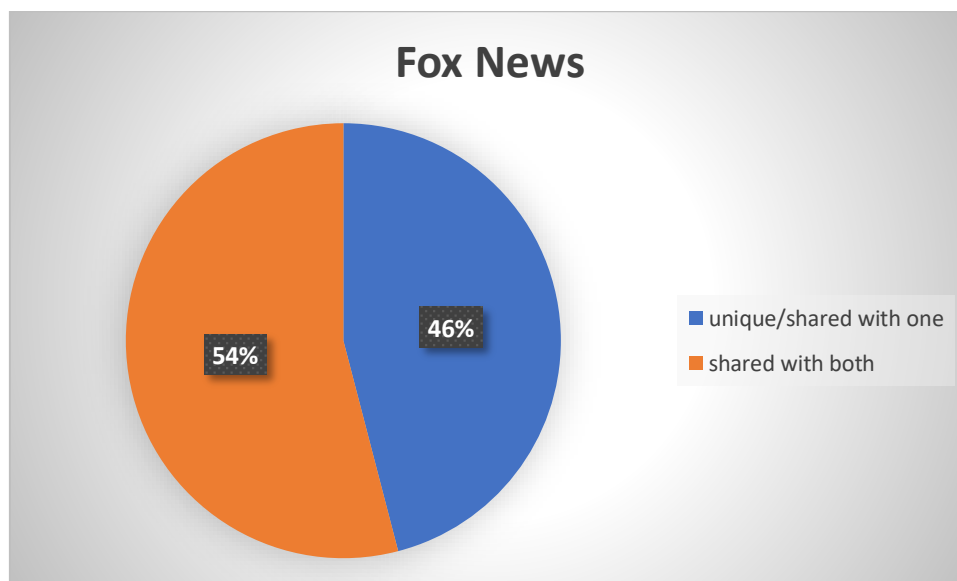
After Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced the official start of the impeachment inquiry in September 2019, Trump has been impeached by the House of Representatives in January on the count of two articles of impeachment. Firstly, the House charged Trump with abuse of power: "Using the powers of his high office, President Trump solicited the interference of a foreign government, Ukraine, in the 2020 United States Presidential election" (The New York Times). Second charge brought against the president was the obstruction of Congress. By refusing to comply, "President Trump thus interposed the powers of the Presidency against the lawful subpoenas of the House of Representatives, and assumed to himself functions and judgments necessary to the exercise of the 'sole Power of Impeachment' vested by the Constitution in the House of Representatives" (The New York Times). The president was ultimately acquitted in early February 2020.
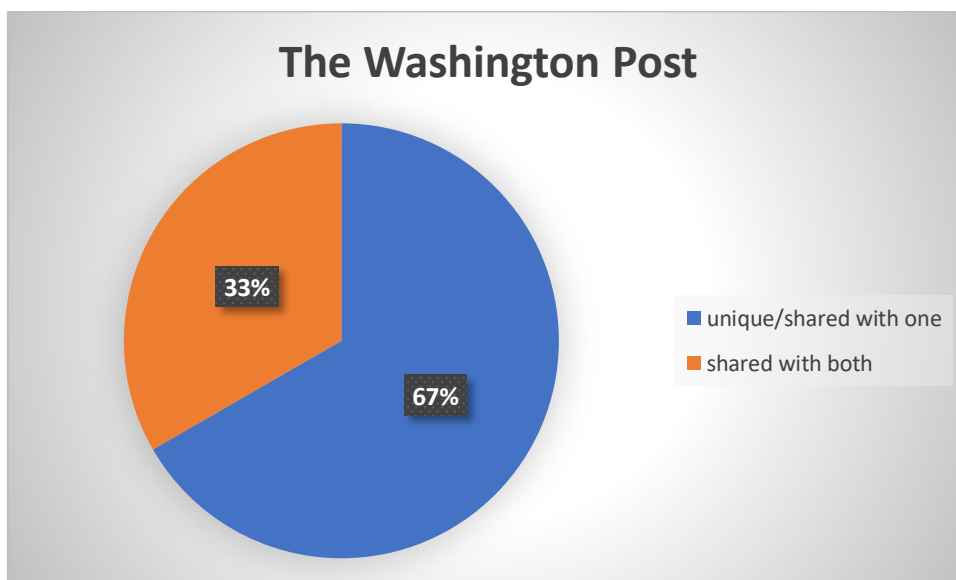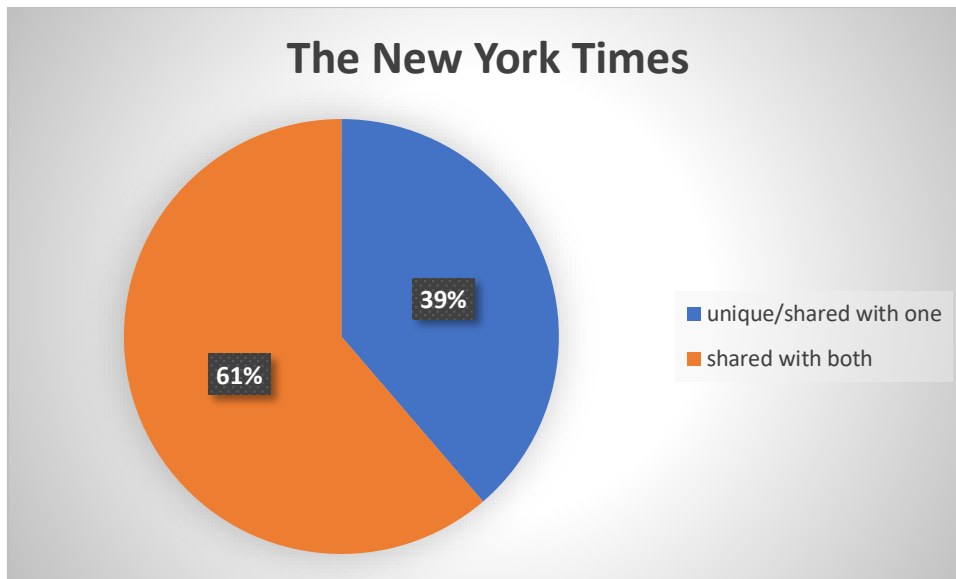
3.2.   Gatekeeping Bias and Media Roles

As was described in the theoretical section, even though that the ideal embedded within American journalism is objectivity, it is at times at odds with the reality of media bias present in the coverage. The following section of the chapter will focus on the discussion of the presence of gatekeeping bias – or the selection of topics which will be presented to the world in the form of articles (D'Alessio and Allen 135) – in the articles by the three outlets, and how it influences the roles the media outlets fulfill in society.

Each outlet featured articles which were not present in all three of the outlets. In the case of *Fox News,* out of total 37 articles analyzed, 17 of them were unique to the outlet or only appeared in two out of three analyzed outlets. With *The New York Times,* out of total 31 articles,

12 of them were unique or only shared with one other outlet. Finally, in the case of *The Washington Post,* out of the total 48 articles analyzed, 32 of them were unique or only appeared in two out of three analyzed outlets. An example for an article which only appeared in one of the three outlets, in *Fox News*, was report on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez criticizing Democrats for cautious approach to impeachment (Calicchio). An example for article appearing in only two out of three outlets was article on White House mistakenly sending Democrats their talking points, only reported by *The Times* (Chokshi, "White House") and *The Post* (Sonmez), but not *Fox News.* Even though all three outlets were covering a single issue and working with similar sources, there were many articles which were not shared in all three outlets across the ideological spectrum. This points to the conclusion that all three outlets practice gatekeeping bias in that they do not cover all the topics, or do not cover them in an equally broad scope.

The New York Times

39%
61%

■ unique/shared with one
■ shared with both

The Washington Post

33%
67%

■ unique/shared with one
■ shared with both

Out of 17 identified articles in *Fox News,* 15 of them could be considered helpful to the president's case with following topics: Trump's attacks on Democrats and the press, Republicans speaking out in support of the president, or Ukrainian officials denying there was pressure put on them by Trump during the call. It can thus be concluded that *Fox News* significantly employed gatekeeping bias in order to strengthen their narrative based on the support for the president, and the choice of the articles which were let in through the gate is a statement of the positive bias the outlet displays towards the president.

Fox News

positive towards Trump
other

12%
88%
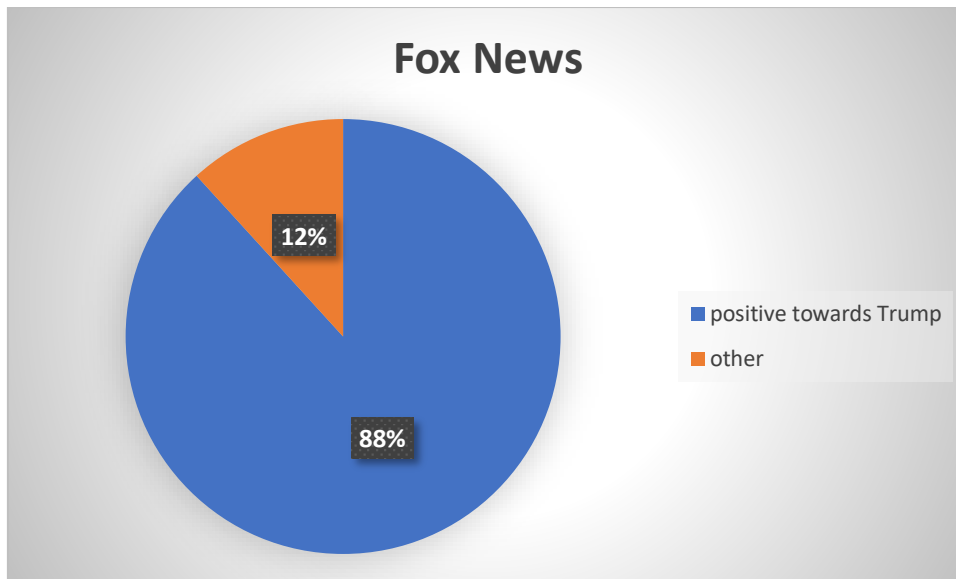
In case of *The New York Times,* the content of the 12 identified articles is more balanced. While seven of them are reports which cover the administration or its members negatively, and analytical texts discussing the complaint, the allegations, and the reactions of the president which could be considered as hostile to the president, the remaining five could be considered as explanatory and timeline-related pieces. This balance thus confirms *The Times* as a relatively objective outlet which corresponds with their position at the center of the ideological spectrum.

The New York Times

negative towards Trump
other

42%
58%
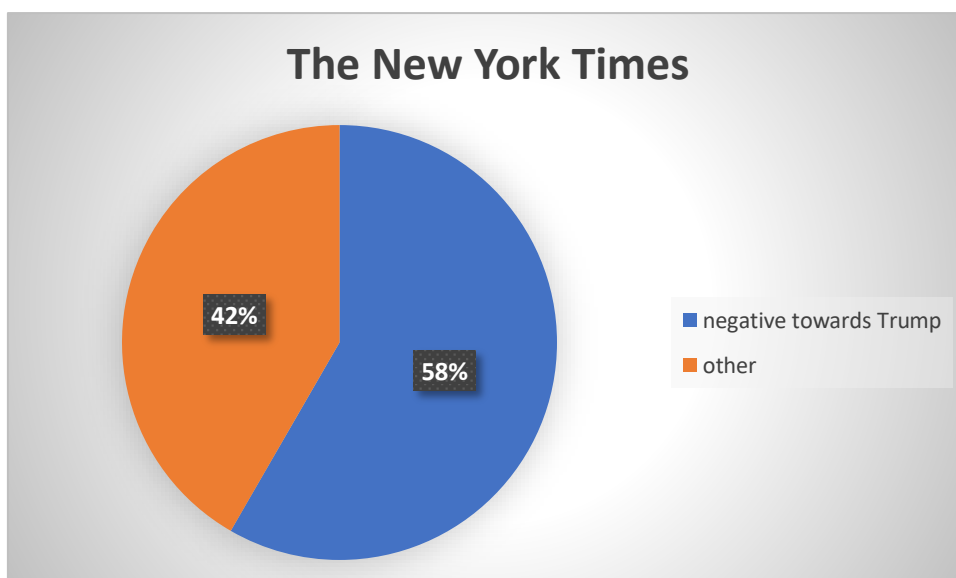
Lastly, in the case of *The Washington Post*, out of the total 32 identified articles, 19 of them could be considered as positioned against the president as they cover topics such as the agenda of Trump's personal lawyer in the country, the rhetoric and self-assurance of the president, or the criticism from Republican rivals. The remaining 13 articles then, as in case of *The Times,* analyze the backgrounds of the issues, and provide timelines and fact-checking. As far as the number of the negative articles is concerned, it could be concluded that *The Post* used gatekeeping to strengthen their narrative and negative bias displayed towards the president. However, the ratio of the articles used to strengthen the narrative to the articles used as background analyses or explanatory texts is almost as balanced as in the case of *The Times* which positions *The Post* closer to the objective center than to the partisanship of *Fox News*.
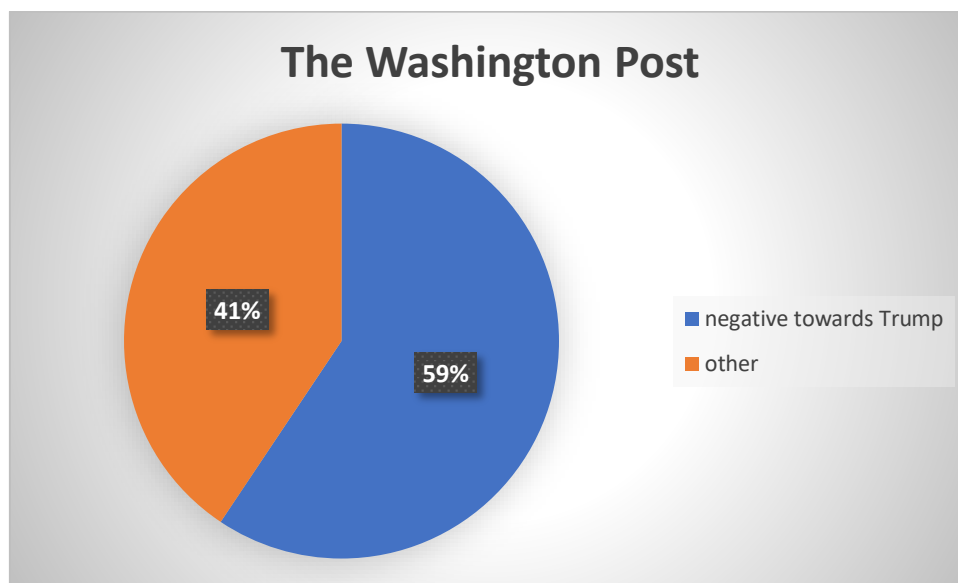
However, even in the cases where the same topic or event is covered by all three selected outlets, by selecting a different strategy for a headline or selecting and arranging sources which match the desired narrative, three significantly different outcomes may be produced. This will be demonstrated on case studies further in the chapter.

It could then be argued that out of the four general social roles of the media in societies which Christians et al. define and which were described in the theoretical section – monitorial,

facilitative, radical, and collaborative role – *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* fulfill the monitorial role which is regarded as the most representative of the common activities of the press. While the gatekeeping bias present in *The Post* implies critical nature of the outlet towards the president, it cannot be considered radical as it does not call for drastic change. *Fox News* similarly fulfills the monitorial role, yet it could be argued that the high level of gatekeeping bias which reinforces the affinity displayed towards the Trump administration is on the verge of fulfilling the collaborative role. While, as per definition, it is only commonly utilized in times of national emergencies, it is based on "the relationship between the media and sources of political and economic power, primarily the state and its agencies" (Christians et al. 31), which is arguably already in place between the outlet and the Trump administration. This could then signal the possible use of the collaborative role for propaganda. Furthermore, all three outlets – most significantly *Fox News* followed by *The Post* and less markedly *The Times* – show signs of partisan advocacy in their reporting. This could mean a breach within the definition of monitorial role – however, it could also signal a development within the usual understanding of the monitorial role in the highly divisive media landscape of the contemporary United States.

The division between *Fox News* on one hand, and *The Times* and *The Post* on the other hand, is more visible when Hallin's theory of spheres of journalism is applied. The latter two clearly operate within the sphere of legitimate controversy. However, while the former reports on the topics which fall into the sphere of legitimate controversy as well – the two-party political system in the United States and the executive branch – it could be argued that they employ the approach mostly seen in the sphere of consensus. While they report on topics that are deemed divisive – as the topic of the impeachment process arguably is – they often seemed to be positioned as an advocate of the administration, and therefore operate in the sphere of consensus as well.

It could thus be concluded that as far as the gatekeeping bias is concerned, it is the most pronounced within *Fox News* – the analysis showed that a significant portion of their coverage of the early impeachment process consisted of stories which were beneficial for strengthening of their positive bias displayed towards the president. Examples include articles such as Trump's critical reaction to Pelosi's announcement of impeachment inquiry (Rambaran) or claim of existence of documents proving partisanship of the whistleblower (Re et al.). This is seemingly reflected in the high number of times the president tweets at the network or shares a headline – the previous chapter concluded it was 552 times in the entire presidency and an overwhelming majority of these tweets were positive or neutral which demonstrated him being in agreement with the network. While this implies that the president tweeted at the network in such amount because the coverage of him was positive, the analysis of the gatekeeping bias in *Fox News* also hints at the fact that he had the opportunity to do so because the positive coverage was quite prevalent.

The analysis of *The Times* and *The Post* also showed – especially in the case of *The Post* – negative bias proving that the outlets on the left, and to some extent in the center as well, also used gatekeeping to strengthen their selected narrative. An example is an article from *The Times* on the ambiguous defense of frozen Ukraine aid (Qiu), or article on Trump and his self-assuredness from *The Post* (Rucker et al.). Nevertheless, the ratio of such articles to more objective pieces was less pronounced as in the case of *Fox News*. However, while the second chapter showed that Trump tweeted negatively at *The Times* almost twice as much as he did at *The Post*, the bigger presence of gatekeeping bias in the latter seems to show that the frequency of negatively-positioned articles against his person is not the main factor in the process of tweeting.

3.3.   Coverage Bias

The second type of bias present in the media is coverage bias, or the preferential treatment of one side over the other in terms of exposure and space devoted to their positions in the articles (D'Alessio and Allen 136). The difference in the employment of sources and their ordering, and impact of this on the outcome of the article will be demonstrated by comparing nine articles covering three topics by all the three outlets. The first trio of articles focused on the topic of Ukraine being at the center of the controversial call. It could be argued that the article published by *Fox News* directly highlighted the president's position. They put a part of his quote calling the whistleblower partisan in the headline and allowed space for several of his quotes before including a quote from the Democratic House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, yet immediately following with Trump's attack on Schiff and the media. While the rest of the article followed an alternating pattern of including quotes from the two parties, the position of the president was also supported by the inclusion of two tweets directly into the article, with both being written by him or his personal lawyer (Pappas, "Controversy"). The article from *The New York Times* is considerably less heavy on direct quotes – as can be observed in most of their articles. While they include the position of the president first, it is only one quote, with similarly one quote being allocated to his lawyer, to an expert allowing the possibility of legitimate concern over the handling of the whistleblower complaint, and Schiff (Barnes et al., "Whistle-Blower"). In the article by *The Washington Post,* there is a shift – the first partisan quote is allocated to Schiff, with the denial of Trump only coming after. The article then alternates the partisan quotes (Nakashima et al.).

In the case of the trio of articles published about the announcement of the impeachment inquiry, *Fox News* used an alternating pattern for the quotes, starting with the Democratic Speaker Pelosi and several quotes from her (Re, "Pelosi Announces"). Similar pattern can be seen in the article by *The New York Times* – however, the article also mentions Republicans

who expressed their reservations at the conduct of the president (Fandos). Lastly, the article by *The Post* also follows an alternating pattern of using partisan quotes, however, they elevated the importance of the quotes by the Democratic Speaker against the president by placing it into the headline as well as the first paragraphs (Bade et al.).
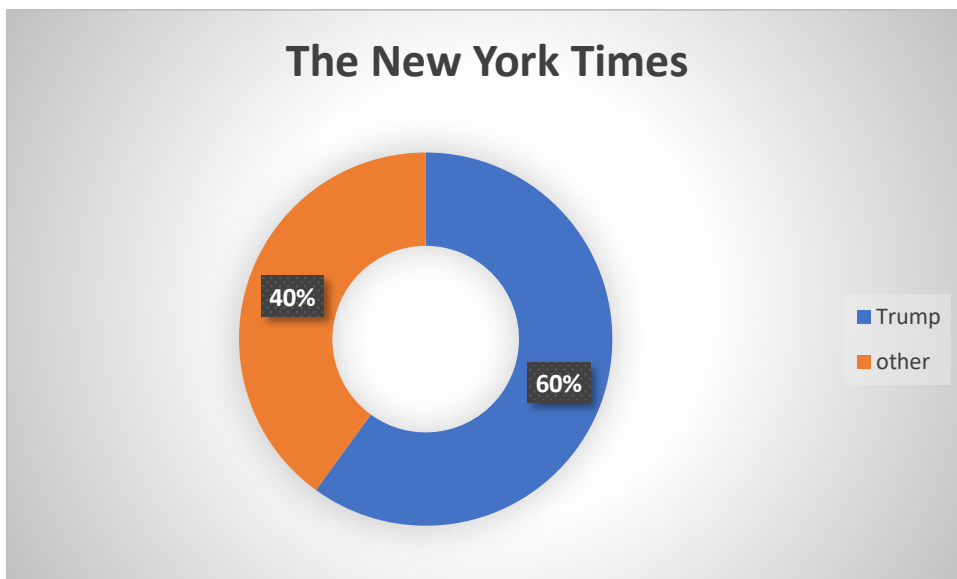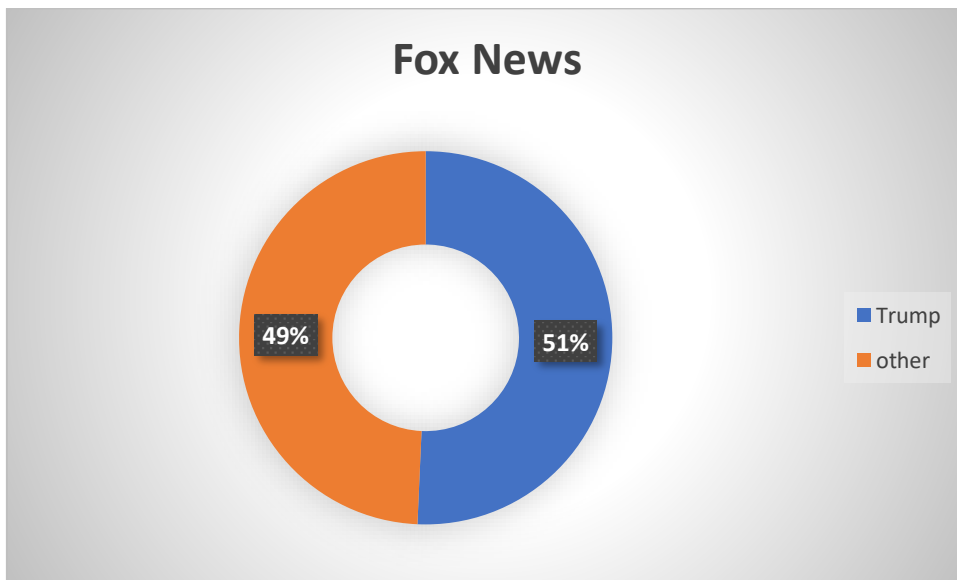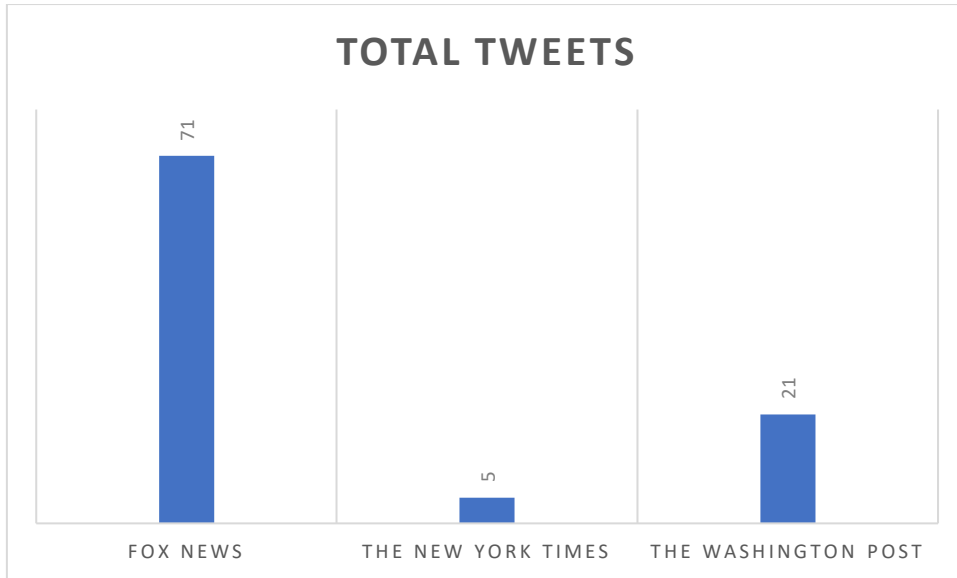
The fact that all three outlets use alternating pattern of partisan quotes seems to show that there are "strong similarities of news processes and news content . . . [which] point to the news media as a single institution" (Cook 84). However, while the practice of alternating between partisan sides is consistently used in the outlets and the quotes they use are similar or the same, the journalists in the individual outlets then "cut and paste these elements according to their own standards of quality and interest" (Cook 98), ordering the quotes based on how important they are to supporting their chosen narrative.
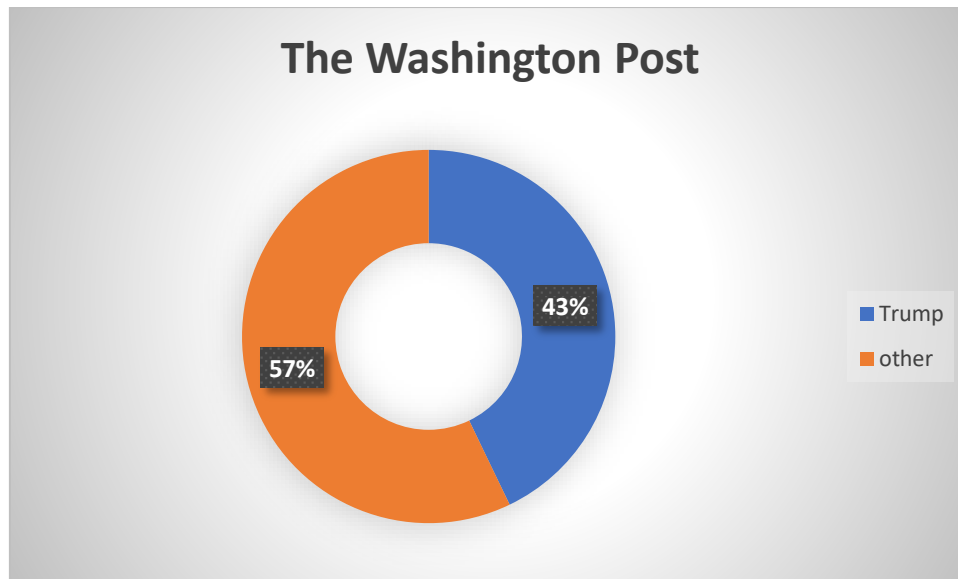
The last article trio then focused on the release of the transcript of the call. In the article by *Fox News*, the first direct quote produced for the article is by the Department of Justice spokeswoman who denied the Attorney General was involved with the Ukrainian investigation. It is then followed by several quotes and a tweet from the president, and only allows place for the Democratic Speaker at the end of the article (Pappas, "Ukraine"). However, in the article by *The Times,* the quote from the Department of Justice spokeswoman is not featured at all, but the rest of the article follows an alternating pattern, albeit also highlighting a dissenting voice from the Republican ranks (Baker, "Trump"). Finally, *The Post* only placed the quote in question in the second half of the article – instead, they allocated the first place to a Democratic quote followed by a quote from the president, yet immediately contrasting it with a dissenting Republican voice (Barrett et al.).

A part of the larger discussion on the employment of sources by the three outlets is the direct use of tweets in the article. All three outlets use the information public officials on both

sides of the barricade tweeted, with majority of those tweets being written by the president on his private account as "his tweets are almost per definition newsworthy" (Hendricks and Vestergaard 34). The fact that much of the times when Trump is quoted in the articles comes from his Twitter account confirms the discussion presented in the previous chapter of the thesis on the importance of his tweets for his need to be covered by the media.

However, as far as the direct embedding of tweets into the online articles is concerned, the three outlets significantly differ, with *Fox News* employing 71 of them in the selected articles, and 36 of them being authored by the president. *The New York Times* only used five direct tweets, with three of them being from Trump, and in the case of *The Washington Post,* it was 21 tweets, nine of them coming from the president's account. Apart from a statement of a different strategy of creating articles, the abundance of tweets and specifically the tweets written by Trump – as there were 37 articles analyzed, in general, there was a tweet from the president present in almost all of the articles – also points at the existence of positive bias displayed by the *Fox News* towards the president. By inserting his tweets directly into the articles, the outlet not only gives the president thrice as big a platform as the two other outlets combined but it also visually highlights the president's tweets and reports on them in their entirety as opposed to simply taking out a shorter quote and inserting it into a paragraph.

TOTAL TWEETS

FOX NEWS: 71
THE NEW YORK TIMES: 5
THE WASHINGTON POST: 21

Fox News

Trump 51%
other 49%

The New York Times

Trump 60%
other 40%

The Washington Post

43%
57%

Trump
other

It could thus be concluded that all three outlets display coverage bias. In the case of *Fox News,* it seems to be in place to strengthen the positive bias towards the president and the administration. This is visible in the higher employment of tweets, and especially those from Trump, in the articles. They also allocate bigger amount of space for his quotes and highlight statements which are beneficial for his case. For example, the former is apparent in an article about the president criticizing the media which is almost entirely built on his quotes (O'Reilly, "Trumps Slams"), and the latter is visible in an article summing up Republican reactions to the whistleblower complaint – the fully supportive voices are in the foreground, and those with concerns at the end (Stimson). Taking the findings of the second chapter into consideration, it can be concluded that by allocating so much space for the president's tweets, the outlet is engaged with a sort of feedback circle with Trump – giving him space within the coverage then arguably earns more tweets, which then, again, gives the outlet more source material.

On the other hand, analysis showed that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* seem to prefer the use of non-partisan, expert voices. Yet based on the fact that they almost always use them to pose a contrast to the claims of the president or in favor of the impeachment proceeding, it could be argued that this, too, is a case of coverage bias which is negative in

nature towards the president and the administration. Examples include article from *The Times* on Trump's conduct (Baker, "Instead"), or from *The Post* on criticism of his rhetoric (Thebault). While non-partisan expert voices do not overtly signal which side of the conflict they support, it does not entail that they are impartial. Selecting an expert voice which supports the selected narrative both adds relevance to the anti-administration arguments and helps frame the article as they use them to challenge the statements or actions of the president and the administration, and to deselect or demote sources beneficial for the president's case. *The Post*, furthermore, often uses its voice to act in opposition to the president and the administration, often creating statement bias which will be documented on examples in the next section. While this conduct would be common in the opinion section of the newspaper, by excluding those articles, its presence in other articles can be considered as a significant sign of partisan bias.
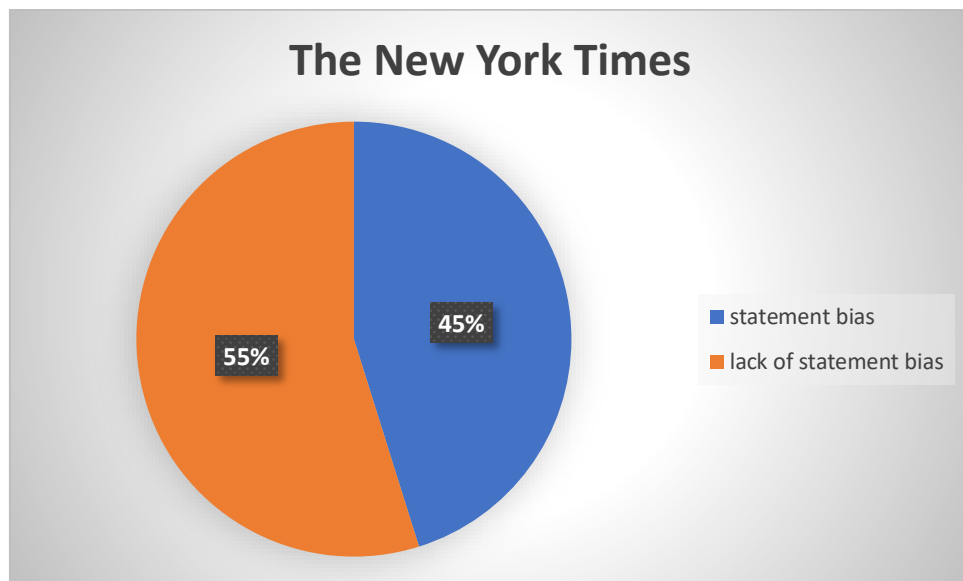
3.4.　　　**Statement Bias**

As far as the third type of bias – statement bias, or the process of reporters adding subjective views or commentary into the articles (D'Alessio and Allen 136) – is concerned, the analysis showed that its presence significantly differed across the three outlets. In the case of *Fox News*, it only appeared in seven out of the total 37 articles, and in a less prominent manner. Instead of inserting subjective statements into the articles, the reporters mostly made use of marked language to convey subjective stance on the issue. As an example, an article on the clash between Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nancy Pelosi, where the appearance of conflict within the Democratic party was highlighted by the use of expressions such as "took a veiled shot", "had lashed out", and "sought to ease infighting" (Calicchio). The position of the outlet in the conflict between Trump and Biden was similarly underscored by the selection of expressions – while Biden "openly bragged" (Re, "Amid AOC") about pressuring Ukraine, Trump was

"trying to turn lemons into lemonade" (O'Reilly, "Trump Campaign") which carries the connotation that he was treated unfairly.

Fox News
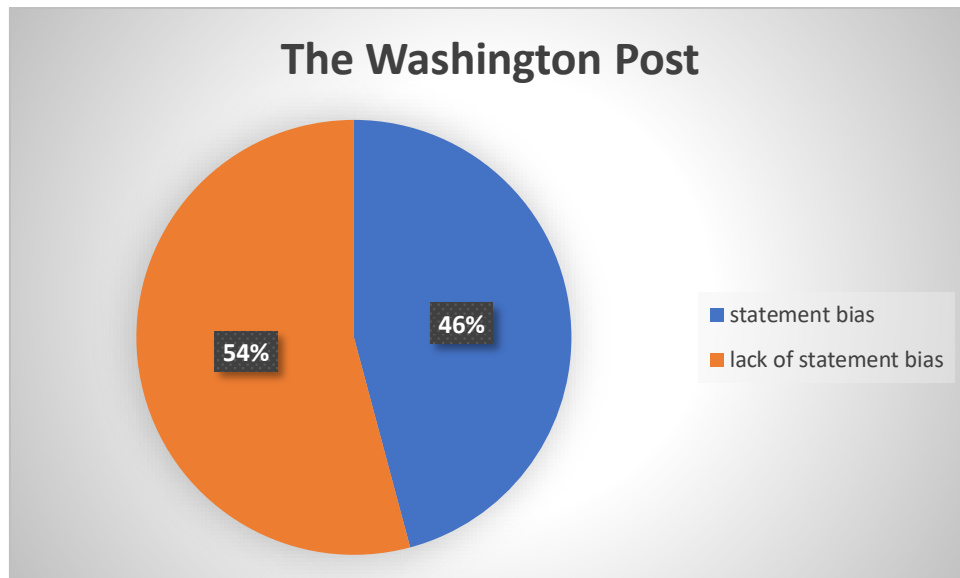

- statement bias: 19%
- lack of statement bias: 81%
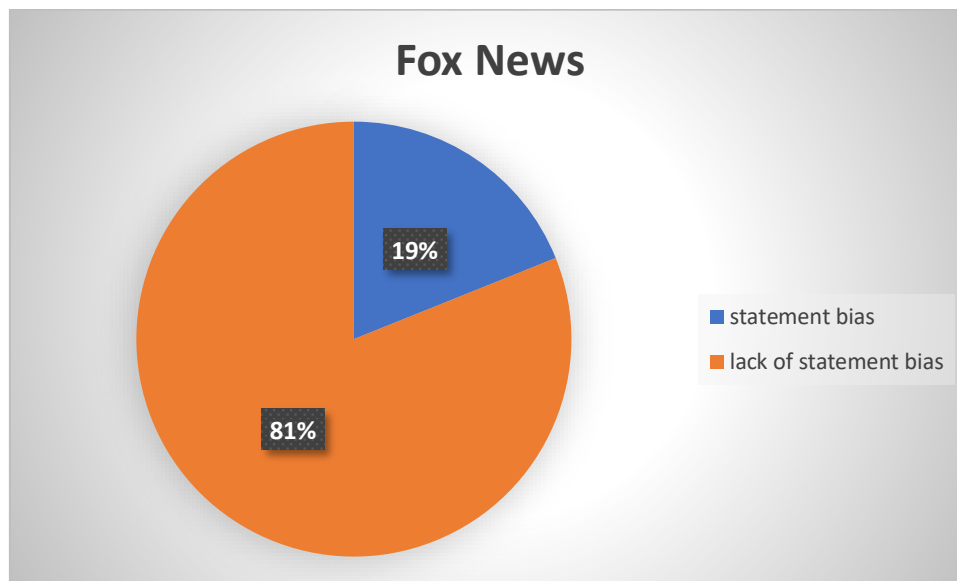
In case of *The Times*, statement bias appeared more often – 14 times out of total 31 articles. As in the outlet before, there was also use of marked language to convey a certain subjective stance – this is visible when the reporters used expressions such as "orchestrating a cover-up" (Barnes et al., "Whistle-Blower"), "chief antagonist of the notorious corruption in Ukraine's government" (Barnes et al., "Trump Pressed") in order to describe Biden's involvement, or "thumbed his nose" (Fandos) to describe Trump's disregard for norms. However, this outlet also interjected into the story with their own subjective comments and observations which arguably shaped the articles and potentially influenced the audience's reading. An example is the following excerpt: "Even for a leader who has audaciously disregarded many of the boundaries that restrained his predecessors, President Trump's appeal to a foreign power for dirt on former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. is an astonishing breach of the norms governing the American presidency" (Baker, "Instead") as it takes a definitive stand on the allegations which lead to the impeachment. Similar effect is achieved with the following phrase: "Mr. Zelensky repeatedly lavished praise on Mr. Trump, employing a

strategy of ego-stroking that world leaders often use with the president" (Shear and Haberman)

as it subjectively defines the nature of the relationship between the two leaders.

As far as *The Washington Post* is concerned, the outlet had the most significant presence

of statement bias out of the three analyzed outlets – out of total 48 articles, it appeared in 22.

The presence of marked language in order to convey a subjective position on the topic was as

common a practice as in the previous two outlets – for example, the expression "spilling the

beans" (Blake) was used to imply that President Trump has something to hide in the

impeachment inquiry, or the use of "loyalist" (Wagner et al.) to describe the supporters of

Trump evokes an excessive amount of partisanship. Furthermore, *The Post* exceeded *The Times*

in the amount of subjective commentary which was interjected into the articles and often took

a clear position in their analysis of the issues. The following excerpt is a clear example of this

pattern: "This is ridiculous, of course, both because of its stark hyperbole and because it's

simply untrue" (Bump, "Trump's Rhetoric") as the newspaper presented what seems as a

definitive answer on whether or not the president is telling the truth. Another example shows

the outlet directly mocking the lack of clarity on the content of the president's calls with other

head of states: "This seems, in the abstract, like it's not a big deal. Trump called Putin and they

talked about wildfires. Who cares" (Bump, "The White House"). However, this article was not a part of the opinion section – it was sorted under the "Politics" section, just as the example before, and while its genre (analysis) is not as objective as a news report, it still implies adherence to facts which only highlights the presence of bias.

It can thus be concluded that *The Washington Post* displays the highest amount of statement bias as the reporters most often interject subjective commentary into the articles to shape their tone and outcome, and select marked language in order to convey similar messages. However, it was followed closely by *The New York Times* which employed both techniques while *Fox News* only used marked language to convey their positions. It could be argued that this discrepancy is determined by the number of analyses published by the former two which focus on the background or the timeline of the reported issues – such article types, while not considered opinions, allowed for a bigger amount of subjective commentary. On the other hand, such articles were lacking in the selection from *Fox News*, and therefore only marked language was used to convey subjective stances.

3.5.   Bias in Action: Two Case Studies

During the analysis, two topics have been identified which will be the focus of this section. By examining the articles published on these topics across the three selected outlets, the thesis will aim to demonstrate the presence of gatekeeping, coverage, and statement bias in the articles, and to discuss how it shapes the outcome of the story.

The first topic was the commentary of the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky on the controversial call with President Trump in which he denied having been pressured. It could be argued that there was a varying degree of gatekeeping bias present in all three articles - while *Fox News* created a separate article for the topic, in *The New York Times,* the story only appeared along others in the highlights of the day, and in the case of *The Washington Post,* in the time frame of the analysis, there was no mention of the comment from Zelensky in the articles; the outlet only published an annotated transcript of their conversation. It could be argued that as Zelensky's comments were favorable for the case of President Trump, the fact that *Fox News* highlighted it by creating a separate article and *The Post* did not confirms the presence of positive and negative bias, respectively, displayed towards Trump by the two outlets. As far as coverage bias is concerned, this is visible in the article by *Fox News* as they devote more space, quotes, and their preferential position to Trump, Zelensky, and Republican sources. Zelensky's denial of pressure is significantly highlighted by appearing in the headline and again in the second paragraph and is followed by Trump's quotes. Furthermore, the first time the Democratic Speaker Pelosi and her announcement of impeachment is mentioned, it is immediately followed by the president's comment: "She's lost her way, she's been taken over by the radical left" (O'Reilly, "Ukraine President"), showing clear preference for his point of view in the article. On the other hand, statement bias was significantly more prevalent in the article by *The Times* as they offered a large amount of commentary to the report of the conversation between the two leaders, inserting statements such as "Mr. Zelensky tried not to

offend", "he was saying when Mr. Trump jumped in", or "Mr. Zelensky said almost apologetically" (Shear). It could be argued that the presence of such evaluating statements can result in the shaping of the reader's opinion and the overall outcome of the article.

The second topic was the CNN interview of Rudolph Giuliani, the president's personal lawyer, in which he gave two conflicting answers to the question whether he did or did not ask Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, Trump's presumptive Democratic rival in the 2020 election. Similarly, there is gatekeeping bias visible when the three articles are compared – while *Fox News* did not devote a separate article to the report and analysis of this interview, *The Times* and *The Post* did. As the interview did not shine a positive light on President Trump and his team, it could again be argued that the fact that the two outlets highlighted the importance of the topic by creating a separate article and *Fox News* did not confirms the presence of negative and positive bias. In the case of coverage bias, there was a significant difference between *Fox News* and *The Times* on the one hand, and *The Post* on the other hand. The former two did not use an abundance of tweets or direct quotes from the interview, and those which appeared in the article came from Giuliani. *The Post,* on the contrary, included significantly more direct quotes from the interview and tweets from both Giuliani and Chris Cuomo, the CNN anchor – yet they framed the selection and ordering of the quotes in a way which would be negative towards Giuliani. As an example, Cuomo's tweet appeared much sooner than Giuliani's did. The use of expressions such as "went into attack mode" and "yelled over" (Itkowitz) similarly attach negative connotation to Giuliani's conduct. As far as the statement bias is concerned, it was again most visible in the reporting of *The Times* as they interjected into the story with numerous phrases which used marked language such as "latest head-scratching revelation", "a needless misstep", or "Crazy like a fox" (Karni and Haberman) to comment on Giuliani's performance. Just as in the previous case, it can be argued that the presence of such marked

commentary can result in the shaping of the reader's opinion and the overall outcome of the article.

The two case studies largely confirm the previous conclusions about the existence of gatekeeping and coverage bias in *Fox News* and *The Washington Post*. However, they also reveal a significant presence of statement bias in the articles by *The New York Times,* using both marked language and subjective comments. Such method of conveying subjective stance thus can be the reason why, as was seen in the previous chapter, the president aims so many negative tweets at the newspaper despite it not being the leader in gatekeeping or coverage bias.

3.6.   The Use of Headlines

Apart from the presence of gatekeeping, coverage, and statement bias in the articles, the analysis also showed another significant area in which framing is apparent – the way the three outlets use to convey unconfirmed information. There seemed to be two most prevalent ways in which the outlets presented such information – either by using mitigating words and phrases such as "allegedly", "reportedly" or "appeared to", or by stating the claim in a declarative manner and referring to a third entity as a source of the information. The analysis focused on the use of these in the headline or in the first two paragraphs of the article.

While both methods are commonly used in the journalistic practice, it can be argued that they carry different connotation and prompt a different reading. The mitigating expressions are generally used in direct proximity to the key part of the information, and arguably present a much less definitive declaration of facts. This contrasts with the more definitive use of referring to sources of information at the end of a declarative statement when the claim is presented as individual piece of information which is free of any influence of interjected

mitigating expressions. Moreover, when used specifically in headlines – the function of which is not only to attract attention but also to sum up the main point of the article – this method may result in the readers only consuming the first, declarative part of the headline which may influence their perception of the issue.

In the case of articles published by *Fox News*, out of 13 articles which utilized either of the two methods, ten used mitigating expressions and three articles used referring to a source and positioning the source at the end of the declarative statement. In all three of the articles, the information presented in this way was favorable to President Trump – the claim that the whistleblower did not have firsthand knowledge of the call, and the claim that the White House has documents proving that the whistleblower was partisan. This points to the conclusion that the outlet displays positive bias towards the president in the impeachment case, and actively seeks to mitigate the definitiveness of allegations against him while highlighting claims which present counterarguments to these allegations. *The Times* struck a balance between the two methods – while the mitigating expressions were used in five cases, the referral to a source of information was utilized four times. This agrees with its position in the center of the ideological spectrum. Lastly, *The Post* only used mitigating expressions in two cases yet used the method of referring to a source of information nine times, therefore stating the allegations against the president in a significantly more definitive manner. This then points to the conclusion that this outlet displays negative bias towards the president during his impeachment case.
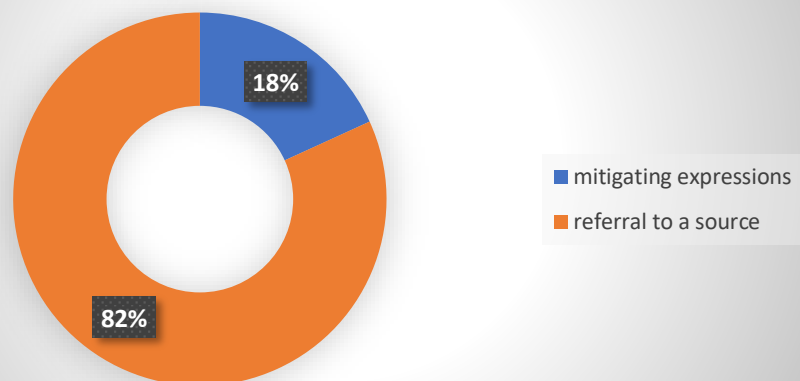
Fox News
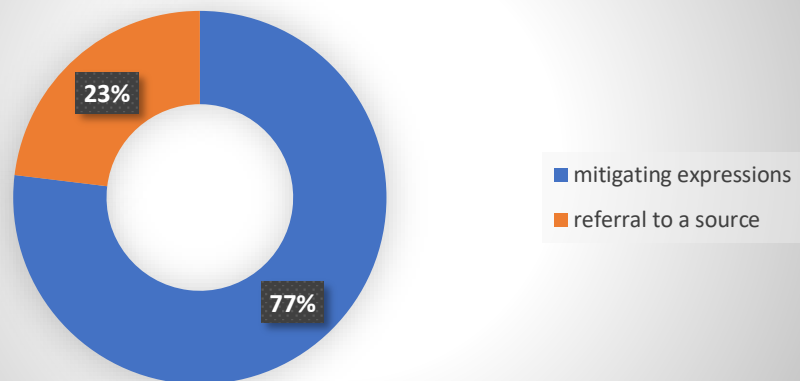
The New York Times
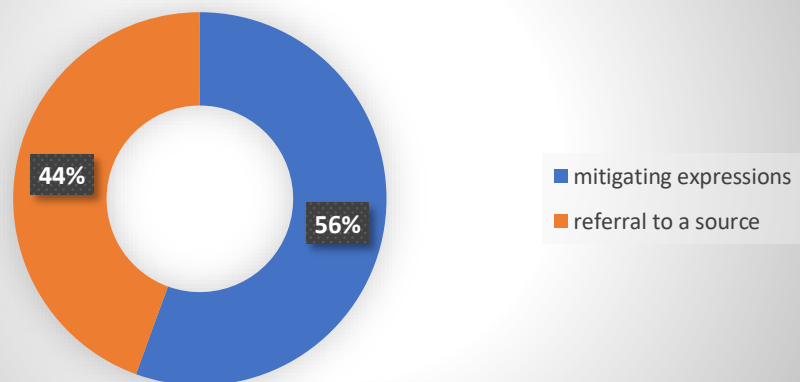
The Washington Post

The difference the headline can create in the framing of the article is similarly visible on the triptych of the articles which were used to demonstrate the impact of the selection and arrangement of sources on the outcome of the story. The first trio of headlines focused on Ukraine being the center of the call in question:

- Controversy over Trump phone call centers on Ukraine, as president decries 'partisan' complaint – *Fox News* (Pappas, "Controversy")

- Whistle-Blower Complaint Is Said to Involve Trump and Ukraine – *The Times* (Barnes et al., "Whistle-Blower")

- Whistleblower complaint about President Trump involves Ukraine, according to two people familiar with the matter – *The Post* (Nakashima et al.)

Contrary to the previous analysis, the headline by *Fox News* does not include any mitigating expressions as it offers a concrete declarative statement about Ukraine. *The Times* opted for a mitigating expression, and *The Post,* as is characteristic for this outlet, used a declarative statement followed by attribution to a source. However, when the first and third headline are contrasted, there is a visible positive bias displayed towards the president by *Fox News* as they give space to his quote and denial of the allegations directly in the headline, highlighting his position significantly.

The following trio focused on the announcement of the impeachment inquiry:

- Pelosi announces formal impeachment inquiry against Trump – *Fox News* (Re, "Pelosi Announces"

- Nancy Pelosi Announces Formal Impeachment Inquiry of Trump – *The Times* (Fandos)

- Pelosi announces impeachment inquiry, says Trump's courting of foreign political help is a 'betrayal of national security' – *The Post* (Bade et al.)

While the first two headlines only offer a brief, matter-of-fact reporting of the development in the process, it could be argued that *The Post* used the headline to display their negative bias towards the president as they utilized a quote from the Democratic Speaker Pelosi, directly highlighting the accusations against Trump that he betrayed national security of the United States.

The last trio of articles covered the release of the call transcript:

- Ukraine call transcript shows Trump sought Biden probe, asked about DNC server – but made no mention of US aid – *Fox News* (Pappas, "Ukraine")

- Trump Pressed Ukraine's President to Investigate Democrats as 'a Favor' – *The Times* (Baker, "Trump")

- Trump offered Ukrainian president Justice Dept. help in an investigation of Biden, memo shows – *The Post* (Barrett et al.)

In this case, there seems to be employment of gatekeeping bias in the headlines of *The Times* and *The Post.* The last two headlines only focused on the alleged pressure on or involvement in the Ukrainian corruption investigation – even though the bias was not present in the article itself as both of them covered the DNC server and fact that there was no explicit mention of withholding military aid in order to achieve a quid pro quo situation with the Ukrainian president. At the same time, the *Fox News* headline comprehensively contained all three of the topics, and therefore could be considered as remaining the most objective in this situation.

As far as the analysis of the three trios of headlines is concerned, it could be concluded that both *Fox News* and *The New York Times* displayed bias – either positive or negative – towards the president. However, it was *The Washington Post* which displayed specific focus in their headlines two out of three times, therefore it can be considered the most biased.

3.7.   Economy or Ideology?

While discussing the reasons for the presence of framing and ensuing media bias, Tewskbury and Scheufele identify five elements which may shape the reporting process into such an outcome: "larger societal norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, external pressures from interest groups and other policy makers, professional routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists" (23). As was discovered through the analysis, there is a distinct partisan bias present in the contemporary media landscape. Out of the five possible aspects which may influence the birth of such bias, it could be argued that two of them are out of the question. As all three outlets are among the established organizations which mostly employ educated, trained, or experienced journalists, differences in professional routines should not be so stark as to warrant for such a bias. Secondly, there should not be any external pressure on the selection and framing of topics for articles due to the structuring of media outlets and the philosophy of strict "separation between the opinions of the newspaper as expressed on the editorial page, opinions that reflected the view of the owner, and the news pages, which were the product of professional journalists" and "between the business departments of the news organization and the newsroom" (Hallin and Mancini 227).

The remaining three factors could explain the existence of bias. Organizational pressures from within the outlets aiming to secure their own commercial interests could influence gatekeeping bias. During the campaign, the pattern of covering Trump more than other candidates had been apparent as "[b]y the end of the national election campaign, media tracking companies calculated that Trump had benefitted from almost five billion dollars of free media time" (Waisbord et al. 30). While this outcome was undoubtedly desirable for the then presidential candidate Trump, it was arguably beneficial for the outlets as well as "Trump's presence boosted television ratings, especially for cable news companies that reported increased ratings and profits" (30). It could be argued that this may have contributed

to the fact that the gatekeeping bias present within the *Fox News* articles was distinctly positive towards the president. As many of the articles from this outlets were based on the tweets or other quotes by the president, it seems as if the outlet realized the appeal the president has on the audience, and the commercial benefits which arise from the increased coverage.

Hendricks and Vestergaard warn of this focus on the commercial success of the news:

If the news market is fully commercialized and completely dependent on advertisers whose only criterion for quality is integers of ears and eyeballs, entertainment value, conflict, sensation, if-it-bleeds-it-leads may well become the decisive news criteria. Here is a possible beeline to misinformation, populism, and political manipulation. (xii)

While they seemingly focus on the case of *Fox News* where the gatekeeping preference of articles heavy on tweets and quotes by the president led if not to political manipulation, then to signs of partisan conduct, the increased presence of Trump-focused articles was visible while analyzing *The Washington Post* as well – however, in their case, it was mostly displaying negative bias towards the president and his statements. This, too, arguably poses a threat to the quality and diversity of the reporting – if outlets which do not display positive bias towards the president would "create something new and publicly meaningful . . . [and] could anticipate what it sees as publicly significant events and invest coverage in these", this "could help audiences pre-mediate alternatives that counter Trump's interests and build immunity to his outbursts" (Ananny 107). Regardless of the fact that the gatekeeping bias within *The Post* aids hostility, not affinity towards the president, the outlet cannot "resist the administration's rhythms" (107) as it, as was visible during the campaign, pays to cover the president. This resulted in significant economic benefits for the media outlets – a surge in subscriptions, for example, which Pickard called "a Trump bump" (198). However, this then poses a threat to the

balance of reporting – as both sides of the ideological spectrum increase their coverage of the president's statements, tweets, and actions, it does not result in objective and balanced view of the situation. As the analysis of the articles showed, it simply creates imbalance of attention within both outlets instead. Furthermore, as the resources the outlets have at their disposal – such as time and the number of journalists – is finite, overly focusing on the rhythm of the administration and the tweets and actions of the president can arguably lead to underrepresentation of other, equally important topics.

Even though all three analyzed outlets exist in the same society, there are arguably still factors – such as economic or regional – which can impact larger societal norms and values. This can, in turn, shape the ideological or political orientations of the reporters which could then explain the existence of all three types of bias – not only gatekeeping but also coverage and statement. This factor, however, is in stark contrast to the ideal of objectivity which should be prevalent in the contemporary journalism – Christians et al. define the ethical code of journalists as "providing a complete and realistic representation of events that enables readers to make personal judgments about the events' implications. The primary obligation of the reporter is accuracy, a well-rounded narrative account, and a nonpartisan presentation" (56). Neutrality and objectivity are agreed on by the journalists as the key qualities good reporting should display:

> In this view, the observer-reporter is no more than an extension of the senses of the members of the public on whose behalf the press acts. Those who hold this view do not want their press to do more than tell them what is happening in social reality, without value judgments, emotion, or interventions. . . . Emphasis is placed on information quality in terms of accuracy, fullness, relevance, and verifiability. The information provision also seems to require the reporter not to be selective in

observation when selection might serve some particular interest or have a distorting effect. (Christians et al. 147-8)

However, as the analysis in this chapter showed, all three outlets displayed the presence of bias, the opposite of the ideal of objectivity. The issue with the "reporter-as-observer" approach to journalistic practice seems to be the active part reporters play in creating a story as they create "news. They do not find it. They do not publish transcripts of reality" (Schudson, "My Very Own" 43) – and therefore they apply their own process of selection, frames, and perhaps most importantly, their worldview into the creation of articles (Barnard 33). It could be argued that it is the reality of finite resources in all media organizations which arguably leads to deselection of some topics, but there is also the human factor of a journalist or an editor assigning importance to a source or a topic based on their own standards. This, in turn, impacts the very definition of objectivity in journalism – it could be argued that it does not exist, or rather that it does not represent the truth: "One set of criteria argues that objectivity, accuracy, and fairness to sources are the bases of truth. But these criteria, as important as they might be, do not guarantee the truthfulness of public discourse" (Christians et al. 84) as truth is arguably a highly subjective concept, and whether or not one accepts something to be true significantly depends on how it relates to their own worldview.

It could then be argued that the subjective worldview – or individual political and ideological orientation – is what creates and shapes the bias present in the media. This is done in twofold manner. Biased coverage is arguably created for the needs of the partisan audience. According to a 2019 research about partisanship in audiences, "[a]bout nine-in-ten of those whose main source is Fox News (93%) identify as Republican . . . Similarly, about nine-in-ten of those who name The New York Times (91%) . . . as their main political news source identify as Democrats" (Grieco). However, there is also the question of the lack of objectivity in the stances of journalists. Out of the three analyzed outlets, *Fox News* would be the best example

of this dichotomy – it "was launched in 1996 with an avowedly conservative agenda. Over time, the station's connection with the further reaches of the Republican Party deepened" and during the 2016 presidential election, "Fox took an avowedly pro-Trump line. But it was more than just a sympathetic outlet for the Republican nominee; it was a platform that buttressed the Republican candidate's entire worldview— and that of his supporters" (Geoghegan 104). However, the worldview and partisan membership seems to be shared also by the *Fox News* employees:

> Since Trump took office, his administration has also hired over a dozen current and former Fox News reporters and contributors to serve in both high-level cabinet and deputy chief of staff posts, as ambassadors, and in communications roles at federal agencies . . . And some former administration officials . . . have left the White House to work at Fox Corp., the parent company of Fox News, or like former press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, have become on-air commentators. (Panetta)

While it cannot be claimed with certainty that all staffers at the White House or all the contributors at *Fox News* share the values and political identification of the administration, an ideological overlap is likely. Combined with the awareness of the worldview of the community the outlet caters for, the links then arguably aid the creation of the positive bias towards the president. These factors create the "propaganda feedback loop", or the process of "the media, elites, and public" who "are all participants in a self- reinforcing feedback loop that . . . increases the costs to everyone of introducing news that is not identity confirming, or challenges the partisan narratives and frames" (Benkler et al. 79). An example of such loop was the use of the president's tweets by *Fox News* which was discussed earlier in the chapter – allocating bigger space in the articles for the tweets arguably leads to creation of further tweets which are, again, potential source material for the network. Such way of producing,

receiving, and repeating news is then arguably detrimental to the ideal of creating a media landscape consisting of objective reporting.

However, this applies to the left and center of the ideological spectrum as well – according to Geoghegan, the majority of the mainstream media were unable to predict the outcome of the 2016 presidential election correctly because "[t]he reporters covering the presidential election were disproportionately well-educated, liberal, white and living in major cities. Many would have known nobody who intended to vote Trump" (109). As was described in the theoretical section, one of the outlooks on the current media landscape is that "the major networks and most major newspapers have a liberal bias" (Bitecofer 41). Yet while Benkler et al. claim that there is still "plenty of room for partisanship— in agenda setting and topic selection, in perspective and framing" (98) – which has been determined by the analysis of the articles published by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* which showed the presence of bias – the system of this end of the ideological spectrum "appears to significantly constrain disinformation" (98). The commitment to deter the spread of misinformation, however, does not automatically entail that the outlets contribute to the creation of an objective media landscape – on the other hand, especially in the case of *The Post* – they contribute to further strengthening of the media bias.

As Benkler et al. conclude:

> Existing in a media ecosystem dominated by media whose role is to confirm your preconceptions and lead you to distrust any sources that might challenge your beliefs is a recipe for misinformation and susceptibility to disinformation. At the end of the day, if one side most trusts Fox News, Hannity, Limbaugh, and Beck, and the other side most trusts NPR, the BBC, PBS, and the *New York Times*, one cannot expect

both sides to be equally informed or equally capable of telling truth from identity-confirming fiction. (328, original italics)

This availability of partisan coverage then causes readers to remain constrained by their own worldview. By not necessarily being faced with information which would challenge it, partisan press thus arguably deepens the partisanship within the audience. Used to the availability of coverage which is in line with their subjective stance, they will further increase the demand for partisan media outlets which the outlets will grant to cater for own commercial interests – and thus, a perpetual vicious circle is created. This circle is then seemingly the biggest threat to the objectivity of the American media landscape, and the battle against misinformation and partisan bias.

3.8. A Threatened Objectivity

The chapter set out to confirm or deny the second hypothesis that in the contemporary media landscape, there is prevalent media bias on both sides of the ideological spectrum. It has been confirmed as all three analyzed outlets display bias. As far as gatekeeping bias is concerned, it was most frequently found within articles from *Fox News* as they most often selected topics which would suit the narrative of the outlet in favor of President Trump. It was, however, closely followed by *The Post*, albeit with a contrastive bias of selecting topics unfavorable to the president. This type of bias was least frequent in *The Times* which thus confirmed its assumed position in the center of the spectrum.

Regarding coverage bias, it can be concluded that all three outlets employed partisan sources in an alternating manner – however, while *Fox News* gave preference and allocated more space to Republican quotes, most notably directly embedded tweets from Trump, within the articles from *The Post*, preference was given more to Democratic quotes. Furthermore, both

The Times and *The Post* employed a significant number of quotes from non-partisan experts; however, they used it to strengthen the narrative against the president. Despite opinion pieces not being included in the analysis, it found that *The Post* also frequently employed their own voice against the president. Lastly, there were varying degrees of statement bias within the analyzed articles. *Fox News* displayed this type of bias least frequently as they only used marked language within some of the articles. On the other hand, *The Times* and *The Post* also inserted own subjective commentary into the articles.

The analysis also found another technique which displayed bias – using different manner of conveying unverified information in the headlines. While *Fox News* mostly used mitigating expressions – which are arguably more efficient in conveying the unverified nature of the information – *The Post* mostly used declarative statements with referral to the sources at the end which convey the information in a more definitive manner. *The Times*, as per its central position, used both techniques in a balanced manner.

All three outlets then display signs of partisan bias – however, the degree varies. *The Times* arguably confirm their central position as apart from statement bias, they can be considered the most objective. *The Post* and *Fox News,* on the other hand, both displayed significant bias – negative in the former, and positive in the latter case. It can be concluded that the presence of bias in the outlets then influences the frequency of the president's tweets aimed at them and the content of the tweets – as far as *The Times* and *The Post* are concerned, it was most likely the presence of statement bias which warranted the amount of negative tweets aimed at them. Not only the presence of all three types of bias in favor of the president, but also the frequency of articles with topics suiting this narrative arguably influences the significant number of tweets the president writes about *Fox News.* Furthermore, the fact that the outlet often uses directly embedded tweets from the president creates a loop in which the positive use of the tweets motivates their production by the president. However, the analysis

failed to provide the explanation for increased tension between the president and the network in the second half of 2019 which manifested itself in an increase of negative tweets – on the contrary, it discovered significant positive bias towards the president.

The analysis also found that all three outlets fulfill a monitorial role in the society – yet all three outlets displayed partisan bias in their coverage which should not be a part of the role. Furthermore, by arguably having a special relationship with the administration, it could be argued that *Fox News* took on some characteristics of a collaborative role – yet in that case, the definition of collaborative role would have to expand to include activity on the verge of propaganda. This is also reflected in application of Hallin's spheres – while *Fox News* arguably reports on topics which fall under the sphere of legitimate controversy, their approach largely fulfills the definition of sphere of consensus.

The chapter concluded that there are two factors which significantly motivate the presence of partisan bias in the outlets – economic benefits and ideological and political motivation. The economic benefits of covering the president extensively are visible on both sides of the spectrum, and so are the dangers to the media landscape. With positive bias towards the president, the increased coverage can lead to almost propagandistic reporting. On the other hand, with negative bias, the outlets can still be so tuned in to the rhythm and activities of the president that they fail to allocate their finite resources to cover other important topics just as extensively.

However, while economic benefits only account for the presence of gatekeeping bias, ideological and political motivations of the outlets arguably motivate all three types of bias. This then poses the question of whether objectivity is possible, as journalists are actively participating on creating the news and truth is not a universal but a subjective concept. The bias motivated by this reason is twofold – by the partisan audience which aligns itself with an outlet

which matches their ideology, and by the journalistic corps as they, too, have their own political convictions and, in the case of *Fox News,* often have intersections with the Trump administration staff. However, the shaping of coverage to cater for partisan audience arguably creates a vicious circle of the outlets not challenging the views of the audience, and the audience, in turn, creating further demand for partisan coverage.

Conclusion

The thesis set out to map how Donald J. Trump has impacted the relationship between the administration and the media. It analyzed his signature communication strategy against media outlets he perceives as hostile and discussed the current level of partisan bias within the media. The three chapters discovered connections between the conduct of the president and the media coverage and identified several threats the partisanship of both poses to objectivity, public awareness, and democracy.

The thesis can conclude that the Trump presidency has left a significant impact on both the relationship of the administration towards the journalists of the country and on the contemporary media landscape. Yet while a strained relationship with the media will be one of the major legacies of his presidency, he is far from the first president who has engaged in warfare against critical journalists. President Richard Nixon, known for his distrust towards the media, regarded them as an enemy trying to frame and discredit him, and as an enemy to be fought. The analysis in the first chapter of the media's involvement in the early Watergate scandal and the ensuing pushback from the administration determined six patterns in his battle strategy. The second chapter then applied the patterns to the analysis of Trump's communication strategy against hostile media outlets. It can be concluded that his battle against these outlets is a continuation of a trend of clashing with critical journalists which was already brought to significant heights by Nixon as all six patterns were directly applicable to the Trump case.

At the same time, however, Trump brought an unprecedented escalation to the self-proclaimed war on hostile media with the goal of decreasing their credibility. This resulted in what is arguably the most strained relationship between the administration and the journalists to date which sets a precedent for the following presidencies. What is more, there seems to be

a distinct trend of further intensification of attacks carried out by the president in the most recent year of his administration. This then implies the possible continuation of this trend in his potential second term which opens the possibility of a further study of the relationship.

The thesis found the president's use of Twitter to be one his two most significant changes in the strategy against hostile media. This presidency then set a precedent for the following incumbents in terms of the usage of social media to communicate with the public and carry out their communication strategy. In contrast to Nixon who preferred direct communication channels simply to avoid distortion by the media's gatekeepers, Twitter became weapon of choice for Trump and his preferred manner of expressing distrust towards the majority of hostile outlets in the center and on the left of the ideological spectrum and attacking them – but also of expressing a personal form of resentment over the negative coverage he believes to be undeserved. Twitter is then how the president denies negative coverage – yet he also uses tweeting to express affinity towards a small portion of outlets on the right, namely *Fox News.* The thesis thus confirmed the hypothesis that the president holds both negative and positive personal bias towards differently-leaning outlets. However, the president's support for *Fox News* has not been as absolute in the recent year as signs of tension started to appear in critical tweets aimed at the anchors and, in some cases, the entire network.

However, partisan bias was also visible in the media landscape. The third chapter confirmed the hypothesis that there is partisan bias displayed by all three selected outlets. The analysis of the presence of gatekeeping, coverage and statement bias, and the differing use of headlines to aid the partisan narrative concluded that *Fox News* displays positive bias and *The Washington Post* displays negative bias towards Trump which was consistent through almost all sections of the analysis. While the analysis showed *The New York Times,* representing the center of the ideological spectrum, to be the most balanced of the three outlets, there were signs – especially within the field of statement bias – that this newspaper, too, was leaning towards

the anti-administration narrative. This poses a question of whether there actually is a center of the spectrum as far as the coverage of the highly divisive president is concerned. The analysis in the third chapter points to the conclusion that there is the conservatively-leaning right, and that there is liberal, or rather anti-Trump bias of varying degrees within the remainder of the ideological spectrum. This, too, opens the possibility of a further study.

The coverage by the three outlets also challenges the definitions of media concepts regarding the role of media in society. While all three outlets seemingly fulfill the monitorial role, their conduct may call for its redefining as they all display partisan bias which is not covered within the usual definition. *Fox News,* with is cordial relationship with the administration, also evokes collaborative role – yet as it is only assumed by the media in times of national crises, the conduct of the network may prompt the inclusion of propagandistic effort into the definition. The lenient attitude of *Fox News* to criticizing the administration also challenges the three spheres of journalistic activity – while the topic of impeachment is arguably within the sphere of legitimate controversy, the network approaches it with the complacency of the sphere of consensus.

The confirmation of negative bias against the president within *The Post* and, to a markedly lesser degree, within *The Times,* thus agrees with the negative bias Trump expresses in his tweets against these outlets. Yet the analysis of the coverage by *Fox News* from a period corresponding to the increased tension between them and the president in the tweets, on the contrary, confirmed a distinct pro-Trump bias in the outlet. The reason for the increased tension then remains a suggestion for further study.

In a significant way, the Trump presidency also impacted the relations of media with the White House – in three years, the communication style of press secretaries has evolved from proactively engaging with the press, albeit in a combative manner, to restricting their

access to the White House and eventually assuming an avoidant position by not interacting with the correspondents at all. The actions the administration took to restrict activities of the hostile media are the second and the most threatening change Trump brought to the Nixon model. Revoking White House passes and access of critical journalists and entire outlets to the president and suing them over opinion pieces did not prove successful. The courts upheld the rights of journalists which is in accord with the historical precedents. A trend of solidarity also rose in response to the bans – even from *Fox News*, a traditional ally of the administration. Similar solidarity could be perceived during the Nixon era where outlets, too, supported those who had their activity restricted by the administration. The reemergence of this trend implies its pervasive nature and it thus appears to be a characteristic of the American media landscape which is triggered by restrictive measures from the administration.

However, the escalated attempts of the administration to restrict the activity of the hostile media signal a troubling legacy of and precedent set by the Trump presidency. By attacking the freedom of individual journalists and outlets, the president also attacks the freedom of the press upheld by the Bill of Rights – and therefore threatens the foundation of democracy in the United States. Trump is thus moving closer to authoritarian regime – while he did not eliminate the opposing media, he is certainly taking active steps to attack them and limit their activity which not only poses a threat to the balance of the media landscape but also to the democratic values of the country.

Yet there are threats posed to the American society by the biased media coverage as well – the thesis can conclude that it endangers the balance of the media landscape and to public awareness as it puts own economic interests and ideological and political orientation before the adherence to the ideal of objectivity. As the analysis showed *The Times* being the most committed to the ideal of objectivity – apart from statement bias – of the three outlets, this was mostly the case of *The Post* and *Fox News*. The study of bias in the outlets showed that no

matter whether they displayed positive or negative bias towards the president, his statements and actions were still heavily featured in the coverage. This is a statement to another significant impact of the president – far from only reacting to it, his tweeting also impacts the creation of media coverage. His tweets create constant newsworthy content for the very same outlets he addresses, and thus directly contribute to the existence of gatekeeping and coverage bias in the articles, fulfilling his need for coverage.

The sources studying the election campaign showed that it was economically beneficial to cover the president, and the analysis in the third chapter showed that the practice continued in the term as well as both sides of the ideological spectrum were attuned to the rhythms of the administration. However, this threatens the awareness of the public – while abundance of positive bias can create propagandistic material for the administration, the abundance of criticism can cause lack of attention on other issues due to finite amount of resources the outlets have.

Equally, if not more threatening is the effect of the ideological or political orientation of both the journalists within the outlets and the audience. This arguably creates a vicious circle in defiance of the ideal of objectivity – if the outlets publish coverage which is framed based on their personal bias, it only perpetuates the trend of audience identifying with an outlet which matches them politically. In turn, such strong identification then creates demand for more partisan bias within the coverage. As a possible consequence, the worldviews and values of the audience are never challenged – on the contrary, their partisanship is fully catered for by the media.

While a synchronic approach such as the one taken by this thesis is unable to conclude whether it was President Trump who brought about the prevalent bias in the analyzed media outlets, it can be argued that an unprecedently divisive president employing his own bias

heightened the partisan tendencies. Precedents were similarly set within the activity of the media as they arguably put their economic interests and ideological and political orientation of their journalists and audience before the ideal of objective and balanced reporting. It suits them to cover the president in demand – even a president attacking the freedom of the press.

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