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From Weinstein to Kavanaugh: Shifting coverage of sexual violence and the #MeToo movement across U.S. news media

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the framing strategies and language features of U.S. news coverage surrounding sexual violence and gender issues across the ideological media spectrum at two pivotal phases of the #MeToo movement: (1) during its initial rise as a hashtag-driven social movement in 2017 and (2) during the Kavanaugh nomination and confirmation in 2018. Using structural topic modeling, community detection, and feature extraction, we reveal a heightened employment of political framing during the Kavanaugh accusations. Topical prevalence and language use in news treatment also showed clear partisan differences, consistent with theories of moral foundation and issue ownership. Implications for research on news coverage of gender rights and framing of social movements are discussed.

Introduction

Efforts to combat sexual violence, gender inequality, and workplace harassment have received ongoing attention from activist groups. Despite this, activists have historically struggled to influence news agendas and in extendiing their influence (Jordan, 2011). Sexual violence gained significant news and public attention when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged her Twitter followers to share their experiences of harassment and abuse using the hashtag #MeToo. Within a year, #MeToo appeared over 19 million times on Twitter (Anderson & Toor, 2018), spurring media attention, allyship, and #MeToo movement resource sharing (Clark-Parsons, 2021).

Media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping public perception regarding the legitimacy and objectives of a movement (Seguin, 2016). Contemporary research indicates a trend in media coverage of social activism towards a richer diversity of nuanced viewpoints (Harlow et al., 2020), moving away from endorsing prevailing power dynamics (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This evolution is attributed in part to the emergence of niche media markets (Stroud, 2011) and the symbiotic relationship between news

outlets and social media platforms (Conway et al., 2015). However, there is increasing evidence suggesting that news media today primarily concentrate on the political aspects of activism, emphasizing political motives and implications rather than the root causes and societal grievances sparking the engagement (Ophir et al., 2021).

These transformations in the media landscape raise the question of whether news framing of sexual violence undergoes changes during politically charged events. According to survey data, political occurrences can significantly influence public reactions to sexual violence (Holman & Kalmoe, 2021). The #MeToo campaign's momentum and the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh's hearing over alleged sexual assault in September 2018 serve as case in point. News media could have potentially contextualized this event with an array of perspectives deriving from the #MeToo movement or have focused on a limited spectrum of frames centered on political maneuvers and fallout (Ophir et al., 2021). This divergence in news frames, defined as the overarching templates used by journalists to structure stories (Gitlin, 1980), might influence not only the public perception of the Kavanaugh case but also steer the course of the movement.

In this study, we examine the nature of news coverage during the Kavanaugh hearings and confirmation, with a focus on the evolution of prominent frames from the initial #MeToo discourse. We provide a comparative perspective, analyzing media outlets across the political divide, juxtaposing left-leaning and right-leaning media with those of a more centrist orientation. Additionally, instead of utilizing theory-derived frames, which may be inherently constrained by subjective biases (Matthes & Kohring, 2008), we leverage computational text analyses. This approach enables us to inductively identify and compare the emergent news frames during two critical phases: (1) the initial surge of #MeToo as a hashtag activism movement in late 2017, and (2) the period around the Kavanaugh nomination and confirmation in Fall 2018. Specifically, we aim to understand how political events, such as the Kavanaugh hearing, might politicize social activism by (a) narrowing the variety of perspectives within media discourse, and (b) intensifying the fragmented representation of the movement along partisan lines (Faris et al., 2017).

The #MeToo movement in the news

Leveraging recent trends in personalized politics and networked acknowledgment (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Suk et al., 2021), the #MeToo movement epitomizes the potential of hashtag activism to unite diverse individuals as a collective force. Hashtag feminism, as an integral part of this movement, renders personal experiences visible (Clark-Parsons, 2021, p. 362), fostering communities of conversation advocating for societal change (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 237). Despite its decentralized origins, the #MeToo movement gained significant media attention, reflecting news responsiveness to online discourse (Conway et al., 2015; Ghosh et al., 2022). Such responsiveness often involved quoting tweets or sourcing crowd opinions, granting online testimonies broader reach beyond the immediate network of the poster (Vergeer, 2015).

However, such media amplification may have its drawbacks. Some studies suggest that feminist ideas risk becoming commodified for wider visibility, often prioritizing voices adhering to mainstream norms to circulate their causes over marginalized perspectives (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Further, coverage often reduces meaningful conversations to

politicized accounts of gender issues, tending to frame non-political matters in political terms (Ophir et al., 2021).

These two critiques (i.e., lack of inclusivity and reliance on political frames) are particularly relevant in the #MeToo movement. On the one hand, media coverage may reduce sexual violence to commercially lucrative messages. For example, high-profile accusation and media events featuring famous women–the Time Magazine's "Person of the Year," the Time's Up initiative, or Oprah Winfrey's speech at the Golden Globes–have enjoyed a greater chance of being reported, compared to the experiences of less affluent women, women of color, or those who face multiple forms of marginalization (Ghosh et al., 2022).

On the other hand, media coverage may represent feminist causes merely as instrumentally motivated, with survivors being acknowledged only as tools of political interest (Schneider & Hannem, 2019). The 2016 presidential candidates and their campaign rhetoric have popularized the use of political frames to talk about sexual misconduct (Conroy, 2018). During the initial #MeToo campaign, multiple accusations against high-profile politicians on both sides also opened up room for politicization (Ghosh et al., 2022). When Dr. Christine Blasey Ford accused Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault in September 2018, news media continued to frame these allegations through the lens of #MeToo.

Given the highly contentious nature and political implications, the Kavanaugh's case posed a particular challenge for campaign activists to focus the discussions on gender-based inequality. Following these two critiques, we seek to understand: (1) how the media framed the movement in the initial phase–its causes, legitimacy, and recommended solutions, and (2) how framing strategies shifted at a polarized moment wherein perceptions of the movement have become divided amidst its application to the Kavanaugh nomination (Holman & Kalmoe, 2021).

News framing of sexual violence

We explore the nature of media coverage surrounding the #MeToo movement through the theoretical lens of news framing. Journalists routinely rely on a set of reporting patterns or templates to present information (Gitlin, 1980) to "simplify and condense the 'world out there'" (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). By focusing on "some aspects of perceived reality," framing activates and associates the issue at hand with a particular set of concepts, thoughts, and feelings (Entman, 1993, p. 52). These processes inevitably promote "a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/ or treatment recommendation" (p. 52).

In the context of covering social movements, journalists may opt for protest-specific frames, such as "freedom of speech," "public order," or "policy debate" (McLeod, 2007). Alternatively, they may use episodic frames, portraying grievances as isolated incidents, or thematic frames, contextualizing these within broader societal trends (Iyengar, 1990).

Prior to #MeToo, media coverage of sexual violence was restricted to a narrow set of frames. News media often emphasized false reporting, justified aggressive sexuality, and resorted to victim-blaming narratives (Jordan, 2011; O'Hara, 2012). These common frames include legitimizing aggressive sexuality as "healthy, normal, and desired" (Keller et al., 2015, p.5) or using stereotyping languages such as monsters, playboys,

virgins, or whores. They also often used episodic frames, focusing on specific incidents or individuals, thus presenting sexual violence as a personal, not structural issue (Iyengar, 1990). Moreover, media selection of individual cases tended to over-represent extreme cases and white women as victims, with acquaintance rape and the experiences of minority women almost invisible (Lykke, 2016).

Despite some evidence of broadened framing strategies (Noetzel et al., 2022), the #MeToo coverage seemed to largely maintain these patterns. While the media may avoid overt "rape myth" language, their portrayals often perpetuated gender stereotypes and victim-blaming narratives (Ghosh et al., 2022; Sacks et al., 2018). These practices may include using euphemisms or softened language (Ghosh et al., 2022), highlighting delays in reporting and questioning motivations (von Sikorski & Saumer, 2021), and normalizing coercion as "acceptable reality of (hetero)sex" (Hindes & Fileborn, 2020). Similarly, the overuse of episodic frames has continued (Hindes & Fileborn, 2020; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020), illustrated by news media's tendency to highlight specific named culprits as "bad men" (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2020) or isolate specific organizations (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Additionally, the #MeToo coverage exhibited a tendency to concentrate on high-profile cases within Hollywood and the entertainment industry (Alamdari, 2018; De Benedictis et al., 2019), overlooking the experiences within other sectors, such as hospitality, faith communities, and education–where a significant concentration of female employment exists.

An inductive and comparative approach

While existing studies offer valuable insights, they are hindered by certain limitations. First, content analysis often involves an inductive approach, identifying frames based on theoretical assumptions and prior knowledge. Consequently, this process could be influenced by subjective biases, potentially limiting the breadth of frames identified (Walter & Ophir, 2019).

Second, many studies lack a comparative perspective, failing to differentiate between media outlets across the political spectrum or account for the temporal evolution of a social movement. Events like Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination, which coincided with the U.S. midterm elections, likely invoke frame competition and narrative shifts (Hansen & Dolan, 2022). In such contexts, examining news coverage of gender-related issues across the media system is essential to understanding media's role in the course of a social movement.

Moreover, previous studies primarily examined frames in terms of a story's main theme, overlooking the array of multiple topics that constitute a "frame package" (McLeod & Shah, 2015). For instance, the public order frame might include topics like "looting and destruction," "curfews," and "damage to businesses" (Ophir et al., 2021). Similarly, word choice can convey distinct realities, as seen in gender-related issues where language can either privilege the victim or the perpetrator's narratives (Lamb & Keon, 1995; Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). Even phrases typically taken as synonymous–"sexual misconduct," "sexual harassment" or "sexual assault"–may diminish or elevate the perceived severity of sexual violence (Ghosh et al., 2022).

Contributing to extant literature, we employ a more nuanced approach to understand framing practices both comparatively and inductively. Comparatively, this study

contrasts the reporting patterns between the initial phase of the #MeToo movement and during Kavanaugh's confirmation across the political spectrum. Inductively, this work takes advantage of a larger corpus of news stories, using a combination of computational techniques to identify prominent frames and language features. Together, this allows a more comprehensive assessment of how language choice, specific topics, and broader frames work in tandem in news narratives.

Additionally, we draw on research on the ethics of care, particularly the distinction between recognition and acknowledgement as two specific forms of communicative action (Inwood, 1992). The language of recognition is often used in courts or legislatures to publicly affirm the recognition of others and the harm suffered by them such that they become identifiable. While holding the potential to empower, many of the relationships established and maintained through recognition are marked by power imbalances, subordinating the group being recognized while elevating those doing the recognizing (Markell, 2003). In contrast, social acknowledgement–i.e., communicative actions that perform care in a manner that confirms, notices, or honors people publicly–involves individuals witnessing their sufferings and traumatic experiences understood and accepted, rather than criticized or dismissed (Mueller et al., 2008). For instance, the word "victim" *recognizes* the harm, whereas the word "survivor" *acknowledges* the ongoing process of recovery (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). As "a way of being for others" (Hyde, 2007, p. 62), acknowledgement creates spaces for healing and hope, which are essential for activism and change (Garlough, 2013). In the context which this paper is concerned, media coverage may acknowledge survivors' experiences of sexual violence by communicating a sense of compassion and care, creating a context wherein their claims are approached as legitimate and valid (Suk et al., 2021).

Comparing gender narratives across partisan media

News coverage of sexual violence isn't homogeneous across all media outlets. Due to the increasing proliferation of content and shrinking audience sizes in recent decades, media organizations and content providers now have stronger economic incentives to create "niche news" that appeals to specific, well-defined audience segments (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006).

More specifically, partisan media outlets often"construct either a liberal or conservative rendition of the news" (Levendusky, 2013, p. 612). Instead of primarily conveying objective facts, these outlets "frame, spin, and slant" the news to advance certain political agendas (Jamieson et al., 2007, p. 26). They aim to help their audiences make sense of the world based on their existing predispositions (Rosensteil, 2006, p. 253).

This partisan slant becomes especially noticeable when covering gender-related issues, where partisanship has increasingly become a defining factor (Ghosh et al., 2022). The emergence of partisanship as an overarching identity that helps organize other social identities (e.g., gender) and positions on women's issues is largely due to the presence of distinct elite cues and strategic issue ownership (Hansen & Dolan, 2022; Petrocik, 1996). Since the early 1970s, the Republican and Democratic parties have shifted from a general consensus to sharp polarization on gender issues, fueled by significant historical events, including opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and emphasis on traditional values during the Reagan era, and the mobilization of the Christian Right

around abortion (Hansen & Dolan, 2022). More recently, Hillary Clinton's candidacy and several key events during the 2016 presidential campaign have intensified the contest between the parties for issue ownership on gender and women's issues, leading to a clearer public perception of party differences (Conroy, 2018).

Furthermore, the increasingly clear alignment between political ideologies and attitudes towards gender issues mirrors the distinct moral foundations of liberals and conservatives (Haidt, 2012). Liberal narratives focus on victim care, freedom from repression, and fairness through political equality. In contrast, conservative narratives typically emphasize authority, rules, and tradition (Haidt, 2012). Therefore, the Democratic Party is known for supporting reproductive rights, social welfare, and workplace equality, while the Republican Party often promotes traditional gender roles and legal protections (Wolbrecht, 2002).

However, despite long-standing party reputations, public opinion research indicates that sexual misconduct remained a politically neutral issue for a long time, even during periods of high-profile accusations (e.g., Clarence Thomas in 1991, Bill Clinton in 1997–1998) (Holman & Kalmoe, 2021). It wasn't until the Kavanaugh confirmation that sexual misconduct became a predominantly Democratic issue (Hansen & Dolan, 2022; Klar & McCoy, 2021). As the Democrats aligned sexual misconduct with their reputation for better addressing "women's issues," partisan audiences transitioned from broad support at the public (Oliphant, 2017) and elite levels (Anderson & Toor, 2018) in the early phases of the #MeToo movement to a sharp partisan divide during and following Kavanaugh's confirmation (Velencia & Mehta, 2018). This divide is exemplified by Republican women's increased skepticism towards female accusers (Klar & McCoy, 2021) and their dismissive reactions to former U.S. President Trump's gendered attacks as "no big deal" and "boys being boys" (Rhodes et al., 2020).

This process of absorbing elite cues and aligning with the masses may be both reflected in and facilitated by the partisan media's treatment of gender violence and inequality. Studies show that right-wing media outlets are more likely to blame victims and accept rape myths (Blumell, 2019), utilizing more anger and sexuality-related words in their headlines (Lee & Chen, 2021). At the textual level, Fox News has shown a preference for the label "victim," while CNN often uses the term "survivors" (Inkinen, 2020). Recent research comparing media coverage in the U.S. and South Korea found that liberal media generally provide more coverage to the #MeToo campaign, while conservative media tend to use more sensational language in their #MeToo stories (Jeon et al., 2022). A similar trend was observed in the UK press, where left-leaning media typically depict the #MeToo movement in a more positive light and devote more coverage to potential solutions (De Benedictis et al., 2019).

Evolving media coverage during the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings

Besides comparing partisan media treatment, another point of comparison is how media coverage has shifted during a highly polarized moment, which opened opportunities for "issue evolutions" (Carmines & Stimson, 1990). Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings present a compelling case to observe how social activism that was initially relatively apolitical can become politicized (Holman & Kalmoe, 2021,

p. 4), particularly in the context of recent trend towards social activism politicization (Ophir et al., 2021).

The Kavanaugh case holds significance for several reasons in the politicization of the #MeToo movement. First, amidst rising concerns about party polarization over judicial nominations, Kavanaugh's confirmation process was embroiled in party hostility from the start (Rogowski & Stone, 2021), exacerbated by Republicans' refusal to consider Barack Obama's nominee, Merrick Garland, to fill the Supreme Court seat in 2016. This divide over Supreme Court appointments was highlighted by both candidates during the presidential campaigns and was considered an important catalyst for Trump's electoral success (Devins & Baum, 2017).

Second, the televised hearings, during which Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testified regarding Kavanaugh's alleged sexual assault to the Senate Judiciary Committee, offered a politically charged platform for strategic elite responses before a national audience. Kavanaugh's unsubstantiated conspiracy theory that the accusation was a "political hit," "revenge on behalf of the Clintons," and the result of "millions of dollars in money from outside left-wing opposition jobs" (Kranish, Brown, & Hamburger, 2018), emphasized a political understanding of sexual violence.

Importantly, the Kavanaugh case generated extensive Twitter conversations, with a variety of perspectives being advanced and contested among networked users. This "bottom-up construction of networked events" (Rathnayake, 2021, p. 4), contrasts with the media discourse of Bill Clinton's misconduct and impeachment in the pre-Twitter era, which, mainly supplied by elites, focused sparsely on the partisan politics of both parties (Shah et al., 2002). Clinton's portrayal of himself as persecuted by partisan enemies was the most effective narrative in safeguarding his presidency (Hopper, 2013). Thus, the Kavanaugh case prompts an empirical question: did Twitter's multi-faceted nature diversify media framing of sexual violence?

There is empirical evidence suggesting that media coverage of the #MeToo movement became "politicized and polarized" during and after Kavanaugh's confirmation, focusing less on the people involved (Earle, 2019, p. 257). Traynor (2019) discovered that while Fox News predominantly echoed the perspectives and rhetoric of Justice Kavanaugh, the White House, and the Republican Party, CNN adopted a women-centric viewpoint, covering the hearings through the lens of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and other accusers. Comparing the 1991 and 2018 hearings of Thomas and Kavanaugh, respectively, AbiNader et al. (2020) noted that "survivors and perpetrators may be politicized as instruments for parties and politicians to debate broader issues or establish political stances" (p. 2). Building on these findings, this study aims to examine the politicization of news coverage of sexual violence (a) across a broader spectrum of media outlets and (b) by contrasting it with the media's initial representation of the #MeToo movement.

> **RQ1**: What prominent topics and frame packages emerged from the U.S. news coverage of sexual violence and gender issues during the two critical phases of the #MeToo campaign (i.e., its inception following the accusations against Harvey Weinstein, and the Kavanaugh case from his nomination, congressional hearings, to final confirmation)?

> **H1**: The news coverage of sexual violence and gender issues during the Kavanaugh period tended to employ (a) more political frame and (b) less thematic/cultural frames than the initial #MeToo phase.

H2: Partisan media coverage of sexual violence and gender issues tended to report on topics that align with their audience's moral values and ideological worldview, with the conservative media devoting more attention to topics associated with authority, tradition, and legal justice than the liberal media.

H3: In their coverage of the #MeToo Movement, liberal media were more likely to use relational, emotive, and acknowledgement-oriented language, while right-leaning media favored a more legalistic, institutional, and recognition-oriented language, consistent with their moral foundations and issue ownership.

Methods

Dataset

Our dataset consisted of news articles published by 23 major news outlets in the U.S. during the two critical periods where discourses about sexual violence were highly visible at the national level. The first period, from October 1 2017 to February 28 2018, captured the initial burst of news coverage following revelations concerning the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein and Alyssa Milano's tweet. The second period, from July 1 2018 to October 31 2018, covered important events surrounding the Kavanaugh nomination, the accusations against him, the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, and his ultimate confirmation.

To examine coverage across the news ecology, we consider both mainstream and partisan media and include both traditional and online-only outlets. For comparability, we restricted our sample to only the print content from each outlet, not considering transcripts from broadcast programs or other formats. Using the Media Cloud, a repository of over 200 million online news articles, we collected news articles from 23 news outlets, selected based on partisan scores, type (e.g., digital native, print, etc.) and media outlet health[1], and labeled them as either the left-leaning, centrist, or right-leaning according to Faris's typology scheme (Faris et al., 2017).[2] All content was scraped using an *R* package *rvest* based on keywords developed through a snowballing process of validation and revision, resulting in a final dataset of 16,272 articles (N_{right} = 6384, $N_{centrist}$ = 6483, and N_{left} = 5009) (see Appendix 1 for the keyword list).

Analytic strategy

To explore the framing strategies, this study followed Walter and Ophir's (2019) Analysis of Topic Model Network framework (ANTMN) to identify prominent topics and frame packages, supplemented with feature extraction and manual content coding. Validated in previous studies across various contexts (e.g., Ophir et al., 2021), this approach comprises three main steps. Firstly, it employs Structural Topic Modeling to identify topics within the data. Next, a network approach is used to reveal the co-occurrence patterns between these topics. Each topic represents a node, and their relationships are computed based on co-occurrence patterns across documents. Finally, frame packages are discerned through community detection.

Structural topic modeling. STM is an unsupervised machine learning technique to infer latent topics based on word cooccurrence in textual data (Roberts et al., 2019). The topics

are "latent" as they emerge inductively as algorithms learn the hidden patterns underlying a collection of texts. Unlike conventional topic models (e.g., LDA) that treat each document as a discrete observation, STM allows documents to have their own prior distribution over topics based on covariates. Our analysis incorporates two document-level covariates: (a) media slant (left, centrist, or right) and (b) timestamp (initial Weinstein phase vs later Kavanaugh phase). The inclusion of covariates allows us to compare media slant and time periods on topical prevalence.

Prior to STM, several standard data pre-processing steps were applied. As an additional step, we employed tag-of-speech (POS) tagging and feature selection to retain only words that contributed to the discrimination of topics (Burscher et al., 2016).[3] To determine the optimal number of topics, we compared models with a broad range of k (2–100) in terms of coherency, exclusivity, residuals, and held-out likelihood (see Appendix 3 for model performance metrics).

Community detection. We employ Louvain community detection algorithm with cosine similarity to uncover topic clusters within broader framing strategies (Walter & Ophir, 2019), similar to the ways concept or argument frames are assembled into narrative packages (McLeod & Shah, 2015), reflecting constellations of topics within a semantic network structure.[4]

Additionally, we conduct Keyness analysis to examine how media corpuses differed in their word choices. As a widely used feature discrimination statistic in discourse analysis, Keyness analysis extracts and statistically tests linguistic units with differential association with one corpus relative to the other (Gabrielatos, 2018). Keyness scores are signed positively if the observed value in the target group exceeds its expected value, calculated based on Chi-squared measure with Yates's correction. We further employ "keyword-in-context" (KWIC) analysis to gain a deeper understanding of how extracted keywords were used in contexts and plot the relationships within a semantic network. KWIC allows for searching for keywords and exploring their local meaning in relation to a fixed number of words preceding and following them.[5]

Lastly, to validate and deepen our observations from computational approaches, we conducted manual content coding of 5% of news articles. A codebook was developed for this task based on our literature review. Each news story was coded for whether it: (a) contained competing narratives of victimhood, and (b) categorized accusations of sexual violence as political instrument. Two trained coders achieved sufficient intercoder reliability prior to proceeding to code the entire sample (see Appendix 5 for codebook and intercoder reliability).

Results

Prominent topics and frame package

RQ1 inquired about the prominent themes in U.S. news coverage during two pivotal periods of increased focus on sexual violence and gender issues. Table 1 displays the STM results, with each topic's keywords and labels.[6] Using Louvain community detection, we grouped the resultant topics into three frame packages (Figure 1).

The first frame package (Testimony: 8.3%; He said, she said: 7.1%; Congress activities: 6.3%; Legitimacy: 5.6%; Horserace: 4.7; White House: 4.4%) closely aligns with the

Table 1. Topic labels and keywords.

Topic (%)	Keywords
[15] Crime & Criminal Justice (13.98%)	police, charge, arrest, girl, child, sentence, victim, prison
[13] Testimony (9.29%)	allegation, party, school, nominee, friend, deny, incident, alleged
[12] Hollywood (10.25%)	actress, allegation, actor, producer, star, director, mogul, industry
[16] Due Process & Investigation (5.16%)	investigation, allegation, claim, investigate, lawyer, attorney, information, office
[9] He Said, She Said (8.09%)	hearing, confirmation, nominee, vote, nomination, senator, court, committee
[4] Congress Hearing (6.42%)	testify, question, committee, hearing, nominee, allegation, testimony, witness
[17] Acknowledgement (3.99%)	victim, survivor, experience, feel, forward, voice, fear, hear
[2] Legitimacy (4.31%)	believe, lie, attack, claim, true, happen, girl, migrant, group, gang
[1] Wartime Rape, Immigrants & Refugees (6.19%)	crime, violence, attack, government, girl, migrant, group gang
[7] #MeToo Movement (4.92%)	movement, #metoo, culture, change, violence, social, problem, consent
[5] Life and Art (4.86%)	joke, love, host, comedian, feminist, appearance, apology, fan
[3] Election & Horserace (4.76%)	political, republican, democratic, percent, candidate, election, senator, campaign
[11] White House (3.05%)	president, allegation, continue, campaign, host, debate, interview, question
[8] Morality and Church (4.29%)	lawsuit, church, victim, priest, child, company, court, suit
[6] Exclusion & Intersectionality (3.95%)	black, white, award, racist, work, online, history, family
[10] Abortion (2.29%)	law, rights, abortion, group, bill, protest, health, legal
[14] College & Campus Rape (3.57%)	student, school, campus, college, university, player, football, coach

political frame as defined in social movement literature (Ophir et al., 2021). Stories in this cluster approached sexual violence and gender inequality through the lens of political strategizing, contested legitimacy, and DC-centered events. Example headlines include: "Republicans hold judicial nominations hearing amid recess and democratic objections,"
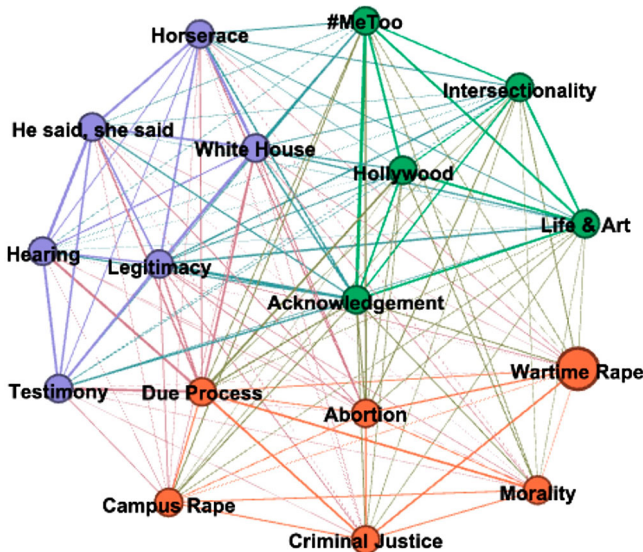
Figure 1. Topic Network using ANTMN with Louvain community detection algorithm. Each node represents a frame element (topic), with size corresponding to relative salience. Edges between nodes represent co-occurrence in documents. Color represents frame packages.

"Kavanaugh was supposed to be a midterm boon for G.O.P. not anymore," and "Future of the G.O.P. civil war comes down to Roy Moore and the Alabama senate race."

The second frame package centrally focuses on authority and tradition, adopting a standpoint grounded in law and order, rules, and morality. Topics under this category frame gender issues in terms of normality and deviation, such as crime stories emphasizing legal procedures (e.g., settlement, convict, sentence, retrial) and enforcement (e.g., lawyer, attorney, client, plaintiff) (11.7%), due process and investigation (7.2%), and morality (4.1%). It also includes topics related to traditional gender roles, such as women's reproductive rights (3.8%), and societal systems in place to protect the vulnerable, such as campus rape (3.5%). Example stories include: "Cristiano Ronaldo's lawyer says rape allegations 'fabricated' after 'data hack' "Maryland authorities say they'll investigate Kavanaugh–if a victim files a complaint," and "Oklahoma lawmaker defends pregnancy from rape and incest as 'beauty from ashes.'"

The final framing package contains issues external to law and politics, with news media focusing on cultural and relational themes. These include discourses related to life and arts (4.8%), Hollywood and celebrity culture (8.0%), and implications of the #MeToo movement (5.3%). Some media attention was also paid to intersectionality (4.0%) and the perspectives and experiences of survivors (5.6%). Example stories include: "'I'm in so much pain': How the Kavanaugh hearings are re-traumatizing survivors," "#WhatConsentMeansToMe: What is sexual consent?", and "When will MeToo become WeToo? Some say voices of black women, working class left out." In summary, our results indicate that a significant portion of media attention remained dominated by a political lens and a focus on restoring justice through the legal system.

Evolving news coverage

H1 predicted that news discourse during the Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation was more likely to adopt a political frame, compared to the initial phase of the #MeToo movement. Results suggest that, controlling for media slant, stories published right before and after Kavanaugh confirmation showed a distinct focus on partisan conflict and political ramification (Figure 2, left panel). Chi-square analysis indicated that time period and framing strategies were not independent, $X^2 = 1785.4$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparison with bonferroni correction further revealed that both political ($p < .001$) and authority frames ($p < .05$) were more likely to appear during the Kavanaugh period, whereas a cultural frame was more frequently adopted during the initial phase of the campaign ($p < .001$). See Online Appendix 6–7.

Partisan difference

Despite some commonality, results indicate that media across political spectrum showed distinct thematic focuses. Overall, Chi-square analysis revealed that media slant and frame adoption was not independent, $X^2(4) = 466.64$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparison with bonferroni correction showed that a political frame was equally likely to be used across the board ($p > .05$). By contrast, authority frame was more prominent on the right, followed by the centrist and the left ($p < .001$). The left-leaning media, by contrast,
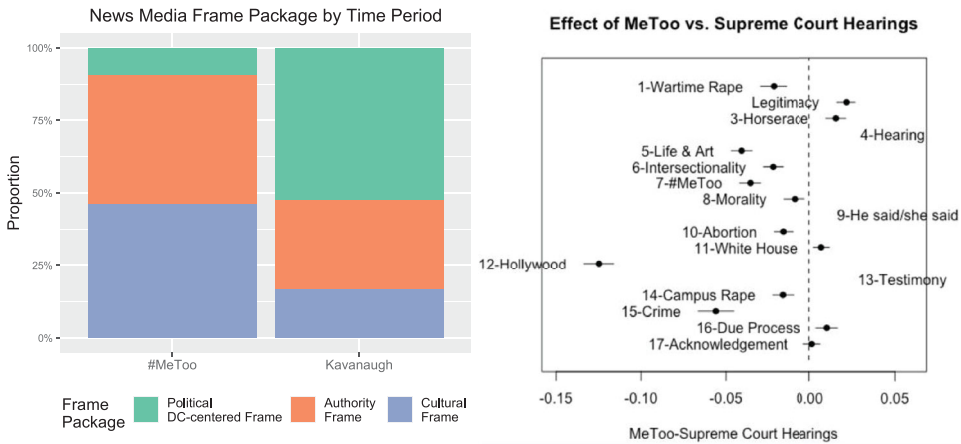
Figure 2. Comparing prominent topics and frame packages between the initial #MeToo campaign and during and after Kavanaugh's hearings. The whisker indicates 95% CI.

more frequently employed the cultural frame than the right ($p < .001$), with no difference from the centrist ($p > .05$) (Figure 3).

The politicization of news coverage was evident across the political spectrum. There was an uptick in the percentage of political frames in left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning media outlets from the initial #MeToo phase to the Kavanaugh period ($p < .001$). Although left-leaning media frequently utilized a cultural frame in covering sexual violence during the initial #MeToo phase, a multigroup Chi-square analysis using Bonferroni correction revealed that this proportion significantly dwindled during the Kavanaugh confirmation ($p < .001$)–a trend also seen in right leaning ($p < .001$) and centrist media ($p < .001$).

Topic-level differences largely confirm this pattern. The right-leaning media tended to emphasize authority-related topics (crime, law, and order), mirroring conservatives' moral focus on authority, tradition, and purity. These narratives, highlighting sex-related crimes and employing legalistic terminology, underscore personal punishment and legal outcomes (e.g., conviction, settlement, sentence) as avenues for achieving justice.

In contrast, left-wing media demonstrated a greater inclination towards presenting diverse viewpoints in their coverage of sexual violence and gender issues. For instance, left-leaning outlets were notably more inclined to discuss gendered issues within every-day scenarios (e.g., date rape, women's attire) and various aspects of popular culture (e.g., standup comedians making derogatory jokes about women). Furthermore, the emphasis on structural, cultural, and historical factors was also evident in the associated keywords used for these topics, such as "power," "change," and "reckoning."

Notably, left-wing media allocated more space to stories about the #MeToo campaign (Topic 7), survivor testimonies (Topic 13), and acknowledging survivors' experiences (Topic 17). These stories expressed empathy and acknowledgement ("help," "support," and "courage"), validated survivors' feelings ("pain," "trauma," "guilt," "shame," and "fear of retaliation"), and utilized empowering words ("help," "support," and
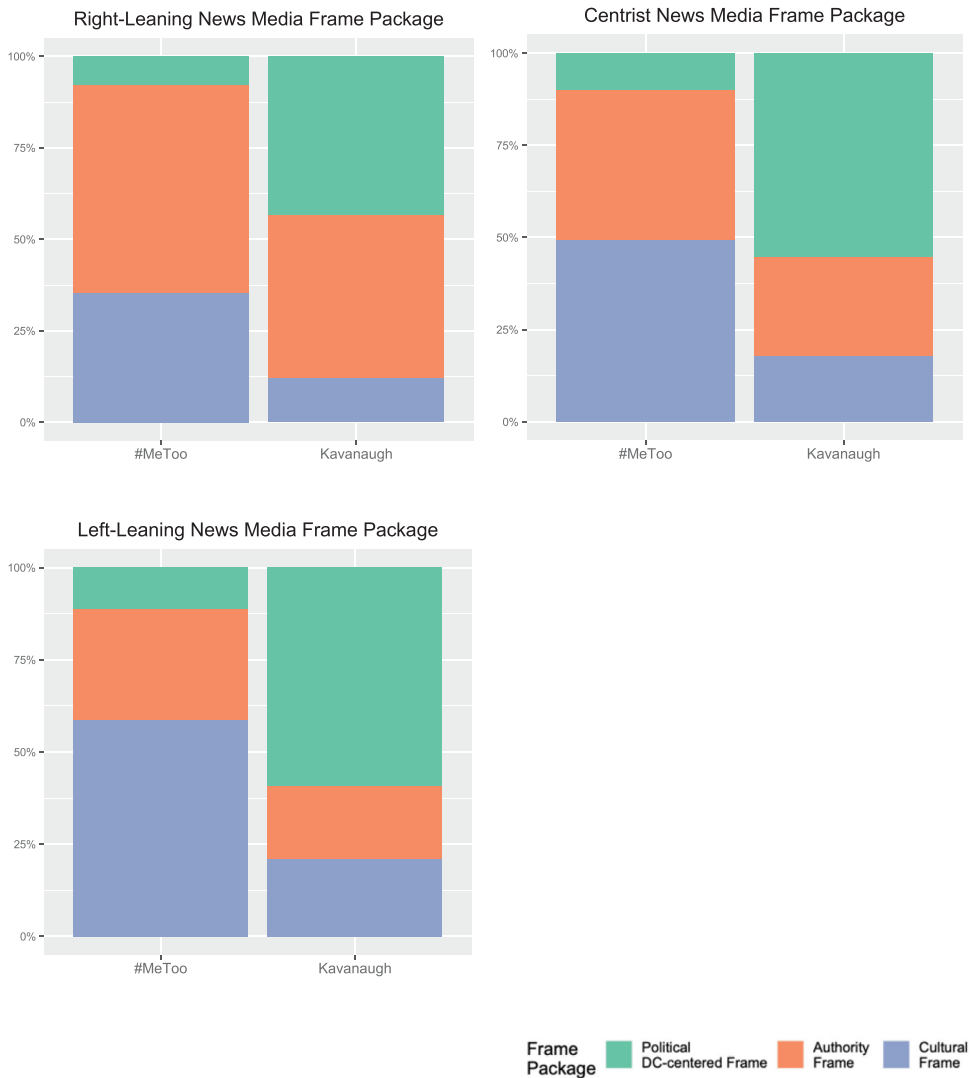
Figure 3. Relative use of frame package by media slant and campaign phases.

"courage"). Additionally, liberal news outlets dedicated more coverage to thematic issues, such as the reasons why numerous sexual violence testimonies remain unaddressed or dismissed (Topic 2: "#BelieveWomen," "#WhyIDidntReport"). Overall, these findings support H2, that partisan media tends to emphasize topics aligned with their values.

Contrastingly, centrist media was more inclined to cover topics traditionally regarded as important and newsworthy. These included coverage of sexual accusations and scandals against high-profile political figures, particularly those associated with the White House (Topic 11) and election races (Topic 3). Centrist media also often adopted a "He said, she said" narrative (Topic 9), possibly due to adherence to objectivity norms, and gave less attention to Hollywood accusations compared to their partisan counterparts (Topic 12). See Appendix 8 for more details.

Language use across partisan media

To test H3, we extracted prominent unigrams from left- and right-leaning media's coverage. Keyness scores were calculated and plotted for word frequency (Figure 4, Appendix 9). Right-wing media primarily focused on words associated with social order, legal procedures, respect for tradition, authority, and the role of families and institutions in safeguarding against outgroup threats. On the other hand, left-wing media utilized more survivor-centered language and action verbs to address structural sexism. Additionally, they employed stronger and more impactful words indicating higher severity. Furthermore, left-wing media made more frequent references to the #MeToo movement compared to right-wing media.

Beyond word frequency, partisan media's language use also varied in context. For example, right-wing media discussed "consent" within the context of protection ("age," "child," "minor"), contested testimonies ("remember"), or specific instances ("hotel," "socialize"). Left-wing media contextualized "consent" with perpetrator actions and victim experiences. Similarly, the word "believe" on the right often co-occurred with distrust ("candid") and legal terms ("criminal"), whereas on the left, it was associated with empowering, sympathy ("need," "help"), and awakening ("uncover," "reveal") (Appendix 10).

Politicization, contested victimhood, and weaponization

Supplementing the computational analyses, our close reading of select articles similarly revealed political undertones of sexual violence reporting. During early #MeToo, media subtly injected politics by highlighting each party's selective moral outrage. Right-wing media criticized liberals for protecting their own, while left-wing media noted conservative hypocrisy.

Additionally, partisan media also offered counter-narratives that deflected the severity of sexual misconduct: Liberal media stressed "Franken's long service of progressive causes, including the rights of women," and the difficulty to weight such contribution against his "ugly and immature treatment of individual women" (Roberts, 2017). Some even reduced Al Franken's sexual misconduct to ill-placed humor (Miller, 2017), or
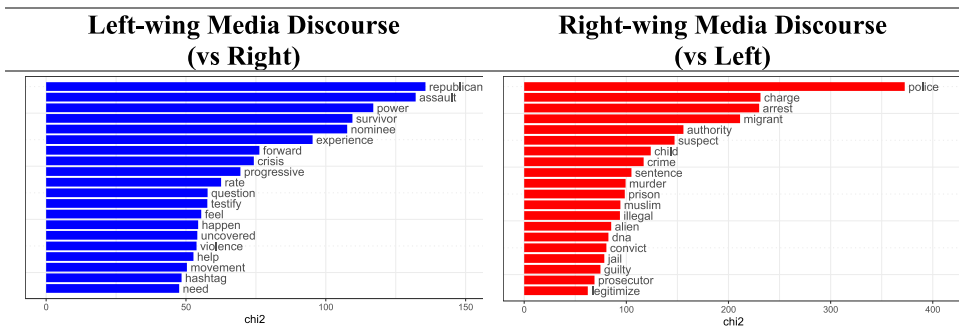
Figure 4. Top 20 words with highest keyness scores of statistical association.

Note: All words of comparison were significant at $p = .001$. X-axis indicates Chi-square statistics for each word, which compares frequencies of words between target and reference documents. Positive scores suggest the observed value in the target corpus exceeds its expected value. See Appendix 8 for detailed results.

emphasized their side's attempt "to address this issue in good faith," which "unfairly held Democrats to a higher standard than Republicans" who have "taken a purely instrumental approach" with "bad faith" (Roberts, 2017).

In comparison, media discourse during the Kavanaugh confirmation took a much more critical stance towards feminism and the transformative potential of the #MeToo movement, questioning whether "politically motivated feminism is killing #MeToo" (Reynolds, 2018), and whether Kavanaugh's confirmation should be treated as "a test for the #MeToo movement" (Stewart, 2018). News stories on the Ford-Kavanaugh accusation also evolved into more explicit partisan blame games, calling Ford's accusation "a left-wing conspiracy" and "a media-Democratic alliance" based on "the Clarence Thomas playbook" to sink a conservative nominee.

This adversarial partisan contestation was evidenced when conservative outlets cast doubt on the timing of the accusation, suggesting Ford's "unproveable claim" was "perfectly timed to have maximum impact." News media on the right also questioned whether the accusation "goes beyond personal or even political justice" by referring to Ford's fundraising progress and book offers. The controversy over an FBI investigation and background investigation offered another point for both sides to advance their preferred interpretations. Breitbart wrote about document review as irrelevant to the nomination vote, calling Democrats' demand for over one million documents merely "an obstructionist tactic to harm Republicans in the midterms" and "retake Senate control" (Klukowski, 2018). Liberal media, on the other hand, wasted no time offering counter-narratives, suggesting the "inherently limited" FBI investigation was "set up to disappoint from the start" due to political calculation on the right (Lopez, 2018).

Such partisan blame games often entailed victimhood and believability disputes. While the right defended Kavanaugh's innocence while discrediting allegations, stressing mistaken identity, distorted memory, and the disregard for due process, the left questioned Kavanaugh's temperament and clean image. Chi-square tests with Yates' continuity correction of sample articles confirmed that news during the Kavanaugh period focused more on "who was the victim" and "how feminism was politicized." There was a significant increase in stories employing a political weaponization frame and highlighting contested victimhood.

Importantly, these two rhetorical strategies often coexisted within the political frame, forming a coherent "frame package" (D'Angelo, 2018). Specifically, the presence of contested victimhood was not equally distributed at varying levels of partisan weaponization: For news articles that emphasized political weaponization, there was a higher likelihood that victimhood was portrayed as discursive instrument open to partisan contestation (See Appendix 11).

Discussion

This study examines the prominent topics and language features of major U.S. news outlets' coverage of sexual violence and women's issues across two critical periods wherein gender issues were catapulted into national spotlight: (a) the rise of the #MeToo movement in late 2017 and (b) Brett Kavanaugh's nomination and confirmation in mid 2018. Using a combination of computational techniques, our study offers a

nuanced understanding of prominent frames spanning U.S. news outlets as their coverage shifted in response to politically salient events.

Overall, the results show that news media cover sexual violence with distinct framing strategies, shaped by their editorial orientation and salient national events. Consistent with historical survey data that shows fluctuating public perception of sexual violence in response to national political events (Holman & Kalmoe, 2021), our study demonstrates stark contrast in prominent themes between the initial #MeToo phase and the Kavanaugh hearings. Specifically, while the initial media coverage offered more diverse perspectives on gender inequality (e.g., arts, intersectionality) and covered a wider range of industries (e.g., school, church, military), the Kavanaugh case provided a context for reframing sexual violence and gender issues as partisan conflicts. The politicization shifted conversations about legitimacy, victimhood, and the impact of false accusations, with party elites inserting preferred narratives into #MeToo coverage.

Besides, liberal and conservative media also employed distinct frames in covering sexual violence in line with their audiences' moral foundation (Walter & Redlawsk, 2023) and partisan issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996). Results from topic modeling showed right-wing media tended to employ the authority frame, approaching sexual violence from the perspectives of legalistic due process and formal outcomes. They also adopted more episodic frames, focusing on crime narratives that featured specific individuals and events. On the other hand, left-wing media tended to employ a cultural/thematic frame, acknowledging survivor experiences, covering the broader #MeToo campaign, and foregrounding structural factors behind gender discrimination. Centrist media, by contrast, frequently adopt frames consistent with traditional news values.

These findings have several theoretical implications. First, consistent with the critique of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and the politicization of social activism (Ophir et al., 2021), our study provides empirical evidence that U.S. media tended to cover sexual violence through the lens of celebrity culture and political ramifications, instead of treating the issue as demanding public attention on its own. The emerging themes were still largely dominantly by a focus on Hollywood and White House. This stands in contrast to the women's and gender studies scholarship, which has witnessed more nuanced contestations and multiple strands of thought concerning how to redefine feminism and what constitutes gender activism. As we show, these deeper conversations, particularly regarding intersectionality and inclusion of multiple identities, had not garnered much media attention even at times when sexual violence was a salient issue.

Second, our study employs a computational inductive approach to identify prominent frames at different textual levels based on a large corpus of media offerings. This expands on prior work investigating story-level frames based on a smaller sample of outlets (Abi-Nader et al., 2020; Traynor, 2019) to provide a deepened understanding of the prominent topics, their interrelationships, and word choices in context across a wider range of outlets.

Importantly, by looking at smaller textual units as part of a coherent framing strategy, our study reveals media's tendency, especially on the right, to use recognition rather than acknowledgement-based language in constructing news narratives. This has important implications: While recognition language may grant attention to victim-survivors, it likely subsumes survivors' voices and lived experiences into legalistic rhetoric (Schneider

& Hannem, 2019). On similar veins, recent work on rethinking distanced objectivity as the only way to imagine journalism's legitimacy (Carlson et al., 2021) demonstrates that the ethics of care and moral solidarity can be an important source of force in the society's collective efforts toward social justice. By exploring not only topics but also word choice, this study advances our understanding of media's role in shaping public discussions on social activism.

Furthermore, a central critique of social activism coverage is the media's inclination to uphold the status quo, "disparag[ing] protestors and hinder[ing] their role as vital actors on the political stage" (McLeod, 2007, p. 185). Extending this critique to partisan media, recent studies have highlighted media's tendency to politicize social activism in their coverage (Shahin et al., 2016).

Building upon this line of work, our study uncovers that both partisan and centrist media tended to frame sexual violence through a political lens, particularly during periods of salient political conflicts. This politicization process may be facilitated by highlighting contested victimhood and political weaponization. Notably, recent case of the Heard vs. Depp trial, and social media contestations surrounding it, further shows the sexual violence accusations and the #MeToo have been weaponized by those questioning the legitimacy of the movement, derailing conversations from the hashtag's initial intent (Sharp, 2022). Despite the emergence of social media as a platform for transforming personal narratives into political action, news media continue to be highly responsive to elite cues, as evident during Bill Clinton's impeachment (Shah et al., 2002).

There are several limitations and directions for future research worth noting. First, our study focuses solely on print stories and left out broadcast content, which continues to be an important part of U.S. public's media diet. Exploring how politicization plays out in social activism coverage between print and broadcast news products would be an important avenue for further investigation. Secondly, our study concentrated on two crucial phases of the #MeToo campaign, allowing us to formally compare topical prevalence between these timeframes using a logistic-normal generalized linear model. While beyond the scope of our inquiry, we hope future studies can expand our findings to offer more granular temporal observations. Third, our study can be fruitfully complemented by qualitative methods, such as constant comparison method, to add more depth and richness to the patterns emerging from our computational approaches.

Conclusion

Overall, our study offers a systematic analysis of large-scale news corpus data across political spectrum and during two pivotal phases of the #MeToo movement. Our findings reveal that news coverage evolved to become more politicized over time, adopting a political frame characterized by recognition language, contested victimhood, and weaponization rhetoric, as compared to the initial phase of the hashtag campaign. Additionally, partisan media tended to align their framing with their audience's moral foundations and strategic issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996). This divergence in treatment sheds light on the influence of partisanship in shaping social perceptions and policy preferences concerning gender issues (Holman & Kalmoe, 2021).

Given the current fragmented media landscape, this presents a significant challenge for news media to provide a common language to a citizenry deliberating on political

action regarding gender justice. The shift in news coverage from widely supportive across the political spectrum in 2017 to politically divided in 2018 (Hansen & Dolan, 2022), going from a coherent and cross-cutting movement to a political scapegoat that the GOP argued put men and a traditional way of life in America in peril (Bacon, 2018), has far-reaching implications for how social activism efforts, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #DefundThePolice, and #GreenNewDeal, can be weaponized and reframed as partisan issues in our contentious era.

Notes

1. Media Cloud contains outlet-level metrics for the number of stories per day for each outlet in their collection. Unhealthy outlets are those low on the metrics at the time of our data collection.
2. This report, generated by the architects of the Media Cloud archive, scored news sources on a -1.0 to +1.0 partisanship scale based on sharing patterns of Twitter users who retweeted Trump or Clinton during the 2016 U.S. election. Outlets scoring less than -0.55 were classified as left-leaning, those between -0.55 and 0.55 as centrist, and those greater than 0.55 as right-leaning. The final complete list contains 8 centrist media (*New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, Politico, USA Today, The Hill, Wall Street Journal, and RealClear-Politics*), 7 right-wing media (*Washington Examiner, Fox, Daily Caller, InfoWars, Breitbart, Gateway Pundit, Washington Times*), and 8 left-wing media (*Daily Kos, Raw Story, Vox, Huffington, Slate, Daily Beast, NPR, MSNBC*). See Appendix 2 for the distribution of the news stories across media outlets.
3. For instance, words that appeared in less than five documents or in more than 40% of all documents were removed. These too common or too rare words do not differentiate well between clusters of news articles (see Burscher et al., 2016).
4. Results from other common community detection algorithms (Fastgreed, Spinglass, and Walktrap) provide similar solutions (see Appendix 4).
5. Specifically, for each top occurring feature, we extracted all its appearance and adjacent words in the immediate context of a 5-word window and plotted its feature cooccurrence matrix.
6. The model evaluation process yields a 17-topic solution, which we further labelled based on three types of information: (a) the most frequent words (words with the highest probability), (b) the most exclusive words (words with the highest ranking FREX scores), and (c) the most representative texts (i.e., articles with the highest theta scores) (Roberts et al., 2019).

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