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Understanding Trump Supporters' News Use: Beyond the Fox News Bubble

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Abstract: Since the 2016 election, the relationship between Trump supporters and Fox News has gained considerable attention. Drawing on interviews with more than 200 people and a representative survey conducted in the state of Wisconsin, we dive deeper into the media habits of Trump supporters using a mixed methods analytical approach. While we do not refute the importance of Fox News in the conservative media ecology, we find that characterizing Trump supporters as isolated in Fox News bubbles obscures the fact that many are news omnivores, or people who consume a wide variety of news. In fact, we find that Trump supporters may have more politically heterogeneous consumption habits than Trump non-supporters. We find that 17% of our survey respondents who support Trump in Wisconsin are regularly exposed to ideologically heterogeneous news media. We also find that like other voters, Trump supporters are disenchanted with the divisive nature of contemporary media and politics. Finally, we analyze the media use of young Trump supporters and find an especially high level of news omnivorousness among them.

Keywords: conservative news media, news media repertoires, news media usage, Trump supporters

1 Introduction

It is arguably common wisdom that supporters of President Donald Trump rely overwhelmingly on Fox News for their political information. This is not unfounded. A recent Pew Research Center study found that Republicans trust and rely on Fox news more than any other news source (Jurkowitz et al. 2020).

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However, this basic fact obscures the more complex reality of what Trump supporters' news use looks like. In this paper, we rely on intensive listening to Trump supporters in Wisconsin coupled with original survey data of Wisconsin residents to examine in depth what sources these voters rely on and how they understand this news use. We find that characterizing Trump supporters in this portion of the country as isolated in Fox News bubbles obscures the fact that many are "news omnivores" (Edgerly 2015) who consume a wide range of news sources and that these voters may have more politically heterogeneous consumption habits than Trump non-supporters. We also find that like other voters, Trump supporters are disenchanted with the divisive nature of contemporary media and politics. Finally, we analyze the media use of young Trump supporters and find an especially high level of news omnivorousness among them.

Our analyses focus specifically on Trump voters, not Republicans or conservatives more broadly, which is a departure from much previous literature on the nature of ideological or partisan news bubbles. Here we seek to contribute to understanding of the contemporary context and hold open the possibility that people are drawn to Trump for reasons other than partisanship or ideology (Hibbing 2020; Kanihan and Rim 2018).

We build on previous work that has cautioned against the assumption that conservatives or Republicans are uniquely in filter bubbles. Yes, many conservatives expose themselves to information streams largely consistent with their ideology, but if anything they do so less than liberals (Young and Anderson 2017; but see Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010). With respect to the internet in particular, some argue that worries about filter bubbles are overstated (Zuiderveen et al. 2016). Earlier work, on 2008 data, suggested that neither Democrats nor Republicans were actively avoiding countervailing news (Weeks, Ksiazek, and Holbert 2016). It does appear that conservatives are more likely now to perceive that mainstream news is heavily biased (Perryman, Foley, and Wagner 2020) and also more likely to perceive that social media companies are biased in their censoring of posts (Vogels, Perrin, and Anderson 2020). Also, in 2016, partisans appeared more isolated in their news exposure than in prior presidential election years, but even that isolation was "modest" (Peterson, Goel, and Iyengar 2019).

Our analyses do more than underscore that Trump supporters rely on more than Fox News. Beyond *what* people pay attention to, there are deeper evaluations of news. For this, we turn to in-depth interviews with individuals and regularly occurring groups of people to investigate how people feel about the sources they rely on and how they think about their news use. This fieldwork allows us to understand the results we observe in our survey data in a nuanced way and reveals the ways distrust of a wide range of media and disenchantment with contemporary partisan polarization motivates many voters' choice of news, especially the choices of many young voters.

Our approach borrows heavily from previous work on news repertoires, or the range of sources people rely on to make up their news diets (see Edgerly 2015 for an overview of news repertoire literature). Edgerly (2015) suggested that many conservatives rely on conservative media, while liberals were more likely to seek out general online news in addition to liberal sources, and suggested that “news omnivores” – people who consume all types of news media – tended to identify as liberal. Building on that study, Zuiderveen et al. (2016) uncovered multiple types of conservative news consumers: people who avoided the news completely, those who consumed only conservative news, as well as those who consumed a lot of news overall. A 2018 study that focused specifically on Trump supporters used metered exposure data from cable boxes, as opposed to self reports of media consumption and found that “news junkies” (akin to Edgerly’s “omnivores”) as well as conservative media users tend to be supportive of Trump (Mourão et al. 2018).

In other words, even if Trump supporters are seeking out media consistent with their political beliefs, many of them are still being exposed to counter-attitudinal information (Zuiderveen et al. 2016, 1135). How are they thinking about this news environment and their consumption choices? What do these choices suggest about the nature of their support for Donald Trump, their future political leanings, and the consumer preferences the news media industry is contending with? The following analyses dive into these questions.

This research is part of a 10 year project investigating the political communication ecology of a single state, Wisconsin. We began our research in 2010 in the wake of the gubernatorial election. Republican Governor Scott Walker explicitly employed tactics of “divide and conquer” (his words) to separate those rural, suburban, and conservative Wisconsinites that Cramer (2016) would identify as having “rural consciousness” from Democrats, union members, government workers, and racial minorities. His action set off a cycle of contentious politics (Wells et al. 2017) that was, in retrospect, a testing ground for the presidential election of 2016.

After that election, it was clear that Wisconsin was not only a tipping-point state as part of the fractured blue wall, but also emblematic of the swing upper Midwest that would likely decide future elections. Our larger research goal was to understand the intersection of political communication with the shifting communication ecology, in particular the continuing decline of the traditional media that had covered state politics (newspapers and local television) and the rise of conservative talk radio and social media. We present the results of this single-state ecological investigation in our forthcoming *The Erosion of Civil Society in a Shifting Communication Ecology: Wisconsin and the Rise of U.S. Populism*. This article grows from the in-depth interviews that we conducted for that work.

2 Methods

Since Spring of 2018, our team has interviewed 226 individuals throughout the state of Wisconsin. We sampled purposively in order to include a diverse range of participants with respect to age, gender, race, occupation, geographic location, and political ideology. Whenever possible, these interviews were conducted in naturally occurring groups grounded in community associations, occupations, or friendship networks. This type of situated listening allows researchers to observe group dynamics and interactions, providing richer data for our analysis.

2.1 Data and Measures

In order to document more generalized patterns of media repertoires and relationship with media trust among Trump supporters in Wisconsin, we rely on data gathered from a web-based survey of registered voters in Wisconsin, collected in October 2018 (before the midterm election). The sample was stratified by state geographic regions and demographics, resulting in a total number of 2058 Wisconsin residents in our sample. Throughout the analyses, sampling weights were used in order to ensure proportional representation of Wisconsin residents.

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they consumed 20 types of media content on a five-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Very Often). They were also asked to report the level of trust in media institutions and groups, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, Wisconsin journalists, and local TV news stations. Descriptive statistics of the key variables are in Table 1.

2.2 Analytic Approach

We employed an iterative, mixed methods approach in our analysis (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007). We began with the qualitative data, uncovering patterns, paradoxes, and processes that emerged in our interviews which we used to develop our initial hypotheses. We then used survey data to validate these hypotheses while also uncovering new and unexpected patterns and paradoxes. We continued to move between the qualitative and quantitative data, using findings and insights from one to inform further analysis of the other. Through this type of mixed methods analytic approach, we are able to expand our understanding. Qualitative data enables us to make sense of patterns

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of key variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Media use				
National nightly news on CBS, ABC, or NBC	2.70	1.437	1	5
The Today Show, Good Morning America or CBS This Morning	2.04	1.271	1	5
Local television evening or nightly news	3.09	1.407	1	5
CNN cable news programs (e.g., Anderson Cooper, Wolf Blitzer)	1.82	1.161	1	5
FOX cable news programs (e.g., Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham)	1.76	1.164	1	5
MSNBC cable news programs (e.g., Rachel Maddow, Chris Hayes)	1.67	1.079	1	5
Entertainment news programs (e.g., Entertainment Tonight, E! News)	1.68	1.007	1	5
Sports talk shows (e.g., Around the Horn, PTI)	1.67	1.068	1	5
News satire (e.g., The Daily Show, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver)	1.65	1.070	1	5
Daytime talk shows (e.g., Ellen, The View)	1.72	1.033	1	5
Late night talk shows – live broadcasts or clips (e.g., Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert)	1.90	1.196	1	5
News programming on NPR – live radio, podcasts, streaming (e.g., All Things Considered)	1.70	1.116	1	5
National conservative talk radio – live radio, podcasts, streaming (e.g., Rush Limbaugh)	1.54	0.988	1	5
Local talk radio	1.84	1.128	1	5
Conservative political blogs (e.g., Hot Air, RedState)	1.25	0.708	1	5
Liberal political blogs (e.g., Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo)	1.29	0.740	1	5
International news websites (e.g., BBC, Al Jazeera)	1.64	1.024		
Local newspapers	2.71	1.377	1	5
National newspapers (e.g., The New York Times; Wall Street Journal)	1.82	1.128	1	5
Internet news aggregators (e.g., Yahoo News, Google News)	2.40	1.305	1	5
Online news organizations (e.g. Politico, The Hill, Business Insider)	1.69	1.060	1	5
Media trust				
The New York Times	2.85	1.112	1	5
Wall Street Journal	2.97	1.037	1	5
Fox News	2.65	1.257	1	5
CNN	2.80	1.203	1	5
MSNBC	2.75	1.147	1	5
Local journalists	3.12	0.983	1	5
Local television station	3.47	0.966	1	5

in our survey data by uncovering the underlying experiences, lenses, and reasons people apply in their daily lives. It allows us to glimpse processes and nuances that are obscured by survey methods. Survey data allows us to ground and contextualize these qualitative findings by seeing how they fit into the broader trends that we observe in Wisconsin across a representative sample. This iterative, mixed methods analytic approach enables us to not only triangulate data to increase the

validity of our claims, but it also provides more depth and texture to our findings than any one method would alone.

3 The Archetypal Trump Supporter

In many ways, Gary is the quintessential Trump supporter. He is a white, semi-retired businessman with a bushy mustache that partly obscures his broad smile. Gary lives in the Fox Valley, a region in northeast Wisconsin with a declining industrial sector and home to the BOW counties (Brown, Outagamie, and Winnebago) which are considered a key political battleground region in the state. He is a proud early Trump supporter and happily recounted how he was the first among his friends to believe that Trump could win the 2016 election. Gary is drawn to Trump because he believes they share core values. He believes in putting American citizens first and supports strong restrictions on immigration and the effort to build a wall between the US and Mexico (see also Hibbing 2020). He believes in hard work and supports strict work requirements for access to government programs like SNAP or rental assistance. He is drawn to Trump because he, too, is a businessman who “talks like us” rather than like a typical politician. But it isn’t just his political beliefs and his feelings towards Trump that make Gary fit the mold of the stereotypical Trump supporter, it is also his relationship to the news media.

Gary begins his mornings the same way each day. He wakes up at the crack of dawn, just in time to turn on Fox and Friends when it begins at 5 am. He reads the local paper every morning out of habit, but laments that its coverage of local issues seems to shrink by the week. Then, he rotates between the regional Fox and NBC affiliates to hear the latest local news and get the weather report before heading out the door just after 7 am. Occasionally, he might watch a little MSNBC or CNN, which he calls the “Communist News Network,” but he finds their coverage so irritating that he can only go a few minutes before shutting it off. Fox News and local television news are the cornerstone of Gary’s news repertoire.

The centrality of Fox News in Gary’s media repertoire aligns with both popular and academic conceptualizations of Republicans in general and Trump supporters in particular (see Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Polletta and Callahan 2017). In many ways, these conceptualizations are correct: Fox News does play a critical role in the media habits of Trump supporters and Republicans. In Wisconsin, we found that 43.6% of Trump supporters and 40% of Republicans watch Fox News “occasionally,” “fairly often,” or “often.” (see Figure 1). In a 2019 national survey, Pew found that 60% of Republicans relied on Fox News “for political and election news in the past week” (Jurkowitz et al. 2020). The relationship between Fox News and Trump, particularly the feedback loop and mutual

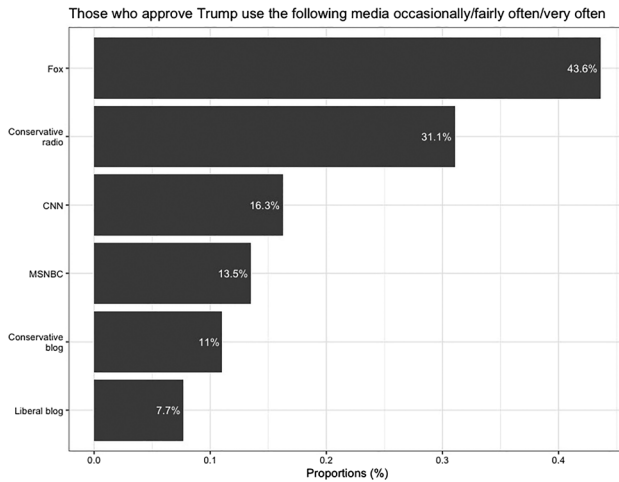


Figure 1: Trump supporters' media use.

admiration exchanged between the two, has long been a focus of journalists (Gertz 2018; Sherman 2018). It may come as no surprise then, that Republicans who watch Fox News are some of Trump's most loyal supporters (Public Religion Research Institute 2019).

For people like Gary, this type of selective exposure makes intuitive sense – Fox News and other ideologically conservative media support their preexisting worldview. The Trump supporters and strong Republican partisans we listened to regularly discussed feeling under attack by the left. Some recounted stories that they heard of other Trump supporters getting physically assaulted in the wake of the 2016 election. College students shared that they were afraid professors would retaliate against their conservative beliefs by punishing them with bad grades. Others recounted how they closed off relationships with friends and even family members over their political beliefs (Wells et al. 2017). Many expressed the belief that mainstream news is dominated by the left. Thomas, a long-retired logger from rural Wisconsin, lamented that mainstream news networks like NBC, ABC, and CNN were “all against Trump right from the get-go,” never giving him a fair shot and taking every opportunity to belittle him.

The validity of each of these claims or the prevalence of specific instances isn't what is most important here. The continuous re-telling of these stories – Trump supporters getting assaulted, college students targeted by liberal professors, the unrelenting liberal bias of mainstream media – is a reminder that many Trump supporters see themselves in the midst of a political battle, where Republicans and Trump supporters must constantly be vigilant to protect themselves from attacks

from the left. This narrative, particularly the reported liberal bias within academia and the mainstream media, has been weaponized by the right and used to justify the creation of conservative alternatives like Fox News (Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Peck 2018). When Republicans and Trump supporters believe they are constantly under attack, it makes sense that some would want to retreat into the conservative space Fox News has carved out for them.

Another central part of this story is the issue of trust in the media. Pew has long documented public trust in institutions like news media. While the levels of trust in the news have remained relatively stable for Democrats, distrust among Republicans has increased in recent years. While Democrats tend to trust a wide variety of sources, Republicans trust only a select few sources and Fox News stands out as their most trusted source (Jurkowitz et al. 2020). This is also consistent with our survey data on Wisconsin residents, where 31.1% of Trump supporters reported that they trust Fox News more than any other media sources (see Figure 2).

This trust in Fox News, and to a lesser degree local TV news, and pervasive distrust of other sources did appear in some of our interviews. Gary noted that he watches Fox because “they’re the ones I believe.” Thomas prefers Fox because “they put the truth on there. They’ve got facts. They back everything up with facts. They won’t put anything on there that is not a fact.” Barry is another unwavering Trump supporter, a retiree living in rural Wisconsin who “specialize[s] in Fox

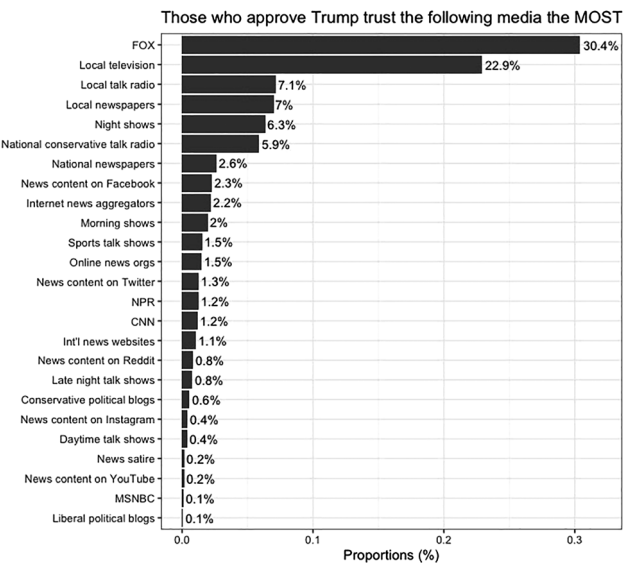


Figure 2: Media sources that Trump supporters trust the most.

News, because they're fair and balanced." When pushed a little more, Barry explained:

I know that people there are biased, and there are anti-Trump people on Fox. I prefer that because then you get the perspective from both sides as opposed to listening to CNN or MSNBC where it's all one-sided, that bring on a Republican who happens to be a RINO.

Gary, Thomas, and Barry all embody the idea of Trump supporters as people who rely on and trust Fox News over any other source. The news network provides them with a refuge from mainstream media like NBC, ABC, CNN, and MSNBC whom they see as constantly attacking Donald Trump and conservative values or as perpetuating political correctness through their coverage of issues like sexual assault in the Me Too era. They justify their trust in Fox News by pointing to their use of "facts" in their reporting and their use of expert guests who represent, in their view, a wide range of ideological perspectives – all things they see as missing in other "mainstream" news sources.

While this image is grounded in facts – our survey data show that Trump supporters and Republicans do disproportionately rely on Fox News and trust it more than other sources – it obscures a more complex reality. As we will demonstrate in the rest of this paper, many Trump supporters do not look like Gary, Thomas, or Barry. Rather than solely relying on Fox News, many Trump supporters and Republicans seek out ideologically diverse news media. Rather than blindly trusting Fox News, many express frustration with partisan bias in the news on both the left *and* the right, though our survey data show notably greater trust among Trump supporters for conservative sources as compared to mainstream and liberal ones. Young Republicans and Trump supporters, in particular, have low media trust and seek out ideologically diverse viewpoints through their reliance on the internet and social media as the lynchpin of their media diets.

First, we will provide a lay of the land by using a cluster analysis to identify key media repertoires among our survey respondents. Then, using our interviews to pave the way, we illuminate the justifications that underlie these repertoires and the lenses through which people interpret the news and make sense of politics in their daily lives.

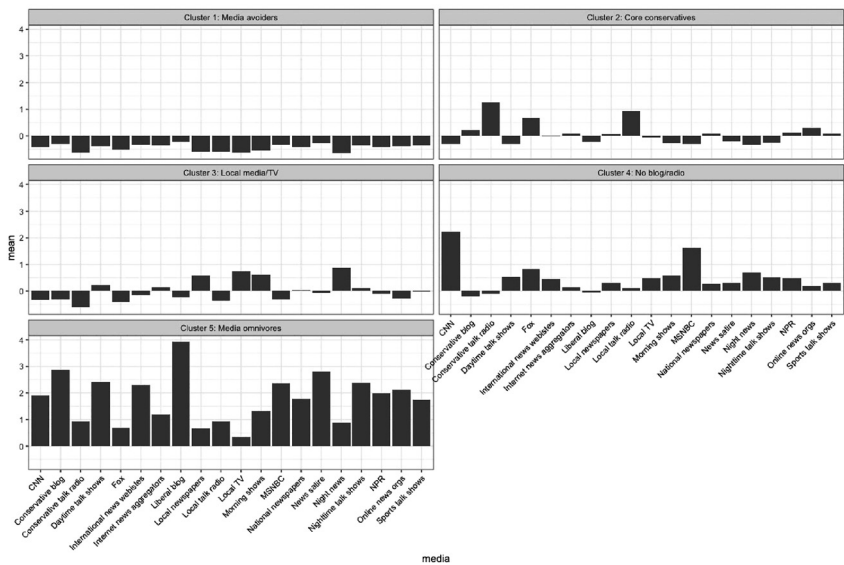
4 The Media Repertoires of Trump Supporters

How does Gary's use of news media compare with the rest of Trump supporters? In order to identify more generalized media repertoires among Trump supporters in Wisconsin, we conducted a cluster analysis (Edgerly 2015). Following previous

studies (Amaro, Duarte, and Henriques 2016; Lankton, McKnight, and Tripp 2017), we performed a two-step process. First, we ran a hierarchical cluster analysis using the Ward method with the standardized values of the self-reported media use measures. Then, K-means clustering algorithm (MacQueen 1967) was applied based on the initial cluster centers. Both methods indicated that a five-cluster solution was the most appropriate. By doing so, we characterized distinct media repertoires and constructed discrete groups of Trump supporters according to similar patterns of media use. Figure 3 illustrates the results.

4.1 The first cluster is *Media Avoiders*

Individuals in this cluster show lower than average scores of media use across 20 types of sources. Interestingly, the largest group of Trump supporters (45%) falls into this cluster. The second cluster, which accounts for about 20% of Trump supporters, is *Core Conservatives*. Home to people like Gary, this cluster is characterized by a high consumption of conservative-leaning media sources, including



Note. The figure shows the standardized values of media use for each of the clusters. Negative values indicate lower than the average while positive values indicate higher than the average.

Figure 3: Cluster analysis of media repertoires among Trump supporters.

conservative blogs, conservative talk radio, Fox News, and local talk radio, compared to other types of media. While they show a higher frequency of talk radio use (conservative/local) than other Fox News and blogs, this second cluster highlights Trump supporters' strong inclinations to follow their ideological orientations in choosing media sources. Similarly, the third cluster shows a selective media use repertoire, especially local newspapers and TV shows (18% of Trump supporters). Instead of national/partisan media and online sources, people in this *Local media/TV* cluster tend to rely on media sources that focus on local issues and are entertainment-oriented.

Unlike the selective media use or avoiding media repertoires, the fourth and fifth clusters feature a wider range of media use patterns. The fourth cluster, *No blog/radio* cluster, accounts for about 9% of Trump supporters and is specifically characterized by a moderate level of media use in various types of sources, except for blogs and radio use (e.g., political blogs, conservative talk radio). It is also noteworthy that individuals in this cluster exhibit more frequent use of partisan media (e.g., CNN/MSNBC/Fox) than other sources. Somewhat similarly, the fifth cluster shows a *Media Omnivore* repertoire (8% of respondents). Individuals in this cluster consume a variety of media more frequently than any other clusters, showing the most active and heterogeneous media consumption patterns (Edgerly 2015). Rather than existing in a conservative news bubble, the 17% of Trump supporters who occupy these clusters consume ideologically heterogeneous news media. These are the precise category of voters most likely to split their ticket in Wisconsin (Wagner et al. 2019).

Looking at the demographic and partisanship makeup further allowed us to identify distinct characteristics of each cluster (see Table 2). In terms of partisanship, while 88.4% of the Trump supporters in our survey data were Republicans (including leaners; 7.1% were Independents and 4.5% were Democrats), we could also see a distribution of opposite partisans and Independents across clusters. For example, 11–16% of Trump supporters in *Media Avoiders*, *Local media/TV*, *No blog/radio*, and *Media Omnivores* clusters turned out to be Independents and Democrats. On the other hand, the *Core Conservatives* cluster is composed of 96% Republicans (including leaners; with the remaining 4% being Independents), documenting their ideologically flavored media repertoires compared to the rest of the clusters. In addition to key trends in partisanship, we also find notable demographic trends across these clusters. 67% of *Core Conservatives* are men and they also had the highest level of education and household income. We also found that the *Media Omnivores* had the lowest mean age compared to the other clusters which ranged from 49 to 60 years.

As a comparison, we also performed cluster analysis of media repertoires among Trump opponents, which resulted in six distinct media repertoires. Similar

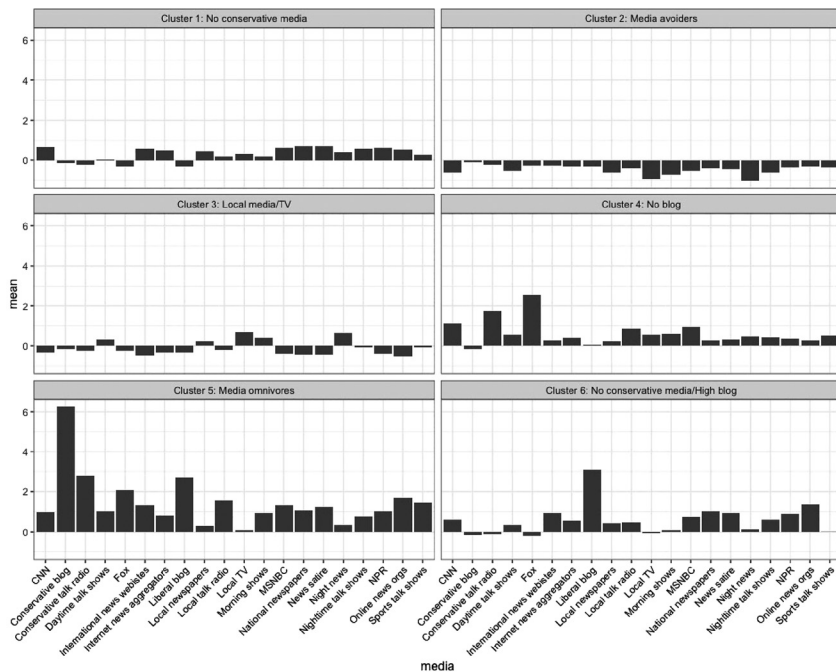
Table 2: Demographics and party identification of Trump supporters in each cluster.

	Cluster 1 Media Avoiders	Cluster 2 Core Conservatives	Cluster 3 Local TV/shows	Cluster 4 No blog/radio	Cluster 5 Media Omnivores
Demographics					
Age	48.88	59.64	59.41	53.60	29.50
Female (%)	42	33	47	55	42
Education	2.13	2.82	2.50	2.37	2.44
Income	3.12	3.81	3.16	2.93	3.25
White (%)	89	92	95	91	78
Party identification					
Strong republican	24.16	33.97	15.12	25.49	6.82
Republican	48.21	41.23	56.43	47.43	59.15
Lean republican	12.70	20.86	17.68	11.57	22.67
Independent	11.55	3.93	5.09	3.94	0.86
Lean democrat	1.80		0.84	1.35	
Democrat	1.58		4.84	7.45	9.38
Strong democrat				2.77	1.12

Note. For education, 1 = High school or less, 2 = some college, 3 = Associate's degree, 4 = Bachelor's degree, 5 = Master's degree, Doctoral degree, or Professional degree. For income, 1 = Less than \$25,000, 2 = \$25,000–\$49,999, 3 = \$50,000–\$74,999, 4 = \$75,000–\$99,999, 5 = \$100,000–\$149,999, 6 = \$150,000–\$199,999, 7 = Over \$200,000.

to Trump supporters, the largest cluster among Trump opponents was Media Avoiders (41%), who show the lowest level of media use across different sources, followed by local TV/show consumers (26%), who are more oriented towards localized media and TV shows. The smallest cluster was of Media Omnivores (3%), who show the most active and frequent use of media sources across outlets.

The first (16%) and sixth cluster (4%) of Trump opponents' media repertoires (see Figure 4) generally feature a moderate level of media consumption across sources, but with one exception: Both clusters are characterized by the lowest level of conservative media use (e.g., conservative blogs, conservative talk radios, Fox News). While both Trump supporters and opponents exhibit ideologically oriented media repertoire clusters (*Core Conservatives* for Trump supporters; *No Conservative Media* clusters for Trump opponents), it is notable that Trump opponents tend to show a selective avoidance tendency while supporters are more selectively exposing themselves to partisan sources.



Note. The figure shows the standardized values of media use for each of the clusters. Negative values indicate lower than the average while positive values indicate higher than the average.

Figure 4: Cluster analysis of media repertoires of Trump opponents.

Similar to Trump supporters, some Trump opponents also showed a wider, more heterogeneous range of media use patterns, including those across ideological spectrum: Cluster 4 (*No Blogs*) and 5 (*Media Omnivores*). While individuals in *No Blogs* are less likely to consume blogs, they overall show higher partisan media use, including both left- and right-leaning sources (e.g., Fox, CNN, MSNBC). Like Trump supporters, *Media Omnivores* are also characterized by their high frequency of various media sources, showing a more generous and active media consumption repertoire. Despite similarities, our findings show that Trump opponents have a smaller percent of individuals with a heterogeneous media consumption repertoire (9% for *No Blogs* and 3% for *Media Omnivores*), compared to Trump supporters (17% total).

Overall, our findings reveal several interesting patterns of media repertoires across supporters and opponents. First, for Trump opponents, we did not find a media repertoire cluster for liberal-leaning sources only, suggesting no “core” liberal media use patterns, unlike the conservative counterpart. In addition, for the heterogeneous media repertoire clusters, we observed a higher % of non-Democrats in the clusters among Trump opponents (35% for *No Blogs*, 25% for *Media Omnivores*) compared to the respective clusters among Trump supporters (15% of non-Republicans in *No Blogs/Radio*, 12% of non-Republicans for *Media Omnivores*).

In the subsequent sections, we will dive more deeply into some of the patterns this cluster analysis revealed. First, we will broadly examine the 17% of Trump supporters who seek out ideologically heterogeneous media. We will show how these trends are related not just to partisanship, but to underlying perceptions of partisan bias and distrust in left *and* right leaning media. We will also explore how partisanship serves as a lens through which people interpret the news, making them more or less open to news they encounter from partisan sources. Second, we will explore the media patterns of young Trump supporters who are disproportionately represented among *Media Omnivores*. We will explore how age shapes personal experience with news media in ways that help explain the relationship between low levels of trust in news and the prevalence of omnivorous media diets among young people.

5 Waning Trust and Ideological Heterogeneity Among Trump Supporters

One of the most striking aspects of our interviews is that regardless of whom we spoke with – where they lived, their occupation, their level of political

involvement, or their partisan identity – they all expressed deep concern about perceived increases in partisanship, polarization, and incivility. Trump supporters were no exception. While some supporters, like Gary, largely reserved this criticism for political elites or liberal media exclusively, many more expressed frustration with news on both sides. Harry is a retiree and Republican activist living in rural Wisconsin. Despite his strong partisan identity, Harry expressed concern over partisan bias of Fox News:

And Fox has in general, if you look at the regular programming, is just as immoral as the rest of them are. It's just that they make a lot of money taking the conservative viewpoint versus everybody else because there's enough viewers, like ourselves, that watch it. So as far as the ownership goes, I have no favorites there. But, I again think that Fox is more unbiased than the rest of them ... I don't watch that because I know where they're coming from. And it's a very liberal, socialist viewpoint. And they hire people for that very purpose. Oh, they may throw in on their panels one conservative, but even then they don't get their views across because they're bashed all the time.

Harry's account warrants some unpacking. First, Harry is saying that Fox News is just as “immoral” as other news sources, and this immorality stems from the fact that it is owned by economic elites. He is conscious of the fact that Fox News tells conservative viewers what they want to hear in order to boost ratings and make money. This type of talk about economic elites shaping news media among Trump supporters was relatively common. This should come as no surprise, as Trump himself drew heavily on similar populist rhetoric throughout his campaign and presidency. Second, Harry doubles back and says that while Fox News is biased, it is less biased than other sources that he sees as liberal or “socialist” (like CNN or MSNBC). He makes an assertion common in our conversation with other Trump supporters and Republicans, that the guests Fox News programs feature and how they are treated is part of what makes it less biased than left-leaning news networks.

Here we can see two frameworks that are central to Harry come into conflict. Through his populist lens, Fox News is simply another way for economic elites to profit off of everyday people (either directly through ad revenue or indirectly through politics) and manipulate them. Through his partisan lens, Fox News is the best available source of news because it aligns with his conservative values.

Despite his frustrations, Harry's media repertoire is entirely conservative. He listens to all three of the Fox channels on SiriusXM and the Patriot channel, another conservative talk radio channel. He subscribes to Breitbart. Even his local news source of choice has a conservative leaning. He still supports and perpetuates the media patterns he dislikes through his everyday choices – and he is not alone. Time and time again in our interviews, people across the ideological spectrum

expressed frustration with the polarization they perceive among politicians, in their social lives, and in the news media. Despite this frustration, partisans largely still engage in politics and media in ways that continue to exacerbate the very things they find so unpalatable in contemporary politics. In our survey, Harry would most likely be categorized as somebody who consumes conservative media and trusts Fox News. And while this is true, it obscures a more complex reality in which Harry's trust in Fox News is only partial and is more relative than absolute.

The lack of trust and an awareness of heightened partisanship in the media profoundly shaped the strategies our participants (regardless of partisanship) used to navigate the contemporary media environment. There are three pathways that emerged throughout our interviews. First, people, like Gary, Thomas, Barry and Harry, rely heavily on media that aligns with their political ideology and reinforces their partisan identity. They are what we call *Core Conservatives* and again, comprise roughly 20% of Trump supporters in Wisconsin. Second, people may check out of political news entirely and join the 45% of Trump supporters in Wisconsin who are *Media Avoiders*. Third, people actively seek out ideologically heterogeneous news media. The 17% of Trump supporters in Wisconsin who are either *No blog/radio users* or *Media Omnivores* fall into this category. For those who follow this third pathway, the dominant logic is that by consuming media from "both sides" they are able to make more informed judgements about what in the media is true. Consuming a wide array of media was often used by participants to signal that they are independent, well informed, and sophisticated consumers of news media that are above the partisan fray. In the remainder of this section, we'll explore how some Trump supporters use this third strategy to navigate the contemporary media environment.

Our survey data revealed that indeed many Trump supporters and Republicans in Wisconsin encounter news from across the ideological spectrum. Our cluster analysis identified two distinct media repertoires that capture this phenomenon among Trump supporters. The first repertoire is *No blog/radio users*. People in this cluster consume relatively high levels of all media with the exception of radio or political blogs. Despite being Trump supporters, CNN and MSNBC are the most frequently used sources in this group. The second repertoire is what we call *Media Omnivores*. People in this cluster tend to use all forms of media at extremely high levels when compared to their peers. Again, despite being Trump supporters, liberal blogs are one of the sources frequently used among this group, followed by other online sources. In fact, our cluster analysis reveals that a larger proportion of Trump supporters have ideologically heterogeneous news repertoires than non-supporters. Recall that among Trump supporters in Wisconsin, 9% are *No blog/radio users* and 8% are *Media Omnivores*. This means that 17% of Trump supporters in Wisconsin are consistently exposed to left- and right-leaning

media. Among opponents in Wisconsin, the comparable repertoires comprise 9% and 3% respectively, a total of 12%. Rather than relying exclusively on Fox News and existing in an information bubble, our data show that a sizable number of Trump supporters are exposed to a wide variety of political viewpoints and news sources in their media repertoire.

Exposure is only part of the story, however. We also need to understand how people perceive the information they are exposed to. Partisanship shapes perceptions of trust and serves as a lens through which people filter the information they receive, so we should expect that Trump supporters walk away from a message with a different interpretation than Trump opponents do (see Coe et al. 2008; Garrett and Stroud 2014; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013). Our interviews offer a glimpse into the justifications some of these Trump supporters use when incorporating liberal media into their diets and how they make sense of the different types of news they encounter.

Matt is in his 40s and has worked as a firefighter in the Fox Valley for almost 20 years. Matt occupies an interesting position politically. At the local and even statewide level, he often votes for Democrats because of his strong union ties. At the national level, however, he considers himself to be a “GGB” Republican because of his strong conservative social values – he votes for “guns, God, and babies.” He voted for Trump in 2016, which he viewed as primarily a vote against Hillary, and is generally skeptical of all politicians. This skepticism extends to his views of news media:

Matt: I watch ... My firehouse on my shift, Fox News seems to be on a lot. Fair and unbalanced, yeah? [sighs] I try to watch CNN, Fox, little bit of both in the morning.

Sadie: Why do you choose to watch both?

Matt: I don't know, because I think all the news sources are fake and I think they're reporting on an agenda. Both of them. Fox News is obviously reporting the right, CNN's obviously reporting for the left. Whichever one you go to, they're reporting their agenda. And I think it's wrong. I think they need to report the news, but until we find some news agency that wants to report the news and not their agenda, we're just ... it is what it is. You have to take what you believe from either one of them, I guess.

In an attempt to account for the bias he sees in all news media, Matt actively seeks out news from the left (CNN) and the right (Fox) in an attempt to balance his exposure. While he tends to vote Republican at the national level, Matt doesn't have particularly strong partisan attachments. This, combined with his deeply held skepticism of the media, shapes the way he engages with news media. He approaches information from both sides with extreme skepticism, evaluating each himself to try and find glimpses of truth among the “fake” news.

While Matt is an ideological news omnivore who is more or less equally open to news from across the political spectrum, others are more closed off. Many omnivores tend to be strong partisans, who use their partisanship as a lens through which they interpret the news. Neil is a wealthy immigrant man of color in his 60s who is a Republican activist and strong Trump supporter. He actively seeks out conservative and liberal sources in his daily news routine, but his partisanship and his identity as a Trump supporter profoundly shape the way he interprets the news.

I'll go to the YMCA at least two or three times a week, and in one hour of walking, I watch a half hour of CNN and a half hour of Fox.

It's amazing. I like watching CNN to think how ridiculous and illogical their thought process is. They catch one thing or some of what Trump said and I've never seen news in my 40 years here where they say, "This is probable. This *could* be." And it's supposed to be news but they're all projecting with all these iffy statements that, "It is probably true," and, "It could mean that." I mean, "He did this but he could ..." And it's not news anymore. It's just commentary.

While Neil technically consumes CNN and Fox at the YMCA, he treats CNN less as news and more as a form of entertainment. This phenomenon is not limited to Neil or conservatives. The leftists we spoke with also talked about looking at Fox News or alternative sources like Breitbart for amusement. Neil said watching CNN allows him a glimpse into the "ridiculous" and "illogical" reasoning of liberals. Neil may actively seek out left-leaning news media, the way he filters and interprets news media is still through a strong partisan lens.

Together, Matt and Neil serve as two poles on the spectrum of Trump supporters who are exposed to ideologically heterogeneous news media (*News Omnivores* and *No blog/radio users*). On one side of the spectrum is Matt. He actively seeks out liberal and conservative news sources as a way of managing his distrust of news media in general. He approaches all news with relatively equal skepticism and attempts to find the "truth" somewhere in the middle. On the other side of the spectrum is Neil. He actively seeks out liberal and conservative news media, but his strong partisanship constantly serves as a lens through which he makes sense of politics. In effect, Neil treats liberal and conservative news sources as distinct. Conservative media has the potential to be viewed as legitimate news, while liberal media is viewed as illegitimate and used as a source of entertainment rather than a source of news.

In this section, we challenged the idea that all Trump supporters are isolated in a conservative media bubble. 17% of Trump supporters in Wisconsin report exposure to ideologically heterogeneous news media. When we listened to people who utilize these repertoires, some did so as a way to cope with their low levels of trust in all partisan media, while others did so as a form of partisan entertainment.

When considering the impact of ideologically heterogeneous news exposure, understanding these distinct reasons, levels of trust in media, and partisanship is critical.

6 Young Trump Supporters and Media Omnivorousness

When examining trends in the relationship between Trump supporters and the media, looking at Trump supporters as a whole can often obscure important differences between different types of Trump supporters. In this section, we will delve more deeply into an often overlooked subgroup of Trump supporters – young people. While young people often do not vote at the same levels as their older counterparts and tend to skew Democratic – in a study of validated voters, Pew found that 13% of the electorate was under 30 and 28% of those voters voted for Trump – it is still valuable to understand generational trends in how young people relate to political news (Pew Research Center 2018). We found that young people, age 18–34, comprised 27.9% of all Trump supporters that we surveyed in Wisconsin, 30.4% for age 35–54 and 41.6% for 55 and older.

When we dive deeper into the relationship between young people and news, we find some interesting trends. First, the dominance of Fox News as the central source of news for Trump supporters is less prominent among young Trump supporters. Only 31.9% of Trump supporters ages 18–34 use Fox News at least occasionally, compared to 48.4% of Trump supporters over 54. Second, younger people also seem to have more ideologically diverse media repertoires. 27.8 and 31.9% of young Trump supporters watch CNN and MSNBC at least occasionally, respectively. This is compared to only 11.5 and 6.4% of older Trump supporters (over 54) who watch CNN and MSNBC at least occasionally. Our cluster analysis also confirms the pattern that young people tend to be *Media Omnivores*. The average age for media omnivores is 36.4, while the mean age for every other repertoire is 55 or older. Third, we notice interesting trends in age and media trust. We ran a series of regression analyses predicting the level of media trust. Our analyses reveal that age was positively associated with trust in the media (including the New York Times, CNN, MSNBC, local journalists, and local news television), indicating that older people were more trusting of the media than younger counterparts (see Table 3) after controlling for other demographics and political interest. The interactions between Trump approval and age further show that Trump supporters in general are less supportive of the media (except for Fox) and such a tendency is mostly pronounced among older generations. On the other

Table 3: Regression analyses predicting media trust.

Predictors	NYT		Fox		CNN		MSNBC		Local journalists		Local TV	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Intercept	2.31***	0.38	1.75***	0.38	2.76***	0.36	2.06***	0.38	2.65***	0.36	3.01***	0.33
Female	0.09	0.07	0.20*	0.08	0.20**	0.08	0.18*	0.08	-0.00	0.07	0.02	0.07
Education level	0.08***	0.03	-0.07*	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.05*	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.03
Income	0.03	0.02	-0.00	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.04	0.02
White	0.33*	0.13	0.11	0.14	0.19	0.14	0.28	0.15	0.09	0.13	0.16	0.13
Political interest	0.08	0.07	0.05	0.08	0.01	0.07	0.12	0.07	0.02	0.07	0.04	0.07
Trump approval	-0.03	0.10	0.28**	0.10	-0.13	0.11	0.01	0.10	0.11	0.09	0.07	0.08
Age	0.01**	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01**	0.01	0.02***	0.01	0.02***	0.00	0.01***	0.00
Trump approval *age	-0.01***	0.002	0.003	0.002	-0.01**	0.002	-0.01***	0.002	-0.01***	0.002	-0.004**	0.001
N		1983		1983		1983		1983		1983		1983
R ² adjusted		0.285		0.256		0.288		0.245		0.126		0.061

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

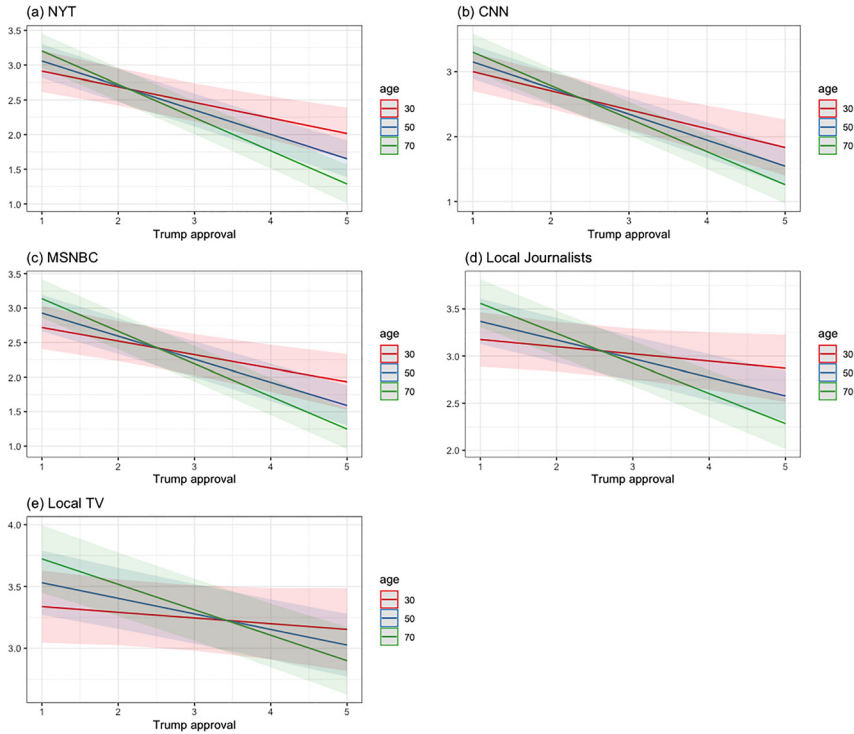


Figure 5: Interaction plots predicting the media trust from Trump approval and age.

hand, trust in media for young people also appears less tethered to their level of support for Trump. Figure 5 illustrates the interaction plots between Trump approval and age, predicting the media trust.

Our interviews can help make sense of these large generational gaps. We know that people use their identities and experiences as a filter when encountering and making sense of news media. We also know that the news landscape has changed dramatically in the last few decades or even the last couple of years. Older people and younger people have grown up with fundamentally different media systems. Listening to both older and younger people across the political spectrum, it is clear that almost everybody is concerned with partisanship and polarization in the current political moment. However, people use their own experiences with politics and news to make sense of these trends (Cramer and Toff 2017). Older participants often nostalgically reflected on the news media they grew up with. James, a retired Vietnam War veteran living in rural Wisconsin, captures this notion that was prominent among many of our older participants:

The early correspondents were all journalists. They were guys from World War II, they didn't even know how they were gonna look on TV. I remember when my grandmother couldn't wait to see what Jack Benny looked like, and Fred Allen. They were Andy Rooney and Charles Collingwood and Walter Cronkite, and you trusted them. And you believed them. Whether it was right or wrong. And they didn't argue, and they didn't push their views, they just reported, and you decided. And it's not like that today.

Our younger participants do not have memories of the era of journalism where the Fairness Doctrine, an FCC policy requiring broadcast media to provide equitable and balanced coverage of political issues, shaped news media. They only know news media in the contemporary era, where news is increasingly catering to a particular partisan audience. Some young people are still critical of partisanship in mainstream media, but they view it as more or less an unavoidable reality. When asked if she found bias in the media disturbing, Emma, a young leader of a College Republicans chapter, replied:

I personally feel like at this point it's kind of just there. I mean it could be upsetting but to me it's kinda just, like, there and I don't know what I'm going to do about it.

After discussing the partisan bias they see on the left and the right, a different group of College Republicans on another UW campus expressed a similar sentiment:

Vicky: Exactly. I do follow The New York Times on YouTube, which is pretty interesting. They're not unbiased, but they're the most unbiased source that I can find at the moment.

Mike: I don't think there really is a true unbiased source.

Vicky: Not anymore

Helen: No, there isn't. There isn't.

Mike: I think people just by nature are biased.

Vicky: There's an inherent bias.

For the young people we spoke with, bias and partisanship in the news is an unavoidable reality of consuming political news. Because eliminating bias seems impossible and their trust in news media in general is so low, young people embrace ideologically heterogeneous media diets. They often use news aggregators or carefully curate their Twitter feeds to give them a more balanced media diet, where they can parse through partisan bias themselves to try and find the truth. More so than any other group we have listened to, young people place the

burden on consumers of news, not the producers, to navigate the contemporary media environment.

Christine, another member of the same College Republicans chapter as Emma, actively curates her media repertoire with a focus on balance. She regularly reads the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the Washington Examiner, and the Chicago Tribune, comparing accounts of the same story across different papers. She also triangulates these accounts with additional web searches from conservative- and liberal- leaning sources. She'll even look to politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, to make sense of particular issues at the local, state, or federal level. This is how she described her view of contemporary media:

I think we've seen, in our time especially, a heightened switch from journalism to news commentary. And what people perceive as journalism or what the same stations that used to offer mostly journalism that had perspective, is now ... instead of journalists giving the news it's a panel of commentators. And they'll discuss what they think is going on rather than just reporting the news. As a consumer, you have to be more aware and pay more attention to who is saying what and why they are saying what. Like what is their goal in getting this out?

There is also another way that some young people attempt to strategically avoid the bias they see in mainstream media – they seek out alternative news sources. Mike, a university student active in College Republicans, explained his preference for alternative media.

If you're actually trying to be unbiased and you slip up, I'm going to be okay with it. [...] but people that purposely write biased things ... I don't think there should be any place for them. I mean there's a place for them, like free speech, whatever, you can say what you want, but to then advertise yourself as an unbiased source and pretend that you're not is ridiculous. That's one thing that I do love about Michael Knowles, Steven Crowder, all those people. Not one of them is going to be like, "Oh yeah we're an unbiased news source." They're like, "No, we're hardcore Republicans, we all voted for Trump, and that's what we support, and that's what we're going to talk about." And they'll tell you that right up front. CNN won't tell you that, Fox doesn't either.

According to this account, Mike despises bias in the media not because it is biased *per se*, but because he sees mainstream news outlets like CNN and Fox as dishonest about their political position. He turns to alternative media figures like Steven Crowder not because he sees alternative media as unbiased, but because he sees alternative media figures as more transparent about their political bias than mainstream media. Mike is not alone. Many of the young Republicans we listened to supplement their more traditional media diet this way.

Again, the vast majority of the people we listened to, regardless of partisanship or age, expressed awareness and frustration with partisanship and bias in contemporary news media. However, the personal experiences that younger and

older people use to make sense of political news vary greatly. While older participants have experience with news media in the era of the Fairness Doctrine, younger participants view bias and partisanship as an immutable fixture in the contemporary news environment. While young people may critique journalists, they place the majority of the burden on consumers to make sense of the contemporary partisan media environment. The vast majority of young people we listened to used ideological omnivorousness and active curation of media flows to balance the conservative and liberal media they were exposed to. Some turn to alternative media sources. This was more common among young people on the right than on the left, as people on the right have an array of high profile alternative news sources they can turn to like Steven Crowder, Ben Shapiro, or Jordan Peterson.

7 Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we aimed to explore the relationship between Trump supporters and news media in a way that highlighted its complexity. We began by exploring the archetypal Trump supporter who relies almost exclusively on Fox News to get political information. While the centrality of Fox News among conservatives and Trump supporters is important, we also challenged the idea that all Trump supporters are isolated in a conservative media bubble. While these *Core Conservatives* are the second most prevalent media repertoire, only 20% of Trump supporters in Wisconsin fall into this category. 45% are *Media Avoiders*, while 18% are *Local/TV News Users*, 9% are *No Blog/Radio Users*, and 8% *Media Omnivores*. These last two categories are made up of Trump supporters who have an ideologically heterogeneous news media diet. This means that 17% of Trump supporters are regularly exposed to left-leaning news media. We explored the reasons these supporters use to justify their exposure to left-leaning news media (from a lack of trust in all partisan media to a desire to expand their political knowledge) and the spectrum of openness with which they incorporate and interpret this left-leaning news content (from treating all news as equal to treating left-leaning news as purely entertainment). Finally, we explored how age and personal experience with the news ecosystem over time shapes perceptions of trust in media, expectations of objectivity in news, and ultimately media repertoires.

We have paid a great deal of attention to a category of Trump supporter that we believe may be particularly consequential – those who are regularly exposed to ideologically diverse news media. While these two media repertoires, even when combined collectively, are the least common repertoires among Trump supporters, the people exhibiting them may be critically important in the 2020 election. These

groups contain the largest percentage of Trump supporters who identify as Democrats out of all of the people with media repertoires that were common among 10% or more of our sample. Presidential elections in the United States are won and lost by increasingly slim margins. Since 1988, the national popular vote margin has been less than 10% for all presidential elections. In Wisconsin, Trump won the popular vote by only 22,748 votes in 2016. This is a razor thin margin of just 0.7%. Taken in this context of extreme electoral competition at the presidential level nationally and in Wisconsin, the 17% of Trump supporters who are regularly exposed to ideologically heterogeneous news media have the potential to be extremely consequential.

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