

Covering #MeToo across the News Spectrum: Political Accusation and Public Events as Drivers of Press Attention

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Abstract

Garnering coverage across the political spectrum is a major challenge for burgeoning social movements. The #MeToo movement stands out due to the volume of attention it generated. Yet, it is unclear how news media across the partisan spectrum covered the movement using different sexual violence language markers, latent topic, and word choices and which accusations and events drove media attention. To examine this, we used Media Cloud to extract 17,877 news articles from nine media outlets across the political spectrum, containing specific n-grams or co-occurrences of (1) “metoo,” (2) “sexual misconduct,” (3) “sexual harassment,” and (4) “sexual assault” from October 2017 through February 2018. The analyses first examined whether language and attention differed across the ideological news ecology and then turned to time-series modeling of these discourses to examine what drove press coverage and structural topic modeling (STM) and term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) analysis to understand latent topics and language usage. Findings reveal that (1) left-leaning media dedicated more relative attention across all topics—#MeToo, sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, and sexual assault—relative to centrist and right-leaning media. Moreover, across the right, left, and centrist media, the language markers “misconduct,” “harassment,” and “assault” decreased over the study period,

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while the mentions of #MeToo movement increased during the same period; (2) stories relating to entertainment and those accusing politicians, especially those belonging to the party in power at the Federal level, seemed to be by far the strongest driver of news media attention; and (3) we further observed partisan differences in topics of news coverage and language usage.

Keywords

social movements, journalism, news events, partisan journalism, United States

Tarana Burke coined the phrase “Me Too” in 2006 to respond to sexual violence directed at women of color, and also to demonstrate empathy, create community, and generate support for “survivors.” By 2017, sparked by a tweet from actor and activist Alyssa Milano reacting to the allegations against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, the “MeToo” hashtag became emblematic of a nascent social movement as millions responded with their own experiences of sexual violence and expressions of support for survivors. The hashtag soon became emblematic of a movement that challenged titans in entertainment, politics, journalism, and the corporate world.

One of the lynchpins to the sustained success of any social movement centers on its ability to generate attention from news media (Seguin 2015) and shape public perceptions of the movement’s legitimacy (AlSayyad and Guvenc 2015). The #MeToo movement generated considerable attention from the press, led by a flood of accusations of misconduct, harassment, and assault, some involving minors, directed at men in positions of power, including prominent figures from the entertainment industry (e.g., James Toback, Kevin Spacey, and Louis C.K.), the news media (e.g., Mark Halperin, Charlie Rose, and Matt Lauer), and politics (e.g., Roy Moore, Al Franken, and Rob Porter). As #MeToo coalesced into calls for workplace safety, institutional accountability, and women’s rights, *Time* magazine named “Silence Breakers” the “Person of the Year,” Hollywood celebrities launched the #TimesUp initiative, and Oprah Winfrey gave a stirring speech at the Golden Globes, with each event providing opportunities to cover #MeToo.

However, research examining coverage of violence against women (Meyers 1996) and women in protest movements (Armstrong and Boyle 2011) has found that news media tend to blame victims and underemphasize female voices, suggesting that journalistic routines often result in distorted coverage around topics like #MeToo. The American news media landscape is also increasingly polarized, partisan (Faris et al. 2017; Levendusky 2013), and focused on celebrity culture (Couldry and Markham 2007). Although news across the ideological spectrum may report on the same events, the type of coverage—the amount of attention and language used—differs to reflect the outlet’s partisanship (e.g., Arceneaux et al. 2013; Puglisi and Snyder 2011) or the value it attaches to the scandalous and sensational (Van den Bulck et al. 2017).

There are a number of questions that merit consideration: (1) Did attention to the #MeToo movement and the language used to frame accusations of sexual violence differ across the ideological spectrum from left-leaning to centrist to right-leaning

outlets? (2) Was the amount of #MeToo coverage and the frame devices used to describe accusations of sexual violence explained by the nature of the accusations, the characteristics of the accused, or the occurrence of supportive events, and how did this vary depending on the partisan slant of the outlets? (3) Beyond these choices of whether and how to frame #MeToo, what broader topic structures and linguistic patterns emerge from #MeToo coverage across the partisan spectrum?

To answer these questions, we used a mixed-method approach that combines (1) frame detection and time-series modeling with (2) structural topic modeling (STM) and term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF). We used Media Cloud to extract news articles from October 2017 through February 2018—from the rise of #MeToo through most of the early defining accusations and events—that contained specific n-grams or word co-occurrences related to #MeToo. This was done for nine media outlets spanning left-leaning to right-leaning partisan media, with the proportion of the content plotted over time to give insights into shifts in news content, followed by time-series analysis using Prais-Winsten estimation to reveal how major accusations and events predicted aspects of coverage. We complement this by analyzing the full text of a random sample of #MeToo stories using STM and TF-IDF keyword analysis to identify major themes that characterize #MeToo coverage across the U.S. media ecology.

Women's Rights and Partisan Media

Differences over women's rights reflect cultural fault lines concerning political ideology, moral foundations, and beliefs about equality and gender roles (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). Haidt (2012) asserts that founding concepts of morality differ between conservatives and liberals, generating different narratives about social issues. The liberal narrative—based on care for victims, liberty from oppression, and fairness through political equality—often rests on challenging authority, power, and tradition. Conservatives may choose to counter narratives of suffering and oppression to attain other moral objectives, such as loyalty, authority, and sanctity. #MeToo, like other women's rights movements, challenges these conservative values.

Furthermore, in the last decades, Democrats and Republicans' views on women's issues have become increasingly polarized, with liberals supporting reproductive rights, educational opportunities, and economic equity for women, and conservatives supporting more traditional gender roles and less state intervention to support women's workplace equity (Sharro et al. 2016). This contrast highlights how partisan reinforcement of structural power differentials and systematic discrimination contribute to gender inequality (Sharro et al. 2016).

Research on media coverage of #MeToo adds to these partisan differences, finding that news media expanded and reinforced #MeToo's visibility, but their coverage was unequal across the ideological spectrum (De Benedictis et al. 2019; Traynor 2019). A study of the U.K. press observed left-leaning media (i.e., *The Guardian* and *The Independent*) endorsing the movement, in contrast with conservative media (i.e., *The Daily Mail*), which were less positive. Similarly, a study about the leaked Access

Hollywood Tape, in which Mr. Trump made lewd remarks and boasted about sexual violence, found that right-leaning media had the highest levels of “rape myth acceptance,” that is, blaming victims for attacks (Blumell and Huemmer 2019).

The narrative variation over different value priorities may be further amplified by the increasingly polarized American political-media system. Benkler et al. (2018) provide evidence of a distinct, rather isolated right-leaning ecosystem dominated by outlets like *Fox News* and *Breitbart*, set apart from the centrist and left-leaning media outlets. Analyzing co-patterns of partisan news sharing on Facebook and Twitter and cross-linking between media sources, this observational network approach has the advantage of not relying on human judgment—and its susceptibility to bias—when categorizing content as left, right, or center (see also Mukerjee et al. 2018; Webster and Taneja 2018 for related approaches).

Based on this approach, political blogs and online-only news organizations, like *HuffPost* and *Salon*, define left-leaning media (outlets scoring lower than -0.55 on their -1.0 to $+1.0$ partisanship scale), which act as an unequal counterweight to the right-leaning media in the *Breitbart-Fox News* nexus (outlets scoring greater than 0.55 as right-leaning on their -1.0 to $+1.0$ partisanship scale). Established news media, such as the *New York Times* and *CNN* (which are center-left) and the *Wall Street Journal* (which is center-right), exist in a broad center (with partisanship scores between -0.55 and 0.55), widely shared, and linked both by partisan audiences and media (Faris et al. 2017). The increased polarization in media, which arguably echoes, and perhaps feeds, larger trends of polarization among elites and publics (Wells et al. 2016) has driven increases in partisan coverage (Trilling et al. 2017). These imperatives should drive left-leaning outlets to cover #MeToo more aggressively (Meyers 1996).

Distorting Women’s Issues and Sexual Violence

Critiquing news coverage of women and women’s issues has been a key aspect of feminist communication research, with the focal concerns being underrepresentation or misrepresentation by the media (e.g., Rakow and Kranich 1991), including framing feminism and feminists as illegitimate, deviant, and unrepresentative of women (van Zoonen and van Zoonen 1994). Since the 1970s, a frame of women as “victims of violence” has been foregrounded, including in domestic abuse and pornography coverage (Gallagher 2013). The most damaging representations imply that, “women who are sexually assaulted are somehow to blame for the violence, sometimes for just being in a space or asserting their sexual agency” (Carter et al. 2013).

The majority of coverage of sexual violence in media is highly event-focused, tending to concentrate on a specific person or incident rather than the larger structural/societal issue behind violence against women (McDonald and Charlesworth 2013). This is consistent with research on news media’s tendency to favor episodic over thematic framing and how this leads audiences to more often attribute responsibility for the problem to the target of the story (Iyengar 1991). Given that coverage of sexual harassment tends to focus on specific events rather than the structural problem, how

media label acts of sexual violence—the discrete frame devices used by journalists to characterize the actions of the accused—will be particularly revealing.

Frames, Cues, and Linguistic Choices

Framing theory finds its foundations in sociological (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Goffman 1974) and psychological traditions (Zaller 1992). Linguistic choice is at the heart of both framing literatures, which have long connected elite cueing of issue labels, journalistic framing of news, and audience understanding of events (Entman 1993). Edelman (1993) was early to recognize the ideological contestation over the expressive and symbolic forms used to define events and issues. From this perspective, elites work to get certain labels adopted by journalists as a way to advance their preferred interpretation to foster a response among the public, or to mute one (e.g., the use of “terrorist” as opposed to “insurgent”). These shifts in language labels can sway the public’s understanding of political issues (Entman 2004). These descriptive “categories” offered by political elites and expressed by journalists are carefully constructed rhetorical choices shaping “enthusiasms, fears and antagonisms” (Edelman 1993).

Bennett et al. (2006) extend this logic, contending that elite success in penetrating news coverage with their preferred labels “will narrow or widen depending on how officials respond to the story” (p. 470). For instance, in the Abu Ghraib scandal, the story quickly took on the narrative preferred by the U.S. government of isolated assaults carried out by just a few troops. Demonstrating how coverage is “constrained by mainstream news organizations’ deference to political power,” mainstream media briefly used the language of “torture,” but it quickly gave way to frames emphasizing “abuse” and “mistreatment” (Bennett et al. 2006: 481).

However, constraint is not deterministic; journalists need not follow elite cues, instead rely on reportable facts or alternative frames. The contestation over issue labels is clearly intended to influence news framing, which concerns the organizing structure guiding the production of the news story as a whole. McLeod and Shah (2015: 4) argue that communication framing exists at different levels of a given message—“from the language cues used to label issues and groups to the news frames used to organize press accounts.” Similarly, Walter and Ophir (2019) argue that “frame devices” (van Gorp 2010) include word choices, metaphors, and arguments that, when appearing repeatedly across time, can indicate framing choices of journalists. From this perspective, the linguistic choices that journalists make function as framing devices within the story. Elites hope to shape the labels and frames that define social issues, as do social movements, which work to advance language that mobilizes the public around injustices and emphasizes the severity of the issue (Benford and Snow 2000).

Framing Sexual Violence

Past studies have uncovered patterns and routines in media coverage of sexual violence (Meyers 1996). Accordingly, we distinguish between three major frame devices

as descriptors employed by media to cover #MeToo accusations: *sexual assault* (a criminal offense that includes unwanted sexual touching and forced sexual contact such as rape), *sexual harassment* (a civil rights offense that includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature in the workplace or learning environment), and *sexual misconduct* (a non-legal term used informally to describe—some would say minimize—a broad range of inappropriate behaviors of a sexual nature). Like the shift from “torture” to “abuse” to “mistreatment” when reporting on Abu Ghraib (Bennett et al. 2006), these terms become naturalized as synonymous when reporting on sexual violence but reflect the contestation over the event’s meaning and consequences. We contend that ideological differences in partisan media should be reflected in the frame devices used in #MeToo coverage.

Stories about *sexual assault* often depict the accused as harmful to society and the act as a serious crime. However, survivors are often portrayed within a virtuous/promiscuous duality, with coverage indirectly reinforcing commonly known “rape myths” in subtle ways (Sacks et al. 2018). The discourse surrounding *sexual harassment* highlights the particular occurrence as an individual situation, often ignoring the broader aspect of systematic gender inequality and workplace discrimination (McDonald and Charlesworth 2013). Furthermore, “classic” cases of quid pro quo sexual harassment are most reported, with the focus on scandalous allegations. Mahood and Littlewood (1997) also argue that such coverage tends to undermine public awareness about the seriousness of harassment by portraying the event as either a “harmless prank” or isolated act. In contrast, *sexual misconduct*, which was a frequent frame device in #MeToo discourse, was often used as a catch-all term indicating inappropriate workplace behavior of a sexual nature without characterizing it as a criminal or civil offense, minimizing the nature of the act.

Whether outlets assigned the correct label to the act of sexual violence based on the nature of the accusation certainly merits attention. While we do not consider all terms used to discuss sexual violence (e.g., “touched,” “groped,” or “raped”), we argue that the usage of different frame devices by journalists when covering similar events pertaining to #MeToo—sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual misconduct—reflect ideological orientations.

The viral movement generated several events, including accusations against prominent celebrities, political figures, and other announcements and speeches that are major drivers of media attention. Understanding what circumstances drove outlets to use more serious language to describe sexual violence provides one layer of insight concerning reporting on #MeToo.

#MeToo Movement and Drivers of Media Attention

Given that prominent politicians and administration officials faced allegations as a part of the #MeToo movement, research on partisan news coverage merits attention as it gives insight about expected partisan reporting patterns surrounding the issue. Political journalists at major news organizations tend to constrain their attention to

“extraordinarily homogeneous kinds of news” (Sparrow 2006: 145) that overemphasizes events and actors within the D.C. beltway and emanate from what has been characterized as “a gendered echo chamber” (Usher et al. 2018: 338). Baumgartner and Chaqués Bonafont (2015) further argue that partisan media defend their chosen politicians by deemphasizing their bad press while highlighting negative stories about opposing political actors. A study of the 2016 U.S. election showed similar trends with the right-leaning media emphasizing Clinton’s emails and the left emphasizing Trump and his misconduct (Jamieson 2020). Hence, minimizing sexual impropriety accusations aimed at partisan allies while amplifying them for partisan opponents would be an expected strategy within a polarized media system. While previous work has examined the influence of partisan viewpoints on political scandals connected to sexual misconduct (e.g. Shah et al. 2002), little work has examined coverage of a social movement fighting sexual violence spanning so many institutions.

The #MeToo movement also contained sensational details involving the entertainment industry and celebrity culture, which has a wide audience appeal (Van den Bulck et al. 2017). The initiating accusation against Harvey Weinstein, the originating tweet, and a number of the major supportive events—namely, Time’s Up and Oprah’s speech—centered on the entertainment industry, allowing the media to feed the audience’s fascination with celebrity culture, especially involving young women and issues of power and vulnerability (Projansky 2014). While celebrity culture and scandals undoubtedly drive media attention (Van den Bulck et al. 2017), it seems particularly likely when an ongoing social movement is centered and launched by accusations surrounding entertainment professionals.

Finally, considering “the well-known problems for civic actors in asserting a steady presence in the mainstream news” (Waisbord 2011: 143), understanding how the #MeToo movement was able to sustain attention becomes more important. News media tend to cover formal, professional groups that mobilize supporters and employ established advocacy tactics (Andrews and Caren 2010). Many events supported #MeToo, from formal initiatives like Time’s Up to the Women’s March, potentially spurring coverage and conversation. Other traditional information subsidies (Gandy 1982) in the form of media announcements (i.e., Time Person of the Year) and major televised speeches (Oprah’s speech when accepting the Cecil B. DeMille Award for Lifetime Achievement) also had the potential to encourage #MeToo coverage. We explore whether these events were able to gain media traction.

Research Hypotheses

The questions of how partisan media covered the rise of the #MeToo movement and the frame devices used to cover sexual violence are important to understand, as is an examination of the triggers of #MeToo coverage and what prompted use of frame devices that emphasize the seriousness of sexual violence among journalists on the right, left, and center. Prior research suggests that right-leaning media outlets will deemphasize the #MeToo movement in line with the values and ideology of conservatism regarding sex roles and will make frame devices when discussing #MeToo

accusations that reflect this ideology. The opposite will be true of progressive media outlets, who will emphasize the issue and elevate the seriousness of language used (Blumell and Huemmer 2019; De Benedictis et al. 2019).

But, when it comes to the triggers of these discourses, we certainly expect journalists and editors on the right, left, and center to respond to the seriousness of the accusations, especially those that involve claims of sexual assault or involve a victim that is a minor. These two categories of behavior are criminal acts and warrant more attention and serious language. Once this is accounted for, we expect these same media outlets to focus their attention on accusations against politicians, due to the routines of beltway journalism (Sparrow 2006), especially given the gendered nature of the story (Usher et al. 2018). We also expect partisan outlets to paint political opponents in a harsher light (Baumgartner and Chaqués Bonafont 2015).

We also expect accusations within the entertainment industry to draw outsized attention as a result of news imperatives to cover celebrity culture, especially when the focus of the story is salacious or scandalous (Van den Bulck et al. 2017). Staged media events and other rallying calls intended to support the movement should also be the basis for journalistic attention, especially if they center on celebrity culture (Couldry and Markham 2007).

More generally, we expect differences in topical emphasis concerning #MeToo coverage across the partisan spectrum beyond these differences, spurred by particular events or accusations. The partisan orientation of outlets should guide their emphasis on specific themes in ways that support their ideological orientation, with left-leaning media emphasizing the severity and scope of sexual violence more than right-leaning.

These issues lead to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): #MeToo will receive differential attention across partisan media, with ideologically liberal outlets (a) devoting a higher proportion of their overtime coverage to the topic and (b) using frame devices that emphasize the seriousness of sexual violence at a higher proportion in their overtime coverage.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): All other things being equal, over time changes in coverage of #MeToo and frame devices concerning sexual violence will be triggered by (a) accusations against politicians, with partisan media increasing its intensity when focusing on accusations against political opponents, and (b) accusations and events centering on the entertainment industry.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Beyond temporal patterns, partisan media will be more likely to focus on topics that boost their ideological positions, with left-leaning media more likely to feature language patterns that heighten the severity of the problem and take the perspective of survivors, and right-leaning media more likely to de-emphasize the severity of #MeToo through softened language.

Method

This study uses a mixed-method approach to examine theoretically driven concepts as well as data-driven unsupervised findings. We employed Prais-Winsten estimation,

STM, and TF-IDF to address the research hypotheses. We relied on three data sets spanning October 1, 2017, through February 28, 2018: (1) a timeline of major #MeToo accusations and events, (2) a time-series of daily article counts using #MeToo-related language drawn from nine news outlets, and (3) the full text of a random sample of news articles focusing on #MeToo.

Event Timeline Data Set

Major accusations and supportive events were included in the timeline if they (1) received attention in at least two of four major news outlets (*CNN*, *Fox News*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*) collected from the Media Cloud database and/or (2) were referenced in the multiple #MeToo movement timelines produced by *Vox*,¹ *The Chicago Tribune*,² *The Sydney Morning Herald*,³ and *Refinery29*.⁴ Although there were many other accusation and events, these limiting criteria assured the focus of the analysis was on the most high-profile moments.

Through this process, we identified twenty-one major events, and these fell into two categories. First, there were seventeen *major accusations*, starting from Harvey Weinstein on October 5, 2017, to Rob Porter on February 6, 2018. Second, there were four focal events that, in different ways, engaged the movement and were considered *supportive events* (i.e., *Time* magazine's naming of "Silence Breakers" as Person of the Year, Launch of *Time's Up*, Oprah Winfrey's speech, and 2018 Women's March). These twenty-one major events are detailed in the Supplementary Information File, Table A1.

Accusations. A team of three researchers coded key characteristics of all the major accusations to construct "ground truth" event features to complete agreement. The researchers used online news sources and judicial proceedings available online (see Suk et al. 2019 for a similar event data set methodology). These included features of the accusation and accused.

Minor victim. Accusations involving a minor or minors as victims, as determined by the law of the jurisdiction in question, were coded as 1, or not, coded as 0.

Sexual assault. Accusations including claims of sexual assault were coded as 1, in contrast with accusations involving sexual harassment or misconduct, which were coded as 0.

Occupation of the accused. The accused individuals were categorized into different occupational categories including "entertainment" (professionals in the field of film, television, comedy, sports, and music), "politics" (national political candidates, officeholders, and officials), "journalism" (professionals in the field of print and broadcast journalism), and "other" (professionals in the field of fashion, technology, hospitality, corporate world, judiciary, or the academy, etc.). The classification of the seventeen major accusations can be found in the Supplementary Information File.

As partisan media differ in the coverage of political actors by their ideological orientation (Baumgartner and Chaqués Bonafont 2015), politicians were subcategorized as Democrat or Republican. Entertainment industry accusations were also merged for testing. Thus, we created three dummy variables: *Entertainment Accused*, *Democrat Accused*, and *Republican Accused*, with accusations directed at individuals in each category coded as 1.

Supportive events. We created independent dummy variables for each major event supporting the movement for the date it occurred. This included *Time* magazine's naming of "The Silence Breakers" as Person of the Year, the launch of *Time's Up*, the Golden Globe Awards featuring the speech by Oprah Winfrey, and the 2018 Women's March.

National News Coverage Data Set

Our news coverage data set consisted of daily counts of articles appearing across nine U.S. news outlets between October 1, 2017, and February 28, 2018, as well as a sub-sample of the full text of articles focusing on #MeToo. We used the Media Cloud (<https://mediacloud.org/>) archive to extract daily counts of articles that mentioned specific n-grams or contained specific patterns of word co-occurrence: (1) (metoo OR "me too movement") AND (metoo OR "me too movement"), (2) "sexual misconduct," (3) "sexual harassment" OR "sexually harassed" OR "sexually harassing," and (4) "sexual assault" OR "sexually assaulted" OR "sexually assaulting."

The article counts were retrieved from nine news sources representing a spectrum of widely consumed news sources. We defined the partisan slant of outlets according to the report by Faris et al. (2017), which scored news sources on a -1.0 to $+1.0$ partisanship scale derived using the sharing patterns of Twitter users who retweeted Trump or Clinton during the 2016 U.S. election (see also Bakshy et al. 2015). We then classified outlets scoring less than -0.55 in partisanship as left-leaning, those scoring between -0.55 and 0.55 as centrist, and those greater than 0.55 as right-leaning. This approach yielded 5,870 articles from left-leaning, 8,400 articles from centrist, and 4,780 articles from right-leaning media (see the Supplementary Information File, Table A2 for details).

Next, we drew the full text of a random 15 percent sample of news articles published by the nine U.S. news outlets that mentioned "metoo" OR "me too movement" twice. We used *rvest* package in R to scrape the original article data, deleted any foreign-language articles (French from *Huffington Post*, and Spanish from the *New York Times* and *CNN*), and removed news briefings, resulting in our final full-text sample consisting of 2,558 articles: 970 from the left-leaning, 897 from the centrist, and 691 from the right-leaning sources. Our content validation process (intercoder percentage agreement = 96.7 percent, Krippendorff's alpha = .93) confirmed that only about 10 percent of the articles used the keyword "metoo" in passing (see the Supplementary Information File, Figure A1 for details).

Analytic Strategy

To test H1(a) and H1(b), we first plotted the trends in attention to #MeToo and the prominence of different frame devices of sexual violence in news reporting across the political spectrum. To account for the “news hole” of each outlet, we relied on Media Cloud information of daily story counts published by each outlet on each date. By treating this as the denominator in our calculations of proportion of overtime coverage, we were able to estimate the amount of coverage dedicated to #MeToo or specific frame devices relative to the output of each outlet.

To test H2(a) and H2(b), we used Prais-Winsten estimation of our event timeline against these time trends of news attention and language use. Specifically, we used the daily article counts as the dependent variable, and the event features as the independent variable, while controlling for the “news hole” of each outlet. After accounting for the autocorrelation and weekly “seasonality” in the data (for more information, see the Supplementary Information File, Figure A1), we estimated the effects of events on the volume of discourse on a particular day. More specifically, we used Prais-Winsten models for our regressions, which involves fitting an AR(1) model along with a seven-day seasonal component to the time-series of the volume of discourse, followed by running simultaneous regressions on the residuals obtained from the time-series model fit (for additional details on this approach, see Suk et al. 2019; Wells et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2019).

To address H3, we conducted STM (Roberts et al. 2014) and calculated TF-IDF scores, allowing us to explore topics and themes used in the news coverage by left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning media. STM is a widely used computational content-analysis technique (Roberts et al. 2014) that relies on a “bag-of-words,” unsupervised approach to infer the latent topical structure based on word co-occurrence in textual data. Words that tend to co-occur in the same documents share thematic meaning. At the core of topic modeling is a hypothetical generative statistical process that “mimics” the writing process, with the assumption that documents are produced from latent topical structure and each topic is characterized by a probability distribution over a corpus of words (Blei et al. 2003).

After standard data-cleaning processes, a part-of-speech (POS) tagging technique was applied, identifying and retaining all of the words that are nouns and verbs to improve topic coherence, reduce model training time, and offer the advantage of efficiently generating more coherent and meaningful document clusters (Martin and Johnson 2015). Finally, after modeling, we compared models with a broad range of k (2–100) to detect the optimal number of topics. A combination of quantitative statistics and qualitative assessment resulted in a decision of 16 topic structures (see the Supplementary Information File, Figure A1 for details on model evaluation criteria).

To further reveal how topics are connected into larger themes, or frame packages, we employ community detection techniques to identify clusters of topics based on similarity measure. This approach, as outlined in Walter and Ophir (2019), maps topics into a network structure based on their occurrence within documents. Each topic is

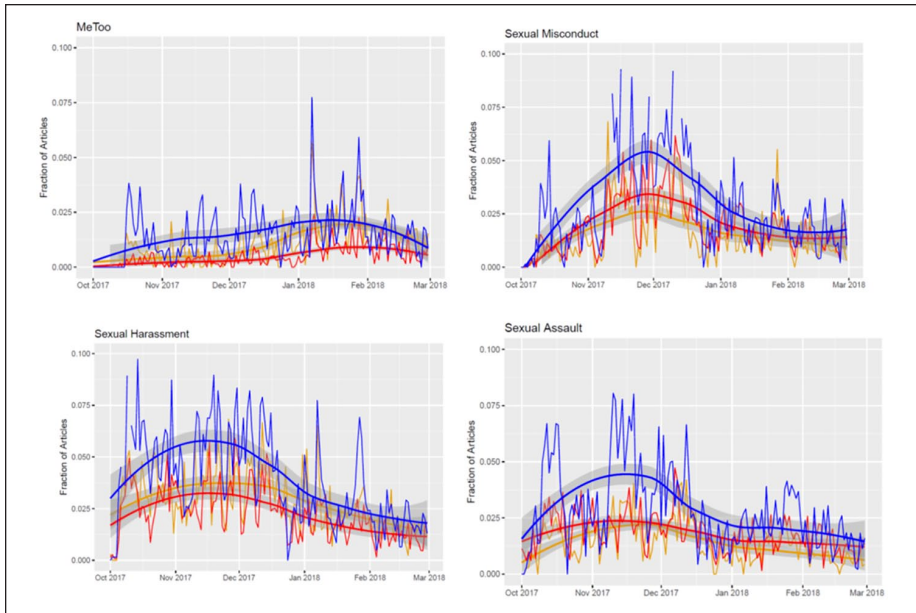


Figure 1. Proportion of daily articles containing #MeToo linguistic choices (smoothed and unsmoothed) for left-leaning (blue), centrist (yellow), and right-leaning (red) media.

graphically represented as a node, with the relationship between them (i.e. their occurrence within documents) as edges (Baden 2018). By inductively clustering topics identified in STM using community detection, we aim to further reveal the inter-topic connections and topic-communities structure, moving from specific topics as recurring linguistic elements to broader themes that reflect constellations of topics within a semantic network structure.

Finally, we calculated the TF-IDF scores and compared them across news outlets. Unlike simple word frequency calculations, TF-IDF enabled us to retain important words that uniquely contribute to a specific corpus, identifying distinct language use patterns in #MeToo coverage across different outlets.

Results

Proportional Trend Analysis

To address H1(a) and H1(b), Figure 1 plots the relative attention to #MeToo and the presence of n-grams denoting frame devices concerning sexual violence overtime, along with their smoothed versions, across the media spectrum, showing the fraction of stories that contained a particular frame device out of all the stories published on each day. The first panel reveals that the left-leaning media dedicated more of its content to #MeToo ($n = 1,080$ stories) than centrist ($n = 1,029$ stories) or

right-leaning media ($n = 760$ stories), with centrist media closing the gap after the first three months (also see the Supplementary Information File, Table A2). The same pattern is true, though more amplified, for the use of the frame devices of “assault,” “harassment,” and “misconduct.” All three are given more “share-of-voice” in left-leaning media outlets than centrist or right-leaning outlets. Moreover, across the right, left, and centrist media, these frame devices decreased over time, while mentions of the #MeToo movement increased over time. These patterns provide support for H1(a) and H1(b), with left-leaning media dedicating more attention and seriousness to #MeToo.

Time-Series Analysis

Table 1 reveals that coverage of the #MeToo movement across media is driven more by supportive events than accusations. Even serious accusations, whether rising to sexual assault or involving minors, did not stoke more coverage across these outlets. However, the left-leaning coverage of #MeToo rose when a Republican, but not when a Democrat, was accused. The same was not true for centrist or right-leaning media, which did not dedicate additional attention to #MeToo when politicians were accused. This offers weak support for H2(a).

In contrast, the Golden Globes and Oprah Winfrey’s speech were drivers of coverage across left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning media. The *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year” sparked coverage in left-leaning media, but not centrist or right-leaning media. Notably, across all models of media coverage, the Women’s March and the Time’s Up initiative failed to generate additional #MeToo coverage, and the same can be said of accusations centering on the entertainment industry, suggesting little support for H2(b), besides the Golden Globes.

Table 2 reveals how use of both *sexual assault* and *sexual harassment* as a descriptor was only significant within left-leaning media when spurred by coverage of accusations against Republican politicians. Finally, in the case of *sexual misconduct*, the coefficients for all media were significant. In sum, left-leaning media used more elevated sexual violence language when focusing on accusations against Republican political opponents, providing some additional support for H2(a). In fact, while the right-leaning media favored the milder term of sexual misconduct, their use of it was nonetheless spurred by accusations against Republicans, possibly countering the more serious framing of the accusation by left-leaning outlets.

Structural Topic Modeling

STM revealed sixteen topics and themes used in #MeToo news coverage by partisan media (Figure 2). The generated topics were labeled based on three types of information: each topic’s top words (highest probability to be included in the topic), top FREX words (top exclusive words for each topic), and representative texts (articles with the highest theta scores) (Roberts et al. 2014). We conducted manual validation of a random sample for each topic (see the Supplementary Information File, Table A3).

Table 1. Concurrent (No Lag) Regression Models after Prais-Winsten Estimation Predicting Articles Mentioning #MeToo Twice across Three Media Categories Controlling for Total Article Volume.

	#MeToo		
	Left	Center	Right
Nature of accusation			
Minor victim	-0.23 (2.82)	3.54 (3.38)	2.83 (2.81)
Sexual assault	-2.03 2.38	1.19 (2.86)	-2.29 (2.37)
Characteristics of the accused			
Entertainment accused	-1.96 (1.8941)	-3.90 (2.278)	-0.97 (2.28)
Democrat accused	6.67 (4.12)	-2.23 (4.95)	-0.41 (4.96)
Republican accused	5.47* (2.59)	0.37 (3.12)	0.37 (3.12)
Supportive events			
Golden Globes	21.09*** (4.13)	17.54*** (4.9710)	11.31** (4.12)
Time Magazine	21.29*** (4.16)	6.92 (4.9674)	2.73 (4.14)
Time's Up	0.66 4.15	0.10 (4.9807)	1.61 (4.13)
Women's March	2.22 (4.14)	7.07 (4.9722)	-1.71 (4.11)
Total volume of articles	0.005** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.0016)	0.004*** (0.001)
Constant	-2.78** (0.97)	-4.76*** (1.12)	-3.64** (1.22)
Adjusted R ²	.3113	.1704	.0708

Note. Cells report unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The topics are further clustered into four broader themes based on their occurrence within documents using *spinglass community detection algorithm* in network analysis (see Walter and Ophir 2019 for details) (Figure 3). The first media frame package centers on the implications of #MeToo for the celebrity culture and fashion world, including supportive events (Golden Globe: 7.19 percent; Film/Oscar: 4.34 percent; Music/Grammys: 3.52 percent), gender issues in the arts (Art/Fashion/Culture: 4.69 percent), as well as high-profile accusations against Hollywood big names (Entertainment accusations: 9.77 percent). The second media frame package shares a thematic focus on political figures and entities such as Trump/White House (11.92 percent), Legislators (7.08 percent), and Bill Clinton (0.12 percent). The third media

Table 2. Concurrent (No Lag) Regression Models after Prais-Winsten Estimation Predicting Articles Mentioning #MeToo Twice across Three Media Categories Controlling for Total Article Volume.

	Sexual Misconduct			Sexual Harassment			Sexual Assault		
	Left	Center	Right	Left	Center	Right	Left	Center	Right
Nature of accusation									
Minor victim	3.41 (7.61)	2.26 (4.66)	7.88 (6.30)	-13.48 (15.86)	4.90 (12.13)	4.27 (14.23)	-5.19 (5.27)	1.33 (3.50)	6.78 (5.05)
Sexual assault	-10.60 (6.43)	-1.43 (3.94)	-9.04 (5.33)	-15.65 (13.39)	-6.996 (10.26)	-14.80 (12.04)	-7.34 (4.45)	-2.90 (2.96)	-2.24 (4.28)
Characteristics of accused									
Entertainment accused	0.91 (5.12)	-1.14 (3.14)	-0.22 (4.26)	3.14 (10.66)	-0.08 (8.18)	9.74 (9.62)	4.20 (3.54)	-0.33 (2.36)	3.13 (3.42)
Democrat accused	6.50 (11.14)	-8.34 (6.84)	14.19 (9.24)	8.79 (23.21)	-25.20 (17.80)	38.36 (20.86)	8.33 (7.7)	-0.90 (5.14)	11.03 (7.41)
Republican accused	26.54*** (6.99)	15.80*** (4.31)	16.83** (5.81)	51.72*** (14.57)	20.69 (11.21)	18.67 (13.11)	13.49** (4.84)	3.61 (3.24)	-0.62 (4.66)
Supportive events									
Golden Globes	13.80 (11.16)	6.53 (6.85)	2.34 (9.26)	39.60 (23.26)	24.92 (17.84)	13.63 (20.90)	5.20 (7.73)	2.15 (5.15)	-2.25 (7.42)
Time Magazine	-2.79 (11.24)	7.31 (6.85)	6.52 (9.29)	12.08 (23.423)	5.3759 (17.83)	22.18 (20.98)	7.67 (7.78)	6.52 (5.15)	3.52 (7.45)
Time's Up	7.08 (11.22)	2.29 (6.87)	7.74 (9.284)	19.83 (23.39)	5.79 (17.88)	24.77 (20.96)	3.62 (7.77)	0.0966 (5.16)	3.70 (7.45)
Women's March	-4.75 (11.18)	5.996 (6.86)	-6.04 (9.24)	2.24 (23.296)	2.91 (17.85)	-5.31 (20.86)	3.36 (7.74)	-2.86 (5.16)	2.26 (7.41)
Total volume of articles	0.017*** (0.005)	0.010*** (0.002)	0.009** (0.003)	0.047*** (0.01)	0.030*** (0.006)	0.033*** (0.006)	0.017*** (0.003)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.017*** (0.002)
Constant	-8.39** (2.62)	-6.48*** (1.55)	-8.16** (2.74)	-23.44*** (5.47)	-19.813591*** (4.03)	-31.70*** (6.19)	-8.549*** (1.82)	-5.07*** (1.16)	-16.93*** (2.20)
Adjusted R ²	.1221	.1832	.09906	.1732	.1572	.1669	.1854	.1223	.3057

Note. Cells report unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parenthesis.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

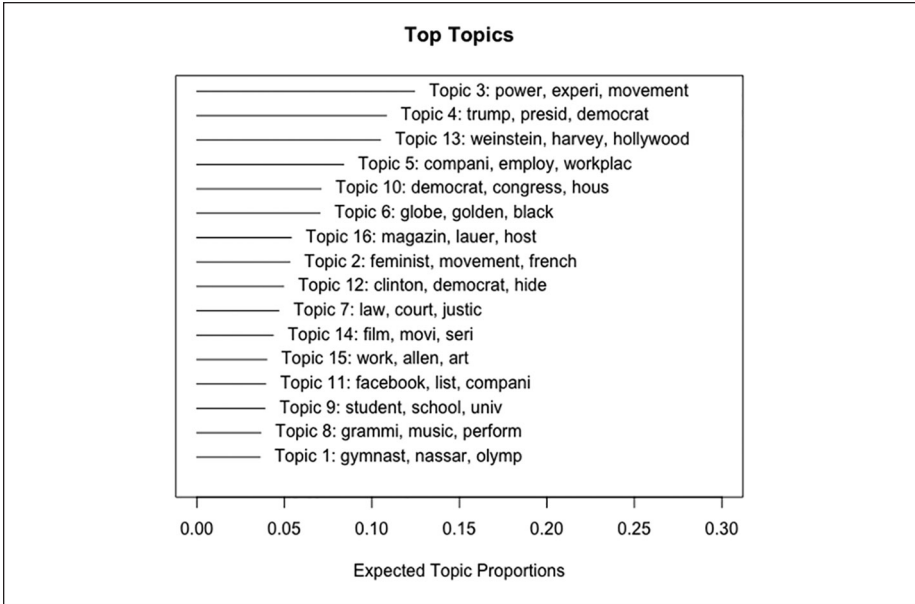


Figure 2. Graphical display of estimated topic proportions.

frame package focused on discourses and contexts of the movement, as well as structural and institutional issues intersecting with it, including MeToo support (4.50 percent), MeToo movement (12.5 percent), Workplace (7.82 percent), Court/Law (4.42 percent), Academia (3.79 percent), Networked Activism (3.67 percent), and Press/Newsroom (5.36 percent). The final cluster focused on a single topic which included sports-related accusations and debates, as reflected in stories about Larry Nassar and Olympics (3.67 percent). These clusters revealed, through community detection share commonality with frame “packages”, the constant use of language elements across texts and time (Entman et al. 2009).

The Effect of Media Slant on Topical Prevalence

H3 predicted how topical prevalence concerning #MeToo would differ across news outlets based on their partisan slants. Table 3 illustrates the results of regression analysis predicting topical prevalence by media slant and Figure 4 visually contrasts topical prevalence. The results show that centrist media tend to cover topics focusing on sexual violence in the workplace (Topic 5), and its impact across various institutions such as academia (Topic 9) and newsrooms (Topic 16). In contrast, partisan media were more restricted in their coverage of accusations, paying particular attention to accusations related to politics as well as the entertainment industry. For example, right-leaning and left-leaning media were both significantly more likely to report on accusations against legislators (Topic 10) and Hollywood figures (Topic 13), compared with the

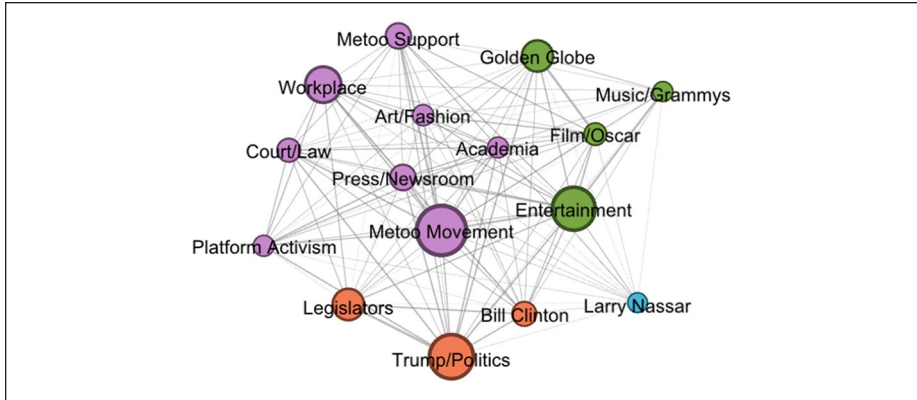


Figure 3. Graphical display of semantic topic networks.

Note. The topic network draws from news coverage from nine U.S. news outlets spanning across political spectrum and is weighed, fully connected, and undirected; nodes represent topics, with the size representing each topic's prevalence; edges represent co-occurrence of topics within documents, with the strength of association between topics calculated using cosine-similarity over the theta matrix columns; colors represent community membership using Spinglass community detection algorithm.

centrist media. Supporting this contrast, centrist media were more likely to cover the MeToo movement beyond accusation stories, reporting on the movement itself (Topic 3), workplace inequities in compensation and career opportunities (Topic 5), and issues of platform activism and anonymous outing (Topic 11).

The focus on the entertainment industry and certain political topics is particularly notable within right-leaning media, as indicated by greater coverage of Music/Grammys (Topic 8), Entertainment (Topic 13), and Bill Clinton (Topic 12). Right-leaning media were significantly more likely to publish stories about accusations against Bill Clinton, compared with the left-leaning and centrist media, suggesting selective attention to ideological opponents. These prevalence analyses consistently reveal that centrist media are more likely to employ structure- and institution-based frame package (Cluster 3), whereas partisan media give particular focus to politics- and entertainment-related aspects of the movement (Clusters 1 and 2). This finding, along with the differential coverage of political accusations across partisan media, supports H3.

To verify insights obtained from computational approaches and deepen our understanding of the coverage patterns, we conducted a follow-up qualitative observation of a random sample of articles for each topic. Results further revealed nuanced differences in how each topic was covered across media slants. For example, when covering Trump/Politics stories (Topic 4), the left and center reprimanded Trump for his inappropriate behavior and support of staffers like Rob Porter, yet, the right defended the President and shifted focus to the Clintons. Likewise, in reporting accusations against legislators (Topic 10), while the left considered the larger picture and patterns of accusations, the right focused more on the political leaning of the accused. Meanwhile,

Table 3. The Effect of Media Slant on Topical Prevalence.

	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4
(Right = 0)	Larry Nassar	MeToo support	MeToo movement	Trump/Politics
Left	-.00	.01	.13***	.01
Centrist	-.02	.01	.06***	.01
	Topic 5	Topic 6	Topic 7	Topic 8
(Right = 0)	Workplace	Golden Globe	Court/Law	Music/Grammys
Left	.02	.02 [†]	-.01	-.03**
Centrist	.08***	-.01	-.01	-.02 [†]
	Topic 9	Topic 10	Topic 11	Topic 12
(Right = 0)	Academia	Accusation against Legislator	Platform Activism	Bill Clinton
Left	-.00	.01	.01	-.02***
Centrist	.02**	-.03**	.04***	-.02***
	Topic 13	Topic 14	Topic 15	Topic 16
(Right = 0)	Entertainment	Film/Oscar	Art/Fashion	Press/Newsroom
Left	-.04***	-.00	.01	.01
Centrist	-.07***	.00	.03***	.03***

Note. The numbers in this table are estimated regression coefficients of media slants predicting topical prevalence.

[†] $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

centrist media reported more on policy changes. These differences even extended to who was featured within these stories. For example, when covering Bill Clinton, right-leaning media highlighted Juanita Broaddrick and her rape accusation.

Language Patterns across Media Slants

Finally, we conducted a series of keyword analysis using TF-IDF scores to detect unique differences in language use across partisan media to further test H3. We examined the top fifty most important tokens with the highest TF-IDF scores, removing overlapping words. This helped focus our analysis on words that are important to one document but not the other (see Table 4).

Our TF-IDF results show that in their #MeToo coverage, left-leaning media tended to use words related to personal narratives (“experience”), sharing of sexual violence (“share,” “violence”), and victim support (“believe,” “victim,” “survivor,” “feel”), along with calls to change the culture and protect victims (“change,” “culture,” “protect,” “forward,” “campaign”), especially when compared with the right-leaning media. The centrist media also show similar patterns of emphasizing personal experiences (“experience,” “victim,” “see,” “feel”), and additionally, greater coverage of

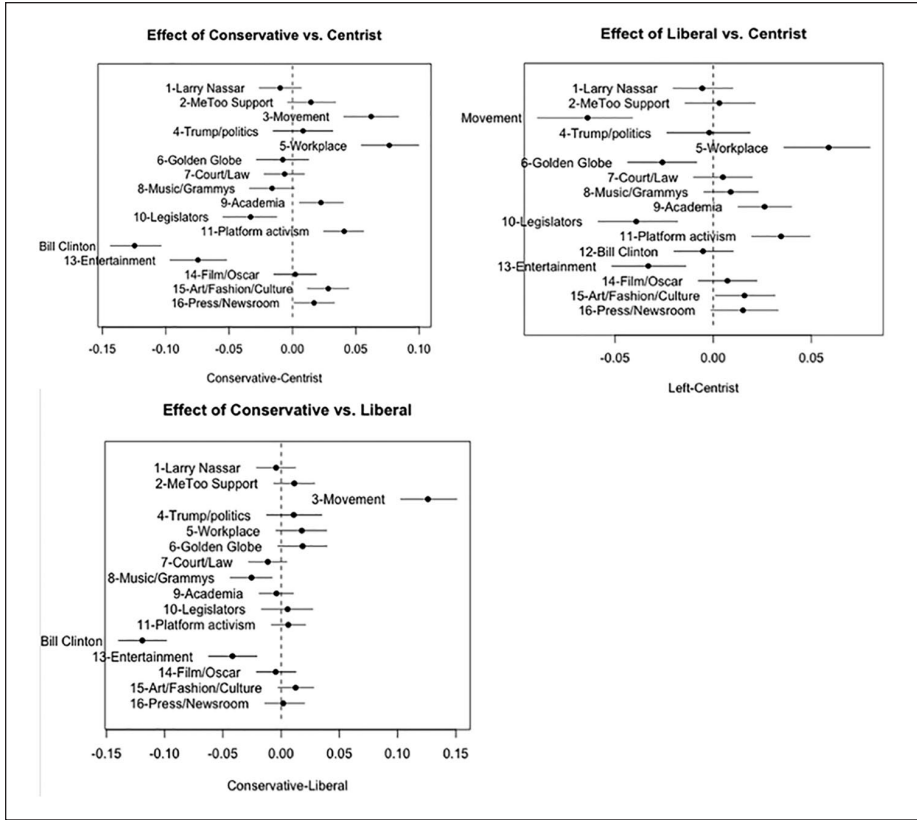


Figure 4. Graphical display of topical prevalence contrast across media slants. Note. The whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals.

gender equality in workplace and industry (“company,” “industry,” “gender,” “culture”) and demand for action and change (“need,” “change”), compared with the right-leaning media.

On the contrary, the right-leaning media’s #MeToo coverage tended to include more terms related to politics (“democrat,” “Clinton,” republican,” “senate”) and entertainment and awards seasons (“hollywood,” “film,” “grammys,” “award,” “actor,” “director,” “actress,” “Harvey”) compared with the left-leaning and centrist media, suggesting the right-leaning media’s greater topical emphasis on personal failings of politicians and Hollywood stars. Notably, our analysis shows nuanced differences between the left- and right-leaning media when referencing accusations, such that the left emphasized more words like “rape” which often indicates elevated seriousness of the cases, while the right showed greater use of softened language or lighter terms such as “claim” and “misconduct.” Indeed, “claim” ($M = 1.01$) and “misconduct” ($M = 1.10$) occurred in right-leaning media twice as often as on the left

Table 4. Keyword Contrast across Media Slants.

Left Media (vs. Right)	Left Media (vs. Centrist)	Right Media (vs. Left)	Right Media (vs. Centrist)	Centrist (vs. Left)	Centrist (vs. Right)
feel	senate	democrat	hollywood	company	see
power	rape	clinton	claim	clinton	feel
experience	violence	hollywood	clinton	young	company
violence	experience	film	actress	social	power
victim	share	issue	senate	child	change
share	survivor	harvey	misconduct	gender	gender
culture	forward	actress	star	art	need
need	believe	star	grammys	school	speak
change	investigate	grammys	republican	march	culture
percent	protect	award	actor	happen	young
survivor		senate	director		experience
rape		claim	impeach		industry
campaign		investigate	globe		child
girl		misconduct	producer		victim
believe		win	republican		social
forward		republican	vote		campaign
protect		stage			

Note. Results are based on term frequency-inverse document frequency pairwise comparison. Words in the table are unique words within the topic fifty tokens in both corpora.

($M = 0.38, t = 2.81, p < .01$; $M = 0.55, t = 3.50, p < .001$). Figure 5 shows the relative importance of words that differ significantly in news coverage from the left and right, providing additional support for H3.

Discussion

This paper seeks to answer three primary questions: (1) Did attention to the #MeToo movement and the language used to frame accusations of sexual violence differ across the ideological spectrum from left-leaning to centrist to right-leaning outlets? (2) Was the amount of #MeToo coverage and the language used to describe accusations of sexual violence explained by the nature of the accusations, the characteristics of the accused, or the occurrence of supportive events, and how did this vary depending on the partisan slant of the outlets? (3) Beyond these choices of whether to cover and how to frame #MeToo, what broader topic structures and linguistic patterns emerge from #MeToo coverage across the partisan spectrum?

We found that left-leaning media dedicated more relative attention across all topics—#MeToo, sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, and sexual assault—relative to centrist and right-leaning media. Moreover, across the right, left, and centrist media, the frame devices “misconduct,” “harassment,” and “assault” decreased over the study period, while the mentions of the #MeToo movement increased during the same time. The more extensive coverage by the left-leaning media could be explained by a

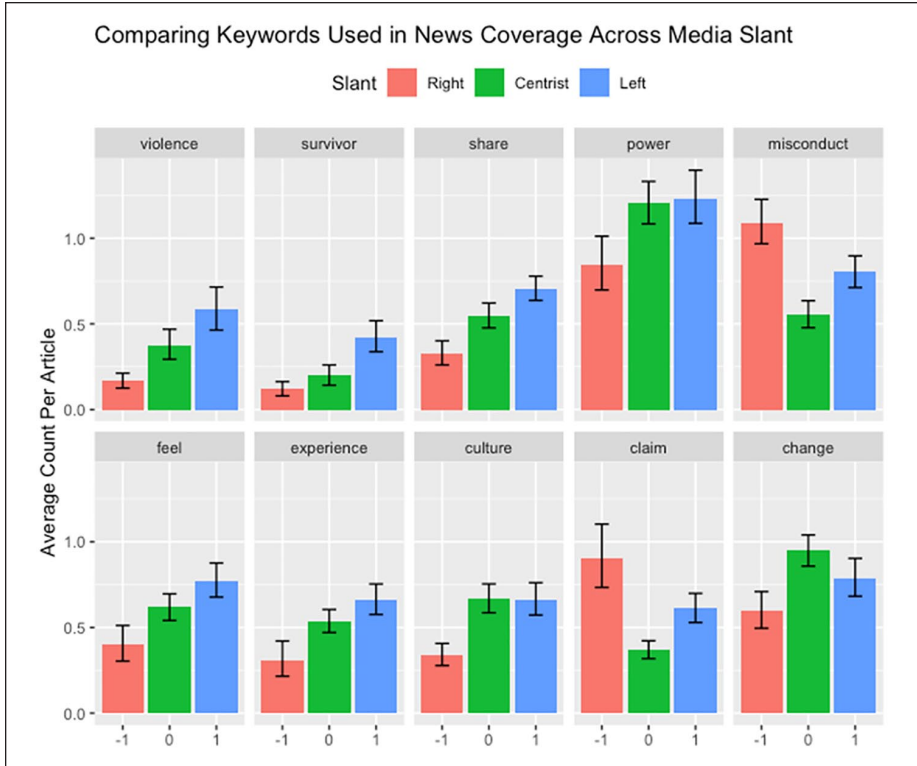


Figure 5. Comparing keywords used in news coverage across media slant. Note. The whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals of sample means calculated based on 5,000 bootstrapping.

willingness to cover the issue in moral terms, while the softer language of right-leaning media tries to de-emphasize the movement and the accusations. Centrist media may tend to avoid more moral frame devices because it clashes with the journalists’ idea of “neutrality,” which should be explored further (Neuman et al. 1992).

Our time-series modeling revealed that stories relating to entertainment events and those accusing politicians, especially those belonging to the party in power at the Federal level, seemed to be the strongest driver of news media attention. After accounting for the volume of coverage in news publications, we see the proportion of left-leaning coverage using elevated sexual violence language rising in the wake of accusations against Republican politicians. This framing of language around accusations reveals underlying partisan priorities. It must be noted that President Trump was one of the Republican politicians accused in the #MeToo movement and garnered ample media coverage, which might help explain the use of misconduct language across the political spectrum when referring to accusations against GOP figures. It is also possible that this pattern reflects an effort by right-leaning media outlets to

reframe accusations against Trump by softening the language, or act as a response to the more elevated language in left-leaning outlets. These patterns of reporting substantiate the idea that the media coverage was fixated with the D.C. beltway, that is, the matters that deal with government officials and elites around them (Sparrow 2006). In this case, accusations involved not only prominent politicians but also the president, usually regarded as the major agenda setter. Accusations being made in other occupational fields, and variations among the nature of the accusations, were not a statistically significant driver of media coverage. When it came to discussions of the #MeToo movement itself, certain key events, such as Oprah Winfrey's speech at the Golden Globes, and the *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year," did drive coverage.

Our STM results suggest that coverage was unequal across partisan media in terms of topical prevalence and linguistic features. Importantly, right-leaning media yielded more topics and language related to specific individuals from politics and entertainment, consistent with media's tendency to overemphasize celebrity culture and the Beltway (Coudry and Markham 2007; Sparrow 2006). STM revealed that both right- and left-leaning media emphasized their partisan view by focusing on accusations from "the other side of the aisle."

Left-leaning media reported more about the movement itself and used language that reflected the stories of victims, focusing on personal experiences and acknowledging their claims through words such as "believe," "share," and "feel," whereas right-leaning outlets tended to favor the perspective of the accused and dilute the power of accusations through words such as "claim" and "misconduct." These results were consistent with liberal value priorities of caring for the harmed and liberating the oppressed versus conservatives prioritizing the values of authority, fairness, and sanctity (Haidt 2012), as evidenced by past literature on gender conventions and reporting norms in the right-leaning media (Blumell and Huemmer 2019; De Benedictis et al. 2019; Schreiber 2010; Traynor 2019).

Overall, our results demonstrate that word choice was an important framing device for coverage of #MeToo across the partisan spectrum, likely shaping audience perceptions and interpretations (McLeod and Shah 2015). Even when the same topics were covered, left- and right-leaning outlets approached coverage differently. When focusing on the movement itself, outlets on the left and center encouraged acknowledgment and empathy with victims, while the right coverage advocated cautiousness and skepticism. These frame devices, and the shifting of cues that emphasize or de-emphasize the seriousness of allegations, reveal the underlying value priorities of the political left and right as reflected in their media output.

This work also shows how the #MeToo movement was able to gain traction across a range of news media outlets. The online expression and activism offered empathy, built solidarity, and collectively organized against sexual violence across domains (Suk et al. 2019). However, unlike the sharing of personal stories and expressions of support that characterized much of the social media posts employing #MeToo, the drivers of the news coverage were accused politicians and outspoken celebrities. This disjuncture talks about a gap between the coverage of prominent news media and the

interests of the public (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013) that demands further attention, because the national conversation taking place online bore little resemblance to the one in prominent news media.

Further analysis on the interaction between the news media and social media can help us understand how the partisan coverage affects online social movements and vice versa. Our finding is extremely important, as social movements depend on mass media to inform the public about their messages and demands. By using a triangulation of methods, we see the difference in temporal patterns, topic, and word usage and the drivers of discourse among media with different ideological stances, showing us that the same #MeToo movement does not generate the same news throughout the vast U.S. media ecology. Our analysis shows that news coverage is motivated by the driving events and partisan nature of the media covering the story.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

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