Voiceover:

From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Policy 360.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Anna Gassman-Pines. I'm going to read you something. This is the start of an article posted on Neiman Lab's website. They are a Harvard publication focused on the future of journalism. “In 2025, trust in journalism reached a record low. According to Gallup, only 8% of Republicans expressed trust in the news media, compared with 51% of Democrats.”

The article goes on to say that “one of the key drivers of this lopsided decline in trust in journalism may be the extent to which news outlets spend time bashing other news outlets or bashing the news media in general.”

That article was written by my guest today. Phil Napoli is a professor at Duke where he leads the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy. And Adam Meskouri is a public policy grad student, and they worked on this research with three other students.

So that's a shocking number. Only 8% of Republicans express trust in the news media. Wow, okay. And you say part of this might be related to how much time some news outlets spend bashing each other. Adam, what do you mean by bashing each other?

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. So when we refer to bashing, one might think of just generally negative statements made by one network that are intended to target another network. So every time that Fox News says that you shouldn't trust the mainstream media because they're lying to you, or every time that CNN says that Fox News is peddling nonsense, that would be an example of media bashing, just really anything intended to kind of criticize, perhaps not so constructively, the actions of other networks.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Okay. So let's take a listen. Here's a sample, both from 2020 related to COVID. The first clip is Tucker Carlson on Fox calling out CNN's coverage of people going outside on Memorial Day. The second clip is CNN's Brianna Keilar accusing Fox News of COVID misinformation.

Tucker Carlson:

And unfortunately, it's too late for a lot of people at CNN, and they haven't even been trapped inside for months. For reasons that no one in authority has ever really explained cable news yappers have been classified as essential workers from the very first day of lockdown. And by the way, that includes us. It also includes the partisan political activists on the other channels. They didn't lose their jobs. They have not been quarantined. If anything, they are thriving in the midst of this disaster. They feel more essential than they ever have. Your suffering has been the best thing to happen to them since impeachment, when they got to spend a full month pretending to know where Ukraine is. So you can imagine their rage when they saw you outdoors this weekend enjoying time with your family. The fact that you disobeyed them drove them insane.

Brianna Keilar:

We have pointed out before how millions of Americans are relying on Fox News to get their coronavirus information or misinformation, I should say, and that includes the president. The biggest names on that network have helped politicize this pandemic, making misleading or false claims about everything from masks to social distancing to treatments for the virus. And if you only watched Fox News, you might think that hydroxychloroquine is to coronavirus what Tylenol is to a headache or that gathering in large crowds without masks indoors is safe or that Democrats want schools and businesses to be closed forever.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Okay. So Phil, we've heard a clip from both Fox and CNN, but your research actually shows a dramatic difference between how often different networks bash each other. Can you say a little bit more about what you found?

Philip Napoli:

Sure. We don't really look at how much they bash each other, but how they bash the news media broadly, how they bash the New York Times. We cast a very wide net as far as who might be the targets of the disparagement. But yes, we find that Fox News engages in this kind of activity about once every 15 minutes.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Once every 15 minutes.

Philip Napoli:

Once every 15 minutes. And for comparison, MSNBC does it about once every hour and CNN does it about once every 140 minutes.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

How did you figure this out? Adam, walk us through this. Were you sitting there watching hours and hours of tape? Tell me more.

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. So traditional content analysis might have had us doing that, but now AI is all the rage. We found out that newer AI models, specifically GPT5.5, are often well-equipped to deal with reasoning through human language dynamics. And so, through a lot of training, we eventually got to a point where GPT5.5, when given a custom set of instructions, was able to parse through cable news transcripts that we downloaded and isolate every potential instance of, as we call it, inter-journalistic disparagement.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So what did this prompt look like? What were you asking the AI to do?

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. The prompt itself is a very large markdown file. In PDF form, it's roughly about 20 pages.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Oh wow. Okay.

Adam Meskouri:

Yes. So it explains to the AI the purpose of the project. It gives it common signifiers of negative language and attacks. It gives it specific network names and shorthands to look for. The prompt just tries to get across the very human ability to recognize disparaging content when we see it. And of course, working with a model has required a lot of in-context learning and adversarial testing. It took a very long time, but we eventually got to a point where compared with human coders, the model was roughly 99.5% reliable.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Wow. So it really wasn't making a whole lot of mistakes.

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. Few, if any. We're very confident in the integrity of the model's work. It has been rigorously tested and the 0.5% of instances where we disagreed with the model were not instances where the model was wrong. There are just some cases that are hard to adjudicate. Like the question of what counts as disparaging content is itself its own debate, and while we can do our best to get across our own ideas of what that means, there is a certain level of subjectivity to it.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right. Okay. And so Phil, you think this research might explain why trusted media has taken such a nosedive, especially among those on the right. Am I getting this right what you think?

Philip Napoli:

We didn't study the effect of this. Cannot emphasize that enough. But when you look at how lopsided the declines in trust in journalism are, it's not that surprising that we saw the same kind of lopsidedness reflected in the activities of these particular categories of partisan news media. We also know, and our research was built a bit on that, we also know that for quite some time now, undermining the mainstream news media has been a common political strategy amongst elected officials, amongst political candidates, et cetera. So this could be a piece of the puzzle and that's actually something we would really like to do next, is design a survey experiment or something of that sort where we look at possible impact of exposure to this kind of disparagement.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right. And just to be clear, you say that Fox News itself actually is much more focused on disparaging the institution of journalism rather than individual kind of competitor news outlets. Is that right?

Philip Napoli:

Right. They do a fair bit of that too, but they are overwhelmingly compared, again, compared to CNN and MSNBC. The bulk of what they do as far as their disparagement is geared towards terms like the media, the mainstream media, the liberal media, et cetera. And that was something that we didn't know necessarily was going to emerge from this, and it is interesting to think about that difference in undermining trust in the institution of journalism versus undermining trust in particular outlets.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right. And so Adam, I'm going to ask you to say a little bit more about that. I think one of your takeaways is that Fox and MSNBC are often seen as equally partisan, one representing the right, one representing the left. But this research seems to indicate that maybe we should see them-

Adam Meskouri:

Slightly differently.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

... kind of differently, yeah. So can you just talk a little bit about that?

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah, indeed. Especially when you consider that a majority or perhaps a plurality of MSNBC's attacks are going towards Fox and that a majority of Fox's attacks are going towards the media, that would even serve to frame MSNBC as being reactively disparaging to the proactive disparagements that Fox is putting out there and serving more as a regulator of their content as opposed to a partisan news source that is contributing to polarization proactively. But most certainly, you commonly hear, if not, that MSNBC and Fox are directly comparable in terms

of the partisan scale of their operations. You also hear that CNN and Fox are fairly comparable and what we see here is that that's not the case at all.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah. Anything you want to add to that, Phil, about why this is important, what we might worry about here?

Philip Napoli:

Yeah. And I think it's yet another of the sort of concerns that arise from a much more fragmented news and information environment in which strong partisanship has become a more important part of the business model than it was in the past. But what fascinates me is as we were sort of contextualizing this work in previous research, this notion that this takes us beyond what the notion of partisan journalism has traditionally meant. We have a long tradition of partisan journalism. The earliest days of newspapers in the US, they were partisan and they were about reflecting a particular partisan viewpoint. But to the extent to which they also engage in this kind of consistent attacking of other news sources, that seems to be at least a bit more of a modern phenomenon. So it's an additional layer onto this.

And if you think about how often we hear these days, "Well, the key to staying informed is to consult a diversity of news sources," there's a lot of naivete built in that because you have to realize, when you're consulting these diversity of viewpoints from a diversity of news sources, they're all telling you that the other sources you are consulting should not be trusted. So that's a flawed logic.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Were you able to identify which hosts engaged in this behavior the most?

Adam Meskouri:

Yes, we were. We can pull that up.

Philip Napoli:

There they are.

Adam Meskouri:

So the top 10 most disparaging hosts and anchors, number one is Sean Hannity, number two is Greg Gutfeld, number three is Tucker Carlson. And of the top 10, I believe eight of them were Fox hosts. And then the other two were Brian Stelter and Lawrence O'Donnell who are kind of towards the bottom of that list. An interesting case is Howard Kurtz who shows up on the list, but who had split his time between CNN and Fox.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Okay. And so, how should we think about this? You have these personalities, they're delivering the news, but it's not equally distributed across the networks how often different network personalities are engaging in this kind of disparaging language. How should we think about why this matters?

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. Well, I'm very glad you asked. I think that a pretty sizable ecosystem of work has indicated that, number one, most voters don't really have the time to thoughtfully engage with American politics and that as a result, they often directly defer to media figures or media institutions for cues on how to act. And so, to that extent, it sort of makes sense that if you are constantly exposed to more combative messaging and the people who are giving you that messaging are considered the primary sources for your political beliefs, that you would resultantly become more combative in the way that you view the other party, the way that you view the state of American politics.

Having trusted sources who really hold significant power over public opinion, perhaps only certain groups of people, but it can impact those people greatly. It's very worrying for sure.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah, and it really seems like one thing that's going on is this kind of blurring the line between opinion and journalism. Were these on the news side of Fox News?

Adam Meskouri:

Yes.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yes, so this is the news time where they're supposed to be presumably sharing out with their listeners, watchers what's going on. It seems to me, just in reading your report, that this is kind of really veering more towards opinion.

Philip Napoli:

Sure. And just to emphasize, we analyze, which a lot of the work that has analyzed cable news before has tended to zero in on particular day parts. We analyze the whole day.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Got it. Okay.

Adam Meskouri:

Across 15 years.

Philip Napoli:

Yeah. And traditionally, and even within Fox News, they will still maintain this distinction that during the day is when they're doing their reporting and then in prime time is their opinion time. And what we haven't done yet is sort of parsed out these data as far as day parts and that sort of thing. But if you look at Sean Hannity, Greg Gutfeld, Tucker Carlson, these are the primetime talking head opinion folks where we're seeing this most prominently.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right. But I do think, to Adam, to your point, listeners are kind of looking to these folks for information and yet what they're getting is probably something more like opinion and it's confusing, right?

Philip Napoli:

Absolutely. And in fact, that's what's interesting is the term that used to get used, and we don't even hear this term used anymore, but when I used to analyze, back in the day when I first started doing this kind of thing, we would analyze news programming and then we would analyze public affairs programming. That was a separate category. The Sunday morning shows were the public affairs shows and that was the talking heads arguing with each other. And the important thing to remember is that kind of content is a lot cheaper than doing journalism generally. And as the patterns we see on all these networks show, it tends to draw higher ratings. So the prime time, why is it that you can't find any real journalism between the hours of 8:00 and 11:00 PM on any of these networks? Because this works better. This attracts larger audiences and that attracts advertisers.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

And so it's connected to these media companies bottom line too, what they end up showing, what kind of content is getting viewers.

Philip Napoli:

Yep.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah. So Phil, I'm really interested in the end of your article. You say we might be headed towards something called anti-media media, which essentially is media that can be weaponized in a democracy, right? Am I getting that right?

Philip Napoli:

Yeah. It's actually directed at other media, which is this idea of partisan media not being just a source of partisan takes on what's happening in the world, but also partisan takes on all of the other news and information sources that are out there. And again, I think this takes us beyond sort of market competition like, "Hey, let's bash the competition in hopes of elevating ourselves," it's tied of course to larger political objectives. It was very interesting. We actually shared an early version of this research with a former president of MSNBC and he was talking about how, "Hey, in my day, if we were getting bashed by Fox, we were thrilled because it meant we mattered."

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right, right, right. They paid attention to us.

Philip Napoli:

Right. They're paying attention so that must mean we matter. And I never really imagined that they would think that way, but that was a different point in time. We're in a different point in time now, and I think amongst all of the things we recognize that are problems with our news and information ecosystem, now we can put some numbers to what I think is another problem, which is this kind of undermining of trust in the press by the press.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right. Yeah. Do you have something you want to add to that, Adam?

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah, yeah. Another thing to note is that aside from the fact that what we've isolated kind of goes beyond what might be expected in a competitive market, it also kind of goes beyond what might be expected of a self-regulating journalistic ecosystem. There is value to news organizations fact-checking each other and holding each other accountable, but taking a look at the text and the context of these attacks, which is another part of the project that we're actively working on, we see that a lot of the language being used is kind of straying away from the fair, constructive criticism that you might expect in an industry that's supposed to keep its players in check. We're not seeing instances of networks saying, "Well, I disagree with how that network framed this story," or using that mild language. It's a lot of very strong visceral language, like "You should never consult this network for news," or "They're telling you lies and they're polluting American democracy." It's very, very strong rhetoric.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

I'm glad you mentioned democracy because that seems really crucial here. We've all been taught and we teach our students that a vibrant media, an independent media is a cornerstone of democracy and how this democracy is maintained. So if we now have anti-media media, what does that mean? What might that mean for the role of media in democracy?

Philip Napoli:

Right, and it raises huge implications, which is to what extent should we, dare we start to cast a more critical eye on what we call our news media? You sort of started to highlight this when you're talking about the blurring between news and opinion. We are in a world of minimal gatekeepers, of citizen journals, of all of these ways in which the boundaries of journalism have become more porous and we're suffering for that in a variety of ways. And so when we see these kind of behaviors that take us outside the bounds of what we would traditionally consider journalistic norms, it reminds us that a lot of what people are consuming as journalism might be falling short in a variety of ways.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Is there anything you think we can do to kind of get citizens to engage with this issue and either be more choosy about what they're watching or listening to or to think differently about how they engage with media? Because that seems to me to be a really important piece of the puzzle about how we might move forward.

Philip Napoli:

Sure. And one of the things we're starting to see happen in a number of states is legislation being passed to require media and digital literacy training in schools. So that's something. I'd like to see it in senior centers around the country as well because that's another category of individual where we see some harmful bad habits that have developed in terms of how people consume news and information, and there, the ramifications you could argue are even more dramatic because they vote. So that is one. But the other one that, this is something we're starting to do some research on, which is all the other institutions who make decisions about what is and what is not journalism, the cable systems that make decisions about what networks to carry, the social media platforms that make decisions about what does and what does not get labeled as news, which impacts how they are highlighted in algorithmic curation systems.

There's the funders that make decisions about what kind of ventures to fund. There's just all these other institutions that are constantly involved in making decisions about what does and does not fit the parameters of journalism. And most of them have done a bad job, I would argue, and could be doing more. They have the right to exert decision-making authority. To be honest, the original motivation for this whole project was when I saw what happened with the Dominion voting lawsuit. I don't know if you remember that, but this was the case where it was found that Fox News knew that they were disseminating false information around the operation of these voting systems. And then it became publicly known that they knew. And not one cable system, not one, not only never dropped the network under the grounds that, "Hey, this is a faulty product." Not even a statement, nothing like, "Hey, we are disappointed that this network that we carry as a news network is not abiding by some of the norms of journalism." So I don't know. That's another direction a little more amorphous, but hopefully, we can see some progress in the future.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah. And Adam, what about, anything to add? I was going to ask you specifically about social media because I know that you've worked as a social media content creator, so you yourself have drummed up a lot of eyeballs on content.

Adam Meskouri:

Yes.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Do you have any thoughts about what role social media could play in helping address this problem?

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. Well, there are the obvious pros and cons to this democratization of journalism that's kind of come about by the advent of social media. We see that it's now possible to widely disseminate coverage of events that might not get coverage on flagship cable networks, but might still have massive impacts, be that to specific communities or even to the world. We also know that we're amidst a decline in local journalism. And so, in news deserts, in spaces where there is just institutionally inadequate coverage, not necessarily by editorial choice, but more so just based on a lack of infrastructure, obviously social media-driven news plays a huge role there. But of course, I think an important thing to note here is that the piece makes no real statements about whether or not the targets of disparagement "deserve" it or not. We are not analyzing whether or not the disparaging statements are based on actions by target outlets that were actually incorrect.

The big thing that I draw from this is that the language is so strong that irrespective of whether coverage is correct or not and irrespective of whether or not the target of an attack has done something wrong, the language that we're using to describe those instances is so emotionally charged to an extent that kind of strays from the constructive criticism paradigm that we might normally expect.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

And I think what's really striking is that's coupled with frequency, at least in the case of Fox News.

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah, that's right.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So if I watch Fox News for an hour, I'm going to hear four instances, not just of some kind of criticism of the media or of a competitor, but as you say, really strong emotionally charged language.

Adam Meskouri:

Language-yeah. I think that's probably symptomatic, as you mentioned, of social media in the sense that ... a big phenomenon of social media is content overload. There now exists an infinite spool of content for people to engage with. Millions of videos are uploaded by the minute, and so in such a situation where content has to find ways to stand out, we know from psychology that people will probably direct their production efforts to stuff that hits on emotional triggers. And so it's this sheer volume of content that's perhaps brought about by social media that I think might in part be responsible for the intensity of the content that we're now getting.

Philip Napoli:

Can I jump into this too?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah.

Philip Napoli:

Getting to the larger democratic implications of all this, when we talk about the idea of polarization or particularly of affective polarization, how it's defined, it's about how much animosity exists towards folks on the other side of the political spectrum. And inherent in this is exactly that, which is this notion of not just informing you of a particular viewpoint, but cultivating that animosity towards the other news or information sources that one might consider. So sort of the dynamics of affective polarization are baked right into this pattern that we're seeing here.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Right, absolutely. Is there anything else that you think our listeners should know about this report? Anything else you found that you want to make sure people hear about?

Adam Meskouri:

I'd like to stress the sheer volume of content that was analyzed.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Oh yeah. So talk a little bit more about this because 15 years of a whole day's worth of programming for three networks, so talk about that.

Adam Meskouri:

Yeah. So we used a constructed week sample, which is basically for each year in the corpus, for each network drawing programming from a random Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, et cetera.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Got it.

Adam Meskouri:

But the big point is that, with this AI-driven analysis, we were able to look at upwards of roughly 62,000 pages of broadcast content with over 18 million words. And so the amount of data that we were able to analyze, again, with a system that was very rigorously designed and tested and proven to be consistently accurate, I think is enough to really amplify the findings here.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

And it really makes me think this is going to open up a lot of doors for studying media because the scale, these AI tools can help us humans address the scale. I'm imagining back in the day when you started doing this work, maybe you'd even be cutting out squares from the newspaper and reading them or something like that, but these tools can help us take in so much more.

Philip Napoli:

Right, and it's interesting. So we're actually working on sort of a methods focus paper as a result of this. On the one hand, there was, as Adam mentioned, a tremendous amount of time, the learning curves of time and effort and money buying all these tokens to train the system to do what we wanted it to do. But once we had it trained, it was a few days and done. So where it all netted out, the old model would've been you train an army of graduate students and you sick them on it for the whole summer.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Three months later or something like that.

Philip Napoli:

Ideally, you have it. So yeah, it's something for us to continue to assess, which is cost benefit calculus of going about it this way. But as a learning experience and as an experiment, it was really interesting.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Yeah. Well, it's certainly been eye-opening for me to read about these findings, to read about the way that you were able to pull them together with this AI tool and a really wonderful conversation. So thank you both so much for your time for joining us today on Policy 360. We will have a link to the research in our show notes so that our listeners can read all the details for themselves. Thanks again so much for being here today.

Adam Meskouri:

Thank you.

Philip Napoli:
Thanks for having us.

Voiceover:
Policy 360 is a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Thank you for listening.