

**Waves of Division?: How Podcasts Fuel Political Disinformation and Polarization in
Partisan Media**

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Abstract

This study delves into the influence of the Ben Shapiro Show, Initially aimed at examining the potential for Shapiro's content to propagate political misinformation and exacerbate polarization, the research encountered challenges as Shapiro consistently emphasizes factual accuracy and sources in his episodes. However, the analysis reveals a nuanced landscape where Shapiro's commentary, despite being factually grounded, often presents content from a conservative viewpoint, utilizing urgent or emotionally charged episode titles to attract viewers. Drawing on comment sections from Shapiro's YouTube channel from November 2020 to February 2021, the study tracks evolving themes and sentiments among the audience.

Findings indicate a progression in audience engagement and thematic diversity over time, with November focused heavily on election-related concerns, transitioning to broader critiques of democracy, media, and government distrust in subsequent months. Despite Shapiro's efforts to ridicule and critique the January 6th insurrection, audience comments reveal persistent aggression towards Democratic figures, although tempered by expressions of disappointment in governmental institutions. The analysis suggests an association between episode titles emphasizing controversy and increased audience polarization and aggression in the comments.

While Shapiro's commitment to factual accuracy mitigates the spreading of misinformation, his presentation style and choice of topics contribute to political polarization. The study emphasizes the role of podcasting in shaping media landscapes and public opinion, advocating for further research into the influence of podcasts on political discourse and the spread of misinformation. Ultimately, the study highlights the complex interplay between podcast content, audience engagement, and societal polarization in contemporary political discourse.

Acknowledgments

Throughout the process of writing this thesis I encountered numerous challenges, both within the scope of this study and on a personal level. There were moments when I doubted whether I could overcome these obstacles, feeling stumped or unsure of how to move forward. I have felt despite all my achievements big and small, I wasn't pushing myself to achieve anything that requires this kind of dedication and commitment - both being attributes that I struggle with as a professional procrastinator. So I took on this thesis to challenge myself, but also with the excitement of studying something I'm passionate about, hoping to inspire future studies or simply spark interest.

As I wrap up this process, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Brian Weeks, and Professor Jimmy Draper. Without their unwavering support and encouragement, this thesis wouldn't have been possible. Over the past year, Brian has not only guided me through the intricacies of research but has also been a constant source of support, celebrating the small wins and helping me navigate the challenges along the way. Jimmy has not only taught me, but the entire class, valuable lessons ranging from crafting introductions to fostering a culture of kindness and support among peers. Both have taught me invaluable lessons that are essential inside and outside of an academic or research setting and I am extremely grateful for their compassion and guidance.

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demands of their own projects and challenges, they consistently made time to support me and my research. From this I've made lifelong friendships and made strides personally and academically, but I couldn't have done this without everyone's support.

Introduction

Obtaining information and doing research without aid from the internet is almost unheard of today. We utilize this vast landscape of sources and materials to accumulate and share our knowledge. It's optimistic to think that the internet is solely used for ethical purposes, that users are sharing media that is true and verified, and that they aren't trying to manipulate or profit off of their viewers. However, that tends to not be the case in many situations. Podcasts have emerged as a prominent medium, exerting significant influence in disseminating information. However, discerning between factual content and misinformation poses a challenge. Users face increased difficulty in deciphering information, raising concerns about media literacy and trust, especially when some very popular podcasts are known for spreading false information or fostering distrust and polarization within communities.

Podcasts are an ever-growing media that are easy to access, while creators can choose exactly what they want to say, do, spread, etc., which is within their rights. But this makes them quite difficult to regulate due to the fluidity of the format. Additionally, this becomes dangerous if podcasters are using their large platforms to disseminate information that is not factual or verified, being used to harm the public sphere, cause civil and political unrest, or increase political polarization. For example, podcasters like Joe Rogan have such a large platform, that they can reach millions of people and spread information whether or not it's true or false, which the audiences then internalize or incorporate into their lives and project onto others, ultimately

impacting specific communities positively or negatively. This is a fast and growing issue within the United States as we see Podcasts become more popular among younger generations due to social media promotions and influencers. Podcasts are also popular among other demographics due to their array of topics, ease, and accessibility. Research found that “As of 2023, 42% of Americans ages 12 and older have listened to a podcast in the past month, according to “The Infinite Dial” report by Edison Research.” (Pew Research Center, 2023). While in 2020 listenership was only at 37% it was found that, “47% of U.S. adults said they got news on the radio often or sometimes.” (Pew Research Center, 2023). We can use podcasts as a medium to learn a lot about many different subjects, for entertainment or solely relaxation, we must also consider how the platform may be rapidly aiding the spread of misinformation.

For this study, I will specifically focus on right-leaning podcasts and conduct a content analysis to determine if there is any misinformation or fake news being spread from predominant podcasters between November 2020 and February 2021. By completing a content analysis of the audience's comments, I will be able to better identify how misinformation is being spread, how frequently, and to what extent. This study aims to answer the questions, ‘To what extent are podcasts aiding the spread of political misinformation and inhibiting social, civil, and political unrest?’ and “Are political podcasts furthering the severity of political polarization within the United States?”

These questions will be explored via right-wing podcaster transcripts, such as The Ben Shapiro Show on Spotify, and reviewing comments from the equivalent podcast episodes on YouTube. I will look for indicators of political misinformation as a factor in leading to the January 6th insurrection and general misinformation that leads individuals down rabbit holes and

into believing conspiracy theories or other harmful ideologies. Throughout this research, I will be attempting to find meaning behind the uses of podcasts to answer the question,

1. To what extent are podcasts aiding the spread of political misinformation and inhibiting social, civil, and political unrest?
2. Are political podcasts furthering the severity of political polarization within the United States?

Before moving into the analysis it is important to understand why this topic has become a central issue within the media and political landscape. Therefore, this study will address the discourses surrounding topics such as political polarization, the regulation of media, motivated reasoning, media literacy, persuasion, and selective exposure. The analysis will then address podcasts that play a role in the proliferation of political misinformation to cause social, civil, and political unrest in efforts to maintain or strengthen a right-leaning political atmosphere within the United States.

Literature Review

The Media Landscape and Misinformation

News media, once spread via word of mouth, evolved to handwritten articles in the 1500s and then to newspaper publications by the 1600s. However, the 20th century is now more evolved, innovative, and ever-changing (University of Minnesota, 2016) with digital news content not only televised but also shared via the internet or on social media; these technological advances have led to many benefits but also raised many points of concern. For example, media is easier to access and even easier to share, because the digital landscape is so fluid, that regulating the spread of misinformation or other harmful content becomes a challenge. Additionally, we see how traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television have been

utilized and hold their purposes for spreading information and news; but conventional media exerts effects on the public to a different degree than digital media. More specifically, one study found that traditional (mainstream) media is considered more credible compared to digital media solely due to the nature of the platforms (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). Traditional media may have different meanings to some audiences due to generational shifts or demographics. To put it into perspective, hearing news from the radio is often believed to be much more influential or credible than hearing news from a podcast online, “A Katz analysis of the latest MRI-Simmons COVID-19 Consumer Insights Study data finds radio is the most trusted medium, with 67% of adults deeming it trustworthy, or very trustworthy.” (InsideRadio, 2021). However, these studies are finding that today, younger audiences may feel indifferent toward these sources due to the prevalence of podcasts and the history of radio.

Radio and television are still broadly used by audiences but are becoming less and less predominant with emerging technologies. For example, by 2025, traditional media is expected to be used an average of 4.3 hours per day, compared to digital media being used an average of nearly 8 hours per day. While back in 2011 things were very different; people were using traditional media for nearly 8 hours per day, and digital media for less than 4 hours (Guttman, 2023). This is because now, users are turning to laptops and desktop computers, cell phones, tablets, and watches, for relaying information and accessing the internet. Younger generations are growing up with this technology easily available and it becomes a part of their life from a young age. With this information, we see how new technologies within digital media are taking over our media culture and landscape. Digital media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, are more often used by young audiences but are still relevant among older audiences; both are utilized to communicate and consume media.

Additionally, journalism has evolved from physical to digital, as publishers such as The Washington Post, The Atlantic, The New York Times, and CNN publish digital articles, both written and verbal reports instead of printing newspapers. In terms of radio, we see audio media platforms for smartphones such as Spotify and Apple podcasts or Audiobooks, becoming more relevant and accessible compared to traditional radio for younger audiences. The next subsection introduces arguments on the accessibility and regulation of media while diving deeper into our understanding of what social impacts and increased accessibility with limited regulatory practices have on audiences and our ways of spreading digital media.

Access and Regulation of Media

The variety of platforms has made spreading information easier but also more complex than ever before and ultimately shifted the culture surrounding news and media. With information just a few clicks away, you can turn to the internet for just about anything. While having access to media is a privilege, it's important to talk about the media we consume. The internet as a device makes it easier to find and consume information, but it also makes it easier to spread partisan information to large audiences (Stroud, 2010).

Digital media are heavily relied on within political atmospheres to communicate with society. We see political leaders, politicians, reporters, journalists, and even presidential candidates utilize social media platforms to relay information to the public or promote their ideologies online. In doing so they can reach and persuade large audiences and build a community around themselves, which may gain momentum for their campaigns or ideologies. For instance, during recent presidential elections, candidates have used social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to express their opinions digitally, connecting with various

groups of people on each platform; this helps them gain social and digital relevance by increasing their visibility and how often they communicate. A strong digital presence is crucial, as it's the primary means for candidates to reach the public. However, in recent years, we've seen how media has been used to spread false information and provoke audiences. For instance, when Donald Trump won the presidential election, there were claims that the election was stolen because Hillary Clinton had won the majority vote, while Donald Trump secured the electoral college. Donald Trump spread misinformation regarding the election via social media and gained substantial traction among his supporters, leading to civil and political unrest. But because of his power and platform, much of what was said or shared was received and observed as fact. Additionally, having that large of a platform can also mean the user holds much greater capabilities for spreading ideals. In 2021, CNN released an article presenting that Trump's twitter account was permanently suspended to prevent the chance of him inciting further violence. In this case, his platform was used to spread more harm than good, as someone with millions of followers, what you post holds much more weight and is carried much further than being just words on a screen. For example, his last tweet being, "To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.", it was said that this could be interpreted to be him saying to his supporters that the inauguration is a safe target for violence since he wouldn't be attending. (Fung, 2021) All users, not just those who support Trump, interpret this differently, some might take it for exactly what he's saying, whereas some could interpret it as something more based on the context and their intentions. It gets difficult to decipher information when there is so much discourse surrounding the language and context of the situation. Studies show that depending on an individual's age and demographics they may be more or less likely to trust politicians. For example, Pew research finds that on a chart showing levels of trustfulness "The

older a person is, the more likely they are to tilt toward more trustful answers.” and “The more education Americans have, and the greater their household income, the greater the likelihood they are high on the personal trust spectrum.” (Pew, 2019). This may be because content is often interpreted differently based on someone's perspectives and biases, making reactions less predictable and unique to every user.

It becomes extremely easy to believe the words of political figures given their positions of power, although it's important to know the dangers of this. Many powerful figures use their positioning to make a profit from their supporters. For example, Joe Rogan, widely known for his media presence and podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*, had an average of 11 million listeners in 2023 (Campbell, 2016). Not only does he use his platform to spread fake news, bigotry, and misinformation, but he makes nearly \$100,000 per podcast episode; thus it is necessary to consider that his podcast content may have monetary influences and biases as well. While these are only brief examples of people with power and platforms using media, to spread misinformation, inhibit violence, or increase tensions and polarization, anyone can do so; but the power of a large platform increases one's ability to spread this information, while increasing viewership and revenue as well.

Within the general public, users can post or promote whatever they like on their accounts. This allows individuals to freely express their opinions and ideas to whomever they can reach. This brings us to question how information is being regulated online if individuals can post and share whatever they like. Many argue that media should be regulated and censored to reduce the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as sensitive topics and harmful media (DeSilver, 2022). Conversely, others argue that the censorship of media is an infringement upon their freedom of expression or silences their voices. The proposed solution is to incorporate

content moderation and treat social media platforms as common carriers that can determine what is regulated on their platforms (Wheeler et al., 2022). This solution is something that we will delve further into during the discussion to better understand if something like this would propose a lasting solution.

With that understanding, this study will explore why individuals are struggling to relay information as false or fact despite power and platforms, while touching a bit on what ethical journalism means, especially considering how journalism affects the media agenda.

The Struggle with Fact-Checking

The problem we face is that with more news content emerging by the day, everyone and anyone can post about it. This is where the line gets blurry and individuals share information that may or may not be factual. The spread of misinformation becomes more and more prevalent as news is spread online and via word of mouth; users may consume false information and share it improperly, resulting in information being skewed. Similar to a game of telephone, if you've ever played it, you know that the person who's told the information last, always announces something completely different from the source. Media is also becoming more difficult to decipher due to underlying biases that publishing agencies may hold. This is why it is important to consider if a source is partisan or nonpartisan as well as if they are sponsored or supporting certain causes before publishing.

It is argued that there is, "disproportionate coverage of marketable business news, homogenized content spread across commonly owned media, blurred distinctions between editorial and advertising content," (Scott, 2005 pg 90). These are just a few examples of more saleable trends in digital journalism. When media becomes increasingly marketable, someone is

profiting from our consumption. The greater the number of people who consume this media, the more profit someone generates. As a result, biases, external influences, and other detrimental aspects may come into play. But with fake news emerging it brings attention to the quality of journalism, and more viewers are seeking reputable journalism and news outlets, which some journalists seem to prefer (Beckett, 2018).

Ethical journalists still exist in many instances but Scott argues that these individuals are inevitably exploited within the world of journalism. Therefore to avoid exploitation, journalism is becoming more and more profit-based – no matter how conscious journalists are of this (Scott, 2005). For something to be published it is required to be profitable in some instance or another. Scott boils this down to say that, “Quite simply, it is the difference between serving the public full stop and serving the public as long as it is profitable and promises to become more profitable” (Scott, 2005 pg 91). Inferring that journalists are either practicing ethical journalism, or they are producing material in hopes of making a profit or becoming profitable – whether or not it is ethical work.

As our media landscape becomes increasingly profit-driven, it's becoming more challenging for individuals to distinguish between fake or commercialized content and unbiased, non-partisan information. The prioritization of profits over quality and credibility is evident, with some media institutions pursuing profit margins as high as 41.6% (Lafayette, 2023). This profit-focused approach often leads to compromises in the quality and trustworthiness of news.

The issue lies in the fact that the media is frequently motivated by financial gain or other agendas, such as political campaigns seeking election victories. This makes it difficult for consumers to determine the trustworthiness of the information they encounter. Therefore, understanding media literacy and critically evaluating media content becomes crucial. However,

the question remains whether consumers are aware of or willing to assess the validity and intentions behind the media they consume.

Additionally, it is necessary to understand why and how audiences are persuaded by fake news, disinformation, or misinformation. The Elaboration Likelihood model is a model that theorizes how individuals are persuaded based on their information processing systems. This is extremely important to understand why and how people may be more or less persuaded by certain content.

Persuasion:

The reliance on mass media for credible information, as evidenced by a study by Hung-Yi Lu, *Information Seeking and Media Credibility*, underscores the enduring trust people place in established sources, stating “respondents rated mass media as their primary and the most credible source for receiving SARS-related information compared to interpersonal channels”. However, in the rapidly evolving media landscape, where newer platforms like podcasts are gaining prominence, there's a pressing need to explore how these mediums shape perceptions of credibility. Podcasts are becoming more and more relevant within the media landscape, especially with platforms like TikTok making it easier to promote content to younger audiences. Based on research done by Spotify, there are over 1 billion active TikTok users globally and, “Gen Z is discovering new podcasts at more than twice the rate of any other age group, and Gen Z podcast listeners on Spotify grew by 62% from 2021 to 2022.” (Spotify, 2023).

Mustafaj's insight into individuals' susceptibility to persuasion serves as a reminder of the importance of media literacy. In an era saturated with information, being able to discern truth from falsehoods is essential for informed decision-making and societal discourse (Mustafaj,

2023). Thus, fostering media literacy skills isn't just advisable—it's imperative for navigating the intricacies of the modern media ecosystem and safeguarding against misinformation.

Media literacy

Media literacy is an essential skill in today's information age. It encompasses the ability to critically analyze, evaluate, and comprehend various forms of media, such as news articles, videos, social media posts, and advertisements. In an era where information is constantly bombarding us, media literacy equips individuals with the tools to distinguish between reliable sources and misinformation. It encourages people to question the motives, biases, and credibility of the content they encounter, fostering a more discerning and informed society. Media literacy not only safeguards against the spread of false information but also empowers individuals to make well-informed decisions, actively participate in civic discourse, and navigate the complexities of the digital landscape. It is not just a skill but a fundamental pillar of modern citizenship, enabling people to engage with the world around them more thoughtfully and responsibly (Curriculum Review, 2017 pg 8).

Today it is evident that media literacy is necessary for navigating this extremely intricate and vast media landscape. However, a national survey from Media Literacy Now finds that only 38% of respondents said they learned how to analyze media messaging and only 42% learned how to analyze science news in high school. It's important to know that the average age of the respondents was 41 years old, and all of them completed a bachelor's degree or higher (Media Literacy Now, Inc., 2023). This emphasizes how limited our ability to analyze media is, and how our education system fails to educate individuals about skills related to media literacy. Not having media literacy skills leads to an increased chance of believing and spreading false

information. This lack of skill results in not only the increased spread of disinformation, but also prejudices, and stereotyping, political and social turmoil like political polarization.

Polarization

Political polarization refers to the deep and growing divide within a society, specifically within the realm of politics, where individuals and groups develop increasingly divergent and extreme beliefs, values, and ideologies . This divide often leads to a breakdown in productive political discourse and cooperation, as people on opposite ends of the spectrum become less willing to engage in meaningful dialogue and compromise. For example, “In 2019, 45% of Democrats said they would be unhappy if their child married a Republican and 35% of Republicans say they would be unhappy if their child married a Democrat” (Najle, Jones, 2019). In recent years, political polarization has become a prominent and concerning issue in many democracies around the world, with heated debates, echo chambers in social media, and a decline in trust in institutions exacerbating the problem. Addressing political polarization requires not only understanding its causes but also fostering a sense of empathy, open-mindedness, and a commitment to finding common ground, as these are essential for maintaining a healthy and functional democracy.

The following charts from Pew Research Center shows how political polarization in the United States has increased from 1994 to 2017,

Exhibit I: Political Polarization In The United States In 1994

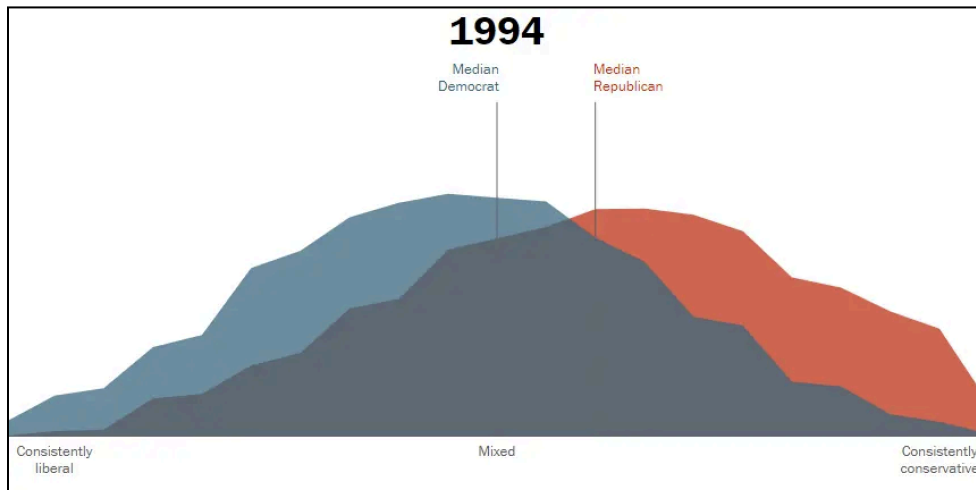
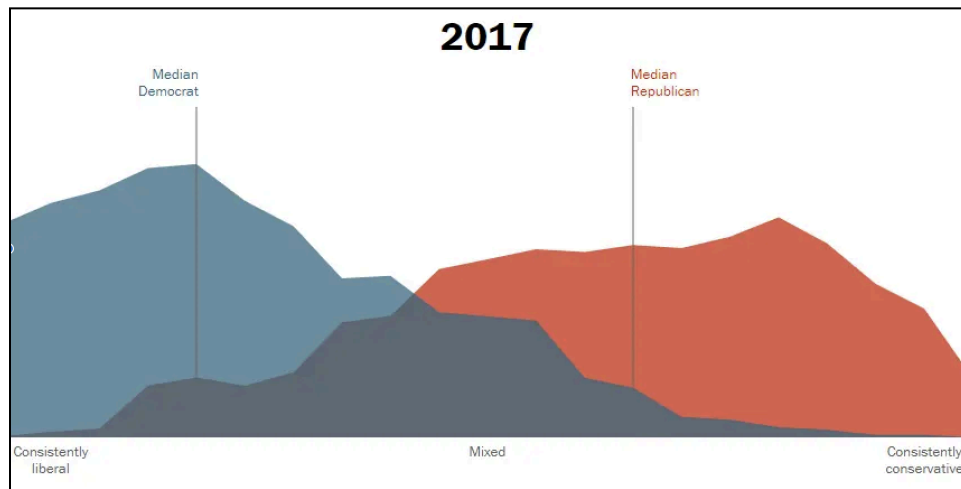


Exhibit II: Political Polarization In The United States In 2017



Source: "Political Polarization, 1994-2017." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. October 20, 2017.

Aside from the increasing divide, studying political polarization is of paramount importance for several reasons. First, it allows us to gain insights into the dynamics of our democratic systems and understand the challenges they face. The increasing polarization in many societies can disrupt the functioning of political institutions, hinder policymaking, and breed

social unrest. In this instance, there have been many podcasts used to share theories and ideologies that are far from credible or factual but have done wonders in inciting social unrest and political discourse. The Southern Law Poverty Center (SPLC) conducted research on the Far Right podcast ecosystem, examining the social network of these podcasts and found that there were 22 far right podcasters at the core of the network, “However, all have been crucial figures in the flurry of far-right extremist activity throughout the Trump years, whether as propagandists or organizers.” (Squire, Gais, 2021).

Secondly, it helps us identify the root causes and underlying factors that drive polarization, such as social media, economic disparities, and identity politics. The focus here is to understand the role that podcasts are playing in the spread of political misinformation and polarization. Understanding these drivers is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate polarization and foster a more cohesive and inclusive society.

Thirdly, by studying political polarization, we can also explore its consequences, which include increased social division and violence, a decreased willingness to engage in constructive dialogue or even marry someone of opposing political parties (Mccoy, 2022). Many studies have focused on this in the past, but here we will focus on the podcasts aiding these social consequences via misinformation.

But how does polarization begin? Well, selective exposure can be a leading cause of polarizing audiences; the nature and effects of selective exposure will be explored to allow us to understand selective exposure influences on political polarization.

Selective Exposure

First, we understand that the media may be a driver for political polarization, especially podcasts in more recent years. With users able to access information that supports their viewpoints, and the help of algorithms, users may get drawn into only exposing themselves to media that supports their ideas. Due to the rising popularity of podcasts, more people are turning to the mic due to its ease and accessibility. While it's okay to practice freedom of expression and speech, many podcasters use their platforms to incite hate speech or spread information and pose it as fact (Ugwu, 2021). For example, Google podcast is being compared to the platform Parler, an app that is now suspended due to users using it as a platform for spreading hate and violence and planning riots leading up to the January 6th capitol insurrection. Google Podcasts is being compared to Parler due to many podcasts that it is hosting on its platform, "The remarks, emblematic of a longstanding online network of white supremacists and pro-Nazi groups, weren't hidden in some dark corner of the internet, but could be found on Google Podcasts," (Ugwu, 2021) Google podcasts is being used by podcasters that tend to be spreading false or harmful messages, which poses questions to understand where else this kind of content is present and how its gaining popularity.

When viewers with similar viewpoints come across these platforms, they may have no credible background, the podcast platform poses enough to validate the information shared. People begin to listen and share media that validates their views and avoid information that does otherwise. This is the theory known as selective exposure - when individuals expose themselves to only specific kinds of media and avoid others. The statement that, "...people can only be influenced by media messages to which they actually expose themselves" (Brosius & Peter,

2011) reinforces the idea that if individuals solely consume media that doesn't challenge their opinions they will be less open or willing to hear alternative perspectives.

Furthermore, the algorithms utilized by social media platforms are designed to present users with content they are likely to prefer, further limiting exposure to diverse information. This exacerbates the phenomenon of selective exposure and widens the divide between communities (Freedman & Sears, 1965). Recent studies have also found that increased exposure to partisan media is a leading cause of polarization (Stroud, 2010), but the consequences of this become particularly concerning when individuals consume harmful or highly polarizing content, accentuating the need for media literacy and critical thinking in today's digital age.

To further understand the motives and effects of political polarization, this study will focus on podcasts as a vehicle for spreading political misinformation within the United States. Many previous studies focus solely on political polarization within social media as a whole or within traditional and mainstream media as a collective. However digital media is dominating the present and future of the media landscape and environment. This study will focus specifically on podcasts as they are a rising alternative platform for radio and broadcasting with little prior research in the field of communications.

The Rise and Role of Podcasts in 2020 Until Now

In this section, we explore the evolution of podcasts in recent years, with a particular emphasis on their growing importance in the media landscape, increased accessibility, and their emergence as credible sources of news. This sets the stage for our discussions where we will dive deeper into topics such as the dissemination of political misinformation and conspiracy theories via podcasts, the vulnerability of audiences to misinformation, and other related concerns.

Podcasts

Podcasts, with their diverse range of content, can either exacerbate this polarization by catering to niche audiences or help mitigate it by exposing listeners to a broader spectrum of ideas. On one hand, there are podcasts specifically tailored to cater to the interests and viewpoints of certain ideological, political, or cultural groups. These podcasts may reinforce existing biases and contribute to polarization. This often occurs when individuals partake in selective exposure to media and become set in their way about certain topics, unwilling to listen to opposing views. On the other hand, podcasts also provide a platform for constructive dialogue and exposure to diverse perspectives. Some creators actively seek to engage with opposing viewpoints and foster discussions that bridge divides. This can reduce polarization by educating listeners on subjects they may initially avoid.

Before we can analyze the use of podcasts as a vehicle for spreading misinformation we must understand that a podcast is known to be a digital medium consisting of audio or video content in an episodic format that often relates to specific themes. Throughout this research, various themes and theories relevant to mass communications will be incorporated, including selective exposure, reactance, media literacy, credibility, and others. We will track the rise of podcasts as they have become increasingly accessible and relevant within the media, examining how their credibility compares to other platforms and understanding their significance in today's media landscape. Moreover, this will guide us toward exploring trust in podcasts and individuals' vulnerability to misinformation, with a particular focus on how podcasts and right-wing conspiracy theories influence their audiences.

Susceptibility

Podcasts have rapidly become a dominant medium in the world of digital content. With their diverse range of topics and engaging formats, they offer a unique platform for creators to share stories, knowledge, and insights with audiences around the globe. No matter what your preference, there's likely a podcast out there that caters to your interests. Within this section, we focus on the rising circulation and relevance of podcasts from 2020 until now. Seeing how the rate in which people are listening to podcasts has increased from 37% to 45% from 2020 to 2023, and it continues to increase. Today there are over 450 million podcasts to exist and “64% of Americans will have listened to a podcast ever in their lives” (Breitman, 2024).

To understand how podcasts are spreading misinformation we must explore what makes media more credible or believable to an audience, and what makes an audience more susceptible to believing such media. In recent years, younger audiences have become more politically active and aware due to the emergence of the internet, as accessing information locally and internationally is easier than ever. Because of this, we can stay informed on topics worldwide if we so choose. An article on political disinformation titled, “Who is gullible to political disinformation?” : Predicting susceptibility of university students to fake news”, by Bringula et al. found greater engagement with political social media, such as spending more time on Instagram, sharing friends' political posts, and liking content from political parties, may heighten one's vulnerability to fake news. Conversely, sharing a political party's post or seeking expert opinions can reduce susceptibility to misinformation.

The next subsection will present an exploration of podcasts and their capacity to propagate information, regardless of accuracy. A specific emphasis will be placed on the spread of political disinformation through conspiracy theories within the podcasting realm. We will

closely examine the significance of the platform and the credibility of content creators, with a focus on prominent figures in the industry or well-known podcasters who wield substantial influence on political discourses.

Susceptibility of Conspiracies in Podcast vs. Other Media

When users interact with media platforms we are undeniably influenced by the algorithms and preferences that have been created for our feed (Brady, 2023). For example, If I like to cook, I am likely to follow cooking accounts or celebrity chefs on social media platforms, and ultimately consume the media that they share and the information they spread. I am also more likely to perceive this information and media as trustworthy since it comes from what I consider a reputable source. These personal biases significantly shape our perceptions of what media is deemed trustworthy as opposed to what isn't, and if the information it presents is accurate, whether fact-checked or not. But what can be done to combat these biases? The study, “Epistemic beliefs’ role in promoting misperceptions and conspiracist ideation” by Kelly Garrett and Brian Weeks, explores the decision-making capabilities of citizens. The results show that it's beneficial to combat misconceptions by encouraging people to value evidence, be careful with their emotions, and have trust in experts who rigorously assess information to guard against political manipulation. In doing so biases and source credibility can be challenged, which may result in lowering one's susceptibility to believing false information or spreading it (Garrett & Weeks, 2017). Podcasts may propose a challenge to combating misconceptions as podcasts often have more of a conversational or narrative style, allowing for more intimate and immersive storytelling experiences. This informal tone can create a sense of connection between the hosts and the audience, fostering engagement and loyalty. But it may also allow for this stronger

connection to hinder one's media literacy or affect how they are susceptible to the information. Especially if someone is more emotional or personally impacted by a topic, they may feel more strongly about it and search for podcasts to support their personal beliefs instead of looking for content that challenges their mindset.

The following will address the influence of conspiracies and misinformation within the media specifically on topics such as the insurrection on January 6th, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Capitol Insurrection

Famous people, celebrities, and anyone with a substantial platform, all have an extremely large influence; as mentioned before, power has a huge impact on determining one's credibility. The article on conspiracy theories during the Trump presidency, states that individuals are more likely to believe information when it has support from powerful people, is repeated often, and is coming from a large platform (Folkenflik, 2016). For example, Former President Donald Trump's media and power had an extreme influence on the events of January 6th, 2021, when his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol. Leading up to the events, Trump had persistently and baselessly claimed that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, stolen, and marred by voter fraud. He used his powerful platform, including rallies, social media, and public speeches, to fuel these allegations, fostering a deep sense of anger and mistrust among his devoted followers. This content will later be analyzed to further understand the grasp Trump had on spreading disinformation, although, it's relevant to understand that because of these accusations and the promotion of a rigged election; Trump supporters took it upon themselves to riot the Capitol. The capitol insurrection occurred on January 6th and was a pivotal moment for our country; many people began to truly understand the extent to which disinformation has on our society as a

whole. Citizens and officials have been aware of how communities are being harmed and discriminated against due to systemic barriers, prejudices, racism, etc. and disinformation tends to feed into heightening this hatred. But it wasn't until the insurrection that policymakers and government officials felt they were in danger as well, and it was at this point that they decided it was time to acknowledge the harm of Trump's accusations and take action to investigate.

Covid-19 and Medical Misinformation

Another example of how disinformation can reach an extent to which communities are being harmed is the Covid-19 pandemic. While podcasts can serve as a valuable platform for information and discussion, they have also been used to spread inaccurate or unverified claims related to the pandemic. Podcasts, with their diverse range of topics and hosts, are another avenue for the spread of COVID-19 misinformation. Some podcasters have used their platforms to amplify fringe theories and pseudoscientific claims, often presented as credible information. The relaxed and conversational nature of podcasts can make false information sound more convincing. As a result, podcast listeners are exposed to a wide array of information, as mentioned previously, distinguishing between reliable sources and misinformation can be challenging.

Previous studies have explored similar subject areas, but not focused on the expanding platform of what we define as podcasts. For example, a study on “COVID-19 vaccine disinformation on YouTube: analysis of a viewing network”, by Calvo et al. focuses on analyzing YouTube to trace recommended content and the spread of medical misinformation surrounding COVID-19. This study finds that the misinformation about COVID-19 spread via YouTube, often “aim to motivate people not to be vaccinated and to take action against the sanitary

measures enacted by the various governmental institutions” (Calvo et al., 2022 pg 233). Additionally, these users are trying to persuade their audiences and manipulate them using ideological and economic objectives (Calvo et al., 2022 pg 233). The study points out that the YouTube videos that they analyze often use short and simple explanations for medical solutions that are false and baseless. Ultimately increasing the dissemination of false information and vaccination hesitancy among the audiences (Calvo et al., 2022 pg 233).

Additionally, claims were made about the origination of the COVID-19 virus and ultimately placed blame on China. With Trump supporting these claims and blaming the virus on the Chinese community, this accusation caused many people to feel and act hostile towards China, Chinese Americans, and other Asians in America during this time. This misinformation and disinformation worked hand in hand to not only cause civil unrest and distrust towards the medical officials and government, but it also aimed violence, hatred, and hostility towards a community.

The spread of disinformation and conspiracies can be extremely harmful, especially when rooted in prejudices and harmful ideologies. We see that having power is an extremely common factor at play when spreading information. But how do we know if sources are validated and why is the podcast industry different from other platforms like radio?

Comparison of Radio and News Validity

The podcasting landscape has become a fertile ground for information sharing, both credible and dubious, often flying under the radar of rigorous fact-checking and editorial oversight that traditional news outlets are known for. This can be attributed to the relatively low barriers to entry in the podcasting world. Anyone with an internet connection and a microphone

can create and share content, which has democratized information-sharing but also made it easier for unverified or misleading information to find its way into the public domain.

While established news outlets have editorial processes, professional fact-checkers, and editorial standards in place, podcasting doesn't always receive the same level of scrutiny. This allows various voices and perspectives to emerge but also makes it challenging for listeners to discern the credibility of the information they encounter. As mentioned previously power and platform play a huge role in positioning information as credible or not. In addition to the previous study, finding results that indicate the spread of medical misinformation via YouTube is an urgent issue at the forefront of our public sphere. It also found that “The actors in the videos cultivate an image of independence in the face of supposed powers that seek to silence their discourse” (Calvo et al., 2022 pg 232) indicating that the hosts of said platforms, whether that be podcasts or not, are using their powers to silence counter-arguments or anything used to invalidate their claims. This could be done by positioning themselves as a medical professional, as someone knowledgeable to be certified in a specific area of expertise, or just by having a large following (Calvo et al., 2022 pg 231).

The use of language and surrounding discourses of political disinformation, such as power, credibility, manipulation, profit, exposure, susceptibility, etc. play subsequent roles in disseminating political misinformation within the public sphere. Before beginning the methodology, it's important to acknowledge and learn about podcasts as a medium for spreading misinformation online.

Podcasts as a Medium for Spreading Misinformation

This section will introduce the methods by which content will be collected. The data collected will emphasize the specific spread of political disinformation by analyzing quotes and transcripts from podcasts that touch on subjects introduced in the subsections prior. It will look at data comparing political polarization before COVID and the 2020 election and leading to polarization and the disbursement of misinformation. It will focus on the effects that these theories have on society and the public sphere as well.

In this analysis, we will explore podcast content and incidents where misinformation has been present, and determine if these media sources have acted as catalysts for heightening tensions and sparking civil unrest within the political and public spheres. As stated much earlier, the focus remains on podcasts over other platforms like TikTok or social media because of the limited podcast research and increasing audience that podcasts are engaging. We will begin by examining instances from podcasts, specifically those addressing the 2020 election, as well as podcasts that may have played a part in disseminating medical misinformation during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we will explore the domain of conspiracy theories, where we examine if they have played a role in the proliferation of misinformation or have been wielded as a tool to legitimize false news and claims.

In the realm of conspiracy theories, we will explore them specifically to understand the conspiracy's role surrounding the 2020 election and electoral candidates. Moreover, I also plan to touch upon theories linked to COVID-19, which fueled misinformation and negatively impacted public trust in medical professionals during a critical time. Through this analysis, the aim is to shed light on the multifaceted ways in which misinformation has been spread via podcasting,

may have intertwined to influence public discourse and, at times, contribute to societal tensions and unrest.

Previous studies are exploring ways in which media as a whole is used as a vehicle for sharing information. Additionally, many studies are focused on examining the effects of media on social cognition and personal biases. Exploring podcasts is something that so far, has very limited research, especially due to how podcasts are a largely unregulated media platform with an array of accessible content and creative opportunities. I will draw on subjects such as motivated reasoning, selective exposure, credibility and susceptibility, demographics, and accessibility, in addition to other important factors.

Therefore, we explore the use of podcasts as a medium for propagating misinformation (both medical and political) and conspiracy amongst audiences to inhibit political unrest to understand further how we might move forward with possible methods to combat this.

Methodology

Throughout my research, I will implement a content analysis methodology to dig deeper into the language and the strategies used to relay disinformation or partisan media within podcasts. The goal of this analysis was to assess whether this content's presence contributed to the spread of political disinformation, aiding the increase in polarization and political misconceptions. To begin, I formulated a timeline outlining the steps for selecting the media and data used in my content analysis. More specifically, I initially chose to analyze the most relevant episodes from popular right-wing and left-wing podcasters. But due to time restrictions, I chose to focus solely on one; The Ben Shapiro Show podcast and YouTube channel. I chose to focus on Ben Shapiro's podcast as it is one of the most popular right-wing commentary podcasts in the

United States, with charts showing it ranked as the 17th most popular podcast in the third quarter of 2023 and by the fourth quarter it was in the top 10 podcasts, being ranked at number 9 most popular in 2023 (Edison Research, 2024).

This medium is important to explore because of the rising presence of podcasts within the modern media landscape, especially considering how individuals can discuss any topic of their choosing, there isn't much prior research that exists on podcasts and their implications on disinformation, media literacy, and credibility. We are also unsure of how effective podcasts are at relaying critical information to their audiences, as well as what impacts this has on the viewers and society as a whole. This study is urgent, relevant, and important to the future of the political atmosphere and media landscape because of these concerns.

This research aims to research podcasts spreading misinformation and polarization, with a focus on Ben Shapiro, to determine if Ben Shapiro had a role in spreading disinformation through his podcast, The Ben Shapiro Show, potentially causing civil unrest and furthering political polarization. Therefore, removing my personal biases and expectations from these methods is essential to producing nonpartisan and unbiased research practices.

I collected comments from the most relevant podcast episodes each month, within the timeline of November 2020 to February 2021. These were chosen by applying the filter "most relevant" to the podcast comment section, which filtered and put the most popular comments to the top of the screen and coordinated them by the number of likes they received. I then determined which comments were more relevant to this study specifically, by looking for comments with keywords like, "Fact," "Election," "Freedom," "Manipulation," "Misdirection," "Lie," "Media," "Democrats," and "Stolen." or any that fit best into any of these categories: election fraud, government distrust, polarization, misinformation/distrust in the media,

conformity, critiquing democracy, accountability (or any comments that were denying accountability), aggression (and any comments that stood out as dismantling aggression in any way). These themes are used to organize the comments collected and are referenced more frequently as I continue to analyze the contents themes.

Upon listening to each podcast, to determine the spread of misinformation, I evaluated the language, content, and made efforts to fact-check any outstanding claims. While also looking at the impacts they may have had on viewers and society as a whole, indicators such as the audience's comments determine the intentions and residing effects the content had on the audience.

Looking at the podcast's content during this timeline will give more insight as to what information was being shared, to what extent and frequency each topic was brought up, and to what degree the audience was impacted. I chose this timeline because certain events and ongoing societal pressures such as the presidential election, Covid-19, and the Black Lives Matter movement, were all adding tensions within the United States political atmosphere. Additionally, there was quite a bit of uproar about the presidency and the insurrection of the capital that occurred on January 6th, 2021. The goal of including this is to attempt to uncover some of the factors that may have influenced the emotional turmoil, and increased polarization or radicalization of political parties within the country at the time. Therefore, I found it necessary to examine content within a timeline that included before and after the occurrence of the events of January 6th to understand if podcast content had a role in inciting political unrest and spreading disinformation amongst the public.

To begin the content collection, I selected the most relevant podcast episodes from The Ben Shapiro Show within this timeline, and collected between 1-4 episodes per month. The

content from November 2020 to February 2021 provides a visual into what topics were relevant at the time. Examining the content within commentary podcasts and how they frame political and medical information gave much insight as to what the country's political mindset was during this time, as well as showing what media was most popular and why.

For this research, I chose to focus specifically on commentary podcasts because they are most likely to touch on and gain traction for commenting on recent or trending topics. The approach may be political, medical, informative, empowering, comedic, emotional, harmful, etc. All content will be inherently political, whether it is intended to be such or not. While the content was important; comprehending the framing, intentions, and strategies employed is important as well because they played a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of the content and communicating with the audience. Additionally, this will allow us to clarify if podcast media is effectively spreading disinformation, misinformation, or fake news to the public, aiding misconceptions, and leading to political and civil unrest.

Procedure

As stated before, the right-wing podcast that I examined was The Ben Shapiro Show. Examining multiple commentary podcasts, specifically from different political views would ensure a diverse set of information and perspectives, and allow me to explore the spread of disinformation in terms of political party as well, although doing so would require much more time which I was limited by, therefore it would be beneficial for further research to be done looking into more diversified podcast content.

To complete the research I retrieved comments from the comment section under relevant podcast episodes on Ben Shapiro's YouTube channel, choosing comments that were most popular

and relevant to the content in the podcast, and color-coordinated the content into certain categories or themes. The organization of my research is extremely important in this case as it allows for an easier understanding of the impacts and relevance of political commentary podcasts. The categories I will be dividing them into will be determined by theme.

To ensure I maintained organization while listening to each podcast, I took note of themes and general topics of the episodes to be able to easily reflect on what each episode focused on. This helped me summarize the episodes to easily reflect on their content. But most importantly, from each episode I visited the comment section under the YouTube video and filtered the comments by “most liked”. I then scrolled through the comments and chose comments that included any of the following themes: Election fraud, Government distrust, Polarization, Misinformation/Media Distrust, Conformity/Herd Mentality, Critiquing Democracy or Politicians, Accountability or outstanding Positive Language, and Aggressive or Violent Language.

The data in this study was collected from the Ben Shapiro Show’s comment section on YouTube and each dataset aims to further examine the themes during the time it was recorded. When collecting data from 9 videos over the span of these four months, I gathered 4-6 comments per video, giving me a total of 45 comments to analyze. I aimed to listen to at least 2 episodes per month to ensure balance and variety in content, but there were cases where I chose to listen to more or less due to lack of or increase in the episodes’ relevance. Below is a table that helps break down how many episodes I retrieved per month.

Table 1: Episode to Month breakdown:

Month	Episodes	Comments
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November 2020	1	5
December 2020	2	11
January 2021	2	10
February 2021	4	19

Analyzing the frequency of collected data reveals a notable trend: as the months progressed, both the number of relevant episodes and comments increased. This trend will be further scrutinized in the analysis but is crucial for understanding my methodology. For instance, each month, I focused on watching episodes that were most pertinent to my areas of interest: political polarization, the January 6th insurrection, and misinformation. The increase in collected data underscores the growing prominence of these themes over time.

When selecting episodes, I targeted keywords like "Fact," "Election," "Freedom," "Manipulation," "Misdirection," "Lie," "Media," "Democrats," and "Stolen." Additionally, I specifically prioritized episodes related to January 6th, regardless of whether these keywords appeared in their titles. However, it was time-consuming to narrow down the episode selection due to numerous titles containing these keywords but lacking relevance to my study. I was only able to narrow down my selection of episodes by watching all episodes with these keywords in their titles to see which episodes had the most relevant content. This allowed me to filter through the episodes and keep only the most related content for my study.

The episodes that I analyzed for this study included:

1136: “Who Really Rigged The Election”

1148: “Why Americans Have Election Trust Issues”

1157: “Medias Next Big Lie”

1168: “The Worst Day in Modern American Political History”

1175: “The Crusade Against Freedom of Thought”

1188: “The Fact Checkers are Full of S#!t”

1189: “Democrats Break All The Rules”

1190: “You Are Being Manipulated”

1196: “The Magical Misdirection of The Media”

As stated before, I collected between 4-6 comments per video, placing me at 45 comments total, which I then categorized by theme and month in a spreadsheet. Doing this allowed me to see the frequency of themes per month and better understand the audience's mentality or viewpoints each month. I then broke down the theme by month to better visualize the frequency, allowing me to decipher which trends were most common and during what period. This allowed me to connect current events and the audience's perspectives and reactions to these topics.

I then counted the frequency of comment themes within each month to aid my analysis and determine quantitative results behind the information shared and spread via podcasts. This was to show what topics or themes were most relevant each month and help me determine if there was any increase or decrease in certain topics as the months continued. The following table includes the frequency of themes as the months progressed.

Table 2: Frequency of Themes Per Month:

	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021
Election Fraud		3		2
Government	1		3	1
Polarization	1			3
Misinfo/distrust in Media		2		2
Conformity		1		2
Critiquing Democrats/Democracy	3	5	3	7
Accountability/lack of			2	1
Aggression (Language)	1		1	

While reviewing this data, we move into analyzing the meaning of frequency and what that might imply for the relevance of themes and the spread of ideas or information during this time. Whether they were extreme or passive, the repetitive nature of these themes emphasizes their significance to the audience. The analysis will delve deeper into what is being said, how the audience is reacting to the podcast content, and what this research means in a broader sense.

When analyzing the content for misinformation and disinformation, I found that there were many challenges in doing so. Ben Shapiro is very adamant about providing content whether that is through interviews, audio clips from the news, studies or even just quotes, to support any and all of his claims. When fact-checking his claims, I found there was nothing outstanding to categorize as misinformation. What I did observe is that many of his remarks utilize satire or

sarcasm, saying things that may be or harmful, but because he's being satirical it is difficult to say that he is purposely spreading misinformation. Mostly because these claims may or may not be interpreted as factual statements, but this is up to interpretation as anything Shapiro says will be retained and spread differently for each listener, it is completely dependent upon the listeners interpretation.

For example, in episode 1175, he argues that, every breaking news [platform] suggested that Trump was a white supremacist, forwarding white supremacy, "repeating this over and over, that he was a threat to democracy" (Shapiro, 2021) and then continued to provide content from news outlets where reporters or commenters were calling Trump a white supremacist. While he supports his statement with evidence, it could be understood as a very generalized claim and lead to media distrust, but it doesn't incite or disseminate any blatant misinformation because it is true that media outlets were doing this.

Additionally, he says things that may be interpreted as more extreme or harmful such as, "...you have one half of the country that would like to excise the other half of the country" (Shapiro, 2021) In saying such things, we saw the comment sections get more aggressive or extreme as well, but it's difficult to determine if the audience believed this statement as true or accurate.

This was a common occurrence within the podcast's content. Much of Shapiro's claims were supported or just satirical. So despite them bordering false information or harmful claims that may incite false information, because I was not focusing on the use of satire in spreading misconceptions and fake news, and because his language, satire and humor are interpreted differently based on the viewers perception and understandings, there was no determining if the audience interpreted his statements as true or false or just humorous.

Analysis

Before doing this research, I was interested in examining how the content from the Ben Shapiro Show led to further political misinformation being spread, as well as how political polarization was increasing and if it was due to the content within the podcasts. However, while listening to Ben Shapiro's Podcasts, it became very clear that Shapiro is determined to keep his content free of any misinformation. Throughout the episodes, he would state that his accusations and information are not baseless and that he doesn't make claims or provide information unless he has sources to back it up.

More often than not, Shapiro made an effort to state his sources whenever he made a claim. With his fact-checking and sources being so apparent, it was difficult to analyze his content on spreading misinformation. What Shapiro tends to do is rephrase the content from news outlets to present it from a conservative perspective. In doing so many of his episode titles come across as urgent or emotionally provoking for conservatives. So how does this draw attention to his content? A study done by NPR found that stories published by The Daily Wire - the website founded by Ben Shapiro - “received more likes, shares, and comments on Facebook than any other news publisher by a wide margin” (NPR, 2021). Having such an extreme reach, one more than any news source puts into perspective the extent of Ben Shapiro's influence in society as a whole. Researchers are describing Ben Shapiro's media outlets to be creating a “rapidly expanding, cost-efficient media empire — one that experts worry may be furthering polarization in the United States” (NPR, 2021).

This is a valid concern; to scrutinize the content and messages of any influential figure, given their substantial reach, allows one to gauge how audiences were interpreting the content.

To do this, I focused on Ben Shapiro's content and directed my attention to the comment sections of his podcast on YouTube. This shift allowed me to focus on both the themes of the podcast episodes and the prevailing themes within the comments. By doing so, I aimed to determine if the audience was experiencing increased radicalization or polarization over the course of these four months.

Before delving into the analysis of quotes, it's essential to examine the frequency of episode relevance (Table 1) and the occurrence of themes per month (Table 2). These tables reveal a notable trend: as the months progressed, there was a substantial increase in relevant content available for this study. From November 2020 to February 2021, the number of comments collected per month nearly quadrupled. This increase can be attributed to the evolving focus of podcast content, which initially centered around election coverage and critiques of political candidates - much of this was crucial for understanding the political climate, but wasn't necessary for this study. As demonstrated in the tables, the scope of content collection expanded significantly from November to December and January, aligning with its increased relevance to the research objectives.

November

In November, the collected comments were predominantly centered on critiquing democracy or expressing concerns about the election outcome. However, a few comments also exhibited themes of government distrust, polarization, or aggression. Below are examples of comments that either express apprehension about the election or criticize the Democratic Party.

"When I die I want "don't let me vote Democrat" on my tombstone"

@oz-jt7sg - 3 years ago

"This is so insane man. I'm absolutely terrified for the future if Biden actually wins. I pray for us all."

@micguardino345 - 3 years ago

"Just like to point out that there are 70 million pissed Republicans and not one city is on fire."

@williamcao03 - 3 years ago

"It's becoming increasingly overwhelming to constantly worry about the state of my country"

@Bunzie311 - 3 years ago

Comments like these, or with similar mindsets, were prevalent in the comment sections in November. While occasional outlying comments seemed to be neutral on the topic of the Democratic Party or the election, they were not enough to represent the general stance of Shapiro's audience. It's worth noting that Shapiro attracts viewers from both the right and left wings, as evidenced by comments from Democrats or left-leaning individuals expressing support for his straightforward reporting.

Additionally, other major themes observed in November included aggression, some polarization, and government distrust. Here are some examples of these themes:

"It's time to repudiate all government and take a stand for God's kingdom."

@josmoyo - 3 years ago

This comment exemplifies a sense of government distrust, with the user expressing a belief that it's time to cease trusting, adhering to the rules of, and accepting the government. Feelings like this were not uncommon, particularly with the podcast's focus being election fraud, titled "Who Really Rigged The Election" (episode 1136), led to a majority of the comments critiquing democrats and expressing distrust in the media or government. As my analysis continued aggressive language or themes became more prevalent in the comments:

"Just spent the last 10 minutes yelling at my grandma for voting for Joe Biden..... Then after leaving the cemetery I went and got breakfast."

@jay8554 - 3 years ago

This comment stood out to me as more aggressive but also a satirical way of expressing polarization. Initially I found it interesting to express aggression and polarization via humor, this comment was one of the first indicators of more aggressive polarizing comments that I found when beginning this study. Although, while continuing to listen to the podcasts, humor and satire were often used to jab at or critique politicians and political parties or occurrences, so this became much more common in the comments as well.

In doing the analysis I find it necessary to identify when the titles of the podcasts may be misleading or pose as clickbait. For example, episode 1136: "Who Really Rigged The Election", is clearly focusing the content on the topic of election fraud, but using language like this implies

to the audience that the election was definitely rigged or “stolen”. In spreading a message like this, it only furthers this belief that this is factual and actually happened, which is why there is concern for his content spreading misinformation and polarization. Whether or not he states in the episode who “rigged” the election, it implied that election rigging happened, which is a dangerous claim and leads to mistrust and unrest among the public and within the political atmosphere.

December

This was evident because as I moved into December I was seeing more comments displaying more distrust in the government but also the media, critiquing the democratic party, or still on the topic of election fraud. In addition to these themes, I did begin to see some users pointing out conformity;

"Well if they didn't keep screaming it in our faces some people might think for themselves. That might lead to people learning anything and then the government is screwed. Gotta keep the cattle scared and stupid."

@chaserohwedder8852 - 3 years ago

This comment from episode 1157: “Medias Next Big Lie ”, stood out to me because it touched on government distrust but also the phenomenon of herd mentality. Stating how once people learn or become more educated in certain fields or become more media literate, they won't so easily abide by the rules of the government. It implies that we're currently being misled and fed false information, inhibiting further distrust. While referring to the public as cattle, it

emphasizes that herd mentality that many believe they are not a part of or try to avoid, but this topic is often brought up by both the left and right. When there are extremists on either end, neither believing they are victims in this mentality, it is much more difficult for the opposing ends to have progressive conversations, get them out of these rabbit holes, or even see things from a different perspective. This is one way in which the political polarization becomes more extreme within both parties and is something I continued to examine as the search continued.

Additionally, the title “Medias next Big Lie” implies that the media is continuously lying to us. This isn't to say that everything in the media is factual or should be trusted 100% of the time, but to impose a blatant distrust of media onto the audience, does little to keep people approaching content with an open mindset. If all of his 6.84 million YouTube followers decided to stop trusting any media that wasn't from Shapiro himself, this would create a very single minded, closed off community, with an ever growing distrust in the news and other sources of information. Ultimately, making it increasingly difficult to relay information from credible sources, or to share ideas and opinions from different views in a constructive and effective way.

January

In January's podcasts, I expected to see quite a bit more aggression, anger, or defensiveness from the audience due to the January 6th insurrection. While there were comments that stood out as aggressive critiques of left leaning or democratic politicians, there was little defense for the insurrection. The episode that primarily focused on these events was titled, ““The Worst Day in Modern American Political History” (ep. 1168). Seeing this title before listening to the episode, I could already tell that the perspectives that Shapiro will be sharing, may be quite a ways away from what I predicted.

Throughout this episode Ben Shapiro made it clear to emphasize how horrible the crimes on January 6th were, that something like this should have never happened and that justice must be served. Saying things like, "Everything that happened was awful and terrible, these rioters not protesters, this is not justified" (ep. 1168) Furthering that criminals should go to jail, this was an evil act, was damaging to democracy, and in many ways it was the worst thing to happen to the U.S.A. since the attacks on September 11th. Additionally, the comments reflected similar opinions, some just as surprised as me;

"No matter if you are red or blue, Rioting and incidents such as these deserve judgment and punishment"

@accidentallyaj5138 - 3 years ago"

"Let's admit it. We all thought he was going to defend that shit. And he didnt, it says alot."

@_alltheseprettylights_ - 3 years ago

Although, just because the general viewer didnt agree with the violence and events on January 6th, there was still substantial aggression towards democratic politicians, and some commenters attempted to place the blame on the democratic party.

"Kamala Harris also literally said, ""they should not stop"", when talking about the domestic terrorist riots."

@loganford9537 - 3 years ago"

When looking at the most apparent themes during January, I found that more often than not, users were taking accountability or expressing shame and disappointment for the American government or politicians and concern for the public, touching on themes like conformity and the herd mentality.

"Where's the diversity in a society where everyone thinks the same, and those who think the other way are ostracized in every way possible?"

@ironsalmon784 - 3 years Ago

"yep, i tried it earlier, I give up... You can't make them think... They are too far gone now. They can thank their precious media and celebrities for their cognitive dissonance."

@prototype9904 - 3 years ago"

This is not what I predicted to find when looking at the audiences' perspectives of January 6th, although to find that the audience was not in support of the violence and insurrection, poses more questions of the audience's general positioning on right-wing politics and opinions. It seemed to be that Shapiro's audience wasn't as extreme as someone who might be a Joe Rogan fan, but they are conservative in ways that might not be as progressive compared to the left. For the most part, the audience focuses on supporting Shapiro, preferring his straightforward, factual and fast way of presenting information, while using humor to call out things or topics they find most important or relevant. Doing more specific research of Ben Shapiro's audience to find their political positioning and opinions would be better for answering questions surrounding their perspectives as a whole. For this research I continue to focus on how

they are receiving the information provided for them from the Ben Shapiro Show, and found that they are generally in agreement with what Ben Shapiro says.

February

Transitioning into February, nearly all themes were represented, with the most prevalent being polarization and criticism of democracy or Democratic leaders/politicians. Direct aggression or violence was less common, though certain comments that fell in other subject areas could be considered aggressive as well due to their language, but to ensure a clear distinction in themes they were not included. Here are some of the most polarizing comments:

"Springsteen: "red vs blue.... freedom vs fear." Could NOT have said it better myself."

@mattsmith3872 - 3 years ago

"We have some neighbors that are very similar. They loved us for years and then found out that we had voted for Trump and now they won't even look at us. Nothing has changed, they just found out our political views which we have every right to as they do as well. It's absolutely ridiculous."

@kimscott7269 - 3 years ago

"Absurdity is a dish best served Democratically."

@grimhammer00 - 3 years ago

These comments highlight the deeply polarized mindset prevalent in many individuals, as evidenced by the use of adversarial language such as "vs." and expressions of societal disconnection. Such polarization undermines efforts to foster constructive dialogue between opposing parties. Moreover, this polarization may stem, in part, from the extreme vilification of political figures. When individuals perceive politicians from opposing parties as monstrous, they are more likely to judge supporters of those politicians accordingly. The episode titles from this month, including "The Fact Checkers are Full of S#!t," "Democrats Break All The Rules," "You Are Being Manipulated," and "The Magical Misdirection of The Media," underscore a focus on themes like misinformation and distrust in government, politicians, and the media. The following comments are examples of how the audience responded to the Democratic Party and politicians.

"Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they are not out to get me. Lol"

@scottmoore6131 - 3 years ago

"What is the correct spelling of the word sociopath in the year 2021? ALEXANDRIA OCASIO CORTEZ."

@92naz32 - 3 years ago

"I'll repeat myself. AoC is legitimately insane. How is she in the Government... Ohhhhhh wait."

@kyrollos777 - 3 years ago

Both comments employ notably strong language to criticize Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, underscoring the intensity of sentiment against her. Furthermore, the insinuation that supporters

of hers must be deemed insane for backing her involvement in government suggests a dismissive attitude towards her supporters. However, it's worth noting that some comments expressed less extreme viewpoints.

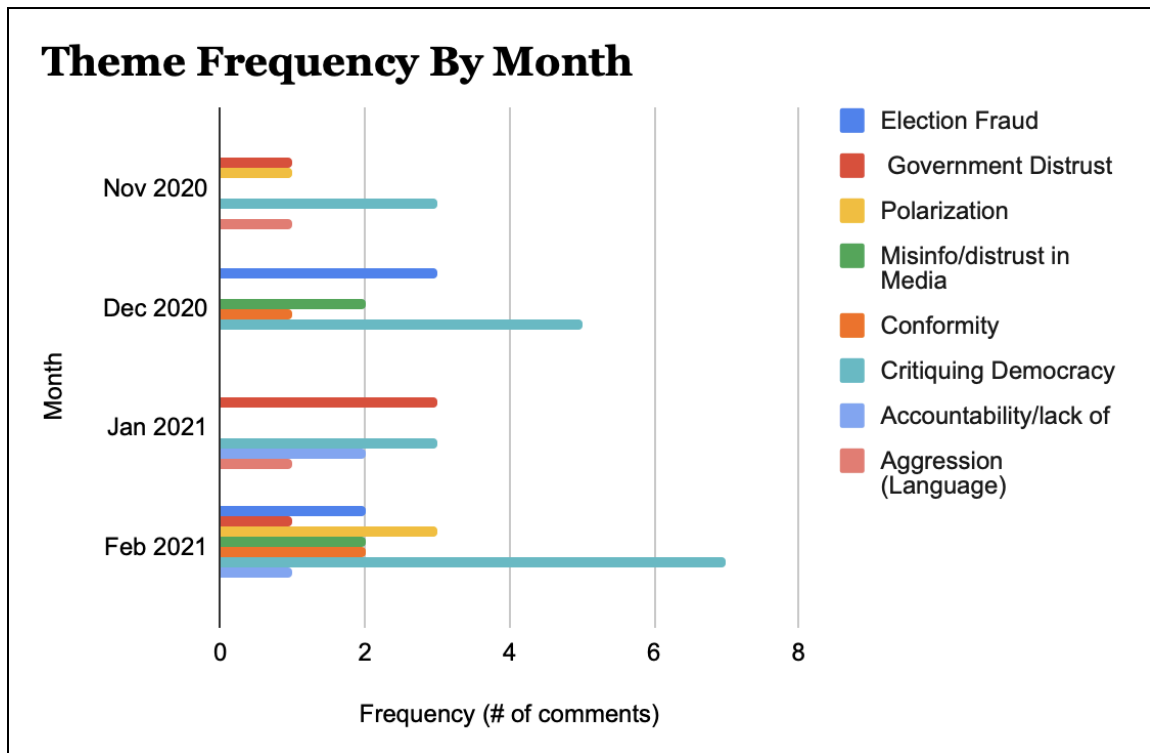
"I'm 47. In my entire life, I don't recall the democrats ever being this morally corrupt."

@vonmilash823 - 3 years ago

In February, the podcasts predominantly centered on mistrust in the media and the perceived lack of validity from sources. Shapiro articulated his apprehensions regarding the public's consumption of false information, highlighting his belief that "blue America" exerts control over various platforms, institutions, and structures in the US. He suggested that this control is utilized to reshape narratives and manipulate the concept of free speech, emphasizing the notion that "you are being manipulated" (Shapiro, 2021). Next, we'll focus on limitations, the broader implications of these findings for this study, and their significance for society and future media studies.

This graphic shows the levels of frequency in themes per month, showing what topics were discussed most or least each month allows us to visualize how the content may have influenced the newsworthiness and relevance of certain topics and how polarization or distrust in the media or government changed over time.

Exhibit III: Theme & Frequency By Month Chart



Discussion

During the analysis of comments from The Ben Shapiro Show, it became clear that Shapiro prioritizes fact-checking and verification to avoid disseminating fake news and misinformation. He supports his claims with context, interviews, and research, demonstrating a commitment to accuracy. However, it's crucial to note that his content is often presented from a conservative standpoint. Despite his efforts to maintain accuracy, Shapiro's influence as a prominent conservative columnist and media figure raises questions about the potential impact of his content on misinformation and polarization within American society.

As previously mentioned, detecting misinformation in The Ben Shapiro Show proved challenging due to the extensive use of sources and context to support claims, aligning with Shapiro's emphasis on factual accuracy to combat misinformation. However, it's important to

note that Shapiro's language tends to be strongly anti-Democrat, and his personal or political opinions often permeate the narratives he presents. Additionally, he frequently exaggerates and uses satire to captivate the audience's attention. An observed trend is that as Shapiro's rhetoric becomes more radical, so does the reaction of his audience. For instance, episodes such as "The Fact Checkers are Full of S#!t" and "Democrats Break All The Rules" demonstrated Shapiro's tendency to vilify the Democratic Party, particularly targeting figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These episodes heightened occurrences of aggressive language and polarization in the comment sections, indicating the influence of Shapiro's rhetoric on his audience's sentiments.

In November, episodes of The Ben Shapiro Show primarily discussed election fraud, reflecting the topic's relevance at the time. However, even as Shapiro's focus shifted away from this issue in the following months, it remained a significant point of interest for the audience. This underscores the influential role Shapiro plays in shaping popular news and topics of interest due to his large platform. Given this influence, it is crucial for Shapiro to exercise caution in making statements, particularly those that may be perceived as harsh or irrational. However, it's notable that Shapiro's episode titles often prioritize grabbing public attention over ensuring accuracy or preventing misinformation. Titles like "Who Really Rigged The Election" and "The Fact Checkers are Full of S#!t" are highly divisive and contribute to polarization and distrust in the media and government. While controversial titles may attract more viewers, they also increase political divides and fuel political unrest.

It's crucial to recognize that despite the potentially negative consequences of controversial titles and content, individuals like Shapiro stand to profit from increased viewership and subscriber numbers. This highlights the importance of considering how

politicians and podcasters may leverage controversy and virality to enhance their financial gain through popularity and media coverage. Titles such as "Democrats Break All The Rules" can be particularly harmful as they exacerbate partisan divisions, regardless of the creator's intentions. Media literacy, education, and individual susceptibility are significant factors in determining one's vulnerability to polarization and misinformation. By using provocative titles, Shapiro prompts his large subscriber base to contemplate statements like "Democrats break all the rules," whether or not such claims are accurate or generalized in the slightest.

Throughout the research, it became evident that themes evolved over time. In November, discussions in the comment sections largely revolved around government critique and democratic practices, a trend that persisted throughout the months. Despite fluctuations in other themes, such as increased polarization, aggression remained prominent, particularly in November and January. Though in January and February there was an increase in comments with extreme or vulgar language. Misinformation emerged as a recurring theme in December and February, indicating heightened audience focus on this issue. These findings show the significant role of podcasts in shaping media landscapes and determining news relevance and popularity, especially when the podcast host has such an extreme reach.

Initially, I had intended to include multiple podcasters in my study. In addition to conservative podcasts, I had planned to incorporate nonpartisan podcasts such as The NPR Politics Podcast to provide a balanced perspective on current events and themes. I intended to include democratic podcasts such as Pod Save America, hosted by former Obama administration staff, and other left-leaning podcasts like Democracy That Delivers or This Is Democracy.

By examining a range of political viewpoints, the aim was to compare how different ideologies disseminate information and contribute to political unrest or polarization in the United

States. However, due to time constraints and the extensive amount of content to analyze, pursuing this approach would have compromised the thoroughness of the study. Therefore, I opted to focus solely on the impact of one highly influential conservative podcaster, Ben Shapiro. The process of selecting relevant episodes for analysis was time-consuming, while the absence of transcripts necessitated listening to each episode in its entirety. These challenges added complexity to extracting relevant quotes and conducting the analysis.

While evidence regarding the spread of political misinformation through podcasts wasn't obtained in this study, the findings offer valuable insights for researchers exploring the influence of podcasts. Specifically, the study highlights how clickbait tactics can potentially contribute to the dissemination of false information, especially when they are extreme titles. Furthermore, it emphasizes the ability of influential figures with large platforms, like Ben Shapiro, to evoke specific emotions in their audience and shape perceptions of relevance and newsworthiness. These insights provide a foundation for further investigation into the mechanisms by which media influences public opinion and behavior.

Exploring how individuals, subjected to selective exposure, maintain, alter, or reinforce their political beliefs over time presents an intriguing avenue for research. Further studies focusing on highly influential podcasters such as Joe Rogan could provide valuable insights into the dissemination of conspiracy theories and misinformation through this medium. Despite my interest in analyzing *The Joe Rogan Experience*, practical constraints, including the extensive volume of episodes, each spanning nearly three hours, made it impractical within the confines of this study. However, investigating the relationship between podcast length and audience susceptibility to conformity poses another compelling area to study. Given the potentially extreme nature of Rogan's content, it prompts questions about whether prolonged exposure leads

his audience to adopt increasingly skeptical, conservative, or conspiratorial viewpoints subconsciously.

If given the opportunity to extend this research, I am interested in investigating podcasts that disseminate misinformation and delve into conspiracy theories. This topic is particularly important in the United States, especially with the impending presidential election, where such narratives contribute significantly to polarization and influence voter behavior. Considering the popularity of the Ben Shapiro Show, Shapiro's podcast audience amplifies the potential impact of his content on the public. Concerns arise when elements like clickbait, unequivocal language, or divisive statements are introduced, potentially exacerbating polarization and undermining societal cohesion.

Encountering limitations was inevitable, and I find it essential to address them transparently to provide context for my findings. Despite constraints such as not having the time or capabilities to listen to all podcast episodes during the time period chosen, collecting a limited amount of comments from the comment sections, and being unable to fact-check every quote of Shapiro due to time constraints, the study still offers valuable insights. Additionally, the inability to study multiple podcasters due to my time limitations poses concern for a lack of variety and the challenge of determining a correlation between media and audience behavior based on perception highlights the complexity of this topic. By acknowledging these limitations and presenting findings as perspectives for potential researchers to consider rather than definitive conclusions, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of media influence and poses an opportunity to continue this study.

Conclusion

After researching trends within the media landscape, podcast trends, and phenomenons of media literacy, polarization, misinformation, and susceptibility, this study aimed to answer the research questions: To what extent are podcasts aiding the spread of political misinformation and inhibiting social, civil, and political unrest? And are political podcasts furthering the severity of political polarization within the United States? However, this study did not find direct evidence of political misinformation spread through podcasts, it still underscores the potential impact of clickbait tactics, such as those employed by Shapiro, on polarization.

The study highlights the power of influential figures to shape audience emotions, perceptions of relevance, and newsworthiness. The thematic frequency within podcasts, like the focus on Election Fraud in November episodes, and media distrust in December and February, influence audience engagement and sentiment. Notably, extreme content was found to amplify audience extremity and frequency of response. Additionally, Shapiro's content, while not as radicalized as anticipated, had discernible effects on audience attitudes, demonstrating the significance of rhetoric in shaping public opinion and posing concern for influencing further political divide and polarization within American politics.

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Appendix

Exhibit I: Political Polarization In The United States In 1994

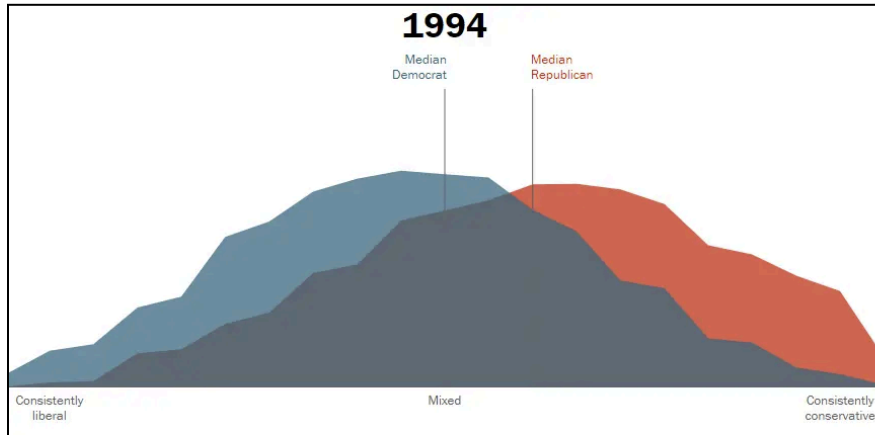


Exhibit II: Political Polarization In The United States In 2017

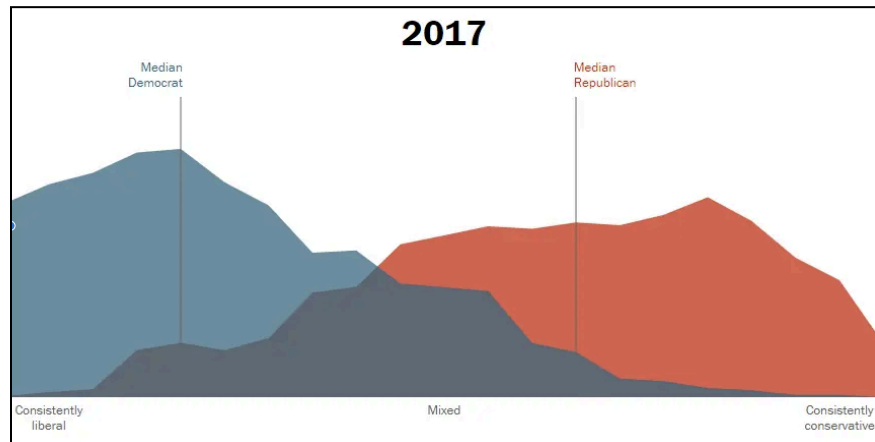


Exhibit III: Theme & Frequency By Month Chart

