Short:

Through web scraping, the researchers gathered political articles from four news sources’ websites. Using the Moral Foundations Dictionary, the researchers created a multi-level model in order to explore the relationship between political lean and moral alignment. The researchers concluded valence of the article’s words should also be considered in analysis.

Problem: The current abundance of political news sources paired with the prevalence of internet-based algorithms tailoring content for each consumer suggests that no two persons view identical perspectives regarding political events. While this new media ecosystem has grown, political opinions have diverged such that there are competing conceptions of objective truth. Researchers must investigate the structure of political news in order to understand the biases of different media outlets in this unprecedented political landscape.

Procedure: The researchers investigated news media within the framework of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) and the Moral Foundations Dictionary (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). MFT posits the existence of five sets of intuitions upon which humans base moral reasoning. Endorsements of the five foundations comprise an individual’s moral domain (Haidt & Graham, 2007). The Moral Foundations Dictionary (MFD) is a list of words structured such that higher occurrence of certain words in text or speech indicates greater endorsement of a particular foundation. Research suggests differences in endorsement among political liberals and conservatives. Specifically, liberals tend to prefer promoting individual liberty, while conservatives focus on group concerns. The investigators conducted analyses in order to determine if the moral endorsements of news organizations (and their biases) matched that of previous findings under MFT. They extracted the text of 3041 political articles from four notable U.S. news sources’ websites. Average valence of the words in accordance to the Warriner, Kuperman, and Brysbaert dictionary (2013) was calculated for each article in order to disambiguate positive versus negative MFD words. All words were processed through a stemming algorithm to remove affixes. Percentage occurrence for MFD words under all five foundations was calculated for each article.

Results: The researchers created a multi-level model in order to test if political lean of the news sources was a significant factor in endorsement of certain moral foundations. There were no notable or significant differences between different news sources in terms of endorsement. The researchers were, however, able to explore the best methods by which to conduct analyses of this kind.

Conclusions: While the researchers were unable to conclude political news media is biased in such a way that aligns with the assumptions of MFT, they were able to conclude that incorporating valence of articles’ words is an important consideration when conducting text analysis of news articles, especially given the apparent ambiguity of the MFD.