The background of the book cover features a complex network graph. It consists of numerous small red and blue circular nodes connected by thin, light-colored lines forming a web-like structure. Several larger, solid red and blue circles are positioned in the center and periphery, some with lines radiating from them to smaller nodes.

YOCHAI BENKLER,
ROBERT FARIS,
AND HAL ROBERTS

NETWORK PROPAGANDA

MANIPULATION,
DISINFORMATION, AND
RADICALIZATION
IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Network Propaganda

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*Manipulation, Disinformation,
and Radicalization
in American Politics*

YOCHAI BENKLER

ROBERT FARIS

HAL ROBERTS

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | vii |
| PART ONE: <i>Mapping Disorder</i> | |
| 1. Epistemic Crisis | 3 |
| 2. The Architecture of Our Discontent | 45 |
| 3. The Propaganda Feedback Loop | 75 |
| PART TWO: <i>Dynamics of Network Propaganda</i> | |
| 4. Immigration and Islamophobia: Breitbart and the Trump Party | 105 |
| 5. The Fox Diet | 145 |
| 6. Mainstream Media Failure Modes and Self-Healing in a Propaganda-Rich Environment | 189 |
| PART THREE: <i>The Usual Suspects</i> | |
| 7. The Propaganda Pipeline: Hacking the Core from the Periphery | 225 |
| 8. Are the Russians Coming? | 235 |
| 9. Mammon's Algorithm: Marketing, Manipulation, and Clickbait on Facebook | 269 |

PART FOUR: *Can Democracy Survive the Internet?*

| | |
|---|-----|
| 10. Polarization in American Politics | 295 |
| 11. The Origins of Asymmetry | 311 |
| 12. Can the Internet Survive Democracy? | 341 |
| 13. What Can Men Do Against Such Reckless Hate? | 351 |
| 14. Conclusion | 381 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 389 |
| <i>Index</i> | 443 |

The Architecture of Our Discontent

TENS OF THOUSANDS of entities form the complex ecosystem of American political media. Americans receive their political information from this diverse set of sources, which aim at a mix of broad and niche audiences. Although a growing proportion of the U.S. population uses Facebook and other social media as primary sources of news, a large portion, particularly those over 50 but even many who are younger, still rely on broadcast television and cable news.¹ Talk radio remains an important source of information and ideology for many Americans. Although the number of people who read newspapers and news magazines is shrinking, it remains significant, and political news is also brought to our attention by many other means, including face-to-face conversations in offline social networks, email, campaign advertising, social media, and family dinners.

To understand media and politics, we must understand the entire ecosystem: the outlets and influencers who form networks, the structure of networks, and the flow of information in networks. The increasing role of online platforms in shaping the media agenda is a challenge for political communications scholars and media observers. Researchers no longer have the convenience of simply looking at major news channels and newspapers to monitor the media agenda. And, conversely, a social-media-oriented strategy that only looks at Twitter or Facebook will miss much of what matters. We have to try to understand the interplay of broadcast news and newspapers with digital news outlets and blogs; of pundits, politicians, and personalities with large followings on social media, as well as the more distributed processes that occur in digital media. Some patterns of information flow emerge from organic, decentralized processes, and some are caused by intentional manipulation and marketing by centralized actors—most prominently political campaigns and state propaganda.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the architecture of political communication in America from the spring of 2015, when the 2016 presidential campaign kicked off, until the one-year anniversary of Donald Trump's presidency. We look separately at the structure of communication during the 2016 presidential election and the post-election period and document how that structure remained largely but not entirely stable during Trump's first year in office. In later chapters we complement this broad structural view with case studies that incorporate television and offer broader media coverage and more granular analysis. Here, we provide two types of maps for each period: an open web map, which describes the hyperlinking practices of online media producers on the web, and social media maps, which describe the content sharing practices of Twitter and Facebook users over the same period. These maps and the resulting analysis were developed using the Media Cloud platform and are based on the linking, tweeting, and sharing of just under four million political stories from over 40,000 online news sources. Media Cloud is an open platform for the analysis of online media that provides free access, through code, web tools, and data, to over 800 million stories from about 60,000 regularly crawled sources.²

Asymmetric Polarization in the 2016 Presidential Election

We present our data first as a series of network maps that describe news media sources and their relations to each other by different measures. We provide the more technical explanation of the methods, the data used to make these maps, and high-resolution images of each map in the online appendix.

The nodes, or circles, in each map, represent news sources. The size of each node represents its relative prominence by one of three measures. In the open web map, the node size represents the number of media sources that link to a site in the period the map describes. We think of these open-web links as expressions of judgment by online media producers about which sources are more influential as sources to cite. In the Twitter map, the size of the nodes represents the total number of tweets that shared stories from that site. In the Facebook map, the size of the nodes represents the total number of Facebook shares of stories on the site. As a rule of thumb, the sizes on the open web map are mostly determined by thousands of web publishers, those on the Twitter map are determined by millions of tweeters, and those on the Facebook map are determined by tens of millions of Facebook users.

The edges, or **links** between the nodes, are what give the network its architecture. They represent the relationships among the nodes. In the open web map, the architecture is defined by the hyperlinks between media sources. For any pair of media sources, the higher the number of stories on either site that link to the other site, the closer they are drawn together by the model. The structure of the Twitter maps is determined by the media source sharing patterns of Twitter users. In these, we create a link between two sites each time a single Twitter handle shares a story from each of those two sites on the same day. The intuitive interpretation is that if someone shares something from Breitbart and from the Daily Caller, that is an indication that Breitbart and the Daily Caller draw a common set of readers. The greater the number of accounts that tweet out links to the two sites, the closer the sites are on the map. Again, it is hardly surprising that more people who tweet out a Breitbart story will also tweet out a story on the Daily Caller or Fox News on the same day or that more people who tweet out a *New York Times* story will tweet a *Washington Post* story on the same day. Critically, the Twitter-derived networks give us the architecture of attention by politically engaged social media users, while the open web maps are based on the decisions of media producers. This provides us with two very different and important perspectives.

We also produce a second version of the Twitter-based network maps to highlight popularity on Facebook. The architecture of these maps is based on the same patterns of Twitter users in sharing links, but the nodes are sized by the number of shares on Facebook. We use the Twitter sharing architecture for the Facebook maps because the data Facebook made available at the time of this research to public researchers only provided total share numbers and not the network structure of those shares.

The similarity of the architecture of the open web maps compared to the Twitter maps strongly supports the robustness of our observations about that architecture. Particularly in evaluating the changes in 2017, the open web map offers us a measure of change that is insulated from the decisions of the social media companies. In this regard it offers us a baseline against which to evaluate changes in Facebook or Twitter prominence and the extent to which any changes reflect a change in algorithm or a change more generally in attention to that site.

The colors of the nodes reflect the partisanship of attention given to the media sources on Twitter. The partisanship is expressed in quintiles: red for the right, pink for the center-right, green for the center, light blue for the center-left, and dark blue for the left. The scores used to color the nodes

reflect the share of that site's stories tweeted by users who also retweeted either Hillary Clinton or Trump during the election. These colors therefore reflect the attention patterns of audiences, not analysis of content of the sites, and are entirely based on user behavior rather than researcher judgment. Dark blue sites draw attention in ratios of at least 4:1 from Clinton supporters; red sites 4:1 from Trump supporters. Green sites were retweeted more or less equally by supporters of each candidate. Light-blue sites draw 3:2 Clinton supporters, and pink draw 3:2 Trump supporters.

The Open Web: 2016 Election

This aggregate view of the open web link economy during the 2016 election period (Figure 2.1) shows a marked difference between the right and everything that is not the right. There is a clear overlap and interaction between the left, center-left, and center media outlets. These are all centered on the cluster of professional, mainstream journalism sites: the *Washington Post*, the *New York*

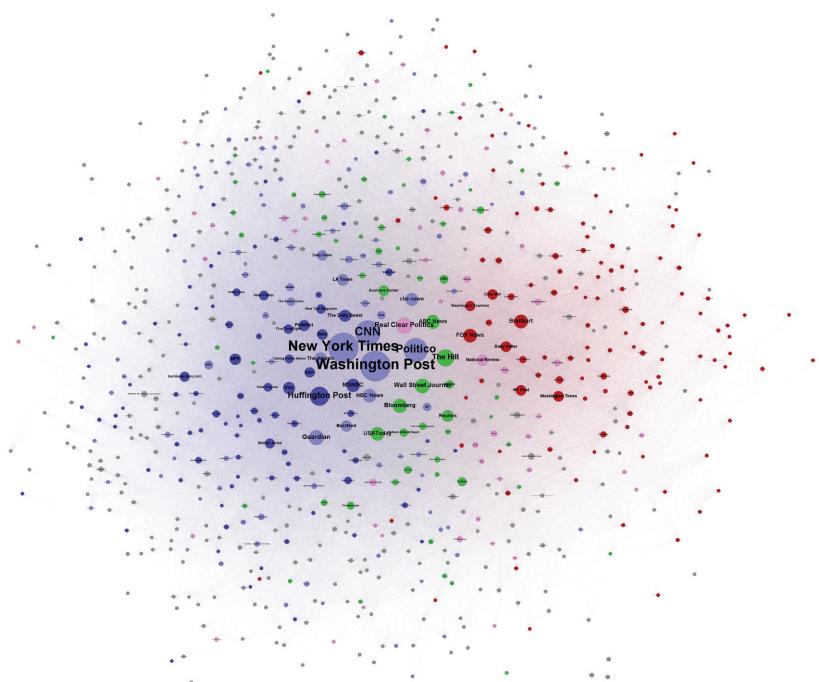


FIGURE 2.1 Network map of election media sources based on media inlinks.

Times, CNN, and *Politico* form a basin of attraction for outlets ranging from the editorially conservative *Wall Street Journal*, ABC News, *Business Week*, or *USA Today*, through the liberally oriented MSNBC. Zooming in (Figure 2.2), we see that the right side of the spectrum, by contrast, has Breitbart and Fox News as its basin of attraction, has almost no overlap with the center, and is sharply separated from the rest of the map. The other leading sites on the right include the *New York Post*, the *Washington Times*, the Daily Caller, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Washington Examiner*. There is almost no center-right, and what there is, anchored around the *National Review*, is distinct from the set of sites anchored by Fox and Breitbart on the right. The Huffington Post, the *Guardian*, and MSNBC receive the largest number of media inlinks on the left, joined by Mother Jones, Slate, Vox, and Salon.

The centrality of the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, CNN, *Politico*, and *The Hill* is determined not only by the large number of media inlinks they receive but also by the fact that they receive inlinks from across the network. The *Washington Post*, for example, is referenced by 5,100 unique media sources. The prominence of these large media sources can be explained in part by the reputation and authoritative voice of these long-standing institutions. But

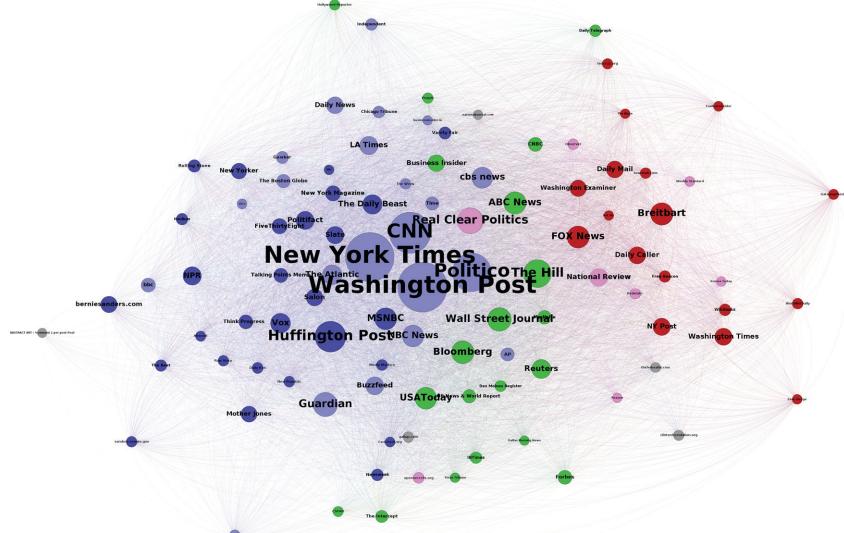


FIGURE 2.2 A closer look at the center of the open web media network map (Figure 2.1).

the sheer volume of stories produced by each outlet is another factor in these patterns. The *Washington Post* produced more than 50,000 stories over the 18-month election period, while the *New York Times*, CNN, and Huffington Post each published more than 30,000 stories.

The open web map—a reflection of which sources media producers deem worthy of citation—offers insights into the views of this elite cohort. As Table 2.1 suggests, this media-centric view attributes most of its attention and authority to professional media outlets, several with quite long institutional histories—legacy media, if you will. The roster of sites

Table 2.1 Top 50 media sources by media inlinks.

| Media Source | Media Inlinks | Media Source | Media Inlinks |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Washington Post | 5100 | HillaryClinton.com | 1561 |
| New York Times | 5026 | NPR | 1539 |
| CNN | 4131 | Los Angeles Times | 1536 |
| Politico | 3866 | PolitiFact | 1489 |
| YouTube | 3846 | BuzzFeed | 1476 |
| Huffington Post | 2963 | Yahoo! News | 1462 |
| The Hill | 2605 | National Review | 1445 |
| Wikipedia | 2437 | Slate | 1410 |
| Real Clear Politics | 2381 | New York Post | 1407 |
| Guardian | 2206 | Washington Times | 1396 |
| Wall Street Journal | 2128 | Daily Caller | 1390 |
| Facebook | 2085 | New York Daily News | 1354 |
| Business Week | 2018 | Daily Mail | 1352 |
| Breitbart | 1990 | Business Insider | 1348 |
| ABC News | 1981 | Salon | 1340 |
| Fox News | 1967 | BernieSanders.com | 1296 |
| MSNBC | 1925 | Washington Examiner | 1295 |
| USA Today | 1921 | Mother Jones | 1259 |
| NBC News | 1897 | New Yorker | 1210 |
| DonaldJTrump.com | 1858 | FiveThirtyEight | 1177 |
| CBS News | 1829 | New York Magazine | 1173 |
| Vox | 1702 | Amazon | 1096 |
| The Atlantic | 1680 | Talking Points Memo | 1052 |
| Daily Beast | 1666 | BBC | 1043 |
| Reuters | 1605 | Forbes | 1037 |

that receive many inlinks on the open web includes some newcomers, certainly, but does not mark an epistemic crisis. Both versions of the social media maps, from Twitter and Facebook, replicate some of this attention pattern but exhibit more asymmetry between the right and the rest of the media landscape. And the largest nodes in the Twitter and Facebook maps include substantially more sites that are both relatively newer and do not claim to follow professional journalistic norms. As we will see later, this difference sharpens further when we break the attention down by partisan quintile, rather than taking a broad view of the top sites across the entire spectrum.

Twitter in the 2016 Election Period

The Twitter-based media network map displays many parallels with the open web network map (Figure 2.3). The separation of the right-wing media sphere and the central role played by Breitbart during the election period are even

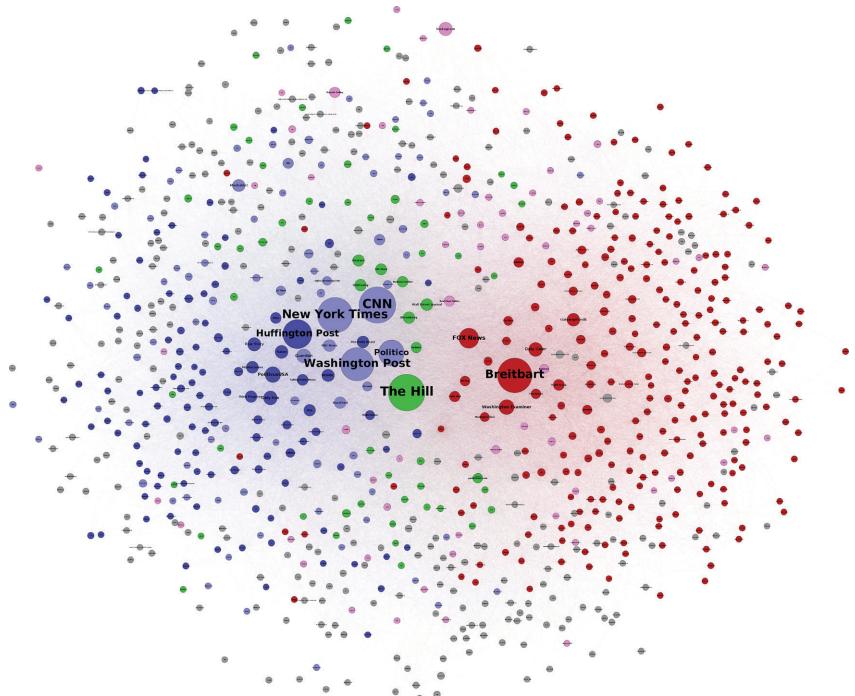


FIGURE 2.3 Network map based on Twitter media sharing, May 1, 2015–November 7, 2016. Nodes sized by number of Twitter shares.

more clearly visible. On Twitter, the left appears to be less integrated with the center-left, suggesting greater polarization on social media than on the open web both on the left and the right. The *New York Times*, CNN, *Washington Post*, and *Politico* remain as important nodes in the center-left along with *The Hill* in the center. The Huffington Post is still the most important media source on the left. On the right, Breitbart overshadows Fox News as the central node of conservative discourse on Twitter, but both rise in the overall hierarchy of sites across the ideological divide, Breitbart to fourth place and Fox to eighth (Table 2.2). Moreover, younger, more net-native, more frankly partisan sites gain significantly in prominence. On the left, Daily Kos, Politicus USA, Raw Story, and Salon gain visibility relative to their place in the link economy. On the right, the *New York Post* and *Washington Times* lose ground, surpassed by the Daily Caller and a newfound prominence for the Gateway Pundit and the Right Scoop.

Because of the influence of bots and coordinated propaganda efforts on Twitter, we tested to see whether the results would change meaningfully if we were to remove all the Twitter handles that would fall under the definition of “bot” according to a slightly revised version of one of the most widely used bot-detection approaches.³ We also generated the maps by using the simple

Table 2.2 Media sources most frequently shared on Twitter.

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 CNN | 16 Raw Story |
| 2 The Hill | 17 Salon |
| 3 New York Times | 18 Gateway Pundit |
| 4 Breitbart | 19 MSNBC |
| 5 Washington Post | 20 NBC News |
| 6 Huffington Post | 21 Wall Street Journal |
| 7 Politico | 22 USA Today |
| 8 Fox News | 23 Mother Jones |
| 9 Politicus USA | 24 Business Week |
| 10 Washington Examiner | 25 BuzzFeed |
| 11 Guardian | 26 Think Progress |
| 12 Mashable | 27 Daily Beast |
| 13 Daily Kos | 28 Reuters |
| 14 Daily Caller | 29 Vox |
| 15 Yahoo! News | 30 ABC News |

rule of removing any bot that tweeted more than 200 times per day. Neither of these bot-filtering methods changed any of our results meaningfully. For reasons we will explain in Chapter 7, we are not confident that this approach fully accounts for all bots or in fact finds only bots we should care about, so we leave all the accounts in the next few figures. We are not claiming that intentional, automated, or human manipulation was unimportant in the campaign. We are observing that removing suspected bot handles does not meaningfully change the overall architecture of the media ecosystem.

Facebook in the 2016 Election Period

Using Facebook shares instead of Twitter shares to size the nodes (but still using tweets for the architecture of the network), there is an evident sharpening of the partisan divide (Figure 2.4). The principal nodes that anchor the center and center-left remain unchanged. The most remarkable feature of this map is the overwhelming prominence of Breitbart. Our data certainly support

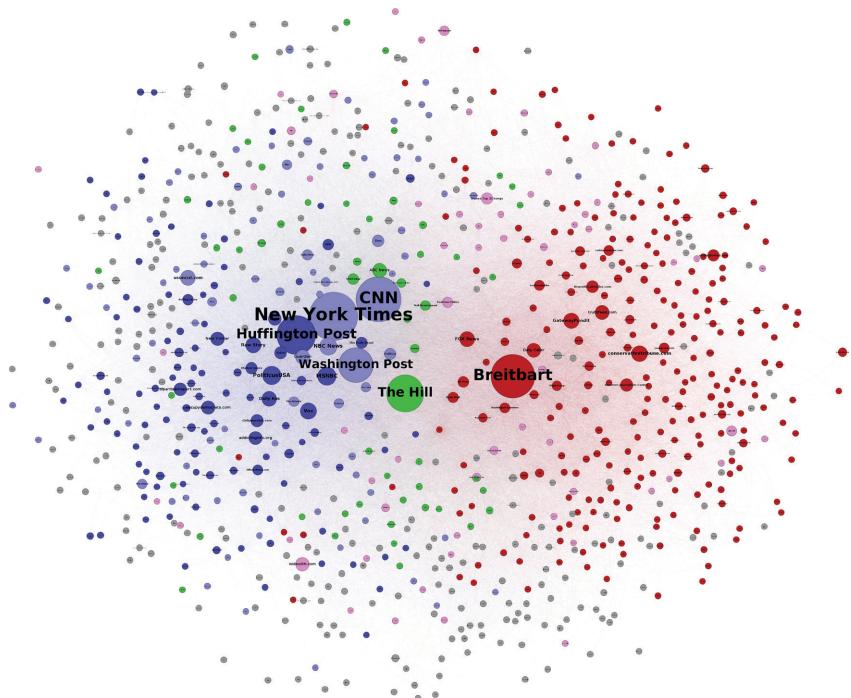


FIGURE 2.4 Network map of media sources shared on Twitter. Nodes sized by number of Facebook shares.

Table 2.3 Media sources most frequently shared on Facebook.

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1 New York Times | ¹⁶ Daily Kos |
| 2 CNN | ¹⁷ Daily Caller |
| 3 Breitbart | ¹⁸ Truthfeed |
| 4 Huffington Post | ¹⁹ Guardian |
| 5 The Hill | ²⁰ ABC News |
| 6 Washington Post | ²¹ New Yorker |
| 7 Politicus USA | ²² Occupy Democrats |
| 8 MSNBC | ²³ Addicting Info |
| 9 NBC News | ²⁴ Bipartisan Report |
| 10 Vox | ²⁵ Slate |
| 11 Conservative Tribune | ²⁶ Western Journalism Center |
| 12 Gateway Pundit | ²⁷ Daily Newsbin |
| 13 Raw Story | ²⁸ Political Insider |
| 14 Fox News | ²⁹ Salon |
| 15 US Uncut | ³⁰ Mother Jones |

Steve Bannon's claim that "Facebook is what propelled Breitbart to a massive audience."⁴ More generally, the roster of top sites on Facebook retains some overlap with Twitter, while diverging even further from the popular sites on the open web (Table 2.3). On the left, many of the mainstays of liberal media are popular on Facebook, including the Huffington Post, Vox, Slate, Salon, Daily Kos, and *Mother Jones*. Politicus USA is still important and is joined by a set of newer highly partisan sites further left on the spectrum: Occupy Democrats, Addicting Info, Daily Newsbin, and Bipartisan Report. The most popular sites on Facebook from the right also include a number of more recent highly partisan entrants: Conservative Tribune, Truthfeed, Western Journalism, and the Political Insider.

Asymmetric Patterns of Authority and Attention

The maps offer one way of looking at the asymmetric architecture of the media ecosystem. The asymmetry becomes clearer with simple bar graphs that depict different measures of attention at different points of political spectrum. Figures 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7 show the top 250 sites during the 2016 presidential election by three measures: media inlinks, Twitter shares, and Facebook

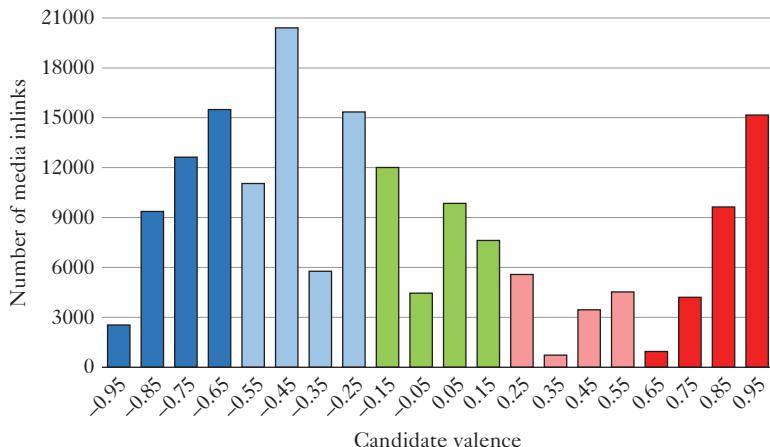


FIGURE 2.5 Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by media inlinks, 2015–2016.

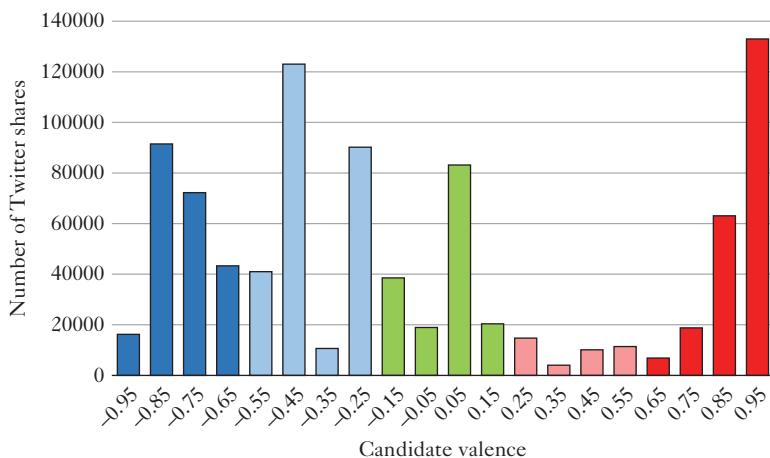


FIGURE 2.6 Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Twitter shares, 2015–2016.

shares. In broad outline, these graphs make clearer that attention, whether by Twitter, Facebook, or the more authoritative cross-media links, follows an asymmetric bimodal distribution, meaning that there are two peaks, and the left peak is closer to the center than the right peak. Starting at the center right and moving left we see a more or less normal distribution. Attention and authority both peak at the major professional journalism outlets that make up the center-left category and drop off as one moves left or right from that peak. By contrast, starting at the center-right and moving right, the distribution exhibits a negative skew: the further right an outlet is, the more attention it

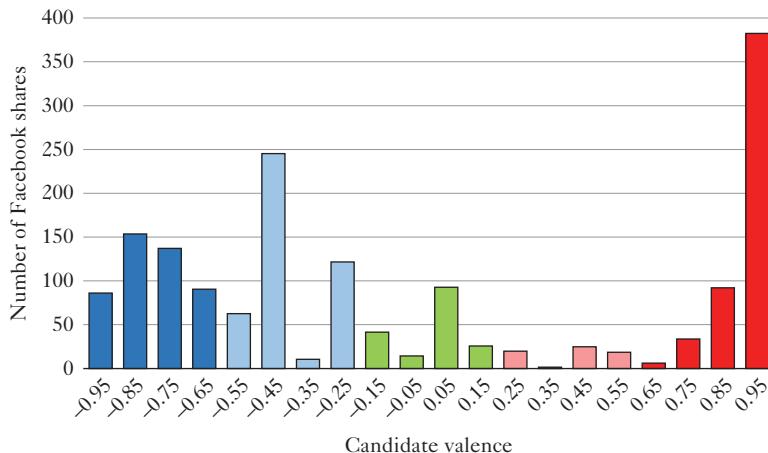


FIGURE 2.7 Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Facebook shares, 2015–2016.

gets. This is a fundamentally different structure of attention. People on the left do not emphasize media that draw only left attention, but frequently instead read, share, and quote the mainstream media, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or CNN. These sites also account for substantial attention from people who otherwise read or write publications from the center, and even center-right.

By contrast, media producers and social media users on the right read, share, and quote almost only right-oriented media, and even among sites in the right quintile, the further right a site is the more attention it gets. The particular prominence of the right-most column in Figure 2.7 reflects the overwhelming prominence of Breitbart, as also reflected in the network maps. The general pattern is consistent across all three measures, although media sources frequently shared on Twitter and Facebook are weighted more toward the extremes, on right and left. This pattern is more pronounced on Facebook than on Twitter. On Twitter, the center-right is the least represented. On Facebook, both the center and center-right garnered relatively little attention. This pattern suggests that social media sharing in general is more partisan than hyperlinking, and sharing on Facebook is more partisan than on Twitter. This finding agrees with prior studies that indicate that more politically engaged citizens are also more partisan, as those sharing political content on Twitter and Facebook are likely those who are politically engaged.⁵ Nonetheless, the overall structure, and in particular the clear difference in distribution of attention between the right and the left, remains clear across the open web, Twitter, and Facebook.

Breitbart, Fox News, and Influence in Conservative Media

The 2016 elections showed an unusual pattern of support for Trump as a candidate. Some right-leaning outlets, most notably Breitbart, launched attacks targeted not only at Democrats and Trump's Republican rivals but also at media outlets that did not fully support Trump's candidacy. A review of the stories most widely shared during the primary season shows that Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and Fox News were major targets of attack from Breitbart and related sites. The anti-elitist and anti-establishment narrative adopted by Trump and Breitbart led toward attacks on traditional institutions on both sides of the political spectrum.

Competition among the Republican contenders during the primaries had a strong impact on the shape of conservative media. Breitbart rose to serve as a focal point for Trump supporters and media organizations on the far right. This was arguably the largest change in the conservative media sphere, and the increasing role that Breitbart played during the election is clearly visible in our data. One important aspect that is less apparent in the network maps is how Breitbart served as a translator and bridge that helped to legitimate and popularize extreme views on topics such as immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments.

Breitbart and Fox News were the two principal poles of conservative media depicted in the link economy maps. This structure remained stable over the duration of the election. Changes over time are more evident in the Twitter-based maps. Recall that the position of media sources on these maps is shaped by the proclivity for Twitter users to share media sources. The most engaged partisans on Twitter effectively voted on which media sources were complementary, as reflected in the maps by their proximity.

In October 2015, with a broad set of candidates running for the GOP nomination, Fox News and Breitbart occupied similar areas of the map, with Fox News closer to the center and Breitbart further to the right (Figure 2.8).

By February 2016, Breitbart had grown more prominent while Fox had declined. In Figure 2.9, Fox News appears as a smaller node quite distant from the Breitbart-centered right. This shift reflects the fact that Fox News then received less Twitter attention than it did earlier or later in the campaign, and less attention in particular from users who also paid attention to the core Breitbart-centered sites. The March map is similar, and only over April and May did the overall attention paid to Fox and attention from Trump followers recover.

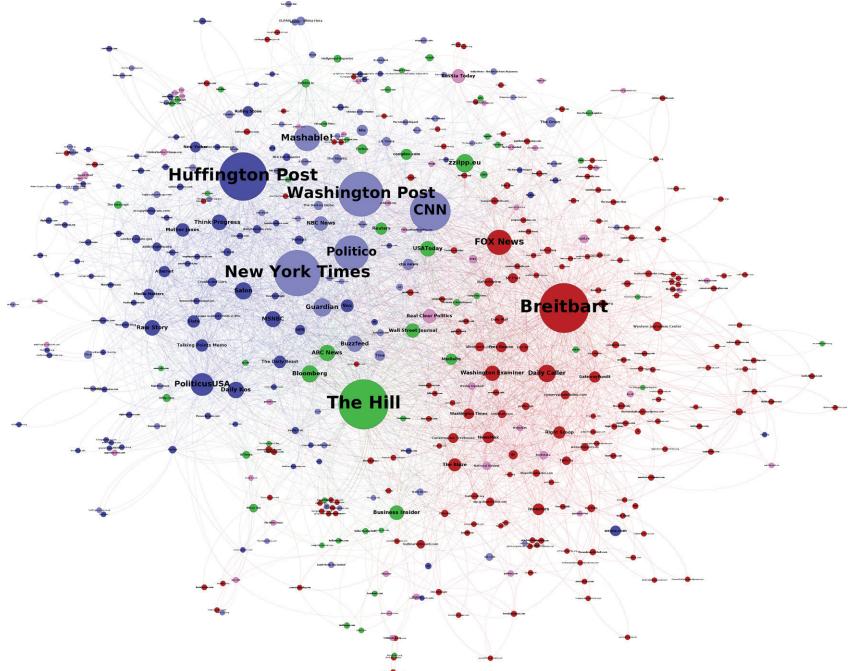


FIGURE 2.8 Network map based on Twitter media sharing, October 2015.

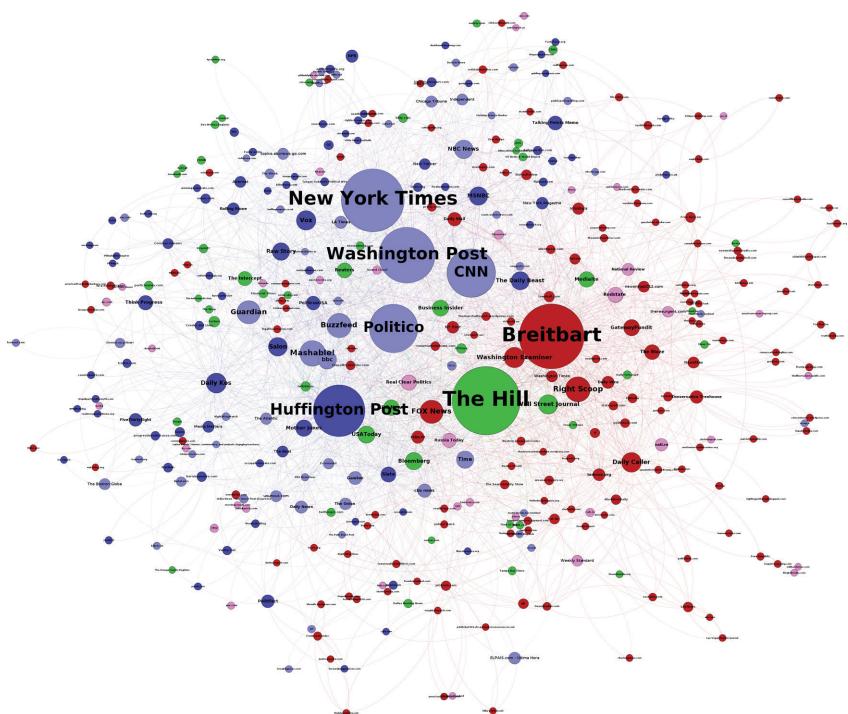


FIGURE 2.9 Network map based on Twitter media sharing, February 2016.

This sidelining of Fox News in early 2016 coincided with sustained attacks against the network by Breitbart. The top 20 stories in the right-wing media ecology during January included, for example, “Trump Campaign Manager Reveals Fox News Debate Chief Has Daughter Working for Rubio.” Many of the strongest attacks on Fox were linked to immigration, which, as we document in Chapter 4, was the central agenda of Trump’s 2016 candidacy. The five most widely shared stories in which Breitbart referred to Fox were stories intended to brand Fox News as weak on immigration and unseat it as the central arbiter of conservative news. The narrative tied together Breitbart’s stance on immigration with its successful framing of immigration as centrally concerned with Muslims, terrorism, and elite corruption:

[The Anti-Trump Network: Fox News Money Flows into Open Borders Group](#)

[NY Times Bombshell Scoop: Fox News Colluded with Rubio to Give Amnesty to Illegal Aliens](#)

[Google and Fox TV Invite Anti-Trump, Hitler-Citing, Muslim Advocate to Join Next GOP TV-Debate](#)

[Fox, Google Pick 1994 Illegal Immigrant To Ask Question In Iowa GOP Debate](#)

[Fox News At Facebook Meeting Is Misdirection: Murdoch and Zuckerberg Are Deeply Connected Over Immigration](#)

The repeated theme of conspiracy, corruption, and media betrayal is palpable in these highly shared Breitbart headlines linking Fox News, Rubio, and illegal immigration.

These sustained attacks likely contributed to the apparent decline in the standing of Fox News among the most conservative voters. As Breitbart trumpeted at the time,⁶ a survey reported that in February 2016 the perception of Fox News among conservative audiences was at its lowest point in more than three years.⁷

Our maps show that, as the primaries ended, attention to Fox recovered and Fox became more closely integrated with Breitbart and the remainder of the right-wing media sphere (Figure 2.10). As right-wing media closed ranks behind their chosen candidate, tensions within the right wing were reduced, and attacks from right-wing media uniformly targeted traditional

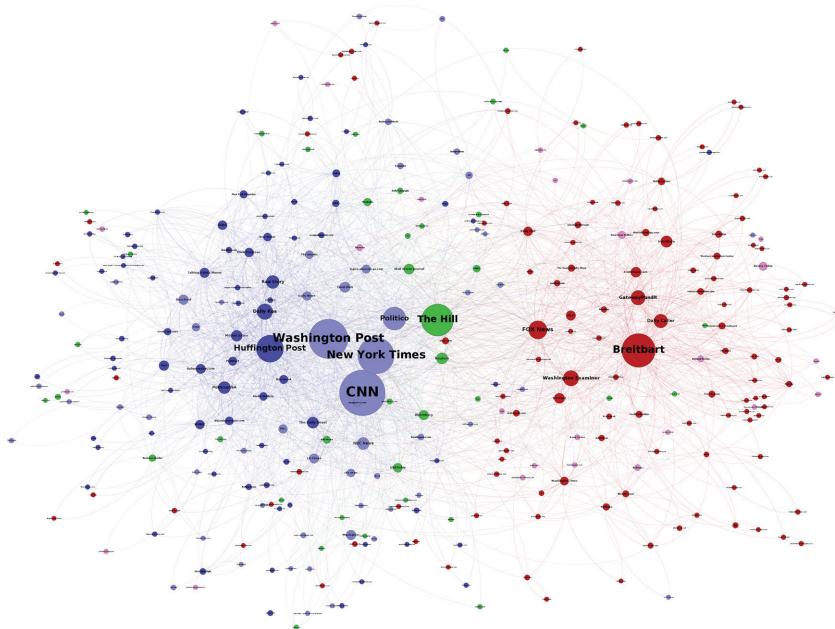


FIGURE 2.10 Network map based on Twitter media sharing, September 2016.

mainstream media. While the prominence of individual media sources in the right-wing sphere varies when assessed by shares on Facebook and Twitter, the content and core structure, with Breitbart at the center, is stable across platforms. Even in the highly charged pre-election months, everyone outside the Breitbart-centered universe formed a tightly interconnected attention network, with major traditional mass-media and professional sources at the core. The right, by contrast, formed its own insular sphere centered on Breitbart.

Post-Election Asymmetry: Fox News Rises on the Right, the Left Tunes in to the Mainstream

The overall architecture of the American political media ecosystem remained as asymmetric in 2017 as it was in the preceding two years. In fact, each segment of the media ecosystem became a clearer version of itself. Outside the right-wing ecosystem, we did not see a leftward polarization but its opposite—an increase in the authority of, and attention paid to, the traditional professional media that occupy the center and center-left, at the expense of the left. On the right, the most important shift was that Fox News reasserted its authority as

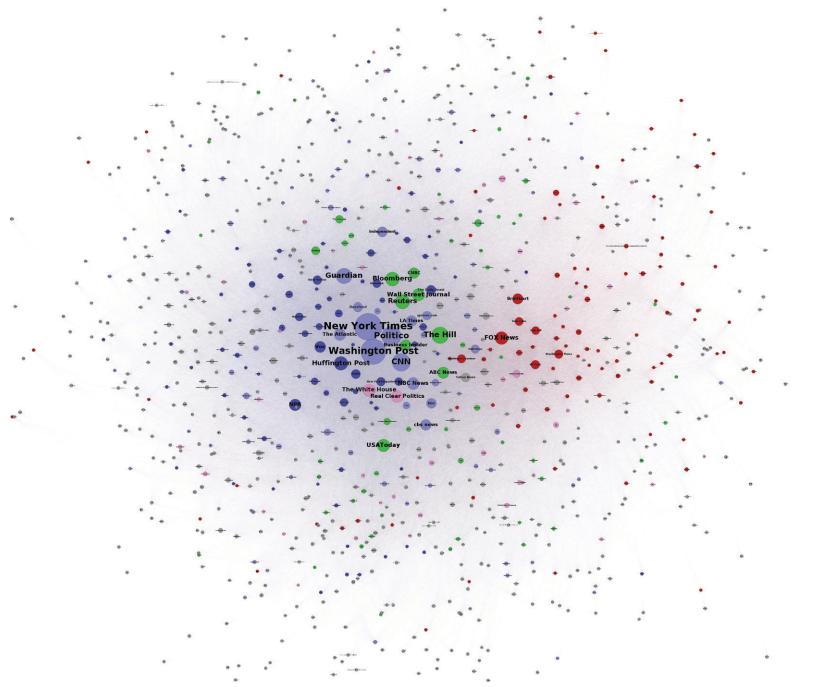


FIGURE 2.11 Network map based on media inlinks, coverage of Donald Trump, November 8, 2016–September 14, 2017.

the central node of the online right-wing media ecosystem. This revival came at the expense of Breitbart, which declined to second place online (leaving aside Fox dominance of conservative television throughout the election and post-election periods). However, Fox News's resurgence did not increase connections between the right and the rest of the network. During the election, Fox online received 40 percent of its inlinks from the right quintile. In the year after the election, Fox received 51 percent of its links from the right quintile. This shift reflected a decline in linking to Fox across-the-board, not only from the left. Indeed, links from the center-right and the center to Fox declined proportionately more than did links from the center-left and left.⁸

The network map shown in Figure 2.11 is based on 1.6 million open web stories related to Trump from the day after the election until mid-September 2017. When compared to the pre-election data (Figure 2.1), the post-election network shows a less prominent right-wing media presence.

Figure 2.12 zooms in to underscore the heightened role of Fox within the right-wing and the general decline in the total number of links to the right, while the center and center-left grew.

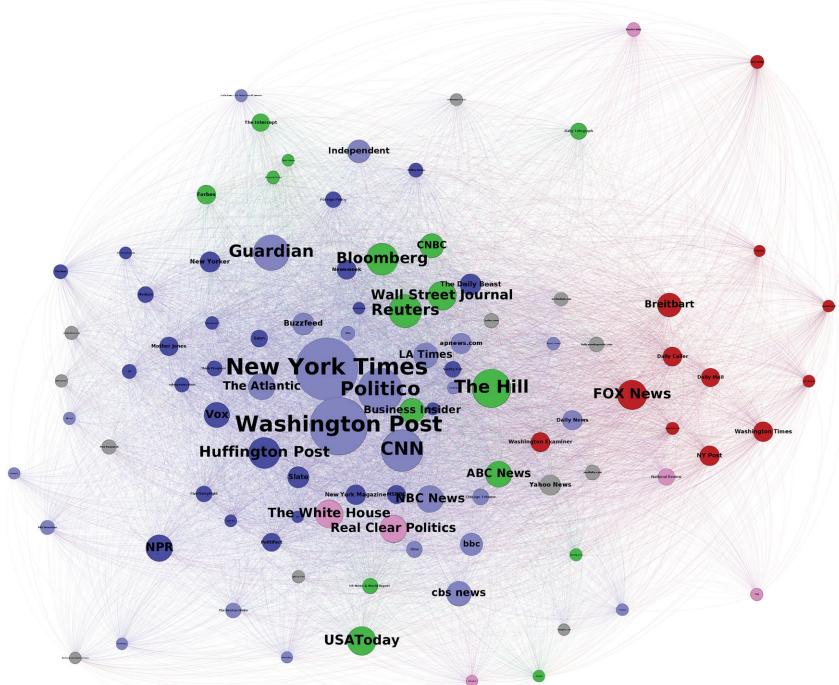


FIGURE 2.12 Core of the network map based on media inlinks, coverage of Donald Trump, November 8, 2016–September 14, 2017.

Figure 2.13 compares inlinks in the 18 months prior to the election, colored by their quintile, to inlinks from Election Day to September of 2017, represented next to them and colored grey for contrast. Links provide a particularly valuable baseline because they are not affected by any of the platform companies' algorithm changes. Facebook, Twitter, or Google may have a modest impact on the media diet of media producers, but cross-media links are deliberate choices of journalists and other online media producers, and are therefore less influenced by the vagaries of platform policies and algorithms. On the left, we see the three most-leftward columns decline in their share of inlinks. The most centrist media sources on the left and those in the center-left gained in inlink shares. These segments, as you recall, are populated primarily by professional journalism outlets. Even within the left, publishers linked more to NPR than to MSNBC or Talking Points Memo. We also see a distinct increase in links to the center in three of its four columns, with the major movers there reflecting an increase in the relative prominence

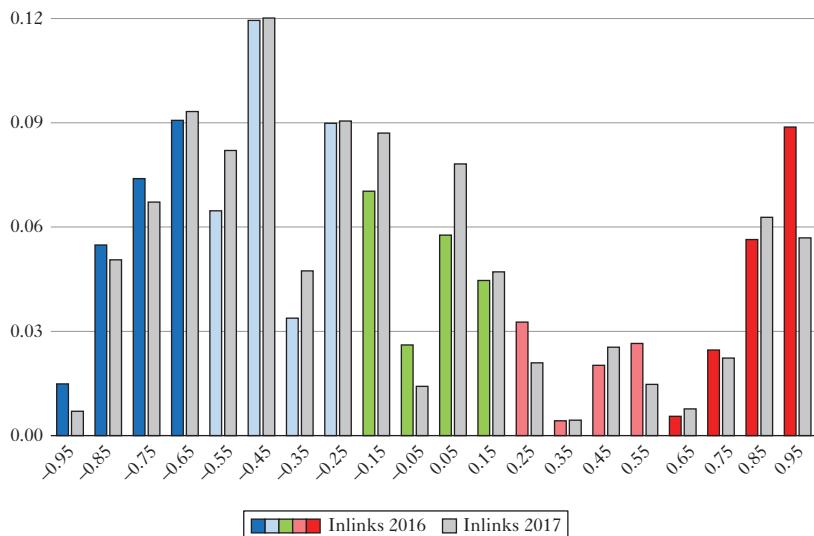


FIGURE 2.13 Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by inlinks—comparison of pre-election and post-election.

Table 2.4 Cross-media inlinks to each quintile.

| | Total inlinks to quintile, in thousands | | Share of total | |
|--------------|--|-------|----------------|------|
| | 2016 | 2017 | 2016 | 2017 |
| Left | 204.9 | 145.2 | 0.20 | 0.18 |
| Center-left | 440.8 | 369.7 | 0.43 | 0.46 |
| Center | 186.1 | 170.2 | 0.18 | 0.21 |
| Center-right | 44.2 | 26.2 | 0.04 | 0.03 |
| Right | 138.6 | 100.6 | 0.14 | 0.12 |

of *The Hill* and Reuters, and a decrease for ABC News and the *Wall Street Journal*. On the right, the biggest change is the dramatic decline in Breitbart's relative weight—and remember, this graph reflects not social-media attention but linking, and therefore is not a function of any social media algorithmic changes. This shift represents the structure of authority on the right, primarily a reassertion of authority by Fox News online.

Table 2.4 shows the share each quintile received of the total inlinks during this period. Prior to the election, for all the vehemence and polarization,

Table 2.5a Proportion of all inlinks to top 50 sites on the right, by site.

| | Total inlinks, in thousands | | Proportion of total inlinks to right quintile | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------|--|------|
| | 2016 | 2017 | 2016 | 2017 |
| Breitbart | 16.6 | 11.8 | 0.12 | 0.12 |
| Fox News | 14.4 | 16.5 | 0.10 | 0.16 |
| Daily Caller | 10.2 | 8.3 | 0.07 | 0.08 |
| Washington Examiner | 9.1 | 7.6 | 0.06 | 0.08 |
| NY Post | 7.6 | 6.5 | 0.05 | 0.06 |
| DonaldJTrump.com | 7.5 | 2.9 | 0.05 | 0.03 |
| Washington Times | 7.0 | 5.2 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Daily Mail | 6.1 | 4.6 | 0.04 | 0.05 |
| WikiLeaks | 4.7 | 0.2 | 0.03 | 0.00 |
| Free Beacon | 4.3 | 2.7 | 0.03 | 0.03 |

Table 2.5b Proportion of all inlinks to top 50 sites on the left, by site.

| | Total inlinks, in thousands | | Proportion of total inlinks to left quintile | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------|---|------|
| | 2016 | 2017 | 2016 | 2017 |
| Huffington Post | 25.0 | 16.3 | 0.12 | 0.11 |
| MSNBC | 16.9 | 4.3 | 0.08 | 0.03 |
| PolitiFact | 11.4 | 5.5 | 0.06 | 0.04 |
| NPR | 10.4 | 14.8 | 0.05 | 0.10 |
| Vox | 10.2 | 11.2 | 0.05 | 0.08 |
| Daily Beast | 9.6 | 7.4 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Slate | 8.2 | 6.9 | 0.04 | 0.05 |
| Talking Points Memo | 7.1 | 4.2 | 0.04 | 0.03 |
| HillaryClinton.com | 7.1 | 0.1 | 0.04 | 0.00 |
| Salon | 6.8 | 4.5 | 0.03 | 0.03 |

65 percent of all links went to the center, center-left, and center-right, while the left got 20 percent of the links and the right 14 percent. In 2017, the shares of the left and right both declined as a proportion of overall authority, and the share of the three center quintiles rose to 70 percent. The asymmetry is a

function of the fact that the center right is largely absent in both years, and this does not change meaningfully in 2017.

Tables 2.5a and 2.5b dig deeper into the most influential media on the left and the right. As a proportion of all links that went to the top 50 media outlets on the left and right, the big positive mover on the right was Fox News, and to a lesser extent the *Washington Examiner*, while on the left we saw a significant decline for MSNBC and a substantial increase for NPR and Vox.

Social Media During the First Year of the Trump Presidency

As we saw in the comparison of cross-media links and social media activity prior to the election, the sharing patterns of politically engaged users on Twitter and Facebook offer a view of media activity that is more partisan and more centered around nontraditional news media.

Figure 2.14, based on Twitter sharing patterns, shows the now-familiar highly segregated network structure. The right stands clearly apart from the center, center-left, and left. Unlike the pre-election period, Fox garners the most attention on the right. Figure 2.15, which compares the distribution of

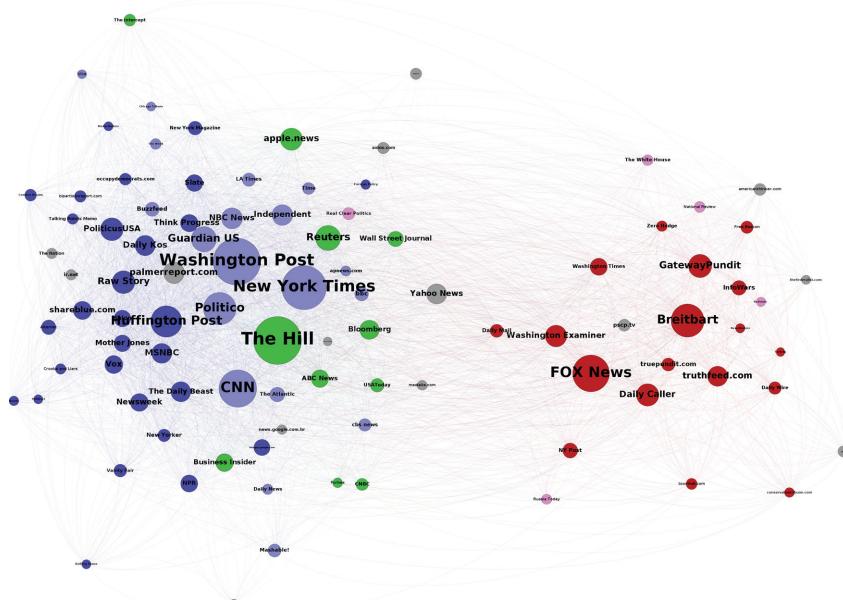


FIGURE 2.14 Network map based on Twitter media sharing, January 22, 2017–January 21, 2018. Nodes sized by number of Twitter shares.

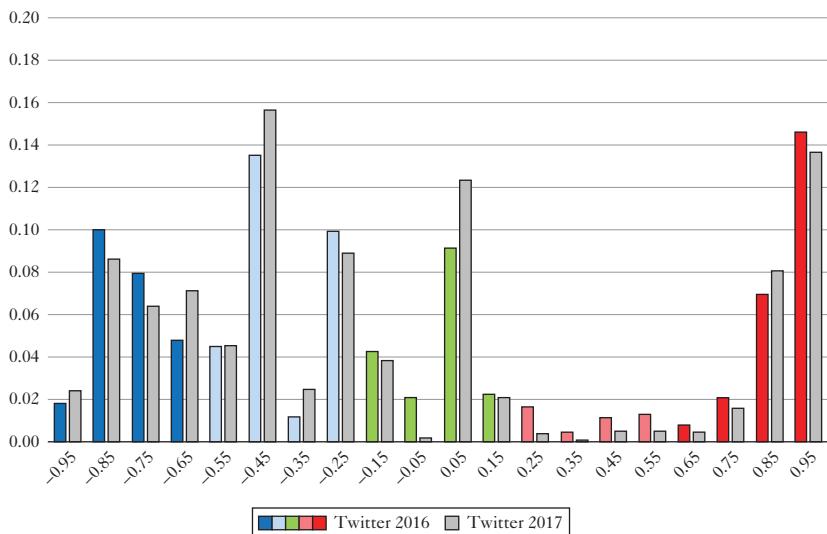


FIGURE 2.15 Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Twitter shares—comparison of pre-election and post-election.

attention across the partisan spectrum in the pre-election and post-election periods, shows a remarkable level of consistency across the two time periods. There are some notable changes. Here we see a small increase in the farthest left column, decreased in the next two columns on the left, and then an increase in the most centrist of the left columns. Three of the center-left segments gained in shares along with the segment in the center occupied by *The Hill*. On the center-right and right we see a broad decline except for the two right-most columns, where Fox News's rise reflects in an increase in the second-from-right segment, and the decline of Breitbart and the increase in the Twitter shares of Truthfeed, Zero Hedge, and the Gateway Pundit balance out.

Fox News surpassed Breitbart in both inlinks and Twitter shares. Breitbart continues to have more Facebook shares, but its lead shrinks from 400 percent to only 30 percent, due to both a collapse in Breitbart's numbers and a substantial increase in Fox's numbers (Table 2.6).

Figure 2.16 shows that the big gains in Facebook share are in the center left and center professional media segments, not on the further left. There is steep decline in the far right. As we will show, this is partially a drop in shares to Breitbart but also a decline for other media sources on the far right. The second to the right column, led by Fox, gains slightly.

Directing attention to particular media sources yields clear insights about who gained and who lost ground across the media landscape after the election.

Table 2.6 Breitbart and Fox comparison of pre-election and post-election periods.

| | | Media inlinks | Total inlinks | Twitter shares | Facebook shares |
|---------------|-----------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Pre-election | Breitbart | 1,990 | 16,649 | 38,467 | 83,529 |
| | Fox | 1,967 | 14,420 | 19,532 | 19,862 |
| Post-election | Breitbart | 1,475 | 11,821 | 13,579 | 31,208 |
| | Fox | 1,915 | 16,493 | 20,376 | 24,780 |

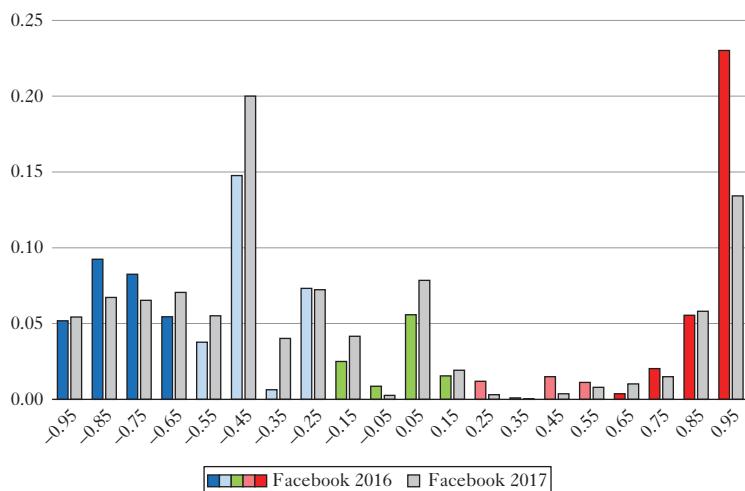


FIGURE 2.16 Partisan distribution of top 250 media sites by Facebook shares—comparison of pre-election and post-election.

Figures 2.17 and 2.18 represent the top sites and their relative changes on Facebook and Twitter comparing the pre-election and post-election periods. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Fox News, and *The Hill* all increased their share of social attention in 2017 on both Twitter and Facebook. CNN, the Huffington Post, and Breitbart, although still very prominent, declined on both platforms. The shift in media coverage after the election is part of the story as post-election media coverage focused more on reporting and investigative journalism and less on campaign horserace coverage. The trend we see among the most popular media outlets is consistent with a shift in attention to larger established media outlets. Two liberal U.K.-based media outlets, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, broke into the top 10 in 2017 by

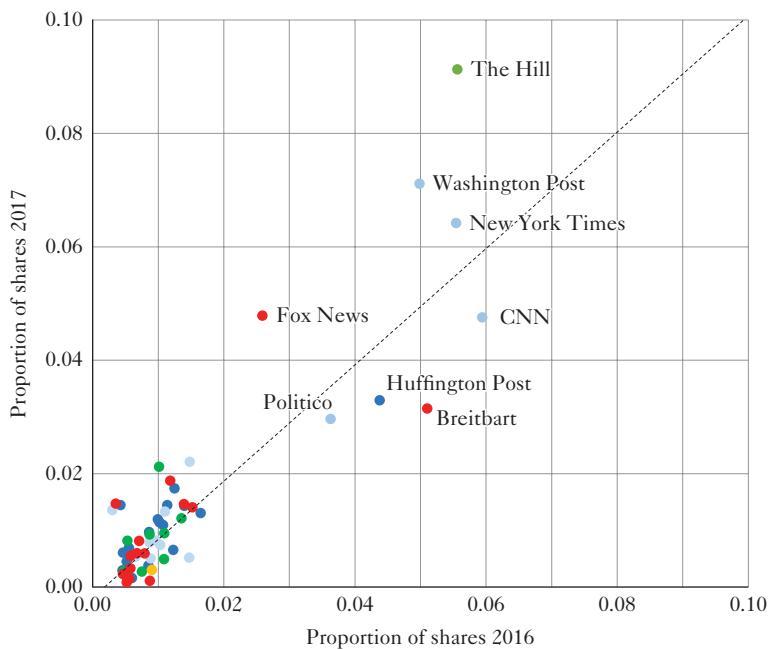


FIGURE 2.17 Proportion of total shares for media sources most shared on Twitter—comparison of 2016 and 2017.

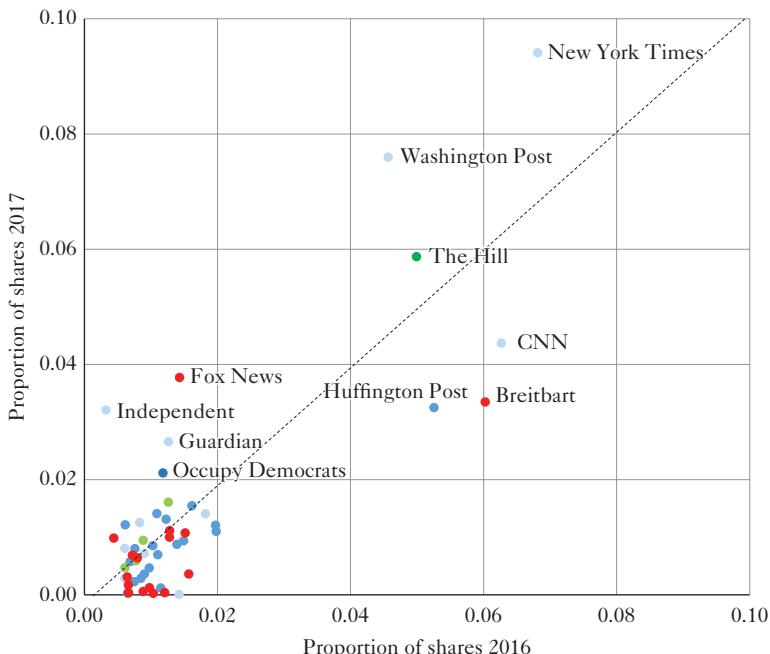


FIGURE 2.18 Proportion of total shares for media sources most shared on Facebook—comparison of 2016 and 2017.

Facebook shares. The rising prominence of Fox News is clear, accompanied by the declining influence of Breitbart on the right.

Occupy Democrats is the only far-left site that gained prominence on Facebook in 2017. These gains occurred before June. Thereafter the site rapidly declined and effectively shifted to new domains: washingtonjournal.com, first, and then washingtonpress.com; neither had as much influence as the site had earlier.⁹ Palmer Report and Raw Story, other left-wing sites, saw more attention on Twitter in 2017, as seen in Figure 2.19, which shows the movement among second-tier media sources on Twitter. Figure 2.20 shows the corresponding changes for second-tier sites on Facebook. The other sites from the left that increased in 2017 on Facebook include the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, and *Slate*. On Twitter, the winners on the left include MSNBC, Vox, and *Mother Jones*.

Hyperpartisan and conspiracy-minded sites on both ends of the political spectrum fared poorly on Facebook, presumably falling victim to changes in

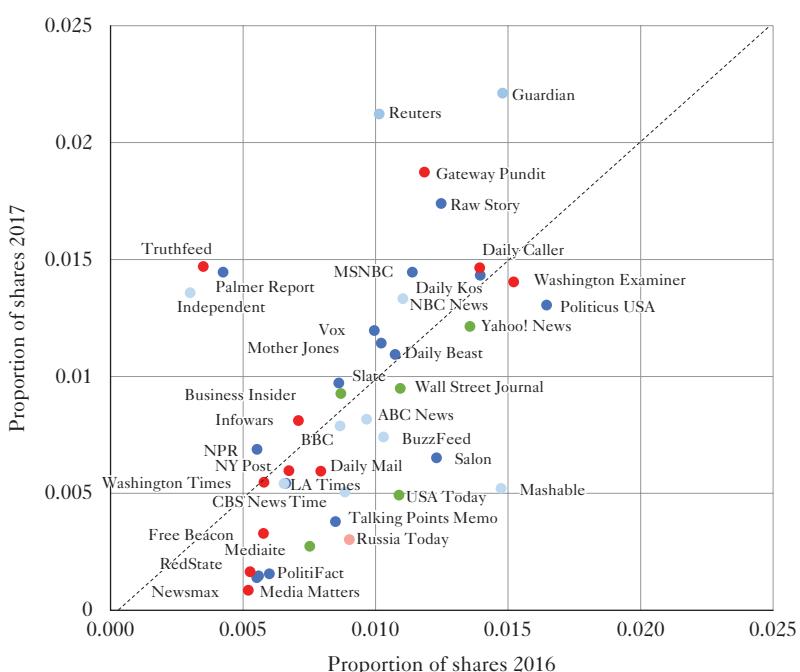


FIGURE 2.19 Proportion of total shares for second-tier media sources on Twitter—comparison of 2016 and 2017.

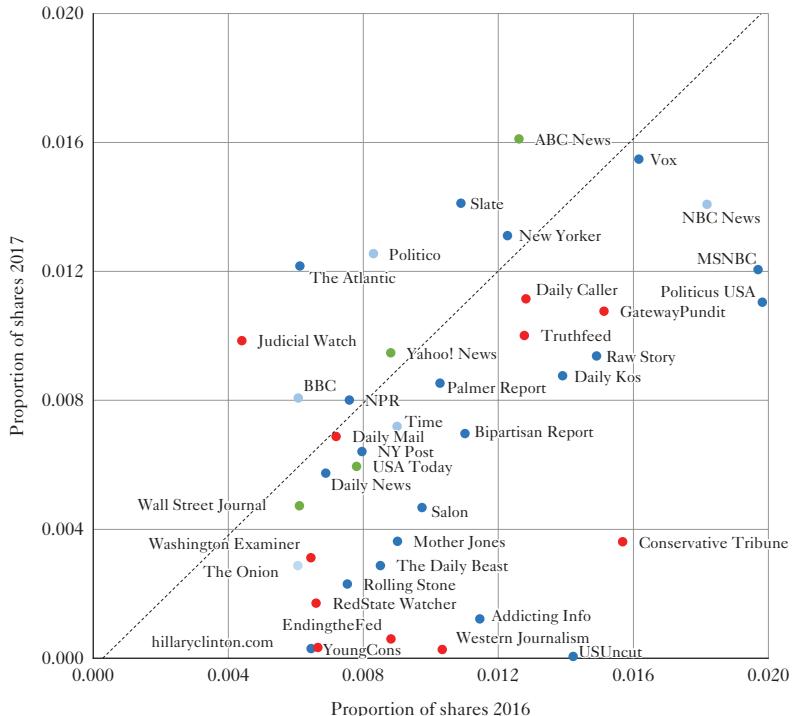


FIGURE 2.20 Proportion of total shares for second-tier media sources on Facebook—comparison of 2016 and 2017.

the Facebook newsfeed algorithm. On the left, the losers include Bipartisan Report, Addicting Info, and Palmer Report (when compared to the prior incarnation of Bill Palmer's site, Daily News Bin). On the right, the slate of hyperpartisan sites declined dramatically, including Conservative Tribune, Western Journalism, Young Cons, Ending the Fed, and Red State Watcher, along with the more popular Daily Caller, Truthfeed, and Gateway Pundit.

On Twitter, there were also far more losers than winners. Overall, the focus of attention shifted toward the top sites and away from second-tier sites. Reuters and the *Guardian* performed better on Twitter in 2017. Looking at Twitter shares on the right, Truthfeed and the Gateway Pundit are outliers, gaining substantially in their share of attention. Infowars also made moderate gains on Twitter, as did the Daily Caller.

Changes on both the left and the right were mixed. As we saw when looking in the aggregate, sites on the left as a whole lost prominence on social media, while sites on the center-left and professional news sites like NPR increased. This did not prevent a hyperpartisan site like the Palmer Report or Raw Story

from joining the Huffington Post as the three most tweeted sources in the left media set. Similarly, results on the right were mixed. On the one hand, Breitbart was replaced by Fox News as the leading site, which suggests some moderation of the style and extremity of views sought by viewers and readers. On the other hand, other winners on the right in 2017 on Twitter included Gateway Pundit, Infowars, and Truthfeed, sites that make Breitbart seem moderate. This shift might be more consistent with a different interpretation of the rise of Fox: that the network became a more extreme version of itself in 2017. We examine that question in Chapter 5, when we turn our focus to what happened to Fox News in 2017.

The changes in 2017 on the left and center-left are not consistent with the sense of a pervasive epistemic crisis. If anything, they mark a moderate strengthening of the role of professional journalistic organizations. Certainly, there were outlets on the left that adopted the hyperpartisan strategy of many of the most successful sites on the right. Occupy Democrats and the Palmer Report are the two clearest examples. As we will show throughout Part Two of the book, however, conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns require more than a single site or two to spin them up to move from isolated chatter to gain broader currency. The architecture of the network in which these left-oriented hyperpartisan clickbait sites operate is fundamentally different from the network architecture which their right-oriented counterparts occupy. And, as we argue in the next several chapters, that architecture and the institutional character of the media outlets that constitute it, more than the Russians, more than the fake news entrepreneurs, more than Facebook advertising, and more than Cambridge Analytica, are most directly responsible for the prevalence and success of disinformation, propaganda, and commercial bullshit in the American media ecosystem.

We began this chapter with an acknowledgment that observing online communications, much less a single medium like Twitter or Facebook, offers only a partial and almost certainly imperfect view of the American media ecosystem. In the run-up to the election, a Pew survey suggested that 57 percent of Americans got their news from television: cable, local, and network news; while 38 percent got their news online.¹⁰ A Pew study from earlier in 2016 found that only 14 percent identified social media as their “most helpful” source for getting information on the election, while cable, local news, network news, and radio were described so by about 60 percent of the audience.¹¹ A 2017 survey by Hunt Alcott and Matthew Gentzkow similarly found that 14 percent of respondents stated that social media were their “most important” source of election news.¹² Narrowing down more

specifically to election news, a Pew survey conducted a few weeks after the election found that Fox News was the primary source of news for 40 percent of Trump voters, alongside CNN (8 percent), the three major networks (12 percent in total), local TV (5 percent), and radio (3 percent), leaving Facebook as the primary source of news for only 7 percent of Trump voters. No print media broke the 3 percent minimum share to be reported in that study. Clinton voters, by contrast, had a more varied diet, with CNN topping at 18 percent, MSNBC (9 percent), local TV (8 percent), NPR (7 percent), the networks (15 percent), the *New York Times* (5 percent), local newspapers (4 percent), and Fox News (3 percent). But Facebook use was quite similar to that of Trump followers, and was the primary source of news for only 8 percent of Clinton supporters.¹³

These observations seem to be at odds with a 2017 Pew survey often cited for the claim that 67 percent of Americans get their news on social media.¹⁴ While that higher number is often cited, it is important to remember that the 67 percent includes 20 percent who say they “hardly ever” get news on social media. The headline finding from that survey might have been entitled: “53 percent of Americans never or hardly ever get their news from social media.” Only 20 percent of respondents in that survey said that they often get their news on social media, and another 27 percent said they sometimes do. When asked looser survey questions about their news consumption habits, such as where they got news “often,” 57 percent responded that they got news on television, ranging across all cable, network, and local, and another 25 percent get their news from radio, some of which is talk radio and some of which is NPR and networks.¹⁵ Clearly, online news continues to grow as a source of news people often turn to, and will continue to grow in importance. This trend is driven by readers over 50, and in particular over 65, increasing their previously low use of online sources, rather than younger people meaningfully changing their already substantial use of online media.¹⁶ Still, television remains the primary source of news and will likely continue to occupy that spot for several more election cycles.

There are several ways in which we try to expand our data collection and interpret our data to allow us to say more about the overall media ecosystem, and not only about online news sources and social media. First, even if only about half of Americans get their news online often or sometimes, these news readers interact socially, and offline social relations are an important source of news for the majority of the population.¹⁷ Many Americans who do not get their news online are a conversation away from those who are. Second, our data include the online versions of the major television news channels, and

while this may not replicate exactly the content of television programming, it represents a reasonable proxy. It also offers us a structural view of how these sources interact with other sources, the patterns of attention they draw, and their relation to other news sites whose content we can analyze in great detail. Third, the prominence of particular sites and stories enables us to identify salient television news coverage that we can then use a database of television broadcasts by major news networks and select local stations maintained by the Internet Archive to study as case studies. This targeting for case studies is further complemented by our ability to analyze YouTube videos, another useful avenue to identify particularly influential television moments. Throughout Chapters 3 to 8 we will combine our online data analysis with television analysis based on these bridges to give a more complete picture of what the media ecosystem looked like even when we do not have a full picture of every communication. Finally, but not least, political and media elites—politicians, pundits, journalists, and activists—all use online media extensively, and their actions are influenced not only by what they read but also by what is written about them and how they perceive this coverage. The combined effect of these approaches gives us a good degree of confidence that our findings reflect something very real about the American public sphere. And our fundamental observations regarding the asymmetric structure of online media receive clear confirmation from a 2014 Pew survey about media consumption and patterns of trust. That survey found that respondents who score as “consistently conservative” on a survey of their political views reported that their most trusted news sources were Fox News, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh. “Consistently liberal” respondents placed NPR, PBS, and the BBC in those top three most trusted positions.¹⁸ This pattern of trust in television and radio sources—one side trusting a highly partisan commercial outlet and two of the most incendiary personalities in American political media, and the other in three public institutions of the most traditional journalistic form, suggests that the overall pattern of the media ecosystem is highly congruent with the patterns we observe online.

THE CONSISTENT PATTERN that emerges from our data is that, both during the highly divisive election campaign and even more so during the first year of the Trump presidency, there is no left-right division, but rather a division between the right and the rest of the media ecosystem. The right wing of the media ecosystem behaves precisely as the echo-chamber models predict—exhibiting high insularity, susceptibility to information cascades, rumor and conspiracy theory, and drift toward more extreme versions of

itself. The rest of the media ecosystem, however, operates as an interconnected network anchored by organizations, both for profit and nonprofit, that adhere to professional journalistic norms. The members of that integrated ecosystem range from traditionally conservative publications like the *Wall Street Journal* or *Forbes* to historically left publications like *Mother Jones* or liberal and progressive activist sites like Daily Kos. This architecture changes the dynamics of information propagation and correction. It imposes higher reputational costs on sites and authors who propagate rumor and provides avenues for relatively rapid fact checking, criticism of false claims, and rapid dissemination of and coalescence around corrected narratives. The insular right wing of the media ecosystem creates positive feedbacks for bias-confirming statements as a central feature of its normal operation. The rest of the media ecosystem comprises sites diverse enough in their political orientation, organizational culture, business model, and reputational needs to create impedance in the network. This system resists and corrects falsehood as its normal operation, even though, like all systems, it also occasionally fails, sometimes spectacularly.

In Chapter 3 we offer a more detailed account of how these different network dynamics might emerge, and use two case studies to show how the architectural differences result, in the case of the right, in high diffusion and amplification of rumors and lies, while on the left, anchored as it is in “the rest” network rather than having its own symmetric echo chamber, rumors and lies get dampened and contained. We return in Chapter 11 to the deeper question of when and why these dynamics developed on the right but not on the left.

Notes

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CHAPTER 3

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2. Mark Hemingway, “Once Again, PolitiFact Struggles to Explain Data Showing They Treat GOP Unfairly,” *Weekly Standard*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/once-again-politifact-struggles-to-explain-data-showing-they-treat-gop-unfairly/article/732009>.