

Google's Top Stories and the 'Fairness Doctrine'

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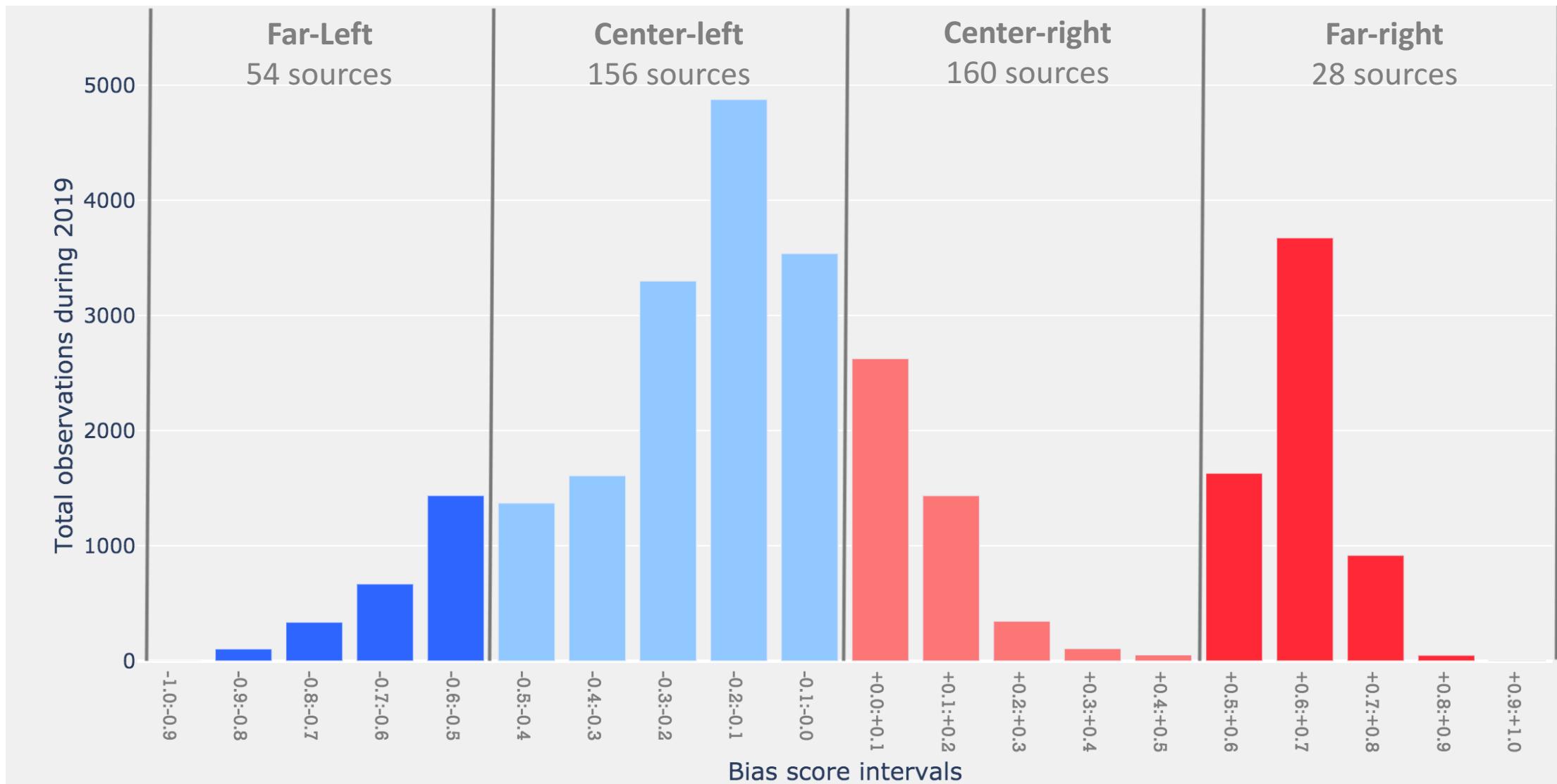
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Main Takeaway: Disproportionate amplification of far-right news sources for election coverage in Google's Top stories.

Joe Biden's Top Stories Distribution Coverage in 2019



Outline

1. What are Google's Top stories?
2. Motivation
3. Data: A one-year collection of Google's Top stories for 2020 US Presidential candidates. Some results about asymmetric amplification.
4. What is the 'Fairness Doctrine'?
5. Provocation: Is Google implementing an algorithmic 'Fairness Doctrine'? What are the implications?

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About 99,500,000 results (0.63 seconds)

Top stories

**FOX NEWS**

Biden claims '10 to 15 percent' of Americans are 'just not very good people'

7 hours ago

**CNN**

The Top 10 women Joe Biden might pick as vice president

9 hours ago

**FOX NEWS**

Trump taunts Biden on 1994 crime bill, black incarcerations

55 mins ago

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joebiden.com ▾

Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website

We are the United States of America. There is not a single thing we cannot do. Are you with us?
Join our campaign to elect **Joe Biden** today!

Morning of June 5, 2020
Google's SERP for "joe biden"

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About 116,000,000 results (0.50 seconds)

Top stories

**FOX NEWS**

Biden claims '10 to 15 percent' of Americans are 'just not very good people'

7 hours ago

**CNN**

The Top 10 women Joe Biden might pick as vice president

10 hours ago

**Fox News**

Chris Wallace: Biden is the 'favorite' right now after 'very tough week' for Trump, US

23 mins ago

[→ More for biden](#)[joebiden.com](#)

Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website

We are the United States of America. There is not a single thing we cannot do. Are you with us?
Join our campaign to elect Joe Biden today!

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About 933,000,000 results (0.74 seconds)

Top stories



CNN

Trump shares letter that calls peaceful protesters 'terrorists'

9 hours ago



THE HILL

Twitter removes Trump campaign tribute to George Floyd claiming copyright complaint |...

11 hours ago



NBC NEWS

Trump visits Maine: Protests will greet him, GOP Sen. Susan Collins won't

3 mins ago

→ More for donald trump

www.donaldjtrump.com ▾

[Home | Donald J. Trump for President](#)

Help continue our promise to Keep America Great!

Morning of June 5, 2020
Google's SERP for "donald trump"

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About 1,080,000,000 results (0.86 seconds)

Top stories



Trump shares letter that calls peaceful protesters 'terrorists'

9 hours ago



Twitter removes Trump campaign tribute to George Floyd claiming copyright complaint |...

11 hours ago



Trump campaign removes space-themed ad amid complaints from former astronaut,...

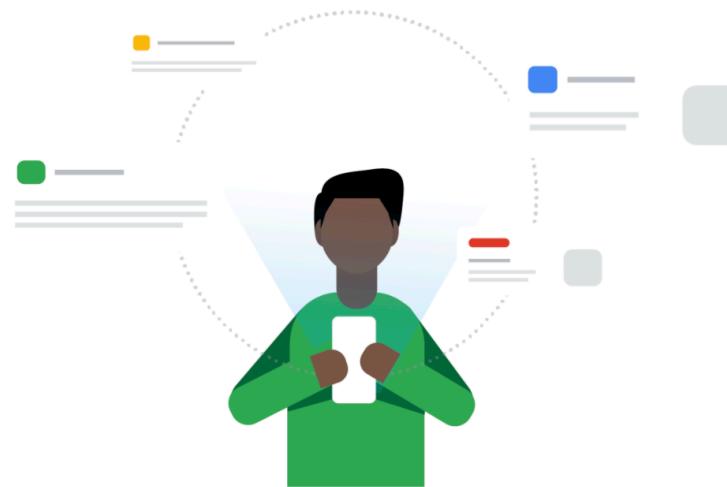
11 mins ago

More for trump

Videos



How news works on Google



Our purpose

To help everyone understand the world by connecting people with high quality news
from a variety of perspectives

Trustworthy and timely information empowers people to better understand the world around them and make educated decisions. Journalism provides that information when it matters the most, shaping our understanding of important issues and pushing us to learn more and seek the truth.

understanding of important issues and pushing us to learn more and seek the truth.

Google aims to make it easier to stay informed by using technology to organize what journalists are reporting about current issues and events. We don't have an editorial point of view. Instead, Google products are designed to connect you with a broad array of information and perspectives to help you develop your own point of view and make informed decisions. We're committed to fostering a healthy and diverse news ecosystem because we know journalism is vital to strong, functioning societies.

Help you make sense of the news

[Next →](#)

Deep context and diverse perspectives

A central goal of Google's news experiences is to provide access to context and diverse perspectives for stories in the news. By featuring unpersonalized news from a broad range of sources, Google empowers people to deepen their understanding of current events and offers an alternative to exclusively personalized news feeds and individual sources that might only represent a single perspective.

Search experiences

When you search for something on Google, you have access to information and perspectives from a broad range of publishers from across the web. If you search for a topic that's in the news, your results may include some news articles labeled "Top stories" at the top of your results, featuring articles related to your search and a link to more related articles on the News tab. You can also search for news stories and see context and multiple perspectives in the results on news.google.com, news on the Assistant, and the within the "Top News" section of search results on YouTube. These results are not personalized.

Our algorithms surface and organize specific stories and articles based on factors like relevance to your query, prominence and freshness of the article, and authoritativeness of the publisher. You can always refine your search terms to find additional information.

Motivation

THE BATTLE FOR THE 2008 US CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS ON THE WEB

Panagiotis Takis Metaxas and Eni Mustafaraj

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Keywords: Search Engines, Web Science, Web search, Web Spam, Social Networks

Abstract: It has been reported that, in the past, political activists have tried to influence web search results. They did that using link-bombing techniques to raise negative web pages with contents close to the their agendas to the top-10 search results. Google has admitted that this happen in the 2006 US Elections, but did it still happen in the all-important 2008 US Congressional Elections? In this paper we try to evaluate whether “gaming” the search engines during the election period is a widespread problem, how serious is it, and how search engines have tried to maintain the integrity of their search results.

[Google](#)[Advanced Search](#)
[Preferences](#)[Web](#) [News](#)

Results 1 - 10 of about 71,800 for "Kirsten Gillibrand". (0.28 seconds)

[The Online Office of Congresswoman Kirsten Gillibrand - Home](#)

Local Congresswoman **Kirsten Gillibrand** meets with New York's First Lady,

Congresswoman **Kirsten Gillibrand** is encouraging senior and veteran families to ...

[gillibrand.house.gov/](#) - 37k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Contact](#)[Constituent Services](#)[Write to Representative Kirsten ...](#)[News Center](#)[On the Issues](#)[Grants](#)[About Kirsten](#)[Energy Solutions for Upstate ...](#)

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[Kirsten Gillibrand For Congress](#)

Incumbent Democratic nominee for US Representative from New York's 20th Congressional District.

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[Kirsten Gillibrand For Congress](#)

Kirsten Gillibrand's 18 months in Congress, the freshman lawmaker has been guided MORE

» ... Today, Congresswoman **Kirsten Gillibrand** announced that MORE » ...

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[edit] External links. U.S. Representative **Kirsten Gillibrand** official U.S. House site; Gillibrand for Congress official campaign site ...

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[Kirsten Gillibrand | Congress votes database | washingtonpost.com](#)

See how **Kirsten Gillibrand** voted on key votes -- the most important bills, nominations and resolutions that have come before Congress, as determined by ...

[projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/members/g000555/](#) - [Similar pages](#)

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Google's SERP for Kirsten Gillibrand on Oct 27, 2008



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About 19,200,000 results (0.82 seconds)

Top stories



Kirsten Gillibrand Drops Out of 2020 Democratic Presidential Race

The New York Times

20 mins ago



Trump mocks Kirsten Gillibrand as she exits 2020 race: 'She was the one I was really...

Fox News

3 hours ago



Kirsten Gillibrand drops out of 2020 presidential race

CNN.com

1 hour ago

Kirsten Gillibrand

United States Senator



Kirsten Elizabeth Gillibrand is an American lawyer and politician who has served as the junior United States Senator from New York since 2009. A member of the Democratic Party, she was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 2007 to 2009.

[Wikipedia](#)

Born: December 9, 1966 (age 52 years), Albany, NY

Office: Senator (D-NY) since 2009

Spouse: Jonathan Gillibrand (m. 2001)

Previous office: Representative, NY 20th District (2007–2009)

Education: UCLA School of Law (1989–1991),
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Children: Theodore Gillibrand, Henry Gillibrand

Profiles



Twitter



Facebook



Instagram



YouTube

People also search for

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Google's SERP for Kirsten Gillibrand on August 28, 2019, as she suspends her presidential campaign.



The search engine manipulation effect (SEME) and its possible impact on the outcomes of elections

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Edited by Jacob N. Shapiro, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, and accepted by the Editorial Board July 8, 2015 (received for review October 16, 2014)

Internet search rankings have a significant impact on consumer choices, mainly because users trust and choose higher-ranked results more than lower-ranked results. Given the apparent power of search rankings, we asked whether they could be manipulated to alter the preferences of undecided voters in democratic elections. Here we report the results of five relevant double-blind, randomized controlled experiments, using a total of 4,556 undecided voters representing diverse demographic characteristics of the voting populations of the United States and India. The fifth experiment is especially notable in that it was conducted with eligible voters throughout India in the midst of India's 2014 Lok Sabha elections just before the final votes were cast. The results of these experiments demonstrate that (i) biased search rankings can shift the voting preferences of undecided voters by 20% or more, (ii) the shift can be much higher in some demographic groups, and (iii) search ranking bias can be masked so that people show no awareness of the manipulation. We call this type of influence, which might be applicable to a variety of attitudes and beliefs, the search engine manipulation effect. Given that many elections are won by small margins, our results suggest that a search engine company has the power to influence the results of a substantial number of elections with impunity. The impact of such manipulations would be especially large in countries dominated by a single search engine company.

Primacy effects in particular have been shown to have a favorable influence on the formation of attitudes and beliefs (18–20), enhance perceptions of corporate performance (21), improve ratings of items on a survey (22–24), and increase purchasing behavior (25). More troubling, however, is the finding that primacy effects have a significant impact on voting behavior, resulting in more votes for the candidate whose name is listed first on a ballot (26–32). In one recent experimental study, primacy accounted for a 15% gain in votes for the candidate listed first (30). Although primacy effects have been shown to extend to hyperlink clicking behavior in online environments (33–35), no study that we are aware of has yet examined whether the deliberate manipulation of search engine rankings can be leveraged as a form of persuasive technology in elections. Given the power of order effects and the impact that search rankings have on consumer attitudes and behavior, we asked whether the deliberate manipulation of search rankings pertinent to candidates in political elections could alter the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of undecided voters.

It is already well established that biased media sources such as newspapers (36–38), political polls (39), and television (40) sway voters (41, 42). A 2007 study by DellaVigna and Kaplan found, for example, that whenever the conservative-leaning Fox television network moved into a new market in the United States, conservative votes increased, a phenomenon they labeled the Fox News Effect (40). These researchers estimated that biased coverage by Fox News was sufficient to shift 10,757 votes in

Auditing Partisan Audience Bias within Google Search

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There is a growing consensus that online platforms have a systematic influence on the democratic process. However, research beyond social media is limited. In this paper, we report the results of a mixed-methods algorithm audit of partisan audience bias and personalization within Google Search. Following Donald Trump's inauguration, we recruited 187 participants to complete a survey and install a browser extension that enabled us to collect Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) from their computers. To quantify partisan audience bias, we developed a domain-level score by leveraging the sharing propensities of registered voters on a large Twitter panel. We found little evidence for the "filter bubble" hypothesis. Instead, we found that results positioned toward the bottom of Google SERPs were more left-leaning than results positioned toward the top, and that the direction and magnitude of overall lean varied by search query, component type (e.g. "answer boxes"), and other factors. Utilizing rank-weighted metrics that we adapted from prior work, we also found that Google's rankings shifted the average lean of SERPs to the right of their unweighted average.

CCS Concepts: • **Information systems** → **Page and site ranking; Content ranking; Personalization;**
• **Social and professional topics** → *Political speech*; • **Human-centered computing** → *User interface design*;

Partisan Audience Bias (Robertson et al. 2018)

-1 : a source shared **only** by democrats

0 : a source shared by an **equal** number of democrats and republicans

+1: a source shared **only** by republicans

Their dataset contains scores more than 19,000 web domains.

WGBH Boston's Public Radio: -0.74 (mostly democrats)

Wall Street Journal: 0.01 (almost equally read by D and R voters)

Breitbart News: +0.74 (mostly republicans)

Search as News Curator: The Role of Google in Shaping Attention to News Information

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an algorithm audit of the Google Top Stories box, a prominent component of search engine results and powerful driver of traffic to news publishers. As such, it is important in shaping user attention towards news outlets and topics. By analyzing the number of appearances of news article links we contribute a series of novel analyses that provide an in-depth characterization of news source diversity and its implications for attention via Google search. We present results indicating a considerable degree of source concentration (with variation among search terms), a slight exaggeration in the ideological skew of news in comparison to a baseline, and a quantification of how the presentation of items translates into traffic and attention for publishers. We contribute insights that underscore the power that Google wields in exposing users to diverse news information, and raise important questions and opportunities for future work on algorithmic news curation.

1 INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the interaction of the public with news, search engines are an increasingly powerful intermediary, both in exposing audiences to news information and assisting them in making sense of it. A Pew survey from 2017 [1] showed that 43% of Americans get their news online, up from 38% in the previous year and closing in on the percentage of people who got their news from television (50%). In a survey by the Reuters Institute in 2017, 24% of respondents from around the world said that search engines are their main gateway to news, compared to 23% for social media [2]. And Google is the dominant search engine, handling 63% of all search queries in the United States in April 2018 according to Comscore [3].

Google is also a powerful force within the news economy. According to the Parse.ly media referrer dashboard in August 2018, 50% of external traffic (and 22.4% of overall traffic) to online publishers was referred by Google search,

Opening Up the Black Box: Auditing Google's Top Stories Algorithm

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Abstract

Algorithmic auditing has emerged as an important methodology that gleans insights from opaque platform algorithms. These audits often rely on the repeated observations of an algorithm's outputs given a fixed set of inputs. For example, to audit Google search, one repeatedly inputs queries and captures the resulting search pages. Then, the goal is to uncover patterns in the data that reveal the "secrets" of algorithmic decision making. In this paper, we introduce one particular algorithm audit, that of Google's Top stories. We describe the process of data collection, exploration, and analysis for this application and share some of the insights. Concretely, our analysis suggests that Google may be trying to burst the "filter bubble" by choosing less known publishers for the 3rd position in the Top stories. In addition to revealing the behavior of the platform, the audit revealed illustrated that a subset publishers cover certain stories more than others.

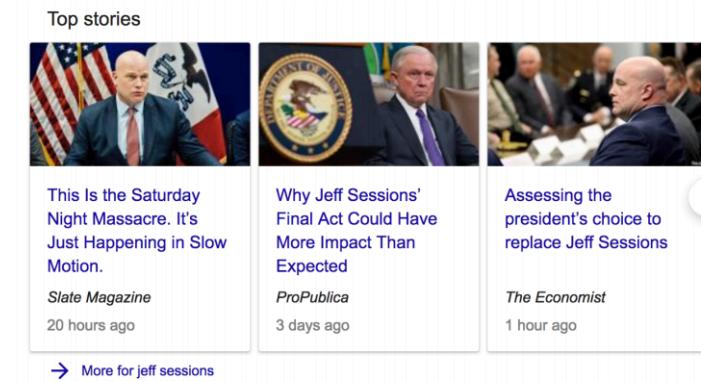


Figure 1: Top stories panel that appeared on Google search for the query "jeff sessions" on Nov 15, 2018 at 12pm.

Frequent Findings

1. Source Concentration
2. Center-left ideological bias

Our Data and Results

The Media Coverage of the 2020 US Presidential Election Candidates through the Lens of Google’s Top Stories

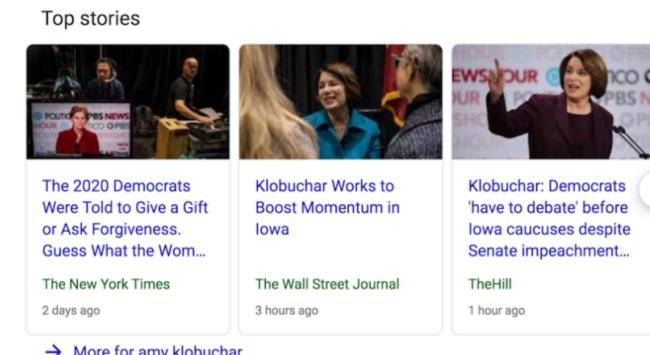
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Abstract

Choosing the political party nominees, who will appear on the ballot for the US presidency, is a long process that starts two years before the general election. The news media plays a particular role in this process by continuously covering the state of the race. How can this news coverage be characterized? Given that there are thousands of news organizations, but each of us is exposed to only a few of them, we might be missing most of it. Online news aggregators, which aggregate news stories from a multitude of news sources and perspectives, could provide an important lens for the analysis. One such aggregator is Google’s Top stories, a recent addition to Google’s search result page. For the duration of 2019, we have collected the news headlines that Google Top stories has displayed for 30 candidates of both US political parties. Our dataset contains 79,903 news story URLs published by 2,168 unique news sources. Our analysis indicates that despite this large number of news sources, there is a very skewed distribution of where the Top stories are originating, with a very small number of sources contributing the majority of stories. We are sharing our dataset^[1] so that other researchers can an-

uct, distinct from Google Search. The latter has since incorporated news headlines in a paragraph titled “In the News.” However, since late 2016,^[4] the more prominent feature of Top stories has become a fixture of many search pages. Figure 1 depicts an example of the Top stories panel in Google’s search engine results page (SERP), containing “fresh” headlines about Amy Klobuchar, one of the Democratic candidates running to become the Democratic nominee for the 2020 US Presidential Election.



The Media Coverage of the 2020 US Presidential Election Candidates through the Lens of Google's Top Stories

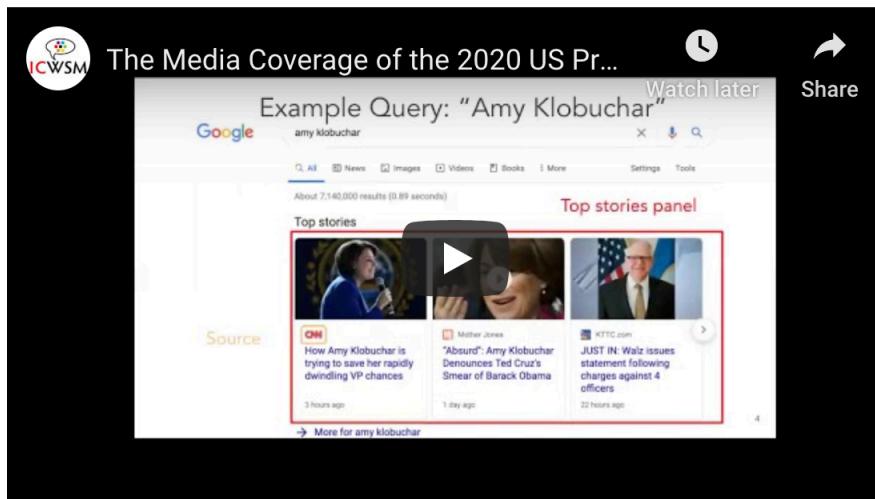
Anna Kawakami, Khonzodakhon Umarova, Eni Mustafaraj

Paper type: Dataset

Keywords: algorithmic curation, contexts, elections, news, news sources, political, presidential election, questions, search, sources, stories

[Abstract](#) [Paper](#) [Slack](#)

2020-06-09 P4 (23:00-00:00 GMT / 19:00-20:00 EDT) [\[Zoom\]](#) [\[Cal\]](#)



30 candidates

4 – 12 measurements/day

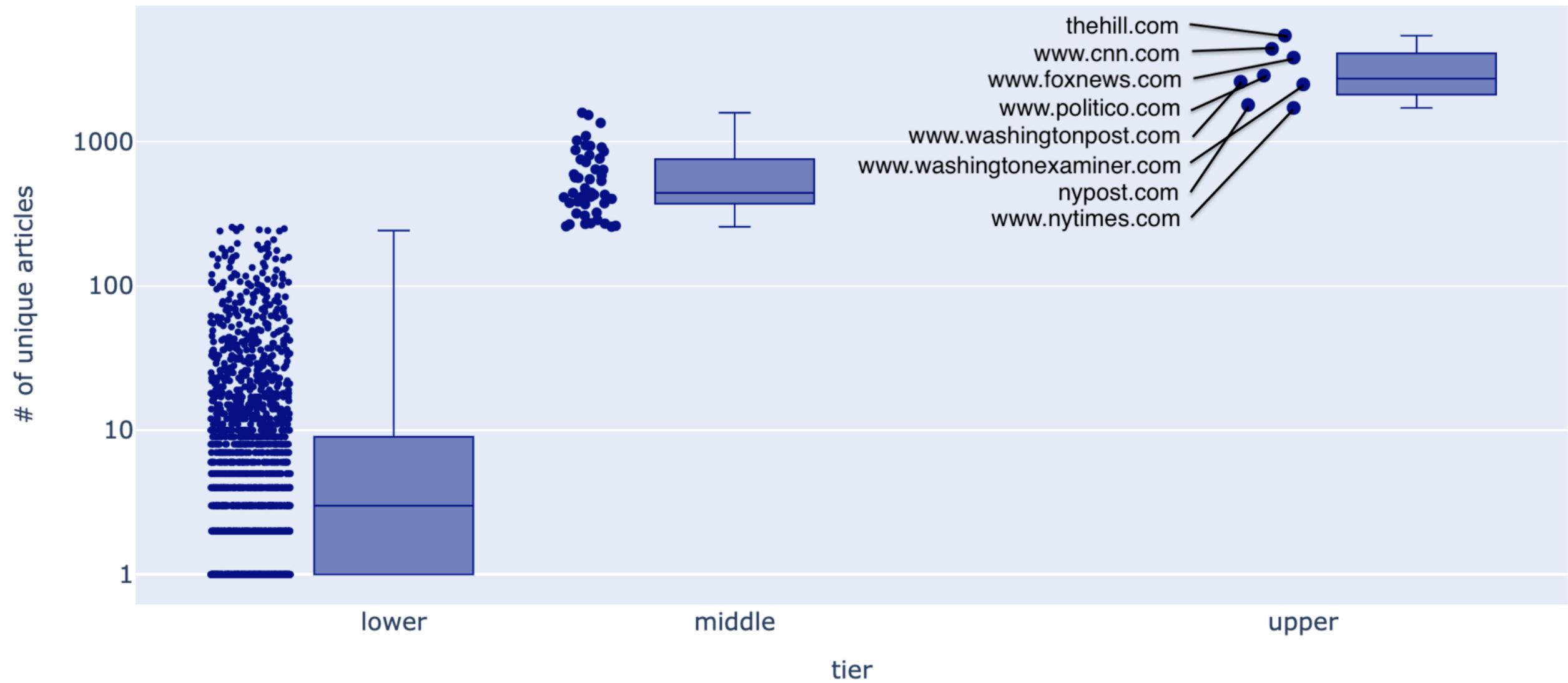
~80,000 unique articles

~ 600,000 measurements

2,168 unique publishers

Dec 15, 2018 – Dec 31, 2019

Source Concentration



Bias Distribution for 2/3 of content by 56 sources

Nr. of unique articles vs. PAB score



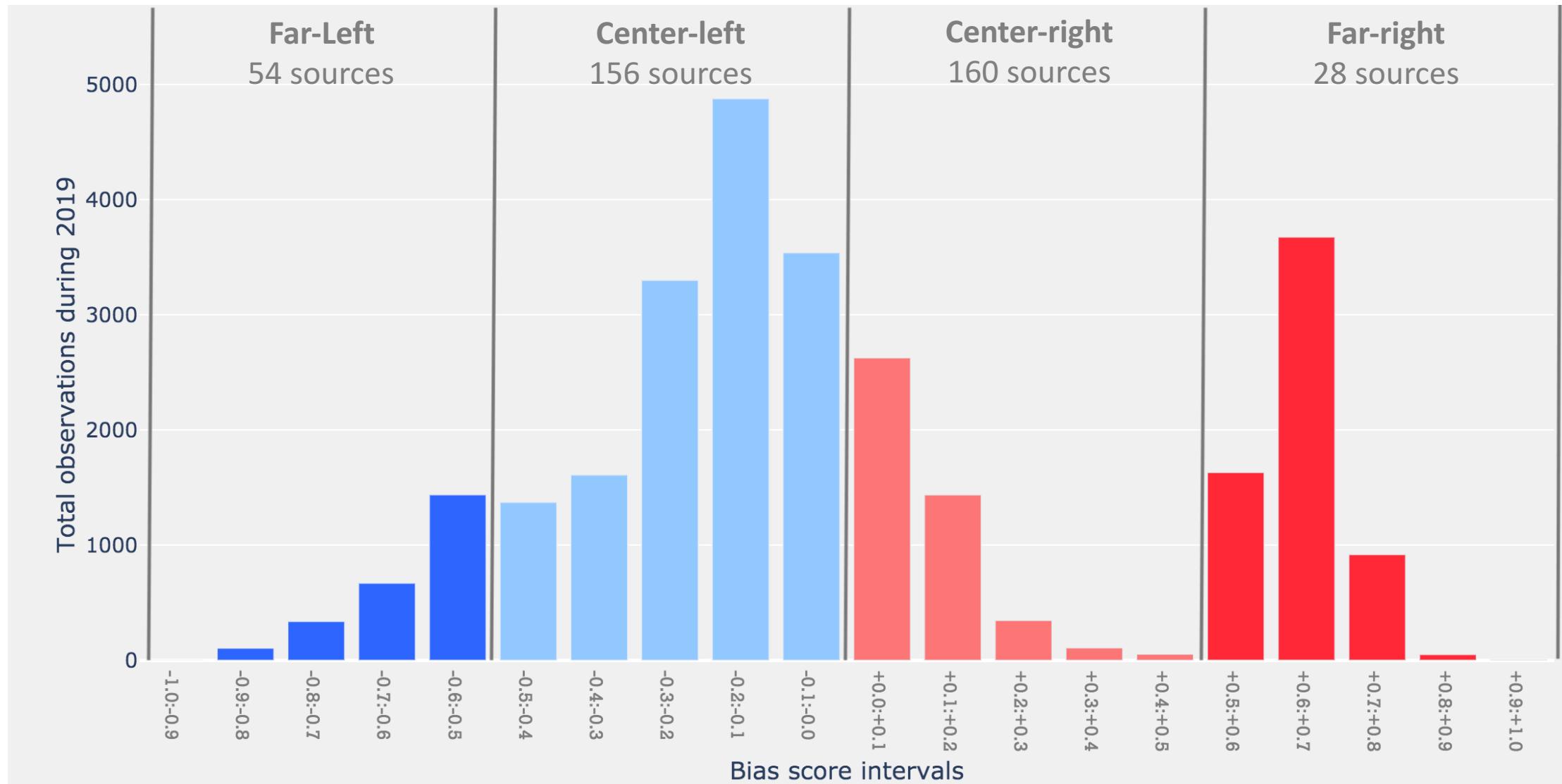
Source Bias Distribution for Top Candidates

Name	Left (-1,-0.5)	Center- Left (-0.5,0)	Center- Right (0, +0.5)	Right (+0.5, 1.0)	No PAB scores
Donald Trump	8.7%	64.9%	17.6%	8.3%	< 1%
Joe Biden	9.0%	51.9%	16.1%	22.1%	< 1%
Bernie Sanders	15.2%	50.4%	18.0%	14.3%	2.1%
Elizabeth Warren	11.5%	53.5%	19.3%	14.6%	1.1%
Amy Klobuchar	8.8%	57.2%	17.2%	12.7%	4.1%
Pete Buttigieg	10.7%	52.9%	21.1%	11.6%	3.7%

Name	Left (-1,-0.5)	Center- Left (-0.5,0)	Center- Right (0, +0.5)	Right (+0.5, 1.0)	No PAB scores
Donald Trump	47 8.7%	175 64.9%	175 17.6%	15 8.3%	28 <1%
Joe Biden	54 9%	156 51.9%	160 16.1%	28 22.1%	28 <1%
Bernie Sanders	77 15.2%	196 50.4%	189 18.0%	29 14.3%	63 2.1%
Elizabeth Warren	64 11.5%	196 53.5%	159 19.3%	29 14.6%	41 1.1%
Amy Klobuchar	48 8.8%	154 57.2%	127 17.2%	23 12.7%	66 4.1%
Pete Buttigieg	70 10.7%	191 52.9%	165 21.1%	27 11.6%	66 3.7%

Disproportional Amplification

Joe Biden's Top Stories Distribution Coverage in 2019

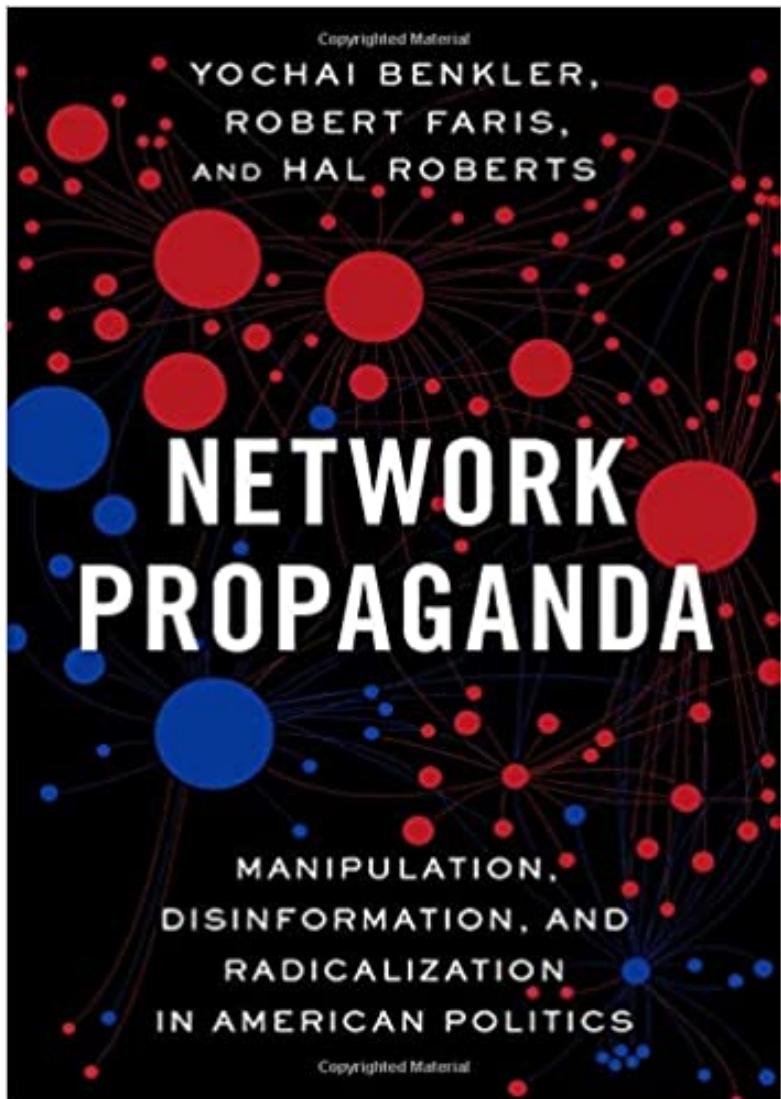


Coverage of Joe Biden

Source URL	Nr of unique articles	PAB score
foxnews.com	737	+0.61
thehill.com	731	
washingtonexaminer.com	480	+0.54
cnn.com	442	
washingtonpost.com	427	
politico.com	376	
breitbart.com	341	+0.74
nypost.com	261	
nytimes.com	247	
usatoday.com	181	
nationalreview.com	156	+0.64
nbcnews.com	155	
newsweek.com	143	
theweek.com	140	
wsj.com	128	
cnbc.com	128	
cbsnews.com	122	
vox.com	120	
thedailybeast.com	118	
slate.com	90	

Coverage of Donald Trump

Source URL	Nr of unique articles	PAB score
cnn.com	2072	
thehill.com	1479	
politico.com	1116	
foxnews.com	1060	+0.61
nbcnews.com	838	
usatoday.com	833	
cnbc.com	718	
washingtonpost.com	632	
nypost.com	562	
nytimes.com	465	
slate.com	390	
newsweek.com	387	
abcnews.go.com	290	
vox.com	282	
thedailybeast.com	263	
theatlantic.com	247	
washingtonexaminer.com	245	+0.54
cbsnews.com	160	
deadline.com	149	
bbc.com	137	



Mobilizing Fear and Loathing: The Clinton Foundation and Islamophobia

As we will see in [Chapter 6](#), defining Hillary Clinton in terms of corruption was the central success of the Trump campaign and the right-wing media ecosystem during the 2016 election. Coverage of the Clinton Foundation in particular played a substantial role in a successful campaign, long engineered by Bannon and Breitbart, to shape the post-convention debate over the course of the month of August 2016, and to orient the debate around allegations of corruption surrounding the foundation.

Joe Biden

Former Vice President of the United States

...



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Top stories >



[The Ukrainian
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16 hours ago



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Sanders Lead
Democratic Race To
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Joe Biden political ad:
'One of the worst
slogans I've ever heard'

Fox News

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→ More for Joe Biden



The Ukrainian
Prosecutor Behind
Trump's Impeachment

The New Yorker

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Health

Breitbart

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Private-eye firm claims Hunter Biden is linked to multiple criminal probes

New York Post

1 day ago

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Hunter Biden owns massive home in swanky Hollywood Hills, court docs reveal

New York Post

18 hours ago



Court Docs: Private Investigator Claims Hunter Biden Under Criminal Probe for...

Breitbart

8 hours ago



What is the ‘Fairness Doctrine’?

A brief timeline of 100 years

- Congress passes Radio Act of 1912 (assign wavelengths and licenses)
- Congress passes Radio Act of 1927:
 - Creates the Federal Radio Commission
 - Introduces the “public interest” standard
- Congress passes the Federal Communication Act of 1934
 - Creates the Federal Communication Commission (FCC)
- 1949: FCC formalizes the Fairness Doctrine to clarify the “public interest”
- 1987: FCC repeals the Fairness Doctrine (reason: chilling free speech)
- 2011: All remaining media rules were repealed.

Fairness Doctrine

What is a broadcasters' responsibility under the public interest standard?

As public trustees, the licensees had a two-fold obligation to their listeners:

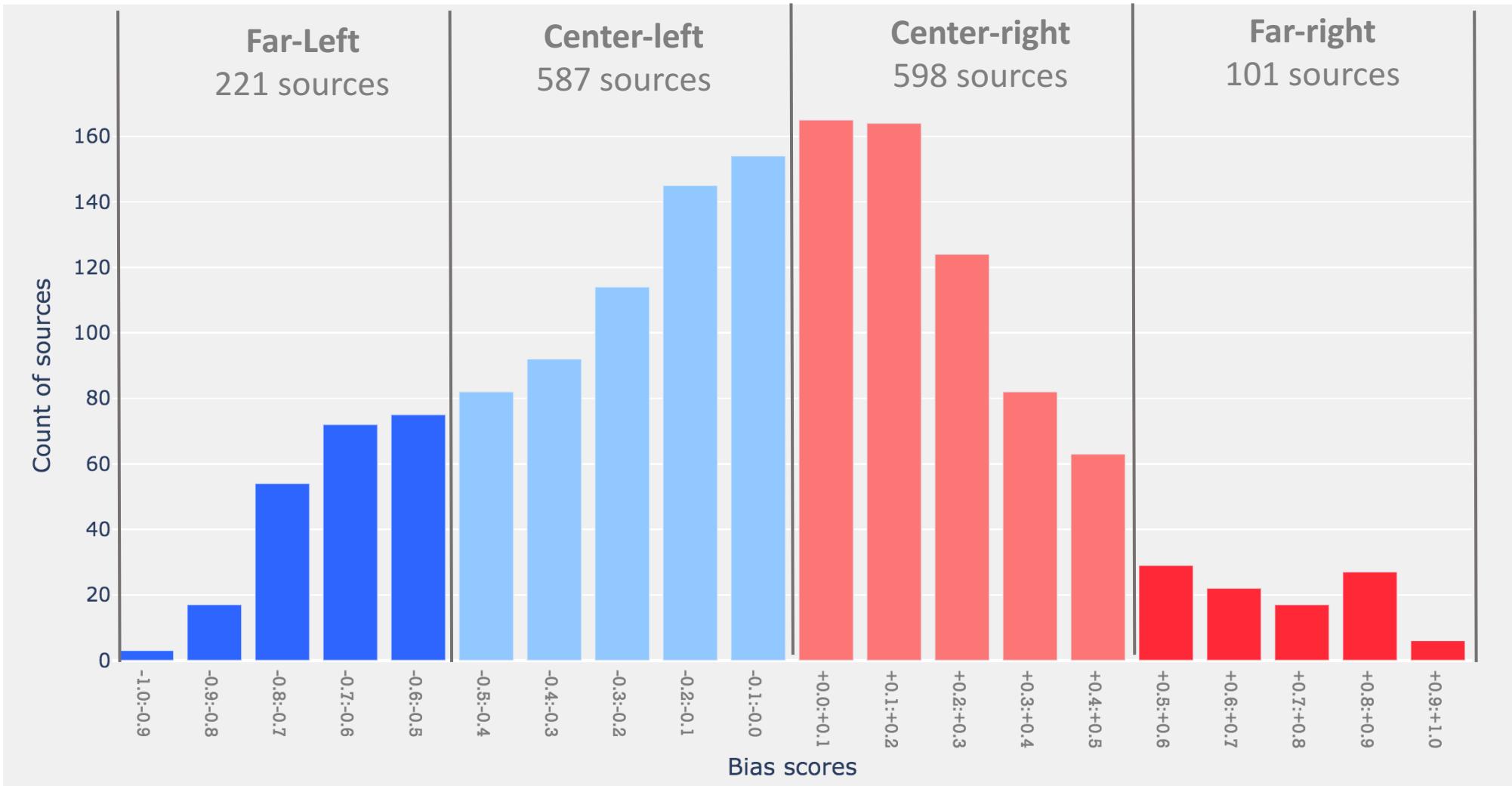
- 1) To provide adequate coverage of important public issues of interest in the community
- 2) Present both sides of the issues for the public's consideration and acceptance or rejections

The right of public to be informed was paramount (trumping other rights).

Google's 'Fairness Doctrine'?

Balanced Coverage

Bias Distribution of 1507 / 2168 sources in our dataset



Google's Criteria for Top stories

Relevance

(article contains your keywords)

Prominence

(are publishers writing a lot about the topic, is it trending?)

Freshness

(how recent is the article)

Authoritateness

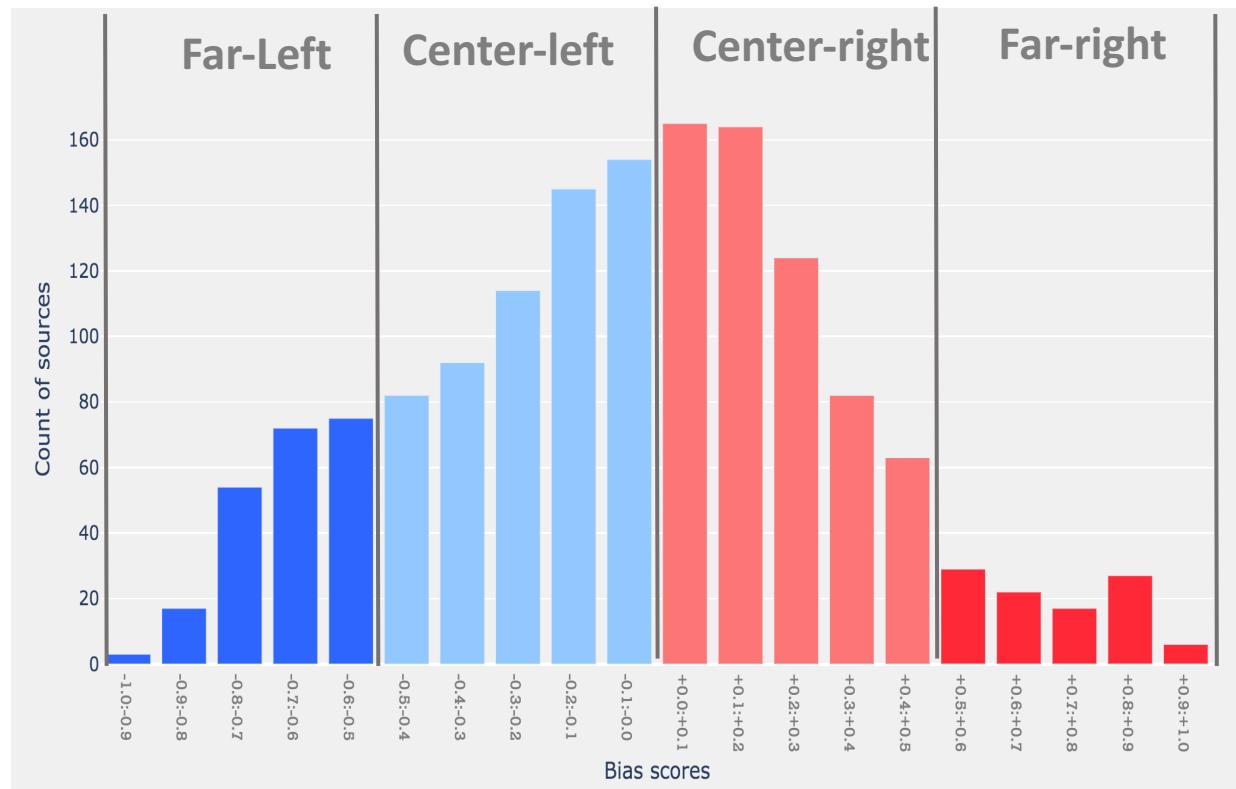
(high-quality information from the most reliable sources)

Ideologically Blind?

Our news algorithms are not designed to use the following factors to influence ranking:

- Point of view on issues - While some personalized news experiences are designed to connect you with stories you may be interested in, none of our systems endeavor to assess a publisher's—or a user's—ideological or political leanings.
- Ad sales or commercial relationships - We take measures to ensure that Google's commercial relationships do not impact the design of our news algorithms. Advertisers and partners do not receive special treatment with regard to how we surface news articles.
- Features such as a user's gender, religious beliefs, age, health information, race, or other sensitive characteristics.

Bias Distribution of 1507 / 2168 sources in our dataset



The promise: balanced news

The reality: unbalanced news

Joe Biden's Top Stories Distribution Coverage in 2019

