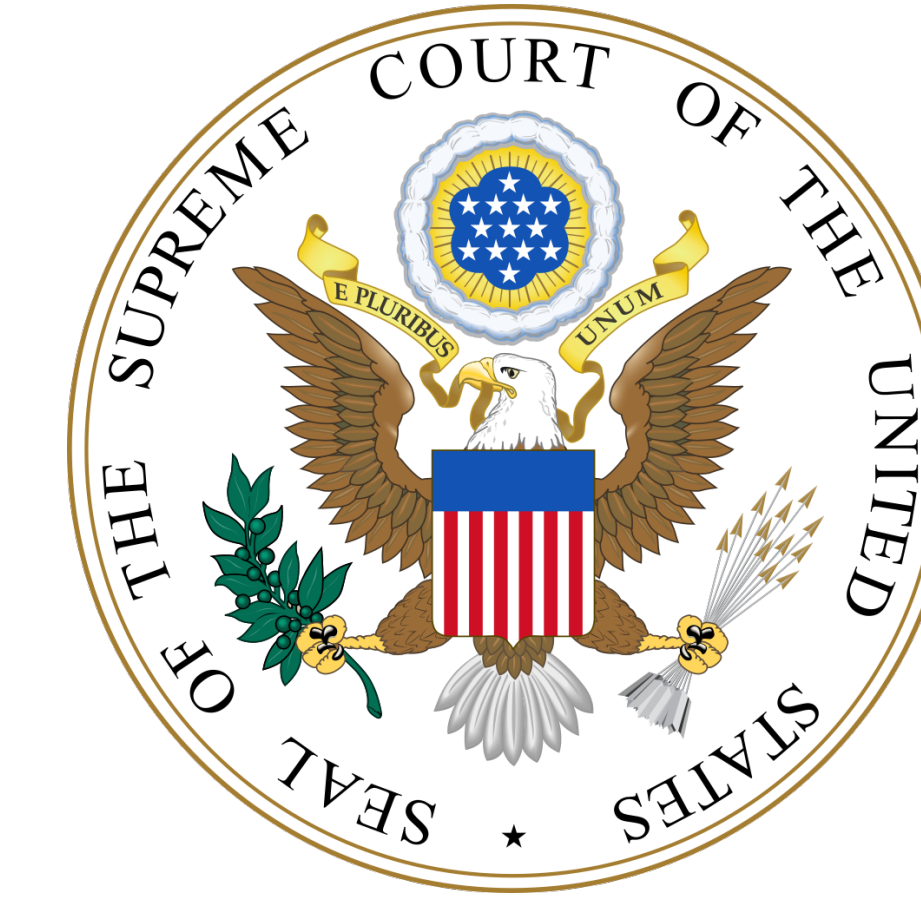# Media Coverage of the Three Trump Supreme Court Appointees

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Programming Humanity: Integrated Program for

Abstract

Ever since Donald Trump rode down his Trump Tower escalator and declared himself a Republican candidate for the American presidency, he has been in the unrelenting glare of the media spotlight. News outlets either adored his every move, or critiqued his every breaking of long-standing presidential norms. Anything President Trump has done over the past five years has been made into a breaking news headline on cable or network TV, and in a barrage of news alerts online and in social media.

The drumbeat of negative coverage of Trump has never slowed, from that escalator descent to today, as he continues to concede his 2020 election loss. No President has a very positive relationship with the media, but it seems as though it is especially bad with Trump. According to a Pew Research Center study comparing the news coverage of the first 60 days of the past four presidencies, 62% of the coverage of Trump was negative, more than twice his predecessors, Presidents Obama, Bush and Clinton. I wanted to see if this negative media assessment was also affecting the public's perception of President Trump's nominees for the Supreme Court.

Introduction

The three conservative Justices Trump appointed might be his most lasting legacy on American politics. Now, the court has six conservative Justices and only three liberal. In fact, President Trump had very little say in the decision making process of his nominees, but nonetheless the nominees were all tainted by Trump's rhetoric. Leonard Leo, of the Federalist Society (FedSoc), a national association of conservative and libertarian lawyers, judges, and legal scholars, played a large role in the nomination of Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. Before the 2016 Presidential election, Trump released a list of FedSoc-affiliated judges in an effort to sway Republican voters that he would fill Justice Antonin Scalia's vacancy with a conservative Justice backed by FedSoc. Indeed, all three nominees were extremely well qualified, having gone to top law schools—Kavanaugh and Gorsuch at Yale, and Coney Barrett at Notre Dame—and both Kavanaugh and Gorsuch had clerked for former Justice Anthony Kennedy and Coney Barrett for the late Justice Scalia. All three had blue-ribbon conservative pedigrees. But, seen through the lens of Trump's highly partisan slant, each justice became a lightning rod for political polarization—put on pedestals by the right, and all but pummeled on the left. The once-staid Senate confirmation hearings became stages for political theatrics that had senators screaming at high volume and one of the nominees in tears explaining his love of beer.
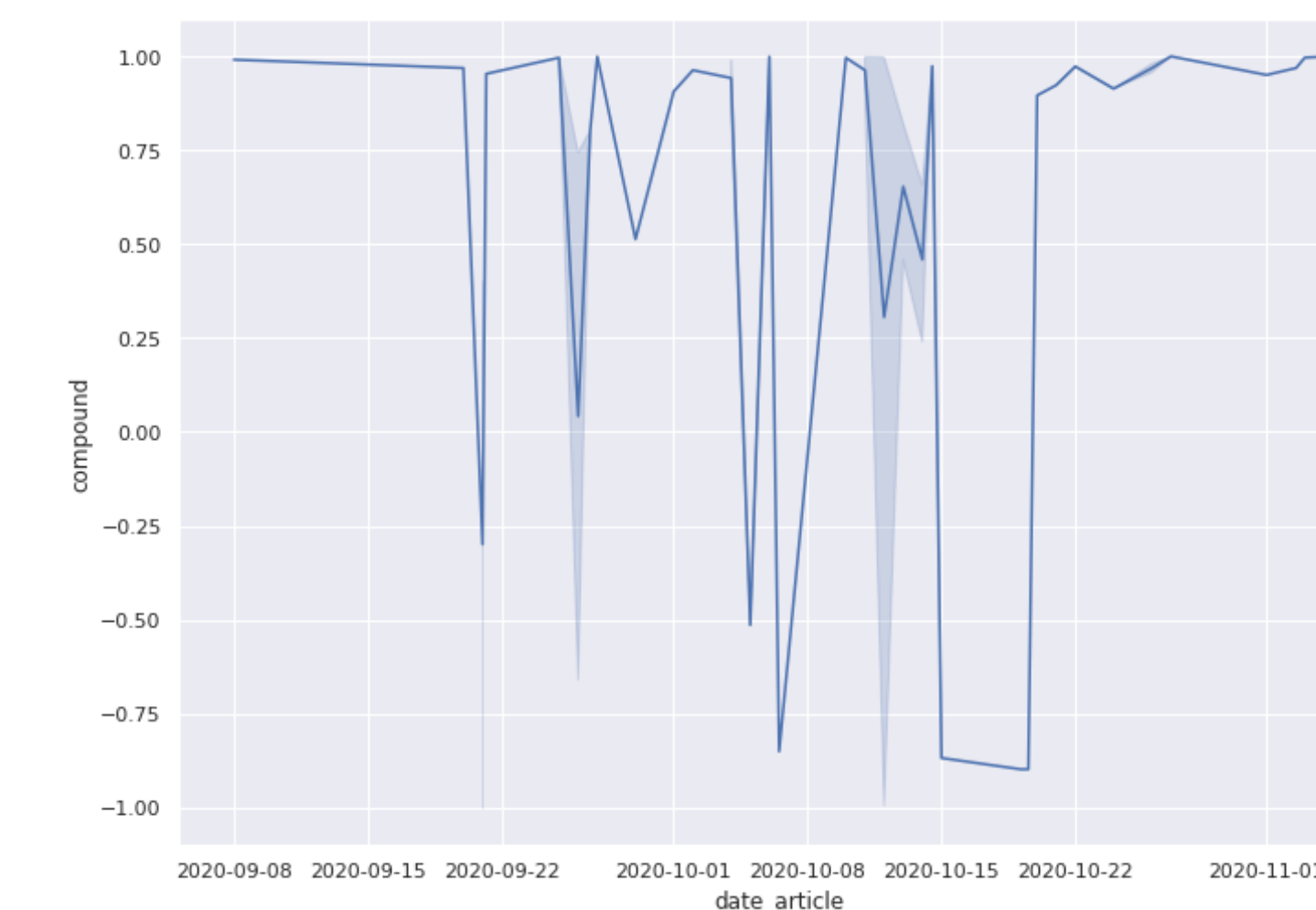
Research Question

During the past four years, President Trump has nominated three different Justices to the Supreme Court. Has there been a bias on the way that different sides of the media have covered the confirmation hearings of the three justices because of their association with President Trump ?
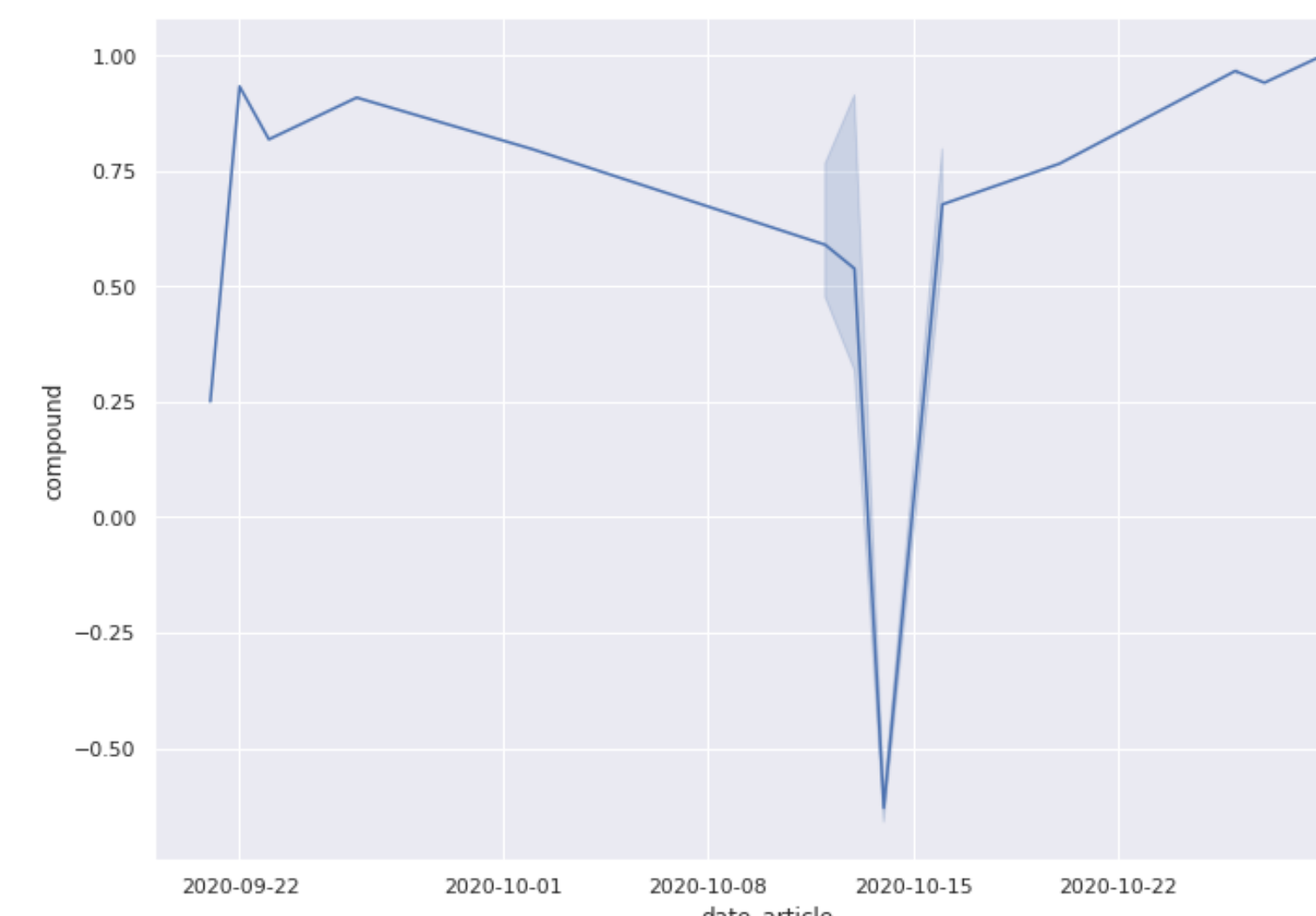
Methodology

I took news articles from CNN and Fox News to be able to see the news narrative being presented by news outlets from two different ranges of the political spectrum. These stories all were about the Senate Confirmation Hearings for the three Supreme Court Justices President Trump appointed. For each nominee I found the date that they were officially nominated by President Trump and chose one week before that as the beginning date of my search cycle and one week after they were sworn in as a Justice as the end of the search. I wanted to capture the full narrative of when they were relevant in the news. For all three cases I was able to look at four different weeks of news articles. Specifically looking at Mondays for the biggest news cycles. Professor Chun was kind enough to do this for me by going through the dates I provided him to find the news articles from CNN and Fox News. Newspaper3k is a python library for finding news articles. Next he used Duck Duck Go to eliminate duplicate and irrelevant news articles that were collected. One of the problems with the dataset was that some were quite small once all redundant urls and illegal content were deleted. There was always between 12-80 articles for each nominee. Then he cleaned the text and put the clean text into Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning(VADER). VADER is a model used for text sentiment analysis that is able to determine positive and negative sentiment. VADER analyzed the graphs for positive and negative sentiment based on the news articles. Then I was able to look at the graphs and take the dates of min or max points on the graphs and find the news articles from that day to contextualize the reason for the positive or negative sentiment on that certain day for Fox or CNN.
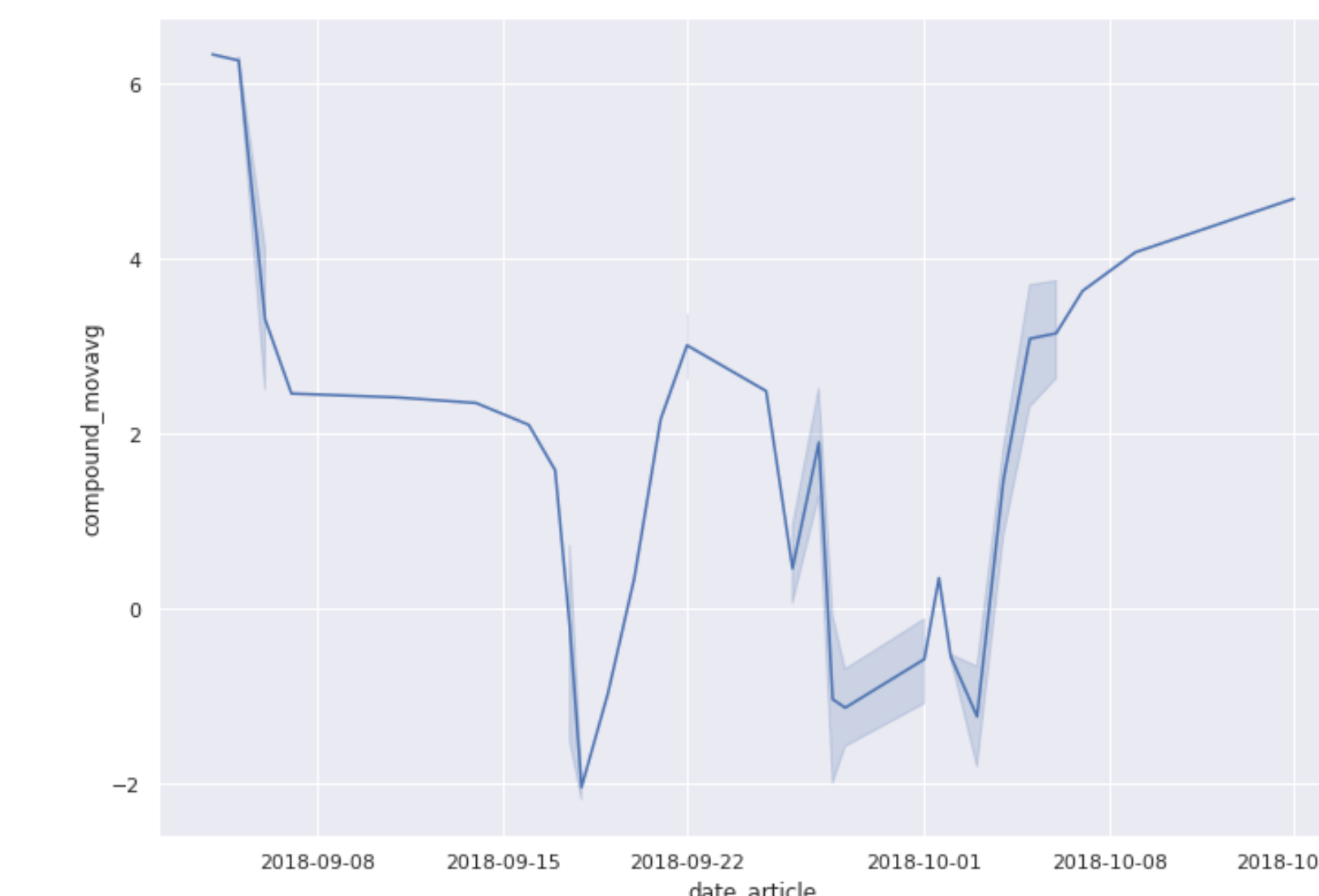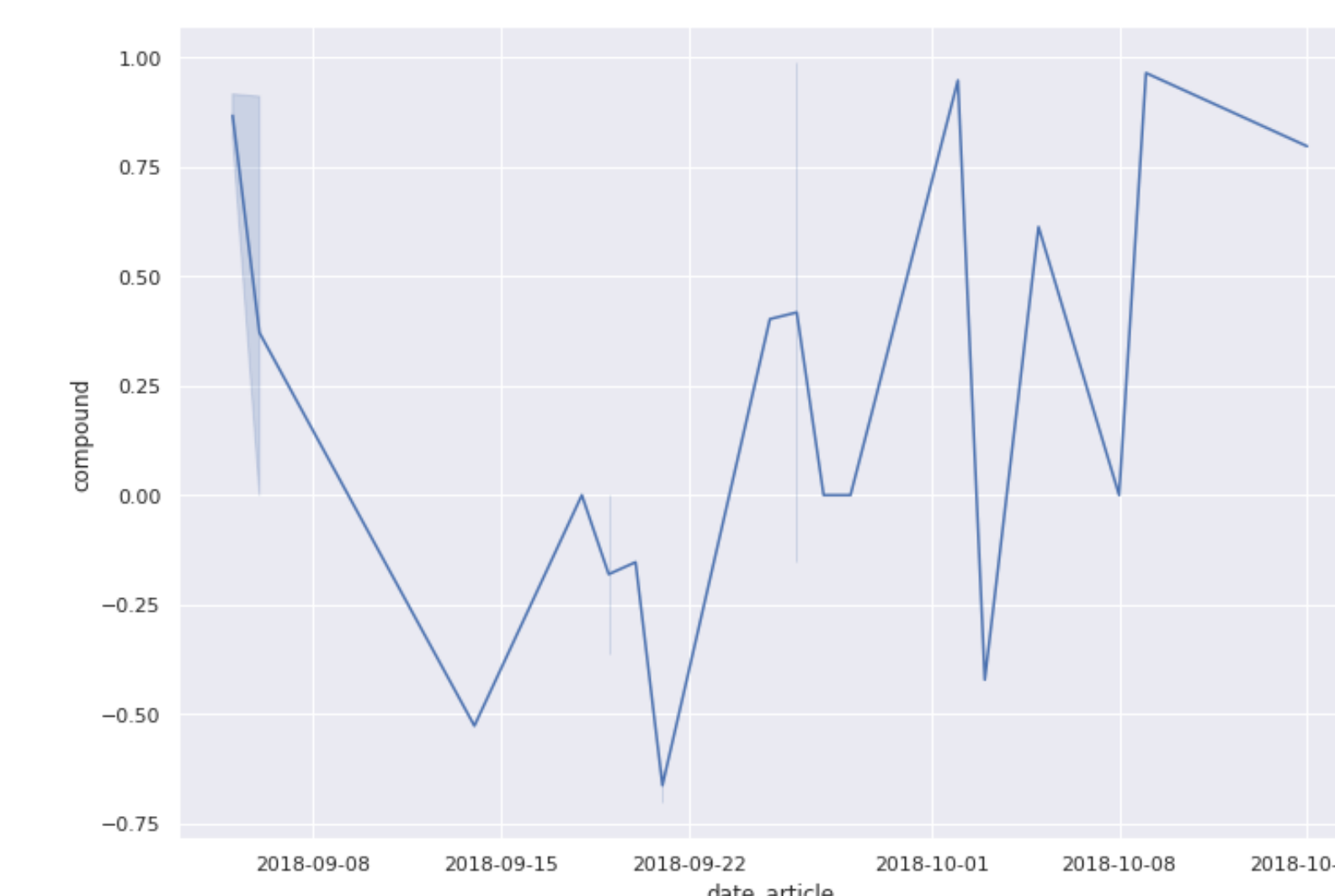
Graph

Amy Coney Barrett CNN Figure 1

Amy Coney Barrett Fox News Figure 2

Brett Kavanaugh CNN Figure 3

Brett Kavanaugh Fox News Figure 4

Conclusion

After reviewing the graphs from the VADER I found the most glaring differences between the media sentiment for Justice Barrett and Justice Kavanaugh. What stood out most to me right away was how much more negative the CNN graphs were compared to the Fox graphs. I expected there to be a certain amount of bias on both sides. CNN bias comes through their use of much more negative sentiment on average in their articles. Also, CNN would have articles that would be written about negative reports that emerged in that days news cycle whereas Fox chose to not report such stories. For example, in Figure 1 there are massive negative lows around the dates of September 26 and October 7. So what was going on around the days to cause the massive negative sentiment coming from CNN? On September 26, President Trump hosted a ceremony at the White House to announce Coney Barrett as his nominee. Under normal circumstances this would be fine, but during the COVID-19 pandemic a gathering of this size with many attendees not wearing masks or following social distancing guidelines this was not medically responsible. After this event, eight people including the President and other top rankings White House Officials tested positive for the coronavirus within the next week. CNN ripped into the Trump administration for their "mismanagement of the crisis" and "shrugging off best health practices" in the articles around these dates. Fox, on the other hand, focused on Coney Barrett's addition to the court would "shift the nation's highest court to the right" as well as praising her impressive credentials. In Figure 2, there is only positive sentiment on these dates. It appears that both news organizations are pushing their own narratives. CNN is continually hammering into the Trump for his mismanagement with the COVID-19 pandemic, and Fox is focusing on Coney Barrett's impressive qualifications for the nomination. Again with the news cycle for Kavanaugh the difference in sentiment between CNN and Fox between the same dates is seen. As seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4 there is a large difference in the sentiment surrounding the dates of the additional hearings on sexual abuse allegations between Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford. Fox would run articles about Kavanaugh's legal prowess, how he denied the allegations, and the democrats being unethical and the whole hearing being a sham. CNN was continually running articles of Ford's emotional testimony and that she was "100% certain it was Kavanaugh who assaulted me" in the days following the hearing. Ultimately, the difference in sentiment of both news outlets when covering the same exact event shows that there has been bias in the media in what type of narrative is being formed on either side.Trump has been very polarizing during his presidency and it has effected news outlets coverage of his nominees for the supreme court.

Acknowledgements/Sources

Coding Sources: Newspaper3k DDGR, VADER

https://www.journalism.org/2017/10/02/covering-president-trump-in-a-polarized-media-environment/