

Right-wing media's coverage of the attack on the US Capitol on January 6

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Executive summary

This white paper examines 12 major right-wing media's coverage of the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. It uses a unique dataset of online right-wing media content that is both broad and narrow. It is broad in the sense that it includes every online article (n=399,266) published by Fox News, Breitbart, Newsmax, The Daily Caller, The Daily Wire, Western Journal, the National Review, The Washington Times, The Washington Examiner, The Blaze, The Federalist and Hannity.com in 2021. It is narrow in the sense that it also includes Facebook interactions data (n=1,752,585,920), which allows me to sift through mass content and focus on the articles that generated user engagement on Facebook.

There are three key findings. First, compared to the mainstream media, right-wing media were significantly less likely to use "insurrection" in the article headlines when covering the attack on the US Capitol. Instead, they used words such as attack, incursion, protest, or riot.

Second, compared to the mainstream media, right-wing media were significantly more likely to cover 1) media reaction to the attack – especially social media crackdown on Trump supporters; 2) investigation including the Jan. 6 select committee; 3) Trump and his political allies being targeted by the investigation; and 4) individuals that were arrested or charged.

Third, 200 most popular right-wing media articles generated more than half of all user engagement for right-wing media's coverage of Jan. 6 on Facebook. Three major themes emerged from these 200 articles: 1) politicians (Democrats in particular) politicized the Jan. 6 attack; 2) Trump supporters were persecuted; and 3) left-wing agitators, including BLM activists, participated in the attack. Many popular articles contained disinformation. Some even spread Russia propaganda. For example, one Western Journal article was titled "Putin rips detention of Jan. 6 protesters, accuses US Government of assassinating Ashli Babbitt." [1]

Content supply

The 12 right-wing media sites produced 399,266 articles in 2021. Among these articles, 6905 (1.7%) contained the word "Capitol," "January 6," or "Jan. 6" in the headline. [2] An analysis of a random sample of 100 articles shows that more than 90% were about the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. [3] Figure 1 shows the volume of articles about the attack on the Capitol. Figure 2 shows the time series plot of right-wing media's coverage of the attack.

[1] <https://www.westernjournal.com/putin-rips-detention-jan-6-protesters-accuses-us-government-assassinating-ashli-babbitt/>

[2] The percentage is comparable to that of the mainstream media, which produced 10561 articles (1.6%) containing the word "Capitol" out of 652,556 articles in total.

[3] The other 10% included articles that are not directly related to the January 6 attack – for example, articles about fencing surrounding the Capitol ahead of rallies in September 2021.

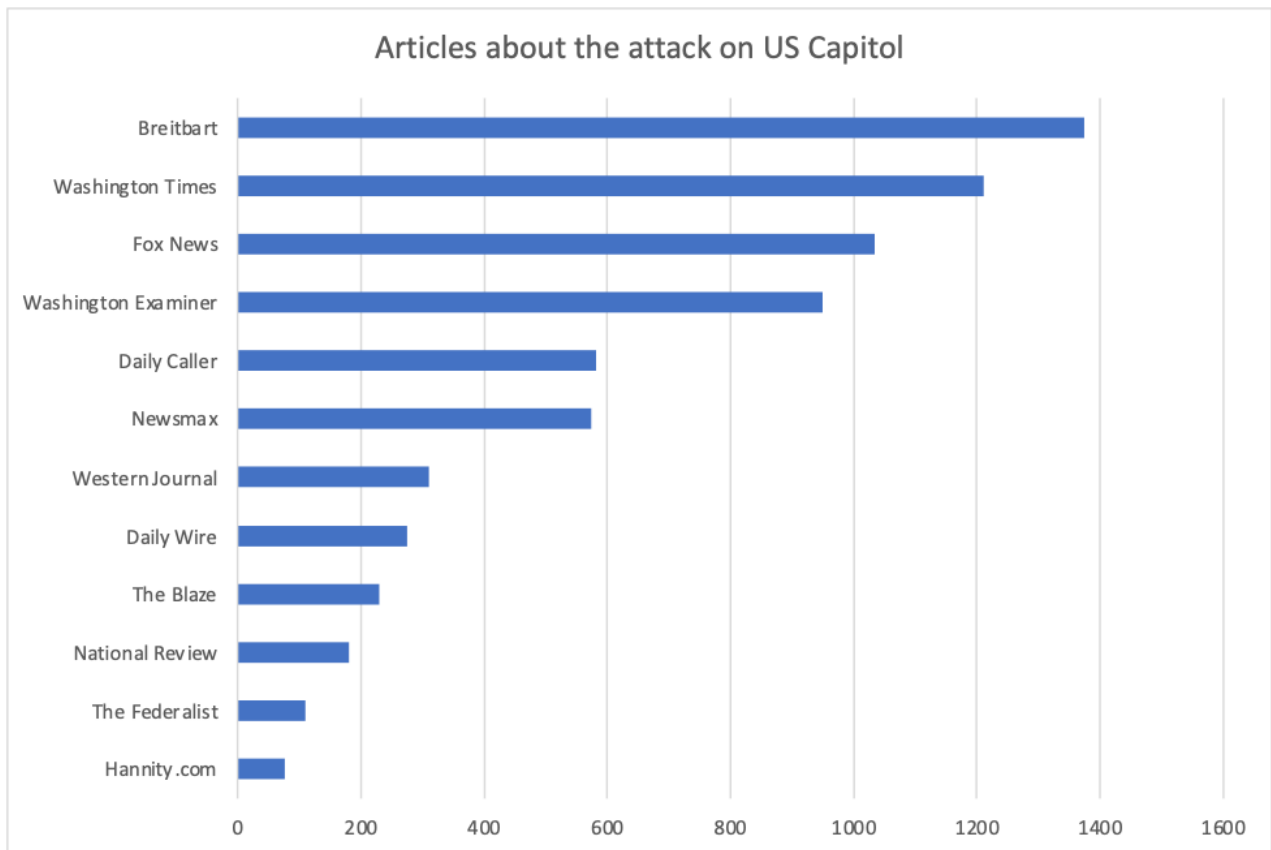


Figure 1: Article volume about the attack on the US Capitol (January – December 2021).

As Figure 1 shows, Breitbart gave the most coverage to the event, followed by the Washington Times, Fox News, and the Washington Examiner. These four outlets combined produced more than half of the corpus. There is perhaps little surprise that these four outlets dominated the coverage: they tend to produce more articles in general: in 2021, fox.com produced 66891 articles, washingtonexaminer.com produced 32033, washingtontimes.com produced 76416, and breitbart.com produced 109048 articles.

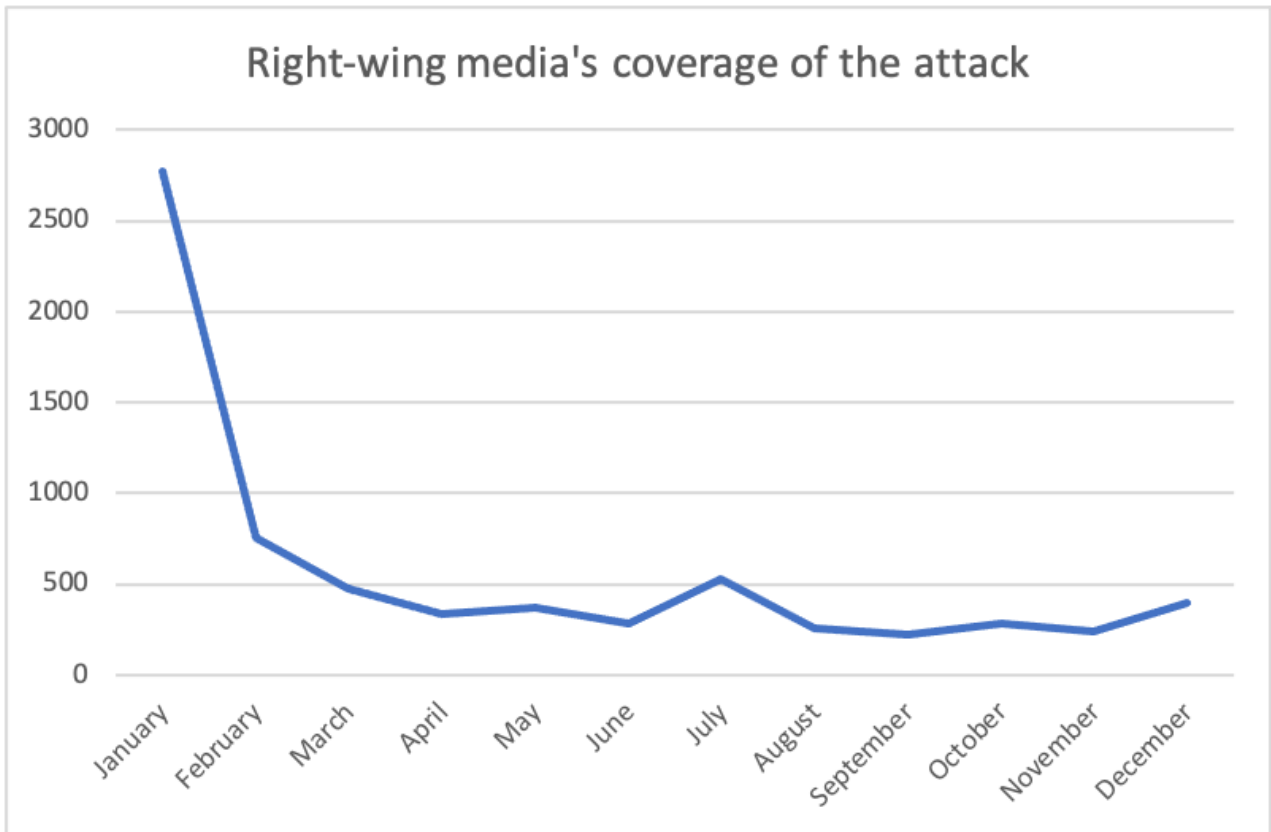


Figure 2: Time series plot of right-wing media's coverage of the attack.

Figure 2 shows that right-wing media's coverage of the event declined in 2021. However, there was a noticeable bump in July when the House Select Committee was formed.

Framing the attack

Among 6833 right-wing media articles about the attack, only 72 (1%) used the word "insurrection." However, among 10220 mainstream media articles about the attack, 341 (3.3%) included "insurrection." The difference is statistically significant.[4] That is to say, right-wing media articles are statistically significantly less likely to use the word "insurrection" in the headlines than mainstream media articles.

Topics

Structural topic modeling (See Data & Methods for details) was used to uncover topics from the corpus. For comparison, I also included all the articles published by 12 mainstream media that contained the word "Capitol," "Jan. 6," or "January 6". Hence, the combined corpus has 6905 articles from right-wing media and 10561 articles from the mainstream media.

[4] Two proportions Z test in R returns a p value smaller than .001.

Table 1 shows the topics as well as the top words associated with them. The third column shows whether right-wing media covered the topic significantly (statistically) more or less than the mainstream media. Topic 3 and 8 are not directly related to the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

Table 1: Top 10 topics in media coverage of January 6
(January – December 2021)

Topic	Top five words	Right-wing media
1 Media reaction to riot	media, claim, support, social, Facebook	Significantly more
2 Investigation/ Jan.6 committee	January, house, republican, Pelosi, committee	Significantly more
3 Capitol Security	Capitol, security, national, guard, police	NA
4 Riot	Riot, people, say, said, attack	Significantly less
5 Senate and White House	Senate, vote, Joe, Biden, call	No difference
6 Death	Officer, Sicknick, Ashli, Brian, die	No difference
7 Video report	Video, attack, new, report, insurrection	Significantly less
8 State Capitol	Protest, state, bill, democrat, storm	NA
9 Trump and allies	Trump, president, committee, subpoena, investigate	Significantly more
10 Arrest	Charge, arrest, man, rioter, FBI	Significantly more

Compared with the mainstream media, right-wing media devoted significantly more coverage to the following topics: “media reaction to riot,” “investigation/Jan. 6 committee,” “Trump and allies,” and “arrest.” They devoted significantly less coverage to two topics, namely “riot” and “video report.” Table 2 shows the top right-wing media article headlines for topics that attracted significantly more coverage from right-wing media.

Table 2: Top article headlines from right-wing media

Topic	Headline
Media reaction to riot	1 Social media crackdown continues after siege of US Capitol (Washington Times) 2 Facebook criticized by Dems, liberal watchdog for skirting Capitol riot blame (Fox News)
Investigation/ Jan.6 committee	1 McCarthy: “We will run our own investigation into Jan. 6.” (Washington Examiner) 2 McCarthy says Pelosi ‘has broken this institution’ by denying GOP picks for Jan. 6 select committee. (Fox News)
Trump and allies	1 Jan. 6 committee issues subpoenas for Kayleigh McEnany, Stephen Miller, and 8 other former Trump staffers. (The Blaze) 2 Trump appeals to Supreme Court to block Jan. 6 committee from accessing records. (Newsmax)
Arrest	1 Proud boys member considers guilty plea in Capitol riot. (Washington Times). 2 QAnon Shaman Anthony Chansley charged in Capitol riot to get organic food in jail. (Fox News)

In addition, although some topics attracted similar amount of coverage from right-wing media and the mainstream media, they were framed differently. Figure 3 shows the words that right-wing media and the mainstream media used when discussing the topic “death”. Right-wing media focused on the death of Ashli Babbitt, a rioter who was shot by the US Capitol Police; the mainstream media, however, focused on the death of Brian Sicknick, the Capitol Police officer who died of two strokes the day after he responded to the attack on the Capitol.

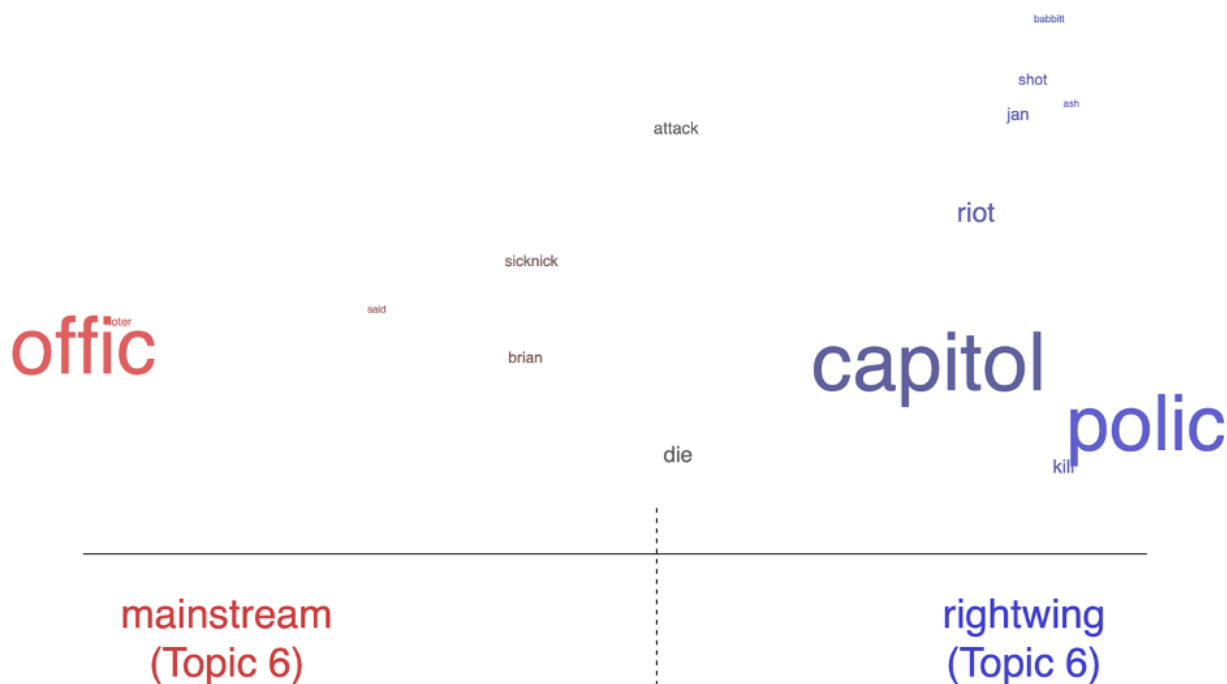


Figure 3: Top words used by right-wing media and the mainstream media in Topic 6 “death.”

Popular articles on Facebook

Popularity on Facebook is measured by the number of interactions, including likes, shares, comments, and reactions. The 6905 articles from right-wing media outlets had 7324 interactions on average whereas articles published by right-wing media in general only had 4389 interactions on average.[5]

Right-wing media content’s popularity followed a pattern of concentration: most user interactions concentrated on just a few hundred articles. The top 600 most popular articles accounted for approximately 80% of all user interactions for the 6905 articles. And the top 200 most popular articles accounted for more than half of all user interactions. The following analysis focuses on the top 200 articles.

[5] The mainstream media’s articles about the attack were also popular on Facebook. The 10561 articles from the mainstream media attracted 17735 interactions on average whereas articles published by the mainstream media in general only had 2344 interactions on average.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the 200 articles over different right-wing media outlets. Daily Wire, Fox News, and Western Journal were especially good at making their articles popular on Facebook. By contrast, although the Washington Times and the Washington Examiner produced many articles about the Jan. 6 attack (See Figure 1), few of their articles made it to the top 200.

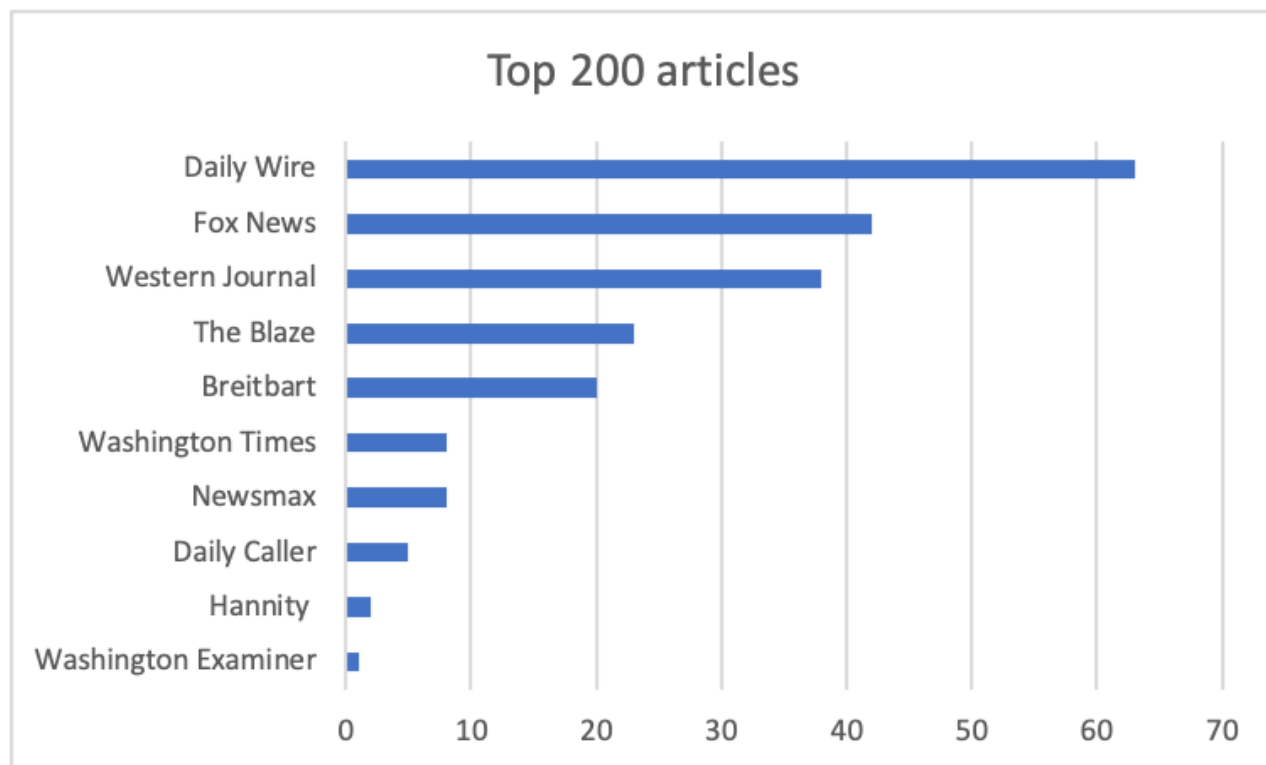


Figure 4: The distribution of the most popular 200 articles over right-wing media outlets

I manually coded each headline for the 200 articles in terms of themes. Three major themes emerged from the analysis. The most common theme is that politicians (Democrats in particular) politicized or used dramatic language to describe the January 6 attack (23%). For example, many articles reported that Chuck Schumer compared the attack to Pearl Harbor, that Biden declared Jan. 6 the worst attack since the Civil War, and that Clinton floated the conspiracy theory that Trump worked with Putin to plan the attack. The second most common theme is that Trump supporters were persecuted in the wake of the attack (12.5%). For example, many articles repeated Tucker Carlson’s comment that the Capitol attack is being used to strip Americans of their rights. The third most common theme is that left-wing agitators participated in the attack on the US Capitol (9%). For example, many articles claimed that Democrats were among those arrested, that BLM activists were involved in the attack, and that NBC and CNN paid leftists to participate in the riot. Table 3 below shows a few examples for each major theme.

Table 3: Examples of most popular right-wing media articles on Facebook

Theme	Headline
1 Politicians politicized Jan. 6.	<p>1 Schwarzenegger compares U.S. capitol riot to Nazis 1938 <u>kristallnacht</u> attack on Jews. (Daily Wire)</p> <p>2 Chuck Schumer compares Capitol chaos to Pearl Harbor. (Daily Wire)</p> <p>3 Pelosi claims Trump is 'accessory' to murder because he 'instigated' deadly violence at us capitol. (The Blaze)</p>
2 Trump supporters were persecuted.	<p>1 Tucker Carlson: Bank of America secretly handed over private customer data to the FBI following capitol riot (The Blaze).</p> <p>2 Putin rips detention of <u>jan. 6</u> protesters, accuses us government of assassinating Ashli Babbitt (Western Journal).</p> <p>3 Retired <u>chicago</u> firefighter accused of participating in capitol riot. he was 600 miles away (Daily Wire).</p>
3 Leftists participated in the attack.	<p>1 BLM activist inside capitol claims he was 'documenting' riots, once said 'burn it all down' (Fox News).</p> <p>2 Court docs: CNN, NBC each paid \$35k to leftist charged with participating in capitol riot (Western Journal).</p> <p>3 Left-wing '<u>agitator</u>' arrested for us capitol riot involvement released from jail without bail (The Blaze).</p>

Data & Methods

Identifying major right-wing media sites

This study focuses on the top right-wing media sites with the largest online traffic and the largest engagement on Facebook. Table 4 shows the top 20 sites ranked by online traffic in January 2021. Table 5 shows the top 20 sites ranked by Facebook engagement in January 2021.

Table 4: US top 20 right-wing media sites ranked by unique visitors in January 2021

Media sites	Total unique visitors (000)
1 Fox News	95014
2 Newsmax	12265
3 Washington Examiner	10339
4 Washington Times	8563
5 TheBlaze	8173
6 Daily Wire	7858
7 Western Journal	7430
8 Gateway Pundit	5315
9 Breitbart	5070
10 National Review	4991
11 Daily Caller	3994
12 The Federalist	3863
13 <u>Bongino</u>	3578
14 Townhall	3075
15 RedState	1828
16 CNS News	1757
17 Hannity	1518
18 Infowars	1340
19 PJ Media	1314
20 WND	1172

Note: web traffic data are based on Comscore Media Metrix Multi-Platform; source: therighting.com

Table 5: US top 20 online right-wing media sites ranked by Facebook engagement in January 2021

Media sites	Aggregated Facebook engagement (000)
1 Daily Wire	72531
2 Fox News	54529
3 Breitbart	25958
4 Western Journal	24595
5 Theconservativeopinion.com	23738
6 TheBlaze	18836
7 New York Post	12299
8 Newsmax	8914
9 Washington Times	7806
10 Daily Caller	4925
11 Washington Examiner	4565
12 Babylonbee.com	3689
13 Epoch Times	3635
14 Billoreilly.com	3566
15 Trendingpolitics.com	3220
16 The Federalist	3083
17 Christianheadlines.com	2427
18 Hannity	1976
19 National Review	1831
20 Fox13news.com	1678

Note: Through a paid subscription with NewsWhip – a digital analytics company, I collected the top 5000 highest engaging articles per week on Facebook in January 2021. Then, I aggregated the article engagement at the media outlet level and ranked media outlets by engagement. Last, I identified the top 20 right-wing media sites using the partisan classification from mediabiasfactcheck.com.

The following 12 right-wing media sites ranked among top 20 both in terms of web traffic and engagement on Facebook. They are the Daily Wire, Fox News, Breitbart, Western Journal, the Blaze, Newsmax, the Washington Times, the Daily Caller, the Washington Examiner, the Federalist, Hannity.com and the National Review.

For comparison, I also collected the articles published by 12 mainstream media outlets in 2021. To identify major mainstream media outlets, I consulted Pew Research’s 2020 study on Americans’ news consumption.[6] The 12 mainstream media outlets are NBC News, ABC News, CBS News, CNN, The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, NPR, PBS, Time, and Newsweek.

[6] <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/media-polarization-methodology/#fn-78243-4>

Applying structural topic models

I applied a Structural Topic Model (STM) to a corpus including articles published by right-wing media (n=6905) and articles published by the mainstream media (n=10561). STM is a variant of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic models, which automatically identify topics in a corpus of texts. The corpus includes each article's headline as well as its first paragraph. Each topic model includes the lean of the media outlet (rightwing vs mainstream) and month as covariates to influence topic proportions. The word threshold in the topic was set to 10, which means that a word needs to appear in more than ten article headlines and/or first paragraphs to be included in the model. The number of topics was set at 10, and each topic was manually validated by inspecting the top words and top articles associated with each topic.