

## Political Identity and the Therapeutic Work of U.S. Conservative Media

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This essay contends that much of the emotional energy of contemporary U.S. conservatism comes from attachments to conservatism as a social identity. Drawing on observations from years of studying conservative news texts and interviewing conservative news consumers, I argue that today's most popular, secular conservative media tell an overarching story of conservatism as an identity facing the threat of stigma from liberal elites, liberal cultural institutions, and allied left agitators. These narratives reinforce a sense among audiences that liberals are intent on shaming conservatives and relegating them to a category of morally-flawed persons unfit to participate in public life. Conservative media serves as a resource for therapeutic support once such a threat has been invoked—providing positive affirmations of conservative identity, defenses against liberal attacks, and discrediting the threatening outgroup. I discuss implications that this approach to political identity and media narratives has for analyzing cultural processes sustaining conservative populist mobilization.

*Keywords: conservative media, populism, affective polarization, social identity*

In February 2017, I started interviewing people in Southeast Pennsylvania who rely on conservative news sources. I met Maria, a White woman in her 40s, at a Starbucks near her exurban home. Before I could pose my first interview question, she started our conversation, "I'm going to tell you right now—I know conservatives are wrongly judged. I could talk about that for hours. I truly feel I have to hide my beliefs. I know that you're liberal. Trust me, I know." Despite her misgivings about how a professor might judge her, there was a lot she wanted to say to me. About 10 minutes into our conversation, she said she needed to tell me about her son. He had come out as gay to friends and family a year ago, just before entering college. What Maria wanted me to hear was not the cliché that a liberal professor might have expected—a conservative coming to terms with her son's gay identity. Rather, she wanted me to understand that "liberal media" had been trying to poison her relationship with him. By her account, neither she nor her conservative husband had ever hesitated in their loving acceptance of their son and his sexual orientation. In fact, they had encouraged him to come out at an early age—before he was ready. They had taken this step because of the media. "The reason we felt so compelled to let him know we had his back was *because we are conservative*," she explained with a sense of exasperation, "And we never wanted him to think, because the media leads people to think, we're so anti-gay!"

My interviewees' stories were unique, but I soon noticed a similar set of themes coming up repeatedly. When interviewees became most emotionally animated, they were talking about perceptions that liberal individuals or institutions have contempt for people like themselves. Almost everyone I spoke

with told me they think that liberals see conservatives as reprehensible people whose beliefs are fueled by racism, homophobia, sexism, greed, and other moral failings. When I asked why they perceive liberals to have such attitudes, they drew on two types of experiences. Some talked about personal experiences of feeling slighted or castigated by liberals—especially on social media. But even more frequently, and often more passionately, they told me about stories demonstrating liberals' disdain for conservatives that they had encountered through conservative news. Many, like Maria, feared that liberals' misrepresentations of conservatives might impact their own interpersonal, and sometimes intimate, relationships.

In this essay, I argue that such grievances are not a mere sideshow in conservative discourse. The social construction of these sentiments is key to the popular mobilization of the American right today. Conservative discourses have long drawn on notions of victimhood, a motif some trace back to the French Revolution (Robin, 2018) or even early Christianity (Kintz, 1997). Critics often frame contemporary conservatism's image of victimhood as a strategic ruse (Alterman, 2005) or a spontaneous reaction to a threat of lost power (Robin, 2018). By contrast, I suggest this sense of victimhood is both deeply felt (so not merely strategic) and amplified and shaped by historical social processes and institutions (so not entirely spontaneous or endemic). Fending off threats of shame—a sense of global badness attached to a shared identity—is a central theme in conservative media. It is also a common motif for conservative news consumers describing their place in the current milieu. Drawing on years of interviews with conservative news consumers (Nadler, 2020b; Nadler, Taussig, Yazbeck, & Wenzel, 2021; Wenzel, Nadler, Valle, & Hill, 2018), interviews with conservative editors and journalists (Nadler, Bauer, & Konieczna, 2020), and observations from studying popular conservative news content (Nadler, 2020a; Nadler, 2016),<sup>1</sup> I put forward an argument that synthesizes observations from different modes of research: Much of today's secular (or not explicitly religious) U.S. conservative media tells an emotionally powerful "deep story" (Hochschild, 2018; Polletta & Callahan, 2017) of political life as a constant battle against liberals and leftists driven by a goal of shaming and humiliating conservatives and their communities.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I argue that much of the emotional energy of contemporary conservatism comes from attachments to conservatism as a social identity. Second, I argue that much of today's popular conservative media—from national talk radio and podcasts to primetime Fox

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews I refer to here were conducted from February 2017 to May 2021, and they were part of three different projects. All conservative news consumers contacted were residents of the Greater Philadelphia area or nearby New Jersey. Some of this data comes from a solo project in which I conducted in-person interviews with 22 people who identified themselves as consumers of conservative news, recruited through social media posts and snowballing. Some of these participants have continued participating through periodic conversations and messages. I am also drawing on interview data collected during two grant-funded projects in which I conducted interviews with small research teams. One project (Nadler et al., 2021) conducted focus groups and follow-up interviews from 2020–2021 with 25 conservative news consumers from the same area. Another team (Wenzel et al., 2018) conducted focus groups and follow-up interviews from 2017–2018 with 43 participants from the same area but from across the political spectrum. The conservative news consumers participating in all these studies were predominantly (but not exclusively) White. Across all samples, participants' ages ranged from early 20s to early 80s. In all studies, participants self-identified as conservative.

News to popular online conservative outlets—tell an overarching story of conservatism as an identity facing the threat of stigma from liberal elites, liberal cultural institutions, and allied left agitators. Conservative news narratives reinforce a sense that liberals are intent on shaming their audiences and relegating them to a category of morally-flawed persons unfit to participate in normal politics. Third, I argue conservative media come to serve as a resource for moral support once such an identity threat has been invoked—providing positive affirmations of conservative identity, defenses against liberal attacks, and discrediting the threatening outgroup. Here, I suggest, conservative media offers a balm for an irritation it helps inflame. I call this kind of identity repair “therapeutic work” not in a clinical sense but to emphasize that conservative news figures and consumers speak of conservative media as offering relief from threats of degradation.

While I draw on social scientific research, this is an essay of social criticism and my goal here is to provoke debate and spur future research. There are important qualifications to my argument. First, my proposals here are presented in the mode of discovery rather than verification (Luker, 2008). My formal interviews with conservative news consumers all took place in the greater Philadelphia region. Perhaps the salience of these themes might be different among conservative news consumers living in more solidly conservative communities. Second, multiple interests and motivations bring audiences to conservative news outlets. My aim is not to paint all conservative news with a broad, reductionist brush but to offer a thick description of one particular emotional dynamic. Third, while I think conservative media tell a unique story about ostracization, future research should consider to what degree similar patterns play out in partisan media across the political spectrum. Fourth, though this essay only examines the therapeutic work of conservative media from examples since 2016, when it may have taken on a special prominence, this emotional dynamic is not exclusively of this moment. Reaction against perceived moral shunning can be traced back much further in conservative media (Hall, 1994; Hemmer, 2016; Nadler & Bauer, 2019; Peck, 2019). Future scholarship might offer a fuller story of how this theme has taken on different inflections and intensities across time.

### **Social Construction of Political Identity**

In conventional thought, a person gravitates toward a political party—or to an ideological affiliation—because they support policies or principles aligned with the party or ideology. This has been a bedrock assumption of what Achen and Bartles (2016) describe as the “folk theory” of democracy. From this perspective, democratic reason rests on individuals’ assessments of which candidates or parties best serve their values and interests. Yet, the folk theory has long faced many challenges. Recent research coming from a largely quantitative approach in the field of political science converges, in certain respects, with humanistic scholars analyzing politics and affect and emotions (e.g., Ahmed, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015). While these two discourses rarely engage each other directly, both are fostering an ascendant view of political motivation that foregrounds the emotional pull of group identity attachments rather than ideological commitment or calculated self-interest. In their sweeping study of both empirical research and political theory, Achen and Bartles (2016) argue that “voters, even the most informed voters, typically make choices not on the basis of policy preferences or ideology” (p. 4). Instead, they conclude, “group and partisan loyalties, not policy preferences or ideologies, are fundamental in democratic politics” (Achen & Bartles, 2016, p. 4).

The notion that group solidarities play a key role in politics is far from new; political scientists and theorists have long challenged rational choice conceptions of political behavior (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). However, recent research is offering a renewed emphasis on partisanship itself as a salient identity category that is tied to, though not reducible to, attachments to race, religion, class, and regional and geographic identities (Mason, 2018). Much of this recent scholarship draws on social identity theory (SIT) to conceptualize the nature of partisan attachment (for an overview see Huddy & Bankert, 2017). SIT suggests that humans have a strong propensity to categorize themselves into groups and “differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity” (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, p. 42).

Social identity theory offers a starting point for understanding a striking feature of the U.S. political landscape: affective polarization. In a landmark study, Iyengar, Sood, and Ylkes (2012) found partisans not only “increasingly dislike the opposing party, but also impute negative traits to the rank-and-file of the out-party” (p. 407). They argue that these negative affects—rather than policy preferences or ideological convictions—have been driving popular (not elite) polarization. Subsequent research has demonstrated affective polarization in the United States through a variety of methods, including attitudinal surveys, field experiments, and even implicit bias experiments (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019).

The burgeoning literature on social identity theory and affective polarization is rarely engaged by scholars coming from cultural or critical media studies.<sup>2</sup> This might be partially explained by a lack of familiarity. Yet coming from the critical tradition myself, I also understand a potential reluctance. To a humanist, SIT can appear as an ahistorical way of thinking about human nature that abstracts subjects from the particular social circumstances and power arrangements in which they are embedded. Nonetheless, the founding figure of SIT, Henri Tajfel (1981), a Holocaust survivor, adamantly warned he did not believe that “‘explanations’ of social conflicts and social injustice can be mainly or primarily psychological” (p. 7). Rather than simply positing a hard-wired drive to form in/out-groups as an explanation for political polarization, SIT can guide an inquiry into *institutional contexts and social processes activating emotional attachments to political identities* in ways that lead to enmity.

There is good reason to believe that media institutions are key aspects of the contexts in which political identities take shape and influence the character of in- and out- group relations. Struggles over identities and community boundaries have been a central theme of cultural approaches to journalism. Rather than approach news media as mechanisms primarily for the transmission of information, Carey (1989) famously proposed a ritual approach that focuses on how news circulation maintains, repairs, and transforms social bonds and a shared apprehension of reality. Journalism scholars have also engaged vigorously with Anderson’s (1991) claim that news outlets have been pivotal, historically, in conjuring citizens’ “imagined communities” and constructing national identities. Much critical work in this vein has focused on the role of news media in projecting a national identity. As national media spheres fracture with the rise of niche-oriented

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<sup>2</sup> To illustrate this lack of crossover, I searched for “affective polarization” in full text searches for prominent critical communication and cultural studies journals: *Communication, Culture, and Critique*; *Media, Culture, and Society*, and *Cultural Studies*. None of these journals had any articles using this term. In *Political Communication*, the same search found 22 items including this term.

news outlets, scholars are turning to a more diverse array of identities and communities—beyond national ones—imagined and mobilized by news outlets.

### **Conservative Media and the Threat of Shame**

An SIT-inflected lens raises key questions about conservative news: What roles might conservative outlets play in constructing conservatism as a social identity? How might they promote emotional attachments to such an identity? What narratives do conservative media offer of political out-groups? Such an inquiry differs from much of the existing research focusing on conservative media's ideological content or the effects of ideological content. There is, however, a small but growing literature on conservative media that does engage with questions of identity construction and community solidarity (Apostolidis, 2000; Hemmer, 2016; Hendershot, 2010; Kintz, 1997; Kintz & Lesage, 1998; Peck, 2019).

Still, scholarship on conservative media remains a nascent subfield among critical and cultural scholars, far underdeveloped relative to the enormous influence conservative media has wielded on political culture (Nadler & Bauer, 2019). There are few studies that analyze the interpretative practices, rituals, or affective and emotional experiences of conservative news audiences (for exceptions, see Nadler et al., 2021; Tripodi, 2018). However, there are a number of insightful ethnographic accounts of contemporary conservative communities (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018), though these offer relatively little attention to media practices. Perrin (2018) and Polletta and Callahan (2017) argue that the recent ethnographies of conservative communities have tended to too easily present conservative beliefs as expressions of lived realities and organic cultural norms. In other words, they often treat political beliefs as expressions of a diffuse, homegrown "culture." Missing, here, are opportunities to consider the experiences of ordinary conservatives while emphasizing social processes and institutional contexts that imbue those experiences with political meaning.

Conservative news outlets are institutions that help shape to conservative political common sense and identity through widely disseminating cultural scripts (Vaisey, 2009). From Fox News commentators to conservative talk radio hosts to popular online right-wing outlets like *Daily Caller* and *Breitbart*, there's one motif that audiences will find repeated endlessly: Liberals and leftists see conservatives—and their communities—as suffering from deep moral failures, and they want to shame and even humiliate them (Peck, 2019; Rosenwald, 2019). In a massive content analysis of cable news transcripts, Knüpfer and Entman (2020) found Fox News was five times more likely to use the word "hate" than CNN or MSNBC from 2017–2020. The vast majority of these references came from anchors or commentators ascribing "hate" to those opposing Donald Trump, his supporters, or his agenda.

While Knüpfer and Entman (2020) show that the specific language of "hate" surged during the Trump administration, I have argued (Nadler, 2020a, 2020b) that the conceit of rebelling against liberal contempt has been central to popular conservative media narratives since the 1988 national launch of *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. Limbaugh (2018), for instance, would remind his audience that "People who mock and . . . insult you and your religion are praised as brilliant artists," while his listeners continue to be "called hicks. You're called White racists. You're called bigots. Sometimes they call you prudes. Sometimes they call you Bible thumpers. You're an idiot. You're small-minded. You're a moral twit" (para. 3). This motif of liberal animus is not just present in occasional tirades but woven into the telling and framing of day-to-day news events (see also, Peck, 2019).

In popular conservative media, liberals' contempt extends to anyone who associates with conservatives or fails to stay in lockstep with prevailing liberal notions. This is a powerful story. It invites audiences to see their very identities under the threat of stigma and shame. It agitates a sense of threat that opens the door, as the next section will detail, for conservative media figures to position themselves as defenders ready to restore the honor of the unfairly maligned. The felt sense of identity threat is not only the product of conservative media, of course. But popular conservative media amplify this antagonism, constantly picking at its wounds, while framing a personal animus against outgroups as an underlying motivation of liberal and left politics. Invoking such a perceived identity threat is a key technique by which right-leaning political entrepreneurs promote emotional investments in conservative—or anti-liberal—identities (George, 2016).

Among the conservative news consumers I have interviewed, almost all have told me they believe liberals hold a deep disdain for people like them. Most say they think liberals see them as lacking intelligence and as racists, sexists, or other types of bigots. For instance, a White woman in her 40s from a Philadelphia exurb told me liberals think that "if you're a conservative, you don't care about the environment. You hate gays, lesbians, transgender [people]." An African American woman in her 60s from a Philadelphia suburb told me, even though she had become disillusioned with the Republican party, she was upset that liberals show no respect for conservatives and religious people and assume they are "uneducated and unreasonable." A White woman in her 70s from a Philadelphia suburb simply told me, "They [liberals] hate us."

When I see interviewees become most emotionally animated, we were usually talking about liberal disrespect. Some have pleaded with me to understand their plight. Several interviewees told me they take steps to hide their conservatism for fear that liberals will try to shame them and excommunicate them from social circles. A White woman in her 50s from a Philadelphia suburb told me she has tried to hide her conservative politics from her coworkers, but she suspects they "all whisper about it. I'm positive they do. You know, like I robbed a bank or something." Several interviewees have even told me they feared physical attacks from strangers. One White woman in her 40s from a Philadelphia exurb told me she wouldn't "wear anything conservative, say anything conservative" or put a Trump bumper sticker on her car because she fears she might be attacked or vandalized.

When I pressed interviewees to describe why they think liberals have such contempt for people like them, they frequently drew on both personal experiences and stories from conservative media. On the side of personal experiences, many have told me about cruel comments from liberals over social media posts. Only a few have spoken of in-person insults, though many suspect disdain among acquaintances happens behind their back and speak of friends or family abandoning them to various degrees. Some have told stories about prejudices they believed they had faced or their relatives had faced in institutions they see as controlled by liberals, particularly in education.

While these stories often evoke some emotion, I have tended to see especially strong displays of emotion when interviewees talk about examples from conservative news. For example, a White man in his 60s from an exurb told me that he had seen clips on Fox News of liberal reporters insulting and scoffing at antilockdown protesters (in April 2020). Even though he didn't fully support the antilockdown protests, he was very upset about news reporters launching "attacks, verbal attacks" on the protesters being called "rednecks" and "fascists." In another interview, two White women in their 40s from a Philadelphia exurb wanted me to

understand the vehemence of liberal hatred toward conservatives. So they told me about a “local girl” who had lost her brother in military service and attended Donald Trump’s inaugural ball for Gold Star families. According to my interviewees, this woman and a friend, who had also lost a relative in military service, were met by seething anti-Trump protesters outside the ballroom. One interviewee said the protesters were “spitting at them, just attacking and shoving them.” Both of my interviewees complained that not only had the violent protesters exemplified the fury of the left, but liberal media turned a blind eye. As I asked follow-up questions, they told me they had learned of this attack not from local word-of-mouth but from Fox News.

Why are stories of liberal contempt told by conservative media so emotionally resonant? Polletta and Callahan (2017) argue that “stories produced by media elites” can “come to feel as if they reflect people’s experience” (p. 392). This helps explain how stories of victimization can strengthen attachments to a conservative identity without assuming simple manipulation and gullible audiences (for debates on this question of manipulation and conservatism, see Apostolidis, 2000; Kintz, 1997). Storytelling is a key process for forming collective identities. Rather than positing conservative media as an external force that exists apart from the grassroots cultures of their publics, I argue it is more helpful to see conservative news outlets as *enmeshed within conservatives’ everyday social networks and communal sense-making practices*. Among other functions, these outlets can help set the agenda of topics and points of information that conservatives talk about among their friends and relatives (Muddiman, Stroud, McCombs, 2014). On an affective level, Polletta and Callahan (2017) contend that the stories told by conservative media can feel very intimate and arouse a sense of collective injury. Drawing on analogies with ethnographic research from other communities perceiving themselves to be persecuted, they suggest that conservative media consumers—like other groups—may experience or even remember stories of persecution as if they happened to them personally, even when they did not.

Motivated reasoning theory offers a key model of influence in studies of partisan media (Levendusky, 2013). It is a well-researched theory that suggests individuals draw on information and arguments selectively to achieve a desired goal. Partisan media can aid this process providing curated information and reasoning for committed partisans to continually affirm existing beliefs. However, stoking a sense of victimization may go beyond facilitating motivated reasoning. If this builds emotional attachments to a group identity, such a process may intensify and shape the desired goals of reasoning, not just facilitate rationalization. The power and salience of a particular identity attachment shifts with context. Perceived outgroup threats can heighten the emotional salience of the identity under threat (see, Huddy, 2001). Conservative media are able to tell compelling stories that vividly render liberal politics as threats to the positive self-concept of their audiences.

### **Conservative Media as Identity Repair**

Invoking a specter of smug liberals and disdainful leftists allows conservative commentators to position themselves as the defenders of their audiences’ besieged identities. Conservative media stars hardly show any hesitation to present themselves as their audiences’ protectors, and many of my interviewees speak of conservative media figures as people who offer emotional support when liberals malign conservatives. Bill O’Reilly (2003) claims to be standing up for “the folks” looked down upon with such disgust by liberal elites. Laura Ingraham (2008) proclaims to champion the people who feel “there is nowhere to turn for help, no safe harbor where our values are protected” (p. 1).

Conservative commentators' promises to defend against these perceived attacks resonate with audiences. Many of my interviewees speak admiringly about hosts' eloquence and courage to counter liberals' attempts to bully and shame conservatives. For instance, a White man in his 40s from a Philadelphia exurb described his appreciation of Rush Limbaugh in these terms:

I tend to agree with everything he says. And I'm not a very fluent person, like speaker wise. I could never be a lawyer because I can't make the arguments, but when he says it and he frames it, you know, [trails off ].

A lot of times you have conservatives defending their position, oh, I'm not racist or anything like that . . . Rush will sometimes reject the premise of a certain question, which I always appreciate, because it's like—why do these people even entertain that question when it's so ridiculous?

This interviewee told me that sometimes when he listens to Limbaugh, he gets upset as he hears about the ill-will liberals direct toward conservatives. But he trusts Limbaugh to punch back, and it gives him a feeling of relief to have such a fighter in his corner.

Several interviewees told me they find conservative media especially important when the news cycle seems bad for conservatives. A White man in his 50s and a Latinx man in his 20s both told me they usually would not watch Sean Hannity's show on Fox News because they think of him as too predictable and too partisan. But they would turn to Hannity on days when the news seemed especially bad for Donald Trump. They knew Hannity would offer a better way of looking at it. A White woman in her 40s told me she sometimes gets news alerts, which include unfavorable coverage of Donald Trump. She described the feeling she gets in response to such alerts as, "God darn it. Oh, if this does have any truth to this—I'm going to be sick to my stomach." But she then turns to conservative sources and finds, "Oh my God, that was misleading. That is not what he said. Or it's not what he did. That's not what he referred to." She described the years of the Trump administration as a time of "constant PTSD" due to liberal misrepresentations of Trump and his supporters.

Conservative media here are not only offering conservative viewpoints on events; they offer a therapeutic form of identity repair. The pattern is repeatedly invoking the very threat of stigma they seek to remedy. Conservative media come to act as a resource for self-care to counter the pain that comes from perceived attacks on their audiences' identity. Sometimes, conservative hosts directly speak to this role, as Limbaugh (2017) describes here:

Do you want to live a better life? Do you really want to have a normal, optimistic outlook on life every day? Don't watch that stuff! Don't watch CNN. Don't read the New York Times. . . Just avoid the crap that pollutes the daily so-called news that comes from left-wing news organizations. . . .

And I know you say, "Well, I gotta stay focused on what the opposition is doing." No, you don't. I'll do that for you. I'll tell you what they're up to—and as a bonus, *I'll nuke it!* You don't need to expose yourself to it. That's one of the many reasons I'm here. *I know how*



*to do this without it ruining my life. I know how to do this without it ruining my day. That's why I'm here to run interference, to be the boundaries for you. (0:00–1:20)*

### **Conclusion: Mobilizing Through Offense-Taking**

Critics have long pointed to a tendency among U.S. conservatives to frame themselves as victims. Some critics portray conservatives' claims of victimization merely as a ploy to "work the refs" (e.g., Alterman, 2005) of public discourse. Others trace this victimization to a direct experience of personal loss—something that arises spontaneously when people in positions of social privilege face challenges to that privilege (e.g., Robin, 2018). While both lines of criticism offer insights, they need to be supplemented. Neither of these influential perspectives can account for the centrality of the threat of stigma so relentlessly amplified by conservative media. This is where critical, interdisciplinary scholarship on conservative media and communication practices can enrich contemporary accounts of conservative populism.

A more robust understanding of the ascent of conservative populism calls for an analysis of the discourses, institutions, and social practices that agitate grievances surrounding conservative identity. In a study of right-wing, religious movements across several countries, George (2016) argues that these movements depend on a double-sided mobilization effort. They entail both "offense-giving" and "offense-taking." George (2016) observes that critics typically key into the offense-giving side, while they usually overlook "the manufacture of offendedness" (p. 6). Instead of inquiring into the social and cultural processes that mobilize offendedness, George (2016) argues that opponents of these movements too frequently accept a "myth of spontaneous rage" (pp. 17–19). They imagine that religious fundamentalists are driven by a primal outrage. This myth obscures the crucial work that goes into framing perceived offenses as deep threats to religious identity and cultivating emotional reactions. The myth of spontaneous rage, then, can perpetuate a victimization complex through producing stereotypes of religious fundamentalists as zealots incapable of emotional control. My arguments here suggest a similar dynamic occurs in nominally secular, conservative media.

Conservative media are just one of the sites where political identities, collective emotions, and political meanings are, to draw on Carey's (1989) words, "produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 19). But I think we have good reason to believe these media outlets are important ones. To understand them further, we will need scholarship that builds on insights from multiple methodological approaches—including ethnography, textual analysis, institutional histories, political economy, and various quantitative modes of gathering data—for a broad view of conservative news cultures. Experimental studies of misinformation and the effects of conservative media can offer insight. However, as critical scholars have argued for decades, any approach that conceives of media influence only in terms of an individual response to discrete exposures to media stimuli will miss important parts of the story (Gitlin, 1978). The power of stories that dramatize threats to conservatives' dignity may not be confined to individualized media effects. Their influence might play out at a more social level, exerting the far-ranging and diffuse force of a media logic (Altheide, 2004) absorbed by conservative political actors and political rituals.

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