International Journal of Communication 19(2025), Feature 2974–2986 1932–8036/2025FEA0002

The Social Construction of Right-Wing Reality

ANTHONY NADLER
DORON TAUSSIG
Ursinus College, USA

How do right-wing news media influence contemporary politics and political cultures? We suggest that two poles structure much of the popular and scholarly discourse attempting to explain this influence. On one hand, a disinformation approach treats right-wing media as a vector for falsehoods or propaganda imposed on gullible audiences. On the other hand, a selective-exposure or cultural-mirror approach posits right-wing media as a reflection of audiences' preexisting resentments and beliefs. Here we argue for a third approach that centers right-wing media's role in social meaning making. This approach emphasizes the ritualistic functions of news media and relationships media voices have with individual consumers and communities, social networks, and group meaning-making practices. We explore three key dimensions of influence of right-wing news that come into view through this lens: mobilizing identities, cultivating deep stories, and supporting epistemic interdependence.

Keywords: partisan news, right-wing media, conservatism, meaning making, epistemology, deep stories, critical theory

Why do right-wing media matter? In the United States, there clearly is significance to the enormous social phenomenon that comprises 37 years of Rush Limbaugh, the biggest cable news channel in the country, Fox competitor/imitators such as OAN and Newsmax, a battalion of popular podcasters and YouTubers, generations of dominant voices in the talk-radio industry, a sea of "pink slime" partisan local news websites across the country, and so on. However, when we look for explanations of the influence of such media infrastructure, we find the most prominent theories wanting.

The predominant current framework for understanding the role of right-wing news media in the United States is the disinformation approach. This approach asks what factually inaccurate information and/or false narratives these outlets spread to their audiences. Recent popular pushback has come from the cultural-mirror perspective, which points to how the preexisting characteristics of conservative audiences inform the content of the media that serve them. Both of these frameworks can offer valuable insights, but both take a narrow view of media influence, focusing on the direct relationship between media exposure and its impact on individual attitudes or beliefs. In so doing, they fail to capture what we argue are more diffuse and community-level dynamics of media influence. To grasp those, one must look at right-wing media from what we call the *social meaning-making* perspective.

In this essay, we offer a sketch for an approach that centers on right-wing news media's role as a key node in processes of social meaning making. This perspective approaches right-wing media as an integrated component of the broader conservative movement and views the relationship among those media, their audiences, and their audiences' communities as complex, interactive, and important. It reflects many of the tenets that cultural studies scholars have long brought to understanding journalism, though mostly in its highly modern professional form (Zelizer, 2004). Bringing this perspective to right-wing news helps us more fully see the shape of right-wing media culture.

We broadly conceptualize right-wing news media as entities run by paid staff or entrepreneurs who are self-identified partisans of the right that concentrate resources on newsgathering or commentary. The dynamics we discuss here are not entirely unique to the United States, but we draw here on years of historical, ethnographic, and institutional studies centered on right-wing media and movements in the United States. We hope further scholarly conversation will engage this approach's adaptability in other contexts.

Our interest is specifically in right-wing media because we see much of the contemporary right-wing project as antithetical to democratic ideals. Our interest is not in identifying what is "wrong" with right-wing media, but rather in better understanding the terrain on which it might be contested. What drives our inquiry is a search for a better understanding of what has given right-wing media their popular appeal and how such well-resourced media have come to help shape the political common sense of many communities. As such, we are oriented toward understanding the popular right. In framing this concept, we draw on Hall's (2009) notion of "the popular" in popular culture as an always contested representation of popular beliefs, attitudes, vernaculars, and so forth. The popular right comprises a slew of commercially driven commentators and newscasters who seek to speak to mass or relatively heterogeneous audiences and communities (see Nadler, 2024). These media personalities have largely won their followings through commercial ventures—talk radio, cable news, podcasts, social media—not directly linked to the Republican Party or ideological think tanks, though they have come to have an enormous influence on Republican politics (Schlozman & Rosenfeld, 2024). While the line between the popular right and the far right can be blurry, far-right vanguardists usually promise to lift the veil on mass delusions, whereas the popular right presents itself as expressing common sense supposedly shared by a target community.

Here, we lay out the underpinnings of a social meaning-making approach to popular right-wing media and explore three key dimensions of influence of right-wing news that come into view through this lens: mobilizing identities, cultivating deep stories, and supporting epistemic interdependence. These are capacities of all news media but considering how they manifest in contemporary right-wing media helps to better understand the nature and scope of that media's influence.

Scholarly inquiry from the social meaning-making perspective can yield rich insights of several kinds. It can inform descriptive work detailing the processes by which right-wing cultures and sensibilities are constructed. It can inform normative work advancing arguments about media practices that serve democratic society best and worst. Perhaps most importantly and uniquely relative to the major alternative frameworks, this approach can inform strategic work that considers how to transform current dynamics in the media landscape by contesting sense-making processes and appeals.

All-Powerful or Unpowerful? Disinformation and the Cultural Mirror

Not all disinformation research focuses on the political right, but disinformation scholarship, which has exploded since 2016, is one of the few areas of research that regularly and seriously examines right-wing media. The disinformation framework's focus on discrete pieces of false information spread through media networks can produce only a limited understanding of conservative news culture, however. Consider the "big lie" that the 2020 U.S. election was stolen—a piece of disinformation that has been the subject of research articles, journalistic essays, and even a landmark congressional report. If millions of people falsely believe an election was stolen, a disinformation analysis might say it is because political leaders and partisan news outlets lied to them. While Americans were certainly lied to, there is more to the story.

The disinformation explanation does not account for the context of the big lie or popular perceptions about American institutions that paved the way for its reception and the role of right-wing media (including numerous right-wing voices that did not endorse the lie) in cultivating those. It implies people who believed the lie are dupes and ascribes an unrealistically direct power to media. In short, it ignores the social processes through which individuals and groups construct a sense of shared reality. We are entangled in relationships of "epistemic interdependence" (Nguyen, 2020), and the language of disinformation does not capture these dynamics.

While the disinformation frame overstates the agency of media producers and elites, the cultural-mirror frame leans far in the other direction. Consistent with neoclassical assumptions that commercial media markets respond to consumer demand, this approach understands conservative media as a reflection of audiences' opinions, interests, or prejudices. It is embedded in media-effects models of "selective exposure" (Nelson & Webster, 2017) that suggest partisan media have limited influence because they reflect the preexisting worldviews of self-selected audiences. It also surfaces in some humanistic analysis that reads right-wing texts as ciphers to reveal the values or deep-seated resentments shared by their audiences.

Like the disinformation frame, the cultural-mirror frame captures some truths. Surely, many are drawn to conservative news sources in part because they find something resonant in the views and values promoted there, but conservative media do more than reflect ideas, and their appeals offer more than ideological affinity. Those same audiences tuning in to right-wing media coverage of January 6 got more than a regurgitation of views they already held. They got information, interpretation, and influence.

Certainly not all scholarship on right-wing media aligns with the disinformation and cultural-mirror poles. Some scholars are engaged with aspects of the social meaning-making approach we are advocating for here, including research into right-wing media's "deep stories" (Phillips & Brockway, 2025). Our goals here are to articulate social meaning making as a clear alternative to the disinformation and cultural-mirror approaches to right-wing media, and to illuminate its relative strengths.

The Meaning Is the Message

Many media scholars, particularly those influenced by cultural studies, began approaching modern professional journalism through a meaning-making lens decades ago (Zelizer, 2004). Influenced by broader

intellectual currents that embraced the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), some focused on how interpretation and communicative practices mediate all human apprehension (Carey, 1989). Other communication scholars followed the "linguistic turn" toward structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives (Hall, 2013). Both of these perspectives suggest there is no raw experience untouched by sense-making, and social life cannot be explained by fixed laws of human psychology or sociology. These lines of thinking pushed analysts to concern themselves with language, narratives, and other communicative practices that render the conditions of human existence into something meaningful.

For scholars interested in journalism, this meant seeking to understand it on these terms—to see "meaning-making as a primary activity" (Zelizer, 2004, pp. 177–178) of journalism and a contribution it makes to the construction of social reality well beyond the field's professional self-conception of informing the public of relevant facts. James Carey (1989), for example, famously described reading a newspaper as a "ritual," comparable to attending mass, "a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed" (p. 20).

We think this intellectual spirit offers a promising entry point for scholarship on contemporary right-wing news and information. It troubles quick dismissals of right-wing news as merely flawed distortions of what fact-based, "real" news should be, instead understanding that news media offer more than claims of fact that may or may not be true. A social meaning-making analysis looks at both high modern journalism and right-wing news as essentially hegemonic projects that are trying to win audiences' loyalties and influence how they make sense of public life.

Critics argue social construction perspectives can slip into relativism, reducing all truth claims to social factors or matters of power (see critique of the "strong program" of constructivism in O'Connor, Goldberg, & Goldman, 2024), but emphasizing that constructed meanings mediate experience does not entail rejecting existence outside social meaning. A meaning-making approach can affirm that there are true and false factual claims about public life, but the emphasis shifts from an analysis of only information presented to a focus on how news media render accounts of events rich with meaning.

It is also true that a central focus on meaning making sometimes leads to overreliance on textual interpretation (Anderson, 2020). We see it as essential to emphasize the social side of social construction. Symbolic action always takes shape under material constraints and affordances. Right-wing media do not yield influence simply by telling a story or coding an event in a semiotic vacuum. U.S. right-wing narratives and meanings travel across media infrastructure built over decades, with billions of dollars, over diverse formats (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018, pp. 311–340). Their influence depends not simply on individual responses, but on communities and practices that political leaders and citizens use to engage right-wing news voices, as well as how existing social institutions and social networks (schools, other media, churches, gun clubs) filter and/or counter right-wing voices.

Scholars taking a social meaning-making approach can examine roles right-wing media play in helping to assemble grids of meanings and knowledge that constitute contemporary right-wing culture. Below, we discuss three key interrelated dimensions of this process.

Mobilizing Identity

"You" was an important word for Rush Limbaugh, pioneer of the "second generation" (Hemmer, 2016) of conservative media. He regularly clarified whom he was speaking to and whom he was speaking about. "People who mock and . . . insult you and your religion are praised as brilliant artists," he told his audience, while "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" (Limbaugh, 2018, para. 9). Bill O'Reilly, at the height of his popularity, published a book titled *Who's Looking Out for You?*, which in the second paragraph says:

> The everyday American who understands what The Factor [O'Reilly's show] is all about is generally a person who wants to live life honestly and make his or her own way. That person is often responsible, generous, aware that others around them also have lives to live, and unabashedly patriotic. You, very likely, are one of those people. (O'Reilly, 2003, pp. 1–2)

Tucker Carlson, when it was his turn at the top, constantly employed a "they-you" framing, according to a *New York Times* analysis (Confessore, Decker, Silver, & Tate, 2022). Who belongs to this "you," and how do they come to be there?

According to social identity theory, humans tend to sort 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). This dynamic helps explain political partisanship generally and our current epoch of affective polarization specifically (Huddy & Bankert, 2017), but it is important to recognize that groups with which people associate are neither predetermined nor automatic; they emerge from cultural processes (Polletta, 2020). Scholarship on populism highlights the power of us/them framing as an identity-based mobilization strategy (e.g., Bonikowski, 2017).

Critical journalism scholarship has applied this understanding to news outlets, examining how they play a key role in creating a shared identity among groups of people. Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities" was introduced to explore the conjuring of national identities, a process in which newspapers played a key role, Anderson argued, by creating a sense of shared belonging among their readers. The imagined-community concept has since been applied in a range of contexts, from Internet comment sections to global audiences.

All of this is to say that the "you" of conservative media should not be understood as simply people with conservative beliefs—and not only because of the well-established fact that partisan affiliation does not solely stem from ideological positions. Nor can the "you" be defined simply demographically, as is sometimes suggested in popular media. Rather, conservative media help create the functional meaning of "conservative" through the act of addressing their audience.

What they create is ever-evolving. It implicates race ("you're called white racists," Limbaugh [2018] also says to his audience [para. 9]), as well as class (Peck, 2019), gender (Berry, Glaser, & Schildkraut, 2021), nationality and ethnicity, religion (see: the war on Christmas), geography, cultural taste,

and more. Each of these categories can have porous boundaries. The "you" is both broader and narrower than any of them and contingent on the message at a given time. Peck (2023) shows the animating impulse of Fox News in the Carlson era was a populist style that fused together economic and cultural class grievances with anti-immigrant sentiment and a resentment of educated elites—an approach that invites members of many of these groups to identify as conservative and gives them reason to do so. Peck (2019) also observes that Fox News draws on tabloid styles and moral narratives that carry an emotional resonance in working-class cultures apart from how they are appropriated for right-wing purposes. Nadler (2022) argues that right-wing media construct a conservative identity held together by the shared sense that conservatives are shamed and stigmatized by liberal elites and offer conservatives the "therapeutic" services of sympathy and solidarity. These approaches highlight that right-wing news voices do not simply appeal to an existing conservative identity but rather define conservatism and interpellate and invite audiences into that imagined community.

Cultivating Deep Stories

Stories, of course, literally comprise the news. As we are scrolling through headlines on FoxNews.com while writing, there is a story about a former prosecutor criticizing Minnesota governor and Democratic vice presidential nominee Tim Walz's handling of Black Lives Matter unrest in 2020, a story about an ESPN host who is "done giving any s---s" about blowback for his position on "men" in women's sports (Gaydos & Canfield, 2024), and a story about President Biden acknowledging that pressure from other Democrats contributed to his decision to drop out of the presidential race. Underneath these ephemeral individual stories, however, are broader and more entrenched narratives of American social and political life. News outlets tell these tales as well and, in so doing, help shape how audiences understand the nature of ongoing political conflict.

Hochschild (2016) coined the term "deep story" in her writing about her ethnographic work with Tea Party supporters in Louisiana. She defined a deep story as

> a metaphor-based narrative, the details of which corresponded to the emotions experienced by my informants . . . A deep story is a *feels-as-if* story—stripped of facts and moral judgment. It tells us what participants think it's normal to feel (everyone does) and normative to feel (everyone should): envy, anxiety, grief, anger, and suspicion. (p. 685)

Hochschild (2016) was writing about the right, but did not view deep stories as the province of conservatism; deep story, she argued, is "the basis of politics," which are "at bottom contests between different deep stories" (p. 686).

These deep stories undergird our understanding of day-to-day events or even major happenings, connecting them to broader themes and giving them meaning. For many liberals, the Obama presidency was narrated as an instantiation of a deep story of progress. For many of Hochschild's interviewees, Obama and what he stood for connected to a different story—about the dispossession of working-class Whites by their country. Fisher (1984) wrote that humans usually think with "narrative rationality": interpreting the world through the common sense of the stories we know and accept as true. Deep stories

provide the basis for this common sense. "We hear a story of a little guy going up against a big guy," explain Polletta and Callahan (2017), "and we recognize them as David and Goliath. We hope David will win and, if he does, we take the message that cleverness can triumph over brute force" (p. 394). In many cases, the deep-story layer of understanding is where our emotional engagement with an issue or event lies. When sports fans fell in love with the 2023 Fairleigh Dickinson University men's basketball team, a Cinderella underdog that upset a top-seeded team in the NCAA tournament, few of them had any connection to the school or any prior awareness of the players involved, but they knew they liked Cinderella. To harken back to Carey (1989), news storytelling invites audiences into a world of "dramatic action in which the reader [or viewer, listener, or user] joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play" (p. 21).

Where do deep stories come from, and how do they take root? Hochschild suggests the deep story that resonated with her Tea Partier interviewees, about hardworking citizens struggling and being disregarded by their government, grew out of her interviewees' life experiences, but Polletta and Callahan (2017) argue there is more to the process. They acknowledge that people's common sense is shaped by their experience while contending that "elite-produced stories" are involved as well. Stories told in media like Fox News "simultaneously reflect and forge a political common sense" (Polletta & Callahan, 2017, p. 392). Newsmakers listen, but also add, subtract, adapt, and reiterate, and they connect the individual stories they cover to the deep stories they tell through their decisions about which stories to cover, which aspects of those stories to include or emphasize, what context to add or editorial analysis to offer—essentially, via "framing" (Entman, 1993). Thus, a story about one prosecutor criticizing Walz's handling of racial-justice protests evokes a deeper story about the Democratic Party's commitment to law and order, which is itself connected to a still-deeper story about liberals' disregard for the interest of decent, hardworking, law-abiding, usually, but not exclusively, White Americans.

Recent scholarship has sought to highlight some of the deep stories favored and promoted by right-wing media. We have argued (Nadler & Taussig, 2023) that a central conceit in right-wing media is a story of conservatism as a social identity facing stigmatization. News that bolsters this narrative—say, a story about cancel culture—receives a lot of attention, and the narrative can be used to reframe other events such as the January 6 riot at the Capitol, which in right-wing media was covered as an example of liberals' desire to smear all conservatives by making them complicit in the attack.

In these cases, we can see conservative media helping shape the thematic preoccupations and emotional investments of the conservative movement via their role in the promotion of deep stories. Crucially, this does not necessarily involve factual error—a deep story is not a falsifiable assertion that can be disproven, though it may be supported by falsehoods—but by contributing so much to the narrative focus of the conservative movement, right-wing media become quite influential over the information conservatives encounter from their most trusted sources and the conclusions they draw.

Supporting Epistemic Interdependence

In *Cognition in the Wild*, anthropologist and sailor Ed Hutchins (1995) famously gives a detailed description of navigating a ship to port to illustrate that cognition is not an individual act. In Hutchins's

account, a 10-person crew, various nautical devices and advanced technologies, charts and other coded nomenclatures, and layers of regulated practices all work together to guide a naval ship to port. It is a complex and coordinated cognition process requiring a distributed system of people and artifacts. No one person (or procedure or device) can guide the ship by themselves—and the system produces knowledge that is more than the sum of individual cognitions.

The third dimension of influence of right-wing media that comes into view through a meaning-making lens is its contribution to the web of knowledge—the epistemic network—available to conservatives, a function that reaches well beyond instances of spreading disinformation or reflecting copacetic perspectives to helping select the premises, facts, interpretations, and projections conservatives use to bring ship to port in understanding public life.

Epistemologist Kevin Dorst (2023) argues that charges of individual irrationality have loomed too large in discussions of polarization, as partisans are seen as giving in to cognitive biases in order to protect emotional attachments to prior views. Dorst (2023) contends this frame misconstrues the nature of the cognitive heuristics we all employ to confront ambiguous evidence and overwhelming information. Under such circumstances, Dorst argues, tendencies favoring confirmation bias and group conformity are heuristics we rely on due not to psychic defensiveness; rather, they serve as good bets under conditions of uncertainty. When conservative news consumers draw conclusions about public issues, they seem reasonable to them. They are based on the information and knowledge available within right-wing networks. Their entire knowledge grid guides them to a port. Right-wing news consumers exercise a bounded rationality that depends, in part, on the networks they rely on for curating and assessing information.

Consider, for example, the issue of immigration. We have already seen how right-wing media might influence the conservative orientation toward this issue first by mobilizing identity in such a way as to define an "us" who are the protagonists of American life, and whose interests are to be protected, and a "them" whose interests are different. News outlets also influence understanding of this issue by identifying, suggesting, and reinforcing deep stories that offer scripts for thinking about the implications of immigration and foregrounding related emotional responses—stories that often evoke fear of displacement or disadvantage of American citizens by immigrants and anger at the elites who prioritize the interests of the outgroup. This identity orientation and narrative focus co-travel with facts, anecdotes, arguments, and concerns that support them, and all of these circulate through conservative media, as well as other nodes of right-wing culture such as political leaders, community institutions, social media voices, and individual conservatives.

Now imagine two people start with similar values and beliefs about the impact of immigration on the United States. If one becomes aligned with right-wing knowledge networks, for any number of reasons—they could get pulled in because a conservative talk show is the only thing on the radio during their commute, or because a YouTube video of a comedian they like leads them into right-wing content, or because the person they have a crush on got pulled in first—they will hear all the facts, anecdotes, arguments, and concerns of the right, and likely very little about the situations most immigrants leave behind, the benefits they bring the country, and so on, and probably end up with a very different perspective on the immigration issue than the other. However, it would not necessarily be because they were duped by factual falsehoods

(though that could play a role) or initially motivated by deep xenophobic sentiments. Rather, they would be drawing rational conclusions *given the information most available in their epistemic network.*

The complexity of information networks makes the influence of partisan media sources (or any media source) difficult to measure. Even critical communication scholars, who have long pointed to the reductionism of the media-effects model, have not developed a lucid vocabulary for talking about political knowledge production through the lens that philosophers of knowledge call social epistemology, which examines how collective bodies (like scientific communities, markets, etc.) produce knowledge and how individuals come to knowledge through interaction with collective knowledge processes. Bringing a social epistemology perspective to right-wing media differs from the (legitimate) concern about echo chambers. The echo-chamber concept differentiates echo chambers from media spheres that represent a free flow of ideas. Social epistemology suggests all discursive spaces produce partial knowledge of the world limited by material and interest-based constraints. This does not mean there is no basis for judging which communication structures best serve democratic ideals, but it does acknowledge that bias and partiality are features, not bugs, of how groups produce political knowledge.

When we apply a social meaning-making lens to right-wing media, we can begin to focus examinations less on whether individual audience members accept or reject views or claims made on right-wing news outlets and more on understanding what roles right-wing news media play in networks of knowledge production and what draws particular communities and individuals into those networks of epistemic interdependence.

Making Space for Democratic Contestation

The framework we are proposing differs from a classic conception of journalism as either a straightforward process of transmission of information (or misinformation) or as a market simply reflecting the preferences, beliefs, prejudices, or anxieties of its audiences. Instead, we suggest approaching conservative media as an important part of a complex social process of meaning making: News voices influence social and political life by cultivating bonds of solidarity and identification, forging connections between unfolding events and emotionally charged stories, and embedding themselves in networks through which communities and people sort and verify knowledge about public life.

Scholars and critics who analyze right-wing media through this framework will pose different questions and foreground different observations about right-wing culture than those coming from a disinformation or cultural-mirror approach, including investigations of how right-wing media influence has taken shape in specific communities. Consider, for instance, the well-documented evidence of class dealignment and the movement of many working-class, White communities over decades from Democratic or contested voting blocs to solid Republican ones (Abbott, 2024). With a few key exceptions (notably, Peck, 2019), there is extremely limited scholarship looking at how right-wing media gained a foothold specifically in White rural communities or those with lower levels of college education, yet targeting such communities has been a strategic investment of the right at the same time as mainstream news sources increasingly pivoted away from working-class and mass audiences to focus on building loyal audiences largely composed of college-educated professionals (Martin, 2019). A social meaning-making approach could lead scholars

toward a deeper understanding of how right-wing media-making practices have become integrated in many White, working-class communities.

Scholars who take a meaning-making perspective will also inquire how right-wing media depend on and interact with other voices and institutions vying to spread their own interpretations of public life. We are in a historic moment of both a waxing and waning of the power of news organizations. On one hand, as many journalism scholars have highlighted, a platform society has greatly weakened the gatekeeping power of news outlets and flooded the public sphere with new voices. On the other hand, as Skocpol (2003) has documented, there is strong evidence of decline in kinds of associational life and group affiliation—from trade unions to fraternal and women's organizations—that long provided an organized counterbalance to the meaning-making power of parties and news media.

Applying a meaning-making framework to understanding right-wing media could also have implications for responding to our current illiberal moment and crisis of democratic values. If the contemporary right has taken up antidemocratic authoritarian politics, if its political discourse includes bald-faced lies and crude insults, how can it be countered with democratic force? When conservatism is viewed through a disinformation lens, responses to it have centered on identifying and combating falsehoods, usually via technocratic means such as content moderation and fact checking. While these measures may be desirable in particular contexts, they have proven insufficient, in part because the disinformation lens overestimates how much democratic politics are driven by facts. A more "realist" (Achen & Bartels, 2016) vision of democracy would see policies as far less important than the clash between identities and group loyalties.

Nonetheless, any realist vision that only sees right-wing media as reflecting predetermined identities lacks democratic hope. If democracy largely revolves around identity conflicts fixed outside of public discourse by birthright, class interest, and the like, then media structures and news voices have little role to play, and democratic engagement cannot shift political dynamics.

If, however, stories and narratives about public life help shape attachments to groups and the perceived (and practiced) relations among them, then public storytelling—and the infrastructures through which stories circulate—matters much more. Moreover, if the stories told in media interact with individual thought and choice in opinion formation as people engage with epistemic networks to gather the facts, observations, and lines of argument they draw on to come to their own conclusions, then there is a possibility of democratic contestation.

As scholars offer rich and vivid accounts of how dominant strains of right-wing media have built their capacities to appeal to particular communities and influence their sense making, they will illuminate the terrain on which battles over political loyalties and meaning making take place. In so doing, they will highlight possibilities for opponents—whether leftists, centrists, or dissidents on the right—to consider how they might build competing media voices to challenge these loyalties and offer alternative meaning-making practices.

References

Abbott, J. (2024). Understanding class dealignment. *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory & Strategy, 7*(4), 76–135. Retrieved from https://catalyst-journal.com/2024/03/understanding-class-dealignment

Achen, C., & Bartels, L. (2016). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York, NY: Verso.

Anderson, C. (2020). Practice, interpretation, and meaning in today's digital media ecosystem. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 97*(2), 342—359. doi:10.1177/1077699020916807

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday.

Berry, J., Glaser, J., & Schildkraut, D. (2021). Race and gender on Fox and MSNBC. *The Forum, 18*(3), 297–317. doi:10.1515/for-2020-2011

Bonikowski, B. (2017). Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment. *The British Journal of Sociology, 68*(1), 181–213. doi:10.1111/1468-4446.12325

Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. New York, NY: Unwin Hyman.

Confessore, N., Decker, B., Silver, J., & Tate, J. (2022, April 30). Tucker Carlson tonight. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/30/us/tucker-carlson-tonight.html

Dorst, K. (2023). Rational polarization. *The Philosophical Review, 132*(3), 355–458. doi:10.1215/00318108-10469499

Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*, 51–58. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Fisher, W. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communications Monographs, 51*(4), 1–22. doi:10.1080/03637758409390180

Gaydos, R., & Canfield, R. (2024, August 13). ESPN star Kirk Herbstreit 'done giving any s---s' about pushback over stance about men in women's sports. *Fox News*. Retrieved from https://www.foxnews.com/sports/espn-star-kirk-herbstreit-done-giving-any-s-s-about-push-back-over-stance-about-men-womens-sports

Hall, S. (2009). Notes on deconstructing "the popular." In J. Story (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (pp. 477–487). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.

Hall, S. (2013). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 277–294). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hemmer, N. (2016). *Messengers of the right: Conservative media and the transformation of American politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hochschild, A. (2016). The ecstatic edge of politics: Sociology and Donald Trump. *Contemporary Sociology, 45*(6), 683–689. doi:10.1177/0094306116671947

Huddy, L., & Bankert, A. (2017). Political partisanship as a social identity. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.250

Hutchins, E. (1995). *Cognition in the wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Limbaugh, R. (Host). (2018, January 18). *The Rush Limbaugh Show* [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Rush Limbaugh* Show. Sacramento, CA: EIB Network. Retrieved from https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2018/01/12/were-sick-and-tired-of-sanctimonious-liberal-hypocrisy/

Martin, C. (2019). *No longer newsworthy: How the mainstream media abandoned the working class*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Nadler, A. (2022). Political identity and the therapeutic work of U.S. conservative media. *International Journal of Communication, 16*, 2621–2633.

Nadler, A. (2024). Not just higher truths. In K. Costley White, D. Kreiss, S. C. McGregor, & R. Tromble (Eds.), *Media and January 6* (pp. 153–162). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Nadler, A., & Taussig, D. (2023, August 16). *The deep story beneath the big lie*. Los Angeles Review of Books. Retrieved from https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-deep-story-beneath-the-big-lie/

Nelson, J., & Webster, J. (2017). The myth of partisan selective exposure: A portrait of the online political news audience. *Social Media + Society, 3*(3), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117729314

Nguyen, C. (2020). Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. *Episteme, 17*(2), 141–161. doi:10.1017/epi.2018.32

O'Connor, C., Goldberg, S., & Goldman, A. (2024). Social epistemology. In E. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Summer 2024 ed.). Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/epistemology-social/

O'Reilly, B. (2003). *Who's looking out for you*? New York, NY: Crown.

Peck, R. (2019). *Fox populism: Branding conservatism as working class*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Peck, R. (2023). The illiberalism of Fox News. In M. Laruelle (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 495–514). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.17

Phillips, W., & Brockway, M. (2025). *The shadow gospel: How anti-liberal demonology possessed U.S. religion, media, and politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Polletta, F. (2020). *Inventing the ties that bind: Imagined relationships in moral and political life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Polletta, F., & Callahan, J. (2017). Deep stories, nostalgia narratives, and fake news: Storytelling in the Trump era. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology, 5*(3), 392–408. doi:10.1057/s41290-017-0037-7

Schlozman, D., & Rosenfeld, S. (2024). *The hollow parties: The many pasts and disordered present of American party politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Skocpol, T. (2003). *Diminished democracy: From membership to management in American civic life*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Turner, J., Hogg, M., Oakes, P., Reicher, S., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. New York, NY: Blackwell.

Zelizer, B. (2004). *Taking journalism seriously: News and the academy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.