

Tow Center for  
Digital Journalism  
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# **CONSERVATIVE NEWSWORK**

## **A Report on the Values and Practices of Online Journalists on the Right**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Boundaries and Tensions Within the Online Conservative News Field</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Training, Standards, and Practices</b>	<b>41</b>

## *Executive Summary*

Through much of the 20th century, the U.S. news diet was dominated by journalism outlets that professed to operate according to principles of objectivity and nonpartisan balance. Today, news outlets that openly proclaim a political perspective — conservative, progressive, centrist, or otherwise — are more central to American life than at any time since the first journalism schools opened their doors. Conservative audiences, in particular, express far less trust in mainstream news media than do their liberal counterparts. These divides have contributed to concerns of a “post-truth” age and fanned fears that members of opposing parties no longer agree on basic facts, let alone how to report and interpret the news of the day in a credible fashion.

Renewed popularity and commercial viability of openly partisan media in the United States can be traced back to the rise of conservative talk radio in the late 1980s, but the expansion of partisan news outlets has accelerated most rapidly online. This expansion has coincided with debates within many digital newsrooms. Should the ideals journalists adopted in the 20th century be preserved in a digital news landscape? Or must today’s news workers forge new relationships with their publics and find alternatives to traditional notions of journalistic objectivity, fairness, and balance? Despite the centrality of these questions to digital newsrooms, little research on “innovation in journalism” or the “future of news” has explicitly addressed how digital journalists and editors in partisan news organizations are rethinking norms. In particular, researchers have almost entirely ignored news workers in conservative-leaning outlets.

We interviewed 22 journalists and editors at 14 online conservative news organizations about what guides their news judgments, how they engage audiences, and how they think conservative news outlets should operate. Our findings, since they are largely based on this interview data, offer insights into the *aspirational ideals* of our participants and their newsrooms.

Vividly understanding how conservative news workers articulate their journalistic aspirations is a crucial point of entry to an understudied field. For some critics, the whole enterprise of conservative journalism can be written off as propaganda or a network of bad-faith actors striving for partisan gain. Questions over the legitimacy of conservative news are leading to consequential debates among civic leaders, tech intermediaries, and mainstream journalists. For instance, Facebook has faced questions over whether to include conservative news organizations as partners in fact-checking operations, and mainstream journalists grapple with questions such as whether to link to certain conservative outlets and how to treat their claims. For some conservatives, these very debates reinforce the perception of a media sphere dominated by liberals who are all too quick to dismiss conservatives as illegitimate participants.

Still, our interviews suggest that contemporary conservative news workers are grappling with many of the same questions and dilemmas as digital journalists at nonpartisan outlets. All are rethinking once-dominant journalistic norms — especially objectivity — while trying to survive and compete in a digital environment, and forging new relationships with audiences. Among our key findings, several point to similarities between conservative digital news and other forms of digital journalism:

- **Most of our interviewees espouse a set of journalistic ideals shared by traditional nonpartisan journalists.** Among these ideals are accuracy, fairly representing differing perspectives, and setting a measured tone in debate.
- **There is no consensus on the roles of objectivity or balance as journalistic ideals.** Some conservative news organizations subscribe to conventional notions of fairness and balance, and see impartial reporting as a worthwhile ideal. Others advocate for radical subjectivity, and contend that all reporters (conservative or otherwise) ought to be transparent about their political and other biases — trusting in the audience to assess the veracity of news on the basis of “authenticity.”
- **Our interviewees largely express a desire to engage with a broad public beyond committed conservatives.** Most envision a pluralist public sphere

with news, commentary, and criticism coming from many perspectives. The journalists we spoke with do not want to partake only in an insular conservative enclave, though there is a debate within the field about whether to try to influence mainstream journalism or form a wholly separate countersphere. A similar debate has taken place among progressives in terms of whether to build alternative journalism institutions or try to influence mainstream reporting.<sup>1</sup>

- **Like other political reporters working for niche publications such as *Roll Call* or *Politico*, some conservative journalists put a special emphasis on reaching policymakers and other elite audiences.** Many of our interviewees felt that certain audience members (policymakers, activists) were most important, and they were attuned to the way those audiences could leverage the impact of their reporting.
- **The editors we spoke with say they are typically looking to hire reporters who are more interested in covering news than in overt political advocacy.** While conservative news outlets do seek reporters who share a common understanding of conservative thought, they express concern about hiring news staff who primarily want to engage in partisan advocacy.
- **The size and structures of conservative news organizations tend to correspond with their orientation toward either news reporting or commentary.** With some exceptions (most notably the *National Review*), outlets with large staffs, specialized reporting positions, and a full editorial hierarchy tend to be more oriented toward news reporting. More commentary-driven sites (e.g. *The Federalist*, *The Resurgent*) tend to be less internally structured, with a higher reliance on casual and remote labor.
- **Most of our interviewees pay close attention to how audiences react to their work, but different reporters and organizations use that information in different ways.** Some embrace audience influence in steering coverage (at least in some respects) while others resist it. A small minority of our participants described actively shielding themselves from certain feedback mechanisms, avoiding social media or metrics.

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<sup>1</sup> Atton, Chris, and James F. Hamilton. *Alternative Journalism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

These findings suggest that online conservative journalists face many of the same dilemmas as other digital journalists, and the two groups' norms are not totally irreconcilable. However, the values and practices of conservative journalists are shaped by their proximity (both conceptual and geographic) to both mainstream political journalism and the modern conservative movement. This affinity results in sensibilities and challenges that are unique to the conservative journalism field:

- **Many participants said they believed that conservative journalism as a whole is treated unfairly by the mainstream press.** This is a unifying belief among many of our interviewees. They believe conservative journalists and organizations are unfairly held to different standards and judged by a mistaken association with fringe elements of the conservative news sphere. For some, this sense of conservatives as embattled justifies limiting media criticism of other conservative outlets and focusing critique on what they see as liberal, mainstream media — and traces back to the origins of modern conservative media.
- **Many participants said they see few other conservative outlets as high-quality news sources.** They described their own publication's commitment to accuracy, thoroughness, or fairly representing fact as an exception within the field of conservative news.
- **Participants varied in how well they felt conservative journalism was representing a diversity of conservative perspectives.** While most of our interviewees wanted to see conservative outlets opening themselves to vigorous debate among diverging conservative opinions, several of those we spoke with felt conservative media as a whole was falling short in this regard during the Trump presidency by marginalizing conservative perspectives critical of Trump's honesty and character.
- **Conservative journalists disagree on how to respond to conspiracy theories and misinformation.** While most of our interviewees acknowledged that misinformation circulating among conservatives was a real problem, they differed in whether they saw this as more of a problem for

the right than the left. They also differed as to whether and when they thought conservative outlets should take active steps to fact check and discredit false conspiracy theories or misinformation circulating among conservative audiences. This differs from the mainstream press in that some conservative journalists felt they have a special role to play in debunking conspiracies that appealed to their fellow conservatives. Others suggested the mainstream press debunks right-wing conspiracies, so they saw their role as one that should focus on criticizing left-wing conspiracies.

- **While conservative journalists enter the profession via many paths, the least circuitous involves plugging into the modern conservative movement.** While they might share similar functions in terms of career advancement, the political networks in which conservative journalists travel are distinct from the educational and social networks more likely to launch the careers of reporters working in the mainstream press.

**Our interviewees tend to assume their audiences want U.S. political stories that resonate with their everyday lives, and especially stories seen as improperly or underreported by mainstream media.** They spoke to us about various types of stories they felt were consistently underreported by U.S. media, such as investigations of liberal institutions such as labor unions and stories about gun culture and religious life.

We conclude with a discussion of our findings' implications for future efforts to understand the changing sphere of conservative news. First, we analyze what this research reveals about tensions within the field that are particular to this historical juncture — a moment when conservative journalists are negotiating among the competing imperatives of journalistic autonomy, conservative ideology, and loyalty to a party with Donald Trump at its helm. Conditions unique to the Trump administration have given rise to two clashing narratives emerging from within the conservative news sphere. Both offer moral pleas regarding the duties and perils conservative journalists are said to face at this moment. One voice implores fellow conservatives to demonstrate principles over political exigency and calls for uninhibited criticism of Trumpism's influence on the right. The other voice cries out for fellow conservatives to stand unified and relentless in opposition

to what is framed as an unprecedented assault by a putatively liberal media on Trump, his party, and its supporters.

Looking beyond this particular moment, we present a preliminary guide to five key differences among conservative news outlets in their editorial philosophies: orientation toward original reporting, adaptation of professional news norms, stances toward engagement with a pluralist public sphere, audience orientation and characteristic style, and orientation toward viewpoint diversity within conservatism. These represent underlying differences in approach that will likely remain useful for differentiating conservative news outlets for the foreseeable future.



# Introduction

Not since the 19th century have openly partisan news outlets been as central to American political life as they are today.<sup>2</sup> Throughout much of the 20th century, the dominant news outlets in the U.S. — newspapers, radio broadcasters, and television networks — mostly shared a consensus around a set of idealized professional norms, which were articulated, supported, and perpetuated by newly founded schools of journalism. These shared norms included an embrace of objectivity and a promise that newsrooms would be insulated from the ideological and pecuniary motivations of editorial boards and advertising departments. This model of journalism, perhaps most clearly articulated in the Society for Professional Journalists’ *Code of Ethics* through its emphasis on “fairness, accuracy, and impartiality,” has long faced challenges, and there have always been outlets for partisan news and commentary.<sup>3</sup> Yet what appears to have changed dramatically in recent decades is the relative influence of nonpartisan vis-à-vis partisan news spheres, with a trend toward greater portions of news audiences relying heavily on openly partisan sources.<sup>4</sup> In 2017, for example, a study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that patterns of online news consumption are more polarized in the U.S. than in any of the 21 European nations studied,<sup>5</sup> a dramatic shift from fewer than 15 years prior.<sup>6</sup>

The renewed influence of partisan media can be traced back to the late 1980s, when the Federal Communication Commission’s revocation of the Fairness Doctrine, combined with industry efforts to save AM radio, yielded a

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); David Mindich, *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism* (NYU Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The SPJ *Code of Ethics* has undergone three revisions since its initial formulation in 1924. All versions have emphasized the necessity of fairness, accuracy, and impartiality in defining professional journalistic behavior. For more on the historical shifts in the code of ethics, see “SPJ *Code of Ethics*,” accessible at <<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>>.

<sup>4</sup> See Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017” (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

commercially viable right-wing talk radio.<sup>7</sup> The talk radio business model, combined with stylistic elements derived from tabloid newspapers, eventually influenced the emergence of partisan cable news.<sup>8</sup> Still, it has been in the arena of online news — and digital adaptation by the larger news system — where the expansion of partisan news has accelerated most rapidly. This expansion has coincided with debates within many digital newsrooms over whether the dominant values of mid-20th-century journalism should be preserved, or whether journalists must forge new relationships with readers and replace familiar notions of objectivity and balance. Efrat Nechushtai argues that the United States is currently witnessing a transformation of its media system, one in which “unevenness and fragmentation are replacing the Liberal consensus on professional ethos, norms, and practices.”<sup>9</sup> Yet very little research to date has explicitly addressed questions of partisan journalism. While work on “innovation in journalism” and “the future of news” has focused on digital outlets like *BuzzFeed* or the now-defunct *Gawker*, which have expressed support for progressive social values, the flourishing sphere of right-leaning online journalism has been almost entirely ignored.<sup>10</sup>

As U.S. journalism turns more partisan, we need a deeper understanding of the values, norms, and engagement strategies animating these news spaces. Journalism researchers, and progressive journalists themselves, have already begun investigating the new boundaries between journalistic professionalism and political advocacy on the left.<sup>11</sup> The time has come for similar investigations into news outlets on the right, especially in light of their significant influence over contemporary U.S. politics. Arguably, conservative news media have also played a

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<sup>7</sup> See Victor Pickard, “The Strange Life and Death of the Fairness Doctrine: Tracing the Decline of Positive Freedoms in American Policy Discourse,” *International Journal of Communication*, 12 (2018), 3434-3453; and Brian Rosenwald, *Talk Radio’s America: How an Industry Took Over a Political Party that Took Over the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Efrat Nechushtai, “From Liberal to Polarized Liberal? Contemporary U.S. News in Hallin and Mancini’s Typology of News Systems,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23:2 (2018): 183-201.

<sup>10</sup> For major themes of this research, see Brian Creech and Anthony M Nadler, “Post-Industrial Fog: Reconsidering Innovation in Visions of Journalism’s Future,” *Journalism* 19, no. 2 (February 1, 2018): 182–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916689573>.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Lewis Raven Wallace, *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and Michael Blanding, “Where Does Journalism End and Activism Begin?” *Nieman Reports* 73:1 (Winter 2019), 6-15.

leading role in mobilizing skepticism of journalistic objectivity and associated professional norms.<sup>12</sup> While academic research into conservative news is starting to gain momentum, to date there has been little focus on how journalists, editors, or other news workers in digital newsrooms on the right articulate their journalistic ideals, describe their routines and standard practices, think about their audiences, or position their work within the expanding sphere of conservative news.<sup>13</sup> This study is a first attempt at understanding how journalists working at these partisan or ideologically oriented online outlets narrate their work, their values, and their role within the broader U.S. news system.

### Methodology

#### *Participant Sample*

We conducted semistructured interviews with 22 journalists employed by 14 conservative news organizations. We built our sample primarily through cold-emailing people listed in the mastheads of news outlets and journalism-oriented nonprofit groups commonly associated with the modern conservative movement in the United States, based primarily on an informal list of conservative news organizations given to us by Rob Bluey, vice president of communications at the Heritage Foundation — a leading Washington, D.C.-based conservative think tank. We reached out to more than 100 staff members at 32 conservative news organizations. For a list of these organizations, and for a fuller discussion of our method and its limitations, see [Appendix A](#).

Our final participant list is dominated by editors and reporters associated with principally digital or online conservative news and commentary outlets. While these outlets differ in terms of reporting and editing practices, size and composition of audience, and ideological emphasis, they share a common political position on the right side of the United States' growing partisan and ideological divide. They also face the professional incentives and constraints common among digital news workers more broadly — rapid news cycles, reliance on social media for distribution, embedded in the online attention economy. We deliberately chose not

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<sup>12</sup> Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Anthony Nadler and A. J. Bauer, eds., *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, eds., *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*.

to solicit interviews from journalists employed primarily by Fox News, or by online sites built around a single radio or television personality (such as RushLimbaugh.com). We wanted this first foray into studying conservative news work to survey journalists working under similar conditions of production. While Fox and talk radio programs may have outsized influence within the broader right-wing media system, their workers face hybrid incentive structures attendant with balancing online news values and audience engagement strategies alongside imperatives unique to cable television and radio. While we eagerly await future research into the production values and practices of heavyweights like Fox News and Rush Limbaugh, this study focuses on a variegated ecosystem of digital conservative news outlets.

### ***Attribution and Anonymity***

Most participants in this study agreed to on-the-record interviews, and to have their quotes attributed to their real names along with other identifying information (including position or title, and employer). We granted anonymity, off-the-record, and background requests on a case-by-case basis. Typically anonymity or background requests were granted to protect participants from perceived professional or political retaliation, or to enable them to speak freely about personal dynamics and interactions.

### ***Key Definitions***

Throughout this report, we refer to the journalists we interviewed and their outlets as “conservative,” a term that is notoriously difficult to define and subject to some disagreement even among self-identified conservatives. As such, we use the term “conservative” as a catch-all for news sites and journalists whose ideological orientations foreground the issues and worldviews commonly associated with the modern conservative movement in the United States, broadly conceived. While the roots of modern conservatism have been traced back to businessmen’s crusades against the New Deal in the 1930s, the term’s modern meaning and salience as a political identity was forged in the wake of the Second

World War.<sup>14</sup> According to intellectual historian George Nash, modern conservative thought involves the fusion of libertarian (or neoliberal) economic ideas, traditionalist or Judeo-Christian notions of morality, and anticommunism.<sup>15</sup> Early conservative media activists, most notably *National Review* founding editor William F. Buckley, played a crucial role in promoting this “fusionist” conservatism beginning in the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the second half of the 20th century, the resulting modern conservative movement grew in fits and starts, ultimately resulting in its de facto capture of the Republican Party with the election of movement darling Ronald Reagan in 1980.<sup>17</sup> While earlier studies of the “conservative media establishment” have defined conservative outlets according to their commitment to fusionist or “Reagan conservative” ideological orthodoxy, Donald Trump’s success in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries highlighted long-standing divisions within modern conservatism, both ideological ones as well as in matters of strategy and style.<sup>18</sup> Trump gave voice to long-marginalized “paleoconservative” policy prescriptions, including trade protectionism and opposition to using military intervention to spread “democracy” abroad, which put him at odds with both free-trade-oriented neoliberal conservatives and more hawkish neoconservatives.

Importantly, the conservative journalists we spoke to are often less inclined toward sub-ideological labels, and more often define themselves and situate their work in contrast with the “mainstream” or “liberal” media, terms they associate with a diverse array of widely circulated news outlets ranging from omnibus television networks such as NBC and CNN to prestige publications like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and digital upstarts like *Vox* or *BuzzFeed*. We use the terms “mainstream,” “nonpartisan,” and “general interest” to describe

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<sup>14</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> For a helpful overview, see historian Rick Perlstein’s *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001), *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), and *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

news outlets that adhere to varying degrees of the 20th-century ideals taught by professional journalism schools — including nonpartisan impartiality, objectivity, and balance — and thus practice a form of journalism that many of our interviewees associate with varying degrees of “liberal” bias. Our use of these terms is by no means intended as an endorsement of our interviewees’ ideological analysis of the overall news system and its putative partisan biases, but rather to name a certain relationality between the conservative news field and its nonconservative journalistic counterparts.

## **Overview**

What follows is a first step toward understanding online conservative news workers’ journalistic ideals, routines, and perceptions of audiences. We present our findings in three sections based on themes that arose from our interviews.

Section One ([“Boundaries and Tensions Within the Online Conservative News Field”](#)) explores how our interviewees assess the state of conservative news as a whole and what they see as key debates within that field. Here, we offer an overview of how our interviewees describe divisions in the conservative news field, relationships with mainstream media and the broader public sphere, the problems of misinformation and conspiracy, and how well conservative media serve as a forum for debates among conservatives.

Section Two ([“Training, Standards, and Practices”](#)) explores the journalistic values and ideals our interviewees articulated and how they are implemented in online conservative newsrooms. This section discusses career pathways into conservative journalism, newsroom training, how our interviewees negotiate and reinterpret traditional journalistic values, and how conservative journalists think about building and managing their reputations.

We conclude with a discussion of the unique historical moment for conservative news when our data was gathered, along with implications for future research. We also identify five defining traits that distinguish different ways of practicing conservative journalism.

# 1. Boundaries and Tensions Within the Online Conservative News Field

American conservative news has been a dynamic force, with shifting tendencies and contours, throughout its history. While most major newspapers in the United States held partisan allegiances throughout the 19th century, a new form of conservative news started to take shape in the years following the Second World War, just as a style of “objective” journalism was coming to dominate most daily newspapers and major news broadcasts.<sup>19</sup> As scholars such as Nicole Hemmer, Mark Major, and Julie Lane have demonstrated, many midcentury conservative media activists saw their *raison d’être* as a fight against the entrenched liberal assumptions of dominant news outlets and the marginalization of conservative perspectives within the press.<sup>20</sup> Yet, from the start of this era of modern conservative news, significant divisions and differences have existed among these outlets relating to style, ideology, and news values. Perhaps the best-remembered division among the postwar conservative media surrounded notions of “respectability.” William F. Buckley, typically cast as the icon of conservative media in the postwar era, sought a model of “respectable” conservatism. He famously denounced Robert Welch, the founder of the John Birch Society, for conspiracy-mongering that was damaging the conservative movement, such as Welch’s accusation that Dwight D. Eisenhower was a communist.<sup>21</sup> Still, Buckley

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); Richard Streckfuss, “Objectivity in Journalism: A Search and a Reassessment,” *Journalism Quarterly* 67:4 (Winter 1990): 973–83.

<sup>20</sup> Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*; Mark Major, “Objective but Not Impartial: Human Events, Barry Goldwater, and the Development of the ‘Liberal Media’ in the Conservative Counter-Sphere,” in *New Political Science* 34:4 (2012); Julie Lane, “Cultivating Distrust of the Mainstream Media: Propagandists for a Liberal Machine and the American Establishment,” in *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, ed. Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> “The Question of Robert Welch,” *National Review* 12, no. 6 (February 13, 1962): 83–88. For a fascinating analysis of debates about this editorial among *National Review* editors and their concerns that denouncing Welch could alienate the *National Review* from rank-and-file conservatives, see Hemmer, p 91-105.

by no means found himself in a position of absolute authority to set the boundaries of conservative news.<sup>22</sup> Then, as now, multiple and distinct currents of conservative news media crisscrossed and occasionally collided.

In this section, we sketch the perspective our interviewees offer on today's conservative news field as a whole, across its various tendencies. Many see their own opportunities to practice journalism — such as finding credible information, getting interviews, and gaining readership and respect — at least partially tethered to the larger conservative news field. So we sought to understand the differences they see among conservative outlets and debates taking place within the conservative news sphere.

Critics of conservative news media sometimes cast it as a homogenous bloc — a fuming haze of partisan fury.<sup>23</sup> Many of our interviewees expressed frustration with this perception; they worried that the worst and most conspiratorial of right-wing outlets color the entire field in the eyes of critics. We highlight differences among conservative outlets perceived by our interviewees, while also pointing to some of the continuities they see, as well as political and economic forces they see applying pressures to the entire field. In this section, we discuss:

- how our interviewees talk about “quality” conservative journalism;
- how they conceptualize niche identities among conservative news organizations;
- how they talk about relations between conservative journalists, mainstream media, and the broader public sphere;
- how they assess how conservative media should respond to misinformation and conspiracy theories; and
- how they evaluate how well conservative media right now are providing space for robust debate among competing conservative perspectives.

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<sup>22</sup> For an account of the “ultraconservatives” who continued to broadcast outside Buckley’s norms, see Heather Hendershot, *What’s Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Brock, David. *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy* (Three Rivers Press, 2005).



### Competition for Quality

Many conservative journalists we spoke with are critical of the dominant professional practices of mainstream media, with some going so far as to reject the notion that news can ever be reported from anything approaching a nonpartisan perspective. Still, our interviewees all positively espoused *some* of the values associated with quality in mainstream journalism. Despite worries of a “post-truth” age in which partisan media operate with irreconcilably divergent approaches to truth and reality, the conservative journalists we interviewed largely spoke of a set of guiding, aspirational values for reporting that would sound familiar to any mainstream journalist: depth; accuracy; consideration of multiple perspectives; well-sourced, original reporting; and (to at least some degree) a sense of journalistic autonomy not simply beholden to pleasing audiences. Many see their distinctness and competitive advantage within the conservative media sphere as being tied to successfully delivering on these notions of quality, though they also recognize that quality does not always deliver revenue or profits.

Commonplace journalistic values serve as yardsticks by which our interviewees measure themselves and their competitors when making judgments of quality. While our interviewees sometimes critiqued mainstream news media for not living up to these aspirations, many also saw other conservative outlets as failing to deliver. When we asked interviewees how they differentiated themselves from their conservative competitors, many responses focused foremost on how they saw their own outlets exceeding other conservative news outlets on these traditional measures of quality. For instance, the Daily Caller News Foundation’s Ethan Barton told us, “Within conservative media, I would say our big thing is that we’re far more in-depth and measured — and I know this is obviously my biased opinion — and reliable than other conservative outlets.”<sup>24</sup> Another conservative journalist (who requested anonymity) told us, “We produce a great deal of high-quality original reporting, which I think sets us apart from a lot of other small news outlets which mainly do, like, aggregation.” They described this as a key competitive advantage their outlet sought to establish within the conservative field.

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<sup>24</sup> The Daily Caller News Foundation is a nonprofit news service and training organization that is a legally distinct entity from the for-profit *Daily Caller*, though they share the same co-founders. The DCNF allows other publications, if they meet certain criteria, to freely republish the material it produces. The *Daily Caller* republishes a high percentage of DCNF stories.

Geoffrey Ingersoll, editor in chief at the *Daily Caller*, stated this more bluntly when asked what sets his outlet apart from the conservative competition:

We break news, man. That's really what it boils down to. It's like bootstraps, no shit, fucking journalism. And a lot of the people . . . who see an editorial bent in what we do, don't want to admit it — but we break news!

Several interviewees shared this view that original reporting, while requiring greater time and money than aggregating or cribbing other reporters' work, can have its own material advantages.<sup>25</sup> Such reporting bolsters publications' reputations and can circulate widely. Yet our interviewees believe this is not necessarily the surest strategy to bring in traffic or make money. One journalist told us “you can differentiate conservative outlets” by noting the “better ones do more original reporting,” but they lamented that aggregating or cribbing others' work could generate a lot of traffic on Facebook, “but not in a good way.” Others also spoke about a tension between their own standards of quality and digital marketplace incentives rewarding inexpensively produced and sensational content. Rachael Larimore, then managing editor of *The Bulwark*, told us “the internet has made it very cheap and easy to throw up an opinion website.” She says this has led to “a huge emphasis on kind of cheap and easy opinion writing rather than more quality journalism.”

Nonprofit newsrooms offer one model that can make it possible for journalists to focus on journalistic quality over online traffic metrics and advertiser monetization. Chris Bedford, then editor in chief at the Daily Caller News Foundation, told us, “I like to push, and the nonprofit allows us to do that — push the important but boring. . . . There's sometimes when you've got a great investigator and you know it's going to take them two weeks to get the story, and it may not pan out and that can be really difficult in the click model . . . to justify that to the publisher.” As Bedford indicates, nonprofit financing allows reporters freedom to pursue their own notions of quality journalism without the same stress of market pressures.

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<sup>25</sup> Mainstream news outlets have also grappled with concerns tradeoffs between investments in original reporting and curation. See Bakker, Piet. “Aggregation, Content Farms and Huffinization.” *Journalism Practice* 6, no. 5–6 (October 1, 2012): 627–37.

Most of our participants — like mainstream and other online journalists — pay close attention to how audiences react to their work. Still, they disagreed on the relationship between quality and awareness to audience — in other words, whether weighing audience taste in what they chose to cover made their content better. For some, those insights helped decide what to cover. Others felt instead that they were the experts on what is news and on what conservatives are interested in, and that it would be inappropriate to bend to audience proclivities in what they chose to cover. Such tensions reflect a larger trend across U.S. journalism as a whole.<sup>26</sup> As the notion of journalists’ professional judgment has been challenged, news organizations have grappled with questions of whether catering to consumer demand best serves democratic interests.

For example, one conservative reporter noted that he ignores online metrics. “I almost never try to look at them, just because I think it throws you off when you do the reporting that you think you should be reporting,” he said. “It’s a bit disheartening to then check the metrics and see that a piece isn’t doing particularly well. It’s not catching fire for whatever reason. It’s usually just sort of judgment that you pick up on the job. I am a conservative, so I know what conservatives are going to be interested in.” David Harsanyi, then of *The Federalist*, agreed, saying that he’s never had a conversation in his newsroom around, for instance, how a particular tenor of reporting on the president might build audience. “We sort of just go instinctually and just do what we have to do,” he said. He added that he had written a book opposed to democracy — *The People Have Spoken (and They Are Wrong): The Case Against Democracy* — “so I don’t really care very much what people think, and I don’t mean that in a superior sort of way. I just think that they’re fickle and they change their minds all the time anyway, so you just have to write what you believe and try to make good arguments and hope people read you and that’s it.”

Similarly, Jonathan V. Last at *The Bulwark* said he was concerned that tracking audience interest or response to content might be subverting the field of conservative news. He noted that, because of business pressures, many conservative news workers aren’t being honest with their audiences about what they believe in the first place, saying one thing in private and another publicly.

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<sup>26</sup> Nadler, *Making the News Popular*.

“There is a large part of the conservative media right now, not all of it, but a large part of it, which is either for prudential reasons or for theological reasons, committed to saying things they don’t think, and I don’t like that, and I don’t want us to ever do that,” he said. David French, then a senior writer at the *National Review*, noted that all publications get pressured for their content and their actions. At the *National Review*, he said, “the most notable pressures that are brought there are those who get particularly angry at our content that is opposed to either Trump the man or Trump the action as president.”

In sum, most of our interviewees espouse familiar journalistic values as measures of quality for both opinion-writing and reporting. One of the key ways they see their outlets distinguishing themselves from their competition is through exceeding the norm in these measures of quality. However, they also see a digital news marketplace and social media landscape that does not always reward quality news and may incentivize pandering. Several interviewees suggested that they see most of the conservative news media failing to live up to these standards of quality, and some worry that pressures to please audiences could undermine journalistic integrity. The nature of the journalist-audience relationship has long been fraught, and the questions asked here by our respondents are certainly not new. We further examine how our interviewees say they implement their quality standards in our section on [newsroom practices](#).

### **Finding a Niche**

Recent research suggests that partisan and ideological media has flourished in the “high choice” media environment of increasing cable channels and online news.<sup>27</sup> In this view, when more capacious cable systems and online media greatly lowered the barriers to entry for new outlets to enter the news media market, partisan consumers started flocking to outlets catering to their own particular tastes, and this has led to the growth of outlets speaking to like-minded audiences. We might draw from this theory that political media would become increasingly fragmented, not simply divided between liberal and conservative outlets, but fissuring among increasingly finer ideological distinctions. On the conservative

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<sup>27</sup> Davis, Nicholas T., and Johanna L. Dunaway. “Party Polarization, Media Choice, and Mass Partisan-Ideological Sorting.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. S1 (January 1, 2016): 272–97. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw002>.

side, for instance, we might expect social conservatives, libertarians, and neoconservatives to start migrating to their own outlets. While such distinctions have been characteristic of intellectual magazines, this is not the landscape our interviewees reported within the conservative news field. As we discuss below ([“Debate Among Conservatives”](#)), most of our interviewees see their outlets as ecumenical forums, hosting debate among competing visions of conservatism. Even as tensions mount among outlets regarding Trump and the embrace of populist nationalism, the ecumenical ideal appears to be holding. Rhetorically at least, these outlets compete with their own visions of what Big Tent conservatism should look like, rather than moving to explicitly define themselves as advocates of a particular strain of conservatism.

Still, some of our interviewees acknowledged that their outlets pursue niche audiences within the conservative field or seek to define themselves through niche specialties. David Harsanyi, a cofounder of *The Federalist*, told us:

Our idea was to, you know, we felt like most of the conservative publications were sort of a bit uptight. Also, we didn't think that they wrote for women enough, and for younger people enough, and random culture enough — or in a way that was accessible. They wrote about culture that was for older folks. So, we decided to just really take that on and bring on younger writers, not just younger writers but writers who would tackle those sorts of things.

According to Harsanyi, *The Federalist* not only diversified its writers but also ventured into new realms of cultural conversation that had been neglected by other conservative outlets, including reality TV, superhero movies, and sex. As he put it, “We don't only have to review history books and things like that. We can talk about all the things that liberals talk about and that millennials talk about and that progressives talk about.” While he described this as a successful move that helped grow *The Federalist*, he thinks more conservative outlets have started competing for the same audiences with their own edgy appeal.

Journalists working at *The Bulwark* also told us about their interest in cultural content more resonant with younger audiences. Then-managing editor Rachael Larimore told us she wanted to “present a newer, maybe a more modern

kind of conservatism” to appeal to a “broader, younger audience.” Larimore emphasized not solely an expansion of cultural topics, but also engaging with a greater range of conservative ideas and principles, moving beyond what she sees as the “populist” strain that dominates conservative media.

*The Daily Signal* takes yet another approach. Executive editor Rob Bluey told us his organization sees its niche as compelling stories about policy. He described the outlet’s highest priority as “putting a human face on policy issues.” Bluey said he believes that conservatives often do a “poor job of storytelling.” So, he says, *The Daily Signal* sets out to “be better storytellers and, and in many cases, to find individuals who are impacted by the public policies coming out of Washington and have them share their story.” The organization leverages its proximity to the policy experts at the Heritage Foundation, which funds the publication and with which it is co-located.

Many of our interviewees added that they targeted readers who came to their sites to read about topics they felt were inadequately reported elsewhere, suggesting they had something of a maverick image of their own reporting and of why audiences would be interested in it. Bedford, then of the Daily Caller News Foundation, noted that “I know that the average person who’s coming to the Daily Caller News Foundation is probably not interested in what’s blaring in all the other headlines, all the other newspapers in the country. They want something that’s a little different.” Gabriella Hoffman, a DC correspondent for *The Resurgent*, noted, “I think readers want to respond to stories that get underreported. I’ve gotten some pretty good responses with my bent if I’m writing about gun legislation or something happening in a very secretive meeting in Congress. Or an agency or a company or a startup that kind of marries a lot of different things, or the success of free enterprise and things of that sort.”

For at least some of those we interviewed, that meant reporting on stories they believed mainstream media was ignoring, as we describe below in [“Training, Standards, and Practices.”](#) Hugo Gurdon at the *Washington Examiner*, for instance, noted that the *Examiner*’s conservative worldview comes from its story selection, pointing out that his publication is more likely than mainstream media to report for instance on political donation and corruption among union members. David French, then of the *National Review*, noted that even Dean Baquet, executive editor

of *The New York Times*, has said that mainstream media doesn't understand religious people. "Conservative media gets it very well," French said. "The level of coverage, the level of understanding of Christian conservatives, people of strong religious faith more generally, of cultural challenges that people face, experience is just so much greater in conservative media." Barton from the Daily Caller News Foundation put a twist on this observation when he noted that Foundation journalists were cautious in reporting about left-wing Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez because of all the over-reporting done by conservative media. "On the conservative side we're just seeing like a lot of non-stories, a lot of non-issues, a lot of conservative preaching," he said. In response, Foundation staffers focused on looking for what he called "legitimate" stories.

In sum, our interviews suggest the segment of the field represented in this research is not openly dividing into ideologically defined niches. Yet some conservative outlets say they are making targeted efforts to appeal to younger audiences and women. These are audience segments they see as somewhat underdeveloped by conservative news in the past. Our interviews also show some conservative outlets are positioning themselves as sources for in-depth coverage of topics or perspectives off the beaten path of mainstream journalism. Yet, as we discuss further below, several of our interviewees believe that conservative outlets are increasingly being identified by their attitudes toward covering the Trump presidency — though many do not openly acknowledge such a stance as a defining editorial policy.

### **Debate and Criticism Within Conservative Media**

The vast majority of our interviewees said they see their outlets as forums to bring together divergent views and serious debate among conservatives. However, while many said they felt their own outlets were doing well at reaching such an ideal, others felt conservative outlets were largely failing in this respect. Different takes on how conservative media covers Trump were at the center of this tension. A key split among our interviewees surfaced in regards to how they assessed the context of mainstream media coverage of the Trump administration. Some suggested that mainstream coverage of the administration has been so negative that criticism coming from conservative media would add little value. Others felt most

conservative media were failing to offer necessary criticism of the administration and were bending to external pressures to stifle dissent within the conservative media sphere.

Interviewees working across different types of outlets told us their outlets were committed to airing diverse conservative views, and they said they saw this as a strength. As a *Daily Caller* reporter put it, “I think the opinion section of the *Daily Caller*’s getting even better because it’s getting more diverse and there are different opinions with not just an echo chamber, which I think is very important.” Gurdon spoke with us about “Who Is Conservative?,” a recent forum published in the *Washington Examiner*’s magazine that included a “wide range of different conservatives ranging from pro Trump to never Trump.” He told us, “We want to be admired and respected as a thoughtful and intelligent and engaging conservative publication,” and hosting such probing debate among conservatives “underscores the kind of image that we want for ourselves.” Rachael Larimore, formerly of *The Bulwark*, gave us a specific example of how her publication has tried to practice elevating thoughtful debate among conservatives. She described how *The Bulwark* covered debates about a notable monologue in which Fox’s Tucker Carlson praised “conservative populism.” As she put it, “We’ve had a couple of different responses to that, but they weren’t ‘Tucker is bad’ or ‘Tucker is good.’ There’s like, ‘Tucker said this and this is what we need to think about.’ So I think we’re trying to approach different ... conservative issues from multiple viewpoints that are all still conservative.” Last noted that there were “a lot of people who were subscribers to *The Standard* who were not in it for a particular program. They weren’t there because they were there for the Iraq war or because they were there for tax cuts. They were there to read about a bunch of different ideas, because they were interested in ideas. And I think you get that with, like, *The Atlantic*. I suspect if you went and pulled up a focus group of 200 people from *The Atlantic* subscribers, you would find something similar. They probably lean left, but I suspect that they do not read *The Atlantic* because they are really excited about pick an issue — climate change or something.”

While the idea of an ecumenical forum is popular, several of our interviewees see the conservative media sphere falling short on that front during the Trump presidency. Last described this as an atmosphere in which “a large part



of the conservative media right now, not all of it, but a large part of it, which is either for prudential reasons or for theological reasons committed to saying things they don't think." He told us that "purely because of Trump ... you have people who will say one thing to you in conversation in the green room and then when you get in front of a camera and you have a red light, they take the entire opposite tack." Charlie Sykes, now editor at large of *The Bulwark* but hosting *The Weekly Standard's* podcast when we spoke with him, told us he now has "a very high level of skepticism for reporting that comes out of certain conservative outlets. I'm going to treat them with a great deal of skepticism. I will never run or comment on a story from *The Daily Caller* or *Breitbart* or any of those folks." In his assessment, "The conservative media has really fractured in the ones who have just simply decided that they're going to be the Praetorian Guard for the Trump administration as opposed to any sort of serious commentary."

Eric Owens, then a writer with the *Daily Caller*, offered insight into both the freedom and pressure he felt in regards to commentary on Trump:

When he was a candidate, I wrote a two-part piece of, basically, Trump is the guy who's a New York limousine liberal, who his entire life has been pro-abortion and pro-universal healthcare and, and against guns and — just so you know — he hires all these immigrants. He's not what he says he is at all. ... It did very well. That was an example of a story that was anti-Trump, at a time when you could really see that Trump was seizing the initiative in the primary. ... I had been used as an example among other *Daily Caller* writers and editors who say, 'Well, you guys never write anything anti-Trump.' Well, what is this that Eric wrote?

Yet he felt the mood soon shifted:

So, you know, then after a while you get to be known as sort of the anti-Trump guy. Your stories don't do very well. The problem is, as much as *The Daily Caller* wants to be a mainstream news source, the fact is if the audience is older and

conservative, so you know, it's sort of like, do I really want to write another piece like this, that no one's going to read? And then after a while it's not that you're not getting published, but it's that, gee, your audience just isn't there.

Some journalists spoke with us anonymously about tensions surrounding coverage of Trump at their outlets or in other conservative outlets. One journalist told us that there had initially been vigorous and open debate about Trump on their site and among its staff. However, as the Mueller investigation picked up, tensions rose to a point where staff members more openly critical of Trump began to leave. Another journalist told us that “a lot of people changed what they view as conservative” in the age of Trump. They said they saw this as a shame, and that it has opened the opportunity for “all sorts of scam artists and conspiracy theorists and grifters” to start getting attention among conservative news audiences. Another interviewee told us that they resented that whenever Trump’s proposal for a border wall came up in the news, the editors at their outlet would push to “get stories about these magical caravans that seem to appear whenever Trump talks about a wall.”

At the same time, some of our interviewees suggested that criticism of Trump is muted in conservative outlets as a way to balance out what they see as the overly negative treatment he receives in mainstream media. One interviewee told us that they did not like Trump, but that their outlet had decided it did not feel that “bashing the guy with everyone else is worthwhile for us to do because it really adds nothing to the conversation.” Several interviewees spoke of the time during and since Trump’s election as one of turmoil among their staff, and of harsh criticism and attacks among conservative media personalities.

In sum, most of the journalists we spoke with said their outlets aspired to be forums for conservatives of different stripes to have thoughtful debates and engage in criticism. Yet some felt that conservative media as a whole was not living up to this aspiration. Most prominently, these divergent assessments centered on how to cover Donald Trump and what range of commentary to run regarding his presidency; some of Trump’s conservative critics in our study saw this as a larger issue of outlets choosing between party loyalties and political expediency versus

conservative principles. Some saw loyalty to Trump as an Achilles heel that leaves most conservative media stumbling over their own standards and values. Others suggested that Trump has been treated so negatively across most media that conservative media needs to offer what they see as a judicious balance.

### **Conspiracy and the Boundaries of Respectable Conservatism**

While many of the online conservative journalists we interviewed reported feeling embattled by negative attitudes from much of the nonpartisan press, most acknowledged that misinformation and conspiracy-oriented stories are a problem within the broader conservative news field. “It’s embarrassing, for sure, to be associated with [conspiracy journalists] like that,” one interviewee told us. “That’s why you have to be careful about where you work.” Our interviewees differed, however, as to the responsibility they believed conservative news outlets should have to respond to such conspiracies. They also differed in assessing exactly how to identify when sources or stories wade into conspiratorial territory, and whether they see conspiratorial or hyperpartisan misinformation as any greater a problem for conservatives than for other political persuasions.

The *National Review* has long played a significant role in attempting to define the bounds of respectable conservatism. Citing William F. Buckley’s rebuke of John Birch Society founder Robert Welch in 1962, then *National Review* senior writer David French told us he saw debating these boundaries as part of the publication’s “DNA.” “We have made strong moves to exile some of the anti-Semitism that emerged in some parts of what was called the ‘paleoconservative’ world,” French told us, adding, “Our writers have been resolute against the alt-right. You won’t find alt-right sympathy in our pages.” Yet he argued that the shifting media environment has made *National Review* less central in this respect:

We absolutely have a version of the gatekeeping responsibility and a version of a gatekeeping role. But I would say that the ability of *National Review* to be a gatekeeper is just not what it used to be — in large part because of the incredible expansion of media. The only gatekeeping you can really do effectively is

gatekeeping yourself. And you can express your ideas in response to that other perspective ... but that doesn't mean that you're going to discredit them necessarily with their supporters. ... You make your argument in good faith and you hope that it has an effect. But the idea that we have some sort of inherent power to write anybody out of the movement — I think that would be overblown.

French thinks *National Review* has a responsibility to criticize and debunk popular right-wing conspiracies if they gain a certain degree of currency. He mentioned his own effort to “take the Seth Rich nonsense head on” by exposing the falsity of the claim by Sean Hannity and others that there was any evidence to suggest Rich’s murder might have been carried out by the Democratic National Committee.<sup>28</sup> Yet he thinks that it is not the responsibility of the *National Review* “to be the Snopes of the right.” Instead, French emphasizes that intervention is only justified when a conspiracy has gained significant visibility.

Other journalists we spoke to were more cautious, and they told us they generally avoid fact checking conspiracy content circulating on the right. Instead, most emphasized that their publication’s duty was simply to avoid publishing or sourcing from conspiracy content itself. Gabriella Hoffman, a contributor and Washington, D.C., correspondent for *The Resurgent*, told us she avoids certain websites known for untrustworthy or conspiratorial content. As an example, she pointed to one right-wing website — a blog known for amplifying conspiracy theories — from which she has seen others draw information but that she says is “a really crazy publication. It has a lot of anti-Semitic overtones and I don’t cite it. I don’t trust it. I mute it.” Another interviewee, who expressed significant concern about unfounded conspiracies circulating on the right, felt there was little they could do beyond staying away. They said they avoid “doing interviews at certain places [and] being involved with those people [pushing conspiracies] in any way.” Yet they expressed a sense of resignation that “at some point I can’t — you know, I can’t force — I can’t shut down the websites or anything like that. ... So I think

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<sup>28</sup> David French, “The Seth Rich Conspiracy Theory Is Shameful Nonsense,” *National Review*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/05/sean-hannity-seth-rich-conspiracy-theory-disgrace/>.

it's more of keeping your own house clean than being able to clean everyone else's."

Several interviewees voiced concerns that focusing too much on debunking conspiracy theories popular among conservatives could further the perception that conspiracy is a particular pathology of the right. David Harsanyi told us that he wanted to make sure conspiracy content stayed out of *The Federalist*. Harsanyi also said he had written stories pushing against the "birther" conspiracy, noting "there was plenty of pushback on this story across mainstream media mocking people who believe that stuff. And rightly so." However, he believes *The Federalist* had to choose its battles with false content, focusing on counteracting what he sees as the dominant weaknesses in mainstream news media rather than correcting what's published in other conservative outlets:

We believe there are not enough people mocking the conspiracy theories of the left-wingers, who believe that Russians changed votes, or that [George W.] Bush was part of 9/11. And we push back against those conspiracy theories probably more often than the others because we don't feel like there's enough coverage of that. We're here to try to balance things out a little bit. We only have a limited amount of space, so we're not going to attack every right-wing conspiracy theory. There is plenty of that out there, and we acknowledge that. We would never want to be part of that, but we certainly focus more on left-wing conspiracy theories.

Geoffrey Ingersoll of *The Daily Caller* went a bit further and suggested that conspiratorial content should be ignored altogether. When we asked him how he treats what appear to be inaccurate stories gaining popularity in the right-wing media sphere, he told us:

We sort of ignore that stuff. No different than we would stories that come from established media ... that don't seem to ring true. There's a kind of *New York Times* palace intrigue, Donald Trump stories that don't ring true, but criticizing them wouldn't be a clean hit because you don't have a clean way to debunk

these, so we just leave them alone. ... Like when it came to Hillary Clinton, you know, taking part in a sex dungeon and a fucking pizza shop or something like that. Like, we're just not going to fucking touch that. ... It's just so crazy that there's no reason to even give it any air.

In summary, conservative writers and outlets face a number of pressures in making decisions about fact checking and critiquing conspiracy theories and misinformation on the right. This can be one way for particular outlets to establish a reputation of credibility more in line with traditional journalistic standards. Conservative outlets that invest in original reporting and more expensive production processes may also stand to gain if they are able to marginalize potential competitors producing cheap, sensational content. In an unstable field, that could be a risky bet, and even the more established outlets may not be confident they have the influence to put conspiracies to rest.

As our interviewees indicate, conservative journalists might have some concern about giving more attention to such conspiracies if they are just emerging. They may also worry about feeding the perception of conspiracy or misinformation as a pathology of the right, or perhaps worry that audiences could perceive them as insufficiently loyal by devoting space to criticism of elements on the right.

### **Engaging with the Broader Public Sphere**

Critics of conservative media have long feared it has a tendency to seal itself into an echo chamber. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella argue that “conservative media create a self-protective enclave” that “reinforces the views of these outlets’ like-minded audience members” while distancing them from liberals and Democrats.<sup>29</sup> One influential study of news shared on social media during the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections concluded that a “right-wing media network” had “developed as a distinct and insulated media system.”<sup>30</sup> Concerns of an isolated conservative news sphere have only been heightened by Donald Trump’s perpetual attempts to discredit news coverage that he finds too critical as

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<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p x.

<sup>30</sup> Yochai Benkler et al., “Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>.

“fake news” — even applying this, on occasion, to Fox News.<sup>31</sup> Political theorist Jan-Werner Müller has described the political sensibility behind Trump’s rise as belonging to a species of “antipluralism” that refuses to recognize any opposition as legitimate and portrays all opponents as fundamentally corrupt.<sup>32</sup> While most of our participants say they see themselves engaging in a broader public conversation — beyond an insulated public sphere — many also say they believe there are special barriers to entering that conversation for conservative journalists.

While our interviewees largely expressed a degree of appreciation for nonconservative journalism and indicated they saw a need for news and commentary coming from multiple perspectives, they also said they felt excluded by mainstream outlets. For instance, Geoffrey Ingersoll of the *Daily Caller* told us, “I have a lot of respect for the *Times*. I think they are obviously the best paper in the world.” Yet he suggested *The New York Times* represents a journalistic culture that largely excludes conservatives and fails to grasp the life experiences of conservatives and their perspectives.

Ingersoll was among several interviewees who said they saw mainstream media as somewhere between dismissive and hostile to conservative media and to conservatives more generally. He told us he thinks that with Trump in the White House, liberal reporters have come to believe in a “caricature of people who disagree with them as evil cartoons,” though he noted that he thought many on the right had held the same sort of caricature while Barack Obama was in the White House. He told us about a collaborative investigation of sexual predation in the news media that he had proposed with a writer at a “left of center” outlet, but he believes the editor of that outlet shut it down because “he feels like we’re trash, so he wasn’t interested in sort of combining sources on that story.” Ingersoll said he’s still interested in collaborating with nonconservative outlets, but he expects that most would not be willing to work with the *Daily Caller* because “they’d rather see us extinguished than collaborate on a story, even if the story has a higher moral value.”

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<sup>31</sup> Inae Oh, “Trump Labels Fox News ‘Fake’ and Claims ‘Something Weird Is Going On’ at Network,” *Mother Jones*, accessed September 22, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/06/trump-fox-news-fake/>.

<sup>32</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

Other interviewees also reported feeling that mainstream media tended to lump all conservative outlets together and associate them with the worst of conspiratorial and hyperpartisan journalism coming from the right. Several felt that conservative outlets are held to a different standard by mainstream media. While every news organization is bound to make mistakes, some of our interviewees believe that conservative news organizations have been unfairly branded by their errors in the eyes of mainstream journalists. Chris Bedford told us, “Scandals, allegations against The Daily Caller News Foundation that are years old will be brought up any time anything comes up because people ... don’t want to have to listen to something that doesn’t vibe with their narrative.” He said he thinks his reporters expect that mainstream media “will look for any way to tear [their work] apart, which can be really frustrating.” Yet Bedford believes that holding his reporters to high standards can at least partially overcome such barriers. He told us, “One reporter said to me last week, ‘If I wrote the sky was blue, you’d make me link it.’ And I told him, ‘That’s part of the nature of what we’re doing.’ I want other reporters and editors to look at our content and say, ‘Well, here’s the primary documents.’”

Some respondents also told us they felt they sometimes had trouble getting responses from liberal sources or institutions when working on stories. Of course, all journalists must build and manage their reputations with a number of constituencies — fellow journalists, audiences, and newsmakers or sources who may be antagonistic toward each other. In the mid-20th century, print and broadcast journalists might have expected their allegiance to objectivity and their broad audiences to give them at least some degree of access to both audiences and powerful figures. Online conservative journalists, however, cultivate their relationships with audiences, newsmakers, and potential sources under a different set of conditions. Audiences are fracturing. Social media are opening alternative pathways to communicate with the public while bypassing journalists. And news sources may be growing more choosy about who they will speak with based on an outlet’s reputation and ideological affiliation. [Later in this report](#), we detail how conservative journalists are responding to how an outlet’s reputation can affect its access to liberal sources and newsmakers. What is worth noting here is that some of our interviewees told us they thought it was more than their own outlets’



reputations that influence their relationships with sources and audiences. Some felt the reputation of conservative news *as a whole field* weighing on these relationships.

Despite this, no one we interviewed framed mainstream news media as “fake news,” though we attended a CPAC panel in which Breitbart reporter Matt Boyle used that moniker to cover mainstream media. As discussed [above](#), most of our interviewees spoke of journalistic values as overlapping with those of mainstream journalism. Those we spoke with who trained and mentored conservative journalists wanted to prepare these budding journalists with skills and credentials suitable for both conservative and mainstream newsrooms — suggesting at least an imagined sense of permeability between the two spheres.

Moreover, many of our interviewees spoke directly with us about the value they see in mainstream news. For instance, Ethan Barton of The Daily Caller News Foundation said, “I think that there is a really important place for news across the spectrum. I’d be very saddened if I saw some very good liberal sites go bankrupt.” He elaborated: “I think that liberal news is extremely important to have. And I think that mainstream news is important to have. ... I think that criticism from within the same side and criticism of mainstream media and criticism of the opposing side is all extremely important, as long as it’s done in a measured and fair way.” Several others echoed similar sentiments and suggested that journalists and readers should be gathering news broadly from across perspectives.

While many of our interviewees indicated they saw a dangerous pull toward polarization in the digital media environment, they largely spoke of aspirations to engage in reasoned argument and steer away from inflammatory statements. Some spoke of personal efforts or standards their outlets use to try to resist the temptation of outrage and personalized attack, though they recognized their own outlets were not entirely immune to such currents. Gabriella Hoffman told us about a norm at *The Resurgent*, which largely publishes commentary written by freelancers, intended to curb invective. She said, “We have a standard in place where you don’t resort to calling people idiots,” although she recognized that some of their authors do use derogatory, if playful, monikers for opponents. As she further explained, “You could make a snarky comment saying this person is an ignoramus. That’s very different. That’s not — that’s not an ad hominem attack. ... You can criticize

people with adjectives that are not surly or offensive ... but that highlight their ignorance or problems in their argument.”

David French, then of the *National Review*, drew on a metaphor from his experience as a trial lawyer to describe his approach to pitching his arguments beyond the like-minded: Describing opposing counsel as his “sparring partner,” he said he often wrote with such a partner in mind — such as a writer or policymaker with whom he disagreed. He said that when he writes, “My object is not to necessarily persuade my sparring partner, who are often the people who are most dedicated to the idea, so it’s futile to sort of try to persuade opposing counsel and the state. But instead you’re trying to persuade the jury, which is the persuadable audience.”

Despite the pervasiveness of this pluralist outlook, many of our interviewees also expressed a sense that conservative journalists are marginalized and embattled by more dominant forms of journalism. This should not come as a surprise, as such concerns have long been central to conservative news media. Early founders of modern conservative media in the 1940s and 1950s believed that major news outlets were dominated by a “liberal establishment” that sought to excise conservative perspectives from the public sphere.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lane, “Cultivating Distrust of the Mainstream Media: Propagandists for a Liberal Machine and the American Establishment”; Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*.

## 2. Training, Standards, and Practices

Journalism in the United States is characterized both by clearly articulated values and by an absence of standardized training in those values. More than a century as an academic discipline, coupled with an evolving constellation of voluntary professional organizations (e.g. Society for Professional Journalists, the Online News Association), has resulted in codes of ethics and best practices that are agreed upon by many, if not most, practitioners. However, unlike other professions — medicine, law, social work — no formal degree or certification is required to work as a journalist in the United States.<sup>34</sup> While 92 percent of U.S. journalists working at “mainstream, general interest” outlets in 2013 held college degrees, only about half (46 percent) were journalism majors, although some 77 percent reported having worked for a college news medium.<sup>35</sup> The varied educational and career pathways that lead workers into journalism ensure its structural instability as a profession, making it more susceptible to lay criticism.<sup>36</sup> The apparent stability, and indeed political autonomy, of U.S. journalism as a profession has long been bolstered by a commitment to impartial reporting, as distinguished from news framed by more partisan or overtly political ideological ends.<sup>37</sup> The gap between the objectivity ideal and its nonstandardized or imperfect application by working journalists has been a key focus of conservative critiques of the press, which created the conditions of possibility upon which the contemporary online conservative news field was built.<sup>38</sup>

Conservative journalism is similarly lacking in standardized training. Indeed, the 22 online conservative news workers we interviewed shared similar

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<sup>34</sup> See Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson, “Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism,” in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 88-101.

<sup>35</sup> David H. Weaver, Lars Willnat, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, “The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Another Look at U.S. News People,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96:1 (2019): 101-130; 112-113.

<sup>36</sup> James W. Carey, “Journalism and Criticism: The Case of an Undeveloped Profession,” *The Review of Politics* 32:6 (April 1974): 227-249.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Schudson, “The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism,” *Journalism* 2:2 (2001): 149-170.

<sup>38</sup> A.J. Bauer, “Journalism History and Conservative Erasure,” *American Journalism* 35:1 (2018): 2-26.

educational backgrounds and varied career paths with their mainstream, general-interest counterparts. All of our respondents reported earning college degrees. Nine of 22 (or 40.9 percent) reported majoring in journalism — five at the undergraduate level, three at the graduate level, one at both. This level of journalism education is consistent with online news workers more broadly, 39.6 percent of whom report having earned a journalism degree.<sup>39</sup> While three of our respondents graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., no other patterns emerged in terms of school, regional background, or major. Respondents earned degrees in such varied fields as political science, English literature, French, business, kinesiology, and molecular biology. Two studied law. While most were affiliated with groups and publications associated with the conservative movement in college or shortly thereafter, others followed career paths more consistent with those of mainstream journalists.

Unlike mainstream journalism, conservative journalism lacks formally codified news values.<sup>40</sup> There are no professional associations, voluntary or otherwise, for conservative reporters and editors. While there is a robust literature of conservative authors, pundits, and news workers critiquing mainstream journalism, few have articulated a positive vision for conservative reporting standards. One such vision, published in May 2019 as we wrapped up our interviews, is conservative talk radio host Mark Levin’s *Unfreedom of the Press*.<sup>41</sup> In addition to reiterating longstanding conservative critiques of mainstream journalism — that general-interest newsrooms lack ideological diversity; that “objectivity” is a fine ideal that journalists either fail to achieve or interpret in practice as corresponding with a progressive worldview — Levin offers up an alternative standard inspired by the news printers and pamphleteers of the U.S. Revolutionary War era. He suggests that contemporary reporters and editors ought to avoid both attempting impartiality and embracing open partisanship. Instead, he thinks journalists (conservative or otherwise) ought to interpret the news in a way

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<sup>39</sup> Lars Willnat and David H. Weaver, “The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Key Findings,” (Bloomington, IN: School of Journalism, Indiana University, 2014), 9. Accessible at <<https://larswillnat.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/2013-american-journalist-key-findings.pdf>>.

<sup>40</sup> The Society of Professional Journalists’ *Code of Ethics* is perhaps the clearest example of codified values among mainstream journalists. Similar values are evident in the hundreds of textbooks designed for teaching journalism at both the scholastic and collegiate levels. Nothing even remotely similar exists in conservative news.

<sup>41</sup> Mark R. Levin, *Unfreedom of the Press* (New York: Threshold, 2019).

that actively advocates for and reinforces “America’s founding principles ... to contribute to a vigorous, productive, healthy, and happy individual and to a well-functioning civil society and republic.” This would include, according to Levin, “expos[ing] official actions aimed at squelching speech and communication” but avoiding functioning as a “propaganda tool for a single political party and ideology.”<sup>42</sup> Another vision of conservative news values, posited by Matthew Continetti as a founding mission of *The Washington Free Beacon* in 2012, takes a more “combative” approach: “What would happen, though, if a website covered the left in the same way that the left covers the right? What picture of the world would one have in mind if the morning paper read like the *New York Times* — but with the subjects of the stories and the assumptions built into the text changed to reflect a conservative, not liberal, worldview?”<sup>43</sup> Continetti’s framing of conservative news, as a “counterattack” against the putatively progressive outcomes of mainstream news standards, is a common refrain from conservative news workers that also arguably comes closest to describing popular conceptions of the conservative news field held by outside observers.

Our participants, however, articulated a wider array of news values and practices consistent with the field’s lack of standardized training or formally codified values. According to our analysis, conservative journalism is thus best characterized not by complete autonomy of values or practices, but by its unique proximity (both conceptual and geographic) to both mainstream political journalism and the modern conservative movement. Although some conservative reporters and editors work remotely, much of the online conservative news industry is based in the greater Washington, D.C. area — a locus not only of political power, but also of the political journalism industry and the myriad advocacy groups and think tanks associated with the conservative movement.

### Training and Formal Standards

As with the newsrooms of mainstream, general-interest publications, online conservative newsrooms are often sites of informal on-the-job training and

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<sup>42</sup> Levin, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Continetti, “Combat Journalism: Taking the Fight to the Left,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, Feb. 6, 2012.

mentoring. Some editors we spoke to emphasized their role in helping early-career reporters develop their chops. The Daily Caller News Foundation leads the field in this regard. It was founded in 2011 to provide experiential education to aspiring conservative news reporters who lacked journalistic training or experience. “We hire a lot of people that don’t go to journalism school,” said then editor in chief Christopher Bedford, who holds a BA in print journalism and world politics from American University. “You can learn a lot in the newsroom, in my opinion. So we were always happy to accept folks who have other skills or interests and studied other things.” Bedford oversaw a two-year fellowship program, and a newsroom that functions as an incubator for early career reporters. “The goal for these reporters, these fellows, is to move on to another outlet that will help them broaden their career,” he said. News Foundation reporters are assigned beats and also cover breaking news. Their stories, and those of more experienced reporters, are circulated via a newswire service, designed with the express purpose of strengthening their clips in the eyes of future employers. “It’s great to go to an editor with a couple of hundred bylines at The Daily Caller News Foundation,” Bedford said. “But it’s better to also say, hey, my work’s been picked up by Business Insider or Fox News.” Whether an aspiring reporter seeks to work in online conservative newsrooms or as a conservative within the newsroom of a more mainstream outlet, movement-aligned and adjacent nonprofits provide journalism training and career development resources that often mirror those offered by professional associations within the mainstream journalism field.

Aspiring conservative journalists may secure the necessary clips by working for their college newspapers (conservative or otherwise). Some may also seek out internships with specialty reporting projects like Campus Reform — a conservative news website, operated by the Leadership Institute, specializing in covering incidents of putative liberal bias and free speech restrictions at American colleges and universities. Others may apply to the National Journalism Center, a journalism training program operated by Young America’s Foundation. Not all NJC participants go on to work in conservative news — longtime *New Yorker* contributor Malcolm Gladwell is a notable alum, and past participants have secured internships at mainstream outlets including *USA Today* and the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. Most of the outlets listed by NJC as intern placement sites, though,

**Columbia Journalism School**

belong firmly within the conservative news field, including *The Daily Caller*, Fox News, *Newsmax*, *Washington Examiner*, *Washington Times*, and the (now-defunct) *Weekly Standard*.<sup>44</sup>

Bedford said he and other editors also teach seminars for early career journalists, training them in subjects including Associated Press style and “Living in the News,” a course designed to teach reporters “how to be constantly consuming data and how to do it rapidly, how to stay on top of their beats while still managing to get off their cell phone long enough to have a social life and enjoy a meal.” According to former News Foundation fellow Will Racke, this training also involves invited talks by experts affiliated with various conservative-aligned think tanks, though he emphasized that these perspectives were not necessarily prioritized in reporting. “If you were writing a story, you didn’t have to tailor your stories to appease somebody at the Heritage Foundation or anything like that,” Racke said. “It was basically just to have everybody with kind of a common understanding of what you would probably call ‘orthodox conservative thought.’” Other outlets, including *The Daily Caller*, emphasized recruiting staffers who have already developed strong writing and reporting skills at other outlets — or as then *Daily Caller* writer Eric Owens put it, reporters for whom this is “not their first rodeo.” For Hugo Gurdon, editorial director of the *Washington Examiner*, this means making sure reporters are “actually interested in the news” as opposed to “miniature politicians trying to make things right.”

While we were not given direct access to them, some outlets (including the *Daily Signal* and *Daily Caller*) reported having in-house handbooks and/or style guides to help reporters and editors maintain consistency in their reporting, and navigate sourcing and other ethical dilemmas. At the *Daily Signal*, every new employee is given a manual that enumerates issues in the reporting and editing process, and the procedures for resolving them — from the story filing process to correction protocols to the appropriate steps to receive editorial approval to use an anonymous source. “It’s been really beneficial for us to have those editorial standards in place, particularly when new employees start,” said *Daily Signal* editor in chief Rob Bluey. While *The Daily Caller* declined to describe its

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<sup>44</sup> “Washington, D.C. Media Internships” (National Journalism Center, nd.). Collected by authors at CPAC 2019, Feb. 27-March 2, 2019, National Harbor, Maryland.

handbook, editor in chief Geoffrey Ingersoll suggested that standards enforcement at the publication typically involves careful attention to sourcing. This applies, he said, not only to original reporting but also to carefully considering which stories by other outlets to follow or aggregate:

As far as aggregate work or write-throughs, it's a matter of not only the masthead, but like where it's coming from, how they source it. And so, *BuzzFeed*, you know, reports that Trump told [Michael] Cohen to lie. And when stuff like that happens generally we're skeptical, especially when there's no documents, there's no e-mails, they didn't embed any e-mail in the body of the text, and their sourcing was kind of nebulous. So we're less likely to run with something like that.

This standard also applies to more “confirmation bias inducing” stories, according to Ingersoll. “So, if *The Wall Street Journal* writes a story about [how] Hillary Clinton is going to get indicted or something,” he said as a hypothetical, noting that he typically finds the *Journal*'s reporting to be credible. “If you look at their sourcing and their sourcing is kind of dodgy, you're like, okay, let's wait a minute. No one else picks it up, and no one else confirms it, then we don't write it.”

Reporters and editors at other outlets reported only implicit or mutually understood standards, which often related to matters of clean copy and accurate reporting. David Harsanyi, then a senior editor at *The Federalist*, stressed his publication's interest in helping commentators develop their craft, including honing writing and argumentation skills. “But if someone is sending me something and I see two or three mistakes, or if I see that they're not careful with their facts, I don't take the time to sort of track everything down,” he said. “We just would reject that piece, and I think that's the level of professionalism that even commentary sites need to have.”

### **Standards in Practice**

Distilling common values and standard practices among online conservative news outlets is complicated by the sheer diversity of missions and newsroom structures within the field. This variety tends to relate to how each site navigates between its reporting and commentary roles. Sites like *The Federalist* and *The Resurgent*, which are both more commentary driven, are highly decentralized —



no newsrooms, heavily reliant on entrepreneurial contributing editors and writers. “If you’re not a self-starter, it’s probably not going to work out for you at *The Federalist*,” said then senior editor David Harsanyi. Stories at *The Federalist* are developed collaboratively between writers and editors, although with no formal beat structure or pitching process, writers wield considerable agency. “Generally, they write what they want,” Harsanyi said. “If something is breaking, we will instruct someone to write about it so that happens as well, but it’s sort of just a mix. I think mostly people generate their own stories.” Comparing the site favorably to *Slate*, Harsanyi said *The Federalist* looks to promote counterintuitive reporting and commentary from a conservative point of view. “I’ve always liked challenging most people’s conventional thinking,” he said. “That’s the kind of story we look for.” As an example, he cited a column published in February 2019 by Christina Parreira, a sex worker and doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who had inadvertently caused some social media trouble for Fox News host Tucker Carlson by posting a photo she took with him at the funeral of Nevada brothel owner Dennis Hof.<sup>45</sup> “You don’t expect a conservative publication to have a sex worker writing about their life,” Harsanyi noted.

Writers for *The Resurgent* are given similar leeway, according to the site’s Washington, D.C., correspondent Gabriella Hoffman. “A lot of our writers tend to have other primary occupations, so it’s kind of like a hobby for a lot of us,” she said. According to Hoffman, editors at *The Resurgent* send out weekly suggestions of topics to write about, but contributors are free to recommend or submit other stories at their discretion. While *Resurgent* writers are expected to check in with editorial leadership before reporting or commenting on internal cable news industry gossip — a rule seemingly designed to avoid complications for the site’s founding editor, Erick Erickson, who has worked as a contributor for CNN and is currently a Fox News contributor — they are otherwise mostly free to write about whatever they wish. “There’s really no restrictions, as long as people just meet a certain threshold for being pro-life,” Hoffman said.

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<sup>45</sup> Christina Parreira, “Stop Shaming Me for Taking a Photo with Tucker Carlson at a Funeral,” *The Federalist*, February 24, 2019. Accessible at <<https://thefederalist.com/2019/02/24/stop-shaming-taking-photo-tucker-carlson-funeral/>>.

On the other end of the conservative news spectrum sits the *Washington Examiner*, which is structured more or less like a mainstream newspaper — complete with clear distinctions between news reporting and commentary roles. The outlet has one of the largest newsrooms in online conservative media, with dedicated breaking news reporters and more specialized beat reporters, and a full editorial hierarchy. Breaking news reporters receive assignments from editors, while beat reporters are expected to generate their own story ideas, often in collaboration with editors, according to executive editor Hugo Gurdon. Beats tend to mirror those common in mainstream political reporting — the White House, the Supreme Court, Congress, national politics, foreign affairs, criminal justice. The *Examiner* also employs investigative reporters and policy-oriented specialty reporters, covering topics including the economy, health care, and the environment. “Broadly speaking, it needs to be about politics, but perhaps quite loosely defined,” Gurdon said. “There’s a lot of stories which might be about ideas or culture, which are upstream of politics but which are interesting to people who are interested in politics.”

While Gurdon acknowledges the *Examiner*’s “forthrightly conservative worldview,” he said he and his staff strive for maintaining a clear distinction between news and commentary. “On our news pages we are very interested and determined to write straight news,” he said. “We want our news to be something that can be relied on by people who don’t like what we write on our commentary pages.” Gurdon’s inspiration here comes from his days working for the conservative *Daily Telegraph* in the United Kingdom. “*The Telegraph* was well known for being read by the socialists,” he said. “And that was because they trusted what we wrote in the news pages was accurate.” The *Examiner*’s conservatism on the news side, according to Gurdon, has less to do with spin or biased reporting than with story selection. For example, Gurdon said the *Examiner* was more likely than its mainstream counterparts to cover the political donations of and corruption within labor unions. “Now, we point that out because we don’t think unions represent their members very well. We think that they’ve become political arms rather than actually representing their members,” he said. “So, we probably write more stories about that kind of thing, or more commentary pieces about that kind of thing, than do other publications which really don’t think that’s

very important — they just don't see that. They don't agree with that, and therefore they don't think it's newsy."

Gurdon took pains, however, to distinguish these conservative news values from biased or partisan reporting. "We're not even slightly partisan in the sense that some people might mean it — that we, you know, we're always supporting one party. We're not," he said. "We actually use our commentary pages, our editorials, and our columnists to be critical sometimes of Republicans, whether they're the president or members of Congress or governors, or whatever. But certainly — certainly we think the country is better governed by Republicans than it is by Democrats." For Gurdon, the *Examiner's* editorial philosophy centers less on party than on ideology. He noted that the *Examiner* will occasionally publish commentary by Democrats, so long as the opinion shares the publication's commitment to "freedom." "Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom of association, free enterprise — all of those things are buttressed globally by American global leadership and American strength," Gurdon said.

The bulk of the conservative news field falls somewhere between *The Federalist* and the *Washington Examiner*, both in terms of organizational structure and of news/commentary hybridity. The *National Review*, for example, has an extensive masthead but less of a formal beat structure, in part due to its mission as a "journal of ideas." "We're not a hard news outlet, we're an opinion journal," said David French, then a senior writer for *National Review* online. While French and his colleagues engage in reporting, he sees his work as closer to news analysis. "I'm a Christian conservative," French said, noting that he imagines many of his readers are, too. "So, one of the things that I think can be valuable is sort of how is an evangelical Protestant, even though I don't put it in these explicit words, like how am I processing things? How should we process this?"

Several of our respondents noted that religious perspective shaped their news judgment or analysis. One suggested the role of personal identity, including religious affiliation, is one factor in why individual conservative reporters gravitate toward different reporting topics. "There is, you know, someone attacks [Brett] Kavanaugh for being Catholic — the Catholic guys will want to write it. If there is something dealing with Israel, the Jewish guys will write it — that sort of thing."

While several respondents drew stark distinctions between hard news reporting and news analysis, in practice those lines often blur. The conservative journalistic practice of basing story selection and framing decisions upon individual reportorial perspectives, be they religious or political, helps explain the resulting hybridity.

At many online conservative news outlets, even those that focus more on hard news reporting, there is a tendency for reporters to write occasional, or even regular, opinion pieces. This dual role can pose challenges for conservative reporters who are more inclined toward writing hard news. “When I’m writing opinion, I get the sense that it is my own voice. So I’m a lot more particular about what it is that I’m saying,” one respondent told us. “You know, when you’re reporting and someone gets angry about what you write, you can say, ‘Well, that’s just the facts.’ When you’re doing an opinion, you have to kind of figure out how you are going to frame certain issues and then figure out what goes in and what goes out.” Indeed, despite writing for ideologically oriented publications, several of our respondents expressed mixed feelings about the art of persuasion. For example, Jonathan V. Last, executive editor of *The Bulwark*, rejects the persuasion imperative of conservative newswork entirely. “I don’t ever want to be in a position where I’m deluding myself into thinking that we’re going to change the minds of 20 million people — no, those people are going to think what they think because circumstances change,” he said. “To the extent that we influence anything, people wind up being at the elite level, and I’m fine if we don’t influence anything anyway. I am fine if we just turn out good writing that people consume and enjoy and feel like they have gotten some value out of.”

### **The Role of the Audience**

Partisan media are gathering places of the like-minded.<sup>46</sup> While some of the conservative journalists we interviewed said they thought their audiences were largely conservative, most said they believed their audiences were not confined to a particular political orientation.

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<sup>46</sup> See Shira Dvir-Gvirsman, “Media Audience Homophily: Partisan Websites, Audience Identity and Polarization Processes,” *New Media & Society* 19:7 (2016): 1072-1091.

Like most other journalists, the online conservative news workers we spoke to were very attuned to how audience members find their content. Bluey from *The Daily Signal* noted that the characteristics of his audiences vary depending on whether they are accessing content through e-mail, social media, or the site directly. “They’re all kind of looking for different things, and different formats even for how they consume the news,” he said. Harsanyi, then at *The Federalist*, said that while he cannot predict as he is writing a story whether it will do well, as soon as it’s published he can tell from the Twitter response. “It definitely matters if someone retweets something and there’s a huge following and they happen to see your story in that manner,” he said. “I can almost tell immediately if a story is going to do or not do well once I tweet it out to my followers on Twitter. If there is immediate action on that story, I know that it’s the kind of headline and the kind of story that people at that point are very interested in.” *The Resurgent*’s Hoffman said it is not always possible to predict how a story would do, either on social media or on its website, noting in particular that busy news days can make it harder for a story to stand out.

For the journalists we interviewed, Matt Drudge and his prominent conservative news aggregator, Drudge Report, loomed large, taking on a unique role relative to the other news organizations the journalists were interacting with. One reporter who has worked at a number of prominent conservative outlets noted they would sometimes write stories specifically intended to get picked up by Drudge. “I have Drudge’s e-mail. I have both his e-mails. I have an e-mail for one of the guys that work for Drudge. If I write a story and I know that I’m first to it — I know that it’s like a big story that’s going to blow up and I feel like I beat everyone else to the story — I will just e-mail a link to the story with a headline, and it is the best feeling in the world when you’re the first to get up on Drudge with a story and the headline is the headline that you put in the subject line of the e-mail because you know it worked and you know that’s just got a whole bunch of clicks,” they said. The reporter added that while they were not certain, they thought that this might be standard practice across many outlets, and that many other conservative journalists seem to have Drudge’s e-mail address. Harsanyi echoed some of this, noting that while the *Drudge Report* doesn’t quite have the power it once did, it still drives traffic when it links to a story. Still, this impetus could also

be distorting. Rachael Larimore, then at *The Bulwark*, noted that before she started at the *Weekly Standard*, “there had been a push from corporate to basically get all your traffic from the Drudge Report, which led to not the best quality journalism.” When she worked at the *Standard*, staffers would appreciate traffic from Drudge when it came, “but we were always more thankful when it came on a — like a solid reported piece that happened to be on a hot topic rather than having a hot take that was written just for Drudge.” These observations mirror conversations taking place among more mainstream digital journalists about how to target audiences and how the way audience members find content is evolving.<sup>47</sup>

Many of the online conservative news workers we talked to felt their audiences were primarily interested in stories related to the U.S., and said that they covered news from outside the U.S. only rarely — typically during major events perceived to have some connection with American political life, partly because of perceived audience interest but partly because of a lack of resources that prevented them from robustly covering foreign news. Barton from the Daily Caller News Foundation noted that he feels “there’s not a big appetite for foreign policy unless it’s really major,” adding that they weren’t covering Brexit much, for instance, even though it’s a big story, but that they do cover foreign news where it influences the U.S., for instance American considerations of getting involved in Venezuela. Bedford, at the same outlet, concurred, adding that audiences might be interested in more unusual aspects of foreign policy, adding that, for instance, a truck bomb in London is rare and might be newsworthy, whereas a truck bomb in Mogadishu might not be. “We try to cover it all,” he said, adding that readers were interested in their foreign policy reporting on ISIS, but that the Foundation doesn’t have the resources to mobilize a big team to do that work like it used to. “I’d like to fix that, toward how much foreign policy reporting we can do, now when a lot of American news watchers are very inwardly focused.” Evan Maguire at the *American Spectator* echoed some of those sentiments, noting that their readers are interested in American politics and even state-level issues.

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<sup>47</sup> James Robinson, “The Audience in the Mind’s Eye: How Journalists Imagine Their Readers,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 26, 2019, [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center\\_reports/how-journalists-imagine-their-readers.php/](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/how-journalists-imagine-their-readers.php/); Anthony M. Nadler, *Making the News Popular: Mobilizing U.S. News Audiences* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

### On Objectivity and Balance

The online conservative news workers we spoke to were similarly varied in their approaches to the profession's most central deviation from mainstream news values — the role of objectivity and balance in news reporting. A clear window into this tension within the field was on display during a “Culture of Clickbait” panel discussion at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2019. Although nominally about the impact of social media on reporting, the conversation repeatedly returned to questions of objectivity, bias, and whether journalists ought to be responsible for merely delivering accurate information or some larger truth.

Panelist Ralph Z. Hallow, chief political correspondent at *The Washington Times*, clearly articulated the dilemma from a conservative journalist's perspective: “This republic cannot function without two things: Information for people to make decisions, and, two, a moral base for people who make up the voters. The population in general has to have some kind of moral ground on which they walk, on which they function,” he said. “It can't just be a neutral all-values-are-equal society. ... That's not the republic that the Founders gave us. They really consciously thought this through and said, yeah, we want to base it on truth and people participating, but they have to have a moral grounding. They have to have something in their head that says this is right and this is wrong.” For Hallow, who later described himself as both a journalist and an “activist on the right” — committed to both factual accuracy and broader moral truths — these two roles at times come into conflict, such as when factual evidence contradicts conservative beliefs or policy prescriptions, or when a conservative leader engages in morally dubious or corrupt acts. “It hurts me when I have to report the truth that undermines what I'm trying to accomplish,” he said.

*Breitbart* reporter Matthew Boyle, on the same CPAC panel, paved over this tension by arguing that all journalism (conservative and otherwise) should be rooted in radical subjectivity: “*The New York Times*, CNN, *The Washington Post*, all these different media outlets are built on a lie. This lie is what I call the objectivity lie. They claim to their audiences that their reporters and editors do not have personal beliefs,” Boyle said. “If they were just honest — every single decision that we make in a media environment, from which stories we cover, to

which ones we don't, to who we interview for them to who we don't interview, to what we put in a headline, to what we use in a story, to what we don't use in a story — all of these decisions, in an editorial capacity, are influenced by our personal beliefs. And the idea that we are somehow robotic and don't have personal experiences and beliefs is just not true.” Boyle advocates for a sort of radical transparency, where all news outlets and individual reporters state their political beliefs and perspectives up front — leaving to readers the responsibility of determining what information and arguments they find convincing. He contends that bias does not stand in the way of reporting accurate information and that, if clearly conveyed, biased reporting allows readers to assess news sources on the basis of “authenticity.” Boyle referred to this vision of the public sphere as one characterized by “informational warfare,” or open conflict among reporters advancing information that supports their respective ideological beliefs.

Fellow panelist Amber Athey, then-White House correspondent for *The Daily Caller*, agreed in principle with Boyle's vision of “radical transparency,” but framed the issue in more positive terms. She argued that the Trump era created an opportunity for conservative news outlets to offer perspectives that were absent from mainstream media coverage of the 2016 presidential election. “Our role is to come in and be the truth-tellers that had been missing, and to be honest about who we are.” For Athey, conservative news fills an unacknowledged blind spot in the political reporting of mainstream news outlets.

The conservative news workers we spoke to were more varied in where the objectivity ideal fits into their day-to-day work as reporters and commentators. Some shared with Boyle and Athey a sense that writing for transparently conservative news outlets enabled them to report facts more honestly. “There's an understanding that it's not as though you have to pretend to be objective,” one conservative reporter told us. “Everyone knows that it's a conservative website. So it's not as though you have to provide arguments for or against or anything like that.” Others emphasized the unique benefits of reporting from a particular ideological vantage point, including “covering stories that aren't otherwise going to be covered.” Hoffman of *The Resurgent* saw conservative journalists as more forthright than their mainstream, general-interest counterparts. “I think you'd find most center-right publications and conservative publications admit their biases.



And that would be something that leftist publications or left-leaning publications should do a better job of,” Hoffman said, referring to publications that claim to provide impartial reporting but that are routinely accused of liberal bias.

“Admitting you have a little bit of bias is helpful.”

Others, most notably editors at the Daily Caller News Foundation, struggled with the common association of bias with dishonesty. “I don’t want someone to be able to say about any of the stories that my team produces: ‘Oh, well, it’s conservative so we don’t want to trust it,’” said Ethan Barton, the foundation’s deputy editor. Barton said that establishing trust with readers involves not only clear and compelling sourcing and diligent fact checking, but also appropriate tone — he routinely eliminates adverbs or other editorial-sounding language.

“Absolutely eliminating any kind of bias or subjectivity in our stories is extremely crucial to me. It’s second only to making sure our story is correct,” he said. Chris Bedford, then the foundation’s editor in chief, shared this sentiment and said it represents a concern for the early career reporters he hopes to support. “I don’t want them simply to get hired in right-wing outlets. I want them to be able to make a good paycheck and to have a broad, wide future ahead of them where doors aren’t closed, they are being opened. So I try to get them to write their copy in a way that would reflect well on them,” he said. “I want their copy to speak for itself. I don’t want to speak to the choir.”

This interest in making conservative news appealing suggests an alternative vision of the public sphere to the agonistic one articulated by *Breitbart*’s Boyle. For Barton and Bedford, doubling down on clearly ideological reporting risks foreclosing the audience for conservative news. They seek to reach not only conservative readers, but readers who might otherwise be reading mainstream, general-interest publications and have grown accustomed to their impartial reporting conventions. “Considering how far left outlets like *The Washington Post* and CNN have drifted in the past few years, I think we provide an important balance,” Bedford said. “And as long as we stick to the facts, and don’t do that fake news, then it’s an important voice to have in journalism.”

Other online conservative journalists we spoke to reported struggling with balancing the benefits of impartial reporting with those of ideological transparency. Bluey of *The Daily Signal* wrestled with this question directly when thinking

through the implications of opening a news outlet based out of a conservative think tank. “We don’t hide the fact that we’re associated with Heritage [Foundation] or that, you know, we are particularly on the opinion side coming from that conservative perspective,” he said. “I think where it comes into play is when you’re doing a story about, you know, a debate on the government shutdown or whatever the issue might be ... are you quoting Democrats who might have critical comments? And yes, it’s important for us to do that.” Bluey described a story that required his reporters to cover a protest, where they were only able to secure an interview from a Democratic congressman. “And we interviewed them,” he said. “You have to be balanced and fair. If you’re going to put that news label on, it’s really important. And we won’t put the news label on if it’s not meeting those standards.” Indeed, conservatives who interpreted objectivity as pertaining to fairness and balance in sourcing tended to be more supportive of the concept. As one reporter put it, “I think when it comes to objectivity, it’s something that should always be tried for. It can never really be 100 percent, but we should always be trying.” That reporter described objectivity as giving public figures, even progressive ones, the opportunity to respond to allegations levied against them or their policies. They noted that this is sometimes difficult in practice, as many Democratic politicians and progressives are apprehensive about responding to requests for interviews from openly conservative outlets.

### **Building and Maintaining Reputations**

Most of the conservative journalists we spoke with told us that they had more difficulty getting responses to queries from liberal newsmakers and sources than from conservative ones. They differed in exactly how they assessed the degree and implications of these potential barriers. One conservative reporter told us that they often try to get responses from liberal sources, but generally do not hear back. They attributed this to concerns of biased reporting: “They believe that the story will paint [the issue] in favor of the right.” Another conservative journalist we spoke with reported a variety of dismissive liberal source behaviors, ranging from “brush-offs where you never get a response, ever” to “sort of kind of snotty or snide remarks.” They preferred the latter, noting that they enjoyed including those disparaging remarks in stories. The worst outcome, that reporter suggested, was

when the subject of an article refuses to offer a response to a true story, only to make a public statement after the story is published, “just dismissing it because of who you are.”

Other conservative journalists spoke of factors beyond the general partisan reputation of their outlet that influence the likelihood of responses from liberals. These included size and general public familiarity — some newsmakers have simply never heard of certain online conservative news outlets. Other newsmakers, even fellow conservatives who are otherwise sympathetic to a particular outlet’s viewpoint, also decline interview requests because they disagree with how they or their cause has been covered by that outlet in the past. While organizational reputation can thus hinder or help a conservative reporter’s efforts to secure comments from reluctant or ideologically oppositional sources, individual reputations and rapport often prove a more decisive factor. As *Daily Caller* editor in chief Geoffrey Ingersoll noted, while there are “some Democrats who absolutely despise us” and would never return a call, “credibility has shifted, thanks in part to Twitter, a lot to individuals.” He credited this shift to his reporters, some of whom have made a special effort at building rapport with mainstream media sources.

Conservative journalists also spoke with us about positive tradeoffs and workarounds to the problem of not getting responses from liberal sources. Several respondents told us they were able to secure comments from conservative sources and institutions who were otherwise skeptical of journalists due to their perceptions of liberal media bias. For instance, one conservative journalist told us that access to such sources — and an ability to report critically on them, taking their own statements into account — is one of the areas where “the more serious [conservative] operations . . . are legitimately adding value to the news.” They continued, “There’s plenty of blind spots or plenty of places where even if you were some sort of ideal, super-fair, perfect journalist at a mainstream outlet, a major outlet, you still might not get the sort of access . . . that you can get if you’re a good reporter at a conservative outlet.” Other conservative journalists, especially those whose work focused on scrutinizing the words and deeds of liberals, said they developed reporting routines and writing styles that avoid contacting sources entirely. “It’s actually rare that I have to contact someone,” noted one conservative

reporter, whose work primarily focused on amplifying and commenting on what they saw as outrageous liberal utterances made on cable news shows.

This tactic of relying on public statements by liberals — often on cable news or social media — enables conservative journalists to avoid direct confrontation with would-be liberal newsmakers or sources while still obtaining grist for the scandal mill. Reporting on the outlandish or inflammatory statements of liberals can be a lucrative source of clicks for conservative news sites. While the SPJ *Code of Ethics* is clear on the question — instructing reporters to “diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing” — deciding when such a source is due a chance to clarify or respond to their scandalous remark presents an ethical dilemma for some conservative journalists. As one of our respondents put it, “I don’t know. I can’t say that I know a rule on that. I wish I had a rule.” Another journalist, who also worked on stories about liberals making comments perceived as outrageous, suggested the importance of building a respectable reputation and relationships across partisan lines, even for this sort of reporting. They told us that reporting on outrageous remarks rarely entails a responsibility to reach out to a source, but stressed that when they do, “I will have sources and people that I approach.”

Lacking shared reporting standards, news values, or even common understandings of their role vis-à-vis the broader public sphere, conservative journalists don’t merely report, write, and edit the news — they are also constantly pushed to justify and theorize their work *as* journalism. Conservative journalism is perhaps most notable for its professional hybridity — situated at the often-conflictual intersection of journalism and the modern conservative movement, conservative news workers run an almost constant risk of miscalculation. Balancing the imperatives of conservative advocacy with factual reporting is no easy task, especially in a Trump era that swirls with “alternative facts” and accusations of “fake news.” Asked what makes for an ideal conservative journalist, *Bulwark* senior editor Jim Swift joked self-deprecatingly, “The ideal conservative reporter or journalist usually just leaves conservative media as soon as they possibly can,” because those who leave to work for more general-interest outlets tend to enjoy better pay and higher public profiles. Those who stay, Swift

included, tend to cite the fun of working in a conservative newsroom and the conservative news sphere more broadly as a measure of success. “It’s the people you see on the weekends and go to drinks with,” one reporter put it. “It’s the people you have fun with and you have a real comradery with on social media, on Facebook or Instagram, places like that.” For conservative journalists, it seems, ideological belief is often experienced as the pleasure of working with like minds with a sense of common purpose.

### 3. Discussion: Mapping a Field in Transition

Our study comes at a particular moment in the long history of conservative news in the United States. We solicited and conducted interviews with online conservative news workers between October 2018 and May 2019, little more than a year and a half into the Trump presidency and in the midst of a prolonged period of more general online news evolution. The preceding decade had witnessed a rapid proliferation of online conservative news outlets — from *Breitbart* to *The Daily Caller*. Conservative media personalities and social media entrepreneurs, such as Glenn Beck and Ben Shapiro, leveraged their personal brands into online news operations like *The Blaze* and *The Daily Wire*. While conservative media writ large have reached a new peak of public influence during the Trump era, with perhaps unprecedented ties to the White House,<sup>48</sup> such visible proximity to power

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<sup>48</sup> See Jane Mayer, “The Making of the Fox News White House,” *The New Yorker*, March 4, 2019. Accessible at <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/11/the-making-of-the-fox-news-white-house>>; and Matt Gertz, “A Comprehensive Review of the Revolving Door Between Fox and the Trump Administration,” *Media Matters for*

has both masked and exacerbated longstanding tensions and contradictions within both the conservative movement and the media sphere.<sup>49</sup>

From the early years of the *National Review*, through New Right publications like *Conservative Digest* and, until recently, in certain corners of the Fox News lineup, conservative reporters and commentators have generally taken pains to assert their independence from the Republican Party. Indeed, they've often taken the lead in criticizing Republican leaders, steering them back toward conservative movement orthodoxies.<sup>50</sup> Yet the historical lines of influence between movement conservatism, conservative media, and the Republican Party have been disrupted by the tenacious gravitational pull of Donald Trump's personality-driven political stardom and his demands for personal loyalty.

For example, take the short-lived "Never Trump" movement during the 2016 Republican primary season. Led by writers associated with legacy conservative outlets like *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard*, the attempt to preempt a Donald Trump presidency also attracted new media figures like Glenn Beck, Erick Erickson, and Ben Shapiro, who owed their stardom to a Tea Party insurgency that had not yet lost its grip on conservative movement dominance. Beck and Erickson participated in a famous January 2016 symposium, published in the *National Review* under the cover headline "Conservatives Against Trump," in which 22 conservative movement figures and media personalities attempted to leverage their collective gravitas against the rising Trump tide.<sup>51</sup>

As Trump consolidated his support within the Republican Party, and indeed took the reins of the party apparatus after his upset victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general election, conservative media outlets were increasingly forced to navigate tensions between various ideological orthodoxies and the ever-shifting Trumpian line. While *The Weekly Standard* remained somewhat critical of Trump,

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*America*, July 22, 2019. Accessible at <

<https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/comprehensive-review-revolving-door-between-fox-and-trump-administration>>.

<sup>49</sup> See A.J. Bauer, "The Coming Splintering of Conservative Media," *Nieman Lab*, January 2019. Accessible at <<https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/01/the-coming-splintering-of-conservative-media/>>.

<sup>50</sup> See Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> See also Ben Shapiro, "I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump. Here's Why," *The Daily Wire*, March 4, 2016. Accessible at

<<https://www.dailywire.com/news/3896/shapiro-i-will-never-vote-donald-trump-heres-why-ben-shapiro>>.

the *National Review* softened its opposition considerably.<sup>52</sup> Shapiro, Erickson, and Beck all ultimately came around to Trump, not only personally but by orienting their respective sites (*The Daily Wire*, *The Resurgent*, *The Blaze*) toward defending the Trump administration and its policies.<sup>53</sup> Shapiro cited Trump's record of conservative policy achievements in office for his shift.<sup>54</sup> Erickson has said Brett Kavanaugh's nomination process convinced him that Trump was the lesser of two evils.<sup>55</sup> And Beck blamed the media for his Trump conversion.<sup>56</sup> All have vowed to vote for Trump in 2020. Other conservative news and commentary outlets, sites like *The Daily Caller*, *The Federalist*, and the *Washington Examiner*, among others, also found themselves struggling to navigate between journalistic autonomy, conservative ideology, and Trump-driven political imperatives.

These internal tensions within the field of online conservative news were by no means resolved by the time we began soliciting interviews for this study in the fall of 2018. Indeed, that October, a group of conservative leaders calling themselves the American Principles Project wrote an open letter to *The Washington Post* editorial board repudiating the "Right" bona fides of Trump-critical conservative columnist Jennifer Rubin.<sup>57</sup> While we were investigating the norms and values of conservative *journalism*, the question of what makes a *conservative* journalist was in the process of being publicly debated both within and beyond the field of conservative news.

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<sup>52</sup> For examples of the publication's recent range, see Conrad Black, "Trump's Only Real Weakness Is His Style," *National Review*, Sept. 11, 2019. Accessible at

<<https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/09/trumps-only-real-weakness-is-his-style/>> and Jim Geraghty, "A Buffet Table of Bad Options for Anti-Trump Conservatives in 2020," *National Review*, Aug. 21, 2019. Accessible at

<<https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/08/a-buffet-table-of-bad-options-for-anti-trump-conservatives-in-2020/>>.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence B. Glickman, "How Never-Trump Republicans Went Extinct," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 2019. Accessible at <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/06/disappearance-never-trump-republican/>>.

<sup>54</sup> See Guy Benson, "Listen: 'Never Trump' Conservative Ben Shapiro Explains Why He's Now 'More Apt' to Support Trump in 2020, Warns Against GOP Primary Challenge," *Townhall*, Aug. 8, 2018. Accessible at

<<https://townhall.com/tipsheet/guybenson/2018/08/08/listen-never-trump-conservative-ben-shapiro-makes-the-case-for-trump-2020-warns-against-a-gop-primary-challenge-n2507814>>.

<sup>55</sup> Erick Erickson, "Trump 2020?" *The Creators Syndicate*, Oct. 5, 2018. Accessible at <<https://www.creators.com/read/erick-erickson/10/18/trump-2020>>.

<sup>56</sup> "Glenn Beck Is Predicting THIS for 2020," *BlazeTV* YouTube Channel, May 18, 2018. Accessible at

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4Ck1CgbrME>>.

<sup>57</sup> "Conservatives to WaPo: Jennifer Rubin Is Not a Conservative," *American Principles Project News*, Oct. 4, 2018. Accessible at

<<https://americanprinciplesproject.org/media/conservatives-to-wapo-jennifer-rubin-is-not-a-conservative/>>.

Not only did the unique pressures of the Trump era inform how conservative journalists understood their work and their field, they also altered the field itself. In December 2018, two months into our study, *The Weekly Standard* was shuttered after 23 years of publication. Its owner, Clarity Media Group, justified folding the weekly print and daily online Trump-critical conservative news magazine by citing its lack of profitability, while simultaneously expanding its *Washington Examiner*. By January 2019, a handful of former online staffers of *The Weekly Standard*, led by Charlie Sykes and William Kristol, launched *The Bulwark* — a Trump-critical conservative online start-up that was especially responsive to our interview solicitations for this study.

As this report illustrates, the pressures and contradictions facing conservative news workers in the Trump era diverge from those of the 20th century — we cannot necessarily generalize, from these interviews, what conservative news work looked like during the Barack Obama or George W. Bush eras, or earlier. Likewise, post-Trump studies of conservative news will need to be attentive to how the conservative media sphere functions absent his considerable influence. Still, while aspects of conservative news could shift rapidly, our interviews also point toward key tensions and divisions among the field that are likely to remain relevant for some time. Through drawing on distinctions evoked by our interviewees, we conclude this report with a preliminary map that highlights several dimensions along which conservative news sites might be distinguished from one another.

First, like other types of online news sites, conservative news outlets can be distinguished from each other by their **orientation toward original reporting**. Some conservative news organizations invest in the staff and resources required to place an emphasis on original reporting. These organizations, such as the *Washington Examiner*, *Washington Free Beacon*, *Daily Wire*, and *Daily Caller*, try to break and report on news stories covering a wide range of topics, while others devote their resources to a special area of emphasis. Other conservative sites do little original reporting but rather focus on commentary (e.g. *The Resurgent*) or aggregating stories with a conservative bent or appeal (e.g. Drudge Report).

Second, conservative news organizations differ in terms of their **adoption and adaptation of professional news norms**. Outlets choose which aspects of



professional journalism's norms, procedures, and values they hold as aspirations and how they try to put them into practice. Some conservative news organizations approach reporting with a set of norms quite similar to those of more mainstream outlets, though they may see themselves as giving priority to a somewhat different set of issues than their nonpartisan counterparts. This position was articulated by the *Washington Examiner's* editor, Hugo Gurdon, who acknowledged that his outlet holds a "forthrightly conservative worldview" while also wanting his reporters to write "straight news" that will be read and trusted by people of various political persuasions. At the other end of the spectrum are those who reject any notion of impartiality or unbiased reporting and see the job of conservative media as being relentless ideological advocates in a hostile environment. The portrait of the public sphere as a space of "informational warfare," offered by *Breitbart's* Matt Boyle during his remarks at CPAC 2019, speaks to this latter approach.

Third, conservative news organizations differ in how they envision their **engagement within a pluralist public sphere**. Most of our interviewees suggested they see worthy opponents of different ideological persuasions and see value in the contributions of different media perspectives. For instance, the Daily Caller News Foundation's Ethan Barton told us he would be "saddened" to see high-quality liberal news sites shut down, and David French, then of the *National Review*, spoke of his opposition as his "sparring partners." Yet other conservative media figures have painted their opposition as thoroughly mendacious or even insane. This would include those who blanketly cast nonconservative media as "fake news" or construe their opposition in terms like those of radio host Michael Savage (not among our interviewees), who diagnoses liberalism as a "mental illness." The forces of polarization might cause outlets to feel greater pressure from audiences, funders, or even sources to move toward an antipluralist orientation.

Fourth, conservative news outlets differ in their **audience orientation and characteristic style**. Some outlets, such as *National Review* or the *Washington Examiner*, place an emphasis on speaking to influential leaders and those working in government and policy circles. Outlets aiming for such an audience tend to take on an elevated tenor, while outlets focusing on popular audiences may choose from a variety of styles, including a populist tone inflected with tabloid sensibilities that flaunts violations of polite decorum.

Finally, conservative outlets express different orientations toward **viewpoint diversity within conservatism**. We can identify three main orientations here. First, outlets can identify themselves as organs for an ideological niche within conservatism. Though none of the journalists we spoke with described their outlets as such, this is a popular option among magazines aspiring for intellectual status, such as the libertarian *Reason* or the religiously conservative *First Things*. Second, conservative outlets can posit themselves as ecumenical forums where diverse conservative perspectives can find space to debate and air their differences. Though most of our interviewees believe their outlets see the forum model as ideal, several believe conservative journalism is largely failing in this regard. Third, conservative outlets may strive for a movement-agenda-setting role, presenting a particular range of views as the only legitimate conservative perspectives while dismissing others. Such outlets ignore conservative perspectives outside their preferred range or castigate dissenting conservatives as only pretending to be conservative or as otherwise weak-willed. Several of our interviewees said they worried that a pro-Trump litmus test was exerting an outsized influence over much of the conservative media field.

# Appendix A: Discussion of Method, Sample, and Limitations

Following in the tradition of newsroom practice research,<sup>58</sup> we based our work on in-depth, semistructured interviews with people at various ranks from the mastheads of prominent online news and commentary outlets. An early set of interview questions was designed based on reviews of the literature and the authors' instincts about how best to elicit insights into online conservative news workers' journalistic ideals, reporting practices, and concepts of their audiences. Early interviews helped us gauge the success of those questions, which were tweaked for subsequent interviews to create an evolving master list. The research team engaged in regular discussions to identify emerging themes so that we could coordinate our interview approaches.

Of course, in the semistructured interview style, each interview proceeded somewhat differently based on the subject's role and position, as well as the issues raised by each subject. Overall, we conducted 22 interviews between October 2018 and May 2019. In late February, we also attended the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which included panelists speaking about conservative news, and informal and unrecorded conversations with several conservative journalists. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the consent of participants.

To analyze the transcripts, we created a series of codes, initially generated through an iterative process in which each of the authors read several of the transcripts using a grounded approach,<sup>59</sup> pulling out key themes and ideas that were deemed important by our subjects and/or that were particularly relevant to the questions we set out to address. After a few iterations, we settled on a list of 12 categories that we defined, iteratively, through several rounds of coding by all the researchers. Coding was conducted using the qualitative analysis software NVivo.

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<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., Pablo J. Boczkowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Matt Carlson, *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era* (Columbia University Press, 2017); Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Anselm C. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Second Edition: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1998).

To avoid the issue of intercoder reliability — and recognizing that this is a qualitative study where such a concept does not necessarily apply in the first place — we divided up the codes, and each researcher read every manuscript searching for excerpts relevant to that researcher’s codes. Depending on the outcome of the coding process, some categories were also subcoded to tease out additional themes and make further sense of the patterns being observed. In all, we had 47 subcodes across the 12 categories.

After coding all transcripts, we could compare interviewees’ responses regarding different subject matter. In some cases, we were able to extract similarities that resonated across many of the interviewees who spoke about a particular topic. In such cases, we selected prototypical quotations that expressed these shared sentiments. In other cases, the comparisons among their discourses on different topics laid bare differences in approach or experience. In these circumstances, we sought to represent a range of interviewees’ responses and noted any patterns indicating subgroups that emerged.

It is important to note that these findings are not representative of U.S. conservative news workers as a whole. First of all, we did not examine the entire field of what one might call conservative news — for details on what we did include, [see below](#). Secondly, we did not aim for a representative sample. Rather, our methods simply allowed us to bring to light a range of perspectives on how conservative news workers think about various aspects of newswork and journalistic ideals. Since almost no previous research has sought to shed light on how conservative news workers make meaning of their work and articulate journalistic principles, we hope this research offers an opening step in this direction. We invite the possibility of future research that might offer a more wide-ranging perspective, and a larger and more diverse sample of participating journalists and organizations.

### **Choosing our organizations**

As the creators of the first major study of conservative news values, we felt it important to sample broadly, both across the types of organizations whose employees we interviewed, and across the particular people from each organization we talked to. We followed Michael Quinn Patton’s lead on generating a purposive

sample, which Patton describes as not covering a representative cross-section of a population but as strategically selecting particular cases that are rich in information and hold the potential to illuminate the questions being asked by the researchers.<sup>60</sup>

To that end, we first recognized three categories of online conservative news outlets that we wanted to include in our research: born-digital, commercial outlets; nonprofit news sites; and the online reporting of legacy conservative publications. Evidently our focus here is on digital news work. We also excluded those sites that primarily aggregate or republish content produced by others, or those that are based primarily on amateur content. Instead, we purposively built a sample that skews toward sites that place a premium on original reporting or commentary from paid staffers.

We built our sample to include organizations that fit the following criteria:

- a) they produce original news content or news analysis;
- b) they do not present themselves as a news source exclusively for a religious constituency; and
- c) they are not sites built around a single personality, such as RushLimbaugh.com or Hannity.com.

To select “conservative” outlets for our study, we started with a list of conservative news organizations given to one of our researchers by Rob Bluey, vice president of communications at the Heritage Foundation. We also built our sample through snowballing, as interviewees and contacts suggested particular individuals or organizations who might participate in our study. Unless we had been referred to a particular journalist, we searched for an online masthead of each news organization we wanted to contact. For sites without listed mastheads, we combed bylines and Twitter bios to help us identify conservative journalists and obtain their publicly available contact information.

Over the course of building our sample, we reached out to staff at 32 organizations. While most of these organizations represent important players in

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc, 1990).

conservative journalism, some of them employed staffers we knew, through snowballing, were conservative within the framework of a more mainstream news organization. We reached out to conservative journalists at the following organizations:

1. Accuracy in Media
2. Accuracy in Academia
3. American Center for Journalism
4. American Spectator Foundation
5. *The Atlantic*
6. *The Blaze*
7. Breitbart News Network
8. *The Bulwark*
9. Commentary
10. *The Daily Beast*
11. *Daily Caller*
12. Daily Caller News Foundation
13. *Daily Signal*
14. *Daily Wire*
15. *The Federalist*
16. Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity
17. Heritage Foundation
18. KVI 570 Seattle
19. Illinois News Network
20. Marylandreporter.com
21. MacIver Institute
22. Media Research Center
23. National Journalism Center
24. *National Review*
25. NewsMax
26. *The Resurgent*
27. *Washington Examiner*
28. *Washington Free Beacon*

- 29. *Washington Post*
- 30. *Washington Times*
- 31. Western Center for Journalism
- 32. *Western Journal*

Ultimately, we spoke with 22 people at 14 news organizations. When requested, we used a range of anonymizing techniques, in some cases not including subjects' names, the names of their organizations, or pronouns that identify their gender (thus we refer to all anonymous sources as “they”).

### **What was the sample like?**

Of the 22 individuals we interviewed, most had worked at several conservative news organizations, and about half had worked only in conservative news, bouncing around publications or climbing the ranks in one. We noted considerable employment turnover among our sources — as of the publication of this report, one-third of the conservative journalists we interviewed have since changed employers, nearly all taking new positions at other online conservative news outlets. In addition, many were occasional contributors to other news organizations, sometimes conservative, sometimes not. One was a contributor at an organization that has few full-time staffers.

Of those who had earlier careers outside of conservative news:

- Several participants worked in more mainstream publications before moving to conservative media, with one noting that they were “one of maybe a handful of non-lefties at the place. So I just kind of stayed quiet and kept my head down.”
- Two were lawyers, with one of them moving to journalism out of frustration over the media coverage of his cases;
- Two had worked in government;
- One had moved on from an internship at a conservative news publication to a mainstream newspaper.

Of the 14 organizations, four were founded before 2000. Eight were registered with the IRS as 501(c)(3) nonprofits, or were projects of a nonprofit. One was dedicated exclusively to training young journalists and journalism students, and one other saw such training as a key element of its work. Two served primarily as wire services, producing content that was published by other organizations. Most produced content that was posted strictly online, but at least two published magazines as well, and several produced video and audio content, including podcasts.

### **Limitations**

As with all methods, interviewing has many limitations. Interviews best capture interviewees' *aspirational* values for what conservative news should be and how it *should* be practiced. Most of the online conservative journalists we spoke with also offered criticism, to one degree or another, of the practices of their outlets or of others in their field. Here, too, we think the normative nature of this criticism offers a window into our interviewees' journalistic ideals. Our interviewees have also helped provide partial maps of how they categorize practices and divide the field of conservative news into different types of outlets.

There are many questions that our interview-based method cannot answer, at least not in full. Interview data, we recognize, do not simply represent the true thoughts and feelings of participants. The relationship between interviewee and interviewer affects what is said. When one interviews current employees of any organization, there is usually an incentive to present that organization in its most positive light. While we spoke with some interviewees who requested to be anonymous or spoke with inside knowledge about news organizations where they were not currently employed, it is important to keep in mind that our interviewees thought of themselves as public-facing representatives. Additionally, as several interviewees reminded us, many conservatives tread cautiously with regards to academic institutions and do not expect their views to be treated fairly. This may help explain the rate of no responses and refusals we received in response to our interview requests (a couple of potential participants explicitly, and politely, declined for this reason), though many of these refusals may simply be due to the intense time pressure faced by almost all digital journalists.



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