

Haocheng Zhao. Comparison of Left-wing and Right-wing Media Coverage on Coronavirus in early 2020. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in I.S degree. May, 2021. 38 pages. Advisor: Francesca Tripodi

The study focuses on how different media stations framed coronavirus from 21st January – 30th April 2020 along three topic areas: risk, mitigation, and blame. In this paper, I choose ABC News and Fox News representing left-wing and right-wing media respectively and adopt content analysis to extract information from news coverages. While both stations recommended the same preventative measures and mirrored CDC guidelines, risk and blame were very different depending on if the coverage came from ABC or Fox News.

Headings:

Media Framing

Media Polarization

Coronavirus

COMPARISON OF LEFT-WING AND RIGHT-WING MEDIA COVERAGE ON  
CORONAVIRUS IN EARLY 2020

by  
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A Master's paper submitted to the faculty  
of the School of Information and Library Science  
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in  
Information Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

May 2021

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## **Introduction**

The novel coronavirus outbreak, which hit the world in late 2019, became a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). United States had its first coronavirus case in late January. Due to the uniqueness of Covid-19, there were few things known about this virus and health as well as medical experts were still conducting research on it in early 2020. Given the newness of the disease, public information early on was unclear and opaque. This provides ample opportunity for Covid-19 information and propaganda to spread in US.

Media manipulation may contribute to increasing distrust in mainstream media, increased misinformation, and further radicalization (Marwick et al., 2017). There are numerous studies associated with political aspect of problematic information (Marwick et al., 2017; Faris et al., 2017; Wardle et al., 2018; Freelon et al., 2020) but few researchers focus on health-related topics. The leading media on the right and left are rooted in different traditions and journalistic practices. And the asymmetric pattern between left and right contributes to polarization in American politics (Faris et al., 2017). Former research mostly started with observation of problematic information and identified them in a political context (Benkler et al., 2018; Farkas et al., 2018; Freelon et al., 2020). This study focuses on a public-health crisis to better understand how polarization of news impacts the kind of information audiences receive surrounding their health. While it is

likely that misinformation first circulated when little was known about the virus - disinformation and mal-information soon followed. Disinformation is information that is false, but person who disseminating it knows it is false and is intended to harm. Mal-information is similar to disinformation but the information being conveyed is rooted in truth claims. These claims are manipulated (hid or twisted) with the intention of harm (Wardle et al., 2018).

In this paper, I use content analysis to compare news coverages about Covid-19 from ABC News and Fox News from January 21<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Given the differences in political axis, I anticipate that ABC News and Fox News would frame the threat and scope of Covid-19 differently. The news data are from relevant searching results of key words “Coronavirus” and “Covid” on Fox News and ABC News and dataset was further balanced to have equal amount of news from each media station.

Based on my findings, polarizing news sources (ABC and Fox News) had similar coverage about precaution methods early on, but very different perspectives regarding risk of mortality and who was to blame for rising US transmission rates.

## **Literature Review**

### **News and How People Access News**

News are recent, interesting events (Kershner 2005) or events that would have great influence on people's life (Richardson 2007). The criteria to determine whether a story can be news contains time, commonness, significance, and people. A new unusual, interesting story about people will potentially be a piece of good news. There are various sources of news, including conflicts, disaster and tragedy, crime, and money, etc. (Ingram et al., 2008). It is obvious that the novel coronavirus outbreak will be a piece of significant news and the media coverage of it is massive. It is still a top headline in the news as of publication of this thesis (May 2021).

Social media have become a major source for news about public affairs (Newman et al. 2017). While there are people still sticking to TV as their primary news source, people are also turning to online news via social media or organizational websites. 86% of adults in US get news from digital devices "often" or "sometimes". In comparison, there are only 68% of adults in US get news from TV "often" or "sometimes". (Shearer, 2021) About half of U.S. adults (53%) get news from social media often or sometimes and the usage is spread out across several different sites, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted 31 August - 7 September 2020. 36% of US adults regularly get news from Facebook, 23% of them regularly get news from YouTube, 15% of them

regularly get news from Twitter and 11% of them regularly get news from Instagram. Within the Twitter users, there are 59% of them getting news regularly from Twitter. And on Facebook, the percentage is 54%. (Shearer et al. 2021). Misinformation and polarization get even more complicated by the fact that people are increasingly accessing news via social media and that these news feeds are highly curated. This is the filter bubble created by internet and personal data. Search engine and social media are pre-sanitizing information perceived by users (Pariser, 2011). By reducing disagreement in their social networks, social network companies could easily increase user polarization by small changes in their algorithm. (Chitrael al., 2020) Online content service would unintentionally expose people who consider themselves “mainline conservatives” to more radical content because there would be different algorithm recommendations from subtle search key words (Tripodi, 2018). 26% adults in US who use social media to get news have heard of the conspiracy theory of pandemic and in contrast, the same number in other adults getting news from other sources is significantly lower. Moreover, 57% of adults in US who get news from social media have low political knowledge, which is rather high percentage compared with other news user groups. (Mitchell et al., 2020) Even without social media preselecting news for people, most Americans tend to watch the same sources when they get the news. 76% of US adults usually turns to the same sources when they get news (Mitchell, 2016). And people love to exchange opinions with others who have similar thoughts. 47 % consistent conservative Facebook users see posts in line with their own views and 44% of consistent liberal Facebook users have blocked or defriended others on social media because they disagreed with what others posted about politics (Mitchell, 2014). In 2016 elections, people were more likely to believe

stories that favor their favorite candidate, especially if they have ideologically segregated social media networks. (Allcott et al., 2017) With help of filter bubble, polarization is not a surprise, but the problem of polarization is more than just social media – often what people are sharing comes from trusted news sources (e.g. ABC, NBC, Fox, CNN). My research helps to fill this gap to shed light on the ways mainstream news coverage also fuels political divides.

While plenty of research focus on how people get their news across platform, rarely do they investigate how different news stations cover the same event.

For a critical disaster like the coronavirus outbreak, media is a primary (if not only) source of information - it controls the risk and knowledge perceived by the public (Kasperson et al., 1988). While a great deal of attention is rightfully focused on social media polarization, this paper looks more at the original sources of news. Comparing and contrasting how two major news stations framed COVID-19 is essential for understanding how the US population made sense of the unfolding crisis.

### **The Ideological Polarization of Coronavirus**

When talking about coronavirus, people's views tend to vary along political lines. When dividing people into two different political leaning subgroups, the separation is very clear to see. According to survey result in February 2021, in democrats or left leaning individuals, 79% think public health official are doing a good job, 93% think people should be asked to avoid gathering in large groups, and 66% think K-12 school should close for in-person learning. In Republicans or right leaning individuals, 44% think



public health official are doing a good job, 56% think people should be asked to avoid gathering in large groups, and 25% think K-12 school should close for in-person learning. (Schaeffer, 2021) 77% of Republicans thought the media was exaggerating the risk, while 49% of Democrats shared that view. (Mitchell et al., 2020) 68% of Democrats were moderately or extremely concerned about COVID-19, but only 21 per cent of Republicans expressed moderate or extreme concern (Badger and Quealy, 2020).

Audiences understanding of the risk and solutions of COVID-19 depend on which news station they turned to for information. In a survey conducted in mid-April 2020, it compared people's view on coronavirus after numerous coverages on coronavirus in March and April 2020. After one month, in mid-April 2020, there were significantly less people saying media exaggerated risk of coronavirus and increasing portion of people were taking coronavirus seriously. For overall Americans, the percentage of people who thought media was exaggerating risk of coronavirus decreased from 62% to 48%. In Republicans or right leaning individuals, the percentage decreased from 76% to 68% while in democrats or left leaning individuals, the percentage decreased from 49% to 30% (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). Such drastic differences in understanding a health crisis along *political lines* requires more inquiry into how different news stations, aimed a different political audience, were reporting on COVID-19.

Knowledge about coronavirus vaccine and origin varies and dependent on the news source (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) In the survey in 2020 April, the audiences were polarized in three different views about coronavirus. The first one is that vaccine needs a year or

more to be available. 78% of MSNBC audience think so, 57% of CNN audience think so and 51% Fox News audience share the same view. The second one is that coronavirus came about naturally. 66% of MSNBC audience agreed with it, 52% of CNN agreed with it and only 37% Fox News audience share the same view. The last one is that media have exaggerated the risks. 79% of Fox News audience agreed with it, 54% of CNN audience think so and 35% of MSNBC audience share the same view. While studies show that audiences perceptions differ, little work has look specifically at differences in the news coverage.

### **Media Framing and Misinformation**

Based on the same underlying facts, media news coverages frame stories differently by selective omission, choice of words, and varying credibility ascribed to the primary source (Gentzkow et al., 2006). The news media cannot avoid framing but executive decisions around what to filter and emphasize fuels polarization. Media are reluctant to report evidence at odds with audience prior beliefs. (Gentzkow et al., 2006). By doing so, audience who has a prior belief about true state of world will strongly believe in the biased reports because inaccurate information should contradict with that belief and this one does not. The strength of news media is also source dependent. While relying on government sources can bolster claims, when journalists become too dependent on government, or corporate sources, “inappropriate” news or challenges to the administration could be screened out (Bennett et al., 2008)

However, there is also the possibility that news coverage is not abiding the standard of journalism. But disinformation or commercial clickbait usually started from the right-wing or aim from abroad at the right that took hold and become widely reported and believed (Benkler et al., 2018). The great separation between views of people using different news source indicates that bias and misinformation exist in media coverage in coronavirus. There are a lot of studies researching on what impact misinformation in media reports have and the polarization in the new coverage. From research of Garrett etc, polarization is an effective mechanism used to spread political misperceptions. (Garrett et al., 2020) Based a model simulating Twitter Networks, researchers found that echo chamber's formation is highly associated with news polarization as well as users' intolerance of dissimilar opinions. (Prasetya et al., 2020)

Events like Iraq War greatly damaged the trust public had on press and it was a disaster that media had close collaboration with administration and became its mouthpiece (Bennett et al., 2008). There are nonprofit media companies being purveyor of bite-size content formats and sophisticated marketing strategies that aim to reinforce distrust in mainstream media (Tripodi, 2018). With the weakening of trust in democratic institutions and increased influence of extremist and fringe communities, it provided great opportunity for disinformation to form and grow in current environment. (Marwick et al., 2021) Given the increasing number of people accessing news on social media, it creates media's dependency on social media, analytics and metrics, novelty first and clickbait, which makes media vulnerable to manipulation (Marwick et al., 2017). There are a lot of misinformation circulating on social media and rumors are amplified on these platforms

in a pattern (Cinelli et al., 2020). The right leaning news media were more likely to make inaccurate claims about origins and treatment of coronavirus and people who consumed more right leaning news coverage are more likely to express misinformed views (Motta et al., 2020). While health experts recommend people to practice social distancing and stay at home as much as possible, there are negative effects on people to follow these rules in biased news coverage. A study finds that a 10% increase in Fox News cable viewership (approximately 0.13 higher viewer rating points) leads to a 1.3 percentage point reduction in the propensity to stay at home (Simonov et al., 2020).

## Research Question

the pandemic unfolded so did clear political divides. This study aims to compare coronavirus news coverage from different political leaning media, to determine how it was framed to their audiences. To better understand the ways in which news media fueled this bifurcated thinking I sought to compare news coverage of COVID-19 in the first few months of the pandemic from two very different politically leaning media sources. In this paper, my goal is to compare news coverage of coronavirus from different political leaning medias in early 2020 using content analysis. There are three specific subcategories that I focused on when doing analysis: 1) precautionary measures for coronavirus; 2) risk of coronavirus; 3) responsibility for current situation in US. The media's concentration of coverages about coronavirus shifted from risk of coronavirus (January to March) to precautionary measures for coronavirus (March to April), and in the end to responsibility for death toll in US (April).

If news media is designed to support a collective understanding of COVID-19, then there would not be any differences in the coverage. There are few examples of disinformation or commercial clickbait started from the left or aim from abroad at the left that took hold and become widely reported and believed. By contrast, these instances repeatedly succeeded in the right-wing media system (Benkler et al., 2018). And right-wing media facilitated the spread of misinformation during early-stage pandemic in 2020. (Motta et

al., 2020). In my research, I anticipate that there will be a lot of coverage differences in risk and precaution methods between ABC News and Fox News.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

To conduct content analysis, I looked at news stories published on the websites of two prominent news stations: ABC and Fox.

There are 2 different media ecosystems in US. One is right-wing, anchored by Fox News and Breitbart. Another part spans the rest of the spectrum including outlets from the left and historically center-right, anchored by media organizations on the center and center-left. (Benkler et al., 2018) Based on the spectrum in Network Propaganda, I choose Fox News representing right-wing and ABC News representing center-left. Another reason for choosing these 2 big nation TV websites as data source is because although social media is currently an important source for news, people trusted legacy media for coronavirus updates (Pew Research Center, 2020). Social media news consumers tend to distrust news from social media. About 59% of social media consumer expect news from social media being largely inaccurate. (Shearer, 2021)

The period selected for this study is between late January 2020 to April 2020 containing about three months' time. This period is chosen because the coronavirus outbreak in US started from late January and in the beginning of May, US had its first reopen from its

first national lockdown. Americans got their first impression on Covid-19 and went through lockdown as well as reopen. To get specific news data about coronavirus, I use search result of key words “Coronavirus” and “COVID” on both sites (ABC News and Fox News) and scrape the news articles data for next step analysis. On ABC News, the results from these two key words do not have much difference and on Fox News, there are significantly more pieces of news from “Coronavirus” than from “Covid”.

It is worth noticing that data from ABC News and Fox News is not balanced. There are twice as much as news from ABC than Fox News. To create an equal corpus of data, my analysis eliminate roughly half of the ABC News reports.

Search result of “Coronavirus” and “Covid” do not guarantee that all coronavirus related articles from each site are shown so the result might not be comprehensive, but top searching results from these 2 key words are very representative of what coronavirus related news articles are like on each media website.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, I perform content analysis of news coverage from three different sources mentioned above (Fox News and ABC News) using three conceptual categories: 1) risk of coronavirus; 2) precautionary measures of coronavirus; 3) responsibility of current coronavirus situation. These three different sub-categories corresponded to different phases of reports of coronavirus. At very beginning, in the middle of January, most Americans hear the phrase novel coronavirus or COVID-19 for the first time. Media reports mainly focused on what coronavirus was and the danger it posed. Later, when



first cases reported in US, people were more worried about contracting coronavirus. Media coverage of it shifted to what we need to do facing coronavirus. Lastly, after death toll kept increasing for months, media stations focused on who should be responsible for these deaths of Americans. Based on this, I created a codebook to look explicitly at these trends: was it dangerous, how did it spread, and who is to blame for the rising death toll. Given the similarities in coverage regarding precautionary measures, my findings are ordered first around similarities and then around differences (risk and blame).

### **Content Analysis**

The focus of qualitative content analysis is on the description and finding the underlying pattern inside the words, sentences, and paragraphs instead of interpreting relationships between numerical variables (Altheide, 2000; Berger, 1982). It tries to identify instances and emphases of certain meaning. (David, 2000) Regardless of the medium, people would not view news coverage as appearances of counted words or phrases but see the news as a whole piece which has a certain meaning. Only describing occurrences of words, phrases or sentences is inadequate (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). The importance is placed on meanings of these news content and how would they affect people in daily conversation and interaction (David, 2000). In content analysis, researcher's perspective or use of framework will determine the result of data; what you see in the dark depends on where you choose to focus the light. (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992)

I first read the articles, then conducted a more thematic analysis based on the three areas outlined earlier (what it is, how it spreads, who is to blame) and then compared the differences in coverage between ABC news and Fox news reports.

## **Result**

### **Precaution method for Covid-19**

Precaution method is a crucial part to stop coronavirus from spreading in community and how people react to pandemic depends solely on the information they receive from news stations regardless the platform.

When coronavirus first case confirmed in late January and February, CDC officials as well as both Fox News and ABC News advised public that they did not need a mask to prevent themselves from getting Covid and there were several news coverages showed evidence of why mask would not work. On January 24<sup>th</sup>, ABC News covered that medical professionals did not know if masks were effective for coronavirus and masks were not recommended as a protection for public. Quote from a board-certified infectious disease physician *“He says masks are used by doctors and nurses when dealing directly with sick people.”* and from an assistant professor of infectious disease at Emory University *“Masks are not recommended for general protection if you are not ill”* On January 27<sup>th</sup>, Fox News covered that there was a shortage of masks in US due to first confirmed case in Washington and mask was useless to prevent coronavirus. Quote *“While the masks are the most visible precaution during outbreaks, they aren't the most helpful, according to health experts. ‘There's little harm in it,’ said Eric Toner, a scientist at Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, ‘But it's not likely to be very effective in*

*preventing it.*” On February 25<sup>th</sup>, ABC News had a story warning that there might be community spreading in US but the precaution methods remained the same. Quote *“hand-washing, staying home from work when sick -- while local officials should make sure systems are in place -- teleschooling, working remotely -- should face-to-face interactions need to be reduced.”* On February 27<sup>th</sup>, Fox News interviewed the CDC director, Robert Redfield and he said Americans should not buy masks and take steps to avoid infection like flu or colds. Quote *“Redfield also expressed his displeasure about people going out and buying masks to protect themselves for the virus, saying that it is not necessary at the time to do that and seeing people stocking up on the masks ‘really displeases’ him.”* and the recommended precaution methods are *“washing hands with soap and water, staying home from school and work when feeling ill, and avoiding close contact with people who are sick.”*

In March, because the increase of confirmed cases in US, ABC News and Fox News had coverages about how to prepare for coronavirus but they still did not include wearing mask. On March 5<sup>th</sup>, Fox News interviewed former secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Michael Leavitt and he repeated the CDC advice on coronavirus. Quote *“Cover nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing with a disposable tissue or flexed elbow. Clean hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub. Avoid close contact with anyone who has cold or flu-like symptoms. Do not feel compelled to come to work if you have a cold or the flu. Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth.”* On March 6<sup>th</sup>, ABC had a coverage about how to prepare for coronavirus in community but still did not recommend general public to wear masks. Quote *“it is not*

*necessary for the general public to wear a mask at this time. Practicing effective hand hygiene is more important.*” This was a few days after San Francisco announced emergency state on February 25<sup>th</sup> and there was a possible lockdown incoming.

And around mid-March, there were news coverages advocating social distance. While several states began lockdown, there were no coverages that suggested public to wear mask when going out or distance in public spaces. The precautions methods recommended would be cleaning hands and disinfecting surfaces and not touching face. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, Fox News covered that coronavirus would stay active on surface for hours or even days and suggested people to disinfect surface. Quote *“The research, published in the medRxiv depository, also notes that the virus can remain on copper surfaces for four hours and cardboard for up to 24 hours. The research found it could stay on stainless steel and plastic for anywhere between two and three days.”* On March 13<sup>th</sup>, ABC News advocated people to practice social distancing. Quote *“Measures to prevent the spread of novel coronavirus are underway with schools closed, sports events canceled, and business conferences postponed. These measures, considered “social distancing,” may be key in containing the spread of the coronavirus.”*

The official guideline that recommended public to wear mask finally came out in April and being reported by both news medias. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, ABC News covered that there would be official announcement from government about facial coverage. Quote *“Vice President Mike Pence says government advisory on masks, facial coverings coming in next few days”* On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, Fox News covered that facial coverage was encouraged for

public. Quote from Dr. Anthony Fauci, *“Because of some recent information that the virus can actually be spread even when people just speak as opposed to coughing and sneezing – the better part of valor is that when you’re out, when you can’t maintain that 6-foot distance, to wear some sort of facial covering”* It was nearly the same pace for Fox News and ABC News to make coverages about precaution methods for public and it was also identical to the CDC guideline.

In my hypothesis, coverages from ABC News and Fox News would be different in some way because of the political leaning of their own, but they have identical coverages for the precaution method during the studied period. They reported the decisive government actions in a timely fashion; however, it reflects that both media stations are acting as communication mechanism for CDC and White House. Media should be public watchdog testing and challenging officials and keep their reportorial independence. Without independent media report, democracy is challenged (Bennett et al., 2008) Similar to government consensus surrounding the weapons of mass destruction, there was no disagreement among official sources regarding the need to wear a mask in public. Since the press relied exclusively from government sources inside the United States, and they were not giving accurate information, the press failed once again. There were several countries experiencing outbreak before US, for example China, Italy, and South Korea etc. They could be an important information source differing from US government.

It is important to note that since I conducted this research, most news stations have adopted CDC guidelines and suggest wearing masks. However, there has been major

resistance on Fox News following conservative politicians who do not believe masks are necessary (e.g. Rand Paul). Fox Host Tucker Carlson told viewers to call the police on parents who have their kids wear masks at the park in April 2021.

### **Risk of Covid-19**

When first case was confirmed in US on 21st January 2020, both ABC and Fox reported this concerning news on the same day and there was little coverage difference between these two reports. These headlines remained relatively similar until late February. Firstly, coronavirus was in US and they both depicted it as a virus having flu-like symptoms for majority of people and only affect elders and people with former disease. Later, WHO announced global health emergency in the end of January but in US, people should not worry about it and there was not any community transmission happening. Reporting that the risk remained low was included in almost all coverage until mid-February.

It is true that in the early stages of the pandemic, the United States was considered a low-risk area and people were not given the impression they were at major risk to COVID-19. Causing panic among people, for example hoarding of daily necessities and masks, would not do any good for fighting coronavirus and might lead to unexpected chaos. But it is also the truth that these reports undermined the risk of coronavirus and left an impression that this new virus was not a big deal for United States.

While low risk of coronavirus was still the truth for most of Americans, people in metropolitan areas like Bay area or New York City would face a much higher risk than Americans in nonmetropolitan or rural areas and authorities should act to stop

coronavirus from spreading too fast (Zhang et al., 2020). At this time, in the end of February, there were not any statistic for US cases and people did not know how situation became worse during past month until first death toll was reported on Feb 29. And in the coming week, the death toll surged to 17, which meant that 16 people died because of coronavirus, numerous states declared that they confirmed first Covid case and California, Washington and New York declared state emergency for coronavirus. These were hard facts and were both reported by ABC News and Fox News.

When San Francisco declared state of emergency over coronavirus in the end of February, nobody took it seriously, and people did not realize that the risk of coronavirus went higher in the past month. It was transmitted among people unconsciously. By March, Fox News and ABC News started to depict very different pictures of pandemic.

#### **ABC News report on risk of Covid-19**

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, ABC News covered that if coronavirus spread, elders in US would suffer the most and their death rate would surge. In this report, ABC News used death rate data from China, *“According to the epidemiological reports from more than 72,000 Chinese patients, the overall case fatality rate was estimated to be 2.3%, while those between age 70 and 79 had a case fatality rate of 8%. For those over 80, almost 15% did not survive. (These figures are from the start of the outbreak through Feb. 11.)”* On March 7<sup>th</sup>, it covered that there were already 11 death cases in US and WHO said coronavirus is deadlier than flu, *“COVID-19 is deadlier than the flu, WHO says”*, in the Today’s biggest development part.

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, ABC News had a story from individual who was fighting coronavirus to show how serious the coronavirus infection is. The man assumed that he got flu and doctor sent him home when his situation was not bad, but it got much worse at home. In the story, he told ABC News after returning to hospital, *“I feel like y'all sent me home to die. I'm feeling worse and worse.”* and *“I have had the flu before, but I ain't never felt this bad”*. This story was a reminder to people that coronavirus is not a flu. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, it covered a story from 64 years old, lung cancer survivor who was told by doctor that she was at high risk for being infected by coronavirus. People like interviewee in this coverage, who are elder citizens and have underlying medical condition are at high risk for becoming ill for Covid-19. Quote *“Winsor said that like many people she knows, she wasn't worried about the outbreak for weeks, but admitted on Thursday: "I'm scared now.””* And in this story, it mentioned the nursing home cluster in Washington, which showed disease's devastation to the elderly.

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, ABC News had stories from Italy, the country hard-hit by coronavirus pandemic at that time and people in Italy were sending out warning to other countries that please don't underestimate this. Quote *““Up until nine, 10 days ago, we were behaving the same way,” said Parenti, who lives in Milan. “We were going outside saying, 'It's just a flu. We get it ... why should we worry?’ But the thing is, we didn't realize how little we know. We make assumptions that not only put us in danger, but others in danger””* On March 19<sup>th</sup>, it covered that fact that 40 percent of hospitalized patients were younger than 54 and the situation for young adults were worse than initially thought. Despite higher hospitalization rate, death rate for people under 54 remained low, at 1 percent. Quote *“As*



*many spring breakers are still seen ignoring social distancing on the beaches of Florida, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is saying more younger people than initially thought are getting seriously ill due to the novel coronavirus.”*

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, ABC News shown that coronavirus was worse than flu in a comparison chart and “silent infections”, people who infected but didn’t show symptoms would let coronavirus spread to more population. Quote *“Perhaps most important, COVID-19 remains extremely dangerous because so many people show minimal or no symptoms -- a phenomenon often called "a silent infection." This can accelerate person-to-person transmissions because carriers of the virus simply don't know they have it.”*

On April 2<sup>nd</sup> as well as April 7<sup>th</sup>, ABC News had two recovering patients’ stories and their terrible experience when fighting against coronavirus. One of them said *“I owe my life to a ventilator. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t able to be connected to that life-saving device.”* And another patient who was only 22 years-old, in the story, she said, *“I think the worst of it was I was so weak I couldn't walk. ... I had no energy. I hadn't eaten in nine days. I was so dehydrated. I thought if I fell asleep, I wouldn't wake up.”* And she also shared that she was frustrating that people weren’t concerned about themselves. Quote *“She called it "frustrating" to see, especially as she was dealing with her illness and said even if people aren't concerned for themselves, they should take the guidelines seriously for others.”*

ABC News highlighted the impact coronavirus was having on elders and people with health problems. It warned people in high-risk categories to socially distance, and was explaining that people who got sick were very sick.

### **Fox News report on risk of Covid-19**

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Fox News had a story teaching people how to tell the difference between flu and coronavirus. It was telling people that flu was like coronavirus for most of the population and currently, the flu was even more deadly e *“There is so much overlap in symptoms between flu and COVID-19, but a couple of hallmark differences do exist, Influenza tends to cause much more body pain and the COVID-19 virus tends to feel much more like the common cold with fever, cough, runny nose and diarrhea. However, in a small portion of the population with either COVID-19 or influenza, symptoms progress to kidney failure and respiratory failure”* from Dr. Caesar Djavaherian in the Fox News report. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, it covered that Gov. Cuomo who said people should not panic over Covid-19, which is an administrative action for government to move faster, and it was just a “bad” flu. *“Cuomo also downplayed the seriousness of the virus itself, noting that it is like ‘a bad flu,’ and not serious unless one is part of these vulnerable populations.”*

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Fox News reported that in overnight hours, Massachusetts confirmed cases had doubled and explained the surge of cases was due to a conference and risk was still low to public. Quote *“State officials insist that the risk of COVID-19 to the public remains low.”* And the city's public health commission said *“There is currently no*

*evidence of community transmission in Boston. The risk remains low, but this situation is evolving rapidly and changes from day to day.*” On March 13<sup>th</sup>, also it covered a story of survivor of coronavirus, and in the interview, patient recovered from Covid-19 told people not to panic. Quote *“Schneider told Hemmer that the virus is concerning because of its novelty and lack of cure, but that many Americans who are stricken with it should turn out fine, as she has.”* In the latter part of interview, she also said *“There are people in our community that are getting very severe symptoms from this virus and they could threaten their life, [But] I would like to tell everyone, please don't panic.”* But it was followed by the fact that she recovered from coronavirus before it was tested positive.

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, Fox News had a coverage about that blood type might be a factor in coronavirus infection and people with blood type A might be more susceptible to coronavirus. *“Researchers studying COVID-19 in its outbreak epicenter, Wuhan, and the city of Shenzhen found the proportion of Type-A patients both infected and killed by the disease to be “significantly” higher than those with the same blood type in the general public.”* On March 20<sup>th</sup>, it had a story showing people there were four different level of severity for coronavirus and how pneumonia affected body. About 80 percent of people would have mild symptoms and recover from it normally. In four levels of severity, only the fourth one had the risk of death and it was usually caused by pneumonia. Quote *“The fourth and most severe group are those who develop severe illnesses, according to the Guardian. These cases are more likely to result in death and Wilson says they normally feature pneumonia.”* And it was worth noticing that there was not any established

treatment for Covid-19. Quote from one medical professional, *“At the moment there isn’t any established treatment apart from supportive treatment, which is what we give people in intensive care.”*

On March 27<sup>th</sup>, Fox News had a story showing people young adults were getting sick from coronavirus and everyone was at risk. While it was a consensus earlier that coronavirus did not infect or greatly harm children and young adult, experts were correcting this misconception, which would cause false sense of security and invincibility. Quote from Dr. John Whyte, *“It is a misconception that children can’t get critically ill. Children are getting sick, but they’re not getting as severe cases. The highest rate of severe cases and deaths remains the elderly. But what we are learning is that everyone is at risk.”* And young adults were critical in controlling coronavirus because most of them were “silent transmitter”.

On April 10<sup>th</sup>, Fox News reported in the headline that former President Trump anticipated country was near a peak and death toll would be under 100,000. Quote from former President Trump, *“We’ll see what it ends up being but it seems we’re heading to a number substantially below the 100 mark. We are near the peak and our comprehensive strategy is working.”* But there were voices from Dr. Deborah Birx said, *“We have not reached the peak. We need to continue doing what we’re doing. We’re united in social distancing and that’s been encouraging to all of us.”* And statement from Dr. Deborah Birx was backed by Dr. Anthony Fauci. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, it covered that former President Trump and health officials argued higher temperature and humidity as well as direct

exposure to sunlight would quickly kill coronavirus. Quote *“Bill Bryan, the head of the science and technology directorate at the Department of Homeland Security, said that solar light along with high temperatures and humidity have a “powerful effect” of creating environments less favorable for the virus to survive.”*

In March, ABC News put emphasis on the death rate of elders and people who suffered from coronavirus to demonstrate its risk and advocated people to be cautious. Fox News, however, still chose to cover people who did not suffer from coronavirus, stated that coronavirus was not dangerous to most of Americans and risk remained low until early April. In April, ABC News kept reporting the heartbreaking stories from patients of coronavirus and had less coverages about risk of coronavirus. Fox News made coverages that showed people that coronavirus was dangerous, but had multiple stories telling people we could fight coronavirus easily and it would end soon, which led to the reopen in May.

Fox News led majorities of its audiences to think that coronavirus was not a threat to them but neglecting that there were numerous elders and people with potential health problem scared to be infected with coronavirus. Media should remind people who valued their freedom of that others might die because of rapid spreading of coronavirus instead of showing them that it would not infect most healthy Americans. When we could do something to prevent coronavirus from spreading and save people’s lives, it is worth doing at any cost. Fox News was spreading mal-information which is information based on reality but could be used to do harm on people, organization, or country (Wardle et al.,

2018). It caused people's ignorance of coronavirus and chaos in the lockdown, which led to increasing number of confirmed cases and death toll.

### **Responsibility of situation in US**

The final part of the result would be the most interesting one because Fox News and ABC News never agreed about who was to blame for the rising death tolls in the United States.

### **ABC News report on Responsibility**

Starting from the end of February, which was the time pandemic had caused damage in US, ABC News blamed Trump and his administration's incompetence.

On February 25th, ABC News quoted former President Trump that coronavirus was under control in US and problem is going away and included opposition from democrats. Quote *"House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the request was 'long overdue and completely inadequate to the scale of this emergency' and said the House would put forward its own emergency funding measure."* On March 16th, ABC News said that Trump's coronavirus response plagued with misstatements. Quote *"His biggest error was to falsely declare that the European travel ban would also 'apply to the tremendous amount of trade and cargo but various other things as we get approval.' But he never corrected his false claim that health insurers have agreed to waive co-payments for coronavirus treatments."* On March 19th, it covered that Trump's own words, contradicting himself about viewing coronavirus very serious. Quote *"'I've always viewed it as very serious,' he said Tuesday. 'There was no difference yesterday from days before. I feel the tone is similar, but some said it wasn't.' On Feb. 26, he claimed that 'pretty soon' there could only be one or two people affected."* On April 2nd, ABC News covered that Trump was criticized for

focusing on political battle instead of coronavirus policies. Quote *“The Trump administration chose not to reopen Obamacare enrollment, despite the enormous spike in people losing their jobs and therefore their health care, while court efforts to get all of Obamacare declared unconstitutional continue with the support of the Department of Justice.”* On April 8th, ABC News reported that while China kept crucial information from foreign governments, intelligence warned of coronavirus crisis as early as November 2019. Quote *“From that warning in November, the sources described repeated briefings through December for policy-makers and decision-makers across the federal government as well as the National Security Council at the White House.”* And Quote *“Those analyses said China’s leadership knew the epidemic was out of control even as it kept such crucial information from foreign governments and public health agencies.”*

While there were coverages addressing that Chinese official hid information, the main responsibility and reason for death toll in US was on Trump’s administration, which downplayed the risk at the beginning and were reluctant to act in time.

#### **Fox News report on Responsibility**

Fox news promoted the idea that China and WHO hiding important information from US government, which caused increasing cases and death toll in US.

On February 27th, Fox News had a story accusing democrats weaponizing coronavirus outbreak. Quote from Sean Hannity *“sadly politicizing and weaponizing an infectious disease as their next effort to bludgeon President Trump.”* The struggle between ABC

News and Fox News just started and got fiercer later. On March 18th, Fox News reported that WHO cited Chinese official claiming no human transmission in January 2020. Quote *“The World Health Organization (WHO) is now haunted by a tweet it sent earlier this year when it cited Chinese health officials who claimed there had been no human transmissions of the novel coronavirus within the country yet.”* On March 20th, it had a story about China being legally accountable for coronavirus. Quote from the complaint states, *“The PRC and the other defendants knew that COVID-19 was dangerous and capable of causing a pandemic, yet slowly acted, proverbially put their head in the sand, and/or covered it up for their own economic self-interest”* On March 29th, Fox News quoted Sen. Cotton saying Chinese government was still lying. Quote *“Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., is calling out the Chinese government for continuing to lie about coronavirus, after their initial response to it – according to him – caused it to become the global problem that it is. Cotton pointed to facts on the ground in China that directly contradict the messages coming from the country’s leaders.”* On April 14th, Fox News covered that if China acted earlier, coronavirus cases in China could be cut by 95 percent. Quote *“The former head of the Food and Drug Administration, Scott Gottlieb, tweeted Monday that the number of coronavirus cases in China could have been cut by as much as 95 percent if Beijing had acted earlier, citing a study published in March.”*

In April, Fox News continued the same reports that had China and WHO accountable for the tragedy happening in US. And ABC News pointed out that Trump did not react in time to prevent situation in US from getting worse and many governors had done a better job than him and federal government led by him. Besides accusing Trump’s slow



action in dealing with coronavirus, ABC News also had several reports arguing that although Chinese government did not reveal the truth, US intelligence did a great job and reported it to White House, so there was no excuse for Trump administration to blame China for current US situation.

It is interesting that although usually ABC News has more pieces of news and it is double than Fox News, in second half of April, there are more pieces of news from Fox to blame China and WHO, which are double than ABC News reports in the same period. Part of the side effect of accusing China for coronavirus is the increasing hate crime against Asian Americans. BBC covered that there were significantly more hate crimes against Asian Americans. Quote *"Late last year, the United Nations issued a report that detailed "an alarming level" of racially motivated violence and other hate incidents against Asian Americans."*

## **Discussion**

In the paper I identify how FOX and ABC differ in their reporting on COVID-19 in the early months of the pandemic. I found that for the mentioned three different aspects about coronavirus, there were difference in the way of framing the coronavirus existing in coverages related to risk of coronavirus and responsibility of situation of US. For future research, more research is needed on the ongoing nature of how news coverage shifted over the course of the pandemic. In this paper, the data source period is strictly between late January and end of April, which cannot contain all coverages about coronavirus in the source sites (ABC News and Fox News).

It was obvious that starting from March, the coverages of coronavirus on risk were segregated. ABC News started to convey information and evidence that coronavirus was more deadly than flu and should be taken seriously, while Fox News kept the old perception of coronavirus and continued to promote the idea that the virus was no more dangerous than the flu.

By March, coronavirus was known to have dramatically high death rate in elders compared with younger population. ABC News emphasized that elder people would suffer for surging death rate, while Fox News had its coverage tell the rest of population not in danger not to panic. It was the same truth, but the underlying meaning of news coverages were totally different. Mal-information, which is information based on truth

but is intended to inflict harm on people, organizations, or country (Wardle et al., 2018), is what Fox News had. Later, when increasing number people were suffering coronavirus, ABC News covered stories from patient struggling in fighting coronavirus, while Fox News covered patients that did not feel much pain from coronavirus. The risk of coronavirus was downplayed by the Fox News and it was not surprising to see that divergence of news coverages.

After one month of different news way of news coverages, there was a survey in mid-April showing that the partisan audience of different news media have significantly different opinion change. For overall Americans, the percentage of people who thought media was exaggerating risk of coronavirus decreased from 62% to 48%. In Republicans or right leaning individuals, the percentage decreased from 76% to 68% while in democrats or left leaning individuals, the percentage decreased from 49% to 30%. (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) And the downplay of risk of coronavirus from Fox News won people's support for the reopening schedule in early May.

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