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COVID-19 Media Narratives in the Era of Hyperreality: A Paradigmatic Analysis of Polarized Media Content

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Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the media has operated as the filter through which information has been disseminated to the masses. The role of the media is often overlooked due to the presupposition of *communicative rationality* wherein the media acts a neutral medium to transmit information to guide the masses toward the most rational course of action. This has created echo-chambers have formed around liberal and conservative media outlets, leading to widely different responses among liberals and conservative with respect to the guidelines and procedures recommended by public health experts.
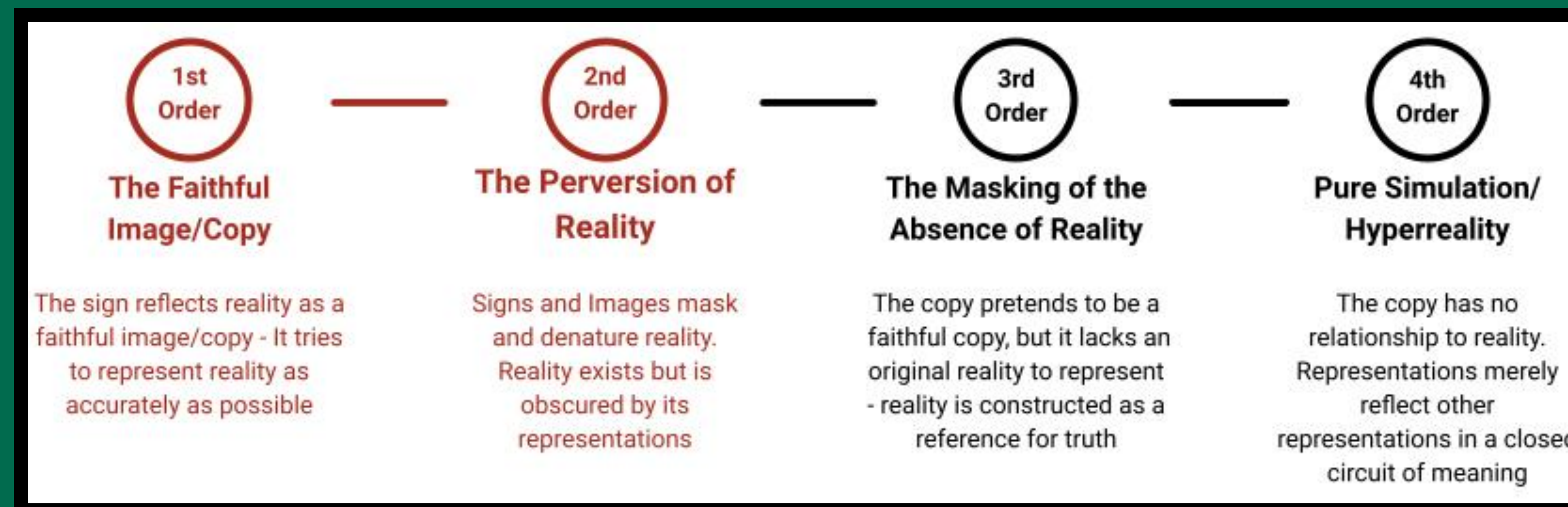
I've proposed this project to intervene into the existing scholarship on media polarization. Contemporary research verifies the existence of ideological polarization, but the cause of that polarization remains understudied with respect to communicative mediums. To uncover these causes my project will utilize Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulacra to articulate the contemporary relationship between the media, representation, and truth.

I hypothesize that a paradigmatic analysis will reveal Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to be descriptive of COVID-19 media representations because despite the reliance on a reliance on a finite set of objective information, various diverging political trajectories will emerge to stabilize the contemporary state of media polarization

Theoretical Background

- Media operates through a generalized logic of consumption
- The audience are consumers of media narratives that are unable to engage in reciprocal communicative exchanges
- The lack of univocal meaning in media content has produced a vertigo of interpretation, justifying an political trajectory
- This has facilitated a transition to an entertainment model of media which constructions media narratives to optimize audience consumption
- As a result, journalism has lost its objective referent in reality, producing hyperreal media discourse as the condition of possibility for misinformation and political polarization

The Four Orders of Simulacra

1st Order	2nd Order	3rd Order	4th Order
The Faithful Image/Copy	**The Perversion of Reality**	**The Masking of the Absence of Reality**	**Pure Simulation/ Hyperreality**
The sign reflects reality as a faithful image/copy - It tries to represent reality as accurately as possible	Signs and Images mask and denature reality. Reality exists but is obscured by its representations	The copy pretends to be a faithful copy, but it lacks an original reality to represent - reality is constructed as a reference for truth	The copy has no relationship to reality. Representations merely reflect other representations in a closed circuit of meaning

Method

- Paradigmatic analysis of COVID-19 media representations focuses on the use of connotative signifiers, how narratives are constructed through the selection of evidence, and audience instruction
- This is the best approach because it considers the audience-consumers non-response
- This project will examine media texts from outlets with ideological differences, placing particular emphasis on networked news shows
- Liberal representations will be assessed through MSNC and CNN
- Conservative representations will be assessed through Fox News
- Focusing on representational contents enables an assessment of the existence of the vetigo of interpretation
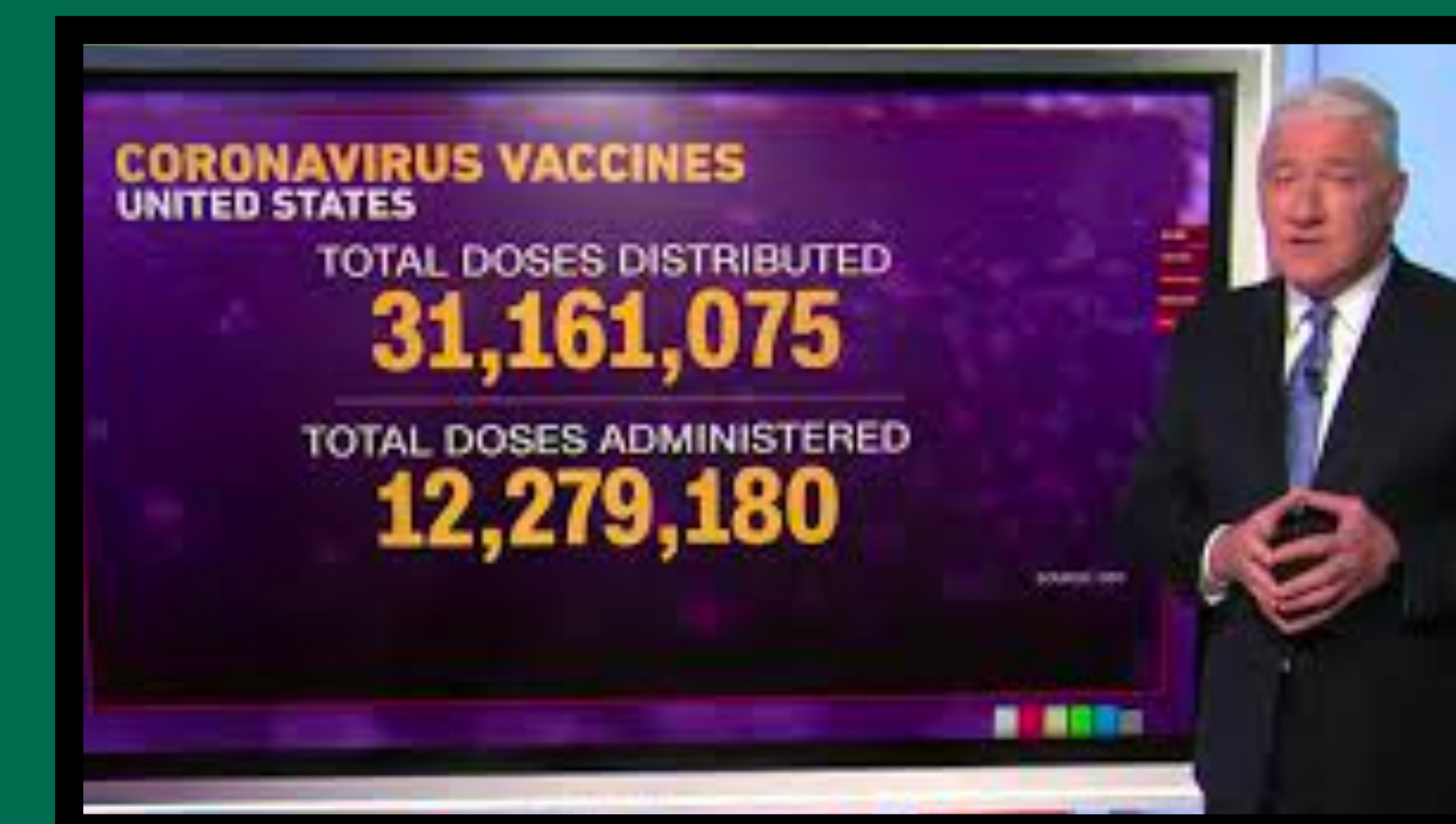
Research Questions

1) What narratives are circulated within the media about COVID-19?

2) How are media narratives constructed within digital media outlets?

3) How do those outlets justify the truth-value of their narratives?

4) How do those justifications differ across outlets with different ideological perspectives?

5) How can Baudrillard's theory of the media be used to understand political polarization in the context of COVID-19?

Summary

This project's paradigmatic analysis will verify Baudrillard's hypothesis by revealing the media to not be an institution predicated on truth and objectivity, but one ensured by a vertigo of interpretation which sustains the media as a hyperreal form of entertainment.

In the process, misinformation and polarization emerge not merely by-products of a broken system, but as necessary components for the business as usual operations of the media. As a result, trust amongst those across the ideological spectrum, and especially in institutions, as collapsed. Only an investigation into the structural cause of this phenomenon can hope to unearth a solution.

Check out this QR code to see "Works Cited" for this project