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Miami, Florida

THE INVISIBLE PROPAGANDA:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S AND THE MEDIA'S  
MESSAGING ON SANCTUARY CITIES

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by

Valeriya A. Popova

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To: Dean John F. Stack, Jr.  
Green School of International and Public Affairs

This dissertation, written by Valeriya A. Popova, and entitled *The Invisible Propaganda: A Case Study of The Trump Administration's and the Media's Messaging on Sanctuary Cities*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Kevin Evans

---

Kyle Mattes

---

Tatiana Kostadinova

---

Susan Jacobson

---

Eduardo Gamarra, Major Professor

Date of Defense: June 30, 2022

The dissertation of Valeriya A. Popova is approved.

---

Dean John F. Stack, Jr.  
Green School of International and Public Affairs

---

Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

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## DEDICATION

To Zaharushka, the love of my life,  
who always encouraged me to get both a PhD and a six-pack.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

THE INVISIBLE PROPAGANDA:

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Valeriya Popova

Florida International University, 2022

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Professor Eduardo Gamarra, Major Professor

How does systemic propaganda work in contemporary American democracy? The literature suggests that propaganda in its negative meaning is limited to authoritarian regimes. In democracies, it is the corporate and partisan newsrooms that acts as propaganda mouthpieces. This dissertation challenges this status quo and shifts the focus to the interaction between contemporary democratic governments and the media.

This dissertation develops a model of democratic propaganda that accounts for the two-step propaganda process in contemporary democracies: the government (responsible for the original message) and the media (responsible for the final message). The project proposes an innovative eight-fold spectrum of media filtering, ranging from the heaviest to the lightest forms. Using the spectrum as an empirical measurement of democratic propaganda, the project draws a clear line between the president's and the media's rhetoric in a case study of the Trump administration's public campaign against sanctuary cities. Using a combination of content, sentiment, topics, and social network analysis, as well as process tracing, this project comprehensively explains how the Trump administration's

propaganda campaign was affected by the media filter, and what challenges the media filter creates for modern presidents' communications strategies.

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A lie told often enough becomes the truth.

Vladimir Lenin, apocryphal

## INTRODUCTION

There is no propaganda in democracy. Americans exist in a chaotic universe of constant political advertising, political communication, strategic marketing, political news reporting, and partisan media, but not under a bombardment of propaganda – that is, propaganda as it is known in the Western part of the world. When they occasionally hear the “p” word in political debates, it is used as an insult to opponents to accuse them of deviation from the rules of the game in democracy. The word conjures negative associations like Vladimir Putin’s killing of opponents and jailing journalists who dared to diverge from the official Kremlin’s line, or doctored pictures praising Kim Jong-un in the streets of Pyongyang.

Yet, the rise of the so-called “fake news” during the 2016 presidential campaign and, even more so, Donald Trump’s presidency, raises a serious question of how well American democracy is insulated from such “aberrations.” The good old-fashioned principle of maintaining a healthy political dialogue in society through the media seems to have lost its power and meaning. Instead, it was replaced by a flood of open populism, false accusations, unproven statements, partisan talking points, and conspiracy theories being spread, not only by citizens and the news media, but also by the very government. America

faced a similar problem before – for example, during the 1800 presidential election. What exacerbates the crisis now is the Internet and social media. Approximately 1 in 4 Americans consumed news from disreputable websites during the final months of the 2016 presidential campaign, with Trump supporters visiting the most pro-Trump conservative fake-news websites (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). The Washington Post has estimated that President Trump has lied 18,000 times in just over 1,000 days (Kessler et al. 2020), and a quick scroll through President’s Twitter shows that millions of users amplified the impact of these lies by retweeting them.

The popularity of social networks and the new media plays a crucial factor in exacerbating this crisis. The Internet has become a giant, easily accessible, hub of political information of all kinds; a chaotic universe of opinions with no dominating power, government censorship, or even clear legal boundaries as governments around the world have been slow to recognize the need for Internet regulation and are only starting to grapple with the problem of uncontrolled online space. Unfortunately, these very qualities that make the Internet an attractive platform for increasing political engagement through unmoderated democratic conversations between citizens in the first place are the reasons why American democracy is losing a battle against fake news. False political news spread significantly faster online and reach a greater number of people than truthful reports (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). Political lies are always hard to spot, and citizens generally rely on pure chance to identify them (Mattes, Popova, and Evans 2021), but sophisticated visual technologies make this task even more challenging as hundreds and thousands of “deepfake” videos and doctored images grossly mislead millions of news consumers every day. Moreover, even democratic gatekeepers cannot stop the surge of

false political statements as fact checkers fail to reach news consumers, let alone successfully combat deceptive political information (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). Ironically, even the term “fake news” itself has become a victim of this all-in ideological battle. In just three short years after Donald Trump’s presidential campaign popularized the term, it has become the epitome and one of the most effective drivers of political polarization. Today, it is used to describe and delegitimize any information coming from the opposing political party (Brummette et al. 2018).

By all signs, propaganda is present in the US. Jack (2017) aptly describes information efforts by online actors and activists as contemporary propaganda, and Pulver (2019) refers to Facebook as “the greatest propaganda machine in history.” Suddenly, propaganda has become a very real – and very powerful – part of political narrative and prevailing feature of political communication in modern-day America.

And yet, the alarming ease with which this chaotic propagandistic narrative has taken over the normal democratic discourse makes one wonder if propaganda ever was an “aberration” in American democracy in the first place. Is it possible that technological development and proliferation of social media have not caused the emergence of, but only revealed systemic propaganda that has been existing and flourishing in the system for a long time? Is it possible that the fake news, post-truth era is only the latest form but not first instance of such systemic propaganda in modern democracies?

The new disturbing reality in which respected media are falling out of fashion and where fake news almost entirely substitutes real news is a culmination of a long process of deterioration of public trust in the media. Media trust was balancing at the level of around 50% since the 1990s, but it fell below that level starting in 2007. A 2016 Gallup poll found

that only 32% of the Americans had "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the mass media, and that the number was as low as 14% among the Republicans (Swift 2016). Over the past several decades, the media has been blamed in advancing partisan politics, propagating donor's political views, failing journalist standards, and causing political polarization. Indeed, the media and its agenda-setting power have been criticized for so long that scholars even coined terms "corporate democracy" and "managed democracy" to describe the perils of modern media in democratic capitalist systems. The media have become a scapegoat that contemporary scholars and political pundits blame for all information failures and deficiencies modern democracies struggle with.

This fixation on the media as main agents of propaganda in democracies hinders a problem of not recognizing another source of propaganda in democracies – governments themselves. There is surprising reluctance to acknowledge this fact in the mainstream political narrative. Unless used in a very pejorative meaning, rarely do we hear the word 'propaganda' when it comes to describing the role of democratic governments in influencing people's opinions. One will be hard pressed to learn anything about systematic propaganda by contemporary democratic governments in the media, school textbooks, or even in anecdotes because it is assumed that democracies do not make use of propaganda when compared to authoritarian regimes. The dominant popular narrative entirely dissociates propaganda from democratic governance and instead blames the media for manipulating people's opinions and disseminating propaganda. Although the media cannot function without the government supplying them with information in the first place, criticism of propaganda in democracies is limited to the media and corporations that own them and leaves out the question of government's role in this system. Even though a great

deal of evidence points toward propaganda being an integral element and dominant communication force in democracies nearly as much as in authoritarian regimes, the conventional wisdom continues to scrutinize the mass media and ignore systemic propaganda run by the government.

### **Research Question**

We have a very interesting puzzle on our hands. There is propaganda that originates in the government – public communications strategies designed to further the president’s legislative agenda – and there is propaganda in the media whose ideological agenda may be entirely opposite of the president’s. The two clash, interchange, support, and contradict each other, but we, as news consumers, see only one final message. In other words, we do not know where the administration’s propaganda stops and the media’s propaganda begins.

That triggers the main question of this research: How does systemic propaganda work in contemporary American democracy? To answer it, the project takes several steps. In the literature review, I explain why biased negative definitions of propaganda, that replaced the classic neutral definition, limits our understanding of the phenomenon. I propose my theory of democratic propaganda and the media filter in the theoretical chapter. My empirical chapters, based on the Trump administration’s and the media’s propaganda on sanctuary cities, draw a clear line between boundaries of the administration’s and the media’s rhetoric, while discussing several cases studies that shows the media filter in action.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Research on propaganda is characterized by theoretical and empirical vagueness. The existing literature builds on an outdated idea of propaganda, which was introduced in the early 20th century. The convention postulates that systemic propaganda is a prerogative of authoritarian governments that directly control the media. Democratic governments, on the other hand, are restricted by freedom of speech and competitive media markets. Thus, researchers interpret democratic propaganda through the lens of agenda-setting power of the media and scrutinize it at the level of partisan outlets and media conglomerates.

My dissertation challenges this theoretical status quo. I argue that systemic government propaganda does have a place in contemporary democracies such as the US, but we have not been able to recognize it because our assumptions about the attributes of propaganda do not reflect the changed nature of modern political communications. My project makes a case for exploring systemic propaganda directly at the level of government institutions in addition to (not instead of!) media coverage. The novelty of my model is that it allows to separate president's propagandistic interests from that of the mass media and clearly delineate the two propaganda kingdoms. Unlike the existing research which assumes that propaganda in democracies originates in the media, my theory places presidential administration at the center of systemic propaganda, with the media acting as a secondary filter.

This framework explains not only institutionalized channels of the administration's propaganda but also its more recent forms such as social media. Researchers approach the latter as a brand-new political phenomenon, which only deepens our misperceptions of it. By situating it within a broader institutional context of continued systemic propaganda in

the US, my research helps get a better grip of the interactive relationship between modern presidents and the media.

### **Research Methodology**

My project adopts a mixed-method approach: a combination of historical, cluster, and content analyses, as well as process tracing. First, I engage in an examination of historical accounts that shed light on popularization of the negative meaning of the term “propaganda” in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. Second, I collect all administration’s propaganda pieces on the sanctuary-city movement from official government’s websites and President Trump’s Twitter. These documents cover the entire period of Trump’s presidency: from January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, to January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Third, I employ content analysis to match these data against records of media coverage in popular news outlets during the same period (I used NewsBank to access news archives). This step allows me to scrutinize general patterns of the administration’s propaganda and later compare them with the media propaganda. I balance the selection of sources so that they would represent three “filter bubbles”: The New York Times and CNN (liberal bubble), AP (center bubble), and WSJ and Fox News (conservative bubble). Fourth, I analyze general patterns of media propaganda on the subject of sanctuary cities. Finally, I explore nuances of interaction between the administration and the media through process tracing. I do so by following the trajectory of select messages from their emergence in the executive branch to their appearances in the media, controlling for timing of these messages and filtering mechanism used to manipulate them.

The study has an analytical bias toward institutions and leaves out the question of behavioral effects of propaganda. There are several reasons for that. First, institutional aspects of propaganda are a relatively unexamined corner of the field, while the effect of propaganda on public opinion is one of the most studied areas of scholarship. I simply do not want to repeat the same mantra as many generations of scholars did before me. Second, tracing effects of propaganda on individual's attitudes would have required me to dedicate substantial energy and time to examination of mass psychology and its connection to individual psychology. That would have set my project on a different trajectory. The third reason is that I find it almost impossible to delineate effects of government's propaganda from that of the media, given that most people have no other access to original presidential communications than through the media. Social media nowadays provide more possibilities for the people to receive "unfiltered" presidential messages, but that channel remains in its infancy and is not on par with institutionalized structures in the White House. Lastly, I chose to focus on institutional dimensions of propaganda because I wanted to do something more fun than sophisticated statistical analysis which would have been a must for studying effects of propaganda on population.

### **Contribution**

The main contribution of my dissertation is to the field of propaganda studies. First, it attempts to correct the existing discrepancy between propaganda as a scientific concept and propaganda as an empirically studied phenomenon. Second, it adopts a fresh institutionalist perspective on propaganda by showing how the latter has evolved under conditions of democracy, free media market, and technological progress to become an institutionalized

practice in a case study of the United States. Third, it brings in much-needed standards of scientific systematicity and rigorousness to the field of propaganda studies that is currently filled with value-driven and empirically weak works informed by a biased perspective on authoritarian propaganda. Forth, it investigates the mechanism which makes contemporary democratic propaganda extremely effective through process-tracing the entire cycle of propaganda production and consumption: from the origins of the message in the White House, to politicians in the executive branches (surrogate speakers), to the media, and to the final message presented to the public. Finally, it bridges the administration and the media that are traditionally studied independently of each other into a single theory of systemic propaganda to show how the media filters the president's message.

The project also speaks to the field of media studies. To tell the story of democratic propaganda, one must account for the role contemporary media play in it. While there are plenty of studies that explain the media's framing and priming powers, my research offers a fresh perspective on the subject by presenting it as a filter. My dissertation develops an original measurement of the media agenda-setting power as a filter, ranging from the lightest to the heaviest forms of propaganda. Unlike existing research that just acknowledges that the media put a spin on the administration's message, I propose a more sophisticated approach that describe the various forms that spin takes.

Additionally, my dissertation has implications for the democratic theory. By tapping into the United States as a case study, it expands our knowledge of propaganda by challenging the conventional wisdom that propaganda and democracy are not compatible. My research shifts the focus from the media to the executive branch as the place of origin of systemic propaganda and fills a respective void in the literature that does not separate

between the corporate media propaganda and the presidential administration's propaganda. By doing so, it offers an alternative framework to explain the rise of systemic propaganda in the US, which cannot be assessed through the lens of the corporate media alone.

My work creates a ground for a critical conversation about systemic propaganda in the United States that exists outside of the conventional focus on mass media. The existing narrative in both academic and non-academic circles recognizes the danger of "managed democracy" but does so in connection to corporate media conglomerates. My project turns attention to propaganda that originates in the administration and pursues goals different from those of the media. Because no previous research attempted to investigate this aspect of contemporary political system in the US, political pundits struggle to explain rapid deterioration of norms of democratic dialogue in the society and alarming popularity of fake news, conspiracy theories, and alike. By situating such contemporary phenomena within the intersection of the administration's and the media's propaganda, this research provides answers to these questions and establishes theoretical and empirical foundations for future research on similar national experiences around the world.

Moreover, this study expands the boundaries of knowledge about contemporary American presidents. This project provides a strong empirical ground to classical works on presidential communications (see Maltese (1994) and Kumar (2007)). By tracing the White House's messages to various federal government's departments and investigating similarities in their rhetoric, my research paints a clearer picture of how the White House's surrogate program works. Moreover, by looking at the final message after the media filter, it helps us better understand the strong and the weak sides of the administration's

communications strategies. All in all, the findings suggest that contemporary presidents need a better approach to make their messages heard.

It becomes increasingly taxing to recognize and confront propaganda in an era of “fake news” and “post-truth.” The more sophisticated and clandestine propaganda becomes, the more it threatens democratic transparency and voters’ ability to make informed choices. My dissertation addresses this important problem by showing hidden mechanisms, channels, and agents of propaganda in American democratic system. By doing so, it fills the gap in the literature created by the misperception that democratic governments do not use propaganda.

As my case study, I chose to investigate Donald Trump’s presidency, thus contributing to growing literature on his tenure in office. The Trump presidency represents a very curious intersection between traditional norms of political rhetoric and his unique populist style. Moreover, he was the first president to actively use personal social media accounts to communicate directly with the public, thus trying to undermine the media’s filtering power. Accounting for these novelties, this dissertation provides insight into President Trump’s strategic communications style.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of sanctuary cities in the US. This political matter encompasses issues of immigration, human rights, federalism, presidential powers, and the system of checks and balances. By looking at it from multiple rhetorical angles (clusters) as perpetuated by the Trump administration’s surrogate channels and the media, my research helps unravel some of the controversies surrounding the issue.

## **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

*The government vs. the administration.* My work closely looks at propaganda that originates in and serves the administration. In other words, I focus on the White House and federal departments rather than the entire government. One challenge with studying communication in democratic countries like the US is a working system of separation of powers. Academic honesty prevents me from making a general claim that propaganda created by the White House's propagandists accurately represents the position of the entire government. The latter includes not only legislative and judicial branches, but also state governments, all of which are independent from the presidential administration. They promote their own messages that may contradict that of the president. Moreover, even within the branches there is an ideological divide resulting in distinctly different messages, especially when it comes to partisan politics. For example, Congress cannot be viewed as a unified propaganda channel. The constant competition for control of Congress pushes both parties to engage in the perpetual campaign that advances their own party's image and undermines that of the opposition (Lee 2016). Thus, it would be appropriate to identify two different propaganda entities in Congress. By the same token, delving into state politics would result in unmasking many independent localized propaganda centers that are very different from the White House and its surrogate channels. Therefore, the focus of this project is limited to the White House and its surrogate channels across federal departments, which I collectively refer to as the administration. The government as a larger and more complex structure can be a subject of future research.

*Donald Trump's presidency as a case study.* Trump's presidency was exceptional in many regards. Unlike many of his predecessors, he was a political outsider with far-right

views and policies. More importantly, his authoritarian and populist tendencies impacted his public campaigning. One of the most obvious differences from previous presidents was President Trump's reluctance to embrace norms of political correctness, which made his administration's propaganda stand out. That said, Trump's presidency is not an ideal, but still viable candidate for generalizing my claims about the mechanisms of democratic propaganda. President Trump's unusual rhetorical style notwithstanding, the media's treatment of his agenda was no different than of his Republican predecessors. As I show in my work, the media filter in American democracy is a result of not only overcrowded and noisy media sphere but also ideological and partisan polarization. These factors did not emerge nor end with Trump's presidency. For example, Maltese (1994) and Kumar (2007) spoke of the hostility between presidents and the media long before President Trump. That hostility remains true for both Republican and Democratic presidents. Moreover, from the institutional standpoint, President Trump and his surrogate speakers observed the long-standing tradition to distribute first-hand information to the elite Washington media. Just like before, during, and after Trump's presidency, there are briefings, gaggles, press conferences, State of the Union addresses, and press releases. Just like before, during, and after Trump's presidency, there are Washington Post, the New York Times, and other media outlets which have strong political standing while serving their narrow ideological interests. In that sense, my argument about the routes of media filtering is applicable for any modern American president. What was different in the Trump era is a greater reliance on social media. President Trump was the first president in American history who made his personal Twitter account his main "bully pulpit." That makes his propaganda unique thus far. Yet, it is almost certain that social media will be playing a greater role in the next

presidents' public campaigns too, given technological advancement of the world. Therefore, my findings are less applicable for propaganda by the previous presidential administrations but may be very-well indicative of what is to come in American democracy in the near future.

Additionally, there were other reasons for me to choose Trump's presidency as a case study. My data collection possibilities were greatly limited by the COVID-19 lockdown. Having no access to the past presidents' archives, I decided to be creative and shift attention to online evidence. Trump's presidency was ideal for that. Upon his departure from the White House, his administration's official website as well as those of governmental departments and agencies were preserved entirely and maintained in a perfectly working condition. Sadly, it was not the case with the previous administrations. The Obama administration's official website, for example, had plenty of missing pages, and many of the departments did not have archival documents from earlier than 2017. There was even a greater challenge to collect primary online evidence for the administrations before President Obama. Prior to 2012, the world was not as digitized as it is now, and government propagandists' digital trace was very small. Taking that into consideration, I opted to limit my study to Trump's presidency. That allowed me to collect all possible online evidence instead of resorting to partial evidence from the previous administrations. For future research, it would be interesting to look at archival evidence from the previous administrations to see how their communications strategies accounted for the media filter. Particularly, the Obama administration should provide a rich educational material. The "first social-media president" (Bogost 2017) gave us quite a few

memorable and innovative media engagement memories, which definitely invites a comprehensive analysis.

*Sanctuary policies as a case study.* President Trump's hardline stance on immigration was a hallmark of his presidency as well as his both presidential campaigns. Immigration is a multifaceted policy area, and covering all the angles of it would be nearly impossible within this project. I focused my attention on the problem of sanctuary cities for several reasons. First, it is a less studied and more complicated topic within the umbrella of immigration policies. Unlike other infamous President Trump's initiatives (the travel ban, family separation and detention, visa rules for international students), his anti-sanctuary acts received less backlash from civil groups and activists. One of the reasons is that sanctuary policies tap into issues of federalism, which makes it a complicated political case. Say, when we talk about family separation policies, the argument is pretty straightforward: they violate human rights. However, in the case of sanctuary cities, both sides of the issue have equally strong arguments. Sanctuary cities may present a threat to national security, but they also preserve sovereignty of local and state governments versus federal powers. That duality of the problem is what convinced me to study sanctuary cities instead of a more "famed" immigration issue. Second, I made sure that my topic of choice was not merely a rhetorical exercise by politicians but a real issue that the administration attempted to address. A good way to gauge the importance of the issue is to see whether the President included it into his State of the Union addresses. President Trump devoted a considerable time to sanctuary cities during his 2020 SOTU speech, hence confirming the importance of the issue. Would my argument hold in case of any other political problem – for example, healthcare reform or environmental regulations? Obviously, rhetoric would

be different. But the essence of the government-media interaction would stay untouched. The greatest contribution of my project is the spectrum of media filtering, which can be used for studying rhetoric on any politically divisive topic by any government in the world. As far as explaining the dynamic of the government-media interactions, my analysis shows that the media tend to pick on the White House's agenda and ignore other surrogate channels, even if the latter are better equipped to provide details of political problems and propose solutions. Furthermore, my analysis shows that the media most often resort to context manipulation instead of going for extremes like fake news or unbiased reporting. In other words, the media manipulate president's agenda to a moderate degree even in case of such a contentious issue as immigration. That effectively refutes a popular misperception that "the media always lie" to the people. With less polarizing political issues, we should expect the media to show less interest and scarce reporting rather than propensity for a different filtering mechanism.

*Typology of messages vs typology of filtering mechanisms.* This project develops a spectrum of media filtering that features eight mechanisms, from the lightest to the heaviest forms of filtering. This typology is useful for assessment of the media's manipulation of original administration's messages. However, it does not account for differences in format of original messages, nor how they correlate with the media's filtering power. Are certain kinds of the administration's messages more likely to be snowballed, cherry-picked, or negatively interpreted by the media? Is there any tendency for the media to block specific administration's messages (or surrogate speakers) and pass others? In its current form, my dissertation does not offer a typology of original administration's messages. One reason for that is that I limited my study to propaganda offensive, which shows the proactive side

of the White House's communications operations. If this research is to be expanded to include the White House's defensive campaigning, such a step will benefit from a comprehensive typology of original administration's messages. Alternatively, the media might vary its filtering options based on the topic of the original message the administration tries to pass through the filter. All in all, such a typology may give us insight into how the media decide what filtering mechanism to apply to each government's message. This is an area for future research.

### **Summary of Chapters**

*Chapter 2* provides an overview of historical development of the term "propaganda." It analyzes early works of propaganda scholars and contrasts them with contemporary research to highlight and criticize differences between the two. I explain how negative contemporary understanding of propaganda was constructed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reflect ideological differences between different regimes (using case studies of Russia and the United States) and argue that the negative view of propaganda has a cultural appeal for English-speaking world that does not reflect practical usage of it throughout the history. I summarize my criticism proposing a non-definition of propaganda describing everything that propaganda is not.

*Chapter 3* provides an overarching theoretical framework for this research. It develops a theory of democratic propaganda that combines elements of the presidential administration and the media to explain how systemic propaganda becomes possible in conditions of free media, freedom of expression, and technological development. It describes the process of propaganda production, distribution, and consumption in

consecutive manner, and explains inner working of each of the elements of democratic propaganda. As such, the chapter proposes a remedy for many existing gaps in the literature on propaganda and prepares a theoretical ground for empirical research on the issue that takes place in the following chapters. I also introduce the spectrum of media filter in the chapter and provide empirical examples for each case.

*Chapter 4* focuses on the research design of my project. Here, I explain the nature of the surrogate-speaker program that ensure that various officials in the executive branch speak in a unified voice. I then turn my attention to the elite Washington media that apply their filters to manipulate the administration's message. I explain what administration's messages I am using for analysis – those that come in the offensive (proactive) format and allow the White House to initiate the public discussion rather than react to the media's agenda.

*Chapter 5* describes the general rhetorical patterns of the Trump administration's public campaign against sanctuary cities. I identify five rhetorical clusters in the administration's propaganda that collectively have created the myth of violent immigrants designed to make ordinary Americans oppose sanctuary cities. I also describe general features of propaganda by each of the involved surrogate channels and the White House.

*Chapter 6* provides an overview of propaganda in the media, split into 3 media bubbles. I focus on topics in context in each of the analyzed sources. Additionally, I describe differences in the intensity of coverage between the outlets, as well as language similarity between the administration and the media. Finally, this chapter explains how the media selectively manipulated personal stories of immigrants to counter the

administration's strategy, which emphasized stories of families who lost members to immigrant crimes.

*Chapter 7* explains the dynamics of the media filter by tracing six stories, from their origination in the Trump administration to the final message filtered by the media. I show specific examples of the media filter, controlling for time and mechanism of filtering. Additionally, I report the results of extensive network analysis that shows ties between the administration's and the media's messages, as well as between different surrogate channels.

Words can be like X-rays if you use them properly—  
they'll go through anything. You read and you're pierced.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

## **THE FINE OLD WORD “PROPAGANDA”**

April 13, 2020, went down as a dark day in the history of American journalism. That day, President Trump was giving a press briefing on the ongoing Coronavirus crisis and his administration's response to it. Such briefings became a daily routine during the pandemic and normally were relatively uncontroversial. The briefing on April 13, however, was different. It started as usual but quickly turned into what CNN called “one of the astonishing acts of disinformation we've seen from a White House since the Vietnam era and the 5 o'clock follies of the Lyndon Johnson administration” Stelter (2020). Several minutes after the briefing began, President Trump played a “campaign style” (The Guardian 2020) video composed of clips taken from Fox News reports that openly praised the administration's success in handling the pandemic (Media Matters 2020), while blaming the liberal media for contributing to spread of the virus.

Various liberal outlets unanimously described the video in similar terms. CNN called it “propaganda on full display” and cut out its live coverage of the briefing (Concha 2020), Washington Post unequivocally characterized the incident as “a spectacle of government-produced propaganda” (Blake 2020), and MSNBC called it “propaganda [meant] to rewrite history” (MSNBC 2020).

It is not certain what triggered journalists and political observers alike to describe this unpleasant episode as “propaganda” - a term that is used very rarely in the context of American democracy. It was not the first time when President Trump publicly lied or misused other people’s words. Nor was it the first instance when he used press briefings to take unearned credit, and nearly all his speeches throughout the presidency could be described as a verbal crusade against mass media. And yet, it was that infamous press briefing on April 13, 2020, that was considered worthy to be labeled “propaganda” as opposed to more common “controversy”, “misinformation”, and “provocation” that are often featured in news covering Trump’s speeches.

Although intensive language, provocative graphics, and false claims are staples of President Trump’s rhetorical style, only some of his speeches get to be remembered as “propaganda.” The border between the latter and a simple heated political speech is often blurred. Despite propaganda being around for as long as politics, there is no clear and precise definition of the term. Moreover, many definitions directly contradict each other. Either it was a consequence of existing theoretical uncertainty or simply reaction on events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that involved brutal propaganda in two world wars, the result is an intricate and perplexing system of misperceptions and confusion about propaganda that are in place today. This convoluted network of myths surrounding contemporary understanding of the phenomenon is the focus of this chapter.

**Guide to reading this chapter.** This chapter delves into the theoretical ambiguity surrounding propaganda. To address that, I first highlight existing deficiencies and contradictions in the field. I group theoretical arguments into two schools of thought - classic and contemporary - and discuss the pitfalls of each. The following section explains

how biased and ideologically driven research on authoritarian countries, such as the present-day Russia, causes a problem of an empirical measurement of propaganda. The concluding section of literature review argues that the study of systemic propaganda in the contemporary US has been replaced by studies of the media and corporate interests - a tradition that my study challenges. I then summarize my critique of the literature by proposing a *non-definition* of propaganda. This non-definition refutes 14 most common misperceptions of propaganda in the contemporary democracy found in the literature and the popular narrative. I argue that the notion of propaganda should not be reduced to deception, brainwashing, biased media coverage, or authoritarianism, among other perils. Instead, I emphasize that propaganda is not a static phenomenon and can be both positive and negative.

The chapter makes five main contributions to the literature on propaganda and research on democratic systems. (1) It identifies and provides an overview of two different schools of thought in the field of propaganda studies. (2) It clarifies the concept of propaganda. (2) It shows theoretical and empirical incoherence in the field by contrasting authoritarian and democratic propaganda. (3) It pinpoints gaps in our knowledge of systemic propaganda in contemporary democracies. (4) It highlights flaws in existing analytic approaches to democratic propaganda and makes a case for analyzing it on the level of government's institutions in conjunction with the media filter.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Existing literature focuses on three areas related to propaganda: the nature of propaganda and theoretical problems of its definition, propaganda in authoritarian regimes, and

propaganda in democracies such as the United States. My work synthesizes these streams, identifies gaps, and proposes remedies for them.

Propaganda has existed for as long as politics, yet political communication scholars have found it challenging to provide a unified definition. Debates around propaganda are so old that O'Shaughnessy (2004, 3) called propaganda an "elusive notion" that is not going to be ever agreed upon. I synthesize all existing literature on propaganda into two opposing schools of thought, which I refer to as the classic and contemporary schools of thought.

*The Father of Public Relations and the Classic School of Thought.* An unpopular minority presented by works written mostly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century interprets propaganda conservatively by following the suit of early investigators of the issue who saw propaganda neither malevolent nor dangerous. The definition of propaganda in this camp is somewhat technical - best described as a tool in democracy, or "means of statecraft" (Kirsch 2016, 32). For example, Harold Lasswell (1927) argued that manipulation of messages in order to invoke a desired reaction from another actor is an inherent feature of democracy as long as an opportunity to do so is open to everyone (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011). The main figure among pioneering scholars of propaganda was "the father of public relations" Edward L. Bernays, who made the first systematic attempt to analyze the role of propaganda in democracy (Kirsch 2016, 29).

Bernays was a public relations campaign manager who worked for many commercial and public campaigns at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More importantly, he was an active proponent of propaganda in democratic societies. In 1928, Bernays published a book laconically named *Propaganda*. It quickly became the bible of

propaganda studies and was especially valued among practitioners of propaganda, who are often called “propagandists.”

The central argument of Bernays’ book is a vital necessity of propaganda for democracy. He opens his book by saying, “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society” (Bernays 1972, 9). He goes on revealing the *heartbreaking truth*: the world is so complex and disordered that only propaganda can tame this chaos, or, in his own words, reduce it to “practical proportions” (Bernays 1972, 11). The author plainly acknowledges that “we are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested” by a few intelligent and knowledgeable manipulators who constitute an “invisible government” (Bernays 1972, 9). The reason why this does not constitute a problem, he explains, is that because this is “a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. A vast number of human beings must cooperate in this matter if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society” (Bernays 1972, 9). By eliminating the need for people to navigate complex and overwhelming information environment, propaganda therefore provides a crucial service for any democratic society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernays borrowed from studies of mass psychology to explain why people’s susceptibility to propaganda (for their own good). Drawing on studies of Trotter and Le Bon, Graham Wallas, and Walter Lippman, he concluded that propaganda is effective because the public mind is easily manipulatable. Mass psychology operates in a way different from individual psychology, and “the group has mental characteristics distinct from those of the individuals” that constitute the group (Bernays 1972, 47). Crowd’s emotions are much easier swayed than individual’s because the mass loses individual’s autonomy and rationality: “[T]he group mind does not think in the strict sense of this work. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions” (Bernays 1972, 50).

When Bernays was writing his book, the world had already seen unpleasant faces of what passed as propaganda during World War I. Nonetheless, he rejected the notion that propaganda was a mere euphemism for “brainwashing.” Instead, he offered his own definition, as neutral as one may imagine – and surely unthinkable in our days. “Modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, or group” (Bernays 1972, 25). He refuses to see propaganda as inherently evil and untruthful and points out that whether “propaganda is good or bad depends on the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published” (Bernays 1972, 20).

His vision, though initially welcomed by some scholars, did not age well. This new generation of propaganda scholars considers Bernays’ approach unconventional by arguing that he rejected a popular idea of propaganda as dangerous manipulation. They conveniently ignore, however, that Bernays himself was building on the classic definition that had crystalized before the tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Propaganda*, the author justifies why he opts in favor of a neutral definition, instead of following the mainstream:

I am aware that the word ‘propaganda’ carries to many minds an unpleasant connotation. ... In itself, the word “propaganda” has certain technical meanings, which, like most things in this world, are “neither good nor bad but custom makes them so.” ... The Scientific American, in a recent issue, pleads for the restoration to respectable usage of that “fine old word ‘propaganda.’ [...] “There is no word in the English language,” it says, “whose meaning has been so sadly distorted as the word ‘propaganda.’ The change took place mainly during the late war when the term took on a decidedly sinister complexion (Bernays 1972, 20-21).

After consulting various dictionaries to find the roots of the definition of propaganda, Bernays concludes that propaganda “in its proper meaning is a perfectly wholesome word, of honest parentage, and with an honorable history” (Bernays 1972, 22).

From Funk and Wagnalls and Standard dictionary, thoughtfully cited by the author, we learn that the word was initially designating the following:

1. A society of cardinals, the oversees of foreign missions; also the College of Propaganda at Rome founded by Pope Urban VIII in 1627 for the education of missionary priests; Sacred College de Propaganda Fide.
2. Hence, any institution of scheme for propagating a doctrine or system.
3. Effort directed systematically toward the gaining of public support for an opinion or a course of action.
4. The principles advanced by propaganda (Bernays 1972, 21).

Bernays firmly maintained his study was resolving a confusion around the term and giving a second life to the proper meaning of the word. His work was more than a simple attempt “to salvage the term” (Kirsch 2016, 32) in a sense that it was a combination of historical analysis and author’s reflection on his personal professional experience. In sum, Bernays unshaken belief that “propaganda is a perfectly legitimate form of human activity” (Bernays 1972, 22) has a strong historical basis, unlike the more contemporary negative meaning of propaganda whose origins lie in the two World Wars and as such cannot be a restoration of the original meaning of the word.

*The War Against Propaganda and the Contemporary School of Thought.* To many, Bernays’ theory of propaganda looks suspiciously like a disguised apology from a man who himself was an expert in “the intelligent manipulation of the masses” rather than an objective analyst. This premise lays in the heart of the contemporary school of thought. The most common accusation in Bernays’s address postulates that he has twisted the concept of propaganda to a more acceptable idea, perhaps to justify his own professional

practice.<sup>2</sup> “Edward Bernays,” writes Kirsch (2016, 31-32), “[played a role] in shifting out cultural conceptions of ‘propaganda’ to the seemingly more palatable ‘public relations.’ ” Henderson and Braun (2016, 14) also lambast Bernays’ neutral definition that turned propaganda into “a phenomenon scholars may examine but not challenge” and suggest that the real purpose of propaganda studies should be to “educate human beings in how to resist and challenge it.” They echo Stanley Cunningham’s complaints that the view of propaganda as a neutral tool “has become widely entrenched, especially in the social sciences, to the point that it is now virtually universal” (Henderson and Braun 2016, 14).

This claim, however, is not substantiated by the dominant narrative represented in contemporary thought. For the purpose of this project, I read an enormous number of books dedicated to issues of propaganda, in both historical and contemporary sense, and must confess that adherents of the neutral definition are extremely rare in scholarly community. (And there is no one who would openly admire and advocate for propaganda, like Bernays did.) Contemporaries tend to treat propaganda as a predominantly negative phenomenon and warn of dangers associated with it. Few, including iconic *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* by the ‘Bordeaux prophet’ Jacques Ellul (1965), do not condemn

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<sup>2</sup> Granted, his manner of handling public campaigns was not an ideal example of “smooth” and natural propaganda as imagined in his own works. Many events that looked spontaneous to the public were in fact meticulously staged by Bernays, and he tightly controlled what journalists could and could not know about the nature of his PR projects. That includes the brilliant and his most famous “Torches of Freedom” advertising campaign in 1929, which, in an apparent challenge to an old social taboo of women’s smoking, for the first time equated female smoking in public with liberation and feminism (and conveniently promoted the American Tobacco Company among women). To put up the show, Bernays planted attractive women in the crowd in the Easter Sunday Parade in New York, who were smoking their “torches of freedom.” He also hired his own photographers to “casually” take good pictures of the smoking women, which were later published all over the world.

propaganda openly, but rather often emphasize its manipulative nature. Others, which would make up the majority of contemporary works, are less sublime. Sometimes an author's attitude toward the subject is visible in the title. For example, *The Rape of Masses* (Chakhotin 1971) and "A Taxonomy of Bullshit" (Thompson 2016) do not really leave much room for guessing what side the authors are on. More often, a gloomy picture of propaganda comes from general descriptions, examples, and definitions offered by various authors.

The field is replete with "innovative" definitions of the phenomenon as nearly every scholar working on the subject proposes their own, with one element in common: propaganda is described as deception and falsification and thus inherently anti-democratic (Snow 2014; Marlin 2002; Jowett and O'Donnell 1999). To summarize hundreds of definitions of propaganda in the literature would be a difficult task. Thankfully, Huckin (2016) took on that burdensome project and offered a composite definition, which I believe perfectly captures the explicit negativity typical in contemporary studies of propaganda:

Propaganda is false or misleading information or ideas addressed to a mass audience by parties who thereby gain advantage. Propaganda is created and disseminated systematically and does not invite critical analysis or response (Huckin 2016, 126).

The first thing one should notice is how different this definition is from the ones offered by dictionaries of the 19th century. Gone are all religious associations, and so are any mentions of cultivating public opinion towards acceptance of a doctrine. The notion of propaganda is now reduced to a set of false ideas that the elites use to confuse the gullible masses - a definitions which is problematic for several reason.

First, it is *unscientific*. It throws objectivity and neutrality—the two bedrock principles of science—out of the window. Contemporary scholars/fighters of propaganda often accuse the pioneers of propaganda studies of “twisting” the culturally justified (negative) meaning of the term. This critique is widely popular, despite the fact that cultural understanding of the term is based on a set of loose assumptions about public resentment of propaganda, which emerged from the two great wars. The modern definition is also value-laden. Almost any political phenomenon can be argued to have good and bad sides, but propaganda somehow is rarely given this benefit of the doubt. The contemporary definition is not concerned with peeling all layers of the onion. By explicitly criticizing propaganda, it reduces the whole notion of the phenomenon to its negative side only and forces a specific and very limited interpretation of propaganda.

Second, the contemporary definition is *ahistorical*. It claims that it rolls back to the original meaning of propaganda, the one that existed before Bernays and his apology arrived to the scene. In this regard, I want to side with the latter and reaffirm once again that the word was originally used in religious circles and had a neutral meaning. What Bernays did not mention is that propaganda was a positive concept for a short time, before it took on a sinister tone. In 1907, Lenin brought it to political lexicon of the Bolsheviks by inventing “agitprop” (agitational propaganda), which bore a favorable connotation (Lenin 1977). That created a precedent, and for a short decade, the word “propaganda” was used liberally to describe everything from official news reports to pamphlets in Great Britain to rhetoric elevating “the spirits of the citizenry” in France (Huckin 2016, 120). All in all, suspicions about propaganda did not emerge until after WWI, and the contemporary pejorative meaning did not crystallize until after WWII. Ironically, the very conditions that

popularized propaganda (mass media and mass wars) also caused widespread skepticism about it. Bernays' 1928 book attempted to restore the good name of propaganda but fell victim to unfavorable historical circumstances. Perhaps, his vision could have received a better appreciation if it was not followed by the Soviets' rather reckless naming of their totalitarian informational machine "propaganda," which seemed to defy in practice everything positive about propaganda in theory. Furthermore, Hitler's coming to power in Germany in 1933 and Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment consolidated the demonic image of propaganda. For the US specifically, just a mere fact that its enemies were using the word "propaganda" to describe their public-campaign activities was enough to develop a distaste for propaganda. Ironically, the US used all the same methods of propaganda and even had dedicated government propaganda organs, just like did its ideological adversaries. To emphasize that the US was nothing like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Russia, however, American authorities deliberately dropped the "p" word from them. In reality, the US had not one, but three propaganda departments – Committee on Public Information, Office of War Information, and the Office of Strategic Services Morale Operations Branch (Laurie 1996). And yet, only messages delivered by the German and Soviet governments were called propaganda, simply because the values they advanced ran counter to the American values.

This old habit of linking propaganda to evil dies hard in America. Just recently, Illinois congresswoman Mary Miller said during a rally speech, "You know, if we win a few elections, we're still going to be losing, unless we win the hearts and minds of our children. This is the battle. Hitler was right on one thing: He said, 'Whoever has the youth, has the future.' Our children are being propagandized" (Maxwell 2021). The

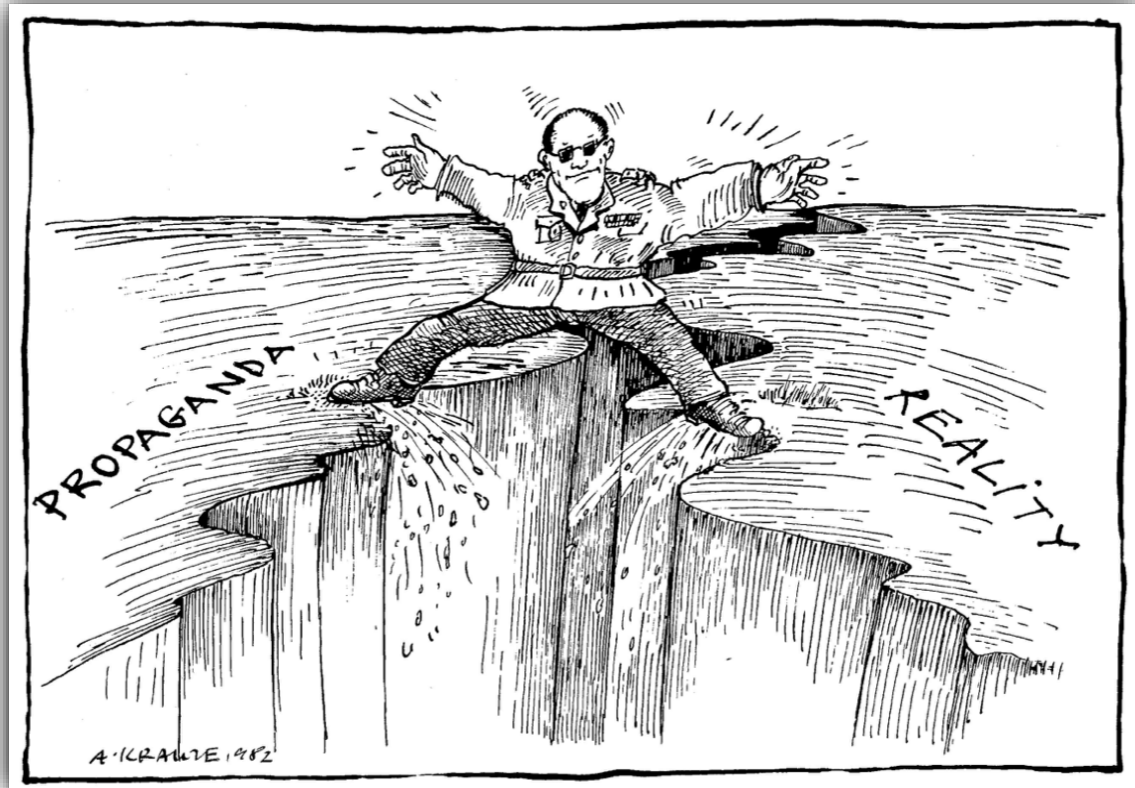
congresswoman was crucified online and in the media that that day for praising Hitler and mentioning propaganda, as if she quoted Hitler's anti-semitic slogans.

Long story short, World War II put the last nail in the coffin of legitimacy of propaganda. From that time on, propaganda became as we know it today—deceit, manipulation, and brainwashing.

There are striking similarities between the scholarly discourse of negativity of propaganda and popular political narrative. That is hardly surprising given that both are products of misperceptions stimulated by the two world wars. Compare Huckin's (2016) composite definition with that offered by a popular online dictionary: propaganda is "(1) the spreading of ideas, information, or *rumor* for the purpose of helping or *injuring* an institution, a cause, or a person; (2) ideas, facts, or *allegations* spread deliberately to further one's cause or *to damage* an opposing cause, and (3) a public action having such an effect" (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, emphasis added). Another popular online dictionary defines propaganda as "ideas or statements that are often *false or exaggerated* and that are spread in order to help a cause, a political leader, a government, etc" (Learner's Dictionary, emphasis added). The list of similarly oriented interpretations can go on and on, and it is not limited to verbal or written forms. Picture 1 is an example of graphic representation of propaganda that speaks volumes. It shows a gap between propaganda and reality which the government (depicted as a military kind here) unsuccessfully attempts to cover. This implies that propaganda never speaks truthfully of real events and is used as a political tool by the powerful to misrepresent real-world issues.

Does it mean that contemporary scholarly discourse of propaganda is entirely based on misguided public sentiments? Not quite. One peculiarity about the field of propaganda research is that its theoretical foundations never were able to precipitate real-life developments. There are disciplines that are strongly normative in their nature: for

Picture 1. Graphic representation of the concept of propaganda



Source: Welch (2013, 3).

examples, democratic theory serves as a guiding point for comparing how contemporary states stand against settled democratic principles. Propaganda studies never enjoyed such a prerogative. The field emerged out of a need to study real propaganda practices employed in the two world wars, catching up with the past events and thus producing a knowledge of the phenomenon a posteriori, not in advance. Moreover, of the two wars, WWII gave researchers much more material to work with than did WWI. That means that a disproportionate focus was drawn to two “evil” countries - Nazi Germany and the Soviet

Union, both of which were totalitarian and had ideologies that antagonized liberal democratic countries. As follows from historical works on the matter (Taylor 2003; Welch 2013; Chakhotin 1971; Roeder 1993; Winkler 1978), a country that most actively employed clandestine propaganda against both friends and foes in WWI was none other than Great Britain<sup>3</sup>, but it did not receive nearly as much scholarly attention as Social Nationalism in Germany and communism in the Soviet Union in WWII. Both flamboyantly used the word as a name for their official information ministries, which performed the same functions as their more-appropriately-named counterpart institutions in democratic countries. In a way, given that the most obvious cases for studying propaganda were, to borrow Taylor's (2003) brilliant expression, "the Nazis, the Soviets and other thoroughly nasty regimes," it was only natural for pioneering researchers to assume that propaganda was an invention of totalitarianism.

These historic circumstances defined not only the assumptions but also trajectory of the discipline. As the first scholarly works explored war-time campaigns, the entire field became heavily invested in studying war-associated rhetoric. The latter has become the

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor describes Great Britain in WWI as a master of "propaganda coups" (Taylor 2003). British propaganda worked simultaneously to blacken the image of Germany and persuade the United States to join the war. One of examples of British propaganda coups was a fake commemorative German medals that praised Germany for causing civilians' deaths when a passenger liner "Lusitania" was sunk in 1915. Although there indeed was a limited-edition collection medal in Germany after the tragedy, it did not celebrate the fact of killing the passengers. The British replicated the medal and changed it so it could be presented as a proof of Hunnish barbarism to the world and the US in particular. German Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels also emphasized British propaganda in World War I, saying that, "The cleverest trick used in propaganda against Germany during the war was to accuse Germany of what our enemies themselves were doing. Even today, large parts of world opinion are convinced that the typical characteristics of German propaganda are lying, crudeness, reversing the facts, and the like. [...] Germany was a defenseless victim of this campaign of calumny" (Bytwerk 2008, 42).

linchpin of propaganda studies. In other words, the term “propaganda” was popularized in conjunction with war, and for a long time, the two were exclusively associated with each other.

This focus on war rhetoric in the early days of the field created two serious problems. First, as the number of wars around the globe dropped toward the end of the century, so did interest of researchers in propaganda (other than Nazi Germany’s and the USSR’s). In the period after WWII until the Iraq War in 2003, which revived some interest in the phenomenon, “the concept of “propaganda” almost disappeared and reached near ‘conceptual extinction’ ” (O’Shaughnessy 2004). Second, as scholars put all their resources to study war propaganda, the idea that propaganda may exist outside of the war domain was overlooked and marginalized.

### **Propaganda in “Thoroughly Nasty Regimes” (Like Russia)**

The resulting theoretical vacuum is apparent in the double-standard approach typical for studies that investigate propaganda in authoritarian regimes. Western researchers write from a specific cultural position – that of explicit rejection of non-democratic regimes. They therefore introduce an implicit cultural bias in their research, which appeals to a western audience that shares those values. That creates a problem of empirical inconsistency in the field. For example, the infamous Russian propaganda has become a subject of increased interest among western researchers in recent years. Putin’s “soft power in a velvet glove,” as (Herpen 2015a) put it, has been characterized by its key features: ownership of foreign media sources (Herpen 2015b), state-corporate ownership of domestic media (Yushchenko 2007), intimidation of independent journalists (Wegren

2012), and rejection of journalistic principles of objectivity, neutrality, and truthfulness (Besemeres 2016). Yet, upon a closer look, it becomes clear that these authors do a fascinating job of investigating blatant corruption in Russia and illicit ways in which the Kremlin meddles in the media markets at home and abroad, but it has little to do with propaganda as such. An awful lot of frightening stories about Russian propaganda are cherry-picked nuances of its political system that do not make sense until placed in a bigger picture. For example, state ownership of different sectors of Russian economy is by no means limited to the media. Likewise, journalists are not the only ones that fear for their lives in that country. Strictly speaking, what is usually called “propaganda” in cases of authoritarian countries is often not propaganda but, rather, abuse of power. There are plenty of works that use the terms “dictatorship” and “propaganda” interchangeably (Herpen 2015a, 2015b; Gaidar 2007; Chen 2016; Wegren 2012). Very few works attempted to analyze the actual narrative and rhetoric in authoritarian countries, which is the most informative dimension of propaganda. Even fewer focused on exploring the inner working of propaganda agencies in authoritarian countries.<sup>4</sup> It is puzzling considering that the

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<sup>4</sup> Some interesting examples of few works that did tap into rhetoric of authoritarianism include analyses of the language of masculinity in political speeches (Tempest 2013), construction of culture-specific public images of politicians (Tempest 2013; Alekseeva 2012; Gouliamos et al. 2013) and the TV role in creation of such images (Bonner-Smeyukha 2007; Smulkina 2013).

linguistic aspects of propaganda have been studied well enough to provide a theoretical framework for such an analysis.<sup>5</sup>

One interesting caveat I noticed during my short detour to the linguistics of propaganda is that there is really not much of difference between rhetoric of authoritarian and democratic leaders - that is, if we ignore ideology draped with the rhetoric. In other words, if our analysis focuses strictly on properties of a political text, it would be impossible to conclude from that analysis alone that the speaker or writer has authoritarian or democratic tendencies. (Treading lightly here, but compare, for example, Adolf Hitler's electoral slogan "One people, one nation, one leader!" and Joseph Biden's "The President for all Americans!") It is a completely different conversation, however, if we place that analysis in a larger context, accounting for historic circumstances, speaker's identity, and values that speaker represents. Once again, that points to the fact that propaganda has no distinctive positive or negative bent until those who analyze it attach a value to it. Even then, the goodness or badness of such values depend on who analyzes or interprets it. Imagine the following scenario: the US government issues an official statement during the Cold War vowing to help third-world countries become capitalist economies. Now imagine how different reactions on those statements are in the USSR and the US. For American researchers, the statement demonstrates US commitment to liberalization and improvement

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<sup>5</sup> I recommend several fascinating works by linguistics scholars who investigated how authoritarian leaders departed from their democratic counterparts in use of specific words, such as "we" (Ilie 1998); whether they are prone to use the language of exclusivity (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990); and how it distinguishes them from democratic leaders' rhetorical figures (Billig 1995).

of the world, while their Soviet counterparts would blame the US for yet another attempt to exploit and subject developing countries.

Thus, it is a fairly straightforward conclusion that speech figures and expressions in and out themselves are properties of political rhetoric rather than inherent features of certain regimes, and that propaganda is not a “smoking gun” of dictatorships. Fairly straightforward, unfortunately, does not mean ironclad. In the field of actual research on the subject as to what constitutes contemporary authoritarian propaganda, everything seems more controversial than it is in theory. I suspect that it is due to theory being pretty weak. The field would have benefitted from an objective comparison of rhetoric in contemporary democracies and authoritarian countries alike, given that there are quite a few classic works on political rhetoric that can be applicable for a comparative analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Propaganda has proved to be tricky to define theoretically, and it is no wonder that empirical research has a hard time delineating propaganda from ideology, especially if that ideology is, well, something we personally do not like. Propaganda and ideology are, of course, connected: in order for ideology to survive in a society for any reasonably long

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, one may check whether political discourse in democracies differs from those in authoritarian regimes in terms of: drawing a hyperbolic line between an ingroup and an outgroup, or friends and enemies (Tajfel 1981); sending two-sided messages that combine both propaganda and refutation of counterarguments (Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield 1949); having a dilemmatic quality of combining contrasting commonplaces, or “ideographs” (McGee 1980) to appeal to several different audiences simultaneously (Billig 2003); following the central or peripheral route of influence, in accordance to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1984); reliance on form (visual structures) or message (semantic compositions) as described by (Billig 2003); the purpose, which may alternate between self-justification or criticism of others (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969); usage of idioms such as “the president”, “the prime minister”, “the economy” that refer to the nation-state indirectly and banally remind the citizens of their national identity (Billig 2003, 240), and others. And this is by no means an exhaustive list of possible ways to put to test an idea that propaganda is a feature of authoritarian states.

period of time, it has to be popularized, or propagated among the people. However, even the most detailed description of ideology does not automatically explain the inner working of propaganda used to advance that ideology. For the majority of researchers, propaganda remains a black box within ideology. Furthermore, ideology is definitely more attractive to study, simply because it is easier to explain it, relying mainly on interpretations of political culture, mass attitudes, political actors, and loosely defined political narrative. Propaganda, on the other hand, poses a challenge of precise measurement and systematic examination. The latter is almost impossible to achieve in context of authoritarian countries: outside researchers, especially those doing critical analysis, are not particularly welcomed and given access to restricted political information, and domestic political scientists are rarely interested in doing research that can harm their careers or even contradict their beliefs. As a result, it is commonplace to see works on authoritarianism that use ideology and propaganda interchangeably, without any systematic measurement of the latter. (Risking sounding too repetitive, I want to exploit the example of Russia once again here and refer my readers to works by three different authors who analyzed modern Russia's *idées fixes* of "putinism", pan-slavism, "sovereign democracy", and imperialism under one umbrella of propaganda (Chen 2016; Herpen 2015a; Gaidar 2007).

With researchers' interest focused on ideology and features of authoritarianism instead of propaganda *per se*, propaganda in democracies has been overlooked. In fact, the same logic is usually not applied in the context of democratic countries. Take the example of the US. Though there is some truly groundbreaking research on roots and consequences of ideology of American exceptionalism and militarism (Bacevich 2014; Thorpe 2014; Boggs and Pollard 2007), it does not describe the problem in quite such terms as

“propaganda.” Ironically, American ideological efforts enjoy positive connotations much more often than revisionist states’, despite being more aggressive and successful.

Furthermore, there is remarkable reluctance to apply the “p” word when it comes to politically biased media in democratic countries. There seems to be a universal assumption in place that the media in authoritarian countries run a repertoire of rumors, lies, and conspiracy theories, while their counterparts in democratic countries work within established boundaries of journalism. For instance, nobody doubts that Russian government-funded channel RT (Russia Today) is a pathetic example of free and objective press, but it is not common to see the Fox News, which often speculates conspiracy theories, being called a propaganda mouthpiece.<sup>7</sup> A side-to-side analysis of news reports shows that the magnitude of speculation and falsehood on the American channel often exceeds that on the Russian venue, as in case of dubious stories about Hillary Clinton’s health issues (RT 2016, Fox News 2016). Consistent disinformation on Fox News during the 2016 presidential campaign was at times identical to propaganda on notorious *Rossiya-1*, a direct descendant of the Soviet Union’s official state media agency, known for its openly anti-liberal agenda, with the same conspiracy theories about Clinton’s non-traditional sexual orientation (Falzone 2013; Calicchio 2019; Kiselyov 2016). This unflattering similarity of Fox News to some of the worst examples of modern authoritarian

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<sup>7</sup> Liberal late-night shows’ hosts are usually more outspoken than their counterparts in daytime outlets in calling out Fox News’s biased reporting propaganda. However, these programs are called shows for a reason because they are designed to entertain rather than seriously inform their liberal audiences. Furthermore, certain features of late-night shows, such as use of humor and a carte blanche for hosts to express their personal views, place them in a different category from serious news media outlets.

propaganda agencies is self-explaining, yet Fox News is generally considered just another media outlet exercising its freedom of speech. Even if Fox News happens to be called upon by liberal media, the word “propaganda” is rarely used to describe their reporting. The media in authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, are labeled “propaganda” for much less. Moreover, double standards are evident when RT’s multiplatform broadcasting in many countries is explicitly called Moscow’s “propaganda offensive” serving Putin’s revisionist agenda (Bullough 2013; Herpen 2015a), while the US’s very own state-funded and owned Voice of America, that has been broadcasting internationally in 47 languages since 1942, is considered a successful instrument of American “soft” and “smart” power (Kharkevich 2014; Nye 1990).

The danger of inventing a rhetorical contrast between “democratic journalism” and “authoritarian propaganda” is that it creates an extremely powerful “they versus us” distinction which affects the very perception of propaganda. It reduces the notion of propaganda to abuse of power, corruption, and simply flawed political ideology. That leaves a false impression that propaganda’s inherent features (if not required components) are intimidation of journalists, pervasive state censorship, punishment of dissidents, bribery of influential figures, and rejection of democratic norms. Kallis (2005) refers to this analytical culture as “particularism.” He writes that demonization of countries departing from a ‘western norm’ and “definitive distinctions between totalitarian ‘propaganda’ and information on the one hand, and information/persuasion in democratic societies on the other” ignore that efforts to legitimize power through information management are typical for “every modern political system” (Kallis 2005, 222).

Simply put, this framework for assessing propaganda takes *means for the ends*. This ecological fallacy constructs popular misperception of propaganda, which fails to distinguish between political communication and political oppression. More importantly, it reinforces a popular belief that systemic propaganda does not exist in democratic countries simply because democratic governments do not abuse power, like authoritarian ones do. This belief is the result of value-driven research marred with empirical incoherence, which, in its turn, is a consequence of theoretical problems around the definition of the term.

### **Propaganda in the US**

So far, I pointed out that existing research on propaganda is characterized by theoretical incoherence, which is a result of natural empirical limitations and value-driven nature of the field. Let me now turn my attention to the problem of propaganda in democracies - specifically, the United States.

The US makes a perfect case for analysis of empirical disparities of the field. The area of research on post-WWII American propaganda is relatively well-developed, at least in its coverage of pre-Trumpism and the “fake news” era. However, when researchers refer to “propaganda” in the US and other democratic countries, they almost always mean the corporate media. A special term “managed democracy” was coined to describe how conglomerates manipulate public interests through the media. Government, the original subject of propaganda studies in the 20th century and contemporary ones on authoritarian propaganda, has all but disappeared from research on contemporary democratic propaganda. In fact, the field nowadays is confined to studies of the media.

The literature on agenda-setting power of the media is massive, and it offers arguments extending to both extremes. Some treat mass media as almighty propaganda machines (Baum and Kernell 1999; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Kernell 1986; Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993); others claim they have no effect on public opinion (Edwards 2003; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Sears and Kosterman 1994); and yet others insist on limited power of the media (Canes-Wrone 2001; Prior 2007; Zaller 1992; Gamson 1992; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Why all the confusion?

Jacobs and Shapiro (2011) distinguish three eras in development of media studies. In the first half of the 20th century, the field was dominated by the hypodermic model of media effects which combined the image of the omnipotent press and the passive public.<sup>8</sup> The effect of the media was argued to be strong enough to not only convince people in the short run but also create long-lasting beliefs and adherences (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993). A competing account emerged in the 1970s and encompassed the model of marginal, or minimal effects. This model argues that individuals selectively accept or reject information coming from the media (Gamson 1992; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992), and that it is social circles, rather than the media, that cause gradual shifts in individuals' belief (Page and Shapiro 1992). Finally, the turn of the century brought about the model of informational interdependence, which elevates the influence of media consumers on news narrative to that of the media (Jacobs and Shapiro 2011).

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<sup>8</sup> The media in this theory is often described as the “hypodermic needle” or the “magic bullet.”

Another typology is suggested by Gaines and Kuklinski (2011), who explain conflicting ideas of political communications by changes in research methods. The first generation of researchers (early 1900s to mid-1940) found out a large and uncontested effect of the media on the public mind, but, due to the absence of sophisticated research methods, these results were not based on any systematic evidence. The second generation (mid-1940s to early 1980s) relied on observational data to present mutually exclusive accounts of media influence, from minimal (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944) to strong (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The third generation (mid 1980s – present) overwhelmingly<sup>9</sup> relies on experiments to derive conclusions about conditional power of the media (Chong and Druckman 2007, 2008; Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Another aspect of this debate relates to democratic theory. Critical voices have long been pointing out that run-of-the-mill government propaganda in democracies has been successfully replaced with brainwashing coming from the media. This concern is especially valid for America, where freedom of speech in the privately-owned media directly results in biased and partisan news coverage. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) put it, media in the US capitalize on public lust for negative news and propagate political views that serve corporate agenda rather than public interests. A special term was coined to describe media

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<sup>9</sup> Though rarely, some researchers, such as (Zaller 1992), use non-experimental methods to study media powers.

propaganda in capitalist liberal democracies and the US specifically – managed democracy, or corporate-managed democracy.

Ironically, even though the media in the US are not state-owned, the media market is extremely concentrated: ninety percent of the media in the country are owned by only 5 media conglomerates (Lutz 2012). That means that very democratic principles that shield the system from tyranny of the government at the same time empower corporations to dictate their agenda to the society through the media. Media watchdog organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting concluded that the media-military-industrial complex (such as a weapon-producing corporation GE) is responsible for boosting militarist values among the Americans by actively pushing forward a biased narrative praising US military involvement through the media it owns (Solomon 2005). Devereux (1996) tested this idea in case of the Vietnam War and found out that the war news coverage in mass media coincided with blocs of business interests owning those media outlets. “Diversity of opinion in business,” he wrote, “translates into diversity of opinion in the media” (Devereux 1996, 38).

Additionally, there is a growing concern about the media being part of the larger party network. Several works pointed out that in the context of the American democracy, parties act as broad networks which include aligned media outlets (Cohen 2008; Bawn et al. 2012). Driven by the intense partisan polarization and the profit-oriented desire to capture their share of the market, private-owned media therefore serve as Democratic or Republican party propaganda mouthpieces. In this view, the media can be understood as a propaganda machine for the party’s message. Moreover, partisan polarization contributes to an increasingly bitter and divisive rhetoric on both sides of political aisle (Lee 2016).

This framework, although does not explain the role of propaganda institutions in the White House and the separate president's propaganda agenda, also challenges the idea of the independent and unbiased media in American democracy.

Following the Iraq campaign, the field saw a boom in studies that promised to show how contemporary democratic governments uses propaganda (David and Jennifer 2005; Bacevich 2014; O'Shaughnessy 2004; Wolin 2008; Taylor 2003). This literature is misleading for two reasons. First, it looks at propaganda from the old narrow angle of war-time rhetoric. The problem with the latter is that it invariably embraces the most extreme and exaggerated language. The screaming qualities of war-time propaganda are objectively not the best representation of the routine propaganda that takes place at peace. There is also little value in applying knowledge derived from studying wars of the past to contemporary US military affairs. Wars used to have the rally-around-the-flag quality to them when they were waged openly and involved boots on the ground, which begged for public approval. The current stage of the US "war on terror," waged primarily through secret drone attacks (Scahill 2016), reverses this logic; if anything, war rhetoric now works to conceal military involvements, not emphasize or celebrate them. Second, such research (Oddo and Dunmire 2016; Taylor 2003; David and Jennifer 2005; Sheldon and John 2003) traces rhetoric through media coverage - that is, perpetuating the same stereotype that government's and corporate media's agenda in the war are not distinguishable from each other. That is not necessarily so. One would expect that corporations were interested in dragging on the war for as long as possible because they were making fortunes from skyrocketing weapon sales. The Bush administration's goal was to win the war, preferably with as little financial and

human toll as possible.<sup>10</sup> It is far more likely, then, that what research found as evidence of government propaganda in the media at that time was reflective of corporate interests rather than the Bush administration.

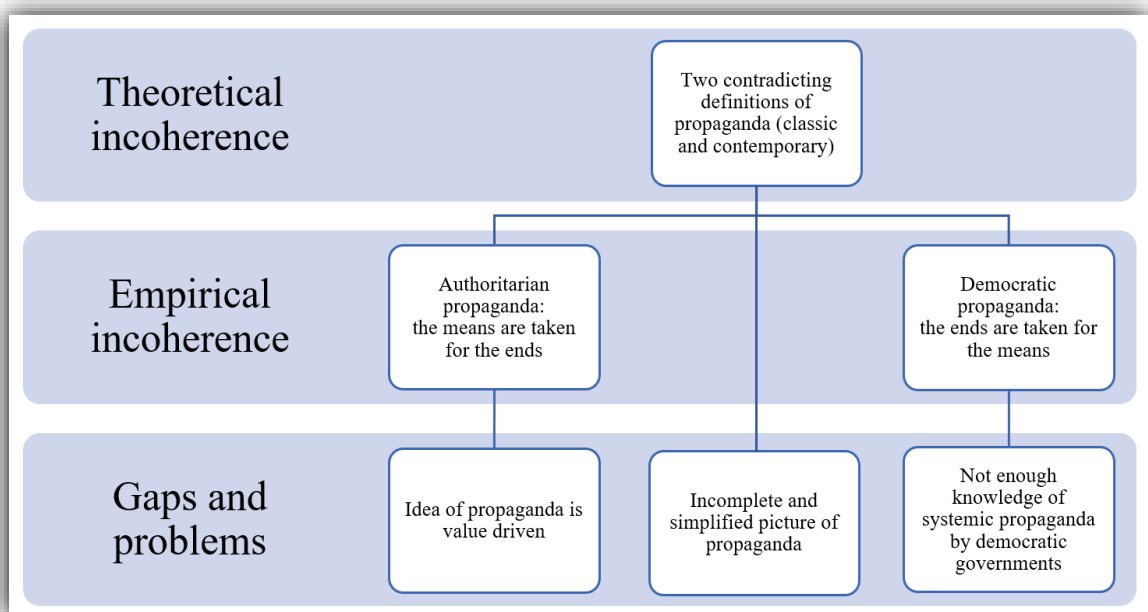
No doubt that ideological positions of media outlets are a crucial factor in contemporary democratic propaganda. It is far more important, though, to understand how exactly media interests interact with the government's. The existing literature does not offer a satisfactory explanation of this issue. The majority of it is confusing, because it treats the media as the starting point of systemic propaganda and offers no insight into government's role in this process. By obsessively focusing on just one part of the complicated multi-layered mechanism of propaganda in democracies, it takes *the ends for the means*. It fails to recognize that, in addition to their own agenda, the media also act as channels and *filters* of government agenda, and that not always are the two aligned.

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<sup>10</sup> Kumar (2007) describes how the embed program during the invasion to Iraq created public relation troubles for the Bush administration. Because reporters (embeds) were on the ground with soldiers, they did not have to rely on military generals for briefings any more. All information, including video and pictures of military advances, was reaching the media headquarters and disseminated faster than the White House was able to precipitate it. The result was that "the administration lost control over defining events—news organizations were doing that for themselves. [...] In an administration that prizes control, officials lost the power to direct how news organizations covered the war" (Kumar 2007, 18). Moreover, embeds on the ground covered different military units from a variety of locations, which created a very fragmented and incoherent picture of the war and raised a lot of questions. The White House struggled to provide a unified context for these fragmented media reports and tie it all together in a way that would fit its official narrative.

In sum, despite the rich literature about corporate propaganda in the US, the inner mechanism of systemic institutionalized government propaganda has not been well examined. To say that systemic propaganda in democracies can be studied on the level of the media these days is to miss the forest for the trees. I want to tell the story of systemic government propaganda in the US that begins with presidential administration, not the media. A story that does not perpetuate theoretical and empirical incoherences - that propaganda is akin to war rhetoric, or totalitarianism, or deception, or brainwashing, or abuse of power, or corporate media. In order not to continue the list of all misperceptions and prejudices about propaganda ad nauseam, I summarized status-quo deficiencies of the field in Figure 1. My argument posits that theoretical incoherence in the field, divided between the classic and contemporary definitions of propaganda, fuels empirical contradictions. Empirically, there is a tendency to overestimate propaganda in authoritarian regimes and underestimate it in democracies. The result is that our ideas of propaganda are

Figure 1. Theoretical and empirical problems in the literature on propaganda



simplified and value-driven, and we do not have enough knowledge about systemic propaganda by democratic governments.

### **What Propaganda is NOT**

Now, as I have discussed all the various ways in which propaganda is misunderstood, a natural question arises: what is propaganda, after all? As much as I would like to land on a perfect definition here, I hate the idea of introducing yet another interpretation of propaganda that will join an already far-too-numerous army of them.<sup>11</sup> However, in the interest of drawing operational boundaries for this project, I will briefly outline what propaganda is NOT. This *non-definition* of propaganda is the bedrock of the theoretical framework of this study.

1. Propaganda is not all white or all black. Although I give a lot of credit to Bernay's now-unpopular positive/neutral definition of propaganda, I must confess that I find it as limited and simplified as the contemporary negative one. When researchers take a stance pro or against propaganda, it creates a theoretical split in the field, which hinders the full picture of the phenomenon. My works aims to reconcile these conflicting approaches. I suggest that

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<sup>11</sup> To see how many definitions of propaganda are out there, and how different they are, two works can be helpful: Thomas Huckin's "Propaganda Defined" (2016) and David Welch's *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion* (2013).

propaganda can be *both* positive and negative, and as such is not a static phenomenon.

2. Propaganda is not an evil. It does not always seek to divide, exploit society's collective weaknesses, and otherwise cause the latter some harm.<sup>12</sup> The majority of existing descriptions of propaganda emphasize that it works to benefit the propagandist at the expense of propagandees, and even makes the latter do things they otherwise would not. I find such an approach contradicting the realities of politics. For any given candidate or policy, there are always parts of society, no matter how small, that sincerely support this candidate or this policy because they see benefits in doing so. No politician in their sound mind would seek to promote a cause, which not a single person in the country believes in. Moreover, it is almost impossible to draw a strict line between politicians' and people's interests. When President Obama launched an extensive campaign for his healthcare reform, did he hope to benefit himself or the people? At whose expense did President Bush run a propaganda campaign promoting conspiracies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction - his own or the American people? Remember that day when Trump's first impeachment lawyer argued in the Senate that, "Every public official that I know believes that his election is in the public interest," and therefore whatever the president does to get reelected is

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<sup>12</sup> For the opposite argument, see Henderson and Braun (2016b).

also in the public interest (Cummings 2020)? I generally prefer not to give credibility to such lawyers, but in this case this obvious cynicism is right on money: it is indeed hard to separate politicians' interests from those of the population. By extension, then, propaganda that serves political agenda (no matter good or bad) benefits propagandees as well as politicians.

3. Propaganda is not confined to authoritarian regimes. Democratic governments, both in the past and present, propagandize their agenda just as much. Moreover, the competitive nature of media market in democracies forces democratic administrations to put more efforts into getting their message out and through the media filter and use more sophisticated techniques of keeping public attention than their authoritarian counterparts. Propaganda exists in every single political system. As long as government pays attention to what people think, there is propaganda.
4. Propaganda is not a bygone political phenomenon. Although we often think of systemic propaganda in terms of the 20th-century war posters, patriotic movies, and information government information agencies, it does not mean that with dismissal of the latter democratic governments give up their efforts to set, spin, and control the public mood. Responding to the changed communications landscape, modern systemic propaganda takes more sophisticated and clandestine forms than in the past, but it still is present, active, and utilizes institutional resources.
5. Propaganda is not an antagonism of freedom of speech and democratic liberties, though it surely is seen as such, especially when it comes to authoritarian

propaganda. The current literature tends to confuse abuse of power in dictatorships with propaganda. In hopes to not repeat the same mistakes, this project does not concern itself with censorship, government-owned media, prosecution of independent journalists, and attempted murders of prominent political critics.

6. Propaganda is not a secret military program of psychological operations that comes handy during wars and aims to neutralize morale of the enemies. This project focuses on less obvious and more consequential propaganda routes that exist at the intersection of daily White House communications and the media agenda.
7. Propaganda is not a random instance of a politician' or a citizen's opinion on politics. Taylor (2003) distinguished between conscious and unconscious propaganda, where the latter refers to propaganda spread unknowingly by individuals who share what they believe is their own opinion and do not aim to change other people's behavior and opinions (that describes every single individual who ever had a political discussion over the Thanksgiving table, myself included). This project studies *intentional* propaganda that requires full awareness of the act, complex multi-layered planning, and long-term goals, which are only achievable through special institutionalized structures such as in the White House, or government-wide surrogate program (explained in later chapters).
8. Propaganda is not conspiracy theories. Propaganda requires attainable goals, straightforward plans, constant monitoring and, if needed, correction in the

process, as well as gauging its effectiveness at the end. Conspiracy theories have none of these characteristics: they emerge randomly, evolve uncontrollably, and do not try to reach specific goals. Unlike propaganda, conspiracy theories do not have a clear managing center; they are a collective endeavor in a sense that anyone may contribute rumors and wild interpretations to its narrative. Finally, conspiracy theories do not enjoy support of official government channels. Although President Donald Trump and some of his avid supporters in Congress peddled and reiterated bizarre QAnon claims in 2020, it never crossed the threshold between their opinions and official view of the administration.

9. Propaganda is not biased news coverage on behalf of the media-military-industrial complex. Ideological sympathies of the media play a huge role in working of the *media filter*, but it does not decide what the government wants to say in the first place.
10. Propaganda is not a subtype of commercial advertising. One of the most persistent simplifications of propaganda is explaining it as if the government was a company trying to sell consumers products and services. In my view, dissimilarities outweigh similarities between the two. Commercial companies rarely have anything else in mind other than profit, and their advertising is built around a single idea - make people buy products and services. Political propaganda, on the other hand, has more at stake: it serves higher goals, reaches out to more people, and creates effects far more consequential than any commercial advertising campaign ever hopes for. Say, it will not be the end of

the world if a company fails to advertise its new toothpaste (or canned fish, or sneakers, or anything else). It is a very different story if a president fails to promote an important tax reform that could have could have provided financial help to millions of Americans (and would not make said propaganda campaign a waste of taxpayers' dollars). Furthermore, commercial brands do not have to worry about the media 'gatekeepers' - something that presidents have to be constantly vigilant about in their propaganda outreach.

11. Propaganda is not electoral campaigning (but the latter is type of the former).

Much like war-time propaganda, electoral campaigns employ exaggerated rhetoric and aggravated language. The aggressive "zero-sum-game" message of electoral campaigning needs to grab and hold attention in order to be effective. On the contrary, this study focuses on the mundane, day-to-day clandestine propaganda by the government that is calculated to work in incremental steps over a long time. Electoral campaigning and systemic political propaganda are like two sisters: the former is a center-of-attention, cheerleader party girl everybody knows and talks about, while the latter is a quiet introvert A+ student who likes to spend her days alone, getting ready for the SAT. My project therefore investigates the mysterious second sister, who does not like to draw publicity to herself to gets things done.

12. Propaganda is not an ideology or values. Intentions behind propaganda can be

good or bad, propagandists' objectives can be questionable, and ideas propaganda serves can be terribly wrong, but propaganda as a communications tool is always neutral. The problem with assigning value to propaganda is

context-dependency: what looked like a horrible and morally-sick ideology to the United States was an exciting new nationalist system for German fascists in the 1930-1940s. Hitler sought to promote his vision, and President Roosevelt pursued the exact opposite. Yet both sides used precisely the same tool - propaganda - for their opposing tasks.

13. Propaganda is not a clever rhetorical trick or the “art of making the worse seem the better cause” (Henderson and Braun 2016a). Although propaganda benefits from witty slogans and emotion-steering visuals, it is not a magic wand that takes away people’s ability to critically assess information. In many instances, propaganda seeks to educate and not just manipulate people’s emotions at the expense of logic and reason. In short, it is not an “exploitation of human inadequacies” (Thomson 1977, 4). Furthermore, the line between propaganda and education is not as strict as imagined: “One person's propaganda may be another person’s education” (Jowett and O'Donnell 1999, 11). For example, history textbooks at schools across America mirror partisan divisions between states. Golstein (2020) found that although textbooks are written by the same authors and published by the same publisher, the content is customized for each state, offering slightly different interpretations of the same historical events.

14. Propaganda is not (always) deception, falsification, distortion, brainwashing, indoctrination, and the like. It may contain false or misleading information or even be literally it, but it would be but one component or instance of propaganda which cannot do justice to the whole concept. Likewise, not every political lie

is propaganda. Just the fact that a politician is lying does not indicate there is a collaborated propaganda plot behind it.

15. Propaganda is not always expressed in evident formats such as text, speech, or visuals. Sometimes saying nothing and skipping the topic entirely is the most effective communications strategy. In the realm of propaganda, what is said and what is *not* said are equally important.

16. Propaganda is not a repetitive one-size-fit-all narrative. Equipped with extensive institutional apparatus and resources, contemporary systemic propaganda exploits increasing fragmentization of the mass media and microtargeting technologies to tailor its message to specific audiences within a larger unified discourse.

### **Chapter in a Nutshell**

This chapter disentangles theoretical and empirical controversies and gaps in the literature on propaganda. To explain contradictory definitions of the concept, I categorize the literature into two schools of thought. The classic school of thought, advanced by Edward Bernays in the 1920s, proposed an essentially technocratic approach to propaganda. The school interprets propaganda as a useful mechanism in the modern world that helps the society make sense of the chaotic universe of information. The contemporary school of thought emerged after World War Two as a reaction on German and Soviet propaganda. It assesses propaganda as deception and brainwashing, and therefore criticizes its applications in democracy. Although unscientific and historically inaccurate, this vision

corresponds to the popular negative connotation of propaganda in today's political lexicon in the US.

Additionally, there is a problem of empirical inconsistency in the field, where different standards and value-driven measurements are applied to study propaganda in authoritarian and democratic regimes. I used case studies of contemporary Russia and the US to demonstrate such biases. Research on the former tends to present abuse of power and direct censorship as propaganda, while the subject of government's propaganda in the US has been replaced by that of the corporate media.

The second part of the chapter reconciles these theoretical and empirical contradictions. Acknowledging that both schools of thought's explanations are one-sided, I propose a *non-definition* of propaganda that disproves common misperceptions of propaganda as a harmful practice and clarifies the conceptual boundaries of this study. Overall, the chapter prepares a theoretical ground for a well-rounded theory of democratic propaganda as a system of government institutions and the media filter, which I introduce in the next chapter.

Then if anyone at all is to have the privilege of lying,  
the rulers of the State should be the persons;  
and they, in their dealings either with enemies  
or with their own citizens, may be allowed to  
lie for the public good.

Plato, *The Republic*

## **THE MODEL OF DEMOCRATIC PROPAGANDA AND THE MEDIA FILTER**

Imagine living in North Korea. There is a lot of information pouring in from the news every day, but all the media outlets are owned by the North Korean government. There is an article in the Constitution that guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but all the news is released and distributed by the North Korean Central News Agency.

Imagine living in China. You have access to the Internet, but you cannot open Facebook or Twitter because the Great Firewall of China has blocked all foreign websites that are critical of the Chinese Communist Party.

Now, let us return back to the United States. We are free to choose what to read, watch, and listen to. Nobody restricts our access to information (unless, of course, we forget to pay for the Internet). There are thousands - literally, thousands - of news websites, podcasts, and political blogs, alongside with millions of social media accounts that either create or amplify news. And the government does not control any of them. People in

modern democracies are very lucky to have governments that do not censor news or own media sources. Does it mean that the news is objective, too?

This is where it gets tricky. The relationship between censorship and news objectivity in modern democracies is not straightforward. The freedom of speech and private ownership of media outlets by themselves do not guarantee that news is objective, or complete, or even truthful. What they do guarantee is the absence of direct government control of the media narrative. That indicates that the US has a functioning democratic system yet does not settle a question about *systemic* propaganda. Modern democratic governments can and do exercise propaganda in forms other than controlled press. Unlike their authoritarian colleagues, they do not need to maintain a monopoly on the truth as long as they figure out how to successfully marry independent media's goals with their own.

The problem with the existing literature is that it tells us a lot about corporate and partisan propaganda in the media— and little about propaganda that originates in the White House. An argument that the media serve as propaganda vehicles for the administration is built on a very simplistic assumption that interests of the media and the administration are aligned. What happens when they are not? Practically every recent occupant of the Oval Office did not feel so great about the media. President Bush referred to it as “filter” (Kumar 2007), President Carter held deep distrust in the media, President Nixon plainly called it “the enemy” (Maltese 1994, 42), and President Trump made “fake news” a synonym of the media in American political lexicon. We know that the media are more likely to oppose public agenda of presidents whose ideology is not compatible with their own, but we do not know how exactly they oppose it. Do they simply ignore the original message, or there is a subtle elaborate way of diluting and delegitimizing the message? Similarly, we

intuitively understand that ideologically compatible media support the president's message, but have no systemic understanding of what "support" looks like on newspaper's pages and websites. Finally, even the most loyal outlets may disagree with the government. President Clinton, for example, complained about the liberal media's inclination to cover his administration's failures in much greater depth than its achievements, describing it as being "at the mercy of press coverage" (Kumar 2007, 36). How do the media deal with a message from an otherwise ideologically aligned administration that may potentially hurt the media's own interests, be it profit-driven or transparency-seeking? In short, when both the administration's and media's agendas are biased in their own ways, what does the final message look like?

**Guide to reading this chapter.** This part of my project develops a comprehensive empirical framework for studying systemic propaganda in contemporary democracies. The main research question of this chapter is the following: how does the administration's propaganda interact with that of the corporate-owned newsrooms? I first engage with the literature on news consumption to explain why propaganda, in conditions of the Internet and media pluralism in the 21st century, still proliferates in contemporary democratic societies. I then set off the discussion of the main question by highlighting gaps in the existing literature, which overwhelmingly focuses on propaganda in the media and ignores propaganda on the level of governmental institutions. After that, I propose a theory of systemic democratic propaganda that clarifies the interconnected yet separate roles the administration and the media play in the cycle of systemic propaganda in the US. Afterwards, I develop a novel measurement of the media filter, which represents it as a spectrum, ranging from heaviest to lightest forms of filtering, and can go in the negative or

positive direction. In conclusion, I explain how the media filter will be used for empirical measurement of systemic propaganda in the following chapters.

The chapter makes a five-fold contribution to our knowledge of systemic democratic propaganda. (1) It reconciles several theoretical contradictions in the field dominated by theories of corporate propaganda in modern democracies at the expense of institutional origins of the phenomenon. (2) It covers gaps in the literature created by the lack of attention to government propaganda. (3) It conceptualizes a new paradigm of democratic propaganda, which clearly delineates propagandistic interests of the White House from those of the media and explains how the two interact. (4) It theorizes the media as a filter in the process of systemic propaganda. (5) It coins the notion of the spectrum of media filtering and develops an empirical framework for studying it.

### **The Great Propaganda Paradox**

Presidents in democracies depend on public consent, and as long they care about public opinion, they will try to propagandize their agenda. There are a lot of mediums for them to do so: televised political speeches, interviews, rallies, meetings with other politicians, press conferences, official accounts in social media, op-eds, private accounts on social media, etc. The way they choose depends on 1) access to institutionalized resources and 2) ability of their messages to survive the media gatekeepers. Managing a wholesome propaganda campaign demands a lot more from its creators today than it used to be in the 20th century. Blood-stirring posters and brazen propaganda ministries proved to be effective when there was just a handful of print newspapers, one radio station, and three TV networks, but they would not have quite the same effect today, when people have access to millions of news

websites, podcasts, and social media. Because presidents now have to maintain a 24-hour presence in multiple media formats targeted at different audiences, contemporary presidency can be described as “ubiquitous” (Scacco and Coe 2016).

The Internet has been both blessing and curse for the White House. Light-speed access to an enormous variety of news sources poses a problem for systemic propagandists. Bill Clinton’s secretary Mike McCurry lamented that when the media space opened to multiple players, it created enormous challenges for the communication strategists in the government, causing their message to lose coherence (Kumar 2007, 3). Yet, it also presents a greater possibility for politicians to tailor their message for smaller groups of citizens without fearing it would interfere with the bigger narrative, provided that the politicians are able to exploit peculiarities of the media system.

The contemporary media system has two conflicting properties that create an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the Internet has brought about profound changes in how news is created and consumed. News is very interactive, diverse, and accessible. Citizen journalism often draws more attention in the online community than do the traditional media. On the surface, we are happily living in an era of informational interdependence (Jacobs and Shapiro 2011), in which people enjoy by diversity of media sources and benefit from a plethora of competitive perspectives every day to have a better and more complete understanding of the political realm. On the other hand, fragmentation of the media space is so enormous that it cancels out its own benefits of diversity. “Our situation is defined by an abundance of information but a lack of understanding of what it means” (Kumar 2007, 3). It is impossible for anyone to screen hundreds of news sources every day, let alone millions of political blogs and news accounts in social media. The news

flow today is simply overwhelming. This extremely noisy communication environment, also described as “information superhighways” (Taylor 2003), makes it too difficult to make sense of it all. Naturally, people, craving for some kind of an order in this chaotic universe, restrict their exposure to information. “No one can see, hear, or read everything. In the course of any hour, let alone a day, every one of us engages in massive filtering, simply in order to make life manageable and coherent” (Sunstein 2007, 10). That means that, although there is a vast universe of possible sources to use, a single individual only uses a very limited number of them.

What defines what sources said individual will pick? The literature suggests that people only use news media that are concordant with their political views and reinforce their beliefs. Such “unmotivated biases” (Levy 2003) constitute what is called “selective exposure” in the communication literature. This phenomenon was previously attributed to avoidance of cognitive dissonance, partisan polarization (Prior 2007), and low political knowledge among the American public (Carpini and Keeter 1996). Another powerful mechanism that confines people to select few sources is the technology. Users are able to pick the content they want to see and silence the rest. Pre-customization and personalization of newsfeed by users results in “echo chambers” when all people hear is voices of like-minded people (Sunstein 2001, 2007; Morozov 2011; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson 2016). In addition, website algorithms create “filter bubbles” by offering users information tailored to their location, past clicks, and search history, and isolating them from all other viewpoints (Pariser 2011).

Therefore, although the advent of the Internet and social media promised to replace the traditional top-down dynamic between the media and news consumers, it fell short of

delivering that promise. If anything, not only did the Internet not eliminate propaganda, it actually made it easier for propaganda to spread online because it makes it possible for news to travel faster and reach more people through traditional communication routes (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017).

For all its wonders, the decentralized nature of the Internet has contributed to propaganda more than it helped fight it. Instead of washing away the media's alleged monopoly on the public discourse, it clustered news consumers around few extremely polarized sources thus putting even greater restrictions on people's exposure to competing points of view. Instead of opening up the door to the world of news production for other players, it opened up a Pandora box of propaganda, conspiracy theories, and straightforward lies of unclear origins. The media, the supposed mogul of propaganda, loses the battle for influence to opinion leaders, citizen journalists, and even shady conspiracy forums. Ever since the Internet has become the major communications medium, the newsrooms' main concern is to quickly get information out before their competitors, which has been a detriment to news accuracy and authenticity. It is not uncommon for today's media to fall into the newsworthiness trap and report inaccurate stories (otherwise known as fake news). The collateral damage of this strategy has been Americans' trust in the media, which has been on a steady decline for several decades now.

Therefore, despite the theoretical informational freedom brought about by the Internet, it does not prevent the White House from discovering new and even increased possibilities for propaganda. Our time is characterized by the *great propaganda paradox*: having too much choice in the media sphere appears to bring the same result as having no

choice at all. A brave new world indeed: “people are flooded with a pacifying array of amusement so that freedom becomes irrelevant” (Jensen 2016, 269).

### **The Model of Democratic Propaganda**

We are bombarded with propaganda every day. It pours in from everywhere - newspapers, social network websites, cable channels, billboards on the road, Hollywood movies, commercial advertising on TV, and town-hall meetings with state senators. On the face of it, all these are similar. “[T]he advertising, marketing, and public relations industries would be described collectively as the propaganda industries” (Jensen 2016, 271).

The issue here is that some components of these industries are studied much better than others. The main problem with existing explanations of systemic propaganda in democracies is that government institutions are understudied, while the media are overstudied. The media has become the center of propaganda studies and replaced the government as the main propaganda entity in democracy. Existing literature overwhelmingly focuses on the corporate-media propaganda machine, entirely removing the government out of the picture.<sup>13</sup> All too often, when we think about systemic propaganda in the US, our thoughts go straight to the media. That leaves an impression that

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<sup>13</sup> One notable exception is the research done by Martha Joynt Kumar over the course of several decades. She realized that the internal White House communications operations deserved its own analysis, which she offered in a series of excellent works (Kumar 2007, 2017). Even though Kumar’s research did not concern itself with systematic in-depth analysis of the media filter, the author’s analytical observations about daily White House communications routine, as she witnessed it during four presidential administrations, were very helpful in shaping my understanding of the White House’s structures.

the government, with all its vast resources, is but a powerless entity in the face of omnipotent fourth branch, and that the media is the originating point of all propaganda in contemporary democracy.

Such logic is faulty. It is a mistake to scrutinize the media and overlook another player in the propaganda game, which has its own agenda, structures, and techniques of influencing public opinion. The more scrutiny the former receives, the less is known about propaganda that originates in the government. It would be absurd to imagine that the White House's public agenda works at the whim of the media. The media, too, do not depend on presidents in their decision on how to cover political subjects. The nature of their relationship is co-existence (or competition), when both sides have to work with each other in order to ensure democratic transparency (for the media) and public outreach (for presidents). Their propaganda operations, therefore, can be connected and even mutually reinforcing at times, but are *not the same*. It is always two independent institutions of propaganda, not one. And it is the media that reach out to the White House for information, not the other way around, which makes the media's role in the system more of a *filter* rather than the starting point of propaganda.<sup>14</sup>

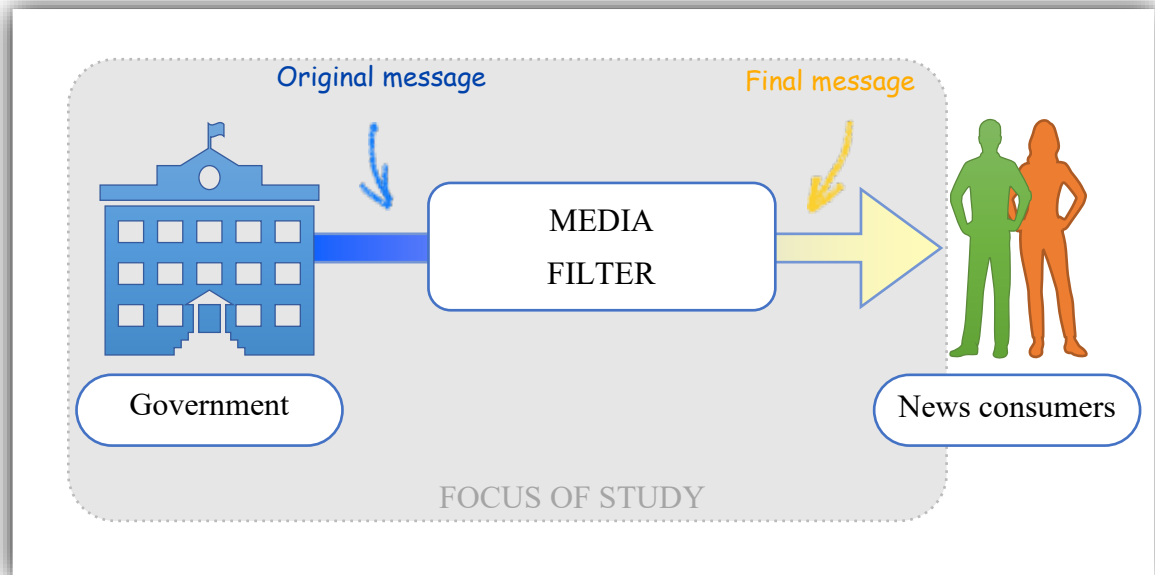
There are three main components of systemic democratic propaganda: original government's message, media filter, and final message. I came up with a model of democratic propaganda that explains how they fit together (Figure 2). The idea is that the

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<sup>14</sup> Coincidentally, president George W. Bush also referred to the press as a "filter" (Kumar 2007), complaining that the media effectively decide the fate of president's message.

original message produced by the White House looks different after it has passed through the media filter on its way to news consumers.

Figure 2. The model of democratic propaganda



The main advantage of my model over existing media-centered explanations is that it allows to delineate the interests of the administration from the media and trace how the administration’s original message becomes diluted with the media’s own agenda when it travels through the filter. In addition to filling in this gap, my model is better equipped to make sense of the elephant in the room - President Trump’s social media communications. The dominant view in the literature is that the relationship between the press and presidential administrations is usually “continuing and cooperative” (Kumar 2007, xix) because the two sides need each other to further their own goals. This existing media-centered paradigm cannot explain away the phenomenon of Trump’s aggressive online propaganda, which at times easily circumvented and defied the media. Trump’s constant bashing the mainstream media highlights the deficiencies of existing explanations that do not distinguish between government’s and media’s narratives. Not only did Trump’s

communication style show that open antagonism with the press works well for gaining populist support, it has also benefitted the liberal media in question, whose revenues have risen during Trump's presidency (Belvedere 2016). It reminds us that the White House and the media are not always cooperative, and that open confrontation between the two has its strategic merits. My model, therefore, highlights the competitive nature of the government-media relationship, rather than its cooperative side.

Although it is important to see how successful propaganda is, my research has a bias toward institutions and does not investigate the impact of political communications on individuals. For one reason, behavioral aspects of communications are the most studied topic in the field, and I highly doubt the need for me to repeat the same conclusions as thousands of scholars before me. Another reason is that governmental institutions are understudied when it comes to propaganda because research is usually centered on the media. Lastly, I find it challenging to conclusively delineate the effect of the White House's propaganda on individuals from that of the media, considering that the media delivers the president's message.

### **The Spectrum of Media Filtering**

Another detrimental problem with our understanding of government-media relationship in democracy is that we imagine it in a very simplistic way. We treat their interaction as a static phenomenon, where the media, if ideologically aligned, facilitate the passage of and reinforce government's message, or obstruct it if otherwise. This misperception about how the media work is typical. Jensen (2016), for example, tackles this problem from a perspective of a radical left thinker who spent decades trying to circumvent the media filter.

He concludes that the only way to survive it is to go around it. This is a good advice if we assume that the media always act in a “yes or no” manner, that is, their only response to the incoming information is a zero-sum game. What if that information comes from the executive branch - a giant complicated structure that has dozens of offices and thousands of people in its disposal to get its message heard? It is pretty hard to believe that the media deal with the president’s message in a simple pass/fail manner all the time. For starters, had it been the case, there would have not been much coverage of democratic presidents in conservative outlets, or Republican presidents in liberal ones. What goes on inside the media filter when president’s message travels through it is a way more multilayered and complex process. This section provides a theoretical description of the inner-working of the media filter - a novel measurement that I develop as a better way to capture the range of media’s filtering options.

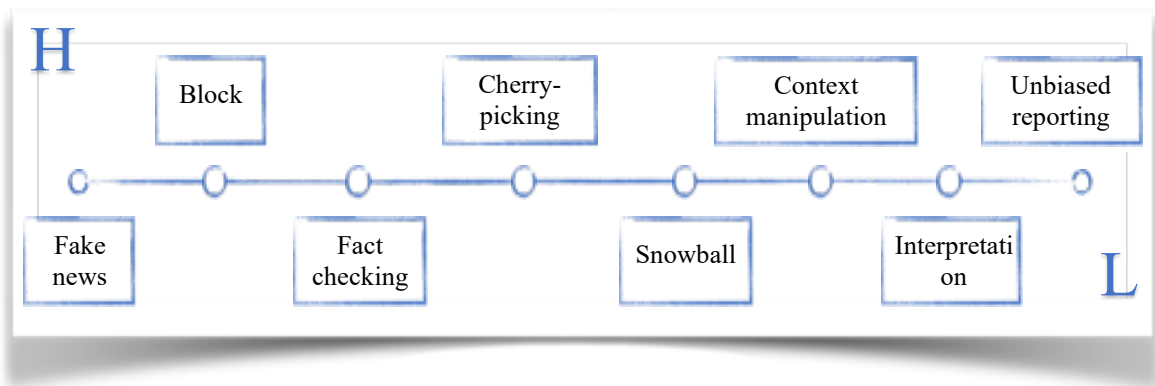
The media have an array of filtering tools in their disposal, which they utilize depending on their ideological bent. They are free to emphasize some edges of storylines and downplay or ignore others. For the administration’s messages that fit nicely into their own narrative, media sources may report them as close to the original ones as possible or even give them a boost of positivity, while in other cases, they may distort messages to the negative side, or simply not circulate them. The beauty of the filtering is that it works unnoticeably for news consumers. As Jacques Ellul put it, “The orchestration of press, radio and television to create a continuous, lasting and total environment renders the influence of propaganda virtually unnoticed precisely because it creates a constant environment” (Ellul 1965, 21-22). Most of the time, news consumers see only the final message after the media filter and are unaware of what the original message looked like. In cases when they

glimpse the original message (say, during a live interview), it is often followed by a network's roundtable discussion or a host's commentary, which may bend, twist, or emphasize portions of the message (in other words, filter the message a posteriori). The interviewee has no control over how their message will be played out in the media afterwards, nor for how long, and a narrative the media adopts to explain the meaning of the message to its audience is most likely the one an average viewer will walk away remembering. This tendency to reduce the news to "sound bites" and "talking-head analysis" has a detrimental effect on the media's ability to produce complete arguments and public justifications (Rinke 2016). Moreover, it destroys democratic deliberation as it leaves citizens less informed and more cynical (Drew, Svehla, and Lyons 2010).

The literature describes agenda-setting power of the mass media in terms of its ability to set up salience of issues for the public, or priming (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 2005; Zaller 1992). In addition to priming, media scholars distinguish framing - interpretations, moral evaluations, and value judgements in media messages (Entman 1993; Scheufele 1999). In other words, "The media not only can be successful in telling us *what to think about*, they also can be successful in telling us *how to think about it*" (McCombs 2005).

My research offers a more nuanced look at the media effects. Although framing and priming allow capture the media agenda, they do not explain the interplay between the media and the administration's propaganda. To address that, I organize media filtering techniques as a spectrum, ranging from the heaviest (H) to the lightest (L) forms of filtering (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The spectrum of media filtering



1. On the lightest side of the spectrum is *unbiased reporting*. It describes a situation in which the media outlet reports a piece of news in its original state as it came from the White House, without auditing or removing anything from it. In this case, the message reaches the public unaltered, which is an idealistic assumption in the context of any contemporary democracy. Not only are the media restricted by ideological commitments, but it also would be not cost-effective for them to cover everything (Martin and McCrain 2019), nor would it make any sense as news consumers are unable to absorb all the information anyway. The media therefore make a decision on what parts of the original message to report and how to go about it. For TV news media, it is a common place to presents the government's message in its entirety: say, a live president's speech is usually streamed uninterrupted.

However, right after that, it is customary for the media to engage in an “instant analysis” where the host and often invited guests interpret the original message and offer additional insights, or simply discuss their subjective reactions. Quite often, the commentary runs longer than the original message. Inevitably, such analysis is prone to be biased. In such a case, although the news began as unbiased reporting, the end result downgrades it to one of the cases of media filtering.

2. The media may provide *interpretation* of the original message, which is probably the most innocent form of filtering, as it is easily recognizable. It usually features some speculations and personal opinions and overall sets the tone of a discussion rather than factual news and leaves some room for a debate. Often, such pieces are explicitly introduced as opinion pieces, but are meant to look like credible news because they are written by political experts for a well-respected media outlet. The news in such cases may be predictions based on superficial speculations rather than facts, as was the case with a NYTimes analytical piece (Picture 2). Alternatively, it may present debatable topics as fact, assessing the latter through an ideological lens. Picture 3 shows an opinion piece at Fox News written by Representative Barry Moore and Trump’s White House chief of staff Mark Meadow. In the article, the authors criticize the Biden’s immigration plan and put an overly positive spin on Trump’s border policies. Such an assessment is largely a matter of partisan interpretations. In comparison to previous administration, Trump indeed introduced some novelties in the policy area. Yet, his temporary travel bans did not come even close to reforming the country’s immigration system, nor was he able to complete

building the wall, nor did the wall stop all illegal immigration as he promised in his presidential campaign.

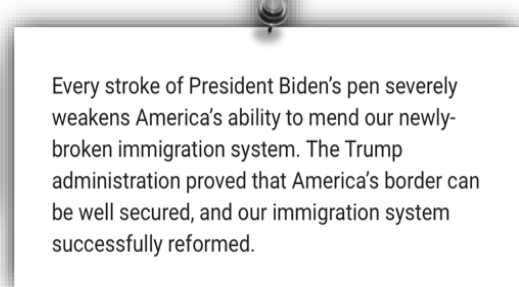
Picture 3. Example of interpretation in the New York Times

A screenshot of a New York Times article snippet, pinned to a surface. The text reads: "While Mr. Schumer awaits bipartisanship, he is preparing for procedural war — a prospect growing more likely considering the extraordinary scope of Mr. Biden's emerging agenda." The snippet is presented in a white box with a black border and a shadow, suggesting it is a physical printout.

While Mr. Schumer awaits bipartisanship, he is preparing for procedural war — a prospect growing more likely considering the extraordinary scope of Mr. Biden's emerging agenda.

Source: The New York Times, April 29, 2021

Picture 2. Example of interpretation on Fox News

A screenshot of a Fox News article snippet, pinned to a surface. The text reads: "Every stroke of President Biden's pen severely weakens America's ability to mend our newly-broken immigration system. The Trump administration proved that America's border can be well secured, and our immigration system successfully reformed." The snippet is presented in a white box with a black border and a shadow, suggesting it is a physical printout.

Every stroke of President Biden's pen severely weakens America's ability to mend our newly-broken immigration system. The Trump administration proved that America's border can be well secured, and our immigration system successfully reformed.

Source: Fox News, June 1, 2021

3. They may engage in subtle *context manipulation*. While preserving the tone of the message, they may provide an ideologically-driven context to help the public see a larger picture. The context can be overly positive or overly negative, although facts in the final message will be on par with the original one's. For example, the

Picture 4. Example of context manipulation in the Washington Post

A screenshot of a Washington Post article snippet, pinned to a surface. The header includes the Washington Post logo and the slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness". Below the header are navigation links: "Coronavirus", "U.S. map", "World map", and "Vaccine tr". The main headline is under the sub-header "Economic Policy" and reads: "Trump signs \$2 trillion coronavirus bill into law as companies and households brace for more economic pain". The snippet is presented in a white box with a black border and a shadow, suggesting it is a physical printout.

**The Washington Post**  
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Coronavirus U.S. map World map Vaccine tr

**Economic Policy**

**Trump signs \$2 trillion coronavirus bill into law as companies and households brace for more economic pain**

Source: *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2020.

Picture 5. Example of context manipulation in the Washington Post

A screenshot of a Washington Post article snippet, pinned to a surface. The header includes the Washington Post logo and the slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness". Below the header is a navigation link: "Economy". The main headline is under the sub-header "Economy" and reads: "Biden stimulus showers money on Americans, sharply cutting poverty and favoring individuals over businesses". The snippet is presented in a white box with a black border and a shadow, suggesting it is a physical printout.

**The Washington Post**  
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Economy

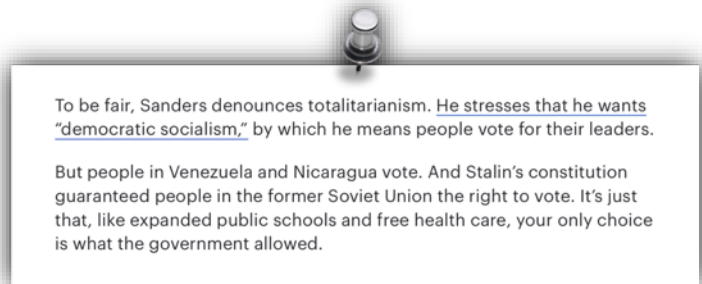
**Biden stimulus showers money on Americans, sharply cutting poverty and favoring individuals over businesses**

Source: *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2021.

Washington Post placed the news about the Coronavirus relief bills by the Trump and Biden administrations in two very different contexts, implying that the former was essentially a futile measure (Picture 4), while the latter would solve all country's problems at once (Picture 5).

4. They may employ what I call the *snowball* strategy. The idea of this strategy is that a media outlet exaggerates the original message. An example of this strategy is a discussion in the media about Senators Bernie Sander's socialist views. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Bernie Sanders was frequently attacked for

Picture 7. Example of snowballing in The Hill



Source: *The Hill*, March 3, 2020.

Picture 6. Example of snowballing on Fox News



Source: *Fox News*, February 24, 2020 (video samples and transcripts were scraped from the Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer).

praising leftist governments around the world. The fact was that the senator only favorably assessed certain social policies of the Soviet Union, Nicaragua, and Cuba, like free education and health care, and never backed such regimes. However, various media outlets overdramatized his position as supportive of the idea of a communist government in general, and concluded that his vision of democratic

socialism in the US promoted government’s brutality, political murders, poverty, and even universal disenfranchisement, as *The Hill* suggested in (Picture 6). At the heart of this *news snowball* lies a fallacy of division: A) Sander is supportive of select socialist policies, thus B) he is supportive of socialism in general, thus C) supportive of communism, thus D) supportive of communist dictatorships, thus E) wants to establish one in America. To simplify this lengthy and faulty logic, news consumers are presented with a shortcut going from A) straight to E): Sanders wants to make the US a communist dictatorship. Sean Hannity of the *Fox News* blew the discussion up to epic proportions, calling Sanders “the Bolshevik Bernie.” This name escalates Sander’s position as a supporter of democratic socialism to that of a member of the Soviet communist party, strongly associated with dictatorship,

Picture 8. Example of snowballing in the Vanity Fair



Source: *The New York Times*, April 18, 2021 (top) and *The Vanity Fair*, April 18, 2021 (bottom).

totalitarian control, and mass murders (Picture 7). News snowballs also appear as reprints from other media outlets, accompanied with a more critical language, additional facts (not immediately related to the issue at hand), and harsher conclusions than in the original article. For

instance, the *Vanity Fair* published a news piece titled “Trump’s Biggest Propaganda Machine Doesn’t Believe its Own Lies”. The article was based off entirely on a report by the New York Times, except the latter had it simply as “One America News Network Stays True to Trump” (Picture 8).

5. Another popular strategy of media filtering is *cherry-picking*. It applies to news reports in which some facts, especially uncomfortable, are omitted to create a pronounced ideological effect. Although facts featured in the story are true, the entire news piece is best described as “half-truth.” For instance, the *Vanity Fair* reported that Ivanka Trump’s post about getting a coronavirus vaccine caused an outrage on Twitter. The article cited posts by multiple Twitter users who criticized

Picture 9. Example of cherry-picking in the Vanity Fair



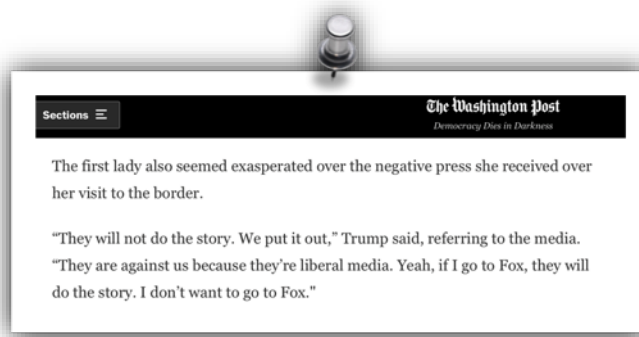
Source: *The Vanity Fair*, April 15, 2021 (top) and *Twitter*, April 14, 2021 (center and bottom)

Source: *Twitter*, April 14, 2021

her. It did not mention a single positive Twitter post, while in reality there were plenty of them, from both Republicans and Democrats (Picture 9).

6. *Fact checking*, with its noble function of combatting spread of misinformation, can be an effective mechanism of propaganda. The media often use this tool to further ideological agenda. To begin with, the media do not fact check every single political statement on a given day. They select only those claims that are provocative and guaranteed to draw readers' or viewers' attention. In a highly polarized environment like the US, ideologically charged media tend to pick on politicians whose ideological stance contradicts their own. Furthermore, a lot of political "facts" are open to discussion and interpretation. For example, as I will show in the further part of my analysis, the between crime and immigration has been advanced by the conservative media but refuted by the liberal media. How is that possible? The two used different scholarly research to support their conclusions and present them as fact checks. The danger of fact checking is that it portrays the government deliberately lying to the people. With one stone of fact checking, the media successfully kill two birds: boosting/refuting the administration's claims and asserting/questioning president's credibility.
7. Yet another media filtering technique is *blocking*. This strategy allows the media to simply ignore the news that diverge from their own agenda and established narrative. In such case, the original message never reaches the audience, effectively nullifying the administration's communication efforts. I locate this mechanism just shy of fake news. Its effect on the administration's message is not as deteriorating as of the latter, yet it is worse than incomplete or biased information. If other

Picture 10. Example of block in the liberal media



Source: *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2020.

strategies familiarize people with at least some aspects of an issue and often provides them with a pre-mastered opinion, concealing information altogether rules out a possibility to form any opinion in the first place. That speaks directly to the point that *what is not said* is also important for propaganda purposes. The strategy is common when the media's and the administration's ideological interests diverge, and it gives the media an upper hand in defining the narrative. Melania Trump's infamous rant about the bias of liberal media against her gave the public a sneak peak of how the strategy is played out. In a private conversation with a friend which was secretly recorded, the First Lady complained that liberal media refuse to cover her political activities that could be perceived positively by the public. At the same time, they were maintaining a negative narrative about the First Lady by picking on less important details such as her wardrobe choices. She also lamented that her only option to circumvent the liberal block was turning to conservative Fox News (Picture 10). Ironically, when the recording was released, liberal outlets overwhelmingly preferred to focus on Melania's remarks about her Christmas decoration duties rather than their own bias. Another example of the liberal media's block - this time of a liberal president's message - is how the press treated Clinton's "first hundred days" handout, which the administration issued to highlight its accomplishments.

Several days before the handout was released, Clinton's budget director Leon Panetta had told a group of reporters that he was pessimistic about the progress of several administration's policy initiatives. That was enough for the main liberal newspapers to focus all their energy on Panetta's remarks for days to come. As a result, the handout "went unnoticed by the press" (Kumar 2007, 35). Another example: in 1969, in the midst of anti-Vietnam war protests, a group of senators passed a resolution supporting the administration's decision to partially withdraw troops from Vietnam. ABC and CBS only briefly mentioned it, and NBC ignored it entirely. Anti-war protests, however, were covered extensively, and the media reports failed to mention the withdrawal under way (Maltese 1994). Conservative media outlets are also very selective about what content they release to the public. When Fox News, after several months of repeating baseless claims that Smartmatic and Dominion voting systems had rigged the 2020 election in favor of the Democratic candidate Joseph Biden, faced multi-billion-dollar defamation lawsuits from both companies in question, that matter never made its way into the media's news coverage. For all other media newsrooms in the country, of course, it was the hottest topic for quite some time. The silence of the channel is remarkable. It could have defended itself before their audience, as did the One America News Network, another right-wing media sued by the voting companies for election-fraud conspiracies. The latter channel proudly announced to their viewers and readers that it would not "cave" to "left-wing pressure" in response to the litigation (OAN Newsroom 2021). In contrast, Fox News instead chose to conceal the issue entirely. The media also frequent the block strategy even when their ideological orientations

are aligned with the government. Say, Fox News is known for its love of on-air recapping Trump’s tweets criticizing major liberal outlets (hello, all-time favorite “failing New York Times”). However, when Trump lashed out at Fox News itself with a dozen of tweets, claiming that it had lost its viewers to other pro-Trump outlets, the conservative channel never mentioned it in its news. In this case, the block strategy has benefited the president, who exploited the channel’s silence to deliver his message uncontested.

8. On the heaviest side of filtering, there are news that directly contradict the facts or

Picture 11. Example of fake news on Fox News

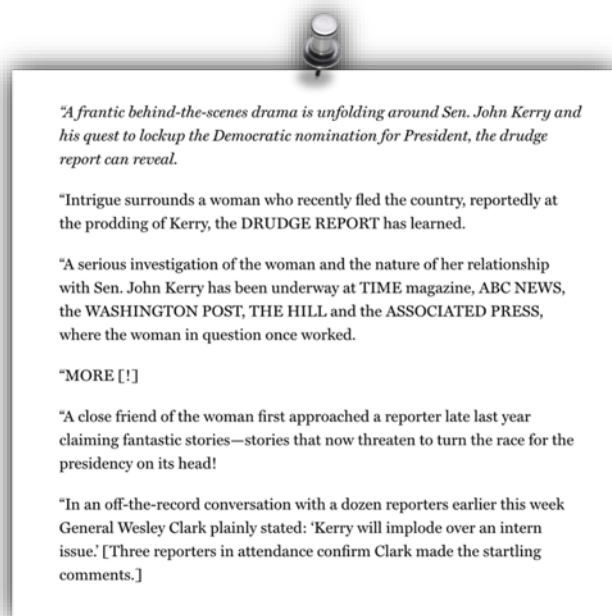


Source: Fox News, August 9, 2016.  
 Video samples and transcripts were scraped from the Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer.

are completely made up, otherwise known as *fake news*. This filtering mechanism is good old deception, no matter how many members of President Trump’s administration attempt to dignify it as “alternative facts.” Fake news also can be described as *rumor bombs* - e.g. news that are not supported by

evidence and created on purpose by someone who politically benefits from the rumor bomb’s diffusion (Harsin 2016). The problem with fake news is that once they find their way online, it is impossible to retrieve and contain them, even after the original media source, as if often happens, removes the story from its website. If such gossip circulates for a prolonged time, it is very likely to spin into conspiracy

Picture 12. Example of fake news in the Drudge Report



Source: The New York Times, May 28, 2004. The picture shows excerpts from the original Drudge Report article cited by the New York. The Drudge Report removed the piece from its website after receiving a backlash.

theories. An example of this strategy is a full week of talk shows on Fox News in 2016, where the “Medical A Team”, consisting of invited medical “experts,” was discussing various health problems of then-presidential-nominee Hilary Clinton (Picture 11). Although none of the invited specialists personally examined her, it did not prevent them from offering far-reaching conclusions about Clinton’s health and her fitness to be a president. “I believe

she had a concussion with a possible brain injury,” - said one of them, adding, “I haven’t seen medical records” (Internet Archive 2016). Another example is a fabricated story in the Drudge Report about John Kerry’s alleged affair with an intern (Picture 12). The story, despite being a complete fiction, made its way into the Wall Street Journal and caused a PR crisis for the John Kerry campaign.

Except for unbiased reporting, fake news, and block, all forms of filtering can be in negative or positive direction. That is, the media do put a favorable spin on the original message when needed. In such cases, the original government’s message is still manipulated, but it benefits the government. In cases where filtering mechanism is applied

negatively, the government's message suffers a blow – the heavier filtering mechanism is, the more harm it causes to government's chances to make the public relate to its message.

### **Chapter in a Nutshell**

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight deficiencies in the existing theories of democratic propaganda that do not pay adequate attention to systemic propaganda that originates in the government, as opposed to the media. To remedy that, I propose a model of democratic propaganda that draws a clear line between the original message (input by the government) and the final message (after the media filter). Building up on that, I present the media filter as a spectrum, ranging from the lightest to the heaviest forms of filtering. This framework will be used in the forthcoming chapters to trace the various subtle mechanisms the media use to modify the government's messages to fit into the media's own propaganda agenda. Using this framework, I will show how exactly the original message changes traveling through the media filter, and what the final message looks like in comparison to the original one.

My spectrum representation of media filtering challenges a simplistic idea that the government-media relationship is a static phenomenon that can be explained by ideological alignments. I propose the spectrum as a better approach to understand the interactive and complex nature of this relationship, as well as provide a more detailed view of the inner-working of the media filter. To put my idea to the test, I will employ this framework to trace how the meaning of select government's messages have changed after they travelled

through the media filter. Chapter 7 explains this in detail and provides examples from real communication campaign by the Trump administration.

It's hard to drain the swamp when you're up to  
your ass in alligators.<sup>15</sup>

Jody Powell, Jimmy Carter's Press Secretary

**THE BULLIES AND THE GOON SQUAD:  
RESEARCH DESIGN OF MY DISSERTATION**

In January 1968, popular CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite went to Vietnam to see the progress of the war. Shocked by brutalities of the combat and massive American casualties, he returned to the United States and publicly voiced his objections against American involvement in the war. He issued a special report, in which he said, "It seems now more than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate." After the report, President Johnson confessed to his advisors that he lost "Mr. Average Citizen" in Cronkite's face (Maltese 1994, 14).

This is an example of how the media filter works. Although politicians do not like the press to interfere with their public agenda, they nonetheless have to admit it is the media that control the final say in a story. Media's remarkable ability to influence the public mind

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Maltese 1994, 72.

and frame political issues goes on par with the government's. Much of the government's public communications efforts, therefore, go into figuring out how to convey their message to the Americans without the media distorting it. That said, not every media outlet enjoys such power, and not every politician is able to cut through the mud of the media filter. Who can, under what circumstances, and what newsrooms hold the most power in the world of politics? This is the focus of this chapter.

All modern presidents take on the task of cutting through the media filter, and some are better at it than others. Yet, confronted with realities of the fast-paced media environment and challenges of the 24-hour news cycle, the White House never developed a solid instrument to systematically gauge success of their battles with the media. Although the White House has several ways of analyzing how the media portrays the president, but, in communications staffers' own assessment, all of them tend to be "partial and impressionistic rather than comprehensive and scientific" (Kumar 2007, 29). Sometimes, it is simple relying on one's "gut" as in the G.W. Bush administration (Kumar 2007, 29), and sometimes it is just deliberately false accounts of the media narrative to please the president (Nixon, to be precise). To sum up, contemporary presidents lack a mechanism that would allow them to conduct an empirically precise analysis of how effective their message is in penetrating the media filter. My projects seeks to do so for them.

***Guide to reading this chapter.*** This chapter finally introduces the research design of the dissertation project. In doing so, I was inspired by two excellent books on the communications operations in the White House: *Spin Control* by John Anthony Maltese (1994) and *Managing the President's Message* by Martha Kumar. They collectively cover the history of the White House's communications operations from Nixon to Clinton. My

project is a continuation of this tradition, although, limited by the pandemic and access to archival resources, I will focus on the Trump administration. For analysis, I chose to comprehensively study the administration's public campaign against sanctuary cities that it had been waging for four years with little results. Additionally, I will show how the media covered the same issue, and what narratives emerged after the administration's messages passed through media filters.

I contribute to the discussion in several ways. First, I approach the issue from a different angle. Whereas the two classic aforementioned works focus on the internal structure of communications unit within the White House, I investigate the intersection between the White House and the media in greater detail. Rather than merely acknowledging the existence of the media filter, my project conceptualizes it and provides empirical depth to it. Second, I focus my analysis on the Trump administration, whose communications operations departed from his predecessors' in greater reliance on social media. Third, I opt to use a different research design. The two pioneers based their works on interviews with former White House officials. My project focuses on the outcome of the White House's communications efforts - that is, textual propaganda pieces itself, in both their original state and after the media filter. The main novelty of my project's research design is in its deductive nature: while interviews allow for a holistic view of the derived from interviewees' subjective memories and assessments, my project uses a large number of textual evidence to arrive into general conclusions.

The research design of my project gives priority to the most important players among the government and the media. In contemplating aspects of design, I considered the

issues of availability of data during the pandemic, most of which come from Internet-based archives and online datasets.

The chapter discusses three main components of the research design and provides a rationale for the choice of units of analysis. First, it explains the role of the White House messengers (known as surrogate speakers, or channels). Second, it discusses two public communications strategies: going around the media filter and going through the media filter. Whereas the former is well studied, the latter has received less attention. This is the gap the study fills. I clarify what news outlets constitute the media filter by closely looking at the elite Washington press and categorize them into three ideological bubbles. Lastly, I explain why I focus on the offensive side of the administration's communications, thus justifying the choice of formats of the message and public campaigns. Afterwards, I briefly explain what data and methods I am using in the following chapters to compare general rhetorical patterns in the White House's and the media's propaganda, as well as in the subsequent network analysis and process tracing.

### **Messengers: The White House's Surrogate Program**

The United States is a democratic system, which brings together hundreds of institutions across different branches and thousands of political actors. All of them have different degrees of importance and influence that serves their unique agendas. But there is just one person in the entire country whose influence is unmatched, and whose agenda dominates over others - the President.

The Constitution vests most powers into the legislative branch, placing the president in a position of the head of the executive branch. Yet, thanks to the domestic economic turbulence and elevated international status of the United States in the 20th century, the chief executive had to assume the central and authoritative role in the political process. Surprisingly, Congress contributed to the modern imbalance of power by endorsing the president's superior position through a series of statutes and reforms.

Almost all presidents have sought to expand their powers beyond what the Constitution intended, but this trend accelerated with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's tenure, who stirred the country through the Great Depression and World War II, thus cementing the president's central status in the system. In his blissful ignorance, President Donald Jr. Trump summarized it as his right to do whatever he wanted (Haltiwanger 2019). That obviously is not true, because there is still a system of checks and balances in place, but President Trump's words are indicative of the great power the Oval Office provides to the chief executive.

Today, the President is the most important political actor in the country. Although the White House is not the entire government, rarely do the most important decisions in the country circumvent the president's desk. Given centralization of the policy-making process in the executive branch and the centrality of president's position, it is customary to focus and scrutinize the White House and presidents personally rather than each individual agency and department within the government (luckily, my project follows a different approach and does analyze other executive offices, too). In short, the president is the most valuable resource the White House has (Kumar 2007, 60).

The president's central status gives the White House major leeway to utilize resources across the government to help fulfill presidential priorities. That includes coordination of communication efforts across government agencies and departments so that the government speaks in as unified a voice as possible. Whenever president takes on promoting a new policy, his communications team orchestrates a public campaign in which, in addition to president himself, Cabinet members, senior administration officials, supporters in Congress, interest groups, and members of the president's family take part in delivering a public message on behalf of the president. These people are known in the White House as "surrogates" (or "advocates", as in the Ford administration), and the task of coordinating and organizing them is called the "surrogates program", or "advocacy system" (Kumar 2007; Maltese 1994). In my work, I am referring to government institutions supplying such speakers as *surrogate channels*.

The White House can only control the agenda if it's able "to maintain discipline within the administration itself" (Maltese 1994, 1). That discipline is usually achieved through collaboration between a strong Chief of Staff and the Communications Office, which together make decisions on the goal of the public campaign, as well as content of message, who and where will deliver it, and in what form. The Communications Office then prepares the text of speeches and remarks to be delivered on various occasions by the President and his surrogates, writes opinion pieces to be sent out to various news outlets under surrogates' signatures, prepares speeches and sound-bites to be used on radio programs, and schedules and approves surrogates' appearances on television. In other cases, the Communications Office helps surrogates with the aforementioned tasks and checks up on the final result. Being in constant contact with Public Information Officers in

government's departments and agencies, the Communications Office may also draft press releases for these departments, especially on important topics, and coordinates the timing of such press releases. If voluntary cooperation does not work, the president's team can exert direct control on department heads. For example, to ensure that departments strictly follow the White House's communications strategy and do not engage in their own, presidents prefer to install loyalists as Public Information Officers in departments and agencies from the outset, thus preventing discord down the road. The White House may also prohibit undesirable administration officials from talking to reports and appearing on television: the Nixon administration, for example, was very adept at using this means of direct control (Maltese 1994).

In short, the entire executive branch is expected to partake in promoting presidents' legislative priorities. For this work, I focus only on surrogate speakers who do not have an obvious personal agenda while promoting presidents' priorities. President's supporters in Congress have their own electoral concerns, which at times may not coincide with president's legislative agenda. Likewise, interest groups advocate on president's behalf if it furthers their own cause. In contrast, cabinet members, senior administration officials, and members of the First family do not explicitly self-serve themselves when they promote presidential priorities. An internal White House memo in 1970 states about Cabinet members that "their job is to sell the Administration, not themselves or their departments. [The communications planners] provide them with [speech] material ... that's designed towards this end, but we've got to do more direct indoctrination that will result in a stronger selling attitude on the part of each of our speakers" (Maltese 1994, 110-111). Granted, cabinet officials might be captured by the interests of their agencies – in fact, many of the

White House staffers that work on similar issues often view them with suspicion and question their loyalty (Maltese 1994; Nelson 2008; Shah 2020). Surrogate speakers may also have their own future political ambitions or pending book deals, which may affect their rhetoric. The point here, however, is to see that their agenda compliments and does not contradict president's. If the latter happens, president and the White House may simply replace "rogue" officials and reinforce their line in the media.

My analysis, therefore, include presidents and only *pure surrogate speakers*:

- cabinet members and their spokespeople
- senior administration officials (vice president, advisers/assistants to President, chief of staff, communications director, press secretary)
- president's family members.

### **The Media Filter: Elite Washington Media**

There are two main offices in the White House that deal with the press and public relations: the Press Office and the Office of Communications. The former is well-known to the public. Headed by the press secretary, the Press Office provides information to reporters seeking to use it in their reports and holds twice-daily press briefings: the morning 15-minute "gaggle" and an afternoon press briefing in the briefing room of the White House. The afternoon briefing used to be a mundane low-profile staged event in the White House, where reporters simply obtained official and factual information from the press secretary. After the White House began to televise afternoon briefings, they have turned into a political combat spectacle, where reporters pose increasingly provocative and ideologically-driven questions, and press secretaries get into verbal fights with reporters, or simply stonewall them. During the late Trump administration, press briefings resembled

political debates rather than informational events designed to dispense information to the media, with the president himself often insulting individual reporters from the podium. Although President Trump's press secretaries' exchanges with the media resulted in attention-drawing scandals more often, previous administrations' press briefings, too, bore the spirit of increasing competitiveness and hostility (Meyer-Gutbrod and Woolley 2021; Kosar 2008). Courtesy of the super polarized political environment, reporters nowadays use televised press briefings as an opportunity to confront the White House and serve their newsrooms' ideological agendas. At the beginning of each briefing, the Press Secretary has an opportunity to put forward a brief statement about President's agenda. The rest of the time, however, is spent on defense, trying to brush off numerous critics of the White House. All in all, Press Office serves as a reactive mechanism of dealing with the media.

There is a rich tradition in the literature on American politics that discusses the phenomenon of tilting the balance of power towards the Oval Office: Neustadt's *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (1990), Kernell's *Going Public* (1986), Tulis's *The Rhetorical Presidency* (2017), among others works, together comprehensively explain the importance of cultivating positive publicity for contemporary presidents.<sup>16</sup> Up until the 1960s, the Press Office was all the White House had. The more central role chief executives played in the political process, the more it was obvious that the White House needed a separate office that would be in charge of planning the communications offensive

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<sup>16</sup> For the opposite argument, see Edward's *On Deaf Ears* (2003). The author argues that White House communication efforts have no effect on moving public opinion, and that constant going public has a perilous effect on president's ability to negotiate with other political actors.

and assume a proactive role in formulating and implementing a communication strategy covering an entire executive branch. Presidents traditionally communicated with the White House press corp to inform the public about their policies, which made their message entirely dependent on the media's coverage. The rise of television in the 1960 changed that dynamic. Television, paired with satellite technologies, became the new medium for the presidents to convey their message directly to the people rather than through traditional print media. The process of 'disintermediation' began. Presidents were finally able to play the media game on their own terms and beat the media in setting public agenda. To fulfill the tightened publicity demands and take the full advantage of possibilities offered by television, President Nixon created the Office of Communications in 1969.<sup>17</sup> The new office became in charge of planning long-term publicity strategies, coordinating communications efforts across the entire executive branch, maintaining contacts with non-Washington press, and simply "the selling of the president" (Maltese 1994, 3). While the Press Office's main task was to report official information from the White House, the Office of Communication assumed a more proactive stance in its dealing with the media. It filled in the risen publicity demands of modern presidency and allowed the White House to carry out the communication offensive.

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<sup>17</sup> President Nixon was the first one to institutionalize the Office of Communications as a permanent unit in the White House, but similar functions were carried out in preceding administrations. For example, President Eisenhower's Press Secretary James Hagerty was essentially doing what the Office is doing today, on an ad hoc basis. Nixon, who was Eisenhower's Vice President, created the Office of Communications after realizing the importance of Hagerty's communications efforts (Maltese 1994).

The offensive may take two forms. The first one is to circumvent the media filter and go *around* it. Having no other choice, early presidents had to cultivate professional relations with the Washington press. Theodore Roosevelt regularly met with reporters during his afternoon shave, Woodrow Wilson established a tradition of regular presidential press conferences, and FDR formally created a Press office. In contrast, contemporary presidents learned to use television to carry out addresses to the nation live, thus limiting media's ability to manipulate the message. Although presidents could not dictate how the media would spin the story later (via instant analysis, for example), it nonetheless was a better way to convey a message directly to the people than solely relying on the White House press corps. President Kennedy, for example, arranged the first 'live' broadcasts of his press conferences (Maltese 1994). Essentially, all presidents since Nixon favored camera over traditional press and were more interested in communication with television networks than with print reporters. For instance, President Nixon refused to communicate with the print media when he was mad at them for their coverage, and President Reagan prohibited reporters from asking questions during photo-ops (Maltese 1994). Reagan, a former Hollywood actor, was also famous for having an entire team of professionals who scrupulously staged all his television appearances down to the tiniest details, including angles, colors, and visual symbols. Presidents Obama and Trump, whose presidencies coincided with the rise of social networks, took advantage of the new route to go around the press and present their unfiltered message to the public on Twitter and White House's official website.

Another way to circumvent the Washington media is to go local. Contemporary presidents excel in that, too, traveling around the country with surrogate speakers whenever

they need public support for new policy proposals. Local media in general tend to present presidential visits in positive light (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2008). Besides, local media are more agreeable than the ones in Washington. Contacts with high-profile politicians from the White House is a big deal for small local media, and they generally do not risk ruining them by negatively covering presidents. As President Reagan said, “I know that what we've been doing doesn't read well in the Washington Post or the New York Times, but, believe me, it reads well in Peoria” (Maltese 1994, 194).

Unfortunately for the White House, local media do not have the might of the national media. Its reach is limited, and so is the importance of issues covered. Likewise, not all television stations have the same credibility status as country's oldest country newspapers. A White House official notes that television programs use stories in the New York Times as guidance for their coverage, and that they often will hold off publishing a story until the elite newspaper breaks it (Kumar 2007). Presidents dislike the elite media, but they cannot do without it. The trend has been that the White House strips power away from the media. Yet, for better or worse, the institution of the media has a special cemented status in the system that forces the White House to communicate with them, thus subjecting their message to the media filter. And so, presidents must figure out how to go *through* the media filter.

Predictably, doing so creates a lot of frustration in the White House. There are several classic works that illustrate the difficulties president face getting their message out (to name few, (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972)). For my study, two works proved to be particularly indispensable: *Spin Control* by John Anthony Maltese (1994) and *Managing the*

*President's Message* by Martha Joynt Kumar (2007). Both works are in-depth qualitative analysis of how presidential administrations from Nixon to Clinton went about structuring and managing their communications needs, and both works played a major role in informing me on the internal role of the Communications Office, as well as its interactions with the media.

All modern presidents aspire to drive the storyline in a needed direction and manipulate the media to cover the administration in the favorable light, but all of them struggle to get their messages through the media filter. President Ford's Chief of Staff Dick Cheney said, "You don't let the press set the agenda. The press is going to object to that. They like to set the agenda. They like to decide what's important and what isn't important. But if you let them do that, they're going to trash your presidency" (Maltese 1994, 130). Greenberg, describing Franklin Roosevelt's public presidency, notes that although it brought in a degree of transparency about presidential affairs, the media still presented it as "a decidedly unwelcome form of propaganda" (Greenberg 2016, 249). President Nixon, who had an especially strained relationship with the press, wrote a document in third person in 1970, in which he praised himself for ignoring the media, and called it "a remarkable achievement" to be able talk directly to the people (Maltese 1994, 46). President Nixon also compiled an "Enemies List" that contained names of many journalists and reporters (Brownell 2017) and attempted to use the FBI to silence his critics in the media (Greenberg 2016). In the wake of the Watergate, Nixon openly talked about his disrespect of the media and noted that he has "never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life ... [W]hen people are pounded night after night with that kind of frantic, hysterical reporting, it naturally shakes their confidence" (Maltese 1994, 106).

Nixon's Vice President Spiro Agnew gave an astonishing anti-media speech, describing the media as "a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one, and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by government" (Maltese 1994, 56-57). Gerald Rafshoon, who served as the communications director in the Carter administrations, said the media have "come to be kind of the bullies on the block since [the Watergate] ... They're going to catch you, even if there's nothing to catch you at" (Maltese 1994, 168). Clinton thought that the news organizations were "biased antagonists who had acquired the conviction that they were the key to crucial consensus building" (Kumar 2007, 40). Susan J. Douglas (2016) concludes that President Clinton's Communications Director George Stephanopoulos treated journalists so badly and unprofessionally that "his administration's unskilled media apparatus gave him one of the shortest presidential honeymoons in recent history." Not to forget President Trump who lamented that he was treated by the press worse than any other president in American history (Samuels 2020). The White House also blames the media for focusing on personalities and conflicts rather than the substance of actual policies - an issue summarized as "News is drama, and drama thrives on conflict" (Maltese 1994, 29).

From the media's side of things, the White House is the bad guy. They and the White House fundamentally disagree about the media's role in the political process. Reporters believe they are "standing in for the public" (Kumar 2007, 256) by peppering politicians in the executive branch the same way parliamentary opposition does in parliamentary systems. The White House strongly disagrees. "They don't represent the public any more than other people do," commented Bush's Chief of Staff Andrew Card.

“In our democracy, the people who represent the people stood for election. I don't believe [the media] have a check-and-balance function” (Kumar 2007, 256).

Thus, there is a natural tension between the president's propaganda goals and the media's gatekeeping goals. Whenever the White House refuses to share information with correspondents, or forces them to follow a specific topic established by the administration (known as “the line of the day”), or attempts to dominate the media coverage behind the scenes, or restricts reporters' physical access to administration officials, newsrooms do not take it lightly and double down on negative news about the administration. Fed up with how the White House officials treated the press, CBS 'news reporter Dan Rather once referred to the Nixon administration's communications team as a “goon squad” (Maltese 1994, 107).

Now contentious, the White House-media relationship used to be cooperative. After all, Presidents have a long history with the press, and the Press Office is the oldest working unit in the White House. Prior to the modern presidency, the chief executive had no other vehicle to deliver their message to the majority of the Americans than rely on the White House press corps. The press corps consists of many media organizations that are stationed in the White House on a permanent basis. Of these, there are several Washington-based elite media which main work portfolio is covering the White House. The elite media enjoy massive budgets and can afford the best and most scrupulous journalists. Having a long history of reporting, they are the most trustable and respected news sources in the country. These media are permanently located in Washington. D.C., and have deep ties with the White House officials and the Washington community. In a way, they enjoy privileged access to politicians. As a result, they are most often the ones who break out political news

stories, and these are the news sources that are most critical of the White House. It is the sources that president's communications team is most afraid of: once they reports something, it will be picked up by the rest of the newsrooms in the country and make its way to the news stream very quickly.

Whenever presidents and their team complain about the media bias, it is usually in reference to these elite media organizations. Presidents certainly have their hands full with other media organizations, too, but no local or less prestigious newsroom treats presidents with as much hostility as do the elite media. The elite news organizations, therefore, is the media filter, which my research focuses on.

The elite status of select newsrooms is obvious from trends in the news stream. Even Americans who never read news heard of the New York Times and the Washington Post. The elite media's unique position among the White House press corps is also acknowledged by the White House that provides special arrangements for them. In particular, the first two rows during press briefings are strictly assigned to reporters from the elite media (Kumar 2007, 241-243). Reporters from other news sources cannot occupy those front rows. During press conferences and press briefings, front-row reporters are recognized and get to ask their questions significantly more often than media representatives from other rows (Kumar 2007). An informal rule of thumb in the White House is that the administration always deals with the elite media outlets first, no matter how badly they feel about them. That includes not only answering their questions during press briefings, but also providing background information and overall assisting their media requests.

My project analyzes coverage of the White House in these elite media organizations: the government’s harshest critics with a privileged position in the White House and biggest impact on country’s news agenda. They are the essence of the media filter that extends to print/Internet outlets, television broadcasters, and wire services.

Modern media are great perpetrators of ideological “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2007; Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson 2016). Therefore, I categorized the media sources into three ‘bubbles’. For guidance, I used the bias rating of each media defined by the *AllSides Media Bias Chart*.<sup>18</sup>

**Liberal bubble**

New York Times  
CNN

**Center bubble**

Associated Press

**Conservative bubble**

Wall Street Journal  
Fox News

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<sup>18</sup> The AllSides Media Bias Chart is based on a multi partisan scientific analysis of ideological slants of media outlets. Its website is <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>.

The chart has five categories of media bias: left, lean left, center, lean right, and right. Some sources are simultaneously assigned into several categories. For example, the NYT Opinion is placed into left bias, but the NYT News is placed into lean left bias. For the purposes of my research, I classify lean left as the left bubble, and lean right as the right bubble.

## **Format of the Message and Public Campaigns: The Offensive**

The White House can deliver its message in a variety of formats: speeches, remarks, press releases, interviews<sup>19</sup>, press conferences, and many others. The most desirable among them are those that do not entail unexpected exchanges with the press and that do not put government's speakers in a defensive position. For example, contemporary presidents are known to hold fewer press conferences than their predecessors because such events put presidents in a vulnerable position of being caught off-guard by questions from the press. Herbert Hoover, for example, held 258 conferences during his 4-year presidency, and Donald Trump had only 88 of them over the same time span. Even worse yet, Ronald Reagan had only 46 news conferences during 8 years in office (Peters 2021). Ideal government messages are those that are initiated by the White House after having been thoroughly pre-varnished by the communications staff. Such messages take place in controllable settings, and the only unpredictable variable in delivering such messages is the press' reaction afterwards. In short, the best strategies for delivering a message are those in which the White House has an upper hand over the media in establishing the initial

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<sup>19</sup> Late presidents recognized the power of appearing on personality-based television shows. They and their surrogates became frequent guests on entertainment programs such as Larry King Live, The Tonight Show, Johnny Carson, MTV, Jimmy Kimmel Live, The Late Night Show, and others. Although these talk shows include interviews, politicians do not face nearly as much pressure as when they are interviewed by the White House press corps. On such shows, neither hosts nor the audience are educated on political matters to the extent that would warrant uncomfortable follow-up questions for their guests. The White House also has a greater control over scripting how the show would go and pre-screening the list of questions. The shows, thirsty for ratings, usually agree to observe restrictions imposed by the White House. Overall, the White House easily controls its message on such shows, thus making it a great offensive medium. However, still being outsider media outlets and "soft news" shows, programs of this kind serve the government's strategy of going around the media rather than through it. For that reason, I do not include them in my analysis. For some of the research on "soft news" and "the Oprah effect," see Baum (2003), Baum and Jamison (2006), (Prior 2003), Simko (2019), and Glogger (2019).

narrative and is being on the offensive. For this reason, any formats of direct exchanges with the media present are an undesirable option for the White House communications planners.

That leaves us with the following formats of messages suitable for analysis:

- Speeches
- Written statements
- Public remarks
- Press briefing opening remarks
- Press releases
- Fact sheets
- Opinion pieces
- Public announcements
- Addresses to the Nation
- Addresses to Congress

One may imagine that president's messages are carried on any number of themes and topics. Not all the topics, however, are initiated by the White House. The media is very effective in forcing the administration into addressing issues they deem important. For example, when a news outlet breaks a political scandal, the White House ends up explaining and defending itself. Although the message in this case may take an offensive form (Clinton's address to the Nation after his Grand Jury Testimony comes to mind), but the issue at hand is not. By addressing issues first brought up by the media, the White House is forced to play its defensive card.

This project focuses on the area where the White House has the best chance for initial domination of the narrative - its 'policymaking shop'. When the White House takes on promoting a new policy, it checks on all parameters of an offensive communications strategy. The communications team plans publicity rollouts well in advance, identifying not only themes of messages, but also formats and surrogates. The White House then makes

the first move by announcing the new policy initiative and following up with a campaign designed to promote the initiative.

This project focuses on the four years of the Trump administration's public campaign against sanctuary cities. Running for presidency, Donald Trump announced that he would end such policies, and he took multiple steps to bring that promise to life, however unsuccessfully. Sanctuary movement falls into the umbrella of immigration policies, which President Trump has made his number one priority in office. In choosing the area to focus on, I opted for something not as complicated as the entire immigration system but something that is indicative of the administration's approach and still has high stakes for the administration. I also made sure that the chosen topic would be clearly marked by the White House as an essential one: not only through legislative actions but also in government's most important speeches - State of the Union Address (SOTU), for example. Presidents have many items "in their publicity grab bag" (Kumar 2007, 282), but by far SOTU is the most important. Delivered at the beginning of each year in a joint session of Congress, SOTU has been traditionally used to lay out the executive priorities for the upcoming year. As such, it serves as a preview of legislative goals of the administration and a great guiding mechanism for my project. President Trump spent some time on his anti-sanctuary agenda during his 2020 SOTU, which overall makes the issue an ideal candidate for my study. I have covered the campaign very comprehensively and included every single administration's message on the topic and every single piece of news in the aforementioned media in 2017-2021. The administration's propaganda offensive on the issue of sanctuary cities constitutes the initial message in my model of democratic propaganda. It covers both the White House as well as government's surrogate channels:

in this case, all departments and agencies involved into immigration and legal questions surrounding sanctuary cities.

### **Brief Recap of Research Design**

In the coming chapter, I first analyze the big picture put forward by the administration's propaganda, through cluster analysis of the administration's rhetoric and comparative analysis of themes in contexts and sentiments in each of the surrogate channel's rhetoric. These steps are completed in NVIVO using automated content analysis. I also manually checked on automated coding to make sure the program was returning meaningful results.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, I report Pearson's correlation coefficients to show language similarity between different surrogate channels. After that, I focus on the media's side, which presents the final message in my model. I have collected the media's messages about sanctuary movement during Trump's presidency from the NYT, CNN, AP, WSJ, and Fox News. I engage in cluster analysis and discuss themes in context for each of the media sources using automated content analysis tools in NVIVO. I then separately discuss

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<sup>20</sup> Appendix A shows a sample of statements automatically coded in NVIVO. To make sure NVIVO dictionaries captured sentiments and topics accurately, I manually checked on the results of autocoding and did not discover any visible errors. One possible concern would be automated coding of President Trump's tweets. Because tweets are very short and do not contain much text (maximum 140 characters), it might be a difficult task for automated content-analysis programs to capture political meanings correctly. In the case of my analysis, President Trump's populist style might have made that task a bit easier. The majority of the President's tweets express his lexicon perfectly, without sugarcoating or beating around the bush. In that sense, the program has seemingly picked on negative connotations and coded them accordingly.

For a detailed description of automated text analysis, refer to Appendix C, where I explain the nature of the method as well as its applicability for my project.

language similarity between the surrogate channels and each of the media outlets, relying on Pearson's correlation coefficients. I additionally measure how often the media mentioned the issue of sanctuary cities, based on the data of network coverage provided by the Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer. Following that, I show the connection between the administration's and the media's messages using NodeXL for network analysis, and a plagiarism-detection software for similarity reports. Coding to identify mechanisms of media filtering was done manually, in accordance with the spectrum of media filtering described in Chapter 3. Finally, the project uses process tracing in Chapter 7, where I follow several messages from the moment when they were made public by the administration to the moment when they appeared in the media, and show how media filtering mechanisms work in practice.

### **Chapter in a Nutshell**

The White House and the media have a long history of a steadily deteriorating relationship. Of all the media outlets the White House deals with on a regular basis, the elite Washington media have emerged as the government's harshest critics. They are the media filter that exerts most power over controlling how the president's message looks like for the public in its final state.

All modern presidents tried to go around or through the media filter to convey their message to the public. Despite that, the White House never defined a scientific mechanism for measuring success of their communications operations vis-à-vis the media. This is what my project does. This chapter discussed the research design of the project. It justified the

choice of units of analysis in terms of messengers (surrogate speakers), media outlets, message format, and topic of political campaign. Drawing on this research design, the coming chapters will delve into tracing the media filter in the Trump administration's messages on sanctuary cities.

When interest corresponds with our own,  
we do not label them propaganda -  
we label it “the truth” or our “shared value system.”

(Taylor 2003, 321)

**“SANCTUARIES FOR LAW-ABIDING AMERICANS, NOT FOR CRIMINALS”:  
HOW THE GOVERNMENT CREATED THE MYTH OF VIOLENT  
IMMIGRANTS**

“This is the Trump era. Progress is being made daily, and it will continue. This will be the Administration that fully enforces our nation’s immigration laws.” These were the words with which Attorney General Jeff Sessions ended his speech on sanctuary cities in April 2017 (Department of Justice 2017). The speech came right after a federal judge ruled that President Trump’s executive order blocking funds from sanctuary locations was unconstitutional. Ironically, events of those days were the highlight of the administration’s efforts to solve the issue of sanctuary cities – places that do not assist federal authorities in deporting undocumented immigrants. Although the fight against such cities did not stop for President Trump’s entire term in office, the rest of the battle took on a largely rhetorical and symbolic turn. The White House recruited multiple government agencies to help wage the rhetorical battle, pursuing a strategy of picturing sanctuary locations in damning colors. In particular, sanctuary locations were portrayed as places where authorities knowingly release violent immigrants to commit murder, thus endangering lives of innocent

Americans. “[T]hey have blood on their hands,” said the White House in a press release in March 2018, referring to “local law enforcement” that “defy an ICE detainer” (White House 2018e).

This chapter tells a story of how this rhetorical war unfolded. It reports the results of analysis of original messages coming from the administration, before they appeared in the media. The focus of this chapter is on general rhetorical patterns. Using a combination of cluster analysis and machine-assisted topic and sentiment analyses, I unearth the image of sanctuary cities perpetuated by the Trump administration. It portrays sanctuary jurisdictions as places where law-abiding Americans suffer from violent immigrants. The following chapter will explain how this image is different from ones presented in the three media bubbles: conservative, center, and liberal.

*Guide to reading this chapter.* I open with a brief history of sanctuary cities in the United States, paying special attention to the Trump administration’s policies that attempted to solve the issue. Such policies are generally considered unsuccessful because all of the administration’s legislative proposals targeting sanctuary jurisdictions failed to pass Congress. Moreover, several executive orders that limited federal funds to sanctuary cities were also reversed by the courts. However, I provide data that illustrates that policies seeking to put an end to sanctuary cities did in fact have a limited effect across the country – the fact typically overshadowed by the administration’s legislative failures. After that, I move to analyze the administration’s rhetoric. First, I conduct a cluster analysis of all original messages on sanctuary cities during the Trump administration. Following the research design discussed in the preceding chapter, it includes not only the president himself, but also his surrogates across the government (the government’s surrogate

program). In the case of sanctuary cities, it encompasses departments and officials whose authority extends to the area of immigration and sanctuary cities. The results show five distinct rhetorical clusters that the administration employed in their public strategy against sanctuary cities: the rule of law, President’s agenda, immigration enforcement, the need for change, and criminal immigrants. Additionally, I show correlation between the White House’s original messages and those of the surrogates. By doing so, I provide an empirical base to Kumar’s (2007) and Maltese’s (1994) accounts of the centralized nature of government’s public campaigns. Following this analysis of the administration’s public campaign against sanctuary jurisdictions as a whole, I separately discuss its components. This step of my analysis describes how each of the surrogate agencies’ rhetoric contributed to creating the image of sanctuary cities as lawless places that deliberately risk lives of American citizens and obstruct the president’s agenda. Using automated content analysis techniques, I distinguish themes in context and sentiments conveyed by the White House and surrogate speakers on the issue of sanctuary cities. Table 1 summarizes my choice of units of analysis as well as methods and tools I employed in the chapter.

Table 1. Data sources and tools used for analysis

<b>Surrogate Speakers</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>URL</b>
White House	Archive of President Trump’s official White House website	<a href="https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov">https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov</a>
Department of Justice	Official website, archive limited to 2017-2021	<a href="https://www.justice.gov/news">https://www.justice.gov/news</a>
Department of Homeland Security	Official website, archive limited to 2017-2021	<a href="https://www.dhs.gov/all-news-updates">https://www.dhs.gov/all-news-updates</a>
Immigration and Custom Enforcement	Official website, archive limited to 2017-2021	<a href="https://www.ice.gov/archive">https://www.ice.gov/archive</a>

<b>Surrogate Speakers</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>URL</b>
Twitter	The American Presidency Project	<a href="https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/app-categories/twitter?items_per_page=20">https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/app-categories/twitter?items_per_page=20</a>
Census	2020 Census Results	<a href="https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-results.html">https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-results.html</a>
<b>Analysis</b>	<b>Tools</b>	<b>URL</b>
Cluster analysis	NVIVO	
Topic analysis and themes in context analysis	NVIVO	
Sentiment analysis	NVIVO	
Visualization	Microsoft Excel	
	Datawrapper	<a href="https://www.datawrapper.de">https://www.datawrapper.de</a>

## **The Problem of Sanctuary Cities**

Taking a hard line on immigration was a signature of Donald Trump’s presidency. Part of his agenda was a strong opposition to sanctuary cities – places that do not assist federal authorities in deporting undocumented immigrants. Trump’s controversial speeches certainly helped put the issue in the national spotlight, and his aggressive moves to cut funding from such jurisdictions antagonized many on the left. Yet, the problem of sanctuary cities is hardly a response to Trump’s deportation policies, nor is it the result of President Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric.

Sanctuary cities have existed in the United States since the 1980s, when Central American immigrants, fleeing violence in their countries, were offered refuge in places of worship in the United States (Martínez, Martínez-Schuldt, and Cantor 2018). That

sanctuary movement was driven by humanitarian motives, seeking to help people who had to relocate because of political persecutions. Over time, sanctuary locations expanded to include entire cities and even counties. After the federal government in the early 2000s initiated several programs to enforce stricter immigration policies, sanctuary cities became a hot-button political issue of federalism rather than immigration enforcement. Since then, the issue of sanctuary cities has always been present, but always on the background, not being the most pressing problem in the area of illegal immigration. That, however, changed when presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016 used isolated instances of crime committed by undocumented immigrants to highlight alleged danger of sanctuary policies. The public became aware of high-profile cases involving sanctuary cities – such as the death of Kathryn Steinle who was accidentally shot and killed in San Francisco by an illegal immigrant. After coming to office, Donald Trump, who made Kathryn the face of his anti-sanctuary-policy campaign, consistently added fuel to the fire by bringing in new shocking details of crimes committed by immigrants across the country. In just 4 days after his inauguration, President Trump issued executive order 13768 “Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States” which stripped federal funding from sanctuary jurisdictions and listed conditions sufficient for deportation of immigrants. Among other things, the executive order stated that, sanctuary “jurisdictions have caused immeasurable harm to the American people and to the very fabric of our Republic” (Trump 2017a). The order proved to be ripe for cherry-picking, as liberal and conservative media distorted its original meaning focusing on different parts of it and ignoring others. The order was quickly challenged and reversed in the court (*County of Santa Clara v. Trump* 2017), before

the administration had a chance to enforce it, thus fueling the debate on legality of sanctuary jurisdictions even further.

One of the pitfalls of the order, as well as subsequent administration's efforts to put an end to sanctuary policies, was the absence of any clear definition of such policies. What are sanctuary jurisdictions? Across the country, disparities are massive. Some localities reject any cooperation with federal immigration authorities altogether, some honor federal detainer (requests to hold an illegal immigrant until federal immigration agents take the immigrant into custody) in case of repeated felons and violent offenders, and others simply inform appropriate authorities of releasing an immigrant from detention. Garbow (2016) defines them as cities that support at least limited cooperation with federal authorities, while the Ohio Jobs & Justice PAC considers sanctuary places only those that have officially published or announced its sanctuary status. In contrast, O'Brien et al. (2019) understands sanctuary cities as places where the police is explicitly prohibited from inquiring into a person's immigration status. Avila et al. (2018) notes that local involvement with the US Immigration and Custom Enforcement agency (ICE) has degrees, from less to more cooperation, but all of them can be considered sanctuary jurisdictions.

All in all, there is no universal answer to the question "What are sanctuary cities?" Trump's relentless pursuit of anti-sanctuary legislation even had an opposite effect and made several mayors and governors across the country openly disagree with the administration's immigration agenda. In obvious defiance of president's priorities, Illinois and California proclaimed their entire states sanctuaries. On the legislative front, the administration was able to push two bills targeting sanctuary jurisdictions through the Republican-controlled House in 2017, but the bills never became a law.

Looking at this string of legislative and judicial failures surrounding Trump's sanctuary-policy agenda, as well as loud criticism from prominent politicians around the country, it is tempting to conclude that the administration's policies were unsuccessful. Is it so? I decided to check whether the President's attempts in fact had any effect on sanctuary jurisdictions on the level of counties. Given that counties cooperate with ICE to different degrees, I triangulated data on local immigration enforcement provided by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center<sup>21</sup> against all counties in the country based on the 2020 census<sup>22</sup>. In the first three years of Trump's presidency, when his administration was most active advocating against sanctuary policies, 475 counties moved towards less cooperation with federal immigration authorities (Figure 4). Over the same time, 287 counties moved in the opposite direction, which could have been the result of the President's threat to withhold funding from such localities as well as his fear-mongering anti-immigration rhetoric (Figure 4). Hence, the net of only 7% of counties cut back on their cooperation with ICE – a result that suggests that President Trump's effort did bring some results, even if his entire ambitious agenda of ending sanctuary policies altogether failed. Finally, the majority of counties in the country (over 70%) had no changes in their immigration policies. That indicates that local governments did not perceive the issue equally pressing and

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<sup>21</sup> Immigrant Legal Resource Center <https://www.ilrc.org>

<sup>22</sup> US Census Bureau <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-main.html>

challenging. In other words, President Trump’s rhetoric inflated the threat of sanctuary cities.

Figure 4. Counties’ cooperation with ICE, 2016-2019



Source: Immigrant Legal Resource Center and the 2020 Census

### Cluster Analysis of the Administration’s Rhetoric

Maltese (1994) and Kumar (2007), authors of two fundamental books on president’s communications strategies who conducted interviews with officials in administrations from Nixon to G.W. Bush, described the surrogate program in the White House. The idea of the program is that the White House exercises tight control over public messages of officials across the entire government. It means that the White House orchestrates government-wide public campaigns rather than develops only its own agenda and leaves it for the rest of the executive branch to decide whether to follow same rhetorical lines. Do modern administrations follow the same principle? All in all, central control of the administration’s message becomes

Table 2. Language similarity between surrogate channels (Pearson correlation coefficients)

	DHS	DOJ	ICE	Twitter	WH
DHS	-	.74	.81	.42	.78
DOJ	.74	-	.53	.52	.84
ICE	.81	.53	-	.22	.61
Twitter	.42	.52	.22	-	.6
WH	.78	.84	.61	.6	-

more challenging as individual politicians have more opportunities to promote their independent vision on social media platforms.

To find out, I conducted cluster analysis of all Trump administration's messages dealing with the issue of sanctuary cities, dating from the first to the last day of Trump in office (January 21st, 2017 – January 20th, 2021). If the White House indeed relies on surrogate speakers to deliver its message on sanctuary cities, they must be co-opted from departments and agencies with jurisdiction over sanctuary cities. Therefore, I collected all mentions of sanctuary jurisdictions in the format of offensive message from the following entities: Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Immigration and Custom Enforcement Agency (ICE), in addition to president's office itself. Additionally, I collected all tweets about sanctuary cities by President Trump, given that he used it as the main channel of promoting his agenda. I manually cleaned each document and removed parts that were not related to the sanctuary-city movement. Overall, the White House launched a rhetorical offensive against sanctuary cities 360 times during the Trump administration (defensive messages took place 35 times). The bulk of analytical work in this chapter was performed in NVIVO. For topic and sentiment analysis, I specified sentences as units of analysis (N=62,160), and for cluster analysis I grouped documents by government's source (N=5), government's source and year (N=22), and number of times the issue of sanctuary cities was mentioned (N=395).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed description of automated textual analysis, refer to Appendix C, where I explain the nature of the method as well as its applicability in my project.

Were messages coming from the White House and directly from President Trump on Twitter similar to those put forward by the surrogate speakers? I used NVIVO to compare text similarity scores of the government's agencies against each other. Results reveal several interesting findings (Figures 5, 6). First, White House and DOJ were a lot closer to each other in terms of their public output than any other two items in my analysis, with the Pearson's correlation coefficient of .84 (Table 2). DOJ is obviously heavily

Figure 5. Language similarity between the White House and surrogate speakers

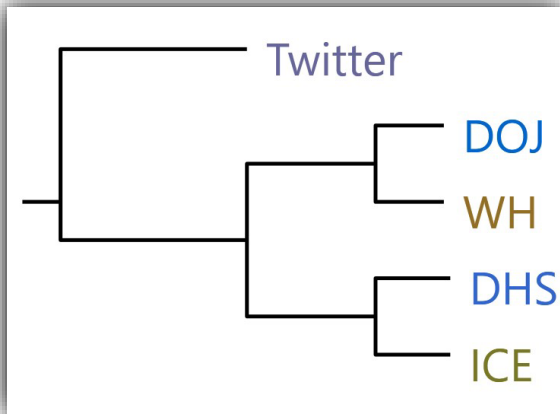
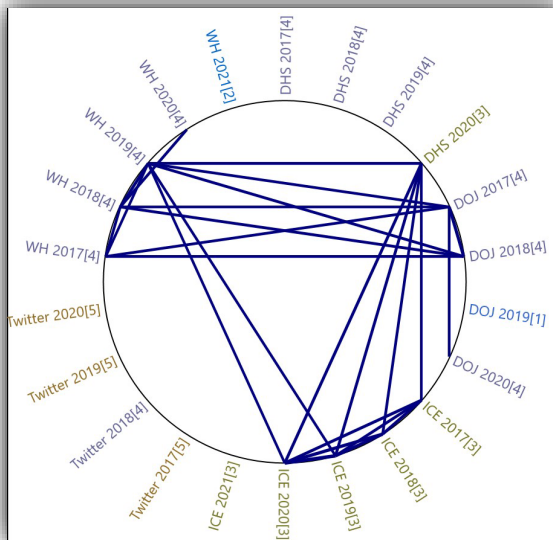


Figure 6. Language similarity between the White House and surrogate speakers

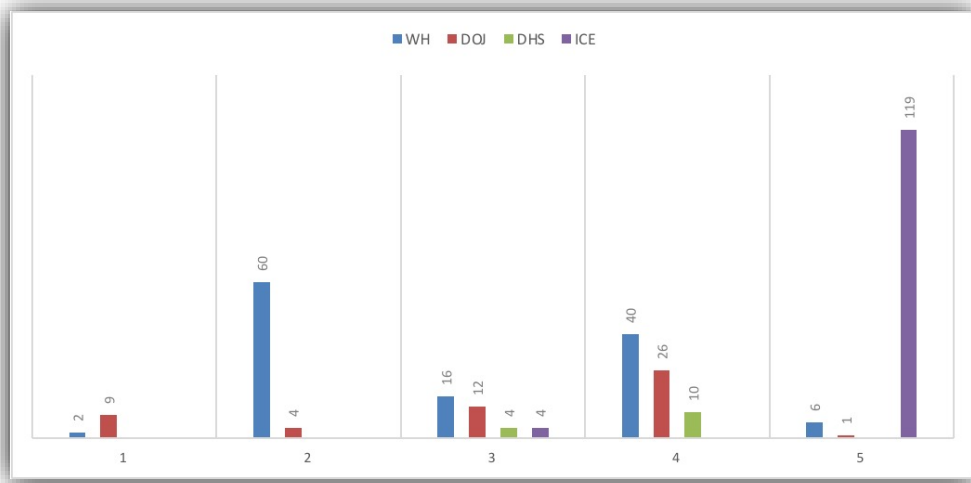


involved in crafting President's executive orders on sanctuary localities, which explain cases where the White House would borrow DOJ's formal language – say, instances promoting President Trump's executive order 13768 mentioned earlier. To begin with, Jess Sessions and President Trump saw eye-to-eye on the necessity of harsher immigration laws. In most cases, however, the directionality of the White House-DOJ connection is reversed: DOJ used expressions nearly identical to those in President Trump's populist arsenals, and even re-used individual stories of crime conducted by immigrants after Donald Trump's electoral rallies. Second, ICE's public messages were

closer to those by DHS. This is explained by the fact that ICE is formally a sub-division of DHS, hence they share a discernible rhetorical line, often speaking of innocent American lives lost due to sanctuary policies and the administration's efforts to make communities safe. Among all surrogate agencies, ICE's main task was to publicly "shame" sanctuary jurisdictions by highlighting individual cases of immigrant violence. This shaming simultaneously played a double-function of praising the great job ICE had done to remove violent immigrants off the streets, which DHS tended to reuse word by word. ICE consistently supplied the White House with new and disturbingly detailed cases of immigrant crime, which President Trump and his surrogate speakers used in their speeches and statements later. For example, ICE released a fact sheet describing a "lewd and lascivious act with a children under 14 years old" committed by a Mexican immigrant (US Immigration and Custom Enforcement 2018). The White House repeated that story word by word a month later, adding that the said immigrants only received 180 days in jail and was released into a sanctuary county (White House 2018i).

Twitter is a clear outlier. Its similarity scores with other surrogate channels are unimpressive, going as low as .22 vis-à-vis ICE. Apparently, Trump's infamous rants on Twitter did not fit in the accepted paradigm of government's communication, making his tweeting style a separate and unique channel for transmitting president's messages. It is indicative that the highest Pearson's coefficient for Twitter was in pair with the White House's (.6): both sources center around the president's persona, so even formal language of the White House's reports does capture Donald Trump's eccentricities to some extent. As a rule of thumb, the White House promotes only messages that would be considered politically correct. In some cases, however, when the media gets the wind of yet another

Figure 7. Rhetorical clusters within the administration’s public campaign against sanctuary cities



controversial President Trump’s speech, the White House goes into the damage-control mode and publishes such messages, no matter how politically incorrect they are, on its official website. For example, it was the case with the President’s remarks during a roundtable where he described criminal gang members as “animals.” Media outlets, present at the event, misinterpreted it as if the president called all immigrants animals (Gomez 2018; Hirschfeld Davis 2018; The Daily Beast 2018). In an apparent attempt to limit the fallout and provide some context to the President’s words, the White House Press office released the entire transcript of the round table (White House 2018f). A modest correlation coefficient between Twitter and White House’s messages is driven up by such instances. Otherwise, the data suggests that Twitter, although being President Trump’s go-to method of communication, is slow to make headway among government’s surrogate communication strategies.

The data supports the claim that there is a government’s surrogate program that employs officials across the executive branch to promote president’s agenda (Figures 5, 6). Based on the language similarity scores, it is clear that some departments and officials

across federal government essentially mirror the message coming from the White House (such as DOJ), while others only focus on a smaller area of a larger issue (ICE, for example, consistently publicized cases of violent immigrant crimes, but never discussed the problem from the perspective of federalism). As Figure 6 shows, the administration's messaging was also consistent across years, connecting messages by the White House, DHS, DOJ, and ICE into a unified propaganda net (Figure 6).

The administration's anti-sanctuary rhetoric forms five distinct clusters. Figure 7 shows its distribution across surrogate channels. It excludes Twitter due to the drastic difference in the tone of messages compared to those distributed through official channels. Predictably, the White House spearheaded the campaign, with its messages present in all five clusters. DOJ, which rhetoric mirrored the White House's, is also found in all five clusters, although with fewer occurrences in each. Cluster 3, that dealt with the immigration enforcement aspects of sanctuary locations, was the most balanced in terms of having all surrogate speakers contributing to it. Cluster 5 is almost solely driven by ICE's rhetoric of public shaming of sanctuary cities.

Clusters reveal the rhetorical angles under which the Trump administration portrayed the issue of sanctuary cities. Below are word clouds showing 100 most popular words in each cluster. They provide a good snapshot of rhetorical sub-strategies in the administration's propaganda.



campaign against such localities. The result was that all of the administration’s policies targeting sanctuary jurisdictions were quickly thwarted in courts.

*Cluster 2: President’s Agenda.* This cluster centers around President Trump and his legacy in fighting sanctuary cities. Typical for President Trump’s rhetorical style, messages in this cluster are populist, meant to elicit an emotional, rather than rational, response from the audience. Figure 9 shows words omnipresent in messages in this cluster: “communities,” “people,” “safety,” “public,”

“dangerous,” and alike, which are a commonplace for populist speeches. Also a must-have for divisive populist rhetoric, most administration’s statements targeted the liberals – the state of California in particular and Democrats in general, whom the president blamed for the broken immigration system. For instance, President Trump said on February 22, 2018, “Frankly, it’s a disgrace — the sanctuary city situation, the protection of these horrible criminals — you know because you’re working on it. And the protection of these horrible criminals in California, and other places, but in California” (White House 2018g).

As is evident in the cluster, the problem of sanctuary cities for the administration is the result of what Trump has consistently described during his presidency as “open border” policies that allow in and protect “illegal aliens.” Furthermore, this cluster captures what President Trump desires to achieve rather than his actual accomplishments in dealing with sanctuary localities (the word “want” is present in almost every message in the cluster).

Figure 9. Cluster 2: President’s Agenda







### *Cluster 5: Criminal Immigrants.*

Driven by ICE and repeated by the White House and DOJ, this cluster of messages pictures immigrants as violent offenders and gang members (Figure 12). In an attempt to draw a clear line between immigrants and crime, the agency released weekly bulletins, in which it listed crimes committed by immigrants in sanctuary localities, going into disturbing details. Notably, the majority of crimes shared by ICE were extremely horrendous, such as murders and rapes, and several of those cases were later re-used by the White House in public speeches – for example, on March 8, 2018 (White House 2018a). This propaganda cluster fulfilled a function of public shaming of sanctuary locations, which lenient policies allegedly empowered criminals to terrorize innocent communities. Crime cases are obviously cherry-picked by ICE to exaggerate the problem of sanctuary cities. In fact, research indicates that sanctuary cities have lower crime levels than non-sanctuary ones (O’Brien, Collingwood, and El-Khatib 2019; Martínez, Martínez-Schuldt, and Cantor 2018). Yet, the troubling details of isolated crime incidents are a perfect instrument to quickly make the public dislike immigrants and oppose sanctuary locations. This cluster represents the most consequential propaganda of the entire anti-sanctuary campaign. Report after report, ICE pictured immigrants as dangerous criminals who prey on innocent American citizens, hoping to make people in sanctuary cities fear for their safety - all without actually saying it. This rhetoric is powerful, especially when repeated

Figure 12. Cluster 5: Criminal Immigrants



by the President and the Attorney General. A mitigating factor here is the media's low interest in spreading the myth of violent immigrants. As I show in the next chapter, media outlets (with exception of Fox News) did not give ICE's reports much attention, thus reducing the impact of the original message.

### **Topics in Context and Sentiments in the Administration's Propaganda**

So far, the analysis shows correlation between the administration's surrogate propaganda channels and that they form rhetorical clusters. This part of analysis demonstrates the hierarchy of topics and the sentiments in the rhetoric of each government agency in the study. Topics and sentiments were identified by automated queries in NVIVO. I additionally discuss the context of the topics. By itself, topic analysis reveals *priming* (that is, what themes were discussed most often), but does not show the extent of *framing* (under what angle these themes were introduced). To account for the latter, I conduct an analysis of themes in context, which allows me to capture slight differences in a surrogate's rhetoric even when the topics are identical. The context analysis will be even more important to show dissimilarities between the administration's and the media's framing strategies in the following chapters.

*The White House.*

Figure 14. Themes in White House’s messages

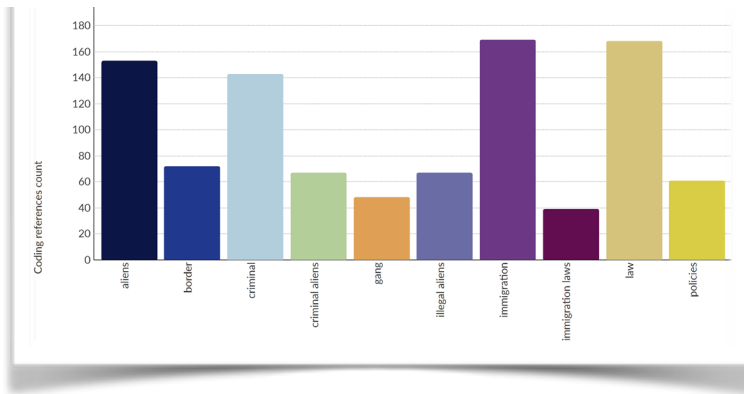


Figure 13 demonstrates what topics the White House’s anti-sanctuary propaganda accentuated. As evident, President Trump tied the problem of sanctuary cities

first and foremost to immigration, a hallmark line of his presidency, followed by crime committed by aliens and law implications of local non-cooperative policies. The topics of international gangs also preoccupied the president, who has many times claimed that sanctuary cities encourage the existence of MS-13, a gang infamous for brutal executions and violent crimes. For example, President Trump’s statement on February 13, 2018, reads, “Sanctuary cities are the best friend of gangs and cartels, like MS-13” (White House 2018b).

Figure 13. White House: context of the topic of immigration

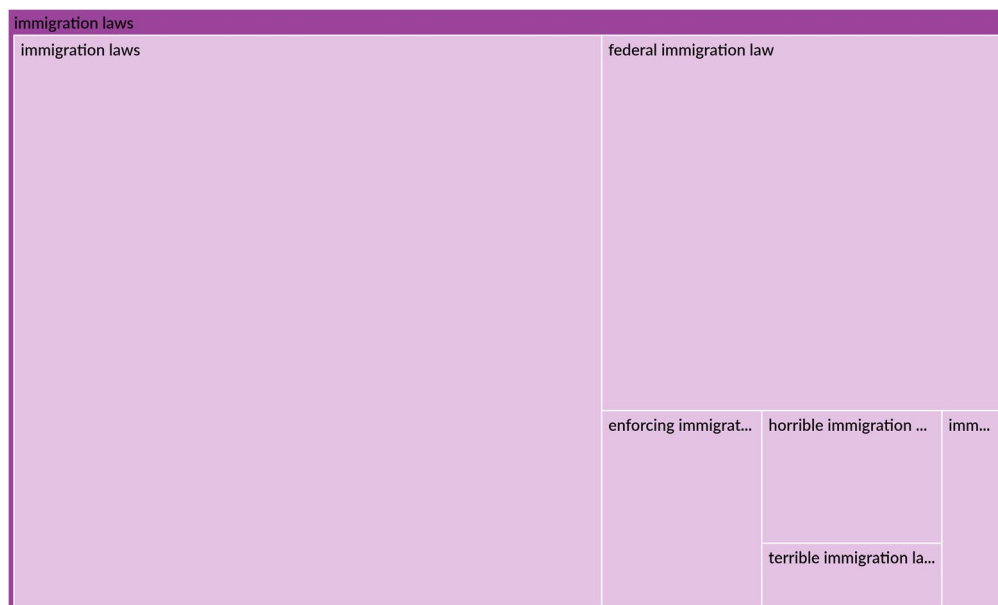


Figure 16. White House: context of the topic of sanctuary jurisdictions

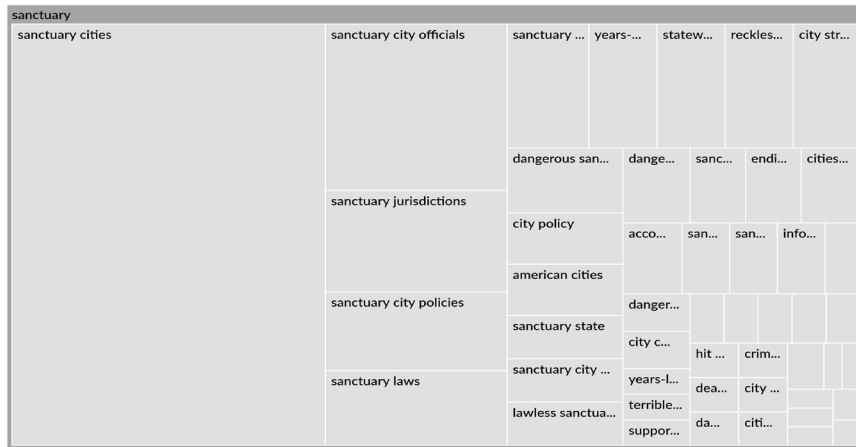
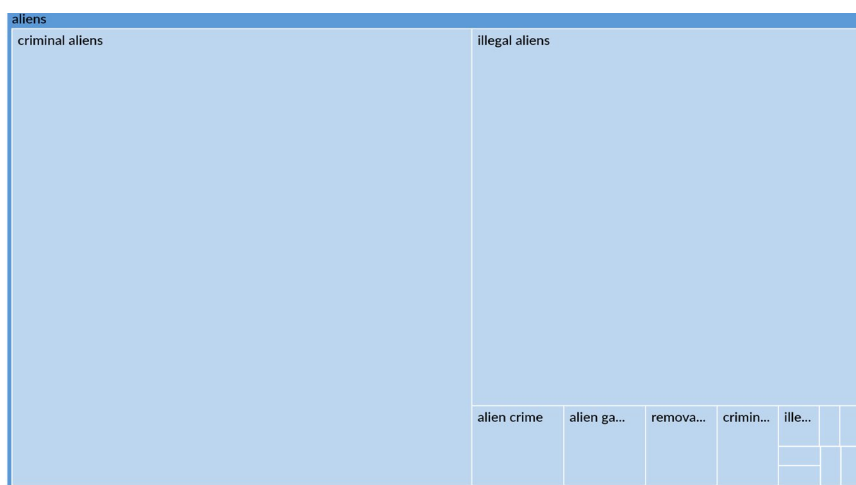


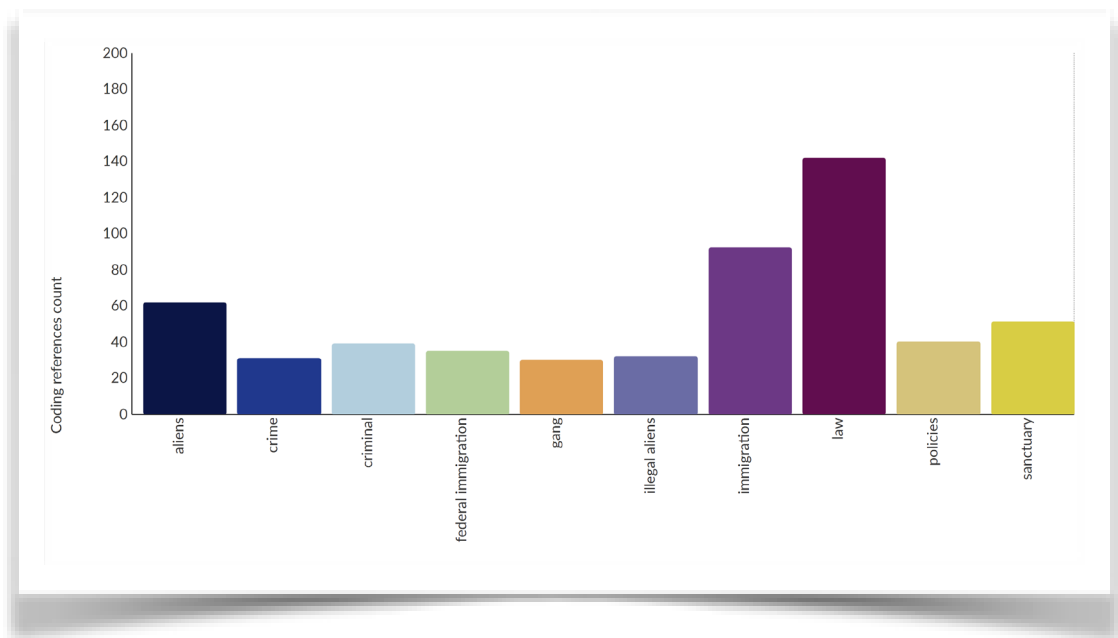
Figure 16. White House: context of the topic of aliens



What is the context of these topics? Speaking of immigration, President Trump and his surrogates in the White House accompanied it with such expressions as horrible immigration laws, broken immigration system, terrible immigration laws, immigration crime victims, and dangerous immigration loopholes (Figure 14). Sanctuary jurisdictions were described as dangerous, lawless, terrible, reckless, criminal, defiant, and outrageous (Figure 15). Aliens - as criminal, illegal, gang members, removable, predators, rapists, and dangerous (Figure 16).

**Department of Justice.** DOJ, which diligently used the majority of talking points coming from the White House, also talked mostly about law and immigration (Figure 17). The context was a lot like the White House’s, too: immigration system was described as broken and lax, sanctuary policies - as open-border, bad, dangerous, obstructive, unconstitutional, extreme, and protecting criminals, and aliens deserved the following epithets: criminal, illegal, deportable, gang members, and wanted. Notably, DOJ also brought up the topic of gangs in sanctuary cities, calling them violent and vicious.

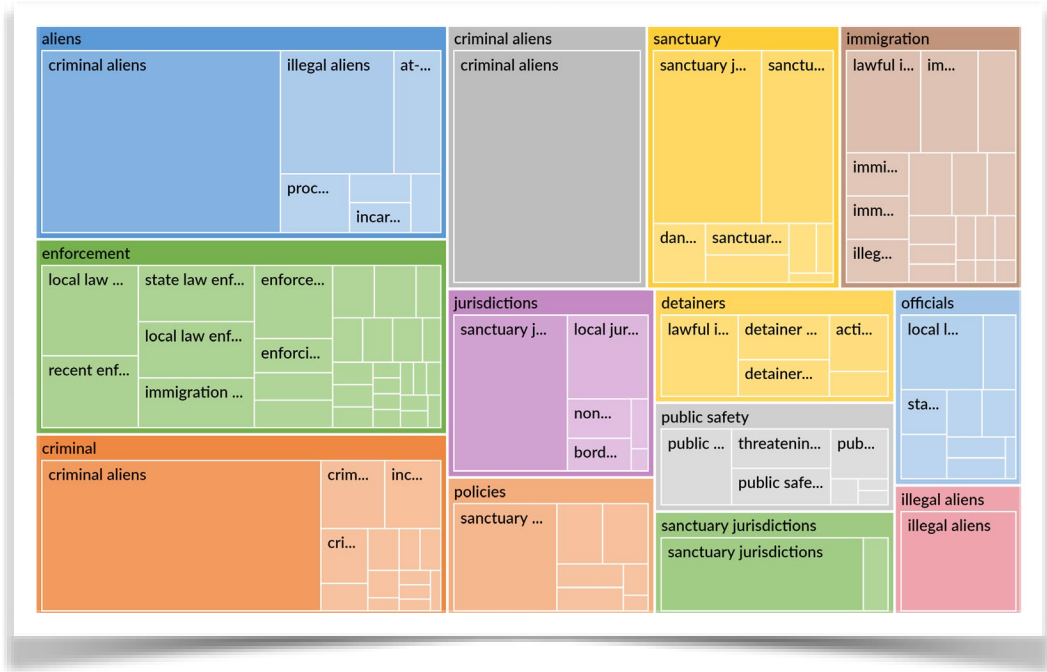
Figure 17. Themes in DOJ’s messages



**Department of Homeland Security.** The primary topics of DHS surrogate speakers’ attention were enforcement, criminal aliens, and immigration (Figure 18). In comparison to the White House and DOJ, rhetoric here is a degree less antagonizing. For example, sanctuary jurisdictions are called non-cooperative instead of lawless and dangerous, policies become misguided, aliens - targeted, incarcerated, and at-large. The topic of immigration enforcement - DHS’s direct duty - receives glowing evaluations of

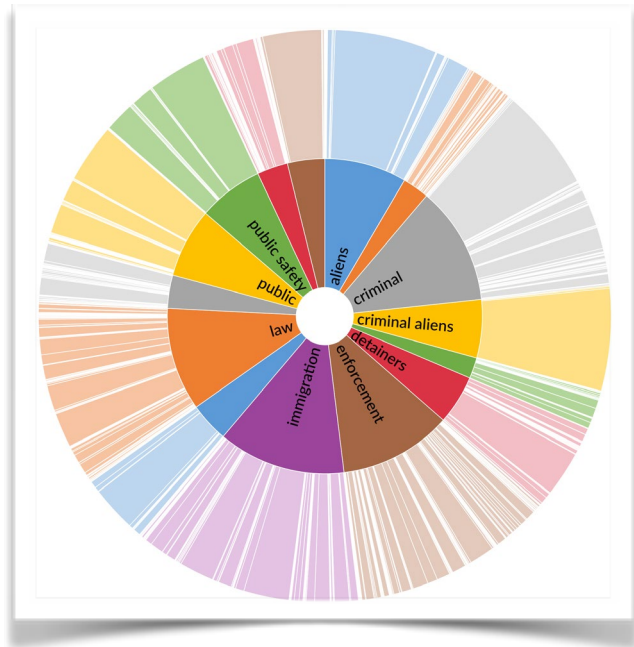
being lawful, while public safety in sanctuary locations is placed in the context of threat to officer's safety.

Figure 18. Topics in DHS's messages



***Immigration and Custom Enforcement.*** ICE, which published weekly shaming lists of sanctuary cities with immigrant crime, talked about public safety, immigration enforcement, and law (Figure 19). What deserves most attention is the context which ICE used to connect immigration and crime: seasoned criminals, dangerous criminals, criminal offenders, criminal groups and enterprises, criminal street gang, and criminal

Figure 19. Topics in ICE's messages



alien at-large, and so forth. Details of crimes were also present: criminal sex act, criminal weapon possession, 2nd degree arrest, child arrest, controlled substance, firearm, forcible rest, and stalking arrest, among others.

Although the sheer number of such crime reports is staggering (ICE was very consistent in doing its public-shaming work), they targeted very few locations. Based on these reports, I created a map of states that ICE shamed most often (Figure 20), with New York topping the list and being targeted twice as often as California, the runner-up. I then mapped out the list of actual sanctuary locations reported by the Center for Immigration Studies (Figure 21). I calculated the percentage of sanctuary counties based on the total number of counties in each state after the 2020 census (for visual clarity, the map shows only states at least 10% of which counties are sanctuaries). Comparing the two maps, certain partisan disparities are visible. In particular, ICE’s reports ignored sanctuary locations in 11 states, 8 of which had Republican governors (New Mexico, Wyoming, Nevada, Vermont, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maryland). Say, only 6 percent of counties in Democrat-governed North Carolina were sanctuary, yet ICE scolded the state

Figure 20. Locations targeted in ICE’s reports of immigrant crime

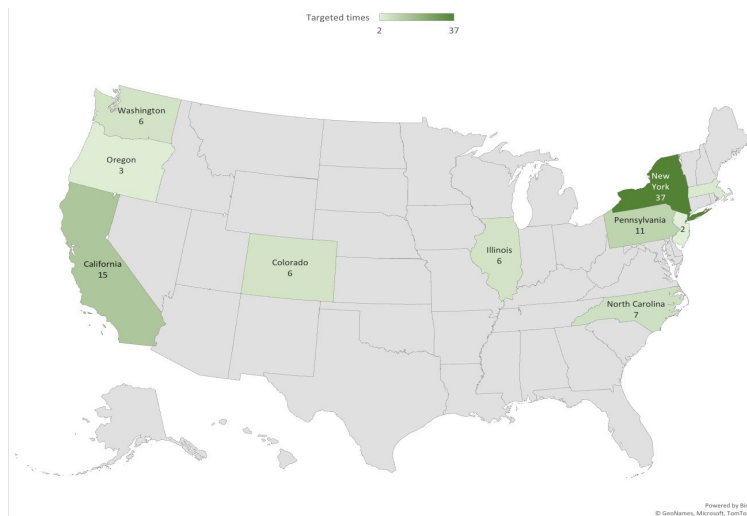
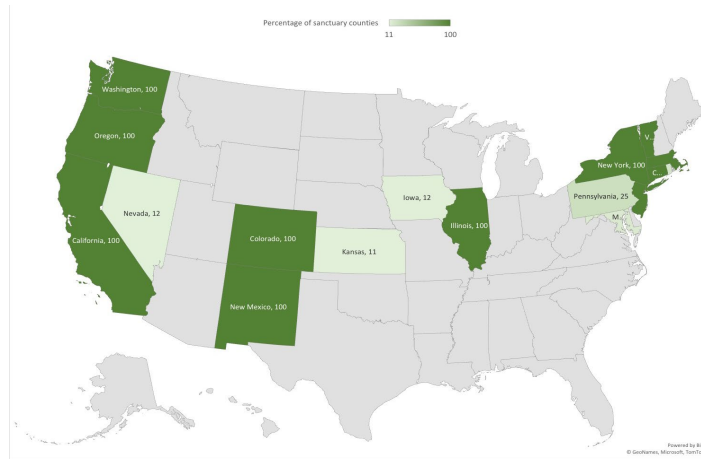


Figure 21. Map of sanctuary locations

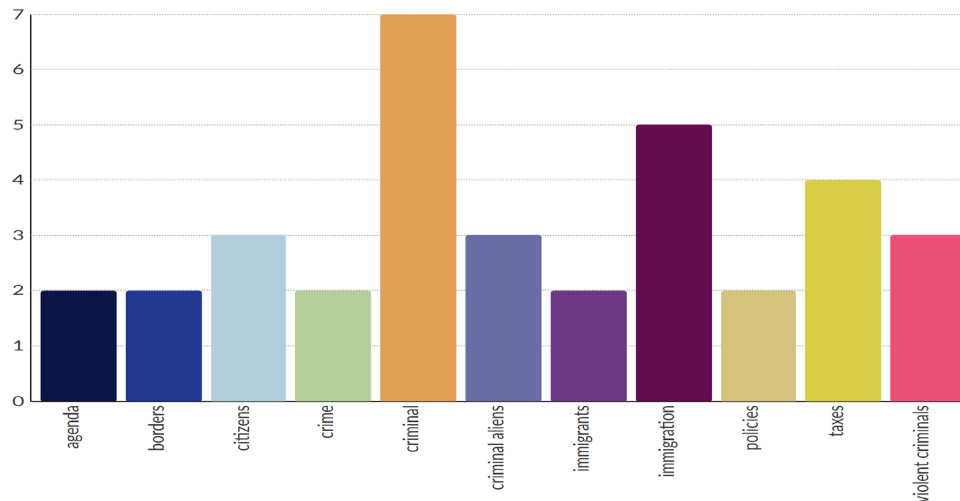


Sources: The Center for Immigration Studies; 2020 US Census.

7 times. At the same time, ICE never criticized New Mexico, although, in accordance with the Center for Immigration Studies’ classification, the entire state was a sanctuary.

**Twitter.** Twitter was a favorite propaganda channel for President Trump. For one, it provided direct access to millions of followers in a matter of seconds. Second, unlike statements distributed through the White House and other official channels, tweets expressed his personal opinions without any consideration for political correctness - that

Figure 22. Topics in Donald Trump’s messages on Twitter





immigrant in the country, but there is no straight line between open-border and sanctuary policies.

Consider the results of automated sentiment analysis of President Trump's tweets (Figure 24). Very negative and moderately negative messages were posted twice as often as moderately and very positive. In very negative messages, President Trump portrayed sanctuary cities as criminal heavens - such as in a tweet on April 14, 2019: "Sanctuary Cities must immediately ACT to take care of the Illegal Immigrants - and this includes Gang Members Drug Dealers Human Traffickers and Criminals of all shapes sizes and kinds" (Trump 2019c). In comparison, very positive messages were those in which the president praised himself or his supporters for fighting sanctuary policies. For example, he tweeted, "Under my leadership, we achieved the most Secure Border in U.S. History!" (Trump 2020). The prevalence of negative (fear-mongering and opposition-slamming) messages over positive ones (inspiring to keep the momentum) reflects President Trump's communication style: not very constructive and open to dialogue, but impressively populist and attention-demanding. Compare these with the results of sentiment analysis of the White House's messages: although negative messages outweigh positive ones, the dominant sentiment was still only moderately negative (Figure 25). For example, the White House released a statement on March 27, 2017, saying that the "laws require us to promptly remove aliens when they are convicted or detained of certain crimes" (White House 2017d). The message has a mixed appeal: it acknowledges that there are immigrants in sanctuary cities that cause troubles and at the same time asserts the legality of the administration's efforts to remove such immigrants.

Figure 24. Sentiments in Donald Trump’s tweets

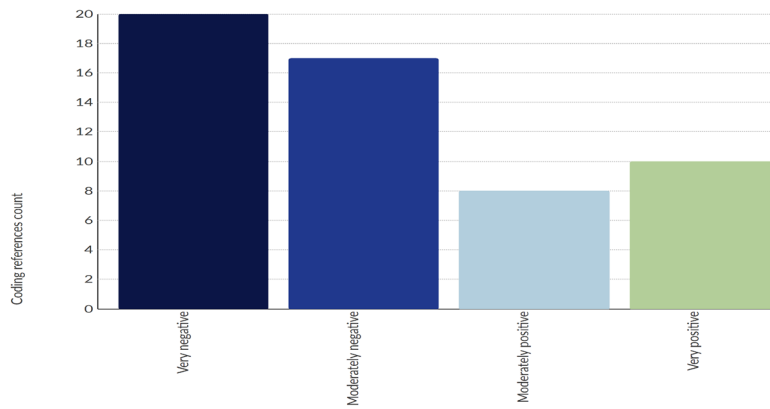
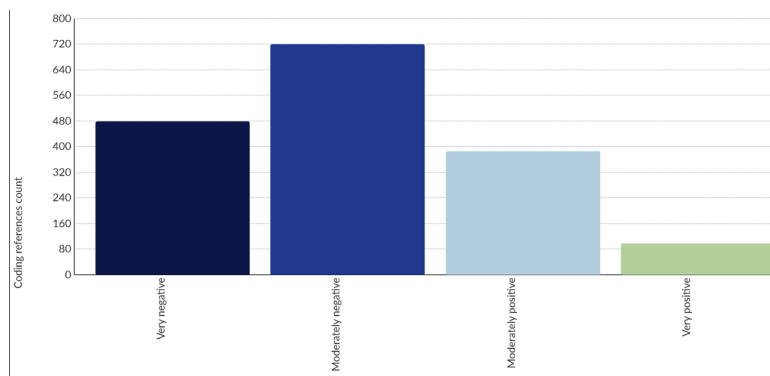


Figure 25. Sentiments in White House’s messages



## Chapter in a Nutshell

In this chapter, I showed how the Trump administration waged a propaganda war against sanctuary cities. With the help of the administration’s surrogate program and President Trump’s personal Twitter account, the White House created an image of sanctuary cities as lawless places filled with violent immigrants whom local authorities deliberately release onto streets to murder American citizens. These optics were developed in five rhetorical clusters focusing on different aspects of the problem (judicial, immigration enforcement, violence, president’s agenda, and need for change). In comparison of propaganda channels within the executive branch, President Trump’s Twitter page supplied the harshest and most negative information about sanctuary cities. President Trump’s populist rhetorical style was also reflected in official White House’s press releases and statements.

Language similarity between different government agencies and the White House point out that there is indeed a surrogate program the White House employs for its public campaigns. Previously, this claim has been put forward by Maltese (1994) and Kumar (2007) in their respective works as a simple informal observation. My analysis empirically confirms it, thus making our knowledge of contemporary democratic government propaganda more solid. Among surrogate channels, the White House and the Department of Justice share the highest rhetorical similarity. This can be explained by the fact that the Attorney General at the peak of the administration's battle with sanctuary cities (2017-2018) was Jeff Sessions. His views on immigration are in every respect as hard-line as Donald Trump's, if not harder. "Even one victim of a crime committed by an illegal alien is too many," Sessions said in 2018 (Department of Justice 2018c). "Sanctuary cities intentionally keep criminals in this country," he stated on another occasion, spreading information that is not only false but also very polarizing (Department of Justice 2018a). Thus, it is understandable that the White House and DOJ exchanged talking points and followed an identical rhetorical line.

Was the administration's anti-sanctuary propaganda false? That is beyond the point of the discussion. The idea of propaganda developed in Chapters 2 and 3 of my dissertation posits that propaganda, truthful or not, has its place in every democratic government's rhetoric. It is not concerned with values and moral implications of the issues propaganda addresses. All in all, in the polarized environment of contemporary America, moral implications of policies shift 180 degrees in the opposite direction every time when the opposite party comes to the White House. Of course, falsehood and manipulation cannot be escaped in government's public campaigns. Time and time again, the Trump

administration used information selectively, exaggerated the severity of the problem, and inflated the threat of illegal immigration. For example, one of its statements reads, “Our efforts to fight crime are being disrupted by certain state and local governments that refuse to cooperate with federal law enforcement, particularly so-called “Sanctuary cities” for violators” (Justice Department 2019). Sanctuary cities for violators? This is a nonsense expression that has no connection to reality. Nobody calls sanctuary cities “cities for violators.” Sanctuary cities do not call themselves sanctuaries in order to give refuge to rule-breakers. And yet, this is how the administration portrayed localities with sanctuary policies. We can also see weird, a-la Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, self-complimenting messages coming from the White House. For example, the Press Office released a fact sheet titled “More Praise for President Trump’s Commitment to Border Security” which presented a collection of quotes from different politicians celebrating President Trump’s tough stance on immigration (White House 2017a). Furthermore, the White House organized multiple public meetings with families of victims murdered by immigrants in sanctuary cities, calling them the ‘Angel families’. During these meetings, personal stories of people who lost their loved ones to immigrant crime invariably described horrendous details and concluded with praise of President Trump’s decisive actions on immigration. For example, on June 22, 2018, during yet another meeting with the Angel families, President Trump said, “Because the news media has overlooked their stories, I want the American people to hear directly from these families about the pain they have had to endure.” One of the audience members then shared her story:

We want to tell you a little bit today about Josh. He was brutally tortured, strangled over and over. He was set on fire after death. His last hours were — was brutal. [...] It’s the media that won’t share it with other people. [...]

But I want to thank you, Mr. Trump, and Vice President [...] Pence — for keeping their commitment to us (White House 2018d).

One can clearly see how such stories were carefully vetted and most likely scripted by the White House's propagandists. At any given public event involving the Angel families, the White House managed to praise the administration's policies, criticize the liberal media, and ramp up anti-immigrant attitudes by sharing horrible details of murders. A stroke of genius or just another dimension of Donald Trump's populist style?

Another thing to note here is that these personal stories have been part of the administration's public strategy all along. The Angel Families have become somewhat of a staple of the administration's anti-sanctuary battle, each time offering to the public new stories from grief-stricken people. Interestingly enough, President Trump is partially right when he says that the stories have been overlooked by the media. Yet, they were not ignored by all media. As I will explain the next chapter, the media did cover personal stories, although of very different people. I will also show in the coming chapter when the media's portrait of sanctuary cities followed the administration's and when it differed.

Propaganda is as American as apple pie.

(Nelson 1996, vii)

**“PERPETUAL STATE OF FEAR”:**

**THE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF SANCTUARY CITIES**

On July 22, 2017, the New York Times published a long melancholic article describing one day from the life of its reporters riding along with ICE agents (Medina and Jordan 2017). The article shows in detail, with pictures and videos, how ICE agents, empowered by President Trump’s policies against sanctuary cities, stop, frisk, and detain all people who look like South American immigrants. ICE agents knock on random doors in immigrant neighborhoods and take away law-abiding, hard-working people, who could not produce immigration documents at the spot. “The handcuffs would leave marks,” sadly reads the caption under one image of an immigrant’s hands (Medina and Jordan 2017). The immigrant was apprehended during one of the ICE raids, along with his family, from whom he was since separated.

The New York Times chose a smart strategy to counter the Trump administration’s efforts to curb sanctuary cities. Instead of openly criticizing the president’s position or questioning the legal basis for ICE’s actions, the media outlet used personal stories of immigrants who suffer from ramped-up immigration enforcement. One of the stories shows a middle-aged woman, who is desperately raising her hands being held at a gunpoint

(Medina and Jordan 2017). She is an illegal immigrant who cleans rich Americans' houses, and whose husband - also an illegal immigrant - milks cows for \$12 an hour. All these details create a powerful narrative contradicting the administration's rhetoric against sanctuary cities. As the previous chapter shows, the administration created a myth of violent immigrants hoping to make Americans fear for their lives in sanctuary cities. The media, at least in case of the *New York Times*, also talks about fear - "perpetual state of fear" of immigrants who are being hunted by ICE agents every day since Donald Trump took office (Martinez 2018). And just like that, the two narratives clash, creating diametrically different accounts of the same cities. In the case of the administration's propaganda, it should invoke fear and outrage towards sanctuary locations. In case of the liberal media, it should invoke empathy and support for sanctuary cities.

This chapter tells a story of rhetorical strategies in the media, divided into three ideological bubbles: liberal, center, and conservative. The goal of this chapter is to show how similar or different these strategies are from those of the administration's. Continuing the style of analysis from the previous chapter, this one also focuses on general rhetorical patterns. I rely on machine-assisted topic analysis, paying special attention to rhetorical contexts. The White House's portrayal of sanctuary jurisdictions as places where Americans suffer from violent immigrants is perpetuated and exaggerated by conservative cable news shows. The printed side of the liberal media bubble shows law-abiding immigrants who live in constant fear of deportation because of President Trump's immigration policies. Liberal cable news shows, on the other hand, portrayed the sanctuary-city conundrum as an extension of Trump's bad presidency. Yet center and conservative print media did not frame sanctuary cities in terms of immigration problems,

but rather the changing norms of federalism and the limits of presidential power. Thus, four competing narratives emerge in the media, and each one represents the original message coming from the Trump administration differently. Table 3 provides a summary of data sources and analytical tools used for analysis in this chapter.

Table 3. Sources of data and tools used for analysis

<b>Media</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>URL</b>
Associated Press	Nexis Uni	<a href="https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/professional/academic/nexis-uni.page">https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/professional/academic/nexis-uni.page</a>
New York Times	ProQuest	<a href="https://www.proquest.com">https://www.proquest.com</a>
Wall Street Journal	ProQuest	<a href="https://www.proquest.com">https://www.proquest.com</a>
CNN	Newsbank Access World News Research Collection	<a href="https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/?p=WORLDNEWS">https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/?p=WORLDNEWS</a>
Fox News	Newsbank Access World News Research Collection	<a href="https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/?p=WORLDNEWS">https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/?p=WORLDNEWS</a>
<b>Analytical tools</b>		<b>URL</b>
Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer		<a href="https://tvnews.stanford.edu">https://tvnews.stanford.edu</a>
NVIVO		
Microsoft Excel		
Datawrapper		<a href="https://www.datawrapper.de">https://www.datawrapper.de</a>

The chapter also shows what contexts the media placed sub-topics of sanctuary cities in. On first glance, the media across the spectrum used the same language to refer to concepts such as laws, immigrant, policies, and cities. However, the analysis shows that the object of that rhetoric was different: in the case of conservative media, it is the local sanctuary policies that were criticized, and in case of the liberal media, the administration's agenda and actions were targeted.

**Guide to reading this chapter.** This chapter continues discussing rhetoric on sanctuary cities, this time turning from the White House to the media. In other words, we are switching our attention here from the original message to the final one. As such, it shows the general mechanism of media filtering in action. The chapter opens by explaining differences in the frequency of coverage between various media outlets. It discusses which news outlets's rhetoric was similar to the administration's and the implications of it, as measured by language similarity coefficients. Next, the chapter shows topics in context in each media's rhetoric. Finally, the chapter reveals how personal stories have become an ideological instrument on both sides, serving opposing goals. Liberal and conservative media picked different stories to create a sense of real people's tragedies and used that to appeal to human emotions in their readers and viewers. Fox News invited grief-stricken relatives of people murdered by immigrants, and the New York Times traced stories of law-abiding immigrants who were arrested and deported despite committing no crime.

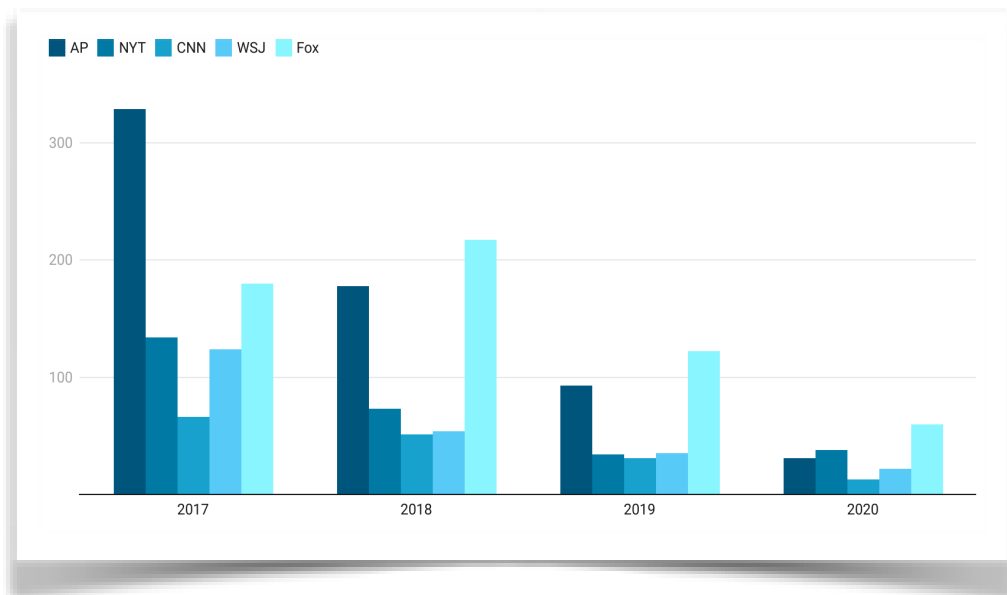
### **Media Priming of the Issue of Sanctuary Cities**

In the four years of Donald Trump's presidency, the media coverage of the administration's agenda on sanctuary cities was chaotic and confusing. Some, such as the Associated Press and the Wall Street Journal, were mostly reactive to messages coming from or involving the White House. For example, when the courts blocked the President's executive order seeking to pull away federal funds from sanctuary jurisdictions. Others, such as the New York Times, demonstrated a lot more initiative, often creating an informational pretext to involve the White House in the debate, rather than the other way around. And cable TV news shows (CNN and Fox News) zealously spent hours spinning the issue in opposite

directions. The following chapter will demonstrate through the method of process tracing how specific messages played out after the media filter. For now, I want to show the importance each media outlet assigned to the issue - that is, how many times the issue was raised during Trump’s presidency on each outlet’s pages.

The sample consists of media mentions of sanctuary cities from January 20, 2017-January 19, 2021. For the digital print media (NYTimes and WSJ) and wire services (AP), the sample includes all such instances. For the cable TV news shows, I opted to focus on television prime hours (6pm-11pm). The reason for that is because the most important issues are likely to be discussed during these hours rather than in the “slow” morning news. Besides, the peak of viewership in prime hours on TV by itself warrants inclusion of controversial topics with high stakes, and the issue of sanctuary cities is such. Finally, lots of news simply are not covered earlier than the prime hours because political controversies are unfolding during the day and are summarized in the evening.

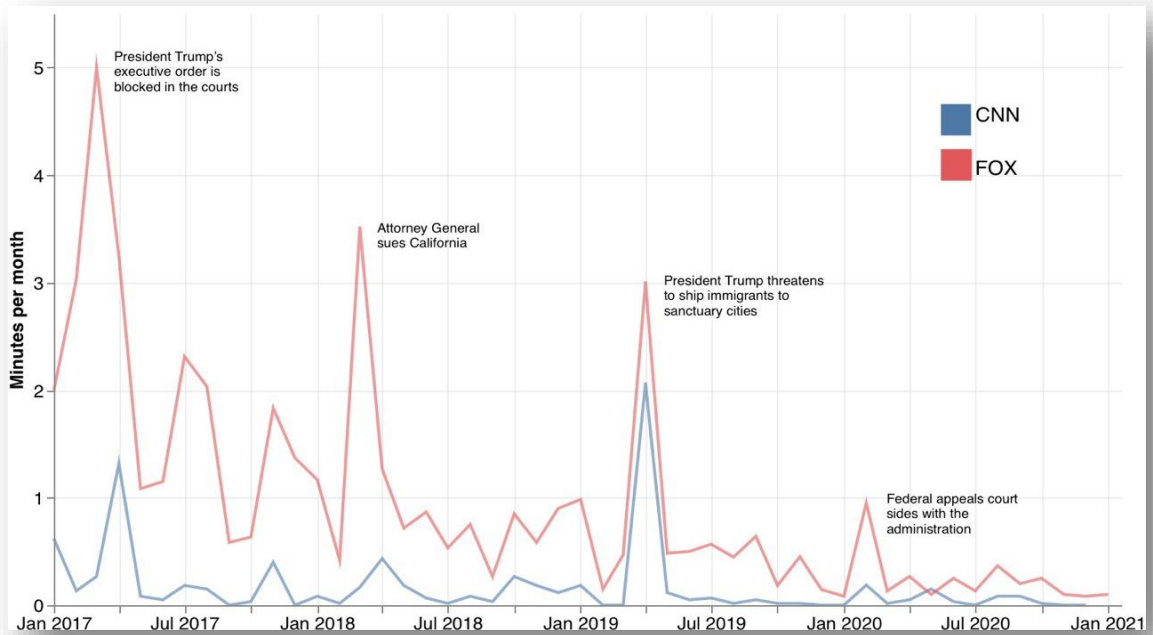
Figure 26. Number of mentions of the issue of sanctuary cities in the media



Overall, the media have covered the issue 1,888 times during Trump’s presidency. Figure 26 shows disparities between news outlets, controlling for year. Overall, AP and Fox News were most active in publicizing the issue. However, while the media’s interest in the issue declined in parallel with the administration’s waning success on the policy fronts, Fox News continued peddling the topic until the very end of Trump’s presidency, sometimes even more aggressively than the administration itself.

Figure 27 focuses specifically on cable TV news programs, CNN and Fox News, during prime hours. The contrast between the two is massive. Fox News covered the issue on average three times more aggressive than did its liberal counterpart channel, and in the first month of Trump’s presidency, the difference was as high as five times. It means that Fox News’ viewers, predominantly conservative Republicans, were significantly more aware of problems associated with sanctuary jurisdictions as well as current political developments of the issue.

Figure 27. Number of mentions of the issue of sanctuary cities on cable news shows



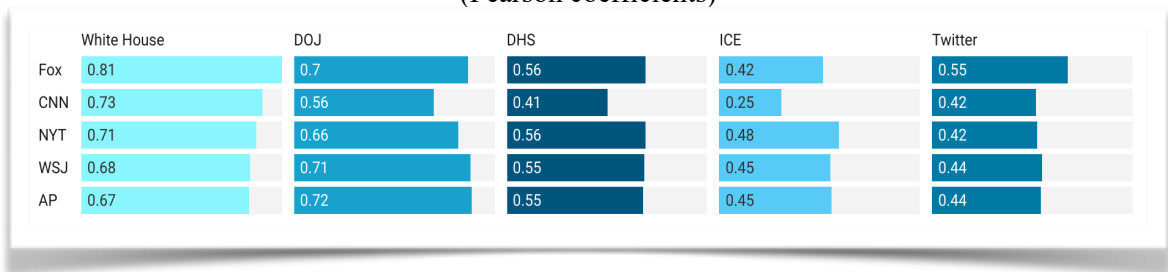
Source: Stanford Cable News TV Analyzer. Explanations of events are mine.

## Language Similarity Between the Government and the Media

The media almost never let the president's message pass through its media filter unaltered. Certain exceptions might be, for example, State of the Union Addresses (SOTU) each year that the media usually cover entirely without interruption. However, the media always filter SOTU speeches a posteriori, through either instant analysis or continuing discussions and manipulation of excerpts in the following days. On any other day, even the most neutral and objective media source slips into occasionally putting positive or negative spin on the administration's original message. Therefore, it is interesting to see similarities and dissimilarities between general rhetorical patterns of the Trump administration and the media, as measured by Pearson coefficients. Figure 28 shows the results. There, we see that in comparison of all the media in my analysis, Fox News's rhetoric was the closest to almost all surrogate channels. It means that Fox News used up significant parts of the White House's messages in its reports. Restricting our sample to just the White House - the first and foremost source of information - Fox News is far ahead in mirroring the original message than any other media outlet. It is also the greatest correlation coefficient for Fox News vis-à-vis any other surrogate channel, pointing that the conservative news outlet aims to facilitate popularization of the administration's agenda as much as possible.

Not exactly a surprising finding. Now, consider Twitter: there is also a significant gap between Fox News and the rest of the media (0.5 vs 0.4s, respectively). DOJ, by virtue of sharing the language with the White House, also received high correlation scores from all the media in the sample. ICE’s reports describing horrors of immigrant crimes did not receive significant attention from the media, and the least of all from CNN that barely reused ICE’s messages (correlation score of 0.25, making it the lowest in the study). As I will show later on, the news outlets did focus on personal stories, however, they were about different people and directly contradicted the administration’s propaganda. Whereas ICE’s reports publicly shamed sanctuary locations by highlighting details of crimes, the liberal media instead produced stories of terrified immigrants.

Figure 28. Language similarity between the administration’s and the media’s language (Pearson coefficients)



### Topics in Context in the Media

After we have figured out that the White House was the most widely cited sources across all surrogate channels, and that Fox News was far more active in recycling the administration’s messages than any other media outlet, it will be useful to provide an analysis of the general rhetorical patterns in the media. I do so through analysis of topics in context. The unit of analysis for this section is the sentence.



focusing on repercussions for federalism and presidential power, and the WSJ only occasionally put positive spin on the administration's messages.

Moreover, in the following chapter, I show that the WSJ filtered the administration's original messages less than any other media, including AP. Surprisingly, WSJ came up as the most neutral media outlet in my sample, overshadowing even AP.

Fox News predictably went all in to present the administration's point of view as compelling as possible. In doing so, the media elevated the president's original message to even more aggressive positions than did the White House itself. It is no surprise that a word frequency analysis of the media's narrative points at

Figure 31. Themes in Fox News's messages

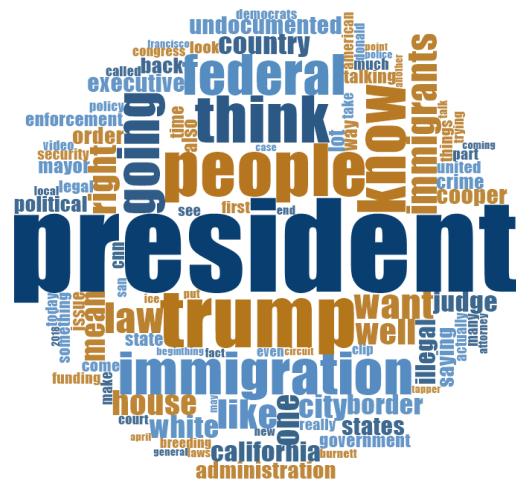


clear populist undertones (Figure 31). The dominant themes were people, country, laws, and Trump. Much like in President Trump's populist propaganda, Fox News was consistently singling out the enemy - Democrats and the "radical left" whose extreme policies were, in the media's words, very harmful for the Americans. Note that Fox News went heavily after California (just like did the White House and President Trump's Twitter), again identifying it as the greatest enemy of the people. For example, Sean Hannity stated on March 27, 2018, that "radical left wing California Governor Jerry "Moonbeam" Brown, he signed a bill into law making California a sanctuary state. In other words, California's lawless lawmakers are now literally barring police from determining the citizenship status of anyone charged with a crime thereby preventing the federal

government from effectively deporting criminal illegal immigrants and enforcing federal law” (Hannity 2018). This divisive rhetoric, repeated day after day on Fox News’ prime-hour TV programs, was in some cases even more confrontational than the administration’s original message. I will show in the following chapter how Fox News snowballed and exaggerated the administration’s select messages thus expanding the boundaries of rhetorical battle even further.

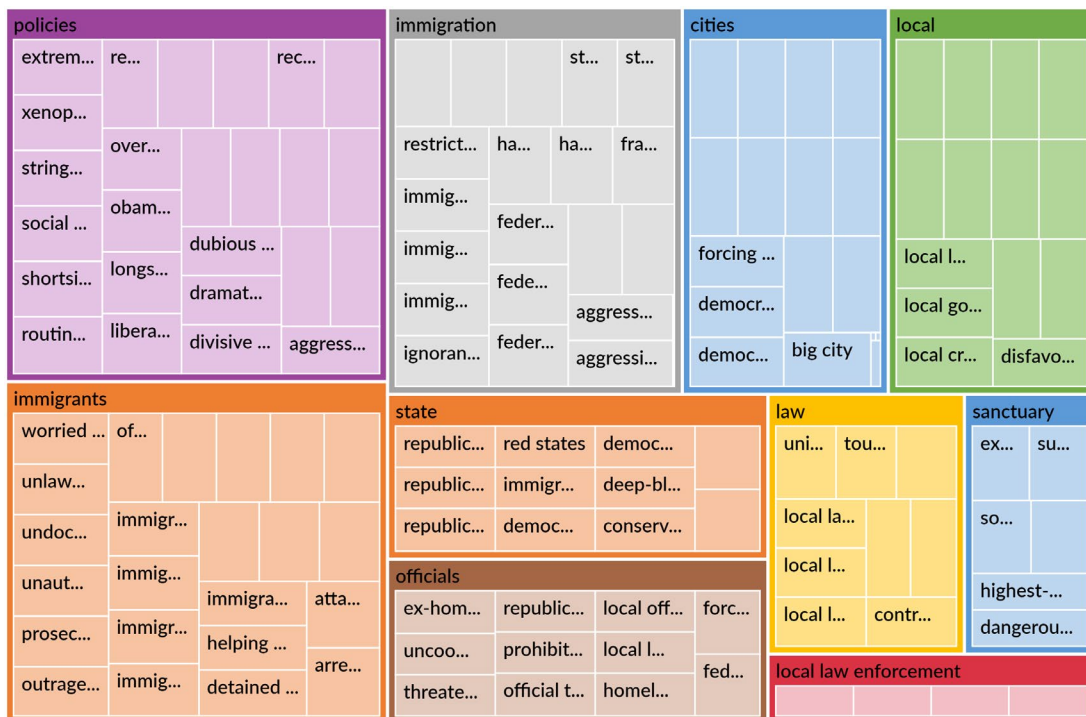
CNN went personally after President Trump. The dominant topic of its entire narrative on sanctuary cities was not even the cities themselves, or immigration, or federalism and alike. By and large, CNN focused its criticism on President Trump’s figure (Figure 32). In that narrative, the administration’s battle against sanctuary cities was merely *yet another* spot on the big canvas of *horrible Trump’s presidency*. CNN rarely offered any comprehensive analysis of the sanctuary controversy, which makes it the least substantial media outlet in my sample. Sure, Fox News oversold the administration’s agenda, but it did so by bringing in the Angel families and invoking citizens’ anger by showing real people’s grief. CNN mostly brought in “experts” - former officials from the previous Democratic administrations - and repeated in circles how badly President Trump handled the matter. All in all, CNN’s coverage was not only extremely biased but also lacking any informational or educational substance.

Figure 32. Themes in CNN’s messages



Finally, the printed side of the liberal bubble, represented by the New York Times, was also biased. This well-respected elite Washington newspaper criticized the Republican administration’s policies from the standpoint of human rights. Those policies, which the NYTimes described as “dubious,” “hard-line,” “dramatic,” “over-policing,” “xenophobic,” “stringent,” “shortsighted,” “divisive,” and “lackadaisical,” seemed to be the focus of the NYT’s attention during the entire Trump’s presidency (Figure 33). In addition, a big portion of the NYT’s coverage was dedicated to immigrants, whom the newspaper called “undocumented,” “unauthorized,” “detained,” “law-abiding,” “noncriminal,” “outraged,”

Figure 33. Themes in the New York Times’s messages



and “worried.” Note how different it is from the administration’s rhetoric. By calling immigrants worried and outraged, the outlet emphasized the burden President Trump’s policies placed on them. Furthermore, the NYT also tried to invoke a sense of sympathy to sanctuary places by sharing personal stories of hard-working immigrants who suffered from what the NYT considered the administration’s “inhumane” policies.

In the sections that follow, we will turn our attention to the context in which these topics are presented by the media. Four topics were chosen to highlight the core differences between the outlets: immigrants, law, policies, and cities.

***Immigrants.*** The NYT most often referred to immigrants as “undocumented,” “unauthorized,” “law-abiding,” and “non-criminal.” Additionally, as the NYT’s strategy was to protest Donald Trump’s immigration policies by showing immigrants living in constant fear, its reports included such expressions as “outraged immigrants,” “immigrant families,” “immigrant rights,” “detained immigrants,” “immigration protections,” and “immigrant rights movement”. In contrast, Fox News’ context about immigrants is very different. For starters, Fox News does not refer to immigrants as such - instead, it repeats the White House’s depiction of them as “aliens.” In the conservative media’s words, aliens are “illegal,” “criminal,” “removable,” and “deportable.” For example, a Fox News’ show host Tucker Carlson stated, “Federal courts set up a roadblock to common sense yesterday ruling that the administration could not cut off certain federal funds to the City of Philadelphia in response to its sanctuary city policies, the ones that protect criminal aliens” (Carlson 2018). Details of crime also accompanied the word “aliens” very often: to name a few, “alien drug dealer,” “alien smuggler,” “alien sex offender,” “alien rape,” “alien offenders,” “alien homicide suspect,” “alien gang,” “alien crime rate,” etc. All these descriptions are meant to reinforce the image of criminal immigrants in sanctuary cities and manipulate Americans’ negative attitudes toward such “unsafe” locations. Fox News’ liberal counterpart, CNN, referred to immigrants as “undocumented,” “harbored,” “non-criminal,” and “low-risk,” thus emphasizing its divergence from the administration’s position on the issue. The portrayal of immigrants was mixed in the case of WSJ. It referred

to immigrants as “undocumented” and “illegal,” but also equally introduced in its reports phrases “fellow immigrants,” “aiding immigrants,” “scapegoating immigrants,” helping immigrants,” and “shelter immigrants.”

**Law.** One interesting fact about the context in which the media placed laws is that they were referring to *different* laws. The liberal media cluster focused on laws introduced by the Republican administration and the language was very harsh. For example, CNN described President Trump’s anti-sanctuary legislative actions as “dangerous” and “inhumane.” On April 12, 2019, CNN host Don Lemon had a conversation with a CNN political analyst:

LEMON: Because the president of the United States openly advocating using migrants, many of them women and children as tools to punish his political opponents. I mean, what do you think of that?

RYAN LIZZA, CNN POLITICAL ANALYST: I mean, I think it's inhumane (Lemon 2019).

The NYT also added “tough,” “sweeping,” “unique,” and “highly controversial” to that list. AP and WSJ kept up with their rather neutral coverage of the issue. Here, the laws are spoken of as “Republican-backed,” “information-sharing,” and “local law enforcement.” Once again, Fox News was a clear outlier. They referred to local sanctuary laws rather than the federal anti-sanctuary policies. Fox News’ language on local sanctuary laws was colorful and harsh: “terrible,” “broken,” “outrageous,” “absurd,” “controversial,” and even “inhumane.”

**Policies.** On the issue of policies, the media once again split in ways they provided context to the topic. The NYT, obviously referring to President Trump’s policies, called them “dubious,” “over-policing,” “reckless,” “restrictive,” “xenophobic,” and “stringent.” Mocking President Trump’s slow progress on sanctuary cities, the newspaper wrote, “One

aspect of Mr. Trump's stringent immigration policies has not happened yet: The president has not deported "millions" of immigrants, as he frequently promises in speeches" (Kanno-Youngs 2020). However, talking about local sanctuary policies, the outlet described them as "immigrant-friendly," "good," "liberal," and "social." Fox News, in contrast, called the latter "insane," "leftist," "questionable," "open-border," as well as "ridiculous," "lousy," "terrible," and even "disgusting." AP seemingly recused itself of trying to define the issue in clear terms and simply referred to policies as the "so-called sanctuary policies." Finally, WSJ covered both sides of the story pretty well, mentioning both aggressive deportation policies and public-safety policies when talking about policies originating in the government, as well as describing the sanctuary cities' position as a policy dispute, rather than calling them illegal.

*Cities.* The NYT drew a sharp line between sanctuary cities and the way the administration treated them. In case of the former, the cities are presented as "welcoming," "democratic-running," and "successful." However, when addressing the administration's treatment of such cities, the NYT used such expressions as "banning sanctuary cities," "targeting cities," "punishing cities," and "forcing cities." The narrative is meant to emphasize admirable and brave immigrant-saving sanctuary cities that continue their noble pursuit despite constant obstacles from the administration. CNN was close in transmitting the same propaganda. The outlet called sanctuary locations "great," "safe," and "inclusive." "The so-called sanctuary county areas have lower crime rates, have less unemployment," said CNN host Anderson Cooper. "I think we know how to build trust and to build an inclusive city and country that helps us be more economically prosperous and safer on the streets" (Cooper 2017). President Trump's anti-sanctuary actions, on the other hand, were

described as “threatening,” “blasting,” “slamming,” “stopping,” and “pressuring.” All of these terms are meant to demonstrate the immense pressure the federal government placed on sanctuary localities. Furthermore, Fox News commonly referred to sanctuary cities as “deadly,” “open-border,” “reckless,” “absurd,” “non-compliant,” “lawless,” and “illegal.” It also added memorable (and eyebrow-raising) “fat,” “giant,” and “nightmare” as the cities’ epithets, bordering into Donald Trump’s personal rhetorical style. Finally, AP and WSJ shared a somewhat abstract idea of the “so-called” sanctuary cities. The WSJ also described them as “liberal sanctuary cities,” and the administration’s stance against the cities as “condemnation” and “pressure.”

### **Personal Stories**

The White House, supplied by ICE with a constant stream of information about hideous crimes committed by immigrants, leveraged personal stories to portray sanctuary cities as lawless and dangerous places. They painted a picture of sanctuary cities as places where authorities protect criminal immigrants rather than law-abiding Americans. As I showed in the previous chapter, the president’s administration organized multiple meetings with the relatives of those killed by immigrants (marketed by the White House as Angel families). The idea behind this strategy was to play with real human emotions: that is, rather than give out abstract and technical details about the legal status of sanctuary jurisdictions, make people see real victims of immigrant crimes and share their grief. How did the media compare in this regard?

Fox News, as the President’s loyal mouthpiece, invited several of the same Angel families in its studios to once again illustrate the “horror” of sanctuary cities. The channel

spent significant amount of time focusing on two particular stories. The first one is of the police officer Ronil Singh who was shot by an immigrant when he stopped to check the latter's vehicle (Brown 2018). Fox News referred to the story at least 16 times, each time blaming sanctuary policies in the state of California. For example, on December 31, 2018, Fox News stated, "Sanctuary cities help no one and absolutely the death of this American hero, Officer Singh, is on the hands of those who support this ridiculous policy, which by the way outside the California, nobody thinks this is makes any sense" (MacCallum 2018). The second personal story is of a suspected rape in sanctuary Montgomery County in Maryland, which Fox News repeated 23 times. A high-school female student was raped in a school bathroom by two illegal immigrants who lived in the county under sanctuary rules. Although the investigation was still ongoing, Fox News had already assembled several "expert" roundtables pinning the blame on the county's pro-immigrant laws for allowing this to happen. Several days after the story broke, the police announced that there was no rape and that the sex was consensual. To that, a Fox News's host reacted: "We weren't there, we don't know. This sounds really fishy to me in a lot of ways. But the bigger picture is we have Americans being killed, Americans the victims of rape, and we have criminal aliens -- I interviewed a father yesterday. His son was killed by an illegal immigrant, Herman, that had held woman hostage for a week and raped her" (Baier 2017).

Note that Fox News not only contradicts the official police version of the incident but also tries to diverge attention to another topic to prove that sanctuary cities are an evil anyway. On multiple occasions, hosts of Fox News' programs precipitated personal stories with self-praising the channel as the only "guardian of the truth," which cuts through the liberal media's wall to open up eyes of the American people on crime in sanctuary cities.

For example, Fox News' host Sean Hannity, speaking with Angel mothers, mentioned, "Does the media ask you for interviews? [...] they don't want to hear the story? And then they arrogantly go on TV, you know how I feel about" (Hannity 2019). In a similar fashion, he stated another night, "Every day in this country there are fresh American tragedies to report on. American citizens brutalized, abused, murdered by illegal aliens. Yet most of these stories are buried at the back of the local metro sections in your local papers, and most of them are never heard national news broadcasts. The media are too busy doing, what? Capturing every utterance of a few specific porn stars" (Hannity 2018).

These claims go hand in hand with what President Trump has been saying all along: that the media are biased against him, that the media do not cover him fairly, and that the media ignore his agenda. Is it true? Partially. Except for Fox News, the media indeed did not repeat stories as controversial as the ones about the Angel families. AP and WSJ in general did not engage in reporting personal stories at all. On the liberal side, CNN was too busy criticizing President Trump's personality to pay attention to simple people's tragedies. The NYT, however, spent a great deal of time developing personal stories of immigrants who suffered from President Trump's relentless immigration enforcement. The outlet also argued several times with the administration on whether personal stories exploited by the White House were true. Particularly in case with the alleged Montgomery rape, the NYT issued a detailed report emphasizing that the story, widely cited by the White House, has been disproven by the police investigators (Stevens 2017). The NYT's rhetoric openly contradicted the president's message quite a few other times too. Where the administration celebrated the results of its anti-sanctuary policies saying that people "revolt" against sanctuary policies (White House 2018h), the NYT immediately published

“proof” of the opposite, covering protests against President Trump’s immigration crackdown. Where the administration (greatly aided by Fox News) publicized the Angel families, the liberal newspaper doubled-down on showing the suffering and fears of immigrants in America and how “good” immigrants being deported anyway (The NYT Editorial Board 2017). To create an illusion of wide-spread opposition to the president’s policies, the NYT even published stories about small bookstores’ owners’ who changed their book selection to resist President Trump (Bosman 2017).

### **Chapter in a Nutshell**

Whether these reports affected people’s thinking, or whether the White House’s and Fox News’ portrayal of sanctuary cities as dangerous and scary places was impactful on people’s political preferences, is beyond the discussion here. Chapter 2 laid out convincing arguments in the literature that point to the agenda-setting power of the media (Baum and Kernell 1999; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Kernell 1986; Canes-Wrone 2001; Prior 2007). Although this discussion is far from over, there is evidence that people are at least somewhat perceptive to what the media say about political issues (Canes-Wrone 2001; Prior 2007; Zaller 1992; Lee 2016). Unfortunately, for an average American voter, being perceptive does not retranslate into having strong political attitudes (Bartels 2003; Carini and Keeter 1991), or increased political knowledge (Converse 2006), or lasting political awareness (Cohen 1995). In this chapter, I aimed to show that rhetoric of the White House and the media clashed in many ways. Of all the media outlets in my sample, AP and WSJ let the administration’s message pass most freely through its filters. They presented the administration’s position from the standpoint of constitutional controversies, e.g., can the

President force localities to cooperate with ICE, or can the localities break federal laws by refusing to do so? There is not much judgement or bias present in these two media sources' reports. Both CNN and the NYT displayed a heavy liberal bias in going after the administration, although CNN offered very little substance to the issue of sanctuary cities itself. Most of the time, it was just rambling about how unfit Donald Trump was to be president, and the sanctuary-city battle was yet another point to prove it. The NYT, on the other hand, provided a very comprehensive review and criticism of the administration's anti-sanctuary laws, presenting it as an assault on human (rather than immigrant per se) rights. Of all the media in the analysis, only Fox News fully aided the president's original message, in that it manipulated information in ways beneficial to the administration, rather than being neutral or negative about it.

The analysis in this chapter shows that there are four rhetorical clusters in the media. The most journalistically neutral one (AP and WSJ) engage with the issue from the standpoint of federalism and balance of presidential powers. In the liberal bubble, both NYT and CNN were very biased, but the former criticized anti-immigration policies as inhumane, while the latter criticized Donald Trump's presidency in general. Finally, Fox News showed a heavy pro-Trump bias, expanding the president's original message to portray immigrants even scarier than did the administration's propaganda. One of the golden rules of an effective propaganda campaign is to reiterate the message very often. For example, Chakhotin (1971), writing of totalitarian propaganda, compares it to Pavlov's principle when constant repetition creates conditioned reflexes in subject's minds. Fox News certainly got that part right. The outlet spent way more time on the issue of sanctuary locations than any other media outlet in my analysis.

Analysis of topics in context demonstrates that there is a great deal of similarity in ways the media talk about such topics as law, cities, immigrants, and policies. However, these ways are pointed at the opposite sides of the controversy. Both liberal and conservative media used the word “reckless” to describe policies, but the former referred to the administration’s policies, while the latter talked about local sanctuary policies. A startling contrast is seen in how the media talked about immigrants: on the liberal side, immigrants were portrayed as frightened and law-abiding people, while Fox News presented immigrants as dangerous and vicious “aliens.”

These differences tell us a story of global media’s misrepresentation of the president’s message, by ignoring certain stories, emphasizing others, and focusing on non-essential details of the issue. The following chapter will process trace how select administration’s messages played out in the media filter.

But in propaganda battles,  
it is not so much a struggle  
for being right but for being credible.

(Taylor 2003, 322)

## THE MEDIA FILTER: TRACING THE ADMINISTRATION'S PROPAGANDA IN THE MEDIA

No reasonable individual should blindly trust the media. We as news consumers tend to follow only those media sources that reinforce our existing beliefs (Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson 2016; Cinelli et al. 2020).<sup>25</sup> However, just by looking at the sheer range of media opinions about the same political events, it leaves one wondering where the truth lies. As I explained in Chapter 3, the insanely overcrowded media space in contemporary democracies deprives people of an opportunity to get familiar with competing points of view, thus confining them to echo chambers and informational bubbles. It results in *the great propaganda paradox*: having too much choice in the media sphere appears to have a similar effect as having no choice at all. In the end, each media source feeds its news

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<sup>25</sup> There is a growing body of literature on ways to fight biased digital “news diets.” So far, the conclusions are pessimistic. Assigning news credibility labels has no correcting effect on people’s news consumption habits (Aslett et al. 2022). Moreover, news media literacy (NML) interventions are only somewhat effective on people with liberal attitudes, that is, more open-minded news consumers (van der Meer and Hameleers 2021).

consumers with a biased picture of political reality - a picture that often defies and contradicts the message that the White House tries hard to deliver to citizens.

The goal of this chapter is to show empirically how the media filters the administration's message. To that end, I bring together my theory of the spectrum of media filtering, social network analysis, and process tracing. I proceed in several steps. First, using plagiarism software WCopyfind, I identify the original messages of the administration that appeared in the media. Next, I assigned each case with a value on the spectrum of media filtering. With help of NodeXL, I present this part of the analysis as a social network of the administration-media propaganda. The total number of connections (edges) in the social-network analysis is  $N=2,590$ . I also report what filtering mechanisms each media outlet used most actively on the administration's surrogate channels. Finally, I trace several hot-button political stories from the moment the administration put them out to the final message presented in the media, controlling for filtering mechanisms and spread in time.

The results of analysis paint a depressing picture of the administration's propaganda. In most cases, the media simply ignored the administration's messages (blocked them) and instead over-focused on most controversial and polarizing topics. The messages that managed to slip into media coverage were altered, most often through filtering mechanism of context manipulation. Very few messages were reported by the media (except for AP and WSJ) unbiasedly. CNN and the NYT promoted an extremely biased liberal agenda and filtered most administration's messages negatively, while Fox News was busy overselling President Trump's agenda. Table 4 summarizes methods and tools of analysis used in the chapter.

Table 4. Tools used for analysis

Analysis	Tools	URL
Plagiarism	WCopyfind 4.1.5	<a href="https://plagiarism.bloomfieldmedia.com/software/wcopyfind/">https://plagiarism.bloomfieldmedia.com/software/wcopyfind/</a>
Social network analysis	NodeXL	<a href="https://www.smrfoundation.org/nodexl/">https://www.smrfoundation.org/nodexl/</a>
Visualization	Microsoft Excel	
	Datawrapper	<a href="https://www.datawrapper.de">https://www.datawrapper.de</a>

### The Media Filter in Action

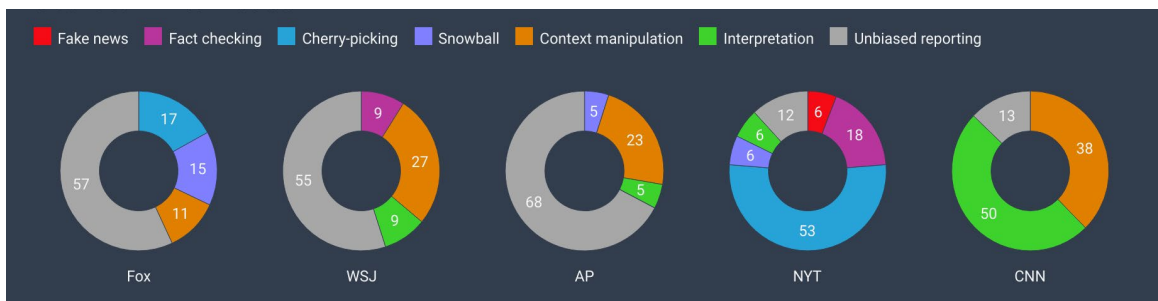
As I explained in Chapter 3, the media filtering spectrum includes eight forms of filtering, ranging from the lightest to the heaviest. Each filtering mechanism can take a positive or negative form compared to the administration's original message. That is, they misrepresent the administration's position anyways, but in the case of positive filtering, it plays in the hands of the administration and delivers an even punchier message than the original one.

To see how the media filters the administration's rhetoric, I grouped all of the administration's messages by surrogate channel and then compared them with the final messages that appeared in the media, word by word (using the plagiarism software WCopyfind). The software marks two sentences as duplicates if they contain more than five identical words in a row. To make sure the results were clean, I manually checked all duplicates identified by WCopyfind. Next, I manually coded each duplicated message in the media as one of the filtering mechanisms, using the typology developed in Chapter 3

(see *The Spectrum of Media Filtering*, p. 61).<sup>26</sup> The results are presented below. They do not capture if the media blocked the administration’s messages, meaning they only cover what was said rather than what was not said. To account for blocking, I will show results of process tracing that will allow us to see how often the media used that strategy to filter out the president’s propaganda.

**The White House.** The main propaganda channel received fairly good treatment from (predictably) Fox News, WSJ, and AP (Figure 34). All three media outlets passed original stories without much bias in over 50% of analyzed cases. On the liberal side of the media bubble, represented by CNN and the NYT, we can see that the White House was not extended the same gratitude. In 50% of CNN’s reports, the White House’s propaganda was manipulated through interpretation. The NYT moved very close to the heaviest forms of filtering: cherry-picking was its favorite methods of misrepresenting the original messages. Additionally, no other surrogate channel received the same heavy filtering from the NYT as did the White House. Also note that 6% of the NYT’s reports were fake news, meaning

Figure 34. Media filtering of White House’s messages

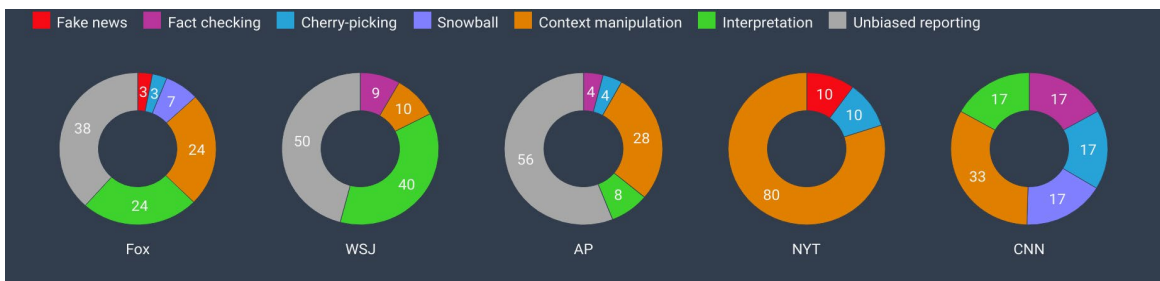


<sup>26</sup> Appendix B explains the process of manual coding by showing real examples of the original and final messages.

they reported something that the White House did not do. This is the highest number of fake-news occurrences in this group in my sample.

**Department of Justice.** Similar to the White House, Fox, WSJ, and AP afforded relatively neutral coverage of DOJ’s messages (Figure 35). As I noted earlier, DOJ’s language was remarkably similar to that of the White House, thus the media treated the two surrogate channels similarly. The key difference is, once again, the NYT. It’s share of fake-news reports took 10% of all its news, and the main mechanism of filtering was context manipulation, a lighter form of manipulation than cherry-picking.

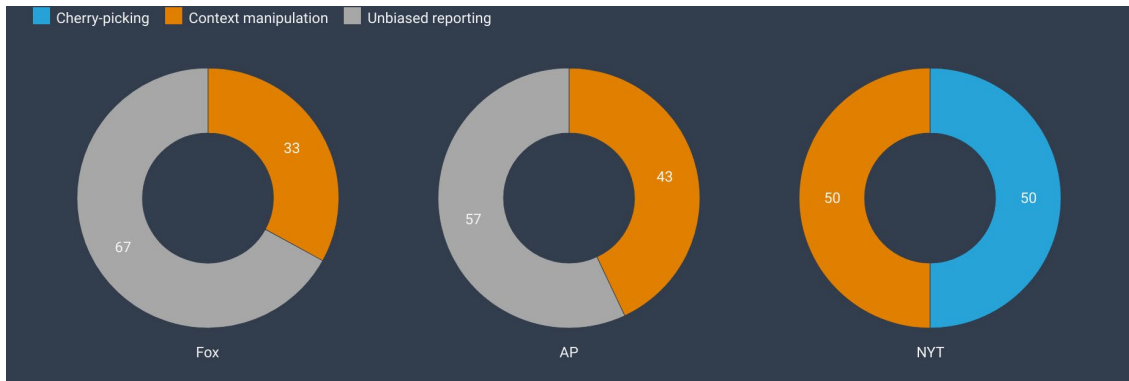
Figure 35. Media filtering of DOJ’s messages



**Department of Homeland Security.** DHS messages generated very little interest from the media (Figure 36). I did not find evidence of direct borrowing from DHS’s public messages in case of CNN and WSJ. Reports perused by Fox and AP were mostly unbiased, although heavily cherry-picked and context-manipulated by the NYT. Why was the media so disinterested in what the DHS had to say? One explanation is that DHS overall was not particularly active in promoting the administration’s agenda: the number of its public messages in 2017-2021 is lower than from any other surrogate channel in my sample. DHS also did not spearhead particularly controversial measures in the battle against sanctuary cities, as did, for example, ICE with its weekly shaming lists, or DOJ with repeating White

House’s polarizing talking points very closely. Hence, the media focused on more interesting rhetorical “enemies” and, as the result, blocked a significant portion of DHS’s messages.

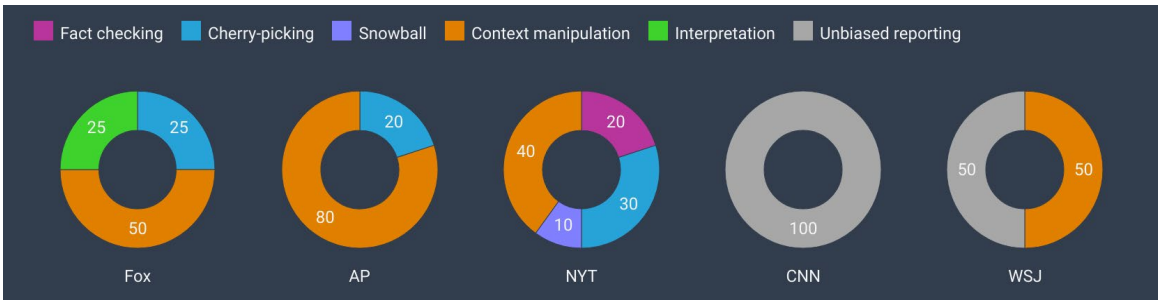
Figure 36. Media filtering of DHS’s messages



***Immigration and Custom Enforcement.*** ICE’s role in the administration’s propaganda campaign was to publish weekly reports of immigrant crimes in sanctuary localities, focusing on the details of crimes. Although ICE’s messages were not as popular and widely-cited as more controversial ones on Twitter and the White House’s website, they still generated a steady rate of interest from the media (Figure 37). The NYT, for example, fact-checked ICE’s reports 20% of the time and called them out as incorrect. Fox News had to cherry-pick several of ICE’s stories and manipulate the context to put them in a larger perspective beneficial to the White House’s agenda. CNN, on the other hand, shows 100% of unbiased reporting, which must be interpreted as an outlier in my analysis. I noted earlier that CNN did not have a substantial position on the issue of sanctuary cities beyond general criticism of Mr. Trump’s personality, thus the cable channel’s interest in all other surrogate channels was peripheral. If any of the ICE’s reports made it to CNN coverage, they were very few and are not a good indication of CNN’s negative filtering

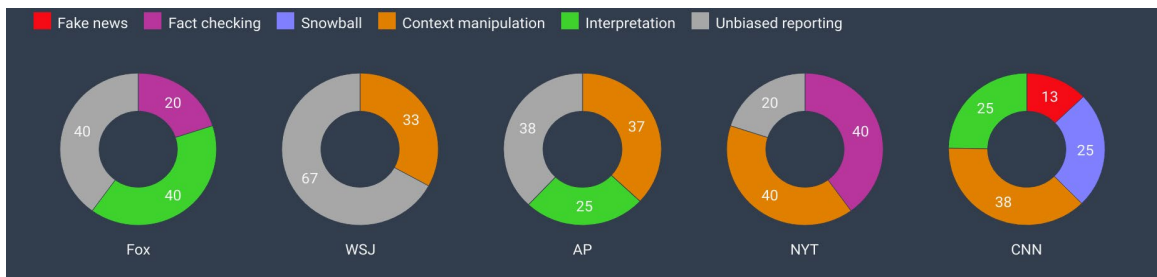
power. AP negatively interpreted 80% of ICE reports, which is explained by the outlet's strategy of tying up the issue of sanctuary cities to the larger issue of federalism. ICE's reports were very targeted, naming and shaming one location at a time, using just a few examples of criminal immigrants at a time. They provided fantastic details for other surrogate channels to use in their messages but did not discuss sanctuary cities in the context of federalism or presidential powers. AP corrected the latter by interpreting those crime stories as indicators of larger political issues.

Figure 37. Media filtering of ICE's messages



**Twitter.** President Trump's personal Twitter account received lots of attention from the media. For one, it was a constant stream of controversial statements from the president ready for dissection by the rating-thirsty media. The media were actively fact-checking President's tweets: a whopping 40% of NYT's coverage of this surrogate channel was dedicated to negative fact checks (Figure 38). Fox News, too, was checking, but usually concluded that the president's tweets were truthful. WSJ and AP, once again, let the

Figure 38. Media filtering of Twitter's messages



president's messages pass uninterrupted. Note that CNN's reports were fake in 13% of cases, along with negative snowballing and context manipulation. Overall, it points at a significant and overt bias in the channel's position on Donald Trump's presidency.

### **Network Analysis of the Administration-Media Propaganda**

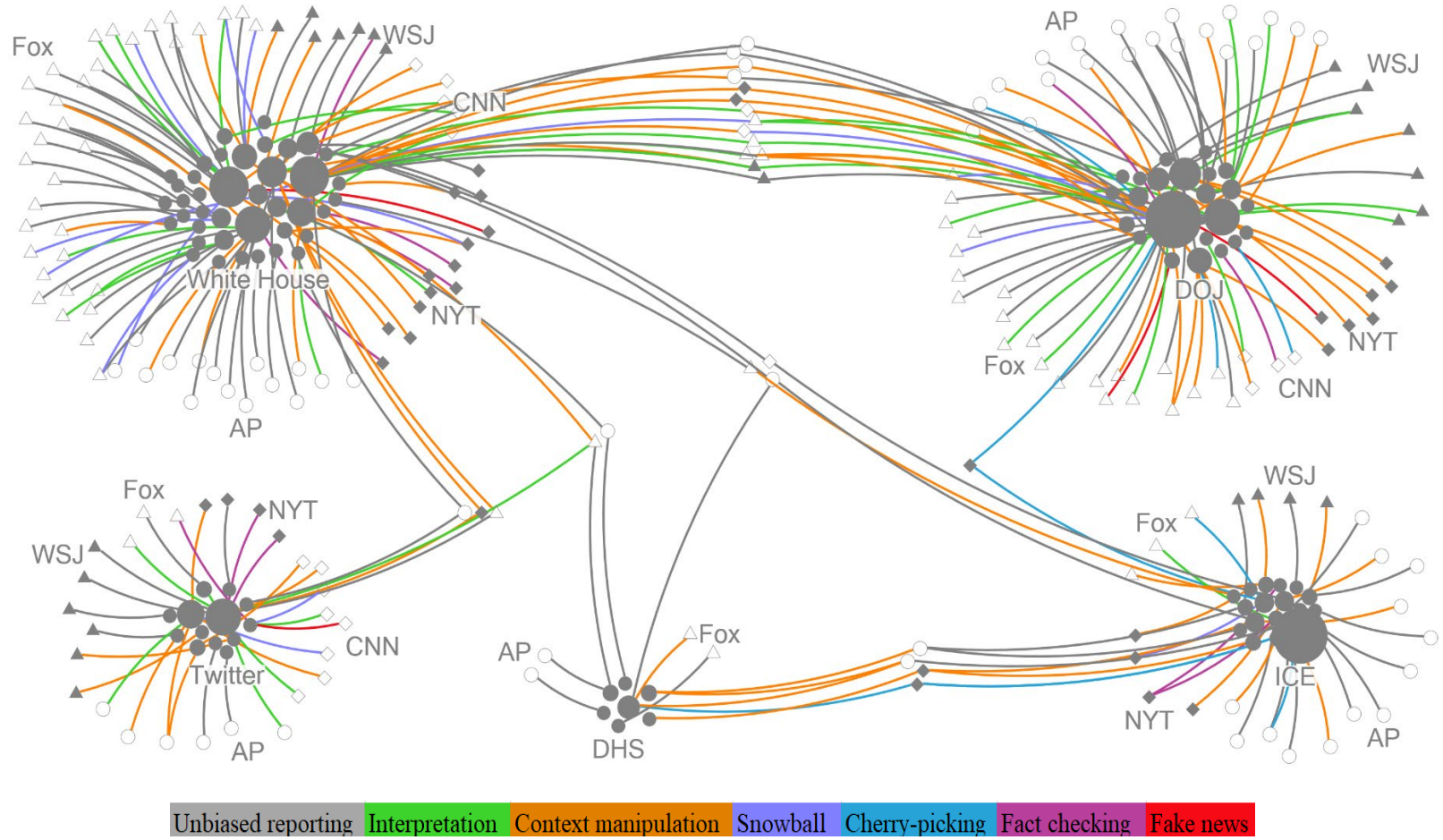
This part of my research shows connections between original and final messages through social network analysis. As a method, it allows to “disclose the patterns that are not generally apparent to human observers” and goes “beyond the visualisation of [...] relations to an examination of their structural properties and their implications for social action” (Scott 2017).

Figure 39 shows the connection network of the administration's and the media's messages. It is organized by the government's surrogate channel, and the media circles are organized to visually separate media outlets from each other.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, it makes it easier to see what filtering mechanisms the media used most actively. This network analysis provides an excellent snapshot of several things I have discussed previously. First,

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<sup>27</sup> Figure 39 captures connections between media outlets and surrogate channels. Each solid gray circle indicates an original message that was promoted through one of the surrogate channels. They vary in sizes: the bigger the size of a circle, the more often the original message was quoted in the media. Outside empty circles, diamonds, and triangles each represent a story that appeared in the media and included full or part of the original message. I chose different shapes to visually separate between different outlets, and I added names of the outlets respectively on the graph. That is, solid inside circles show original messages (the administration), and empty circles, diamonds, and triangles show final messages (the media). The connection between the two is captured by colored lines. The latter corresponds to filtering mechanisms. For example, context manipulation is color-coded as orange, and cherry-picking as blue. Therefore, the graph should be interpreted in the following way: an original message by the government (a solid circle) was turned into a final message in the media (one of the shapes) through a filtering mechanism (a colored line between the two).

Figure 39. Network of original administration's vs. final media's messages



it shows that the White House and DOJ captured most interest among the media, and as the two shared language and facts, the media often cited both of these two surrogate channels simultaneously. Also note how disproportionately Fox News drew its reports on the White House and DOJ's messages and essentially ignored other surrogate channels. Moreover, unbiased reporting took a big part of the Fox News' coverage of the White House's messages, compared to other surrogate channels. Second, from this analysis follows that the media's favorite filtering mechanism is context manipulation, which strikes a near-middle spot on the filtering spectrum. That effectively answer the question of how exactly the media manipulates the administration's propaganda. Although instances of heaviest forms of media filtering (such as fake news and fact checking) are not uncommon, they constitute more of an exception than the rule. Third, we also see that the media clearly separate between the "main" propaganda channels - in this case, the White House aided by DOJ - and the rest of the surrogate channels.

These findings have disappointing repercussions for those in charge of the government-wide public agenda. In accordance with the cluster-analysis results (Chapter 5), the Trump administration's public strategy against sanctuary cities was split between the surrogate speakers in different departments and formed five rhetorical clusters. However, the media focused mostly on the White House and somewhat on DOJ, thus greatly reducing the potential of the entire propaganda campaign. Part of the message was lost due to the media's ignoring the surrogate channels, and the remaining public potential of the White House's propaganda was reduced after the media manipulated the context of the administration's messages. To make matters worse, network analysis shows that only a few of the administration's messages were actively used by the media for its reports,

while the rest were only mentioned once or twice (on Figure 39, the size of circles corresponds to the number of times the administration's original message was used by the media). That means that the media's attention was confined to a few select stories, nullifying the meaning of the administration's messages. Finally, this administration-media network analysis captures just a small part of all messages the White House put out. The rest went simply unnoticed by the media – or blocked if we are using the filtering-spectrum terminology.

That leaves us with a depressing picture of the state of democratic propaganda – that is, depressing for a president trying to shape hearts and minds of citizens, especially those who are not his core supporters. Although the White House pours massive resources into planning and carrying out its propaganda offensives, only very few messages actually reach the public, and even those that are delivered are manipulated by the media filter.

From the standpoint of rhetorical efficacy, democratic propaganda seems to be having an awfully hard time cutting through the media's biased agenda and reaching citizens. Until recently, social networks were a neat alternative where officials could engage with millions of people directly, without relying on the media. However, recently social media platforms, pressed by the public, began to sensor users' posts and even block them, as happened with President Trump's Twitter and Facebook accounts. As of now, that communication channel is also of questionable help for the administration's propagandists.

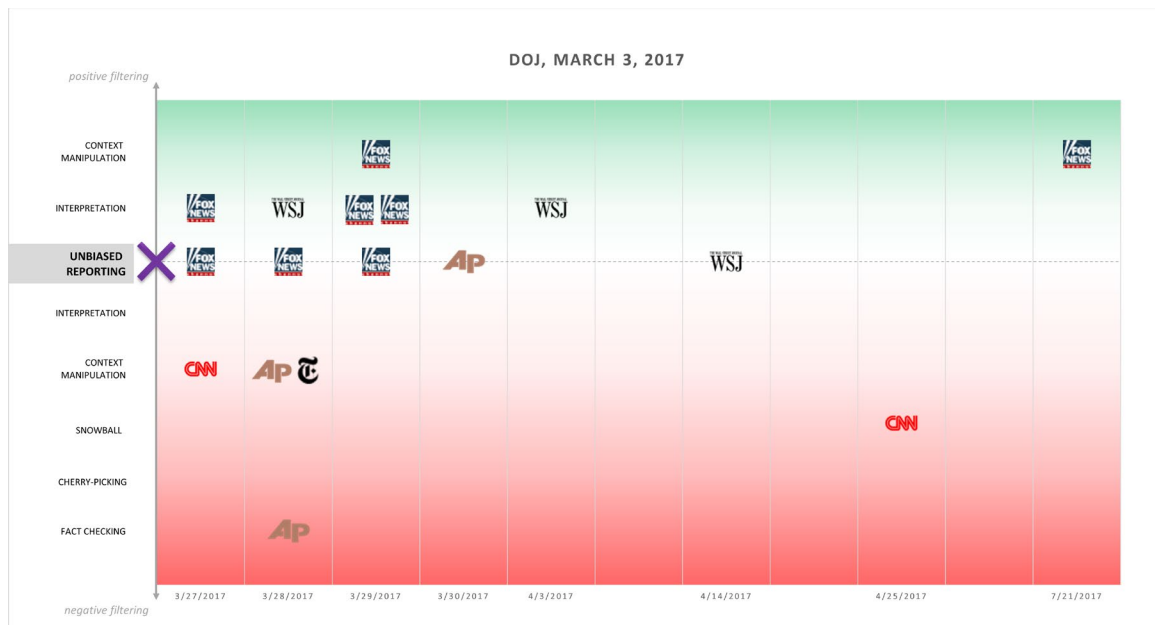
## **Tracing the Administration’s Propaganda in the Media**

The final step of my analysis is process tracing of several high-profile stories that generated most interest among the media outlets. I selected the administration’s messages that were mentioned in the media over 6 times. This is an arbitrary number, which I picked aiming to focus only on those occurrences when a story was repeated enough times to be remembered by news consumers. In tracing those stories, I paid attention to not only mechanisms of media filtering but also how long the media kept priming the story - that is, the time span of the original messages.

*The Attorney General’s remarks on March 3, 2017* (Figure 40). Two months into Donald Trump’s presidency, Attorney General Jeff Sessions delivered scathing remarks about sanctuary cities. Among other things, he stated, “Such policies cannot continue. They make our nation less safe by putting dangerous criminals back on our streets” (Justice Department 2017a). The liberal media cluster’s coverage of the event was generally negative, but Fox News reacted positively. In the coming days, Fox News referred to the Attorney General’s remarks at least 8 times, each time putting a positive spin on it. For example, two days after the remarks, Fox News’ Sean Hannity (2017) cited Sessions and added of sanctuary cities: “This is a violation of federal law”. In the original speech, Attorney General did not come with such strong definitions, thus making the conservative TV hosts’ opinion an example of media interpretation. Compare that with an AP’s report the following day after the remarks. The outlet fact-checked some of Sessions’ statements and concluded that “there is no evidence to support his claims that ‘countless Americans would be alive today’ if every local jail cooperated with immigration detainees” (AP 2017).

This is an example of negative fact-checking of original messages in the media, which casts doubt on the truthfulness of the administration’s propaganda. Overall, we can see that Fox News was way more active in covering this message for the White House, while other sources mentioned it just once or twice. It shows us how echo chambers work in practice. Fox News familiarized its viewers with the Sessions’ speech way better than did the rest of the sources for their respective audiences, thus raising the salience of the issue for the conservative part of the American electorate.

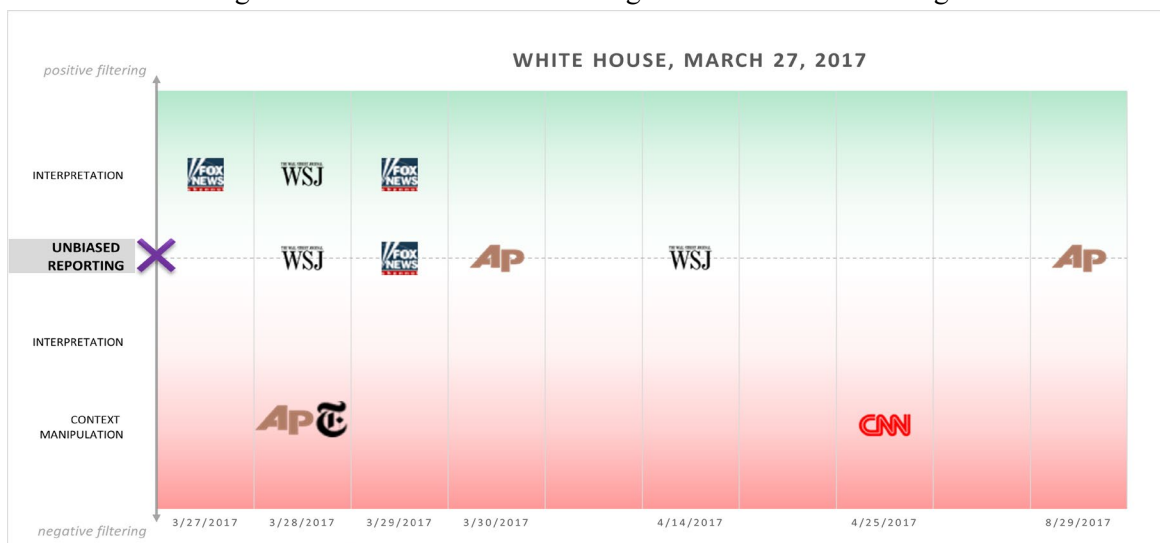
Figure 40. Process of media filtering of DOJ’s message



*Jeff Sessions’ press briefing on March 27, 2017* (Figure 41). By Late March 2017, the White House was in the active stage of its public war against sanctuary cities. White House strategists invited in surrogate speakers to talk on behalf of the administration. In this case, it was Attorney General who briefed the White House press corp on the issue. The timing was on spot: it was right after the courts delivered the initial blow to President Trump’s executive order withholding funds from sanctuary locations. Fox News reacted

first, saying that “Doing what Trump set on immigration makes everything else we have to do so much easier” (Hannity 2017). That statement marks an example of positive interpretation. Several similar statements came from the channel and WSJ over the next days. Compare that with the liberal media cluster. The NYT offered the following context to Sessions’ statements: “Mr. Sessions did not announce any new policy on Monday. His announcement appeared to be essentially a reiteration or reminder of the status quo” (Hirschfeld Davis and Savage 2017). Such a context diminishes the punch of the government’s message. Here, the liberal newspaper put things in a perspective that makes the White House’s efforts look unsuccessful, full of empty words and promises but having no real implications. CNN covered the story in a full month after the fact. A delay like that is a type of blocking mechanism. Citing Sessions, CNN’s host Don Lemon mentioned that “this isn't the first time a judge has used the administration's own words against them” (Lemon 2017), meaning to attach the label of permanent judicial failure to the administration’s policies.

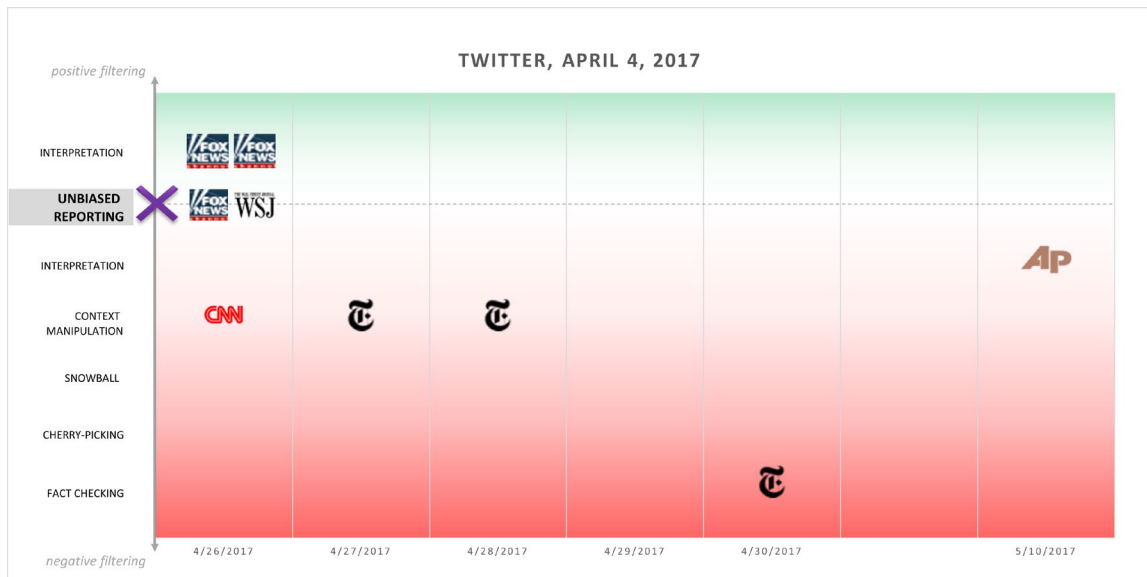
Figure 41. Process of media filtering of White House’s message



*President Trump's tweet on April 26, 2017* (Figure 42). The President tweeted, "First the Ninth Circuit rules against the ban & now it hits again on sanctuary cities-both ridiculous rulings. See you in the Supreme Court!" (Trump 2017b). WSJ and one report on Fox News offered pretty neutral accounts of the tweet right away, simply repeating it. However, as hours passed by, Fox News assembled a panel of "experts" - all of which were editors of conservative newspapers and magazines - and asked them to weigh in on the tweet (Baier 2017). No surprise, the tweet received a lot of praise around the table, thus allowing Fox News to provide a positive interpretation to the original message. On the liberal side, CNN manipulated the context of the tweet in the negative direction. Citing the tweet, CNN's news anchor noticed that it came "weeks after his executive order on travel ban were also blocked in federal courts" (CNN 2017b). That negative context downgraded the significance of administration's efforts to deal with sanctuary locations. CNN referred its viewers to another judicial setback for the Trump administration earlier, which was not in any way related to the issue at hand. This demonstrates how the media can subtly manipulate the context to elevate or diminish the administration's messages, instead of openly refuting or blocking it. The NYT also offered a negative context. In explaining what the tweet signifies, the newspaper gave its reader a history lesson about "a Republican litigation playbook" (Liptak 2017). When President Obama signed executive orders on transgender rights, individual judges in Texas blocked it. The outlet sarcastically noted that, "It turns out that legal principles meant to curb executive overreach are indifferent to the president's party" (Liptak 2017), thus ridiculing President Trump's tweet. Finally, the NYT also labeled the tweet false four days later. In a separate article, the newspaper stated that President Trump's statements were a "steady stream of falsehoods" and that he got his

facts wrong about the judge who blocked his executive order (Qui 2017). To be sure, the NYT complained about a fairly technical and nonessential point - that is, although the named judge resides in California, which is the Ninth Circuit, he does not sit on the Ninth. Yet, the outlet marked President's message as falsification, which makes it an example of negative fact-checking.

Figure 42. Process of media filtering of President Trump's tweet



***Another round of the Attorney General's remarks on March 7, 2018*** (Figure 43).

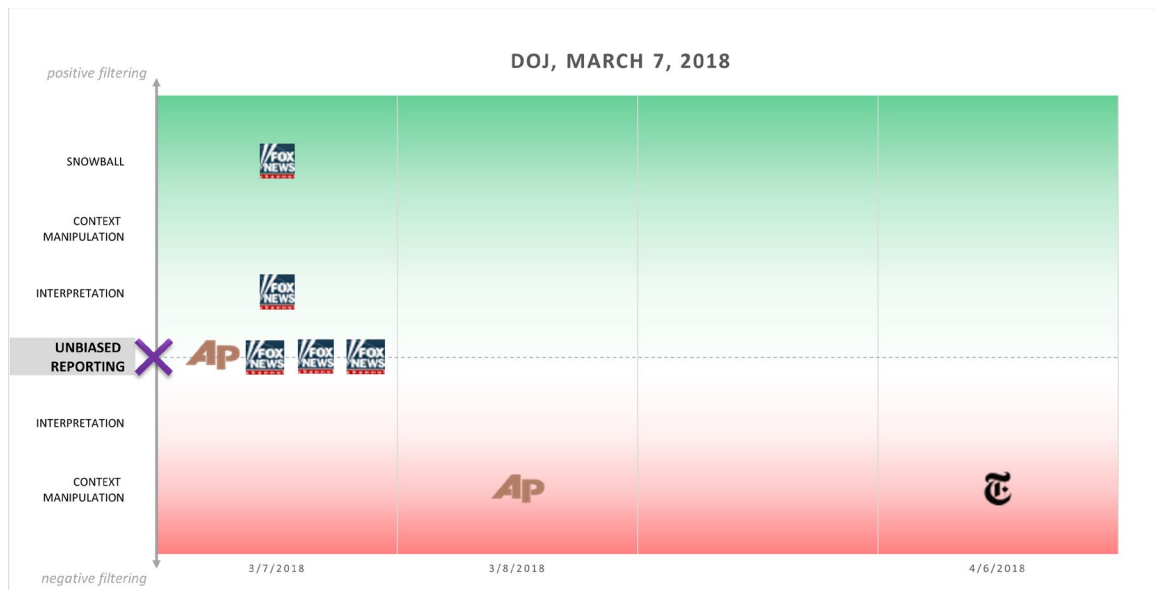
This case represents a great example of blocking in the media. It is unknown to us, news consumers, to what extent the media block the administration's messages entirely so that we are not even aware of the message's existence in the first place. Let us have a look at Figure 43. We see that Fox News did all the heavy lifting in covering the message, while CNN and WSJ ignored it entirely. AP mentioned the Attorney General's speech twice, including once in a manipulated context, and the NYT mentioned is only once, a month later. Overall, the meaning of the government's message is very likely to be lost on liberal media news consumers and over-represented for the conservative ones.

In the remarks, Jeff Sessions blamed California’s sanctuary policies and praised the brave work that ICE agent do despite the state’s resistance (Department of Justice 2018a). Aside from multiple neutral repetitions of the speech by Fox News, I would like to show a curious case of snowballing by Fox News later that same night. To remind, media snowballing refers to instances where the media exaggerates the original messages and over-represents its meaning. Citing excerpts from Session’s speech, Fox News’ host Hannity added,

The Trump administration draws a line in the sand when it comes to liberal states aiding and abetting criminal illegal immigrants that pose a significant threat to you, the American people. [...] Now, President Trump, Jeff Sessions, and the federal government, they are simply standing up for the rule of law. Now, the radical left, they are putting criminal illegal immigrants before the safety of American citizens. Now, all the Trump administration wants to do is enforce federal immigration laws that are already on the books. It's really that simple. We either in this country, we have law and order or we have chaos (Hannity 2017).

Blowing things out of proportion is a typical feature of snowballing. Misrepresenting the threat as more pressing than it is in reality, as did Hannity, is also a classic feature of snowballing. By and large, what Hannity summarized as “simple” is not

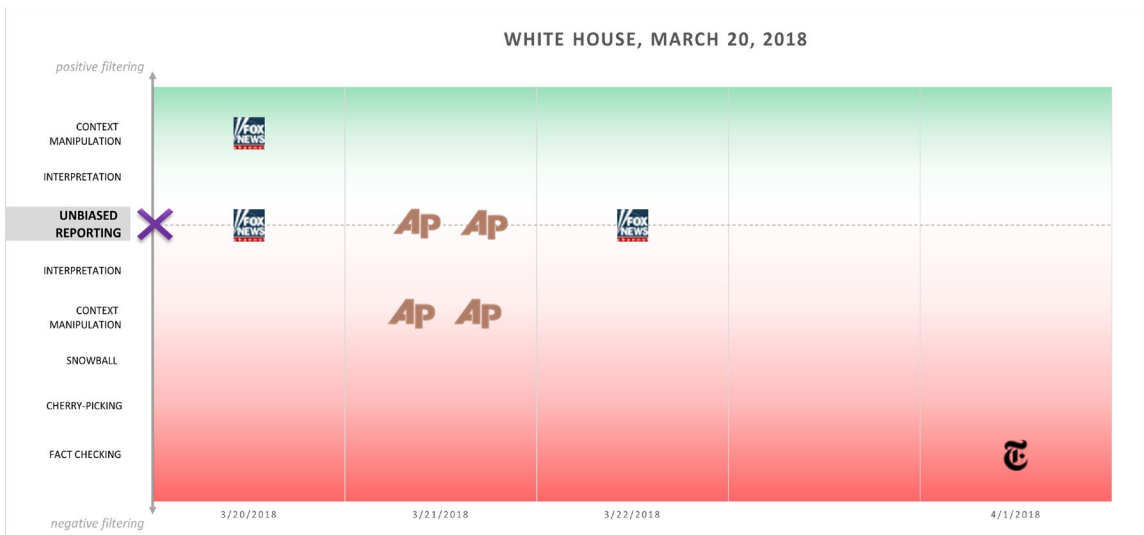
Figure 43. Process of media filtering of DOJ’s message



simple at all, and the Attorney General’s speech did not state so either. Moreover, equating sanctuary policies with “chaos” was never the gist of the original message, although this addition by Fox News made it look more prominent and straightforward. All in all, a solid case of positive snowballing.

*The White House’s sanctuary cities roundtable* (Figure 44). In most cases, AP and WSJ were the most neutral outlets in my sample, manipulating the president’s message very little if any. Occasionally, both media would engage in subtle context manipulation (although WSJ manipulated the context favorably for the administration, and AP negatively). This case study describes such manipulation instances. Covering the roundtable, where officials, including President Trump, delivered criticism of sanctuary policies, AP wrote the following: “Trump applauded Attorney Jeff General Sessions, whom he’s criticized for recusing himself from the Russia investigation” (Colvin and Fram 2018). That context, not related to sanctuary cities, leaves an impression that the administration has some internal contradictions and troubles, which casts a shadow on the

Figure 44. Process of media filtering of White House’s message



unity of the administration’s message. Ten days after the roundtable, the NYT issued a report once again questioning the validity of President Trump’s statements. Arguing with his claim that “sanctuary cities put innocent Americans at the mercy of hardened criminals and heartless drug dealers” (White House 2018c), the newspaper wrote the following: “The data is crystal clear that immigrants do not lead to an increase in crime [...] According to one recent analysis, a large-scale collaboration by four universities, the areas with the largest increases in immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980” (Caron 2018). Fact-checking with negative results has been a hallmark of the NYT during the entire Trump’s presidency. Of all the media in my analysis, the NYT was using this filtering mechanism most often. On the spectrum of media filtering, fact-checking is a serious and effective tool of undermining the administration’s message. When the administration’s propaganda is labeled as deceptive, it casts a long shadow on other messages coming from the same surrogate channel, and the NYT was using that mechanism to create an image of the administration that lies to the people all the time.

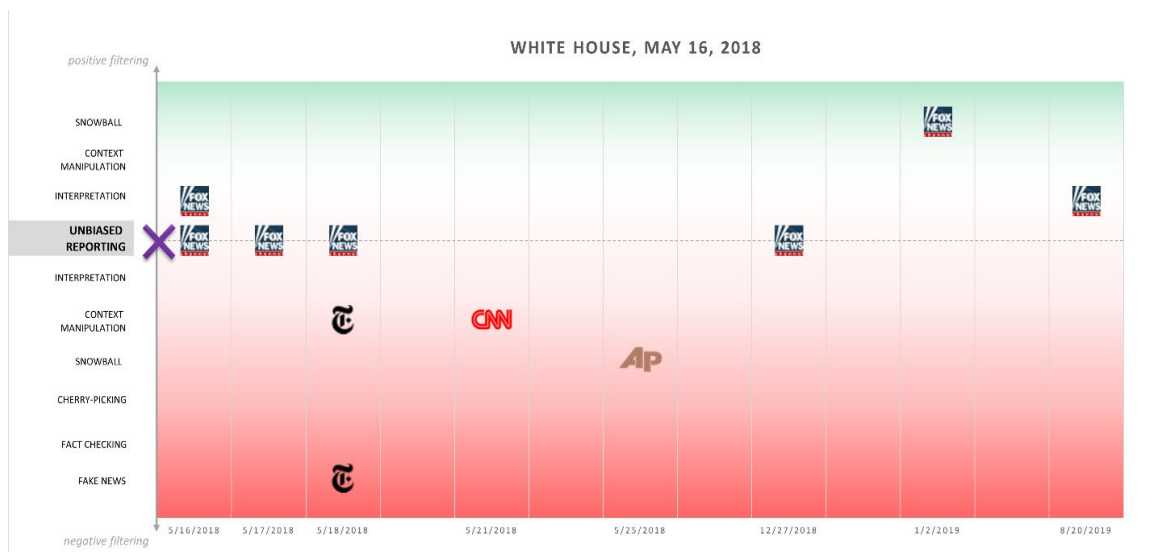
*The President’s “animals” comment on May 16, 2018* (Figure 45). During a roundtable with sheriffs on the problem of sanctuary cities in May 2018, President Trump, true to his rhetorical style, casually referred to MS-13 gang members as “animals”:

Roundtable participant: [...] There could be an MS-13 member I know about — if they don’t reach a certain threshold, I cannot tell ICE about it.

THE PRESIDENT: We have people coming into the country, or trying to come in — and we’re stopping a lot of them — but we’re taking people out of the country. You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people. These are animals (White House 2018e).

That comment sent the liberal media bubble into a frenzy of fake news and context manipulation. The NYT's article blamed the White House for calling all immigrants animals (Hirschfeld Davis 2018), although it was crystal clear from the President's words that he was referring strictly to gang members. What the NYT and many other media outlets did is an example of fake news when it becomes an instrument of extreme media filtering. Even after a significant debate in the media space about President Trump's comment, the NYT did not apologize for creating a false narrative around it. On the contrary, the liberal newspaper published another news piece named "The Context Behind Trump's 'Animals' Comment." In it, the NYT works its ways around an argument that, since the President's comment about MS-13 came during a roundtable on sanctuary cities, he *might* have meant all immigrants in sanctuary places (Qiu 2018). Even the usually neutral AP snowballed President Trump's words saying that calling MS-13 members "animals" is just one step away from calling all immigrants animals (Navarrette 2018). Only Fox News came to the rescue and reminded its viewers that the animal comment could not be interpreted in any other way than it was intended to: about gang members (Hannity 2018). The channel's

Figure 45. Process of media filtering of White House's message



voice, however, drowned in a chorus of other media that unanimously promoted a fake narrative that President Trump, with his troubling history of racist remarks, thinks of all immigrants as animals (Concha 2018; Gomez 2018; Luft and Solomon 2018; The Daily Beast 2018).

### **Chapter in a Nutshell**

What do these stories tell us? First, the administration has a very little power vis-à-vis the media to control what happens to the message once it is out of the administration's hands. This is where lies the crucial difference between propaganda in authoritarian and democratic regimes. Unlike its authoritarian counterparts who rely on state-corporate ownership of domestic media (Yushchenko 2007) and are not afraid to intimidate independent journalists (Wegren 2012), American presidents have their hands tied. The days when the US government could directly censor news, especially related to war affairs (Roeder 1993), are also gone. Unfortunately, the absence of direct government censorship does not mean the presence of objective and neutral news (Besemeres 2016). Having many ways to filter the administration's message, from blocking it altogether to offering subtle interpretations, to selectively fact-checking it, the media in the US control the narrative far better than does the White House, its surrogate speakers, or even president's direct posting on social media.

From the analysis, we see that the most common media filtering method is context manipulation. Adding details to the original message to present a larger and more comprehensive picture of the issue stirs the conversation in directions never intended by the administration's propagandists. During Trump's presidency, the White House and

surrogate government channels were lucky to have Fox News on their side because the conservative media outlet promoted the administration's propaganda with unparalleled zeal and, in doing so, greatly aided the original message. A handful of the media – in the case of my research, conservative-leaning WSJ – allowed the administration's message to simply pass through its filters without alternating it much. Even AP fared worse than WSJ in this regard, sometimes slipping into the lightest forms of filtering such as interpretation. The liberal bubble (the NYT and CNN) went much heavier in terms of filtering, with the NYT often falling into frequent fact-checking of the tiniest details in President Trump's statements and even spreading fake news. My findings once again reiterate just how pronounced the media bias is in American politics (Ledbetter 2015; Jerit and Barabas 2012), and how much it contributes to political polarization (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

From the network analysis, we learn that the media focused mostly on the White House as their main source of information ignoring other surrogate channels. Thus, the president's surrogate program needs some serious modifications that would make the media listen to surrogate speakers as much as they do to the president. Disproportionate attention to some channels and not others causes news consumers to have an imbalanced idea of the White House's agenda. Also, the analysis shows that the media use original messages very selectively. A large portion of the administration's propaganda was simply ignored by the media. However, a few very controversial messages received lots of attention. That reminds us a decades-old thesis by Herman and Chomsky (1988) that the media thrive on negative news that increase their readerships, viewership, and ratings. What is missing in this formula is the substance. Every piece of positive government

propaganda ignored by the media contributes to people's low political knowledge (Carini and Keeter 1991; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Prior 2003). Every piece of snowballed propaganda reiterated in the media on one side of the ideological spectrum contributes to growing polarization in the country (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). Every negative fact-check from the media further deteriorates people's already low trust in the government (Swift 2016). My analysis shows that the most common method of filtering the president's message in the media is context manipulation. Although it is not the heaviest form of propaganda, it still is an effective mechanism to undermine the administration's message by deflecting people's attention to other topics. Many contemporary presidents complained that the media are not fair in their treatment of the chief executive (Kosar 2008; Maltese 1994). It seems that the White House's communications wizards still have not figured out how to counter this media bias.

Power is in tearing human minds to pieces  
and putting them together again in new  
shapes of your own choosing.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

## CONCLUSION

On February 24, 2022, Russia, a country where I was born and raised, did the unimaginable and invaded Ukraine. I, who quit reading news a good year ago – and yes, the irony is not lost on me as a scholar who studies the media – was awoken in the middle of the night by a stream of messages from my sisters who are still living in Russia. “Have you heard the news? What do you think?” And then immediately, like in a bad anecdote, “We are so happy that Russia will finally punish those Ukrainian fascists marching openly in the streets.”

What do I think? As days passed by, I came to learn what my sisters, both of whom are educated and smart, thought of the war and the unfolding tragedy. From them I learned that there was a genocide against the Russians in Europe, that NATO had plans to nuke Russia by June 2022, and that the war in Ukraine was actually started by the US, not Russia. I also realized that my sisters did not know that Russia had attacked civilian areas and killed civilians in Kiev, nor that there was over a million Ukrainian refugees fleeing violence and destruction.

The power of contemporary Russian propaganda shocked me. Before I began my PhD, I had worked in the Russian government as a public relations specialist. Yet, even in the midst of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the propaganda I was involved in was innocent in comparison to what my sisters are being fed now. After multiple attempts to appeal to my sisters' common sense and to show them that they had fallen victim to the Kremlin's ruthless and terrifying disinformation, I was called an American spy who is paid by the American government to hate Russia, and I was deleted from the family chat.

What is the difference between an average American and an average Russian (like my sisters)? The Russians do not have a choice. The Kremlin's propaganda is the only source of information for them. Americans do have a choice. In fact, Americans have so much choice in the media sphere that it drives them crazy and makes them voluntarily restrict themselves to "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" (Cinelli et al. 2020; Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson 2016; Jamieson and Cappella 2010; Lewis and Marwick 2017; Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2001, 2007). Welcome to democratic propaganda, in which the president, in order to present its message to the public, has to pass the robust media filter. The media, adept at manipulating the administration's message, spin the latter as they please. And that is the essence of democratic propaganda. After all, as the New York Times wrote in an editorial on September 1, 1937, "what is truly vicious is not propaganda but a monopoly of it" (Welch 2013, 200).

My project explores systemic propaganda in contemporary America, using President Trump's battle with sanctuary cities as a case study. It challenges the established notion of systemic propaganda as a feature of authoritarian governments and argues that modern democratic governments are engaged in their own propaganda campaigns. Unlike

the existing literature on propaganda in the US that explains the phenomenon through the lens of partisan news outlets (Lee 2016) and media conglomerates (Martin and McCrain 2019), this dissertation postulates that the White House's propaganda utilizes its own institutional means and channels (the surrogate-speaker program), and that its propaganda machine works independently of the media's. That said, I pay credit to the media as the final force that decides how the administration's message will be presented to news consumers. Within this framework, the media play the role of a filter. I introduce a model of democratic propaganda that distinguishes between the original message (by the presidential administration) and the final message (after the media filter).

This dissertation contributes to our knowledge of propaganda and media filtering power. First, it explains through historical analysis that we misperceive propaganda as a negative phenomenon instead of following a more complete and neutral definition. The neutral definition is what I advocate for in my research. After that, it explains the *great propaganda paradox* in modern democracies: even with plenty of independent media, people still consume biased and one-sided information, thanks to "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles." That makes the task of the administration's propagandists more challenging than their authoritarian counterparts. In order to deliver the president's message to the public, the administration and its surrogate speakers have to cut through the media filter.

Additionally, this dissertation develops an empirical measurement of the media filter as a spectrum. It distinguishes eight of them, ranging from the lightest to the heaviest forms of filtering: unbiased reporting, interpretation, context manipulation, snowball, cherry-picking, fact-checking, block, and fake news. Any of these filtering mechanisms

can be positive or negative: for example, liberal media may negatively fact-check and disprove statements of the Republican administration, while conservative media may run their own positive fact checks and agree with the same statements. This empirical measurement of media filtering power is what I use in empirical chapters (Chapters 5-7) to demonstrate the interaction between the administration's and the media's narratives about sanctuary cities.

Using a combination of cluster, content, sentiment, and topics analysis, I revealed step-by-step how the administration tried to sell to the public a portrait of sanctuary cities as dangerous and lawless places, while the liberal media was actively working on the opposite goal and portrayed immigrants in fear of President Trump's policies. Finally, process tracing of the original messages in the media shows that only a small portion of the administration's public agenda made its way through the media filter, and that the majority of the messages were modified by the media's filtering mechanisms.

My analysis arrives to a disappointing conclusion: the administration's propaganda is mostly ineffective vis-à-vis the power of the media filter. The exception in my case study is Fox News that went above and beyond to aid the president's message by positively snowballing and interpreting it whenever possible. Thus, President Trump's strategy to make Americans resent sanctuary cities largely failed. To begin with, all modern presidents have a hard time setting a long-lasting public agenda (Cohen 1995). Couple that with selective exposure to news (Cinelli et al. 2020; Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson 2016; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2001, 2007). That means that the possible impact of the administration's propaganda was limited to a small group of President Trump's core supporters who watched Fox News. Of course, it very well might

be that the administration's strategy was to not appeal to a broader audience but galvanize only his core supporters who rally behind anti-immigration policies. It might explain why the propaganda campaign so unabashedly criticized liberal states like California for its sanctuary laws instead of adopting a dialogue-inviting approach. On the other hand, there is no real strategic reason for the president to target his fan base. As the past has shown, President Trump's devotees support his policies in all cases despite numerous scandals and controversies.

The administration's propaganda campaign makes sense if we consider it as a president's attempt to boost his legislative influence. This fits into a greater discussion about president's going public. Consisted with the phenomena of rhetorical presidency (Tulis 2017) and ubiquitous presidency (Scacco and Coe 2016), publicizing political conflicts might give modern presidents some legislative leverage (Schattschneider 1975; Kernell 1986; Neustadt 1990). This is the impression the White House aimed to create when it published a collection of various politicians' statements praising President Trump's anti-immigration policies (White House 2017a). On the other hand, as we know from the literature, president's going public may have a deteriorating effect on his ability to negotiate with other political actors (Edwards 2003). Covington (1987) argues that modern presidents have more to gain from "staying private" than from constant publicity about their legislative priorities. After all, even with help of many surrogate channels, the Trump administration's propaganda did not help solve the problem of sanctuary cities in four years, nor was it convincing enough for the courts to uphold President Trump's executive orders. Canes-Wrone (2001) lists several factors aiding presidents' chances to benefit from going public: presidential priorities, approval ratings, prior salience of and public support

for the issue. President Trump lacked some of them. To begin with, sanctuary cities are a divisive issue for most Americans (Avila et al. 2018; Garbow 2016), hence it would be unreasonable to expect off-the-charts public support for President Trump's policies. Moreover, President Trump's approval rating never reached 50% during his entire tenure (Gallup), which might have contributed to the administration's unsuccessful public campaign against sanctuary cities.

Are there remedies to this depressing picture? One undesirable and constitutionally infeasible solution is for the administration to directly censor the news like in Russia (Besemeres 2016; Bonner-Smeyukha 2007; Bullough 2013; Chen 2016; Gorham 2014; Herpen 2015a, 2015). Once the government takes total control of the media sphere, the confusion and chaos existing in the media coverage will be over. So will be the plurality of opinions and democratic deliberation. Thankfully, this is not a real option for the United States. Democratic governments struggle to cut through the media filter to deliver their points, but this is the beauty of competitive democracies. As Greenberg put it, "for all its transformational potential, the bully pulpit hadn't repealed the checks and balances of the Constitution; for all the firepower it gave the White House, the spotlight of press attention didn't free the president of external constraints" (Greenberg 2016, 125).

Perhaps a president's communications strategists can tweak the surrogate program to make it more exciting. One of the reasons why the media outlets were so eager to cover President Trump's speeches and tweets compared to the surrogate speakers' was the president's populist rhetorical style. In the world of political correctness, Donald Trump stood out as a unique example of a politician who defied run-of-the-mill "boring" political communications norms. The media, driven by personality politics, was happy to entertain

the public with spicy details of President Trump's rhetorical mishaps. In the contemporary fast-moving world people do not care for long and substantial political speeches anymore. If presidents hope to keep up with popular demand for concise, straight-to-the-point information, the White House's strategists have to make sure that its surrogate speakers deliver the administration's propaganda in a format that would not bore news consumers in 12 seconds.

Of all the media in my sample, only WSJ and AP showed some adherence to journalistic norms and let the administration's message pass by unaltered in most cases. Even Fox News, many of whose news were pretty neutral and close to the original message, only did so because it supported the Republic administration from the onset. The cable channel is not so gracious when it covers Democratic administrations. The New York Times and CNN did not bother hiding what they felt about President Trump's agenda. Their coverage was extremely biased, and, in the case of CNN, lacking any informational substance or even decent political agenda other than open bashing of President Trump's personality. In an age of polarization, the media contribute to the growing ideological division (Prior 2007; van der Meer and Hameleers 2021; Martin and McCrain 2019; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017) as mouthpieces for not only political parties (Lee 2016), but also its corporate owners (Thompson 2016; Wolin 2008).

I do not have the answer to the question of how to make the media adhere more closely to the journalistic norms of neutrality and objectivity. There are economic considerations, too, that prevent the media from just changing their course of action out of good will. The NYT, which President Trump repeatedly called "failing," significantly increased its subscription revenues once the newspaper dropped its strict adherence to

norms of journalism and began to unabashedly criticize Republicans at every turn (Belvedere 2016). In the modern world, this strong, opinionated, and at times explicitly biased agenda attracts a huge number of followers. Just like on the conservative side, it is not food for thought that people crave – rather, simple pre-packed “facts” stripped of long and boring pros and cons. The media are happy to deliver. The result is that the government, after having spent financial, human, and time fortunes to formulate propaganda that would help drive political changes and actions, receives remarkably little returns from all those efforts. After all, the media are the main drivers of public opinion, not the government, and my research reminds us of that once again.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

**A sample of automated sentiment analysis results**

Sentiment	Message
Very negative	<p>The charges and convictions against these aliens included drug-trafficking, hit-and-run, rape, sex offenses against a child, and even murder (Justice Department 2017b).</p> <p><i>Twitter</i>                      Democrats must change the Immigration Laws FAST. If not Sanctuary Cities must immediately ACT to take care of the Illegal Immigrants - and this includes Gang Members Drug Dealers Human Traffickers and Criminals of all shapes sizes and kinds. CHANGE THE LAWS NOW! (Trump 2019c)</p>
Moderately negative	<p>Civil rights groups say the threat from the governor could lead to racial profiling (The Associated Press 2017).</p> <p><i>Twitter</i>                      Just out: The USA has the absolute legal right to have apprehended illegal immigrants transferred to Sanctuary Cities (Trump 2019a).</p>
Moderately positive	<p>The reality is the vast majority of immigrants are very hardworking. They're taxpaying residents of this great state (CNN 2017a).</p> <p><i>Twitter</i>                      Thank you San Diego County for defending the rule of law and supporting our lawsuit against California's illegal and unconstitutional 'Sanctuary' policies (Trump 2018a).</p>
Very positive	<p>Through increased border security and legislation like the No Sanctuary for Criminals Act, the Trump Administration and Congress are making great strides to end illegal immigration, making American citizens safer and more prosperous (White House 2021).</p>

	<p><i>Twitter</i> Under my leadership, we achieved the most Secure Border in U.S. History! (Trump 2020)</p>
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APPENDIX B

**Examples of manual coding of messages as media filtering mechanisms**

Original message	Final message	Filtering mechanism
<p>Tom Homan, Acting Director of ICE has said that “being a law enforcement officer is already dangerous enough, but to give the criminals a heads up that we're coming in the next 24 hours increases that risk. I watch [the mayor’s] statement when she said her priority is the safety of her community, but what she did has the exact opposite effect” (Department of Justice 2018b).</p>	<p>The acting ICE director is slamming that mayor of Oakland. Take a look.            “Being a law enforcement officer is already dangerous enough. But to give the criminals a heads up that we're coming in the next 24 hours, increases that risk” (Fox News 2018).</p>	<p>Unbiased reporting</p>
<p>So here’s my message to Mayor Schaaf: How dare you. How dare you needlessly endanger the lives of law enforcement just to promote your radical open borders agenda. But in California, we have an even bigger problem than just one mayor (Justice Department 2018).</p>	<p>In a moment here, the panel on the Trump administration declaring war on California's sanctuary state policies.            JEFF SESSIONS, U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL: How dare you? How dare you needlessly endanger the lives of our law enforcement officers? [...]            HANNITY: I think the Trump administration is on very solid legal ground (Hannity 2018).</p>	<p>Positive interpretation</p>
<p>This ruling reverses a lawless decision that enabled Sanctuary City policies, putting the safety and security of all Americans in harm’s way. [...] We urge citizens across America to demand that Democrat leaders cease their support for Sanctuary policies that deprive Americans of life, limb, and liberty (White House 2019).</p>	<p>"This ruling reverses a lawless decision that enabled Sanctuary City policies, putting the safety and security of all Americans in harm's way," the White House said later Friday in an emailed statement. "We urge citizens across America to demand that Democrat leaders cease their support for Sanctuary policies that deprive Americans of life, limb, and liberty."            Federal courts have blocked some efforts by the administration to withhold money from sanctuary</p>	<p>Negative interpretation</p>

	<p>cities, including an executive order issued by the president in 2017 that would have barred them from receiving federal grants “except as deemed necessary for law enforcement purposes” (Johnson 2019).</p>	
<p>Today, the rule of law suffered another blow, as an unelected judge unilaterally rewrote immigration policy for our Nation. Federal law explicitly states that “a Federal, State or Local government entity or official may not prohibit, or in any way restrict, any government entity or official from sending to, or receiving from, the Immigration and Naturalization Service information regarding the citizenship or immigration status, lawful or unlawful, of any individual.” 8 U.S.C. 1373(a) (White House 2017f).</p>	<p>On Monday Attorney General Jeff Sessions allegedly outraged mayors from coast to coast by announcing that he is going to enforce an Obama Administration policy. Specifically, Mr. Sessions said that cities and states applying for grants from the Department of Justice will have to certify that they are complying with an immigration law signed by President Bill Clinton. [...] A charmingly titled "Fact Checker" item in Tuesday's Washington Post claims, "Immigration enforcement is a federal responsibility, and state and local law enforcement can decide how much they want to cooperate with the federal government for immigration enforcement." But a law signed by President Clinton in September of 1996 states that “a Federal, State, or local government entity or official may not prohibit, or in any way restrict, any government entity or official from sending to, or receiving from, the Immigration and Naturalization Service information regarding the citizenship or immigration status, lawful or unlawful, of any individual” (Freeman 2017).</p>	<p>Positive context manipulation</p>
<p>Those Illegal Immigrants who can no longer be legally held (Congress must fix the laws and loopholes) will be subject to</p>	<p>President Donald Trump suggested Monday that his threat to ship migrants to so-called sanctuary cities is taking effect,</p>	<p>Negative context manipulation</p>

<p>Homeland Security given to Sanctuary Cities and States! (Trump 2019b)</p>	<p>even though it remains unclear whether such a plan is feasible. "Those Illegal Immigrants who can no longer be legally held (Congress must fix the laws and loopholes) will be, subject to Homeland Security, given to Sanctuary Cities and States!" Trump tweeted just days after aides insisted the plan had been shelved (Colvin 2019).</p>	
<p>We're getting no help from the state of California. I mean, frankly, if I wanted to pull our people from California, you would have a crying mess like you've never seen in California. All I'd have to do is say, ICE and Border Patrol, let California alone. You'd be inundated — you would see crime like nobody has ever seen crime in this country. And yet we get no help from the state of California (White House 2018g).</p>	<p>(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP) DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: We are getting no help from the state of California. I mean, frankly, if I wanted to pull our people from California, you would have a crime nest like he would never see. All I had to do is say ICE and Border Patrol, let California alone. You'd be inundated -- you would see crime like nobody's ever seen crime limits country. And yet, we get no help from the state of California. (END VIDEO CLIP) HANNITY: All right. When it comes to criminal illegal immigrants, the media, the left, liberals, they refuse to look at facts and because of this, they are complicit in the harm that these people in the future will cost to American citizens (Hannity 2018).</p>	<p>Positive snowballing</p>
<p>And yet we get no help from the state of California. They are doing a lousy management job. They have the highest taxes in the nation, and they don't know what's happening out there. Frankly, it's a disgrace — the sanctuary city situation, the protection of these horrible criminals — you know because</p>	<p>President Trump ventured into what his team regards as enemy territory on Tuesday, and it was not a peace mission. In his first visit as president to California, the blue bastion of liberal resistance, Mr. Trump unloaded on Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, and called on Congress to punish jurisdictions in the state</p>	<p>Negative snowballing</p>

<p>you're working on it (White House 2018g).</p>	<p>that do not cooperate with federal immigration authorities. Governor Brown does a very poor job running California," Mr. Trump said during a visit to the Mexican border, where he inspected prototypes of the wall he wants to build. "They have the highest taxes in the United States" (Baker and Arango 2018).</p>	
<p>Now most cities and states do not have these "sanctuary" policies— because the vast majority of the American people are opposed to these policies. According to one poll, 80 percent of the public believes that cities should turn over criminal illegal aliens to immigration officials (Justice Department 2017c).</p>	<p>(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE) SESSIONS: 80 percent of the public believes that cities should turn over illegal aliens to federal immigration officers. (END VIDEOTAPE) [...] LA JEUNESSE: But are they willing to risk federal money? California, a sanctuary state, receives \$30 million in Justice grants; New York City, \$4 million; Chicago, \$2.3 million (La Jeunesse 2017).</p>	<p>Positive cherry-picking</p>
<p>Respect for the rule of law has broken down. In Chicago, their so-called "sanctuary" policies are just one sad example (Justice Department 2017b).</p>	<p>The Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, strongly criticized Chicago's sanctuary city policy, saying the rule of law has broken down (Tatum 2017).</p>	<p>Negative cherry-picking</p>
<p>There is a Revolution going on in California. Soooo many Sanctuary areas want OUT of this ridiculous crime infested &amp; breeding concept. Jerry Brown is trying to back out of the National Guard at the Border but the people of the State are not happy. Want Security &amp; Safety NOW! (Trump 2018b)</p>	<p>Trump tweeted today, "There is a revolution going on in California. So many sanctuary areas. Want out of this ridiculous crime infested breeding contest." Jerry Brown is trying to back out of the National Guard at the border, but the people of the state are not happy. Want security and safety now." The president may have the numbers to close prove it. Nearly 20 jurisdictions in California have announced their opposition to the state sanctuary law (Ingraham 2018).</p>	<p>Positive fact checking</p>

<p>My administration is also confronting things called “sanctuary cities” that shield dangerous criminals. And every day, sanctuary cities release illegal immigrants and drug dealers, traffickers, and gang members back into our communities. They’re protected by these cities. And you say, “What are they doing?” They’re safe havens for just some terrible people (White House 2017e).</p>	<p>The Trump administration’s first year of immigration policy has relied on claims that immigrants bring crime into America. President Trump’s latest target is sanctuary cities.</p> <p>“Every day, sanctuary cities release illegal immigrants, drug dealers, traffickers, gang members back into our communities,” he said last week. “They’re safe havens for just some terrible people.”</p> <p>[...] But is it true that immigration drives crime? Many studies have shown that it does not (Flagg 2018).</p>	<p>Negative fact checking</p>
<p>There is a Revolution going on in California. Soooo many Sanctuary areas want OUT of this ridiculous crime infested &amp; breeding concept. Jerry Brown is trying to back out of the National Guard at the Border but the people of the State are not happy. Want Security &amp; Safety NOW! (Trump 2018b)</p>	<p>ACOSTA: The president has fired off a number of tweets, including this one from last week. "There's a revolution going on in California. So many sanctuary areas want out of this ridiculous ,crime-infested and breeding concept."</p> <p>The White House was asked about the use of the word breeding.</p> <p>(on camera): When he used the word breeding, was he making a derogatory term about Latinos in California, that they breed a lot or that they're prone to breeding?</p> <p>[...] APRIL RYAN, CNN POLITICAL ANALYST: What does breeding mean to this president? Because, when you think of breeding, you think of animals breeding, populating. [...]</p> <p>ACOSTA: Now, Wolf, we never got a clear answer as to what Sarah Sanders was talking there in reference to the president's tweet about immigrants breeding out in California (Acosta 2018).</p>	<p>Fake news</p>

## APPENDIX C

### **Computer assisted content analysis as the method of choice for the project**

The empirical part of my research relies on content analysis, particularly its computer assisted version (CATA=computer assisted textual analysis). Using CATA, I identified sentiments and topics in both the administration's and the media's rhetoric.

What is CATA? In its essence, it is a method of deriving meaning from large texts using computers and built-in dictionaries (also referred to as text mining). An alternative method would be human coding on the basis of a codebook designed uniquely for the project. Both methods have their strong and weak sides. The advantage of CATA is its perfect reliability and high speed of analysis. Using computers for text analysis also excludes a possibility of a human error and prejudice that would contaminate the results. However, CATA is blind to capturing nuances of language and idioms that only a human can understand. For example, a sentence "I received an awful lot of gifts for my birthday" would be assigned different sentiments by computers and human coders. For computers, the presence of the word "awful" would mean the sentence has a negative sentiment. A human coder, on the other hand, would categorize the same sentence as an expression of a positive sentiment. Therefore, fully automated methods of text analysis are "no substitute for careful thought and close reading" (Grimmer and Stewart 2013, 267), and "several subjective steps must be taken to adapt the content to the program" (Conway 2006, 186).

I used NVIVO for sentiment and topics analysis in my project. NVIVO is a software for qualitative research, and it has several powerful options for text analysis. First, the program employs LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) system, which was useful to create word clouds to show general patterns of the administration's and the media's

rhetoric, as well as clusters within the former's rhetoric. Additionally, the software has a built-in capability to perform fully automated sentiment and topics analysis of large textual data, for which NVIVO uses Saliency 6.1.1, developed by Lexalytics. The algorithm assigns sentiment scores (a continuum from -1 to +1) to a text based on a pre-scored set of several hundred thousand words and phrases. Developers of the algorithm explain that sentiments have "three major axes:

- Emotionally laden words such as love, hate, beautiful, catastrophe
- Information laden words such as "decreasing revenue" or "hard bed"
- Reader's perspective - your competitor's decreasing revenue might be positive for you."<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the program scans the entire text looking for negative and positive words and presents the final score as the average of all adjusted scores of the phrases in the text. To simplify it for the end user, the final score is presented as a distribution of very/moderately negative, neutral, and moderately/very positive sentiments. The results of sentiment analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 of my dissertation are products of this algorithm.

As discussed earlier, one must be very careful not to overly rely on fully automated text analysis. To that end, I manually checked the results to make sure that the program categorized phrases and words into proper sentiments and compiled a codebook presenting examples of real text units from the dataset (Appendix A). However, categorizing media's messages as filtering mechanisms was done completely manually. The spectrum of media filtering is my attempt to simplify a multidimensional concept of information manipulation

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<sup>28</sup> <https://saliency-docs.lexalytics.com/v6.1.1/docs/analyzing-sentiment>

by the media. The only way to analyze it through CATA would be to develop a brand new dictionary and teach the program to code sentences in accordance with that dictionary. In other words, my main method would be supervised natural language processing (NLP). This is a task for another time. For this project, standard CATA and human follow-up perfectly satisfied my analytic goals. For examples of research using CATA, see Anstead (2018), Bennett (2015), Brier and Hopp (2010), Lucas et al. (2015), Luo (2022), Ryan (2018), and Wiedemann (2013).

## VITA

### VALERIIA POPOVA

- 2010-2014      B.A., Political Science  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
Moscow, Russia  
• Diploma with honors
- 2014-2016      M.A., Political Science  
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
Moscow, Russia  
• Diploma with honors  
• Best graduate 2016
- 2014-2015      Public Relations Specialist  
Federal Government of the Russian Federation  
Moscow, Russia
- 2016-2019      M.A. in Political Science  
Florida International University  
Miami, Florida  
• Service Award 2017-2018
- 2019-2022      Doctoral Candidate  
Florida International University  
Miami, Florida

## PUBLICATIONS

Koruzhde, Mazaher, and Valeriia Popova. 2022. "America Still Held Hostage: The Hostage Crisis Generation and Public Opinion about Iran Deal." *Political Science Quarterly* (Fall).

Popova, Valeriia. 2021. "Full-Spectrum ISIS Propaganda." *International Studies Review* (August). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab042>.

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