



DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATION

Conspiracy Theory Reporting: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Conspiracy Dissemination in Alternative and Mainstream Media in the US

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Master's Thesis in Media and Communication

Thesis:	30 hp
Program and/or course:	Master's Programme in Political Communication/MK2502
Level:	Second Cycle
Term/year:	Spring/2023
Supervisor:	Jesper Strömbäck
Examiner:	xx

Abstract

Over the last couple of decades the dissemination, reporting and consumption of conspiracy theories in the US has increased in popularity due to widespread use and round the clock access to the internet. One of the primary reasons for the spread of conspiracy theories is that the internet and digital media has allowed for greater access to online content that at first glance appears to challenge the authority of traditional mainstream media. In the US, alternative media usage has been associated with those on both the left and the right (Democrat and Republican) of the political divide and who are able to consume 'alternative' news which aligns with their political ideology and opinions whilst being able to avoid other opinions which contradict their own. For this reason, alternative media in the US has been able to attract audiences by becoming more partisan (either left or right). However, alternative media in the US has predominately been linked often linked to those who seen to be on the alternative 'alt-right' of politics. While the dissemination of conspiracy theories was once seen as the preserve of extremist right-wing groups and the alternative-right media, conspiracy theory dissemination can now also be seen in media outlets regarded as being alternative-left, and those media outlets seen as belonging to the traditional, mainstream media. The mainstream media in the US traditionally has been associated with being central/neutral and non-partisan whose responsibility is to report the news in an unbiased manner. However, owing to how divided along politically partisan lines the US currently is, a subtle, and not so subtle partisan divide between mainstream media outlets can be seen. Additionally, there are mainstream media outlets that clearly have a partisan leaning (left or right) and this continues to draw in audiences who share the same political leanings. Also, even media outlets which have started out as slightly partisan such as *Fox* have become known as more alternative-right due to having programs and hosts that have more polarised views. It has also become apparent that the 'lines' between alternative media and mainstream media in the US have become 'blurred' with both kinds of media outlets employing similar tactics and reporting methods when it comes to disseminating conspiracy theories.

This paper analyses the reporting and dissemination of conspiracy theories by online media outlets (alternative-right, alternative-left, and mainstream media) in the US during a five-month period October 2022 – March 2023. This time frame also saw the 2022 US midterm elections take place in November. The method used for this study was quantitative content analysis which analysed 628 articles taken from ten online US media outlets - three digital newspapers (*The New York Times*, *New York Post* and *The Washington Post*) and seven websites (*AlterNet*, *Breitbart*, *CNN*, *The Gateway Pundit*, *Fox News*, *Mother Jones* and *MSNBC*). The aim of the study was to compare how the various outlets reported conspiracy theories, the language/rhetoric used, and if there were any similarities in the reporting when looking at the outlets regarded as being on the slight to moderate left or right of US politics, and those regarded as being alternative media outlets and those generally seen as belonging to the mainstream media. The findings overall concur with previous research that although alternative right media tends to disseminate conspiracy theories more, the alternative left media, the more 'mainstream' partisan media and the centre/mainstream media will also report on conspiracy theories with a sharp focus on conspiratorial content targeted at partisan government.

Word count: 24,713

Keywords: alternative media, alternative right, alternative left, mainstream media, conspiracy theories, reporting, dissemination

Acknowledgements

Completing this master thesis has been a journey which has taught me many things such as engaging in critical thinking and honing my skills as an academic. Furthermore, this experience has taught me patience and perseverance. This endeavour has been a dream come true and I am truly grateful to have been given the opportunity to do so.

I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to my supervisor Jesper Strömbäck who took the time to guide and support me in this process, and for always being available to answer my questions throughout from the beginning phases until the end. Additionally, to Nicklas Håkansson and all the tutors at JMG.

The ability to be able to pursue my masters (and entire academic pursuits) would not have been possible without the love and support from my family and friends:

My loving family, Shirley and Eric, Ray and Carol and all of the inspiring ‘Clark’s’ one could not have asked for a better family dynamic to belong to - thank you all for your unwavering support.

My friends and second ‘family’ Mike and Tanja, ‘sister’ Flora and Imanuel. Also, I would like to thank my mentor and friend Chris, your support and wisdom has been invaluable – looking forward to the next chapter and future adventures. Finally, to Martin for always making me laugh and for being there.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the past two decennia the popularity of conspiracy theories and their reporting by the media in the US (particularly online) has become more problematic and polarizing because of the number of widely disseminated articles which contain, discuss, promote or even foster such conspiracy theories. (For an analysis of the rise in popularity and spreading of conspiracy theories in the US, see for example Barkun, 2013). In the US the spreading of conspiracy theories can be seen to be particularly problematic by alternative media as large parts of the country and its population are politically polarized along party lines with many Republicans and conservatives sitting on the ‘the political right’ and the Democrats and liberals equally situated on ‘the left’ (for an analysis of the US media’s political polarization see for example Mitchell et al., 2014). Belief in conspiracy theories tends to increase such political divisions, increase distrust in the ‘other side’, cultivate dangerous beliefs/opinions and can lead to extremism, violence, disorder and in some cases deaths (see for example Douglas, 2021).

In recent years some of the more widely, and believed, conspiracy theories include: the US government being responsible for the 9/11 Twin Towers terror attack in 2001 (see for example Sáfrány, 2013); the COVID-19 pandemic was a hoax and the subsequent vaccines were deadly (Douglas, 2021 discusses these issues); how democracy was endangered in 2020 when the US presidential election was ‘stolen’ from the Republicans (see Wang & van Prooijen, 2022); and even more recently – the 2022 US midterm election was also ‘stolen’ by the Democrats and embroiled in electoral fraud claims (see for example Cassidy, 2023). The issues surrounding the popularity and spreading of conspiracy theories has caused a certain amount of concern to some scholars such as Beyer and Herrberg (2023), who suggest that such theories as not only a threat to democracy, but also can be dangerous or even life-threatening. For example, the spreading of conspiracy theories about electoral fraud and stolen election during the 2020 US presidential election directly led to widespread violence, riots, the ‘storming’ of the Capitol Building in Washington (Beyer & Herrberg, 2023, pp. 4-5).

The danger of conspiracy theory dissemination by alternative news media is that their audiences might solely consume news stories from these outlets, particularly as the US’ alternative media outlets tend to be partisan in nature (Steppat et al., 2023, p. 745). Therefore, the conspiracy theories being reported by alternative media outlets will ‘speak to’ individuals (either on the left or right) looking to consume news which reflect their political ideology or leanings which might lead these individuals away from consuming other news which differ from their own opinions. In fact, Linden et al. (2021), argue that more than 50% of the US population believe in at least one conspiracy theory for a number of reasons such as: “paranoia, narcissism, distrust, feelings of [being] powerless, [and] low levels of education and intelligence” (Linden et al., p. 24). Moreover, Linden et al., suggests that what draws individuals towards conspiratorial thinking is due to ideology, because they hold “beliefs, opinions, and values about the way society is and how it should be” (Linden et al. 2021, p. 24) which can promote and foster conspiratorial thinking. Linden et al. (2021), also argue that Americans on both side of the political divide can be vulnerable and susceptible to misinformation and believing in conspiracy theories which are reported on alternative media outlets (such as Breitbart) (pp. 25-26). However, Linden et al. (2021), argue that the right

media consumers are more likely to be susceptible to conspiracy theories than those on the left side.

Although there have been various studies on why or how conspiracy theories have the ability to draw certain people in. Douglas et al., (2019), suggest that previous research has shown that people's belief in conspiracy theories is connected with certain factors such as: (1) psychological factors such as monological belief system (closed worldview coupled with beliefs) that combined reinforce this; (2) epistemic motives (internally reaffirming explanations) that prolongates beliefs; (3) existential motives (feeling threatened); (4) social motives (positive self-image); (5) demographics (level of education or income); (6) political factors (a winners/losers or "us versus them" mentality); (7) ideology (opposing political side as having malevolent intentions); and (8) motivated reasoning (having a different ideological reasoning might mean having different interpretations) on information (pp. 7-9). This might suggest that political factors, ideology and motivated reasoning might be at play (along with the other factors) when it comes to why certain individuals gravitate towards partisan alternative media and political conspiracy theories particularly in the US (for an analysis of partisan beliefs and conspiracy theories see for example Smallpage et al., 2017). Furthermore, Sutton & Douglas (2020), argue that more and more conspiracy theories continue to spread into politics (particularly populist/partisan), and receptivity for them by certain people is linked to having a conspiracy theory mindset (p. 120). For instance, it is more likely that a supporter of the Republican Party will find comfort and 'security' in believing a conspiracy story about a Democrat politician/candidate but they would be far more likely to dismiss a conspiracy about a Republican politician/candidate (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

The primary reasons why conspiracy theories such as these are likely to spread and become more popular is the rise of 'alternative media' (alt-media) which is widely available on the internet (Theocharis et al., 2021). Furthermore, the widespread use and twenty-four-hour access to digital media via the internet has seen a profound change in how people access and consume news media. Previously, individuals could only access news stories via mainstream media (also regarded as legacy or traditional media). Mainstream media was mainly a stalwart source of information system which was the socially recognized place to get news from as it was brought to the public by news conglomerates (often with worldwide media partnerships owned or 'controlled' by big business or governmental agencies). Such news conglomerates comprised of television news stations, printed newspapers and later online media (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861). Formerly, people would generally acquire news from a single (daily) newspaper or television news program, and whilst this is still evident today, the internet has greatly increased one's accessibility to a variety of news media outlets which has led to the rise of so-called alternative media (Andersen et al. 2021, pp. 834-835).

Scholars such as Ihlebæk et al. (2022) and Schulze (2020) define alternative media as media which challenges the narrative put forward by mainstream media, or as a populist form of media that offers an alternative voice and is anti-elitist. This type of media has taken a foothold (primarily online) in many western democracies in countries such as the US, the UK and parts of the EU (albeit to varying degrees). In fact, the increase in alternative media and its popularity suggests that traditional mainstream media has needed to adapt and change to compete with alternative media outlets and to remain relevant to its audiences (Cushion,

2022, p. 1696). Scholars such as Harlow and Harp, (2013); Kenix, (2011) have researched how alternative media in the US continues to gain popularity across the whole populous, particularly within the parts of the US' society than can be seen to be radically politically polarised and partisan. Moreover, alternative media in the US can be seen as a reflection of how partisan its society has become, and is becoming, as the alternative right (alt-right) and alternative left (alt-left) vigorously 'back' the corresponding left or right political party whilst trying 'damage' the other side. While the popularity of alternative media can be seen to increase with those who affiliate themselves with either the left or right side of politics in the US (and other countries), the popularity of alternative media is more prominently associated with those on the right. (For studies on the popularity of alternative media in the US and elsewhere see for example Andersen et al., 2021; Harlow & Harp, 2013; Kenix, 2011).

In US politics it has always been important for politicians (Republicans and Democrats) to use the media to campaign during elections and keep their audiences informed and often "create, tap, or steer information in ways that suit their goals...modify, enable, or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings" (Chadwick, 2017, p. 131). However, as the old news media system (newspapers and print media) has evolved into a newer system (digital media) and has become hybrid (old and new media combined) (Chadwick, 2017, pp. 33, 46), politicians have adapted their communication means via a "hybrid media system [...] new and old media are intertwined and their logics complement each other, political actors no longer rely on a single communication channel" (Ernst et al., 2019, p. 4).

Furthermore, the US has continued to become more polarised politically with the left and right side increasingly becoming more partisan and even hyper-partisan (the definitions used in the context of this study are discussed further in Chapter 2 in this paper). Likewise, with the rise of political populism, in the US presidential populism (both Republican and Democrat factions) has become a part of the US' political fabric (Bonikowski & Noam Gidron, 2016), which has also been reflected in the alternative media in the US. Political populism is a set of political views that tries to tap into the 'fears/beliefs' of "the people" whilst trying to juxtapose the people against the corrupt "ruling elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 25). Over the last decade, political populist leaders in countries such as in the US, the UK and western Europe have used the internet to campaign and communicate with their constituents as they are "the messenger in political communication" (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1284). Furthermore, populist parties or candidates which have gained widespread traction and popularity amongst the electorate have been defined by different scholars as political parties, candidates (and politicians) which generally seek to portray themselves as "the voice of the people" because they echo what "the people" are thinking/concerned about (see Van Raalte et al., 2021; Vitale & Girard, 2022). Therefore, populist leaders can market themselves and campaign the internet and social media and via alternative media as being representatives of "oppressed people", which can further polarize an already polarized electorate (as in the US for example) as "populist leaders frequently distinguish between the "real" people and other groups within the state" (Barber, 2019, p. 131). For instance, during the 2016 presidential election campaign, the populist Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump used the social media platform Twitter to spread his rhetoric and to emotionally connect directly to potential voters as one of his election campaign tactics (Barber, 2019, p. 132).

Moreover, it has equally become as important for a moderate or populist party or candidate (either left or right) who wishes to attempt to win an election or simply to strengthen their side's political positioning, to affiliate themselves with the alternative media aligned with their party's ideology. Previous research has shown that it is more so the political right which align themselves with 'alt-right' or far right alternative media - as they are intrinsically connected and identified with their partisan ideology (Haller et al., 2019). For example, when Trump won the 2016 US presidential election, the alternative right news media outlets *Breitbart* and *The Gateway Pundit* joined the White House Press Corp, suggesting that "alternative right-wing media are gaining importance in daily politics" (Haller et al., 2019, p. 3). Equally, alternative media, which pushes the agendas and views of politicians and political parties from either side of politics, will promote the narrative and agenda of these specific parties or candidates over another. For instance, this can be seen in how the media in the US reports (and backs) the political party and candidates they 'agree' with, whilst criticising, attacking, or negatively portraying those they do not (Linden et al., 2021, p. 24). Likewise, such practises can be seen elsewhere, such as in the democratic EU country of Denmark in which some alternative right media favoured the populist far-right party and gave them far more publicity during election campaigning (Brems, 2023, pp. 246-247). However, it must be acknowledged that the rise of alternative media in the US and other western democracies has had different levels of influence on their citizens.

One by-product of the dissemination of political news by alternative media in the US is the potential of reporting/spreading of conspiracy theories (a sub-category of fake news, mis – and disinformation as outlined in Chapter 2) and might even have elements of mis – and disinformation in the conspiracy theory stories (see for example Aïmeur et al., 2023). As mentioned above, the US can be seen to be a politically polarised and partisan society (split between those who support the Republican Party and those who support the Democrats) and the reporting of such aspects are often levelled against the opposing political camps (e.g. Democrats vs Republicans), sometimes with little or no evidence to back the reported claims (Green et al., 2022). Mancosu and Vegetti (2021), state that conspiracy theory consumers who use alternative media platforms tend to believe not just one conspiracy but also many more. For instance, people who believed in the conspiracy of the US government's involvement in 9/11 were more likely to be invested in other conspiracies, and more likely to believe conspiracies that were reported in the alternative media source which reflected their own partisan leanings (pp. 1204-1205). Overall, conspiracy believers are more likely to seek out the alternative media which reflects their inner beliefs which in the US is divided as "Democrat-consistent news content and source tend to be perceived as more accurate among Democrats and less among Republicans (and vice versa)" (Mancosu & Vegetti, 2021, p. 1206).

While alternative media is associated with disseminating conspiracy theories, likewise, some mainstream media outlets in western democratic societies have also been known to be the vehicles for spreading 'fake news' and "false information, masked as traditional news, to advance political goals or generate ad revenues" (Tsfati et al., 2020, pp. 157-173) and at times conspiracy theories (see Schemer et al., 2022). However, to what extent the mainstream media in the US has reported on conspiracy theories has not been researched as much as conspiracy dissemination by the alternative media (particularly the alternative

right) (see for example Beyer & Herrberg, 2023). Bruns et al. (2022), argue that being mindful about disseminating conspiracy theories (even unwittingly) is a huge challenge for mainstream media journalists. Bruns et al., further suggest that alternative media are not the only 'news' outlets sharing conspiratorial content (p. 937). For instance, in the US although some 'fringe' alternative media reported on the 2021 conspiracy that there was a link between the spread of COVID-19 and the wider use of the 5G phone signal network – there was also coverage by some mainstream media in Italy who reported the story and even used direct quotes from the conspiracy theorists instead of “taking a more proactive and direct fact-checking approach” (Bruns et al., 2022, p. 937), when reporting on the supposed COVID/5G link conspiracy theory. Thus, there can equally be a danger of mainstream media sometimes disseminating conspiracy theories - even if traditionally mainstream media is seen to be the standard for journalistic integrity. Consequently, it has been a concern for some scholars (see for example Brown & Mondon 2021; Rauch 2016; Schemer et al. 2022), that mainstream media have the potential to spread conspiracy theories, and this should further be studied. Therefore, this paper looks at previous research on alternative and mainstream media and conspiracy theories, whilst affirming that currently there is a scarcity of research looking at actual political conspiracy theories generated and disseminated by media outlets in the US, a gap that has been identified by this study's author and, therefore, will be further explored in this paper.

1.1 This study

The primary aim of this study is to look at how media (mainstream and alternative) in America reported conspiracy theory news stories from their respective partisan political sides (the Democrats on the left, and Republicans on the right) during a specific, recent timeframe. The analysis looks at articles taken from online media sources that according to Silver and Shearer (2021) can be seen as being either alternative media sites, or part of the mainstream media. The timeframe chosen for this study begins on October 24th, 2022, and ends on March 26th, 2023, covering a total of five months. This time period was chosen as it includes the time when the 2022 US midterm elections took place in November 2022. Therefore, it would be expected that during this period the various media outlets would have increased their dissemination of conspiracy theories in order to push the agenda of their favoured political party and influence their readerships' voting (Brown, 2020). To conduct this study a quantitative content analysis of news articles from within the selected time period published by ten national online digital US news outlets was carried. According to a report Shearer and Mitchell (2021) the ten media outlets can be classified as: two alternative-left and two alternative-right; and six mainstream with three having a centre/left-leaning, and three with a centre-right leaning.

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 Theory of conspiracy theories

Defining conspiracy theories

Scholars such as Theocharis et al., (2021), define conspiracy theories as “attribution of the causes of some event to the machinations of powerful people attempting to conceal their role” (Theocharis et al. 2021, p. 4). In other words: elites who are behind the scenes controlling the lives of citizens who are unwittingly going about their everyday lives in ignorance of this ‘dark organisation’. Others, such as Douglas et al. (2019), suggest that a conspiracy theory is about a secret plot between two or more elite actors designed to destabilize the established order, and is an “attempt to usurp political or economic power [...] infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions” (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). Additionally, Uscinski and Enders (2023), state that conspiracy theories are often defined as being carried out by a small group of people who attempt to wield power, albeit secretly, to control the unwitting masses (p. 4). Furthermore, according to Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen (2022), the conspiracy theory narrative also contains an element of ‘us against them’, whereby certain media outlets (such as the alternative-right outlet *Breitbart News*) disseminate such theories that widen the gap between the ‘powers that be’ and the ‘people’. What is more, *Breitbart* has been associated with applying a discursive style of delivering news stories by pitting themselves as the ‘good guys’ against the corrupt political left and extolling their outlet and “‘Their Good’ journalism and ‘Other Bad’ journalism” (Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022, p. 844).

While what constitutes a conspiracy theory may seem somewhat straightforward, conspiracy theories are in fact a subcategory of (spreading) misinformation and disinformation, and they can contain either misinformation (misleading information sometime unintentionally spread) or disinformation (deliberate or orchestrated information that is inaccurate), or a combination of both elements (Bruns et al. 2022, p. 931). Whether a conspiracy theory contains one or both types of mis – or disinformation, conspiracy theory dissemination in the US by alternative media such as *Breitbart* (a right-wing media outlet) can influence its audience to partake in further conspiratorial content and increase their beliefs in partisan conspiracy theories (Schemer et al. 2022, p. 911). Enders et al. (2022), further suggest that in the US the belief in political conspiracy theories is subjective because it depends on the side who has won or lost an election. Believing in particular political conspiracy theories such as a partisan belief in a ‘stolen election’ conspiracy are rooted “the electoral fortunes of one’s preferred party and that party’s messaging” (Enders et al., 2022, p. 5). Thus, conspiracy theories such as partisan ones can create a scepticism towards the government or political institutions.

Definition of ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’

Conspiracy theories are a subcategory of two categories ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’. These two terms which are used in relation to conspiracy theories are misinformation and disinformation (see for example Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020) are also used in this study in the same context when referring to facets of conspiracy theory reporting by either the alternative or mainstream media outlets examined either in previous research or in the current study. However, it is important to point out that misinformation and disinformation are not the same as both have different functions. Muhammed and Mathew (2022) define ‘misinformation’ as “information which is fake or misleading and spreads unintentionally” (p. 271). In other words, misinformation is false information which is spread (usually) without

intent. Moreover, misinformation often begins when people are uninformed, such as in times of a crisis which can lead to uncertainty and anxiety and can subsequently lead to the spreading of misinformation. One main vehicle for spreading misinformation is social media where false information is shared in this echo chamber by organisations, political actors and individuals (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022, p. 272). Conversely, whilst misinformation is erroneous information unintentionally spread, 'disinformation' is false information that is spread intentionally. Disinformation contains the element of spreading false news (sometimes covertly) in a deliberate way to deceive and/or influence people (McKay & Tenove, 2021). Freelon and Wells (2020), suggest that disinformation poses a definitive threat to a "healthy democracy" and contain three critical elements: "1) deception, 2) potential for harm, and 3) an intent to harm" (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 145).

Definition of 'fake news'

Another term used by some scholars in relation to conspiracy theories is 'fake news' when looking at different conspiracy theories disseminated by the media (alternative, mainstream or hybrid) (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020) and is used in the same context for this study. Similarly, Donald Trump regularly used the term fake news to denounce media stories (particularly those in the mainstream media) that he believed to be conspiracy theories against him and his supporters because they criticised his policies/views (Meeks, 2020). By calling such stories as fake news/conspiracy Trump was able to galvanise and mobilise his supporters and further enhance any feelings of "us-versus-them" (Meeks, 2020). The term 'fake news' can be defined as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). Another definition by Anjin-Tetty (2022) is that fake news is "information pollution" designed to manipulate a person's perceptions of real facts or event and even about statements. Fake news can often be presented by the media outlet as 'real news', even though there may not be any truth to the story, or the information has been fabricated to appear as factual but is instead deceptive or misleading. Also, fake news can often be disseminated via online social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter by alternative news media outlets, groups and organisations, political actors (such as Trump), and individuals (Adjin-Tetty, 2022, p. 17). Other scholars also state that fake news is misleading and inaccurate information, sometimes presented in a sensationalistic manner designed to garner attention, deceive and ruin reputations (e.g. the reputation of a politician or political party) (see for example Aïmeur et al., 2023; Tsfati et al., 2020).

Figure 1 (below) provides a visual representation of the how misinformation, disinformation and fake news. Figure 1 shows that, as mentioned above, a conspiracy theory can contain elements of misinformation, disinformation and fake news (and, at times, facts to make them more believable). As mentioned, this section provides a little background information on conspiracy theories and what constitutes elements of a conspiracy theory. While disinformation, misinformation and fake news a closely related and a conspiracy theory can include at least one of these elements, it is important to point out that during the article analysis conducted for this study, the author has not made a distinction as if the conspiracy has been disseminated unintentionally or intentionally with the aim to mislead the reader.

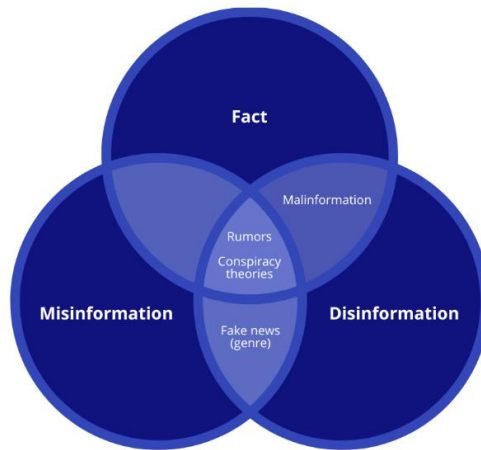


Figure 1: Visual Representation of the Relationship between Conspiracy Theories, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News. Source: Taylor & Francis (2023).

2. 2 Clarifying concepts of different media as conspiracy theory disseminators

This section attempts to clarify the concepts used throughout this study to ensure that the definitions are understood (in context). The main terms used throughout this paper are: mainstream media, alternative left media (alt-left) and alternative right media (alt-right). In addition, this chapter will also provide definitions to the term's partisan media and hyperpartisan media. All definitions are given by using some of those used by scholars in previous research.

2. 3 Mainstream media, alternative media, alternative right 'alt-right' and alternative left 'alt-left' media

The next section discusses the different types of media referred to in the study with an aim to clarify and distinguish the differences in both types of media, namely the mainstream media (including the partisan left and right media) and the alternative right and alternative left media.

Mainstream media

Mainstream media is defined as “news media organisations which [...] characterised by certain, often hierarchical organisational structures and traditional publishing routines” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861). In addition, Wimmer and Dominick (2013) define mainstream media as “any communication channel transmitted through a medium that simultaneously reaches a large number of people” (Wimmer and Dominick, 2013, p. 2) while fulfilling a “societal function [enabling] public discourse through the provision of topics of general interest [and] facts [...] published following professional rules” (Holt, et al., 2019, p. 861). As mentioned in the introduction, mainstream media was primarily the stalwart source of news which brought news to the public by news conglomerates (often with worldwide media partnerships owned, or ‘controlled’, by big business or governmental agencies) which comprised television, newspapers and later online media (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861). Before the proliferation of the Internet people tended to get their news from a single daily newspaper, hourly radio programme, and/or a single television station with “trained professional journalists serving exclusively as disseminators of news and information” (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020, p. 2). However, the Internet and new media outlets has seen a change in how people consume

news. In recent years what was traditionally seen as the tried and trusted mainstream media has also received criticism from some politicians and certain sections of the general public who claim that mainstream media's reporting is false and biased and now many Americans claim to have no trust in mainstream media at all (see for example Gottfried & Liedke, 2021; Brennan, 2022). This lack of trust and dissatisfaction in what mainstream media was reporting has helped fuel the rise of alternative media (Andersen et al. 2021, pp. 834-835).

Alternative media

Previous definitions as to what constitutes as alternative media state, for instance, that it can be defined as media that differs from traditional or normative mainstream media (see for example Holt et al., 2019). Further, alternative news media is suggested to be a proclaimed (or self-proclaimed) media which critiques, challenges and seeks to correct the mainstream media narrative which is disseminated to the public via "public discourses" (Ihlebaek et al., 2022). Alternative media's critiques of mainstream media can be carried out in varying degrees "expressed implicitly or explicitly, moderately or aggressively, randomly or systematically, and be directed towards individual journalists or the institution" (Ihlebaek et al., 2022, p. 1268). Other definitions of alternative media are that it is an anti-elite, populist media which has risen in response to a cultural need for 'alternative' information or differing opinions from mainstream, and as a reflection of society which often changes when the 'alternative' option becomes the mainstream (Schulze, 2020, p. 7). Alternative media in the US might be seen by some consumers and critics, as a vehicle which challenges the lack of diversity of media choices which has arisen and gained a wider audience so that it has become a competitor to established mainstream media outlets (Ihlebaek et al., 2022, pp.1270-1271).

Definition of alternative right 'alt-right' and alternative 'alt-right' media

Dobratz et al., (2019) define alternative right (alt-right) as: "a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that "white identity" is under attack by multicultural forces using "political correctness" and "social justice" to undermine white [...] civilisation [and] characterized by heavy [online use]" (Dobratz et al., 2019, p. 539). In addition, Forscher and Kteily, (2020) state that the alternative right has been described as a movement that is on one side antiestablishment and anti-globalism to an even more extreme side of it being associated with white supremacists and antisemitism (p. 91). The alternative right might also be seen as challenging the left's narrative on liberalism by being in "opposition to liberalism and "political correctness," [...] Its animating dynamic is disruption" (Berry, 2018, p. 680). Rae (2021), who uses the term 'alt-right' to describe the alternative right, discusses how the movement became more prominent during the 2016 election via digital media. Rae also states that alternative right media outlets such as *Breitbart News*' presence in 'official' White House reporting increased due to the Republicans winning the 2016 presidential election. *Breitbart's* 'official' White House presence subsequently saw more alternative right media platforms appear "across the Western world including *Rebel Media* in Canada, *The Unshackled* in Australia and the now defunct *Westmonster* in the United Kingdom" (Rae, 2021, p. 1117).

Alternative right-wing media or alternative right media which has been called 'far-right media', 'right-wing media' and 'alt-right media' (Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2019, p. 1223), has been defined by some scholars as fringe news, opinions and commentary (mostly online). Alt-right

media outlets challenge and criticize not only mainstream media's power and journalistic reporting, but also the 'liberal left' agenda. However, there is not a consensus by scholars on exactly how alternative right media should be defined, as there are research gaps on newer alternative media outlets such as alt-right's *Breitbart News Network* (Schulze, 2020, p. 7). Yet, some previous research has shown that alt-right media such as *Breitbart* attract right-wing (and far-right) audiences because these media outlets "on the political fringes gain success along with generating increasing voter shares for right-wing parties" (Haller et al., 2019, p. 3). Additionally, other scholars owing to events such as the 2016 US election which witnessed alt-right media outlets gaining "immense power" (Rae, 2021, p. 1118), US populist politicians have aligned themselves with alt-right media to target potential voters and communicate with their supporters directly. Based on the clarification of concepts in this section, for this study's purposes the terms 'alternative right', 'alt-right', 'alternative right media' and 'alt-right media' are interchangeable (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Forscher & Kteily, 2020).

Definition of alternative left 'alt-left' and alternative left 'alt-left' media

According to Starbird (2017) the left-wing media promote "liberal/progressive" views to society while 'demonising' the right. The left-wing also has far-left or radical-left factions (see Cushion, 2022), although the term 'alt radical left' was first used by the Republican side when Sean Hannity (of *Fox news*) used it to describe the 'left's' behaviour during the 2016 elections (Rae, 2021, p. 1122). Further, although the term 'alt-left' was originally used by some of the right-wing to describe the left-wing (which has been contested by some on the left), the alt-left also have their own alternative media outlets which disseminate the alt-left or left-wings views and opinions. Alternative left-wing media or alternative left media which has been called 'left-wing', 'left-wing media' and 'alt-left media' (Rae, 2021), has been described as having the same discourse as the alt-right or right-wing does which means that the left-wing also have an 'us' against 'them' narrative, while also criticizing the establishment. In the US, there are some alt-left media outlets that have fairly large audiences such as *The Young Turks* which has four million subscribers, and *Chapo Trap House* which has two hundred thousand listeners. However, according to scholars such as Rae (2021), the alt-left media is not as prominent in the US as it is in other western democracies such as the UK. For the purpose of this study the terms 'alternative left', 'alt-left', 'alternative right media', and 'alt-right media' are also used interchangeably.

2.4 Partisan and hyperpartisan media

This study looks at the US media outlets which have a kaleidoscope of different media outlets ranging from centre/non-partisan to partisan and even hyperpartisan publications (Mitchell et al., 2014). The terms partisan and hyperpartisan media are used in this study to help distinguish between the different types of media categories which have additional terms associated with these media which are: center (non-partisan), left to far left and right to far right.

Partisan ideology and partisan media definitions

Media has had an impact on shaping public opinion because exposure to news helps create political awareness and can promote learning and understanding about local and international issues (Garrett et al., 2019). However, in the US the media landscape has changed over the past decades, and partisan media has also influenced public opinion albeit in a more polarised manner. In the US, audiences will most likely consume news about their

favoured party or candidate from a partisan news media outlet they associate with owing to “divergent political orientations” (Messing & Westwood, 2014, p. 1042). Choi (2022) suggested that partisan media has been defined as being news outlets which provide content to audiences that promote one-sided opinions which favour the side the partisan outlet is ‘for’. For instance, during the 2016 US elections *Fox News* reported favourably for Trump as the Republican presidential candidate, whilst *MSNBC*, a more left-leaning outlet did not and there was a clear partisan divide in their reporting throughout the election campaign (Choi, 2022, p. 131). However, the information given in *Fox’s* and *MSNBC’s* reporting might contain misconceptions or bias (only representing one point of view) because they were not telling the other side of the story and therefore not giving a balanced picture (Garrett et al., 2019, pp. 492-504).

Within the US population, politics is often divided along clearly defined partisan lines as many Americans strongly identify as either Democrat or Republican while only a small proportion of the population can be described as being non-partisans as they do not support either party (Green et al., 2022, p. 2). According to a 2021 Pew study on Americans and their preferences of news media suggests that in the US citizens tend to learn about news occurrences or information in ‘news bubbles’ (Silver & Shearer, 2021). One possible reason for this is as some scholars have suggested that people tend to choose their media selectively which is associated with the selective exposure theory (Choi, 2022, p. 130). The selective exposure theory posits that people tend to choose news that is aligned with their pre-existing opinions and ideological beliefs, whilst tending to avoid news (or information) which is not aligned to their opinions and beliefs (Sears & Freedman, 1967, pp. 195-197). Partisan media plays a big role in the US, particularly in politics “partisan media outlets on both sides have been described as engaging in outrage discourse: promoting hostility and disdain” (Garrett et al., 2019, p. 493) towards the opposition and during elections there is a barrage of disinformation about opposing parties and candidates.

Hyperpartisan media

Hyperpartisan media has a similar definition as partisan media, yet it is more extreme in nature as the news content is much more polarised (and biased) which tends to attract people who consume media at the extreme end of the partisan media spectrum owing to their political ideology and leanings. Politically speaking, the content of hyperpartisan media tends to reflect people’s own political attitudes and opinions albeit in a more ‘hyper’ manner owing to “populist logic of intensification” (Rae, 2021, p. 1126). Hyperpartisan news disseminates uncompromising (often extremely polarised) content – in which the outlets report in a way that makes their favoured political side ‘look good’ whilst portraying the other side in a very negative light (Mourão & Robertson, 2019). Consequently, consumers of this type of ‘hyper’ news media will likely tend to ‘tune out’ other mainstream media in favour of hyperpartisan content as their main source of information no matter if the news provided does not paint an entirely accurate picture. Moreover, the dangers with some partisan and hyperpartisan media outlets is that the more they disseminate polarised news it can create a sense in some people that their side is superior which can then lead to hatred of opposing groups (Garrett et al., 2019, p. 493).

The definitions of partisan and hyperpartisan media show that they have similarities albeit the hyperpartisan outlets are more ‘extreme’ in their biased reporting. As mentioned in the introduction the ten media outlets chosen to this study can be classified as being four

alternative left and right outlets and six mainstream outlets with either a centre-left or centre-right leanings (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). This also means that the centre-left and centre-right outlets can be seen to be partisan to the respective left and right of US politics, while the alternative left and right outlets can be regarded as leaning more towards hyperpartisan media outlets.

Chapter 3: Literature review: Understanding alternative and mainstream media

According to many scholars, defining what is or should constitute as alternative media can be difficult (see for example Brems 2023; Cushion 2022; Holt et al. 2019; Müller & Schulz 2021), other experts such as McDowell-Naylor et al. (2023, p. 43) agree with the definition given by Holt et al., (2019) that alternative media opposes the narrative of mainstream media, or “what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt et al. 2019, p. 3). A possible reason for this according to Müller and Schulz (2021), is that alternative media is a direct answer to a gap that mainstream media has not been able to fill as “so called ‘alternative media’ possess the potential to constitute a counter-public to mainstream political discourse” (Müller & Schulz, 2021, p. 3).

Additionally, Müller and Schulz also agree with previous research that some reasons for the increased rise of alternative news are the internet and local (grassroots) political mobilisation. However, another prevalent reason for turning towards partisan alt-media is that certain individuals are dissatisfied with mainstream media reporting, and generally distrust what mainstream media has to say and has led to what can be seen as a general breakdown of trust between citizens and news media (Brenan, 2022). Likewise, Li et al., (2022), state that people are turning more and more to alternative media because of the perceived lack of transparency citizens see coming from their leaders coupled with the dwindling trust in mainstream media (p. 1214). However, due to the nature of alternative media on the Internet, ‘news’ content can be difficult to monitor and control and almost anyone can post an article that is completely baseless for all to see with little or no recriminations. For example, in the US alternative media often take a position against a political party or candidate which the mainstream media appear to favour. Moreover, US citizens themselves can choose to consume partisan alt-media (e.g., Democrat left or Republican right), whilst being able to avoid reading anything about the opposition – unless it is presented to them in a biased (often negative or attacking and not necessarily accurate) manner (Li et al., 2022, pp. 1215-1216).

However, according to Andersen et al. (2021) there is a danger that alternative media can further polarise an already polarised society (such as the US) by displaying a strong ideological presence by representing the opposite of what the established media system stands for and “providing a platform for viewpoints usually ignored” (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 3). However, while alternative media can be difficult to ‘control’, such outlets have often been carefully scrutinised and criticised by scholars, governments and mainstream media. This is because while the public can access alternative opinions on political events, alternative media can be heavily biased, inaccurate and divisive. It is important to stress that Andersen et al.’s article is only referring to alternative media outlet practises associated with western democratic societies where there is a clear partisan divide. Thus, when looking at how alternative media operates in the US (a prime example of partisan divisions) often the type of alt-media consumed by citizens is linked to their politics, as evidenced in the Pew Research Center 2014 report Political Polarization & Media Habits (Mitchell et al., 2014).

One major reason for the rise of alternative media is down to digital media being widely available on the Internet. Furthermore, previous research shows that at one point historically, digital, alternative online media was consumed by people engaging in populist forms of activism, associated with specific groups, or group, or social movements/movement. Subsequently, alternative media became synonymous with populist political partisan movements which stemmed from social uncertainty and turmoil (Andersen et al., 2021, pp. 3-4). For example, the Republican based Tea Party movement utilised their online website to mobilise against the US government's stance on taxes, national debt and other similar populist grievances that resonated with certain sections of America's society. In the US the Republican Tea Party is recognised as being affiliated with the far alt-right Republican movement and is linked strongly to alt-right media platforms (Atkinson & Berg 2012, pp. 520-523, p. 528, p. 532). In addition, in US politics alternative media outlets have become synonymous with taking a partisan side and supporting that particular political ideology. It has been widely acknowledged that there is a very definite partisan divide in America's media (alternative and mainstream) where outlets sit firmly on either side of the political divide (see in particular Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). In their analysis Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen (2022) examined how the alt-right media outlet *Breitbart News* grew in power in the US because of its targeted audience who ranged from those with mild, right-leaning tendencies, to those who held far-right, extremist opinions. In addition, *Breitbart's* growth came from its heavily publicized partisan campaign coverage of the populist 2016 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. Over the years alternative media outlets like *Breitbart* have benefited greatly from their coverage of populist politicians such as Trump. In return these politicians have also benefited greatly from being endorsed and reported by the alternative-right media (Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022).

On the other side of the aisle, the left also has various outlets such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (Mitchell et al., 2014), and alternative media. As with the alternative right media, there are alternative left media outlets which report political news in a partisan fashion and according to Bacaksizlar and Galesic,(2023) *Mother Jones* is where some alternative left leaning citizens are likely to go to get their political news, another is alt-left media outlet *Alter-Net*. Over time, consumption of alternative news in the US has radically changed. For example, although alternative media consumption was previously connected to the left-wing's social and political activist activities looking to change the 'system' using liberal ideology to counter the rise of populist Republican political figures such as Trump. Now, alternative media in the US has become predominately more associated with conservatives, right-leaning and far-right ideology, and extreme populist groups (see for example Wong & Trilling, 2023).

However, there are ever growing concerns by governments and those in the mainstream media in western democracies about alternative media's impact on democracy. Nevertheless, it is perhaps important to point out that alternative media consumption does not translate directly into a hyper partisan mentality as people's ideologies will vary in each western democratic society. For this reason, although it is important to observe the challenges alternative media poses to democracy, and to mainstream media's place of relevance, it is still difficult to ascertain the level of the threat as it varies depending on the country and its citizens' partisan identities (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 5). Nevertheless, as in

the US there are similar political party systems in other western democratic countries such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK which share the same challenges associated with the rise of online alternative media. According to Heft et al. (2021), when looking at the influence of alt-right media across the US and the other western democracies the level of transnational and European joint cohesion is rising due to the far-right moving away from merely a nationalistic view point and towards a more shared global ideology which instead contains “a form of pan-European and transatlantic discourse of “civilizationism” focusing on shared cultural values, which are purportedly under collective threat from [...] out- side forces” (Heft et al., 2021, p. 485).

3.1 Alternative and mainstream media’s coexistence

Scholars have debated the role of mainstream media since the onset of alternative media and its “anti-systemness” which challenges the normative role of mainstream media and the traditional channels mainstream media uses to disseminate news to the public (Holt, 2018:861-863). Previously mainstream media in western democracies was widely used to disseminate news, reached large audiences and was mainly trusted by the public as a:

a system that is formed by specific [mainstream] news media organisations which themselves are characterised by certain, often hierarchical organisational structures and traditional publishing routines. They fulfil a societal function by enabling public discourse through the provision of topics of general interest that are oriented on facts, selected by professional actors, and published following professional rules. (Holt, 2018, p. 861)

With the rise of alternative media citizens have been provided with not only more news choices, but also the choice to consume news solely based on their social and political leaning. This can be seen in the US where media tends to be consumed depending on partisan preferences (Bauer et al., 2022, p. 20).

Moreover, in the US alternative media can be seen to take definite political sides in an uncompromising manner by openly endorsing a particular party, its candidates and their political policies and ideologies (see for example Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Evidence shows that US politicians from the alt-right who have been associated with populist ideology are strongly linked with alt-right media, and to a lesser degree the same applies to left wing politicians being associated with the alt-left media (Mayerhoeffer, 2021, p. 120). In this manner alt-media has become a vehicle which can spread the politician’s messages to a partisan audience (Müller & Schulz, 2021, pp. 3-4), which challenges or opposes the hegemonic strength of mainstream media and traditional journalistic authority (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019, p. 1223). Additionally, in terms of political engagement and political parties in the US – online partisan media (both mainstream and alternative media) has become a greater source of information (and disinformation) (Bauer et al., 2022, p. 19). A consequence of the digitalisation of news and the greater choice of different types of media outlets has seen a rise in what scholars suggest are ‘high and low’ choice political media environments which increasingly has become blurred and is, therefore, more difficult to determine the quality of the source.

As in the US, there is a growing level of mistrust with traditional media in the UK. According to Cushion et al. (2021), in 2018 a survey showed that just under half of the UK believed that journalists were reporting factually and thus, “mistrust may have informed how the UK public interpreted traditional news media practices and the political balance of coverage.” (Cushion et al., 2021, p. 634). Equally, studies in other western democracies show people are turning toward partisan alternative media for political news and information about their party or candidates. Heft et al. (2020), argue that western EU countries have seen a rise in online alt-right media platforms to facilitate the alt-right’s demand for news coverage that reflects their ideology (views), and “hyperpartisan media, [...] provide an alternative to legacy or mainstream media sources in times of high-choice media environments” (Heft et al., 2020, p. 21). Moreover, Heft et al., suggest that as political polarisation has increased, mainly due to these alt-right online media platforms, their audiences might become isolated from mainstream media and therefore not able to distinguish fact from fiction in the content provided (often leading to radicalisation), and this can be dangerous for democracy. Hamerleers and Schmuck (2017), argue that not being able to distinguish fact from fiction can help perpetuate and push conspiracy theories which attempt to scapegoat individuals or groups of people as either being good or evil (pp. 1426-1427).

Strömbäck et al. (2020), also argue that some alternative media (often partisan) is in competition with mainstream media and often attempts to pull individuals in the opposite direction and might “actively engage in attempts to undermine trust in traditional news media” (Strömbäck et al., 2020: 151). Furthermore, Cushion et al. (2021), also agree that although alternative media might differ from country to country, in a nation such as the US, the partisan nature of its politics suggest that the right leaning side tend to go towards alternative news more sharply (but less so on the left), owing to growing scepticism in obtaining non-biased news about their party and candidates (pp. 633-634). The issue here is that this type of reporting has been criticized by mainstream media as being rooted in conspiracy and not facts. Since the rise of digitalization, alternative media has incorporated social media where there is more efficient (unregulated and unchecked) information sharing from alternative-media outlets to their audience. Consequently, mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories can be dangerous, as they undermine western democratic government governance (including decision making), particularly in times of crisis such as was evident during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Theocharis et al., 2021). One of the main arguments put forward by critics of alternative media is that people who use alternative media outlets are being increasingly exposed to content (particularly from alternative right media) that is not fact checked (Strömbäck et al., 2022, pp. 50-52).

However, once a piece has been shared online, there is a risk that those who read it believe what has been published even if it is not based on fact, or is entirely fictitious (Cushion et al., 2021, pp. 633-634). Besides the issue of non-fact checked conspiracy-based articles being available online to a wide audience, another danger is in how long a ‘shelf life’ such articles have. Mancosu and Vassallo (2022), suggest that extant research has shown that the life cycle of a conspiracy theory is dependent on a number of factors such as when the conspiracy is spread (e.g., before or after elections), or an individual’s political, religious, or psychological orientation (p. 12). However, Mancosu and Vassallo (2022) also found in their own study on political elections in Italy between 2013 and 2020 and conspiracism,

conspiracy theories eventually dissipate over time when people are educated and made aware of the dangers of conspiracy dissemination. Moreover, it is also possible that a conspiracy theory's 'shelf-life' depends on how curious/interested people were in it at the time of dissemination and then losing interest afterwards, or even in not being fully behind or believing the conspiracy theory in the first place.

3.2 Mainstream and alternative media's potential 'blurred lines'

At times it can appear that the 'lines' between the mainstream and alternative media environments can be somewhat 'blurred'. This can be problematic because even so called trustworthy mainstream media news outlets can also be guilty of spreading conspiracy theories and/or mis- and disinformation (see Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020). Nevertheless, Nygaard (2021), argues that according to Hallin's Three-sphere Model theory (1986), the mainstream media still sees that it is their 'job' to appoint and maintain what is considered to be appropriate and responsible journalism, as they are the 'guardians' or watchdogs of these boundaries (p. 7). However, the question arises as to who watches the watchdogs? For instance, partisan media has created political categories and according to Shearer and Mitchell (2021), there is now a broader consent on what US citizens consider to be mainstream – even if the news outlets are steeped in partisanship content. Moreover, although there are currently news outlets which are deemed to be more centralist or mainstream, such as *CNN* or *ABC News*, and there are even partisan distinctions between the centrist to left leaning (*MSNBC*) or right leaning (*The Wall Street Journal*) they are still considered as being mainstream (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Furthermore, outlets such as *Fox News* which is known to go from right leaning to far right, hyper partisan with their staunch views on COVID-19, unwavering support of Trump, and supporting conservative policies and values are regarded as being mainstream (Broockman & Kalla 2022). This broad news range has been made possible because of special programs the *Fox* network has allowed, whereby the hosts are more alt-right and far-right rather than just being right-leaning. Some of *Fox's* current and former presenters, such as Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and Greg Gutfeld (the latter being the top ranked show in US night-time television) command a huge following. Yet, despite having some reporting biases (see Morris and Francia, 2010) and promoting some alt-right programming on their network, 73% of Americans consider *Fox* to be a mainstream news media. The danger is that this might create a dilemma for conservatives who do not hold far-right views and are merely looking to consume factual news and unwittingly be exposed to conspiracy theories instead. Thus, it may be the case that over time due to these outlets adding more alternative content, such as Carlson, the definition of mainstream and alternative media might be changing as alt-right news is housed within an established (mainstream) conservative outlet (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

What is more, other findings from previous research show that the media outlets which could be considered as 'hybrid' or by being categorised as not being firmly mainstream, non-partisan and politically unbiased, have been instrumental in mobilising potential voters and growing their political bases. Choi (2022), states that both *Fox News* and *MSNBC* outlets were once associated with being more centrist in their inception in 1996 (p. 131). However, both outlets have been re-branded as being either more partisan (*MSNBC*), or radically partisan (*Fox*). Scholars such as Nygaard (2021) continue the debate about how near or far

apart alternative media is to mainstream media. Likewise, Pyrhönen and Bauvois, (2020), argue that political events such as elections can show how mainstream media and alternative media overlap in their reporting of conspiracy theories, however, both types of outlets do this differently because “countermedia-based conspiracy stories seek to “reinform” their audiences by attributing any and all societal problems to corrupt members of “the elite” [...] mainstream outlets fiercely compete to first expose presidential candidates’ hidden networks, contacts, and activities” (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020, p.706). This begs the questions as to what extent the differences are (if any), and what is the future of news media? Rauch (2016) argues that there are in fact some similarities between mainstream and alternative media such as, commercialism, blogging and open-source publishing, original critical content, objectivity, advocacy, native reporting and citizen journalism, personnel and management (pp. 758-764).

On the other hand, Rauch does state that alternative media also has differences such as: contesting power, seeking change and audience perceptions of difference. Moreover, there is evidence of co-operation between some mainstream and alternative media. For example, alt-right media outlets such as *Breitbart* attack the mainstream media on the left side and accuse them of false reporting or even spreading conspiracy theories that are against the right, but then seem to have an alliance with *Fox* and support/promote output such as that from the now former *Fox* host Tucker Carlson (Roberts & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022, pp. 840-843). Likewise, evidence from such sources as the 2014 Pew report by Mitchell et al (2014) on public political partisan news consumption show that the liberal left (left-leaning) news media can also be associated with being a mainstream news vehicle. Consequently, this might suggest that for US news media in the future, the lines between mainstream and alternative partisan media may become even more blurred (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Thus, while it can be somewhat difficult to determine which media outlets are ‘only’ perceived to be partisan, due to personal political thinking, and which do in fact produce partisan content, Gramlich (2020) suggests that there is a deep partisan divide within the US which has continued to widen over the years (see Jurkowitz et al., 2020). In addition, a study on political media bias which analysed the tone and language used in reporting shows that there is a definite partisan divide in the media in the US (Bernhardt et al., 2020).

Chapter 4: Literature review: How conspiracy theories are disseminated by the US media

This chapter discusses firstly, how conspiracy theories are disseminated by US alternative media (both alt-right and alt-left) and secondly, how conspiracy theories are reported by mainstream media (which includes lean-to-left and lean-to-right outlets) in the US.

4. 1 Alternative news and conspiracy theories

The concern by mainstream media (and journalists) in western democracies such as the US regarding alt-media reporting of conspiracy theories as fact is growing, as it has become increasingly difficult to monitor these stories and fact check. In the US many alternative media are in competition with mainstream or “professional media with respect to the accuracy of the news, but some of them also report fake news, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated claims of different kinds” (Mancosu & Vegetti, 2021, p. 1205). For instance, Green et al. (2022), suggest that just after the 2020 US presidential election results were announced, there was unrest on the Republican side due to claims that the election had been stolen by undemocratic means which then had a marginal influence on the Georgia run-offs voter turn-out in 2021. These findings show that political conspiracy theory dissemination by the alternative media (particularly the alt-right) can be detrimental to democracy or “nuanced potential consequences of election-related conspiracy theories” (Green et al. 2022, p.9).

Likewise, these types of conspiracy theories were spread previously by the partisan (alt-right) media in 2016 when similar claims of election interference were reported on by alt-right media outlets such as *Breitbart* and *The Gateway Pundit* (see for example Kaiser et al., 2020). Therefore, alternative media and the largely unregulated (and oft unchecked) spreading of conspiracy theories as fact on social media has become an ever-increasing problem. For example, Facebook was used to widely spread that the aforementioned presidential election win for the Democrats was invalid because of electoral irregularities and voter rigging (Uscinski & Enders, 2023, pp. 2-4). Moreover, Van Prooijen et al., (2022), argue that when conspiracy theories are spread, they promote distrust by sending a message that a group of elites are out there secretly plotting malevolently against the ordinary people to control them and deny them their voice in the democratic process (p. 1062).

Similarly, when social media platforms disseminate news originally reported by other alternative media outlets, there has been great concern as to the quality of the reports. For example, Herasimenka et al. (2023), found that alternative media via online platforms are often less developed and less likely to have content moderation as these platforms are still considered to be “fringe” or ‘alt-tech’ equivalent of mainstream social media” Herasimenka et al. (2023) and not as regulated as traditional or mainstream media and are therefore prime locations for mis- or disinformation (p. 198). When looking at how mis- and disinformation are passed between alternative media communities to ‘alt-online’ platforms such as Telegram in the US, Herasimenka et al.’s (2023) findings also showed that alternative media audiences are influenced by the content on these platforms as “users consuming misinformation are potentially more deeply affected by the news than their mainstream counterparts” (Herasimenka et al., 2023, p. 206). This further suggests that partisan alt-media outlets can

create a misinformation 'bubble' for individuals who actively seek to consume news selectively. Also, although platforms such as Telegram may not yet have as large an audience as mainstream sites do, when an 'alt-right' outlet is on an online platform the chances of gaining a wider audience is greater. As a result, mis- or disinformation and conspiracy theory spreading is multiplied.

In addition, another study by Bradshaw et al. (2020), also supports the theory that online platforms associated with alternative media platforms is an issue, as alternative news links containing political conspiracy theories are provided by 'alt-outlets'. Moreover, 'junk news' websites (i.e., sites that post completely unfounded, fake and outlandish articles) which often mimic mainstream media digital news outlets in appearance (similar web addresses or layout/font style) and their links have been shared by politically partisan or alternative (left or right) groups on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during crucial election cycles (e.g., the 2016 US presidential election). These findings point to not only the changing landscape of political communication, owing to the internet, but it also highlights the influence the combination of alternative and social media news dissemination has had on politics. However, this influence is not always positive due to in part what Castaldo et al. (2022), state is 'junk news' (misleading and often deceptive, sensationalised information) dissemination, stemming from 'junk news bubbles' often masquerading as factual, serious and responsible journalism. Moreover, a 'junk news bubble' is similar to an echo chamber and "although not the sense of a secluded informational space, but rather as market bubbles: speculative waves that destroy rather than create richness in public debate." (Castaldo et al., 2022, p. 2028). These junk news bubbles make it difficult for people to separate factual and fictional news reports (Bradshaw et al., 2020, pp. 175-179).

Similarly, Steppat, et al. (2023), argue that the rise of partisan media publications (particularly online outlets) in the US, are brought about because of the increasing polarisation across the nation which has helped create "a more fruitful environment for alternative media to thrive due to more antagonistic positions between media outlets" (Steppat, et al. 2023, p. 745). As a result of media fragmentation and a polarised US, alternative media audiences are more likely to partake of these outlets to get their news from and are therefore more likely to be exposed to conspiracy theories which can be disseminated on these alternative media outlets. However, previous research has provided more studies on alt-right media which have disseminated or reported on conspiracy theories (see for example Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bauer et al., 2022; Haller et al. 2019). However, research by scholars on the alt-left media outlets who have reported on political conspiracy stories as their alt-right counterparts have done - does not appear to be as plentiful. Thus, it would be of benefit to further investigate how (and when) alternative media on both sides (left and right) spread conspiracy theories to ensure their political agendas are achieved - which scholars have argued aids in the hinderance of the democratic process because when these conspiracy theories are disseminated by alternative media outlets, their audiences are likely to seek a different form of governance as "conspiracy beliefs are associated with a tendency to reject representative democracy while favouring more direct forms of democracy." (Papaioannou et al., 2023, p. 847).

4.2 Mainstream media conspiracy theory dissemination

It is a fair assessment made in this study that there is a lack of previous research looking into the area of mainstream media's dissemination of conspiracy theories due to alternative media becoming blurred with the mainstream and vice versa. Some scholars assert that conspiracy theory spreading is mainly conducted by online alternative news and so called 'journalists' or "by means of casual information collected on the Internet (and especially on independent media outlets)" (Mancosu & Vegetti, 2021, p. 1213). Others have provided different findings which appear to contradict this. For instance, Schemer et al., (2022), have argued that conspiracies can be spread by mainstream and partisan media alike for a variety of reasons as mentioned in this study's Introduction. Because of this, the concern here is that mainstream media has the potential to also report conspiracy theories (p. 913). Therefore, previous research has shown that both media environments have engaged in the same practices, as "empirical research has found that media producers labelled 'mainstream' and those deemed 'alternative' routinely borrow practices from each other." (Rauch, 2016, p. 760). For example, Brown and Mondon (2021), argue that UK's mainstream media outlet *The Guardian* set an agenda by priming and framing the subject of right wing populism for their readership by running a six-month series exploring and criticising right-wing populism (pp. 280, 283, 290). Moreover, Brown and Mondon suggested that *The Guardian* was a vehicle of legitimisation for what right-wing populism is which *The Guardian* defined as: "a homogeneous, transcontinental threat, rather than a collection of disparate and often contradictory interests." (Brown & Mondon, 2021, p. 290). For this reason, if a noteworthy mainstream media outlet reports on a conspiracy theory, readers can unwittingly be influenced even if the story was later retracted, and an apology issued.

Conversely, mainstream media can be seen to disseminate conspiracy theories or fake news in order to draw attention to any exaggerations, distortions, and to "seek the truth and to expose what is not true" and "to correct manipulation and disinformation" (Tsfati et al., 2020, p. 161). Yet, the fact that mainstream media reports on conspiracy theories in order to debunk them is not the purpose of this study, as part of the aim of this study is to look at only to what extent reporting is done by mainstream media outlets (including mainstream lean-to-left and lean-to-right outlets). On the other hand, looking at the extent of mainstream media's reporting of conspiracy theories does not suggest that one should not be concerned about far-right radicalism (or far-left extremism) or conspiracies disseminated by alternative media. Previous research has argued that far-right media has had a substantial influence on alt-right audiences (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). Conversely, the alt-left media has also attracted audiences who consume content on these extremely partisan online outlets as they align with their ideology and political leanings (Mitchell et al., 2014). Thus, this study looks to contribute to extant research on both the alternative and mainstream media's reporting of political conspiracy theories.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to look at how media (mainstream and alternative) in the US reported conspiracy theory news stories from the respective political sides (the Democrats on the left, and the Republicans of the right) during a specific, recent timeframe. The study looks at articles taken from ten online media sources that are generally regarded as being either alternative media sites (left and right), or part of mainstream media (Mitchell et al., 2014). The timeframe chosen for this study begins on October 24th, 2022,

and covers a total of 12 weeks (84 days) and ends on March 26th, 2023. The 12 weeks also include the period when the US 2022 mid-term election results were announced in November. For this reason, the study will use quantitative content analysis from the US' national online digital news outlets with two regarded as being alternative-left, two as alternative-right and six mainstream media outlets (two mainstream/centre, two mainstream/lean left and two mainstream/lean right), within the selected period (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

4.3 Hypothesis and research questions

The following hypothesis and research questions have been considered for this purpose:

H1a: Political news coverage which contains references to conspiracies and conspiracy theories are more common in alternative right “alt-right” media than in the alternative left “alt-left”.

Previous research has shown that alt-right media has been known to disseminate political conspiracy theories for example during election campaigns to ‘promote’ and endorse a Republican candidate and even after an election has been called, conspiracy theories about voter fraud are spread if an opponent has won (see Haller et al., 2019; Douglas et al., 2019). Although the alt-left have media outlets which might report on political conspiracies the hypothesis posed asserts that alt-right media reports on conspiracy theories much more than the alt-left media.

H1b: Political news coverage which contains references to conspiracy theories are more common in alternative right “alt-right” media than in the mainstream media.

Although previous research has that alt-right has reported on political conspiracy theories (see for example Mayerhoeffer, 2021; Berry, 2018), mainstream media (particularly with partisan leanings) will also report on conspiracy theories (see for example Schemer et al., 2022), yet, to what extent has not been as widely researched. Therefore, this study will investigate the extent that mainstream media has reported on conspiracy theories and if they have done so less, more or even equal to the alt-right media outlets.

RQ1: Does the alt-right media report on political conspiracy theories about opposing or rival candidates, parties and government (partisan and non-partisan) more than the alt-left?

Moreover, previous research discussing ideological bias when it comes to spreading conspiracy theories shows that more alt-right leaning media outlets have disseminated more conspiracy theories than the alt-left media (Alyt et al., 2021, p. 1951). It would be a fair assumption to make that the same can be said when it comes to disseminating conspiratorial content. However, research is lacking on the political dissemination front, because during political campaigning, elections, or major political happenings, although partisanship is evidenced when reporting on candidates and parties, evidence remains to be seen if this is the case regarding political conspiracies. Thus, this study would like to examine to what extent and which side more frequently used political disinformation to further their aims during the 2022 midterm elections.

RQ2: To what extent do the mainstream media (particularly lean-to-left or lean-to-right outlets) report on political conspiracy theories?

Owing to blurred boundaries, it might happen that even the mainstream media can be seen to publish conspiratorial content that has not been properly fact checked. For this reason, it will be interesting to look at how and when this occurred during and after the midterm elections, as posting disinformation for mainstream media has a particularly damaging effect on democracy (Rauch, 2016). Thus, it might be necessary to continue to be vigilant and hold mainstream media accountable, if they deviate from their moral obligations and standards.

Chapter 5: Methodology and data

A quantitative content analysis was conducted on political news coverage and conspiracy dissemination by media outlets in the US that are considered to be either part of the mainstream or alternative news media. For this purpose, news articles (n = 628) from ten US national mainstream and alternative online news publications were analysed during a span of 12 weeks (84 days) from October 24, 2022 to March 26, 2023.

5. 1 Sampling

As US citizens are increasingly using digital media to consume their news (because of its efficient and mostly accessible formats), this study has chosen to do the sampling using publications selected from online platforms which have been deemed relevant to this study. The publication selection is based on previous research on the types of media audiences consume based on their political affiliations which Pew has likened audiences' news consumption in the US as being worlds apart (depending on one's partisan leanings) (Mitchell et al., 2014). To that end, there are ten news media online publications which have been categorised into four genres (owing to their content) as identified by Pew: centre non-partisan/mainstream, liberal/left leaning, conservative/right-leaning, alternative left (alt-left) and alternative right (alt-right).

The chosen ten media outlets are: (digital newspapers) 1) *The New York Times*; 2) *New York Post*; 3) *The Washington Post*; (news websites) 4) *AlterNet*; 5) *Breitbart*; 6) *CNN*; 7) *The Gateway Pundit*; 8) *Fox News*; 9) *Mother Jones*; 10) *MSNBC* (see Table 1 for the complete list of online publications).

These ten media outlets were chosen by their categorisation based on US audiences in the 2014 Pew Research Center by Mitchell et al. (2014) in order to give this study of spread of different kinds of media coverage (see Table 1). The following online publications from mainstream media (including lean-to-left and lean-to-right) were selected as they are widely consumed, and single articles (n=628) were sampled: *The New York Times* (n=147) and *The Washington Post* (n=49) (mainstream/lean left) and *New York Post* (mainstream/lean right) (n=91) these online publications were chosen as they are quality/agenda-setting digital newspapers from the most widely used mainstream (left-leaning, right-leaning) outlets (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

The following websites were selected as they are widely consumed by mainstream (including lean-to-left and lean-to-right) audiences: *MSNBC* (mainstream/centre) (n=35) (although *MSNBC* has been suggested as the more liberal outlet between the two online publications) (Choi, 2022) and *CNN* (mainstream/centre) (n=36). Lastly, *Fox News* online (mainstream/lean right) (n=56) was selected as a widely watched conservative, partisan/right-leaning TV and online news media network. The alternative (alt-left and alt-right) websites online which are growing in popularity amongst alternative media consumers that were selected: *Breitbart* (n=55), *The Gateway Pundit* (n=44) (alt-right) and *Alternet* (n=68) and *Mother Jones* (n=47) (alt-left). The website articles were downloaded during the designated sampling timeframe as outlined in the codebook (Appendix 1), and then the subsequent content analysis was carried out.

The unit of analysis from the samples were the individual news articles selected relevant to political conspiracy theory news and thematic news items. A manual selection was conducted to identify news articles that verbally referred to political conspiracy theories based on the criteria set forth in the codebook.

This study conducted a sample search using keywords from the following search string:

*conspir**; *conspiracy theor**; *conspiracy*; *conspiracy theory*; *covid*; *gov**; *government conspiracy*; *cover up*; *covered up*; *corrupt*; *corrupt government*; *deep state*; *deep state media*; *election interference*; *election meddling*; *election tampering*; *elite*; *elite group*; *elite Washington*; *Washington elite*; *expose*; *expose truth*; *fake news*; *fake media*; *hidden plan*; *hunter biden*; *illegitimate*; *illegitimate president*; *illegitimate presidency*; *interference*; *lie*; *lies*; *big lie*; *laptop*; *legitimate*; *legitimacy*; *midterm*; *midterm elections*; *mockingbird media*; *Pelosi*; *Pelosi hammer*; **rig*; *rigged*; *rigged election*; *secret plan*; *secret plot*; *secret society*; *secret organization*; *secret deal*; *secret deals*; *stolen*; *stolen election*; *steal*; *stop steal*; *vaccine*; *voting discrepancy*; *voting discrepancies*

Table 1. List of online publications and websites including their genres (percentages) (n=628)

Online Publications		N	%
Digital Newspapers			
	Genres		
The New York Times	Mainstream/Lean Left	147	23.4
New York Post	Mainstream/Lean Right	91	14.5
The Washington Post	Mainstream/Lean Left	49	7.8
Websites			
AlterNet	Alternative left (alt-left)	68	10.8
Breitbart	Alternative right (alt-right)	55	8.8
CNN	Mainstream/Centre	36	5.7
The Gateway Pundit	Alternative right (alt-right)	44	7.0
Fox News	Mainstream/Lean Right	56	8.9
Mother Jones	Alternative left (alt-left)	47	7.5
MSNBC	Mainstream/Centre	35	5.6
N		628	100

Note. Ten online news media publications were analysed. N=628

For this study a total of 628 articles from the ten media outlets within the chosen timeframe were analysed. To select the articles analysed an initial keyword search of 'conspiracy theory' was carried out on each of the ten media outlets to determine what kind of articles (with relevant topics) came up. Both *The New York Times* (NYT) and *Fox News* sites allowed searches to be further refined by date/date range. On the NYT and *Fox* sites a search was conducted with a date range of October 24th, 2022, and March 26th, 2023 using the keywords 'conspiracy theory'. During these date-refined searches a number of political conspiracy theories were being reported, but the most repeated ones centred on: President Biden's son's 'stolen' laptop; a hammer attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of Nancy the Speaker of the House of Representatives; electoral irregularities during the 2022 midterm elections; and the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination program.

Those articles that came up during the searches were read for their validity and 'saved' in a preliminary Excel spreadsheet (one of three 'working' Excel documents). Further keyword searches were then conducted on all ten media sources using the search terms listed in the search string above. The articles that were found were opened and then read for their appropriateness for this study. In total 637 text articles containing political conspiracy theory stories were found in the searches across the ten media outlets, however nine articles had to be excluded from the study as they did not meet the eligibility criteria (i.e. less than ten lines of text) as set out in the codebook (Appendix 1). All suitable articles found during the keyword/date searches were 'saved' in the preliminary Excel spreadsheet. Once the final 628 articles were collated in the preliminary spreadsheet they were reread, transferred to a new spreadsheet and coded as per the instructions in the codebook.

Coding process

Once the final articles (n=628) selection was completed on the original Excel spreadsheet, the entire list was re-compiled on a different spreadsheet and arranged in ascending date order from October 24th, 2022, to March 26th, 2023. The variables from the codebook were also then transferred to the spreadsheet ranging from Variables 1 – 20 (variables 1-8 were included in the spreadsheet but not included in the reliability testing - with the exception of variable 3 online publications which was included in the reliability testing and final analysis) and scores were added to the individual variables spreadsheet as directed in the codebook.

5. 2 Codebook

A codebook (see Appendix 1) was created for this study on alternative and mainstream media conspiracy dissemination based on the quantitative content analysis methods guidebook by Neuendorf (2017), which has described in detail the techniques and best practices on how to do a quantitative content analysis research study. Additionally, other studies with similar conditions, were reviewed and considered, as their processes were deemed reliable by the author in terms of replication (Del Valle 2020; Manganello & Blake 2010 and NEPOCS "Key Concepts Comparative Study (KCCS)" Codebook for Media Content Analysis Version 6.0 issued 2012). The codebook was designed with a purpose and outline in mind which was designed to answer the hypothesis and questions posed in this study. The codebook was developed with three main sections: I Study outline this section discusses the purpose of the study, the research timeframe and the criteria for selecting the news outlets and units of analysis (articles); II Formal Categories outlines the variables used for the demographics of the coder, date/timeframe and media outlets (e.g. type of media

outlet etc.); III Variables discusses all the variables used to analyse the ten outlets and determine whether conspiracy theories were reported, subsequently after the variable data was compiled it was then analysed.

Conspiracy theory variables

The codebook consisted of a total of 20 variables. In “Formal Categories” variables 1-8 were: coder; article identification number; online publication; date; type of news pieces; news story placement (importance placed); visuals (visual content/images) and video content. There were 12 main variables which were developed and used in this study to look at dissemination of conspiracy theories in online publications (either mainstream or alternative media).

To be able to investigate what conspiracy theories were published by online media outlets, it was necessary to develop four different conspiracy theory variables as conspiracy theories can either be reported explicitly (i.e. using the exact term ‘conspiracy theory’) and/or can be reported on in an implicit manner in an alternative or mainstream media online publication:

1) Conspiracy theory: Explicit reference to conspiracy theory (whether the publication explicitly mentions the term “conspiracy theory” in the article); 2) conspiracy theory: implicit - secret/covert group or secret plot (an implicit reference to a conspiracy theory in the article which is about a secret/covert or elite group who might be secretly plotting behind the scenes and the public is unaware of these groups); 3) conspiracy theory: implicit - evidence to back claims (implicit references to conspiracy theories which might include stating in the article that there is a claim with proof that an election was stolen or voter fraud); 4) conspiracy theory: implicit – scapegoating (a conspiracy theory story that has implied references which reports on an issue or situation which scapegoats or blames a candidate, politician or party for being the responsible party).

To look at what type of conspiracy tactics were used and on whom targets were, the following variables were also developed:

5) Issue attack: An issue attack is when a news article by an online article attack (being critical in their reporting) the plans or policies of opposing candidates or parties (partisan or non-partisan) which may include attacking their opponents’ political motives and/or political behaviour. For example, an article can report a conspiracy theory which suggests the opponent’s might not have the public’s interest in mind owing to their being a part of a ‘secret group’ who covertly are benefitting from policies put in place.

6) Trait attack: A trait attack is when the article disseminates a conspiracy theory based upon a personal/personality trait that is aimed at either the opposing party or candidate (partisan or non-partisan). For example, an article might report that their opponent’s political or personal image and/or performance due to a lack of competence, lacking in moral character or even having sexually defiant characteristics or marital, substance or legal problems. The trait attack might also include that the person or party in question is only in power (or nominated) owing to their association with a ‘secret powerful group’.

The ‘target (whom the attacks are aimed at) of political actors required the development of the following variables:

7) Rival candidate or politician/partisan (political actors targeted in the article); 8) rival party/partisan (opposing side); 9) government/partisan (opposing government); 10) government/non-partisan (government in general).

11) Issues: The type or theme of conspiracy that the online publications reported about varied, however, there was a prominent hierarchy list of the most salient issues which primarily dominated the US' alternative and mainstream media outlets during the timeframe of the study: 1) immigration/border control, policies related to immigration 2) the government/poor leadership 3) crime/violence, lack of policing, criminal prosecution rates etc. 4) race relations/racism 5) elections/election reform/democracy 6) loose morals, sexual deviancy and 7) other (e.g. January 6 US capitol Insurrection, COVID-19/vaccines/pandemic etc.).

12) Journalistic tone: This variable was developed and used to determine if the articles had a derisive and/or biased tone when reporting a conspiracy theory:

When an online publication reports on a story which contains a conspiracy theory, there may contain a journalistic tone which is not neutral or unbiased and might instead be reported in a tone which is more derisive or biased. This variable was developed to be able to determine which tone was used when an online media outlet reported on a conspiracy theory. For example, an article might report on a conspiracy theory about a candidate, party or politician in a 'neutral' tone. However, an online outlet may report on the same story with a derisive or biased 'tone' which suggests that there might be a 'slant' or biased 'spin' to the story.

5. 3 Reliability testing and limitations

As the quantitative content analysis is done by manual coding, there is always a danger of subjectivity. Thus, either an intercoder (two coders) or intracoder (one coder) reliability test must be conducted on the selected articles, as there might be a possibility of bias occurring this has to be acknowledged and carefully monitored throughout the process to lessen the likelihood that bias could potentially arise. (Neuendorf, 2017). To test the reliability of this study, a Holsti reliability test was conducted to measure if there were sufficient reliability scores (Del Valle 2020: 217-218). An intracoder (single coder) reliability test was conducted twice on variables V5-V20 on a total of (roughly) 10% (n=62) of the articles. To conduct the reliability test a roughly even spread of articles were chosen at random from the ten media outlets which were then tested in two phases. First, half of the articles (n=31) were coded using the codebook to see if there were any issues or misunderstandings with the original codebook instructions. Second, the codebook was amended based on the previous coding results of the original codebook. Third, a final test of the other half of articles (n=31) was carried out and a Holsti reliability score was produced. Once the test phase was completed on the 62 articles, a reliability test was then carried out on the remainder sample of articles (n=566). The overall reliability score (for the complete list see Appendix 2) for all variables analysed was 0.97. This confirmed that the reliability score was above the required 85% score and could be considered a reliable study and proceed with the quantitative content analysis on all the selected articles (n=628) looked at in this study. The data were then cleaned (i.e., examined for any missing values etc.) and exported from Excel to SPSS. After exporting the data to SPSS, labels were added to reflect the variables listed in the codebook,

and then a complete analysis of the data was conducted. Cross tabs were used to produce descriptive statistics which included a Chi-square test.

Chapter 6: Results

This study wanted to examine one hypothesis and two research questions based on alternative and mainstream media's reporting and disseminating of conspiracy theories in their articles. There were ten online outlets investigated ranging from mainstream, left/liberal and conservative to right leaning, and alternative media (further right and left) for the purpose of determining whether the hypothesis would be accepted or rejected, and to answer both research questions.

6.1 Results H1a and H1b

H1a: Political news coverage which contains references to conspiracies and conspiracy theories are more common in alternative right "alt-right" media than in the alternative left "alt-left".

H1b: Political news coverage which contains references to conspiracy theories are more common in alternative right "alt-right" media than in the mainstream media.

H1a posited that alt-right media's political news coverage contains more references to conspiracy theories and have more conspiratorial content in their political articles such as election fraud, crime or deviant sexual behaviour than alt-left. **H1b** also predicted that the alt-right media would have political news coverage which contained more references to conspiracy theories (as it is more common in alt-right news media) than the mainstream media. A Chi-square test was conducted to see whether the chosen online news media outlets reported conspiracy theories in their articles. To determine which of these outlets were spreading political conspiracy theories four different variables were looked at: conspiracy theories (explicit), conspiracy theories (implicit: secret/covert), conspiracy theories (implicit: evidence to back up claims) and conspiracy theories (implicit: -scapegoating). The results varied between the ten different media outlets. Only two of the conspiracy theory (implicit) variables showed significant differences (results percentages are shown in Table 2). The two alternative alt-right media looked at were *Breitbart* and *The Gateway Pundit* for **H1a** and **H1b**.

The **H1a** findings showed that conspiracy theory articles which contained implicit stories on secret/covert groups consisting of elite actors who secretly wield their political and economic power over the 'people' to control them and is conducted 'behind the scenes' had a significant difference in dissemination between the ten online outlets (Cramer's $V = .161$, $p = .003$). As there were implicit conspiracy theories about secret groups doing devious things, the articles referred to these secret groups as 'they' 'them' or 'deep state' factions. The news articles ($n=551$) containing this type of conspiracy theory were found in both alternative (right and left) and mainstream media with an overall high level of dissemination (87.7%). The alt-right online media outlets (90.9%) were found to have a high percentage of articles on conspiracy theories albeit implicit with content which for example talked about secret or covert groups that are controlling the government and economic enterprises in secret whilst the public have no idea that they are being controlled covertly. However, the alt-left (89.6%)

also had high percentage of dissemination (89.6%), which is slightly lower than that of the alt-right outlets.

Furthermore, **H1b** predicted that the alt-right media reported political conspiracy theories more than the mainstream media tended to. The findings show that although mainstream media/lean left (90.3%) had an almost equal percentage of reporting on secret groups' conspiracy theories (implicitly) as the alt-right media did (although slightly less), the alt-right online publications were still in the lead. Likewise, **H1b** analysis found that the mainstream media/lean right (87.8%) also showed a high amount of reporting albeit they were just slightly under both the alt-right and mainstream/left lean online media outlets. On the other hand, amongst all of the online news media outlets, the mainstream media/centre (73.2%) had the lowest number of articles that included content that had implicit conspiracy theories which discussed secret/covert or 'they/them' groups. (See Table 2 below for the results of the analysis of conspiracy theories either explicitly or implicitly).

Table 2. Online publications usage of conspiracy theories either explicit or implicit

Online Publications	Present (Yes)						Total
	Not Present (No)	Alt-Left	Alt-Right	Mainstream/Lean Left	Mainstream/Lean Right	Mainstream/Centre	
Conspiracy theory: Implicit-Secret/Covert Group**	Yes	103 (89.6%)	90 (90.9%)	177 (90.3%)	129 (87.8%)	52 (73.2%)	551 (87.7%)
	No	12 (10.4%)	9 (9.1%)	19 (9.7%)	18 (12.2%)	19 (26.8%)	77 (12.3%)
	Total	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	196 (100%)	147 (100%)	71 (100%)	628 (100%)
Conspiracy theory: Implicit Scapegoating *	Yes	99 (86.1%)	71 (71.7%)	139 (70.9%)	113 (76.9%)	48 (67.6%)	470 (74.8%)
	No	16 (13.9%)	28 (28.3%)	57 (29.1%)	34 (23.1%)	23 (32.4%)	158 (25.2%)
	N	115	99	196	147	71	628

Note. **Statistical difference at the .01 level between online publications and implicit reference conspiracy theories (secret or covert group)

*Statistical difference at the .05 level between online publications and implicit conspiracy theories (Scapegoating). N= 628

Conspiracy theories with implicit scapegoating findings showed there was a statistical difference between the online media outlets (Cramer's $V = .139$, $p = .016$), as all the online media publications had disseminated conspiracy theories (74.8%) with scapegoating content ($n=470$) which depicted their opponents (overt or covert groups and other political actors) as being the 'culprits' and thus 'pointing the finger' in their direction and blaming them for a political issue (or several political issues in some cases). Overall, for **H1a** although the alt-right media outlets (71.7%) had quite a high percentage of covering conspiracy theories where scapegoating was evidenced, the alt-left media outlet's coverage (86.1%) was even higher. In fact, the alt-left media outlets had the highest of all online publications in this category of conspiracy theories. The **H1b** findings showed that in comparison to the alt-right online media, the mainstream media/lean right (76.9%) and the mainstream media/lean left (70.9%) was just under that of the alt-right media.

Furthermore, the mainstream media/centre (67.6%) had the lowest number of disseminating conspiracy theories where the article was about a conspiracy theory which involved scapegoating. In summary, the findings overall confirmed that alt-right will cover conspiracy theory news stories that implicitly discuss conspiracy theories that are either about secret/covert groups or attempting to use scapegoating tactics on a target. However, the alt-right tended to report more on conspiracy theories which were about secret or covert groups. Thus, the **H1a and H1b** hypothesis has been accepted as overall the alt-right does more reporting of conspiracy theories more so than the alt-left or mainstream media does. However, the results have also shown that most common type of implicit conspiracy theory coverage or reporting will be on secret or 'deep state' groups and less about blaming or scapegoating their opponents.

6.2 Results RQ1 and RQ2

RQ1: Does the alt-right media report on political conspiracy theories about opposing or rival candidates, parties and government (partisan and non-partisan) more than the alt-left?

The first research question (**RQ1**) asked if the alt-right media mainly report on political conspiracy theories on the opposing side (parties and candidates) more so than the alt-left. The Chi-square test was conducted on the four alternative media outlets (two alt-left and two alt-right), on the type of conspiracy theory that was likely to be used and who the target was in their articles (n=214). The variables were: 'issue attack' (e.g. attacking issues such as crime or election fraud); 'trait attack' (e.g. attacking a candidates personal traits such as being exposed as a liar or sexual deviant); 'rival candidate or politician partisan' (Democrats attacking Republicans and vice versa); 'rival candidate or politician non-partisan' (attacking the same side the candidate, party is on); 'government partisan' (Republican or Democrat lead government) and 'government non-partisan' (government on the same side). When analysing the two categories 'trait attack' and 'issue attack', the findings showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the alternative media outlets analysed that disseminated conspiracy theories on issue attacks (Cramer's $V = .139$, $p = .002$) both the alt-left and alt-right outlets' articles (n=150) with 70.1% in their content. Additionally, there was a statistical difference on conspiracy theories which contained trait attacks (Cramer's $V = .107$, $p = .027$) in their news stories (n=142) with 66.4% in the articles. However, the alt-right media outlets did not have as high a number of issue attacks (64.6%) (attacking specific issues associated with their opponents) in their articles, nor did the alt-right media have a very high levels of trait attacks (59.6%) which attacked their opponents on a personal or trait level in their conspiracy theory content. Overall, trait attacks were more prevalent in their news stories, yet their number of disseminations in both of these categories were only moderately high when comparing both the alternative right and left outlets. Whereas the alt-left outlets showed an even higher level of reporting of conspiracy theories which contained issue attacks (74.8%) and just slightly lower number of trait attacks (72.2%) and had a higher percentage in these two categories than alt-right outlets (see full list of percentages in Table 3).

Table 3. Alternative media online publications: Issue or trait attack conspiracy theories on rival and non-partisan candidates (politicians), parties or government

Online Publications Alternative media	Present (Yes) Not Present (No)	Alt-Left	Alt-Right	Total
Issue Attack**	Yes	86 (74.8%)	64 (64.6%)	150 (70.1%)
	No	29 (25.2%)	35 (35.4%)	64 (29.9%)
	Total	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	214 (100%)
Trait Attack*	Yes	83 (72.2%)	59 (59.6%)	142 (66.4%)
	No	32 (27.8%)	40 (40.4%)	72 (33.6%)
	Total	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	214 (100%)
Rival Candidate Politician/ Partisan***	Yes	19 (16.5%)	48 (48.5%)	67 (31.3%)
	No	96 (83.5%)	51 (51.5%)	147 (68.7%)
	Total	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	214 (100%)
Rival Candidate Politician/ Non-Partisan***	Yes	22 (19.1%)	52 (52.5%)	74 (34.6%)
	No	93 (80.9%)	47 (47.5%)	140 (65.4%)
	Total	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	214 (100%)
Government Partisan***	Yes	89 (77.4%)	26 (26.3%)	115 (53.7%)
	No	26 (22.6%)	73 (73.7%)	99 (46.3%)
	Total	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	214 (100%)
Government Non-Partisan***	Yes	6 (5.2%)	47 (47.5%)	53 (24.8%)
	No	109 (94.8%)	52 (52.5%)	161 (75.2%)
N		115	99	214

Note. **Statistical significance at the .01 level between online media conspiracy theories and issue attacks

*Statistical significance at the .05 level between online media conspiracy theories and trait attacks

***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on rival candidate or politician/partisan not present

***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on rival candidate or politician/non-partisan not present

***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on government partisan present

***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on government non-partisan was present. **N=214**

The findings also showed varied results about the targets the alt-right media outlets reported on. Although the conspiracy theory content from their side was primarily issue attacks, the targets choices found in the articles were unlikely, in that political actors as individuals or the parties were not as important a target to report on (this included partisan and non-partisan sides alike), instead these attacks were aimed at a different target entirely. The data showed there was a statistical significance (Cramer's $V = .270$, $p < .001$) on the reporting of conspiracy theories about rival candidates or politicians (partisan) by the online media stories were not present in their content in most of their articles ($n=147$), these conspiracy theories were found to be present in only a small percentage of the articles (31.3%). Nevertheless, out of the two alternative media online publications, the alt-right media outlets did have the highest number of conspiracy theories about rival partisan candidates or politicians from the other political side (between alt-right and alt-left media), but these numbers were moderate (48.5%). Statistical significance (Cramer's $V = .249$, $p < .001$) about conspiracy theories on rival candidates or politicians (non-partisan) was also shown as not present in most of the articles ($n=140$) in a significant way in the alternative media outlets examined as there was only a smaller number present in their content (34.6%) (see Table 3). This suggests that individual political actors or parties were not the primary target of the conspiracy theories the alt-right was aimed at. Furthermore, there was slightly higher reporting of conspiracy theories (52.5%) when it came to non-partisan rival candidates or politicians by the alt-right media outlets, which might suggest that conspiracy theories from the alt-right media might be aimed more at the so-called 'elite' secret groups behind the government itself and so are not as focused on targeting the Democrat politicians in government during the timeframe of the study.

On the other hand, the alt-left online media examined showed even lower numbers (16.5%) of conspiracy theories aimed at rival individual political actors or the parties themselves, as there were very few conspiracy stories disseminated by the alt-left media which targeted rival partisan candidates or politicians specifically. However, the alt-left outlets showed slightly higher numbers (19.1%) of disseminating conspiracy theories on rival non-partisan candidates which might suggest that they will also attack same side individual candidates and their own party. Likewise, just like the alt-right websites although there were some articles published which attacked a rival partisan or non-partisan candidate or party, they primarily stayed away from targeting them with issue or trait attacks as the analysis showed that it did not appear that attacking in that way was as important. Overall, between both sides of alternative media, the alt-right websites showed that they will disseminate conspiracy theories about rival candidates or parties (partisan or non-partisan), but only to a small degree.

However, **RQ1** found that when it came to the alternative online publications disseminating conspiracy theories on partisan government it was not only the alt-right who were disseminating these news articles as there was a statistical significance between both the alt-right and the alt-left online media outlets (Cramer's $V = .338$, $p < .001$) ($n=115$). The alt-right outlets had the lowest number (26.3%) on partisan government conspiracy theories. Conversely, the alt-left outlets showed the highest percentages of disseminating conspiracy theories on partisan government (77.4%). Thus, they were in the lead over the alt-right media

because the alt-left's figures showed that they tended to attack partisan government more often than the alt-right (see Figure 2).

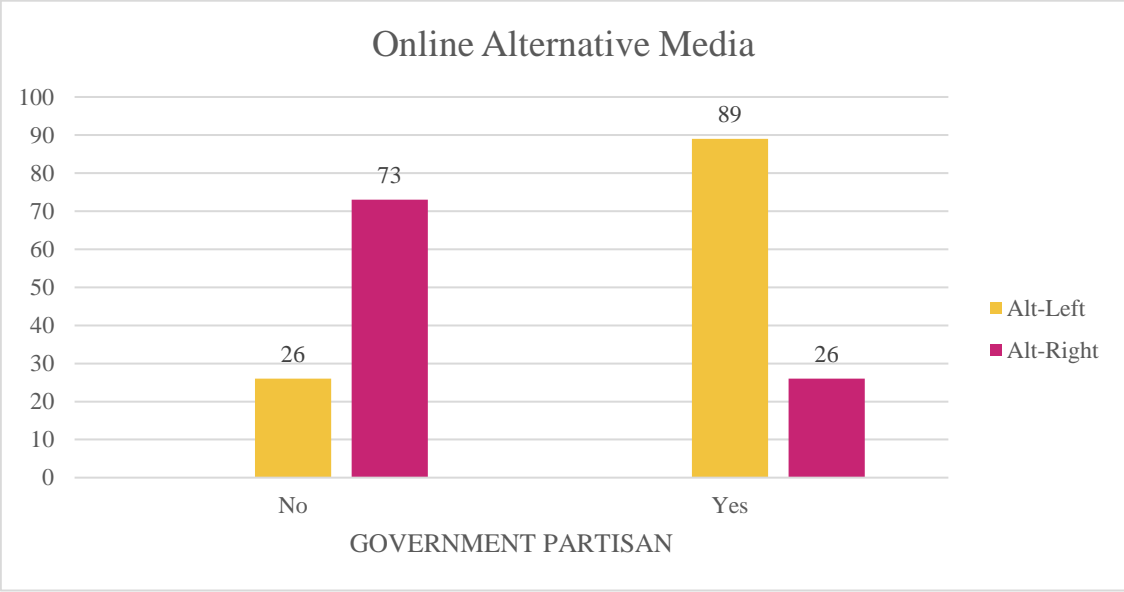


Figure 2. Level of Conspiracy Theories Attacks by Alternative Media on Partisan Government. N=214

However, the findings showed that there were not as much coverage by the alt-right media on political conspiracy theories about the government which were non-partisan in nature, the same was seen across both alternative media outlets as there was a statistical significance between them that conspiracy theories containing this type of content was not present (Cramer's V = .330, p <.001) in only 24.8% of the articles. Among the alternative media outlets looked at (left and right), the alt-right media had the highest percentage (47.5%) of reporting whilst the alt-left (5.2%) had the least amount, which might suggest that the alt-left do not tend to publish conspiracy theories about issues connected to a government which is non-partisan (see Table 3).

Overall, the findings of **RQ1** showed that the alt-right media do disseminate conspiracy theories about the opposing side as they will publish stories that contain either issue or trait attacks on their opponents (partisan left). However, they will also report on conspiracy theories which are non-partisan. Yet, when it comes to alt-right disseminating conspiracy theories which contain partisan or non-partisan conspiracy theory themes solely about candidates, politicians or parties, evidence showed this these types of stories were less likely. The alt-right were not alone in reporting conspiracy theories as the alt-left have shared news stories with similar content. Similarly, the alt-left online media outlets did not publish as many conspiracy theories (partisan/non-partisan) at the level of candidates, politicians or party as they did on partisan government (and not as much on non-partisan government). However, it as the alt-right media which primarily covered conspiracy theories more so about non-partisan government (e.g. Democratic or Republican government was irrelevant), as the alt-right media outlets examined showed a higher level of reporting this type of content which was aimed beyond a partisan government. Thus, whilst the results show that alt-right media does disseminate political conspiracy theories using either issue or trait attacks, they do not appear to attack partisan or non-partisan candidates or politicians as much as they would do

towards a partisan government, unlike the alt-left which has shown that they will attack a partisan government in their conspiracy theory coverage. Yet, **RQ1** has been answered that according to the results, when it comes to the alt-right news media they do report on political conspiracy theories on opposing or rival candidates and politicians, parties and government on both sides of the political aisle. However, the alt-right are most likely to report on conspiracy theories that are primarily about non-partisan government. Nevertheless, it does not appear that they report on conspiracy theories more than the alt-left does as the data in this study has shown that the alt-left will report on partisan and non-partisan government (particularly partisan government), parties and candidates alike and will cover conspiracy theories which contain issue and trait attacks (the results are shown in Table 3 on p. 31).

RQ2: To what extent do the mainstream media (particularly lean-to-left or lean-to-right outlets) report on political conspiracy theories?

The **H1** previously looked at whether alt-right media outlets were more likely to cover conspiracy theories more than alt-left and mainstream media. To test **H1** and answer **RQ2** this study wanted to find out to what extent the mainstream media (including lean-left and lean-right online outlets) reported on conspiracy theories a Chi-square test was conducted on all ten online media outlets (n=628) for this purpose (as previously outlined in Table 2). There were significant differences between the ten online media outlets when it came to reporting on implicit conspiracy theories (on secret or covert group) and implicit conspiracy theories (scapegoating) in their news stories (for full list of results see Table 2 on p. 29).

RQ2 asked to what extent mainstream media (particularly the lean-to-left or lean-to-right outlets) disseminated political conspiracy theories and six online media outlets' articles were analysed (n=414). Therefore, this section specifically looks at the findings for all mainstream media online outlets (including the lean-to-left or lean-to-right outlets) included in this study (n=6). The mainstream/left lean online media outlets (90.3%) had the highest amount of conspiracy theory dissemination amongst the mainstream media outlets which included conspiracies about secret or covert groups. This was followed by the mainstream/right lean media (87.8%) and mainstream media/centre (73.2%). Moreover, the mainstream/ left lean online media outlets (70.9%) again had the highest amount of conspiracy theory dissemination which included conspiracies which targeted their opponent using scapegoating or blaming or accusing them of being the cause of various political issues, followed by the mainstream/right lean media (76.9%) and mainstream media/centre (67.6%). The results show that the mainstream which have a more partisan leaning also had the highest number of articles which covered conspiracy theories even though it was done implicitly. The mainstream media which represent the centre of both partisan sides, had less conspiracy theory dissemination. This might suggest that the extent the mainstream media will report on conspiracy theories is owing to the online publications target audience, and as the US is more politically partisan the more liberal or conservative a mainstream media outlet might report on conspiracy theories that have partisan themes such as about election fraud, crime, immigration or other issues that are associated by both Republicans or Democrat political actors of being the fault of the opposing side (see these results in Table 4).

Table 4. Mainstream media's usage of conspiracy theories either explicit or implicit

Online Publications Mainstream Media	Present (Yes)				Total
	Not Present (No)	Mainstream/ Lean Left	Mainstream/ Lean Right	Mainstream/ Centre	
Conspiracy theory: Implicit-Secret/Covert Group**	Yes	177 (90.3%)	129 (87.8%)	52 (73.2%)	358
	No	19 (9.7%)	18 (12.2%)	19 (26.8%)	56
					414
Conspiracy theory: Implicit Scapegoating *	Yes	139 (70.9%)	113 (76.9%)	48 (67.6%)	300
	No	57 (29.1%)	34 (23.1%)	23 (32.4%)	114
N		196	147	71	414

Note. **Statistical difference at the .01 level between online publications and implicit reference conspiracy theories (secret/covert group)

*Statistical difference at the .05 level between online publications and implicit conspiracy theories (Scapegoating) (overall results from the 10 online publications. N= 628) - This table reflects only the mainstream media articles (N=414) to show percentages of conspiracy theory dissemination on these outlets only.

The analysis on the extent mainstream media reported on political conspiracy theories showed that although some mainstream (non-partisan) media outlets such as *CNN* (centre) or *MSNBC* (a more lean-to-left outlet) report on political conspiracy theories in a moderate manner - it is particularly prevalent when a mainstream media outlet that has a partisan leaning such as *The Washington Post* or the *New York Post* disseminate conspiracy theories. This suggests that US news media is politically divided into two main party camps (Democrat and Republican), as previous research has argued that their audiences are mainly partisan in nature and tend to consume media which reflects their political leanings, opinions and choice (see Schulze, 2022). Thus, the media outlets themselves are more likely to report on conspiracy theories which are partisan even though the media have a wider 'mainstream' audience they are likely to be partisan and so their content will 'lean' in the direction of political affiliation whether knowingly or unknowingly. Additionally, regarding the type of implicit conspiracy theory (secret/covert groups or scapegoating) which is more widely used in the articles, it appears that the online mainstream news media will cover conspiracies that talks about secret or hidden groups, as it had a higher percentage in the data than scapegoating conspiracy theories. On the other hand, both implicit conspiracy theories categories which were reported by mainstream media more than either explicitly or with conspiracy theories which purported to provide evidence to back up a claim such as 'evidence' from one political side or the other that there has been election interference or voter tampering.

Furthermore, when it came to the type of attacks and who the targets were that the conspiracy theories were on, the analysis showed that it was not only the alternative media (particularly the alt-right) that disseminated political conspiracy theories with a specific aim at a target (either a rival candidate, politician or the government). There was a significant

difference between the mainstream media outlets where the mainstream media targeted their opponents using issue attacks (Cramer’s V = .148, p = .003) in their news articles (n=237) with 57.2% of their content containing these types of attacks. The mainstream/centre news media outlets had the highest number of issue attacks in their content (67.6%), whilst both the mainstream/left lean and the mainstream/right lean media outlets had the same number of issue attacks (55.1%) in their reporting (see Table 5).

Table 5. Mainstream media online publications: Issue or trait attack conspiracy theories on rival and non-partisan candidates (politicians), parties or government

Online Publications	Present (Yes)	Mainstream/Lean Left	Mainstream/Lean Right	Mainstream/Centre	Total
	Not Present (No)				
Issue Attack**	Yes	108 (55.1%)	81 (55.1%)	48 (67.6%)	237 (57.2%)
	No	88 (44.9%)	66 (44.9%)	23 (32.4%)	177 (42.8%)
	Total	196 (100%)	147 (100%)	71 (100%)	414 (100%)
Rival Candidate Politician/Partisan***	Yes	15 (7.7%)	42 (28.6%)	17 (23.9%)	74 (17.9%)
	No	181 (92.3%)	105 (71.4%)	54 (76.1%)	340 (82.1%)
	Total	196 (100%)	147 (100%)	71 (100%)	414 (100%)
Rival Candidate Politician/Non-Partisan***	Yes	26 (13.3%)	49 (33.3%)	22 (31%)	97 (23.4%)
	No	170 (86.7%)	98 (66.7%)	49 (69%)	317 (76.6%)
	Total	196 (100%)	147 (100%)	71 (100%)	414 (100%)
Government Partisan***	Yes	175 (89.3%)	62 (42.2%)	44 (62%)	281 (67.9%)
	No	21 (10.7%)	85 (57.8%)	27 (38%)	133 (32.1%)
	Total	196 (100%)	147 (100%)	71 (100%)	414 (100%)
Government Non-Partisan***	Yes	8 (4.1%)	47 (32%)	12 (16.9%)	67 (16.2%)
	No	188 (95.9%)	100 (68%)	59 (83.1%)	347 (83.8%)
	N	196	147	71	414

Note. **Statistical significance at the .01 level between online media conspiracy theories and issue attacks
 ***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on rival candidate or politician/partisan not present
 ***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on rival candidate or politician/non-partisan not present
 ***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on government partisan present
 ***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online media conspiracy theories on government non-partisan was not present. N=414

The findings further showed that when it came to the number of attacks towards partisan candidates, politicians or government versus non-partisan, there was a statistical significance that the mainstream media (including lean-to-left and lean-to-right outlets) primarily targeted a partisan government (Cramer's $V = .386$ $p < .001$) in their articles ($n=237$) with 57.2% in the news stories. Moreover, the mainstream/centre and mainstream/left lean media outlets analysed displayed a high number (over 50%) in their articles, particularly the mainstream lean-to-left online publications who were more partisan online media outlets. The mainstream/lean left media outlets (89.3%) had the highest which might suggest that these stories are reported on due to having a wider (and more partisan left) audience. Also, the mainstream/centre media outlets (62%) had a moderately high level of reporting on of conspiracy theories about partisan government (see Table 5). On the other hand, the mainstream/lean right media (42.2%) had the lowest number of articles which contained conspiracy theories directed at a partisan government, which again suggests that the mainstream/lean right media publications might be more focused on targeting the groups believed to be behind whatever government is currently in power (see Figure 3).

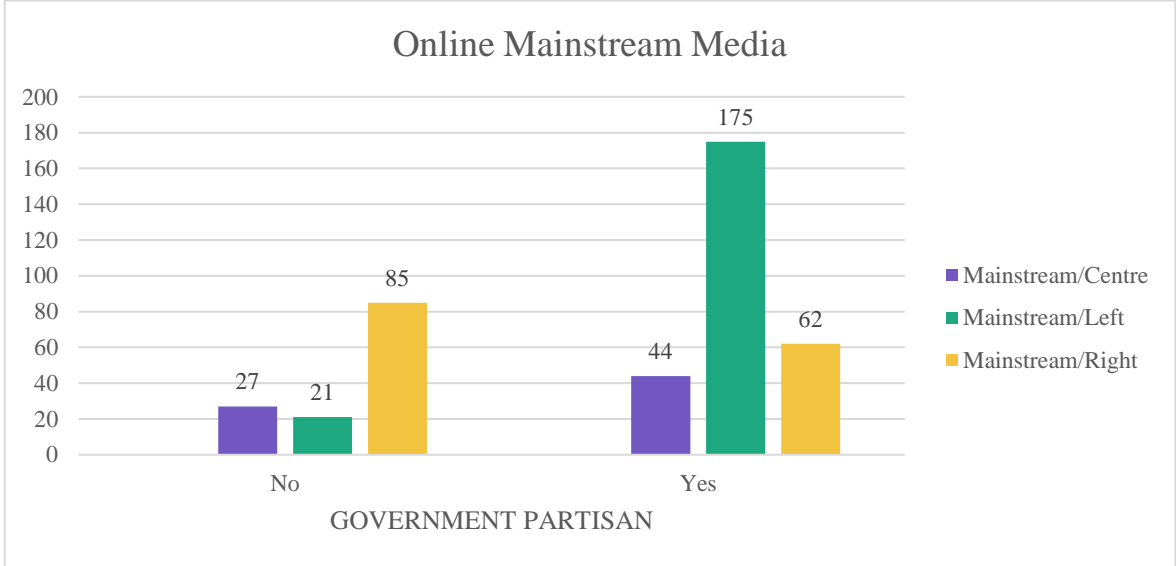


Figure 3. Level of Conspiracy Theories Attacks by Mainstream Media on Partisan Government. N=414

However, the findings showed that articles targeting a rival candidate (either partisan or non-partisan) or a non-partisan government was not as highly disseminated by either the mainstream/centre or the mainstream left-leaning or right-leaning media outlets (full list of percentages in Table 5). There was a statistical significance which showed that reporting on a rival candidate or politician who was partisan was not present (Cramer's $V = .245$ $p < .001$) in the articles (82.1%). Nevertheless, the mainstream/lean right had the highest number of reporting (28.6%) these types of conspiracy stories ($n=42$). Likewise, conspiracy theories which were targeted at non-partisan rival candidates or politicians were not reported in such a high number, as there was a statistical significance (Cramer's $V = .213$ $p < .001$) which found that these types of stories were also not present in mainstream media articles (76.6%). Yet, the findings showed that the mainstream/lean right again had the highest number of

articles (n=49) in this category (33.3%) which was reported on. Additionally, the reporting of conspiracy stories on a non-partisan government, the findings showed that all mainstream media outlets had a low number of articles (16.2%) which disseminated conspiracy theories specifically targeting non-partisan government as there was a statistical significance (Cramer’s V = .279 p < .001) that conspiracy theories in this category was not present in a significant way. The mainstream/lean right again had the highest number of conspiracy theory stories (n=47) in this category (32%).

6. 3 Further findings

This study’s analysis also showed some additional findings when looking at both the alternative (left and right) media and the mainstream media’s reporting of political conspiracy theories.

Journalistic tone in reporting

When a media outlet is reporting on a story there is a journalistic tone (usually formal and objective). This study wanted to analyse the tone used in the reporting of conspiracy theories in the various chosen outlets. For instance, the article might have contained a particular ‘tone’ which ranged from ‘neutral and unbiased’ to ‘biased and derisive’. One reason to look at the type of tone used in the articles is that it is important to investigate if the analysed news media (either alternative or mainstream) used a ‘neutral and unbiased’ tone when reporting, as they are supposed to along with using selectivity and accuracy (Andersen et al., 2021). This study found that there was a statistical significance in the tone the media outlets used when reporting various conspiracy theories which were mainly ‘neutral and unbiased’ tones. This was seen to be the tone across all the news media articles (n=376) (59.9%) analysed (both alternative and mainstream) (Cramer’s V = .309 p < .001). Further, although most of the ten online media outlets showed a low number (40.1%) of reporting on conspiracy theories using a ‘derisive and biased’ tone, there was an exception as the alt-right media showed a significantly higher number (66.7%) which used a more derisive and biased tone (see Table 6).

Table 6. Online Media Tone of News Article

	Online Publications	Alt-Left	Alt-Right	Mainstream/Lean Left	Mainstream/Lean Right	Mainstream/Centre	Total
Tone of News Article***	Neutral/Unbiased	62 (53.9%)	33 (33.3%)	154 (78.6%)	88 (59.9%)	39 (54.9%)	376 (59.9%)
	Derisive/Biased	53 (46.1%)	66 (66.7%)	42 (21.4%)	59 (40.1%)	32 (45.1%)	252 (40.1%)
	N	115 (100%)	99 (100%)	196 (100%)	147 (100%)	71 (100%)	628 (100%)

Note. ***Statistical significance at the .001 level between online publications and the tone of news articles. N = 628

Issues – themes of news articles

One further finding when analysing the articles (n=628) published by the ten media outlets was on the themes surrounding the conspiracy theories. Looking at the themes reported provided further insight into what types of stories alternative news media and mainstream media were most likely to report on. The most salient themes (or issues) that were most widely reported in the articles were: (1) elections/election reform/democracy (n=208); (2) other (e.g. January 6 US capitol Insurrection, COVID-19/vaccines/pandemic etc.) (n=174); (3) crime/violence, lack of policing, criminal prosecution rates (n=86); (4) the government/poor leadership (n=80); (5) Loose morals, sexual deviancy (n=65); (6) Race relations/racism (n=9) and (7) Immigration/border control, policies related to immigration (n=6) (see Table 7). The fact that conspiracy theories about elections were the highest on the themes/issues list suggests that this particular topic appears to be highly on the minds of the US citizens and political actors alike. Moreover, this theme seems to have remained salient as there is a political partisan divide in the US and both partisan political actors (via the alternative and mainstream media) often accuse the other of ‘election fraud’, ‘election rigging’ and ‘voter tampering’. The build-up (before and during) the election campaigning, the voting process and the election results was a theme which appeared several times in the articles among all of the ten online publications looked at. Yet, some of the loudest voices regarding election integrity or election misconduct were the Republicans, especially by the ‘right-wing’ or ‘far-right’ citizens, candidates and politicians, which mainly escalated after the 2020 presidential election (see Broockman & Kalla 2022).

Table 7. News content: Themes of conspiracy theories

Online Publications						
Issues (News Content/Themes)	Alt-Left	Alt-Right	Mainstream/Lean Left	Mainstream/Lean Right	Mainstream/Centre	Total
Immigration/border control, policies related to immigration	0	2	2	1	1	6
The government/poor leadership	18	9	23	18	12	80
Crime/violence, lack of policing, criminal prosecution rates etc	11	23	26	19	7	86
Race relations/racism	2	2	2	3	0	9
Elections/Election reform/democracy	38	29	76	34	31	208
Loose morals, sexual deviancy	11	13	15	19	7	65
Other (e.g. January 6 US capitol Insurrection, COVID19/vaccines/pandemic etc.)	35	21	52	53	13	174
N	115	99	196	147	71	628

Note. Seven themes analysed on ten online publications. N= 628

When comparing both the alternative left and right online news media outlets, the alt-left had the highest number of articles which contained conspiracy theories (n=115) with the highest number of articles on the theme “elections/election reform/democracy” (n=38) followed by the alt-right (n=99) whose top theme was also on elections (n=29). The mainstream media which

included the lean-to-left and lean-to-right outlets showed that the mainstream/lean left had the highest number of conspiracy theory articles (n=196), and highest on their theme list to report on was also about elections and election reform (n=76), this online mainstream publication was followed by the mainstream/right lean online publication (n=147), however, their top theme was not about elections, instead it was on “other (e.g. January 6 US capitol Insurrection, COVID19/vaccines/pandemic etc.)” (n=53). The mainstream/centre was at the bottom of the media publications list as they had the lowest amount of articles (n=71), and the theme which was disseminated the most on was on elections which showed that almost all online publications primary reporting (of the themes covered) were on conspiracy theories which had a focus on elections, election reform, voting, voter fraud and issues associated with the US elections (for the full list of theme results see Table 7).

6.4 Summary of results H1a and H1b, RQ1 and RQ2

This study’s hypothesis was that alt-right media covered or reported on more political conspiracy theories than alternative alt-left media or mainstream media does. Although the findings supported **H1a** on the extent that alt-right media does in fact report on conspiracy theories which contain implicit stories either about secret or covert groups or articles which attempt to scapegoat an opponent, the alt-left media also reported similarly. Nevertheless, the **H1a** was accepted based on the results which showed that the alt-right covered political conspiracy theories which contained stories surrounding secret or covert groups (also about elite, ‘they’ or ‘them’ groups and ‘deep state’ actors). However, the alt-right media is by far not alone in this practice, as the results also found that the alternative alt-left media (to an equal extent shown in many articles) and mainstream media (no matter the partisan leanings) will also incorporate conspiracy theories in their articles and evidence here in this study has shown that all of the online outlets looked at are likely to spread conspiracy theory content via their articles. H1b showed that more mainstream conservative right-leaning media outlets such as *Fox News* also disseminate conspiracy theories particularly owing to the fact that they have programs with hosts who report on far-right conspiracy theories. Likewise, the mainstream/left-leaning outlets such as *The Washington Post* also reported on conspiracy theories to a greater extent. However, overall, the alt-right media reported more conspiracy theories than the mainstream media outlets and were more likely to disseminate conspiracy theory stories which were on secret or covert groups.

The first research question asked whether alt-right reported on political conspiracy theories on their opponents more than their counterpart’s the alt-left media did. The findings for **RQ1** showed that alt-right media will disseminate conspiracy theories that are either ‘issue’ or ‘trait’ based (or both) and these attacks will be targeted less towards partisan rival candidates (and politicians) or parties and more aimed at rival non-partisan candidates or parties. Also, the alt-right will disseminate conspiracy theories less about partisan government and more on non-partisan government, which is a much broader aim, and a possible reason is that they target instead the so-called ‘secret’ or ‘covert’ groups behind the government. Yet, the alt-right does not report on political conspiracy theories more than the alt-left, as the findings showed that the alt-left media carry out similar ‘issue’ or ‘trait’ attacks in the same manner but was aimed at a partisan government instead (not as much at non-partisan government), and not as much at the politicians or parties themselves. Overall, this suggests that alternative media outlets will most likely report conspiracy theories aimed at the US

government and less on individual candidates or even the parties themselves, no matter whether it is a partisan or non-partisan government.

The second research question (RQ2) looked at to what extent mainstream media reported political conspiracy theories. The findings showed that mainstream media does disseminate conspiracy theories in their online publications which are either implicit in nature (either about secret/covert groups) or scapegoating their opponents. Furthermore, although the mainstream media looked at are seen to be centrist/non-partisan media outlets – it is not as simple or easy to determine in the US as there is a wider variety of mainstream partisan news media outlets. For instance, conservative to right-leaning and liberal-left leaning online media outlets are also considered to be mainstream as they have audiences that encompass a broad scope of political partisan leanings (from slight to firmly right or left). For instance, *Fox News* which was also analysed (albeit in the mainstream conservative and lean-to-right outlet category) has a much wider audience than *Breitbart* or *The Gateway Pundit* and is primarily considered to be a mainstream conservative to right leaning news media outlet, it also contains some alt-right programs and hosts such as Sean Hannity which makes this outlet more difficult to fit into just one media genre category (Gramlich, 2020).

Therefore, as the US media can be seen to have a mainly partisan based audiences who select media which are associated with their ideology and political leanings (Mitchell et al., 2014), there are also more ‘mainstream’ online media publications associated with certain partisan ideology as shown in this study, that will disseminate conspiracy theories of a partisan ilk on both sides owing to the US’ politically partisan news media arena.

Chapter 7: Discussion and conclusion

7.1 Discussion

The reporting of conspiracy theories by the US media has continued to be an issue of concern for scholars over the past two decades because the number and popularity of such theories has continually increased. Alternative media has gained more popularity in the US (Linden et al., 2021), and there have been previous research studies showing how conspiracy theories such as those centring on ‘election fraud’ or that the ‘COVID-19 pandemic was a hoax – and other such related themes – have been disseminated primarily by alternative media (both on the left and right side of politics) such as *Breitbart* or *Mother Jones* (see for example Bacaksizlar & Galesic, 2023; Douglas, 2021; Sáfrány, 2013). These conspiracy theories gain further traction when the stories reported by alternative media outlets are then shared by other groups or individuals on social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegraph, YouTube and TikTok. Furthermore, conspiracy theory dissemination via either alternative or social media (by alternative media, groups or individuals) has increased the popularity of these conspiracies in the US and previous research has shown that more than 50% of Americans believe in a least one conspiracy theory. Originally, alternative media was born out of the need for more diversity and perhaps an answer to traditional mainstream media. Further, alternative media typically online websites, was the ‘alternative’ place for individuals (both on the left and right) to get news which often challenged the authority of mainstream media and traditional journalism by opposing mainstream media narratives (see

Holt et al. 2019) and reflected their own social, political ideologies and opinions (Müller & Schulz, 2021).

However, as the US is primarily a politically partisan nation citizens are most susceptible to conspiracy theories coming from certain alternative media which are about a candidate, party or government which is on the 'other side' of their political ideology or leaning (see for example Linden et al., 2021). As a result, alternative media has become increasingly extremely polarised (either left or right) promoting either a Democratic or extremely liberal far-left or alt-left political ideology or on the other side an extremely Republican far-right or right-wing political outlook (and ideology). The danger of the continued rise of alternative media spreading conspiracy theories is that their audiences are more likely to consume only news stories coming exclusively from these outlets which can create a misinformation 'bubble' (Herasimenka et al., 2023, pp. 206-207). Furthermore, when individuals remain in these misinformation bubbles, they tend to disregard and ignore more mainstream media outlets and less partisan news which might help to clarify specific facts about the stories in question and provide a more balanced (less biased) point of view. This then leads to a greater danger that individuals become more 'entrenched' in their political and ideological beliefs and therefore hyper-partisan. Nevertheless, previous research has evidenced that it is more the alternative right 'alt-right' media which tends to have more outlets in the US with a high audience and wider reach. One such alt-right outlet is *Breitbart* which saw its influence grow significantly due in part to the partisan coverage of the 2016 presidential election and subsequent win of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). Yet, this is not to say that the alt-left media's influence is lesser with their audiences as the alt-left has had a history of activism and challenging authority (Nygaard, 2021). However, there appears to have been more recent studies by many scholars on the spreading of conspiracy theories by alternative right media compared to studies looking at alternative left media's conspiracy theory spreading/reporting (see Atkinson & Berg 2012; Berry, 2018; Mayerhoeffer, 2021; Schulze, 2020; Van Raalte et al., 2021). This study has previously acknowledged that there was a gap in this area of research and this was one of the primary aims for wanting to investigate this phenomenon further and investigate further into the US' alternative right and left online media outlets political conspiracy theory reporting.

On the other hand, it is not exclusively the 'fringe' or alternative US media which have reported on conspiracy theories (as previously suggested). In the past, the spread of conspiracy theories has mostly been associated with alternative media (see Mancosu & Vegetti, 2021). However, mainstream media have also been evidenced as partaking in spreading conspiratorial content (see Schemer et al., 2022). In the US the mainstream media has become increasingly more partisan in nature, as audiences continue to consume political news which reflects their own political leanings and ideology. In the US, news media outlets such as *CNN* remains primarily a centre/mainstream platform. However, news media outlets which were once more neutral have attracted audiences which are partisan. This has been evidenced with the news media outlet *MSNBC* which was once considered to be a purely centre/mainstream outlet. Nowadays *MSNBC* has become more liberal in reporting and has attracted a more liberal audience according to the Pew 2014 survey (Mitchell et al., 2014). Likewise, although *Fox News* is recognized as being a large mainstream conservative

network by most Americans (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021), Fox news continues to lean further to the right, particularly as they have a varied roster of alt-right programs and hosts. The increased polarisation of mainstream media in the US is perhaps in part due to the popularity of partisan news stories being reported which has appealed to a large part of the American population. Furthermore, misinformation and conspiracy theory dissemination might even play a role in drawing in larger audiences (albeit partisan), which might help increase the ratings (and popularity) of mainstream news media outlets (Brown & Mondon, 2021). For this reason, it might appear to some scholars that there are 'blurred lines' between alternative media and mainstream media as both have likely disseminated conspiracy theories, mis- or disinformation and perhaps unwittingly 'fake news' (Rauch, 2016).

This study's aim was to contribute further to extant research into conspiracy theories dissemination by not only alternative media (both left and right) but also by mainstream media as there was a gap in the research. Thus, the study looked at how the US' alternative media disseminated conspiracy theories within a designated period to support the hypothesis and two research questions posed by in this paper (see chapter 1). The study's findings corroborated some of the research that had previously shown that alternative media (particularly alt-right) media have disseminated conspiracy theories. Yet, other findings in this present study yielded further insights into how the alternative left and mainstream media also participate in conspiracy theory reporting.

7.2 Discussion of H1a and H1b, RQ1 and RQ2

Discussion H1a and H1b

The analysis overall showed that alt-right media will report on conspiracy theory stories as both of the alt-right online media websites analysed, *The Gateway Pundit* and *Breitbart* reported on a high number of conspiracy theories as evidenced in this study. These alt-right outlets are considered to be moderate to highly alt-right, as they have been strongly linked to the far-right wing of the Republican Party. Furthermore, *Breitbart* has been shown to have close ties with the 2016 Trump campaign and Trump's subsequent presidential term in office (Haller, et al., 2019). One possible reason why the alt-right media websites disseminated as many conspiracy theories is owing to the demand from their readership for political news content because these individuals consume political news from their websites as primary source of news because these media outlets reflect their political ideology, opinions and leanings. Another possible reason for the alt-right's media coverage of political conspiracy theories might also be linked to being 'fringe' news sites and having 'free reign' to publish what they want as there will not be as much monitoring or fact-checking of their content by the established, trusted traditional media watchdogs who are put in place for this purpose. However, the alt-right media outlets were by no means alone in the spread of political conspiracy theories.

Conversely, this study also shows that both of the alt-left online media websites *Alter-Net* and *Mother Jones* disseminated as many conspiracy theories as their alt-right did. This perhaps could suggest there is a 'far-left' audience who are also seeking political content which fits their political ideologies. Moreover, the results showed the alt-left consistently displayed a high level of conspiracy theories which had implicit conspiracy theory news stories which discussed secret groups or conspiracy theories which had stories about 'they'

or 'them' plotting against the general public or even reporting on the opposing side as being the 'other' nefarious group. This suggests that again, these two alt-left websites which are both 'on the fringe' and further removed from the news media watchdogs (in terms of being monitored) can report on stories which may contain conspiracy theories without being fact checked.

When it came to the mainstream media's reporting of conspiracy theories the findings showed that they will disseminate conspiracies at a relatively high level, perhaps as a way to get higher ratings or merely to debunk the conspiracy theory. In fact, the partisan mainstream media were among the highest outlets who published conspiracy stories. Furthermore, the mainstream/left lean and mainstream/lean right outlets reported on conspiracy theories almost as much as the alt-right tended to. Moreover, the type of conspiracy theory which was reported on the most was on secret 'elite' or covert groups. Nevertheless, the alt-right remained in the lead of reporting conspiracy theories.

Discussion RQ1

There was strong evidence to support that alternative 'alt-right' media does report on political conspiracy theories, as this was seen in the two alt-right media outlets analysed *Breitbart* and *The Gateway Pundit* in their articles. Yet, the question here is whether the alt-right media disseminates conspiracy theories more than their counterparts – the alt-left, the alt-right predictably reported on conspiracy theories which contained 'issue' or 'trait' attacks against their political opponents. The trait attacks were anywhere from accusing a rival politician or party (partisan and non-partisan) of unscrupulous or devious behaviour such as lying or cheating (either professionally or in private) and other irresponsible acts. Issue attacks constituted of stating that a rival politician or party on both sides of the political aisle were for instance, 'rigging' an election or enabling voter fraud, immigration negligence and even concealing important political evidence from the public. Thus, this study's findings show the fact that the alt-right online media outlets reported on such things, echoes the findings of previous research. However, what was revealed in the findings was that alt-right conspiracy theory reporting tended to be more on non-partisan government and not as much on partisan government, as their attacks were not directed as much towards a Democrat or Republican candidate or politician, or the Democrat or Republican Party itself. One explanation for the attacks on non-partisan government coming from the 'right-side' could be owing to the right-wing holding a 'shadow' government as being responsible, which is also in line with the findings in this study on conspiracy theory reporting on secret or covert groups. Thus, **RQ1** was answered in the affirmative in part that alt-right media websites will cover political conspiracy theories.

On the other hand, it must be stated that the alt-right are not alone in this practice as was evidenced by both alt-left outlets *Alter-net* and *Mother Jones* in their news stories which were analysed. One possible reason the alt-left media in the US has shown that they will also disseminate conspiracy theories when it is about partisan government might be due to the growing political polarisation, which has witnessed the left side often being at utmost odds with the right side on many political issues. Therefore, partisan conspiracy theories are likely to be reported by alt-left media websites such as *Mother Jones* which is a counterpart of alt-right online media outlets such as *Breitbart*. Overall, what the evidence shows when looking at political conspiracy reporting between the alt-right and the alt-left is that alternative media

in the US will, in general, most likely spread conspiracy theories which contain a trait attack and issue attacks. Yet, the alt-right will particularly disseminate stories about non-partisan government rather than partisan government (rather at who might be responsible behind the scenes), whilst the alt-left are more likely to cover political conspiracy theories about a partisan government (attacks aimed at a Republican government as the political actor) and not as much on partisan candidates or parties. What is clear from the data is that the alt-right and the alt-left will both report on conspiracy theories. Therefore, it is not only the alt-right has a sole monopoly on political conspiracy theory reporting as both the alternative left and the alternative right media tend to do so in equal measures.

Discussion RQ2

It is not always as easy to categorise the mainstream media outlets in the US in the traditional sense of mainstream media, which is them being a neutral and predominately 'centre' (neither left nor right leaning) place where audiences go to consume news which is unbiased and non-partisan. This is mainly due to the fact that media in the US is primarily partisan in nature and US citizens by and large tend to associate their media consumption choices with the media outlets which align with their own personal ideology and political preferences. For that reason, what might have formerly constituted as mainstream media, may in fact be closer to a partisan media alignment which is associated with a certain political ideology or leaning (see Ernst et al., 2019). Therefore, how divided or polarised US media is, must be taken into consideration when attempting to analyse to what extent mainstream media disseminates conspiracy theories (which has mainly been associated with alternative media). For instance, *CNN* and *MSNBC* are often thought of as being mainstream/centre media outlets, yet evidence has shown that *MSNBC* has an audience which is more liberal, and their reporting tends to lean towards a liberal, left-wing narrative (Choi, 2022).

Additionally, although *Fox News* is associated with conservative or slight right-leaning audiences, it currently has some alt-right programs and hosts airing on the network. In fact, *Fox News'* conservative label has continued to be changed by some critics and scholars (see for example Morris & Francia, 2010) because of the news programs aired on the Fox network which are heavily biased in the Republican Party direction (submersed in alt-right content). Also, *Fox News'* popular hosts such as Sean Hannity, Jesse Watters, and Greg Gutfeld, owing to their content and views, are considered to be more alt-right or right-wing leaning than conservative (Gramlich, 2020). Subsequently, *Fox News'* content and output remains popular not only with conservatives, but also with many alt-right or right-wing viewers owing to their programs (and hosts) blatant manner of 'direct speech' which populist audiences (and conservatives alike) have gravitated to. The network has evolved from a more conservative outlet to a place where most Republicans (moderate to radical) trust and will get their political news from, and much of *Fox News'* current success is due to the Trump pre-2016 election and his presidential era (Sutton, 2017). Thus, *Fox News* was also looked at as being a mainstream/right lean outlet considered a more 'mainstream' conservative network based on their audiences.

When looking at the mainstream/centre media outlets (*CNN* and *MSNBC*) for **RQ2**, both outlets reported on conspiracy theories implicitly either about secret or covert groups or scapegoating a target, which was primarily aimed at partisan government (less at non-

partisan government) and not at the candidate or party level (either partisan or non-partisan). There was less reporting about non-partisan candidates, politicians or parties by the mainstream/centre media. However, the extent that these outlets disseminated conspiracies was moderate, and this is only one part of the analysis on mainstream media in this study. The other mainstream media categories (lean-to-left and lean-to-right) which are closer to the mainstream media interpretation (based on the opinions of US citizens) (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021), but also have partisan leanings evidenced that they reported conspiracy theories albeit it at a higher number than the mainstream/centre. The mainstream/lean-left outlets were in the lead as they reported conspiracy theory stories which had content containing news stories about the 'they' or 'them' when depicting the opposition, along with content which discussed targets albeit in a scapegoating manner. Yet, conspiracy theory news stories of a scapegoating nature were not as high in their article content. The mainstream/left covered issue and trait attacks in their news stories in a moderate in number, but not as high as the mainstream/centre outlets. The conspiracy theories in their articles were aimed mainly at a partisan government which was similar to the mainstream/centre's findings.

On the other side, the mainstream/lean right media reported on secret groups, but this was not as high as the mainstream/left outlets. Conversely, the mainstream/right media reported more conspiracy theories that were aimed at a target as a scapegoat or attempting to blame their opponents as being responsible for a political issue (or issues), they also had a moderate number of news stories with issue or trait attacks also aimed at a partisan government and not as much towards a non-partisan government, party or candidates.

Further findings showed that all ten online news media outlets examined used a mainly 'neutral' and 'unbiased' tone in their articles when reporting on the conspiracy theories and 'unbiased or derisive' tones were not overly present, with the exception of the alt-right media. Lastly, although there were seven themes which were salient to look at in this study (Issues around immigration/border control; government/poor leadership; crime/violence/policing; race/racism; election/election reform/democracy; loose morals/sexual deviancy; and 'other'), the number one issue which was reported on the most by most of the online publications selected was about the election, election fraud, 'rigged' elections, voter fraud (and voter suppression) and topics related to election integrity or the need for election reform associated with the American democratic process when selecting and voting for candidates, parties or government. This suggests that the election themes were on the highest priority list of conspiracy theories reported on due to the salience of the topic. The issue (or theme) reported on the least during the period analysed was on race relations or racism, which might suggest that although it is one topic discussed in the US by the media (both mainstream and alternative) as being an issue, it may not be as salient in comparison with the US' election issues.

7. 3 Conclusion

In summary, what the evidence has shown in this study is that in the US the alternative right media has covered political conspiracy theories, yet the alternative left has reported on conspiracy theories in an equal manner. Additionally, the mainstream/centre media will also disseminate political conspiracies at a moderate to high level. However, as the US media has a partisan divide which might at times appear subtle and other times be blatantly obvious,

there are other mainstream (left lean and right lean) outlets which disseminate conspiracy theories but at the partisan level. The obviousness or suitability of the reporting all depends on the media outlet and their readership. Another factor to consider is that there are a wide variety of media outlets in the US ranging from centre/mainstream, liberal/left-leaning and conservative/right-leaning towards the other end of the spectrum which is alternative media that is associated with either the alt-left/far-left or alt-right/far-right. Therefore, while it has been confirmed that both the alt-right and alt-left will report on political conspiracy theories at almost equal levels of dissemination, mainstream media disseminates conspiracy theories via a wide variety of non-partisan and partisan online media outlets, it should also be clarified that what constitutes as 'mainstream' in the US continues to change. In addition, some would argue that news media in the US is going in the direction of not only greater partisan divide, which could lead to greater political polarisation in the US, there might also be more alternative media outlets 'cropping up' in response to the US public's increasing need for news media outlets which reflect their ideologies and political leanings. Another observation from this study's author is on how mainstream media in their response to the growing popularity of alternative media, coupled with the rise of alternative social media, might prompt mainstream media to compete with these formats to further their own aims and of the political actors they 'favour' (Holt 2018, p. 52).

Limitations

There were limitations within this study as although there are plentiful alt-right media outlets in the US to source news article samples from, there were less alt-left media outlets to choose from. The reason for this might be that there are fewer alternative left media outlets in the US, whereas it appears that the alternative right online media network continues to grow. Other methodological limitations were the size of the sample, because a larger sample size of more articles would have been beneficial to look at as this might have provided richer findings. Also, another limiting factor found is on the selection of keywords used to search for the sample, upon reflection other search words could have been added to the search string such as 'Qanon' which is another specific word linked to conspiracy theories and it may have yielded different results. Regarding the coding process, limitations were seen in the areas where the study would have benefited from having multiple coders to avoid bias or misinterpretations of the codebook. Further, for this study to have progressed by including a larger sample size, having additional coders would have been useful.

In regard to the geographical location this study was limited to the US. If the study had included countries of the European Union, and perhaps the UK, the study would have been more varied because the countries mentioned would have different types of media (both alternative and mainstream), political parties and governments and in some cases, different political systems. Additionally, as it can at times be difficult to distinguish between the various media in the US. This 'difficulty' has a lot to do with how partisan US media audiences are and they are likely to gravitate toward the political content which best aligns with their political ideologies and leanings, in future perhaps other media outlets chosen would provide different findings on alternative and mainstream media's reporting of conspiracy theories. Furthermore, every media outlet will disseminate conspiracy theories for various reasons, thus, it would be helpful to research more into the types of media the US has which would then help to better group the media categories. Another issue is that the news media were chosen based on audience consumption patterns, and not based on the content the outlets

produce, thus, it might be unclear exactly to what extent the outlets examined matches the audience's political leanings. Lastly, another limitation was that the study only looked at the media outlets (alternative and mainstream) which reported on conspiracy theories, yet it did not investigate how they disseminated them and whether the outlets merely reported on, embraced or endorsed them, or attempted to debunk the conspiracy theories.

Future research

This study has reviewed previous research firstly, to learn what extant research has found and secondly, to determine what gaps, if any, were present in the existing research. For future research, to expand the current research, it would be useful to look at whether mainstream media mirrors alternative media when a conspiracy theory is reported to maximize on a story which is already in circulation. Also, it would be interesting and recommended to do a comparison of alternative online media and mainstream media outlets and conspiracy theory dissemination cross-nationally, for example, between the US and the UK or another similar EU country. The reason for this recommendation is that it would perhaps provide a broader understanding of how conspiracy theories are reported on differently in various countries by a wide array of media (alternative and mainstream).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Codebook

Codebook: Conspiracy Theory Reporting: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Alternative and Mainstream Media in the US

I Study Outline

1. Purpose of Conspiracy theories and alternative and mainstream media study

The aim of this study is to look at how mainstream and alternative media (left and right), disseminated political conspiracy theories during the time frame between October 24th 2022 (prior to the US 2022 mid-term elections) to March 26th 2023.

1.2 Sampling units

For the US, which will be analysed nationwide, as US citizens have increased their online news media consumption – although newspapers or television channels for each media category with the respective online sites chosen initially chosen - only the online digital newspapers were coded and analysed. Where there was only an online site available, these were selected evenly (a balanced number for each category) and analysed.

For digital newspapers' respective online websites, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *New York Post* are (1) quality/agenda-setting digital papers, from a (2) widely read mainstream tabloid paper. Websites (with respective television networks) *CNN*, *Fox News* and *MSNBC* were selected and used because they are widely viewed online news media platforms.

For websites without newspaper publication, *Mother Jones*, *AlterNet* (alt-left) and *Breitbart*, *The Gateway Pundit* (alt-right) were chosen as they are relatively popular alternative media outlets and attract a readership that consumes alternative left and alternative right news online.

Units of analysis

Units of analysis are news articles that refer to conspiracy theories in national online publications reporting on current political news, ranging from political parties and candidates - to politicians and policies. Yet also publish stories on other topics (e.g. social, cultural themes, sports and entertainment) - the units of analysis from these outlets will be articles from digital newspapers or websites.

Definition of a news piece

A news piece is an article either on a digital newspaper (from a newspaper outlet) or website (from a television channel or without a newspaper publication).

Digital Newspaper/Website

- The single online news piece comprises (1) text or (2) text with pictures and or videos.

Do not code: News articles which contain less than ten lines of text

Only news articles which are fully visible or a teaser on the starting page of the website with a link to the full article will be analysed. Teasers can consist of (a) text (b) text and/or a picture or video

1.3 Sampling

The sampling period for the analysed media was between October 24, 2022 and March 26, 2023. The content analysis includes all articles that make explicit and implicit references to conspiracies or conspiracy theories in the selected media.

2.1 Step 1

To identify relevant articles, the following search string was used:

Search terms

Keywords: conspir*; conspiracy theor*; conspiracy; conspiracy theory; covid; gov*; government conspiracy; cover up; covered up; corrupt; corrupt government; deep state; deep state media; election interference; election meddling; election tampering; elite; elite group; elite Washington; Washington elite; expose; expose truth; fake news; fake media; hidden plan; hunter Biden; illegitimate; illegitimate president; illegitimate presidency; interference; lie; lies; big lie; laptop; legitimate; legitimacy; midterm; midterm elections; mockingbird media; Pelosi; Pelosi hammer; *rig; rigged; rigged election; secret plan; secret plot; secret society; secret organization; secret deal; secret deals; stolen; stolen election; steal; stop steal; vaccine; voting discrepancy; voting discrepancies

2.2 Step 2

Digital Newspaper/Website

On the online digital newspaper and website, any news articles that include the search string - which are coded that have teasers on the starting page or another page linked to the navigation bar, which also have a headline, sub-headline, first paragraph or a visual which refers to a political story about a political event or situation an opposing party or candidate (or government institution).

2.3 Selection criteria

Important: It is required that a check is made to determine if the text fits the criteria set by clicking on the teaser which leads to the next page. **Example:** coders must click the teaser on the starting page and check to see if the content is relevant.

II Codebook: Categories

1. Formal Categories

V1 Coder

1) Tamala Clark-Einzinger/TCE

V2 Article identification number

This is the same article ID which was assigned to the article when the database was constructed. The code show follow format: year-month-day-digital newspaper abbreviation-article number* (e.g. 2023022000). Note: *Create a running order, allocate a number in ascending order to each article coded (e.g. 1,2, 3,...100,101,102). **Important note:** when coding a new news piece, always assign a new number to it in ascending order - never use another already assigned number. Furthermore, every news piece should have its own unique ID number allocated one time only.

V3 Online Publication

Coding Scheme:

Digital newspapers

- 1) The New York Times
- 2) New York Post
- 3) The Washington Post

Websites

- 4) AlterNet
- 5) Breitbart
- 6) CNN
- 7) The Gateway Pundit
- 8) Fox News
- 9) Mother Jones
- 10) MSNBC

V4 Date

The date is added that the article was published on. The following format will be used: DD-MM-YYYY (e.g. 20-February-2023).

V5 Type of news pieces

Code which types of news pieces the story is:

Coding Scheme:

1 News story

Fact-based story, news report or the reporting of events (i.e. describing what has transpired), providing the “when, where, what and why” in factual recounting. This will be one of the most likely types of news pieces to code.

2 Column / commentary / editorial

This type of new piece will be from the author who will interpret the story in a subjective manner and is their own opinion. *Column*: this will be clearly stated as a special column, which differs from the usual news reporting. Additionally, the column will be written from the perspective and opinions of the author representing their respective newspaper.

Commentary: most times this will be written by an outside source (e.g. politician or professional/expert), and will be clearly labelled as a commentary. *Editorial*: Mainly this is stated as an editorial or opinion piece, which is clearly evidenced, and will be located in its own regular section (page) within the paper.

3 Interview / discussion

These will be news pieces to be coded that are composed of questions and answers which are in print and direct quotes in an interview structure (interviewer and interviewee) which is a discussion between two or more individuals. The criteria for interview/discussion are that there must be at least two interview questions.

V6 News story placement (importance placed)

Code where the news pieces are placed in the news publication

Online

- 1 Full article on front page
- 2 Teaser on front page

V7 Visuals (visual content/images)

Code if the news piece has visuals or still shots (e.g. pictures, photos, graphs and map etc)

- 0 no visual
- 1 visual

V8 Video content

Code whether the news piece has video content (this includes online video)

- 0 no video
- 1 video

III Variables

2. Tone of News Article

V9 Journalistic tone in article

Code 1 - Example: Code 1 if a publications news article delivers the story in a manner which is in a neutral or unbiased tone. Example: The journalist who writes on a particular story states the facts or presents the facts in a formal objective style, without being derisive, “finger pointing” or using accusatory language or tone, such as “*The allegations made today, are being investigated...*” or “*Federal agents believe they have gathered sufficient evidence to begin the indictment process...*” or “*The mid-term election campaigning began this morning starting in...*”

Code 2 - Example: Code 2 1 if a publications news article reports on the story in a manner which is in a biased or derisive tone, such reporting bias can be identified when the article is written with a particular tone or “spin”, which might influence readers to perceive the story in a certain manner. Also, the reporting bias tone is present without applying any skepticism or placing comparison to another news piece appearing in an opposition news outlet. Example: The journalist who writes on a particular story states the facts or presents the facts in a “finger pointing”, sarcastic, snide or derogatory manner and/or uses accusatory language attack, such as “*The voting on election day was a complete disaster across the country and especially in Arizona...*” or “*At least that is what is implied...*” or “*sorry, the story is still not a thing*” (Code 99 should be used sparingly).

Coding Scheme:

- 1 Neutral/unbiased
- 2 Derisive/Biased
- 99 Cannot be determined

3. Conspiracy theory and target definitions

V10 Conspiracy theory: Explicit reference to conspiracy theory

Explicit: (Coders should code 1 when an article contains explicit wording – see example outlined below) **Note:** Code if the news piece uses the exact wording “**conspiracy theory**” coming from one party (left or right) towards the political opponent or if the exact wording “**conspiracy theory**” is used without being directed at an opposing side.

Code 1 if the news piece talks about the how the opponents’ political legitimacy, daily dealings, positions of power or that established events/situations surrounding a group or individuals is a conspiracy by powerful, covert and sinister organisations (groups) using the words “conspiracy theory” as previously defined (Strömbäck, et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2019). **Example:** the news article covers a story about the opposing party or candidate and mentions that an event or situation which has occurred is a “conspiracy theory” or that the other side thinks that what they are doing is a “conspiracy theory”, then the event or situation will be analysed. Another example, when one party mentions that the rival’s actions or policies have come about due to being connected to a “conspiratorial group”. Additionally, if

the article talks about a “conspiratorial group” but does not actually talk about an opposing political party or candidate, will also be analysed.

Coding Scheme:

0	Not present
1	Present

V11 Conspiracy theory: Implicit - Secret/Covert Group or Secret Plot

Implicit: (Coders should code 1 when an article contains implicit conspiracy theories – see example outlined below)

Note: In article, the wording does not have to be explicit for the story about an event or situation, to be considered a conspiracy theory – it can also be implicit (implied), and enough to justify an “Present” -coding.

Code 1 if the news piece talks about how a secret group has affected an event or circumstance, whilst referring to the opponents’ political legitimacy, daily dealings, positions of power or events/situations surrounding a group or individuals is a conspiracy by powerful, covert and sinister organisations (groups) without using the words “conspiracy theory”. Also, if one party or candidate’s publication on the opposition criticizes the other side as being a part a secret plot to undermine the established order, then it is enough to justify a “Present”-coding, as the implication is there owing to the definition of what a conspiracy theory may constitute, will be included in the analysis. *Example:* the news article covers a story on an event or situation whilst suggesting that this is owing to a secret or covert groups actions. Another example is when the article attacks the opposing side about an event or situation and attempts to link that side to a secret group will be analysed.

Coding Scheme:

0	Not present
1	Present

V12 Conspiracy theory: Implicit - Evidence to Back Claims

Implicit: (Coders should code 1 when an article contains implicit conspiracy theories – see example outlined below)

Note: In article, the wording does not have to be explicit for the story about an event or situation, to be considered a conspiracy theory – it can also be implicit (implied), and enough to justify an “Present” -coding.

Code 1 if the news piece provides ‘evidence’ to back up the claims of the story on how a secret group has affected an event or circumstance, whilst referring to the opponents’ political legitimacy, daily dealings, positions of power or events/situations surrounding a group or individuals is a conspiracy by powerful, covert and sinister organisations (groups) without using the words “conspiracy theory”, but the implication is there owing to the definition of what a conspiracy theory may constitute, will be analysed.

Example: the news article reports a story on an event or situation that suggests a secret or covert group is behind this, whilst providing purported evidence to back up the claims. However, the evidence provided may not have been fact checked or rigorously vetted to ensure the evidence has come from a reliable source etc.

V13 Conspiracy theory: Implicit - Scapegoating

Implicit: (Coders should code 1 when an article contains implicit conspiracy theories – see example outlined below)

Note: In article, the wording does not have to be explicit for the story about an event or situation, to be considered a conspiracy theory – it can also be implicit (implied), and enough to justify an “Present” -coding.

Code 1 if the news the article attempts to scapegoat people or groups as being either good or evil (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017: 1426-1427), by referring to the opponents’ political legitimacy, daily dealings, positions of power or events/situations surrounding a group or individuals is a conspiracy by powerful, covert and sinister organisations (groups) without using the words “conspiracy theory”, but the implication is there owing to the definition of what a conspiracy theory may constitute, will be analysed.

Example: the news article reports a story on an event or situation that suggests a secret or covert group is behind the scenes controlling its citizens, whilst reporting in a manner which suggests that it is “us against them”, as it is the elite on one side and the public on the other, and this evil must be fought against in order to be freed from it.

Coding Scheme:

- 0 Not present
- 1 Present

V14 Issue attack

Does the article include an issue attack?

Issue attacks refer to a publication reporting in a critical manner the plans or policies of an opposing party or candidates’ political motives and/or conduct.

Code 1 - Example: Code 1 if one publication mentions that the rival party or candidate does not have good policies regarding employment, health care, and security, among others. Owing to being part of a covert group which benefits from the plans or policies either currently in effect or proposed.

Coding Scheme:

- 0 Not present
- 1 Present

V15 Trait attack

Does the article include a trait attack?

(Trait attacks by the publication refer to criticizing the traits of an opposing party or candidate (i.e. group or an individual's integrity or moral deficiencies, lack of competence).

Code 1 - *Example:* Code 1 if one publication reports that the rival party either in government and had a similar role in the government before and did not have a decent performance. It can also apply when they are attempting to run for government, are not up to the task due to being elected or nominated because of affiliations to a secret group. Also, code 2 if there are reports about a political actor from the opposing side personal issues of the rival like marital problems, drug or alcohol abuse, legal problems, etc., which might have happened due to secretive and covert activities.

Coding Scheme:

0	Not present
1	Present

4. Target (Actors)

Does the article report about an actor by targeting directly?

(The decision on which actor is targeted depends on the presentation of the individual news item. This means that the same event can be framed differently by different news media outlets).

V16 Rival Candidate or Politician/Partisan

This variable target individual candidates or politicians. Rival candidate or politician can only be partisan. For example, if the publication is left or right then the target must be from the opposite side. **Code 1:** if there is a clear bias when reporting on a conspiracy theory which is directed at the opposing side (it is possible that only a rival partisan candidate or politician is targeted, and not the actual party itself).

Coding Scheme:

0	No
1	Yes
99	Coding requirement not met

V17 Rival Party/Partisan

This variable targets rival parties. Rival party can only be partisan. For example, if the publication is left or right then the target must be from the opposite side. **Code 1:** if there is a clear bias when reporting on a conspiracy theory which is directed at the opposing side (it is possible that only a rival party is targeted, and not an actual candidate or politician).

Coding Scheme:

- 0 No
- 1 Yes
- 99 Coding requirement not met

V18 Government/Partisan

Government can only be partisan where the majority of its leadership (i.e. politicians, government representatives) are either from the left or the right side. For example, if the publication is left or right then the target must be from the opposite side.

Coding Scheme:

- 0 No
- 1 Yes

V19 Government/Non-Partisan

The publication can attack the government without mentioning if it is a left or right leaning one. For example, if the publication is left, right or centre target does not have to be from any political side.

Coding Scheme:

- 0 No
- 1 Yes

5. News Content: Theme of Conspiracy Theory

When coding this variable there should be a theme of a specific type of conspiracy theory that the article writes about. The list below is intended to provide a guideline for the potential categories that a conspiracy theory article might be placed in. To determine this, coders should look at the article's title first, if the title does not indicate the type of conspiracy theory theme or type, then use the main body of text as an indicator.

V20 Issues

1. Immigration/border control, policies related to immigration
2. The government/poor leadership
3. Crime/violence, lack of policing, criminal prosecution rates etc.
4. Race relations/racism
5. Elections/Election reform/democracy
6. Loose morals, sexual deviancy
7. Other (e.g. January 6 US capitol Insurrection, COVID-19/vaccines/pandemic etc.

Appendix 2: Holsti Reliability Test

Holsti Reliability Test

Variables Used	Holsti Reliability
Conspiracy theory: Explicit reference to conspiracy theory	0.99
Conspiracy theory: Implicit - Secret/Covert Group or Secret Plot	0.98
Conspiracy theory: Implicit - Evidence to Back Claims	0.97
Conspiracy theory: Implicit – Scapegoating	0.97
Issue attack - Does the article include an issue attack?	0.97
Trait attack - Does the article include a trait attack?	0.99
Rival Candidate or Politician/Partisan	0.99
Rival Party/Partisan	0.97
Government/Partisan	0.98
Government/Non-Partisan	0.97
News Content: Theme of Conspiracy Theory	0.95
Journalistic tone in article	0.98