The Visual Presentation of American Right-Wing News Sites

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Abstract

When it comes to the type of fake news and misinformation that's often circulated on digital platforms, an underresearched aspect is how a news article's visual design affects readers' assessment of its quality. Traditionally, the visual presentation of news has come with long-standing conventions – columns, a main image and one headline larger than the rest, and the presence of a nameplate, surrounded by vital information like date of issue and price, at the very top of the page – many of which have carried over into the design of the online homes of newspapers.

In the last decade or so, a crop of partisan news challengers has emerged, largely skewing to the right and declaring themselves, either explicitly or implicitly, in opposition to the "mainstream media," which they see as actively oppressing their viewpoints. One of the ways they signal their independence from legacy media is via visual design, which, as this report shows, retains most of the same visual identifiers of traditional news, but incorporates a few notable differences that help identify it as potentially biased and possibly untrustworthy. By carrying out a textual and semiotic analysis of four major hyperpartisan right-wing news websites and comparing them to four outlets considered to be less partisan, I identified a handful of design conventions specific to digital hyperpartisan news. With this project, not only do I delineate exactly what those design conventions are, I argue that the visual signifiers of hyperpartisan right-wing digital news influence readers' instinct to share via social media, thereby sustaining the United States' struggle to contain fake news circulated via online communities, which can contribute to real-world harm.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

As I write this, in November of 2022, the aftermath of another instance of mass violence is unfolding in the United States. On 19 November, a man entered a LGBT+ nightclub in Colorado Springs, CO with an assault rifle and began shooting, killing five and injuring others. It has not yet been determined by authorities whether this attack was motivated by hate, but it comes on the heels of a year's worth of harassment and attacks on LGBT+ citizens by adherents of the American extreme right (Parks, 2022), influenced strongly by false and derogatory rumors and made-up moral panics about queer people concocted in their online spaces and then repeated by right-wing media. Social media — and mainstream news media — has been quick to connect the dots between previous incidents of harassment aimed at LGBT folks and allies and the 19 November attack.

This past year comes on the heels of four years of a president who parroted right-wing media viewpoints informed by some of the ugliest, most hateful beliefs, often sharing articles from right-leaning hyperpartisan – defined as reflecting the values of a specific political party, often excluding appropriate context or complete truth to further those beliefs – news sites on social media (Stelter, 2015). The implicit endorsement of misinformation from leaders in both the White House and at the local level can give these falsehoods legitimacy in the eyes of the public, which then sparks a deluge of misinformation across the web, many of it both spread to and culled from right wing communities online by hyperpartisan news outlets that confirmed and lent credence to existing, false beliefs.

There are many factors that prompt the circulation of misinformation – a category of content under which hyperpartisan news falls – and, as this project will show, the visual design of websites is one of them. This project determines that right-wing hyperpartisan news outlets design their websites with the aim of entertainment and strong emotional appeal rather than straightforward information dissemination, with the likely intent of swaying readers to their preferred side of the political aisle. They accomplish this by retaining a simple, relatively "no frills" visual presentation paired with long-standing hallmarks of sensational journalism – oversized headlines in all-caps, bright colors, and provocative titles. These are design and content choices that have historically visually communicated strong emotions like alarm and anger. The aim is to get a strong, shocking message across quickly, matching the fast pace of information consumption via social media and to help prompt its sharing via those same platforms. The panic imparted upon readers by the comparatively loud design of hyperpartisan sites is strongly linked to sharing on social media, as described by previous research covered in following chapters. Other small details, like the more frequent engagement of social media affordances, strengthen a sense of "us against them" community, another factor strongly linked to a likelihood to share on social media.

As evidenced by the example given in the opening paragraphs, the United States is, and has been for years, in a crisis of mass violence heavily influenced by right-wing media bias. Certain content styles of digital media – for example, writing provocative titles or using outrageous photos to accompany articles – can significantly impact users' impulse to share news via social media. When it comes to news that may be sensationalized, biased, or outright false, this, as evidenced in previous paragraphs, can result in deadly harm. Which makes my research question of utmost urgency: What are the common design conventions among hyperpartisan right-wing news websites, if any, and how do they differ from those exhibited by news websites generally considered not to exhibit significant partisan bias?

There exists several years' worth of research into the realm of "fake news" – what it is, how it spreads, and the harm it does to society – especially after 2016. But very few look at the specific type of misinformation disseminated by right-wing media – an incredibly popular form of media (Bovet and Makse, 2019) – and even fewer look at the visual design of the websites that host it and how that may influence its continued popularity.

By synthesizing notes on a detailed textual analysis of right wing media sites into data, and then doing the same for nonpartisan[1] sites as a control, I will contribute further research on how hyperpartisan news – the specific variety of fake news that is currently of most concern to many researchers (Xu *et al*., 2020; Mourão and Robertson, 2019; Pennycook and Rand, 2021; Lazer *et al*., 2017; Marwick and Lewis, 2017) – is propelled into the public consciousness and how that influences belief and faith in false information. After gathering my data, I will then use a semiotic analysis of the visual presentation of these sites to draw conclusions on how certain design choices – for example, setting titles in capital letters – are commonly interpreted according to American and Western cultural interpretations of these choices. The research will show that there is significant overlap in the design of both hyperpartisan and nonpartisan online news sources, but a few distinct design styles that distinguish hyperpartisan outlets from nonpartisan do present themselves.

Violence is more and more often linked directly with online conspiracy theories, which share a strong link to fake news and hyperpartisan content (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). To look closely at the individual elements that inspire trust in hyperpartisan news media is to better understand its spread online, and thus better devise solutions for how to stop that spread before it causes violence again.

[1] No publication is truly free from bias – in fact, all sites I have compared the hyperpartisan sites against have been accused of showing political bias at one time or another. In this report, "nonpartisan" is used as a simplified, catchall term for publications generally considered to be less biased than their hyperpartisan counterparts, a claim supported by the 2014 Mitchell study cited extensively in this work.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Existing publications on the topic of online misinformation take a very broad view of its spread and influence on social media users. In general, current literature focuses on the people most likely to promote it and the dangers its proliferation poses to the public. Several common themes emerge throughout current literature on the digital spread of misinformation, which I have examined in this section. The most common is that, at present, the most concerning form of fake news is biased or incorrect information created to further the message of a particular political party – called "hyperpartisan" news. Therefore, in this study, I will focus on the hyperpartisan variant of fake news. In this chapter, I will contextualize the phenomenon of fake news by starting with historical examples, then moving through to the present day to give clear examples of the way fake, sensational, and heavily biased news has changed – but in some ways has also stayed the same.

2.1 The History of Fake News: From Mass to Digital Media

Ballads and Broadsides

Much research exists into the history of fake news. Cindy L. Otis' *True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News* (2020) traces it as far back as the reign of Ramses II, an Egyptian ruler who had highly embellished accounts of his feats in battle translated into a ballad to be recited to citizens. This story ties into one of the most prominent historical platforms for the dissemination of misinformation: broadsides. Broadsides – sheets of paper posted in public places that contained information relevant to the public such as updates from the government and news of the day, sometimes presented in the form of poems and songs called "ballads" – became an early form of tabloid press as they rose in popularity in the British Isles and the United States in the 16th through the early 20th century (National Library of Scotland, no date). Broadsides and broadside ballads successfully communicated news, sometimes of dubious origin, by employing the use of oversized, all-capital-letters headlines, as they were meant to attract attention from a distance (Stock-Allen, 2011), and entertaining storytelling. Though newspapers existed at the time, broadsides were meant to appeal and be accessible to a wide range of people, including those who could not read (Amable, 2021). As time went on, the subject matter tended toward the lurid, such as upcoming executions or local crime, or content that stirred "political agitation" (National Library of Scotland, no date). Their influence can be seen in two common creative choices in news sources that deal in sensationalism today: big, blocky, eye-catching fonts for headlines ("fat face" types, created for use on posters, were developed in 1803) (Library of Congress, no date) and simple, easy-to-understand prose or writing that seeks to stir emotions rather than break down nuance in a voice that emphasizes a news event's most shocking details.

Print as a Platform for Fake News

Newspapers existed concurrently with broadsides and were also responsible for the dissemination of misinformation, often knowingly. Otis (2020) uses media coverage of the Jack the Ripper murders in London as a case study for the propagation of misinformation in the 19th century. Newspapers reporting on the increasing number of women found murdered in

London's East End found that the gorier the details they published, the more newspapers were sold. Journalists began to report on every minute detail uncovered by investigators – however, the more they wrote, the less news they had to print. Since newspapers at the time did not have an established tradition of editorial oversight (Lazer *et al*., 2017), there were no consequences for journalists that published untruths. Newspapers began publishing unconfirmed speculation about the identity of the murderer (often rooted in the ugly anti-Semitism of the time) as well as stories that were wholly made up. In fact, researchers later discovered that some of the famous letters long believed to have been written by the killer were in fact fabricated by a journalist (Otis, 2020).

Newspapers at that time also did not deal strictly in news – like broadsides, they were a forum for all types of writing. In some publications like penny-press papers (cheaply produced newspapers that contained mostly shocking and sensationalistic stories) parody pieces and poems sat alongside current events (Otis, 2020). Current research shows that situating stories of true events alongside content readers understand to be fictional or unlikely can cause them to be less able to distinguish fact from fiction, and less likely to care about that distinction – as a modern example, when fake news is shown in alongside lighthearted life updates from trusted friends on social media, it puts users in a frame of mind where they are not ready to be skeptical of information (Hobbes and Marshall, 2020). The coverage of the Jack the Ripper murders encompassed almost all types of writing under the "fake news" umbrella and set up a framework for future generations of it. Many of the traits of early forms of misinformation, like sensational embellishment, are echoed in the results of my analysis of hyperpartisan news sites, which I will explore more in the Results and Discussion sections.

The 2016 Fake News Crisis

There are numerous other historical examples of misinformation, disinformation, and/or sensationalism causing harm to the public that consumed it – Nazi propaganda campaigns, yellow journalism in the U.S. – but fake news emerged as a particularly alarming problem in the United States in the months leading up to the country's 2016 presidential election. Not only did content from news sites with obvious – and sometimes admitted – political bias like Breitbart and Fox News rise to the top of social shares, bots built to spread disinformation (Bovet and Makse, 2019) ran rampant all over social media, particularly Twitter (Kennedy *et al*., 2022). During his 2016 and 2020 campaigns and all through his presidency, Donald Trump and his team shared on social media and verbally repeated false information that originated from hyperpartisan sites (Gursky and Woolley, 2020; Stelter, 2015), adding to existing tensions in the American public discourse. Though it was combined with other societal forces, the spread of rumors and conspiracies endorsed by the president himself culminated in a violent and deadly breach of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021.

The Role of Digital Platforms

These falsehoods are largely propelled by social media, which provides a platform for cultivating networked publics. Networked publics are a form of community connected initially and sustained by a digital platform, and are communities that would not have formed without the affordances, or "the possibilities for action that are called forth by a social technology or

environment" (Parks, 2010, p. 109) of the particular platform on which it flourished. (For example, Facebook's Events feature, on which a user can create and send an e-vite to other Facebook users, is one of the platform's affordances. Other major social networks, such as Instagram and Twitter, do not offer such a feature.)

From its earliest incarnations, social networking sites have been built with the intention of growing and galvanizing communities (Parks, 2010) (think of the tagline for Myspace, a social network founded in 2003: "A place for friends."), the process of which is significantly affected by the tools offered by and the infrastructure of an individual site. Over time, and especially over the last decade, these networked publics have emerged as a significant driver of misinformation – Facebook, in particular its Groups feature which allows the creation of a closed platform-within-a-platform for a select group of users which is more or less unique among leading social media sites, has become fertile breeding ground for the trade of extremist values and conspiracy theories (Paul, 2021). Marwick and Lewis (2017) further make clear the power of extreme-right networked publics to affect the wider American discourse: the authors trace the path of incorrect or outright hateful ideas circulating in the general American populace from intentionally provocative jokes and memes begun on obscure message boards and platforms to the point at which they travel off their original platforms to the general public, who have no knowledge of the rhetoric from which they were born. Simultaneously, right-wing media borrows talking points from those original sources and synthesizes these ideals into "news," which, due to presentation choices I will dissect further in the Discussion chapter, the wider public interprets as unbiased and wholly true, resulting in the sanitization, and soon after the normalization, of hate, bias, and misinformation. These online gathering spaces of ultra-right wing hate groups, and the ease at which they can share false and misinformed ideas without the disturbance of outside information, has been clearly linked to incidents of violence and public displays of hate, such as the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which left one counter-protestor dead 19 others injured (Daniels, 2018). In this chapter, publics – be they politicians, propagandists, content creators, or regular citizens – continue to harness the tools offered by emerging platforms to share misinformation, disinformation, and other forms of fake news.

2.2 Common Themes in Online Misinformation

"Hyperpartisan News" as a recent concern

The most common theme across all literature reviewed on the subject is stressing that, while the word "misinformation" covers a wide range of news presentation styles ranging from flagrant falsehoods to honest mistakes that make it into print, one subtype has become the primary point of concern for researchers as of 2022. "Hyperpartisan" news – referring to content that takes a strong political stance and sometimes is explicit about its intention to skew to a specific political viewpoint – is the most common and concerning type of misinformation currently spreading online (Xu *et al*., 2020; Mourão and Robertson, 2019; Pennycook and Rand, 2021; Lazer *et al*., 2017; Marwick and Lewis, 2017). This stands in contrast to traditional reporting, which, according to industry standards, should strive to be neutral and reflect multiple perspectives on a news event. Hyperpartisan news falls under the misinformation

umbrella insomuch as creators of hyperpartisan content sometimes purposely remove important context of a news story to further a specific agenda. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on sites that deal in hyperpartisan content aimed at United States citizens to give this project a specific scope and to focus on a population more affected by the spread of fake news than others.

Fake news lives longer

One of the most significant findings in existing research on the path fake news takes across social media comes from 'The spreading of misinformation online' by Michela Del Vicario, *et al*. (2016) In comparing articles about scientific findings based in fact (referred to simply as "science news" in the study) to content that revolved around conspiracy theories, researchers found that the conspiracy articles had a much longer lifespan on social media than the articles based in verifiable fact – likely because social platforms, by design, push the most engaged-with content to the top of peoples' feeds. While the science news experienced a sharp peak in shares shortly after initial posting to social media, content espousing conspiracy theories slowly gathered steam over a longer period of time than science news, eventually amassing more shares:

> *Science news…reaches a higher level of diffusion quickly, and a longer lifetime does not correspond to a higher level of interest. Conversely, conspiracy rumors are assimilated more slowly and show a positive relation between lifetime and size. (Del Vicario et al., 2016, p. 556)*

Relatedly, Sander van der Linden (2022, p. 463) notes that "Twitter has found that false news is about 70% more likely to be shared than true news, and it takes true news six times longer than false stories to reach 1,500 people." Of course, not all hyperpartisan news is conspiratorial, but it can and often does overlap with conspiracy theories circulating in hard-right communities online. See the opening paragraph of Marwick and Lewis' 'Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online' (2017), for an example – the path of the infamous "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory, from message boards to conservative blogs and eventually the mainstream media. These studies provide striking examples of the outsize presence false and distorted information has on social media and its effects on society, confirming the necessity of this study.

One piece of research highlights the role of imagery among far-right supporters: 'The Far Right and January 6, 2021: How Cyber and Real Life Spaces Became One and the Imagery That Facilitated the Process.' In it, scholar Dori LaMar studies visual themes present on signs and clothing used by the January 6 rioters. Many of the pieces of imagery began as memes (running jokes or references that circulate within networked publics) passed around within right-wing communities online or are visualizations of the tenets of the QAnon conspiracy lore and would not be recognizable to non-adherents (LaMar, 2021). While hyperpartisan news sites may not adopt such colloquial imagery, this report provides insight into the motives common amongst people who believe misinformation and how they try to communicate these ideas via visual insignia concocted within their networked publics and the "weaponization of patriotic symbols"

(LaMar, 2021, p. iii). With this project I argue that a similar tactic is sometimes employed by hyperpartisan sites, which will be touched on in the Analysis chapter.

The "Big If True" effect

Another common theme is the lack of motivation from social media users to determine if a piece of news is factually sound or not before spreading it. Misinformation often appeals to a reader's emotions, using sensational language, especially in headlines, to express the main points of a story quickly and in a way most people can understand (Zhang and Ghorbani, 2020). This motivates people to act on the emotions these headlines stir up and share information with their contacts on social media, even if they are unsure of its veracity. Multiple studies state that whether the person is sharing the piece of information because they believe it or are sharing it with a caveat that they are skeptical about its quality does not matter – the more a person is exposed to a story that contains falsehoods, the more they are apt to trust its truthfulness (Hobbes and Marshall, 2020; Lazer *et al.*, 2017). I call this the "big if true" effect – named after a phrase used on social media to recognize that the information shared or consumed could be incorrect, but would have a big impact within a community or the wider culture if it is, in fact, true.

However, simply sharing a piece of fake news, whether a person believes it is true or is sharing it to criticize it, carries the risk of negative consequences (Lazer *et al*., 2017). Fake news can be very hard to correct, as corrective social media posts hardly ever travel as far as the original misinformation (Caled and Silva, 2021). van der Linden highlights an interesting point as well: attempts to correct false news on social media by simply attaching a banner or flag, as major networks like Facebook have done, to the post containing it still leaves a "gap in peoples' understanding" (van der Linden, 2022, p. 464) as to how the information is incorrect, and thus has little effect on stemming the tide of fake news. Of larger importance, however, that multiple pieces of literature express is that mere existence of misinformation can bring about problems, as it erodes the public's trust in more legitimate news outlets (Otis, 2020; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Caled and Silva, 2021; Zhang and Ghorbani, 2020; Robertson and Mourão, 2020). The end result of the spread of misinformation is a "lack of shared reality" (Lazer *et al*., 2017) among the public, and hyperpartisan sites contribute to this issue by, as mentioned in its definition, distorting the truth of a news story to fit a political agenda.

The role of "cognitive sophistication"

A person's likelihood to endorse and propagate content containing misinformation is strongly linked to their level of education and "cognitive sophistication" (DeVega, 2022). His article highlights findings from a study conducted by sociologist Darren Sherkat, where he distributed a vocabulary test to participants. Over 70% of those who missed all 10 questions claimed they would vote for former president Donald Trump in a future election. Trump remains a popular figure in extreme-right networks; many members of which still believe his false claims that the results of the 2020 election, in which Democratic candidate Joe Biden prevailed, were falsified (Kennedy *et al*., 2022).

Prior to his election, Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail employed an extremely casual, conversational speaking style: "Trump's campaign may also have been more attractive to people with low cognitive sophistication and a preference for low-effort information processing because compared to other candidates Trump's speeches were given at a much lower reading level" (DeVega, 2022). This is reflected in the casual writing style that favors simple, everyday speak that extreme-right and other hyperpartisan sites often employ. Another example of the link between the propensity to endorse misinformation and education level emerges in 'Misinformation: susceptibility, spread, and interventions to immunize the public' (van der Linden, 2022): People who scored higher on a cognitive reflection test were better able to tell the difference between true and false news, regardless of whether the news aligned to their political beliefs. In the United States, followers of far-right politics tend to have completed a lower level of education than those who lean left (Pew Research, 2016). The appearance of a site communicates certain ideas and values without relying on words at all, which may make it more appealing to readers of all literacy levels – somewhat like the broadsides mentioned previously. The socially constructed meanings of certain art and design conventions will be explored more in the Analysis chapter, as this will give us a more precise insight into how right-wing news sites' decisions on design may influence sharing and the spread of misinformation as a whole.

Extreme right viewpoints and misinformation

One of the most regularly recurring themes in studies of fake news is that the vast majority of hyperpartisan misinformation that spreads online espouses values that align with the beliefs of the United States' extreme right wing: "Repeat Spreaders and Election Delegitimization: A Comprehensive Dataset of Misinformation Tweets from the 2020 U.S. Election"'s (2022) study of common false narratives surrounding the 2020 U.S. presidential election that circulated on social media found that "all but two of the top 100 'repeat spreader' accounts were supporters of then-President Trump" (Kennedy *et al*., p. 2). Similarly, a supplement to "Influence of fake news in Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election" (Bovet and Makse, 2019) shows that, of web sites hosting fake and hyperpartisan news sampled, the number of far-right leaning sites far outnumbered ones skewing to far left political perspectives and had a substantially further reach in terms of retweets and shares. This is important to consider as hyperpartisan news sites are more likely to align with far-right politics and will likely travel further across the web than articles that, conversely, seek to undermine the right. This is supported by another fact: Pennycook and Rand (2021)'s research, as well as others, shows that those who self-align with the American right wing are far more likely to share fake news (Kennedy *et al*., 2022; van der Linden, 2022; Bovet and Makse, 2019).

Creating an Oppression Narrative

Another theme that emerges in select literature is the theory that hyperpartisan sites, while seeking to project the authority of traditional news media, also make an effort to not just set themselves apart from, but stand in opposition to established nonpartisan offerings. Billard and Moran (2022) and Xu, *et al*. (2020) point out that there is a prevailing belief among creators of fake news sites that the mainstream media is actively ignoring or trying to silence the viewpoints they espouse, and they are more morally righteous; more patriotic than others for

spreading them. The overlapping elements between nonpartisan and hyperpartisan sites, combined with the visual signifiers specific to hyperpartisan sites, simultaneously seek to "establish themselves as legitimate claimants to the label of "news outlet" and differentiate themselves as outlets that can be depended upon to provide a certain class of political information that falls outside the mainstream (Billard and Moran, 2022, p. 1)." This tenor of content appeals to established ideals that float within the digital right-wing community (Gilmore and Rowling, 2019), and was a core element of the most obvious example of the negative effects of the misinformation's spread within right-wing circles: The January 6th riots at the U.S. Capitol, in which a large mob of Trump supporters broke into the building to interrupt the certifying of the results of the recent election, which Democratic nominee Joe Biden won, on the false belief that voting had been tampered with and Trump was in fact the rightful victor.

2.3 The Look and Feel of Fake News

While the above information paints a detailed picture of the past, present, and likely future of how misinformation spreads online, there has not been much research analyzing the content itself. Though there are few, some previous texts have analyzed the structure and common themes of the content of known fake news sites (Mourão and Robertson, 2019; Robertson and Mourão, 2020). Both explore the appearance of online news outlets prone to peddling misinformation, concluding that they draw on design conventions of established media outlets of the past to situate the reader and signal to them that they are as legitimate as news delivery channels that are generally considered trustworthy. This tendency toward mimicking the appearance of legitimate news sources in fake news is supported by another historical precedent detailed by Otis (2020): Benjamin Franklin's fake newspaper. In the 1780s, American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin printed "supplements" to the newspaper the Boston Independent Chronicle that contained writings that pushed for American independence. He designed these to look as close to the Independent Chronicle as possible by using a similar layout and type and included advertisements for an added appearance of authenticity. The news in it wasn't completely fake, but was created solely to further a specific agenda – much like the hyperpartisan news seen today. Currently, this trend toward cribbing the look and feel of traditional news is true for some, but not all major hyperpartisan news sites. It will, however, be important to consider as we examine how the design choices of hyperpartisan sites attempt to signal their legitimacy to readers. Otis (2020) lists a few other visual cues common to poor-quality online news and hoaxes as well: URLs made to look like those of legitimate news sources (for example, one containing a slight misspelling of the name of a trusted news outlet), homepages that only contains a few other articles, no author listed on article pages, and stories that contain no hyperlinks to further information.

Just as there has not been much research into the content of fake news sites, there has been little significant research specifically focused on the design choices common among those sites. However, "Designing Trust: Design Style, Political Ideology, and Trust in "Fake" News Websites" by Thomas J. Billard and Rachel E. Moran, examines the design choices of known fake news sites in a manner similar to how I will dissect the design choices of hyperpartisan news sites.

Among their findings were that that while fake news sites do mimic some elements of legacy news sites, there exists notable differences. For example, they find that fake news sites often favor a more rudimentary layout, featuring stock photos and default fonts that are widely available in common word processors. Conversely, sites representing long-standing newspapers and news outlets that began as websites – hereafter known as "digital-born" outlets – are more likely to use original photos, custom illustrations, a broader color palette in their branding, and were more likely to borrow design conventions from more recent media platforms like blogs (Billard and Moran, 2022). Billard and Moran's assessment of these choices is that "The choice to use "unprofessional" design reflects conservative fake news audiences' normative orientations toward the very idea of professionalism as a feature of untrustworthy "liberal mainstream media (2022, p. 24)."

While it is true that there is some overlap in web design between widely trusted online news sources and hyperpartisan news sites, it also is clear on quick glance that there are some departures from conventional news website design that may distinguish them from mainstream digital media – comparing top right-skewing and outwardly partisan news outlets like Fox News, The Daily Caller, and The Daily Wire, we can see overlap in theme colors, layout, and font styles across more than one of America's leading conservative news outlets. This will be explored further in the Analysis section.

2.4 Conclusion

The overarching theme of existing literature on the misinformation epidemic in the United States is expressing the scope of the harm it has done and has the potential to do to society, both in the United States and globally. Misinformation spread digitally has, on several occasions, driven American citizens to violence – most famously in incidents like "Pizzagate," where:

> *…conspiracy theories spread throughout 4chan and extremist circles of Twitter and Facebook, claiming that Hillary Clinton was deeply involved in a child sex ring and satanic rituals. These claims were then taken up by a series of sites designed to look like mainstream news outlets, which published sensationalist false content to gain advertising revenue. (Marwick and Lewis, 2017, p. 55).*

As a result, in 2016, a man fired an assault rifle in a Washington, DC pizza parlor, convinced he was going to save children from its basement. Though no one was hurt, this incident is a well-known turning point in the United States' increasing number of incidents rooted in conspiracy theories that circulate online, carried out by people with intent to harm. Online misinformation has continued to inspire acts of mass violence like the 2022 mass shooting that took place inside a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, where it was found that the shooter was motivated by racist conspiracy theories disseminated online (Marwick, 2022). The beliefs espoused by those willing to commit violent acts are often circulated via message boards and in digital social circles on mainstream social media channels (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Right-leaning hyperpartisan news outlets then skim content off the rumors that circulate in these spaces

(Marwick, 2022), adding – in conspiracy theorists' eyes – legitimacy to unfounded beliefs that can go on to create real-world harm.

As exemplified in numerous violent incidents, especially ones taking place in the United States, "fake news doesn't become dangerous because it's created or because it is published; it becomes dangerous when members of the public decide that the news is worth spreading" (Mustafaraj, 2017). When sites that spread misinformation adopt design conventions of news outlets long deemed legitimate and trustworthy by the public, they can convince readers of their information's trustworthiness, making it seem more impartial than it actually is and prompting them to share them via their favored publics. This project seeks to identify precisely what elements are common across hyperpartisan sites, and how, if at all, those elements elicit trust from readers in the veracity of the site's offerings.

The ultimate theme of all existing theories surrounding all types of misinformation stress that the effects of its digital proliferation can have real and serious consequences. But while much has been studied about the existence of misinformation online – who spreads it, why they spread it, what platforms they spread it on, and the trajectory it takes as it travels across the web – there is a glaring gap where studies of the actual content of the sites the misinformation originates from should be. Examining the design choices of consistently problematic news sources is a worthy endeavor so that the public may better identify information that may contain bias, an ulterior motive to mislead, or outright untruths.

Chapter 3. Methodology

In this project, I sought to identify aspects of visual web design common to hyperpartisan right-wing news sites aimed at U.S. audiences. As stated in the previous chapter, "fake news" commonly "mimics the features of news, but is low in facticity and deceptive" (Robertson and Mourão, 2020, p. 1012). I examined exactly what elements of design on sites that peddle hyperpartisan right-wing misinformation recall earlier forms of digital news (per literature like Billard and Moran's study), which elements are specific to hyperpartisan news websites, and, using semiological study, determined what sites that spread right-wing misinformation – knowingly or unknowingly – are trying to communicate with some of these design choices.

3.1 Methodology Type

Textual analysis is the study of individual pieces of media and "cultural artifacts, material documentary evidence that is used to make sense of our lives" (Brennen, 2013, p. 193). It can also be broken down into qualitative and quantitative textual analysis, the former being a study of qualities of the text and items within it, and the latter a count of individual elements. In this case, the individual pieces of media are the individual websites I will be examining. Taking these definitions into account, a qualitative approach to textual analysis is the most appropriate form of methodology to answer this research question.

A related methodology is semiotic analysis – the study of "signs" (Brennen, 2013, p. 196), or items like poems, paintings, sounds, body language, and even words themselves that stand in for an embedded, culturally agreed-upon meaning. The meaning of certain items and actions is determined by a combination of knowable facts and cultural conventions. There have already been some theories put forward on the deeper meanings that, purposely or not, the design of fake news sites conveys, already covered in the Literature Review chapter. I applied semiotics to the design of hyperpartisan sites specifically, as it provided insight into the level of trust readers may place in the validity of the content and what compels people to share highly biased information with associates, whether they believe it or not.

Using a combination of these methodologies, I undertook a qualitative textual analysis of four well-known extreme-right skewing news sites, examining the design of the homepage and individual article pages. Those items were then connected to as many common semiotic associations with the design choices (for example, a site's use of a red, white, and blue color scheme evokes U.S. patriotism, as they are the colors of the country's flag) as were apparent in the results and compared to the same elements present in four non-partisan news websites.

3.2 Methodology Process

In order to identify any design choices specific to hyperpartisan news sites, I coded a handful of elements of web graphic design used across news sites of all varieties, such as:

- layout
- font choices for header, headlines, and body text

- type (such as writing in all capital letters vs. sentence case)
- advertisement placement and type (static ad, pop-ups, etc.)
- color scheme
- "story density" (the number of stories featured on a page)
- inclusion of video on article pages

These items, chosen due to their ubiquity across digital publications, were compared to the same design aspects of sources more likely to be considered trustworthy by the public, like the Washington Post and the New York Times (Mitchell *et al*., 2014). I organized these elements via tables and comparison charts, then detailed the findings in several paragraphs. Fonts were identified via an online tool that analyzes images to identify fonts called WhatTheFont. Tools that identify colors in uploaded images are also available online and were used when comparing color palettes used on each site, though this aspect of my research did not reveal anything significant.

When choosing news sites on which to focus my research, I did so based on popularity with U.S. news readers, determined by a combination of the results of studies of news consumer preferences (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014; Magid, 2022), "likes" on Facebook and followers on Twitter, and visitor statistics compiled at semrush.com. All social media follower counts are current as of October 2022; monthly visitors August 2022.

The hyperpartisan sites I examined are:

Publication Name	Description	Social and Site States
Breitbart	Breitbart is a popular conservative news site formerly led by Steve Bannon, who went on to be Chief Strategist for President Donald Trump's administration – a president known to repeat right-wing misinformation in public speeches and through his social media posts (Stelter, 2015).	• **Facebook Likes:** 4.4m • **Twitter Followers:** 1.6m • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 109m
The Daily Wire	The Daily Wire is a conservative media company established by right-wing commentator Ben Shapiro. It regularly platforms other well-known conservative content creators, such as Matt Walsh, Candace Owens, and Dr. Jordan Peterson. Daily Wire personalities have a history of endorsing more radical right-wing opinions through false claims, such as insisting a hospital that performs	• **Facebook Likes:** 2.5m • **Twitter Followers:** 1.1m • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 35.6m

	gender-affirming surgeries on transgender patients is “mutilating and sterilizing” children (Drennen, 2022).	
The Daily Caller	The oldest of these hyperpartisan sites, The Daily Caller was founded by Tucker Carlson, longtime presenter for conservative TV news channel Fox News, in 2010.	• **Facebook Likes:** 5.3m • **Twitter Followers:** 898,400 • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 8.9 million
Fox News	Fox News is the most popular news network in the United States (Johnson, 2022), and their online home, foxnews.com, is the third-most visited site in the United States as of 2022 (Magid, 2022). They are known for taking a conservative stance on current events, and the written content on their site focuses largely on highlighting flaws or missteps of figures on the American political left and offers almost no criticism of the right.	• **Facebook Likes:** 19m • **Twitter Followers:** 22.4m • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 295.7m

As back-ups, I also identified:

- **TheBlaze:** A media company founded by conservative radio host Glenn Beck in 2011, now mostly known as a website.
- **The Federalist:** A conservative-skewing site with a history of publishing false information, speculation, and sensationalism, especially concerning the 2020 election (Reuters, 2020) and COVID-19 (Hagle, 2022).

These were eliminated for final selection due to lower follower count on social media.

I also attempted to choose sites that have a similar publication history: ones whose main method of information delivery is via a website, that did not start as a print publication, and do not present their work in another format like a previously existing television channel or terrestrial radio show – hereafter known as “digital-born” publications, as it is termed in Harmer and Southern’s work (2020). However, as YouTube channels and podcasts are common external offerings amongst all media entities, regardless of level of bias, sites that also offered content in these formats were permitted. The only aberrant option that was selected for study in the Hyperpartisan section is foxnews.com, as it is the fourth-most popular news site in the

United States overall as of October 2022 (Magid, 2022). This was countered with the selection of CNN.com – the digital version of 24-hour cable news network CNN – on the Nonpartisan list.

The Hyperpartisan selections were compared to the sites of news outlets generally considered to be without a significant partisan lean:

Publication Name	Description	Social and Site Stats
The Washington Post	Founded in 1877, the Washington Post is the premiere paper covering U.S. politics. The Washington Post has a legacy of breaking news of major importance to the American public: the Pentagon Papers, for example; a year later reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein exposed the Watergate scandal (*Washington Post company history*, no date). It is currently owned by Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, a company frequently criticized for, among other things, its labor practices (Kantor, Weise and Ashford, 2022). Still, the Washington Post is mostly considered trustworthy by the American public (Mitchell *et al*., 2014).	• **Facebook Likes:** 6.6m • **Twitter Followers:** 19.9m • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 149.7m
The New York Times	The New York Times covers New York City but is considered a paper of record for the United States as a whole (Caulfield, 2017, ch. 28). NYT hosts robust reporting on national and global news and has a staff of correspondents all over the world. It was founded in 1851 and has amassed numerous Pulitzers for its reporting (Pulitzer Prizes, 2022). However, the newspaper has experienced a slight decline in reputation over the last decade, as trust in news media in the U.S. becomes more divided along partisan lines (Pew Research Center, 2012).	• **Facebook Likes:** 18m • **Twitter Followers:** 54.4m • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 619.6m
CNN	CNN.com is the online home of U.S. 24-hour news channel CNN, but it is the second-most visited news site in the US (Magid, 2022). In recent months, CNN has been accused of favoring	• **Facebook Likes:** 34m • **Twitter Followers:** 60.1m

	conservative viewpoints due to recent firings and departures of correspondents who challenge right-wing misinformation (Klein, 2022; Peters, 2022; Mastrangelo, 2022). Its status as the digital home of a 24-hour news channel provides balance for inclusion of Fox News in the Hyperpartisan section.	• **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 573.6m
The Wall Street Journal	WSJ is business-focused, but still covers national news. It is known for being slightly right-leaning, but according to a 2014 study is considered trustworthy across all major American political ideologies (Mitchell *et al*., 2014).	• **Facebook Likes:** 6.7m • **Twitter Followers:** 20.2m • **Unique Monthly Visitors:** 67.2m

The backups chosen for the Nonpartisan section were sites of city-based legacy newspapers with large circulations and a history of excellence in reporting: The Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times.

3.3 Analysis Plan

As web design is a visual communication form, an assessment of visual elements gave me the clearest picture of how, in conjunction with written content, the aesthetic choices of hyperpartisan news sites communicate a particular voice and image to their audience.

Over the course of late October and most of November, I:

1. Analyzed the homepage of each site on both lists. I first made a list of all elements on the page: layout (header, menu bar, columns, ad placement), headline fonts, deck fonts, body fonts, colors, photos, pop-ups if any, article length, and described important qualities (name of font, type of ad, etc.).
2. Did the same for article pages.
3. Created a comparison table for each element (columns: Element/Hyperpartisan Notes/Nonpartisan Notes).
4. Went into further description by writing up a paragraph or two comparing the elements by type of site.
5. Drew general conclusions based on findings.

The web pages were viewed on a 2020 MacBook Air, using Chrome Version 105.0.5195.125 browser. I devoted roughly an hour to an analysis of each site. This approach revealed answers

to the research question by giving me an uncommonly deep and detailed look at the overarching visual themes of right-wing digital news presentation.

3.4 Limitations

To make sure the results of the study were as fair as possible, I thought it was important to compare sites with similar publication histories. I decided to look mostly at digital-born sites – news sites that do not serve as the "digital home" of another outlet such as a television channel or radio show and did not originate as a print publication. However, considering the outsize influence Fox News' website has on consumers of right-leaning news sources, I made an exception for it.

However, there are very few nonpartisan news sites in the United States that are not tied to a previously existing newspaper. Thus, the comparisons are not quite even. Similarly, as there is no national news outlet of record for the United States (Caulfield, 2017, ch. 28), let alone one that is digital-born, I included CNN.com (also a site that represents a news network) to fill that gap. It is the second-most popular news site in the United States (Magid, 2022). This means the results of this study will not be the result of a truly direct comparison.

Also of issue is that posts with links attached, especially ones that link to news articles, only make up a minimal percentage of overall posts on Facebook (Meta, 2022), historically a major driver of right-wing misinformation (Silverman and Alexander, 2016). This means that this project only examines a small subsection of the channels through which Americans are exposed to right-wing misinformation. Further research into the spread of right-wing misinformation online should take this context into consideration.

Lastly, though they are the most current numbers available, the unique visitors per month for each website are slightly outdated.

3.5 Conclusion

A qualitative textual analysis provided the best course of methodological action for this process. By taking a semiotic approach to my research question, I was able to more clearly define the elements that make up the common presentation of hyperpartisan news sites and draw conclusions about the effect the visual presentation of these sites may have on how readers interpret the information presented within them.

In the next chapter, I will present my findings and supplement the resultant data detailed descriptions.

Chapter 4. Results

With this analysis I sought to find what, if any, design choices made by hyperpartisan right-wing American news sites were specific to this type of content. To do this, I compared four major hyperpartisan sites, chosen through a combination of site visit statistics and social media "likes" and "follows," and compared individual design elements to those present on websites for publications known to be less partisan, according to Pew Research from 2014 (Mitchell *et al*.). Analysis found that the overall design of the sites examined exhibited several overlapping elements that were not distinct by partisan affiliation. However, a handful of more subtle themes emerged as particular to nonpartisan and hyperpartisan news sites: letter case, accessibility and style of font, and integration of social media being some. The significance of these themes will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

To present my findings, I created a glossary defining terms frequently used in and specific to this section, which can be found in Appendix 2. Some are print journalism terms applied to similar features of a digital destination – for example, "above the fold" and "deck."

4.1 Process

First, I took an initial look at all the sites I'd be analyzing to familiarize myself with site sections and navigation. Immediately apparent were some differences between the two types, but they were difficult to articulate without further inspection. To start, I wrote down some perfunctory notes to try and capture the look and feel of a site and anything more concrete I noticed. I also began gathering screenshots to support the details I found.

Once I had sufficient information gathered, I synthesized my notes into a spreadsheet that broke down my initial observations by publication into uniform categories: body text font, the presence of advertisements, color scheme, and more. As I began to take an even deeper look at the sites, I drew out individual design elements present on most of the websites (Columns, Menu Bars, Ad Location and Type, etc.), then created uniform phrases to describe features many of these elements exhibited (for example, attaching an "autoplay" note to code the use of videos that did played automatically, which occurred on multiple homepages and article pages regardless of partisan skew). Of course, not all notable features fell into uniform categories – some required unique descriptions that were only used in one instance. I also signed up for subscriptions to the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, as articles are only accessible to paid subscribers. The New York Times requires a subscription to read beyond three articles per month. However, I already had a subscription with which to carry out this research.

After collecting all my data, I found it hard to navigate the spreadsheets I made to organize my results. I transferred the data into individual tables for each item, rather than coding according to publication, making my data much easier to find and quickly compare across websites.

Speaking generally, my research found that the aesthetic design of nonpartisan news outlets was much more sophisticated, incorporating a wider variety of multimedia and interactive elements, and different – sometimes radically different – graphic design for different sections of the site. The hyperpartisan sites generally exhibited more rudimentary design, combining simple text, images, and sometimes video, that remained mostly consistent across pages.

4.2 Major Findings

The font divide
There was a clear divide in fonts used, with hyperpartisan sites favoring sans serif fonts that were available for free or at an affordable price online. Nonpartisan sites all used proprietary fonts created specifically for the company or custom-designed headers and logos. All except one nonpartisan site (CNN) used serif fonts for body text. Sans serif fonts are generally considered easier to read (Hojjati and Muniandy, 2014; Josephson, 2011), while serif fonts, having been developed during the time of print, can conjure up notions of being "stable, polite, mature, formal, assertive, attractive, elegant." (Sheikh, 2007, p. 97).

Font case
The use of words and phrases set in all-capital letters was also a defining feature of hyperpartisan sites, best exemplified in Fox News' regular inclusion of a banner containing a word or phrase in single quotes and all capital letters in the lower left corner of splash images. The Daily Caller also included an all-caps word or phrase in single quotes above splash images. Breitbart seemingly sets homepage titles in capital letters as a style rule.

Embedded social media
The most surprising thing I came across was the hyperpartisan sites' comparative propensity to use embedded social media posts within their written stories, mostly from Twitter. Embedded posts seemed to be used more sparingly across nonpartisan articles, and when they were used, it was usually in relation to a story about the technology. On hyperpartisan sites, it seemed commonplace to fill out a story with social media posts related to the story's theme to support the information or viewpoint they were trying to communicate.

Decks vs. no decks
In print journalism layout, decks are 1-2 sentences of additional description added under a headline in a newspaper or magazine article (see Appendix 2 for image examples). None of the hyperpartisan homepages used decks with their headlines, whereas all nonpartisan homepages included them. This points to hyperpartisan sites' apparent commitment to ease of reading and comprehension and their common impulse to set themselves apart from mainstream media.

GIFs
Though they only appeared on two sites, my most noteworthy finding was an emerging use of GIFs on homepages and article pages, sometimes accompanying reporting on major, quite serious stories like CNN's detailed feature on the 31 October crowd disaster in Seoul. GIFs are an informal type of visual communication, usually used to express a reaction to commentary on

social media and confined to use on platforms or personal blogs (Miltner and Highfield, 2017). News sites' repurposing of the GIF's affordance of looping video for informational, rather than reactionary, communication is what makes this finding so surprising.

4.3 Homepage Elements

Below is a table showing each design element examined on homepages and article pages for each site, both nonpartisan and hyperpartisan. More detailed descriptions of findings follow.

Some elements were not present on both site sections or did not change depending on section, and therefore the list of elements is not identical for homepages and article pages.

Homepages	**Article Pages**
Header Font and Type	--
Menu Bar	--
Number of Columns	Number of Columns
Headline Font	Headline Font
Deck Font	Deck Font
Font Case	Font Case
Ad Location	Ad Location
Ad Type and Pop-Ups	Ad Type and Pop-Ups
Color Scheme	Color Scheme
Story Density	--
Photos and Art	Photos and Art
Use of Video and Autoplay	Use of Video and Autoplay
--	Social Embeds

Header font

A header – also called a masthead or nameplate – is a staple of newspaper design. It acts as a paper's logo and communicates visually that the publication is a newspaper – and all the cultural assumptions of neutrality and gravitas that come with that (Billard and Moran, 2022).

The fonts used in the headers of the sites I looked at can be separated into two categories: Specially commissioned and freely accessible. I confirmed that three of the nonpartisan sites use a proprietary font or design created especially for the company, some of them centuries ago. The Washington Post, for example, uses a digitized version of their historical header, in use since its founding in 1877 (Dvorak, 2017), with a deck bearing the slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness" that was added in 2017. The Wall Street Journal's header appears to be a custom font called Escrow. Two of the four nonpartisan sites – the New York Times and the Washington Post – use a header set in an Old English (also called Gothic or Blackletter) style font, a long-standing staple of newspaper design.

Hyperpartisan sites all used open-source fonts (fonts available for free) or fonts available at an affordable price in their header. Fox News uses a logo rather than a traditional header, which incorporates a slightly altered version of Franklin Gothic, a widely accessible font common to word processors. Its television counterpart CNN has a stylized illustration of the letters "CNN" for a logo, designed for them at the channel's inception in 1980 (*The CNN (1980) logo*, 2009).

Menu Bar

Very little variation is apparent in the placement and content of homepage menu bars across all sites examined. All provide clear navigation. The only major difference is not in the design, but in the content: The Daily Wire, the Daily Caller, and Breitbart use subsection names that are less straightforward, highly colloquial, and seem meant to provoke strong emotional reactions in readers by referencing controversial topics. For example, Breitbart offers a sub-section titled "Border-Cartel Chronicles"; the Daily Caller "Narcofornia" under a section titled "Patriots." These inflammatory, emotionally provocative titles draw on historical sensational journalism trends, the aims of which will be further detailed in the Discussion chapter.

Several sites employ the use of what I called "two-story" menu bars, displaying general sections at the top and a second line of more specific topics that tend to lean toward trendy ideas or developing news underneath. For example, in November of 2022, the lower bar of Fox News' menu bar used an "Elon Musk" tag, while CNN had one titled "Ukraine-Russia." The sections featured in the main menu bars remained relatively the same across all sites: U.S., World, Politics, Entertainment, Sports, etc.

Number of Columns

When taking note of the number of columns on a homepage, I attempted to assess how many columns were visible "above the fold," or above the bottom of the browser window when the page is loaded, as the layout of columns, and the presence of columns entirely, can change as a homepage extends below the bottom of the browser window. However, the presence of a banner ad – the impact of which will be discussed later – at the very top of almost every website proved a significant obstacle, as it often crowded out almost all the topmost editorial content on a homepage. Also complicating matters was the fact that, on some sites, the homepage layout can change as breaking news or developing stories emerge. The Washington Post's middle column, except in the event of major news, is also bisected horizontally above the fold, the bottom half populated with stories separate from that which occupies the top section. This could be considered a third column.

Fig. 1 (left) and Fig. 2 (right). The New York Times homepage on 24 October 2022 (left) as opposed to 7 November, 2022 (right).

Overall, there was little variation in the number of columns visible above the fold on all news sites I looked at. All except one fell within the range of 2-3 columns across the homepage. The only outlier was the Wall Street Journal, which features four.

Headline Font

There is a clear divide in use of serif and sans serif fonts between the nonpartisan and hyperpartisan homepages in all text. Overall, far more use of sans serif fonts was seen across hyperpartisan sites, with nonpartisan ones clearly favoring fonts with serifs and ornamental lettering – something I observed in the "Header" section.

We also see proprietary fonts in use for headlines on nonpartisan homepages: NYT Cheltenham, CNN Sans (Hill, 2016) Escrow (Font Bureau, 2016), and "Postoni," a modified version of classic font Bodoni special to the Washington Post (Type Network, no date).

Deck Font

Two of the nonpartisan sites use serif fonts for decks, and two use sans. With the exception of CNN, the nonpartisan sites used a serif inverse of their headline font – sans serif for decks. None of the hyperpartisan sites use decks at all. Some sites (Washington Post, CNN) used bullet points instead of a traditional deck – I counted these as a deck as well, as they perform the same function.

Font Case

As covered in the literature review, a long-standing hallmark of sensational content is the liberal use of entire words and phrases set entirely in capital letters. Since the advent of the internet, using all-capital letters for written communication is interpreted as "shouting" (McCulloch, 2019) and three out of our four hyperpartisan sites indulged in an all-caps case style in part or all of headlines. Fox's homepage overlays a striking all-caps word or phrase over the bottom left corner of the lead image, and Breitbart uses only all-capital letters for headlines. These stylistic decisions create the impression of alarm or urgency, consistent with the design history of written sensationalist content.

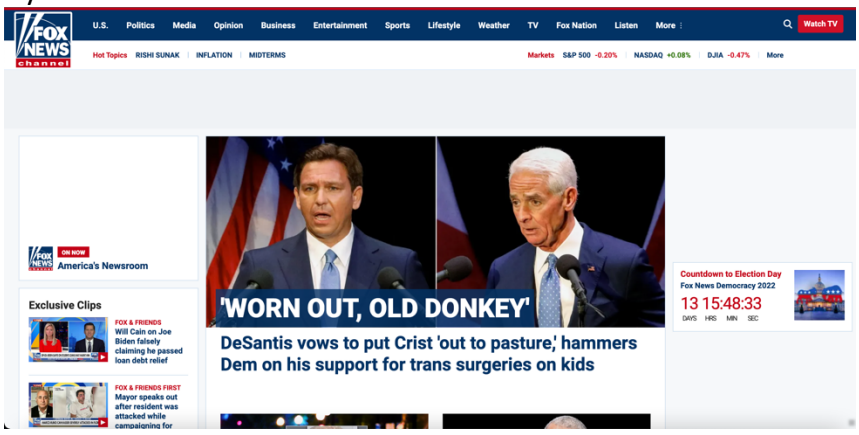


Fig. 3. The Fox News homepage on 25 October 2022, showing the all-capital phrase overlaid on the splash image.

Nonpartisan sites did not use all-caps for headlines, or at least did not during the timeframe I carried out my research. The only use of all-caps on nonpartisan sites was in labels for special types of coverage, such as in a link leading to live, constantly-updated coverage of a consequential Supreme Court hearing on affirmative action that took place on 31 October 2022. In contrast, Fox News, the Daily Caller, and Breitbart all make use of all-capital words and phrases. The Daily Wire does not use all-capital words in text on the page but does in some of the custom illustrations used to promote exclusive content like video series.

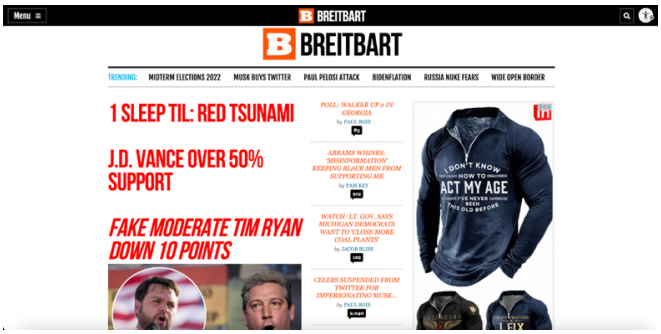
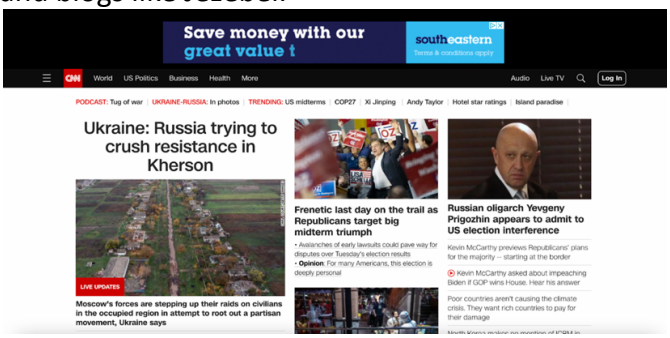


Fig. 4 (left) and Fig. 5 (right). An image used to promote a Daily Wire video feature (left) and the Breitbart homepage (right) showing use of all-capital letters.

Ad Location

All sites except the Daily Wire employed the use of a banner ad at or near the top of the homepage and other pages, which could sometimes be very large. This type of ad is common across web publications, also appearing on other news sites like Slate, pop-culture oriented outlets like BuzzFeed, and blogs like Jezebel.



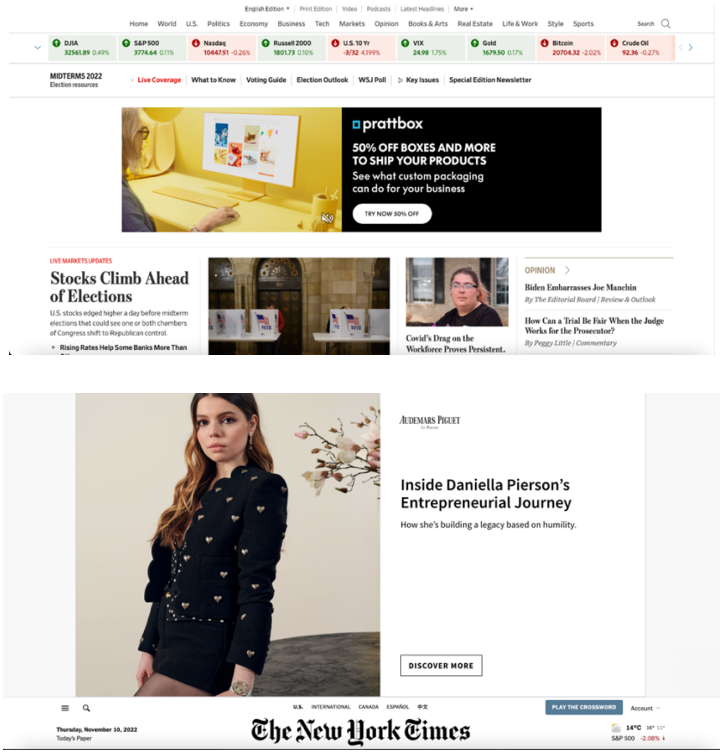
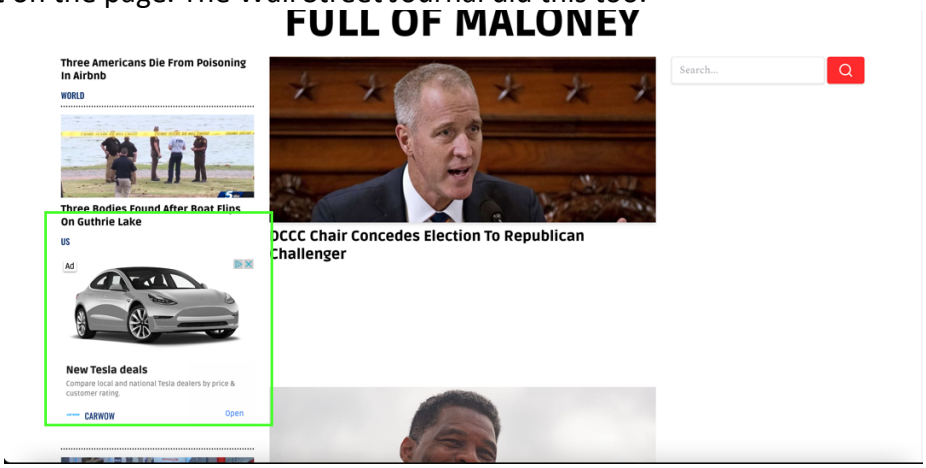


Fig. 6 (top), Fig. 7 (middle), and Fig. 8 (bottom). Examples of banner ads in various sizes at top of CNN's (top), the Wall Street Journal's (center), and the New York Times' (bottom) homepages.

Other than that, there was little consistency in the placement of ads, appearing everywhere from the right column to interspersed through the length of the page between links to content. On most, no ads besides the large top ad were visible above the fold, but two hyperpartisan sites hosted no ads for external products on their homepage at all. The other two – the Daily Caller and Breitbart – featured ads in line with the content, meaning it was not confined to its own separate section like the banner and right column ads, and used similar or the same fonts as other text on the page. The Wall Street Journal did this too.



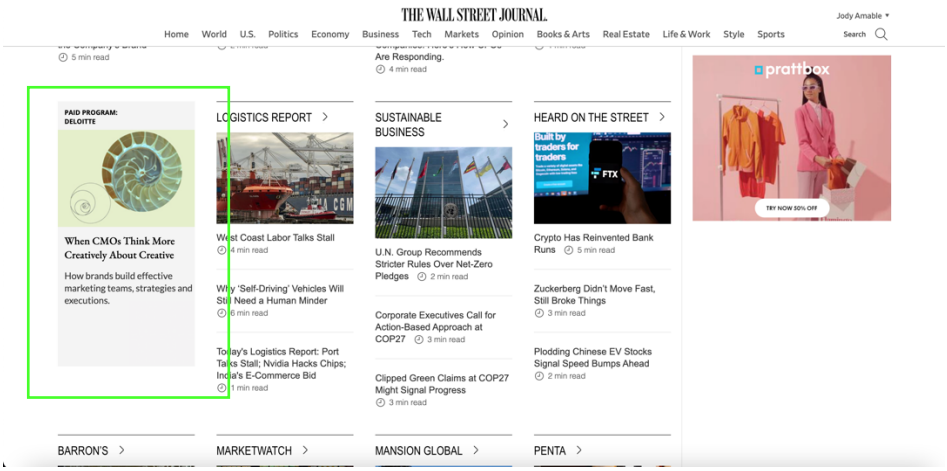


Fig. 9 (top) and Fig. 10 (bottom). Ads in line with other content on the Daily Caller's (top) and the Wall Street Journal's (bottom) homepages.

Ad Type and Use of Pop-Ups

There are generally two types of advertisements used on websites: static and dynamic. Static ads are shown to all users, while dynamic ads interact with a user's search history to serve them advertisements for products they may have viewed online or that are related to previous browsing activity. In my research, most homepages displayed a mix of dynamic and static ads, often with advertisements for other products from the site's brand (for instance, a call to action to subscribe to an outlet's newsletter or a link to their podcast series).

Another sub-type of ad present on many of these sites is the "chumbox" ad. Often labeled "Promoted Stories" or "Around The Web," they link to external articles that often focus on the shocking and the weird – articles often hosted on straightforward "fake news" sites themselves. They're free to add to a site (Lopatto, 2020) and are often laid out in rigid rows and columns with uniformly sized photos and text, making them easy to identify. Breitbart uses these on the homepage, but there will be more when we look at article pages.

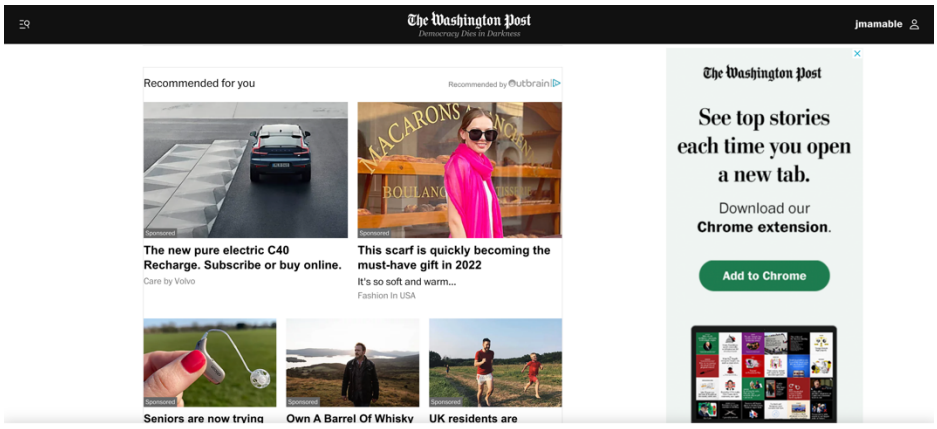


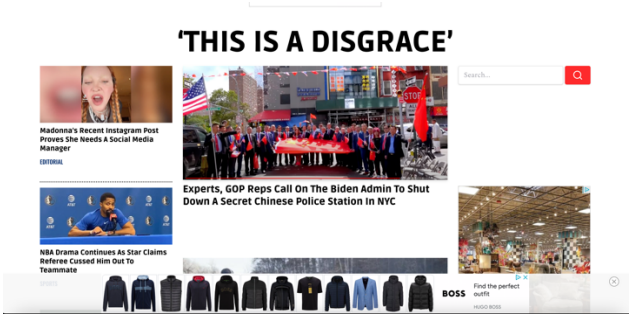
Fig. 11. An example of "chumbox" ads on a Washington Post article.

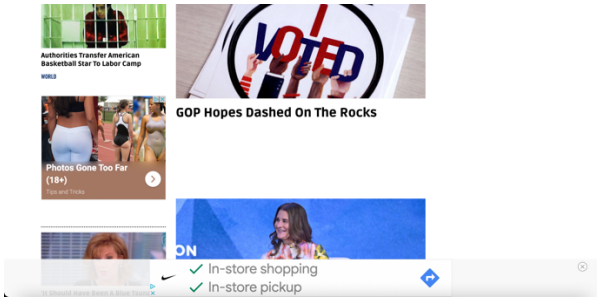
Color Scheme

Red is the most common color used, seen across both hyperpartisan and nonpartisan sites. Nonpartisan sites favored black and white, with CNN incorporating red to match their logo. Two hyperpartisan sites adopted a red, white, and blue color scheme, with Breitbart used red and orange as featured colors and Daily Wire red and gray. A notable difference is that on hyperpartisan sites, the colors are deeper: Breitbart's orange is vivid, and Daily Wire and Daily Caller use an orange-red. Instead of straightforward red, white, and blue, Fox News uses brick red, white, and navy blue. The red, white, and blue color scheme is evocative of the American flag, and invokes a sense of patriotism in readers – the weaponization of patriotism being a core feature of modern American right-wing politics (Gilmore and Rowling, 2019). While this color scheme only appeared in half of the sites examined in this report, it appears in several other hyperpartisan publications: Turning Point USA, One America News Network, and Newsmax, to name a few. (Similarly, sites like the Federalist and the Washington Examiner include an image of a bald eagle, the national bird of the United States, in their header.)

Story Density

As defined in the Appendix, "story density" is a term I've coined to quantify the number of stories visible on the page of a news site. This proved difficult to calculate, and the results that were revealed did not give an accurate picture of the "density" of stories to one page. Once again, the banner ad at the top of most homepages pushed editorial content to the lower 1/3rd or 1/4th of the page, creating cut-off text and images, which compromised a completely accurate collection of data. In that way, there existed little variation in story density above the fold. Most homepages fell between two and three stories fully visible, with cut-off text and images counted as "half." The Daily Caller and Breitbart's story density was skewed by unusual spacing – the Daily Caller exhibits wide gaps in between stories, and Breitbart's right column abruptly ends while the middle column continues down the page.





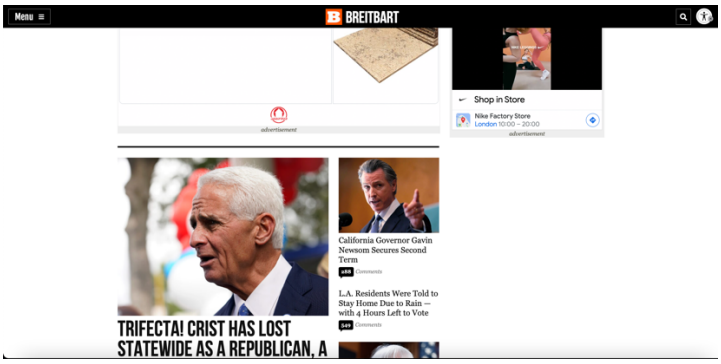


Fig. 12 (top left), Fig. 13 (top right), and Fig. 14 (bottom). Examples of unusually wide spacing on the Daily Caller homepage and Breitbart (bottom) homepage.

Photos and Art

Images to accompany articles are common across all media sites. Most of the sites I analyzed use a splash image on the homepage to promote a lead story. In the Daily Wire's case, this was replaced by a video player containing a trailer for their latest exclusive video offering. The only possible exception was Breitbart, which did make use of photos on the homepage, but they were not visible without scrolling down. On Breitbart's homepage there were far fewer photos accompanying headlines in general, outnumbered by those used in advertisements.

Completing a visual analysis of the photos used on hyperpartisan sites versus those on nonpartisan revealed that hyperpartisan sites are more likely to use photos, on both the homepage and article pages, culled from wire or stock image services. Nonpartisan sites make use of a combination of wire images and those taken especially for them.

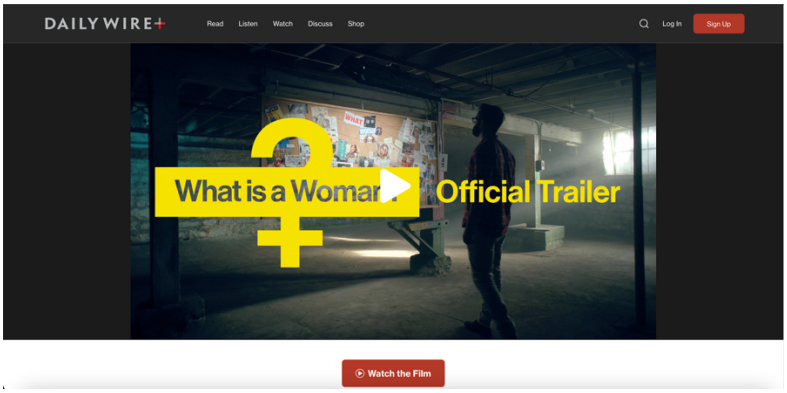


Fig. 15. The Daily Wire homepage's lead video, immediately visible above the fold, on 19 November 2022.

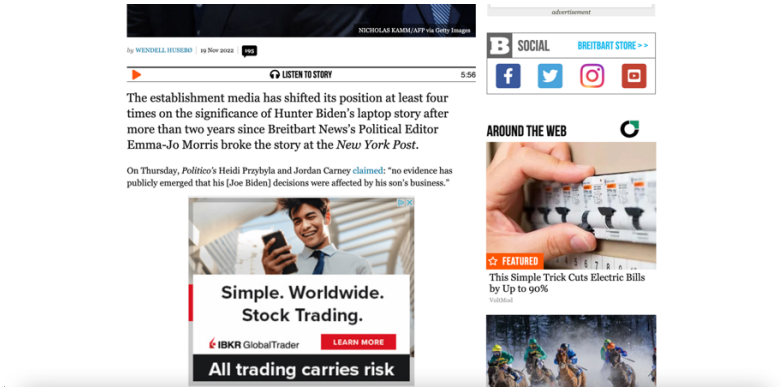
Video and Use of Autoplay

All sites incorporated, at some point during my research, video on their homepages, but with some notable differences. The Daily Wire features a video player that takes up all browser space on the homepage before scrolling down, and Fox News displays an entire left column devoted to video clips. For nonpartisan sites, videos on the homepage were mostly confined to a special "Video" section further down on the page. Interestingly, I noticed GIFs used in place of lead images and thumbnails on more than one homepage. Fox News, on one day I visited, used a GIF as a thumbnail image for a smaller story, as did CNN for a major above-the-fold splash image on November 5. None of the sites that featured videos on their homepages employed an autoplay function, but a handful did on article pages, which I will discuss in the next section.

4.4 Article Page Elements

Columns

The number of columns present on article pages across all sites dropped to 1-2, with some presenting a large column for the body of the article and a thinner one to the right for advertisements and links to other stories on the site. On some sites, the number of columns changed according to type of article. Breitbart had a particularly busy article page, with a larger left column featuring the article and a right column displaying a combination of both dynamic and chumbox ads, links to their social media profiles, and links to other stories on the site with comparatively little space in between that extended well past the end of the article body.



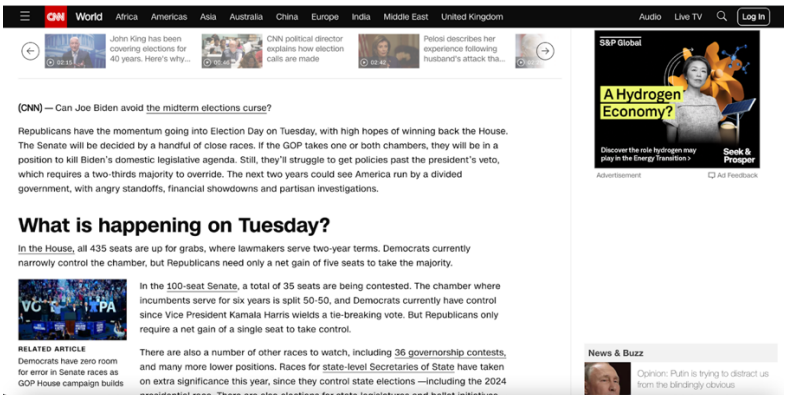


Fig. 16 (top) and Fig. 17 (bottom). Breitbart's right-column ad space (top) and CNN's (bottom).

Headline Font

For nonpartisan sites, the headline font per article page varied greatly. As they mimic the newspapers they stemmed from (Cooke, 2005) layout and design of individual article pages sometimes changed depending on the site section they appeared in, which sometimes included the changing of fonts. Hyperpartisan sites may use different fonts for headlines than on the homepage, but use that same font across all article pages.

Fig. 18 (left) and Fig. 19 (right). A New York Times news article page (left) and magazine article page (right) from 8 November 2022.

Deck Font

Nonpartisan sites used the same headline/deck font pairing established on the homepage for news articles. Three out of four of the hyperpartisan sites did not use decks on their article pages at all.

Font Case

All nonpartisan sites used sentence case in article content except for the occasional use of all-caps in an article's dateline, which is standard. Only Breitbart wrote some headlines in all caps. In the case of the Daily Caller and Fox News, the title that appears on an article page is sometimes different from the corresponding headline on the homepage. Even when the headline text remains the same, the all-capital headlines seen on the homepage do not carry over.

Fox News also intersperses links to other stories with all-caps text in the text of articles.

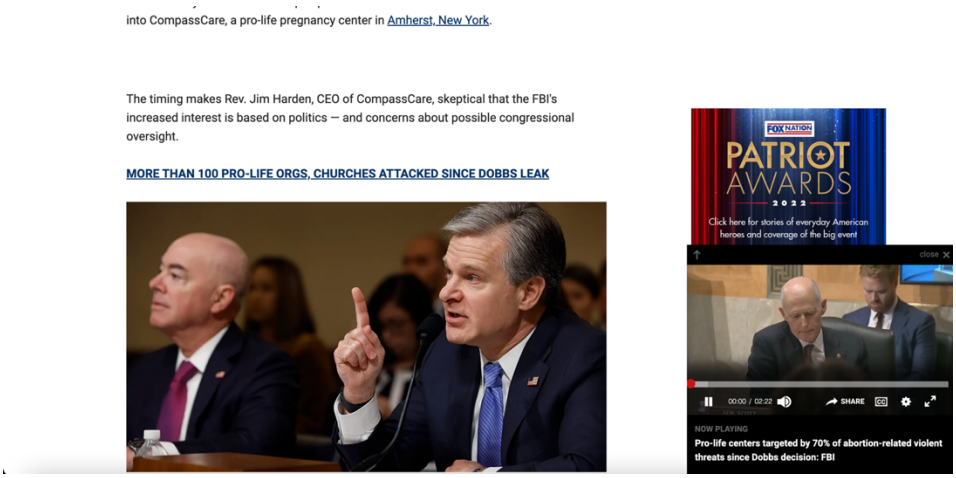


Fig. 20. A Fox News article with an all-caps link to another story inserted between article body elements.

Body Font

Once again custom fonts are seen in use for the nonpartisan sites. CNN again uses CNN Sans, and the Wall Street Journal a specially designed font called Exchange (Frere-Jones, 2017). The New York Times and the Washington Post use Georgia for their body font.

However, the examination of body fonts provides two exceptions to the serif/sans serif divide I noted earlier. For article body text, CNN uses a sans serif font (CNN Sans) and Breitbart uses a serif font (Georgia).

Ad Location

The locations of ads remained relatively unchanged from the site's homepages. For Breitbart, however, the number of ads incorporated into the body of articles was striking: In a 250-word article, two ads interrupted the body text. On a 770-word article, eight ads were present within the article text. Compare that to CNN, where a 2,000-word article sampled exhibits one ad interrupting the article body; the rest neatly tucked away in the right column and at the end of the article itself.

Some articles contained blank spaces that appeared to be reserved for ads or were marked "ADVERTISEMENT," but the ads did not load.

Ad Type and Use of Pop-Ups

All sites except the Daily Wire, which does not display ads for external products, used the standard static and dynamic banner ads. Many sites also made use of chumbox ads on article pages. Two of our hyperpartisan sites use pop-up ads for either external advertisers or their own products. The Daily Caller has a banner ad that pops up along the bottom of article pages, and the Daily Wire includes video players promoting their film projects in the body of articles, which pop out into lower right color when you scroll past, much like CNN and Fox News.

Color Scheme

Color schemes remain largely the same on article pages as they are on homepages. The only difference is that different colors may be introduced depending on the section or if it's a special report. However, the basic infrastructure of the site (header, menus, and navigation) keeps the same basic color scheme exhibited on the homepage.

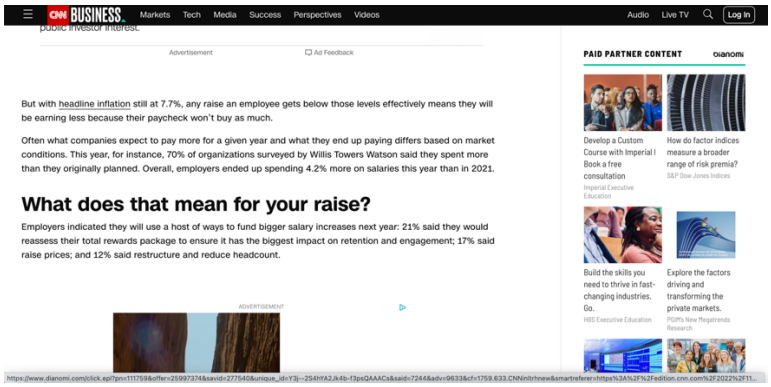


Fig. 21 (top) and Fig. 22 (bottom). The New York Times' midterm elections page (top) and an article from CNN's Business section (bottom). Note the introduction of red-orange and light blue in the New York Times' "2022" banner for their special election coverage and the inclusion of seafoam green in CNN's Business section.

Embedded Posts

Embedded social media posts were not originally on the schedule of elements to study. In my reading, I found that Harmer and Southern (2020)'s report focused extensively embedded tweets being an increasingly common way to support arguments and claims in news articles, so I decided to add it to my list of elements to inspect. Nonpartisan outlets seemed to use embedded posts sparingly, but three of the four hyperpartisan sites (Daily Caller, Breitbart, and the Daily Wire) used them often. In a random sampling of hyperpartisan article pages, I encountered embedded social posts within 2-3 randomly selected stories, whereas on nonpartisan sites I went through around 4-6 before I found one.

This could be related to a detail also in Harmer and Southern's study: "Digital-born journalists made much more use of digital affordances (2020, p. 2245)." All four hyperpartisan sites are digital-born publications (foxnews.com was developed concurrently with the television channel (Wayback Machine, no date)), and thus the staff may be more in tune with social media – or the nonpartisan sites, all born from other forms of media with sometimes centuries-long histories and style customs that readers are long familiar with, might be more cautious about investing in new forms of information delivery.

Photos and Art

Hyperpartisan sites used mostly wire photos and stock images, whereas the nonpartisan options displayed many photos captured by in-house photographers. GIFs were also used on some CNN article pages. On nonpartisan sites, articles from certain sections (for example, arts and culture) may use a commissioned illustration instead of a photograph. Only on the Daily Wire was custom art in place of photos on article pages observed on hyperpartisan sites.

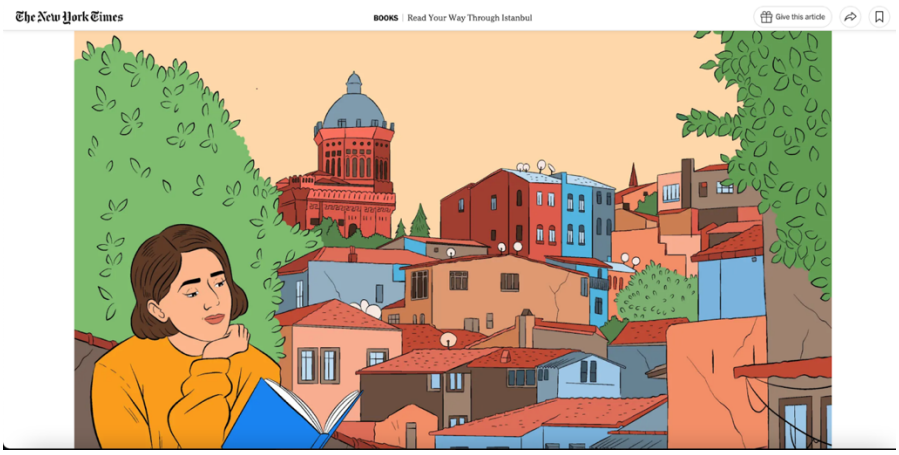


Fig. 23. An example of custom art taking the place of a lead photograph in a story.

Video and Use of Autoplay

Fox News almost always used a video in place of a lead image on article pages, and when scrolled past, it sometimes popped out into the lower right corner and continued playing. CNN did the same for some articles, but not all, and the videos did not pop out. Their use of video to replace other media on these sites is not surprising, as both brands are primarily television networks.

The most obtrusive implementation of video was seen on the Daily Wire's site, where they heavily promote featured videos available only to subscribers. Video players containing the trailers interrupt the body of articles, and also pop out into the lower right corner of the page and continue playing unless closed by the reader.

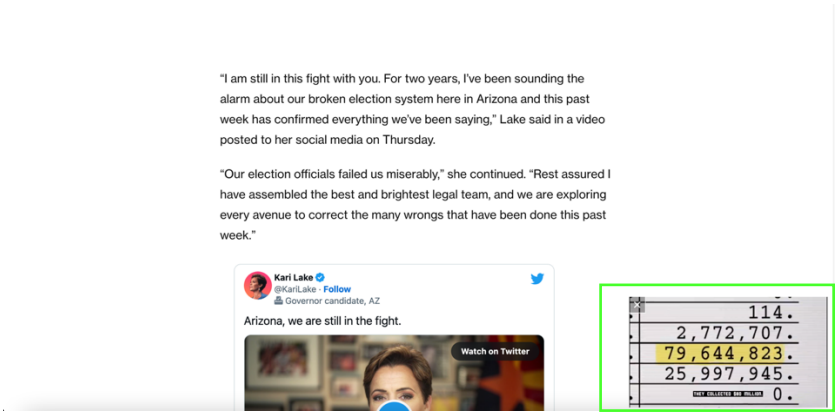


Fig. 24. An example of the Daily Wire's pop-out video feature.

Chapter 5: Discussion

For this research project, I established the question: What are the common aesthetic characteristics of hyperpartisan right-wing American news sites? My thesis argues that the main aesthetics of these types of news outlets, increasingly relied upon for information by social media users, clash with those established in mainstream digital news: all-capital titles, widespread use of sans serif fonts, fonts that are available for free to the public (as opposed to those commissioned by the company), and less reliance on decks.

In this chapter I will reflect on the findings revealed by my analysis and how they respond to my research question by connecting them with existing literature and adding new findings that build upon previous studies. The design choices distinct to hyperpartisan news sites are few, but the ones that exist are obvious and strongly suggest that the aims of these news organizations are not so much to inform as to stoke outrage, panic, and other strong emotions to further galvanize right-wing communities by relying on some very old hallmarks of sensational journalism design, as covered in the literature review. Broadly speaking, hyperpartisan news sites' aesthetic tendency to remain static in design across all parts of the site, retain easy-to-read text in all textual elements, eschew extraneous text like decks, and make the visual elements of the actual article content attention-grabbing are linked to a desire to get a desired message across quickly and with impact, which encourages sharing via social media channels – according to the sources covered in the literature review, the need to get information across quickly and loudly has always been a core component of sensationalism and fake news. The widespread use of the hallmarks of sensational news presentation also facilitates the entrenching of pre-existing beliefs, which in turn connects to the theory that the mere circulation of a piece of information within an online community, even in the face of factual information that counteracts it, can drive people further into belief in false information, which is a driving force in inspiring real-life violence (Marwick, 2022).

5.1 General Aesthetic Themes

In general, hyperpartisan sites kept most design and content elements simple and easily digestible compared to the nonpartisan ones, possibly to cater to the average level of "cognitive sophistication" of American right-wing adherents, as discussed in the literature review, or to encourage dissemination on social platforms by keeping distractions to their appeals to strong emotions to a minimum. The predilection toward sans serif fonts – fonts perceived to be easier to read on device screens than ones with serifs (Hojjati and Muniandy, 2014; Josephson, 2011) – removes a barrier for those with lower literacy and who, as pointed out in the literature review, gravitate toward short, colloquial statements that can be digested quickly. This adoption of traditional sensational forms of news delivery, also detailed in the literature review, is also reflected in hyperpartisan sites' liberal use of all-capital words and phrases. Fox News provided the clearest and most oft-repeated example of this, overlaying a word or phrase on all homepage splash images and frequently affixed an introductory all-caps word or phrase to article titles on the homepage, ranging a simple directive to "WATCH" video content to prefacing titles of articles about controversial subjects with inflammatory,

disproportionately alarmist statements like “MIGRANT FLOOD.” The Daily Caller also did this, placing a word or phrase in single quotes above the homepage splash image instead of on the photo, and prefaced other titles with all-caps lead-ins. Fox News also intersperses links to other stories within the body of articles, identified by entire titles set in bold, all-capital letters.

5.2 Creating an Outrage Community

As discussed in the Analysis section, setting a word in all capital letters, especially in digital communication, indicates shouting, panic, or alarm. This practice has existed since at least the days of broadsides and the penny press, as evidenced by existing research on the history of fake news detailed in the literature review. Fear and similarly strong emotions inspire people to take action (Hobbes and Marshall, 2020), like share in networked publics, and the single point of the short statements the alarm and panic is expressed through, as opposed to nonpartisan publications’ tradition of lengthy feature stories that explore a current event’s many nuances, is easier to get across on a busy social media site. If a social media user clicks through to the site, these choices would be more likely to prompt sharing on social media than measured, neutral design that adheres to previously established traditions of news presentation. An additional factor, noted in Xu, *et al*.’s report, is that strong emotions created by these design choices strengthen the bond between readers and between readers and the creators of the content: “Online space is filled with emotions as collective grievance attracts like-minded people and affective storytelling drives affective publics to take actions.” (2020, p. 10). Design choices, along with the fact that people are more likely to share information that skews to the shared beliefs of their community (Lazer *et al.*, 2017; Caled and Silva, 2021; Pennycook and Rand, 2021; Xu *et al*., 2020), creates closed loops of information within networked publics online. Hyperpartisan sites’ more frequent engagement of embedded social media posts is related to this too, and seems to indicate an understanding on the part of the site’s creators and contributors of how powerful right-wing networked publics are. Embedding posts from users sharing information they already agree with, or users they may already be familiar with, adds, to fans of the publications, legitimacy to the information being presented. It’s also worth noting that most of the embeds I came across were from Twitter – along with Facebook, one of the most powerful platforms in the propulsion of misinformation on social media (Kennedy *et al*., 2022). An additional relevant point is that Fox News developed a website alongside the creation of the television network – a clear sign that they recognized the power of the web to create community and reach readers from the very start.

5.3 Communicating the “Oppression” Narrative

As covered in the literature review, newer studies theorize that hyperpartisan sites have established a unique voice that attempts to assert themselves as an authority on par with traditional news media, but also as righteously rabble-rousing upstarts that are giving a voice to the voiceless – even though, within the last decade, right-wing lawmakers have controlled American Congress, had a majority in the Supreme Court, and occupied the White House. A way of achieving this is by combining the common aesthetics of old-guard news that visually signify legitimacy with both rudimentary web design conventions, like uniform layout across the site or

widely-available fonts, and adoption of more colloquial, recently innovated forms of communication like social media embeds and videos – something I found most mainstream news sites have not incorporated as smoothly into their regular news presentation. Hyperpartisan sites' harnessing of these more recent forms of communication like embedding social media posts in articles and more readily presenting a mix of multimedia content on the homepage, means their content is more familiar-seeming to their readers and less intimidating than a long, verbose news article – and therefore is more shareable, as evidenced in the 'Widely Viewed Domains' section of Meta's 'Widely Viewed Content Report' (2022), which shows that the top 5 domains from which content posted to Facebook are non-news sites. This achieves their intended balance of presenting themselves as oppressed in voice but forging ahead with their message any way they can, using any tools they have available – the way an underground newsletter or zine may make use of the resources they have on hand, no matter how outdated they are. Much like the clash of old and new exhibited in the sites' design, the integration of social media affordances itself shows that, while data shows that right-wing Americans have on average completed a lower level of traditional education than Democratic-aligned ones, they are resourceful when it comes to tools available to appeal to their associated networked publics, and want to appear so to their fellow conservatives – perhaps building on the "hard-working" ethos of the American Republican party (Gilmore and Rowling, 2019).

5.4 Conclusion

All of these choices combined speak to a deep knowledge of their audience. Though, as shown in the Sherkat study, right-wing adherents generally possess a lower level of traditional education, evidence suggests that, counterintuitively, they are more digitally savvy – or at least those creating the digital content that has a direct impact on their political allegiances are (Halper, 2020; Hatmaker, 2020). Overall they are eager to be seen not as misinformation peddlers but as scrappy, grassroots band of outsiders that are oppressed by legacy media, and the tendency of the hyperpartisan sites to be simultaneously welcoming of social media affordances but comparatively crude in design to nonpartisan sites supports that. The ability of hyperpartisan content's distinct visual and textual style to mold and sustain them, detailed in this chapter, is a major component in attaching an air of legitimacy to false or extremely biased content presented as news online.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

With this project I sought to identify what, if any, design choices were specific to news websites that expressed a clear bias toward the American extreme-right viewpoints. To do so I compared them to websites of outlets considered to be nonpartisan, as determined by a Mitchell *et al*.'s study from 2014. My project found the individual elements were mostly the same, however a few things stood out as specific to the hyperpartisan sites I examined: a preference for sans serif fonts, more frequent engagement of embedded social media posts, and the use of autoplay videos and pop-out video players among them. It also considers more strongly the "partisan" in "hyperpartisan" – that design choices signal an allegiance to right-wing politics in various ways and, somewhat counterintuitively, the comparatively crude design signals American right-wing content creators' imagined status as silenced underdogs speaking up for oppressed beliefs, rather than them trying to assert their legitimacy by adopting the exact same design of mainstream nonpartisan news sites – and the relationship between this and their visual design. These observations add a new layer of insight into the power of media to propel falsehoods and misinformation among networked communities, resulting in harmful real-world effects.

Limitations

This project presented some limitations in research. For example, I worked with a very small sample size due to time constraints. Even with a quick glance there can be seen other design conventions common to right-wing media that, by chance, did not present strongly in my sample: headers in gothic fonts (a choice that replicates design traditions of regular newspapers), or the use of red, white and blue, bald eagles, and other examples of the far right's "weaponization of patriotic symbols" (LaMar, 2021).

Another limitation is that, as stated earlier in this report, "nonpartisan" isn't a totally accurate descriptor of the outlets I chose to compare the hyperpartisan sites against. All four nonpartisan outlets have been accused by media watchdogs and social media users of expressing a conservative bias or harboring conflicts of interest. However, they were chosen for their reputations amongst the public as being generally neutral in political stance, based on a Mitchell *et al.*'s study from 2014, and in terms of recognizability and readership size among the public. Still, this does not give a fully accurate, balanced comparison of the two reporting styles.

Future Research

Future research should take an even deeper look than this report has. Due to time constraints, I worked with an extremely small sample size that does not give an appropriately nuanced portrayal of the full right-wing media landscape in the United States. There are also many more design elements that can be examined such as font size, incorporation of charts and data visuals, or stylistic photo choices (for example, an image of a left-wing politician with their eyes half-closed, or one of a Democratic leader laughing juxtaposed against an article on a serious topic). Another constraint of this report is its geographic and cultural focus on the United States. While, as stated in earlier parts of this report, the United States has been experiencing

an unprecedented fake news crisis for several years that has resulted in violence, the scourge of fake news is certainly not limited to its shores: For example, Otis' book (2020) tells an anecdote about a rumor spread via WhatsApp users in Mexico, which resulted in two innocent men murdered by a vigilante mob, and two of the most notable incidents of hate-inspired murder in the last decade and a half occurred overseas – Norway in 2011 and New Zealand in 2019. Lastly, this report does not incorporate other channels of right-wing misinformation – television or online video broadcasts and talk radio being other popular ones (Mitchell *et al*., 2014). It would be beneficial in the future for researchers to take a much deeper look at more sites over a longer period of time, and add more global and holistic perspective on the effects of fake and hyperpartisan news to the growing body of research.

This project also ends just before the most consequential step in the typical trajectory of fake news on the web: the point at which it is posted to social media. The effects of the visual design of a website only are activated when a person clicks through to the article that has been posted, which is not a guarantee. As stated in the Methodology chapter, a report from Meta – its main product, Facebook, being the most popular platform for the dissemination of fake and hyperpartisan news by far – shows that posts with links attached make up only 7.7 percent of all posts the platform (Meta, 2022). All of my data reflects the point after social media users click through to the site, which is not a guarantee. A more impactful study would investigate posts solely composed of users' private content or types of misleading content that do not require a user to leave a platform to ingest, like deepfakes or out-of-context photos, and subsequently determining how these content formats affect the spread of fake or highly biased information on social media or on a single network. Another valuable perspective could be gained by executing interviews with users who consume right-wing online news as well.

Well before I undertook this project, it was clear to me that misinformation spread online had much further-reaching consequences than simply misunderstandings of news events in the American public. When hyperpartisan outlets manipulate the narrative of a news event – especially events with global significance – by focusing on details that adhere to pre-established viewpoints or provoking strong emotions in readers in an attempt to persuade them to their preferred political stance rather than strictly inform, they run the risk of inspiring more harm to undeserving citizens by stoking outsize anger and outrage. This project contributes a small, but necessary piece of further understanding as to how, exactly, hyperpartisan sites have and continue to implicitly or explicitly inflict and endorse the specific type of bias and prejudice that leads to violence so that we as a public may better understand how to resist it or, ideally, how to stop it for good.

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Appendix 1. Chapter 2 Glossary

Misinformation is the word most commonly used to describe a wide range of content types, such as:

- **Fake news:** For much of history, *fake news* has been used to describe news that is demonstrably false and not grounded in reality. By 2016, U.S. President Donald Trump, infamous for endorsing biased or false information that adhered to extreme-right values, added another definition: news stories that included less-than-flattering facts about him and his team or gave a platform to viewpoints he didn't agree with (Mustafaraj, 2017). Presently, it is almost interchangeable with *misinformation*: it describes news that is, in any way, not totally true.
- **Disinformation:** Content that is intentionally misleading and created to sow discord and doubt in institutions within a group of people. For example, in the weeks following the United States' 2016 election, it was found that bots originating in Russia were responsible for posting pro-Trump content with the objective of creating mistrust of government from the American public (Timberg, 2016).
- **Sensationalism:** News that is fully or somewhat true but focuses on the most lurid details of the story, distracting from or distorting the reality of the events.
- **Hyperpartisan news:** News that reflects viewpoints popular with a certain political party, often at the expense of the full context or truth. Hyperpartisan news can technically be true, but still purposely exclude information that contradicts established values within that political sphere. Marwick and Lewis (2020, p. 21) describe it as "not fake news per se, but propaganda rooted in an ideologically-driven worldview." For the purposes of this report, "hyperpartisan news" refers to publications that are biased toward American extreme-right political stances, unless otherwise noted.

Appendix 2. Chapter 4 Glossary

In Chapter 4, I introduced several new terms common to web graphic design and newsroom production, including:

- **Above the fold:** "Above the fold" is a newspaper term used to describe news items that were visible above the literal fold in the center of a standard-sized newspaper. To have a story printed "above the fold" is considered prestigious, as it implies precedence and importance to the public. In some instances in this project I have referred to content on a site that is visible upon opening the page and without scrolling down as "above the fold."
- **Call to action:** A "call to action" is a marketing term referring to a phrase that urges the user to perform an action immediately. In the context of news sites, it's often seen in the form of buttons or text on advertisements prompting the reader to "Subscribe Today!" or "Find out more here."
- **Deck:** A deck – alternatively spelled "dek" – is a sentence or two of descriptive text placed under a headline, containing more detail about the story to follow. This common component of print media design has carried over into some forms of digital journalism display.

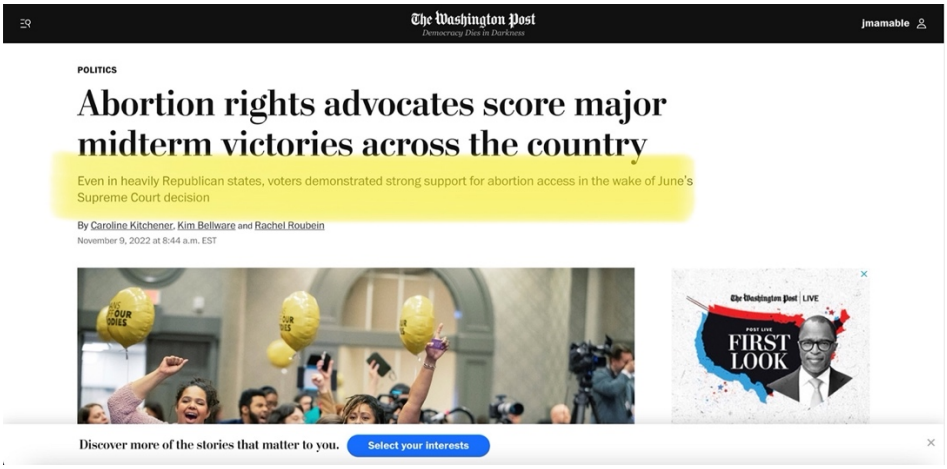

Fig. 25 (top) and Fig. 26 (bottom). Decks as seen on the Washington Post's website (top) and a historical Times-Picayune issue. (bottom).

- **Embedded post:** A social media post displayed directly on an external webpage from the network where it was originally posted. Often an embedded post retains a selection of functions available on the original platform, such as liking or sharing a post.
- **GIF:** "Graphics Interchange Format," a file type that supports both static and looping images. Attaching an animated GIF image to social media posts is a common way to respond to casual discussion on social media.
- **Gothic script:** also called "Old English" or "Blackletter" fonts, Gothic script is highly ornamental style of font that originated in Europe in the 12th century.
- **Nameplate/Masthead/Header:** In the United States, a nameplate is the illustrated name of a publication at the top of the front page of a newspaper. In other countries this is known as a masthead – however, in the US, a masthead is the list of editors, writers, and producers traditionally printed in the first or last few pages of a publication.
- **Open-source font:** A font that is legally accessible via the internet (many fonts are licensed and must be purchased from the font foundry) and downloadable at no cost to the user.
- **Serif and sans serif fonts**: Two common classes of font. Serif fonts, like Times New Roman and Georgia, contain a small bar – a serif – at the tips of some or all letters in the font family. Sans serif fonts, like Helvetica and Arial, do not.

Fig. 27. Screenshot of sample text of Times New Roman and Helvetica fonts, with serifs highlighted on Times New Roman.

- **Splash image:** The main image on a site's homepage. Splash images are larger than other images on the surrounding page, indicating a story's comparative priority or importance.
- **Static and dynamic ads:** Static ads are advertisements "built in" to the site and displayed to all users. Dynamic ads change upon page refreshes and are often connected to the user's search history and site visits.
- **Wire photos and stock images:** Wire photos are photos provided to publications by a wire service like the Associated Press or Agence-France Press. Stock images are accessed through a stock photo library.

Appendix 3. Data Tables Used in Analysis

Below are the tables I created in which to sort and organize my data that was collected when inspecting design elements on my chosen hyperpartisan and nonpartisan sites.

Outlet	Homepage: Header Font	Notes and Observations
NYT (The New York Times)	• Old English • Proprietary	
WP (The Washington Post)	• Old English • Proprietary	
WSJ (The Wall Street Journal)	• Escrow • Proprietary	
CNN	• Logo rather than font • Proprietary "font"	
Fox (Fox News)	• Logo rather than font • Variations on Franklin Gothic	
DC (The Daily Caller)	• Lemon Milk • Free use font	Font could not be identified with certainty, but appears most similar to it
DW (The Daily Wire)	• Penumbra Flare • Free use font	
Breitbart	• Bebas Neue • Free use font	Appears to be paid variation, priced between £4.99 and £13.18

Outlet	Homepage: Menu Bar	Notes and Observations
NYT	• Under header • Spans almost the entire width of the screen • Two-story • Lower bar features stories receiving live updates	White bar with black type
WP	• Very top	Black bar with white type

	• Spans full width of browser • Section headers left-justified • One-story	
WSJ	• Integrated into header section; no separation • Three-story: additional stock information and special Midterms coverage menu bars	
CNN	Two story: top bar with general topics, another with more specific topics underneath	Lower menu bar topics lean toward trendy (“Doctor Who”, etc.)
Fox	Two story: general with "Hot Topics" menu underneath that changes with trending items	
DC	• Integrated into header section; no separation • Standard topics leading to drop-downs with sub-topics • Additional topics for other media offerings (videos, newsletters) and a special section for subscribers (“Patriots”)	Sub-topics under paywalled “Patriots” section bear sensational, clearly biased titles like “Narcofornia” and “Unwoke USA”
DW	• Very top • Only 5 sections • Left-justified	
Breitbart	• Under header • General topics	

Outlet	**Homepage: Number of Columns**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• 2 ATF (above the fold) • Column configuration changes as you scroll	More as you scroll in various configurations, but dividing line between original two columns remains

WP	• 1 ATF • 2-3 columns • Column configuration changes as you scroll	• A single above the fold column was observed on 31 October 2022, during live coverage of Supreme Court arguments • Right column is bisected
WSJ	2-3 ATF • Column configuration changes as you scroll	
CNN	• 3 ATF • Column configuration changes as you scroll	CNN is busy in a way similar to many hyperpartisan sites (I think it may be the lists instead of decks and stacked headlines underneath) but seems to make much better use of space than WaPo or NYT
Fox	• 3 ATF • Column configuration changes as you scroll	Two for stories, far right column for ads
DC	• 2 ATF • Column configuration changes as you scroll	Far right column contains search bar and, after much white space, more links to stories
DW	• One ATF • Smaller • Column configuration changes as you scroll	• Underneath lead story (at the time of analysis, the lead item remained a video player with a trailer for the Candace Owens feature) are two: One with main story and right has multiple • Scroll further and you get 4x1 grids with thumbnails and links to multimedia content (podcasts, videos) • At very bottom, a 4x4 grid of thumbnails and links to written stories (which looks a lot like chumbox ads) with option to expand further
Breitbart	• 3 ATF • All text and paid links, which get very large as you scroll down • Column configuration repeats as you scroll down	Two columns for stories, one for ad space

Outlet	Homepage: Headline Font	Notes and observations
NYT	• NYT Cheltenham • Proprietary	
WP	• “Postoni” - a variation on Bodoni • Proprietary	https://www.poynter.org/archive/2002/behind-the-redesign-washington-post/
WSJ	• Georgia Pro	Georgia Pro is a paid variation of classic font Georgia
CNN	• CNN Sans • Proprietary	Based on Helvetica
Fox	• Roboto • Free Use	
DC	• Ruda • Free use	• Fox News uses a “pre-headline” - an all-caps quote or word overlaid in left corner of splash image. • Especially for splash stories, the headline on the article page may be different than the one on the homepage
DW	• Helvetica • Free use	
Breitbart	• Georgia Italic • Free use	

Outlet	Homepage: Deck Font	Notes and Observations
NYT	Georgia	
WP	Franklin	
WSJ	Arial	
CNN	CNN Sans	
Fox	N/A - no decks	

DC	N/A - no decks	
DW	N/A - no decks	
Breitbart	N/A - no decks	

Outlet	**Homepage: Font Case**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• Sentence case • All-caps in "LIVE" tag	
WP	• Sentence case • Some use of all-caps in special content labels ("WAR IN UKRAINE", "MORE COVERAGE")	
WSJ	• Sentence case • Some use of all-caps in special content labels (“MIDTERMS 2022”)	
CNN	• Sentence case • Some use of caps in decks to call attention to a type of article or special feature ("INVESTIGATION") • Some use of all-caps in special content labels, overlaid on left lower corner of photo	Fox News’ lower-left banner is much larger and more obtrusive
Fox	• Liberal use of all caps • All-caps lead-ins in several headlines: (“COUNCIL CONTROVERSY: Dem mayor sued over tantrum that shut down public criticism”)	• All lead story images have a somewhat large banner in lower left quadrant with a short, shocking phrase or word related to the story in all caps, as do second-tier main stories. • If article has an all-caps lead-in on title on homepage, the title on the article page may be different • Lead-ins are set in red; rest of headline in blue

DC	• Lead story also gets all-caps "pre-headline," a la Fox News • Some headlines have all-caps lead-ins	
DW	• Sentence case • Some all-caps in text in illos	
Breitbart	All headlines are all-caps	On 5 November 2022 there were exclamation points

Outlet	**Homepage: Ad Location**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• Large banner at top • No other ads visible above the fold • Banner ads Interspersed throughout content • Ad space spans entire width of browser window	
WP	• Large banner at top • No other ads visible above the fold • Banner ads interspersed throughout content	
WSJ	• Large banner at top • No other ads visible above the fold • Right column ads • Banner ads interspersed throughout content • Ads in line with content, similar format • A sign-up link visible on the right above the fold	
CNN	• Large banner at top • Banner ads interspersed throughout content • Ads in line with content, similar format • Chumbox at bottom	
Fox	No ads	
DC	• Large banner at top • Smaller banner at bottom • Right column • Left column • Ads in line with content, differing format	
DW	No ads	

Breitbart	• Large banner at top • Right column (very crowded) • In line with content, similar format • Chumbox at bottom	

Outlet	**Homepage: Ad Type and Use of Pop-Ups**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• Combination dynamic/static • No pop-ups	Ads for NYT product ads are dynamic, external are static
WP	Static	
WSJ	• Combination dynamic/static • No pop-ups	
CNN	• Top banner dynamic • Pop-ups: autoplay videos	
Fox	Dynamic	Pretty even split of paid ads and links to other Fox News content and products (newsletter, podcasts etc)
DC	• Dynamic • Pop-ups (asks to show notifications)	
DW	N/A	
Breitbart	Combination dynamic/static	

Outlet	**Homepage: Color Scheme**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	Black and white	Only deviant color is red for "LIVE" tag
WP	Black and white	
WSJ	Black and white	Only deviant color is red for "LIVE" tag
CNN	Black, white and red	Red: #cc0100, Black #0c0c0c, white #fefefe

Fox	Red white and blue	• Red: #c30017, blue: #013365, white: #f6f8fa, • Colors are darker
DC	Red, white, blue and black	• Red: fe2a2c, white: #fcfcfc, blue: 4084f4, black #000000 • Red is more orange-y
DW	Black and red	• Red: #d81c23, gray: bbbebf, black: #1b1b1b • Also some gray • Alternating white and black background
Breitbart	Main colors: orange and black	• Orange: #fe5502, black: #000000 • Also some red • White background

Outlet	**Homepage: Story Density**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• In total: 3 fully visible stories, two photos that are half-visible before scrolling down • Only two of the 3 visible have photos; one is far larger	
WP	Three headlines, one half a video and one full (but small) photo in the right column	
WSJ	• 2 full headlines • Two full photos • Two headlines cut off by subscription ad • Only one shows full deck	
CNN	• Three and all headlines are fully visible! • Oct 27: three headlines and photos fully visible, one half photo	
Fox	Two and a half (only headline visible) but also link to live TV broadcast	
DC	ATF: two and a half (two headlines, one half photo)	
DW	Just a big preview video for Candace Owens film	
Breitbart	• Two and a half, no photos	

	• Scroll down and it becomes VERY dense	

Outlet	**Homepage: Photos and Art**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	Lead image/thumbnails	
WP	Lead image/thumbnails	Photos are colorful and plentiful; nicely spaced. Not too crowded. Type that separates them is light and clean.
WSJ	Seem smaller than others	
CNN	• No lead photo per se ○ Photo in far left column seen ATF is bigger than others but not by much	• Seem more colorful than other outlets • Nov 5 2022: the "lead" image was a GIF
Fox	• one large for featured story • mostly file/pool photos • Several examples of using photos most would consider unflattering of left wing political figures	All lead images have what we'll call a "pre-headline" in lower left corner in all caps
DC	None visible ATF; crowded out by banner ad	
DW	Large video player fills up ATF space	
Breitbart	• No lead image ATF • Very few photos. None visible above fold	• If there is any lead image it is confined to left column instead of centered-ish • Number of photos in ads outnumbers photos for editorial content

Outlet	**Homepage: Video and Use of Autoplay**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• Video is lead media on homepage some days, though is not always the case • No autoplay	Inventive video embed one section down - looks modeled on TikTok

WP	• Video is lead media on homepage some days, though is not always the case • No autoplay	Oct 26: Largest piece of media visible above the fold is a video - debate highlights between Fetterman and Oz
WSJ	• Videos in separate section • No autoplay	Other than video section, only animation is in ads and some buttons that flicker when you hover over them.
CNN	• Videos in separate section • No autoplay	4/11/22: small gif ad thumbnail in right column after scrolling down a bit
Fox	• Videos in separate section • Top video autoplay	11/4/22: One GIF on page
DC	None	
DW	• Currently the lead media on the site • No autoplay	
Breitbart	None	

Outlet	Article Page: Columns	Notes and Observations
NYT	One	
WP	One	
WSJ	One for story, one for links to top stories/ads on right (some but not all)	
CNN	One for story, one for links to top stories/ads on right (some but not all)	
Fox	one with story, one with ad space	
DC	One	
DW	One	
Breitbart	One for story, one for links to top stories/ads on right (some but not all)	

Outlet	Article Page: Headline Font	Notes and Observations
NYT	Varies by section	On most article pages examined it is NYT Cheltenham, though appears to be at a slightly heavier weight than the deck text
WP	Same as font on homepage	Opinion pages differ slightly (denoted by a sentence-case label, in same font but using a dark tan color)
WSJ	Same as font on homepage	
CNN	Same as font on homepage	
Fox	Same as font on homepage	looks like wider spacing than homepage (could be wrong)
DC	Oswald	
DW	Same as homepage	
Breitbart	Same as homepage	

Outlet	Article Page: Deck Font	Notes and Observations
NYT	NYT Cheltenham	
WP	Same as homepage	Appears to be heavier weight
WSJ	Same as homepage	
CNN	Same as homepage	
Fox	Roboto	
DC	No decks	
DW	No decks	
Breitbart	No decks	

Outlet	Article Page: Font Case	Notes and Observations
NYT	Sentence case	Only use of all caps is in dateline, which is standard in news
WP	Sentence case	
WSJ	Sentence case	only use of all caps is for section headers
CNN	Sentence case	
Fox	sentence case	except for links to related on-site articles interspersed throughout body text
DC	Sentence case	Only use of all caps is in bylines, social links, etc.
DW	Sentence case	
Breitbart	Title all caps, body uses sentence (except for things like “DC”)	

Outlet	Article Page: Body Font	Notes and Observations

NYT	Georgia	Looks a little taller than regular Georgia; HTML says Times
WP	Georgia	Looks like a lighter weight than regular Georgia
WSJ	Exchange	Custom, commissioned by them
CNN	CNN Sans	https://www.cnncreativemarketing.com/project/cnn-sans/
Fox	Roboto	Possibly Helvetica
DC	Spectral	
DW	Helvetica	
Breitbart	Georgia	

Outlet	**Article Page: Ad Location**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	Banner ad at top	
WP	• Banner ad at top • Banner ads interspersed in article body text • dynamic right column ads	
WSJ	• Banner ad at top • Right column ads • Banner ads interspersed in article body text	
CNN	• Banner ad at top • Banner ads interspersed in article body text • dynamic right column ads • Chumbox ads in right column	
Fox	Right column	
DC	Chumbox ads at bottom	Links to other DC articles mix in as well
DW	• Banner ads interspersed in article body text (but they don't always load)	Might be considered an ad - trailer for "films"

Breitbart	• Banner ad at top • Right column ads • Banner ads interspersed in article body text	• # of interspersed ads changes: 3, then 2 in a 250-wd article, 6, then 3 in a 340-wd article, counting CTAs to other Breitbart products) • As many as eight in a 770-word article

Outlet	**Article Page: Ad Type and Use of Pop-Ups**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	Dynamic - changes locations	
WP	• Dynamic - change locations • Some video, some images • Chumbox ads along bottom	
WSJ	• Combination dynamic/static • No pop ups	
CNN	• Dynamic • Pop-ups: CNN subscription pop-up • Chumbox ads along bottom	
Fox	No ads	
DC	• Dynamic • Pop-ups: banner ad along bottom of page • Chumbox links at bottom	
DW	• Pop-up ad for “Dinner with Trump” if you leave the page unattended for long enough	Trailer for the Candance Owens movie pops out to lower right as you scroll down unrelated article page
Breitbart	• Dynamic • Some animated • Chumbox links right column • Chumbox links at bottom	

Outlet	**Article Page: Color Scheme**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	Varies depending on section	• For regular “newspaper” article page, black and white

		• Some red used in live updates
WP	Same as homepage	
WSJ	Same as homepage	Stock ticker at top adds notes of red and green
CNN	Same as homepage	Some sections like Health or Business will inject small notes of other colors like teal or green
Fox	same as homepage	
DC	same as homepage	
DW	same as homepage	
Breitbart	same as homepage	• Less orange, more black b/c more text • Preponderance of ads makes actual color scheme less obvious

Outlet	**Article Page: Embedded Posts**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	Some (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/03/technology/twitter-layoffs-elon-musk.html, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/04/style/twitter-verification-rat-emoji)	
WP	Some	Did not see any in the several pages reviewed but have to assume they are used somewhere on the entire site
WSJ	Some	Seemingly only in stories about those technologies (https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktoks-stratospheric-rise-an-oral-history-11667599696?mod=hp_lead_pos10)

CNN	Some	https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/05/us/tiktok-intergenerational-friendship-undivided-cec/index.html
Fox	Some	
DC	None observed	Gallery of their own social posts at bottom; have not seen this anywhere else
DW	Some	
Breitbart	Some	

Outlet	**Article Page: Photos and Art**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• Large lead image • Spans nearly the width of the browser window • Photos tend to be taken by staff photographers • For non-news sections like Arts, article may use a custom illustration instead of a photo	
WP	• Large lead image • Spans width of article column • Photos tend to be taken by staff photographers	Photos are not a given on article pages: election analysis does not include one but does have infographics within story
WSJ	• Photos tend to be wire and stock photos • Some by staff photographers • Custom illustrations	
CNN	• Frequently uses video in place of lead image • Photos tend to be wire and stock photos • Use of GIFs	CNN shares a lot of design similarities with Fox News, such as frequent use of video in place of lead image and reliance on stock or agency photos rather than original art

Fox	• Frequently uses video in place of lead image • photos tend to be wire and stock photos	
DC	Wire and stock photos only	
DW	Wire and stock photos only	
Breitbart	Wire and stock photos only	Some pages have lead videos sourced from elsewhere

Outlet	**Article Page: Video and Use of Autoplay**	**Notes and Observations**
NYT	• Yes • Special video section • No autoplay	
WP	• No noted use of video (besides some ads with animation) on article pages • Some include video further down in article body • No autoplay on special video pages	
WSJ	• Some articles with video • No autoplay	
CNN	• Some articles with video • Sometimes autoplay	Frequent, but that's not unusual since CNN is first and foremost a tv network
Fox	• All articles have video • Autoplay: yes	• Uses video in place of lead image - clicking on it may take you to it on their page of videos of on-air segments • After autoplaying, ideos pop out into lower right as your scroll down • Lead video on article pages or may not even be associated with the story you're reading (ie, Paul Pelosi video on article about Saudi Arabia)

		• Sometimes it is a TV segment
DC	• Some articles with video • No autoplay	• Not all pages listed under “Top Videos” on the homepage lead to articles with video • This is only based on one article with video • It was YouTube video from the Daily Caller’s YouTube account, not custom player
DW	• Some articles with video • Autoplay: yes	Trailer for Daily Wire “documentaries” are in body of text, then pop out to lower right as you scroll past
Breitbart	• Some articles with video • No autoplay	Some pages have lead videos sourced from elsewhere