Chapter 6

The Media Divide beyond Left-Right

I've been a political journalist for more than fifteen years. In that time, I've been a blogger, a newspaper reporter, a magazine writer, a long-form editor, an opinion columnist, a cable news host, a social media personality, a viral video star, a podcaster, and a media entrepreneur. I launched *Wonkblog*, the online policy vertical at the *Washington Post*, and I was a cofounder and the first editor in chief of the explanatory news organization Vox, which now reaches more than 50 million people each month.

When I was launching Vox, I often got asked who our competitors were.* The answer people expected me to give was other politics-heavy news and analysis sites. The *Atlantic*. Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight. The *Washington Post*. But the truth was that other news sites were less competitors than they were collaborators in a shared effort to engage people in politics. If Silver converted a sports fan into a politics junkie, that person

* Vox is a general-interest news site that covers science, culture, technology, and much more. But this is a book about American politics, so in this section I'm going to be mainly talking about our political coverage.

access, the difference in political knowledge between those with the highest and lowest interest in cable news was 27 percent. That dwarfed the difference in political knowledge between people with the highest and lowest levels of schooling. "In a high-choice environment, people's content preferences become better predictors of political learning than even their level of education," Prior wrote.

We talk a lot about the left-right polarization in the political news. We don't talk enough about the divide that precedes it: the chasm separating the interested from the uninterested. But you can't understand one without the other. To a large degree, one exists because of the other. And remember: Prior was conducting this research in the early 2000s, before Facebook and Twitter, before mobile internet and YouTube algorithms, before MSNBC's leftward turn, before *BuzzFeed* and *HuffPost*, before Breitbart and the alt-right. The internet has become much better at learning what we want and giving us more of it since then. The competition for audience, and the threat to journalistic business models, has become much more intense since then. And all of this has changed both how political news is produced and how it's consumed.

Political media is for the politically invested

In *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*, economist James Hamilton writes, "News emerges not from individuals seeking to improve the functioning of democracy but from readers seeking diversion, reporters forging careers, and owners searching for profits."[2] That's a bit

more cynical than I'd be—a lot of us really do want to improve the functioning of democracy—but as a description of the overall economic system that surrounds our work, it's accurate. And as much as we might want to, it's malpractice to try to understand the news without understanding the financial and audience forces that shape it.

In an age of choice, political journalism is a business that serves people interested in political news and that tries to create more people interested in political news. That wasn't the business model when political news was just one part of a monopolistic bundle; when we were attached to the one newspaper in the city or to the three networks given access to public airwaves, the business model was about appealing to as wide an audience as possible, but it wasn't necessarily about serving an audience intensely interested in politics.

The rise of a more opinionated press is a return to an older media equilibrium. For much of American history, most newspapers were explicitly partisan, often including "Democrat" or "Republican" in the name to signal their lean—some of them, like the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, and the *Arizona Republic* (which was, until 1930, the *Arizona Republican*), still carry that legacy on their mastheads. In 1870, 54 percent of metropolitan dailies were affiliated with the Republican Party, 33 percent were Democratic, and 13 percent claimed independence from party.[3]

Hamilton argues that the transition to a news industry that prized independence from party and ideology was driven by technological advances that changed the business model of newspapers. "The development of presses with runs of 25,000 sheets or more per hour meant a single newspaper could supply a significant portion of a city's readers," he writes. Alongside a drop in the price of paper, newspapers became cheaper, which meant their potential audience became larger, which meant the

prices advertisers would pay to reach that audience multiplied. The money really started rolling in if you could dominate a market, because then you could set the rates advertisers paid. But you couldn't dominate a market if you were explicitly serving one political persuasion and offending the other. Thus, newspapers, and other forms of news media, began building an ethic of nonpartisanship, one that both protected their businesses and served important editorial goals.

The explosion of choice and competition carried by digital news upended this calculation again. If the strategy of the monopolistic business model was to be enough things to all people, the strategy of the digital business model is to be the most appealing thing to some people. So the question becomes: What makes people interested in political news? It's that they are rooting for a side, for a set of outcomes. This is not a new insight. Columnist Walter Lippmann put it sharply in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*:

> This is the plight of the reader of the general news. If he is to read it at all he must be interested, that is to say, he must enter into the situation and care about the outcome. . . . The more passionately involved he becomes, the more he will tend to resent not only a different view, but a disturbing bit of news. That is why many a newspaper finds that, having honestly evoked the partisanship of its readers, it can not easily, supposing the editor believes the facts warrant it, change position.

To be interested in politics is to choose a side. How could it be otherwise? The differences between the parties and their coalitions are profound. They are ideological, geographic, demographic, temperamental. Whether your side wins or loses is a literal matter of life and death—perhaps not for you, but given the stakes for health insurance and foreign policy, certainly for

someone. Whether your side wins or loses is also a matter of identity and group status. Think back to the magazine covers that follow presidential elections, the ones that make sweeping pronouncements about what kind of nation we truly are based on whether 3 percent of the Midwest vote swung left or right, or the predictable postelection screeds in which liberals discuss moving to Canada and conservatives wonder if Texas should secede; elections feel like they decide whether our country belongs to us and whether we belong in it.

In the less polarized media sphere that preceded cable news and the internet, this focus on whether your side would win or lose expressed itself in an overemphasis on horse race journalism—journalism literally about whether Democrats or Republicans would win or lose the next election. In a media committed to the appearance of neutrality, horse race coverage let them focus on the questions that most animated the audience without tipping ideologically to one side or the other. It's considered biased to say one party's health plan is better than the other's, but it's not considered biased to say one candidate's campaign is better run than the other's. Take it from a practitioner: political journalism is weird.

In today's media sphere, where the explosion of choices has made it possible to get the political media you really want, it's expressed itself in polarized media that attaches to political identity, conflict, and celebrity. That is to say, it expresses itself in journalism and commentary that is more directly about the question of why your side should win and the other side should lose.

I don't want to denigrate this kind of journalism. I've produced much of it myself. I cover politics because I think policy is important, which is to say, because I think who wins and who loses policy fights is important. And, obviously, my views on those questions are rational, judicious, disinterested, and objectively

correct. The problem is lots of other people are doing that kind of work, too, and some of them come to different conclusions than I do. So what I want to do here is step back and look at how a political media system increasingly organized around that axis deepens political identity, hardens polarization, and raises the political stakes.

The simplest measure for assessing political journalism is whether it's giving those who follow it a more accurate understanding of American politics. As one disturbing window into this question, consider "The Parties in Our Head: Misperceptions About Party Composition and Their Consequences," a fascinating study published by Douglas Ahler and Gaurav Sood in 2018. In it, Ahler and Sood observe that the intensity of partisan feeling is increasing as the parties become more demographically different from each other, but the level of animosity seems to far outpace the level of difference. After all, they write, "majorities of both parties' supporters are white, middle class, and heterosexual, and both parties' modal supporters are middle aged, nonevangelical Christians."[4] So what's going on?

The answer, they say, is that the parties we perceive are quite different from the parties that exist. To test the theory, they conducted a survey asking people "to estimate the percentage of Democrats who are black, atheist or agnostic, union members, and gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and the percentage of Republicans who are evangelical, 65 or older, Southern, and earn over $250,000 per year." They were asking, in other words, how much people thought the composition of the parties fit the caricatures of the parties.

Misperceptions were high among everyone, but they were particularly exaggerated when people were asked to describe the other party. Democrats believed 44 percent of Republicans earned over $250,000 a year; it's actually 2 percent. Republicans believed that 38 percent of Democrats were gay, lesbian, or bisexual; the correct answer is about 6 percent. Democrats believed that more than four out of every ten Republicans are seniors; in truth, seniors make up about 20 percent of the GOP. Republicans believed that 46 percent of Democrats are black and 44 percent belong to a union; in reality, about 24 percent of Democrats are African American and less than 11 percent belong to a union.

But what was telling about these results is that the more interested in politics people were, the more political media they consumed, the more mistaken they were about the other party (the one exception was the income category: high levels of political knowledge led to more accurate answers about the percentage of Republicans earning more than $250,000). This is a damning result: the more political media you consume, the more warped your perspective of the other side becomes.

But it makes sense if you think about the incentives driving media outlets. Fox News doesn't get Facebook shares by reporting on some banal comments made by Bob Casey, the understated Democratic senator from Pennsylvania. It focuses on Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar, a liberal, confrontational Muslim American who wears a hijab and speaks with a soft, Somalian accent. Similar dynamics hold on MSNBC and, honestly, everywhere in the media. Representative Steve King, the racist Republican from Iowa, holds little power in the House but receives far more coverage than Representative Greg Walden, the top Republican on the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The old line on local reporting was: "If it bleeds, it leads." For political reporting, the principle is: "If it outrages, it leads." And outrage is deeply connected to identity—we are outraged when members of other groups threaten our group and violate our values. As such, polarized media doesn't emphasize commonalities, it weaponizes differences; it doesn't focus on the best of the other side, it threatens you with the worst.

As that last paragraph suggests, I'm about to step into some dangerous territory, so let me say this clearly: I'm not asserting moral equivalence, and I'll have much more to say in future chapters about the ways and reasons the Left and the Right—including their media spheres—have diverged. But virtually everyone in political media is competing for audience attention and loyalty amid a cacophony of other choices. We all make different decisions about how to compete for that audience, but since we are all trying to attract other human beings, there are certain similarities in our approach.

Why audience-driven media is identitarian media

Krista Tippett, host of the humane and wise public radio show *On Being*, once told me the media often looks to her like "a conspiracy to surface the loudest voices."[5] She's right, but it's no conspiracy. It's more like the reason the food and restaurant industries pack products with salt and fat and sugar: that's what the market demands. And market demand in media has become a more powerful and more precise force.

I've already discussed the way the audience didn't have much choice in media as recently as a few decades ago. But just as important, the media didn't have much information about the audience. The networks had ratings. The newspapers had subscription renewals. Everyone received letters. But that was really it.

The combination of direct competition and constant access to audience analytics transformed newsrooms. I used to regularly guest host on cable news, and the emotional rhythm of that work-

day crested around four p.m., when the Nielsen numbers came out, and everyone stopped to compare how their show did against the competition. If you beat your competitors—both inside and outside the network—you could rest easy. If you didn't, you had to worry. And if you lost a few times in a row, you'd start getting calls from upstairs. Maybe your programming should stick closer to the news of the day. Maybe you needed shorter intros, or longer intros, or more guests, or more heat. The numbers were broken up by the quarter hour, so you could even try to decide whether your B block was superior to your D block. The data wasn't good enough to truly answer those questions, but it was good enough to decide whether you were to be celebrated, left alone, or subjected to concerned scrutiny. Cable news is journalism, but it's also a business, and the business runs on ratings. Chris Hayes, who anchors MSNBC's eight p.m. newscast and is among the most thoughtful, civic-minded journalists in the industry, put it this way on his podcast:

> We have very strong metrics we get every day about how many people are watching our show. It is our job to get people's attention and to keep it. And getting people's attention and keeping it can sometimes be in tension with giving them information. There's an amazing Will Ferrell line in *Anchorman 2*, in which he says, "What if instead of telling people the things they need to know, we tell them what they *want* to know?" Which is like the creation story of cable news.[6]

"At some level," he continues, "we're wedding DJs. And the wedding DJ's job is to get you on the floor." The point is not that this leaves no room for serious journalism. As Hayes says, there are good wedding DJs, and bad wedding DJs, and the work of

man who was running a newsroom at that time—this is the way analytics and social media improve our work, by giving us truer, broader information about the audience's interests.

But the other perspective takes identities as living, malleable things. They can be activated or left dormant, strengthened or weakened, created or left in the void. In this telling, all this identity-oriented content will deepen the identities it repeatedly triggers, confirms, or threatens. It will turn interests or opinions into identities.

When I was in high school, I began smoking pot. When I started reading about it online, I quickly fell into drug legalization communities that turned my interest in getting high into an activist identity, complete with a rich community of people I believed in, enemies I was mad at. I subscribed to a newsletter full of stories I never would've seen but that now pissed me off and made me more committed to the cause. I don't say this to dismiss my younger self or criticize the process of identity formation. I think my high school self was right about pot legalization. I think developing an activist identity was healthy. The point is simply that this process is far easier in the age of the internet than it was before.

The digital scholar Zeynep Tufekci has tracked the way YouTube's recommendation algorithm serves as an engine of radicalization. She noticed that videos of Trump rallies led to recommendations for videos of alt-right content. Videos of Hillary Clinton speeches eventually served up leftist conspiracies. As she widened her analysis, she found it wasn't just politics. "Videos about vegetarianism led to videos about veganism. Videos about jogging led to videos about running ultramarathons. It seems as if you are never 'hard core' enough for YouTube's recommendation algorithm. It promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes."[7]

That algorithm isn't just an engine of radicalization; it's an engine of identity. As Peretti observed, interests become identities as they socialize you into a community. YouTube's algorithm is constantly trying to lure you into new communities, populated by charismatic YouTube stars who cultivate tight-knit audiences. When I was a teenager smoking pot, I had to search out a newsletter about pot legalization, and I had no sense of who wrote it or who read it. Today, I would be algorithmically invited into communities of legalization activists, whose names and faces I would quickly come to know.

Many of us who wrote about politics on the internet before the rise of social media lament the feeling that something has been lost, that a space that once felt fresh and generative now feels toxic and narrow. In her book *Trick Mirror*, Jia Tolentino offers a description of what changed that feels right to me, which is that social media shifted the "organizing principle" of online discourse:

> The early internet had been constructed around lines of affinity and openness. But when the internet moved to an organizing principle of opposition, much of what had formerly been surprising and rewarding and curious became tedious, noxious, and grim.
>
> This shift partly reflects basic social physics. Having a mutual enemy is a quick way to make a friend—we learn this as early as elementary school—and politically, it's much easier to organize people against something than it is to unite them in an affirmative vision. And, within the economy of attention, conflict always gets more people to look.[8]

Few realized, early on, that the way to win the war for attention was to harness the power of community to create identity,

and the simplest way to do that, particularly in politics, was to focus on enemies. But the winners emerged quickly, often using techniques whose mechanisms they didn't fully understand—witness the reckoning Facebook has had to undergo facing up to the behavior their core product rewarded—and triggering an explosion of digital identities.

When I entered journalism, the term of art for pieces infused with perspective was "opinion journalism." The point of the work was to convey an opinion. Nowadays, I think a lot of it is closer to "identity journalism"—the effect of the work, given the social channels through which it's consumed, is to reinforce an identity. But an identity, once adopted, is harder to change than an opinion. An identity that binds you into a community you care about is costly and painful to abandon, and the mind will go to great lengths to avoid abandoning it. So the more media people see that encourages them to think of themselves as part of a group, and the more they publicly proclaim—through sharing and liking and following and subscribing—that they are part of a group, the deeper that identity roots and the more resistant the underlying views become to change.

Reading the other side doesn't change our minds, it deepens our certainty

When I interviewed Obama, he put particular focus on the role of the media in polarization. "I'm not the first to observe this, but you've got the Fox News/Rush Limbaugh folks and then you've got the MSNBC folks and the—I don't know where Vox falls into that, but you guys are, I guess, for the brainiac-nerd types. But

the point is that technology which brings the world to us also allows us to narrow our point of view."*[9] You can call this the echo chamber theory of polarization: we've cocooned ourselves into hearing information that only tells us how right we are, and that's making us more extreme.

There is an optimistic theory embedded in this story: people are open to counterevidence, but they're just not getting much of it. We watch MSNBC if we're liberal, Fox News if we're conservative, and CNN if we just want to see people fight; Facebook and Twitter serve us up the news they've learned we like, which means the angriest voices we already agree with; we don't see or hear from the other side, so of course we're becoming more polarized. This story suggests a straightforward solution: if only we crossed the informational aisle, if only the liberals would watch a bit of Fox and the conservatives would spend some time with Maddow, we would realize the other side is more like us than we thought, that it makes some good points, too, and our enmity and polarization would ebb.

Beginning in October 2017, a group of political scientists and sociologists decided to test this theory. In the largest study of its kind ever conducted, they paid 1,220 regular Twitter users who identified as either Democrats or Republicans to follow a bot retweeting elected officials, media figures, and opinion leaders from the other side. The participants took regular surveys asking about their views on ten issues ranging from immigration to government waste to corporate profits to LGBT acceptance.

The researchers were testing the collision between two pop-

* Obama is onto something with that description of Vox. "Brainiac-nerd type" is a kind of identity people hold, and it's one we try to activate both in our brand and our coverage. We do that in part because we think it's a healthy identity that aligns well with producing rigorous journalism. That we can choose to activate more productive identities is a theme I will return to later.

allowed them to change the channel, the effect dissipated entirely. It turned out the polarization was coming from forcing people who were persuadable to watch political news, which they didn't want to do. Once you gave them the choice to opt out, it was just preaching to the choir.

Tellingly, this was under conditions that were unusually favorable to cable news: political channels were a third to half of all available content in the experimental conditions, as opposed to a tiny fraction of all available content, as is true on our actual televisions. But even that bare level of choice permitted the persuadable to wander off—or, if you prefer, flee elsewhere. "Political news shows cannot directly affect those who refuse to watch them," Arcenaux and Martin conclude.

I don't take this to prove cable news and other forms of politicized and social media aren't polarizing, even on those who don't watch or tweet. Many of us, myself included, have watched an older family member retire and swing sharply right as Fox News comes to fill their days. And a number of studies show that Fox News increased Republican vote share as it rolled out across the country, suggesting a genuine persuasive effect compared to the pre–Fox News equilibrium.[13] But the reality is these networks command modest audiences. The key to their influence is that they have the right audiences. A polarized media environment can polarize the country through its effect on political elites and party activists. Virtually every congressional office on the Hill has its televisions tuned to cable news. Politicians are increasingly addicted to Twitter, with the president being only the most prominent example.

To the extent that political elites have cocooned themselves into more polarized informational worlds—and they have—they behave in more polarized ways, which in turn polarizes the system. Fox News has whipped the Republican Party into a number of gov-

ernment shutdowns, and much of Trump's most offensive rhetoric comes on a direct conveyor from conservative media feeding him conspiracies that he transforms into presidential proclamations. Indeed, the impeachment effort House Democrats launched against Trump stems from Trump believing a set of anti-Biden conspiracies pushed by Breitbart editor-at-large Peter Schweizer and heavily promoted on Fox News.[14] Most Americans had never heard of Hunter Biden, much less followed vague insinuations about Ukrainian prosecutors. But the president was sufficiently persuaded that he threw the weight of his administration into an investigation, setting off a chain of events that changed American political history. You don't need a big audience when you have the right audience.

Politics is, first and foremost, driven by the people who pay the most attention and wield the most power—and those people opt in to extraordinarily politicized media. They then create the political system they perceive. The rest of the country then has to choose from more polarized options, and that in turn polarizes them—remember, the larger the difference between the parties, the more compelling it becomes for even the uninterested to choose a side.

Journalists are hardly immune to these forces. We become more polarized, and more polarizing, when we start spending our time in polarizing environments. I have seen it in myself, and I have watched it in others: when we're going for retweets, or when our main form of audience feedback is coming from partisan junkies on social media, it subtly but importantly warps our news judgment. It changes who we cover and what stories we chase. And when we cover politics in a more polarized way, anticipating or absorbing the tastes of a more polarized audience, we create a more polarized political reality.

The media creates, it doesn't just reflect

The news is supposed to be a mirror held up to the world, but the world is far too vast to fit in our mirror. The fundamental thing the media does all day, every day, is decide what to cover—decide, that is, what is newsworthy.

Here's the dilemma: to decide what to cover is to become the shaper of the news rather than a mirror held up to the news. It makes journalists actors rather than observers. It annihilates our fundamental conception of ourselves. And yet it's the most important decision we make. If we decide to give more coverage to Hillary Clinton's emails than to her policy proposals—which is what we did—then we make her emails more important to the public's understanding of her character and potential presidency than her policy proposals. In doing so, we shape not just the news but the election, and thus the country.

While I'm critical of the specific decision my industry made in that case, this problem is inescapable. The news media isn't just an actor in politics. It's arguably the most powerful actor in politics.* It's the primary intermediary between what politicians do and what the public knows. The way we try to get around this is by conceptually outsourcing the decisions about what we cover to the idea of newsworthiness. If we simply cover what's newsworthy, then we're not the ones making those decisions at

* Speaking of the news media as a singular entity is, of course, problematic. The *New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Examiner* and NPR and Vox do not make coverage decisions as a cartel. But the news media exhibits enough herdlike behavior, and responds to similar enough incentives, that I don't think it's any more problematic than talking about "Wall Street," "Silicon Valley," or "America."

all—it's the neutral, external judgment of newsworthiness that bears responsibility. The problem is that no one, anywhere, has a rigorous definition of newsworthiness, much less a definition that they actually follow.

A simple example comes in the treatment of presidential and pre-presidential rhetoric. On some level, anything that the president says, or that a plausible candidate for president says, is newsworthy. And yet, only a small minority of what is said by presidential candidates, or even presidents, gets covered as major news.

When President Obama gave a speech on manufacturing policy at an Ohio steel mill and when Senator Marco Rubio held a town hall discussing higher education costs in New Hampshire, they struggled to get the press to take notice. Trump, meanwhile, routinely gets cable networks to air his rallies live—and he was able to command that kind of coverage even before he became president. Indeed, there's a good argument to be made that this is why he became president.

In *Identity Crisis*, Sides, Vavreck, and Tesler find that "from May 1, 2015, to April 30, 2016, Trump's median share of cable news mentions was 52 percent." There were seventeen Republican candidates running for president, so Trump was getting more than half of all the media coverage, with the other sixteen candidates splitting the remainder.[15]

It gets worse. "Trump received 78 percent of all coverage on CNN between Aug. 24 and Sept. 4, 2015," and by November 2015, "Trump had received more evening network news coverage—234 minutes—than the entire Democratic field. By contrast, Ted Cruz had received seven minutes."[16] This was a choice the media made, and it is not one, in retrospect, that I think many would defend. In February of 2016, for instance, the chairman of CBS said of Donald Trump's candidacy, and the ratings it drew, "it may not be

good for America, but it's damn good for CBS. . . . It's a terrible thing to say, but bring it on, Donald. Keep going." I suspect he would not make the same comments today.

Sides, Vavreck, and Tesler argue that in a chaotic, crowded primary, the media coverage Trump received was crucial to legitimizing his campaign. "Republican voters had received no clear signal about who the front-runner was or should be. The resulting uncertainty meant that this signal needed to come from somewhere else. It was news media coverage that would fill this void."[17] The coverage of Trump also made it impossible for his challengers to get their messages heard.

But why did the media give Trump so much coverage? Why does he continue to get so much coverage? That he led the polls then or is president now isn't good enough. Trump got that coverage before he led the polls; he then got more coverage than other front-runners in past primaries and he gets more coverage than past presidents. As president, his rambling monologues, which are unusually detached both from factual rigor and from his own administration's policy-making decisions, are treated as worthier of airtime than the more careful, factual, and policy-predictive speeches of his predecessors. I remember the Bush and Obama administrations begging the press to pay attention to this or that policy announcement. But when Trump sends out a misspelled tweet slamming Elizabeth Warren, it dominates cable for the rest of the day. The answer, simply, is that Trump understands what newsworthy really means, and he uses it to his advantage.

In theory, newsworthiness means something roughly like "important." The most newsworthy story is the most important story. But if that were true, front pages and cable news shows would look very different from how they do now: more malaria, fewer celebrities (including political celebrities). In practice,

newsworthiness is some combination of important, new, outrageous, conflict-oriented, secret, or interesting.

"Journalism academics have always known that newsworthiness, as the American press defines it, isn't a system with any coherence to it," Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, told me "It doesn't make any sense. It's just a list of factors that occasionally come together to produce news. There's no real logic to it, other than it's a list of things that can make something news. The advantage of it is that it leaves maximum leeway for editors to say, 'This is news,' and, 'That's not news,' and so it's news if a journalist decides it's news."[18]

But journalists don't want to decide what's newsworthy, because we don't want to be seen influencing politics so profoundly. If we began saying, for instance, that education policy announcements were only half as newsworthy as national security announcements, the outcry would be immense. The point is to obscure the fact that the decisions being made are decisions at all. It's best if newsworthiness feels like a quality external to journalistic judgment, as if it were a weight attached to each story and measurable with proper instrumentation.

Because of that, judgments of newsworthiness are often contagious; nothing obscures the fact that a decision is being made quite like everyone else making it, too. Thus, a shortcut to newsworthiness has always been whether other news organizations are covering a story—if they are, then it's newsworthy by definition. In the modern era, a shortcut to newsworthiness is social media virality; if people are already talking about a story or a tweet, that makes it newsworthy almost by definition. In both cases, the presence of other outlets and other voices serves to build a fortress of tautology: whatever everyone is covering is newsworthy because everyone is covering it.

This can lead the country into odd, angry cul-de-sacs. I remem-

ber returning from an offline vacation only to find the entire political media at war over a viral video in which students from Covington Catholic High School wearing MAGA hats appeared to harass Nathan Phillips, a Native American elder playing a drum. In the original video, which took place during a protest at the National Mall, the teens were seen mocking, smirking, and making Tomahawk chop motions at Phillips. A longer video muddied the waters, offering evidence that the teens were themselves harassed by members of the fringe Black Israelites group beforehand. Soon enough, the media was filled with takes and counter-takes, and President Trump himself was weighing in. "Nick Sandmann and the students of Covington have become symbols of Fake News and how evil it can be," he tweeted.[19]

What was striking, walking into this debate without the (dis) advantage of being present for its initial escalation, was how angry everyone was over something that objectively didn't matter at all. Who cared about an unpleasant—but ultimately nonviolent—confrontation at a protest that few even knew was happening in the first place? How was this newsworthy? The answer was that it had been dominating social media all weekend and that had made it newsworthy. And why had it dominated social media? Because it was a perfect collision of political identities: MAGA-hatted teenagers against a peaceful, drumming Native American elder. Liberal news outlets turning the country against conservative, Christian children from a religious school. As my colleague Zack Beauchamp wrote, it was like a "skeleton key to our increasingly identity-focused politics."[20] But more than that, it was an object lesson in how social media's preference for identitarian conflict focuses the media on identitarian conflicts, even when these collisions are almost comically obscure.

These are dynamics that Trump, who is masterful at seeding social media with identitarian conflict, exploits daily. He weaponizes outrageousness, offensiveness, and identity cues to capture a share of political coverage unknown in the modern era. He's shown that in a competitive media environment—particularly one responsive to social platforms—you can dominate the media by lobbing grenades into our deepest social divides. If you announce your campaign by calling Mexican immigrants rapists and criminals, you'll dominate mindshare among both the people who hate you, whose identity and group you're threatening, and the people who've been waiting eagerly for someone to descend a golden escalator and finally stand up for them and their beliefs. To put it simply, in a media driven by identity and passion, identitarian candidates who arouse the strongest passions have an advantage. You can arouse that passion through inspiration, as Obama did, or through conflict, as Trump did. What you can't do is be boring.

Trump understood this and deprived his competitors of the media oxygen necessary to get their own messages heard. How do you knock Trump off the polls if you can't get a word in edgewise? On December 7, 2015, the first poll was released showing Trump falling to second place in Iowa, behind Cruz. Later that same day, Trump took the stage and read, unusually, from a prepared statement. "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on," he said. It was a shocking, unconstitutional proposal—and it gave Trump complete control of a media narrative that might otherwise have emphasized Cruz's candidacy and Trump's slipping numbers.

The media doesn't just reflect the politics we have; it shapes it, even creates it. For all the talk of Trump's Twitter feed, the demographics of his voters are the precise inverse of the demographics of Twitter users. Twitter is used by the young; Trump won atop the votes of the old. His Twitter feed matters because it sets the agenda for every political news outlet in the country.

The media is how most Americans get their information about politics and politicians, and if the media is tilting, or being tilted, toward certain kinds of political stories and figures, then the political system will tilt in that direction, too.

Trump is a product of the tilting, but he is not the first, and he will not be the last. The political media is biased, but not toward the Left or Right so much as toward loud, outrageous, colorful, inspirational, confrontational. It is biased toward the political stories and figures who activate our identities, because it is biased toward and dependent on the fraction of the country with the most intense political identities.

Oh, and funny thing. So, too, is everyone else in politics.

Chapter 7

Post-Persuasion Elections

Before he worked for George W. Bush, first as Bush's director of polling and planning in 2000 and then as Bush's chief campaign strategist in 2004, Matthew Dowd had been a Democratic campaign consultant. He was that rarest of creatures: a persuadable voter. Perhaps that's why he was able to recognize, poring through the results of the 2000 election, that he was going extinct.

"One of the first things I looked at after 2000 was what was the real Republican vote and what was the real Democratic vote," he recalled in an extensive interview to PBS's *Frontline*, "not just who said they were Republicans and Democrats, but independents, how they really voted, whether or not they voted straight ticket or not. And I took a look at that in 2000, and then I took a look at what it was over the last five elections or six elections."[1]

What Dowd found was that the share of true independents—the number of people who were actually undecided and could vote for either party—had plummeted in recent elections, going from, in his calculations, about 22 percent of the electorate to 7 percent. The implications of this were "fairly revolutionary,