Analyzing persuasion in web articles during Donald Trump's presidential campaign

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Communication Studies

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Supervisor: Dr. Gabrijela Buljan, Associate Professor

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Contents

Abstract

This research deals with analysis of articles found on news web sites, written during Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, with a view to understand the ways the media spread their influence on readers. After dealing with the theory of persuasive communication, media bias and models of mass media influence, the paper analyzes the articles from left and right poles of the political spectrum. The articles were written during the American presidential debates in 2016 between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The results of this research lead to discernible classification of media outlets on the political spectrum. Some media outlets were more explicit in showing their leniency or hostility towards certain candidates, while others tried to remain objective.

Keywords: media bias, Donald Trump, mass media, persuasion

Sažetak

Ovo se istraživanje bavi proučavanjem pristranosti internetskih novinskih članaka nastalih za vrijeme predsjedničke kandidature Donalda Trumpa, s ciljem shvaćanja načina na koji mediji šire svoj utjecaj na čitatelje. Nakon prikaza teorijskih spoznaja o utjecajnoj komunikaciji, medijskoj pristranosti pri izvještavanju i modelima utjecaja masovnih medija, analizirani su članci sa određenih lijevo i desno orijentiranih internetskih izvora. Internetski članci nastali su u razdoblju nakon američkih predsjedničkih debata 2016. godine, između Donalda Trumpa i Hillary Clinton. Rezultati istraživanja jasno ukazuju na postojanje podjela među medijima s obzirom na njihove različite naklonosti prema pojedinim akterima na američkoj političkoj sceni. Neki mediji bili su eksplicitniji u favoriziranju i omalovažavanju kandidata, dok su drugi nastojali objektivno izraziti svoje mišljenje.

Ključne riječi: medijska pristranost, Donald Trump, masovni mediji, uvjeravanje

1. Introduction

Thanks to technological advancements, mass media have become the main tool of mass communication in modern times. The public is exposed to their influence on a day-to-day basis, and each day mass media are becoming more and more accessible. This ubiquity of media can be exploited for many different purposes, mainly for information sharing, but also for advertising, persuasion and even promoting political agendas. According to the poll (Harper, 2016), 59% of registered U.S. voters claim that the media was biased towards Hillary Clinton, wrote fabricated stories about Trump and tried to influence the voting results. Despite Republican nominee's victory, the 2016 presidential election brought about a lot of hostility between Donald Trump and the media. There was a lot of commotion about media manipulation during the presidential elections, but it is still uncertain to what degree it influenced the voters. The question of media bias is a commonly researched topic, and it has been covered in numerous studies (Budak, Goel & Rao, 2016; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Krasner 2017).

1.1. Aim of the study

Relying on various theories of the theory of communication (Nordlund 2003; Fodor & Kriskó 2014) and dimensions of persuasive discourse (Miller 1980; Pratkanis & Aronson 2001), the aim of this study is to gain insight into the methods used by media to influence public opinion on the Republican candidate Donald Trump during the American 2016 election. Specifically, the idea is to establish which methods of persuasion were used by select left- and right-biased news websites in order to influence the outcome of the elections.

1.2. Methodology

The database for the study consists of 26 web articles from 4 news sites (2-2 from both sides of the political spectrum). The reason for choosing internet articles is their accessibility, and suitability for retrospective analysis. In addition to that, a web search can be optimally adjusted to look for specific details. For my study, I analyzed the most relevant articles according to Google, from popular US websites. The specific news outlets were selected according to their political orientation described in previous academic works by Sarah Krasner (2017) and Budak, Goel, & Rao (2016). The news sites include the following: Huffington Post, The New York Times, Fox News and Breitbart. Of these, Fox News and Breitbart are generally perceived as being right-oriented, whereas Huffington Post and The New York Times are generally considered leftist (Budak, Goel & Rao 2016; Krasner 2017).

The articles selected from the said web sites were all published in the period after the political debates held on 26 September, 9 October, and 19 October 2016, more accurately, between September 26-27, October 9-10, and October 19-20. Examples from politically-biased articles were used to identify the persuasive methods used by politically left and right-oriented internet news outlets in the last 3 months of the 2016 presidential campaign. I chose to analyze these articles because, as media experts D. Dayan and E. Katz (1994) pointed out, presidential debates are great media spectacles, specifically designed to attract massive numbers of live audiences and draw attention towards a certain topic, which, in this case, is the US presidential race. This media event sparked public interest for the candidates, and this can be proved by the following statistics from Google:
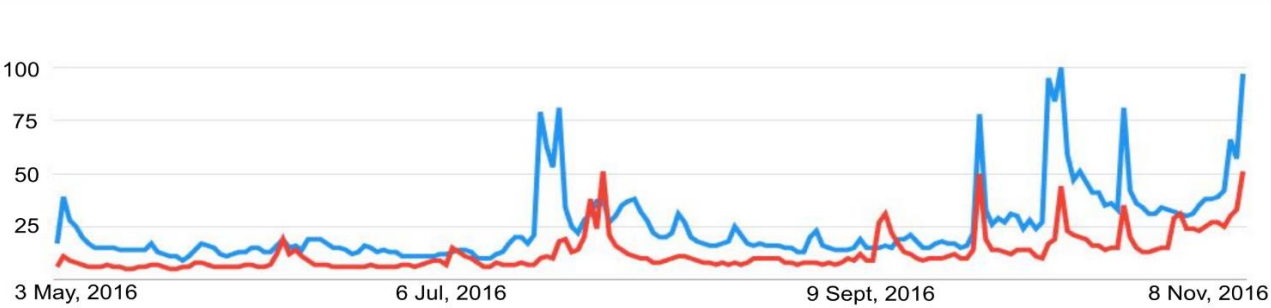
Figure 1 Search for keywords: Trump (blue) and Clinton (red)
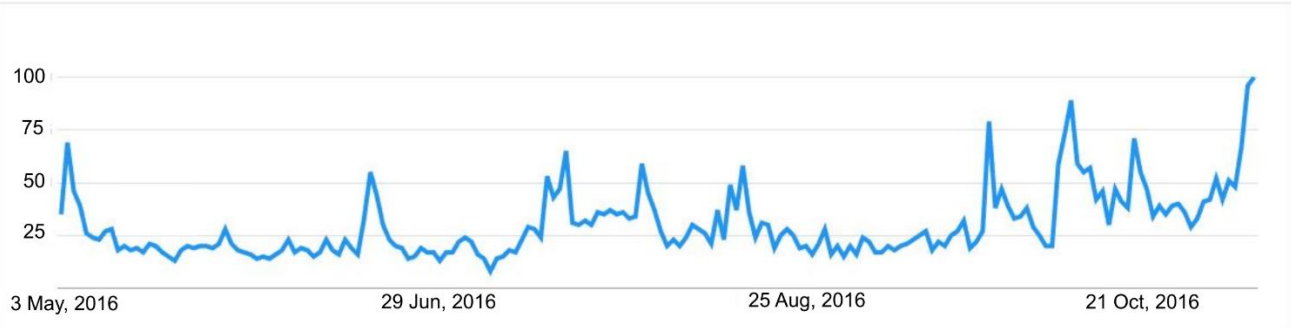
Figure 2 Search for keywords: Donald Trump, presidential campaign

Google Trends show that search for keywords containing the names of the candidates in periods around the debates was significantly higher than average (up to 3 times higher).

With these facts in mind, conducting analysis of the articles about the debates seemed like a logical choice, because, according to Google, the audience's interest during that period was at peak and media outlets had much bigger reach. Importantly, however, in order to counter-balance media bias, and to get a reasonably objective view of the state of affairs, public polls were added to the analysis.

1.3. Organization of paper

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 lays out the background for the study. Section 2.1. discusses the theoretical background of the study, specifically, in sections 2.1.1. and 2.1.2., I define the terms media and mass media, and discuss some of their social functions and their role in everyday life. In section 2.1.4. I discuss how media bias is formed and how it manifests in the media outlets. In sections 2.1.5 and 2.1.6., dimensions of persuasive communication are defined and their application in mass media is illustrated. Section 2.2. presents a general background into Donald Trump, i.e. his rise in popularity. In section 3, I analyze news articles from various web sites from both ends of the political spectrum and discuss their commentary on the political debates.

2. Background

2.1. Theoretical background

2.1.1. Mass Media

In order to discuss media influence on the 2016 presidential campaign, the meaning of the word *media* should be defined in the context of communication and discourse analysis. First, I clarify the notion of *mass media* and elaborate on their social functions. Next, I examine the methods of persuasion that mass media use to influence public opinion. While this certainly seems worth exploring, we must concede that many experts claim that there is no clear scientific way of proving the degree of their public influence. For this reason we will not attempt here to gauge the extent of media influence, but focus on the strategies deployed to that end. I conclude this section with explaining the idea of media bias whose manifestation in news coverage will be explored in the analytical part of the paper.

According to Fodor and Kriskó (2014) *medium* is a word of Latin origin that means device or agent. In theory of communication, the word *media* is understood as a conduit and a channel that serves the purpose of transmitting information from the communicator to a recipient. During this process of transmission, the information is coded and transformed into signals. When the information reaches the recipient it is then decoded and interpreted. Mass communication involves a much wider audience, i.e. the information travels through multiple channels until it reaches more recipients via mass media. In modern sense, mass media is an expression that includes all electronic media, such as the television, the radio, the cinema, the Internet and even CDs and DVDs, but it also includes non-electronic media, such as books, newspapers and other press media vehicles.

2.1.2. Social Functions of Mass Media

In the last several decades the pervasiveness of mass media has significantly increased and their presence is continuously growing. As a result of this process and because of their prominence in people's everyday lives, media have appropriated certain social functions. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1957) observed three main functions that mass media have in modern society. They named the first function *status conferral function*, according to which the individuals that are presented in the media are people of certain social status or prestige:

> The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status. Recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one's behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1957:461)

The media present these individuals, or in our case politicians, as valued experts in their field whose professional opinion is highly regarded. A journalist, assuming the role of conduit, aims to communicate that opinion to the audience, in order to show them an example of professionalism and morality. This person becomes a model, someone who can reinforce values and teach new behavior. By reporting on such individuals, media correspondingly also gain prestige and reputation from the audience. Thus, this is a mutually beneficial process, based on reciprocal admiration.

The second social function is *enforcement of social norms*. This happens in cases when mass media "initiate organized social action by "exposing" conditions which are at variance with public moralities" (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1957:462). This means that the media take it upon themselves to draw a line between what is right and wrong, and demonstrate that to the public by showing various cases of socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behavior. The media use examples of deviant human behavior to provoke public action against such behavior. Every case of deviation from social norms will be frowned upon and judged by them, in order to demonstrate to the public that such actions will not be tolerated. This method of criticizing deviant behavior aims to raise public awareness and reinforce social norms, thus maintaining the cohesiveness of society.

The third social function of mass media described by the two researchers is called *narcotizing dysfunction* and is considered negative. They explain that the dysfunction occurs due to abundance of information that the public is exposed to through mass media, which

leads to a certain numbness and "superficial concern with the problems of society" (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1957: 464). The overwhelming stream of media content keeps the public occupied. Therefore, mass media consumers don't take action against problems, even though they are aware of them, well informed about them, and even discuss them among their peers:

> He comes to mistake *knowing* about problems of the day *for doing* something about them. His social conscience remains spotlessly clean. He is concerned. He is informed. And he has all sorts of ideas as to what should be done. But, after he has gotten through his dinner and after he has listened to his favoured radio programs and after he has read his second newspaper of the day, it is really time for bed. (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1957: 464).

Media consumers perceive the world through a secondary pair of eyes (or ears) and lose direct connection with it. The reality behind the received information does not seem real, so the public turns passive and develops a certain apathy towards it.

László Fodor and Edina Kriskó (2014) pointed out several, more practical, social functions of the mass media, based on a more modern point of view. Some of these include: informing the audience about the ongoing events, providing a platform for exchanging norms and values between generations and different social groups, providing knowledge about culture and education, and providing a platform for entertainment and relaxation.

2.1.3. Pervasiveness of Mass Media

Despite the growing presence of mass media, there is still a question of how much effect they have on their consumers and whether they are powerful enough to directly influence the outcome of events like presidential campaigns. Mass media coverage on the candidates during campaigns is "the major source(s) of national political information; for most, mass media provide the best – and only – easily available approximation of ever-changing political realities" (McCombs & Shaw 1972: 185). However, it is an ungrateful task to measure the effectiveness of media persuasion and their impact on public opinion, because it depends on the voluntary readiness of the individual to absorb the information the media delivers. Media consumers might spend a great deal of their respective time exposed to mass media influence, but there is no clear way of measuring how much of that content is absorbed and processed.

> The statistics on the pervasiveness of the mass media are startling. Communications is a $400-billion-plus industry with $206 billion spent on mass communications, that is,

communications produced and distributed in identical form to people in different locations. In the United States, there are 1,449 television stations and four major networks, 10,379 radio stations, 1,509 daily newspapers and 7,047 weekly newspapers, more than 17,000 magazines and newsletters, and nine major film studios. Americans have ample opportunity to consume mass media messages, and consume they do. Each year the typical American watches 1,550 hours of TV, listens to 1,160 hours of radio on one of 530 million radio sets, and spends 180 hours reading 94 pounds of newspapers and 110 hours reading magazines. Each year an American has the opportunity to read more than 50,000 new books in print. More than half of our waking hours are spent with the mass media. (Pratkanis & Aronson 2001: 5)

It is possible for analysts to measure the audience's exposure to the media content, but those statistics only show media presence, but not effectiveness and impact on public opinion:

But they are merely supply and consumption figures, not figures registering the effect of mass media. They bear only upon what people do, not upon the social and psychological impact of the media. To know the number of hours people keep the radio turned on gives no indication of the effect upon them of what they hear (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1957:459).

The selective attention span of media consumers is a big factor in media inefficacy. The consumers are free to choose what information to believe, remember or even hear in the first place. If certain media-broadcasted information does not agree with one's attitudes, the consumer might decide that it is not worth its time, not worth dealing with, and can be forgotten. According to Fodor and Kriskó (2014), the reason to this lies in the theory of cognitive dissonance, which explains that humans do not bother dealing with beliefs that compel them to reconsider their existing attitudes. This indicates that mass media will have a hard time persuading the audience and changing their opinion, and it should deal with reinforcing their existing views instead. Considering this theory, the presumption that media bias influenced the 2016 presidential elections might be incorrect. Nonetheless, journalists (Shellan 2016, Schroeder 2016) still claim that Donald Trump's media coverage before the elections gave him considerable advantage. Research shows that media "have no or little power over the readerships attitudes" (Nordlund 2003: 3), but there is evidence that "voters learn from the immense quantity of information during each campaign" (McCombs & Shaw 1972:176).

In fact, there does appear to be something that the media can influence directly. The media "may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen in McCombs & Shaw, 1972:177). This means that media have the possibility of choosing what to report on and decide what should be shown to the audience:

> On any given day, the world is full of happenings such as wars, riots, consumer frauds, spelling bees, family violence, scientific achievements, political speeches, and human sorrows and happiness. Obviously, the news media cannot (and does not) cover all these events. It has been estimated that, for the typical daily newspaper, more than 75% of the potential news items of the day are rejected and never see print. For national media such as network television news, the percentage of rejected news is much higher (Pratkanis & Aronson 1992:110).

By choosing a topic to report on, the media puts itself in the position to singlehandedly determine the importance of events that are happening in the world, thus feeding the audience only the news from their own "news preference list" (Fodor & Kriskó 2014). This leads us to conclusion that "readers of newspapers are consequently 'recipients of selected information on recent events', not 'recipients of the new information on recent events'" (Reah in Nordlund 2003: 4).

2.1.4. Media Bias

The aforementioned practice of news filtering and selective reporting is called *gatekeeping*. It is one of three types of media bias, and also the most commonly used one. Ideological bias in US mass media is a common occurrence. Left and right politically oriented people have a freedom of choice regarding their source of information, and follow the one that agrees with their own beliefs. Partisan reporting in US is a result of business-oriented policies of the American news outlets. The media, recognizing the need for such politically motivated discourse, is only doing its job in reporting what the audience wants to hear, in order to increase their profit in a highly competitive market.

The process of gatekeeping is a method used by media to withhold relevant information from the public and manipulate the perspective. Instead of showing the whole picture, the media shows only one side of the story. This can be understood as selective exposure, which means that "media can selectively omit relevant information that conflicts with their viewer's beliefs and preferences, but they cannot 'fabricate' news outright" (Bernhardt Krasa & Mattias

2008: 1093). According to T. Groseclose and J. Milyo (2005) this kind of media bias (generally) does not happen because of dishonesty, but because of personal preference. The filtering of information happens on ideological grounds in order to suit the needs and preferences of the audience. The real disadvantage of this kind of reporting is that the important information is missing from the whole picture.

The second type of media bias is called *coverage bias* and it is about the "physical amount of coverage each side of some issue receives" (D'Alessio & Allen 2000: 134). In political contexts, this directly refers to the amount of text that is written in favor of one of the given political options. "In a two-party electoral system, it is reasonable to assume that half of the coverage should be accorded to one side and half to the other, and that deviations from this pattern are consistent with coverage bias of some kind" (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000:136).

The third type of media bias is the *statement bias,* or expressing the personal opinion of the journalist in the written article. This kind of article contains subjective views and implicitly or directly favors one of the options. However, this kind of bias is not always discernible, because sometimes there are several interpretations to the text. Also, it is noteworthy to mention that, according to Budak, Goel and Rao (2016: 250): "news organizations express their ideological bias not by directly advocating for a preferred political party, but rather by disproportionately criticizing one side, a convention that further moderates overall differences".

The reason for media bias, in the first place, is that most of the mass media outlets are owned by big corporations that want to get their share of the market: "the business-oriented nature of American media is the key element in determining the media's biases" (D'Alessio and Allen 2000: 134). This is business, just like any other, run by publishers and businessmen who are chasing advertising revenue: Advertisements are an essential part of any media funding and advertisers are the ones who determine what stories they want to invest into:

> Today, twenty-three corporations control most of television, magazines, books, and movies. Some facts about media ownership: 60% of local daily newspapers belong to one of fourteen corporate chains, three corporations dominate the magazine industry, six record companies control 80% of the market for recorded music, and nine film studios produce 70% of network TV's primetime schedule. This concentration of ownership results in direct pressure on the reporter; certain stories are encouraged or

not encouraged depending on their implications for the parent corporation (Pratkanis & Aronson 2001:112)

Owners have the authority when it comes to determining what stories will be covered and what side the media should take regarding their political stances. News are full of ideational stances and beliefs and the "newspapers are not likely to express views that do not agree with the owner's political standpoint" (Nordlund 2003: 4), so the journalists must abide by their rules.

Media polarization in the US and their separate ideological views have been studied for decades. Studies came to several points of agreement regarding the political orientation of news outlets, and these are the following: According to Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley and Matsa (2014), but also Budak, Goel, and Rao (2016), the most left-leaning on the political spectrum are the New York Times and Huffington Post. CNN Washington Post fluctuate on both sides of the spectrum, but most of the time are trying to be objective. The most influential news outlets leaning on the right side of the political spectrum are Fox News and Breitbart News Network, which are consistently conservative, which makes them the primary sources of people who agree with Republican views.

Several instances can be brought up as evidence of excessive media bias that caused Trump to react. Explicit accusations of reporting false stories in order to negatively affect Republican nominee's campaign have led to a direct clash between Trump and the media. One such incident was during a news conference in May[1], when he was defending himself against media accusations of hiding where his donations came from. He explained that his "opinion on the media is very low", because they made him "look very bad". During that conference a reporter tried to defend the media saying that Trump is "resistant to scrutiny that comes with running for president of US", which caused Trump to lash out at him and call him "sleazy". Another such instance happened in August, when, provoked by the New York Times article titled "Inside the Failing Mission to Tame Donald Trump's Tongue" claiming that his bluntness and aggressiveness have presented him as a unqualified and racist candidate in the public eye, Trump expressed his discontent with the media coverage, claiming that they have bad influence on the poll numbers: "I'm not running against crooked Hillary, I'm running

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[1] CNN (2016): Donald Trump attacks media, calls reporter 'sleazy'

against the crooked media", and continued by saying that "the newspapers are going to hell".[2] Afterwards, he explained that his behavior was not going to change, just because they do not like it, because he was there for his supporters. These are only several examples of how mass media can sometimes go over the top with their bias.

2.1.5. Persuasive Communication

To understand how communication can be used to influence media consumers and change public opinion, certain dimensions of persuasion should be discussed. G. R. Miller (1980: 11) defined persuasion and persuasive communication as "any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others". This indicates that persuasion is an intentional activity directed at others in order to change their behavior. Furthermore, Miller described three dimensions of persuasive communication in order to better understand this phenomenon.

Response shaping process takes action when individuals are presented new values and attitudes. Such processes are used to form new positive attitudes and "foster positive responses to a new stimulus object" (Stiff 1994: 5). This process is very often seen in political campaigns while shaping the public's view for the sake of generating the desired mind-set towards a certain subject, such as a new candidate or political decision. For example, in autumn 1975 Jimmy Carter was introduced to the political scene. A persuasive mass media campaign was initiated in order to create a positive image of this political newcomer. As a result of this highly successful campaign, after a period of 10 months, Jimmy Carter was elected President of The US.

The second persuasive process is *response reinforcing*. Its main tools are reinforcement and support – this process strengthens our existing beliefs and gives positive feedback in order to maintain current behavior. This method of persuasion is commonly seen among politicians:

> As political campaigns near Election Day, politicians spend a disproportionate amount of their time in precincts and districts where they enjoy widespread support. Returning home to friendly districts, political candidates reinforce existing political opinions and motivate people to go to the polls on Election Day. (Stiff 1994: 7).

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[2] ABC News (2016): Donald Trump Blasts Media in New Attacks

Politicians spending time with their supporters give the supporters motivation to maintain their existing behavior. This communicational method of reinforcing and encouraging the existing mind-set will result in continuation of that behavior and reduced probability of a change in attitude.

The third dimension of persuasive communication is *response changing process*. It occurs when influential groups or individuals motivate others to change their stance about a certain topic. Response changing process is "motivated by new information and a re-evaluation of previously held beliefs" (Stiff 1994: 9). Shifts in attitude are caused by a strong persuasive influence of a group or a charismatic leader whose communication strategies are influential and can be used to achieve the desired goal. This process is best explained using the example of America's involvement in Vietnam War. In 1964 Kennedy advocated the US's involvement in the Vietnam War with intention of stopping Communism. Two years later, the circumstances and numerous American casualties lead to re-evaluation of his beliefs and an attitudes, so in 1966 he publicly opposed the war and suggested a negotiated settlement (Shannon 1967).

The outcome of any persuasive communication is a change in one's attitude or behavior. If we take the 2016 presidential election into consideration, then *voting for Donald Trump* is the main goal that the persuasive campaign was trying to achieve, but also "attitude formation was a critical intermediate step in that persuasion process" (Stiff 1994: 9). Attitudes are the main focus points of persuasive action. The one who engages in persuasive communication wants to influence the attitudes, because attitudes are behind people's preferences, reactions, and behavior. Milton Rokeach defined attitudes as "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner" (in Stiff 1994: 11). Since attitudes develop with one's experience throughout a longer period of time, they do not change easily. Attitudes are like a web of one's beliefs, resembling a "cluster around a central attitude object, and the entire cluster of beliefs is the attitude about the object" (Rokeach in Stiff 1994: 11).

2.1.6. Models of Mass Media Influence

Having defined persuasive communication and analyzed its dimensions, it is now possible to discuss its application in mass media. In this section I will present several techniques used in mass media to influence public opinion, and more specifically, the utilization of those techniques in political campaigns in general. These techniques are based on theories of

persuasion and have been used for the last several decades in various persuasion campaigns to influence behavior.

Studying the behavior of individuals, E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld (1955) pointed out one of the key factors that influence the audience's reception of media broadcasted messages. Interpersonal relations with people in one's surroundings have a substantial effect on the reception of media content. Other people's attitudes, behavior, and comments will influence an individual's opinion. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) also noted that certain individuals have a stronger influence on the people in their surroundings. They assume the role of opinion leaders and share their own views with other people. Opinion leaders form their opinions from the ideas broadcasted by the mass media and channel those opinions on other, less informed, individuals:

> The image of the audience as a mass of disconnected individuals hooked up to the media but not to each other could not be reconciled with the idea of a two-step flow of communication implying, as it did, networks of interconnected individuals through which mass communications are channeled (Katz 1957: 61)

Two-step flow communication is based on a theory that the mass media influence public opinion through individuals, i.e. opinion leaders who act as a conduit. Opinion leaders can also form a group around their (acquired) beliefs that will share common views. Furthermore, when that group becomes homogenous, and all of its members share the same beliefs, it can spread those beliefs to other groups. Taken a step further and combined with persuasive communication, this becomes a tool that is commonly used to spread political propaganda. The root of all this is social influence and the individuals who are influential enough to become role-models to others. The rest of the group will follow their example, observe their behavior, remember it, and reproduce it in similar situations. This process will continue as long that behavior is reinforced, as the "reinforcement increases the probability that the behavior will be enacted repeatedly" (Stiff 1994: 238).

It is common practice for political campaigns to extend their reach via mass media and use them as a tool to gain more influence. However, negative political campaigns against the opposing party and its candidates are becoming the main tool of gaining political points (Wallace 2016). So called mud-slinging or the smear campaign is an offensive tactic of promoting negative propaganda in the mass media in order to ruin the opponent's reputation:

… for both Democrats and Republicans, we find that news outlets are almost universally critical rather than supportive, a practice some have called "gotcha journalism." For example, as many political commentators have observed, the failures of the Affordable Care Act received far more media attention than its successes (Budak, Goel, & Rao 2016: 268).

William McGuire (1964) studied a technique of resisting persuasive communication, called the *inoculation theory*: "He was interested in understanding the psychological and cognitive processes that affects a person's willingness and motivation to resists arguments that attack widely held beliefs" (Stiff 1994: 230). According to his inoculation theory, each individual has a set of attitudes and beliefs about the world and the culture, called cultural truisms, and when outside information, containing an opposing view, challenges those cultural truisms, the individual will develop arguments to counter that information. "The basic procedure for inoculating people against persuasive attacks involves providing them with an attack message containing weak arguments that opposes a particular belief" (Stiff 1994: 231). By repeating this process of providing counter-arguments to defend one's beliefs, subsequently stronger and stronger arguments will be developed. This theory has proven to be highly useful in political practice, because it is a good counteractive measure against negative offensive criticism from the opposing party. Because of the immense popularity of smear campaigns, the political competitors must always be on alert for such negative comments aimed at them. In case of receiving an attack message from the opponents, the defending party can counter their assaulting claims, with the help of well-thought-out defensive arguments and defend their reputation. Any subsequent attack will be less effective, because increasingly better arguments will be developed.

A model that is commonly used in health campaigns, but can also be applied to the political scene, is the *health belief model* by Irwin Rosenstock (1974). Series of health issues during 1950s and preventive public health programs helped in developing this belief model. This is a model designed to prevent improper behavior and habits that might lead to health risks: "This orientation produces a *value-expectancy explanation* of behavior, which posits that in uncertain situations, behavior is determined by the value an individual assigns to a particular outcome and the expectation that the behavior will result in that outcome" (Rosenstock in Stiff 1994: 243). This model is based on three main factors, the first being the perceived susceptibility, i.e. the belief that the person is exposed and vulnerable to any kind of health risk. The second factor is the perceived severity, or the feeling of concern caused by

fear of the disease and understanding the danger that comes with it. The last factor is the perceived efficacy, or the belief in the beneficial effect of the recommended preventive or counteractive behavior against the disease. This means that "efficacy reflects the belief that a particular behavior will successfully achieve the desired outcome" (Stiff 1994: 245). When transferred to the political context, the opposing side winning can be considered *contracting a disease*, while the unwanted behavior can be understood as *casting a vote*. This model can be used in precautionary messages to the voters to take into consideration which side they will pick, because picking the wrong side might have horrible consequences.

It can be seen that a big part of media influence, during a political campaign, revolves around negative press about the opposing political side. In our analysis we will pay special attention to the frequency of such persuasive methods in the American news outlets.

2.2. General background: Trump the underdog

Donald Trump's victory in 2016 presidential elections is still considered a phenomenon, and is being studied by scholars and political experts trying to explain how it happened. He was considered an underdog, a business mogul who, until the day of his election, thrived on his fame as a celebrity host of The Apprentice TV show: "The Apprentice made Trump a national celebrity who became well-known enough to run for president and throughout the campaign Trump has used his celebrity to gain media time" (Kellner 2016: 8). His celebrity persona was built around an image of a self-assured, outspoken, and powerful businessman, who always spoke his mind and promoted freedom of speech. His populism and rhetoric took him a long way, from beating the other GOP candidates, facing off against Clinton, and finally, towards winning the elections. It was indeed shocking to discover the results of the elections on November 8, 2016 and it can be said that "what the Donald has done … is a political revolution and its effects will be felt many years from now" (Dodo 2016: 594).

Trump's underdog status and people's discontent with politicians helped him win the election. He assumed the role of a leader of a dissatisfied mass of people, who were let down by their government and decided to take matters into their own hands. The way that he speaks and the problems that he was talking about made him look genuine in the eyes of the public, and won him the support of his voters. The people were tired with inefficient politicians and were looking for a leader who has grown tired with disputes between Democrats and Republicans, and who would deal with the real problems. Trump mastered the rhetoric and

acted as an alpha-male during the early stages of the campaign: "Rather than reinventing himself for voters, Trump continued to play his already well-known public persona as an outspoken, dramatic and abrasive businessman" (Krasner 2017: 6). He was not afraid to speak his mind and interrupt others while trying to speak their own: "Trump shoots from the lip and cannot resist insults, attacks, impolitic language and rants against those who dare to criticize him" (Kellner 2016: 20). "Trump derives his language and behavior from a highly competitive and ruthless New York business culture combined with an appreciation of the importance of media and celebrity to succeed in a mediacentric hypercapitalism" (Kellner 2016: 5). One of his tactics in the early stages of the campaign included name calling the other candidates. "Crooked Hillary", "Lyin' Ted" and "Little Marco" are just some of the provocative names he used to label his opponents based on their characteristics. This simple psychological trick was very effective, since it helped him assert dominance and the nicknames stuck among his voters throughout the campaign. He successfully dominated the primary debates and threw the remaining Republican candidates off the tracks. He felt comfortable in his celebrity persona, he acted aggressively and manipulated every conversation to achieve maximum advantage against his opponents. Kellner also commented that "Trump is the first celebrity candidate whose use of the media and celebrity star power is his most potent weapon in his improbable and highly surreal campaign" (2016: 6).

Another characteristic that defined Trump is the constant strive for "winning". Compare, for instance the following quote: "(…) folks, we do not win anymore, and when was the last time that we win anything, we do not win in trade, we cannot beat ISIS" (Trump in Dodo 2016: 606). He is addressing USA's status on a global level, which is declining because of the numerous public issues, such as the recent wars in the Middle East that had little to no success and the recent cyber-attacks that showed that US security against hackers is inefficient. His main goal is to get America back on track as the dominating world power. He wants to recreate the image of a country that does not falter before terrorism and military threats, and can stand its ground among the competing global giants, such as China or Russia.

2.2.1. Populism

Trump's rhetoric was simple and easy to understand, it was pointed against the elitists and politicians. He stood out from the other candidates because of his attitudes that were equal to those of many blue-collar Americans. However, this is nothing new, "of course, nearly all democratic politicians seek to align themselves with 'the people', which is why the populist label gets so widely applied" (Oliver & Rahn 2016: 191) but it was effective. He assumed a

clear stance against terrorism, Muslim extremists, illegal immigration, crime, and stood up for the preservation of American values. He relied on sentimentality and pandering, as his speeches were all about promising the things that the working class American wanted to hear: "Mr. Trump is giving voice to people who cannot publicly express their outrage and frustrations against policies that they feel cheat them" (Dodo 216: 596). The audience that Donald wants to represent are the people who felt cheated and mistreated by the establishment, who were too many times promised change that never happened, and like any other angry admirers of populist movements "Trump's admirers had suffered under the vicissitudes of capitalism, globalization, and technological revolution" (Kellner 2016: 23).

This kind of communication is called populism. "At its core, populism is a type of political rhetoric that pits a virtuous 'people' against nefarious, parasitic elites who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk" (Oliver & Rahn 2016: 190). Populists, such as Donald Trump, claim that they represent ordinary, everyday, honest people who are silently watching while the elites and corrupt politicians deprave them of their rights. "Their whole purpose is to challenge the dominant order and give voice to the collective will. Goals that are infused with a sense of urgency by proclaiming that a crisis exists" (Oliver & Rahn 2016: 191).

According to J. E. Oliver and W. M. Rahn the reason for populist movements in the world is the inefficacy of the establishment and ignoring the "desires of large sections of the electorate" (2016: 194). Their research points to several moments in the last 20 years "when the public felt especially unrepresented". This feeling of discontent with the government is something that was happening in the 1990s, in 2010, and occurred once again in 2016. These periods "followed economic recessions and particular catastrophes in the financial sector … the national news media … contained many more stories about economic inequality than in previous years" (Oliver & Rahn 2016: 196). According to these findings, we may conclude that the emergence of the politics of Donald Trump is "ultimately rooted in American party politics" Oliver & Rahn 2016: 202) and is a result of government inefficacy in resolving persisting issues that had threatened the well-being of its people. Donald Trump promised the changes that his supporters had been waiting for years.

2.2.2. Trump, Media Favorite

On June 16, 2015 Donald Trump announced his candidature as a GOP nominee for US Presidency. His candidacy announcement speech caused quite a stir among mass media, due to his aggressive stance on immigration, Obamacare, global affairs, and government

leadership. The media coverage of his candidacy speech was very diverse. While one side praised him for wanting change, the other side went rampant over some of his outrageous claims.

Having arrived to the lobby of Trump Tower in New York City on June 16, 2015, in front of the gathering press and supporters, Trump announced his race for Presidency by promising to bring back to life the American dream and to make America great again.[3] The candidacy announcement speech lasted for around 40 minutes, it "ran the gamut of topics … from the economy and trade, to immigration, terror, foreign policy, healthcare, education, and infrastructure" (Krasner 2017: 18). A particular part of his speech sparked an immense amount of criticism:

> When Mexico sends its people. They're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Trump, 2015)

Media bias played its part, and different news sources reacted differently to this statement. The left-oriented news websites came up with titles such as "Donald Trump Refers to Immigrants as 'rapists' in Presidential Campaign Launch" (Kaufman 2015), "Donald Trump is Actually Running for President. God Help Us All" (Bobic 2015), "The 6 Most Provocative Parts of Donald Trump's 2016 Announcement" (Sakuma 2015), "Trump Not Cleared to Use Neil Young Song". They reacted instantly, heavily criticizing his opinions on Mexican immigrants and expressing their doubts in the possibility of Trump's victory. He was depicted as a tyrant and a fascist who is not fit to run the country.

The right-oriented media outlets published articles on their websites commending his determination, personal success, and efforts in initiating policy changes. Headlines such as "Donald Trump Wants to Make America Great Again, Announces 2016 Campaign" (Swoyer 2015), "Peak Trump: 'I Don't Need Anybody's Money'" (Shapiro 2016) could be read on Fox News, Breitbart, and Wall Street Journal. They focused on the positive parts of his speech, how he wants to bring back jobs to America and prevent illegal immigration, and almost completely ignored the controversial comments about Mexican immigrants. From their

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[3] Trump, Donald (2015): Presidential Campaign Announcement Full Speech on YouTube

perspective, Trump was a determined leader, who had great potential to become the next U.S. President.

In the eyes of mass media, Donald's candidature for Presidency was a gift that kept on giving. His every public appearance gave birth to innumerable news articles, and there was always something shocking and scandalous to write about: "in two or three weeks' time his candidacy had gained traction and the media buzz had become all about what Trump says and what he is going to say next" (Dodo 2016: 598). From the beginning of his campaign, he was a spectacle and received surprising amount of media coverage. To clarify my point regarding the word spectacle, it can be defined as: "media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and which become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks…" (Kellner 2016: 3). Scholars even compared his media success with Obama's. In his book (2016: 4) Douglas Kellner points out: "I've argued since 2008, that the key to Barack Obama's success in two presidential elections is because he became a master of media spectacle, blending politics and performance in carefully orchestrated media spectacles". Obama's famous "mic drop" [4] in April, 2016, after giving his final speech in White House, and mocking Trump was an interesting public stunt that attracted a lot of media attraction and positive responses. But unlike Obama, Trump is missing composure, and while Obama used to make jokes and funny remarks, Trump is winning public attention with his shocking actions. However, this is not the first time Donald Trump competed in elections. In 2000 he joined race as the Reform Party nominee. Because of his inexperience in politics, he ended up losing to Pat Buchanan. This was interpreted as a publicity stunt by the media and has been rarely mentioned ever since.

Starting from the 1990s with the Clinton sex scandal, media started seeking spectacles and scandalous events in order to appeal to the audience. Many events, from mass shootings, terrorism attacks, wars, up to presidential debates and celebrity debacles were a real treat for the audiences. Some events, like political debates, were specifically organized in order to fulfil the public demand for spectacle.[5] Such was the TV show that started it all, a public spectacle with controversial characters, designed to draw public attention. Donald Trump's

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[4] Global News (2016): President Barack Obama's hilarious final White House correspondents' dinner speech

[5] Dayan, Daniel and Katz, Elihu (1994) talk about such events that "have the potential for transforming societies even as they transfix viewers around the globe".

TV show *The Apprentice* was the beginning of the Trump phenomenon. The show premiered in January 2004, and it was highly rated by the audience. Trump became a celebrity who presented his determination and harshness by yelling "you're fired!" at the show contestants. It was thrilling to watch the contestants fight it out in a dog-eat-dog world of corporate schemes and carry out special tasks, as they were trying to impress the big boss, Donald Trump. Since then, Trump has mastered the orchestration of the mass media in his favor. "Trump also explained … why he was getting all the media attention: "RATINGS, (…) it's ratings, the people love me, they want to see me, so they watch TV when I'm on." (Trump in Kellner 2016: 11). All mainstream media, from the social media to television and newspapers, report on his spectacles. According to the expert opinion, by giving him quite generous media exposure, mass media inadvertently supported Donald: "Trump's orchestration of media spectacle and a compliant mainstream media was a crucial factor in thrusting Trump ever further into the front runner status in the Republican primaries and winning for him the overwhelming amount of media attention" (Kellner 2016:10) and eventually the elections.

3. Analysis: media discourse on Trump

The aim of this paper was to analyze the media discourse that appeared during the 2016 presidential campaign, more accurately, after the three presidential debates that took place on September 26, October 9 and October 19. The primary rationale for this study was the strong public opinion that mass media and media bias played a significant role in determining the winner of the US presidential elections in November 2016.

In this section I present the results of my analysis, whose primary aim was to illustrate how media bias manifests itself, and how it tries to shape public opinion on Donald Trump. I did not aim to measure the power of media influence because that is a separate topic that was already tackled by numerous other experts, such as Lazarsfeld & Merton (1957) and Pratkanis & Aronson (2001). Also, as was duly pointed out earlier, there seems to be suspicion as to the possibility of measuring media influence in the first place. This work focuses on examples of media bias, and delivers an analysis informed by the theories presented in the previous chapters. Specifically, the analysis takes account of the social functions of mass media, its relevance in today's world, how media bias is formed, and also seeks evidence of the methods and strategies of persuasive communication introduced in previous sections

The following elements were kept in mind during the analysis: tone, topic, visibility and type of bias, and what method of persuasion is used.

3.1. First Debate

Background: The first debate took place on September 26, 2016 in New York. During the debate the candidates discussed the trade deals, their plans on fighting terrorism, support of war in Iraq and several other issues. Some of the highlights include Trump calling Hillary incompetent, because of her life-long struggle against ISIS, which she was unable to beat. Clinton pointed out the fact that Trump still, to that day, did not release his tax return information, and accused him of tax avoidance. Trump's reply to that was that he was waiting for her 33,000 deleted e-mails to be released first. Furthermore, they touched upon their relationship with Obama. Both of the candidates pointed out that the other was disrespectful towards the former president. Towards the end of the debate Donald assaulted Hillary's looks and said that she didn't have the stamina to become the president. Clinton's final remark reminded voters that Trump hates women and calls them pigs.

Polls: According to the poll conducted by CNN and ORC, 62% of voters thought that Clinton did better in the debate, while only 27% voted for Trump. Furthermore, 51% of debate viewers claimed that Clinton handled the economy better, while 47% thought Trump was better in that area. When asked who was more sincere and authentic, 53% voted Clinton, as opposed to 40% who voted for Trump. The only category where Trump took the lead was in "Who spent more time attacking the opponent", with 56% against Clinton's 33%.

Media coverage: The following quotes are taken from the most popular post-debate articles from several news sites, and they will be used to illustrate each of the web site's general attitude towards the presidential candidates and their performance during the first debate. Example(s) (1) and (2) are from two left-oriented media sources, examples (3) and (4) are from two right-oriented websites. I present below the opening paragraphs from the articles commenting the overall results of the debate:

(1) Howard Fineman (The Huffington Post): Republican nominee Donald Trump turned in the worst — and I mean worst — debate performance in modern times. It was so bad that in a normal year, it would disqualify him from getting anywhere near the White House.

(2) Alexander Burns and Nick Corasaniti (The New York Times): Donald J. Trump lashed out on Tuesday in the aftermath of a disappointing first debate with Hillary Clinton, scolding the moderator, criticizing a beauty pageant winner for her

physique and raising the prospect of an all-out attack on Bill Clinton's marital infidelities in the final stretch of the campaign.

(3) Anonymous author from Fox News: Donald Trump brushed himself off Tuesday following a rough-and-tumble debate with Hillary Clinton, returning to the campaign trail while warning he may have to "hit her harder" in the next round. If polls only included media pundits, Hillary Clinton would have won Monday's debate by a landslide, but online surveys had Donald Trump as the yuge winner.

(4) Joel B. Pollak (Breitbart): Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton won the first presidential debate on Monday night, but without knocking Donald Trump out of the race.

Despite Donald Trump's somewhat weaker performance during the first debate, the article quoted in (3) (Fox News, 2016a) from the right-leaning Fox News website claims that audience supported him in surveys, and continues to provide poll results from a different source. According to The Drudge Report online vote (an American conservative, right-wing news aggregation website), "online surveys had Trump as the yuge winner" with 80% of data subjects giving the victory to Trump. Fox News' opinion is that the candidates were equal and that victory could have gone to either side. They are keeping to their objectivity, mentioning Hillary's readiness in debate and Trump's inexperience in such media events. They also say that the real clash awaits Trump in the next debate, quoting his words that next time, he may have to "hit harder" in order to win, adding also that: "If Trump continues to surge in key battleground states, it will be taken as evidence he accomplished what he needed to in the debate. If Clinton stops or even reverses his momentum, she may be retroactively declared the winner" (Fox News, 2016b). Breitbart's journalist Pollak (see example 4) gives recognition to Hillary and her adamant bearing, but quickly jumps to his favorite candidate's defense. Later in the article, he mentions media bias and bad moderating skills of the debate host as the main reason for Republican candidate's loss: "Lester Holt was terrible (...) Holt will face well-deserved criticism from the right, which will serve as a warning to the remaining moderators. Moreover, no one else is as inexperienced as Holt" (Pollak 2016a).

On the other side of the spectrum, an article (see example 1) found on the left-oriented Huffington Post web site immediately sets a mocking tone in the first paragraphs, showing their mud-slinging intentions: "Republican nominee Donald Trump turned in the worst - and I mean worst - debate performance in modern times" (Fineman, 2016). They go on, listing the bad sides of Trump's performance during the debate, and even going as far as pointing out the

fact that Hillary was interrupted by Trump 51 times, while she only interrupted him 17 times. The two authors from The New York Times (see example 2) agree with the leftist portal, calling Trump's appearance on the debate "disappointing". They spitefully accentuate his more aggressive rhetorical approach, by using expressions such as "scolding", "criticizing", and describing his behavior as an "all-out attack".

3.2. Second Debate

Background: For their second public debate on Sunday night, October 9th 2016, both candidates tried to take an offensive approach, and refused to shake hands at the beginning. While Donald Trump prepared a press conference, where he gathered women who were sexually assaulted by Bill Clinton, and trying to turn that into a political stunt against Hillary, Mrs. Clinton dug up old recordings of Trump bragging about groping women. Mr. Trump was continuously questioned about his bad treatment of women, while Hilary was all smiles, and did her best to show her calmness. At one point Donald turned against Hilary, saying that "she's lied about lots of things" and that "she has tremendous hate in her heart". During the final moments of the tumultuous debate, candidates were asked to say positive things about each other. Clinton said that Trump's "children are incredibly able and devoted" which says a lot about him, and Trump complimented Hillary for being a fighter: "She doesn't quit, she doesn't give up".

Polls: Morning Consult, a nonpartisan media and technology company conducted a poll and surveyed 2,001 registered voters. According to their results, 42% debate viewers voted in favor of Hilary Clinton, as the winner of the debate, as opposed to 28% that voted for Donald Trump. Only 12% of the surveyed votes claimed that the presidential debate changed their mind about who they would vote for. According to 44% of respondents, Trump's performance gave the viewers a less favorable view of the presidential candidate, while 35% gained a more favorable view. Clinton's performance resulted in 54% respondents claiming a more favorable, and 35% claiming a less favorable impression. 51% of the viewers voted Trump to be racist, 60% saw him as sexist, and 45% of the voters see Donald Trump as a strong leader.

Media coverage: Articles from left-oriented Huffington Post turn against Trump for his sexual assaults and mock him for his inability to hold his composure while being questioned "while Clinton wasn't thrown off, Trump was. The GOP nominee was 'stalking, couldn't control himself, couldn't sit down,' and was 'pacing' and 'meandering' around the stage" (Reilly & Bobic 2016). Additionally, every Huffington Post article about Donald Trump ends

on an Editor's note, saying that: "Donald Trump regularly incites political violence and is a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, misogynist, and birther who has repeatedly pledged to ban all Muslims - 1.6 billion members of an entire religion - from entering the U.S."

The New York Times' writer Charles M. Blow criticized Trump's political stunt and went into detail, analyzing his performance: "I was gobsmacked at the whole spectacle and incredulous as to whether I was actually hearing and seeing what I was hearing and seeing. Could this really be happening, or was I losing my mind?" (2016). He called Trump's second performance crazy and pointed out that Trump is on a moral low ground: "We have to stop grading this man on a curve, against abysmal expectations. The curve is how he has been allowed to bend the truth, to bend decency, to bend decorum, to bend America's moral fiber".

Except for calling this debate a "political Schocktoberfest", Bill Whalen from Fox News was mainly objective in commenting this event. They passed the victory to Trump, only because Hillary lost points, due to her insecurity. Funnily enough, his final remark can closely be compared with the one from The New York Times' Charles M. Blow. Where Blow antagonizes Trump, Whalen points out that Hillary might be the villain: "In all, it was an evening that will be hard to forget. Trump thinks Clinton should go to jail. Judging by the look on her face, Clinton would like to condemn Trump to a more subterranean existence – which is funny, since it's Trump who thinks Hillary is satanic" (Whalen 2016).

In complete contrast to Huffington Post and The New York Times, Breitbart's Matthew Boyle (2016) portrays Donald Trump as a knightly hero and a winner who "crushed his Democratic opponent Hillary Rodham Clinton in Sunday evening's debate at Washington University in St. Louis - propelling him closer to the White House". He applauded Trump for holding his own in the debate, and for being bold. He pompously described Trump's second performance as a "game-changer" where he "steamrolled" ahead, gained momentum and "returned to the offensive position - riding high into political battle - moving into the final month of the campaign".

3.3. Final Debate

Background: The highlights of the final debate, held on October 19, 2016 include talks about deportation of illegal immigrants, Trump's accusations against Hillary and her false accusations regarding the sexual assaults, and the most thought-provoking moment, when Trump announced that he would not accept election results, because he believed that the US

presidential election was rigged against him. This moment was criticized by many, because it showed his stubbornness and disrespect towards US democracy.

Polls: The media was once again divided about the winner, and the polls are showing various results, and cannot be completely trusted. Results of the CNN and the ORC poll go in favor of Clinton, winning the debate with 52%, against Trump's 39%. However, according to the Washington Times survey, Donald Trump won the final presidential debate with astonishing 72%. Our illustration of the media coverage of the final debate shows interesting results, primarily in the details that were covered by each news outlet and the way they comment on the Trump's performance.

Media coverage: Jonathan Cohn of the Huffington Post (2016) could not forgive the fact that Donald Trump was not ready to accept the results of presidential election, describing it as "unsettling", "shocking", "dangerous", and worthy of "condemnation", even pointing out the small detail that "Off stage, according to media reports, the audience reacted with an audible gasp". About the winner of the final debate, he wrote:

> Donald Trump was on his way to his best performance in a presidential debate Wednesday night — right up to the moment when he refused, twice, to say he would respect the results of November's presidential election. It overshadowed everything else that happened on the stage in Las Vegas and arguably told voters everything they need to know about the Republican nominee for president (Cohn 2016).

He continued to devote the whole article towards criticizing that particular moment, barely mentioning any of the Hillary Clinton's lapses. The NY Times' author Peter Wehner, who, according to the description, "served in the last three Republican administrations and is a contributing opinion writer", took the bitterness to an even higher level:

> The post-debate coverage has been dominated by Mr. Trump's refusal to say he won't accept the election results, and rightly so. It would be a shocking statement, except for the fact that he has spent much of this month attempting to undermine the foundations of our democratic system. That he would do so in a debate, despite how obviously self-destructive it was, underscores what has always been his main weakness: his unstable and disordered personality. (Wehner, 2016)

He chided Donald Trump, mainly focusing on his "narcissism", "vanity", and "self-obsession", and even going as far as speaking in the name of majority: "Most Americans are

unsettled and unnerved by Mr. Trump, and the more exposed to him they are, the more unsettled and unnerved they become".

The complete opposite of this description comes from an article found on Fox News, written by Liz Peek, titled "Calm, informed, reasonable: Trump scores at final debate". Her thoughts on the debate were as follows: "in the third and final presidential debate, Trump had his best outing yet. He was calm, informed and reasonable, and managed to again put Hillary on the defensive". Peek also briefly mentions the "drama of the debate", i.e. Donald Trump refusing to guarantee to accept the results of the election, but without dwelling on that and continues to talk about how "media establishment is pitted against him" instead, and how "the entire country is alert to what has become the most aggressive media onslaught ever waged against a presidential candidate".

Pollak from Breitbart once again expresses his favoritism of Trump, emphasizing his thoughts with an exclamation: "With — finally! — a fair fight at hand, Trump showcased his strengths. He was (…) calm but aggressive, showing the fighting spirit that lifted him past the Republican field" (Pollak, 2016d). Interestingly enough, Breitbart's author forgot to mention Trump's momentous refusal to agree with outcome of the election, that almost every media outlet was buzzing about.

3.4. Discussion of results

Our results indicate a polarity in the way left-oriented media outlets (Huffington Post and The New York Times) and right-oriented outlets (Fox News and Breitbart) relay to the audience their view of success of the two candidates in the political debates. Left-oriented websites adapted a somewhat more aggressive approach against the Republican candidate, while right-oriented ones relied on a more defensive tactic.

Huffington Post and The New York Times were equally explicit in showing their bias towards their favorite candidate, heavily discriminating against their opponent. Their bias is manifested through gatekeeping and statement bias. While both of the candidates were given equal coverage, the articles were very selective in what they were reporting about, i.e. they were almost exclusively focused on the bad sides of Donald Trump's performance. They were also very vocal in expressing their personal opinion, either through the usage of negative and shock-provoking statements, such as "Trump incites political violence", and describing him as "serial liar", "xenophile", racist", "misogynist", "unstable" or by the tone of the article, which is often disdainful, unforgiving and particularly aggressive towards the Republican candidate.

They try to form or shape reader's opinion by using response changing and response reinforcing methods of persuasion. The articles provide enough bad coverage of the opposing candidate to make it likely that the reader would either change their opinion about Trump or have their existing anti-Trump opinion boosted. In terms of media influence models, this is a prime example of a smear campaign, i.e. promoting negative propaganda against the opposing candidate.

Right-oriented websites explicitly showed their bias used a contrasting tactic. Fox News strived towards objectivity in their articles, while Breitbart still showed a tendency towards showing support for their favorite candidate. Fox News' articles generally showed only vague signs of bias, keeping to the more objective tone and avoiding shocking phrases. Both candidates received decent amount of coverage, and fair share of criticism for their lapses. However, slight "rooting" in favor of Trump is still noticeable, mainly through the selection of featured poll results and mentioning Trump as the winner of the second two debates. Fox News also stood in his defense during the big "crisis", when he exclaimed that election is rigged. On the other hand, Breitbart was not holding back on partisanship. All three types of media bias can be seen in their articles, but instead of taking an offensive approach against Hillary, they turn to persuading and comforting their audience via response reinforcing dimension. A certain positive tone towards Trump's actions can be noticed in their articles. Breitbart's authors defend their candidate's attitudes and commend him on his improving performance. The general strategy of these articles is to fend-off negative criticism and reassure Trump supporters. This approach is consistent with the inoculation model of media influence.

While the particular choices of strategies vary from source to source and depend on the content reported, all the sources I studied show clear evidence of bias, and thus confirm the theoretical and empirical importance of communication strategies and concepts mentioned in sections 2.1.5. and 2.1.6.

4. Conclusions

This paper sought to explore media bias in presenting the outcomes of three presidential debates during American 2016 presidential elections. The rationale for the study is the well-known fact that due to their ever-growing presence, mass media have the potential to influence public opinion on any matter, politics including. While there is some agreement that it is hard, if not impossible, to *gauge the extent* of media influence on individuals or

groups, studying the *strategies* deployed by various media outlets is certainly an agenda worth pursuing for their potential impact on public opinion.

We decided to focus on the news coverage of presidential debates, because, according to Google Trends graphs (Section 1.2.), public attention to the presidential race seems to peek immediately in the aftermath of debate broadcasts. Moreover, such high-intensity political run-ins are bound to inspire strong reactions in the public and the media.

We explored some of the main tenets of communication theory and the notion of media bias. In particular, we examined three possible forms in which media bias may manifest itself, i.e. gatekeeping, coverage bias, and statement bias. We also examined the dimensions of persuasion characteristic of biased articles intent on shaping readers' opinions. Those persuasion methods were presented as frequent components of various models of media influence, viz. *smear campaigns*, *inoculation methods* or *health belief models,* some of which manifested in the articles we examined in the analytical part of the paper. The articles we selected for our analysis were published by four media outlets that covered the political debates. Importantly, these outlets have been found to be polarized, with Huffington Post and The New York Times being left-oriented and Fox News and Breitbart right-oriented. Given this bias, we sought to establish which of the strategies explored in the theoretical part of the paper were deployed in those media outlets to potentially influence their readership.

We found clear evidence of media bias in the media outlets explored, but the choices of strategies and persuasion methods varied. Left-oriented websites adhered to a more unforgiving and overly aggressive smear-campaign against Donald Trump, while Right-oriented websites kept to a more defensive strategy, a strategy consistent with the model of media influence called the inoculation strategy. They rejected negative criticism and commended Trump's performance in order to lift the morale of Trump supporters.

Although this study only looked at a relatively small segment of news coverage, even this limited empirical material has shown clear evidence of media bias in covering the 2016 presidential campaign and shows much promise for future research in the area.

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