Partisanship, Power, and Politics
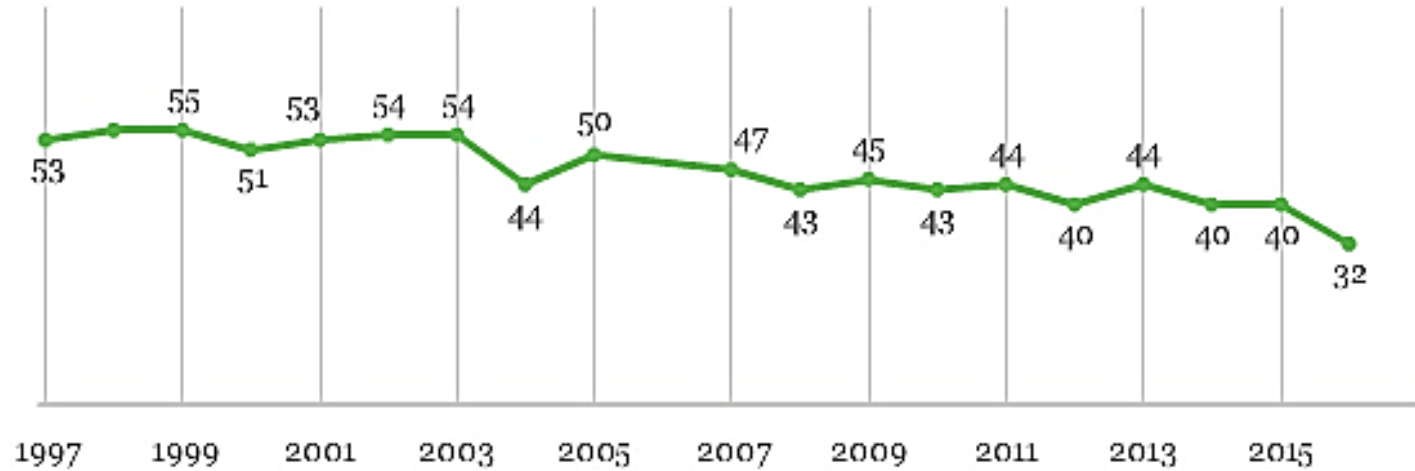
The Impacts of Media Bias on Television News Content

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Why study media bias?

Americans' Trust in the Mass Media

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

■ % Great deal/Fair amount

53 55 51 53 54 54 44 50 47 43 45 43 44 40 44 40 40 32

1997 1999 2001 2003 2005 2007 2009 2011 2013 2015

GALLUP

- In 1976, 72% of Americans trusted the media. In 2016, it was 32%.

- Many believe media outlets are biased, which many scholars confirm.

- This bias has a corrosive impact on democracy, as it makes it difficult to hold the government accountable.

Research Question and Hypothesis

- **Research Question:** In what ways does media bias impact television news content in the United States?

- **Hypothesis:** An increase in media partisanship leads to an increase in bias in television news and altered content between various outlets. This includes varieties in factors such as word choice and emotional tone.
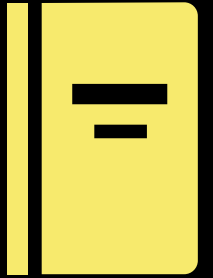
| Level of partisanship | → | Level of content bias |

Methods and Case Selection

Transcripts from CNN, Fox News, PBS Newshour, and MSNBC covering the 2020 Super Tuesday elections were collected.
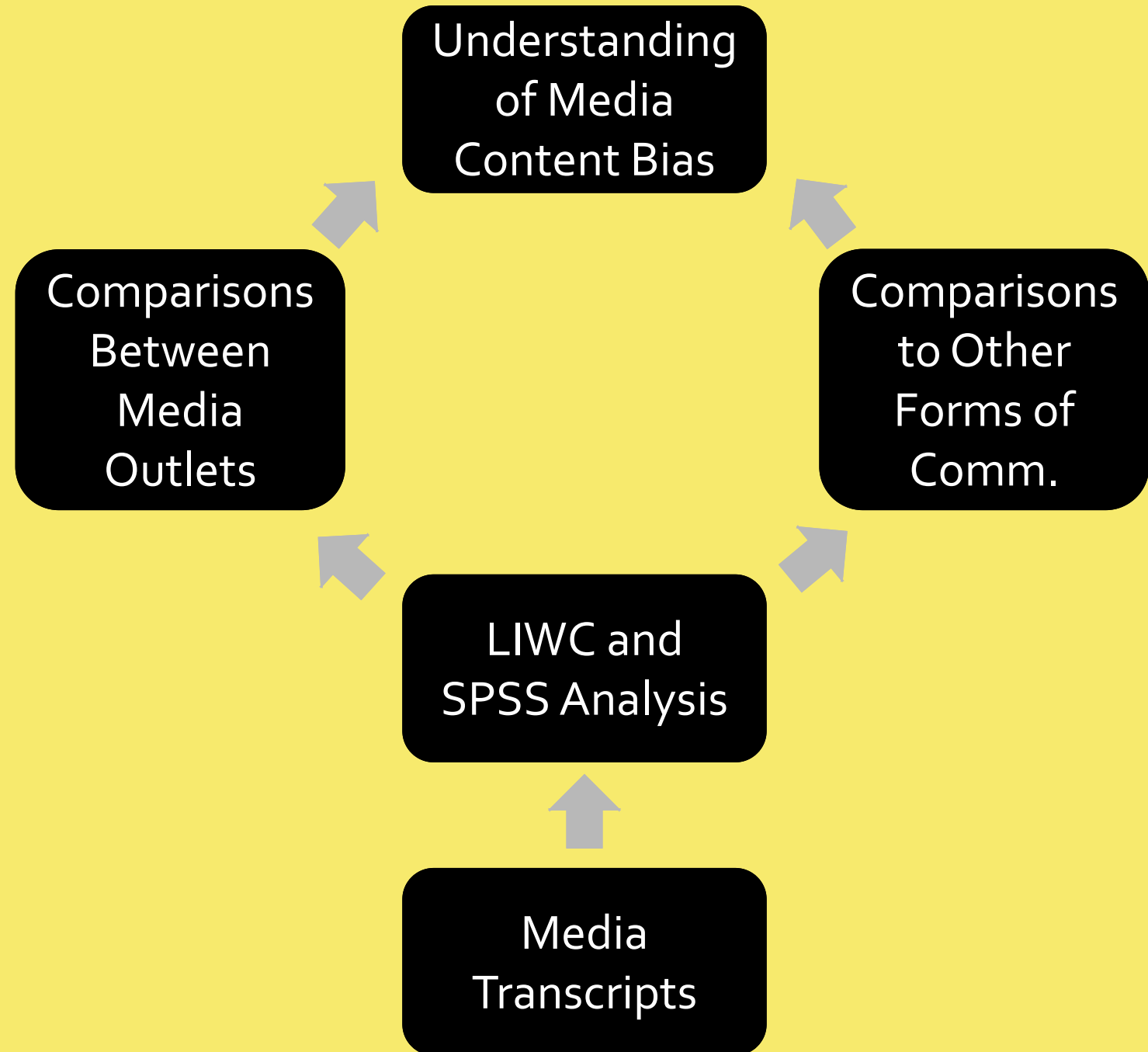
The transcripts were analyzed using LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), which sorts words into psychologically meaningful categories.

The LIWC data was then analyzed with SPSS Statistics to make comparisons between outlets and against other forms of communication.
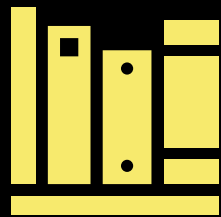
Research Design

- How do major news outlets compare to other forms of communication?

- How do these news outlets compare to each other?

Understanding of Media Content Bias

Comparisons Between Media Outlets

Comparisons to Other Forms of Comm.

LIWC and SPSS Analysis

Media Transcripts

What Do We Know About Media Bias?

Literature Review

The presence of bias

Many scholars focus on determining if media bias really exists. The majority agree that television news outlets are biased in some way.

The causes of bias

Some scholars conclude that the media is biased and focus on the factors behind it. Many agree that corporate ownership has an impact.

The effects of bias

Other scholars follow the same conclusion. However, they focus on the impact on content. The upcoming analysis follows this school of thought.
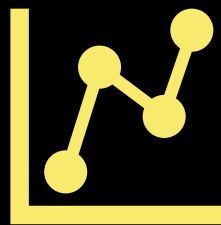
Results

- PBS was more analytical than the other three outlets. However, CNN, MSNBC, and Fox sounded more authentic.
- The most variations were found between PBS and Fox News.
- There were no major differences in content between CNN and MSNBC.
- All four outlets sounded less authentic when compared to other forms of communication.

TABLE 1. SELECTED LIWC NEWS OUTLET COMPARISONS

	PBS	CNN	MSNBC	FOX
Linguistic Processes				
Analytic	76.14	64.21	70.81	56.93
Clout	77.64	77.22	79.12	77.75
Authentic	26.48	39.18	38.87	37.92
Tone	55.02	63.08	60.60	64.30
Psychological Processes				
Positive Emotion	2.59	2.79	2.50	2.98
Negative Emotion	1.04	0.79	0.66	0.94
Cognitive Processes				
Insight	1.74	2.00	2.03	2.41
Certainty	0.98	1.06	1.16	1.21
Drives				
Power	3.69	3.83	3.33	3.28
Reward	1.26	1.64	1.68	1.80
Risk	0.41	0.25	0.19	0.32
Time Orientations				
Focus Past	3.88	2.92	3.43	3.57
Focus Present	8.47	12.72	9.42	12.67
Focus Future	1.37	1.97	1.86	2.16

Analysis and Assessment

The results suggest the presence of bias when news outlets covered the Super Tuesday elections in 2020.

MSNBC had less negative emotion and a higher focus on reward, suggesting a stronger preference for Democratic candidates.

Fox News presented prior related events in a more negative light than CNN and MSNBC.

Fox and PBS differed the most, while CNN and MSNBC had the most similar coverage.

Conclusion

- Overall, the findings suggest that media partisanship has an impact on television news content and leads to an increase in altered content between sources and overall bias.

- In the future, other factors such as prioritized news stories and cited sources should also be analyzed.

- More research is needed to determine what media bias looks like, as a lack of trust in the media has a corrosive impact on democracy and makes it difficult to hold government officials accountable.