



# “The Looming, Crazy Stalker Coronavirus”: Fear Mongering, Fake News, and the Diffusion of Distrust

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## Abstract

The authors explore media distrust among a sample of precarious and gig workers interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these left-leaning respondents initially increased their media consumption at the outset of the pandemic, they soon complained of media sensationalism and repurposed a readily available cultural tool: claims of “fake news.” As a result, these unsettled times have resulted in a “diffusion of distrust,” in which an elite conservative discourse of skepticism toward the media has also become a popular form of compensatory control among self-identified liberals. Perceiving “fake news” and media sensationalism as “not good” for their mental health, respondents also reported experiencing media burnout and withdrawing from media consumption. As the pandemic passes its one-year anniversary, this research has implications for long-term media coverage on COVID-19 and ongoing media trust and consumption.

## Keywords

coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, precarious, gig work, media, fake news, liberal

Americans have become increasingly skeptical of the media since the 1970s (Lee and Hosam 2020; Tsfati and Cohen 2012). Many question the credibility of sources, citing partisan slant or network profits for their distrust (Ladd 2012; Lee and Hosam 2020). Media distrust increasingly echoes political divides, with self-described Democrats trusting network news, NPR, and the *New York Times*, whereas most Republicans trust only Fox News (Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Stroud 2011). Additionally, “differences in trust and distrust of news outlets [are] often wider among the ideological wings of each party—conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats” (Jurkowitz et al. 2020:22).

Yet when the novel coronavirus outbreak began in the United States, millions of Americans turned to media coverage of the pandemic, seeking answers and reassurance. In March 2020, the week after former President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, cable news viewership increased exponentially: CNN viewership jumped 193 percent, MSNBC increased by 56 percent, and Fox experienced an 89 percent climb in ratings (Bond 2020). Nielsen found that individuals in the United States spent 215 percent more time reading news online than they had during the same month of 2019 (Oxford Business Group 2020). Social media use also increased, with a Harris Poll survey

conducted between late March and early May showing that between 46 percent and 51 percent of U.S. adults were using social media more since the outbreak began (Harris Poll 2020); the *New York Times* reported that Facebook use was up 27 percent and YouTube visits were up 15.3 percent (Koeze and Popper 2020). Indeed, as noted by the Pew Foundation, early in the pandemic, Americans were more positive than negative about COVID-19 news coverage (Gottfried, Walker, and Mitchell 2020).

In light of this increase of media use, how has COVID-19 affected the perceptions of low-income, liberal adults regarding the media? Focusing on New York City, an early epicenter of the virus in the United States, we ask, how has the lived experience of residents in New York affected respondents’ opinions of the media during a rapidly changing public health crisis? Did increased media use during these unsettled times (Swidler 1986) build trust?

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In this article, we draw on surveys and in-depth remote interviews conducted from April 2020 through June 2020 with nearly 200 gig and precarious workers. Contrary to work by Gauchat (2012) and Evans and Hargittai (2020) suggesting that conservatives and moderates are “collectively different” from liberals and Democrats, we find that left-leaning or liberal-identified participants also complained of media sensationalism, fake news, and conflicting narratives in COVID-19 coverage. Additionally, although Shepherd, MacKendrick and Mora (2020) found that existing political polarization and attitudes about Trump affected the public’s understanding of COVID-19, our in-depth interviews suggest that these perspectives may be more nuanced than survey research has previously found.

We draw upon Swidler’s (1986) theory of strategic cultural action to conceptualize liberal respondent’s claims of “fake news.” We argue that the pandemic constitutes “unsettled times,” in which social reality is actively undergoing transformation (Swidler 1986:279). Grappling with conflicting reports on the source of the virus, how it spreads, and how to protect themselves and loved ones (Sanger et al. 2020), respondents repurposed a readily available cultural tool: claims of “fake news.” As a result, these unsettled times have resulted in a “diffusion of distrust,” in which an elite conservative discourse of skepticism toward the media has become a popular form of compensatory control (Kay et al. 2009) used by conservatives and liberals alike to make sense of the contradictory, continuous coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, perceiving media sensationalism and “fake news” as “not good” for their mental health, respondents reported experiencing media burnout and physical and emotional responses to media that resulted in a withdrawal from media consumption. Given the importance of an informed electorate, we suggest that this media withdrawal may have long-term consequences for American democracy and that postpandemic media coverage will require a rebuilding of trust with members of the American public across the political landscape. In the following section, we outline the theoretical premise of our article within the literature on media distrust, populism, and prevailing cultural logic.

## Theoretical Framing

### *Distrust of Media and Expertise*

Americans have grown increasingly distrustful of news media over the past 40 years (Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Ladd 2012). Distrust in media has spread as confidence in other institutions and in the impartiality of science has dwindled (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Evans and Hargittai 2020). Prior research has cast these anti-institutional trends in terms of populist backlash against racial minorities and elites (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Mudde 2004), but the prevalence of this distrust

suggests the need for additional explanation. Following World War II, Western democracies increasingly relied on a technocratic discourse of expertise to legitimate government policies (Eyal 2019; Mudge 2018), replacing religious, moral, and legal justifications with apolitical appeals to technical knowledge (Ezrahi 2004:254). Although scientific authority initially lent these governments a sheen of credibility, the reduction of politics to expert management eroded democratic responsiveness by isolating policy making from popular will (Mounk 2018).

A crowded field of political actors claiming expertise further undermined public confidence. Competitive pressures, disciplinary specialization, and the complexity of socioeconomic forecasting led a glut of experts to assert contradictory claims that appeared increasingly arbitrary and politically biased, a dynamic Eyal (2019) neatly summarized: “The ‘scientization of politics’ inadvertently causes the ‘politicization of science’” (p. 97). Ultimately, public perception of expertise as self-interested has shaken the credibility of institutions ranging from government to science and mass media (Antonio 2000; Beck 1992).

### *Populism*

As popular rejection of expertise intensifies, scholars have trained their attention on populism as a political vehicle for this backlash (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Eiermann 2016; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Oliver and Rahn 2016). Populist discourse tends to resonate with people cynical about government responsiveness (Fieschi and Heywood 2004; Plattner 2010), but these feelings are not confined to any single demographic. Supporters of populists come from all social classes (Gusterson 2017; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016). Likewise, as populism’s “thin-centered” ideological framework can be harnessed by the political left or right (Eiermann 2016), its appeal spans the political spectrum (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013).

Although populism differs between the political left and right (Oliver and Rahn 2016), research on contemporary American populism focuses on conservative, authoritarian, and nationalist variants (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). These right-wing populisms entail distrust of political elites, but also rejection of scientific expertise and institutional media. Conservatives are less likely to find scientists credible (Evans and Hargittai 2020; Gauchat, O’Brien, and Miroso 2017) and to trust mainstream news sources (Müller and Schulz 2021), including for information related to COVID-19 (Uscinski et al. 2020). Other work, however, has linked the scientific “legitimacy problem” to widespread disenchantment with expert authority (Gauchat 2011) independent of left-right political ideology (Fawzi 2019; Stecula and Pickup 2021), suggesting the need

to extend research on populism and institutional trust beyond conservatives.

### *Prevailing Cultural Logic*

According to Swidler (1986), culture shapes actors' "strategies of action," forming cultural repertoires that draw on prevailing "cultural logic," or widely shared codes and principles that attribute meaning to action (Swidler 2002). Swidler (1986) explained that actors "select differing pieces for constructing lines of action" (p. 277), but "People do not build lines of action from scratch. . . . Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links. Culture influences action through the shape and organization of those links" (p. 277). During "unsettled times" of "crisis and uncertainty . . . the cultural scaffolding around us collapses" (Luft 2020). As a result, during major social upheavals or pandemics, conventional cultural logics can loosen and change, enabling individuals to "establish new styles or strategies of action" (Swidler 1986:278). Nonetheless, the emergence of new cultural repertoires is limited by legitimate and socially acceptable meanings (Tavory and Swidler 2009) drawn from existing ideologies.

Although liberals have traditionally been more supportive of mainstream news media (Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Stroud 2011), since the 2016 election, claims of "fake news" have become increasingly prevalent. President Trump referred to "fake news" almost 160 times in the first year of his presidency (Stelter 2018), and use of the term increased 365 percent since the 2016 election, resulting in the dubious distinction of "word of the year" in 2017 (Meza 2017). According to Google Trends, searches for the term peaked following the president's inauguration in February 2017, and it experienced a resurgence in popularity in March 2020, the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although President Trump did not invent "fake news," his persistent scapegoating of the media coincided with its dominance in popular discourse, particularly among conservative supporters (van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Roozenbeek 2020).

During the Trump era, conservative attitudes have become increasingly associated with the belief that most mainstream news is "fake" (Lee and Hosam 2020). In fact, those who most frequently engage with Fox News were less likely to answer questions about the coronavirus correctly, compared with MSNBC viewers (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020). Although conservatives are generally more sensitive to threats than liberals (Matthews, Levin, and Sidanius 2009; van Leeuwen and Park 2009), Calvillo et al. (2020) found that conservatism was "associated with perceiving less personal vulnerability, rating the virus as less severe . . . and that the media had exaggerated the risks of the virus." As a result, mask wearing and social distancing have become ideologically polarized (Pepinsky, Gardarian, and Goodman 2020; Rothgerber et al. 2020).

### *Media Distrust on the Left*

Although media distrust has become deeply entangled with the Republican Party platform and constituent identities, left-wing distrust in the mainstream media is not entirely new (Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Lee and Hosam 2020). Indeed, Holt (2017) traced the popularity of media criticism to left-leaning historical thinkers such as Noam Chomsky, and left-wing news sites, social media groups, and podcasts are emerging in the United Kingdom and the United States (Coppins 2017; Cushion forthcoming).

Additionally, the United States has a lengthy history of left-wing, antiestablishment politicians and parties, evidenced by the popularity of Depression-era "share our wealth" proponent Governor Huey Long of Louisiana and contemporary Democratic socialist politicians such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Judis 2016). Similar to their right-wing counterparts, left-wing populists espouse distrust toward elites and associated institutions but tend to be more supportive of minority rights (Judis 2016; Marcos-Marne forthcoming).

Within this climate of institutional cynicism, disengagement and personal knowledge can seem more appealing than mainstream media. Furthermore, psychological research demonstrates that information scarcity and uncertainty motivate compensatory behaviors that recapture a sense of control (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Kay et al. 2009). Thus, low-wage, liberal workers may discredit the media coverage of the pandemic to mitigate the risks they face at work. Media distrust and skepticism may be particularly dangerous during the pandemic, wherein credible public health information is essential in mitigating risk by promoting mask wearing, social distancing, and vaccination (Malecki, Keating, and Safdar 2021). In the case of precarious and gig workers, who often lack the privilege of remote work, media distrust or avoidance may lead to missing important information such as vaccine eligibility or availability of unemployment assistance (Ravenelle, Kowalski, and Janko, 2021).

### **Research Methodology**

The data for this mixed-methods study were collected from April through June 2020, during the first wave of the virus, when New York City was considered the epicenter of the outbreak in the United States (McKinley 2020). Precarious workers were recruited via advertisements on Craigslist, OffStageJobs.com, and Dance/NYC; posts on New York City-focused Reddit and on Facebook groups for gig workers, unemployed workers, and creative professionals; and snowball sampling. Workers were eligible if they used gig platforms for work or were in precarious jobs such as retail, restaurants or bars, or freelance work.

All participants were asked to complete an online demographic survey and participate in a respondent-directed

	On-platform	Off-platform
1099 workers	Food delivery (e.g. UberEats, Grubhub, DoorDash, Postmates) (24); Dog walkers (i.e. Wag.com & Rover) (8); TaskRabbit workers (9); Uber/Lyft Via drivers (6); Shopper/pickers (i.e. Instacart & Shipt) (6); n: 53	Creative freelancers in film production, acting, modeling, photography, etc (60); Non-platform based gig workers (i.e. Craigslist) (15) n: 75
W-2 workers	*	Non-medical essential workers (13); Restaurant workers (e.g. cooks, servers, bartenders) (33); Low-wage workers (i.e. cleaning, childcare, call center, beauty services, etc) (15); Truck/Warehouse workers (3) n: 64

**Figure 1.** Platform participation and work categorization of participants ( $n = 192$ )

\*The vast majority of gig platforms pay their workers as independent contractors.

interview (Weiss 1994). The telephone interviews focused on open-ended questions: what workers were doing before the coronavirus and their income source(s) during the pandemic; how their daily routines had changed because of the pandemic; their media consumption; and their perceptions of how platforms, clients, and/or employers were handling the pandemic.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using flexible coding (Deterding and Waters 2021), an iterative coding method that is well suited for collaborative analysis of in-depth interviews (averaging 86 minutes). Respondents were assigned pseudonyms and offered a \$25 gift card incentive.

One hundred ninety-two precarious workers participated in our study, including 60 creative freelancers, 33 restaurant workers, 28 nonmedical low-wage workers, and three truck and warehouse workers (Figure 1). Fifty-three gig-based workers were included from platforms such as TaskRabbit, DoorDash, Instacart, and Uber, in addition to 15 non-platform-based gig workers who secured work via Web sites such as Craigslist. All workers had worked face to face before the pandemic, with 76.5 percent reporting experiencing job or income losses because of the pandemic.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (51.6 percent) were women, 46.8 percent were men, and 1.6 percent identified as gender nonconforming or nonbinary. Fewer than half (42.9 percent) identified as white, with equal numbers identifying as Black or Hispanic (14.8 percent), 13.2 percent as Asian, 8.5 percent as multiple races, and 5.8 percent as a race not listed. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 64 years, with an average age of 33. Roughly equal numbers had associate's degree (9 percent) or high school diplomas (8.5 percent). More than a quarter had some college experience (27 percent), while 36.5 percent held bachelor's degrees and 18 percent held graduate degrees or had some graduate school experience. Nearly two thirds (61.5 percent) of interviewees made less than \$40,000 per year, with 28.9 percent earning less than \$20,000 per year. Almost a

quarter (24 percent) of interviewees made between \$40,000 and \$70,000 per year before the pandemic.

## Findings

Although early survey-based research on attitudes toward COVID-19 revealed that Democrats experienced increased trust of scientists (Evans and Hargittai 2020) and that political worldviews affected perceptions of threat (Shepherd et al. 2020), our in-depth interviews with nearly 200 respondents suggest that liberals' perceptions of media coverage may be more nuanced, and negative, than previously thought, especially among precarious workers. These findings are all the more surprising given that participant interviews were conducted during the first surge of the pandemic, when local hospitals, overwhelmed by patient deaths, were being outfitted with refrigerator truck morgues; for New Yorkers, the coronavirus was a reality, not an abstraction.

In the following section, we discuss precarious New Yorkers' perceptions of media coverage of pandemic and their complaints of media sensationalism, fake news, and conflicting narratives. We then discuss respondents' reports of media burnout and the potential implications for trust in media and public health directives as the pandemic stretches past the one-year mark.

### *Sensationalism and Fear Mongering: "Like It's the Zombie Apocalypse"*

A common complaint about media coverage of the virus was that journalists and broadcast professionals engaged in sensationalism by using attention-getting stories or language to capture audience interest, often with little regard for accuracy. Charges of media sensationalism have been a common complaint in conservative criticism of virus coverage (Calvillo et al. 2020; Shepherd et al. 2020) but were unexpected given that interviews were conducted with residents of the New York metropolitan area when the area accounted for 5 percent of cases globally (McKinley 2020).

To put this in context, daily cases in New York peaked at more than 9,000 in mid-April, totaling more than 200,000 confirmed cases, and approximately 18,600 people died between February and June in New York City (Thompson et al. 2020). Fears over the virus, partnered with a closing of schools and childcare centers, and the requirement that non-essential workers stay home, led many New Yorkers to flee the city, with nearly 300,000 address changes filed with U.S. Postal Service in just the first 10 months of the pandemic (Klein 2020). The exodus, partnered with the stay-at-home orders that instructed residents to stay at home except for socially distanced exercise, food and medicine procurement, and essential work led to a postapocalyptic sense of emptiness on the streets.

The stillness on the streets was linked to a reduction of pollution (Krajick 2020; Plumer and Popovich 2020) and increased resurgence of nature in cities worldwide (Macdonald 2020), but for many workers, encountering an unexpected sleepiness to the city that never sleeps brought to mind horror movies. As Enrique, 43, a food delivery driver, explained, “I’m such a huge *Walking Dead* fan, and I feel like, ‘X the zombies out,’ everything else is, it’s just like that. It’s like the *Walking Dead*.” Iris, 34, a nail technician turned gig worker, echoed the horror movie theme: “It looks dead. It looks very, like one of those zombie movies, where there’s barely that many people outside. It’s definitely something that you would not recognize in New York.” Unlike residents in more rural areas, or even those in the Midwest and South who were largely spared from the first surge of the epidemic (Gee et al. 2020), the sheer emptiness of the city meant that New Yorkers could simply walk outside and realize that something was amiss.

Additionally, a number of interviewees believed that they had caught the virus, or knew of family or friends who had been sick or even died. As illustrative of how extensive the impact was on the city, the New York City Health Department (2020) estimated in Queens, a particularly hard-hit borough, between 30 percent and 50 percent of residents had antibodies to the virus. More than 20 percent of New Yorkers overall are estimated to have antibodies (Goodman and Rothfeld 2020). In light of this, respondent claims that the media was attempting to arouse fear through the spreading of frightening stories or data about the coronavirus are especially noteworthy.

A common explanation for the claims of fear mongering was that it was intended to drive ratings and revenue. As self-described “liberal” Alvin (no age given), a unemployed barista, explained,

It’s fear mongering a lot of the time, and it affects a lot of people and it can get a lot of views, but I don’t know if the ultimate goal is to get a lot of views when it comes to media. Or at least I don’t think it should be.

Seth, 28, a “somewhat liberal” unemployed health care office assistant, echoed this perspective, explaining that media

accounts were especially dismal so that the outlets could “make money,” explaining,

fear drives viewership, and especially with people being at home with nothing to do except watch the news. All the news is about, it’s like everything else stopped happening, almost. It’s virus, virus, virus. I think they found something that they could use to drive their own viewership and I think they’re taking advantage of it.

Contributing to claims of sensationalism were complaints that the news was intentionally intended to depress the audience and that anything positive was ignored or hidden. While the “good news” was when someone survived the virus, participants complained that there was very little focus on COVID-19 survival statistics:

From all of the bad stuff I heard, I heard it twice saying that the majority of people can [survive] COVID. . . . You get it, but then most people have beat it. Why aren’t you not saying, why are you not balancing it out? You’re just talking about all of the negative. (Tyler, 33, former personal trainer and Democrat)

I think that they’re milking it. They’re milking it, and it’s kind of like they want to depress you. They’re trying to make everything worse, at least from what I see. I know it’s bad, but I’m saying I feel like they’re making everything worse than it really is just for bigger news and everything else, to make you even more nervous than you already are. It seems like all the news channels hate Trump. So they seem to make it worse because then he’ll get blamed for it. But it’s affecting us because you’re depressing us. (Carlos, 43, Democrat and former restaurant server)

These comments from Tyler and Carlos, both of whom describe themselves as Democrats, are intriguing. Their complaints that media accounts are trying to “make everything worse” and not mentioning that “most people have beat it” echo messaging from President Trump and conservative media comparing the coronavirus with the flu, noting that most people survive (Cillizza 2020), and suggesting that the virus was a Democratic hoax that would disappear after the election (Gregorian 2020). Although Shepherd et al. (2020) found that Trump approval is associated with COVID-19 risk perception and beliefs, these comments suggest that the impact of conservative messaging may have diffused across a wider audience than previously documented.

### *Fake News and Contradicting Narratives: “Where Are They Getting These Numbers From?”*

Similar to right-wing cynicism toward the media (Barthel and Mitchell 2017; Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Lee and Hosam 2020; Nadler and Bauer 2019; Mitchell et al. 2014), the workers we interviewed also decried mainstream media. Participants dislike of, and lack of trust in, media was often linked to the idea of fake news or contradicting narratives,

stories that seemed to change from one day to another or from one news source to another. Although it is not unusual for news reports to be continually evolving as additional information arises, the sheer length of the coronavirus crisis meant that respondents were regularly confronted with numerous examples of changing information, such as details about how the virus is spread, how deadly it can be, and the importance of wearing a mask. Additionally, as participants were actually living through the crisis while watching coverage of the pandemic on television, they often compared and contrasted their experiences of the outbreak with what they were reading or watching online, a comparison that was rarely complimentary for the media coverage.

For instance, Tyler, 33, a Democrat and former personal trainer, explained,

First of all, I believe that everything that you see on the news, you should not believe. Everything that you read and everything that you watch on TV is not the truth. First of all, I mean, I don't understand where are they getting these numbers from? This is a good question because this could be very debatable because when they talk about 90,000+ people have died from COVID, I don't believe that because my own experience when I went in and she said I had COVID and then she wouldn't test me for it. And then she was just ready to get rid of me.

Tyler's personal experience of trying to get tested and hearing contradictory information about his status regarding the virus contributed to questions about the prevalence of COVID-19 and the possibility of false diagnoses.

My point is, how do you know some of these COVID cases aren't the flu? There's thousands of people who died from the flu every year too. How do you know which one is not which? . . . How do you know they're not just saying it's a COVID case and it could be something else? How do you know it's not pneumonia, or this, or that, whatever. And I think, where are these numbers coming from?

The question of "where the numbers [are] coming from" is also similar to claims, which originated with QAnon, and were repeated by President Trump, that the number of COVID-19 deaths was lower than the official statistics (Aschwanden 2020). Yet the idea that on-the-ground reality was different from media accounts was also echoed by Kody, 27, a freelance musician:

Being in New York definitely shows you how extreme it can be but also that people are surviving it. . . . You can just kind of crowdsource information, I guess. We're one of the guinea pigs to all of this because we're in close proximity and we don't have a choice, you know? Based on the odds, most New Yorkers are going to come in contact with it. . . . I mean, it's like I said, it's weird because you can go outside and see tons of people who aren't sick and tons of people who are kind of doing some kind of form of normal life activity. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're not going through anything or it might not catch up

with them or whatever the case may be, but it just like maybe [is] less of the looming, crazy stalker coronavirus right around every corner, you know what I mean? Like Jason or like Freddy Krueger.

For Kody, a "somewhat liberal" Democrat, the ability to "crowdsource" information about the virus by looking at the people who were still engaging in a "form of normal life activity" made the virus less scary and reduced the sense that the virus belonged in a horror movie. At the same time, this disconnect between their lived experience and media observations contributed to a sense that the news focused on worst-case scenarios. Although lay expertise is typically conceived as a means for patients to challenge medical authority (Eyal and Buchholz 2010), for instance by justifying vaccine reluctance (Prior 2003), our respondents acquired information from personal experience and online communities in much the same way (Rueger, Dolfmsa, and Aalbers 2021) and with similar intent to undermine or circumvent established (media and medical) expertise. In the following subsection, we further explain participants' perceptions regarding fake news and contradictory narratives.

*Fake News: "It's All Fake . . . It's All Biased."* For some respondents, fake news was considered to be a hazard of social media and often furthered by friends and family. For instance, Hunter, 23, a furloughed restaurant worker and self-described "moderate," explained,

Basically, I just look at the news. I don't rely on fake news because there's so much of it on my social media feed. My friends share those conspiracy theories; I don't get into that, I look at the news to see if anything new happened.

Linking social media with fake news is hardly new, with work by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) linking a large percentage of fake news to social media sites, while Ferrara (2017) found a considerable increase in "social media accounts controlled by computer scripts that try to disguise themselves as legitimate human users."

However, fake news was not seen as limited to social media but also prevalent in mainstream news sources. A number of respondents asserted lay expertise about and against mainstream media. They cultivated media savvy through online interactions and independent research on sites such as YouTube, professing "disinterest, skill, and credibility" usually reserved for institutional experts (Eyal 2013:869). As Gabriella, 23, a restaurant cook who was "very liberal" and independent, explained, "I don't really watch the news on TV because I feel like they tend to give a lot of fake news and false information." Likewise, Jade, 20, avoided mainstream media, choosing to get news from independent sources she felt were more upfront about their biases and made it easier for her to "differentiate what's someone's opinion versus what's actual news coverage." As she

explained, “I just know it’s all fake. That’s about it. It’s all fake. . . . It’s all biased and people don’t disclose their biases, and there’s a lot of logical fallacies, so you have to really dissect what you’re watching.” Additionally, for Jade, who also described herself as a “very liberal” independent, there wasn’t much of a difference between mainstream media that was more left or right leaning, “I mean, [the right and far right news sources] they’re all pretty much under the same corporation as the more liberal news sources. They’re the same team. They just have different people they’re targeting, and that’s about it.”

These comments are notable because such discounting of mainstream media has long been thought of falling under the realm of right-leaning media sources and less likely to be found among a population of largely liberal, working-class participants (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Barthel and Mitchell 2017; Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Lane 2019; Swift 2017). The claims of fake news echo claims from conservative media and President Trump, who “claimed 146 times in his Twitter personal account that mainstream media was a source of fake information and news manipulation” (Hirst 2017, cited in Goyanes and Lavin 2018).

#### *Changing Narratives: “Every Day They Say Something Different.”*

When the novel coronavirus was first discovered in China, little was known about the virus or its potential impact. Early reports out of China were widely believed to have underplayed the virus. In the United States, residents were told that border shutdowns would prevent the virus from traveling to the United States, that the virus was not in the United States, and that masks were not needed. As Seattle and New York became early epicenters of the virus’s spread, residents were told to stay home, wash their hands regularly, and avoid congregating (Duhigg 2020).

This sense that information was constantly changing contributed to workers’ perceptions that media accounts were untrustworthy. As Jade explained,

I don’t watch news, regular news. But I guess, at first, they’re all kind of figuring it out as they go, which I think is not real journalism. Don’t make such solidified statements if you don’t really know. Please preface with “this is a production” or whatever.

Workers also expressed a sense that the news differed not only from day to day but also among sources. Felicia, 46, a liberal Democrat and furloughed food server noted, “Every day they say something different. I don’t know if you had heard a couple of weeks ago they said murder hornets have come, and—it’s crazy. Who knows? Every channel has something different to say.”

The changing narratives led to a sense of exhaustion for some respondents, as illustrated by this quotation from 42-year-old liberal Democrat Michaela:

I am so tired of it. I can’t even stand it anymore. Because everything changes each day and it’s just. . . . Not only maybe the number rises, some states peaked, other states haven’t, like New York City still doesn’t have a reopening date. The only thing that [inaudible] are all these speculations and how the market is just currently. . . . The stock market is not reflecting the current picture or how. . . . I am so fed up with the news of it right now. There’s all these speculations but then it changes the next day. When I was watching a month ago it was a conspiracy theory that it was spread in China, that it was in a lab, that it was meant to derail the US economy. There’s just so many theories.

Even when the contradicting narratives were not directly linked to a specific political motive, there was still a sense that information was not clear or consistent, even when coming from the same source. Kody said,

The most frustrating thing about all of this has been the conflicting information. I mean, it’s almost like they give you conflicting information in the same breath. And I mean “they” by everyone. All news, the president, Dr. Fauci . . . everyone. Even the essential workers are having to get out here and do campaigns, or they’re even talking about what they’re experiencing and it’s just like they’re having conflicting things.

#### *Media Burnout: “It’s Not Good for My Mental Health”*

One of the downsides of a 24-hour news cycle, and the push to be first with breaking news, is the risk of presenting information that has not been adequately vetted. Similar to Stainback, Hearne, and Trieu (2020), we found that contradicting news accounts, partnered with what felt like a never-ending access to bad news, led to a perception among respondents that the news was having a negative impact on their mental health and happiness. As Skyler, 26, a nonbinary pet sitter and “very liberal” independent explained, “It’s not great. It’s not good for my mental health.” Although much of the news was negative, it was the increase in media consumption that many respondents linked to decreased mental health and a sense of unhealthiness.

When we did go into quarantine, I was sort of being a sponge, where I was listening to all different sources, because that’s also another side of me where I’m just sort of like, okay let me hear what five different media sources are saying opposed to just. . . . Well, I was even going even further than that. I was saying like, okay let me listen to what 10 different sources are saying. But that was just driving me crazy mentally, too. It just wasn’t great for my mental health. (Vanessa, no age listed, freelance producer and liberal Democrat)

Respondents also reported emotional responses to the news, including crying, disturbed sleep, and a loss of motivation, symptoms that are often linked to depression or anxiety.

Angelica, an unemployed actor and “very liberal” Democrat, described the news as “really scary. People in their thirties, like me, relatively young and healthy people were getting really sick and dying. Then I thought about my parents, who are in their seventies, my siblings and my husband’s parents,” she explained.

I started thinking, “Oh my God, this is really, really serious and really, really scary.” And so, I lost my mojo at the beginning of April, a little bit. . . . In terms of things that were enriching my artistic side, because I got really scared.

For some workers, the magnitude of the impact on New York was overwhelming, leading to unexpected emotional outbursts, such as experienced by 43-year-old Enrique, a food delivery driver and Democrat:

I was watching the news the other day, and I’m going to admit this to you, and I started to cry. I just got emotional. They said that somebody died every two minutes yesterday in New York. And that shit hit me hard. I’m not a crier. But for some reason it touched home. I said, “Gee, I mean, when you put it like that? Oh my God, that’s a real punch in the stomach to reality.” . . . Because you hear these numbers on how many people, 789 people died today in New York? That sounds really bad. But when you put it, “Somebody died every two minutes the last 24 hours,” it just sounds crazier. What? Because, one episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, 10 people died? I mean, that’s ludicrous. . . . When you start comparing it to that, 10 people died, when you watch one episode on a streaming device with no commercials, 10 people, we lost 10 New Yorkers? I mean, that hurt me.

For Ethan, 35, a white male comedic actor and “very liberal” independent, the pandemic was particularly disruptive. Ethan moved back home to his mother’s house to save on rent and reduce expenses when most of his performance gigs disappeared in March 2020. Although he felt that moving back home in one’s 30s was stigmatized as something done by people who “just bottomed out” and “couldn’t get any work” and were “an idiot or whatever,” the scope of the pandemic reassured him that others were in similar situations. He explained,

because we are all in the same boat, I’m able to wake up in the morning and I just bawl my eyes out. Although I look at the news and then I . . . cry and weep tears of anger. . . . I only watch the news once a day, for 30 minutes you don’t keep it on. I don’t keep on a 24 hour news cycle. I can’t handle it. We just watch the news. We yell a lot during it. “You’re an idiot!” . . . say all kinds of shit.

Still, even though he was spending most of the pandemic outside of New York City in the relative safety of a more rural community with few cases, he had not managed to escape the mental and emotional effects of the virus:

I just stay up late just out of worry. And just out of “the world is on fire and how do I . . .,” I’m kind of OCD and stuff too. I don’t think I’m mentally ill, but it’s a lot going on, man. I mean, I don’t think anybody could say “Hey, I’m totally fine.” . . . then you’re nuts. But [I] stay up kind of rocking back and forth. Is there going to be a tomorrow?

To address his insomnia and feelings of doom, while rocking back and forth, Ethan used a unique strategy to manage his stress and frustrations:

I have an effigy of Trump I burn or, like what do they call it? A thing you put pins in it? Like a frigging dolly, a voodoo doll. I keep stabbing it in the heart, but I don’t know, just nothing happens. But oh, you know what? He has no heart, that’s the problem. I’ve tried stabbing it in the brain. The same reason it didn’t freaking work.

Although Ethan’s voodoo doll was a memorable strategy for stress reduction—and also a case of developing lines of action on the basis of different but not newly invented cultural tools—his effort to reduce news consumption was more common. As noted by Goldfarb (1991), belief in the inherently self-interested bias of institutions motivates disengagement, particularly when emotions run high. Emotions can catalyze activism, but cultures of political distrust lead individuals to invert feelings of powerlessness by focusing on private affairs (Zhel'nina 2020). Disengaging from public issues restores agency “by making a lack of power or knowledge seem intentional” (Eliasoph 1990:473).

As a result, respondents also frequently reported actively working to restrict, filter, or reduce their media consumption in an effort to protect their mental health. Arielle, 32, a restaurant worker and liberal Democrat, explained,

I’ve had to heavily filter my media intake. I’ve just had to heavily, heavily filter it not only with concerns and spikes in coronavirus, but with everything else that’s happening in New York right now and across the country. It’s a lot to take in.

Felicia, 46, a furloughed restaurant server and liberal Democrat, echoed the sense that media consumption had to be limited, noting, “So you just watch enough to stay informed, but you can’t sit there all day and watch it because it will make you paranoid, and scared to live . . . because I was afraid to live.” This awareness of the impact of negative news also led Monika, 41, a laid-off restaurant worker and mother to avoid the daily noon update from New York’s Governor Cuomo, explaining that she had begun to, “skip it so the kids don’t listen to much bad information, what was going on, especially when the death toll was so high.” This finding is consistent with Pew’s finding that 7 in 10 U.S. adults needed to take breaks from the COVID-19 news coverage in order to reduce its negative effects (Mitchell, Oliphant, and Shearer 2020).



In some cases, participants restricted their news consumption to the point of stopping it almost entirely, including social media use. Amanda, 21, a full-time student, freelance musician, and moderate independent, found herself avoiding social media because it was “depressing and crazy” and would “unmotivate” her for the day. Likewise, Isabel, 33, a restaurant server and Democrat, also “stopped watching the news” explaining, “it makes me so upset and makes me so I just want to turn everything off and I don’t want to watch it again.” For Brandon, 28, a somewhat liberal Democrat and a food delivery driver, the pandemic caused him to cut back on media consumption that he had previously enjoyed:

I like to listen to the daily *New York Times* podcast, I like to watch Vice News in the evenings, I like to read articles and stuff like that. I can’t do it anymore. It’s too much. I have no mental capacity at this point. It’s not going to do me any good.

Although reducing excessive consumption of negative news may be an effective compensatory strategy to mitigate the anxiety workers face during the pandemic, a wholesale restriction of news consumption is problematic for an informed democracy. Additionally, by avoiding the news, respondents run the risk of being uninformed about new findings regarding virus transmission, safety protocols, and their position in the vaccine queue.

## Conclusion

Although research has examined how political affiliation affects trust in mainstream media (Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Lee and Hosam 2020) and science (Gauchat 2011, 2015), little is known about how living in the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic may affect perceptions of media coverage. Drawing on interviews conducted with nearly 200 precarious workers in the New York metropolitan area during the height of New York City’s coronavirus outbreak, we find that rather than reassuring respondents that the virus was real, and an issue of concern, participants criticized media coverage as being sensational “fake news” intended to boost ratings and profits.

Although the prevalence of media skepticism related to the coronavirus has been well documented among conservatives (Shepherd et al. 2020; Stainback et al. 2020), liberals and Democrats are often reported as being more trusting of pandemic media coverage and scientists (Gottfried et al. 2020; Lee 2021). Additionally, many respondents used language that echoed the claims more commonly found in conservative media, including that the virus was not especially dangerous or that case counts were inflated. Work by Graham et al. (2020) has pointed to a link between support for President Trump and defiance of social distancing, but our study suggests that even among individuals who found themselves living in the epicenter of the virus, and who self-identified as Democrats or liberals, Trumpian messaging

regarding “fake news” may have been more salient than previously believed.

Drawing upon Swidler’s (1986) theory of strategic action and the rise in populist sentiments (Akkerman et al. 2014; Eiermann 2016; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Oliver and Rahn 2016), we argue that these unsettled times have resulted in a “diffusion of distrust,” in which an elite conservative discourse of skepticism toward the media has become a popular toolkit used by conservatives and liberals alike to make sense of the contradictory, continuous coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as the “fake news” discourse diffuses across the political spectrum, its meanings and ideological associations are diluted. Instead of simply parroting conservative outcries over “fake news,” the self-identified liberals in our sample recycled the “fake news” discursive strategy to fit their existing political ideology. While conservatives criticize the mainstream media for liberal bias, liberals conceptualize fake news as unscientific, profit-driven sensationalism and express concern that news companies are turning a profit by engaging in fear mongering. Additionally, because of their ability to “crowdsource” information by looking out the window and walking the streets of New York, residents felt that the virus seemed less scary than the media accounts of “the looming, crazy stalker coronavirus right around every corner.” Our findings suggest that liberals’ antiestablishment operationalization of fake news is a novel approach to navigate the uncertainty created by the pandemic.

Finally, perceiving media sensationalism and “fake news” as “not good” for their mental health, respondents reported experiencing media burnout and physical and emotional responses to media including crying, sleeplessness, and loss of motivation. As a result, participants began to actively reduce their media consumption as a self-protective compensatory mechanism, with some restricting their media consumption to the point of stopping it entirely. Unfortunately, we are unable to determine if this media distrust has always been evident among liberal precarious workers or if the pandemic has greatly increased the perception of distrust. Given that many participants spoke about cutting back on their media consumption, it appears that this sense of distrust may be relatively new and that respondents considered media to be at least somewhat more reputable, or desirable, at the start of the virus.

One possibility, of course, is that this diffusion of distrust may also be strategic in that residents living in the epicenter of the virus feel inclined to minimize the risk and would thereby be biased toward seeing the media as fear mongering. Work by Ravenelle et al. (2021) revealed a number of precarious workers turning to the “side hustle safety net” of gig work out of reluctance to accept unemployment benefits or when such assistance was unavailable. As a result, precarious workers, who often speak of their need to maintain “side hustles” may be more invested in an ideology of self-reliance. This diffusion of distrust may temporarily serve as a protective mechanism during these unsettled times (Swidler 1986).

As the pandemic stretches past its one-year anniversary, and as states dial back their social distancing restrictions and mask mandates, a loss of trust in media coverage may have dire implications for public health. If low-income, liberal respondents are decrying media sensationalism during the first surge of the pandemic, what will be the reaction during a third or fourth surge? Rates of coronavirus infection in New York were highest in neighborhoods with the highest concentration of Latino and Black residents, such as Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, compared with wealthier, predominantly white neighborhoods in Manhattan (Younes and Shaw 2020). At the same time, lower income workers are also more likely to be in essential or public-facing jobs, such as service work (Tomer and Kane 2020). An increase of distrust in media coverage of the public health implications of the virus may further contribute to vaccine hesitancy among precarious workers, or they may miss important information regarding vaccine availability and eligibility, and inadvertently contribute to a lengthening of the pandemic.

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