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555695

27/June/2024

CM4500 – Master Thesis

Digitalization, Surveillance and Societies

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

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Qualitative Thematic Analysis of the March 2023 TikTok CEO Hearing Coverage by Fox News and CNN

Word Count: 17,714

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Abstract and Keywords

A key concern that emerges from the prevalence of media bias is political polarization, in which politically motivated groups on opposing sides become radicalized away from moderate center positions or collaboration, fueling extremism and intolerance. However, mainstream news sources, notably in the United States, reflect on these political parties and opposites, with potential bias a potential consequence of biased media reporting on key controversies and subjects. By analyzing the similarities and differences in reporting styles used by two politically opposed news sources, comparisons can be made to conclude whether and how political polarization can emerge from biased media reporting. This thesis conducts a thematic analysis on a key case study, analyzing Fox News and CNN coverage of the TikTok CEO hearing of 2023, in order to answer how politically polarized news sources report on a shared subject. Fox News and CNN were identified as politically-opposed media rivals and were determined to be appropriate for the case study, with a collection of 50 articles, an equal number of Fox News and CNN articles, collected for the coding process. With a thematic analysis, key themes were established with a coding process using the collected articles, centered around three focal areas, being mental health of users, national security concerns, and media coverage of the CEO hearing. The main research question is 'How do American Politically Polarized News Sources report on the TikTok platform?' This thesis concludes that both Fox News and CNN, which lean politically to the right and left respectively, share similar themes and patterns in reporting and can share agreement on specific subjects. However, political positions, ideologies, and perspectives can and do lead to differences in reporting, as well as more subtle differences ranging from grammar and key terms to the priority reporting of specific subjects. With regards to the TikTok CEO hearings of March 2023, the risk of political polarization is not as serious as suggested, at least within this specific case study.

Acknowledgements

To my parents for supporting me day in and out from across the world

For my sister for always pushing me to do my best

And especially to my professor Dr. Daniel Trottier
for helping me through thick and thin through this year

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2014, a Pew Research Center report revealed that the polarization of political groups, primarily between left-leaning Democrats and right-leaning Republicans, had heightened to the greatest divide in decades (Geiger, 2014, para. 1). Spearheaded by both politically divided mainstream news companies such as Fox News and CNN, alongside the easy spread of misinformation and reporting in social media, the effects political polarization on the spread of information have resulted in effects ranging from the frequent spread of misinformation to intentional use of terms to alter the perceptions and opinions of audience members (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, pp. 189–193). All of these have contributed to a widening gap between political parties and, as such, the increasing phenomenon of polarization.

With the rapid spread and mass adoption of social media platforms, new ways in which individuals are able to communicate with each other and receive news has resulted in a large number of questions and opinions on these new platforms, especially from the traditional sources of information, mainstream media. Spearheaded by the widespread adoption of technology such as smartphones, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and others have resulted in individuals having greater access to information and the ability to convince others, a role that previously had been dominated by mainstream news companies such as newspapers and television.

However, a commonality between both forms of media is the prevalence of bias, whether it be based on political ideology, cultural perspective, or other alternate or opposing perspectives. In particular, the presentation of specific social media platforms by mainstream media presents a unique opportunity to study biased reporting, the ways in which they manifest, and common themes that may emerge in terms of writing depending on pre-existing biases.

Through a qualitative thematic analysis of two American media news companies, Fox News and CNN, this thesis will analyze the coverage of a specific controversial subject in order to ascertain the ways in which political bias affects reporting on different subjects. Through the analysis of a case study on the coverage of the TikTok social media platform, a number of themes have been identified surrounding three main areas of focus on reporting, being the coverage of mental health concerns of users, the platform's national security concerns in relation to China, and the coverage of the March 2023 hearing of the CEO of TikTok, which are shortened to Mental Health, National Security, and CEO Hearings. Within these three subjects, multiple themes have been determined in relation to these three, through which the thematic analysis will analyze and justify. These three main focal areas for analysis were also determined due to their relevance to the case study and opportunity for deeper analysis, encompassing the effects of social media on users, the concerns of TikTok and its relation to China that differentiate it from other social media platforms, and the differences in reporting on the hearing of the CEO by two politically and ideologically opposed news companies.

The choice for the comparison of Fox News and CNN is based on their positions on the American political spectrum, with Fox News leaning politically right and CNN to the left. Both news companies hold both large numbers and influence and reporting on the same events as some of the highest viewed news channels in the US, according to independent media bias charts (AllSides.com, 2019), with existing academic works utilizing them for comparative analysis frequently (Yang, 2023, pp. 3–5). Additionally, the choice of selecting their coverage of the TikTok social media platform is based on a number of key thematic points of analysis, with three main areas within which these themes take form: Coverage of mental health in relation to users, coverage of national security in relation to TikTok's links to the Chinese Government, and direct coverage of the hearings of the CEO of the platform primarily around March 2023.

The coverage of mental health encompasses multiple subjects centered around user wellbeing in relation to social media usage, with national security encompassing coverage of the controversy surrounding TikTok's links to the Chinese government, and the final point being a more direct comparison in the coverage of the CEO hearing held in March 2023 by both Fox News and CNN. The first focal area was chosen due to a common pattern of the mental health of users being brought up as a criticism against the social media platform across both companies' articles, as well as established academic works comparing coverage of mental health-related subjects (Zheng & Scardino, 2021, p. 4). The second, national security, was highlighted due to it being the primary concern and motivator behind the hearings and controversy surrounding the platform (Lewis, 2024, paras. 1–4). The third focal area, CEO hearing coverage, was selected due to it being a key area of comparison from which differences in reporting by both CNN and Fox News articles could be made, as well as highlighted similarities and patterns that would assist the coding and establishment of main themes for the thematic analysis (Yang, 2023, pp. 5–8). All three focal areas will be elaborated and justified regarding their selection, primarily based on a combination of identified patterns of reporting and as viable points of comparison.

The central question for this thesis is 'How do American Politically Polarized News Sources report on the TikTok platform?' The concerns of TikTok and its coverage provide a key case study in which to analyze a number of key issues that have gained notoriety and prevalence in the modern digital era. One of the largest concerns in the modern digital age is that of media bias, in particular political bias among mainstream news companies, in large part due to their status as information providers making them prone to presenting biased perspectives to their audience. The prevalence of bias leads to differently aligned groups, including media companies, to create messages and report on events through a specific lens that serves to reinforce or support their perspective, whether it be the significance of an event or the opinions of an individual or group, among many others. News groups in particular hold a large degree of power due to their role in being information providers to large audiences reliant on their reporting, and as

such they can select and omit details or information as they see fit. Combined with the ease in which individuals can communicate and relay such information, and the threats of misinformation, disinformation, and media bias become all the more important to consider when working to counter the spread of false information.

Additionally, different subjects and topics are often regarded as either a priority or less significant depending on the individual's and group's personal beliefs, a phenomenon that is prevalent within US Politics. Positions on subjects such as mental health, foreign and national security concerns, social media, and others are often placed in opposition between political parties or political sides, such as conservative versus liberal, or Republican versus Democrat. Through the analysis of the three main thematic subjects, this paper will examine Fox News and CNN articles in order to analyze the ways in which each side may draw focus to positions more in line with their political and party positions, and how they may underreport or even dismiss other subjects that are either not of concern or may be supported by the opposition.

The importance of the study and identification of polarization and bias is often underestimated. Media bias takes on many forms and can occur due to a lack of knowledge or a malicious attempt to spread a lie, which can often result in individuals creating opinions on individuals, groups, events, and so on based on incorrect information. Such biased opinions can also affect behavior, leading into polarization, in which individuals align with groups that grow intolerant and distant from each other. Defined often as a divergence from the center by groups towards more extreme positions on the political spectrum, polarization is often spearheaded by misinformation and disinformation, as well as media bias, leading to a number of consequences as a result of clashes between more divisive groups (Weber et al., 2021, pp. 184–186). With the real-world risk of division resulting in multiple concerns, from clashes between political groups to the undermining of democratic systems, the risks of a rise in political polarization necessitates a greater focus and effort in identifying sources and preventing these from spiraling out of control.

The concerns and developments of mass media and its spread give way to a series of questions: Do politically opposed news sources undermine each other's positions? Do they propel their own positions while undermining those supported by the opposition? In what ways does this manifest? These concerns are critical to understanding how media groups and news companies are able to alter events and words in order to create explanations that are fitting for their political and social positions, which are a key part of understanding media bias.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Context

This section covers the literature review will provide context by exploring the identification and selection of Fox News and CNN for the analysis, the TikTok controversy and US-China cyber conflict, media bias and misinformation, and the polarization of US politics and media. The section will then finish with a reiteration of the main research question upon the final provision of necessary context in relation to the key point of analysis, as well as a number of proposed hypotheses based on prior knowledge as guidance into the analysis of these subjects.

Fox News and CNN Bias Identification

The identification of Fox News and CNN as opposing political news companies is primarily identified through the use of third-party analysis, but both news companies, as well as other mainstream American news groups, have been identified as having right-leaning and left-leaning ideological differences. Academic studies have frequently pitted the two news companies against each other due to their large audiences and mainstream status within the left-leaning liberal and right-leaning conservative supporter base within the United States, as they often reflect the ideological positions of the Democrat and Republican parties on key issues. For example, a study by Jinhe Yang on the influence of mass media on polarization used a case study in which Fox News and CNN reporting were compared on the subject of environmentalism due to opposing ideological positions (Yang, 2023, pp. 3–5).

While CNN and Fox News have been utilized in comparison to one another, it is important to highlight that both news companies have certain differences regarding their reporting and audience. While Fox News' audience leans to the right and conservative, while CNN's audience leans leftward and liberal, also differ in the means of presenting news. According to Paul Farhi, Fox News cultivates an audience that is actively engaged in politics and media news, whereas CNN's audience more largely consists of an audience utilizing it for breaking news updates (Farhi, 2003, pp. 32–35). Nonetheless, a political rivalry is often placed between both news companies due to each company's respective political alignment resulting in opposing positions on key issues, ranging from political positions of individuals to support of key legislature or political movements, such as environmentalism.

One of the key sources in which the identification of Fox News' and CNN's political leanings was based on their placement on the media bias chart, created by AllSides, an American company that specializes in identifying and categorizing biased media news companies, media headlines, and other sources of information, created in September 2012 (Said, 2018).

Through a variety of methodological processes, including but not limited to a large data pool, multi-year data collection, and user votes, AllSides examines the biases of a number of news companies

and designates them based on political bias. As visible in Figure 1, CNN is rated as being politically left-leaning, whereas Fox New and Fox Business are designed as right-leaning respectively.

Figure 1: AllSides Media bias chart, note the Fox and CNN designations (AllSides.com, 2019)

With confirmation through third party analysis, and with a number of other factors considered, including their use by academic sources as parties of comparison, the choice was made to select CNN and Fox News as the two main politically opposed news groups in which sources would be compared and analyzed, which is not an uncommon dichotomy made between both news companies (Necheles, 2022, paras. 2–3). Because of the size and influence of both companies, with Fox News and CNN each achieving over 600,000 daytime news audience members ("Cable News Fact Sheet," 2023), their status as mainstream news outlets, as well as their largely politically aligned audiences, make the two news companies a candidate choice for comparative analysis (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, pp. 597–603).

Within the United States in particular, the debate around social media and its effects on users, especially among youth, is significant, as Americans hold some of the strongest criticisms of social media over any other nation with regards to its effects on their personal lives and wider society. Pew Research data reveals that up to 74% of Republicans and Republican-leaning conservatives believe that social media has had a negative effect on American democracy, while a smaller percentage of Democrats and Democrat-leaning liberals believe in its negative effects, at only 57% (L. Clancy, 2022, para. 2). With regards to TikTok in particular, the social media platform holds significant sway and influence, in

particular among youth, as according to Pew Research data around 62% of US adults under the age of 30 reported to have used TikTok, with a total of approximately 33% of US adults using the platform (Eddy, 2024, paras. 3–7). Additional studies confirm that a majority of concern with regards to TikTok and social media comes from Conservatives and Republican-leaning individuals and groups, in particular within a national security level.

US-China Cyber Conflict and TikTok Ban

The US-China cyber conflict is in reference to an ongoing technology-based back and forth between Washington and Beijing, with technology and media companies being utilized and caught in the middle of a war of influence between the democratic USA versus the more authoritarian Chinese Communist Party. Ranging from hackers infiltrating companies and governments to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, TikTok is caught in a unique position in that it is owned by a Chinese parent company, ByteDance, placing it differently from its larger western social media counterparts like Facebook and Twitter; the potential cybersecurity concerns that come with a foreign and, to a degree, hostile nation gaining access to private data of US citizens (Suciu, 2024, paras. 5–8). TikTok has already been banned in a number of areas of the US, with both support and backlash (Clausius, 2022, pp. 273–278). Additionally, the social media platform was banned for use within the devices used by government officials, due to a threat by the Chinese government's ability to collect user data, and alleged risk of its harmful utilization (Bhaimiya, 2023, paras. 3–7).

The threat of China's government is a key factor in opposition against the platform by both US lawmakers and the American public. Within a study conducted by Pew Research in May of 2023, approximately 59% of Americans reportedly agreed with the claim that TikTok was either a major or minor threat to the national security of the United States, with 29% seeing it as a major threat. Within these numbers, Conservative Republicans hold the strongest belief in the threat of TikTok with seven out of ten conservative republicans agreeing with the belief in TikTok posing a threat to national security, compared to only 53% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents (McClain, 2023, paras. 1–3). This would ideally correlate with regards to the opinions of Fox News and CNN based on their political and party alignments coinciding with the survey data.

It is also worth noting that cybersecurity concerns are not exclusive for the US Government, as China and other foreign governments have also introduced measures to prevent foreign-owned technology and cyber platforms from operating in their nations, in order to prevent their citizens' personal data being collected for potential use by foreign actors (Clausius, 2022, pp. 273–276). TikTok's parent company's links to the Chinese government, as well as the threat of China's authoritarian government able to lawfully gain access to servers, lays the foundation of the concerns of US lawmakers and anti-TikTok

proponents: that the personal information of American users, including names, addresses, locations, and so on, will be available to the Chinese government.

Additionally, these concerns would reflect in the public opinion of the platform and its connections to China, influencing a large movement pushing for the banning of the platform due to its connections. Central to this thesis, the March 2023 hearing of the CEO was a central part of the move by US lawmakers to ban the platform, with the CEO hearing lending to a large amount of focus by the public.

According to Pew Research Data polls, at the height of the CEO hearings of late March 2023, approximately 50% of all Americans supported a ban of the social media platform, with 22% opposed and 28% unsure of their position. Additional data supports the largely political and social divisions with regards to the potential banning of the company, as support and opposition to the bill, according to Pew Research, was heavily linked to positions on the potential ban. Interestingly, at the time, while 60% of Republicans and Republican-leaning individuals supported the ban, approximately 43% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning individuals also supported the ban, though a larger number opposed a ban outright at 25% compared to the 19% of Republican-leaning individuals (L. S. and L. Clancy, 2023, paras. 1–4). It is worth noting that Republicans and conservatives make a majority of non-users of TikTok, and the largest number of supporters in favor of a ban do not use the platform, with 70% of non-user Republicans supporting a ban compared to 54% of non-user Democrats. A key important aspect of these figures is the role in which media, in particular media bias and misinformation, play a role in the outcome of these opinions.

Media Bias and Misinformation

Media news bias has been a prevailing phenomenon that has occurred and is in general an accepted fact of mainstream news coverage, with almost all news channels and groups associated to a position within a national political spectrum, such as leaning to the right and conservative, or to the left and liberal. Studies and analysis have been conducted to prove in which direction a mainstream news group is willing to lean towards, with CNN and Fox News identified as leaning to the left and right respectively. Notable examples include analysis of their presentation of certain events. For example, Fox News coverage tended to lean much more supportively towards conservative and Republican interests, such as through supporting Conservative-related events (Aday et al., 2005, pp. 3–8). This rapid development of social media and technology has also created a host of unique developments, concerns, and problems that warrant study and analysis, ranging from the spread of misinformation and disinformation to unsuspecting individuals to the malicious spread of false information and radicalization of individuals or groups (Stubenvoll et al., 2021, pp. 2766–2769).

Media Bias plays a significant role in the differences in political and ideological representations and comes in a number of forms that are used in order for individual companies to establish perspectives in-line with their beliefs. Various forms of bias are utilized in order to alter the context, perspective, or even provide false information in order to warrant a specific reaction that falls in-line with the news group's ideology, such as outrage, pity, support, or opposition in response to an event. These terms, referred to as misinformation and disinformation, are often used interchangeably, but their definitions have a key differential point: that being the intentionality behind the false information's spread.

Within the context of mainstream news sources such as Fox News and CNN, various forms of bias are often used, ranging from the inclusion or omission of specific information or details of a case, or the use of accusatory or other types of language to present a specific narrative. For example, certain studies into the analysis of news reporting reveals that certain subjects may be described with terms that denote a stigmatizing or negative tone, such as mental illness (Zheng & Scardino, 2021, pp. 1–3). While the exact levels of bias within media is hard to determine, areas in which biases can be based on are often due to political, ideological, or personal views held by the group or individuals reporting the event or news.

Importantly, different forms of misinformation and disinformation are a common factor within media and news coverage, due to either accidental or purposeful presentations of incorrect information. However, a key difference exists between the two terms, despite them being used interchangeably, which leads to confusion when it is brought up, thus requiring exact definitions to be specified.

Between these two similar terms, while they engage in the same main subject of false information, they differ in a key point that warrants specification due to being extremely distinct. Misinformation pertains to the spread of factually incorrect information by individuals or groups, but specifically without an intentionality behind its spread, without the knowledge of the individual or group passing it along. In contrast, disinformation is the intentional spread of incorrect and false information, with the key distinguishment between the two terms being the intentionality behind the act. Misinformation, for example, would be an individual repeating a factually incorrect claim without the knowledge of it being so, and thus being uninformed of the factual inaccuracy. In contrast, an example of disinformation would be an individual slandering another individual with a claim that they know to be false, with other examples of disinformation being rumors, urban legends, and so on (Wu et al., 2019, pp. 80–84).

Within the scope of mainstream media, in particular news companies that report on often ongoing cases with real-time information coming in, misinformation and disinformation are a large concern that has appeared often. Primarily, misinformation is more common as, in particular with coverage of ongoing cases such as breaking news events, factual inaccuracies can be spread if the sources used by the

companies are wrong. For example, if a news company was on the site of an accident and an official made an incorrect statement, the news company would repeat the same statement despite its inaccuracy due to a lack of knowledge of the truth.

One more unique term that is worth mentioning within the scope of media bias is 'Fake News', a common term that became popular with its use through the 2010's by several high-profile individuals, including Donald Trump, who used it against several left-leaning news companies and channels, accusing them of attempted character assassination and slander on numerous occasions before and throughout his presidency (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, pp. 211–219). However, while it did gain traction as a term during his term, Fake News had existed for years before as a buzzword for news parodies and propaganda (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018, pp. 137–141). The term itself has often been used to reference both misinformation and disinformation, contributing to the confusion between both terms.

As mentioned previously, misinformation via mainstream news media, in most cases, comes as the repetition of misinformation by on-site and live news coverage by these news companies. Research suggests that fake news is not viewed from the source by a majority of individuals, but rather its spread to the wider population is the result of coverage by mainstream media. (Tsfati et al., 2020, pp. 161–170). The pervasiveness and frequency of fake news stories being spread, as well as a relative lack of fact-checking conducted by readers, has resulted in the wide spread of these false stories, and reaching a large number of readers who believe in them. In a survey conducted in the United States alone, up to 75% of adults in the country were tricked by fake news headlines, highlighting the difficulties in identifying fake news and the high rates in which such stories are believed (Singer-Vine, 2016, paras. 9–10).

This highlights one of the largest effects of mainstream media news channels, including Fox News and CNN, being the capability of spreading biased, misinformed, or even intentionally falsified information to their audiences, which contributes to the increasing polarization and intolerance between different political groups. In particular, negative coverage of other groups has contributed to a heightened perception of radicalism among their political rivals, as individuals base their views of other groups on misinformed stereotypes and even biased disinformation (Enders & Armaly, 2019, pp. 815–819). As a result, misinformation and disinformation have resulted in heightened polarization between opposing groups, notably political groups, due to the consequences being both groups gaining exaggerated negative views of the other fueling intolerance and radicalism. However, a further examination of polarization is required to fully understand the consequences of media bias and political groups.

Polarization of US Politics and Media

One of the important areas of concern within the United States has been the increasing polarization and widening of political divides that has occurred in recent years, notably during the latter half of the

2010's due to presidential elections such as Donald Trump's victory in 2016. Notably, according to Pew Research surveys, a large political divide exists with regards to the polarization of the public's belief and trust in mainstream media groups. According to a research survey, prior to the 2020 elections, large divides in political groups and their respective views on mainstream news were made clear, as a majority of Republican-leaning independents and conservatives viewed a majority of mainstream media groups as untrustworthy, with the opposing Democrat-leaning independents and liberals viewing a majority of news groups as trustworthy (Walker, 2020c, paras. 1–4). Within the same survey, and a noted point highlighting political media polarization, 75% of Republican-leaning conservatives view Fox News as a trustworthy news source, while only 16% rate CNN as trustworthy. In direct contrast, among Democrat-leaning liberals, trust in CNN reaches 70%, while trust in Fox News drops down to 12% (Walker, 2020b, paras. 2–5).

Political Polarization is defined as a division that occurs within a population based on political ideologies, in which individuals will shift their ideological thinking further from the moderate center towards more extreme political ideologies (Weber et al., 2021, p. 186). Particularly present within democracies and two-party systems, such as in the United States, political polarization identifies itself with groups leaning further towards political extremes while distancing themselves from opposing rivals, such as between conservative-leaning Republicans and liberal-leaning Democrats within the United States. While it is often associated as a divergence based on policies between political groups, other factors are suggested by scholars to hold significance behind widening political polarization, with factors including religion vs. secularism, nationalism vs. globalism, urban vs. rural, and many other points of conflict between politically opposed groups (McCoy et al., 2018, pp. 20–21). These often physical and ideological divides and points of conflict result in the formation of groups who become polarized due to a lack of will or understanding for other groups.

The polarization of US politics is one of the most prominent concerns within the United States as members of the two main political parties of the United States, the Republicans and Democrats, have seen greater divides and fewer connections between each other. These range from a rise in dedication to ideological thinking to an increase in animosity and decrease of tolerance towards the opposite political party, becoming extremely pronounced in the last two decades (Geiger, 2014, para. 1).

It is important to note that polarization, the separation and consolidation of separate political perspectives and ideologies, is not necessarily a bad thing for democracies such as in the United States and can contribute to diverse societies. However, the problems of polarization become abundant when these individual groups fail to open up to each other, which is a necessary component of democratic governance (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020, pp. 179–181). The festering of so-called 'Us versus Them' mindsets forms the basis of the main threats posed by rising political polarization, wherein political and social

groups fail to cooperate or coexist peacefully (McCoy et al., 2018, pp. 23–24). These threats are especially risky for functioning democracies that rely on political cooperation between groups, as a rise in radicalism by politically-opposed groups has been studied and determined to erode effective democratic actions with a system (McCoy et al., 2018, pp. 25–26).

In general, within the United States, Republicans lean towards conservative positions while Democrats lean towards liberal, with different mainstream media news groups gaining audiences associated with either leaning and voter base as a result of their political alignment. According to Pew Research Surveys, a majority of Republicans lean primarily on Fox News as its mainstream media source, whereas CNN is the most viewed mainstream media company watched. While both Republicans and Democrats watch other channels and news groups, both Fox and CNN are respectively each of their politically aligned demography's most viewed sources, with a majority of their audience voters of each channel's respective politically-aligned party (Walker, 2020a, paras. 2–7). This is one of the key reasons why Fox News and CNN were chosen as well, as opposed to alternative news sources and channels.

However, there are ways in which to counter the growing concerns of polarization by analyzing the reasons behind such effects. One of the key reasons why polarization tends to grow between groups is due to a lack of understanding of other parties, notably those that are opposed to one another such as political parties and their supporters. Research shows that Republican-leaning supporters and Democrat-leaning supporters often think of stereotypes pertaining to the other, creating exaggerated perspectives that cause them to believe the other as being more radical. A key reason for this is due to the depiction of radicals within each side, who while forming a minority within their political groups are often depicted most often by opposing news as much more prominent, contributing to the polarization of political groups (Frimer et al., 2019, pp. 1216–1219). Political supporters, in this case Republicans and Democrats, adopt an intolerance towards the other through pervasive negative views of the other, perpetuated in large part by misinformation and disinformation by politically opposed media sources, misinformation, and disinformation. These threats posed by rising political polarization, while a threat to the United States' and its two majority parties, is not limited to the nation and is a global concern across all functioning democracies around the world (McCoy et al., 2018, pp. 34–36).

Proposed Hypotheses

Based on the established themes and coding processes, as well as additional supporting information from the main articles and additional sources such as Pew Research polls, a number of hypotheses can be drawn up based around the three main established subjects of analysis, being mental health, national security, and CEO Hearing coverage. These hypotheses are also drawn up based on the predicted claims by each news group based on the analysis of each of their respective political and

ideological positions within the US political spectrum, with CNN leaning towards Democrats and liberals' positions, with Fox News gravitating towards Republican and conservative ideals. These hypotheses primarily aim to assist in reaching a conclusion to the main research question and will be tested through a further analysis and application of the research.

The first subject, mental health, is hypothesized to see a much bigger focus on the subject from CNN, due to the left-leaning liberal position with regards to mental health being more supportive, as research tends to suggest that conservatives view mental health in a stigmatizing manner, which would correlate to Fox News due to its conservative leanings (Löve et al., 2019, pp. 365–369). However, it would be unlikely that Fox News would be outright hostile, but rather CNN would be more likely to bring up mental health-related concerns in relation to social media at a greater rate than Fox News.

The second subject, national security, is hypothesized to see more coverage and focus by Fox News than CNN due to polling and research highlighting the greater focus by conservatives and Republicans towards international threats (Smith, 2015, para. 2), with the US-Chinese conflict seeing particular focus when considering the historical and political oppositions between the two countries. While CNN is also expected to focus on the US-China rivalry, the conservative-leaning Fox News is expected to take on a more hostile position and thus use more confrontational language when referring to national security.

Lastly, the CEO Hearing is hypothesized to reflect on the tone and views of the hearing members, and reflect on the confrontational manner in which the panel will confront the CEO, with Fox News in particular hypothesized to lean more heavily into terms that evoke such responses. These hypotheses will be challenged and analyzed in order to determine their validity and will be used to answer the main research question with regards to media bias based on political and ideological polarization and opposition.

Chapter 3: Method

Thematic Analysis by Clarke and Braun

Thematic Analysis was selected as the main method of analysis in which to answer the main question revolving the ways in which politically different news companies report on the same subject, due to its flexibility which will allow the establishment of shared themes to be determined from which an answer to the research question may be concluded. The Thematic Analysis process, as outlined by Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, is a qualitative method of study that was primarily utilized within the psychology field, but through their efforts was outlined as an applicable method of qualitative analysis within fields of study beyond it (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 81–85).

In general, two main forms of data that is utilized within research analysis exist, being quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data primarily roots itself in objective and numerical information, primarily focused on establishing answers to hard data questions with objective answers, such as mathematical formulas. In contrast, qualitative data engages with information that otherwise does not have objective measures, such as human emotions or behavior-centric studies (Sechrest & Sidani, 1995, pp. 78–80). While the differences and similarities between both are viewed differently, both are often utilized as the two main central forms of methodological research, with the vast majority of data analysis methods under one of these two groups.

Thematic analysis, also referenced as qualitative thematic analysis, is a method of sorting, organizing, and analyzing qualitative data through the establishing of central themes through a coding process. Rooted in a qualitative research process, thematic analysis primarily focuses on the establishment of broader themes in which data and information can be sorted and analyzed in order to answer a research question. It was originally established by Braun and Clarke as a valid method of qualitative analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017, pp. 297–298). By its design, thematic analysis applies to qualitative and thus non-numerical or non-quantitative data, utilized when sorting data such as interviews, eyewitness accounts, and others.

Interestingly, thematic analysis is considered to be a uniquely independent form of qualitative research compared to other methods such as qualitative content analysis, which focuses on analyzing the specific content written within data, such as reports, interviews or articles. Thematic analysis instead examines the content and establishes codes and then themes that collectively group this data for analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, pp. 400–401). Importantly, thematic analysis is not simply a summarization of the qualitative data, but rather to identify and interpret key features of the data in order to answer the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017, pp. 297–298).

A number of reports and articles that utilize thematic analysis focus on areas of research in which qualitative data is the primary form of data collection and analysis, such as in the medical and

psychological fields, specifically with regards to human behavior and responses (Neuendorf, 2018, pp. 214–215). The process has seen favor in particular with analysis of quantities of collected data, with examples including analysis of individuals who respond to questionnaires that pertain to specific medical conditions or mental health, in which the themes are an outcome of the thematic analysis and are hence utilized to answer the primary research question within the research papers.

It's worth noting that thematic analysis is extremely flexible, and the research question is largely guided by the direction in which the coding and established themes take form, with certain codes able to become themes with sufficient support from the data. It is also important to note that themes do not encompass information within an article or specific data point, such as a news article, but rather catch patterns that are shared across the entire data set.

Data Collection: Fox News and CNN Articles

The primary sources consist of a collection of 25 Fox News articles and 25 CNN news articles, all focusing on the subject of TikTok in order to conduct an analysis on each respective news company's perspectives on the social media platform. The reason for the selection of the Fox News and CNN news networks for analysis is due to a number of factors, including audience size, established political positions, and a pre-established cultural rivalry within the US. Both Fox and CNN news companies are regarded as well-established mainstream news companies, with both national and international audiences and high numbers of established viewers. Additionally, both news companies each align to the opposite ends of the political spectrum, as supported by a number of political bias analytics and studies, including independent third party sources (Weatherly et al., 2007, pp. 91–97). As seen in their viewership, as well as the AllSides media chart referenced in figure 1, CNN aligns to the left side of the political spectrum, with Fox News leaning to the right.

The articles were each chosen using an established set of criteria, requiring each article to consist of at least 300 words, have been published between three months before and after March 2023, and be sufficiently relevant to TikTok. The reason for articles being selected between December 2022 and May 2023 is due to a hearing in March 2023 of the TikTok CEO in the United States, resulting in a heavy focus on the platform by mainstream news media during this period, including Fox and CNN. Additionally, for an article to be sufficiently relevant for inclusion in the data collection, the article in question was required to have the company as the main focal subject, as opposed to mentioning TikTok in passing. For example, articles related to US Congressional hearings of the TikTok CEO were deemed appropriate due to their direct relevance to the platform, while articles focused on TikTok's use by activists for social causes, such as environmentalism, were not selected.

Each of the total of 50 sources in the appendix were collected from the CNN and Fox News websites, with the above criteria applied to the selection of relevant and appropriate articles, that being between December 2022 and May 2023, with the use of each site's search engine with the word TikTok entered. The reasons why alternative search engines and platforms, such as Nexis Uni, were not utilized is due to a few problematic issues that prevented the collection of appropriate articles. In the case of Nexis Uni, the search engine would provide articles that were not from the Fox or CNN news groups and would instead only provide articles and academic works that had made references to a number of relevant articles. In general, rather than utilizing search engines that provided information referencing articles, the use of the Fox and CNN news websites would allow the collection of sources from the host websites.

While not a quantitative nor objective method of data collection, the primary measure for the choices of source articles was based on pre-established criteria, including the minimum 300-word limit, the time period in which relevant articles were selected, and the perceived relevance and subject matter in relation to TikTok.

Additionally, the choice to only select written news articles, as opposed to alternative forms such as videos, interviews, newspapers, and so on, is due to a number of factors. These include the consistency of finding similar articles for analysis, the availability of access to articles as opposed to alternative forms such as video transcripts, and the consistency in data collection through established criteria. For example, including transcripts from news channels would be difficult to collect, and would be more difficult to compare alongside alternative forms such as articles. Web articles written on Fox News' and CNN's websites are consistent with a sufficient number available for the data collection through a consistent method, that being the use of specific terms in their search engines, minimum word count, and relevance to the main subject of TikTok.

Coding Process and Examples

Coding refers to a process within Thematic Analysis in which data is organized by the recognition and noting of specific aspects of the data, through the use of a multi-step process. The specific method of thematic analysis primarily presents the exact method of coding and the establishing of themes as being in line with what David Byrne defines as a coding reliability approach, in which themes are primarily hypothesized during the coding process as opposed to after on the basis of familiarization with the primary data (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1392–1394), in this case the fifty chosen articles from Fox News and CNN (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, pp. 399–403). The process itself has a degree of flexibility, but in general, as outlined by Braun & Clarke, a number of steps were taken in order to conduct the coding and determining the main themes identified for the thesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 86–93).

The first step is to familiarize and read through the data, which for this thesis consists of the fifty chosen articles from Fox News and CNN, which were carefully selected through the identified pre-established criteria. These main items selected for the appendix for this thesis were selected through pre-established criteria that consisted of both content-based requirements, such as the focus on TikTok, and form-based ones, such as a minimum word count.

The second step was to begin generating initial codes, which are loosely defined and primarily are determined based on the researcher's own subjective selection. They generally summarize the main subject of the specific piece of data, such as identifying the parties mentioned and certain important figures or methods used within it, such as the use of terminology or argumentation.

The third step involves the sorting, searching, and identification of the main themes, in which the individual codes are grouped together into larger groups that follow similarities. These similarities are in general themes, and the process of refining and determining each theme is repeated through simplification and renaming. The fourth step largely encompasses this, with the process of refining the themes through two main levels: The first being based on the codes, and the second being on the whole data set, in order to determine its applicability (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 91–92).

The process of creating and designating codes was primarily conducted by analyzing the consistency and frequency of specific subjects, ideals, and patterns shared across more than one article. These codes, importantly, were absent of specificity when it comes to the identification of differences between both news groups. For example, a code would not be written as "Fox news articles are more likely to focus on national health". Instead, the codes were written more generally, such as "National security is considered most important", in a manner which applied to both Fox and CNN news articles that were being analyzed.

Additionally, certain codes were created in order to determine the frequency of appearance and the discrepancy in which they appeared within both news companies' articles. For example, two identified codes that were noted were "calls for government to take certain action" and "criticism against government for taking certain action". These two codes stand in opposition to one another but were equally valid due to the consistent appearance of these in multiple articles.

Using one of the identified codes during the identification of themes, "National security is considered most important", numerous articles from the selection of 50 Fox and CNN articles were first examined and marked if they displayed similar patterns, of which the frequency of the observed code was noted. For example, a Fox News article published on the 24th March by Kristine Parks, titled 'FCC Commissioner warns it's 'crystal clear' TikTok puts Americans at 'risk' for Chinese surveillance' focuses on the potential threat of Chinese surveillance that could occur due to the Chinese government's ability to secure TikTok's information on users (Source 11, para. 4). Another example article, published on CNN by

Brian Fung titled 'TikTok collects a lot of data. But that's not the main reason officials say it's a security risk' echoes similar sentiments though differing on specifics, as while it points out the hypothetical nature of the concerns of user privacy and security, nonetheless remains a main focus within the article (Source 32, paras. 1-3). Because of the shared patterns of placing national security is a priority and main focal point, the resulting code was established and supported with evidence from the collected articles. Similar codes were identified in relation to mental health, such as "Addiction, anxiety, and depression were labeled under mental health issues", which were further narrowed and grouped together into the six established themes, two for each of the focal areas of mental health, national security, and CEO Hearing Coverage.

The eventual formation of themes within this essay primarily falls in line with David Byrne's outline of what he terms a coding reliability approach, in which themes are established early in the process of the coding and research phase in part due to prior knowledge and theory built up on it (Byrne, 2022, pp. 1392–1393). This is similar to what occurred with regards to the coding process, as the three focal areas were identified early in the coding process, with the establishment of the six themes similarly occurring relatively quickly. The coding process, therefore, was guided primarily within this thesis by the establishing of the three focal areas, which guided the finalizing of the six established themes.

By utilizing a thematic analysis, a total of six themes were established in order to conduct the analysis in which to answer the main research question, by utilizing a coding process to analyze general patterns within the data. Additionally, the main analysis and thematic analysis was conducted through an observation of three main focal points of comparison between the articles, and which were designated as: Mental Health, National Security, and CEO Hearing Coverage. Alongside the established themes, within the three main focal areas, a comparative approach will be used to compare articles from both Fox News and CNN in order to highlight the key differences in reporting, in order to assist in answering the main research question.

Focal Areas: Mental Health, National Security, and CEO Hearing Coverage

Through the established themes that cover the three established main areas of mental health, national security, and CEO Hearing coverage, the primarily analysis will utilize the established themes in order to break down and analyze the differences in reporting between the two predominantly left-wing and right-wing American news sources, being Fox News and CNN. In order to establish an overall structure for analysis and to determine specific areas for coding and the identification of themes, three main areas were established from which the main broad focuses were identified, from which coding and eventual themes were based around. These three focal areas, while labeled with specific terms, encompass a wider grouping of data and points that will be further clarified in order to differentiate them from the

established thematic analysis, themes, and coding process. These focal areas were also identified as areas in which direct comparisons between Fox News and CNN articles could be observed, primarily based around political and ideological differences – such as opinions and views on certain subjects – and therefore on general reporting.

The first of the three main focal areas of study, Mental Health, was selected due to an identifiable difference of opinion on the subject in the United States based on political leanings, especially within liberal vs conservative coverage of the subject. One example is a report covering Fox and CNN news coverage on the parkland shooting of 2018, in which an analytical report found that Fox News associated mental health in a negative context for a majority of its reporting, associating it with mass shootings as a direct cause of the tragedy and thus influencing a negative view of mental health (Zheng & Scardino, 2021, p. 4). The study of TikTok with regards to mental health is also rooted in academic study, as the TikTok platform and other social media platforms have been used as a source of study into the effects of social media use on user's mental health, behavior, and others, even prior to the March 2023 hearing and outside of the controversies surrounding the platform (Miltsov, 2022, p. 665).

The second identified focal area, National Security, encompasses a wider arrange of themes, but largely encompasses the coverage of TikTok's controversial security with regards to the Chinese Communist Party. One of the biggest controversies about the platform and the main point of criticism against it by the United States government is the Chinese government's ability to access data servers that are housed in China, with a concern of US citizens' private information being accessible to the CCP (Lewis, 2024, paras. 1–4). The concerns of foreign governments and actors gaining access to private information, notably that of high-ranking individuals in the government and other institutions, is a growing concern among a majority of governments, not just the United States, and as a result legislation, including the recent congressional bills and hearings around TikTok, has been enacted (Clausius, 2022, pp. 273–277). TikTok in particular, since the 2020's, has been embroiled with a wider geo-political clash between the US and Chinese governments, with TikTok viewed as a potential threat to the US (Miao et al., 2023, pp. 97–101). While the move to restrict and even ban the platform has been regarded as controversial, the subject has sparked debate within the US, as the TikTok hearings and legislation are an example of ongoing American discourse regarding national security for the public versus freedom of speech and expression.

The third main focal area is based on the coverage of the CEO of TikTok's US congressional hearings in relation to the threat of TikTok. The majority of articles selected for analysis focus on the congressional hearings conducted in March 2023, which focused on questioning the CEO of TikTok, Shou Zi Chew, on a number of concerns in relation to the social platform, which included questions about protections for young users and its relations to China and the Chinese government, among others.

Additional articles cover similar hearings and news in relation to the CEO's hearings, including a small number of articles on separate hearings that took place in May 2023, though most of the analysis into the CEO hearings will involve articles published in March of 2023. The main reason for the analysis of the CEO Hearing's coverage is to compare the coverage of Fox and CNN articles, highlighting areas in which each news source omitted or included information and facts based on potential biases more closely. Additionally, it will allow for a deeper analysis of the forms of potential reporting bias that both Fox and CNN employ in reporting on the hearings, such as specific terminology and grammar used, based on their opposing political leanings (Yang, 2023, pp. 5–8).

It is important to note that these three focal areas are not the established themes or codes, but were rather broad focal areas in which the analysis, coding, and eventual established themes would guide themselves around. As part of the analysis, after reading through the chosen articles from both Fox and CNN, the process of coding began to establish patterns shared across articles from which a thematic analysis could be conducted.

Limitations and Concerns

Ultimately, there are certain limitations and concerns with regards to the data collection methods, primarily rooted in the subjective nature of the criteria selection for articles. The selection criteria for the chosen source articles in and of itself is based on subjective selectors that others who wish to replicate the study may alter due to their perceptions on applicable or insufficient criteria. For example, the choice of a minimum 300-word requirement may be deemed as insufficient for some researchers, and a higher minimum word count may be utilized. Additionally, the method of source collection and even the number of sources my differ if other researchers wish to replicate the study.

The subjective nature of the establishing criteria for the study is especially highlighted with the selection of articles in and of itself. Even if a researcher was to replicate the exact criteria established for this study, it is possible for them to acquire different articles than those that are listed in the appendix. This is partially due to the randomized presentation of articles within the Fox and CNN websites' search engines, as well as individual subjective selection for the relevance of different articles.

Additionally, with regards to the Fox News and CNN articles, there are also a number of limitations with regards to selecting the most ideal ones for the analysis. One of the key points to highlight is that, while both news companies are publishing articles that will be compared, neither necessarily create articles in direct response to the other, making the selection of articles for comparison reliant on individual subjective identification using the established criteria for data selection. Therefore, rather than making direct comparisons between individual articles, a selection of main themes and subjects will be chosen in order to compare the coverage by both Fox and CNN news groups.

The 25 Fox News and 25 CNN news articles selected for this thesis are established to fit within the criteria outlined within this thesis. Additionally, reasons and motivations for the established criteria have been outlined and justified to a sufficient degree. Researchers who wish to replicate the study may come to different conclusions on the results and with the same or different data collection requirements, due to the subjective nature of the research and possible conclusions from the data. They may also alter the established criteria used to select appropriate articles for the main sources.

Chapter 4: Results

The main thematic analysis of the differences in reporting between Fox and CNN on the TikTok platform produced six identified themes were determined through the coding process, based around three main focal areas of comparison from a total of fifty sources. Each focal area, being identified as mental health, national security, and CEO Hearing coverage, encompassed two identified themes from which a coding and analysis of the articles identified patterns of reporting. These identified themes and additional evidence will be used to identify and answer the main research question 'How do American Politically Polarized News Sources report on the TikTok platform?' By focusing on the established themes and highlighting the key differences present between them, focal analysis will identify key differences in the reporting of both Fox News and CNN, highlighting both shared similarities and differences that will identify an answer to the main research question.

Each of the main three identified focal areas will be analyzed, with the identified themes first established in order to establish similarities between the articles published by both news companies. Afterwards, a more comparative analysis will be conducted in which the key differences between both styles of reporting will be highlighted and examined.

Established Themes

After the coding process, a final total of six themes were established after careful analysis of the articles, with approximately two themes focused primarily within each of the three established subjects of mental health, national security, and CEO Hearing.

The first theme was identified as 'TikTok users are seen as victims of the platform in terms of mental health' and was established as a result of an observed pattern of reporting within most of the main articles. Within these articles, it was noted that users of the platform were often labeled in a manner due to a general distrust and targeting against social media platforms, with users often regarded as being subject to the negative consequences of social media use.

The second identified theme, which also is linked to the identified subject of mental health, is 'Addiction is reported as the most frequent mental health concern from TikTok use', due to the frequency of the specific concern of addiction being levied against the platform. Concerns such as depression and anxiety were also mentioned, but a common theme was the highlighting of addiction in particular as the primary concern, due to frequent social media use being associated as the main cause for such concerns. These two themes were identified within the subject of mental health concerns of users.

The first of two themes that link to the subject of national security, and the third theme overall, is 'TikTok is seen as a primary concern to US national security over other concerns', which was identified due to the frequency of its appearance within the articles. Above all others, the concern of TikTok's links

to the Chinese government were one of the most frequent accusations brought up, and as a result it necessitated its consolidation into a main theme.

The fourth theme is 'TikTok's links to the Chinese government are justification for concern'. While similar to the prior theme, the articles share a common repetition of a shared agreement about the justification of the reasons behind the TikTok ban, with enough frequency to be identified as a separate theme. Multiple instances appear in the articles in which direct links were drawn between the Chinese government and TikTok. Whereas the prior theme centered around the concern compared to others, this theme focuses on the main justification given, being specifically the Chinese government's alleged links to the social media platform.

The last two themes established pertain to the coverage of the March 2023 CEO Hearing, with the fifth identified theme being 'The TikTok CEO is viewed as being suspicious and evasive during the hearing', with a number of articles using similar terms that depict the CEO as being suspicious with his answers. The coverage by both news companies focused on the elusive and vague answers, with additional descriptors highlighting a shared suspicion that became an identified theme.

The last established theme is 'The CEO Hearing's panel members were overly hostile against the TikTok CEO and platform'. The common theme was apparent as the articles covering the CEO Hearing highlighted the questions and actions of the hearing panel members, depicting them as hostile to the CEO and platform. Due to the prevalence of these identified codes through the reporting, this became another key theme identified, and the second within the focus into the CEO Hearing reporting.

Each of these central themes were created based on observations within the coding process and the consolidation of three main subjects for the analysis to answer the research question. With the established themes, similarities in reporting can be identified between the Fox news and CNN articles. Alongside a more comparative approach that will be examined within the three focal areas, key differences will also be analyzed and identified in order to answer the main research question and identify key points of difference between the news articles and their reporting on the TikTok platform.

Mental Health

One of the central subjects that was identified as a focal analytic point is coverage in relation to mental health of users of the social media platform. To preface this, the analysis of Mental Health doesn't just cover specifically the mental health of users, but also encompasses other concerns among young users of social media, such as user well-being from addiction and other concerns. Within the discourse of social media, the effects of platforms on the mental health and livelihoods of young individuals and users is a common subject of debate and analysis. With the recent rise in the widespread adoption and use of social

media platforms in the last several years, a wide number of concerns have arisen with regards to the potential negative consequences of the use of social media, notably among youth.

As cited in chapter 2, a significant number of American users in particular hold strong opinions on the role of social media and its effects, with approximately 74% of Republicans and Republican-leaning conservatives believing in social media's negative influence, while 57% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning liberals believe so. This reveals the fact that in general, Democrat-leaning individuals will be less likely to be as critical against social media as Republican-leaning individuals, which would naturally reflect on the reporting by Fox News and CNN due to their political and party alignments.

Two of the identified themes are present within this focal area and form key identifiers for the differences in reporting by both news companies. The first identified theme is 'TikTok users are seen as victims of the platform in terms of mental health', which emphasizes how the fault of the negative effects of social media use is associated with the company and platform as opposed to the individual user. Articles that highlight this directly place the platform as being responsible for putting users at risk of being exposed to troubling content, such as a CNN article which reveals how young teens, a vulnerable user group, were exposed to harmful content that was stated to negatively affect users' mental health and body image (Source 39, paras. 1-3). The wording of this CNN article phrases the blame of users gaining access to harmful content on the platform's recommendation system, associating it as a risk without placing fault on the user.

Another source that supports the theme in which users are viewed as victims is through a Fox article that quotes individuals who criticize the platform as a risk for users. In quoting Michigan governor Gretchen Whittamer in February 2023 about a TikTok ban, Fox News directly quoted her statement on thoughts about the safety of the platform for children, quoting "I'm concerned about a lot of ways that social media is curated and drags people down rabbit holes in this country…" (Panreck, 2023, para. 9) (Source 10, para. 9). While not directly using the word addiction, the main risk emphasized by articles from Fox is the prolong use and exposure of harmful content to young users, particularly children, who are considered to be innocent and at risk of being manipulated (Source 10, para. 9). The inclusion of these quotes and focus on the responsibilities of the TikTok platform lend to justification of the identified theme, that the articles view TikTok's users as victims of the platform through manipulation and emphasis on the platform's control.

The second main theme that was identified through the coding process was 'Addiction is seen as the most frequent mental health concern from TikTok use', with the specific concern of social media addiction appearing the most frequent criticism against the platform. Within academic research, correlations have been drawn in a rise in addiction, depression, and anxiety among youth, coinciding with an increase in social media usage. Analysts and researchers suggest that use of social media can result in

these harmful effects on users, and while the results have been mixed, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, among others, are associated with small but significant negative emotions and effects among its users, from fostering anxiety and depression to encouraging comparisons with unrealistic standards that facilitate vulnerabilities (Nesi, 2020, pp. 116–118).

Addiction itself, in particular addiction to social media use, is considered to be a common criticism utilized by mainstream media and concerned groups as a concern for young users of such platforms. While there does exist difficulty in the identification between addiction and overuse (Xu et al., 2023, pp. 440–442), addiction in particular is referenced in a number of articles that delve into user concerns. While certain articles mention other concerns alongside addiction, such as depression and anxiety in conjunction, emphasis is placed on addiction as a primary concern, due to it being a source of the latter; for example, a fox news article notes that addiction in particular is a problem mentioned alongside anxiety, due to it perpetuating the decline of user mental health (Source 19, paras. 16-21). The article does note other concerns before bringing up addiction, being anxiety and depression, but addiction is brought out with a heavier emphasis on consequence due to the nature of addiction perpetuating the other mental health issues (Source 19, paras. 19-21).

Outside of these established themes, more direct comparisons can be drawn between the reporting of broader subjects in relation to mental health between Fox News and CNN, which will now be analyzed in a more comparative manner.

One specific argument that highlights the differences in reporting is the belief of social media's negative effects on children and young users, with the different forms of reporting reflecting positions based on political, party, and ideological lines. For example, in one Fox News Article, CNN and other news groups such as the Los Angeles Times were reported as "defending" TikTok by applying the argument that the TikTok platform was not the only one conducting bad practices. The article's headings read "Media continues defending TikTok as push to ban app mounts: 'No worse than other social media platforms'", with the specific use of the term 'defense' in reference to arguments pushed forward by opposing news companies is frequently repeated by the article, including statements such as "CNN, WaPo, LA Times are among outlets circling the wagons…" (Source 18, para. 1), which is a play on words that denotes a negative connotation. Specifically, the arguments presented by these news sources being criticized are aimed against other social media companies as part of a wider criticism against social media platforms as a whole, primarily through the negative effects they have on users in terms of causing addiction, spreading misinformation, and so on. These dismissive terms and statements are used by Fox News to negate the reporting of concerns against TikTok and other social media platforms, and as a result of this focus on other concerns in relation to mental health, addiction, and others applicable to other social media platforms outside of TikTok. The Fox News article accuses these left-leaning news companies of

viewing TikTok as a "scapegoat" and purely theatrical (Source 18, paras. 5-6), which in turn diverts focus away from the main reason behind the TikTok controversy. In other words, with regards to the TikTok coverage, Fox News views alternate discussions like mental health as secondary to the focus against China and the Chinese Government and is willing to dismiss the subject if it detracts from the priority that is denouncing the TikTok platform.

CNN articles apply a similar application and standard of criticism against Fox News and conservative news groups, utilizing specific terms and language to describe certain actions with a left-leaning, Democrat-focused bias. In one article published in December 2022, a CNN article focused on the pushing of the ban of the TikTok app by Republican politicians, describing it as a 'trend' in which the targeting of the app is seen as a way to stand against the Chinese Communist Party, described as being "politically advantageous in the Republican Party" (Source 45, para. 3). The article's use of terms such as "playing to the Fox News crowd" and "posturing" (Source 45, paras. 4-5) lends to the view of the presentation and actions of Republican politicians as inauthentic, an act meant to gain support from the largely conservative and Republican party leaning Fox-News audience. In describing it in such a way, the CNN article depicts the Republican denouncement of TikTok as an inauthentic means of gaining popularity through the conducting of a socially approved act, which would harm the authenticity and perceived dedication of their actions and statements. It also implies that Fox News audience members are able to be played with, a term that implies manipulation and can be perceived as a poor view of the audience of Fox News.

With regards to arguments focusing on mental health and similar subjects, CNN articles also place much more emphasis on the concerns of mental health of users, especially among the youth. An article from January 2023, makes mention of the focus of the ban being on the connections between ByteDance and the Chinese government, but the article focuses on a secondary focus by researchers and lawmakers on the negative effects of the social media platform on users, with an opening describing how a user's life deteriorated with frequent use before deleting the social media app (Source 46, paras. 1-3).

With regards to mental health solutions, both news groups tend to produce relatively effective suggestions on counters to these negative effects. Fox News articles that focus on mental health among youth do place emphasis on the need for finding proper and appropriate healthcare and support, with an emphasis on the negatives of social media use. One particular focus by Fox News is that of social media's spread of misinformation, with an article from March 2023 focusing on the phenomenon of American youth using sites, including TikTok, as a source of mental health information and support (Source 19, paras. 1-5). In the article, Fox News is absent of a majority of negative stigma that comes with mental health, citing mental health experts and providing relatively appropriate information with regards to

mental health information; primarily, to not rely on TikTok or other social media sites to diagnose possible mental health symptoms and to seek professional health.

This suggests that, when directly confronting the subject, Fox News is not necessarily against mental health or dismissive of the concerns against it and is able to provide acceptable and appropriate information on the subject. However, as noted in the other articles, it is willing to use the subject in passing and cast its mention in a negative light if it furthers another, far stronger stance that it holds. In this example, to dismiss statements by left-leaning news companies that may divert attention away from TikTok, specifically social media's effects as a whole on mental health of users, Fox News was willing to adopt dismissive and hostile language in order to focus on the main point against TikTok, being its links to China. With the mention of mental health applicable to other social media platforms, Fox News viewed it as a means of drawing focus from TikTok, and thus used combative terms to counter the attempt to draw focus from TikTok's links to China, the focal point of criticism against the platform.

To conclude this section's analysis, two main themes were established within the articles that focus on TikTok users being depicted as victims of the platform, and the identification of addiction as the most frequent mental health concern reported with TikTok use. Within a wider comparison between the reporting between the two companies, Fox News and CNN are both able and willing to discuss the effects of mental health and similar concerns with regards to the users of social media platforms, with clear emphasis on the established themes being shared across the board. However, Fox News demonstrates a strong willingness to dismiss statements on this subject if they perceive it as a distraction from its main goals, in this case being a focused denouncement of TikTok. If the mention of mental health or similar themes may draw focus away from criticism against TikTok, Fox News is willing to divert from CNN and dismiss it as a distraction from the main cause. In summary, Fox News is capable of presenting a relatively fair approach and concern for mental health-related subjects but is willing to place it as secondary and even as a point of attack if used to detract from a stronger position that the news company holds.

National Security

The second main focal area of study identified, and which is the basis for two of the six main identified themes, is National Security, a term which encompasses a number of different subjects including the ongoing US-China cyber conflict, social media user security, and the potential risk of online platforms being utilized by governments, among others. Within the context of the connection between TikTok's parent company and the Chinese government, this focal area marks one of the most significant points of controversy surrounding the social media platform, and arguably lays the foundation for the situation.

As cited in chapter 2, one of the main threats that is presented by lawmakers within the US is the Chinese government's alleged ability to gain access to information within data servers in China, which could be used to store American TikTok users' private data and thus place them at risk of surveillance. Part of an ongoing US-China cyber conflict, TikTok was already banned across a number of federal and state entities from the devices of officials, and as stated in Section 2, in order to circumvent the alleged threat posed by the platform (Bhaimiya, 2023, paras. 1–7).

Within this focal area of national security, two main themes were established that establish similarities shared between all the main sources. The first main theme that was identified, and the third overall, is 'TikTok is seen as a primary concern to US National Security over other concerns', which was identifiable due to the significance of the main subject of TikTok's controversy. Unsurprisingly, the TikTok platform's links to China form the basis of the main controversy and the main justification of US lawmakers to ban the platform from use, both within institutions and, at least through attempts on, the national level.

A number of patterns and codes were established that drew links towards the recognition of themes main themes, with a number of sources sharing similarities linking together. Across both Fox and CNN articles, TikTok as a primary concern was listed above all other concerns such as concerns for users mental health. Shared across a majority of sources, and reflecting off the central controversy around the platform, National Security is the largest concern that is reflected across the articles, notably within Fox News articles, but with patterns shared across a number of CNN articles as well.

Fox News articles were much more likely to reference the concerns of national security and user privacy within articles, with a number of them directly quoting statements by important figures surrounding the TikTok CEO hearings that label the threat of Chinese surveillance on US Citizens, such as a Fox News article by Kristine Parks, published on the 24th March 2023, which quotes the FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr of TikTok's "crystal clear" threat to US national security (Source 11, para. 4). Shared across other articles, individuals were often quoted as raising concern for US national security as a central point, the inclusion and lack of alternate or opposing reporting indirectly pushing a pattern in line with the established theme.

Some articles went as far as to associate the concern of TikTok as encompassing others beyond national security, with one such Fox News article referencing House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul's statements about the platform being a great propaganda tool for China, emphasizing the threat and directly stating the platform's threat to national security (Source 7, paras. 1-7). In general, Fox News, as reflected in conservative views and anti-Chinese opinions specified in section 2, was overall much more hostile to the platform, and reflective of the main controversy surrounding the platform was much more likely to reference the threat to national security overall.

Other articles, while taking more nuanced perspectives, do also fall in line with the established theme of national security being viewed as a primary concern above others. A CNN article by Brian Fung, published on the 21ˢᵗ March 2023, reported that evidence supporting the concern about possible security risks by the Chinese government is limited and that the concerns might be exaggerated. However, the article does not outright dismiss the concerns or consequences of China's possibility to breach national security and does not elaborate on any other concerns, maintaining security for American users as a priority (Source 40, paras. 1-4). Ultimately, numerous sources provide evidence that show patterns in line with the established third theme, with national security considered to be the primary concern above others with regards to coverage of the TikTok controversy. This stands to reason due to the central event around the reporting being the CEO hearing, with national security concerns levied as the primary charge against the platform.

The second theme within national security and fourth overall is 'TikTok's links to the Chinese Government are justification for concern', which has similarly a large number of sources that support this theme from both companies, shared across the reporting of the platform.

Codes that were established in support of this were created with multiple articles identifying TikTok's connection to Beijing as being a key point of concern, due to the Chinese government's ability to force companies operating within its jurisdiction. Cited in a Fox news article by Brooke Singman, China's 2017 National Intelligence law is explained as requiring Chinese businesses hosted in China to hand over data to the Chinese government, which forms the basis of criticism and concern against the platform depicted within numerous articles (Source 7, para. 4). A number of articles, while not directly citing the intelligence law, share common patterns of identification of China's government as untrustworthy, with the possibility of their access to the personal data of US citizens posing a national security risk.

Another article, published by CNN's Brian Fung, gives an explanation as to the concerns shared by groups and individuals about the platform and its connections to Beijing, citing security experts who explain the fears as driven by a combination of the power of the government over Chinese platforms, Chinese espionage, and existing distrust of the Chinese government (Source 29, paras. 1-5). Other articles cite the connection to Beijing as being a primary source of concern, with another article quoting that "At the heart of both is an underlying concern that any company doing business in China ultimately falls under Chinese Communist Party laws." (Source 35, paras. 5-7). With the numerous occasions and similar patterns shared across the selected articles, the establishment of the fourth theme was justified. Additionally, there were very few articles which directly refuted the concerns of the Chinese government or TikTok, which further lays credibility to the established themes.

While these themes establish similarities that are shared across the selected articles from Fox News and CNN, both companies express certain differences in reporting that appear to be guided by different values and perspectives. Differences in reporting reflect different priorities and aims, which are key to identifying diverging perspectives within the main focal area of national security.

While it is the case that the main selected articles do share similar themes with regards to national security, the key differences in reporting, from focus areas to differing perspectives, allows for a more detailed examination of the areas of bias within each news company. Each of the news companies uses specific terms and makes note of the security and cybersecurity concerns of TikTok with regards to the main focal area. Within Fox News, the depiction of the ban of TikTok is often associated with credible authorities and given a large degree of explanation, with some articles referring to lawmakers, the FBI, and other government agencies when explaining the 'credible' threats posed by Pro-Beijing misinformation from the company (Source 4, para. 3).

Within the Fox News articles, the depiction of the Chinese government and affiliated groups is often presented in a negative view with regards to political and social security, with terms such as "… communist China's state-run media" used in order to denounce Chinese sources and media (Source 1, paras. 1-3). The specific use of the term 'communist' evokes negative responses in Fox News' largely conservative audience, as research shows that a majority of Republicans view communism and socialism as a negative political and social movement, often alongside a positive view of capitalism and other 'opposing' ideologies (Atske, 2019, paras. 3–7). This is not surprising given the political left and right spectrums include communism and socialism on the left, with capitalism and democracy to the right of the former. Fox News also uses other negative terms in a number of their other articles, often referencing China's government with descriptors such as 'Authoritarian' and associating the CCP with conducting activities such as 'spying' on users and citizens (Source 3, para. 7).

In contrast, with regards to China, coverage of the Chinese government and the concerns of Chinese influence is largely reported with the absence of the political spectrum, in that there are very few instances of China's government being labeled as a socialist or communist government. Rather, emphasis is placed on the Chinese government as being more strictly authoritarian with greater leverage over companies and individuals, to a degree that warrants concerns of Chinese espionage and private data collection (Source 32, paras. 4-6). This highlights how CNN appears to avoid associating left-leaning political ideologies such as socialism and communism as a specific negative connotation with China's government. Rather, it focuses more on China's authoritarianism as the key point of difference between it and the US. While Fox News leans into the left-wing and right-wing systems comparisons, CNN instead focuses on authoritarianism versus western democracies as a general point of comparison.

Interestingly, however, some articles from CNN take the inverse of Fox News and make statements against Capitalism and large companies, such as TikTok and other social media platforms. For example, one CNN article quotes a Taiwanese researcher, Pellaeon Lin, who is quoted at the end of an article as attributing the TikTok platform's potential user data risks as "… a product of the entire surveillance capitalism economy", which is a politically opposing parallel to Fox News' perspective of communism and socialism being a large concern (Source 32, paras. 43-44). While the concerns of China and the Chinese government's access to user data is highlighted, the articles are more likely to associate the security threats of TikTok laying fault in the platform and wider practices by social media companies, especially in comparison to Fox News.

CNN also would mention the term national security in passing with regards to quotes made by individuals, but largely avoided using the term itself (Source 34). Rather, CNN uses terms that avoid taking ownership of specific statements and positions, instead utilizing terms such as "Some in" and "Others have raised alarms", attributing statements to other individuals or groups (Source 35, paras. 4-6). One key source is an opinion editorial piece from Alex Stamos, who wrote an opinion piece on CNN with a heavy focus on the TikTok security concerns, with an expanded section on the threat of social media as a whole on national security and society, though the CNN made it a point to emphasize the piece reflected Stamos' own opinions as opposed to an endorsement of CNN's views (Stamos, 2023, para. 1). Within the opinion piece, Stamos explains that the threat posed by China's intelligence services is a very real threat as part of a wider information war between the United States and its western democratic allies against the authoritarian Chinese communist party but emphasizes how TikTok is a "single chess piece", highlighting the need to focus beyond just the company as a potential security risk (Source 50, para. 22).

To conclude the analysis of the National Security focal area, two man themes were established, being 'TikTok is seen as a primary concern to US national security over other concerns', and 'TikTok's links to the Chinese government are justification for concern'. Both articles from Fox News and CNN shared similar patterns with regards to certain subjects, identified within the themes as both a general agreement of National Security concerns being the primary focus around the TikTok platform controversy, as well as the Chinese government's alleged connections to the platform being a worthy point of concern and distrust for the platform.

The articles across both companies did not refute these themes, but differences do exist between their focuses in reporting. Fox News articles were much more likely to be aggressive and confrontational against the platform and Chinese government, ranging from the use of terms linked to negative concepts such as 'Communism' to a general antagonistic focus on China as opposed to others. In contrast, CNN articles were less likely to place specific labels against the platform and Chinese government, and in some cases were willing to broaden criticism to other concerns, such as the wider concept of social media and

surveillance. In summary, Fox News was much more confrontational in its opposition to TikTok and reflective of the concerns presented around the controversy, while CNN, which shared similar concerns as established in the themes, was more moderate in its reporting style and more likely to draw attention to other areas of focus.

CEO Hearing Coverage

The third main focal area of study differs somewhat from the prior two, in that it is primarily determined in order to provide a more direct focus on the comparative reporting by both news companies. However, themes are still identifiable within the articles that cover the March 2023 congressional hearing of TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew, primarily centered around the identifiable patterns that are found in a majority of reporting covering the event.

The articles themselves were centered around the congressional hearings of the TikTok CEO, Shou Zi Chew, in March 2023, in which the US government questioned the CEO about the platform's possible risks to national security and its data collection practices. These were conducted as part of a wider move by the Biden Administration's considerations for banning the platform, with the government pushing for the owner of TikTok, the Chinese company ByteDance, to either sell the platform to a US company or face a potential ban (McCabe & Kang, 2023, paras. 1–3). The hearings, while debated over their effectiveness and ultimate goals, were a significant focal point for reporting by mainstream news, including Fox News and CNN.

The fifth theme overall and first of the focal area is that 'The TikTok CEO is viewed as being suspicious and evasive during the hearing', with multiple articles covering the hearing focusing on the reporting of the CEO's answers to the questions posed during the hearing by US lawmakers. This theme was identified based on an analysis of the articles and coding that identified the common perspective presented by the reporting articles of the TikTok CEO's unclear and vague answers that contributed to a suspicious image, a reflection of the feelings of the panel members.

The articles covering the CEO Hearing often reflected on the attitudes and tones of the members of the panel, as often direct quotes were stated with the tones behind them being conveyed, with the same applied to the answers given by the CEO, Shou Zi Chew. It is worth noting that many of the questions that resulted in responses that were deemed as unsatisfying appeared to cover more controversial subjects in relation to possible Chinese connections. For example, one Fox news article by Peter Aitken covering the hearing wrote "TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew proved evasive on direct questions about China's human rights abuses…" (Source 22, para 1), with emphasis on the term 'proved evasive' worthy of note. Such responses were primarily aimed at confronting the CEO with questions pertaining to its links to the Chinese government, with the comment specifically in reference to the Chinese government's human

rights abuses in reference to the persecution and ethnic cleansing of the native Uyghur Muslim population located in the Xinjiang region of China, which the Chinese government denies and state-sponsored and supported media refute (Smith Finley, 2021, pp. 348–353).

Additional articles highlight a relatively closed-minded attitude by the panel towards the CEO, with little trust or leeway given to Mr. Chew by members of the panel, which is noted by numerous articles. One article from CNN, by Catherine Thorbecke, states in a subheading that "Washington has already made up its mind about TikTok" (Source 31, subheading 1) with additional statements claiming that lawmakers "remained combative throughout" (Source 31, para. 4) the hearing. These terms overall reflect upon the theme by depicting the lawmakers and by extension the articles highlighting their view of the CEO as being evasive within the context of answering specific questions on the platform's links to the Chinese government. To be elaborated on further in this section, the overall depiction of the CEO is reflective of the perspective and attitudes adopted by the hearing panel members.

The last main theme identified for the analysis and second within the focal area of CEO Hearing reporting is 'The CEO Hearing's panel members were overly hostile against the TikTok CEO'. This theme was concluded based on multiple articles displaying similar patterns of recognition around the Hearing panel members with regards to their hostility against the CEO. This is not too surprising, given how the panel consisted of members of congress who were reported as supporting a ban of the platform.

These articles often use specific terms that aim to highlight the hostile approach of panel members against the CEO during the hearings, with lines such as "US officials have threatened to ban TikTok…" (Source 29, para. 15), with the specific term 'threaten' evoking a hostile definition. This is understandable as the panel was made with the aim of challenging TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew on the potential security risks posed by the social media platform, and the risk of alleged Chinese surveillance. Additional terms were used to describe the manner in which the CEO responded to specific questions, with terms such as "evasive" (Source 22, para. 1), with an established hostility from the hearing panel members reflecting within the reporting by the articles. One article, a CNN article by Brian Fung, highlights this phenomenon by stating "The hearing… kicked off with a lawmaker calling for TikTok to be banned and remaining combative throughout." (Source 32, para. 2). This statement aptly captures the manner of reporting by the majority of articles, reflecting the hostile nature of the lawmakers who were part of the hearing by capturing the aggressive and hostile manner which the CEO of TikTok was questioned with.

While the two identified main themes encompass two key patterns within the coverage of the CEO Hearing by the chosen articles, the reporting of the hearing between the two companies reveals specific differences that pertain to both the specific aspects and priorities of each company's reporting, and the ways in which these are reported on. These differences will be analyzed further in order to

highlight areas where both companies diverge, in order to further analyze the focal area of the CEO Hearing coverage, and to answer the main research question.

Within Fox News articles, terminology and statements made on a number of articles presented a primarily hostile attitude with regards to Shou Zi Chew, CEO of TikTok, with regards to the focus on the congressional hearings conducted in March 2023, and notably in comparison to CNN. Mentioned previously in reference to the fifth theme, the Fox News quote associated with the term 'evasive on direct questions' highlights one of the key points, drawing focus on the CEO's lack of a perceived satisfactory answer to what is described as a direct question. The Fox News article highlights the CEO's lack of response as a means of discrediting the CEO for what is perceived as a question of morality, as well as a means of highlighting a possible connection with the Chinese government, due to the state's strict rules on censorship.

However, this has been perceived by some other news organizations, including CNN, of being a means of moral grandstanding without true reason or merit with regards to the hearing's goals. One CNN article from March 2023 that covers the hearings highlighted how the hearing was, by design, not necessarily meant to allow the CEO to change the minds of the lawmakers in charge, with many lines emphasizing the stonewalling of lawmakers, such as stating that the CEO's words "appeared to fall on deaf ears" (Source 31, para. 9). The article uses these lines in order to paint a picture of a closed-minded hearing without the goal of allowing the TikTok CEO to attempt to change their minds, in other words simply meant to allow lawmakers to confront the CEO on a public stage.

Notably, as mentioned previously in reference to the fifth theme, the line "Washington has already made up its mind about TikTok" (Source 31, subheading 1) reflects a key perspective by CNN that is only implied and not confirmed by Fox News, in that the hearing's panel members were extremely biased against the platform and were in a confrontational manner. While the main reason for the hearing is determining the threat posed by the platform, the public hearing and questioning of the CEO, as reported by CNN, was not meant to provide a chance to be convinced, but rather to confront and raise suspicion against the social media platform.

The different reporting styles of each of the two news groups reflect on the levels of bias and opinions established with the data, in that Fox News' more conservative and Republican leanings highlight the largely anti-TikTok opinions demonstrated among its audience, while CNN's more Democrat-leaning and left-leaning bias see less scrutiny against the company in comparison. However, CNN was also critical of the TikTok platform, given that while Democrat-leaning independents and Democrats are less likely to push for a ban of the platform as highlighted in Section 2, it does not necessarily equate to an opposing position compared to Fox News. Rather, it entails a less critical position against the platform in comparison to Fox, but with differences through the use of specific supportive or

antagonistic terms, statements, focus points, and so on. Notably, CNN focused on social media platforms on a wider scale with emphasis on the negative effects of social media platforms in general on users, emphasized with the focus on mental health of users and young users.

      In comparison, Fox News prioritized the TikTok company itself in its coverage, largely based on its potential ties to the Chinese government and the risk it played on national security, a point that is emphasized through its heavy focus on Chinese links to the platform and denouncing of CNN's attempt to detract focus from TikTok to other social media platforms, as cited previously. However, all articles shared similar themes, such as 'the CEO was viewed as being suspicious and evasive during the hearing', and 'The CEO hearing's panel members were overly hostile against the TikTok CEO and platform'. These codes were utilized to identify the six themes within the three focal areas, thus allowing for similarities and differences to be highlighted in order to test the proposed hypotheses and answer the primary research question.

Conclusion, Reflections, and Future Research

Conclusion

The primary research question of this thesis is 'How do American Politically Polarized News Sources report on the TikTok platform?' A number of key themes were established centered around three main focal areas of study, from which a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted in order to establish the themes and patterns in a manner that would highlight similarities and differences between the reporting of the March 2023 hearing of the TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew by Fox News and CNN.

Within the three main focal areas of mental health, national security, and CEO Hearing coverage, six main themes were established through the coding process that determined similar patterns through the collected 50 articles; TikTok users are seen as victims of the platform in terms of mental health; Addiction is reported as the most frequent mental health concern from TikTok users; TikTok is seen as a primary concern to US National Security over other concerns; TikTok's links to the Chinese government are justification for concern; The TikTok CEO is viewed as suspicious and evasive during the hearing; The CEO panel members were overly hostile against the TikTok CEO. These six established themes highlighted the similarities in patterns of reporting by both Fox News and CNN, making the key differences elaborated on in Chapter 4 key to the identification of differences in reporting, and thus answering the hypothesized questions and research question.

The first hypothesis, in relation to mental health, suggested that CNN placed a greater focus on the subject as opposed to Fox News. This was established to be true, as while Fox News was just as capable of reporting effectively on the subject of mental health, the right-leaning conservative program was willing to use the point as a mark of criticism when it proved beneficial to do so. While both news groups were willing to bring up mental health, CNN did so more frequently within the collected articles.

The second hypothesis, covering national security, stated that the main focal area would receive greater coverage and focus by Fox News than CNN, in large part due to supporting evidence of Republican-leaning independents and conservatives showing greater concern against the Chinese government. This hypothesis was deemed to be true, though it is still debatable as to how wide the differences are, as CNN was similarly placing great focus on the threat posed by Chinese surveillance. However, the key difference, as outlined in Chapter 4, appear to suggest that Fox News platformed the conflict as a staunch rivalry within the context of the US-China cyber conflict, whereas CNN was more likely to frame it in a broader context of government surveillance threats.

Lastly, focusing in the area of CEO hearing coverage, the final hypothesis was suggested that the articles, particularly Fox News, would lean into the confrontational manner in which the hearing panel members took when confronting the CEO, with Fox News in particular hypothesized to lean more aggressively. This has been determined to be true, though the data is not solid, and is primarily concluded

due to Fox News' more open use of hostile terms and language when describing the interactions between the CEO and panel members.

Thus comes the main research question 'How do American Politically Polarized News Sources report on the TikTok platform?' The answer is that the political positions of certain key issues ultimately dictate the degree of priority in reporting that appears, and the manner in which the reporting is presented. A number of subjects including mental health and national security were universally mentioned by both news companies, but depending on ideological positions on said subject determined whether it was considered a priority or utilized as a point of criticism or support, such as mental health being used as a convenient point of criticism by Fox News, with an accusation of diverting interest away from the more important subject of national security.

Additionally, the positioning resulted in different levels of terms and language utilized in order to convey certain perspectives, tones, and emotions, with Fox News more likely to lean into aggressive and accusatory terms compared to the CNN articles.

In conclusion, the political ideological differences of both news sources did not place both sides as directly opposed to each other, as both news companies shared a number of similar themes and agreement on specific points in relation to many concerns linked to the TikTok platform. However, their political positions, which affected the prioritization of specific points and opinions on certain subjects such as mental health and national security, were the key determinators in differences in reporting, with both news groups observed to draw focus towards what they believed to be the most important subjects as valued by their audiences.

However, the polarization of their audiences and the primary news articles does not suggest a heavy degree of polarization to warrant a large-scale problem with regards to coverage of the TikTok CEO. This is the case despite the political rivalry between the two primary parties, separated by ideological positions, poses a great risk of further radical polarization between them. The more moderate conclusion found in this thesis is only applicable in terms of coverage of the TikTok CEO's hearing in March 2023, as other more controversial or divisive subjects could expose a far greater polarization and confrontational reality existing between both news companies that reflects their respective audience's political positions and oppositions.

Reflection and Challenges

Through the research process and thematic analysis that was undertaken in the writing for this paper, a number of challenges were observed that, while not necessarily limiting or reducing the final findings, could result in fundamentally different findings if other researchers were to conduct a similar process. The thematic analysis process as outlined in Chapter 3 was undertaken with a degree of personal

bias, as the process of coding and identification of key patterns and, eventually, themes, is qualitative by design. Certain identified patterns, codes, and themes may be determined to be either adequate or inadequate according to other researchers, and differences in observed patterns and coding processes could result in alternative themes being established and identified.

A key point of note with regards to qualitative thematic analysis is that its qualitative nature lends to it a high degree of flexibility in not just the data analysis, but also in the final findings of the thesis and answers to the research questions. Different researchers, even using the same criteria for the data collection process, may select other articles, or choose to analyze a different number of articles. Established themes may also differ due to a difference in the codes established, even if operating with the same dataset. Additionally, as outlined by Byrne's coding reliability approach, the reliance on prior knowledge, existing understanding of data and context, and the early establishment of the three focal areas of study resulted in the early establishment of the themes. Other researchers may conduct different methods of coding and may create different themes of a lesser or greater number.

In reflection, the main subject of media polarization shows that these cases are ultimately very complex and varied, and different case studies could lead to differing conclusions with regards to understanding the effects of media bias and political polarization. The exact solutions to these issues are subject to controversy and debate regarding implementation, effectiveness, and viability as well. The qualitative nature of conducting analysis into bias, however, should not be a deterrent for engaging in such research, and rather serves as a goal for both better understanding of the forms of and awareness around bias and political polarization. As well as this, the importance of the threat of political polarization and media bias should not be understated, and attention, focus, and knowledge of the various means of which they appear must continue to be examined. While the TikTok CEO hearing coverage presents a case of shared themes, alternative subjects of coverage, notably more controversial political and social issues, could reveal a more confrontational reality.

Future Research

While this thesis sought to focus on a case study around TikTok and an analysis between Fox News and CNN's reporting, there are a number of areas from which future research can be conducted into both the specific case study and beyond into alternate case studies or covering broader themes or subjects. While a researcher conducting the same form of thematic analysis could theoretically come to a different conclusion, it does not mean researchers should limit their focus to the main research question of this thesis.

One area, for example, would be adopting an alternative form of qualitative analysis, such as one more geared towards comparative analysis between the Fox News and CNN articles selected. Additional

considerations for future research could be to broaden or narrow down the criteria used in the collection of data sources, including increasing or decreasing the number of chosen articles. Different researchers would have to rely on individual judgement to determine appropriate articles, providing the possibility of varied responses, meaning that identification and justification behind these criteria and collection is a necessity.

Other areas of future research could expand beyond the two news companies of Fox News and CNN and could look at broader groups and opinions shared by members of politically opposed groups, in order to ascertain a clearer image of these possibly polarized groups. While Fox and CNN were determined to not be too polarized to the point of a confrontational clash, other groups or even individuals may display signs of heightened polarization and opposition to each other. Additionally, analysis into the motivations and reasons behind the polarization could merit a deeper wealth of knowledge from which possible remedies could be gained, from effective solutions to counter media bias to identifying and resolving political polarization.

Another alternative method for research would be within the thematic coding process itself. Due to its flexibility and focus on qualitative interpretation of data and information, it is possible for researchers conducting the same analysis to identify different codes and themes, as well as alternative focal areas of research. Because of this, researchers should not expect to fully replicate results from this thesis and may come to different conclusions or alternative themes based on similar or identical information and sources.

One last area of suggested change for future research would be the selection of a specific event being covered by two or more mainstream media sources. The CEO of TikTok's hearing of March 2023 is unique in that both Fox News and CNN displayed similar themes and points of agreement between each other on key areas covered by the themes and established in the conclusion. However, coverage by both media companies of different events or subjects, notably more controversial social issues within the United States with clearer division based on party and political positions, could draw very different results and conclusions on the prevalence and dangers of political polarization and the effects of media bias.

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Appendix A – Fox News and CNN Articles

Media Article Coverage of TikTok Platform

Note: Articles that have been selected were chosen between the months of December 2022 and June of 2023. This period for article collection was determined due to a majority of articles covering TikTok appearing most numerous around March 2023. Articles have been chosen between three months before and three months after, within December 2022 and June 2023.

Sources are numbered appropriately and will be referenced based on their listed number, along with paragraph numbers when applicable when cited.

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