Cable News, Negative Language & Partisan Affect:
"They hate" as a Causal Heuristic on Fox News

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Introduction

Fox News is 5-times more likely to use the term "hate" than its main competitors. The term is often used in the context of providing explanations for opposition to Trump's agenda and evokes negative partisan affect along with in-group mentality. While it's no secret that cable news outlets cater to different audiences (Jurkovitz et al. 2020) and often tend to highlight different aspects of a particular events, their overall news agenda often does not diverge as markedly as one might expect. Instead, particular narratives and frames are important in understanding how various parts of the public come to learn about events and what explanations they are offered in order to make sense of them.

In our research, we examine partisan speech patterns and the use of specific terms in cable news media coverage. Our initial focus was coverage of the impeachment hearings and shifted towards a focus on the Coronavirus pandemic early this year.

As we sifted through multiple months of transcripts provided via the LexisNexis database, we began to notice an interesting difference between data collected from Fox News and its main competitor, MSNBC. While it's no secret that these outlets cater to different audiences, and often tend to highlight different aspects of a particular events, the overall news agenda on all three channels did not diverge as markedly as one might expect. Instead, difference emerged in the terms and phrases that are employed to construct news narratives around specific people or events.

Data and approach

Our research initially focused on terms that might indicate antipathy or resentment, as we were interested in estimating how polarized media coverage might contribute to the tense political situation around issues of partisan politics or the response to Covid-19.

We collected verbatim transcripts from the leading primetime shows on Fox News and MSNBC (in the 6:00–10:59 pm timeslots), between January to May 8, 2020. The sample included a total of 1088 transcripts from the two channels (*n* Fox = 558; *n* MSNBC = 530). These were provided via the LexisNexis database, and were initially gathered via an empty keyword search for these two channels over the timeframe specified above. The transcripts were then loaded into a text analysis software, where they were systematically ordered.[1]
We them employed a quantitative content analytic approach, by which we constructed a dictionary of terms and phrases indicative of strong antipathy, such as "dislike," "despise," "can't stand" or "hate."

As both channels are often perceived and depicted as highly partisan, we expected some degree of similarity along these basic measures of antipathy and negative sentiment. Our results painted a different picture: usage of these terms was 5 times higher on Fox News than on MSNBC. One term in particular stood out: "hate," of which we found a total of 647 mentions on Fox, compared to MSNBC's 118.

Table 1: Results of "hate thesaurus" dictionary coding

Antipathy Thesaurus	FOX NEWS	MSNBC
hate	647	118
resent	12	3
dislike	33	15
despise	26	4
detest	5	2
loathe	10	2
abhor	9	2
deride	4	6
disparage	6	4
hostile to	9	3
can't stand	37	0
SUM	798	159

Ratio *Fox News : MSNBC = 5,02*

Further analysis revealed that "hate" was most frequently used in conjunction with "(Donald) Trump" (n = 99) and in combination with the pronouns "I" (n = 128) and "they" (n = 101). This

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[1] For full list of transcripts, coded segments and access to the analyzed dataset, please contact authors.

latter combination was also were the starkest difference between the two channels emerged: only 5 instances of this phrase were found in the MSNBC data, compared to Fox News' 101 (= 1:20).

1 Word before			1 Word after	
I	128	**HATE**	Trump	81
they	101	**HATE**	to	58
the	41	**HATE**	the	49
you	30	**HATE**	that	26
to	22	**HATE**	you	24
who	18	**HATE**	him	21
and	11	**HATE**	crime	19
we	11	**HATE**	Donald	18

Table 2: Keyword-in-context analysis for first word occurring before and after "hate."

Based on these initial findings, we decided to broaden the scope of our analysis. To do so, we drew on data provided via the Internet Archive's Television News Archive (https://archive.org/details/tv) which we queried via the GDELT Project's Television Explorer (https://blog.gdeltproject.org/the-new-television-explorer-launches/). Doing so allowed us to include CNN as an additional comparative value. It also enabled us to search for the specific keyword combination "they hate" in a corpus of data going back until mid-2009.

The resulting timeline clearly shows clear differences between Fox News on the one hand, and MSBC and CNN on the other. It also indicates that the channel's usage of "they hate" increased over time with a clear spike and upward trend beginning around 2016.
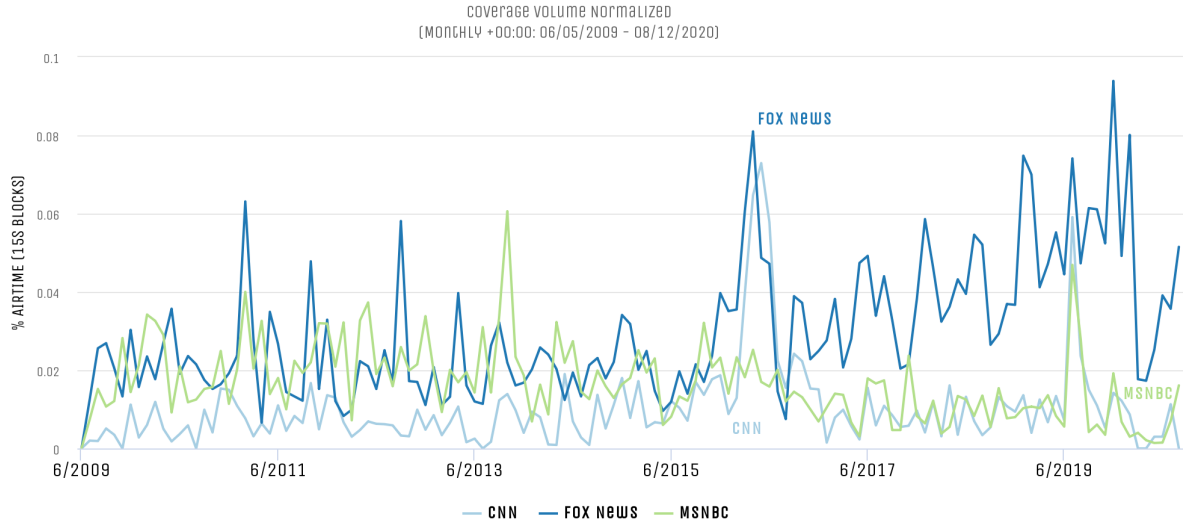
Coverage Volume Normalized
(Monthly +00:00: 06/05/2009 – 08/12/2020)

Data Source: Internet Archive Television News Archive
Human Summary: *"they hate" AND (Station:CNN OR Station:FOXNEWS OR Station:MSNBC)*
https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tv/tv?format=html&timespan=FULL&last24=yes&query=%22they%20hate%22%20(station:CNN%20OR%20station:FOXNEWS%20OR%20station:MSNBC%20)%20&mode=timelinevol&timezoom=yes

When we split the data into two separate time blocks, the differences become even more pronounced and point to a stark difference not just between the channels but also between Fox News up to 2016 and Fox News as of January 1, 2017 and up to today.


"They hate" per channel / timeblock
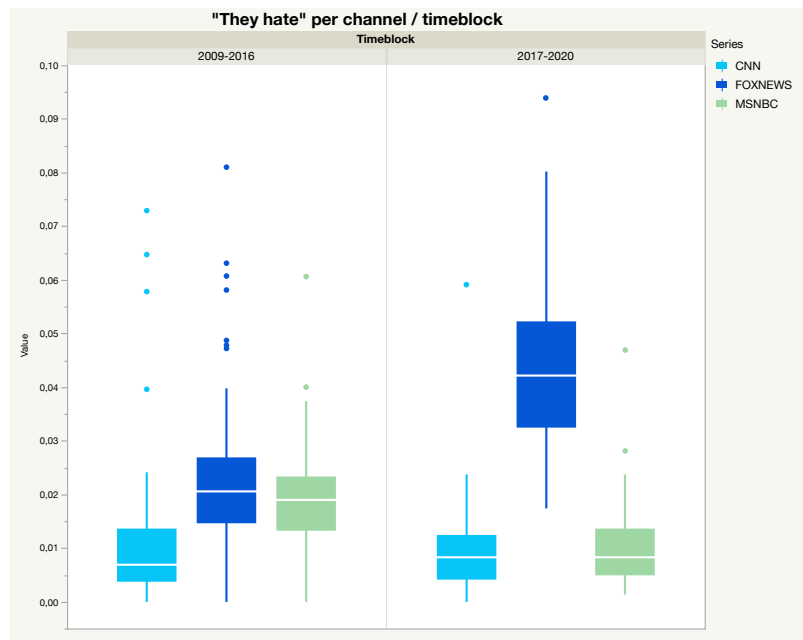
Channel	Statistics	06/09-16	17-08/20	6/09-8/20
CNN	N	273	132	405
	Sum	0,96	0,4139	1,3739
	Median	0,0069	0,0082	0,0072
	Mean	0,010549	0,009407	0,010177
FOXNEWS	Sum	2,1281	1,9327	4,0608
	Median	0,0205	0,0422	0,0249

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	Mean	**0,023386**	**0,043925**	**0,03008**
MSNBC	Sum	1,7948	0,4621	2,2569
	Median	0,019	0,0083	0,0154
	Mean	0,019723	0,010502	0,016718
All	Sum	4,8829	2,8087	7,6916
	Median	0,0157	0,0133	0,0152
	Mean	0,017886	0,021278	0,018992

Table 3: Occurrences of "they hate" per cable news channel and timeblock. (Based on data provided via the Internet Archive's Television News Archive).

Our results go back to 2009 to show how usage of the phrase "they hate" in particular has increased dramatically on Fox News during the Trump presidency. On the level of shows, the results also indicate that the phrase was significantly more likely to be featured on the most fiercely partisan Fox News programming, namely *Hannity* and *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, than other cable television shows.
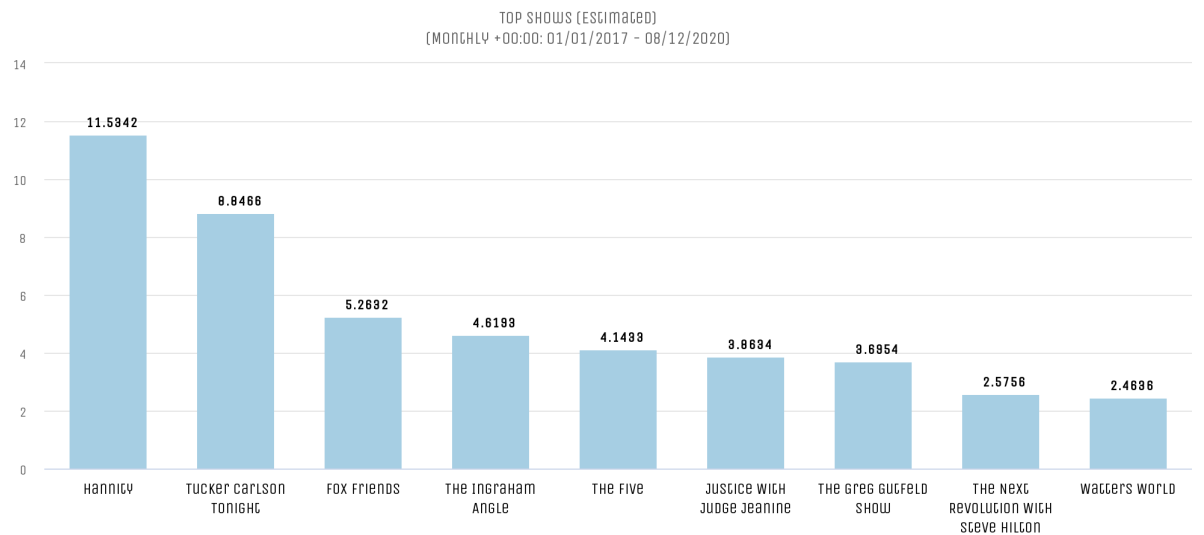
TOP SHOWS (ESTIMATED)
(MONTHLY +00:00: 01/01/2017 – 08/12/2020)

Data Source: Internet Archive Television News Archive
Human Summary: *"they hate" AND (Station:CNN OR Station:FOXNEWS OR Station:MSNBC) AND PublicationDate>=1/1/2017*
https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tv/tv?format=html&startdatetime=20170101000000&last24=yes&query=%22they%20hate%22%20(station:CNN%20OR%20station:FOXNEWS%20OR%20station:MSNBC%20)%20&mode=showchart

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Station Chart
(Monthly +00:00: 01/01/2017 - 08/12/2020)

GDELT PROJECT + INTERNET ARCHIVE (VIZ: GDELT + HIGHCHARTS)

Data Source: Internet Archive Television News Archive
Human Summary: *(dislike OR despise OR "can't stand") AND (Station:CNN OR Station:FOXNEWS OR Station:MSNBC) AND PublicationDate>=1/1/2017*
https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tv/tv?format=html&startdatetime=20170101000000&last24=yes&query=(dislike%20OR%20despise%20OR%20%22can%27t%20stand%22)%20(station:CNN%20OR%20station:FOXNEWS%20OR%20station:MSNBC%20)%20&mode=stationchart

Based on these findings, we believe that the phrase "they hate" can serve as an operationalizable indicator for larger rhetorical patterns which might be found in these programs. In order to learn more about the specific contexts in which the phrase was used, we went back to our initial sample of Fox News transcripts, in order to conduct a more in-depth text analysis. To learn more about how Fox uses the phrase, we constructed a simple coding scheme to identify *subjects*, *objects*, and *causes* connected with "they hate."

Subjects: *Who* are "they"?

Who are "they"?	Sum	%
"Democrats"	24	29%
Various non-specific groups (e.g. "political elites," "talking heads," "these people.")	20	24%
"The media"	14	17%
Specific media outlets	10	12%
Specific individuals	7	8%
"Liberals" / "the left"	5	6%
Other	4	5%

• The liberals; • the left; • Adam Schiff; • Democrats with no principles; • people who can't accept the fact that he won; • Democrats; • Chris Matthews, Richard Engel, Andrea Mitchell; • living rooms across America; • These people; • the people who hate him more than they hate the coronavirus; • these people on stage of this Democrat debate; • mainstream media and especially CNN; • Washington Democrats; • journalists; • the media; • Jennifer Rubin, the never-Trumper, and others; • a lot of the people who really dislike Donald Trump; • group of Democrats; • talking heads; • Whoopi Goldberg; • Rachel Maddow; • Adam Schiff; • political elites; • the media class; • left-wing lawyers; • the media mob; • The Times; • Democrats; • Iranians; • Hollywood; • Democrats in the media; • the mob; • the media; • the Democratic Party; • Democrats; • Washington Democrats; • the media; • the establishment elite class in D.C., New York, L.A., San Francisco; • CNN; • the old civil libertarians; • The Democrats; • Today's Democratic Party; • Don Lemon; • Democrats; • Democrats; • Democratic Party; • the radical Democratic Party; • state run media mob; • Democrats; • New York Times; • commentators and columnists and correspondence; • the mainstream liberal media; • Democrats; • The mob; • the media; • The New York Times; • NPR stations; • The mob; • the media; • vox.com; • the Dems; • Our law enforcement; • the media; • Democrats; • The Democratic primary

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viewers; • Prosecutors; • Americans; • Virginia Democrats; • corrupt people in the D.O.J. and in the F.B.I.; • Democrats; • a very tiny percentage of MSNBC hosts; • the Democratic establishment; • Democratic campaign for 2020; • the left; • CNN; • the oblivious media; • Democratic Party; • the media; • the woke left; • the whole Democratic establishment; • the liberals; • The New York Times; • The New York Times; • Wall Street executives

Fox links most of these subjects ("they") together. Terms such as media, the left, Democrats and political elites are often used interchangeably, portraying these actors as unified in hatred of Fox audiences, their views and their representatives.

Objects: W*hom* or *what* do they hate?

Whom or what do "they hate"?	Sum	%
The president; Trump	34	36%
You; me; us; the people	14	15%
Various non-specific groups (e.g. "Walmart shoppers," "the Heartland," "Christians.")	14	15%
Specific individuals	13	14%
General political / partisan aspects	11	12%
Specific policies / things	4	4%
Other	4	4%

•Donald Trump; •Mitt Romney; •the speech; •the idea of this President winning; •the idea of losing another election; •that Trump actually gets to choose the foreign policy and dictate foreign policy for the United States; •the President; •the politics at these award shows; •his tariffs; •president; •the American tradition; •the President; •the fact that we're winning,; •Donald Trump; •he's really good at it; •his supporters; •Donald Trump more than they love America; •his guts; •Anyone in Donald Trump's orbit; •Donald Trump; •president; •Donald Trump; •everyone who supports him; •Trump; •the president; •America; •Israel; •Donald Trump; •we the people; •Donald Trump; •the fact that he's president; •the fact that the country is doing well; •the president; •the fact that we're winning; •the presiden; •us smelly Walmart Trump supporter; •Donald Trump; •the American people who voted for him; •Roger Stone; •this president; •they also hate you, they hate me, they hate your viewers; •Donald Trump; •President Trump; •smelly, Walmart shoppers; •Trump; •Trump; •2016 election; •Donald Trump; •this show; •the president; •you; •me; •the viewers; •everything about us; •all things Trump; •all things conservative; •Sean Hannity; •Donald Trump; •the president; •Donald Trump; •Trump supporters; •you; •me; •a lot of us here on FOX; •Rush; •Mark Levin; •others; •Donald Trump; •Donald Trump; •me; •you; •sanctuary cities; •that Lincoln was a Republican; •when these people attack each other; •Roger Stone; •the media; •gun owners; •Michael Flynn; •the President; •Tulsi Gabbard; •Tulsi Gabbard; •Trump; •Trump; •guns; •Bernie Sanders; •Donald Trump; •Bernie Sanders; •Bernie Sanders; •the Heartland; •Bernie; •the people who live there; •Christians; •Christians; •Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid

While Donald Trump was the single most named individual, the second largest object category where instances in which speakers addressed their audiences directly or referred to themselves and as part of the same in-group.

An illustrative example stems from U.S. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, saying on Hannity (February 13): "Democrats…. don't just hate the president, they hate you, they hate me, they hate the viewers. They hate everything about us."

Causes: *Why* (i.e. what reasons are offered)?

- no principles
- can't accept the fact that he won
- They can't stand what he's done
- They want the seventh floor, the second floor or whatever floor the State Department to determine it
- because he actually likes -- he likes us

- because I had the gall to stand up for the Constitution on behalf of a president
- because we voted for the person
- because he doesn't need them
- They think you're a bunch of rubs because you didn't listen to the media
- Stone made fun of the ruling class.
- when Michael Flynn got up and testified, he said, al Qaeda is not on the run.
- for the crime of opposing wars in countries that are not in our national interest.
- They are for punishing people who don't vote for them
- Sanders talks mostly about economics rather than Putin and non-binary bathrooms
- because they didn't vote for him

What was most striking about this analytical category, was how seldom it was applied. In total, we only found 13 instances in which an explicit reason for *why* "they hate" was offered. This included unspecific claims such as "they can't accept the fact that he won" or "because we voted for the person."

While one might reasonably expect claims about someone hating someone or something to be followed by an explanation for why this would be the case, the research findings suggest that instead, the claim serves as a causal heuristic in itself, meaning that is offered as an explanation rather than an explanandum / something that is to be explained.

A keyword-in-context analysis for "they hate" with 15 words before and after revealed that out of 25 hits in total, the term "because" appears 17 times (68 %) before and 8 (32 %) times after "they hate." In other words: It's mostly "because they hate…" not "they hate because…"

In looking at who the speakers are that are making these claims, our data also show that hosts like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson are more likely than others to use the term. Nevertheless, in total this was a phenomenon that was not confined to any particular show or individual speaker. A total of 34 unique individuals using the phrase could be identified within the transcripts we analyzed. 57 % of all coded instances where attributed to Fox News hosts, leaving 43 % to various guests, analysts or outside voices.

SPEAKERS USING "THEY HATE"

■ FOX HOST ■ OTHER

43% 57%
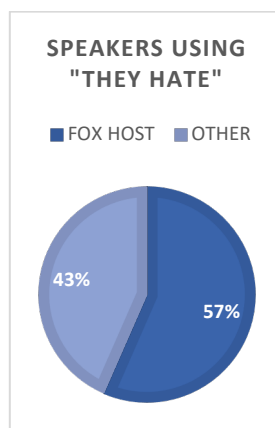
Conclusion

Using "they hate" in the way outlined above serves to dismiss potentially valid criticism of Republican policies and personnel as being driven by irrational hatred. The "the hate"

heuristic might therefore help explain (Rand et al., 2014) why so many Republicans resist corrections of Trump's false assertions (Walker and Gottfried, 2019). As our data shows, intensely partisan hosts like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson are more likely than others to use the phrase. Nevertheless, it appeared throughout evening programming, uttered by hosts, interviewees and Republican sources, all using the same heuristic to paint Trump critics as literally unbelievable enemies making bad-faith assertions.

Fox News constructs two dueling imagined communities(Warner and Villamil, 2017) for their audiences: "Us," a community arising in part from the common, irrational hatred directed at them by the nefarious "Other" community: Democrats, liberals, the left and mainstream media, the "elite" that is ruining the country (Bahador et al., 2019). Repeatedly telling Fox viewers they are bound together as objects of contempt from large, powerful groups of fellow Americans likely fosters an in-group mentality (Happer and Philo, 2013) as it deepens feelings of antipathy towards the hateful out-groups (Pew Research Center, 2016). Fox personalities and guests appear to use this roundabout way of rousing viewers' emotional involvement, constantly reinforcing a commonsense view of good folks under siege. Fox may be boosting its ratings (Lahut, 2020) at the cost of undermining American social capital (Gopnik, 2020) (trust among fellow citizens)—just when democratic legitimacy and values (Durante et al., 2020) are under particular stress, and state institutions confront crises like Covid-19 (Bartscher et al., 2020).

More research is needed on how diverging news diets (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) might be asymmetrically instilling a belief (Flynn et al., 2017) that the Other side hates Us and how this fits into the larger picture (Yudkin et al., 2019) of heightened polarization (Barber and McCarthy, 2015), negative partisan affect (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016), and policy paralysis (Werner, 2020) affecting the US.

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