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Framing Dr. Fauci:
The Portrayal of Dr. Anthony Fauci by Fox News and CNN
in the Early COVID-19 Lockdown

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HNRS 350: Portrayal of Science and the Scientist in Popular Culture

Sheila Webb

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Introduction

COVID-19 caused the severe acute respiratory coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that emerged in December 2019 (Center for Disease Control, 2022). When COVID-19 became prevalent in early 2020 in the United States, the media played a large role in communication about the pandemic, whether it was transmitting updates about the spread of the virus, posting alerts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), or sharing medical research on COVID-19 (Grasso, 2021). As the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci became a leading figure in informing the public about the virus. He was featured regularly on news sites, where many looked to him for updates and solutions. However, media politicization of COVID-19 became more apparent as American citizens disagreed on restrictions and opinions were split along partisan lines (Hart, Chinn, & Soroka, 2020). Media portrayals can influence people's opinions (Dunwoody & Kohl, 2017), and during the initial period of high uncertainty following the first COVID-19 cases, a negative portrayal of Dr. Fauci's messaging could sow doubt in him and have grave health consequences whereas a positive portrayal might indicate an enhanced understanding of the issues. This study looks at the framing of Dr. Fauci by Fox News and CNN during the first lockdown and shows how two popular mass media outlets at opposite poles of the political spectrum portrayed science and experts during the pandemic. Results revealed a very clear and polar opposite portrayal of both Dr. Fauci and COVID-19 by these two media outlets, indicating a necessity for further examination of partisan-driven coverage of scientific uncertainty and its influence on public attitudes and opinions.

Literature Review

Background on COVID-19

In December of 2019, a doctor in Wuhan noticed a group of patients exhibiting Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) -like symptoms and reported the information to the local World Health Organization (WHO). Scientists worked quickly to identify and publish the genome and on January 30, 2020, the outbreak was declared a public health emergency. The first case of local person-to-person spread was reported in mid-February 2020 in Wuhan, after which the crisis developed rapidly worldwide. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was the largest pandemic the world had experienced, it was not the first zoonosis from wildlife to impact human population. SARS is a virus that predominantly affects people who work closely with infected animals and health care workers. Although COVID-19 shares almost 80% of genetic sequences with a SARS outbreak in 2002, it had more widespread impact because COVID 19 spreads very quickly from person-person contact, a problem that was largely caused by asymptomatic carriers (Lango, 2021). Despite it being less virulent than SARS, this easy transmission of COVID-19 resulted in much greater health and social consequences. The COVID-19 virus infected over 33 million people in the United States from 2020 to 2021 (Irons & Raftery, 2021). Its impacts were far reaching, posing a threat to people's social lives as well as to their physical health. Quarantine restrictions trapped many in their homes and prevented large gatherings at places like school, church, and shopping centers. Information-sharing moved online, including things like health appointments and classes (Grasso, 2021).

Scientific Uncertainty and Portrayal of Scientists in Media

The presence of uncertainty is inevitable in science knowledge, and communication of scientific uncertainty can have an impact on attitudes towards science and scientists. This inherent uncertainty played a role in the coverage of COVID-19 because the CDC itself was

trying to figure out best practices. Media communicate scientific uncertainty using a number of different strategies, some of them targeting the credibility of researchers by including contradictory statements or epistemic arguments (Peters & Dunwoody, 2016). Gustafson and Rice conducted a study on the effects of the communications of scientific uncertainty in 2020 and found that uncertainty characterized by controversy or disagreement among experts was related to a decrease in the perceived credibility of the message. However, a strategy known as “weight-of-experts,” has been found to combat uncertainty among contested topics by highlighting the reliability of experts (Dunwoody & Kohl, 2017). This strategy involves presenting readers with multiple existing truth claims and then following up with information about where experts stand on the issues, steering readers towards valid conclusions. The weight-of-experts strategy has been found to be effective in influencing attitudes and beliefs (Dunwoody & Kohl, 2017). COVID-19 was a period of scientific uncertainty when many scientists were uncertain of next steps. This study examines media coverage of Dr. Fauci during the early period to see if either of these techniques was utilized (weight-of-experts, contradictory statements). This research also provides a background for the reason behind media using these strategies and their expected outcomes.

Frame Analysis

In 1993, Robert Entman described the creation of frames: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). Analysis of media framing can provide insights into how transmission of information can guide opinion. During the pandemic, news sources played an essential part in providing updates and health information. Frame analysis allows us to examine by these sources portrayed science and health officials.

Studies of media coverage during health crises using frame analysis are instructive. Pan and Meng (2009) used news frames to analyze coverage of the swine flu outbreak of 2009. Through the lens of a crisis management approach, their goal was to look at how news media function in the management of a pandemic. Pan and Meng identified the frames of health risk, societal problems, political/legal issues, prevention/health education. The health risk frame focused on transmission and prevalence of the epidemic, while the prevention/health frame was leveraged in stories to educate the public and provide health warnings. Pan and Meng found that the medical/scientific frame that highlights medical treatment and scientific research were utilized after the outbreak (2009).

Bolsen, Palm, and Kingsland (2020) examined the impact of exposure to framed messages about the origins of COVID-19. They tested two sets of opposite frames: whether the disease was zoonotic or human engineered, and the impacts of origin beliefs on the desire to either penalize China or support increased funding for research. They found the effects of one-sided framing to be significant. When only one strong frame was presented, it was capable of influencing individuals' beliefs about the origins of COVID-19. However, when two strong competing frames were present, they canceled each other out and reduced influence on people's beliefs about where the virus came from (Bolsen, et al., 2020). Their findings emphasize the power of framing in a real-life context and the influence media can exert over people's opinions. Xu, Yu, and Löffelholz (2020) conducted a frame analysis of texts and visuals posted on Twitter by two German newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the frames included in their study were: updated information, preventive information, medical research, social impacts, economic impact, diplomatic context, and combating misinformation. Although my study focused on textual frames and not visuals, I adopted several of their study's frames.

Method

RQ1: How did Fox News and CNN frame COVID-19?

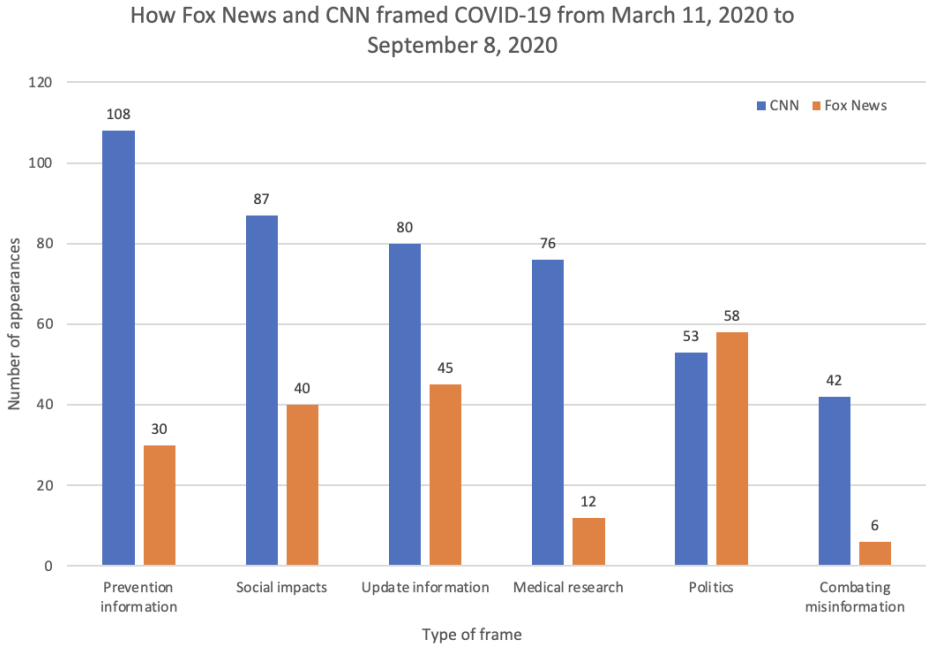
RQ2: How did Fox News and CNN characterize Dr. Fauci as a reliable or unreliable source?

This study examined a series of 75 randomly selected articles from Fox News from March 11, 2020, to September 8, 2020, and 150 articles from CNN from the same time period. These two media organizations were selected because they represent two opposite political poles of the most popular media outlets in the US. Using the keywords “Dr. Fauci” and “Covid,” the search revealed over 300 stories for Fox and 600 for CNN. I analyzed every fourth one for each. Articles under the tabs of “politics,” “health,” and “media” were examined; the opinion and sports categories were not included. The time period analyzed marked the beginning of the first countrywide lockdown restrictions in the US to when COVID-19 cases began to decline for the first time. I choose the March 11, 2020, lockdowns as the beginning of the timeline because they had a widespread effect on the lives of US citizens. On September 8, 2020, the US had a break in the increasing case numbers, signifying that the restriction efforts were having an effect. I wanted to examine the transition from initial reactions to the urgency of the virus to the period when US citizens had had time to adjust to the lockdown during a time of scientific uncertainty.

Coding of the data involved a pre-set list of media frames that were mostly derived from the work of Xu, Yu, and Löffelholz, which consisted of: updated information, preventive information, medical research, social impacts, economic impact, diplomatic context, and combating misinformation. The political frame was added during the process of analysis to answer the RQs more effectively. The six frames of this study are: update information, preventative information, medical research, social impacts, combating misinformation, and politics. I noted which frames appeared in each article examined, and articles containing multiple same-category frames were double coded. For example, three appearances of political frames in an article would be coded as one political frame. The frames are characterized below:

Frame	Definition
Update information	Providing updates about COVID-19 (case spread, number of deaths, etc.)
Preventative information	Information about masking, vaccines, social distancing, and other preventative measures
Medical research	Research concerning COVID-19 conducted by scientists or medical professionals
Social impacts	Impacts of COVID-19 as pertaining to daily life and society
Combating misinformation	Addressing misinformation such as the ineffectiveness of vaccines and providing accurate information
Politics	Mentions of political issues (controversies regarding COVID-19, politicians weighing in)

Findings for RQ 1: How did Fox News and CNN frame COVID-19?



For Fox News, the political frame had the most appearances in the coded articles at 58, and update information followed with 45. Social impact frames were found 40 times, and prevention information frames were found 30 times. Medical research and combating misinformation frames were found the least, with 12 and 6 appearances, respectively. There was a noticeable lack of medical research and scientific information in the Fox articles. The social

impacts frame and political frame combination appeared much more frequently, with politicians referencing social impacts of COVID-19 and preventative measures such as limiting gatherings or wearing masks. The update information frame also appeared consistently, with information about number of COVID-19-related cases or deaths. I noticed a trending shift of focus from update, health, and preventative frames, which appeared in a higher concentration in articles written during the first two months of lockdown (March and April), to political frames, which appeared more frequently in articles written after these months.

The most common frame found in the CNN articles was prevention information, which appeared 108 times. The second and third most common frames found were social impacts and update information, found 87 and 80 times, respectively. Medical research frames followed with 76 appearances. Politics was the second least common frame, with 53 appearances, and the combating information frame was found the least, with 42 frames. The majority of CNN coverage focused on providing new updates on the pandemic (case numbers, testing developments) as well as prevention and health recommendations for the public to protect themselves and others from getting sick. Political and combating misinformation frames appeared together in many articles, with politicians being criticized for spreading inaccurate information and CNN providing accurate information through quotes from scientists. All frames had consistent frequencies of appearances throughout the limited time period.

RQ1 Discussion and Comparison

The scientific uncertainty of COVID-19 impacted the way news outlets approached its characterization, and Fox News and CNN framed COVID-19 in very different ways. Fox framed COVID-19 as the subject of a political fight, shifting focus from the health implications of the virus to the social and political issues of preventative measures like the discontinuation of large gatherings or bodily autonomy in regards to mask wearing. Many articles cited inconsistency

from health officials and included comments from politicians criticizing them. One article included comments from Sen. Rand Paul, who spoke out against continued COVID-19 lockdowns, saying, “The one thing that will get our economy growing again is reopening American commerce” (Fox News, April 23, 2020). A main focus of Fox News’s coverage of COVID-19 seemed to be highlighting controversy, as opposed to relaying health information. On the opposite side, CNN characterized COVID-19 as health emergency. Almost every article included information about the importance of prevention and health precautions, and the urgency of the pandemic was stressed heavily. Medical research frames were used to provide evidence for guidelines. CDC recommendations were also mentioned frequently and CNN did not publish any quotes or information that contradicted the CDC. CNN also took a more proactive approach to combating misinformation than did Fox. A CNN article from March 24, 2020, detailed the dangers of using the drug hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19. The article pointed out misinformation that was being spread about the drug, most notably former President Trump’s comment: “We know if things don’t go as planned, it’s not going to kill anybody” (CNN, March 24, 2020). The article went on to explain the medical research behind hydroxychloroquine, stressing that further research must be done to ensure safety. Fox News did not prioritize combating misinformation and included little medical research in their presentation of COVID-19. Fox News also had more appearances of political frames than CNN despite having a smaller sample size. It was clear that Fox framed COVID-19 as a partisan political battle, and CNN framed it as an urgent health issue.

Findings for RQ2: How did Fox News and CNN characterize Dr. Fauci?

On March 25, 2020, in the weeks following lockdown, Fox noted that Dr. Fauci was “the face of the pandemic” and “the nation’s top expert on infectious diseases” (Fox News, March 25, 2020). Almost every article written after this date had a direct quote from Dr. Fauci, and a

number of these quotes were about Dr. Fauci's praise for different politicians, especially former President Trump. In these cases, Dr. Fauci is characterized as being reliable (longer, more detailed quotes from Dr. Fauci, commenters agreeing with him). The much smaller number of articles which characterized Dr. Fauci as reliable focused on informational quotes from Dr. Fauci about only health-related information and excluded the political frame. Most of the articles included comments from miscellaneous talk show hosts, politicians, and advocates who had no expertise in the health sciences but whose comments undermined Dr. Fauci's reliability. One example is found in an article from July 31, 2020, where Rep. Jim Jordan argues with Dr. Fauci about Dr. Fauci's recommendations on limiting gatherings. After Dr. Fauci states that he recommends avoiding crowds of any kind, Rep. Jordan responds, "Government's stopping people from going to church, Dr. Fauci. Last week... five liberals on the Supreme Court said it was OK for Nevada to limit church services... Is there a world where the Constitution says you can favor one First Amendment liberty, protesting, over another, practicing your faith?" (Fox, July 31, 2020). Many of the articles that characterized Dr. Fauci as unreliable were similar to the example with Rep. Jordan, with Dr. Fauci cautioning about preventative measures and commenters criticizing him and referencing social impacts of the measures.

CNN cited Dr. Fauci as "one of the most visible faces on the administration's [COVID-19] task force" in an article on March 19, 2020. CNN's views of Dr. Fauci's expertise is demonstrated by his frequent, substantial appearances in CNN articles. CNN's characterization of Dr. Fauci was consistently positive, with many articles including comments and recommendations solely from him. CNN utilized the weight-of-experts strategy (Dunwoody & Kohl, 2017) in communicating the uncertainties of COVID-19 by presenting conflicting or changing information first and then including comments from Dr. Fauci about his thoughts on the matter. When articles address contentious matters, Dr. Fauci's opinion is included, indicating his reliability as an expert source.

One example of this occurred in an article about restricting air travel in the US. The article noted that the decision to suspend domestic air travel is under disagreement, but included a comment from a White House official who said, “Dr. Fauci is still pushing for it, maybe he’s right” (CNN, March 19, 2020). The article listed evidence in support of Dr. Fauci’s recommendation.

RQ2 Comparison and Discussion

Peters and Dunwoody (2016) noted that different strategies are adopted by media in order to communicate scientific uncertainty. CNN and Fox News used two different strategies to frame Dr. Fauci that resulted from the uncertainty of COVID-19. While both news outlets recognized Dr. Fauci’s prominence as an expert, Fox News used Dr. Fauci as a scapegoat for uncertainty regarding COVID-19, picking holes in his arguments and criticizing his recommendations. The strategy utilized by Fox to portray that Dr. Fauci communicates uncertainty by undermining the credibility of him as a scientist. CNN took an opposite approach and used the strategy known as weight-of-experts, which highlights the reliability of experts and uses their comments to navigate uncertainty. CNN portrayed Dr. Fauci as extremely reliable, consistently turning to his opinion when things were uncertain and using his name to lend credibility to other people or ideas.

Conclusion

Media communicate scientific uncertainty in different ways. It is important to examine the representation of science and science experts in mass media as it can influence thoughts and opinions, especially during emergencies like the pandemic where proper health communication is vital. Fox News framed COVID-19 as a political controversy, shifting focus from health and prevention to disagreements between scientists and politicians. Instead of providing direct prevention recommendations, Fox News highlighted frustration and conflict. Fox News characterized Dr. Fauci as an unreliable expert by including comments and opinions that contradicted his recommendations, as well as criticizing his motives. CNN took a different

approach, underscoring the urgency and importance of health and prevention of COVID-19 in almost every article. CNN also characterized Dr. Fauci as a reliable source, using his name to lend credibility to COVID-19 updates and guidelines and including many long, detailed comments from him. These findings have implications for the future of science coverage. First is the potential negative impact and risk of news outlets that express distrust and frustration towards science and experts during times of uncertainty. Second is the possible consequences of having such polar opposite representations of a universal health emergency. Partisanship was a driving force behind the differences in Fox News and CNN coverage, and both these outlets have very different audiences. Fox News viewership consists of older, conservative-leaning individuals, while most CNN viewers tend to be younger and liberal (Pew Research Center, 2019). These audiences are siloed, and this could mean that different audiences receive conflicting information in a time of crisis where misinformation could be deadly. Considering the prevalence of mass media and the fact that these two outlets are leading in popularity in the US, further research could examine how these conflicting representations influence public attitudes and opinions.

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