

AMERICAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE JANUARY 6, 2021
EVENTS AT THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL:
A GLIMPSE INTO THE POLARISATION OF
THE UNITED STATES NEWS MEDIA

Witold Ostafiński

 orcid.org/0000-0002-1366-9024

Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Techniczno-Ekonomiczna w Jarosławiu

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the extreme political polarization of the United States news media through the lens of the reporting on the January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection. Through a close reading of news articles reporting on this event from both liberal and conservative news sources, this paper argues that the insurrection was both the product of this media polarization, as well as an event which precipitated further polarization of these media sources. The results of this research demonstrate that there is indeed a major discrepancy in media coverage of this event between the two disparate sources of news. Overall, this paper demonstrates that the January 6, 2021 events provide a cognitive means by which one can best ascertain the long-standing ideological polarization of the American news media sources.

Keywords: political polarization, the United States, news media, Capitol insurrection, news sources, media polarization

Introduction

The January 6, 2021 insurrection at the American Capitol building was one of the more jarring political events in recent United States history. The media coverage of this event was swift and quickly divided into both “left” and “right” political camps, with the former claiming that this event was no less than an effort on the part of former United States President Donald J. Trump to overthrow the democratic government and install his own form of right-wing populist fascism, and the latter claiming it was little more than random mayhem, or even a form of legitimate

political discourse. The media coverage surrounding this event in the last 20 months has been similarly polarized, and it is highly representative of the extreme political polarisation of the American media that has been extant within the United States in the last two to three decades. Through a close reading of both left and right wing news media from this nation since this event, this paper will argue that the January 6, 2021 Capitol event is both the culmination of this media polarization, as well as a cause of further division.

January 6, 2021 Capitol Events

In the United States capital city of Washington D.C., the morning of January 6, 2021, a sunny yet frosty in the midst of winter, started off rather normal. The major event planned for that day was the ceremonial tabulation of the presidential votes of the November 2020 election by Congress, upon which time the Vice President, Mike Pence, would formally certify the account and announce the victory of Joseph Biden. By all means, this formal certification was merely a legislative formality and a political ceremony. Electronic voting technology had already determined that Biden won the Electoral College vote hands down, and this was a matter that had been re-confirmed repeatedly in the last few weeks, as President Trump hotly contested the outcomes in the states which he had lost and demanded that the votes be recounted. Normally, the presidential election certification is a very dull process, and very few members of the general public turn out for the event, and only the most hardcore political junkies tune into the process on cable television.

As such, the first indicator that things were not quite right were the masses of people gathering around the Capitol building shortly after noon, many holding “Trump 2020” and “Stop the Steal” signs, and acting in a rather belligerent manner. Supposedly, these citizens were simply in D.C. to listen to a public speech given by Trump by the Capitol building, in which he continued the claim that the only reason he lost the presidential election was due to the presidential election being “rigged” and claiming that the presidency had been stolen from him. Perhaps most audaciously, Trump called upon Vice President Mike Pence to refuse to certify the election results. As Trump continued to bellow from his platform the numbers of the crowd multiplied in their ranks and they grew increasingly bellicose. Seemingly out of nowhere, hundreds or thousands of angry Trump supporters marched into the Capitol building, apparently hell bent on ensuring that Congress did not certify Biden as the next United States president.

Over the course of approximately three hours, these mobs vandalized the Capitol building, physically attacked police officers, and stole items from the building. Astoundingly, even though what all of these individuals were doing was considered a federal criminal offence, many of them happily spoke with shocked reporters who were covering the event, allowing for their picture to be taken, and providing their full names, ages and city of residence. Once the crowds were finally placed under control and driven out of the area, the Capitol building was destroyed in many

areas, several people were deceased (with many more having to be rushed to the hospital for their injuries), and the United States was in a collective state of shock.

While live televised news coverage of the Capitol events began almost immediately after the violence began, the most that viewers could see in real-time were bits and snippets of the riot. However, as the nightly news reports began to air, the scope of the Capitol events came into full relief. It quickly dawned on many viewers that the people who stormed the Capitol sincerely believed that they could overturn the election results by threatening the United States Congress with bodily violence. Moreover, the banality of many of the rioters was shocking; law enforcement agencies began to broadcast video footage of multiple individuals whom they wanted to identify for further questioning and/or arrest. Most of these people appeared to be over the age of 30, relatively “normal” looking and certainly did not appear to be major criminals or political extremists. The American and increasingly global public was stunned by this event; clearly, a major criminal, and possibly terroristic, the act had taken place at the United States Capitol. Or, was it simply a legitimate act of political discourse?

Analysis

A review of some of the major headlines in United States media outlets on January 7, 2021 covering the event reveals a wide spectrum of conjecture regarding the nature of what had taken place at the United States Capitol the day prior. The front pages of the *New York Times*, an avowedly liberal media organization declared: “A Mob and the Breach of Democracy: The Violent End of the Trump Era” (Baker 2021), and “A Democratic Triumph in Georgia: Overshadowed by Right Wing Violence in Washington” (Herndon and Rojas 2021). The similarly left-leaning *Washington Post* announced: “After inciting mob attack, Trump retreats in rage. Then, grudgingly, he admits his loss” (Rucker et al. 2021). As for the major headline concerning this event in the right-wing media outlet, *Fox News*, its front page merely stated: “Biden says Capitol was stormed by ‘riotous mob,’ ‘domestic terrorists’” (Steinhauser 2021). Less than 24 hours following the conclusion of the Capitol events, the left and right-wing media were already disagreeing with each other regarding the severity of the events that had taken place. For those outlets on the left end of the political spectrum, the event represented no less than a *de facto* insurrection, and an attempt on the part of Trump and his supporters to violently usurp the democratic process. On the other hand, the right wing media came close to brushing this event off as a mere political protest and painted Biden and other liberal politicians as being hysterical and trying to interfere with the freedom of speech and assembly guaranteed to the American people, regardless of their political affiliation.

The fact that the perceptions of these two sides of the American media were so divided when it came to such a dramatic event came as little surprise to both media scholars and lay observers of the United States press. In the last two to three decades, the American press has grown increasingly polarized and politicized, a trend

that began with the official launch of the highly conservative Fox News network in 1996. As the American public began to observe that this particular network was incredibly strident in its promotion of Republicanism and right-wing ideologies, many of the more established news media outlets in the country, notably the *New York Times*, CNN, and MSNBC began to grow more noticeably liberal in the slant of their reporting.

To be sure, there are many scholars who might argue that the apparent political polarization of the American news media is simply reflective of an overall cultural and social trend towards political division within the United States. Pundits and scholars have long observed that there are significant regional and cultural differences between the highly populated coastal regions and the interior of the United States, which has often derisively been referred to as “flyover country” (an insult which insinuates that the only encounter many Americans from the West or East Coasts ever have with the southeast and the Midwest is to fly over these regions en route to the opposite coast, as no “civilized” American would ever want to take a vacation to any of these cities). Indeed, there have been sharp ideological divisions between these areas in the United States since the beginning of the nation; however, it is also quite apparent that they did not emerge so strongly until the advent of Fox News in 1996.

Further, many of these ideological divides within the United States have become even more sharply exacerbated since the advent of the Internet, and the emergence of online news sources and the proliferation of social media websites. As Wilson et al. (2020) argue: „American media has seen a proliferation of increasingly partisan news media including a widening array of online news sources of varying dubiousness. Whereas news in an earlier era was biased toward neutrality and inoffensiveness to capture the largest audience share, in the current high choice media environment the bias is toward standing out amongst a sea of options, which in itself may push for greater polarization. Of particular theoretical interest is the media model described as the ‘outrage industry,’ which selectively amplifies extreme incidents and depicts opponents in an optimally unflattering light. For example, cherry picked instances of campus progressives behaving illiberally (e.g. deplatformings) are shared with disproportionate frequency in right wing media bemoaning liberal ‘snowflakes’ or ‘social justice warriors;’ left wing media in turn prioritizes coverage of the relatively rare but unquestionably egregious incidents of white nationalism and other overt bigotry, sometimes casting these acts as reflective of the entire conservative base. This selective reporting style may play a key role in exacerbating misconceptions about opponents and increasing polarization” (p. 225).

To be sure, when it comes to the events which took place at the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2021, these were broadcast for the entire world to view, and there is no doubt in most observers’ minds that the things which took place that day were objectively horrifying. Some of the more notorious images from that day include an older man parading through the halls of Congress waving a Confederate flag (a symbol of racism and neo-confederacy in the United States), a gallows that was labelled as being intended for the public execution of Mike Pence

should he refuse to block the presidency of Biden, and one of the insurrectionists, Ashley Babble, being shot dead by Capitol security as she tried to break into the Senate chambers. Moreover, footage emerged of police officers being bludgeoned over the head and beaten by rioters (with one of them dying a day later from his injuries), and it also emerged that the bathrooms in the Capitol building had been vandalized by rioters smearing their own fecal matter on the walls (McKee 2022). In short, it would have been extremely difficult for the right wing media to deny that what took place was an absolute travesty and a breakdown of civil order. Additionally, the left wing press did not have to engage in a great deal of “spin” in order to cast this day in an appallingly negative light. With that being stated, it is clear that there was a major divergence in the ways in which either side of the American media portrayed the January 6, 2021 event in the weeks and months following, as journalists were able to engage in deeper analysis, and various law enforcement and governmental agencies progressed in their investigations.

As the investigations and analyses regarding the events unfolded over the course of the upcoming months, much of the left wing press focused on three primary factors: the culpability of President Trump in instigating the uprising, the role that various right wing conspiracy theories (e.g., QAnon) played in persuading seemingly otherwise law abiding individuals to take part in such potentially seditious behavior, and the overwhelming “normalcy” of many of the people who were being slowly identified as playing a part in the riot and of even committing prosecutable crimes in the midst of the insurrection.

In examining some of the coverage that emerged in the *New York Times* concerning the event in the months following January 6, one of the more notable pieces is one that closely examined the profiles of individuals who had been arrested for their part in the insurrection as of early February 2021. In their February 4, 2021 article, “Arrested in Capitol Riot: Organized Militants and a Horde of Radicals,” Valentino-DeVries et al. write: “Although organized groups may have played an important role in the attack, most people identified so far were loosely affiliated. In part, this reflects the slower development of cases with conspiracy charges, but it is also consistent with patterns of radicalization on the far right in recent years.” In essence, Valentino-DeVries et al. (2021) forward the claim that, while some of the apprehended individuals were dedicated conservative activists and members of anti-government militias, many others were far more ordinary in their backgrounds, and many had no prior criminal record nor any apparent participation in organized militias or other political extremist groups (Bolsen, Shapiro 2018, p. 151).

Indeed, the only common theme that Valentino-DeVries et al. (2021) were able to identify among the currently (at the time) apprehended persons was that they were all unified by the shared belief that the 2020 United States presidential election had been rigged and that there was a Democratic conspiracy in Congress to “steal” the election away from Trump. To be sure, given the thorough nature in which the votes from that election were meticulously counted and re-counted, this belief seems to be quite irrational (Levy 2021). Valentino-DeVries et al. (2021) opine that this apparent “group psychosis” may have been an after-effect of the growth of online

conspiracy theories in the United States in the course of the COVID-19 lockdowns and its associated quarantines and shelter-in-place orders (Lazer et al. 2021). In essence, Americans who were temporarily laid off from employment and stuck in their homes often sat online all day and became involved in various social media groups (Lee 2021). Many of these online media groups revolved around anger over the shelter-in-place orders, and even expressed doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic was as severe as the government claimed it was, or even sowed scepticism that the virus existed at all (Soto-Vasquez 2021, p. 73). Upon entering these social media forums, group participants often became involved in a space that functioned as an ideological echo chamber and served to further radicalize people who may have only been slightly conservative prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but who were now completely isolated from co-workers, family members and friends who served as a form of a reality check (Blake 2021). As such, this was how much of the left wing media accounted for the rather odd fact that many of the participants in the United States Capitol insurrection were rather run of the mill, ordinary American citizens, and not hardcore criminals nor career political extremists (Munn 2021).

A review of the news stories from various right wing news outlets in the United States in the months immediately following the Capitol insurrection reveals something very striking: many of them simply proceeded with “business as usual,” and almost acted as though the riots never took place. A review of several of these outlets in this time period shows that the main sources of right wing media attention were a purported inability of President Biden to maintain proper security at the United States-Mexico border, along with a deep preoccupation with the “problematic” voting laws in the state of Georgia, which was one of the states whose election results Trump most hotly contested (Nelson 2021). As for other major topics in the conservative media at this time, there is almost no mention of the events on the far right online news site, *breitbart.com*, and one of the major headlines is that of a story detailing the fact that the Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer claiming that *Breitbart* is a news site that is specifically targeted only to white supremacists (Olson 2021). Perhaps the only right wing media outlet that even acknowledged the insurrection had ever even taken place by April 2021 was the One America News Network, who only stated that the entire event could be solely blamed on “right wing extremists” and “hooligans” and expressed severe doubt that Trump had anything remotely to do with its origins (Abrams 2021).

Indeed, if one were to solely rely on the coverage from right wing news media outlets just three months following the U.S. capitol insurrection, one could easily come away with the impression that it never even happened, or that it was a relatively minor incident that truly warranted no further attention (Wojcieszak et al. 2021). In the instance that this event was covered even briefly in the right wing news media at this point in time, it would be only to insist that the event was the doing of aberrant and lawless fringe elements of the party, or to subtly suggest that the riot was actually warranted (for instance, in continuing to insist that Biden did not actually win the state of Georgia, after all, and that the efforts of criminal investigators should be focused on the election commission in that state, not on Trump).

In other words, it is clear that the right wing media in the United States wanted to simply move forward beyond the January 6 riots, and treat this event as an unfortunate but anomalous occurrence.

Of course, the United States federal government did not perceive the events of January 6, 2021 to be a random, anomalous, and forgettable event, and it launched its Congressional hearings into the insurrection in spring of 2022. The primary goal of these hearings is to determine the criminal culpability of Trump and other key political figures in fomenting the insurrection, and so these hearings have largely taken center stage in the American news media on both sides of the political and ideological spectrum (Kubin & von Sikorski 2021, p. 202). As was the case with the immediate coverage and the fallout reporting related to the event, the discourse is similarly divergent, and an analysis of some of this coverage reveals even more political polarization within the American news media.

As for the coverage of these hearings on the liberal end of the news media spectrum in the United States, much of this coverage has focused on the enduring emotional and psychological trauma that the police officers and security guards at the event have endured in the past year, as well as the odd manner in which much of the Republican Party seems to have more or less forgiven Trump for any possible role in the insurrection, and even desires for him to run for the United States presidency once again in the 2024 presidential elections (Jakubik et al. 2022, p. 23). Additionally, the liberal-leaning news media has also focused on the shocking declaration of the Republican National Convention that the insurrection was nothing more than “legitimate political discourse.”

As Weisman and Epstein (2022), reporting for the *New York Times*, write: “The Republican Party on Friday officially declared the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol and events that led to it ‘legitimate political discourse,’ and rebuked two lawmakers in the party who have been the most outspoken in condemning the deadly riot and the role of Donald J. Trump in spreading the election lies behind it” (Weisman, Epstein 2022, n.p.). Indeed, this bold declaration on the part of the Republican National Convention in February 2022 was the natural outcome of the manner in which the American right (as evidenced through its various media apparatuses) simply wanted to minimize, rationalize, or completely downplay the events of January 6, 2021 (Tong et al. 2020, p. 771). It thus only made sense that they would use the American press to try to legitimize these acts right on the dawn of the Congressional hearings related to the insurrection. While the statement of the Republican National Convention was shocking on its face, it ultimately did not arouse much surprise on either end of the political spectrum, as even the most liberal corners of the United States news media had already grown inured to the Republicans’ outright denial of the severity of the attack.

In addition of focusing on the audacity of the Republican Party in their denial and minimization of these events, it has also been the case that the liberal media has focused strongly on the condemnatory testimony that has been provided by many of the star witnesses of these hearings, namely Cassidy Hutchinson, who worked as an intern on Capitol Hill and was present for many of the conversations

of key Republican figures. This particular witnesses' testimony was highly credible, as Ms. Hutchinson worked for a Republican politician, and she has been a registered Republican for her entire adult life. The liberal media seized on aspects of her testimony that portrayed Trump as an unhinged madman on the day of the insurrection, stating that he ordered the Secret Service to allow protesters through with firearms and other weapons, and also claiming that he tried to commandeer a car from a Secret Service agent so that he, personally, could join in on the storming of the United States Capitol.

As for the position of the right wing news media with regard to the Congressional hearings, this has largely taken two major directions (Frincu 2021, pp. 221–225). At present, there are numerous examples of right wing journalists seeking to actively discredit some of the explosive testimony given by Hutchinson and other witnesses. Conversely, many other outlets are working to deflect the public's attention away from these hearings by focusing on the high rates of inflation in the United States at this time, along with Biden's apparent inaction regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and to thus suggest that the Democratic Party orchestrated these hearings with the sole motivation of improving their own candidates' chances in the upcoming 2022 midterm elections. It is clear that the events of January 6, 2021 both illustrate the polarization of the United States news media, as well as the role that this event also played in the continuing polarization of American society in general (Jakubik et al. 2022).

In regards to official press releases that have been released by either party in relation to the January 6, 2021 event or its fallout, this discourse has been similarly divided among party lines. For instance, on March 15, 2022, the Republican National Committee (RNC) stated that it was suing Senator Pelosi's Committee as a result of that entity's decision to include several American corporate entities in their effort to prosecute the offending parties in this event (RNC 2022). On the other hand, the press releases of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) have focused on some of the more salacious aspects of the Congressional testimony concerning various facets of the event, stating:

The Republican Party has no shame. Donald Trump incited his supporters to storm the Capitol, attack police officers, smear feces on the wall, and try to overturn an election – in no world is that 'legitimate political discourse' (DNC 2022).

These direct press releases by both the RNC and DNC are further evidence that the United States is highly divided in terms of its official political discourse. The liberal media in the United States tends to regard "the other side" as being uneducated, delusional and highly reactionary. On the other hand, the conservative media within the United States regards liberals as being "overly sensitive," and as being too pre-occupied with matters that do not really impact the day-to-day lives of the average person, such as arguments over "pronouns," and whether or not minors should be allowed to seek transgender surgery, if that is their wish.

Conclusion

While the extreme polarization of the news media in the United States is a media phenomenon that has been evident for the last two to three decades, it has become especially pronounced in the year and a half following the storming of the United States Capitol (Boone et al. 2022). One major question that does emerge from this analysis is that of how much the media polarization itself contributed to this event, and in turn, how much the insurrection further polarized the American media. Indeed, the massive discrepancies between the reporting on this event between the two different sides of the political spectrum do not seem to bode well for the future.

In conclusion, the close reading of the disparate media coverage of the January 6, 2021 Capitol event demonstrates that there is a major ideological divide in the American media when it comes to cataclysmic political events such as this one. On one hand, the liberal news media in the United States are consistently reporting that the January 6, 2021 Capitol event represents a genuine attempt to overthrow American democracy and that criminal penalties should be leveraged against the instigators and perpetrators of this insurrection. On the other hand, the right wing news media in the United States continues to insist that this event was little more than civil mayhem and legitimate political discourse. Ultimately, the American news media reporting on this event reveals that there is currently a major political and ideological divide in the United States news media.

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STRESZCZENIE

Amerykańskie relacje medialne z wydarzeń na Kapitolu z 6 stycznia 2021 roku. Polaryzacja mediów informacyjnych w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie skrajnej polaryzacji politycznej mediów informacyjnych w Stanach Zjednoczonych przez pryzmat doniesień dotyczących szturm na Kapitolu 6 stycznia 2021 roku. Analiza tekstów prasowych, liberalnych i konserwatywnych źródeł informacyjnych donoszących o tym ataku pozwoliła pokazać, że szturm na Kapitol był zarówno produktem samej polaryzacji mediów, jak i wydarzeniem, które przyspieszyło dalszą polaryzację mediów. Uzyskane wyniki badań ujawniają, że istnieje poważna rozbieżność w zakresie relacjonowania tego samego wydarzenia przez różne media, bazujące na odmiennych źródłach informacji. Artykuł pokazuje, że wydarzenia z 6 stycznia 2021 roku dostarczają środków poznawczych, za pomocą których można zrozumieć trwającą od dawna polaryzację ideologiczną amerykańskich źródeł medialnych.

Słowa kluczowe: polaryzacja polityczna, Stany Zjednoczone, media informacyjne, szturm na Kapitol, źródła wiadomości, polaryzacja mediów

