

Perceptions of Partisanship in Local Television News

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William O'Brochta*

People turn to local media for information during crises such as the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). What factors impact media consumers' decisions about which local television news broadcast to watch? This study argues that media consumers infer the partisanship of local television affiliates — judging local Fox and NBC news broadcasts to be right and left slanted, respectively, based on their perceived associations with Fox News and MSNBC. Using the results from a representative survey of Americans (N = 5,461), the study demonstrates that local Fox and NBC viewers are significantly more likely to watch Fox News or MSNBC. As a result, watching local Fox is associated with less coronavirus risk because media consumers choose local Fox believing that it will align with their existing conservative views. This study demonstrates the importance of the *perceptions* of local news partisanship in influencing the consumption of critically important local crisis news.

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* School of History and Social Science, Louisiana Tech University, 1308 West Railroad Avenue, Ruston, LA 71272. obrochta@latech.edu.

Biography: William O'Brochta is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Louisiana Tech University.

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The public relies on the media for information, especially during disasters and crisis situations. Amid the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), for example, both social media use and national news consumption increased, particularly in the first few months of the pandemic (Koeze & Popper, 2020). However, unlike most previous crises (or pandemics), everyone is at some degree of risk of coronavirus exposure (Fowler et al., 2020). As a result, local television news consumption had a resurgence as people tried to assess the spread of coronavirus in their local area (Fischer, 2020; Nielsen, 2020). Interest in local news increased dramatically at the beginning of the pandemic and remained high in the following months (Kim, Wang, and Malthouse, 2021). During this period, local news outlets struggled to deliver the kinds of pandemic news that members of the public wanted (Masullo, Jennings, and Stroud, 2021). Under these circumstances, why do people choose a particular local television news broadcast to watch, and what are the impacts of this choice?

Drawing on the “carry-over effect,” where television viewers who choose to tune into a particular program on a given channel are more likely to watch the preceding and following programs because they are already on that channel (Lin, 1992), this article argues that media consumers infer the partisanship of local television affiliates, using similarly named national media outlets as their guide. As such, consumers of local Fox affiliate news are more likely to consume right slanted Fox News and likewise for local NBC affiliate news and left slanted MSNBC, despite the fact that affiliate status is not an informative signal about local news partisanship. This study demonstrates the presence of a “partisan carry-over effect” by fielding a representative survey of U.S. adults (N = 5, 461), who respond to questions about local and national news viewership. It also explores the consequences of the partisan carry-over effect by

evaluating whether respondents who select into watching local Fox because they believe that it will be more conservative have decreased perceptions of coronavirus risk and harm. The design can show whether people's perceptions of media partisanship impact local television news viewing behavior. The results can help to inform journalists and public policy practitioners about gaps in media literacy that, if corrected, can lead to improved strategies for presenting news to the public.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

This article is the first to examine perceptions of partisanship of local news. Hedding et al. (2019) have established that some local television news broadcasts are partisan. However, actual partisanship is different from how members of the public perceive partisanship and the extent to which local news consumers are motivated to watch local news that they perceive aligns with their partisan identity. This article argues that local media consumers connect partisanship with network affiliation and, as a result, that they may misidentify partisan sources of local news.

Media and Partisanship

Media consumers and producers interact in a feedback loop where consumers choose their preferred media sources and producers seek to attract and retain consumers (Scheufele, 1999). Some media consumers are "media omnivores" who prefer to consume many media sources or media sources that they perceive to be unbiased (Dempsey et al., 2021). Other media consumers actively seek out and consume media sources that align with their perspectives and partisanship (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Hopkins & Ladd, 2012; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Martin &

Yurukoglu, 2017). For example, media consumers know Fox News' reputation for producing right slanted content and choose to consume it when it aligns with their political preferences (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Thompson, 2020).

Media sources use agenda setting and framing to appeal to partisan viewers. In the canonical conception of agenda setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrate that media sources strategically choose content to present. This content is then framed "to promote a particular problem definition" or a potential solution (Entman, 1993, 52). Quasi-experimental studies show that exposure to Fox News Channel prompts a significant rightward shift in consumers' political attitudes because of the way in which Fox News Channel presents and frames stories (Dellavigna & Kaplan, 2007; Simonov et al., 2020).

The feedback loop between media consumers and producers remained important in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Hubner (2021) shows that early pandemic media coverage chose to cover the health aspects of the pandemic along with its economic consequences. As the pandemic spread, right-wing viewers sought out conservative media perceived to be focusing on topics other than coronavirus or downplaying coronavirus risk (Ash et al., 2020).

Scholars have recently started considering the relationship between media, media consumers, and partisanship at the local level (e.g., Hedding et al., 2019; Martin and McCrain, 2019). Station ownership is the key determinant of local television partisan slant. Local television stations owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group exhibit significant rightward partisan slant, in part because of Sinclair corporate content that "must run" on local television stations (Hedding et al., 2019; Miho, 2020). This right slanted messaging may work to shift media consumers' partisanship rightward (Martin and McCrain, 2019), since local media is quite

effective at framing and agenda setting (e.g., Baranauskas and Drakulich, 2018; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Hester and Gibson, 2007).

Local Television News Viewing Habits

How does national media partisanship impact the local television news environment?

While Sinclair-owned local television stations may be right slanted, local media partisan slant is not immediately apparent to media consumers.¹ This is because partisan cues based on the name of the television station that are informative at the national level provide no information about local television partisanship. Scholars agree that Fox News is right slanted and that MSNBC is left slanted (e.g, Bard, 2017; Motta et al., 2020; Taylor, 2017). However, local television stations are affiliated with, but produce content independently from national news companies bearing similar names. Because local Fox affiliates operate independently from Fox News and local NBC affiliates operate independently from MSNBC, there is no reason to expect that local Fox or NBC affiliates systematically display a respective right or leftward partisan slant, even though they share parts of their names with partisan national media channels. Evidence for this comes from the fact that scholars treat local news stations as interchangeable, examining how local news broadcasts cover certain issues across media markets and what makes for successful local television news coverage (Belt & Just, 2008; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Hale, Fowler, and Goldetein 2007; Kerbel, 2018; Lavery, 2013; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002). In an interesting comparison between local television crime reporting in Salinas, California, Brown and Roemer (2016) find that different local television affiliates brand segments on local crime in different ways, but report on crime with similar intensity. The focus on similar local stories reported on from different angles continued in the context of the coronavirus pandemic (see SI B).

To understand how media consumers translate knowledge of national partisan slant to the local television news context, consider a media consumer who chooses to watch local Fox or NBC because of the perceived affiliation with Fox News or MSNBC. That viewer will certainly be disappointed to learn that the Fox and NBC labels are not informative about the partisanship of local news, but, in all likelihood, all local news affiliates are covering similar stories — the coronavirus pandemic in this context — in similar ways. Initial partisan perceptions are important because once viewers start watching a local newscast, they are likely to remain loyal to that newscast (Lin, 1992; Webster and Newton, 1988). Since most local affiliates are substantively similar, there is no partisan reason to switch to a different affiliate. In fact, consumers' choice of local media that they perceive as partisan may result in them ascribing partisan bias to politically neutral local news (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Thompson, 2020).

The result is that local media consumers choose a local television affiliate based on perceived partisan alignment and then remain loyal to that affiliate. In essence, Fox News or MSNBC viewers are more likely to watch local Fox or local NBC, *switching channels from a cable to a broadcast station* because they associate local Fox with Fox News and local NBC with MSNBC due to their name similarities. The reason that media consumers make these associations is simple: the blatantly and overtly partisan nature of some national news channels makes it easy to develop a mental framework about national media partisanship that consumers then carry over to local news. There is some anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon: local Fox affiliates report that viewers are often confused by the Fox affiliate branding of their station, as they equate Fox with Fox News (Barney, 2014; Vaccaro, 2017). Some local affiliates actively work to fight their perceived association with Fox News by shrinking the size of Fox branding in their logos, for example (Strupp, 2010).

Given the importance of perceptions of media partisanship and the potential connection between national news partisanship and perceptions of local news partisanship, H1 hypothesizes that local television news consumers infer the partisanship to local network affiliates based on their knowledge of the partisanship of similarly named national cable news channels.

H1: Media consumers who watch Fox News or MSNBC are more likely to watch local Fox or NBC stations, respectively.

If H1 is supported, then many media consumers select into watching local Fox because they are Fox News viewers and are interested in conservative local news. What are the consequences of this partisan carry-over effect? Understanding the consequences is important because journalists can then use the differences in political attitudes between local Fox and non-Fox viewers to explain how the partisan carry-over effect works to members of the public. This study takes place during the coronavirus pandemic when conservative national news outlets --- particularly Fox News --- downplayed coronavirus risk, resulting in Fox News viewers perceiving decreased coronavirus risk (Ash et al., 2020). RQ1 asks whether local Fox viewers also have relatively lower coronavirus risk perceptions compared to consumers of other local news stations. There is reason to believe that this is the case if H1 is supported because then local television viewers engage in partisan sorting, meaning that conservative viewers who already have decreased coronavirus risk perceptions choose to watch local Fox. The article proceeds by describing this possibility as a research question instead of a hypothesis since it is necessary to establish a partisan carry-over effect before exploring its consequences.

RQ1: Do local Fox viewers have lower coronavirus risk perceptions compared to consumers of other local television news stations?

Method

Evidence for this study comes from an online, nationally representative survey of 5,461 adults in the United States fielded between June 8 and June 29, 2020. The field period represented a point in time when the coronavirus pandemic had significantly impacted all parts of the country.² This period was after the first wave of coronavirus cases in the United States and as initial stay-at-home orders were expiring. Local news consumption was critical because local regulations were changing frequently and coronavirus cases were spreading rapidly.

Survey respondents were asked about media consumption. For national television, respondents were asked “When you watch national television news, which station do you most often watch?” and were presented with options for the three major network news stations (ABC, NBC, CBS), the three major cable news stations (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News), PBS, and One America News Network (OANN, a far-right network). Respondents could also select that they do not watch national television news. The question for local television news was similar, with the four major network affiliates (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox) and a none option. The survey focuses on station choice because this study is interested in which local affiliate respondents watch *when they choose to watch local news*. These responses are used to assess H1: whether Fox News and MSNBC consumers are more likely to watch local Fox and local NBC respectively, indicating the presence of partisan carry-over.

Next, the survey investigated RQ1 by assessing whether the partisan carry-over effect results in differences in coronavirus risk and harm perceptions based on the local network

affiliate respondents watch. The research question focuses specifically on attitudes toward the coronavirus pandemic, as the survey was conducted in June 2020 when the pandemic was covered extensively on both national and local news. Therefore, the survey asked about respondents' coronavirus risk and harm perceptions in several ways. First, it asked how likely the respondent felt that they (*Personal Risk*) or their family or friends (*Family Risk*) were to be infected by coronavirus. Next, the survey asked respondents to evaluate the amount of harm that the coronavirus outbreak would cause to themselves (*Personal Harm*), their family (*Family Harm*), their community (*Community Harm*), and the United States (*US Harm*). Responses served as a measure of the consequences of partisan carry-over because decreased perceptions of risk or harm can lead to behavioral changes that increase the spread of coronavirus. See Supplemental Information (SI) A for additional survey details, including a rationale for this particular survey design.

Findings

Partisan-Carry Over

Based on the survey responses, the findings break out local news consumption by national news channel viewership and party affiliation. Here, the findings test H1 by showing whether respondents who watched Fox News or MSNBC were more likely to watch local Fox and local NBC and if those local Fox and local NBC viewers were more likely to be Republicans or Democrats, respectively. Table 1 shows the percentage of local news consumers who watched different national media sources. Network Loyalty refers to people who watched the matching local affiliate and national broadcast news channel (e.g., local ABC and national ABC). Other

Non-Affiliate refers to people who watched a local affiliate that does not match the national broadcast news channel that they watched (e.g., local ABC and national NBC).

Table 1: Local Television News Consumers

	Local Fox	Local ABC	Local NBC	Local CBS
Watch Fox News	0.56	0.12	0.09	0.15
Watch MSNBC	0.02	0.04	0.08	0.05
Watch OANN	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00
Watch CNN	0.13	0.15	0.16	0.15
Network Loyalty	--	0.53	0.47	0.38
Watch Other	0.19	0.11	0.16	0.20
Non-Affiliate				
Watch None	0.09	0.06	0.05	0.07
Republican	0.47	0.27	0.26	0.30
Democrat	0.22	0.44	0.41	0.37
Independent	0.25	0.25	0.27	0.27

Percentage shown among local news consumers. Network Loyalty is watching national network news on a given affiliate. Other Non-Affiliate refers to watching national network news not on a given affiliate.

Respondents who watched local Fox were approximately four times more likely to watch Fox News than were respondents who watched any other local affiliate (56% versus $\approx 12\%$), supporting H1. In fact, the percentage of respondents who watched both local Fox and Fox News was higher than network loyalty for other affiliates. This is curious because individuals who are loyal to a particular network *do not need to change the channel* to watch local and national news on that network. Local Fox viewers need to switch channels to watch Fox News Channel, which is not directly associated with local Fox affiliates. Since network news is broadcast during the second half hour of Fox local news on other affiliates, local Fox viewers might be more likely to watch national news on cable. The consistent proportion of respondents watching CNN across local news affiliates suggests that local Fox viewers are not simply more likely to watch cable news, instead they decidedly prefer Fox News. Additionally, a much larger share of local Fox

viewers identified as Republicans and a much smaller share identified as Democrats compared to viewers of other network affiliates.

Note also that the perceived association between local Fox and Fox News replicates when examining the relationship between local NBC and MSNBC. Local NBC viewers were twice as likely to watch MSNBC compared to viewers of other local channels. The local NBC and MSNBC carry-over may be smaller than for local Fox and Fox News because NBC and MSNBC share some on-air talent and news content. These results support H1 by showing that there is a partisan carry-over effect, meaning that media consumers appear to make assumptions about the partisan slant of both local Fox and NBC stations based on the cable networks with similar names.

As a robustness check, regression analysis was used to see whether these patterns hold when controlling for demographic and geographic area characteristics. The analysis focused on respondents who report watching local news and created dichotomous dependent variables indicating that a respondent most often watched one of their local Fox, ABC, NBC, or CBS affiliates. A wide range of independent variables were used to determine characteristics of local television affiliate viewers. These variables included local television station ownership, national television news consumption, newspaper consumption, age, gender, education, party identification, income, employment status, ethnicity, political knowledge, and coronavirus knowledge. Controls for logged coronavirus case counts, community type (urban, rural, suburban), and state fixed effects were also included.

Consistent with Table 1 and H1, logistic regression analysis shows that respondents who watched national ABC, NBC, or CBS news broadcasts were more likely to watch the corresponding local affiliate (see SI C). Fox News viewers were significantly more likely to

watch local Fox. Similarly, MSNBC viewers were significantly more likely to watch the local NBC affiliate. Also, as suggested in Table 1, Republicans were significantly more likely to watch local Fox and significantly less likely to watch local NBC. Media consumers clearly connect local Fox with Fox News and local NBC with MSNBC despite the fact that neither local Fox nor local NBC stations exhibit systematic partisan bias.

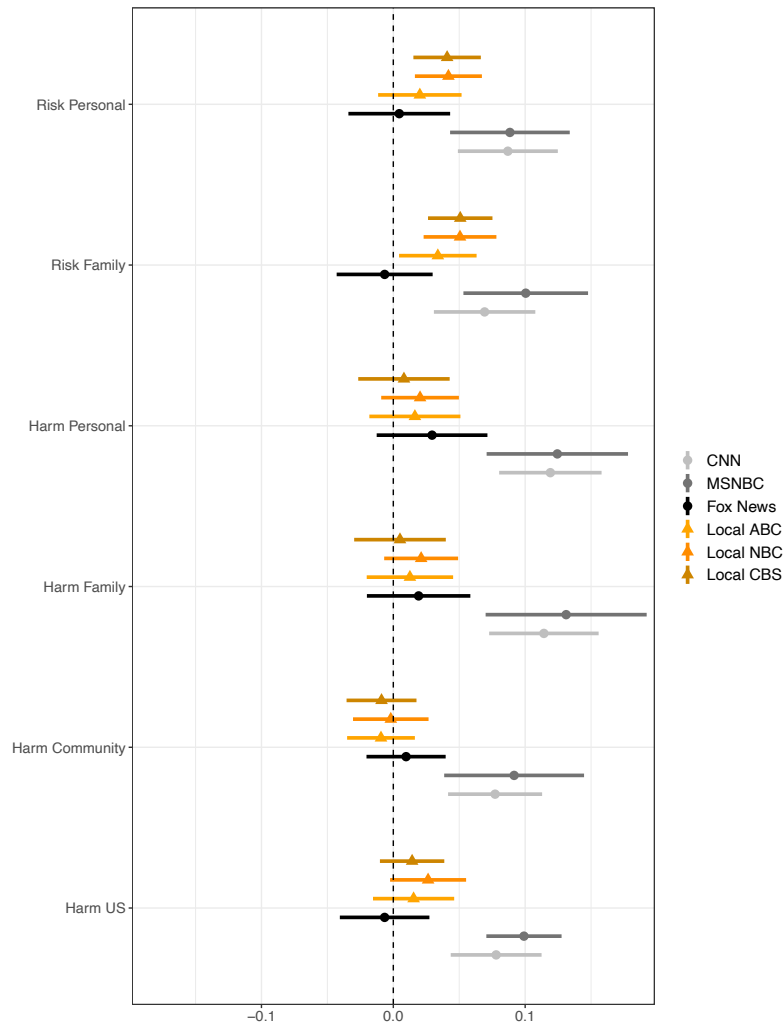
Consequences of Partisan Carry-Over

To examine consequences of the partisan carry-over effect, the analysis again focused on respondents who said that they watch local television news. A factor variable for local affiliate viewership was created with watching local Fox as the reference level. The analysis then attempted to answer RQ1 by comparing risk perceptions of respondents watching local Fox affiliates to those watching other affiliates. The results present coefficient estimates from linear models with dependent variables scaled between 0 and 1, demographic controls, controls for national news consumption, and state fixed effects. SI C has the associated regression tables and robustness checks.

Figure 1 shows the results. Coefficient estimates for the effect of watching local ABC, NBC, or CBS on risk perceptions are shown with local Fox viewers as the reference category. For the sake of comparison, coefficient estimates for the effect of watching national Fox News, CNN, or MSNBC, are also displayed, where watching no national television news is the reference category. Respondents who watched local affiliates other than Fox perceived significantly more personal and family risk from the coronavirus than respondents who watched local Fox. There were no significant differences in how respondents who watched local affiliates other than Fox perceived the extent to which coronavirus would cause harm. By way of

comparison, Fox News viewers perceived significantly less risk and harm from coronavirus compared to CNN and MSNBC viewers and comparable risk and harm to people who did not consume national television news. Watching local Fox is associated with lower coronavirus risk much in the same way as is watching Fox News. The answer to RQ1, therefore, is yes: local Fox viewers do have lower coronavirus risk perceptions compared to viewers of other local television outlets. While the differences in risk and harm perceptions between Fox News viewers and CNN or MSNBC viewers have been explained by the partisanship of the news content, this study suggests that right partisans select into watching local Fox because they believe it will align with their political views, even though local Fox content is not systematically biased.

Figure 1: Coronavirus Risk and Harm Perceptions by Local and National Television News Consumption



Linear models with dependent variables scaled between 0 and 1, state fixed effects, and robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals shown.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has demonstrated a partisan link that media consumers make between local and national television news. Media consumers largely trust local news and view it as a non-partisan source of information, though this reputation is declining (Gallup, 2019). Perceptions of local news partisanship through the partisan carry-over effect add to the sense of increasing partisanship in and the decreasing credibility of local news. The results from this paper are

important because they point to the partisan carry-over effect as *unnecessary* partisanship within the local media landscape. Unlike partisan biases exhibited by station owners (e.g., Hedding et al., 2019), there is no evidence that local network affiliates are systematically partisan. This finding holds even in the context of the coronavirus pandemic (see Piltch-Loeb et al., 2021).

Recent work on media literacy (e.g., Guess et al., 2020) and trust in news (e.g., Brennan, 2021) has shown that both are declining over time. The results from this study suggest an interplay between media literacy and trust in news: as media literacy decreases, media consumers make increasingly broad generalizations about the partisan nature of news sources, decreasing trust in media. Improving media literacy is a collective task where journalists, scholars, and the public themselves can all help to contribute.

One limitation of this study is that it does not explain the thought process that results in individuals connecting local Fox and NBC affiliates with Fox News and MSNBC. In the future, scholars could study the viewing habits and patterns of individuals who watch local and national news to see whether local Fox viewers switch to Fox News after the end of the first half hour of local news. If local Fox viewers exhibit this behavior, then the fact that Fox stations do not carry national broadcast news provides a mechanism by which viewers connect local Fox and Fox News. The local NBC and MSNBC case presents a useful contrast, as it is unclear when local NBC viewers would switch the channel to watch MSNBC since they can stay on the same channel and watch NBC broadcast news. What is more, the ability to record television shows on different channels to watch later may — along with the Internet and social media — make it easier for media consumers to associate local and cable stations with similar names with one another. Viewing habits are a key area for future research because they help to inform about how media consumers approach consuming news. For example, an advertising campaign by a local

Fox station to describe their non-partisan approach to reporting news is significantly less effective if most local Fox viewers record local news and play it back later, skipping the commercials.

Another limitation is that this study asks respondents about local television station choice, not the frequency with which a respondent watches local television news. Station choice is informative about which station respondents prefer, but some respondents may not have strong preferences or may watch multiple stations regularly. Future research could examine the interaction of station choice and the frequency with which respondents watch different stations.

How can local television affiliates overcome the partisan carry-over effect and convince viewers (and potential viewers) of their objectivity? One answer is to continue to directly fight these perceptions by disassociating themselves from affiliate branding (Strupp, 2010). For example, local television affiliates may wish to discuss the network affiliation process with viewers to ensure that local news consumers can correctly identify partisan sources of news. Moskowitz (2021) suggests another plausible answer: re-focusing attention on providing true local news content. This will likely prove difficult amid corporate consolidation and shrinking local television news budgets, but reporting on important local news stories instead of filling broadcasts with summaries of national news is one strategy to distinguish local news content from the partisan nature of national television news.

Whether local television audiences will be convinced by these efforts is significantly less clear. Individual initiatives by local Fox journalists or local Fox affiliates are unlikely to counteract an increasingly polarized national political landscape. Reinforcing the power and importance of nationwide journalistic ethics standards like those from Radio Television Digital News Association could help to broaden the conversation about perceptions of local news

polarization beyond local Fox affiliates. This could provide an opportunity for local news affiliates to rely on and to support one another by presenting a unified message about the non-partisan nature of local political news. Media consumers are often willing to consume news from a variety of perceived partisan affiliations (Dempsey et al., 2021), and such behavior could be encouraged by between affiliate collaboration. This potential needs to be investigated further, particularly with the motivations of local television affiliate owners (e.g., Sinclair (Hedding et al., 2019)) in mind. By identifying and presenting the first evidence of a partisan carry-over effect in news consumption and demonstrating its impact on crisis risk perceptions, this study has implications for media consumption, partisanship, and trust in television news.

Endnotes

¹ It is important to control for station ownership in the statistical models, but station ownership does not align with network affiliation (Miller & Jessell, 2020). Indeed, Sinclair's 10-K Annual Report filed on March 2, 2020 indicates that Sinclair owns 30 ABC, 17 NBC, 25 CBS, 43 Fox, 37 CW, and 32 myNetworkTV stations.

² The survey was fielded by Respondi. Institutional Review Board Approval #202004256. The survey design was pre-registered with EGAP. Respondents from New York City were excluded due to lack of availability of county-level coronavirus case information.

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Supplemental Information: Perceptions of Partisanship in Local Television News

Replication files for this article are posted on the author's website.

A: Survey Details

Survey Variables

- **Media Consumption:** These questions are based on survey questions from Gallup and a list of news organizations from Gallup and Pew. Asking about media consumption instead of perceptions of media political slant focuses on individuals' behavior instead of their attitudes. The behavior of choosing to watch a particular media outlet is of primary importance because it represents more of a commitment on the part of media consumers to watch a particular channel instead of simply expressing their attitudes. This approach also helps to reduce social desirability bias because it is not obvious the purpose of asking about media consumption. On the other hand, asking directly about perceptions of media slant reveals that the researcher is interested in studying how people perceive media slant and may result in some respondents providing socially desirable answers.
 1. National: "When you watch national television news, which station do you most often watch? (ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC, One America News Network, I never watch national television news)."
 2. Local: "When you watch local television news from TV stations in your area, which station do you most often watch? (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, I never watch local television news)."
 3. Newspaper: "When you read a newspaper, which newspaper do you most often read? (Local newspaper, The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, I never get my news from a newspaper)."
- **Risk and Harm:** Risk questions are based on Gallup poll questions; Harm questions based on Pew poll questions. These questions are designed to determine the consequences of the partisan carry-over effect, as in the ways in which the partisan carry-over effect can explain patterns in political attitudes. Without partisan carry-over as an explanation, we would have reason to believe that local Fox affiliates systematically influence coronavirus risk and harm perceptions. The particular focus on coronavirus risk and harm perceptions instead of other political attitudes questions is a result of the coronavirus pandemic being the prevailing political issue during the survey field period in June 2020.
 1. Personal Risk: "On a scale from 0 to 100, how unlikely or likely do you think it is that you will be infected by coronavirus in the next several months? (0-Very unlikely to 100-Very likely)."
 2. Family Risk: "And how unlikely or likely do you think it is that a family member or friend will be infected by coronavirus in the next several months? (0-Very unlikely to 100-Very likely)."
 3. Personal Harm: "How much do you think the coronavirus outbreak will harm you personally? (1-Not at all to 4-A great deal)."
 4. Family Harm: "How much do you think the coronavirus outbreak will harm your family? (1-Not at all to 4-A great deal)."
 5. Community Harm: "How much do you think the coronavirus outbreak will harm your community? (1-Not at all to 4-A great deal)."

6. US Harm: “How much do you think the coronavirus outbreak will harm people in the United States? (1-Not at all to 4-A great deal).”
- Control Variables:
 1. Age: “In what year were you born?” Recoded into 18-34, 35-49, 50-64, and 65 and above. Reference level is 18-34.
 2. Female: “Please indicate whether you are male, female, or other.” Dichotomous variable where 1 is female.
 3. Education: “What is the highest level of education you have completed? (Did not complete elementary and middle school, completed elementary and middle school, attended high school, high school graduate, some college, Associate’s degree, Bachelor’s degree, Master’s degree, Professional school degree, Doctorate degree).” Recoded into dummy variables for below completing high school, high school, some college or Associate’s degree, and Bachelor’s degree or higher. Reference level is not completing high school.
 4. Party Identification: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, and Independent, or what? (Republican, Democrat, Independent, Other).” Dummy variables for Republican, Independent, and Democrat. Reference level is Democrat.
 5. Income: “Thinking back over the last year, what was your family’s annual income? (Less than \$10,000, \$10,000-19,999, \$20,000-29,999, \$30,000-39,999, \$40,000-49,999, \$50,000-59,999, \$60,000-69,999, \$70,000-79,999, \$80,000-89,999, \$90,000-99,999, \$100,000-119,999, \$120,000-149,999, \$150,000-199,999, \$200,000-249,999, \$250,000-349,999, \$350,000-499,999, \$500,000 or more).” Recoded into low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high based on percentiles where low is below 25th percentile, lower-middle is 25th to 50th percentile, upper-middle is 50th to 75th percentile, and high is above 75th percentile. Reference level is low.
 6. Unemployed: “Which of these descriptions best describes your situation (in the last seven days)? (In paid work; In education; Unemployed and actively looking for a job; Unemployed, wanting a job, but not actively looking; Permanently sick or disabled; Retired; In military service; Doing housework; Don’t know; None of these).” Dummy variable 1 if unemployed and actively looking for a job and unemployed, wanting a job, but not actively looking for a job and 0 otherwise. Reference level is 0.
 7. Ethnicity: “What racial or ethnic group best describes you? (White; Black or African American; Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish; Asian; American Indian or Alaska Native; Other).” Dummy variable 1 if not white 0 otherwise. Reference level is 0.
 8. Political Knowledge: “For how many years is a United States Senator elected — that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. Senator? (type the number)” Dummy variable 1 if answered 6, 0 otherwise. Reference level is 0.
 9. Coronavirus Knowledge: “Which of the following are common symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus)? (Fever, cough, and shortness of breath; Frequent urination, increased thirst, and increased hunger; Heartburn, upper abdominal

pain, and nausea).” Dummy variable 1 if answered fever, cough, and shortness of breath, 0 otherwise. Reference level is 0.

10. State: “In which state or territory do you live?”

11. County: “In which county or independent city do you live?”

Geographically Defined Variables

1. County-Level Coronavirus Cases: County-level coronavirus case data collected from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center from May 24 to June 29, 2020. Data is updated daily at around 2AM the day following new case data. I downloaded daily updates in order to ensure that contemporaneous information was being used, as some case data is updated post hoc. Data is updated based on information from government health departments (county and state). Case counts were merged with survey respondent data using the day the respondent took the survey. Survey start times were converted into local time zones to determine the local date when the survey was started. That date was used to merge with the coronavirus case data. Case counts are logged.

There are several instances of missing cases wherein the JHU data does not report cases for a given FIPS code that contains a survey respondent. Most of the missing cases are also missing for other coronavirus datasets like that of the New York Times. Missing cases were dropped. Substantively, the impact is quite small other than considering that New York City area cases were completely dropped.

List of missing cases: 36005 (Bronx, NY), 36047 (Kings, NY), 26081 (Queens, NY), 36085 (Richmond, NY), 72139 (Trujillo Alto, PR), 36061 (New York, NY), 20203 (Wichita, KS), 49015 (Emery, UT), 49033 (Rich, UT), 49047 (Uinath, UT), 49053 (Washington, UT), and 49057 (Weber, UT).

2. Local Television Station Ownership: As of 2020, the three main corporate owners of broadcast television affiliates are Sinclair, Nexstar, and Gray. There are certainly other players in this market, but their lower market share means that survey power is too low to analyze more than these three companies. Using annual reports filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission (10-K reports), I coded corporate ownership of a station within the 209 Designated Market Areas (DMAs) as defined by Nielsen (as of August 2020). Only ownership of the Big 4 networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) were coded, as myNetwork TV and the CW do not have local news broadcasts in the vast majority of DMAs. Both presence in a DMA (owning at least one station) and the affiliate owned were recorded. I match DMA data to county-level FIPS codes using a crosswalk developed by Gaurav Sood (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IVXEHT>). This assumes that local television station viewership is restricted to a given DMA and that viewers outside of the DMA cannot view a given station. Though exceptions certainly exist, the stations associated with a given DMA are the stations most likely to be watched in that DMA. I then match respondent local television station viewership with ownership of that network affiliate, producing a dichotomous variable indicating whether a survey respondent watches a given corporate owned affiliate.

Table A.1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Min	Max	SD	Mean
Watch National	0.00	1.00	0.39	0.82
Watch Local	0.00	1.00	0.39	0.82
Read Newspaper	0.00	1.00	0.49	0.60
Personal Risk	0.00	1.00	0.27	0.39
Family Risk	0.00	1.00	0.28	0.42
Personal Harm	0.00	1.00	0.31	0.51
Family Harm	0.00	1.00	0.30	0.52
Community Harm	0.00	1.00	0.27	0.65
U.S. Harm	0.00	1.00	0.24	0.81
Log Covid Cases	-6.91	11.49	2.23	7.15
Age 18-34	0.00	1.00	0.47	0.33
Age 35-49	0.00	1.00	0.44	0.27
Age 50-64	0.00	1.00	0.44	0.26
Age 65+	0.00	1.00	0.34	0.13
Female	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.52
Education: Below HS	0.00	1.00	0.30	0.10
Education: High School	0.00	1.00	0.42	0.23
Education: Some College	0.00	1.00	0.45	0.29
Education: BA	0.00	1.00	0.48	0.37
Rural	0.00	1.00	0.41	0.21
Suburban	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.51
Urban	0.00	1.00	0.45	0.28
Republican	0.00	1.00	0.46	0.31
Democrat	0.00	1.00	0.48	0.35
Independent	0.00	1.00	0.45	0.27
Income 25 th Percentile	0.00	1.00	0.43	0.24
Income 50 th Percentile	0.00	1.00	0.45	0.28
Income 75 th Percentile	0.00	1.00	0.43	0.24
Income 100 th Percentile	0.00	1.00	0.39	0.19
Unemployed	0.00	1.00	0.35	0.14
Non-White	0.00	1.00	0.43	0.25
Political Knowl. High	0.00	1.00	0.49	0.40
Covid Knowl. High	0.00	1.00	0.33	0.88

All variables dichotomous except for Log Covid Cases. Minimum, maximum, standard deviation, and mean shown. Survey is representative of age, gender, and education.

B: Local News Coverage of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Are there differences in coronavirus news coverage between local television stations in the same television market? Local television news broadcasts can report on the pandemic in one of two ways: they can produce their own content or they can run content provided to them by either their network affiliate or station owner. Because networks do not control local affiliates, locally produced content on local Fox is no more likely to exhibit partisan bias than is locally produced content on local ABC, NBC, or CBS.

However, local affiliates can run content provided by their network affiliate or station owner. Station ownership is important, and the analysis controls for station ownership to account for possible systematic biases in the ways in which station owners run local television stations, including any biases in content provided by the station owner.

Beyond this, local affiliates may run affiliate produced content. If affiliate produced content were systematically biased, then this could potentially explain the reason that local Fox viewers perceive less coronavirus risk. ABC, NBC, and CBS all run national nightly news broadcasts and employ news staff who can produce content for local affiliates. Fox Broadcasting Company has no national newscast and does not employ news staff. As such, it is possible that exposure to less national news content on local Fox stations resulted in decreased coronavirus risk, but the more likely explanation is that viewers perceive that local Fox is associated with Fox News and viewers with decreased coronavirus risk perceptions select into watching local Fox.

To explore the possible differences between local television news broadcasts reporting during the coronavirus pandemic further, available transcripts from the 6PM to 7PM local news broadcasts in the San Francisco media market during the survey field period (June 15 to June 26, 2020) were collected. San Francisco was chosen due to data limitations --- transcripts for local television news broadcasts are rarely available for multiple television stations in the same media market. The Internet Archive maintains transcripts for KGO (ABC), KNTV (NBC), and KTVU (Fox) in San Francisco.¹ These stations are owned-and-operated, meaning that ABC, NBC, and Fox are the station owners, maximizing the potential for reporting national content.

In comparing local affiliate coverage on San Francisco television stations, coronavirus was the most talked about lead story on Fox (5 times) compared to ABC (3) and NBC (3). On the other hand, ABC (6) and NBC (6) led most often with stories about either Black Lives Matter protests or racial issues compared to Fox (2). Each network also occasionally led with local crime stories — ABC (1), NBC (1), Fox (2); Fox was the only station to lead with national news (1).

Though there was some alignment between ABC and NBC on leading with racial issues versus coronavirus, the actual lead stories on all channels were typically quite different. For example, at least two of the three stations led with coronavirus from June 23 through June 26. On June 23, both ABC and Fox led with a story about the coronavirus case count in California breaking a record, while NBC discussed racial issues. On June 24, both NBC and Fox led with the same gubernatorial press conference, while ABC discussed a police policy change. All three networks led with coronavirus on June 25 and 26, but the messages behind these stories were different, from mass transit ridership (ABC June 25), to beach reopening (Fox June 25), to fire

¹ KPIX (CBS) only runs a 6PM to 6:30PM local newscast, so it was excluded.

preparation during a pandemic (NBC June 25). This diversity illustrates the degree to which these stations compete for different story angles while all reporting relatively similar issues.

Next, the full broadcast transcripts were examined and a dictionary of 32 terms mentioned in the transcripts that were most likely to be associated with coronavirus was created. For comparison, a similar dictionary of 12 terms related to racial justice protests, two related to President Trump, and 13 related to weather was also created.² Using the frequency of term dictionaries, the analysis assesses whether news content — particularly the discussion of coronavirus — differs across local affiliates.

Table B.1 displays the frequency with which different topics were mentioned in local news broadcasts, where the entries represent the number of times words in topic dictionaries that I constructed were mentioned as a proportion of the broadcast word count. From the Table, it is clear that coronavirus, racial justice, and weather terms were mentioned with similar frequencies across the three stations. It is interesting to note that President Trump was mentioned much more on local Fox than on other stations.

Table B.1: Frequency of Local Television News Topics

	Fox	ABC	NBC
Coronavirus	4.20	4.12	4.45
Racial Justice	1.90	1.20	1.73
President Trump	0.53	0.05	0.28
Weather	1.42	1.58	1.41

Percentage of words about a given topic based on the seven days where full transcripts for all three stations were available. San Francisco television market.

To provide a better sense of what the frequency with which coronavirus was mentioned means, each station mentioned this topic about 1,000 times during the course of seven, one-hour news broadcasts. This equates to about two mentions per minute or over two minutes of each broadcast dedicated entirely to saying terms related to the coronavirus. In other words, all stations talked about coronavirus roughly equally and for a substantial amount of time. Additionally, all stations followed the same basic format for reporting on coronavirus, focusing on case counts, health measures, and re-opening plans. It was not the case that any one network affiliate dismissed the severity of coronavirus or downplayed its impact.

This exploration should be viewed as exploratory and preliminary. It is possible that other media markets operate differently, and future research should investigate this possibility. Overall though, as expected, local news affiliates discussed pressing topics during this time relatively similarly. There appears to be no major reliance on stories from national affiliates that might

² The terms were: Coronavirus: case, test, reopen, health, covid, coronavirus, home, pandemic, mask, close, wear, hospital, social, distance, hand, order, stay, issue, safe, virus, doctor, salon, spread, spike, surge, infect, customer, patient, risk, restrict, hair, ill.

Racial Justice: police, black, protest, celebrate, Juneteenth, racism, event, march, reform, racial, union, rally.

President Trump: president, Trump.

Weather: temperature, low, heat, fog, wind, forecast, warm, cool, weather, hot, degree, clear, cooler.

explain the association between local Fox viewership and decreased coronavirus risk perceptions.

C: Main Text Results

Table C.1: Predicting Local Television News Affiliate Choice

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Local Fox (1)	Local ABC (2)	Local NBC (3)	Local CBS (4)
Fox News	1.20*** (0.16)	-0.66*** (0.17)	-0.52** (0.19)	-0.67*** (0.18)
ABC	-1.62*** (0.19)	1.98*** (0.16)	-0.73*** (0.19)	-1.30*** (0.20)
NBC	-1.83*** (0.21)	-1.46*** (0.19)	2.51*** (0.18)	-1.04*** (0.19)
CBS	-1.30*** (0.21)	-1.23*** (0.20)	-0.69** (0.21)	1.97*** (0.18)
MSNBC	-1.09*** (0.27)	-0.33 (0.22)	1.19*** (0.21)	-0.22 (0.23)
CNN	-0.53** (0.18)	-0.04 (0.17)	0.60** (0.18)	-0.07 (0.18)
PBS	-1.08** (0.33)	-0.55* (0.28)	0.76** (0.26)	0.57* (0.26)
OANN	0.81 (0.42)	-0.35 (0.49)	-1.91 (1.03)	0.23 (0.45)
Republican	0.58*** (0.12)	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.26* (0.11)	-0.02 (0.11)
Independent	0.25* (0.12)	-0.16 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.10)	0.06 (0.11)
Observations	5,283	5,283	5,283	5,283
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Fixed Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Logistic regression models.

Table C.2: Media Consumption and Perceptions of Coronavirus Risk and Harm

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Personal Risk	Family Risk	Personal Harm	Family Harm	Community Harm	US Harm
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Local ABC	0.02 (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)
Local NBC	0.04** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	-0.002 (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)
Local CBS	0.04** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)
Fox News	0.005 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.005 (0.02)
ABC	0.08*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.02)
NBC	0.05** (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05** (0.02)
CBS	0.06** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)
MSNBC	0.09*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.02)
CNN	0.09*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
PBS	0.12*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.03)
OANN	0.06 (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.06 (0.07)
Republican	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
Independent	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.02** (0.01)
Observations	4,310	4,310	4,310	4,310	4,310	4,310
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Fixed Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Linear regression models with robust standard errors.

Table C.3: Media Consumption and Perceptions of Coronavirus Risk and Harm Multinomial Logistic Regression

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Personal Risk (1)	Family Risk (2)	Personal Harm (3)	Family Harm (4)	Community Harm (5)	US Harm (6)
Local ABC	0.02 (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)	0.10 (0.09)	0.10 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.10)	0.17 (0.10)
Local NBC	0.04** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.12 (0.10)	0.13 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.10)	0.26* (0.10)
Local CBS	0.04** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05 (0.10)	0.03 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.10)	0.15 (0.11)
Fox News	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.18 (0.13)	0.14 (0.13)	0.09 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.14)
ABC	0.08*** (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)	0.58*** (0.13)	0.51*** (0.13)	0.38** (0.14)	0.24 (0.14)
NBC	0.05** (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.45** (0.14)	0.43** (0.14)	0.41** (0.14)	0.22 (0.15)
CBS	0.06** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.48*** (0.14)	0.50*** (0.14)	0.40** (0.15)	0.32* (0.15)
MSNBC	0.09*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.82*** (0.17)	0.86*** (0.17)	0.67*** (0.18)	0.97*** (0.20)
CNN	0.08*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.75*** (0.14)	0.74*** (0.14)	0.56*** (0.14)	0.76*** (0.15)
PBS	0.12*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.79*** (0.21)	0.77*** (0.21)	0.61** (0.22)	0.36 (0.23)
OANN	0.06 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.37)	-0.28 (0.39)	-0.40 (0.38)	0.11 (0.42)
Republican	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.19* (0.07)	-0.23** (0.07)	-0.38*** (0.08)	-0.61*** (0.08)
Independent	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.21** (0.07)	-0.24*** (0.07)	-0.28*** (0.07)	-0.28*** (0.08)
Observations	4,310	4,310	4,310	4,310	4,310	4,310
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Fixed Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Multinomial logistic regression models.