

Telling Others' Stories:

Media Representation of Prison Populations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## **Executive Summary**

In this paper we critically examine how bias in mainstream media shapes societal narratives of marginalized groups, in which reporting and storytelling become politicizing and polarizing forces. Specifically, we examine popular online news sources' reporting on the experiences of individuals in United States prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic. We viewed articles from across the political spectrum and found that the language used in each one played a powerful role in conveying the humanity of subjects, the relationships among them, and the amount of power or agency they had. These findings highlight the necessity of critical media literacy for any person who reads the news and desires a deeper understanding of the complex issues that a certain group (or society as a whole) is facing.

## **Introduction**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States created new societal issues and exacerbated existing ones, particularly regarding the politicization and polarization of viewpoints. Central to this issue is the media, which plays a powerful role in determining in whose stories are told and how. There is a long history of bias in the U.S. media's reporting on those at the margins of society, particularly certain racial groups (Baker-Bell et al, 2017). In the mainstream media, marginalized groups tend to have less control over their own narratives (Polletta et al, 2011). Recognizing this, the authors chose to examine language used in the media surrounding the experiences of incarcerated individuals in U.S. prisons during the current pandemic. In the present study, we explore how various media sources tell the stories of these individuals, whose limited communication with society gives them little control over their own narratives.

The 'social fragmentation' framework allows us to problematize the issue of media bias in reporting on the experiences of inmates in U.S. prisons. Conklin's (2005) description of 'social

fragmentation' identifies any force of fragmentation in society as "...a phenomenon that pulls apart something which is potentially whole" (p.2). Due to its history of bias, the U.S. media is a potential source of social fragmentation, and even more so during an election and pandemic. To better understand any polarizing effects, we take a critical look at political bias in the mainstream media alongside its portrayal of inmates and their experiences. Signs of polarization or fragmentation may be understood according to Conklin (2005): "Fragmentation suggests a condition in which the people involved see themselves as more separate than united... information and knowledge are chaotic and scattered" (p.2). While this perspective is relevant generally to U.S. society, it is applied in the present study to the media's role in telling the pandemic-related stories of prisoners. The language used to portray interactions between subjects of news articles and descriptions of events and experiences illuminates the polarizing effects of news reporting.

Our ultimate purpose in performing this study is to learn and share the stories of a group of marginalized individuals, and to develop 'critical media literacy' (Morell, 2008) in ourselves and others. The following paper is a critical examination of popular online news sources and the narratives they create surrounding the experiences of those currently incarcerated or detained in prisons throughout the United States.

## **Methodology**

We used Statista to find the most popular news websites by unique monthly visitors. The top thirteen sources were used for this study. Articles selected were the first search result on the media source's website produced by searching "prison" and "COVID-19" (see [Appendix A](#)). Information about the political bias of the online content from each source was provided by AllSides, while data on perceptions of news trustworthiness was sourced from the Pew Research Center (see [Appendix B](#)).

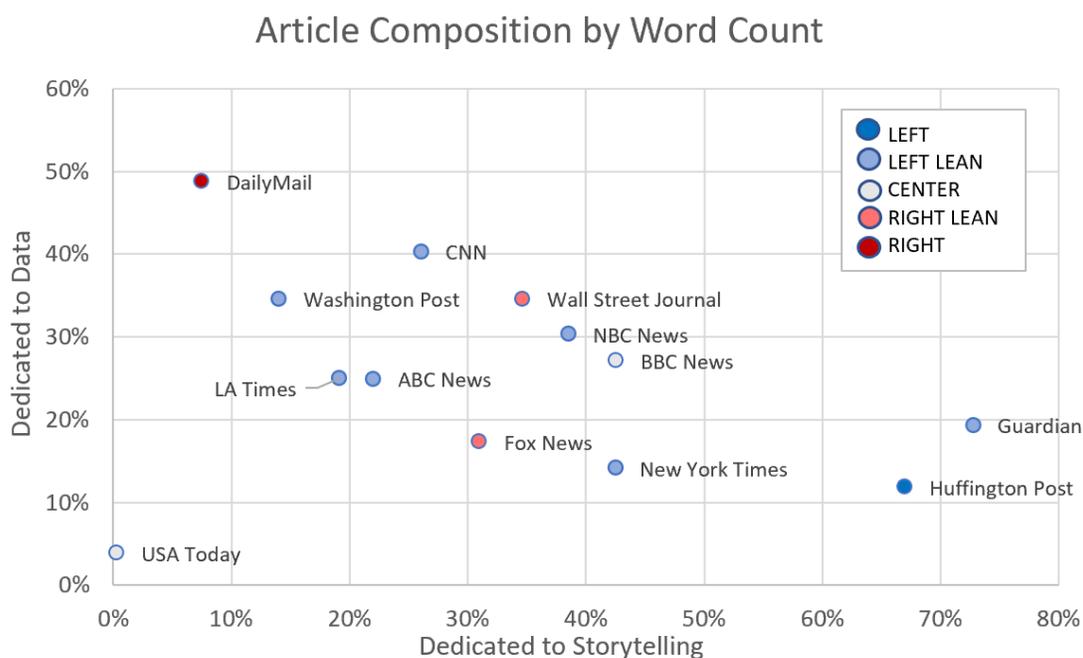
We performed content analysis on the articles using inductive open coding methods to identify emerging themes and patterns surrounding language use. It became evident that the articles differed in their humanization of inmates and in their depictions of relationships between subjects. The extent to which an article humanized or did not humanize inmates was operationalized based on the presence of storytelling elements (e.g., descriptive language, direct quotes, etc.), data (e.g., numbers, statistics, etc.), and sources of quotes (e.g., prisoners, advocates, prison officials, etc.). Depictions of relationships among subjects were divided into three main categories based on the nature of the relationship (inmates and prison staff; inmates and communities; advocacy groups and the prison system). Language used to position members in relation to another (insiders vs. outsiders; just vs. unjust) and to describe their ability to exercise control over their current situation or their future reflected differing perceptions of power and agency in the relationships.

Article composition was calculated based on what percentage of the article was devoted to storytelling elements (descriptions of people, events, or direct quotes) versus data (statistics on death tolls, the number of cases, etc.). These percentages were found using a word count to compare the qualitative and quantitative components of each article to the total word count. We also categorized and counted the proportion of quotes attributed to various subjects by category (including prisoners and their allies, individuals within the prison system, and advocacy groups or external experts).

## **The Balance of Storytelling and Data**

The graph below compares the percentage of the article which was devoted to data, such as statistics, versus the percentage dedicated to storytelling elements, such as descriptive, evocative language and direct quotations. Facts that were not related to the topic of the article but rather to the character of an individual – for example, a description of a prisoner as “a peer counselor and a

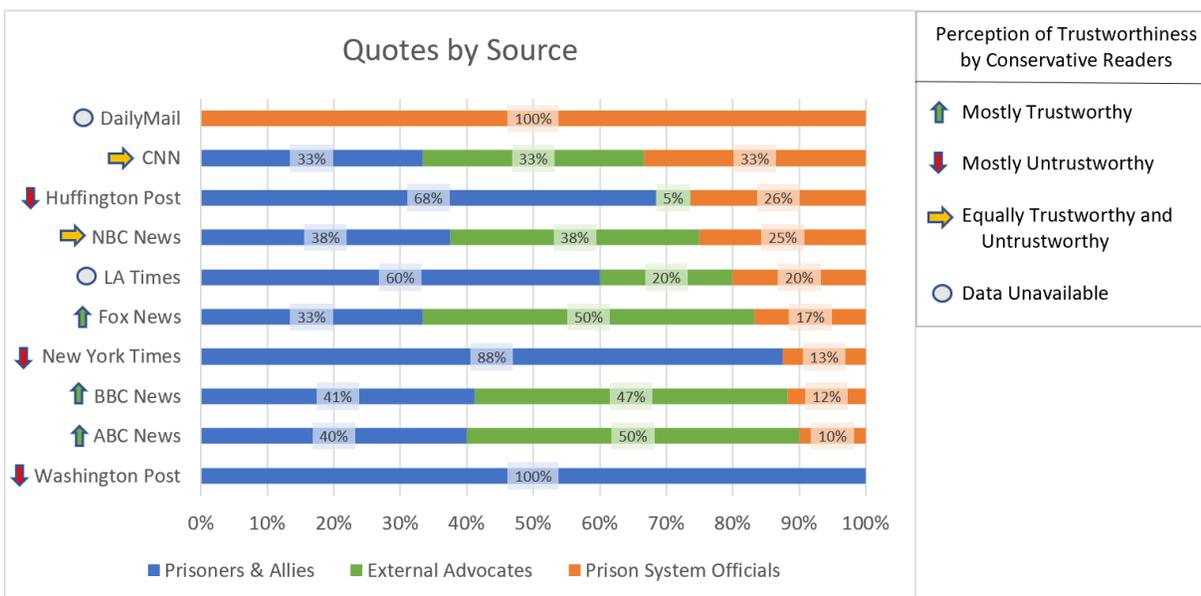
church praise dancer, spending her Sundays raising her arms to the sky, leading worshipers in songs that promised a brighter tomorrow” (*LA Times*) – were also classified as storytelling elements. Notable outliers include *The Guardian* and *USA Today*, both of which ran articles written by non-reporters. *The Guardian*’s piece was a description of prison conditions authored by a prison guard, while *USA Today* ran a letter written by a panel of legal experts with recommendations for the judicial system.



Data was most often used to illustrate negative aspects of a situation, such as the impact of COVID-19, the severity of prison overpopulation issues, or even crime rates. Storytelling aspects were used to spark emotional responses and engender sympathy, and were most often used in connection to groups or individuals the source portrayed positively. Generally, sources which were identified as “center,” “right lean,” or “left lean” by AllSides dedicated a comparable portion of their article to storytelling elements and to data. The only “left” source in our data, *Huffington Post*, dedicated the majority of their article to storytelling (67%), including a poem written by the family member of a prisoner, and used data sparingly (12%). The “right” source, *DailyMail*, used mostly data (49%) and only a few sentences of storytelling components (8%). This disparity makes sense

given that the topic of these articles, prison populations, is generally viewed more negatively by those on the political right and positively by the political left.

In examining whose stories were being told and how they were being conveyed, we also investigated quotes. Of the thirteen articles we reviewed, ten contained direct quotes. Sources of quotes included incarcerated people and those closely connected to them such as friends, family, and lawyers; members of the justice system (primarily official spokespeople); and external advocates such as advocacy groups, policy organizations, researchers and academics. With the exception of *DailyMail* who only quoted prison system officials, all articles sourced the majority of their quotes from prisoners, their allies, and external advocates.



The balance of various quoted sources or the preference for a particular group did not appear to influence how the media source was perceived by the general population either in terms of political lean or in trustworthiness, or by readers with mostly liberal political views. When looking only at readers with mostly conservative views, however, the prioritization of external experts and advocates correlated to how trustworthy the news source was perceived to be. Three sources which used primarily quotes from external sources were mostly trusted, sources which used roughly equivalent numbers of quotes from all three sources were seen as equally trusted and

distrusted, and sources which prioritized quotations from prisoners and their families were seen as more distrusted.

Across all sources, incarcerated individuals were quoted 26 times. Their family members were quoted nearly as often - a total of 25 times. This may be explained by the fact that nonincarcerated family members are often more accessible to reporters, and their communications are not restricted by the prison system. However, in many cases family member quotes appear to have been used intentionally instead of or in addition to direct quotes from prisoners. In their role as storytelling elements, quotes from family members do twice the work; they add a relatable voice to engender sympathy but also serve as reminders of the prisoner's humanity by showcasing a family relationship.

## **Power and Agency in Relationships**

Another theme that emerged in our analysis of the media sources was their portrayal of relationships among the subjects of each article. Relationships between family members were mentioned in a majority of the articles, generally to evoke sympathy and humanize inmates. We also identified three categories of non-familial relationships that served a different purpose. These three categories are relationships between (1) prison staff and inmates, (2) communities and inmates, and (3) advocacy groups and the prison system. The language used in each article spoke to the distribution of power and agency among members of the relationship, and the portrayal of each relationship was not always consistent across the articles from different news sources. While we acknowledge that the third category of relationships (advocacy groups/the prison system) played an important role in these articles, we will focus on the first two categories for the remainder of this paper. These two categories of relationships (prison staff/inmates and communities/inmates) are more closely related to our research questions, and include more language surrounding the direct experiences of prisoners.

## **Prison Staff and Inmates**

Prison staff and inmates were often placed in opposition to one another. News outlets like *NBC News* and the *Wall Street Journal*, though they lean towards opposing sides of the political spectrum (AllSides, 2020), both dichotomized the relationship between staff and inmates. The way these articles used language was notably divisive: relative to other news outlets, the *Wall Street Journal* article used terms for “inmates” with a strong negative connotation (e.g., “violent prisoners,” “murderers,” “parole violators,” “savvy jailbirds”), casting them as villains. While *NBC News* used more sympathetic terms for inmates (e.g., “people stuck behind bars”) it used more negative terms for prison staff, being the only source we viewed that referred to prison staff as “jailers” and “wardens.” Regardless of whether it was positive or negative, left-leaning or right-leaning, the language used by these two sources exacerbated the divide between prison staff and inmates.

While *NBC News* and the *Wall Street Journal* used the most extreme language, all the articles regardless of political bias portrayed prison staff as holding more power than inmates. There are several accounts of prison staff mistreating and/or neglecting inmates (*BBC News, The Guardian, Fox News, New York Times, LA Times, NBC News, CNN, Associated Press, Huffington Post*). Inmates were repeatedly assured that prison staff were taking the virus seriously, but numerous anecdotes demonstrate how inmates’ concerns over the spread of COVID-19 and their own health were ignored or violated. One prisoner at Farmville Detention Center in Virginia describes unsanitary conditions, a lack of medical treatment for the infected, and having pepper spray shot into his dorm when fellow inmates were sick with the virus – only to have these events denied by prison staff later on (*Huffington Post*). Individuals who spoke up or requested care were generally disregarded, suggesting a lack of control inmates have over their own health and safety. Abuses of power on behalf of the prison staff and lack of agency on behalf of inmates was a recurring theme in the articles we analyzed.

## **Communities and Inmates**

The relationship between communities and inmates was most often described through the lens of benefits, and was highlighted in four of the sources. Only one source, the “right-leaning” *Wall Street Journal*, painted this relationship negatively. The article shames progressives for “demanding that criminals be allowed to go free” while “hundreds of millions of law-abiding Americans were on lockdown.” The article, titled “You’re More Likely to Catch Covid at Home Than in Jail,” pronounces inmates a major threat to society. It describes uncontrolled releases, inmates purposefully infecting themselves with the virus, and provides statistics about murderers, parole violators, and “savvy jailbirds” being “...let loose...back to the communities they previously victimized.” In some ways, the *Wall Street Journal* article describes incarcerated individuals as having more power and agency relative to outside communities and society itself in their roles as aggressors.

The other sources discuss how inmates might contribute to society post-release by starting a business or using the GED that they earned while incarcerated (*BBC News, FOX News*). This positioning of inmates as outsiders who must contribute something in order to rejoin society suggests that communities outside of prisons are in a position of power relative to those incarcerated, as they define community membership. However, these articles also reveal a certain amount of agency on behalf of the inmates themselves. They detail how some individuals were productive members of the prison community who contributed by taking advantage of educational opportunities, or by looking out for their fellow inmates. For example, the inmate at Farmville Detention Center in Virginia mentioned earlier contributed to the prison community by voicing his health concerns and “...running self-help groups and a horticultural program for other inmates” (*Huffington Post*). In these ways, both prisoners and communities were described as having a certain amount of power and agency in constructing mutual beneficial relationships with one another.

## Implications

In choosing to investigate how various news sources reported on the topic of how prison populations were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, we used media as a means to learn about a situation for which we have no shared context, and in which the affected group is largely unable to affect the narrative of their own accord. In any circumstance, inmates have limited communication with the outside world and what communication they do have is closely monitored, and this is further complicated presently by visiting restrictions as a result of COVID-19. As our analysis included only one article from each source, the themes we noticed should not be used to draw conclusions about this specific topic, about the reporting capabilities of the individual news outlets themselves, or about media bias in general. However, these trends do provide insights into how we may approach news articles concerning similar issues – that is, issues for which we have no expertise or lived experience, and in which the population at the center of the story is relatively powerless to control their own narrative. Other instances of this dynamic in the current news include immigrants and asylum seekers in ICE detention centers, members of the Latinx community with significant language barriers, or children affected by remote learning during the pandemic.

First, the tendency of articles to use storytelling elements such as evocative descriptions, direct quotations, and ‘character references’ in order to humanize or stir an emotional response can provide immediate insight into whose story the article is trying to tell, and with whom the author intends the reader to sympathize. Being aware of this can allow a reader to step back and view the story more objectively – which is not to say that these humanizing elements should be disregarded. Rather, it is important to remember that parties on both sides of the story are human and that these same storytelling elements could have been applied to either or both, and to recognize the author’s agency in choosing which party to portray sympathetically. On the other hand, the fact that data can often be overwhelming makes numbers and statistics an excellent tool to cast one side of an issue in

a negative light. Coupled with a lack of storytelling elements, aspects of a situation described with quantitative data often feel cruel, impersonal, and inhuman.

Another important aspect to consider is whether the news source portrays one or more parties as having power or agency in a situation, or not. Considering who provides direct quotes for the article – and, therefore, whose knowledge and experience is considered most relevant to the situation or most important to convey to readers – is one easy determinant for this, as is examining how relationships between the subject population and others are portrayed. News sources that hope to inspire action may lean towards portraying the group in question as entirely powerless and at the mercy of the system, while their opponents become malicious actors who must be stopped. In some cases, this portrayal may be accurate, while in others it may be exaggerated to create a stronger emotional response and call to action for the reader to “save” these people from this situation. If this type of portrayal is paired with a devaluing of knowledge and experience from that community, however, it can be a dangerous recipe where those with no knowledge of the situation – the readers – feel empowered and even obliged to become involved, direct the course of action, and determine the best solution. This can be, at best, a suboptimal solution; at worst, it may cause further harm or damage to the marginalized population.

In approaching these types of situations in the news moving forward, readers can look for what those involved are saying directly, either within the article or, more importantly, from other sources. In some cases, it may be possible to find a source written directly by a member of the target population, or to see how this group is quoted in a variety of media sources. An important caveat is that no one individual should assume the burden of speaking for a group; just as readers should be wary of any news source which relies on quotes from only one person, a single source written directly by a member of the target group such as a letter or blog post cannot be used to make generalizations about the entire population. Ideally, the news we consume would already include a sampling of many different members of the target population. This is most important in

instances where readers are unlikely to know much, if anything, about the situation at hand; however, this is also when it is most difficult for reporters to collect a breadth of information from a variety of sources.

Overall, it is clear that while readers should be discerning with all news, it is particularly important in cases such as the one we investigated, where readers have little, if any, prior knowledge of the situation and there are significant barriers to those directly involved sharing their stories of their own accord. Readers should be attentive to power dynamics and relationships within the stories, but should remember that another relationship exists off the page: the relationship between themselves and the author. In this relationship, the author has the ultimate power to determine what is shared, how it is shared, and what perspectives to prioritize. Only by being constantly aware of this relationship and being critical of the choices the author made can a reader reassert agency in this relationship.

## **Conclusion**

Storytelling elements, quantitative data, and descriptions of relationships are used to shape perceptions of incarcerated individuals in terms of both their humanity and their agency over their lives. Readers must cultivate critical awareness of how news is conveyed in order to see the situation beyond the perspective of the author. This is particularly difficult with complex issues because solutions are often unclear, and perspectives neither “right” nor “wrong.”

While the “best” way to report remains unclear, storytelling in complex contexts can be managed appropriately so as to minimize contributions to harmful phenomena such as social fragmentation. Snowden and Boone’s (2007) model for managing complex contexts suggests that media discourse would encourage open discussion, dissent, and increased communication between stakeholders. Conklin (2005) also notes that a viable solution to a complex issue “...puts human relationships and social interactions at the center” (p.7). With these points in mind, readers can

balance their news consumption not just across the political spectrum, but through considering diversity of quoted sources, the balance of storytelling and data, and focusing on relationships and power dynamics between stakeholders. In these ways we can come to a better understanding of the experiences of marginalized individuals and also develop our own critical media literacy.

## Appendix A: News Sources Used in Analysis

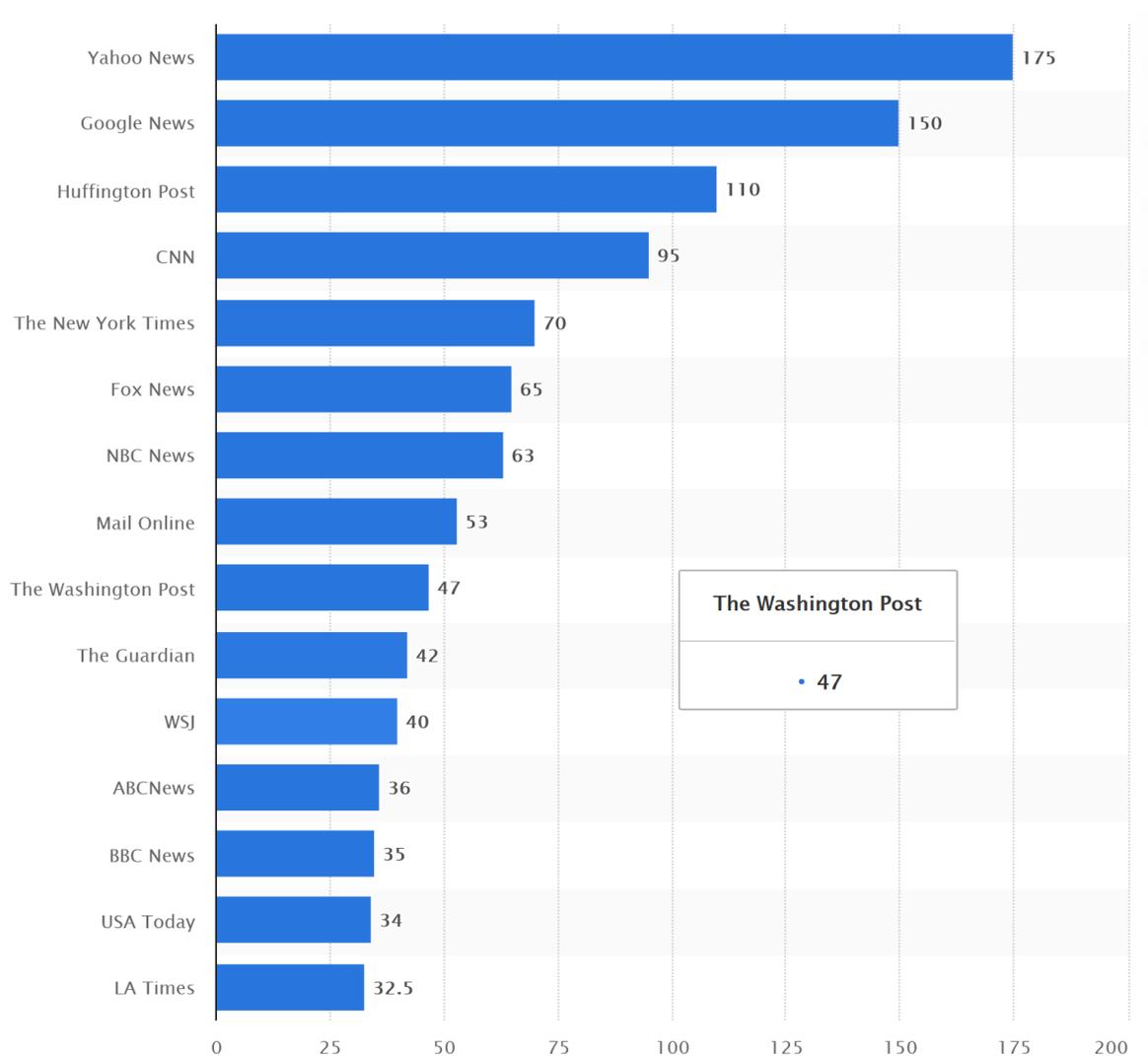
News Outlet	Article Title and Link
Huffington Post	<a href="#">The Last Months of a Canadian Who Died of COVID-19 in ICE Custody</a>
Fox News	<a href="#">Ohio inmate alleges COVID-19 outbreak in prison, lack of testing, threats of retaliation</a>
The Washington Post	<a href="#">Ex-congressman seeks to delay going to prison, citing COVID</a>
ABC News	<a href="#">Coronavirus infecting America's prison inmates 5 times more than outside, new study finds</a>
LA Times	<a href="#">California kept prison factories open. Inmates worked for pennies an hour as COVID-19 spread</a>
CNN	<a href="#">The death toll in ICE custody is the highest it's been in 15 years</a>
NBC News	<a href="#">Thousands of sick federal prisoners sought release as Covid-19 spread. Nearly all were denied.</a>
The Guardian	<a href="#">As a prison officer, I'm afraid of what Covid restrictions are doing to inmates</a>
BBC News	<a href="#">Coronavirus: Can this California prison save itself from Covid-19?</a>
The New York Times	<a href="#">Federal Prisons Will Let Inmates Have Visitors During Pandemic</a>
Daily Mail Online	<a href="#">COVID-19 cases explode in California prison</a>
The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)	<a href="#">You're More Likely to Catch Covid at Home Than in Jail</a>
USA Today	<a href="#">Former attorneys general: Criminal justice reform vital to slow spread of COVID-19</a>

## Appendix B: Sources Used to Evaluate Media Bias and Trustworthiness

### Major Media Sources

Amy Watson via Statista, September 2020.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/381569/leading-news-and-media-sites-usa-by-share-of-visits/>



Yahoo News and Google News, the two most visited platforms, were excluded as they produce no unique news content. All other sources were included.

## Media Bias

AllSides Media Bias Chart, AllSides, 2020.

<https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings>

# AllSides™ Media Bias Chart

All ratings are based on online content only — not TV, print, or radio content.  
Ratings do not reflect accuracy or credibility; they reflect perspective only.



AllSides Media Bias Ratings are based on multi-partisan, scientific analysis.  
Visit AllSides.com to view hundreds of media bias ratings.

Version 3 | AllSides 2020

## Perceptions of Media Trustworthiness

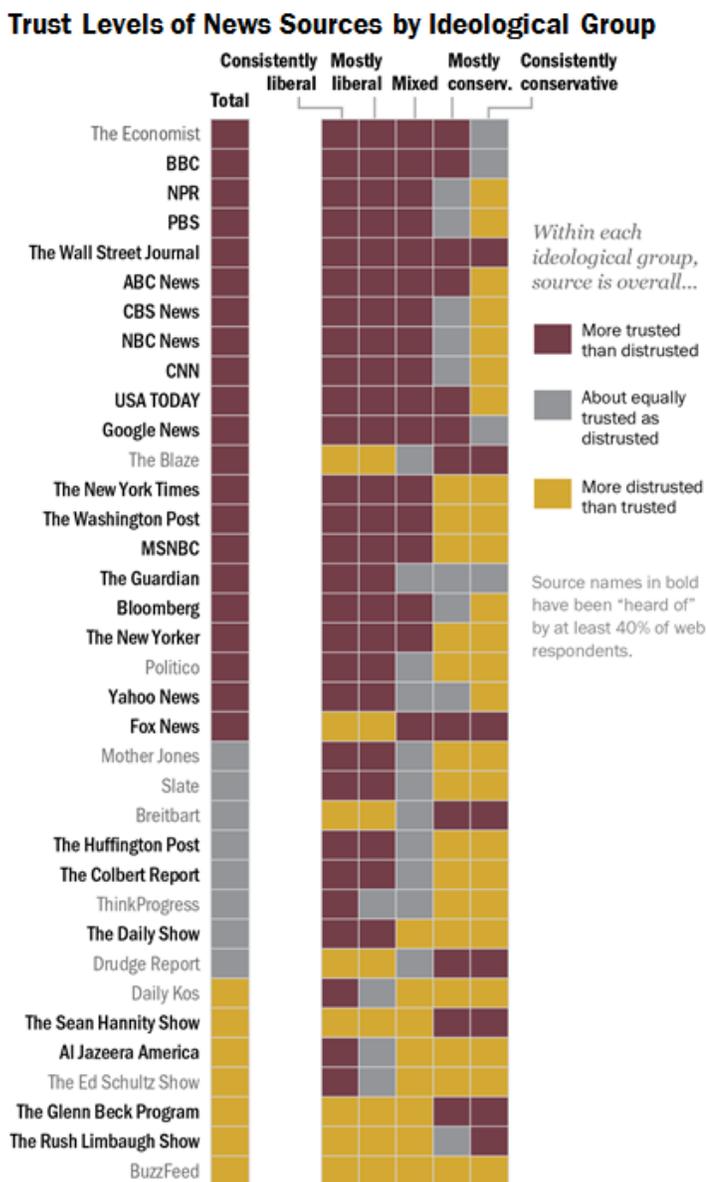
Pew Research Center, Political Polarization & Media Habits, 2014

Summary link: <https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>

Complete report link: [https://www.journalism.org/wp-](https://www.journalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2014/10/Political-Polarization-and-Media-Habits-FINAL-REPORT-7-27-15.pdf)

[content/uploads/sites/8/2014/10/Political-Polarization-and-Media-Habits-FINAL-REPORT-7-27-](https://www.journalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2014/10/Political-Polarization-and-Media-Habits-FINAL-REPORT-7-27-15.pdf)

[15.pdf](https://www.journalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2014/10/Political-Polarization-and-Media-Habits-FINAL-REPORT-7-27-15.pdf)



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q21a-21b. Based on web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see about the survey). Grouping of outlets is determined by whether the percent who trust each source is significantly different from the percent who distrust each source. Outlets are then ranked by the proportion of those who trust more than distrust each.

## Appendix C: Other References

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