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Marrissa S. Ballard

Salve Regina University, marrissa.ballard@salve.edu

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Indoctrination over Objectivity?
Examining *Breitbart*'s Framing of Candidates and Social Issues in the 2016 Election

By
Marrissa Ballard

Prepared for
Dr. Esch
Department of English and Communications
Salve Regina University

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ABSTRACT: *During the 2016 election, Breitbart News became a key conservative source in reporting on the candidates and social issues. Drawing on scholars who have studied news media and politics, this paper uses content analysis to dissect what specific frames appear in Breitbart's coverage. The study finds that Breitbart departs from typical journalistic standards, reinforces problematic gender and racial stereotypes, and utilizes propaganda tactics to spread conservative ideologies. Though it was once considered a fringe source, Breitbart's growing and highly engaged audience demonstrates the platform's potential to shape political discourse and even influence election outcomes.*

Introduction: News Media, Candidates, and Election 2016

Throughout the 2016 presidential election, the news media played an integral role in reporting on candidates, scandals, and social issues. Some of the most prevalent themes in news articles were issues of identity, and feminism in particular became a central part of election coverage. This election also demonstrated a rift between citizens, parties, and ideologies, and this division was clear in the ways that news sources reported on current events and the candidates. As sources began reporting on polls in fall 2016, I became interested in how news sources can frame political conversations depending on the information they include in their articles and the ways in which they phrase that information. In addition, the news landscape seemed to become increasingly fragmented as fringe sources gained more traction and followers, eventually emerging as key players in political conversation. Sites like *Breitbart News* were prevalent in news feeds for election information, often delivering highly conservative and hyper-partisan news, commentary, and clickbait articles that garnered millions of likes and readers.

The number of readers and viewers proved important during the 2016 election, and thus this past election serves as an excellent case study for examining how media coverage can help to popularize or silence a candidate. It was often noted that Bernie Sanders, a grassroots candidate who focused on socioeconomic issues, received less media coverage than the two main candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Trump, an outlier from the beginning of his

campaign, was often featured in headlines due to his extreme stances and statements, and these articles served to spread his platform and ideologies. According to *The New York Times*, this massive amount of coverage amounted to “\$2 billion worth of media attention” (Confessore and Yourish). The writers of this report then link this amount of coverage to Trump’s ability to dominate the primaries, despite not being seen as a serious candidate by many pundits.

Reflecting on the election, these numbers demonstrate how news media can shape results simply through covering a subject across different platforms and formats. Highly partisan sources also use that tactic and can amplify a candidate’s message to a group of devoted readers who share that source’s political viewpoint.

With the increasing partisanship and polarization among voters and news sources, the 2016 election also indicated several shifts in journalistic practices. Within this conversation, it is necessary to explore questions of objectivity and bias, questions that have long plagued news media and scholars. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), one of the leading voices on journalistic ethics, provides helpful guidelines on what to expect from well-rounded news articles. While it is true that the idea of objectivity itself can be questioned in that the reporter or platform chooses what subjects to cover, these journalistic traditions and concepts of ethics can still hold news media to a standard of reporting. According to the SPJ, journalists can demonstrate objectivity and careful reporting through an attention to detail, accuracy, and the use of sources (Society of Professional Journalists). The number one edict is to “seek truth and report it,” and this includes documentation of interviews, quotes, and admittances of possible biases (Society of Professional Journalists). In the ever-changing social media news environment, it is important to question whether these standards are present in news reporting. In addition, as

fringe sources continue to gain power and readership, scholars must analyze the messages that are being spread through non-traditional platforms.

While many scholars have studied mainstream sources like Fox News, *The New York Times*, and their coverage of issues, fringe sources have often received less attention despite their growing popularity. In October 2016, *CNN Money* reported that “*Breitbart* claims a bigger digital audience than every other conservative outlet with the exception of Fox News and Drudge Report” (Byers). This report demonstrates that *Breitbart*’s extreme and opinion-driven partisan reporting is entering the mainstream at an increasing rate, and thus it is important to study and understand the ways in which sites like *Breitbart* represent feminism and social issues. In addition, if these sources are now acting as information sources for the public, it is doubly important to analyze their coverage. Such research could possibly shed light on the following questions: How did their coverage of social issues, in relation to the two candidates, contribute to or affect political discourse? How does *Breitbart* and the 2016 Election media cycle demonstrate journalism’s changing form and tone? In researching this topic, I aim to discuss the discourse happening in *Breitbart* articles and possibly discern how its coverage may have shaped public opinions and knowledge about election issues.

Literature Review: Gender, Politics, and Bias in Election Coverage

Several scholars have studied bias in news coverage and the media’s role in politics. In particular, Julia R. Azari analyzes the news media’s impact on the 2016 election and how coverage may have influenced Trump’s victories in the primaries. For Azari, the news media tend to work “within, not against, the political institutions that shape nominations” (677). Azari frames the media’s role through three central ideas: coordination, consistency, and coverage. One of the most important aspects, coordination, signifies the media’s creation and dissemination

of a “shared message” (Azari 678). In this way, the news media serves a “core party function” by publicizing Donald Trump consistently, which then allowed him to appeal to voters (Azari 678). In addition, by detailing his many controversial plans, news media coordinated his image with an air of presidential power. As Azari notes, this representation is inaccurate, as the level of power prescribed to presidential figures often differs from the power they actually have while in office. Combining these three perspectives, Azari hypothesizes that, in the case of the 2016 election, the media’s main role was repeating rather than challenging institutional power.

Even though Azari does not provide exact examples or publications to bolster her points, other scholars have tested how the press can act as an effective mouthpiece for political figures. In a 2008 study, researchers analyzed how former President George W. Bush’s use of “masculinized language” in his speeches was repeated and disseminated by mainstream media sources (Coe et al. 32). To analyze how the press interacted with this language, the researchers studied Bush’s public addresses, newscasts from NBC, and editorials from *The New York Times*. In their results, they found that the press had indeed repeated his language without questioning it, and thus served as the “government’s little helper” (Coe et al. 37). The study’s conclusions not only demonstrate the media’s tendency to spread his masculine messaging, but also the president’s power to shape news coverage. Looking at this analysis, it seems likely that the media in 2016 played a central role in constantly publicizing Trump’s statements and tweets as well as repeating his own “masculinized language,” though it is not easy to answer whether this directly affected his victory. These studies overall demonstrate the media’s significant role in representing candidates and political issues. However, in the current media landscape, it is also important to consider the role of partisan biases and how these biases can further shape news coverage.

In observing past elections, it is clear that partisan sources occupy a powerful space in political discourse. In a 2005 study, Jonathan Morris discusses the predictors and effects of consuming partisan sources. His results indicated that Democrats are more likely to watch CNN, while Republicans are more likely to watch Fox News (65). Fox News, notes Morris, is known for appealing to “Americans right of center” and moving away from traditional ideas of journalistic objectivity (60). Interestingly, Morris also discusses how “the effect of party identification on viewing habits is stronger for the Fox News audience” (65). This conclusion reveals that Fox News viewers are more likely to be guided by their partisan views than other audiences. His results also show that Fox News viewers are more cynical towards the mainstream media and that “in each year, Fox News viewers are clearly the least knowledgeable of the three audiences” in terms of political issues (68). Thus, his results not only demonstrate the partisan media habits of viewers, but also what information they were receiving from these sources.

In 2007, Morris replicated his study but focused only on Fox News and its portrayal of the Bush administration. For his method, he focused on the data only from the 2004 presidential election, which makes his research more relevant for my study of the 2016 election. Again, he mentions the audience’s cynical attitude towards mainstream media, but also notes that bias is more apparent when the bias in question is “counter to their views” (Morris 709). For example, a Fox News audience member may see and take issue with perceived liberal biases, but not see an issue with an apparent conservative bias. He also discusses how viewers were using more alternative platforms for their news sources. In the increasingly fragmented news landscape of 2007 and now 2017, Morris emphasizes that viewers are receiving “different versions of the same issues” and that, ironically, the access to a multitude of platforms may actually lessen

exposure to divergent sources (726). In 2012, researchers Robert H. Wicks, Jan L. Wicks, and Shauna A. Morimoto again confirmed that individuals tend to choose media that reinforce their beliefs. In this way, limited knowledge, misinformation, as well as “partisan selection and polarization” may be increased among voters (Morimoto, Wicks and Wicks 1132). Each of these studies uses survey data to analyze the polarization occurring due to the use of partisan media, and this polarization only increases when scholars move from studying audiences to looking at the content of news coverage.

Content analysis demonstrates how news coverage can influence readers through framing information to fit a particular narrative or agenda. Framing differs from bias in that it can operate on a subtle, unconscious level through the use of particular devices, perspectives, or words to shape the reader’s perception of an issue. According to Blumell and Rodriguez, framing can also influence public opinions about any given subject through the use of sources, quotes, and headlines. In their research, they analyze source quotes to discern how the *New York Times* framed the issue of marriage equality. Echoing previous scholars’ conclusions, the authors note that the news media represents “a larger hegemonic power structure” and has often “played a role of creating and regulating the boundaries of gender” (Blumell and Rodriguez 343). Blumell and Rodriguez focus on the “master frames” of morality and equality, which are very relevant to my own study (345). They also note that political ideologies often affect what frames are used. For example, they state that conservatives and religious activists are more likely to appeal to the morality frame, while liberal sources like the Human Rights Campaign are more likely to discuss issues within the equality frame (345-6). Their study of source quotes demonstrates how authors can frame information depending on the sources they choose to feature, a subtle detail that can

drastically change the information the reader receives. Further analysis demonstrates that framing can also appear within elements like headlines, images, and leads.

For example, framing can occur through rhetorical devices like repetition, either through a repeated connection between two ideas or a repeated phrase. Scholar Erika Falk focuses on the metaphor of “playing the gender card” and dissects how it had been used by the press during Clinton’s campaigns (192). She argues that this phrase effectively masks “relations of power and dominance” in its ability to discredit a female politician’s speeches, stances, and the discrimination she faces on the campaign trail (204). Through examining this metaphor, Falk demonstrates how language in news coverage can have an impact on the portrayal of women in politics. Similarly, scholar Erica Scharrer studies this same phenomenon by categorizing gendered negative statements that appeared in news coverage of the 2000 New York Senate race between Hillary Clinton and Rudolph Giuliani. The results of Scharrer’s study demonstrate that Clinton received more negative coverage and an “unfavorable tone” when stepping out of traditional gender roles (Scharrer 398). She also coded the statements into categories according to whether they related to Clinton’s character, personality, or political activity. After coding the articles, Scharrer found that “a substantial number of negative statements were based on gender” (403). Overall, Scharrer’s work provides a helpful framework for categorizing claims made about political figures, particularly in races that include a rivalry between male and female candidates. Building on her analysis, I will examine how partisanship impacts gendered frames and statements in campaign coverage.

Regarding the 2016 election, some scholars have already considered how these gendered frames often appeared in articles. In particular, Kelly Wilz notes that women who attempt to seek political power are often “pornified, degraded, diminished, and treated differently” (358). She

also argues that women in politics must “enact just the right degree of femininity and masculinity” in order “to be taken seriously” (358). Clinton’s problem, Wilz argues, is that she has failed to be feminine enough. This is most apparent in a comparison between Clinton and her main opponent in the Democratic Party, Bernie Sanders. Wilz hypothesizes that Sanders could “navigate this complex sphere” through enacting a “hyper-masculine” persona, with much of his campaign concerned with over-turning the economic system (358). Because of this hyper-masculinity, Wilz argues that Sanders could represent all the same liberal beliefs as Clinton with a more appealing edge. Regarding Clinton’s Republican opponent, Donald Trump, Wilz notes that his gendered attacks against her gained increased traction among his supporters. Overall, Wilz argues that he gained support by “playing on the anxieties” of his constituents with the threat of “social inferiors” taking their place (Wilz 359). Trump’s campaign success, for Wilz, demonstrates that the oval office is still entrenched in notions of masculinity. Her analysis also shows that the hatred and backlash against Clinton is often tied to her gender.

Coverage of the 2016 Election not only focused on gender and feminism, but also emphasized the backlash occurring against current social movements. While it may seem particularly acute, this backlash is emblematic of a cycle of criticism that has repeated itself throughout the last several decades. Susan Faludi, in her aptly-titled work *Backlash*, discusses these reactions and puts them into a social and historical context. In her chapter about the news media, Faludi notes how reporters “discredited” the feminist movement in the 60s and 70s (75). She argues that the media, again acting in its role of disseminating a shared message, “popularized the backlash beyond the New Right’s wildest dreams” (76). With the rise of “trend journalism” in the 80s, the news media exercised its power to repeat messages, and Faludi notes that “said enough times, anything can be made to seem true” (79). Her attention to the “New

Right” makes her analysis even more relevant to our current political climate, and she argues that this political group was built on “backlash politics” with feminism as their target (234). Not only did this group enact social change via spreading their message, but Faludi also discusses their eventual entrance into national politics. Through Faludi’s analysis, it becomes apparent that the media plays an integral role in bringing certain movements and conversations into the public’s consciousness, and thus the news media has a particular power in shaping political discourse.

It is clear that there are many scholars discussing partisanship, gendered news coverage, and the media’s general role in politics. However, in my study I bring these concepts together in paying special attention to *Breitbart News* and its coverage of the 2016 election. In my research, I discern and describe the site’s style of coverage and how the platform fulfills or challenges traditional understandings of journalism and objectivity. In particular, I study how *Breitbart* interacted with social issues and gender. With these concepts in mind, my research questions for this study were: What frames appear in *Breitbart News*’ coverage of the candidates and the election? What tactics do the authors use to create these frames, and how does this contribute to the site’s specific brand of online journalism?

Methodology

To better understand *Breitbart* and its style of coverage, I gathered a sample of articles using the search function on its website. I used the search terms “feminism,” “gender,” “women’s rights,” “racism,” “LGBT,” “Hillary Clinton,” “Donald Trump,” “election 2016,” and a combination of those terms. To combat any possible bias in my searches, I also looked into what particular phrases right-leaning sites use in their coverage of social issues. After that research, I added the terms “identity politics,” “isms,” “political correctness,” “Alt-Right,” and “nationalism.” The hard-right and Alt-Right movements also often use the term “social justice

warrior” to describe individuals who are a part of social movements, so I also searched for that term in election coverage. The search function on the website always yields five pages of results, and from these results I selected pieces according to the criteria of word count, date, and amount of original reporting.

To narrow the possible results, I studied articles that were published between October 25th to November 22nd, which gave me a date range of two weeks prior and two weeks after the election. I wanted to include post-result coverage to gauge how *Breitbart* reporters felt about President Trump’s win. This also allowed me to study the frames that appeared in the coverage of his victory. During my search, I also applied a second criteria of word count and omitted articles that were under 200 words, as many of *Breitbart*’s pieces are short and quote-heavy. While looking at the results I noticed a few patterns in *Breitbart*’s coverage as I encountered many articles that were transcripts of polls, videos, or radio appearances with no original text or reporting. In addition, many results included a short article repeating what a commentator or reporter said on another show or video, the only original reporting being the headline and the lede. I also found many articles that would include a headline and an excerpt from another news source such as *Huffington Post*, *New York Times*, or *The New Yorker* with a hyperlink to the original story. I decided to omit these articles because they did not include any interaction with the information and included little to no reporting from the writer. I made exceptions for articles that were repeating information from either of the candidates. With all of my criteria, I gathered a sample of 123 articles. I then numbered each article and used a random number generator (Random.org) to pick the 75 articles that I would read.

Within my sample of 75 articles, I studied all written parts of the piece including the headlines, quotes, sources, and text from the reporter. I looked for mentions of social issues,

feminism, gender, and the candidates and then used the context around the word to discern what frame or pattern was appearing. I also paid special attention to verbs and adjectives placed around names or issues. For example, a few of the articles in my sample repeatedly used the word “elite” to describe institutions and politicians, and this emerged as a criticism that linked these individuals with corruption or ignorance. Expressed emotions were also noted with attention to exclamation points, italics, or the use of metaphors. Once I noticed a few patterns, I created a spreadsheet with a column for categories such as author’s gender, tone, and source demographics. I then created a number-based key for several categories and coded each article. For example, in the category of “Tone” I use “1” for “sarcasm,” “2” for criticism, “3” for celebratory,” and “4” for “objective.” (See Appendix for all categories and numbered codes used in this study.) Articles that fit more than one code in a category were counted for each applicable code, so an article might be categorized as “1,4” to indicate sarcasm and some objective statements. I thought it was important to note any articles that included objective sentences or sections, even if some emotional language was present, because these mixed tones demonstrated how *Breitbart* often combined typical news standards with more partisan, opinionated writing.

Once I had completed my spreadsheet, I calculated patterns based on the appearance of frames and re-read examples of each category to cement the results. For detailed lists of results in each category, see the Table 1 and Table 2 in the Appendix. While this quantitative data was important for my analysis, I also analyzed particular passages as examples of categories. I also used my notes on each article to discover new patterns that I had not accounted for. The numbers and notes I gathered from counting the appearance of patterns then aided in my analysis of *Breitbart News*’ framing of feminism and social issues in its election coverage. After interpreting my spreadsheet, I combined some of the patterns into larger frames, such as gendered frames,

racial frames, or general elements of *Breitbart*'s coverage. These subsections allowed me to break my analysis up into parts, revealing the site's style, tactics, and overall slant.

Analysis

Breaking down Breitbart

Breitbart News was founded in 2005 and makes its conservative, anti-establishment viewpoint clear in both its design and reporting. The site features large subsections titled "Big Journalism" and "Big Government," which work to portray the news media and government as large, oppressive, and singularly organized structures. In addition, through its frequent use of non-traditional reporting, *Breitbart* departs from the typical ideas regarding journalistic objectivity and further distances itself from the media it criticizes. In the clearest example of this break from typical journalistic norms, *Breitbart* often calls attention to itself in its reporting. In 10 articles within the sample of 75, *Breitbart* reported on itself, its former-chief Steve Bannon, or its writers. Often, these articles were used to defend *Breitbart* or Bannon from allegations of having links to extreme alt-right groups. In one of the articles, the author reports on how the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) "backed away" from its claims that Bannon has ties to white nationalists (Pollak 17 November). Importantly, the ADL's statement also includes an allegation against *Breitbart* that describes its reporting as "inflammatory" (Pollak 17 November). The author then refutes each of the allegations by calling them false, but does not provide any evidence as to why the allegations are untrue. Instead, the author argues against the ADL's claims by pointing out their "left-wing ideological orientation" and characterizing their platform as un-objective. The author then plainly states that "*Breitbart* is not an alt-right publication, and the daily news content of the website speaks for itself" (Pollak 17 November). In this example, the author does not provide any facts to dispute the ADL's claims and instead argues against the

allegations by calling the organization biased, again without any supporting details. Four of the ten articles about the website served as defenses from such allegations; however, these defenses rely simply on the author's opinions and own views of the site. Several of these articles also demonstrate *Breitbart's* care to present itself as an objective news source in comparison to other platforms. In this way, these articles demonstrate its branding as an anti-establishment source.

As seen above, *Breitbart* often defends itself from the accusation of bias and falsehood by using these same accusations against other news organizations. In the another article, Pollak – apparently one of the platform's main voices – reports that *Breitbart* has been included on a list of "fake news" sites. The author then states that "*Breitbart* and other legitimate conservative news media websites" appear on the list, while "openly partisan left-wing sites like *The Huffington Post*" are not listed (Pollak 15 November). In this statement, the platform presents itself as "legitimate" and defends itself only by criticizing the legitimacy of other news sites, specifically targeting sites that operate with a slant opposite to its own. Similarly, in another article, Pollak comments on "the partisan behavior of the media," as if *Breitbart* is not an openly partisan source (Pollak 7 November). Pollak also questions the legitimacy of sites like *The Huffington Post* by placing quotation marks around the word 'reporting' – effectively characterizing their articles as false. In another article related to the charge of "fake news," Pollak criticizes the *New York Times* for linking Steve Bannon and *Breitbart* to "white nationalism" and the "alt-right" (Pollak 21 November). In calling one of the most historically reputable sources "fake news" – a charge that was once used against *Breitbart* – Pollak demonstrates his view that his organization is a true, objective, and legitimate source. These examples also exemplify the platform's anti-mainstream media stance.

In addition, these articles present the platform's understanding of its role in the media ecosystem and its involvement with national politics. The clearest example of this appears in a headline stating, "President-Elect Donald J. Trump Praises *Breitbart* News Network: 'It's a Pretty Big Thing'" (Boyle 22 November). In the article, the author highlights a quote in which Trump compares *Breitbart* to *The New York Times*, stating, "They cover stories like [*The New York Times*] covers stories" (Boyle 22 November). Here, a disconnect appears between this article and articles that insult *The New York Times* as "fake news." In this piece, the author highlights the comparison as a badge of verification for *Breitbart*, but in the other article, the author characterizes *NYT*'s coverage as false and untrustworthy. Such differences between articles and authors demonstrate how *Breitbart* will frame information to fit the agenda of each piece. If it is an article defending Bannon or the platform from allegations, the sources are false. However, if *Breitbart* wants to cement its place as a credible source, *The New York Times* is used as a type of model. In this example, *Breitbart* also boasts a close relationship to the Trump administration, and this continues in other articles that discuss more of its writers joining his staff (Hayward 22 November). One could argue that in these connections to the President, *Breitbart* is embedding itself in an establishment. However, because this administration was portrayed as anti-politician and anti-establishment, *Breitbart*'s connection to it only exemplifies its anti-establishment messaging. Overall, this self-referential reporting demonstrates how *Breitbart* frames other news sources in comparison to itself as well as its power in the Trump administration. These frames also emphasize the site's anti-media and anti-establishment stances, which inform much of its coverage.

Elements of Objectivity?

There are many aspects of *Breitbart*'s coverage that make the platform seem as though it is operating under codes of objectivity and legitimate news gathering, while other elements set it apart from typical standards. These patterns are dangerous in that they disguise the more insidious frames and practices that appear in *Breitbart*'s coverage and may give it the appearance of a reliable, reputable news source. It is important to note that *Breitbart*'s articles do often hold to the typical formula of journalistic reporting, including the use quotes and sources. However, the presence of these tactics must also be judged on the way they are used to frame information.

In regard to quoting, across the sample the average number of quotes per story was 7.5, with a high of 43 quotes in a story about Jill Stein (Hahn). Ten articles in the sample did not use any quotes, and these were pieces that were entirely written from the author's perspective. It is important to note here that the use of abundant quotes may lend more objectivity to the stories, but quotes are still filtered through *Breitbart*'s conservative slant. For example, in the story about Jill Stein and Hillary Clinton, all of the quotations are used to frame Clinton as untrustworthy and corrupt. Further, all of the quotations come either from Stein – who is anti-Clinton – or columnists who are writing based on opinion and not fact. Within the subject of opinion versus fact, *Breitbart* also neglects to label or separate its opinion pieces from its news stories. Clearly, some of its articles hold the formula of editorial pieces due to the clear authorial voice and lack of quotes, but they are never labeled as such. This is problematic, as many of *Breitbart*'s pieces emerge as a mix between the two formats, and it is unclear what pieces are meant to be read as fact-based news stories.

In addition to the number and use of quotations, patterns also emerged in the use of sources. In stories that used sources, the average number was 2 sources per story with a high of 18 different voices. Of the 75, 29 of the articles quoted other news sources or polls, with six

articles using these sources as the only quoted voice. In terms of political leanings, 38 articles included conservative sources, with 15 articles solely quoting from those voices. However, the number of quoted liberal or pro-Clinton sources was not far behind, with 31 articles using liberal or progressive voices. While this may give the impression that *Breitbart* is including a good range of voices, it is important to remember that these liberal sources were often used to criticize Clinton, the so-called “Left,” or the Democratic Party. For example, there were quite a few articles that quoted Bernie Sanders, Barack Obama, and Jill Stein, but these sources were only used to critique Clinton and highlight the division within left-leaning groups or political parties. The opinions of these sources outside of this purpose are not given, like their opinions on the economic system or on Trump himself. This example demonstrates how the authors use these sources to frame particular information or subjects, all while leaving out other opinions that do not fit with the article’s agenda. While it is true that authors will often only include relevant information in articles, writers should also work to address any contradictions or discrepancies that would undermine the quotes presented in their work. The fact that many of these sources opposed Trump, for example, was never addressed in any of these articles.

In addition to the use of sources, *Breitbart* writers demonstrate frames and agendas within articles through their use of tone. The largest pattern in this category included 35 articles that utilized an angry tone to criticize political actions and movements. Most obviously, this tone occurred in an article with the headline “Hillary Clinton Should Be in Jail, Not the White House” (Tancredo 5 November). This article reads as angry from the very beginning, asserting that it is a “national embarrassment” for Clinton to even have been nominated (Tancredo). The author then continues, stating, “The only reason anyone should vote for Hillary Clinton on November 8 is give formal representation at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to the nation’s criminal class”

(Tancredo). The author then provides 16 bulleted points about alleged crimes that Clinton committed, none of which are explained aside from a one-sentence blurb, and ends the article by asking the reader to vote “NO!” on the “Clinton Crime Syndicate” (Tancredo). In this line, the author directly tries to persuade or influence the reader’s decision. The publishing date of this critical piece is also significant, as it was posted three days before the election and fully villainizes Clinton as a corrupt, criminal candidate.

In addition to anger, other tones appeared in smaller patterns. The second largest category included 27 articles which held mostly objective tones, meaning that the author used other people’s voices to give opinions and state facts. However, articles often held some elements of objectivity mixed with sarcasm, anger, or inflammatory language, and thus it is hard to isolate solely objective pieces. In general, 12 articles held a mixed tone or were hard to discern due to the blurring between opinion and news pieces. Another 12 articles utilized sarcasm to mock Democrats, Clinton, or liberals. For example, in an article quoting Clinton’s views that Muslims are “peaceful,” the author undercuts her words with a sarcastic use of italics, stating that “she doesn’t want too *many* ground troops,” (Hayward). Another example occurs in the platform’s analysis of election day results, in which the commentator uses overt insults and infantilizing phrases to insult Clinton supporters, most notably in the phrase “poor little snowflakes” (Breitbart News). Aside from the sarcastic tone, 13 of the articles used celebratory language, especially when coupled with news of Trump’s performance in the polls and overall victory. There were four articles in which the writer seemed to reassure the reader that Trump would win, and these articles made use of celebratory language as an avenue of this assurance. Lastly, in my sample, there were a few outliers that did not match the tone and style of the rest of the reporting, such as a serious report about the national suicide hotlines receiving more calls after the election

results were publicized (Rodriguez). However, the small number of outliers only served to emphasize how *Breitbart's* typical style and tone appeared across the majority of the sample. (See Figure 1 for examples of articles within each tone category.)

Further patterns demonstrate how *Breitbart* creates its style of coverage, and one important feature to note is the make-up of its staff. When looking at the writers, I determined their gender not only by looking at their name but also by searching for them on *Breitbart's* database or through Google. I would then discern the author's gender through finding a photo or their personal social media accounts. My results revealed that the majority of the articles I looked at were written by men and featured male sources. With these figures in mind, it is apparent that the articles in my sample privileged male voices, despite Pollak's description of the staff as "diverse" (Pollak 21 November). In my sample, 58 pieces were attributed to male reporters. One of the pieces was written by both a male and a female, but otherwise only 14 articles were written by women and 5 were attributed to "Breitbart News." This might indicate that *Breitbart's* staff is made up of mostly male authors, with some female commentators featured periodically. Gender was also important in the inclusion of sources, as 55 articles included male sources, while only 30 included female sources. Interestingly, 22 articles solely quoted men, while only 4 articles solely quoted women. In addition, female voices were most often only included in articles that held a mix of multiple sources, including organizations and several male sources.

Further, female authors and sources were often employed to speak about other women or stereotypical "women's issues" such as motherhood. One of the few articles written by a female focuses on a mother who "kicked out" her child for voting for Trump (Shadwick). The article is clearly meant to criticize the mother and is accompanied by an upsetting recording of the incident. While the mother arguably deserves some criticism for treating her young child in this

way, it is interesting that this article was given to a female reporter because motherhood and child-bearing are typically seen as “female” issues or subjects. In addition, several of the articles used female voices, such as politicians or columnists, to explicitly critique Clinton as either “not representing all women” or as a “corporatist hawk” (Swoyer and Hahn). These examples demonstrate how *Breitbart* only included female voices to criticize other women, effectively ignoring female perspectives on many other issues. Interestingly, the site would sometimes point to feminist voices as credible sources to critique Clinton, but in other articles would feature distinctly anti-feminist views and decry the feminist movement as a whole. In one article featuring Camille Paglia as a key interview, the author – who is also female – mentions the “gender card” and discusses how Paglia’s “view of feminism” is stronger and better than Clinton’s (Berry). This again demonstrates how information is molded to fit the specific agenda of the article, leading to many inconsistencies in the platform’s reporting. This pattern also emerges as a subtle form of framing that sets a standard for what kind of subjects women are able to speak on. In addition, not only does *Breitbart* propagate these gendered stereotypes in its structure, but also in its coverage of the candidates.

Framing Gender and the Candidates

In accordance with prior research, the candidates were often presented in opposite and gendered terms. Donald Trump was most often portrayed with a sense of success, with this frame appearing 22 times in the 34 articles that applied to him. In portraying Trump with an air of success, *Breitbart* emphasized his status as a masculine ideal. This pattern was most apparent in reports on polls, but also emerged in articles about his “accomplishments” for America, which were discussed even before he took office (Pollak). Importantly, Trump’s success was often connected to economic ideas in reports on the stock market, his business, or quotes from

corporate sources. For example, in an article about the stock market ending on a “high” after the election, several CEOs and chief economists are quoted stating that the “stock market will settle down and decide that it likes Trump” (Hayward 9 November). This framing also correlates with prior research, as male candidates are often connected to financial or economic issues under a gendered assumption that men are more fiscally responsible than women (Scharrer). It could be also argued that this framework is meant to demonstrate Trump’s career as a businessman. However, if the platform wanted to accurately report on his past endeavors, the authors should also address the alleged failures and bankruptcies he faced, which were highly publicized by other outlets during the campaign. Thus, in only framing Trump as successful based on monetary means and ignoring any controversy that contradicts this frame, *Breitbart* reproduced traditional, conservative, and stereotypical ideals about the role of leaders and male candidates.

Aside from success, Trump was also associated with anti-establishment sentiments, thereby representing him as a political outsider and independent thinker. This frame appeared 14 times and set him apart as *Breitbart*’s ideal candidate, as his anti-establishment platform mirrored its own. This also closely aligns with typical constructions of masculinity that include an emphasis on being independent rather than cooperating. Overall, Trump’s campaign and presidency demonstrated how anti-authority and anti-establishment values became a key aspect of expressing strength, prowess, and masculinity. The idea of being anti-establishment or existing outside of the so-called “system” also signifies the masculine quality of not being easily influenced or thinking for oneself. Articles that contained this frame also portrayed Trump as a symbolic figure of renewal that would upend the current political system, again aligning the candidate with *Breitbart*’s own views. These sentiments were most apparent in two articles that discussed what Trump “means” for America and what he has accomplished (Milo). In another

piece written by Geert Wilders, he lauds the victory as a sign that the “media and the chattering classes have all been beaten.” In this quote, Trump is clearly framed as an anti-media, anti-establishment savior. Some articles focused specifically on the idea that the media was rigged against Trump, and this was most apparent in a transcription one of Trump’s radio appearances (Hayward). Trump is quoted saying “the press has been unbelievably unfair” and accuses the media of ignoring Clinton’s scandals (Hayward). In smaller quantities, Trump was portrayed as trustworthy, collected, rational, and strong, and there were no articles in my sample that spoke negatively about him. Looking at these results, *Breitbart*’s framing of Trump as a powerful figure heavily relied on and fell within stereotypical masculine qualities.

As for Hillary Clinton, many of the articles in my sample disempowered her through a critical view of her behavior, personal life, and politics. Within the 40 articles that applied to her, Clinton was most often framed as an untrustworthy figure, but this finding is not surprising due to the media cycle’s focus on her email scandal. The “untrustworthy” frame appeared 19 times and is most apparent in the opinionated articles about her alleged “crimes” (Tancredo 5 November). Other articles portrayed her as dishonest, also adding to her untrustworthiness. For example, in an article about “ObamaCare,” Moons and Pollak record a quote from Mike Pence stating, “I guess even with a Clinton, sometimes truth happens” (Moons & Pollak). This sense of distrust was emphasized in Clinton’s supposed “establishment” ties to Obama, the Democratic party, and corporatism. Interestingly, Clinton’s connections to corporations are framed negatively as evidence of her corruption, while Trump’s connections to CEOs are used as evidence of his power and success. Through these opposing frames, *Breitbart* again reinforces the gender binary, and its reporting exemplifies how it is less acceptable for a female politician to be involved in economics. One article specifically focuses on her ad spending, using the

amount to demonstrate Clinton's alleged failures in her campaign (McHugh) In another article, Rush Limbaugh is quoted saying that Clinton is "not seen as a Democrat" but instead as part of an elite "club" of self-interested politicians (Hudson). In both articles, Clinton is firmly entrenched in some sort of establishment, though the definition of the word changes between pieces to refer to political administrations or financial "elites." This framing again ignores any contradictory information, such as Trump's ties to large businesses, in favor of setting Clinton up as a foil to Trump. The emphasis on her ties to these establishments also presents her as part of a group rather than an individual, and this representation aligns with the stereotypical idea that women are more easily influenced or less likely to act independently.

In addition to untrustworthiness, Clinton was most often associated with failure or an inability to complete tasks, and these failures were also connected to her status as an "establishment" candidate. Articles that covered Clinton's loss emphasized her "failure" to address the crowds at her "own victory party" on Election day (Pollak 8 November). Other articles, frequently featuring Obama's voice, framed the loss as Clinton's failure to connect with voters and her "divisive" campaign (Munro 21 November). This use of Obama's voice is interesting, as Munro continues to criticize Obama and his politics while also using his quotes as credible points to critique Clinton. As seen in the above quote, many of the articles that covered the election results linked Clinton's loss to her focus on social issues. This is significant because *Breitbart's* coverage often portrays those who are connected to social issues as overly emotional, sensitive, or irrational by reporting on Clinton supporters "crying" and "hugging each other" (Breitbart News 8 November). Here, Clinton is also portrayed in stereotypical, emotional, and feminine terms due to her ties to social issues.

Interestingly, there were also several articles in my sample that framed Clinton as dangerous, either because of her establishment ties or her emotions. This representation links her with stereotypical ideas of women being emotional and unable to handle tough situations. One article begins this idea in its headline, “Hillary Clinton Throwing Objects and Screaming Obscenities in Election Night Meltdown,” and the author repeats this violent and dramatic language throughout the article. The use of “screaming,” “throwing,” and “meltdown,” paints Clinton as a child having a tantrum. The night is characterized as an “evening of rage” for Clinton, and the lede repeats the language of the headline in reporting that she was “shouting profanities, banging tables, and turning objects not nailed down into projectiles” (Flynn). While the purpose of my study was not to fact-check *Breitbart*’s articles, it is important to note here that the entire article is based on anonymous tips from a source who spoke to *The American Spectator*, an online commentary website run by one individual named Emmett Tyrrell. *Breitbart* then repeated the quotes from that website, treating Tyrrell as an expert on Clinton, but this information is not credible or founded in facts. In addition, Flynn uses *The American Spectator*’s commentary again to introduce coverage dated to the 90s which also paints Clinton with “a foul mouth and a good throwing arm” (Flynn). The article then implies a history of abuse between Clinton and her husband, positing that he avoided her on election night to escape abuse. The reporter even comments on the lack of “purple marks about his face” the next day (Flynn). This framing of Clinton as both violent and abusive is significant as it represents her as unhinged. The insinuations of the author also place her in the dominant position in her relationship with her husband, effectively masculinizing her and feminizing him.

It is also interesting that in *Breitbart*’s coverage, Clinton is being presented as aggressive, violent, and emotional – mixing both feminine and masculine gender codes. Arguably, this

reflects Clinton's own navigation of different gender characteristics. Scholars have noted that female politicians often must find a balance between seeming too masculine and threatening or appearing too feminine and gentle (Wilz). Wilz also notes that this is an issue Clinton has faced before, noting, "Secretary Clinton's "failure" to be "appropriately feminine" not only has hindered her but has also made her the target of hatred for decades" (Wilz 358). *Breitbart's* coverage of Clinton demonstrates that this is still a problem that female politicians face. In particular, this frame appeared when articles discussed how Clinton's presidency would lead to war (Hahn 7 November). This presentation masculinizes her as a "warmongering" figure, but also aligns with the stereotype that females would be more likely to start wars due to their emotions (Hahn). It is also significant that the article uses another female voice – Jill Stein – to present Clinton as a more threatening, highly-masculinized female in comparison. Thus, Clinton is portrayed as violent to demonstrate her masculine characteristics, but presented as emotional and irrational to point to the feminine characteristics that render her unable to lead. Taken together, the representations of Clinton and Trump fell along binary understandings of gender roles and reproduced previous patterns in the coverage of male and female candidates.

Framing Race and Gender with Repetition

While studying *Breitbart's* articles, I not only noted the various frames in its coverage, but also discovered a clear framing tactic in the use of repetition. This is a stark difference compared to journalistic norms, as journalistic writers are often careful with their words and word counts. The tactic of repetition, of course, can be used to emphasize particular points to a reader, but repetition often leads to redundancy and is thus typically avoided. *Breitbart's* coverage, in contrast, places repeated statements throughout articles, near each other. This repetition is made more obvious in that the platform's articles are often short, and arguably with

such short pieces it would be even more pertinent to avoid repeating similar words and statements. Significantly, in the sample of 75, 55 articles used repetition, meaning that the author repeated whole quotes, sources, words, or phrases more than three times. In this way, *Breitbart* again demonstrates its departure from traditional standards in reporting. The use of repetition in the articles also embodied *Breitbart*'s conservative perspective, and this tactic gives its claims more power and makes its frames more apparent. For example, in framing of Clinton as dangerous, the reporters used repetition to emphasize Clinton's position as a threat. One article included an interview with a Slovenian cultural theorist and repeated the idea that Clinton is a "danger" six times, often repeating phrases or sentences, verbatim, several times (Hahn). Clearly, the author is repeating words and quotes again to cement this framing of Clinton as dangerous and make the point stick in the reader's mind.

In addition to gendered frames, the use of repetition also demonstrates *Breitbart*'s framing of race and race issues. In an article about vetting refugees, the reporter begins with referencing a 1980 Act and "consultation clause" that requires the federal government to consult with states before the arrival of refugees that will be settled there (Leahy). The repetition of the clause and the federal government's failures to comply with it form a critique of the Obama administration. This repetition and critique also culminates later in accusations against Clinton, who is described as wanting to let people "pour" into communities (Leahy). However, this framing also portrays refugees as dangerous or harmful to the communities they join, often through emphasizing the need for vetting and approval. This frame is further demonstrated in an article about sanctuary cities that provide residence for undocumented immigrants. In this article, which held the highest number of repeated phrases, the author uses the words "criminal aliens," "criminal alien felons," or simply "criminals" to describe immigrants over 30 times (Tancredio 19

November). Quite clearly, this repetition frames undocumented immigrants as dangerous, unlawful, and untrustworthy. Further, in only associating immigrants with criminal activity, *Breitbart* also perpetuates frames that form the basis of racial stereotypes and political actions. Significantly, these are claims that were often propagated during the election in President Trump's campaign, and these articles demonstrate how his rhetoric was reproduced in *Breitbart's* reporting. This example also shows how the authors choose to repeat things that are unfounded or even false. Even for those who are hesitant about immigration or refugees, labeling an entire group of people is fundamentally inaccurate and emerges as a clear framing strategy.

In fact, the use of repetition could emerge as a tactic to make these phrases seem like facts rather than opinions, because these false or unfounded points are emphasized until they are cemented with the reader. Relating back to Faludi's note that "said enough times, anything can be made to seem true," this repetition enables the platform to impart false and emotional information (79). It is also significant that the articles with the highest number of repeated statements were concerned with framing particular races or genders as violent or dangerous. Many of these racial and gendered stereotypes are repeated not only in specific articles, but also externally across many articles, and this only serves to further exemplify the platform's framing of its subjects. For example, each time Islam was a topic in an article, it was connected to terrorist groups or acts. This framing portrays only one view of the religion, presents Muslims as violent, and completely ignores any nuanced, researched, or opposing representations. This use of internal and external repetition, combined with the authors' lack of engagement with any opposing opinions, also demonstrates *Breitbart's* tendency to act as a mouthpiece for extremely partisan and conservative ideologies.

Conclusion: Changing Media, Changing Politics

As *Breitbart*'s popularity and readership continues to grow, it is important to discuss what messages appear in its coverage. In its success, *Breitbart* represents a shift in political journalism as digital, niche media overtakes legacy sources and the print format. This shift is perhaps most clear in the abandoning of typical objective tones and the complete lack of differentiation between "opinion" pieces and news stories, as well as the blatant use of repetition. Interestingly, *Breitbart* also seems careful to present itself as objective and comparable to other news sources like *The New York Times*. Yet, many of its tactics and frames depart from traditional journalistic norms. In particular, *Breitbart*'s form of extreme conservatism depends on anti-media and anti-establishment opinions that are embedded in many of its articles. Through these anti-establishment frames, *Breitbart* positions itself as an "outsider" within the media ecosystem, which emerges as a useful device to disguise the lack of objectivity and facts in its reporting. This is most obvious in the number of articles in which *Breitbart* discusses itself and its writers, thereby defending and distancing itself from any possible criticism. In addition, as discussed, the tactic of repetition emerges as a way for the platform to repeat opinionated language instead of focusing on factual reporting. Through this self-referential reporting and unapologetic presentation of sensational, opinionated, and sarcastic material, *Breitbart* attempts to excuse and popularize its extreme opinions. In a political climate that currently scorns "political correctness" and welcomed Donald Trump as the anti-establishment candidate, *Breitbart* has emerged as a powerful force in shaping political discourse.

This power is emphasized through a consistency in coverage, tone, and framing. As Julia Azari discusses in her study of politics and media, tactics like these demonstrate how news media can become part of national parties and politics. Through my sample, it is apparent that *Breitbart* is operating as an ideal megaphone for the Trump administration. For further study,

scholars could isolate the link between *Breitbart* and Trump through analyzing his use of the source on his campaign website and Twitter account. Because this link exists internally on *Breitbart*'s website and externally through other platforms, I could not pursue this line of questioning beyond *Breitbart*'s own articles. In addition, late into my study I started noticing patterns that I could not categorize in depth due to time and content constraints. These patterns included the use of images and external repetition of the same quotes between different articles. While I tried to make sense of some of the external repetition, I did not keep record of every group of articles that reproduced the same quotes, phrases, or sources. In addition, I began to question whether *Breitbart* reporters conduct their own interviews or simply use quotes from other sources, tweets, or speeches. This line of questioning seems fruitful, as 29 articles could be identified as quoting from other sources rather than individual people. If *Breitbart* reporters do not conduct interviews or indicate where the quotes come from, this would be yet another departure from the norms of journalism. It would also be interesting to look at how these secondhand quotes are pulled from their source material and then framed in *Breitbart* articles. Such extensions to this study could further demonstrate the platform's style of coverage and framing techniques.

Even with many avenues left for research, my study found that *Breitbart*'s tactic of repetition formed the basis of its ability to propagate particular messages. These messages served to reproduce conservative gender and racial stereotypes through a reliance on non-objective tones and opinionated language. It is also important to note that this coverage not only influenced *Breitbart*'s own readers, but also affected the larger media landscape. In a study that covered how articles were shared on social media during the election, the *Columbia Journalism Review* reported that the "pro-Trump media sphere appears to have not only successfully set the agenda

for the conservative media sphere, but also strongly influenced the broader media agenda, in particular coverage of Hillary Clinton” (Benkler et al). Through their findings, the researchers demonstrate how *Breitbart*’s constant framing of Clinton as untrustworthy, dangerous, or emotional not only affected conservative discourse during the election, but possibly pulled the general media farther right. The results of their study also demonstrate *Breitbart*’s influence not only on its target readership, but also on the media landscape and, through that, the general public. This is particularly alarming, as *Breitbart*’s coverage emerges as not only opinionated, but more poignantly as a form of propaganda.

While the characterization of *Breitbart* as propaganda might seem harsh, it is hard to ignore the overt repetition and framing that appears in its coverage as well as the platform’s overt links to political figures and parties. However, those who agree with the opinions presented in *Breitbart* might not view its coverage as propaganda, and may instead value its voice and prefer its use of tone. For my study, I combated my left-leaning biases through quantifying my findings, randomizing my sample, and focusing on traditional journalistic norms, but I realize that individual readings might differ from my own. Even still, the tactics used in the articles and the blatant repetition threaten the level and quality of information that the public has access to, particularly in a divisive political climate. The lack of journalistic standards and lack of different perspectives, too, is an issue that should be considered by all readers and voters; the presence of objectivity should not be a partisan issue.

This study also demonstrates that readers must learn to recognize biased reporting and question the frames that are presented to them, particularly in our current media ecosystem. Media literacy will be increasingly important in the era of “fake news” as social media significantly impacts the way news is reported and spread. The terms “echo chamber” and

“bubble” became extremely popular during and after the election as algorithms funneled our news through our pre-determined perspective, reducing our exposure to other opinions and affecting our ability to have nuanced discussions. Most clearly, this past election revealed social and political tensions that further polarized both readers, politicians, and news sources, and these tensions demonstrate how powerful framing can be in shaping our worldview. It is clear that we must hold news sources accountable for this power. If sensational, propagandizing, and highly partisan coverage like *Breitbart*’s continues to dominate and affect political discourse, we run the risk of losing balance and truth in favor of extremism and click-bait.

Appendix

Figure 1. Categories and Numbered Codes

Categories that did not use numbered codes are excluded from this list (Ex: Number of quotes and sources).

Category	Numbered Code	Example (where needed)
Author Gender		
Male	1	
Female	2	
Tone		
Sarcastic	1	<u>“her <i>real</i> enemy” “not too <i>many</i>” “greenies”</u>
Critical/Angry	2	<u>“national embarrassment”, headline</u>
Celebratory	3	<u>“Congratulations America!”</u>
Objective	4	<u>Election Results Cause Spike” serious tone</u>
Use of Repetition		
At least 3 times	1	<u>“criminals” “criminal aliens”</u>
No repetition	2	<u>Amal Clooney: Everyday Acts of Feminism</u>
Gender of Sources		
Male	1	
Female	2	
N/A	3	
Political Leanings of Sources		
Liberal/Democrat	1	
Conservative/Republican	2	
N/A or Unidentifiable	3	
Rep. of Donald Trump		
Strong	1	<u>“would not back away from a fight”</u>
Weak	2	N/A
Rational	3	<u>“simply by enforcing existing federal law”</u>
Calm/Composed	4	<u>“country come together” “move on”</u>
Trustworthy	5	<u>“concern for issues” “disavow”</u>
Anti-Establishment	6	<u>“renewal” “uproot the D.C establishment”</u>
Successful	7	<u>“winning” “building tycoon” “all-time high”</u>
Negative	8	N/A
Rep. of Hillary Clinton		
Strong	1	N/A
Weak	2	<u>“doesn’t have what it takes” “coddled”</u>
Emotional	3	<u>“screaming” “throwing objects”</u>
Violent/Dangerous	4	<u>“trigger-happy militarism”</u>

Untrustworthy	5	<u>“tight-lipped discussions” “cheating”</u>
Establishment	6	<u>“the Clinton machine” “elite” “club”</u>
Failure	7	<u>“desperate long shot” “last-ditch bid”</u>
Positive	8	N/A
Representation of Islam/Refugees		
Connected to Terrorism	1	<u>“terrorism, extremism” “terrorists”</u>
Not Connected	2	N/A
Stance towards Media		
Pro	1	N/A
Anti	2	<u>“Hypocrites” “establishment media”</u>
Stance towards Establishment		
Pro	1	N/A
Anti	2	<u>“establishment Republicans”</u>

Table 1. Elements of Coverage

Category	#/75
Author Gender	
Male	58/75
Female	14/75
Credited to "Breitbart News"	5/75
Tone	
Sarcastic	12/75
Angry/Critical	35/75
Celebratory	13/75
Objective	22/75
Mixed	13/75
Repetition	
At least 3 times	55/75
No repetition	20/75
Source Gender	
Male	55/75
Female	30/75
N/A	28/75
Source Politics	
Liberal/Democrat	31/75
Conservative/Republican	38/75
Unidentifiable or N/A	29/75
Stance towards Media	
Pro	0
Anti	23/75
Stance towards Establishment	
Pro	0
Anti	19/75

Table 2. Frames in *Breitbart's* Coverage

Category	#
Representation of Donald Trump	
Strong	9
Weak	0
Rational	5
Calm/Collected	3
Trustworthy	6
Anti-Establishment	14
Successful	22
Negative	0
Representation of Hillary Clinton	
Strong	0
Weak	3
Emotional	3
Violent/Dangerous	6
Untrustworthy	19
Establishment	11
Failure	18
Positive	0
Representation of Islam	
Connected to Terrorism	6
Not Connected to Terrorism	0

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