



## Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 13(2) 2020: 1180-1189

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i2p1180

Published in July 15, 2020

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

---

## RESEARCH NOTE

### U.S Audiences' Perceptions of Covid-19 and Conservative News Frames

**T. Makana Chock**  
*Syracuse University*

**Se Jung Kim**  
*Syracuse University*

---

**ABSTRACT:** During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. conservative news downplayed the threat of the virus. Perceived risks of COVID-19 are an important factor in influencing citizens' willingness to comply with risk prevention measures. An online survey (N=269) of U.S. residents was conducted March 30 - April 1, 2020. We found that those who used partisan conservative news sources as their primary source of information about the virus were significantly less likely to view it as a threat, compared to those who cited Far Left, Center Left, and Center Right news sources. Politically conservative Far Right news audiences reported significantly lower estimates of their own COVID-19 risk, as well as that of their age group peers, the average person in the U.S., and the average senior citizen in the U.S.

**KEYWORDS:**

News framing, COVID-19, risk prevention, political bias, conservatism

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):**

T. Makana Chock, Ph.D.

[tmchock@syr.edu](mailto:tmchock@syr.edu)

## 1. Introduction

During times of major health crises, the public relies on news media for information about ways to respond to the crisis and to protect themselves and those around them. The more information that people have, the better equipped they are to respond. In the early days of the pandemic, however, some conservative politicians, led by President Trump, downplayed the risks of COVID-19 and resisted calls for social distancing and other preventative measures. This politicization of the virus was to some extent countered by public health officials and experts. Many news outlets offered a platform for these voices and provided audiences with medical information and public health prevention recommendations. More partisan conservative news outlets, however, framed coverage of COVID-19 in ways that supported the President's stance on the issue.

The different ways in which the virus was framed had an impact on audiences. During the spring of 2020, a national U.S. study found that increased exposure to mainstream broadcast and print media was correlated with greater accuracy concerning COVID-19 information. However, increased exposure to conservative media sources was positively correlated with beliefs that the dangers of COVID-19 were exaggerated and to inaccurate information about the virus (Jamieson and Albarracín, 2020). This study examines ways in which partisan news impacts audiences' perceptions of the threat and the risk posed by COVID-19 to themselves and to others in society.

### ***1.1 News Bias, Politics, and COVID-19***

In the U.S., where citizens tend to classify themselves along a political spectrum ranging from liberal to conservative, or left to right, some news outlets market themselves to audiences on extreme ends of the spectrum. Although many news outlets attempt to adhere to traditional journalistic principles, partisan sites may frame issues in ways that support specific political agendas. Framing, or the social construction of an event, can impact audiences' interpretations and evaluations of that event (Goffman, 1974). Politically biased frames tend to interpret issues in ways that either support political agendas and specific politicians, or disparage opponents (Lakoff, 2002).

News frames are traditionally constructed through journalists' selection of words, images, and use of sources (Weaver, 2007), but without altering the actual facts that provide the basis for a story. Thus, it is possible for politically partisan news outlets to provide widely different interpretations of the same event by emphasizing certain aspects or by providing favorable or critical evaluations of actions and consequences (Lakoff, 2002). In the case of COVID-19 coverage, however, medical health professionals criticized some conservative outlets and politicians for providing not simply biased, but inaccurate information about COVID-19. This type of coverage may have had an impact on audiences' perceptions of, and responses to, the virus (Bursztyń et al, 2020).

A national poll conducted in early April 2020 found that although a majority of Democrats and Republicans agreed that some measures were necessary to restrict the spread of COVID-19, Republicans were less likely than Democrats to view the virus as a major threat to public health, and more likely to view people as overreacting (Green and Tyson, 2020). Another national survey found that although most Americans supported stay-at-home measures, support was impacted by both political party identification and source of COVID-19 news (Bertrand et. al, 2020).

Republicans were much more likely than Democrats to believe that the media were exaggerating the risks of the COVID-19 threat (Bertrand et al, 2020). Partisan perceptions of the threat of COVID-19 were also linked to perceptions of President Trump's response, and some Republicans viewed mainstream media coverage of COVID-19 as an attempt to discredit President Trump (Green and Tyson, 2020; Jamieson and Albarracín, 2020).

Conservative mistrust of news media outlets is nothing new. Over the past few years, perceived credibility of news outlets has polarized. Although overall perceptions of news media credibility had decreased over the preceding decade, major partisan differences developed following the 2016 election. In March 2020, a Gallup poll found that 62% of Democrats, 26% of Independents, and barely 10% of Republicans had a favorable opinion of news media (Ritter, 2020).

There are exceptions. Conservative audiences have much greater trust in conservative news media outlets and rely on these for information. Although less conservative audiences use a fairly broad range of news outlets, Republicans are significantly less likely to report using a mix of news sources and are more likely to rely on conservative news outlets (Ritter, 2020). This has been a consistent pattern over the past few years. For example, most voters used a mix of news outlets during the 2016 election cycle, but Trump voters relied much more heavily on Fox News (Gottfried et al, 2017).

### ***1.1 News Bias and Risk for Self and Others***

Perceptions of the potential threat of COVID-19 are of more than political importance. A key tool in limiting the spread of the pandemic is societal-wide engagement in prevention behaviors. COVID-19 has proven to be particularly dangerous for older individuals and those with underlying health conditions. Public health messages have urged individuals to socially isolate themselves and engage in a range of risk-prevention behaviors that will limit not only their own risk, but also others' risk. If people do not perceive COVID-19 as posing a threat, or a risk to themselves and others, they may be less willing to do so.

Understanding people's perceptions of others' risk is also of importance as it may give a clearer picture of individuals' overall perceptions of the threat posed by the virus. Extensive studies of risk perception have found that people tend to underestimate their own risk in comparison to others and to be optimistically biased about the likelihood that they will not contract a disease or suffer negative health consequences (Weinstein and Lyon, 1999). They tend to be better judges of societal-level risk, relying less on ego-defensive perceptions, and more on statistical information (Shepard et al, 2013). The impact of biased news frames of COVID-19 may therefore be less confounded in people's perceptions of others' risk than in estimates of their own risk.

### ***1.2 News Bias, Political Ideology, and Perceived COVID-19 Risks***

This online survey study examines the relationships between use of partisan news sources, audience's political ideology and party identification, and perceptions of the perceived threat and risks associated with COVID-19 for self and others in society.

Earlier studies have examined differences between Republican and Democratic perspectives of the virus. It is important to note, however, that within political parties there is a range of political ideology and news media use. There are liberals who do not identify with the Democratic Party and Republicans who consider

themselves to be politically moderate. Independents, who make up approximately a third of the U.S. electorate, identify with neither party and this group is comprised of people with a range of political ideologies. Also, although the audience for conservative news outlets is predominantly Republican, not all Republicans use conservative news outlets. Therefore, we will examine both political ideology (liberal – conservative) and political party identification.

### *Hypotheses:*

- *Hypothesis 1:* Audiences will be significantly more likely to use news sources consistent with their political a) ideology and b) party.
- *Hypothesis 2:* Perceived threat associated with COVID-19 will be lower for a) conservatives and b) those who identify as Republicans.
- *Hypothesis 3:* Perceived COVID-19 risks for self and others will be lower for a) conservatives and b) those who identify as Republicans

## **2. Method**

The data for this study were collected (March 30 - April 1, 2020) as part of a larger online survey examining news variables and COVID-19 perceptions. The 269 participants' ages ranged from 18 to 76 ( $M = 33.35$ ,  $SD = 11.67$ ), and 46% identified as male, 51% as female, and 3% as other.

Participants were recruited using Prolific, an online survey company that recruits from a large pool of pre-selected and screened respondents. Survey participation was restricted to U.S. residents. After completing the consent process, participants completed a survey assessing demographics and political positions, media use, and COVID-19. All stages of this study were approved by a university institutional review board.

### **2.1 Measures**

*Political Ideology:* Participants were asked to identify their political party identification (Democrat:  $N = 152$ , 53%; Republican:  $N = 33$ , 13%; Independent:  $N = 61$ , 36%). Political ideology was assessed using an 11-point scale (0 = extremely liberal, 10 = extremely conservative),  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ .

*News Source.* Participants were asked to identify the news source they used most frequently for information about COVID-19. These news sources were then coded for perceived bias based on prior coding determinations by the *AllSides Media Bias Chart* (2020) and the *Pew Research Center* (Jurkowitz et al, 2020). Based on multi-year ratings of coverage, these coding schemes were consistent in their categorizations of polarized sources that were rated as extremely left or extremely right. There was some variation in categorizations of less extreme sources as left-leaning, centrist, and right-leaning in the Media Bias Chart compared to the Pew survey assessments. In order to reconcile these, four categories were identified, Far Left (MSNBC, Huffington Post, Vox, etc.) (7%); Left Center (New York Times, CBS, CNN, The Washington Post, etc.) (68%); Right Center (Bloomberg, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, etc.) (13%); and Far Right (Fox News, Breitbart, Daily Caller, etc.) (12%).

*Perceived Threat.* Perceived threat was assessed using the 4 item 5-point (1= Not at all / 5 = Extremely) threat dimension of the Stress Appraisal Measurement scale (e.g. “How threatening is this situation? Does this situation make me feel anxious?”) (Peacock and Wong, 1990). Scores were averaged to create a single measure of perceived threat ( $M = 6.96$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ,  $\alpha = .75$ ).

*Perceived Risk.* Participants were asked rate their agreement (1 = Strongly Disagree / 10 = Strongly Agree) with a series of statements concerning the likelihood of contracting COVID-19 for themselves ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ), their age group peers ( $M = 6.22$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ), the average person in the U.S. ( $M = 6.59$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ), and the average senior citizen in the U.S ( $M = 7.19$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ).

### 3. Results

Preliminary analysis indicated no significant differences in age, race, or gender between users of the different news sources. Tests for skewness and kurtosis indicated normality of distribution of the dependent variables.

#### *Hypothesis 1*

The first set of hypotheses addressed polarization of news audiences. There were no significant differences in political ideology between users of Far Left, Left-Center, and Right-Center news sources. However, one way analysis of variance tests with post-hoc Bonferroni tests found that Far Right news users were significantly more conservative than all other participants,  $F(3,265) = 13.12$ ,  $p < .001$ . See Table 1.

There were significant differences in selection of news sources depending upon political party,  $\chi^2 = 28.88$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .001$ . Approximately 36% of Republicans used Far Right sources, compared to 12% of Independents, and 6% of Democrats. Interestingly, only 6% of Democrats cited Far Left news as their primary source of information about COVID-19, compared to 11% of Independents, and 3% of Republicans. The majority of participants in each political party cited Center Left news sources (e.g. broadcast network news, CNN) as their primary source of information about COVID-19: 58% of Republicans, 58% of Independents, and 74% of Democrats.

#### *Hypothesis 2*

The second hypothesis addressed perceptions of threat due to COVID-19. There were no significant differences in perceived threat between users of Far Left, Left-Center, and Right-Center news media. However, Far Right news media users viewed COVID-19 as significantly less threatening compared to all other types of news users,  $F(3,265) = 3.62$ ,  $p = .014$ ). See Table 1.

#### *Hypothesis 3*

The third set of hypotheses addressed political ideology and party, news bias, and perceived risk. As political conservatism increased, perceived risk for self ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p = .002$ ), age group peers ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the average person in the U.S. ( $r = -.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the average senior citizen ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the U.S. significantly decreased.

A repeated measures analysis of covariance, controlling for ideology, comparing differences between political parties found that political conservatism,  $F(1,265) = 7.68, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , decreased perceived risk for all targets. After controlling for political ideology, however, there were no significant differences between political parties in terms of perceived risk,  $F(2,265) = 1.53, p = .219, \eta_p^2 = .01$ .

A repeated measures analysis of covariance, controlling for political ideology, was used to compare differences between participants who used different types of news sources, found that political conservatism,  $F(1,264) = 3.02, p = .083, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , did not significantly impact perceived risk for self or others as a covariate, but that news bias had a significant effect on perceived risk for self and others,  $F(3,264) = 5.72, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . Those who used Far Right news sources reported significantly less perceived risk for themselves, their age group peers, the average person in the U.S., and the average senior citizen in the U.S. See Figure 1.

## 4. Discussion

News outlets serve as an important source of information during a health crisis. The ways in which different types of news sources presented and framed information about COVID-19, significantly influenced audiences' perceptions of the disease. In the early days of the pandemic, Far Right news outlets downplayed COVID-19 risks and provided a platform for conservative political voices that minimized the potential threat of the virus and argued against the need for social distancing measures and other types of preventative measures. This study found that audiences who relied primarily on Far Right news sources were significantly less likely than users of all other media types to view the virus as threatening and as posing a risk for themselves or for other people in society.

A number of factors can influence individuals' perceptions of their own risk, but prior research has found that societal-level assessments of other people's risk tend to be formed by societal-level knowledge, frequently acquired from mass media sources (Tyler and Cook, 1984). In this study, Far Right audiences gave significantly lower risk estimates for the average person in the U.S. as well as for the average senior citizen in the U.S. Given the novelty of the pandemic, and the lack of prior information or attitudes about the disease, this suggests that people's risk estimates were heavily influenced by their choice of news source.

The perceived risk of others in society is a particularly important factor in citizens' responses to COVID-19. Individuals are being asked to engage in precautions, social distancing and wearing masks, that are designed to limit risk for others in society, particularly the elderly. Although these actions may also limit the risk for individuals, personal risk decisions are driven by different motivations than societal actions. If more conservative audiences do not believe that other people in society are at risk, they may be less willing to comply with actions to protect others in their community.

Far Right news use and political conservatism were more influential than actual party identification. This is important to understand, as not all Far Right audiences are Republican (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2020). In this study, Far Right audiences were also comprised of some Independents and a few Democrats. The majority of Republicans cited Far Left sources, such as national broadcast news and CNN as their primary source of COVID-19 news. These types of outlets have provided a platform for public health officials and experts to present scientific and medical information about COVID-19. National polls have found that most people in all parties support social distancing measures and view COVID-19 as a major threat (Green and Tyson, 2020; Jamieson and Albarracín, 2020). Partisanship, rather than party, may be more likely to contribute to individuals' underestimating the threat posed by COVID-19.



#### **4.1 Limitations and Future Directions**

A certain amount of caution needs to be taken in interpreting the results of this study. The data were collected using a pool of online participants, which can limit the diversity of respondents. Although the Prolific system has been extensively used in psychological and communication research studies, it is not a representative sampling of the population. The percentage of Democrats in this study was greater than that of the U.S. as a whole, and only a limited number of participants identified as Republican. A larger and more diverse sample of political ideology and party identification may have elicited different responses.

Although there were no significant differences in age between news user groups in this study, online survey users tend to be younger than the population as a whole, and age can impact news source selection. However, given the importance in age in both news source selection and perceived risk, an analysis of covariance controlling for age was conducted and found that age was not a significant factor in impacting differences in perceived risk between news groups in this study.

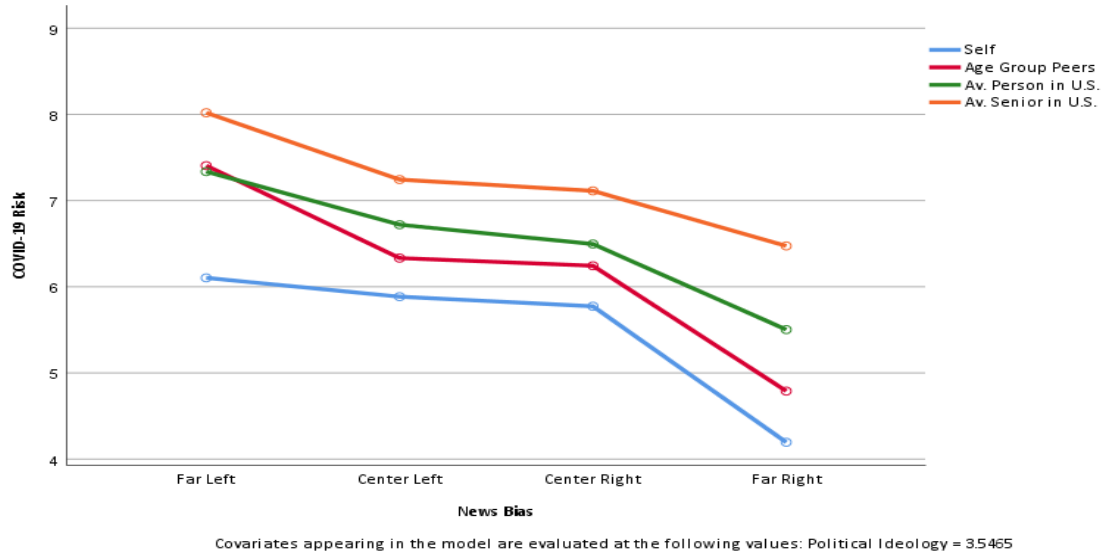
The number of people who cited Far Right news sources as their primary source of COVID-19 news made up a small proportion of the sample. However, this is not unrepresentative of news consumption in the U.S. National studies using representative samples found that approximately one fifth of both Democrats and Republicans received their news primarily from left-leaning or right-leaning sources. Democrats in these partisan bubbles, however, drew on a mix of different sources including both Far Left and Center Left sources, whereas Republicans partisan-news consumers relied heavily on one source, Fox News (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2020).

There were no statistically significant differences in perceived risk among participants who used Far Left, Left Center, and Right Center news sources for information about COVID-19. However, partisan left coverage could also have an impact on perceptions of COVID-19. Far Left audiences gave slightly, but not significantly, higher assessments of other people's risk, particularly that of senior citizens. This may reflect Far Left critical frames of President Trump's actions on COVID-19. Future studies should examine the ways in which Far Left coverage may have impacted perceptions of the threat posed by the virus.

#### **Conclusion**

The need for an informed public is vital in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. Without widespread cooperation among members of society, social distancing and other preventative measures cannot succeed. News outlets play a major role in providing accurate information to their audiences. The results of this study suggest that politically conservative news frames may have significantly impacted U.S. audiences' perceptions of, and possibly responses to, COVID-19.

**Figure 1 – Perceived COVID-19 Risk of News User Groups.**



**Table 1 - Political Ideology and COVID-19 Perceptions between News Bias Groups**

N	<u>Far Left</u>		<u>Center Left</u>		<u>Center Right</u>		<u>Far Right</u>	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Political Ideology	2.37	2.39	3.41	2.49	2.68	2.54	6.03	2.64
COVID-19 Threat	7.59	1.58	7.04	1.87	7.05	1.49	6.02	2.01
Personal Risk	6.21	2.18	5.90	2.39	5.85	2.38	3.97	2.24
Age Group Peer Risk	7.47	1.54	6.34	2.14	6.29	1.90	4.65	2.04
Av. Person in U.S. Risk	7.42	2.01	6.73	2.10	6.56	1.85	5.32	1.87
Av. Senior in U.S. Risk	8.11	1.66	7.25	2.06	7.18	1.93	6.29	2.36



## References

- AllSides. (2020) *Media Bias Ratings* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings> (accessed 6.9.20)
- Bertrand, M., Briscese, G., Grignani, M., Nassar, S. (2020) “How are Americans coping with the COVID-19 crisis? 7 key findings from household survey”, *Rustandy Center / Chicago Booth*, April 23, 2020 [online]. Available at: [https://www.chicagobooth.edu/research/rustandy/blog/2020/how-are-americans-coping-with-the-covid19-crisis-7-key-findings?sc\\_lang=en](https://www.chicagobooth.edu/research/rustandy/blog/2020/how-are-americans-coping-with-the-covid19-crisis-7-key-findings?sc_lang=en) (accessed 6.2.20)
- Bertrand, M., Briscese, G., Grignani, M., Nassar, S. (2020) “WAVE 2: When and how the U.S. should reopen is a matter of politics, trust in institutions and media, survey says”, *Rustandy Center / Chicago Booth*, May 5, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.chicagobooth.edu/research/rustandy/blog/2020/wave-2-when-and-how-the-us-should-reopen-is-a-matter-of-politics-and-trust-in-institutions-and-media> (accessed 6.2.20)
- Bursztyn, L., Rao, A., Roth, C., Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2020) “Misinformation during a pandemic”, *Becker Friedman Institute for Economics / University of Chicago*. April 19, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/2020-44/> (accessed 6.2.20)
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Gottfried, J., Barthel, M., Mitchell, A. (2020) “Trump, Clinton voters divided in their main source for election news”, *Pew Research Center*. January 18, 2017 [online]. Available at: <https://www.journalism.org/2017/01/18/trump-clinton-voters-divided-in-their-main-source-for-election-news/> (accessed 6.2.20)
- Green, T. V., Tyson, A. (2020) “Five facts about partisan reactions to COVID-19 in the U.S”, *Pew Research Center*. April 2, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/02/5-facts-about-partisan-reactions-to-covid-19-in-the-u-s/> (accessed 6.2.20)
- Jamieson, K.H., Albarracín, D. (2020) “The relation between media consumption and misinformation at the outset of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the US: HKS Misinformation Review”, *Misinformation Review*. May 1, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-relation-between-media-consumption-and-misinformation-at-the-outset-of-the-sars-cov-2-pandemic-in-the-us/> (accessed 6.9.20)
- Jurkowitz, M., Mitchell, A., Shearer, E., Walker, M. (2020) “U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided”, *Pew Research Center*. February 21, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/> (accessed 6.2.20)
- Jurkowitz, M. Mitchell, A. (2020) “About one-fifth of Democrats and Republicans get political news in a kind of media bubble”, *Pew Research Center* [online]. March 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.journalism.org/2020/03/04/about-one-fifth-of-democrats-and-republicans-get-political-news-in-a-kind-of-media-bubble/> (accessed 6.2.20)
- Lakoff, G. (2016) *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Peacock, E., Wong, P. (1990) “The stress appraisal measure (SAM): A multidimensional approach to cognitive appraisal”, *Stress Medicine*, 6, p227-236.

- Ritter, Z. (2020) “Amid Pandemic, News Attention Spikes; Media Favorability Flat”, *Gallup.com* [online]. April 9, 2020. Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/307934/amid-pandemic-news-attention-spikes-media-favorability-flat.aspx> (accessed 6.9.20)
- Shepperd, J.A., Klein, W.M.P., Waters, E.A., Weinstein, N.D. (2013) “Taking stock of unrealistic optimism”, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8, p395–411.
- Tyler, T.R., Cook, F.L. (1984) “The mass media and judgments of risk: Distinguishing impact on personal and societal level judgments”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, p693–708.
- Weaver, D.H. (2007) “Thoughts on agenda setting, framing, and priming”, *Journal of Communication*, 57, p142–147.
- Weinstein, N.D., Lyon, J.E. (1999) “Mindset, optimistic bias about personal risk and health-protective behaviour”, *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 4, p289–300.

### Authors' Information:

**T. Makana Chock** (PhD., Cornell) is an associate professor and the David J. Levidow Endowed Professor at the S. I. Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University. She studies media psychology, examining the intersections of personality and social characteristics and media formats on audiences. Much of her research has focused on the impact of health and risk communication messages on audiences. She held the Newhouse Endowed Chair of Public Communications from 2013 to 2016.

Website: <https://newhouse.syr.edu/faculty-staff/makana-chock>

Email: [tmchock@syr.edu](mailto:tmchock@syr.edu).

215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13244-2100

**Se Jung Kim** is a doctoral student at the S. I. Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University. His research focuses on media psychology and the ways that audiences process and respond to media content in different formats of emerging media.

Email: [skim34@syr.edu](mailto:skim34@syr.edu).

215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13244-2100