Autism Portrayal in Newspaper Corpora of Different Politically-affiliated States

Riya Ravuri

Monta Vista High School

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Introduction

Media representation has become an increasingly important concern for marginalized and/or disenfranchised communities over the past several years. Neurodivergent and disabled people, for example, have been largely underrepresented (Mellifont, 2019) - as such, for discourse analysts, it is important to consider how these individuals are portrayed, and whether these representations are helpful or harmful towards the communities in question. Although the harmful ideologies surrounding neurodivergent individuals have decreased over the years, negative attitudes and opinions are still prevalent within society and are routinely reflected in media, whether they are accomplished with a subconscious or conscious intent. I aim to address and document these ideologies by examining a dataset of newspaper articles containing the search term "autism"; using corpus analysis and discourse analysis, I demonstrate the primary rhetorical themes pertaining to media representation of individuals with autism in newspaper discourse. Ultimately, I argue that autism representation in the media is not only specifically tied to its linguistic portrayal, but also to its particular sociopolitical context.

Critical discourse scholars have documented how political persuasion impacts a publication's portrayal of particular events, public figures, and social issues (e.g. Cameron & Panovic 2014). As such, I am also interested in understanding how politics might be implicitly connected to the portrayal of autism and autistic individuals in the media. In what follows, I first document the importance of discourse to the construction of autism and the autistic experience, explaining how media texts are complicatedly *mediatized* and therefore fundamental to people's perceptions of this disorder. Next, I explain my particular methodological approach and describe my data collection process. In the quantitative results I introduce my corpus of newspaper texts

and explain how each dataset differs according to political persuasion. This largely descriptive section is followed by qualitative analysis of extracts which I identified according to the primary rhetorical themes: (1) labeling; (2) age; and (3) gender. I conclude by suggesting that the representation of autistic individuals in newspaper texts follows particular patterns - namely, their experiences appear to be overly generalized, and often seem to perpetuate problematic stereotypes. Furthermore, these discursive trends are prevalent across the corpus but do seem to be more typical in conservative-leaning geographic areas.

Theoretical Framework

As media and news organizations have strived to represent individuals with neuropsychiatric disorders more accurately in recent years, these organizations shape public perceptions of these disorders. In particular, as individuals with autism are gaining a larger space in media, it is important to analyze the language and methods in which they are being portrayed, and understand what it means in our modern context. To do this, studies have focused on autism portrayal in media, and how they lead to unrealistic societal expectations of autism, as well as discourse surrounding autism in news organizations. Although discourse around autism has been studied in a news context as a whole, and within particular news organizations (Billawala 2014), very few studies focus on the portrayal of individuals with autism in different political groups. As the political climate has become more tense and polarized in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2021), newspaper organizations may have also become more polarized (Jurkowitz 2021), and the information broadcasted by these organizations therefore may express more bias than it had in previous years. This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze how news

organizations with generally different political standings have represented individuals with autism and autism as a disorder, and the implications of this. With roots in Critical Theory, CDA is not one particular approach but rather an umbrella term for all approaches that seek to underline how discourse is shaping societal beliefs and inequalities. Discourse refers to all communication that creates meaning, and critical discourse analysis attempts to contextualize and challenge this discourse and understand how it upholds societal institutions and hegemonic structures.

Foucault's Theory of Discourse

Discourse theory, in essence, underlines how the power structures in place form the type and nature of discourse used by those under power. Foucalt (1979) defines discourse as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them." He attempts to convey that individuals do not have command over the discourse in which they express and engage in, rather that it is controlled by the power structures in place. These power structures can be any hegemonic force that exerts control over the lives of individuals. By doing so, these forces shape the communication and meaning that these individuals express.

One large power structure is the government, and their power is exerted through political endorsements and encouragements. Newspaper organizations are often endorsed by political figures, and according to Foucault's discourse theory, this power structure may influence the discourse released by the news outlets. Additionally, discourse from news organizations in states with a particular party affiliation may be affected and shaped due to the political power structure that the state is affiliated with. Therefore, according to Foucault's theory of discourse, the power exerted by political structures over news organizations may cause the critical discourse analysis

of news organizations in states with different political viewings to yield different results. The power exerted by political structures over news organizations speaks to the way institutions and language are powerfully connected.

Mediatization

The mediatization theory refers to how the discourse released by the media shapes other social fields and forms the basis of societal conversation. Through this process, any bias or partiality being expressed about a specific topic by the media influences social behaviors about this topic. Since autism (often referred to as autism spectrum disorder, or ASD) is in fact on a spectrum and therefore does not have a singular set of associated behaviors, it is inaccurate to develop a standardized portrayal of autism. As Adelphi University Professor Stephen Shore states, "If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism." — one person does not determine the standard for the hundreds of millions of people (CDC, 2020) with the disorder. Oftentimes, there is information released by the media that categorizes individuals with autism into a group with a single set of behaviors (Prochnow 2014) and due to the severe societal influence that the media has, this information pushes the narrative in all members of society that autism has a definite set of markers and associated characteristics.

Media has always been a fundamental tool in the development of new inventions and thought processes that shape our current society. However, in recent decades, we have entered the "Age of Information" (USHistory.org) — with the new technology available to us, the internet can provide a fast and accessible means to access information, and this has strengthened the effects of mediatization. With access to thousands of news and media platforms at our fingertips, it is easier for media to influence society on a personal level, which allows the fabric

of society as a whole to be altered and shaped by media organizations — a process that is only becoming more common with time, as technology becomes more and more prevalent in the daily lives of individuals. (Schulz 2004) explains that mediatization "substitutes prior or direct social activities or experiences with mediated ones." As the increasingly accessible media works along with the polarized political climate and certain economic affiliations, it gains control over and reshapes social fields.

The theoretical areas of mediatization and Foucault's theory of discourse shape the framework for this research paper. As power structures such as political figures control the discourse expressed by news organizations, and these news organizations shape societal fields and frameworks through the process of mediatization, it is necessary to analyze what exactly is being expressed by these news outlets and how they are different from those being controlled by differing power structures. This will help us understand the implications of these different news organizations and how they shape societal beliefs and understandings. Discourse on autism, an important yet fairly controversial topic, has rarely been studied in the context of news organizations with different political standings, so this paper answers three questions. Firstly, how do different political affiliations affect how autism is portrayed in newspapers of different states? Do newspapers from a "neutral" state display results close to one specific side (left-leaning or right-leaning), and if so, why? Lastly, how do I know if a trend in results is due to political standings or another factor?

Data Background and Methods

To collect our data, I used the Nexis Uni database, which allowed us to filter newspapers by time period, search term, and location. I wanted to separate our research into three separate groups: left-leaning newspapers, right-leaning newspapers, and moderate newspapers. At first, I attempted to manually find newspapers with a particular agreed-upon political affiliation, but the data I found displayed a definitive correlation between locations and political affiliations but not newspapers and political affiliations, so I chose to filter by location due to the higher amount of data that allowed me to differentiate the datasets. I then decided to use newspapers from states with left-leaning, right-leaning, and moderate political affiliations. To determine which states to use, I used a 2014 Pew Research study that broke down the percentage of adults per state that voted for each political party. California was chosen as the left-leaning state because it had the largest Democrat:Republican ratio, a large newspaper corpus, as well as being the largest Democrat state. Idaho was chosen as the right-leaning state because it had a high Republican:Democrat ratio, and had a substantially large newspaper corpus. Texas was our other consideration for the Republican, or right-leaning state, due to its large size and strong Republican affiliation, however, the Texas newspaper corpus was not nearly large enough to run analysis on. Alaska was chosen for the moderate or "neutral" state due to it having the largest percentage of adults with no lean. Once I determined the states, I used the search term "autism" on Nexis Uni and then filtered the results per state using the location function on the database. To ensure that there were no repeats, I used the "Delete Repeats" function on the database. After doing this, I was left with 131 California (left-leaning) articles, 104 Idaho (right-leaning) articles, and 244 Alaska (moderate) articles.

Although I filtered for repeats in Nexis Uni, I noticed that there were still repeats in the data that Nexis Uni had not detected. If the number of repeats is enough to affect the overall

trends in data, this may be a possible source of error for the study. Additionally, the location function on Nexis Uni was not entirely accurate because I noticed that some of the newspapers from the "California" location was based in other states, but I decided to continue using the location function because if the newspapers were showing up under the "California" location, it was likely that majority of its readers were based in California. This would support our goal of each newspaper having a specific political affiliation, so I decided to keep these newspapers in the data.

I used a concordancer called AntConc (version 3.5.9) as the software for our study. AntConc only accepts .txt files (simple text documents), so I had to convert each document from Nexis Uni, which was downloaded as Microsoft Word files. Once each file was converted, I was able to upload each corpus (the California, Alaska, and Idaho corpora) into AntConc and run an analysis. To see the context around each of our search terms, I used the Key Word In Context (KWIC) feature on AntConc, which shows the words surrounding our search term for each file in the corpus. I used the search terms "autistic", "autism", "disabled", "ASD", "Autism Spectrum Disorder", and "special needs" with this tool, and the KWIC tool allowed us to see how these words were used in context for each of these articles. Additionally, the Word Cluster Tool in AntConc allowed us to search multiple words and displayed whether these words appeared close together in each file for our corpus.

Debates have ensued over the last several years over the appropriate way to address a person with autism — some argue that person-first language should be used, separating the individual and the disorder to emphasize that the disorder does not define the person (an example of this would be "person with autism"). Others argue that identity-first language should be used, keeping together the individual and the disorder, to show that autism is a fundamental part of

who they are and has played a vital role in the construction of their identity. A way to use identity-first language in this scenario would be “autistic person” or “autistic individual”. Using the KWIC and Word Cluster tool, I will be able to determine if person-first or identity-first language is used more often in each corpus. Once I have run the analysis for the three corpora and collected data, I will search for trends within the data and differences between the three corpora. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses will be run. Quantitatively, I will determine how abundant each search term is within each article and corpus, and how often these terms are associated with factors such as age, gender, and social status. Qualitatively, I will determine the context in which each term is used and which words or concepts are associated with each search term.

Analysis: Quantitative Results

I started the investigation with the three corpora (Idaho, Alaska, and California) being individually analyzed for the frequency and number of times each of the key terms “autistic”, “autism”, “disabled”, “ASD”, “autism spectrum disorder” and “special needs” were stated. Although the Idaho corpus was smaller than the California corpus by 25 articles, it surprisingly yielded more hits for certain search terms than the California corpus, although there were never more hits than the Alaska corpus — most probably due to the fact that the Alaska corpus is almost double the size of the Idaho corpus.

Table 1: Number of results per search term in California corpus v. Idaho corpus, for terms that yielded higher results in Idaho corpus

Search Term	Frequency in California corpus	Frequency in Idaho corpus
autistic	33	43
disabled	19	36
Autism spectrum disorder	3	6
Special needs	17	46

For the four aforementioned terms (autistic, disabled, autism spectrum disorder, and special needs), the Idaho corpus yielded a higher number of results than the California corpus, but perhaps the most noteworthy terms from this table are “special needs”, where the amount of Idaho corpus results is over double the amount of California corpus results, and the term “disabled”, where the number of Idaho hits is almost double the amount of California corpus results. Using the term “special needs” to define a group of individuals with autism or any other disorder has generally been deemed an offensive term (Hodges, 2020), and although there is no general consensus on the term “disabled” (Harpur, 2011), some argue that this term also serves a derogatory and ableist purpose. The Idaho corpus’ abundant use of both these terms points to potentially offensive or at least tone-deaf undertones in Idaho’s newspaper articles, although qualitative analysis here will help illuminate the true situation. Although the Idaho corpus also has double the number of results for “autism spectrum disorder” than the California corpus, the number of results per corpus (<10) for this term is not statistically significant compared to the

other search terms to make a definitive conclusion. This term is the scientific term for individuals with autism and is agreed to be an acceptable way to refer to these individuals (Harpur, 2011).

The Alaska corpus, which is around double in size compared to both the California and Idaho corpora, yielded a large number of hits for each search term as well. However, it was initially unclear if this number was due simply to the large number of articles included in the corpus, or if the search terms were especially frequent within the corpus. To determine this, I used the Concordance plot tool to see the frequency of each term within each article in the corpus. Within this corpus, most articles only included each search term less than three times, except for some cases where one article had abnormally high usage of the search term (for example, with the search term "autism", most articles fluctuated between including the term 1-3 times, except for one article that used the term 15 times). Based on this information, I determined that a large number of hits per search term on the Alaska corpus was due to the large size of the corpus itself, and not a high frequency of each search term within each article.

As expected, some frequent collocations for the word "autism" in each corpus were medical-related terms, such as "disorder", "diagnosis", and "illness". As autism is a medical disorder, it is not surprising that articles addressing autism also address other medical conditions, either about autism or separately, although the number of times they are referred to in each corpus differs from each other. In the Alaska corpus, the number of times the aforementioned terms (and slight variations of the term, such as "disorders", "diagnosed", and "ill") were mentioned amounted to 286 hits. This was by far the highest frequency. Again, because the Alaska corpus is around double the size of the Idaho and California corpora, one would expect

the number of medical collocation hits to be around double the frequency in the other two corpora. However, the amount of hits in the Alaska corpus is significantly more than double. Thus, it seems that the Alaska corpus' usage of these medical terms is disproportionately high, but this could be due to the fact that the Alaska corpus also refers to ASD a disproportionately large amount compared to the other two corpora.

Surprisingly, despite the Idaho corpus being the smallest in size, it yields a higher amount of total hits for the medical collocation search terms than the California corpus, with a greater amount of hits for every single search term except "ill". However, similar to the Alaska corpus, if the medical collocations are indeed associated with the word "autism", then a large amount of these collocations in the Idaho corpus could simply be due to a large number of times autism is referred to in the corpus — recall that the Idaho corpus yielded higher results than the California corpus for the search terms "autistic", "disabled", "autism spectrum disorder", and "special needs".

To determine how often other medical conditions or illnesses are referenced in association with autism, I used "autism and" as a search term for each corpus. Unsurprisingly, a majority of the associated conditions and illnesses in all three corpora were mental, however, both the Idaho and California corpora mentioned specific illnesses, such as schizophrenia and dementia, while the Alaska corpus remained vague and mostly referred to these illnesses as "related disabilities" (this term occurred quite often) and "other developmental disorders". This is surprising because due to the size of the Alaska corpus, one might expect a higher likelihood of specific disorders being mentioned. However, mental disorders are often referred to in quite

vague or broad terms (Keil, 2016), and the Alaska corpus seemingly follows this trend more than the other two corpora.

While medical collocates in all three corpora occurred frequently, one particularly interesting set of collocates in the Idaho corpus were those that referred to terms of incapacity, powerlessness, and dislike — overall, words with a negative or weak indexicality.

Frequency	**Word**
1	impediment
1	weakness
1	victims
1	variation
1	untreated
1	unsure
1	undergone
2	difficulty
4	challenges

Although these terms do not necessarily appear frequently within the Idaho corpus, the sheer number of related terms and the nature of these terms differentiates this corpus from both

the California and Arizona corpora. The occasional negative collocates detected in the other two corpora are few and far between and do not compare to the nature of the terms within the Idaho corpus. The fact that the Idaho corpus has negatively connotated terms that appear close to the word "autism" could perhaps imply that *autism* is negatively connotated in this corpus. These words, which seem to circle the theme of victimization, are actually commonly used when describing individuals with autism (Hodges, 2020) and their usage in the Idaho corpus may point to underlying themes of attitudes and judgment towards those with autism that are not prevalent in the other two corpora.

In sum, according to my cross-corpora comparison, I identified four specific trends in the data: age association with autism, gender association with autism, and language used to refer to individuals with autism. I found that words with a weak connotation, or indexicality, are associated with autism and prevalent in the Idaho corpus. Additionally, more terms that are generally deemed offensive are present in the Idaho corpus compared to the California and Alaska corpora. When looking at disorders and conditions often associated with autism, the Idaho and California corpora state-specific conditions, while the Alaska corpus surprisingly remains vague and unspecific. The following section will analyze these trends and detail their significance.

Analysis: Qualitative Results

LABELING

Debates have ensued over the last several years over the appropriate way to address a person with autism (Botha 2021) — some argue that person-first language should be used, separating the individual and the disorder to emphasize that the disorder does not define the person (an example of this would be “person with autism”). Others argue that identity-first language should be used, keeping together the individual and the disorder, to show that autism is a fundamental part of who they are and has played a vital role in the construction of their identity. A way to use identity-first language in this scenario would be “autistic person” or “autistic individual”. Using the KWIC and Word Cluster tool, I was able to determine if person-first or identity-first language is used more often in each corpus. There is no “correct” or agreed-upon way to refer to individuals with autism, so perhaps the different terminology when referring to them will not be significant in terms of what is “right” or “wrong” — but the findings could still hold significance. The following extract details an example of how person-first language is used in the context of autism (Anchorage Daily News, November 2005).

Extract 1

Trisha Kolegar and her son, Timothy, 3, ride a four-wheeler while on a training run Saturday with one of Lynda Plettner's puppy teams. Kolegar, a 2000 Iditarod veteran, co-founded Idita-Race for Autism, an organization that will provide funds to place effective treatment for autism within the reach of all Alaska families. Timothy was diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old. Kolegar plans to run the 2006 Iditarod to raise awareness and money for the organization.; Left, Tim kolegar, Timothy's father, helps Timothy count his fingers after putting

on his glove. Autism is a developmental disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate, to reason and to interact with others.

Within the Alaska corpus, there was a clear trend towards person-first language (for example, “individual with autism”). This was found by searching “with autism” in the Alaska corpus and seeing how many results this yielded, versus the search term “autistic”. However, the issue with this was that many results for the “with autism” search term were actually in the context of “diagnosed with autism”, rather than “individual with autism”. It was not person-first language, so it takes away from the total number of times person-first language is used in the Alaska corpus — Extract 1 is an example of this. “Autistic”, however, is used only in reference to identity-first language and the total number of times it is represented in the corpus is accurate. There were 112 hits for “with autism” (including the term “diagnosed with autism”) compared to only 84 hits for “autistic”. Looking through the results, the number of results for “diagnosed with autism” was substantial, but even without that term, there was very likely more results for the term “with autism” than “autistic” — therefore, even with this roadblock, there is still a specific trend within the Alaska corpus. The following extract (Los Angeles Times, 2021) is a unique case — within a few sentences, both person-first and identity-first language is used when referring to people with autism.

Extract 2

Even now, playing a groundbreaking character in a TV series that practices acceptance of differences, I must face the fact that women with disabilities, especially those with autism, are

rarely represented in mainstream media. As Josh commented in a recent panel interview with the Autism Society of America, there are currently no other TV shows with autistic girls. None.

A similar trend emerges with the California corpus — individuals "with autism" are represented more than "autistic" individuals. This particular extract is interesting because it covers both terminologies — earlier in the extract, it states "those with autism", using person-first language, but it goes on to state the term "autistic girls". Not only is this extract unique in that it includes both kinds of terminology (perhaps to seem neutral, as the author did not know which one was more socially acceptable?) but the content in it refers to the mis- and under-representation of females with autism in the media. The show that this extract refers to — Freeform's "Everything's Gonna Be Okay" — which premiered fairly recently, in 2020, is actually the first-ever show to integrate a person who actually has ASD to play a *lead* character that has autism in the show as well. The fact that this show only aired in 2020 highlights the dilemma that our society faces — the representation of people with autism in the media is actually few and far between. It now occurs to me that perhaps other articles use this same strategy, of using both terminologies because the author does not know which one is the "right" one to use. However, browsing through the articles within the California corpus and also within the Idaho and Alaska corpora, it seems that these articles are rare, and mostly, articles trend towards sticking with a certain kind of terminology and staying consistent with that throughout the article.

Idaho follows the same trend as Alaska and California, having person-first terminology being more common when referring to individuals with autism. However, the difference between the number of times person-first and identity-first language is used is almost inconsequential — there is a difference of fewer than 10 articles, much less than the other two corpora. This, of

course, could be due to the fact that the Idaho corpus is the smallest so the difference would also be the smallest, but it could also be because identity-first language is more prevalent in the Idaho corpus compared to the other two corpora, even though person-first language is still the most common terminology.

AGE

Due to the slow destigmatization of autism and mental health conditions in general in recent years (Aubé, 2020), more parents are recognizing and accepting traits in their children that could be markers for autism, and more children are diagnosed now than have been before. Some believe that the increase in autism diagnoses is also due to the increasingly vague requirements for diagnosis, due to autism being a spectrum. In other words, a wide range of behaviors could imply the presence of autism, rather than a specific "symptom" or behavior. However, there are still some common "signs" of autism, especially in youth, such as refusal to maintain eye contact, and twitching. In fact, there are several different types of autism, such as low functioning, high functioning, verbal, nonverbal___… which again takes away from the diagnosis being straightforward or "believable" by many people. Additionally, diagnosis of autism does not result from a medical test (McCarty, 2020) (like a blood or skin test), rather from observation of the individual and their current behaviors as well as their behavioral history. This causes the belief that autism is subjective and therefore is diagnosed more often than necessary, simply based on the doctor's "opinion". Whatever the reason, the number of diagnoses for autism increases (CDC, 2016) each year, and is likely to continue increasing (Prior 2003). However, the regular upwards trend in autism diagnosis has not always been constant. Between

the years 2000 to 2016, autism diagnoses jumped from only 1 in 150 children to 1 in 54 children, according to the CDC. Previously, autism was a stigmatized disorder (it still is to this day and many parents refused to believe their children had it or believed they could "cure" it. Therefore, many cases of autism in this time period, even severe autism, were never reported and recorded, and the more mild cases of autism were passed off as "bad behavior". The first case of autism was reported in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner (Applied Behavior Analysis Programs Guide, 2018) and has been studied since then, but like many other disorders, it is something people tend to avoid getting labeled as, even if a diagnosis and medication will help their wellbeing. This was especially the case in earlier years, preventing many millenials with autism from being properly diagnosed and treated. Due to this, most data on adults with autism have only been reported in the adult's later life, and not when they were children, limiting the amount of data on these older subjects. Additionally, many adults are not willing to get tested for autism or report their diagnosis (due to the additional stigma they may face as an adult with autism, which is less reported and also "less common"), also limiting the amount of data that can be reported on them. This juxtaposition between children with autism and adults with autism may be reflected in the media (Cage, 2019), such as popular television shows and movies. To understand if and how age is correlated to autism in the news, in the following subsection I will use data and specific extracts from each of the newspaper corpora to detail and analyze the relation of age to autism. The following extract, from the Anchorage Daily News (Aug 2007), demonstrates how children with autism are offered more help and resources than adults with autism.

Extract 3

The Centers for Disease Control released data in 2007 that found that about one in 150 8-year-old children in multiple areas of the United States had an autism spectrum disorder.

Clinical studies indicate that the earlier a child with autism receives intervention and support, the better the long-term outcome. This year's Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority supported and the Legislature approved additional resources to identify and diagnose young children experiencing autism.

A trend that emerges across each of the three corpora is that many of the newspapers include articles about new organizations, bills, laws, and opportunities to help and include children with autism, but rarely adults. Many articles offered exclusive opportunities to children with autism. This phenomenon could be because more children than adults are diagnosed with autism (Hertz-Picciotto, 2014), so more children should have opportunities and resources to help them overcome any challenges they may face. It could also be due to the stigmatized notion of adults with autism — while children are often associated with the themes of vulnerability and innocence (Burman, 1994), adults are expected to be responsible and in control of their life. Therefore, a belief may exist within society that children with autism need resources more than adults with autism do because children are to be "helped" and a "proper" adult should not be reliant or in want of any kind of assistance. This notion could exist within the minds of adults with autism as well — they may believe that they should not ask for help, or they will be seen as a less competent adult (Sperry, 2005). Perhaps they do not *want* to be put in the same boat as children with autism, as their self-pride and confidence will be damaged when they are compared to young children with a disorder that may limit their social skills. When adults with autism refuse to reach out or accept help, and this becomes a pattern of behavior over time, this may result in resources to stop being offered. Additionally, some believe that the symptoms of autism diminish with age (Shattuck 2006), so less help is *needed* for adults with autism, and therefore

less help is offered. If any of these are the case, it would explain why resources and opportunities available primarily target children with autism.

Extract 3 serves as an interesting example of resources and help provided to children with autism. The first sentence in the extract details the number of children diagnosed with autism in the US, according to the CDC. This article was published in 2007, so at the time it was the most updated information about autism. It is crucial to recognize that the article only chose to include CDC data about children with autism rather than data regarding adults with autism, although this may be due to the fact that data on adults with autism may have been limited at the time. The CDC information in this article comes from a statement made by the CDC in Washington in 2007 titled "Autism Spectrum Disorders" — nothing in the title of the statement or even the introduction to it specifies that it will only address autism in children. However, the statement goes on to detail statistics and facts about children with autism, and the families and parents of these children, but not anything about adults with autism. In fact, the only reference to adults that may have autism is a sentence briefly stating that the CDC "promot[es] the health of children and adults with disabling or potentially disabling conditions". This reference not only groups autism with other conditions, diminishing any significance of the inclusion of adults with autism, but also groups children and adults together. Autism is referred to in exclusive reference to children throughout the statement, but never exclusively in adults, highlighting how autism is seen as a "children's disorder" and many articles implicitly refer to autism as such. Autism only being referred to in conjunction with other disorders (in the reference to adults with autism) also undermines the importance of caring for and helping adults with autism. Due to the article's principal focus on children with autism, it is understandable why the provided extract only

includes data on children with autism, although it does speak to the overall theme of children with autism being more represented in media than adults with autism.

The extract goes on to detail that children who receive help earlier in life will have a better quality of life later, so it is crucial to help children while they are still in their developmental phases. After including data that highlights how prevalent autism is, and how treating it early will help individuals, the article explains that steps are being taken to help diagnose children with autism. Although the article says nothing about the resources helping the individuals once they are already diagnosed, the main impact of the extract is that children having the opportunity to be diagnosed at a young age will allow them and their families to reach out and plan for resources that will help the child as they grow, and this will allow for them to have a better quality of life overall. Therefore, this resource not only helps the child now but plays a vital role in shaping the quality of life this child will have as they grow up into an adult — so although the article is targeted towards children, it has implications that it will help the person throughout their whole life, even as an adult. However, this extract specifically focuses on adolescents, using words such as “child” and “young” four times within three sentences, while any word referring to adults or grown individuals is not referenced at all. From this information, and simply from the wording of the extract, it is not difficult to see that the focal point of this extract is the idea of helping children and not adults. Yes, this resource may help children have a better quality of life once they are grown, but this is a one-time diagnosis offered to and only to children. Adults who may have autism are unable to use this resource, and after reading the verbiage of the extract, may be discouraged to even investigate whether or not they have autism due to the article’s focus on children with autism and the exclusion of adults with autism.

Additionally, it uses the verbiage “experiencing autism”, as though it is a temporary condition that people are unfortunate enough to be going through. The vagueness of the extract also seems significant enough to mention — it doesn’t mention any specific resources or support that will be given to children with autism and doesn’t go into detail about what long-term issues may arise without these (unspecified) resources. Although this extract and article as a whole may be well-intentioned, its exclusionary nature creates problems for the rest of the autistic population and is indeed reflective of media attitudes towards autism.

Articles from the California corpus were also significantly focused on children with autism, but a few articles from this corpus included adults with autism as well and resources for these adults. When the word “adult” or “parent” is used within five words of the word “autism” in these articles, it is generally only used to describe the family of an individual with autism, rather than the adult having autism. Resources and support to adults with autism were rarely found in these articles, and in the few cases where adult resources were offered (which was very few compared to the number of resources for children with autism), these resources were offered in conjunction with children with autism, rather than exclusively to adults with autism.

The next extract, which is from the Sentinel Echo (May 2021), demonstrates the focus on children rather than adults, based on both its phrasing and content.

Extract 4

A ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday offered the public a view of the new facility that features devices to assist children with disabilities, a gymnasium, and sensory room for children with autism and adults.

We offer services for anyone from 0 to 100," Alexander said. "We have speech therapy, occupational therapy and we are currently looking for a physical therapy. We've added Chris George who deals with behavioral problems."

Extract 2 is an example of one of the few articles that addressed autism in adults. This article, which was published in May 2021, is more recent and therefore is more up-to-date than many of the other articles within this extract. This could be a contributing factor to the article's inclusion of adults with autism — more recently, attitudes towards adults with autism have become more positive and accepting (Cage, 2018), and this fact could be reflected in more recent media. However, despite this article standing out from many of the other articles within this extract and even within the other two extracts by including adults with autism, it offers a resemblance to the other extracts in that its primary focus is on children. The extract begins by explaining that the devices are intended for *children* with disabilities. By putting this piece of information before the other resources that the facility provides, it highlights its importance compared to the other two resources — specifically, it highlights the importance of a resource exclusive to children with disabilities. However, they do not specifically mention autism in reference to children, which would have placed even more emphasis on the exclusionary nature of resources for children with autism. Instead, the blanket term of "disabilities" is used, which makes it less specific, yet children are still specifically mentioned rather than all individuals with disabilities. Of course, the author of the article did not create the devices and cannot control that they are meant for children — they are simply reporting on them. However, the mention of these devices is put towards the front of the sentence and this move made by the author may push the narrative of children with autism being more important or in need of help than adults with autism.

The sentence goes on to mention resources for “children with autism and adults”. Again, children are being put towards the beginning of the phrase, emphasizing their comparative importance to adults. Additionally, the phrasing of the sentence is confusing to readers — it is unclear whether it is referring to adults with autism, or simply adults, because the word “adults” is placed after the word “autism” rather than before — literally making adults an afterthought. This also undermines the importance of adults with autism, as it is unclear whether the author of the article is even referencing them. The next sentence in the extract reveals that the facility does indeed offer resources to adults with autism because they are open to any age group. Again, this sentence does not exclusively mention adults with autism, but it does reveal that adults with autism are welcome to use the resources available. This tells us that the previous sentence *was* likely referring to adults with autism and not just neurotypical adults, however, the phrasing only signified the importance of children with autism. The individual quoted also uses the phrase “behavioral problems”, which seems unprofessional and doesn’t appear to be a medical descriptor of people with disabilities. This language also doesn’t seem objective, although it should be — Alexander is a specialist working for children with disabilities, yet a biased tone comes off in the quote. This could reflect unconscious attitudes towards individuals with autism in general, an unintentional bias. Despite the article trying to be inclusive of all age groups (which is a very progressive step compared to the other articles within the rest of the dataset), the terminology and phrasing of the article do make it seem focused on children with autism. This is likely an unintentional choice by the author, but it does reflect subconscious views and attitudes towards autism that are prevalent in our society — the qualitative analysis has revealed that generally, people tend to associate autism with children rather than adults.

GENDER

Although autism is not a gender-specific disorder, females with autism are diagnosed much less often than males with autism. This could be because there may be genetic differences in females with autism than males with autism (Zhang, 2020). This could also be since many females with autism are just diagnosed incorrectly, or not diagnosed at all. Some claim that females are more difficult to diagnose because their "differences" are not as obvious as their male counterparts, despite having the same condition. Another theory, the empathizing-systemizing theory, postulates that female brains have a larger focus on empathy while male brains place a larger focus on systemizing. Many people use this as reasoning for the extreme male brain theory of autism (Baren-Cohen, 2002) — a theory that states that autism is an "extreme of the normal male profile", which is backed by evidence. Essentially, individuals with autism seem to portray extreme systemizing traits, which is far into the male end of the autism spectrum, with the empathizing-systemizing theory. However, associating autism with males, causes the focus to be placed more on males with autism than females with autism. Additionally, females that may exhibit systemizing rather than empathizing traits may just be seen as "different" from other females and forced to think differently, rather than getting tested and diagnosed like a male might do in their situation. One more theory is based on a study (Ratto, 2018) which found that higher IQ females with autism are less likely to meet the criteria on certain autism diagnostic tests that determine whether someone has ASD or not. This means

that females are less likely to be diagnosed, even if they have autism, and therefore males are diagnosed at a much higher rate simply due to the nature of the test (Looms, 2017) (the test exhibits a bias towards the male gender). The reason for the low diagnosis of females with autism could be due to one of the aforementioned reasons or maybe a combination of all of them, but whatever the reason, the number of female diagnoses for autism compared to the number of male diagnoses is about 1:3 (Looms, 2017) (this number fluctuates from a 1:4 down to a 1:2 ratio, depending on the study, but the large majority of studies do agree that females are diagnosed disproportionately less than males).

Within the Idaho corpus, which is also the smallest one, the amount of “he” and “she” collocates for the word autism were equal — 11 each. However, the “her” collocate appeared 10 times within the corpus while the “his” collocate appeared only 7 times. Taking the rest of the gendered pronouns — ex: “she”, “hers”, “him”, “his” — and terms that implied gender, such as “brother” or “sister”, the total corpus has a higher number of female-related terms than male-related terms. This is surprising, considering that the Idaho corpus had proven to follow the stereotype that autism is more prevalent and important in children than adults. Given this information, it would make sense that the Idaho corpus would follow the stereotype that autism is associated with males more than females, especially given that far more males are diagnosed with autism. The number of males with autism represented in media would likely correlate to the number of males diagnosed with autism. However, the fact that *more* females are represented in the Idaho corpus than males is interesting.

This could be because although female pronouns are used closely with the word "autism", the actual person with autism that they are referring to may not have autism. Extract 5, from the Idaho Business Review (Aug 2010), below, is one such example:

Extract 5

"I certainly don't think the doctors are in cahoots trying to harm kids," said Teresa Price, who has three children ages 6, 12, and 13. She immunized her first two children but held off on immunizing the third. Her oldest child has autism, and while she's unsure what caused it, she said she doesn't want to risk any more immunizations right now.

The female in this extract is Teresa Price, although both of the words "she" and "her" are used closely with the keyword "autism", which could have indicated a female association with autism; the person with autism in question is a male. The article later goes on to state that the child with autism is her "son", and only that one gendered pronoun is used to refer to him as a male. The amount of female pronouns is greater than the number of male pronouns, yet the entire extract is referring to a *male* with autism. Therefore, the fact that the Idaho extract has more female than male pronouns close to the word "autism" could just be a coincidence, although many of the articles do refer to actual females with autism. It could also, however, be indicative of the fact that females are more closely associated with *caring* for people with autism than males. Within this corpus, the term "mother" yielded 20 hits, and the term "father" only yielded six hits. This has nothing to do with the actual genders of the individuals with autism represented within this newspaper corpus, however, it could be significant when considering the genders associated with the general concept of autism.

As expected, there were more gendered pronoun collocates in the larger California corpus - 35 occurrences of male-gendered pronouns and words, compared to only 12 of female-gendered pronouns. This data is more representative of the stereotype that males are more often diagnosed with autism (and represented in media) than females with the same disorder. Furthermore, the male-related collocates actually refer to males with autism and not neurotypical males that are coincidentally close to the word “autism” in the sentence. The female-related collocates, however, mainly refer to female caretakers or family members more often than actual females with autism. This follows the same trend as the Idaho corpus and indicates that even though females are associated with autism in the media, they are mainly associated in the context of caring for individuals with autism, so they are not truly represented to the extent that they should be. However, since fewer females are diagnosed, this may be the reason that their representation is so limited. Ultimately, males with autism are overall represented in each dataset more than women with autism, but female pronouns still have an association with the word autism — for the purpose of being the caretaker of an individual with autism. Another example of a female only being referred to as a caretaker for an individual with autism is detailed in the next extract (Hollywood Reporter, August 2009).

Extract 6

There are also a world premiere for Icelandic director Fridrik Thor Fridriksson's "The Sunshine Boy," which captures a mother's journey to understand her son's autism and an international premiere for "Stolen," a film from Australian filmmakers Violeta Ayala and Dan Fallshaw about

Saharawi refugees in limbo in Algeria that stirred controversy over allegations of modern slavery when first screened at the Sydney Film Festival.

The above extract (from California) is another example of female pronouns being used close to the word "autism" to describe a *male* with autism. Similar to the previous example, the amount of female-related terms ("mother", and "her") is greater than the amount of male-related terms (simply "son's"). Also, the female pronouns serve the role of describing a caretaker, similarly to the previous extract. These female pronouns are not about people with autism, but rather that they play important roles in these individuals' lives. Additionally, even though gender norms have greatly progressed past the traditional home environment where the only job of women was to care for the children, women are often still portrayed and seen as caretakers, with their primary role being to care for and nurture the people around them (Rabe-Hemp, 2011). This may be the reason they are contextualized like this in newspapers (Mapes, 2018). Furthermore, people with autism are often seen as particularly vulnerable due to their condition (Jacobs, 2019), and many think that they need extra support in order to overcome the challenge of assimilating into neurotypical society (Camm-Crosbie, 2018). Their "vulnerable" state may be the thing that reinforces the fact that females are seen as "caretakers" for them, as opposed to neurotypical individuals who may not be as "vulnerable" or needing of help. This concept could be connected with the vulnerability of children as well, providing a reason why most autistic people are assumed to be children.

A similar trend is seen within the Alaska corpus, although here the numbers are more drastic. 64 male-related pronouns are seen within the corpus, compared to only 33 female-related pronouns. Like the other two corpora, the female pronouns are also largely due to a female caretaker's role

in the life of an individual with autism. Although Idaho displays a larger amount of female-related pronouns than male-related pronouns in context to autism, all three corpora show the common trend of females being frequently depicted as a caretaker when used in context with the word “autism”, rather than female pronouns only being used when referencing females with autism. This trend reinforces the perception that has followed women for years — that their role is to take care of others, and they shouldn’t need to take care of themselves. It is important to understand that this narrative should be changed in the media so that conscious and unconscious societal attitudes towards women will shift as a result.

CONCLUSION

A difficult challenge for discourse analysts researching autism and its representation in the media is that the language surrounding this topic is frequently debated. In essence, it is hard to definitively determine whether there is a “right” or “wrong” way to discuss autism (Prior 2003). While some individuals with autism prefer a certain type of language, others prefer other types - as such, in this study, I have attempted to simply document these language trends and offer analysis according to larger social issues. Ultimately, the trends I have identified speak to the larger issue of society’s attitudes towards individuals with autism. And importantly, it is through these sorts of mediatized texts that overarching perspectives are shaped and disseminated. Indeed, it is crucial to analyze and deconstruct discourses that circulate widely, and greatly impact the general public.

In this paper, I sought to do two different things: first, find common quantitative trends in the data, and second, understand how the factors of age, gender, and identity feature y in articles

about or including autism. In my qualitative analysis, I interpreted these trends in context, t, determining how they differed between the three different corpora. This in-depth discourse analysis allowed me to more accurately pinpoint the attitudes that society seems to hold towards individuals with autism in general, as well as how these ideologies differ accordingly to political persuasion.

On the quantitative level, some clear differences between the California, Idaho, and Alaska corpora emerged. For example, the Idaho corpus used the word “disabled” when describing individuals with autism many more times than the California corpus despite being a smaller corpus. The Idaho dataset also included more occurrences of autism-related descriptors for most words. Additionally, the negative indexicality of the words within the Idaho corpus (such as weakness, and victim) is interesting, as both the California and Alaska corpora do not include this information. All three corpora followed the trend of associating autism with other common disorders or conditions, although the Alaska corpus kept these other disorders vaguer while the other two corpora included specific disorders and conditions.

For my qualitative analysis, I first aimed to see if there was a trend for the way each corpus referred to individuals with autism (whether they used person-first or identity-first language). All three corpora used person-first terminology more often than they used identity-first terminology. However, the difference between the number of times person-first and identity-first language is used is very little, indicating that it could simply be a random occurrence that person-first language happens to be the most common. This seems reflective of the ongoing debate: different people have different opinions on whether person-first versus identity-first language should be used when describing individuals with autism. The kind of

language preferred by individuals with autism varies from person to person, and this preference should be investigated more as autistic individuals become more prevalent and represented in media.

In terms of age, all three corpora primarily referred to children when talking about individuals with autism. Associated with this was the offer of help, through programs or devices, but these were exclusive to children with autism rather than adults with autism. The California corpus was the only corpus that offered multiple resources to adults with autism, although even this corpus primarily focused on children with autism and many articles did not even include adults in the context of autism. The Alaska and Idaho corpora emphasized children with autism more than the California corpus, offering little to no resources for adults. The three corpora point towards the conclusion that autism seems to be a children-focused disease in the minds of many people, and that adults with autism don't need or shouldn't be offered resources.

Lastly, in terms of gender, the Alaska and California corpora used male pronouns more often than female pronouns when referencing individuals with autism. The Alaska corpus presented the most striking difference between the two gendered pronouns, with almost double the amount of male-related pronouns as female pronouns. The Idaho corpus, on the other hand, actually had more female-related pronouns than male pronouns. However, when analyzing how these pronouns were used, a surprising trend was found: female pronouns were not used to refer to those with autism, they were actually there to refer to the *caretakers* of individuals with autism, such as a mother or sister. Upon investigation, this trend was actually found in all three corpora, although within the Alaska and California corpora the number of male-related pronouns

trumped the number of female-related pronouns. Within all three corpora, males with autism have been more frequently represented than females with autism, and females are mainly only represented in the context of being a caretaker for an individual with autism, reinforcing the stereotypical narrative of a female's role of "caretaker".

In sum, in this study, I have attempted to understand how autism is discursively portrayed through the media because this representation shapes the way autism is understood and interpreted by each member of society. As it stands, individuals with autism often seem to be portrayed inaccurately, and even harmfully -, particularly in more conservative-leaning states. This representation must change, so that societal attitudes towards individuals with autism will shift in conjunction. The misrepresentation that more men than women have autism, and that women should simply care for men with autism, is detrimental to the many individuals who have been incorrectly diagnosed (or were not tested for autism) due to their gender. Additionally, the false narrative that children with autism need more help and resources, and should be portrayed more than adults with autism is harmful to the adults who have autism, whether diagnosed or not. Ultimately, for people with autism to be de-stigmatized and better understood, their representation in news discourse must be more accurate and more balanced - and this begins with understanding that there is an imbalance in the first place.