The role of the media in escalating social tension in the USA

Oksana Anatolievna Kaverina[1*]*, Margarita Valerievna* Novosyolova[1]

[1] Irkutsk State University, Department of Oriental and Regional Studies of the Asia-Pacific Region, 664003, Irkutsk, Karl Marx Street 1, Russia

Abstract. The media are considered to be a pivotal source of creating and reflecting various processes in modern societies. The media's role in escalating social tension in the USA is essential and will be examined in detail in the article. The work focuses on the language used in the media to create social tension, the phenomenon, caused by worried feelings, no trust, stress, hostility, unfriendliness, not sharing common needs or interests, anxiety, violence, and conflict. The pandemic of COVID-19 has led to inequality of views in terms of health and life-activities and has triggered off a wave of anxiety, stress and other manifestations of tension in different social spheres. The analysis of the mass media, namely publicist articles, blogs, forums, and posts in social networks, allows seeing people's discontent about the current realities in medicine, education, ecology, and politics. People's feelings of discontent and stress can be generally conceptualized as social tension.

1 Introduction

More than ever, Americans are concerned about social issues they are facing nowadays. The media is a forum, which makes it possible for journalists, politicians, bloggers, and mere citizens to openly express their viewpoints about current events and to respond to breaking news in the country. The range of topics Americans worry about is uncommonly diverse. Educational issues, civil rights, poverty, climate change, health care, terrorism, racism, political battles have become acute questions for Americans to discuss and debate about. The focus of the work is on some of them, chosen by the authors according to the survey published by American Psychological Organization [1]. However, the subject of the article is not to study the stress itself but the means of social tension representation and escalation in the American media and social networks.

2 Theoretical basis of the study

The notion of social tension is ambiguous, probably due to its interdisciplinary nature being applied to the field of psychology, conflict studies, sociology and others. According to Talcott Parsons, one of the founders of modern theoretical sociology, tension correlates with strain, both of which "connote injury due to overexertion, overtasking or excessive pressure" [2]. Parsons considers strain an endogenous source referring to "a condition in the relation between two or more structured units that constitutes a tendency or pressure toward changing that relation to one incompatible with the equilibrium of the relevant part of the system" [2]. It is claimed that if the tension rises, the control mechanisms will not be able to provide conformity to proper expectations which are essential to avert the disintegration of the structure [2]. Burnap and Williams define social tension as any incident that would tend to deteriorate the normal relationship between individuals or groups [3].

Although social tension often takes place in a socially and economically unstable society, it can implicitly exist in a relatively stable one [4]. Social tension can be encountered in different spheres of a society – social, economic, political. The issues under consideration in this paper are COVID-19, environment and politics.

Social tension is a massive syndrome that reflects the degree of physiological, psychophysiological and socio-psychological adaptation or maladjustment to social changes. Social tension is manifested in discontent, distrust of power, conflict in society, anxiety, economic and mental depression, rush demand, demographic challenges, aggressive and stressful relationships. Physiological maladjustment is caused by the inability of people to adapt to social changes, for example, to higher prices, high inflation, which explains the worsening demographic situation or high mortality. Psychophysiological maladjustment is expressed in mass anxiety, aggression, and apathy during the period of adaptation of people to difficulties and social changes. Socio-psychological maladjustment reflects the conflicting attitudes of people towards difficulties, which are manifested in increased politicization, strikes, migration, emigration, and an increase in crime and violence. Social tension functions as destructive, adversely affecting the state, economy, power and personality, and constructive, which motivates people to overcome difficulties [5].

---

* Corresponding author: vastik37@mail.ru

In addition to public manifestations of common social moods – strikes, protests, riots, aimed at demonstrating a clear negative attitude towards certain social issues, social media have become a powerful tool of influence on people, their minds and behaviors. Articles, blogs, forums, social networks provide the massive textual data to discover useful patterns on human emotions, behaviors and sentiments expressed to certain events [6].

Following the present-day scientific tradition, language is believed to be an instrument and source of power. Most scholars accept that "a neutral use of language is, in principle, impossible" [7]. The study of linguistic means used to verbalize social tension in the discourse is socially significant as it focuses on identifying tensions indicators in media texts – digital articles (and headlines), posts and comments of qualified experts and individuals in social media, interactive technologies that allow sharing of information via virtual communities and networks.

For a start, it is imperative to analyse the concept TENSION by picking out its conceptual features. According to some lexicographic data (LD) they are as follows.

Table 1. Conceptual Features of TENSION.

LD	Tension
LDCE	Nervous feeling: a nervous feeling of worry that makes it impossible to relax
	No trust: the feeling of distrust to each other; people or countries may suddenly attack each other or start arguing
GWG	Stress: a state of mental or emotional strain or suspense. Latent hostility
Webster	Inner striving, unrest, or imbalance often with physiological indication of emotion
Oxford	a situation in which people feel unfriendly, and that may cause them to attack each other
	a situation in which different needs or interests causes difficulties
Collins	the feeling of people when they are anxious and do not trust each other, and when there is a possibility of violence or conflict

Summarizing the data above we can see the pronounced features of tension which are: nervous worried feeling, no trust, stress, latent hostility, unfriendliness, not sharing common needs or interests, anxiety, violence or conflict. Along with the distinguished conceptual features, and consequently the method of conceptual analysis to be undertaken in the research of social tension, O. Vybornova and colleagues suggest the semantic analysis aimed at revealing semantic relations between syntaxemes, "minimal indivisible semantic-syntactic structures of language". The authors claim that the meanings of syntaxemes prevailing in a certain discourse can mark tension. Besides the linguistic tensions indicators the psycholinguistic indicators are also to be taken into account, namely first-person singular pronouns, first-person singular verbs in past tense, verbs in passive

voice, impersonal verbs, and others [8]. To express feelings and emotions in a written text it is the phonetic, graphical, lexical and syntactical peculiarities that matter as well.

3 Discussion

People all over the world are experiencing a global health crisis which has upended people's lives and is still triggering human suffering and death. According to the survey provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2020, Americans have been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social media serve as a space of emerging misconception and confusion. On one hand people are recommended to get the information from reputable sources like WHO (World Health Organization), the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Intermountain Healthcare, where, as they claim, the teams of professionals – the world's leading public health experts, including doctors, epidemiologists, scientists and managers inform people about the COVID-19 data. They tell about the disease itself, give advice for the public, publish weekly epidemiological update on COVID-19, debunk the myths about the coronavirus disease (one of the latest – receiving a vaccine will make you magnetic), explain how vaccines are developed, distributed and work, using charts and illustrations to provide visual guidance.

All these organizations through their web sites pursue one goal – to make the public believe that COVID-19 is a serious infectious disease which adverse and even killing effects on our bodies shouldn't be neglected. They commonly call for mandatory vaccination as the only safe and effective way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. Along the way, the Internet offers the sort of information that makes people hesitate, confuse, and feel tension.

According to the research of J. Miashkova, The USA is the country with the largest share of no-vax authors – 12% among English-speaking countries [9] and up to 25% in some states are unlikely to get the Covid vaccine [10]. The journalist also focuses on the number of unique authors on top media platforms hosting the most of no- and pro-vaccine talk – Twitter (85% – pro-vaccine / 15% – anti-vaccine), Facebook (90% – pro-vaccine / 10% – anti-vaccine), Instagram (92% – pro-vaccine / 8% – anti-vaccine). The skeptical or negative responses to the calls of the US government and medical organizations to get vaccinated don't come out from nowhere.

The Covid Blog (the official blog of COVID Legal USA) is a team of paralegals, legal writers and researchers helping Americans represent themselves in legal matters against oppressive COVID mandates that guarantee truthful data about COVID vaccines and their severe adverse effects on people. The blog displays posts telling what repercussions for taking an experimental COVID-19 vaccine can be. Particularly, the site has a section called TRUTH ABOUT MASKS stating categorically that masks are unnecessary and do more harm than good [11]. Analyzing some of the posts we

are hoping to reveal the indicators of tension which are created by the authors of the blog and the people cited.

Mrs. Jamie Walton, a Texas realtor received the experimental Johnson & Johnson injection on April 14, 2021. When she started feeling numbness throughout her body, she went to several doctors. One doctor said it was *just* dehydration. Another doctor told her it was *just* anxiety. The numbness continued as no doctor would help her. She went to the emergency room several times and still got the runaround. By mid-June, she was paralyzed from the waist down and diagnosed with Guillain-Barré Syndrome. It is *only* because her brother-in-law is a doctor that she got any help at all. Another user, Mr. Anthony Shingler, having similar symptoms was first diagnosed with *only* allergies. The incompetence of the doctors or a deliberate concealment of the side effects the vaccines have multiplied by numerous detailed descriptions of the people's sufferings told by their relatives raise the situation of distrust. The modal particles *only, just* enhance the negligence of the medical workers to the problem that raise no trust in them.

Ms. Madeline Johnson's future may now be in jeopardy, the blog states. Madeline is suffering from Shawn Skelton Syndrome, after receiving her experimental Pfizer mRNA injections. She lost fine motor skills and suffered high fevers, nausea, swollen limbs, breathing issues and random bouts of paralysis in various parts of her body. Her mother, Marah Johnson, writes on her Instagram: "First I want to preface this post by saying this is not an anti vax post. This is a we need all the risks known post. This is "the side effects are real post" this is a we are asking … no we are begging to help post" … Anyone else having similar symptoms. Please share. Any nuggets of info or insight might help us"; "We just want TRANSPARENCY. And help. Nothing more nothing less" [12]. This case depicts the absence of proper information about the condition Madeline proved to be in.

The comments to the posts of Marah Johnson, Madeline's mother, are also telling. People show various states and feelings towards the vaccine itself, its harmful or even killing effects, for instance, "Dear Jesus, flush the poison from this sweet girls body!" (linziboo77). "This is so scary they haven't pulled this from the market. So many injuries and deaths now" (mariabrophy).

The following comments show the lack of trust in the official authorities, for instance, "No sane person will have their lives ripped from them, and still be 'pro vax.' When you truly do the research you will uncover the disgusting, inhumane deception, and lies, the government and CDC (a vaccine company masked as a health organization) have allowed one to take place on American citizens" (bigharma.is.lying2you). "Vaccine injury is not new its labeled as a conspiracy theory by society and those who believe the religious teachings of money hungry Big Pharma propaganda. Its only growing at an exponential rate with no end in sight, Speak Up…!! Anti-vax should not be shunned or gaslight discussion it should be an open conversation" (mrs_kendall); "… that's what's f.ucked up about the Gov they don't care

about people at all" (gen5ceaz); "… The vaccination programme is not to "protect" others. Don't be subject to their propaganda. Everything that has happened during covid has been in the interests of the powerful. The biggest wealth gap between the poor to the rich the world has ever seen … funnily enough just before a great depression" (domi.a7x).

The sad Madeline Johnson's story makes people feel nervous, scared, hesitant, for instance, "I can't like it. It makes me both angry and incredibly sad (momzthelukage); Omg I'm going to get my Pfizer done on Friday I'm worried now" (noraabdullar19844).

People's comments are varied, most of which are encouraging and supporting. However, some negative responses are obvious, for instance, *reproach* – That's what you get for trusting the government (gloryboy.mat); *unfaith* – Needs some checking as young people were not even getting the first dose at that time. You have to watch the disinformation on Facebook (drummond3748), and Marah's *aggressive response* – she's front line worker in a hospital. Soooooo perhaps think to ask before ASSuming (marah_johnson). The prolonged and highlighted letters intensify Marah's resentment. In one of her late posts (attached with the image of puma) Marah fiercely defends her daughter against some unfriendly reactions, for instance, "Right now I feel like this puma mama. I will NOT put up with anyone or anything attacking my child". That proves that there are hissy fits (impoliteness, distrust, skepticism) in the posts of people commenting on the Madeline's case.

Few spheres of life have been left unscathed due to the pandemic, a challenging and complex phenomenon, carrying deep consequences not only on the medical but also economic domain. According to the APA data, 68% report their job or employment has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including hours cut, being laid off, getting fired and others. Another tension in the American society concerns the mandatory vaccination required by some institutions.

The Covid Blog site provides this sort of information emphasizing the devastating effect of the Covid vaccines. One of the posts is devoted to Ms. Robin Spring Saunders, a 45-year-old mother who found a job at one of the most prestigious universities but never made it to her first day of work as she passed away six days later after the first shot. On that day she wrote on her Instagram "I never thought I'd get a Covid shot but I got my first one today. Unfortunately my job requires it" (Robin Spring Saunders). It is clear that the woman was not willing to be vaccinated unless a condition of employment at Johns Hopkins University where she was going to work. Another user asks on her Instagram: "DOES ANYONE KNOW HOW TO HELP ME GET OUT OF A MANDATORY VACCINE THAT MY JOB IS REQUIRING?" (dinahbe_). The capitalized question intensifies the negative attitude of the writer to compulsory vaccination.

On July 1, 2021 BBC broadcast the video 'Vaccine hesitancy: Your job or the jab?' It introduces a new syndrome – vaccine hesitancy, which refers to objection to getting the vaccine. A group of nurses from Houston opposes the state's largest hospital policy, which is

requiring them to get vaccinated or lose their jobs. The authorities think it a logical decision to get the staff vaccinated so as to keep the patients safe. Initially the medical workers were fairly positive about the vaccination but only after the vaccines to be thoroughly tested and approved by FDA. As time has progressed they refuse to get vaccinated because they aren't confirmed with certainty whether the vaccines are available to protect them from the virus and control the pandemic on the whole. However, the law is very much on the side of employers in this matter. The federal government says that the companies can require vaccination as a condition of employment but in some states Republican governors pass laws to make vaccine requirements illegal. It violates personal liberties and creates tension. There is a lot of autonomy and independence in the United States, so there are always some holdouts who are fighting the concept of vaccination. As a result, around 178 staff members at Houston hospital system have been suspended. Being 'heroes' a year ago, the nurses are undergoing disheartening actions from the employer. Along with it, Joe Biden reports on his Twitter: "Since I took office six months ago, we've gone from 60,000 new jobs per month – to 60,000 every three days". A common reply is "This does not mean that the millions of workers who lost their jobs due to COVID have been able to return to work. Many of these "new" jobs are low paying plus there are other pandemic related barriers to reemployment" [13].

The tensed situation about the mandatory vaccination as a condition of employment can be observed through the analysis of the lexical units, for instance, the paronyms *job* and *jab*. The word *injection* is more and more often replaced with the word *jab*, which bears negative implications (a blow; a sudden, sharp punch) [14]. Thus, *jab* is more a military term than medical. According to the etymology dictionary, the term is a Scottish variant of the word *job*, which means *to strike, pierce, thrust* [15]. In cognitive linguistics, particularly in cognitive metaphor studies, 'war / military metaphors' are used to talk about health-related discourse [16]. P. Wicke and M. Bolognesi report that the WAR frame is frequently used to talk about Covid-19 [17].

Highlighting some aspects of a concept in terms of another, metaphors are widely used to express the urgency associated with a quite tensed situation, which the pandemic has brought. In the following headline, the author uses metaphors to capture attention to the negative sides of the vaccines, for example, "Health Ranger warns that mandatory vaccines are MEDICAL RAPE and a form of felony assault with a deadly weapon" [18].

Brigitte Nerlich analyzes not only the war-metaphors in the time of coronavirus ('invisible enemy' (Donald Trump), 'an assailant, an unexpected mugger that has to be wrestled to the floor' (Boris Johnson)), but also a lot of disaster metaphors ('epicenter', 'Trump's Chernobyl', 'killer plague', 'storm', 'wildfire', etc.) [19]. Thus, it is worth laying special emphasis of metaphors on reporting about the coronavirus and everything that goes with it.

The pandemic uprooted people's lives and left many experiencing more fear and uncertainty than ever before. On the list of social work's 'Great Challenges' Americans face today, it might be surprising to see "strengthen social responses to environmental changes." The effects of climate change can be seen all over the news from wildfires in Idaho, Montana, and California to record-breaking temperatures all over the United States, which was never this hot in June in 127 years of record-keeping. This might seem like a problem for scientists, not social workers, but climate change can put a strain on resources and impact the wellbeing of entire communities [20].

Prompted by a growing awareness of humans' impacts on the planet and the realization that the long-term viability of every household and enterprise depends on the availability of finite and fragile natural resources, there is a growing acceptance that everybody needs to be sustainable, or be on a clear path to becoming one. Evidently, in a recent survey by the Pew Research Center – 6 in 10 Americans said global climate change is a major threat to the country [21].

In an attempt to draw people's attention to the ecological issues and urge people to change their ways, the media and the press use eye-catching headlines, abundant in adjectives and verbs with negative connotations: *kill, dead, catastrophic, disastrous, dangerous, devastating, destroying,* etc. These articles cannot fail to convey an overall negative message and make people feel anxious and depressed about the environmental problems. The lexemes *kill*, *dead* and their derivatives are frequent in environmental headlines and strongly emotive as killing and death is something all people feel uneasy and tensed about. *Kill* is mainly used in criminal, war or terrorist settings, so ecologically unsafe areas ere compared to battlefields or crime scenes: "Pesticides Are Killing the Organisms That Keep Our Soils Healthy", "Will NEON Kill Ecology?", "Heat Wave Death Toll Will Rise With Thorough Count", "Why Extreme Heat Is So Deadly".

Another linguistic means to make the information more relatable, and therefore make the audience feel more anxious and sympathetic is the use of plural first-person pronouns *we, our*. When American journalists refer to human-inflicted damage to the environment, they implement a universal *we*. This presumes an idea of a collective humanity destroying the planet: "We Have Just Two Years to Stop Deep-Sea Mining from Going Ahead", "If We Dig out All Our Fossil Fuels, Here's How Hot We Expect It to Get".

Judging by the topics and the headlines in the media, ecological issues are a huge source of stress and anxiety for Americans: "Terrified of Climate Change? You Might Have Eco-Anxiety", "Climate anxiety in young people: a call to action", "5 Ways to Cope If You're Dealing with Eco-Anxiety", "Eco-anxiety: the psychological aftermath of the climate crisis", etc. The articles are either informative and state the facts or give the statistics about which groups of society are more prone to stress and anxiety caused by environmental issues, or aimed at giving advice and recommendations about how to combat eco-anxiety, also known as eco-

distress. Although a neologism, the term "eco-anxiety" has already carved out a significant niche in psychological studies around the world and, obviously, in some people's daily lives. The term was defined by the American Psychological Association in 2017 as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" [22].

In 2018, some environmental surveys were conducted in the USA; it was shown that almost 30% of Americans were very worried about the climate, which is double the rate of a similar study in 2015. The condition has become especially common for children and young adults – in some universities over 70% of students have self-described as suffering from eco-anxiety [23].

Strong climate emotions are especially prevalent among young people. The increased sensitivity of the young brain to the effects of stressors is one of the reasons; the other is the increased likelihood young people face of being impacted by more severe climate-related effects throughout their lives. Thus, there is another reason of tension and stress caused by ecological issues – the environmental generation gap, which received extensive coverage in the media: "The Environmental Generation Gap", "Ecology: the clash of generations", "The Age Gap in Environmental Politics". A 2016 University of Texas poll reports the millennials and seniors differ on many issues. About 60% of millennials want to reduce the use of coal, twice the percentage of over-65 Americans. Notably, half of millennials support a carbon tax, which again is twice the percentage of senior citizens. And according to a Pew poll, 56% percent of millennials, but only 37% percent of seniors, regard climate change as a high policy priority [24].

The majority of young people in the US feel their generation is under pressure to solve environmental issues such as climate change and plastic pollution. There is a number of movements organizing strikes and demonstrations to demand action from political leaders to take action to prevent climate change and for the fossil fuel industry to transition to renewable energy. FridaysForFuture is an international movement of school students who skip Friday classes to participate in such strikes.

Green consumption, in all but name, is a beneficial strategy in the context of an increasing focus on sustainable lifestyles. Still, it is a controversially problematic concept, not least because it is an apparent oxymoron. Green means the protection of natural resources, while consumption primarily involves their devastation.

Green consumption can be a controversial issue because of unfair business and political practices, numerous cases of greenwashing, and deceptive marketing. During the pandemic time, companies have tried to sell to the world how much they care about people and the planet. But it is rather challenging to tell the difference between real, positive commitments to change and greenwashing. The term "greenwashing" appears in the US media as a means to spot companies and brands that use words like *green*, *sustainable*, *eco-friendly*, or *vegan* simply as a marketing ploy, without any deep understanding of what the terms mean, and crucially – without any responsibility for their actions.

American consumers are estimated to spend $150 billion on sustainable products with increased willingness to pay considerably more for such goods. To capitalize on this growing demand for environmentally conscious products, the prevalence of greenwashing nowadays is astounding. The pandemic tempted companies to jump on the woke bandwagon. Eco-Business highlights the times when brands were called out for making a profit on environmental or social issues.

"While more businesses pivot their branding to attract a more sustainably-minded demographic, we need to call out greenwashing and not buy into the scam that it is – literally", Pratiksha Gurung states in her article for Medium.com [25].

A group of American employees from Deloitte Insights are writing about closing the trust gap when it comes to environment: "Brands that engage in greenwashing falsely promote their product or service as 'green', without actually implementing business practices that reduce their environmental impact. Not only is this deceptive marketing, but it also detracts from making tangible progress against climate change", "Warming rivers in U.S. West killing fish, imperiling industry".

Thus, awareness about ecological issues has found its place in people's mind set. During the past decades, consumers considered environmental issues and social issues (e.g. label's right or labor rights) while purchasing products. They are opting for sustainable products, which are presuming environmental issues and social issues. Consumers want to purchase products they view as sustainable and believe that their consumption habits will not negatively affect the environment, and they are fearful of the overall impact of the climate change.

In an April 2020 study of citizens across 14 countries, the US among them, with the pandemic spreading, more than 70% saw climate change as a long-term crisis as serious as COVID-19. Americans, Gen Z in particular, are challenging fast fashion, reducing the waste they produce (zero-wasters), and choosing eco-friendly brands but it may feel overwhelming and stressful as one individual is trying to make a difference: "We don't really worry about climate change because it's too overwhelming and we're already in too deep. It is like if you owe your bookie $1,000, you're like, 'OK, I've got to pay this dude back.' But if you owe your bookie $1 million dollars, you're like, 'I guess I'm just going to die." [26].

Non-governmental organisations and activists, from veteran organizations to young protesters, have a wide range of expectations and approaches to influencing corporate climate action. At the same time, an increasingly vocal and influential climate activist community can take some of the credit for pushing climate change to the top of the global agenda. Climate strikes and other highly visible actions from various groups have captured global attention and galvanized opinions.

Additionally, using environmental problems as a means of political propaganda and promotion of a

political course, skewing the facts for their own political benefit, regardless of the real state of affairs, is another source of concern and anxiety for a lot of Americans. To tackle environmental issues now is more problematic because the essence of the problems has altered: such problems used to be, before everything else, scientific and technocratic, but now they are almost exclusively problems of politics.

So, the media cover one and the same event from two polar opposite perspectives: "The Biden administration is taking steps against climate change by proposing a greenhouse gas emission plan that would push some drivers to use electric vehicles by 2030" and "Biden Administration Is Skewing Carbon Numbers to Push Regulations". These polarized views undermine people's trust in the government, the media and science, and distrust in public institutions is a pronounced feature of social tension: "It is the lack of trust in government that may be one of the foundational barriers to effective environmental action." [27]. As for disagreements between the parties, the biggest dispute on climate policy and climate science are between those at the ends of the political spectrum – Republicans and Democrats [28].

The effort to downplay the importance of the problem of climate change can be traced in mass media: "After all, the purpose of climate change regulations is to drive energy prices higher so families and businesses use less energy < … > more heavy-handed climate regulations would drive up electricity bills and prices at the pump. Families would be hurt multiple times over, paying not just more for energy but also more for food, clothing, and healthcare... These rising costs would stifle economic growth, one of the most important factors for maintaining a cleaner environment < … > So creating more economy-killing climate regulations and taxes would not only harm the livelihoods of the American people, they would also harm our ability to protect our environment" [29].

Damages from climate change and subsequently natural hazards, which are expected to increase substantially in coming years, have become a largely ignored contributor to social tension, namely wealth inequality and racial discrimination in the United States. As local hazard damages increase, so does wealth inequality. At any given level of local damage, the more aid an area receives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the more this inequality grows. This chronic, pervasive, and increasingly expensive reality of natural hazards makes them an important social problem in their own right. When they interact with social inequality, the problem only compounds.

Sociological research on disasters has long documented how less-privileged residents often suffer losses in economic as well as social and cultural resources after hazards hit, while more-privileged residents, by contrast, tend to recover more quickly and may even benefit financially [30]. With the COVID-19 pandemic and its racially unequal impact, and the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, America is at this moment where the longstanding racial disparities are on vivid display. The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have cast new light on the racism that remains deeply embedded in U.S. society. It is as present in matters of the environment as in other aspects of life: both historical and present-day injustices have left people of color exposed to far greater environmental health hazards than whites.

Sociologists in their scientific works and journalists in their publicist articles are studying connections between worsening environmental conditions and people's race, gender and wealth: "How Communities of Color Are Hurt Most By Climate Change", "Unequal Impact: The Deep Links between Racism and Climate Change", "Social Dimensions of Climate Change", "How Climate Change Exacerbates Gender Inequality Across the Globe". The idea implicit in the headlines is that climate change is more than an environmental crisis – it is a social crisis and compels people to tackle issues of inequality on different levels: between rich and poor in the United States; between people of color and white population, between men and women, and between generations.

During most of the 20th century, through depression and wars, Americans expressed high faith in their institutions. In the mid-1960s, 77 % of Americans said they trusted the federal government most or all of the time. In the late 1960s and '70s, amid Vietnam and Watergate, trust in institutions collapsed. By 1994, only 20 % of Americans said they trusted government. Then the Iraq War and the financial crisis and the election of Donald Trump came. Institutional trust levels remained pathetically low. What changed was the rise of a large group of people who were actively and poisonously alienated, they were explosively distrustful. Explosive distrust is not just an absence of trust or a sense of detached alienation; it is an aggressive animosity and an urge to destroy. Levels of trust in this country in its institutions, in the politics, and in each other are in decline [31].

Low levels of trust or no trust at all, are one of the key components of social tension. As shown in the media, the situation is not improving. All the headlines are dated January – June 2021: "Americans Trust CEOs More Than Their Own Government, Survey Finds", "Public trust in government remains low", "Across America, Trust Is Falling Apart. Can It Be Rebuilt?", "Falling Trust in Government makes it Hard to Solve Problems". The COVID-19 pandemic undermined people's trust in their political institutions even more: Donald Trump downplayed the crisis, and his administration was a daily disaster area. The Disease Control and Prevention Centers produced faulty tests, failed to provide up-to-date data on infections and deaths, and did not provide a trustworthy voice for a scared public. A Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape survey found that 55 % of Americans believe that the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 was created in a lab and 59 % believe that the U.S. government is concealing the true number of deaths. Half of all Fox News viewers believe that Bill Gates is plotting a mass-vaccination campaign so he can track people.

Falling trust in countries' institutions can have a devastating effect on the nation; when people lose faith

in their government and each other, societies begin to fall apart. Some analysts have said that the events unfolding may lead to a Civil War in the future [32]. The Fractured States of America is a relatively new concept, which is receiving coverage in the media today: "Fractured America: How did we get here?", "Special Report: The Fractured States of America", "How America fractured".

Christine M. says that her stepfather canceled his plane ticket to her wedding in Utah because of their political differences (she's anti-President Donald Trump, he's pro). Justin M. will not wear his MAGA hat in his hometown of Boston for fear he will be humiliated. Richard G., an independent who lives in the Tampa area, put a "No Politics Zone" sign on his door after several Trump-supporting coworkers challenged him over the latest political headlines. Mario Benavente, a North Carolina Republican, puts it simply: "Political debate right now is a blood sport." These folks are only a snapshot of the reality facing Americans today. Many parents no longer want their children marrying people from a different political party – 35% of Republicans and 45% of Democrats, to be precise. Some on the right are even concerned we are on the verge of a new Civil War [33].

The language most commonly used by political scientists to describe this divide, "political polarization" or "partisan polarization," has itself arguably become too bloodless to capture adequately the nature, intensity and consequence of the extraordinary rift in American society. All of that is happening in a context in which Americans on all sides believe that more is at stake in the 2020 election than any they can remember [34].

Partisan media race became more complex with the rise of new media in the mid- to late- 2000s. While television news remains the leading source of news for most Americans (49% of Americans report getting their news from television), digital news consumption (33%) and social media consumption (20%) have experienced growth in recent years, according to Pew Research Center. Social media, in particular, has greatly contributed to a drastic change in the impact of "mere" citizens on the political views of their counterparts. Social media complicated the political discourse and to some extent distorted the real picture. Previously, people's political views were held close to the chest, and people could only potentially influence their relatives and friends. But now many people speak out on social media, they can both willingly and unwillingly create and reinforce an US versus THEM mentality.

4 Conclusions

This paper investigated how social media reveal social tension in the United States by means of the strategic use of the language. The year 2020 has been challenging for the whole world and the United States in particular with the COVID-19 at the centre of attention. The virus presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, employment, environment, politics and other spheres, having led to new dramatic tensions in the American society. The media have become a strong and ever more affecting source of generating and reflecting social tension, the provoked phenomenon, caused by worried feelings, stress and anxiety, distrust, confusion, not sharing common needs or interests on the current events.

Although a mass vaccination campaign for COVID-19 is underway in the USA, it is not pervasively accepted. Adverse side effects of the vaccines described in Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, Instagram users' posts are at odds with the official calls of the government to get vaccinated as the only effective way to stop the pandemic. As it is clear from the review of some posts and comments, mandatory vaccination is thought to be an unwise direction to incline people to get vaccinated if they don't want to. Thus, in America, the country, where individuals are 'free and sovereign beings' and the only way someone can have any power over Americans is by their consent, the tension in the society is notably acute. It is created by the media texts containing certain lexemes, syntaxemes, phonetic and graphical peculiarities.

American media represent ecological issues, climate change in particular and all its possible consequences, as a huge threat to the society's wellbeing and as a source of tension and stress for the people of the United States. Worsening environmental conditions lead to eco-anxiety, the environmental generation gap, greenwashing, distortion of the facts, wealth inequality, and racial discrimination.

The events of the year 2020, namely the coronavirus pandemic; the killing of George Floyd; social-media mobs, and urban unrest hit the population of the United States. These negative events escalated every existing tension and exposed every social drawback. As the research demonstrates, multiple social, cultural, and religious factors have linked up to create a toxic social situation, which is graphically depicted in the media. This only contributes to tension escalating and adding to the "hype" of an unavoidable catastrophe.

References

1. *Stress in America* https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/sia-mental-health-crisis.pdf
2. T. Parsons. *An Outline of the Social System* https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Talcott%20Parsons%20%20An%20Outline%20of%20the%20Social%20System.pdf
3. P. Burnap, M. L. Williams *Cyber Hate Speech on Twitter: An Application of Machine Classification and Statistical Modeling for Policy and Decision Making* P&I, **7(2)**, 22-242 (2015)
4. I.T. Kerimzade *Social tension as a scientific problem* Scientific Publishing Center "Sociosphere" LLC, 6-10 (2010)
5. *Social psychology: Textbook for universities* Higher education, 600 (2001)
6. D. Donchenko, N. Ovchar, N. Sadovnikova, D. Parygin, O. Shabalina and D. Ather *Analysis of Comments of Users of Social Networks to Assess the*

Level of Social Tension Procedia Computer Science, **119,** 359-367 (2017)

7. A.N. Baranov *Political discourse: methods of analysis of thematic structure and metaphor* Fond INDEM, 94 (2004)

8. O. Vybornova *Social Tension Detection and Intention Recognition Using Natural Language Semantic Analysis*: in Proc. EISIC, 277-281 (2011)

9. J. Miashkova *The anti-vax movement on social media: an analysis* https://awario.com/blog/anti-vax-social-listening-analysis/

10. *Vaccine hesitancy: Your job or the jab?* BBC https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-57686717

11. *The Covid Blog* https://thecovidblog.com

12. *Instagram* https://www.instagram.com/?hl=ru

13. *Twitter* https://twitter.com/

14. *Collins Dictionary* https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english

15. *Dictionary* https://www.dictionary.com/

16. E. Semino, Z. Demjén, J. Demmen, V. Koller, S. Payne, and A. Hardie, *The online use of Violence and Journey metaphors by patients with cancer, as compared with health professionals: a mixed methods study* BMJ Support. Palliative Care, **7**, 60–66 (2017).

17. P. Wicke, M. Bolognesi *Framing COVID-19: how we conceptualize and discuss the pandemic on Twitter* PLoS ONE (2020).

18. *Natural News* https://www.naturalnews.com

19. *The University of Nottingham* https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/

20. Yeshiva University https://online.yu.edu/wurzweiler/blog/2020-biggest-social-justice-issues

21. J. Weirens, K. Sullivan *Building credible climate commitments* Deloitte https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/strategy/trust-in-corporate-climate-change-commitments.html (2021)

22. S. Clayton, C. Manning, K. Krygsman, M. Speiser *Mental health and our changing climate* APA, 70 (2017)

23. A. E. Stewart *Psychometric Properties of the Climate Change Worry Scale* International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. **18 (2)**, 494 (2021)

24. D. Farber *The Environmental Generation Gap* Legal Planet https://legal-planet.org/2018/07/30/the-environmental-generation-gap/ (2018)

25. https://medium.com/climate-conscious/why-is-greenwashing-still-trending-in-2020-42cf1fa887e

26. C. Jost *Saturday Night Live* (2018)

27. E. Kamarck *The challenging politics of climate change* Brookings (2019)

28. *Pew Research Center* https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/

29. *The Heritage Foundation* https://www.heritage.org/environment/heritage-explains/the-right-way-ensure-cleaner-environment

30. J. Howell, J. Elliott *Damages Done: The Longitudinal Impacts of Natural Hazards on Wealth Inequality in the United States* Social Problems, **66(3)**, 420-448 (2018)

31. D. Brooks *America is having a moral convulsion* The Atlantic https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/collapsing-levels-trust-are-devastating-america/616581/ (2020)

32. J. Bennett *The second American civil war is underway. Only this time, it's not North vs. South* The Independent https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/michigan-trump-civil-war-coronavirus-fox-news-nancy-pelosi-a9495151.html (2021)

33. Y. Frederick *Welcome to the fractured states of America* CNN https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/11/opinions/fractured-states-of-america/part-one-fredrick/(2019)

34. M. Hetherington, J. Weiler *Fractured America: How did we get here?* Les marges créatrices: intellectuel.le.s afro-descendant.e.s et indigènes aux Amériques, XIX-XXe siècle **16** (2020)