



Defining Differences:

How five major news publications defined and operationalized Critical Race Theory from September, 2020 to June, 2021

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About the Narratives Project

The Narratives Project is a social venture for political mindfulness and peace. In a world of social media bubbles, bias, and shamelessly framed “news,” the Narratives Project aims to help readers make sense of the world by highlighting the narratives unfolding around them.

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Key Takeaways

1. Our values impact our interpretation of new concepts, including critical race theory (CRT). Even when we attempt to present “neutral” definitions, our values show through. People will therefore reach different conclusions about what CRT means, even if they have access to the same information.
2. Systemic racism is a common theme in CRT definitions on the left and right. However, left-leaning newspapers define CRT as *recognizing* systemic racism, while right-leaning newspapers define CRT as *ascribing* systemic racism to different aspects of US society.
3. We can gain a deeper understanding of how both we and our contra partisans think by understanding how values impact our views on specific topics, as it allows us to be more knowledgeable and have better conversations.
4. A “center” position does not necessarily mean a neutral position; newspapers are often classified as “center” because they publish arguments from both sides of an issue, not because their view is neutral or at the center of the ideological spectrum.

Introduction

The idiom “Talking past one another” suggests that participants in a discussion have disparate understandings and definitions of the topic at hand. “It is the sort of situation,” writes Goodman (2007) “that would guarantee that the interlocutors are ... failing to communicate.”

In the national discourse on critical race theory (CRT), the interlocutors are undoubtedly talking past one another and are fundamentally failing to communicate. Starting in September 2020, the subject has become immensely polarized, with people on the left generally supporting CRT, and people on the right generally opposing it. This makes necessary conversations impossible. Without a clear understanding of what people with different ideological positions mean when they use the term CRT, we risk talking *past*, rather than *with*, each other.

In this analysis of CRT discourse, we employ qualitative, inductive coding to examine how five newspapers representing different positions on the ideological spectrum — CNN, The Washington Post, The Hill, Washington Examiner, and National Review — define and operationalize CRT. By analyzing articles from newspapers with distinct ideological perspectives, we identify how the different definitions and narratives surrounding CRT reflect either strong support for or opposition against CRT. We also examine the underlying assumptions embedded within these definitions, which support an internally consistent narrative as to why CRT is good or bad on each side.

We will not attempt to find a “True” definition of CRT, or evaluate the merits of any definition. Instead, we attempt to highlight *why* people with different ideological beliefs reach different conclusions of what CRT means, and *how* those conclusions are presented and reinforced in the media. Our hope is that the spectrum of opinions presented below will build a greater mutual understanding and contribute to more humane and productive conversations.

Research questions

Our examination of newspaper articles is guided by three research questions:

1. What themes are central to the definition of critical race theory to the left and right?
2. What are the thematic differences and similarities between each side?
3. How do underlying assumptions impact the view of, and conversations around, critical race theory?

The first two research questions explore how CRT is both defined and operationalized in news articles, and how those definitions reflect the left and right’s ideological positions. The last research question investigates what prior beliefs and assumptions support these definitions of CRT.

Online Trends

Online conversation around CRT ebbs and flows as the topic surfaces in the context of different news stories.

According to Google Trends, public interest in “critical race theory” or “CRT” (using Google’s Interest Index as a proxy) peaked in June 2021:

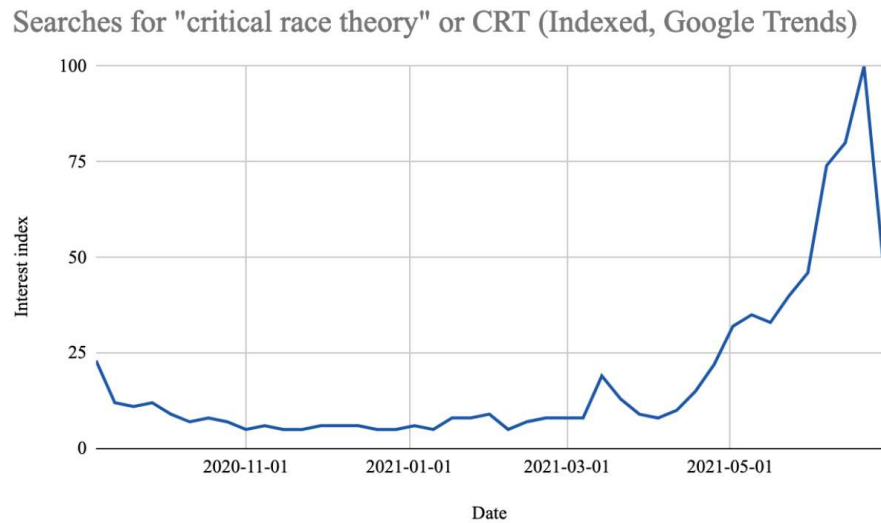


Figure 1: The public interest in “critical race theory” or CRT, September 1, 2020-June 30, 2021.

On Twitter, the mentions of CRT were at their highest in September 2020 and June 2021:

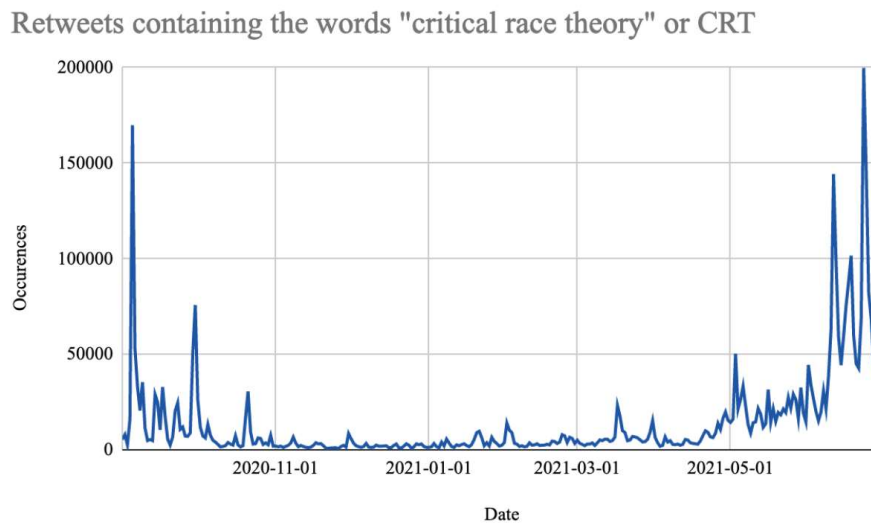


Figure 2: Number of retweets containing the words “critical race theory” or CRT, September 1, 2020-June 30, 2021. Data are aggregated.

The words listed in Figure 3 were most commonly used alongside “critical race theory” or CRT in tweets, indicating that CRT is most often discussed on Twitter in relation to education, and that racism and race are also prominent themes.

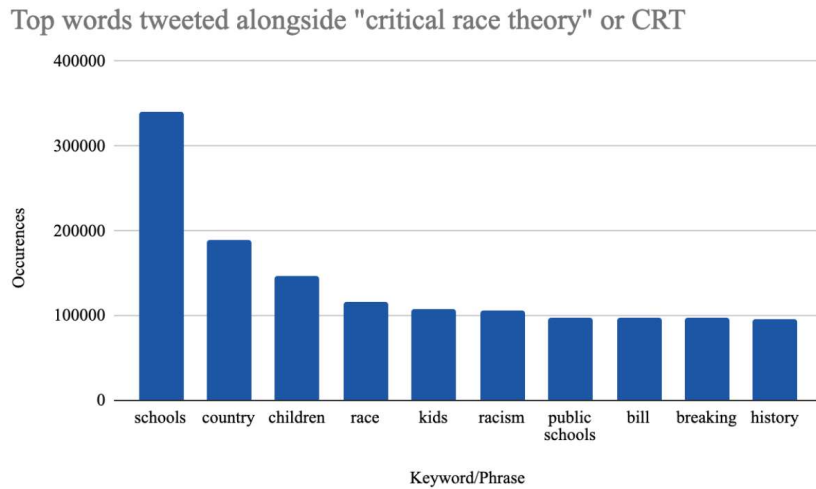


Figure 3: Top 10 words used alongside “critical race theory” or CRT on Twitter, September 1, 2020-June 30, 2021.

These online trends suggest that, even though our research only examines CRT discourse in publications, similar themes appear in CRT conversations on social media as in news outlets.

Methodology

The increase in the debate about CRT in the past year has contributed to the emergence of distinct narratives on the left and right. In this study, we examined articles from newspapers with different ideological positions to identify how each newspaper defines and operationalizes CRT.

Sources

We studied articles from five publications that represent distinct ideological positions. These classifications are based on AllSides Media Bias Chart, which organizes 67 news publishers into five ideological categories: *left*, *lean left*, *center*, *lean right*, and *right* (Allsides, 2019). Our initial selection of news outlets included MSNBC (left), The Washington Post (lean left), Reuters (center), The Washington Times (lean right), and Fox News (right), but due to issues with the availability and accessibility of written content from these outlets, we replaced our original selections with outlets in the same AllSides category with more written content on CRT. The final selection of publications includes CNN (left), The Washington Post (lean left), The Hill (center), Washington Examiner (lean right), and National Review (right).



Figure 4: Newspapers selected for analysis, representing five different positions on the ideological spectrum.

Time frame and selection criteria

In the fall of 2020, there was an increase in conversations surrounding CRT (See Figures 1 and 2) following the Trump administration’s memo instructing federal agencies to halt some employee training on racism which the administration classified as “divisive, un-American propaganda” (Vought, 2020). We therefore chose September 1st, 2020 as the start date for our analysis to capture the conversation immediately following the Trump administration’s announcement. The end date, June 30th, 2021, was chosen as it was the last full month before the start of data collection and analysis in July, 2021. This coincided with a peak in the conversation surrounding CRT at the end of June 2021, after Joint Chief of Staff General Mark Milley was asked about the theory during a House panel meeting (Stewart, 2021). At the same time, the public comment period at a school board meeting in Loudoun County was ended early due to disruptions fueling the debate about CRT in public schools (Battiston, 2021).

The selected data comprise all written content from the selected outlets available online which includes the term “critical race theory” and/or “CRT” in either the title or body of the text. 640 articles were collected in total, and 562 of those articles were selected for analysis as they discussed CRT in sufficient detail for qualitative coding. The number of articles by newspaper is available in Table 1.

| News Source | Number of Articles |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| CNN | 48 |
| The Washington Post | 84 |
| The Hill | 118 |
| Washington Examiner | 136 |
| National Review | 176 |
| Total | 562 |

Table 1: Number of articles by newspaper included in the analysis.¹

Procedure

The selected articles were analyzed with MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2019), a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Rather than organizing the data into pre-established codes, we used inductive (Kuckartz, 2014) open coding (Saldaña, 2013) to tease out codes from the ground up.

The codes were organized into two main categories: *CRT Definitions* and *CRT Descriptors*. Both categories include codes that characterize CRT, but differ in an important way: *CRT Definitions* only includes definitions presented in the articles as either “neutral” fact or are definitions attributed to an expert or academic, while *CRT Descriptors* includes descriptions of the impact of CRT and definitions attributed to non-experts (i.e politicians, parents, activists, etc). The codes in the *CRT Definitions* category underwent a second round of coding, where we separated the definitions by newspaper and re-coded them using the

¹ Although there appears to be a linear trend in the number of articles on CRT from left to right, we have not analyzed the frequency of CRT articles in relation to the total number of articles published by each newspaper. Therefore, we cannot confirm the apparent linear trend from left to right.

inductive open coding process used in the first round of coding. This allowed us to create more precise codes for the *CRT Definitions* that were specific to each newspaper.

Once the articles had been coded, all codes were reviewed and cleaned to ensure they were applied in a consistent manner. We then organized the codes into categories to group similar concepts. All *CRT Descriptors* with more than 20 instances across all five newspapers were chosen for analysis (for a full list of descriptors included in the analysis, see Appendix A). *CRT Definitions* with more than five occurrences in the relevant newspaper were included in the analysis.

Exclusion criteria and rationale

There are some concepts which are considered CRT by one side but not the other. Because we are interested in understanding how the left and right define and operationalize CRT *within their own terms*, we only include definitions and descriptors which are tied to CRT in the texts. For example, left-leaning newspapers often discuss culturally responsive training, a concept which is related to, but not necessarily the same, as CRT. When culturally responsive training was not identified as CRT, it was excluded from the analysis; in instances in which it was identified as CRT, it was included. It is therefore possible that a specific concept is included in some instances, while excluded in others, depending on whether the author identifies it as CRT.

This line is not always obvious, and there are a number of instances where CRT is discussed in conjunction with other concepts, making it difficult to determine what parts of the conversation relate specifically to CRT. Different researchers could reasonably disagree on which of these instances to include in an analysis of CRT discourse, as coding “attributes interpreted meaning” to the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 4). We chose to take a cautious approach and excluded descriptors that cannot be directly tied to CRT either by an explicit definition or by clear context clues. This choice is one potential explanation for why the left appears to have significantly fewer CRT descriptors than the right. For example, discussions around The 1619 Project (The New York Times Magazine, 2019) are excluded from our analysis if they are not directly tied to CRT, even though these discussions often include the same descriptors as the discourse on CRT. However, we do not think this more limited scope compromises our findings. The descriptors we have identified plausibly apply to a broader set of data as well, including topics related to CRT, such as The 1619 Project.

The challenge of determining what to include in the analysis is not only an issue on the left. The right also discusses other educational proposals and concepts in conjunction with CRT, one example being proposals referred to as “action civics.” In these situations, we only included terms which can be tied to CRT by an explicit definition or by clear context clues. Although the right often talks about CRT and action civics in conjunction, they separate them as two distinct, although related, approaches to civics education.

Analysis

Three main factors impact how CRT is presented to readers: CRT definitions, CRT descriptors, and the authors’ pre-existing assumptions which impact the framing of CRT in the articles. Below we discuss these three in turn.

Definitions: Disagreement over “neutral” definitions

Even when authors appear to present a “neutral” or “expert” definition of CRT to ground the conversation, some of their ideological priors make their way into the definition they present. By looking at each newspaper’s “neutral” or “expert” definitions individually, it’s clear that ideas presented as “fact” are not identical across the ideological spectrum because of these prior assumptions. The profile definitions presented below do not cover every individual CRT definition in the newspaper articles, but summarize the most frequently occurring themes in each publication.

CNN²

In CNN, the “neutral” or “expert” definitions emphasize that CRT recognizes the impact historical and systemic inequality and racism continue to have on society. CRT also helps people understand racism and systemic racism better, and addresses inequality by teaching the history of racism and white supremacy.

The Washington Post³

The Washington Post’s “neutral” or “expert” definitions of CRT focus on the theory’s academic and intellectual roots. CRT examines the systemic nature of racism, acknowledging that racism is not only a result of individual prejudice, but also exists in institutions and systems because of historical racism that has carried over into the present.

The Hill⁴

The Hill’s “neutral” or “expert” definitions emphasize the academic nature of CRT and the theory’s capacity to recognize the impact of a racist history and founding on American systems today, making racism prevalent in US laws and institutions. The definitions also highlight the systemic power structures that reproduce racism in society and the importance of examining barriers to equality.

Washington Examiner⁵

The Washington Examiner’s “neutral” or “expert” definitions highlight that CRT frames America (or its laws and institutions) as inherently or fundamentally racist. The definitions also emphasize that in CRT, racism and white supremacy are considered central to US history. CRT uses race as a determinant of people’s character and considers racism as ordinary, and a primary influence on societal relations. Additional common definitions include that CRT is an academic discipline, is based on Marxism, and justifies unequal treatment of individuals to achieve equal outcomes.

² Systemic racism in history impacts present [15 segments], understanding racism/systemic racism [15 segments], history of racism [13 segments], address/challenge racism [8 segments] from 17 documents.

³ Examine systemic racism [35 segments], academic framework [32 segments], racism is systemic, not only individual prejudice [7 segments], racist history and present [6 segments] from 43 documents.

⁴ Racist laws and institutions [27 segments], racist history/founding [20 segments], academic theory [15 segments], systemic power structures produce racism [7 segments], systemic racism still present [6 segments], examines barriers to equality [5 segments] from 49 documents.

⁵ US laws and institutions are fundamentally racist [30 segments], race determines character [11 segments], racism in US history/founding [8 segments], racism dominates society [8 segments], racism is ordinary [7 segments], academic [6 segments], justifies unequal treatment [6 segments], based on Marxism [5 segments] from 52 documents.

National Review⁶

National Review’s “expert” or “neutral” definitions state that CRT criticizes or rejects traditional values such as liberalism, meritocracy, and equality before the law. CRT also holds that America is racist to its core or that racism is an intrinsic American characteristic. National Review also emphasizes that CRT vilifies people based on their race or apparent privilege and allows for new types of discrimination to end minority discrimination. The goal of CRT is to transform the US based on group identity.

Comparison: Agreement and disagreement between the left and right

Across all five newspapers, the role of systemic racism in US society is at the center of the CRT definitions. But a closer examination of the definitions reveals that, even with a general agreement that systemic racism is CRT’s main component, the “neutral” definitions also indicate whether the author (and publication) views CRT in a positive or negative light.

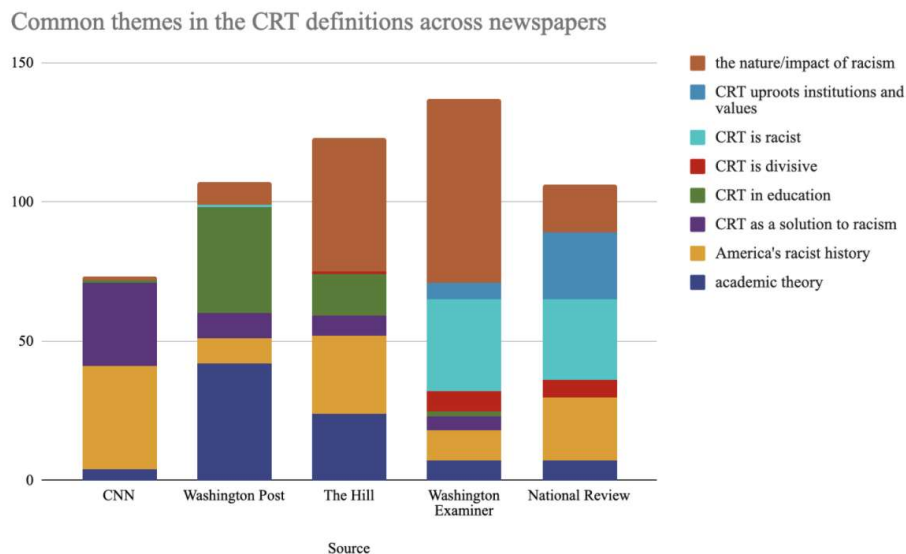


Figure 5: Common themes in the CRT definitions in CNN, The Washington Post, The Hill, Washington Examiner, and National Review, September 1, 2020-June 30, 2021.

Although similar themes appear in the newspapers’ definitions of CRT, the authors’ view impacts how that information is presented.

⁶ America is racist to its core [17 segments], rejects traditional values [14 segments], vilifies people based on race/privilege [11 segments], transforms US based on group identity [7 segments], discriminates to end discrimination [5 segments] from 40 documents.

Recognizing racism versus ascribing racism

When CNN and The Washington Post define systemic racism's role in CRT, they emphasize that the theory enables people to recognize and examine the influence of systemic racism in society. In contrast, National Review and the Washington Examiner focus on how CRT defines America and its institutions (and, by extension, individuals) as racist.

This subtle, but important, distinction in the definitions of CRT on the left and right means the left defines CRT as *recognizing* a problem that already exists, while the right defines CRT as *ascribing* a problem to American systems (that may or may not actually exist).

An example of the distinction between recognizing versus ascribing racism can be found in The Washington Post (center-left) and the Washington Examiner (center-right). The Washington Post defines CRT as “a framework for examining systemic and institutional racism” (Barr, 2021), framing CRT as an important tool for understanding the systemic racism that already exists. The Washington Examiner, on the other hand, defines CRT as a theory “which teaches [us] that American laws and institutions are inherently racist” (Lee, 2020), regardless of whether that is true.

Articles from The Hill include definitions that fit into both the definitions on the left and right. However, The Hill relies heavily on scholarly or academic definitions, which tend to align more with themes on the left. This means definitions in The Hill more often align with definitions in CNN and The Washington Post.

Whiteness

In addition to differences in how information is presented, there are other aspects of the CRT definitions on the right which do not appear on the left. National Review and the Washington Examiner, for example, emphasize that CRT characterizes “white” or “whiteness” as negative, or even evil, and, by extension, characterizes white people this way as well; however, this theme is not present in articles from CNN or The Washington Post. Instead, left-leaning newspapers focus on how racism throughout history continues to impact society, a claim that some authors in right-leaning newspapers agree with, but others vigorously contest.

Context

Writers on the left and right also signal whether CRT is good or bad by discussing the topic in different contexts. Because definitions do not exist independent of context, discussing CRT in different settings influences how people interpret it.

If an article, for example, introduces CRT in the context of students experiencing racism at school (Asmelash, 2021), the reader could infer that CRT is a *solution* to the problem described in the text. However, if CRT is discussed in an article about conservative voices being silenced on college campuses because of CRT (Weiner, 2020), the theory might instead appear as a threat to free speech. By embedding CRT in a context where it is framed either as a solution or a problem, the connotation of the theory shifts, even if the definition itself is similar in both contexts.

“Neutral” definitions communicate more than just facts

Defining a concept in a “neutral” way is extremely difficult, as both phrasing and context impact how the definition is perceived.⁷ Even when writers try to ground their writing in an “neutral” definition, their ideological priors often shine through. In the instances where the left and right seem to agree on a definition, the presentation and framing of CRT still significantly impact how readers perceive the theory.

But the framing of CRT is not the only thing that creates division between the left and right. The theory’s utility is also contested. Even though the left and right may agree that CRT is concerned with systemic and institutional racism, they disagree on whether CRT is the correct approach to eliminate those forms of racism. The left generally perceives the use of CRT as positive, a way to examine the structural racism that exists; the right often sees the use of CRT as negative because it does not just identify systemic racism, but also ascribes it where it does not belong.

Descriptors: Driving the point home⁸

In addition to the definitions presented as “neutral” or “expert” definitions in the articles, many descriptors of CRT presented by “non-experts” (such as politicians, parents, community members, etc.) are also used. These descriptors further frame the conversation around CRT and emphasize the difference between the left and right.

Negative descriptors of CRT

The most prominent negative descriptor of CRT, which often underscores the “neutral” definitions presented in right-leaning newspapers, is that CRT goes against Western or American values. CRT is un-American/anti-American and unpatriotic because it promotes hate for the country by suggesting that America is fundamentally or inherently racist. The theory both ascribes racism to American institutions and actively goes against fundamental American principles. CRT also aims to divide people based on racial identity. It is a threat to societal cohesion, promoting thinking that weakens trust between people.

From this perspective, CRT is just another form of racism, where white people are demonized for the color of their skin. Such a theory is dangerous and harmful to children as it encourages race-based hatred. CRT is politicized and toxic because it encourages a singular way of thinking by repressing all criticism or critique. CRT is a vehicle for woke, left-wing ideology used to indoctrinate children across the US. It is rooted in Marxism, and is comparable to Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan, Maoism, and Nazi Germany.

⁷ This is a challenge we have dealt with in the authoring of this paper.

⁸ A complete list of descriptors can be found in Appendix A.

Top negative CRT descriptors across newspapers

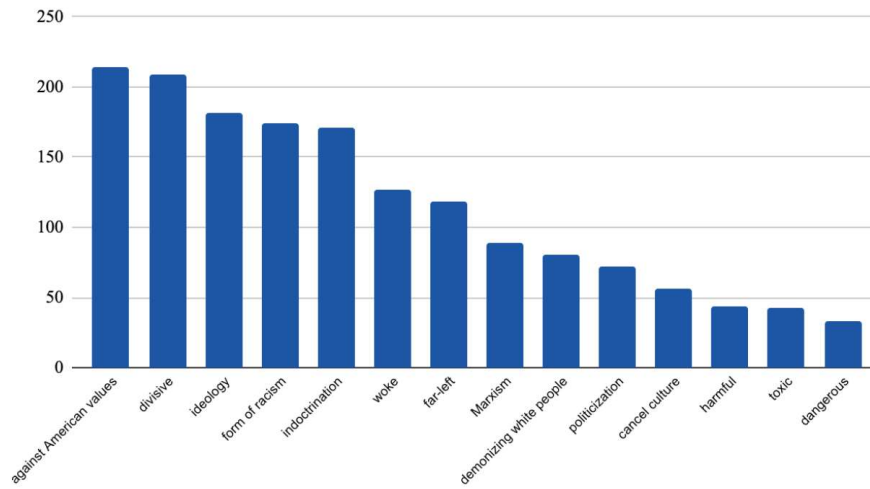


Figure 6: Top 14 negative CRT descriptors in CNN, The Washington Post, The Hill, Washington Examiner, and National Review, September 1, 2020-June 30, 2021.

Positive descriptors of CRT

There are fewer positive descriptors in the articles than negative ones. The positive descriptors often underscore the “neutral” CRT definitions presented in left-leaning newspapers.

The most common positive descriptor is that CRT helps address racism and/or promote anti-racism. The theory is a tool that helps people talk about and learn to recognize systemic racism. It fosters racial awareness or cultural representation and attempts to widen the range of perspectives presented to students in school to teach an accurate and more complete account of American history. CRT is a promising vehicle to increase representation in history classes, replacing the selective history curriculum we have now.

Top positive CRT descriptors across newspapers

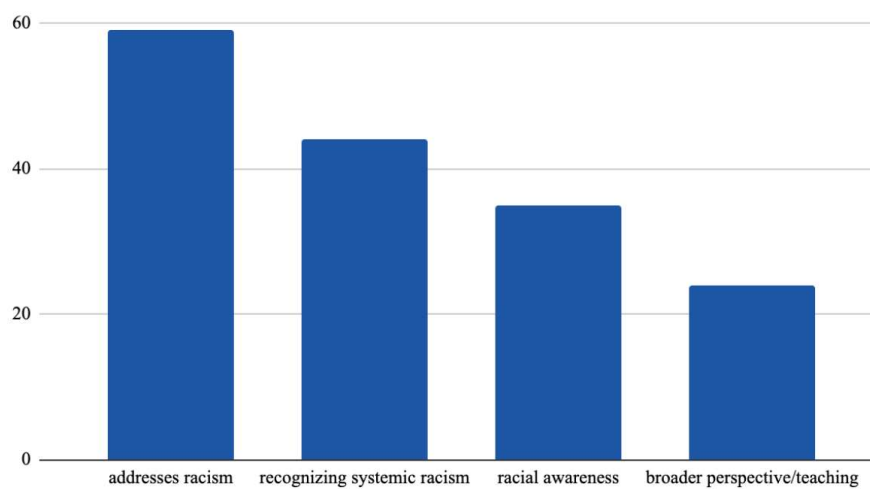


Figure 7: Top 4 positive CRT descriptors in CNN, The Washington Post, The Hill, Washington Examiner, and National Review, September 1, 2020-June 30, 2021.

Takeaways: Descriptors and polarization

When we consider the positive and negative descriptors used to discuss CRT in the media, it is easier to understand why the left and right have reached such distinct conclusions about CRT. People who consider CRT a harmful ideology that imposes a new form of racism in America will feel righteous in their fight against it. Others who see CRT as a method for accurately teaching American history and as a useful tool to dismantle racism will feel righteous about its implementation in schools.

To people who hold the latter view, any opposition to CRT is an expression of the racism that continues to exist in American society. To people who hold the former view, CRT is another example of progressives' attempts to transform American society into something unrecognizable.

Because we are dealing with such a multifaceted issue — involving the academic field of CRT, the introduction of CRT concepts into K-12 education, and a broader conflict over the nature and persistence of racism in America — people use the descriptors of CRT to make sense of what is going on. Few of us have the time or energy to go through all the literature, commentary, and lesson plans on CRT before forming an opinion about the issue. We thus turn to external sources, where we are likely to encounter not only important information about recent developments in CRT, but also an implicit interpretation of what that information means.

Narratives and Priors

When exposed to a new piece of information — be it a letter in the mail, the bark of a strange dog, or news about the economy — a person is immediately confronted with the question: “What does this mean?” This question requires the application of reason, which means taking other information into consideration, such as our experiences, prior knowledge, and values.

It is useful to conceptualize this prior framework as a narrative — a linear information packet which we use to interpret novel events. To illustrate this let's imagine two people:

- **Person A** has been bitten by a dog in the past, believes barks are threatening, and thinks dogs are dangerous.
- **Person B** has grown up around barking dogs, believes barks are often due to excitement, and loves dogs.

We would expect **Person A** to interpret the bark of a strange dog as a negative, dangerous thing, whereas we would expect **Person B** to interpret it as a fairly banal, if not positive, event.

This example illustrates that, although they have come to different conclusions, both interpretations are reasonable — both **Person A** and **Person B** are applying reason appropriately based on their experiences and priors. They come to different conclusions due to the differences in the information they use to interpret the event.

So too, when people on the left and right discuss CRT, they bring their experiences, prior knowledge, and values into the conversation. In this section, we will dive into those priors to understand the foundations of the disagreement.

Two Great American Myths⁹

The discourse around CRT is often contextualized within two disparate national narratives.

The first narrative might be called *The Patriot's Myth*. It goes something like this:

America is fundamentally a miraculous human accomplishment. It was born out of resistance to tyranny and stands today as a beacon of liberty. America is a good country, and has continued to live up to its promise of freedom as it moves into the future. It is a nation where all men and women, regardless of color, class, or creed come together and prosper as American brothers and sisters.

The second narrative might be called *The Progressive's Myth*. It goes something like this:

America is fundamentally an oppressive institution. Its systems were created by white slave owners, and its commitment to liberty has been hypocritical from the start. Throughout history, America has continued to oppress minorities and favor the wealthy. It is a nation that privileges certain people and ideas at the expense of others.

While our description of these myths is crude, and there are certainly shades between them, they represent two distinct interpretations of American history and society. How one understands the past contextualizes how that person will interpret new information, and when something like CRT is introduced, it is interpreted according to these priors. To someone leaning towards *The Patriot's Myth*, CRT threatens to undermine and erase all the great things American society has accomplished. To someone leaning towards *The Progressive's Myth*, CRT is an obvious illumination of deep injustices that require rectification.

The Purpose of Education

As the CRT discourse is often centered around education and schooling, a person's priors around the purpose of education also play an important role in their interpretation of CRT.

To some, the history currently taught in school accurately reflects what we know, and does not need reframing from the perspective of race. It has already evolved over time to ensure that it reflects the full scope of American experiences. Moreover, the purpose of education is to look back and learn from the accomplishments and mistakes of the past.

To others, education is a tool to shape the trajectory of society for the better — preserving practices just because of historical precedent holds society back. When we see flaws in present day education, we must ensure that we reform it for the better and inspire students to advocate for change. There are central aspects of history that should be taught, but are being brushed aside to create a comfortable environment for the majority.

⁹ Note that the term “myth” does not mean untrue in this context.

Discussion

Based on our analysis of newspaper articles from CNN, The Washington Post, The Hill, Washington Examiner, and National Review, we conclude that the division on CRT stems from differences in values and priors on the left and right, manifesting itself as a disagreement over both “neutral” definitions and descriptors of CRT. Moving beyond the CRT discourse, the three broad takeaways of this research are:

1. What is presented as “Fact” is often not fact, but interpretation.
2. A center position does not necessarily mean a neutral position.
3. What is largely perceived as a conflict about definition and implementation is often, at its core, a conflict of values.

We’ll discuss each of these conclusions below.

Facts

Virtually everyone is convinced that their understanding of CRT is the correct one. Often, people on either side of the issue call on experts to ground their view of CRT, but not even “expert” or “neutral” definitions result in a universally agreed upon view of CRT. This leads us to have conversations about the utility of CRT without first agreeing upon what CRT means. As a result, the left and right often speak past each other, as one group thinks they are advocating for anti-racism training while the other thinks they are opposing the teaching of racist ideologies. Everyone believes they are fighting racism.

Because there is no objective definition of CRT, what one side perceives as fact is pure fiction to the other. The expert definitions called upon by the left and right are subjective interpretations of CRT, determined by the knowledge and experience of the person providing the definition. Because everyone’s perception is unique, we are unlikely to reach broad consensus on a “factual” definition of what CRT is as we cannot define it without also interpreting it within our value system.

Center ≠ Neutral

In our analysis, we chose to include a newspaper at the center of the ideological scale to see where the opinions of CRT on the left and right converged. However, our findings show that The Hill did not represent a “neutral” position between the left and right, but rather presented definitions from *both* the left and right. Thus, just because a newspaper is classified as centrist does not mean their definition or view of CRT is more “neutral” than others. Instead, a “center” newspaper might indicate that there are articles presenting different views on the issue, rather than favoring one perspective over another.

We found that the mere action of defining and discussing CRT is inherently subjective. The human mind is very skilled at fitting new information into our pre-existing bank of knowledge, which will, inevitably, frame how we perceive something. We struggle to find agreement between the left and right on the definition and interpretation of CRT because there is no neutral position to congregate around.

We can try to get a fuller picture of the debate by seeking out viewpoints that contradict our own, but claiming to approach some topics from a neutral point of view is, as far as we can tell, impossible given our distinct experiences and worldviews. Therefore, our best option appears to be attempting to understand the root causes of our disagreement instead of pursuing consensus.

Definitions reflect our values

If the concept we are defining is morally laden and tied to our values, as in the case with CRT, we are no longer speaking solely about a “neutral” definition, but about deep-seated values. This is what makes it so difficult to reach an agreement about what CRT is — when people question our definition they are, by extension, attacking our values. In those circumstances, reading a different definition will not be enough to convince us to change our minds because in doing so, we would also have to alter our values.

Many of the newspaper articles discuss how their contra partisans are mistaken in their definition of CRT and are arguing for or against a concept they do not fully understand. But because each side’s definition is based on prior assumptions and beliefs, the definition of CRT presented by the left and right is largely consistent with each side’s point of view and in line with their values. Differences in definitions are not indicative of faulty understanding or reasoning, but rather stipulate differences in what we use to render interpretations: our priors and values.

By acknowledging how our values impact our views on different topics, we have a better chance of understanding the people with whom we disagree. To understand them does not, however, mean that we must agree with them. It is perfectly fine, perhaps even preferable, that we do not change our opinions on a whim, just because someone disagrees with us. But being able to understand how someone reached a certain conclusion can help us view them with more humanity and respect. When we understand why we disagree, there is a greater chance that we can have constructive conversations.

Conclusion

The differences in values and priors on the left and right result in distinctive conclusions about what CRT is and what its implementation would mean for America’s future. The source of these diverse views of CRT is a difference in fundamental values.

Systemic racism is a common theme in the CRT definitions on both the left and right, but the two sides differ as to whether CRT will contribute to decreased or increased racism in society. To people on the left, CRT is a welcomed change that will help us create a better society for all people by identifying racism where it exists. To people on the right, CRT is uprooting American values by attempting to implement a new value system onto society that centers race and inaccurately identifies racism where it does not exist.

Because CRT touches on our deepest beliefs about what America stands for and the role of education, bridging the gap between left and right goes deeper than just agreeing upon or enforcing a standard definition. In order to talk more constructively with one another, we have to understand and acknowledge — though not necessarily agree with — each other’s values.

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Appendix A

| Codes | Subcodes | Memo | Frequency |
|--|--|---|-----------|
| CRT Descriptors | | Includes descriptors of CRT from "non-experts" with ≥ 20 instances across the 5 newspapers. For codes with a variety of synonyms, additional synonyms are listed in the memo field. | 2311 |
| against Western / American values | | | 214 |
| | hate/despise/insult/loathe/fuel bad about country | | 36 |
| | fundamentally / systemically / inherently racist country | irredeemably racist country | 53 |
| | unamerican / anti-american / anti-Western / against liberalism | anti-capitalist anti-Enlightenment against american values/ideals threat to American way of life | 90 |
| | unpatriotic | wicked, horrible, evil country | 35 |
| (not) divisive / separation / polarizing / weakens trust | | rip/tear us apart | 209 |
| ideology | | | 181 |
| form of racism | | neo-racist race-baiting race-obsessive racial engineering racial essentialism racial obsession racialist racist | 174 |

| | | |
|---|--|-----|
| | re-racializing white supremacy | |
| creates racism | | 8 |
| indoctrination | | 171 |
| woke / ultra-woke | | 127 |
| far-left / left / progressive / Democrats / extremist | left-leaning ultra-progressive left-wing liberal leftist | 118 |
| comparisons to other political systems and/or ideologies | | 110 |
| Jim Crow | | 1 |
| KKK / Klansmen | | 10 |
| Maoism / Chinese Cultural Revolution / Communist China | | 5 |
| Marxism / communism / neo-Marxism / Marxist roots/influenc e | | 89 |
| Nazi / Hitler | | 4 |
| demonizing / blaming / dehumanizing / hating white people | | 81 |
| white people are evil/malevolen t / evil whiteness | | 9 |

| | | |
|--|---|----|
| white people are racist / contribute to racism | | 41 |
| feel bad for being white | | 2 |
| spirit murder | | 8 |
| politicization / politicized / political | | 72 |
| address racism / anti-racism / predict systemic racism | against racism dismantles anti-blackness | 59 |
| cancel culture / political correctness / blinders / censor | stultifying | 56 |
| forced coercion pushed mandate peddled intrusion preached | invasive infiltration require | 47 |
| talking about /understanding / recognizing systemic racism/race | | 44 |
| harmful / pernicious / malign / prejudicial / traumatize / hurt | abuse | 44 |
| propaganda / agitprop | | 44 |
| toxic / noxious / poison | | 43 |
| radical / extremist | | 40 |
| hate / loathe / animosity / despise | | 40 |
| discrimination / not discrimination | | 37 |
| one view among many | | 37 |
| approach / lens / perspective / discourse / frame | | 16 |

| | | |
|---|--|----|
| theory / theoretical | | 7 |
| tool / analytical tool / model | | 13 |
| cultural/racial awareness/sensitivity/re presentation | culturally responsive inclusive teaching | 35 |
| (not) diversity / privilege training | | 11 |
| (not) academic | faculty-lounge | 34 |
| dangerous / vicious / perilous | | 33 |
| destruction / demolish / damage | | 32 |
| false / lies / misconception / falsehood / misrepresentation | | 31 |
| Unconstitutional | | 30 |
| 1st amendment violation / issues | | 10 |
| 14th amendment violation | | 2 |
| suppress free speech | | 9 |
| guilt | | 30 |
| war language | war weapon combat aim fight attack assault army | 26 |

| | | |
|--|---|----|
| | hostile battle enmities onslaught crusade | |
| understanding / teaching | | 24 |
| equity | | 24 |
| (not) accurate / complete / true | | 23 |
| shame / shameful / shaming / demean | | 21 |
| discomfort / insensitive / distress | | 20 |