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Organizational Legitimation in a Polarized Media Landscape: The Role of Robust Organizational Impression Management

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Abstract: We conducted a longitudinal case study about the United States (U.S.) electronic vehicle manufacturer Tesla and its spokesperson Elon Musk to investigate how organizations can maintain organizational legitimacy through organizational impression management among a heterogeneous audience, as exemplified by the ideologically polarized U.S. media landscape. We uncovered that Tesla's spokesperson, Elon Musk, mobilized two different types of what we refer to as 'robust organizational impression management' (i.e., chameleon and diplomacy strategies). The 'chameleon strategy' portrays Tesla as ideologically open and appeals to different, highly polarized audience demands, while the 'diplomacy strategy' places Tesla in a diplomatic role that serves to de-polarize how the audience views the organization. Together, these strategies enabled Musk to both retain Tesla's good relations with the leftwing media and to simultaneously reduce its illegitimacy among the rightwing media outlets. In this way, Tesla maintained its legitimacy among a highly heterogeneous audience. Our study contributes to the literatures on organizational legitimacy, organizational impression management, robust action, and political ideology.

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ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMATION IN A POLARIZED MEDIA LANDSCAPE: THE ROLE OF ROBUST ORGANIZATIONAL IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

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ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMATION IN A POLARIZED MEDIA LANDSCAPE: THE ROLE OF ROBUST ORGANIZATIONAL IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

We conducted a qualitative case study and inductively explored the impression management strategies that Elon Musk, the founder and CEO of the U.S. company Tesla, mobilized to gain and maintain moral legitimacy for himself and his companies in the ideologically polarized U.S. news media landscape which is constituted by a wide left-rightwing gap among the distinctive media blocs. We uncovered that Musk mobilized three different types of what we refer to as ‘robust organizational impression management’ strategies: The ‘chameleon strategy’ portrays Musk and Tesla as ideologically open and appeals to ideologically polarized media demands, while the ‘diplomacy strategy’ places Musk and Tesla in a diplomatic role that serves to de-polarize how the media views the organization. Eventually, the ‘assurance strategy’ compensates for the pitfalls of the aforementioned strategies. Together, these strategies enabled Musk to both maintain Musk’s and Tesla’s perceived value alignment with the leftwing media and to simultaneously reduce its perceived value misalignment among the rightwing media outlets. In this way, Tesla maintained its moral legitimacy among a highly heterogeneous audience. Our study contributes to the literatures on organizational impression management, organizational legitimacy, political ideology and robust action.

(186 words)

Keywords: organizational impression management, organizational legitimacy, moral legitimacy, political ideologies, CEO-sociopolitical activism, news media, media polarization, robust action, qualitative research methods

Organizational impression management (OIM) refers to the use of communicative actions by organizational spokespersons which aim at developing images of their organizations that are perceived favorably by external audiences (Elsbach, 1994; 2006; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993). It has thus been suggested that OIM is important for managing an organization's legitimacy (e.g. Bansal & Cleland, 2004; Elsbach, 1994; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Organizational legitimacy refers to audiences' evaluations that an organization and its actions are 'desirable, proper, or appropriate' (Suchman, 1995: 574). In particular, organizational spokespersons can rely on OIM to influence external audiences' moral legitimacy judgments (e.g. Bansal & Cleland, 2004; Elsbach, 1994; McDonnell & King, 2013; Zavyalova et al., 2012; see also Goffman, 1956), that is audiences' evaluations about whether or not what an organization does is 'the right thing to do' as derived from the audiences' socially constructed value systems (Suchman, 1995: 579). The organizational spokespersons who engage in OIM may include 'anyone who is perceived by audience members as representing the organization' (Elsbach, 2003: 36) such as public relations professionals, or – critically – organizational founders and CEOs (Elsbach, 2003; Ginzel et al., 1993; Zott & Huy, 2007) because the latter function as prominent figureheads and public embodiments of the organization (Elsbach, 2003; Mintzberg, 1973; Hambrick & Wowak, 2019; Pfeffer, 1981).

Overall, extant research assumes that effective OIM is particularly difficult, if not impossible, if an organization's external audiences are highly heterogeneous (Elsbach, 2006; Ginzel et al., 1993). Evidence suggests, however, that audiences and the value systems on which they base their moral legitimacy judgments are becoming increasingly heterogeneous (e.g. Lamin & Zaheer, 2012; Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). In particular, this is true for the news media, a particularly important legitimacy granting audience and thus a core target of OIM (Elsbach, 2006; Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Vergne, 2011; Westphal & Deephouse, 2011; Zavyalova et al., 2012). News media landscapes have become highly fractured and ideologically polarized (e.g., Newman et al., 2019). We conceptualize *news media polarization*

as a wide left-rightwing gap among the media blocs which frequently stigmatize and antagonize each other (e.g., Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Edkins, 2017). Polarized news media draw on heterogeneous value systems, i.e. political ideologies. *Political ideologies* are belief systems about how the social world operates ‘including ideas about what outcomes are desirable and how they can best be achieved’ (Simons & Ingram, 1997: 784; see also e.g. Hambrick & Wowak, 2019). Consequently, in the context of news media polarization, an organizational spokesperson's public claims about a particular socio-political issue may lead to an increasing alignment with the value-system and political ideology of one audience group (Hambrick & Wowak, 2019) but it may also lead to increased misalignment with the value-system and political ideology of the other audience group. As a result, resource withdrawal and other negative consequences may follow if the organization is similarly dependent on both audiences (e.g. Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Scherer et al., 2013). Yet, while extant OIM has uncovered a large variety of OIM strategies and tactics mobilized in contexts with a more homogeneous audience (e.g. Elsbach, 2006, for a review) our understanding of effective OIM in the context of highly heterogeneous audiences has remained surprisingly limited¹. Hence, our study seeks to explore the following research question: *Under which conditions does OIM enable organizational spokespersons to maintain moral legitimacy of organizations among a polarized media – and why?*

To address our research question, we conduct an inductive qualitative case study of Elon Musk (*hereinafter: Musk*) as spokesperson of his organization, the U.S. electronic vehicle manufacturer Tesla, and his public communication in the polarized U.S. news media landscape. The latter is constituted by a wide left-right gap, whereby only few outlets attract a mixed audience, since particularly the right leaning audiences are deeply skeptical of information

¹ In turn, neo-institutional research has offered some strategies on how organizations can respond to contradictory, coexisting constituent demands (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991; Pache & Santos, 2013). Yet, it does not provide answers as to what the organization's *spokesperson* should do to manage organizational legitimacy in highly heterogeneous audience settings.

provided by the mainstream outlets because they perceive them to be left-leaning and therefore avoid them (Barnidge et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2019). We chose the U.S. context since the presidential change from Barack Obama to Donald Trump in 2017 led to an intensification and increased visibility of this media polarization and the existence of distinctive right-wing media channels. Moreover, Musk and by extension Tesla provided a fruitful ground for our study because, as we detail further below, they are equally dependent on audiences from both sides of the ideological spectrum. We seek to shed light on Musk's reaction to political events as our unit of analysis, such as Trump's announcement of the Muslim travel ban via Twitter and how this is evaluated by the polarized U.S. media on both sides of the ideological spectrum.

Based on our findings, we inductively develop a novel theoretical model which emphasizes the role of, what we refer to as, '*robust organizational impression management*' (R-OIM) for securing an organization's moral legitimacy among highly heterogeneous audience groups in general and among ideologically polarized media in particular. Generally, robust action is defined as 'action that accomplishes short-term objectives while preserving long-term flexibility' (Eccles, Nohria, & Berkley, 2003: 11). More specifically, we refer to R-OIM as entailing those actions and communications that aim at dynamically developing a multi-faceted organizational image over time with the result that heterogeneous and antagonistic audiences largely accept what the organization – interpreted from their perspective – is and what it does and continue to provide the necessary material and immaterial resources to sustain it (Padgett & Ansell, 1993; see also Jensen & Kim, 2014). In our case, R-OIM enabled Musk to maintain moral legitimacy among the left-wing media (Tesla's traditional 'fan base') while gradually reducing the organization's illegitimacy and securing more neutral evaluations among the right-wing media which initially had evaluated Musk and Tesla in rather disapproving, hostile ways². We suggest that R-OIM consists of three complementary types of

² This development has been independently from the economic growth of Tesla as we display in a later section.

OIM strategies: the ‘chameleon strategy’, the ‘diplomacy strategy’ and the ‘assurance strategy’. Our theoretical model explains how these three R-OIM strategies contribute to securing an organization’s moral legitimacy through three respective mechanisms: *creation of an ideologically multivocal image, alignment of image with cross-cutting virtues and (reduced) alignment of image with cross-cutting vices.*

Our study makes significant contributions to different streams of literature. First, contributing to research on OIM (e.g. Elsbach, 2003), we explore and explain what organizational spokespersons need to do to make OIM sufficiently ‘robust’ and effective if organizational legitimacy-granting audiences are highly heterogeneous (see also e.g., Lamin & Zaheer, 2012; Scherer et al., 2013). Second, we seek to shed new light on political ideologies, a phenomenon that has recently received increased attention from management scholars (e.g., Hambrick & Wowak, 2019), by elaborating on how organizational leaders can align their organization with both sides of the ideological spectrum in a polarized media landscape. Finally, we contribute to research on robust action (e.g., Eccles et al., 2003; Ferraro, Etzion & Gehman, 2015) by uncovering a range of robust action strategies that go beyond the extant focus on ‘multivocality’ in this literature.

RESEARCH SETTING

To address our research question, we conduct an inductive, qualitative case study to investigate how Musk, the spokesperson of Tesla, applied OIM strategies seeking to maintain moral legitimacy of his organization among the polarized U.S. news media.

The polarized U.S. news media

The media landscape in the U.S. exhibits a strong polarization (Melki & Sekeris, 2019; Prior, 2013) with deep ideological differences that are evident and resulting in distinctive media blocs which frequently stigmatize and antagonize each other (e.g., Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Edkins, 2017). According to Media Bias Fact Check (2019), the U.S. media landscape can be clustered along a broad ideological continuum from more left center-biased, liberal oriented

media outlets such as *The New York Times* to more rightwing centered-biased ones such as the moderately conservative biased outlets as *The Wall Street Journal* or the more right to extreme rightwing biased media such nationalist-oriented *Breitbart News Network*, classified as questionable source due to publication of conspiracy theories and propaganda, as well as several regional newspapers (Media Bias Fact Check, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018). A specific characteristic of the U.S. media landscape is the existence of distinctive right-wing media channels such as *Fox News*. While in other countries like Germany the right-wing parties convey their thoughts predominantly via social media channels (e.g., Busvine, 2018) claiming that the traditional media outlets are all liars (‘*Lügenpresse*’) painting an image of ‘journalists as the enemy’ and hereby systematically undermining the trustworthiness of an entire profession (ECPMF, 2017), the U.S. right-wing populists have their own media speaking tube. The transition from Obama to Trump has given an increased visibility especially to those rightwing outlets that are deeply skeptical of news from mainstream sources (Edkins, 2017; Newman et al., 2017) and making them more prominent. In particular, partisans engage in selective exposure, that refers to the preferential selection of predispositional media for political reasons, when choosing their information sources due to their generalized perception that ‘the media’ in general is biased against their point of view and therefore seek to avoid them (Barnidge et al., 2020).

Hence, people choose their news outlets according to their political ideologies and deny exposure to news outlets from the ideological opposite (Garrett, 2009). This partisan selectivity in turn leads to the constitution of increasing polarized political attitudes and fragmented interests of citizens since the media is the primary way that polarization is transmitted to the public. Therefore, people’s opinions on important political issues may vary widely and causes the questioning of the political legitimacy of public officials that do not share their view (Stroud, 2011). Since the readership of these different media outlets is fairly homogeneous, it has become bloc-like, too: less than 5 percent of New York Times readers consider themselves

‘rightwing’, and less than 7 percent of Fox News watchers and readers consider themselves ‘leftwing’ (Newman et al., 2017). In particular, conservatives distrust the mainstream media sources whereby this skepticism is fueled by their deep and almost exclusive commitment to Fox News (e.g., two thirds of right-wingers are regular Fox News watcher). For instance, the trust in mainstream news among the right-wing audiences decreased from 17% to 9% alone in 2018 (Newman et al., 2019; see also the study on the effects of elite discourses about ‘fake news’ by Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). In addition, an increasing number of 19 percent of those right-wingers (Newman et al., 2017) is even regularly visiting ultra-right-wing site Breitbart. In contrast, Liberals gravitate towards other more left-leaning outlets such as The New York Times. This development results in the U.S. having the largest media polarization far exceeding those of any other Western country (Edkins, 2017; Newman et al., 2017) and providing the unique opportunity to grasp the ideologically distinctive media evaluation from the polarized parts which seeks to uphold either an Obama-like ‘America-as-Open-Door’ or Trump’s ‘America-First’ ideological register. While the former stands for an ideological approach based on globalism, social democracy and environmentalism, the latter can be characterized by the diametrically opposed ideologies such as nationalism, populism, economic libertarianism and anti-environmentalism (e.g., Crouch, 2017; de Jonquieres, 2017; de Matas, 2017; Irwin, 2017; McGuire, 2017; Rona-Tas, 2016). Table 1 depicts and summarizes these opposing ideological registers (a more detailed description of how we operationalized these registers and of the incompatibilities between them can be found in the appendix).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Therefore, a polarized media landscape forces organizations and their spokespersons – like Tesla and Musk in our case – to operate under the assumption of highly heterogeneous, if not even antagonistic audience demands.

Elon Musk and Tesla

Elon Musk, the founder and CEO of the U.S. company Tesla constitutes a revelatory case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) of how an organizational spokesperson responds to the demands of a heterogeneous audience of a polarized media landscape.

Tesla is an U.S. manufacturer of electric vehicles (EVs) headquartered in Palo Alto, California (U.S.), founded and steered by Musk, the mastermind behind the organization. Tesla's mission is to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy, offering the full suite of energy products: EVs, solar, storage and grid services (Tesla, 2020a). As per 2018, Tesla had a domestic manufacturing base producing the main products in the U.S., a global product distribution, and a futuristic outlook aiming to develop for instance self-driving vehicles or saving humankind from its own destruction (Vance, 2015). Tesla employed approximately 48,000 people and generated a revenue of 24.6 billion USD in 2019 (Statista, 2020; Tesla, 2020b). Since its founding in 2003 Tesla has developed into a global competitor and disruptor within the automotive industry (Vance, 2015).

Musk, Tesla's CEO, is a serial entrepreneur. As founder of PayPal, Tesla and SpaceX, he is named along with the most famous American entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford or Thomas Edison (Vance, 2015; see also Hayward, Rindova, & Pollock, 2004). While Musk refers to himself as 'apolitical' (Musk, 04/02/2017a,c) in public, his decisions and actions suggest that he favors the Democratic party. For instance, prior to the U.S. election in 2016, he openly claimed that Trump is 'not the right guy for the job' (NYT, 27/01/2017) and aligned closely with the Obama administration. In addition, from these actions one can assume that he sympathizes with global, social democratic and environmentalist ideas, whereas Trump favors the opposite. However, despite the skyrocketing growth of Tesla's business endeavor, we acknowledge that Tesla is far from being a showpiece enterprise illustrated by a range of scandals caused by Musk himself that set the organization into trouble.³

³We acknowledge that Musk himself polarized in some incidents: the discussion with the SEC about his tweet of taking Tesla private called the SEC into action (e.g., O'Kane & Lopatto, 2018), the debate with a Thai cave diver or his media war or his dispute with financial analysts during an earnings call.

Our case selection is based on the following three rationales. Firstly, Musk owns a Twitter account regularly publishing his opinions as Tesla's spokesperson resulting in a rich data base for analyzing OIM activities. This is appropriate as we found that Musk is widely perceived as the company's 'figurehead' who is representing, if not embodying, the organization both by internal and external audiences, and thus everything Musk says or does is ascribed to the company⁴. Hence, we regard Musk's Twitter statements as largely impacting the impression that audiences ascribe to 'his' company Tesla. Secondly, we selected Tesla because it is highly dependent on constituencies from both sides of the ideological spectrum and hence forced to manage its legitimacy within a strong area of tension. On the one hand, Tesla has a dependency on rather left-leaning constituencies: the majority of consumers, part of the financial investors and workforce. For instance, Tesla's main customer base is located in mainly Democratic voting states in the U.S. such as California or New York (Malone, 2019). On the other hand, Tesla is equally dependent on right-leaning constituencies such as the incumbent government, the other part of investors and workforce⁵. Being drawn within this tension, Musk has reacted explicitly and regularly to the political events connected to the advent of the Trump administration which has contributed to increasing media polarization in the U.S. Thirdly, Tesla is a popular brand with a famous spokesperson, the CEO himself, that attracts heightened media attention leading to a rich data basis for our analysis. Importantly, our analysis suggests that media channels on both sides of the ideological spectrum appear to monitor Musk's tweets closely because they are regularly referenced verbatim in media articles,

⁴ Musk embodiment of Tesla is illustrated in the following: (1) Tesla alerted investors in a 2013 SEC filing that they should follow Musk's Twitter feed for 'additional information' about the company (Reuters, 2018); (2) Musk being sued by the SEC following his tweet about taking Tesla private due to the hereby caused manipulation of Tesla's share price (O'Kane & Lopatto, 2018).

⁵ For instance, Musk needs the government for federal subsidies required for their endeavors and favorable regulation for self-driving vehicles such as the federal EV credit of up to 7,500 USD that is offered by the U.S. government for consumers buying a new EV car (Malter & Sprague, 2018; Manjoo & Isaac, 2017). An analysis of Tesla's ownership structure shows that they have a tendency towards larger donations for the Republicans, however displaying a mixed picture regarding the PAC contributions of key shareholders towards Democrats and Republicans. While for instance Fidelity Investments with its CEO Abigail Johnson distinctively favors the Republicans, other key shareholder such as Blackrock Inc. or Vanguard Group show a more equally balanced PAC contribution distribution (Bloomberg, 2019; The Center for Responsive Politics, 2019).

and they serve as important source upon which the media establish their legitimacy evaluations of the company.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data sources

To address our research question, we collected different types of qualitative data from three type of sources as indicated in Table 2 – Twitter, blog and media data – covering the period from 2013 to 2018⁶, thus creating a rich data set.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Twitter and blog data. To capture the OIM claims of the organizational spokesperson, i.e. Elon Musk, we collected his direct statements ('tweets'), i.e. short messages that he sends over his Twitter account (@elonmusk) (Castello, Etter & Nielsen, 2016; Fischer & Reuber, 2014) as well as statements from the Tesla blog written by Musk and his team. A focus on these data sources is appropriate since extant research has emphasized that organizational spokespersons increasingly rely on social media, such as Twitter or corporate blogs as OIM platforms (e.g. Castello, Etter & Nielsen, 2016; Etter et al., 2018; Fischer & Reuber, 2014; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). As of 2013, we included all statements made on Twitter (5,515 tweets) and the Tesla blog (145 entries) for the 2nd Obama presidency until December 2018. We searched for those tweets and blog entries that refer to what we conceptualized as 'political event' and explored how Musk conveyed Tesla in response to individual political events such as, for instance, president Trump's Muslim travel ban (McCarthy & Laughland, 2017). A 'political event' refers to the most striking public policies as identified in step 1 of our data analysis process. All the political events – i.e. Obama's and Trump's policies announcements – included in our analysis and their implications are summarized by date in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

⁶ We choose this timeframe for our analysis to include all data from the beginning of the 2nd Obama presidency on 1st January 2013 until the end of 2018 to cover the last full year before Musk was fined by SEC and forbidden to tweet about share price related incidents without pre-approval from a securities lawyer from April 2019 onwards (Korosec, 2019).

Media data. To investigate the media evaluations of outlets on both sides of the ideological spectrum, we gathered full-text media articles electronically from the global news database *Factiva*. We chose traditional media (Pollock & Rindova, 2003) since it is more obvious which ideological orientation they represent in contrast to social media such as analyzing responses from Twitter users due to their user anonymity. Traditional media in our case does also include Breitbart. We included newspaper articles from the more leftwing-biased media (*The New York Times*), but also from outlets located on the moderately to extreme rightwing biased side such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fox News* or *Breitbart News Network* (Media Bias Fact Check, 2019). In the time between 2013 and 2018 we searched for ‘Trump and (Musk or Tesla)’ and ‘Obama and (Musk or Tesla)’ to identify articles related to the relationship and/or positioning of the president and the organization. 1274 articles in total have been retrieved.

Data analysis

We aimed to capture and conceptualize OIM images claimed by Musk with regard to precipitating political events and the respective images formed by the polarized news media in terms of evaluating those images in terms of granting moral (il)legitimacy to the organization. Our analysis consisted of several interrelated steps that focused first on the analysis of Musk’s OIM claims, second on the media evaluation and, third, on the relationship between the claims and evaluations. Due to our large media data corpus, we chose a combinatory methodological approach based on a systematical content analysis (Krippendorff, 1989) followed by developing theory inductively from our qualitative data following mainly Gioia et al.’s (2013) recommendations and guided by an interpretive methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, we sought to choose content analysis to create replicable and valid inferences by attributing conventionally meanings to textual data derived from our media content (Krippendorff, 1989).

Then, following Gioia et al. (2013) we were looking for codes across data to cluster them into first-order themes and investigating those categories regarding interrelations among

those to merge them eventually into theoretically distinct clusters: the so-called second-order themes. In our recursive and non-linear coding process, we moved iteratively between the first-order categories and the emerging patterns in our data until adequate conceptual themes emerged (Eisenhardt, 1989). In a final step, we organized those second-order themes into the overarching dimensions that are the foundations of our theory-building purposes. In order to enhance validity, we constantly compared coded data and discussed possible emerging conceptual patterns among all authors until agreement was strong (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Musk's OIM claims. In a *first step*, we analyzed Musk's statements on Twitter and the blog with political relevance such as his communicative reactions to policy announcements and implementations of the U.S. administration. Examples therefore are Donald Trump's election in 2016 or the exit from the Paris Climate Agreement, the so-called 'political events'. This led us to an inclusion of 100 statements (tweets and blog entries) for further analysis. We then came to conceptualize his statements with an OIM lens (e.g., Elsbach, 2006) regarding them as OIM claims. This led us to conceive of the political events as 'trigger events' for OIM (Ginzel et al., 1993). However, we evaluated these claims inductively by openly coding those data in order to uncover specific OIM strategies that are beneficial regarding the polarized media audience. This analysis step involved looking for codes across data to cluster them into categories on the basis of statements that revolved around Musk's positioning with political relevance. Eventually, those categories formed our first-order codes as result from our inductive study that are briefly presented here due to illustrative purposes in anticipation of the following case study. They were comprised by either statements regarding the *ideological orientation*, *diplomatic* or *assurance approaches*. In the next step, we moved towards the second-order themes. For instance, we clustered all first-order categories containing an ideological claim that fashioned Tesla aligned with a certain ideology into the theme labeled 'chameleon strategy'. Ultimately, we summarized those second-order themes into the overarching dimensions that build the basis for our theory development.

Moral legitimacy evaluations. In a *second step*, we analyzed how the polarized U.S. media evaluated Tesla's moral legitimacy based on political ideologies. We extracted the data from *Factiva* and after screening for duplicates, we analyzed a total of 1,136 articles in detail. First, we searched for articles containing evaluations about Musk or Tesla regarding their positioning towards political events. In this vein, we decided to also include the other organizations from his conglomerate (i.e., SpaceX, SolarCity and The Boring Company) where he also acts as spokesperson, if there was a political relation. However, we excluded all articles (in total 942) related to other themes such as Tesla's business conduct (e.g., reporting of quarterly results), product related news (e.g., product innovation of the new Tesla model) or topic related discussions (e.g., artificial intelligence, self-driving technology or Musk's debate with the SEC). We aimed to extract only the evaluations of Musk's OIM claims regarding political events, not his evaluations within his business endeavors. This led us to an inclusion of 194 articles with a balanced distribution of articles from the leftwing (48 %) and rightwing-biased (52%) media outlet side for further detailed analysis. Next, we investigated Musk's respectively Tesla's valence within a single article (Deepphouse, 2000) as proxy for the audience perception of the organization as 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' (Haack et al., 2014). First, each article was coded as positive, neutral respectively ambivalent or negative regarding the organizational evaluation and/ or its spokesperson (e.g., Bansel & Clelland, 2004; Pollock & Rindova, 2003). A *positive* evaluation occurred when the organization or the spokesperson was praised for its communicative actions with regard to political related themes, i.e. there was an alignment among the organizational actions and the audiences favored perceptions, while a *negative* evaluation occurred if the organization or the spokesperson has been criticized for instance by media's usage of negative adjectives or accusations, i.e. there was an ideological misalignment. We coded an article as *neutral*, if the article's essence was a declarative reporting of the organization or the spokesperson without evaluative modifiers. A neutral tenor was also given when there was a balance of positive and negative evaluations within an article

(Deephouse, 2000) that can be also referred to as ‘ambivalent’ (Wang, Raynard & Greendwood, 2020). We then performed a quantitative media tenor analysis following Pollock & Rindova (2003) as addition of our media content analysis (Krippendorff, 1989) to capture the overall tenor of the media within our timeframe by using the Janis-Fader coefficient of imbalance (Deephouse, 2000; Janis & Fader, 1965). See further down Figure 4.

Exploring the relationship between OIM claims and moral legitimacy evaluations. To investigate, whether and if so, why, there is a connection among our proposed OIM strategies and the media tenor, we sought to conduct process tracing (Mahoney, 2012) by analyzing the media articles more in-depth to uncover the actual images that are conveyed by Musk’s OIM claims and perceived from the media as such. We sought to detect the underlying social mechanism referring to ‘a process in a concrete system, such that it is capable of bringing about or preventing some change in the system as a whole or in some of its subsystems’ (Bunge, 1997, p. 414; see also Schneider & Scherer, 2019). Following past research suggesting that an article can contain multiple evaluations (Lamertz & Baum, 1998), we extracted those and coded each of them separately. Eventually, that led to a total of 237 evaluations included for further analysis.

We then engaged in a similar process as mentioned earlier conducting a Gioia et al. (2013) analysis to derive the underlying abstract concepts for theorization purposes. We hereby focused on the images about Musk and his organizations that developed and evolved over time as perceived by the media. Our final data structure is presented in Figure 2 showing the codes from which we developed our findings and the relationships between them. Table 3 shows additional supporting evidence for our findings in terms of representative first-order data, which underpin the second-order themes.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

FINDINGS

Below, we present the case narrative structured according to our inductively derived first-order concepts. A gradual development of the results took place, which gradually merged into the overall picture. Hence, the presentation of the results does not take place in a chronological order analogous to the research recognition process, but the results are presented in a systematic, holistic way: First, we present Musk's OIM strategies. Subsequently, we focus on how the polarized U.S. news media evaluate Musk and Tesla over time.

Elon Musk's OIM strategies

We discovered after a careful inductive analysis of the data three underlying strategies that emerged in the longitudinal stream of Musk's OIM claims (i.e. Images claimed by Musk) as illustrated in Figure 3, whereby we define strategy as patterns in the stream of OIM claims of organizational spokespersons (see Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

In a first pattern, Musk behaved similar to a chameleon that wanders through the various ideological registers over time. He flexibly connected Tesla with diverse left- and right-leaning political ideologies. Over time, he did so both within single tweets and communications (when relying on multifaceted claims) and across tweets and communications (by relying on both multifaceted claims and on alternating univocal ideological claims). Overall, this created a rather complex and multifaceted portrayal of Musk and Tesla.

Musk frequently associates himself and Tesla with left-leaning ideologies, including environmentalism, globalism and social democracy. These associations are prevalent throughout the whole timeline from 2013 to 2018, however in different intensities as illustrated in Figure 3. During the Obama presidency, and based on associations with an environmentalist ideology, Musk primarily portrayed himself and Tesla as *climate saver*, noting that climate change is a serious threat to humanity and that it is of utmost urgency to combat it. Fortunately, Tesla would offer products that help to fight against climate change and achieve these goals

such as EVs or recyclable space rockets with SpaceX. Additionally, Musk increasingly realized *globalist* claims from 2015 onwards (see Figure 3). Within his tweets and Tesla's blog entries, Tesla is portrayed as a globally oriented organization by emphasizing Musk's vision about Tesla's global expansion of the production network for instance to Europe and China. Finally, in line with a social democratic ideology, Musk conceives of himself and Tesla as *social* equalizer claiming that he seeks to fight discrimination and fosters social equality for instance by claiming that he supports the idea of a universal basic income or that he regards himself as a 'socialist' (Musk, 16/06/2018).

However, Musk simultaneously associated himself and his company with right-wing political ideologies including libertarianism and nationalism. For the former, he mobilized libertarian claims throughout the whole timeline by highlighting that he gained his wealth without government support: 'I 'got rich' from [...] PayPal w zero govt anything' (Musk, 24/05/2013). Or, that he is against patents and supports the idea of a competitive, free market: 'I really hate patents unless critical to company survival' (Musk, 15/07/2013). Moreover, Musk started connecting Tesla with a nationalist ideology starting to appear from 2015 onwards – shortly after Trump announced his presidential candidacy (Diamond, 2015) and increased in intensity from 2016 onwards (see Figure 3) after Trump's election. At that time, he started portraying himself and Tesla as a *patriot* and as *domestic job creator*, thus aligning Tesla with Trump's notorious slogan 'Buy American, Hire American!'. In this regard, concerning Tesla's acquisition of the U.S. company 'SolarCity' located in the U.S. city of Buffalo or the construction of the lithium ion battery factory 'Gigafactory', Musk emphasized repeatedly that 'thousands of American jobs' will be created thanks to him and his company (Tesla, 04/01/2017). Relatedly, he implicitly leant towards a nationalist ideology when he agrees with Trump that the trade deals between the U.S. and China are unfair for the U.S. – 'For example, an American car going to China pays 25% import duty, but a Chinese car coming to the U.S. only pays 2.5%, a tenfold difference' (Musk, 08/03/2018b) – and need to be renegotiated.

Importantly, however, the above mentioned chameleon-like ideological flexibility of Musk did not involve any anti-environmentalist portrayals of himself and Tesla – presumably because his vision and Tesla’s business model are based on the idea of ‘saving the environment’. Hence, environmentalism remained a constant theme also in the Trump era, and despite Trump’s anti-environmentalist policies and remarks.

In a second pattern of OIM claims, Musk, like a diplomat, communicates in a conciliatory way from 2016 onwards and portrays himself and his company as counteracting ideological polarization. Specifically, he associates himself and his company with two moral virtues that do not belong to any direct political ideology: First, Musk frequently conceives of himself as embodying an *entrepreneurial spirit* (and respectively his company as entrepreneurial company). As an entrepreneur, he seeks to predict and shape the future, expects and embraces change and eventually regard taking risks as inherent entrepreneurial value. He claims that he is ‘apolitical’ and ‘just want[s] to help invent and develop technologies that improve lives’ (Musk, 04/02/2017a). Second, he conceives of himself and his company as *bridge builder* that seek to overcome trench warfare and decrease differences among polarized political groups and unify them in peaceful way. Although Musk had initially opposed and criticized Trump’s candidacy by claiming, along with other tech giants, that ‘he is not the right guy for the job’ (NYT, 27/01/2017), after the election, he joined Trump’s presidential advisory board⁷. In principle, he thus acknowledges the legitimacy of the Trump administration and its various policies and concerns (even though he did not agree with many of them).

He actively sought the exchange with Trump to build bridges by means of respectful conversation and constructive advice across contradictory ideologies such as nationalism and globalism. In particular, however, he sought to bridge ideologies appeasingly between environmentalism and anti-environmentalism by continuously emphasizing his long-term

⁷He stayed on it, despite protests, until Trump's announcement that the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, when Musk, along with other prominent U.S. CEOs, withdrew from the board.

vision of a more sustainable world as a guiding mantra for all of Tesla's domains of activity. In cases where he disagreed with Trump's agenda, instead of directly attacking him, Musk used conciliatory and guarded language. For instance, with regard to the Muslim travel ban that prevents people from several Muslim countries to enter the U.S., he wrote on Twitter: 'The blanket entry ban on citizens from certain primarily Muslim countries is not the best way to address the country's challenges [...] those people [...] don't deserve to be rejected' (Musk, 28/01/2017). Likewise, he takes a stand against extremism and encourages moderation and exchange: 'A lot of terrible things could happen in four years of extremism. Do you really want another war? That's where extremism leads' (Musk, 05/02/2017b). Overall, and following his conciliatory approach of actively appealing to entrepreneurial values and seeking to build bridges across ideological divides, Musk sought to stay close to Trump to actively shape his political agenda towards one that is less extreme and also signals the rightwing spectrum that he is open towards their ideologies.

In a third pattern, around 2016, Musk started to affirm his ideological loyalty towards his core audience, i.e. those with a more left-wing ideology, assumingly to mitigate the potential pitfalls of his approaching attempts towards Trump and more right-wing political groups. For instance, he points out that due to him and his participation in the advisory board the travel ban topic went back on White House' agenda for discussion, emphasizing that he directs Trump's attention to perspectives that are otherwise ignored (Musk, 04/02/2017b). Likewise, he voiced frustration with the continued calls to leave the advisory board, emphasizing that he was in a position to do good and 'move things in a more positive direction' (Musk, 05/02/2017a). Eventually – following Trump's announcement that the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement – Musk also justifies his exit of the presidential advisory board as an incident not compatible with his environmentalist ideology: 'Am departing presidential councils. Climate change is real. Leaving Paris is not good for America or the world' (Musk, 01/06/2017a).

Evaluations of Musk and Tesla by the Polarized U.S. News Media

Next, we turn our focus towards the polarized U.S. news media and investigate inductively how they evaluate Musk's OIM strategies (i.e. formed images). Again, for illustration purposes we present the overall picture of the results, not in the chronological order of the research recognition process. Overall, the media tenor among the left-wing media tenor (blue line in Figure 4) remained positive, while the right-wing media tenor (red line) became much less negative since the beginning of Musk's Twitter activities in 2013, and eventually both tenors converge on the positive side by the end of 2018. Below, we elaborate this finding in detail. Toward this end, we focus on the images that the polarized media formed about Musk and Tesla and whether these have a positive or negative moral connotation as derived from our inductive data analysis (see Figure 5).

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Evaluations of Musk and Tesla among left-wing media remain positive. The left-wing media evaluated Musk's OIM claims throughout our timeframe in a positive manner thereby forming predominantly positively connoted images of Musk and Tesla.

A first set of these positively connoted images has a tight connection with left-wing ideologies: environmentalism, globalism, and social democracy (see Figure 5). For the former, the leftwing media evaluated Musk's environmentalist OIM claims positively and construed him as '*climate saver*'. For instance, they commend Musk for using Twitter to fight back after having been attacked by Robert E. Murry, CEO of a major coal company and an apparent denier of climate change, citing Musk's tweet: 'Real fraud going on is denial of climate science' (NYT, 6/12/2016). Moreover, they emphasize that 'Elon Musk of Tesla' deserves to get credit for leaving Trump's advisory council because he 'could not abide the president's decision to abandon the Paris climate accord' (NYT, 22/08/2017). Additionally, Musk's tweets where he portrayed himself and Tesla as globalist and social democratic, anti-discrimination supporter

went down very well with the left-wing media. For instance, they appreciate Musk's efforts for the disadvantaged by using his White House access to criticize the Muslim travel ban (NYT, 30/04/2017).

A second set of positively connoted images, however, is not directly connected with such left-wing ideologies (see Figure 5). Rather, our findings suggest that Musk's tweets provoked the left-wing media to not only rely on their polarized and polarizing ideological standpoints but to broaden their moral horizon. They also drew on those more general values and virtues – i.e. those of entrepreneurship and bridge building – that Musk's diplomatic communication claims offered. For the former, and from 2013 onwards, they construe Musk as the embodiment of the American '*spirit of enterprise*', i.e. as a prototype of an innovative, visionary and hard-working entrepreneur who strikes out into unknown territory.

For the latter, Musk successfully justifies his approaching attempts towards 'the enemy' in what we refer to a bridge builder in particular an '*ideological ambassador*' triggering a positive evaluation of Tesla. As such he is perceived as someone who is cooperating with the opposite side and who seeks collaboration with Trump trying to convince him of his core ideologies for instance by joining the advisory board. This behavior starts in 2016 and is perceived as positive particularly from the leftwing media. They remark for instance the growing relationship among Musk and Trump and that Musk is attractive to the president due to their similarities. In that sense, Musk and Trump do not only coexist, but even thrive together (NYT, 6/12/2016). They even go as far as to portray their relationship as a 'budding bromance' since both like to 'think big' (NYT, 27/01/2017). Based on Musk's tweet regarding the 'trade problem with China', they even 'accept... the fact that some things are true even if Donald Trump believes them', which is surprising because the left-wing media tended to otherwise bash Trump and his comments or policies (NYT, 14/03/2018).

However – in a minority of cases – it seems that Musk's bridge building attempts and communications backfired. As such, we also uncovered a third pattern of images. However,

although these images are again not connected with particular left-wing ideologies but rather with overarching and more general values and virtues, they have a negative connotation. In a minority of articles, Musk is construed as a *deceiver*, an *opportunist* who enters Trump's advisory council and allies with the ideological enemy for reasons of self-interest. For instance, they thus criticize that rather than taking a clear stand and defending the higher good, Musk only made a 'tepid and slow-moving response to the [Muslim] travel ban' that Trump aimed to initiate (NYT, 4/06/2017). Yet, these images with a negative connotation did not increase substantially but rather declined again in frequency toward the end of our study period which suggests that Musk's claims whereby he sought to assure the left-wing audiences that he is on their side had a beneficial effect. In general, the media justified and rationalized the temporary association of Musk with Trump, voicing hope that it might have had a positive influence on Trump's policies.

Evaluations of Musk and Tesla among right-wing media become less negative. In contrast to the left-leaning media, the right-wing media initially evaluated Musk and Tesla in a harshly negative manner. However, the tenor improved significantly over time and eventually became neutral.

INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

During the 2nd Obama presidency from 2013 to 2016, the right-wing media developed negatively connoted images of Musk (see Figure 6). In particular, what they find most negative is that Musk embodies for them a '*crony capitalist*' and as such the '*elite*' who misspends taxpayers' money to subsidize his 'niche products' which only 'the wealthy' people would be able to afford (Breitbart, 31/05/2015), hence he is 'no poster boy for the free market' (WSJ, 25/10/2014). Hereby, he incorporates images that are opposing towards their favored libertarian and populist image and they perceive Musk's social democratic and anti-populist claims as highly negative. Particularly, they accuse Musk and his affluent target customers as benefitting on the expense of the 'standard middle-class taxpayer' due to his good connections with the

Washington elites as embodied by the hatred Democrats and his ‘sweetheart deals’ (Fox, 19/04/2014). This is perceived as unfair and needs to be stopped. Those themes represent the overarching criticism that however decreases slightly from 2017 onwards. Closely related is also the criticism of Musk being an ‘*environmental hypocrite*’ who perfectly symbolizes the typical Obama entrepreneur who relied on the government’s pro-environmental subsidies to allow his company to succeed in the vein of a ‘government giveaway bonanza’ (Breitbart, 15/01/2013). While the image of Musk as a ‘*crony capitalist*’ decreases from 2017 onwards, the image of Musk as a ‘*domestic job destroyer*’ appears since rightwing media dislikes his international expansion plans towards China perceiving that as a ‘questionable decision’ since the U.S. ‘is in the midst of a manufacturing resurgence’ (Breitbart, 17/08/2018). However, the degree of disapproval and antagonism that Musk and his organizations encountered from the rightwing media initially, gradually decreased and the media evaluation became more neutral which can be also closely linked to next observation.

The prior described ideologically negative connoted images of Musk and Tesla have been joined by positive ones such as that of a ‘*libertarian*’ and a ‘*domestic job creator*’. For example, they positively acknowledge that Musk supports public-private partnerships with NASA ‘favored by President Donald Trump’s administration’ (WSJ, 28/02/2017). Additionally, they highly appreciate Musk’s extensive domestic workforce which fits perfectly into their nationalist directive remarking that Tesla employs more than 35,000 ‘American workers’ (Breitbart, 29/01/2017).

In unison with leftwing, the rightwing media also developed positively connoted images of Musk that are not directly related to right-wing political ideologies, but rather to culturally anchored values related to the American dream. Again, we found two manifestations, however slightly different than before: First, the positive perception of Musk as embodiment of ‘*entrepreneurial spirit*’. Not only does the rightwing media – despite all the amount of criticism – appreciate that Musk repaid the governmental loan early, but also do they value his

groundbreaking entrepreneurial talent and already see in him the next Steve Jobs (Fox, 19/09/2013). Additionally, they perceive him as among ‘the most patriotic U.S. car makers’ beside Ford (WSJ, 11/01/2017) since Tesla would have the most extensive U.S. manufacturing base with a purely domestic value chain – something that obviously went down well also on the more extreme right end of the U.S. media spectrum.

Second, we found empirical evidence that the rightwing media emphasized and appreciated the growing relationship between Musk and Trump. They view Musk as a bridge builder, particularly an ‘*ally of Trump*’ who seeks to strengthen the relationship with him which they perceive as positive. From 2016 onwards (see Figure 6), they began to characterize Musk and Tesla more neutrally and occasionally also quite positively. For instance, they interpret Musk’s joining of the presidential advisory board as a first sign that ‘Trump is mending ties with Silicon Valley’ despite the fact that he earlier criticized Trump’s candidacy (Breitbart, 14/12/16). The WSJ also recognized, similar to the leftwing media, that ‘Musk’s role as a Trump advisor is unusual in Silicon valley’ picking up his Twitter note regarding his intention recommending changes to the immigration order towards the president, but emphasized the strategy of engagement and that it is a ‘balancing act’ (WSJ, 01/02/2017). Additionally, they started portraying Musk explicitly as an ‘ally’ of Trump (Fox, 31/05/2017) and remarked positively Musk’s tweet regarding the Chinese import tariffs mentioning that ‘the Middle Kingdom’s current rules make things very difficult’ (WSJ, 8/03/2018a), that in turn got picked up by Trump who mentioned Musk’s tweet within his announcement to charge tariffs on steel and aluminum: ‘That’s from Elon [...] But everybody knows it, they’ve known it for years. They never did anything about it’ (WSJ, 08/03/2018b). The right-wing outlets viewed Musk’s Twitter approach very beneficially and as a sign that he is siding with Trump over tariffs (Fox, 08/03/2018), even though they find it surprising that Musk directly approached Trump via Twitter despite previously quitting Trump's advisory board.

However, similar to the leftwing media, the OIM claims regarding shared values can occasionally backfire and being perceived as negative. In a minority of cases, they can lead to Musk's image of a '*deceiver*' in terms of a '*Trojan horse*' who ingratiates himself with Trump in order to betray him eventually by trying to whisper into his ear to persuade him of the opposed ideological orientation. These evaluations starting from 2016 onwards and can therefore be seen as the potential pitfalls of Musk's former OIM pattern. For instance, they perceive him as a hypocrite and flags in the wind stating that he initially 'said Trump was 'not the right guy' to be president' but soon after his election changed his mind and joined the advisory board (Breitbart, 26/01/2017) or denying his business relations with Trump, but 'still takes Trump's money' (Fox, 01/06/2017). Eventually, they remark ironically that he may have now realized that a cooperation with Trump may 'benefit his bottom line' (Breitbart, 08/03/2018).

In conclusion, and overall, the antagonism of the moderate and extreme rightwing media towards Musk and his organizations clearly decreased over time. While they did not become close 'friends' with Musk and Tesla, our analysis within our covered time frame clearly shows that the right-wing media over time portrayed them in less negative, more neutral, and occasionally even in positive ways.

THEORY DEVELOPMENT

We now draw on our empirical findings to address our research question and theorize: *under which conditions does OIM enable organizational spokespersons to maintain moral legitimacy of organizations among a polarized media audience – and why*. Most generally, our findings suggest that an organizational spokesperson's OIM succeeds in that regard if it is characterized by what we refer to as '*robustness*'. Accordingly, our inductively derived findings led us toward blending the literature on OIM with recent pragmatic explorations of the concept of 'robust action' (e.g. Ferraro et al., 2015) and towards theorizing how and why what we came to refer to as *robust organizational impression management (R-OIM)* enables maintaining

organizational legitimacy in polarized media landscapes. The inductively derived aggregate dimensions and second order themes (see Figure 2) constitute the variables in our theoretical framework. Below, we will introduce these variables first and the framework thereafter.

Variables and mechanisms

Robust Organizational Impression Management (R-OIM). R-OIM is defined as the organizational spokesperson's ongoing and mundane communications and actions aimed at creating a complex, multi-faceted organizational image that is evaluated favorably by heterogeneous audiences with polarized ideological leanings. In this regard, our findings and reflections led us toward drawing on recent pragmatic, agency-oriented formulations of the concept of 'robust action' (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2015; see also e.g. Eccles et al., 2003; Leifer, 1983). Robust actions are streams of action 'that can be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives' (Padgett & Ansell, 1993: 1263). Robust action is beneficial when future problems and opportunities are uncertain (Eccles et al., 2003) – such as when countries are undergoing ideological transitions (Stark, 1996) or in the case of polarized media landscapes – insofar as it does not constrict the organization's ability to adapt its portrayal as situations change and conflicting ideological world views evolve. Specifically, we came to conceptualize R-OIM as involving three complementary types of strategies as pattern that we as researcher identified as emerging from the data within our inductive study.

The chameleon strategy. The first type of R-OIM is what we conceptualize as 'chameleon strategy'. It is constituted by a combination of launching claims from alternating ideological registers. In our case study, Musk's tweets and blog entries flexibly connected Tesla with diverse political ideologies over time and without making deeper commitments to the main lines of ideological conflict in the U.S. Over time, this strategy can include both alternating claims that associate the spokesperson and its organization with a single ideology and more multi-faceted claims that construe associations with several ideologies within one claim. A chameleon strategy can therefore provide and maintain for organizational spokespersons

‘discretionary options across unforeseeable futures’ (Padgett & Ansell, 1993: 1263) hereby accomplishing short-term objectives, but at the same time was able to maintain long-term flexibility (Eccles et al., 2003). In our case, Musk acted in many ways like a juggler trying to keep all the different ideological balls up in the air. As a result, the present claims do not overly constrict Musk’s ability to adapt his company’s portrayal to new political and ideological developments as they evolve throughout time.

The diplomacy strategy. By means of a diplomacy strategy, the organizational spokesperson is portrayed as someone who attempts to build bridges between diverse and polarized ideological positions, thereby aiming to reduce their antagonism and to contribute to their pacification (see also Banfield et al., 2006; Henisz, 2016; Steger, 2003; Tripathi & Gündüz, 2008; Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein & Fort, et al., 2015). We found that this diplomacy strategy consists of two elements: the appeal to overarching ideals and mediation. The former entails appeals to ideals and values that are not directly related to any political ideology but deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the wider social context, such as, in this case, the American ideal of having an entrepreneurial spirit and realizing the ‘American Dream’ (Cullen, 2004), pursuing a vision of a better world made possible by effort and the diligent use of superior technology. In this case, the spokesperson is conveying an image that he and his organization is focusing on pragmatic, overarching solutions to societal problems rather than adding fuel to the (ideological) fire. In turn, the latter conveys an image of Musk as a mediator who seeks to overcome trench warfare through relationship building and communication facilitating strategies (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2003) targeting, in our case, in particular the rightwing media to decrease differences among the polarized groups and unify them in a peaceful way by showing mutual respect, empathy and politeness.

The assurance strategy. The assurance strategy, in turn, includes affirmations that the spokesperson and the organization represented, despite mobilizing diplomatic claims (see above), represents the ideologies and values of one of the polarized audience groups. In our

case, both audiences are addressed, but Musk mainly mobilizes assurance claims that aim to convey his continued connection to left-wing ideologies.

Moral legitimization mechanisms. Below, we elaborate on our inductively emerged social mechanisms explaining why R-OIM contributes to organization's moral legitimization in polarized media landscape. As defined earlier, we understand a social mechanism as referring to 'a process in a concrete system, such that it is capable of bringing about or preventing some change in the system as a whole or in some of its subsystems' (Bunge, 1997, p. 414; see also Schneider & Scherer, 2019).

Ideological multivocality of image. A multivocal organizational image is one that can be 'interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives' (Padgett & Ansell, 1993: 1263). Multivocality means that the diverse and flexible portrayal of the organization leads diverse audiences to develop 'their own distinctive understanding of the organization's identity and goals' such that the organization can be interpreted relatively coherently and favorably from audiences with different perspectives (Padgett & Ansell, 1993: 1263; Jensen & Kim, 2014). We suggest that a multivocal organizational image contributes to ideological value alignment and hence moral legitimacy of the focal organization because it enables the organization to appeal to the positive normative evaluations of its diverse and polarized audiences (Suchman, 1995: 578). In this context, spokespersons can use value systems as 'cultural tools' (Swidler, 1986) to develop favorable images in polarized audiences. In our case, it allowed Musk and his organizations to maintain positively connoted images among the leftwing media and, at the same time, appease the moderate and extreme rightwing media outlets by both reducing the negatively connoted images and even inducing positively connoted ones.

Alignment of image with cross-cutting virtues. A virtue refers to an 'excellent trait of character' and as such not only disposition to behave in the right manner (e.g., Hursthouse, 1999), but also according to Aristotle involving situation specific 'know-how' by acting on what is relevant in a concrete moral context (Louden, 1984). In our case, Musk attempted and

to a certain degree also succeeded in shifting the discussion to a meta level perspective by creating virtuous images of Tesla, hereby raising himself and his organization beyond the ideologically heated daily debates about and with Trump. In this way, congruence with cross-cutting virtues (DellaPosta, 2020) contributes to the organization's moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) as this associates the organization with higher order cultural 'certainties' that continue to be shared and 'taken for granted' even in a society that largely appears disrupted and polarized on an ideological level. Hereby, the audiences are lifted out of their ideological rift and a different, more general value system is taken into account, which is less polarized and polarizing, but rather cross-cutting and congruent with positive overarching substantive ideals (e.g., Snow & Benford, 1992) and procedural norms (e.g., Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994).

In particular, Musk's portrayals were appealing to at least three overarching virtues that were relevant for our case: first, the idea of entrepreneurial spirit and free enterprise system; second, the 'American dream'; third, the vision of providing solutions to public issues by developing superior technology: All three are substantive virtues that are deeply embedded in American society (Cullen, 2004; Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Snow & Benford, 1992). Together, they lead the media to develop virtuous images of Musk as a bridge builder to eventually interpret Musk and his organizations primarily as an entrepreneurial and economic entity that follows a business rationale in terms of making profits, rather than as a political actor or partisan engaging in contestations over the public interest. This also aligns well with Musk's frequent claim of being 'apolitical'. As a consequence, the media are more likely to realize that, to strive for success, Tesla needs a functioning economic and political system that allows Musk to conduct profitable business and thus to realize the 'American dream'. The American dream emphasizes the possibility of upward social mobility due to prosperity and business success based on hard work and superior business ideas (Cullen, 2004). By doing so, Musk positions himself and his organizations as outside or above the political system and the inherent political trench warfare. Likewise, Musk's portrayals of his organizations focus on advancing superior

technologies to address and solve fundamental problems of humanity shift him and his organization to a technocratic and thus politically neutral position that – at least partly – shields Tesla off from political contestations, as technology can principally serve any political ideology (though technology can itself become an ideology, see Habermas, 1971). He emphasizes respect for his opponent, acknowledges the principal legitimacy of the concerns of the Trump administration, and does not engage in direct face threats that might result in negative publicity for the opponent (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990). Rather he mobilized diplomatic claims and sought to avoid words or deeds that could appear overly aggressive or abusive, instead showing tolerance and respect for both ideological opposites. Both the leftwing and the rightwing media acknowledged and appreciated this, which seems counterintuitive since the media itself did not respect these norms when commenting on politicians and their plans or behavior.

Reduced alignment of image with cross-cutting vices. In some cases, however, when audiences leave their polarized ideological value systems, they may formulate negative images based on overarching value systems, i.e. they may see someone as vicious. Vices are the opposite of virtues (e.g. Hursthouse, 1999) such as ‘untruthfulness’ (Louden, 1984). Eventually, we discovered that the assurance strategy triggers a third robust mechanism that seeks to mitigate those drawbacks – the perception of vicious images of a deceiver, either as an opportunist in case of the left media or a Trojan horse in case of the right media – from the second mechanism. We found hints of evidence that on the left side vicious images decrease and moral legitimacy is maintained if the assurance strategy is applicable, while the right stays the same. This is, however, no surprise since the main target of the assurance strategy is assumingly the leftwing media. But, we suggest that there might be risks involved, if an organizational spokesperson targets both sides simultaneously because both audiences may perceive him as inauthentic and might reinforce the vicious images.

Moral Legitimacy in a Polarized Media Landscape. R-OIM enables an organization to maintain moral legitimacy in a polarized media landscape. Since those demands are highly heterogeneous in a polarized media landscape, it is rather unlikely that both sides attribute the organization high levels of legitimacy. Hence, the aim of an organization will rather be to navigate within a certain tolerance range to keep positive evaluations and reduce the negative ones as much as possible. As we showed in Figure 4, both polarized media audiences perceive the organization as morally legitimate. In our specific case, the leftwing media stayed throughout the whole timeframe positive in their perception of Musk and his organizations, while the rightwing media improved their perception over time.

Introducing our emergent theoretical framework

Having introduced the variables of our theoretical model, we now present our theoretical framework as illustrated in Figure 7.

INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

Overall, we propose that R-OIM consists of three sub-types that lead – taken together – to moral legitimacy in a polarized media landscape. As Suchman (1995) argues, moral legitimacy can be achieved if the organization and its activities are established as normatively acceptable based on an explicit moral discourse (see also Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer et al., 2013). As we detailed before, each subtype of R-OIM triggers a certain social mechanism that eventually contributes to the creation of moral legitimacy.

The first type of R-OIM, i.e. *the chameleon strategy*, is about associating an organization with diverse and frequently contradictory ideological positions over time that triggers the *ideological multivocality of image* mechanism that develops positively connoted images on both sides of the ideological spectrum. The reason is that the diverse ideological associations conveyed by the chameleon strategy contributed to an organizational image that appears multivocal with regards to ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do’ (Padgett & Ansell, 1993) and eventually leads to moral legitimacy on both sides of the ideological spectrum.

Following, the second type of R-OIM, i.e. the *diplomacy strategy*, compensates for the potential drawbacks of the former strategy. As we found, this strategy triggers a second type of robustness mechanism that prior research on robust action, with its predominant focus on multivocality (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2015; Padgett & Ansell, 1993; Padgett & Powell, 2012; Zuckerman et al., 2003), has not taken into consideration. Specifically, Musk's diplomacy strategy triggers a second robustness mechanisms by facilitating an *alignment of image with cross-cutting virtues* that are perceived favorably by both sides and hence leading to moral legitimacy.

Eventually, a third type of R-OIM, the *assurance strategy*, triggers the third mechanism – the reduced alignment of image with cross-cutting vices – and hereby compensate for the potential deceptive perceptions of the diplomacy strategy. Taken together, those three R-OIM subtypes trigger distinctive mechanisms that – in sum – lead to moral legitimacy of the organization in a polarized media landscape.

Complementarities between R-OIM strategies. As indicated earlier, we suggest that following a cascade principle, organizational spokespersons may strive to evoke the second type of robustness mechanism for compensatory purposes if they can only activate the first mechanism (i.e., multivocality) in limited ways. In our case, Musk's portrayal of his organizational conglomerate as multivocal, flexible, and multifaceted – and thus his 'chameleon strategy' was limited to the ideological axis of globalism vs nationalism. However, due to its attachment to environmentalism, the organizational image was neither multivocal nor flexible with regard to the environmentalism-anti-environmentalism axis – a finding which is generally in line with extant research which emphasizes limitations to the flexible use of 'cultural resources' by organizational spokespersons (e.g. Weber & Dacin, 2011, for a review).

Specifically, Musk appears to have used the second type of R-OIM (i.e. diplomacy strategy) also to compensate for the organization's lacking cultural flexibility on this second ideological axis – and his doing so proved relatively successful also with his ideological

enemies (i.e., the right-wing media with their typically not only nationalist but also anti-environmentalist rhetoric). Conceptually, this suggests that the focus of an organizational spokesperson on the second robustness mechanism (i.e., alignment of image with cross-cutting virtues) can shift an audience's attention away from aspects and elements of an organization's portrayal that may otherwise appear illegitimate. Hence, the diplomacy strategy is complementary to the chameleon strategy in that it compensates for the potential downsides of the perception of ideological misaligned images. The assurance strategy then mitigates the potential pitfalls from diplomacy strategy to avoid the development of a deceptive image of the organizational spokesperson (see also Figure 7) where the ideologists do not trust its sincerity and assume a betrayal on their core values and activate the third robustness mechanism (i.e. reduced alignment of image with cross-cutting vices) in order to reduce those potential drawbacks and get also the hardcore believers on board.

Alternative explanations

We showed empirical evidence that our inductively derived findings and identified mechanisms played a substantial role in explaining *how* and *why* an organizational spokesperson manages to maintain moral legitimacy among a polarized media landscape. However, those may not be the only explanations. Potential alternative explanations could be Tesla's impressive economic growth⁸ including the development from a new venture to a giant corporation that provides legitimacy based on past performance (e.g., Zimmermann & Zeitz, 2002) and eventually attracts more media coverage that in turn again grants legitimacy (Pollock & Rindova, 2003). Besides that, the innovative products or a positive spillover effect from Space X successes with NASA (e.g., Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) could be other explanations for the positive development of the media tenor. However, we verified the development of the media tenor for those occasions by re-calculating it with and without those events as illustrated in Figure 8.

⁸ Tesla's share price increased more than tenfold in our analysis time frame from 35,36 USD (2nd January 2013) to 332,80 USD (31st December 2018) leading from a market capitalization (current share price multiplied with number of shares outstanding) of 4.0bn USD in 2013 to 57.2bn USD in 2018 (Bloomberg, 2020).

<< INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE >>

Intriguingly, this graph shows a completely different picture than Figure 4 displaying the media tenor based on exclusively political events. We found that the inclusion of Tesla's business report such as the reporting of quarterly results and product related articles such as applauded product innovations displays a significantly worse tenor ranging between 0 and 0.14 at the leftwing side and between -1 and 0.02 on the rightwing side. Hence, in this case Tesla never gained a positive legitimacy evaluation by the leftwing side. The inclusion of Space X business reports to political events displays a similar tenor as the one including only political events related articles. Those avenues may provide fruitful ground for future research.

Generalizability of the theoretical framework

Our study suggests an array of analytical concepts for scholars to study organizational responses to heterogeneous, polarized audiences. The global political landscape is facing an emergence of more and more polarized societies such as the rise of right-wing parties across central Europe, the Brexit referendum in the UK, the Hong Kong 'pro-democracy and anti-government' protests in 2019 (Yeung, 2019), the 'Black Lives Matter' protest regarding racial discrimination around the world (e.g., Burch et al., 2020) or the debate about the trade-off between saving lives and saving the economy in course of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown decisions in 2020 (e.g., Bazelon, 2020) – to name only a few – causing a split, not only among media, but also among society as a whole. More and more organizational leaders and spokesperson raise their voice by taking a stand towards political issues (e.g., Hambrick & Wowak, 2019). Our proposed model could provide meaningful insights for those leaders on how to tackle those arising challenges by approach the polarized audiences through both ideological aligned communicational efforts and diplomatic approaches. While our findings and implications may be applicable to various contexts, they have to be carefully translated in light of the particularities of other settings. In particular, future studies could account for potential differences in other national media landscapes. For instance, the media landscape in the UK is

less polarized than that of the U.S., and even less so in Germany or Austria where also rightwing ideas are rather transported via social media than via traditional media. In other European countries with an increased level of populism such as Hungary or Turkey the picture is different again since the media is governmentally controlled in these states.

In addition, by building our case study on Tesla and Musk, our theorizing appears to be most applicable to other technology-oriented, founder-led organizations since both Tesla and Musk can be considered as a ‘celebrity firm’ and, respectively, a ‘celebrity CEO’ (Lovelace et al., 2018). Therefore, there may be different dynamics and evaluations at play when one looks at non-celebrity firms and CEOs which could be interesting to study such as fossil fuel companies. An organization with less celebrity appeal is most likely to not have a CEO that is as active on Twitter as Musk is and will have rather less media attention than in our case. Moreover, as prior research has emphasized, Twitter and other social media are a particular genre, providing different types of enablers and constraints to strategic legitimation attempts (e.g., Castello et al., 2016) as compared to other types of communication, such as press releases or meetings with journalists (e.g., Westphal & Deephouse, 2011) which organizational representatives may also rely on.

Finally, the expansion of investigation towards other types of constituencies-audiences could opening further avenues for future research. In our case, we put the focus on the media, as one of the most important infomediaries and legitimacy-granting audiences, and how the polarized U.S. media evaluated Musk’s stream of communicative actions. However, it would be interesting to see future research building on our findings and investigating other audience groups as well – for instance, investors, customers, employees or NGOs – either in the same or in a different context. Notably, we have some indications that, in Tesla’s case, the dynamics for employees are similar when comparing the ideologically more globally oriented Silicon Valley tech-employees in Tesla’s headquarter and the potentially more national oriented blue-collar workers in its Gigafactory in Nevada.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

In this study, we have theorized how and why what we referred to as R-OIM and its three specific sub-types (chameleon, diplomacy and assurance strategy) enables organizational spokespersons to maintain moral legitimacy for their organization in a polarized media landscape. Our theory has been derived inductively by conducting a longitudinal, qualitative case study of Musk and its organizational conglomerate by exploring how he responded to the increasingly polarized media landscape in the U.S. as key legitimacy-granting audience. Our study makes significant contributions to different streams of literature.

Contributions to research on OIM and organizational legitimacy

First, we enhance scholarly understanding of OIM by the robustness aspect by elaborating on how R-OIM enables an organizational spokesperson to generate favorable evaluations for their organization from a highly heterogeneous audience. In this way, our study goes beyond prior research which has typically focused on OIM in the context of rather homogeneous audiences (Elsbach, 1994). We show how an organizational spokesperson can through application of both alternating ideologically distinctive and multifaceted claims achieve robustness.

Likewise, our study also contributes to research on *organizational legitimacy* (Lamin & Zaheer, 2012; Scherer et al., 2013) by suggesting strategies through which organizations can manage moral legitimacy in the light of a highly polarized media audience. Moreover, while prior research has predominantly focused on OIM in response to one-time, legitimacy-threatening events such as instances of organizational wrongdoing or misconduct (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Elsbach, 1994; 2006; Zavyalova et al., 2012), our second contribution to OIM research is that we explore OIM in response to different type of ‘precipitating events’ (Ginzel et al., 1993) that pose a specific challenge for organizational spokespersons: i.e. political events (see also Hambrick & Wowak, 2019). We conceptualized a political event as a controversial incident in the public or political sphere that triggers an enormous interference with the public and political sphere. Spokespersons react to those events in particular when they are

controversial, when the prevailing ideology is disrupted or if those events force the corporation to take a stand. Political events are likely to happen frequently as political leaders in societies with a polarized media landscape tend to launch divisive claims and policies regularly. In turn, this necessitates a conception of OIM not so much as a one-shot game but rather as an ongoing activity, entailing the repeated, and frequently mundane ‘strategies’ of organizational spokespersons aimed at constructing and socially negotiating a legitimate image for their organization based on their patterns of communicative actions over time (see Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

Contributions to research on political ideologies

Next, we contribute to research on *political ideologies* in management and organization studies (e.g., Chin et al., 2013; Gupta & Briscoe, 2020; Hambrick & Wowak, 2019; Wang, Du & Marquis, 2019). First, our OIM perspective complements the political psychology perspective on the ideological leanings of companies and their leaders that has become the dominant choice in this body of scholarship (see e.g. Jost et al., 2008). Based on its underlying social approval motive, an OIM perspective portrays companies and leaders as much more dynamic, flexible and open in how they incorporate and deal with political ideologies than what is currently assumed in organization and management scholarship.

Second, and relatedly, we introduce to this literature the concept of ‘media polarization’ as an important focus for studying organizational environments with multiple and antagonistic ideological constellations where political ideologies as the dividing fault line play a dominant and significant role. Moreover, our theorizing around R-OIM also suggests avenues for how organizational leaders can create value alignment between their organizations and audiences from both sides of the ideological gulf that demarcates a polarized media landscape. In this way, our study further elaborates and goes beyond Hambrick and Wowak’s (2019) recent conceptual work which has focused on how organizational leaders can maintain and improve the alignment of their organizations among constituencies with the same ideological orientation

as the leaders and their organizations. We show empirically and theoretically that this innate model is not sufficient since an organizational spokesperson does not necessarily need to have an innate ideology, but rather can meander back and forth between different ideologies. In face of an ever-increasing polarization around the world, it is more purposeful to develop a theoretical model that accounts for this fact and acknowledges that the audience perceptions can be steered by an organizational spokesperson through their R-OIM strategies.

Contributions to research on robust action

Finally, we also enhance scholarship on *robust action* (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2015; Padgett & Ansell, 1993) by both investigating it within the polarized media context and being based on communicative actions. We uncovered three new types of robust action in that sense, which we refer to as ‘chameleon strategy’, ‘diplomacy strategy’ and ‘assurance strategy’. On the one hand, the chameleon strategy rests on an underlying multivocality mechanism that prior research has emphasized as well. On the other, however, it goes beyond the prevalent portrayals of robust action as resulting in a ‘sphinxlike’ (Padgett & Ansell, 1993: 1263) portrayal of an organization. Rather, we suggest that in times of a polarized media landscape it is not sufficient anymore to adhere to a static, sphinxlike image, but rather focus on a set of dynamic and relational strategies more in the vein of a chameleon which can change its ‘colors’ and associations more dynamically over time.

Perhaps more importantly, however, our emergent ‘diplomacy strategy’ emphasized a second type of robustness mechanism (alignment of image with cross-cutting virtues) that prior work on robust action has not yet taken up, despite its potential importance in securing beneficial outcomes for a focal actor in the face of heterogeneous and conflicting audience expectations. Specifically, creating congruence with cross-cutting virtues that, on a higher level, cut across audience divides can generate common ground among heterogeneous and even among potentially divided audience groups. Moreover, we have also shown and theorized how

actors can use this second type of robust action for compensatory purposes if their ability and motivation to develop a complex, multifaced, and sphinxlike impression is limited.

Additionally, we uncovered a third type: the assurance strategy with a corresponding third type of robustness mechanism (reduced alignment of image with cross-cutting vices) that again, can be used for compensatory purposes of the limitations of the aforementioned ones.

CONCLUSION

Polarized media landscape and the associated polarized societies are among the major challenges of our time. With this study, we introduce this socio-political challenge to organizational scholars in the belief that we, as scholarly community, can contribute to a better understanding and resolution. Specifically, and as extant research on these topics has predominantly been conducted by political scientists, we know hardly anything about how organizations and organizational elites can go about these challenges and what the implications are for the organizations themselves as well as for their audiences and the larger cultural environments in which they are embedded. Focusing our study on polarized media landscapes, we have explored how organizational spokespersons can help their organizations maintain moral legitimacy in such an environment. Much more organizational research is needed, however, as polarized media landscape is among the most veritable dangers and challenges of our times.

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APPENDIX

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TABLES

Table 1: Ideological Registers in the U.S. from 2013 to 2018

	‘America as Open-Door’ Ideological Register	‘America First’ Ideological Register
Political Orientation	<p><u>Globalism</u> e.g., Free-Trade agreements: negotiation of TPP et al. (BBC, 2017)</p> <p><u>Cosmopolitanism/ Anti-Populism</u> e.g., Initiation of Dreamer program to integrate children of Illegals (BBC, 2017)</p> <p><u>Social Democracy</u> e.g., Initiation of American Health Care Act (‘Obamacare’) (BBC, 2017)</p>	<p><u>Nationalism</u> e.g., ‘Buy American, Hire American’ EO (BBC, 2017); Rollback of Clean Power Plan, e.g. tariffs on imported solar panels (NYT, 8/12/2017); Withdrawal from TPP (BBC, 2017); Renegotiation NAFTA (Financial Times, 2017) et al.; Chinese tariffs</p> <p><u>Populism</u> e.g., Mexican border wall (BBC, 2017); Reversal of Dreamer programme (BBC, 2017); Travel ban for 6 Muslim-majority countries (McCarthy & Laughland, 2017); Environmental Protection Agency turns over to fossil fuel industry (NYT, 20/12/2017) et al.</p> <p><u>Economic Libertarianism</u> e.g., promised biggest tax cuts since Ronald Reagan era ; repeal American Health Care Act (‘Obamacare’) (BBC, 2017)</p>
Environmental Orientation	<p><u>Environmentalism</u> e.g., Clean Power Plan: subsidies for solar power and tax credit for EVs (BBC, 2017); Initiation of Paris Climate Agreement (WSJ, 19/06/2017)</p>	<p><u>Anti-Environmentalism</u> e.g., Cancellation of Paris Climate Agreement (WSJ, 19/06/2017); Proposal to repeal Clean Power Plan (NYT, 9/10/2017); Revision of Dakota pipeline project (WSJ, 25/01/2017); Description of climate change as hoax created by the Chinese to reduce the competitiveness of the American manufacturing sector (MacGregor-Bowles & Bowles, 2017); Appointment of climate change denier Scott Pruitt as new CEO of EPA turning the agency over to fossil fuel industry (NYT, 20/12/2017)</p>

Table 2: Data

	Data Sources	Matches	Timeframe
1. Political events	-Inductive Google search for newspaper articles about most striking policy changes from Obama to Trump, e.g. BBC, Financial Times -Identification of most striking public policies	50 (*)	2017
2. OIM claims	- Twitter Elon Musk (@elonmusk) - Tesla blog entries (www.tesla.com)	5,515 145	13.05.2013 – 31.12.2018 01.01.2013 – 31.12.2018
3. Media evaluation	Newspaper articles via Factiva <u>Total retrieved (included**)</u> <u>Leftwing Media:</u> The New York Times (NYT) <u>Rightwing Media:</u> The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) Breitbart News Network (Breitbart) (***) Fox News (Fox) <u>Search Words:</u> Trump <i>and</i> (Musk <i>or</i> Tesla); Obama <i>and</i> (Musk <i>or</i> Tesla)	<u>1,136 (194)</u> 654 (94) 337 (52) 27 (24) 118 (24)	01.01.2013 – 31.12.2018

(*) Our Google search yielded about 51,000,000 hits regarding ‘most striking public policy changes Obama to Trump’. However, our analysis reached saturation and thus no substantial additional insights based on our careful reading of approx. 50 articles that lead to our ‘political events’.

(**) The number represent both all articles retrieved and in brackets the actual included articles in the further analysis.

(***) Since Breitbart articles are not represented in Factiva, we retrieved those related to political events via Google search.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Timeline of political events

Figure 2: Data structure

Figure 3: Images claimed by Elon Musk

Out of the total number of tweets (5,515) and blog entries (145), we considered 100 statements as relevant due to their political relevance. We explored those in detail regarding the main ideologies conveyed and clustered them accordingly. Due to multivocality, one tweet or blog entry can contain several ideologies resulting in multiple counts.

Figure 4: Media tenor analysis

Media tenor analysis based on the overall tenor of the media within our timeframe by using the Janis-Fader coefficient of imbalance (Deephhouse, 2000; Janis & Fader, 1965):

$$Tenor = \frac{P^2 - PN}{V^2} \text{ if } P > N; 0 \text{ if } P = N, \text{ and } \frac{PN - N^2}{V^2} \text{ if } N > P$$

Hereby, P represents the number of positive articles about Musk/Tesla, N the negative articles and V the total volume of articles including the article with a neutral tenor. The tenor can range from -1 to 1, whereby -1 equals an 'all negative coverage' and 1 equals an 'all positive coverage' (Pollock & Rindova, 2003). Here fore, each media article was coded regarding the tenor: positive, neutral or negative.

Figure 5: Images formed by leftwing media

Figure 6: Images formed by rightwing media

Blue-tinted bars represent images aligned with left-wing ideologies (positive connotation left/ negative connotation right);

Red-tinted bars represent images aligned with right-wing ideologies (negative connotation left/ positive connotation left);

Yellow-tinted bars represent images independent from political ideologies (positive connotated both sides)

Grey-tinted bars represent images independent from political ideologies (negative connotated both sides)

Figure 7: Theoretical model

Figure 8: Alternative Media Tenor analysis (including Tesla business reports and products, excluding political events)

ONLINE APPENDIX: Table 3: Additional evidence for codes

Second-Order Themes and First-Order Categories	Representative Data
<i>Overarching Dimension: Robust Organizational Impression Management</i>	
1. Chameleon Strategy A: Climate saver (Environmental image)	A1: Real fraud going on is denial of climate science. As for ‘subsidies’, Tesla gets pennies on dollar vs coal. How about we both go to zero? (Musk, 10/10/2016) A2: Am departing presidential councils. Climate change is real. Leaving Paris is not good for America or the world (Musk, 01/06/2017a)
B: Global entrepreneur (Global image)	B1: No, but we will need to build a factory in Europe to serve long-term regional demand [...] (Musk, 3/04/2016) B2: A China factory for local demand cd (sic) be as soon as a year after. A factory in Europe wd (sic) happen for same reason (Musk, 25/10/2015)be as soon as a year after. A factory in Europe wd happen for same reason (Musk, 25/10/2015)
C: Social equalizer (Social democracy image)	C1: Thanks! Everything we make on the expensive cars goes into developing more affordable cars (Musk, 10/06/2017) C2: By the way, I am actually a socialist. Just not the kind that shifts resources from most productive to least productive, pretending to do good, while actually causing harm. True socialism seeks greatest good for all (Musk, 16/06/2018)
D: Libertarian (Libertarian image)	D1: I ‘got rich’ from...PayPal w zero govt anything, then put 100% of that into SpaceX, Tesla and SolarCity (Musk, 24/05/2013) D2: I really hate patents unless critical to company survival. Will publish Hyperloop as open source (Musk, 15/07/2013)
E: Domestic job creator (Nationalist image)	E1: Buffalo will continue to expand Tesla’s American manufacturing base and create thousands of new jobs in the coming years. [...] create over 1,400 jobs in Buffalo—including more than 500 manufacturing jobs (Tesla, 27/12/2016) E2: Bringing cell production to the U.S. allows us to create thousands of American jobs. [...] will hire several thousand local employees and at peak production, the Gigafactory will directly employ 6,500 people and indirectly create between 20,000 to 30,000 additional jobs in the surrounding regions (Tesla, 04/01/2017)
2. Diplomacy Strategy F: Entrepreneurial spirit	F1: I'd rather do what I believe is right, than do what appears right simply to avoid critics [...] really dont want to get into politics. I just want to help invent and develop technologies that improve lives (Musk, 4/02/2017a) F2: This is a very important action by China. Avoiding a trade war will benefit all countries (Musk, 10/04/2018)
G: Bridge builder	G1: The blanket entry ban on citizens from certain primarily Muslim countries is not the best way to address the country’s challenges [...] those people [...] don’t deserve to be rejected (Musk, 28/01/2017) G2: A lot of terrible things could happen in four years of extremism. Do you really want another war? That’s where extremism leads. (Musk, 05/02/2017b)
3. Assurance Strategy H: Affirmation	H1: At my request, the agenda for yesterday’s White House meeting went from not mentioning the travel ban to having it be first and foremost (Musk, 04/02/2017b) H2: I am not working for Trump, I am trying to provide advice that helps move things in a more positive direction (Musk, 05/02/2017a)
<i>Overarching Dimension: Moral legitimization mechanisms</i>	
4. Ideological multivocality of image	
Left-wing media: Images formed with positive ideological connotation I: Climate saver	I1: Mr. Musk, fighting back on Twitter, wrote of Mr. Murray, a Republican who doesn’t belive human activity is affecting the climate: Real fraud going on is denial of climate science. (NYT, 6/12/2016) I2: There are two others who haven't gotten a whiff of credit but should: Bob Iger, chief executive of Disney, and Elon Musk of Tesla, who left the councils long ago because they could not abide the president's decision to abandon the Paris climate accord. (NYT, 22/08/2017)
J: Global entrepreneur	J1: India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, on the other hand, was on a charm offensive during his own American tour. After a stop in New York City, he headed to Silicon Valley, where he visited Tesla and attended a dinner with tech chieftains like Satya Nadella of Microsoft and Sundar Pichai of Google. (NYT, 28/09/2015)

K: Anti-discrimination supporter	<p>K1: Even some of those working closely with the Trump administration were critical. Elon Musk, the chief executive of Tesla and SpaceX, who sits on two of Mr. Trump's advisory committees, wrote on Twitter that the ban was "not the best way to address the country's challenges." (NYT, 30/01/2017)</p> <p>K2: Some business leaders have parlayed their White House access into support for specific causes [...] Musk said, 'I've used the meetings I've had to argue in favor of immigration and climate change,' according to a Twitter post published by the organization. (NYT, 30/04/2017)</p>
<p>Right-wing media: Images formed with negative ideological connotation</p> <p>L: Environmental hypocrite</p>	<p>L1: Lately, though, he has cashed in on the Obama 'green energy' and government giveaway bonanza. [...] Thanks to the support of the taxpayers, Musk was able to roll an IPO out for Solar City earning him an estimated half a billion dollars. Not a bad investment for Musk. Poor investment for taxpayers.[...] Musk symbolizes the Obama entrepreneur — someone who relies on government to make their riches as opposed to the marketplace. [...] Welcome to Obama's Gilded Age. (Breitbart, 15/01/2013)</p> <p>L2: Why should middle-class taxpayers whose incomes are falling still pay to subsidize the purchase of cars that only the affluent can afford, and then partly as a gesture of their superior environmental virtue? [...] (WSJ, 24/05/2013)</p>
M: Domestic job destroyer	<p>M1: Now, China plans to dominate high-tech manufacturing as well, taking more and better paying jobs from our country. American companies seem eager to help them do it. Tesla [...] says its next facility built in China - not the US. (Fox, 09/05/2018)</p> <p>M2: In July, Musk announced that his car company, Tesla, would be building a car factory in China. Beyond the questionable decision of building cars outside the U.S. while the country is in the midst of a manufacturing resurgence, Breitbart News economics editor John Carney says that Musk may be driving directly into a 'China Trap.' (Breitbart, 17/08/2018)</p>
N: Elite embodiment	<p>N1: Well, millions of Americans scrambled this week to make the April 15 tax filing deadline. And most did it without the sweetheart deals reserved for the country's most well-connected. In California, billionaire businessman, Elon Musk, is lobbying the state assembly for a 10-year property tax break for his space exploration company [...] It's funny, Democrats, they get the idea that low tax rates encourage business activity only when they're talking about Hollywood, green energy. Elon Musk, he's into green energy, but I guess his space exploration company will get a break as well. You wish they would understand the benefits for everyone, not just their friends who write them big checks. (Fox, 19/04/2014)</p> <p>N2: [...] and remain niche products mostly for the wealthy. The average Tesla owner's household income is about \$320,000, according to Strategic Visions, an auto industry research firm. (Breitbart, 31/05/2015)</p>
O: Crony capitalist	<p>O1: Tesla is being called an Obama green success story. But the truth is, what few cars it has sold have been heavily subsidized. We don't know if that model is sustainable. (Fox, 25/05/2013)</p> <p>O2: Cynics [...] will point out that Tesla founder Elon Musk is no poster boy for the free market. Mr. Musk has proven himself a master at talking states into dedicating their taxpayers' money to help finance his dreams -- with subsidies for his manufacturing plant in Nevada and state rebates to purchase his cars [...] (WSJ, 25/10/2014)</p>
<p>Right-wing media: Images formed with positive ideological connotation</p> <p>P: Libertarian</p>	<p>P1: Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's SpaceX has proposed taking tourists around the moon in as soon as two years, touting such missions as the evolution of public-private partnerships favored by President Donald Trump's administration. (WSJ, 28/02/2017)</p> <p>P2: With Mr. Musk laying out a much faster schedule than the National Aeronautics and Space Administration -- while contending his vision is less expensive and could draw primarily on private financing -- a debate unlike any before is shaping up over the direction of U.S. space policy. (WSJ, 05/10/2017)</p>
Q: Domestic job creator	<p>Q1: So, what, Tim. So, what. It's a shadow of the combustion engine. Electric cars damage OPEC, Putin. It will save Americans trillions if they can become available. Why quibble. Why quibble. (Fox, 01/04/2014)</p> <p>Q2: [...] U.S. employment and manufacturing, Musk's companies are near or at the top as the fastest growing players. From a base of just 899 Tesla employees in 2010, Tesla now has roughly 25,000 U.S. workers; [...] SpaceX has 4,000 U.S. employees; [...] Gigafactory expects to hire 6,500 American workers when completed; and [...] Hyperloop One has 200 employees. (Breitbart, 29/01/2017)</p>
5. Alignment of image with cross-cutting virtues	
Left-wing media: Images formed with positive (non-ideological) connotation	<p>R1: Musk is the one person [...] more responsible than anyone for generating a vision for the re-emergence of manufacturing in the US en masse. (NYT, 6/12/2016)</p>

R: Spirit of enterprise	R2: Nearly 35,000 jobs created 6,500 expected to be employed by 2020 at the Tesla Gigafactory, a 5.5-million-square-foot battery factory under construction. After the factory's construction, 95 percent of Tesla parts will be made in the United States (NYT, 7/12/2016)
S: Bridge builder: Ideological ambassador	S1: budding bromance between Trump and Musk'; 'both like to think big', i.e. Trump likes SpaceX project; 'Trump and Tesla can not only coexist, but even thrive together' (NYT, 27/01/2017) S2: One of the hardest things to accept for all of [...] is the fact that some things are true even if Donald Trump believes them! And one of those things is that we have a real trade problem with China. [...] Tesla founder Elon Musk tweeted it right when he said that "no US auto company is allowed to own even 50% of their own factory in China, but there are five 100% China-owned EV auto companies in the US." [...] ' (NYT, 14/03/2018)
Right-wing media: Images formed with positive (non-ideological) connotation T: Spirit of enterprise	T1: This fellow (Musk) [...] has the DNA of Silicon Valley. He's the next generation, if you will, Steve Jobs. [...] He's doing something right. Well, keep in mind that he (Musk) didn't really need the billion and change loan from the government. He did pay that back. [...] his first innovative breakthrough was PayPal. [...] He's part of the folks that really disrupted the banking industry. (Fox, 19/09/2013) T2: Which are the most patriotic U.S. car makers? By Donald Trump's apparent measure, Tesla Motors, BMW and, yes, Ford Motor are the improbable medalists. [...] Meanwhile, the company with the most extensive U.S. manufacturing base relative to sales is electric-vehicle specialist Tesla, which makes all its cars in the U.S. and exports almost half of them. (WSJ, 11/01/2017)
U: Bridge builder: Ally of Trump	U1: The Trump transition team confirmed that Musk, who previously said Donald Trump 'was not the right guy' for the presidency, [...] will join the Trump administration to advise on economic issues. The appointments are the first signs that the Trump administration is mending ties with Silicon Valley, who apart from PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, overwhelmingly opposed his candidacy for the presidency. (Breitbart, 14/12/2016) U2: Mr. Musk's role as a Trump adviser is unusual in Silicon Valley, but his effort to balance criticism and constructive engagement reflects the broader quandary Silicon Valley faces as it tries to reconcile industry opposition to many of the new president's positions with the reality of doing business under a Trump administration.[...] Mr. Musk has performed his balancing act partly in public, via Twitter . He wrote there late Saturday that the immigration order is 'not the best way to address the country's challenges.' On Sunday afternoon, he promised to bring up the policy during a meeting of the president's Strategic and Policy Forum, on which he serves. (WSJ, 01/02/2017)
6. (Reduced) alignment of image with cross-cutting vices	
Left-wing media: Images formed with negative (non-ideological) connotation V: Deceiver: Opportunist	V1: By all accounts, people close to Mr. Musk say he was upset about Mr. Trump's order, but offered a somewhat tepid rebuke on Twitter: "The blanket entry ban on citizens from certain primarily Muslim countries is not the best way to address the country's challenges." He quickly found himself as the target of criticism from fans who wanted him to go further. "Expected a much more forceful condemnation from someone like Elon," one Twitter user wrote. (NYT, 30/01/2017) V2: In a handful cases, people have said they are canceling new Teslas because they view him as working for the president. Where Musk however replied on Twitter: 'Activists should be pushing for more moderates to advise President, not fewer,' Mr. Musk responded on Twitter. 'How could having only extremists advise him possibly be good?' [...] The answer did not satisfy everyone. As one critic replied to Mr. Musk on Twitter: "You are not advising Trump, you are giving him cover and validating his nonsense. You can do more good by taking a stand. Please." (NYT, 13/02/2017)
Right-wing media: Images formed with negative (non-ideological) connotation W: Deceiver: Trojan horse	W1: Musk, who once said Trump was 'not the right guy' to be president of the United States, quickly triangulated after Trump's election triumph to having himself named to the new president's business advisory team.(...)other Silicon Valley CEOs may find it in their business interest to join Musk in flouting the Silicon Valley political orthodoxy. (Breitbart, 26/01/2017) W2: Elon Musk says [...] 'I'm not even doing business with Trump anymore', and he was on Trump's..But still take Trump's money, right?..It's our money. (Fox, 01/06/2017)

APPENDIX

Analyzing media polarization based on diametrically opposed ideological registers

We sought to capture and operationalize media polarization by identifying the prevailing *political ideologies* in the U.S. during the Obama and Trump presidency as mirror of the ideological orientation of the U.S. media. An inductive Google search has been conducted to identify the most striking policy changes during both presidencies as illustrated in Table 2. Starting with a search for ‘Trump’ AND ‘policy changes’ we identified newspaper articles summing up the biggest political changes from outlets such as *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* or *The Financial Times*. By cross-checking with the White House Executive Order (EO) database, the content of each policy change has been verified, leading to the ‘most striking’ public policies followed by their classification with the relating ideologies. For instance, the ‘Buy American, Hire American’ EO is an indication for a ‘nationalist’ ideology since it emphasizes the ‘perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance’ (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989: 271). We clustered those ideologies according to two different and partly oppositional ideological ‘registers’ regarding their political and environmental orientation (see also Weber, 2005; Weber et al., 2008; Weber & Dacin, 2011). This analysis thus suggests that the two recent U.S. presidencies are characterized by ideological registers that are diametrically opposed to each other thus creating the foundation for the media polarization as they are speaking tube for society that has democratically elected the president.

‘America as Open-Door’ Ideological Register of the Obama Presidency. The Obama presidency from 2009 to 2016 is characterized as an ‘*America as Open Door*’ (see e.g., van Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 2017: 357) ideological register manifest in policies of the Obama administration that were both based on *globalism, cosmopolitanism, social democracy* and *environmentalism* claims (see, e.g., Kintisch, 2011; Lasher & Sixta Rinehart, 2016; Patman & Southgate, 2016; Rona-Tas, 2016: 845; van Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 2017; Vezirgiannidou,

2013). *Globalism* emphasizes an open and free global market (Rona-Tas, 2016: 845; van Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 2017), demonstrated by Obama for instance through the initiation of free trade agreements to foster international trade such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (hereinafter: TPP) (e.g., BBC, 2017) and the appreciation of globalization as such (Patman & Southgate, 2016). Closely linked is also cosmopolitanism as antidote for populism, where Obama for instance initiated the ‘Dreamer program’ to integrate children from illegal immigrants (BBC, 2017). *Social democracy* was displayed in the initiation of American Health Care Act (‘Obamacare’) aiming to provide healthcare services to all American people (BBC, 2017). *Environmentalism* emphasizes a sustainable ecological environment and refers to ‘the belief in the political importance of the natural environment and is often used to denote a reformism approach to nature that reflects human needs and concerns’ (Heywood, 2007: 261). Since the combat against climate change was regarded as topic of imminent global importance, it was emphasized that global cooperation would be needed to tackle this issue as it cannot be achieved by a single nation. For instance, the Obama administration led global efforts to finalize the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 to reduce carbon emissions and limit global warming (WSJ, 19/06/2017).

‘America First’ Ideological Register of the Trump Presidency. In contrast, Trump’s administration sought to challenge, attack and undermine the previously established ideological register and to replace it with a new, oppositional one. Hereby, he created or tapped into values, needs, and emotions in sections of those parts of society that were previously not or not sufficiently met by the ruling political elites (Zito & Todd, 2018). ‘America First’ portrayed by mobilizing *nationalist, populist and economic libertarianism* claims within the political orientation (see e.g., Crouch, 2017; de Jonquieres, 2017; de Matas, 2017; Irwin, 2017; McGuire, 2017; Rona-Tas, 2016) and *anti-environmentalism* claims hereby making those political ideologies eventually socially acceptable. *Nationalism* refers to the ‘perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance’ (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989: 271)

including both rational element such as self-determination, but also irrational ones including hatred and ancient fears (Heywood, 2007). Nationalist claims are often articulated in conjunction with other discursive strategies such as *populism* (Bonikowski, 2016), which, in a nutshell, contains the components that ‘the good people’ are endangered by ‘the evil others’ (Riedel, 2017), such as seen in xenophobic propaganda against, for instance, refugees produced by right-wing politicians across the globe (e.g., Fund for Peace, 2017). Trump demonstrated these ideological claims for instance through policies such as his catchphrases ‘Buy American, Hire American’ (e.g., BBC, 2017; Diamond, 2017) or a travel ban that forbids citizens of Muslim-majority countries to enter the U.S. (McCarthy & Laughland, 2017). Within the vein of *economic libertarianism* he promised the biggest tax cuts since Ronald Reagan era and repealed the American Health Care Act (‘Obamacare’) (BBC, 2017). *Anti-environmentalism* comprises both a lack of regulation and also a lack of regard for the environment which is either explicitly stated or inherent in an economic activity favoring an approach which would have a negative impact on the environment (Macgregor-Bowles & Bowles, 2017). This is accompanied by the initiation of the rollback of formerly implemented environmental protection policies (McKee, Greer & Stuckler, 2017) such as the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement in June 2017 to support traditional, national fossil energy sectors such as crude oil or coal mining (WSJ, 19/06/2017). Hereby, he subordinates environmentalism in favor of nationalism where he also claimed that climate change is a hoax created by the Chinese to reduce the competitiveness of the American manufacturing sector (MacGregor-Bowles & Bowles, 2017), and he nominated a climate change denier, Scott Pruitt, CEO of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Hereby, he initiated a total turnaround of Obama’s environmental fairway.

Incompatibilities and Conflict between Ideological Registers. The above analysis suggests that considerable incompatibilities and conflict between Trump’s and Obama’s ideological registers exist, particularly in the following ways: Firstly, Trump’s *populist*

nationalism has fundamentally contradicted *globalism* and *cosmopolitanism* ideologies as established under the Obama administration and before (see e.g., de Jonquieres, 2017; De Matas, 2017). The latter's emphasis on the free market is incompatible with the former's anti-globalization rhetoric and policies that reject those free markets and favor isolated markets for the benefit of the protection of national industries (Rona-Tas, 2016: 845). Likewise, Trump's *anti-environmentalism* and Obama's *environmentalism* are contradictory and mutually exclusive and hence leading to an obvious ideological conflict: While the latter criticizes the currently unsustainable practices, emphasizes the importance of and advocating for the preservation and improvement of the natural environment as a political priority (Freedon et al., 2013), the former deemphasizes environmental regulation and displays a lack of regard for the environment (Macgregor-Bowles & Bowles, 2017). Relatedly, Trump's *populist nationalism* also contradicts Obama's *environmentalism* (see, e.g., McGuire, 2017). Environmentally-friendly policies such as the Paris Climate Accord which aims to reduce carbon emissions can negatively affect domestic fossil fuel industries, resulting in job losses. Right-wing populists like Trump therefore favor a lack of regard for the environment in favor of national jobs.