Reimagining Journalism
to Help Save Democracy
and Fight Trumpism

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Abstract
This manifesto examines the discourse used by journalists in their coverage leading up to and following Donald Trump’s ascendency to the presidency in the United States. To examine this topic, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of a sample of English language newspaper articles, collected primarily via Lexis-Nexis and Media Cloud between June 2015 and October 2017. My corpus included articles from leading national newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post and metajournalistic discourse from the Columbia Journalism Review. I show how journalists discursively rely on historical analogies to make sense of an unprecedented political phenomenon known as Donald Trump and Trumpism, and how, by looking to the past, journalists seek to bolster their cultural authority at a time when trust in the media is at record lows.

Keywords
Journalism, Trump, Watergate, McCarthyism, collective memory, Goldwater
Introduction

Democratic society is in peril in the United States, and journalists are helping to facilitate its demise. Frequently hailed as the arbiters of truth and the Fourth Estate, journalists are failing to uphold their normative contract as responsible informers of public opinion. This is clearly shown in numerous ways, but most recently through their abysmal political reporting during the U.S. Presidential Campaign in 2016.

Following Donald Trump’s surprise electoral victory in November 2016, journalists and media organizations, pundits, and pollsters have been scratching their heads trying to figure out how they got the anticipated electoral result so spectacularly wrong. Since then, journalists have sought to report on an unpredictable president in an increasingly fractured, foggy, and “fake news” infused news landscape filled with frenetic tweets by the president. They have also sought to defend themselves and their importance as meaning-makers following an election they failed to predict and accusations that they facilitated Trump’s rise as well as Trumpism: a unique political phenomenon comprised of an attachment to celebrity, nativism, the outsider, and populism, which extends beyond Trump.1,2

The Commercial Imperative of Spectacle

Journalism facilitated the rise of Trumpism in part because commercial imperatives of media organizations reward coverage of spectacle.3 The more spectacular and unusual, the more attention-grabbing it is, which in turn, results in higher advertising dollars and revenue for media organizations. Trump is the king of spectacle – purposefully saying outlandish and culturally insensitive comments to cement his visibility in the media and play to his image as an outsider to retain support from his base. Media organizations have been more than willing to oblige such antics and thus have helped to cement Trump’s dominant place in the news.

Indeed, Trump received nearly double the amount of nightly broadcast network news coverage than his democratic opponent Hillary Clinton4 and he received between two to three billion dollars of free media coverage throughout his campaign.5 Yet, Trump was not the only person who benefited from such coverage. Cable-news organizations scooped up an unprecedented amount of money to the
tune of 2.5 billion dollars during the election cycle and the networks were willingly complicit in the money-making scheme. CBS president, Leslie Moonves, infamously remarked during the election that even though Trump might not be good for America, he has been “damn good for CBS.” Trump squarely met journalists’ story needs like no other presidential candidate in recent history. A Harvard report from the Shorenstein Center said that the “car wreck” of the 2016 election “had many drivers, but [journalists’] fingerprints were all over the wheel.” Some journalists warned that the media’s opportunistic approach to covering Trump, “betrayed an inability to recognize that Trump is not a standard candidate but rather the kind of polarizing, knowledge-proof opportunist whom the Founders worried might one day come to power in their fledgling nation.”

The symbiotic relationship between polarizing political figures and the media companies that report on their behavior has deeply entrenched commercialized imperatives and logics. As a result, the watchdog function of the American news media is marginalized while sensational coverage is prioritized, ultimately contributing to an unfit individual obtaining the American presidency.

### Financial Crises, Local News Deserts, and Diversity Gaps

The incestuous relationship between politicians and the media is not the only factor threatening the relationship of journalism and democracy and giving rise to Trumpism. Journalism continues to face significant financial difficulties, stemming in part from the inability of news corporations to obtain as much money from digital advertising as they used to and social media companies’ abilities to scoop up most of the profit. Although some legacy media organizations like The New York Times and The Washington Post have experienced a “Trump bump” within the last year, such an increase in subscriptions won’t save journalism.

In addition to the financial challenges hobbling the news industry, the body politic of journalism has also shifted from rough-and-tumble journalists who went to mostly non-elite colleges to journalists with elite pedigrees and a penchant for power, putting them at odds with the celebrated journalistic maxim of “speaking truth to power.” U.S. newsrooms are primarily white and male, eliding diverse perspectives that would arise with enhanced socio-economic, racial, and gender diversity in the newsroom. Adding to the re-entrenchment of hegemonic values vis-à-vis white male
dominance is the abyss of local news which has dried up across the United States leaving many communities without trusted information about public issues of import. These systemic issues contributed to the media’s failure to understand and explain Trump’s supporters and led many journalists to instead ridicule and dismiss them. Journalists’ failure to maintain a pulse on America’s voters and the media’s inability to forecast a Trump election is a crucial test for the journalistic field arising at a critical moment in our nation’s fledgling democracy. As the editor of the Columbia Journalism Review put it: “In terms of bellwether moments, this is our anti-Watergate.”

When Threatened, Journalists Create Boundaries and Turn to the Past to Reassert Their Cultural Authority

In response to challenges and threats to journalism from insiders or outsiders, journalists push back via discourse. They set boundaries about who is a journalist and what constitutes journalism. Such metajournalistic discourse aims to determine boundaries of acceptable behavior and to control what constitutes journalistic activity. In their discourse, the media also seek to reiterate their authority by turning to past events to reconstruct and maintain collective memory, or “society’s retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting.” Journalists invoke the past “to delimit an era, as a yardstick, for analogies, and for the shorthand explanations or lessons it can provide.” Journalists’ decisions to connect to past events provides a way for them to reassert their cultural authority and to strengthen their position as members of interpretive communities at a time when trust in media is at historic lows.

Boundary-Making and Discursive Distancing Through Linguistic Choices

Yet boundary making via linguistic choices, adherence to traditional journalistic norms, and reliance on historical memory can discursively distance journalists from the ability to clearly see the present and pivot when necessary. By staying steeped in the past, journalists also flatten potential futures.
Misunderstanding Trumpism Through Generic Classifications

Journalists tended to treat potential Trump voters in rather narrow and generic terms during the election campaign. By grouping supporters of Trump into the category of the white, working-class, journalists misrepresented Trump’s wide appeal and helped obscure his eventual victory.\textsuperscript{19,20} By utilizing an inaccurate genericization, journalists discursively distanced themselves and their imagined readers from the cognitive conflict of being part of a society that facilitated Trump’s rise to power. In so doing, they elided their responsibility as journalists to present a comprehensive and accurate narrative of a complex socio-political phenomenon and thus facilitated its rise.

Reliance on Traditional Norms Obscures Journalistic Responsibility

Journalists also discursively distanced themselves from the idea that they may have facilitated Trump’s rise through rhetorical strategies of objectivity and balance. Balance, or better known critically as false balance or false equivalence, is essentially “what happens when you are led to believe that two things should be given equal weight in your considerations as you come to any given decision, while those two things are not in any way actually equivalent.”\textsuperscript{21}

During the presidential campaign, reporters allowed candidates to speak for themselves without any added judgment or analysis and regardless of the facticity of the information.\textsuperscript{22} Journalists cited polls that showed Trump and Clinton were considered untrustworthy by citizens, but did not provide analysis about “the sources and consequences of the public distrust for each candidate,” thereby treating them equally according to journalistic standards but doing a disservice democratically by leaving the public ignorant and misinformed.\textsuperscript{23} Such engagement with journalistic norms is “an abdication of news judgment and a disservice to readers.”\textsuperscript{24}

Yet, when called out on these issues, the (now former) public editor of the \textit{New York Times}, Liz Spayd, argued that journalists, and \textit{The New York Times} in particular, covered the campaign in a fair and journalistically-responsible way. Said Spayd, “The problem with false balance doctrine is that it masquerades as rational thinking. What
the critics really want is for journalists to apply their own moral and ideological judgments to the candidates.” \(^{25}\) Yet, such thinking is problematic when covering an outlier like Trump whose behavior is unprecedented in U.S. presidential history. Journalist Jack Shafer called on Spayd to “reject the chimera of journalistic balance altogether, and enjoin reporters to worry less about the nitpicking of partisans and more about whether they’re aggressively chasing good stories.” \(^{26}\)

**Connecting to the Past to Make Meaning in the Present**

While many journalists desperately cling to traditional norms of journalism in the hope that doing so will maintain their authority and credibility in the public eye, journalists also steadfastly stick to the past in the hope of bringing meaning to the present. In their coverage of Trump and Trumpism, journalists consistently invoked historical analogies of Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate to bring meaning to an unprecedented and mercurial presidential candidate, a surprising and historic presidential election, and a seemingly endless deluge of controversial and norm-breaking behavior by Trump during the first 10 months of his presidency.

**Norm Deviation and Mental Instability vis a vis Goldwater**

Journalists invoked the former conservative Republican, Barry Goldwater, to describe how Trump’s campaign and brand of Trumpism deviated from the Republican norm. \(^{27}\) By connecting Goldwater’s resurgent conservatism campaign which ultimately failed, to Trump’s distinctively anti-Republican campaign, journalists were suggesting that Trump and Trumpism would ultimately fail because it deviated too spectacularly from the status quo. When Trump was able to obtain the nomination, and was not completely repudiated by the Republican establishment à la Goldwater, journalists turned to concerns about Trump’s lack of mental fitness for office with the expectation that such concerns would ultimately have a similar effect as they did on Goldwater, and lead the public to consider him unfit for office. Yet, Trump continued to surprise journalists, Republicans, and members of the public by winning the nomination and ultimately becoming president of the United States.
Trumpism as Twenty-First Century McCarthyism

Following Trump’s presidential win, journalists leveraged the historical analogy of McCarthyism, or the persecution of innocent, often elite individuals, on spuriously ideological grounds (popularized by the late Senator Joseph McCarthy), to warn against the dangers of Trumpism and to call out McCarthy and Trump’s symbiotic relationship with the press corps as well as the “objective” journalism that fueled the leaders’ demagogic tendencies. In other words, journalists invoked the ghost of Joseph McCarthy to warn their fellow journalists and the public that history was about to repeat itself unless Trump’s rise was examined critically, analytically, and rigorously.

Upholding Cultural Authority by Holding onto Watergate

Journalistic references to Watergate dramatically increased the longer Trump spent time in office. Journalists invoked Watergate to remind each other and the public that they’ve been in this position before and have an important role to play in ensuring Trump’s presidency is evaluated and investigated by hard-hitting reporting. Through their use of local and durational modes of interpretation they were able to reassert their cultural authority by arguing that President Trump’s time in office would eventually end like Nixon’s—an end which journalists helped to facilitate through their investigative and persistent reporting on the Watergate scandal.

As hostility from Trump increased, journalists invoked the myth of Watergate to inspire the next generation of journalists. The day after Donald Trump was elected president, Columbia University journalism professor Ari Goldman reminded his stunned journalism students that America had been here before with the election of Nixon. Like Trump, Goldman said, Nixon “was an ardent foe of press freedom. He wiretapped journalists’ phones, unleashed the Internal Revenue Service on them, and featured them prominently on his ‘enemies list.’” Goldman told his students that, “Nixon won by a landslide that night…but most important…He was forced to resign less than two years later because of two young and smart reporters at The Washington Post.” By leveraging Watergate in this way, Goldman reiterated the myth of journalism in Watergate, or the belief that journalists alone brought down the former president and the same could occur with Trump.
Seeking Calm in Chaos

Utilizing historical analogies can be reassuring to the public because it suggests an ending that is predictable. Such reassurance may reduce visceral discomfort of the citizenry, but can also be problematic for the public imaginary because it suggests a knowable ending. Analogies which view the past as static can prevent individuals from fully anticipating and imagining a future that is different than the past. As a result, individuals may become complacent because they are comforted by the belief that the patterns of the past will occur in the present if they just wait long enough for them to appear. Such thinking is dangerous because it can result in a failure to imagine.

The ferocious cacphony that Trump constructs and wields through his tweets and Trumpisms serves to inculcate fear and anxiety and squash space for imagination and an ability to know oneself in temporal reality. In the media’s race to keep up, they fall back on their ingrained tendency to search for historical analogies to current events. Rather than “looking for the future in the misty past…we should be looking for it in the inchoate patterns of the present.”

A 10-Step Plan to Reimagine Journalism to Save Democracy

If journalists are going to have even a slim shot of upholding their watchdog role amidst an unprecedented hostile environment in the United States, where physical and verbal attacks are occurring against journalists with increasing frequency by Trump and his cronies, as well as a broader war waged against the notion of truth, journalists and supporters of journalism need to take the next 10 steps.

1. Urgently create a new business model that does not rely on advertising to be successful. Separating commercial imperatives from the selling of salacious spectacle will serve to enhance the public’s trust in media because journalistic coverage will inform the public about critical and urgent issues necessary for robust public debate.
2. Increase diversity in the newsroom through creative partnerships with foundations, which could sponsor fellowships to introduce and support journalists from different socio-economic, gender, racial, geographic, and political backgrounds.

3. Foster greater collaboration between “liberal” and “right” legacy media (e.g. The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal) by facilitating an exchange between opinion columnists on a monthly basis. Doing so would increase diversity of thought and ideological perspectives for readers, while still maintaining high standards of quality journalism.

4. Reassess traditional journalistic norms of objectivity and balance in light of their contribution to the rise of the destructive phenomenon of Trumpism. Such a reassessment could occur through the creation of a working group within the auspices of the Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ) and could inform SPJ’s Code of Ethics.

5. Motivate and encourage technology companies and platforms (e.g. Facebook, Google, etc.) to support local journalism efforts by appealing to the concepts of human rights in business and public responsibility.

6. Foster the open-source creation of technology tools that journalists and their sources can use for communication so they don’t have to rely on proprietary software from companies incorporated in the United States, which are subjected to national security letters (NSLs) accompanied by gag orders.

7. Open more bureaus in rural places throughout the United States to increase diversity of coverage and thought and facilitate opportunities for people who have been ignored to have their voices heard. Simultaneously encourage journalists to reflect critically on how they represent and give voice to diverse populations in order to avoid obscuring the environment and the people in it.

8. Continue to support fact-checking on platforms to decrease the dissemination and believability of fake news.

9. Partner with non-profit organizations like Free Press to take the net neutrality fight, which the FCC recently voted to squash, to Congress and the courts. By acting to retain a free and open internet, news organizations are helping to ensure access to
information and freedom of expression to all individuals; not just those who can afford it.

10. Keep historical context in news articles, but work to avoid an overreliance on historical analogies, which can stifle creativity and prevent imagination of potential futures.

**Toward New Imagination in Journalism**

While these actions are crucial to reimagine journalism to save democracy, it is essential that the media change their journalism into “an agent of prospective memory” to remind readers and the broader public what needs to be done. Media could move beyond their agenda-setting function to provide “reminders of collective commitments, promises, and intentions” and provide a “to-do list” of what could be done. Tying prospective memory to imagination could be an important way for journalists to move beyond limited historical analogies to more accurately and creatively encapsulate the chaotic and embryonic patterns of the present and to provide space for change amidst the confusing and deliberate cacophony of Trumpism(s). Doing so could pave a way for journalists to give “presence and visibility to issues and people when information, images, or visible developments are not available” and thus more accurately and comprehensively articulate our current temporal reality and allow us to imagine a different future.

**Notes**


9 Ibid.


23 Ibid.


31 Ibid.


35 Ibid.

36 Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt. (2011). ‘Journalism As An Agent of Prospective Memory’. In M. Neiger, 0. Meyers and E. Zandberg (eds.), On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age (pp. 213-224). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

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