The Watchdogs of Democracy:

A study on journalism ethics and their application to presidential campaign coverage

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The media as we know it

How many times in the last year has “fake news” been cried? Which news headlines boast the larger cringe factor: Fox or CNN? In the current environment of disinformation, mass internet use, social media takeovers, and an increasingly polarized society, journalism finds itself in an identity crisis. As journalists follow candidates across the country or over a Zoom screen, ethical standards remain the same and must translate to these changes of the 21st century. Trump’s 2016 victory shook journalists; they had somehow become so removed from American voters that they missed one of the biggest political stories of modern history. Days after the results came through, Rutenberg (2016) wrote for the *New York Times*, “It was clear that something was fundamentally broken in journalism, which has been unable to keep up with the anti-establishment mood that is turning the world upside down.” Trump’s celebrity status confused typical media coverage (Boydstun & Lawrence, 2020) not because celebrities are outside the norm but because journalism has moved into a field in which it determines who is presidential rather than reporting facts, statements and actions. With the rise of social media use among not only journalists (Fincham, 2019; Lawrence et al., 2014) but also as a branch of political communications for the campaign and forthcoming presidency (McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2020), the types of 2016 election coverage and its failures were in some ways inevitable. The industry is salvageable, though, with a proper understanding of what historical factors have contributed to the state of journalism, an analysis of the ethical codes for journalists, and a study of the interactions between reporters and candidates in a changing communications landscape.

Aggressive journalism and polarization

In the wake of Watergate, news writers began to cover the presidency more critically, and this theme of "hostile media" has continued to rise ever since (Clayman et al., 2010). Further research has indicated that as polarization rises in the country, viewers tend to watch and read the news with an increased tendency to perceive attacks against their personal opinions and stances (Clayman et al., 2010). During his campaign and presidency, Trump capitalized on this habit by openly supporting some news outlets while lambasting others for "fake news," spurring the polarization trend. The media industry capitalized on this as well, but with a more subtle bias. According to a 2016 analysis by Budak, Goel, and Rao, ideological bias reared its head during news coverage not by openly supporting or defaming a candidate but by "disproportionately criticizing one side, a convention that further moderates overall differences" (250). This practice is called issue filtering because it selectively decides which news to give air time or copy space, and usually the most scandalous or negative stories win the fight for attention. The analysis posits that by trying to avoid the appearance of partisanship, publishers and producers favor mass criticism, but this approach allows political bias to enter news coverage under the guise of comprehensive coverage. "For both Democrats and Republicans, we find that news outlets are almost universally critical rather than supportive, a practice some have called 'gotcha journalism'... Regardless of the rationale, predominantly critical coverage likely masks relevant facts and may hinder readers from developing informed opinions" (Budak et al., 2016, 268). These changes have turned political journalism into an even larger minefield of ethical and practical concerns.

Budak, Goel, and Rao's findings are further confirmed by recent studies of news consumers in the U.S. In 2019, Gallup concluded Fox News and CNN were tied in terms of ratio

of adults trusting and distrusting their content. A 2020 Pew survey expanded on this trend by showing a drastic difference between the types of news consumers trust correlated to their political beliefs (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). Tracking the past five years, researchers described the current journalism landscape as "two nearly inverse media environments." For example, 65% of Republicans cited Fox News as their most trusted source while the majority of Democrats listed it as the least reliable outlet. The opposite was true for CNN with 67% of Democrats affirming its quality and 58% of Republicans putting it at the top of their list of most untrustworthy sources. Notably, though, none of the thirty news outlets listed earned more than 50% trust from all U.S. adults, indicating that overall reliance on the media is also declining while ideological differences become more prevalent (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

Media consumption is another constantly-changing landscape, with social media taking place as the rising star in the most recent changes to news. While analyses of how the pandemic has altered social media are still in process, Pew Research Center's Journalism Project has already started highlighting issues between news producers and consumers. A December 2020 study asked U.S. adults about their news habits, and although most Americans say keeping in touch with current events is an essential part of being a good citizen, most overestimated the frequency with which they read the news. Only 9% said they were confident in recognizing when an organization conducted its own reporting, and within that group, 23% incorrectly picked news organizations that did not actually do their own reporting (Barthel, Mitchell, Asare-Marfo, Kennedy, & Worden, 2020). Their findings indicate that not only do adults mistrust the news, but they also have significant trouble analyzing when something is news and how the process works. Many seem to recognize the social desirability of being "in the know," but few are actually well-read when it comes to news outlets. Social media adds a further dimension to this paradox.

Another study by Pew asked where adults find news, and a rising majority reports that they find news on social media through reposts, private messages, or original posts (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Facebook constituted 36% of this news traffic, and Twitter only accounted for 15%; however, the majority of Twitter users said they logged regularly to get the news while Facebook users logged in for other reasons. Despite this new avenue for media consumption, 47% of Americans say that even the prevalence of news articles and videos on social media does not make a difference in their overall understanding of current events (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

Journalists are not immune to social media's complications, polarization, or issue framing and selection bias. In any analysis of political coverage, it is useful to know how campaigns are set up and what reporters face on the campaign trail. American politics present unique processes compared to other countries, as studied by Esser and D'Angelo (2006). American candidates enjoy more screen time through televised debates, advertising, and guest appearances on entertainment platforms than British or German candidates do (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006, 49). This sets the American political stage as one that is more characterized by media than by party, thus creating a race not only for the electoral college but also for the larger advertising budget (49). This values system also encourages journalists to view candidates as antagonists to crack, leading to stories that emphasize a battle or try to convince readers that a reporter is exposing the real person. Esser & D'Angelo (2006) argue that this represents a need for greater accountability in American media to avoid being swayed by the larger sums paid for airtime and print space. Being the gateway through which candidates may speak to the country sets journalists as gatekeepers with great responsibility, but the danger is that the opportunity for increased coverage turns the media into a "Strategic Actor, which accentuates the news media's role as a consequential actor that compels a candidate to adapt his strategies to press coverage" (58). Once

journalists become part of the story, it can be impossible to avoid the slant that so many readers distrust, and it alters the role of the media from a watchdog at the gate to a participant.

Accessing "the Real Deal"

Campaign reporters on the road offer glimpses into the long months leading up to Election Day. Philip Seib (1994) reminisced on the long days spent covering mostly the same events every day, with a bundle of reporters all vying for access. As competitive as the atmosphere can get, Seib noted that grouping all the reporters together tends to cement them as a unit, which then affects their writing by "fostering consensus journalism" (60). The press corps is often referred to as a pack, and pack mentality quickly prevails. Rather than break the mold, some writers can feel pressured that they must produce the same type of professional content as everyone else. Combined with the fact that campaign staff order events so that journalists can see the candidate in the best possible light, Seib expressed concern for autonomy in reporting: "reporters should beware of the narrowness of the pack's vision. They should simply keep their eyes open and maintain an appropriately broad view of the campaign, noting all that is going on and making *independent* judgments about what is newsworthy" (61).

Joan Didion was recruited to cover the Bush/Dukakis campaigns leading up to the Democratic National Convention in 1988. In her essay "Insider Baseball," Didion used her position as an outsider to report not only on the candidates but also on the status of political journalists on campaign trails. As Seib found, she discovered that "routine encouraged passivity," where reporters were more concerned about how much time they would get to sleep or which bus had the better food rather than noticing that the candidates avoided substance in a particular speech (Didion, 2001, 26, 29). Didion also noticed the change from media as a

watchdog to media as a decider of political importance. Using their status as a reliable outlet, many magazines and newspapers chose which candidates they considered presidential and then implemented keywords to promote that image for their readers. This would not raise any red flags on the ordinary voter's bias radar, but the slant was most telling when journalists hyped the images of Bush versus Dukakis with rolled sleeves and descriptions of whether they were "tough," "Kennedyesque," or "electrifying" at rallies. During one particular description, campaign aides wanted to push the image of Dukakis being relatable, so while the press corps were waiting with their recorders and cameras on the tarmac, they gave the candidate a baseball and glove to play catch with some aides and then his daughter. This gave them free advertising, which the journalists were well aware of, but according to Didion, none of them wanted to be the only outlet not to show the endearing coverage. Additionally, journalists who join the campaign trail for adventure want to be considered part of the elite group knowledgeable about politics, and their position as one of the few people witnessing the event was too individualized to give up (Didion, 2001, 37).

Didion called the political coverage process not journalism but "invented narrative." While the Dukakis campaign pushed programs and the Bush campaign hammered down on values, Didion asked where the ideas were. "What it 'came down to,' what it was 'about'... was not an historical shift largely unaffected by the actions of individual citizens but 'character,' and if 'character' could be seen to count, then every citizen… could be seen to count. This notion, that the citizen's choice... makes a 'difference,' is in fact the narrative's most central element, and it's most fictive" (44). The wooing of the press corps doesn't stop after the election; Helen Thomas, White House reporter for decades, remembered that Carter played softball with reporters and photographers to build camaraderie with them (Thomas, 1999, 82).

David Foster Wallace also joined the ranks of non-political journalists who joined the campaign trail as readers began to distrust campaign reporters. His experiences of the constant moving, poor diets, and sub-groups within the press affirm Seib's and Didion's experiences. Wallace hopped on the "Straight Talk Express" of McCain's campaign and reported on the men and women talking about the candidate. He wrote about "The Twelve Monkeys," the moniker given to elite journalists from the top newspapers who always moved together and wrote about the same things. He exposed how difficult it was to write about anything other than what the campaign aides sent in press releases and how quickly he found himself turning cynical. Getting to know "the real McCain," according to Wallace, was nearly impossible when a multitude of sleep-deprived writers are all fighting for access to him and wearily turning in quick news pieces on what happened that day. The potential for negative slant or missing newsworthy content was high when all the journalists can see is another long night ahead of them and when all they are around are staffers who specialize in marketing and the art of diversion (Wallace, 2006).

What is journalism for?

When readers say they don't trust fake news, they make a judgment on the purpose of journalism, and yet the ethics of a journalist and the industry are not frequently analyzed in conjunction with these critiques. Taking a step back to see the wider picture of journalism as a profession necessitates an understanding of its purpose and role in society. The 1947 Commission on Freedom of the Press emphasized, as did Thomas Jefferson in the founding of the United States' political system, that a free society and a free press go hand in hand. "Where freedom of expression exists, the beginnings of a free society and a means for every extension of

liberty are already present. Free expression is therefore unique among liberties: it promotes and protects all the rest" (quoted in Craft, 2010, 41).

What are these liberties that only journalism can preserve? While news media is frequently criticized as partisan muckraking, Borden (2010) defined journalism as an essential element of democracy in its preservation of collective rights and flourishing, and it also constitutes a moral calling (54). The history of American legislation and journalism are wrapped up in the predominance of knowledge and information as contributors to the functioning of society. According to Borden, the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights establish individual rights and the necessity for journalism to safeguard them (55). Citizens become journalists and thus adopt an additional responsibility in their civic life: acting as a watchdog on power to preserve the rest of society (56).

Drawing from Aristotle and the Progressive Era of liberalism, Borden sees journalism as the primary means of societal flourishing through its emphasis on "respect for the person, social well-being and the development of community, and peace which ensures stability to sustain the common good (58). Elliott and Ozar (2010) add some complexity to the definition, though, by noting that while journalism is vital for society's functioning and for preserving the common good, this necessitates a duty to cause harm by sounding the alarm when injustices occur. "They [journalists] must be able to effectively evaluate when they can prevent or reduce harm, when such harm is fully justified, and how to explain their choices both to those they harm and to the citizens they serve" (10). For example, reporting on an elected official who misused campaign funds harms that official but provides necessary information for citizens on the moral dysfunction of their government. Because the official was breaking the law, according to Kant's theory of justice s/he relinquished the right to not be harmed which gives journalism the

protection then to expose wrongs for the populace to correct them. In this sense, journalism serves as a Fourth Estate in democratic governance; as Pulitzer noted, the court of public opinion can often be more effective than the legislative process (Craft, 2010, 43).

Journalism lives at the center of a democracy because it is responsible for serving all the people in a particular society. While coverage may include subgroups (economists will be interested in financial news while lawyers might be focused on international law and blue collar workers want to hear about changes in their local community), the overall content of a newspaper or outlet must be accessible and essential to a wide audience. When one particular news outlet is preferred by a leader, the temptation is to cater coverage in such a way that the leader continues to support that outlet; this is a misuse of journalism when content only benefits a subgroup and ignores their wider responsibility (Elliot & Ozar, 2010, 11). Modern politics demonstrates the need for journalism as a watchdog, especially when the common denominator in the rise of tyrannical governments is the lack of access to news coverage (13). Providing information, then, is a moral and social responsibility.

The uses of this information are to preserve the society in many ways: prioritize the facts that citizens need to know for living, respond to social desires, and contribute to the overall safety. One example of the way journalism has appropriately maintained these roles is when the coronavirus first began sweeping the world. In March 2020, as quarantine disrupted life and halted in anticipation of mass infections and deaths, major newspapers removed the paywalls for health coverage. Recognizing the pandemic as a natural disaster, the media eliminated whatever inhibitions to access they could to allow for widespread information dissemination. Social media began to take the helm of necessary information as well by moderating posts through fact-checking information on the virus. While the authority of social media magnates to add to an

individual's online statements has been contested, it further demonstrates an understanding of information as essential to society.

While the information age presents challenges in maintaining the verity of sources and facts, journalism still represents one of the few avenues for citizens to treat information as a forum by which they can more effectively participate in society. "When civic journalism is construed in this richer sense [referencing reporting as a type of public soul-searching], it is clear that journalism has a moral reason for being beyond surveillance, as it becomes a vehicle for responsible participation" (Borden, 2010, 59). The target priorities for journalism, then are to speak to broad communities rather than target audiences, to avoid false consensus resulting from an ideological echo chamber, to focus on the common good through reporting on stories that give citizens the knowledge they need for their individual and collective benefit, and to empower citizens to through information on what is happening among those in leadership (61-64). Given the abundance of information resulting from technology, Borden also promotes disciplines of verification and confirmation to further provide self-monitoring for the journalism industry.

Because the internet has removed the press's monopoly on the flow of information, the relationship between journalists and their audience is complicated when the audience attempts to moderate their own informational flow with no bounds on ethics. This complication places undue emphasis on journalism as a business industry, vying with private citizens for attention and thus "conflating the marketplace of ideas with an actual marketplace in which goods are bought and sold" (Craft, 2010, 26). While private citizens may be effective in circulating information, they lack the same democratic function as journalism because they are not bound by the ethics of verification or a consistent watchdog role, tending to focus instead on what is important to them personally rather than the broader public.

In addition to this verification, though, autonomy in journalism is vital to its own preservation, and it extends this quality to the community as well. When journalists can access an event or individual and write about it without pressure from others to mold the message to fit a partisan purpose, the resulting article then provides readers with more autonomy in their views of the person or event as well as how to respond (Elliott & Ozar, 2010, 14). This further builds up community through all types of coverage. While the watchdog metaphor is the most common one, it watches more than just those in power. Human interest stories bind communities together by connecting those with similar experiences, showing an injustice or failing that needs remedy, or inspiring individuals to participate in the community. The relationship between journalists and their readers, therefore, is symbiotic. The community provides the stories and the content while the journalists disseminate these stories and aid in the community's development. Political coverage has the same opportunity.

Who is a journalist?

Thus far, most studies of journalism treat their subject matter as a singular entity. The process of journalism, though, complicates how it may be critiqued. The media as an industry implements its own standards and values, thus ordering the way that information is communicated. This information is collated, though, by thousands of individual people with a drive to find and share the truth - ideally, that is. When citizens say they don't believe the media, they typically refer to outlets and businesses rather than specific journalists. But the individual journalists are the ones using social media to spread their stories, the ones riding the campaign buses for months, and the ones responsible for interrogating information and sources. It seems

important, then, to consider what qualities define a good journalist and whether these are being upheld.

Coleman (2010) studied the ethical makeup of journalists to answer this question. Using the Defining Issues Test (DIT), journalists scored fourth - behind seminarians/philosophers, medical students, and doctors - in terms of their ability to objectively assess and respond to issues, and this factors into an assessment of their overall moral development. Coleman found that moral development tended to level off when formal education ended, proposing journalists who go to college tend to exhibit better critical thinking skills (30). The ones who were more highly educated scored higher on the test. Religion also proved to be a significant benchmark but in a negative direction. Coleman found that reporters with religious backgrounds scored lower on the DIT, presumably due to a hesitancy to critique or scrutinize religious institutions (30). In terms of political ideology, it is generally accepted that conservatives are typically more supportive of authority and established practices than progressives or liberals are, however this correlation was not found among journalists. Based on their DIT results, journalists were able to separate their personal politics from ethical reasoning and could cover both sides effectively. Coleman presumed that this shift was due to the ability of journalists to engage in freedom of thought that transcends personal preference (30). Finally, investigative reporting was seen as one of the top practices a journalist could engage in to improve moral reasoning and preserve autonomy.

Craft (2010) also supports this autonomy among individual journalists but adds that it places an extra burden of accountability on reporting. While the government used to regulate the press when it had concerns about wandering ethics, the regulation has shifted to the public instead -- using *New York Times v. Sullivan* and the Hutchins Commission as precedent). “News

media accountability in the United States, then, is voluntary, dependent on the conscience of individual journalists, the civic-mindedness of media owners, and the judgments of the court of public opinion" (48). This is where personal frameworks come into play, such as the code of ethics offered by the Society of Professional Journalists, addressing individuals, not their corporations.

The bubble

How do these ethical frameworks and moral responsibilities hold up in practice, though? The fact that distrust of the media is increasing indicates that somewhere along the way the ideal function of journalism is failing, and this might be happening when individual journalists group together in their own professional echo chambers rather than connecting to the community.

Following the political upheaval of the 2016 election, communications researchers began taking a closer look at the sociological makeup of journalists in the country. Politico reported that a media "bubble" exists where the majority of journalists do not necessarily reflect the country they report on (Shafer & Doherty, 2017). Based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, only 7% of journalists nationally consider themselves to be Republicans. Although this takes into account a larger group than merely political correspondents, the fact remains that most journalists tend to self-report as Independent (50.2%) or Democrat (28.2%) (Gold, 2014). More striking, though, are the geographical places in which journalists can be found. With the advent of online publishing and the decline of the local paper, journalists have congregated in the big cities and politically "blue" areas, leaving rural life largely uncovered in the media. When local newspapers were more prevalent, newspaper jobs were scattered across the country; this is no longer the case as print publications are losing staff at double the rate that online sources are adding them

(Shafer & Doherty, 2017). This creates a partial explanation for what went wrong in campaign coverage. The statistics show that "Clinton dominated where internet publishing jobs abound," causing publication employees to only hear and see support for that candidate. Shafer and Doherty (2017) suggest that because journalists are not spread out across the country, they have become out of touch with the main demographics that voted for Trump: "the 2016 election made clear, the national media just doesn't get the nation it purportedly covers."

Social media and the abandonment of rural areas

Social media has offered Twitter as another resource promoting homogeneity among journalists. Especially for political journalists, Twitter is most often used as a self-promotional tool where the primary interactions are between other professionals (Lawrence et al., 2014). Gatekeeping is not as clear cut in 140 characters, where studies have found that most politically related tweets state opinions, not facts. Fact checking (1.5% of political correspondents' tweets during the 2012 election) plays a very minor role in tweeting when the emphasis instead is to convince followers that the journalist is a trustworthy source, thus providing only the illusion of objectivity and transparency. Studies found that the top priorities in tweets from political correspondents were opinion (29.1%) and job talk (14.7%); these priorities fall outside traditional gatekeeping responsibilities and promote personal reputation over factual information (Lawrence et al., 2014). It is also important to note that the majority of Twitter users are professionals seeking to expand their platform (Fincham, 2019; Lawrence et. al, 2014).

Fincham (2019) explored this social media bubble further by contrasting American journalists and British journalists during national elections. Identifying homophily - the tendency of persons to interact with those most similar to themselves - as a key danger for journalism, Of

all the tweets during each country's respective election, political journalists and news media accounts comprised 82% of retweets in the U.S. and 64% in the U.K (Fincham, 2019, 218). The sheer number of these statistics indicates that while U.S. journalists tend to be more homophilous, reporters in both countries form journalism-centered bubbles that exclude other voices in a battle for internet attention and clicks on their own articles. Such online conversation promotes personal reputation rather than accessible, general knowledge and further abets a pack mentality that prizes those select few that attain "insider status" for election coverage. "Political journalists, despite the almost limitless opportunities to do otherwise, continue to confer such power and visibility on other journalists… as they remain tethered, albeit virtually, to the journalism packs of the legacy media era" (222).

This tethering became most noticeable in the rural areas of America that mainstream journalism forgot about. As journalists flock to the cities and media companies expand to encompass more local papers, community newspapers struggle to stay afloat. When they do not have the funds for a full team of reporters, these publications rely rearrange their assets by assigning reporters to local interest stories and relying on Associated Press (AP) bulletins for the important national events (Darr, 2019). Because AP is one of the largest media conglomerates, it prioritizes what information will get more attention. Because of this system, press releases from frontrunners in a campaign will be sent to more papers to republish than statements from less likely candidates will - another instance in which the media is deciding which persons are worth their time rather than allowing citizens full information and free choice (Darr). In the case of Iowa, the first primary is held in one of the states that is least connected to national politics. What if campaigns and reporters returned their focus to the citizens in rural areas? According to a study by Darr (2019), community newspapers are in the best position to accurately report on

the state of the nation, and yet they are the most underfunded as well. Missing the mark of massive political movements is not new for media - news outlets were also caught unawares by the rise of the Tea Party and the Republican waves of 2010 and 2014, but the issue of media professionals only serving one population appears to be worsening (Rutenberg, 2016).

Internet age and the Trump phenomenon confuse ethics

How can a journalist retain their morals in the internet age? This is a question most seek to be avoiding as they compete in a new online environment. When the most important question becomes how many clicks an article will attain or how highly a program will rate, journalists' personal ethics fall to the wayside in favor of business decisions instead. When sensationalism and reporting the negative fights and "horse race" politics earn higher numbers of viewers and subscribers, reporters are bound by what the producers and editors assign. "On CNN, the news is increasingly inflammatory and oversimplified, for the benefit of the bottom line… We're merely there to sow conflict and make the numbers go up, to sell more ads" (Pekary, 2020). An eye attuned to showcase only negativity and promote the predetermined acceptable candidate undermines the role of journalism as a community builder and watchdog. When a figure such as Donald Trump enters the political and media fray, ethics tend to deteriorate further. It is unfair to blame Trump for the decline of ethical media; in fact, his response of "fake news" to coverage he didn't like was probably inevitable considering that producers stuck in group think had already decided not to treat coverage of his candidacy with the same serious slant as others in the running for president.

When the media is out of touch with a large portion of the voting base, sensationalizes the scandalous and underplays the positive, and favors ad space over news coverage, where

should a competitive candidate go? Trump took a logical avenue: he followed the journalists to Twitter. Trump's presidency was the first one to elevate Twitter to the center of political communications, with Trump posting roughly 49,000 tweets as of February 2020 (Lewandwosky et al., 2020). At the same time, he rejected the traditional White House press briefings which were the typical avenue for reporters to ask the president questions, opting instead to publish commentary on his own platform. Additionally, Fox News filled the void many Republicans were feeling by catering to conservative issues and selective coverage that presented Trump in a favorable light and pushed the message of a partisan battle. Lewandowsky et al. (2020) analyzed two large corporations, the *New York Times* and *ABC* to see how Trump's social media use affected national political coverage. Their findings supported the hypothesis that Trump turned his own commentary into important news coverage and diverted attention from media coverage that he didn't like by either placing attention elsewhere through a bombastic tweet or by calling particular coverage fake news (9). This use continued during his most recent campaign and may set the tone for future elections.

Trump's previous celebrity status also challenged the way political journalism works, arguably for the better. When entertainment media clashed with political reporting, journalists found they had no precedent for how to cover the combination. Trump treated politics like he did entertainment - something to dominate on the screen. Reporters who knew him as the host of a show swung back and forth between covering his campaign as part of "clown coverage" or serious coverage (Boydstun & Lawrence, 2020). Historically, as in the cases that Didion noticed, when producers must decide which candidates to assign their reporters, which interviews to seek, and which b-roll to run, they determine the likelihood of each runner and decide on characteristics to highlight in a candidate to emphasize whether they are fit to run, using

descriptive phrases to drive that impression. Due to the pack mentality of campaign reporting, the prevailing impression of a candidate perceived to be the most presidential tends to perform better in polls and enjoys better coverage overall. Oftentimes the criteria are based on name recognition, behavior, and conventionality versus unconventionality. In the cases of Howard Dean (who unfortunately screamed "Yeah!" after a rally, which the press decided was unbecoming a future leader of the free world), Edmund Muskie, and Herman Cain, they failed to convince the press that they were electable through deficiencies in one or each of these criteria.

Enter Trump: someone with more name recognition than most candidates who were outside of politics, a personality that rejected presidential norms, and an unconventional approach that voters appeared to love. He brought entertainment value to the debate stage, ensuring that viewers would tune in, but producers and journalists no longer knew what played as reality TV or a legitimate campaign (Boydstun & Lawrence, 2020). Even negative media kept his name in the headlines, and even his mistakes or controversial statements boosted ratings that producers felt he was the only news worth covering (133). The types of comments and behaviors that had killed previous candidacies only fed Trump's, so the media responded by issuing a range of serious and clown coverage not only in editorials but also in news sections (137). Their confusion translated to confusion among voters, "producing a disjointed conceptualization of Trump" (138) and widening the polarization gap. Liberals received confirmation in their suppositions that Trump was a distraction from real politics and that he could never win. Conservatives felt validated in their distrust of the media that refused to take someone seriously who addressed their own concerns (139). The fight between the future president and the media was already established long before the oath of office was administered.

New competition at the gate

When the social media gate is shared not only by the journalist keepers but also those in power and all the citizens who have an opinion, this indicates that journalism is shifting away from a gatekeeping role to a relationship-based one.

Singer (2010) argues that although the medium may change, a focus on ethics must translate to modern journalism: “without the ethical journalist… information may well include disinformation or misinformation - and those are far worse than no information at all” (118). Online access and the breakdown of the hierarchy of newsrooms has blurred the lines between producers of the news and consumers of the news as journalists tend to be the story just as much as their own subjects are. When publishing a story quickly and ensuring its accuracy are mutually exclusive, journalists need an ethical reset (117).

The internet space has thrown journalists and their audiences into the same mixing pot, forcing journalists to not only act as gatekeepers but also to interact with citizens to prove that their work is credible. The way that consumers look for news is also different. Rather than picking up a preferred newspaper and reading the sections one is personally interested in, a reader now types a topic into a search engine and the outlet with the best SEO rating and most eye-catching headline wins the click. The advent of citizen journalists also complicates the nature of journalism by trying to insert themselves as a check on journalism. While the unofficial Fourth Estate does indeed require oversight given its responsibility, news bloggers tend to act more as chihuahuas to the journalist’s watchdog - they declare their legitimacy by adding to the sensationalism and noise, not by improving the quality of democracy through the spread of accurate information. This further challenges a journalist’s autonomy and pushes them to interact only with those they consider professional peers, further solidifying the online echo chambers

(124-125). “The ethical transition from professional discourse to a far more personal one is a challenge, as journalists move from a gatekeeping role to one that entails engagement with an enormously diverse range of unseen but definitely not unheard people” (127). The gatekeepers have been sucked into gate speakers.

What can be saved?

But what is the difference between a reporter covering a political rally and a private citizen livestreaming it while providing commentary? What is the role or benefit of a political journalist in modern society? Using Shoemaker’s 5-level analysis of media’s structural hierarchy, every aspect of journalism is redeemable and necessary even in the evolving landscape of social media-celebrity-sensationalist-polarized news.

1. Individual Level

Journalism does not exist in a cave, it is affected by influences both within and outside the newsroom (Wang et al., 2018). The first level of influence is individual: what personal elements do journalists need to redeem the practice and return to a proper ethical framework? The first task is to pop the journalism bubble in real life and online. It’s time to move out of the cities and into a better understanding of the makeup of American society. Tom Brokaw gives the following advice: “Take some of the people who are only in Washington and send them to Salt Lake City or Kansas City… invest yourself in different parts of the country and get to know the politics and culture” (Bauder, 2021, “Retiring Brokaw”). Taking cues from Lawrence et al. (2014), journalists also need to diversify their online interactions. Twitter can become a resounding space for writers to complain about misinformation and share their own articles, but it also offers an opportunity to interact with diverse communities and keep a finger on the pulse

of public opinion. While social media platforms tend to collect mostly debaters and discord, journalists have the opportunity to remain above the fray by treating users as sources and citizens they serve.

In every setting, Singer (2010) argues that the binding ethics are what sets a journalist apart from an interested blogger. “More crucial, in my view, are the ethical commitments journalists bring to those tasks [time, talent, and skills] - commitments to such principles as truth, fairness, independence, and importantly, accountability. Strong ethics are the hallmarks of journalism in a network” (120-121). The flow of information is no longer linear, it is interconnected online and on the ground, on the campaign bus and at the polls. While building relationships of trustworthiness is an important element in a networked society, those relationships are farces if the journalist is not advancing trustworthiness based on sharing the truth fairly. Relationships built upon Twitter platforms that try to pull readers into an article for the purposes of the most clicks. Rather, journalists serve the essential need to share the truth to all, not the band of online followers of a particular leader (121). A reporter’s loyalty is to the public, not to the domain owner.

2. Routine Level

The routine level focuses on journalism as a profession with defined practices and norms. These are the factors that turn a paper of words into a news story, and they ought to be predictable to a point. This is the level at which the most issues are found between journalists and readers, though. Failures in objectivity, overly negative coverage, the seesaw of clown coverage versus serious reporting, and the lack of independent reporting all contribute to distancing citizens from their press. Issues at the routine level account for 42% of media problems, according to Wang et al. (2018, 1249-50). When it comes to campaign coverage, the

first solution is to eradicate complacency on the campaign buses. By remaining inquisitive and looking for fresh angles, reporters preserve their own autonomy and thus the autonomy of their readers. Avoiding groupthink will be essential for campaign coverage moving forward, and this will even aid a journalist's reputation when their work can stand out from the rest of the crowd's. Wang et al. suggests that reporting on actions rather than statements is a practical step to accomplish this independence (1253).

3. Organizational Level

The organizational level shifts the focus from individual journalists to their bosses: the editors, producers, and owners. These are the leaders who set the tone for their publication and its procedures. Various ideas have been floated to establish public funding for the news to remove the business model that competes with ethics. While attempting to muzzle the root of all evil is laudable, public funding throws journalism out of the frying pan and into a different fire of ethical dilemmas. The impetus ought to be on those in journalistic leadership to preserve ethics by 1) leading by example, 2) giving their reporters investigative autonomy, and 3) hiding click and subscription data. Coleman's (2010) DIT results positively linked investigative reporting with ethical reasoning (31), and a growing number of journalists view investigating government figures to be an important part of their jobs (Gold, 2014). By giving their employees the freedom to follow stories where they lead and choosing assignments that genuinely interest them, managers can expect a higher quality of reporting (Coleman, 2010, 31). Micro-managing tends to interfere with the journalistic process by pressuring a writer to achieve standards that ought to be outside of their jurisdiction. Another practical step to aid in this is to remove journalists from any group that sees the statistics on TV ratings and subscription data. Numbers should not sway

truthful reporting. Without the economic incentive to sensationalize, writers are free to leave entertainment and get back to the news.

4. Institutional Level

The institutional level looks at the media industry as only one piece of the media puzzle. Journalism does not exist independently, its very functioning is for the purpose of connecting others. Given the rise of social media in the overall communications ecosystem, it is important to define boundaries between types of media while also finding ways to cooperate between them. This community of media will then be equipped to return to a gatekeeping role that preserves the flow of accurate information. By equipping readers to know the function and purpose of journalism, citizens will better be able to differentiate between legitimate and fake news (Wang et al., 2018). This first requires a restoration of trust between journalists and their audiences. Just as the relationship between reporter and reader should be a symbiotic one, so too the responsibility is on both sides to counter disinformation. This will involve rebuilding local journalism and emphasizing street-level reporting that retells unbiased information for the benefit of a wide range of readers. In this instance, again, social media can be used as a tool rather than a weapon.

5. Social System Level

The final level addresses the economic and political structures that influence the media. Getting back in touch with America requires understanding what citizens actually want and need to know rather than anticipating what they will get angry about. Journalists have used transparency to replace objectivity and have catered to cries of anti-elitism, to the detriment of their own craft (McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2018). “A journalism of expertise - an ‘elite’ journalism without apology - would better capture the substantive concerns of rural America” (McDevitt &

Ferrucci, 2018, 521). Selection bias can become a thing of the past when news outlets replace confirmation bias with actual neutrality. The hostile media effect claims that news consumers will deem a medium "hostile" if they disagree with the position they think the medium supports. The friendly media effect encourages consumers to avoid hostile media and only give attention to the media that they think supports their beliefs (Kaye & Johnson, 2016). Because the two are not mutually exclusive (619), journalists can work these effects to their advantage.

By covering the events of a campaign and information on what the candidate does and says rather than the personality s/he projects, reporters produce newsworthy content from all angles of an issue. This multiplicity of views then welcomes all readers to spend time with the particular outlet. A newspaper or TV channel that invites both critique and support of a candidate then maximizes their audience. This is a better display of objectivity by serving real communities and not imagined profit avenues.

Looking ahead

Based on historical examples and ethical principles, campaign coverage clearly sets the tone for political engagement both before and after Election Day. Internet use intensifies the spread of information, and social media has entered as a viable form of political communications, yet a journalist's fundamental role has not changed. The Trump presidency established the precedent of using Twitter for major communications, and it remains to be seen how President Biden will navigate the online landscape. On the institutional side, the ideological battles between CNN on the left and Fox News on the right are still being waged. Even without the title anymore, Trump dominates headlines because news outlets are still looking for sensational and negative media to encourage clicks.

In his latest address to the nation regarding vaccine distribution, Biden approached his words carefully, reiterating that he will “tell the truth.” For many citizens, this is a comforting tone, but it is the journalists who must interrogate to see if it is accurate. The watchdogs of democracy need to return to their posts equipped with the ethical framework that reasons clearly and independently, always with an eye to preserve the common good. Many reporters reeled after the results declaring a Trump win pulled back the curtain on their failures as a democratic function. “Journalists respond to their failings best when their vanity is punctured with proof that they blew a story that was right in front of them. If the burning humiliation of missing the biggest political story in a generation won’t change newsrooms, nothing will” (Shafer & Doherty, 2017). The journalism bubble is ready to be popped, setting reporters free to serve their communities once more.

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