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Why Journalism in the Age of Trump Shouldn't Surprise Us

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Trump and the Media

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2 Why Journalism in the Age of Trump Shouldn't Surprise Us

Barbie Zelizer

In the months since Donald Trump ascended to the US presidency, unexpected obstacles have been held responsible for preventing better coverage. This essay¹ argues, however, that journalism in the age of Trump is far more predictable than assumed, and that its analysts and observers would do well to assess why. It argues that deep mnemonic cues about enemy formation, consolidated and entrenched during the Cold War, have undermined coverage of the Trump phenomenon. Until their influence is more fully exposed, there is little chance of journalism moving beyond these cues.

On Enmity and Politics

Enmity is instrumental in political discourse, used by political leaders to help articulate who they are by defining what they are not. Although the notion of an enemy—he or she who is not us and who threatens us—constitutes what Kenneth Boulding (1959, 130) called “the last stronghold of unsophistication,” it nonetheless permeates in times of political uncertainty, disarray, and crisis, promoting behavior that sharpens distinctions between what is and is not seen as appropriate for the time.

A set of representational patterns launches this dynamic. Requiring clarity and simplicity and provoking anxiety over an imminent threat, enmity “turn[s] established values upside down,” with “the otherwise forbidden” newly encouraged (Beck 1997, 66). In so doing, enemy formation activates a range of negative behaviors—distrust, polarization, negative stereotyping, black-and-white thinking, aggression, deindividualization, and demonization (Spillmann and Spillmann 1997)—while fostering ethnic intolerance, racism, and political or religious fundamentalism (Beck 1997). Central to

enmity are dichotomies, which reduce complex, unmanageable, and often indecipherable realities into binaries between “us” and “them” (Finlay, Holsti, and Fagen 1967). Often taking the shape of mirror images that position the two sides as opposites of each other, dichotomies produce a range of antithetical values—good/bad, right/wrong, moral/immoral—that keep the binary in place. Predictably, when enemy formation becomes the aim of one institutional domain, it is often introduced into other domains cohabiting the same institutional culture. This puts journalism in the direct path of enmity that is driven by political, economic, or other institutional concerns, leaving it subject to external objectives that may contradict its own.

Cold War Enmity, Cold War Journalism

Such was the case during the Cold War. Although not the only period in which journalism had been tasked with reflecting enmity crafted elsewhere, an entrenched set of newsmaking cues emerged during this period that were rarely thereafter questioned. In large part, this had to do with journalism’s centrality in driving the Cold War, whose prosecution depended on journalism’s buy-in.

The Cold War was driven by a deep mindset sustained over nearly five decades of international conflict between the US and the USSR and intensified domestically via McCarthyism. More an idea than a war, it took shape via populist impulses that were uniform, internally consistent, and steadfast in nature. As its ideological contours offered Americans unambiguous cues about what made an enemy, how one recognized its presence, and how one minimized the threat it brought, a very particular kind of journalism evolved in the war’s early years, much of it taken up with establishing and disseminating enmity (Zelizer n.d.). That enmity cast the war’s central antagonists—the US and the USSR—as polarized, mirrored opposites of each other and propelled a hunt for the enemy within US boundaries. In this mindset, neutrality disappeared.

Unusual here—and a direct precursor to current circumstances—was journalism’s instrumentality. With no battles, physical destruction, or corpses on its main front, the Cold War needed instructional, exhortative, propagandistic, and pedagogic efforts to instill and maintain the necessary mindset of war. It was thus up to actors on the mediated landscape to

intensify the psychic distance between a democratic US and a communist USSR so that everyone remembered the conflict at hand.

Echoing journalism's predilection for clear, dramatic, and simple formations of conflict, the larger ideological environment of the time easily displayed what Hofstadter (1964, 3–4) later called “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” The need to emphasize the conflict between “absolute good” and “absolute evil” remained high:

What is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things to a finish. Since the enemy is thought of as totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated. (Hofstadter 1964, 82)

Although ideological stridency raised different kinds of problems across institutional culture writ large, it was particularly problematic for journalists, who were torn between two dissonant goals—maintaining independence or servicing an ideological anticommunist environment.

The latter goal took precedence over the former. As many journalists became Cold War navigators—relying, in one view, “less on facts” and “more on moral assumptions about how the world was to operate” (Adler 1991, 43)—they readily sustained the binary between “us” and “them,” strengthening rhetoric about US democracy and fostering a negative image of the Russians and communism. Political pressures—tendered via red-line edits on news copy, subtle censorship, loyalty oaths, dismissal, and special favors in exchange for sympathetic coverage—reminded journalists to mind their perspectives carefully (Liebovich 1988); economic trends toward corporatism and consumer capitalism made bucking the line more difficult (Hixson 1996); and television's technological predilection for briefer and more formulaic relays readily cohered with Cold War aims (Bernhard 1999), to say nothing of a public largely indifferent to the news. It thus became easier for journalists to downplay the problematic aspects of current events and overstate those consonant with Cold War enmity.

But none of this would have succeeded had Cold War enmity not rested on longstanding journalistic conventions and practices. The embrace of enmity firstly required deference and moderation, which helped turn journalists into eager spokespeople for those in power. Self-censorship and currying favor happened regularly, as when *Look* magazine featured a cover story titled “How to Spot a Communist” (Cheme 1947). As the trade journal *Editor and Publisher* proclaimed in 1948, “Americans are Americans first and newspapermen second” (“Security Problem” 1948, 36).

Second, enmity relied on cronyism, close ties between officials and journalists that ensured officialdom would remain the preferred information source. "If McCarthy said it," one reporter later remembered, "we wrote it" (cited in Broder 1987, 138). Not only did this uphold proven patterns for accommodating elite sources of authority (Gans 1979), but it also facilitated intricate and sometimes incestuous sharing of personnel, resources, and information across news organizations and government agencies like Voice of America or Radio Free Europe, setting boundaries around what was permissible and appropriate to say.

Third, enmity invited understatement, euphemism, and false equivalences that obscured clear articulation. Many reporters showed timidity about the topics broached and provided qualified observations of what they thought they saw, sorely misreading what was happening: Slow to recognize McCarthy's impact, journalists at first treated him like a joke, dismissing him with labels like "Senator McThing" (Markel 1953, 26). As late as 1955, the American Society of Newspaper Editors voted McCarthy one of the most overplayed stories of the preceding year ("Second-Guessing" 1955, 1).

Finally, enmity rode on accommodating objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance. Broadcaster Eric Sevareid dismissed his colleagues for "our flat, one-dimensional handling of the news" (cited in Broder 1987, 138), while another reporter said journalists had been no more than "recording devices" for officials (cited in Broder 1987, 138). Believing that a valueless perspective and reporting from nowhere would offset political interference, journalists maintained the illusion that they were acting independently. The tools they relied on, however, tied their hands.

What all of this meant was that Cold War mindedness succeeded in driving journalism for two related reasons. First, it rested upon already existent predilections among journalists, securing their widespread conformity by playing to long-held occupational and professional mores and conventions. Simultaneously, it made journalism central in the entrenchment of its ideological contours, where journalists became irreplaceable navigators of Cold War enmity. Although holding journalists captive to these circumstances undermined autonomous newsmaking, it made simplified and polarized enmity a necessary part of their coverage.

How Cold War Enmity Has Reemerged with Trump

Today's journalism builds upon Cold War enmity with a remarkable degree of consonance. In a way similar to other deep mnemonic structures, Cold War cues inhabit a silent backdrop for journalists facing the unfamiliar circumstances prompted by Trump.


In part, this is because enemy formation has itself been central to Trump's rise. Mobilizing fear, anger, frustration, and resentment like most populist leaders to divide the public into in-groups and out-groups (Wodak 2015), his rhetoric insists upon the demonization and necessary elimination of an external other. Thus, much about longstanding extreme versions of us versus them motivates today's circumstances: unexpected exits from conventional political alliances, hate speech as it takes on local flavor across multiple locations, entrenched divides between political formations. In the words of the *New Yorker*, "outsiders are in, insiders are out" (Lepore 2016, para. 13).

In part, too, economic pressures and surrounding institutional structures continue to reward outrageous reports and cut back support for more nuanced and time-consuming coverage of conflict. With negative, simple, provocative, and emotional events driving the news and its ratings, Trump's indignation and drama render him newsworthy, underscored by his media savvy. Coming from years of reality TV, tabloid coverage, and gossip shows, he repeatedly turns journalistic activity into evidence of his own victimization, even when he contradicts himself. In Rosen's (2016) terms, the consequent asymmetry that characterizes contemporary politics works to mute journalism. The uneven delegitimation of one political side by the other—normally recognized as polarization—cuts to the heart of journalists' dependence on balance as the key to political coverage, making it irrelevant when the parties are not symmetrically positioned. The resulting asymmetry thus "fries the circuitry of the mainstream press."

But it is wrong to blame only media economics, Trump's rhetoric and strategizing, or the structural relationship between politics and journalism for journalism's poor performance. For the core of the problem lies with journalism itself. How journalists of the Cold War era dealt with enemy formation—accepting it as dogma, sidestepping and underestimating its impact, pursuing a value-free ground that abdicated journalistic responsibility for addressing events with nuance and thoughtfulness even as US

public life crumbled—offers a familiar precedent for covering the anger, resentment, and polarization that accompany Trump, making it easy for journalists to import enmity into coverage that might have been reported differently.

This has happened in three ways. First, journalism's hearty embrace of Cold War tools has been ongoing. The conventions that allowed Cold War enmity to flourish—moderation, deference, cronyism, euphemism, understatement, false equivalences, neutrality, impartiality, balance, and objectivity—figure largely in coverage of the Trump phenomenon. This has stretched from Trump's presidential campaign—when Fox News's Megyn Kelly and NBC's Matt Lauer soft-pedaled Trump's flaws, and then-President Obama accused the media of creating false equivalences between Trump and Clinton ("Obama Critiques Media" 2016)—to the still-resonant reluctance to call Trump's lies by name, preferring instead to label them "controversies" (Pompeo 2017). It lurks in journalistic deference and moderation, which encourages journalists to sidestep the dangers attached to Trump's assault on widely-shared US norms of the presidency, press, and legitimate elections and to stay silent in face of his rogue behavior—intolerance, name-calling, bullying, disregard for conflicts of interest, extremism, and self-aggrandizement. Much like these conventions failed journalists in explaining the Cold War, they leave contemporary journalists unable to fully contextualize, evaluate, or criticize Trump, showing that "a balanced treatment of an imbalanced phenomenon distorts reality" (Mann and Ornstein 2016). Largely because journalists are too entrenched in their own compliance with Cold War enmity, the practices it spawned, and the structures to which it responded, they repeatedly fall short.



Second, the failure of journalists to go beyond enmity in their coverage of the so-called "flyover zones" means that, just like during the Cold War, they are unable to either serve or reflect the US public writ large. Journalists' embrace of dichotomous black-and-white thinking prevents them from recognizing that the public—no longer as uniform as journalistic conventions tend to assume—differs from that which has conventionally been addressed by the news. In Glenn Greenwald's (2016, para. 3) view, journalists—reflecting "an agreement that Trump was this grave evil"—acted like elites "telling each other how smart they [are]," so that Trump supporters

weren't really ever heard from ... they were just talked about in contemptuous tones ... sort of looked at like zoo animals, like things you dissect and condemn (para. 4).

The neglect in this regard has been significant, for in not listening across the divide, journalists treat class as a disruption rather than a fundamental flaw in their thinking. Buttressed by a feedback loop that is closed to others, journalists' reluctance to stretch beyond people like themselves, again to quote Greenwald, is legitimated by the sentiments of opinion-making elites that are "cloistered," "incestuous," and "far removed from the public" (2016, para. 5, line 5). As journalists instead remain caught by enmity's grasp, populism passes them by.

Third, journalists' inability to see that they are part of the problem makes them unable to recognize the ramifications of a changing institutional culture that undermines journalism's authority. Journalism exists as an integral part of a larger institutional culture, where its deep ties with politics, economics, the law, education, security, religion, and the military are profoundly intertwined with how the news works. That culture includes patterns of inter-institutional dependency, entrenched power sharing, corruption, concentrated or government ownership, a gravitation toward impunity, self censorship, and a resistance to change.

It stands to reason, then, that the populism that helped bring Trump to power comes with its own novel descriptors. As it has blurred longstanding distinctions between left and right, liberal and conservative, young and old, urban and rural, the enmity it spawns against Washington insiders, global interventionists, and immigrants keeps populism afloat. This challenges much of what has been a given in US politics—a symmetrical two-party system; elites positioned authoritatively across central institutions; a largely silent majority—and rattles many assumptions related to coverage. These include acting as if difference is inevitably settled by compromise; as if facts, truth, and evidence are equally revered by all players in the game; as if political culture necessarily works through symmetry; and as if journalists are not part of the political systems they cover. Because politics and the news inhabit the same institutional culture, journalism has little choice but to accommodate such change, but US journalists do not yet show their recognition of its inevitability.

Thus, journalistic judgment remains at fault here just it was during the Cold War. With many journalists continuing to act in ways that should

have been retired long ago, they reveal how out of touch are many of their assumptions about covering Trump. Conditions thought necessary for journalists to do their job in more conventional ways are no longer applicable today. Journalism has been here before, but it again fails to notice.

Conclusion: Why Journalism in the Age of Trump Shouldn't Surprise Us

This essay has addressed how one aspect of the Cold War mindset—that of enemy formation—undermined US journalistic coverage of the Trump phenomenon. Journalists not only reproduced the conformity and homogeneity of the Cold War era but also oriented to its longstanding—and now outdated—cues of practice. This renders them powerless to offset the problematic coverage of Trump that has ensued. With such mnemonic cues deeply and uncritically entrenched, the past silently undergirds the conventions through which the present takes on journalistic form.

Populist passion and the strident, anti-establishment enmity it rides on erupt when something is not quite right with democratic function. When that is further unsettled by something being not quite right with journalistic function either, it is time to think creatively about journalism's reformulation. Journalism in the age of Trump should not surprise us. But imagining journalism differently can do no less than jumpstart our expectations.

Notes

1. Parts of this essay appear in N. Carpentier and V. Dudaki (eds.), Special Issue of *Comunicazioni Sociali* on "Power, Contingency and Socio-Political Struggle," 2017. It was written while the author was the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies.