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Trump and the new inquisition: Media coverage, past and present

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The love-hate relationship between Trump and the media has devolved, post-2015, into mutual enmity. Trump views many media organizations as corrupt and dishonest, referring to them as *fake news* and *enemies of the people*. Meanwhile, the Media Research Center found that ABC, CBS and NBC evening news coverage of Trump in May 2020 was 99.5% negative (in none of the periods they examined did negative commentary account for less than 92% of coverage).¹ Another study from 2017 found that Trump receives negative coverage at least twice as often as the previous three presidents² and positive coverage at least four times less often (compared to Obama, negative coverage is three times as common and positive coverage eight times rarer). One explanation for this intriguing situation might be that Trump is *simply that bad*, but his record in office does not alone account for such hostility. Instead, it appears to be an *emotional* reaction. An examination of historical Trump coverage reveals how journalists have long found Trump *aesthetically offensive*—tacky and boorish in the way he talks, runs his businesses, and views the world. As a New York real estate magnate and TV star Trump was treated with a mixture of fascination and consternation by the media, and the public could choose to enjoy or ignore him. But in power he has become an ever-present physical manifestation of the fears haunting the journalistic psyche: doubts about the Neo-liberal ideology they have championed, the loss of confidence in a culture that they have undermined, escalating racial tensions they have ginned up, and doubts about their own utility to society. Rather than facing up to their own responsibility for the tensions of the age, journalists have projected this *baggage* onto Trump. Trump is the bogeyman, a modern-day heretic who must be burned at the stake so that they may

resume the journey down the path to a globalized, egalitarian, rational, and peaceful world—this is the story they tell themselves, and this is how they justify their behavior.

Debunking the *He's simply that bad!* argument

Fox News and a smattering of newspapers aside, Trump is despised by national network and cable news and the broadsheets, yet his policy positions and achievements fall far short of the apocalyptic. In the face of constant attempts by the Democratic Party, the judiciary and the media to hamstring the power of the executive branch, the Trump administration has negotiated new trade deals with Mexico and China (some might characterize the latter as economic warfare). It has been a vocal cheerleader for American business, and through corporate tax cuts, the easing of regulations, and the public bullying of CEOs, Trump has had some success in bringing back manufacturing jobs to America. Pre-COVID-19, the administration presided over record levels of employment. Since 2016, annual legal immigration has been halved.³ Trump has had less success in cutting its illegal counterpart,⁴ but if he had received support for the wall, ICE deployment and crackdowns on 'sanctuary cities,' things would no doubt have turned out differently.

Trump has made unconventional inroads into the Korean peace process, and perhaps due to these efforts North Korea has not tested any nuclear weapons since 2017. The Trump administration has taken a far more aggressive position towards Russia than its predecessor, lobbying against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and sending arms (rather than blankets) to the Ukraine. Trump has pressured NATO

members and other allies to contribute more to American military protection and reduce dependency on Russian energy, backing up these demands with punishments for non-compliance; the recent withdrawal of 12,000 American troops from Germany is one example. Trump has propounded a non-interventionist foreign policy but has had limited success in reining his generals in, failing to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan. Overall, Trump has taken a hardline posture towards foreign policy, but his administration's actions have, counter-intuitively to some, been less destabilizing than those of the Obama administration, which presided over the efforts to demonize Russia over annexing Crimea, the MH-17 flight incident, 'election interference', and Syria.

Trump's record is mixed, although it bears remembering that his inability to fulfill all of his election promises is in part due to opposition and obstruction from Congress. But while many of his policies are controversial, they are not particularly extreme when measured past administrations, who have engaged in unnecessary brinkmanship with the Soviet Union that brought the world close to nuclear war, invaded Vietnam and Iraq, bombed and splintered Yugoslavia, initiated widespread electronic surveillance of the US public, established draconian military prisons and contentious drone assassination programs, and intervened in Libya with catastrophic consequences. Trump, by contrast, has (with good reason) exhibited a mistrust of the hawkish policy recommendations of the US intelligence agencies, and has yet to start any new foreign wars.

Culturally, Trump has become a symbolic figurehead for those who oppose media influence and political correctness. He declines to participate in the racial identity politics of the left, professing instead a colorblind approach. Contrary to media insinuation he has aired no overtly racist opinions, although he has broken recent precedent by criticizing certain cultures, nationalities, and religions. The Trump administration has not imprisoned journalists, nor has it limited press

freedom beyond temporarily banning particularly obnoxious journalists from White House press briefings. No president has given more regular press conferences or taken more questions from journalists. Perhaps most importantly, despite near-universal media opposition, Trump won enough popular support to be elected in 2016, and retains a fighting chance of serving a second term. Which is to say, the lop-sided media coverage is wildly unrepresentative of roughly half of public opinion.

The media, meanwhile, is reliably politically partisan—96% of political donations⁵ from journalists went to the Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016. Nonetheless, one might hope that journalists who profess a commitment to accuracy, truthfulness, impartiality, and objectivity⁶ would set aside their political ideologies in order to provide sober analysis of Trump's domestic and foreign policies. While it is true that the media typically treats presidents running on a Republican ticket with contempt (unless they are launching a war), the focus on sensationalism, smears, and political instigation is unprecedented in recent years. In a four-month period in 2018, for example, CBS and NBC devoted 0.7% of their coverage to the economy⁷ but hundreds of hours to the machinations of an ex-porn star who broke a legally binding non-disclosure agreement with the president to reveal minor indiscretions which at worst constituted a violation of campaign finance laws. Perhaps most egregious was the media's promotion of the baseless conspiracy theory that Trump colluded with Russia to win the 2016 election.⁸ As a result of such brazen political partisanship, it is no surprise that trust in the media is at record lows. A Gallup poll of American public opinion found that only 20% of respondents had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in TV news, and only 23% in newspapers.⁹ Of the 16 institutions included in the survey, only Congress scored lower. The media's bias has become the object of ridicule, where the media has less of a monopoly on information. The following is a representative sample of some of their double standards.^{10 11}

Organization	Stance one	Stance two
The Washington Post	Can we just stop talking about Hillary Clinton's health now?	Hillary Clinton's health just became a real issue in the presidential campaign
The Inquirer	Why is Philly's homicide rate going up?	Trump said Philly's murder rate is 'terribly increasing.' It's not.
MSNBC	Khizr Khan's words won't soon be forgotten	RNC manipulates the pain of a grieving mother for partisan gain
The New York Times	How Obama tapped into social networks' power	Trump is confused about social media. He's not alone
Metro	Trump's going to have to look at his baby blimp self when he comes to visit	Flying the Sadiq Khan balloon is not an exercise of free speech—it is a party for bigots
CNN	Everyone should have a shot at paid family leave	<i>(after Trump's budget included paid family leave)</i> How paid family leave hurts women
Associated Press	Factcheck: Trump wrong that Syria's Assad is fighting Islamic State militants	After Palmyra, Syrian troops take another IS-controlled town
The Huffington Post	If you judge people for how they like their steak, you might be a Trump supporter	Donald Trump prefers his steak well done, AKA the worst possible way
The Independent	Donald Trump is wrong about a rigged election, scientists have proved	People are saying the election was rigged against Hillary. Here's how that would work.
Salon	"Nazis" and "Hitler"—the right's casual, trivializing political insults	Is Donald Trump a new Hitler? Hannah Arendt might argue that they're closer than you think
Slate	Donald Trump is actually a moderate Republican	Donald Trump is a fascist

The media is biased against Trump to such a degree that it can be viewed primarily as a political faction. The remainder of this article seeks to understand why the media *particularly* derides the 45th president.

Entree: The Art of the Deal

The contemporary treatment of Trump's first book, *The Art of the Deal*,¹² serves as an example of how Trump and the media find each other so maddening. Published by Random House in 1987, *The Art of the Deal* introduces the thoughts and business practices of the future president in characteristically bombastic style. It covers Trump's childhood, his relationship with family members, his early building work in Brooklyn, and then later the formation of the Trump Organization and its projects in Manhattan. The *Art of the Deal* reached the top of the *New York Times* Best Seller list and stayed there for 13 weeks.¹³ Authorship is credited to Donald J. Trump and Tony Schwartz, who was paid \$250,000 to ghostwrite the

book. He and Trump and Trump split the royalties, which by 2016 are thought to have exceeded \$3 million.¹⁴ In a contemporaneous review, *Publishers Weekly* described *The Art of the Deal* as "boastful, boyishly disarming", and "thoroughly engaging."¹⁵ Ralph Novak, in 1988, wrote in *People Magazine* that "the billionaire New York real estate developer...looks like a movie star and acts like a showboat gambler." He concludes: "...even those who never get closer to the real estate business than paying the rent could find moments of fascination in this book. This is the entrepreneurial mind at work if ever there was one."¹⁶

Trump has called *The Art of the Deal* his favorite book after the bible, while Schwartz, coincidentally at the time he began to find work in the media as an anti-Trump pundit, claimed that writing the book was his "greatest regret in life."¹⁷ In an interview prior to the 2016 election he averred: "I genuinely believe that if Trump wins and gets the nuclear codes there is an excellent possibility it will lead to the end of civilization."¹⁸ Schwartz's heel turn was

heavily promoted by (or, more likely, closely coordinated in partnership with) the media, and so began a predictably negative reappraisal of the book.

As of writing, 30 of the 34 references in its Wikipedia article¹⁹ post-date Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, many of them articles that take at face value Schwartz's professed contrition in having led to the 'rise' of Trump. Not known to sit quietly on the sidelines, Trump has insinuated publicly that the book was less than completely ghostwritten, presumably knowing that this would annoy the self-appointed defenders of factual propriety in the newspapers and on cable news. This is a prototypical Trump-media storm in a teacup: The media sensationalize a story which is in truth little more than gossip, while disingenuously presenting themselves as being concerned *solely with the facts* and Trump's refusal to admit them. They do this by making use of any disreputable character to hand—in this case Tony Schwartz, whose behavior would be judged by conventional standards as mercenary and thus of questionable integrity. Meanwhile, Trump views the media as petty and hysterical, and enjoys toying with them; this in turn delights his supporters, who revel in the *troll-in-chief's* unique talent to drive what they view as an elitist, self-important press to apoplexy with a single Tweet, turn of phrase, or politically incorrect expression.

The media vs. Trump

I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it *truthful hyperbole*. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion.²⁰

Prior to 2015, Trump's media coverage tended to combine sincere critique with fascination. Besides his relationships with women and the peculiarities of his gold-plated lifestyle, the numerous long-form profiles Trump courted over the years tended to focus on his iconoclastic means of marketing himself and his brand through hyperbole and exaggeration, and the inevitable conflict that arises between such rhetoric and journalistic accuracy. Prolonged exposure to Trump's 'truthful hyperbole' led more than one of the writers

who spent time with Trump to declare physical exhaustion. The title of a 2013 article published in the Atlantic,²¹ "What Exactly is Donald Trump's Deal: Is he a buffoon? A genius? An exploration of the man, his brand, and his chronic bluster" is as representative of the general tone as any. Mark Singer, in an article for the New Yorker in 1997,²² analyzed Trump as follows:

...there is no "new" Trump, just as there was never a "new" Nixon. Rather, all along there have been several Trumps: the hyperbole addict who prevaricates for fun and profit; the knowledgeable builder whose associates profess awe at his attention to detail; the narcissist whose self-absorption doesn't account for his dead-on ability to exploit other people's weaknesses; the perpetual seventeen-year-old who lives in a zero-sum world of winners and "total losers," loyal friends and "complete scumbags"; the insatiable publicity hound who courts the press on a daily basis and, when he doesn't like what he reads, attacks the messengers as "human garbage"; in sum, a fellow both slippery and naïve, artfully calculating and recklessly heedless of consequences.

The choice of descriptors such as *narcissist*, *naïve*, *perpetual seventeen-year old*, and *heedless of consequences* are now de rigueur in descriptions of Trump, but in older articles such as this one can sense a mixture of grudging admiration and puzzlement on the part of profilers trying to understand how *a man like this* could be so successful, and what it says about human nature and society. Trump of course has a different take on matters. Judging by his history of statements about the press, it is likely that he considers many journalists to belong to the category of life's losers mentioned in *The Art of the Deal*:

One of the problems when you become successful is that jealousy and envy inevitably follow. There are people—I categorize them as life's losers—who get their sense of accomplishment and achievement from trying to stop others. As far as I'm concerned, if they had any real ability they wouldn't be fighting me, they'd be doing something constructive themselves.²³

One problem for journalists is that Trump's exaggerations tend to be couched in such a way as to leave room for plausible deniability. In the same New Yorker piece in 1997²⁴, for example, Trump claimed that 1.4 million people had turned out to a veteran's day parade he had helped to finance. In response, the interviewer noted that the press

clippings Trump had just handed to him placed the number at half a million. "OK," Trump replied, "I see this story says a half million spectators. *But, trust me, I heard a million four.*" We cannot of course establish for certain that Trump did not hear the (presumably) exaggerated figure. Trump-truth and journalistic-truth were always going to be a marriage made in hell, but in earlier coverage²⁵ journalists showed a desire to understand the Trump-rationale:

His methods of valuing assets are more creative than precise, although Trump has his own internal logic for them. For instance, in 2005, he was paid \$400,000 for a speech at the Learning Annex, but bragged on *Larry King Live* that his pay was actually more than \$1 million because, as he explained [in a subsequent deposition], the speech was promoted in billboard, newspaper, radio, and TV ads around New York City, creating extra value for his brand.

In a 2016 deposition hearing Trump was asked if he ever exaggerated his net worth.²⁶ Trump replied "I think everybody does...Who wouldn't? I'm no different from a politician running for office. You don't want to say negative things." The same hearing also featured the following exchange:

Trump: My net worth fluctuates, and it goes up and down with the markets and with attitudes and with feelings, even my own feelings, but I try.

Lawyer: Let me just understand that a little. You said your net worth goes up and down based upon your own feelings?

Trump: Yes, even my own feelings, as to where the world is, where the world is going, and that can change rapidly from day to day.

It is easy to sneer at a statement like this, but there is a truth to it that a superficial financial statement, despite the rubber stamp of accredited authority that it bears, cannot capture. Most politicians lie, but they typically do it through the adept use of spin: they give deliberately vague responses to journalists (preferably friendly ones), they limit press access, and stick to prepared statements whenever possible. Through semantic trickery they give the impression of a certain degree of honesty. Trump, by contrast, doesn't use political language primarily in order to give an impression of truth (this is a secondary concern), but as a weapon or tool: to *do* things, to inspire, to annoy, to provoke, to distract

and to attack. Responsible journalism therefore needs to enlighten the reader as to how Trump uses hyperbole, misdirection, sloppy use of language (intentional or otherwise), falsehoods (possibly unintentional), and, indeed, lies (intentional). Instead, the media has retreated into a puerile, superficial habit of lie-detection, or 'fact-checking.' Politifact,²⁷ for example, an organization cited widely in the media, rates presidential utterances naively on a cline from true to false. A cursory examination of the first page of their list of Trump's falsehoods includes the following examples:

- President Obama and Vice President Biden never even tried to fix this (police reforms) during their eight-year period.
- Children are "almost immune from this disease."
- COVID-19 cases are "up only because of our big number testing."
- Absentee voting is different from mail-in voting and has more protections against fraud.

Given a sincere attempt to understand the pragmatic, rather than simply semantic content of Trump's statements, and the role of hyperbole or imprecise use of language, a more charitable interpretation can be put forward: Obama and Biden didn't do anywhere *near enough* to reform the police; Children have a *minuscule* risk of dying from COVID-19; Increased testing increases the number of *recorded* COVID-19 cases. This third statement is admittedly a bit of a stretch—half true at best, but his remarks on mail-in voting are patently true, as the New York Times explained in an in-depth article in 2012.²⁸

Those who do not share the media's allergy to Trump understand how he speaks, and make the necessary allowances. To them, the obsession with 'fact checking,' which often renders judgment on politically contestable statements,²⁹ appears blatantly partisan and humorless. I characterize the fact-checking obsession in journalism in my forthcoming paper in the *Heterodox Review* as a retreat into to *semanticism*, whereby the media withdraw into an obsession with the strict semantic veracity of statements, many of which are presented out of context with the aim of bolstering the narrative the newspaper wishes to emphasize. It is for the most part a political tactic designed to smear the target, not a journalistic technique. It may not even be very effective politics—it did not work in 2016, and the only thing it has done for sure besides preaching to the converted is to undermine trust in

the media. This self-defeating exercise of constantly screaming "liar" brings to mind William Brian Key's observation of 'bad' TV commercials:

TV commercials appear foolish, clumsy, and ineffectual on purpose. They are made to appear this way at the conscious level in order to be consciously ridiculed and rejected...Most ad men will confirm that over the years the seemingly worst commercials have sold the best. An effective TV commercial is purposefully designed to insult the viewer's conscious intelligence, thereby penetrating his defenses.³⁰

Bad advertising, like Trump's self-promotion, hyperbole, and exaggeration, may be an easy target for smug ridicule and outrage, but who will have the last laugh? The media is supposed to offer a deep analysis of phenomena such as these, but it has chosen instead to switch off its critical faculties, rendering it impotent in understanding the nature and consequences of Trump-speak.

Trump vs. the media

Trump's use of language was destined to make him a stylistic enemy of journalists. But there is a more straightforward reason for press animosity, namely that Trump returns the sentiment. He has never suffered under the delusion that the press is fair or objective; nor, like most politicians, does he pretend to do so for tactical or appeasement purposes. Trump is not the type to make speeches that stroke the egos of journalists about their role as *stalwart defenders against tyranny* and the like. Rather, his is an instrumental view acquired through a long and bruising relationship:

One thing I've learned about the press is that they're always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational the better. It's in the nature of the job, and I understand that. The point is that if you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you.³¹

Like language, the media is a tool that Trump uses instrumentally. Positive coverage does not matter to him so much as *getting the story out*. In the *Art of the Deal* he reflects on the consequences of the widespread criticism in the New York press following his destruction of sculptures that some wanted to be preserved during the demolition of the Bonwit Teller building:

Ironically, the whole controversy may have ended up being a plus for me in terms of selling Trump Tower. The stories that appeared about it invariably started with sentences like: "In order to make way for one of the world's most luxurious buildings..." Even though the publicity was almost entirely negative, there was a great deal of it, and that drew a tremendous amount of attention to Trump Tower. Almost immediately we saw an upsurge in the sales of apartments. I'm not saying that's a good thing, and in truth it probably says something perverse about the culture we live in...Good publicity is preferable to bad, but...bad publicity is sometimes better than no publicity at all. Controversy, in short, sells.³²

This is an astute observation of how media coverage influences people, much more sophisticated in nature than the reasoning behind the petty semanticism explained in the previous section. Another passage in *The Art of the Deal* foretells the dilemma he would find himself faced with upon his entrance into politics:

If there's one thing I've learned from dealing with politicians over the years, it's that the only thing guaranteed to force them into action is the press—or, more specifically, fear of the press. You can apply all kinds of pressure, make all sorts of pleas and threats, contribute large sums of money to their campaigns, and generally it gets you nothing. But raise the possibility of bad press, even in an obscure publication, and most politicians will jump. Bad press translates into potential lost votes, and if a politician loses enough votes, he won't get reelected. If that happens, he might have to go out and take a 9 to 5 job. That's the last thing most politicians want to do.³³

Trump is by no means immune to the influence of the media, but he has shown less willingness than the politicians he caricatures to 'jump' on demand. Instead, he has continued to antagonize the media as he did in the past:

My people keep telling me I shouldn't write letters like this to critics. The way I see it, critics get to say what they want to about my work, so why shouldn't I be able to say what I want to about theirs?³⁴

New technology did much more than dispense with the need to write nasty letters to critics; it enabled Trump to win the election in 2016 by addressing his supporters and enemies free from the control of

information gatekeepers. It is one of the ironies of 2016 that Trump's election was facilitated by tech companies based in Silicon valley whose owners and employees find him just as odious as many journalists. Much is made of Trump's use of Twitter. Lakoff,³⁵ for example, developed a taxonomy of Trump's Tweets, dividing them into four strategies: *pre-emptive framing, diversion, deflection, and trial balloon*. But these rhetorical strategies pre-date Twitter. What distinguishes Trump's use of Twitter is that it is virtuoso—theoretical metrics simply cannot do it justice. Many of Trump's most frustrated opponents in the press believe that politics is a science; Trump knows that it is an art.

Every era has its biases in communication. Marshall McLuhan's view was that electronic media were sending us back into a tribal era of emotion, spontaneity and unpredictability rather than print-based systemic reductionism—particle physics vs. Newtonian dynamics. Trump excels at this electric tribalism; the media, in the mistaken belief that they are defenders of the rational, fear it.



In an academic paper published in 2017, Brian Ott wrote that "...Twitter breeds dark, degrading, and dehumanizing discourse; it breeds vitriol and violence; in short, it breeds Donald Trump".³⁶ This is a curious statement, but variants of it are common enough. Trump, now 77 years old, is the same as he ever was. In no way was he *bred* by Twitter.

Social media has undermined the power of the establishment media to control the public discourse and threatens them with obsolescence, and Trump is unlikely to come to their defense. The fact that social media content is transmitted "with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment," or that "An individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN, or the New York Times"³⁷ understandably troubles the media, but it suits Trump just fine.

Mass hysteria and psychological projection (or Trump Delusion Syndrome)

hys·te·ri·a/hī-stēr' ē-ə/

- n(1) Behavior exhibiting excessive or uncontrollable emotion, such as fear or panic.
- n(2) A group of psychiatric symptoms, including heightened emotionality, attention-seeking behavior, and physical symptoms in the absence of organic pathology...

A curious article in the New York Times recently claimed that teachers were opposed to reopening schools *because* Trump was enthusiastic to open them up again.³⁸ The byline reads "Distrust of the president and his motives hardened the conviction of some educators that teaching in person was unsafe, helping drive union opposition." The writer explains:

Going back into the classroom seemed possible. Districts started to pull together plans. Then came a tweet..."SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!" President Trump declared on July 6, voicing a mantra he would repeat again and again in the coming weeks, with varying degrees of threat, as he sought to jump-start the nation's flagging economy...Mr. Trump's aggressive, often bellicose demands for reopening classrooms helped to harden the views of many educators that it would be unsafe—and give their powerful unions fodder to demand stronger safety measures or to resist efforts to physically reopen.

What is intriguing from a journalistic perspective is that the article exhibits no self-awareness of how hysterical the presented rationale is. Another illustrative example of Trump-related hysteria is the fierce campaign against use Hydroxychloroquine in treating early-stage COVID-19 infection *solely because of* Trump's enthusiasm for it.³⁹ In truth, the drug has been shown to have some success.⁴⁰ The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons writes:

Peer-reviewed studies published from January through April 20, 2020, provide clear and convincing evidence that HCQ may be beneficial in COVID-19, especially when used early... Unfortunately,

although it is perfectly legal to prescribe drugs for new indications not on the label, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recommended that CQ and HCQ should be used for COVID-19 only in hospitalized patients in the setting of a clinical study if available. Most states are making it difficult for physicians to prescribe or pharmacists to dispense these medications.⁴¹

An underlying theme of Trump media coverage and the public reception it incites, is that *if Trump is for it, we are against it*—a hysterical view if ever there was one. Trump seems to anthropomorphize the fears and uncertainties that many, particularly on the left, feel about the world and that this explains some of the more irrational hostility displayed towards him. The neo-liberal tenets he threatens, and the 'nightmarish' values he represents (with a certain degree of overgeneralization) can be contrasted as follows:

The media	Trump
Cultural humility	Cultural pride
Atoning for Western history	Celebrating Western history
The media as revered experts	The media as a threat
The media is a check on power	The media is a power unto itself
Globalism	America first
Diversity is our strength	We all bleed the same
Illegal immigrants are Americans too	Illegal immigrants are criminals
More immigration	Less immigration
Affirmative action	Merit-based
Censorship (protecting the vulnerable/"hate speech")	Free speech
Semantic truth	Pragmatic truth
Politics as rational	Politics as performance art
Return to normalcy	Drain the swamp
Trust the experts	Trust your instincts/your own eyes

Trump ran on a Republican ticket, but he is not a member of the old Republican elite ("There are two publics as far as I'm concerned. The real public and then there's the New York society horseshit").⁴² Many of the views he expresses would have been conventional 20 or 30 years ago. Some of these views align with things Hillary Clinton and Obama said on immigration, for example, but when Trump says the same things they magically become 'racist.' Trump is a newcomer to politics who either cannot or does not wish to modify his rhetoric to align with the convention of the times. He was elected on the basis of policies that enjoy widespread public support. Responsible, useful journalism requires sincere engagement with such policies, not the Pavlovian reaction to tarnish such ideas simply by virtue of their *association with Trump*.

Demonization is a lazy alternative to tackling the myriad problems of the modern age. Blaming Trump for teachers not going back to work is easier than criticizing teachers who receive full pay sitting at home—because teachers are 'heroes,' and one does not criticize heroes. Blaming Trump for the COVID-19 crisis is easier than tackling the failure of experts and their reductionist efforts to 'stop the virus' by any means without considering more important preliminary considerations such as: i) How bad is it?; ii) Can it be stopped?; and iii) What are the opportunity costs? Anti-immigration sentiment is widespread among the American public, but rather than understand why, it is easier to paint Trump and his followers as racists. A more isolationist foreign policy threatens the military industrial complex and reduces the influence of the intelligence agencies. Rather than offering serious consideration of whether it would in fact be to America's, not to mention the world's, advantage not to spread its military forces quite so widely requires effort, but painting Trump as irresponsible and naïve does not ("Can you *believe* he asked what the point of NATO was?"). Understanding political rhetoric requires knowledge of history and intellectual curiosity, but banging on about Trump being a liar, under the facile presumption that truth telling is key to political effectiveness, requires little thought. Rather than getting to grips with the reasons why people distrust the media so deeply, why not simply play the victim and paint Trump as a threat to press freedom? Who needs to waste time addressing the profound consequences for society wrought by the advent of social media when a more straightforward task is to silence and de-platform Trump's supporters?

In closing

It takes a great deal of professionalism and self-restraint for a journalist, especially one who holds the types of views listed on the left of the table above, to deal with Trump in anything approaching an objective, impartial manner—Trump is a slippery customer and a wily political operator. But this does not absolve journalists of the responsibility to at least try. Unfortunately, the media has chosen the easy, self-satisfying, anti-Trump route, in search of cheap applause. In doing so they have speeded on their own obsolescence, prompting more and more people to abandon them for alternative, Internet-based sources.⁴³ If enough people continue to get their news from the legacy media, it will retain its power. It may still have enough of it to defeat Trump in the coming election (Biden certainly needs their help), but it has been a remarkable thing to see them get so bloodied up by a politically green, reality show host. Trump has always supplied the media with what sells newspapers and garners clicks: sensationalism, controversy, and outrage. The media has foolishly chosen to take the bait as Trump moved into the political realm, catching a nasty dose of the famed Trump Derangement Syndrome in the process. This paper, I hope the reader will understand, is not intended to be a defense of Trump (beyond pointing out that he is treated extremely unfairly by the media), but a critique of the media itself. Politicians, especially those who rise to the top, behave in unsavory ways and there are many legitimate things for which the media can and should take Trump to task. However, by focusing solely on negative coverage and blanket opposition to anything Trump supports, the media has chosen to trade journalistic standards for those of the political class. Trump's behavior, in substance if not in style, is in line with the conventional *modus operandi* of his new profession. What is the media's excuse?

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² Kurtzleben, D. 2017. Study: News Coverage Of Trump More Negative Than For Other Presidents. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/02/555092743/study-news-coverage-of-trump-more-negative-than-for-other-presidents>

³ Anderson, S. 2020. Trump cuts legal immigrants by half and he's not done yet. *Forbes*.

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⁴ U.S. Customs and Border Protection. 2020. *Southwest border migration FY 2020*. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration>

⁵ Harnik, A. (2016). Journalists shower Hillary Clinton with campaign cash. *Publicintegrity.org*. <https://publicintegrity.org/politics/journalists-shower-hillary-clinton-with-campaign-cash/>

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