

# Rhetoric of (re)presentation

## Retoryka (re)prezentacji

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### REAKCJE/REACTIONS

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**The destruction of democracy: American mainstream news reportorial practices today**

**Niszczenie demokracji: współczesne praktyki reporterskie w amerykańskich mediach głównego nurtu**

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## The destruction of democracy: American mainstream news reportorial practices today<sup>1</sup>

The American press has traditionally been seen as libertarian in function, with a slow movement to social responsibility and advocacy (CFP 1947, 15; Seibert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956, 87; Shedden 2015; Pease 2010). Today it's a combination of the two, with an *overwhelming* socially responsible element in political reporting (Are 2020; Niles 2011); in short, journalists should “serve society” rather than merely report news (Aucoin 1995, 8; Breed 1964). One way this has manifested itself is in increased reporter interpretation and less presentation of facts, evidenced in part by the Shrinking Soundbite and other reportorial practices that have increased the interpretive function of reporters (Hallin 1992; Patterson 1997, 452). Unfortunately, as journalists moved from reporting news to interpreting the news (Kuypers 2014), we see a transformation in the American model of news production from essentially Libertarian into an Authoritarian model of the press (cf. Goldberg 2020). To see this, let us look at the political composition of the press; journalists' worldviews and moral judgments expressed in news stories; the implications of all of this; and finally, some solutions to this problem.

### 1. The Political Composition of the Press

Reporters have a shared value system, a monolithic ideological voice, and this predisposes them to see and report news remarkably the same (Kuypers 2014; Shafer and Doherty 2017); *as a group*, they are overwhelmingly Democrat and liberal.<sup>2</sup> For instance, by the 1990s, over 60% of journalists described themselves

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1. Condensed version of the Keynote Presentation as delivered live March 25, 2021 to Media in America, America in Media International Online Conference.

2. By the early 1990s, party affiliation was 50% Democrat, 37% independent, and only 4% Republican, with 9% other parties, primarily left-leaning. This lop-sided party affiliation continues when one moves beyond Washington: 44% of reporters polled nationwide considered themselves Democrats; 34% as independents; only 16% identified themselves as Republicans. Nationwide at this time, however, party affiliation was 33% Democrat, 33% independent, and 30% Republican (“Freedom Forum” n.d.). This trend has only increased to the present day (“Deep Dive” 2015; “Media Bias 101” 2014; see also, Oakley 2009).

as liberal, with only 15% leaning right (Kuypers 2014; Gold 2014; “Media Bias” 2018), and surveys for the past 25 years have consistently shown “journalists are much more liberal than the rest of America” (Noyes 2004; Kuypers, 2020). In *political activities* they are liberal, too. For example, the percentage of journalists voting for the Democrat candidate for president has, since the 1960s, consistently hovered between 75 and 80%, and even higher for national level journalists (Kuypers 2014). In terms of donations, during the 2016 presidential race, of those who gave, 96% gave to Clinton; less than 3% gave to Trump (FEC 2016).

Schooling also plays a role, with student journalists essentially exposed to one ideological perspective, which plays a role in the formation of journalist groupthink (Thorne 2009; Abrams 2017). As reported in 2019: “in the . . . majors . . . where journalists earn their degrees, the number of Republicans on average approaches zero. [T]he number of Americans who lean toward or identify as Republican is around 40%” (Horning and Kuypers 2019). So new journalists are steeped in liberal and progressive culture<sup>3</sup> throughout school and then they step into newsrooms overwhelmingly dominated by liberal thought.

Some will say that having progressive politics doesn’t necessarily mean that journalists inject it into their reporting (Blanding 2018; Carr 2013). Yet journalists have admitted as much through both self-admissions<sup>4</sup> and exposes (Limbaugh 2020). We have liberal journalistic collusion against conservatives demonstrated in groups such as JournoList, Cabalist (Goldberg 2010), GameJournoPros (Yiannopoulos 2014), and JournoList 2 (Nash 2018). In my own work I have listed hundreds of specific examples, and have also cited other works collectively listing tens of thousands (Kuypers 2014, 2002; Aamidor, Kuypers, and Wiesinger 2013). All of this leads to a disconnect between journalists and the public they are to serve.

## 2. Journalists’ worldviews

Going deeper, we can discover how journalists’ worldviews inform their reporting.

In two major studies I looked for worldviews as expressed in news stories, and in another I looked at the moral foundations of journalists expressed in news stories. In terms of worldviews, in one study I examined the nomination acceptance speeches of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (Kuypers 2017), and in the other

3. Some journalism professors actually go so far as to teach that journalists should engage in advocacy journalism, not traditional journalism, thus creating even more pressure on students to conform to progressive norms (see Are 2020; Niles 2011).

4. Of course, a trend since the 1990s is for journalists to describe themselves as “independent” instead of Democrat or Republican, and as “moderate” instead of liberal. But as will be seen later, the actual reportorial practices reflect overwhelmingly a liberal worldview.

study I examined examples of the mainstream news coverage of those speeches (Kuypers 2018). Using Kenneth Burke's (1969) ideas we can discover unity, (or shared views of reality of the world), and also disunity, those points where worldviews and shared notions of reality diverge. When comparing the reporting on Trump and Clinton, I found the news media<sup>5</sup>, in Burke's terminology, wholly insubstantial with Trump, but through its lockstep reporting of Clinton's speech, it demonstrated that it is substantial with her thinking, with the worldview expressed in her speech.

The tendency is for those substantial with each other to see reality in much the same way; and with the press, to report the same as true. So the very way that the press sees the world *prevents* it from fairly and accurately covering both candidates. These worldviews, or terministic screens as Burke called them, are "indicative of the internal thinking of the communicator" and affect the very "nature of our observations..." (1968, 46). In short, such strong substantiality between Clinton and the press would *naturally* lead the press to work (consciously or not) on its own behalf in helping her and hurting Trump, using values that are rooted in both the Democrat party and progressive politics. And we can see this same press worldview operating when we look at press coverage of Trump through the lens of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) (Kuypers 2020).

MFT starts with the premise that human nature is intrinsically linked with moral elements (Haidt 2012, xiii), and that moral reasoning is often about supporting our "social agendas—to justify our own actions and to defend the teams" to which we belong (Haidt 2012, xiv). There are five moral foundations analogous to five moral "tastes," each of which contains an opposite quality:<sup>6</sup> Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation. Empirical research links these receptors to political leanings in individuals, with findings indicating that liberals operate with an increased sensitivity to some receptors, most notably care/harm, and decreased sensitivity to the others; conservatives have a balanced palette use (Haidt 2012). These foundations are both innate *and* learned; society influences us, as do our family, friends, experiences, and culture (Haidt 2012). To the degree that this is true, we should find that the mainstream news media, as its own culture (and monolithically liberal in composition), would show signs of moral reasoning/judgements indicative of the liberal mind in its reporting.

5. E.g.: *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, CNN, and Fox News (see Kuypers 2018).

6. Haidt (2012, 170) and other researchers have suggested a "provisional" sixth foundation, liberty/oppression. The liberty/oppression foundation focuses on equality, and on signs of attempted domination of others. There is a certain degree of "reactance" here, where we react negatively to perceptions of "aggressive, controlling behavior...."

In *President Trump and the News Media: Moral Foundations, Framing, and the Nature of Press Bias in America* (Kuypers 2020) I tested this notion. I looked for the frames used by Trump in major policy speeches, and then looked at the mainstream news reporting concerning those speeches. I found that the press failed to convey both Trump's framing and moral foundations. They instead prioritized their own moral foundations, ones, such as care/harm, that are linked with liberal political beliefs. Put simply, the progressive ideology of the reporters permeated their reporting as linked to their moral values, ones in lock step with those expressed by the Democrat critics the press cited in its stories about Trump. We thus have press reporting intimately aligned with what Democrats and Hillary Clinton are saying. So striking was this, that it appeared that the press has, consciously or not, subordinated itself to Democrat Party views, adopting voluntarily *in practice* an authoritarian model of press functioning, publishing little that would undermine that party's authority or standing, or that would give offense to the existing political values endorsed by that party (Kuypers 2018, 2002; Harsanyi 2020).

### 3. Implications for the American Republic

I've pointed out before the growth of an alternative press, one that represents conservative views and values traditional objective reporting (Kuypers 2014). I posited that as this alternative press grew, mainstream journalists and progressive politicians would have to contend with oppositional points of view—a new competitive, although partisan, press. If we can't have objectivity, let's at least have a competition of ideas through an adversarial press. The response of the mainstream news has been open hostility, censorship, and even greater politically charged reporting. For example, consider the reporting on hydroxychloroquine. Based on my observations, it was essentially neutral until President Trump praised it; immediately coverage turned negative, even in the face of evidence of its effectiveness that should warrant discussion (O'Neil 2020).<sup>7</sup> After the Trump Presidency, mainstream news appears to be quietly saying it is good (Rucker 2021).

As another example, consider the tone of coverage during the 2020 presidential campaign. The news media coverage of Trump was, as it was throughout his presidency, over 90% negative; Candidate Biden's coverage was 2/3rds positive, with reports now suggesting this positivity has only continued (Noyes 2020).<sup>8</sup> Consider also the press suppression of facts during the 2020 presidential campaign; stories that could hurt Biden with voters were minimized or withheld (Sun

7. I am not saying that Hydroxychloroquine is the cure, but only that there was data supporting its effectiveness in certain circumstances and that this was sidelined after President Trump supported investigating this.

8. I performed an informal analysis of a random selection of 100 mainstream news reports from the 2020 campaign and found similar results.

Staff 2021; O’Leary 2021).<sup>9</sup> As another example, with credible accusations and evidence of voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election being actively discussed in the alternative press and in State legislatures across America,<sup>10</sup> the news media responded with the simplistic statement that the election was free and fair even when as many as 100 million Americans believe it was not, and that the man who is now president is there fraudulently.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of addressing these concerns and investigating, the mainstream news media minimizes coverage, or simply ignores it; they had a duty to thoroughly investigate, and they did not.

In the short space after the election these examples continue ad nauseam, with the press favoring Biden and liberal interpretations of events. For example, the *Washington Post* set up a special unit to fact-check President Trump for even the slightest exaggeration, but, even while still fact-checking, deletes that unit of reporting for Joe Biden (Talcott 2021). After months of suggesting to Americans that they couldn’t trust the COVID-19 vaccinations being developed, ABC news almost immediately after Biden assumes office begins urging Americans to trust the vaccines (Marsh 2020; see also Lockhart 2020). And after railing against President Trump’s rather average use of executive orders for several years (Peters and Wooley 2021), ABC praises Joe Biden for “aggressively pursuing executive orders” to obtain policy goals (*Good Morning America* 2020; *This Week* 2021).

I could go on indefinitely with specific examples such as these, but I think the picture has been painted. Unfortunately, it gets worse when one considers BIG TECH.

I mentioned earlier that with the rise of alternate news media, there was growing competition that could be a positive force in society. But I hadn’t reckoned on BIG TECH’s influence. Twitter, Facebook, many social media outlets, and ISPs, aggressively censor and label conservative news and many ideological narratives that they oppose, all while allowing progressive messages, even some hateful ones advocating violence, to remain. Here are but a few examples of the thousands documented (see Berman 2021; Hall 2020; Forbes 2021). Twitter, for instance, allows foreign despots such as Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to spew hatred and threats of violence against Israel, and also allows Communist China’s totalitarian rulers to falsely accuse the United States for COVID-19, and allows them to defend

9. One would assume that if the interview was about how Joe Biden would lead the country that it should have been made available to voters before voting began and not after.

10. I realize that this issue is contentious. The point is that a sizable portion of Americans believe there was fraud and that fraud was being discussed in both non-mainstream media and in the State Legislatures in the contested states. For example, see how the alternative news media reported official State of Georgia Senate Committee Hearings on election fraud that were not well-reported in the MSM (see Steiber 2020; Hoft 2020).

11. I have seen surveys ranging from 74 million to 100 million, with even a sizable number of Independents and Democrats believing there was voter fraud to elect Joe Biden (see “61% Think” 2020; “A Sampling” 2021).

its genocide against the Uyghur Muslims, but then actively discriminates against conservatives and helps liberals in America (Bozell 2021). For instance, it locked the *New York Post* out of its account until it would retract its story on Hunter Biden's association with Communist China and the connection with his father, Joe Biden (Golding 2020). And Twitter actively banned any discussion of election fraud in the 2020 election, as did YouTube, with Facebook joining them by banning some and flagging other stories as "contested." And, of course, there was the banning of the President of the United States from Twitter and subsequently Facebook.

These, and all the other examples, are all signs of a rising authoritarianism, all voluntarily moving toward embracing a totalitarian one party state. If a correct political value is not expressed, they can censor, deplatform, and so on. This is not how Democracy works, but how totalitarianism is grown, as in Communist China. The government did not compel this collusion between BIG TECH and the news media; instead, with the one sided reporting and open attempts at censorship, both BIG TECH and the mainstream news, voluntarily assume an authoritarian model of press operation.

Walter Lippmann wrote over 100 years ago, "the press," and I would add now, BIG TECH, "threatens democracy whenever it has an agenda other than the free flow of ideas. . . ." (1920, 64). The American news media and BIGTECH engage in practices both authoritarian and anti-democratic (Goldberg 2020). The press has for decades taken political sides, but is now *openly* doing so, slowly rending the very fabric of the American Republic (see Goodwin 2016; Nolte 2016). And these actions are not without consequences. As discovered by Gallup, Rasmussen, and others:

"[R]aw partisan shaping of political news has come back to haunt the mainstream press; American's trust in the news media is at an historic low." (Mullen 2016)

A majority of voters believe the press was and is biased against Trump. (McCaskill 2016; see also Lott 2018)

Seventy-two percent of Americans believe that "traditional major news sources report news they know to be fake, false, or purposely misleading. . . ." (Concha 2018)

Only 17 to 23 percent of Americans rate journalists high or very high in ethical standards. (Mencher 2011, 552; Norman 2016)

There are many more such surveys, all of which suggest the same conclusion: *the American mainstream news media, in terms of political reporting, is seen as partisan, unethical, untrustworthy, and is contributing to an increasing sense of partisanship and distrust in American Institutions.*

## Some Solutions

First, the public should demand viewpoint diversity in newsrooms. Given that up to 90% of MSM journalists are left of center (Rokke 2018),<sup>12</sup> news rooms must burst their confirmation bias bubble by hiring those who are not liberal, and return to a notion of a press that *serves the people* instead of the political priorities of the press. We can thus arrive at fairer, more accurate, and Democracy nourishing products. It is simply not the role of the press to effect partisan change, but to provide complete, accurate details, within an unbiased context, so that *the people* may make informed political judgments.

Second, the public must demand anti-trust legislation to break up the corporate consolidation of news outlets and also BIG TECH. Google, Amazon, Facebook, and news owning organizations—all should be broken up. As it stands now, 15 billionaires own almost all of America’s news media (Vinton 2016). This is simply anti-democratic. The best defense against a tyranny—whether of ideas, products, or people—is competition.

Third, the American public should demand Section 230 protections be removed, and that BIG TECH companies who own and run social media networking sites treat them legally as the public sphere in terms of freedom of speech. Thus, no censorship based on political point of view or on the whims of CEOs. Some states are already fighting back with aggressive laws (see Davidson 2021).

Fourth, alternate news and social media sites must take steps to protect themselves from de-platforming. For example, the Twitter alternative, Parlor, which links its free speech policy to that accepted as Constitutionally protected speech, was de-platformed for the crime of refusing to ban conservative thinking on allegations of election fraud in the 2020 presidential election (Lyons 2021; Mazzone 2021). Yet had it used decentralized server networks, it couldn’t have been so eliminated on a political whim (Conklin 2020).

To conclude, then, we have reviewed the political composition of the press and its worldviews which reflect this composition. We have also seen how moral judgements flow from these political points of view, the implications of the press and BIG TECH actions, and considered some solutions. There is no easy path, but America must reform its news media and BIG TECH practices soon or risk losing its Democracy.

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12. This is on the highest end of the estimates and surveys. The exact percentage is difficult to gage, especially since the mid 1990s when journalists, responding to criticisms of bias, began to describe themselves as “moderate” and “independent.”



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