

10 Years of Trumpism

Newsroom

CPR

(Covering Populism Right)



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Journalists worldwide are facing increasing challenges from populists who label the media “enemies”. To cover populism better, newsrooms must adapt

Journalists worldwide are facing increasing challenges from populist-authoritarians who label the media “enemies of the people”. The anti-media campaign includes digital harassment and doxxing of critical reporters, legal and financial warfare, hostile legislation aimed at eliminating press freedom, threats and intimidation, appointing political loyalists to oversee the news, attempted capture of public broadcasters, and establishing media outlets that use the facade of journalism to spread propaganda. This emerging trend – facilitated by an unregulated online universe – has detrimental effects on journalism and democracy.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

1 Undermining and polarising public trust

There is ample evidence by now that – whether true or false – populist campaigns against the media are effective in shaping public perception of the media

2 Harm to journalists’ well-being and safety

Global researchers established the varied and devastating impact of anti-media populism on journalists’ safety and well-being

3 Self-censorship eroding our right to know

Empirical evidence around the world demonstrates that the populist campaign against the media effectively encourages self-censorship, false equivalences, and strategic bias

WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO COVER POPULISM RIGHT?

There are unique risks and challenges when covering populist politicians, parties and movements:

1. Disinformation and conspiracy theories

All interviewees might lie, but research found that populist politicians tend to spread lies and conspiracy theories at an exceptional pace, which makes debunking feel endless and futile. When should you cover demonstrable lies, and when is it better to ignore them? And how to make sure you're not wasting time and resources on what will be old news by the time you finish verifying?

2. Hate speech and incitement to violence

Populist politicians tend to manipulate the media to spread hate speech and incitement of violence or harassment towards various groups, depending on the local context. If you repeat their hateful statements – you help spreading them; if you don't – you might be normalising them. What's the way out?

3. Media bashing

Populists weaponise journalists to spread and amplify their campaign against “the media”. How to cover media bashing without advancing it on the one hand, and without being perceived as “the opposition party” on the other? Should you make yourself ‘the story’? Or is there another approach to take?

HOW TO DO BETTER?

5 Leading Principles

1. Cover, cover, cover.

Political efforts to capture the media should be covered seriously and thoroughly – not buried in media columns. When a substantial threat to democracy takes place, it should open newscasts and lead the headlines. Oftentimes, journalists feel like attacks on journalists (like media purchase by pro-government loyalists or legislation meant to curb press freedom) are some niche, behind-the-scenes, insider talk. It is not. Reporters might feel odd covering their own industry, competitors or workplace, using their mic to try and save ‘their own skin’. However, the war on the media is not about journalists at all. It is about us – the people. Without the public’s attention, journalists are of no interest to anyone. Therefore, it is crucial to cover attempted media overhauls properly. This story is about democracy, and whether we get a chance to fix it.

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2. Campaign for journalism.

Educating people on what journalism is, how it benefits society, and what it requires—should have been the job of schools, not journalists. Unfortunately, this type of democratic education doesn't exist in many aspiring democracies today, and it might even get worse in the foreseeable future. Journalists must step up and fill the vacuum: don't count on others to celebrate independent, powerful journalism and how it serves us all. But what does campaigning for journalism look like?

If you genuinely believe that journalism is essential, explain exactly how and why

Basically, accepting the commitment to promote and explain journalism as a (flawed yet) necessary institution. Abstract arguments about 'democracy' won't do—they're too vague, and carry little sentimental resonance. If you genuinely believe that journalism is essential, don't shy away from stating and demonstrating exactly how and why. How have your outlet actually contributed to people's lives this year? Which case of corruption, discrimination or exploitation have you exposed? Which tough questions have you asked those in power? Which debates did you enable and which voices did you platform? How does your work protect us against foreign propaganda operations or voter suppression? Telling your audiences, as compellingly as possible, what your reporting did for us this year, is a good place to start (and a good compass, too). How have real people truly benefited from your reporting?

3. Solidarity is crucial.

When journalists are labeled ‘enemies of the people’, one destructive instinct is trying to prove one's patriotism. Surrendering to populist loyalty tests can manifest in various ways, from displays of hawkish militarism to avoiding criticism of the country's leadership – even when such criticism is vital. Journalists who belong to marginalised communities are often targeted by authoritarian populists more harshly, and earlier. If you don't speak up when they are bullied, you'll soon find the same tools used to silence you, too. Strategically, ethically, and professionally, solidarity with **all** journalists is essential. It isn't some wishy-washy idealism. It's the only path to media freedom.

4. Objectivity and balance are about process.

Don't fall into the ‘biased media’ trap. Remember: the way to judge your impartiality or balance is when you work on a story, not when you publish it. For instance, when you get a leak about a political scandal in the party you voted for; would you chase it as eagerly as you would if it were the opposing party that's suspected of misconduct? For journalists, the answer is ‘yes’. Will this type of professional, solid, consistent journalism lead to balanced news reporting? Probably not. Politicians and parties are corrupt to varying degrees, lying to varying degrees, spreading hate to varying degrees. Your role is not to balance out an unbalanced reality, but to approach your work, materials, and sources as seriously and as fairly as possible. The outcome will not be **symmetrical** – simply because reality often isn't.

5. Don't leave fun for the bad guys.

Don't let fun become the villains' kingdom. Smart, accurate and valuable journalism can also be funny, real, and moving. News avoidance is growing worldwide, with people investing considerable efforts in actively running away from news. And for good reasons: the news is often depressing, heartbreaking, even maddening. After a decade of Trumpism, it's safe to say entertainment has been an enormous advantage for populists worldwide, from Trump to Farage, from Modi to Milei. If the only fun in town is authoritarian, journalism doesn't stand a chance. The algorithms behind our attention economy turned fun into a powerful magic trick. Fun means attention, and attention is everything. Unfortunately, fun doesn't always correlate with the set of skills required to become an excellent reporter. Well, we'll have to learn! Fun doesn't mean ignoring harsh realities, dumbing down, or faking positive takes. And yet, fun plays a critical role when engagement determines who will see your reporting and how many times. Make news fun again. Fun is a serious matter, and integral part of democracy's survival kit in the 2020s.



10 RULES OF THUMB

I

Don't let the populist become your editor-in-chief.

Lies and hate are easy to produce and quick to spread. Debunking them, however, requires endless resources: time, energy, and workforce. Even if you have miraculously managed to perfect your fact-checking skills and successfully chase the moving target of populist manipulation, you still end up discussing whatever it is the populist determined you would discuss that day. Decades of communication research tell us that often, determining what we **discuss** – for instance, immigration or health care – can be as influential as what we **say** about it. By obsessing over fact-checking, journalists chase an ever-changing bogus agenda. This is what the populist machine counts on: by the time reporters figure out how best to refute the daily lie, ten others already spread. As long as our gatekeepers keep chasing the last dazzling extremist lie, populists will keep running the conversation. When someone lies to you repeatedly, they are not to be trusted; This is true even if they become president. Don't give up on your editorial independence.

II

Pre-bunk rather than debunk.

Wondering how to cover lies and conspiracy theories without amplifying them? If there's reason for concern, it's worth giving viewers an advanced warning. Pre-bunking, a method inspired by vaccination, means alerting the public to be critical towards problematic messages – just like early exposure to a weakened virus helps the body cope with disease. Pre-bunking misinformation is more desirable than debunking it, as prevention is better than cure. Research on pre-bunking is still ongoing, but setting the stage before platforming consistent liars seems like good

journalistic practice either way.

Pre-bunking includes a warning, alerting viewers to the potentially manipulative content they're about to see, thus activating mental defence mechanisms against unwanted manipulation; and preemptive refutation: a 'weakened version' of the problematic content (e.g., previous lies). The chances of successfully covering misinformation seem to increase when following the next steps: (a) Lead with the truth; (b) Warn in advance that a myth is coming; (c) Explain how the myth misleads and what is the motivation behind it; (d) Conclude by reinforcing the fact (multiple times if possible). Another advantage of the pre-bunking approach is its focus on broad narratives rather than specific lies. Thus, journalists aren't expected to refute each lie individually, saving resources and time.

III

Covering conspiracy theories.

Exposure to extreme ideas might increase support for them – even when covered critically – as it fosters a false sense of popularity. Media attention conveys the impression that a conspiracy theory is more popular than it might be. This is how extreme ideas go mainstream. How to do better? First, try not to be the one promoting a niche conspiracy theory into the mainstream. But second, once an extreme idea penetrates the public conversation, make sure to **provide your audience with accurate data on the level of support for it**. Recent findings indicate that fully debunking conspiracy theories, or avoiding them altogether, are both effective strategies in preventing the spread of conspiratorial beliefs. However, when journalists offer mild corrections, or attempt to balance reporting on “both sides” – endorsement of conspiracy beliefs significantly increases.

IV

Silencing attempts should be met with saturation.

Research worldwide repeatedly indicates that solidarity and cooperation are critical to journalists' ability to resist hostile takeovers. This is not only about emotional support — when each newsroom or reporter fights alone, it cannot withstand a sweeping populist attack. When news organisations join forces in the fight for the public's right to know, there's a chance to prevent descent into dictatorship and tyranny. Every new attempt to eliminate media independence should be met with resistance. If a government targets a reporter, her face should be all over the news the next day – regardless of personal contacts or political views. Targeted reporters should be invited everywhere to speak about press freedom and top-down threats to take it away. What authoritarian leaders seek to silence - should be amplified. This would render their silencing efforts ineffective and counterproductive.

V

Find common grounds with your audiences.

It is difficult to compete with partisan media outlets, which a-priori share something very significant with their audiences – their partisan identity or ideological inclination. Too often, journalists who work for media outlets that try to reach across the aisle, end up turning to hyper-nationalism to create an equivalent sense of proximity and belonging. **Try finding identities that you already share with your audience – and activate them.** Initial evidence supports this approach. Maybe you all pay taxes? You're all worried about sending your kids to school after another mass shooting? Perhaps you're all NHS patients? Or dog lovers? Or volunteers? We all have various identities. For journalists to find a non-partisan, non-exclusionary, shared identity with their audiences is crucial for the future of news.

VI

Propaganda is not journalism.

Treating Russia's *RT*, Israel's *Channel 14*, or the US's *OANN* as 'partisan' journalism is wrong and risky. **Those who knowingly spread lies, propaganda, and incitement — often against journalists — are not in the same profession as those sourcing, corroborating, fact-checking, and correcting when needed.** This is not about ideology: conservative journalism exists, even if sidelined in some countries in the 2020s. Media freedom protects journalism, not propagandists who masquerade as journalists to avoid scrutiny. It is important, even if messy and difficult, to distinguish between journalism and anti-media media, which weaponises the journalistic facade against journalistic values.

VII

No pro-con debates on verifiable facts.

Newsrooms tend to prioritise artificial symmetry and false equivalences over accurate representation, often inviting one representative from each side of the aisle – regardless of the value or veracity of their arguments. Jay Rosen called it 'bothsidesism': "distorting a news report by taking an asymmetrical situation and putting it in symmetrical terms". Don't let the populists turn journalistic norms against you. Impartiality, balance and fairness are all means to a goal – the goal is truth-telling. First, avoid holding pro-con debates around fundamentally factual issues. Second, if you've chosen to invite two opposing speakers, make sure to reflect the credibility and popularity of their views among the general public or the relevant professional community. Third, out of fear of being perceived as taking sides, journalists often refrain from determining who is right – this is not serving your audience. Finally, remember that **most topics have more than two valuable, interesting angles – and those are not always spread equally across the political divide.**

VIII

No strategic bias or self-censorship.

The chilling effect of the campaign against the media is powerful, leading to corrosive self-censorship and strategic bias (a defence mechanism where journalists knowingly slant the news to favour one candidate, party or political camp – regardless of their personal beliefs and without informing their audience – as a response to populist challenges to their public credibility and legitimacy). What does it look like in practice? Taming down criticism of populists, avoiding ‘problematic’ interviewees, slanting line-ups, and more. Journalists might turn to strategic bias for good reasons: to maintain the public’s trust or prevent future media bashing. The problem? It’s bad journalism, and it’s not working. Experiences of targeted journalists worldwide tell us that the populist loyalty test never ends: when Fox criticised Trump, he turned against them, as Nigel Farage did when the previously-friendly Daily Mail dared question him. **Unless you’re willing to become full-on propagandists, self-censorship won’t save you.** You might as well try to stand up to authoritarian bullies; together, we stand a chance.

IX

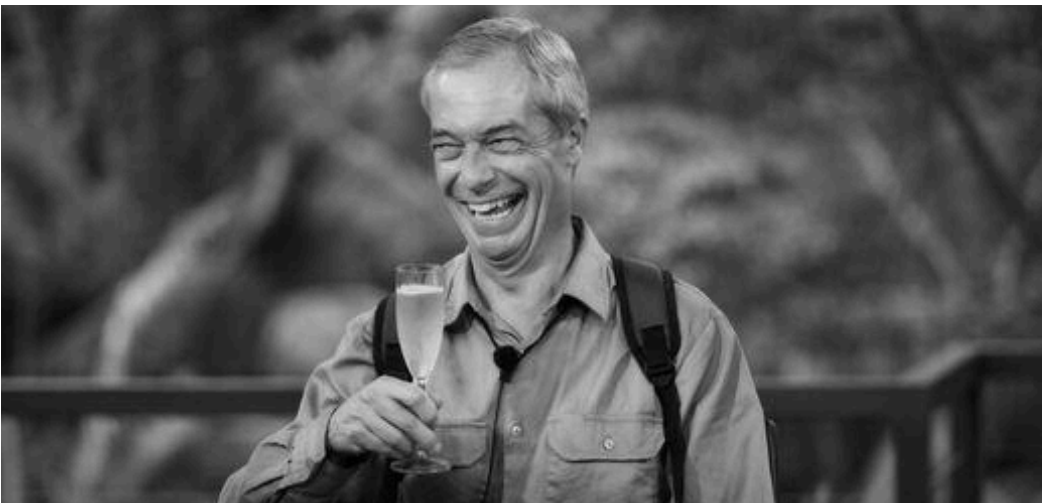
Name and shame.

‘Softening’ and ‘sanewashing’ may sound dignified, but both are nicknames for bad journalistic practices that prioritise politeness and business-as-usual over truth. Instead of using general labels, describe political figures by their specific characteristics: ‘racist’, ‘manipulator’, ‘liar’, ‘convicted felon’, ‘rapist’ or ‘inciter of violence’. Care should be taken to use descriptive words that provide clear context, informing audiences who the person is, what they believe, how trustworthy their previous statements were found to be, and any other relevant information for the public to assess their credibility.

X

Provocations should be dealt with caution.

One of the populist super-powers is attention-grabbing. In today's information space, cutting through the noise is indeed priceless. How should one cover provocative statements by elected officials? Does reporting mean amplifying? Or is ignoring them normalising the outrageous? Populist provocations should be framed as predictably strategic, and it's advisable to minimise bombastic headlines and sensationalism. "Put the statement in context", explains Margaret Sullivan. "'Here's a politician who thrives on division, taking it one step further'. A headline saying 'Trump blasts shithole countries' does the work for him. We want to work for the public". Good journalism does not ignore populist provocations, but reduces the harm to democratic discourse and journalism. "Consider how we cover suicides, mass shootings, or terrorism", says Sullivan. "Coverage of such events exercises extreme caution to avoid copycats and reduce the 'contagion effect'. Similarly, we can –and should – approach populist provocations". Importantly, this also means telling the story of communities harmed by the provocations -and not just the drama of norm-breaker.



10 CONCRETE SCENARIOS

MEDIA BASHING

Politicians defame one of the reporters during a press conference, refusing to answer their question.

When a journalist in the room is attacked and their question is ignored, all journalists in the room should repeat the same question until it is answered. It does not matter whether this is the best question in your view, or if you prepared a better one. You cannot fight for press freedom alone. This is what solidarity looks like in this scenario.

RIGHT-OF-REPLY

A political figure or party send a “reply” to a news story which includes lies, racism, incitement, or mudslinging against political rivals or public institutions.

The right of reply is not a right to defame, smear, lie, or incite. It is meant to protect those without a public platform when they believe they are mistreated by the media. There are different legal and professional norms around the right-to-reply in different countries, but generally, if a political figure or party wish to respond to a news story, they can send a representative to the studio to answer journalists’ questions. If the response contains new, verified, plausible information, it should be broadcast. There is no justification to amplify lies or conspiracy theories, even if they come from the PM’s or the President’s Office, and even if they are labelled as “reply”. Don’t publish as a ‘reply’ content that you would not broadcast in any other format.

BANNING ACCESS

A political leader or party punish journalists for critical reporting by banning access to press conferences or rallies.

Whether the banned journalist is your best friend, a direct competitor, or your greatest enemy, the purpose of such punishment is to create a loyalty regime in which government propaganda is rewarded with carrots, while independent and critical coverage – the kind the public needs – is punished with sticks. There is no room for hesitation. The relevant press corps should immediately leave the press conference or rally until the boycotted reporter or newsroom is reinstated. This principle applies to journalists and reporters – not to propagandists or official spokespeople.

‘PRESS CONFERENCE’

A political leader refuses to give interviews to journalists, counting on newscasts to air his social media videos or ‘interviews’ with propagandists instead.

This is a common scenario and is expected to intensify ahead of election seasons. The temptation is great: every word uttered by a senior political figure — no matter how false or lacking actual public value — feels like “news”. It might even generate ratings or traffic. But broadcasting “interviews” with propagandists legitimises and authorises sycophantic propaganda. Therefore, airing content from propaganda channels should be minimised and put in context (e.g., “Benjamin Netanyahu has refused to answer journalists’ questions for years, the only people he is talking to are his media loyalists, as can be seen in this short video”).

LIVE INTERVIEW

You're accused of being an 'enemy of the people' on a live interview.

Research shows that, unfortunately, the populist demonising of journalists indeed shapes what people think about the media. Too often, journalists refrain from responding to false accusations against their reporting, their workplace, or colleagues. Keeping quiet – hoping that the public sees the populist smear for what it is or waiting for these dark days to pass – has not been proven useful. Initial evidence suggests that responding to media bashing is crucial to maintain (or regain) the public's trust. Think of it as **your** right of reply – not a diversion from journalism, but a better practice of it. In some cases, journalists hesitate to end interviews, fearing accusations of censorship. As a result, the public is often exposed – via the media – to the most egregious lies about 'the media'. Censorship occurs when voices and stories with public value are suppressed; if your interviewees defame you or your profession, ending the interview is an expression of responsibility and care toward your colleagues, and more importantly, audiences.

MEDIA CAPTURE

The government suggests a new legislation aimed at intimidating or restricting media freedom.

Cover any attempts to harm the public's right to know, seriously and thoroughly. Explain the risks, meanings, and implications. Frame each new bill, reform, and initiative to curb media freedom as part of a broader effort to control public opinion. Don't get lost in technical details – they are all part of a comprehensive process with clear goals and a playbook that has played out elsewhere before.

SPEECH

A political leader sends a pre-recorded speech to newsrooms, demanding that it be broadcast immediately.

The first journalistic step would be watching the recording, assessing whether it has public value, cross-checking and debunking falsehoods, removing incitement, and broadcasting it with appropriate framing – if the content is indeed new, important, and interesting. Broadcasting live, without editing or framing, does not require newsrooms, certainly not in the age of social media.

‘INTERVIEW’

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SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation)

A politician or party sues a journalist following accurate (but critical) reporting.

It is vital to stand together against political SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) – lawsuits that are intended to silence, intimidate, and exhaust reporters and newsrooms. If you're not already a member of a journalists' association or union, join one. If you are a member, try to initiate collective legal support against legal warfare on journalism. The goal is never to silence only this one journalist or one particular newsroom. Collective resistance can minimise this phenomenon and weaken its chilling effect.

IN THE NEWSROOM

Concerns arise that political pressures are overriding or beginning to crack the independence of the media outlet you work for.

Unfortunately, local and global history show that attempts at silencing and corruption sometimes percolate into newsrooms. This is a particularly difficult situation, trapping reporters in an impossible position. There is no greater challenge than turning your journalistic skills (investigation, fact-checking, scrutiny of power) toward your own workplace, especially at times of precarious working conditions. Nevertheless, experience shows that silence serves no one in this scenario – apart from those trying to capture the newsroom. If you suspect unethical deals, unprofessional decisions, or silencing efforts within your workplace, organise and leak anonymously to colleagues in other media outlets. There is no other way to ensure your future independence.

SOME GLOBAL INSPIRATION

India

Collaboration towards the last elections

During the 2024 general elections in India, independent news outlets and digital journalists formed an informal coalition to amplify issues often suppressed by the mainstream media. While traditional broadcasters were increasingly operating as ‘Godi Media’ – the local nickname for pro-government media – the independent network of journalists focused on unemployment, agrarian distress, and political corruption. By breaking the monopoly of the ruling party, the BJP, this collective effort played a role in narrowing the influence of Modi’s disinformation operation, ultimately bringing about election results that defied the predictions of most major pollsters.

Australia

Newspapers join efforts against media reform

On October 21, 2019, Australians awoke to a striking visual protest: the front pages of every major daily newspaper were blacked out. This coordinated action, spearheaded by the ‘Your Right to Know’ coalition, served as a powerful response to restrictive national security laws and high-profile police raids on journalists’ homes. Competing media giants united to demonstrate how the criminalisation of journalism threatens public access to information.

Brazil

Reporters choose to leave Bolsonaro's hate conferences

In 2020, Brazil's major newsrooms made an unprecedented collective decision to suspend their daily coverage of then-President Jair Bolsonaro's briefings outside the presidential residence, an action that became known as the 'Cercadinho Boycott' (referring to the fenced-off area designated for press). The move was prompted by persistent insults, humiliations, and verbal harassment directed at journalists by Bolsonaro and his supporters, transforming the briefings into a site of bullying and incitement. This rare collaboration was aimed at ensuring the physical and mental safety of reporters, while setting a firm boundary against the political weaponisation of anti-media violence.

US

CNN calling out election deniers

For a short period of time, following the January 6th insurrection, CNN and other newsrooms adopted an editorial stance which refuses to legitimise 'The Big Lie' (baseless claims regarding the 2020 election results). Journalists were consistently using the term "Election Deniers" to identify candidates who actively undermined the integrity of the democratic process. By employing this unambiguous "naming" strategy, the network prioritised truth and the public's right to know over traditional fears of political backlash or accusations of bias. Unfortunately, this strategy was short-lived.

UK

Journalist start a collective anti-SLAPPs fund

In response to the rise of predatory lawsuits intended to infringe press freedom and intimidate investigative reporters, UK journalists and free speech advocates established the UK Anti-SLAPP Protection Fund. The initiative provides much-needed financial and legal shield for reporters and whistleblowers targeted by Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). By uniting to provide this safety net, journalists mitigate the chilling effect of legal warfare, ensuring that the ability to turn costly litigation into de facto censorship is minimised.

FINAL WORD

It is possible to overcome media capture. Professional journalism still has significant power – otherwise, authoritarian populists would not invest so much effort in silencing it. To avoid deteriorating into tyranny, reporters must use all available tools to fight back now. After the fact, resistance will be far harder, and success rates much lower. Despite past failures and shortcomings, the next steps of media capture can still be stopped – but it will require proactive efforts and updating newsrooms’ protocols.

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For questions, comments, and requests for workshops/trainings, contact us [here](#).