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The Ultimate News Value: Journalism Textbooks, the U.S. Presidency, and the Normalization of Donald Trump

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ABSTRACT

U.S. journalists covering Donald Trump's presidential campaign and early administration submitted to unprecedented abuse while normalizing and legitimizing his candidacy and official acts. Many justified such coverage as something they *had* to do because Trump was definitionally newsworthy. This interpretive textual analysis of 75 journalism textbooks from 1894 to 2016 offers a window into a professional discourse that reifies the U.S. presidency as a news value of such unsurpassable significance that the perceived obligation to naturalize presidential behavior overwhelms professional judgment and journalistic autonomy. The analysis also highlights precedent in journalistic discourse for reporters and editors to ignore or de-legitimize candidates they deem unviable or outside mainstream U.S. politics. Recognizing such normative leeway, and expanding the scope of the ethical imperative to "minimize harm," might make space for journalists to adopt new strategies for covering deceitful and demagogic political actors.

KEYWORDS

Discourse; Donald Trump; journalism; news values; presidency; political journalism; textual analysis; textbooks

When Donald Trump made his dramatic 2015 escalator descent in New York's Trump Tower to announce he was running for president, the political press, by and large, did not take it seriously (Heidt 2018; Tur 2017). Instead, the performance – in which Trump derided Mexican immigrants as "rapists," declared the U.S. "a dumping ground for everybody else's problems," and boasted owning "the best [golf] courses in the world" (*Time Staff* 2015) – was greeted as "comic relief" (Heidt 2018, 218). Trump offered little to recommend him as a future president: He had no resume of military or public service, had driven several businesses into bankruptcy, regularly stiffed his contractors, had promoted baseless conspiracy theories against the sitting president, faced a class action lawsuit over an eponymous "university" accused of fraud, had been sued by the U.S. Justice Department for racially biased leasing practices, and was best known as the self-aggrandizing host of a reality television show. Dismissing his chances of victory and characterizing his candidacy as "a joke" appeared to absolve journalists of confronting the dark content of Trump's message (Heidt 2018, 219).

Despite the bemusement that greeted Trump's announcement, he quickly began to dominate presidential coverage (Confessore and Yourish 2016) and push other candidates, and substantive policy issues, to the sidelines. Because most serious political journalists did

not expect Trump to succeed, we may attribute this early coverage not to political news values but to other news judgment criteria such as prominence, conflict, and unusualness (Patterson 2016). But as Trump's extensive coverage helped him tap into latent racial and gender resentments (e.g., Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018), his populist rhetoric gained support, and he climbed in the polls, journalists' approach to Trump began to change. He was the same man with the same background and the same aberrant ideas. Yet news values surrounding Trump shifted from an entertainment or sideshow frame into a public affairs frame in which Trump became implicated with the U.S. presidency, drawing him into a century-old discourse with certain rules of conduct that journalists find difficult to resist.

This paper offers a Foucault-inspired exploration of professional journalistic discourse around the presidency. It sheds light on longstanding discursive rules of performance (Baym 2000) that help orient and constrain reporters' and editors' approaches to presidential figures through hegemonic constructs of the presidential-press relationship and ideological circumscriptions that have largely persisted in news coverage of Trump's presidency despite his "assault on widely-shared U.S. norms of the presidency, press, and legitimate elections" (Zelizer 2018, 14). The primary work of this study is an interpretive textual analysis of 75 U.S. journalism textbooks published from 1894 to 2016, which offer a rich distillation of professional values through pastiches of narrative instruction, professional interviews, exemplary news articles, secondary research, and authors' personal experiences. Journalism textbooks have been used to examine the discourse around such practices as objectivity (Vos 2012), ethics (Peck 2003), public service (Mari 2015), news values (Parks 2019a), and emotional labor (Hopper and Huxford 2017), but there has been little research on how textbooks have helped to reify discourse around journalism and the U.S. presidency.

While journalism textbooks since the early twentieth century have established explicit criteria for judging newsworthiness (Parks 2019a), the present analysis shows they also have worked implicitly to enshrine the presidency as a distinct and supreme news value: a subject so natural and significant that people in its orbit – however deviant or dangerous – can become the subject of breathless, normalizing coverage. I argue that dominant journalistic discourse around the presidency, exemplified in journalism textbooks and borne out by contemporary case studies, is counterproductive in its rationalizations of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable political news judgment. This is not a causal argument but a discursive one: Textbooks don't drive journalistic decisions, they "put into discourse" (Foucault 1978) the conditions of newsworthiness, offering a uniquely normative window into the universe of possible and plausible decisions journalists have made and are encouraged to make again.

Invoking the Foucaultian concept of discipline ([1975] 1995), a driver of subjectivity in which people accede to assumed but invisible power relations, I argue that dominant discursive norms made journalists' actions to normalize Trump's anti-rational and anti-democratic behavior – such as delegitimizing the press and federal agencies, denying climate change, embracing dictators, and disparaging Constitutional balances of power – appear natural, while efforts to point out his harmful effects in news reports were often unacceptable. Drawing on textbook evidence, I also show that the available journalistic discourse around political and presidential coverage is much broader than the dominant strains of discipline and practice tend to acknowledge. Textbooks contain not just

hegemonic ideological reproductions of professional norms but also contradictory and paradoxical norms (e.g., Parks 2018b) which are equally available to tap. This analysis seeks both to make explicit the common sense reproduced in these texts and to shine a light into remote corners of the discourse where such common sense might be disrupted.

Trump and Journalistic Discipline

NBC News correspondent Katy Tur's (2017) memoir describes her harrowing experience covering Trump in 2015–16. Trump belittled and humiliated Tur, nicknamed her "Little Katy," accused her of lying, and called her reporting "third-rate." His supporters threatened Tur at rallies. Trump also kissed Tur, without consent, before a television appearance: "[B]efore I know what's happening, his hands are on my shoulders and his lips are on my cheek. My eyes widen. My body freezes. My heart stops" (Tur 2017, 54). Tur was "mortified" by the experience, but not for the reasons one might expect. "*I hope the cameras didn't see that,*" she recalls thinking. "*My bosses are never going to take me seriously*" (p. 55). The anecdote is a compelling window into journalistic discipline: Tur is less concerned about a violation of her body, or that such an act by a presidential candidate might be newsworthy, than she is about appearing too familiar with Trump and insufficiently detached to fairly cover him. Her first concern is: Was I being watched?

Tur's story is emblematic of reporters' experiences covering the Trump campaign. While the press corps was routinely humiliated, threatened, mocked, and misled (Mazza 2016), they also provided Trump extensive ink, air, and electrons and integrated Trump's behavior and rhetoric into routinized political coverage. As evident from the initial dismissive journalistic reactions to Trump's candidacy, routinizing such behavior was not inevitable; by doing so, journalists conferred legitimacy to Trump's campaign. Journalists often rationalized their collective actions to certify Trump's authority and amplify his speech by invoking his status as a presidential candidate – adopting the stance that Trump's presence in the race meant reporters simply *could not* ignore him, deny that he was news, or cease to cover his antics.

The professional discursive environment that produces such imperative language, defining an object of newsworthiness journalists were *not permitted* to decertify, conflicts with longstanding discourses around journalistic autonomy and the fundamental right of reporters and editors to define news (Parks 2019b). Journalists "typically have framed their stance in terms of the need to fulfill their public service obligations of informing the citizenry, free from the influences of government or of obligations to any other external force" (Singer 2007, 81). They "claim freedom from interference not only by non-journalists but also by superiors; they have the right to make their own news judgments, which is why they cannot be given orders" (Gans 1979, 101). Despite their obligation to routines and deadlines, "[s]omething about the way news production is learned and enforced gives reporters a great deal of autonomy in choosing which rules to apply and how to apply them" (Ryfe 2006, 203). This autonomy includes the authority to "take sides" in the sense of using judgment to legitimize and amplify certain political actors over others – such as focusing on major- and not minor-party candidates – so long as the decision is collective (Cook 2005) and rationalized on the basis of newsworthiness and not partisanship.

And yet, by insisting in 2015–16 that they *had to* cover Trump, journalists implicitly acknowledged that such coverage proliferated against their better judgment or perception of the common good. No other candidate's coverage required or elicited such a defense. There is a contradiction in journalists' general claims that no one can tell them what to cover and their specific defense of Trump coverage as a categorical necessity. Cook (2005) captures this contradiction by arguing that "journalists work hard to maximize their autonomy. But they also work hard to present a news account that *seems* largely beyond their individual control" (p. 7, emphasis added).

Characterizations in more than a century of journalism textbooks support and reify secondary evidence that the U.S. presidency holds a special, almost mythic, cultural status laden with normative traditions that encourage reporters to subsume their independent judgment to the trappings of the office, even when practical political normativity has been suspended. Michel Foucault ([1975] 1995) explains this conforming behavior in terms of *discipline*, a self-governing mechanism by which people comport themselves as they believe others expect them to behave, even when no one is *making* them do anything. The discipline conceived through Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon – Jeremy Bentham's prison design in which cells surround a central tower from which guards can see but not be seen – helps account for Katy Tur's anecdote above: Journalists were less responsive to their personal reactions to Trump than to what they thought their colleagues and superiors might *think* of their reactions, and they checked themselves accordingly.

Foucault's conception of power differs from more structuralist or Marxist approaches because of his insistence that power is not merely imposed by the strong against the weak but rather constitutes a productive and diffuse potential force. This conception is useful in theorizing journalistic behavior (Andrejevic 2008), in part for its flexibility regarding the circulation of power, which does not inhere in people or institutions but can be wielded in context by any willing actor. Such an approach allows for ruptures that precipitate change in naturalized behaviors, as Foucault "works the seams of ambivalence in the name of possibility" (Andrejevic 2008, 613). The deception of discipline, Foucault suggests, is that it camouflages the fact that "people ... are much freer than they feel" (Martin 1988, 10), because power "doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault [1976] 2000, 120, quoted in Fendler 2010). A goal of critical scholarship is to "know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known" (Foucault [1985] 1990, 9). Foucault's work was explicitly anti-normative, and its diffuse conceptions of power undermine more Habermasian or Arendtian conceptions of a rational and intentional public sphere (Villa 2008, 265), but it helps us to consider how power and discipline contribute to the elevation of certain normative frameworks against competing norms in a discursive field. Foucault also makes space for working journalists to reassert a form of normative democratic politics that Trump has endangered, by inviting us to question why some norms have been naturalized and others have been sidelined in contemporary discourse.

The President and the Press

A key convention of modern American journalism, Schudson (1995) argues, is that "a president is the most important actor in any event in which he takes part" (p. 55) and "the

single most symbolically potent and legitimate source of authority” in the country (p. 1). This is not a natural occurrence, but the result of common-sense conventions embedded in the national culture. Whereas Italian political coverage has emphasized multi-party deliberation and Japanese coverage has focused on bureaucratic process, in the U.S., “normal political news is the story of the President trying to govern, or trying to govern in a way to maximize his chances for reelection ... ” (Schudson 1995, 31). This conceptual primacy is intertwined with popular mythology that exaggerates presidential power (Azari 2016), helping to shape a discourse in which journalists attend to the president relentlessly, reifying cultural expectations that he (so far) is omnipresently newsworthy. The result, according to former *New York Times* reporter Steven Greenhouse (2019), is a “decades-old journalistic reflex that because of the importance of the office, you have to take everything a president – including this president – says seriously ... ”

The aura of supreme significance that surrounds the president – and, by extension, people journalists deem “serious” presidential candidates – renders deviations from routinized journalistic practice subject to Foucaultian discipline, or what Rosen (2017) has called “self-policing.” Rosen cites a *Washington Post* story questioning whether CNN correspondent Jim Acosta had “crossed the line” by resisting early Trump White House press restrictions:

Acosta’s remarks aren’t just blunt; they’re unusual. Reporters are supposed to report, not opine. Yet Acosta’s disdain has flowed openly, raising a question about how far a reporter — supposedly a neutral arbiter of facts, not a commenter on them — can and should go. (Farhi 2017)

The story further observes “the relatively tepid support Acosta has received from his fellow White House journalists. ... In fact, the pushback against Acosta from some quarters of the media has been more striking.” Such an emphasis privileges normative approaches to objectivity – and deference to the office and mythology of the presidency – above normative defenses of open government and democratic process. It’s not, then, that journalists refused to pick a side over the abolition of norms in Trump’s press room – it’s rather that they took the side of Trump.

Journalists continued to validate Trump’s rhetoric through the beginning of his presidency (Parks 2019c). While his falsehoods at rallies, in speeches, and other communication were routinely fact-checked, basic news stories maintained a normative stenographic sheen, with false tweets retweeted and false statements featured prominently in headlines and leads. A study by Media Matters for America of 2,000 news media tweets in early 2019 found that news organizations failed to correct Trump’s false or misleading statements nearly two-thirds of the time (Gertz and Savillo 2019). As *Washington Post* columnist Greg Sargent (2018) writes, “Often it requires reading deep into a story to discover a corrective, if there is a corrective at all.” Sargent attributes the reluctance to aggressively challenge Trump’s statements to the fact that “too many newspaper editors and television producers still continue to fear that if they forcefully — and prominently, right in tweets and headlines — call out Trump’s lies for what they are, they will somehow come across as biased or lacking in objectivity.”

Trump’s words and deeds – including his family separation policy at the U.S.-Mexico border and his inciting language before and after a racially motivated mass shooting – were often subject to aggressive coverage by the third year of his presidency. Some

journalists developed admirable models for consistently covering Trump without normalizing his rhetoric or legitimizing his deceptions (Parks 2019c). However, much daily news coverage of Trump failed to rise to the challenges he posed, instead maintaining the veneer of a normalized presidency entrenched in typical partisan battles and engaged in responsible policy deliberations. Even as Trump escalated racist language and stereotypes against his minoritized political enemies, for instance, the *New York Times* framed this rhetoric as part of a two-sided “feud” with U.S. Representative Elijah E. Cummings and other Democratic lawmakers of color (Baker 2019). Amidst this rhetoric, and following Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s report and testimony implicating Trump in several attempts to thwart investigations into Russian interference in U.S. elections, the *Times* pursued stories such as “Trump Administration Is Divided Over Tax Cut for Investors” – as though a regular White House were pursuing normal policy goals (Rappeport and Tankersley 2019) – and “For Trump, Staying on the Line Helps Keep the G.O.P. in Line” – as though Trump were some kind of throwback to Lyndon Johnson (Hulse 2019).

Such coverage was subject to both intellectual and moral scrutiny in the summer of 2019. Under the headline “Letting Trump off the hook,” a *Columbia Journalism Review* commentary noted how mainstream coverage of an ostensibly unifying speech Trump read after racially motivated mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, “quoted Trump’s words without any effort at context” about his own inciting language (Allsop 2019). Former Republican speechwriter David Frum (2019), meanwhile, pointed out that the public sphere had barely registered Trump repeating conspiracy theories that political rivals Bill or Hillary Clinton had been responsible for the prison death of accused child trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. The breadth and intensity of critiques such as these speak to the level of normalization of Trump that persisted into the third year of his presidency – finally prompting some serious, public-facing introspection at the *New York Times* by mid-August 2019 after the paper changed an equivocating lead headline regarding Trump’s El Paso response (“Trump Urges Unity vs. Racism”) that even staff had protested (e.g., Darcy 2019).

This paper offers evidence from longstanding discourse about the U.S. presidency that suggests an atmosphere in which presidential mythology so overwhelms journalists with disciplinary obligation that they have rarely resisted, denormalized, or delegitimized certain presidential activity – even activity that threatens democratic norms and institutions including the press itself (“Erosion, polarization, and norm violations ...” 2018). Focusing on a century’s worth of journalism textbooks, I argue that these clearinghouses for the institutional values that shape reporting practice have helped to reify the presidency as an implicit but ultimate news value that naturalizes the acts of presidents and legitimized presidential aspirants as mandatory elements of the public domain – contributing to a discourse in which these acts and actors *must* be covered, and even the most dangerous and unworthy pretenders *can’t* be ignored.

Textbooks and Text

This paper is part of a larger research project (e.g., Parks 2019a) exploring news values in journalism textbooks. The present study is an interpretive textual analysis of the discourse of the American presidency in 75 introductory U.S. reporting and writing texts dating from

1894 to 2016. My interest in textbooks stems from these texts' sites as a body of knowledge (Cotter 2010; Kuhn 1970) that offers perhaps the most detailed window into the professional discourse surrounding news values and news selection. Textbook news values aren't the only factors journalists use to reach and justify news decisions (Berkowitz 1990), but such texts are important cultural touchstones of the sensibilities that drive such decisionmaking. Textbooks tend to synthesize and help perpetuate dominant paradigms (Kuhn 1970). Journalism textbooks "have been one of the ways journalists have passed down their institutional knowledge and beliefs about their social role" (Mari 2014, 381). "Hence," writes Vos (2012, 437), "textbooks are uniquely suited to establish occupational norms." Many news values, including timeliness, proximity, and prominence, have been explicit throughout formal journalism education and are thoroughly explicated in textbooks (Parks 2019a). Other values are implicit and can only be discerned through close reading. Journalism scholars such as McCluskey (2019) have begun using explicit textbook news values to help explain coverage decisions about Trump. This study highlights more subtle values in the discourse that inform such decisions, adding important depth and nuance to this research.

Textbooks were selected based on sampling methods from prior studies, focusing after Vos (2012) on titles that achieved at least a second edition from Mirando's (1992) exhaustive bibliography encompassing the mid-nineteenth century through 1987. The sample contains multiple editions from several popular authors (e.g., Charnley, Fedler, Hohenberg, MacDougall, Mencher), some of whom continued updating their texts over several decades. For texts published after 1990, I used the list derived by Hopper and Huxford (2017) from publishers' recommendations of frequently adopted introductory texts. The final sample included 75 texts spanning 122 years. I read each book in depth, taking notes on every reference to the presidency, particularly in the contexts of news values and discussions of journalists' public service responsibilities. Through constant comparison and multiple re-readings, I observed a recurring pattern of discourse around the presidency over time. The following analysis is a cultural and discursive argument, weaving textbook data with secondary literature and examples from historical and contemporary journalistic practice to illuminate the interplay of professional knowledge, scholarly findings, and real-world decisions in (re)producing the discipline surrounding presidential coverage.

The Ultimate News Value

Schudson (1995) suggests that the president's exalted place in U.S. political culture began in the early 1900s, when reporting emphasis shifted from Congress to the chief executive. This period signals the dawning of a journalistic form that "emphasizes the preeminence of the President ... [and] incorporates the assumption that the President is in some sense a representative of the nation, a national trustee, rather than merely the leader of a political party" (p. 60). Stephens (1988) argues that the rise of national radio networks in the 1920s and '30s helped the federal government assert communication primacy over local institutions that were not so efficiently covered: "The president's fireside had become more accessible than the mayor's" (p. 279). Symbolically and metaphorically, the president now embodies the Constitution, unparalleled military power, and the moral authority of the United States as a democratic republic (Schudson 1995).

Evidence in journalism textbooks helps us to trace shifts in professional discourse commensurate with these political and social developments. The singular word “president” does not appear in Edwin L. Shuman’s seminal guidebook *Steps into Journalism* (1894), and presidential references are largely incidental in textbooks published during the first decade of the twentieth century. But in Charles G. Ross’s (1911) *The Writing of News: A Handbook*, a human interest feature on William Howard Taft visiting the Washington Monument is used to illustrate headline styles. The lesson in this example is not about the significance of the presidency; rather the story is selected as a presumably routine article for which the New York *Sun*’s style “demands that in this head the last line of the third deck shall end flush at the right” (p. 204). The choice of a story about a trivial act of a president to make a point about typesetting indicates that such activities have become routinely newsworthy. Grant Milnor Hyde, in his *Newspaper Reporting and Correspondence*, (1912) confirms this suggestion by holding the presidency as the apex of the news value favoring “Big Names”: “Although Colonel Smith of Smith’s Corners has to do something very unusual to get his name in any paper outside his county, the slightest thing that President Taft does is printed in every paper in the country” (p. 23).

For the remainder of the past century, the president has been portrayed in journalism textbooks as definitionally newsworthy. In a chapter on interviewing, Hyde (1912) suggests that the substance of a presidential interview is less commanding than the mere fact that the quotes come from the president: “An interview with the President on the tariff is not necessarily interesting in the new ideas it brings out, for we have many other ways of knowing the President’s opinions on the tariff question; but the interview is worth printing because every one is interested in reading anything that the President says, although he may have read the same thing many times before” (Hyde 1912, 176). C.N. Warren similarly wrote more than a decade later in *News Reporting: A Practice Book* (1929) that “[s]everal important considerations test the value of any public address. Who is the speaker? Every word uttered by the President of the United States is news, while ramblings of a schoolboy orator count for nothing” (p. 80).

We can see in these early twentieth century assertions a formative news value orientation toward “official” sources – especially the highest-level official source – in direct contrast to the everyday citizens for whom those officials purportedly work. The presumption of power and authority vested in the president results in a normalization of the newsworthiness of his everyday activities and reifies the implicit power of his most subtle gestures.

Foucault has been noted for his tendency to find historical discontinuities where others see continuity, and vice-versa (Fendler 2010). In the present analysis, while the power, reach, and cultural authority of the presidency have changed substantially with historical circumstances, technological affordances, and the traits of individual office-holders, I find remarkable continuity in the level of triviality that has been demonstrated as a threshold for newsworthy presidential behavior in prominent journalism textbooks across the past century. For instance, Curtis MacDougall in *A College Course in Reporting for Beginners* ([1932] 1935), the precursor to his half-century run of the text *Interpretative Reporting*, asserts in his section on prominence as a news value, “Even the bait which a president of the United States uses is news, because the fisherman is the chief executive” (p. 54). Some 75 years later, Lanson and Stephens’ (2008) *Writing and Reporting the News*

selects, from all possible cases, a presidential example to illustrate how early twentieth century newspapers would emphasize brief features:

In the first part of this[sic] century, many newspapers would mix in a few short brights to lighten up their front pages. The New York Times once ran a short front-page story about the president being hit by a pea. (p. 374).

Izard, Culbertson, and Lambert's (1973) text *Fundamentals of News Reporting* echoes earlier uses of the president as the pinnacle example of the news value of prominence: "It's gotten so the President of the United States can scarcely sneeze without getting front-page attention" (p. 15).

The intertextuality of journalism textbooks, echoing one another across decades, is evident in these presidential characterizations. Where Izard, Culbertson, and Lambert (1973) noted the newsworthiness of a presidential sneeze, Fedler et al. (2001), in the seventh edition of Fedler's long-running *Reporting for the Media*, heighten the mythology of presidential power by suggesting in their two-paragraph news values entry on "Prominence" not just *interest in* trivial presidential incidents, but *effects from* them: "If an insurance salesperson or a plumber catches a cold, no one cares, except that person's friends and family. If the president of the United States catches a cold, the stock market may lose 500 points" (p. 110). Note also how this 2001 passage juxtaposes the insignificance of the Everyman's concerns against the import of the president's in similar fashion to Warren's characterization in 1929. Fedler et al. do offer a caveat that "Reporters should not cover celebrities to the exclusion of stories about ordinary people, but the American public seems to have an insatiable appetite for information about those who are famous" (p. 110).

Textbook assertions such as those above, which tend to grab historical or hypothetical examples out of context and typically provide no guidance for assessing the *relative* value of presidential activities, facilitate a conflation of style and substance in politics and render commonsensical that all presidential activities are equally noteworthy. They set the stage for contemporary news media's naturalized embrace of every Trump tweet as a discrete object of newsworthiness, regardless of its accuracy, relevance, or context.

The president's special status results not just in outsized coverage but also contradictory norms that produce measures either to protect or damage the president's reputation through quotation choices. Because the president and presidential candidates are under a constant spotlight, the potential for them to say something awkward, impolitic, or ignorant is enormous. Generally, textbooks grant substantial leeway to journalists in determining whether politicians' sloppy speech should be repeated verbatim or massaged toward respectability. Melvin Mencher's (2006) *News Reporting and Writing* devotes a subsection of his chapter on interviewing to "Bushisms," the frequent misstatements of George W. Bush. Mencher appears to argue that accurately conveying a president's meaning is more important than illuminating his intellectual foibles: "Mercifully, reporters overlooked the mangled syntax and the misused nouns and verbs and paraphrase Bush so that his meaning is presented" (p. 322).

Other textbooks, such as John Hohenberg's ([1960] 1962) *The Professional Journalist*, suggest that unorthodox presidential utterances can merit exceptions to typically enforced standards of decency. In a chapter section on "Good Taste," Hohenberg writes:

Usually it is unnecessary to use profanity or blasphemy merely as a matter of straight reporting. The fact that someone said it is not sufficient excuse to repeat it. But if the President of the United States uses profanity to describe a music critic, of course the particular word is at least indicated to the public. *Then profanity becomes news*, and there is a sound excuse for violating the canons of good taste. (p. 90, emphasis added)

This hypothetical textbook scenario arose in actual politics in 2000 when George W. Bush was caught calling *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer a “major league asshole,” resulting in a range of editorial decisions about how to play that language (Kurtz 2000). More recently, Trump said he wanted the U.S. to stop accepting immigrants from “shithole” countries where people of color live, and news organizations wrestled with whether the word “shithole” was appropriate because the president said it. Many decided yes (McCluskey 2019): The *Washington Post*, unprecedentedly, put it in a headline, and CNN ran it on the onscreen chyron. As *Post* Executive Editor Marty Baron said, “When the president says it, we’ll use it verbatim. . . . That’s our policy” (Freed 2018). Note how Baron’s contemporary editorial declaration maps onto Hohenberg’s textbook guidance from six decades earlier – a bright continuity of discourse.

Textbooks acknowledge that it is especially difficult normatively for journalists to dismiss or disparage a high-level elected official. “Like most Americans,” Izard, Culbertson and Lambert note in *Fundamentals of News Reporting*, “journalists want to respect their leaders” (1973, 21). This textbook discourse of respect and deference again played out in contemporary politics, as reporters have seized opportunities to characterize Trump’s less shocking speeches and actions as “presidential.” Media commentators such as Yglesias (2018) noted how reporters covering a Trump meeting with Democrats praised him essentially “for the feat of not suffering from any obvious symptoms of dementia.” Some news stories appeared to coach Trump toward legitimate behavior. One post-hurricane news analysis recounted how Ronald Reagan had taken on the mantle of “consoler-in-chief” after the 1986 space shuttle *Challenger* explosion (Montanaro 2017). The headline on this story, addressed to a president who had already dismissed the millions in the storm’s path with a casual “good luck,” was, “Can Trump Show A Nation He Cares?” The pattern repeated after 2019 mass murders in El Paso, Texas: The *Washington Post* ran a story headlined, “Trump says white supremacy and sinister ideologies ‘must be defeated.’ Will he lead the way?” (Balz 2019). The phenomena of reporters lowering the bar to legitimize Trump got so common that some commentators ahead of the 2018 State of the Union address wrote under headlines such as “Please Don’t Call Him Presidential” (Goldberg 2018).

Journalists Can’t Ignore Candidates – Or Can They?

A principal journalistic rationalization for saturation coverage of Trump has been the invocation of basic news values: He’s a candidate for president; he’s drawing people to rallies; he’s rising in the polls; he won the nomination; he occupies the office. We *can’t* ignore him. Trump’s very success during the 2015–16 campaign was a legitimizing force that increasingly precluded reporters from deviating from the narrative and coverage patterns of their peers, despite Trump’s derogation across a spectrum of political norms. Journalists process their rationalizations as natural, which makes it easy not to notice that the same disciplining forces allow them to rationalize contrary practices when those have been naturalized.

The hegemonic principle of objectivity (Hamilton 2004; Vos 2012) notwithstanding, textbooks dating to the mid-twentieth century encourage journalists to repudiate politicians and public acts that violate basic standards of democracy or decency. The texts do not do this systematically, but rather in the context of a general duty to serve as guardians of what Gans (1979) conceptualized as the “enduring values” that U.S. journalists routinely promote without fear of partisan retribution. These values are *ethnocentrism*, or more favorable treatment for American than foreign interests; *altruistic democracy*, or watchdogging an ideal of honest and efficient governance in which “[f]inancial corruption is always news, as is nepotism, patronage appointments, logrolling, and ‘deals’ in general” (p. 43); *responsible capitalism*, or support for competitive but non-exploitative business conduct; *small-town pastoralism*, or romanticized ideals of tight-knit communities; *individualism*; and *moderatism*.

Implicit defenses of these enduring values, particularly altruistic democracy, appear haphazardly in journalism textbooks. Chilton Bush, in his *Newspaper Reporting of Public Affairs* (1940), for instance, calls for critical engagement by newspapers in political life. Bush argues that although journalists must tolerate “some of the aspects of a show business” in their publication, this “limiting factor” is superseded by the “chief functions” of the newspaper, including “to stand vigil for the public to guard it against unscrupulous exploiters, demagogues, and other real public enemies” (p. 3). A reporter, Bush writes, “should be able to check information given him against other facts in his possession and against his own sense of the probabilities” (p. 4). Wolseley and Campbell’s (1949) *Exploring Journalism* urges a similar critical stance for reporters in an early section on “Constitutional guarantees” and the First Amendment.

When is a newspaperman free to influence? He must have the legal and historical right to criticize those in power and authority. He must have the right — and with it the responsibility — to expose and oppose the government, church, business, or labor when in his judgment he thereby serves public interest. (p. 14)

These are clear assertions in the World War II era (and repeated by Wolseley and Campbell in a later edition printed through at least 1965) of an affirmative duty for journalists to exercise independent moral authority in evaluating power. Such a duty was codified in the Associated Press Managing Editors Association’s undated “Criteria of a Good Newspaper,” quoted in William L. Rivers (1964) *The Mass Media: Reporting, Writing, Editing*. The manifesto declares that good papers “[o]ppose demagogues and other selfish and unwholesome interests, regardless of their size or influence” (p. 338) while exhibiting “a concern for human decency and human betterment and a respect for the accepted standards of its own community” (p. 336). This moral duty was maintained by Harriss, Leiter, and Johnson (1981) in the fourth edition of *The Complete Reporter*, which, while suggesting that journalists’ role in part is “aiding the executive branch to educate the public about matters of government” (p. 316), is clear that “the reporter must be careful not to become just an unquestioning mouthpiece for the executive” (p. 316) and, more critically, “The public more or less depends upon him to expose the bad and commend the good deeds of public officials” (p. 319). A quarter century later and just 10 years before Trump’s election, Melvin Mencher’s *News Reporting and Writing* (2006), in a chapter titled “The Morality of Journalism,” argues that journalists hold “reverence for shared values, rules, codes, laws and arrangements that give a sense of community. Such

concern causes the journalist to keep careful watch for any action that can divide people by groups, classes or races" (p. 553).

A lovely textbook foreshadowing of the 2016 campaign appears in Robert M. Neal's (1949) *News Gathering and News Writing*. In a chapter on "Political News," Neal argues that one of the reporter's "psychological jobs" on the campaign trail is to maintain perspective, offering this hypothetical cautionary tale:

Here is a candidate so bright with color that he seems spectroscopic. He amounts to nothing, but he's a glorious relief from the other candidates. They declaim about tax rates and other mathematics; the sideshow lad jumps on the table, rips off his shirt, sings hymns, and swears lustily. The reporter must present him as what he is, a good show, but must make it evident that the show is vaudeville rather than drama. (Neal 1949, 513)

Should a political reporter aggrandize a sideshow candidate, that candidate eventually "will address throngs of 1,200 rather than 200 and ... will be taken seriously. Why? Because the reporter has built him up from a clown to a prophet" (Neal 1949, 514).

Textbooks are vague as to how reporters might identify political "clowns" or separate legitimate from illegitimate campaign rhetoric, but many are supportive in principle. Chilton Bush (1940), before the "gotcha" investigative era that arguably began around the time of Watergate, lamented journalists' kid-glove treatment of politicians: "[T]he newspaper shields them as it shields no private citizen" (p. 349), in part to preserve access to those officials. Bush, though, offers broad license to newspapers "to identify the true and the false leaders" (p. 348), to closely examine politicians' records of past deeds, and to refrain from printing political falsehoods. Mitchell V. Charnley's *Reporting* (1975) similarly suggests, in traditional gatekeeping fashion, that reportorial authority to determine the public good supersedes the rhetorical privilege of newsmakers or the whims of publics:

The reporter or editor ... has to decide to present facts that interest few of his audience but that nevertheless should be made available to all; on the contrary, he may withhold facts of enormous interest because he feels he cannot justify the results their publication would bring. (p. 25).

And Melvin Mencher (1991), in the fifth edition of his *News Reporting and Writing*, endorses the concept of balance but challenges journalists' perceived obligation to give equal space or treatment to unequal political circumstances:

If candidate A makes an important speech today, the speech may be worth page one play. If, on the same day, opponent B repeats what he said yesterday or utters nonsense, the newspaper or station is under no obligation to balance something with nothing. ... Balance is a moral commitment and cannot be measured by the stopwatch or the ruler. (p. 42-43).

In the contemporary era, in a section on "Covering politics," Tim Harrower's *Inside Reporting* (2013) expects reporters to "to cut through campaign rhetoric" (p. 110), often "with a declarative sentence that reflects your own authority and knowledge – not a quote from an opponent, which turns the discussion into a *he-said, she-said* mudbath" (p. 111).

But these textbook appeals to higher values and autonomous judgment are checked by contradictory, and often superseding, prescriptions around the disciplines of "objectivity" and "balance." On the same page that Harrower (2013) calls for reporters to exercise authority and knowledge in political reporting, he also reminds them to "[t]ake pains to be as

neutral as possible,” borrowing the cliché that “[i]f, over the long run, you get comparable numbers of complaints from both sides of the aisle, there’s a good chance that you are [doing your job]” (p. 111). Although F. Fraser Bond’s (1961) *An Introduction to Journalism* suggests that Washington correspondents enjoy more autonomy than their local peers – they are “given leeway as interpreters and, indeed, in the expression of opinion” (p. 132) – most accounts of political coverage from that period differ, even as recalled in later textbooks. Mencher (1991, 39) quotes a political reporter recalling of the 1964 election,

We could not, without ‘editorializing,’ tell the readers that [Sen. Barry] Goldwater was not getting a strong reaction from the crowds, that he was in some cases boring them. We couldn’t say that some of what he said didn’t make sense ...

Similarly, George S. Hage and co-authors of *New Strategies for Public Affairs Reporting* (1976), in a discussion of objectivity, quote Timothy Crouse, author of the popular campaign memoir *The Boys on the Bus* (1973), noting that Crouse “concluded that a strict anti-interpretation rule was imposed on most journalists. ... ‘A reporter was not allowed to make even the simplest judgments; nor was he expected to verify the candidate’s claims’” (Hage et al. 1976, 18).

Even when textbooks grant journalists room to interpret, reporters are often advised to sugarcoat characterizations that might help audiences confront the brutal nature of certain political behavior: “Reporters assume audience members are intelligent and capable of reaching their own conclusions ...” Fedler and coauthors write in a section titled “Remain Objective” in the seventh edition of *Reporting for the Media* (2001); hence, “Reporters avoid loaded words, such as ‘demagogue,’ ‘extremist,’ ‘radical,’ ‘racist,’ ‘segregationist’ and ‘zealot’” (p. 46). Paradoxically, in a section on “Euphemisms,” the same text congratulates the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* for being blunt while covering gubernatorial candidate David Duke: “When Duke urged a return to ‘neighborhood schools,’ the Times-Picayune reported that Duke was using the phrase as a euphemism for ‘segregated schools’” (Fedler et al. 2001, 80). In a span of 35 pages, then, this textbook both discourages calling someone a segregationist to avoid being biased and offending readers, *and* encourages replacing a politician’s racially coded euphemism with the word “segregated” even at the risk of offending readers. Such juxtapositions offer a microcosm of journalism’s muddled discourse (see Parks 2019b).

In practice, journalists have historically displayed remarkable autonomy in collectively establishing which politicians are and aren’t worth attention, belying the notion that they *have to cover* or *can’t ignore* particular political actors. Schudson (1995, 230), for instance, points to a *Columbia Journalism Review* article detailing “how the press systematically avoided covering Democratic presidential candidate Larry Agran” in the 1992 primary process: “With Catch-22 logic, Agran has been told by news media executives that he has not earned the right to media exposure because, among other things, he has not received enough media exposure” (Meyrowitz 1992, 46). Agran, a longtime local elected official, was ignored in part because he had never held state or national office – a condition that hardly persuaded journalists to dismiss Trump. Even as Agran rose in the polls, news outlets continued to ignore him until his public support dropped back into oblivion, which suggests that momentum alone does not mandate coverage.

A case from the very campaign that made Trump president is Rocky De La Fuente, a millionaire businessman who in 2016 competed for the Democratic nomination and then ran as the Reform Party candidate. De La Fuente garnered almost no coverage from the national news outlets that helped shape campaign discourse, demonstrating that journalists as a group tend to construct and select the personalities to whom egalitarian values apply. These are rules shaped in each unique campaign season through the collective, recursive practices of tightly knit and highly disciplined reporters (Crouse 1973; Tur 2017). Of course, Trump, unlike De La Fuente, met several textbook news criteria before the campaign began: He was already a prominent person and publicity magnet, and his talent for drawing audiences surely produced varying levels of economic pressure on at least broadcast gatekeepers (see Hamilton 2004). But considering normative criteria for assessing the legitimacy of presidential candidates – the criteria journalists applied when they initially dismissed Trump’s candidacy as a joke – reflective journalists might ask themselves what role they played in rendering that candidacy serious.

Conclusion: “Minimize Harm”

In this study, I drew from a broad journalistic discourse circulating through textbook content and professional practice to analyze competing normative claims around journalists’ roles and obligations in covering U.S. presidential figures. I have shown that while the presidency is not listed as a distinct news value in journalism textbooks, it is often portrayed as the epitome of explicit values such as prominence, reifying a sheen of unsurpassable newsworthiness on the office and its seekers. Such a hegemonic value renders journalists easy marks for political operatives who leverage journalistic norms toward their own ends. Textbook discourse also offers numerous ways for journalists to assert their autonomy in the face of this disciplinary juggernaut – duties to clarity, to fairness, to community values, to altruistic democracy – but coverage of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign suggests a superior cultural value was at play: “[T]he media not only performed institutional functions in 2016. It also reinforced the values and impressions associated with the institution in question – the presidency” (Azari 2016, 679). Journalists have largely forsaken alternative norms and traditions as they succumbed to the supreme newsworthiness of this institution in making news decisions about Trump.

A corrective might be to privilege one journalistic norm whose broad application could disrupt journalists’ tendency to apply traditional news values without regard to those values’ consequences. The Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics, reprinted in numerous textbooks, has since 1996 included a section titled “Minimize Harm.” The section is narrowly written and interpreted, with a focus on showing compassion to vulnerable sources and being sensitive when reporting on private citizens (Plaisance and Deppa 2009; Slattery 2016). But imagine if this mandate to minimize harm were construed broadly and applied to the social implications of reporting. As textbook authors Fedler et al. (2001) relatedly suggest in their chapter on ethics:

A journalist can ask several questions when facing an ethical decision. Two of the most important are:

- Who will be hurt, and how many?
- Who will be helped, and how many?

... Weighing the hurt against the benefits, and justifying that hurt, can help journalists make the right choice. (p. 538)

Of course, these questions require speculative and subjective reasoning (Richardson 1994). But they also create opportunities for political journalism that journalists are generally disciplined to avoid. To take the SPJ code, and Fedler et al.'s questions, at face value would open up all kinds of ostensibly forbidden choices. Journalists, for instance, could have approached the 2016 election by asking, "Who will be hurt or helped if Donald Trump is elected, and how many? Who will be hurt or helped if Hillary Clinton is elected, and how many?" and then proceeding with coverage based on informed conclusions about which candidate would be more likely to hurt or help the country and world. This could well mean "taking sides" in the traditional sense of suggesting that one candidate might be preferable to another by framing choices explicitly in terms of costs and benefits to health, the environment, wages, investments, global stability, etc. But if such conclusions are based on rigorous reporting and informed projections, the "side" journalists take would be of the citizens whose futures depend on electoral outcomes.

I've seen no evidence that it ever occurred to a journalist to apply the "minimize harm" standard to something so monumental as a federal election. Bringing it into the discourse might make space for journalists to adopt new strategies for covering deceitful and demagogic politics.

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