When Distancing Fails—How Journalists' Discursive and Mnemonic Techniques Facilitated the Rise of Trump and Trumpism

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This article argues that journalists used distancing techniques and mnemonic devices leading up to and following Trump's electoral win to make sense of Trump and Trumpism and to bolster their cultural authority at a time when trust in media is at record lows. A textual analysis of news documents and metajournalistic discourse indicates a form of reflexivity in which journalistic practice is justified by relying on discursive distancing techniques and past historical analogies including Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate. This article suggests that by using these techniques, journalists helped to facilitate the rise of Trump and Trumpism. Thus, this article recommends that journalists change their distancing practices and their reliance on past events that serve to legitimate their current temporal reality to ensure that journalism can serve as an agent of prospective memory and thus more accurately and comprehensively provide space for an imaginative future.

Keywords: collective memory, cultural authority, Donald Trump, journalism, prospective memory, Trumpism

Following Donald Trump's surprise electoral victory in November 2016, several journalists and media organizations, pundits, and pollsters attempted to ascertain how they spectacularly failed to anticipate the electoral outcome. Myriad factors were at play, including the proliferation of fake news across social media channels, the bullish and adversarial stance of Trump versus the press, and Trump's ability to circumvent the media's traditional agenda-setting process (Delli Carpini, 2018). Throughout Trump's presidency, journalists reported on an unpredictable president in an increasingly fractured, foggy, and "fake news" infused news landscape filled with false and frenetic tweets. During this time, journalists also sought to defend themselves and their importance as meaning makers following an election outcome they failed to predict and their role in facilitating the phenomenon of Trumpism.

Trumpism is a dynamic concept that relates to the philosophy, policies, and politics of Trump, especially those involving the appearance of a rejection of the current political establishment, the vigorous pursuit of U.S. national interests, as well as the outrageous statements uttered by him (Flood, 2016). The

inaugural address Trump delivered was "Trumpism distilled to its raw essence: angry, blunt-spoken, and deeply aggrieved" (Barabak, 2017, para. 2). Trumpism embodies the characteristics of celebrity, nativism, the outsider, and populism, which has made it a unique political phenomenon with surprising appeal across the political spectrum and which extends beyond Trump himself (Tabachnick, 2016). Although embodied by Trump, Trumpism emerges from a culmination of trends that have been occurring for decades and represents "a fundamental shift in the relationships between journalism, politics, and democracy" (Delli Carpini, 2018, p. 18). Trumpism exists amid increased right-wing populism in the United States, Europe, and certain countries in South America. Although this article deals with Trumpism (of which a tenet is populism), it is worth noting that this article adheres to the definition of populism as "a political communication style in the construction of identity and political power" (Block & Negrine, 2017, p. 179), which generally uses communication to connect with *the people* and to demonize the other (i.e., elites/the establishment). The theoretical framework of populist political communication proposed by Block and Negrine (2017) applies well to Trumpism because it suggests that Trump uses and reinvents cultural symbols to construct collective identity; leads by brutally antagonizing the elite and connecting with disenfranchised publics through colloquial yet skillful rhetoric; creates ongoing controversy; and becomes the media event (Block & Negrine, 2017). In other words, Trump uses a political style of communication that connects and divides and constructs and reconstructs identities in the pursuit of power (Block & Negrine, 2017).

Trumpism has been chosen for this article because its emergence takes the form of a moment that is important to the continued well-being of the journalistic community (Zelizer, 1992). For the first 18 months since Trump announced his candidacy, the news media tended to portray Trump as an unlikely contender for the presidency, focusing on his clownish remarks and egomaniacal and narcissistic tweets (Greenberg, 2016). Yet, as Trump appeared to resonate with larger parts of the population, secured the nomination, and ultimately was elected president of the United States, journalists and others had to wrestle with the emergence of something broader than Trump himself: Trumpism. Trumpism is also relevant to journalism because the media ostensibly helped to fuel its rise. As scholars have long noted, the news media and antiestablishment agents are invested in and act as coproducers of disruptive events (Katz & Liebes, 2007). Meanwhile, commercial imperatives of media organizations reward coverage of spectacle because it results in higher advertising dollars and revenue for these organizations (Kellner, 1984). Trump is a king of spectacle—purposefully making outlandish and culturally insensitive comments to cement his visibility in the media and playing to his image as an outsider. Throughout his presidency, media organizations have been more than willing to oblige such antics and thus helped to cement Trump's dominant place in the news. Indeed, Trump received nearly double the amount of nightly broadcast network news coverage than his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton (Tyndall, 2015), and he received between $2 billion to $3 billion worth of free media coverage throughout his campaign (Confessore & Yourish, 2016; Schroeder, 2016). Cable-news organizations also benefited—receiving $2.5 billion during the election cycle (Berg, 2016; Gold & Weprin, 2016). Former CBS president Leslie Moonves infamously remarked during the election that even though Trump might not be good for America, he has been "damn good for CBS" (Collins, 2016, para. 2; Goodman, 2016). This symbiotic relationship between polarizing political figures and the media companies that report on their behavior has deeply entrenched commercialized imperatives and logics. As a result, the watchdog function of the American news media is marginalized while sensational coverage is prioritized, in this case, ultimately contributing to Trump's ascendance to the White House.

This article aims to fill a gap in the scholarly literature by focusing on how journalists may have facilitated the rise of Trump and Trumpism through the discursive practices or techniques of distancing that they use when reporting, including their recursive turn to the past to make meaning of an inchoate present. To do so, this article will engage with Trumpism through an interpretive textual analysis of news articles to examine how journalists discursively rely on past events in their coverage of Trump and Trumpism; how journalists distance themselves from the way they covered Trump and the rise of Trumpism; and the ways in which journalists assert their cultural authority when describing Trump and Trumpism. In doing so, this article will connect journalistic practices as they relate to the coverage of Trump and Trumpism to larger claims about journalistic practices and provide an opportunity for analytical reflection to better ensure that journalists are more thorough and circumspect when covering future political events and politicians in the United States.

Metajournalistic Discourse, Distancing, and Journalists' Recursive Turn to the Past

Journalism is variable, socially, and contextually embedded (Carlson, 2016). In response to challenges and threats to journalism, journalists actively strive to shape collective notions of what constitutes journalism through metajournalistic discourse or "the public interpretive work journalists and others do to define appropriate journalistic practices and to argue for (and, in some cases, against) journalistic authority" (Carlson, 2012, p. 34). Such discourse is an interpretive activity aimed at better defining the dynamic concept of journalism (Carlson, 2014) and includes the meanings of journalism, from definitions and boundaries to claims of legitimacy, that arise through metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016). It plays several roles, including determining boundaries of acceptable behavior (Gieryn, 1999), controlling what constitutes journalistic activity (Carlson, 2014), influencing members of the public, and establishing closure among myriad journalistic actors (Berkowitz, 2000). This boundary work examines "how the practitioners protect their boundaries by both extolling the strengths of what they do and demonizing those who might encroach on their territory" (Conway, 2016, p. 386). Journalists use metajournalistic discourse to distance themselves from some audiences while closing the distance among others, such as their fellow journalistic peers. The theory of metajournalistic discourse argues that discursive processes reveal and contribute to shared understandings of journalism, which are then visible through journalistic practices (Carlson, 2016). As Zelizer (1990) has noted, the "function of journalistic discourse is not only to relay news but to help journalists promote themselves as cultural authorities for events of the 'real world'" (p. vi).

Another way the media seek to reiterate their authority and role in the present is by turning to past events through the lens of collective memory. Collective memory is "a metaphor that formulates society's retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting" (Schwartz, 1991, p. 302). It allows journalists to activate the familiar, which operates as a heuristic for audience comprehension while simultaneously affirming the news media's authority in the retelling of the event. In this way, memory is used as an instrument of reconfiguration rather than retrieval (Halbwachs, 1950/1980).

Thus, collective memory helps to make news stories appear persuasive and natural while streamlining journalistic labor (Berkowitz, 2011). Associated with the notion of collective memory is the

concept of critical incidents (Zelizer, 1992, 1993) or "hot moments" (Levi-Strauss, 1966)—when a society or culture assesses its significance through discourse (Zelizer, 1993). Journalists invoke the past for myriad reasons, including "to delimit an era, as a yardstick, for analogies, and for the shorthand explanations or lessons it can provide" (Lang & Lang, 1989, p. 127). In so doing, journalists use three forms of stories: Commemorations, historical analogies, and historical contexts (Edy, 1999). Historical analogies are the most relevant to this article because they use the past "as a tool to analyze and predict the outcome of a current situation" and thus make the past relevant to the present (Edy, 1999, pp. 76–77). Journalistic sharing of memories through discourse helps to establish journalists as members of an interpretive community or "a group that authenticates itself through interpretations furthered by its narratives and rhetoric" (Zelizer, 1990, p. 13). "Collective memory, as the vessel of codified knowledge across time and space, reflects a reshaping of the parameters of appropriate practice through which journalists construct themselves as cultural authorities" (Zelizer, 1990, p. 8). More specifically, journalistic authority is "the ability of journalists to promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespeople for the events of the 'real world'" (Zelizer, 1990, p. 20). This study will explore what three critical incidents meant to the journalists who covered them: Trump's nomination, Trump's election, and the investigation into Trump's Russia ties. It will assess how journalists have used narratives about these incidents to consolidate themselves into an authoritative interpretive community and cultural authorities.

My research questions include the following:

RQ1:   *What historical analogies and discursive distancing strategies are used by journalists to make sense of Trump and Trumpism?*

RQ2:   *What does the use of these historical analogies and discursive distancing strategies reveal about journalists as interpretive communities and their cultural authority?*

This article will show how journalists' decisions to connect to past events provide a way for them to reassert their cultural authority and strengthen their position as members of interpretive communities at a time when trust in media is at a historic low. Yet, in doing so, they also limit the potential of journalism to engage with prospective memory and imagine different futures.

Qualitatively Engaging With Trumpism Through Textual Analysis

I conducted a textual analysis on 150 Lexis-Nexis articles under the category of "major U.S. newspapers" from June 2015 to October 2017 that contained the word "Trumpism." This period was chosen because it included Trump's presidential campaign, his election, as well as his first year (approximately) in office. In this sample, I found that three historical analogies—McCarthyism, Watergate, and Goldwater—frequently emerged. I constructed a sample frame by using the search terms "Trumpism AND Watergate OR Goldwater OR McCarthyism" within the body of the articles from Lexis-Nexis for all sources within the category of "major U.S. newspapers." I supplemented this archive with articles from the Media Cloud's database (a platform for studying media ecosystems) and the *Columbia Journalism Review* to obtain metajournalistic discourse. I carried out a textual analysis with two rounds of coding to examine manifest and latent content and contextual meaning (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The first round of open coding identified

themes related to historical memory when journalists talked about Trump and Trumpism, specifically the examples of Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate. The second round of coding focused more explicitly on the language used to better understand the meaning of content and how discursive strategies differed (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). I used the frame of critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the "discursive conditions, components and consequences of power abuse by dominant (elite) groups and institutions" (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 24) to examine how the media talk about their practices and the elite actors they report on and because it provides a way to interrogate discursive distancing through specific linguistic features. Specifically, I looked at two linguistic terms: Nominalization and genericization. Nominalization is "a transformation which reduces a whole clause to its nucleus, the verb, and turns that into a noun" (Fowler, 1991, p. 39). It has several ideological features, including "a) deleting agency; b) reifying; c) positing reified concepts as agents, and d) maintaining unequal power relations" (Billig, 2008, p. 785). Genericization is the representation of "social actors as classes rather than as specific individuals" (Baker & Ellece, 2011, pp. 52–53). The final two ways of assessing distancing involve examining journalists' rhetorical strategies of objectivity and balance as they relate to Trump and Trumpism and temporal modes of distancing within articles that cited historical analogies of Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate when covering Trump and Trumpism. I ultimately discovered insights into how past historical analogies informed journalistic interpretations of current phenomena in the political sphere.

Understanding the Phenomenon of Trumpism

To understand how journalists used techniques of distancing, it is first important to identify how journalists talked about Trump and Trumpism. Many news articles implicitly or explicitly suggested that Trump would not win the presidency but cautioned that the phenomenon of Trumpism, which Trump embodied and emblematized, might nonetheless remain. According to one journalist, "There's Trump and there's Trumpism. The political fate of the former remains unpredictable. It's the latter that may have already carried the day in the Grand Old Party (GOP). In that sense, The Donald may have already triumphed" (Grier, 2016, para. 7). Trump and Trumpism may be inextricably linked because they "represent an amalgam of long-festering economic, cultural and racial dissatisfaction among a swath of left-out Americans," are "a broader manifestation of the uneven impact of globalization on a significant segment of the population," and "a rejection by these voters of institutions and elites in both parties" (Balz, 2016, paras. 4, 7). Regardless of whether Trump won or lost on election day, he had already reshaped the Republican Party and current-day politics through the arrival of his particular brand of Trumpism, which "has now entered the lexicon, shorthand for his blend of populism and nativism, delivered with the charisma of a celebrity outsider" and had "shown the way to the nomination with a message of nativism and economic populism" (Feldmann, 2016, paras. 46, 66). Another journalist agreed, stating that

> Even assuming Trump loses, the relief will be superficial: Trumpism will remain, and the world will have to contend with the fact that about 40% of the US electorate saw little wrong with his racism and misogyny, alleged sexual assaults, business scandals, lies, misrepresentations of his wealth and charitable giving, probable failure to pay taxes, lack of impulse control, profound ignorance and tiny attention span. (Burkeman, 2016, para. 3)

To obtain a better sense of the discursive features related to Trumpism, I searched for "Trumpism" in the collection "U.S. Top digital native sources" in Media Cloud's database to generate a word cloud that revealed associations with Trumpism.[2] In the coverage I examined, the term populist was most frequently associated with Trumpism, followed by xenophobia and nationalism. The size of words in the word cloud indicates frequency, with larger words being used more often in news coverage as they relate to the phenomenon of Trumpism. Smaller-sized words also arose in the coverage as it relates to Trumpism but were not used as often. Thus, while Trumpism is discursively described in various ways, the concept has negative characteristics and associations.

Figure 1. Trumpism word cloud.

It is clear from this word cloud that Trump has negative connotations in mainstream news coverage. In this regard, he has emblematized everything that America was (supposedly) not. The question then arises how was it possible to contextualize a president who undermines all that the United States stands for according to mainstream news outlets? It is here that journalists turned to distancing mechanisms, looking for interpretive tools that could give Trump's actions meaning while maintaining their own authority.

Mechanisms of Distancing

Journalists use distancing to simultaneously cover news events and self-protect. This article identifies three primary forms of distancing that journalists used when covering Trump and Trumpism: (1) discursive distancing, (2) normative distancing, and (3) mnemonic distancing.

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[2] Media Cloud is a consortium research project across the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Northeastern University, and Harvard's Berkman Klein Project.

Discursive Distancing

This type of distancing uses specific methods in metajournalistic discourse to distance the journalist from their audience. In discursive distancing, nominalization and genericization are used. Nominalization is the "conversion of processes into nominals" (Baker & Ellece, 2011, p. 76), and it permits "habits of concealment" because it is "inherently potentially mystificatory" (Fowler, 1991, p. 80). The choice of nominalization in discourse also serves to delete agency, give an appearance of objectivity (Fairclough, 1992), and reify the process because processes assume the status of things (Fowler, 1991). A concern about journalists' reliance on "Trumpism" is that it nominalizes a phenomenon that is wider, more historic, and more complicated than can be identified only through Trump. Alongside nominalization is the technique of genericization or the representation of "social actors as classes rather than as specific individuals" (Baker & Ellece, 2011, pp. 52–53). Journalists used this technique when describing Trumpism's supposed followers during the election campaign and while following Trump's win by grouping supporters of Trump and his brand of Trumpism into the category of the White, working-class, or blue-collar voters. For example, the *New York Times* heralded Trump's victory because of his appeal to "a largely overlooked coalition of mostly blue-collar white and working-class voters" (Flegenheimer & Barbaro, 2016, para. 4), while the *Atlantic* called Trump's "blue-collar following" the reason behind his success (Brownstein, 2015). *Poynter* argued that the election outcome showed in part how disconnected journalists are from much of the country and how they need to be reporting from rural America and have more diversity in the newsroom to better address and cover stories that deal with race and low socioeconomic status (Hare & Mantzarlis, 2016).

The lack of socioeconomic, racial, gender, and ideological diversity in newsrooms (Chideya, 2018; Cobb, 2018; Grieco, 2018) and the surplus of local news deserts throughout America (Stites, 2018) contributed to discursive distancing and the media's failure to understand and explain Trump's supporters. Instead of taking Trump supporters seriously, many journalists ridiculed and dismissed them. Such representations of Trump's followers by journalists were later revealed to be inaccurate by journalists and researchers as many of Trump's followers were White, well-educated, and affluent voters (Carnes & Lupu, 2016, 2017; Uberti, 2017). By using an inaccurate genericization in their description of Trump supporters, journalists discursively distanced themselves and their imagined readers from the cognitive conflict that they may be part of in a society that facilitated Trump's rise to power. In so doing, they elided their responsibility as journalists to present a comprehensive and accurate narrative of a sociopolitical phenomenon to inform the public. Journalists' failure to maintain a pulse on America's voters and the media's inability to forecast a Trump win signifies a test for the journalistic field. When describing the moment for journalism, the editor of *Columbia Journalism Review* invoked historical memory by saying, "In terms of bellwether moments, this is our anti-Watergate" (Pope, 2016, para. 2).

Normative Distancing

The use of objectivity and false equivalence, or "the presentation of each side of a debate as equally credible, even when the factual evidence is stacked heavily on one side" (Spayd, 2016, para. 2), is a technique of normative distancing found in the metajournalistic discourse. By employing these techniques, journalists discursively distanced themselves from the idea that they may have facilitated Trump's rise to

power. For example, during the presidential campaign, some reporters allowed candidates to speak for themselves without any added judgment or analysis and regardless of the facticity of the information (Mann, 2016). Journalists also tended to cover outrageous statements and systematic transgressions of known boundaries of American political behavior by not distinguishing among the severity of such transgressions or adding necessary context, which could have helped viewers and the public understand the differences between boorishness and demagoguery (McQuaid, 2015). Additionally, journalists cited polls that showed Trump and Clinton were considered untrustworthy by citizens but without analyzing "the sources and consequences of the public distrust for each candidate" (Mann, 2016, para. 4), thereby treating them equally according to journalistic standards but doing a disservice democratically by leaving the public ignorant and misinformed. Yet, when called out on these issues, the (now former) public editor of the *New York Times*, Liz Spayd, argued that journalists, and the *New York Times* in particular, had covered the campaign in a fair and journalistically responsible way: "The problem with false balance doctrine is that it masquerades as rational thinking. What the critics really want is for journalists to apply their own moral and ideological judgments to the candidates" (Spayd, 2016, para. 8). Yet, such thinking is problematic when covering an outlier like Trump whose behavior is quite outside the norm for U.S. presidential politics.

Mnemonic Distancing

The third technique found in the metajournalistic discourse is mnemonic distancing or when journalists turn to the past and use collective memory to embolden themselves as members of an interpretive community and reassert their cultural authority. More specifically, in this study it was found that journalists relied on connecting the present to the past with historical analogies to bring meaning to an unprecedented and mercurial presidential candidate, a surprising and historic presidential election, and a seemingly endless deluge of controversial and norm-breaking behavior by Trump during the early stages of his presidency. The three historical analogies that rose to the fore in the metajournalistic discourse analyzed included allusions to three political figures in U.S. history: Barry Goldwater, Joseph McCarthy, and Richard Nixon. These historical analogies were invoked not only to describe Trumpism but also in reaction to events during Trump's campaign and presidency. The following section will provide a brief background on each of the three historical analogies before assessing how they interrelate with Trumpism.

Three Historical Analogies: Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate

In 1964, Democrats and Republicans attacked U.S. Republican senator Barry Goldwater during his presidential campaign for his demagogic tendencies and his leadership of right-wing extremists and racists. Goldwater was criticized for being someone who "was likely to lead the United States into nuclear war, eliminate civil rights progress and destroy such social welfare programs as Social Security" (Barnes, 1998, para. 6). That same year, more than 1,000 psychologists signed a letter declaring Goldwater unfit for public office. In response, Goldwater sued *Fact* magazine for libel and won. Shortly thereafter, the American Psychiatric Association's professional code of conduct established that it was forbidden for "members to publicly comment on the psyches of living public figures whom they have not personally examined," leading to the creation of the Goldwater Rule (Mayer, 2017, para. 2).

Joseph McCarthy was a former U.S. senator from Wisconsin, who was closely associated with the so-called Red Scare in the United States because he publicly persecuted innocent and often elite individuals through hearings and investigations by falsely arguing that they were communists, leading to the development of McCarthyism (Griffith, 1970). McCarthy and McCarthyism began to fall out of favor following televised hearings between McCarthy and the army in which McCarthy attacked members of the armed forces for supposedly having communists in their midst.

The 1970s' Watergate scandal involved associates connected to U.S. president Richard Nixon's reelection campaign who were caught stealing documents and wiretapping phones of the Democratic Party headquarters. To cover up the crime, Nixon took aggressive steps including telling the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to impede the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigation, which was an abuse of presidential power and a deliberate obstruction of justice. Eventually the House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment, leading Nixon to resign before there could be a vote against him (Logevall & Preston, 2008; Strauss, 2017).

Goldwater, Norm Deviation, and Mental Instability

The three main historical analogies worked in tandem to import different sources of distancing. Journalists invoked former conservative Republican, Barry Goldwater, to describe how Trump and Trumpism deviated from the Republican norm. During Trump's campaign, traditional Republicans were horrified that the GOP could become synonymous with Goldwaterism, which they believed, would marginalize Republicans like it did following Goldwater's landslide loss in 1964 when conservatives lost (and ultimately never recovered) the Black vote. According to one journalist,

> Today's Republicans face a similar threat from Trumpism. Trump's racist rhetoric and hardline immigration policies have alienated Hispanic voters, a group that is rapidly increasing its share of the population. Should Trump win the nomination, he could cost the GOP the Hispanic vote for a generation. (Hemmer, 2016, para. 13)

Journalists also referenced the Goldwater Rule when drawing parallels to Trump's lack of mental fitness for presidential office. The analogy emerged in part because of an online campaign by psychologist William J. Doherty, who wrote an online manifesto speaking out against the dangers of Trumpism. As in the Goldwater era, the manifesto was signed by hundreds of psychologists who agreed that Trumpism was a danger to society.

Journalistic use of the Goldwater analogy when describing Trump and Trumpism served two main purposes. By connecting Goldwater's resurgent conservatism campaign, which ultimately failed, to Trump's distinctively anti-Republican campaign, journalists were suggesting that Trump and Trumpism would ultimately fail because the campaign deviated too spectacularly from the status quo. When Trump was able to obtain the nomination and was not completely repudiated by the Republican establishment à la Goldwater, journalists turned to concerns about Trump's lack of mental fitness for office with the expectation that such concerns would ultimately have a similar effect as they did on Goldwater and lead the public to consider him unfit for office and not vote for him. Yet, Trump continued to surprise journalists, Republicans, and members

of the public by winning the nomination and ultimately becoming president of the United States. Ultimately, the Goldwater analogy used by journalists and others underscored a personal assault on Trump and his associated brand of Trumpism although its outcome deviated from past historical outcomes.

Trumpism as 21st-Century McCarthyism

Journalists also leveraged the historical analogy of McCarthyism to warn against the dangers of Trumpism. McCarthy and Trump were considered demagogues, opportunists, scapegoaters, and men without character, who were helped to power by political elites who were willing to look the other way (Beinart, 2015). A *New Yorker* article proclaimed that "Trump is the second coming of Joseph McCarthy," citing their "kindred traits of demagogues—bombast and the manipulation of public fear in the service of their own ends" and "conspiratorial outlook" (Cobb, 2016, paras. 1–2). Another journalist said, "Every era spews up a Joe McCarthy type who tries to thrive by dividing and frightening us, and today his name is Donald Trump" (Friedman, 2015, para. 16). This discourse reveals how journalists who were critical of news coverage used the example of McCarthy and McCarthyism to show parallels with Trump and Trumpism.

Journalists called out Trump and McCarthy's symbiotic relationship with the press corps and the "objective" journalism that fueled the leaders' demagogic tendencies and left their pathological lies unchecked (Cobb, 2016, para. 3). Journalists argued that the media's opportunistic approach to the coverage of Trump "betrayed an inability to recognize that Trump is not a standard candidate but rather the kind of polarizing, knowledge-proof opportunist whom the Founders worried might one day come to power in their fledgling nation" (Cobb, 2016, para. 5). In this way, journalists sought to distance themselves from their role in Trump's rise while other journalists critiqued these actions by invoking the historical analogy of McCarthyism as a warning to their fellow journalists that history was about to repeat itself unless journalism learned from its past mistakes and examined Trump's rise critically, analytically, and rigorously.

Echoing Watergate in Hope for a Better Future

Watergate was the most frequently used historical analogy in the news articles that were assessed. This may have been for myriad reasons, including the similarities between Watergate and events of Trump's presidency, the abundance of Watergate-era sources, and because the press has lionized its role in bringing down Nixon through its Watergate coverage.

The Watergate analogy was used by journalists to show similarities between Watergate and Trump's presidency. Watergate and Trump's election both began with break-ins—the physical break-in that occurred in the Watergate Hotel and the virtual hacking of the Democratic National Committee. Both Watergate and Trump's election involved the "acquisition of damaging political intelligence," and both involved orders from presidents (i.e., Nixon and Putin, respectively; Freedland, 2017, para. 2). Both are believed to have engaged in corrupt behavior and Trump's firing of FBI director James Comey echoed Nixon's order to fire the independent special prosecutor Archibald Cox, which led to the infamous Saturday Night Massacre.

Another reason the Watergate analogy was prominent is that Watergate-era sources are relatively easy to access and were used by journalists to draw parallels between present-day occurrences in the Trump administration and actions that took place during Watergate (Glasser, 2017).

Journalists also invoked Watergate to remind each other and the public that they had been in this position before and had an important role to play in ensuring Trump's presidency is evaluated and investigated by hard-hitting reporting. Journalists reasserted their cultural authority by arguing that President Trump's time in office would eventually end like Nixon's—an end that they helped to facilitate through their investigative and persistent reporting on the Watergate scandal. Said one journalist,

> If you look through a sharp Nixonian lens at Trump's trajectory in office to date, short as it has been, you will discover more of an overlap than you might expect . . . You will find reason to hope that the 45th president's path through scandal may wind up at the same destination as the 37th's—a premature exit from the White House in disgrace—on a comparable timeline. (Rich, 2017, para. 6)

Such an explanation underscores journalists' attempts to predict the outcome of Trump's presidency by leveraging the historical analogy of Watergate and by using their cultural authority as journalists. Others argued that Trump was inspiring practicing journalists to hold power to account despite the financial uncertainty of the profession. Once more, journalists talked about their profession in terms of a calling more than a choice—a sentiment that would have resonated with the "Watergate generation" of journalists (Sullivan, 2017).

Journalists also invoked Watergate to inspire the next generation of journalists covering Trump and Trumpism. The day after Donald Trump was elected president, Columbia University journalism professor Ari Goldman reminded his stunned journalism students that America had been in the same place before, with the election of Nixon. Like Trump, Goldman (2016) said, Nixon "was an ardent foe of press freedom. He wiretapped journalists' phones, unleashed the Internal Revenue Service on them, and featured them prominently on his 'enemies list'" (para. 6). Goldman (2016) told his students that "Nixon won by a landslide that night . . . but most important . . . He was forced to resign less than two years later because of two young and smart reporters at *The Washington Post*" (para. 6). By leveraging Watergate in this way, Goldman was reiterating the myth of journalism-in-Watergate or the belief among journalists that they alone brought down Nixon (Schudson, 1992).

Seeking Calm in Chaos

This article used a qualitative textual analysis to examine how journalists discursively rely on past events in their coverage of Trump and Trumpism, how they distanced themselves from the way they covered both, and how they asserted their cultural authority when doing so. More specifically, it revealed that journalists used distancing techniques of genericization and nominalization; rhetorical strategies of objectivity and balance; and historical analogies of Goldwater, McCarthyism, and Watergate to try to make sense of Trump and Trumpism.

The discursive distancing techniques of genericization and nominalization and the normative distancing techniques of objectivity and false equivalence underscore journalism as an interpretive community deeply unsettled by the shattering of the status quo through the rise of Trump and Trumpism. The metajournalistic discourse of these discursive distancing strategies revealed that journalists were trying to maintain a sense of normalcy by going about business as normal and by employing techniques long equated with "good" journalism such as balance and objectivity. Journalists' use of nominalization and genericization also underscored a subconscious entrenchment of traditional, hierarchical power structures that had limited minority involvement—whether racial, gender, socioeconomic, or geographic.

As the events of Trump's nomination, campaigns, election, and presidential tenure took root, so too did journalists' adherence to collective memory to both uphold their place in their interpretive community and their cultural authority to provide journalistic accounts of norm-shattering behavior. By repairing to the past, journalists were signaling that "this too shall pass" if only they were to dig in and report as they had previously, such as during the Watergate scandal, thus contributing to the eventual resignation of former President Richard Nixon.

Using historical analogies can be reassuring to the public because they suggest an ending that is predictable. Such reassurance may reduce the visceral discomfort of the citizenry, but it can also be problematic for the public imaginary because it suggests a knowable ending. Analogies that view the past as static can prevent individuals from fully anticipating and imagining a future that is different from the past. As a result, individuals may become complacent because they are comforted by the belief that the patterns of the past will occur in the present if they just wait long enough for them to appear. The ferocious cacophony that Trump constructed and wielded through his tweets and Trumpisms serves to inculcate fear and anxiety and squash space for imagination and an ability to know oneself in temporal reality (Gessen, 2017). In the media's race to keep up, they fell back on their "ingrained tendency to search for historical analogies to current events" (Siegel, 2017, para. 1). Rather than "looking for the future in the misty past . . . we should be looking for it in the inchoate patterns of the present" (Siegel, 2017, para. 7).

This article has reaffirmed Berkowitz's (2011) finding that journalists use mnemonic devices to help "make news stories appear natural and compelling" while "streamlining" their work (p. 201). By using the historical analogy of Watergate, journalists engaged in "double-time," which enabled them "to claim historical authority" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 233) based on their perceived journalistic authority. Interestingly, journalists did not do so in their reporting of McCarthyism despite Edward R. Murrow's celebrated acts of journalism in that era. This may have been because in many ways the myth of Watergate outshines journalistic authority associated with other historical analogies like McCarthyism or Goldwater. Ultimately, the discourse showed how Trump has emblematized everything that America was (supposedly) not, and how journalists have sought to contextualize a president who undermines what America stands for by turning to the past to find historical events that could give Trump's actions meaning.

Toward Imagination in Journalism

As events related to Trump's time in office continue to unfold and as he has announced making another run at the presidency, it is likely that journalists will continue to use historical analogies to explain the present.

Yet, rather than root themselves in an illusion of a static past, the media could change their journalism into "an agent of prospective memory" to remind readers and the broader public what needs to be done (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2011, p. 214). In other words, journalists could move beyond their agenda-setting function to provide "*reminders* of collective commitments, promises, and intentions" and provide a "*to-do list*" of what could be done (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2011, p. 216; emphasis in original). Tying prospective memory to imagination could be an important way for journalists to move beyond limited historical analogies to encapsulate the chaotic and embryonic patterns of the present more accurately and creatively and to provide space for change amid the confusing and deliberate cacophony of Trumpism. Doing so could pave the way for journalists to give "presence and visibility to issues and people when information, images, or visible developments are not available" (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2011, p. 221) and thus more accurately and comprehensively articulate our current temporal reality and provide space for an imaginative future.

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