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Ronald N. Jacobs

*University at Albany, State University of New York*

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## Virality, Algorithms, and Illiberal Attacks on the Press: Legitimation Strategies for a New World

Ronald N. Jacobs\*


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### Abstract

Historically, professional journalism has justified its importance through a series of binary oppositions that privileged objectivity over opinion, news over entertainment, impartiality over partisanship, and public interest over profit. Over the last half century these distinctions have become increasingly destabilized, and the press finds itself under attack from a number of different directions. This article examines the social forces that have combined to challenge press authority: (1) the changing ownership structure and revenue model for news organizations, (2) the shifting dynamics of media influence made possible by convergence culture and algorithmic culture, and (3) the attacks on expertise made possible by the spread of neoliberal and populist rhetorics in the public sphere. After describing this challenging new media climate, the article finishes by examining the different legitimation strategies journalists have used to defend themselves, considering the different challenges and constraints they confront when articulating these strategies as well as the different potential alliances that are available to them.

**Keywords:** Journalism; populism; algorithmic culture; democracy; civil society.

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\* Department of Sociology, University at Albany, State University of New York (United States); ✉ [rjacobs@albany.edu](mailto:rjacobs@albany.edu);  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1253-8102>

## 1 Introduction

In November 2018 the White House revoked the press pass of CNN reporter Jim Acosta, after a verbal confrontation he had with President Trump. CNN sued the White House, arguing that they were violating the reporter's First Amendment and Fifth Amendment rights. While extremely unusual by historical standards, the confrontation was part of a clear pattern for President Trump, who had repeatedly called the press the "enemy of the people," and who had threatened to fine and even jail journalists he disliked. Defenders of the press responded with equal force, raising millions of dollars for legal defense funds to protect press freedoms, and filing dozens of lawsuits challenging Trump's attacks on a free press.

Trump's behavior is unusual because of the strong history of press freedoms in the US, but his attacks on the press are part of a larger global trend. According to Freedom House, press freedoms have been deteriorating for the last decade. For a long time, it was primarily authoritarian governments that threatened press freedoms, through tactics of censorship and intimidation. Though these tactics continue to prove effective, and while they increasingly serve as inspiration for populist and would-be authoritarian leaders, they are being supplemented by new types of attacks that are appearing in democratic societies. Indeed, there is now a well-developed "illiberal toolbox" that elected political leaders are using to threaten and curtail journalists' actions (Csaky, 2019). These new tools include the following key strategies:

- The creation of new media outlets, the takeover of financially-struggling organizations, and the biased distribution of state advertising, all designed to increase the proportion of pro-government media and also to make pro-government media more profitable than their competitors.
- The installation of loyalists at the head of public media organizations, which increasingly become agents of state propaganda.
- The deployment of expensive lawsuits and tax investigations against critical media organizations, which are designed to make them unprofitable and ultimately to drive them out of business.
- A refusal to grant interviews to journalists who work for more independent and critical media organizations.
- A campaign of verbal harassment against the press, in which journalists are called traitors, foreign agents, and the like.
- An unwillingness to pursue or prosecute cases of physical threats made against journalists.
- An indifference to fake news and disinformation campaigns, which contributes to a general mistrust of all media information.

The historical strategies of press legitimation are not well-suited to the significant new challenges that this "illiberal toolbox" presents. While the discourse of a "crisis of journalism" is as old as professional journalism itself (Breese, 2016), the political and professional challenges facing journalists today are fundamentally different in several important respects. My aim in this article is to describe these new challenges, and to explore the different legitimation strategies that journalists are developing to confront the new challenges that face them.

## 2 The Traditional Narrative of Press Legitimation

Legitimation of journalism is important for two reasons. First, legitimation is absolutely essential for securing the relationship between news organizations and their readers. To put it simply, if readers do not trust journalists to act as legitimate professionals, they will not read newspaper articles, or watch television news programs, or click on new websites. Understandings are not fixed for what counts as press legitimacy, and readers are open to new narratives about the legitimate role of journalism. Once they settle on an understanding of what that legitimate role is, however, they must believe that the press is fulfilling that role.

The legitimacy of the press is also consequential for the relationship between journalists and political actors. After all, it is the legitimacy of the press that forces political actors to engage with journalists in the public sphere — answering questions, justifying their positions, and engaging in debate in front of a large, impersonal public audience. Similarly, the source and meaning of that legitimacy is not fixed. It could be based on a belief that journalists are representatives of the public, it could be based on the celebrity and the influence of journalists themselves, it could be based on a belief that journalists are an important source of public opinion and will formation, or it could be based on something else entirely. But most political actors prefer secrecy, and engage in public sphere discussions only grudgingly (Adut, 2018). The main reason they participate in public debate is because of the power, influence, and legitimacy of the press.

Cultural sociologists have identified a “sacred discourse of journalism” that links the mission of the press to the ambitions and the ideals of democracy and civil society. Because the sacred discourse of journalism is part of a culture structure, it is everywhere put into practice through the semiotic logic of opposition (Alexander, 2006). The sacred is only made meaningful in relationship to the profane, the pure through the polluted, the heroic through the tragic. A heroic press narrative only works in relationship to a crisis narrative.

Historically, the cultural logic of press legitimation has been built around three sets of binary oppositions. The first is a distinction between information and opinion. Here the goal of the press is to provide citizens with the information they need to become informed and discerning citizens (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). Individuals read newspapers, watch television, and browse the internet to become better informed about public matters, to make more informed choices about public policies, and to distinguish fact from opinion. In fulfilling this aim, editors and journalists have a civic responsibility to get the facts right, and to hold public officials accountable to getting the facts right.

The second opposition that has informed the culture of press legitimation is the distinction between impartiality and partisanship. As Schudson (1978), has argued, the modern press evolved throughout the nineteenth century, shifting away from a media ecology dominated by partisan party papers toward a new situation dominated by neutral and impartial styles of reporting. Specific strategies developed for reporting about the facts of the day (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). Fact-based news articles and opinion-based editorial columns were strictly separated. There were new guidelines about how to source news articles, how to develop and deploy quotations, and what kinds of authorial voices were appropriate for creating a non-partisan presentation of the relevant facts of the day.

The third and final element is the distinction between news and entertainment. Modern discourses about democracy and civil society were built upon a symbolic hierarchy that privileged serious talk about politics and policy, while criticizing talk about entertainment as a mindless diversion from more serious matters (Jacobs, 2012). Journalism has more or less embraced

this symbolic hierarchy. The newspaper places its most important stories about politics and policy in the front page and the front section, while segregating news about arts, entertainment, and sports into separate sections that come later. The majority of journalism awards are reserved for the more “serious” news genres, which means that professional status tends to concentrate around those genres.

Historically, these three sets of binary oppositions have combined together to institutionalize a “sacred discourse of journalism”, which symbolically purifies objective print-based news while polluting entertainment-based television (Jacobs & Wild, 2013). As new media technologies enter the scene, this gets elaborated as a historical narrative about a golden age of print journalism that is perpetually under threat by new technologies (Breese, 2016). If journalism is failing, in this narrative, it is because it is unable to combat the encroachment of entertainment values and market logics. This is the standard form of press legitimation that journalists produce, particularly if they are elite print journalists.

As I have argued elsewhere, the traditional strategies of press legitimation featured prominently in the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential election (Jacobs, 2017). In criticizing the press coverage of the political campaign, elite journalists and media critics complained that news organizations had treated the campaign as a reality television program. They complained that dishonest political actors had been able to bypass the critical press by using Facebook and other social media to spread falsehoods and propaganda. They complained that decades of cynical political comedy had eroded the public’s interest in the kinds of impartial, information-based deliberative norms that were essential for a democratic political culture. And yet, even while making these criticisms, they did so with a sense of resignation, and a growing awareness that the media ecology in which they operated had changed forever.

### 3 The New Media Ecology

While the environment in which journalists work is always changing, the pace of change has accelerated rapidly over the last three decades, in a manner that has profoundly destabilized and challenged the traditional narratives of press legitimation. These changes include (a) new ownership patterns and revenue models that have been imposed on news organizations, (b) the growth of convergence culture and algorithmic culture, and (c) new trends in populist rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1 Ownership Patterns and Revenue Models

The intensifying concentration of media ownership is by now well-known. When Ben Bagdikian first published *The Media Monopoly* in 1983, he sounded the alarm about the fact that there were fifty companies that together controlled more than half of the total media market share (Bagdikian, 1983). By 2004, when he published *The New Media Monopoly*, that number had been reduced to five companies: Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Viacom, and Bertelsmann (Bagdikian, 2004). Since 2010, more than 90 percent of media market share has been controlled by no more than six companies (Rapp & Jenkins, 2018).

The concentration of ownership presents a number of potential hazards to the press. When news organizations are controlled by a small number of large corporations, there is a tendency

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1. The discussion that follows concentrates on the US experience, where all three trends are well-developed. To be sure, different media systems would display different levels of development and balance in the different changes that characterize the US experience.

for them to privilege the voices and perspectives of corporate managers over those of workers and unions (McChesney, 2008). Corporate ownership also tends to place larger profit expectations on the press, typically resulting in reduced news-gathering costs (reducing the number of journalists, of news bureaus, and of extended investigative stories) and an increased proportion of “soft news” stories that will attract a wealthier consumer audience (e.g., expanded travel sections, real estate stories, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

The growing preference for digital media has also had a big impact on the press, and particularly for print newspapers. Total newspaper advertising revenue has been on the decline since 2006, driven by a continuing decline in overall circulation as well as an accelerating turn to digital media (Boczkowski, 2004). The problem with digital media is not only that digital newspaper ads cost less, but also that the turn to digital media means that the ad revenue is often going to aggregator sites (Google, Facebook, BuzzFeed) instead of the legacy journalism organizations. And these trends have an impact on the daily practices of journalists too, as they are asked to devote more of their energies thinking about how to become reputational entrepreneurs on Twitter and other social media (Revers, 2017).

In an era of neoliberalism, where the ability to be viable in the market is the dominant test of social and moral worthiness, the financial pressures facing many news organizations create legitimation challenges for the press. To put it simply, newspapers that fail to turn a profit are viewed by many as failing in general, and television news stations that suffer from low ratings are viewed as illegitimate (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). These kinds of criticisms align easily with populist rhetorics, as I discuss later in the article.

#### 4 The Intensification of Convergence Culture

Connected to the changing ownership patterns described above is the rise of convergence culture, in which the distinctions between different media genres and media formats become increasingly blurred. As audiences have become increasingly segmented, and as a small number of media companies have grown and consolidated their control, they have shifted their programming strategies toward content that encourages intensive engagement, across multiple media platforms, and over extended periods of time. According to Jenkins (2006), who focuses primarily on entertainment and creativity, convergence culture offers a number of advantages to users and would-be content creators, including low entry costs, good informal mentorship, the opportunity to develop media skills, and the continual adaptive upgrading of those skills.

Where the press is concerned, however, the advantages of convergence culture are less clear. As Sunstein (2001) has argued persuasively, convergence culture encourages the creation of self-contained multi-media ecosystems that fan the flames of political partisanship. The ability to filter topics means that people are only exposed to content that they choose themselves. This minimizes unanticipated encounters with others who have different experiences and different opinions. As like-minded individuals interact only with each other, they strengthen and harden the attitudes and beliefs that they hold in common. Building a homogeneous and self-reinforcing information ecosystem, they come to see alternative beliefs not just as different but as evil. They develop an adversarial relationship to those audiences and publics that have different beliefs, viewing the world of networked audiences and publics through an increasingly Manichean lens of allies and enemies (Malacarne, 2020).

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2. For a thoughtful review of the literature on the sociology of media ownership, see Benson (2019).

These tendencies toward polarization are accelerating further with algorithmic culture, in which machine learning technologies analyze users' media browsing patterns in order to select and suggest new information for them. The basic idea here is that algorithms help to create "filter bubbles" in which the user is fed information that matches her previous consumption behavior (Pariser, 2011). The user is likely to click on these algorithmically provided links, because they confirm preexisting biases and interests; when they do this, the algorithm feeds them even more of this kind of content, resulting in ever more narrow and selective exposure (Cho et al., 2020). Even more concerning, algorithmic selection technologies do not tend to distinguish between high-quality and low-quality information, or between professional journalism and "fake news" (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Political actors can take advantage of how these algorithms work to spread propaganda, to manipulate public opinion, and to sow division and discord (Kurasawa, 2014; Golebiewski & boyd, 2019).

Taken together, convergence culture and algorithmic culture have created significant legitimacy challenges for the press. Balanced, professional journalism finds itself polluted as either uninteresting, or dishonest, or both. For many of the many media consumers who get their news from social media, professional journalism gets filtered out almost entirely, replaced by algorithmically curated sources of information that reinforce and harden prior beliefs. In this new media ecosystem, the quest for alternative viewpoints and the respect for expertise both recede in importance — particularly when combined with a resurgent populist movement that seeks to delegitimize the very notions of impartiality and expert knowledge.

#### 4.1 New Trends in Populist Rhetoric

Taken together, convergence culture and algorithmic culture encourage an attitude of ambivalence about expertise, by suggesting that traditional expert discourse is only one form of analysis and interpretation, and by questioning whether expert discourse deserves the intellectual privileges that have historically been associated with it. Neoliberal discourse reinforces this ambivalence, by offering up a singular and alternative metric for evaluating quality, in which quality and worthiness is reduced to market success. The spread of populism accelerates these delegitimation tendencies even further, by inverting the hierarchical relationship between expertise and ordinary knowledge (Jacobs & Townsley, 2018).

The rise of right-wing populism has been a significant force in the Western world since the late-1980s (Berezin, 2009; Kazin, 1995). Globalization and neoliberalism have weakened national identities at the same time as they have magnified feelings of insecurity. Populist movements have been able to exploit these insecurities, usually relying on charismatic leaders who promise to return society to "the people" by overthrowing a corrupt establishment and building higher walls against external enemies (Hawkins, 2010). Examining the structure of populist discourse, Mudde (2004) finds that it is based on a binary distinction between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." The symbolic pollution of elites is a key factor, because it helps to mobilize large masses of people against traditional political leaders and traditional forms of expertise. A leader who can successfully use populist discourse becomes almost immune to traditional forms of criticism, because every critique by an intellectual expert quickly gets interpreted as evidence that the leader is succeeding in their epic quest — rescuing society from the corrupt establishment, and returning it to the people (Moffitt, 2016).

Berlusconi provided the contemporary template for using populist discourse in a mediated world defined by increasingly diverse and relativized forms of intellectual/ public performance. Berlusconi was already a celebrity based on his extensive real estate and media holdings,

which gave him virtually unlimited access to the means of symbolic communication. Berlusconi presented himself as the savior of the Italian people, calling himself the Jesus Christ of politics. He made exaggerated claims about how great Italy would be after he became the leader. He relied on performance styles that he knew would be dismissed and mocked by traditional political experts and critics. He made frequent references to his sexual exploits. He made vague policy proposals that were instantly dismissed by the experts as uninformed, unrealistic, and dangerous. But criticism by experts only reinforced Berlusconi's support, at the same time that it made him the center of the public conversation.

In contemporary US politics, Donald Trump deployed a similar conservative populist strategy to win the Presidency of the United States in 2016. Dismissing his critics as "losers", Trump justified his own intellectual authority by pointing to his millions of followers on Twitter and Facebook, and he continues to engage his base through Twitter as a tactic for circumventing traditional media spaces.

Since his election, Trump has accelerated his criticism of experts. He has eliminated nearly one-third of all scientific advisory committees from the federal government, he has suppressed scientific research on climate change, and he has dismissed scientific advisers who disagreed with him. His attacks on the press have been particularly vicious. He has repeatedly called the press "the enemy of the people", he has threatened to rescind the licenses of television news stations that criticized him, and he has threatened to regulate or even to shut down social media such as Twitter when they labeled his posts as misleading or false.

As I suggested at the beginning of the article, Trump's populist attacks on the press are part of a larger global pattern. In the Phillipines, President Duterte has called journalists "spies" and "vultures", and he has warned that members of the press are plotting to overthrow his government by spreading lies and "fake news" (Hammer, 2019). In Brazil, President Bolsonaro regularly attacks and discredits journalists, calling them an "endangered species" and encouraging his followers not to read newspapers and not to believe what the press reports. Bolsonaro has actually created a "hate office" that publishes fake news and helps to coordinate the distribution of more than 10,000 daily attacks on professional journalists. Similar strategies have been employed by leaders in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, as well as by opposition parties and populist movements throughout Europe, Africa, and Australia.

## 5 New Legitimation Strategies

In the current media environment, the old strategies of press legitimation have proven ineffective. Complaining about entertainment values and partisan news genres fails to resonate in a neoliberal era where the higher ratings of those formats are taken as evidence of their social and moral value. Arguments about democracy's need for an adversarial press face counter-arguments from populists who call the press the "enemy of the people." Beliefs about the putatively self-evident value of impartial professional journalism fail to recognize how algorithms and filter bubbles are pushing that kind of content off the screens of an increasingly large number of users.

And yet, regardless of the challenges that this new media environment presents, many journalists have continued to act like their only choice was to continue doing their jobs as if nothing had changed. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential election, with journalists wondering aloud about where they had failed and worrying about the threats they were likely to face from a Trump administration, a common refrain among journalists was that they "just needed to do their job" (Jacobs, 2017). We can see this suggestion in an article writ-



ten by Martin Baron, the editor of *The Washington Post*, about how journalists should respond to Trump's electoral victory:

The answer, I believe, is pretty simple. Just do our job. Do it as it's supposed to be done... The public expects that of us. If we fail to pursue the truth and to tell it unflinchingly — because we're fearful that we'll be unpopular, or because powerful interests (including the White House and the Congress) will assail us, or because we worry about financial repercussions to advertising or subscriptions — the public will not forgive us (Baron, 2016).

Baron and others argued that the public desperately needed and wanted an objective and fact-based journalism covering the actions of the Trump administration. But while this was certainly true for some members of the public, it was by no means true for all of them. As a legitimation strategy, it failed to consider any of the changes in the media environment I described earlier. Furthermore, it was based on a vision of professional journalism that described a much narrower set of practices than journalists actually employed.

Looking at the full spectrum of journalistic practices, and relaxing or questioning some of the assumptions about the nature of the relationship between journalism and democracy, we can identify four new legitimation strategies that are based on things that are already happening in the world of journalism. Some of these practices have been common in journalism for more than a century, and suggest new legitimation strategies that have been available for just as long, but which have largely not been articulated by journalists, editors, or media critics. Other practices are newer, and are associated with the growing influence of digital media. One of the strategies remains extremely uncommon. The specific combination of strategies that journalism might adopt will depend on the specific conjuncture of events, and the specific nature of the relationship between elected politicians and the press.

### 5.1 New Strategy #1: Rely on the Columnists

Professional journalism has always included more than the kind of impartial, information-based reporting that informs the traditional narrative of press legitimation. As Jacobs and Townsley (2011) argued in *The Space of Opinion*, the rise of fact-based reporting was closely connected to the rise of modern opinion columns. Already by the 1920s, it was becoming clear to editors and other media professionals that most readers lacked the time or the discernment to filter the deluge of information that was coming at them. They needed trusted guides to help them determine which facts were important, which facts could be trusted, and which public policies the facts supported. And newspapers offered up just such a guide from the world of professional journalism, in the form of the syndicated columnist.

The most influential and iconic of the early columnists was Walter Lippmann. After a successful period of working as a journalist and a political adviser, Lippmann moved into the world of editorials and opinion columns — first at *Vanity Fair*, then at the *New York World* (the first newspaper to establish the op-ed page), then at the *New York Herald-Tribune* (where his “Today and Tomorrow” column won two Pulitzer Prizes), and finally at *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, p. 23). At its peak, Lippmann's syndicated column was distributed to 275 different newspapers.

In his more academic writings, Lippmann articulated a second narrative of press legitimation that was centered around the work of columnists (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, pp. 24–25). Lippmann argued that most individuals lacked the time and the analytical skills to develop a

sufficiently informed and nuanced understanding of the world. Nor were they well-served by the dominant practices of news reporting, which tended to compress the complexity of the day's events into a series of oversimplified news leads. What they needed were expert analysts, who could help them understand what events were really important, how different events were connected together, and what kinds of social and historical context they needed in order to understand the significance of a particular event and to evaluate different policy proposals that were being offered to help respond to it. They also needed someone to speak as a proxy for them in the political conversation — people who could advocate for the public interest, and who had enough influence that other political actors would have to take their advocacy seriously.

The columnist's authority has had a number of different sources, including access to political insiders, the detachment of an academic scholar, and the autonomy that came from syndication. But it was really the autonomy derived from syndication that marked the distinctive power and influence of American opinion columnists, as compared to other countries (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, p. 30). And this autonomy has actually been magnified by the current media environment. Today's popular columnists are syndicated in dozens of newspapers, like they always have. But they also appear frequently on television, blogs, Twitter, and other digital media (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, pp. 49–51). Their columns are shared by users on social media platforms, increasing the likelihood that they will get pushed forward by algorithms.

The autonomy, influence, and ubiquity of the columnists gives them the ability to move beyond analysis and explanation in order to engage in moral argument and critique. In fact, as Jacobs and Townsley (2011, p. 141) found, slightly more than one quarter of all opinion columns in *The New York Times* contained moral critique as their primary argument style. In the aftermath of the Enron scandal, columnist Paul Krugman blamed Republicans in Congress for shirking their responsibilities to provide honest oversight of the financial industry (Jacobs and Townsley 2011: 185). During the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2002, columnist David Brooks complained that many politicians in Congress were placing party loyalty above their moral conscience, in a manner “that really is dishonorable” (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, p. 233). This kind of moral discourse may not be available to reporters, but it is absolutely part of the repertoire available to columnists.

In fact, elite columnists have been consistently and scathingly critical of President Trump since his election in 2016. In *The New York Times*, columnist Charles Blow responded to Trump's election by declaring that he was “part of the resistance,” and he has castigated Trump as a racist, a misogynist, a xenophobe, and a bully who was a danger to democracy itself.<sup>3</sup> Paul Krugman describes Trump as an openly corrupt individual, a “deadly narcissist” who is a danger to the nation and to the world at large.<sup>4</sup> David Brooks has argued that Trump is a sociopath who is incapable of empathy, and so ethically flawed that he is a danger to the moral standing of American democracy.<sup>5</sup> Recent new columnists hired by the paper reinforce this moral criticism of Trump. Outlining how Trump's actions are connected together in a dangerous kind of moral degeneracy, they act as proxies and advocates for those members of the public who secretly worry that the nation is headed in the wrong direction.

3. See for example, Charles Blow, “America Elects a Bigot”, *The New York Times*, November 10, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/opinion/america-elects-a-bigot.html>

4. Paul Krugman, “Trump's Deadly Narcissism”, *The New York Times*, September 29, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/opinion/trumps-deadly-narcissism.html>

5. David Brooks, *PBS News Hour*, March 13, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/shields-and-brooks-on-leadership-in-a-time-of-crisis>

## 5.2 New Strategy #2: Partner with Social Media Companies to Develop Different Algorithms

Shortly after the 2016 US Presidential election, media scholar Zeynep Tufekci wrote an op-ed column in *The New York Times* suggesting that Facebook was failing to meet its civic responsibilities (Tufekci, 2016). Specifically, she argued that Facebook's algorithms (a) made no attempts to distinguish between real news and fake news, (b) were de-prioritizing information from professional news organizations in favor of those posts shared by friends and family, and (c) were actively creating filter bubbles by prioritizing posts and information that users already agreed with. Worse still, Facebook seemed uninterested in exploring or responding to these problems, and they refused to share their data with independent researchers who were concerned about the social impact of these media algorithms. Tufekci later wrote a similar op-ed column about Youtube's algorithm, which she described as "one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the twenty-first century" (Tufekci, 2018).

Tufekci's op-ed columns about algorithms, news, and democracy are a good example of the important role that columnists play in the public sphere, a voice of moral criticism that offers an alternative (or, more likely, a supplementary) legitimation strategy for the press. But they also point to the fact that professional journalism has much less control over the flow of information than they once did. It is not only that journalism's legitimacy has come under attack by populist discourse. It is also the case that many users access the world of news in a media ecosystem that fails to distinguish between credible news and misinformation, and that has a built-in tendency to push forward more partisan and more radical viewpoints.

Rather than denouncing the situation, hoping that users will come to their senses and realize the value of professional news, an alternative response by the press might be to create alliances with those individuals and organizations that have already proved themselves to be adept at navigating the waters of the new media ecosystem. What might such an alliance look like? In an article published in *Columbia Journalism Review*, BuzzFeed's journalism editor Ben Smith suggested several possibilities (Smith, 2016). First, journalists could start covering the new media ecosystem as an important beat, covering the innovative actors who were working to expose the dangers that algorithms posed to civil society and to promote less partisan or selective forms of digital engagement. This kind of reporting would improve media literacy, by making people more aware of the way that they were being herded into filter bubbles. It would bring attention and influence to these digital innovators, improving their effectiveness by increasing their visibility and their prestige. Finally, by making these digital innovators into regular subjects and sources for professional journalists, it would increase the opportunities and the possibilities for creating solidarities and alliances with professional journalists. Alliances between these groups was crucial in the fight against fake news and polarization, Smith argued, as a way to encourage the new media platforms to think more seriously about how to support the "native journalism" that comes from newspapers and other legacy media (Smith, 2016).

While coverage of social media algorithms and polarizing discourse is not institutionalized in the press in the same way that the work of columnists is, it has definitely increased in the years since Trump's election. Besides Tufekci, who writes regular columns for *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, the major newspapers in the US have moved to hire prominent figures from the world of new media. Most notably, perhaps, *The New York Times* hired Ben Smith in 2020, bringing him in from his position as editor-in-chief of *Buzzfeed News*. *The Washington Post* created a new position in 2016 for a full-time beat reporter who would cover big data, artificial intelligence, and the impact that algorithms had on social life. *The Wall Street Journal* has three

reporters covering the new media and technology. Over the last twelve months there has been consistent reporting in the press about the relationship between social media algorithms and polarizing discourse.

## 6 New Strategy #3: The Aesthetic Public Sphere

The aesthetic public sphere refers to public discussions about entertainment and other aesthetic concerns (Jacobs, 2012). Aesthetic publics work at the level of the social imaginary, by providing important meaning structures and cultural scripts that people use to make sense of themselves and the world around them (Alexander, 2006). They have occasionally expanded the collective understanding of what counted as a matter of common concern, through psychological portraits that helped people think about the link between biographical problems and socio-historical structures (Jacobs, 2012). Because arts and entertainment often include social commentary, they can act as a “counterfactual public sphere” in which fictional individuals gather together to discuss matters of politics and common concern. With some genres, such as docudrama or documentary theater, the story, dialogue, and characters are based on real events and are intended as a consideration, reflection, and commentary on those events. Furthermore, because the audience for entertainment has a different (and often larger) composition than the audience for “serious” news, the public discussion about entertainment and the arts expands the scope of people who are talking about matters of common concern.

There is good reason to believe that the aesthetic public sphere offers important spaces for social criticism in contexts where professional journalism faces significant challenges and restrictions. In China, where strict government controls of media place significant restraints on the kinds of news professional journalists can produce, Internet discussions of popular reality television programs allowed ordinary people to have conversations about social justice, about how voting should work, about generational differences, and about other matters of common concern (Wu, 2017). In the US, political satire programs on television have been effective at criticizing government propaganda, particularly during wartime contexts that placed greater constraints on professional journalists (Wild, 2019). Professional journalists recognize this. During the immediate post-9/11 period, for example, there was extensive newspaper coverage of “The Daily Show”, which was described as the “perfect antidote” to government misinformation as well as to the “fake news” emanating from cable television stations (Jacobs & Wild, 2013; Townsley, 2020).

Just like journalists once covered political satire programs as a way of criticizing the Bush Administration’s communication strategies, they are now covering how key critics in the aesthetic public sphere are effectively mocking and criticizing President Trump. In the US, programs such as *Saturday Night Live*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* continue to receive extensive coverage by professional journalists — treating these satirists as important official sources in the political public sphere, as good models of effective critical journalism, and as better journalists than the kinds of partisan hosts one often finds on cable television news programs. Journalists have also started covering popular Internet memes mocking Trump, with considerations of why they were resonating so much with viewers, why they were so successful as examples of critique, and what that says about the current state of political debate and political journalism.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Internet memes that have drawn attention from the press include those created by Sarah Cooper, by Occupy Democrats, and @TrumpDraws.

Reporting about the aesthetic public sphere has a number of advantages for professional journalism. First, it reinforces the way that “the new media ecosystem” is an important beat for journalists, and an important way to increase media literacy among its readers. Second, it increases the visibility and the influence of these media satirists, in a way that challenges the legitimacy of populist leaders. Third, it creates conditions for possible alliances between professional journalism and political satirists, in a manner that can destabilize the populist rhetoric that equates professional journalism with elitism. Indeed, it is much more difficult for Trump or other populist leaders to use their standard rhetorics to delegitimize these more satirical criticisms, because the critics are neither journalists nor experts.

## 7 New Strategy #4: Journalistic Boycotts of Populist Demagogues

Finally, professional journalists can decide to reduce or even eliminate coverage of a populist demagogue, arguing that the leader whom they are boycotting represents a fundamental threat to civic norms and to democracy itself. Legitimizing such a move would be complicated and risky, requiring a fundamental shift in the discourse used to legitimate professional journalism. But there are theoretical foundations as well as some limited empirical evidence supporting the possibility of such a move.

Though still uncommon, we can find some evidence of press boycotts against elected populist leaders. In Brazil, in response to angry verbal attacks and threats against the press by supporters of President Bolsonaro, the nation’s four largest news media outlets withdrew their reporters and announced that they would no longer cover the informal press conferences that Bolsonaro regularly held outside his presidential residence (Phillips, 2020). In the UK, journalists boycotted a government press conference after an aide to Prime Minister Johnson tried to ban specific reporters from the room (Mason & Sparrow, 2020). In the US, there have been repeated debates among journalists about boycotting President Trump’s news briefings and restricting coverage of his Twitter provocations. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* stopped sending reporters to cover Trump’s COVID-19 press briefings, complaining that they were bereft of news and filled primarily with propaganda, and that they were not worth risking reporters’ health. For the most part, though, journalists have been extremely hesitant to boycott elected politicians, feeling that doing so violated their professional obligation as journalists to cover the news of the day.

Theoretically, a news boycott against a populist leader would require a fundamental rethinking of the proper balance between the civic and professional identities of journalists. As I argued earlier, the professional identities of journalists emphasize the impartial reporting of information, so that their readers and viewers can be knowledgeable about the key issues and events of the day. To be sure, journalistic identities are also informed by a civic narrative about the press as the “fourth estate,” which insists that a free press is a necessary requirement for a real democracy. But this civic identity is based on the idea that reporters serve democracy by shining a light on the actions of elected politicians, and doing so without having to worry about coercive reprisals from the state. A decision not to shine a light on the actions of an elected politician would seem to be something different.

To think about how the press might legitimate a boycott of a populist leader, we can turn to Alexander’s recent work on the societalization of social problems (Alexander, 2018). In that work, Alexander explores how ongoing structural tensions become full-blown social crises. They do so by becoming “societalized”, which means that they come to be judged according to a justice-based civic logic instead of some other social logic (e.g., market rationality, political

expediency, professional autonomy, etc.). Alexander argues that investigative journalists and prosecuting attorneys are particularly important actors in this respect, because of the work that they do to uncover corruption and abuse and because of their insistence that this corruption and abuse represents a fundamental threat to the moral fabric of the society.

Although fairly unlikely, it is possible to imagine a sequence of events that could lead to a justification of a specific kind of boycott of a populist leader. A series of investigative stories uncovers flagrant actions of dishonesty, corruption, and abuse of power by the elected leader. These stories are followed by a series of legal filings asking the courts to force the leader to turn over more information, and to sanction the leader for violations of the law. The populist leader refuses to cooperate, continues to spread lies, and threatens the investigative journalists and prosecuting attorneys who are arrayed against him. At this point, media organizations decide that the populist leader is an untrustworthy source and a threat to public safety. They attach warning labels to all of the leader's statements, describing them as untrue, untrustworthy, and dangerous. They change their algorithms to de-prioritize information coming from the office of the elected leader. They cover the leader's battle with the legal system and with the media, but they stop attending his press briefings and press conferences organized, choosing instead to label them as dangerous disinformation campaigns. They promise to return to normal reporting as soon as the civil crisis has ended.

## 8 Discussion and Conclusion

To be sure, all of the legitimization strategies discussed above face significant challenges and constraints. Many of them run against the traditional narrative of press legitimacy, and would require a more expansive understanding of professional journalism that was embraced by journalists as well as the larger public. Some strategies require alliances with other actors in the media ecosystem, which would require those actors to embrace a civic orientation over a market-focused one. Still other strategies run the risk of reinforcing the populist criticism of elites. None of them deal very effectively with the existence of political loyalists at the head of key media organizations. Nor is it clear how they deal with the legal and physical harassment which journalists increasingly face. And several of the legitimization strategies are in tension with one another. The rest of the article elaborates on these constraints and tensions in greater detail.

The riskiest and most unlikely strategy is the press boycott of populist leaders. The notion of a press as a fourth estate is based on journalists actively reporting about events those in power would prefer to keep secret, and the need for democratic societies to protect them in their quest to uncover the truth and expose it to the light of public scrutiny. Labeling a political leader's statements as dishonest, reporting on the nature of the dishonesty, and correcting the public record are active moves that more closely align with this ideal. The decision simply to stop covering the leader does not. Furthermore, a press boycott would need to be widespread in order to be effective. This is difficult in a market system where news organizations are competing for an audience. It is even more difficult in a media system where the leader being boycotted has political loyalists at the head of key news organizations. In addition, a press boycott feeds directly into the populist critique of the press, because the decision to boycott can easily be narrated as a paternalistic move by an elitist press. The more active journalistic actions that would presumably accompany a press boycott are already happening in the US, and are likely to continue: reports of government lies and corruption, extensive coverage of legal suits filed against the Trump Administration, and warning labels attached to Trump's tweets and other public statements. And while Twitter has not changed its algorithms to de-prioritize informa-

tion coming from Trump, the labels they have applied to some of his tweets do prevent them from being circulated more broadly. While an absolute boycott is much more likely to lead to societalization and an escalation of crisis, it is an exceedingly low-probability and high-risk event, which would turn the press into an explicitly political institution and create significant tension with all other sources of journalistic legitimacy.

Relying on the social and moral criticism of the columnists also carries significant risk. While columnists have been an important part of the press for more than a century, the traditional narrative of press legitimation has continued to rely on the opposition between news and opinion. This inherent symbolic tension between news and opinion means that highly visible columnists have an ambivalent relationship with traditional journalists, particularly when those columnists lack work experience as national or foreign correspondents, a professional trajectory that was more typical in the past (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). The moral criticism of populist leaders by successful and influential syndicated columnists also feeds directly into the populist rhetoric about elites, because the sustained criticism can get reinterpreted as evidence that the leader is succeeding in his quest to rescue society from the corrupt establishment and to return it to the people. Historically, the press has dealt with these risks by maintaining a symbolic and spatial bifurcation between news and the op-ed page.

Relying on the aesthetic public sphere to fend off populist attacks carries also carries risks, though they are less significant than those associated with press boycotts or reliance on columnists. Satirists and entertainers have proven adept at uncovering misleading and false political statements. They have proven equally effective at unmasking the hypocrisies of feigned moral outrages. Journalists recognize and appreciate the role that these media figures play in reinforcing the spirit of critical journalism. On the market side, they recognize that coverage of the most popular political satirists links them to an audience that is desirable to advertisers. The main problem is that the aesthetic public sphere offers few legitimation resources for traditional journalists. Reporting that treats comedy as critical journalism threatens the symbolic hierarchy between news and entertainment that informs the traditional narrative of press legitimation. Furthermore, the comedians and satirists of the aesthetic public sphere have frequently also turned their critical gaze toward mainstream journalists, in a manner that surely does not reinforce press legitimacy.

The fewest risks and constraints are associated with a potential alliance between traditional newspapers and new media organizations. Covering the new media ecosystem as a regular beat is an active move that aligns well with the traditional narrative of press legitimation, because it is providing information on matters of common concern. On the market side, reports about new media draw an audience that is desirable to advertisers. The main challenge associated with a more robust alliance is that new media platforms have made a lot of money with their current algorithmic strategies, which prioritize information that users already agree with and that increase user engagement within tightly drawn filter bubbles. Op-ed columns are unlikely to convince them to change their behavior, nor are careful news articles about how filter bubbles work. On the other hand, pressure from civil society itself can be effective. Twitter and Facebook have both faced extensive social pressure to block or even suspend Trump's accounts. These pressure campaigns have had some success, with Twitter placing warning labels on some of Trump's tweets. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has stated publicly that he is personally disgusted by Trump's divisive rhetoric, but has so far continued to leave the posts on the platform. Increased pressure by Trump himself could also strengthen an alliance between newspapers and new media organizations, if Trump were to follow through on his threats to punish social media sites he doesn't like.

While the current environment is indeed challenging for journalism and its traditional legitimation strategies, changing political alignments have the potential to ease some of these challenges. Consider what would happen if the public rejected populism, whether by refusing to vote for populist leaders, protesting against or rejecting populist rhetorics, or both. Semiotically, the public that rejects populism also rejects the symbolic and physical assaults on the press that are connected to populist political rhetorics. The public then becomes the protector and the defender of journalism. No longer seeing themselves as relatively passive readers and viewers of news, they embrace their identities as citizens, demanding that elected politicians engage with journalists in a transparent and good-faith manner. But this scenario is almost certainly too optimistic. The structural challenges facing journalism show no signs of abating, nor do the structural forces that are fueling populist movements worldwide. In such an environment, the press needs a variety of legitimation tools in its cultural toolkit.

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**Ronald N. Jacobs:** Department of Sociology, University at Albany, State University of New York (United States)

📧 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1253-8102>

✉ [rjacobs@albany.edu](mailto:rjacobs@albany.edu); 🌐 <https://www.albany.edu/sociology/faculty/ronald-n-jacobs>

Ronald N. Jacobs is Professor of Sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He is cofounder and coeditor of the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*. A cultural sociologist who studies media, politics, and civil society, his publications include *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere* (Oxford University Press, 2011), *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (2012), and *Living Sociologically: Concepts and Connections* (Oxford University Press, 2019).