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How *The New York Times* Discredits President Trump's Fake News Accusations

Juliane A. Lischka

Abstract

News organizations in many Western democracies face decreasing trust amid fake news accusations. In this situation, news organizations risk losing their license to operate and need to defend their legitimacy. This study analyzes how *The New York Times* discredits fake news accusations, which are prominently expressed by US President Trump. A critical discourse analysis of *The New York Times*' news articles about fake news accusations in the first 70 days following President Trump's inauguration reveals four delegitimizing strategies used. First, the accusations are taken as a "badge of honor" for professional journalism but are morally evaluated to damage journalism's role as the fourth estate in democracy. Second, using sarcasm, the articles criticize President Trump's capacity to govern and thus question his legitimacy. Third, reporting implies that fake news accusations aim at suppressing critical thinking as in authoritarian regimes. Fourth, accusations are described as irrational response to professional reporting or proven to be factually wrong, when possible. Overall, reporting in *The Times* portrays President Trump as an irresponsible leader risking the well-being of the country's citizens, its journalism, and its democracy, as well as journalism in foreign countries.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; journalism; legacy media; legitimacy; news content; Trump; politics; populism

Introduction

News organizations fulfill important functions for democratic societies as they follow the ideal of a fourth estate. The basis for an efficient relationship between news media and democratic societies are attributions of legitimacy by the public toward the news media. However, legacy news media organizations have "lost the unquestioned, unchallenged status of a 'fact of nature'" in the digital social-networked age and have to "be more actively defended and reaffirmed" (Couldry 2009, 447).

Legacy news organizations have been facing decreasing public trust and credibility in many Western democracies (Newman et al. 2016). In Germany, supporters of a right-wing opposition movement accuse mainstream legacy news organizations of generally being a *Lügenpresse*, or "lying press" (Hagen 2015). This term was used in Nazi Germany and has become a "flat-rate defamation" (Denner and Peter 2017, 3) against news outlets that are perceived to follow the political elite and to report without a strong right- or left-leaning political stance in Germany (Newman et al. 2017). Likewise, the Finnish public holds the perception that news media follow the political elite in reporting (Hujanen 2007). In the US, a which has a news media system with a high degree of political parallelism (Newman et al. 2017), readers criticize *The New York Times* (*NYT*), an "archetype of the modern Western metropolitan newspaper" (Tracy 2004, 451), for "not being objective, for creating false balance, for failing to uphold the standards of accuracy and truth, and for not being transparent" (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016, 687).

Also, President Donald Trump has frequently criticized mainstream news organizations on Twitter, stating their reporting was biased, dishonest or fake. He supports instead right-

leaning media such as Fox News (see Newman et al. 2017, 20 for a spectrum of the political polarization of news outlets in the US). A popular addressee of President Trump's tweets (@realDonaldTrump) has been *NYT* (@nytimes), e.g.,

- The failing @nytimes has disgraced the media world. Gotten me wrong for two solid years. Change libel laws? (March 30, 2017)
- The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People! (February 17, 2017)
- The fake news media is going crazy with their conspiracy theories and blind hatred. @MSNBC & @CNN are unwatchable. @foxandfriends is great! (February 15, 2017)

These antagonistic tweets are a systematic approach to delegitimize the news as an institution. This intention is brought to an alarming level through the recent launch of Trump TV, which President Trump calls "real news" (Illing, August 09, 2017). President Trump's fake news accusations can be regarded as a means to retain direct interpretive authority about his political legitimacy. His tweets attack the conduct and the product of news media. Since news content is the major source for news outlets' performance and legitimacy assessments by society (Bachmann and Ingenhoff 2017), such attacks could damage the addressed news outlets' legitimacy. At the same time, news content is an efficient vehicle for strategic management of the legitimacy of a news outlet and thus can be used to defend legitimacy.

Therefore, this study asks, How does *The New York Times* engage with fake news accusations against its news content? The goal is to reveal whether and, if so, how the news outlet delegitimizes fake news accusations using its editorial content to defend its legitimacy. The purpose of this article is to discuss ways of legitimacy management for news organizations to defend themselves from such accusations. As President Trumps' libel laws tweet of March 30, 2017, implies, news organizations could become vulnerable to legally rearranging their role in society. Concerning President Trump's expressions, Edmondson (2017, 98) argues that "words are one thing, but the legal actions of a vengeful government official against the press are entirely different." On that matter, Waisbord and Amado (2017) demonstrate that Latin American presidential tweets harassing the press correlate with hostility toward freedom of expression and the right to communication. To impede the possibility of governmental restrictions on such subjects, it is critical for news outlets to defend their legitimacy. Claims by political conservatives that liberal media show bias have led to the rise of a belief that there is a liberal ideological slant in news content (Domke et al. 1999), thus making legitimacy management even more relevant.

The research question raised by this study is empirically answered following a critical discourse analysis approach applying van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of delegitimizing strategies on *NYT*'s news content that addresses fake news accusations during the first 70 days of Donald Trump's presidency.

Literature Review

I conceptualize President Trump's accusations as the discursive strategy of an institutionalized and politically conservative actor that are embedded in the context of expectations regarding the performance of news media (particularly to report truthfully and impartially), the news media's conduct within their institutional field, and a "tradition" of liberal bias claims against news media. Following Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) description of discursive practices as producing unequal power relations, President Trump's accusations aim at altering power relations within the institutional field of the news media and between the news media and society.

Institutional Foundation of News Organizations' Legitimacy
Following the ideal of the fourth estate, news media are seen as social institutions, which are extremely visible in society (Fairclough 1995) and exhibit symbolic and persuasive power (Gitlin 1980). With power comes responsibility, or, according to an institutional view, social expectations that must be met by an organization to gain social legitimacy. Organizations are regarded to result from social expectations (Zucker 1987; Meyer and Rowan 1977). News media organizations established because the role of fourth estate became necessary in the context of an evolving public sphere, social movements seeking for freedom of suppressed social groups, and the ideology of egalitarianism (Burrowes 2011).

Organizational legitimacy is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995, 574). Tight coupling, i.e., conduct according to societal expectations, is a predisposition for legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Legitimacy provides an organization with 'a reservoir of support' (Tost 2011, 686) that is vital for its survival (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Dowling and Pfeffer 1975).

Regarding its powerful position within society, journalism has developed consensual rules and standards (McQuail 1992; Hanitzsch et al. 2011) to ensure that news media's power is not misused, and thus providing journalism with a reservoir of social support. The Society of Professional Journalists (2014) sees its goals as to "Seek Truth and Report It." "Act Independently." and "Be Accountable and Transparent." *NYT* mentions principles of fairness and impartiality, integrity, and truth in its standards and ethics section.

> At a time of growing and even justified public suspicion about the impartiality, accuracy and integrity […] it is imperative that The Times and its staff maintain the highest possible standards to insure that we do nothing that might erode readers' faith and confidence in our news columns. (The New York Times 2017a)

This suggests a tight coupling of *NYT*'s conduct to professional standards of the trade.

The appropriateness of rules and standards is constantly being contested within the field of journalism (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Maushart 1986) and journalists discursively construct the societal responsibility of their work (Siltaoja 2009). Historically, the liberal press had gained political independency by being profitable and thus could gain legitimacy through the role of the fourth estate (Schultz 1998). Still, this role has been reinterpreted and transformed by news media since the nineteenth century (Schultz 1998). This discursive construction of appropriate standards is an attempt to manage the journalistic field, which Hardy and Phillips (1999) describe as discursive struggle. *NYT* standards and ethics reveal that the organization struggles with social expectations. Appealing for the "highest possible standards" suggests that *NYT* attempts to more tightly couple its standards to social expectations.

To signal professional principles has allowed journalism to pursue the role of the fourth estate. Whether the role of the fourth estate is legitimate has been reason for debate.

Challenging News Organizations' Legitimacy
Legitimacy is challenged when an organization's behavior conflicts with societal norms and expectations. That is, the conduct of an organization *decouples* from societal expectations. If organizations do not act according to publicly demanded rules or standards, organizational legitimacy is at risk.

Because the fulfilment of expectations are a matter of opinion, it is easy to question the legitimacy of news media organizations. Schultz (1998, 100) notes that "the partisan nature of the news media has been a constant frustration for politicians." The (perceived) news media's political stance can risk its legitimacy. Objectivity has been described as the core principle of American journalism (Muñoz-Torres 2012; Schudson 2001). Since human perception is subjective by nature and objectivity an impossible ideal (Muñoz-Torres 2012), accusations that

news reporting is politically biased can easily be articulated. The "liberal media bias" has been an increasingly popular claim of conservative political elites in the US for decades (Domke et al. 1999; Ladd 2012). Liberal media allegations may be part of a strategy to diminish public confidence in a non-conservative government and the press (Domke et al. 1999). In the politically polarized climate of the politically parallelized media system of the US, news organizations are confronted with competing expectations of two audience groups with opposing political positions, i.e., the Democrats (who predominantly use liberal news sources) and the Republicans (who prefer to use conservative news sources) (Newman et al. 2017; Iyengar and Hahn 2009).

In the case of the Republican presidency in the US, liberal news outlets report about a political agenda that is often in conflict to their stance. When "faced with competing orders, models, or logics, organizations must find a way to hybridize them" (Lowrey and Erzikova 2014, 558). A different use of article genres may hybridize these competing expectations. Whereas professional standards of factual reporting may be more important for straight news articles, the editorial political stance on a certain issue may be more relevant in editorial opinion pieces. Castilla, Rodríguez, and Quesada (2014, 71) suppose that the "editorial section is the perfect space to investigate the identity of newspapers." However, a single news outlet with a non-conservative political stance cannot fully fulfill the expectations of both parties and its legitimacy may erode in the opposing group's point of view. This societal group—especially conservative Republicans—might consider the reporting of news outlets as biased toward liberal political views (Lee 2005). President Trump's fake news accusations take up political parallelized stances within the US media system and turn it against the news media on the non-conservative side of the political spectrum.

At the same time, politicians "need a legitimated journalism that is perceived to [be authorized to] sanctify and render credible these institutions' messages" (Lowrey 2011, 67). When political actors take up fake news accusations, they seek to damage news outlets' sovereignty of interpretation and legitimacy and attempt to gain interpretative power for themselves. Because politicians still need to be legitimized through news outlets' reporting, political actors require the support from news outlets reporting in line with politicians' own political positions. Thus, delegitimizing accusations cannot address the entire field of journalism. Hence, in a highly politically parallelized media system such as the US, delegitimizing complaints can be expressed against the media holding a conflicting political stance.

Using Twitter as a publishing platform enables politicians to attack critical journalists or citizens, which Waisbord and Amado (2017) show for the presidential Twitter use in Latin America. Waisbord and Amado (2017, 1330) conclude that "Twitter has been a megaphone for presidential attacks on the press and citizens. It has provided with a ready-made, always available platforms to lash out at critics, conduct personal battles, and get media attention." Especially populist presidents were more likely that non-populist presidents to use Twitter to criticize the press and make references to news. For example, Correa, the former president of Ecuador, tweeted, "@Guardian, show a little bit of professional integrity. Do some research, or at least pick up the phone." (Waisbord and Amado 2017, 1339), which suggests a decoupling of the news outlets from professional standards. This tweet is similar in tone and content to President Trump's tweets attacking news outlets. President Trump is criticized for applying "politics of debasement" (Ott 2016, 59) on Twitter and his tweets are described as "simple, impulsive, and uncivil" (Ott 2016, 64), suggesting his tweets have a lot in common with those of Latin American populistic presidents.

Defending one's Legitimacy as a News Organization
From an institutional point of view, news organizations need to defend themselves against legitimacy attacks to retain their right to exist. When exhibiting social accountability, not to react "can be understood as an illegitimate evasion and a transgression of norms" (Ekström 2009, 681). Since news content is the basis for the social legitimacy attributions of the audience

(Bachmann and Ingenhoff 2017), news outlets provide themselves a platform for legitimacy defense. They can implement verbal legitimation strategies into their news content.

However, the news media may not defend their legitimacy sufficiently. In the German *Lügenpresse* discourse, Denner and Peter (2017, 275) determine that the news media trivialize that fake news term used by populistic movements: "It sometimes even seems that newspapers use the term ironically as a synonym for themselves." The authors conclude that the news media did not take the chance to discuss the term properly or even invalidate it. Instead German media may be establishing the use of *Lügenpresse* as synonym for mainstream news media. Therefore, news media missed an opportunity to strengthen their legitimacy and that of journalism itself. Jutel (2016) draws a similar conclusion from *NYT*'s reporting on the populistic Tea Party: journalism has failed to defend its universal value against populism. Although *NYT* treats the Tea Party as an "irrational pseudo-political actor" (Jutel 2016, 1129), *NYT*'s reporting remains rather moderate.

> The Times continues to function as the standard bearer, or last bastion, of the high modern paradigm of journalism. In writing for a liberal unified public, it attempts to strike a measured tone, imagining itself above the fray even while competitors in the field engage in a political battle to undermine all that the Times stands for. (Jutel 2016, 1134)

Thus, the self-concept of a legacy news outlet within the journalistic field may prevent a strong delegitimization of fake news accusations. Moreover, replying to fake news accusations would signal that a news outlet accepts President Trump's conditions of the discourse. *NYT* could assume that their audience predominantly shares their political stance (Iyengar and Hahn 2009), which might make an extensive delegitimizing of fake news accusations redundant. This could also be a reason why German news outlets did not defend themselves but ironically used the term "fake news." The extent of explicit opinions and delegitimizing in news articles may even be perceived improperly by the audience, since this is what opinion pieces are used for. Jutel (2016, 1135) notes that in straight news or feature reporting "the *Times* claims to be objectively representing the social world, as opposed to opinion pieces that are intended to 'push the envelope,' framing the range of acceptable opinions."

A further argument that may prevent an accused news outlet from delegitimizing fake news accusations is that the accusations may even help the news outlet to increase its audience, as positive first-quarter results in 2017 of the *NYT* and *CNN* may suggest (Bond, May 03, 2017). Thus, in contrast to previous research revealing that "liberal media" accusations harm the institutional legitimacy of news media (Ladd 2012; Domke et al. 1999), the current fake news accusations in an increasingly polarized political environment may even help liberal news media.

Against this background, this study asks, How does *The New York Times* engage with fake news accusations against its news content?

Method

Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

Public discourses occur within wider processes of social and cultural change, power relations, and ideological societal processes (Fairclough 1995). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) note that discourse is social practice. That is, discourse constitutes situations, institutions, and social structures. In addition, discourse is socially conditioned, as it helps to sustain or change the social status quo. Different actors and content compete for interpretative dominance of a public discourse. Critical discourse analysis presumes power relations between actors expressing views within a discourse using "strategic ways *to change the mind of others in one's own interests*" (van Dijk 1993, 254, italics in original). *Critical* discourse analysis attempts to reveal such power relations and "root out a particular kind of delusion" (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 187) within a discourse.

The discourse considered in this study was initiated by Donald Trump's fake news accusations against US liberal news media—a discourse with a long past of liberal bias accusations (Domke et al. 1999; Ladd 2012). The present analysis focuses on *NYT* as one example of the accused subjects to study that subject's reaction to the accusations. *NYT* was chosen as a well-known representative of the liberal news media that has institutionalized the field of journalism since the nineteenth century (Schultz 1998; Maushart 1986). Additionally, *NYT* is a popular addressee of liberal media bias claims (Domke et al. 1999). The material for analysis is the editorial products of *NYT*, which are socially and discursively constructed. This analysis focuses on a temporal fragment of the discourse, namely, the first 70 days after Donald Trump had been turned into a political institution as the US President. During this period, President Trump tweeted 16 times directly addressing *NYT* (see Figure 1). The critical analysis aims at assessing whether *NYT* can retain its legitimacy and achieve interpretative dominance in this discourse.

Sample and Coding

First, a sample of n = 182 articles was drawn from LexisNexis. This included all articles published by *NYT* between January 20 and March 30, 2017 (the first 70 days of President Trump's presidency following his inauguration) with the term "fake news" anywhere in the text. During this period, *NYT*'s reporting referred to "fake news" more than 400 times, that is, about six times per day. From this sample, those articles referring not to fake news accusations were excluded. These were articles that referred to fake news only as "either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context" in line with Bakir and McStay's (2017, 1) fake news definition. For example, *NYT* refers to fake news as "stories invented from whole cloth, designed to attract social shares and web traffic by flattering the prejudices of their intended audience" and note that "a large number of Americans have become accustomed to rejecting factual information, or even that they have become habituated to believing hoaxes." Slightly more than half of the sampled articles (n = 99, 54%) relate to this "real" fake news issue. The final sample with articles referring to fake news as formulated in President Trump's accusations comprises n = 83 articles.

The bases for coding were the section or sections within each article in which the term "fake news" appears. The delegitimizing strategies used in this section were coded. If the "fake news" section did not include a delegitimizing argument, the following and previous sections within an article were included to the coding. Thus, coding measures the variety of delegitimizing strategies used in *NYT* articles about fake news accusations.

Analytic Framework

Building on the multimodal legitimation strategies of van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), van Leeuwen (2007), and van Dijk (2006), five major verbal legitimation strategies can be distinguished. van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) and van Leeuwen (2007) separate four sub-categories of justifying strategies, namely, *authorization* through personal or impersonal institutionalized authorities, *rationalization* through purposes, *moral evaluation* that links activities to values such as leadership and governmental control, and *mythopoesis* through telling stories. Authorization answers the question "Why must it be so?" using a "Because so-and-so says so" answer (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 104). Thus, as a delegitimizing strategy of an accusation, it answers "Why is it not so?" Rationalization refers to the utility of the social practice, for example, referring to common sense or academic studies, or uses definitions and explanations. Moral evaluations comprise any references to values that moralize an activity, such as public interests or economic value. Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999, 108) describe it as the "one of the least explicit forms of legitimation." Mythopoesis is telling a story, often negative, that is taken as evidence for a behavior, which then legitimizes an activity regulating such behavior. In addition, van Dijk (2006, 380) describes various forms of positive self-presenta-

tion and negative other-presentation through "enhancing the power, moral superiority and credibility of the speaker(s), and discrediting dissidents, while vilifying the Others, the enemy; the use of emotional appeals; and adducing seemingly irrefutable proofs of one's beliefs and reasons." Such negative other-representations were often telling a sarcastic narrative about Donald Trump in the present sample. Therefore, negative other-representation and mythopoesis were summarized to "sarcastic and mythopoetic other-representation" for analysis.

Intracoder reliability achieved at least 86% of agreement for the resulting categories: (1) authorization, (2) rationalization, (3) moral evaluation, and (4) sarcastic and mythopoetic other-representation.

The article genre is derived from the type of desk and the section it is published in. This information is part of the article metadata in LexisNexis. For example, 'Editorial Desk; op-ed columnist' indicates an opinion piece, whereas articles in the 'Foreign Desk' or 'National Desk' are coded as straight news.

Results

Straight Versus Opinionated News Articles

Overall, nearly a third of the articles (29%, n = 24) on fake news accusations is an opinion piece (71%, n = 59 straight news articles). On average, about one straight news article is published every day and one opinionated news article every three days during the observation period. In straight news, delegitimizing strategies are used 86 times (on average 1.5 delegitimizing arguments per article), of which 19% are authorization, 10% rationalization, 50% moralization, and 21% sarcastic and mythopoetic other-representation. In opinionated news, delegitimizing strategies are used 24 times (on average 1 delegitimizing argument per article), of which 4% are authorization, 4% rationalization, 58% moralization, and 33% sarcastic and mythopoetic other-representation. Straight news articles use authorities and rational arguments to delegitimize fake news accusations more often than opinionated news do. Opinionated news use moral or sarcastic arguments slightly more frequent than straight news articles. Moral arguments are the key delegitimizing strategies in both article genres.

Hence, *NYT* may partly use article genres to hybridize competing expectations of audiences since there is a difference in dispassion across the two article genres. However, since straight news did not refrain entirely from using sarcasm or mythopoesis, one could accuse it of lacking objectivity or even as decoupling from professional standards.

Delegitimizing Fake News Accusations

In the articles about fake news accusations (n = 83), the legitimation strategy of moral evaluation is used most often (n = 57), followed by sarcastic or mythopoetic other-representation (n = 26), authorization (n = 17), and rationalization (n = 10). Figure 2 plots the variety of delegitimizing strategies used over the observation period. In the first 20 days of the observation period, the articles use moral evaluation, rationalization, and sarcastic, negative other-representation or mythopoesis. Authorization is added as a delegitimizing strategy when tweets by President Trump and reporting about fake news accusations intensify in February. In March, the number of articles decreases to the level of January again, making use of four delimitation strategies.

Moral Evaluation
NYT extensively morally delegitimizes President Trump's fake news accusations through values of professional journalism and its role in democracy as the fourth estate. The conduct of domestic and foreign news outlets, the relation to the audience, and democracy in general are described to be put at risk.

Fake news accusations are described to harm journalism in four stages. First, they obstruct the professional conduct of White House reporters, "The press must battle every day to wrest the truth from the tangled web of West Wing deceit, delusion and charges of 'fake news

blah blah blah.'" Second, the accusations follow actions against the accused news outlets, "'We strongly protest the exclusion of *The New York Times* and the other news organizations. Free media access to a transparent government is obviously of crucial national interest.'" Third, the accusations have consequences for the conduct of news outlets. They lead to self-censorship, as reported by the editor of a particular news outlet: "[The editor of The Journal] said that Americans already distrusted the news media, and that if The Journal covered Mr. Trump in an overly confrontational way, that distrust might increase." Thus, that news outlet gives in to the strategic goal of the biased news media claim of conservative political elites. This suggests a looser coupling to the professional standard of independence and not performing as government lapdog. It also refers to the discursive nature of professional standards that are subject to social negotiation within the journalistic field. Therefore, professional standards might become susceptible to frequently expressed fake news accusations for selective news outlets at least.

Fourth, fake news accusations harm journalism in foreign countries, too, since "Autocrats see a green light" now. In Russia, fake news accusations are adopted and extended: "the Foreign Ministry has […] a new feature on its website in which articles critical of the government are stamped with a big red 'FAKE.'" In Turkey, "President Recep Tayyip Erdogan commended Mr. Trump for putting a CNN reporter 'in his place' […] and said such organizations 'undermine national unity.'" Reporting stresses that Tukey is a country with low press freedom "where scores of journalists have been arrested and more than 150 media companies closed down." When governmental actors of countries with a low level of press freedom support or even imitate President Trump's behavior, this strongly indicates that press freedom is at stake in the US.

In addition to directly affecting news outlets, the narrative of a liberal bias has settled into the public's beliefs about journalism and becomes manifest in decreasing trust in mainstream media. *NYT* states that fake news accusations are "Mr. Trump's tactic of pitting the press against the public," disclosing the strategic goal behind the accusations. One journalist reports that "I'll get messages from people that are just: 'No, that's completely wrong. Everything you said is fake. *The New York Times* is fake. It's all fake. You're an idiot. I hate you.'" More generally, President Trump's behavior in his institutionalized role has negative social consequences, "The president is a reference point; if he lies, lying seeps deep into the culture." So not just attacking and debasing news organizations but lying has become part of the political and social culture.

Thus, *NYT* reporting warns about negative consequences for the conduct and product of domestic as well as foreign news outlets as well as society. In sum, *NYT* morally suggests that fake news accusations harm journalisms' role as the fourth estate and damage people's trust in news, which eventually harms democracy.

Sarcastic and Mythopoetic Other-Representation
Negative or sarcastic narratives aim at degrading President Trump's legitimacy rather than delegitimizing fake news accusations themselves. From time to time the reporting of *NYT* makes fun of President Trump and his accusations using sarcasm, sometimes by quoting external sources or even sympathizers of President Trump. By selecting statements by credible external sources, the author of an article avoids using her or his own words and adds authority that emphasizes the article's slant. When citing sympathizers of Trump who describe unpresidential characteristics, these descriptions gain additional credibility.

Various references question President's Trump's ability to govern. Indicating that President Trump's statements are neither trustworthy nor reasonable, the *NYT* reports that "The dictionary's tweet overlaid his words with a definition for paralogize ('to draw conclusions that do not follow logically from a given set of assumptions'), which was Dictionary.com's word of the day." Further, an opinion article cynically compares President Trump to previous presidencies.

The old bar: Inspire viewers with oratorical flair. The new bar: Prove capable of speaking for 60 minutes without throwing a temper tantrum and ranting about ratings, the failing New York Times, fake news or the size of your inaugural crowd. Bonus points: Refrain, for eight days, from tweeting in ALL CAPS.

Another opinion article ironically imitates his tweeting style, "Yes, Mr. President, everyone is saying you are right! And they're saying, wow, you made a BIG discovery about NATO spending!", followed by the directly offending sentence, "They are also saying there's an unidentified lying object in the White House."

The reporting also refers in more detailed fashion to some of President Trump's amateurish and naive characteristics. A national desk article reports that "aides to Mr. Trump say he fares best when he's able to target -- and nickname -- an opponent, whether it is 'Little Marco' Rubio, 'Crooked Hillary' Clinton or the 'Fake News' media," implying narrow-mindedness to some extent. However, dismissing fake news accusations as nicknames trivializes the potential legitimacy danger that is related to this term. In addition, references to President Trump's modest vocabulary are made, for example, "Still, for a sophisticated consumer of news, Mr. Trump retains a brutally simple, almost Manichaean view of his coverage: good stories are good, bad stories are evil." Another person close to President Trump is cited as inferring narcissistic desires, "'He loves the press; he lives for it,' Howard Stern, a frequent Trump interviewer and friend, said […]. 'He wants to be liked; he wants to be loved.' Being president […] is not 'going to be a healthy experience.'" Consequently, reporting suggests that President Trump's fake news accusations can be attributed to his personality instead of being an actual liberal media bias.

Overall, these negative and sarcastic remarks portray President Trump as being incapable of being a credible president.

Authorization

NYT uses individual institutionalized and collective authorities from academia, journalism, politics, and the public, as well as partisans of autocratic regimes to delegitimize President Trump's fake news accusations and to legitimize the performance and importance of the news media as the fourth estate.

Many of the quoted authorities react to President Trump's tweet about the media being an enemy of the American people (February 17, 2017). A very authoritative source is the former Republican President George W. Bush who disapproves of President Trump's accusations.

'I consider the media to be indispensable to democracy,' Mr. Bush told Matt Lauer, the 'Today' host. 'We need the media to hold people like me to account. I mean, power can be very addictive and it can be corrosive and it's important for the media to call to account people who abuse their power, whether it be here or elsewhere.'

Since Bush had the same institutionalized role within the same party as President Trump, his statement enhances the legitimacy of the news media and more strongly degrades that of President Trump than any other political authority could. In addition, a reference to the American society is made, "But in interviews around the country this week, Americans of varying political affiliations, even those with serious misgivings about the media, largely allowed that the president's characterization had gone too far," complementing the picture of inadequacy of President Trump's accusations. Quoting the lionized journalist Carl Bernstein whose practice has notably fulfilled societal expectations to journalism as the fourth estate enhances journalism's legitimacy.

'Oh boy,' Carl Bernstein, the journalist who helped to uncover the Watergate scandal, said on Friday, after a reporter read him Mr. Trump's tweet. 'Donald Trump is demonstrating an authoritarian attitude and inclination that shows no understanding of the role of the free press.'

NYT also quotes a "left-leaning" former Obama State Department official as saying, "Authoritarian governments sow distrust and division as a way of discrediting anything that is negative or critical of them." To underline the authoritarian attitude reporting implicitly compares the situation of the US media to that of the Russian media, indicating that fake news accusations are an oppressive strategy.

The Russian dissident and chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov drew upon long familiarity with that process when he tweeted: 'The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to ex-haust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.'

NYT quotes a former Soviet Communist Party leader comparing President Trump's wording to the dictator Stalin.

'The formula "enemy of the people […] was specifically introduced for the purpose of physically annihilating such individuals" who disagreed with the supreme leader [Stalin] […] Mr. Trump has demonstrated, Ms. Khrushcheva said, that the language of 'autocracy, of state nationalism is always the same […] formulas of insult, humiliation, domination, branding, enemy-forming and name calling are always the same.'

That article also mentions that the White House did not comment about the origin of the "toxic phrase," which shows the professional journalistic working procedures of *NYT*.

In sum, various authorities delegitimize President Trump's fake news accusations and reveal an underlying oppressive strategy of such accusations. The overall conclusion from *NYT*'s reporting is that the fake news accusations aim at installing authoritarian rule.

Rationalization

NYT regards fake news accusations as an irrational overreaction to professional journalistic reporting and "all-purpose insult" against liberal leaning news outlets. Reporting indicates that the accusations are inappropriate, for example by using quotation marks: "President Trump's […] tendency to deride any less-than-flattering report as 'fake news.'" or, "In Trumpworld, numbers are what you want them to be, and anything else is fake news." The term "Trumpworld" implies that President Trump follows a different set of rules that are irrational in the field of journalism. *NYT* as a journalistic institution implies that it follows its role as a member of the fourth estate. In contrast, a government lapdog would write flattering reports and would not get awarded with fake news accusations. A statement by president of CNN that "Our folks […] wear those insults as a badge of honor" encourages liberal news media to consider fake news accusations as acknowledgement of their work.

NYT can seldom factually refute the accusations since they are too generally formulated, which reporting criticizes: "It's a dangerous and troubling situation for governments or individuals to simply assign the label of fake news to a story they don't like, instead of challenging specific facts or offering counter-evidence." Official sources or evidence can rarely be used, such as "Recent F.B.I. data indicates that crime rates have been dropping […] which Mr. Trump referred to as 'totally out of control.'" or "But most of the polls Mr. Trump referred to actually reflected the popular vote total within the margin of error." Alternatively, reporting adds a personal assessment, for example, "Sadly, potus is just wrong about the facts." Very rarely, reporting directly refers to the general accusations. In one example, a reporter replies to

Trump's enemy-of-the-people tweet, "Biased? Probably. Oppositional? Maybe. Essential? In theory. But the enemy? Not so much." This implies that *NYT* is accepting that part of President Trump's accusations is in accordance with their identity, but, overall, remains untroubled.

Thus, reporting suggests that President Trump's accusations are irrational and, when possible, factually wrong.

[Figure 1 near here]
[Figure 2 near here]

Conclusion

This study investigates *NYT*'s verbal delegitimizing strategies in their editorial content against President Trump's continuing fake news accusations. These fake news accusations relate to a long "tradition" of conservative politicians imputing a liberal media bias. The narrative of a liberal bias has settled into the public's beliefs about journalism and becomes manifest in decreasing trust in mainstream media. Therefore, news media risk losing public legitimacy, which constitutes their license to operate. The utterance of press-antagonistic expressions is often a favorite act among populist presidents, which also corresponds to their hostility against freedom of expression (Waisbord and Amado 2017). Hence, it is most relevant for news media to defend their legitimacy.

Using the four delegitimizing strategies moral evaluation, mythopoesis, authorization, and rationalization, *NYT* applies a complete set of verbal possibilities, according to van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), to defend its legitimacy. The most frequently used delegitimating strategy morally evaluates the damage of fake news accusations to journalism's role as the fourth estate domestically and abroad as well as to the trust of the audience (moral evaluation). Although moral evaluation is regarded as the least explicit delegitimizing strategy (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 104), news media can well relate to moral values of public interest due to their institutionalized role as fourth estate. Through moral evaluation, news outlets can argue how concerned they are about democratic values and that they are tightly coupled to societal expectations, which is the basis for their legitimacy according to institutional theory (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). Secondly, negative or sarcastic narratives challenge President Trump's governmental capacity (mythopoesis). For such narratives, *NYT* could be criticized for not following objectivity standards, especially when sarcasm occurs in straight news articles instead of opinion pieces. But articles often refer to external sources that describe President Trump's nature. This can be viewed as a strategy to hybridize competing objectives as described by Lowrey and Erzikova (2014). Third, by quoting institutionalized authorities from academia, journalism, politics, partisans of autocratic regimes, and the public, *NYT*'s reporting illustrates that fake news accusations are extreme and aim at suppressing critical thinking as in authoritarian regimes (authorization). Fourth and least frequently, reporting describes the accusations as an irrational overreaction to professional journalistic reporting, debunks them as tactic of inciting the public against the press, and, if possible, proves that they are factually wrong (rationalization). Unspecific liberal news bias accusations are not invalidated, for example through proving that reporting is unbiased, which was also determined in the German "Lügenpresse" news discourse by Denner and Peter (2017) and criticized by Jutel (2016). Instead, discussing the effects of fake news accusations on journalism and society and questioning President Trump's leadership attempts to discredit the accusations.

In sum, *NYT*'s reporting illustrates the expression of fake news accusations as irresponsible and risking the wellbeing of the country's citizens, of journalism, and of democracy, as well as journalism in foreign countries. After all, the accusations may be worn as a "badge of honor" by journalists and no reason at all to change the paper's reporting methods. However, other news outlets not being an "archetype" of journalism (Tracy 2004, 451) as *NYT* may give in to the demand to report more positively about President Trump.

To conclude, by revealing the strategic nature of fake news accusations, *NYT* is aware of the attack on their legitimacy. Yet, *NYT* seems mostly intent on defending the legitimacy of journalism but not explicitly its own legitimacy. *NYT* upholds journalism as a social institution emphasizing journalism's responsibility for civic society as the fourth estate. *NYT*'s reporting also warns of negative effects of fake news accusations within the field of journalism, such as a deterioration of professional standards that are discursive in nature (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Maushart 1986), potential self-censorship of news outlets, and repression of news organizations in countries with an already low level of press freedom. Therefore, *NYT* attempts to manage the journalistic field (Hardy and Phillips 1999) and does not leave President Trump in possession of interpretative power.

However, the "badge of honor" for one side may still be regarded as justified complaints by others in the politically fragmented public in the US. It is questionable whether *NYT*'s delegitimizing strategies are sufficient to satisfy expectations of politically conservative members of the audience—if these members get in touch with *NYT*'s reporting at all. Especially against the background of the launch of Trump TV, an online network financed by President Trump's reelection fund (Illing, August 09, 2017), which is an attempt to institutionalize propaganda messages, it is most relevant that viewers of that content are made aware of what they are watching and how it is different from independent journalism. Since these viewers are not likely to be aware of liberal media news content, news organizations are not able to defend their legitimacy and journalistic professional standards by themselves. To find more general means to defend the "liberal" news media's legitimacy we may have to reconsider how the news media were established in societies where egalitarianism became a core value (Burrowes 2011).

Analyzing the editorial content allowed this study to understand the stance and identity of *NYT*, as argued by Castilla, Rodríguez, and Quesada (2014). Nonetheless, this study has major limitations and suggestions for future research. One of those limitations is that this study leaves unclear whether President Trumps' accusations damage or even enhance the legitimacy of accused news outlets. As *NYT*'s first-quarter results of 2017 reveal, the number of online subscriptions has increased (Bond, May 03, 2017), which could be a proxy for growing legitimacy—at least for one part of the audience in the politically polarized US. On the other hand, user comments on a *NYT* Facebook advertisement stating, "Facts. We seek them out. We check them. We help you make sense of them" (The New York Times 2017b), reveal a hostile attitude toward *NYT* (e.g., "facts... you make them up... you spin them... you lie about them. because you are proxies for the Democrats and you have no journalistic integrity or ethics..."). It also remains in question whether and which delegitimizing strategies being used are effective in convincing audience members about news media's legitimacy. Coming studies could experimentally test which legitimation strategy is effective in changing legitimacy ascriptions of news media by audience members of different political positions and reflecting society's fragmented audiences. For democracy, it could be most healthy if research can identify which legitimation strategies convince supporters of political populists or even propagators of conspiracy theories of a more nuanced worldview. In addition, journalism scholars could assess whether fake news accusations may lead to self-censorship with news outlets who might fear to displease audience members through critical writing. Finally, if future research could suggest a means to prevent potential "legal actions of a vengeful government official against the press" (Edmondson 2017, 98), it would be performing a great duty to society.
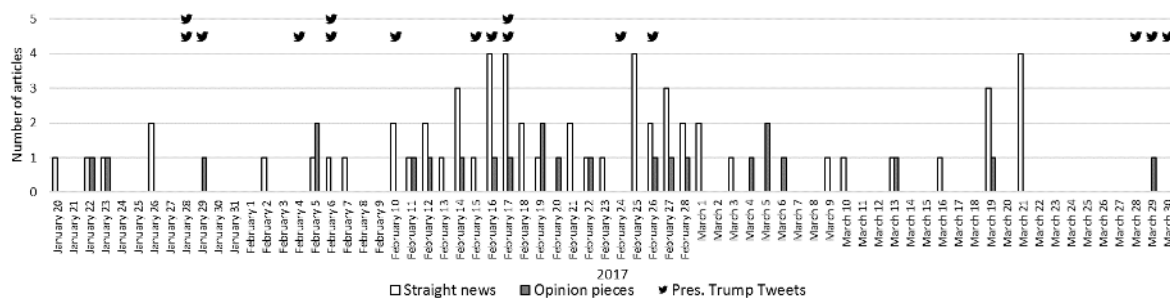
Figure 1: Article genre and number of tweets by President Trump per day
Note. President Trump's tweets according to trumptwitterarchive.com
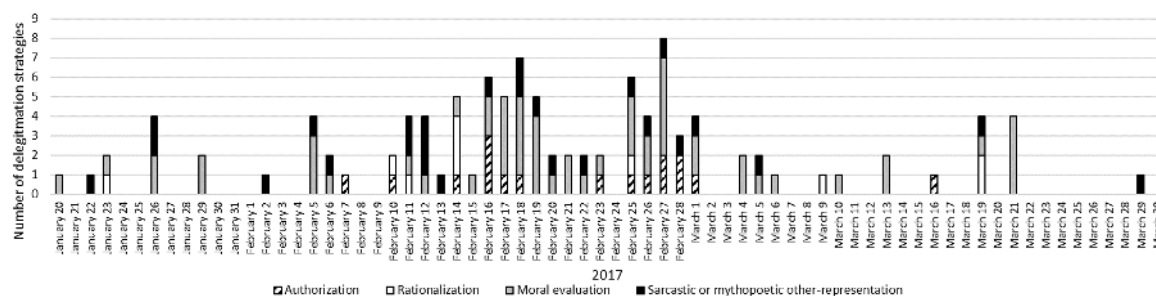

Figure 2: Variety of delegitimizing strategies per day

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