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# **New Rules for an Old Game? How the 2016 US Election Caught the Press off Guard**

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## **Abstract**

Traditionally, media coverage of political campaigns has been shaped by working routines that constitute a set of “rules” journalists follow. How did these rules fare in the US 2016 election? We wanted to know journalists’ and political consultants’ answers to this question, and so we interviewed 24 of them, seeking their perspectives on how the traditional rules did (or did not) apply in 2016, and with what normative consequence. Our data reinforce the widely-articulated notion that journalists were caught off guard in 2016. We add to this understanding by unpacking the particular challenges journalists faced, including the way Trump controlled the news cycle, the fact that his “gaffes” had little effect, and the difficulties in correctly capturing public mood among voters (a challenge exacerbated by populism). We conclude that the old rules of the game failed to account for the particulars of 2016 and, perhaps, are no longer applicable for elections moving forward.

Key words: Journalism, US elections, news values, in-depth interviews

In Western democracies journalists are more autonomous than ever, and yet the news content they produce remains highly similar across outlets. Past scholarship (e.g., Cook, 2005; Sparrow, 1998) suggests that this homogeneity is due mainly to the working routines and news values that constitute a set of “rules” that are shared by journalists across the board. These rules are often implicit, and hard to define and measure, but nonetheless they provide a solid framework for journalists in making the news. Some of the rules apply to all types of journalism, whereas some are more specific to particular contexts, such as the context of an election campaign, which is our interest here. For instance, during a campaign period, news outlets tend to abide by the unwritten rule of equivalency, giving roughly equal amounts of coverage (including negative coverage) to competing candidates. In turn, this rule means that every respectable news outlet will send at least one reporter on the campaign trail with every major candidate. The fact that both candidates are followed closely will increase the chance that the coverage is balanced between the candidates and that media are seen as impartial reporters of a political contest. This beat reporting also allows news outlets to report in nearly real-time on what a candidate is promising and how the public reacts to him/her, in line with another unwritten rule of campaign coverage, namely to offer reporting that is representative of public sentiment and conducive to public involvement. This latter rule means that journalists are expected not only to report on campaign events, but also to use these events to interpret how the candidate is doing and to speculate about what it all means for the “horse race.” Implicit in these and other rules of campaign coverage is the assumption that other actors in the political system—namely, politicians and citizens—will respond to the press in a predictable fashion. For instance, when a candidate makes a gaffe and the press publicizes it, the rules of journalistic campaign coverage hinge on the expectation that citizens will respond negatively to the information the press provide about the gaffe, and in turn that the candidate will offer a mea culpa (or bow out of the race altogether).

As we will discuss, journalists' rules of campaign coverage—by which we mean written and unwritten codes of conduct that govern news production during a campaign—have long been criticized as not always producing the best possible journalism for a democracy. Although the press is an institution (Cook, 1998), it is not a *political* institution and therefore has “no capacity for organizing the election in a coherent manner” (Patterson, 1993: 28). Still, in modern history the rules of campaign media coverage have generally remained fairly stable (e.g., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). But then came 2016.

Following the US 2016 election, traditional news outlets were highly criticized for their handling of the campaign coverage. Some pundits and journalists even claimed the press was partly responsible for the success of Donald Trump and the surprising election. This discussion inspired us to seek out journalists' own perceptions of the election, digging deeper into how journalists themselves interpreted the role of the press, and the “rules” of the press, in the specific context of the 2016 election.

Based on interviews with 24 journalists and political consultants involved in covering the campaign, we show that journalists felt ill-prepared for the phenomenon that was the 2016 election. In short, they were caught off guard. Although most journalists perceived that, overall, campaign coverage was of decent quality, they identified several shortcomings in the press coverage. Among other difficulties, the people we interviewed point to the extreme levels of coverage given to Donald Trump, to the fact that Trump's incendiary statements and “gaffes” had little effect, and to the difficulties in correctly capturing the public mood among voters.

Our conclusion, based on these interviews, is that the old rules of the campaign coverage game simply failed to account for the particulars of the 2016 election. At the beginning of the campaign, the news media started following their standard set of general and specific rules that had proved more or less successful in covering previous campaigns. Yet

these rules, we argue, proved inadequate. It was as if the press showed up for 2016 ready to play baseball by the rules of baseball, only to find that the game itself had changed to one of cricket or, more aptly, American football. The journalists we interviewed broadly identify three reasons for this exceptional situation. First, specific to the 2016 campaign, there was the unusual combination of competing candidates: an exceedingly experienced first female presidential candidate versus a complete outsider celebrity candidate. Second, the traditional rules of campaign coverage were premised on a tradition of politician and citizen responsiveness to the media (i.e., politicians and citizens adhering to their own unwritten rules of interacting with the press) that did not materialize in 2016. Third, a more structural reason is that journalists were out of touch with part of the electorate, and in particular not tuned in to the deep public mistrust in all institutions, including hostility toward the press itself.

In addition to looking back at the 2016 campaign, we talked with journalists about the rules of covering the Trump presidency in 2017, in order to see whether the election period was an anomaly from which press/politics relations have recovered, resuming business as usual. Yet here, too, it seems the rules (or the game itself) are indeed changing and that journalists are still struggling to adapt to the new context.

Before we further document our central findings, we first elaborate on the existing literature on journalistic routines and values, with special attention to the rules related to covering an election campaign. We discuss how these rules relate to commercial incentives and normative ideas about the role of the press in a representative democracy. Next, we explain our qualitative approach to interviewing 24 national, regional and foreign correspondents and consultants that were in some way involved in covering the 2016 campaign. We present findings in the form of six common themes that arose throughout our

interviews. We close by speculating on how journalists might adapt to the new environment and reconnect with the public at large.

### **Theory: About Routines and Rules**

The idea that journalists rely heavily on routine procedures to report news goes back to the early work of Tuchman (1972, 1973). According to her, these routines were necessary to transform the many unexpected events into a daily-made product we call news. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) also emphasized the need of news routines to translate the enormous amounts of raw material into news with limited means and time. Several additional authors have stressed that these news routines are the outcome of a set of organizational and professional rules. Bennett (1996a: 373-374) noted that the many subtle news decisions journalists take are guided by “practical, simplifying rules.”

The idea of journalists abiding by key rules is central in the work of the so-called new institutionalist approach to the news. Two central figures of this approach are Cook (2005) and Sparrow (1998), each of whom authored an influential book with the same subtitle: *The News Media as a Political Institution*. Both authors argue that the work of (political) journalists follows standard practices and procedures, and these routines resemble what many political scientists and sociologists have called “institutions” (Ryfe, 2006a). In their words, the news media form an institution characterized by recurring patterns of behavior and collectively shared beliefs of what is news (Cook, 2005). For instance, journalists’ decisions to cover events or political actors in the news and to give them the space to present their points of view are steered by particular media routines and standards of newsworthiness rather than by what political actors consider to be relevant (Wolfsfeld, 2011: 72; Cook, 2005: 63).

Building on this “new institutionalist” approach, Ryfe (2006b: 210-211) later specified the concept of news rules, defined as “assumptions or expectations about the news—about what it is (constitutive rules) or how it ought to be produced (regulative rules).” The idea here is that most journalists know well these assumptions about news and largely take them for granted, meaning there is little need to spell the rules out in precise terms.<sup>1</sup> Yet even though they are usually unwritten, informal, and assumed, the so-called regulative rules nevertheless come into play when there is a discussion or question about the legitimacy of a certain news product. For instance, when the reliability or appropriateness of a news item is questioned, journalists will generally defend their news product by referring to the rules they followed in producing it (Gans, 2004).

It is perceived that the new institutionalist approach to news production is useful in explaining the homogeneity and predictability of news content, but less useful in studying how and why certain rules change over time, or whether journalists perceive the rules to work differently in different contexts. Indeed, new institutionalism stresses the stability or “stickiness” of many news rules (Ryfe, 2006a). However, several students of the approach acknowledge that the rules are not immune to change. Scholars have identified significant changes, with some rules becoming more important at the expense of others. For instance, the growing pressure to entertain the public and the success of so-called infotainment programs in the mid-nineties suggest that the rule “that news should in the first place inform the public” has lost prominence (Bennett, 1996a; Brants & Neijens, 2001). In some cases, classical rules are questioned, at least by part of the press. For instance, the outspoken partisan way of

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of informal rules exercising outsized power over human behavior is not unique to journalism. Social norms help drive the evolution of cultures, both personal and professional (Burns & Dietz, 1992). Hollywood depicts this idea in *A Few Good Men* (1992), where the prosecution hinges its case on how unwritten rules in the military are rules nonetheless.



reporting the news on talk radio, FOX News, and MSNBC can be seen as a violation of the traditional rule of balanced or impartial reporting (Ryfe, 2006b).

In this paper, we start from the idea that journalists generally follow the rules of campaign coverage, but we focus on why these rules were inadequate to handle the context of 2016 election, and perhaps elections to come. In the next section we spell out what the traditional rules are (or were) for political journalists covering a presidential campaign, before turning to a discussion of how the relevance of these rules differs depending on different normative theories regarding the role of the press.

### **The Old Rules of the Game**

Journalists responsible for covering political campaigns generally abide by a broad set of journalism rules, as well as specific rules that apply in a campaign context. Below, we outline four key rules that have generally pertained to campaign coverage, and which nest under Ryfe's (2006b) constitutive and regulative rules: 1) maintain balance, 2) act as a politically neutral adversary, 3) generate a professional and marketable product, and 4) represent public sentiment and stimulate public involvement. We will also discuss how these rules derive from ethical/normative and marketplace incentives that both individual journalists and larger newsrooms face (Boydston, 2013).

#### **Rule 1. Maintain Balance**

Journalists have long abided by the unspoken rule of maintaining balance, which means giving both candidates in a two-candidate race approximately equal coverage and being equally critical of both (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Kenney & Simpson, 1993; Westerståhl & Johansson, 1986). In presidential debates, for instance, the candidates' speaking time is roughly equal, and the role of the journalist is (usually) limited in order to maintain balance

between the candidates (e.g., Kraus, 2013; Milavsky & Zhu, 1996). More generally, a meta-analysis of studies between 1948 and 1996 on partisan bias showed that news coverage of presidential campaigns turned out to be highly balanced between the two main parties. Television networks showed a minimal pro-Democratic bias and major news magazines showed a minimal pro-Republican bias (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Studies dealing with more recent campaigns largely confirm these results, but also show that the media interpreted the balance rules less rigidly (Diddi, Fico, & Alomit Zeldes, 2014). This rule of balanced coverage between candidates is much less clear during the presidential primaries, when multiple candidates compete for their parties' nomination. During this stage of the campaign journalists have the "most latitude in deciding what and who to cover" (Patterson, 2016b: 17).

The idea behind the rule of maintaining balance derives from the normative notion that the press should be independent from politics, refraining from pressing on the scales of any given election, no matter the particular views of the journalists doing the reporting. According to this rule, news outlets, in their best form, should give equal amounts and types of attention to the different options facing voters so that voters can use that information to make their own judgments. Yet despite the good intentions behind maintaining balance, many argue that this rule can lead, in specific circumstances, to false equivalency, where even objectively more qualified ideas or candidates tend to receive coverage that is at least as critical as that given to their less-qualified opponents (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Karpf, 2016). For example, despite the fact of nearly uniform consensus about climate change within the scientific community, mainstream media outlets in the US spent the early portion of the twenty-first century giving nearly equal treatment to both "sides" of the issue (Mayer, 2012).

## **Rule 2. Act as a Politically Neutral Adversary**

The same normative expectations that lead to balancing (and false equivalency) are also behind the unwritten rule that the press should act as a politically neutral adversary, charged with the responsibility not only of covering the candidates but interrogating them, their actions, and their words. This rule is inherently conflicted, since it requires both neutrality and adversarial behavior. The neutrality part leads the press to behaviors like fact checking, which has long been considered the responsibility of a healthy press (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Indeed, in recent years there has been a surge of fact checking journalism (Graves, 2016). But this rule also leads journalists to play the part not just of the watchdog but of the “gotcha” watchdog. Giving acute scrutiny to candidates’ personal gaffes, false claims, and other campaign missteps is not only good in terms of news values (see below), but also—in theory—good for democracy, since this kind of coverage helps voters view the candidates in full form, warts and all.

Yet the neutral adversary rule hinges on journalists respecting the institution the politicians represent, and on the politicians accepting the role of the media (even if they do not like it). As Bennett (2012: 2014) says, “the ritual works as long as neither side undermines its credibility by raising questions about the system that legitimizes their roles.” Additionally, because this rule fuels the “gotcha” reporting that is on constant alert to catch any gaffes candidates commit, it helps explain the disturbing tendency for journalists to focus as much (if not more) on the personalities of the candidates in a campaign as on the substantial issues of an election.

### **Rule 3. Generate a Professional and Marketable Product**

The third main rule of campaign coverage stems, of course, from journalists’ professional and economic desires to create a good product—specifically, one with high “news value.” News values refer to the key characteristics of an event (Galtung and Ruge 1965; O’Neill &

Harcup, 2009). They derive from both professional demands (what is relevant) and commercial demands (what is interesting for the public), which often (but not always) align (Fuller, 1996; Hamilton, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). The fact that news values are seldom made explicit, yet are still widely shared among journalists, suggests they are internalized (Caple & Bednarek, 2015) and grounded in a professional organizational context that determines the news production process (Tuchman, 2003). Harcup and O'Neill (2009) admit that news values stem mostly from events, but explain how they can also be created by journalists, making it difficult to distinguish between news selection and news treatment. For instance, conflict might be characteristic of an event, but also a way for a journalist to frame the story.

Probably the single most important news value for political news is “power” (Bennett, 1996b; Sellers & Schaffner, 2007). According to Bennett (1996a), most of the basic rules of political journalism are related to political power, such as stories on official sources that index the views of these elites and follow the trail of power. However, when moving to US elections, the influence of “power status” becomes less formal, translated into the question “who will have the power to govern after the election?” In that sense, a political candidate with limited formal power—such as Senator Barack Obama in the run up to the 2008 campaign—can become highly newsworthy if the polls show he has a relatively good chance at winning (see more below). In addition, other news values, like conflict, that might play a secondary role in routine times can become more important during an election. From the perspective that conflicting ideas about the organization of society are at the heart of democratic politics (Schattschneider, 1960), it is hardly surprising that conflict is one of the most popular news frames used in political news coverage (Bartholomé, Lecheler, & de Vreese, 2015; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). According to Shoemaker and colleagues (1991), conflict relates to the broader concept of deviance, including news values that also

stress the unexpected, sensational or negative nature of political events. More concretely, journalists are inclined to give more attention to candidate statements that are a direct reaction to or attack on their opponent. Several authors have documented how “negativity” has been a prime feature of US campaign coverage (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Patterson, 1993).

Another news value especially relevant in the context of election campaigns is entertainment. Mainly driven by commercial pressure, media have shifted their focus from informing to entertaining their audience (McManus, 2009). In the case of political news this trend has been labelled “infotainment,” introducing topics and style features that were traditionally only part of soft news and pure entertainment programs (Brants & Neijens, 1998).

Thus, in covering a campaign, journalists need to find stories—and angles of stories—that appeal to the consumer. Easy ways to do so are to highlight aspects of power (e.g., pulling ahead in the polls), conflict (e.g., disputes or slurs between the campaigns), and entertainment.

#### **Rule 4. Represent Public Sentiment and Stimulate Public Involvement**

On top of all these other informal rules, traditional campaign journalism has also abided by the rule of representing public attitudes in its coverage (Brookes, Lewis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). This kind of coverage goes beyond detailing the what, where, and when of campaign events to highlight how everyday citizens are responding to and thinking about the candidates and issues at stake. This rule follows the general patterns of the media agenda responding to the public agenda (e.g., Boydston, 2013; Brosius & Weimann, 1996). And especially in the age of social media, where interactive platforms like Twitter and Facebook offer increasing opportunities for citizen representation in “the media” (Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, &

Bae, 2014), traditional news outlets are more incentivized than ever to represent public interests and stimulate public involvement. As with the first two rules discussed above, this rule has good normative motivation: in order for citizens to make fully informed judgments on election day, it can help to know how their fellow citizens are reacting. In addition, inspired by participatory views on democracy, news media might want to mobilize people's interest and participation in politics. Such mobilization can be fostered by giving ordinary citizens a voice in the news and by showing how they can become more actively involved in the campaign (Strömbäck, 2005: 340)

Yet this rule, like the others, manifests in specific, sometimes disappointing ways. First, rather than focusing on the issues that the public is most concerned about, journalists often adopt a myopic focus on how the candidates are doing in public opinion polls, using what has been termed "horse race coverage" or "game framing" (Benoit et al., 2005; Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015; Patterson, 1993). Second, the media participation of the public might remain rhetorical or hollow. Krämer (2014) gives the example of talk radio, where the opportunity of true public involvement is not carried through because callers are often pre-selected or self-selected with regard to ideological positions. As we discuss more below, the rule of representing public sentiment becomes particularly challenging against the backdrop of rising populism and public discontent.

### **Conflicting Rules and Normative Expectations**

Scholars have pointed out that since the rules identified above are not always complementary, journalists struggle to combine them in their daily coverage. Which rules should journalists prioritize? According to normative theories, the answer to that question mainly depends on what kind of model of democracy is desired (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). In brief, more limited or "realistic" models suggest that the news media

should provide (neutral) information on the records and ideas of the political elites competing in the election so voters can make an informed choice. Minimal theories, such as the Burglar Alarm Standard proposed by Zaller (2003), also expect that the media will provide crucial political information when enough people ask about it. In short, these models are not too worried about the commercial nature of the media. However, more “ambitious” models of democracy suggest that the media also need to mobilize voters so they will participate in discussions and deliberate on policy alternatives. These more ambitious models expect the media to do more than provide balanced information or play an adversarial role towards the main candidates; instead, they put public representation and involvement center stage. These normative models require more qualitative news coverage that allows for constructive discussions and conflict resolution (Strömbäck, 2005).

In short, different normative theories on democracy lead to different and sometimes conflicting viewpoints on the role of the news media and the importance (and appropriateness) of the traditional rules of campaign coverage. Yet although these traditional rules have often been at tension with one another, putting journalists in a tough position (e.g., it is often difficult to maintain balance while also generating a marketable product), in the past journalists have generally been able to navigate these tensions through compromise, partially but not fully abiding by each rule.

With regard to the 2016 campaign, several scholars have already suggested it was nearly impossible to abide by multiple rules, leaving journalists compromised in their professional (and normative) duties. On the rule of balancing, Patterson (2016a) shows that Trump received significantly more coverage than Clinton, suggesting that the context of 2016 pushed the rule of balancing past its limits. One possible reason is that in 2016 the rule of balancing was at odds with the rule of producing a professional and marketable product. Donald Trump’s presidency had an inherent entertainment factor (Trump was, himself, a

reality TV star). Thus, whereas the “maintain balance” rule would have prescribed equal amounts of coverage, the “marketable product” rule would have encouraged as much attention to Trump as possible. As CBS Executive Chairman, Leslie Moonves, said about the presidential race, “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS... I’ve never seen anything like this, and this going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”

The entertaining nature of Trump’s campaign may have also put the “marketable product” rule in tension with the “neutral adversary” rule. In a less entertaining context, we would expect the neutral adversary rule to direct the press to interrogate Trump and Clinton equally about their past track records and “gotcha” moments. But survey data show that Americans heard an overwhelming amount of critical media coverage of Clinton’s email scandal, at levels that eclipsed discussion of any one of Trump’s missteps (Newport, Singh, Soroka, Traugott, & Dugan, 2016). Moreover, the press treated Trump as entertainment fodder throughout the campaign, never fully shifting to treat him as a “serious” candidate (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017).

In short, even before 2016 the traditional rules of campaign coverage were inherently conflicted. But 2016 delivered an unusual, if not unique, set of conditions, potentially putting the rules into even greater tension, or upending them altogether. Thus, based on our theoretical and normative discussion of the rules of campaign coverage, as well as the content of news coverage of the election other scholars have already analyzed, we wanted to see how journalists themselves perceived the rules of the journalism game and, in particular, whether the rules operated differently in 2016 than in past elections.

## **Methods**



We interviewed 24 journalists, editors, as well as a few political strategists or analysts who provided input for journalists or commentary for news programs. We contacted a broad range of political journalists and strategists. For those who were willing to talk to us, we ended each interview by asking for contact information of relevant colleagues, and then we contacted those colleagues in turn, producing a snowball sample. Appendix A provides the full list of interviewees, along with dates and interview lengths. We deliberately focused on a wide variety of people active in the media sector, including journalists working for local (e.g., *LA Times*, *Sacramento Bee*), national (e.g., *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, NPR) and also foreign news outlets (e.g., *The Guardian*, NRC). All interviewees were actively involved in covering at least part of the election campaign; some followed the candidates on the campaign trail, others made editorial decisions at their local newspaper, etc. We do not claim that these journalists are representative for the population of journalists involved in the US campaign coverage, but by including this diverse group of respondents, we hope to get a broader picture of how different types of journalists interpreted the campaign and the role of the media in particular. For instance, the foreign correspondents were deeply involved in covering the campaign but with a more distinct position compared to national journalists that followed the candidates on the campaign trail. We included political strategists in order to provide a semi-outsider perspective. These strategists were partly on the sideline (in terms of the production of news coverage), but also active participants in the news coverage of the election (in terms of helping to craft the messages that journalists then filtered). The interviews took place between April and September of 2017, such that all our conversations occurred within ten months of the 2016 election. We conducted one interview in person, and the rest by phone. We employed a consistent set of questions that we asked of everyone (see Appendix B), but we also followed up with additional questions, responding organically to the interviews as they occurred. We focused on how the interviewees perceived their own

role and the role of the press in general during the campaign. Importantly, our questions were designed so as not to lead subjects into explicitly discussing the classic journalistic rules that drive campaign coverage. However, nearly every person we interviewed volunteered at least one comment in line with the idea that both the rules and the campaign itself were different in 2016, providing strong support for the overarching conclusions we draw below.

Although many of the people we interviewed gave us permission to quote them with full attribution, several preferred to remain anonymous. In all but one case, we also received permission to record our conversations, which recordings we then had professionally transcribed. After all the interviews were completed, we analyzed the transcripts qualitatively, looking for themes related to journalistic practices in covering the campaign and the first months of the Trump presidency.

## **Results**

Our interviews point to an overarching idea that journalism's rules of campaign coverage did not "work" in 2016 as they used to. Our interviewees describe this idea in different ways. Some claim the rules "changed", others mention that the rules "did not apply" or simply "didn't matter." Under this broad umbrella, we present six more specific themes we observed from our interviews, each of which speaks in some way to how the traditional rules of campaign coverage were inadequate to the task of 2016.

### ***Theme 1: Trump controlled the attention***

The vast majority of the people we interviewed confirm that the news in general, and cable news in particular, was overly focused on Donald Trump at the expense of other candidates. Dan Morain, Editorial Page Editor for the Sacramento Bee (US), says: "I think the cable news outlets and the news networks gave Trump an extraordinary amount of free publicity. I

say publicity because it wasn't news. It was publicity." Bjorn Soenens, a US correspondent for VRT News (Belgium), makes this point more concrete by giving the following example: "I remember that Bernie Sanders was giving a speech after primaries, and they did away with that speech, and instead, the networks, even CNN, they showed the microphone which was waiting for Mr. Trump, his speech from Mar-a-Lago, from his estate there in Florida, so everything he did, everything he does still gets all the attention."

But why exactly did Trump receive the lion's share of attention? Here, we find less consensus. Our interviewees refer to a wide range of factors. Several journalists mention the fact that the news media gave more attention to Trump simply because this type of coverage attracted more viewers, suggesting a direct conflict between the rules of "maintain balance" and "generate a professional and marketable product." A US political strategist (Anonymous F), states it this way: "It really is a chicken or egg question for me. I tend to think CNN probably started to cover things and saw there was interest, and started to cover them more, and saw there was more interest and then started to sell more advertising and the rest, as they say, is history."

Other interviewees point to Trump's strategic ability to control the news cycle. As one White House correspondent (Anonymous B) says: "[Trump] was an attention seeking, or attention creating candidate... the coverage of his early days of his presidency has also been sort of off the charts wall to wall, and part of that is because of the unpredictability, and part of the unpredictability is his strategy for getting more coverage." And Kevin Eckery, a US political analyst, says of Trump that "He didn't control information but he controlled attention. He was masterful at sort of just capturing attention." Many interviewees refer to the now-famous statement made by CBS chairman Leslie Moonves, quoted above ("It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS"), or to similar statements by other people

in the business, such as the *New York Times Magazine* article excoriating CNN for its nearly unfettered coverage of Trump (Mahler, 2017).

From many journalists' perspectives, the written press was less to blame for the problem of not maintaining balance of coverage. However, even journalists working for these outlets mentioned that they felt the pressure to report on Trump as he was attracting more readers. Guus Valk, DC correspondent for NRC Handelsblad in the Netherlands, puts it this way: "Every morning my editor-in-chief emails the visits on the site and what articles are well read and so on, the Trump articles always are the top five articles."

### ***Theme 2: Trump was a fascination***

The more challenging question is, of course, which elements explained the fascination for Donald Trump. Several journalists we interviewed make a direct link to Trump's entertainment background as a reason for the joint fascination of the media and the public.

As one interviewee—a former US journalist, now political ghost writer (Anonymous J)—notes: "I think that the public fascination with entertainment and envy of entertainers and celebrities also played a role. I think there were plenty of people out there who vote for Donald Trump because they want to be Donald Trump." Similarly, a US national-level political reporter (Anonymous H) says this about Trump: "I think because he was treated as an entertainment figure, almost as a joke, even funny, he was [the] punchline and obviously he's not going to succeed. So, you know, he wasn't seen, as a serious contender, and therefore not a serious threat to anything."

In line with the idea that the press never completely shifted from treating Trump as a celebrity to treating him as a serious presidential candidate (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017), Susan Milligan, a political reporter for *US News & World Report*, says: "At the beginning [Trump] was sort of like the entertainment portion of our election. I'm talking about the

primaries. Nobody thought he was going to get the nomination, so when people wrote about the things he said, it was just not from the perspective of a serious person making these comments because we didn't take him seriously.”

Martin Pengelly, an editor and reporter in DC for *The Guardian* (UK), speculates that the level of media attention given to Trump had to do with Trump’s rising public success and the enthusiasm of his grass roots supporters: “He had more attention, but as far as I can see, he just demanded it, because it was a movement.” Pengelly’s comment would suggest that the press failed to abide by the rule of balancing because this rule was at odds with the rule of representing public sentiment. Trump seemed to inspire a part of the public that previously was hardly involved in electoral politics. As we will see below, however, most people we interviewed feel that although the press gave a disproportionate amount of attention to Trump (breaking the rule of balancing), the press also failed to capture the true pulse of Americans’ attitudes.

### ***Theme 3: Trump was “the Teflon candidate” in the extreme***

The press might have given more attention to Trump, certainly during the primaries, but that did not mean it covered Trump less critically. On the contrary, Patterson’s data show that the majority of coverage about Trump was negative (2016). Nevertheless, many journalists we interviewed note that their critical coverage of Trump’s outspoken statements and gaffes, which would normally be enough to doom a candidate’s chances (both in the media and with the public), did not seem to affect coverage (or public sentiment). As the aforementioned journalist-turned-ghost-writer says, Trump “was the Teflon candidate. I’m not sure why, but I just think that it seemed like nothing really stuck.”

Many of the people we interviewed echo this point. Scott Horsley, a White House Correspondent for National Public Radio (US) describes it this way when talking about why

Trump's gaffes did not sink his campaign: "We've asked ourselves that a lot. I remember landing in Iowa in July of 2015 on the morning that he made his comments about John McCain and thinking 'Okay, well that's it.'... I thought that would be the end of it. If nothing else, I certainly thought the Access Hollywood video would be the end of it. If people called Ronald Reagan the Teflon president, I don't know what you call Donald Trump."

Pengelly (*The Guardian*, UK) makes a similar argument: "Nothing seemed to matter about Trump. He was news-proof. There were a million different reasons he shouldn't have made it, and he somehow did." And another national-level political reporter (Anonymous G) says it yet another way: "Well, he lied outright. I mean, he just did. He peddled conspiracy theories. He insulted regular people, I mean, not just his opponents, but regular people. He mocked a handicapped person, and that's what he did, no matter what Trump said. It's very obvious that's what he did. I mean, all of his... he insulted women, which, even if the women deserved it, and I'm not saying they did, it's just something you don't get away with."

#### ***Theme 4: Trump resonated with the public***

What, exactly, explains why Trump "got away" with so many gaffes and off-putting statements? Across the people we interviewed, one clear message came through: Trump's campaign resonated with a big section of the US electorate in ways that the press simply did not understand. Milligan (*US News & World Report*) tells us: "I think he touched a chord with a certain segment of the public that was just frustrated about a lot of things.

Immigration, just the fact that their world was just so much different, especially for middle aged people, than it was when they were kids, or what they thought their world was going look like. I think he really hit on that frustration and really benefited from it."

According to Soenens (VRT, Belgium) Trump's statements were simply in line with the public mood. He puts it this way: "Mr. Trump, who was not afraid openly, without hesitation,

and without inhibition, showing that he was able to be crude and that he was able of being very, very, openly insulting towards people, towards certain groups, and he really tapped into a new zeitgeist, as I would call it. Sign of the times that he could do this, he could pull this off. If he had been a candidate in let's say in 1988, or 1996, he would have been a detail in the campaign. [...] He was really a child of the time, and that's the difference." This point ties in directly with the next theme that shone through in the interviews we conducted.

### ***Theme 5: Journalists were out of touch***

Our interviews made clear that, in contrast with Trump's resonance with a large section of the public, journalists had an exceptionally hard time understanding this resonance and, in turn, that section of the public. According to political analyst Kevin Eckery, many journalists and commentators could not understand Trump's appeal because they were focused on his words, while his supporters by contrast were driven by emotions. He says: "I was spending too much time reading and following the words. I wasn't following the feelings. He was lying on so many things but it didn't matter because the people who were supporting him were paying attention to the tone and to the feelings, not the facts."

Interestingly, although academics struck quickly on the important role of populism in helping to explain Trump's near-immunity to his political gaffes (e.g., Block & Negrine, 2017; Schaffner, Macwilliams, & Nteta, 2018), none of the people we interviewed in 2017 mention the concept explicitly. Yet nearly all our interviewees reference the general disconnect between journalists' and pundits' expectations of how the public would respond to Trump and, importantly, to campaign coverage of Trump, and how the public actually responded.

A former journalist (Anonymous J) claims: "I think that there was just this huge assumption from the beginning that there was no way he could get enough votes to get over

the threshold, and so there was a complete miscalculation of the electorate and the themes that would resonate with them that he used so well.” One national reporter (Anonymous H) describes underestimating the feelings of part of the public, saying: “I think I knew, but underestimated how much anger there was at the system. [...] I knew that that existed, but I think I didn’t understand quite how visceral it was.”

Several journalists refer to the size of the country and the difficulty of interpreting diverse signs of public opinion. A White House correspondent (Anonymous B) puts it this way: “But campaigns are really hard things to cover. It’s like looking at the toenail of an elephant, and you know, you talk to voters in one cafe, or you talk to voters at a bunch of different events, but how do you know whether that’s part of a trend or not? And then you try to attach that to polling or attach that to demographic data, but it’s pretty impossible to see the whole elephant.”

This challenge of reading public opinion might have been more outspoken in the 2016 election compared to campaigns in the past, as the journalists we interviewed complained about the pressure to publish constantly. Foreign correspondent Valk (Netherlands) says: “I saw a lot of my American colleagues being under such an enormous pressure when they were on the campaign trail to publish all of the time. I really felt that they were working very hard but had no idea in which state they were or what town hall they were.”

Our interviewees throw into sharper relief the self-criticism of many journalists who have pointed to the fact that the major news outlets in America are on the coasts, and that journalists themselves have a standard of living that is a far cry from most working-class Americans (e.g., Todd, 2016; McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2017). Relatedly, one interviewee (Anonymous H) says: “I think there are structural issues with the media that probably contributed to [the problem of the press representing the public]... It is still true that most of the major and most influential and powerful press is based in a couple of coastal cities and



not all of those people are from those places, but they often have lived there a long time... I think this election has sort of opened a lot of people's eyes to the importance of spending more time out in the field, out in the country talking to people." Another interviewee (Anonymous G) says: "I do think the mainstream press, which I'm a part of, tends to treat conservative voters like exotic animals. I think that's a long-standing problem. I don't think there are enough mainstream reporters who come from the world of conservative living... and I don't mean a registered conservative. I mean, how many of them come from entrepreneurial families where tax cuts and few regulations actually can make a difference in whether or not your business survives and whether or not you can start a business? Just understanding that world."

The press has surely never been fully representative of the diverse attitudes of the electorate as a whole, but in 2016 journalists may have been especially disconnected from the type of voter to whom Trump appealed. As two Politico reporters put it the day after the election, "We were all wrong. That seems obvious, right? But we were more than wrong. We were laughably oblivious. The entire Washington political-media complex completely missed the mark. Not by inches or feet, but by miles." (Palmer & Sherman, 2016). Our interview materials underscore the notion that the press failed to apply the traditional rule of representing public sentiment. But, importantly, the press did not *know* they were not representing the public, as evidenced in part by the fact that the large majority of journalists we interviewed told us they were surprised by the election's outcome.

We attribute the disconnect between the press and the public to the various factors mentioned in our interviews, but also to the populist zeitgeist of 2016. The backdrop of populism served to expose existing tensions between the traditional rules of the game. The fourth rule we identify above ("represent public sentiment and stimulate public involvement") only works in concert with the first and second rules ("maintain balance" and

“act as a politically neutral adversary”) and, more to the point, with the normative tenets of democracy, when public sentiment is deliberative in nature. But when public sentiment is fueled by populist fervor on either or both sides, the “marketable product” part of the third rule calls for journalistic representation of that fervor. Such representation is excellent for ratings, but normatively problematic.

***Theme 6: In the Trump presidency, the pace is fast and there is deep mutual mistrust***

In addition to discussing the role of the press during the campaign, we raised questions about the Trump presidency and how it affects political journalism and the press-politics relationship. Two important points arose across several interviews. First, journalists struggle with the increased tempo of news related to the White House. Of course, the digitalization of the political communication process is far from new, but the constant stream of messages from the commander-in-chief (mainly via Twitter) has left journalists struggling and confused. Several interviewees complain that the president’s tweets set their agenda, while at the same time they feel powerless not to report on it.

For instance, John Myers, Sacramento Bureau Chief for the *Los Angeles Times* (US) describes it this way: “In the last six months, it is often a scan of Twitter feed and what did the president tweet. Today was one of those days. Especially when you live in California, you’re in Pacific time zone, you wake up and the president’s tweeted six things, and you have a sense of where the day’s going to go.” Pengelly (*The Guardian*, UK) makes a similar observation: “[Trump] just attacks, attacks, attacks, attacks all the time, which means you have got to take what he’s doing and report it.” It seems that journalists have a hard time re-evaluating the news value of “power status.” The president of the US has always been the most prominent political actor in the country, and therefore his communication has always had a higher newsworthiness than that of other actors. However, our interviews suggest that

journalists are in doubt about whether the president's inherent newsworthiness means that every presidential tweet should get the attention of a presidential press briefing. This dilemma is especially challenging when considering that news coverage given to the president's prolific Tweets comes at the price of time and resources that cannot be spent on other newsworthy items. One reporter of a leading national newspaper (Anonymous I) complains about how the focus on Trump pushes important policy-related stories from the news agenda: "I find there are some significant stories that just aren't getting played that would have under other circumstances, but we are just always under the pressure of this astonishing, unfolding story of the Trump presidency."

A second recurring topic related to the Trump presidency is the profound mistrust between two institutions: the press and the president. Several journalists mentioned that the relationship between the president and the press has always been antagonistic, but simultaneously respectful. Both players might have been overly critical of one another, but never with the intention to delegitimize the other. In this way, our interviewees refer implicitly to the role of the press as a politically neutral adversary. The fact that President Trump, even more than candidate Trump, openly criticizes and attacks journalists, calling them enemies of the people, has severe consequences for political journalists. The main consequence, of course, is that journalists must be concerned that a growing number of citizens no longer believe them. One interviewee (Anonymous J) describes the negative effect this way: "I think the damage [Trump's] done to legitimate media sources in terms of undermining public confidence, that's not going to just go away even if he goes away. I think that the media is going to have a really big job re-establishing itself." One foreign journalist (Anonymous E) who travelled through the US to report on state of the country during the first six months of the Trump presidency, notes the frequency with which citizens said "I don't believe the media." According to this interviewee, such sentiments are relatively new for the

American media establishment, but echo back to the reporter's time as a foreign correspondent in Italy during the days Silvio Berlusconi was in power, when a large part of the country deeply mistrusted the traditional news media.

This mutual mistrust is exacerbated by journalists' perceptions that the Trump administration puts out more false information than previous administrations. Journalists have always been sceptical of the information politicians give them, being aware of the strategic goals politicians have when sharing information. But our interviews make clear that the difference today is that journalists need to question the factual nature of the information. One White House correspondent (Anonymous B) makes the following comparison with the previous administration: "In the Obama administration, you knew that they were spinning you constantly, but at some fundamental level, there was you know, truth hiding under there if they gave you a number... They didn't want to be called out for saying something that turned out to be wrong. That is not the case with the Trump administration, currently. I don't know if it's just sloppiness, or they just don't care, or they are actually trying to put something over on us, but the press secretary literally comes out and says things from the podium that are easily verifiably not true, which changes the value of anything that is said from the podium in the briefing room." The result is not only an abstract degradation in trust but also a more practical consequence in the form of journalists needing to fact check every piece of information they get from the White House.

## **Discussion**

Based on our interviews with 24 journalists and political consultants, we conclude that the traditional press was unprepared to cover the 2016 campaign. Many of the people we interviewed feel that it simply no longer works to do their job as they always did. John Myers (*Los Angeles Times*, US) summarizes it metaphorically: "It's like we put on a raincoat to go

out to report a rainstorm, and we walked into a hurricane. We knew what the weather was like, but we weren't prepared for the ferocity of it." Based on all our interview material, it seems that of the four traditional rules we outlined at the start of this paper, none of them applied in traditional ways. The "professional and marketable product" rule, in particular, was pushed to its extreme because Trump's entertainment value incentivized broadcasters and media outlets to prioritize ratings. Many people in the news business, however, never thought that this "overexposure" was problematic in terms of breaking the rule of balanced reporting, as they were convinced Donald Trump would never win the primaries, let alone the general election.

Our interviewees were most surprised that applying the rule of being a neutral adversary had no effect on the outcome of the 2016 election. News outlets gave significant amounts of coverage to the insulting statements Trump made about political opponents, reporters, women, immigrants, and others. And yet, somehow, these comments did not disqualify Trump as a candidate for the presidency. According to our interviewees, the Teflon nature of Trump's candidacy can be explained by the strong resonance he had with large segments of America—a resonance that was more driven by emotions than facts, and that many journalists failed to fully capture. Journalists believed that, from their perspective, the coverage they gave to Trump would have had a clear effect on the public and the candidates' position in the race, as was the case in previous campaigns. The fact that their coverage did not have the expected impact left many of them confused about both their perception of the (Trump) electorate and their role in this campaign.

It was striking that nearly all the journalists we interviewed put at least part of responsibility for the breakdown in the rules of the game on the fact that citizens failed to respond to cues from the press as they "should", or at least as they had in the past. The fact that the rules of the game hinge, at least in the minds of many journalists, on citizen

responsiveness challenges the idea that journalistic rules can work as long as they are shared amongst journalists themselves. If the health of a democracy leans on the ability of the press to communicate the strengths and weaknesses of candidates to a citizenry, the rules of campaign coverage need to account for the possibility, especially acute in a populist context, that citizens will not always take the offered cues.

The exact ways in which the rules of campaign coverage or even the game itself were changed in 2016 is, of course, a more complicated story than we have been able to capture here. And, thinking forward to future campaigns, it is difficult to anticipate exactly how the old rules need to be adapted or whether we simply need a whole new set of rules for what might be a “new normal” game. However, the prevalence of populist attitudes around the world, growing polarization, the increasing distrust in the news media as an institution and the pervasiveness of “post-truth politics” all point to the idea that the journalistic rules of yore are no longer sufficient to keep campaign coverage even reasonably in line with the classic normative expectations for a neutral watchdog press. British media scholar McNair (2016) sums the phenomenon of 2016 this way: “The mainstream media in America and around the world demonstrated their inability to cope with the challenge of a President Trump within the conventional paradigms of journalistic objectivity, balance and fairness... It is time to rethink the appropriate response of ‘objective’ journalism to the post-factual politics of extreme subjectivity.” The interviews we conducted directly support this troubling conclusion.

It is, indeed, time for journalists and academics alike to rethink our understanding of both the rules and the game. Based on our study, we speculate on the normative implications. Most challenging for future campaign coverage is the hurdle of the press reconnecting with ordinary citizens across the country and across the political spectrum and, as just mentioned, accounting for the possibility that even if journalists play by their own rules, citizens and politicians may not respond in predictable ways. A first basic step might be, as suggested by

journalists themselves, to improve the (physical) presence of the press in mainland America. Next, journalists need to look for ways to foster real citizen involvement. Mapping our interview data against normative theory, this involvement would be best not in a populist form, namely by choosing to stand with “the public” against the political elite (“look how extreme and angry these people are”) (Krämer, 2014). Such a populist perspective on representing the public is not compatible with a more deliberative—or at least reason-based—form of news coverage. Therefore, we argue in favor of an alternative approach, more in line with the normative ideal of a participatory democracy. In the present, highly polarized climate in the US, we would advocate for an approach that centers on bringing people of different political leanings back together in at least two ways. First, through representation in the news. For example, diverse representation could be fostered if news outlets from the *New York Times* to FOX News made even more room for empathy-driven profiles of real citizens, struggling with real problems, often similar on both the left and the right, with a goal not of fueling debate but of establishing understanding and awareness. This kind of diverse representation might not help ratings, but it would help democracy. Second, a diverse representation approach would involve news outlets appealing (in a market-aware way) to different stripes of the electorate, resisting the current trend toward niche news (Stroud, 2011). We are aware that this truism may sound naïve, but the success of recent initiatives such as “Better Angels”, an organization that brings people with different political views together with the aim to “depolarize America”, shows that something can be done. The aim of depolarizing America is well beyond the scope of journalism, but news outlets could develop their own journalistic initiatives, aimed at “representing America”, that stimulate genuine interaction and deliberation between people with diverging views. Such initiatives could take many forms, from a concerted effort to focus less on conflicting views and more on the simultaneous truths behind both liberal and conservative views, to sponsoring

conversations over shared meals (as Sarah Silverman demonstrates in her “I Love You America” series), to moderating civil and reason-based conversations between people who disagree (as demonstrated powerfully by the “Change My View” community on Reddit (Malone, 2017)). In short, we advocate for journalists to put concrete initiatives in place to represent America as the diverse place it is not only to “save democracy”, but also for news outlets’ own self-interest, as garnering diverse public participation might be the only way to fix the growing public distrust in the press as a democratic institution.



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## Appendix A: List of interviewees

<b>Journalist</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>
Anonymous A	Chief Political Correspondent for a national news outlet (US)	17-Apr-17	34 minutes
Doug Elmets	Political consultant	19-Apr-17	68 minutes
Kevin Eckery	Political analyst	21-Apr-17	74 minutes
Scott Horsley	White House correspondent for National Public Radio (US)	24-Apr-17	20 minutes
Anonymous B	White House correspondent for a national news outlet (US)	25-Apr-17	32 minutes
Dan Morain	Editorial Page Editor for the Sacramento Bee (US)	4-May-17	37 minutes
Anonymous C	Editor for national a news outlet (US)	5-May-17	31 minutes
Anonymous D	Political correspondent for a national news outlet (US)	5-May-17	43 minutes
Susan Milligan	Political reporter for US News & World Report (US)	5-May-17	29 minutes
Roel Verrychen	US correspondent for various European news outlets	10-May-17	60 minutes
Anonymous E	Staff Writer at the Foreign Desk of a non-US newspaper	11-May-17	91 minutes
Anonymous F	Political Strategist	15-May-17	35 minutes
Guus Valk	US Correspondent for NRC Handelsblad (Netherlands)	17-May-17	45 minutes
Mike McPhate	Columnist for New York Times (US)	17-May-17	46 minutes
Anonymous G	Political Reporter for a national news outlet (US)	6-Jun-17	30 minutes
John Myers	Sacramento Bureau Chief for LA Times (US)	6-Jun-17	69 minutes
Anonymous H	Political reporter for a national news outlet (US)	6-Jun-17	33 minutes
Anonymous I	Political reporter for a national news outlet (US)	6-Jun-17	33 minutes
Anonymous J	Former US journalist, now political ghost writer	7-Jun-17	32 minutes
Bjorn Soenens	US Correspondent for VRT News (Belgium)	3-Jul-17	38 minutes
Mars van Grunsven	US correspondent for various European news outlets	4-Jul-17	29 minutes
Martin Pengelly	Editor and reporter for The Guardian (UK)	2-Aug-17	60 minutes
Karin Henricksson	US Analyst for Doc SE Foreign Policy Magazine (Sweden)	8-Aug-17	28 minutes
Matthias Kolb	US correspondent for Suddeutsche Zeitung (DE)	5-Sep-17	59 minutes

**Appendix B: List of interview questions (in addition to other questions that arose organically during each interview)**

1. What was your assignment/role during the campaign?
2. In general, what were your main sources of information in covering/discussing the campaign?
3. The 2016 election has been called ‘exceptional’, ‘extreme’, ‘historic’. How do you look back at the election?
4. In thinking back to the 2016 election, how do you judge the role of the press in general: Did the press (mainstream national newspapers) deliver good campaign coverage?
5. Did the press play an important role in the election outcome? Can you give examples of where the press focused on the right issues/aspects of the campaign and on the wrong issues/aspects of the campaign?
6. Overall, how would you describe the relative influence that all these different types of media had on the election?
7. If you covered previous elections, was it different for you to cover this campaign, compared to previous elections?
8. Did the press give too much coverage to Trump during the campaign? How about now?
9. Do you think Donald Trump is truly a unique phenomenon, or just a more extreme version of the kind of candidate we should expect to see in today’s media environment?
10. For FOREIGN JOURNALISTS: Did you cover Trump differently than your US colleagues because you report for a European audience?
11. Do you think the press treated Trump differently in any way because he came to politics via entertainment?
12. The campaign was closely followed by people all over the world. Were you contacted by foreign journalists? Did you read or see foreign coverage of Trump during the campaign? Do you have any thoughts about how the foreign coverage compared to national coverage? How about in recent weeks?
13. For FOREIGN JOURNALISTS: Did you follow the coverage of other foreign journalists? How would you compare the coverage of the foreign press with the coverage of the US press?
14. Here’s the last question about the election: Were you surprised by the outcome of the election? Knowing now what the outcome was, is there anything you would have changed about how you covered the election?
15. Can you describe your normal day right now, in terms of which news source(s) you look at first thing in the morning, again later in the day, etc.?
16. Has the Trump presidency changed your work?
17. What other question should we be asking? What else do you want to tell us?