Covering the Coverage

The 2020 Election
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Good riddance to 2020. Never forget 2020. Hope is finally here. This is the darkest time in US history.

And so it goes for this awful, momentous, extraordinary year, one in which the news both accelerated and melted together in unimaginably complex ways. What started as a critical election year became the story of a pandemic, which then turned into a national reckoning over racial injustice.

At the Columbia Journalism Review, we have sought to cover these interwoven story lines as they reflect, and are reflected by, journalism. It turned out to be a very wide lens.

Writing about the election of 2020 meant we also wrote about policing and why the racial makeup of newsrooms got in the way of telling that story. It meant chronicling Donald Trump’s estrangement from Matt Drudge and his new romance with Newsmax and One America News Network. And it required our public editors to hold big media to account, and our digital media writers to dissect misinformation and the role of the big platforms in spreading it.

This compilation is intended to give you a taste of CJR over the past year. This project began as an effort to provide a quick overview of our election coverage. The fact that it ballooned to these hundred-plus pages—with so much left out—tells you both about the year we have had and about the tireless efforts of our team of writers, illustrators, editors, and photographers. My deep thanks to them all.

We invite you to enjoy this collection, and to revel in the fact that 2020 is really, truly, almost done.

Kyle Pope
Editor and Publisher
Columbia Journalism Review
Why did Matt Drudge turn on Donald Trump?

Matt Drudge, who rose to stardom when he broke the Monica Lewinsky story around the last presidential impeachment, still runs the news aggregation site that bears his name during this one. And he’s still one of the most influential people in the media.

The now-fifty-two-year-old Drudge and a skeleton staff effectively invented clickbait. They still present lines of juicy, but contextless, text, aggregated from around the Web, in a typewriter font: “STUDY: Farmers have most sex…” “Interior minister warns of repeat of migrant influx into EU…” “HILLARY 2020? ‘DON’T TEMPT ME’…”

It’s been an effective recipe. In recent years, according to one analytics firm, the Drudge Report has surpassed the New York Times in Web traffic. On his site, Drudge boasts ten billion views for the past year, which is generally in line with other reported estimates. And during the last presidential campaign, he used every bit of that influence to back Donald Trump, going all in on the candidate well before many other major conservative entities, including Fox News.

Trump’s main rival, Ted Cruz, lashed out at Drudge for his apparent bias, calling the Drudge Report “an attack site for the Donald Trump campaign.” Carl Bernstein called Drudge’s backing “an influence unequaled” in Trump’s ascent to the GOP nomination. Bob Sutton, a self-described “foot soldier” in the Trump movement and chairman of the Broward County Republican Executive Committee, said the backing from a media powerhouse helped rally the Trump movement. “Drudge was an early supporter of our grassroots effort with Trump,” said Sutton, who is pushing the president’s reelection efforts in South Florida, where Drudge resides. “It was nice to know there was a friend.”

Trump reciprocated Drudge’s affection after the election, calling him a “great gentleman” and hosting him at the White House. But cracks began emerging in Drudge’s devotion two years into Trump’s term, with the president’s inability to get full funding for the border wall. The issue was clearly central to Drudge’s support, as it was to that of other hardline conservatives, including Ann Coulter, who has heavily criticized Trump for failing to build the wall as promised.

Drudge had been serving up a diet of stories painting “illegals” as job-taking, disease-carrying criminals long before Trump deemed them rapists. (Just three weeks before Trump announced his candidacy, Drudge posted a story alleging a “surge” in deaths and gang activity “as illegals flood the border.”) And Drudge clearly wasn’t pleased when Trump didn’t follow through on some of his campaign promises. This summer he posted a banner headline that slammed Trump for building “no new wall at all!”

Following that opening salvo, his hits on Trump began stacking up. Through July and August last year Drudge warned that big government had expanded on Trump’s watch, that his “trash talk” turned off suburban women, that farmers were struggling, and that the president was ruining markets with his trade wars.

And since the impeachment proceedings began, Drudge has gone further anti-Trump, pounding him day after day.

I wanted to ask Drudge about his changing stance on Trump, but he hasn’t given a mainstream media outlet an interview in years. The voicemail I left him
went unreturned, so last year, just as the headlines began to turn, I drove out to Drudge’s house in a remote farming community called Redland in southwest Miami-Dade County.

I did not have high hopes of finding him. Drudge’s house, which he bought along with the adjoining property for about $2.2 million in 2013, is hidden in woods, not far from the Everglades. Pulling up to the entrance after driving on some of Redland’s idyllic tree-domed roads, I expected nothing less than a high-walled bunker. A wooden gate greeted me instead. It was wide open.

Though decidedly reclusive, Drudge hadn’t completely fallen off the earth before my visit. He’d surfaced, or at least his voice had, twice in the past four years, both times within the confines of his acolytes in the conservative media. The first came in October 2015, when he joined a sort-of protégé, Alex Jones, on Infowars.

The Drudge Report has linked to hundreds of Infowars stories over the years, driving millions of views to the conspiracy-driven site. He did the same for Breitbart News (the late Andrew Breitbart worked as an aide for Drudge, or as Breitbart himself put it, “Matt Drudge’s bitch”).

When he appeared on Infowars, Drudge lamented that “you can’t underestimate the sickness of the American people right now,” but praised Jones as “a romance figure” who was “standing up tough, facing headwinds.”

Winding through palm-spangled Florida woods on Drudge’s driveway, I caught a glimpse of a swimming pool and the edge of his home, carved into the landscape.

After a brief conversation with an apparent groundskeeper on a golf cart who spoke little English, I knocked on his door—no answer. Then I left. Later in the day, I called his number again. And this time Drudge answered, his nasal voice unmistakable. I introduced myself and told him I was working on a story for the Columbia Journalism Review, and said I’d tried knocking on his door.

“That was you?” he asked with apparent astonishment.

He said he couldn’t make out who it was in surveillance videos, noted that he’d put up keep out signs on his property for just this kind of occasion, and had even called the police. (The Miami-Dade force produced no record of such a call, when I asked for one later.)

“That’s not fair that you would come onto my property, knowing the climate we’re in,” he said. “It’s a volatile climate, and you could have been hurt.… What happens if it was a fan? What happens if it was a stalker?”

He didn’t sound angry; much of the call was oddly pleasant. But he became defensive when I asked him if he felt he was in danger from fans or stalkers.

“He was still caught up on my door knock.

“Ambushing someone on a private property, you can get yourself hurt, Bob,” he said. “I’ve followed your career. I watched you on [local Miami television], and I’m surprised you would conduct yourself in that way.”

Was Matt Drudge trying to guilt-trip me? After going back and forth for several more minutes, he finally asked me what I wanted to talk about. I told him I was

“I live in a world that is free, colorful, vibrant, takes chances, bold, stands up to power. And that’s where I’ve made my success.”

“But you’re there and you’re not alone,” Drudge told Jones. “Limbaugh, Savage, Hannity, Levin…. I’m friends with all of them.”

He was referring to conservative radio hosts Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage, as well as Fox News commentators Sean Hannity and Mark Levin. Drudge spoke a great deal about his own freedom to say whatever he wanted, without reliance on any other person or corporation, including Web behemoths like Facebook and Twitter.

“You’re playing in Google’s hell pit,” said Drudge. “Make your own place…. I live in a world that is free, colorful, vibrant, takes chances, bold, stands up to power. And that’s where I’ve made my success.”

Drudge’s other relatively recent public appearance was in March 2017, when he briefly appeared on the radio show of Michael Savage, a white nationalist and conspiracy theorist. There Drudge spoke of Trump in near-heroic terms, calling him “one of the most fascinating Americans that has ever lived in the modern era.” He said he suspected that the new president was the victim of “sabotage” from Congress and worried Hillary Clinton might win the presidency in 2020.

“We’re trying to save this young Trump administration,” he said.

Savage boasted that he and Drudge were the “two people on earth” who had done the most to get Trump elected. “I don’t know about that,” Drudge demurred.
curious about his current thoughts on Trump.

“You and everybody else,” he said.

I noted that he went all in on Trump during the election.

“That was three years ago,” he said.

That response seemed rather telling, a clear distancing from the president. But Drudge wouldn’t go further. Instead, he went right back to the supposed violation of his inner sanctum.

“The gate was open, I drove to your door, I knocked and I left,” I told him. “You were an aggressive reporter yourself at one point, I believe.”

“I remember knocking on Maureen Dowd’s door years ago,” he said almost wistfully.

Shortly after our somewhat tortured conversation, the impeachment process began. And the Drudge Report was no longer defending Trump in the least. In fact, Drudge seems to be outwardly rooting for Trump’s downfall. The loaded headlines tell the story: “Republican criticism [of Trump] mounts...” “It took [a] long time for Republicans to abandon Nixon...” “Senate likelier to remove [Trump]...”

Leading the page recently was a photograph of a troubled-looking Trump over links to a poll showing that 52 percent of respondents supported his removal from office, one noting that the impeachment process “mirrors Nixon,” and another asking “would Trump agree to quit?” When Trump said in late October that the wall was being built in Colorado, Drudge skewered him for the gaffe, leading his page with a doctored map of the southwest United States.

Of course, Drudge’s persistent slamming of Trump hasn’t gone unnoticed. Many conservatives have voiced a mixture of anger, shock, and dismay over the apparent shift.

“[D]oes anyone know what @realDonaldTrump did to @DRUDGE to cause him to go from great news aggregation provider to anti-Trumper number one?” tweeted conservative radio talker Joe Pagliarulo, adding, “What gives?”

Radio host and frequent Fox News contributor Dan Bongino recently launched his own news aggregation site in direct reaction to Drudge’s shift on Trump. With a subcategory titled “The Impeachment Witch Hunt,” the site promises to be 100 percent pro-Trump.

“Drudge has abandoned you,” Bongino tweeted January 8. “We never will.” CJR
One America News was desperate for Trump’s approval. Here’s how it got it.

Andrew McCormick
May 27, 2020

One America News Network is having a moment. In April the small, right-wing national cable network made headlines when Chanel Rion, its White House correspondent, was banned from the briefing room by the White House Correspondents’ Association for ignoring social-distancing regulations. Since then, the network has supported the president’s claim that hydroxychloroquine, a controversial and potentially dangerous drug, is a cure for the novel coronavirus.

The drug has “proven to be miraculous,” Robert Herring, OAN’s owner and chief executive, said, falsely, on an OAN broadcast in May. He’d purchased hydroxychloroquine himself, he added, and was grateful to Trump for leading by example.

From the moment, in 2015, that Trump announced his run for the White House, OAN, sometimes called OANN, has worked aggressively to curry favor. In 2016, it devotedly carried Trump’s rallies in full. Since he took office, the channel’s programming has consisted of incessant and uncritical coverage of the president and his policies. Its aim: access, and praise. But that hasn’t all gone to plan. Until recently, the big interviews with Trump and top cabinet officials were given to Fox and, every once in a while, CBS and NBC. “For us, it was difficult to get interviews with Ben Carson,” a former OAN producer told me.

In late 2018, Herring attempted to right this wrong by meeting with Trump and administration officials in DC. But when he returned to the network headquarters, in San Diego, he was glum, according to multiple employees present at the time. All he had gotten from Trump was a compliment on OAN’s graphics.

In the following months, however, the president began fielding more questions from OAN during press briefings. Last May, the network nabbed an interview with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. And throughout last year Trump repeatedly praised OAN on Twitter—perhaps with the intention of needling Fox, but praised nonetheless. “Thank you to One America News for your fair coverage and brilliant reporting,” the president wrote in October. “@OANN is doing incredible reporting,” he tweeted in December.

Charles Herring, OAN’s president and Robert Herring’s son, says that the network’s news shows are unbiased. “Our news anchors are NOT allowed to express their opinion,” he wrote to me in an email. “They are presenters, and the STAR of the show is the ‘news,’ not the talent.” But to tune in is to enter a dizzying alternaverse in which the least credible of Republican talking points are taken as fact. On OAN, Trump is perennially the victim of deep-state scheming. Democrats’ efforts to block a census citizenship question were a ploy to hijack the Electoral College. And the Pentagon, by investigating atrocities committed under the American flag, is waging a “war on warriors.” Last December, OAN ran a three-hour special in which Rion and Rudy Giuliani collaborated to “debunk the impeachment hoax.” (Russian state television later rebroadcast part of the special.)

I spoke with more than a dozen former and current employees of OAN, some on the condition of anonymity because they feared reprisal. A few had kind words for the network and for their coworkers, but collectively they described a circus, where ethics are absent, turnover is high, and dissent is met with rage. At the helm, they say, is Robert Herring, a wealthy businessman and kind of mini-Trump,
whose near-singular focus seems to be supporting the president and his policies. “[Herring] is the network,” a former anchor told me. “He is in control of absolutely everything he wants to be, and if someone doesn’t like it they’re fired.”

The One America Building, a brutalist two-story, sits north of downtown San Diego, in an office park off Interstate 5 that is also home to a tile store, a Southern Baptist church, and a vending machine distribution company.

Robert Herring, who declined to be interviewed for this article, is around eighty years old and stocky, with bottle-brown hair. He was described to me as an eccentric who buys his dress shirts from Costco but lives with his third wife in a luxurious mansion with a tennis court, a pool, and a pond with a bridge across it in the front yard.

Herring is originally from Louisiana but moved to Southern California as a boy. He worked briefly in pet stores—“he once casually informed me that he knows how to anally express a poodle,” a second former anchor told me—and in the 1960s became a salesman for a circuit board manufacturer in Orange County.

Over the subsequent decades he founded, then sold, two circuit board companies of his own, for $60 million and $122 million. In 2004 he founded Wealth TV, a luxury-lifestyle network, which later became A Wealth of Entertainment, or AWE, with shows including **Boys Toys**, **Private Islands**, and **Platinum Playgrounds**. The San Diego Business Journal called Herring a longtime, self-described “news junkie.” He started OAN in 2013.

Helping chart the network’s course are Charles Herring and another son, Bobby; as children, the brothers cleaned shop on afternoons and weekends in their father’s factory. Each man leaves his mark on the network’s content, but it is Robert Herring whose life and views dominate OAN programming.

While much of the network’s coverage is in lockstep with Trump—it is anti-immigrant and pro-police and rejects climate science—some of the content is pure Herring, staffers say. He drives a Tesla and is said to invest in the company, for example, so stories that reflect negatively on Tesla or Elon Musk are discouraged. (“If you keep running stories about Tesla, and the stock keeps going down, I may not be able to afford you all,” a former employee recalls him telling the newsroom.)

Herring’s grip on the network’s coverage gets even tighter when it comes to stories of greater importance. Police shootings of unarmed Black men are a well-known taboo at OAN. “We ignored certain stories just because H didn’t like them,” Warnke says. “Even when there were compelling reasons not to ignore them.”

OAN wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. The Herrings say their intention was to create a network that focused on dispassionate reporting, to fill a gap in the cable news landscape left by an industry-wide migration to punditry and “news analysis.” A 2013 Pew Research Center “State of the Media” report showing that news packages had declined significantly on other networks convinced the Herrings there was an opportunity for a network that pitched straight down the middle.

Robert Herring is known for thrift—he told the Business Journal he “can do more with less than anybody in the world”—and he’d been sold by the makers of a control room system called Ross OverDrive, popular among local news stations, on the idea of “news automation,” which promised that a single computer could take the place of a team of people in managing the video, audio, and graphical overlays of a newscast. The plan was for OAN to run preproduced packages from video news services like Reuters, with an anchor to read intros and outros and a bare-bones team behind the scenes to operate cameras and the computer.

The problem was that such automation only works if the newsroom is already well-staffed, according to Gabe Soltero, a former news director who was one of OAN’s earliest hires, in April 2013. Without writers and producers, the network would be entirely dependent on wire content and would have no ability to respond quickly to breaking news. Herring had hired only a handful of anchors, some production assistants, and four directors, only two of whom, including Soltero, had news experience. It

Even when management did the right thing at OAN, Robert Herring’s own behavior kept employees on their toes.
quickly became clear that OAN needed more people, but persuading Herring to pay for more staff wasn’t easy. “We tried to explain to him what a producer is and what it did, and that just pissed him off,” Soltero says. In the end, Herring relented—even if he insisted on calling the producers who were brought on board “story pickers.”

On July 4, 2013—Independence Day—the network launched, broadcasting twenty-one hours of live news. The reports were basic, and the majority of each news hour repeated the content from the hour before it. But it was something for everyone involved to feel proud of. “When we got there, it was not even a studio,” Renee Summerour, an early production assistant and anchor, says. “We helped build a station from the ground up.”

But Herring quickly assumed control. As soon as he understood that his staff had the ability to write the news, he began sending the news team must-run stories, often from far-right websites such as Breitbart and the Gateway Pundit, whose penchant for conspiracy aligned with Herring’s own seemingly insulated worldview, former employees say.

“From the get-go, there was no understanding of, ‘We are journalists and we follow the ethics of journalism,’” Soltero says. Bright-eyed, in his twenties, Soltero frequently approached his boss to suggest that the network verify facts, or that it steer clear of conspiracy theories. Herring welcomed the conversations but never budged. “I realized that he gets entertainment from debating us,” Soltero says. “He will never change his mind, but he enjoys the debate.”

When the 2016 presidential campaign season kicked into gear, Herring saw an opportunity to court Republican candidates’ attention. In August 2015, he hired Sarah Palin to guest-host the evening talk show On Point; her swooning interview with Trump was so popular that online searches for it crashed OAN’s website. Then, that fall, a handful of staffers decided to air a Trump rally in its entirety—not for partisan purposes, Soltero, who was in the newsroom, says, but because it struck them as an opportunity to stand out from Fox and CNN, which were not running the rallies at the time. “We were like, ‘Let’s do it and see what happens,’” Soltero says. The rally was a hit.

“I come in on Monday, and Mr. H is all excited,” Soltero recalls. “He’s like, ‘Did you see the ratings?’” From then on, OAN went live with all of Trump’s rallies and events. Production teams planned entire news hours, only to scrap them minutes before showtime because somewhere out there Trump was talking. When the network missed a rally once, due to technical difficulties, it tweeted a public apology.

To an extent, this was just good business: the more viewers, the better. But Herring seemed increasingly driven by personal affinity. “H was filled with Trump-mania,” Soltero says. He even observed Herring sending a gift basket, with wine bottles, to the Trump campaign.

Despite the network’s conservative tilt, many of its former and current employees identify as politically liberal. As the network lurched to the right during the campaign, some told me, the wall-to-wall Trump coverage gave them a view of something happening in the country that mainstream media outlets seemed to be missing. The day after the election, recalls the second former anchor, “We all had this in-a-fog, depressed feeling. I said to [a colleague], ‘I feel like we’re a little bit responsible for this.’ And she goes, ‘I’ve been struggling with that all day’.”

That same day, Robert Herring wore socks that featured a roughly stitched likeness of Trump, with a shock of yellow hair.
For the writers and producers who remained, the pressure to fall in line became suffocating. Democrats in scandal were in; Republicans in scandal were out. When referring to Hillary Clinton, it was never “former presidential candidate,” it was “twice-failed presidential candidate.” When selecting stories, writers and producers were to give the impression of a crisis: crimes in Europe committed by immigrants, for example, were typically preferred over stories about the EU. And when they strayed, the story was killed. Kendra Sitton, a former nighttime producer, once turned in a report on migrant deaths in the Texas desert, which she thought might humanize the border debate. She was warned not to write anything like it again.

“You want to help, want to put together a good show, want to look good compared to your coworkers,” Sitton says. “So having your stuff thrown out, it’s demoralizing.... In the long run, you wind up self-censoring.”

OAN relies heavily on young, inexperienced staff who work for low pay. Sitton was twenty-two when she started at the network and glad to find any job in journalism at all. She wasn’t alone. “Some of us would discuss amongst ourselves how different it was and that we knew it wasn’t proper,” Jorden Hales, a former writer, says—but with relatively little experience in newsrooms, staffers weren’t always sure if they should push back. Hales shared an email sent by OAN’s top producer instructing writers not to cite their sources, even though the network did little original reporting. “Keep it vague,” the email read. “We don’t want every story to say ‘according to CNN...because it looks like we are using all other websites for all of our stories.’” But that’s exactly what the newsroom was doing, Hales says.

In a typical newsroom, a show’s content might be determined in an editorial meeting. At OAN, the process was more scattershot. Each day, news directors presented writers with a wide pool of potential stories that needed writing. Stories coded as “H stories” were the top priority and usually came from far-right websites. The writers were technically free to choose whichever stories they wanted from the pool, which for those concerned with ethics prompted a rush for those pieces that could be written without a slant, David Jones, another former writer, recalls. Business and tech stories, even if about Tesla, were popular, as were local news stories that were more resistant to partisanship.

Firings were common. On a weekday in May 2017, Robert Herring barged into a studio in the middle of a live broadcast. “Who told you to say that?!” he shouted at an anchor in plain view of rolling cameras. The director motioned wildly to cut to commercial. The anchor had read a tweet on air that Herring thought—incorrectly, multiple employees say—was disparaging of Trump. “Did you tell her to say that?!?” Herring yelled at a producer, a young woman, who was fired immediately. The anchor quit soon after.

In time, conservatives in the building grew emboldened. In October 2018, on the day Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court, applause carried audibly through the building. The same year, a conservative writer in the newsroom verbally attacked liberal coworkers on his shift with slurs and insults. The employee was ultimately fired. But even when management did the right thing at OAN, Robert Herring’s own behavior kept employees on their toes.

Employees said Herring watched them on CCTV cameras placed throughout the building and reprimanded them when he saw them visiting websites he didn’t like. He clocked one anchor’s movements during her lunch break, watching her car from his office window, and admonished her for returning to the office four minutes late. Another anchor was vehemently accused of shilling for Obamacare after he read on air that it was the final day to sign up. “We want it to fail!” Herring scolded.

Once an employee got on Herring’s bad side, Herring became suspicious and vindictive. “I’m concerned that you actually work for him,” the first former anchor, who left in 2017, told me, “and that he’s having somebody call former employees to see what they say.”

In February, a San Diego jury ordered OAN’s parent company, Herring Networks Inc., to pay $1.1 million in damages to Jonathan Harris, a former producer, who was fired after complaining of racial harassment at the network. According to the San Diego Union-Tribune, the jury did not find OAN guilty of racial discrimination but said Harris’s complaint itself had clearly motivated his firing.

In OAN’s seventh year of operation, many of the basic aesthetic trappings of a national network are still missing. The lighting in shots is often flat; cameras are out of focus. The sound is off, with airy room tone and microphones placed too far away from those talking. Scripts contain poor grammar, and presenters stumble over their words, even in recorded segments that could have been reshot. (The network hires for experienced news positions on Craigslist.) And the reason the network goes by the cheaper URL.

It makes up for these shortcomings with outlandish and unnecessary exaggeration. The network’s bio for Rion, the White House correspondent, says she is believed to be the first journalist in the world to report, in January, that Ukrainian Flight 752 had been shot down by an Iranian missile. (In fact, Newsweek had published an entire piece before Rion even tweeted.) In a recent segment on the coronavirus, Jack Posobiec—a semi-prominent...
alt-right troll who was instrumental in propagating the 2016 “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory, and who is a political correspondent for OAN—suggests he was uniquely prescient in predicting a pandemic.

“Jack, you’re one of the few people who I’ve seen consistently following this situation,” the anchor in discussion with Posobiec says, endorsing his claim.

Perhaps none of this matters. In January, the Wall Street Journal reported that Hicks Equity Partners, owned by the family of Thomas Hicks Jr., cochairman of the Republican National Committee and a personal friend of Donald Trump Jr.’s, was exploring an OAN buyout. At the time, Charles Herring said the family business was not for sale. Then, this month, Vanity Fair reported that an investment group “aligned with” Hicks Jr. and Trump Jr. had acquired a major stake in the network, with an eye toward a “Trump TV,” possibly, to ensure the president maintains a news platform even if he loses re-election in the fall. Robert Herring subsequently denied the deal, adding that Hicks Equity Partners was not the only interested buyer.

The Herrings did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this story.

It’s not clear how many people are actually watching OAN. The network reaches thirty-five million homes across the US, up from about thirty million in 2017. But that’s still a fraction of the roughly ninety million homes reached by Fox, CNN, and MSNBC. Cable providers AT&T U-verse, DirecTV, and Verizon Fios carry the channel, but other majors including Comcast Xfinity and Charter Spectrum do not. (“Call your cable provider & demand OAN be added to your cable line-up!” a banner on OAN’s website implores.) The network claims to be the country’s fourth-ranked cable news network, ahead of Fox Business, CNBC, and others. It bases that on Comscore set-box data, rather than Nielsen ratings, which Brian Stelter, of CNN, has pointed to as a sign that the network’s audience might actually be quite small. Nielsen, he emphasized, and not Comscore, is the industry standard.

But Robert Herring is above such petty debates. “Our ratings are going up because we treat you like you are the President of the United States,” Herring tweeted at Trump recently. “Your ratings are going up because you are doing a great job. Let’s keep it up!” CJR
The story has gotten away from us

Six months of life and death in America

Betsy Morais and Alexandria Neason
June 3, 2020
A narrative, by its nature, is a contained thing. Some bits get trimmed out in the interest of coherence. Some get cut for time or space. Always, a storyteller makes choices, choices that are informed by her worldview, to collect material in support of a thesis, a plot. But life, by contrast, is a mess.

For the most part, journalism has decided that the coronavirus and the killing of George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, in Minneapolis, are two distinct stories. That’s fiction. Floyd’s murder, under the knees of a white police officer—and the demonstrations in response—occurred as part of a cascade of events. There is the history of systemic racism in America, police brutality, and protest. There is the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, and its economic effects. Floyd had worked as a security guard, alternately at a Salvation Army and a club called Conga Latin Bistro, which closed amid the mass shutdown of bars and restaurants. On Memorial Day, he walked into a corner store for a pack of cigarettes; he was arrested for allegedly trying to pay with a fake twenty-dollar bill. His punishment was death. An autopsy report later showed that Floyd had been infected by the coronavirus before he was killed. His last words were the same as those of so many Black Americans: “I can’t breathe.”

Donald Trump, too, is part of the story. As people began pouring into the streets—first in Minneapolis, then across the country and all over the world—the president of the United States suggested that they should be shot. Trump’s comment—cribbed from Walter Headley, a former police chief in Miami who in December 1967 promised that racial uprisings would be met with violence—came not long after he’d expressed support for those who stormed their state capitols in opposition to measures intended to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has observed that COVID-19 disproportionately harms racial and ethnic minorities.

The web of connections is intricate and vast. In recent days, many journalists—and those following the news—have used the word overwhelming to describe this moment. Yet it’s important to acknowledge that the situation did not arise suddenly. To properly contextualize our reporting, we must look at how we got here, turning back at least as far as the beginning of the calendar year.

**JANUARY**
On New Year’s Eve, Chinese health authorities identified a cluster of pneumonia cases in people who had been to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Within a week, it was confirmed that these people were sick from something associated with a novel coronavirus, which became known as 2019-nCoV. The general public remained mostly unaware of the outbreak, however, until January 20, when President Xi Jinping issued a statement promising to “resolutely curb the spread of the epidemic.” By that time, the coronavirus had traveled across the world. The same day, a thirty-five-year-old man in Snohomish County, Washington, became the first confirmed case of infection in the United States. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, spoke out with increasing boldness about the need to broadcast information, in spite of China’s strict
policies on censorship; he was among hundreds of people who were reprimanded or detained for “spreading rumors” about the virus. Soon, Li died of complications of COVID-19. Most of the world was slow to appreciate the seriousness of his warnings; some outlets covered the story mainly through the lens of stereotypes.

**FEBRUARY**

On February 23, a twenty-five-year-old Black man named Ahmaud Arbery went for a jog. He was in Brunswick, Georgia, where the afternoon sun was out, making shadows of the leaves of the trees. Behind him, in a pickup truck, were Gregory McMichael, a retired investigator for the Brunswick Judicial Circuit district attorney, and his son Travis. They were white; they were armed. They called the local police to report Arbery. “What is he doing?” the dispatcher asked. The answer: “He’s running down the street.” While the conversation continued—and the dispatcher promised to send an officer out—Travis McMichael stepped out of the truck and fired shots at Arbery, who died at the scene. The McMichaels told police that they believed Arbery had been breaking in to a home; they referred to a rash of recent burglaries. According to the Brunswick News, however, there had been just one: a gun stolen from an unlocked car outside Travis’s place. The story was not reported for weeks, until local media got hold of the police report. It would be months before Arbery’s name entered the national news.

Meanwhile, more reports of the coronavirus were appearing outside Asia. February 14 brought the first COVID-19 death beyond the continent’s borders; the deceased was an eighty-year-old Chinese tourist in France. Ten days later, the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummeted to its worst close in two years. Within a week, Americans learned of the first coronavirus-related death in the United States—a man in his fifties, in Washington State. Yet the story, when it received coverage at all from American outlets, was still largely focused on China: on the Xi administration’s cover-up of the spread of COVID-19, on the impact on US-China trade, and on conspiracy theories related to the origins of the virus. On February 22, the Global Times—a tabloid published by the People’s Daily, a Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece—suggested that the coronavirus did not originate in the Huanan market. Rumors circulated that the virus was a biochemical weapon developed by the US military. On February 23, around the time Arbery’s body lay on the ground, Trump told the press, “President Xi loves the people of China, he loves his country, and he’s doing a very good job with a very, very tough situation.” As for the US, Trump said, “We have it very much under control.”

**MARCH**

Over the course of March, in the eyes of the American press, the coronavirus story went from being a distant concern to an immediate crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) designated COVID-19 as a pandemic and, on March 13, declared that Europe had become the epicenter, reporting more cases and deaths there than in the rest of the world combined. Several states—including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Maryland—announced plans to close schools. The same day, an emergency room technician named Breonna Taylor was shot eight times, to her death, by police officers who had used a battering ram to enter her apartment. Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old African-American woman, had been asleep; the officers had executed a “no knock” warrant. What the cops were looking for wasn’t there. The story did not make headlines in mainstream national publications.

Coverage of the public health crisis, however, was gaining traction. On March 15, twenty-nine more states—including New York, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Hawai’i—closed schools. The CDC released guidelines recommending that no events with more than fifty people be held; the next day, Trump told Americans to avoid gathering in groups of more than ten and to stop going to restaurants and bars. Wall Street took a nosedive.

On March 18, the United States closed its borders to all “nonessential traffic” and suspended refugee admissions. Trump signed a coronavirus aid bill into law. Not in the news: Monika Diamond, a thirty-four-year-old transgender Black woman, who was killed in Charlotte. Diamond was active in the local LGBTQ and nightlife community and was the co-CEO of the International Mother of the Year Pageantry System, which honors LGBTQ mothers.

On March 20, the market tanked again. The US faced its worst economic week since the 2008 financial crisis. Days later, American coronavirus
cases topped fifty thousand; the number of deaths passed a thousand. By the end of the month, US cases surpassed the total in China. On March 28, the COVID-19 death toll reached two thousand. The same day, local New York media reported, a thirty-three-year-old transgender woman known as Lexi of the House of Ebony was fatally stabbed. She was a sex worker in Harlem who liked to read poetry.

APRIL

The month of April brought devastating job losses. Week after week, the number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits broke records. By month’s end, thirty million people—about 18 percent of the workforce—were jobless. That did not count anyone who worked on a freelance basis, who would not be eligible to file, or anyone undocumented who didn’t qualify for unemployment insurance. According to the Economic Policy Institute, Black workers saw greater losses in employment than white workers did—more than one in six Black workers lost their jobs between February and April, per a recent report—and, as of April, under half the Black population was employed. The hardest-hit group was Black women: between February and April, 18.8 percent lost their jobs.

The effect of the coronavirus on income—especially in the Black community and among Latinos—compounded existing inequality in American households: Black and brown people tend to have lower wages, fewer earners in a family, and less generational wealth. Many of those deemed “essential workers” felt they had no choice but to report for duty; fewer than one in five Black workers could do their job from home. These factors contributed to the results of a report released in April by the CDC, which found that African Americans had been diagnosed with COVID-19 at disproportionately high rates. Coverage of this data often omitted mention of Black patients’ employment or housing stability, focusing instead on the fact that people of color reside in “large urban cities.”

At the time, increasingly large groups of people—most of them white—were gathering at statehouses across the US to protest stay-at-home orders. In North Carolina, Missouri, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia, demonstrators railed against measures aimed at halting the spread of the coronavirus, including the wearing of face coverings. Maskless—and sometimes bearing guns—they called for businesses to reopen. Trump encouraged these rallies in tweets and at press conferences. Soon he announced that he was temporarily suspending immigration to the United States in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the “need to protect jobs.” During a briefing, he suggested, offhandedly, that Americans might try injecting disinfectants into their bodies. News organizations went to great lengths to debunk that dangerous claim. At the following day’s briefing, when asked about it by a member of the press, Trump replied, “I was asking a question sarcastically to reporters like you, just to see what would happen.”

EARLY MAY

On the first Sunday in May, Nina Pop, a twenty-eight-year-old Black trans woman, was found dead in her apartment in Sikeston, Missouri. She had been stabbed. Pop, who worked at a fast-food restaurant in town, was written about by the AP, which remarked on “a rash of similar killings so far this year.” The article quoted Tori Cooper, of the Human Rights Campaign’s Transgender Justice Initiative. “For the past four weeks, we have seen the deaths of five transgender women of color in this country. We are seeing an epidemic of violence that can no longer be ignored,” Cooper said. “Transgender and gender non-conforming people, especially trans women of color, risk our lives by living as our true selves—and we are being violently killed for doing so.”

On May 5, the WHO revealed that a case of COVID-19 had appeared in France in December of last year. The sickness, as it turned out, had been with us all for longer than we’d realized. The same day, a lawyer working for the family of Ahmaud Arbery released a video that appeared to depict his murder.
On May 6, celebrities—including Ava DuVernay, LeBron James, Kim Kardashian, and Taylor Swift—shared the Arbery footage on social media, driving major press attention and more clicks.

Joe Biden—the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, whose campaign had gone fully digital—said during a virtual roundtable with African-American leaders that Arbery was “lynched before our very eyes.” Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejía, a man who had fled violence in El Salvador and was now being held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, became the first person in federal immigration detention to die of coronavirus-related illness. He was fifty-seven.

That evening, a twenty-one-year-old man named Desjean Reed, who went by Sean, was driving in his Toyota Corolla on the north side of Indianapolis. Kendale Adams, the deputy chief of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, spotted Reed, began to chase him, and radioed for reinforcement.

Reed streamed on Facebook Live, in view of some twenty-five hundred people. “You gotta look,” he told them, pointing his phone’s camera toward the cop car behind him. As he drove on, he said, “I’m not going to jail today.” Then he pulled over, and appeared to get out of the car. By that point, four thousand people were tuned in. They could hear muffled sounds and pops of gunshots; the camera’s lens turned skyward. Sixteen thousand viewers now. A man’s voice could be heard, apparently from among a group of officers at the scene: “I think it’s going to be a closed casket, homie.”

Protesters gathered where Reed died. Police met them there in riot gear. Reed had been in the Air Force, as RTV6, the ABC affiliate in Indianapolis, reported; he was last stationed at the Joint Base San Antonio in Lackland, Texas, where he served as an airman first class. Amanda Starrantino, the RTV6 evening anchor, told viewers, “Police have not confirmed whether a Facebook Live video viewed and shared thousands of times shows the shooting as it happened.” As the night wore on, and morning dawned, local police shot and killed another Black man—McHale Rose—and a cop car struck and killed Ashlynn Lisby, a white woman. Lisby was pregnant; the fetus did not survive. More rallies followed.

By this time, on May 7, the Arbery video had gone viral. Pressure was mounting that something be done. Ahead of a coronavirus press briefing, Georgia’s governor, Brian Kemp, a Republican, made note of the case. “Earlier this week, I watched the video depicting Mr. Arbery’s last moments of life,” he said. “I can tell you it’s absolutely horrific and Georgians deserve answers.” Within two hours of Kemp’s comment, the McMichaels were arrested on charges of murder and aggravated assault. More than two months after Arbery was killed, the story finally made national news.

The next day, May 8, would have been Arbery’s twenty-sixth birthday. Many of the same people who circulated the footage of his murder on social media now organized a virtual protest, using the hashtag #RunWithMaud. Participants were encouraged to go 2.23 miles, in honor of the date of Arbery’s death. While word went around, the US Labor Department reported that the country’s unemployment rate had leaped to its highest level since the Great Depression; 20.5 million people had lost their jobs. Later in the day, as runners documented their tributes to Arbery, another suspect came under investigation: William “Roddie” Bryan, a neighbor of the McMichaels’, and the man who filmed the killing. When asked at a news conference if the case would be considered a hate crime, Vic Reynolds, the director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, pointed out that Georgia has no hate-crimes law. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution obtained another video of Arbery’s death, from a source outside the GBI; it appeared to be from a home security camera about a block away. As social media reacted, with grief and anger, Black journalists and others commented on the problems inherent in disseminating videos of marginalized people dying. The arguments, which had been made before, over the years of numerous extrajudicial killings in the digital media age, went roughly like this: On the one hand, the images are striking and inspire non-Black viewers to respond. On the other, the images become ubiquitous and traumatic to Black people, who never needed to watch a clip to become aware of racist brutality.

There was another concern, too, about relying on horrifying videos to spark a response to white-on-Black violence: “Arbery’s murder, for example, only took hold in the national press after footage depicting his death was uploaded; in Taylor’s case, by contrast, there is no video, and her death has received relatively less coverage.” On May 12, while Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, testified at a

The images become ubiquitous and traumatic to Black people, who never needed to watch a clip to become aware of racist brutality.
public Senate hearing about America’s coronavirus response, warning of dire consequences should the country reopen for business too soon, Taylor’s mother, Tamika Palmer, spoke out in the local Louisville press. Her family had still received no answers to explain why Breonna was dead.

**The days are filled with mourning, the nights with shouts.**

**MID-MAY**
The number of Americans who had succumbed to COVID-19 neared an astonishing hundred thousand. Grief blanketed the country. Some mourned with their families, others alone; many felt at a loss for a collective experience through which to express their despair. George Floyd, who was forty-six, had recently found himself out of a job as a bouncer at Conga Latin Bistro, a restaurant and club in north Minneapolis. Originally from Houston’s Third Ward, he was known as “Big Floyd.” At 6′6″ he towered over everyone; his height seemed a measure of his spirit. Before moving to Minnesota, Floyd had been an active member of the Third Ward’s Christian community, coordinating ministry outreach with the Resurrection House, a local church. It was warm the day he died: on May 25, Minneapolis hit 78 degrees, a prelude to summer. Floyd entered a grocery store called Cup Foods on 38th Street and Chicago Avenue, on the city’s south side, around 8pm. He wanted a pack of cigarettes. He handed a twenty-dollar bill to the cashier, who suspected it was counterfeit and called the police. Two officers responded, and they identified Floyd, who was by then sitting in a parked car across the street. Soon, more cops arrived. Surveillance video shows the officers handcuffing Floyd and leading him to the side of a nearby building, where an officer named Derek Chauvin, a white man, pinned Floyd’s neck to the ground with his knee. The whole of Chauvin’s body weight pressed into Floyd’s airway, for nearly nine minutes. The other officers—Thomas Lane, J. Alexander Kueng, and Tou Thao—stood watch as Floyd gasped for air. He cried out for his mother. “I can’t breathe,” he managed to say. Bystanders shot video, pleading with Chauvin to get off Floyd’s neck. But it was too late. Floyd lost consciousness; his body went limp. Even still, Chauvin’s knee remained lodged on his neck. By the time fire and medical personnel arrived, they found Floyd with no pulse. He was pronounced dead at 9:25pm at Hennepin County Medical Center. A video shot by a bystander depicting his death went viral. It was later reported that Floyd and Chauvin had once worked security shifts at the same nightclub.

Early the next morning, the Minneapolis Police Department released a statement: Floyd had died of a “medical incident” while in police custody. It did not mention that Chauvin’s knee had been on Floyd’s neck. But the Hennepin County medical examiner’s office ruled the death a homicide; later, a private autopsy conducted at the behest of Floyd’s family would reach the same conclusion, implicating Chauvin and the two officers who helped pin Floyd down. On the morning of May 26, Jacob Frey, the mayor of Minneapolis, held a press conference in which he condemned the behavior of the officers involved. “For five minutes, we watched as a white officer pressed his knee into the neck of a Black man. For five minutes,” he told reporters. “When you hear someone calling for help, you are supposed to help. This officer failed in the most basic human sense.” The four officers implicated in Floyd’s death were placed on paid administrative leave, then fired. Protesters began to gather near where Floyd had been killed. They brought signs that read “I Can’t Breathe”—a chilling echo of Eric Garner, a Staten Island man killed in 2014 by a white police officer who put him in a choke hold. Thousands marched from Cup Foods to the Third Precinct—the city’s largest, and the headquarters of patrol officers and the community crime prevention team. The tension was palpable; the city had not yet released the names of the officers responsible for murdering Floyd. People threw water bottles; police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

By Wednesday, the names of the cops—and their disciplinary records—were released and reported in the press. Chauvin’s was especially damning: he had been implicated in multiple shootings—“officer involved,” in cop-speak. Thao had been sued for “use of force” in 2017. Reuters called Floyd’s killing “racially charged.” That night, protesters again gathered near Cup Foods and marched to the Third Precinct; police again attacked them, using rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades. Several stores were looted; an Autozone, a Wendy’s, and an apartment building were set on fire. National media snapped up the images and began to frame coverage of the demonstrations around looting, setting up a dichotomy in which protesters were classified into good guys and bad. Headlines and chyrons used words like chaos and rage and rampage to describe the civil unrest, particularly in Minnesota, where there are wide gulfs between Black and white residents when it comes to wealth and health. The owner of
a pawnshop shot and killed a man he thought was attempting to burglarize his store.

As the media turned its sights on Minneapolis and the response to Floyd’s death, another Black victim of police brutality received less notice. Tony McDade, a thirty-eight-year-old trans man, was shot by an officer in Tallahassee, Florida. He’d been attacked by a group of men, McDade said in a video posted to Facebook, and was prepared to defend himself. He also predicted a confrontation with cops (“I am killing and going to be killed because I will not go back into federal prison”), which may have suggested that he had so-called police-assisted suicide in mind. Out magazine reported that McDade marked the third “officer involved” fatal shooting in Tallahassee in two months, and the eleventh reported death that year of a trans or gender-nonconforming person.

On Thursday, protesters in Minneapolis took to the streets for a third consecutive night. Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota, signed an executive order declaring a “state of peacetime emergency” and militarized the city, activating the National Guard. Around 10pm, protesters entered the Third Precinct. Local media reported that explosives were thought to be in the area; the building was evacuated. Soon, it was set ablaze. Clouds of gray smoke wafted upward. Within minutes, the Minnesota National Guard tweeted that it had activated five hundred troops at Mayor Frey’s request. Press reports led with flames.

The next morning, the previous night’s damage came into clear view: hundreds of fires had burned around the city overnight. Just after 5am, Omar Jimenez, a journalist for CNN, was there, reporting live, as protesters continued to mill around. Police in riot gear approached him. Jimenez, who is Black, was surrounded by a camera crew and producers, who repeatedly told the officers that he was a member of the press. The journalists asked where they should move. The cops arrested Jimenez while the camera kept rolling—and ignored him when he asked why he was being arrested. Soon, his entire crew was handcuffed and led away. An officer picked up the camera, apparently unaware it was still on. CNN hosts in the studio watched, aghast. Nearby, a white CNN reporter was also approached by police but allowed to stay.

In the early morning hours of May 29, Donald Trump logged on to Twitter. Having watched the coverage of Minneapolis, he labeled protesters “thugs.” He added, “When the looting starts, the shooting starts,” invoking Walter Headley, the former police chief in Miami who had used those words during a news conference in 1967. Headley’s quote was later considered to have been a contributing factor to an uprising that broke out in Liberty City, a Black neighborhood, the following August. Twitter, for the first time in its history, blocked a sitting president’s tweet for violating its code of conduct; Trump’s message had broken a rule against glorifying violence. Meanwhile, for the first time since at least the seventies, the White House announced that it would not release summertime economic projections. The country was in a hole; the Trump administration hoped that Americans would place our attention elsewhere.

**WEEKEND OF MAY 29**

Four days after Floyd was killed, protests sprang up across the country. Police swarmed. They continued shooting rubber bullets into crowds; citizens, including journalists, were hit; the images were posted to social media. The wounds were swollen and red and bleeding. Police continued spraying tear gas; in a video posted to Twitter, a tank rolls down a residential street in Minneapolis as officers follow, yelling at residents standing on their own front porches and firing paint canisters at them. The canisters pop like bullets. News outlets used passive language to describe police violence, active voice to describe those participating in protests. The New York Times shared a story about journalists injured while covering the unrest: “Protesters struck a journalist with his own microphone,” the article said, whereas “a reporter was hit by a pepper ball” shot by police. Stories and chyrons flashed the words *riot and looting* with little context—and virtually no discussion of unrest as a legitimate form of protest in American history or its strategic use to thin out police forces, rerouting them to prevent them from brutalizing activists. Some stories presented acts of civil disobedience as aberrations—as if a sudden current of violence had bubbled to the surface—and implied that allegedly violent protesters had provoked police aggression. The Chicago Tribune put this phrase on its front page: “Protests give rise to chaos.” The press also largely failed to frame the protests—including vandalism and fires—as a late act in a long drama. These actions came in response not just to the deaths of Floyd, Taylor, Arbery, and McDonald, but to the never-ending list of Black people killed by police over many decades: Philando Castile, Alton B. Sterling, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, and Garner, to name a few of the most recent examples.

At least twenty-five cities in sixteen states imposed curfews as a means of quelling the uprisings. In Los Angeles and Atlanta, the National Guard was deployed. On May 30, the Pentagon put military police at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Drum, New York, on alert for potential deployment to Minneapolis. The Minnesota National Guard authorized more than ten thousand troops to descend on the city. Police and elected officials began to disseminate a narrative to explain the property
that we have built for the last several decades,” he said. Other mayors made similar arguments, which were picked up in press reports. By the end of the weekend, however, journalists had reviewed arrest logs and found that, in Minneapolis, most people arrested had local addresses. *Slate* received well-deserved praise for its headline “Police Erupt in Violence Nationwide.”

**The Atlantic** published an article acknowledging that mass protest amid the pandemic could set off a new wave of infections. “There’s little doubt that these protests will translate into increased risk of transmission for COVID-19,” Maimuna Majumder, a computational epidemiologist at Boston Children’s Hospital and Harvard, said. Nevertheless, she supported the demonstrations. “Structural racism has been a public-health crisis for much longer than the pandemic has.” Days after his killing, an autopsy report revealed that Floyd had coronavirus. It turned out that his cause of death was “cardiopulmonary arrest complicating law enforcement subdual, restraint, and neck compression.”

**NOW**
The days are filled with mourning, the nights with shouts. As of this writing, police have arrested more than nine thousand people. A woman in Austin fell to the ground, having been struck in the abdomen by rubber bullets. “My baby!” she cried—she was pregnant. Some protesters have been killed. “At least five deaths have occurred amid unrest, while other deaths have taken place nearby but their ties to protests are uncertain,” the *New York Times* reported. “Several people have died nationwide in the protests,” per the *Washington Post*. “Skirmishes continued into the early morning hours as cops continued to disperse the crowd while people drove around city streets squealing their tires and hanging out windows,” according to the *Detroit News*. Not every life lost on the streets has been at the hands of cops—in Detroit, for example, a twenty-one-year-old man was sitting in his parked Dodge Caliber, in the vicinity of that city’s demonstrations, when he was shot and killed by a guy about his age. In Omaha, a twenty-two-year-old Black man, James Scurlock, was shot and killed while protesting by a local bar owner, who was white; the *Omaha World-Herald* has since reported that the shooter, Jake Gardner, will not be charged with a crime.

To a large degree, characterizations of the events, on television and in print, have suggested a chaotic flurry of outrage, with attacks flying in all directions. Water bottles lobbed in the air are, somehow, rendered the equivalent of a police van plowing through an assembly of bodies. In describing the death of David McAtee, a fifty-three-year-old Black man, in Louisville, the *Times* wrote, “It was not immediately clear if Mr. McAtee had been killed by the police or someone in the crowd, the authorities said.” But it was clear. According to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the local chief of police “said in a statement that someone shot at police and officers and soldiers ‘returned fire,’ killing McAtee.” In New York, local media reported on police officers taking a knee alongside protesters. The highest-ranking officer to do so, Terence Monahan, told the ABC affiliate, “We hugged to show there’s solidarity”; online, the story’s headline called it a “moving show of support.” But stories like this didn’t mention the moments that turned uglier—when, according to activists on the ground, the same cops photographed kneeling came back hours later to beat people up. Elsewhere in the city, an officer was filmed by a protester: he’d pulled out what appeared to be his gun, and was waving it at the crowd. On Tuesday
night, while armed police forces trapped a large group of protesters on the Manhattan Bridge, their colleagues took another life, in Brooklyn. Monahan tweeted, “An illegal gun was recovered at the scene.” ABC reported, “The incident is not related to any of the protests or riots.” Wasn’t it, though?

Too often, the aggression of police officers—sometimes backed by members of the National Guard—has been shrouded by journalists’ use of passive language or depictions of mass disarray. For generations, cops have been offered the benefit of the doubt in the press; historically, people in marginalized communities have viewed major news outlets as institutions of white supremacy. This time around, we saw the gravity of the story get pulled toward the methods of protest: looting, confrontation, outsiders (possibly) bussed in to stir up trouble. A skirmish doesn’t kill, though; people do—people with tear gas and trucks and guns. And isn’t that what the demonstrations are about? That is: Seeing violence for what it is, and recognizing those who caused it. Seeing the harm of policing Black communities instead of investing in them. The press, if it is doing its job right, should be exposing these things, too.

In the first days of June, we saw a glimpse of what it’s like when reporters cover abuses of power truthfully and plainly. On Monday, at the White House, Trump gave a speech in which he called himself “your president of law and order” and demanded that governors deploy National Guard units to “dominate the streets.” He then walked across Washington’s Lafayette Square, making his way over to St. John’s Church, a lovely, pale-yellow Episcopal edifice just off the park. Clergy of the church, which is known for its dedication to social justice, had been speaking with protesters; on a recent night, a fire had started in the basement as demonstrations took place nearby. To clear a path for the president, US Park Police and National Guard troops shoved an assembly of peaceful gatherers, and hit them with tear gas. Then Trump posed for a painfully awkward picture, holding a Bible in his hand like an auction paddle, his eyes squinting, his mouth in a grumpy frown. “Peaceful Protesters Tear-Gassed To Clear Way For Trump Church Photo-Op,” NPR reported. CNN’s chyron: “Peaceful protesters near White House gassed, shot with rubber bullets so Trump can have church photo-op.” In New York magazine: “Peaceful Protesters Gassed So Trump Can Do a Sacrilegious Bible Photo Op.” HuffPost went with something simple: “FASCIST PHOTO OP.” In outlets all over, the coverage was striking for its directness, as if emerging from tight lips that had for too long failed to open. CJR
Mark Zuckerberg and Noam Chomsky are strange bedfellows in this political moment, but they found themselves on the same side this week in resisting so-called cancel culture. While Zuckerberg, under pressure from a growing advertiser boycott, refused to make changes to Facebook’s policies on misinformation and hate speech, Chomsky joined luminaries including Margaret Atwood, Wynton Marsalis, J.K. Rowling, and Gloria Steinem in signing “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” published by Harper’s Magazine.

The two separate incidents illustrate how cultural change is reshaping both journalism and social media platforms, as gatekeepers old and new confront their long-ignored blind spots. The Harper’s letter reaches for more nuance than Zuckerberg’s position on speech but broadly occupies the same territory. The letter seeks the answer to intolerance and extremism in the “free exchange of information and ideas” (rather than what the 153 signatories see as a constriction of speech), alluding to how employers such as the New York Times have reacted to public outcry about editorial decisions.

Meanwhile, other publishing platforms with far more reach have few, if any, boundaries for acceptable speech. On social media, politicians—presidents, even—can encourage the violent suppression of demonstrations without censure.

In fact, Facebook has hardly narrowed the boundaries of debate at all. Conspiracy theories and divisive speech continue to circulate on the platform; political advertising, which increasingly takes place on Facebook, advances blatant lies without fear of fact-checking; and damaging and misleading ideas about critical issues such as the coronavirus pandemic and climate change are frequently posted without tangible consequences.

The concern over what Facebook has framed as a “free speech issue” is now impinging on company revenues. Advertisers including Unilever, Verizon, LEGO, Dunkin’ Donuts, Pepsi, and Target have joined the boycott, organized by groups including the NAACP, Color of Change, and the Anti-Defamation League, as well as Free Press. The demands of the campaign extend to structural reforms inside Facebook, including the appointment of a human rights expert to advise the company, regular external audits of the platform for identity-based discrimination and bias, and the adoption of a number of other policies. Although the campaign targets racist hate speech on all social platforms, Facebook has become the focus of the story after the company repeatedly refused to flag or remove posts from President Donald Trump that stoked racial tensions and called for shootings during the recent Black Lives Matter protests.

Facebook’s chief executive, Zuckerberg; its chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg; and its head of communications, the former British deputy prime minister Sir Nick Clegg, met the boycott campaign organizers via Zoom on Tuesday, but to little effect. Free Press’s Jessica Gonzalez, who attended the Zoom meeting, said it yielded only “spin” from Facebook: “I’m deeply disappointed that Facebook still refuses to hold itself accountable to its users, its advertisers and society at large. I was hoping to see deep humility and reflection about the outsized role that Facebook plays in shaping beliefs, opinions and behavior, and the many harms it’s caused and facilitated in real life. Instead we saw more dialogue and
no action,” said Gonzalez in a statement.

News organizations sit uncomfortably on the jagged edge of this debate. One of the striking aspects of the #StopHateForProfit campaign is that, while many news organizations have celebrated the discomfort of Facebook, not many of them have actually joined the boycott. In fact, media properties such as HuffPost, Yahoo, and TechCrunch are still running promotional ads on the social platform, according to the data in Facebook’s advertising library, despite being owned by Verizon, one of the companies on the boycott roster.

This is a hard case for news companies. Very few have the scale or reach that would enable them to forgo the distribution power of Facebook, and that means they’re stuck paying to promote their own articles. In other words, for many publishers, advertising on Facebook is not optional. Many have pointed out that the current Facebook boycotts are taking place at a time when advertisers are not planning on spending, and this is a way to burnish their own brands at relatively little detriment to revenue. However, the equation for the news business is different. Advertising on Facebook is like paying trucks to take your product to newsstands or paying carriage costs for cable television. It is access to the market more than it is brand promotion.

One organization taking a different stance is New Zealand’s largest news group, Stuff, which told staff in a leaked internal memo that it would cease all activity on Facebook until further notice, in line with the current ad boycott. Editor in chief Patrick Crewdson was quoted in a report from website The Spinoff saying, “We’ve all seen examples of social ills on Facebook that aren’t compatible with trust—for instance the spreading of fake news and hate speech. Stuff itself is frequently frustrated by other sites posing as our website on Facebook.” Stuff is the largest employer of journalists in New Zealand and the fifth-largest site on the internet there. It is also, like all publishers, experiencing an unprecedented drop in advertising revenues.

Facebook’s perceived lack of trust might be damaging to news publishers, but the company itself has become ever more interwoven into the fabric of the news business, especially through direct grants to journalism organizations and schemes to help newsrooms develop new products. The Stuff precedent raises many interesting ethical issues for publishers about how they should relate to Facebook. Should they keep accepting Facebook money for journalism support while spending their own resources on Facebook promotion of their content? You will read a great deal about the Facebook boycott movement in the pages of many news organizations that themselves remain locked into the broader ecosystem that tolerates material their subscribers might find abhorrent. Stuff says its boycott is an experiment. Publishers around the world will be interested to see the results. CJR
The run-up to the 2020 November elections in the US has produced new networks of shadowy, politically backed “local news websites” designed to promote partisan talking points and collect user data. In December 2019, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism reported on an intricately linked network of 450 sites purporting to be local or business news publications. New research from the Tow Center shows the size of that network has increased almost threefold over the course of 2020, to over 1,200 sites.

Identifying these new sites is a result of further analysis of the closely linked entities with conservative ties illustrated in Figure 1 (below). The Tow Center focused predominantly on Metric Media, Franklin Archer, Local Government Information Services (LGIS), and Locality Labs. Both Metric Media and Franklin Archer claim to be the largest local news provider in the US, though many of their sites have low visibility in both search and social media. Over 90 percent of their stories are algorithmically generated using publicly available data sets or by repurposing stories from legitimate sources. In the remaining stories that have an authentic byline, there is often a conservative bent. As reported by the Lansing State Journal and The Guardian, this includes articles about voter fraud using data from the Heritage Foundation, negative pieces about elected Democratic representatives, and stories supporting conservative candidates. This low-cost automated story generation has come to be known as “pink-slime journalism.” In addition to the hundreds of titles that ape the look and feel of local news, our research has detected new sites in this network that address single subjects, appeal to religious affiliation, and focus on business news.

The recent increase in activity is in line with the election cycle. It is becoming an increasingly common campaign strategy for PACs and single-interest lobbyists to fund websites that borrow credibility from news design to help advance particular agendas. The proliferation of politically funded local news sites across the political spectrum raises questions about how these entities represent themselves to the public, and how they are categorized by search engines and social platforms.

The number of news media properties funded by often obscure political interests has been growing for years and will reach a new peak in the 2020 election cycle. A recent report from Open Secrets highlighted “dark money” networks funded by liberal-leaning donors. Academics Jessica Mahone and Phil Napoli recently plotted some of these known entities on a map to show the geographic concentration of the networks. But the definitions of what constitutes a politically funded network are hard to establish, particularly if the financial and ownership structures are not clear. A recent report from Politico outlined how Courier Newsroom, a group of politically affiliated local news sites, was spending large amounts of advertising money on Facebook on articles promoting Democratic candidates. Establishing how politically funded networks are intrinsically different from news organizations with strong political affiliations, such as Breitbart or Fox News, can be a tall order. Politically funded networks can appear on Facebook pages classified as “Media/News company,” and articles from partisan sites are indexed by Google News.

Today, along with further analysis of this network, we are publishing the full list of websites, the geographic focus of each publication where one
exists, and the corresponding organizational entity each site belongs to. However, due to the convoluted connections between these organizations, precise ownership is difficult to establish. Often a site will carry different information about its provenance on its “About” page, its Facebook page, and in the terms and conditions it publishes on its own site.

The overlapping networks seem designed to confuse casual observers as to their origins and ownership, and delineations between them are fuzzy. The publishers involved are incorporated in different states, have different business models, and provide different services. However, they all share certain distinguishing traits that suggest close relationships, such as the same authors, story templates, analytics identifiers, and other technological features.

To identify these new sites and the evolution of the networks, we adopted the same techniques we used for our investigation in December, relying heavily on third-party tools like RiskIQ and Farsight DNSDB.

In our latest research, we found the vast majority of the domains were under the umbrella of Metric Media, a Delaware limited liability company that is a division of Situation Management Group. Metric Media properties now account for more than 960 sites, or 80 percent of all the domains we’ve identified that belong to this network. All publishing is done “under a licensing agreement with the Metric Media Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit news content provider.”

Over seven hundred of these local sites have been activated in 2020, pointing to a sharp acceleration in the lead-up to the November elections. The new activity has seen a host of titles, such as the Philly Leader and San Francisco Sun, added to the network, with the number of states expanding from ten to all but one. (While Metric Media doesn’t have any titles for Illinois, LGIS does.)

Beyond Metric Media’s rapid expansion, our research showed that Franklin Archer had also expanded the number of networks under its umbrella. The organization boasts that it is “the largest producer of local news in the United States,” with better than two hundred active websites and two networks: Metro Business Network and Local News Network. A third, the American Catholic Tribune Media Network, was created in March 2020. There are currently six sites in the network, including the American Catholic Tribune. Further, Franklin Archer products now also include a handful of stand-alone titles that are either single-subject (e.g., Current Science Daily) or geographically focused on specific towns or neighborhoods (e.g., West Loop Today), as...
EVOLUTION AND SPRAWL OF THE NETWORK IN 2020

The bulk of sites that went live in 2020 are under the Metric Media banner. In 2019, when we were first looking at Metric Media, its stated goal was to launch “hundreds [of sites] nationwide to inform citizens about news in their local communities.” Today, the language on the same page indicates it has reached the goal of creating “hundreds” of sites. A website lists its publications by state, along with a one-line explanation of what the company is: “a digital firm managing the online presence of the portfolio of local news sites known as Metric Media.” Based on passive DNS data (RiskIQ and DNSDB Scout), by the end of January 2020, Metric Media had publications devoted to all but one of the forty states that weren’t already covered in 2019; the domains for these were registered in the second half of 2019. The one exception was Illinois, which we cover in more detail further down.

Some sites cover entire states, whereas others are devoted to specific cities and metropolitan areas. The nomenclature is often formulaic, combining compass directions with the names of the states or cities and then generic terms for news publications. Site names include SW Oklahoma News, NE Ohio Times, and West SFV Today (in California’s San Fernando Valley). Many major cities get their own “wire” publication: Figure 3 illustrates the number of publications present in each state. Rhode Island has the fewest devoted to it (four), California the most (seventy-four). We didn’t find any publications for either of these two states in 2019; in fact, we only found Metric Media properties in ten states then. Now there are sites covering forty-nine states; only Illinois and Washington, DC, are absent from the Metric Media network.

The absence of Illinois publications may have a relatively simple explanation: LGIS, a stand-alone corporation devoted to covering Illinois since 2015, is part of the extended network, with connections to Metric Media. LGIS has ties to conservative figures in the state, including Dan Proft and Brian Timpone. Proft, who through his PACs has raised millions to back conservative candidates in Illinois, shut down two PACs earlier this year. Timpone has a long history creating businesses focusing on automated low-cost journalism (or “pink slime” journalism), including the controversial Journatic and its successor Locality Labs. Locality Labs appears to be the organization creating the technology that allows for the automation of news stories using publicly available data sets across this entire ecosystem of twelve hundred websites. One of Proft’s now-shuttered PACs has paid one of Timpone’s other companies, Newsinator, for “Advertising—newspaper,” according to campaign finance records.

Until December, the About Us page of the Illinois sites stated that they were a “product of LGIS—Local Government Information Services,” while the Terms of Service and Privacy pages indicated they were properties of Locality Labs LLC. As of March, however, the Terms of Service and Privacy pages are blank. The language on the About Us pages hasn’t changed, maintaining that the sites are part of LGIS and funded in part “by advocacy groups who share our beliefs in limited government.” (Most of the Illinois websites have similar language in their About Us pages, where they mention details specific to the publication, and then details about the objectives of LGIS and its funding. However, for some sites, like the Grundy Reporter and Southern Illinois News, the About Us pages have been blank since at least last year, based on snapshots in the Internet Archive.)

In March, these Illinois sites adopted the same website theme (and thus the same look and feel) as the sites that Metric Media explicitly states it runs.

Additionally, Metric Media has at least two single-subject sites: Insurance Rate Reporter and
Priya N Na Be Na

Education Daily Wire. The About Us page for the former is blank, but its Privacy Policy and Terms of Service pages say the site is operated by Metric Media LLC. Education Daily Wire’s Privacy and Terms of Service pages are blank, but its About Us page says it’s funded by the Metric Media Foundation. These publications are not mentioned on either Metric Media website: the LLC or the foundation.

Also absent from any Metric Media website are the fifty-one Metro Business Network publications operated by Metric Media LLC, per their privacy policies and terms of service. According to the Metro Business Network site, these publications “aim to cover news from Fortune 500’s to SMB’s on Main Street [sic].” While the site does not mention anything about the ownership or funding of these publications, the Privacy Policy and Terms pages state that the network is operated by Locality Labs.

Tracing the ownership of sites within the network is made more complicated by how the sites label themselves on Facebook. The Facebook pages for the business news sites include information about the page owner, which is where information about news and media properties on the platform can be found. However, sites within the same subnetwork (Metro Business Network, in this case) have different confirmed page owners—and, in a handful of cases, no confirmed owner at all. Those with confirmed page ownership are split between Franklin Archer and Metric Media, and while the addresses for the two owners are different, their phone number is the same. The social presence of the network is very small, with negligible interactions (followers, likes, and shares) on each page.

Franklin Archer, a fictitious name for Iowa-incorporated DirecTech LLC, “brings coverage to underreported areas of American life,” according to its website. It has two networks: the “Metro Business Daily Network” and the “Local News Network.” As reported by The Guardian, the CEO of Franklin Archer is Timpone’s brother Michael Timpone. On the corporate front, the relationship between Metric Media LLC and Franklin Archer remains unclear, but they appear to share not only technology resources and authors, but also the publications themselves. To wit, as can be seen below in Figure 4: at the time of this writing, the Arizona Business Daily was owned by Franklin Archer, according to Facebook, and the Michigan Business Daily by Metric Media LLC. The New Jersey Business Daily has no confirmed page owner.

In 2020, a third network was added to the Franklin Archer portfolio, although it is not mentioned on its website: the American Catholic Tribune Media...
Network, which includes five state-specific publications (in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Florida, and Arizona) and one national outlet (the American Catholic Tribune). These sites relay information about parishes and churches, including updates on how various churches intend to conduct Mass every week. Earlier this year, the sites mentioned they are “a product of Franklin Archer,” but that disclaimer no longer exists. Their Facebook pages, however, state they are owned by Franklin Archer.

These sites follow the exact same model as all the others in the extended network: rewrite original reporting from existing sources, including diocesan newspapers; repurpose announcements (including Mass timings and homilies) published by various churches under the guise of “press release submissions”; and sprinkle on some original reporting.

Yet another new product of Franklin Archer is the Freedom Media Network, which hosts podcasts and a YouTube channel with just under a thousand subscribers. The channel is described as “your source for positive news and content aimed at helping you become more purposeful, productive, and prosperous.” One of the podcasts, Freedom Mindset Radio, is rife with anti-science positions, including the suggestion that getting a diagnosis is dangerous, as “they’re labeling a bag of symptoms.” The YouTube videos started being uploaded in January, and the website went live in March.

One-off sites continue to be created alongside these dedicated networks and channels. Sites created since our last investigation include the Neighbourhood Guardian, West Loop Today, the Midland Times, and Current Science Daily. CJR
Here comes Trump. He wears a navy suit, a white shirt, and a patterned blue tie. Cameras follow him as he makes his way across the White House lawn, in the shade of a tree, and then through a gate. He does not wear a mask, though the world is fighting a deadly disease that spreads through respiratory droplets. He walks with his attorney general, his chief of staff, his secretary of defense, his press team, his daughter, and his son-in-law. They are not wearing masks either. Trump approaches St. John’s Church, an Episcopal congregation just off Lafayette Square. He stops in front of the church’s sign, whose black and white lettering reads “Sunday Services Online.” The services are online because COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, has by this point killed more than a hundred thousand Americans. A disproportionate number of the deceased are Black. Trump’s posse is entirely white. It is the first day in June, and the sun shines in Washington. Someone hands Trump a Bible, which he turns over in his hands like a box he isn’t sure how to open. His eyes are narrow—the look of a man who wants to look determined; the look of a man with sun in his eyes, so perhaps he cannot see.

Moments before he arrived at this spot, officers cleared the square of a crowd that had been protesting peacefully as part of an uprising against systemic racism, in particular police brutality targeting Black people. That story is long—both complicated and simple (Black people are dying, by white violence and by COVID-19). A coalition was gathering to say that Black lives matter. In Lafayette Square, they had set up outside a church, one known for its commitment to social justice. But that day, the Congressional Budget Office projected that, over the next decade, without serious help from Washington to confront the losses caused by the pandemic, the US economy could become $15.7 trillion smaller; now Trump wanted to do his photo op; the protesters had to go. The federal park police descended, in riot gear, firing off rubber pellets and spraying the area with tear gas. Puffs of smoke filled the air; legs went spiraling in all directions, arms waving. Fear, shouts, coughing. Empty space for Trump to fill. The cameras rolled.

This is a snapshot of a presidential campaign season that has been unlike any other. The coronavirus has disrupted the usual election cycle routines—the bus rides, the stump speeches, the canvassing, and all the accompanying coverage. Joe Biden, a man of seventy-seven, secured the Democratic Party’s nomination and then hunkered down in his basement, in Wilmington, Delaware, saying little. With nobody to brawl with on TV, and a pileup of national crises, Trump, the incumbent, age seventy-four, still had to run. He has since waged a campaign that is not so much against his political opponent as it is against the American people. Joe Biden in a basement, the story of the 2020 campaign revolves around Trump’s opposition to the American people.
the ground by Derek Chauvin, a white policeman—Chauvin’s knee on Floyd’s neck. Portland’s public spaces bloomed with outrage: in Lownsdale Square, Chapman Square, and Terry Schrunk Plaza. On May 28, someone tossed a Molotov cocktail in the direction of the Portland field office for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The next day, the Portland Police Bureau began teargassing the crowd. Officers also beat up protesters and shot projectiles their way. Trump told Americans, “We have the greatest country in the world. Keep it nice and safe.” During a speech in Philadelphia, Biden criticized Trump for deploying chemical agents. “We can be forgiven for believing the president is more interested in power than in principle, more interested in serving the passions of his base than the needs of the people in his care,” he said.

At the same time, the *Washington Post* reported, “Joe Biden is facing growing pressure from activists and party leaders to lead a racially balanced ticket in the wake of explosive incidents involving African Americans and police violence that have stoked widespread outrage.” The idea that he ought to choose a Black woman as a running mate, it seemed, was driven by a strategic motivation to quell so-called racial tensions with a symbolic gesture, rather than by a genuine interest in equitable policy. Various outlets chimed in. (“He hears the concerns of folks across this country who have asked for an African-American woman vice president running mate,” Symone Sanders, Biden’s senior adviser, told ABC.) Biden demurred on questions of police violence; instead, he affirmed his support of departments in op-eds for the *Los Angeles Times* (“Most police officers meet the highest standards of their profession, which is all the more reason that bad cops should be dealt with severely and swiftly”) and *USA Today* (“Every single police department should have the money it needs to institute real reforms”). In an interview on the *CBS Evening News with Norah O’Donnell*, he assured Americans that he did not support “defunding the police.”

Meanwhile, at the beginning of June, the Portland police were stocking up on military gear. KATU, an ABC affiliate in Portland, obtained records showing that the city’s police bureau spent nearly $50,000 on tear gas, pepper spray, and related items. “We ordered munitions to ensure we have an adequate supply for future incidents,” a spokesperson said. Then officers started spraying demonstrators with chemicals every night. By June 5, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported, protesters had filed a class action lawsuit against the City of Portland for “indiscriminate use” of tear gas. “We’re out screaming
for justice for Black people and asking the state to stop its violence against us, and the City responds by using tear gas when we’re in the middle of a pandemic of respiratory disease,” Teressa Raiford, of an advocacy group called Don’t Shoot Portland, said in a statement. Ted Wheeler, Portland’s mayor, declined to comment for the article; OPB reported that he visited a demonstration and said, through a bullhorn, “I do not like the tear gas, I think it’s ugly—it is not focused enough.” Soon, Wheeler was nicknamed “Tear Gas Teddy.”

But Portland was not yet a national story. Confirmed cases of coronavirus infection in the United States were now surpassing two million; an autopsy report showed that Floyd had been infected before he was killed. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development released a report stating that the pandemic was on track to cause the worst recession outside of wartime in a century. Black and Latino people—many of them deemed “essential” in their jobs—faced the greatest risk of medical emergency and financial collapse. The humanity of those workers could not be ignored by the rest of the country as their daily struggles—which largely predated the pandemic—now became news. Early coverage of the protests, which leaned on terms such as chaos and rage and rampage, shifted in tone, turning increasingly sympathetic. USA Today ran the headline “I Can’t Breathe: Dying Words Gaped by Dozens Restrained by Police in Past Decade.” According to Civiqs, an online survey research firm, public support for Black Lives Matter, a movement that formed in 2013, rose as much in the two weeks after Floyd’s death as in the previous two years; a majority of Americans now believed in the cause.

“Many nonblack protesters have reasoned that black people should not have to risk their lives alone in taking to the streets demanding that the state not execute its citizens without consequence,” Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote in a sweeping essay for the New York Times Magazine. “These protests not only give Americans who are not black a moral reason to leave their homes after weeks of social isolation; they also allow protesters to vent anger at the incompetence of the man in the White House, himself a product of this nation’s inability to escape its death pact with white supremacy, who they sense is imperiling this terribly flawed but miraculous country.”

As June progressed, Americans, spurred to action by the uprisings, were learning about a Black holiday that had, until this year, been ignored by most non-Black people: Juneteenth, celebrated annually to commemorate the liberation of the last remaining enslaved Black Americans on June 19, 1865, in Galveston, Texas—two years after Abraham Lincoln delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, and two months after Robert E. Lee, the Confederate general, surrendered. News outlets published primers: “So you want to learn about Juneteenth?” (the New York Times), “What to know about Juneteenth and why people are talking about it now” (CNN), “What to know about Juneteenth” (USA Today). The sudden press interest paired with a shameless corporate rush to honor Juneteenth—by Nike, Postmates, Twitter, the NFL, and many others with questionable-at-best, indefensible-at-worst track records regarding racial equity. (CBS reported that some 40 percent of Black-owned businesses are not expected to survive the pandemic.) White executives made hurried gestures to observe Juneteenth, amid calls to make it a national holiday; while Black people appreciated the recognition, however belated, they also feared the inevitable: co-option, dilution, theft. News organizations took company holidays, too—including Vox Media, Buzzfeed, the Times, and CJR. The front page of the Philadelphia Inquirer that Friday ran both “Juneteenth: What You Need to Know” and “Police Budget Will Lose Money.” (By Monday, the lead story was “Being Black vs. Being Blue in Phila.”)

Juneteenth had been on the books for a Trump rally in Tulsa, where, in the summer of 1921, a white mob burned down a neighborhood known as Black Wall Street. Some three hundred residents were killed in the massacre; others were hauled off and imprisoned for as long as two weeks; local police pressed no serious charges against the assailants. “The relationship between Tulsa police and the black residents they are bound to protect was poisoned,” Victor Luckerson wrote for The New Yorker. Toxicity remained. Did Trump know this? When asked the question on Fox—if he chose Juneteenth, in Tulsa, on purpose—he said no. But Kayleigh McEnany, the White House press secretary, told reporters that Juneteenth was “meaningful” for Trump. “At these rallies he often shares the great work he has done for minority communities,” she said. Trump resolved the matter simply: “Think about it as a celebration.” The Democratic National Committee’s Black Caucus released a statement to the press: “The Trump campaign knows exactly what they’re doing,” it read. “They don’t care.”

In the days leading up to the event, however, the optics got bad enough that his team decided to push it back a day, to June 20. But there was another reason not to hold the rally, which had been communicated to those making the arrangements: “Health experts believe this weekend’s indoor rally could result in a super spread that will leave each of us vulnerable to exposure and potentially tax our health system in an unprecedented way,” Susan Savage, a healthcare executive and former mayor of Tulsa, wrote in a planning email. The Tulsa World later reported how much more was known about the spread of COVID-19 than was reflected in the action
of local leaders: “There were about 50 emails—a few from public officials—opposing or expressing concern about Trump’s campaign rally taking place.” The week of the event, Tulsa set a record for coronavirus cases. On CNN, Karen Keith, the Tulsa county commissioner, told Wolf Blitzer, “Nobody is wearing masks, and you know, people are coming in, Wolf, from all over the country—so they could be coming in from hot spots.” Nothing would deter the Trump campaign, which spent $2.2 million on the whole affair, even as it wound up playing to a lot of empty seats. Facing a crowd of just 6,200 people (in an arena built to seat 19,000), Trump took aim at protesters—some of whom filled the streets just outside—and tried to malign Biden by linking him to the uprising. “Joe Biden and the Democrats want to prosecute Americans for going to church, but not for burning a church,” Trump said. “They believe you can riot, vandalize, and destroy, but you cannot attend a peaceful pro-America rally.” That evening, CNN and MSNBC flipped back and forth between Trump’s speech and the demonstrations surrounding him. Fox covered the whole thing, drawing 8.2 million viewers at its peak—the highest Saturday prime-time rating in Fox history. “Big numbers,” McEnany later told the press.

The same could be said of the coronavirus cases in Tulsa. About two weeks after the event, Dr. Bruce Dart, the executive director of the Tulsa Health Department, reported a surge—nearly five hundred positive tests in a two-day period. He believed the rally and several other large-scale events recently held in the city were to blame. “I guess we just connect the dots,” he said. Trump’s staff disputed the doctor’s conclusion, as they had been wont to do over the past months. Tim Murtaugh, the Trump campaign’s communications director, told CNN that “the media” was obsessed with Trump rallies. “There were literally no health precautions to speak of as thousands looted, rioted, and protested in the streets and the media reported that it did not lead to a rise in coronavirus cases,” he said. “Meanwhile, the president’s rally was eighteen days ago, all attendees had their temperature checked, everyone was provided a mask, and there was plenty of hand sanitizer available for all.” Never mind that every campaign staffer who attended the rally was instructed to quarantine after coming into contact with several colleagues who had COVID-19. Two Secret Service officers at the rally also tested positive.

June ended with an executive order from Trump and a press conference with Biden. The order, on “Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence,” instructed federal law enforcement officials to prosecute vandals and withhold money from local governments that declined to confront “mob rule.” (The word “mob” appeared repeatedly throughout the order; it’s also commonly heard on Fox News.) “The president has argued that protesters have gone too far,” CBS reported, citing the removal of a couple of Confederate statues and a failed attempt, before police intervened, at toppling one of President Andrew Jackson, who enslaved Black people. (Other monuments were being taken down at the behest of local governments—John C. Calhoun in Marion Square, in Charleston; Jefferson Davis in the Kentucky Capitol Rotunda; Christopher Columbus in Tower Grove Park, St. Louis. In Richmond, Mayor Levar Stoney ordered the removal of all Confederate statues from city land.) “In an attempt to punish those governments that the president claims have looked the other way during monument destruction, the order directs officials to consider holding back funding and grants,” the Times observed. “But it is unclear whether the Trump administration could actually follow through on that threat.”

Biden made his first appearance before the press in about three months, at a high school a short drive from his house. His focus was the coronavirus—he outlined his plan to curb the spread, and denounced Trump’s efforts. Then he did something weirdly normal, Politico reported: “The presumptive Democratic nominee made what now amounts to news in this bizarre election: He opened the floor to questions from reporters, waving off aides when they tried to cut him off and marveling at how strange this has all become.”

The spring had been marked by a series of tragedies and responses to them, all linked by their display of what had for too long gone unseen. Trump’s response, as the summer dawned, was to scream, to lean further into the absurd. Independence Day—a celebration that for some has always carried an asterisk—bore its contradictions more visibly this year. Many Americans prepared
to loudly reject the lies inherent in celebrating freedom for all. On July 3, Indigenous treaty protectors gathered in South Dakota’s sacred Black Hills, on the road leading to Mount Rushmore. Press reports described their protest as a “culture war.” The Indigenous demonstrators demanded their land back. The Black Hills had been part of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, signed by the US government and a collective of peoples native to the area. In the 1870s, however, gold was discovered; the US broke its part of the deal and systematically seized the land; it was 1927 when workers began to carve the faces of four white men into the earth’s flesh. Native news outlets covered this year’s protest: more than a hundred people blocked the road, waving signs and chanting. A nonprofit advocacy organization known as the NDN Collective parked white vans across the highway and deflated the tires. Local law enforcement, outfitted in riot gear, arrived; the officers ordered the protesters to clear the area, directing them to a “free speech zone.” The protesters refused. “We don’t need them to give us permission to do this on our land; we intend to stay here indefinitely throughout the night,” Nick Tilsen, who is Oglala Lakota and works with NDN Collective, told Indian Country Today. “Mount Rushmore is a symbol of white supremacy.” That evening, twenty people were hauled off to jail.

On July 4, Trump showed up. He wore a navy-blue suit, a white shirt, and a red tie. Whereas protesters were seeking the removal of monuments to Confederate traitors, colonizers, and other brutal men responsible for the pillaging of Native land and Black bodies in the name of American glory, Trump and his cast of apologists accused the demonstrators of aiming to erase history. With the faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln rendered in stone behind him, Trump stepped onto a stage festooned with Americana. He then delivered a speech. “As we meet here tonight, there is a growing danger that threatens every blessing our ancestors fought so hard for, struggled, they bled to secure,” he said. “Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values, and indoctrinate our children.”

Trump continued, “The violent mayhem we have seen in the streets of cities that are run by liberal Democrats, in every case, is the predictable result of years of extreme indoctrination and bias in education, journalism, and other cultural institutions.” He refused to be “tyrannized” or “demeaned” by “bad, evil people.” In press reports, the speech was described as lacking in self-awareness and, in the context of a nation failing to address the worst health crisis in recent memory, beside the point. The New York Times characterized it as “appealing to a subset of Americans to carry him to a second term by changing the subject and appealing to fear and division.” Foreign Policy noted the irony of a speech that railed against so-called left-wing fascism using fascist rhetoric. Conservative and right-wing media praised the event. One outlet, the US edition of The Spectator, ran a column titled “Donald Trump teaches history.” The Supreme Court did not agree: days later, a decision was handed down ruling that about half of Oklahoma belongs to Native Americans.

In Portland, protesters continued taking to the streets; police kept on spraying them with tear gas. Between May 29 and July 4, according to a data analysis by a graduate student at Portland State University, officers attacked protestors with chemical agents more than a hundred times. In a special session, Oregon’s state legislature passed a bill banning choke holds and tear gas, but an exception was carved out for “circumstances constituting a riot”—which, according to the state’s rules, could involve as few as five people. Jason Kafoury, a civil rights lawyer, told the Willamette Week, “I’m not sure how that’s going to decrease tear gas use.” Around the same time, the Trump administration launched “Operation Diligent Valor,” which brought yet more tear gas to Portland. Per Politico, a hundred and fourteen federal agents were deployed, in full military gear, carrying rifles longer than their chests. Led by the Department of Homeland Security, they assembled a “Rapid Deployment Force” of officers from ICE, the Federal Protective Service, and Customs and Border Protection; US Marshals joined, too. Gathering around Portland’s buildings and filtering into the crowds, they chased people away from the demonstrations and snatched others up. One man, Mark Pettibone, a twenty-nine-year-old, was approached by men in green military fatigues—they hopped out of a van and ran him down. He fell to his knees. “I was terrified,” Pettibone told the Washington Post. “It seemed like it was out of a horror/sci-fi, like a Philip K. Dick novel. It was like being preyed upon.” The officers drove him to the federal courthouse and placed him in a holding cell; then they let him go, with no explanation. He was not charged with a crime, nor did he know who, exactly, arrested him.

“Protesters and journalists have documented a litany of human rights violations perpetrated by federal agents,” The Appeal reported. In the month after federal forces arrived in Portland, they made ninety-four arrests; local police fielded at least a hundred more. Some officers fired shots. One protester, Donavan LaBella, age twenty-six, was hit in the head with an impact munition. He lost some cognitive function; his overall prognosis remains unknown. The Times obtained an internal memo from the Department of Homeland Security revealing that the federal agents sent to Portland hadn’t been trained to handle mass demonstrations. The US attorney in Oregon announced federal
charges against seven protesters, who stood accused of defacing a courthouse and assaulting officers. Thousands more people came out; in a Fox interview with Chris Wallace, Trump called them “anarchists.” But the scene also had moms: the Wall of Moms, who locked arms in yellow shirts, crooning an eerie lullaby (“Hands up / Please don’t shoot me”) that quickly went viral. The moms were written up everywhere—in BuzzFeed, USA Today, and Mother Jones, which declared, “The Portland Moms Are Giving Trump a Headache.” The Associated Press covered the “divided” story of Portland: “The Federal Protective Service, U.S. Marshals Service and U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents were tired and frustrated,” the article observed. “They didn’t want to confront the crowd; they just wanted to go home.”

The Atlantic argued that the abuses in Portland were “working” for Trump: “Apparently powerless to stop the chaos, Trump has now decided to embrace it, hoping that if he was unable to deliver the security he promised, perhaps heightened fear would motivate voters nearly as well.”

Then again, CNN found, “With just four months until Election Day, the Trump campaign is struggling to deploy what was supposed to be a chief feature of the president’s reelection effort—the signature Trump rally.” One was scheduled for New Hampshire, then called off. “Three weeks after the poorly attended Tulsa event, the hangover is still being felt inside the campaign.” CNN went on to describe discontent within the Trump ranks, much of it directed toward Brad Parscale, the campaign’s manager. When Trump’s friends get mad, he gets mad. “He does not like Brad,” an adviser is quoted as saying. “I think Parscale probably needs to go,” a donor chimed in. Within two days, Parscale was demoted. For the Times, Maggie Haberman reported, “The president at times berated Mr. Parscale over real and perceived transgressions, sometimes screaming at him and once threatening to sue him.”

With that settled, Trump and Mike Pence, his vice president, set off on a tour to besmirch a shadow Joe Biden—a figure far more progressive than the real man—who “would set America on a path of socialism and decline” and abolish the police. But in the Fox interview with Wallace, Trump was corrected. (“The White House never sent us evidence the Bernie-Biden platform calls for abolishing the police, because there is none,” Wallace said.) A few weeks earlier, Politico had published a story, “Why Trump’s attempt to tag Biden as a tool of the radical left isn’t working,” pointing out that Trump had been running an ad highlighting Biden’s work on the 1994 crime bill, which “destroyed millions of Black lives.” Here was a mixed message—destroying Black lives was, apparently, supposed to be Trump’s wheelhouse.

So Trump announced that he would send more federal agents into American cities. “Mr. Trump, who has sought to make ‘law and order’ a campaign theme and has denounced ‘Democrat-run cities’ as he seeks re-election,” per the Times, gave remarks at the White House vowing never to defund the police, and “to make law enforcement stronger, not weaker.” William Barr, Trump’s attorney general, stood beside him. Trump told reporters that his administration would send some two hundred officers to Chicago, and dozens to Albuquerque; more would be deployed to Kansas City and elsewhere. The same day, during a virtual town hall organized by the Service Employees International Union, Biden commented on Trump’s racism: “The way he deals with people based on the color of their skin, their national origin, where they’re from, is absolutely sickening,” he said. “No sitting president has ever done this. Never, never, never. No Republican president has done this. No Democratic president. We’ve had racists, and they’ve existed, they’ve tried to get elected president. He’s the first one that has.” The press, incredulous, leaped: “Biden says Trump is America’s first ‘racist’ president” (the Washington Post); “Joe Biden calls Donald Trump America’s ‘first’ racist president” (The Guardian). PolitiFact got in, too: “Historians say this is wrong,” the article deadpanned. “Various presidents since the country’s founding can be considered racist, whether because they enslaved Black people, held racist beliefs, or used racist rhetoric.” Reporters asked Trump for his take, and he gave it: “I’ve done more for Black Americans than anybody, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln.”

On July 17, John Lewis, who represented Georgia’s Fifth District in the House of Representatives and was known to colleagues as “the conscience of the Congress,” died, at the age of eighty. The son of Alabama sharecroppers and a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Lewis was a moral beacon in the fight for civil rights, during which he survived bloody beatings and a fractured skull. He succumbed to pancreatic cancer. “When he revealed his condition, last December,” Jelani Cobb wrote for The New Yorker, “hope persisted despite those odds, in part because, for many people, the thought of confronting the reactionary, racist, and antidemocratic realities of the Trump era without one of the nation’s most potent symbols of decency was too difficult to countenance.” Lewis was a persistent critic of Trump, and Trump expressed only disdain for Lewis. Trump did not attend the funeral. (“I don’t know John Lewis,” he later told Axios. “He chose not to come to my inauguration.”) The Trump administration sent yet more federal agents to Portland. NBC questioned what right he had to do so: “Trump and Barr cannot dispatch federal agents to take over local law enforcement activities simply because they
might think local police are doing a poor job.”

Biden gave a speech in New Castle, Delaware, not far from his home. He wore a blue suit and a blue-and-white striped tie. “Families are squeezed emotionally and financially,” he told a small crowd. “They need help, but too often they can’t afford it.”

It was the third of four economic policy rollouts he planned to make before the Democratic convention, this one focused on caregiving and education; “racial equity” would come next and last, his campaign said. NPR observed, “After months of mostly focusing on Trump’s actions and statements, Biden is now focusing more on highlighting his own proposals and possible presidential agenda.” The Biden campaign was proceeding under a banner of “empathy”; at the event, he spoke about his own collapse into tragedy—when his wife and daughter were killed in a car crash and, in an instant, he became a single father. Around the same time, news outlets were covering the story of Black mental health; per the Post, “The rate of black Americans showing clinically significant signs of anxiety or depressive disorders jumped from 36 percent to 41 percent in the week after the video of Floyd’s death became public.” Some protesters began to suffer from physical maladies, too—Oregon Public Broadcasting reported that women and trans and nonbinary people in Portland were experiencing strange side effects from the tear gas, including disruptions to their menstrual cycles. The extent of the environmental damage would be unknown, however, “because no other U.S. city has ever been subjected to such a sustained barrage of tear gas.”

At the end of July, Barr appeared at a hearing before the House Judiciary Committee. The room was dimly lit; staffers spread out among the seats; the session was carried live on cable news and covered by every major outlet. Barr wore a gray suit. He confirmed to the committee that, when protests poured into America’s cities and towns, Trump moved down to the White House bunker. “There was unprecedented rioting around the White House,” Barr said. Plus, he continued, “the crowd was very unruly.” Jerry Nadler, the committee’s chair, took his turn to address Barr about the deployment of federal forces in Portland. “Mr. Attorney General,” he said, “would you agree with me, at least on principle, that it is improper for the Department of Justice to divert resources and law enforcement personnel in an effort to assist the president’s reelection campaign?” Barr replied, “No.”

In early August, Ibram X. Kendi suggested in The Atlantic that, in one respect, Americans should be thankful to Trump. “He has held up a mirror to American society, and it has reflected back a grotesque image that many people had until now refused to see: an image not just of the racism still coursing through the country, but also of the reflex to deny that reality,” Kendi wrote. “Though it was hardly his intention, no president has caused more Americans to stop denying the existence of racism than Donald Trump.”

By now, at least 150,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus. Another study made the rounds in news reports, adding evidence that the rate of COVID-19 cases has been significantly greater among minority and poor families; this time, the research focused on children. Biden announced that he would not fly to attend the Democratic National Convention, in Milwaukee; he’d accept the nomination from home. He called off other travel plans, too. The headline in the Times read, “Biden’s Milwaukee Trip Is Canceled, and So Is a Normal Presidential Campaign.” The Republican National Convention was slated to be held in Charlotte; Trump threatened to pull out when that state’s governor insisted on basic health precautions; Trump wanted to move the whole thing down to Jacksonville, but then COVID-19 cases skyrocketed in Florida, so he backtracked. On Fox & Friends, Trump mentioned that he might deliver his convention speech from the White House. “I think it’s a beautiful setting, and we are thinking about that,” he said. On MSNBC, Andrea Mitchell discussed the news with Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker. “He has floated the idea today of doing it on the south lawn of the White House,” Mitchell said. “We are thinking about that,” said Pelosi. “Our reporting is also that he has suggested monuments as a backdrop, like the Lincoln Memorial. Is that appropriate?” Pelosi curled her mouth into a frown. “It’s very wrong,” she said. “It won’t happen.” The AP interviewed Jordan Taylor’s cause subsumed the whole election cycle—whether or not the campaigns or political reporters realize it, fully—because her cause is that of a people demanding that they have a future, no matter who the president is.
Libowitz, of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a watchdog group; he said that “a separation between governing and campaigning is fundamental to democracy.”

Swirling around the convention news was speculation over Biden’s vice presidential selection—a story that proceeded with minimal comment from his campaign. The focus was on Kamala Harris, a senator from California; Karen Bass, also from California, and the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus; and Susan Rice, a former US ambassador to the United Nations and national security adviser. (Another contender, Stacey Abrams, had already been discounted; some in the press dismissed her as overly eager—“her thirst borders on threatening,” according to the Washington Examiner, in a piece called “Stacey Abrams feels entitled to power, which is why she shouldn’t get it.”) Coverage of Harris, Bass, and Rice often made comparisons, instead of direct evaluations: “In many ways, Karen Bass is the anti–Kamala Harris,” according to Politico. On The Breakfast Club, a radio show, Charlamagne tha God, one of the hosts, asked Bass about that characterization. “I’ve never seen them do that with white women,” he said. Bass shook her head. “Why are you comparing me with her?” she replied. Harris was, in contrast with Bass, labeled “too ambitious.” During a livestream of the Black Girls Lead 2020 conference, Harris addressed that contention. “There will be a resistance to your ambition—there will be people who say to you, ‘You are out of your lane,’” she told viewers. “They are burdened by only having the capacity to see what has always been, instead of what can be. But don’t you let that burden you.” The same day, the Sacramento Bee published an editorial: “Biden will likely pick Kamala Harris for VP. Here’s why Karen Bass is a better choice.” In anticipation of racist attacks on whomever Biden chose, a group of Democratic women sent a letter to the top editors of major newspapers and networks, urging them to avoid “stereotypes and tropes” and to “actively work to be anti-racist and anti-sexist in your coverage.”

Election coverage, even this year, has had its rhythms, its moods. The press finds it hard to resist following certain through lines, or creating them. An aberration of 2020, however, has been the story line of Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old African-American woman who worked as an emergency room technician in Louisville. Taylor was asleep at home one night with her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, when three white police officers entered, in plain clothes, with a no-knock warrant and a battering ram. Walker got up to see what was going on. Then came gunshots: the officers fired more than twenty times; eight bullets tore into Taylor’s body. She died on March 13. The officers—Jonathan Mattingly, Myles Cosgrove, and Brett Hankison—have not been charged with any crime; only the last of the three men was let go from the Louisville police. (Hankison had, as it turned out, a history of violating departmental policy and stood accused by several women of sexual assault.) Mattingly and Cosgrove remain on administrative reassignment. Joshua Jaynes, the detective who signed off on the warrant, was also placed on administrative reassignment. For months, even when there were no updates in her case to report, Taylor’s picture floated across the internet, as a cause and sometimes a meme; people spoke her name in the way of an incantation; “Justice for Breonna Taylor” became, on social media, the campaign slogan to which many Americans feel most connected—and around which they’ve centered their political identities.

The presidential candidates have not been able to avoid that fact. On Taylor’s birthday, June 5, Biden tweeted a message to her mother, Tamika Palmer: “Our country needs to act—now.” Trump did not say anything about Taylor—except when he threatened those who rallied around her family. Back in May, Trump tweeted that protesters were “thugs” and that “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.” (He’d stolen that line from Walter Headley, the former police chief in Miami who uttered those words during a news conference in 1967, catalyzing an uprising in a Black neighborhood.) Twitter, for the first time in its history, blocked a sitting president’s tweet for violating its code of conduct; Trump’s message had broken a rule against glorifying violence. Then Trump tweeted again: “Looting leads to shooting, and that’s why a man was shot and killed in Minneapolis on Wednesday night—or look at what just happened in Louisville with 7 people shot. I don’t want this to happen, and that’s what the expression put out last night means…” But no one had been shot, nor had anyone looted, at the protests in Taylor’s name. Trump lied, which perhaps is not notable—except that the gravity of Breonna Taylor is what pulled him there, this time. In death, after a horrific murder, she became a driving force of American political life. Her cause subsumed the whole election cycle—whether or not the campaigns or political reporters realize it, fully—because her cause is that of a people demanding that they have a future, no matter who the president is. CJR
Joe Biden’s selection of Kamala Harris as his running mate—a thrillingly historic choice, no matter your politics—has delivered a restart of the 2020 campaign cycle. Since March, election reporters have mostly been sitting on their hands, watching the pandemic subsume their beat. Now their instinct is to pick up where they left off—to wallow in the trivia of the candidates’ personalities and polls. My advice: don’t do it.

You could see the muscle memory kicking in on day one of the Harris coverage. First came the ridiculous speculation on media Twitter, based on flight data, about whose private planes were descending into Delaware. Once Biden made his announcement—which, notably, not a single political reporter scooped—the game was on. Did Harris apologize during the vetting for ripping Biden over his opposition to integrating schools through busing? How many candidates were interviewed, and by whom? What would choosing Harris mean for the 2024 and 2028 presidential campaigns? In the New York Times, an examination of Harris’s policy stances was treated like a sidebar. CNN carried Donald Trump live as he gave his reaction to the press and, instinctively, used a sexist slur to describe Harris; more vileness is no doubt forthcoming. Acolytes of the president foreshadowed that the next three months would involve a radical takeover of the Democratic Party.

Must we go back to where we were early this year, before the coronavirus and Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, brutally killed a Black man named George Floyd? America is in the midst of a deadly pandemic and an uprising for racial justice—why should journalism act as if the spring and summer never happened?

It doesn’t have to be this way. On the eve of Trump’s inauguration, I wrote an open letter, with misguided optimism, about what to expect from a newly energized, independent White House press corps. We would set the ground rules, I wrote then. We would shape the narrative. We would decide which stories most needed telling. How naive I was. Within weeks of Trump taking office, the status quo of political reporting resumed and grew ever more insidious. For too many newsrooms, Trump’s Twitter feed became the assignment desk. Trump’s lies—and those of his lackeys (including at Fox News, which became the nation’s most-watched cable network)—were given credence they never deserved. Political reporting, especially on television, became an exercise in hate-watching. The spectacle reflected nothing about the experience of living in a torn, dysfunctional country.

By placing Trump at the center, the press was beholden to his whims and follies and cultivated distractions. He is a fount of misinformation; covering his every move is perilous. That is not a problem new to Washington, of course—as Michael Herr, who was the Vietnam correspondent for Esquire, wrote in his 1977 book, Dispatches, “It was inevitable that once the media took the diversions seriously enough to report them, they also legitimized them.” He went on, “The press got all the facts (more or less); it got too many of them. But it never found a way to report meaningfully about death.” His subject was a war; ours is the ongoing epidemic of police brutality against Black people and now the coronavirus.

Recently, when the pandemic froze the campaign and protesters filled the streets, we experienced a reprieve: officialdom was stripped of its agency. Journalists recognized the futility of reporting on
an emergency from inside an administration that tells us the opposite of what we see happening in our hospitals. Police information—never all that worthy of trust—was deemed an unreliable source on the demonstrations. As five million people became sick, and more than 162,000 died, many reporters decided to focus less on stock-market analysis than on the human beings facing destitution. The disinformation streaming from officials was right-fully hectored, then ignored.

For those of us disillusioned by the status quo of political reporting, the past five months have been, in that one sense, freeing, as we’ve been spared the vacuous town halls and inane analysis and empty prime-time speculation. Instead, we have seen some magnificent journalism that takes America’s problems seriously. Ed Yong, of The Atlantic, has covered the coronavirus as a signifier of the country’s systemic inequities. Nikole Hannah-Jones has broken down what is owed Black Americans for centuries of racism. The team at the Marshall Project, working with the Associated Press, has embarked on the task of chronicling all those who have contracted the coronavirus while in prison—ninety thousand so far—as lawyers argue for the early release of incarcerated people. For CJR, Betsy Morais and Alexandria Neason have argued in a brilliant two-part essay that these stories connect to every facet of American life and form the basis of the campaigns. The election of the president need not be siloed into a narrative about superficial campaign machinations.

The American people are living on the edge of death and economic despair. Those are the stakes of the 2020 election, one whose integrity is in jeopardy thanks to the hypocrisies of Silicon Valley and the influence of foreign (and domestic) actors, on top of voter suppression—by online disinformation campaigns and simpler means (including manipulating the post office). The press must look past the campaign coverage that was and embrace its role as a safeguard of democracy. We have to tell the whole story of the American experience, not merely the horse race of candidates for high office. That’s the only way journalism can regain its rightful place as a trusted institution. CJR
When the pundits paused

‘Life has punctured the bubble of political bullshit in Washington’

Simon van Zuylen-Wood
Summer 2020
Pick a day. Any day. There’s a good chance that David Axelrod has been quoted in a major American publication. Take August 29, 2019, a nice-sounding day. Joe Biden has been telling a story that doesn’t add up, about pinning a star on a naval officer. Critics accuse him not of lying, but of mental decline. The Washington Post publishes the scoop. Axelrod shares it on Twitter. “@JoeBiden is a gaffe and embellishment machine,” he observes. “But if you read to the end of this story, it also reflects something that is a real strength, and that is his empathy.” Axelrod’s take is cited in follow-ups by FoxNews.com and The Guardian. The Associated Press runs a piece, by Bill Barrow and Thomas Beaumont, quoting him. “Where it becomes problematical is if it’s seen as evidence of some sort of decay,” Axelrod tells them. “That is obviously a danger.” The New York Times also publishes an article about this, by Katie Glueck; Axelrod is quoted in that one, too. “In this story you have the risk and strength of Biden, the risk being that he is a gaffe-prone guy,” he says. “But on the other hand, he projects extraordinary empathy, and that empathy is a huge strength.”

After a Labor Day hiatus, Axelrod is back. On September 6, Maggie Haberman quotes him in a piece for the Times about the GOP canceling some primaries. On September 8 he appears in a New York Post column about Biden’s blunders. On September 11, Axelrod writes an op-ed for the Times about how to defeat Donald Trump. On September 12, Axelrod is a lead source for a Politico article called “Why Are You Pissing in Our Faces?: Inside Warren’s War with the Obama Team.” Later that night, he is quoted in yet another Times piece, this one coauthored by Glueck and Matt Flegenheimer, about a Democratic debate. “There’s just a real anxiety about not making a mistake,” Axelrod says, among other things.

Axelrod—nom de guerre: Axe—is the Waldo of pundits. He shows up everywhere. From the first Democratic debate, last June, until the coronavirus-hastened end of the primary, journalists at major publications reached him for comment an average of once every other day. (I ran the numbers.) That doesn’t include the vast secondary market of articles citing things he has said on Twitter; on CNN, where he is a senior political commentator; or on either of his two podcasts. Part of what makes Axe, who is sixty-five, such a trusty pundit is that reporters don’t consider him a pundit. He was the strategist behind Barack Obama’s two presidential campaigns, meaning that he is on the political A-list and his insights haven’t yet fossilized. Early on, he was a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, making him a member of the tribe. He’s liberal, but not boringly partisan. He’s establishment, but tends to avoid Beltway platitudes. Who wouldn’t want to talk to David Axelrod, a hard-nosed politico in the person of an approachable frump? His trademark walrus mustache, now shaved off, is hard to unsee.

What really makes him the pundit king, though, is something more pedestrian. Axelrod calls reporters back and gives them good quotes. “He speaks in very complete sentences,” a campaign reporter told me. “Fluent sentences are obviously really important.” Not only that—he uses metaphors and analogies. Pete Buttigieg needs to “keep the balloon in the air.” Obama sees himself as a “ref, not a player.” Biden is like Mr. Magoo. The more Axelrod’s name appears in print, the more journalists call him, reinforcing his credibility. (The Axe economy runs on a pyramid
“I used to have anxiety 
dreams about accidentally 
agreeing to go on some other 
TV channel.”

and Democratic Parties,” Jonathan Tamari, a polit- 
cical reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer, told me. “One of the reasons a lot of us missed what was going on in 2016 is probably that a lot of the people who get quoted very often, who we go to for insight, live by the traditional rules of politics.” Donald Trump didn’t play by those rules, and his victory blindsided the commentariat.

After the shock of Trump’s win, many political reporters vowed to rethink their approach. Except they didn’t. There was no discernible change in habit, and pundits multiplied. Overstuffed cable news sets now resemble NFL pregame shows. (Jonathan Mahler, of the New York Times Magazine, called them “Last Supper–size panels.”) To what end? Writing in the New Republic, Walter Shapiro, a veteran campaign reporter, ticked through the various “narratives” that dominated pundits’ chatter in February alone: “Joe Biden will limp to inevitable victory; Bernie Sanders is the likely delegate leader; it’s a Sanders-versus–Mike Bloomberg race; welcome to a contested convention in Milwaukee; and after the Nevada caucuses, Sanders is unbeatable.”

Then covid-19 began ravaging the United States, and the presidential campaigns dried up. If the Trump era inflated a pundit bubble, I thought, maybe the pandemic would pop it. So, like many others before me, I called Axelrod. He was quarantining with family in Arizona and picked up his cellphone without recognizing the number. How was he doing? “My anticipation was that I was going to be talking every week about the primaries,” he said. “It became obvious as March began, and particularly as March wore on, that that wasn’t going to be the case.”

He hadn’t been on-set at CNN since March 17, two weeks earlier. “I think it was probably the last time there was a large assembly of people there,” he said. “We were already observing social distancing—our panel was shrunken, so we could space out more.” The writing was on the wall. At the end of the night, somebody joked, “See you in November.” The good news was that if CNN needed him back, he’d be on call. “They sent me equipment,” he said. “I’ve got a little rig in my house, so I can go on the air when necessary.”

I asked Axelrod what he made of the coronavirus. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime—hopefully—pandemic,” he said. “The suffering is obvious, and the outlook is unclear. So the campaign, like every other aspect of our lives, has been overtaken by the virus. If you’re a commentator on politics, you’re kind of a spare part in the garage.” How did it feel to be a spare part? “Eh, I think it would be colossally obtuse and unfeeling to complain about that,” he replied. “I personally want to see, on television, experts. I don’t want to see bloviators about politics.”

As ever, he knew just what to say. Still, his comment made me wonder if Axe and company were in existential crisis. Would pundits be swept away by a new demand for facts over opinion? Or would they simply flip themselves upright, like tide-swept crabs, and keep on talking?

D avid Broder and Hunter Thompson walk into a bar. It’s about 3pm on a sweltering weekday afternoon in June 1972, in a Midtown dive called the New York Lounge. Broder, forty-two, of the Washington Post, is an ultra-square obsessed with the virtues of the two-party system. He sips a Coke. Thompson is Thompson. He drinks beers and margaritas. With them is Thompson’s Rolling Stone colleague Timothy Crouse, who drinks scotch and will write this up in his book The Boys on the Bus. Thompson is up four hundred dollars on Broder, from betting on various state primary elections. Broder is trying to account for his bad prognostications, which also appear in print. “The most distressing thing about covering politics,” he complains, “is that the guy who was absolutely right, whose wisdom was almost breathtaking one election
year—you go back to that same man for wisdom some other year, and he’ll be as dumb as dogshit.” His takeaway: “I think it would have been useful for me to get out of Washington more.” Instead, Broder returns to Washington, never leaves, and rides out a storied Post career as a centrist pundit.

For more on the roots of modern punditry, I called Shapiro, who has covered every presidential campaign of the past forty years. Foundations were laid in 1966 with William Buckley’s erudite PBS debate show, Firing Line, but the pundit industry, Shapiro figured, really took off in the early eighties, when the Broders of the world started appearing on TV. “I blame everything on The McLaughlin Group,” he said, referring to the syndicated political shouting match refereed by John McLaughlin. (The original show ended its run after McLaughlin died, in 2016, though a McLaughlin-less McLaughlin has since resurfaced.) “The fact is, there was money to be made in aggressively mouthing off on TV, because you became famous and that meant you got to go on the corporate speech circuit.” (Those gigs pay well.) McLaughlin debuted in 1982, the same year as CNN’s Crossfire. From then on, the live-argument format propped up an entire class of well-compensated blowhards. “George Carlin said there were seven words you couldn’t say on TV,” Shapiro told me. “Now there are three: ‘I don’t know.’” (If Shapiro ever wants to get into the punditry racket, he knows his way around a one-liner.) And so we have Morning Joe, Real Time with Bill Maher, The Circus, and engorged debate-night iterations of Anderson Cooper 360.

Let’s take a moment to define terms. A pundit can’t simply be a person who broadcasts his political opinions in public. In the age of Twitter, that describes too many people. Rather, a pundit must be sought out, like a village elder. By my definition, a talk radio host or an academic or a high-volume social media poster is never by default a pundit, but can become one as soon as other credentialed people begin calling.

Because pundits are anointed, rather than self-made, they tend to be typecast. One of the most abundant species is the never-Trump conservative consultant, such as Steve Schmidt, Rick Wilson, John Weaver, and Mike Murphy, who hosts a podcast with Axelrod called Hacks on Tap. Out of favor with the GOP, they are free to throw bombs while maintaining the insider credibility of apostates. Schmidt is known to give you whatever you want to hear in the most colorful, flamboyantly obscene terms. Wilson sees the world through a Trump-crime-syndicate lens, and will say so. (These are some of the same gurus whose credibility was supposedly damaged when the candidates paying them lost to Trump, in 2016.) They know their audience, and are happy to serve.

There are also the Trump-whisperers. Salena Zito, a former columnist for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, scored a book deal and a CNN contract on the strength of a phrase: Trump’s supporters, she wrote, “take him seriously, but not literally.” Jeffrey Lord, a former Ronald Reagan aide who was living with his ninety-seven-year-old mom and trying to write thrillers, became CNN’s first pro-Trump pundit after publishing a few positive pieces about him in the American Spectator. There are the popular historians, like Douglas Brinkley, Michael Beschloss, and Doris Kearns Goodwin. There are the electeds who become more famous on TV than they were in office. Harold Ford Jr., an ex-MSNBC fixture, pioneered that art form. CNN’s Bakari Sellers, a former state representative from South Carolina, is the next generation.

In 2019, CNN hired Alexandra Rojas, the executive director of Justice Democrats, a left-wing PAC. She was one of the few pro-Sanders commentators on cable news. Because the pundit economy tends to reward people who are established, the insurgent left has had a harder time breaking through. Krystal Ball, a progressive who cohosts a show on The Hill’s website with a conservative commentator named Saagar Enjeti, was poised to become a national star, until the nomination slipped from Sanders’s grasp. The pundit economy doesn’t run on merit. And mostly, it rewards people who answer the phone.

If the old way to monetize punditry was landing on the speechmaking circuit, the new way is landing on a cable news contract. Pre-Trump, CNN thrived on developing stories: the O.J. chase, Hurricane Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon spill. But after Jeff Zucker took over the network, in 2013, he struggled to keep it relevant in the absence of breaking news. MSNBC and Fox News found themselves better positioned to cover the polarized politics of the Obama era. Then came Trump, who started running for president in 2015. Zucker, who had presided over The Apprentice during a past life at NBC, stuck him on TV at every opportunity. Rallies were carried live; Trump called in constantly.

In August 2016, an underappreciated shift occurred. Steve Bannon replaced Paul Manafort as Trump’s campaign chairman and tilted the effort toward a right-wing base. Trump halted his regular interviews with CNN; instead, he started calling it names. CNN filled the void by hiring people to talk about Trump. Enter the pundits. Most of them were adversarial; then there were the handful plucked from obscurity to speak in his defense. Partly, that was for balance. Mostly, it was for entertainment. “The political-panel strategy was purely for television ratings,” a former CNN executive told me. A typical scenario: CNN runs an outrageous Trump statement by a formerly obscure Trumpist who then contorts herself into knots to defend Trump, provoking an anti-Trump talking head to go ape. Instant conflict. “Obviously the
panels became a point of controversy, leading up to and beyond the election,” the former executive added. “All noise, no news.”

I called David Gergen, a Washington Post writer and longtime CNN pundit, to ask about the recent proliferation of his kind. He was sheltering in place on Martha’s Vineyard. “Some of the younger people are just terrific, some of the most promising journalists,” he said. “Some other people who walk through, it’s like, where do they find these people?”

In 2017, Zucker described his growing contributor network, as the pundit ranks are called, as “characters in a drama.” “Everybody says, ‘Oh, I can’t believe you have Jeffrey Lord or Kayleigh McEnany,’” he told the Times Magazine, the latter being a twenty-nine-year-old pro-Trump law student he started putting on the air. “But you know what? They know who Jeffrey Lord and Kayleigh McEnany are.” This past April, McEnany was named White House press secretary.

There are two classes of paid CNN pundit: “commentator” and “analyst.” Commentators tend to be partisan. Axelrod is a commentator. Analysts are subject-matter experts. Within the analyst class, there are a handful of major subcategories: legal, national security, political, and, now, medical. Print journalists are well-represented in this class: Haberman, of the Times, was one of the political analysts hired in the Zucker era; Jeffrey Toobin, of The New Yorker, has been a legal analyst for CNN since 2002. Some people have “senior” in their titles; others don’t. It’s not clear what this signifies. Punditry has been a major growth area since 2015; CNN won’t reveal precise numbers, but a high-ranking person at the network told me the roster now includes somewhere under a hundred fifty talkers.

CNN contracts tend to run for one or two years. The salaries aren’t public, but network sources told me that they ranged from $25,000 to more than $200,000. One pundit revealed, without a name attached, a salary in the high five figures. Almost everyone else I asked said, after awkward pauses, that they didn’t want to disclose their earnings. Lucky for me, in March, the Hollywood Reporter published financial disclosure forms of ex-Trump officials, revealing how much Fox News had compensated certain people before they joined the administration. I figured the paychecks were comparable across networks. From 2013 to 2017, Scott Brown, a former US senator from Massachusetts, got $175,000 a year. (He is now the US ambassador to New Zealand.) Anthony Scaramucci, who had a crash-and-burn stint as White House communications director, earned $88,461 as a Fox Business Network contributor. John Bolton, the former national security adviser, was pulling $569,423. Axelrod, who used to have a Saturday show on CNN, and still hosts a CNN podcast called The Axe Files, is likely paid on the high end. (When I asked him the amount, he wouldn’t say.)

Once contributors sign on—at CNN, at least—they’re free to go on any of the network’s shows they like, by negotiating directly with producers. Outside podcasts, radio, and speeches are usually fine. The only thing they can’t do is sleep with the enemy. “I used to have anxiety dreams about accidentally agreeing to go on some other TV channel,” a CNN political analyst told me.

That creates a strange dynamic with the legions of on-staff CNN journalists, armed with original reporting, who find themselves in competition for airtime with talking heads—some of whom, like Haberman, have allegiances to other outlets. “They have a stockpile of weaponry, and they maybe sometimes aren’t as strategic about who they have and how they use them,” the former CNN executive said. “There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and only probably six hours in the programming schedule that really matter.”

Working as a TV pundit is some of the easiest money in journalism. Setting aside the election night workhorses, the average contributor probably isn’t on air for more than thirty minutes a week. (Other kinds of labor are sometimes involved: Lord used to get ferried three hours each way from his home in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, every time he went to the studio in New York.) If producers need you, you’re on retainer, and supposed to show up. But you’re not exactly obligated. “If they asked you on every day, you could say no,” Wajahat Ali, a commentator CNN hired last year, told me. “At the same time, there’s an unspoken rule: if you keep saying no, they’re not going to call you anymore.” And then they might not renew your contract. Besides, Ali said, he likes going on television. The exposure has been nice. In the past, when he did cable for free, “It was, ‘Oh, here’s the Muslim guy.’” Now, having built up relationships with CNN producers, he’ll go on to discuss any number of things. “It’s been really good. I get to flex.”

And, really, what otherwise crumlimly paid writer is going to pass up $75,000 to speak his mind for a few minutes a week on national TV? Which, of course, poses a problem. It is famously verboten, outside the realm of tabloid journalism, to pay sources. The theory being, you can’t trust what someone’s saying if he’s saying it to get paid. Yet on cable, the practice takes place at all hours.

CNN has a pundit czar. Her name is Rebecca Kutler. A nineteen-year veteran of the network, she has for the past five been scouting and courting contributors. We spoke in April. Kutler, forty, was hunkered down at home with her family in Bethesda, Maryland. “This part of the industry has grown a lot in the last few years,” she told me. “Well, there’s more networks and more competition for the best experts—to be able to showcase them. In order to do that, the business has changed a bit.” The
trend toward enormous political panels has required her to do more hiring; the general theory seems to be that a channel-flipping viewer should easily find someone relatable to root for. As such, diversity—of race, gender, ideology—is crucial. It also helps if you look good on TV. (The universe of print-quoted pundits tends to be more white and male.)

I asked Kutler what she seeks in contributors. “I wake up every day trying to think about, ‘What is appearing on-screen in the early evening was all but shot, Steele said. “Yesterday, I was on Ari Melber’s show in the beginning, but then the president’s press conference went to 7pm.” Ali told me the last time he was on air was March 3, for one of the Super Tuesday panels. “Being the son of immigrants, I’m like, ’You guys pay me every month—I want to be useful,’” he said. “Another part of me is like, ’This is coronavirus. This is a global pandemic. Maybe the world doesn’t need to hear more political punditry.’” Ali’s contract would be up in June, and he’d been discussing his predicament with fellow talking heads. “Will they retain us? Are they all in on doctors? Nobody knows.”

Pivoting, Ali got in touch with The Atlantic and wrote a couple of coronavirus pieces for its website. This is an exceptional time, yet the pause on political pundits is in fact an unusually bracing version of something that happens regularly. In 2019, thanks to the Mueller investigation and then impeachment, federal prosecutors were in vogue on cable TV. By early 2020, they had been booted for politics people. A while ago, Ali was talking to a CNN legal analyst who brought up the meme in which a boyfriend is checking out a hot chick in full view of his girlfriend, who looks on appalled. At the time, the legal analyst was the girlfriend, CNN was the boyfriend, and political pundits were the hot chick. Then came corona. Suddenly, doctors were the hot chick, and everyone else was the girlfriend. (Later, the news would change course again, as the nation filled with protests against police brutality, and CNN would forget about its new doctors for a while.)

Cable news shifts mercurially from one story to the next; certain pundits, whatever their realm of expertise, wind up filling the gap between breaking news and ground-level reporting. Sometimes, that means they have to reach past what they really know. “Part of what I think is troubling about the modern media template is, technology has allowed us to do everything remotely, including, you know, polls up the wazoo,” Axelrod said. “One place where news organizations have cut back is on travel. My neighbors in rural Michigan, where I have a place, could not imagine him losing. Most neighbors in Chicago couldn’t imagine Donald Trump winning, and my neighbors in rural Michigan, where I have a place, could not imagine him losing. Most journalists live in the first environment, not the second.” It’s hard to speak on behalf of the country when you see only a fraction of it. And, as covid-19 reminds us, it’s impossible to predict the future.

Surely, some pundits must realize that what they say is ephemeral and often wrong. In 2005, Philip Tetlock, a social scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, published Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?, a seminal book on political prediction, examining eighty thousand forecasts made by two hundred eighty-four political “experts” from 1984 to 2003. The pundits may as well have been flipping coins; the worst
prognosticators tended to be the most famous. One explanation: pundits aren’t really interested in accuracy. Quoting Richard Posner, the jurist, Tetlock argues that pundits traffic in “solidarity” goods, rather than “credence” goods. We absorb punditry, in other words, not because we’re interested in truth, but to ratify our political identities.

Or maybe pundits aren’t self-aware. I asked Steele if the Trump era, or the fallout from the pandemic, had led him to reconsider any of the wisdom he’d banked in his career. “Nope,” he said. I asked Steele if Republican support for the largest economic stimulus package in United States history, designed to prop up the wrecked economy, had made him rethink any of his small-government principles. “Nope,” he repeated. He dismissed the idea, he said, “that you get into a crisis and change what you believe and walk away from that.”

Scrambling for takes early on in the coronavirus outbreak, the commentariat didn’t drape itself in glory. On March 11, after several weeks of lying about or minimizing the crisis, the president delivered a formal address from his desk in the Oval Office. “Trump’s tone tonight more serious, a welcome change,” Gergen tweeted. Several days later, Trump participated in a briefing. “He is being the kind of leader that people need,” Dana Bash, CNN’s chief political correspondent, said, praising his “tone.” Interspersed with these appearances were an attack on “Sleepy Joe Biden” and a smirk upon being told that Sen. Mitt Romney had entered protective quarantine (“Gee, that’s too bad,” Trump said). It took a while for the pundits to catch on.

On March 24, Hacks on Tap returned with its latest installment. The hosts debated how Joe Biden should engage with voters in quarantine. Murphy was nonplussed by the campaign’s troubled efforts to beam Biden to the internet. “It undercuts the competence thing,” he said. “If they can’t put together a live feed, then how is he going to handle corona 3.0 in two years?” Axe agreed. “That’s what the Trump people have picked up on,” he said. “They are sniping at him about the quality of his broadcasts.” He took a beat. “I don’t know that it means anything,” he added. “I don’t know that anything means anything.”

One day in April, I spent my waking hours watching CNN. I was looking for pundits. Between 10:30am and noon CNN featured on-the-ground COVID-19 reporting from Shanghai, Rome, and Brooklyn. At noon, the network aired Governor Andrew Cuomo’s daily briefing. At 2:12pm Anderson Cooper interviewed Sanjay Gupta, the chief medical correspondent. Around 6pm, I watched Trump’s daily briefing. At 7:07, CNN cut away from the briefing for Erin Burnett OutFront. (MSNBC kept the briefing on.) Jim Acosta, CNN’s chief White House correspondent, commented on the president’s remarks: “A stunning performance by someone who clearly has his back up against the wall.” At 8:25pm, Cooper interviewed Chuck Schumer, the Senate majority leader. At 8:44pm, CNN phoned an outside political analyst—At last, I thought, after a bleary-eyed day mainlining cable news—Josh Dawsey, a Washington Post White House reporter. At 11:48pm Haberman called in. But I didn’t see anybody discuss the campaigns, except insofar as they reviewed Trump’s leadership performance.

I asked Kutler about the new era. “We went about hiring some of the best infectious-disease experts and doctors, to help our audience once again understand what’s happening,” she said. She named a few of them. Was it difficult to transition from political pundits to medical experts? “It hasn’t been a challenge at all,” she said. “Doctors are usually pretty great communicators.” In June, Ali, the political commentator, did not get his contract renewed. Kutler called to let him down gently, saying that he was a casualty of CNN’s turn to COVID-19 coverage.

By then, prime-time viewership was up 117 percent from 2019. Zucker told the Times, “Between now and November, there’s no chance it’s a normal political year.” Even as the Black Lives Matter movement bumped the virus off front pages and cable news ran live coverage of the protests, he maintained that COVID-19 would remain the “principal story of our time.”

Still, the coronavirus is, of course, also a political story. And CNN continued to employ plenty of political pundits. After not too long, the Trump administration’s handling of the pandemic became the dominant theme of Democratic attack ads. That pundits remained relatively muted during the
same period seemed doubly interesting, since the era in which they proliferated was also defined by unpredictability. When the universe of Trump has felt out of control, the pundits have rushed in with tidy narratives to help restore order. They weren’t just characters, as Zucker would have it. They were storytellers, too. And Axelrod, as a tribune of the Obama era, was—for a certain kind of political junkie—a particularly trustworthy narrator.

When I asked Axe why he left politics for media—first at MSNBC, in 2013, before jumping to CNN, in 2015—he said that he didn’t intend to be a partisan talking head. “Temperamentally, you know, my orientation is to try to be calm and to be reflective, and I think there’s actually a need for that now,” he said. “Everybody is so reactive.” Rather, he hoped to serve as a kind of elder, available to impart his forty years of wisdom about professional politics unto younger generations. He had served in campaigns and in government, at the highest level. “There are other people like that,” he said, “but not many.” (Karl Rove, James Carville—figures in the emeritus stage of their careers.) “The thing about commentary,” he said, “is that it’s better if it’s informed.”

No doubt there is comfort, during times of uncertainty, in watching seasoned practitioners hold forth with conviction. But that doesn’t mean pundits should be considered essential workers. There’s only so much sagacity that can be conveyed in a seven-minute TV segment or a two-sentence quote. Even before the virus struck, there were too many bloviators. As Axelrod put it, in a Hall of Fame Axe-ism, “Conventional wisdom is a perilous thing.”

Gradually, though, as summer dawned, campaign coverage started to pick up; the pundits were reenlisted. Maureen Dowd, working on a column for the Times about bats, viruses, and White House bloodsuckers, called Axelrod for a quote. He gave her what she needed. “Trump is like a vampire!” Axe told her, adding an expletive that the Times couldn’t publish. “You’ve got to drive a stake right through his heart.” A few weeks later, Axelrod waded into the national conversation about systemic racism, offering an out-of-the-blue mea culpa in the Washington Post headlined “I thought I understood issues of race. I was wrong.”

Wanted or not, the talking heads will continue to pop up. As they do, blame not the Axelrods, who do their best to say smart things when reporters call, but the media outlets that use pundits as a crutch. “If I look at my email, at six or seven inquiries, I just try to hit as many as I can,” Axelrod told me. “If people think I have something to offer, if I can help illuminate something, then I’m gonna respond.”

CJR
Every afternoon at a quarter past four, an email goes around 30 Rockefeller Plaza to all of MSNBC’s on-screen personalities, all of their executive producers, all of their bosses, and all of their bosses’ bosses. It contains a long spreadsheet, in yellow and white, meticulously detailing total viewership in fifteen-minute increments throughout the previous day’s schedule. When the numbers are good, everyone’s cellphone blows up with congratulatory messages from colleagues. When the numbers are bad, there’s silence. “You cannot understand the building, the network, or anything without understanding the centrality of that,” a high-level MSNBC employee told me. “I can’t overstate the degree to which it has an impact. Everyone gets those numbers. Everyone looks at it. Everyone knows what it is. Everyone knows when someone’s rating well, when someone’s rating poorly.”

It’s only natural that ratings would be important to cable executives. But in the halls of 30 Rock, where MSNBC has undergone multiple reinventions over the years, those spreadsheets have been a compass, guiding a seemingly dissonant ensemble of on-air talent. These days, the lineup includes, among others, left-leaning commentators like Rachel Maddow, Lawrence O’Donnell, and Chris Hayes, along with centrist Republicans like Joe Scarborough, a former congressman, and Nicolle Wallace, who once quarterbacked the daily media spin of President George W. Bush. There’s Brian Williams, Chuck Todd, and Katy Tur, old-school newspaperpeople with inside-the-Beltway sensibilities. And until recently, MSNBC also had a blaring establishment Democrat, Chris Matthews, whom I watched on live television in late February as he compared the victory of Bernie Sanders in the Nevada Democratic primary to the Nazi conquest of France. As Matthews told viewers, “The general, Reynaud, calls up Churchill and says, ‘It’s over.’ And Churchill says, ‘How can that be? You’ve got the greatest army in Europe. How can it be over?’ He said, ‘It’s over.’” Matthews added, “I had that suppressed feeling.”

I was taken aback by the analogy. It turned out that others were, too. Within days, criticisms of his Sanders comments were piled on top of long-standing #MeToo accusations against Matthews, and he announced that he was retiring, effective immediately. It was also widely reported that the Sanders campaign had been banging on the door at MSNBC for a while, upset over a perception that the message coming from the network’s assorted talkers was that Sanders was not to be taken seriously, and even feared. Ahead of the Democratic debate in Las Vegas, which MSNBC sponsored, Sanders had marched up to the event’s producer, stuck his finger in the man’s face, and yelled, “Your coverage of my campaign is not fair!” Later, outside the greenroom, Sanders took his complaint directly to Phil Griffin, MSNBC’s president.

“Thereir news coverage from the field reporters, I had no qualms about,” Bill Neidhardt, the Iowa deputy state director for the Sanders campaign, told me. “It was the anchors, the analysts they brought on.” A sample on-air exchange: “If you’re voting for him because you think he’ll win the election because he’ll galvanize heretofore sleepy parts of the electorate, then politically, you’re a fool, and that’s just a fact,” James Carville, a senior Democratic consultant, said. “You’re describing what sounds a lot like political suicide,” Wallace replied. To Sanders
and his supporters, it seemed that MSNBC, a cable network ostensibly geared toward Democratic voters, was unwilling to engage with an important faction of the party. “What bothers people is that MSNBC takes up this oxygen as a gatekeeper of acceptable liberal thought,” Adam Johnson, a media analyst for Fair.org and the host of a podcast called *Citations Needed*, said. “Yet most of the hosts have a pretty well-documented ideological perspective that is hostile to what is viewed as being to the left of the Democratic Party consensus.”

MSNBC has rejected the notion that it ever demonstrated bias against Sanders. “He is due fair, not fawning coverage, like any other campaign,” Alexandra Roberts, a network spokesperson, told me. Besides, she said, as the race evolved, so did the balance of conversation. To an extent, that’s true; for a few weeks in February, when Sanders looked like a leading contender, producers started booking more of his evangelists. Beyond that, however, when I asked around at MSNBC, it became clear that election coverage has been driven less by a particular political view than by a faithfulness to numbers—hence the importance, in the office, of the daily email that breaks the ratings down for all to see. The majority of MSNBC viewers are over fifty—which is to say, they’re Biden people. And the person most responsible for ensuring they’ve been served play-it-safe centrisms from Beltway-credentialed anchors and pundits has been Andy Lack, the chairman of NBC News and MSNBC. “He’s the most slavishly establishment person I’ve ever encountered,” the high-level MSNBC employee said. Lack’s tenure will be over at the end of May.

Measured from a business standpoint, MSNBC has done well under Lack. Last year, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence, its operating revenue topped a billion dollars for the first time, more than double what it was in 2014. Over the same period, advertising surged from $212 million to $614 million. Four years ago, MSNBC was the sixteenth-ranked network in total viewers. This year, it’s second. It has, at times, even bested Fox.

But those numbers could be attributed as much to Lack’s acumen as to Donald Trump’s presence in the White House. And many on MSNBC’s staff have found Lack, who is seventy-three, to be a problematic leader. During his time at the helm, male employees were accused of predatory behavior toward their female colleagues. Personnel changes—made not to protect women, it seemed, but to chase ratings—left current and former staff members unhappy. Some found Lack’s temperament to be
harsh and intimidating. Reporting on sexual abuse was shelved. Politically, MSNBC has undergone numerous makeovers. There is a sense, including among some top anchors, that the network has never quite known what it wants to be. (Lack declined to comment for this piece.)

If the tensions—and outright hostilities—present in the Democratic Party are also coursing through the halls of the network that aims to cover it, you would think that might make for good television. Instead, what the audience sees is a breathless, perpetual four-alarm fire drill, a confused jumble of viewpoints tipped to favor the old guard, and personality-forgeries forged in the Darwinian crucible of Nielsen quarter-hour rating reports. Sometimes, the shows are simply boring. As I watched, it felt like a shame that the ideological conflicts within MSNBC don’t appear on air, except insofar as they’re expressed by the instability of its programming. Since the network’s founding, it has struggled to find its footing, in ways that reflect compelling shifts in the American political discourse.

Several rebrands ago, in December 1995, MSNBC was introduced at a press conference as a big idea for the new millennium. Bob Wright, NBC’s president and CEO, was flanked by suits from General Electric and Microsoft, who were collaborating on the project (hence the “MS” in the name); Bill Gates joined via live video feed. “MSNBC will redefine the way that people get information by making available news content of unparalleled breadth and depth whenever and whatever form it may take,” Wright said. This was early on in the dot-com era, when the bubble was just beginning to inflate.

Lack, then the president of NBC News, was among the executives in attendance. A well-dressed but slightly disheveled figure, he has big, bushy eyebrows, a receded hairline, and a modest paunch. He’d gotten his start as a producer on 60 Minutes, worked with Walter Cronkite at CBS, and, in 1993, after Dateline rigged the explosion of a truck to make a safety segment look dramatic, was hired by NBC News to restore its credibility. With Lack in charge, Tom Brokaw overtook ABC’s Peter Jennings to become the most-watched anchor on television.

Onstage for the MSNBC rollout, Lack outlined his plans to lead the network into the internet age. Backed with the full resources of NBC News and Microsoft, he said, this new twenty-four-hour cable channel would “run with any big breaking story,” on air and online. The venture was designed to attract “a whole new generation of viewers, the millions of people sixteen and older who use the internet regularly.” It was expected to reach more than thirty-five million Americans by the year 2000.

MSNBC went live in 1996 from Fort Lee, New Jersey, just across the river from Manhattan. (The headquarters was later moved to Secaucus.) Sets were designed to resemble internet startups, with laptops visible on desks. The programs had names like Homepage, Internight, and News Chat. They scored some early successes. MSNBC’s coverage of Kosovo, the Columbine shooting, and the death of Princess Diana, with somber stand-ups from the dark streets of Paris, allowed the network to show off its breaking-news chops. In June 1999, MSNBC topped CNN in viewership for the first time with its coverage of the wedding of Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones, at Windsor Castle.

But even in those days, MSNBC executives realized they had a problem of purpose. The hours of extra airtime on cable came in handy when the world was on fire, but you still had to find a way to keep people interested after the firefighters put out the flames and everybody went home. When there was nothing big to cover, ratings plummeted. “It’s a great business to be in, the breaking-news business, when there’s breaking news,” Erik Sorenson, MSNBC’s general manager, told a reporter at the time. “It’s a very suspect business when there’s no breaking news.” Journalists can fall into a trap: “You do stay with a story—and we’ve all been guilty of that, milking and milking and milking.”

The challenge of keeping viewers tuned in absent any big news was particularly evident at prime time, which offered the highest advertising rates and thus the greatest pressure to perform. To fill the hours, Lack and Sorenson experimented with a format they called “the friends of MSNBC,” shows that featured a sort of Washington dinner party, live. After that, they tried the version with warring guests, a model pioneered on CNN with Crossfire. To find the right formula, Lack, Sorenson, and other executives experimented with a wide array of people, from Paul Begala to Oliver North. Keith Olbermann began his first stint at MSNBC in 1997, hosting a show in the 8pm slot. On one particularly slow news day, he led off an episode with the publication of that year’s Farmers’ Almanac. “It was as bad as it sounds,” he told me. “We weren’t doing well, and I was not having a good time.” When Bill Clinton was impeached, Olbermann’s audience increased more than tenfold, he remembers. But after that story ran its course, MSNBC’s ratings problems returned.

The year 2001 was a turning point. In May, Lack was made president of NBC, which meant that his attention was no longer focused on cable news. In September, terrorist attacks on the United States upended the world—and transformed TV journalism. MSNBC covered the story, but advertising revenue fell. Desperate for more viewers, the network unveiled an entirely reimagined programming slate for the spring 2002 season, with a new slogan: “America’s NewsChannel.” It was “a new name, for a new day and a new time,” Sorenson
wrote in a memo to the staff, explaining a need to “serve the American people.” The tail feathers of the peacock logo became red, white, and blue; there were American-flag ribbons in the background on sets. New hosts were brought in, figures with bombastic personalities and strong opinions: Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angels, got a show; Patrick Buchanan, a xenophobic, conservative firebrand, was paired with Bill Press, a liberal pundit who previously worked for Jerry Brown, the governor of California; MSNBC also briefly brought in Jesse Ventura, a professional wrestler turned politician. The splashiest and most expensive move was the hiring of Phil Donahue—the old king of daytime talk, whom MSNBC lured out of retirement and pitted directly against Bill O’Reilly, on Fox.

The result, in many cases, was an undignified spectacle that embarrassed the old-school stars of NBC News, many of whom were reluctant to appear on cable. To make matters worse, the ratings barely moved. Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, was so frustrated that he appeared on Fox News with a message to the executives who worked for him. “I think the standard right now is Fox, and I want to be as interesting and as edgy as you guys are,” he said. Afterward, the Wall Street Journal called MSNBC’s ratings “abysmal” and reported that staffers were uncomfortable with its new identity, “which they see as a cynical attempt to cash in on post–Sept. 11 patriotism.” The article added, “A day of reckoning—and possibly yet another change of direction—may be at hand for the network.”

So a year later, when he again felt moved to speak out against Bush, he went for it. At an event with veterans in Salt Lake City, Donald Rumsfeld, the defense secretary, accused critics of the Iraq War and the administration’s counterterrorism efforts of trying to appease “a new type of fascism”
and of suffering from “moral or intellectual confusion,” making a comparison with the concessions European leaders made to Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. When Olbermann read those comments, he said, “the back of my head blew off.” On his show, he delivered what he would later call a “special comment”: “in what country was Mr. Rumsfeld raised?” Olbermann asked viewers. “On what side of the battle for freedom did he dream one day to fight? With what country has he confused the United States of America?” While producing the segment, Olbermann thought to himself, “If NBC doesn’t fire me because of this, and I don’t get thrown into the back of a black car headed for Gitmo or something, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

Instead, Olbermann said, Griffin appeared the next day in his office and informed him that his ratings had shot up 50 percent. The anti-Rumsfeld segment had gone viral, Griffin told him, on a new form of social media called YouTube. Could Olbermann do a “special comment” every show?

Olbermann declined to commit. But on future episodes, he would accuse Bush of failing to learn the lessons of Vietnam and of perpetuating the “monumental lie that is our presence in Iraq.” He spoke out against the Military Commissions Act of 2006, which deprived enemy alien combatants of legal protections normally afforded to United States citizens. He began tracking terrorist threat level alerts, suggesting that they were suspiciously timed. His rants tapped into a deep vein of discontent; his mood seemed high. But there were dissenters among the ranks: some managers and established journalists grumbled about the dismantling of NBC’s reputation for objective newsgathering (and about having their seats stolen at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner). In 2011, Olbermann left under acrimonious circumstances—he’d recently been suspended for donating money to Democratic candidates—and decamped to Al Gore’s Current TV, a wannabe progressive channel that never took off. Still, you couldn’t argue with the money. By 2012, according to S&P Global, MSNBC’s profits had grown to $235.9 million—a 25 percent spike over a two-year period. Comcast bought out GE for a majority stake in NBCUniversal, and Steve Burke, the executive tapped to run it, consolidated the news units. Griffin was elevated on the organizational chart to be the equal of Steve Capus, the head of NBC News. MSNBC received more investment from its corporate overseers. Griffin decided to throw his own correspondents’ dinner after-party.

MSNBC was never an ideological project, however. It was always about the ratings. “Corporations are organisms. They’re like sharks,” a former MSNBC executive told me. “They just move toward the money. That’s all they do. It’s not moral or immoral; it’s amoral. They follow what gives them money. And that was how it started. There’s no liberal overseer, and there really isn’t coordination...
with the Democrats. There isn't. It really began by luck. It was just Olbermann doing his thing. **Holy shit, let's do that more.** And then Matthews kind of followed suit. And by 2008—so three years later—along came Rachel to have her own show, and the rest is history.”

As time went on, Griffin’s formula would face the inverse of the problem MSNBC had in its early years. Back then, when there was not enough news, anchors didn’t have enough to say. Now all they did was talk, and they all talked about the same things, in the same way, on repeat. In an analysis of 108 hours of cable programming over three days in November and December 2012, the Pew Research Center found that MSNBC devoted 85 percent of its programming to opinion, with only the remainder going to “factual reporting.” That figure far outpaced CNN and even Fox. The ratings started to drop. Mark Kornblau, who joined MSNBC in 2014 and is now the executive vice president for communications in the NBCUniversal News Group, recalled attending Kornblau, who joined MSNBC in 2014 and is now the executive vice president for communications in the NBCUniversal News Group, recalled attending Pew Research Center meetings in which even the progressive participants complained. “I love steak, but you’re giving me steak all day long,” he heard them say. “Put on West Wing reruns at five o’clock, or something.”

While MSNBC paid out expensive contracts to its opinionated hosts, CNN focused on reporting. By the third quarter of 2014, MSNBC hit a low point, falling from second to fourth place in the ratings among viewers in the key demographic—behind Fox, CNN, and HLN (formerly Headline News). During the same period, CNN’s ratings doubled. Naturally, along with the decline in viewership, MSNBC’s profit fell: from 2012 to 2014, it decreased by $54 million. Something had to change. “You can look at the dysfunction in Washington, the wariness about politics, the low approval ratings,” Griffin said at the time. “That’s had an impact. But we’ve got to adjust; we’ve got to evolve.”

There was trouble at NBC News, too: Brian Williams, by then the *Nightly News* anchor, was found to have misrepresented aspects of his reporting on the Iraq War; he was suspended, then demoted. There was conflict at the *Today* show. Upper management at NBCUniversal decided they needed Andy Lack back. To accept the job, Lack resigned from a position he’d only just recently taken, as chief executive of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the agency that oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and other federally supported international news media. He returned to 30 Rock in April 2015. Griffin found himself with a new boss and was obliged to follow Lack’s lead. The plan was to remake MSNBC in the image of its founding: as a premier destination for reporting, backed by the resources of NBC News. “The news is the star,” Lack said at the time. “We are building a network that has as its core value delivering breaking news better than anyone else. It is not about the anchor who happens to be delivering the news.”

Lack and Griffin canceled all of MSNBC’s liberal daytime programs. The prime-time lineup—which Lack referred to as the channel’s “op-ed pages”—likewise seemed in danger of being upended. Once Donald Trump was elected president, Lack brought in Wallace, along with Greta Van Susteren, a Fox News veteran; Hugh Hewitt, a conservative radio personality; and a slew of right-wing commentators that included Peggy Noonan, Charlie Sykes, and George Will. He also signed Megyn Kelly to a three-year, $69 million contract and placed her at *Today*, NBC’s most important franchise.

“Andy’s view was not ‘We want to change the ideology of the network,’” Kornblau told me. “It was: ‘It’s boring if everybody says the same thing, and our audience will want to hear what conservatives are saying even if they don’t agree with it. And so let’s get those voices in the mix. Let’s get some voices on there that aren’t predictably toeing the Democratic line, so that there’s more interplay and back-and-forth and diversity of perspective.’” Lack hoped, too, that figures like Van Susteren could persuade Republicans to appear on MSNBC, which they had been loath to do before.

Lack recruited a new ally to shepherd many of these changes: Jonathan Wald, formerly an executive producer for Don Lemon at CNN. Wald became MSNBC’s senior vice president for programming and development. Though Griffin ranked above Wald in the organizational chart, Wald had executive producer credits at both *Today* and the NBC *Nightly News*, and many interpreted his arrival as an indication that Griffin’s days were numbered. Soon, Wald was showing up at daily meetings with prime-time executive producers, offering story suggestions and providing feedback on guests—feedback, it was assumed, that reflected Lack’s preferences.

The plan might have worked, except that it did not. Instead, it was Hayes and O’Donnell, the progressives, who became must-watch television for the network’s anti-Trump viewers, who started growing in number. The ratings for those shows skyrocketed. Maddow, too, was a fan favorite. Nobody wanted to tune in to MSNBC to hear from GOP pundits. What they came for was seeing the opposite of Fox. Gloating and still somewhat bitter, MSNBC’s progressive faction took swipes at Lack in the press. Many of Wald’s suggestions were ignored; eventually, he was demoted. “Hayes, Maddow, O’Donnell—the entire primetime lineup is doing record numbers and Lack can’t stand it. It makes him furious,” Ryan Grim, a former MSNBC contributor, wrote in *HuffPost*, quoting an anonymous senior MSNBC source. “Tossing those primetime hosts overboard while they’re raking in viewership and revenue has so far proved an elusive task.”
The greatest fear, perhaps, was what would happen if I didn’t watch.

to breaking news, while prime time retains its “point of view” shows. The changes in recent years amount to adjustments of “format,” Roberts argued, not failed ideological reinventions. “We cover the news aggressively and provide compelling and insightful analysis,” she told me. “Our goal is to own the big stories, put our unrivaled NBC News and MSNBC resources behind it, and cover it in a way that is valid, aggressive, and has an in-depth perspective.”

In February, almost immediately after I started watching MSNBC all the time, my wife began complaining that her quality of life had gone into marked decline. It was not that I made her watch it with me. She refused. It was that, according to her, I had entered a state of heightened anxiety and excitement. I ambushed her with polling data when she was coming out of the laundry room. I interrupted her when she was talking about our kids’ schoolwork to speculate on whether Biden would make peace with the Bernie wing of the Democratic Party. Often, she complained, I wasn’t “present.” I couldn’t help it. I was preoccupied by the possibility that Russia would interfere—again—in the November election.

Even with vast resources to draw upon, cable news is a repetitive medium. Part of my obsession with these stories reflected the way MSNBC hammered at them over and over again, with endless contributors on split screens, chewing every angle. The arguments were fairly consistent, and relied on conventional wisdom. I’m sure it happened once or twice, but in my months of watching MSNBC consistently I did not see one voter interviewed; everyone was discussed in terms of demographic groups and trends. The opinions of each host were predictable; the more I watched, the more they seemed like old friends. But in every case it was a masochistic relationship, one defined by a persistent sense of doom. In the age of Trump, these shows, even the news programs, almost always left me with a sense that the world was on the verge of collapse.

The greatest fear, perhaps, was what would happen if I didn’t watch. Occasionally, for brief moments, MSNBC would offer hope, but it came as comfort in the idea that many more viewers like me would tune in, discover the truth about America’s political crisis, and rally in pursuit of redemption. Other people, I learned, shared the feeling. A friend of my mother’s, a retired professor named Ann Yee, keeps MSNBC on all the time. “There’s a palpable fear that Trump’s world of absolute power, ignorance, and white supremacy will become our new reality, because nothing seems to take him down,” Yee said. “That’s what makes us insane. But the knowledge that there are still a few loud voices out there who continue to bring light to truth is the reassuring part.”

And then the coronavirus hit. It was earth-shattering, and there was plenty to report. MSNBC seemed at its best when it tried to get ahead of the story or dig behind the headlines; Maddow did an admirable job on her show, contrasting images of empty, pandemic-stricken Europe with the Trump administration’s avoidance of the subject. When states began to shut down—and it became clear that Biden would receive the Democratic nomination—MSNBC bailed on its horse race political coverage and devoted itself to reporting on the spread of COVID-19. Here was a breaking-news event tailor-made for the Andy Lack era.

The daytime shows began highlighting the latest developments with a rubric placed prominently on-screen: “Know the Facts.” But there was a problem: the facts were bleak, changed only incrementally as the hours passed, and were repeated on every show. Soon enough, MSNBC returned to form, scrutinizing the news first as information, then as evidence of Trump’s dangerous incompetence. Eventually, it became excruciatingly tedious to watch.

The coverage also highlighted the challenge of following traditional journalism rules in the Trump era. During the day, the president’s many failures of leadership were subject to discussion; in the evening, MSNBC aired his coronavirus briefings live. Early on, I saw value in that; I learned crucial information. As the crisis unfolded, however, health officials faded into the background. Trump co-opted their time, using the briefings as an opportunity to browbeat reporters and play to his base. “From a purely journalistic news point of view, I can’t imagine any other circumstance in which a news network would turn over hours a day of its airwaves to an event where they know that misstatements, disinformation, and outright lies will be disseminated,” Mark Lukasiewicz, a former NBC News
executive who was in charge of breaking-news specials and is now dean of the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University, told me. On Twitter, a number of MSNBC’s hosts condemned the practice of carrying the press briefings live. Even Lack wrote, on the NBC News website, that “Trump’s daily briefings, which sometimes include pertinent and significant information, have also frequently become a sideshow, filled with false and misleading statements, compulsive boasting and self-promotional videos.”

Some networks dialed back their coverage, but MSNBC continued on for weeks, basking in the ratings and allowing Trump to dominate the news narrative with falsehoods—just as he had during the 2016 campaign. (Lack wrote that his newsroom was “aggressively fact-checking in real time, assessing the value to viewers minute to minute and cutting away when warranted,” but to me, the efforts were subtle.) And as the shock of the pandemic began to wear off, political overtones returned, recasting the network’s emphatically partisan coverage of the election in a more somber light.

On April 16, Morning Joe landed a pair of special guests, Joe Biden and his wife, Jill. The show airs from 6am to 9am, and the Bidens wouldn’t be coming on until the last hour, so Scarborough and his cohost and wife, Mika Brzezinski, a liberal commentator, needed to fill time. To set the stage, they opened with a clip of John Kennedy, a Republican senator from Louisiana, appearing the previous night on Fox to argue that it was time to reopen the economy. “If we don’t, it’s going to collapse, and if the US economy collapses, the world economy collapses,” Kennedy said. “Trying to burn down the village to save it is foolish.”

The camera cut to Scarborough. “That’s just one of the dumbest things I’ve actually heard him say, and he’s said so many stupid things over the past year, it’s hard to count,” he said. The rest of the block was devoted to the hypocrisy of Kennedy and other Trump allies who claimed to represent “the party of life” but, in Scarborough’s telling, seemed fine with poor, elderly vets contracting COVID-19 and dropping dead to save large corporations. “Sure, senior citizens are gonna die, but what the hell?” he said, impersonating GOP leaders. “We really got to get Wall Street moving again.” Other topics included a segment on Trump’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies and an interview with the author of The Toddler in Chief, whose cover features a picture of a balloon designed to look like Trump as a baby.

When it was finally time for the Bidens, Scarborough welcomed them by noting that in the middle of a pandemic, it was a shame that Americans didn’t have a leader capable of expressing empathy. Could Joe Biden, “as a man who’s endured loss,” share with the public what was on his mind?

“Well, Joe and Mika, I really mean it, what’s on my mind is they’re on my mind,” Biden replied. “I mean, people are frightened, they’re frightened.” He was not pressed to answer policy questions.

If things had gone according to plan, Lack would likely have announced his retirement at the end of this year. “What has become powerfully clear during this pandemic is that the heart of journalism has never been stronger,” he wrote in April, for the NBC News website. “As ever, journalists are asking tough questions and going where the facts lead.” He went on: “Make no mistake, journalists have plenty of faults. Our coverage is rarely, if ever, flawless. We are a collection of human beings making hundreds of decisions a day. During times like these, as millions of people turn to the news for answers, the choices we make about what to air and how and to report it can make the difference between panic or persistence, and even life or death. Humbled by the responsibility we bear, we try our damnedest to serve our audience.” He closed by saying how lucky he felt to have a career in the news business. “In this moment,” he wrote, “it feels more like a calling.”

Lack’s essay may have been part rallying cry, part earnest reflection on his work, as he perhaps knew that his last days at NBC were approaching sooner than anticipated. At the end of 2019, the New York attorney general’s office had begun investigating allegations of sexual harassment, retaliation, and gender discrimination at NBC News; according to Variety, Lack’s behavior was central to the questioning. Women who had come forward with allegations against Brokaw, Matt Lauer, and other NBC stars past and present were interviewed about Lack’s awareness of their cases and how he responded. Several women had been compelled to sign nondisclosure agreements. (An NBCUniversal spokesperson told Variety, “We are not aware of any inquiry.”) “It’s time to ask what top management at NBC and other outlets are doing to change the culture that allowed Lauer, along with numerous news anchors with questionable attitudes toward women, to stay in their positions for so long,” Addie Zinone, a former production assistant on the Today show, said in the Variety article. (The attorney general’s office offered no comment on that story or this one.)

At the same time, employees exchanged complaints about how Lack had handled reporting by Ronan Farrow, an investigative journalist, on Harvey Weinstein’s sexual crimes. In 2017, Lack and his deputies killed the story. Farrow went on to publish it in The New Yorker and to receive a Pulitzer Prize; last year, he released Catch and Kill, a book detailing his experience getting his work out. “The way that Lack and other top executives at NBC presided over our reporting on Harvey Weinstein was an absolute disgrace,” Rich McHugh, Farrow’s former producer
at NBC, told me. “They were not acting as journalists or treating this as journalism. They were behaving more like an extension of Weinstein’s PR team.”

For months, it seemed as though Lack—the “news is the star” advocate—would survive the embarrassment of losing such a scoop. But then he started facing scrutiny from new sources. Burke, the chairman of NBCUniversal, was preparing to retire. His replacement, Jeff Shell, used to be the head of the Broadcasting Board of Governors—and he’s the man who recruited Lack to the job Lack quickly ditched to join NBC in 2015. By all accounts, Shell had been furious about and felt betrayed by Lack’s abrupt departure. Early this year, Shell, who most recently was overseeing NBCUniversal’s film and entertainment division, became the company’s CEO, and embarked on a staff-wide listening tour. Employees in the news division vented about Lack’s ruling on the Weinstein story and attitude toward the women in the workplace; they also took the time to air strategic concerns with his oversight of MSNBC.

“You cannot, I think, with a straight face, argue that the vision Andy Lack outlined in 2015—that it’s all going to be straight news during the day—has come to pass,” an MSNBC veteran, who declined to be identified for fear of retaliation, told me. “What’s working is leaning into the coverage of the Trump administration and the progressive versus conservative political divide in the country. And that’s what they’re doing.” MSNBC’s schedule has plenty of straight reporting, on shows helmed by Stephanie Ruhle (9am), Hallie Jackson (10am), Craig Melvin (11am), Andrea Mitchell (12pm), Ali Velshi and Ruhle (1pm), Tur (2pm), Wallace (4pm), and Todd (5pm). But several of those hosts have taken open swipes at Trump. Lack’s biggest success, Wallace, among the last remaining Republicans at MSNBC, has thrived in part because of her willingness to attack the president. Last year she was number one in cable news for total viewers in her time slot—the heart of the news day—for the first time in MSNBC history. She labeled Trump’s defenders in the media “chicken-shit” and, more recently, declared that the prospect of his reelection was so awful, she would rather vote for “an automobile.”

In the nineties, a key to Lack’s vision, in addition to breaking news, had been building a network for “the next generation.” Today, however, MSNBC’s viewers skew old; the focus on ratings, to this point, has meant missing out on the young people driving interest in socialism. One of the progressives Lack sent away upon his return was Krystal Ball, who hosted a daytime program. Ball has since emerged as a leading voice of the young left; she now has a show on The Hill’s website with a young Trump-conservative. Hayes, who may be the network’s most outspoken progressive, has courted a younger crowd, though many of those fans, it seems, would rather follow him on Twitter or listen to his podcast than tune in to his television program.

Going forward, MSNBC will have to find ways to lure younger audiences. But that job will not be Lack’s. In early May, a day before Variety published its report on the attorney general’s investigation, Shell announced a corporate restructuring: Lack was out; Cesar Conde, who was the chairman of Telemundo, would oversee NBC News, MSNBC, and CNBC, as chairman of the NBCUniversal News Group. To many at MSNBC, the timing of the changeover was a surprise. “This is the right structure to lead NBCUniversal into the future during this transformational time in the industry,” Shell said in a press statement. The send-off to Lack, at the bottom of the release, consisted of a line saying that he’d decided to step down.

With Lack gone and Conde taking over, the old guard, it appears, has lost a pivotal battle. Lack’s deputy, Noah Oppenheim, the president of NBC News, who had been considered Lack’s likely successor, was vaulted over. The outlook could be similarly grim for Griffin. In Catch and Kill, Farrow singled out Oppenheim and Griffin as the two Lack associates most involved in suppressing his reporting; all three, Farrow writes, were in direct communication with Weinstein and his attorneys. “I think this puts them all in a perilous position,” McHugh told me, referring to Lack’s departure. “Noah was supposed to be the heir apparent. A lot of people feel both he and Phil have to go in light of the body of reporting that has raised serious questions about their views towards women. Getting Lack out the door is a half step. But it needs to be completed.”

McHugh, who no longer works at NBC, had another observation: “It’s interesting that in this grand reorganization, given what NBC has just been through over the past four years—with both the Lauer and Weinstein disgraces—that they couldn’t come up with at least one qualified female executive to help lead their charge forward.” (NBC declined to make Oppenheim, Griffin, Conde, or Shell available for interviews.)

Conde, a polished and well-liked forty-six-year-old graduate of Harvard and Wharton, joined NBCUniversal in 2013. Before that, he’d been an aide to Colin Powell, the secretary of state in the Bush White House, and spent ten years at Univision, rising to become the network’s president. He left for NBC the same year Comcast acquired its majority stake, serving as the executive vice president in charge of international and digital enterprises; in that position, he reported directly to Burke. In 2015, he was named the chairman of the NBCUniversal International Group and NBCUniversal Telemundo Enterprises. Under Conde’s leadership, Telemundo
overtook Univision in the ratings during weekday prime time among viewers between eighteen and forty-nine—a coveted demographic. Conde has aggressively pursued young Latinx audiences, developing original series like *El Señor de los Cielos*, based on the life of a Mexican drug lord, and *Sin Senos Sí Hay Paraíso*, which follows a young girl as she fights to get away from a crime-ridden environment. He’s also expanded Telemundo’s news coverage, pushing his team to focus on immigration, the Mexican border, and Puerto Rico.

Few among the MSNBC rank and file know much else about Conde, except that he’s not Lack. For many people, that’s reason enough for optimism. “Somebody coming from Telemundo is a little bit outside NBC News—I feel hopeful about that,” Jessica Kerry, a former segment producer for Hayes, said. “The new leadership could certainly change the coverage of the election, and could make the tough choices about how you cover people in power who lie.” Perhaps employees from across the ideological spectrum would now be at liberty to speak their minds, even when they’re at odds with the establishment.

Then again, it’s hard for staffers to know what will happen—or to expect meaningful change. Networks are like sharks, after all; they move toward the money. The economic crisis caused by the pandemic has already led to pay cuts and furloughs at NBCUniversal. It feels too early for the progressives at MSNBC to celebrate. “It would take more outside-the-box thinking to change it,” Kerry said. “It will take some tough decisions to change the way the campaign is covered—and that will have to come from somebody in leadership.”

Whether MSNBC takes this moment as an opportunity to unburden itself of its worst qualities is yet to be seen. Much depends on to what degree Conde—whose portfolio is significantly larger than Lack’s was—decides to tinker with MSNBC’s identity. As time passes, producers will no longer be able to count on this generation’s older viewers to keep watching. And it’s not hard to guess what will happen. Inevitably, the ratings will reflect how things have changed. The executives will fret. Once again, MSNBC will reinvent itself. **CJR**
‘This is a moment for imagination’

Mychal Denzel Smith, Josie Duffy Rice, and Alex Vitale on the limits and opportunities of considering police abolition in an election year

This spring, amid a global pandemic and an unprecedented presidential campaign season, a number of Black Americans—including Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd—lost their lives to police violence. In June, CJR convened three longtime writers and speakers on the subjects of anti-Black racism and policing to discuss the media conversation that has evolved in the wake of recent protests.

SMITH We’re now a few weeks into sustained national protests against police brutality that erupted after the death of George Floyd, and all three of us have been appearing on air as a result of intense media attention on protesters’ demands to defund the police or abolish the police. We’ve talked and written about these ideas before, and in this moment we’ve had an opportunity to speak to a number of different audiences. How are you two feeling about making the media rounds?

DUFFY RICE It feels overwhelming. For years I felt like I was Bible-thumping on the corner to an audience that didn’t want to hear it. Or I was talking to the same people who already believed. So it’s exciting to see more people grapple with these ideas.

VITALE Mostly it’s exhausting. I’ve been working twelve-plus-hour days. But it also is an obligation. I feel that I need to use my position as an academic book writer to create as much public space for this movement as I can, in the arenas that I have access to. I’m trying to advance these ideas in ways that provide political space and resources intellectually and financially to folks on the ground.

SMITH In the conversations on police abolition that I’ve participated in with both of you in these past few weeks, I do feel like we’ve had space, but then what we say gets chopped up, decontextualized, and turned into sound bites. How do we push the conversation further when we know the media attention span is so short?

VITALE I’ve been actually blown away by the number of hour-long radio shows and podcasts and live events in which I’ve had opportunities to explain these things in depth. But even having five to seven minutes on national television to lay out what this movement is about was something that I’d never experienced before, except in one case with *PBS NewsHour*. The time spent discussing police abolition by mainstream media sites like the *Washington Post* and *Time* magazine and CNN has really been remarkable. So at least in those first two weeks of the protests there was a real openness to hearing what this is about. I think we’re in a slightly different moment now.

DUFFY RICE It’s a moment for imagination, which has generally been scarce in talking about criminal justice. It’s very hard for people who don’t do this work every day to imagine a new world, so to see people engaging in that is major. The national conversation won’t remain this focused forever, but I hope this moment will open the door to a new way of thinking. My grandma, for example, has been doing civil rights work for seventy years. A couple of weeks ago, police abolition was not even on her radar. Now you can see her looking at these ideas as if they’re not so foreign. There’s no going back to a world where people don’t have this paradigm in their head.
**SMITH** At the same time, the context that’s needed to have a difficult conversation is diminished because cable news outlets are committed to a certain style of television and presentation that’s built around quick segments. The ideas get packaged and served to a majority-white audience in the form of a basic introduction rather than a complex argument. Is that the best way for people to understand these issues? What do you do when you’re on television knowing that this is one of the few opportunities that you’re going to get to advocate for the idea of abolishing the police or discuss it with any real knowledge?

**VITALE** All you can do in those moments is give the best, most concise argument you can for having these ideas be seriously considered, and attempt to lift up the folks who are doing the actual work on the ground. The only reason that this level of conversation is happening is because of the uprisings. Strategically my focus is on using my voice to directly support those movements, because that’s what’s going to really create the political power necessary for change. Technocratic arguments and well-reasoned treatises are not enough.

**SMITH** The ideas we’re seeing around policing and abolition have been developing for a long time. We’re hearing a lot from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for example, whose writing and organizing dates back decades. We are reaching a zenith for the movement in which Mariame Kaba can write an op-ed for the *New York Times* saying literally abolish the police—the product of so many decades of work—but certain journalists who are now just encountering the movement dismiss it out of hand as silly and unserious, in bad faith. Some writers are saying, “This is a dumb idea, I don’t know where it came from, no one has explained it.” A few are fixating on polls showing that people don’t support the idea of abolishing the police. Is this sort of dismissal worth addressing? Does the focus need to be less on those who aren’t interested in taking the conversation seriously and more on media that is curious?

**VITALE** I’m not interested in debating Tucker Carlson. But I think there does need to be some pushback on the kind of Vox news centrism that relies on misrepresentations of these ideas and these movements.

**DUFFY RICE** There is an overreliance on numbers in journalism. I don’t think poll numbers are totally irrelevant. I wouldn’t suggest right now, at this very moment, that Joe Biden make his entire platform about abolishing the police. I understand that there’s a utilitarian approach to winning a presidential election. But the thing is, poll numbers aren’t my job. I’m not a campaign manager. What I do, and what Alex does, is present ideas where we have expertise. Everything I learned, I learned from Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis. These are the people who have taught me everything. And I didn’t start out in this field as a prison abolitionist or police abolitionist. Learning is a valuable skill that can help you change your mind. Abolishing slavery also didn’t poll well. Martin Luther King didn’t poll well. Historically, when we look back on things and think, “How could we have had that system?” the answer is that the majority of people supported that system. So the fact that it doesn’t poll well is just not relevant to my own approach to thinking about this work. We’re asking people to change their minds about a big idea. Sometimes that takes longer than three weeks.

Number-based critiques frustrate me because they are an illusion of information that isn’t reflective of actual truth. If the numbers say crime goes up, well, what crime are we talking about? Who’s measuring it? Most crime isn’t even reported. The word *crime* itself is laden with assumptions and biases and misunderstandings. FBI statistics cannot describe what’s happening in a community or how people feel.

**“Abolishing slavery didn’t poll well. Martin Luther King didn’t poll well. The fact that it doesn’t poll well is just not relevant.”**

**DUFFY RICE** Cable news is not constructed for new arguments. And it’s hard to overestimate the importance of this year being an election year, and the fact that a lot of these people think that police abolition is a losing issue. We’re always battling the court of public opinion, and good ideas that are new don’t always poll super well. That’s not a concern of mine, necessarily, but it is a concern of cable news networks.

**VITALE** This rejigging of the cable TV narrative is definitely tied to the election. It’s clear that CNN and MSNBC are in the Biden camp, and therefore they share a very narrow analysis of police reform. They don’t want to do anything that is going to show up Biden or make Biden look inadequate. They’re not interested in having many voices that are undermining Biden’s pro-police message.

**DUFFY RICE** At the same time, the context that’s needed to have a difficult conversation is diminished because cable news outlets are committed to a certain style of television and presentation that’s built around quick segments. The ideas get packaged and served to a majority-white audience in the form of a basic introduction rather than a complex argument. Is that the best way for people to understand these issues? What do you do when you’re on television knowing that this is one of the few opportunities that you’re going to get to advocate for the idea of abolishing the police or discuss it with any real knowledge?

**VITALE** All you can do in those moments is give the best, most concise argument you can for having these ideas be seriously considered, and attempt to lift up the folks who are doing the actual work on the ground. The only reason that this level of conversation is happening is because of the uprisings. Strategically my focus is on using my voice to directly support those movements, because that’s what’s going to really create the political power necessary for change. Technocratic arguments and well-reasoned treatises are not enough.

**SMITH** The ideas we’re seeing around policing and abolition have been developing for a long time. We’re hearing a lot from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for example, whose writing and organizing dates back decades. We are reaching a zenith for the movement in which Mariame Kaba can write an op-ed for the *New York Times* saying literally abolish the police—the product of so many decades of work—but certain journalists who are now just encountering the movement dismiss it out of hand as silly and unserious, in bad faith. Some writers are saying, “This is a dumb idea, I don’t know where it came from, no one has explained it.” A few are fixating on polls showing that people don’t support the idea of abolishing the police. Is this sort of dismissal worth addressing? Does the focus need to be less on those who aren’t interested in taking the conversation seriously and more on media that is curious?

**VITALE** I’m not interested in debating Tucker Carlson. But I think there does need to be some pushback on the kind of Vox news centrism that relies on misrepresentations of these ideas and these movements.
Trying to measure the worth of policies by determining that for every dollar of crime prevention we put in, we get $1.63 of social benefits is an approach that will never accurately reflect the lived experiences of people. We have to interrogate really basic ideas about justice to even have a real conversation about police abolition, and I don’t think that interrogation is happening. Some reporters cite studies and say, “We’re just asking the real tough questions.” But they’re not. The real tough questions are the ones that don’t have an answer here, and that result in some uncertainty, and that make us question everything we think we know about crime and safety in America.

VITALE It’s not just a kind of willful ignorance or intellectual laziness. This is about a political-economic viewpoint that says that it’s not appropriate for us to have universal healthcare or adequate housing because that would require reining in the power of economic elites. It’s a defense of a rancid class war carried out in part by a reliance on policing.

“\text{The harms the news talks about are framed as individual moral failure and inadequacy rather than structural failures.}”

DUFFY RICE What we’re saying is that policing is part of a much bigger structure that relies on the control and the subjugation of Black people and poor people, and has for decades. What if we were to grapple with what it means to not rely on policing? I think that when this feels theoretical to you as a journalist, those conversations seem too big and too unnecessary and too leftist and too pie-in-the-sky. They’re not. They’re actually crucial for us to evolve as a country. This isn’t a thought exercise. I think it is lamentable to see laziness disguised as pragmatism in people who present themselves as thought leaders.

SMITH Let’s talk about America’s discourse about crime historically. Crime became central to politics in the sixties, as uprisings in urban areas reacted to a lack of jobs, to poverty, to police violence. Simultaneously the suburbs were built and became a destination for white flight. Consequently, white people feared violence encroaching upon their safety in their suburban enclaves. And so, during the Lyndon Johnson administration, the idea of an urgent need to eradicate crime was born. Richard Nixon took it to another level, and a number of big-city mayors came to power by committing to maintain law and order. That was translated again through Ronald Reagan and the war on drugs, and adopted by the Democratic Party. The idea of crime and Black criminality was a bipartisan idea. So I say all that to ask, what gets lost when conversations about crime and policing get subsumed into electoral politics?

DUFFY RICE I think what you’re getting at is the social construction of crime and criminality and the fact that for decades politicians have been wielding this as a shortcut to an election win. And not just presidential candidates or congressional candidates—it’s every single level of government in almost every single position, including judges, city council, mayors, district attorneys, sheriffs, state legislators. We started seeing cops in schools around the time of Brown v. Board. We articulated the war on crime in the Johnson administration, around the time of the Civil Rights Act. So you can’t decouple racism from crime in this country’s history, and you certainly can’t separate partisanship from the conversation about crime.

But, look, fear is a very salient emotion. I recognize that as a parent. I spend half my time worried about something happening to my kid that statistically is just as likely as him getting abducted by aliens. When people feel like their safety might be at risk, it’s very difficult to have a reasonable conversation about statistics. That is one of the most uphill battles that we fight. But I do think that arming people with the truth is a helpful defense. It’s interesting to see people’s reactions when you tell them crime is lower on average than it’s been in fifty years. Maybe your car gets broken into, or maybe there’s interpersonal conflict, but the random violence that we think of as crime is not happening at scale. People think crime is a solid category with solid numbers with solid indicators. It’s not. That’s scary for people in many ways, but it’s also an opportunity to shift our electoral politics away from allowing elected officials to lock people up and to then say they did their jobs. What really keeps us safe? Is it the back end of policing, is it the back end of prisons, or is it making sure kids have good schools? Making sure they have parks? Making sure someone picks up the garbage? What is it that provides people with safety? In large part, it’s dignity and opportunity, and if we don’t provide those two things, then we’re fighting a losing battle—the same one that politicians have said they’re fighting for years.
VITALE It’s important to emphasize that this is a public safety movement led by people who have experienced a profound lack of safety in their lives, and for whom policing has not been the solution. But there’s a larger conversation that needs to be had about how we understand harm and risk. And the electronic media, both local and national, in the United States is funded by corporate advertising. It’s important to them that harm and risk be conceptualized in a particular way that absolves corporate America of any responsibility for these problems. So if General Electric owns national media directly through purchase or indirectly through advertising, we’re not going to hear much about how they’re poisoning communities. Look at climate change and how poorly that’s been covered—because it implicates the people who pay for the news to go on the air. That means that the harms that get talked about on the news are the harms that are framed as being the result of individual and group moral failure and inadequacy rather than structural failures of housing markets, labor markets, and healthcare markets. That has always been a major factor in the “it bleeds, it leads” approach of news programs. We need to lift up non-corporate-sponsored media so we have a chance to explain these ideas more fully.

SMITH What are the prospects of pushing the Democratic Party, and in particular Joe Biden, their selected standard-bearer and architect of the 1994 crime bill, to have a substantial conversation around defunding the police?

VITALE None. I’m very pessimistic about this. A month ago, no one I worked with thought that we would be in direct conversation with the Biden folks about discussing abolitionist frames for understanding the criminal justice system. I think our ability to make an impact on this national election is quite limited, and strategically I continue to put most of my effort into building local organizing.

DUFFY RICE I don’t think any shift at all is impossible. Certainly I agree that come November, defunding the police is not going to be on the table. I also agree that that’s not where defunding the police happens. National narratives do have salience, and it’s critical that national politics at least be aware of the conversation. But policing, again, is local. Criminal justice is local. And what the community needs in West Virginia is not going to be what the community needs in Baltimore or Atlanta or Oakland. We’re always trying to tell local stories on a national scale, but that can be difficult to do if you don’t have a strong local journalism infrastructure, which obviously has been depleted over the past few years.

We need to build momentum locally, where it has already been building. I’m reminded of the $15 minimum wage. When I graduated from law school, in 2013, a $15 minimum wage was a crazy idea. Nobody was talking about it except some fringe labor activists. And then it got pickup in Seattle, in San Francisco, in New York. Suddenly it’s a national movement. And here we are in 2020, when a $15 minimum wage is a reasonable position for a Democratic politician to take and not be laughed offstage. These shifts are possible—I don’t know if they’re possible five months from now, but they’re possible long term. We’re seeing a chink in the armor of the culture of policing. People are starting—not enough people, not a majority—but some are starting to think that maybe police have too much power and they’re not capable of maintaining it responsibly. There is potential. This is a groundswell movement.
Mathew Ingram chats with Kevin Roose

Not that long ago, the jumble of conspiracy theories and magical thinking known as QAnon was seen by many—if they even knew of it at all—as a sideshow confined to the darker corners of the internet, like 4chan and 8chan, where people with a screw loose muttered to one another about the “deep state” and other cryptic phrases. Fast-forward just a few years and there are more than a dozen people running for Congress who have expressed some form of support for QAnon theories, and the president and members of his family have retweeted accounts on Twitter that are part of the QAnon ecosystem.

How did we get here? And what should we do about this encroachment of dangerous ideology onto our mainstream discourse? Do journalists help or harm that discourse when they cover QAnon? To answer these and other questions, we’re talking this week with a group of journalists who specialize in understanding not just QAnon but disinformation as a whole. Our next guest is Kevin Roose, a technology columnist for the New York Times and writer-at-large for the New York Times magazine.

Prior to joining the Times, Kevin was vice president of editorial and news director for Fusion Media, and before that he was a reporter and columnist for the Times. He has also worked as a writer for New York magazine.

INGRAM Kevin, thanks very much for doing this. I know this is a topic you have covered fairly extensively, including a great QAnon explainer, but maybe you could start by giving us your thoughts about the movement and where it stands now, how we got here, etc. Does it surprise you how mainstream it has become? Is the media to blame for its credulous coverage, or are platforms like YouTube and Facebook the real culprits?

ROOSE Hey, Mathew! Good to be back for—I think?—a second time here.

I’m surprised by a lot of internet culture, but I’m honestly not surprised by most of what’s been happening with QAnon recently. I—and a bunch of other journalists, like Paris Martineau, Brandy Zadrozny, Ben Collins, Will Sommer, Jared Holt, Charlie Warzel, and others—have been following this movement closely for years, and it’s been pretty obvious to me where it’s been headed. We’ve learned that so-called “fringe” groups rarely stay on the fringe these days, especially when they have wind in their sails on social media, and so, for me, the fact that there were these big, hyperactive QAnon Facebook groups and YouTube channels, often outperforming more mainstream channels and pushing bad information into mainstream discourse, was always a bad omen. Now, though, the normie tipping point has definitely arrived—I define “normie tipping point” as the point when my non-journalism friends, family members, people I went to school with, etc. start texting me to ask, “So what’s up with this QAnon thing?”

I don’t know exactly how to apportion blame for QAnon, or that apportioning blame is the most productive thing to do right now. The major platforms have obviously played a big role in helping it spread. 4chan and 8chan were the original homes of Q’s posts, and Jim Watkins, the owner of 8chan and its successor site, has helped QAnon survive deplatforming attempts, so he’s got to be part of the conversation too. The media has done some pretty
good coverage of QAnon, but some outlets have either a) laughed it off as an exotic novelty, or b) taken the claims of QAnon-inspired movements like #SaveTheChildren too credulously.

The big surprise to me, actually, is how QAnon is playing in Republican politics. I expected that, if QAnon ever became big enough to merit a mention by elected officials, they would find it pretty easy to denounce. I mean, it’s a theory that claims that Democrats are secretly trafficking and eating children while worshipping Satan. But the fact that so few GOP lawmakers have been willing to denounce it is genuinely shocking.

INGRAM It does feel as though the GOP has shamelessly decided to surf whatever wave QAnon brings with it, perhaps in part because they look at it the same way that Facebook does: any engagement is better than no engagement. On that note, do you think Facebook’s recent moves to ban accounts and groups related to Q will have any effect, or is this just closing the barn door after the horse has escaped? Would it have made a difference if they and Twitter and YouTube had acted more strongly earlier than they did?

ROOSE It absolutely would have made a difference—not just in limiting the spread of QAnon, but in limiting the spread of all kinds of dangerous misinformation. Many QAnon groups and pages I’ve been tracking have grown exponentially since the start of COVID-19, and the information they’re sharing is not just about the satanic global cabal. They’re also sharing bad information about masks, bad information about vaccines, bad information about vote-by-mail.

The thing I don’t think the social media companies understood—but that lots of us have been observing for months, if not years—is that the existence of QAnon on their platforms makes all of their anti-misinformation work harder, because these people are, to borrow a term from epidemiology, misinformation super-spreaders.

I think banning QAnon groups, and limiting their appearance in recommendations, could help slow QAnon’s growth at the margins. But it’s too late to have any effect on the people who have already been radicalized, or roll back the effects of all of this misinformation that has already entered the national bloodstream.

INGRAM As I think you pointed out in your explainer, one of the main features of the Q ecosystem is that it’s kind of a catchall for just about any conspiracy theory that comes down the pike—whether it’s alien abductions or anti-vax or lizards in government. In that sense it seems like a virus that keeps evolving and changing shape so that it can’t be pinned down or inoculated against. What strategies do you think might work against such an animal?

ROOSE This is the million-dollar question, and one I’ve spent a lot of time reporting on recently. At the individual level, I don’t think most people are going to be debated out of believing in QAnon. Pointing out Q’s failed predictions, showing them counterevidence—all of this just causes people to dig in their heels, in my experience. Instead, I think a better approach is to figure out what function QAnon is serving in someone’s life—is it giving them friends? A mission in life? A way to pass the time?—and finding healthier ways to meet those needs.

At the network level, I think disrupting the spread of QAnon content is probably the right approach. But that’s gotten harder, because these activists are savvy, and they’ve begun branching out into nonobvious forms of QAnon proselytizing. #SaveTheChildren, for example.

INGRAM Yes, I wanted to ask what you thought of some of the local coverage of those Save the Children protests—Jay Rosen had a thread of coverage that seemed overly credulous, which I admit I was surprised by, given how much reporting you and the others you mentioned have done on this topic. And on a related note, what did you think of the way Q was brought up with Trump during the briefing? Was that poorly handled, phrased badly, or just an outright mistake?

ROOSE I was honestly pleasantly surprised by how little local reporting I saw that took the Save the Children protests at face value. I was expecting dozens and dozens of articles that made no mention of the QAnon ties, but most of what I saw at least mentioned the connection. I know Jay Rosen has found plenty of examples of credulous local coverage, though, so maybe my expectations are just too low.

I don’t think it was a mistake to ask Trump about QAnon. Some journalists disagree with me on this, but I think it was pretty important to get the president on record talking about it, and I think the question
could have been even more straightforward: “Do you believe that someone from your administration is leaking classified information on the internet under the code name Q?”

Obviously, no answer Trump gives is going to dissuade the hardcore QAnon people. But I think the way the question was asked left him a lot of wiggle room, and he used it.

INGRAM Thanks. We are just about out of time, unfortunately, so maybe one more quick question. On your Rabbit Hole podcast, you talked about a QAnon believer’s journey, so I wondered whether you might have any advice for someone—like me—who has friends and/or family members who have been sucked into this rabbit hole. How should we approach them, and can we help them?

ROOSE I’m not an expert on this subject, but I’ve talked to some people who are, and I think a good first step is to listen. Ask them what they’re seeing, where they’re getting their information, and how believing in a conspiracy theory makes them feel. Without passing judgment or trying to debate them, figure out the role this movement is playing in their lives, and how those needs could be met in a less dangerous way.

Then try to get them talking about how QAnon, or whatever conspiracy they believe, is impacting their offline lives. Is it hurting their marriage? Has it alienated their friends or distanced them from colleagues at work? I’ve spoken to some families who say that the thing that made their mom/dad/aunt/brother/cousin stop believing in conspiracy theories was that it was ruining their relationships with people they loved, and reminding people that their internet activities affect the people around them can be a powerful form of intervention.

Or just unplug their router. That could work, too. CJR
When I was hired as a producer at MSNBC, almost seven years ago, I did not own a television. I considered myself an accidental TV producer, having crossed the line from public radio to cable news to help launch what I thought was going to be my dream job. The show I worked on—Up Late with Alec Baldwin—was canceled after only five weeks on air. Welcome to the TV news business.

Over time, I forged a role as a producer for The Last Word with Lawrence O’Donnell. I was proud of the work I had done in public radio. I thought I could use that experience to bring a broader range of stories to light at MSNBC. By the end of my tenure this summer, however, I realized I could not improve it from within. The problem as I came to understand it is industry-wide. I had to leave the network to try to change it from the outside.

And that, in part, is why I’m now taking on this new challenge, as CJR’s public editor covering CNN. I will use what I have learned from nearly a decade in cable news to show you why you see the things you do, and why you get that frustrated feeling about certain coverage without knowing quite why.

The television news producers I know are whip-smart and want to do the right thing. The problem is the job itself, which forces them to muffle ideas of substance and moderation. The biggest roadblocks, as I observed, are not ideological bias or outside influence from corporate interests. Those things are juicy narratives. But they aren’t what really drives the decisions.

The largest obstacle to reliable news and information is this: hardly any programming decision is made without considering how it will “rate” (i.e., how it will appeal to the largest audience possible). No one is immune, not US senators, not presidential candidates. Election coverage. Will it rate? Pandemic. Will it rate? Civil rights crisis. Will it rate? It’s the only metric that matters.

There are so many shortfalls that flow from this model. For one, predictions about what may “rate” are often based on rudimentary factors, such as what has rated well in the past or what personal bias leads producers or anchors to think will rate well in the future. News is subjective.

But ultimately, financial incentives are a bad way to decide news priorities. Ideas at the extremes overpower those in the middle. MSNBC calculates that the ideas of the far left will rate. Fox News calculates that the ideas of the far right will rate. And CNN calculates that those two teams’ arguing with each other will rate.

What the viewer tuning in to coverage of Black Lives Matter protests sees are more violent clashes rather than peaceful rallies. Audiences are more likely to sit and watch a burning car than a classical-music vigil, the thinking goes, more likely to respond to a violent cop than a decent one, more likely to send a clip of two people arguing from polar positions of hate viral than a reasonable discussion.

A former boss said to me, “We are a cancer, and there is no cure.” But he added, “If you could find a cure, it would save the world.” I take that as a challenge—and a mission. It is a flawed system, and one that undercuts a pillar of our democracy.

On CNN, the news is increasingly inflammatory and oversimplified, for the benefit of the bottom line. (It is now owned by AT&T, which shows signs it intends to make the media companies under its umbrella more cynical and short-termist than ever.)
It pits the far left against the far right; there is no room for nuance. You’ll notice that CNN segments rarely achieve any resolution. They thrive on conflict, all so they can set up the next fight for another day.

On the second night of the Republican National Convention, CNN hosted two segments featuring three Republicans: one who is voting for Joe Biden; one who is voting for Donald Trump; and one who is purportedly undecided. Erin Burnett played video montages, one each from the RNC and the DNC, in an attempt to show how both sides were using fear to motivate voters.

That format may appear balanced from afar, but in truth it was a distortion, as if the two events were equally dark. Then, two days after the president’s RNC speech, a Republican strategist sparred with a Democratic strategist over Trump’s attack on Democrat-led cities. Again, that match pretended to be “fair.” But to CNN, the success of the segment would be judged mostly for its ability to elicit a visceral reaction from the audience, which surely kept watching, and not for the fact that it continued to give oxygen to Trump’s divisive rhetoric two days after the fact.

To be clear, my intention here isn’t to criticize the people working at CNN. Their industry has been shrinking and in crisis for years. They don’t have much choice, however they feel privately. But the system they are stuck in uses staff, contributors, and viewers as tools. We’re merely there to sow conflict and make the numbers go up, to sell more ads. They deserve better. We all deserve better. 

CJR
Last night was the logical end point of debates in America

“HORRIFIC.” “A total mess.” “An embarrassment.” “A national humiliation.” “An epic moment of national shame.” “Off the rails.” “A pure trainwreck.” “A hot mess inside a dumpster fire inside a trainwreck.” “A stressful, chaotic trash fire.” “A shitshow.” “The great American shitshow.” “A low point in American political discourse.” “A disgusting night for democracy.” “It was not a presidential debate. It was off the rails.” “It wasn’t even a debate. It was a disgrace.” “I can’t go to you, Chuck, with my normal Give me some political analysis question, because I think we need to just pause for a moment and say, That was crazy. What was that?” “I basically am paid to watch it, and it was a struggle for me to get through ninety minutes of it. That was some tough television. Whew.” “As somebody who has watched presidential debates for forty years, as somebody who has moderated presidential debates, as someone who has prepared candidates for presidential debates, as someone who’s covered presidential debates, that was the worst presidential debate I have ever seen in my life.” “Perhaps we could also debate by mail.”

As legions of pundits concluded in its aftermath, the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, in Cleveland, was, indeed, dreadful—though it feels unfair to drag Biden, the city of Cleveland, and the word “debate” into that analysis. More or less every fear that I had going in was realized: the moderator, Chris Wallace, was desperately inadequate; Trump’s lies about election integrity weren’t sufficiently challenged; the segment on “race and violence in our cities” missed the point and played into Trump’s hands. (“Surprise!” BuzzFeed’s Ryan Brooks wrote. “The ‘race and violence in our cities’ section of the debate was really racist!”) One moment was particularly dark: Trump failed to condemn white supremacy, then name-checked the Proud Boys, a violent far-right group, and told its members to “stand back and stand by.” (Proud Boys everywhere were thrilled.) That aside, it’s not worth dwelling on what was said, since much of it defied coherent characterization and analysis. “How do you even write about what just happened?” Kyle Pope, CJR’s editor and publisher, asked on Twitter. “You have to Hunter S. Thompson it, riffing on the absurdity and the chaos and the gloom.” (Maria Bustillos, who also writes for CJR, suggested writing privately for posterity, like a latter-day Suetonius.)

Much punditry cast the debate not only as awful, but as an aberration from a fine democratic tradition—an echo of the way many pundits see Trump generally. That’s mistaken. Just as Trump is, in many ways, a symptom of wider systemic flaws (see the tax system for the most recent example), last night felt like the logical end point of America’s recent history of debates, and the way we talk about them. If you insist on grading a serious process as shallow entertainment, it should be no surprise when a shallow entertainer turns up and exploits it. Yesterday, a finding from a Monmouth University poll—that 74 percent of Americans were planning on watching the first debate, even though just 3 percent thought it “very likely” to sway their vote—circulated widely, as evidence of entrenched polarization. That’s fair, but a different assessment of that figure—that “the audience for these debates are voters who already have a rooting interest in one side or the other”—was perhaps more pertinent. This is the reason
you watch a sporting event. And that is what many Americans have come to expect of debates.

In the aftermath, some media critics stressed that the format needs to change ahead of the next debate, including by empowering the moderator to cut off candidates’ mics when necessary; numerous columnists argued that there shouldn’t be a second debate at all. As I’ve written before, reforming the format is a good idea—but tweaks, frankly, are unlikely to salvage the debates at this point. Nor should we expect future debates to be canceled. TV networks like the ratings, even when their talking heads tut-tut at the poverty of the discourse on display. A cynic might even see the outraged reaction as part of the entertainment: ripe to be clipped, then splashed across networks’ homepages and YouTube pages and Twitter, with praise emojis and eyeball emojis and I Can’t Believe Dana Bash Said “Shitshow”! captions.

In many ways, the things reporters and pundits said before yesterday’s debate are as illuminating as the things they said afterward, and perhaps more so. As I wrote yesterday, the buildup was marked by a parade of values-free, fight-night type triviality, including many takes that implicitly lauded the effectiveness of Trump’s “style.” (Some of these felt like hindsight-heavy revisionism, but that’s beside the point.) Such analysis continued right up until debate time. Some of the last remarks I heard before the networks handed to Wallace said, of Trump: “He is a performer, and of course, we’ll have to see how he performs tonight”; “He wants to shake things up, that’s always been his way”; “He’s been here before, four years ago, and he turned it around, in part, with a debate, and going relentlessly and ruthlessly on the attack.” Trump’s subsequent behavior was not some huge surprise—not enough of one to justify the whiplash change of tone, at any rate. Instead, we were performing a debate ritual: provoke fights, then clutch pearls about the fights, then analyze how good the fights were. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Unlike some of those who would cancel the debates, or write them off as inevitably worthless, I believe that they can matter, and should be illuminating. That they so often aren’t is not just a product of weak moderation, or format flaws, or Trump—it reflects a media-wide failure of seriousness and imagination. Such failures don’t just manifest in the language pundits use to frame debate nights themselves; they manifest in wider attitudes that treat genuine policy debates—in the broadest sense of that word—as boring, unrealistic, infantile. In so many ways, 2020 is a natural jumping-off point for broad, society-wide debates that allow radical ideas—on reforming the economy, on fighting climate change, on racial injustice, and so on—a fair hearing. It’s the media’s job to moderate such debates, by featuring them prominently in our day-to-day coverage and chatter. Until we do that more consistently, debates—in the narrower sense of that word—will, like so much else in America, continue to be a shitshow.

Below, more on the debate:

THE MODERATOR

Many viewers had harsh words for Wallace’s performance. CNN’s Oliver Darcy said that Wallace “failed to meet the moment”; the Daily Beast’s Lloyd Grove called him “the debate moderator who couldn’t”; MSNBC’s Mika Brzezinski tweeted, “CHRIS WALLACE DO BETTER.” Wallace “entered the night lauded as perhaps the most fearsome interviewer on national television,” The Atlantic’s David A. Graham wrote, “and left as roadkill.” Others argued that Wallace had an impossible job.

FALSE EQUIVALENCE

While many observers said clearly that Trump behaved much worse than Biden last night, some post-debate coverage muddied the waters, hiding behind impersonal language that implied that Trump and Biden were equally responsible for the mess. Matt Gertz, of the liberal watchdog group Media Matters for America, picked out some representative headlines: “Sharp Personal Attacks and Name Calling in Chaotic First Debate” (the New York Times); “Personal attacks, sharp exchanges mark turbulent first presidential debate” (the Washington Post). “None of those descriptions comes close to capturing what happened,” Gertz wrote.

PROUD BOYS

Joan Donovan, of Harvard’s Shorenstein Center, offered some advice for reporters covering Trump’s Proud Boys remarks and members’ reactions. “Please please please do not try to interview the Proud Boys. They seek media attention and then use it to spread their toxic message,” Donovan wrote on Twitter. “When reporting on tonight’s debate, call them white supremacists. But do not give them a mic.”

A SPECK OF LIGHT ON A DARK NIGHT

Ahead of time, it looked as though Wallace wasn’t planning to ask a question about the climate crisis, but he did—the first time a presidential debate moderator has done so in eight years. The ensuing conversation, like the rest of the debate, was a mess, but the question was a start. CJR
How the media has abetted the Republican assault on mail-in voting
The presidential debate on September 29, 2020, ended with President Trump reiterating the false claim that mail-in ballots were subject to mass election fraud and citing this concern in order to justify his refusal to commit to accepting the results of the election should he be defeated. That assertion capped a six-month-long disinformation campaign, waged by the president as well as his party, against the expansion of mail-in voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. That campaign has succeeded: polls conducted by Pew, Monmouth, and Morning Consult in August and September show that about half of Republican voters consider fraud a major problem with voting by mail, and more than half point to Democrats as the most likely perpetrators of election interference. Democrats, by contrast, overwhelmingly believe that mail-in voting is reasonably secure and should be used to increase access to the ballot during the pandemic. The consensus of both academic and independent journalistic investigations is that voter fraud is extremely rare and, where observed, occurs on a small scale unlikely to affect the outcome of a presidential election.

The gap between partisans regarding the susceptibility of mail-in voting to fraud is likely to affect voter participation in the election as well as perceptions of the legitimacy of the outcome. Voter participation may be depressed if Democrats are deterred from voting by mail because they fear that postal delays or allegations of fraud will nullify their vote; Republicans may shun mail-in ballots if they fear their votes will be stolen. Both could avoid voting at the polls if the pandemic surges in their precincts, although this is more likely to deter Democrats, who show a higher level of concern about infection. So long as the president declares that only a “rigged” election would explain his loss, the legitimacy of the results will be in question.

To understand how voting came to be so politicized this election cycle, my team at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard analyzed fifty-five thousand online media stories, five million tweets, and seventy-five thousand posts on public Facebook pages that referred to mail-in voting and the risk of fraud, all posted between March 1 and August 31 of this year. Contrary to most contemporary analyses of disinformation efforts in the American political-media ecosystem, our findings suggest that the disinformation campaign that has shaped the views of tens of millions of American voters did not originate in social media or via a Russian attack. Instead, it was led by Donald Trump and the Republican Party and amplified by some of the biggest media outlets in the country; social media played only a secondary, supportive role.

Trump laid out his strategy around voting in a March 30 interview on Fox & Friends and again one week later in a tweet. In the interview, Trump bragged that he had forced Democrats to relinquish voting-related provisions, stating that their efforts to make voting easier and more ubiquitous during the pandemic would attract so many voters that “you’d never get a Republican elected in this country again.” One week later, Trump raised the matter again in a tweet:

During the ensuing six months, the president and the Republican Party—abetted by major media outlets—executed on their strategy to discredit the voting process for millions of Americans.

TRUMP IS THE CENTRAL NODE IN THE DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

Figure 1 (below) shows a network map of media outlets that published the fifty-five thousand stories about the mail-in voter fraud frame and how they linked to one another. The map shows the by now well-known asymmetrical polarization of the American political-media ecosystem, with a distinct right-wing media sector and a “rest” of media that includes everyone from centrist services such as Reuters and the AP to left-oriented outlets such as MSNBC and Daily Kos.
The most prominent feature of the map is the central role that Trump’s Twitter handle plays in the media ecosystem, placing it on par with the most influential media sites—and, indeed, marking it as the most influential information source with a right-wing audience orientation. Trump’s Twitter handle is also the only right-wing-oriented site located firmly at the center of the map, indicating that it is influential for centrist and center-left as well as for right-wing media.

The centrality of Fox News to the right-wing media ecosystem also emerges clearly. More surprising, perhaps, is that “center right” outlets like the Wall Street Journal and the New York Post, which in most of our analyses are closer to the center, have been pulled deeper into the right-wing ecosystem, away from “the rest.” In the debates over mail-in voting and fraud, reporting in the Post and editorials in the Journal have boosted the legitimacy of the campaign, and are therefore highly linked to by right-wing sites. No left-oriented site plays a major role, with the exception of the Brennan Center for Justice—a nonprofit fighting voter suppression and the publisher of a widely linked literature review of studies of voter fraud in the United States.

The nodes are sized according to how many other sites link to their stories, which we take as a measure of influence among media producers. For this analysis, we created a synthetic source, “Trump Twitter,” which aggregates all links into tweets by @realDonaldTrump, the president’s Twitter handle. Node proximity is determined by the frequency of links: they are close to each other when either one of them links often to the other’s stories, and farther apart if neither links to the other often. The more central a node is in the map as a whole, the more influential it is for media across the ecosystem. Nodes take their color from the political orientation of their Twitter audiences, which we divide into quintiles: right (red), center-right (orange), center (green), center-left (light blue), and left (dark blue). Fox, which is both large and separate from
the central cluster, is large because it is influential, and not central because its influence occupies a relatively insular subnetwork: the right-wing media ecosystem.

**POLITICAL AND MEDIA ELITES PLAY A PRIMARY ROLE IN DISINFORMATION; SOCIAL MEDIA PLAYS A SECONDARY ROLE**

Figure 2 (above) shows the intensity of coverage of the mail-in voting fraud agenda across the fifty-five thousand stories, five million tweets, and seventy-five thousand Facebook posts we studied over the six-month period. Peaks in attention to the mail-in voter fraud frame on social media and in mass-media stories are clearly related. We studied every peak in attention from March 1 to August 31, looking at the Facebook posts with the greatest engagement, the tweets with the most retweets, and the earliest and most linked online stories across the political spectrum to analyze what statements, actions, or publications triggered each peak. In each case, the spike in attention was occasioned by a statement or action by a political figure or elite media outlet; the most common by far were statements Donald Trump made in one of his three main channels: Twitter, press briefings, and television interviews. Many of these peaks aligned with, or were directly supported by, statements from Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican National Committee; Trump’s communications staff, both at the White House and in his campaign; and, in one major spike, the president’s reassertion of the voter-fraud falsehoods at the Republican National Convention. Only one major peak was triggered by reporting in the Washington Post and the New York Times, about how changes to the Postal Service were causing delays in mail delivery; still, even that peak followed just three days after Trump’s August 13 phone interview with Maria Bartiromo on Fox Business, in which the president said he was refusing to reach agreement with...
House Democrats over coronavirus relief funding. (“If we don’t make a deal,” he remarked during that interview, “that means they don’t get the money. That means they can’t have universal mail-in voting. They just can’t have it.”) Several less prominent peaks in attention—following specific AP reports and instances involving news of a voter-fraud prosecution or guilty plea—generated coverage that received substantial attention on right-wing media and from right-wing politicians and media personalities.

What this means is that the “usual suspects” in public debates about disinformation are not the central actors in voting disinformation. We found no examples where clickbait factories, fake pages (Russian or otherwise), or Facebook’s algorithms could explain any peak in engagement that was not better explained as having been set in motion and heavily promoted by political figures and elite right-wing media personalities, and disseminated to millions by major media outlets. On Twitter, if bots or trolls played any role, it was dwarfed by tweets from the president, his staff, and other institutional and media allies.

Our data cannot exclude the possibility that targeted ads or narrowcast campaigns on Facebook, aimed to suppress carefully selected audiences, will affect voting in specific groups. Nor does it deny that radicals can use Facebook to organize for violence. These remain valid concerns about abuses of social media platforms. But our data strongly questions whether Facebook or Twitter has any meaningful role as an instigator of the broad suspicion with which Republicans regard mail-in voting, a notion that runs counter to the current criticisms of the social media platforms as the core purveyors of disinformation and the origin of mistrust in facts and institutions.

In this disinformation campaign, social media plays a decidedly secondary and supporting role. The disinformation campaign itself is elite-driven and transmitted primarily through mass media, including outlets on the center-left and in the mainstream.

**NEwS EDIToRS IN MAINSTEAM MEDIA, PARTICULARLY AT THE ASSOCIATED PRESS AND OTHER SOURCES OF SYNDICATED NEWS, ARE A CRITICAL BULWARK**

There is a profound disconnect between the broad public concern with social media disinformation, the persistent scientific evidence that exposure to online fake news is concentrated in a tiny minority of users, and survey evidence that repeatedly shows that less than 20 percent of US respondents say they rely on social media as a major source of political news. Network and local TV, by contrast, are the primary source of political news for about 30 percent of the population, and news websites or apps accounted for another 25 percent, according to the most recent Pew survey. When arranged according to the degree to which they report believing mail-in voter fraud is a major problem, adults who get their news from ABC, CBS, and NBC occupy an intermediate position between Fox News viewers, on one end, and readers of the New York Times, viewers of MSNBC, or NPR listeners, on the other. Local TV news viewers, in turn, form the least politically knowledgeable group of Americans, edging out the much younger respondents who mostly rely on social media. When we analyzed the stories about mail-in voter fraud, we observed that peaks in media coverage usually consisted of large numbers of syndicated stories reported by the online sites of local papers and television stations.

When we consider the listenership, viewership, and readership of these outlets, Figure 3 (below) offers insight into the central role syndication—particularly by the AP (which appears in both the blue and green clusters)—plays in shaping Americans’ perspectives. For news sites, the analysis looks directly at what these outlets publish. For local TV stations, the online news items offer only a rough image of what airs on TV; still, it is not unreasonable to assume that news items published online offer some insight into what the station will choose to air.

Figure 3 is a map of only those sites that republish stories that have duplicates in other publications. Each node represents a single media outlet. The nodes are sized according to the number of syndicated stories they publish. The links between the nodes reflect the number of times any two nodes syndicate the same story. Two nodes that often publish the same syndicated stories—for instance, local newspapers that syndicate the same AP stories—will be closer to each other, and farther away from a different pair of nodes that publish different syndicated stories: for instance, two NPR affiliates that often publish the same transcripts from Morning Edition, but not AP stories.

The color of the nodes reflects their membership in a network community identified by running Louvain community detection, the most widely used approach for identifying clusters of related sites in a network. The blue community at the center consists primarily of Associated Press syndication by local newspapers, some local television sites, and national sites. The yellow community reflects primarily local media that are part of Gannett’s USA Today Network, replicating USA Today stories but also reflecting some AP syndication. The green community consists mostly of local television stations, syndicating a combination of AP materials, CNN reports, and shared stories in group-owned stations such as Nexstar or Hearst Communications. NPR is visible in orange at the bottom left. The gray cluster nearby
comprises Wicked Local publications. Given survey responses that suggest significant audiences (particularly those with low political knowledge) depend on local television, and the relatively high trust that survey respondents place in local media, the role of the producers of syndicated news and the editors of local outlets that use them becomes clear.

Based on the survey evidence and the prominence of the number of stories they publish at peak moments of attention to mail-in voter fraud, no group of journalists and editors has a more important role to play in the month leading up to the 2020 election, and in the weeks and months thereafter, than those who work for syndicated news outlets. Given the insularity of the right-wing media ecosystem, it is extremely unlikely that viewers of Fox News or talk radio listeners will change their view that mail-in voting is an invitation for fraud. The equally confident responses of the readers of the New York Times or the Washington Post, NPR listeners, and MSNBC viewers suggest that they, too, will not suddenly begin to believe that Democrats are stealing the election by committing voter fraud with mail-in ballots.

But 30 percent or more of the US adult population is less committed politically, and less uniformly committed to one or the other proposition, regarding fraud and mail-in ballots. These people watch the TV networks, CNN, and local TV, and they trust their local media. That local media, in turn, depends on syndicated news. And it is these journalists and editors who appear to have been the most susceptible to Trump’s tactics of harnessing professional journalism to his disinformation campaign. Early in the campaign we saw more of the “balanced” approach that repeated the president’s framing of the problem as a partisan conflict. By August, more of the stories, including syndicated ones, underscored the falsity of the president’s assertions in either the headline or the lede, and even briefly reminded readers of Trump’s specific electoral strategy that leads him to make these false claims.
In the coming months, it will be critical for editors of these national and local media—trusted by the least politically pre-committed and, in some cases, least politically attentive citizens—not to fall for the strategy that the president has used so skillfully in the past six months. They should not capitulate to the inevitable charges of partisanship that will befall any journalist or editor who calls a disinformation campaign by its name. They should not add confusion and uncertainty for their readers, viewers, and listeners by emphasizing false equivalents or diverting attention to exotic but (according to our research) peripheral actors like Facebook clickbait artists or Russian trolls.  

"This article is based on a report by Yochai Benkler, Casey Tilton, Bruce Etling, Hal Roberts, Justin Clark, Rob Faris, Jonas Kaiser, and Carolyn Schmitt, Mail-in Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign, Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society, Harvard University. October 2, 2020. Funding was provided by Craig Newmark Philanthropies, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations."
His tie red, his baggy suit blue, his face the familiar stained orange, President Trump approached a podium in the rotunda of the National Archives Museum and began to speak. It was September 17, and Trump looked bored. He was there for something called the White House Conference on American History. He mentioned Mount Rushmore—“which they would love to rip down, and rip it down fast,” he said, referring vaguely to the summer’s anti-racist protesters—“but that’s never going to happen.” Then he paused and started a new thought. “The left-wing cultural revolution is designed to overthrow the American Revolution,” he told the crowd. “Whether it is the mob on the street or the cancel culture in the boardroom, the goal is the same: to silence dissent, to scare you out of speaking the truth, and to bully Americans into abandoning their values, their heritage, and their very way of life. We are here today to declare that we will never submit to tyranny.”

He identified some “tyrants”: the 1619 Project, a Pulitzer-winning reporting and education initiative produced by the New York Times Magazine, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which had recently published a graphic identifying aspects of white culture. (A week before Trump’s speech, Donald Trump Jr. and allies at Fox News had bullied the museum into removing the graphic from its website.) Trump also inveighed against critical race theory, a decades-old philosophical framework for examining and opposing institutional racism. “Teaching this horrible doctrine to our children is a form of child abuse in the truest sense of those words,” he said. “For many years now, the radicals have mistaken Americans’ silence for weakness, but they’re wrong. There is no more powerful force than a parent’s love for their children, and patriotic moms and dads are going to demand that their children are no longer fed hateful lies about this country.”

Trump possesses an unmatched talent for connecting with the lizard brain, tempting people to turn off their better judgment and submit to simple rage. Still, even for him, the address at the National Archives Museum was remarkably unhinged. It attracted a few news stories, whose emphasis was mostly on Trump’s intention to monkey with educational curricula. Only a few academics and researchers seemed to notice that, with his rhetoric, Trump wasn’t merely rehashing his racist views—he was trying out a new kind of pandering, this time to the “save the children” crowd: a front for QAnon.

QAnon, formerly known as The Storm, is a conspiracy theory that casts high-level Democrats, media personalities, and movie stars as a cabal of satanic pedophile cannibals who harvest a special chemical called adrenochrome from the brains of fearful children, whom they devour. A secret resistance to this team of supervillains is being led by Trump, the theory contends. The head of QAnon is “Q,” a person—or, more likely, a few people—posting to message boards. The contours of Q’s world are largely recycled from the fake scandals elevated by right-wing outlets ahead of the 2016 presidential election: the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, for one; an obsession with child-abusing secret societies that pervades the American right; plus assertions, promoted by Alex Jones, of Infowars, that the Clinton family has been involved in satanic rituals, possibly with the help of Marina Abramović, the conceptual artist. A lunchroom casserole made of yesterday’s
leftover conspiracies, Q takes ingredients from various fringe groups, often ones that are racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-vaccination. Q works closely with Jim Watkins, an American expat who runs websites that verify and host Q’s posts, or “drops.” (Watkins lives in the Philippines, where he oversees message boards frequented by Nazis and child abusers, and tends a pig farm.) For a couple of years, Facebook and Twitter have embarked on large-scale bans of pages and accounts related to Q; on Tuesday, at long last, Facebook updated its policy, announcing that it “will remove any Facebook Pages, Groups and Instagram accounts representing QAnon, even if they contain no violent content.”

The first major news article exploring QAnon was a column by Paris Martineau that appeared in New York magazine in December 2017. “As most terrible things do, this story begins with a post on /pol/, a sub-board of the more-or-less-anonymous, anything-goes website 4chan,” she wrote, tracing the first Q missive to October of that year. In November, Trump began elevating QAnon personalities on Twitter. Martineau’s piece conveyed a sense of exasperation: “How can we even begin to argue with hundreds of thousands of people who choose to believe that a top government agent is speaking to them through 4chan, that Trump has been playing a game of 4-D mind chess this whole time, and that the Las Vegas massacre was an inside job?”

Since then, QAnon has become something between a news story and a full-blown beat. In August 2018, Trump hosted QAnon conspiracists at the White House. A year later, the FBI warned that the group officially constituted a domestic terrorism threat. Technology journalists who had covered Russian meddling in the election—notably Brandy Zadrozy and Ben Collins, at NBC, and Craig Silverman, at BuzzFeed—were among the earliest covering Q’s rise, as they tracked how the alt-right dished out conspiracies on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The two most popular figures to emerge from the fever swamp were Mike Cernovich and Jack Posobiec, crossover stars who parlayed large social media followings into real-world political access, in Cernovich’s case, and a gig with Trump’s beloved One America News Network, in Posobiec’s. Coverage of a political movement often focuses on its adherents, but the tech reporters were most interested in mapping the networks of information distribution and determining how such a movement forms. Q wasn’t a joke, these journalists found, and it was dangerous.

Others were on the story, too: No one covered the culture inside the conspiracy community better than QAnon Anonymous, a podcast hosted by three men with backgrounds in marketing and entertainment calling themselves Travis View, Julian Feeld, and Jake Rockatansky (all are pseudonyms), alongside a UK correspondent, Annie Kelly (an academic using her real name). Will Sommer, a tech reporter at the Daily Beast with roots in DC journalism, chased the fringes of the fringes in his newsletter, Right Richter. For the most part, however, Beltway reporters treated Q as a novelty, not a powerful political force—with a 2018 column by Dave Weigel in the Washington Post being an uncommon exception. That created a problem: QAnon was in constant, symbiotic contact with politics coverage without becoming a real target of scrutiny. All the while, Q and its followers were able to bend and maim the political press, which has a tendency to sand off the rough edges of the GOP. Using its influence under the radar, Q flourished.

By the time Trump’s second presidential campaign was gearing up, QAnon had made itself a visible presence at his rallies. Acolytes wore shirts bearing the initials “WWG1WGA,” which stands for: “Where We Go One, We Go All.” Still, Q remained the purview of tech reporters. That surprised Feeld, who pointed out on his podcast that the movement is politically motivated (“The point of this…is to get you to vote for Trump,” he said. “That’s what’s behind all of the adrenochrome and the cabal stuff”) and that there was something weird about the silence of American intelligence agencies as people organized online, challenging the federal government’s authority, under the aegis of a man in the Philippines (“How is he not at a black site, tied to a chair in Belarus or something?”).

As the months went by, and Trump embraced Q with increasing enthusiasm, the political press finally started to take notice, especially as the group’s cult fantasies inspired real-world violence that showed up in crime stories.
finally started to take notice, especially as the group’s cult fantasies inspired real-world violence that showed up in crime stories. “QAnon believes you are secretly saving the world from this cult of pedophiles and cannibals—are you behind that?” a White House reporter asked Trump during a press conference this summer. “Is that supposed to be a bad thing or a good thing?” Trump replied. “If I can help save the world from problems, I am willing to do it.” (Over on Fox News, the commentator Jesse Watters declared that QAnon had “uncovered a lot of great stuff when it comes to [Jeffrey] Epstein and when it comes to the deep state.”)

When Trump gave his speech on anti-racism scholarship as “child abuse,” the reference to Q—which had lately softened its baby-eating-satanist talk to more general appeals that one must think of the children—eluded campaign reporters behind on the latest developments. Q was in disguise mode: social platforms were more aggressively cracking down; a spokesperson for Twitter said that the number of Q-related tweets had been cut in half. So Q had issued marching orders: “Deploy camouflage. Drop all references re: ‘Q’ ‘Qanon’ etc. to avoid ban/termination.” QAnoners busily rebranded as promoting “save the children” and “anti human trafficking” campaigns.

It’s not clear how many people Trump thrills when he flirts with dangerous extremist groups at events and on national television. Internal data at Facebook puts the number of QAnon group members in the millions. That’s certainly enough to qualify as a newsworthy movement—but recently, there has been pushback against covering Q, as academics warn against inadvertently granting it greater prominence through sensationalized coverage. That assumes that Q breaks through in major stories about the campaigns, however, and that largely has not happened; political journalists are only just starting to get up to speed. Even finding the right words to identify QAnon has proved tricky—is it a conspiracy theory? A cult? A “collective delusion,” as BuzzFeed would have it? The more Q grows, the harder it is to ignore, and the higher the stakes for covering it responsibly.

It may already be too late. A Q candidate, Lauren Boebert, defeated an incumbent Republican in Colorado’s Third Congressional District, which has been a GOP stronghold for a decade. Jo Rae Perkins defeated a party-backed Republican in the Oregon primary and is now a contender for the United States Senate. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a staunch believer in the satanic cannibals of Hollywood and Washington, DC, is vying to represent Georgia’s Fourth District in Congress—and her chances are good, since she’s running unopposed. At the state level in Minnesota, six candidates for office are QAnon devotees. (Local newsrooms, like the Minneapolis Star Tribune, tend to be better at this coverage than their national peers.)

Like it or not, the question now is how QAnon will shape policy once its adherents take office. And as Q representatives prove that they can mobilize in large enough numbers to win elections, other politicians won’t just pronounce their shibboleths, they’ll start performing constituent service. What do QAnon people want? Trump knows as much as he needs to. As he said during a briefing in August, “They like me very much.”
Campaign journalism tends to revolve around a single question: Who’s winning? Since the beginning of the year, the answer has been obvious. Joe Biden has never trailed Donald Trump in national polls, and his advantage has been larger and steadier than that of any candidate since Bill Clinton. Biden has raised more money than Trump, has commissioned more advertising in more states, and his current path to 270 electoral votes appears robust enough to withstand the same degree of polling error that occurred in 2016.

Still, the surprising result of that race is leading the media to treat Biden’s position as precarious. Every major newsbreak has given rise to a rash of articles speculating about how events might affect the former vice president’s lead. The wave of unrest that followed the killing of George Floyd led many to wonder if Trump’s race-baiting “law and order” message might help him regain an advantage with white voters in the Midwest, while the surge in coronavirus cases across the South this summer had others imagining a landslide victory for Biden—though public opinion about the candidates barely quivered in response to both. Earlier this month, the president’s coronavirus hospitalization spawned yet another round of breathless conjecture.

“Ifs,” “mights,” and “coulds” are the stock-in-trade of the punditry business. They allow for the imagination of a possible future even as they stop short of forecasting how likely that version of events is to occur. Covering hypotheticals in this way has become all too common this fall, with articles seeking to capture the dimension of everything that could possibly go wrong on November 3 garnering far more attention than workaday dispatches from the quasi-virtual campaign trail. The New York Times offered seven “nightmare scenarios,” ranging from Chinese hacking to the processing of mail-in ballots dragging into mid-December, and The New Yorker published a feature report on how the legal wrangling that might stem from a close election could make declaring a winner impossible. What happens if the president loses but refuses to leave the White House? Would a federal judiciary stacked with Republican appointees be willing to subvert the public will? Has a foreign power already gained access to voting machines?

None of these questions are groundless, yet discussing them so fervently overshadows the less panic-inducing ways in which this election will unfold differently from how others have in the past. There will be more ballots cast by mail than ever before, and for that reason alone it may indeed be impossible for TV journalists to declare a winner on November 3. But by conjuring images of an election night that doubles as an authoritarian coup, the media is priming the electorate to respond to any immediate uncertainty about the outcome of the presidential race with distrust rather than patience. The stage has been set for small hiccups in the mechanical counting of votes to be recast as symptomatic of widespread fraud, foreign meddling, or some as yet untold terror—exactly the kind of vague sense of distrust that Trump has turned to his advantage throughout his presidency.

Too many journalists are fostering a public impression that nothing is knowable except that the worst might occur. Such speculation can’t help but degenerate into a mess of equivocation and doubt, the sort that leaves its audience associating the election with anxiety or dread, obscuring the fact
that individual voters are the only ones who actually have the power to determine how events will unfold.

The political prediction business takes two forms: gut-instinct analysis and the poll-driven models that have proliferated since the 2008 debut of Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight. Up until Election Day in 2016, it seemed that the data-savvy crew had firmly displaced the veteran political observer; in 2012, Peggy Noonan infamously predicted a Romney win based on the yard signs she had seen in Florida, while Silver's model accurately called the winner of all fifty states. Trump's victory, however, left both the number crunchers and the shoe-leather journalists scrambling for answers. In response, both schools of electoral prognosticators have toned down the conviction of their forecasts, even as they refuse to stop attempting to anticipate the future. Silver has tweaked his model to make it as cautious as possible, writing that in addition to factoring in polling trends and economic indicators, it now accounts for "the number of full-width New York Times headlines," the thought being that "more news means more uncertainty." That equation has drawn criticism from many of Silver's analytics-minded counterparts, including the Times' Nate Cohn, who noted that, by Silver's standard, 2016 was a more newsworthy year than 1968, a notion he called "undefensible."

For many traditionalists, no amount of twiddling with the data will make polls worth following. Outlets have seized on quotes like "I don't trust polling" or "The polls are a mirage" from Democratic politicians and organizers to prop up stories that are largely speculative, like one The Guardian headlined "US election polls look good for Joe Biden. But can they be trusted?"

Campaign journalists of all stripes have twisted themselves into an impossible position, attempting to forecast how the election will play out based on both hard numbers and anecdotal metrics of support even as they refrain from taking too bold a stand. The result is uncertainty that breeds uncertainty, making the whole election appear to be an event that could unfold any which way one might be able to imagine.

A quote from a Harvard psychologist that the venerable Times columnist Thomas B. Edsall used to close his discussion of the Republican National Convention is telling of the general mood: "I think that Biden will probably win and will probably be the next president. But the fact that I can't say more than 'probably' is terrifying to me. I fear that we are witnessing the end of American democracy."

Seeking certainty about the future, though, is not just unreasonable, but impossible. Rebecca Traister, writing in New York magazine, provides a useful reminder: “No one, in fact, knows anything about what’s to come.”

On one hand, Biden could be swept into the White House by a “blue tsunami” unseen since the days of FDR. On the other, these could be the last days of the republic. Between those extremes exists a plenitude of possible futures. By embracing a variety of disaster scenarios, the pundit class risks creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Again: this election will be different, and uncertainty remains about how it will play out. But if the expectation has been set that any question about the counting of ballots opens the door to the end of America as we know it, then how much more likely is the president to shove that door wide enough to step through if it takes a few extra days to declare a winner?

Too many journalists learned the wrong lesson from the 2016 election: rather than accept that a somewhat unlikely event can indeed occasionally happen, they now seem to believe that anything is possible at any time. Normal levels of uncertainty have been conflated with a sense of an onrushing cataclysm. It’s time to take a step back—and a deep breath. With votes already being cast and Election Day only a few weeks off, what matters now is to cover the facts on the ground. To describe the world as it is. Yes, things are changing, as they always are. But journalists are not soothsayers or clairvoyants. Yard signs and election models are not the same as crystal balls; they are simply different ways of describing the present. Today, right now, Biden is winning the election; observing that reality is a far cry from predicting that he will win. Let’s see what happens next. 

CJR
In the run-up to the presidential election, *The Atlantic* launched E. Jean Carroll’s series of interviews with women who allege that Donald Trump sexually assaulted them. This week, the final installment of “I Moved on Her Very Heavily” goes live.

Carroll, a journalist and author, recently joined Kyle Pope, editor and publisher of CJR, to discuss her interviews with Trump’s survivors and why she knew telling her own story of how Trump raped her in the mid-nineties would rouse his base.

**KYLE POPE** It’s been four years this month since we woke up to find ourselves staring at a video clip, an outtake from *Access Hollywood*, in which then-candidate Donald Trump bragged about how easy it was for him to sexually assault women. Here’s the part of that tape I will always remember:

*Donald Trump:* I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.

*Billy Bush:* Whatever you want.

*Donald Trump:* Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.

**POPE** That moment solidified what became a pattern with Donald Trump. Reports from women, credible, believable reports that he had assaulted or sexually harassed them; then a brief burst of scandal; followed by, frankly, nothing. And it’s been the case again and again and again. It started during his campaign—actually long before that. But it has continued through his presidency. And it raises really important questions, media questions, about why this hasn’t become more of an issue in this reelection campaign.

**E. JEAN CARROLL** Kyle, that is the mystery, isn’t it? Big, fat mystery.

**POPE** Does it enrage you when you watch these debates and this conversation leading up to this reelection, that this is almost never, ever mentioned, either by the press or by his opponents, or by anybody else?

**CARROLL** No. Kyle, you know what, I don’t get mad at that. There is nothing I can do. I get mad about things that I can do something about. I can’t do anything about running the national conversation.

**POPE** All of us know E. Jean from her column in *Elle* magazine that ran for twenty-seven years, “Ask E. Jean.”

**CARROLL** I know you wrote to me frequently.

**POPE** I did. I was a pseudonym, but you know who I am.

And then her 2019 memoir, *What Do We Need Men For?*, in which she accused Donald Trump of rape in a Bergdorf’s dressing room in the 1990s. That case is now tied up in litigation. She sued Trump for defamation after he called her a liar and said he’d never met her. And then a New York judge recently rejected Trump’s bid to halt the proceedings. We’re not going to get into that, partly because it’s in the middle of litigation, and also a lot of the details are out there.
What I want to talk to you about is this extraordinary series of pieces that you’re doing for The Atlantic, in which you interview other women who have been assaulted by Donald Trump and talk to them about their experience, both in the moment with him, and also after the disclosure. And actually, there’s a fascinating conversation you have with somebody who decided not to disclose it.

**CARROLL** Wasn’t that interesting? Boy.

**POPE** It was really interesting. It was enraging, frankly, because these stories are so compelling. One, there is so much overlap in the stories that the women tell. Trump’s approach is so similar from case to case. His modus operandi is just so repetitive, and frankly, it’s so lame. I mean, he’s just thoughtless…. There was this amazing moment where this woman—

**CARROLL** The woman on the airplane, right, Jessica Leeds.

**POPE** Yes. She was groped by him.

**CARROLL** Well, more than groped. The media uses the word *groped*. Nobody knows what the hell *groped* means.

Two weeks ago, I talked to a woman, Kristin Anderson, who explained exactly what groping by the president is. I understand why the media has to use terms like *groped, grab, kiss*. Those words are useful because in certain publications, you cannot go into sexual detail. So they are shorthand. But it does the women no favors because the evangelicals and the voters just sloughed it off. If they knew what groping was, they would stop and think. *Wait a minute, this man did that to that woman?*

In Jessica Leeds’s case, he reached inside her blouse and tried to pull out a breast. He was going at her with both hands, while the guy across the aisle stared. Jessica said his eyes were as big as saucers, and nobody came to her assistance. It’s amazing.

**POPE** And she saw him years later?

**CARROLL** Two years later, he was at the Humane Society Gala at Saks Fifth Avenue, with all the major designers. She was dressed in a beautiful designer gown. And he walked in with a very pregnant Ivana. He saw her, stopped, stared, and said, *You’re the cunt from the airplane.*

**POPE** And the reason that that was so chilling is it just spoke to his sense that he was answerable to nobody. He could say that in public. And it wouldn’t matter, right?

**CARROLL** Here is why he is answerable to nobody. I have a theory, Kyle, about why nobody does anything about all these women coming forward. First of all, I think many women voters like to hear that he grabs women, that he’s very sexual, that he’s very powerful. They will vote for him. They’re lonely; they want to be grabbed.

Now, people are going to say, *E. Jean, how can you even think that?* But I know some of these voters. They’re my people. I know evangelicals. You know, I was born and raised in Indiana. There are many women out there who find this extremely attractive. And the men vote for him because he’s a leader. A man who can do this to women can do anything. It’s the mark of, like, a Caesar, or a Genghis Khan, or an Alexander the Great. I’m naming people who had several wives. It’s attractive in a male leader.

I paused myself before I came forward, because I knew it would rouse his base to greater heights. I think I was right. I think that people like that he does this. I think that many liberals don’t like it. Most thinking women don’t like it. But that’s what we’re living with here. And the evangelicals, by the way, their belief is that he hasn’t attacked any women lately. God has forgiven him and he’s improved.

**POPE** Do you think that the way that these cases are covered contributes to that? What’s astonishing about your series is that these stories are told entirely from the point of view of the women. We hear pretty much only from them. It’s their view of what happened. So many other stories are sexualized, or they’re told from the point of view of the man. Do you think that changes how they’re received?

**CARROLL** That’s very interesting. I hadn’t thought of that. Yeah. These stories put the woman watching her life as she moves through her life. What she was like at the time it happened. What happened after she came forward. We had the shower of death threats and the miserable way these women were called liars and skanks and crazy. Inevitably, the woman’s looks are disparaged.

So the one who comes forward knows what she’s getting into. That they came forward in 2016 and then were brave enough to do it again for *The Atlantic* magazine, to me, is the most astonishing part of it. My hat goes off…they’re endlessly brave.

**POPE** So how could these cases be covered differently by news outlets to make these women’s stories resonate more?

**CARROLL** Start writing the real truth about sex, number one. That will never happen. So I may as well not even suggest it. The *New York Times* is not going to talk about Donald Trump sticking his
finger into the vagina of a woman. They are just not going to do it. I mean, I can’t figure out a way they could do that.

POPE Was that the case before he was the president? Or do you think that’s because he’s the president? Because the reason I ask is that, when I read the coverage of Harvey Weinstein, that was explicit.

CARROLL Well, that was because it was Megan Twohey and [Jodi] Kantor. Those two women will cross every line to get their story. We’re talking about two heroes there. They were explicit. So they really are breaking down that barrier a little bit.

But, you know, Trump is something else. He’ll sue you at the drop of a hat. He’s already sued the Times. He’s threatened to sue every single one of these women. I think there’s a good chance that he’s going to be reelected.

POPE You do?

CARROLL Oh, yeah. Don’t you?

POPE I don’t know.

CARROLL Did you see who’s ahead today in South Carolina? Lindsey Graham. And then, you know, I’m not going to give you my theories about the Russians coming in to save the election for Trump, but I think there’s a strong possibility.

POPE You know, E. Jean, I was so taken aback in 2016, and I became very cynical about polls and now about coverage.

CARROLL I know that you’re very skeptical of polls, and good for you.

POPE I mentioned at the top that you had a really interesting conversation with a woman, a lawyer, who also had a story to tell, but had decided, for her own reasons, not to go public with it. What do you make of that decision? I assume that you understand completely. I mean, I thought your profile of her was quite sympathetic and really hashed out the reasons that she came to this conclusion. But what do you make of it?

CARROLL Well, she was up for partner at her law firm. Her career would have ended if she had come out against Trump. It would have ended. And she had just had a baby, if you remember from the profile. She had to weigh having her career stopped in its tracks, or not telling what happened. She told her mother, and her mother still voted for Donald Trump. Her mother, by the way, is a doctor and abortion rights woman and a feminist. The mother voted for him because she liked her portfolio and she thought he’d do well in business.

POPE There was another quote from another woman saying that what happened to her after she went public was as bad as what Donald Trump did to her.

CARROLL Oh, that’s Karena. Actually her quote was that it’s a billion times worse, what she went through. She lives in a very Republican area. Her kids go to a Republican school. She’s still being tortured. Her neighbors are still giving her the cold shoulder. You know what, Karena came forward a second time for The Atlantic. I mean, talk about being brave.

POPE You know, when we started this conversation, I asked how you view the fact that we’re not having a bigger conversation about this in the middle of this campaign.

CARROLL I sit back and laugh. A lot of my life is filled with hilarity and good cheer. I know we’re doing the best we can. We have a complete clown in the White House who is sexually assaulting women. And I am only touching the tip of the iceberg... We all know, because we’ve heard it in my transcripts, and every woman I talked to now knows two other women. But we can’t reveal that. If the women won’t come forward, they won’t come forward. So we know that the stories that are out there are just a sliver of the reality of what Trump has done to women. It is astonishing.

POPE Do you think people’s views toward the body of evidence here will change if he is voted out of office? Do you think that there could be criminal cases? Do you think it’s going to be any different?

CARROLL No. Kyle, even in 2020, women come forward accusing men of sexual assault and women are not believed. That’s how it is. Men are powerful. Women lack their power. So it’s the same as it was two thousand years ago, as it was in the Renaissance, in the 1800s, the 1900s.

And now it’s the same thing. Women come forward. They are not believed. We know that because it’s less than 5 percent of rape cases that the guy goes to jail, because a woman is not believed.

POPE Do you think that Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein were anomalous, in the sense that they were actually held to account, finally?

CARROLL Oh yeah, my God, we should have a national holiday... Journalists did it, Kyle. If there was ever a moment to be proud, it was Megan and Jodi and Ronan [Farrow], you know.
Your publication, you’re graduating kids out of there, they’re gonna go out and be just crazy enough to break some rules and get these stories done.

**POPE** We should add E. Jean Carroll to that list of people. These are terrific pieces.

Let me ask you about *Elle* magazine. What happened there? Why did that end? I don’t know if you want to rehash this, but I’m really curious what your communication with them was.

**CARROLL** Well, when they called me to tell me that, after twenty-seven years, they were not going to renew my contract, I thought they were calling to invite me to the Christmas party. I swear to God.

You know, Hearst is a very conservative company. A great company, but very conservative. Over 85 percent, or perhaps it’s 90 percent, of their political contributions go to the Republican Party. I had a lot of Republican readers. They could not have an advice columnist advising women about their careers, for God’s sakes, and their love lives, who’s accused the president of the United States of rape. Can’t have it. I get it. And it was probably a fairly easy decision to make.

However, they said they were sort of pissed off that I took this story to *New York* magazine.

**POPE** Do you believe that?

**CARROLL** I think that upset them, but of course, I went to *New York* [because] *Elle* never would have run it. Can you picture *Elle* magazine running that story?

**POPE** No. I could picture *Teen Vogue* running it. There are other titles that would’ve done it, but not *Elle*. Were they honest with you about the reason why?

**CARROLL** No, no. They said, *We don’t have the pages*. Hilarious. They don’t have the pages. Do you have any idea what that means? I have no idea.

**POPE** How many more of these profiles will we see?

**CARROLL** The last profile will appear next Wednesday.

Maybe you didn’t figure this out, but the way I did these profiles, I started out with Natasha [Stoynoff], who was with *People*. He shoved her up against the wall and kissed her. Then I went to Karena, and he grabbed her breast. And then we had the woman whose name was not used and she didn’t come forward. Then we had Jessica. He grabbed her breasts and went up her skirt. You see what I’m doing here? And then we had Alva, who is a Republican campaign worker, and in front of others, he kissed her. Then I had Kristin, he went up her skirt, squished her vagina in his fingers, squeezed it—that’s what groping is. And then I end with Jill, who barely made it out alive. So I start with the kiss and work through the female body.

And so Jill Harth is the last. You will not believe how many times he assaulted her. It is incredible. She’s the first woman to publicly come forward.

**POPE** What has been your sense of how these pieces have landed?

**CARROLL** I have no idea. Everybody went nuts for it on Twitter. But that’s a sliver. I don’t know. Do you have any idea?

**POPE** I do. My idea is that they haven’t landed like they should have. And that’s no criticism of *The Atlantic*, or their efforts, or certainly of what you’ve done. But I just think it speaks to what we talked about earlier, which is the receptivity that people have with this, and this sense in the news cycle that *We know this*, right? *What can you tell us that we don’t know?*

I think it’s a huge flaw in the way we frame stories and the media attention span.

This is a very weird example to bring in, but if you look at how the *New York Times* has approached Trump and taxes—that’s a boring story. We know he’s a shady businessman, but they just sort of kept at it again and again. They packaged it, and they’ve just been relentless. They haven’t really cared whether, in the short term, a lot of people click on it, because they know that it’s the right thing to do. And I think the same thing applies here. Like, you just have to keep on it. Again and again and again.

**CARROLL** Thank you, Kyle. I like that analogy, because I’m a big fan of the Trump taxes. It was relentless every day. And you’re right, that packaging in the various parts was brilliant.

People think they know. But honestly, they don’t know what he actually has done. They have no idea. **CJR**
This month we learned that Tesla, a $400 billion public company run by one of the richest people in the world, has done away with its media relations department—effectively formalizing an informal policy of ignoring reporters. Though we should all be grateful for the chance to hear less about Tesla, we should also recognize this for what it is: one more glaring data point showing that powerful people no longer think they need the mainstream press, especially critical and ethical outlets like the *Washington Post*.

This presents a problem. Because the mainstream press still needs powerful people—quite literally, in the case of the *Post*, as it’s owned by the world’s richest man, Jeff Bezos, who is no fonder of difficult stories about his companies than any other billionaire.

We are living through a historic, technology-fueled shift in the balance of power between the media and its subjects. The subjects are winning. The internet in general—and social media platforms in particular—have destroyed one of the media’s most important sources of power: being the only place that could offer access to an audience. When Elon Musk can say whatever he wants to forty million Twitter followers at any time with no filter, it is little surprise that he does not feel compelled to listen to unpleasant questions from some reporter who wants to know why he busts unions and wildly accuses people of pedophilia.

As journalists, we all view this as a horrifying assault on the public’s right to know, and on our own status as brave defenders of the public good. And that is all true, for what it’s worth. But this is about power. We need to take some back, lest the rich and powerful run away from one of the last forces restraining them.

Because journalism, particularly at the highest level, is about raw power. It is about bringing important people to heel, on behalf of the public. Politicians and officials and business leaders don’t want to talk to the press, subjecting themselves to the possibility of being made to look bad; they do it because they have always felt they had no choice. They felt that way because papers like the *Post* could offer the carrot of great exposure to those who needed it, but also, always, the stick of negative coverage to those who spurned them. There is nothing devious or ignoble about this; a powerful press, for all its flaws, is good for democracy, and tends to promote equality by holding the big shots in check. Anyone who has ever negotiated to land a contentious interview with a famous person knows that you only get those interviews when your subject fears what will happen if they don’t do the interview. Today, that fear is disappearing. We all need to figure out what to do about that.

The *Washington Post* and its competitors—the elite level of national news, the places that have traditionally set the agenda—are the most vulnerable to this shift. They are the relatively small portion of the media that is able to command both access and editorial independence. Politicians feel that they must deal with the *Post*, but the *Post* still feels like it can say what it wants, critical or otherwise. That state of affairs, which has been taken for granted for decades, is evaporating.

Donald Trump, unfortunately, looms large in this. His imperviousness to the usual blows from the press was evident five years ago. (One of my colleagues at *Gawker* got so exasperated with Ted Cruz’s
It turns out that being utterly shameless and uttering the words “fake news” nonstop, while having an entire right-wing media ecosystem amplify your message, really works. Trump himself, a pure creature of the New York tabloids, is too vain and dumb to realize that he could probably ignore the normal elite press altogether. But his incredible accumulation of power in the face of countless well-documented scandal stories in the Post and the New York Times and elsewhere—stories that would have brought down earlier presidents—is a proof of concept that will surely be used by smarter characters in the future.

The question for the Post is: What are you gonna do about it? When the fear that was instilled in generations of politicians by Watergate wears off, and the federal government becomes ever more populated by officials who have discovered that no matter how meticulous David Fahrenthold’s reporting is, it won’t move the needle that much on entrenched public opinion? When the full flowering of the social media age turns even the most prestigious paper into just another midsize Facebook page struggling to catch up to the reach of Dan Bongino?

I must admit I do not know the answer. All I know is that there is only one way the press maintains its power in society: by metaphorically putting the heads of powerful people on pikes. If the Post and all the other respectable media outlets lose their ability to do that, powerful people will, by extension, stop caring what the well-informed segment of the public thinks. Democracy dies in dumbness.  

CJR
With public attention fractured between multiple crises—the pandemic, the election, the changing climate, the lurching Supreme Court, and an economy on the brink of collapse—the delicate machinery of MSNBC’s bland, both-sides facade has become impossible to maintain. It’s like trying to dance a minuet in a hurricane. Nearly every wig in the place has blown clean away.

Long-suffering anchor Chris Hayes, whose father works in public health, made the pandemic a key part of his coverage before the virus had reached the US. On February 25 he reported somberly that around the world, more than three thousand people had died of covid-19, most of them in China: a colossal, incomprehensible figure, back then. The headline beneath him read, “OFFICIALS WARN OF CORONAVIRUS SPREAD IN U.S.”

But Hayes’s condemnation of the White House was still detached and sleekly professional. The administration was “completely unprepared,” he observed. A note of disbelief crept in when he quoted the president’s remarks, that same day: “I think the whole situation will start working out,” Trump had said. Today the number of dead is in excess of 1,117,000 worldwide, with more than 220,000 in the United States.

By July, Hayes had grown far angrier, and had kicked his rhetoric up a few notches, openly denouncing the Republicans’ “insane fight against masks.” The GOP, he said, is “corroded, desiccated, dangerous... becoming a pro-virus party before our eyes.”

In September, it emerged that Trump had known of the dangers of the virus himself, all along: knew that it was airborne, knew that it was deadly, and—in February—had confided that knowledge on tape to Bob Woodward. A subdued Hayes opened his show with a sentence that rushed out of him as if in a single word: “GoodeveningfromNewYorkI’mChrisHayesWELL... he knew. He knew.” At that point, pretty much anything you could say would have been soft-pedaling the calamitous facts. “He knew how bad the virus was... he understood it, amazingly, and then he lied and he covered it up and he made it all worse...it’s arguably the worst cover-up in American history.”

More recently, Trump has called Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, “an idiot.” He has effectively fired every senior health official originally charged with managing the government’s pandemic response, installing in their place a toadying radiologist whose chief credential is apparently his affiliation with the conservative Hoover Institution. The administration has pretty much ditched every shred of its responsibility to protect the citizens of the United States from harm.

And now, finally, there are no curbs left on Hayes’s anger. “Evil” and “sick” are the words he is using to describe the administration’s pandemic response.

Hayes represents the tip of an iceberg—he states what others still understate. “Well! That happened,” Rachel Maddow said last Wednesday night, right after the Trump town hall broadcast on MSNBC. “Let me remind you that what you just saw was a production of NBC News. We are MSNBC,” she added dryly. “We did not produce that event, we simulcast it here.”

Feeble as they were, Maddow’s veiled objections were another revealing departure from MSNBC norms: the network’s most popular anchor...
expressing strong public disapproval of her bosses’ decision on presidential coverage, and on the threshold of an election.

In the end, Trump’s characteristically boorish grab for the spotlight backfired spectacularly, and on multiple levels, in large part because of Savannah Guthrie, the town hall’s moderator.

I can’t remember ever seeing a more successful performance from a political moderator; Guthrie was Raddatz-level, or beyond that. The Guthrie Method involves loudly and immediately calling out lies and demanding answers. She held Trump to account in something like the manner of Jonathan Swan of Axios in his celebrated one-on-one interview. But hers was a much harder job, with far higher stakes, a dozen simultaneous claims on her attention, live and in front of some thirteen million people.

She was by turns incredulous, insistent, and resolutely challenging; she also flattered and cajoled Trump now and then. It was like watching a seal with a beach ball. “You’re going to like this question,” she told him; “You’ll like this.” And then she forced the president to admit that he really does owe more than $400 million to unknown parties, and called him out on his retweet of some wild fabrication alleging that Biden ordered the killing of a Navy SEAL team.

“That was a retweet—that was an opinion of somebody,” he said.

“You’re the president; you’re not like someone’s crazy uncle who can just retweet whatever,” Guthrie shouted.

This simple, no-nonsense approach won Guthrie the praise of media reporters, the admiration of millions of viewers, and the rage of the president, who later referred to her as “totally crazy.” She became part of the living history of this terrible moment, this election, and single-handedly defused the tension around NBC’s decision to air the circus in the first place.

Most of all, Guthrie demonstrated that the most important thing for journalists to remember in corrupt and mendacious times is our own commitment to the truth. With luck she will inspire other cable hosts, and other journalists, as she did me.
In late August, Sam Dolnick, an assistant managing editor at the New York Times, tweeted a link to an episode of The Daily, his paper’s flagship podcast, about President Trump’s “law and order” messaging, the suburban vote, and the supposed parallel of the 2020 election and Richard Nixon’s victory, in 1968, unfolding against backdrops of social unrest. To “complement” the episode, Dolnick recommended that listeners also read Nixonland by Rick Perlstein, a prominent historian of the conservative movement. “I am reading [it] now,” Dolnick wrote, “and highlighting every page.”

The next day, Perlstein published an op-ed, also in the Times. He noted that a “parade of reporters, podcasters, and editors” had recently asked him about the 1968/2020 parallel. The two years, Perlstein told them, aren’t very similar at all: the dynamics of this summer’s protests were very different to those at play in 1968. After giving a number of interviews along the same lines, Perlstein reached what he described as “an unusual conclusion” for a historian: that “it was time to stop talking about history,” because “it was only taking us further from understanding the present.” He began declining further media requests.

Perlstein shared a link to his op-ed in a reply to Dolnick’s tweet. “Stop reading Nixonland,” Perlstein wrote, “and start assigning reporters to explain what’s happening now, because we don’t yet have any idea.”

Nixonland, which came out in 2008, was not Perlstein’s first book about the history of American conservatism. He’d already published Before the Storm, about Barry Goldwater and sixties conservatism, and has since written two more books: The Invisible Bridge (2015), exploring the period between Watergate and Ronald Reagan’s unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 1976, and Reaganland, which came out this summer, weighs in at 914 pages (plus notes), and focuses on the growth of the conservative movement during the presidency of the Democrat Jimmy Carter, who lost to Reagan in 1980.

I read The Invisible Bridge in 2017, shortly before I started working for CJR, and was struck that, while the news media was not explicitly the subject of the book, it lurked beneath the surface—a key factor in structuring the politics of the seventies, much as it has been a key factor in structuring the politics of the Trump era. I recently read Reaganland, and had a similar reaction. Problems with media framing that I write about regularly in CJR’s newsletter The Media Today—false equivalence, sensationalism, the obsession with optics—are all present in coverage that Perlstein references, from TV segments about the Iran hostage crisis to an overhyped scandal involving Jimmy Carter’s brother Billy Carter. Perlstein’s present-day media criticism, indeed, finds clear echo in his pages.

I recently spoke with Perlstein over Zoom to get his thoughts on the media themes in his books, campaign coverage past and present, and 1968. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A
Historian Rick Perlstein on media ‘bothsidesism’ and why 2020 definitely isn’t 1968

Jon Allsop
October 26, 2020

When I told you of my sense that there are a lot of media stories running below the surface in your books, you replied that I’d put my finger on a key theme. What do you mean by that?

Perlstein The secret is I’ve really produced a three-thousand-page exercise in media criticism, with some politics thrown in for good measure.
I think that if we listed a catalogue of important variables for how American political culture got to be the way it is now, the media—as an institution that contains within it certain implicit ideological assumptions, certain routines and practices—has done a lot more than historians generally appreciate to shape our own political world. I don’t often talk explicitly about that, but it’s a thread that ties together the entire story. It starts, really, with the political media—which I summarize under the figure of the pundit—declaring conservatism a dead letter in American politics, and works through the irony of this supposed corpse arising from the dead again and again, and being declared dead again and again. And yet the media still repeated this ritual of pronouncing America a center-left country.

One of the reasons I think my books have resonated so much with people trying to understand contemporary politics is the way this keeps on happening in the present. The civil war between progress and reaction in American politics always being dead and buried happens over and over again, generally whenever a liberal wins. And that’s a story about the political media, fundamentally.

ALLSOP You say that ideological assumptions shape the role of the media. How do you identify those? I think it’s an ideology of consensus: that Americans are united and fundamentally at peace with themselves, and that it’s [journalists’] job to elide the structural tensions that are kind of built into the American project. That’s how you rise to the empyrean heights. That’s how you become host of Meet the Press, as opposed to a beat reporter in Cleveland: your success in telling a story about conflict in America being epiphenomenal.

PERLSTEIN When it comes to political media, there are themes that are more or less related to that. In the beginning of Reaganland, I talk a lot about how the coverage of the 1976 presidential election introduced a new kind of triviality, and elevated pseudo-scandals to exaggerated force as an entailment of the experience of Watergate. Then, in the last few chapters of Reaganland, I work out an even bigger theme, which is the broader dynamic of “bothsidesism,” and, I think more than anywhere else in any other of my books, talk about what happens when the media internalizes the right wing’s critique that it’s structured by liberal bias. It’s there in the other books: I talk about how the Washington Post, whenever they did a Watergate story in 1972, would elevate some trivial supposed sin of the [George] McGovern campaign onto the front page, too. But it really, in my work, reaches its apotheosis with the coverage of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

ALLSOP Media framing errors depicted in Reaganland resonated with me as being similar to ones we see today, including bothsidesism. Do you think the mainstream political press is doomed to repeat these same mistakes over and over?

PERLSTEIN I wouldn’t say “doomed,” because I’d like to be part of the solution, not just someone recording this stuff for the record. But I think the fact that these same patterns repeat themselves is built into the structure of how American campaign coverage and political coverage works, and it’s hard to be recognized as doing your job as a political reporter without reproducing some of these patterns. And I think that the media needs to be much more self-critical and self-aware about how this stuff works. Unfortunately, I don’t see any signs of this happening.

Part of the pattern is that the right wing weaponizes these instincts in the media for its own advantage. One way to do it is to introduce scandals into the public record that then have to be covered because they’re being talked about. As we speak, an extremely dubiously-sourced “scandal” involving Hunter Biden and his computer was retweeted by Maggie Haberman [a reporter at the Times], in the same way that extremely dubiously-sourced claims about Billy Carter—the scandal of him taking hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Libyan government—was tied to the Jimmy Carter White House, without any evidence, by Republican operatives. That became a dominant keynote of the New York Times coverage of Jimmy Carter in 1980—even as a much more salient scandal involving Reagan’s national security adviser, Richard Allen, didn’t get nearly the coverage.

That kind of asymmetry is part of the pattern we’re talking about. One of the most important watersheds in it is in the media’s response to being blamed for the violence at the Democratic convention in Chicago, in 1968, which caused this dark night of soul-searching—that the media, being based in the Northeast and in these liberal institutions and educational institutions, somehow was alienated from conservative Middle America.

ALLSOP This year has been compared often to 1968 in media coverage. My lazy assumption for a long time has been that the more you can root journalism in historical context, the better. But you have a slightly different perspective. What do you think the limits of that approach are at a time like this?

PERLSTEIN I think that, quite frequently, journalism in the present that pretends to root itself in historical insights is just another way of reproducing clichés. Nineteen sixty-eight is a great example: for
some reason—maybe it’s just the sheer melodrama of it—it looms large in every discussion of the 2020 presidential race, as a year in which profound civil discord resulted in a Republican winning by making an argument about Democratic and liberal responsibility for that civil discord. Okay. But what about 1963-1964, which was another period of profound civil discord, in which the electorate reacted by giving the liberal Democrat [President Lyndon B. Johnson] a landslide victory?

The formulation I’ve been asking journalists to consider is that it makes more sense to think of history in terms of process than parallels. What happens in the past conditions what happens in the present, it doesn’t somehow follow these sorts of flat-circle eternal returns, or waves, or cycles. Nineteen sixty-eight has a lot more to do with conditioning the kind of clichéd questions we ask than the dynamic we’re seeing in the 2020 presidential election. So I called a moratorium, in my own media commentary, on answering questions about 1968, because it was only taking us further away from an understanding, and it was becoming an alibi for not reporting. People were just reverting to this supposed ironclad pattern, which was not in fact an ironclad pattern at all—and they were doing so almost at the request of Donald Trump. He was the one who started using Nixon tropes in describing what he was trying to accomplish in the 2020 election. So history is great, but it has to be good history. It has to be smart history.

Almost every day, I get some request to say, How does this debate that we’re having compare to the debates between Reagan and Carter in 1980, and Reagan and [Walter] Mondale in 1984? Well, maybe instead we should be thinking about how this election is unlike any other election because its most important variable might be the fact that the incumbent president doesn’t see it as an election but as an attempt to retain power by any means necessary. Popular votes and electoral votes might be, like, fourth or fifth down the list of things we should be thinking about.

**ALLSOP** There’s been some great reporting on the threat to the election, but a disconnect whereby that reporting isn’t really paired with the horse race coverage, much of which is treating this as a normal election.

**PERLSTEIN** Yeah. Who’s gonna win the horse race if someone bombs the track?

**ALLSOP** You write in your books about key organizational drivers of right-wing politics in the period you study, including the religious right and the big-business lobby. It looks familiar from a present-day point of view—but the absence of today’s right-wing media ecosystem, with Fox News at the center, looms large for me. Do you think that media ecosystem has changed the texture of right-wing movement politics since the seventies?

**PERLSTEIN** It really is a story of continuity and change. We’ve never had a twenty-four-hour news channel that seems to be exclusively devoted to advancing the fortunes of a particular presidential candidate and his ideology; we’ve never had this twenty-four-hour news environment dedicated to creating a bubble around reality that doesn’t correspond to facts. But we have had, say, a newspaper, like the Chicago Tribune, that, in the thirties and forties, could frequently resemble the kind of thing you see on Fox News. You had a discourse concerning liberal-democratic perfidy that sounds exactly like Fox News playing itself out quite frequently in the letters pages of ordinary newspapers. The kind of discourse we see on Fox News was always present in American politics.

**ALLSOP** In Reaganland, you have a description of the anti-gay-rights movement in the late seventies where they’re talking about saving the children...

**PERLSTEIN** It’s QAnon.

**ALLSOP** Exactly! My first thought was: QAnon. These narratives are really persistent...

**PERLSTEIN** You’ve got to go back thousands of years for that one.

**ALLSOP** Is the internet just a new way of channeling those views that have always been around? Or is it shaping that conversation on the right and taking it in new directions? Or is it both?

**PERLSTEIN** Well, I think that’s where you need to get quite specifically into technology and the question of the algorithm: that platforms were specifically designed in order to glue more eyeballs to their screen for longer periods of time, to privilege conflict over consensus, to privilege sensation over information. And it’s not just that this is available twenty-four hours and anyone can contribute to it, but that certain messages are privileged over other messages.

**ALLSOP** You write about right-wing letter-writing campaigns in the seventies that strike me as having a similar organizational function to a lot of what you see online today.

**PERLSTEIN** The fascinating thing about the direct-mail campaigns of the 1970s that I write about is that they happened underneath the radar. The parallel there is the way the psychographically targeted
campaign messages in 2016 on Facebook existed under the radar. No one knew—until we did—that African Americans were being bombarded with messages about Hillary Clinton once saying that Black youth were “superpredators.” Now, that strategy is certainly not new. So, similarities, differences; differences, similarities. This is why journalists should take history courses, read serious history—not just popular history but academic history.

**ALLSOP** The way you write history—stitching together contemporaneous media coverage into a narrative—reminds me of the sensation of consuming news in the present for the newsletter that I write. Why do you write like that?

**PERLSTEIN** I think it’s because it’s how people experience the world. People do not experience the world with these neat divisions between politics and culture and economics and family relations and art. All these things are mixed up together in our lives, and each of them helps determine the other: Elvis’s role in creating a desegregated society; will.i.am’s role in electing Barack Obama; the role of the 2007–8 economic collapse in creating the conditions of alienation that made it possible for an antiestablishment candidate like Donald Trump to make sense.

**ALLSOP** And you think showing the reader the contemporaneous media coverage holds the key to understanding that? Does it bring that kind of... messiness to the fore?

**PERLSTEIN** Yeah. “Messiness” is a good word. But the messiness has a shape. It’s not just a pile of randomness. All these things are determining the flow of the story—the story that we live.

**ALLSOP** What’s your advice to reporters covering the 2020 campaign in these final weeks, assuming that the really entrenched problems of campaign journalism aren’t going to change overnight?

**PERLSTEIN** My advice to reporters would be to not allow themselves to be manipulated: to study the history of how right-wing politicians have weaponized the anxieties of culturally elite journalists in order to deliver more power to themselves. Revealing the strategies of the powerful without fear or favor is the highest calling of journalists. I know it’s hard: we all have lives and careers and bosses and readerships. But our highest duty has to always be to the truth. I think a certain kind of self-possession, a certain kind of self-respect vis-à-vis those who would use us for their own agendas, has to be the starting point and the ending point.

**ALLSOP** It strikes me that a lot of the stuff I end up writing about in the newsletter these days involves the media stoking conflict—on debate nights, for example. I think a lot of journalists would say that conflict makes for a good story. You mentioned conflict being hardwired into social media algorithms these days, too. Do you think there’s been a shift, from an ideology of consensus in the period you’ve been writing about to more of an ideology of conflict today?

**PERLSTEIN** No. There’s conflict that’s merely trivial: the horse race has conflict, but it’s not conflict of any particular consequence. Who wins the horse race obviously has consequence, but the conflicts about who is ahead in the rear stretch by a nose is not necessarily the most important thing for understanding how the race is shaping our reality.

When I say that journalists fetishize consensus and avoid conflict, I mean the big questions that structure American life, which are very scary and more resemble the metaphor of what happens when you open Pandora’s Box than describing a horse race. That’s the kind of conflict we tend to avoid. What would happen if we talked frankly in our journalism about who benefits when Republicans win compared to who benefits when Democrats win? Or the extent to which America holds together because of a series of dirty bargains that disenfranchise and dispossess the vulnerable? Those are deep conflicts, not trivial conflicts, and I don’t think those are the kinds of thing you hear when you flip on a Sunday show, even if people are shouting at each other.
The Doociness of America

What Steve Doocy, the host of Trump’s favorite morning show, tells us about Fox News and the nation in 2020

Mark Oppenheimer
October 29, 2020

Fox News is authoritarian state media. Fox News is the only truthful outlet. Fox News is Tucker Carlson. Fox News is Chris Wallace. Fox News is thriving. Fox News is dying. Fox News is the real America. Fox News sells miracle cures and identity-theft protection to a small number of unhappy old people.

Understanding America’s most popular cable news channel has come to feel even more urgent in the run-up to the presidential election. If Trump refuses to accept unfavorable returns on November 3 and in the days thereafter, he will count on Fox to play along—potentially sowing weeks, or even months, of resistance and protests. And although the channel’s news programming has some independence, however strained, from the opinion division, which oversees Carlson, Sean Hannity, and others, it was the news desk that seemed defiant on election night in 2012, when Megyn Kelly left her anchor’s chair to berate her own analysts for calling Ohio for Barack Obama.

Americans tend to watch Fox News either religiously or never at all. For the latter camp—like me, until recently—understanding the channel is one way to comprehend an America that has come to seem distant to those of us who could never have imagined a Trump presidency. And to that end, it’s worth considering Steve Doocy.

Unless you are a regular Fox viewer, you may only remember Doocy from The Daily Show’s Moment of Zen—a brief excerpt of television that the producers find somewhere else in TV land, played alongside the closing credits. It’s a few seconds of self-evident absurdity, a bit of TV that is funny even, or especially, shorn of context. Calculating, nefarious, ideological evil makes for bad Moment of Zen material: Hannity and Mitch McConnell do not work well. But Doocy, who since 1998 has been a host on the Fox & Friends morning show, was a regular.

The Moment of Zen from January 12, 2010, is a fourteen-second clip of Doocy talking to his cohosts about the influence of late-night comedy. “When William Jefferson Clinton was running for president,” Doocy says, sitting on the sofa next to then-cohosts Gretchen Carlson and Brian Kilmeade, “a lot of people say that what really got a lot of juice for him was the fact that he went on The Arsenio Hall Show...” The clip then cuts to Doocy barking Hall’s signature “Woof! Woof!” Doocy doing an Arsenio imitation—that’s the punch line.

Ten years later, it’s not as easy to laugh at Doocy. He is watched daily by the president of the United States, whose rise Doocy goosed with regular invitations to Fox & Friends back when the idea of Trump as president was a punch line. Fox & Friends helped make President Trump—and now helps make President Trump’s agenda. According to a Media Matters study, between September 1, 2018, and August 31, 2020, Trump sent 1,206 live-tweets about television shows, nearly all of them Fox programs, and 355 of them in response to something he was watching on Fox & Friends.

And many of those segments represent a brand of casual fear and divisiveness that pervades Fox News and has washed over much of America in the past four years. For Fox & Friends viewers, there is an immigrant invasion, populated by criminals, murderers, the other. After the Trump administration began separating families at the border, Kilmeade emphasized that these are “not our kids.” Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna
Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib are communist and anti-American, as is, according to some guests, wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19. On *Fox & Friends*, a lighthearted segment can feature a QAnon supporter wearing a brick-wall outfit to a Trump rally.

To many, Doocy is a faux simpleton at the head of the vast right-wing machinery, somebody who toggles between reciting the president’s talking points and writing them, in an endless, mindless morning-TV loop. But this past summer, as I spent many covid-quarantine mornings with Doocy and his cohosts on their famous “curvy couch,” I realized he is no puppet master. Nor is he a simpleton. He is something else.

Doocy lacks the rage of his cohost Kilmeade, who has all of Hannity’s spittle but even less engagement with ideas, and he shows none of the deer-in-headlights vacancy of Ainsley Earhardt. He is, rather, precisely somebody for whom Bill Clinton is a footnote to Arsenio Hall. In a Doocy world, pop-culture levity rises above the news, is above the news.

Doociness gets to an important and little-understood part of Fox News: like Doocy, most Americans are not zealots like Hannity or Tucker Carlson, or perpetually enraged like Kilmeade. According to two political scientists who study political engagement, 80 to 85 percent of Americans “follow politics casually or not at all.” And yet millions of them voted for an insult comedian whose political philosophy, to the extent he has one, is “Lock her up!” There is a little bit of Doocy in all of them.

Stephen James Doocy—Stephen to his parents but Steve to his four younger sisters and his subordinates in the Future Farmers of America, which he served as chapter president at Clay Center High School in 1974—was born in 1956 in Algona, Iowa.

His father, Jim, worked at Welp, a huge chicken hatchery, in the town of Bancroft. Welp was the company in a company town, and numerous Doocys had drawn Welp paychecks over the years. When Steve was young, his dad took a new job, selling advertisements for a plat book, an atlas showing who owns what in a rural area. He was given Kansas as his territory, and the Doocys moved to a town there called Russell, where Jim Doocy would sometimes bump into a young congressman, Bob Dole, running errands. “They would talk about things people talked about in the sixties,” Doocy said, in one of four lengthy phone calls I had with him as summer turned to fall this year. “Hey, Jim, how about that Bay of Pigs?”

Jim soon took a new job, and the family bounced around, doing time in Abilene and Salina. In sixth grade, Doocy attended a one-room schoolhouse in Industry, where the last post office closed in 1906. There were eleven students, four of them Doocys.

As a teenager, Doocy liked Kurt Vonnegut, whose countercultural celebrity was peaking at the precise moment Doocy was feathering his hair for his first junior high dance. He had played with the idea of becoming a doctor, but now, as an aspiring wordsmith, he developed a strong vocational crush on the two young reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, breaking story after story about Richard Nixon’s malfeasance. “As the nation was caught up in Watergate, it’s like, ‘How come it’s only these two guys who are figuring out the whole story? That’s so cool!’” Nixon resigned in August 1974, the month before Doocy began his senior year of high school.

Doocy worked on his school newspaper, and the next year he was off to the University of Kansas to study journalism. On the first day of school, he and his roommate, a fellow Future Farmer of America, were walking around campus when they heard loud music “coming out of a little scroungy-looking building. And the door was open, and we walked in. And we walked directly into the control room of a radio station. It was a hot day, and the door was open because the AC didn’t work.”

Doocy had never given a thought to college radio, but he liked the idea. As a teenager, one of his other
great heroes, besides Woodward and Bernstein, was Paul Harvey, a radio host and erstwhile McCarthyite beloved by millions, although not by the liberals he red-baited (according to a New York Times obituary in 2009, Harvey also “railed against welfare cheats and defended the death penalty. He worried about the national debt, big government, bureaucrats who lacked common sense, permissive parents, leftist radicals and America succumbing to moral decay. He championed rugged individualism, love of God and country, and the fundamental decency of ordinary people.”). Doocy had no opinion of Harvey’s politics; he just loved a good storyteller.

Musically speaking, Doocy’s tastes had always run to the lite end of contemporary—Jim Croce, James Taylor, Elton John—but now, as a DJ, he pushed the boat out from shore a bit. “You would just say, ‘Those were the Moody Blues, and next up, here’s Boz Scaggs!’” On October 15 of his freshman year, Doocy was behind the turntable when word came that KJHK had gotten FCC permission to broadcast beyond the campus, to a radius of almost ten miles. As the new signal went live, Doocy chose the first song, Jimi Hendrix’s version of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

In small-town Kansas, KJHK was the place: DJs scored interviews with Blondie, Tom Petty, Patti Smith. And Doocy did stints as program director and station manager. He became KJHK. He was the perfect man for his time and place: pumped for an interview with the Ramones, but uninterested in drugs or revolution. (He never smoked pot, although he did enjoy 3.2 beer, which was for sale in grocery stores at a time when much of Kansas was still dry.)

He still revered Woodward and Bernstein, but man, radio was fun. And television, too, which he would soon discover suited him just as well. Doocy had it: the right mix of ego and affability to enter other people’s living rooms and put them at ease. His junior year, he took a part-time job at the NBC affiliate in Washington, DC. He special-
ized in goofball segments, branded “Steve Doocy’s World,” that ran at the end of the news half hour. In a late-eighties segment that survives on YouTube, Doocy interviews Bob Golub, a New Yorker who believes that his potatoes, regular spuds on which he writes his name in black marker, bring people luck. As Golub ambles around DC, trying to bestow potatoes on people, he is followed by Doocy, who asks viewers, “Why is he so a-peeling?”

Doocy got offered a daily syndicated show, House Party, based on the long-running Art Linkletter show of the same name. The show, which taped in NBC’s Studio 8H at Rockefeller Center, home of Saturday Night Live, lasted just one season. After that, Doocy bounced back to Washington, but not for long. He had caught the attention of television producer and political consultant Roger Ailes—the messaging genius who had worked with Nixon, Reagan, and the first President Bush—whom NBC had hired to start a new twenty-four-hour news channel called America’s Talking.

The main premise of America’s Talking, which

If one had to describe the politics of Steve Doocy on the eve of his college graduation, in 1979—the late Carter years, inflation high, six months before hostages were taken in Iran—one might say he was a good-government solutionist liberal. He was against corruption, was untroubled by the loosening cultural mores of the Me Decade, and shared the broad American optimism that government could be a force for good.

“Everybody in the Doocy family was a Democrat,” Doocy said. When he was still at home, his mother had begun to develop heart troubles. “And while my dad had jobs, we never had health insurance. I don’t know that I knew anybody with medical coverage.” His high school girlfriend, whose parents were leaders of the Democratic Party in Clay County, got him involved in the congressional campaign of Bill Roy, a pro-choice congressman running for Senate in 1974 against Dole, now a powerful incumbent Republican. Roy, a doctor, was pushing for universal coverage. “And look, I wanted to protect my mom,” Doocy said. “I was like, ‘Look, that’s the best thing anybody has ever come up with. I have to pull out all the stops.’ So I knocked on doors for Bill Roy. Ultimately, he lost. And that was heartbreaking.”

In 1984, he left Kansas for a plum job with WRC, the NBC affiliate in Washington, DC. He specialized in goofball segments, branded “Steve Doocy’s World,” that ran at the end of the news half hour. In a late-eighties segment that survives on YouTube, Doocy interviews Bob Golub, a New Yorker who believes that his potatoes, regular spuds on which he writes his name in black marker, bring people luck. As Golub ambles around DC, trying to bestow potatoes on people, he is followed by Doocy, who asks viewers, “Why is he so a-peeling?”

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The main premise of America’s Talking, which
went on air July 4, 1994, and lasted two years, seemed to be, “We can do twenty-four-hour talk that’s way less serious, and way more fun, than what they’re doing on CNN”—the big cable news network of the time. It launched the television career of Chris Matthews, who had a nighttime politics show. The middle of the day featured shows like Am I Nuts?, with Long Island psychologist Dr. Bernie Katz and behavioral therapist Cynthia Richmond solving people’s problems, and Bugged!, a show about stuff that bugged people. And in the morning, from seven to nine, America’s Talking, with Doocy and his cohost Kai Kim. The hosts chatted and cooked and bantered with Tony Morelli, “the Prodigy Guy.” Morelli worked for early internet service Prodigy, which had a partnership with the network; viewers were invited to post their feedback on Prodigy for Morelli to share, in an early version of the Twitter real-time feedback loop. Morelli did his bits while sitting in a classic American convertible, “the Prodigy Vehicle,” in front of a screen, with highway scenery going by—to show that he was on “the information superhighway.”

America’s Talking was shut down in 1996, after NBC decided to partner with Microsoft to form MSNBC. Doocy’s colleagues from that period emphasize that they had no idea if he was a conservative. What they remembered was that he and his wife, Kathy, were generous hosts who would have everyone out to their place in Wyckoff, New Jersey. Bill McCuddy got hired at the network by winning a nationwide search for a new host, a publicity stunt Ailes had cooked up. Doocy was there when McCuddy was introduced. “We were taking this group picture,” McCuddy remembered, “and he leaned down to me and said, ‘Never work with puppets.’”

After America’s Talking was shuttered, Ailes jumped from NBC to News Corp, where Rupert Murdoch hired him to start the right-leaning network that would be Fox News Channel. Ailes took a bunch of his America’s Talking talent with him, including Katz, Mike Jerrick, McCuddy, and Doocy. At first Doocy was doing the weather—a reprise of his first role in Topeka local news—but almost immediately he was made one of three cohosts of Fox & Friends, the job he has had ever since.

When it launched, in 1998, Fox & Friends hewed pretty close to the immensely lucrative morning-show model, pioneered by Today on NBC and Good Morning America on ABC: regular news breaks punctuating long stretches of “lifestyle” segments, about animals or cooking or celebrities. But not for long. “It really all changed with 9/11,” Doocy said.

The show didn’t drop the lighter fare entirely, but at a moment when the country went all in for patriotism—when the Dixie Chicks (now just the Chicks) could mortally wound their own career by criticizing the president from the concert stage—Fox stood out for its jingoistic fervor. Fighting terror, supporting the troops, and attacking dissenters became the Fox brand. It was great for ratings.

Even the lighter fare became more political, a change most evident in the role of Donald Trump. When Fox & Friends began featuring the future president, he was very much a lifestyle guest—socialite, real estate developer, reality TV host, People magazine cover boy, one-man brand. Then, in 2011, he began using his Fox appearances to promote his obsessive “birther” crusade, trumpeting the baseless theory that Barack Obama was not born in the United States (a theory in which Fox hosts like Hannity also dabbled). On March 28, 2011, as Trump was on the phone with Fox & Friends talking about Libya, the network ran a graphic asking, “What would President Trump do?”

Doocy has never seemed as intense about politics as his cohost Kilmeade, who appears as though he needs to fan himself whenever Trump joins the show by phone. Nevertheless, Doocy has been the genial ringmaster for almost twenty years of on-air immigrant-baiting, gun-rights salivating, white-nationalist coddling, and Obama-hatred. He has been the chief attendant to Trump; when he has given pushback, asked tough questions, it’s only to the point that Trump enjoys, so the big man can mix it up.

At one point, frustrated, I let Doocy have it. I said that my liberal friends and I look at the president and think of his “pussy grabbing,” his lies, his refusal to release his tax returns, his attacks on China and immigrants—all of it—and wonder how a decent person could vote for the man. Even if one agrees with his conservative policies, it would have to be a tough vote to cast. No? “It seems not to touch you,” I said.

Doocy conceded the point, sort of. “That is an excellent question you pose, and I honestly hadn’t really thought about it like that...”

Had Doocy always been the conservative in their group? “No, not at all,” he said. “I will say just the opposite.”
Doocy says he voted for Trump in 2016. He once voted for Jimmy Carter, and he used to be an independent, but he is now a registered Republican—so he can vote in primaries, he told me. “I voted for Ross Perot either one or two times, because it’s like, whatever was going on was not working. I didn’t like either party. I think most of my adult life I have been more in the middle, and then, when given the choice between the two, it’s What policies I am most concerned about right now? To be honest, since 9/11, for me, the big stuff is security—national security, personal security.”

Doocy has written four books: Tales from the Dad Side: Misadventures in Fatherhood; The Mr. & Mrs. Happy Handbook: Everything I Know About Love and Marriage (with corrections by Mrs. Doocy); and two cookbooks with his wife, Kathy, the second of which, The Happy in a Hurry Cookbook: 100-Plus Fast and Easy New Recipes That Taste Like Home, was published last month and debuted at number one on Amazon’s best-seller list.

As he has aged, Doocy has moved back toward his Catholic faith. He attends Mass regularly, and he often talks about religion during his daily walks with Tony de Nicola, his close friend and a devout Catholic who has given millions to the University of Notre Dame. The shift began with the death of his mother, JoAnne, on Christmas Day, 1997. For over a year, he had trouble sleeping. Until, one night, Doocy dreamed that his phone was ringing, and when he answered, his mother was on the line. She was fine, she said, and she was able to watch Fox & Friends in heaven. Then he woke up—sad that it was a dream, but cheered nonetheless. Then, a few months later, before falling asleep, he looked through the skylight at the moon and asked God for a sign. “Let me know,” he implored his creator, “there is a second act.” He addressed his mother: “Mom, if you’re up there, somewhere—show me.”

When his alarm went off, at 3:27am, Z-100 FM, New York City’s Top 40 powerhouse, began to play a particular tune. “I was about to turn off the clock radio when Janet Jackson started her hit song, ‘Together Again,’ about how one day she’d be reunited in heaven with a lost loved one,” he writes in his new cookbook. “I listened to the whole song with goosebumps the size of saucers. That was some impressive signage, I thought, and I felt a wave of something good wash over me.”

Today, Steve Doocy is sixty-four, he’s made his money, and he doesn’t have to keep hitting the alarm clock at 3:27 in the morning. But he was born to be on the air, and he is. That’s a privilege, and Doocy is a grateful man. But I wonder if, like the rest of us on the downslope of life, he ponders whether he picked the right mountain.

One former America’s Talking producer compared Doocy to another radio personality who landed in right-wing media. “I feel like Steve Doocy

“I was not so invested in any of the candidates that I had to see what happened. I got a good night’s sleep.”
is like Glenn Beck, a journeyman DJ who will do what you need,” the producer said. “‘You want me to do country? I’ll do country! You want me to do AOR?’”—album-oriented rock—“‘I’ll do AOR.’ Then he stumbled into right-wing [TV] and was kind of good at it. He was the ambling guy who would bob around the office being goofy. To see him transformed into this guy has been weird.”

When we spoke in September, Doocy said he was still an undecided voter. “I’ve got to see,” he said. Doocy told me he wished people could just talk to one another again, and really listen. He said he could imagine voting for Republicans and Democrats in the future. I asked which Democrats out there might win his vote. “I will tell you this,” he said. “I went to a Pete Buttigieg rally in New Hampshire, and I liked his message a lot. And Kevin Costner was there, and I did a little interview with him, and it’s like, I think he’s interesting.” (I think he meant Buttigieg, not Costner.)

Then, in October, a month after I first asked Doocy whom he was voting for, I checked in with him again. By this time, there had been one debate and the dueling town halls on the night of the canceled second debate. America was, at that moment, perhaps the most polarized it has been outside of wartime. Doocy was not too concerned.

“I am going to tell you a story,” Doocy said. “Election night, 2016, what time did you go to bed?” About midnight, I told him. “I went to bed at 9:15,” he said. “Because what are you going to do? I knew who I had voted for.” The next morning, he learned of Trump’s victory from a note left by one of his children. “I was like, Wha? But I was not so invested in any of the candidates that I had to see what happened. I got a good night’s sleep.”
One week before Election Day, President Trump tweeted, “Big problems and discrepancies with Mail In Ballots all over the USA”—a claim he used to call for the dismissal of some of those ballots and for a definitive result on November 3 regardless of outstanding votes. Since the summer, Trump has cherry-picked examples of voting irregularities to paint a picture of an unreliable and exploitable system. Those examples are often plucked from developing stories covered by local news outlets that continue to pursue clarity for their readers even after the president reaches for the next one.

CJR spoke with reporters in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Minnesota, and New Jersey about their efforts to reassure local readers about the integrity of the electoral process, even as national figures spin stories about their coverage areas. Most described their reporting on these issues as a balancing act—weighing the need to decisively counter Trump’s misleading claim against the possibility of appearing as a partisan corrective to a divisive president who has primed supporters to view journalism as dissent.

**PATERNON, NEW JERSEY**

On June 25, New Jersey’s attorney general announced voting fraud charges against four men in connection with a Paterson City Council election held the previous month. The election was the first one to be conducted almost entirely by mail, per an order issued by Gov. Phil Murphy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The result was messy: nearly 20 percent of ballots were rejected, and multiple candidates contested the results. Trump latched on to the story, conflating the ballot rejection rate with instances of fraud. On June 28, Trump tweeted, “Bad things happen with Mail-Ins. Just look at Special Election in Patterson [sic], N.J. 19% of Ballots a FRAUD!”

Trump’s comments found their way into local and national coverage, including by Terrence T. McDonald, a reporter for NorthJersey.com. But critically, in his follow-up coverage, McDonald contextualized the number of ballots thrown out—just two years earlier, 11 percent of mail-in ballots had been rejected from a city election—and spoke with local officials and civic leaders who refuted the idea that the incident was predictive of what would occur in the general election. Many of the discounted ballots, McDonald reported, were actually discarded over issues with voters and deliverers failing to complete a “bearer certificate”—more likely attributable to error, not fraud. He also noted the Trump campaign’s lawsuit against the state’s new rules concerning mail-in ballots, which was ultimately thrown out; Trump’s repeated references to Paterson on Twitter; and Trump’s previous vilification of a New Jersey city in 2016, when, as a candidate for president, he claimed that “thousands and thousands of people were cheering” in Jersey City as the World Trade Center fell, an attempt to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment.

The few criminal charges that have been filed in relation to the Paterson episode are still pending—and, according to McDonald, are “so specific that it’s hard to replicate in anything other than a local race.” While McDonald allowed for the possibility that limited cases might demonstrate voter fraud, Trump’s comments, he tells CJR, “brought it to a different level.”
ATLANTA, GEORGIA
On September 2, Trump instructed his supporters in North Carolina to vote once by mail and then again in person. One week later, Georgia secretary of state Brad Raffensperger revealed that some Georgia voters had apparently done just that, during the summer’s primary election, and announced an investigation. “We didn’t have a whole lot of information at first about who these double voters were or what their motivations may be,” Mark Niesse, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter who covered the state’s investigation, says.

Niesse had already covered the history of voter fraud allegations in Georgia, for a piece that called concerns over mailed ballots “more a fear than a reality” and offered examples of scenarios that, while technical instances of voter fraud, are not part of a nefarious or coordinated campaign. (“When it does happen, it’s small or unintentional: a mother voting for her daughter, election officials accepting several ballots without signatures, a woman who asked her friend to turn in a ballot.”) He built on that foundation for a new story, which made clear the lack of coordinated fraud: “Inquiry shows 1,000 Georgians may have voted twice, but no conspiracy.”

“There aren’t usually allegations of large-scale tampering with absentee balloting in Georgia, although everyone latches on to the cases they do hear about,” Niesse says. Many of the readers he has heard from during this campaign season believe that voter fraud is either rampant or nonexistent, rather than merely rare; readers who gravitate to one extreme are skeptical of those on the other, something Niesse attributes to coverage from national outlets as well as messaging from political organizations trying to drum up enthusiasm. The national fixation on voter fraud, he says, “makes me try to be as careful as I can. There’s no need to overemphasize what the news value of something is, because I think people are primed to pay attention.”

OUTAGAMIE COUNTY, WISCONSIN
On September 21, deputies at the Outagamie County Sheriff’s Office in Wisconsin found three trays of mail in a ditch near Highway 96. A statement from the sheriff’s office said the mail contained “several” ballots, though many details, such as how many ballots were found or whether they had been completed or were being mailed to voters, remained unclear. Conservative outlets including Breitbart, Fox News, and the Washington Examiner ran stories about the incident, noting in headlines that absentee ballots were among the discarded mail. Trump appeared to reference the incident in the first presidential debate, during which he mentioned ballots found “in creeks.”

Patrick Marley, a state politics reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, has covered voting issues for more than a decade, including Wisconsin’s controversial 2011 voter identification law, challenges to which have sprawled into this election season. Given the gaps in the official announcement, he wanted to tread carefully. “You have the president stepping into that and saying—at least implying—it’s a sign of some kind of voter fraud effort,” Marley says. “And clearly a lost ballot is a problem, just like any lost mail is a problem. I wouldn’t say that amounts to fraud.” Marley held off on covering the story until October 1—the day the state elections commission announced that no Wisconsin ballots were among the discarded mail, a detail made front and center in the headline to Marley’s story. In the story itself, Marley put Trump’s claims in context, showing them against the backdrop of Trump’s previous assaults on mail-in voting and connecting mail issues to funding cuts and related slowdowns at the United States Postal Service.

LUZERNE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA
On September 24, the Department of Justice released a memo publicizing an investigation into the provenance of nine military ballots apparently discarded in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. The memo, which offered few details, initially noted that all the ballots had been votes for Trump, though that language was later corrected. The next morning, Trump referenced the episode in Pennsylvania, tweeting that “there is fraud being found all over the place.”

Within a day, Julia Hatmaker, a reporter for PennLive who covered the Justice Department announcement, had reported a more detailed account. The ballots had been accidentally discarded by a temporary worker who had been on
the job for just a few days, and all had been recovered immediately. Hatmaker’s story emphasized that, in fact, the local election board’s processes were sound; its headline read, “Investigation over Trump ballots proves Pa. election system works: Luzerne County officials.”

Ron Southwick, managing producer and editor at PennLive, says his outlet is “not so much concerned with trying to look like we’re taking a side or that we’re out there trying to counter the message of the president. That’s not our job.” The headline to Hatmaker’s story did counter Trump’s message, but, according to Southwick, it was intended as a corrective to Trump’s allegations, which had already been amplified. “President Trump, with his extraordinary reach on social media, he’s able to get his message out quickly,” Southwick says, “and we wanted to make sure we were getting out what the local officials were saying in response to that message.”

Southwick says PennLive has adjusted its typical election coverage in an attempt to keep readers informed about the different ways they can vote, and how to ensure their votes are counted. Coverage this election season has frequently eschewed the more typical narrative stories in favor of concise information about the electoral process—how-tos, for instance, or maps of ballot drop box locations, even if it means republishing similar information. “We know people are really struggling to keep on top of everything they need to do just to get through the day,” Southwick says, referring to disruption caused by the pandemic. “So sometimes we sort of republish stories, with maybe a different headline, that’s just basic voter information.”

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA
On September 27, Project Veritas released a video that purported to show Rep. Ilhan Omar’s campaign paying people to collect ballots en masse from members of the Minneapolis Somali community and bring them to the polls. On its face, the video—which also made similar, vague allegations against Somali-American city council member Jamal Osman—raised many red flags: Project Veritas has a history of deceptively editing videos and passing them off as undercover journalism, and, at the time the video was likely filmed, ballot harvesting had been made legal by court order. The video was swiftly promoted by Donald Trump Jr. and went viral; an investigation by researchers with the Election Integrity Partnership later determined, per the New York Times, that the video was “probably part of a coordinated disinformation effort” intended to distract from a Times investigation of Trump’s taxes. Within twenty-four hours of the video’s release, Trump had retweeted a Breitbart story about it, writing, “This is totally illegal.”

After the video went viral, staff at the Sahan Journal—a nonprofit newsroom that covers news for immigrants and refugees in Minnesota, including the Somali community that the video focused on—discussed how best to cover it without repeating its central claims, many of which have since been widely debunked. Becky Dernbach and Hibah Ansari, Report for America corps members at the Sahan Journal, decided on a “truth sandwich” method when reporting on the disinformation, sticking false or misleading allegations between statements of fact to avoid amplifying the video’s disputed claims. To do otherwise, Dernbach says, would be to risk “perpetuat[ing] the sensationalism instead of getting at what’s true.”

The Sahan Journal’s relationship with the city’s Somali community, which helped elect Omar and Osman, also helped the reporters access sources that others missed. For example, they knew from their reporting that Omar Jamal, a central figure in the Veritas video, had a history as a provocateur and of making unverifiable claims. (Somali American TV, a Minnesota news show distributed via YouTube, was the first to note Jamal’s departure from the Veritas narrative—something the Sahan Journal flagged in its own subsequent coverage.) Some people depicted in the video, and others with knowledge of its making, came to the Sahan Journal with their stories. “I think that speaks to people hopefully trusting us with stories,” Dernbach says.

Mukhtar Ibrahim, the Sahan Journal’s founder, later posted a screenshot of Google results for the words “project veritas ballot harvesting.” The Sahan Journal’s explainer neared the top of the results—right after less critical coverage from Fox News and the New York Post. In his post, Ibrahim encouraged readers, “Keep reading and sharing our story.” CJR
The results of election night 2020 were not as conclusive as many anxious Americans had hoped. But, for me, one long-running debate was settled for good: it’s time to retire the New York Times’ needle—the graphic display that shows the likely winner of an election.

I’ll say right up front that I have been a strong partisan in this particular fight. In 2016, I found that the whipsawing gauges, which were programmed to be extra bouncy, accomplished nothing but to induce high anxiety. (Others disagree, of course, because it’s the internet. I also pronounce “gif” with a soft G. Don’t @ me.)

On Monday, the Times’ polling guru Nate Cohn announced that the needles were returning for 2020, but only sort of: instead of a running gauge predicting the ultimate winner of the presidential election, the Times limited it to just three states: Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina. Why those three states? Because they were releasing the kind of data that the needle’s algorithms require. Cohn wrote that they were restoring the needles because they allowed for a simple presentation of complex electoral analysis, in real time.

When Florida began releasing votes soon after polls closed, all three swung toward Trump. A little after 9pm, Cohn explained on Twitter, in a fairly complicated walk through the models used, that he thought they were being too pessimistic.

Throughout the night, Cohn continued to interpret results in terms not of the election outcome, but of the needle: “Trump’s lead in Georgia down to 2.5 points; needle unmoved on the news.”

This seemed a strange use of his time as, in the run-up to the election, Cohn’s polling blog was an exceptional resource for making sense of the deluge of survey data released each day, and was nuanced and hedged enough in its explanations that it is difficult to criticize even in the wake of results that have again left people questioning the reliability of polling.

The Times did, in fact, turn off this year’s needles at 6am on Wednesday morning. It removed all traces of them from its election results pages.

It should be for good. Instead of educating readers on how to understand its needle, the Times should continue to educate readers on how to understand the election results themselves. They have exceptionally skilled human beings, like Cohn, who can do a much better job than a faux dial.
The final vote tallies still aren’t known, but the media verdict of this presidential election is in: it’s 2016 all over again. Four years ago, in the hours after Donald Trump declared victory on the strength of 306 Electoral College votes and the ballots of nearly sixty-three million Americans, I wrote a column about the failures of the press throughout that campaign, and declared that “journalism’s moment of reckoning” had arrived. “Reporters’ eagerness first to ridicule Trump and his supporters, then to dismiss them, and finally to actively lobby and argue for their defeat have led us to a moment when the entire journalistic enterprise needs to be rethought and rebuilt,” I wrote then.

It is astonishing, today, how little we seem to have learned since. Once again, opinion polls were overhyped and under-scrutinized. Some of them were also wildly off—and, though that’s different from 2016, when the polls were largely accurate but widely misunderstood, it doesn’t let media organizations off the hook for their treatment of the numbers. Newsrooms leaned too heavily on polls as a substitute for on-the-ground reporting, and they were led astray. Journalists spent too much time talking to each other on Twitter, inhabiting an alternate algorithmic reality that bore little resemblance to the life of the country. And major media institutions made it all but impossible to envision that, despite the wealth of reporting on the president’s lies and his racism and his circus—nearly half the country remains beholden to the man and his beliefs. “We can’t go back to assuming, just because we think Donald Trump is an outlier, that he is not connecting to a lot of American people in ways that, frankly, a lot of us cannot understand,” Claire McCaskill, a former Missouri senator, said Wednesday morning on MSNBC. The feeling of déjà vu, and of lost journalistic opportunity, is inescapable.

This, then, will be the media debate as we move forward: How much of the election outcome is about Americans and what they think, and how much is it about the proto-authoritarian who occupies the Oval Office, who used party machinery and the most powerful propaganda networks in history to mislead the electorate? Both factors matter, of course. But it is certain that much less journalistic firepower has gone into probing the country than into pointing out the infinite faults of the man who, at the moment, leads it. (Remember the post-2016 pledges to “go out into the country”? We seem to have forgotten.)

It would be unfair not to note what many reporters got right in this cycle. They predicted that early voting would favor Biden, and that turnout in big cities would be huge. They advised the electorate of entirely legitimate delays in vote counting, and warned that Trump would likely declare premature victory. They chastised Republican legislatures for engineering an electoral process that would leave Trump a legal opening. They counseled patience, which is never a reporter’s instinct. They knew that, the closer we came to the election, the darker and more threatening Trump would become.

Still, we’ve kept too big of a distance from too much of America, nearly half of which has voted for an administration that downplayed a deadly pandemic; exacerbated the climate crisis; emboldened racism, xenophobia, and gender-based violence; and embraced an authoritarian’s handbook on misinformation. In 2016, the press determined that our inability to grasp Trump’s rise ranked as one of our deepest failures. To repeat that mistake—as it
appears we have—is somehow worse. Our task now is to report on the fact, ugly as it is, that Trump won more than sixty-seven million votes. That story is only partly about the president’s odious tweets and lies. Voters who support him know about most, if not all, of his flaws—thanks in no small part to some great journalism—and yet pulled the lever for him anyway. Now is our time to focus on the America he has laid bare.

We are hindered in our efforts by the hollowing-out of local newsrooms across the country. In so many ways, local journalists serve as reality checks, outside of the Beltway bubble and deeply sourced in their own communities. In 2016, almost without exception, local reporters in districts that had voted for Trump—mystifying the political class—said that they weren’t surprised. These reporters had seen the evidence of Trump’s popularity in yard signs and letters to the editor, in rallies and debates that weren’t captured by national-media microphones. With many of those journalists now stretched impossibly thin, or laid off, the national press has been left to fill the local-news void—a job that, at the moment, it is neither equipped nor prepared to perform. Before the next election cycle, the top posts at the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, and elsewhere are expected to turn over. The new leaders at those places will be tasked with making this right.

Trump will, sooner or later, be gone—no doubt under duress. What is left for the press to understand—and it may be the biggest story of our lifetimes—is a vast, complicated country.
I thought a majority of conservative media outlets would frame last night’s inconclusive voting results as a Trump victory. Instead, in some cases, they were even-handed.

Fox News called Arizona and Maine for Biden, ahead of CNN and MSNBC. This was a surprising and welcome development in a fractured media landscape characterized by polarized reporting and opinion. The Washington Examiner also provided fodder for this détente of sorts. Senior columnist Timothy Carney called Trump’s claims of voter fraud “unpresidential and bad.”

Others could not resist the tastiest sound bite from Trump’s speech—“frankly, we did win this election.” It allowed several conservative outlets to amplify the president’s dark interpretation of the voting results. Both WND and Big League Politics had prominent homepage stories featuring that unverified declaration. Aggressively pro-Trump writer Conrad Black asserted in his column for American Greatness that Trump “has probably won.”

Neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer agreed with him. Ominously, its editor, Andrew Anglin, wrote: “Trump is ready to take whatever actions are necessary to ensure that our country is not stolen from us. We are going to win. You may be called upon to help the president.”

Meanwhile, the Daily Caller’s White House correspondent Christian Datoc spent the evening inside the White House to report on Trump’s election night party. We learned that guests dined on hamburgers, french fries, and pigs in a blanket. Few wore masks. (We can only dream of what Hunter Thompson might have written in such a target-rich environment.)

There was one area of clear agreement between media outlets on the right and those on the left. Everyone despaired of polling. It was the night’s only clear loser, so far. 

Howard Polskin
November 4, 2020
What will the press do without Trump?

In November 1962, the not-yet-infamous Richard Nixon famously gave what he claimed would be his last press conference, right after losing a gubernatorial race in California (and two years after losing a presidential bid to John Kennedy). This is what he told reporters:

As I leave you, I want you to know—just think how much you’re going to be missing. You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference.

As we know, that wasn’t his last press conference, and reporters did have Nixon to kick around after 1962: a narrow presidential win in 1968, a massive victory in 1972, and then, in 1974, a resignation in disgrace.

We don’t know yet what Trump will tell the press when (or if) he finally admits defeat. We can predict that it will include some of Nixon’s self-pity, along with vitriol about how unfairly he has been treated and lies about how the election was stolen.

The more interesting questions, for journalists, are these:

What will the press do without Trump? How will we function without a towering political figure to kick and be kicked around by? And what will the press do about Trump? Once he’s out of office, how much longer will we allow him to set the news agenda?

For the past five years, journalists have tussled with a president who antagonizes the press as much as he courts it. Trump has demeaned and castigated journalists for actual errors, such as those that plagued the investigation into Russia’s involvement in the election, as well as slights that are part of the normal political process. While much of the sparring has been limited to Twitter, some of Trump’s press-hatred has fed into terrifying conspiracy theories. Remember Cesar Sayoc Jr., the Florida man who sent homemade pipe bombs to those he saw as Trump’s enemies, including CNN? And individual reporters, particularly women and those of color, have borne the brunt of vicious threats, both online and offline.

President-elect Joe Biden is likely to be a more accommodating figure, with less-shouty briefings and a far shorter litany of deceptive statements or outright lies. PolitiFact recently rated 38 percent of Biden’s statements as ranging between “mostly false” and “pants on fire,” while Trump clocks in at 72 percent on those metrics.

But should it be considered a victory that Biden isn’t nearly as dishonest? The danger is that our standards for scandal have changed so much, and Trump’s mendacity has become so deeply ingrained, that journalists could see a Biden administration’s garden-variety ineptitude or minor-league misconduct as not really worth their attention, in the same way that a single homicide won’t get much publicity if it occurs shortly after a mass shooting. In any newsroom, a nemesis like Trump clarifies the mind and the mission. Biden is unlikely to become so polarizing or riveting a figure.

For now, the press is vowing to hold the incoming administration to account. As Brian Stelter, CNN’s chief media correspondent, recently wrote, “The media’s adversarial approach that you’ve seen during the Trump years...serves us well no matter who holds high office. If Biden says the blue sky is red, the media must call it out.” That sounds very noble; let’s see if it holds true.

And what of Trump, an ex-president who’s unlikely to fade into the bushes, Homer Simpson-style? Nixon doesn’t provide a useful template. As
John Aloysius Farrell, author of a superb biography, told me, Nixon went to great lengths to rehabilitate his image after his California defeat. He traveled the world, “stopping in at embassies and ministries to talk to US and foreign diplomats. Then he presented what he learned in the form of speeches, after-dinner talks and essays...to build a reputation in the eyes of the press as an expert in international affairs.” It’s safe to predict that Trump won’t follow that path—and, as Farrell noted, he won’t need to, given that today’s media landscape is far less dependent on a few major gatekeepers.

Once Biden takes over, we can expect to see a flood of damning evidence about how the Trump administration managed its affairs—the way its Justice Department handled investigations into the president’s opponents; the way its Environmental Protection Agency diminished regulatory oversight; and, most crucially, the way its healthcare officials botched the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists are likely to spend as much time doing forensic analysis of the past president’s conduct as they are of the new president’s programs and policies. But it won’t just be retrospective journalism, given that Trump can craft his own media empire. As Lauren Williams, editor in chief of Vox, said this week: “It would be a mistake to say, ‘Trump is out of office—we just don’t have to pay attention to him anymore.’” While journalists shouldn’t “hang on everything he says,” Williams added, we can’t pretend that “he doesn’t still wield power and influence.”

This may wind up as the greatest risk of all for the press. Trump, who craves the spotlight the way a kitten craves the sunny corner of a rug, will demand to be seen and heard. It will take every ounce of self-control that journalists can muster to resist his insistence on getting attention and airtime. We saw how badly the cable networks, in particular, handled this in the 2016 campaign, with their incessant and uncritical broadcasting of Trump rallies and remarks, to the point of live-shooting his campaign plane as it came in for final approach. (Assessing the coverage years later, CNN president Jeff Zucker was just restating the obvious when he said that his network’s obliviousness toward Trump was “probably a mistake.”)

If journalists allow ex-president Trump to set their agenda the way they’ve done with candidate and President Trump, they’ll enable the Biden administration to skate by without the scrutiny that it deserves and that the public expects. At a time when trust in journalism already is shaky, that’s a legacy the press can’t afford.
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