Journalism, Populism and the Future of Democracy

Keynote speech of Robert G. Picard, Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, to the 40th Anniversary Symposium of the Institut für Journalistik, Technische Universität Dortmund, October 28, 2016.

It is a pleasure to be here with you today to celebrate the anniversary of the Institut für Journalistik, which has for 40 years been a leader in improving journalistic practices.

Today I will address the critical vulnerabilities of contemporary journalism practice that allow populist parties and their supporters to actively manipulate the press and delegitimize and subvert democratic processes.

Populism has followers throughout the democratic world and is growing in strength in many countries. Populist leaders in Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere are gaining strength and testing the journalistic notions of objectivity, fairness and balance, and showing journalistic practice to be deficient. If journalists and news organisations do not respond, we risk the essential freedoms that citizens of democratic society enjoy and place Western democracies in harm's way.

Journalists and news organisations all too often have not taken populism seriously as a political force. We have tended to marginalize it as unimportant by ignoring it or describing it with simplistic almost neutral phrases such as calling it "the far right" or "anti-immigrant party", or acting as if populist parties and leaders have no hope of victory or influencing political processes and outcomes. The ways journalists have covered, and not covered, populists and the rise of populism are in part responsible for their importance in political and social life today.

The contemporary environment is not the first time in which societies have wrestled with the challenge. Populism has risen and declined at various points in history, usually in periods of economic and social turmoil. Unemployment and underemployment, wealth inequality, race issues, and rapid social change are often triggers. Populism is built upon individual and collective feelings of insecurity, disaffection, frustration, resentment and anger that are represented and released through populism. It can be associated with both the political left and right. Fundamentally, populism is based in misunderstandings about the complexity of society, false notions about democracy, misrepresentation of facts, and unashamed self-interests. It is reactionary, offers careless and reckless proposals, simplistic rhetorical solutions without real plans for action, and can all too easily evolve into authoritarianism and fascism.

Populism is powerful because it persuades by focusing on common human fears: threats of outsiders, loss of identity, diminished autonomy and control over one's life, loss of material comforts, and the unknown. These fears are very real and inside all of all. These fears cannot be easily dismissed. Research has shown that heightened levels of uncertainty, threat, and anxiety produce both physiological and psychological changes and intensified fear reactions. The more danger perceived and more fear produced, the more likely to support populist solutions. Populists, unfortunately, focus primarily upon fanning these fears rather than focusing on opportunities, progress, and human betterment. And their protectionist approach is rarely well thought out or founded in clear policies, planning, or concern for its social, economic, or cultural effects.

Populism presents particular challenges to journalism and those who believe in facts and reason. The base of populist support tends to come from ill-informed or misinformed individuals who accept populist leaders at their word. They respond with high attention engagement to powerful speeches

and spectacles. They tend to be hypersensitive to threats and have exaggerated fear responses. They tend to ignore contrary evidence, logical arguments, or expert opinions because they believe those are parts of elite manipulation and conspiracies, or that only they perceive the truth.

Contemporary populism is characterised by its focus on a number of common elements: discontent with government effectiveness, anger at economic and employment conditions, fear and resentment of immigration, and readiness to embrace simplistic explanations and solutions. Representative democracy is perceived as being controlled by corrupt elites that need to be removed. The division of power among independent legislative, executive, and judicial branches is seen as undesirable, reducing governmental effectiveness, and hindering the populist agenda. Populists believe that governments can easily and rapidly alter economic and social conditions. Their world view typically contains elements of virulent nationalism and isolationism.

Responding to those factors, populist supporters tend to seek out charismatic dissenters, usually outside conventional parties and the mainstream of society. These leaders solidify their world views, draw people of similar views together, and become catalysts for action. Populist supporters tend to ignore or forgive the idiosyncrasies and faults of populist leaders and movements and to dismiss or excuse unrestrained behaviour and excesses.

The list of populist leaders and organisations in recent years is long, including Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen in France, Gert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Donald Trump in the United States. Political organisations such as Alternative für Deutschland, the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland, the UK Independence Party, and the Tea Party and even the Occupy movements in the US are all based on elements of populist ideology and rhetoric.

In promoting their views, populist leaders almost universally rely on hyperbole, misstatements, and demagoguery. They exhibit narcissistic traits and disdain for other people. Their rhetorical tools and practices do not produce negative reaction among their supporters, however, but rather increases their support and recruits new followers. They also make great headlines and stories for journalists and news media.

It is through that news selection and practice that populism exploits the vulnerabilities of journalism. The fundamental practices of journalism are used against itself and democratic society. By giving populists' outlandish statements and stunts attention, by treating them fairly, and by accurately reporting their statements and activities, journalists open themselves to exploitation in ways that distort and conceal truth. Malicious ideas that are antithetical to democracy, human dignity, and knowledge are regularly spread without direct correction or criticism, and thus the foundational values on which the practices of journalism were established are endangered.

I will illustrate the challenge through the rise of Donald Trump in the United States and the media coverage of his campaign.

Trump, as you know, is a wealthy real estate developer who has never been active in party politics. He is a political outsider who attacks the US political establishment and the status quo with an anger and rhetoric traditionally unseen in American politics. He is a performer who thrives on attention and feeds off crowd reaction. The more outrageous his speeches, the stronger supportive reaction he gets. His outrageous statements attract audiences and new supporters. He dismisses critics of his ideas and behaviour as "stupid", "idiots", "incompetent", and "losers". He uses language typically unacceptable in public life and denigrates women, disabled persons, and immigrants.

In doing so he provides a powerful narrative for news media, delivers good copy, and dominates the news cycle. Reporting his outrageous claims and vile attacks on political opponents and others has kept the news media from focusing on deeper issues. The norms of objectivity have kept most news media from doing little more than merely reporting his statements—even those filled with errors and misinformation. His outrageousness pushes other candidates off the front pages and out of lead broadcast stories. Trump has particularly dominated television news coverage, especially on cable news channels such as CNN and Fox News.

During the primary elections, Trump statements were rarely challenged or corrected, but merely reported—particularly on cable television news and public affairs shows. Trump launched attacks with equal vigour against the Republican elite establishment, the right wing opponents in the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party. He incited and condoned violence against protestors at his political rallies.

For the most part, news coverage of Trump's primary campaign focused on name calling and political infighting. This lack of evaluation of his policies can be somewhat explained by the fact that his campaign is based primarily on populist slogans rather than developed policy thinking. However, little effort was made to directly compare his views and proposals with those of other candidates or to discuss the flaws and weakness in the rough outlines of his policies.

Throughout the primary campaign, journalists completely misjudged the popularity of Trumps views and his ability to tap into popular resentment and anger. Political journalists in major media downplayed or dismissed his chances of becoming the Republican nominee because he was not part of the elites and didn't run in the political circles frequented by major political journalists.

When commentators and others have dared to raise questions, Trump portrayed them as villains who were part of the elite ruling class. He punished the press, withdrawing press credentials from the *Washington Post*, *Des Moines Register*, and most major online news organisations for unfavourable coverage. His security staff roughed up and removed journalists who asked questions they did not like during press conferences.

All of the attention drawn by his behaviour and that of his campaign staff dwarfed the coverage given to his rivals. Between January and September of this year, Trump received 822 minutes on the network television nightly news broadcasts, whereas Clinton received only 386 minutes. If valued as television advertising time, the free media attention on television news, cable news, and public affairs programs given Donald Trump during the primary elections was worth more than one billion dollars, compared to $300 million for his nearest competitor. This disparity catapulted Trump from being a sideshow performer into the Republican Party nominee.

News media have now begun to alter their coverage of Trump, in part because of widespread criticism of their behaviour during the primary elections. They created a monster that they are now set to destroy in the general election. Having finally seen the reality that he could become President, they have begun doing what they should have done before—examining his claims and investigating his past. Even conservative newspapers such as the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Arizona Republic*, and the *San Diego Union-Tribune* have broken tradition to denounce Trump and endorse Hillary Clinton.

Is it too late? Will the changing coverage keep Trump from becoming President? We will find out in ten days.

No one should feel superior in the false belief that European journalism has done better in covering populism than the American media. Failures of coverage across the continent have led to many voters embracing populist agendas and pushing governments to adopt populist policies. Journalism as a profession is partly to blame for populism because of its coverage practices and because it has not responded to stage management by populist leaders that exploits those practices.

Some journalists may be tempted to hold the contemporary economic crisis in journalism responsible for the deficiencies in covering populist leaders and movements. This is erroneous, because the problem has not been lack of coverage but, rather, poor coverage and because the challenges of covering populism existed long before the changing financial support for news enterprises.

We must thus consider what it is about the journalistic techniques and practices that are producing deficiencies, rendering us vulnerable to manipulation by populists, and negating the role of the press in democratic society.

To begin with, we must recognize that journalism is a form of storytelling about the world in which we live. It is important because humans interpret the world through stories, through narratives that organise, condense, and abridge facts, numbers, and complex concepts into less complicated explanations that help make sense of the world. Stories are the basis of journalism, but also of political communication, motion pictures, television programs, theater, and opera that help us comprehend events, issues, and social developments.

Populist leaders also employ storytelling, weaving narratives based on facts, suppositions, events, and issues that are not guided by the journalistic principles of accuracy and verification. They latch on to triggering events—millions of immigrants crossing borders, a vote to exit the EU—to seek levels of coverage and attention that they would not normally receive.

The end result for the public is that they are provided the populists' stories, within the framework of journalists' stories, in ways that do not adequately question the stories told by populist leaders and movements.

Part of the problem is that journalists' selection of what to cover and whose stories to tell is biased by emphasis on the novel, the unusual, the unexpected, and the deviant. Populist rallies and speeches typically involve all those factors, thus getting the attention and emphasis of journalists and news organizations.

That alone assists populists, but there are also significant failures in the news coverage itself.

The failures are not about accurate reporting, because most media accurately report populist speeches, pronouncements, and rhetoric. The failure is not one of fairness *per se*, because reporting of populist events and ideas are not often distorted. Nevertheless, there are significant failures involving accuracy, verification, balance, fairness, and permitting manipulation to occur.

The failure in accuracy occurs when journalists accurately report what is said, but the story does not present an accurate picture of the world to readers, viewers, or listeners. When stories are filled with assertions based on falsehoods and misinformation and they are not called into question by the journalist or contain rebuttals by other parties, some of the public will accept the assertions as truthful and based on established information. Quality journalism identifies dubious assertions to avoid misleading the public.

The second failure involves reporting without adequate fact checking and contextualisation. Journalists have a duty to their readers and to democratic society to ensure that the information in each article is as truthful as possible. This means they and their editors must do more than merely report on what candidates say, but provide information that confirms or contradicts statements made or show where statements are based on misinformation or misconstrued facts.

To avoid this failure of inadequate verification, journalists need to examine claims, seek out the facts, and expose falsehood. This needs to be done at the time of the original reporting, not 12 to 48 hours later. There should be no wait for other journalists, commentators, or members of the public to do so.

The third failure in reporting on populist leaders and movements results because journalists do not often respond to the significant challenges to the ideal of balanced reporting that it creates. The idea of balance—that there two sides of the story that must be told—often distorts the truth. This idea of two sides is erroneous on its face, because there are usually multiple sides of a story. The real failure, however, results when an equal "balanced" presentation gives reader the impression that each perspective should be given equal weight and is based on similar veracity.

This problem of false equivalency becomes a significant challenge in covering populists and others, because there are some ideas that simply should be ignored, repudiated, or denounced. Not all ideas are of equal value and should not be presented that way. Some are based on information and facts, some on unsupported beliefs; some are based on false premises and arguments, some on careful examination and deliberation; some are based on incorrect interpretation, some on sensible analysis; some are based on respect for all human beings, some are based on racism and hatred. Journalists must thus play a role in helping readers distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable ideas.

This equivalency and balance problem becomes particularly problematic when covering statements and ideas that are based on misinformation, misrepresentation, and falsehoods. How can truth be balanced with a lie?

In covering populism, journalists who provide neutral reporting of slander, hate speech, and lies become complicit in attacks on democratic values and human rights. When journalists remain unreasonably neutral, they help spread falsehoods and lies and promote the causes of hatred and racism. When journalists stand above it all and don't respond, they become partly responsible for the results.

A fourth failure involves the issue of fairness. Journalists have an obligation to be fair to those they are reporting about, but also to those they are reporting for. The duty to report fairly does not mean permitting misrepresentations, exaggerations, falsehoods, and lies to be disseminated without rejoinder. And when there is a conflict between duty to those being reported upon and the public, the duty to readers, viewers, and listeners should prevail.

The fifth failure has been to ignore or not react to manipulation. Many populists have learned to control journalistic practices to their benefit. Journalists must take special care when rallies and speeches and populist responses to public events and developments—terrorist attacks, fear of foreigners, floundering Middle East policy, and stagnant economies—are clearly being used to gain media attention or twist the coverage. Efforts should be made to ensure that reporting is not unduly responsive to deliberately provocative language and assertions. Failure to exercise care about manipulation makes journalists complicit in the effects of populism.

There is little journalists can do directly to overcome the fear and lack of knowledge of populist supporters because most are not regular readers and viewers of quality news providers. We need to ensure, however, that those who do use our newspapers, broadcasts, and other news platforms understand populism and its threats. We need to ensure we are identifying and covering its appearance, addressing it early, and then continuing to critically and carefully cover it without becoming its mouthpiece to recruit new supporters.

We need to be more aware of the types of coverage we are providing, whether our practices are skewing our coverage or allowing us to be manipulated, and the unintended effects of our coverage. Journalistic practices are not sacrosanct, but are in place to help us better serve the public and democratic society. Unthinking and uncritical adherence to the practices can become dangers to those objectives. We need to continually be asking whether we are merely showing loyalty to our practices or loyalty to our audiences and to democracy.

Populism continues to remain a danger to representative democracy. It is our responsibility as citizens and journalists to ensure an effective response to it and that the coverage we provide gives the public the information they need to astutely evaluate its elements, deficiencies, and threats. The future of democracy depends upon it.

Thank you.