



REUTERS
INSTITUTE for the
STUDY of
JOURNALISM

**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper
University of Oxford**

**All the president's lies:
Media coverage of lies in the US and France**

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Michaelmas and Hilary Term 2017

Sponsor: Fritt Ord

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Acknowledgements

First of all, thank you to my sponsor Fritt Ord in Norway, who allowed me to spend this valuable time here at the University of Oxford, one of the most inspiring places I have ever been. Big thanks to Dagsavisen, who generously gave me this precious time off to learn, think and explore. Thank you also to my supervisor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, one of the sharpest minds around, and to the good people at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for their important work and dedication, and to James Painter for teaching us how to punt and for being a wonderful guide and mentor through this time. Thank you also to everyone who agreed to speak to me about these sensitive issues and to all the journalists around the world who are doing their best in difficult times. Thank you also to Frances Stead Sellers for generously sharing interesting insights, thoughts and even contacts. Not least, a big thank you to the most amazing group of fellows! I want to thank every one of you for making this stay such a fantastic one. Your experience, intelligence, humour, enthusiasm, love, curiosity and openness have taught me so very much. You give me great hopes for the future of journalism and even for this world. I will miss all of you.

1. Introduction

On November 8th 2016 I was standing in the press area in the Javits Center in New York, to cover Hillary Clinton's election night party. The confetti machines were ready. The crowd's spirits were high. The Associated Press started calling state after state, at around 8 pm. First they called the safe and predictable ones. Clinton won Vermont. Trump won Indiana. A couple of hours later Ohio was called for Donald Trump. The cheerful atmosphere started to change. Shortly thereafter they announced a Republican victory in the decisive swing state of Florida. When he won Wisconsin at 2:30 am, it was clear Donald Trump would be the 45th president of the United States. Soon after, Trump took the stage to hold his victory speech to a mostly stunned American audience, and a very surprised press corps. Trump had defied most predictions. He had refused to follow the unwritten rules. And he had won.

There is of course a range of reasons for Donald Trump's victory. I will not go into all of them here. But I will look at Donald Trump's relationship with facts, and how the media have tried to hold him accountable. Throughout his electoral campaign, Donald Trump presented falsehood upon falsehood to the American voters. He was called out on them often. The fact checkers at Politifact.com had already named him Liar of the Year in 2015. Even so, he won the Republican nomination the following year, and then went on to win the presidential elections. Some expected he would change after the inauguration, that he would be more "presidential". He did not change. During the first 40 days of his presidency, Donald Trump said something untrue, in public, every day. ¹

Lies coming from the powerful is nothing new. It is a well-known tactic of authoritarian and populist politicians across the world. All politicians lie sometimes, both on the left and on the right, both establishment politicians and fringe candidates. Bending the truth for political gain is as old as politics itself. Yet the proliferation of lies, the spread of fake

¹ "President Trump's Lies, the Definitive List - The New York Times," accessed June 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html?smid=tw-share>.

news and the so-called post-truth era of today pose serious challenges for journalists and the media industry.

This paper is therefore not looking at something entirely new – rather at a changing aspect of journalism and political coverage. I ask if the amount of falsehoods have changed US political journalism and in what ways media outlets are dealing with it. The relationship between the journalist and her source has been the basis for political journalism for a long time, as noted in Timothy E. Cook’s book on the subject “Governing with the News”² about the relationship between politicians and the media: “The political agenda is set not by the media by themselves or by the politicians by themselves but by the two sides, whether working together or in competition.” This relationship has been the basis of much of US political journalism since at least the Second World War. There are some unwritten rules of trust and tradition: The politician will try to be truthful and rather give a “no comment” than to lie.

Things said on the record are generally true, with important historical exceptions. Journalists will give politicians room to respond and defend themselves when writing an unfavourable story, particularly if it includes serious accusations. There is a certain mutual understanding and respect. On a plaque on the desk of President Reagan’s White House spokesman Larry Speakes it says “You don’t tell us how to stage the news and we don’t tell you how to cover it”. (Cook, 1998)³ This relationship between the politicians and the political journalists, what Herbert Gans (1980)⁴ called “a tango dance” is a constant dilemma for any political journalist. It requires a healthy dose of scepticism, but a certain level of trust from both parties. There can of course be too much trust, or too little scepticism, as we saw in the US media coverage of the build up to the Iraq war of 2003. The large amount of falsehoods and lies coming from the White House is shaking up this relationship.

² Cook, Timothy, *Governing With The News, The News Media as a Political Institution* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gans, Herbert J., *Deciding What’s News* (Random House, 1980).

In her essay in *The New York Review of Books*, the philosopher Hannah Arendt warns about the effect continuous lies will have on democracy.

*If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. [...] And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."*⁵

To spread lies, create uncertainty and sow doubt is an efficient strategy to avoid a fact based debate. The so-called *weaponised relativism* tactic was developed by the Russian intelligence organization KGB in the 1970's.⁶ By offering many and competing alternatives to the truth, the truth eventually becomes blurry. It also directs the media's and hence the public's attention away from facts and towards doubt. The traditional definition of propaganda is information with the intent of making the public believe a specific event or ideology. The *International Encyclopaedia of Propaganda* uses a more comprehensive understanding, and looks at propaganda simply as a means of persuasion through communication.⁷ In this case, a conscious use of falsehoods to spread doubt could be said to be a type of propaganda.

There are many questions regarding the media coverage of the US general election campaign in 2016. The sheer amount of coverage of the Republican candidate, particularly in the early stages of the campaign, has received deserved criticism. The same has the question of false equivalence. But there were also a lot of good reporting and serious investigation this campaign. But what were the consequences? As a reporter from the *Washington Post* states in this report: "We exposed his lies. They still wanted Trump." If accountability does not follow exposure and transparency, this is a cause for worry.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Hannah Arendt: From an Interview," *The New York Review of Books*, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview/>.

⁶ "Authoritarianism Goes Global," accessed July 1, 2017, <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/authoritarianism-goes-global>.

⁷ Robert Cole, *International Encyclopedia of Propaganda* (Chicago ; London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998).

A lie can travel half the world before the truth puts its boots on, is a quote often attributed to Mark Twain, though ironically there is much confusion about who really said this. Regardless of who said this, it has never been truer than in the age of social media. Several studies point to the fact that unverified rumours travel faster, meaning they generate more traffic and shares, than true rumours.⁸ This has contributed to a climate of low trust, a climate where also political lies seem to be more efficient than before.

On the eve of November 8th 2016, when it became increasingly clear that Donald Trump would win the election, I sat down next to a French man, with his head heavy in his hands. He was worried. He feared Trump's win would embolden right wing populists in his home country and elsewhere in the world, and that it would have consequences for the French presidential election in 2017. Would other populist candidates see how efficient it could be to spread doubt and false information? I wondered about the same. This led me to France, where there would be a presidential campaign a few months after the US election. I asked French journalists and editors if there has been an uptick in lies coming from the powerful, a so-called Trump-effect, and how the French media is dealing with this. Finally, I compare my findings in the US and France.

⁸ Arkaitz Zubiaga et al., "Analysing How People Orient to and Spread Rumours in Social Media by Looking at Conversational Threads," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 3 (March 4, 2016)

2. Literature review, method and limitations

There is a growing worry about the impact of false information worldwide, combined with a low trust in institutions and the press. This did not start with the US presidential election campaign. The word post-truth was Oxford Dictionary's word of the year in 2016, but one of the early mentions of this term was by Ralph Keyes in his book *The Post-Truth Era* from 2004. Ten years later, the World Economic Forum identified the rapid spread of misinformation online as among the top 10 perils to society for 2014.⁹

Much has been said about the falsehoods of the president, and there has been a lively debate in the US media about this. However, as far as I can tell, there is still not a lot of published research on this topic. I expect there is ongoing research yet to be published. There is some research about the lies of Mr Trump seen in a historical and cultural context¹⁰ and the problems of political misconception.^{11 12} There is also a growing body of published research about the media coverage of Donald Trump, as well as how he has used social media to communicate to the US voters.¹³

There has been some interesting research done regarding the amount of false information being distributed online in both the US and the French elections. This is also

⁹ Howard, et al, "Junk News and Bots during the French Presidential Election: What Are French Voters Sharing Over Twitter?," 2017, <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/04/What-Are-French-Voters-Sharing-Over-Twitter-v9.pdf>.

¹⁰ Carole McGranahan, "An Anthropology of Lying: Trump and the Political Sociality of Moral Outrage," *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 2 (May 1, 2017): 243–48, doi:10.1111/amet.12475.

¹¹ Briony Swire et al., "Processing Political Misinformation: Comprehending the Trump Phenomenon," *Open Science* 4, no. 3 (March 1, 2017): 160802, doi:10.1098/rsos.160802.

¹² Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 303–30, doi:10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2.

¹³ Gunn Enli, "Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 50–61, doi:10.1177/0267323116682802; Chris Wells et al., "How Trump Drove Coverage to the Nomination: Hybrid Media Campaigning," *Political Communication* 33, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 669–76, doi:10.1080/10584609.2016.1224416.

all relevant to my research, where trust plays a crucial role. The Oxford Internet Institute has published several relevant research papers on this topic.¹⁴

This paper looks at how different media outlets deal with falsehoods presented as facts coming from the politicians themselves, in forms of statements either on social media or in person. I have conducted semi-structured interviews with journalists, fact checkers and editors in major newspapers, online news sites and traditional broadcasters in the US and France, and analysed the coverage of some of the falsehoods presented.

There are of course many limitations to my research. In the US, I have mainly spoken to news outlets and websites, and not TV, which was very influential in the presidential election campaign. While most interviewees have agreed to speak on the record, the sensitivity of the issue have made a few journalists, all from the US, request to give off the record interviews. All the French journalists I interviewed spoke on the record and seemed to allow themselves to speak more freely than their US counterparts. This also points to another limitation, that the US and French political environment is quite different, both when it comes to the relationship between the politicians and journalists, and of course also the election outcome. It was difficult to compare the two directly. The majority of the sources, though not all, also have a more liberal bias.

It is also possible this research paper is a bit premature. Journalists and editors in the US are acknowledging that the new administration is affecting the way they do journalism, but a few months into Trump's presidency, they are still adjusting. It would be interesting to see how my questions would be answered a year or two from now.

My limited time stops me from researching what is perhaps the biggest challenge in all of this, namely the low trust in the media, and what the industry can do to re-establish trust. Fact-checkers might be doing a heroic job trying to judge what is true and not, but it does not matter if people do not care about facts. This, I believe, is one of the big

¹⁴ Howard, et al, "Junk News and Bots during the French Presidential Election: What Are French Voters Sharing Over Twitter?"

problems journalism faces today. While a sceptical audience is a good one, we need a level of trust and agreement on some basic facts to be able to have a constructive debate to lead to sound policies.

3. Coverage of lies in the US

“We haven’t figured this out yet.”

David Fahrenthold, Washington Post

The problem

While political lies are not new, neither in the US or overseas, the share range of falsehoods and incorrect information coming from first candidate Trump and now president Trump and his staffers is changing the relationship between politicians and political journalists in the US. There are many reports documenting Donald Trump’s uneasy relationship with the truth, counting the number of Trump’s lies, falsehoods or exaggerations. After Donald Trump’s first 33 days in office, the Washington Post published a thorough analysis of all of the president’s lies.¹⁵ According to the newspaper, Donald Trump lied every single day, often many times in one day, throughout his first month in The White House. According to US fact checking sites, most of the candidates for president lied one or several times during the election campaign, but Donald Trump was in a league of his own. The fact checking team at the Washington Post give Pinocchios when they fact check statements, ranging from one (not entirely true) to four Pinocchios (completely false). Throughout the election campaign, Hillary Clinton had an average of 2.2 Pinnochios, while Donald Trump got 3.4, an average higher than any politician has ever gotten.

When Politico assigned a team of reporters during primary season to listen to every word in Trump’s speeches, they found he offered “a lie, half-truth, or outright exaggeration” once every five minutes, for an entire week. When the same team repeated their research after Trump won the Republican nomination in July, during the

¹⁵ Chris Cillizza, “Analysis | Donald Trump’s Streak of Falsehoods Now Stands at 33 Days,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 2017, sec. The Fix Analysis Analysis Interpretation of the news based on evidence, including data, as well as anticipating how events might unfold based on past events, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/21/donald-trumps-unbroken-streak-of-falsehoods-now-stands-at-33-days/>.

general election campaign, he did it once every three minutes. American journalists continue to struggle to find a way to deal with an unprecedented amount of lies.

There is a lot to choose from, but here are a few examples:

During the presidential campaign: Trump said the unemployment rate was 42 percent, when it was actually only five percent. (Though real unemployment is much higher than five percent, it is still nowhere near 42.) When he talked about the high number of 92 million jobless Americans, in a nation of 320 million inhabitants, he included everyone who did not want to work, like students and retirees.

Donald Trump also championed for many years the conspiracy theory that President Barack Obama was not born in the US, and was therefore not a legitimate president. According to the constitution, only citizens born in the US are eligible to be president. Trump finally put that claim to rest in September 2016, stating that “Barack Obama was born in the United States.” He also repeatedly claimed things had happened, that in fact, had not. He has said he saw Muslims in New Jersey cheer after the terror attacks on 11 September 2001. There is no evidence that this happened. There are numerous examples of falsehoods or lies presented during the campaign, which space does not permit me to list.

Political journalists in the US interviewed for this paper all agree that Donald Trump is posing a new challenge to political journalism. There is also an agreement that classic reporting - seeking the facts, using multiple sources, double and triple checking everything - is still crucial. They are all thinking and debating how to handle this new way of communication by the president. While some spend a lot of time focusing on the presentation of a story, particularly on the headline and social media share line, others are looking for different ways to report on falsehoods, some by avoiding the contentious word lie, others by strengthening the fact checking departments, or by inviting the audience to collaborate in untraditional ways.

Why is this important?

Trump is not the first president to be at odds with the press, but the amount of lies he delivers and his aggressive attacks on and constant undermining of the legitimacy of the media, is unprecedented. This is changing the relationship between political journalists and the president, a relationship that has been built on a certain amount of trust and mutual respect. One thing is the amount of falsehoods. Another aspect is how Trump responds to journalists who try to hold him accountable. In the words of David Fahrenthold of the Washington Post, who won a Pulitzer prize for his work on the Trump Foundation:

“Trump would do something scandalous. He would insult congressman John McCain or the judge with Mexican heritage. But instead of focusing on it and talking about it, he would do something scandalous again the next day and leave no time to focus on the first scandal. I don’t think the news media was ready to cover the amount of scandals coming from Trump.”

He says the media had trouble with the amount of lies coming from the campaign, both from Donald Trump himself as well as the people close to him.

“We had trouble with the amount of lies. We were not used to politicians not telling the truth all the time. We also had this assumption that the public would be outraged,” says Fahrenthold.

They were not. Fahrenthold believes things are about to change, and that journalists now are more aware that an on the record denial might not be correct, and that the people who also surround Mr Trump will not always tell the truth. The result is a different way of structuring the article, where the official denial is given less weight than it would have under a different president. “We’ll include the denial in the story, but there is not that much credence given to them.” Fahrenthold says journalists are still

trying to deal with how to cover the large amount of lies: “We haven’t figured this out yet”

Here are some of the ways US journalists are adjusting to this new level of falsehoods coming from the White House:

Focus on the headline

For BuzzFeed, a liberal-leaning website with a relatively young audience, the most crucial decision when it comes to covering lies or falsehoods from politicians, is what words to use in the headline of the article and the headline shared on social media.

“We try to be really aware of it, and if what someone is saying is something demonstrably false, when there is no question about the falsehood of it, it is crucial that you don’t make the false statement the emphasis of your coverage”, says Craig Silverman, media editor at BuzzFeed. This is why you will not see BuzzFeed simply state “Trump said this”, but make it clear that Trump’s claim is false. “It’s important to do so in the *social share line and the headline*, and not just repeat the lie” says Silverman.

Ex: Donald Trump Lies that He Opposed The Iraq War From Beginning And Goes Unchallenged (Buzzfeed, Sept 8th 2016)

“Trump Falsely Claims Millions Voted Illegally, Costing Him The Popular Vote”. (Nov 28th, 2016)

Silverman says he is very aware that a lie can stick, even if you call it false or a lie in the headline, and so he says the company is constantly weighing how and what to cover. But to look the other way and for example not cover the president’s tweet is not an option, says Silverman. “Trump is the president. What he says will continue to be important, there is no way around that.”

When to use the word 'lie'

When do you call a lie a lie? This is an ongoing discussion among American journalists and editors. There are at least three camps:

1) The ones who will not use the word lie, like The Wall Street Journal and NPR (National public radio).

The Wall Street Journal's and the NPR explains their resistance to using the word lie with the question of *intent*.

I'd be careful about using the word "lie", said Gerald Baker, editor in chief at the Wall Street Journal, when NBC's Chuck Todd asked whether the Baker would be comfortable characterizing something Donald Trump says as a "lie". Baker continued: "Lie implies much more than saying something that's false. It implies a deliberate intent to mislead."

In an article elaborating his stand, Baker states:

"Mr. Trump has a record of saying things that are, as far as the available evidence tells us, untruthful: thousands of Muslims celebrating 9/11 on the rooftops of New Jersey, millions of votes cast illegally in the presidential election, President Obama's supposed foreign birth. We can also point out that the circumstances are such that it's reasonable to infer that Mr. Trump should know that these statements are untrue. (...)

But I'm not sure the story would have been improved by our telling the reader in categorical terms that Mr. Trump had told a "lie." In fact I'm confident that the story--and our reputation for trustworthy and factual news reporting--would have been damaged. The word "lie" conveys a moral as well as factual judgment. To accuse someone of lying is to impute a wilful, deliberate attempt to deceive. It says he knowingly used a misrepresentation of the facts to mislead for his own purposes.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gerard Baker, "Trump, 'Lies' and Honest Journalism," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2017, sec. Opinion, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-lies-and-honest-journalism-1483557700>.

Example:

“Donald Trump says Barack Obama was born in the US after years of sowing doubt.” Wall Street Journal, Sept 16th 2016.

Gerald Baker has, alongside the public broadcast NPR, been one of the more cautious voices in the debate about the use of the word “lie” in the coverage of falsehoods coming from politicians. While Baker doesn’t rule out the use of the word lie, the NPR do, arguing it is not helpful to their audience and might push people away.

NPR’s Michael Oreskes, Senior Vice President of News and Editorial Director writes:

“We want everyone to listen to us and read us. We want our reporting to reach as many people as possible. It is a well-established piece of social science research that if you start out with an angry tone and say something a listener disagrees with, they will tune out the facts. But if you present the facts calmly and without a tone of editorializing you substantially increase the chance that people will hear you out and weigh the facts. That is why the tone of journalism matters so much. We need potential listeners and readers to believe we are presenting the facts honestly, and not to confirm our opinions.”¹⁷

2) The ones who will use it with a lot of caution but prefer not to: The New York Times, Washington Post.

The New York Times has twice called candidate or president Trump out for lying. Once after Trump conceded that president Barack Obama was born in the US, after years of claiming he was not, without evidence. The second time was when Trump kept repeating three million people had voted illegally in the November 8th elections. Still the

¹⁷ “NPR And The Word ‘Liar’: Intent Is Key,” *NPR.org*, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/25/511503605/npr-and-the-l-word-intent-is-key>.

paper prefers to use other words. Elisabeth Bumiller, Washington bureau chief for The New York Times, explains why there is such a high bar for using the l-word, pointing to the problem of knowing the intention with which a falsehood is stated.

“The problem is it is to some degree a judgment call. We can’t really know a person’s intentions. Traditionally we avoid using that word,” says Bumiller. She says it can be challenging to cover the 45th president, and that the decisions to use the word lie is not hers to make, but has to be decided on the top level, as it has on previous occasions.

“It’s a challenge covering him, when so much of what he says is not true (...) We have to have our own facts in order.” After this interview, the paper published an interactive list of “lies” told by the 45th president, saying they have “catalogued nearly every outright lie he has told publicly since taking the oath of office.”¹⁸

Washington Post reporter David Fahrenthold says one of the problems with using the word lie is that Trump often seems to forget what he has said, that he says something untrue does not necessarily mean he has lied. As a journalist on a deadline is it also quicker to use other less contentious words that don’t require approval from a range of editors.

“Lie is a strong word, and you don’t want to dilute the power of it. I err on the side of not using it, and there are other words you can use, like falsehood and untruth, that are equally powerful. I also don’t want to drive away maybe new readers, who might like Trump or not, by using that word (...) It is also much quicker to avoid it, then I don’t have to talk to ten editors before publishing,” says Fahrenthold.

3) The ones who do not have a problem using it: HuffPost and BuzzFeed.

Neither HuffPost nor BuzzFeed shy away from using the word ‘lie’ in their coverage of the president. But while BuzzFeed has a policy on when to use it, HuffPost does not.

¹⁸ “President Trump’s Lies, the Definitive List - The New York Times.”

Political reporter Mary Ann Georgantopoulos at BuzzFeed explains the policy in the beginning of her continuously updated article "Here's A Running List Of President Trump's Lies And Other Bullshit".¹⁹

"A lie isn't just a false statement. It's a false statement whose speaker knows it's false. In these instances, the president – or his administration – has clear reason to know otherwise. Reporters are understandably cautious about using the word – some never do, because it requires speculating on what someone is thinking. The cases we call "lies" are ones where we think it's fair to make that call: Trump is saying something that contradicts clear and widely published information that we have reason to think he's seen. This list also includes bullshit: speech that is – in its academic definition – "unconnected to a concern with the truth."

HuffPost have no written guidelines on this.

"We don't have policy on when to use the word lie. We try to make clear that a Tweet is wrong rather than repeating it, so it seems like what he says is right. But there is no specific policy on this", says Amanda Terkel, political editor at The Huffington Post.

While bigger more established legacy news organization have strict policies for when to call something a lie, and the journalists at both The New York Times and Washington Post will have to go through several editors to be able to use the word, HuffPost does not have any procedure around lies, and each journalist gets to be the judge of when to call something a lie.

"We use the word when we think he is lying. Our journalists are free to use it. (...) I don't think it's hard to figure out when someone is lying", says Terkel.

¹⁹ Mary Ann Georgantopoulos, "Here's A Running List Of President Trump's Lies And Other Bullshit," *BuzzFeed*, accessed June 26, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/maryanngeorgantopoulos/president-trump-lie-list>.

One of the biggest changes with the Trump presidency, is that it is hard to figure out what is official policy and not, says Terkel, is that you can no longer assume what the president tweets or says is official policy.

“That is a big change from the previous administration. Obama was very careful about this. There are typically ways that the president conducts himself, and Trump doesn’t follow those same rules. Usually you know that when the president says something, it is official policy. With Trump you never quite know. It is much harder to figure out with this president than with the previous president.”

This also applies to the many tweets Trump delivers. During the campaign season Donald Trump’s tweets would often capture the headlines. Indeed news agencies and journalists are still checking the president’s twitter page often. A recent visit to the Reuters headquarters in London, showed Donald Trump’s twitter page on one of three screens monitoring world news.

But not every tweet is news, says Terkel. “You have to figure out how much weight you want to give each tweet”. The website was banned from Trump’s campaign early on, and while they do cover the White House briefs, Terkel describes the website’s relationship to the Trump administration as “not exactly close”. HuffPost famously declared that they would put their coverage of Mr Trump in their entertainment section of the website when Donald Trump announced he would run for president in 2015. This has now been reversed.

Both HuffPost and BuzzFeed are catering to a largely liberal and younger audience, and both outlets are less concerned with “driving people away”, like the more established organizations like NPR and the Washington Post mention as a reason to avoid the word. HuffPost and BuzzFeed does not only have a younger audience, their organizations are also newer and only online, which seems to make them quicker at adapting to a new environment than older and more traditional outlets. Another reason might be language. BuzzFeed for example uses the word “bullshit” in their headlines, which is a

word The New York Times rarely uses in print, and never in headlines. The language of both BuzzFeed and HuffPost is more colloquial and informal, and could make it easier to adapt quicker to a new political environment where the use of the word lie seems difficult to avoid.

Strengthen fact-checking departments

Several media outlets have strengthened their fact checking departments over the past few years, long before the ascent of Donald Trump. Lucas Graves argues, “fact checking is the product of a half-century shift that has seen political reporters as a class grow less trusting of officials and more willing to subject their claims to sceptical analysis.” Graves points to 2004 as the year of the Fact Check, when factcheck.org was first launched.²⁰ There has been another uptick in fact-checking sites in 2009 and in 2016.

Both representatives from the Washington Post and The New York Times quote an increased fact checking efforts in order to deal with the many false statements of Donald Trump. There are often also more bylines, meaning there are more journalists working on each story. Elisabeth Bumiller, bureau chief in Washington DC for The New York Times says the paper recently has hired one person in the DC bureau just to do fact checking, in addition to the paper’s general fact checking efforts. The way to deal with lies from the White House is simply strong, factual reporting, says Elisabeth Bumiller.

“We cover the president extensively. We have six reporters to cover the White House, and that is more than ever. If Trump says something that is not true, we point it out. We fact check and explain”, says Bumiller, who emphasises explainer articles. She uses Trump’s repeated claim that NATO nations owe the US money as an example. “That is

²⁰ “Deciding What’s True, by Lucas Graves,” *Issuu*, accessed June 26, 2017, <https://issuu.com/columbiaup/docs/graves-deciding-excerpt>.

not how NATO works. So we'll do a story saying it is wrong and explaining how it actually works".²¹

More leaks - though leakers also lie

Journalists covering politics have always had to double-check information coming from the White House, as they have to do with all their sources. But with a president and official spokespeople with less regard for facts than previous administrations, political journalists have had to adapt. A source from a national US newspaper says one of the ways they deal with all the incorrect information coming from the top, is that they now rely much more on anonymous sources than before.

The journalist says the first press briefing where press secretary Sean Spicer tried to back up the president's claim regarding the audience numbers at the inauguration was a sign of what was to come.

"There are a lot of untrue things coming out of the White House. But they also seem to be so disorganized, we don't know if they really are mistaken or not", says one source, comparing the internal rifts in the administration with a parlour game. The same source says there is a lack of trust in what is said on the record by the White House, and that they are not "very responsive" to the news cycle. "They seem unprepared for the amount of inquires" coming their way.

So while journalists may have to rely even more than before on leaks and sources speaking on background, these sources are less trustworthy than before, says one journalist, also speaking on background due to the sensitivity of the issue.

"The use of background sources is important. It was always the case that background sources was important for finding out what's going on. But now it is as vital as ever",

²¹ "Trump Says NATO Allies Don't Pay Their Share. Is That True? - The New York Times," accessed July 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/europe/nato-trump-spending.html?_r=0.

says one journalist covering the White House, who like many of this journalist's own sources, has asked to speak off the record. Ironically, this same source says the journalist's own trust in political journalism has gone down as a result of the many unnamed sources and the journalist's own experiences covering the White House. "I see an article today with 10 or 20 unnamed sources, and I really don't know if I can trust they got it right, knowing how much incorrect information is around."

"We have been trying to play by the old rules. But today, a hard on the record denial means nothing. The president can tweet something one day, and a staffer can say something different the next day. It's very difficult to know what is right. The whole industry is struggling with this", says one source.

Another journalist from the Washington Post says they try to use off the record sources to balance out the false information they get on the record.

"There is so much on the record that is not true. There is a ton of information from leaks, so we can balance true off the record with false on the record and get a pretty good idea of what's going on."

Be transparent

David Fahrenthold famously won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Trump Foundation, and used Twitter as a tool to get information, but also to engage the audience.

"I asked people for their help, saying what I was looking for. I got a lot of help. When you are transparent and show people how you work and what you are looking for, people can see you're not out to get anyone, you follow the truth," says Fahrenthold. While reporting on the Trump Foundation, he says he was lied to many times.

“His people lied to me, yes. First they would say a total lie, then only occasionally. Mostly they just didn’t reply to my questions, and sometimes they would say I was wrong.”

Fahrenheit says the biggest difference in covering Trump is that he has refused to play by the rules. Fahrenheit describes the “normal cycle” when a scandal is revealed, a kind of routine that follows when the media discover something embarrassing, a lie or a scandal: Something bad comes out. The candidate minimizes it. Then he or she tries to deny it. The coverage continues. The candidate eventually apologizes. All these steps would be in separate news cycles. This way it would stay in the news, and do certain damage, which is also why politicians try to avoid it. The Hillary Clinton e-mail scandal followed this pattern almost perfectly. He believes one of the lessons learned is that journalists should cover Donald Trump’s words less and focus more on the president’s actions. He believes Trump’s tweets have lost some of their powers. “We don’t cover his tweets like we used to do”.

4. Coverage of ‘*Les Mensonges*’ in France

According to interviews with French journalists and fact checkers, there were more lies coming from the candidates during the French election campaign of 2017 than before. This was mainly because of the far right candidate Marine Le Pen’s many false statements. But she was not alone. The electoral campaign was also dominated by the scandal surrounding the conservative candidate François Fillon, which was the source of some of the many falsehoods delivered during the campaign. French journalists and fact checkers I have talked to are worried, both with the lies presented by the politicians, and the spread of false information online. Fact checkers and political journalists have increased their efforts to try to debunk both false news reports, as well as checking statements from the official candidates. While most of the candidates have been corrected one or more times by French fact checkers, the far right candidate Marine Le

Pen, as well as other representatives from her party Front National, has been the politician delivering the most falsehoods, according to my sources.

Lies from politicians is nothing new, says Maxime Darquier from the TV channel France 5, a public television network and part of the France Télévisions group.

“What is new is that the fake news and the lies work so well, like we have seen in the US. French politicians see that it works for Trump, and they ask themselves – can it work for us?” says Darquier.

He also points to a new dynamic in French politics, namely that the two traditionally dominant parties in France, the conservative Republicans and the Socialist Party were about to be crushed. The new rising candidate, now President Emanuel Macron, was subject to many false news articles spread online, as well as false attacks from the other candidates, and Darquier suggests the reasons behind all these false attacks were the changing dynamics of French politics.

Julien Pain of France 24 points to the US president’s success and the trust in news media, which has been falling both in the US and in France. “Donald Trump’s victory showed that the truth doesn’t really matter that much. Many people will still believe the politicians over a journalist”, says Pain.

This is true for both the US and France. In the US, only 38 percent of the people say they agree that they can trust “news overall most of the time.” In France, trust in the media is among the lowest in Europe. Only 33 percent of the people in France agree with the statement: “the news media does a good job in helping separate facts from fiction” ²²

According to Le Monde’s fact checker site Les decodeurs, many of the political rumours or hoaxes during the presidential election campaign, like the suggestion that Alan Juppe was close to radical Islam (and named *Ali Juppe*), come from a small number of actors,

²² <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf>.

also responsible for creating memes spreading false information.²³ Many of the sites behind the rumours or hoaxes are from what Le Monde calls a “fachosphere”, meaning people who are not all supporters of the far right Front National (FN), but who share the party’s views on immigration and Islam. This trend is not directly linked to my research question here, but is relevant for the context and the spread of misinformation and decline in trust. According to a report from the Oxford Internet Institute, there was much less false news spread on Twitter during the French presidential campaign than in the US.²⁴

Strengthen fact-checking efforts

The team at Le Monde’s “Les decodeurs” has grown to ten journalists and fact-checkers since their launch in 2009. They do both fact checking and data journalism. According to Maxime Vaudano, one of the journalists at Les decodeurs, they check and debunk lies from politicians, rumours and conspiracy theories year-round, but increased their efforts during the electoral campaign.

During the presidential debates, Vaudano’s team were fact checking live, and followed up with explainer articles. They have found all the candidates presenting false statements, in one form or another, says Vaudano.

“But there are more lies coming from the extreme right. There are also more lies coming from the extreme left than from the centre and main parties, though less than from the extreme right”, says Vaudano. He thinks there has been more disregard for facts in the election campaign of 2017 than in previous years, and that it makes sense to talk about a “Trump-effect” in French politics.

²³ Samuel Laurent et Adrien Sénécat, “Présidentielle 2017 : une campagne plombée par les rumeurs, les intox et les « fausses informations »,” *Le Monde.fr*, May 5, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/05/05/une-campagne-plombee-par-les-rumeurs-et-les-fausses-informations_5122623_4355770.html.

²⁴ Howard, et al, “Junk News and Bots during the French Presidential Election: What Are French Voters Sharing Over Twitter?”

Fact checker Julien Pain, the editor-in-chief of France 24's Observers, also believes there has been a so-called Trump-effect in France, particularly on the far right, but not exclusively. Pain has intensified the fact checking efforts on his programme, and sees it as an increasingly important field of journalism.

"Politicians today seem less concerned with being perceived as truthful and use falsehoods or lies more often in their communication. (...) Before, politicians were more concerned with being perceived as being truthful, and they tried to avoid the shame that followed being called out if they were using false information. Now, even if lies are corrected, they see it might work to their benefit anyways. Being correct is not always efficient, and they are more concerned with being efficient," Pain says.

According to his experience, the extreme right party Front National use more false information in their campaign than the other parties. "But everyone does it", says Pain.

Taking fact checking to the street

A common challenge with fact checking is how to reach people that do not necessarily tune in to your channel or website, and who are often sceptical of the news media, says Julien Pain. At France 24's Observers he has tried to expand his audience by changing the format and the platform. Since September 2016 he has taken fact checking out of the news room and the traditional broadcast and to the streets of France, and Facebook Live. This way he reaches not only a larger audience, but a more diverse one.

"I realized I was only reaching people who agreed with me and I wanted to change that. When I use Facebook Live I reach far beyond my community. I can tell by the comments section, that is not always nice, but that's ok. It's good to reach other types of people", says Pain.

He will present people in the street with false information being distributed online and ask for their opinion about it, before revealing that it is false. In the comment section,

there will be links with the facts mentioned in the video. The sessions last up to one hour, and they also make shorter videos that are aired both on TV and social media.

The results have been encouraging, says Pain. One of the sessions gained 700,000 viewers on Facebook, and a shorter version near 3 million. Pain says the format is working well too, particularly with people with little trust in journalists. “ Many viewers see it as more authentic. It’s all there live. People see that we don’t edit the videos and, that we don’t leave out information”, he says.

Explainer articles

Explaining what lies behind the falsehoods has been very important during the electoral campaign, says Maxime Darquier of France 5. On the programme *C Politique* they try to add context to the fact checking. They also use Facebook Live to reach viewers.

“I think the best way to do it is to tell a bigger story, I will talk about the theme of a debate that has emerged, and try to explain if it is really true that this is a problem in France. It’s important to give context to the falsehoods and explain why or why not these things are said.”

There is also a strategy of just spreading doubt by presenting claims that cannot be immediately confirmed or falsified, says Benjamin Oulahcene. He says politicians will also try to spread doubt by presenting claims that cannot be immediately confirmed or falsified:

“This seems to be a strategy for some. On our show we try to explain what lays behind not only obvious falsehoods, but also vague campaign promises. We don’t only check or explain certain statements, but try to explain what lies behind the statements, and explain why and how it I wrong, and give context.”

Le Monde's Les decodeurs will also add explainer articles to their fact checking efforts, particularly if they are live checking a debate.

Reluctance to use the word lie

In general, French journalists and fact-checkers are more cautious than their US colleagues when it comes to using the word *mensonge* - lie - to describe untrue statements coming from their politicians. At Le Monde they have decided to tone down their language, says Maxime Vaudano, worrying that the press will be seen as too aggressive.

"We used the word "lie" a lot more before. Now we are careful with the usage of the word. We use it less and less. Unless we consider it obvious that the politician is aiming to fool the audience, we try to avoid using the word, and use error for example instead. It is not our role to be aggressive or in a combat with the politicians. There are other words that are just as efficient", says Vaudano.

This is the opposite from what is going in the US, where more and more news outlets are considering when to use the l-word. This is likely due to the different political climate, and the plain fact that the French politicians lie less than the current US president. Le Monde does use the word, though reluctantly.

"We don't use it unless it is necessary. For example if a candidate repeats a statement many times that has already been debunked. If we know he or she knows it's wrong, and that there are no reason to repeat it a 5th time, and we can reasonably tell he or she knows it's a lie, then we can call it a lie."

Because politicians communicate differently on the left and the right - basically that the politicians on the right outright lie more often - the fact checkers will seem more biased if they only use "lie" to describe the right, says Vaudano.

In his weekly programme *C Politique* on TV 5, Maxime Darquier tries to avoid taking an aggressive tone when he calls out the political lies on air. He also tries to avoid using the word lie, saying it is an aggressive word best to be avoided.

“Calling people liars, that is a language of politicians. They can all each other liars. If we use it too, we become part of the political game”, says Darquier, who has used the word, but “not often”.

Julien Pain is also very cautious with the use of the word *mensonge*.

“I don’t see the need to use the word mensonge. I say false information. My audience might answer with “lying politicians”. And they are free to do that, but that is on them. I don’t feel we as journalists need to call things a lie. It’s impossible to prove the intention”, says Pain. An often-used word in French fact checking is “intox”, referring to intoxication, but also manipulation.²⁵

The financial paper Les Echos also subscribe to this view, and will not use the word lie. Olivier Tossier, journalist for the French journal Les Echos, does not see the need for such a strong word.

“There is a big difference between falsehood and an imprecision. The usage of “lie” implies that the journalist or paper take a position against the person behind the statement, and Les Echos doesn’t do that, we don’t take a position.”

Tossier points to how the different candidates use language differently, and that though the far right is known to deliver more false statements than more centric and leftist politicians get away with being vague. “Macron gets away with vague political statements that are difficult to fact check”, he says.

²⁵ Éditions Larousse, “Définitions : Intox - Dictionnaire de Français Larousse,” accessed June 26, 2017, <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/intox/43938>.

Interestingly, it is only the popular and more conservative-leaning TV station BFM TV that does not have a problem with calling a lie by its word. Benjamin Oulahcene says he does not have any qualms about it, and he thinks it is important to use the right words. In the company there is no policy against using the word lie.

“I think it’s important to be precise, and sometimes lie is the most precise word to use. There are many dilemmas in covering politics, but we don’t have a problem with that word,” he says.

The challenge with balance

Fact checkers and political reporters everywhere struggle with how to balance their reporting - if one candidate or party uses falsehoods or lies more often than the rest, how can you balance your work?

“We do verify some candidates and parties more than others. This is always difficult,” says Maxime Vaudano from Le Monde. He admits this is tricky and something they would have liked to avoid. But the imbalance of lies necessarily forms the way they work:

“There are generally more lies coming from the right and the extreme right. And a bit more from the extreme left. In general there are a bit less lies coming from the centre and the left, because their rhetoric is different. It doesn’t mean that they are perfect, but they use fewer direct lies, they use different rhetoric. But this means that our fact checking is a bit unbalanced, says Vaudano.

An example of the difficult imbalance was obvious in the last TV debate before the 2nd round in the presidential elections, between Emanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. While Marine Le Pen gave a false statement 19 times, Macron was called out for giving a false statement once, according to French fact checkers.

It is a “huge problem and very complicated” to keep a certain balance, while one side does present more falsehoods than the other, says Maxime Darquier. He tries to examine both sides, and often uses explainer format, rather than just deeming a statement false or true.

“I never attack one candidate or one political party”. The FN lies more than the others, but we cannot just go after their statements. We have to balance a bit, but also avoid the false equivalence (...) In the last debate Le Pen said a falsehood 19 times, while Macron said a falsehood once, and it was just something imprecise. When it is like that, we have to say it like it is. I am not favouring Macron, but this is what actually happened. We shouldn't force it.”

Benjamin Oulahcene of BMF TV says the Front National is the party closest to Donald Trump in terms of communication and their relationship to facts.

“What seems to be important is not what the truth really is, but what the people hear the candidates saying”. He is frustrated with the repetition of lies among some politicians. “Even if it's false, and it has been debunked, the candidates will keep saying it”, says Oulahcene.

5. Comparison US – France

The past few years have seen a rise of political populism both in the US and France, with anti-establishment politicians often dominating the media coverage. Journalists in both countries, and around the world, have struggled with how to cover this.

Still, the US and France differ in important ways:

While lies have always been an integral part of politics and political communication, the US journalists are now dealing with a president who is delivering untruths on an unprecedented scale. Mr Trump did this both while running for president, and he has continued to do so in office. There is no precedent for this amount of untruths in the US, and there is no comparison to be found in France. The election outcome was also quite different in the two countries. Although the winner in France, Emanuel Macron was also, in a way, an anti-establishment candidate whose victory broke the traditional two party system of the 5th republic, Macron has a much less strained relationship with the French media, and he is nowhere close to Trump when it comes to delivering false statements.

Another stark difference is the political climate. While it can be aggressive in France, it is neither as polarized or openly hostile to the media as in the US. The fact that the current US president is attacking the media on a regular basis, calling major news outlets out for “fake news”, has not improved the relationship between the media and the White House. This is particular to the current president in the US, and very difficult to find any parallel to in France.

The media landscape also differs substantially. The US has a clear majority of liberal-leaning news outlets on paper and online, a strong conservative voice in the TV station Fox News, and very little public subsidies for the media industry. France has a relatively heavily subsidized media industry, the fourth in Europe, a strong public broadcasting

tradition, and a more diverse media and online news sites with a less polarized audience than in the US. ²⁶

Though Macron won, it is worth noting that the far right candidate Marine Le Pen did get to the second round of the presidential election, and won more votes than in the party's history. All my French sources point to the far right populist and anti-establishment candidate Marine Le Pen as the politician who most often resorted to falsehoods or lies in her campaign, though she is not the only one doing it. This compares to the US, where Trump, the largely populist and anti-establishment candidate in the 2016 presidential campaign did the same. In this sense, one can argue there are similarities between the French and US presidential electoral campaigns of 2017 and 2016.

This proves a challenge for journalists and fact checkers in both countries, where they worry that they will be perceived as unbalanced and lose audience and impact if they focus too much on one candidate or party. In both countries they are struggling with how to avoid been seen as going after one candidate or party, while at the same time not becoming victims of pursuing a false equivalence. Interestingly, the French media are much more reluctant to use the word lie about statements coming from their politicians. This could of course be because lie and mensonge is not used in exactly the same way, that there are nuances in language. Le Monde says they use it less now than before, because they do not want to be seen as aggressive. This is similar to the reasoning of David Fahrenthold at the Washington Post, saying he worries calling things a lie will drive away new readers.

While US journalists are actively pursuing strategies for dealing with what everyone agrees as a new phase in the relationship between the politicians in power and the

²⁶ Reuters, 2011, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Public%20support%20for%20Media_0.pdf; "Digital News Report 2017," 2017, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf.

media, French journalists I have talked to focus more on checking facts and explaining statements from their politicians, and while they are worried about their politicians' apparently more sloppy relationship with the facts, they are not by far as alarmed as their US colleagues. This makes sense, seeing how Donald Trump has disrupted the president's traditional relationship with the media. Neither Marine Le Pen nor Emanuel Macron have had that kind of impact.

6. Conclusion

There is a consensus among the media companies I have spoken to that there are now more falsehoods being spread openly from politicians, both in the US and in France. In the US, Donald Trump's long list of falsehoods and lies is unprecedented. It is not just the president himself, who often tweets statements that are demonstrably false or accusations with no evidence, but people in his administration will also present what Kellyanne Conway famously labelled "alternative facts". The biggest difference between the US and French political journalism is quite obvious: There is no Donald Trump in France.

The increased amount of falsehoods has disrupted the old dance between the sources and the politicians in the US, and journalists and editors are struggling to come up with a new tune. One challenge is the reporting, where officials can lie on the record and off, and where what the president says is no longer necessarily official policy. Another aspect is the presentation of the news articles, what words to choose and how to frame an article about a president's lie while avoiding being seen as too aggressive.

In the US it's interesting that the newer media organizations, BuzzFeed and HuffPost, seem to have adapted quicker to this new environment, and they spend less time pondering about the use of the word 'lie'. Their audience is younger and more liberal than for example the Wall Street Journal. The desire to be seen as objective seems to lead to vague language in many cases, particularly in the US. I think in the case of the US, the acknowledgment that something has changed has not yet been followed by substantial changes in the way journalists do their reporting. To strengthen the fact checking departments is all well and good, but it does not really represent a deep change. I think this shows how slow journalism is to react to a change in external environments. While pondering new approaches to political reporting, much stays the same. That is not a bad thing. Journalists have to cultivate sources in the White House, on Capitol and in the different departments. Some media scholars, like Jay Rosen, suggest that the US media should spend less time cultivating access in DC and more time writing about people's lives. This is not happening, as far as I can tell from my interviews. Political journalism

is intrinsically bound to Washington DC. The biggest change I have found is in the attitude of the journalists, who say they can no longer trust information coming from the president or White House officials. This is not necessarily a bad development, having seen many instances of uncritical reporting from the White House in the past. What is more worrying is the openly hostile attitude to a free press, and the president's many aggressive attacks against the media.

What should journalist do about this? It is clear they have to be much more critical of the information coming from the White House, not only checking and double-checking official information, which they should always do. They need to verify if something really is official policy – the fact that the president or a staffer says it is, is simply not enough anymore. This isn't a huge change to journalism however, to have to check your sources more thoroughly.

There are no simple solutions to this. I do not believe the timing of Mr Trump's many lies and that he could and can get away with it now is coincidental; call it post-truth or just a time where scepticism toward the elites and the media is so strong that many simply do not care if their president says things the media deems as false. From my own experience, as a US correspondent covering the campaign, supporters of Mr Trump often understood that not everything he said was correct, but that other factors (his wealth, anti-establishment, authenticity) were more important to them.

I think the Washington Post journalist David Fahrenthold is on to something, being open and transparent in his reporting. He no longer has access to Mr Trump, he says, but that does not stop him from doing excellent work.

It is not always easy to confirm whether something is entirely true or false, as the world is not black or white. As journalists we should do what we can to establish what elements are factual and reliable, and provide enough clear information to the public. When it is clear what is right or wrong – and when a politician delivers a statement that

is factually incorrect – it is important to say so in no uncertain terms. Beating around the bush and insinuating or burying the actual story is not helpful to anyone, even if some readers or viewers would prefer a softer tone.

Interestingly, while many news outlets in the US are more prone to using the word 'lie' now, the French Le Monde says they use this less than before. The paper's fact checking department Les decodeurs says they are searching for a less aggressive language to avoid being perceived as in battle with the politicians. In the US the stark accusations from the president against much of the US media makes it difficult for US journalists to avoid this perceived battle.

Interestingly the French media is not using that word, and for example Le Monde say they are now less prone to use the word 'lie' now than before. This again shows how different the context in France is, where they are very concerned with not being seen as aggressive or part of the political game, a concern grown out of the very low trust among the French public.

The relationship with the politicians in power has always been a challenging one for journalists. This challenge has become more prominent in the US because of the combination of Donald Trump, the low trust in the media and the rise of social media. In France, where journalists also worry about the low trust and the false information spread online, there is simply no Donald Trump. The environment is therefore less alarming than in the US, and the changes smaller and less visible. But they are there as well, with low trust being a huge problem for French media.

What are the solutions to this? Personally, I don't see any reason to shy away from the word 'lie' if it is clear that's what is going on. There is an argument to be made for not being seen as hostile to either the president in power or towards any particular candidate during an election campaign, but it is even more important to give correct information. Politicians have always lied, and it has always been a journalist's task to expose them. Journalists in other countries with populist regimes have been dealing

with lies from the powerful for a long time, and the US media could have much from learn from their colleagues there.

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