The Trump Presidency, Journalism, and Democracy

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Chapter 6

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Media and White-Supremacist Terrorism in the Trump Era

Katherine M. Bell

It may be too soon in the early stages of Donald Trump's presidency to suggest that his election ushered in a new era of white-supremacist attacks in the United States, even in the face of violence that erupted in the summer of 2017. In truth, the country has an ongoing crisis with race-based violence, forged from its founding in slavery. Recent decades have seen far-right violence surge notably in the 1990s, defined by Timothy McVeigh's anti-government bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City. It swelled again with the country's first African American president (Anti-Defamation League, 2017; Potok, 2015). But Trump's political rise is inseparable from his xenophobic rallying cries to loyal followers. In a July 2017 speech to rightist Polish officials and bussed-in supporters in Warsaw, he said:

> The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. We are fighting hard against radical Islamic terrorism, and we will prevail. We cannot accept those who reject our values and who use hatred to justify violence against the innocent.
>
> (CNN, 2017)

Trump's assertion of "our values" is a dog whistle for the far-right and its fear and hatred of non-white, non-Christian Americans, or immigrants. The phrase marks a boundary of inclusion and exclusion. Sometimes Trump couches his rhetoric as he did in Poland. At other times his racism is overt, as when he labeled white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, as "very fine people" (Hayes, 2017), when he lied about Muslims cheering as the World Trade Center towers went down (Carroll, 2015), when he called for "a total and completed shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Johnson, 2015), or when he launched his presidential campaign in 2015 by suggesting that Mexican people in the United States are drug dealers and rapists (*Washington Post*, 2015). Trump's modus operandi has been not only to minimize the threat of racist white extremism but to actively foment it for personal gain and aggrandizement.

While racist violence is not new, Trump has emboldened extremists, as rallies such as Charlottesville demonstrate. In recent years, white

nationalist Richard Spencer helped popularize the Orwellian term "alt-Right" as a benign-sounding moniker for white nationalists online, and the media quickly made the term mainstream (Harkinson, 2016). Spencer remained a frequent spokesperson in media coverage of extremist protests. Alt-Right darling Milo Yiannopoulos emerged from the *Breitbart News* machine that helped propel Trump into office and garnered extensive mainstream coverage (Fulwood, 2017). Former Klansman David Duke reemerged and ran for federal office in 2016 on an openly racist platform (Domonoske, 2016). He appeared as a spokesman at Charlottesville and directly linked the racist movement to Trump's political rise (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017). Through such messengers, simmering race-based hatred reached a boil with Trump's nascent political career.

The mainstream media have covered racist rhetoric and violence in the Trump era, as they did in the past. Barack Obama's tenure saw white supremacist Dylann Roof murder nine African American parishioners in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, among other attacks. It also saw tragically regular instances of police violence against unarmed black men and women (e.g., Friedersdorf, 2015; Williams, 2016). Reporters struggled before Trump's rise with whether to call these acts "terrorism," with all of the media images of barbarism that attach to the term. Ultimately, news organizations remain wary of applying the same criteria to white-supremacist attacks that they have to so-called Islamist violence since 9/11. They have not come to terms with the reality of violence against racialized minorities in the United States as terrorism by another name.

This chapter calls on the mainstream media to reassess their role in covering white-supremacist terrorism. At this historic moment, they must name terrorism consistently and heed research that time and again cites right-wing extremism as the biggest terrorism threat in the United States. It is not that racist attacks in 2017 were markedly different than those during Obama's presidency, but that the conditions for race-based violence are at a new conjuncture. The Trump administration heralds an upswing in Jim Crow-style acts of racist intimidation and speech from an emboldened extremist right (e.g., Doubek, 2017; Strickland & Gottbrath, 2017). Trump himself has been a reluctant critic of the attacks as he promises a "law-and-order" platform. This conjuncture thus brings mainstream political recognition of extremists and a White House set on banning visitors from Muslim countries that have not attacked U.S. soil.[1]

The media's inconsistency, I suggest, flows from institutional biases rooted in an ideology of whiteness. Racialized assumptions within the fabric of journalism are entwined with Orientalist views about Muslims since 9/11. Such assumptions by the media are shot through with the rhetoric of political leaders and government agencies that deal with race-based crime. Ultimately, the media must take seriously the evidence that

places domestic right-wing extremism as a greater threat to the country than Islamic extremism. Through the establishment of consistent ethical standards in naming what counts as "terrorism," and through nuanced treatment of the plots, attacks, and ideologies that spawn them, the media can influence public perceptions of the threats Americans face. Thus, this chapter urges journalists to examine the institutional and ideological biases that impede them.

The discussion below begins with a snapshot of several racist attacks in early 2017, followed by a brief overview of the multiple definitions of terrorism, historically and currently. I connect media treatment of extremist violence to the political and institutional ideologies of whiteness and examine several research studies that serve as evidence for this connection in coverage of terrorism. The chapter ends with a discussion of the impediments to U.S. media in naming terrorism and how they relate to racial institutional bias more broadly.

Terrorism in the Trump Era

In March 2017, James Harris Jackson traveled from his home in Baltimore to Manhattan to quench his seething hatred of black men, particularly those "mixing" with white women (Southall, 2017). He stalked several men over three days before he set his sights on Timothy Caughman, 66, whom he stabbed with a sword. Caughman managed to stumble to a nearby police precinct but died of his wounds. Jackson chose New York for the publicity that his attacks would bring. The stabbing was meant to be practice for a violent rampage against black men, but Jackson threw his sword in a trash bin and turned himself in. Police charged him with murder as a hate crime and later with state charges of murder as an act of terror. Jackson expressed some remorse that his victim was "elderly." He wished that he had attacked a younger black man, perhaps someone who was with a white woman.

In May, avowed white supremacist Jeremy Christian boarded a light-rail train in Portland, Oregon, and approached two teenage girls, one African American and the other Muslim American and wearing a hijab. As he spewed a racist diatribe at them, several bystanders intervened and tried to calm him down. He drew a knife and stabbed three white men, two of whom died and one of whom he seriously wounded. Police arrested Christian after he left the train and charged him with two counts of aggravated murder, attempted aggravated murder, first-degree assault, two counts of intimidation, and three counts of unlawful use of a weapon. "Free speech or die, Portland," Christian yelled in his first court appearance. "You've got no safe place. This is America. Get out if you don't like free speech" (Bernstein, 2017a).

These were but two of numerous attacks in 2017. A member of a Facebook group called "Alt-Reich Nation" stabbed and killed an African

American college student and Army lieutenant on the University of Maryland campus in May (Lerner, 2017). A white patron shot and killed two immigrants from India in a Kansas bar in February (Eligon, Blinder & Najar, 2017). Many of the killings had several themes in common. They were so-called lone-wolf attacks carried out by a single person against one or two individuals. In each case, suspects were white and were soon characterized by authorities as having mental health or substance abuse problems. Through social media or personal connections, most suspects had expressed a confusing array of xenophobic political beliefs (e.g. Acker, 2017a, 2017b; Bromwich & Blinder, 2017).

The summer of 2017 also saw white violence in the context of a media spectacle of right-wing hate. A white supremacist plowed his car into a crowd of anti-racist protesters in the streets of Charlottesville, killing a woman and injuring 19. The protesters were countering a rally of white-supremacist groups that had marched the night before carrying torches and chanting slogans reminiscent of Nazi Germany. At this writing, law enforcement officials had not determined whether the 20-year-old driver, James Alex Fields, would face charges of domestic terrorism, though numerous politicians across the spectrum said it was terrorism (Thrush & Haberman, 2017; Robinson, 2017). Media coverage in the week following emphasized Trump's erratic response to the tragedy. He was initially silent, then blamed "both sides." Two days later he read a statement condemning violence by white supremacists; a day later he again blamed the "alt-left" as equally culpable (Shear & Haberman, 2017).

The 2017 cases each have their own characteristics in terms of the media coverage. Charlottesville notwithstanding, most white terrorist acts have been characterized by a single attack that does not take place with cameras rolling. Many bring a flurry of initial reporting, but do not attract widespread or sustained mainstream media treatment. Even the Jackson case, which did result in state terrorism charges, did not impel the major media into deeper investigation and analysis on the nature of white-supremacist terrorism. The media offered limited explanation of the ways in which such perpetrators become radicalized or context about the broader threat of white-supremacist violence.

In the Christian case, Portland's own paper, *The Oregonian*, produced relatively few stories beyond the spot coverage. In the weeks following, its coverage included comment from an FBI agent that it was too soon to call the attack terrorism (*Oregonian*, 2017). Stories included discussion of the fact that a hate-crime charge would be difficult given that the men killed were not those being targeted by the racist threat (Bernstein, 2017b). A reporter prepared a look at terminology and affiliations of far-right extremists (Acker, 2017a) and an examination of Christian's beliefs based on his social media presence (Acker, 2017b).

The U.S. and international media did give blanket coverage to a white man's attack on Ramadan worshippers outside a London mosque in

June. One person died at the scene and 11 were injured when Darren Osborn plowed his rented van into a group of people who had just left the mosque. National media in the United States had extensive reporting on the attack, both spot developments and wider analysis and opinion. The attack's location in a major world city and that fact that British officials did not waver at labeling it as terrorism, made the politics of this particular story somewhat different for U.S. media. *The New York Times*, for example, published two pieces decrying right-wing terrorism.

A news feature by columnist Max Fisher (2017) examined what acts of violence are deemed terrorism, hate crimes, or murder and suggested that the London attack fit scholarly and legal definitions of terrorism. He contemplated the sensitivity of naming an act terrorism and the discrimination that Muslim communities experience following such events. There are clear disparities between how acts of violence committed against them are treated compared with those by Islamic extremists. Fisher wrote:

> Years of seeing terrorism as a foreign threat, and of arguments that Muslim communities must address the roots of extremism, has freighted the term with accusations that extend beyond the attacker to his or her community.

His point gets to the crux of how the terrorist label forces individual Muslims, and communities of color generally, to account for the deeds of their larger communities. The reverse is not true of acts of politically motivated violence by white citizens.

A *Times* op-ed by scholars Amarnath Amarasingam and Jacob Davey (2017) of the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue cited a 2017 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2017) to highlight the threat of right-wing violence. The report states that 73 percent of deadly terrorist attacks on American soil since 9/11 were committed by anti-government, white-supremacist, and neo-Nazi extremists from within the United States? They argued broadly for greater attention to such attacks and called for such violence to be treated similarly to that of jihadist terrorists. Significantly, they did not specify whether their call was directed at the media, law enforcement, prosecutors, or politicians. Neither did Fisher mention the news media's role in defining terrorism as an act perpetrated by Muslim suspects.

These examples all capture a number of themes that I take up below. For one, the media are wary of labeling terrorism in the absence of official sources doing so. As well, the legal system uses a confusing array of legal charges, which can inhibit journalists in formulating their own definitions of terrorism. These challenges stem in part from a pervasive ideological investment in whiteness that long predates Trump's racist rhetoric. The following section begins with an exploration of definitions

of the word "terrorism" and makes the theoretical connection to the analytical concept of whiteness. It also examines research on the contradictory media treatment of acts of terrorism.

What is Terrorism?: News Coverage, Whiteness, and Orientalism

These examples demonstrate the inconsistencies that have challenged media in covering extremist violence since well before Trump. The media are not helped, as Fisher implies, with the varied and imprecise meanings of the word "terrorism." Not only are there conflicting academic and legal definitions, but different government and international agencies have their own criteria. Some definitions are overly broad: The *Oxford English Dictionary* begins with a broad definition: "[t]he unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims" (Oxford, n.d.).

However, the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the federal Department of Justice, uses a more precise definition from Title 22 of the U.S. Code of Laws in that terrorism is "…premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines it as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (National Institute of Justice, n.d.).

European terrorism scholar Alex P. Schmid (1983) provides language useful for journalists, describing it as an act of "an anxiety inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons" (p. 70). A key characteristic of terrorism is that victims are often random. Terrorists choose symbolic targets to send a message and publicize their political aims and grievances. This definition implies an obvious reality: media are an essential part of the equation for terrorism; they are the primary means by which terrorists' actions and ideological beliefs are publicized. Yet, the media connection is not always direct. And in recent decades, terrorists have not always claimed credit for violent acts, though the publicity remains a key characteristic of terrorist violence (Yin, 2013, pp. 37–38).

The meaning of terrorism has been remade over time in different places, and scholars debate the historical significance of various "waves" of terrorism (e.g., Hanhimäki & Blumenau, 2013). The term carried a positive connotation in the late eighteenth century, used by the French revolutionary state as a tool for maintaining order and governance (Hoffman, 2006). Some scholars suggest the first wave

of global terrorism took place in the decades before the First World War, coinciding with massive economic shifts (Jensen, 2013; Rapoport, 2013). It took on its more contemporary character internationally after the Second World War (Hoffman, 2006). The 1960s and 1970s brought debates about nationalist and separatist groups such as Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization and about distinctions between freedom fighters and terrorists in the post-colonial context. In the early 1980s, terrorism became associated with the destabilization of the West and by the mid-1980s, state-sponsored terrorism became a reality that enabled weaker states to challenge dominant powers (Hoffman, 2006; Riegler, 2013). In the wake of 9/11, the definition of terrorism shifted again as U.S. President George W. Bush deployed the phrase "war on terror." He invoked the term "evildoers" to define perpetrators and used the definition to take out Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein despite a lack of evidence connecting his regime to the attacks (Hoffman, 2006; Rapoport, 2013).

Many working definitions of terrorism combine political aims and unlawful use of force as being primary characteristics. The Anti-Defamation League (2017) in the United States, for instance, identifies it as "a pre-planned act or attempted act of significant violence by one or more non-state actors in order to further an ideological, social or religious cause, or to harm perceived opponents of such causes" (p. 2). These criteria have been assigned to Islamic extremism since at least September 11, 2001, and in the early years subsequent, U.S. military, security officials, politicians, and law enforcement agencies focused heavily on Al-Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for the airplane attacks. More recently, U.S. political leaders and security officials have focused their efforts against terrorism on other organized groups such as ISIS and on solitary actors who self-radicalize on the internet.

News organizations have spent vast resources covering attacks and plots by radical Islamic groups and individuals. They have investigated the strategies, cultures, leadership, resources, and motivations of groups across the Middle East and beyond. Such a response would be expected given the enormity of the 2001 attacks; however, scholars and commentators have critiqued the broad assumptions and characterizations of Muslims and Arabs the news media used in the years following 9/11 (e.g., Akram, 2002; Ismael & Measor, 2003; Kellner, 2016). News accounts have been filled with anxious stories of the Muslim "Other," and often offer little nuance about the varied cultures and beliefs of Muslim people.

These portrayals flow from a news culture steeped in Orientalist assumptions about a distant Other (Said, 1978, 1997), a news culture also rooted in whiteness as an ideology (Dolan, 2011). Extensive research reveals the pervasiveness of whiteness as part of the institutional structures of the United States and other Western countries. Assumptions

about the normative nature of whiteness as a non-race permeate the law, judicial system, education, politics, and journalism (Omi & Winant, 1986). Scholars have analyzed whiteness as an ideology, a discursive formation, a "process constituted by an ensemble of social and material practices" (Shome, 2000) and as structural racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1986), among other conceptions. All approaches are committed to making whiteness visible as a social category.

As race is itself a social construction, whiteness is created, historically and currently, in the interests of maintaining power structures (Lipsitz, 1998; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1986; Shome, 1996). It can be difficult to see the impact of white privilege because it is the norm in the United States. It is everywhere and nowhere at once. It is the unmarked category against which all other racial categories are valued. In fact, it flourishes in its invisibility. People equate racism to overt prejudice, but whiteness often operates on a much subtler level. As a form of racial bias, it serves to maintain institutions, norms, laws, and expectations in ways that privilege its dominance and obscure it as a racial category.

Both journalism's norms and its practitioners are suffused with normative assumptions about the dominance of whiteness. This accounts for an overrepresentation of white journalists in news organizations, but it goes much deeper. The norms that dictate news practices—from objectivity to selection of sources to decisions about what constitutes news—are forged from the invisibility of whiteness, which makes them seem wholly unconnected to racial dominance (e.g., Dolan, 2006; Heider, 2000; Wilson, 1995). Indeed, U.S. journalism pedagogy is a study in whiteness, where aspiring reporters are schooled in "diversity" from the perspective of white dominance (Alemán, 2014).

Journalism is institutionally structured to deploy practices that assume whiteness as a non-race. Journalists of color must also adopt these institutional norms and practices. People "learn" to be white, as Raka Shome notes (2000, p. 368). This is true for white people, but also in a sense for people of color in order to conform to dominant social norms. As such, performing within the rubric of whiteness can be a survival strategy for non-white journalists, a strategic decision in the name of success, or a less conscious assimilation.

From within this structural paradigm, where journalists marinate in an organizational culture that renders whiteness invisible, came the coverage of the Muslim and Arab Other after 9/11. Edward Said's (1978) classic book *Orientalism* describes the "Orient" as a colonial creation of the West. Orientalism is a strategic racialized process that has maintained European superiority over non-white cultures, particularly Middle Eastern and other Asian subjects. As Said describes, it allows the West to view itself as superior in juxtaposition to Arab cultures as backward, violent, hypersexualized, and irrational. Orientalist views that

justified the treatment of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century, of Japanese-American citizens during the Second World War, and others percolated through news and popular culture (Ono & Pham, 2009).

After the 9/11 attacks, political leaders and news media portrayed Muslim and Arab cultures, which they knew little about, as barbaric. Some researchers call this clash of civilizations narrative "new Orientalism." Politicians and pundits continue this rhetoric, as do the news media (e.g., Altwaiji, 2014; Amin-Khan, 2012). While this chapter does not take up all the nuances and impacts of Orientalism, from a journalistic perspective it is an ideological outlook that enables opinion leaders to mark Islam as the "antithesis of 'Western civilization'" (Amin-Khan, 2012, p. 1596). Orientalism maintains the West, as represented by whiteness, as the natural order of things. At the same time, it inflects coverage that minimizes white-supremacist violence against all people of color.

Media Research and the Bias of Whiteness

Researchers have written volumes on the impact of whiteness across U.S. institutions. Content analyses and framing studies bear out that an Orientalist ideology permeates news coverage of Muslims. One framing analysis of six major organizations' coverage of 11 attacks on U.S. soil from 9/11 to December 2009 found news reports infused with fear of Muslim terrorism (Powell, 2011). Domestic terrorism, meanwhile, "is cast as a minor threat that occurs in isolated incidents by troubled individuals" (p. 91). The attacks included high-profile threats by domestic and international perpetrators, Muslim and non-Muslim, including an anthrax mail attack and the "shoe bomber" attempt of late 2001. Media made connections to al-Qaeda without evidence, associated suspects' names with Islam incorrectly (Powell, 2011, p. 97), and used the term "terrorism" with scant proof. The anthrax case, in which the main suspect was white, saw media de-emphasize terrorism in accordance with officials' insistence that the country focus on the threat of another al-Qaeda attack.

A legal case study of four separate attacks in the 2000s found similar inconsistencies. News reports described Muslim suspects as terrorists and white suspects as common criminals with a sorry past. Journalists labeled two as terrorism where suspects were identified as Muslim (Yin, 2013). Two of the cases, both in Oregon, involved bombers: Mohamed Mohamud and Joshua Turnidge. The other two involved shootings: the 2009 attack by Army psychologist Malik Hasan at Fort Hood and the 2011 mass shooting in Arizona by Jared Lee Loughner, who killed six people and wounded 13, including U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. In the two bombing cases, the local coverage of Mohamud garnered significant national media attention as an act of terrorism, while Turnidge's case did not (p. 47).

Mohamud, the subject of an FBI sting, proposed making a car bomb to go off at a Portland Christmas-tree lighting ceremony. Agents helped him acquire materials and moved in for the arrest when he tried to detonate the device, which was inert. Turnidge, 32, called in bomb threats to two banks in December 2008. When police tried to detonate one device it exploded and killed two officers. *The Oregonian* described Turnidge and his father, who was also arrested, as conducting a murder plot, even as police cited anti-government sentiment as a motivation (Yin, 2013). Just 1.7 percent of stories about the Turnidges mentioned terrorism; 29.8 percent of the stories about Mohamud did so. And there were many more stories in total about Mohamud.

A recent analysis of two attacks in Canada found a similar proclivity among major news organizations to characterize non-Muslim perpetrators in a softer light. In two politically motivated attacks in 2014, Carver and Harrie (2017) found that the media labeled the one in which the suspect declared an allegiance to Islam as terrorism; the other was a "shooting spree." Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, a homeless man with a drug-abuse problem who had converted to Islam, carried out one attack in Ottawa. The other, in Moncton, New Brunswick, was by Justin Bourque, a libertarian "gun enthusiast" with a hatred of government and police. Carver and Harrie (2017) write that a Muslim terrorist frame overrode the fact that Zehaf-Bibeau had mental health issues relating to substance abuse and homelessness. Reports did not portray Bourque as a terrorist, though he clearly had anti-government motives.

Many studies also demonstrate media bias against African American subjects (e.g., Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Dixon & Azocar, 2007). News coverage of crime involving African Americans tends to be framed in terms of already existing stereotypes about black citizens (Holt & Major, 2010). While each case has unique circumstances, motivations, and treatment under the law, the research highlights a pervasive bias that makes violent and stereotyped assumptions about people of color, including Muslims. It is not possible to know what precise decisions lead organizations to their coverage of white-supremacist terrorism. However, the pattern is evident and it is borne out in research by anti-discrimination groups as well: mainstream media give significantly less coverage to violent acts that stem from right-wing extremism (Anti-Defamation League, 2017). In many cases, news reports suggest the mental stability of the white perpetrators somehow precludes the possibility of terrorism. Police and attorneys frequently activate the specter of mental competence with white suspects. This detail clouds newsroom decisions about how to characterize white-supremacist attacks.

Dylann Roof, for example, refused to be declared unfit despite the insistence of his attorneys. He represented himself before a jury that later sentenced him to death. "There's nothing wrong with me psychologically," he told jurors (Blinder & Sack, 2017). He planned his

2015 killing of nine African Americans at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, for at least six months. He told police he wanted to start a race war, and he expressed no remorse. He believed that the "lower race" had forced him to take action. A court-appointed psychiatrist found him to suffer from a number of disorders, including social anxiety disorder and a schizoid personality disorder, both broad categories that have a range of symptoms.

The case prompted media discussion about whether Roof was motivated by extreme ideology and should be declared a terrorist. The shootings constituted the worst act of right-wing violence since McVeigh's 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City. In the aftermath, some media contemplated the disparity between the easy labeling of attackers who are Muslim or other people of color as terrorists. U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch's explanation did not clarify matters. She originally stated that federal officials were investigating Roof as a terrorist. He was charged with hate crimes. "Hate crimes are the original domestic terrorism and we feel that the behavior that is alleged to have occurred here is archetypal behavior that fits the federal hate crimes statutes and vindicates their purpose," Lynch told reporters (Craven, 2015).

The Roof case raises a number of issues that come into focus in the context of an overtly xenophobic White House. One is whether and how journalists can name an act of white-supremacist violence as terrorism when police, justice officials, or psychiatric experts might label the suspect mentally ill. The other is the confusing array of state and federal charges that suspects might face and how that creates impediments to media naming a white domestic perpetrator as a terrorist. The law offers limited options for terrorism-related charges against domestic suspects (Zakaria, 2016a), as I discuss further below. First, the following section examines research on the threat of right-wing violence, which provides a backdrop to the argument for news media to attend to institutionalized racial bias in the Trump era.

The Threat of Right-Wing Violence

If the news media are to erode the ideology of whiteness in journalism and employ ethical protocols that account for acts of extreme-right violence, they must take seriously a vast body of existing research. It includes:

- A study on the far right for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point found that "contentious and conservative political environments as well as … political empowerment" are associated with far-right violence, as well as "the sense of empowerment that emerges when the political system is perceived to be increasingly permissive to far right ideas" (Perliger, 2012, p. 5)

- An analysis by Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security at Duke University stated that law enforcement agencies "consider anti-government violent extremists, not radicalized Muslims, to be the most severe threat of political violence that they face" in the United States (Kurzman & Schanzer, 2015)
- A report prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice on "lone-wolf" terrorism found that the prominence of attacks by single perpetrators has been on the rise since 9/11 and that military personnel and police have increasingly become targets of such attacks (Hamm & Spaaj, 2015)
- A Southern Poverty Law Center study of both radical-right and jihadist terrorism from 2009 to 2015 found that an attack occurred on average every 34 days. Of the more than 60 incidents it examined, 74 percent were carried out by lone actors. It echoed other reports that find "more people have been killed in America by non-Islamic domestic terrorists than jihadists" (Potok, 2015, p. 4)
- An Anti-Defamation League study (2017) finds that right-wing extremism has been a major source of terrorism over 25 years and one under-represented by the media. The vast majority of incidents stem from white-supremacists and anti-government extremists. Most were by people acting on their own.
- A 2011 study by the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, found that right-wing terrorists since 2001 had killed 48 people compared with 26 by jihadist attacks. It examined the motivations and attributes of the perpetrators. (Sterman & Bergan, 2011)

This is not an exhaustive list, but such reports agree that right-wing violence, including white-supremacist violence, poses a serious national threat in the United States. As the 2017 Government Accountability Office report to Congress mentioned earlier states, since 2001, "fatalities resulting from attacks by far-right wing violent extremists have exceeded those caused by radical Islamist violent extremists in 10 of the 15 years," (GAO, p. 4). Of 85 extremist incidents that resulted in death since 9/11, "far right wing violent extremist groups were responsible for 62 (73 percent) while radical Islamist violent extremists were responsible for 23 (27 percent)" (p. 4). The Anti-Defamation League's inventory of 25 years of right-wing terrorism argues that the media have under reported the problem, which tamps down awareness among public officials and the public (2017, p. 1).

Several such studies classify right-wing extremism by type, which is a useful starting point for nuanced coverage. Perliger (2012), for example, delineates a typology of three major ideological strains. The first, white-supremacy groups, consists of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazi groups, skinheads, and other organizations such as the National Alliance. These collectives aim to impose, or in their words to "preserve and restore," a

racial hierarchy through establishing codified social and political control over non-whites. The second type of right-wing extremism includes sovereign citizen groups that aim to undermine the influence, legitimacy, and sovereignty of the federal government. It includes people such as McVeigh, although he also held white-supremacist beliefs. The third category fuses religious fundamentalism with white supremacy, Perliger suggests, as with groups such as the Aryan Nations.

These typologies are not discreet categories, as the McVeigh case points out. However, they do provide a framework for media to think about far-right extremism. Equitable coverage on domestic terrorism in the Trump era begins with an understanding of whiteness as a pervasive ideology. It deploys consistent definitions and pays attention to a typology of extremism on the right where research identifies the greatest threat. The media cannot be limited by law-enforcement and justice system determinations of what counts as terrorism. They must develop and adapt a consistent colloquial understanding that captures the multiplicity of actors, many of whom are inspired by, but not members of, extremist groups.

The problem of deferring to official sources to classify news characterizations of terrorism is evident in a report for the Tow Center on Digital Journalism at the Columbia School of Journalism (Beckett, 2016). Editors reported a sense of discomfort with using the word "terrorism," sensing rightly that it was frequently misused. Some news organizations banned its use, while others grappled with the fact that the word can be a barrier to public understanding. One editor for ABC News told researchers that its journalists may only use the word when quoting someone else as having said it. "Our modus operandi is to do what it says on the tin. We would wait to see how someone [in authority] characterized it," said Jon Williams, international managing editor (Beckett, 2016, p. 18). Such a standard for naming terrorism means that the media cedes all power and moral authority to agencies that themselves are afflicted by institutional racial bias, as I discuss below.

The following section takes up the political pressures and influences that mainstream news organizations face as well as institutional biases that inflect journalism's response to white-supremacist violence. These responses include media uptake of institutional bias among law enforcement, justice, and legal representatives who downplay white violence as a form of terrorism. They also include structural impediments within the law. Both are linked, I argue, to the mental health frame so common in media coverage of white domestic perpetrators.

Whiteness and Impediments to Media Coverage

There's no doubt that matters of race come with vast political implications for the media. So strong is the pressure from elected and unelected officials that news organizations face a chill when they depart from the

political rhetoric about terrorism as an act of an "evil" foreign aggressor (Beckett, 2016, p. 20). After the World Trade Center attacks, politicians chastised coverage that they believed did not toe the patriotic line. For example, Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Secretary of State under President George W. Bush, warned media against broadcasting material from Osama bin Laden (Thussu & Freedman, 2003, p. 43). Some journalists lost their jobs for questioning the government's handling of the "war on terror" (pp. 163–164). Politicians declared criticism of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan unpatriotic and disrespectful of the military personnel whom the Commander-in-Chief had ordered into battle. Since then, military, and political leaders, particularly Trump, continue to deploy the threat of foreign terrorism for political aims, even in the face of attacks by domestic actors.

Such institutionalized bias from the political sphere certainly beset the Obama administration as well. A Department of Homeland Security (DHS) report in 2009 warned that the economic downturn, coupled with the election of the first African American president "present unique drivers for rightwing radicalization and recruitment" (Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2009, p. 2). It pointed out the willingness of a small number of disillusioned former military personnel to join extremist groups in the 1990s. Conservative politicians latched onto that point, saying it painted all veterans as right-wing extremists. In the ensuing storm of criticism, then Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano disavowed the entire report and issued an apology. The agency soon dismantled the DHS group that produced it.

Yet, Trump demonizes foreigners, and non-white citizens, with a torrent of invective too extensive to itemize. His vitriol linking terrorism to Islam has incited a moral panic that the White House used to justify discriminatory travel bans in 2017. In this toxic environment, which seeps outward to touch all people of color and gender minorities, the media face political pressure against attempts to define terrorism outside of hegemonic norms. The current political landscape valorizes the power of whiteness in journalism, and raises the stakes for media reliance on official sources that maintain racialized policies and language. American journalism norms, combined with pressures on corporate media to select saleable, clickable news content, stunt the media's resolve to risk backlash from powerful segments of the political and public spheres that rely on fear of difference.

Institutional bias within police and justice systems is one manifestation of the invisibility of whiteness that percolates through media coverage (c.f. Alexander, 2010). Federal terrorism laws are largely focused on international terrorism and on tracking and preventing terrorism by Muslims in particular. Only 33 states have laws to prosecute domestic terrorism not captured by federal statutes (Daniels, 2016). And U.S. federal law does not deal with the issue of material support

for domestic terrorism (Zakaria, 2016a, 2016b). This means that hate speech by white-supremacists, on the internet or in public forums, is largely protected under the First Amendment. A Trump supporter can yell "Kill all Muslims," as happened during the campaign (Zakaria, 2016b), for instance, and white supremacists' spreading of hate online goes under the radar. Meanwhile authorities investigate and prosecute similar online activity by Muslims, such as retweeting or posting translations of jihadist material. Thus, news coverage that relies on an official definitions and confirmations of domestic terrorism will be deploying a race-based double standard.

As a report by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at the Columbia School of Journalism argues, prosecution and reporting of hate crimes against Muslims remains low (Zakaria, 2016a, p. 6). If official sources do not telegraph the problem, the media are less likely to investigate it, despite consistent evidence of the threat of right-wing terrorism, including white-supremacist violence. Certainly, when new evidence comes out, such as the Anti-Defamation League's report (2017), the news media take notice. When a new attack takes place, media sometimes raise the question of terrorism, as with the Jackson and Christian cases in 2017, yet too often they pin this discussion to whether or not the accused will be charged with terrorism-related offences under the law or whether some official utters the word.

This tendency to defer has consequences, as scholars of critical race theory and others have argued (e.g., Crenshaw, 1995; Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, & Gilmer, 2015). Racial profiling has helped skew the public perception of terrorism and criminality toward people of color (Alexander, 2010; Yin, 2013, pp. 58–59). Police officers kill African Americans at traffic stops at a terrifying rate, and departments have spotty records, to say the least, at dealing with xenophobia from within (e.g., Department of Justice, 2016). Yet some notable media efforts to expose the roots of racial bias have had minimal impact. In January 2017, the news site *The Intercept* published an exclusive report from a classified FBI counterterrorism guide which states that white supremacists maintain an active presence in police departments and other domestic agencies (Speri, 2017). The FBI guide, dated 2015, discusses the agency's efforts to account for this infiltration. Likewise, an earlier well-publicized FBI intelligence assessment in 2006 also warned of white-supremacist groups' interest in infiltrating law enforcement (Speri, 2017).

Any infiltration by white supremacists in law enforcement agencies has to have an impact on the handling of white-supremacist crimes. At minimum, the expedient categorizing of white perpetrators as mentally ill is part of institutional bias that reinforces the invisibility of whiteness. The legal system poses the mental health question in opposition to terrorism. If the suspect is 'unhinged' it seems he—and most perpetrators are men—cannot be a terrorist. This is not true for non-white suspects. "Isn't it weird how we Muslims seem somehow immune to 'mental health

issues?'" British journalist Mehdi Hasan noted in *The Intercept* (2017). Indeed, the question becomes whether mental health precludes the news media from reaching a different conclusion than what police, prosecutors, and defense attorneys publicly state. It is only through a willingness to examine the subtle pervasiveness of whiteness as an ideology that permeates institutions, including journalism, that members of the media can begin to unravel its hold.

Whiteness as Official Policy

This problem of bias is exacerbated in the current political moment. Trump is known to foment violence, including during campaign rallies of 2016 (e.g., Tiefenthaler, 2016) when he urged his crowd to "rough up" protesters and bemoaned the fact that security officers and police were not brutalizing those who protested or spoke against him from the crowd. In the summer of 2017, President Trump told an audience of law enforcement officers to not be too gentle with criminal suspects (Berman, 2017). "When you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over?" Trump said. "I said, you can take the hand away, okay?" While some police departments and law enforcement organizations criticized the remark, some officers in the crowd clapped and smiled at the veiled reference to police brutality.

The Trump administration also reportedly planned to rename the Countering Violent Extremism program as "Countering Islamic Extremism" (Ainsley, Volz, & Cooke, 2017), and it has held up funding for fighting right-wing terrorism (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). These moves highlight the administration's determination to stake its political ground on constructing a threat from outside the United States. If news organizations defer to official sources in deciding what counts as terrorism, and what constitutes a threat to U.S. citizens, it means that governments and agencies can deploy racially biased discourse and policies without a check on their power.

In the age of Trump, mainstream media must overcome their history of minimizing hate-based attacks from the right, a disposition rooted in an ideology of whiteness. News organizations cannot be governed by a legal and law enforcement fixation on the mental health of white suspects and indifference about the mental health of those who purport to act in the name of Islam. They must establish their own consistent standards for covering all political violence, including that by white-supremacists and others on the extreme-right.

Conclusion

White-supremacy is a very uncomfortable subject in the United States, and the spectrum of news coverage about issues of race reflects that tension. In the Trump era, it is even more grievous for the media to gloss over the ideological biases that exist in political, religious, law enforcement

and media circles. There is abundant evidence of racial bias, some overt and some percolating through the structures of whiteness that hold up our institutions, including within the Fourth Estate. Media will require an ideological shift to fully address the distinct Orientalist clash of civilization narrative that continues to drive coverage.

That narrative is inseparable from xenophobia that makes all people of color in the United States, particularly African Americans the research suggests, a target of violent extremism. Without a doubt, naming an act of terrorism is a complicated task. It asks a lot of editors that they formulate definitions that do not adhere to those in statutes or agency policy, or that are carried on the lips of official sources. Yet those official definitions are rooted in racial bias. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the credible mainstream media to employ ethically consistent criteria in naming terrorism.

The current media ecosystem includes many microclimates, not least of which is the right-wing news machine that has grown by leaps and bounds since Fox News made its debut in 1996. In the Trump era it includes *Breitbart* News, the rise of the propagandist Sinclair Broadcasting, the paranoid screeds of such characters as Alex Jones, and the more intellectual bigotry put forth by Richard Spencer. It includes an all-out assault by the right to change what counts as news and to defy the rigors of evidence and reason. This assault on fact-based journalism only adds to the stakes of reporting on hate from within the boundaries of the United States. This "post-truth" climate and the mainstreaming of organizations such as *Breitbart* in the White House press corps signals a media epoch that will not disappear when Trump leaves the Oval Office.

In the face of these challenges, the media cannot underestimate the current moment as a potential watershed for the normalizing of hate speech and for the end of even minimal civil discourse. Trump has brought a seismic shift in rhetoric and bigotry. And even in the era of social media his administration has been obsessed with how national news organizations cover the former reality TV star. With nearly every public address he brings injury to some individual or minoritized group. Trump's presidency heralds a kind of white identity politics and policy decisions that aim to roll back the gains made in the Civil Rights movement. The media's role in challenging racialized representations has never been more urgent, and that urgency calls for journalism to take stock of the racialized nature of its norms and practices and of the ideologies of whiteness that can be invisible to the eye.

Note

1 An original ban in January 2017 included Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. A later ban did not include Iraq. Both bans were challenged at the federal and/or Supreme Court levels.

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