

Politics of Fear and Attention-Based Politics Promote Donald Trump and Other Right-Wing Autocrats

Cuando la Política de Shock legitima a Donald Trump y a otros autócratas de ultra derecha

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Abstract

Any society runs on fundamental assumptions about rights, liberty, justice, and routine social processes that are implicitly and explicitly communicated. While these have often been problematic for minority group members, they are now less certain for many Americans and citizens in numerous democratic countries since Donald Trump refused to accept losing the 2020 presidential election and then incited an insurrection against the Congress of the United States on January 6, 2021, just weeks before his term ended. This shift is mainly due to policy changes, such as abolishing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Fairness Doctrine in 1987 that facilitated right-wing news organizations like Fox News (Honig, 2019), along with the rise of digital media that altered the communications ecology and promoted disinformation for profit (Benkler; Faris and Roberts, 2018; Benkler et al, 2017; Bennett and Livingston, 2018). These changes were the foundation for President Trump's weaponizing of fear, especially his rhetoric about murderous illegal immigrants and the pursuit of a multi-billion border wall to keep Americans safe and keep his supporters fearful. Propaganda and false claims about immigrant criminality contribute to Republican supporters' anger, but most anger is based on deep-seated fears and misinformation.

Key Words: Political communication; Politics of fear; Attention-based politics; Autocratic politicians; Donald Trump

Resumen

La sociedad suele basarse en preconceptos acerca de los derechos individuales, la libertad, la justicia y los procesos que hacen a la vida rutinaria. Los estadounidenses aceptan sin crítica alguna, ciertas ideas base aun cuando estas sean discriminatorias o invasivas para ciertos colectivos minoritarios. Todo ello es ciertamente desastroso para la democracia legitimando a largo plazo las políticas iniciadas por Donald Trump y su administración. Por medio de la manipulación política del temor, Trump supo imponer una retórica discriminatoria basada en la peligrosidad de los inmigrantes ilegales como así también en la necesidad de construir un muro en la frontera con México con el fin superior de proteger a los estadounidenses. Por medio de noticias falsas, y una propaganda espuria, sus políticas recibieron el apoyo del partido Republicano recordando que el resentimiento se nutre de fuerzas profundas como el temor y la desinformación.

Palabras Claves: Comunicación Política; Políticas del miedo; Políticas de Shock; Autocracia; Donald Trump.

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While fundamental assumptions about rights, liberty, and justice have often been problematic for minority group members, they are now less certain for many Americans and citizens in numerous democratic countries since Donald Trump refused to accept losing the 2020 presidential election. This shift is mainly due to policy changes, such as abolishing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Fairness Doctrine in 1987 that facilitated right-wing news organizations like Fox News (Honig, 2019), along with the rise of digital media that altered the communications ecology and promoted disinformation for profit (Benkler et al, 2017; Bennett and Livingston, 2018). These changes were the foundation for President Trump's weaponizing of fear.

This paper is about how Donald Trump's election in 2016 and his destructive four-year term, transformed American politics, radicalized followers against a free press and scientific information, and invigorated right-wing autocrats throughout the globe. Despots have been encouraged by the attack on the United States' democracy, despite the unsuccessful insurrection and prevention of Congress certifying Joe Biden's Electoral College win. The 2016 campaign and diatribes over four years by this savvy media entertainer relied on using social media, especially Twitter, to broadcast nearly 60,000 tweets and retweets – as Tweet Binder calculates on its blog, between 2009 and January 8, 2021 – promoting the politics of fear against immigrants, a threat of socialism, and extended populist politics and attention-based politics (Altheide, 2017; Merkovity, 2017). As one study noted about the 2016 media coverage, while mainstream media coverage was often critical, it revolved around the agenda that the right-wing

media sphere set: immigration. In turn, right-wing media framed immigration in terms of terror, crime, and Islam, as a review of Breitbart and other right-wing media stories about immigration most widely shared on social media exhibits. Immigration is the key topic around which Trump and Breitbart found common cause; just as Trump made this a focal point for his campaign, Breitbart devoted disproportionate attention to the topic (Benkler et al, 2017).

Digital media, along with Trump-friendly Fox News, convinced 70% of Republican Party voters that the election was not free and fair even though dozens of court challenges found no evidence of this (Morning Consult and Politico, 2020: 59). Many believed whatever he said, including that his defeat in 2020 was a victory, that Democrats had rigged the election. Trump's claim that the election was stolen and that followers must fight for their country gave supporters – particularly those who killed a police officer – permission to storm the U.S. Capitol and disrupt the certification of President-elect Joseph Biden. One invader said he was following “the president's instructions”, while another claimed she “answered the call of my president” (Feuer and Hong, 2021). Notwithstanding his telling more than 23,000 lies during his four years in office by 2020 (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2020), he continued to be popular among his cult-like following, including numerous members of the U. S. Congress, who feared that his disapproval might cost them votes in their re-election bids. Virtually all established journalism reports were dismissed as “fake news,” a term very popular with his followers at home and autocrats worldwide (Kellner, 2018). American politics and election norms were further transformed by: President Trump's

failed attempt to postpone the election (Megerian, 2020); his vow to not accept the election results if he lost (Crowley, 2020); his defeat by Joe Biden in 2020; and then inciting a mob to break into the Capitol and threaten members of Congress on January 6, 2021. Indeed, the embarrassing yelps that he won the election – because the Democrats cheated – were belted and tweeted for weeks even though there was no evidence of any cheating whatsoever. Traditional American allies Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, and most NATO members offered quick congratulations on administrations' change. Republican party sycophants, who refused to acknowledge the loss, were joined by right-wing leaders such as Brazilian President: Jair Bolsonaro, along with the heads of Turkey (Erdogan), Saudi Arabia (Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman), and Estonia (Minister Mart Helme). Hungarian Prime Minister: Viktor Orban acknowledged Biden's victory four days after the election, while Russian President: Putin took several weeks to acknowledge Biden's victory (Schemm and Taylor, 2020; Doff, 2020).

The post-truth in Trump era

On the one hand, the truth of the election outcome, like all truths denied by Donald Trump, did not matter to his supporters because Trumpers followed the principle that virtually all facts were biased, that experts – including scientists warning about the ravages of the pandemic or the threat of global warming – were biased and acting out of political preference rather than scientific research. Disinformation and fear, along with attention-based politics are toxic to democratic institutions that rely on shared factual information. According to Bennet and Livingstone (2018) disinformation refers to “Intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals [...] disinformation invites looking at more systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them” (p.124).

On the other hand, Trump administration's alternative truths are widely spread by the Trump supporters and even the ex-president itself. Among the claims that Trump administration falsely claimed: the fastest-growing economy in history; lowest unemployment in history; near-completion of a southern border wall; diplomatic openings with North-Korea; winning a trade war with China; 'historic' improvements for Black Americans. However, these claims usually neglect the full picture. For instance,

the economy was on the rise since the end of the 2008 economic meltdown and ended with the escalation of COVID-19 pandemic (Richter, 2020). The same is true regarding the unemployment rate (BLS, 2021). The border wall is nowhere close to being finished, and eventually, the U.S. government will not pay the estimated \$40 billion (Kakaes, 2016), although the Biden administration will halt wall construction. North Korea did not give up its nuclear ambitions after diplomatic openings, and it is very close to being called a “nuclear state” (Anderson, 2017). The US-China trade war short-term consequences include that, although the U.S. has more substantial bargaining power than China, it could hurt most economies in the world especially in manufacturing employment (Li, He, and Lin, 2018). Furthermore, Black Americans' situation have not improved during the Trump years mainly because of authoritarian populism relying on the white identity of Trumpism that amplifies the political polarization, which has been increasing since the nineties (Edelman, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2017).

Notwithstanding that COVID-19 killed more than 400,000 Americans and infected more than 29 million of his countrymen, President Trump was a dominant source of misinformation about the pandemic, insisting that the disease was under control and going away (Evanega et al, 2020). He would not invoke a comprehensive Defence Product Act (DPA) to produce more medical and safety equipment. He would not permit his pandemic task force to coordinate with President-elect Biden's public health team to put a real plan into action in January after his inauguration. We can no longer assume that people share basic ideas about science and medical experts, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that were politically compromised as the Trump administration downplayed the magnitude of the pandemic (Behrmann and Brown, 2020). The politicized resistance to the pandemic public health crisis illustrates how President Trump and his minions rejected the mission and goals of public health measures such as wearing masks and avoiding large crowds. Despite nine months of medical evidence and warnings about the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, many citizens reject scientists' warnings and recommendations. Half of Americans say they will not get COVID-19 vaccine (Mullen O'Keefe, 2020).

The lasting impact of Trump's legacy will continue to be felt because he legitimized denials, lying, and autocratic brutality; after all, if the United States operated this way, why could not autocrats

worldwide? During an interview a few days after Trump lost the 2020 election, one example aired on BBC America (Nov. 9, 2020). Reporter Olga Guerin questioned Azerbaijan President: Ilhan Aliyev, about civilian atrocities in the ongoing war with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh. He said that regardless of what BBC journalists had seen about Azerbaijan bombing and shelling civilian residences and apartments, it never happened. President insisted, “We don’t want to continue” this war. When asked about the impending humanitarian crisis in Nagorno Karabakh with the coming winter and closing off to civilians, he suggested that this is up to Armenia. “We do not attack civilians, unlike them...” Reporter Guerin then says, “Well, let me tell you what our own BBC colleagues have seen during Oct. 1, 2, 3; they witnessed shelling of the town, an apartment block destroyed. They characterized it as indiscriminate shelling of a town without clear military targets... this was witnessed and filmed by the BBC.” President Aliyev responded: “I doubt it...so what if they were there. It doesn’t mean anything. It is fake news.” Guerin persisted, “Why is it fake news? Aliyev insisted, “Because of the biased approach to the conflict. Because of the black propaganda against Azerbaijan by the international media.” Guerin wanted to be clear about his meaning: “You cannot be guilty of any wrong? Everything is fake news?” “Absolutely,” replied Aliyev.

The attention-based politics of Trump

Most democratic governments worldwide will cheer Biden’s election. Still, in one sense, the outcome of the presidential election matters very little because we have all lost so much of our basic understandings and shared assumptions that are necessary for social order and civility. Even though President-elect Biden defeated Trump by electoral college votes (306–232) and about 7 million popular votes, the ousted president still received more than 74 million votes. The USA’s social foundation has been severely damaged and is not likely to recover any time soon.

Taken for granted assumptions about race relations, the integrity of elections, and the government’s role have also floundered because of politically convenient lies and distortions. President Trump downplayed brutal police killings of Blacks (Peters, 2020). President Trump denied decades of social science and governmental research documenting social inequality and institutionalized racism in numerous tweets and inflammatory statements, stressing law and order, rioting, and

attacks on police (Konrad, 2018). His son-in-law advisor, Jared Kushner, said that “Blacks have to want to be successful” for the president’s policies to work (Cummings, 2020). The president appealed to fear and boasted of keeping suburbs safe; he drew attention to himself as the saviour of the suburbs and law and order: “Attention-based politics describes the process in which politicians use their communication to draw the attention of the biggest possible crowd of the audience (voters) to themselves or to the themes they propose in the multitude of information or news flows” (Merkovity, 2017: 66). President Trump solidified the politics of fear through attention-based politics. He stressed that the American economy would implode under what he claimed would be Joe Biden’s socialism, which strongly appealed to many Latino voters, especially those in Florida with family ties and memories to Castro’s Cuba. Trump stated: “This election is a choice between a TRUMP RECOVERY or a BIDEN DEPRESSION,” the president tweeted, echoing what he tells supporters at rallies: “It’s a choice between a TRUMP BOOM or a BIDEN LOCKDOWN. It’s a choice between our plan to Kill the virus – or Biden’s plan to kill the American Dream!”.

It would be a mistake to believe that attention-based politics had not been present earlier. Attention has always been inherent in the political world. Salient examples can be typically found at the time of campaigns as in democracies. It is the election period when citizens can directly and sensibly have a word in political processes through the election results. These results also show what the opinions are about politicians, parties and policies. Therefore, they can influence the process of campaign communication. The pre-election period is especially communication-oriented; the public’s attention is exceptionally open to political messages. Lastly, campaigns test the public communication how they work, how free it is, how checks and balances work, what image certain democracies have about themselves. So, there is intensive attention surrounding the election campaigns. Among democratic proportions, attention can typically be tied to captivating votes and reaching interest in topics to be observed in the relation of the political actor and the voter (Merkovity, 2020).

For the concept of attention, its control is also inherent. For example, it was not known by many at the age that Franklin Roosevelt spent most of his time in a wheelchair. He never showed up in public this way; he usually stood in one place or relied on his helper. The politician could not afford being judged based on his physical state as it was believed that he could have never been voted for president knowing

this. He agreed with the press and not to take pictures of him in his wheelchair (Gallagher, 1985). It never turned out why the press staff would agree to play this game. Directing attention was made whole by the new medium of the age, the radio. Roosevelt was one of the first politicians who had regular radio speeches. The radio messages reflected a leader who was strong and ready for action, who – thanks to his wife’s typical visits in the country – was familiar with important issues in the United States and the world. With the one-way communicational channel’s help, the president virtually appeared in the listeners’ living rooms and created an example of directing attention (Stone, 1991).

Besides directing attention, Charles de Gaulle used television regularly for raising attention. We are still talking about a one-way channel that contains some visuals as well. The president had the goal of unconsciously reaching the public’s attention with his speeches on television and his essential gestures. Televised speeches made it happen that from 1958, the French presidents make special attention to their appearances on television because from de Gaulle, the public ties the political actor with the political position (Gaffney, 2010). Ronald Reagan used television in the same way, to promote his popularity and personalize political communication. Symbols got a vital role in his speeches that had the task of grasping and directing attention, preferably more expressively than his opponents did. Raising attention there became secondary, the image got into the foreground that not only strengthened the speech’s content but the person himself. In Reagan’s case, this tactic of directing attention served to cover the gaps in his political program. So, he put the focus on the goal instead of the way leading there. Of course, it was needed for the president to recognize the effect of media on the image that was not a challenge for him thanks to his past career as an actor (Covington et al, 1993). Reagan influenced other American and European politicians who put more and more emphasis on the image instead of the political program.

The last example is a recent one and belongs to the age after the internet. Some examples are Barack Obama’s presidential campaigns in 2008 and partly in 2012. Before the elections, online communities’ power forming politics seemed to be a myth rather than real potential. Obama used YouTube, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter and other community sites for maximizing attention. The favourable image is not enough if there is no constant attention associated with it that pushes the opponent in the background.

By the phenomenon called the Obama-effect, the campaign team let an insight into the campaign’s everyday happenings with exclusive contents for the members of Obama’s network of social media that was noticed by the traditional media as well, initiating more discourses about the candidate. All of this could only be maintained by analysing the voters’ data by the campaign members, resulting in personalized messages sent to supporters and voters (Bimber, 2014). An even more important outcome of maximizing the attention of – the traditionally apolitical – youthful involvement as volunteers in the campaign. The campaign resulted in 3.1 million individual (financial) supporter and more than 5 million volunteers who could be spectacularly cropped in the traditional (e.g. telemarketing, street canvassing or door to door) campaign.

Furthermore, the candidate became a constant topic in the voters’ conversations, and practically he became a celebrity. However, this status meant collecting and purchasing the big data, from which those records had to be chosen with data analysis, which proved to be useful from the campaign’s viewpoint. These could make the campaign personalized and – with some exaggeration – the celeb-Obama that they wished for could be created for everyone. The two election campaigns of Barack Obama showed that it is not the existence or non-existence of the technology that can define an election’s outcome. Still, for the sake of gaining, keeping and maximizing attention, technology needs to be used, too.

The above-listed examples show the use of attention for political goals. However, the different aspects of grabbing attention can be described not only at the time of election campaigns of media appearances. In attention-based politics, the emphasis is on media use. The online communication will be necessary where the different social life events take place. In this communication, the voters take part actively and are not as passive as traditional media consumers. Active participation, however, does not mean interactivity at the same time, as most of the political actors will avoid those situations where they can get into contact with the voters directly, for example, through a discourse (Aharony, 2012). Therefore, we can say that attention-based politics – just as we saw in the previous examples – cannot be tied to interactivity. The main thing is gaining, maximizing and directing attention.

Right-wing (illiberal) regimes will use a mix of traditional and new wave attention-based politics. Still, the interactivity is not an essential element to

them; however, they will refer to it. For instance, the Hungarian government led by PM Viktor Orbán will use the social media to get in touch with the public (e.g., the PM used his Facebook channel daily during the COVID-19 related lockdown). This communication does not require any feedback from the followers. It is a press-conference like communication just without questions from the media or the public (Merkovity, Bene & Farkas, 2021). Here the gaining and maximizing of the attention are the critical components. So-called National Consultations are used to direct the attention to different issues. These consultations are quasi-referendum organized with some regularity and allow the Hungarian citizens to answer questions posed by the government. Naturally, the possible answers are limited to several, government-friendly responses. The results of the consultations are usually used as a reference base for the next period of governance, claiming that the people are those who decided the most important issues, therefore, these issues are going to be on the top of the agenda (Körösényi, Illés & Gyulai, 2020).

The emphasis in political communication moved from the actual topics to the planned and staged actions for the politicians to form voters' reactions from different sides to political actions. Attention-based politics covers the turning point when the nature of the struggle for voters' attention changes. In this communicational situation, there is a fight for attention not only with the other politicians or parties but also with other actors. This is what Donald Trump understood from the public sphere; numerous sources of information get to an average person in different forms or ways (Chadwick, 2017). Data can be about, e.g., celebrities, the entertainment industry in general, close and distant events, terrorism, sport, politics. In this sense, politicians fight for attention together with the Kardashians, the NFL stars, TikTok influencers or the ISIS.

The Politics of Fear

The politics of fear refers to decision-makers promotion and exploitation of citizens' anger and fear for their own political goals and objectives (Altheide, 2002; Furedi, 2005; Glassner, 1999). President Trump seemed to rejoice with fear (Woodward, 2019). These tasks usually involve major communications media and information technologies to harness and disseminate propaganda. Communication media are central to the process of constructing civilization (Couch, 1984; 1990). Every country and culture have unique pathways to fear and autocracy, often

involving historical events and popular scapegoats and "outsiders" to blame for troubles.

Moreover, the approach to propaganda will vary throughout history, cultural contexts, and particularly information technologies for communication. Further, the format and logic underlying the use of the communication media to promote fear and justify autocratic rule will be reflexively involved in the content of messages and the information consumers (e.g. the audiences) and participants in the messaging process. While contemporary propaganda of fear messages often involves television and digital media (e. g. internet), in other contexts – and times – they may include film, print, radio, or even the religious pulpit. The key to understanding the politics of fear and autocratic emergence and control, then, is to be tuned to the media logic operating within a given ecology of communication (Altheide, 1995; Altheide & Snow, 1979) as well as the specific adjustments made to maximize the impact of messages (Hepp, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). The upshot is that autocrats and propagandists adjust their approach and content to audience expectations, familiarity, and skill with information technologies and communication formats. A significant problem with rapidly changing information technologies today is that audiences are not just audiences that receive information and then interpret it. Still, they are actively involved in the processing and selecting and even resending less referential messages – requiring reflection – but are more evocative. This is critical when participants lack basic media literacy with these new formats that are often instantaneous, personal, and visual.

The news media have contributed to our deteriorating – but entertaining – political situation. Mr Trump was President partly because he was entertaining. Research on TV news shows that promoting the politics of fear is a by-product of entertaining and sensationalized reports to build audience ratings (Altheide, 1976; Epstein, 1973; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991; Tuchman, 1978). Contemporary news practices have increasingly been wedded to new information technologies that provide visuals and images, particularly portable cameras and smartphones. The entertainment format of much of U.S. TV news promotes the use of video or other visuals that are dramatic, conflictual, and emotional. Screen images dominate broadcast news as well as social media. Investigations of news coverage of numerous local, national, and international news reports reveal how our current "news code" operates (Altheide, 1985b; Chadwick, 2017). TV tells time with visuals. Although the intent may be to use visuals to

tell a story about something, the logic in use amounts to telling a story about the visual at hand. Events that are more likely to satisfy these format criteria are more likely to be broadcast. Indeed, it is increasingly common for digital media vignettes to be included in various news reports.

Our work over the last four decades also demonstrates that politicians and others who provide visual events and dramatic performances are more likely to receive news coverage (Altheide, 1976; 1985a; 1985b; 1994; 2002; 2004; 2016). We have documented the profound effects this format-driven media coverage has had on social institutions ranging from sports, news, politics, education, and religion. Contemporary news practices continue this trend. Indeed, even the prestigious evening network newscasts have adopted this approach, especially as social media have provided seemingly ubiquitous videos of a wide array of events, many of which are posted on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. As newscasts seek higher ratings, it should not be surprising that they have adjusted their selection of news items to include visually interesting bits that have already been viewed – or gone viral – on the internet and social media. All of this played well with Donald Trump.

Trump was a master of the politics of fear (Altheide, 2017). He opened his 2016 campaign descending an escalator and then primed his paid throng to cheer vicious remarks about impending doom to American culture by Mexican immigrants: “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, and they’re rapists” (Reilly, 2016). The real culprit is our entertaining media culture that thrives on fear, confrontation, and conflict. Moreover, social media have extended the opportunity to be profane. Many of Mr Trump’s followers state that he says what they are feeling, and that is the problem: civility and maintaining a public order requires restricting dark, petty, and bigoted feelings to private spaces.

The role of the media goes a long way in explaining significant divisions in the United States today. Fear prompts people to take action and to speak their mind. We are barraged with dramatic and evocative messages that danger and threat are imminent even though numerous studies show that Americans face little danger from terrorist attacks. Like Donald Trump, politicians have skilfully combined the politics of fear with personal attacks blaming opponents for permitting the threat, such as restricting gun sales and not restricting immigrants.

There are three major contributors to our

current politics of fear. First, while many voters claimed to be angry, most anger is based on fear, and in the United States there have been several decades of fear promoted mainly by the entertainment-oriented mass media and popular culture presenting non-stop fear about crime, violence, drugs, gangs, immigrants, and more recently, terrorism. Most of this had occurred when the crime rate, especially violent crime, was declining. It still goes on; in the United States 25-40% of local TV news reports are about crime and violence. Second, the 9/11 attacks initiated an intense anti-terrorism propaganda campaign waged by the Bush and Obama administrations that expanded surveillance and heightened fear of terrorism, linking it to crime, drug sales, and immigration. News reports and advertisements joined drug use with terrorism and helped shift drugs from criminal activity to unpatriotic action. Donald Trump’s campaign in 2016 stoked fear about crime, minority groups, immigrants, Muslims, and terrorists, stressing that they threatened American safety and jobs. These became the targets of anger. The electorate’s fear-based anger was channelled through a populist appeal with uncivil discourse attacking all opposition (Castells, 2018). His 2020 campaign stressed law and order, fear of minority groups, and socialism by the Democrats and Joe Biden.

Social media were the third factor that channelled fear into personal feelings and perceptions. According to the Pew Research Internet Project, in 2000, about 46% of Americans had access to the internet, while over 87% did so in 2014. Cell phone usage increased from 53% to 90% during the same period. Smartphone ownership – quite rare in 2000 – soared to nearly 60% in 2014. Communication became more personal, instantaneous, and visual, with social media development, especially interactive smartphones (Panagopoulos, 2016). Individuals could focus on private networks (e.g. Facebook) and not only share personal information but more importantly, could share their own opinions and select information sources and content that they preferred, regardless of its veracity. Treating all facts as mere opinions promoted the development of fake news, or what a Trump advisor referred to recently as alternative facts, that appealed to the frightened voters.¹

1 Opinion poll data show that in 2019 Republicans prioritized fear issues—terrorism, immigration, and military—while Democrats focused more on institutional support issues such as health care, education, and the environment. These are significant differences, the one signalling concern with protection, safety and security, while the other is more future-oriented and enabling. Party members agree that things have changed recently. In

A constant discourse of fear – even if false – about pervasive immigrant crime, disease, and terrorism helped to keep Republican supporters on high fear-alert and direct their angst at the most prevalent threats. President Trump has skilfully directed the news cycle with tweets to keep people frightened and assuring them that he will protect them. Inflammatory tweets are repeated in regular news reports and amplified through social media, even if they are false. President Trump told George Stephanopoulos in June 2019: “I put it out, and then it goes onto your platform. It goes onto ABC. It goes onto the networks. It goes onto all over cable. It’s an incredible way of communicating”.

This kind of communication shapes public opinion by emphasizing dangers – both real and imaginary – that his policies purport to fix. That is the key: President Trump will save the people. Sociologist Barry Glassner, an authority on the culture of fear, states: “His [Trump’s] formula is very clean and uncomplicated: Be very, very afraid. And I am the cure.” According to an Administration official, “The American people are afraid.” “That’s what the President’s reflecting” (Altman, 2017).

The politics of fear that raged for nearly 20 years after the 9/11 attacks focused on terrorism and Muslims, but it shifted as protests mounted over Black Americans’ police slayings. President Trump did not voice empathy with hundreds of thousands of protesters who filled the streets of American cities after viewing the video of brutally killed George Floyd when a Minneapolis police officer choked him to death with his knee on his neck. News coverage of fear, threat, and violence continued to influence and manipulate politicians attuned to network TV criteria for coverage. President Trump sent armed federal agents to several cities, to battle “terrorists” because he said some cities run by Democrats, were out of control. “Look at what’s going on – all run by Democrats, all run by very liberal Democrats. All run, really, by the radical left, Mr Trump said. He added: If Biden got in, that would be true for the country. The whole country would go to hell. And we’re not going to let it go to hell (Baker, Kanno-Youngs & Davey, 2020).

1987, only 25% of those surveyed said there was a great deal of difference between Republicans and Democrats. But by 2019, 54% gave this view. For more information, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/05/republicans-and-democrats-have-grown-further-apart-on-what-the-nations-top-priorities-should-be/> or <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/01/24/publics-2019-priorities-economy-health-care-education-and-security-all-near-top-of-list/>.

Despite President Trump’s rant, opinion poll analysis suggests that most Americans were sympathetic to the Black Lives Matter protests (Parker, Menasce Horowitz & Anderson, 2020). Heightened awareness of systematic institutional racism against minorities, especially black people, was conducive to media messages about nationwide reflection for changes in policing, and criminal justice discrimination in general. Moreover, the public was less supportive of the president’s self-promotive coronavirus briefings that were typically short on facts and long on political attacks. Indeed, some major networks stopped providing live coverage of what several reporters regarded as campaign speeches (Porter, 2020).

President Trump countered with violent political theatre that would assure televised confrontations with Portland protesters to provide dramatic visuals that power the politics of fear. He dispatched a cobbled array of unidentified and improperly trained federal agents in unmarked vehicles to combat protesters in front of TV cameras, despite the demands to cease by Portland’s mayor, police commissioner, and Oregon’s governor. They expressed confidence in their local and state police forces to deal with the protests (Olmos, Baker & Kanno-Youngs, 2020). The skilful use of news media for propaganda provided visuals of conflict widely presented by TV networks, which the president claimed was proof that the country is out of control and “going to hell”. Atlantic writer Anne Applebaum referred to this as “performative authoritarianism,” adding (Stelter, 2020) “This is being done partly for the photographs... This is a way of messaging – that “we’re in charge, we’re doing something, we’re restraining these forces of violence”. And that’s designed to appeal to a certain kind of voter who wants to see this control put onto contemporary events.

Those opposing this distorted coverage had to rely on interviews and talking heads, rather than the more entertaining conflict visuals. John Sandweg, former director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), observed: “I think it’s an abuse of DHS [Department of Homeland Security]. I mean really the president’s trying to use DHS as his goon squad. That’s really what’s going on here” (Straus, 2020). During a Congressional Hearing about presidential abuse of power, William Barr, the Attorney General, was chastised for coddling presidential overreach and supporting the use of Homeland Security agents against protesters at the White House and in Portland, Oregon. Congressman Nadler stated: “The president wants footage for his campaign ads, and you appear

to be serving it up to him as ordered”, “You are projecting fear and violence nationwide in pursuit of obvious political objectives. Shame on you, Mr Barr” (Fandos and Savage, 2020).

Most efforts to use fear to win elections relied on rhetoric; for example, George W. Bush’s re-election campaign in 2004 used threats from terrorism. Fear was expanded with the 9/11 attacks against any group or country that was labelled terrorist. After he was elected in 2012, President Obama used fear to justify escalating drone attacks against suspected terrorists. Still, Presidential candidate Donald Trump took the politics of fear to a new level by promoting the fear of immigrants, especially Mexicans, while demonizing Muslims. Many American citizens supported this fear with ballots and large increases in hateful attacks on Mexican Americans, Jews, Muslims, and minority groups. Creating political theatre with clashes between unidentified federal agents and protesters is a new level of manipulation, aided by TV networks’ pursuit of exciting visual coverage that can distort a more complex reality.

Donald Trump rode the theme of fear and law and order into his 2020 re-election campaign. The president’s fear-mongering acceptance speech at the Republican Convention referred to riots (10 times), the Democratic left (11 times), criminals (10 times), and his usual standby, illegal immigrants (5 times). Despite a nation commiserating the egregious murder of several black people by police officers, race was mentioned once, and numerous organizational commitments to address institutional racism and discrimination (NPR, 2020).

Several observers argued that President Trump was attempting an autocratic coup with his refusal to concede losing the election and his claim that he lost because of massive fraud (Gessen, 2020). As noted above, opinion polls show that 70% of Republican party members believe that the election was fraudulent, not legitimate, not fair and that Joe Biden is not the duly elected president of the United States. He took the drastic step of inciting an insurrection to prevent Congress from affirming a new president when his efforts failed to overturn the election through legal challenges.

This extreme version of the politics of fear was initiated by President Trump attacking undocumented immigrants, and religious minorities are pushing our political parties apart. Political divisions in the United States are increased when the two major political parties do not agree on the crucial matters. Historically, Democratic and Republican

parties essentially agreed on the important issues but differed in the approach to dealing with them (Mellnik, Alcantara & Uhrmacher, 2016). There was still agreement about the top issues after President Obama was elected. In 2009, the electorate of both parties ranked terrorism, economy, and jobs among their top 5 priorities. Indeed, in 2014, the economy, employment and social security were among the top 5 concerns of both parties. That changed during the Trump years.

President Trump demonized immigrants, Muslims, and Middle Eastern minorities as potential terrorists, while also devaluing – and even insulting – journalists, scientists, progressive policies, allies, and treaties that promote programs, approaches, and values affirming various social service and government actions toward health care, education, human rights, international relations, and scientific consensus. This has made Americans, especially Republican backers, more afraid, and they focus on different issues than Democrats. And there are indications that many Republican supporters feel righteously entitled to pull further away from everyday matters.² Others have noted the differences in partisan world views: If you think the world is dangerous, safety is always the No. 1 concern. When it comes to physical safety, letting your guard down against adversaries could be disastrous. If you think the world is safe, however, discriminating against groups that have generally been down the racial, gender, or sexual orientation hierarchy is the real sin (Klein, 2018).

Recovery after Trump

President Trump was impeached for the second time by the House of Representatives on January 13, 2021, one week before leaving office. Recovering from President Trump will require planning. After the allied assault on North Africa in 1942, Winston Churchill remarked: “Now, this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” In ordinary times, the end of one presidency does not signal a fundamental shift for new leadership. These are not ordinary times; Donald Trump has systematically negated significant domestic and international policies, programs, and treaties.

² For example, in 2019, most Republicans (58%) wanted their party to move in an even more conservative direction, while 53% of Democratic voters preferred that their party should become more moderate. See more detailed findings in the report: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/01/24/publics-2019-priorities-economy-health-care-education-and-security-all-near-top-of-list/>.

He also openly attacked the FBI and the Department of Justice by releasing a memo scripted to make himself look good. Journalists, opponents, Republican Party leaders, and strategic leaks from many of his advisors and cabinet members make it clear that his disjointed policies, statements, and executive orders were slogging down in narcissistic muck (Woodward, 2019). Notwithstanding his disgraceful defeat and second impeachment, there must be a clear U. S. leadership strategy as we advance. We are not referring to particular Presidential candidates, but rather to strategic healing, maintaining, reassuring, and rebuilding domestic and international alliances, noted elsewhere (Altheide, 2017).

First, key organizations and institutions should join in a well-publicized national and international communication campaign to convey their commitment to key American values including equality of opportunity, non-discrimination and equal rights for women, racial, religious, and ethnic minorities, support for science and international treaties, as well as diplomatic solutions to significant world problems. Key organizations should come together at a national summit meeting and state with several key points about the significant national and world issues, stressing that most people in the United States – who, after all, voted against Mr Trump – affirm a commitment to the major principles. The aim is to assure the influential groups, regions, and countries that positive steps will continue and persevere. The relevant organizations should include, but not be limited to, religious groups (e.g. the National Council of Churches), organized labour, the National Academy of Science, the United Nations, NATO, The European Union, major energy organizations (e.g. Sustainable Energy Organizations), International Atomic Energy Agency, and the International Court of Justice.

Second, we must understand the role of the mass media and propaganda in promoting an entertainment-based politics of fear that led to the election of reality-TV star Donald Trump and energized white supremacists and autocrats, who benefitted from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. An updated version of the FCC's Fairness Doctrine is needed to prevent the asymmetric loop of ideological information. What happened in the 2020 presidential election was even more extreme than the 2016 campaign studied by Benkler et al (2017), a right-wing media network anchored around Breitbart developed as a distinct and insulated media system, using social media as a backbone to transmit a hyper-partisan perspective to the world. This pro-Trump media sphere appears to have not only successfully set the agenda for

the conservative media sphere but also strongly influenced the broader media agenda, in particular coverage of Hillary Clinton.

Trump emerged in a context of fear. The war in Iraq was partly the result of an expanding politics of fear, or decision-makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear to achieve certain goals. Prior administrations promoted fear of terrorism and offered more social control and military operations that launched 15 years of invasions of Middle Eastern countries, sent hundreds of unmanned drone attacks that killed thousands of civilians, launched an epoch of governmental surveillance and propaganda that systematically frightened and angered millions of Americans to such an extent that they elected Donald Trump, who vowed to prevent Muslims from entering the United States, attack immigrants, and support hate groups. In his final days in office, he incited his followers to attack the Congress of the United States. The Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican stated: "The mob was fed lies. They were provoked by the president and other powerful people. And they tried to use fear and violence to stop a specific proceeding of the first branch of the federal government which they did not like". (Mascaro & Jalonick, 2021).

Third, we must challenge the insidious effects of media culture, promoting the politics of fear. The politics of fear is relevant for a social life because it influences our activities, meanings, routines, and perspectives. These effects can be reduced through critical thinking and awareness of the social changes and the implications of blanket adjustments in security and policy. The initial step is to expand understanding of media logic's role in social life, and how new information technologies have altered citizen awareness, political campaigning, and propaganda manipulation. This is especially challenging in our time of social media that are instantaneous, personal, and visual. Disinformation and propaganda can only survive when users cannot think critically and accept brief, emotionally resonant messages.

Fourth, another critical step involves journalism training, ethics, and responsibility. With the explosive growth of fake news by propagandists – Russians included – journalists must become more critical and bolder in refusing to report on blatant lies or greatly qualifying the fallacious claims. More time and space need to be given to reports to provide more contexts to understand the meaning and significance of events and counteract propagandised memes' destructive simplicity. This includes journalistic

reflections on coverage and narratives of prior events as things become more evident over time. Mistakes and errors should be acknowledged.

Fifth, we must recognize that very little of any consequence occurs in our society without popular culture. This is important to defuse harmful stereotypes, especially simplistic assertions about stronger social control to protect us from danger. Social media matters more than ever, particularly when politicians of fear seek more control by attacking safeguards of individual liberty and dignity.

Finally, we should inform citizens about a wide range of media literacy. We must tell the young people about another way, about the implications of social control and bad decisions. Besides, scholars and researchers of all persuasions should attend once again to the subtle forms of propaganda, deviance, and resistance. The foundation of this moral reasoning must be citizenship and civil rights, in addition to individual responsibility. Let us not become what we are trying to undo in our endeavour. Let us not forget how moral absolutism and entertainment got us to this point. Above all, we must continue to tell our students and whoever will listen to be aware of the propaganda project, but not to be afraid.

These steps can help us to begin the end of President Trump's American disaster. The politics of fear has taken a toll on American life far greater than the normalization of massive surveillance and a herculean increase in the defence budget. While it is a cliché to argue that we are a product of our past, it is instructive to understand how communication policies, information technology promoting propaganda, attention-based politics, and the politics of fear helped set the 21st-century agenda. To put it more directly, little of our misguided romp through the mushy quicksand of terrorism would have occurred without the misinformed stumbling into Afghanistan and Iraq that expanded the politics of fear and heightened Americans anxiety about the future and nurtured anti-democratic sentiment.

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