

Liquid populism applied to anti-media hostility: Bauman's strangeness versus Bolsonaro's enemy construction of the press

Abstract

This work attempts to deconstruct Jair Bolsonaro's hostile policy vis-à-vis the Brazilian media during his presidency by applying Zygmunt Bauman's description of "liquid modernity" and its aversion to "strangeness" as the sociological-philosophical apparatus combined with the presidential-press relationship and the enemy construction dynamics of the communication research. The explorative qualitative empirical analysis of three-dimensional anti-media categories traditionally associated with right-wing populists – the discrediting and blaming of the press and detaching it from the people – throughout the 'honeymoon' period of Bolsonaro's presidency confirmed the decoupling of the traditional presidential-press and media-public relationships. Besides validating the primacy of the logic of consumption over morality, it further corroborated the fiercely adversarial populist policy designed for strangeness rhetoric construction of the media as distrusted 'outsider' and 'enemy'.

Keywords: Bauman; strangeness & liquid modernity; Bolsonaro and Brazil; right-wing populism; press-presidential relationship.

Introduction

After having gone through the pandemic crisis that began in 2019, uncertainty is somewhat of a specter hovering on our horizon. In such a context marked by severe environmental, ecological, economic, and political crises, populisms are also on the rise. It is a kind of right-wing populism often fed by the re-emergence of old nationalisms of exclusion and accompanied by the preservation of national identity elements. Whether it is a "crisis of democracy" or the rise of so-called "populist movements," we have been witnessing the return of some aspects of a totalitarian state, in the sense of seeking to nostalgically re-found a "strong state," promoting protectionist policies both on a purely economic level and on a broader cultural level.¹

Of course, history never repeats itself. But old ideologies may incarnate in new ways. The threat of Vlaams Belang in Belgium, not to mention the already considerable influence of the French Rassemblement National, the Dutch Freedom Party, the Austrian Party for Freedom, the Alternative for Germany, as well as La Liga in Italy, Victor Orbán's party in Hungary, the triumph of Brexit in the UK, or the US neo-protectionism of the former president Donald Trump, call into question the foundation and sustainability of the intuitions created to promote justice and peace in the aftermath of World War II.² The populism of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil comes in the wake of these right-wing movements. Even though he lost the elections in 2022, Bolsoranism is still as present in Brazil as Trumpism is in the USA. Proof of this is the January 2023 violent invasion of the institutions of Brazilian democracy that seemed to repeat the attack on Capitol Hill two years before.

Drawing upon Zygmunt Bauman's description of "liquid modernity" and its aversion to "strangeness" as the sociological-philosophical apparatus combined with the presidential-press relationship and the enemy construction dynamics belonging to the communication research realm, this work attempts to deconstruct both the populism that fragmented Brazilian society and the inimical relationship with the country's media during Bolsonaro's rule. Moreover, it applies Bauman's thesis about our current epoch as a liquidation era to sheds light to the political, moral, and social specificities of Bolsonaro's hostility toward the media in Brazil. It concludes that Bolsonaro's strategically antagonistic relationship with the press confirmed the primacy of the logic of consumption over morality. It also corroborated the construction of the right-wing populist identity through a dialectical opposition of the elite media as the other or the stranger.

Bauman's notion of "strangeness" and the (re)emergence of the right-wing populisms

According to Bauman, the main difference between solid modernity and liquid modernity lies in the way social and personal relationships are formed and maintained. While, in solid modernity, social and personal relationships were characterized by rigidity and stability, with strong bonds between people and a sense of permanence, liquid modernity is characterized by a lack of stability and the constant flow of relationships.

Even though the exact starting point is difficult to pinpoint, one may see this new liquid phase of modernity can be traced to the end of the Cold War, the rise of globalization, and the increasing fluidity and instability of social, political, and economic institutions.³ This era is characterized by a profound sense of uncertainty, instability, and constant change, and is marked by a decline in the authority of traditional sources of power, including religious institutions, the state, and other forms of social organization. In such a context, relationships are more ephemeral and transitory, with people frequently changing jobs, partners, and even friends. This sense of fluidity and instability leads to a greater sense of individualism, with people feeling increasingly disconnected from each other and from traditional social institutions. Additionally, the rise of consumerism and the decline of traditional forms of authority and community in liquid modernity can contribute to a sense of uncertainty and insecurity.

Bauman explores this feeling of fear and its implications as a commodity within contemporary globalization. Fear, in its darker form, is used as a tool to reinforce power structures, and it is prevalent in various forms to increase the perceived need for personal safety, rather than the broader notion of security. The other, the stranger, is also an object of fear, among many others such as deregulation, globalization, loss of control, and even the end of fear itself. And, in a certain way, fear is also used as a product of capitalist logic.⁴

The emergence of new forms of fundamentalism and sectarianism that characterize the new types of right-wing populism manifest themselves as phenomena of liquid modernity, which we can also call postmodernity. On the one hand, while they offer a sense of security and a life purpose that aggregates a community, stimulating a sense of belonging in its moral demand, the individual who lives in a liquid society, in his search for stability and security, may want to adhere to a totalitarian system. Fundamentalisms indeed offer a clear sense of identity and purpose, as well as a set of moral and ethical guidelines that can help individuals navigate the complexities of contemporary life.⁵ On the other hand, by vehemently criticizing the excesses of consumerism and individualism, which are prevalent in liquid modernity, the new fundamentalist right-wing political movements seem to propose a kind of counter-narrative to these dominant cultural forces. In so doing, fundamentalisms may provide a

sense of resistance and opposition to the *status quo* giving individuals a sense of control over their own lives.

Thus, even though traditional institutions and authority figures, such as the nation-state, religion, and the family, have declined in power, leaving many individuals feeling lost and uncertain, fundamentalism, sectarianism, and populism have emerged from liquid modernity and should be understood as post-modern phenomena.⁶ But gaining an understanding of the relationship between right-wing populisms, in particular, and the liquid modernity we are living in requires a further examination of Zygmunt Bauman's concepts of "strangeness" and its related notion of "square people."

The fluid and dynamic nature of modern societies, marked by mobility and fragmentation, results in widespread alienation and instability among individuals. The shifting social, cultural, and political norms characteristic of liquid modernity also contribute to the emergence of a sense of "strangeness," making it increasingly difficult for people to form stable and meaningful connections with others.⁷ According to Bauman, "strangeness" refers to the fragmented and disconnected nature of contemporary society, characterized by a lack of stability and certainty and the decline of traditional sources of authority.⁸ In fact, in liquid modernity, insofar as individuals are increasingly isolated and estranged from one another, they tend to experience disorientation and uncertainty in their relationships.

Accordingly, the "other" – those perceived as different or outside the community – becomes a source of fear and threat, endangering the sense of security and stability provided by one's community and ideology. As a result, the notion of "strangeness" plays a crucial role in understanding the connection between right-wing populism and the current liquid modernity. These right-wing populists exploit the sense of alienation and insecurity prevalent in liquid modernity by presenting themselves as the guardians of the community, promising to restore stability and security against perceived threats from outside the community.

Likewise, Bauman's concept of "square people" interests this work. Through this terminology, Bauman refers to individuals who come together in temporary and issue-specific forms of solidarity, even if not united by a common vision for society or a shared lifestyle, but rather by their opposition to a particular issue or cause.⁹ What unites them,

therefore, is opposition to the “communist” or “globalist” forces whose ideologies the ruling mainstream elites impose upon them. The communal gatherings of “square people” in public squares or at protests can create a sense of unity, but this sense of unity is temporary and disappears once the individuals return to their highly individualized lives.

In this sense, Bauman’s concept of “square people” captures the fluid and issue-specific nature of social connections in contemporary society and highlights the decline of traditional forms of community and the rise of individualized and fragmented forms of social interaction. It is worth noticing that the rise of “square people” reflects the decline of traditional forms of community and the emergence of fragmented and highly individualized forms of social interaction. It is why the emergence of these right-wing groups is peculiar to the liquid modernity that characterizes post-Cold War Western societies. Bauman’s notion of “square people” seems appropriate to describe Bolsonaro’s group of supporters that was wide enough to have people of different religious denominations, members of distinct Churches, or even people refusing to profess any religion. It also nicely parallels Bolsonaro’s united front in the enemy construction of the media as part of the mainstream elite.

Even though Bauman’s notion of strangeness cannot be considered an exclusive prerogative of populist actors or Bolsonaro, the identity construction of the former Brazilian president at the expense of the strategic dialectical opposition vis-à-vis the country’s media will still illustrate it. But before entering such examination, some theoretical contextualization of the media-president relationship within the framework of the communication research is needed.

“Honeymoon period”? From the “Hundred-days” up to the first year of the presidential term

To empirically assess how the far-right liquid populism and Bauman’s notion of “strangeness” translate into Bolsonaro’s hostility and enemy construction of the press, this study draws upon two-related traditions of the media-president relationship inherited from the US context that eventually spread into the other national contexts, and the Brazilian in particular: the ‘honeymoon period’ and the first ‘Hundred Days’ of the presidential term.

Historically, communication research suggests that a newly elected (US) president, for the most part, enjoyed a ‘honeymoon’ period marked by a “temporary period of cordial cooperation” with the press.¹⁰ Although disagreeing in terms of the duration of the relatively brief ‘honeymoon,’ scholars convey that besides an absence of criticism and tonal antagonism, the press was also likely to display during that period an extraordinary willingness to comply with the version of the power holders.¹¹ In addition, this period of relative harmony among government officials and the reporters, who cover them with ‘cooperation and continuity’ at its core, also served for reporters to build positive relationships to their subsequent advantage in granting privileged access to policymakers and documents.¹² Aware of the importance of first impressions upon longer-term working relationships, ‘beat sweetening’—flattering or non-critical coverage that emphasizes positive aspects—further helped smooth the access and the news coverage.¹³

Such a temporary alliance phase of cooperation in which the combative press suspends its traditional adversary role may not be appropriate in some cases, though.¹⁴ Scholars have argued that the conventional cordial cooperation was lost “during the recent decades of increased media negativity”, but not without signaling Obama as “a revival of the traditional presidential “honeymoon” of favorable media treatment that presidents once enjoyed”.¹⁵

A second tradition inbred from the *Americanization* and nowadays entrenched in the typical symbiotic relationship between presidents and the press, regards the convention of the first ‘Hundred Days’ of a new administration.¹⁶ While evoking Franklin D. Roosevelt managing to get sixteen major bills through Congress at the onset of his first term of 1933, it contemporarily stands for an early assessment by both the power holders and the press of the first three months in office. Seizing the opportunity-alike to leave their mark in the early months of a new term coinciding with the honeymoon period, Presidents tend to focus on their achievements and issuing a message of optimism for the future. Likewise, in their logic of pre-scheduled predictable “future events” and ‘continuing’ events, the press usually not only sums up the work done so far by the newly elected president contrasted with the campaign promises but also predicts and speculates about what will happen and the challenges ahead).¹⁷

Amongst the factors that could jeopardize such a honeymoon period and condition/negatively impact upon the press' initial 'Hundred Days' of a President, mention should be made to the extraordinary occurrence of high levels of hostility by the incumbent vis à vis media outlets. Indeed, fiercely adversarial rhetoric designed for strangeness-construction signals the media's distrusted 'outsider' or 'enemy' status. Of relevance to this work is the precedent established by Donald Trump in the US that marked a critical juncture of the press-presidential relations with the press latter extensively emulated by Bolsonaro.¹⁸

Once in office, Trump engaged in "war with the media," or a very large part of it, and had no qualms in championing incivility and going after the press "with a venom unmatched by any modern president."¹⁹ Besides staking his presidency on destroying accurate reporting and the credibility of the news media, another behavior central to Trump's strategy consisted of frequently accusing it of being "inaccurate," "dishonest," and purveyors of "fake news".²⁰ His "strangeness" construction of the press as "unpatriotic" and enemies of the people" or through attributing it causal responsibility of misleading or deliberately lying to the people, further accentuated the media disconnect with the ordinary people as an extrapolation of the corrupt elites.²¹ Lastly, Trump served as a role model that encouraged and empowered authoritarian leaders in other countries to target their news media.²²

Likewise, Jair Bolsonaro—aka the self-entitled 'Tropical Trump'—emulated the strategy of denigrating and displaying contempt at the press as the presidential candidate and particularly ramping up the attacks throughout his initial years in office.²³ He wasted no time in displaying his hostility to the independent news media even before entering the Palácio de Planalto (presidential office) in one of his first interviews as president-elect at the 2018 presidential ballot. During this media appearance, he threatened to punish unfriendly coverage by cutting state advertising in newspapers or broadcasters that "behave disgracefully" and "lie shamelessly."²⁴ First on the list of the media outlets to have invoked Bolsonaro's wrath was Folha de São Paulo—Brazil's largest daily newspaper—which he declared as "finished" after breaking a story on an illicit campaign to sending bulk WhatsApp messages slandering his opponent.

From the outset of his presidency, as acknowledged by the president of the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (ABRI), Marcelo Träsel, Bolsonaro

unprecedentedly acted “with hostility against journalists, subjecting professionals to unworthy conditions for interviews, uttering personal offenses, and criticizing the coverage”.²⁵ Overall, attacks on press freedom exploded during the inaugural year of the term, according to the Brazilian National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ) as a result of the “frequent and systematic action” of the president to promote the “systematic discredit” of the media outlets and “institutionalize violence against the press and its professionals as a governmental practice.”²⁶

Against this backdrop, the current explorative study builds on these strands of research to unpack Bolsonaro’s hostile policy toward the Brazilian press during the ‘honeymoon’ period of the first year of his mandate in the country’s presidency. It is useful to this end by incorporating a recent conceptualization of the populist communication framework.²⁷ Moreover, it adapts the three frames related to the core anti-elitist normative dimension of populism to another distinctive foundation of the far-right populists: the anti-media. Indeed, media are either considered elite actors *per se* (along with other established institutions of politics and science) and, as such, “evil” outsiders that neglect or do not represent the *volonté générale* or are regarded as the mouthpiece of the elite, the “diabolical enemies” that come to betray their roots and the virtuous people.²⁸

Accordingly, the three-dimensional categories consist of discrediting and blaming the media, as well as detaching it from the people. An example of the first would be an accusation of press bias, incompetence, and malevolence. Being responsible for a negative development or a threat would qualify as blaming, whereas detachment from the people would be conveyed by not speaking for nor caring for their best interests.²⁹

Departing from the adapted preconceived schema of the dimensions involved in Bolsonaro’s enemy construction of the Brazilian press, a qualitative textual analysis of the dominant themes featuring in the 2019 report of the National Federation of the Journalists (FENAJ) is conducted. Besides denouncing throughout the year, the assaults on freedom of the press and direct violence against journalists as they take place, FENAJ compiles them in a yearbook report.

The analysis: A crescendo anti-press attacks as time goes by

Out of the 114 reported presidential verbal attacks against the media registered in 2019 by FENAJ, only a few were perpetrated during the first hundred days of Bolsonaro's term. And except for the February 13 interview to TV Record and speeches during public ceremonies, all the anti-media invectives for that period were perpetrated via Twitter.

More concretely, the attempts to discredit the press ranged from allegations of selective omissions to more serious accusations of purposed falsehoods and lies. In the case of the former, it regards explicit references to the press bias of privileging negative news to the detriment of conveying him in a positive light. As for the latter, besides denouncing attempts of the media to create disunity in the government (that included some of his family members) the negative rhetoric depiction of the press, at the time, mostly consisted of “disclosing distorted information”, “manipulating” or “making up lies 24 hours a day”.³⁰ Then, in late March, he introduced the “fake news” label as an alternative upgrade to lies and falsehood accusations. Unsurprisingly, it was conveyed during a public address at the Brazil Day commemorations in Washington and in referring to have experienced the same ordeals as Trump of an opposing press during the campaign.³¹ Both the “fake news” label and the reference to an adversarial press during his presidential campaign would linger throughout the remainder of the first year with a particular focus upon specific outlets.

In addition, a measure of blaming strategy was already visible during the first hundred days. As early as January 5th, Bolsonaro provided the first blame attribution to the press for not displaying “the slightest concern for the information” that was nuanced one month later to “the slightest commitment to the truth” and further reinforced when pointed his finger of blame to its “excessive irresponsibility.”³² Interestingly enough Bolsonaro was careful up to this point to target his criticisms to “part of the” or “sectors” of the media engaged in deviance behavior.³³ Quite the opposite, direct references were absent from Bolsonaro's weaponry toward the press during the first three and a half months of the inaugural year of his mandate. Or, at most, they could be implicitly inferred from the criticisms aimed at the foundational mission of the press to provide accurate and reliable information to the public.

For the remainder of his mandate, Bolsonaro but intensified the enemy construction of the press on different grounds. Besides further reinforcing the discrediting and blaming of the media, he did not miss any opportunity to detach it from the people. A good indication of such an exacerbation of the hostility towards the press is the Bolsonaro's dramatization of the ongoing media's persecution of him and his family depicted as "demoralizing" (translation of the original jargon Portuguese "*esculachado*") and a "massacre."³⁴

Another persistent lingering criticism missing from the early days of the mandate consisted of frequently associating the critical press with the former presidents (from the left) and the "left" in general. He started by sharing a video denouncing "militant journalism" by one news professional working for the fourth largest Brazilian television network, the free-to-air Band TV, in October.³⁵ Two months later, he also denounced the media's double standards in occasionally referring to him as a "dictator" while "idolizing" the left-wing (a depreciative reference in the original language to "*esquerdalha*") that, unlike him, did endeavor to "social control" the press in the past.³⁶ Beyond such ideological parallelism, Bolsonaro ended up referring to the press as an opposition political actor when wishing it would "refrain from doing party politics."³⁷ Such a dystopian view of the generality of the national media led him to vent that, with some exceptions, social media were the "only free press" that he had.³⁸

Predictably, Bolsonaro highlighted several related arguments to blame the press and detach it from the people. To start with, in accusing the media of "attempting to create the chaos" and promoting "foreign interests" in their coverage of the Amazon instead of cooperating with the country in "breaking obstacles that prevent it from occupying a prominent place in the world."³⁹ Similarly, in "doing a disservice to our country" by going after the president, attempting to render "illegitimate" a government "elected by the popular vote" or simply not being committed to the country's hand-in-hand with the president.⁴⁰ In addition, he expressed his regret at the media's use of "fake news" and "disinformation" that "backlashes" and "undermines the public trust" in the press.⁴¹ It was in contradiction with Bolsonaro's aspiration of having the press "selling the truth to the Brazilian people."⁴²

Lastly, while accusing broad swaths of the media of undeservingly profiting from public funds in the past and failing to perform their social role, Bolsonaro displayed the

anticipatory undercutting of the press benefits as early as May.⁴³ Later, he put rhetoric into practice and fulfilled his threat when signing a Provisional measure in August cutting press subsidies. Besides openly declaring such a measure as a “retaliation” payback to the media attacks, he ironically wished that newspapers—such as *Valor Econômico* that had just reported negatively on him as having an identical economic policy to the one of Dilma Rousseff—would survive.⁴⁴

Discussion of the findings and conclusion

At first glance, it might seem that globalization processes, accelerated by the progressive digitalization of societies, would promote the recognition of otherness. However, globalization and multiculturalism in plural contemporary societies have not always translated into respect for others as different. The ease of communication and the shortening of distances have not always translated into a true encounter of cultures nor materialized into gestures of true hospitality. In the liquid modernity, however, hospitality no longer constitutes a mark of the contemporary era.

This article makes a practical application of Bauman’s theory to the concrete situation of the particularities of the Bolsonaro era in Brazil. More concretely, departing from Bauman’s analysis of liquid modernity, especially based on his notion of “strangeness,” helped in the understanding of the far right-wing populism’s emergence within the Brazilian political scenario. While characterizing liquid modernity by fluidity, uncertainty, and instability, Bauman highlights the challenges faced by individuals in constructing their identities and establishing meaningful connections with others. More concretely, Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity offered the theoretical framework to explore in this work the dynamics of Bolsonaro’s communication strategy, particularly in relation to his policy of public vilification and strangeness construction of the media.

The employed qualitative textual analysis of the dominant themes featuring in Bolsonaro’s attacks on the Brazilian media displayed such a disposition right from the outset of the “Hundred days” of his mandate till the end of the first year in the term. Indeed, all three frames related to the core anti-media dimension of populism - ranging from discrediting and blaming the elite press to detaching it from the people - only deepened as time passed. While the "Hundred days" and the "honeymoon period" conventions may be mere oversimplifications of the politician-journalistic conception of

their relationship, the themes emerging from the coverage during the early stages of the press-president relationship had decisive implications.

Bolsonaro started by setting the tone for the rest of his mandate right from the outset through adversarial rhetoric designed for strange construction. He also impacted the public perception of the media by immediately signaling its distrusted ‘outsider’ or ‘enemy’ status. In that regard, Bolsonaro’s discrediting of the media relates to Bauman’s perspective of the fluid and unstable relationships of the current era. In liquid modernity, traditional sources of authority and information, such as the media, have lost their power and influence. Bauman’s notion of “strangeness” also operates in the understanding of the anti-media hostility among contemporary far right-wing populists such as Bolsonaro. It has led to a sense of strangeness or the feeling that the world has become foreign and unfamiliar and that the institutions and sources of information that have been the foundation of the democratic period are no longer to be trusted. Right-wing populists accentuate this sense of strangeness by continuously depicting the media as a hostile stranger.

Similarly, it is possible to understand right-wing populism as detaching the media from the people with a consumerist logic. In liquid modernity, the media has become one commodity among many.⁴⁵ Bauman’s analysis leads to looking at consumers as free agents who choose from a vast array of media sources, and the news outlets must compete for their attention and support. Far right-wing populists exploit this situation by presenting themselves as an alternative source of information that is more reliable and trustworthy than the mainstream media. Bolsonaro’s approach to the media is rooted in the logic of consumption, which prioritizes the immediate satisfaction of individual desires over moral considerations.

Bolsonaro's use of the media to construct his political identity and that of his supporters reflects such a consumerist mentality by presenting himself as a charismatic leader and creating an opposition between himself and those he deems as strangers. This distinction between the self and the other, which is a hallmark of right-wing populism, is based on a logic of exclusion that seeks to establish a homogeneous and unified community by demonizing those whom they perceive as different. Lastly, given Bolsonaro’s allusion to social media as a valid alternative to the mainstream legacy media, Bauman’s concept of “square people” also applies in this context for reflecting the decline

of traditional forms of community and the emergence of fragmented and highly individualized forms of social interaction.

All in all, this has led to a growing distrust of mainstream media and the proliferation of alternative sources of information that portray far-right populists as the only reliable source of information and impose the individualistic will of an identity closed in on itself. By doing so, they end up controlling the narrative in order to manipulate public opinion in their favor. In addition, individuals are encouraged to regroup in supportive groups that give them the feeling that they are thus able to be free from mainstream opinion, which facilitates the spreading of fake news by adhering to the news only from the raw news and not from the journalistic account, verification and interpretation of the facts.

In sum, the main argument advanced in this work asserts that Bolsonaro's politicization of anti-media criticisms in Brazil marked the decoupling of the traditional presidential-press relationship that no longer benefits from the convenient alliance of the "honeymoon" period. Furthermore, he continuously discredited traditional journalism as an extrapolation of the corrupt elites aiming at accentuating the disconnect with the ordinary people. But above all, this article confirmed the primacy of the logic of consumption over morality while further corroborating the construction of the right-wing populist identity by making the community of his followers view the mainstream media as the "other" or the "stranger" who endangers them and as the enemy to fight.

In the wake of the above exploration into the insidious construction of "strangeness" in Brazilian politics, exemplified by Bolsonaro's attacks on the media to erode a pillar of democracy, it becomes imperative to draw lessons that help democratic societies protect themselves from similar threats. It is even more pressing insofar as the weaponization of media against democracy is not unique or self-contained to Brazil, nor has press antagonism been limited to mere rhetoric but reverberates a little elsewhere in the world, including in the United States with another presidential election in sight and the possibility of Trump's comeback as an outlier or from an outsider lane for reelection in 2024 looming large.

Although the resilience of the democracy in Brazil has yet to stand the post-Bolsonaro test of time, it is likely that it will take a combined effort to effectively confront the divisive rhetoric of right-wing populism movements and build more resilient

democratic systems that thrive in the diverse and dynamic environment of the 21st century. Such a joint effort entails blending strong checks and balances mechanisms of the liberal democracies and dynamic civil society with a responsible press, as elaborated below.

A good indication of the former - the judicial branch preventing actions by the executive one - at the time of the writing of the study was the decision to bar Bolsonaro from running for office until 2030 for abusing his power and casting unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system. Bolsonaro's case marks the first time a (former) president has been suspended for election violations and sends a message that those who do not respect the democratic rules will be out of the game. Likewise, Donald Trump's recent indictment by a grand jury in New York in the Stormy Daniels hush-money case - the first ever handed down against a former president - sided with other possible indictments over his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election and his mishandling of classified documents after leaving office up to the possibility of an imminent arrest, seems to be indicative of distinct liberal democratic systems reacting to the populist threats.

In a preventive fashion, governments could develop responsible regulations and a robust network of independent fact-checking organizations that strike a balance between freedom of expression and curbing the spread of false information, hate speech, and incitement to violence. Also, central to safeguarding democracy is a society's ability to cultivate a well-informed population capable of distinguishing reliable, well-documented news from fake news and ideologically fabricated narratives. Such a media literacy empowers individuals to seek out credible sources of information, thus reducing the susceptibility to manipulation by extremist ideologies. For this reason, governments might promote civic engagement and critical thinking through initiatives such as town hall meetings and open forums that offer invaluable chances to ask tough questions, as well as media literacy programs as another powerful defense against populist disinformation.

Moreover, governments and civil society should join forces in protecting journalists and freedom of the press as a cornerstone of democracy. It implies strengthening legal protections for journalists, ensuring their safety, and safeguarding their ability and willingness to confront or challenge people in power - opposition

reporting - without fear of retaliation. In countries where populist authoritarian regimes attempt to overhaul the media as one of the checkers on the government's actions, civil society plays even a more a crucial part in defending a free and independent press. Although citizens may hold passion towards populist charismatic leaders, such as Bolsonaro or Trump, and opposing views about the media or individual journalists, it should not prevent them from acknowledging the value of a functioning press.

This is not to say that the press is an innocent 'victim' of the right-wing populists' determination to challenge the status of professional journalism and disrupt news reporting practices through emotionally exploring prevailing normative 'common-sense' criticisms of the media. Although the press alone is not to blame, the media's own practicum and logic have propelled the success of the many right-wing populist parties and projects in different settings. Far from being passive bystanders while striving for readers, clicks, and revenues, some press sectors ended up siding with and platforming right-wing ideologies or policies and their shredding of democratic norms. Out of fear of otherwise seeming biased, other media also boiled down complex dynamics into opposing sides, as a rule. And by so doing, it normalized anti-democratic right-wing populists as ordinary politicians or candidates.

Accordingly, while conveying the complexity and nuances of political journalism in the current growing success and durable support of the populist "zeitgeist" from the 2010s onwards, media organizations and journalists need to learn from their own past experiences and from their counterparts dealing with other anti-democratic populists in other parts of the world. There is room for further reflection in the newsrooms on the circular polarizing question of whether or how to cover the right-wing populist candidates and officeholders: to grant them and their most noxious ideas airtime or ignore them; and to verify and fact-check or let them discredit themselves?

At the same time as defending its role in a democracy, the press must adapt to the ongoing and ever more complex ecosystem defined by Bauman as "liquid" or fluid and heterogeneous. To (re)build its authority and legitimacy amongst its readership in its symbiotic relationship with right-wing populists, the acceptable norms and boundaries of journalism ought to be assiduously reconsidered or even redefined. In a nutshell, instead of broader narratives of a complex polarized political reality, journalists could consider letting every story stand for itself. In lieu of horserace prism and other outdated norms of

the political report, opt for more substantive coverage and sober journalism. And, as an alternative to also granting primacy of the logic of consumption over morality - by prioritizing emotional content to commodify the mood of citizens - doubling down on continuous critical reporting and leaning into an adversary role, when and if needed, that directly and actively calls out authoritarian populist movements that undo democracy.

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