What We Should Really Be Asking About Media Attention to Trump

Regina G. Lawrence & Amber E. Boydstun

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Forum

What We Should Really Be Asking About Media Attention to Trump

REGINA G. LAWRENCE and AMBER E. BOYDSTUN

In her piece for the November 2016 issue of The Forum, "How the News Media Helped to Nominate Trump," Julia Azari contends that the media played a crucial coordination function for Donald Trump's rise. In the absence of a coherent Republican party response to the Trump insurgency, Trump's campaign messages were widely disseminated despite his campaign's lack of expertise and organizational strength. Indeed, Azari argues, 2016 demonstrates that "the media's main institutional role comes from repeating, rather than challenging, [campaign] promises, frameworks and narratives."

Other research from the 2016 campaign season would seem to agree that Trump infiltrated the media system. As Wells and colleagues illustrate in their November Forum piece, "How Trump Drove Coverage to the Nomination," Trump appeared to have played the media expertly, with a combination of staged and unscheduled appearances and a vigorous social media presence. Specifically, their findings point to Trump's success in running a hybrid media campaign (Chadwick, 2013)—driving news coverage through conventional (public relations) tactics and through newer/less conventional methods (Twitter). The authors conclude their examination of Trump's media presence with a compelling provocation: "Journalists should reflect on what prompts their attention to Trump as we head into the general election and beyond" (p. 675).

We join the conversation by positing, first, that journalists and political communication scholars alike are, in fact, fairly cognizant of what prompts attention to Trump. Theories from news values to evolutionary biology support the idea that Trump's entertaining, sensational, inflammatory words and actions make him the kind of phenomenon we just can't look away from. Second, we believe even more important is a follow-up question, the answer to which could benefit scholarship and democracy alike: How—if at all—has mainstream media coverage of Trump really mattered?

Regina G. Lawrence is Executive Director of the Turnbull & Agora Centers, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon. Amber E. Boydstun is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis.

Address correspondence to Amber E. Boydstun, One Shields Ave., 469 Kerr Hall, Davis, CA 95618, USA. E-mail: aboydstun@ucdavis.edu

Why High Levels of Media Attention to Trump are (Super)Normal

Decades of research suggest the press relies (more or less unconsciously) on some key rules of thumb. We view media coverage of Donald Trump as being generally in accordance with these rules. One such rule is to follow the polls: If a candidate polls well, that must signal his or her chances of electoral success, which therefore legitimizes greater coverage (see Meyrowitz, 1994, for an intriguing and still-timely example of how the press erases from their coverage, figuratively and sometimes literally, presidential candidates not polling well). This standard seems to offer a safe, nonpartisan guide to coverage decisions, but such rules of thumb belie the press's lack of clear guidance in particular circumstances—especially circumstances as extraordinary as 2016.

As Thomas Patterson's recent analysis suggests (and as noted by Wells and colleagues), the only recognizable standard guiding early coverage of Trump must simply have been his entertainment value, since Trump was *not* initially leading in the polls—although he came to do so after weeks of prominent coverage (Patterson, 2016). It seems a fair bet—and an important hypothesis for empirical study—that in 2016, the perceived commercial payoff of Trump news supplemented the usual look-to-the-polls rule to give Trump overwhelming news presence.

Thus, the unwritten rule of following the polls appears to have been trumped (ahem) by another press rule: candidates who remain "interesting" to reporters are more likely to get through the press filter. For example, the candidate who veers off message is more newsworthy than the candidate who sticks to her teleprompter to deliver the same speech reporters have heard countless times. Whether by plan or by accident, Donald Trump exploited this press tendency, delivering his signature controversial lines in speeches that departed from his prepared remarks (Draper, 2016).

So, Trump is the proverbial exception that proves the rule—or in this case, the informal rules that guide campaign coverage. In fact, we can think of Trump as a non-naturally occurring politician, akin to—bear with us here—what evolutionary biologists call a "supernormal stimulus." The idea is that most species have evolved to favor animals who know to rely on certain cues, like moths who have evolved to navigate using the moon. But when a new (often artificial) version of that cue comes along, it can stimulate the animal to respond too strongly (and often in a non-adaptive, irrational way); the moon that moths think they are flying toward turns out to be a bug zapper. Trump is the supernormal stimulus that reveals clearly the press's predilections.

Thus, any argument we might want to make that the press shouldn't have attended so much to Trump is to imagine a different media from the one we actually have. The media covered Donald Trump's campaign almost exactly as we should expect our actually existing media to cover him, illustrating an argument made by Thomas Patterson two decades ago (Patterson, 1994): The fact that the media have assumed central importance in American elections does not mean they are well-designed for the functions they have taken over. Instead of the critical (albeit imperfect) scrutiny of candidates via party elites, primary candidates today are subjected to scattershot scrutiny through the media's ever-shifting spotlight.

But How Did Media Coverage of Trump Matter?

It is against this backdrop of understanding why journalists were drawn to Trump's campaign that we should be asking whether media coverage of Trump is the sole or even the most important factor that explains his becoming the 2016 Republican nominee.

Turning from the normative to the empirical in order to consider the prevailing notion that Trump drove the media to his nomination: As appealingly simple as this theory may seem, there are several questions that beg examination. First, and crucially, we do not know whether the mainstream media coverage Trump earned actually helped him. We know that he successfully moved onto the proverbial front page throughout the campaign, but we don't know who's reading that front page, nor how that coverage influenced their votes. Past studies suggest that media coverage can be an important predictor of electoral success, but past studies also suggest that media coverage is closely related to fundraising, which does not seem to have held in Trump's case (Trump being one of the most poorly financed candidates in recent memory). Past studies may also not adequately account for the sharply rising importance of social media in voter behavior. If Trump has, as the data from Wells and colleagues indicate, successfully parlayed "tweet storms" into news coverage, we don't know whether it's Trump's news coverage or his social media activity that is most to blame (so to speak) for his success at the polls. In other words, mainstream media coverage may to some unknown extent have been an *externality* of the real dynamics of Trump's electoral success.

Moreover, and equally importantly, we don't yet know the overall tone and content of the mainstream press coverage of Donald Trump. A crop of studies is no doubt springing up as we write this essay, but at this moment, a crucial question remains unanswered: What if the coverage of Trump was predominantly *negative* (or at least as negative as that of his competitors)? Does the Trump-riding-the-media-to-victory theory still hold under that condition? If so, then we might need to set aside the notion that candidates need to win not just coverage, but relatively high portions of positive coverage, in order to prevail (unless we are willing to concede the old adage that all press is essentially good press).

Alternatively, given fairly clear evidence that many Trump voters are the same voters who reject the legitimacy of the mainstream press, it is doubtful that his mainstream media coverage influenced his electoral success—*except by reinforcing* these voters' notions about press bias and fueling Trump's rise. At least one poll suggests that Trump supporters are more likely than other voter groups to get their news from television instead of print and to be more susceptible to "clickbait" stories (Lapowski, 2015).

It is thus highly possible that the mainstream press falls aside as a key explanation for Trump's rise. If Trump voters were not tuning into mainstream news coverage or did not give credence to predominantly negative coverage of him, then the media are not—in the simplistic sense—to blame for Trump.

In closing, we wish to be absolutely clear: In our opinion, media coverage of election 2016 is an essential object for further study, and, in our view, this coverage has in many ways proved sorely lacking in critical content. Nevertheless, we should not imagine that the press failed to meet some clearly defined or agreed-upon standard of election coverage, for, in fact, no such standard exists. And that is what journalists, if they are so inclined, should reflect upon as we move toward election 2020.

References

Azari, J. R. (2016). How the news media helped to nominate Trump. *Political Communication*, *33*, 677–680.

Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Draper, R. (2016). How Donald Trump set off a civic war within the right-wing media. *New York Times Magazine*, September 29. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/magazine/how-donald-trump-set-off-a-civil-war-within-the-right-wing-media.html

Lapowski, I. (2015). Donald Trump supporters are more susceptible to clickbait. *Wired Magazine*, October 30. Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/2015/10/donald-trump-supporters-are-more-susceptible-to-clickbait/

Meyrowitz, J. (1994). Visible and invisible candidates: A case study in "competing logics" of campaign coverage. *Political Communication*, *11*(2), 145–164. doi:10.1080/10584609.1994.9963021

Patterson, T. E. (1994). *Out of order*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Patterson, T. E. (2016). Pre-primary news coverage of the 2016 presidential race: Trump's rise, Sanders' emergence, Clinton's struggle. *Shorenstein Center,* June 13. Retrieved from http://shorensteincenter.org/pre-primary-news-coverage-2016-trump-clinton-sanders/

Wells, C., Shah, D. V., Pevehouse, J. C., Yang, J., Pelled, A., Boehm, F.,… Schmidt, J. L. (2016). How Trump drove coverage to the nomination: Hybrid media campaigning. *Political Communication*, *33*, 669–676.