CHAPTER 3

The Magic Trick of Establishment Media
News Abuse in 2017–2018

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We know of course there’s really no such thing as the “voiceless.” There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.

—Arundhati Roy

INTRODUCTION

As the work of Project Censored has demonstrated for decades, establishment media play a fundamental propaganda role in the United States by systematically ignoring important stories that deserve greater public attention. Often the space that should be occupied by these stories is filled with the kind of sensationalist or titillating material that Project Censored founder Dr. Carl Jensen termed “Junk Food News.” Even when important issues receive extensive coverage, however, they can be presented in a way that minimizes their deeper importance, distorts what is happening, or otherwise encourages the public to interpret the story in a way that falls into line with the interests of the power elite. Dr. Peter Phillips, former director of Project Censored, coined the term “News Abuse” to describe this “abuse” of the public trust by news outlets that offer “spin,” and sometimes outright propaganda, instead of prioritizing proper investigation.

News Abuse perpetually operates like a magician’s trick, using distraction to direct our attention away from what we really need to
know. While the magician keeps us focused on one minor or misleading part of the story, the important things—the operation of power, the purchasing of influence, the daily injustices affecting ordinary people, the courageous movements for social change—continue moving forward, largely free from journalistic scrutiny and open public debate.

Throughout 2017, the troubling rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, including vicious attacks on journalists, led to occasional signs that the establishment media were waking up and seeking to uphold their proper role as investigative watchdogs. More commonly, however, the American public was subjected to an ongoing torrent of News Abuse that served more to mislead and confuse than to educate.

In our investigation of News Abuse in 2017, we drew on our experience with the citizen journalism project Weave News (www.weavenews.org) to investigate a number of stories that clearly fit the News Abuse label. We examined the coverage of these stories by focusing on major establishment media outlets, including the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Wall Street Journal, National Public Radio (NPR), CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. We found repeated examples of the establishment media framing crucial public issues in ways that marginalize critical and grassroots perspectives, shield the powerful from scrutiny, and discourage the public from understanding the deeper forces that are shaping their lives. Whether in endless articles about Trump’s “heartland” voters, “culture war”–style coverage of National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s principled stance against racist police violence, paper-thin discussions of corporate influence in the political system, or misleading coverage of colonial violence in Palestine, the magic trick of News Abuse was unfortunately on full display in 2017.

TRUMP VOTERS: CLASSIST MYTHOLOGY

Since the 2016 US presidential election, establishment media outlets have intensely focused on those who voted for Donald Trump: who they are, where they are living, why they made that decision, and how they have or haven’t changed their minds. The media’s classist
mythology of Trump voters, constructed around the voters’ psyche, circumstances, and motivations for supporting Trump, has further suppressed the stories of marginalized communities, whose livelihoods are unequivocally at a heightened risk of harm under this administration. Meanwhile, the voices of anti-racist or anti-deportation activists and advocates who always knew the election of Trump would bring little to the white working class, but would endanger the lives of people of color, remain underheard.

Leading up to the election and throughout 2017, Trump’s voter base was often described by establishment media as consisting of people “from the heartland of America.” The dominant narrative was that Trump voters are working class, blue collar, and not highly educated; their way of life is eroding; and they saw a leader in Trump, who is anti-establishment and will take a populist stand for the country. A survey of eight establishment media outlets in 2017 demonstrates this pattern, as the phrase “Trump voters” appeared in the headlines of 2,040 news stories. Of these stories on Trump voters, 49 percent included descriptors such as “poor” (340 stories), “working class” (241), “white working class” (90), “populist” (214), “Rust Belt” (75), and “heartland” (33). When considering the motivations of Trump supporters, 15 percent of stories included the terms “racism” (262), “nationalism” (74), or “nativism” (13).

Fox News provides an insightful glimpse into how Trump supporters describe themselves in the US political landscape. According to the Pew Research Center, at least 40 percent of Trump voters named Fox News as their “main source” of news during the 2016 presidential campaign. Following the August 2017 incident in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which white supremacists and counter-protesters violently clashed over the removal of a Confederate monument, conservative commentator and author Wayne Allyn Root explained on Fox News how the incident was connected to Trump. Or rather, Root explicitly distanced the “typical Trump voter” and the president himself from the Charlottesville neo-Nazis and KKK members:

The typical Trump voter is NOT a racist. I was opening speaker at all six Donald Trump campaign events in Las Vegas. I never saw or heard one instance of racism at any
Trump event... nor at any of the hundreds of Tea Party events that I spoke at across America from 2009 to 2015.

The anger of almost every white middle class Trump voter has nothing to do with racism... and everything to do with economics. It’s about financial survival, not race. The middle class is being targeted for extinction. It is being persecuted and wiped off the face of the earth by liberal/progressive/socialist economic policies.4

Root further asserted that these middle-class voters are predominantly small business owners concerned with “big taxes, big regulations, big government, illegal immigration and using Obamacare, climate change, and government agencies like the EPA and the IRS to kill our jobs and redistribute our hard-earned income. Those are the reasons middle class voters are angry.”5 Thus, by removing the racialized component of Trump voters’ behaviors and statistically evidenced biases, Fox News perpetuated a simplified class conflict.6 Supporting Trump, therefore, was not racist; it was necessary resistance against the unchecked liberal elite.

It quickly became apparent that, despite his populist message, Trump’s policies would not meet the material needs of working-class voters; yet working-class voters were presented as uniquely responsible for his election. By creating this simplified conflict and narrative, establishment media outlets not only accentuated an earlier narrative of “Blue vs. Red” partisan division, but also stereotyped and scapegoated the white working class. What about the affluent Republican voters and activists who may actually have fueled the fire and reaped the benefits?

To counter the prevailing narratives, the Washington Post examined polling data and surveys of Trump voters’ income and education in June 2017. They found that only one-third of Trump voters made less than $50,000, while two-thirds of white voters with and without college degrees voted for Trump:

According to the election study, white non-Hispanic voters without college degrees making below the median household income made up only 25 percent of Trump voters.
That’s a far cry from the working-class-fueled victory many journalists have imagined.7

This nuanced, outside-the-establishment narrative of Trump voters wasn’t widely circulated until six months into his term as president. For the remainder of 2017, the Post was practically the only media outlet in this analysis that published regular counter-establishment narratives in coverage of Trump voters.

Consequently, this classist story of poor, uneducated white voters has remained in the mainstream, reinforcing longstanding class-based animosity and prejudice. Ultimately, it has reproduced the institutional hegemony of wealthy elites, many of whom are at the helm of establishment media outlets and other institutions of power. Moreover, the descriptions of Trump voters as white and working-class also overlooked the reality of many Midwestern communities that experienced economic revitalization and growth in the last two decades. This can be attributed to recent immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, an increased workforce that has resulted in overall greater racial and ethnic diversity.8 Stories and narratives of Trump’s base almost always discounted these immigrant voices that are also very much “from the heartland.”

Establishment media’s coverage of Trump voters also largely excluded stories of marginalized communities, people of color, and activists and advocates at odds with Trump’s policies and actions. Undoubtedly, these communities were among the most active in organizing major anti-Trump movements and events, such as the Women’s March and the March for Science. Yet, overall, the individual, intimate attention given to Trump voters sharing their opinions was not granted to left-leaning individuals and movements. Several of the major outlets reviewed in this analysis—the New York Times,9 NPR,10 CNN,11 and the Boston Globe12—published at least one “one year later” piece on Trump voters, mainly asking whether those same people had changed their minds about supporting the president. Such follow-up stories are important, but why wasn’t similar, personalized attention paid to individual immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ+ people, or their advocates, who were all directly targeted by Trump at several points in 2017? By not amplifying their voices to the same extent as Trump
voters and supporters, the establishment media failed many of the most vulnerable communities.

In 2017, the New York Times widely circulated op-eds by columnist Nicholas Kristof, who also contributes to CNN. One particular piece, titled “Trump Voters are Not the Enemy,” insisted on humanizing Trump supporters rather than those facing immediate harm.13 In August 2017, the Times continued soliciting input from Trump voters regarding their views, but a reader solicitation form was never created for people opposed to Trump.14 NPR, which is often considered a more liberal outlet and praised for its compassionate audio storytelling, published soundbites of Trump voters several times in 2017. In one particular story following the events in Charlottesville, a rural tradesman made sweeping, almost nonsensical statements about racial and ethnic identity, with a stream-of-consciousness frankness that almost seemed obtuse:

Who cares what your ethnic background is? Great. You know, maybe we can learn something. Maybe I can teach a dish. You know, I’m fourth generation here, so I don’t have a—I didn’t have a grandmother teach me how to cook ethnic. But if you did, great. You know, come on over for a meal. I’ll go over your house for a meal. And the left likes to teach us diversity, which is just a thinly veiled balkanization is what it is, you know. E pluribus unum—many one, and they teach the opposite.15

In contrast to the presentation of such unfiltered, accusatory remarks, it was very challenging to find a parallel piece on a left-leaning voter or activist, or simply an ordinary person opposed to Trump’s policies, who made generalized negative statements about an entire community simply because of that community’s support for Trump (reader comments were not included in this analysis).

Most interesting amid the “news abuse” coverage of Trump voters was how traditionally liberal media outlets fared in comparison with conservative outlets. In November 2017, the New York Times, a centrist, neoliberal, and highly regarded outlet for the upper and wealthy classes, published its now infamous profile of a white supremacist.16
The reporter followed his subject’s daily schedule and conversations, picked at his ideology, and reviewed online postings of alt-right extremism, thus normalizing his visions of hate. The Times was harshly criticized by readers and other journalists for painting a picture of the “Nazi next door,” but the editors staunchly defended the piece.\(^{17}\) The problem, again, was that the story was never balanced with a similarly in-depth profile of a far-left activist. With the clashes in Charlottesville still in recent memory, establishment media could have captured readers’ attention with a profile of an antifa (a term used to designate a range of anti-fascist movements) activist, but instead did a disservice to liberal, progressive, and left-wing groups by not providing them with a similar platform.

From a conservative perspective, Fox News published an opinion piece from Jean Card, a writer and communications consultant. In it she drew parallels between Trump voters and the #MeToo movement, arguing that each received a “megaphone this year” that “was good for America.”\(^{18}\) Card’s comparison of women who are survivors of sexual harassment and assault with disenfranchised white Trump voters is an intensely false equivalence. How can the #MeToo “crowd” make any inroads against hegemonic institutions when Trump was elected president of the United States with 21 accusations of sexual misconduct against him, and essentially zero accountability?\(^{19}\) Trump may have “candidly acknowledged that there is agony in America” for the working class, but he has simultaneously created agony for many more people.\(^{20}\) Card also relied on the watered-down class narrative, stating that “[w]orking-class Americans have long known how the wealthy and powerful actually view them, and they have long known that elitism contributes to injustice.”\(^{21}\) Fox News and the New York Times have diverging brand reputations and audiences, yet similar, overtly compassionate takes on Trump supporters.

Near the end of 2017, Fox News published a poll from Politico/Morning Consult conducted exactly one year after Trump’s election, in which 82 percent of those who say they supported Trump said they would vote for him again.\(^{22}\) Kyle Dropp, Morning Consult cofounder and chief research officer, concluded that “[v]oters who support President Trump have a markedly sunnier outlook on their own financial situation than those who don’t,” as 41 percent of those who strongly
approve of Trump report that they’re better off financially than they were the year before.\textsuperscript{23} It begs the question of what the survey results would have been if the views of people of color, immigrants and refugees, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities were examined with the same, captivated interest throughout the year.

While Trump’s purported base may not have benefited in a materially significant way in 2017, classism is embedded so deeply into US society and establishment media that Trump’s election symbolized a psychological, emotional, and moral victory—in other words, a reclamation of greatness—for the white working class. By not giving those who faced the greatest threats from Trump an equally nuanced, contextualized, and data-driven platform for their stories, establishment media collectively failed those communities. This abusive coverage from establishment outlets reinforced a system of racist, classist hegemony that ultimately harmed, and continues to harm, everyone.

\textbf{COLIN KAEPERNICK: MISSING THE MESSAGE}

While NFL players kneeled in protest against racial injustice in the United States, the establishment media presented a distorted narrative that marginalized their message and amplified critics’ misperceptions of the protest. Nationwide, police killings continued to ravage predominantly black neighborhoods, and in response to the carnage NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began to engage in peaceful protest in 2016 by sitting or kneeling during the playing of the national anthem at football games. National correspondents, despite Kaepernick’s articulate explanations, disconnected his protest from the social conditions that produced it. Instead of raising awareness of racial injustices in policing, journalists trained the nation’s eyes on the ideological differences between NFL players and the fans and owners who objected to Kaepernick’s protest and the protests of fellow players he inspired. The NFL kneeling controversy thus devolved into a 21st-century culture war over patriotism while the racially disproportionate police killings persisted.

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick chose to sit during the US national anthem during a preseason NFL football game in August 2016, a peaceful protest against what he perceived
as racial injustice in US policing. Kaepernick explained, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color . . . There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”

He said he would stand for the anthem “[w]hen there’s significant change and I feel that [the US] flag represents what it’s supposed to represent.”

The establishment media exploded with commentary on, and opposition to, Kaepernick’s protest. Critics charged that Kaepernick offended the men and women who serve in the US armed forces when he sat for the anthem. For some veterans, Kaepernick’s peaceful protest was a “form of rejection” because the US flag symbolizes the nation that soldiers swore to protect with their lives.

Media pressure prompted a shift in tactics. Kaepernick decided to continue his protest but to kneel rather than sit. “I have family, I have friends that have gone and fought for this country,” Kaepernick explained. “And they fight for freedom, they fight for the people, they fight for liberty and justice, for everyone.” Out of respect for US soldiers, Kaepernick decided to kneel on one knee, but he refused to stand until the US began to honor its values: “People are dying in vain because this country isn’t holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody.”

Kaepernick’s protest became a national soap opera in 2017 as the establishment media amplified the cultural tensions between protesters and their critics. No one stoked the fire of controversy like President Donald Trump, who argued that NFL players who knelt for the national anthem were “ruining the game” by disrespecting the US flag. “That’s a total disrespect of our heritage,” he proclaimed at a rally in Alabama. “That’s a total disrespect of everything that we stand for.” Trump called on NFL owners to fire players like Kaepernick for their lack of patriotism and directed fans to boycott NFL games in which players knelt during the anthem.

Following Trump’s invective, the national media focused much of their attention on the NFL’s response to player protests. NFL franchise owners like Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys prohibited their players from protesting during the national anthem. Players who decided to kneel would be in direct violation of team policy and risk fines, suspensions, or even termination of employment. The league as a whole sent a
clear message that it would demonstrate its intolerance of player protest by closing its doors to Kaepernick. The former standout quarterback has not been able to find work in the NFL since opting out of his contract with the 49ers. “Colin Kaepernick is Unemployed. Is It Because of His Arm, or His Knee?” read one New York Times headline in March.29 Later in the year, after the 2017–2018 NFL season had begun, the Washington Post reminded readers that Kaepernick, “the NFL’s most talked-about player,” was still unemployed.30 Kaepernick is not the only player who risked his career by kneeling for the national anthem. In fact, the term “Kaepernicked” has entered the national lexicon to indicate when an employee loses opportunities due to expressing controversial views. The Washington Post reported that Eric Reid, strong safety for the 49ers, had been “Kaepernicked” for supporting the protest in its early days.31 For his part, Kaepernick filed a collusion grievance against the NFL owners in October 2017, claiming that the owners have been working together to prevent NFL franchises from hiring him. To date, no NFL team has hired Kaepernick, and the owners’ opposition to national anthem protests remains resolute.32

The establishment media deserve some commendation for attempting to contextualize Kaepernick’s national anthem protest as part of a broader black American protest tradition. Without focusing on the social conditions that gave rise to this protest, however, even this progressive news coverage marginalized the athletes’ message and rather ironically reified stereotypes of aggressive, disruptive black athletes. The New York Times, for example, reported on the long history of national anthem protests by black American athletes since sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised black-gloved fists in a Black Power salute during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City.33 Other correspondents began to discuss Kaepernick in the context of civil rights activists like Muhammad Ali. In fact, for taking a courageous stance against racial injustice, Kaepernick won Sports Illustrated’s Muhammad Ali Legacy Award and a host of other awards, such as ESPN’s Best Breakthrough Athlete ESPY and GQ’s Man of the Year.34 Though Kaepernick deserved praise for his peaceful protest, comparing him to civil rights leaders of the past did not result in a nuanced discussion of the social conditions Kaepernick and his fellow athletes sought to change. The establish-
ment media focused more attention on ranking Kaepernick among a growing list of black activist athletes than addressing the pervasive-ness of racial inequality and injustice in 21st-century America.

It bears noting that, according to the Washington Post’s Fatal Force database, there were more deadly police shootings in 2017 (987) than in 2016 (963).\(^{35}\) Kaepernick’s peaceful protest began in 2016 to highlight these tragedies and demand justice for the victims and their families. The establishment media picked his protest apart but rarely gave voice to the very message that Kaepernick hoped to send. Instead the media distracted from this message and encouraged cultural bickering. Although Kaepernick inspired a national conversation on race, the media failed him by making the story about the legitimacy of protest and not the need for social change.

**CORPORATE CAPTURE: MISSING THE CONNECTIONS**

Corporations and wealthy individuals have long had an outsized influence on government policy. Since the infamous 2010 Citizens United ruling and the release of unchecked dark money into the political system, wealth has encountered few barriers to purchasing political perks, and nowhere have there been fewer barriers than in the Trump administration. While establishment outlets reported on isolated conflicts of interest and corporate maneuvers to influence policy, they failed to report some key connections between various incidents that would give a sense of the enormity and pervasiveness of the problem.

Most Americans agree that corporations and the wealthy hold sway over too much US policy.\(^{36}\) In fact, a much-discussed 2013 study found that the political system in the United States more closely resembles an oligarchy than a democracy due to the overwhelming influence of special interests.\(^{37}\) A critical role of the fourth estate is to guard against this type of influence by keeping the public informed about it. However, reporting in establishment media often fails to connect the dots when the subject is deep corporate pockets and the regulatory, or corporate, capture of government officials and policies. When government officials and agencies regulate in the interest of corporations or wealthy influencers rather than, and often at the expense of, the interests of the public, they effectively disenfranchise citizens.\(^{38}\)
While there are some establishment media journalists who choose to dig deeper with their reporting, too often articles regurgitate press release talking points rather than assess the veracity of the stakeholder’s claims. This is, in part, a function of round-the-clock journalism, intended to sell the public’s eyeballs to advertisers through easily digestible snippets instead of offering thorough, hard-hitting reporting. Furthermore, in this case, there is a consistent failure to name the problem shaping American politics today: corporate capture.

In early 2017, congressional Republicans instigated a flurry of regulatory rollbacks using an obscure law known as the Congressional Review Act (CRA). Although the law itself has since received a lot of coverage in establishment media, little attention has been paid to the question of which stakeholders won big as a result of these rollbacks—and why. Analysis conducted by the International Corporate Accountability Roundtable found that “the victims now lying in the CRA’s regulatory graveyard leave no doubt about whose wishes were prioritized—Big Oil’s.” Environmental protections, clean water requirements, and anti-corruption regulations opposed by natural resources companies—but broadly supported by US citizens—were just a few of the safeguards that were repealed at the behest of the extractive industries. The wins continued to roll in for the oil, gas, and mining sector throughout 2017 with the rollback of safety regulations meant to prevent another oil spill like BP’s Deepwater Horizon disaster of 2010, the opening up of public lands for extraction by the Department of the Interior, and the passing of the GOP tax bill into law, which allowed oil and gas companies to reap $190.4 billion in benefits.

Why do these companies have the influence they do? The answer, of course, is the money that they funnel into politics. But the establishment media consistently fails to acknowledge this as a systemic problem for democracy. Every article detailing a new “win” for the energy sector should include an evaluation of who made the decision to grant the “win,” how much the interested companies spent on lobbying, whom their money enriched, and whether the decision was influenced by “revolving door” agreements—that is, political favors exchanged for securing future corporate positions.

The prevalence of the use of the terms “regulatory capture” and “corporate capture” was surveyed, using a Google News search, in
news coverage published by eight establishment media outlets: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and NPR. The results were disappointing. In 2017 the term “regulatory capture” appeared only 11 times and “corporate capture” appeared only five times in articles available online. When “oil” was added to the search terms, there were only three relevant results—one each from the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, and the *New York Times*.

The *Wall Street Journal’s* use of the term “regulatory capture” did not appear in a news article, but in an opinion piece about the influence of corporate capture on Environmental Protection Agency policy under Scott Pruitt’s leadership.41 The CNN article discussed “regulatory capture” in the Trump administration and how its deregulatory philosophy, which only considers the costs and not the benefits of regulations, will have a negative impact on the public.42 Finally, the *New York Times* article detailed the 2017 climate talks in Germany, and noted representatives’ concerns that corporate interests were being prioritized over the needs of developing nations. The terms “corporate interests” and “corporate power” were featured prominently in the article, but “corporate capture” was only used to refer to the words on a protester’s sign.43

A search for the term “policy capture” in establishment media yielded no results at all; the term “state capture” appeared 17 times, but the term was only used in reference to issues in countries outside the United States. An even broader search for “corporate influence” yielded only 27 results, and, while “corporate power” yielded 97 results, those instances were often irrelevant to the topic at hand. When the term “oil” was added to these searches, moreover, very few relevant or viable results remained.

These results highlight a major failure of establishment media reporting in 2017. These influential news outlets failed to name, with consistency, the systematically disproportionate influence corporations—particularly among the energy sector—wield over regulators and policies when compared with that of citizens. Journalists must call this beast by its name—corporate capture, power, and influence—in a consistent way to highlight the ubiquity of the issue for those most affected by it. While the lack of results could partly be attributed to the fact that the terms “corporate capture” and “regulatory capture”
have, to date, been used mostly by academics or Beltway insiders rather than the general public, that precedent is no excuse for journalists to shirk their duty to inform the public of such a pressing issue; connecting the dots of corporate capture—whether that be through “revolving door” agreements, cushy political appointments, lobbying, or campaign contributions—to favorable regulatory results for corporations is a critical public service and a central task of journalists. Unfortunately, in 2017, the establishment media fell short.

**PALESTINE: INVISIBLE COLONIZATION, DECONTEXTUALIZED VIOLENCE**

Palestine/Israel has long been the ultimate blind spot for the establishment news media in the United States, with the nearly unassailable US–Israeli alliance mirrored by a myopic and destructive pattern of news coverage. At best, coverage often takes refuge in the language of false equivalence, using the infamous “both sides” frame despite the extreme lack of equivalence between the two “sides’” abilities to inflict violence. At worst, the coverage openly adopts and naturalizes Zionist linguistic and ideological categories without any attempt at portraying alternative perspectives. While there have been some marginal improvements in recent years, 2017’s coverage nonetheless displayed many of the patterns familiar from previous years that serve to hide the realities of what is happening on the ground.

At the root of establishment media coverage of Palestine/Israel is a dominant frame that uncritically accepts a number of interrelated assumptions:

- the situation is best understood as a “conflict” between two “sides”
- Israeli violence is only to be understood as a “response” to Palestinian violence
- the so-called “peace process” leading to a “two-state solution” is the only way to resolve the problem
- the US role in the situation is inherently benevolent and impartial

The coverage surveyed from 2017 starkly reflects these patterns. Of
the nearly 3,000 stories from seven establishment media outlets (the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, CNN, NPR, MSNBC, and Fox News) that mentioned Palestine or Israel, a sizable number contained references to “the Israeli–Palestinian conflict” (439 stories), the “peace process” (530), and the “two-state solution” (540), with the exact phrase “both sides” appearing in more than 10 percent of all stories (366 out of 2,948).

By contrast, the coverage systematically ignored alternative frames that might call into question dominant categories or Zionism more generally. For example, the idea of a “one-state solution”—the extension of full democratic rights to all people who live in Palestine/Israel—is outnumbered by the “two-state solution” in the coverage by a factor of more than ten (45 vs. 540 references).

More generally, thanks to the binary “conflict” frame, the grievances of Palestinians were typically presented as opinions to be weighed against official Israeli talking points rather than as political expressions grounded in international law and empirical realities. A prime case is coverage of the fundamental right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland. While this right is well established under international law, the phrase “right of return” (which is ubiquitous in Palestinian political discourse) appeared in only 26 of the 2,938 stories surveyed—a paltry number when compared with the number of stories quoting Israeli officials and pro-Israel experts who are openly opposed to Palestinians’ right of return.

Arguably the most glaring pattern in the coverage, however, is the failure to acknowledge the Zionist project as a case of settler colonialism. Critics and scholars have produced dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and numerous major international conferences devoted to the study of Palestine/Israel through the settler colonialism lens. Yet the 2017 establishment media coverage reviewed here contained exactly two references to settler colonialism in Palestine: one in a quote from Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi, and the other in a discussion of a University of California, Berkeley, course that drew attention for employing “the lens of settler colonialism.”

When the search of establishment media coverage was broadened to include the terms “colonial,” “colonization,” and “colonize,”
the results were equally stark. Only 15 of the nearly three thousand articles on Palestine/Israel contained any of these terms in specific reference to Israel. Of those 15 instances, seven were news stories and eight were op-eds or interviews. In the seven news stories, all references were found in quotes from political officials or protesters/activists; not a single academic expert on settler colonialism was ever quoted.

The eight op-ed pieces referencing Israeli colonization included a prominent *New York Times* piece by jailed Palestinian activist Marwan Barghouti; a follow-up in the *Times* two days later by public editor Liz Spayd giving voice to reader critiques of the Barghouti piece; four pieces by pro-Israel authors who only acknowledged the colonial framework in the process of seeking to discredit it; an NPR interview with Palestinian lawyer and author Raja Shehadeh (who made one indirect reference to Israeli colonialism); and a *Washington Post* piece by Israeli sociologist Gershon Shafir (which gave Shafir the distinction of being the only scholarly expert on settler colonialism to appear in the nearly 3,000 stories surveyed).

In the 2004 documentary *Peace, Propaganda & the Promised Land*, filmmakers Sut Jhally and Bathsheba Ratzkoff identify “invisible colonization” as one of several key elements of Israel’s “public relations” strategy that has a direct impact on US media coverage. While Israel’s colonization project has only accelerated since that time, and while the vast majority of the world views such actions as plainly illegal under international law, this survey of 2017’s coverage suggests that little progress has been achieved in making colonization an explicitly visible part of the public narrative.

Finally, it is worth noting in particular that MSNBC’s coverage on Palestine/Israel in 2017 was almost laughable in its myopia. In this case, however, the problem has less to do with the replication of dominant categories and more to do with the network’s status as a de facto mouthpiece for the Democratic Party. Of the 15 MSNBC stories that referenced Palestine/Israel in any significant way, all 15 were primarily about President Donald Trump, either addressing his questionable approach to foreign policy or his late-2017 decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. For MSNBC, it seems, the situation in Palestine/Israel is only relevant insofar as it connects with the cable...
audience’s appetite for all things Trump. Any other issue, including the actual conditions facing Palestinians living under Israeli colonization backed by bipartisan US support, merits nary a mention.

**CONCLUSION**

This review of coverage from 2017 demonstrates that establishment media continue to serve as ideological magicians, consistently diverting the public’s gaze away from some of the most important elements of key stories. The urgent perspectives of vulnerable communities following the election of Donald Trump, the critiques of structural racism offered by Colin Kaepernick and other high-profile athletes, the corrosive influence of the fossil fuel industry and other corporations on the US political system, and the ongoing colonization of Palestine are realities hiding in plain sight, demanding our attention and concern. Yet they are starkly downplayed, sometimes to the point of being virtually absent, in the reporting of the most influential US news outlets. Far from simple censorship, these patterns reveal a deeper process of mass distraction, ex-nomination (the systematic failure to name certain processes and structures), and political manipulation whose detrimental impact on public discourse, and on democracy itself, cannot be overestimated.

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Notes
2. In this chapter we use the term “establishment media” to highlight the role of influential news media outlets—typically those that are corporate-owned or otherwise closely connected with private interests and with the power elite (“the establishment”) more broadly—in setting the agenda for public debate. The “establishment media” privileges certain voices, perspectives, categories, and narratives at the expense of others, thereby creating and reinforcing “establishment” views. For more analysis of this terminology, and the use of “corporate” media vs. so-called “mainstream” media labels, see chapter 8 of this volume by Peter Phillips.
5. Root, “Charlottesville, Trump and Angry White Males.”


21. Ibid.


