CHAPTER 3

Comforting the Powerful, Ignoring the Afflicted
News Abuse in 2018–2019

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Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them.

—Edward Said

INTRODUCTION

When we reviewed the patterns of News Abuse in US establishment media a year ago, we used the metaphor of a magician’s trick to describe how News Abuse works: by diverting the public’s attention away from key elements of important, widely reported stories, establishment media minimize the stories’ deeper importance, distort what is happening, or otherwise encourage the public to interpret the stories in ways that fall into line with the interests of the power elite. Sadly, this past year demonstrated that these patterns have not abated. Despite the chaotic winds swirling around the Trump administration, major establishment outlets continue to perform their traditional ideological role by policing the borders of “acceptable” public discourse. Even when providing detailed coverage of major stories, these outlets too often frame issues in a way that leaves questions of structural power in the background or renders them nearly invisible. This type of framing also functions as a form of censorship, and it’s
what former Project Censored director Peter Phillips labeled “News Abuse” back in 2002.

Bringing our experience as independent journalists with Weave News (www.weavenews.org) to bear on these questions, we focused our analysis on four News Abuse stories from 2018 to 2019: the death of Senator John McCain, the debate surrounding Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court, the migrant “caravan” from Central America’s “Northern Triangle” to North America, and the election of a group of women of color dubbed “the Squad” to the US Congress. What we found was a heavy reliance on tropes, frames, and narratives that served to shield elite groups and the US empire itself from critical scrutiny while marginalizing or casting doubt on the voices of the relatively powerless.

While these constitute by now quite familiar tactics from the corporate media playbook, it remains disheartening, if not altogether surprising, that the major outlets continue to employ the tools of News Abuse so brazenly while the public’s demand for critical, constructive journalism grows ever more emphatic. Independent reporters and media watchdogs may have their work cut out for them most at times of social and political struggle and crisis, as it’s only by exposing news media complicity in abuses of power that the powerful can be held accountable for their predations upon the oppressed.

**JOHN MCCAIN: MEDIA MYTHOLOGIES OF AN IMPERIALIST “MAVERICK”**

In his influential 1989 book *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, Bruce Lincoln highlights the role of what he calls “sentiment evocation”—appeals to emotion—in helping alternative discourses and frameworks gain a hearing and, by extension, helping to create the conditions for social change. Dominant discourses, though, also make heavy use of sentiment evocation, often in an effort to reinforce existing social hierarchies and relations. In the hands of establishment media outlets, sentiment evocation can play a key role in coverage that falls under the category of News Abuse. Establishment media coverage of the death of Senator John McCain reveals some of the complexities of the process. Amidst ongoing liberal concern
over “norm erosion” during the first two years of the Trump administration, establishment outlets responded to McCain’s death by providing the public with a steady diet of emotional appeals to American patriotism, exceptionalism, and innocence. In the process, they helped normalize the worst excesses of the country’s imperial militarism while also keeping Trump himself at the center of the news cycle.

The days following McCain’s death on August 25, 2018, saw a heavy outpouring of establishment media coverage, including breaking news stories, lengthy obituaries, a variety of opinion pieces and editorials, and significant attention devoted to the debate over Donald Trump’s slow and tepid reaction to the news. All eight news outlets surveyed here—the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, NPR, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC—provided sustained, detailed reporting on the story. This analysis focuses on substantial articles published during the first week following McCain’s death (August 25 – September 1), when key narratives about the former presidential candidate crystallized.

News Abuse always involves a combination of what is present and what is absent. In the case of the McCain story, the coverage featured the strategic use and repetition of a number of key words and tropes that were quite consistent with how McCain had been covered for much of his political career. Through sentiment evocation, those characterizations play on the emotional need of centrist audiences to believe in a certain image of American politics and American empire. At the same time, the coverage was also clearly marked by what analyst Norman Solomon called “obit omit—obituaries that are flagrantly in conflict with the real historical record.” Consequently, we need to pay special attention to those aspects of the historical record that were either left out or left in the background of the story.

The first trope about McCain centers on the word “maverick,” which originated as a term for unbranded cattle and has come to be used to describe particular individuals who take independent positions. As Branko Marcetic argued in an insightful piece for Jacobin, the idea of McCain as a political “maverick” was a carefully constructed image decades in the making. McCain’s support for campaign finance reform in particular played a key role in forming a narrative that even-
ually became a virtual truism despite McCain’s overall record as a solid GOP loyalist. By 2018, the trope was so entrenched that it would have been shocking not to see the word peppered all across front-page headlines. In this, the establishment media did not disappoint: initial coverage of McCain’s death on August 25 included news and op-ed headlines such as “John McCain, ‘Maverick’ of the Senate and Former POW, Dies at 81,” “John McCain, a Maverick We Can Learn From,” “Six Memorable Moments when John McCain Earned a Reputation as a ‘Maverick,’” and “From a POW Prison, John McCain Emerged a ‘Maverick.’” The use of scare quotes often signaled a backhanded recognition of the term’s constructed nature, yet without the necessary critical distance to acknowledge the beltway media’s own central role in propagating it in the first place.

McCain the “maverick” was the perfect alibi for a political and media system that excludes systemic critiques while providing an endless spectacle of 24-hour “debate” between, and sometimes within, the two establishment parties. The alibi, in this case, works through a particular kind of sentiment evocation: the nostalgic appeal to a distinctly American, white, male notion of “rugged individualism” associated with the colonial frontier and the so-called “Wild West.” Much as fascism, in the words of Walter Benjamin, offers the masses “a chance to express themselves” in the absence of any real opportunity for economic justice, the trope of McCain the “maverick” offers a periodic dose of highly circumscribed and choreographed “rebellion” as a substitute for a political system that would truly address the needs of ordinary Americans.

A second, equally ubiquitous trope concerns McCain’s military service, and here the country’s tradition of “support the troops” rhetoric obviously looms large when it comes to sentiment evocation. Typical of this trope was Fox News’s decision to begin its initial obituary by describing McCain as “a war hero who survived five years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.” While Fox managed to avoid mentioning the senator’s vocal opposition to the US use of torture, other outlets heavily emphasized the importance of that stance, writing of the “lessons” that the country could learn from McCain’s principled position.

Meanwhile, the insertion into the conversation of Donald Trump, who famously avoided military service through a series of deferments
during the Vietnam era, offered an opportunity to reinforce the narrative of McCain's heroism. Trump had stated of McCain during the 2015 campaign, “He’s a war hero because he was captured. I like people that weren’t captured.” The Trump–McCain feud would continue until, and even after, the senator’s death, with the contrast between now-President Trump’s insensitive comments and McCain’s military bona fides providing endless fodder for cable news shows and sober newspaper articles alike. Going well beyond a recognition of McCain’s service in Vietnam, for example, the Wall Street Journal was quick to point out that he “came from a family that had fought in every American war since the revolution.”

And what of those wars? Perhaps most importantly, what of the many post-Vietnam invasions, proxy wars, “interventions,” and other military adventures that McCain could always be counted on to support? Many outlets were quick to recount the feel-good stories about how some of McCain’s former antagonists in Vietnam later came to admire him as a “good friend” for his role in promoting strong US–Vietnam ties after the war. The sentiment evocation in such coverage contributes directly to the reproduction of a narrative that cuts the brutality of imperialism with a heavy dose of wishful American innocence. In other cases, such as Roger Cohen’s New York Times column on August 31, 2018, the warmongering is papered over with phrases such as “man of conviction,” “American global commitment,” and “self-sacrifice.”

By contrast, few establishment outlets were willing to ask the obvious question: How do the family members of the millions killed and displaced in US and US-supported wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Central America, and elsewhere feel about the man who never hesitated to back the use of military force in the service of US empire? While socialist critics such as Ashley Smith and anti-imperialist reporters such as Mehdi Hasan pointed out that support for US wars inevitably means participation in war crimes, NPR stayed safely within the accepted framework of McCain the heroic (if occasionally flawed) “idealist.” Speaking on Morning Edition, NPR’s Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman emphasized McCain’s belief in “American power as a moral force” and his steadfast desire to “promote democracy around the world.” Aside from a single reference

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to Chinese imperialism, the word “imperialism” does not appear a single time in any of the nearly 200 reports on McCain published by the eight selected outlets during the week following his death. It was similarly difficult to locate any acknowledgment that the tactics of the US military might raise as many ethical red flags as the torture McCain so famously condemned on the basis of his own experience.

Given his outsized role in the nation’s history of militarism, McCain’s death could have provided an opportunity to engage with the implications of that history. In this light, his antagonistic connection with antiwar activists such as Medea Benjamin, the founder of Code Pink, is instructive. Interviewed on Democracy Now!, Benjamin observed, “I just spent the last weekend with Veterans for Peace, people who are atoning for their sins in Vietnam by trying to stop new wars. John McCain hasn’t done that.” And indeed he hadn’t—but he had clashed with Code Pink protesters in 2015 as they interrupted a Senate hearing to demand the arrest of former secretary of state Henry Kissinger for war crimes. “[Y]ou’re going to have to shut up, or I’m going to have you arrested,” replied McCain, the Senate Armed Services Committee Chair. “If we can’t get the Capitol Hill police in here immediately—get out of here, you low-life scum.” This interaction, also not referenced in any of the establishment coverage reviewed here, adds a critical layer to a third trope regarding McCain: his supposed sense of “decency” and “honor.”

Finally, it is worth noting how much of the coverage following McCain’s death referenced his popularity among members of the Washington press corps, who typically attributed this close relationship to the senator’s personal efforts or magnetism. The Washington Post, for example, cited his legendary “knack with the media” and his ability to “make journalists love him,” as if reporters were purely passive objects of his irresistible charm. A more plausible explanation is that McCain benefited from the unwillingness of the press to ask basic questions about the global impact of the policies he championed. As John McCain’s record of enthusiastic support for imperialism passed largely uncriticized, the establishment media ensured that the spin he proudly stood for would continue long after his death.
CANT’HUMANIZE A CARAVAN: CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES AND THE PROBLEM OF METANARRATIVE

In 2018, national media outlets like the New York Times, Washington Post, Fox News, and USA Today reported extensively on the “immigrant caravan,” a massive procession of more than 5,000 Latinx migrants who walked from the “Northern Triangle” states in Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) to Mexico and the United States in search of a better life. The selection of the term “caravan” to describe this migrant population created a problematic metanarrative in the establishment media. The dominant interpretation of the “immigrant caravan” is that it was a ragtag group of Latinx migrants trying to resettle in North America, illegally if need be. Only secondarily do the conditions that fueled this Central American diaspora get sustained analysis in the media. As a result, the “immigrant caravan” has come to represent a threat to national security in the United States, further fueling an incipient 21st-century nativism among citizens who view Latinx as unwanted visitors.

The term “immigrant caravan” fails to describe accurately the mass migration of Central American migrants to North America in 2018. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, British English speakers use the term “caravan” to denote a mobile home, a vehicle in which passengers might live. Others use the term to describe itinerant traders and priests from the ancient world who traversed the Eurasian steppes or the Sahara Desert to circulate ideas, people, and goods. American English speakers, on the other hand, define a caravan as a “company of travelers journeying together. . . . A single file of vehicles. . . .” The latter definition explains why the US national press labeled the migrants an “immigrant caravan,” publishing photographs of thousands of Central Americans walking together as one. The problem is that the term connotes itinerancy without acknowledging the chaotic conditions that pushed migrants out of the Northern Triangle in the first place.

National correspondents worked diligently to document how Central American migrants perceived their decision to walk to North America, but the men and women journalists interviewed represented themselves more like refugees than the traders or priests
that the term “caravan” might imply. They identified record levels of violence and few opportunities to earn a living as the main factors pushing them out the Northern Triangle. For example, Edwin Enrique Jimenez Flores, a truck driver who left Tela, Honduras, in the summer, cited gang violence as the main reason to migrate. Jimenez Flores called city police to arrest gang members who violently assaulted his brother. As retribution, the gang members threatened his life. “I spent four months hidden. I couldn’t even go into the street. I can’t go back,” he said. Daisy Guardado had a similar story. She fled Honduras because gang members killed her brother and attacked her daughter. Traumatized and forced into hiding, Guardado chose to leave her homeland: “I [was] so scared,” she explained, “I didn’t know what to do.”

In addition to gang violence, Central American migrants abandoned states because of their stagnant economies. According to the Washington Office on Latin America, 64.3 percent of all households in Honduras in 2017 lived in poverty. The Northern Triangle as a region has a rural poverty rate of 60 percent. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that some migrants moved north to find living-wage work. Bayron Cardona Castillo, for example, decided to leave Honduras for better social and economic opportunities. As he told reporters, “The truth is, what we’re looking for is a way to live in peace, in tranquility, with employment . . . In my case, all I ask is an opportunity, a chance to work and help my family.”

To call these Central American migrants an “immigrant caravan” elides the chaotic conditions that caused them to head north. The term “caravan” connotes itinerancy with a purpose; caravans come to town to sell goods or to spread ideas. The Central American migrants who walked to the United States were not traveling to serve their interests; they were traveling because the economic and law enforcement sectors in their countries had all but collapsed, creating uninhabitable conditions in their communities. A far more accurate term for these migrants would have been “refugees,” people forced to leave their countries because of exigent circumstances like war, persecution, and natural disaster. There is a moral obligation to help refugees, however; this obligation simply does not exist when a population is labeled a “caravan.”
President Donald Trump and pundits for Fox News, a conservative-leaning media outlet, intended for the term “immigrant caravan” to rattle conservative Republican constituents. Trump popularized the term to raise fear about “illegal immigrants” and generate support for his immigration policy, which seeks not only to restrict immigration further but also to erect a wall along the entire US border with Mexico. In April 2018, Trump tweeted that US Border Patrol agents should have more discretionary power to jail “illegal immigrants.” They needed new powers, he urged, because “‘Caravans’ [of illegal aliens are] coming.” Inside these caravans, Trump intimated, were rogues, rapists, criminals, and terrorists, sneaking into the United States to harm citizens, leech off social safety net programs, and steal economic opportunities from working-class [white] Americans. Trump’s deployment of nativist rhetoric should come as no surprise, since he began publicly vilifying Latinx immigrants as soon as he announced his presidential campaign in June 2015, when he claimed that Mexico was sending rapists and criminals to the United States and he promised to protect citizens by building a “great wall” to stem illegal immigration from Central and South America. Indeed, ste-
reotyping and discriminating against Latinx migrants featured prominently in his rise to the presidency.

Fox News correspondents and conservative pundits joined Trump in fearmongering over the “immigrant caravan,” partly to advance Trump’s immigration agenda, and partly to gain readers and viewers by creating controversy. Pundits on the Right wrote salacious tales to support Trump and galvanize the base around the issue of immigration. Nativist sentiments, in one instance, enflamed a debate between Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson and immigrant rights activist Enrique Morones. Carlson verbally accosted Morones after the activist expressed empathy for the migrants. For Morones, the migrants were refugees, and the United States should help them, especially because US intervention in the Northern Triangle has caused some of the political and economic instability in the region. “You hate America,” Carlson barked at Morones. From Carlson’s perspective, Morones unfairly blamed America for the immigration problem. While the US may have a “sinful” past in the Northern Triangle, he suggested, this history was not a justification for illegal immigration. To suggest that the “immigrant caravan” had a just cause, Carlson exhorted, was anti-American.28

If fighting illegal immigration was a patriotic duty, protecting citizens from Latinx rogues and criminals was a presidential duty, according to FrontPage Mag writer Lloyd Billingsley. He praised Trump for taking a tough stance against the “immigrant caravan,” because the migrants were unwanted and potentially dangerous: “The United States did not request the arrival of any person in the caravan, and none has any right to enter the United States. The unvetted caravanners might be gang members, criminals or terrorists. So the president was right to say the border is getting ‘more dangerous.’”29 If allusions to patriotism and law and order were not enough to mobilize the base, conservatives had no qualms about circulating “immigrant caravan” conspiracy theories. Former Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer David Ward even claimed that the “immigrant caravan” was a socialist conspiracy to test citizens’ political values. “This was an organized plan and deliberate attack on the sovereignty of the United States by a special interest group,” said Ward. “They rallied a bunch of foreign nationals to come north into the United States to test our resolve.”30
While conservative pundits’ support for President Trump and his outlook on immigration was not surprising, the inability of establishment news outlets with a more liberal orientation to control the narrative was odd, to say the least. The problem was that liberal pundits focused coverage on migrants’ experiences before and after the walk and offered commentary on conservatives’ campaign of misinformation without countering the terms of the “caravan” story. In most circumstances, such a strategy would be successful, because migrants can explain the unlivable conditions that would push them north and liberal commentators can expose the inaccuracies in some conservatives’ reports. In this case, however, even liberal pundits’ efforts to document facts and rehumanize the migrants could not overcome the metanarrative framing the entire controversy. Migrants and refugees can be humanized in the national press. Caravans, on the other hand, are groups of travelers, trinkets, and beasts of burden. As liberals learned, it is hard to humanize a “caravan” of people.

One New York Times columnist came close to unveiling the root cause of the “immigrant caravan” controversy in the national press. In his essay “Trying to Fight, Not Spread, Fear and Lies,” Nicholas Kristof argued that the establishment media played a pernicious role in the story. In his view, the national media facilitated the controversy to sell papers and recruit new cable viewers. “The news business model,” Kristof explained, “is in part about attracting eyeballs, and cable television in particular sees that as long as the topic is President Trump, revenues follow. So when Trump makes false statements about America being invaded by Central American refugees, he not only gets coverage, but also manages to control the media agenda.” Kristof advanced two important criticisms here: First, he condemned Trump’s use of misinformation and fearmongering to malign the “immigrant caravan”; and second, he chided establishment news outlets for running stories with sham information just to sell their news. Kristof missed the bigger picture, however. Yes, the national press should check facts before running stories, and they should not publish inaccuracies even if the people quoted are famous and can sell newspapers and TV shows. But making these changes would not have stopped the spread of fear and lies, because the people being vilified were not given a label that connoted peoplehood. Ironically, Kristof called the migrants “Central American refugees,” a term that unmistakably
humanizes the travelers and carries with it a moral and political obligation to help them. Herein was the best strategy to challenge the “immigrant caravan” controversy—stop calling the population a “caravan.”

The stories that the US media tell shape national conversations and consciousness. As important as telling the story, but not nearly as well understood, is the impact of how one tells the story—the setting, characters, tropes, and selected words that writers use. In his classic postmodern monograph *Metahistory*, historian Hayden White argued that the structure of stories—the way that certain tropes presuppose how plots unfold—can sometimes determine how historians interpret their research data. The emplotment of certain types of stories can prefigure what an historian will write about their research, even before they have completed the analysis. As Hayden White theorized, labels like “immigrant caravan” work to skew the results of any reporting, even ostensibly positive and sympathetic journalism. The term muted the Central American crises pushing people out of the Northern Triangle and, rather subtly, dehumanized the refugees.

**“THE SQUAD”: VISIBLE SAVIORS, INVISIBLE MOVEMENTS**

The US midterm elections of 2018 were a rallying point for liberal Democrats determined to take Congress back from Republicans. After more than a year of nightmarish policies under the Trump administration, new candidates emerged at every level of government, and voters elected a record-breaking number of women into Congress, with 35 winning seats in the US House of Representatives and five winning seats in the Senate—bringing the total number of women serving in the House to 102 (plus four nonvoting members representing Washington, DC, and US territories), the total number women serving in the Senate to 25, and the total number of women who can vote in Congress to 127. Many of the newly elected members of Congress were hailed for being “firsts” in their districts and in the legislative branch of government: female, immigrant and refugee, millennial, black, Somali, Native American, Asian American, Palestinian, Muslim, and openly LGBTQ. The newly elected members were also overwhelmingly left of center; of the 42 women elected to the House and Senate for the first time, 38 ran as Democrats.
Unfortunately, establishment media coverage of this important development in 2018 met the criteria for News Abuse by fixating on female Democratic congressional candidates in two specific ways: by relying on a neoliberal savior trope of newly elected progressive, Democratic women, and by simultaneously erasing the sustained grassroots organizing that is fundamental for radical change to occur. This coverage limited the possibilities for informed civic participation aimed at systemic change and further reinforced the hegemonic, corporate capitalist, two-party political system of governance.

Examining the broader circumstances of the 2018 midterms, we find that establishment media eagerly filled the role of reporting on Donald Trump’s every tweet and tantrum as well as the resultant ridicule and admonishment from his high-profile critics on the Left. Many of the female congressional candidates were fit into the oversimplified narrative of ideological conflict between Trump and vehemently anti-Trump Democrats. Headlines run immediately before and after the elections from November 5 to 7, 2018, included

- “Trump vs. Democratic Women: Headline Fight of the 2018 Campaign” (*Wall Street Journal*)
- “Women Lead Parade of Victories to Help Democrats Win House” (*New York Times*)
- “A Record Number of Women Will Serve in Congress (with Potentially More to Come)” (*National Public Radio*)
- “New ‘Year of the Woman’? Over 100 Female Candidates Set to Win Seats in Congress, Make History” (*USA Today*)

Although increased gender representation in elections and public office may be a net gain for US democracy, it would be foolish to assume that the work of achieving that representation is complete, as the United States’s elected offices still have a long way to go before reaching gender parity. Data from the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics shows that, despite comprising more than half the population and the voters, women still accounted for less than a third of all 2018 candidates for Congress, the governors’ offices, and other statewide executive seats.
Leaving that data out of the story, establishment media became hooked on judging the latest batch of congresswomen by their opinions of President Trump. Four women running for seats in the House gained particular attention due to their politics, identities, and history-making races: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. The candidates, all women of color running for Congress for the first time, fondly referred to one another as “sisters in service” and soon became known as “the Squad.” They pledged to use all their resources if elected to shut down the Trump administration, but they also ran on unabashedly progressive platforms and proudly challenged the “old guard” of establishment Democrats.

By presenting the Squad as the new progressive champions of the Democratic Party and Congress, the media framed a narrative that these women’s bold leadership would pull the United States out the
Trump quagmire. Tlaib was featured in an interview with Boston NPR affiliate WBUR with the headline, “Rep.-Elect Rashida Tlaib Says She Will Work to Get Trump ‘to Follow the Law.’” U.S. News & World Report called the four women “The Freshman Congressional Renegades.” Alongside Democratic women candidates in general, USA Today linked their motivations to resisting Trump a few times in the same article:

Women will represent two-thirds of the districts that Democrats flipped, building on momentum from the “Resist” movement that followed President Donald Trump’s election in 2016. . . . Women were poised to make significant electoral gains in this “Year of the Woman” election. Their historic involvement follows the massive Women’s March to resist Trump’s presidency and the #MeToo movements’ protest against sexual misconduct in the workplace.

The overwhelming attention on these women, ranging from fascination and adoration to shock and disgust, catapulted them to celebrity-like status—and particularly, in the case of Ocasio-Cortez, to extraordinary popularity on social media. She gave Instagram followers unparalleled access to the legislative process by recording live videos during and after each day of congressional orientation, leading to the growth of her already massive follower count. Ocasio-Cortez’s age and leftist values made her a particular target for Fox News critique, and the Washington Post even went so far as to report on her trolling of the conservative news channel in Spanish after commentators poked fun at her.

This fixation on the Squad’s identities and history-making ethnic, religious, gender, and age representation actually diminished critical conversation around and in-depth analysis of progressive and leftist policies. Following Pressley’s primary win in September, NPR published a piece titled “Ayanna Pressley’s Upset Victory Shows Power of Women of Color in Democratic Politics”; according to that report,

The Democratic Party has referred to African-American women as the backbone of the party, but in recent years,
some black organizers have expressed frustration that the party has not invested in recruiting black candidates. Pressley’s victory is a sign that organizers and activists are no longer willing to wait for the party’s blessing. It’s also a sign that issues of representation rather than ideology are motivating voters in Democratic primaries.47

News consumers were led to believe that a handful of progressive Democratic congresswomen would transform the United States through a mosaic of singular actions targeted against the Trump administration. Though many voters and news consumers held, and still hold, this optimistic perspective, it overemphasized the role of individual politicians whose leftist values are still in the significant minority in Congress. It also placed significant pressure on members of the Squad to amplify leftist policies that would be a radical departure from most federal legislating, and are unfortunately not likely to be brought forward and approved on the House floor anytime soon.

Establishment media’s individualistic focus on the congresswomen also led to them ignoring the broader systems and institutions that participated in and influenced the Squad’s effectiveness in multiple spheres. Establishment outlets, for instance, pushed the narrative of growing tensions between new progressives and incumbent Democrats in Congress, many of whom are part of the party establishment and/or are assuredly centrist. On Pressley, CNN wrote, “Rising Democratic star Ayanna Pressley is testing whether her party is willing to cast aside its experienced and reliable veterans in favor of a new generation of leaders who argue they are more suited for politics in the Donald Trump era.”48 A week after the November election, the members-elect went to Washington, DC, for congressional orientation, where Ocasio-Cortez made headlines for joining a climate change protest outside then–House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi’s office.49 Ocasio-Cortez’s commitment to her activist roots began serving as a litmus test for other Democrats and especially party leadership.

The recurring question of which direction the Democratic Party is being “pushed in” ultimately served to reinforce the system of two corporate-capitalist parties who dictate the rules of elections and gov-
erning. Members of the Squad, however, proved that they were not elected into Congress to simply fall into party lines. In fact, Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib were endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America. All four women were also endorsed by Justice Democrats and Brand New Congress, two PACs that aim to overturn existing power structures within Congress. Since the same corporate class backing the major political parties also owns and controls establishment media, painting the Squad as an emerging threat to status quo democracy became imperative.

Moreover, establishment media’s neoliberal lens caused the Squad to be watered down into sound bites and images, not remembered for the grassroots movements that elected them into office. Tlaib and Omar were touted for being the first Muslim women in Congress. Pressley was hailed as one of hundreds of black women running for office in 2018, and the first black woman to join the Massachusetts congressional delegation. After Ocasio-Cortez’s primary win in June against Representative Joseph Crowley, a nineteen-year incumbent from Queens who had not faced a primary challenger in fourteen years, the New York Times labeled her “A 28-Year-Old Democratic Giant Slayer.”

Who were the people behind the Squad who organized, mobilized, and voted for their progressive values? These four candidates won campaigns by foregrounding leftist policies that separated them from establishment Democrats: Ocasio-Cortez rallied on Medicare for All and urgent measures to slow climate change; Pressley declared that she would abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); and Tlaib and Omar took anti-imperialist foreign policy stances and openly supported Palestine. To create the transformational systems change that the Squad is advocating, there needs to be a mass movement of people ready to make it happen. Those people are out there—but establishment media had zero interest in giving them a platform.

Most of the national establishment outlets ignored the Squad’s congressional races until the final days leading up to the elections. The horse race–style coverage of any political race is abusive to the public, barraging news consumers with minute updates, gains, losses, and polling numbers that do not always accurately represent voter turnout, as demonstrated in Ocasio-Cortez’s and Pressley’s win-
ning primary races. Some local media outlets did do the candidates more justice by reporting on their races from day one, but others fed into establishment narratives that lacked nuance and frequently missed the mark.

Finally, it is necessary to address the underlying cynicism any left-leaning voter may hold, even after a history-making election cycle: Is diversity in politics going to lead us any closer to liberation when the same political system remains in place? The concept of diversity has been co-opted by the neoliberal capitalism that serves white supremacy, as each intersectional identity becomes a commodifiable check mark symbolizing progress. It is meaningful to see faces and stories of people other than white, cis-heterosexual males securing high-profile positions of power, but this does not necessarily translate into material change. The US corporate, partisan political system does not provide room for nuance nor truly progressive policy proposals. So while our “firebrand progressives” are finally giving the mic to leftist values, the overall hegemonic discourse within Congress and government is neoliberal at best, centrist and conservative in swaths, and far from socialist or guided by radical thought by any measure. The question remains: can politicians with oppressed and marginalized identities remain subversive within an institution that is inherently white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, sexist, and classist? If Omar, Tlaib, Pressley, and Ocasio-Cortez are truly committed to building the grassroots movements that sent them to Congress into a political revolution, then the answer must be yes.

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, BRETT KAVANAUGH, AND THE PARTISAN DEFENSE OF PATRIARCHY**

In late 2018, the United States was captivated and divided by the controversy surrounding Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court. What began as a standard vetting process swiftly turned into a new chapter of the culture wars when Kavanaugh was accused of sexually assaulting Christine Blasey Ford in high school. Coming in the midst of the #MeToo movement, the accusation sparked an avalanche of media coverage, including investigative articles, opinion pieces, and editorials. A close look at editorials from two key establishment
media outlets, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, reveals that the latter traded repeatedly in News Abuse as it sought to protect patriarchal elites from legitimate analysis of their structural power.

An examination of those editorials shows that both the *Times* and the *Journal* took an avid interest in the topic. In September and October 2018, the *Times* published thirteen editorials on Kavanaugh, eleven of which were published after Ford’s accusations emerged. Similarly, the *Journal*’s editorial board published ten pieces, nine of which came after the accusations. Notably, the *Journal* also published an op-ed by Kavanaugh himself after his bombastic testimony in response to the Senate’s questioning over Ford’s allegations. Furthermore, from September 9 to October 13, 2018, the *Times* published approximately 200 articles and opinion pieces that included the words “Kavanaugh” and “Ford,” and the *Journal* published approximately 150.

While these numbers demonstrate that the outlets shared nearly equal interest in the Kavanaugh–Ford story, further analysis shows clear divergences in the types of coverage. The *Times* provided appropriate reporting on the accusations while also offering ample space to connect the controversy to the broader cultural conversation about sexual assault, power, and gender. The *Journal*, by contrast, tended to divert its readers’ attention away from any discussion that might shed light on the structural privileges enjoyed by the white, male, upper-class elites who make up its traditional audience.

A keyword search for the terms “Kavanaugh” and “patriarchy,” “sexist/sexism,” “culture war,” “misogyny,” “rape culture,” or “toxic masculinity” illustrated these patterns. Out of the roughly 200 pieces surveyed in the *Times*, those terms appeared approximately 75 times, but out of the roughly 150 *Journal* articles, there were only six instances. While the two papers dedicated nearly the same amount of editorial space to the topic, the *Journal* failed to connect the dots in a way that could have provoked meaningful conversation and critical reflection on dominant social structures. While the term “MeToo” appeared in nearly every *Times* article, it appeared in less than a third of the articles published in the *Journal*.

The difference in coverage becomes even clearer as one digs into the work of the respective editorial boards. Editorials are considered the institutional opinion of the newspaper and are written to be catchy
and thought-provoking. The fact that they are not news articles does not absolve the authors of their responsibility to the facts.

The *Times* editorials generally (although not always) tried to strike a neutral tone by presenting evidence from both sides of the Kavanaugh–Ford debate. They allowed for the possibility of Kavanaugh’s innocence, called for an impartial FBI investigation, and, most importantly, connected the story to the broader issue of sexual assault and the difficulties women face in coming forward with accusations. While still offering a limited perspective, the *Times* at least had something to say about this important societal issue.

On the other hand, by offering a sustained defense of Kavanaugh, the *Journal*’s editorial team went out of its way to undermine and even ridicule the structural analysis offered by the #MeToo movement and by critics of rape culture. With each additional editorial focused on Ford’s accusations, the language became increasingly aggressive. One editorial in particular, “The #MeToo Kavanaugh Ambush,” prefigured the rage and enmity shown by Kavanaugh in his response to the accusations before the Senate.57

Both editorial boards made reference to Senate “norms” and called for an end to partisan bickering and politicking. In “The Supreme Court Confirmation Charade,” the *Times* criticized both parties for politicizing such an important process and emphasized that, for the good of the country, the Supreme Court needs to maintain its credibility.58 The *Journal*’s critiques, however, were wholly one-sided, sometimes to the point of conveniently forgetting recent history. In “The #MeToo Kavanaugh Ambush,” they argued that Ford’s allegations amounted to “character assassination” and that Senator Dianne Feinstein’s delay in bringing the accusations forward amounted to a last-minute “political stunt” designed to hold up the nomination.59

In “The Never Conservatives” and “Who’s Attacking Political Norms Now?,” the *Journal* accused Democrats of violating “democratic norms” in their handling and the timing of Ford’s accusations.60 The GOP’s destruction of the filibuster, however, was never raised. Unlike in the *Times* editorials, the only mention of Merrick Garland’s stolen Supreme Court seat came when the *Journal* petulantly asserted that Democrats would have done the same as Republicans had they been in the position to do so. For the *Journal*, owned
by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, it seems that party criticism only goes one way.

As for the Kavanaugh accusations themselves, the editorials again revealed important differences. The Times acknowledged the credibility of Ford’s testimony, properly cited evidence and investigative efforts by providing quotes and links to source material, and consistently called for an impartial investigation by the FBI. The Journal, however, at no point acknowledged the possibility that Ford could be telling the truth, cherry-picked and at times misled readers with their evidentiary references, and rarely provided links or direct quotes. The editorial board even cynically referred to the accusations as a part of the “Anita Hill playbook,” alluding to the accusations of sexual harassment faced by Clarence Thomas in 1991 prior to his confirmation to the Supreme Court. Hill, a former subordinate to Thomas at the Department of Education and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thomas’s behavior and was widely vilified and disbelieved at the time for coming forward with her accusations.

Rather than seeking the truth no matter where it leads, the Jour-
nal’s editorial board, only a quarter of whom are women, relied on a number of arguments that have long been used by those seeking to cast doubt on accusations of sexual assault. For example, before Ford had even had the opportunity to testify, the *Journal* called the accusations “too distant, too disputed and too late in the day” to be worth investigating. The implication was that if survivors wait “too long” to report, their accusations do not count. They called into question Ford’s memories, her motivations for coming forward, and her desire to remain anonymous. *The Journal* did not acknowledge, as the *Times* did, that the difficulty of coming forward leads many women to wait years before doing so. They further attempted to cast doubt on Ford’s accusations by noting that there were no other accusers, stating that “every #MeToo miscreant is a repeat offender.” Yet, when another woman did come forward, that logic was quickly forgotten: Deborah Ramirez was categorized as part of a smear campaign “abetted if not orchestrated by Democrats.”

*The Journal*’s failure to provide even a semblance of objectivity became still clearer in its evaluation of Kavanaugh and Ford’s testimonies. *The Times* pointed out inconsistencies in both stories but highlighted the fact that Kavanaugh’s testimony was often misleading and that he sometimes lied about seemingly innocuous things to try to maintain his image as a “choir boy” in high school. Yet the *Times* consistently maintained that there must be a presumption of innocence and that the hearings were a job interview, not a court of law. Conversely, the *Journal*’s editorial board all but exonerated Kavanaugh before he had even testified and never once allowed for the possibility that Kavanaugh may have assaulted any of his accusers.

Indeed, Kavanaugh’s rage and disrespectful behavior during his testimony only solidified the *Journal*’s support. The editorial board called his testimony “as powerful and emotional as the moment demanded,” asserting that his anger was self-righteous and that all of us would have done the same. Despite the numerous college and high school associates who commented on Kavanaugh’s drinking and belligerent behavior, and despite the components of his yearbook that seemed to contradict his characterization of himself as a model teenager, the editors claimed there was no evidence he had ever behaved badly toward women. *The Times* acknowledged that Kavanaugh is
owed the presumption of innocence, but also insisted that his testimony demonstrated that he lacked the temperament and was too divisive to be a Supreme Court justice.

While the *Journal* knew better in the current political climate than to directly call Ford a liar, its characterization of her spoke volumes. They conceded that she was a sympathetic witness, but also used coded, sexist language in stating that she seemed “emotionally fragile.” They also patronizingly claimed to believe that Ford was sincere, but that her memories were just mixed up. In sum, the *Journal*’s editorial treatment of Ford’s accusations read like propaganda for the Republican Party, failing to serve the broader public.

Beyond the specific accusations, the fight over Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court did not happen in a vacuum. There were numerous cultural conversations happening concurrently with the nomination process, such as the #MeToo movement, as well as broader conversations about power, who has it, and who can be held accountable. Any honest assessment of the events would naturally need to incorporate those factors. Once again, the *Times* met that obligation far better than the *Journal*.

The *Times* pointed out the hypocrisy of Republican senators claiming they would take the accusations seriously and listen to Ford’s testimony, when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was simultaneously telling supporters they intended to “plow right through” to confirm Kavanaugh. The *Times* also pointed out the resurgence of the “boys will be boys” excuse so often used in response to allegations of sexual misconduct. Equally important, the *Times* devoted two of its editorials to reporting on the impact of the Kavanaugh hearings on women. One of the editorials, “Women are Watching,” came the day after Ford’s testimony, and noted how the Republican Party’s treatment of Ford connected with the experiences of many women who are afraid to come forward and report their abuse. The piece also noted that Ford’s testimony galvanized thousands of supporters to march in the streets, confront senators on Capitol Hill, and take to Twitter to tell their stories. At a time when Republicans cling to a message of “male victimhood” and worry that “good men” will be driven away from public service for fear of facing false accusations, the *Times* characterized the Kavanaugh hearings as just one compo-
nent of the antipathy the Trump administration has shown toward women, noting efforts to undermine women’s access to birth control and abortion and weaken protections for victims of sexual assault.

Rather than acknowledging the importance and legitimacy of the #MeToo movement, the Journal tried to paint it as a political cudgel being used by the Democrats to save a Supreme Court seat and take back the Senate. The editors didn’t bother to remind the public that Democrats had actually turned on one of their own, Senator Al Franken, when allegations of sexual assault were raised against him, ultimately leading to his resignation from the Senate. Almost none of the Journal’s editorials discussed the difficulties women (and men) face in reporting sexual assaults, especially those perpetrated by powerful men.

Corporate media outlets often focus on the political game between Democrats and Republicans, an approach that tends to leave little room for a deeper examination of societal factors such as misogyny, toxic masculinity, and prejudice against sexual assault survivors. Arguably, both outlets’ editorial boards could have made a greater effort to delve more deeply into those issues. However, analysis clearly shows that in this instance the Journal entirely failed to meet its obligation to the public, putting partisan agendas ahead of the need to help readers understand the broader significance of the Kavanaugh case. For a society that desperately needs to confront structures of entrenched patriarchal power, that failure represents a damaging case of News Abuse.

CONCLUSION

As the quote from Edward Said at the start of the chapter indicates, news coverage is never as simple as presenting “facts” that automatically “speak for themselves.” Instead, Said calls our attention to how the use of narratives, tropes, and other framing devices can profoundly shape the circulation, perception, and impact of information about the world. There is nothing inherently objectionable in the use of such devices; indeed, part of Said’s point is that whenever information is shared socially, some form of narrativization is almost inevitable. As our analysis indicates, however, establishment media’s
narrativization of events too often crosses the line into News Abuse. One reason for this problem lies in the nature of establishment media themselves and their role as gatekeepers of what is “socially acceptable” (to use Said’s phrase). Even as they seek to uncover new information, they can find themselves imprisoned by “established” narrative structures and ideological assumptions. These include the overly narrow structure of the two-party system as well as unspoken assumptions about US militarism and imperialism; the supposed “threats” facing the nation; the primacy of electoral politics over other forms of politics; and the relative value of some lives over others. Challenging the abusive nature of such coverage remains one of the most crucial tasks in the struggle for media freedom and the larger struggle for democracy itself.

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Notes


5. In the context of the US political spectrum, the term “centrists” is used here to refer to so-called “moderate” Democrats and traditional conservatives whose positions define the limits of “establishment” views.


18. Ibid.


40. Edmondson and Lee, “Meet the New Freshmen in Congress.”


44. Gaudiano, “New ‘Year of the Woman’?”


This timeline covers the period from the days leading up to the announcement of the first accusations to the week following Kavanaugh’s confirmation. It is worth noting that both the Washington Post and the New Yorker broke significant parts of the overall story surrounding this controversy.

The Washington Post’s results were similar to those of the New York Times.


Ibid.


