CHAPTER 4
Establishment Media’s War Metaphors Obscure Injustices and Block Global Healing
News Abuse in 2019–2020

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Last year the earth didn’t so much rotate on its axis, as it seemed to turn upside down. What sociologists once called “social unrest” broke out around the globe, from France to Lebanon and from Chile to Gaza, as people took to the streets in massive numbers demanding change, mostly against austerity measures driven by neoliberalism’s inability to meet the needs of citizens. In the face of impending ecological disaster, environmental activists demanded radical change, even as the United States ruthlessly attempted to hurl the country backward into extractive deregulation and to discharge global waste. Against this backdrop, two earth-shattering international scientific reports were released; one warned that the planet’s climate system would destabilize at record speed unless action to cut CO₂ concentrations was taken, while the second predicted that the world’s unabated loss of biodiversity would soon reach catastrophic proportions, with one million species likely to go extinct within decades.
In response, activists young and old redoubled their efforts with determination and a willingness to be arrested in large numbers. The international movement Extinction Rebellion, exuberantly costumed, burst onto the streets of London, shutting down parts of the city by blocking roads, trains, passageways, and bridges. While most US corporate media ignored their actions, news of these events managed to reach and inspire the US public through independent media.

As government forces responded to global citizen actions, US media used their own template to cover global protests and established the pattern for News Abuse that can be identified throughout the year’s reporting. “News Abuse” is a term coined nearly twenty years ago by former Project Censored director, sociologist Peter Phillips, who saw that it was important to understand how corporate media not only ignore crucial stories, but spin and frame news in ways that distract, distort, and sensationalize reporting. In addition, by employing interpretive frames, media serve to present familiar narratives that fit seamlessly into official, establishment positions that shape and alter the significance of global events. Phillips understood that without historical context, crucial perspectives, or meaningful follow-up reporting, corporate news produced a subtle yet sophisticated form of propaganda, and he called the practice “News Abuse.”

This past year, from the denial of global injustice and environmental collapse to the framing of the COVID-19 pandemic, war and its metaphors guided coverage, and can be consistently identified among prominent examples of News Abuse in 2019–2020. As the ethos, belligerencies, and protocols of war were celebrated, establishment
media took us further away from peace and global unity, and worked to obscure the visions and practices so necessary to heal the planet and its peoples.

**ENDLESS WAR**

As the second decade of the 21st century came to a close, endless war, launched by the George W. Bush administration in 2001 with the infamous “War on Terror,” seems now to suffuse the air we breathe. The military–media mergers of these decades have come to define a militarized culture and its economic priorities, as the United States spends more on defense than the next ten countries combined. The Trump administration currently carries out clandestine military maneuvers that actively destabilize the governments of Iran and Venezuela for the purposes of seizing geopolitical power and control of global resources. US militarism includes 800 foreign military bases paid for by the American people at a cost of $156 billion per year—as David Vine puts it, more bases “than any other people, nation, or empire in history”—in pursuit of a particular vision of American corporate–military domination.

In July 2019, Global Witness reported that Latin America continues to be one of the deadliest places for environmental defenders, where killings are often the result of US military policies in the hemisphere, especially in Guatemala. In addition, amidst continuing global belligerencies, journalists keep dying in numbers that attest to the ways that war and conflict lead to the loss of global press freedoms. In 2020, Reporters Without Borders ranked the US 45th on its World Press Freedom
When whistleblowers attempt to expose the US military’s criminal activities or the impact of its wars on journalism and the environment, as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange did by releasing the classified US military video known as “Collateral Murder,” they are often targeted for punishment even as the criminals they expose are not. The torture and prosecution on espionage charges of Assange, and the lack of media coverage of these injustices, stand as a stunning indictment of the treatment of journalists who struggle to reveal the truth of war.

As perpetual war threatens a world ever more on the brink, military actions around the globe are infrequently covered in the corporate media, and even more rarely, from a critical perspective. Yet war is a constant backdrop, a positive ethos habitually deployed to frame news coverage of all sorts, explicitly and implicitly, from global protests to the coronavirus pandemic. Corporate media outlets almost never present ongoing war in ways that expose its vicious consequences to the globe and its peoples. Burying the truth of war assigns to it the status of cultural myth, and encourages its use as a dominant metaphor that frames a wide variety of public concerns. So many social issues, from attempts to relieve poverty to ridding the country of drugs, are conceptualized as wars, framed as the cure-all, the single solution to the earth’s problems. The habitual use of war metaphors was a prominent theme of News Abuse for 2019–2020.

Journalists and scholars have long understood that the domestic consequences of a warring state have been historically devastating for freedom of the press. War spending also diverts federal budgets from caring for civilian populations, robbing them of social services, including
education, healthcare, and a living wage. Nowhere has that become more evident than in the United States, where, in addition to neoliberal policies, the resulting erosion of the middle class and increased misery nationwide also tell a sad story about how the largest economy ever to exist in the world has achieved so little to further human well-being, yet has succeeded in transferring great wealth to a small group of billionaires.

**AMERICANS HAVE HAD ENOUGH**

Currently, ruling elites hold power as a minority, and their goals and views are at odds with the needs and desires expressed by global publics, especially and increasingly in the United States. Even a brief glimpse at polling data reveals that the American people have had enough. In surveys documenting the views of citizens throughout the United States, the evidence is overwhelming across the political spectrum. From a wealth tax to minimum wage, Americans want change. A March 2019 CNBC All-America Economic Survey illustrates these desires: support for paid maternity leave stands at 84 percent in favor, 75 percent would like to see government funding for childcare, 60 percent agree that a higher minimum wage is past due, and free college tuition is supported by 57 percent of the public. Support for Medicare for All came in at 54 percent. As reported by The Hill, another recent survey conducted by American Barometer found that “70 percent [of the public] supported providing ‘Medicare for all,’ also known as single-payer health care.”

There is also broad public support for a wealth tax. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll published in January
2020, nearly two-thirds of respondents agree that the very rich should pay more than everyone else to support public programs.\(^6\) Seventy-seven percent of Democrats polled support such a tax, though so too do a majority—53 percent—of Republicans.\(^7\) In addition, vast majorities of Americans, whether self-identified as liberal or conservative, support key aspects of a Green New Deal.\(^8\)

Such popular policy demands for social services and environmental protections were articulated and promoted by presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, first throughout his 2016 run for the White House, then further amplified in his second campaign, and they were also picked up by other Democratic candidates, especially Elizabeth Warren. Though it was clear that Sanders’s ideas and policies helped set the 2020 campaign agenda and debates, by the time the flawed Wisconsin primary was carried out in April 2020 as COVID-19 was in full swing, what had begun as a seemingly unstoppable movement toward real change in American politics was all but abandoned when Bernie Sanders left the race.\(^9\)

It will come as no surprise to thinking people that something is terribly wrong with the way we’ve been doing things—when the demands of a clear majority of citizens are represented by neither presidential candidate from the two largest political parties and by none of the largest, most influential news outlets—and the question we must ask ourselves next is “How did it come to this?” The ideologies, values, practices, and policies of those who hold the power and wealth are not our own. The corporate media’s News Abuse functions to gloss over, deny, and in general make acceptable the disconnect between the public and the powerful by framing world events in ways
that obscure the causes and contexts that explain global realities and offer alternative visions.

**THE ROLE OF CORPORATE MEDIA**

Interrogating corporate media treatment of some of the most important issues of our time helps reveal the key role such media have played in promoting the broken policies perpetrated on the country by both major political parties for decades. For instance, how does media embed a preference for Wall Street and the extractive industries at the expense of social justice and the natural world? How does News Abuse serve to maintain the status quo, promote US belligerencies and global militarism, and economic policies that have led to such extremes of wealth and poverty? How does media discourse make acceptable the continued burning of fossil fuels in the face of planetary collapse? How does coverage of global protest hide the role of international banking institutions and the International Monetary Fund in forcing governments to shred the social safety nets of their citizenry? What biases, double standards, and decontextualized framing—all common News Abuse tactics—are applied to a myriad of news stories, from presidential candidates to global conflicts, environmental emergencies, pandemics, and so much more?

**Double Standards**

One of the most telling examples of double standards this year was on display during Democratic Party primary debates: when progressive candidates advocated for
Medicare for All, corporate media presenters pressured them to explain, in detail, how they intended to pay for it; yet when the US government passed a federal budget for 2020 that allocates just short of one trillion dollars to the military, journalists and pundits from those same media outlets reported it with little to no questioning, discussion, or public debate.20

What forces are behind the habitual obscuring of the meaning of policies and their predictable consequences, as news frames narrow public debate and refuse to place events and information within a truthful explanatory context? Reporting is so constrained that many viewers and readers never recognize the proverbial elephant hidden by the small news details of surface description. Ideas and events seem to happen in a void when news stories come from nowhere, the foundational ideologies of their framing are rarely exposed, and the bigger picture remains outside the frame. In such a corporate media environment, understanding the forces that shape our world becomes impossible. News has no history and the world spins by at a frenetic pace, the larger meanings of which are left to the fake news utterances of conspiracy theorists and politicians who lie.21

**Global Protests**

A study done by Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) of the press coverage of global protests in 2019 offers a striking illustration of the US corporate press’s News Abuse in covering global movements for social justice, peace, and environmental healing.22 Researcher Alan MacLeod evaluated the coverage of CNN broadcast
news and New York Times reporting, comparing coverage of demonstrations in Hong Kong, Ecuador, Haiti, and Chile, from March to November 2019. MacLeod found staggering disparities in how the demonstrations were reported. While Hong Kong protests were the subject of 737 stories, the protests in Ecuador were covered in 12 stories, the long run of demonstrations in Haiti garnered 28 stories, and the one million Chilean citizens who went into the streets made it into those two paragons of US corporate media a grand total of 36 times. In addition, many of the stories besides those mentioning Hong Kong were simply headlined within news briefs of global protest. Both the Times and CNN had similar ratios of coverage.

MacLeod attributes the prominence of Hong Kong’s protesters in US media to the targeting of China, an official enemy of the United States—“hence the extent and favorability of the coverage.” In Hong Kong, protests flared in response to a proposed extradition treaty between the island city, the Chinese central government, and Taiwan. Residents feared the treaty would be used by Beijing to arrest and persecute critics of the Chinese state. US corporate media assigned the coveted moniker “pro-democracy” to characterize Hong Kong protesters, while the Chilean demonstrations were commonly referred to as riots, and the New York Times reported that protests had descended into “looting and arson.” Unlike in Hong Kong, where police did not kill demonstrators for disrupting commerce, in Chile 27 people were killed during protests and a national strike. Column inches were devoted to such vague abstractions as “The mayhem in Chile is the latest spasm of unrest in a region that has
been awash in political crises this year,” as well as descrip-
tions of violence “on both sides,” with police use of force
always following “violence” by protesters.\textsuperscript{16} No mention
was made of human rights violations. In contrast, an Al
Jazeera report titled “Chile Protest: What Prompted the
Unrest?,” with the subtitle “At least 20 people have been
killed in protests over inequality in the worst unrest to hit
the country in decades,” offered straightforward, factual
information, explaining why people were in the streets
and the consequences they’ve suffered.\textsuperscript{27} Initially the rising
cost of public transportation sparked student-lead demon-
strations against fare hikes, but Chileans also protested
“the increasing cost of living, low wages and pensions, a
lack of education rights, a poor public health system and
crippling inequality.” Also included in Al Jazeera’s report
was information on UN investigators sent to Chile in
response to the UN High Commissioner for Human
Rights calling for “an independent investigation into the
deaths and ‘disturbing allegations’ of excessive force used
on protesters.”\textsuperscript{28}

To its credit, though very late in the news cycle, by
November 1, 2019, the \textit{New York Times} broke with its
blurry “news reporting” and published an opinion piece by
a poet and essayist, Daniel Borzutzky, who pointed out
that Chile’s Constitution, “written in 1980 during Pino-
chet’s rule, created the legal basis for a market-driven
economic model that has privatized pensions, health and
education.”\textsuperscript{29} As he pointed out, “The Chilean dictator-
ship destroyed collective bargaining rights; decimated
the public education system; and handed over social
security programs, health care, utilities and public ser-
vice to private enterprises.” Chile’s history of militarism,
and attacks on Indigenous peoples fighting deforestation by the logging industry—crucial historical context from the still-recent past—were rarely included in any US reporting of the protests. Even as the country had become the most unequal in the region over the previous decades, with the most profound socio-economic inequalities, Chile’s economic growth was being touted by international banking and extractive industries; yet none of this background information necessary to understanding the reasons and goals driving the protests was discussed in the US corporate media.

The popular protests in Ecuador and Haiti mirrored those of Chile, though as MacLeod pointed out, “the severity of the repression meted out by security services” was often greater in those countries. Yet the vast majority of establishment news coverage offered no outrage, tacitly condoning the killings and human rights abuses and instead focusing on Hong Kong.

Driven by US geopolitical strategies, corporate media followed a news frame defined by US anti-China policies. Ultimately, that coverage served to reinforce the military strategies of the United States by underscoring the demonization of the Chinese government as a US enemy target. In addition, by masking the reasons for people going into the streets in other countries, as their lives have become more precarious and their livelihoods have shrunk, media coverage obviates empathy with protesters mischaracterized as “violent.” Viewers watching “riots” presented without explanation fail to recognize mutual struggles and common circumstances. Painting a broader picture of the global economy and its effects on the impoverishment of global communities and regions would encourage
mutual aid and solidarity, as well as heightened understanding between global citizens. Of course, that would also make it much more difficult to present the outside world as a scary foreign “Other,” and therefore would belie the sentiments that feed the xenophobic scapegoating and warmongering that accounts for most US foreign policy.

HEALTHCARE AND THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY CAMPAIGNS

At no time has the need for universal healthcare in the United States been more strikingly evident than in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ironically, the crisis hit the country just prior to Bernie Sanders dropping his bid for the presidency, so the United States lost the strongest progressive voice it had fighting for the American people on the national political stage at exactly the time when that voice was most needed. In less than two months the US death toll had reached 60,000, accounting for one-third of COVID-19 deaths globally.33

Medicare for All: Media Follow Industry Talking Points

For insight into how the world’s richest country so completely failed to protect its citizens that a large portion of the population was left without access to affordable healthcare in the midst of one of the largest pandemics in its history, consider the way corporate media presented policies designed to protect the well-being of its citizens in the lead-up to the crisis.

Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have been leading
the Medicare for All (M4All) movement within the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. As the popularity of a government-funded single-payer plan snowballed, insurance companies understood they would soon be out of business, and they stepped up their attacks against it.34 Billionaire Michael Bloomberg and Wall Street–backed Joe Biden tried to put the brakes on M4All with alternative, tepid proposals, yet the diversions did little to slow the growing calls for M4All.35 So big insurance set its sights on designing stronger, more effective messaging that would muddy the debate and instill doubt in the public mind. They erroneously claimed M4All would result in “death panels.” Of course, private, for-profit insurance companies have already been making decisions about how to ration care—often with life-or-death consequences—for some time. Such decisions have ultimately been driven by the logic of the bottom line, a cost–benefit analysis guided by the insurance industry’s need to produce profits.

But it was the words of Mayor Pete that started to make a difference. Buttigieg, a former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and at the time a Democratic candidate for president, followed what one former health insurance executive recognized as corporate messaging, using “health insurance industry talking points against more progressive health care policy.”36 Buttigieg, the candidate with the second-largest contributions from pharmaceutical and health insurance companies after Biden, claimed he supported “Medicare for All Who Want It,” saying he was all for adding “choice.”37 But his plan was designed to preserve private insurance. Helaine Olen also warned that Buttigieg was using health industry talking points when he claimed that thousands of jobs would be lost in
changing to a M4All healthcare system. That is, of course, a nonsensical assertion because a workforce will have to administer any program that replaces the current state of the industry. Olen went on to charge Buttigieg with “cherry-picking facts” to make the industry’s case: “He’s pitting the needs of those who, in many cases, benefit from making the health-care system more difficult to navigate against the moral imperative of making it better for everyone.”

Despite the public’s overwhelming support for M4All in the face of the for-profit healthcare industry’s weak excuses for perpetuating itself, NPR’s Mara Liasson asserted that the vast majority of Bernie Sanders’s policies were unpopular with the American people, and that “[e]ven a majority of Democrats don’t want to end private health insurance.” Clearly the sentiments that guided that response were not those of the American people, but were invented by corporate message designers and repeated by establishment media.

**Media Treatment of the Bernie Sanders Campaign and Policies**

If it were possible to identify the single topic this past year most egregiously distorted by corporate media News Abuse, subjected to deliberately misinformed coverage written by biased reporters and presented without even a hint of meaningful context, that topic would undoubtedly be Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign. In fact, writing in Truthout, Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff identified a news blackout of Sanders’s campaign at the height of his popularity, and reported that “Sanders was covered three to
four times less than Joe Biden in 2019 despite being neck and neck in the polls.”

The Washington Post’s News Abuse was among the most blatant. As Julie Hollar points out, “there’s a clear antipathy at the paper to many of Sanders’ signature policy plans, like Medicare for All.” In March 2019, Michael Corcoran charged the Post with having taken a “hard-line stance against Medicare for All,” throwing back at the paper its charge that “hard-line liberal groups and unions” and “advocates on the far left” were promoting M4All. Corcoran writes,

Among the “hard-line liberal groups and unions” the article refers to in its headline and lead is the Consortium of Citizens with Disabilities, a coalition of approximately 100 national disability organizations. The “hard-line” groups include much of the grassroots movements for healthcare justice in the country: National Nurses United, Social Security Works and the Center for Popular Democracy. These orgs—described elsewhere in the piece as “advocates on the far left”—are devoted to such “hard-line” positions as universal healthcare, protecting senior citizens and empowering voters and activists.

As noted above, the majority of the American public want universal healthcare, which is enjoyed by citizens in many countries throughout the world. As Corcoran points out, “[W]hat the Post describes as ‘hard-line’ and ‘far left’ is actually a very popular position.”
The New York Times and MSNBC

The New York Times assigned Sydney Ember, a reporter whose résumé was limited to the finance industry, to cover Bernie Sanders. Ember was formerly an analyst for BlackRock, the biggest global investment management corporation and the largest investor in coal plant developers in the world. Though she’s credited as reporting news, not op-eds, in the more than two dozen pieces she penned she consistently depicted Sanders in a bad light. Ember went so far as to hide the conflicts of interest among corporate and political sources she relied on, which FAIR drew attention to when reviewing her biased reporting. As Katie Halper noted, Ember’s hire “makes sense, given the New York Times’ documented anti-Sanders bias, which can be found among both editors and reporters alike.”

MSNBC is another media outlet with a well-documented bias against Sanders, an outlet arguably highly influential in its appeal to liberal viewers and its popularity as the second-most-watched cable network. In These Times analyzed the network’s coverage of the Democratic Party’s leading candidates, Sen. Bernie Sanders, former vice president Joe Biden, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, focusing on the network’s six flagship primetime shows. The study found that over a two-month period, from August and September 2019, the programs “focused on Biden, often to the exclusion of Warren and Sanders.” Sanders received not only the least total coverage (less than one-third of Biden’s), but also the most negative. “As to the substance,” Branko Marcetic noted, “MSNBC’s reporting revolved around poll results and so-called electability.”
Corporate Democrats, the Media, and “Electability”

Though polls consistently showed that Bernie Sanders would beat Trump, corporate media and elite Democrats continued to claim he was unelectable. The day of the Iowa caucuses, NPR’s Mara Liasson asserted that Democrats were “paralyzed by indecision,” and that none of the candidates seemed like “a sure thing to defeat” Trump.48 Such handwringing was not founded in facts or survey data. An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll published the day before found that Trump was trailing the top four 2020 Democratic candidates in theoretical head-to-head matchups.49 Looking more broadly at polling, Bernie Sanders had by that date beaten Trump in 62 out of 67 such matchups.50 Nevertheless, Bernie Sanders’s supposed lack of “electability” solidified into a media obsession in mid-April of 2019, when Obama’s former campaign manager, Jim Messina, now a political strategist for corporate Democrats, announced on the Powerhouse Politics podcast that Sanders couldn’t beat Trump.51 After that the unelectability trope was adopted by pundits as a self-evident platitude. Vox was one of the few media outlets to point out a few days later that Sanders actually had a very good electability record, having “consistently run ahead of Democratic Party presidential campaigns in Vermont” when he ran for reelection as a US representative.52 But unelectable became the endless refrain for the purveyors of News Abuse, and that biased messaging pushed by centrist Democrats and corporate media had its effects. Nevertheless, as Bernie Sanders noted when he suspended his campaign, even in the states he didn’t win there was still strong majority support for Medicare for All.53
COVID-19

By April 2020, 26 million Americans had lost their jobs, with more to come. Many were left without health coverage or any way to pay their rent. At the same time, a vast amount of federal dollars were given to bail out US corporations, yet money for the American people has been woefully inadequate, compared especially to the amounts European governments have allocated to their citizens through direct payments, business loans, and expanded social services. As Jacobin put it, “Congress offers corporate America a massive and larcenous bailout” while “American workers facing looming layoffs are still waiting.” In addition, COVID-19 has exacerbated a national crisis of water insecurity, where an estimated fifteen million Americans do not have access to running water in their homes, mainly because they can’t afford to pay for it. Though ABC News covered the hardship of those struggling without water, missing from those stories are the reasons behind it. No mention was made of resource privatization, or the long, sordid history of Nestlé stealing water from California to Maine, and from myriad other countries throughout the world. That reporting was left to the UK newspaper The Guardian.

Yet even in the midst of a raging pandemic, record unemployment, and widespread lack of access to basic resources, the US addiction to military spending seems insatiable. Environmentalists Against War reported that the defense industry was using the pandemic as an excuse to twist more taxpayer money from Congress. By the end of April, Arkansas senator Tom Cotton—a recipient of tens of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions
from the arms industry—introduced a bill proposing at least $14 billion be given to weapons dealers, on top of the hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars already budgeted for the defense industry. So engrained is the military ethos in American culture, it must have seemed natural to pull from the cultural firmament the ever-popular metaphors of war and apply them to the pandemic.

Of Wars and Pandemics

Eric Levenson on CNN noticed that media was framing the battle against the virus as a war, and he claimed the metaphor “fit smoothly” in a number of ways. After all, it’s a front-line battle with an enemy that can strike at any time. CNN and others recast doctors and nurses as soldiers. In xenophobic language, Trump identified the enemy, decrying the “China Virus,” which he later described in more virulent terms as “Kung Flu.”

Drawing out the war analogy, the enemies in wars are always dehumanized, positioned on the other side of a wall between us and them. They are part of a vision of a world divided in conflict, a vision that runs completely contrary to the only effective way of dealing with a pandemic: that is, collectively, at the local and global levels. Trump as a “war president” uses violence in words and deeds, and still targets his declared enemies, sanctioning Iran and Venezuela and exacerbating the humanitarian crises in both countries. War separates the United States from the global community and is used to justify the failure of the United States to join international efforts to contain the pandemic. As the World Health Organization organized an international consortium called Solidarity to advance
global research as quickly as possible, the Trump administration announced plans to entirely cut its funding for the WHO.65

**Trump’s Messaging**

With hospitals swamped by COVID-19 patients, and health professionals struggling with inadequate personal protective equipment and other necessary supplies, the President of the United States refused to respond to the virus in any compassionate or rational way. As precious lives were lost and bodies filled temporary trailer morgues in New York, or were laid to rest in mass graves in the potter’s field on Hart Island, corporate media allowed an unhinged egomaniac to occupy television screens spewing nonsense, recommending that viewers inject disinfectant or irradiate their bodies with UV light, inrambling press conferences that should have been considered violations of health and safety laws.66

As COVID-19 swept the country, Trump, as well as Republicans in Congress, again called upon enemy demonization to deflect criticism from the US government’s botched response to the pandemic and the resultant escalating death toll. They called COVID-19 the “Wuhan virus” or the “Chinese virus,” and Trump used the free platform provided by the corporate media to blame Chinese leadership for the US outbreak, chiding the foreign leaders for “not telling him soon enough.”67 Throughout April 2020 right-wing messaging became more disciplined, offering a strong narrative with a clear storyline about who was to blame for the virus—China, and more generally people of Asian descent. Christian mega-church
leader Jack Hibbs, a Trump supporter, proclaimed, “I absolutely believe that this is biological warfare launched by China.” The Trump administration’s use of ‘strategic racism’ was amplified by right-wing propagandists, and, as Erin Heaney points out, “it has been effective in channeling the anxieties, insecurities and anger of millions of whites into blaming communities of color inside the U.S. and ‘foreigners’ for the troubles and hardships they face.”

The anti-China narrative has directed attention away from the failings of the Trump administration and the greed of corporations that supported Trump’s rise to power. Combined with a “Democratic Party strategy still heavily influenced by the losing politics of the Democratic Leadership Council, established to pull the party to the right” toward corporate priorities, Erin Heaney writes, the Republicans’ strategic racism presents “a perfect storm for covering up the problems created by capitalism and exacerbated” by Trump. The only way to counter this narrative is to engage in a fundamental critique of the US economy, distorted as it’s become under militarism and capitalist market domination—yet calls for real change as articulated by Bernie Sanders and other progressive presidential candidates were not tolerated by establishment media.

These factors—racist deflections, context-free reporting of catastrophes, deliberate obfuscation of the actual roots of societal problems, and the silencing of viable grassroots alternatives to a deadly status quo—all come together and reinforce one another in the regrettably potent implementation of News Abuse.
A Call to Arms

In Trump’s racialized rhetoric, we can see the connections between xenophobia as a diversion from failed policies, and the way violence, belligerencies, and conflict are celebrated. The mounting protests staged by white supremacists organizing against stay-at-home orders during the pandemic, like the dumbfounding and despicable spectacles of swastikas, rifles, Confederate flags, and signs that proclaimed “Make treason punishable by hanging” on display at the Michigan statehouse, were amplified by media coverage that offered little context and often included Trump’s incitement efforts. Trump spoke directly to armed groups when he tweeted “Liberate” to anti-lockdown protests in states with Democratic governors. Trump’s tweets signaled that the White House itself backed the rifle-carrying groups, and his administration’s support was immediately embraced with a surge in Twitter posts about the “boogaloo,” a term meaning armed insurrection to the conspiracy-theory-infused Far Right. The rallies were part of a coordinated campaign anchored by a number of state-based conservative policy groups and a coalition that received funding from the Koch Brothers organization and the DeVos family. Attorney General William Barr also threw in the support of the Justice Department, and from Fox News to talk radio, right-wing corporate media promoted the anti-lockdown protesters’ dangerous actions.

A “GROTESQUE SPECTACLE”

In the Irish Times, Fintan O’Toole gave voice to what many others around the world must have been thinking: “It is
one thing to be powerless in the face of a natural disaster, quite another to watch vast power being squandered in real time—willfully, malevolently, vindictively. It is one thing for governments to fail . . . quite another to watch a ruler and his supporters actively spread a deadly virus. Trump, his party and Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News became vectors of the pestilence.” He went on to remark upon Trump’s “grotesque spectacle” of “openly inciting people . . . to oppose the restrictions that save lives.” Trump’s daily briefings on the crisis, he noted, had been used “merely to sow confusion and division. They provide a recurring horror show in which all the neuroses that haunt the American subconscious dance naked on live TV.”

On April 28, 2020, after 58,000 coronavirus deaths and more than one million infections, a US corporate media outlet finally acknowledged what the rest of the world had been witnessing all along: Margaret Sullivan, in the pages of the Washington Post, wrote that “Trump has played the media like a puppet,” admitting that for nearly five years “the story has been Trump,” and the corporate media cover him “on the terms he dictates.” Outlets like the Post provide “far too much attention to the daily circus he provides.” It is certainly true that corporate media have normalized Trump, allowing him to distract and disgust—but far worse, they have enabled the harm he has caused, by ignoring the worst aspects of an emergent fascism that seeks to scapegoat people of color, and all those “Othered,” for the failures and neoliberal dismantling of the common good that US politicians continue to inflict.

In an opinion piece published in The Guardian, George Monbiot wrote an eloquent appeal to governments, enjoining them to resist throwing a lifeline to the big-
gest industrial polluters hemorrhaging money during the coronavirus pandemic:

Do Not Resuscitate. This tag should be attached to the oil, airline and car industries. Governments should provide financial support to company workers while refashioning the economy to provide new jobs in different sectors. They should prop up only those sectors that will help secure the survival of humanity and the rest of the living world.78

Few writers, and ever fewer publishers, offer such creative, linguistic bonds able to connect social justice strategies, economic restructuring, government actions, and environmental imperatives so nimbly and persuasively. His words demonstrate how easy it can be to reveal a larger picture and provide the scope needed for a new vision of a future world. They lay bare the distortions and obfuscation of the News Abuse so often propagated by corporate, so-called “mainstream” media reporting.

Corporate news media habitually marginalize or discredit popular movements that aim to promote peace, social justice, economic equality, or environmental sustainability. These narrow “mainstream” narratives foreclose meaningful public debate and offer no alternative visions for a society based on racial justice, economic equality, or global peace and security. Calling out and opposing News Abuse is thus an important and necessary step for nurturing the burgeoning social and environmental movements to halt planetary collapse and to create a more equitable society.
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Notes


majority-of-americans-favor-wealth-tax-on-very-rich-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBNiZ9j4t.
26. See Bonnefoy, “After Fare Hike Stirs Violent Unrest.” News coverage frequently depicts attacks by security forces on demonstrators in foreign lands as retaliatory. In narrative sequencing, force is applied only after protesters initiate it, yet most of the time snipers or police shoot first. This type of reporting is used to justify police repression and human rights violations when state security forces murder demonstrators. See Robin Andersen, *A Century of Media, A Century of War* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), Chapter 5: “Visions of Instability: Telling Stories on Television News.”


32. MacLeod, “With People in the Streets Worldwide.”


34. Indeed, in August 2018 a Reuters/Ipsos survey found that a stunning 85 percent of Democrats supported Medicare for All, and a majority of Republicans—a full 52 percent—were in favor of it as well. See Letitia Stein, Susan Cornwell, and Joseph Tanfani, “Inside the Progressive Movement Roiling the Democratic Party,” Reuters, August 23, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-progressives/.


44. For the long list of countries that provide their citizens with some form of free, or very inexpensive, care, see “Countries with Universal Healthcare 2020,” World Population Review, undated, https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-with-universal-healthcare/ [accessed May 31, 2020].
45. Corcoran, “WaPo’s ‘Hard-Line’ Stance.”
60. As the organization pointed out, this would add to its nearly one-trillion-dollar budget, which is “15 times [the] annual U.S. contributions to the World Health Organization and the budgets of the Centers for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health, combined.” Win Without War, “Billionaire Merchants of Death Want a Bailout,” Environmentalists Against War, May 2, 2020, http://www.envirosagainstwar.org/2020/05/02/action-alert-billionaire-merchants-of-death-want-a-bailout/.


68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.


75. Elbaum, “Trump and the Militias Consummate Their Marriage.”


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