When former Project Censored director Peter Phillips coined the term “News Abuse,” he sought to identify the numerous ways that media language, logics, framing, and sourcing serve to distort and obscure the accurate reporting of news that is necessary in a democratic society. False and misleading interpretations of current affairs, people, and groups leaves a democratic public in the dark. As citizens, we not only have a right to know, but an obligation to be informed. As the political Right promotes fiction over fact, it has become increasingly clear that accurate information is at the heart of a democratic society, and that lies and distortions are antithetical to the democratic process. This chapter seeks to shed light on the accuracy and validity of news and information in an age of “fake news” and a “post-truth” media environment.

News Abuse has become a key concept over the years because it encourages us to cast a critical eye toward what is presented as news, and to understand how news practices and conventions frequently blunt the forces of democracy and obstruct the fight for racial, gender,
and economic justice and struggles against oppression, inequality, and environmental collapse.

**THE YEAR IN NEWS**

Capping one of the most momentous years in recent American politics, the 2020 presidential election brought an end to the devastating four-year reign of Donald J. Trump, and it was followed by an angry backlash by right-wing rioters who stormed the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021. As news outlets broadcast images of pitched battles between Capitol police and rioters—benignly characterized as “Trump supporters”—forcing their way up the Capitol steps and into the congressional chambers, media commentators seemed to be as surprised as viewers by the TV footage. The country and the world watched for hours as the violence raged, and media tried to catch up with the story that was unfolding before their eyes. What became evident almost immediately was that rioters were stoked by a conspiracy-fueled rage of stolen-election rhetoric and racism, incited by Trump and other Republicans as they attempted to overturn the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

Another crisis, generations in the making, brought on by the structural racism that permeates the United States—especially within the ranks of law enforcement—had already hit the country on May 25, 2020, when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, with the complicity of three other cops, brutally murdered George Floyd while bystanders bore witness and documented the crime. The world was watching then too, as state-sanctioned killers took the life of yet another Black person in
America. Initial news reports across the media spectrum from ABC to PBS would rely on the vague, mystifying lexicon that has served to shield police from justice for decades, claiming Floyd “died in police custody.”

Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests erupted immediately as American citizens took to the streets in outrage, and further actions spread throughout the world. Comparing the law enforcement response to BLM protests with that of the white insurrectionists who rioted on January 6th, President-Elect Joe Biden gave voice to what had become obvious to many when he said, “No one can tell me that if it had been a group of Black Lives Matter protesting yesterday, they wouldn’t have been treated very, very differently from the mob of thugs that stormed the Capitol.” Biden added, “Don’t dare call them protesters.” Media coverage would also reveal a striking double standard in reporting on the two utterly disparate groups.

The 46th president of the United States, Joe Biden, was inaugurated in the middle of an economic, environmental, political, and public health crisis of unthinkable dimensions in a ceremony that took place primarily over media channels and platforms. In stark contrast to Trump’s fearful rhetoric of “American carnage” four years earlier, Biden’s message was generous and unifying, and his inauguration featured uplifting performances, including a young Black female poet named Amanda Gorman, who became the youngest inaugural poet in US history and a notable celebrity. Present at the inauguration, and photographed sitting alone with his arms crossed over his chest and wearing a simple cloth mask and colorful handmade mittens, Bernie Sanders quickly became a social media meme. Sanders’s perhaps skeptical or impatient look
sparked a nerve and seemed to remind the country that his presidential campaigns had given voice to a renewed political vision, one that looked back to the New Deal and policies that embraced a more just economy where inequality, oppression, and corporate domination would no longer define what America had become after decades of neoliberal policies. The new administration was put on notice that the power and strength of progressive forces within the Democratic Party could not be ignored, would not stand for continued social and economic injustice, and would demand action to prevent environmental collapse.

President Biden’s first one hundred days were a whirlwind of policy initiatives, diverse cabinet appointments, and executive orders, many of which overturned the anti-environmental, anti-labor, and anti-immigrant actions of the Trump era. Biden commemorated those who died from COVID-19, offered solace to a country reeling from the loss of half a million people in a pandemic made worse by Trump’s public information disaster, and changed the tenor of discourse from toxic to humane. In a somewhat surprising break from a good number of past policies of corporate Democrats, the new president’s more progressive agenda seemed to take establishment media by surprise.

Coverage of President Biden was mixed, but the primary focus used to cover the new administration was an inside-the-Beltway lexicon, a tired, constructed frame that calls for “bipartisanship,” which, as detailed below, undermines democracy and disavows the will of the American people. Even though such false balance, sometimes referred to as “both-sidesing,” wobbled under the weight of Republican obstructionism, media continued
to frame debates about policies as legitimate differences between two equally democratic political parties. As the GOP blocked every Democratic initiative, Republicans claimed they were being unfairly censored by “cancel culture,” a claim that was definitively belied in May 2021, when the party censured and purged its own conservative politicians, including Senator Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Representative Anthony Gonzalez of Ohio, for insufficient loyalty to Trump, as they had refused to go along with his Big Lie of election theft.

As the year wore on, media reporting would represent the fragmented world of politics with coverage that failed to make the connections necessary to understand the full extent and true dangers of the country’s political crises. Even more than usual, media relied on superficial reporting, often dominated by shocking visuals devoid of meaning and substance that presented the mere simulacrum of life on the ground.

Reviewing the book *A Brief History of Fascist Lies* by Federico Finchelstein, chair of the History Department at the New School for Social Research, Eric Black described being “troubled by certain similarities between Trump’s methods (including lying frequently while always claiming to be telling the truth) and those of Hitler and Mussolini.” Black also pointed out how relevant the book is “to the world we’re living in today.” Though Trump is no longer in office and has been “deplatformed” (removed from social media platforms), his lies continue to be upheld by the GOP. Indeed, a majority of Republicans still believe Trump’s 2020 election loss “resulted from illegal voting or election rigging.” News media, in not confronting those lies head-on and instead insisting upon
“both sides” narratives even in the midst of anti-democratic maneuvering, have played an outsized role in the growth and perpetuation of a truly dangerous politics.

MEDIA CAUGHT BY SURPRISE ON JANUARY 6TH

From the first images of rioters festooned in Trump gear, wielding Confederate flags, throwing aside metal barriers, clinging to the steep outer walls of the Capitol building, and storming up its steps to wreak havoc once inside, media were caught off guard as commentators scrambled for words to describe the perpetrators and the nature of the mayhem taking place. Throughout the long afternoon the language would evolve, but the innocuous-sounding terms “Trump supporters,” “demonstrators,” and “protesters” were being used for the rioters on many news programs even after the breach of the Capitol. This Trump creation was a beast that stubbornly remained out of focus, indefinable, and seemingly inexplicable.

From magazines to comedy shows, practically all media seemed to have a team on the ground or a compilation video. Indeed, the Daily Show’s Jordan Klepper walked with the mob to the Capitol building and was the first to call their actions “sedition.” The Nation’s Elie Mystal said the first word that sprang to mind while watching the insurrection was “Whiteness.”

Video footage revealed heated confrontations between Capitol police and rioters, as well as some officers standing aside, warmly greeting the trespassers, or even taking selfies with the crowd of mostly white men who seemed awestruck and confused about what they might do next
once they entered the majestic Capitol rotunda. Rioters wore various costumes; some donned MAGA hats or were draped in Trump flags, and others mingled with the notorious QAnon “shaman” who entered the media spotlight in face paint, with horns on his head, tattoos on his stomach, and fur on his legs. Men in paramilitary garb carried weapons, and some sprayed police with chemical irritants, beating and pushing officers down the steps.

Watching the documentation emerge was equivalent to experiencing media whiplash. Footage of rioters smashing through windows and doors was seen over and over, and cameras followed their frenzied hunt for congressional prey as they chanted “Where is Pence?” and “Hang Mike Pence.” Journalists were also under attack. Rioters made their intentions clear when they painted “Murder the media” on one of the building’s doors. Belligerent shouting rioters surrounded and threatened reporters and destroyed their equipment with glee. Photographs revealed a noose hanging ominously from the inaugural scaffolding, a reference to the violent racist history that forged so much of the background of the day.

From one hour to the next on January 6th, and for days to come, dozens of descriptors were used, tested, tried, and rejected. Were the people who stormed the Capitol insurrectionists, violent rioters, traitors, patriots, or just a mob? Did they commit sedition, an attempted coup, or a “political protest that got out of hand”? In a flourish of descriptive prose in the New York Review of Books, Mark Danner would narrate his impressions as he strode alongside rioters to the Capitol steps. Understanding that “Trumpism is driven by cruelty and domination even as its rhetoric claims grievance and victimization,” Danner rightly deemed the event a “stupid coup.”
Trump’s words before the riot calling for Mike Pence to overturn the election results and for the mob to stop “the steal” (that is, Congress’s confirmation of the verified results of a legitimate election) were later shown to have also been promoted by a number of other Republican leaders, from Ted Cruz to Jim Jordan, who had enthusiastically egged on extremists’ conspiracy theories for weeks. This mob had been incited by Trump as they pursued lawmakers, many of whom were forced to flee their chambers in terror. As police held back the rioters, congresspeople cowered under furniture and desperately called for help and their families. Capitol police were ultimately the last line of defense for the US Congress and Constitution against a raging horde of Trump fanatics.

By the time members of Congress came out of hiding to certify Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States, Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) identified the people who stormed the Capitol as “domestic terrorists,” words that the corporate media would quickly forget.¹⁴

**Media Miss the Story of the Decade**

When *Washington Post* editors Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert G. Kaiser wrote about American journalism in peril in 2002, they admitted that the press completely missed the Iran–Contra scandal, saying, “We didn’t get one of the biggest stories of the Reagan years until it was handed to us on a platter.”¹⁵ Certainly the same can be said for corporate media and the Capitol Insurrection of January 6th.

When investigations by government and the press into the forces that created the mob began, they quickly revealed the near-total lack of preparedness and secu-
rity at the Capitol (at times deliberate), and the failure of information leading up to the attack, even though the planning and threats of violence were readily available to government and journalists months earlier. As Wired magazine observed, researchers who study far-right movements had been “expecting—and warning—of the likelihood of violence around either the Electoral College vote or the upcoming inauguration since Biden’s victory, especially since Trump and right-wing media outlets have been stoking baseless conspiracy theories about election fraud for weeks.” Luke Mogelson’s long article in the New Yorker about the insurrection was subtitled “a chronicle of an attack foretold.” In it, Mogelson detailed the many warnings of what would unfold on January 6th, from Trump’s own words in statements and speeches in the weeks leading up to Biden’s confirmation, to a protest at the Pennsylvania state capitol in Harrisburg on Election Day where hundreds of heavily armed militia members vowed to revolt. Mogelson also noted that militant pro-Trump gangs like the Proud Boys—a national organization dedicated to “reinstating a spirit of Western chauvinism” in America—had been “openly gearing up for major violence.” In early January, on Parler, a social media website frequented by the Far Right, one of the leaders of the Proud Boys had warned that lawmakers “should be dragged out of office and hung.”

Before the election, Trump himself repeatedly announced that if he didn’t win, the election must be deemed fraudulent. In a gamble that the outcome might mirror the 2000 election results that brought George W. Bush to the White House, Trump made it clear to media that he would do everything in his power to attempt to
halt counting of mail-in ballots beyond Election Day. Right up to the moment before the Capitol was stormed, Trump was urging his supporters to “fight like hell, [or] you’re not going to have a country anymore.” In other words, there were many indications that Trump was rallying his forces to steal the election, and even inciting his mob to attempt a potentially violent coup d’état.

**Corporate Media Fail the American Public before and after the 2020 Election**

Though major news organizations reported on the dozens of lawsuits that Trump’s clownish legal team were crisscrossing the country to file—before and after Biden was elected—stories failed to connect the dots and show the bigger picture of the reasons for the flurry of litigation. For example, Business Insider reported on an “all-out legal war to stop the expansion of vote-by-mail,” detailing actions against New Jersey, Nevada, North Carolina, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Montana, states that were allowing voters to cast their ballot by mail more easily because of the pandemic. But after detailing the suits, the article simply ended, with no explanation for what it all meant, why such legal maneuvering was being done, and what the consequences might be for the election—and democracy. Connections between Trump’s “legal war” and voter suppression strategies were not made.

In threats issued two days before the election, Trump told reporters in Charlotte, North Carolina, “We’re going to go in the night of, as soon as that election is over, we’re going in with our lawyers.” The Washington Post reported that the “president’s comments are among his most unam-
biguous yet . . .” Here the paper could have followed with “... of Trump’s ongoing efforts to steal the election.”

But instead, the sentence continued with passive legalistic wording, “... that he is embracing an aggressive legal strategy in an election that has already been beset with a multitude of lawsuits.”

Trump had been setting the stage to steal the election for months, but as Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) pointed out, “it appears to be taboo for journalists at the biggest newsrooms in the country to straightforwardly report the fact that Trump is trying to do so.”

FAIR even conducted a Nexis search for “Trump” + “election” + “steal” of most of the biggest newspapers in the country from July 7 to September 7. Out of all election-themed coverage, there wasn’t a single article reporting that Trump was trying to steal the 2020 election.

Yet a robust discussion—and reporting critical of media silence on the issue—was taking place on independent and alternative media outlets. As early as June in the New Yorker, Bill McKibben noted that Trump seemed to be gearing up for “a coup,” pointing out that his “constant shout-outs to ‘the Second Amendment people’” was nothing less than a “clarion call” for violent disruption. The Nation presented Democrats with a three-point strategy of what they must do should Trump try to stage a coup. And writing in the Intercept, Frances Fox Piven and Deepak Bhargava offered grassroots activism as their answer to the question posed in the headline, “What If Trump Won’t Leave?”

OPENING THE FRAME

While corporate outlets caught up with a reality they had refused to acknowledge for months, some alternative and historical explanations began to enter public discourse, a phenomenon recognizable to media scholars. When predominant narratives fail to explain a sudden crisis or surprising event, the boundaries that contain standardized reporting break down and an opening for a broader range of information and perspectives can develop. Frequently such information has been pushed to the margins, but as it is made more central to public debate the dynamics of history become visible, if only briefly, as media scramble to impose another framework for coverage.

The Turner Diaries

The day after the storming of the Capitol, the New York Times published a piece by journalist Seyward Darby titled “The Far Right Told Us What It Planned. We Didn’t Listen.” In the piece, Darby connected the language and iconography of the rioters to the long-standing narratives of white supremacists. She noted similarities between the Capitol riot and The Turner Diaries, a racist dystopian novel written by a white supremacist in 1978. A noose, like the one seen hanging over the inaugural scaffolding on January 6th, unmistakably recalls the history of white vigilantes lynching Black people. As Darby explained, the gallows erected in front of the Capitol also alluded to an event in The Turner Diaries known as the “day of the rope,” when the terrorists lynch their enemies: ‘the lawyers, the businessmen, the TV newscasters, the
newspaper reporters and editors, the judges, the teachers, the school officials, the “civic leaders,” the bureaucrats, the preachers.’ And, yes, ‘the politicians.”’ Hannah Gais, a senior researcher for the Southern Poverty Law Center, agreed with Darby’s assessment, adding on Twitter that some among the more than 5,000 viewers on a livestream of the siege proclaimed “hang all the congressmen” and “give them the rope.”

Darby also asserted that the press was complicit in hiding the depth of the white supremacist violence that had become increasingly common in Trump’s America by perpetuating the narrative of the “lone wolf,” the myth that growing right-wing violence is a matter of “isolated incidents” perpetrated by disturbed individuals, disconnected from any larger pattern of organized racist violence.

Other critical perspectives likewise found their way into the public sphere: for example, an essay by Eric Foner on the history of American racism appeared in The Nation two days after the riot, and racist violence was a central theme in some reporting. Other reports helpfully referred to an On the Media podcast by WNYC Studios that explained the roots of the QAnon conspiracy and the iconography that appeared so frequently in images from January 6th.

QAnon Rooted in American Gnosticism and the Anti-Semitic Blood Libel

In an interview with On the Media host Bob Garfield, Jeff Sharlet, professor of English at Dartmouth College, said of QAnon, “You’ve heard this song before.” As Sharlet explained, the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon is rooted
in American Gnosticism and the basic premise that experts and institutions always hide the truth. Followers of QAnon believe that what we see before us is not real, a logic that opens a deep rabbit hole of conspiracy theory that has been burrowing at the fringes of American culture for a long time. Present-day Trump conspiracy theorists frequently speak of people in the “dark shadows” in power, and they are certain that Trump will bring down forces shrouded in darkness and expose them to the light. In this narrative, only their leader knows the truth and independent facts disappear.

Conspiracy theories tend to have similar structures, and the brutal QAnon narrative that Democrats are kidnapping children and cannibalizing them is little more than a makeover of the old anti-Semitic conspiracy theory of the Blood Libel. The Gnostic mindset that divides the world into purely good and evil forces and that insists the truth can’t be trusted has actually been “uniting very disparate followers in belief about something sinister.”\(^{36}\) The idea that the election was stolen and that believers must Stop the Steal of course had no basis in fact, but that didn’t matter to Trump’s base as they fought to bring the latest “hidden truth” into the light.

The QAnon conspiracy theory and its iconography underlie a variety of phrases used on January 6th as well as the slogan popular among the rioters, “Dark to Light!”\(^{37}\) The conspiracists’ twisted logic also explains their intransigence, preventing even visual evidence from challenging beliefs that they hold as uncontested truths. In early April 2021 a Reuters/Ipsos poll demonstrated the power and scope of these conspiracy theories, finding that about half of Republicans believe the siege was largely a nonviolent “protest,” or was the handiwork of left-wing activists.\(^{38}\)
So the various elements that came together as the January 6th mob amounted to a toxic mix of delusional extremists that Trump gave voice to and helped unify into a violent movement. The symbolism and iconography of the costumes, secret hand signals, QAnon references, and Confederate flags of white supremacist and anti-government militias united far-right fringe believers together with anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, and racist members of law enforcement and the military. In the absence of a sufficiently critical media, Trumpists believing in a bizarre mélange of lies seized the moment to attempt to violently overthrow American democracy.

The best way to counter conspiracy is to expose the logic of its meanings and its purpose, and then proceed to counter the lies it tells. Yet corporate media have consistently failed to expose Trumpism for what it is, and thus have been complicit in its rise.

As Trump Sets News Agenda, Media Ignore QAnon Conspiracy Codes

Trump regularly used right-wing racist, ethno-nationalist, and anti-immigrant codes and narratives, a strategy that media failed to notice even though it accounted for much of his electoral success in 2016. From the moment Trump began his bid for the presidency, the phrase “false claims” proved to be entirely inadequate for countering Trumpian disinformation. Throughout his 2020 presidential campaign, no less than in 2016, Trump regularly spoke in conspiracy codes, a language that should have been easy for journalists to identify and call out, yet corporate media rarely did.
For instance, in an interview on Fox News with Laura Ingraham, Trump alluded to QAnon logic by saying “people that are in the dark shadows” are “controlling the streets.” From what he had just been discussing, he was apparently referring to BLM protests. When host Laura Ingraham pointed out that it “sounds like conspiracy theory,” Trump doubled down, launching into a tale of a mysterious plane that allegedly flew from an unnamed city to Washington loaded with “thugs wearing these dark uniforms, black uniforms, with gear.” Trump was likely referring to the “anarchists, paid by outsiders” in Portland, Oregon, from a point he made earlier in the interview. To QAnon followers, his vague words represented coded, secret messages about the hidden liberal forces that Trumpists must prevent from manipulating reality and causing violence. In reporting on the interview, the Washington Post said only that Trump’s comments were met with “bafflement” or “head-scratching” from critics.

Beyond failing to call out Trump’s conspiracy coding, the press allowed him to establish its framing of left-wing protesters, and specifically the Black Lives Matter movement, as violent lawbreakers. That assertion was headlined in corporate media and became the dominant theme for reporting on what was, in fact, the largest people’s movement in the history of the country.

**CORPORATE MEDIA PORTRAY BLM PROTESTORS AS VIOLENT LAWBREAKERS**

Throughout the summer of 2020, media asserted in lock-step that BLM protesters were violent looters causing chaos across America’s cities, a message the GOP—the
“party of law and order”—also promoted. Writing for FAIR, Joshua Cho wrote that “throughout the ongoing protests this year, corporate media seemed to take every opportunity to vilify the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement by spinning the protesters—rather than the racist and authoritarian US regime they are protesting against—as the primary instigators of violence.” Headline after headline in corporate media demonstrated bias against the protesters.

On June 1, 2020, an NBC News headline read “Some George Floyd Protests Turn Violent in Several West Coast Cities.” The story claimed, “From Colorado to California, nearly every protest started peacefully before some people provoked confrontation.” The next day the Wall Street Journal published an article titled “Protests Sparked by George Floyd Death Descend into Violence Despite Curfews.” ABC News cited law enforcement reports, saying, “Police Declare Riots as Protests Turn Violent in Cities Nationwide; 1 Demonstrator Dead in Austin.”

Many headlines characterized protesting as an excuse for stealing and looting. One Washington Post headline used a euphemism for police violence while accusing protesters of criminal behavior: “Looters Smash Business Windows along Chicago’s Magnificent Mile after Police-Involved Shooting.”

“Police are Rioting across the Nation”

Police violence was evident on the ground, and the reporting of BLM protests by media free from corporate control was strikingly different from corporate sources and far more accurate. Alternative news reported on the police
riots, detailing how law enforcement routinely initiated violence. For example, as Common Dreams reported just beneath one article’s headline, “Police are rioting across the nation.” On June 6, 2020, the Intercept offered ideological analysis and historical perspective on the protests, writing, “Police Attacks on Protesters are Rooted in a Violent Ideology of Reactionary Grievance.” As the Intercept noted, peaceful protesters stood bravely against “a lawless police culture” of state-sanctioned violence. Amnesty International identified human rights violations faced by protesters. The organization released a report on June 5, 2020, documenting many acts of brutality perpetrated by law enforcement against BLM protesters. The study recorded 125 separate incidents of attacks against demonstrators, medics, journalists, and legal observers in forty states and Washington, DC, and told the stories of more than fifty people who were victims of the police’s violence and use of excessive force.

“It’s Difficult to Tell . . . Who Started What”

In many cases, US corporate media covered violent right-wing counter-demonstrations to BLM protests using the false-balance frame. Coverage of a rally in Texas for Hank Gilbert, the Democratic challenger to Rep. Louie Gohmert, offers a good example. Armed counter-protesters carrying Confederate and Thin Blue Line flags—many toting military-style firearms—crashed the event, beating and robbing attendees and injuring several. Though video documentation clearly showed who instigated the attack, local news coverage portrayed it as a clash as opposed to the targeted political violence that it was.
The Tyler Morning Telegraph featured the far-right Republican Louie Gohmert claiming, “It is difficult to tell, from what I understand today, who started what.” Deploying a narrative of “both sides” to justify the political violence of one side ignores facts and uses neutered language to obscure the actual perpetrators of the violence. As FAIR pointed out, “Armed supporters of a far-right politician holding Confederate flags and attacking people in broad daylight in front of police, in a place like East Texas with a history of white supremacist violence, is an important event with national implications about the growing boldness and militancy of the far right.”

By August the New York Times, among other news outlets, employed a somewhat novel approach, worrying about the effect of BLM “violence” on swing-state voters. This reporting accepted without qualms that violence was perpetrated by BLM protesters, effectively reversing reality. Preemptively blaming Trump’s reelection on BLM also ignores how Trump’s election-theft efforts included stoking violence by white supremacists on his behalf. As FAIR documented, corporate media ignored and minimized right-wing extremist violence, even though, as
early as October 22, 2020, the *Guardian* reported that white supremacists were behind most US domestic terror attacks in 2020.55

Corporate media coverage left the misleading impression that the BLM uprisings spawned a massive wave of violence and property damage, yet a Princeton University/US Crisis Monitor study found that, as of September 3, 2020, 93 percent of all racial justice protests during the summer were peaceful and non-destructive.56 More damning still were the conclusions drawn in a series of reports evaluating the police response to the summer protests. The reports, prepared by outside investigators, watchdogs, consultants, city-hired risk-management companies, and even several police departments, were compiled and reviewed by the *New York Times*, and, to the newspaper’s credit (despite coming nearly nine months after the protests), it detailed the study’s findings, noting the “widespread failure in policing” evident in the “startling display of violence and disarray” that law enforcement agencies were responsible for throughout the country.57 Reviewers found that “officers behaved aggressively, wearing riot gear and spraying tear gas or ‘less-lethal’ projectiles in indiscriminate ways, appearing to target peaceful demonstrators and displaying little effort to de-escalate tensions,” the *Times* reported. In many cities, the actions of officers made matters considerably worse.

**Racist Violence on the Rise**

With the exception of a long, well-researched piece in Vox, which detailed the ideology of American policing and how it justifies racist violence, corporate media failed throughout the summer of 2020 to paint a clear picture
of the systematic, structural nature of police violence and killings, or its connections to white supremacy, the military, and capitalism. These connections would only become apparent after investigations of the Capitol riots drew them out and establishment media then followed the story. In April 2021, Daily Kos, along with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, reported on a study that traced the 377 violent rioters arrested at the Capitol and found that they were not motivated by election theft or the economy, but instead by “deep-seated resentments having nothing to do with democracy but rather with preserving and maintaining white power in this country.”

When the study’s author, Robert A. Pape, warned that political violence would not go away without “additional information and a strategic approach,” he spoke directly to the need for vigorous and truthful reporting on white supremacist and police violence.

**Derek Chauvin Found Guilty on All Counts**

The guilty verdict handed down to Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd came about because Floyd was killed in front of dozens of witnesses who will have to live with the trauma of what they saw and filmed that day for the rest of their lives. Their documentation and testimony proved Chauvin’s guilt beyond doubt. After the verdict was announced, CNN examined the language police initially used to describe Floyd’s death in a story that decoded the official Minneapolis Police Department’s press release, which stated “Man Dies after Medical Incident during Police Interaction.” Above a video clip from the trial, CNN compared witness testimony to the
police language, with the heading “How Police Language Obscured the Truth.” Still, no mention was made of language media used or the years of corporate reporting that parroted police reports. Instead, the many linguistic conventions that media employed for decades to obscure the truth of police killings remained unexamined.

Close to three months after Floyd was killed, *New York* magazine’s website The Cut still used “died in police custody” as a descriptor of the event, but then proceeded to use more explicit language: “following a brutal police assault that was captured in a bystander video.” Here the magazine could have acknowledged what media studies scholars have long understood: namely, that citizens’ use of cell-phone video to capture police brutality and the killing of Black people, alongside the unprecedented attention focused upon police violence by BLM organizing and protesting, created a historic anti-racist movement that ensured a murderous officer would finally be held accountable. Without such documentation and BLM protests, Derek Chauvin would most certainly have gotten away with murder—yet those same protests that have shaped contemporary American politics and shifted the way police killings can be reported were not only ignored by corporate media, they were also actively slandered, disparaged, and certainly “news abused.”

**GOP Election Denialism and Domestic Terrorism down the Memory Hole**

As Republicans once again refused to impeach Donald Trump—this time by ignoring his incitement of the Capitol riot while holding tight to the “Big Lie” of a stolen
media reporting of party politics remained virtually unchanged. During Biden’s first one hundred days, what should have been reported as a struggle for democracy against authoritarianism, for economic justice against extreme inequality, and for diversity over white supremacy or even fascism, was couched instead as a period sorely in need of bipartisanship, with demands that Biden and Democrats negotiate with Republicans as the most important political mandate. This frame has consistently allowed Republicans to block policies popular with the American public.

Indeed, many Sunday morning shows continue to showcase Republicans who voted to overturn the election results. Washington Post columnist Margaret Sullivan argued that “Big Journalism” has shoved “the undemocratic efforts by some Republican elected officials to delegitimize or overturn the 2020 presidential election” down the memory hole. Republican members of Congress such as Kevin McCarthy, Ted Cruz, and Ron Johnson appear without a word to viewers about how they “encouraged the Trumpian lies about election fraud that led to the violent assault on the U.S. Capitol”—and Sullivan’s article was published less than four months after the coup attempt, since which time the corporate media’s recuperation of these figures, as well as the memory hole necessary for their recuperation, have only grown. Princeton University history professor Kevin Kruse told Sullivan, “There’s a kind of clubby atmosphere on these shows, part of the Beltway Bubble mentality, in which it’s become almost impolite to raise the topic of the insurrection.”

Sullivan applauded CNN’s show State of the Union, which she cited as declining to provide a venue for the “Sedition Caucus,” the 147 Republicans who, even after the
January 6th riots, voted to overturn the election results. But she saved her highest praise for one all-news public radio station in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, WITF, where journalists decided not to let Republicans forget their “damaging lies.” In light of an “unprecedented assault on the fabric of American democracy,” the newsroom regularly reminds listeners that some state legislators urged Congress to vote against certifying the Pennsylvania election results, and that members of Congress had voted against certifying the state’s election results for President Biden. Tim Lambert, WITF’s news director, told Sullivan that months before the election, “We could see the disinformation really taking hold, this idea that the only way President Trump could lose is if the election were rigged.”

In a series of tweets dated May 16, 2021, Matt Negrin, a producer at the Daily Show, chided ABC’s preference for Republican sources, saying, “ABC has been pushing the Big Lie for months, giving their platform to Steve Scalise, Rand Paul and other Republicans . . . every week.” Negrin continued, “This is exactly what a coordinated misinformation campaign looks like and it’s happening

Democracy deserves better journalism that is capable of making contextual connections between inequality and insecurity, local and global issues, health and the environment, and race and violence.
on a legitimate news outlet.” In response to Negrin, Aaron Rupar also called out ABC for traveling “to Wyoming to interview random Trump supporters. One was given airtime to push a wild conspiracy theory about the 2020 election without any pushback.” Negrin went on to argue that ABC “is not just being complicit. They are making conscious choices to air misinformation deliberately.” By presenting election conspiracy theories with a veneer of legitimacy, ABC was “worse than Fox News,” Negrin tweeted, because the platform provided for anti-democratic politicians by ABC “looks like a real news show.”

**BOTH-SIDES FRAMING OF VOTER SUPPRESSION AND THE VOTING RIGHTS BILL**

Nowhere has the corporate media’s both-sides framing distorted the struggle for democracy more than in coverage of new voter suppression laws and the federal voting rights bill known as the For the People Act of 2021. Investigative reporter Jane Mayer, who specializes in how “dark money” sabotages the political process, published an incisive piece in the *New Yorker* on the Republican panic over the proposed election reforms contained in the For the People Act. The bill strengthens voting rights by creating automatic voter registration and expanding access to early and absentee voting. It would overhaul government ethics and campaign finance laws, and stem the flow of dark money from organizations that serve as vehicles for political donors such as the billionaire oil magnate Charles Koch.

On a conference call between dark-money groups and an aide to Mitch McConnell, Mayer reported, par-
participants conceded that the bill was so popular, among liberal and conservative voters alike, that it wasn’t worth trying to mount a public-advocacy campaign to shift opinion; indeed, polling data found overwhelming support for key provisions in the For the People Act. With the help of Data for Progress, Vox surveyed 1,138 likely voters nationally between April 16 and April 19, 2021, and found that more than “80 percent of respondents said they supported . . . limiting the influence of money in politics, and modernizing election infrastructure to increase election security.” Those provisions would help block restrictive state bills—on redistricting, closure of polling places, voter ID requirements, and other measures that tend to decrease voter turnout and the power of the vote—that disproportionally affect Black and low-income voters. As Mayer reported, instead of trying to change such strongly positive public opinion, “a senior Koch operative said that opponents would be better off ignoring the will of American voters and trying to kill the bill in Congress.”

That strategy was a perfect fit for the “both-sides” media frame employed ceaselessly on network television. Corporate media presented the story as a congressional battle, not as an example of anti-democratic Republican obstructionism against the will of the American public. One CBS headline read, “Senate Committee to Hold Markup on Controversial Voting Bill.” But why call a popular bill “controversial”? The popular voting bill is controversial only for dark-money donors who would prefer to restrict voting rights. CBS continued with a standardized back-and-forth, framing the controversy as a difference of opinion: “Democrats claim the bill is nec-
ecessary to counter new voting restrictions being considered by multiple states, while Republicans decry it as federal overreach.” Thus the struggle for democracy against the threats of authoritarianism and white supremacy are obscured and denied.

A look at the media coverage of one of the first voter suppression bills to grab national attention since the 2020 election also exemplifies this media framing. Julie Hollar’s critique in *Extra!*, titled “Both-Sidesing Georgia GOP’s Racist Suppression of Democracy,” offers examples of “perfect false balance.” For example, ABC News reported,

Democrats and voting rights advocates have blasted the bill as a voter-suppression tactic and legislative “power grab” in response to former President Donald Trump and GOP allies peddling false conspiracy theories. . . . But Republicans contend the bill increases accessibility and is meant to streamline elections, provide uniformity and address a lack of confidence in Georgia’s elections “on all sides of the political spectrum,” a notion Democrats dispute.

CBS followed suit, reporting, “Conservative groups hailed the legislation’s passage, while liberals voiced their concern.”

That style of reporting refuses to distinguish fact from fiction. There is simply no way that the Georgia voter suppression bill “increases accessibility.” If journalism is to provide information to a democratic public, the claim that the bill addresses “a lack of confidence” in elections
should also be exposed as a solution to a problem created by Republican conspiracy theories and lies that the election was stolen.

The false-balance frame used for Democrats and Republicans should no longer be considered actual journalism. It is simply a linguistic strategy that refuses to inform the public while blurring the line between information and wild, baseless assertion.

**CONCLUSION: NEWS ABUSE ALIVE AND WELL (AND DANGEROUS AS EVER)**

As we have seen, alternative media have remained far more likely to offer accurate reporting than their corporate peers; this fact makes the employment of draconian algorithms that have targeted alternative media, “de-ranking” them in search results or bouncing them from search engines entirely, ever more dangerous for American journalism and democracy. At the same time, the dependency corporate press rooms formed for Trump’s perpetual ratings-boosting, conspiracy-laced outrages, and the interest in all things Trump, made corporate media even less informative and more prone to “both-sidesing” than ever before. As Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff noted, corporate media that profited from Trump admitted to becoming dependent on lazy and reckless coverage of the 45th president, and it led to their failure to connect Trumpian rhetoric and his “cult of reality TV personality” to the bigger picture of “the decades-long, bipartisan embrace of neoliberalism,” and it fostered their incompetence in reporting how conspiracy lies accelerated racist violence and ultimately led to domestic terrorism. Because of this,
Big Journalism either missed the biggest stories of the decade or got them wrong in fundamental ways.

In the face of the ongoing rehabilitation of the Republican Party, establishment media often fail to reveal how American democracy remains at risk. Many states temporarily expanded mail and early voting in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the largest voter turnout in more than a century and a decisive win for Joe Biden. With less than 25 percent of voters now self-identifying as Republican, the GOP plan to maintain its grip on power is to push hundreds of voting restriction laws in 43 states in what critics say is the “most sweeping contraction of ballot access in the United States since the end of Reconstruction” and the beginning of Jim Crow.74 As Robert Reich points out, “The greatest danger to American democracy right now is not coming from Russia, China, or North Korea. It is coming from the Republican Party.”75

Today, with GOP-fueled right-wing domestic terrorism a major security threat, a militarized US foreign policy continues to drive a bloated Pentagon budget aimed at belligerencies outside of US borders, with barely a pittance aimed at cooperation with other nations to thwart a now near-certain climate catastrophe.76 Such spending is pushed through with bipartisan agreement and little debate in US newsrooms, despite millions of Americans being out of work and in need, devastated by a pandemic that has exposed extreme racial and economic inequalities throughout the world.

Democracy deserves better journalism that is capable of making contextual connections between inequality and insecurity, local and global issues, health and the environ-
ment, and race and violence. Global and local publics need a press willing to distinguish truth from lies, not media reporting that hides behind a tired Beltway frame incapable of illuminating policies to address fairness, peace, sustainability, and global well-being.

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**Notes**

4. Media scholars have long criticized media’s “both-sides” professional canon. The term “false balancing” was used by Michael Parenti in his introduction to *20 Years of Censored News*, eds. Carl Jensen and Project Censored (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), and in his article “Monopoly Media Manipulation,” posted on the Michael Parenti Political Archive, May 2001. The terms “both-sidesing” and “false balancing” are used interchangeably here.
7. “Majority of Republicans Still Believe the 2020 Election was Stolen from Donald Trump,” Ipsos, April 2, 2021.
11. See the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, which aggregated all documented instances in which members of the press were assaulted, arrested, or had their equipment damaged while covering the riot. The phrase “Murder the media” was documented by the New York Times: Tiffany Hsu and Katie Robertson, “Covering Pro-Trump Mobs, the News Media Became a Target,” January 6, 2021. See also Katherine Jacobsen and Lucy Westcott, “Three People Threatened to Shoot Me. Journalists Describe Covering Mob Violence at the US Capitol,” Committee to Protect Journalists, January 7, 2021.
18. Morgan Chalfant, “Trump: ‘The Only Way We’re Going to Lose This Election is If the Election is Rigged,’” The Hill, August 17, 2020.

26. The newspapers identified in FAIR’s research were the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Houston Chronicle, Chicago Tribune, Star Tribune, Los Angeles Times, and USA Today. They are among the largest newspapers in the country based on circulation.

27. Andersen, “Media Fail to Prepare Public.”


33. Hannah Gais (@hannahgais), Twitter post, January 6, 2021, 2:15 p.m.


35. See “Extended Version: The Ancient Heresy That Helps Us Understand QAnon,” On the Media, WNYC Studios, produced by Eloise Blondiau and hosted by Bob Garfield, November 23, 2020; Sharlet’s quote begins at 8 minutes 45 seconds. Sharlet also reported for Vanity Fair on Trump’s 2020 campaign.

36. Ibid., spoken by Bob Garfield at 20 minutes 55 seconds.


42. Civis Analytics, a data science firm, along with three other data research organizations, found that 15 to 26 million people had participated in protests during the weeks that followed George Floyd’s killing, a number


44. “Some George Floyd Protests Turn Violent in Several West Coast Cities,” *NBC News*, June 1, 2020.


59. “Dartagnan,” “Study Indicates the Jan. 6 Riots were Motivated by Racism and White Resentment, Not ‘Election Theft,’” *Daily Kos*, April 6, 2021. See also Alan Feuer, “Fears of White People Losing Out Permeate

60. Feuer, “Fears of White People.” Emphasis added.
64. Ibid. See also Karen Yourish, Larry Buchanan, and Denise Lu, “The 147 Republicans Who Voted to Overturn Election Results,” New York Times, January 7, 2021.
68. Andrew Prokop, “Republicans Feared Democrats’ Voting Protections Bill Polls Well. A New Poll Says They’re Right,” Vox, May 3, 2021. Furthermore, Vox reported, “More than 60 percent of respondents supported requiring nonpartisan redistricting commissions, a 15-day early voting period for all federal elections, same-day registration for all eligible voters, automatic voter registration for all eligible voters, and giving every voter the option to vote by mail.”