



By: Ferry Biedermann

Journalism after the Trump shooting



The shots fired at Donald Trump have not only **shocked** some politicians but also journalists and commentators into a bout of introspection. While self-examination is essential in journalism, the results have mostly been as depressing as the assassination attempt itself.

That's not very surprising. The non-right-wing media, along with the rest of the democratic centre, fail consistently in strategies to deal with and report on far-right populists, such as Trump and his ilk.

The assassination attempt both emphasises that failure and makes it harder again to find effective ways of coping with this conundrum.

In the immediate aftermath of Trump's shooting, and in response to accusations from the far-right, many commentators in centrist and progressive publications warned against the danger of being cowed into, even more, self-censorship.

Analyst and commentator David Rothkopf on the Daily Beast site **warned** that "Unity doesn't mean covering up the truth about Donald Trump".

And in the Guardian, Jan-Werner Müller, a **professor** of politics at Princeton, put the onus on "professional observers: pundits and journalists", not to "give in to blackmail based on the notion that criticizing politicians' authoritarian aspirations is equal to incitement to violence."

Yet, this appears to miss the point with regard to the situation in many western countries, including the US.

How to report on the far-right

While some parts of the media still grapple with how to report on the far-right, many pundits and journalists have by now long sounded the alarm over its authoritarian aspirations. Still, support for it keeps growing.

Journalists are not politicians or activists but

the defence of a free press is part and parcel of the overall safeguarding of democracy and open societies. As such, journalists can only have one response when these are under threat. The question, though, is how best to go about it.

Efforts by journalists and academics to come up with modes of writing and reporting on the extreme right, such as calling out its lies, dog-whistles and incitement, avoiding euphemisms and avoiding false equivalencies, may have had some effect, but clearly not enough.

How else can the press explain the enduring and even growing popularity of far-right leaders and movements, whether in the US, France, the UK, Germany, Italy or elsewhere? Are we still doing it wrong, the reporting, analysing etc., or are we just not that relevant to voters?

Despite the much-debated echo-chamber of social media, a range of journalism still reaches the eyes and ears of many people across the political spectrum

There is much ongoing lamentation about the decline of traditional news outlets, be they print, tv or radio. Indeed, Pew Research Centre data show that at least in the US, most people now prefer to get their news from news websites and apps.

Yet, the most popular among these still largely belong to mainstream and legacy news media. What's more, the picture is not very different for Republican- or Democrat-inclined voters.

So, despite the much-debated echo-chamber of social media, a range of journalism still reaches the eyes and ears of many people across the political spectrum.

True, among the top US news websites and apps there's also Fox and the New York Post, and that's probably the news intake of the more Republican-inclined part of the electorate. While the more Democrat-leaning section will tend to such outlets as the New

York Times and (still) CNN.

That leaves the centre, where for journalists, as for politicians, the real gains can be found, among the limited pool of floating voters who might still be open to arguments. More importantly, perhaps, the media can also play a role in mobilising voters.

French elections

In the recent French **elections**, we saw the effect of media narratives on the mobilisation of various blocs of voters, and also on how they voted.

Participation in the French parliament elections was the highest in four decades and a 'Republican Front' consisting of centrists and the left, was able to stop an almost foregone victory by the far-right.

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Beyond straightforward reporting on the calls for tactical voting from the Republican Front, many 'pundits and journalists' were quite clear about the danger of the far-right. This probably played a role both in mobilising the voters and the way they voted tactically.

Still, lest everybody regard this as a triumph: An unprecedented 37 percent of the French electorate voted for the far-right. In that respect, neither the politicians' pleas nor the media's efforts paid off.

The latter might even have been partly counterproductive, by making the far-right into the underdog and mobilising its base.

Playing the victim card

Playing the victim card is part of the far-right panoply of tactics. After the Trump shooting, figures such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Nigel Farage in the UK, along with Republicans such as senator Tim Scott in the US, blamed the incident among others on 'media incitement' against the former president.

Apart from it being the media's job to accurately report on anti-democratic, authoritarian, racist, incendiary, and other pronouncements by major political figures, such accusations from the right also amount to gaslighting.



Geert Wilders, now leader of the governing coalition in the Netherlands, once called journalists "scum". After he won the elections last year, the Dutch journalists' association warned that he was a "booster of hostility towards the press."

Trump and Wilders are widely known for their hostility to journalists, with the former president reaching such lows as making fun of a disabled reporter and last year saying that were he to be re-elected, the press "should pay a big price".

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Shoot-the-messenger anger

In the US as in the Netherlands, threats and violence against journalists are rife and much

of this, though not all, comes from the far-right. Think of the January 6 mob scrawling “murder the media”, on the doors of the US Capitol.

More recently, the International Women’s Media Foundation **said** that 37.7% of journalists covering the US elections in eight swing states had been threatened with physical violence.

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Beyond shoot-the-messenger anger, much of the more systematic demonisation of the media, by the far-right especially, must have a tactical motive: Someone still thinks that the media narrative matters.

And indeed, it does, although journalists themselves, as well as academics studying the media, seem to have a very poor understanding of how and why.

The far-right seems to be able to bend any situation to its advantage: Media criticism can be used to whip up its base, media acknowledgement can be used to gain legitimacy.

Journalists might have to admit that it’s the Trumps, the Wilderses, the Le Pens, the Farages etc. of this world who have the better insight into their own craft. That is what real media introspection should focus on.