

Orange Man Bad: Russiagate, the Rise of Boomer Journalism, Narrative and Pro-Social Lying

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"The descent to Hell is easy; the gate stands open day and night beckoning us in. But to climb back out, that is a much harder task."

Virgil, Aeneid Book 6.

From Victorian Liberal Journalism to Boomer Journalism.

Russiagate was a significant moment in the history of journalism. It made a process of evolutionary change clear and visible. The transformation was fundamentally epistemic; from Victorian Liberal Journalism – which prioritized the search for truth, to a more modern formula – which recognized and prioritized journalism's ethical-political responsibilities. To see the change, it is helpful to briefly consider how Victorian Liberal journalists understood their profession. For example, the famous American journalist Walter Lippmann, writing in 1920, was unequivocal; the pursuit of truth must always come first,

"In so far as those who purvey the news make of their own beliefs a higher law than truth, they are attacking the foundations of our constitutional system. There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil." (2010: 4).

This view formed the foundation of the Anglo-American journalistic tradition until the last third of the 20th Century. It assumed that

responsibility for knowing in a Liberal Democracy rested with the individual, and that the role of journalism was to report facts and opinions impartially to help audiences reach their own conclusions about matters of public interest. This implied a quasi-scientific methodology that attempted to separate fact from opinion and which regarded objectivity and impartiality as supreme virtues. As the BBC explained in 1946,

"The objectivity of BBC news involves a most rigid and absolute avoidance of expressions of editorial opinion, combined with an equally rigid refusal to omit or to bowdlerize any news that is of sober public interest." (BBC 1946: 55)

According to the Victorian Liberal model of journalism, no attempt should be made to manipulate the audience, people must be free to form their own conclusions. As the BBC put it in 1957, a news bulletin must consist of a,

"Fair selection of items impartially presented... there is no room in a BBC bulletin for the personal views of the editors or sub-editors. Their duty is to give the facts so that listeners may form their own opinions." (BBC 1957: 63)

However, by the 1960s, the winds of change were beginning to blow. Writing at the end of the decade, Gerald Priestland, a BBC Correspondent and presenter, expressed alarm at what was happening, "it concerns me that television may be creating a world rather than reporting one. Creating a tiny, rowdy, rather incestuous sort of news world" (Bakewell

1970: 178). Journalism, he said, was guilty of manufacturing oversimplified narratives,

“The tendency to present stories like sketches in review, the plot, the middle, the end, a nice snap curtain. Life is not like that, things are interrelated. It is not the real world at all, but it fools a lot of people that it is.”

Priestland was watching a pendulum that was only just starting to swing. The forces pushing it were, first and foremost, generational.

Generational Cohort Theory is a popular research methodology in the social sciences (Norval. 2005, 2), but is rarely used by scholars of journalism. It was pioneered by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim who argued that belonging to a particular generation endows individuals with a “certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action.” (1952: 291) The Baby Boomers were more idealistic and Utopian-minded than their parents largely because they grew up during an era of remarkable affluence which they took for granted (Majin, 2023). As the American scholar Allan Bloom put it, because the Boomers were raised in comfort, and with the expectation of ever-increasing comfort, “they do not particularly care about it, they are more willing to give it up in the name of grand ideals” (Bloom 1988, 49). The Boomers changed virtually everything: music, fashion, social attitudes, sexual mores and much more. Unsurprisingly, they also transformed journalism to suit their needs and values. Boomer Journalism first appeared as the underground journalism of the counter-

culture which flourished during the 1960s. As Aniko Bodroghkozy notes, Boomer journalists did not see themselves as neutral observers in the Victorian Liberal tradition, but as activists,

“Journalistic notions of objectivity, distance, balance and the like had no place in underground press articles, which were advocacy to the extreme and often not overtly concerned with accuracy of detail.” (2001: 11),

By the 1980s and 1990s, the Baby Boomers had reached senior editorial positions in news organizations and their more committed, advocacy style of journalism was replacing the Victorian Liberal model. In 1997, Martin Bell the BBC’s Chief Washington correspondent, famously called for a new “journalism of attachment”. Bell condemned the “dispassionate practices of the past” and said the time had come for,

“A journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; and will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor.” (1997: 8),

Boomer Journalism required a new methodology. Instead of providing the raw, factual information and a range of contrasting opinion to facilitate debate; the emphasis shifted to interpreting information so as to make the case for social change. Boomer Journalism blurred the distinction between fact and opinion and tended to be explanatory. The complex mixture of hedonism, consumerism and utopianism that formed the DNA of the Boomers, favored quick, ready-made solutions to problems, less effortful journalism, and a less effortful type of democracy.

The media scholar Michael Schudson, noting the mood of the times, said that instead of “informed citizens”, modern democracy required only “monitorial citizens”. Schudson suggested people should outsource their responsibility for knowing to professional, expert journalists in the same way that parents relaxing by the pool outsourced responsibility for looking after their children to professional lifeguards,

"The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene." (1998)

Boomer Journalism has two defining characteristics: it is narrative-led and it tolerates forms of pro-social lying. Narrative is the default way human beings make sense of the world. At a basic, psychological level, we are "*homo narrans*" storytelling animals who understand through the medium of narrative (Fisher 1984, 6). Good stories transport us into their world and make us switch-off our rational, critical faculties. As Melanie Green explains, narratives drug us into accepting the world the author has created, "While the person is immersed in the story, he or she may be less aware of real-world facts that contradict assertions made in the narrative." (Green 2000, 702) When journalists construct news, a similar process takes place. News narratives are intoxicating and persuasive because they stitch together all our pre-existing knowledge, assumptions and expectations into a cohesive cluster which reinforces our worldview or *weltanschauung*. Hence, news narratives “bring order to news stories to

prevent them from being meaningless, random noise” (Majin 2021: 59). Journalists had, of course, always told good stories, but whereas Victorian Liberal Journalism attempted to restrain the power of narrative, Boomer Journalism embraced it.

The news narratives of Boomer Journalism are, by their very nature, selective. What they leave out is as important as what they include. Because they are incomplete, they can be considered as a form of pro-social lying. Pro-social lying occurs when people deceive others to help them. Having a benevolent motive is what makes lying pro-social. A detailed exploration of this morally complex behavior is beyond the scope of this chapter; however it is at the heart of the distinction between Victorian Liberal and Boomer journalisms. In the former, journalists are expected to supply audiences with complete information regardless of the consequences. In the latter, journalists are expected to self-censor and report selectively if doing so would promote social justice. Telling the truth is judged to be less important than the ethical-political *consequences* of telling the truth. As the behavioral scientists Emma Levine and Maurice Schweitzer explain, “individuals who tell prosocial lies, lies told with the intention of benefiting others, are perceived to be more moral than individuals who tell the truth” (2014: 107).

Mainstream journalism, like any other community, creates its own shared knowledge - the consensus of what is believed and accepted to be true (Nonaka 1994). This shared understanding helps group members deal with uncertainty and act "in a coordinated and orchestrated manner"

(Erden 2008). It is not easy for individuals to question or challenge this shared knowledge, and subtle forms of pro-social lying to protect it are likely to arise. As Irving Janis, in his famous study of groupthink noted, members of a community of knowledge tend to believe, not just in the truth of their shared beliefs, but also in their own inherent goodness. This illusion of epistemic and moral certitude justifies a wide range of questionable decisions,

"The shared belief that 'we are a wise and good group' inclines them to use group concurrence as a major criterion to judge the morality as well as the efficacy of any policy under discussion. 'Since our group's objectives are good,' the members feel, 'any means we decide to use must be good.'" (Janis 1972: 108)

In summary, Boomer Journalism recognizes the power of narrative to help shape the world, change it, and make it a better place. According to this model, news should encourage good, and discourage bad, ethical-political behavior. The search for truth is not abandoned, instead it is shifted to second place. When the two motives clash, it is the ethical-political goal that is prioritized.

Russiagate; Boomer Journalism's moral panic.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 provoked an extraordinary moral panic. The new President appeared to reject the entire fabric of Boomer ideology. His supporters praised his commitment to "the purity and sacredness of family, country, tradition and history" (Kedhi 2021). In the

imagination of his opponents therefore, Donald Trump was not merely a Republican politician, he was a demon who threatened to open the gates of Hell, wind the clock back to the 1950s, and reinstate the values of the pre-Boomer age. Mainstream journalists recognized their ethical-political responsibilities and, like an army mobilizing for war, set to work to neutralize the profound ideological threat posed by Trump and Trumpism. Each generation has its own folk devils and moral panics. As the sociologist Stanley Cohen famously explained,

"Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops and other right-thinking people." (Cohen 2002: 1)

The Boomer generation's demons were anyone who rejected its ideology and sought to change it. Even before the election, the media had begun manning the "moral barricades". *Mother Jones* expressed horror at the spread of "Trump fever" which it said was hate disguised as politics.

Donald Trump, the news website warned "thrilled and emboldened hate groups far more than has been generally understood". Trump, it said, was a dangerous, destabilizing force who threatened the established moral order by normalizing deviant views. The website concluded, "Trump's tacit welcoming of these hate groups into mainstream American politics will have long-lasting consequences" (Posner: 2016).

Writing on election day, Vox saw Donald Trump as the figurehead of a movement seeking to undo the moral progress made by the Boomer generation,

"This is a man who's just one election away from becoming the leader of the most powerful country in the world. Yet he's also someone who has time and time again proven to be corrupt, sexist, racist, and all sorts of other -ists." (Lopez 2016)

The tone of much mainstream media reporting became increasingly hysterical. Sarah Ditum, writing the day after the election, saw the new President as a threat to the progressive, consensus worldview. His election, she said, was an ideological catastrophe, "You looked down into the Trumpian abyss and saw the violence, the coziness with Putin, the KKK endorsement, and yes, you saw the pussy-grabbing too". Ditum concluded that Donald Trump was an existential threat to feminism, abortion rights and respect for marginalized groups. "Trump" she said, "is not so much a step backwards as a boot in the face for those issues" (Ditum 2016).

At the center of Russiagate was the accusation that Donald Trump was working closely with, or was an agent of, Russian President Vladimir Putin. As Oliver Boyd-Barrett explains, for two years Official Journalism frequently repeated a series of "astonishing allegations" many of which were "false or questionable". These included the theory that,

"Trump was some kind of "Manchurian candidate" who had been identified as a possible candidate for high office by Russian

authorities over several years, and was subsequently groomed by them." (2020: 12)

The most salacious allegation was that, on a visit to Moscow, Donald Trump had taken part in perverted "sex parties" and had,

"Rented out the presidential suite of the Moscow Ritz Carlton that had once hosted Barack and Michelle Obama, then hired "a number of prostitutes to perform a 'golden showers' show in front of him," "defiling" the bed the Obamas had once stayed in". (Vice 2018)

Taken as a whole, Russiagate was in many respects a perfect news narrative, partly because many of the details were impossible to prove or disprove, but also because it was congruent and coherent. For example, Vladimir Putin was openly hostile to the Boomer world view and had frequently called for a return to pre-modern, Orthodox Russian, Christian values. According to Putin, many fashionable Western values, such as transgender ideology, are Godless, degenerate and evil. As Putin told a conference, the West teaches,

"Truly monstrous things when children are taught from an early age that a boy can easily become a girl and vice versa... this verges on a crime against humanity, and it is being done in the name and under the banner of progress." (Putin: 2021)

The moral values of Putinism were also spelled out by the influential Russian political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. Dugin, sometimes described by Western media as "Putin's Rasputin", said modern Western ideology produced "'freaks' and 'monsters', 'transvestites' and

'degenerates'" and was the product of "the kingdom of the Antichrist" (Dugin 2012: 19-23).

Putinism and Trumpism are in fact very different ideologies. Although both are critical of modern Western society which they regard as having taken a wrong turn, Putinism finds inspiration in Russian spiritual values, and calls for strong, autocratic rule (De Floirac 2022). Trumpism, on the other hand, seeks inspiration in the tradition of the American Dream and in Jacksonian democracy (Majin 2022: 4). Nevertheless, conflating Trumpism and Putinism was a highly effective tactic which created a simple, plausible narrative. Many of Putin's traditionalist views would have been considered perfectly normal in pre-Boomer America. Being gay for example was illegal in the US prior to 1962 (Weinmeyer 2014). In the demonology of the Russiagate narrative, if Putin was Satan, then Donald Trump was one of his minions, a dangerous monster sharing his master's beliefs and doing his bidding. Russiagate was nothing if not a moral panic.

The Russiagate narrative is captured by the meme "Orange Man Bad" which was used both by the President's opponents, and (with intentional irony) by his supporters. Taken literally, it expresses a Manichean struggle between good and evil. *The Bulwark*, for example used theological language to argue "The Orange Man is bad indeed,"

"The plain fact is that Donald Trump is not just a bad man. He is an avatar for iniquity and immorality and selfishness. He runs the table on the seven deadly sins and demonstrates not a trace of any of the four cardinal virtues." (Miller 2020)

The Russiagate/Orange Man Bad narrative was repeated innumerable times by the mainstream media. As I have written elsewhere,

"How many thousands of hours of airtime, how many printed articles, journalistic books, blogs and social media posts have been devoted to Russiagate? They are probably beyond counting, which makes accurate quantitative analysis difficult." (Majin 2019: 2549)

Whether the allegations were true or not was almost beside the point. What mattered was the sustained barrage of "venomous innuendo" (Bell 1997: 57) which created the illusion of truth and tattooed the narrative indelibly on the minds of the audience. Donald Trump's counter narrative, that the allegations were "fake news" - part of a conspiracy designed to cripple his presidency by "fabricating a scandal that would be used to trigger an unfounded federal investigation and ignite a media frenzy" (Donald J. Trump v Hillary R. Clinton et al.) - received comparatively little mainstream media coverage.

Of particular significance to scholars of journalism however, is that fact that Russiagate established a norm for how unproven accusations of improper conduct against public figures should be reported by news organizations. i.e., with extensive repetition of venomous innuendo and little, if any, attempt at balance. Russiagate established a precedent according to which the object of "false or questionable" accusations should be assumed guilty until proven innocent. Thus, Russiagate unintentionally created a *de facto* objective standard. In future, audiences would be entitled to expect symmetric coverage. In other words,

accusations aimed at other politicians should be covered in a similar manner and to a similar extent to the way the media covered Russiagate. If reporting was *asymmetric*, then what would the implications be for perceptions of honesty and trustworthiness?

Hunter's inconvenient laptop

The first major opportunity to evaluate journalism's even-handedness and impartiality arose during the run-up to the 2020 presidential election when *The New York Post* published a story claiming Joe Biden, the Democrat candidate, had sold political favors via his son Hunter. *The Post* claimed Hunter was appointed to the board of the Ukrainian energy company Burisma and paid \$50,000 a month in return for arranging a meeting between his father, who was then Vice President, and a Burisma executive. Evidence supporting the allegations came from emails discovered on a laptop computer Hunter left in a repair shop. *The Post* added,

"Other material extracted from the computer includes a raunchy, 12-minute video that appears to show Hunter, who's admitted struggling with addiction problems, smoking crack while engaged in a sex act with an unidentified woman, as well as numerous other sexually explicit images." (Morris 2020)

Here then, was prima facie evidence of a major political scandal. As a news story it had much to recommend it, not least because it was heavily spiced with salacious, prurient detail. However, it quickly became clear

the mainstream media did not intend to report the Hunter laptop story symmetrically – i.e., in the same way it had treated the allegations that Donald Trump was a Russian agent.

The New York Times was quick to heap doubt on the story and quoted anonymous sources at the *Post* to justify its skepticism, "some reporters withheld their bylines and questioned the credibility of an article that made the tabloid's front page on Wednesday." According to *The Times*, this was evidence the story was probably not true,

"Many *Post* staff members questioned whether the paper had done enough to verify the authenticity of the hard drive's contents, said five people with knowledge of the tabloid's inner workings. Staff members also had concerns about the reliability of its sources and its timing, the people said." (Robertson 2020)

The Washington Post also dismissed the story. There was no proof, the paper said, that the emails on the laptop were genuine, "*The Washington Post* has not been able to independently verify or authenticate these emails, as requests to make the laptop hard drive available for inspection have not been granted." *The Washington Post* argued the emails on the laptop might have been planted by an "active Russian agent" and therefore they, "could be part of a broader disinformation campaign" organized by Vladimir Putin (Kessler 2021). The *Huffington Post* reported the opinion of a group of former intelligence officials who said the story might have been manufactured by Vladimir Putin,

"A coalition of former intelligence officials issued a joint letter condemning a recent smear campaign against Hunter Biden, the son of Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, saying it appeared to have the hallmarks of a Russian disinformation campaign meant to influence the upcoming election." (Visser 2020)

NPR, the independent, non-profit media organization, did not report the Hunter laptop story because, it said, it could not be certain it was true,

" This was a story marked more by red flags than investigative rigor. To start, the emails have not been verified as authentic. They were said to have been extracted from a computer assumed — but not proven — to have belonged to the younger Biden." (Folkenflik 2020)

It was possible, NPR said, that the evidence might have been fraudulent, "we don't know whether those emails were somehow hacked and doctored, or completely fabricated." Since there was reasonable doubt, NPR said would be irresponsible to run the story, "with all these warning signs, other news organizations, including NPR, have held back."

CNN took a similar view. Describing the story as "dubious", its Chief Media Correspondent Brian Stelter explained, "we are not talking about fully reliable sources here." CNN noted other mainstream media outlets had not reported the story which suggested it wasn't true. As Stelter put it, "the media world has largely ignored *The Post's* Hunter Biden story" (Benveniste 2020).

In the UK, the BBC, which had eagerly reported the Russiagate narrative for two years, also showed little interest in the Biden scandal. Its influential North American Editor Jon Sopel explained,

“The provenance of the story looks decidedly dodgy... all the *Post* offers are screengrab photos, which could easily have been doctored.

There is enough to cause concern that this is genuine fake news.”

(Sopel 2021)

Sopel pointed out that the methodology of professional journalism prevented the BBC reporting unproven allegations. If there is doubt, he said, a story should not be broadcast,

“The question we ask in situations like this is ‘Does the story stand up?’ This one doesn’t seem to, so we give it a wide berth”.

However, unlike the “false or questionable” evidence for the Russiagate story, the emails on Hunter Biden’s laptop turned out to have been genuine. This was quietly confirmed by *The New York Times* seventeen months after the *Post*’s original story. *The Times* admitted federal prosecutors had examined the emails which had been “authenticated by people familiar with them and with the investigation.” (Benner 2022)

Independent journalists and bloggers were furious. *The Federalist* angrily noted, “It wasn’t until this week that *The New York Times* stealthily admitted in the 24th paragraph of an unexciting article about Hunter that the laptop story was true” (Boyd, 2022). The legal scholar Jonathan Turley sarcastically noted Harry Houdini once made an elephant disappear. The Biden family, he said, had performed a more audacious

trick. With the assistance of mainstream journalism and social media, it had made a major political scandal disappear, "Twitter banned postings about the laptop until after Biden was elected. The media dismissed the story as a conspiracy theory" (Turley 2021).

The asymmetry of the reporting was characterized by three distinct features: First, the media reversed the burden of proof. In the case of Russiagate, the default position was to assume Donald Trump was guilty of wrongdoing until proven innocent. However, when it came to the Hunter laptop story, it was assumed the Biden family was innocent until proven guilty. Second, the media used a very different *standard* of proof. In the case of Russiagate, it was considered legitimate to repeat accusations that were "false or questionable" because they might be true. However, the accusations about the Bidens were not published because they might be untrue. Third, the media's approach to Russiagate was aggressively curious. Every twist and turn received maximum media scrutiny. However, in the case of Hunter's laptop, the media was aggressively *incurious* and sought excuses to not report the story. This aggressive incuriosity justified itself with the following logic: The fact the mainstream media is not reporting the story suggests it's not true. If it's not true, the mainstream media should not report the story. According to this circular reasoning, whatever the mainstream media prominently reports must be true, whereas whatever is unreported must be false.

Perhaps the most plausible explanation for the asymmetry of the reporting is the dominance of the Boomer model of journalism. Once the

Russiagate/Orange Man Bad narrative had been established, it became virtually impossible to report anything that would undermine it. Having cast Donald Trump in the role of the devil, journalists felt compelled to paint his opponents as moral and virtuous. Thus, mainstream journalism was captured by its own narrative and almost powerless to change course.

Toiletgate

Is it possible however, that the asymmetry of the reporting was simply the result of partisan, party-political bias? Would this not provide a simpler explanation of the apparent double standards? To investigate this possibility, it will be fruitful to examine another case study and this time limit scrutiny to the BBC. The BBC is chosen because as a British news organization it is more likely to be free from partisan political bias – though not necessarily from *ideological* bias. Additionally, the BBC is legally required to be impartial. As the BBC explains, "BBC Guidelines demand the highest level of impartiality in News and Current Affairs and factual journalism" (BBC: 2020).

In early 2022, a news story broke indicating that some of the evidence for the Russiagate narrative had been gathered through spying on President Trump at the White House and that the spying had been funded by the Clinton campaign. The claim, unlike the Hunter laptop story, was undeniably credible, and not easily dismissed, because it came from official court documents filed by US Special Counsel John Durham.

Durham stated he possessed evidence that spying had targeted internet traffic at "Donald Trump's Central Park West apartment building, and the Executive Office of the President of the United States." (USA v Michael Sussmann, 3). Durham added this was done "for the purpose of gathering derogatory information about Donald Trump" and as part of a conspiracy to "establish 'an inference' and 'narrative' tying then-candidate Trump to Russia." In other words, according to the US Special Counsel, the Russiagate narrative was based, at least partly, on tainted evidence paid for by Donald Trump's political opponents. As *The Federalist* summarized,

"Enemies of Donald Trump surveilled the internet traffic at Trump Tower, at his New York City apartment building, and later at the executive office of the president of the United States, then fed disinformation about that traffic to intelligence agencies hoping to frame Trump as a Russia-connected stooge." (Cleveland 2022)

Sean Hannity on *Fox News*, described the court filings as evidence of "the biggest election and presidential spying scandal in the history of this great country." "Make no mistake" he said, "this is far worse than Watergate." Hannity also accused the mainstream media of complicity in the crime,

"The reason the media will ignore this story that is bigger than Watergate is because they are accomplices. The entire time they have lied, the entire time they advanced their propaganda almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and they did it for over three

years. They knew ... but their hatred of Donald Trump was more important than the truth." (Hannity 2022)

Here then, was an opportunity for the BBC to demonstrate its impartiality and even-handedness. The perfect forum to discuss the story and analyze it was BBC News' *Americast* podcast hosted by Jon Sopel and Emily Maitlis. Curiously however, the *Americast* ignored the story. Instead, its 23 February edition led with a story suggesting Donald Trump welcomed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The show played a sound bite in which Trump commented "this is genius... I said how smart is that" (BBC *Americast* 2022).

The *Americast* also ran a second story claiming that Donald Trump had improperly disposed of secret documents by flushing them down the White House toilet. The story was based on an anecdote in a new book written by *New York Times* journalist Maggie Haberman. In her book Haberman said she had learned that a pipe in the White House was found clogged with papers which might have come from the President's bathroom. The *Americast* reported Toiletgate with much chuckling from Sopel and Maitlis. Maitlis told the audience,

"We know how much Donald Trump cares about top-secret documents because several were torn up and stuffed down his loo¹ in the White House according to a new book."

Sopel was enthusiastic about the story and urged his colleague to reveal more detail. As he eagerly explained, "we want to know about him tearing up documents and stuffing them, and blocking, White House loos!"

A third anti-Trump story followed; that Donald Trump may have breached the Presidential Records Act by retaining official documents after he left office. The show explained the National Archive had removed 15 boxes of documents from Trump's Mar-a-Lago home, "It has been reported now there were classified documents, and some very and highly classified documents, included in the boxes". In another segment, the *Americast* interviewed former Chief of Staff of the Department of Homeland Security, and Trump critic, Miles Taylor who claimed Trump's own advisors were "worried about bringing classified information into the Oval Office and briefing him because we were concerned that he would share that information with people he shouldn't." When asked about Toiletgate, Taylor said he had no first-hand knowledge of clogged plumbing, however he joked, "It was a big frustration for me to use that toilet; so many classified documents were blocking that toilet!"

The significance of Toiletgate is that it is a strong example of narrative-led journalism in action. Narrative is a hungry, insatiable beast. Once born, it feeds on what audiences would *expect* to be true based on their pre-existing knowledge. Narrative does not tell us what is true, but rather what *ought* to be true, or what we *want* to be true. The narrative tells us Donald Trump is Orange Man Bad. Therefore, we are not surprised to hear he engages in deviant, fetishistic behavior. Toiletgate works by slyly associating him with excrement. Haberman's unverified, scatological anecdote fits other pieces of the mental jigsaw we already possess – such as the rumor that Donald Trump paid Russian prostitutes to urinate on

Obama's bed, and that he carelessly, or improperly, took boxes of official documents home when he left office. Narrative nourishes our prejudices and our prejudices nourish the narrative.

The *Americast* is also an example of asymmetric journalism. It made no attempt to provide balanced, impartial reporting. Why, for example, was the Durham story ignored? Why instead did the BBC choose to run four anti-Trump stories? Why was Toiletgate reported so prominently despite the lack of supporting evidence? Why did Sopel abandon his own rule that a story should not be reported if it does not "stand up"? Why did the BBC not give Donald Trump a right of reply? ²

Jon Sopel rejects the idea that news has become narrativized. "I don't buy your analysis" he says, "I just don't buy where your questions are going. I disagree" (Sopel, 2022). Indeed, he is indignant at the suggestion that the BBC's reporting of Donald Trump has been anything other than fair and balanced, "you're trying to say that there was an anti-Trump narrative at the BBC... that's bullshit" he says. "I absolutely believe in impartiality... but I believe that you can be quite aggressive in that impartiality". Sopel explains that 'aggressive impartiality' means that if Donald Trump says something journalists believe to be untrue, it is the duty of journalists to point that out. "We're not going to say 'he says', 'she says', we're going to say it's not true. And I think that's good journalism." In the case of Donald Trump, Sopel says "he lied quite frequently" therefore he deserved to be called out for it. As Sopel puts it,

"I'm absolutely, firmly of the view that it's my job is to hold people in power to account".

So how does Sopel justify the choice of stories on the *Americast*? Specifically, why did the BBC ignore the Durham story? Sopel is unapologetic. The Durham story, he says, is "complicated". "I think you've gone for the *Fox News* headline version of it" he says, "I think what Durham asserted was more complicated than the headline, and I've read some quite detailed analysis of it." Sopel also says the Durham story wasn't included because it was old news, having first appeared twelve days before, "I mean, why am I going to put something in the podcast that is from twelve days ago, and which isn't very clear?"

Although Sopel's explanations are plausible, they are not entirely convincing. For example, he gives two reasons for not running the Durham story on 23 February 2022: A) the story was too old, B) The story was too complicated. It would certainly be rash to underestimate the complexity of the journalistic decision-making process. However, what Sopel omits to mention is that there was another *Americast* broadcast on 15 February – two days after the Durham story broke. The BBC cannot have its cake and eat it. If the criterion for including the story is timeliness, then the *Americast* could have included the Durham story on 15th. Sopel also fails to mention that the story about the National Archives retrieving documents from Mar-a-Lago was reported by *The Washington Post*, and other media, on 7 February (Alemany 2022). This

means it was actually a week older than the Durham story – yet the *Americast* was happy to report it.

The argument that the Durham story was too complicated is also unconvincing. Sopel acknowledges *Fox News* succeeded in making the story comprehensible and it is hard to believe it was beyond the capabilities of the BBC to explain it had it wished to. What Sopel calls 'aggressive impartiality' is perhaps better described as an example of 'aggressive incuriosity'. Therefore, a more plausible explanation is the BBC didn't include the Durham story because reporting that Donald Trump might have been the victim of a sophisticated conspiracy, and that he was targeted for political destruction by his opponents – aided by the mainstream media, would be to pour poison on the roots the narrative.

Conclusion

The Boomer generation introduced a form of journalism that featured simplified news narratives and tolerated forms of pro-social lying in order to bring about social change and make the world a better place. But Boomer Journalism had serious unintended consequences. Pro-social lying, for all its good intentions, remains lying. And when audiences detect they are being deceived and manipulated, they withhold their trust. It is a phenomenon that seems to be confirmed by numerous polls and surveys. Gallup has tracked Americans' trust in newspapers since 1973 and television news since 1993 and reports a steep decline since 2017. In 2022, Gallup reported a further deterioration, "Americans'

confidence in two facets of the news media – newspapers and television news – has fallen to all-time low points” (Brenan 2022). The Edelman Barometer has measured trust in institutions since 2000, and argues that both government and the media are responsible for fueling a “cycle of distrust”,

“Government leaders and journalists are seen as the least trusted societal leaders today... Concerns over fake news or false information being used as a weapon is now at an all-time high.” (Edelman 2022)

In the UK, Ofcom, which regulates broadcast news, has also expressed concern at declining trust and singles out the BBC for criticism,

“The BBC’s impartiality remains a key area of concern with its audiences... The BBC needs to understand why this is the case and do more to address concerns arising from perceptions of its impartiality.” (Ofcom 2022)

The BBC also recognizes there is a problem with the asymmetry of its journalism. The organization’s Director General Tim Davie has told his staff,

“We urgently need to champion and recommit to impartiality... If you work here, nothing should be more exciting than exploring different views... If you want to be an opinionated columnist or a partisan campaigner on social media then that is a valid choice, but you should not be working at the BBC.” (Davie 2020)

The significance of Russiagate is that it forced professional journalism to choose between the old values of Victorian Liberal Journalism –

scrupulous impartiality and fairness regardless of consequences, and the new values of Boomer Journalism – the desire to make the world a better place and defend the ethical-political achievements of the Boomer generation. Mainstream journalism chose the latter. Journalism's evolution had been taking place imperceptibly over decades. Russiagate marked the moment of metamorphosis when the transformation became visible. It had taken hundreds of years to build Victorian Liberal Journalism and its methodology of restraint, objectivity and impartiality, but just one generation to pull it down. Rebuilding trust in journalism is unlikely to be an easy task. As the Roman poet Virgil wrote two thousand years ago, "the descent to Hell is easy; the gate stands open day and night beckoning us in. But to climb back out, that is a much harder task."

1 Loo is British slang for toilet, like 'can' in the US.

2 According to Donald Trump it was fake news, "It's a totally false story. She made it up... Who is going to be a source for that anyway? Who would know that? There is no source." (Rossi, 2022)

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