Journalist Fellowship Paper

Reporting populism: the harm-reduction playbook

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Preface

This project was prepared by Michael Hauser Tov, Chief Political Correspondent at *Haaretz*. It is the product of a three-month fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by *Haaretz*.

Hauser Tov is the youngest journalist to hold the position of Chief Political Correspondent at Haaretz, and he is a Forbes 30 Under 30 honouree. His journalistic coverage has exposed scandals in the Prime Minister's office, and in the conduct of the war in Gaza.

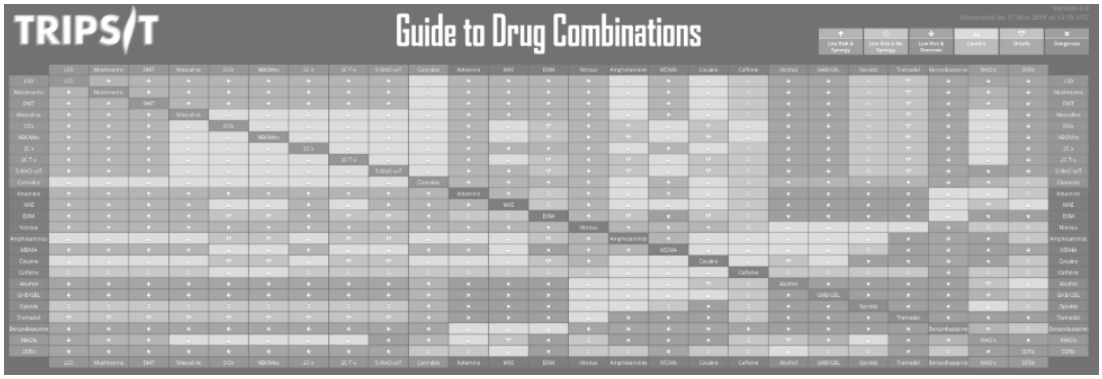
Introduction

Populist politicians are rewriting the rules of politics and weakening journalism in the process. But journalists are hooked: we can't stop giving them oxygen.

There are plenty of explanations for why populism gets so much coverage – most obviously, it drives engagement. But at this stage, with populists dominating the public agenda, the *why* isn't the point. When a doctor discovers metastases, they don't ask why the patient started smoking. They focus on what to do next.

If we treat our coverage like an addiction, then the solution becomes obvious: harm reduction.

A decade ago, a group of doctors and researchers at TripSit produced a chart showing which drug combinations are safe and which are dangerous.



TripSit's "Guide to Drug Combinations" – a harm-reduction reference that maps the relative risk of mixing common substances, from low risk to dangerous, first created in 2015. Credit: TripSit/Screenshot

They weren't promoting drug use; they were accepting the reality of usage and working to limit the damage. Journalism now needs the same kind of framework.

This playbook draws on the harm reduction model to offer practical tools for covering populist figures responsibly. Not abstract debates about whether to cover them, but clear techniques you can use in your newsroom tomorrow: how to quote a lie without amplifying it, how to avoid false balance, how to name the behaviour instead of the category, how to respond to anti-journalistic attacks.

The goal is not to eradicate coverage – that's impossible – but to reduce the harm it causes to democratic discourse and to the craft of journalism itself.

Recognising the problem

The instinctive reaction of any good journalist to this playbook might be: why do populist politicians require special journalistic treatment at all? We already have a broad set of professional tools that we are supposed to apply equally. Why should one politician require a set of tools different than the rest?

The answer lies in this chapter, which explains how populist politicians differ from their peers, the tactics they exploit for position, and the dangers of platforming these antics without due caution.

How to identify a populist politician

Numerous studies in recent years have examined populism, populist politicians, and their representation in the media – each employing slightly different definitions of who constitutes a populist.

Today, the prevailing consensus that has emerged defines populism is a "thin" ideology that divides society into two homogeneous groups: "the real people" and "the corrupt elites" who have conspired against them.

This definition, from Dutch scholar Cas Mudde, offers a good foundation.[1] But it doesn't address journalistic involvement, so it is insufficient for our purposes.

To find a measure useful to our work, let's return to the fundamental definition of the relationship between a journalist and a politician: researchers tends to describe this relationship as a kind of tango or "tug-of-war" – a give-and-take relationship in which both sides sometimes win and sometimes lose.[2]

Quick populist ID guide

☐ People vs "corrupt elite" framing

☐ Broken reciprocity with the media: criticism fuels them; recognition/normalisation > tone; routine media attacks

If both boxes are ticked, switch to harm-reduction coverage.

[1] Wettstein, M., Esser, F., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., & Wirth, W. (2018). *News media as gatekeepers, critics, and initiators of populist communication: How journalists in ten countries deal with the populist challenge.* The International Journal of Press/Politics, 23(4), 476–495.

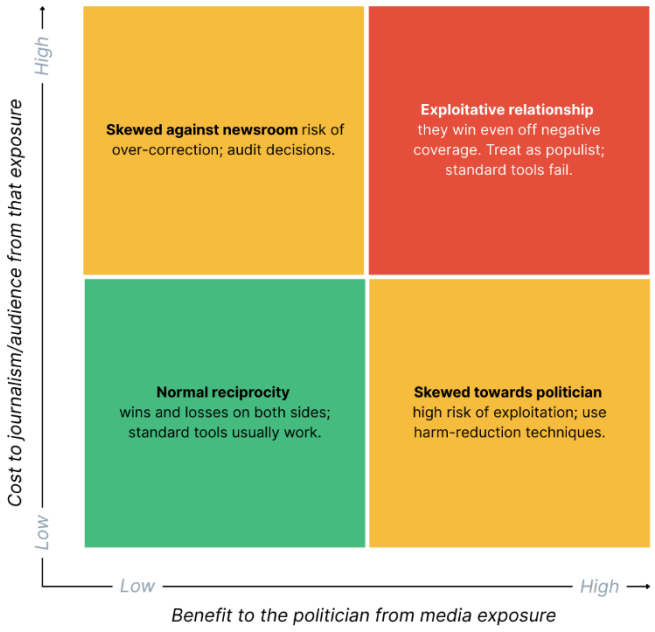
[2] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp24-26.

This creates *double reciprocity*: in any healthy journalist-politician relationship, both parties necessarily experience wins and losses over time.

Populists break double reciprocity. Unlike traditional politicians, who accept both the benefits and costs of media engagement, populists manipulate the relationship to ensure they always come out ahead. This insight suggests a good measure for identifying populist politicians could be the "double reciprocity test". When reciprocity breaks down, and a certain politician exploits their relationship with the media to only win or mostly gain, it's both a sign of the ineffectiveness of existing journalistic tools and of the need for alternatives.

The double reciprocity grid

Plot the benefit to the politician (left to right) against the cost to journalism (bottom to top). The nearer you are to the top-right, the more the relationship is being exploited.



Signs that reciprocity is broken

If two or more signs apply, consider treating the actor as a populist and use the playbook.

- ☐ Negative coverage recycled as "proof" of media bias.
- ☐ Routine attacks on journalists/media.
- ☐ Recognition or normalisation is valued over positive tone.
- ☐ Coverage volume greater than electoral support/salience.
- ☐ "Flooding the zone" to slip in unchallenged claims.
- ☐ Misuse of right of reply to inject propaganda.

To reframe our playbook definition then: *populist politicians deploy a thin ideology that divides society into two homogeneous groups – "real people" and the "corrupt elites" (who have conspired against them) – and exploit their media appearances to only win or mostly gain position.*

Among our viewers, listeners, and readers, there exists a basic and important desire not to be exploited by the media, with an understanding that journalists have considerable power to influence their personal opinions and the public opinion at

large.[3] From this perspective, it's important to understand that the main victim in a situation where any politician succeeds in exploiting their media appearances is not the journalist themselves, but their audience.

This playbook is intended for journalists, but ultimately it aims to serve the public.

Why do populists require different tools?

The goal of this playbook is not to portray populist politicians negatively or to try to influence public opinion against them. The opposite is true. Thoughtful use of these techniques should create a situation where sometimes the populist politician comes out on the bottom, but sometimes also on top.

If we use the metaphor of a tug-of-war, then in the case of the populist politician, the ground on which he and the journalist stand is simply uneven. This stems from the fact that populist politicians are less dependent on positive coverage compared to "regular" politicians, according researchers.[4] Why? Because the populist's goal is not necessarily to gain sympathy, but to gain legitimacy, establish their status, and bring ideas from the margins into the mainstream. In such cases, the positive effect of media exposure is more important to them than the negative effect of the tone they receive in coverage.[5]

Studies have found that frequent media coverage grants a party an image of competence – at least in the eyes of its target audience – even when the coverage is accompanied by scandals and criticism.[6] Therefore, for populist politicians seeking this "certificate of competence", the media appearance itself may be the goal and required achievement, not its content. This is especially true for new parties and politicians, or those who are electorally marginal. They need the "oxygen of publicity" to achieve a certain level of recognition.[7]

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[3] Biddlestone, M., Stuart, A. and Goldberg, B. (2022). *A Practical Guide to Prebunking Misinformation*

[4] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp27-28.

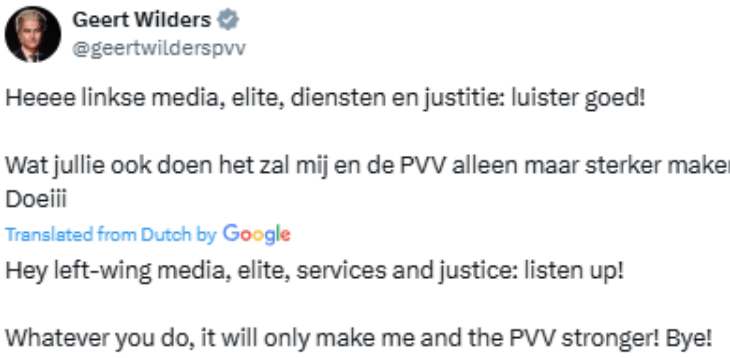
[5] Esser, F., Stępińska, A. and Hopmann, D.N. (2016). Populism and the Media. Cross-National Findings and Perspectives. In: T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck and C.H. de Vreese (eds), Populist Political Communication in Europe. London Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

[6] Bos, L., W. Van der Brug, and C. De Vreese. 2011."How the media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Leaders." Political Communication 28 (2): 182–206.

[7] Maurer, M., Jost, P., Schaaf, M., Sülfow, M. and Kruschinski, S. (2023). *How Right-Wing Populists Instrumentalize News Media: Deliberate Provocations, Scandalizing Media Coverage, and Public*

Additionally, populists have perfected methods that allowed them to "win" in every media appearance. Today, a central part of the populist campaign is directed against journalists and the media. When they present journalists as enemies, and as biased, any "negative" coverage becomes an asset – serving only to prove the "hostility" the media displays toward them and their supporters.[8]

This dynamic is perfectly captured in former Dutch Prime Minister Geert Wilders' 2016 tweet:



Sophisticated populist politicians succeed in neutralising even the best of our old journalistic tools: investigative reporting, exposing corruption, or publishing accounts of misconduct.

In 2018, *60 Minutes* host Leslie Stahl testified that U.S. President Donald Trump explicitly told her his strategy: he repeatedly attacks the media in order to "discredit all of you and demean you all, so that when you write negative stories about me – no one will believe you".[9] This dynamic places journalism in a clear position of disadvantage in its confrontation with populists.

What are the dangers?

The ineffectiveness of existing journalistic tools and populist politicians' exploitation of their relationship with journalists may be reason enough to use different journalistic tools. But, in addition to this, it's also important to understand

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Awareness for the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The International Journal of Press/Politics, 28(4), pp.747–769.

[8] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp27-28.

[9] News, C. (2018). *Lesley Stahl: Trump said he bashes press to 'demean' and 'discredit' them*. Cbsnews.com. Retrieved from: https://www.cbsnews.com/video/lesley-stahl-60-minutes-president-trump-press [Accessed 2 Aug. 2025].

the media's role in shaping the boundaries of legitimate discourse and normalising extreme ideas – two results of the exposure granted to populist politicians.

Questions such as "what are the boundaries of legitimate discourse", "which ideas are considered extreme", and "whether a certain statement might constitute hate speech or incitement", contain a political element. In order to avoid political positioning, this paper will *not* attempt to define the legitimate boundaries of public discourse, nor will it provide tools for doing so (despite the importance of the topic).

Start only from the premise that discourse has boundaries: that hate speech exists. That some ideas are dangerously extreme. Now understand this: the way media reports on such actions, statements, and ideas normalises them. The media's primary power lies in its ability to bring extreme statements into mainstream discourse. Even if the context is negative, the very act of being presented in the media allows an extreme statement to undergo a process of mainstreaming.

This process may certainly change the moral boundaries between right and wrong, and between acceptable and unacceptable speech. Most often, this normalisation happens unintentionally. Journalists operate under the professional assumption that elected officials must be covered. As a result, extreme statements and policies get woven into regular news coverage, moving populist arguments from the political margins to the mainstream, and inadvertently legitimising them in the process.[10]

Journalism carries inherent moral weight and helps shape how society defines "right" and "wrong". Research already shows that behaviours once portrayed as deviant now appear routine in populist politicians' media coverage.[11] In response to this challenge, this playbook aims to provide tools for covering extreme statements without legitimising them.

[10] Ekström, M., Patrona, M. and Thornborrow, J. (2022). Reporting the unsayable: Scandalous talk by right-wing populist politicians and the challenge for journalism. Journalism, 23(5), pp.955–972.
[11] Ibid.

Exploring harm-reduction solutions

The old saying goes that recognising a problem is half the solution. This rings true for covering populist politicians effectively. Many journalists believe they can level the playing field by simply being more critical and biting in their coverage. Others think the answer is covering extreme ideas less frequently to avoid normalising them. Both approaches assume that existing tools can solve the problem.

However, recent studies suggest that more of the same simply won't help.

Researchers examining populists' coverage across 10 different European countries found that, even in cases where populist politicians received relatively low exposure relative to their electoral power and faced critical coverage, the populism they promoted still flourished.[12]

In other words, covering populists less frequently or more critically won't solve the problem. Klyani Chadha, a media researcher and professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, put it bluntly: "I think one of the most practical things is that journalists – at least in the U.S., and maybe this holds elsewhere – need to abandon standard practice. I know that's very hard."[13]

Research by Dr Ayala Panievsky at the City University of London in the *International Journal of Communication* reached the same conclusion.[14] We need new tools and techniques beyond those in standard use today. Despite years of journalistic and academic focus on confronting populism, identifying effective approaches remains elusive. This chapter aims to lay out new techniques in simple language.

"I think there are degrees of doing it right and wrong," said journalist and media critic Margaret Sullivan. "I'm not sure I can say this journalist always does it right, and it's great, and we should all be exactly like this one journalist. I think it's more about collecting good examples."[15]

In the absence of a single "magic formula" for effective coverage of populist politicians, what remains is the possibility of searching for, locating, and identifying

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[12] Wettstein, M., Esser, F., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., & Wirth, W. (2018). *News media as gatekeepers, critics, and initiators of populist communication: How journalists in ten countries deal with the populist challenge.* The International Journal of Press/Politics, 23(4), 476–495.

[13] Interview with Professor Klyani Chadha, Northwestern University, 24 June 2025.

[14] Panievsky, A. (2021). *Covering Populist Media Criticism: When Journalists' Professional Norms Turn Against Them*. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, pp.2136–2155.

[15] Interview with Margaret Sullivan, Columbia University, 30 June 2025.

the “good examples”. No single solution will solve the entire problem, but many small adjustments could prove significant.

How the playbook was constructed

Building this playbook involved two steps. The first was to identify techniques that have proven effective in related fields – such as preventing misinformation spread and addressing hate speech – with empirical and qualitative academic studies on their efficacy. Second, as part of the validation process, media researchers from around the world were asked to review these techniques and provide feedback to better understand their applicability.

Relying on empirical research was crucial. Journalists’ instincts about effectively covering populism have been proven wrong more often than not. What seems effective to a journalist may not appear that way to audiences.

Even flawed conventional practices have their own resilience. Senior NYU media researcher Dr. Jay Rosen illustrated this with the paradox with ‘both-sides’ journalism: “You can say that ‘both-sides’ journalism is terrible and it’s a joke and it’s weak, which is true. But it has a lot of power. If you ask readers what they would prefer - journalism with a point of view or both-sides reporting? Unanimously they’ll say both-sides reporting, because they associate it with fairness and balance and all these good things, right? These practices are weak but they also have strengths”.[16]

All of the techniques presented here are simple to implement and don’t pull the ground out from under conventional journalistic principles. The new techniques are careful to preserve the strengths behind traditional rules. Rather than proposing a revolution or change to the status quo, the new techniques focus on adaptation. As a rule, they don’t require resources, money, new reporters, or any change in the newsroom, meaning any journalist in the field may implement them.

The techniques are divided into three categories, moving from immediate tactical responses to broader strategic approaches:

- **Basic techniques** will address the fundamental daily challenge: how to cover populist lies and provocations without amplifying them. These apply to almost every journalist-politician interaction.

[16] Interview with Dr. Jay Rosen, NYU, 13 June 2025

- **Audience-oriented techniques** focus on how journalists communicate with their audience about populism. These methods help readers better understand and contextualise populist rhetoric, reducing populists' ability to manipulate public perception.
- **Newsroom-oriented techniques** strengthen journalism's institutional defences against populist manipulation. These range from individual reporting practices to newsroom-wide protocols that protect journalistic integrity.

Basic techniques

At a glance

The following points address the most basic challenge journalists face with populist politicians: whether and how to cover their lies and provocative statements. This is a daily challenge that characterises almost every interaction between journalists and populist figures.

- If a statement or story hasn't gained traction beyond its original or immediate audience, consider whether coverage risks giving it undeserved reach.
- Avoid headlining the reaction generated by provocative statements, which creates a position-versus-position dynamic. Focus instead on telling the story of communities harmed by the provocative statement.
- To correct a lie effectively, use the FWEF technique: lead with the Fact, then Warn that a lie is coming, then Explain how the lie misleads, and finish by reinforcing the Fact – multiple times, if possible.

1. Decide when to ignore populist claims

Ignoring populist content can let harmful narratives spread unchecked. But before covering a story, check if it has spread beyond its original audience – if not, your coverage may amplify fringe content that would otherwise remain obscure.

Several studies have concluded that boycotting extreme actors is not helpful, creates discomfort among broad audiences, and may even create a negative effect.[17] Avoiding media treatment of populist stories could allow harmful

[17] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, p56.

information to spread unchecked, cause another journalist to tell the story first and poorly, allow negative ideologies to grow unimpeded, and contribute to radicalisation processes.[18]

On the other hand, journalists must avoid amplifying content that would remain obscure without media attention. Excessive coverage of populist content necessarily leads to its normalisation. Especially when dealing with populism, it's important to ask whether the media coverage itself is what creates the story. This is relevant to stories that would never have developed without the media platform given to them, or those created just to "generate headlines".

This guide neither advocates for blanket coverage nor systematic avoidance of populist content. Instead, the following technique is intended for borderline cases when journalists are debating whether certain populist content merits coverage. A useful guideline is: *if a statement or story hasn't gained traction beyond its original or immediate audience, consider whether coverage risks giving it undeserved reach*.

For example: has a Facebook post spread beyond the group where it was first published? Academic research marks the point at which a story spreads by someone outside the group or community for which the story is relevant as the "tipping point". If the story hasn't yet reached this point, journalistic coverage will only amplify it and increase the likelihood that it will spread and reach that point.[19]

It's important to remember that even if something has received widespread exposure online, that's not sufficient reason to publish it as news. The credibility and weight that people attribute to content published by established media outlets is significantly higher than that of a viral content on social networks.[20] Therefore, journalists cannot absolve themselves of responsibility for the consequences of publishing a story on the grounds that "it's already circulating online."

Finally, it's worth remembering that the question of whether to cover a particular story involves many nuances, including the prominence a media outlet gives it. Even when choosing to cover a story, decisions about placement –

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[18] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification*. Data & Society Research Institute : 7

[19] *Ibid.*, 107

[20] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, p56.

keeping it off the front page or out of television news headlines – can mitigate the negative effects of amplification.

2. How to cover provocative statements

Journalistic reporting should focus on the substance of a statement, not the controversy it generates. Therefore, avoid framing headlines around reactions to the statement.

The overarching goal of this technique is to avoid framing the provocative statement as part of a legitimate political debate. Once such statements are made, reactions naturally flow. The resulting journalistic framing often presents a position-versus-position dynamic, which represents a major victory for the populist politician, as it transforms their statement into legitimate political discourse and normalises it.[21]

To prevent this, avoid centring coverage on the controversy generated by provocative statements and focus instead on the statements themselves. Avoid presenting opposing reactions in headlines – even if they criticise it harshly – as this creates the very position-versus-position dynamic you want to avoid.[22]

Provocative statements can also be framed as predictably strategic, and it's advisable to minimise bombastic headlines or sensational language that would encourage further provocations.

Margaret Sullivan adds: "The way you don't want to cover it is just to go to the outrageousness of it. It's outrageous. But you need to put it in the context of 'here's a politician who has thrived on division, and he took it a step further today when he did this…' And not just have a headline out there that says 'Trump blasts shithole countries', or something like that. [This] does the work for him. We want to work for the public. We don't want to do the work for the politician."[23]

To draw a distinction: consider how we cover suicides, mass shootings, or terrorism. Just as coverage of such events exercises extreme caution to avoid

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[21] Ekström, M., Patrona, M. and Thornborrow, J. (2022). Reporting the unsayable: Scandalous talk by right-wing populist politicians and the challenge for journalism. Journalism, 23(5), pp.955–972.
[22] Ibid
[23] Interview with Margaret Sullivan, Columbia University, 30 June 2025.

copycats and reduce the "contagion effect", we can and should apply the same to provocation. [24]

This means telling the story of communities harmed by the provocative statement, avoiding portraying the populist as an impressive figure, and minimise the use of superlatives ("The worst statement you'll ever hear").[25]

3. How to correct a lie in the moment

It's not enough to note that a statement is false – you must also explain what the truth actually is. It's important to correct every lie each time it's told, even when repeated, to prevent the 'illusory truth' effect.

A scene where a host challenges an interviewee's false statement is commonplace. Usually, they'll dismiss the claim and briefly note that it's false. However, studies show that simple corrections are insufficient to "erase" false information once it's been absorbed. The chances of successfully debunking misinformation increase significantly when following the FWEF technique:

1. **Fact.** Lead with the truth: make it simple, concrete, and plausible.
2. **Warn.** Warn beforehand that a myth is coming and tell it only once.
3. **Explain.** Explain how the myth misleads.
4. **Fact.** Finish by reinforcing the fact: multiple times if possible. Make sure it provides an alternative causal explanation.[26]

It's important to make sure to correct every lie told on air, even if it's been repeated before. In fact, repeated are the most effective because they create the "illusory truth effect".[27] Repeated exposure to false information without correction makes people perceive it as more credible.

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[24] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online.* Data & Society Research Institute : 112

[25] Ibid

[26] Cook, J., Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U.K.H., and others. (2020). The Debunking Handbook 2020. The University of Queensland and Monash University.

[27] Fazio, L. K., Brashier, N. M., Payne, B. K., & Marsh, E. J. (2015). Knowledge does not protect against illusory truth. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 144(5), 993.

Finally, remember that any engagement with a false information – even when debunking it – serves those spreading it by providing exposure and potential normalization. It's often better to avoid giving lies a platform in the first place.[28]

Audience-oriented techniques

At a glance

The following techniques relate to how journalists convey information about populist politicians and their statements to the public. They offer methods that may make reporting more effective and reduce populists' immunity to journalistic criticism. Most involve simple, targeted changes to routine journalistic work and can be implemented by individual journalists without needing to mobilise the entire newsrooms.

- Prebunking, inspired by vaccination, involves exposing the audience in advance to a weakened version of problematic statements.
- When hosting a panel, beware of distorting reality with bothsidesism; tell the audience the real distribution of the relevant professional community.
- When dealing with an extreme idea, even in a negative context, it's important to present viewers with data about the actual level of support for that idea.
- Beware of misleading sensational language about populist politicians and events: use numbers and quantities that clarify to viewers the actual scale.
- Using vague labels like "populist" or "extremist" softens how problematic certain politicians are. Instead, use specific terms that match their actions: if they're racist, say "racist"; if they incite violence, say so.
- Avoid detailing populist politicians' lives when they have no news value. Presenting mundane personal details increases empathy and receptiveness to their ideas.

4. Prebunking: advance warning for problematic content

A journalist's ability to control a live broadcast is, as we know, limited. When a network broadcasts a politician's speech live, or brings a guest into the studio for a live interview, no one knows what they'll say – whether they'll spread lies, make provocative statements, or manipulate viewers. Dealing with all of these is challenging, and sometimes impossible.

[28] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online*. Data & Society Research Institute : 110

Because responding to manipulation is always reactive and necessarily comes after the fact, the effectiveness of the response will be limited, and uprooting ideas that have already taken hold with viewers is extremely difficult.

If there's concern that content being broadcast live might include viewer manipulation, it's worth giving viewers advance warning. "Prebunking" involves alerting the audience beforehand to be vigilant to problematic messages, which makes such messages harder to spread.

Prebunking is a method inspired by vaccination: just as early exposure to a weakened virus helps the body cope with disease, controlled exposure to problematic content creates attitudinal inoculation and may help us deal with manipulation.[29] This can be done directly or more subtly.

Before broadcasting a live interview with a populist politician prone to controversy, or before airing their speech when manipulation is expected, remind viewers manipulation is to be expected: this isn't their first lie. This isn't their first conspiracy theory. This isn't their first dog whistle. Advance warning has proven more effective than after-the-fact correction.[30]

This is the most effective approach, but it isn't always appropriate. A more subtly alternative could be a background piece reminding viewers what the politician said previously – what proved true and what was manipulation.

Studies have found it's important that prebunking should include two parts. The first is a warning that alerts viewers to the potentially manipulative content they're about to be exposed to, which activates mental defence mechanisms against unwanted persuasion attempts. The second is pre-emptive refutation – a "weakened version" of problematic content, such as a past statement and an explanation that debunks it.

The advantage of this approach is its focus on broad narratives rather than specific lies. Prebunking is "universal" – suitable for any provocative statement or lie, regardless of content or speaker. This means journalists aren't required to debunk every lie individually, saving resources and eliminating the need for prior knowledge of every topic that might arise.

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[29] Roozenbeek, J., Maertens, R., McClanahan, W., and Van der Linden, S. (2023). A Practical Guide to Prebunking Misinformation. Google Jigsaw and University of Cambridge.

[30] *Ibid.*

5. Avoid "false balance" when both sides aren't really equal

It's important to present the actual distribution of opinion on the issue under debate. If you decide to air both sides' positions without deciding between them, you must give the audience a sense of each camp's actual size.

Many news broadcasts include panels on topics of public controversy. Beyond ensuring productive and interesting discussion, many media outlets prioritise objectivity and therefore typically invite two representatives – one from each side – regardless of the topic. Media researchers call this approach 'bothsidesism'. As one definition puts it, bothsidesism "is the act of distorting a news report by taking an asymmetrical situation and putting it in symmetrical terms, falsely suggesting there are two equal and opposing sides in normal conflict with one another".[31]

The desire to create bothsidesism may present audiences with a symmetrical appearance of an asymmetrical reality.

"Journalists tend toward 'balance', or what they perceive as balance," said media researcher Klyani Chadha. "It's not balance, but [...] the strategic ritual of objectivity, where you perform it just so it looks like you're being objective, and then you can deflect criticism."[32]

One should be wary of such situations. In 2022, British journalist Emily Maitlis recounted the panels she produced for a television programme about Brexit: "It might take our producers five minutes to find 60 economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole voice who espoused it. But, by the time we went on air, we simply had one of each. We presented this unequal effort to our audience as balance. It wasn't. I would later learn the ungainly name for this myopic style of journalism – 'bothsideism,' which talks to the way it reaches a superficial balance whilst obscuring a deeper truth. At this stage, I had never heard the term – or indeed the criticism – I just thought we were doing our job."[33]

If you've chosen to hold a discussion on a particular issue and invited one representative for and one against, make sure to reflect the true distribution on the subject to viewers, not just what's currently represented in the studio.

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[31] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp68-69.

[32] Interview with Professor Klyani Chadha, Northwestern University, 24 June 2025.

[33] Maitlis, E. (2022). *We have to stop normalising the absurd.* Prospect magazine.

The relevant distribution isn't necessarily that of the general public – if you're hosting a panel of professionals, present the distribution of the relevant professional community.

6. Reflect the true level of support for ideas

Media coverage of extreme ideas creates a false impression that a larger portion of the population supports them.

We already know that exposure to extreme ideas may normalise them (even when presented negatively), but an additional byproduct of presenting extreme ideas in media outlets is creating a sense of popularity. A recent study found that exposure to extreme ideas increases viewer's sense that "a larger portion of the population holds these views and supports these statements".[34] In other words, the very fact that an idea received expression in the media conveys a false impression that it's more popular than it actually is. Ideas perceived as popular are normalised much more easily.

This false impression can be prevented by providing data on the level of support for the idea while discussing it. If you're interviewing a populist politician who promotes a certain idea, try to present a poll showing the level of support for that idea. The goal is not to show support for the politician, but for the specific idea they're presenting. This is a good opportunity for cooperation between media outlets, since populists often give interviews simultaneously to different media outlets – and one poll would suffice.

7. Reflect the true scale of events

The use of sensational terms like "political firestorm" or "the opposition attacks" is very common in political coverage. In reality, it takes only a few isolated reactions from a handful of parliament members to turn any issue into a "firestorm". While the media's interest in creating drama and generating audience engagement is understandable, it's important to recognise the damage such presentation creates.

When concrete and quantitative dimensions aren't provided for a particular event, and vague terms referring to "the masses" are used, viewers get the

[34] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, p59.

impression that it's more central and significant than it actually is. Research has found that this feeling creates a "magnet" that increases interest in it and attracts additional participants and supporters.[35]

The media will always want to generate interest, because interest attracts viewers and increases ratings, but it's worth remembering – especially with extreme and particularly repulsive statements and ideas – that superlatives like "political firestorm" expand the circle of support for the ideas behind that "storm".

You need not ignore the event or statement, but simply present its true scale to viewers: if five parliament members reacted to a certain statement, cite that number instead of using general descriptions like "across the political spectrum" or "within the opposition/coalition".

8. Name the behaviour, not the category

Populist politicians have many faces. Some spread false and misleading information, others incite against minorities or promote racism, some deny election results, and so on. Analysis of media coverage revealed that journalists typically label them all with catch-all terms like 'populist' or 'extremist' rather than using more specific descriptions.[36] For example, instead of calling a politician 'racist', they'll likely be labelled 'populist'. This process is called 'softening,' and it blurs the politician's problematic image.[37]

Instead of using these general labels, it's better to describe politicians by their specific problematic characteristics – such as 'racist', 'manipulator', or 'inciter of violence'. Care should be taken to use descriptive words that provide clear context, ensuring readers understand who the person is, what they believe, and what they've done, or seek to do.[38]

The term "populism" has been overused to the point of blurring its meaning and emptying it of significance. It has undergone a process of trivialisation

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[35] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online.* Data & Society Research Institute : 113

[36] Brown, K. and Mondon, A. (2021). *Populism, the media, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study.* Politics, 41(3), pp.279–295.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online.* Data & Society Research Institute : 119

and is no longer considered as negative as it once was – sometimes it is not considered negative at all. These processes of softening and trivialisation help populists build a renewed image, alienated from stigma.[39]

9. Avoid coverage of the populist's personal life

In covering populist politicians, journalists and editors must exercise careful judgment regarding every personal detail that could be reported – about their families, hobbies, and daily lives. Feature stories that reveal details about the politician's personal life are common, and can even teach us about the politician's origins and what brought them to their extreme position.

However, exposure to personal information automatically increases empathy and sympathy toward the subject, making it easier for viewers to accept their messages. Therefore, it's worth considering whether each detail meets the threshold of news importance, and remembering there's a high chance it will be used manipulatively. Information that doesn't meet these standards should be reduced or omitted.[40]

A particularly striking example can be found in a 2017 *New York Times* article that presented mundane details about the life of a white nationalist who identifies with Nazism (*This person exists, and he shops at Target*).[41] Even if this wasn't the intention, the article's framing contributed to making it a recruitment and radicalisation tool and a symbol of victory for extremists who saw it as positive publicity on a prestigious platform like the *New York Times*.[42]

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[39] Brown, K. and Mondon, A. (2021). *Populism, the media, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study*. Politics, 41(3), pp.279–295.

[40] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online.* Data & Society Research Institute : 117

[41] Fausset, R. (2017). *A Voice of Hate in America's Heartland*. The New York Times. 25 Nov.

[42] Phillips, W. (2018). *The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online.* Data & Society Research Institute : 117

Intra-journalistic techniques

At a glance

The following techniques relate primarily to journalistic work itself. They attempt to reduce populist politicians' ability to manipulatively exploit journalistic tools, and should help protect journalism's core principles. Some techniques are specific and relate to individual journalists, while others are broader and apply to newsroom operations.

- Prevent opinion-based discussions around clearly factual topics. If such a discussion develops anyway, the moderator must clarify what is true and what is false.
- In an interview with a populist politician, focus the conversation on one or two topics. A wide agenda makes it easier for them to flood the zone.
- Beware of the misuse of "right of reply" to spread false or manipulative information. Journalists can use their own right of reply to set the record straight.
- Anti-media tirades spread by media outlets themselves are very effective tools for populists. Respond to every anti-journalistic attack and refute it.
- Collaboration between journalists and outlets can be effective and ethical – either as specific and one-time events, or as strategic and ongoing initiatives.

10. Avoid pro-con debates around factual topics

Lively public debates may develop even around factual topics with clear answers. For example, during the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, a debate developed about President Barack Obama's birthplace – a completely factual topic – after Republican Party supporters raised false claims about it.

Out of fear of being perceived as taking sides in a political conflict, many journalists refrained from deciding who was right, thereby leaving their audience without an answer about what the truth was, even though it certainly existed.[43]

It's important to avoid holding a pro-con debate around a fundamentally factual topic.

Even if not all details are known or the journalist cannot determine what the truth is, if the topic revolves around a clear factual question, a public debate would be inappropriate. In such cases, it's advisable to present all known

[43] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, p71.

details as well as the questions that remain open – but not to invite opinions from both sides.

If a pro-con debate develops anyway around a clearly factual topic, the moderator or authoritative journalistic figure must clarify unambiguously what the correct position is and what the false position is – as far as they know. The example of debating Obama's birthplace, for instance, is simple and clear. But we should also be aware that more convoluted examples might arise for discussion, such as: should one obey the law? In certain countries, like Israel, government ministers publicly call for disobeying Supreme Court rulings.[44] While covering their statement is legitimate, it's important to avoid holding a debate around the statements in which opinions for and against it are presented.

11. Focus only on the interview topic

In a 2018 interview, Steve Bannon, former advisor to President Trump, said: "The media, because they're dumb and they're lazy, can only focus on one thing at a time [...] I said, all we have to do is flood the zone. Every day we hit them with three things. They'll bite on one, and we'll get all of our stuff done [...] But we've got to start with muzzle velocity."[45]

Steve Bannon's "muzzle velocity" strategy follows a simple principle: to advance any topic, a populist must "flood the zone" with as many additional topics as possible. Some – maybe most – will fail. But they'll succeed in advancing what they really wanted.

"Muzzle velocity" operates on the same principle as the "cognitive accessibility effect" – the theory that humans can focus on only a limited number of topics simultaneously.[46] This principle underlies agenda-setting method, and applies to interviews with populist politicians.

When a politician arrives at the studio, the conversation almost naturally focuses on several topics on the agenda. Such a conversation essentially

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[44] *Ibid.*

[45] FRONTLINE. (2020). *Zero Tolerance: Steven Bannon Interview*.

[46] Maurer, M., Jost, P., Schaaf, M., Sülfow, M. and Kruschinski, S. (2023). How Right-Wing Populists Instrumentalize News Media: Deliberate Provocations, Scandalizing Media Coverage, and Public Awareness for the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The International Journal of Press/Politics, 28(4), pp.747–769.

creates a "flooding" of information, through which it's easier to implement the muzzle velocity theory and slip populist arguments into the conversation.

Even if the host challenges some or most of the populist arguments presented, the politician will succeed in slipping in something that remains unchallenged.

Therefore, it's advisable to focus interviews with politicians and ensure you discuss only the topic for which they were invited. Instead of covering everything on the agenda, focus the conversation on one or two topics.

It's worth diving deep and challenging the politician, rather than letting them flood the conversation. Of course, follow-up questions are the foundation of any successful interview with a populist.

12. Prevent misuse of the 'right of reply'

Historically, the right of reply was intended to protect ordinary citizens who otherwise would have no access to the media space.[47] This is certainly not the case for politicians who are in positions of power with access to media outlets and social networks.

This right, which is fundamental in journalism, essentially provides subjects of coverage the opportunity to voice their version of events without journalistic intervention. Sophisticated populist politicians have learnt to manipulate it – using it as the freedom to advance their messages as they wish, sometimes without even addressing the claims raised against them.[48] Without our due caution, it can be used as a way to convey lies, crude attacks on the media, or give extreme statements significant platform.

To prevent populist politicians from abusing the right of reply, several approaches can be taken. The most direct approach is simply deciding not to publish parts of the response that aren't relevant to the claims raised against them, that spread lies, or that attack the media.

For some journalists, this step may seem too drastic. In such cases, the journalist's own right of reply can be used. If the subject of coverage made a

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[47] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp71-72.

[48] Panievsky, A. (2021). *Covering Populist Media Criticism: When Journalists' Professional Norms Turn Against Them*. International Journal of Communication, 15, pp.2136–2155.

false claim or attacked the article's author, don't hesitate to set the record straight and respond. Journalists who are defamed within a response also deserve the right of reply. This doesn't mean abandoning the right of reply; rather, it's a more sophisticated and careful implementation of it.[49]

13. Respond to anti-journalistic attacks

Academic research has found that journalists often shy away from refuting false accusations directed against them, their outlets, or the media in general, citing concerns about damaging their image as unbiased or fear of being perceived as exploiting their power for personal purposes.[50]

More than being absurd, this is harmful. Studies show that attacks on the media, when broadcast by the media itself, are particularly effective and have the power to damage public trust in media outlets.[51] Yet anti-media messages are constantly broadcast in interviews, responses, and live speeches – and remain unanswered.

This is a mistake. The same studies also found that refuting anti-media claims is effective. In fact, it has the same effectiveness as the right of reply: just as it would be unthinkable to broadcast a statement against a person without their response, it should be equally unthinkable to broadcast a statement against a media outlet without the media's response.

It's important that journalists answer every claim made against them. This can be an actual response, like any other response, or in more significant cases, an entire segment whose sole purpose is to dismantle the anti-media claims. Do not let a desire to maintain the appearance of objectivity prevent you from addressing any claim you are not objective.

14. Collaborate

Collaboration between media outlets can be a powerful tool against populist manipulation. Populist politicians live off media coverage. They will continually raise the bar of provocations to broadcast time. A decision by one

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[49] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp71-72.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp64-66

[51] *Ibid.*

outlet to withhold coverage will be meaningless and ineffective if another outlet runs with it. Not only will the populist achieve their goal, but the network that chose to ignore it may lose viewers. In extreme circumstance, a collective agreement on boundaries can be effective.

Collaborations between news organisations are a rare, mainly because journalism is perceived as a highly competitive profession, where journalists and newsrooms constantly struggle for scoops, exclusive stories, leaks, sources, subscribers, and advertisers.[52]

Additionally, journalists fear that collaboration might be perceived as "proof" of a conspiracy against populists.[53]

However, as the following examples demonstrate, collaboration is more feasible, ethical, and frequent than generally assumed.

The easiest collaboration occurs within the newsroom itself. In 2024, NBC's prominent hosts publicly opposed their network's decision to hire – as a paid political analyst – a former Republican Party chair who was involved in Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 election results. The hosts used their programmes to voice co-ordinated objections. Within less than a week, NBC management cancelled the appointment.[54]

Collaboration can also exist between different media outlets. In 2019, the front pages of all major daily newspapers in Australia were blacked out in a coordinated protest against new laws that threatened press freedom in the country.[55]

It is worth understanding the distinction between specific one-time collaboration and broader, strategic collaboration. In the 1990s, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held press conferences that barred the asking of questions. In response, heads of Israeli TV channels decided not to broadcast his speeches live until journalists were allowed to ask questions.[56]

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[52] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp86-90.

[53] Panievsky, A. (2025). *The New Censorship: How the War on Media is Taking Us Down*. London: Footnote Press, pp86-90.

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] *Ibid.*

While a decision like this requires strategic collaboration at high levels, less formal collaboration is also possible. If a politician refuses to answer a question from one of your colleagues, consider what would happen if each journalist in the room asked exactly the same question again. Such collaboration can prevent politicians from evading the question.

Collaboration works, and works well. Among other proof, we have the 2016 Panama Papers – hundreds of journalists from competing outlets worked for months to analyse 11.5 million financial documents. No single newsroom could have processed such massive amounts of data or understood the implications across different countries and legal systems. And the coordinated release also prevented any individual or government from suppressing the story.

When facing powerful adversaries who operate across borders, journalists can and must set aside competition to serve the public interest.

Other good examples of collaboration taken by media outlets worldwide

- Brazilian television network Rede Globo declined to broadcast President Bolsonaro's speeches live, instead having journalists read excerpts and provide context during news segments.
- The German Journalists' Association (DJV) recommended that media outlets implement clear contextual warnings when reporting on the AfD, comparable to health warnings on tobacco products.
- In Canada, a government-appointed commission established participation criteria for election debates that make it difficult for trendy, newly-emerged parties to enter mainstream discourse and gain public legitimacy through debate appearances.

Populist coverage playbook tools

This section is a tear-sheet for busy journalists. The matrix, checklist and FAQs on the next two pages are also available as printable PDFs and mobile-friendly images on the Reuters Institute website – so you can pin them above your desk or save them to your phone.

Reporting populism: the harm-reduction matrix

When populist politicians use well-worn tactics to draw coverage, journalists are usually left with three options: ignore them, cover them neutrally, or cover them critically. The matrix below shows the risks of each approach – and points to adapted techniques for harm reduction. For more on these techniques, consult *Reporting populism: the harm-reduction playbook*.

✓ Safe ! Risky x Harmful

Populist tactic	Ignore	Cover neutrally	Cover critically	Apply adapted technique
Provocative statement	Risk of fringe idea spreading unchecked	Amplifies by creating "debate"	Still legitimises provocation	Frame as strategy; avoid reactions; focus on harm caused
Blatant lie	Lets lie circulate unchallenged	Repetition boosts illusory truth	Quick dismissal insufficient	Fact: Warn: Explain: Fact (structured correction)
Attack on media	Normalises attack; erodes trust	Silence = implied agreement	One-off rebuttal too weak	Always refute; dedicate response segment if needed
Extreme idea	Allows idea to incubate	Creates false impression of popularity	Normalises fringe ideas	Provide polling data; show true level of support and scale
Personal softening ("human interest")	Safer if avoided	Risk of empathy/sympathy boost	Frames extremist as ordinary	Skip personal detail unless genuinely newsworthy
Flooding the zone	Many unchallenged claims slip through	Audience overwhelmed	Diffuses critical focus	Limit interview to 1–2 topics; use persistent follow-ups
False balance panel	Fringe voice gets spotlight	Creates symmetry where none exists	Normalises minority position	Reflect true distribution of opinion; avoid bothsidesism

Reporting populism: the checklist

✓	**Prebunk** Before airing manipulative content, remind audiences of past lies. Prime them to spot patterns by combining a warning with examples of previous deceptions.
!	**Avoid false balance** Don't frame unequal positions as equal. Reveal the actual distribution of opinion, e.g. "60 economists against, 1 for."
✓	**Reflect true support for ideas** Use polls to show real levels of support for extreme ideas. Don't let coverage inflate their popularity.
✓	**Reflect true scale of events** Replace vague drama ("political firestorm") with numbers ("five MPs criticised"). Quantify instead of sensationalising.
✓	**Use precise descriptors** Skip "populist." Say what they did: spreads conspiracy theories, made racist statements. Use clear behaviour labels.
!	**Avoid personal softening** Don't run lifestyle features unless they're genuinely newsworthy. Personal details humanise and boost receptiveness.
x	**Don't debate facts** Never host pro/con debates on factual matters. Present evidence; moderators must state what's true.
✓	**Keep interviews tight** Limit to 1–2 topics. Prevent "flooding the zone" with multiple unchecked claims. Use persistent follow-ups.
✓	**Protect the right of reply** Remove lies and irrelevant attacks from responses. Add your own correction when falsehoods are included.
✓	**Respond to attacks on journalism** Refute every attack on media credibility. Silence signals agreement – dedicate space to debunk anti-media narratives.
✓	**Collaborate** Coordinate across newsrooms. Share resources, set collective boundaries, and act together where individual restraint will fail.

Reporting populism: FAQs

Answers to three common dilemmas in covering populists.

1. When should we ignore the populist?
Check if content has spread beyond its original audience. If it hasn't crossed the "tipping point" to unrelated groups, coverage will artificially amplify it.

2. How should provocative statements be covered?
Report the statement itself, not reactions to it. Avoid headlines with opposing responses that frame extremism as legitimate debate. Present provocations as predictable strategy and skip sensational language.

3. What's the best way to correct a lie said on air?
Lead with the truth, warn a lie is coming, explain how it misleads, then repeat the facts. Correct every repetition to prevent the "illusory truth effect" where familiarity breeds credibility.

Conclusion

For too long, journalists have distorted their own coverage in response to populist threats to their credibility and public legitimacy. Populists appeal directly to the public to undermine trust in journalism, and in response, journalists change their professional decision-making process. Consciously or unconsciously, we have softened our coverage of candidates, parties, and camps as a way of responding to the criticism hurled at us.[57]

This damage to our professionalism has been made possible only thanks to journalists' professional ethos: our desire to demonstrate objectivity when facing accusations of bias.

But research tells us that, "Ironically, journalists' dedication to objectivity serves as a tool for undermining public trust in that very objectivity."[58] Several researchers go as far as to argue that "in exceptional circumstances – such as in asymmetric political arenas or facing authoritarian movements – journalistic objectivity should even be abandoned entirely".[59]

I'm not personally convinced that the current wave of populism counts as those "exceptional circumstances". In any case, the purpose of this playbook is not to cause anyone to abandon objectivity.

Instead, it attempts to offer a middle way. Rather than abandoning objectivity, it tries to reinterpret it.

Using one technique with populist politicians and not with another may not be the most objective act, but it is a journalistic act. In fact, it aligns with other journalistic values that are no less important – foremost among them: providing the audience with the truth, and only the truth.

Objectivity is not our highest goal – it's a tool. It's worth remembering that. As early as 2016, media researcher Professor Jay Rosen from New York University, tweeted:

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[57] Panievsky, A. (2021). *Covering Populist Media Criticism: When Journalists' Professional Norms Turn Against Them*. International Journal of Communication, 15, pp2136–2155.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] *Ibid.*

“The problem is not at the level ‘how to cover Trump’, but how to recover conditions in which anything journalists do makes a difference.”[60]

In our conversation, Margaret Sullivan told me: “We’re in a different era, and I don’t think we necessarily are playing by the same rules. So we have to be objective in our methods, but not normalising by doing that kind of bothsidesism that used to pass for good journalism.”[61]

It’s a great and significant challenge, and above all, it doesn’t have one good answer. Because journalism has repeatedly failed in effectively covering populist politicians, and because populism has spread under our watch, I think the answer won’t come from the media alone. Behavioural research and a better understanding of people is, in my opinion, essential.

This observation is also a call for future research. While considerable attention has been devoted in recent years to studying media coverage of populism, very little research has examined the journalistic practices employed and their real effectiveness in restoring balance. Joining forces between the media and academia may yield results that neither alone appears capable of achieving.

Finding a solution is not without precedent. After countless mass shooting incidents, journalists and researchers understood that these events couldn’t continue to be covered as usual. Slowly, and with the support of considerable research, journalists came to understand that, contrary to their instincts, in such cases one shouldn’t focus on the attacker but on the victims; they shouldn’t emphasise the act but its consequences. A similar process occurred with coverage of suicide, and these are only two examples.

Years and decades don’t need to pass before we understand that when covering populist politicians, we journalists need to work with a different set of guidelines.

The first collection presented here do not cost money, needn’t hurt ratings, and don’t undermine journalistic principles. They simply require thought, which every journalist has a duty to invest.

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[60] X.com. (2025). Retrieved from: https://x.com/jayrosen_nyu/status/808004638238720000 [Accessed 2 Aug. 2025].

[61] Interview with Margaret Sullivan, Columbia University, 30 June 2025.

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