



Reporting the news: How Breitbart derives legitimacy from recontextualised news

Discourse & Society

1–14

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DOI: 10.1177/09579265221095422

journals.sagepub.com/home/das**Jason Roberts and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen**

Cardiff University, UK

Abstract

The alternative right-wing news website Breitbart has been a subject of increased academic scrutiny following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President in 2016. Due to its prominence during the campaign, where it became the most significant news website within the conservative media sphere, Breitbart remains highly influential within the conservative media sphere, particularly as a result of its attacks on mainstream media actors and organisations, which remain a prominent feature of its coverage and represent an ongoing form of metajournalistic discourse in the struggle to define the boundaries of journalism. This paper seeks to examine how Breitbart builds journalistic authority and legitimacy amongst their readership as a result of attacks on liberal and conservative journalists alike, emotionally appealing to normative, ‘common-sense’ understandings of journalism. In particular, Breitbart frequently use recontextualised news as a method of attacking oppositional journalism whilst simultaneously bolstering their own journalistic credentials. We argue that in a media ecology in which emotional content is prioritised in order to commodify the anger of citizens, practices of recontextualisation will continue to play an important role in the battle over the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practice.

Keywords

Alternative media, boundaries of journalism, Breitbart, conservative media, ideological square, journalism studies, metajournalistic discourse, recontextualised news

Introduction

The emergence of alternative right-wing media outlets has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past decade. In the United States, the rise of Donald Trump was linked to the success of Breitbart News. *Breitbart's* ability to set the agenda during the

Corresponding author:

Jason Roberts, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, 2 Central Square, Cardiff CF10 1FS, UK.

Email: robertsjd2@cardiff.ac.uk

2016 U.S Presidential election was greater than that of ‘legacy’ news organisations such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (Benkler et al., 2017). In this paper, we analyse how Breitbart uses distinctive discursive strategies to legitimise and normalise both its journalistic coverage and the politics within that coverage through the use of recontextualised news from other media outlets, and how this reporting helps to define their brand of journalism and contest the journalism of their ideological and journalistic opponents.

Our interest within this article is an underexplored element of Breitbart’s coverage: The site’s ongoing effort to construct ostensibly disparate elements of the American media landscape as a unified opposition against conservative individuals and ideals. We draw on Carlson’s (2016: 349) concept of ‘metajournalistic discourse’ to describe attempts at contesting various forms of journalistic practices, and thereby redefining the discursive boundaries of the field. Through this lens, Breitbart’s media section can be viewed as a continued and sustained piece of metajournalistic discourse. It not only aims to defend their brand of journalism, but also to attack their ideological opponents within the journalistic mainstream. As such, we take the view that examining Breitbart’s journalism *about* journalism can offer insights into how they seek to legitimate and normalise their own brand of populist journalism. Our research focuses on Breitbart’s coverage of the media to identify the site’s strategies for undermining mainstream journalistic institutions. Breitbart cultivates feelings of victory, victimhood and vilification amongst its audience (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), creating an epistemic community where heroes and villains are easily signposted and identified, creating an ‘embattled cultural identity’ (Nadler, 2021: 154).

This article aims to demonstrate how Breitbart builds discursive ‘Us vs Them’ categories to define ‘Their Good’ journalism and distinguish ‘Other Bad’ journalism. We draw on van Dijk (1998) framework of the Ideological Square, where ideological discourse is produced with the aim of creating an in-group (Us), and ostracising an out-group (Them). This is done by emphasising ‘positive things about Us [and] negative things about Them, as well as de-emphasising negative things about Us [and] positive things about Them’ (van Dijk, 2007: 44). We also examine how Breitbart’s distinction of ‘Their Good’ and ‘Other Bad’ journalism is generated by inverting the traditional notion of right-wing populism as uncivil and extremist. This is achieved by recontextualising content from mainstream media organisations designed to generate emotional reactions within Breitbart’s readership, and presenting Breitbart’s brand of journalism as a legitimate means of defence against these perceived attacks. By depicting themselves as upholding and protecting the values of American democracy through rebellion against dominant liberal hegemony, Breitbart derives journalistic legitimacy and contests mainstream media practices. While the journalistic attacks of Breitbart occur within the distinctive context of US domestic politics, it reflects broader shared practices at play across alternative right-wing media organisations on a global basis. Although these unfold within distinctive national historical, political, social and economic contexts, they signal the coalescence of alternative media practices around attacks on established media institutions. With this in mind, we have devised the following research questions to examine the nature of Breitbart’s coverage of the media:

R1) How does Breitbart use recontextualised news as a means of demonstrating journalistic legitimacy?

R2) How does Breitbart construct 'Their Good' journalism as opposed to 'Other Bad' journalism?

Literature review: Contextualising alternative right-wing media

The rise of Breitbart has often been analysed in relation to the resurgence of conservative populism across the globe (see: Garrahan, 2016; Gray, 2016). While this analytical approach helpfully places the site within a broader context of major political transformation, right-wing media within the United States have an extensive history that long predates Breitbart, going back to the 1940s (Hemmer, 2016). Although Breitbart has been around in its current form for almost a decade, it is therefore not a particularly new development. Rather, it is important as it is representative of broader online practices of far-right normalisation across the globe. Previous research (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021) has demonstrated that Breitbart uses similar (de)legitimation strategies to those found in far right-media beyond the American context (Cushion, 2020; Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019), indicating convergence around practices of contesting forms of mainstream journalism.

Carlson (2017: 349) posits that journalistic reporting *about* journalism constitutes a 'metajournalistic discourse' which is used to shape and define the field. In performing metajournalistic discourse, journalists attempt to negotiate acceptable and unacceptable journalistic norms and practices and establish journalistic legitimacy. Of note to this study, Carlson (2017: 80) identifies 'rhetorics of differentiation' in which journalistic outlets will contest the ethics and practices of other organisations as a means of bolstering their own legitimacy. This is particularly prevalent when examining alternative right-wing media outlets such as Breitbart, and examining such forms of metajournalistic discourse deployed by these types of media organisation is crucial to understanding the means by which mainstream journalistic authority is delegitimised, and alternative forms of journalistic practice are advanced.

Many studies of alternative right-wing media focus on what Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017: 569) refer to as 'bottom-up incivility', identifying these outlets as non-professional, run by amateurs and activists. By comparison, Breitbart is a professional news organisation with multiple bureaus worldwide. Nevertheless, it produces journalistic content that frequently oscillates between the alternative and the mainstream. This is often evidenced by their extensive use of '*borderline discourse*' (Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017), a frequently used discursive strategy by far-right alternative media, where extreme and uncivil views are disguised within civil communicative forms. But much of Breitbart's media reporting is based on reposting content (sometimes extracted, and sometimes in full) from other media organisations with or without commentary. These practices constitute 'recontextualised news', understood as the movement of certain elements of language and discourse across different social locations (Krzyżanowski, 2016,

2018). Such practices are not unique to Breitbart: Far-right partisan media frequently recontextualise content from mainstream media institutions to advance their own message (Haanshuus and Ihlebæk, 2021; Haller and Holt, 2019; Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017). As Krzyżanowski (2016) has argued, through examining both the production and recontextualisation of texts, we may better understand how discourses are strategically reordered and ideologically repositioned.

Such recontextualisation constitutes an inherently political act, performed under the guise of traditional journalistic values. As a result of its unusual place within the media ecology, Breitbart provides an interesting case for examining the normalisation of far-right and populist discourse.

Methodology

Operationalising recontextualised news

One of the methodological difficulties in performing this research was to operationally define recontextualised news. Within the context of this paper, we examine the transition of a particular news item from one source to another (Krzyżanowski, 2016), in this instance to the Breitbart 'Media' section. This first required us to operationally define 'news'. Within their study, Haanshuus and Ihlebæk (2021: 41) used the following definition: 'professional news sites with an ascribed editor and that adheres to an established ethical code of conduct'. However, while this definition proved useful for much of the corpus, some examples did not meet these criteria yet still could have been considered a form of recontextualised news. For instance, articles using tweets from reporters or other media figures as source material would not have met this criteria, despite possibly appearing in published news articles. Furthermore, some news sites sourced by Breitbart do not have an ethical code of conduct available to view, and some may not meet an agreed definition of professional. In addition, other source material, such as information from polling bodies or think-tanks would also be excluded within this definition. This again highlights one of the prevalent issues when studying Breitbart as opposed to overtly racist alternative media such as in the case of Haanshuus and Ihlebæk (2021), where the use of seemingly mainstream source material is not recontextualised through heavy editing and framing, but through subtler means in order to bolster the legitimacy of Breitbart's journalism.

Ultimately, we extended the definition of Ihlebæk and Haanshuus's methodology to include news media sites regardless of editor status or a code of conduct, although the overwhelming majority of source sites met this criteria. However, articles which only contained tweets, or were sourced from polling data or think-tanks were not counted as containing recontextualised news. Although polling data and think-tanks are often useful journalistic sources, the purpose of this study is to examine how Breitbart uses the media generated by a particular news organisation to contest the acceptable practices of journalism, rather than acceptable practices of political polling. Likewise while the use of tweets as source material is often legitimate the length of the tweets were often too short to conduct in-depth analysis. As a result, they were also excluded from the definition of recontextualised news for the purposes of this study.

Sampling

To obtain a sample, we examined Breitbart's 'Media' section, where reporting on other journalism and media organisations generally appears, and logged the story with the most comments each day during the period 1st September 2020–1st March 2021 ($n = 181^1$). This date range was chosen as it encompassed a variety of events that received significant media coverage, such as the 2020 Presidential election and inauguration, the Capitol Hill riot, as well as President Trump allegedly calling fallen World War I soldiers, 'losers' and 'suckers' (Goldberg, 2020). With the sample collected, stories were initially coded as to whether they enhanced positive coverage of Breitbart and its allies, or negative coverage of Breitbart's enemies. Stories were also coded when they attempted to mitigate negative coverage of Breitbart and its allies, as well as positive coverage of their enemies.

Coding and theoretical approaches

van Dijk (1998) has been used extensively when examining partisan and ideological representations in news coverage. It allows for the analysis of 'the overall strategy of ideological discourse. . . the enhancement of *Our* Good Things, and *Their* Bad Things, and the Mitigation of *Our* Bad Things and *Their* Good Things, at all levels of discourse structure' (van Dijk, 2013).

This study required close attention to the politics of Breitbart in considering the nature of 'Good Things' and 'Bad Things'. As supporters of Donald Trump and his 'America First' brand of populism, stories that featured disparagement against the former president were considered 'Bad Things', with support being coded as a 'Good Thing'. In addition, based on previous work on Breitbart, we were familiar with a variety of media-adjacent figures that were often frequent targets of attack, such as professional athletes or celebrities that expressed desire for social justice.

Once these initial characteristics had been logged, each article was analysed through the lens of the Ideological Square, looking for discursive strategies that pertain to the identity, activities, goals, norms and values, group relations and resources of Breitbart, as these are the discursive frames which construct the self-image of Breitbart and its relations to other groups (van Dijk, 1998). Additionally, considering the arguments of Bernstein (1990), we examined how each recontextualised text was presented and ordered to suit Breitbart's ideological goals while simultaneously undermining ideological opponents.

Findings

Initial exploration of the corpus indicated that 88.3%² of Breitbart's stories aimed to highlight its own successes, or draw attention to the perceived negative actions of their enemies within the media and political spheres. By contrast, 11.7% of stories that appeared in the sample were attempts to downplay the successes of their opponents, while also mitigating any negative attention towards their allies or the organisation itself. Of all the stories, 86.7% were sourced with recontextualised media, while 13.3% of the

stories were not. This initial exploration highlighted the extent to which recontextualised news is a crucial part of Breitbart's journalistic practice, particularly when coupled with the fact that so much of its media reporting is hostile to mainstream journalistic institutions. Given that we view Breitbart's 'Media' section as a sustained effort to redefine the boundaries of journalism through metajournalistic discourse, a significant portion of Breitbart's media coverage consists of recontextualising media content from their enemies with little overt discursive framing or packaging. This allows Breitbart to successfully 'play both sides' – ostensibly adhering to the traditional norms and values of journalistic objectivity, whilst evoking an emotional reaction from their audience based on a shared epistemic universe where it is understood who is 'good' and who is 'bad'. Below, we examine articles of note within the corpus to identify how the recontextualisation process and the formation of 'Our Good'/'Their Bad' journalistic discourses are not only crucial to various discursive aims of Breitbart, but inextricably linked to one another.

One rule for them, another for us: Recontextualisation and the reinforcement of 'liberal media bias'

Breitbart frequently recontextualised news that originated from prominent mainstream news sources such as CNN or MSNBC, as these not only represent ideological opponents, but also exemplify standards of journalistic practice as a result of their prominent status. As discussed previously, like many alternative media outlets Breitbart derives its journalistic legitimacy from critiquing the norms and ethics of mainstream journalism. Within the context of the American media landscape, these complaints are particularly grounded within the notion of 'liberal media bias', a popular conservative belief that the mainstream media within the United States are inherently biased towards liberal viewpoints (Hemmer, 2016).

The example below is taken from an article about ABC journalist George Stephanopoulos who moderated the first debate between Trump and his opponent Joe Biden, failing to ask Biden a question regarding his son's involvement in business dealings with Ukrainian energy company Burisma. The article includes recontextualised news in the form of a lengthy quote from a story originally published in the *New York Post*, a well-established right-wing tabloid, and uses this as the basis for an attack on Stephanopoulos' handling of the debate:

(Example 1): As Breitbart News noted Wednesday, the New York Post unveiled emails which the paper reports were obtained from an abandoned laptop containing Hunter Biden's correspondence with a senior Burisma official. . .

Despite having 90 minutes in which to ask Biden the question, Stephanopoulos never did so, nor did anyone in the audience.

(Pollak, 2020)

Here, the reproduction of a story from the *New York Post* lends credence to implicit allegations of a bias in favour of Joe Biden. Such claims of bias are frequently seen in media

coverage of political debates, where the authority of moderators is challenged by partisan groups. It is noteworthy that Pollak mentions the lack of critical questions ‘the audience’ within this article, insinuating a bias in selection. This particular article is representative of the ‘borderline discourse’ that Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) refer to; where allegations of misconduct and bias are concealed within seemingly civil discourse.

Breitbart does not confine itself to the use of recontextualised news from ideologically aligned sources. In previous work we have elaborated upon how Breitbart will frequently recontextualise and amplify explicitly emotive content from political opponents in order to depict liberals as unhinged and mob-like (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Within our corpus, one example of such ‘hostile’ recontextualisation features the prominent liberal commentator Keith Olbermann, whose YouTube rant Breitbart reported on a month prior to the election:

(Example 2): Mr. Olbermann called Trump supporters “maggots,” the new insult du jour to replace 2016’s “deplorables” in the 2020 presidential election.

“Trump can be and must be expunged,” Olbermann said in his YouTube rant. “The hate he has triggered, the Pandora’s box he has opened, they will not be so easily destroyed.”

“So, let us brace ourselves,” he continued. “The task is twofold: the terrorist Trump must be defeated, must be destroyed, must be devoured at the ballot box, and he and his enablers and his supporters and his collaborators and the Mike Lees and the William Barrs and the Sean Hannitys and the Mike Pencs and the Rudy Giulianis and the Kyle Rittenhouses and the Amy Coney Barretts must be prosecuted and convicted and removed from our society while we try to rebuild it and to rebuild the world Trump has nearly destroyed by turning it over to a virus.”

“Remember it, even as we dream of a return to reality and safety and the country for which our forefathers died, that the fight is not just to win an election but to win it by enough to chase, at least for the moment, Trump and the maggots off the stage,” he inveighed. “And then try to clean up what they left.”

(Williams, 2020)

This article is an almost entirely verbatim transcription of Olbermann’s video, without much discursive framing. This allows Breitbart to depict Olbermann, a former mainstream media figurehead, as overtly partisan. The example includes multiple instances of ideological signposting, such as the multiple disparaging remarks about Trump and his supporters, as well as calls for prominent American conservatives like Vice President Mike Pence and Fox News host Sean Hannity to be arrested. Breitbart frequently uses this strategy, mobilising hostility towards their ideological opponents by highlighting moments when they disparage those understood to be ‘Good’. In doing so, it builds a discursive frame which suggests that mainstream media united in their opposition to Trump and the conservative movement.

Both pieces of recontextualised news are designed to evoke anger within Breitbart’s readership. The goal of recontextualisation here is as Bernstein (1990) first noted; in the process of relocation, the ideological positioning of the text has been fundamentally

changed. In this instance, it has been positioned to weaponise feelings of anger grounded within the context of liberal media bias on the American right. This anger is cultivated through reliance upon the shared understanding between Breitbart and its readership regarding the supposed norms of mainstream journalism, primarily that of objectivity. Politics are undoubtedly a significant part of creating this reaction, but there are other factors at play too. Olbermann is a well-known media figure, legitimated by his appearances on mainstream television and news. He performs a similar style of emotional news to that of Breitbart, referring to Trump and his supporters as ‘maggots’ and calling for the prosecution of his political enemies in a particularly Trumpian fashion, yet he is allowed to maintain his authority as a mainstream journalist. By contrast, Breitbart have faced a loss of advertising revenue as a result of a lobbying campaign, as well as exclusion from covering presidential campaigns (see: Johnson, 2018; Pollak, 2019).

Hochschild (2016) has articulated the sense of victimhood felt by American conservatives based upon feelings of cultural displacement, a sentiment also prevalent within Breitbart’s journalism (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). This encompasses the belief that liberals can make and break social rules with little consequence, while conservatives are shamed publicly and unjustly for any hint of transgression. By tapping into this sentiment, Breitbart is able to legitimate its more emotional style of journalism. In an increasingly polarised and emotional media landscape, such content is widely available for Breitbart to recontextualise as a resource for legitimising its own brand of journalism.

‘Friendly’ fire? The recontextualisation of conservative media, and the boundaries of conservative journalism

Whereas Breitbart’s coverage of liberal-leaning mainstream outlets was largely negative, the conservative media content recontextualised by Breitbart points to a different dynamic, where individual voices are amplified and presented as ‘truth-tellers’ within elements of the conservative movement. In contrast to the examples analysed above, this analysis examines recontextualised media across two similar ideological sites, with much of this type of reporting focussed on the role of Fox News, the most prominent conservative media organisation in the United States.

Firstly, these stories highlighted the journalistic relationship between Breitbart and Fox News which is indicative of the blurred boundaries between the alternative and the mainstream within the contemporary media landscape. Breitbart’s reporting on Fox is reflective of a wider schism within the American conservative movement in the wake of Trump’s election in 2016 and his defeat in 2020: That between supporters of Trump, and those who oppose him. As long-standing supporters of Trump, Breitbart frequently attacks his opponents and provide positive coverage of his supporters. This contributes to normalising conservative media, and the conservative movement as a whole, to Trumpian behaviours and rhetoric. The examples chosen from the sample are indicative of how Breitbart attempts to achieve this. The first story (Nolte, 2020) opens with the injunction to ‘Watch this video of Fox News anchor Sandra Smith as she expresses her elitist contempt after a Trump supporter dares question The Mighty Fox News Channel’s decision to declare His Fraudulency Joe Biden the winner of a hotly contested presidential election’. In the story

which follows the link to the Fox News Video, Breitbart columnist John Nolte decried Fox News for showing contempt to Trump supporters:

(Example 3): "Fox News laughs at us, mocks us, betrays us over and over and over again while posing as "fair and balanced," while posing as "different from the mainstream media," while posing as one of us. . .

And now we know what Fox News thinks of Trump supporters when Fox believes no one is watching them.

Anyone who is still watching Fox News is being laughed at by Fox News, and you're not just being laughed at by Fox News because you support Trump, you are being laughed at by Fox News because you are a sucker who still watches Fox News.

There is no doubt in my mind that Fox News just howls with laughter and ridicule at those faithful Fox News viewers who allow themselves to be stabbed in the back over and over and over again."

(Nolte, 2020)

Within the first paragraph, there are two clear invocations of metajournalistic discourse that positions Fox as 'Bad' journalism, while the continued repetition of 'us' implicitly aligns the reader towards Breitbart's journalism as the 'Good' alternative. Such appeals rely on public understanding of traditional journalistic norms, and an understanding of where Fox News and Breitbart are positioned within the US media ecology. The mockery of Fox's appearance of being 'fair and balanced' demonstrates this, as these words are not only an attempt to invoke the popularly understood journalistic standard of objectivity, but also a reference to the iconic Fox News slogan of 'Fair and Balanced' that ran until 2017. The insistence that Fox is 'posing as "being different from the mainstream media" while posing as one of us' is an example of Carlson's (2017) 'rhetorics of differentiation', the identification of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of journalism to Breitbart readers serves to create boundaries that demarcate 'Our Good' journalism and 'Their Bad' journalism.

However, not every piece of recontextualised Fox News content was necessarily framed negatively. Some Fox journalists were lionised for their political stances, perhaps none more so than Tucker Carlson. In a piece covering the passing of the Fairness for High Skilled Immigrants Act, Carlson took aim at Republican senators for supporting the law. In distinction to the previous article, which opened with a recontextualised video clip, followed by Nolte's critical comments, the text within this article is interspersed with reporting on the passing of the law, alongside quotes from Carlson's broadcast.

(Example 4) Tucker Carlson of the Fox News Channel says Senate Republicans are attempting to pack foreign workers into high-paying U.S. jobs while nearly 18 million Americans are jobless.

On Thursday evening, Carlson slammed Senate Republicans for failing to stop Sen. Mike Lee's (R-UT) green card giveaway that will allow Indian nationals to effectively monopolize

employment-based green cards for at least a decade and tech corporations to privatize the system.

“We’ve known for a long time that Silicon Valley wants foreign workers to dominate our economy,” Carlson said. “They don’t care what kind of effect that has on Americans. What’s surprising is that in a time of mass unemployment — and that’s what we have now, mass unemployment — the Republican Party of all people is helping them do it. That’s happening.”

“Yesterday, the Republican-controlled Senate unanimously passed a law called the ‘Fairness for High Skilled Immigrants Act.’ As if the problem with America is that we don’t have enough fairness for people from other countries. No concern about fairness for Americans,” Carlson continued. “The whole process took a matter of moments. It was led by Utah Senator Mike Lee. And without any objections, passed it.”

(Binder, 2020)

This article is perhaps the best example within the corpus of a policy issue that could reasonably be defined as Trumpist, with anti-immigrant sentiment a prevalent theme throughout, and a concern for ‘American’ workers at a time of record unemployment. It can be seen from the short extract above that Breitbart’s reporting on Fox News is far from homogenous. Rather, it is representative of a continuous, multifaceted effort to police and coerce Fox News into aligning with Breitbart’s aims and values, and by extension, with former President Trump.

This suggests that the relationship between Fox and Breitbart is best understood as a ‘relational’ one in which Breitbart envisions its journalism as a ‘self-perceived corrective’ and ‘counter-hegemonic’ (Holt et al., 2019, 862–863) to particular voices within Fox News. Throughout the sample, Breitbart used recontextualisation to amplify the voices of particular Fox journalists, such as Carlson, as well as talk show hosts Lou Dobbs, and Jeanine Pirro. Others, such as Chris Wallace and Bret Baier, received negative coverage for perceived transgressions against Trump and his movement.

In addition to the previously discussed ‘rhetorics of differentiation’, Breitbart builds journalistic legitimacy through attacking both sides of the political divide. Although openly partisan, Breitbart routinely demonstrates a willingness to attack those that could be perceived as ideological allies as well as their enemies, and to ostracise political conservatives who do not adhere to its ideological tenets. Through attacks on liberals and conservatives alike, Breitbart can claim adherence to the very journalistic ideals of fairness and balance that they argue are absent at Fox.

The best form of defence: recontextualisation as mitigation

It should be noted here that so much of Breitbart’s media reporting is spent attacking their opponents that they often ignore any negative coverage of their allies. Along those lines, the site frequently wholly omits any harmful stories. Nevertheless, there are instances when a story gains such prominence that Breitbart take a defensive approach to protect themselves and their allies. In these instances, recontextualised media content from liberal-leaning outlets is deployed in a similar manner to the first examples, in an effort to highlight perceived bias and unfairness. The difference in this instance is that the context of these arguments is

located within notable transgressions by conservatives, rather than liberals. The example below represents a reaction to media coverage of the January 2020 Capitol Hill riot, during which citizens stormed the Capitol building in anger after Trump's loss. Following the riot, Breitbart frequently drew equivalent comparisons to the Black Lives Matter protests over the summer of 2020, arguing that rioting was never justifiable in any circumstance. This line of reasoning can be seen in the example, which reports on a CNN broadcast in which a US immigration official argued with news anchors Don Lemon and Chris Cuomo:

(Example 5): CNN anchors Don Lemon and Chris Cuomo asserted Tuesday night that the riot on Capitol Hill last Wednesday was different than the Black Lives Matter riots last summer.

Bring up the summer riots, immigration official Ken Cuccinelli said, "They just haven't done it at the Capitol. They've been doing it all over the country for seven months."

Cuomo said, "That matters. That matters. Overturning the election is different than being pissed off about being shot by cops."

During the transition to the next show, anchor Don Lemon said, "That was a very important interview. And listen, I'm glad you mentioned about being shot by cops because you cannot compare. And I'm sick of people comparing. You can't compare what happened this summer to what happened at the Capitol. It's two different things."

He continued, "One is built on people, on racial justice, on criminal justice, right, on reform, on police not beating up – or police treating people of color differently than they do whites. Okay? That is not a lie. Those are facts. Go look at them. What happened at the Capitol was built on a lie perpetrated by the president and the people who support him. So, just on that one merit, if you want to call it, it's not comparable. That things are not comparable. So they should not be doing it. And stop this whataboutism."

(Key, 2021)

Breitbart here uses recontextualisation to attack Lemon and Cuomo as partisan, based on their open support for the Black Lives Matter movement, and their rejection of the notion that the two events are equivalent. This is a political appeal, but it is once again grounded within the notion that mainstream journalists should adhere to the tenet of objectivity. Breitbart specifically calls attention to Ken Cuccinelli's position as an immigration official who is also attempting to equate the two events. This is likely an effort to resonate with their conservative audience who are generally more favourable of more severe immigration controls, especially when squared off against known hate figures of Breitbart in Lemon and Cuomo. Overall, Breitbart's 'defensive' rhetoric bears great similarity to its attacks, with this type of coverage aiming to highlight how social rules are supposedly different for liberals than they are for conservatives, and how the mainstream media will attempt to manufacture this.

Conclusion

Through its use of recontextualisation, Breitbart simultaneously manages to appear objective and in line with legitimate journalistic values, *and* to evoke an emotional reaction in its audience. Breitbart frequently constructs discursive boundaries regarding what constitutes

'Their Good' journalism and 'Other Bad' journalism. This, in turn bolsters the site's journalistic legitimacy. Breitbart is vociferous in its attacks on liberal and conservative journalists alike, in an effort to portray them as engaged in a unified assault on authentic conservative values (Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Often, these attacks are emotionally and discursively grounded in a shared set of understandings about what the fields of journalism, politics, and indeed America *should* be. By highlighting perceived hypocrisies, double-standards, and other journalistic transgressions by mainstream media, Breitbart attempt to redefine the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practice in its own favour. While Breitbart is currently somewhat of a distinct case due to its financial backing and the political history of the United States, their use of discursive strategies is mirrored in other alternative right-wing media across the globe (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019).

However, for the most part, Breitbart reports on the media through recontextualising news from cable television channels that are themselves grounded in emotional appeals to audiences based on shared understandings about the social world. As news production practices of mainstream media in the United States have changed to generate increasingly emotional content to commodify the anger of citizens (Taibbi, 2019), this has provided Breitbart with the ideological ammunition needed to challenge the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable journalism. If an inherent part of journalistic legitimacy consists of the stories an institution tells about itself and others (Carlson, 2016), the increase in emotionally volatile content along with increasingly personalised content curated via algorithmic preferences, represents an epistemic problem for the journalistic profession, as shared understandings of what constitutes journalism begin to fracture. This represents a variety of opportunities for the study of the increasing prevalence of emotion not just within alternative right-wing media, but within mainstream journalism and how this is indicative of evolving news production processes within the US media landscape.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Jason Roberts was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for his doctoral research at the time of publication.

Notes

1. No stories were published in the Media section on 28th November 2020.
2. A story about Larry King being hospitalised with COVID-19 was excluded from this part of the study, as there was no detectable ideological slant within the article.

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Author biographies

Jason Roberts is a Research Student in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, UK. More info: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/research-students/view/1322772->

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen is a Professor in the School of Media, Journalism and Communication and University Dean of Research Environment and Culture, Cardiff University, UK. More info: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/182966-wahl-jorgensen-karin>