

The Press War in the Post-Truth Era: A Corpus-Assisted CDA of the Discourse of US Political Analysts on Trump's Figure and Policy

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Abstract

The election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency has been linked to a decline of popular confidence in democratic institutions and to the emergence of a *post-truth* era. The President accuses unfavourable media outlets of spreading *fake news*, which he contrasts with opposing – and even unproven – stories. The present research considered Trump's statements about the media posted on the social network Twitter since his election. Following his tweets, articles and broadcast news issued by the media under attack and those published by more acquiescent press were collected in order to explore how the President's figure and policy were framed by the voice of political analysts. Texts were investigated from quantitative and qualitative perspectives, combining Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the topics and discourses exploited, the strategies enacted in the presentation of opinions, and to discuss their implications and contribution to the reproduction of ideologies. The study suggested that the liberal media tended to exploit scandals to construct Trump's presidency as chaotic and to depict his figure as unreliable. The right-leaning press seemed, instead, to reproduce the President's discourse about biased media and to spread any alternative opinions and facts which may prove useful to defend and support Trump.

1. Politics in a post-truth age

Large numbers of people appear nowadays to be experiencing a sense of disillusionment with politics, a growing cynicism about the power of politicians to exert any real influence in decision-making

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processes in the contemporary context of globalisation (Wodak 2009: 23). The year 2016, in particular, was marked by the ascent of a new wave of anti-establishment populism, embodied in the British decision to withdraw from the EU and in the strengthening of nationalist movements all over Europe. The rise of such anti-politics became evident on November 8, 2016, when, in a stunning defeat of the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump was elected President of the USA. Clinton had actually won the popular vote, receiving nearly 3 million more preferences than the tycoon, but, irony of the US election system, Trump emerged as the winner due to the way votes are apportioned in the electoral college (see Krieg 2016). Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican candidate had actually been opposed by several members of the party (Burns, Haberman, Martin 2016). However, in the US two-party system, many electors tend to vote for the party, for the history, traditions and ideology it embodies. Many citizens thus decided to remain loyal to the Republican party despite disapproving of the personality representing it (Jackson 2016).

Trump was undeniably an unconventional candidate: before entering politics, he had no prior political or military experience, but had been in the spotlight for years, as a popular businessman and reality television star (Koran and Browne 2016). With his crass materialism, self-aggrandisement, racism and vulgarity, he personifies everything the rest of the world despises, but also admires, about America (Thomas 2015). Yet, from his independent position, he could condemn the establishment as corrupt and unresponsive and was able to exploit to his advantage the decline of public confidence in democratic institutions, especially for their supposed inability to provide solutions to unemployment, inequality, low income growth, immigration and terrorism (see Inglehart and Norris 2016).

Previous presidents like J.F. Kennedy and Obama were able to connect both with the black community and the lower – and middle – income whites. The last presidential election revealed instead a growing gap between the white working class and the politicians, intellectuals and media. Donald Trump managed to tap into the anger and frustration of the blue-collar workers and people from rural areas, who felt left behind in the U.S. economy (Vance 2016),

while the elites, with their assumptions of moral superiority over Trump's electors, were actually punished by the vote (Kahlenberg 2017). Through his arguments and his unrestrained communicative style, Trump cleverly managed to manipulate electors into consenting to their own exploitation, an achievement which is clearly illustrative of Gramsci's *hegemony* theory (1971). Yet, some of the President's actions, like his continuous attempts to repeal *Obamacare*, clearly reveal him as a champion of neoliberalism who endorses privatisation, free-market capitalism and reduced government spending, and places economic interest over public good (Zimmerman 2017).

Both the campaign and first measures of the newly elected President centred on controversial issues, such as the restriction of immigration and the expansion of the US nuclear arsenal; positions which have determined a clash with judges, with public opinion and the media. One of the main questions compromising the credibility of the White House is the current investigation into the relationship among Trump, his team and Russia during his presidential campaign in 2016. While denying accusations, Trump has regularly attacked certain media outlets for spreading what he calls *fake news* about him. The President discriminates between *good* and *bad* press, and even excluded some of the opposing news media from a White House press briefing, a decision which undermines the basic principles of democracy (Siddiqui 2017). Trump is not the first American President to display hostility to the media. Nixon, Bush, and even Obama showed similar stances to different degrees, e.g. trying to keep information about their administration secret. However, former President Richard Nixon expressed in private conversations the type of disdain that Trump uses in public (Shashkevich 2017).

Nowadays, the edges between facts and fiction are blurred, the Internet has democratised access to information and communication, deference towards experts has declined, the political establishment is subject to rising scorn and social media help the reproduction of ill-founded opinions (Jeffries 2017). We live in the era of *post-truth*, a neologism declared word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries and defined as an adjective "relating or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". The prefix *post*-refers to a time in which truth has become unimportant or irrelevant (Oxford Dictionaries 2017).

In an age of relatively high freedom of expression, fact-checking in order to verify or disprove assertions made in speech, print media or online content would appear essential for the integrity in any area where claims are made, including government, journalism and business (Rouse 2017). Yet, misinformation dominates and “[t]he truth has become so devalued that what was once the gold standard of political debate is a worthless currency” (Norman 2016). Donald Trump seems to personify this tendency, for his appeal to the “visceral over the rational” (D’Ancona 2017 quoted in Jeffries 2017) and his rejection of unfavourable data, constantly contrasted with alternative and even unproven narratives.

While newspapers and television remain the dominant sources of news in general, social media have become an increasingly important means of political communication. Former President Obama understood the significance of social media for civic engagement and community-building (Zappavigna 2011: 171), and since 2009, Trump has been using the social network Twitter to build his brand and interact with electors through “a stream of boasts, taunts” (Barbaro 2015), together with real-time comments and opinions about facts and news. Twitter has become his main sounding board and his tweets are regularly retweeted, quoted and analysed in the media.

Trump’s tweeting practices, like most of his actions during his presidency, reflect a defiance of established political norms. He uses a very basic lexicon, makes spelling and grammar mistakes and even often contradicts himself (Leith 2017). His communicative style on social media appears impulsive and clumsy, yet authentic; in line with the current trend for de-professionalisation and amateurism in political discourse (Enli 2017; see also Paragraph 5). The boundaries between celebrities and politicians, the latter traditionally serious, have become less defined, due to pressure to appear on television as frequently as possible and, more recently, to exploit social media to appeal to large audiences, so that “[p]oliticians become stars, politics become a series of spectacles and the citizens become spectators” (Street 2004: 441). Studies on nationally and internationally famous politicians (e.g. Berlusconi, Blair, Merkel, Obama) have analysed the transformation of discourses and performances of political action and their representation, acknowledging the emergence of a *celebrity culture* in the political field (Wodak 2011). The individual

media-savvy performance of politics seems today to have become more important than the political process (Grande 2000), a tendency which was clearly evidenced in the last US Presidential election campaign and its debates.

Politicians depend on reports in the media to spread their political agendas and the media rely on politicians as a source of information and news stories (Wodak 2009: 19). Trump acknowledges the importance of the media and has a mutually beneficial relationship with it. By giving attention to Trump, the US media can increase their audiences, while providing him with a platform to air his views:

The cost of a full-page ad in the New York Times can be more than \$100,000. But when they write a story about one of my deals, it doesn't cost me a cent, and I get more important publicity. I have a mutually profitable two-way relationship with the media – we give each other what we need. [...] These media types sell more magazines when my face is on the cover, or when I bring a bigger audience to their television show than they normally attract, and by far. And what's funny is that it turns out the best way for them to get that attention is to criticize me. (Trump 2015: 11, 14)

The present study stems from the analysis of the US President's opinions about the media expressed on his Twitter account, then to investigate comparatively the articles and broadcast news he denigrated and praised, and to explore how Trump's figure and policy were pictured by the voice of political analysts.

2. The discourse of news media

Far from being a value-free reflection of reality, news may indeed be viewed as a frame through which the social world is routinely constructed (Fowler 1991: 2, 4; van Dijk 1988a: 7-8). The perceived interest or *newsworthiness* of events is influenced by factors or *values* which are not neutral but rather cultural (Bell 1991: 156). All news is reported from a specific angle. There are always multiple ways of telling the same event and no choices are accidental, but convey ideological distinctions and differing representations (Fowler 1991: 4, 10). The study of media discourse considers, therefore, news as a complex communicative event embodying a social context, a set

of participants and the processes of production and reception (van Dijk 1988b: 1-2).

Through subtle discursive practices, journalists create public identities for both social groups and individuals (Fairclough 2003: 213-21) and often contribute to the expression and legitimisation of the national and international power structures (van Dijk 1988b: x). Media discourse appears to *construct* readers: newspapers not only have in mind an ideal addressee but also form their audience who will then be comfortable with the ideological position offered (Fowler 1991: 232). Language itself represents part of this ritualisation, as each news provider maintains a particular brand of language which is able to hold together its readership or viewership (Conboy 2010: 7-8; Nisco 2016: 28).

The media often seem to oversimplify complex processes, reducing them to brief spotlights, snippets or scoops (Street 2001: 58-9). This is influenced by the organisation of journalism itself, as professionals need to present stories which will attract many readers and to write them in a limited space and under tight deadlines (Wodak 2009: 18). News stories also try to reveal the backstage of politics, tracing the genesis of relevant decisions and making intrigues and conspiracies transparent (Machin and Niblock 2006), yet, in many cases, journalists typically rely on information from secondary sources which is impossible to validate (Wodak 2009: 19).

The process of news creation is influenced by a set of organisational, economic, and socio-political elements, one of which is newspaper ownership. In the past, owners used their newspapers to convey their own views, while, today, forms of direct control are not known to be very frequent. Yet, big owners still occasionally get involved in the editorial contents of their newspapers (Busà 2014: 13). Rupert Murdoch, for example, chairman and CEO of Fox News channel, is accused of biased reporting and of promoting the Republican Party (Compton 2004: 204). Influence is more commonly exerted indirectly, for instance, by appointing a newspaper editor who will publish material in line with the owner's point of view. In recent years, global media organisations and management groups have acquired various newspapers, thus reducing the number of independent information suppliers. This concentration of news organisations also affects online news, provided by a variety of

sources, from the publishers of print newspapers themselves, to Internet-based and mainstream media. In particular, large television networks like CNN, ABC and NBC have also been able to impose their presence online (Busà 2014: 13-4). While freedom of press is defended in the US constitution as one of the basic tenets of democracy, it also has to be acknowledged that the media have acquired an increasingly commercial character and an adversarial orientation (Patterson 2000: 241-42).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; e.g. van Dijk 1988a; 1988b; Bell 1991; Fairclough 1995) has investigated media discourse, focusing on the process and motivations behind linguistic and representative choices in order to unravel ideologies which may reproduce or challenge the dominant socio-political order. The synergy between Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis has been another productive approach to the study of media discourse. Corpus Linguistics tools allow researchers to identify themes or patterns that are not evident to the naked eye, through the statistical overview of large numbers of tokens and patterns, thus pinpointing areas of interest for a subsequent close analysis (Baker, Gabrielatos, McEnery 2013: 20-8).

3. Aims and purposes

The present research aims to investigate how President Trump's figure and actions are defined by conservative and liberal political analysts. More specifically, the study focuses on the discourse of news articles and television news mentioned by Trump on Twitter – whether he was expressing rage or approval. The analysis contrasts the news published by the media under attack with that issued by the more acquiescent press, in order to identify the linguistic choices made in the tweets, the motifs and discourses exploited, the strategies enacted in the presentation of opinions, and to discuss their implications and contribution to the reproduction of ideologies (see e.g. van Dijk 1995).

4. Corpus and methods

The present study integrated quantitative and qualitative analytical perspectives, by combining elements from Corpus Linguistics and

Critical Discourse Analysis. To distinguish between supposedly *real* and *fake news*, a selection of the messages posted on Twitter by Donald J. Trump from November 7, 2016 (the US Election Day) to May 31, 2017 was collected. Tweets were retrieved thanks to Twitter's advanced search tool¹, by searching for references to media (search words: *article, coverage, media, news, pundits, report, show, story*), then expanding the query to posts mentioning newspapers or television channels (search terms: *ABC, CNN, Financial Times, Fox, NBC, nytimes, Time Magazine, washingtonpost*). The final Twitter corpus comprises 112 short messages, for a total of 2,831 tokens (running words) and 842 types (distinct words). As Twitter only allows a 140 character limit, in some cases Trump's messages developed along a stream of consecutive tweets. In the first stage of the analysis, files were processed through the corpus investigation suite *WordSmith Tools 6.0* (Scott 2014a). Frequency distributions and recurrent patterns were retrieved in order to reveal how the President categorised and provided definitions for the different media outlets quoted.

Guided by @realDonaldTrump's² Twitter posts, the articles or television news referenced by the President were then collected, contrasting news causing his critiques with those approved by him. When Trump quoted no references as a source of data contradicting *fake news*, articles from Fox News and Breitbart were identified. Fox News channel, owned by the world's most powerful media mogul Rupert Murdoch, is known as recently providing powerful backing for Donald Trump (Rutenberg 2017). Breitbart, an alternative right and anti-establishment online news website, was selected since it represented one of Trump's preferred media outputs during his campaign and its Chairman, Steve Bannon, received further legitimization by being appointed White House Chief Strategist and Senior Counsellor (Frank 2017). The final news corpus consists of 24 original pieces of news condemned by the US President and 21 considered or referenced as *real news*. As would be expected,

¹ <https://twitter.com/search-advanced?lang=en>

² The @ symbol added to the beginning of Twitter account names is the way to send a public message or refer to somebody on Twitter.

the approved media maintained conservative positions, while liberal newspapers and cable news networks were constantly condemned by Trump (see Blake 2014).

The *fake news* corpus comprises: 10 articles by The New York Times, 8 articles by CNN, 1 television news show by CNN, 2 articles by The Washington Post, 1 article by NBC, 1 short piece of television news by NBC, 1 television news show by MSNBC, for a total of 37,745 tokens and 4,829 types. The *real news* corpus includes: 9 articles by Fox News, 3 television news programmes by Fox News, 1 piece of television news by Fox News, 4 articles by Breitbart, 1 by The Bloomberg View, 1 by The Financial Times, 1 by Time Magazine, 1 radio programme by PRN, for a total of 27,053 tokens and 4,623 types. Despite the heterogeneous news genres, the choice of corpus appeared to appropriately reflect the discourse panorama that inspired Trump's tweets.

With the aid of corpus linguistics tools, the news produced by the two groups of media were compared by retrieving keywords (Partington 2008: 98), then key items were concordanced to identify areas of particular interest. A close analysis of language was combined with a contextualisation and interpretation of patterns and tendencies. The study also examined comparatively the article headlines and programme titles of the two groups of texts, in order to investigate the way news stories were summarised and presented to the audience from different perspectives (van Dijk 1995; Baker, Gabrielatos, McEnery 2013: 20).

5. Trump's tweets about the media

The Twitter corpus was processed with the aid of *WordSmith Tools 6.0 Wordlist* (Scott 2014a) utility. From the frequency list, words referring to media outlets, genres and figures were identified (see Table 1).

Lexicon defining news in terms of its veracity and honesty (Table 2) also revealed to be among the most common semantic areas in the corpus, thus testifying to Donald Trump's tendency to express his attitude toward the media, by evaluating them through judgements that convey his praise or condemnation (see Martin and White 2005: 52-3).

TABLE 1

List of terms referring to media in Trump's tweets³

<i>Words</i>	<i>Occurrences</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>Occurrences</i>
media	48	washingtonpost	2
news	44	reporting	1
story	15	CBS	1
CNN	14	cover	1
nytimes	14	debate	1
report	10	Financial Times	1
coverage	6	Fox	1
FoxNews	6	Hannity	1
press	6	impersonation ³	1
sources	5	meetthepress	1
NBC	4	MSNBC	1
NBCNews	4	NBCnightlynews	1
ABC	3	Saturday Night Live/nbcnl	2
foxandfriends	3	pundits	1
interview	2	reporter	1
outlets	2	reviews	1
reports	2	Time Magazine	1
show	2	writers	1
stories	2		

TABLE 2

List of terms defining the media veracity in Trump's tweets

<i>Words</i>	<i>Occurrences</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>Occurrences</i>
fake	48	accurately	1
dishonest	13	amazing	1
failing	9	bias	1
wrong	8	demeaning	1
real	6	dishonesty	1
bad	5	disparaging	1
biased	5	distorted	1
badly	4	fabrication	1
false	4	fictitious	1
great	5	hoax	1
inaccurate	4	inaccurately	1

(continued on next page)

³ In his Twitter campaign against the media, the President even attacked the satirical programme *Saturday Night Live* defining it biased and, in particular, deprecating the imitation of Trump by actor Alec Baldwin.

TABLE 2 (continued from previous page)

Words	Occurrences	Words	Occurrences
made up	4	lie	1
truth	4	lied	1
crooked	3	mainstream	1
enemy	3	one-sided	1
fakenews	3	poor	1
lies	3	poorly	1
phony	3	ridiculous	1
credibility	2	rigged	1
fabricated	2	scam	1
terrible	2	untrue	1
unfair	2	unverified	1
unwatchable	2	viciously	1
accuracy	1		

The spread of false information to support a cause or influence public opinion is indeed a worrying phenomenon connected to the increasing use of the Internet and social media (Dietrich, Friesen, Tarvin, York 2017). Yet, it seems that President Trump, who has long had an antagonistic (although mutually profitable, see Paragraph 1) relationship with the press, is riding the popular lack of trust in the media to deny news stories he sees as unfavourable (Greenwood 2017). As expected, Trump mainly defined media as *fake* or *dishonest*, with *fake news media* (14 instances) being a fixed pattern, thus constructing them as a unitary opponent. As revealed in a previous corpus study (Tsur, Ognyanova, Lazer 2016), Trump’s use of language on Twitter shows a tendency to create nicknames, by using recurring adjectives followed by someone’s name or username. For instance, Trump typically referred to The New York Times as *failing @nytimes* (9 occurrences), lambasted for being one-sided and out of touch with voters. He also provided similar definitions for the other *offending* organisations, defined as “the opposition party” (30/01/2017) and he even declared:

The FAKE NEWS media (*failing @nytimes*, *@NBCNews*, *@ABC*, *@CBS*, *@CNN*) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People! (17/02/2017)

Trump's attacks against the media seem to reproduce the language typically used by leaders to refer to hostile foreign governments or subversive organisations, echoing the discourse of autocrats who seek to minimise dissent (Grynbaum 2017). Yet, he also constructed himself as a victim of a conspiracy and indulged in metadiscursive reflections on the role of Twitter as a way to bypass biased news media and reveal authentic facts directly to his followers:

If the press would cover me accurately & honorably, I would have far less reason to "tweet." Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen! (05/12/2016)

Trump also exploited his microblogging site to praise supportive media. On certain occasions, he exclaimed "Thank you to Time Magazine and Financial Times for naming me 'Person of the Year'" (15/12/2016) or "Thank you to Eli Lake of The Bloomberg View" (15/02/2017). More frequently, he paid tribute to the Trump-friendly Fox News and to its shows, by complimenting them on their ratings, e.g. "Congratulations to @FoxNews" (25/01/2017), and on their favourable coverage, as in "Thank you to @FoxNews and so many other news outlets for the GREAT reviews of the speech!" (21/01/2017), "@foxandfriends is great" (15/02/2017), "Wow, @FoxNews just reporting big news" (01/04/2017).

Trump's online persona adopts a very recognisable tweeting style, not dissimilar from the style of his speeches (see Leith 13/01/2017), but also influenced and constrained by the features of Computer Mediated Communication. The President makes frequent use of extreme but empty adjectives and adverbs like *great*, *wonderful*, *amazing*, *fake*, *unfair*, *failing*, *badly*, *poorly*. He tends to employ a simple syntax and short words, and a childish but direct lexicon. The use of adjectives like *wrong* (e.g. "their coverage was so wrong") and *bad*, in particular, seems remindful of children's language and of a Manichean distinction of the world into good and bad. To reproduce the tone of spoken language, he also makes abundant use of emphatic language by means exclamations, question marks, *shouty* capitalisations and intensifiers like *very*, *so*, *totally*, *truly*. He focuses public attention on certain issues with continuous repetitions and variations on a theme, so that "dishonest" becomes, for instance, "Very dishonest", "How dishonest are they", "More dishonest than everyone knows". The President also tends to stress his point by

finishing his tweets with an evaluative word or phrase, like “This is REAL news!”, “FAKE NEWS – A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!”, “Are we living in Nazi Germany?” (see also Leith 2017; Hodges 2017).

His posts are generally published immediately after reading a piece of news or while watching a television programme. In his instinctive real-time reactions to press disclosures, Trump actually seems to uncritically highlight and reuse any contents and sources that may support his cause, without showing any real commitment to the truth, facts and validity on which he insists in his comments. Trump’s tweets also contain a large amount of offensive comments, which appear to be published without considering their consequences and the President’s institutional role. Trump’s invectives have become so common that The New York Times website has even launched a project collecting and updating his Twitter insults in an online database (Lee and Quealy 2017).

Trump’s incendiary language and attitude may resemble that of his angry Twitter followers and – voluntarily or involuntarily – convey an impression of authenticity and closeness to the American people. The US President may seem, in sum, to be the archetype user of Twitter, a platform defined as a channel of communication promoting simplicity, impulsivity and incivility (Ott 2017).

6. The discourse of the US news media about Trump

Following Trump’s tweets, the *Fake news* and *Real news* corpora were collected. With the aid of *WordSmith Tools 6.0* (Scott 2014a), the lists of frequencies for each component were obtained. The corpora were then compared through the *Keywords* device, in order to extract a keyword list which shows the terms occurring statistically more often in one corpus than the other. Due to the small size of the corpora, the *p value* was set at 0.001, the minimum frequency at 2 and the minimum percentage of texts at 15% (see Scott 2014b).

From the keyword list, *investigation* (111 instances)/*investigations* (18) (see Table 3) was one of the most relevant terms typifying the *Fake media* corpus – i.e. texts generating Trump’s anger. A number of inquiries have clouded the present administration since its beginning, mainly related to Trump’s alleged connections with Moscow. As evident from Table 3, further keywords for the democratic media

refer to the Russian scandal: *Comey, FBI, director, attorney, James, fired, general, Jeff, committee, senate, Russian, Sessions.*

TABLE 3

Keyword lists

<i>Fake news</i>				<i>Real news</i>			
<i>Word</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Keyness</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Keyness</i>
Comey	97	0.26	104.95	percent	58	0.21	61.28
FBI	110	0.29	74.47	Obama	83	0.31	55.24
director	69	0.18	54.92	Hannity	33	0.12	49.73
investigation	111	0.29	45.09	Fox	37	0.14	39.40
attorney	61	0.16	42.90	voters	32	0.12	35.13
that	813	2.15	38.24	March	25	0.09	31.59
CNN	49	0.13	25.55	signed	31	0.11	30.56
James	38	0.10	24.86	#	358	1.32	26.74
fired	40	0.11	23.43	media	38	0.14	26.10
investigations	18	0.05	19.46	Nunes	29	0.11	25.09
general	84	0.22	18.33	press	44	0.16	24.59
Jeff	30	0.08	17.57	never	31	0.11	21.24
independent	16	0.04	17.30	surveillance	11	0.04	19.22
committee	49	0.13	16.75	held	16	0.06	17.56
senate	34	0.09	15.62	Steve	15	0.06	16.05
Conway	49	0.13	15.02	promises	9	0.03	15.72
Russian	78	0.21	14.95	spy	9	0.03	15.72
confidence	30	0.08	14.79	unmasking	9	0.03	15.72
democrat	18	0.05	13.37	leaking	8	0.03	13.98
know	89	0.24	13.26	destroy	8	0.03	13.98
say	66	0.17	13.01	weekend	8	0.03	13.98
bipartisan	12	0.03	12.97	young	8	0.03	13.98
Republicans	48	0.13	12.81	guys	8	0.03	13.98
mean	38	0.10	12.55	jobs	15	0.06	13.23
estate	11	0.03	11.89	narrative	7	0.03	12.23
Murray	11	0.03	11.89	immigration	7	0.03	12.23
California	11	0.03	11.89	citizen	7	0.03	12.23
contact	11	0.03	11.89	deal	33	0.12	11.93
Sessions	26	0.07	11.53	brand	10	0.04	11.85
health	26	0.07	11.53	fake	12	0.04	11.64
Mr	135	0.36	11.31	better	18	0.07	10.94
Republican	54	0.14	11.07				

The term *investigation* occurs on 10 occasions with the context words *Michael Flynn*, former counsellor for the National Security, under scrutiny for concealing conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak to the US Vice President Mike Pence (Borger, Jeffery, Scruton, Levett 2017). While carrying out the Russia investigation, former FBI director James Comey was removed from his position by Trump, on the recommendation of the current Attorney General Jeff Sessions (Borger, Jeffery, Scruton, Levett 2017). 21 occurrences of *investigation* refer to the issue and present Sessions as the man who “interfered with”, “changed the focus of” but then “recused himself from” the Russia enquiry. On 7 occasions, political commentators also call for an *investigation* by an *independent*, *transparent* and *impartial* commission, while at the same time also expressing a lack of trust in any substitute prosecutor nominated by Trump:

[...] it destroys people’s confidence in the FBI about whoever the president may appoint is now going to be in charge of an investigation into people who have been close to the president during the campaign. Any potential collusion with Russia. (*Anderson Cooper 360*, CNN 09/05/2017)

60 instances in the left-leaning corpus refer to the Senate and House Intelligence Committees and FBI *investigation/s* into Russia’s involvement in the last presidential election, including the Republican primaries and Trump campaign. In particular, the texts mention 15 times the controversial issue of whether Trump himself was under scrutiny or not, e.g. “this White House is under investigation” or “Comey may have told him he wasn’t under investigation”. Following the collection of the present corpus, it was actually revealed that the House Judiciary Committee, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and FBI are currently analysing any offences that may have been committed during the investigation itself, including whether the US President pressured Comey to drop the Flynn probe, which may even cause Trump’s *impeachment* for a possible obstruction of justice (Borger, Jeffery, Scruton, Levett 2017; Henderson 2017).

Before the election, the presidential campaign had already been shaken by the FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton. It was revealed that, rather than using official State Department e-mail accounts

on federal servers, the Democratic candidate had used a private provider for official correspondence which was allegedly hacked by Russian Intelligence (Bryan 2017). The issue is mentioned in 17 cases by the liberal media, since Trump exploited it to justify Comey's dismissal, deprecating his "handling of the investigation of Hillary Clinton", which the President had praised at first.

On two occasions in the *Fake news* corpus, it was suggested that the Russia scandal may have affected the outcome of the 2016 elections (*Nightly News with Lester Holt*, NBC 05/01/2017) and to overtly generate doubts about the legitimacy of Trump's election:

'The New York Times' and 'The Washington Post' [...] report that Mike Flynn was in contact with the Russian government during the campaign, before the election, while Russia was interfering in the U.S. election in multiple ways to tip the balance of the election to Donald Trump. (*The Rachel Maddow Show*, MSNBC 14/02/2017)

A peculiar characteristic of news discourse is its intertextuality and its reliance on various sources of information (see Richardson 2007). As in the examples shown, direct and indirect quotes are frequently woven into the fabric of the news discourse to give it a semblance of authenticity, rendering words as incontrovertible facts. Yet, the use of quotations from selected legitimised sources results in the establishment of a specific view of the world (Teo 2000: 18). Quotation patterns, in sum, "can become a powerful ideological tool to manipulate readers' perception and interpretation of people and events in news reports" (Teo 2000: 20).

Considering the keywords for the *Real news* corpus (see Table 3), the Russian scandal appears to be more often presented from a different perspective. The right-leaning media seem indeed to focus on the developments of the House Intelligence Committee investigation involving *Obama*, *Nunes*, *surveillance*, *spy*, *unmasking*, *leaking*. The Committee Chairman Devin Nunes alleged the surveillance of Trump's collaborators during the transition period was incidental but the disclosure of their identities perhaps deliberate. *Obama* is mentioned on 83 occasions in the right-leaning corpus. While on 35 occurrences the texts generally comment on or refer to his administration, 48 instances link his figure to the Intelligence scandal. In particular, conservative media appear to

support the opinion held by the current US President, who blamed Barack Obama for the surveillance and leaking, alleging a conspiracy to sabotage Trump's administration:

It's also possible that a group of national security bureaucrats and former Obama officials are selectively leaking highly sensitive law enforcement information to undermine the elected government. (The Bloomberg View 14/02/2017)

A former top Obama administration official has acknowledged efforts by her colleagues to gather intelligence on Trump team ties to Russia before Donald Trump took office. (Fox News 29/03/2017)

'The main issue in this case, is not only the unmasking of these names of private citizens, but the spreading of these names for political purposes that have nothing to do with national security or an investigation into Russia's interference in the U.S. election' a congressional source close to the investigation told Fox News. (Fox News 31/03/2017)

Among the keywords for the conservative corpus, terms referring to the news media were also retrieved: *media*, *press*, *narrative* and *fake* (see Table 3). The term *narrative* (7 occurrences) acquires a negative connotation, referring to distorted representations circulated by the Democrats which the commentator wishes to challenge. In 6 cases, the fabricated story refers to the *fake* or *conspiracy narrative* about Russian collusion, while on one occurrence it is used to object to the prejudice according to which "Republicans are racist, that they're sexist [...]" (*Hannity*, Fox News 03/01/2017).

Right-wing media exploit Trump's antagonism with the democratic press to their own advantage and re-appropriate the President's public discourse about *fake news*. From the analysis of the concordance lines (see the sample in Figure 1), the liberal media appears to be presented as: "not doing its jobs"; "not reporting" the President's "achievements"; "not covering" news that might harm the Democrats; inventing stories about the Russian scandal "without substantiating the claims"; trying to "destroy Trump". In sum, echoing Trump's language, as being "very dishonest".

From a closer reading, it appeared evident that the right-leaning media tended to go beyond mere intertextuality and political analysis. The articles and programmes in the *Real media* corpus referenced statements pronounced by Trump and his aides by

inserting carefully chosen sentences which become representative of the point of view maintained by the news outlet, as in “‘No, the Kremlin has no compromising materials on Trump’, Peskov [Putin’s spokesman] said. ‘This is absolutely fake information, a fabrication and complete nonsense’” (Breitbart News 11/01/2017).

FIGURE 1

Sample of concordance lines for *media* in the *Real news* corpus

covered by this all-left propaganda destroy Trump media, and it does involve the Clintons and an tones, the president is firing howitzers at the media and the Washington establishment. I'll and to the American people by criticizing the media?" And there it was. Sure as I'm sitting here the media should be focusing on? Gillian: I think the media and White House should be focusing number one to pay attention to it, and I think that's cause of the media collusion – is they were exposed as using racial you there is zero evidence of this eight-month-old media conspiracy narrative that President Trump and So what does that say to the American people about media coverage in America? Dishonest?" Assange: "It's Julian Assange: Media coverage in America is very dishonest Jan. 03, took him seriously but not literally, while the media did the opposite. Now that he has won, election represents a new reality that if the media does not do its job, there will be more Wikileaks course the Democrats don't like it, and of course the media doesn't like it, but it isn't gonna stop him. And I the spy's dossier, which has generated backlash about media ethics over how an outlet can publish rocky from the start. When Flynn was attacked in the media for his ties to Russia, he was not allowed by as when the president told CIA employees that the media had invented the story about his enmity toward and his radical belief system, and everybody in the media ignored a lot of it. So my question to you then : Yet they don't care about the truth, neither does media. Now, Congressman Nunes to his credit, he's politics. Closely related is the collapse in trust for the media — or the Lügenpresse as Mr Trump's alt-right waving his arms around are easy to find, yet the media pretends they don't exist. Trump, who once exposed—" Assange: "Could I just go back to this media question? What is the line now in the New York . This is Donald Trump going over the head of the media right to the American people, advancing his gonna go straight to the American people because the media's being so dishonest and misrepresenting. This is this now a new reality going forward in terms of if the media's not going to do their job, they are going to be off the achievements they've had here that the media's not reporting 'cause they're so focused on disrespect; violence incites violence." Of course, the media's repeated insistences that "Trump mocked a incidents and wild market gyrations. It is not just media self-interest to raise the alarm about his method

Conservative means of communication appear to protect and sponsor Trump, often through the voices of fervent right-wing media icons. In particular, in his programmes on Fox News, *Hannity*, Sean Hannity attacked the liberal press, dismissed any claims, vigorously defended the President and drew attention to alternative narratives:

[F]or weeks now we've been telling you there is zero evidence of this eight-month-old media conspiracy narrative that President Trump and

his campaign were secretly colluding with Putin and the Russians. Zero evidence. [...] I want to focus on the real scandal that is rarely covered by this all-left propaganda destroy Trump media, and it does involve the Clintons and an enormous mining company called 'Uranium One'. [...] If you haven't heard this before, you're probably watching the mainstream media. (28/03/2017)

Similarly, in an interview that appeared during an episode of one of Trump's favourite television news programmes, *Fox & Friends*, more appropriate topics of interest for the press were also suggested:

Ainsley Earhardt: 'What are the biggest national security concerns that the media should be focusing on?' Gillian Turner: 'I think the media and White House should be focusing number one on Russian provocations around the world [...]'. (18/02/2017)

In his programme on PRN, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, the radio host Rush Limbaugh also expressed his admiration for Trump's attitude during his solo press conference, in which he berated the press for its negative coverage of his administration:

Just what the doctor ordered. This is Donald Trump going over the head of the media right to the American people, advancing his domestic agenda and being totally transparent with these people. [...] H]e rattled off the achievements they've had here that the media's not reporting. (16/02/2017)

Other *Real media* also defended Trump from allegations and condemned rival news outlets, such as when world-famous Hollywood actress Meryl Streep's accusations of discrimination were reproduced across the media: "Of course, the media's repeated insistences that 'Trump mocked a disabled reporter' are not honest" (Breitbart News 09/01/2017).

More balanced analyses were carried out by less overtly *Trumpist* media, yet they still tended to criticise the liberal press, e.g. for underestimating the strength of the Republican nominee, as in the article published in *The Financial Times*: "The pithiest summary of Mr Trump's road to victory was that his supporters took him seriously but not literally, while the media did the opposite" (12/12/2016).

For the present study, it also appeared interesting to consider the way the two groups of media condensed President Trump's

decisions and actions through headlines and titles. Initial summaries like headlines and leads in newspapers are seen as prominent expressions of the overall meaning or gist of a news report. Headlines convey the (subjectively) most important information, backgrounding or foregrounding specific topics, thus also signalling underlying ideologies (van Dijk 1988b; 1995).

As expected, the two groups of media under study gave prominence to different aspects of the same events. Table 4 shows a sample of the comparison between titles of news articles and programmes dealing with the same stories in the same time span but from contrasting perspectives.

As appears evident, liberal media showed a tendency to present Trump’s transition and presidency as chaotic and unstable (e.g. *firings, discord, disarray*), his person as unreliable (e.g. “believes Julian Assange over the CIA”) and thus to undermine his credibility. Conservative media appear instead to refer to and highlight any information or opinion which may favour, restore and support the President’s image (e.g. “Julian Assange: Media coverage in America is very dishonest”; “Kremlin: Compromising Donald Trump report is ‘pulp fiction’”), a trend already identified in Trump’s public discourse (see Paragraph 5).

TABLE 4
Headlines comparison

<i>Fake media</i>	<i>Real media</i>
Firings and Discord Put Trump Transition Team in a State of Disarray (The New York Times 16/11/2016)	The Latest: Developments in the Trump transition efforts (Breitbart News 15/11/2016)
Ex-CIA spokesman: Trump believes Julian Assange over the CIA (CNN 04/01/2017)	Julian Assange: Media coverage in America is very dishonest (<i>Hannity</i> , Fox News 03/01/2017)
Trump asking Congress, not Mexico, to pay for border wall (CNN 06/01/2017)	Trump may pursue border wall without new bill (Fox News 05/01/2017)
Inside the Russian hacking report that President Obama received Thursday (<i>Nightly News with Lester Holt</i> , NBC 05/01/2017)	Kremlin: Compromising Donald Trump report is ‘pulp fiction’ (Breitbart News 11/01/2017)
Trump News Conference Provokes Anxiety, Humor and Shrugs Around World (The New York Times 17/02/2017)	Trump Triumphs Over Press (<i>The Rush Limbaugh Show</i> , PRN 16/02/2017)

7. Conclusions

With his political incorrectness, his theatrical populism, his provocative use of social media, his authoritarian use of a friend-enemy scheme, and his anti-intellectualism, Donald Trump surely represents an unconventional political leader (Fuchs 2017).

We are aware of the fact that Donald Trump is an easy target and that he is the object of constant and similar analyses by the liberal press. However, the present article aimed at providing an initial overview of the ongoing discourses circulated by both Trump's Twitter channel and by contrasting US news media, especially on the figure and earliest actions of the President and on the role of the media itself. While the way the press chooses to report and comment on events always reveals ideological implications (Fowler 1991: 232), the stances held by news outlets on Trump seem to be particularly polarised and influenced by private interests, incited by the President's continuous attacks against left-leaning means of communication.

The first stage of Trump's Presidency has been troubled by several controversial issues, and the investigation into possible collusion with the Russian government still hangs over his administration. The liberal media, which failed to forecast Donald Trump's election, seem now to be taking every opportunity to convey the image of a chaotic administration and to cast doubts about the legitimacy of Trump's election, in an apparent attempt to contribute to a political crisis and to impeachment claims.

After Obama's two administrations, the conservative and alternative media outlets have now gained greater visibility and influence. The news media which, covertly or overtly, support Trump's policy would therefore seem to be struggling to preserve their privilege, tending to strenuously defend the President from attack. In their rhetoric, the right-leaning media appear to echo the President's discourse about *fake news* and about the alleged conspiracy carried out by Democrats to compromise his administration. To support Trump, conservative media thus give credit to any alternative piece of information or opinion which may favour him. The *social media President* will tend, in turn, to uncritically tweet such news, thus creating a vicious circle in which truthfulness never seems to require validation.

The present research has suggested the need for additional studies on the relationship between politics and social media, not only in the United States but also in other national contexts. It has also shown how social media posts are increasingly inserted in the very fabric of the news texts. It would thus be interesting to further explore the way politicians' messages on personal channels are being recontextualised by the press as a source of news and opinions, and to support ideological beliefs.

As for the future of Trump's administration, David Gergen, former adviser to Presidents Nixon and Clinton, declared that the USA is definitely "in an impeachment territory" (in *Anderson Cooper 360°*, CNN 17/05/2017). However, history tells us that only three Presidents have been subjected to impeachment proceedings: Johnson and Bill Clinton were indicted but acquitted and remained in office, while Nixon resigned to avoid being prosecuted amid the Watergate scandal. In the current scenario, those calling for impeachment are both most Democrats, and Trump's opponents in general, as well as Republicans who are deserting him. However, impeachment is not a simple process and, to date, Trump has not yet been officially accused of any offences, though legal analysts say he may have obstructed justice. Thus, the point is, how might a conspiracy eliminate him? Politicians and media may be lying about him with no fear of being blamed, just as, interestingly enough, more Americans want Trump's impeachment than wanted Richard Nixon's at the beginning of the Watergate scandal (Mindock 2017). A most unprecedented unpopularity for a most unusual President, or more media lies?

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