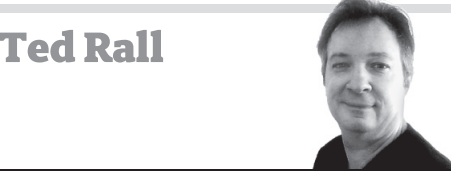


# The U.S. media is in the gutter with Trump



Ted Rall

NEW YORK

How you respond to an attack defines you. Keep your cool, remain civil and others will respect the way you handle yourself, even if they disagree with you. Lower yourself to your assailant's level and — at best — spectators will dismiss your dispute as a he-said-she-said between two jerks.

So much has been written about U.S. President Donald Trump's debasement of rhetorical norms and his gleeful contempt for truth that there is no need to cite examples or quote studies that count the prolificacy of his lies. Trump's attacks on journalists — "fake news," mocking a disabled reporter's body movements — are contemptible. They undermine citizens' trust in news media — a serious menace to democracy and civil society.

Less noticed is how major news organizations, incensed by the president's trolling, have debased themselves to Trump's moral level.

American journalism used to adhere to strict standards. Though impossible to achieve, objectivity was paramount. At bare minimum, reporters were expected to project an appearance of political neutrality.

Truth only derived from facts — verifiable facts. Not conjecture and never wishful thinking. Sources who wanted to be quoted had to go on the record. Anonymous sources

could flesh out background but could not be the entire basis for a story.

From the start of Trump's run for president — before the start — Democratic-leaning media outlets abandoned their own long-cherished standards to declare war on him. Every day during the 2016 campaign The New York Times led its coverage with its forecast of Hillary Clinton's supposed odds of defeating Trump. Setting aside the fact of the Times' embarrassing wrongness — the day before Election Day they gave Clinton an 85 percent chance of winning — it cited odds rather than polls. Maximizing a sense of Clintonian inevitability was intended to demoralize Republicans so they wouldn't turn out to vote. The two figures might mean the same thing. But 85-15 odds look worse than a 51-49 poll.

It's downright truthy. And when truthiness goes sideways it makes you look really, really dumb. 51-49 could go either way. 85-15, not so much.

The impeachment battle marks a new low in partisanship among media outlets.

After Trump's surprise-to-those-who'd-never-been-to-the-Rust-Belt win, outlets like the Times declared themselves members of a so-called resistance. Opinion columnists like Charles M. Blow pledged never to "normalize" Trumpism; what this has meant, ironically, is that Blow's essays amount to rote recitations on the same topic: Normally, about the argument that Trump sucks. Which he does. There are, however, other issues to write about, such as the fact that we are all doomed. It would be nice to hear Blow's opinions about taxes, militarism and abortion.

Next came years — years! — of Robert



Partisan political reporting has undermined the credibility of U.S. media outlets. BLOOMBERG

Muellerpalooza. Russia, corporate media outlets said repeatedly, had "meddled" in the 2016 election. Russian President Vladimir Putin installed Trump; Hillary Clinton's snubbing of her party's 72 percent-progressive base had nothing to do with the loss of the most qualified person blah blah blah to an inductee in the WWE Hall of Fame.

Whatever happened to the journalistic chestnut: If your mother says she loves you, check it out? Russiagate wasn't a news report. It was religious faith. Russia fixed

the election because we, the media, say so, we say so because we were told to say so by politicians, who were told to say so by CIA people, whose job is to lie and keep secrets. No one checked out anything.

What we knew and still know is that a Russia-based troll farm spent either \$100,000 or \$200,000 on Facebook ads to generate clickbait. Most of those ads were apolitical. Many were pro-Clinton. The company has no ties to the Russian government. It was a \$6.8 billion election; \$200,000 couldn't have

and didn't move the needle.

Anonymous congressional sources told reporters that anonymous intelligence agents told them that there was more. The Mueller report implies as much. But no one went on the record. No original or verifiable copies of documentary evidence has been leaked. The report's numerous citations are devoid of supporting material. By pre-Trump journalistic standards Russiagate wasn't a story any experienced editor would print.

It was barely an idea for a story.

Russiagate fell apart so decisively that Democratic impeachers now act like the Mueller report — a media obsession for three years — never even happened.

Speaking of impeachment, mainstream media gatekeepers are so eager to see Trump removed from office that they're violating another cardinal rule of journalism: If it's news, print it. The identity of the CIA "whistleblower" (scare quotes because actual whistleblowers reveal truths that hurt their bosses) who triggered impeachment over Trump's menacing phone call to the president of Ukraine has been known in Washington, and elsewhere if you know where to look, for months.

Federal law prohibits the government from revealing his identity, and rightly so. But it has leaked. It's out. It's news. Nothing in the law or journalistic custom prevents a media organization from publishing it. News outlets felt no compulsion to similarly protect the identity of Bradley Manning or Edward Snowden. So why aren't newspapers and broadcast networks talking about it?

"I'm not convinced his identity is important at this point, or at least important enough to put him at any risk, or to unmask

someone who doesn't want to be identified," New York Times editor Dean Baquet said. So much for the people's right to know. Why should subscribers buy a newspaper that doesn't print the news?

There is a "because Trump" change in media ethics that I welcome. What's suspect is the timing.

Trump is the first president to get called out for his lies right in the news section. Great! Imagine how many lives could have been saved by a headline like "Bush Repeats Debunked Falsehood That Iraq Has WMDs." A headline like "Slurring Sanders' Numerous Female Supporters as 'Bros,' Hillary Clinton Lies About Medicare-for-All" could have nominated and elected Bernie and saved many Americans from medical bankruptcy.

But all presidents lie. Why pick on Trump? His lies are (perhaps) more numerous. But they're no more bigger than his predecessors (see Iraq WMDs, above). Yet discussion of former presidents remains respectful and slavish as ever.

I say, give coverage of Obama and other ex-presidents the same tone and treatment as the current occupant of the White House gets from the news media:

"Wallowing in Corrupt Wall Street Cash, Obama Drops \$11.75 Million on Gaudy Martha's Vineyard Mansion Estate"

"Ellen DeGeneres Sucks Up to Mass Murderer George W. Bush"

"Jimmy Carter, First Democratic President to Not Even Bother to Propose an Anti-Poverty Program, Dead at TK"

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Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's mission to reset the clock of British politics ended in disaster for the British left. AFP-JIJI

## Labour's defeat offers the left hard lessons

STEPHAN RICHTER  
AND DENIS MACSHANE  
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THE GLOBALIST

Never, ever before has such hate and venom been directed on the doorsteps throughout Britain against a party leader as was this case with Jeremy Corbyn.

The Labour Party leader was never going to be elected but insisted on running to satisfy his — hard to imagine — personal vanity, in addition to trying out his throwback politics.

This was an amazing election because British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is not a popular candidate. He is a known liar. That is usually wonderful grounds for an opposition — if not to win, then to make gains. The opposite happened. This is Labour's worst electoral defeat since 1935.

That this was so is due to the fact that Johnson could not have dreamed for a better Labour candidate than Corbyn. The latter is the one man in British politics who is even significantly more unpopular than Johnson himself.

Johnson probably could never believe his good luck that Labour sent up from central casting an easy-to-beat old man with political ideas that date him by decades.

None of that fazed Corbyn. He gave off the sense of seeing himself on a historic mission to reset the clock of British politics back to the 1960s. Corbyn's list of catastrophic failures is long. It includes his personal unwillingness to root out anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, his admiration for Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, his life-long hostility to NATO and the European Union, his rampant anti-

Americanism and his personal hatred of the election-winning Tony Blair and his history of support for different terrorist groups like the nationalist IRA.

Corbyn has managed to defy political gravity and accountability for four years but now has come crashing to the ground.

It would be nice — and fully within British electoral traditions — for Corbyn, the resoundingly beaten leader, to step down. Instead, he and his acolytes will blame everyone else — the media, the Blair generation, centrist-oriented Labour MPs and Blair — but they will not look in the mirror.

There is a major lesson in Corbyn's defeat for the European left like the German Social Democrats, who are desperately turning leftward in their search for more appealing policies, new offers to voters and new leaders.

Corbyn incarnated all the European hard-left's standard trope but, outside young, urban, leftist circles, his vision flopped completely. "The people" — i.e., traditional Labour voters — just didn't buy his ranting on globalization, liberal economics or more state control of the economy. Instead, they put in their lot with the Tories.

Still, Corbyn is convinced to this day that deep down people wanted more power for trade unions, more taxes as well as a liberalizing of modern capitalism through nationalizations. He was wrong.

At least Corbyn's offer to the British people was honest in one regard: It incarnated every wish list that different groups in left-wing 20th century politics had ever advocated.

As they look at the disaster of Corbyn and elimination of Labour as a serious political force in Britain for at least a decade, will the generation of young activists rethink?

Labour attracted 500,000 new mainly

young, university educated members after 2015. They swallowed the magic socialist potion offered by Corbyn and his narrow coterie of Marxist advisors.

Now, the Corbyn generation of young Labour activists face a decade in the political wilderness.

But it is not just them who have some serious rethinking to do. So do the (older) intellectuals, university professors and journalists — for example columnists on The Guardian. They are the ones who describe in glowing terms the links between the Corbyn team and leftist parties like Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Die Linke in Germany and Jean-Luc Melenchon, the French leftist who leads the anti-EU La France Insoumise party movement. Most of them rank in the single digits electorally.

Some serious rethinking needs to happen if the Labour Party is not planning to be a spent, past force in British politics.

Achieving just that is certainly the ambition of Johnson and the Tories, with their grand plan to achieve a realignment in British politics through what they grandiosely label as "The People's movement." The question is whether Labour seriously wants to continue making things easy for Johnson.

A first step for Labour would be to elect a sensible new leader soon, probably a woman (such as Rebecca Long-Bailey or Emily Thornberry). But even when that happens, Labour will take some time to get back on its feet.

*Stephan Richter is the publisher and editor-in-chief of The Globalist. Denis MacShane, a contributing editor at The Globalist, was Britain's minister for Europe from 2002 to 2005.*

# Xi Jinping's annus horribilis

China's president is paying the price for shifting the country to authoritarianism

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CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

China's strongman leader can't seem to catch a break. From the trade war with the United States to the crisis in Hong Kong to international criticism of his human rights record, President Xi Jinping suffered major setbacks in 2019 and his prospects for 2020 appear even worse.

China could have ended the trade war with the U.S. last May, thereby giving its flagging economy a significant boost. Yet, at the last minute, Chinese leaders backtracked on a number of issues that American negotiators had considered settled. With the U.S. also incurring high costs from the trade war, U.S. President Donald Trump was furious and took his revenge.

Beyond imposing new tariffs, Trump escalated his efforts to limit China's access to vital technologies. Less than two weeks after the trade agreement collapsed, Trump signed an executive order barring U.S. companies from using telecoms equipment from manufacturers that his administration deemed a national security risk. The most prominent of these is the Chinese tech giant Huawei, which Trump had already been targeting for months.

While the U.S. and China have announced agreement on the terms of a new "phase one" trade deal, the technology war — and the broader confrontation between the two powers — will continue. This implies that Xi's problems won't go away, given China's enduring economic dependence on the outside world and the importance of rising living standards to sustaining the legitimacy of one-party rule.

Further risks arise from Hong Kong, which is engulfed in its worst political crisis since its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. It all started when Hong Kong's China-backed chief executive proposed a bill that would make it easier to extradite criminal suspects from the city to the mainland. Viewing this as part of a broader central-government campaign to assert tighter control over the special administrative region, people poured into the streets to protest.

The government refused to budge, so the protesters became angrier and their numbers grew. Asia's commercial hub quickly became a battle zone, with riot police firing tear gas and rubber bullets at black-clad protesters, who responded with Molotov cocktails and bricks. By the time the bill was formally withdrawn, months had passed and it was too late to return the genie to



Chinese President Xi Jinping's intolerance of dissent and vulnerability to bad information has made his government much more prone to policy blunders. REUTERS

the bottle. Despite thousands of arrests, the protesters have shown no signs of backing down.

In late November, after more than six months of unrest, China's government suffered the ultimate indignity, when nearly three million voters turned out to hand an overwhelming victory to pro-democracy forces in local district-council elections (which won 388 of the 452 contested seats). At this point, a crackdown reminiscent of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre would be likely to backfire, leaving Xi with few options.

Xi suffered another serious blow in November, when The New York Times obtained more than 400 pages of internal Chinese documents concerning the mass incarceration of ethnic minorities — particularly Muslim Uighurs — in the Xinjiang region. Only Chinese government insiders had access to such sensitive materials, suggesting that Xi's political enemies may have deliberately leaked them to the Western press in order to undermine his international standing.

Xi is also losing his grip in Taiwan. At the end of last year, Taiwan's ruling pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, led by President Tsai Ing-wen, was dealt a painful general election defeat. But, since the protests erupted in Hong Kong, Tsai has portrayed herself as defending Taiwan from a Chinese-government stooge who would accept a "one country, two systems" model. Tsai now seems set to secure a landslide victory in next month's presidential election.

Xi can blame only himself — or, more specifically, his excessive centralization of power — for the challenges of the last year. Trade disputes with the U.S., concerns about Chinese interference in Hong Kong and eth-

nic tensions in Xinjiang all preceded Xi's rise to power in late 2012. But China's collective leadership, however corrupt and indecisive, managed to limit the escalation of these crises, thanks largely to their aversion to risk. For example, when more than a half-million people in Hong Kong protested against a proposed national security law in 2003, the Chinese government immediately agreed to its withdrawal.

As Xi has concentrated political power in his own hands, however, decision-making has been transformed. Those hoping to influence policy must gain access to Xi himself and they have every incentive to cherry-pick information to support his preferences. Likewise, Xi's colleagues on the Politburo Standing Committee, fearful of appearing disloyal, are loath to share information that may contradict his view. They know that proposing an alternate approach could be seen as a direct challenge to Xi's authority.

Xi's intolerance of dissent and vulnerability to bad information has made his government much more prone to policy blunders. Making matters worse, because a strongman must maintain an image of virtual infallibility, even demonstrably ineffective or counterproductive policies are unlikely to be reversed.

For now, Xi's grip on power is probably secure. But, with decision-making dynamics at the top unlikely to change, he will become vulnerable to more challenges in the coming months. Indeed, 2020 may turn out to be Xi's worst year yet.

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