Today’s populism is an entity born of late modernity. Proliferating in a way that the New York Times’ correspondent Roger Cohen calls an insult to “the differences through which democracy thrives,” populism posits that “the liberal democratic rules-based consensus prevailing since…the Cold War” doesn’t work. And it doesn’t work “for the simple reason that it has not delivered…economically, socially or culturally.”

What this means is that today’s populism by definition (as much as we can define it) is an entity responding to a plan gone wrong, to unrealized rhetoric. This linkage between what is and is not readily manifest, what is known and experienced and what is imagined and unmarked lies at the core of why journalism in an era of populism, and particularly authoritarian populism, needs to change.

I’ll make my argument by building three points for discussion:

1) Contemporary populism and its reliance on the media took shape in response to the Cold War
2) Contemporary journalism remains steeped in the same Cold War mindset that populism was responding to
3) Journalism thus ends up a priori unresponsive, if not oblivious, to populist convention, even when it has an authoritarian bent. Journalism thereby legitimates populist skepticism and critique through its very activity of newsmaking. Specifically, journalism’s Cold War mindset has made the autocratic dimensions of populism difficult, if not impossible, for the US media to act upon.

A few caveats on what I’m about to say: I am speaking only about US populism and its autocratic version, and only contemporary US populism as it emerged in the post WWII era and is sustained today. That’s not to suggest that there might not be parallels with journalism elsewhere or at other times, only that I can’t vouch for them.

**How contemporary populism came to be**
I’ll start with a well-known quote from the American critic Christopher Lasch, who maintained in the early 1990s that populism is “the authentic voice of democracy.”

At the time, Lasch’s sentiments about the distrust in democracy’s institutions, elites and traditions challenged a longstanding liberal disregard for populism as a nostalgic, backward yearning for a simpler life. A remnant of 1950s and 60s modernization theory which developed
on the back of Cold War sentiments, thinkers like Hofstadter, Lipset and Bell had given populism little attention because it upset the clean dichotomy between capitalism and communism that fueled Cold War ideology.

But as the Cold War faded, populism invited more nuanced discussion that continues today, one that links it to backsliding in democratic regimes. Urbinati, for instance, writes that “populism takes advantage of government by opinion and makes it the expression of an opinion that belongs only to one public,” while Muller speaks about democracy’s “shadows,” Bobbio of broken promises and Arditi of internal peripheries. All wrestle with what that connection between populism and democracy means.

Few scholars, however, have gotten far in elucidating what contemporary populism is, other than to say that it has no consensual essence. As Roger Cohen continued to argue, “in nearly every case, there is a better, more precise way to describe a current political phenomenon than the word “populist.”

This, of course, is what Cas Mudde calls a “thin ideology,” one that borrows from thicker ideologies to make sense. So I’d like to tackle the oblique character of the tie between populism and democracy by addressing how contemporary populism and authoritarianism evolved together, and what that did to one of democracy’s stalwart supports—journalism.

Here I’m drawing largely from Federico Finchelstein, who argues that democracy and contemporary populism became linked when fascism turned untenable after WWII. As fascism came to be regarded as antithetical to post-war recovery, populism absorbed many of its features. What ensued was an authoritarian form of democracy, which depended on a charismatic leader, anti-pluralist view of popular representation, anti-elitism and institutionalism, and an apocalyptic view of the future. This positioned populism as a counter point to the Enlightenment and to liberalism and as an underside to Cold War thinking.

The odd blend that resulted is what we call today illiberal democracy, autocratic democracy or soft authoritarianism (though some differences remain), and it transformed the failed state of prefascist populist movements into the real thing. According to Finchelstein: “Before fascism, populism had been an authoritarian political style for opposition movements. After fascism, the political field was clear and populism became complete, a fully fledged authoritarian political paradigm—namely, an influential way of dominating the state in the absence of fascist powers.”

This makes the Cold War a formative backdrop against which contemporary authoritarian populism has flourished, seeking a middle ground between the Cold War’s offering of liberal-democratic forms of capitalism, on the one hand, and Soviet style communism, on the other. What Finchelstein labeled a desire to “escape the newly established bipolar world” is what made
populism soar from the Cold War era till today. It is also what made it so amorphous and internally contradictory, an ideological pendulum that incessantly swings between left and right, letting it then create a middle space between democratic capitalism and communism and more recently what helps it to thrive amidst the inconsistencies of neoliberalism.

Contemporary populism pulls together aspects of both representative democracy (electoral convention, the rule of law, checks and balances) and autocratic rule (unity before pluralism or diversity, denunciation of elites and institutions, an unmediated link with the public). In between—and this is key-- lots of traits tend to work for both sides: a charismatic leader, an appeal to “the people,” an emphasis on celebrity culture, slogans and sensation, tensions with independent media, a folkloric political style, popular political engagement, strong degrees of nationalism. This formation now prevails in many places as an authoritarian answer to the limitations of formal democracy, taking the form of what Mudde calls “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” In this light emerged two of the most recent US populist enterprises -- the Tea Party and Occupy. Neither evolved into a regime but both laid the ground for Trump’s ascent.

This evolution is centrally important for the news. Not only is populism conscious of and systematic about its corruption of the institutional foundations of democracy, but its core introduction of autocratic mechanisms into democratic settings impacts all proximate institutions, including journalism. And this is despite, or perhaps because of, these institutions’ inability to shed themselves of a mindset ill-equipped to recognize, much less contest, what is happening.

Journalism is relevant here because populism, authoritarian or not, simultaneously despises and feeds on the media. On one hand, populism has contempt for any intermediate institutions separating leaders from “the people.” In Muller’s words, populists “always want to cut out the middleman…, to be done with journalists,” and they aim to both delegitimate independent media through punitive measures and transform state media into governmental mouthpieces. This means that making the media into an enemy of the people is not a shocking happenstance, as most US journalists have told it in the age of Trump, but one of the most predictable outcomes of a populist regime.

On the other hand, populism needs the media. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and his colleagues speak of “mediated populism,” where populist sentiment must build on media dynamics to survive, while Ruth Wodak talks of “performance strategies” made possible by modern media democracies. We know that populism projects uniformity that is widely disseminated by the media, that there is often marked investment in sensationalism and emotions, that populist leaders tend to be skilled media manipulators who drive messages of fear, anger, resentment and frustration. By often unmindfully feeding populism the nutrients it needs to grow—allowing its distorted, exaggerated
or false information to propel a reactive news cycle, accommodating its moralizing sentiments, providing a stage for its rhetoric, parroting the simplicity of its logic — journalism is thus complicit with populism’s rise, even when it sees it as problematic. What Thomas Frank in 2017 described as “a parade of the aghast,” where “all the skills of the journalist are reduced to a performance of perturbation and disgust” doesn't do much to combat populism or explain how it works. Instead, the media get coopted into the cycle, where just about everything they do further entrenches populism’s hold.

Because our knowledge of populism and the media remains uneven, we haven’t laid as much responsibility on the media as is perhaps deserved. Most academic discussions tend to argue either that pronouncedly partisan media (from left and right) knowingly advance populism or that tabloid media unknowingly foster its entrenchment via their favored forms of relay. Meanwhile, the elite, mainstream or legacy media are thought less impacted by populist sentiment because their striving for fair and unbiased reporting makes them, in Mazzolenni et al’s words, “less ready to echo populist claims.” This means that the platforms, entities and organizations closest to the core of democratic aspiration which supposedly provide resistance to authoritarian creep are left outside of most discussions of populism and the media.

That neglect is a problem. Not only does it inject a greater presumption of binaries than is actually the case, missing the ongoing and often unrecognizable blending of democratic and autocratic, old and new, punitive and celebratory, legacy and digital, but it enables the notion that populism is somehow stifled by the occupational orientation among elite or mainstream journalists, buoying the assumption that legacy journalistic response can right the wrongs inflicted by populism. This helps explain why current authoritarian populism is not well understood by most US journalists, who continue to act as if pure forms of government, media and publics are the main given in their political surround.

But what if the same play to binaries and the same occupational mindset among legacy, elite and mainstream journalists is exacerbating the problem?

This possibility deserves more attention. For it’s these journalists who continue to set the tone about US populism, even though they are not doing enough to notice, explain or contest its emergence.

**How journalism became entrenched in a Cold War mindset**

There are many interconnected reasons for journalism’s failure to understand current authoritarian populism, but I want to focus on one: a Cold War mindset that was set in place in the early years of the war—1947-1952—and under which US journalists continue to operate today.
I’d like to take a step back and talk a bit about how this Cold War mindset-- which I’m writing a book about-- took hold and why it persists.

When the Cold War was said to have ended in 1989, the mindset driving American institutions for almost five decades did not disappear. Instead, it went underground, continuing to ensure that Americans viewed otherwise incomprehensible events and issues through an ideological frame left over from the Cold War.

Cold War mindedness was born in a perfect storm. Politically the US had left WWII not only relatively unscathed but filled with an American exceptionalism that aggressively pushed its version of democracy everywhere. Corporatism and consumer capitalism met fast-paced technological change, and the rise of TV and local radio, driven by a focus on advertising, privileged a singular voice and complicated the ability to speak independently. Socially, conformity, homogeneity and restraint prevailed—in family life, gender roles, popular culture, government structure, and acquiescent and hostile politics.

Against this backdrop, a culture developed across most US institutions that was elitist, symbiotic and myopic. This culture was associated with militarism, secrecy, image management and fear as a mode of control, and it gave different institutions different ways of falling in line behind what quickly became a uniform narrative for an American population fielding large degrees of uncertainty.

For journalists, becoming Cold War navigators involved developing practices of care -- conventions that could facilitate simultaneous support of Cold War objectives while upholding or minimally disrupting occupational identity and professional aspiration. This untenable relationship between two fundamentally dissonant journalistic goals--practicing craft independently versus living in a Cold War reality—meant that already in 1948 when the trade journal Editor and Publisher observed that “American newspapermen are Americans first, newspapermen second,” there weren’t many who disagreed.

The news thus rode on compliance, deception, stereotypy, black-and-white thinking, polarization, demonization, deindividualization, guilt projection, distrust and simplification, all used to manage the image of the US and serve as a breeding ground for Cold War thinking. News relays became briefer, simpler, less nuanced, more conflict oriented and more formulaic, as deep background, historical context, varieties of communism or democracy and national histories all disappeared or receded from the record. Sourcing practices collapsed the distance with officials, making journalists eager spokespeople for those in power. Tactics that allowed reporters to fade into the crowd were the rule: deference and moderation (and the false equivalences they fostered), euphemism and understatement, qualified observations of what they
saw. Most of all, an allegiance to news from nowhere: the idea that journalists could and should
fall in line behind impartiality and balance, objectivity and neutrality. Journalistic perspectives
on the world thus became thin and predictable, exacerbated at times by loyalty oaths, special
favors in exchange for sympathetic coverage, subtle censorship and red line edits on news copy.

Dichotomous thinking was central here, where it helped shape the patterns of enemy formation
key to the ideological conflict: an Us versus Them that Kenneth Boulding called “the last
stronghold of unsophistication.” Constructing an enemy meant looking with disdain at the other
side. Enemy formation required clarity and simplicity to be understood, anxiety to invite clear
perceptions of threat and a sense of imminence to foster aggressive behavior.

Dichotomies offered a way to put whole populations, regimes, policies and objectives in
oppositional categories to each other. This helped reduce complex and often indecipherable
realities into a manageable either/or polarity separating friend and foe. We know that Cold War
enmity built on longstanding tensions between the two emerging superpowers—Russia and
America—but the mirror image of the two and the impassable divide between them became a
model for contemplating difference. Such dichotomies were spun via affective convention that
left little room for alternative interpretation. Although Tocqueville had been among the first to
predict hostility between the East and West and foresaw already in the late 1800s a race between
democracy and authoritarianism, the enmity he predicted made even better sense during the Cold
War. In Ulrich Beck’s view, it turned “established values upside down” with “the otherwise
forbidden” newly encouraged. Intolerable behavior suddenly became okay, as enmity turned
into an incubator for all sorts of projections common to populist formations: among them, ethnic
prejudice, political intolerance, religious fundamentalism.

This clear separation between good and bad produced a detailed repository of dichotomous
values: good/evil, right/wrong, moral/immoral, and over time more specific differences:
progressive/backward, democratic/communist, incorrupt/corrupt, free/oppressed,
peaceloving/aggressive, moderate/extreme. Both groups were portrayed in simplistic, uniform
and internally consistent ways: Each saw the other as an untrustworthy aggressor, the other’s
government as exploitative, the other’s public as ill served.

By the same token, sameness and conformity became a code of honor, with consensus politics
and culture deemed necessary to uphold what “us” meant. Dissident, alien and non-uniform
elements in American life were systematically excluded from public view, and neutrality
disappeared, as did all the blended or hybrid forms that went with it. Those who dared to
question were penalized, jobs lost, lives ruined.

Yet most journalists hopped on board, convinced in one view that “rooting for ‘our side’ [was] a
legitimate news practice” and recognizing that banding behind dichotomous thinking, deference
and moderation, objectivity and impartiality was their saving grace. It wasn’t just a question of helping the Cold War effort but, as we see here, of driving its dissemination. To seek the truth became wrapped up in defending national security. Without journalists’ complicity, there would have been no Cold War.

What resulted—what I call a deep memory of Cold War mindedness—prevailed as a way of easing occupational dissonance, offering journalists a way to predicate their professionalism on a heartfelt opposition to communism. Though this mindset raised challenges for free-minded journalists, piggy-backing on it assuaged their discomfort at becoming Cold War navigators. They thus repaired to Cold War mindedness to make sense of the times, doing so without confronting lingering ideological inconsistencies or noticing how the very tenets of liberal democracy were crumbling at their feet.

**Why journalists fail to recognize populism**

So what does journalism’s reliance on the Cold War mindset have to do with contemporary populism in the US?

Enter Donald Trump.

There is little doubt that Trump replicates the profile of a charismatic populist leader so necessary to populist formations (remember that charismatic doesn’t mean you love the leader, only that he or she draws you to them). What observers are still on the fence about is the degree to which the Trump regime is authoritarian. To be fair, this echoes much existing knowledge of authoritarianism, which tends to focus more on a priori authoritarian systems or authoritarian personalities, but less on the practices by which democracies turn autocratic.

Nonetheless, from the beginning Trump’s candidacy prompted analogies with Hitler and Mussolini. The parallel, however, never really went further than that. And it’s this “treatment lite” of authoritarianism – what the Guardian called “more metaphor than mood”— that I believe the mainstream media’s coverage of Trump can most productively be evaluated.

I say this because everything about the Cold War mindset helps explain why US legacy journalists fail to address the authoritarian nature of contemporary US populism. It is no accident that the moment at which contemporary authoritarian populism began to rise coincides with the moment that US journalism, if not journalism elsewhere, began to stagnate.

A few words first about US populist sentiment today. We know that authoritarian populist leaders use the same institutions that exist in democratic regimes for anti-democratic purposes—via what one legal scholar described as “cloak[ing] repressive measures under the mask of law, imbu[ing] them with the veneer of legitimacy, and render[ing] authoritarian practices more
difficult to detect and eliminate.” Such regimes rely on unseen devices—measures, effects and platforms that ensure that autocratic populist rule slips undetected through the weakest links in otherwise supposedly democratic environments. Rarely visible and almost always subtle, then, authoritarian populist rule gets its way by forcing action from the public eye—via acts of coercion, censure, exclusion, insult, manipulation, closure, repudiation, intimidation and disregard.

The authoritarian populism of the Trump regime is alarming, because, as is becoming increasingly clear, most Americans don’t even recognize it. To borrow from a recent Vox summation of the prevalent understanding of authoritarianism (in this case, in Malaysia), Americans tend to have a far more brutish, less nuanced understanding of what authoritarian rule looks like. For most, it is both fantastical and cartoonish, replete with thugs and dictators, hardship, uber-controlled activity and the punitive murder or disappearance of opponents. Such an image is drawn from mythmaking and a kind of imaginary othering “in which the opposite of democracy is the absence of everything that characterizes the one democracy that one knows.”

All of this is also drawn from the media.

So with that thought, I want to bring together the three interlocking pieces of Cold War mindedness that I’ve been discussing – dichotomous thinking, an orientation to deference and a repair to news from nowhere – and show how they converge in US coverage of Trump. What I’m focusing on are the mainstream, elite and legacy media, because even in this digital age, I contend that they bear much responsibility for the current state of coverage.

**Dichotomous thinking**, first. Dichotomies make it hard to recognize authoritarian populism for what it is, as its blended nature is unfamiliar to journalists. With dichotomies long used to separate praiseworthy democracy from problem-ridden authoritarianism, their blending disrupts journalism’s default evaluative skills. When coupled with the fact that journalists make news judgements all the time in challenging circumstances, dichotomization becomes difficult to shed because of its simplicity, availability, familiarity and entrenched nature.

Dichotomization shapes just about everything in the news: military conflict, security, politics, culture, education, the law and social welfare. Though the terrain changes, clear separations between left/right, secular/religious, strong/weak, insider/outsider, global/nationalist, moderate/radical, modern/fundamentalist, democratic/authoritarian – and the underlying moral judgment of right/wrong -- remain the default setting for how the media explain the world, even when they’re no longer the case. And we all know what that does to the institutions at stake.

In the age of Trump, journalists’ embrace of dichotomies may seem odd, because they drive his belittlement of the media. Via power dynamics dependent on neutralizing existing institutions, he
defends what he calls the people’s true identity by detailing how elites and institutions have wronged them. Hence, the media are “the enemy of the people,” journalism a “failing institution,” and news that critiques him all “fake.” Scrutiny, to paraphrase political scientist Kirk Hawkins, has been recoded as opposition.

Yet a reliance on dichotomous thinking has significantly impacted coverage. On one hand, it’s fostered an inability for journalists to see what they’re looking at. As Trump began flattening nuance into a statement of friendship or hostility while undoing the ordinary connectors between media and government (briefings, pools, conferences), Reuters issued a missive to its US-based reporters, telling them that they knew how to cover the administration because they had covered it everywhere else in the world where autocratic governments prevailed—Thailand, Syria, Malaysia and China, among others. That was in January of 2017. Since then, movement on this fundamental question—is the Trump regime authoritarian, and more important, what do journalists do about it?—hasn’t gotten far.

On the other hand, as Trump ups the ante—moving from ridiculing all media to singling out particular news outlets or reporters—we’ve seen not solidarity but journalists acting like they’re under siege, tackling just about everything on Trump that’s thrown their way, without ranking, reflection or pause. The Detroit News observed that “We are not only giving him more scrutiny — rightly so — but we are making more mistakes in our haste to discredit him.” It’s hard to be a safeguard against autocratic tendencies when one doesn’t have the mindset to see things in shades of grey. So that neither response incorporates nuance into the binary separating democracy from authoritarianism.

Dichotomous thinking also affects what journalists deem important. To put it bluntly, legacy journalism focuses so intently on its back and forth volleys with Trump that it hasn’t done a good job of covering anything else. As US writer Corey Robin noted in The Guardian, the media “focus more on the rhetoric of an abusive man than the infrastructure of an oppressive state, more on the erosion of norms than the material instruments of repression.” And that’s to say nothing of other stories that have disappeared altogether—like Yemen or climate change.

All of this suggests that though we have different players and a terrain of a different symbolic order, all the traits I mentioned earlier that go into dichotomies continue to render one side good, the other evil. No nuanced contextual or structural explanations, no grey areas. What we see instead, just like during the Cold War, is a focus on an enhanced good side winning against a demonized other, without recognizing that neither good nor bad bears much resemblance to reality.

A second issue is the deference and moderation of US journalists that make it difficult to process any recognition of authoritarianism should it occur. Taking shape in practices like
euphemism, understatement and qualified observation, deference and moderation protect journalists from feeling that they’ve gone over the line into unprofessional behavior. So when Trump belittles a reporter at a press conference, the response is not to ask the question a different way, but simply to stop asking.

We need only think about CNN reporter Jim Acosta being castigated by Trump at a press conference in November, after persisting aggressively at posing his question. Predictably, Trump responded by denying him further access to White House briefings. Less predictably, but more tellingly given the argument here, many mainstream outlets responded by critiquing not only Trump but also the reporter, calling his behavior “rude grandstanding” and “unprofessional.”

The nod to deference, coming at the expense of solidarity, finds its way too in the still-persistent reluctance that mainstream US journalism displays regarding the fact of Trump’s lying. Though the number of lies Trump has told in public now stands at 8k (a figure which I’m sure needs updating), his lies still became directly reported headlines. To be fair, the media are wrestling with responses – counting lies, finding patterns in the lies. But this is deeply reactive and not enough. Esquire went on record last week calling on the media to do better at “calling out Trump’s shit,” saying “In the light of a brand new year, I have one simple wish: Big news organizations need to do a better job treating the President like the liar that he is.”

Not all of this has gone unnoticed. This past October, Common Dreams called on journalists to “stop stifling their outrage” toward Trump. Labelling deference a “grave disservice to their audiences and to country,” Dan Froomkin argued that a lack of outrage is eroding democratic institutions, sending “the message that what is going on is within the realm of the normal, when it is not.” It was not a surprise, he concluded, that Trump “had played the mainstream media for fools. He knew political journalists would be paralyzed into stenography by their phobia of appearing politically biased. He knew — he still knows — that every time he makes a preposterous statement, they’ll give him a megaphone, rather than a dunce cap.”

All of this shows that deference and moderation are not well-suited to handling current circumstances. When one part of an institutional environment behaves tyrannically, moderation and deference only exacerbate its power.

This brings us to news from nowhere, a third dimension of the Cold War mindset that reflects journalists’ core adherence to objectivity, balance, impartiality and neutrality. This repeatedly invoked stance pushes perspective to the side of the picture and justifies for journalists the decision to withhold recognition of authoritarianism. As mainstream journalists take refuge in news from nowhere, we get lengthy discussions of rhetorical devices like false equivalences or vulgar language but very little address to the more substantive issues behind them—like cronyism, pandering, impunity, power-sharing, corruption, institutional complicity. Not only does this show how difficult it is for journalists to part with default values and the tools by which
they’re realized, but it suggests little change moving forward. As the Washington Post’s Margaret Sullivan noted, the “traditions of newsgathering and presentation run deep. Most journalists — among them the very best — believe that if they keep presenting the facts and countering the spin that that will be enough.”

As is clear with this nod to Sullivan, calls to journalism to up its game rang clear already from the beginning in the mainstream media. In July of 2016, right after Trump received the GOP nomination, the Washington Post queried “whether it was time to revisit journalism’s ethical responsibilities.” The following month New York Times columnist Jim Rutenberg wrote a column titled: “Trump is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism,” where he argued: “if you’re a working journalist and you believe Donald Trump is a demagogue, you have to throw out the textbook that American journalism has been using for the better part of the past half-century, if not longer.”

That was then. Such calls have continued over the long haul of Trump’s presidency but other than singular mainstream journalists who keep on the mark—Margaret Sullivan’s at the top of the list—such commentary now comes mostly from non-mainstream media critics.

And they’ve been vocal. Jay Rosen famously called on news organizations to stop attending White House briefings and to send in the interns instead. George Lakoff suggested that reporters begin to use “truth sandwiches: reality, Trump spin, reality.” The Wrap contemplated what would happen if journalists turned voluntarily into activists. The Nation criticized the mainstream media for their bias, insularity, groupthink, and condescension. In August of 2018, multiple news organizations—mainstream and not—simultaneously published editorials contesting Trump’s repeated moniker of the media as enemy of the people. But isolated responses like these don’t last in any meaningful fashion. Journalists have become more skeptical. But not enough, not all the time, and not with productive effect.

It should be clear why all of this is problematic. As the terrific Mann and Ornstein book It’s Even Worse Than It Looks said, a balanced treatment of an unbalanced phenomenon distorts reality. The stakes right now are higher than ever.

Conclusion
So to conclude. It is easy to say that journalists need to find a different stance, a position that is less defensive, reactive, deferent, dichotomized, objective and impartial—in short, a position that’s less Cold War-ish. But what we haven’t figured out is why it is taking journalists so long to change.

You’re looking here at a clip from the McCarthy Hearings of 1954, one of the lowest points in American press history. I’ve argued that one reason journalists remain so resistant to change is
because an unmarked mind-set that entrenches and naturalizes a non-critical and compliant response to authoritarian power dynamics keeps them unable to recognize or contest contemporary authoritarian trends. As Vox founder Ezra Klein recently noted, journalists are “being used to fracture American democracy, and I don’t think we know how to stop it.”

The incremental nature of change applies to authoritarianism itself. Where scholars are pretty much agreed is that if authoritarianism were to come to a country as diverse and complex as the US, it will be slow, legal and gradual. There won’t be one cataclysmic moment when we can say it arrived.

This offers journalists an opportunity—to understand now more fully how authoritarianism is invading the institutional landscape. As The Nation’s Michael Massing noted, “Trump is both the product and the servant of an entrenched system—one that news organizations generally shrink from challenging.”

And “Why is that?”, he asked. “Because writing about the way things really work would endanger journalists’ access to sources? Because it would provoke an outcry from powerful people? Because it wouldn’t produce enough traffic? Or is it a result of the “Trump effect”?”

The probability that it is all of the above should remind us how entrenched institutional mindsets can be. And how destructive their impact. Why do the top journalism watchdogs—CNN’s Reliable Sources, the Poynter Institute or the Columbia Journalism Review, for instance—“rarely go after the elite press”? While the New York Times adopted a new slogan that heralds the day differently—the Truth Demands Our Attention—at the same time it eliminated its public editor position. There are too many examples like these.

This opportunity for journalists to pay more attention involves going beyond institutional culture, particularly to the political impulses not yet covered enough by mainstream media. As Jay Rosen noted, the core of Trump supporters disbelieve the mainstream media “because they’ve been instructed to do that” by a well-developed conservative movement that triangulates across Trump, activists, trolls and right wing news outlets. The result, he says, is that for one third of the population, “Trump is the major source of news about Trump. Which means that for this portion of the American public, an authoritarian news system is already up and running.”

Here you may have noticed, we have two liberal critics making the very points that Trump has been using to attack the media. I mention this because it shows how little we understand of the ways in which Trump manipulates the deep structure of elite US news to his own advantage. With so much of today’s populism reacting to unrealized rhetoric, critical oversight of what’s gone wrong is way overdue.
And yet, the opportunity for change may be closing. For the perfect storm that engendered Cold War thinking is still with us. And the particulars of that storm continue to motivate and shape what mainstream journalism does today, regardless of its topic of coverage.

Populist passions erupt when something is not quite right with democratic function. The need for a critical journalistic voice grows with populism’s entrenchment. Though many argue that the current media moment leaves leaders more exposed and less able to manoeuvre in secrecy than ever before, that presumes that there is a journalism out there, waiting on the sidelines, one that knows how to capitalize on the opportunity created for intervention.

US legacy journalists are not yet that journalism. They do not yet recognize that an opportunity to act exists, that it will be short-lived and that they have to change to make it happen.

In November of 2018, Newsday published a piece titled “Who Will We Be When the Trump Era Ends?” It’s a question we might ask ourselves about the media moving forward.

Thank you.