Although the question of what constitutes “evil” has engaged philosophers for more than 2000 years, the issue of how media should behave, or what their role is, in circumstances that we might all agree are evil, is much more recent. Arguably the concern is less than 75 years old, arising initially when the Nazis came to power in Germany and began to use propaganda to prepare the population for war and the Holocaust. Some might argue that the concern should be extended backward further, perhaps to the war-mongering of William Randolph Hearst near the end of the nineteenth century, or the exposés of the muckrakers in the early twentieth century. Others might suggest the use of photography by Jacob Riis as a medium to expose the depredations of New York’s slums or even Matthew Brady’s photography of the carnage of the American Civil War. But the most sustained scholarly concern with the role of media in circumstances where people have been slaughtered—whether by serial killers, rapist-murderers, terrorists, or rebel movements, in wars or through state-sponsored genocide and ethnic cleansing—has occurred since the end of the Second World War, and especially in the last three decades.

Scholars have taken several positions on how the media have operated in evil circumstances. By far the most scholarship has been directed to analysis of the role of media in war—and, more recently, how domestic media have been used or have eagerly participated in the justification for going to war, or how media have become tools of warring powers through propaganda and “public diplomacy.” Some research has concentrated, too, on how the media have been mobilized by totalitarian or absolutist regimes to justify their policies and how they have propagandized their own people through media use. This has occurred sometimes by state control of the media themselves, or through strictly enforced censorship, or direct or implied threats for non-compliance with state directives. At other times it has been the result of the media’s voluntary compliance, or endorsement, of the state’s policies. Still other scholars have been more concerned with how independent media have reported about violence, whether individual or collective in nature. Still others have concentrated on specific aspects of the media–evil nexus, such as the manipulation of media by terrorists, or the clash of ideals in covering violence of various kinds.

Most recently the issue of evil has itself become contested. Most of the examples in this essay deal with largely uncontested evils, but in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this has not been the case. The issue of immigration became a question, among others, of evil, especially in Europe and the United States, although not for the first time. In the nineteenth century,
for instance, both the U.S. and Canada defined immigration from China as an “evil” (see Munro, 1971, pp. 42–51).

This essay will examine some of the most significant scholarship on the relationship between media and evil—or how the media have functioned in evil circumstances—as participants, dupes, signalers, critics, legitimizers, or sensationalists of evil. Then it will provide a perspective on media in evil circumstances that is still to be fully explored.

Kevin G. Barnhurst (1991, p. 75) argues that authorities who study terrorism and the media take one of two perspectives. The first perspective is that “the media play an essential role [in terrorism] and that news coverage spreads terrorism like a disease.” The second is that “the media are victims of terrorists,” responding initially to violence and then reducing coverage as it becomes routine. The first of these perspectives suggests that the media are either participants in evil itself or merely signalers of evil, while the second sees the media as dupes or sensationalists—even when they are critics. Each of these perspectives requires some elaboration.

MEDIA AS PARTICIPANTS IN EVIL

Media can be forced into participation in evil using a variety of methods, or they can voluntarily participate. In Rwanda, for instance, members of the Hutu elite invested in the creation of radio station RTML and it, in turn, incited the genocide. “Do not kill these inyenzi (cockroaches) with a bullet, cut them to pieces with a machete,” broadcaster Valerie Bemerki counseled her listeners (Mirzoeff, 2004). And listeners also heard Simon Birkindi’s song, “I Hate These Hutus,” “a long delineation of all the different Hutu who were held to be insufficiently loyal” (Gourevitch, 1998, p. 100). Although some Rwandans, especially in the northern half of the country, could hear the Rwandan Patriotic Front station, Radio Muhabura, it did little to contribute to the free flow of information. Instead, as its name suggests, Radio Muhabura [Leading the Way] continued the culture of propaganda and counter-propaganda, providing little concrete information about events and spending a lot of air time presenting and promoting the RPF to the Rwandan population.

(Article 19, 1996, pp. 23–24)

Kellow and Steeves (1998) also reported, based on Reporters Sans Frontières’ documents, that newspapers in Burundi were operating similarly, fanning the flames of hatred there just as RTML was doing in Rwanda. In Ivory Coast in 2002 the media were owned by political leaders who used them to spread hate messages targeting different political parties, ethnic groups and religions (Alexis and Mpambara, 2003, p. 3). (These efforts were paltry, however, compared to the total use of media by the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 40s; see Gupta, 2001, p. 123). And the Serbs used similar means, with Warren Zimmermann, the American Ambassador to Yugoslavia saying, “It was TV that promoted the hatreds. It gave people myths and called them history” (quoted by Gupta, 2001, p. 123).

Accounts of the wars in the Balkans and the Rwandan Genocide which reject the ‘ancient hatreds’ interpretation have emphasized the role played by the media in creating killers from one-time neighbours who had managed to co-exist peaceably for lengthy periods, if not perpetually.

Susan L. Carruthers wrote (2000, p. 46). In Yugoslavia, the main agent of the “alien virus” was Srpski Radio Knin, “a Serb-run radio station pouring out anti-Croat propaganda” and Serbian Radio-Television. “As one Sarajevo-based journalist put it, “Every person killed in this
war was first killed in the newsrooms” (Carruthers, 2000, p. 47). Gupta likewise discusses the use of media by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and the Habyarimana regime in Rwanda (2001, p. 159). As Mark Frohardt and Jonathan Temin put it (2003, p. 2), “media can be extremely powerful tools used to promote violence...” And, as Dusan Reljic concludes about Europe: “the media plays a significant part in whipping up nationalist feelings of xenophobia, racism or ethnic chauvinism,” even when conflict is not imminent. They do so by reinforcing “existing differences and thus accelerat[ing] a disintegrating effect on the homogeneity of the population” (n.d., p. 2).

On a more voluntary level was the “collaboration” of the American press with the Bush administration in conceptualizing and justifying the war to force Saddam Hussein from Kuwait (Kelman, 1995, p. 121). And, in another variant, Eytan Gilboa (2000, p. 295) wrote that “sometimes during severe international crises, the media provide the only channel for communication and negotiation between rival actors.... Officials more frequently use global television rather than traditional diplomatic channels to deliver messages.” Gilboa cites instances of the Iran hostage crisis, the 1985 hijacking of a TWA jet to Beirut, the 1990–1991 Gulf conflict, and a 1998 communiqué of conciliation from Iranian President Khatami as examples of state use of media to deliver messages during crises (see also O’Heffernan, 2001, p. 3 on TV’s “global crisis communication role”). Finally, Lee Artz (2004, p. 80), calls the photographs and drawings run by the *New York Times* during the second Iraq war “perhaps the most revealing instances of media’s complicity with U.S. propaganda...” (see also Solomon, 2004, p. 57).

MEDIA AS DUPES IN EVIL CIRCUMSTANCE

Media become the dupes of evil when they, as a result of their own commitments or principles, unwittingly become tools of evil. Terry Anderson, a journalist who was held captive by terrorists in Lebanon for over five years put it this way (1993, p. 129): “In my opinion, the very reporting of a political kidnapping, an assassination or a deadly bombing is a first victory for the terrorist. Without the world’s attention, these acts of viciousness are pointless.” Anderson goes on to argue that even when the media run long analyses about terrorist organizations, they legitimize them. Susan Carruthers (2000) has argued that the media have become more willing accomplices in wartime propaganda, but Danny Schechter (2004, pp. 30–31) outlines a variety of techniques used by U.S. administrations to “seduce and co-opt” the media.

MEDIA AS SIGNALERS OF EVIL

Media sometimes are the first to indicate that evil is about to break out, or they signal the beginning of a campaign of evil. Often, such as the cases in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Georgia, this signaling actually occurred via obfuscation. The media in these societies “signaled” “imminent” threats against the majority populations of Hutus, Georgians, and Serbs, “though there was only flimsy evidence provided to support them,” and thus constructed fear and the “foundation for taking violent action through ‘self-defense’” (Frohardt and Temin, 2003, p. 6). An analysis by Piers Robinson of the role of news media in provoking humanitarian interventions (2000, p. 8), suggested that media coverage of humanitarian crises did “trigger the use of air power but not the deployment of troops” in Bosnia, and that in other cases, including Somalia and Kosovo, claims made that the news media are influential in driving foreign policy are “not without substance.” And Morand Fachot (2001, p. 53) argues that
An indisputable consequence of the ‘CNN effect’ is the shortening of the news cycle, which forces politicians and the military to react swiftly to events, often in the absence of an appropriate context or background: they now have to operate in a round-the-clock, real-time, global news environment.

As former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III wrote in 1995, “In Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, and Chechnya, among others, the real-time coverage of conflict by the electronic media has served to create a powerful new imperative for prompt action that was not present in less frenetic [times]” (quoted in Gilboa, 2005, p. 28; see also Albright, 2001, p. 105).

MEDIA AS CRITICS OF EVIL

Media can sometimes bring pressure to bear in evil circumstances by rallying world opinion to occurrences of evil or encouraging condemnation by nation-states. Unfortunately, there has been little scholarly attention to this potential aspect of media behavior, largely because the media have become increasingly reactive in reportage as a result of reducing their foreign bureaus and depending more on stringers who are paid to report “events” rather than to signal possibilities or to bring moral probity to the instances of evil that they witness. Some individual reporters, such as Thomas Friedman for the New York Times, have responsibly criticized evil, but most such criticism evaporated with the collapse of the Soviet Union as “evil empire.” President Bush’s characterization of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil” never really caught on with the media beyond its panache as a catch-phrase, and reporting of conflicts between the U.S. and each of these three societies has been treated within traditional categories of political gamesmanship rather than as a confrontation with “evil.” The same is true of President Trump’s characterizations of the regimes in Iran, Venezuela and North Korea: it’s all jockeying for position to gain the upper hand.

The criticism that does emerge, too, does not always follow the same pattern. For instance, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, Michael Wolff wrote that the U.S. media’s response was one of what he called “notionlessness.” “A retreat, over a period of years, from consistent, in-depth coverage of world affairs left journalists, readers and audiences to identify the villain as some pure spasm of all-powerful, far-reaching apocalyptic irrationality” (quoted by Lynch, 2002, p. 10).

It has not been controversial for the media to refer to other world situations as evil. Hannah Ellis-Petersen reported for The Guardian in 2018 that a senior minister in the Bangladeshi government had referred to the Myanmar government as evil; the Boston Herald published an editorial in 2017 on “The evil in Bangladesh.” The Associated Press carried a story in 2018 referring to Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte as an “evil psychopath,” while Adele Webb (2016) asked in an opinion piece for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation whether Duterte (the “Trump of the Philippines”) was a “force for good or evil.”

A variation on the role of critic is that of contester of the definition of evil itself. U.S. President Trump has referred to those seeking entry to the country via its southern border with Mexico, both asylum seekers and illegal border-crossers, as “animals,” “rapists,” “murderers” and “some” good people. His policies have resulted in separation of children from parents or guardians, confinement of children in what have been termed “cages,” incarceration of both adults and children in overcrowded detention centers with inadequate supplies of food or access to water, clean clothing, and toilet facilities. Some children have reported sexual abuse at the hands of border agents. In an earlier age such characterizations and policies, and especially their results,
would have been referred to as evil. The Trump administration contests such constructions. Much
of the reporting, however, has taken an adversarial tone toward the administration and much
of the contest between media and the executive branch has been over definitions of acceptable
and unacceptable situations, American vs. unAmerican policies. Whatever is unAmerican is by
definition, evil. The framing of the debate is, according to George Lakoff, at the center of the
immigration debate, with each form of linguistic framing constraining the nature of the debate
that can be pursued by using “legitimate” terms (2006; see also Chomsky, 2018; Carlson and
Quinn, 2018; Gupta, 2019; Navarrette, 2018).

There is precedent for this dispute. In 1912, in the decade when the United States had its
greatest percentage of immigrants compared to the total population until the last few years, Jer-
emiah W. Jenks and W. Jett Lauck, both members of a presidential commission on immigration,
wrote in their introduction (1912, p. 2):

Immigration of foreigners into the United States has been long recognized as one of our important
social and political problems. Perhaps no other question has aroused more bitter feelings at times,
or has called out more lofty sentiments of altruistic purpose. On the one hand, our Government
has been besought to protect our people from the ‘degrading influence’ of the immigrant. On the
other, it has been declared that our doors should never be closed against those suffering from
religious or political persecution.

A bit later (p. 7) the authors say that, of the chief questions raised by immigration, are “the
moral characteristics of various races” and “the social evil and the white-slave traffic.” Immigra-
tion is not a new issue in the United States. Whether it is evil to allow immigrants untrammled
access to the country, or evil to adopt measures to prevent them from doing so, however, is an
ongoing contested issue (see also Busey, 1896).

MEDIA LEGITIMIZING EVIL

Chris Hedges (2003) writes that war
dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even
humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim realities of smut and death. Fundamental ques-
tions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we
watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not
far below the surface within all of us.

(p. 6)

And the media’s role in providing access to alternative viewpoints about going to war in Iraq was,
as John F. Stacks puts it (2003–2004, p. 20),

abyssmally thin. The full texture and shape of the internal government debate (and one assumes
there was some debate) was not known to the public. Without knowing much about the stakes and
reasons for the war, the public supported the president.

This is legitimation by omission. Similarly, when the Bush administration claimed that vid-
eos issued by Osama bin Laden might contain coded messages and called on American television
networks not to air them unedited, the “networks took the request one step further and declined
to air virtually any video of bin Laden” (Bamford, 2001, p. 20).
MEDIA AS SENSATIONALISTS

Media can, and sometimes do, exploit evil for their own purposes, principally to increase circulation or ratings. During the Gulf War, when the British press was actively debating what levels of carnage were appropriate to show to viewers, the Sun newspaper, which was an avid supporter of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s policies, “opportunistically latched on” to

extremely brief, and heavily pixellated, footage of the dead bodies of Staff Sergeant Simon Cullingworth and Sapper Luke Allsopp, who were killed in an ambush during the war, footage which the BBC, along with other UK broadcasters and the press, had refused to show at the time of its original release…. The Sun referred to the footage variously as an “atrocity”, “sickening” and “beyond comprehension”, although in fact the only thing that was truly sickening about this episode was the Sun’s entirely cynical exploitation of the grief of the dead men’s relatives for its proprietor’s commercial ends.

(Petley, 2003, p. 78)

Arguably the media’s treatment of Syrian refugees’ efforts to cross the Mediterranean for European sanctuary has also been sensationalized, with stories covering the deaths of children in refugee camps, although such stories were often based on reports from Human Rights Watch and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The photo published of a three-year-old refugee, which shocked Europeans, did result, however, in petitions to the government of the United Kingdom to accept more refugees (Worthington, 2015). Sometimes sensationalism has results. But a similar picture along the Rio Grande, of a father and his infant daughter dead along the bank, while it evoked outrage in some quarters of the United States, was easily ignored in others, the result of the fractious debate on immigration (see Thebault, Velarde, and Hauslohner, 2019; Gallón, 2019, and reports by many other news organizations).

ANALYZING THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN EVIL CIRCUMSTANCES

What all of this suggests is that the media have a variety of impacts, sometimes even contradictory impacts, within evil circumstances. While the media may signal atrocities, violence, and conflict through the so-called CNN effect, they can also easily be co-opted by adroit application of media relations strategies by governments, essentially becoming cheerleaders for policies that might, themselves, cause such circumstances. They can both dampen evil by exposing it to the world and heighten it by sensationalizing it. They can legitimize it by giving perpetrators the publicity they seek and, at the same time, horrify the world with the brutality of these perpetrators. These descriptive analyses of the role of media indicate both a complex set of roles, and a tendency toward irresponsibility seen through the lens of ethics.

It could be argued that the complexity of the media’s response to evil circumstances is the result of their independence—and that this confirms the value of a free press. But there are two responses that must be made to such an assertion. First, the role of the press within domestic contexts to support the policies of their governments—however disreputable—casts significant doubt on their independence. This is true even within democracies with guarantees of a free press (such as the United States), and those with a long tradition of a free press (such as Canada and Great Britain). So it is questionable whether complexity is necessarily indicative of independence. Second is the ease with which governments are able to enlist, or co-opt, the press to do its bidding. Although the media complained bitterly in the aftermath of the first Gulf War that the military had exerted undue interference and control on their reporting (with the criticism being
“swift, high-powered, and damning;” Skoko & Woodger, 2000, p. 79), by the time of the second Gulf War the military had become even more adept at controlling the press. But the agreements that had been reached in 1992 between the press and the military (nine principles of combat coverage) were largely abandoned by the Bush administration’s adoption of new rules for embedded journalists during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The result of the decision to “embed” reporters in Iraq resulted in very narrow “soda straw” views of the war as it progressed, made the reporters dependent on the military for protection in ways that the press had not experienced before, and made it difficult to report independently—both for policy reasons that reporters bought into (such as limitations on the use of electronic equipment and specific information that should not be reported) and for interpersonal reasons, since some reporters apparently participated in identifying targets and “passing ammunition” and thus became part of the military’s mission, rather than just observers of it (see Artz, 2004, pp. 82–83; Bernhard, 2003, pp. 86–87; Calabrese, 2005, p. 157; Larson, 2004; Tehranian, 2004, pp. 238–239). Whatever the difficulties were, however, a RAND report on the experience concluded that, “Overall, there were far fewer press complaints during this war than seen in previous major conventional operations…” (Paul and Kim, 2004, p. 81). Once the push into Baghdad was complete, journalists abandoned their “embeds” in droves, dropping from an estimated 570 to 750 to “roughly 100” within six months, to under 50 in another six months, and to under 10 by October 2006. All of this was occurring, of course, while the “evil” of civilian deaths, insurgency and political gridlock gripped Iraq and American and allied forces absorbed more casualties than they had during the brief war itself. It appears to be a lack of realistic perspective on the part of the press (see Vaina, 2006; Al-Marashi, 2006, pp. 1–2).

The various behaviors of the press in evil circumstances, when examined independently, provide but thin descriptions. But when they are seen in their entirety, in their complexity, and in their contradictions, a thicker description is possible. This thicker description—whether the focus is on genocide, war, ethnic conflict, domestic or international media—suggests that the most accurate descriptor of their collective behavior is opportunism. By and large the media have been willing to abandon their independence and shelve their skepticism for short term gains—either to support or ingratiate themselves to the powerful, or to “get the story” for their audiences.

This need to “get the story” has only increased as the financial foundations of major media organizations have collapsed in the twenty-first century. Many news outlets have closed, thousands of journalists have lost their jobs, and investigative staffs have been eviscerated in many cities. Their replacement—a poor substitute: social media feeds. Social media feeds have not only replaced the attention paid to media, they have also become major sources of information in organizations that have cut back on their foreign sources. When events that are off the beaten path of journalists have erupted, such as protests in Tehran, major media outlets have depended on reports by civilians inside such countries to “get the story.”

This is perhaps no surprise, as “getting the story” is what journalism is all about. But most journalists would agree that this goal should not be met by becoming too cozy with those in power. The Poynter Institute, for instance, calls for journalists to “hold the powerful accountable” (Steele, 2000), and many journalists objected to the term “embed” to describe their deployment with U.S. forces in Iraq for what it suggested. In cases where the media clearly supported genocidal policies (in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent military actions in Bosnia and Kosovo, in Rwanda and Burundi), of course, “getting the story” essentially meant toeing the party line, abandoning any pretense to independence.

What this attention to constructed media ecologies may raise as an issue is whether the actions of individual journalists have in any way ameliorated or exacerbated the actions of the media as an institution. Certainly there are instances in which reporters have adopted a stance that was not in accordance with the desires of their governments. Anne Garrels’ reporting from
Baghdad during the second Gulf War, which often discovered that events were not as being reported by other U.S. media outlets or as the Bush administration or military spokespersons claimed, is a case in point (see Garrels, 2004). Anna Politkovskaya’s reporting on the Chechen War (which apparently cost her her life) comes in this category, as does Willem Marx’s exposé (2006) of the U.S. military’s propaganda activities in Iraq.

Perhaps the most poignant and powerful treatments of the consequences of evil have come from feature-length films (Hotel Rwanda, Sometimes in April, Osama, Turtles Can Fly, Blood Diamond, The Last King of Scotland, Lord of War, for instance), documentaries such as those produced by Democracy Now or the Media Education Foundation criticizing media practices in response to evil, or accounts of the effects of evil on those who have been its victims (see Neuffer, 2002 on the conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda; Mertus, Tesanovic, Metikos, and Roric, 1997 on Bosnia and Croatia; Goureевич, 1998 on Rwanda; Seiestad, 2003 on Afghanistan; or Shadid, 2006 on Iraq). Although collectively these may suggest that significant attention has been given to evil by media practitioners, in reality, they are too little, too late. Most of these accounts are published after the consequences of evil have become apparent, even in the mainstream press, and together these treatments cover thirty years of history, thus providing but a glimpse into the consequences of evil.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE MEDIA IN EVIL CIRCUMSTANCES

The media cannot control the political, social, cultural, or military context within which they may be called to operate. Sometimes circumstances may call on the media to function outside their “comfort zone.” Clearly in some cases there is little that can be done to demand a different standard of behavior. For instance, if the media are controlled by the state, dominant political parties, kinship, tribal identity-politics or military force, it is naïve to expect the press to function independently. In such cases, it is more likely that the media will become instruments of evil than signalers or critics. Even condemnation or successful prosecution of media owners for being part of a genocidal regime (as happened with two Hutus associated with RTML in Kigali) only occurs after the fact, so it has no immediate impact on the atrocities as they are taking place.

Nevertheless, there are standards to which the media should be held—even if only rhetorically. For instance, as Roy Peter Clark puts it (2006), “In politics, each term carries ideological meaning, even as it appears to the world in the sheep’s clothing of impartiality.” Clark refers in his essay to George Orwell’s diatribe against the abuse of language. Orwell (1946) argued that “All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.” This, of course, is a conclusion that it behooves all journalists to recognize. Orwell goes on to explain his objections to toeing the party line.

Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.… When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—bestial, atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder—one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker’s spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved, as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is
one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

(Orwell, 1946)

In our time, wrote George Orwell after World War II,

political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties.

Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. As Orwell argued,

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

(Orwell, 1946)

Clark’s (2006) example, picking up on Orwell’s argument, is that,

Today, the debate is framed by simple phrases, repeated so often to stay “on message,” that they turn into slogans, another substitute for critical thinking. So one side wants to “stay the course” without settling for the “status quo,” and condemns political opponents who want to “cut and run.” It is one job of the journalist to avoid the trap of repeating catch phrases, such as “the war on terror,” disguised as arguments, and to help the public navigate the great distances between “stay the course” and “cut and run.” Surely, they are not the only options.

And Karim H. Karim argues that

even though the events of September 11, 2001 were extraordinary, their reporting was routinely placed within the cultural frames that have long been in place to cover violence, terrorism, and Islam. The focus was on the immediate reaction rather than the broader causes of the attacks or the existence of structural violence in global society. As the hunt began for the “Islamic terrorists,” the media failed to provide a nuanced and contextual understanding of Muslims or the nature of the “Islamic peril.” Journalists generally echoed the Bush administration’s polarized narrative frame of good versus evil.

(cited by Zelizer and Allan, 2003)

“By reporting, however neutral they try to be” Eknes and Endresen say (1999, p. 11): journalists take on a role that makes them distinct from passive observers of an event or situation. By putting some stories on the front page and ignoring others, journalists and media influence the setting of agendas and thereby the evolution of conflicts or political processes. When conflicts loom, the political discourse becomes conflict-oriented, as do local media.

In other words, for journalists to provide an “objective” account of evil, it is necessary that they be circumspect in their choice of language. They cannot allow those in power—elites,
politicians, propagandists, spin doctors, military authorities, and so on—to determine the nature of their stories by providing the vocabulary they should use to write those stories. They should be skeptical of words that are condemnatory, or absolutist, or obscure, because such words hide more than they reveal. Neither should they hide behind the notion of “objectivity” by quoting those who use such language without pointing out its demonizing, dehumanizing, obfuscating, or absolutist qualities. These qualities stifle debate, suggest the existence of an irreconcilable antipodal condition that is unlikely to represent the true conditions of a conflict, and obscure the common humanity of the participants.

The American media in mid-2019 were caught in a maelstrom that resulted in within-industry criticism for failing to call President Trump’s “racist tweets” what they were: naked racism. He had tweeted that “the squad,” as they came to be called (four minority female House Representatives who had made what he and his supporters considered radical proposals) should go back where they came from, although three of the four had been born in the United States. Since that language (go back where you came from) was a long-used trope in white supremacist rhetoric, it resulted in various news organizations referring to Trump’s comments as racially tinged, racially loaded, racially charged, but not racist, per se. The Washington Post reported (Farhi, 2019) that, “News organizations wrestled with that question [of characterization] … after Trump tweeted a series of statements aimed at four members of Congress, all women of color.” But Keith Woods (2019) wrote an opinion for NPR, after criticism emerged about the use of the word “racist” by Trump’s supporters or those offended by the moniker, that “the president of the United States has used the sniper tower of Twitter to take aim at immigration, race relations and common decency.” But much of the media’s reporting equivocated when faced with the tweets. They blinked.

I understand the moral outrage behind wanting to slap this particular label on this particular president and his many incendiary instances…. It is precisely because journalism is given to warm-spit phrases like ‘racially insensitive’ and ‘racially charged’ that we should not be in the business of moral labelling in the first place. Who decides where the line is that the president crossed?

After quoting the tweets, he then concluded: Trump’s

words mirror those of avowed racists and xenophobes that date back to the birth of this country. Was that a moral judgment, my last sentence? I would argue no. I’d call it context, and it doesn’t require my opinion, just a basic understanding of history.

None of these are acceptable for journalists who are seeking the truth of a matter, or who are attempting to put the day’s events in a context that gives them meaning. Once the meaning of words is left to those with policies to pursue, strategies to execute, or evil to consummate, the press has lost its independence and its ability to tell an accurate story. Related to this issue of language use is that of mythic framing (or archetypal framing) of stories (see Lynch, 2001). The outbreak of violence against the “other” is often preceded by characterizing a dispute in some mythic frame: “axis of evil,” “greater Serbia,” the “hamitic hypotheses” (Rwanda), “betrayal” (Cambodia), the “Jewish conspiracy” (the Third Reich), and so forth. In Yugoslavia, for instance,

Well before any fighting began in Bosnia, Croatian television, like Serbian, was airing nationalist broadcasts discussing how the Serbs intended to exterminate the Croat population in order to form a ‘Greater Serbia.’ These incendiary programmes suggested to Croats that they were in mortal danger from the Serbs and that they should arm themselves before it was too late.

(Price, 2000, p. 5)
Melone, Terzis, and Beleli (2002) conclude:

Instead of reflecting pluralism in the social and political structures and thereby contributing to the creation of an informed critical citizenry within a country, the media often act as a mouthpiece for ethnic power circles. Thus a deliberate distortion of news coverage for particular interests easily exacerbates the tension between opposed factions and becomes a main trigger of violent conflict.

(p. 1)

It is not merely ethnic power circles. In the United States, the Fox News channel is widely seen as a mouthpiece of the Trump administration. Although he has criticized this network on a few occasions, Trump has clearly identified other outlets, notably The New York Times, The Washington Post, and CNN as “fake” news outlets, although there is little evidence that they have targeted the president or any of his administration for negative coverage. Trump thinks that any negative coverage of him or his policies is fake, while he reportedly uses Fox News personalities as advisers and sounding boards for this decisions. Alex Shephard (2017) even claimed that Trump was treating Fox News as if it were a state television channel. Jane Mayer (2019) asked whether Fox News had become propaganda due to its relationship with the Trump White House. The relationship soured, however, and by 2019 Trump claimed that watching Fox News was “worse than watching low ratings Fake News CNN” (Rozsa, 2019).

Since conflict, by definition, pits one against the “other,” people are asked to identify with one or another side. And since putting an historical or mythic spin on events has appeal to people who wish to think of themselves not as perpetrators of evil, but as victims of it, such myths, or the archetypes of victimhood (such as the Jews to whom the Serbs compared themselves as victims), have tremendous power in mobilizing support for murderous regimes. In Yugoslavia both Serbs and Croats used a “covenantal cycle” teleology as the core of their nationalism. This allowed the use of images suggesting “the constant battle between good and evil throughout history—the ‘chosen’ nation versus its many enemies” (MacDonald, 2002, p. 5). In the portrayals used by Croats, Serbs were “an evil, expansionary, annihilitary other, seeking first to invade, then to enslave, and then to exterminate the Croat people. … Other important myths include the Antemurale Christianitatis, the belief that Croatia represented the easternmost outpost of European civilisation” (p. 8). But Serbs, too, were dependent on the same teleology as the basis of their myths to undergird nationalist aspirations (MacDonald, 2002, pp. 15–16).

These conflicts are then what are referred to as “identity conflicts” in which “the mobilisation of people in identity groups [is] based on race, religion, culture, language, and so on” (Hieber, 2001, p. 10). In such conflicts it is crucial that parties, histories, religions, ethnic demographics, and traditions be treated both respectfully and equally. Otherwise, by using the framing adopted by one or the other of the conflicting groups, the media unwittingly becomes both a legitimizing force and an unwitting participant in whatever follows. Although adopting an independent frame and discussing conflict in neutral language will not necessarily prevent conflict, it will both maintain the credibility of the media and prevent media incitement of violence.

Not all journalists will agree with this stance, of course. The Institute of War and Peace Reporting, for instance, contrasts the “beaten track of objectivity” with the “polemical and the partisan.” It highlights the debate between those who remain “clinically neutral” with those who practice a “journalism of attachment” (Davis, 2001, p. 7). But this is a mischaracterization of the issue. The conflict is not between neutrality and attachment. It is between true neutrality, socially-constructed “neutrality,” and attachment. What IWPR discusses is the latter two aspects of this issue. A socially-constructed neutrality is one that reports conflict on the basis of the language, images, and socially-constructed or resurrected myths and archetypes of identity politics.
as defined by the conflicting parties. This must be contrasted with a true neutrality that seeks the truth without resorting to such demonizing language and images, and mythic constructs provided to the media by those in conflict. This is a truer or purer form of neutrality than can be achieved using pre-constructed ideas.

Is this naïve? Perhaps. But it is in accord with a recognition that the “construction of ‘otherness’” plays a key role in the formation and transformation of political boundaries constructed in terms of moral superiority/inferiority as well as in the conflict generated by such formation and transformation” (Wilmer, 1998). If journalists use the terminology and concepts of either of the warring factions in reporting the events occurring within the context of conflict, it contributes to the construction of “otherness,” becomes entangled in the moral boundaries being constructed, and not only compromises its neutrality but helps concretize the boundaries that make atrocity possible. Refusing to participate in such boundary construction by careful choice of words, images, and archetypes of understanding makes neutrality real and avoids passive participation in morally reprehensible acts. It is to recognize that “It is the social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful, to communicate about the world meaningfully to others” (Michel Foucault, quoted by Reich, 2003, p. 11; see also Murray and Cowden, 1999).

Such expectations, of course, although they might apply to media that have thrown in with political factions that engage in evil, are unlikely to have much traction in a more general context. So much of the abuse people suffer at the hands of the media is unlikely to be solved by such reportorial tactics. But using such tactics will at least reduce the involvement of the external press in such evil. As Loretta Hieber puts it (1998), traditional journalism that “seeks to report conflicts for a general audience in a manner aimed at promoting peace rather than inflaming existing tensions” is one means of media intervention.

Such changes in practice are no small matter. Robert Karl Manoff (1998) argues that the scale of human slaughter in the twentieth century was “something new in human history.” Whereas a “mere 19 million people died in the 211 major conflicts of the Nineteenth Century” and only seven million in the eighteenth, the twentieth century saw 110 million people killed in 250 significant armed conflicts, with many times that number wounded, crippled, and mutilated..... Mass violence on a previously unimaginable scale has become universalized, industrialized, and routinized. By now there are 233 politically active communal groups in 93 countries, representing fully one-sixth of humanity, at present engaged in political or military struggles from which more than 20 million refugees are currently in flight.

The industrialization of mass violence began with the Third Reich (Bauman, 1989), and has continued with the increasing distribution and use of cheap weaponry—from Kalashnikovs to machetes, tanks to heavy machine guns, helicopter gunships to “smart bombs” and “bunker busters.” And if Benjamin Barber (1995) and Thomas Friedman (1999) are correct in their assessment of the oppositional tendencies of the current age—where grasping for modernity goes hand in hand with tribalism—then the likelihood that such conflicts will diminish over time seems dim indeed.

Such tribal identities and the hatred that often accompanies them suggest that the media must see both parties (or all parties in multi-party conflict) as the “other,” and not use definitions of the “other” as supplied by any of the conflicting parties themselves. There is some foundational justification for such a perspective. Most of the world’s major religions, for instance, do have expectations that those defined as the “other” will not be subject to degradation or violence. But, at the
same time, while any of them might serve as a foundation for journalists to justify refusal to accept characterizations that are the result of military or political expediency, or even to protect people so identified as enemies, several of these religious traditions have been compromised by world conflicts. Different factions are fighting for the soul of Islam as those with more moderate views—the majority of Muslims by all accounts—find their faith debased by those who equate it with terrorism, or ridiculed by those with more radical leanings. Judaism, both as historical “enemy” of Arabs in its Zionist form and as aggressor in the guise of Israeli anti-terror policies, is currently a frail reed to support the weight of the media. And Christianity, too, has seen its moral authority weakened in conflict situations by the willingness of those who share a faith to slaughter one another (Protestants vs. Catholics in Northern Ireland, Orthodox vs. Catholic in Croatia, Catholics and Adventists indicted for crimes against humanity in Rwanda) and by controversies apparently inadvertently initiated by Pope Benedict. So while the foundation for an independent ethical stance for the media may be present in these traditions, all find their moral authority weakened by circumstances.

In the U.S. the tight connection between Donald Trump and the right-wing evangelical community has strained the traditional separation of church and state. Progressive Christians did little to respond to claims that Trump was “God’s man” until mid-2019, when a movement began to attempt to counteract the corrosive effect of this Trump-evangelical connection on younger people, who were staying away from churches in droves. There has been little movement in Trump’s support since then, with Trump’s approval rating actually improving among both conservatives and evangelicals in the aftermath of his racist treats.

The dominance of the Western media is being challenged as never before around the world. New satellite channels, new independent media outlets, new applications on the Internet (including blogs, vlogs, Youtube, Google video) and citizen journalism via cell phone, have all developed using different understandings of the role of communication media in conflict situations. The uploading of bomb damage from Israeli warplanes in Beirut via cell phone cameras and the internet to Google Earth so that the world could see the results within hours of the nighttime raids challenges the notion of “big media” as gatekeepers, as those who construct the meaning for the world’s peoples, and contribute to the global understanding of history. But the Western media are still the sine qua non of ethics in the world of media—whether deserved or not. In the long run, this is the truly significant aspect of practice that media professionals should cherish. As Fred H. Cate puts it (1996, p. 19), “the power of public communications … poses important issues about the capacity of such communications to misinform, distort, and misfocus attention.” This is where the Western media must concentrate its attention—on preventing such results. But it is also easy to lose this quality to other media systems, especially if all that characterizes Western media is increasing attention to sensationalism, decreasing attention to investigation, and continuing use of the words, images, myths, archetypes and socially-constructed frames of understanding that are promoted by groups perpetrating evil—whether those are domestic or foreign.

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32. THE MEDIA IN EVIL CIRCUMSTANCES


