**The Sanewashing Phenomenon**

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**The 'sanewashing' phenomenon**

**When reporters tidy up Trump's tangents.**

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**Rob Tornoe | for E&P Magazine**
We in the media business love a good buzzword.

The latest to sweep across social media and into circular think pieces at The Atlantic and elsewhere is a term tied to criticism of how media outlets cover Donald Trump's rambling answers and lengthy speeches — "sanewashing."

The charge against media outlets goes like this: On the campaign trail, Trump has become increasingly incoherent, responding to basic policy questions with meandering word salads flooded with bizarre comments about things like sharks and Hannibal Lecter. Faced with deadline pressures and word counts, reporters process Trump's comments through a newspaper machine, which cleans up his outlandish and detached remarks and makes him sound much more like a normal politician.

Hence, sanewashing.

In just one example, Trump offered a meandering response to a question at the Economic Club of New York last month about his plan to make child care more affordable. His basic answer was that tariffs imposed on foreign nations would cover the cost without offering further details beyond, "It's about Make America Great Again."

However, some news outlets initially covered Trump's comments as if they made sense. An Associated Press headline read, "Trump suggests tariffs can help solve rising childcare costs in a major economic speech." The New York Times led with another piece of news from Trump's remarks, "Trump Calls for an Efficiency Commission, an Idea Pushed by Elon Musk."

"By continually reframing Trump's incoherent and often dangerous rhetoric as conventional political discourse, major news outlets are failing in their duty to inform the public and are instead providing cover for increasingly erratic behavior from a former — and potentially future — president," Parker Molloy wrote last month in The New Republic.

In response to another wild claim — Trump's suggestion that children were getting gender-changing surgery at school — longtime Los Angeles Times columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winner Michael Hiltzik wrote that none of the coverage he read gave "anything like the flavor of his

diatribe." He also noted coverage of Trump's claims about transgender athletes competing as women made him sound "almost rational (though not quite), compared to what he really had to say."

"The rule at The Times is that we shouldn't apply language associated with mental illness to people who aren't known to be mentally ill," Hiltzik wrote. "But sorry, who can listen to this and not think, 'This is abnormal.'"

One challenge for reporters is Trump's incoherent responses are no longer a novelty — a difficult sell in a news ecosystem focused on what's new. He was rambling long before he descended an escalator at Trump Tower in 2015 to announce his presidential campaign, and it didn't prevent him from defeating Hillary Clinton in the election. Neither did his increasingly detached rhetoric lead to any difficulty securing the Republican Party's presidential nomination in 2020 or this election cycle.

It's also a reporter's job to pare down the news into a story that's as easily digestible as possible. There's nothing easy about forcing readers to consume rambling quotes veering off the cliff toward insanity.

Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor-in-chief of The Atlantic, described this in a recent piece as a "bias toward coherence," noting as journalists, "We feel, understandably, that it is our job to make things make sense. But what if the actual story is that politics today makes no sense?"

While many might consider this a national media problem, local journalists in battleground states will be on the frontlines until next month's election. With Trump and other candidates campaigning across the country, it becomes critical for journalists to present as clear a picture as possible about the choice voters will face when they head to the ballot box, from Trump and Kamala Harris down to their local candidates.

So, how do you avoid sanewashing Trump or any other politician?

The first thing you can do is employ a "truth sandwich" in your coverage. Developed by author and linguist George Lakoff and promoted by New York University professor and author Jay Rosen, it basically means to surround a lie or misstatement with the truth.

Here's how Lakoff described it:

1. Start with the truth. The first frame gets the advantage.
2. Indicate the lie. Avoid amplifying the specific language if possible.
3. Return to the truth. Always repeat truths more than lies.

Most mainstream outlets have done this well in response to another wild lie Trump has put out into the news ecosystem — that migrants in Ohio were eating the pets of one town's residents. ABC News anchor David Muir even corrected Trump in real-time during last month's presidential debate, noting there were "no credible reports of specific claims of pets being harmed, injured or abused by individuals within the immigrant community."

Here was the lede in The Associated Press news story about Trump's remarks:

"Former President Donald Trump on Tuesday amplified false rumors that Haitian immigrants in Ohio were abducting and eating pets, repeating during a televised debate the type of inflammatory and anti-immigrant rhetoric he has promoted throughout his campaigns.

'There is no evidence that Haitian immigrants in an Ohio community are doing that,' officials say."

"False" and "no evidence" are straightforward ways to report on Trump's wild claims while making it clear to readers that they have no basis in reality. Putting them in the lede means it's likely a reader just skimming the news won't miss the context.

"The main news story about a lie should rapidly confront and dispel the lie with facts," Dan Froomkin wrote recently in his Press Watch newsletter. "Journalists should treat a lie like a virus, for which they are the vaccine, not the spreader."

Another helpful suggestion comes from Poynter's Kelly McBride, who thinks journalists should be clear about why a politician is lying and the purpose the disinformation serves.

While many outlets fact-checked Trump's false claim about Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, eating cats and dogs, NPR's Jasmine Garsd published an explainer delving into the long history of similar claims being made against immigrants. The Washington Post also explored the history of Trump's remarks, concluding they were "rooted in a centuries-old racist trope of vilifying newcomers to the United States."

While important, these pieces are often read by fewer people than the initial breaking news stories. The best suggestion, when possible, is to let a politician's quotes stand and be direct about why to your readers.

For example, regarding Trump's childcare comments, NBC News reporters Sahil Kapur and Peter Nicholas opted to publish the former president's complete 376-word response, ramblings, tangents and all. In setting up the quote, they explained Trump's full response "fell short of offering a coherent vision or policy for how he'd address childcare needs." They also prominently quoted conservative economist Brian Riedl, hardly a Harris-supporting lefty, who said, "Trump sounded like the student who hadn't studied for the test and was making up numbers."

"Within the journalism community, a debate is raging over whether and how the big news organizations should highlight Trump's mental condition," Hiltzik wrote. "There's no secret how to do it, of course. Just quote, directly, what he says, and don't sugarcoat a thing."

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