

Rhetoric of American Identities

Retoryka amerykańskich tożsamości

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The Rhetoric of “Whataboutism” in American Journalism and Political Identity

Retoryczny „Whataboutism” w amerykańskim dziennikarstwie i tożsamości politycznej

Abstract

This paper is focused on the contextual use of the term “whataboutism” in contemporary American politics, specifically in the language of political news commentary. After tracking the word’s emergence in political discourse, some analysis of the term’s recent use in examples of commentary articles is done to explore what the term means as a rhetorical device that structures political conversations in the media and shapes political identities in the public sphere. Overall, “whataboutism” is found to be part of an asymmetrical media ecosystem polarizing the American electorate, and one of the rhetorical tools systematically used in maintaining political group divisions. How “whataboutism” is deployed in political discourse and then grappled with or normalized by journalists is emblematic of trends in American journalistic discourse after the election results of 2016, and the term’s newfound prevalence is illustrative of the degree to which American identities have become politically tribalized.

Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na kontekstowym użyciu terminu „whataboutism” [pl. „a za to u was”] we współczesnej polityce amerykańskiej, szczególnie w języku komentarzy politycznych. Po prześledzeniu występowania tego słowa w dyskursie politycznym, przeprowadzono analizę jego użycia w wybranych artykułach komentujących bieżącą sytuację, w celu zbadania, jak termin ten funkcjonuje jako retoryczne narzędzie, które porządkuje polityczne rozmowy w mediach i kształtuje tożsamość polityczną w sferze publicznej. Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, „whataboutism” okazuje się być częścią asymetrycznego ekosystemu medialnego, polaryzującego amerykański elektorat oraz jednym z retorycznych narzędzi, systematycznie stosowanych w celu utrzymania podziałów politycznych. Sposób, w jaki „whataboutism” jest wykorzystywany najpierw w dyskursie politycznym, a następnie normalizowany w dyskursie dziennikarskim, symbolizuje trend, który pojawił się w amerykańskim dziennikarstwie po wyborach prezydenckich w 2016 roku. Powracająca popularność tej retorycznej strategii świadczy o pogłębiającej się trybalizacji amerykańskiej tożsamości politycznej.

Key words

American journalism, political news commentary, epistemology, political tribalism
amerykańskie dziennikarstwo, bieżący komentarz polityczny, epistemologia, trybalizacja polityki

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1. Introduction: “Whataboutism”

This paper is motivated by recent ongoing discussions about journalistic identity and journalism’s general role in constructing American political identities. This assumes that the public’s interactions with and perceptions of the varieties of news discourse they encounter corresponds to the ways in which political group members perceive themselves and conceive of their relationships with members of other political groups. The paper is also interested in how American journalistic news commentary confronts a particular form of public political argumentation and selectively engages with that style of political rhetoric. More specifically, this exploration is interested in how distinctly formulated rhetorical terminology in opinionated journalism discourse can influence and structure public affairs discourse and how it may also reflect political identity formulations in American society.

The word “whataboutism” is newly prominent in American political discussions, but the rhetorical argumentative technique it refers to is timeless. The term “whataboutism” is used to name the logical fallacy, “tu quoque” (Latin for “you also”), which is an attempt to defend against criticism by turning a critique back at the accuser. In this way, an accusation of an offence is met with a counter-accusation, and the intent is to pivot away from the original criticism. But responding in this way is considered to be a deflection, because whether the accuser is guilty of exactly the same type of misdeed is irrelevant to the veracity of the original accusation. Also, “tu quoque” is related to ad hominem argumentation, in how it aims to attack the character, not the position, of an opponent. Recently, the word “whataboutism” has also taken on a slightly modified meaning, indicated in *The Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of the term:

The practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue. Also in later use: the practice of raising a supposedly analogous issue in response to a perceived hypocrisy or inconsistency.

This definition clearly captures the essence of the word's meaning beyond "tu quoque". To add more layers of meaning, the following sections of this paper seek to connect this definition with the term's contextual, social and political dimensions as well as with some corresponding identity-related aspects of the word as it is currently being used in American political discourse.

2. "Whataboutism" in Context

2.1 Historical Origins and Past Contexts

In a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "The Roots of the 'What About?' Ploy" (June 9, 2017), linguist Ben Zimmer traces the history of the term back to its likely origins in the sectarian conflict between North Irish Unionists and North Irish Republicans. Zimmer found that in a published letter to the editor of the *Irish Times*, January 30, 1974, "the Whatabouts" was used to describe people answering condemnations with arguments meant to prove the more serious atrocities of their "enemy". Zimmer writes that very soon after, "Commentators on the Troubles embraced the term "whataboutery" and frequently mentioned it in the ensuing years of strife", and eventually "the whataboutism variant" was applied to this type of reasoning, notably appearing in a book about the Irish Troubles by Tony Parker published in 1993. In further researching the history of the term, Zimmer also notes that it was popularized by a senior editor at *The Economist*, Edward Lucas, who served as the magazine's Moscow bureau chief from 1998 to 2002, and whose articles in 2007 and 2008 used the term "whataboutism" to describe a typical Cold War style of argumentation prevalent in Putin's Russia. One *Economist* article, "The Kremlin's useful idiots in Russia's shadow" (October 29, 2007), describes "whataboutism" as "the Kremlin's useful idiots" seeking to "match every Soviet crime with a real or imagined western one". Another *Economist* article, "Whataboutism" (January 31, 2008), specifically portrays the term as making a "comeback" after western interlocutors "nicknamed" this propagandistic tactic during the Cold War, and characterizes "whataboutism" as being reminiscent of a 1980's type of Soviet apologist argumentation which is typically deployed when Russia's problems are brought up. Yet, this use of the term seems to be somewhat limited to these articles in *The Economist* until its more prominent recent comeback. However, the association with Cold War propaganda has stuck and has now largely eclipsed earlier connotations and usages, as we will see in the next section of this paper. Apparent in an effort to track an emerging definition of the term, *Merriam Webster's* current online "Words We're Watching" entry gives credence to a Russian connection:

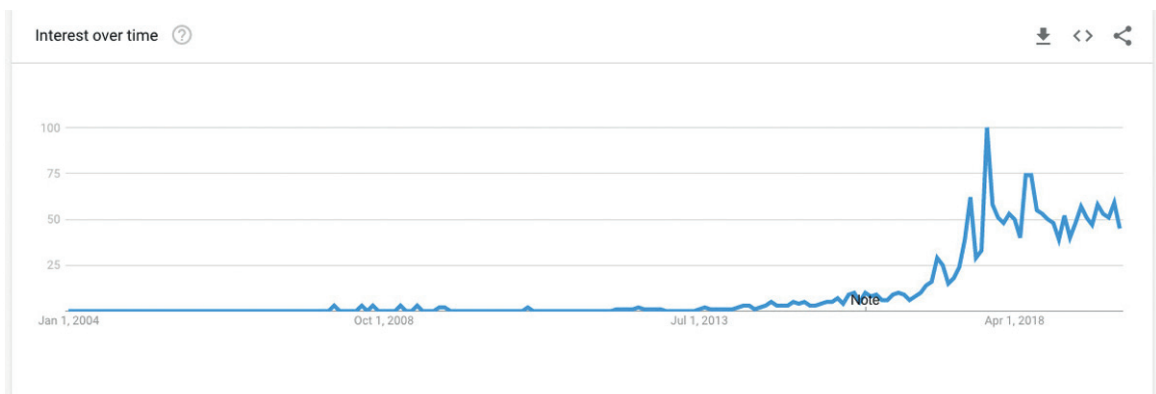
The association of whataboutism with the Soviet Union began during the Cold War. As the regimes of Josef Stalin and his successors were criticized by the West for human rights atrocities, the Soviet propaganda machine would be ready with a comeback alleging atrocities of equal reprehensibility for which the West was guilty.

This part of the definition is generally accepted despite the fact that the term's association with the Cold War is not evidenced by any prominent examples of "whataboutism" actually being used in journalism about the Cold War from the 1950s to the 1990s¹ (Johnson and Shirazi 2019).

Yet, in more current applications, the term often gets retroactive use to describe East-West "tu quoque" rhetoric from that past era, or the term gets a revived use, as when some prominent American columnists began to use "whataboutism", referencing *The Economist* as originally coining and defining the term in 2007. This is evidenced in how *The New Republic* writer Julia Ioffe used the term in writing "Edward Snowden's Strange Layover in Moscow" (June 23, 2013) and another similar example is writer Olga Khazan from *The Atlantic*, who used the term in her article "The Soviet-Era Strategy That Explains What Russia is Doing with Snowden" (August 2, 2013). Both articles address Russia granting asylum to American Edward Snowden. So, authors like these were further applying the term in discussions about Putin's Russia in relation to America. The term was subsequently used even more widely in journalism around Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2014, and it was in 2014 that the term first started to be used in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Still, use of "whataboutism" was in reference to how Russia and Putin defended against criticisms in retorts that consistently pointed a finger at the West's supposed hypocrisies and faults.

2.2 Present Contexts and Contemporary Uses

"Whataboutism" has more widely entered public discourse in the present day. The graph below includes the examples mentioned in the previous section of this paper and shows the sharp present increase in public interest in "whataboutism" since 2017.

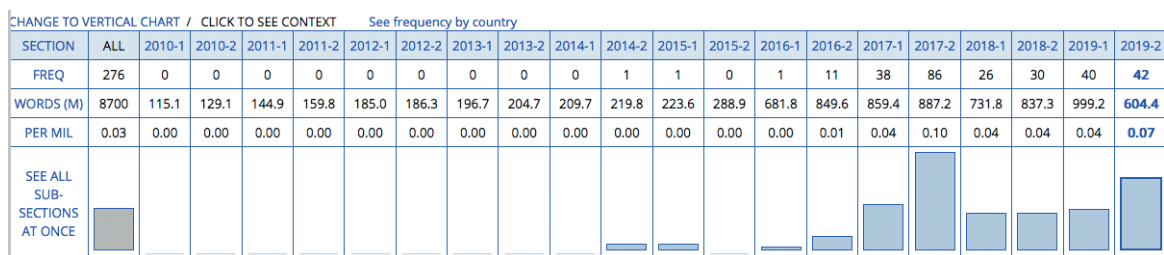


(Fig. 1) Google Trends, Nov 16, 2019, Worldwide Interest: "whataboutism"

1. Aside from one mention in an Australian publication, *The Age* (June 17, 1978)

Recent interest in the word and some changes in the way “whataboutism” is being applied can be understood within the contemporary American political environment. American usages of the term coincide with questions about American president Donald Trump’s associations with Russia’s president Vladimir Putin, and with an electoral issue in American politics after the 2016 election. In 2017, investigations began into Russian interference with the American election process and public accusations about election meddling grew. This spotlighted East-West relations in the national political discussion, and the term began to get wider use. The term tended to retain its Russian connotations, which were gradually transferred into more general descriptions of internal conflicts in the American side of the political situation, as done in *The Economist’s* article “Why the what-about-ism?” (March 20, 2017). However, “whataboutism” eventually gets attached to Trump, and now is also commonly used by American political commentators to specifically describe the way in which, as president, Donald Trump answers/avoids questions from journalists and the ways in which Trump’s defenders in the media use “whataboutism” techniques to redirect and reframe public criticisms of Trump, often toward some type of implied/supposed hypocrisy located in his opponents.

The chart below shows how the word “whataboutism” has remarkably and consistently become a part of the terminology in the news since the start of the Trump presidency in January 2017. When combined with the data in figure (1), the relationship between general interest and specific use in journalism is indicated, especially in the timing of the increases coinciding with the aftermath of the November 2016 American election.



(Fig. 2) NOW Corpus (News on the Web) Nov 16, 2019, Word Frequency: “whataboutism”

Beyond the statistical data in figure (2), it is important to look at the word in the context of specific events and statements made in the American political arena. Since the focus of this paper is on how journalistic news commentary engages in political argumentation, we need to look at how the term “whataboutism” has currently been used in opinion articles. In doing this we will be better able to describe how the term plays a role in shaping political discussion and debate, as well as consider how that debate, in turn, is shaping American political identities. Some selected examples below will be used to demonstrate the term in context,

and we can refer to these political commentary examples in an analysis in part three of this paper.

(1) Shortly after being inaugurated, Trump's habits of answering criticism become notable in how they may mimic Putin's. The instance below was viewed by many journalists as being particularly Russian and nihilistic, as demonstrated in a section of Masha Gessen's *New York Times* commentary article "Bring Back Hypocrisy!" (February 19, 2017):

This [cynical] stance has breathed new life into the old Soviet propaganda tool of "what-aboutism," the trick of turning any argument against the opponent. When accused of falsifying elections, Russians retort that American elections are not unproblematic; when faced with accusations of corruption, they claim that the entire world is corrupt. This month, Mr. Trump employed the technique of whataboutism when he was asked about his admiration for Mr. Putin, whom the host Bill O'Reilly called "a killer." "You got a lot of killers," responded Mr. Trump. "What, you think our country's so innocent?" To an American ear, Mr. Trump's statement was jarring -- not because Americans believe their country to be "innocent" but because they have always relied on a sort of aspirational hypocrisy to understand the country. No American politician in living memory has advanced the idea that the entire world, including the United States, was rotten to the core.

(2) This next column excerpt, from *The Washington Post*'s Dan Zak, titled "Whataboutism: The Cold War Tactic, Thawed by Putin, is Brandished by Donald Trump" (August 19, 2017), addresses a specific, widely-known and discussed example of "whataboutism" regarding Trump's lack of satisfactory response to a violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, NC:

We've gotten very good at what-abouting. The president has led the way. His campaign may or may not have conspired with Moscow, but President Trump has routinely employed a durable old Soviet propaganda tactic. Tuesday's bonkers news conference in New York was Trump's latest act of "whataboutism," the practice of short-circuiting an argument by asserting moral equivalency between two things that aren't necessarily comparable [...] Using the literal "what about" construction, Trump then went on to blame "both sides" for the violence in Charlottesville. "What about the 'alt-left' that came charging at the, as you say, the 'alt-right'?" the president said. "Do they have any semblance of guilt?" For a nanosecond, especially to an uncritical listener, this stab at logic might seem interesting, even thought-provoking, and that's why it's a useful political tool. Whataboutism appears to broaden context, to offer a counterpoint, when really it's diverting blame, muddying the waters and confusing the hell out of rational listeners.

(3) Another common angle for political commentary is to note how news organizations contribute to the general climate of "whataboutism" in politics, and how it is used by Trump's defenders as if it is a legitimate form of response to criticism, as observed in this example extracted from writer Philip Bump's *Washington Post* article with the headline "Why is Whataboutism Having a Moment?" (August 29, 2017):

Whataboutism is a cheap rhetorical tactic that relies on drawing false or sketchy comparisons between two things which may not actually be all that comparable [...] Whataboutism was a staple of cable news over the course of 2016, and not just at Fox (though it was then and is now a key part of coverage there). CNN had paid whatabouters on staff [...] rising unfailingly to Trump's defense, often by citing some tangentially related whatabout example from a Democrat or Hillary Clinton [...] This is the same media environment in which Trump's own political worldview and rhetorical tools were forged. Trump has watched Sean Hannity and "Fox & Friends" for years, places where whataboutism has long had a place. So for Trump, as for many Americans, what about what Clinton did is a perfectly fair and reasonable response to criticism. Therefore, it's a response that all too often is offered.

(4) Nearly a year after the previous examples, as Trump's constant deflections have become repetitive and patently absurd, "whataboutism" continues to be probed for its rhetorical weaknesses, while acknowledging that it still has shown remarkable strength and staying-power in a polarized political setting. An example of this is in Ben Yagoda's *New York Times* column titled "One Cheer for Whataboutism" (July 19, 2018) that explores the problems endemic in its use:

That sort of response is a deflection, and could and should be pounced on as such by a skilled debater [...] Another common problem is evident when the supposed offense that's whatabouted pales before the initial charge. This is a cherished move of Mr. Trump's, seen most recently in his post-Putin-summit news conference. In an exchange about Russian election meddling, The Times reported, he "changed the subject, demanding to know why the F.B.I. never examined the hacked computer servers of the Democratic National Committee," and then offering the prototype of modern false equivalence: "Where are Hillary Clinton's emails?" What-abouts also tend to have a kind of no-duh quality. Of course each side in our polarized polity trashes its opponents for actions that, if taken by its allies, would be excused, defended or rationalized [...] What else would you expect?

(5) Notable in this following example, excerpted from an editorial (a more traditional legacy news opinion genre) from *The Washington Post* with the title "Don't Fall for Trump's Latest Whataboutism" (August 11, 2018), is the often observed connection which is drawn between a conservative cable television host and Trump's public tweeting, where the "whataboutism" feeds itself through repetition, giving his base a readily available, easy to use, yet faulty argument:

The president was back at it again Thursday, quoting a conservative cable host's assertion that "Hillary Clinton & the Democrats colluded with the Russians to fix the 2016 election." This inflammatory argument may play well with the president's supporters and others inclined to believe the worst about Ms. Clinton. But the claim that Ms. Clinton's 2016 opposition-research activities were on the same moral or legal plane with the Trump team's direct interactions with Russians represents a preposterous effort to confuse and distract [...] For all of Mr. Trump's efforts to muddy the waters, the two cases are decidedly different [...] Mr. Trump's whataboutism obscures the fundamental difference [...] One of Mr. Trump's go-to defenses is insisting that others have done the things he is accused of, only worse. No matter how many times he tweets about Ms. Clinton's supposed collusion, that doesn't make it true, nor does it diminish legitimate concerns about his own campaign's behavior.

All of these examples are responding to the general increase in “tu quoque” that has appeared in American political discourse and the discussions are centered on how this is influencing discussions of public affairs. An important distinction should be made here about the media and journalism context, before proceeding. That is to differentiate between two aspects of this rhetorical phenomenon.

One part of the context is the usage of the “tu quoque” fallacy in the argumentation rhetoric of politicians and their defenders, and clear examples of this can be observed when their statements are publically presented on television, on the internet, and on social media such as Twitter. Here, Trump and his defenders in the media are identified to be rhetorically using an explicit phrase “what about...” or to be using some other implicitly “what-about phrasing” to quickly re-frame various issues they are being asked about. In doing this, they are said to be using a what-about strategy in order to deflect questions and avoid addressing inquiries into topics they don’t want to discuss. Further, the “tu quoque” strategy is a way to direct vague criticism back toward their perceived political opponents in an attempt to stall them and/or appall them.

Another part of the context involves the rhetoric in the commentary articles of news media journalism. In opinion articles, when journalists label observable uses of the ‘tu quoque’ argumentative fallacy with the term “whataboutism”, they are using this term to describe, criticize and decry the particular rhetorical practice as juvenile, deficient and deceptive. At the same time, a typical opinion column trope in dramatizing and pathologizing this condemnation is to associate the practice of “whataboutism” with reviving Soviet Cold War propaganda techniques or to mention that it is a form of argumentation borrowed by Trump and his supporters from Putin and the Russians. In this, criticism of Trump through accusations of “whataboutism” is about exposing the absence of valid argumentation in his utterances and also about linking Trump’s facile manner of responding to questions with a depiction of his glib, self-serving and anti-American attitude.

3. “Whataboutism” in the American Rhetorical Environment

3.1 Impacts on Journalistic Roles and Identities

The news commentary texts under consideration here are ones that circulate in the digital news ecosystem of America, appearing on news sites, on mobile applications, and shared on social media networks and other online platforms. Production, dissemination, reception and consumption of news and news commentary is influenced and modulated by technology, as well as shaped by a reader’s ability to control what types of news they encounter. The dynamics of how

new media technologies shape the intersection of journalism, political identity and the notion of a deliberative democratic public sphere has been continually reassessed as new iterations appear (Gitlin 1998; Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlberg 2007). Considering these continuing discussions, one way of looking at digital spaces today is as a reflection of how the modern internet's especially centrifugal qualities are impacting the Habermasian concept of the public sphere and an imagined national public, which are both seen to be in decline as social and political identities fragment in digital media spaces (Hodkinson 2017, 192-193). This has impacted journalism's role in the public sphere in many ways. One example is found in how engagement and participation in public culture and politics involves new and remixed forms of news and journalism that have emerged in the digitally mediated public sphere. Among these are the types of journalism discourse we are discussing in this paper. This type of civic journalism, done by media workers, is a type of institutionalized journalistic news blogging that does not usually produce news, but provides glossing and makes regular professional opinionated commentary on public affairs news. The increase in this type of journalism may address issues and help mobilize public opinion, but it is also problematic, (Siapera 2012, 164-165) as:

The political role of this kind of journalism is close to the liberal and early Habermasian normative ideals of legitimation of political decisions through public opinion. However, to the extent that it does not provide a forum or enable more active participation from its readers, it repeats and re-enacts a division between politics-journalism-citizenry.

So, when it comes to democracy and journalistic identity, there are expectations about the informative and interpretive approaches journalists use and the relationships they have with the public. At the same time, there is a contextually constructed perception that tends to subordinate citizens as receivers/reactants and journalists as the experts entitled and authorized to produce knowledge since they have been granted "epistemic authority" (Ekström and Westlund 2019, 11-12) in formulating rhetorical lenses for understanding public affairs news. For this paper, we refer to some details in rhetorical style as the location of that dynamic in framing interpretation.² Specifically, we can further examine the impact of "whataboutism" terminology as a textual choice being made in constructing, modifying and representing alternative ideological conceptions/positions, because when "looked at systematically, such choices cumulatively build a specific rhetoric that characterizes a given news producer/mediator in terms of their dominating strategies

2. These rhetorical features in opinion journalism can also be examined at a critical stylistic level to note how strategic ideological conceptualizations are triggered (Dykstra 2019) and explored with critical epistemic discourse analysis to note how knowledge, power, and manipulation intersect in the discourse (van Dijk 2011).

for textualization of social reality” (Molek-Kozakowska 2016, 279). With these perspectives in mind, we now turn to how “whataboutism” is shaping discourse and is shaping American journalistic identities.

3.1.1 Normalizing Effects

As mentioned in section two of this paper, journalistic commentary that calls out and criticizes Trump for using (Russian-style) “whataboutism” expresses the role of watchdog journalism in performing a news media fact-checking function, which is central to the process of verifying statements made by people in positions of power and to exposing misleading proclamations. This is an identity formulation involving journalistic norms where journalists perform an institutional role of presenting accurate information in the public interest. The analytical and evaluative journalism of opinionated commentary is within this sphere, but what is problematic is saying that a statement should be disregarded and disdained simply “because it is whataboutism” is dismissive and does not require much further thought and conversation; the risk is that the term becomes an ubiquitous “zombie phrase” or “thought terminating cliché” (Johnson and Shirazi 2019).

If an accusation of “whataboutism” is to have an effect, it must be acknowledged that while “tu quoque” arguments have obvious rhetorical limitations, they can still have an impact. The role of the journalist can be to parse this complexity in news media commentary, as noted in example (4) above. In normal human discourse and in politics, ad hominem questioning is a way of raising doubts about an opponent’s character and is part of pointing out inconsistencies or hypocritical stances. This can lead to demonstrating actual differences between opponents if the “tu quoque” argument is applied rigorously and conscientiously to discover faults. However, problems can arise in a reductionist “that’s just whataboutism” response to it that discounts the practice as a normative form of partisan ad hominem political rhetoric. In the end, “tu quoque” defensive deployment and subsequent “whataboutism” inculcation leave the accuser and accused both open to charges of fault. Often, these accusations are thereafter not duly pursued, as no space is left for completing the rhetorical exercise with deeper discussions exploring culpability or comparing moral equivalency. Instead, by remaining in a zone of what is essentially superficial banter, this performance of accusations can allow politicians, partisan pundits and other types of news analysts to (repetitively) move on and elide any further substantive explorations.

3.1.2 Epistemological Effects

Another related impact of these “whataboutism” rhetorical rituals in politics and punditry is that argumentation can be shifted away from any shared journalistic

epistemic about information and knowledge production and veer into the territory of purely partisan divisions. Journalists can play a role in this transference. How this is playing out in America is noted in an Op-Ed article in *The New York Times* titled “If Liberals Hate Trump, He’s Doing It Right” (May 14, 2017), professional pundit Charles Sykes points out that conservative media pundits’ practice of “whataboutism” is a contributing factor in inciting anti-liberalism by encouraging:

Loathing those who loathe the president. Rabid anti-anti-Trumpism [...] For the anti-anti-Trump pundit, whatever the allegation against Mr. Trump, whatever his blunders or foibles, the other side is always worse. But the real heart of anti-anti-Trumpism is the delight in the frustration and anger of his opponents [...] If liberals hate something, the argument goes, then it must be wonderful and worthy of aggressive defense. Each controversy reinforces the divisions and the distrust, and Mr. Trump counts on that.

In this refocusing of argumentative rhetoric, conservative media pundits induce the movement of discussion away from Trump and onto the undertaking of ridiculing and attacking liberals. At the same time that this move evades raising doubts about or reckoning with actual problems in the Trump administration, it is also good for the business of retaining a loyal audience and maintaining media ratings. As was previously mentioned in example (3), media acceptance of this form of rhetoric becomes a structure for pundits to normalize Trump’s rhetoric and connect it with additional public confirmation in its public recitation. Through the pundit’s promotion, these tactics are given the appearance of legitimacy and consistency. In also being propagandistically designed for an ideologically supportive audience, these packaged anti-liberal messages are easy to assimilate, and can also manipulate and warp that audience’s views on social reality, as claims to truth are not important in these cases, but emotional reactions are.

The wider backdrop for the link between journalistic epistemology and propaganda is in how Trump and his supporters dismiss the mainstream media, and repetitively label news outlets that follow journalistic norms as “fake”, “corrupt” and “biased”. This depiction of journalistic identity is rendered possible because the nature of the American media ecosystem provides them with an ideologically congenial media alternative. Trump and his supporters are interacting with an American media ecosystem that is asymmetrical, with strong structures for maintaining an institutionally separate partisan right-wing propaganda feedback loop, where multiple media outlets do not follow journalistic norms and are producing news with polarizing effects. This is part of an American “epistemic crisis” and is a dynamic called “network propaganda” and these effects are “induced misperceptions, disorientation, and distraction -- which contribute to population-scale changes in attitudes and beliefs”, and which come from a variety of outlets producing repeated versions of a narrative, thereby “adding credibility and improving recall

of the false, misleading, or otherwise manipulative narrative in the target population, and disseminating that narrative more widely in that population” (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018, 33).

Allowing unquestioned and unchecked “whataboutism” as a normative type of argument in public political discourse and debate is one part of this dynamic. Failure to call out the rhetorical fallacies in “whataboutism” argumentation or adopting it for partisan reasons is a neglect of basic journalistic standards and can, as a result, contribute to erosion of public perceptions of what truth-seeking and logic-based civil political debate should look like. “Whataboutism” demonstrates that not only is the right-wing media apparatus unabashedly biased in attracting and keeping its base constituency, but also other sectors in the American journalistic media ecosystem appear to have lost sight of their general civic purpose in consistently neglecting “to consider the question of *what* journalism is for”, and thereby largely failing to serve the public by not “taking clear steps to confront outrage” and instead capitulating to it or normalizing the false equivalencies it relies on (Zelizer 2018, 146-147). The result is a general failure in journalism to advance political discourse to the level where it is positively affecting and enriching the deliberative democratic process. Yet, beyond criticism of how well journalists are performing a watchdog role, it must be acknowledged that journalism and the media function within a larger systemic framework, where other political, economic and social forces are also shaping media agendas and framing public issues, so that the “power structure of the public sphere may well distort the dynamics of mass communication and interfere with the normative requirement that *relevant* issues, *required* information, and *appropriate* contributions be mobilized” (Habermas 2006, 418).

3.2 Impacts on Political Discourse and Identity Politics

Journalists rhetorically trapped in “whataboutism” argumentation become “us versus them” enabling pundits, rather than pursuers of non-partisan truth. A misapplied cycle of “tu quoque” and “whataboutism” is paralyzing because it avoids truly confronting the complex tangled principles and hypocrisies this type of pursuit inherently must address. Such deep analysis is rarely found in the political discourse of daily digital news commentary, which is usually limited to pointing out that using the “what about” technique is an untenable or treacherous act of political maneuvering. Worse, when partisan voters/supporters adopt this simplistic type of argumentative reasoning they can become even further oriented into political filter bubbles and more firmly entrenched in biased echo chambers, which calcify their political and social identities. The problem for a public inundated with “whataboutism” is that while it is vague and it fails as logical rhetorical tool,

it comes across as straight-talking and unifying populist talk when uttered by political leaders and their affirming media pundits, and it is helpful in identifying a common enemy.

3.2.1 Polarization and Political Tribalism

Polarized American political groupings have been likened to tribes. In his *New York Magazine* essay “Can Democracy Survive Tribalism? -America Wasn’t Built for Humans” (September 18, 2017), Andrew Sullivan finds a relationship between American political tribalism and “whataboutism”:

One of the great attractions of tribalism is that you don’t actually have to think very much. All you need to know on any given subject is which side you’re on [...] When criticized by a member of a rival tribe, a tribalist will not reflect on his own actions or assumptions but instantly point to the same flaw in his enemy. The most powerful tribalist among us, Trump, does this constantly [...] reflecting the now near-ubiquitous trend of “whataboutism,” as any glance at a comments section or a cable slugfest will reveal.

Some, like Sullivan, argue that humans are hardwired for tribalism and this argument can be extended to say that the origins of political partisanship and tribalism in America are in the American voters’ attachments to social groups (class, racial, religious, regional), which leads them to seek out particular political ideologies and political parties (Mason 2018). However, when looking at how the appearance of actual political differences also stems from a constructed ideological split, it must be considered that maintenance of a group’s ideological unity has additional supporting structures. In America, it has become clear that political affiliations go beyond social groupings to include media choices. Support for tribal tendencies and division comes from how information regarding a group’s social reality becomes ideological in the media. As mentioned in the previous section of this paper, an asymmetrical media ecosystem contributes to the concept of an American ideological battle between incompatible value systems. Mainly, the conservative movement has worked to undermine mainstream journalism, generating fervent distrust for it among their followers. At the same time, this polarization process has cemented the group’s reliance on a separate coterie of explicitly biased news providers and media sources creating content particularly aligned with their political group orientation (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). This is a self-reinforcing system where exposure to a constant flow of information with congenial ideological perspectives can make politically tribal divisions appear to be very real and justified. Thus, the group’s impulse for entrenching in a supportive epistemic and for fervently defending partisan viewpoints becomes a natural response to any form of criticism.

3.2.2 Assimilating “Whataboutism” into Political Discourse

General acceptance of the assumptions in “whataboutism” rhetoric and argumentation is a sign of the previously described group divisions, polarization and tribalization of political identity in American society. In addition, “whataboutism” stubbornly resists the type of scrutiny that requires diligent adherence to core journalistic principles of accuracy and fairness. As we have seen earlier in examples (2), (4) and (5), even as some political observers lament it, “whataboutism” has seemingly become a commonplace way to sully an opponent and gain partisan advantage over the other side. One reason a political group’s endorsement of this rhetoric is possible is because the American political media information apparatus is already operating along highly partisan tribal lines, and has assimilated it, as indicated in example (3). In such a mode, insulated knowledge spaces and tribal conceptions of social reality develop. Thus, a pattern is established where a continuing form of epistemic closure can isolate a group in their own “tribal epistemology” (Roberts 2017), as:

Information is evaluated based not on conformity to standards of evidence and correspondence to a common understanding of the world, but on whether it supports the tribe’s values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders. “Good for our side” and “true” begin to blur into one.

Another factor in the way “whataboutism” is being grappled with in journalistic discourse is that “what-about” style accusations and false moral equivalencies are being assimilated within ordinary political cynicism. There is an amount of natural “aspirational hypocrisy” in American politics, as mentioned in example (1) and it can be said that political lies are also inevitable, and that some political types of lying are expected and even “acceptable” in the spectrum of the discourse. But this still requires that there be a common notion about rhetorical norms and violations of those norms. If “whataboutism” is not duly publically contested, and if there is no agreement about trans-partisan rules for political engagement and discussion, then “whataboutism” will continue to be a quick, convenient way to thoughtlessly avoid uncomfortable confrontations with truth, where the potential risks in the increasing polarization of public political identities is being ignored. A related concern, worth mentioning here, involves questions that can be posed regarding how assimilation of these types of rhetorical norms in the news media, as part of a degenerating mode of political discussion, could also lead to a situation where “personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promote civic privatism and a mood of antipolitics” (Habermas 2006, 422).

4. Conclusion

Whether the rhetoric of “whataboutism” is attached to “Trumpism” or will have staying power in American journalistic vernacular remains to be seen. For the time being, we can note how it has become one of the systemic strategies in political and news commentary discourse structuring and shaping American socio-political identities. “Whataboutism” rhetoric uses the guise of entering into participation in a debate, but this proves to be a relatively empty exercise. While having the appearance of truth-seeking, it is unmoored from a commonly shared epistemic and therefore allows introduction of unfounded conspiracy theories and propaganda as supporting evidence in a falsely comparative framework. The inherently false equating and negating effects in posing a “tu quoque” rejoinder to a question causes even reasoned attempts to call out this “whataboutism” to fall into perpetually divisive “us versus them” conceptualizations of the relationships between political groups. In these rhetorical dynamics, American news commentary journalists are shown to be unable to find the proper discursive mechanisms to bridge the divide between two discourse communities with separate basic heuristics and procedures for evaluating knowledge. Even information and truth are depicted as ideological in this context, signaling that Americans do face an epistemic crisis in journalism, society and civic life, and the rhetoric of “whataboutism” is one of its visible symptoms.

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