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# The Question of Journalism in a Post-Fact Trump World: Objectivity is a Lie and the Teen Girl Can Lead a Revolution

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## **The Question of Journalism in a Post-Fact Trump World: Objectivity is a Lie and the Teen Girl Can Lead a Revolution**

By: LeeAnn Penz

"Who's to say that young girls who like pop music – short for popular, right? – have worse musical taste than a 30-year-old hipster guy? That's not up to you to say... You gonna tell me they're not serious? How can you say young girls don't get it? They're our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of keep the world going. Teenage-girl fans – they don't lie. If they like you, they're *there*. They don't act 'too cool.' They like you, and they tell you." – Harry Styles, member of boyband One Direction, when asked by *Rolling Stone* if he feels pressure to prove his “credibility” in the face of his primarily teen girl audience

### **Introduction**

The main question being asked by those who align politically Left since November 2016 has been: how did Donald Trump become the president of the United States? American society is in a state of extreme polarization defined by two distinct realities—one that sees Donald Trump as the antithesis of all that is good, and the other that sees him as their savior. The current political environment of America is the result of the dominant institutions that purvey hegemonic ideologies and continues a specific social order that disenfranchises already vulnerable populations. Only immediately following Donald Trump's widely unexpected win did some respectable news publications become self-reflexive and explore the institution's role in this outcome. Journalism is promoted to be a factual, unbiased product through the broad claims of “objectivity,” which masks its involvement in the perpetuation of oppression, the continued normalization of our corrupted state, and its function as an ideological tool.

From before the election until shortly after Trump's inauguration, I interned at *In These Times*, a self-described progressive publication that took on the mission of undermining the Trump administration and conservative politics. I entered my internship skeptical of journalism as a successful tool against oppression, with particular emphasis on the denial of diverse representation of teen girls in respected news publications. I compared this self-proclaimed counter-hegemonic publication to the subcultural space of fandom, seeing fandom as the response to the repudiation of the teen girl subject as a political being capable of subversive ideological critique and struggle against the mainstream press system. Through my internship, I sought to determine the role that journalism—especially a kind that specifically adopted the claim of “progressive”—played in getting America to the point where someone like Trump could be voted president and what these publications continue to do to perpetuate similar political environments.

### **Capitalism's Interference with the Ideal Journalism**

Journalists are defined as first and foremost purveyors of the public interest, community values, and democracy (Cohen 17). Journalism is taught to be a “moral agent” that holds citizens and businesses responsible for their behavior and encourages the virtues of courage and restraint in order to stimulate self-governance (Wallace 15). The journalist is held accountable by their moral duty of respecting the public's trust (Ugland and Henderson 256). Journalism exposes corruption and injustices while simplifying complex issues for citizens and consumers, playing what Anderson, Bell, and Shirky sees as an “irreplaceable role in democracy” (34). The ultimate goal of journalism is the production of an informed citizenry (Jackson 152). These definitions of the function of the journalist and the press are in direct contradiction to economist Robert L.



Heilbroner's definition of capitalism as being the pursuit of money that rewards gluttony and punishes virtuosity (140). Most authors agree that the moral qualities embedded within the definition of journalism are in opposition to the amoral characteristics of capitalism (Heilbroner, Radin, Jackson, Cohen).

Eighteenth century American newspapers reflected the political views of the editor (McChesney and Scott 5). They ranged in opinion and none dominated the market (McChesney 28). The market was highly competitive and it was moderately easy for entrepreneurs to start their own newspaper. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the journalism market immensely changed, with less competition and the increasing presence of newspaper monopolies. Advertising became the largest source of revenue for newspapers, accounting for the majority of income by the twentieth century, leading a preference for reporting of "news" (whether it was true or not) that would attract the widest audience and incite the most advertisers. Profit-driven yellow journalism of the early 1900s was the natural product of a capitalist newspaper industry. A promise for "professional," objective journalism began to be made by publishers, without any real actions being taken in order to give the newspaper more credibility, gain their reader's trust, and attract a larger audience (McChesney and Scott 5-6).

Upton Sinclair's 1919 book *The Brass Check* is one of the first systemic critiques of American journalism. Sinclair analyzed the limitations of the so-called "free press" within the discussion of broader political corruption resulting from the very nature of capitalism. Sinclair wrote: "Politics, Journalism, and Big Business work hand in hand for the hoodwinking of the public and the plundering of labor," and compared journalists to prostitutes, claiming that the rich owned them both (153). According to Sinclair, a class bias was inherently built into journalism

(409). As a way to counteract the radical criticisms against capitalist journalism during the Progressive Era, the journalist's devotion to a non-partisan "professionalism" and "objectivity" arose—a development Sinclair regarded as a façade (McChesney and Scott 3).

Anderson et al argue that subsidies in the news environment are mutually beneficial for both the publisher and advertiser (36). Subsidies refer to any support granted to work seen as a public good (such as journalism), which can be direct or indirect, public or private, government funded or donated by citizens. They believe that it is necessary for "good journalism" to be subsidized, and that although many news outlets are in the advertising business and not the news business, the relationship between the advertiser and publisher is not inherently bad or impendent to the democratic function of journalism. The relation between the two parties is not a partnership but simply a sales transaction, with the dominance in the hands of the publisher. Anderson et al. argue that the advertiser has a lack of choice, as they must rely on publishers to get seen and has no say in how the publisher then uses the profits garnered within their transaction (Anderson et al 36). Their argument is a strong point of contention between scholars, especially those that see capitalism as diametrically opposed to democracy. Elliot D. Cohen calls the moral/amoral contradiction between journalism and capitalism, the "free press-free market paradox" and that the two are "inherently incompatible" (17). Commercial media, or the intersection of capitalism and journalism, creates a culture that views capitalism positively and helps to maintain it as our economic mode (McChesney 23).

It is unclear whether scholars are completely willing to write off journalism as a hopeless endeavor within a capitalist society. Pamela Taylor Jackson believes that there is no conflict within the teaching of impartiality to journalism students and that the problem lies not with the individual

journalist but with the publisher's strive for profit (152). John McManus details that "fluff" journalism is the natural conclusion of a capitalist society that strives for the lowest cost of production and the highest amount of ratings. Since the 1990s, the "journalistic judgment" has been replaced with "market judgment," resulting in a shift in journalism from being ideologically driven to profit driven. McManus says that this shift is problematic as it threatens the public good of an informed electorate, compromising the possibility of a true democracy and declining the social welfare of all (xiii). The Pew Research Center and the *Columbia Journalism Review* concluded in a 2000 survey of around 300 journalists that 41% purposely avoided "hard news" stories or softened controversial stories in order to benefit their organization's financial interests. The intimate relationship between news sources and advertisers and the blanket claim of "objectivity" has created a moral dilemma for journalists as to where their allegiance lies (McManus 202). In contrast to the problematic qualities inherent to commercial journalism, a non-profit journalistic publication has the potential, in theory at least, to be less likely to become compromised by the pursuit of wealth and motivated by the threat of debt.

### **My Internship**

From September 2016 to March 2017, I interned at the non-profit, independent, Chicago-based publication, *In These Times*. *In These Times* is a print and online publication that has been in existence since 1976 and founded by author and historian James Weinstein. On the *In These Times* website, it states that the publication's mission is to be an: "independent, nonprofit magazine... dedicated to advancing democracy and economic justice, informing movements for a more humane world, and providing an accessible forum for debate about the policies that shape our

future (“About Us”). *In These Times* has described itself as a progressive, Left-leaning independent magazine of news, culture, and opinion. It often praises socialist politics without identifying with the label of a “socialist magazine”; *In These Times* is much happier with being named a purveyor of “progressive” politics.

*In These Times* focuses on movements, political activism, social issues around the world, as well as class and power struggles, particularly, within the subject of labor and unions. The publication has stood strong against oppression of any form regardless of the dominant ideologies and hegemonic attitudes of the time, even to the point of standing in opposition to the rhetoric of mainstream media (such as their coverage of the “War on Terror” or the early support of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primaries). Furthermore, the publication has created a space for public debate and analysis of the real life situation of many underprivileged, disenfranchised subjects in society. Over the years of its existence, *In These Times* has featured many prominent progressive writers, thinkers, and political figures such as: Senator and 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, Naomi Klein, E.P. Thompson, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Kurt Vonnegut, and Alice Walker, amongst others (“About Us”).

*In These Times*, as a highly partisan paper vocal about its Left-leaning progressive political preference, satisfies, by definition, the archetypal function of being a “moral agent” (Anderson et al). In their “About Us” page, *In These Times* expresses their commitment to the public interest because “a strong democracy depends on healthy debate” and that *In These Times* “is one of only a handful independent media projects fighting to widen the terms of national discussion” (“About Us”). It is clear that *In These Times* prides itself on its dedication to bettering the function of democracy by exposing fraud and injustices while educating the citizenry to be able to self-govern.

At *In These Times*, I held the position of editorial intern and was one of many interns that they had over the course of my six months stay at the publication. I was also one of only two interns that remained for the full six months—in comparison most interns worked over the course of just one academic semester (or approximately three months). Over the entirety of my internship, there were twelve regular editorial interns, including myself. Out of the twelve, eight of the interns were women, and five out of the twelve were people of color. Among the five editors in the office, the majority was male with three men and two women, and all were white. Each issue features different writers with some regulars, and the actual make up of each issue is created by a diversity of genders, races, nationalities, and ethnicities.

As an editorial intern, I was given the responsibilities of fact-checking unfinished articles, preparing articles to be published on the website, proof-reading printed articles, ensuring incorrect fact-checks were changed in the final copy, pulling quotes from issues, transcribing audio interviews, and helping with minor office maintenance. All interns work independently and verbal, face-to-face communication is limited in the office. Interns are sent assignments through email, either through a mass email system and given to the first one to respond, or in a private email specifically addressed to them. Interns are invited to the regular pitch and cover story meetings with the editors. I mostly interacted with other interns and the intern supervisor, but the overall level of engagement between editor and intern, or intern and intern is kept to a minimum.

*In These Times* upheld their published stance against exploitative labor and offered a stipend of \$250.00 per month for each intern (with a total of \$1,000.00 each half of my internship). If the intern writes an article for an issue or for the website, they are given additional money. However, the additional pay does not include the short pieces in each issue that are written only by

*In These Times* interns that are all under 400 words. No additional funding is given to those who write these pieces (labeled in the issues under: “Louder Than Words,” “Blueprints,” and “Art Space”) and it is seen as part of the expected responsibilities of the editorial interns covered within the original stipend. These pieces were assigned to specific interns by the intern supervisor based on who was free at the time, unless someone specifically pursued them and pitched an idea in advance.

The practice of fact checking articles is the *In These Times* intern’s main job and there were established rules for how to do it. The intern must check everything stated as fact and pay special attention to spelling, dates, quotes, and statistics. In their “Editorial Intern Binder,” it specifies the “good” sites to use to fact check as: government websites, university resources and archives, *The Nation*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Through my work as a fact checker, I primarily used the last three sources to confirm data.

### **Fact Checking & “Objectivity”**

It is important to note that objectivity and fact checking are not the same things, although the discourse of journalism often equates them. Fact checking is the only point where a scientific and truly objective approach can be applied to a journalist’s news reporting process. Fact checking provides proof that supports the unbiased claims being made in the story such as the statistics, names, places, or times. Fact checking is not the foolproof way to ensure a professional journalism free of bias, but simply, a way to promise a component, whether minute or large, of non-opinionated, proven facts. The process of fact checking can be used to check a journalist’s bias.

Lucas Graves concludes that the practice of fact checking results from a long tradition of progressive muckraking. Annotative journalism is a meta-journalism that combines original news reporting with media criticism; fact checking is inherent to annotative journalism (Graves 15). Fact checking began in the form of proofreaders in the eighteenth century and emerged in departments at national magazines in the early 1900s. The first online fact checking website dedicated to monitoring journalistic practices was FactCheck.org created in 2003, followed by PolitiFact (part of the *Tampa Bay Times*) and The Fact Checker (part of the *Washington Post*) in 2007 (Graves 2-4). These three organizations accounted for over three-fourths of the fact checks published from 2003 to 2012 (Marietta 579). Michael Dobbs credits the spur of the fact checking industry to the lack of journalistic investigation into President George W. Bush's claim of weapons of mass destruction to justify the invasion of Iraq (4). Graves argues that fact checking functions as a tool to check a compromised journalism and attempt to bring back the idealized role of journalism as a stimulant for democracy.

However, Stephen J. Farnsworth maintains that fact checking fails to fulfill the primary responsibility of journalists: to create an informed electorate (6). A content analysis of PolitiFact done by Eric Ostermeier from 2010 to 2011, with an almost equal examination of Democrats and Republicans (47.2% of the statements were made by the former and 50.4% for the latter), provided evidence that Republican officials were criticized more than their Democratic counterparts in the fact checking industry. Republicans accounted for 76% of the statements PolitiFact judged "false" compared to just 22% for Democrats (Ostermeier). Furthermore, PolitiFact focused mostly on political claims that were considered newsworthy, significant, or likely to be repeated, suggesting the possibility of a compromised "fact" checking industry (Adair). Farnsworth is hesitant to link the

higher rate of harsh ratings for Republicans as being a result of the GOP being more likely to make false claims, or if it was a matter of selective bias on the part of the fact checker (16). Glenn Kessler, columnist at the Fact Checker, argues, instead, that the focus on newsworthiness is proof that fact checkers are not motivated by partisan agenda but “true” journalistic obligations.

Morgan Marietta claims that the primary concern of the fact checking industry is to deal with the public’s *disputed realities*, particularly on the subjects of economic conditions, war, healthcare, and racism—“realities” which vary greatly depending on the person’s own political opinion (578). Despite the evidence provided by these fact checking websites disproving statements made by Republican politicians on such disputed realities, conservatives reject the “fact checking” as biased, speculative, and deliberately false in order to push the Left’s agenda (Cassidy). Glenn Kessler claims that this is true for any partisan individual with extremely strong opinions as they are more likely to believe in the “facts” that confirm their already established opinions and to claim the fact checkers to be biased. Gaines et al says that factual accuracy does not matter in politics and like the informal claims of “objectivity” in the early 1900s, they do little to remedy the corruption of profit-driven journalism (957).

There is no equivalent of the fact checking process for opinions—only what is or is not “speculation.” Objectivity can never be scientifically proven or supported. The markers of “speculation” are decided by the individual publication but in the end, any opinion promoted as factual, like the claim of objectivity, is pure conjecture. If constituents cannot even agree on what is a fact, and the primary function of journalism is to produce an informed citizenry and better the process of democracy, the teaching of journalistic “objectivity” is not of value anymore. Instead, the focus should be on what the journalist then does with these facts. We must move forward



understanding that the false claim of “objectivity” is part of the greater regulatory system of social power that all media institutions contribute to.

Objectivity, though it is defined as a neutral approach to news that is free from personal bias where both the Right and Left are respected equally, helps to *excuse* such biases by suggesting that there is any truth inherent to such subjective journalism. It is at best an over-exaggeration and at worst a blatant lie to claim a news publication to be truly objective. The use of the claim of “objectivity” by mainstream media, particularly commercial journalism and the types of news sources *In These Times* is in response to, is a catch-all excuse to refuse to distance any political demographic in order to ensure the highest profit and audience. For the most part, “objectivity” is used to justify the lack of investigative work on the part of a publication and to justify the lack of criticism toward a flawed government, corrupted system of living, and oppressive ideological mode.

A publication keeps its readership and maintains profit by publishing and promoting the hegemonic ideologies of their given market—whether that is the dominant culture addressed by mainstream press or the alternate subculture like the Left addressed by *In These Times*. Regardless of what ideologies are being promoted, “objective journalism” is simply a journalism that uses rhetoric that produces the least amount of resistance from their target audience. In no way are these opinions factual. A counterhegemonic, anti-capitalist bias and opinion is no more or less factual than its conservative or mainstream counterparts. Stuart Hall writes about the media’s active role in the production of consent to social order: “For reality could no longer be viewed as simply a given set of facts: it was the result of a particular way of constructing reality. The media defined, not merely reproduced, ‘reality’” (“Encoding/decoding” 64). The media legitimizes and secures

dominant ideologies and conformity to a specific set of existing social, economic, and political rules. Journalism does this by representing selective definitions “the real” (Hall, “Encoding/decoding” 64).

*In These Times* has a strong political stance, perhaps more so than other publications, and actually promotes itself based on their strong bias. It is clear who the target audience is and who is not. It is obvious that the population that most benefits off of the dominant ideologies of twenty-first century America in our capitalist socio-economical mode—or more simply put: white Republicans—are not valued consumers to *In These Times*. By having this preference of demographic, *In These Times* openly antagonizes the normalization and naturalization of the dominant ideologies (particularly those that support the oppression of the Other in society and the continuation of capitalism) by directly challenging such ideals. Furthermore, *In These Times* not only just gives voice to those that are counterhegemonic to such ideologies, but the publication specifically argues that it does so in order to mobilize the oppressed and create connections that stimulate more successful social movements.

The fact that *In These Times* is very one-sided, in the sense that it is purposely disconnected from those that might not agree with progressives or extreme Leftist, liberal, or Democratic beliefs, is both a strength and weakness of the publication. While this preference and lack of objectivity is not overtly harmful or even a new development of journalism, it goes against *In These Times'* claim to be dedicated to the ideal function of journalism. If only one part of the population is being addressed while those that identify as the political polar opposite are purposely alienated, how is their work contributing to the overall social welfare of America or the public good of an informed citizenry—a citizenry that includes both conservatives and liberals? Does *In These Times* truly

challenge the ruling class and dominant ideologies by giving voice to the oppressed and not catering to the hegemonic groups that would disagree? Or does the publication do little to challenge and disrupt the hegemonic status quo, and simply exist within a bubble for a specific population, with little impact on the rest of society—essentially making no difference at all?

Because *In These Times* is not in dialogue with the entire population, their mission to bettering society and providing a public space for discussion can never succeed. In our current state of highly segregated, opinionated, biased journalism, readers of these news sources are consuming such journalism in order to confirm their pre-existing political opinions and prove them to be factual regardless of their basis in reality. While *In These Times* specifically claims to exist as a medium *for* the oppressed and I see their work is important because I identify with their politics, the publication's highly partisan agenda is not any different from a conservative publication made for the oppressor fulfilling the same role and creating a space for those happy with conservative laissez-faire capitalism. Publications with such strong views furthers our extreme polarization of bipartisan politics that has created an environment where a "fact" is not a fact, depending on which side you ask. Further segregation of the political affiliation binary benefits only those in power and with political capital, not the public wellbeing or the strive for an informed electorate, in fact, it does the opposite and creates waves of populations unaware of their exploitation and manipulation by so called "objective" news sources and politicians.

Throughout the presidential campaign and since Donald Trump's inauguration, the articles *In These Times* sent me, more times than not, said essentially the exact same thing. Almost every article I was given discussed the potential, inevitable, and current negative effects of a Trump presidency. Any subject matter covered by *In These Times* can and will be related back to

anti-Trump sentiment, to the point where the blows seem desperate. A fellow intern who was assigned to cover Muslim activism in Chicago struggled with writing her piece and said to me that she did not want to talk about Trump in the piece because it was not her intended focus. She worried that *In These Times* would not publish her article because it did not fit in with their agenda. Essentially, she was frustrated, as was I, that *In These Times* seemed so desperate to entertain their readership's hatred for Trump that they happily published articles saying the same exact message over and over again without concern of a lack of creativity or boring the audience. It certainly bored the interns.

I was assigned to write the "Louder Than Words" section for the March issue, where I had to write about an upcoming protest, campaign or other action that *In These Times* reader could participate in. I was given some direction on what kinds of actions to focus on (ie. one that countered the conservative agenda and President Donald Trump's administration). I ultimately wrote about a variety of new organizations that were working to regain progressive power in the government and take political control away from Republicans. I spent only one day at my internship working on this and was sent it back once to revise. I did not see the piece again until the issue was printed and sent to me, where I found it completely re-written and re-organized. The only part of it kept the same was my research and my name. Because I was only in the office twice a week, others took over my piece and essentially rewrote it—however, I still somehow had the byline.

To combat that turn of events, when I was given the "Blueprints" piece (a 400-word account of an organizing victory—legislative, labor, electoral, or anti-corporate—overlooked by the national mainstream press) for the April issue, I took much better care to keep it mostly in my

hands. Ultimately, I wrote about the successes of progressive activists in challenging pro-Trump and conservative lawmakers who were unwilling to schedule town hall meetings with their constituents. Aware of how the last piece turned out, I agreed to work outside of the office on it until it went to press. This decision paid off and it went to press still looking and sounding familiar to me.

What I learned from this experience was that *In These Times* as part of the ecosystem of news, essentially plays a fill-in-the-blanks game, where anyone can write a successful article for their publication as long as they use the rhetoric of the Left—which in 2017 often is in the form of anti-Trump punches, no matter how desperate or overdone. The byline reflects none of the additional workers behind the finished product and the result is often the reproduction of the ideologies accepted by the publication's dominant market. Publications want to, as Hall says, "win the consent" of the audience and result in the preferred decoding within the desired ideological framework ("Culture, the Media and the Ideological Effect" 344). The institution produces these works, not the author; the author reproduces the ideology. In this sense, the claim of "objective" journalism is just the reproduction of the dominant ideology and suppression of counterhegemonic practices, functions as a regulatory tool. Hall writes: "Since the encoder wants to enforce the explanatory reach, the credibility and the effectiveness of the 'sense' which he is making of events he will employ the whole repertoire of encodings... to 'win consent' in the audience... These 'points of identification' make the preferred reading of events credible and forceful: they sustain its preferences through the *accenting* of the ideological field" ("Culture, the Media and the Ideological Effect" 344).

It is important to note that the anti-Trump and anti-conservative message being disseminated by *In These Times* is counter-hegemonic, in the sense that it is in opposition to dominant institutions. What separates *In These Times* from other highly partisan journalistic publications blatant in their biases and reproduction of dominant ideologies is its focus on reform. *In These Times* does not only offer a limited perspective of reality and take on politics, but it pledges to push for systemic reform. The publication challenges the structure of the American government and the socio-economic power relations embedded within it. I see this route of systemic reform as a solution to improve the inherent regulatory function of the claim of “objectivity.” There needs to be more attention paid and effort made to expose the repercussions of such claims of “objective” “facts.” It is only in this sense that I see *In These Times*’ bias as useful for society as a form of annotative journalism challenging a corrupted system.

*In These Times* fails to stand apart from other publications when it fails to use its bias purely for reformist motivations. *In These Times* does not dedicate every article, feature, and issue to dismantling the capitalist, white supremacist, and patriarchal system. In reality, *In These Times* often covers stories already covered by the mainstream press that they criticize in their mission statement. Their anti-Trump stance can, at times, be so dramatic and unnecessary that it becomes nonsensical, and when this happens, it is clear that the publication is spouting the Left’s dominant belief for the purpose of making a profit—and by doing this, they are exploiting the oppressed and doing the exact opposite of their mission statement. *In These Times* works within that regulatory system when it fails to promote reform and simply uses Leftist rhetoric to sell its commodity and make a profit off of the oppressed.

Although *In These Times* is a non-profit, independent publication, the publication still relies on the 63% of their readership that contributes donations. It is logical to conclude that the publication is motivated, as part of the institution of journalism in a capitalist mode, by their readership and their lack of total devotion to radical progressive politics results from the strive for the highest profit. The assurance of a loyal readership is needed for *In These Times* to continue its production, suggesting that *In These Times'* drive may not be as pure as insinuated in their mission statement and that it shares similarities with the mainstream press that it so often critiques.

Furthermore, it is ironic that while *In These Times* describes itself as an alternative to the mainstream, “elite” news sources that lack obvious governmental and systemic critique, those same publications are used as the main sources of determining whether something published in their publication is a “fact.” A 1992 study by Daron Shaw and Bartholomew Sparrow showed that there is an established “inner ring” and “outer ring” of news sources. Research found that the “inner ring,” which included publications like the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*—the sources I used the most—were considered more elite and prestigious, and that the “inner ring” often shaped the news agenda for the “outer” less respected or mainstream sources. As fact checker, I would confirm that one of those “elite” sources said the same sentiment being stated in the *In These Times* article, label it as “true,” and link to the article written by the other publication. While doing this, I found it interesting to compare *In These Times'* article with the one written by the mainstream press. More times than not, the authors argued the same things and *In These Times'* coverage and critique of President Donald Trump was rarely more radical than that done by the *New York Times*. This observation suggests that either *In These Times* is not as radical as they

promote themselves to be or that some of the mainstream press is more critical and less compromised by profits as previously assumed.

Because our current political environment has such a contentious relationship with what is or is not a “fact,” I see my role as an *In These Times* fact-checker, as the most important part of my experience at this internship. It is particularly deceptive that the fact-checking process of any journalistic publication, “elite” or otherwise, is unknown to the public. *In These Times* fact checks their articles against other, more established and successful publications and yet, we, the *In These Times* staff and the public, know nothing about the *New York Times*’ fact-checking process—we just assume that their “facts” are actual facts. As the intern whose efficiency relied on completing these assignments to the publication’s liking, I approached the fact checking process with the mindset: if the *New York Times* did not publish it, it is not a fact. If we do not know the difference between political propaganda and fact, how does the public then make an informed decision as the electorate force? How are politicians and businesses held accountable? If there is no shared level of education, awareness, and ability to analyze the media, how do we even hope for the return of the “fact”?

I am skeptical if any journalistic publication published and offered to the public can ever be successful and maintain integrity, as promoting the dominant rhetoric and confirming the biases and opinions readers already have is the best way to ensure profit and readership. Our current historical moment feels so dangerous that attempts at systematic changes must be made to all dominant institutions, including the media. One way to move forward is to end the big senseless claim of “objective” news reporting and put effort into creating a basis of what is a “fact” is. The opposite of the false claim of “objectivity” would then lead to interpretative journalism, which presents the



facts and covers the story while also offering context, analysis, and explanation of the consequences (Salgado and Strömbäck 145). However, centuries of partisan politics and emphasis on binaries make it difficult for interpretative journalism to be fairly reported or respected by all citizens. It is not helpful for us to continue in our state of high polarization between populations. The only way for the field of journalism to responsibly move forward is to become as transparent as possible in the ways that they gather, confirm, and share their facts with the public, in hopes that media literacy increases and “objectivity” as a tool of the oppressive regime is undermined.

The road to an ideal practice of journalism is difficult or potentially impossible to achieve. The American media system should be approached as deeply flawed, controlled by capitalism, partisan beliefs, regulatory ideologies, and hegemonic attitudes of a post-fact world. A second way to remedy this situation of a vastly uncritical readership consuming polarized one-sided opinions as “fact” and a media system profiting off of the uninformed electorate, is to focus on the personal power of the reader. Particularly, the ways in which individuals, especially those marginalized under this system, can resist such ideologies.

### **Resistant Reader & the Teen Girl**

Stuart Hall acknowledges the *active audience* as being able to interpret and decode media messages in multiple ways, subject to their experiences in life. Hall details three possible ways of interpreting a media message: the dominant reading, the negotiated reading, and the oppositional reading, all with varying levels of distance from the dominant ideology and repudiation. The reader is then active in their participation with the text and able to engage, discern, and negotiate within it. Hall writes: “One of the most significant political moments... is the point when events which are

normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the 'politics of signification'—the struggle in discourse—is joined" (138).

Meenakshi Gigi Durham says that the media, including all forms of journalism, is part of the regulatory system of power and is a tool used for maintaining the social order. The dominant ideologies embedded in media texts are tied to economic, cultural, and political power structures and such ties are not natural or consistent but dependent on culture and history (Durham 214). Because meaning is constantly shifting, the relationship between "the subject-reader" and interpretations of dominant ideas are always active (Kuhn 12). The act of resistant reading depends on the individual reader's ability to reconstruct meaning from media messages. Under the active participant and resistant reader model, the audience has the ability to manipulate texts that perpetuate dominant ideology for subcultural opposition and find empowerment within these discourses. According to Janice Radway, the possibilities for resistance arise exteriorly through lived experience and are performed most successfully in groups. Radway says about feminist resistance in particular: "Commodities... are selected, purchased, constructed, and used by real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretative strategies... In thus recalling the interactive character of operations like reading, we restore time, process, and action to our account of the human endeavor" (217).

The active and resistant reader is particularly observable through the example of the teen girl subject and her representation in journalism. Historically, magazines made specifically for the consumption and purchase of teenage girls have been characterized by misogynistic stereotypes. Media constructs adolescent girls as powerless, neurotic, helpless, and timid. The representation of womanhood in female-centered advertising and journalism focuses specifically on romance,

domesticity, body image, and subordination to men, with little variation throughout over half a century (Durham 217). A fairly recent shift of the portrayals of adolescent girls in the 1980s to 1990s took the exploitative form of commodity feminism (McRobbie 533). This faux-feminist shift resulted in young girls being positioned as subjects of consumption, with self-realized empowerment being replaced by neoliberal spending power. Teen girl magazines adopted hypersexualized depictions of girls that emphasized the ideals of the beauty and fashion industry, alongside “girl power” messages (Kehily 60). McRobbie and Garber found that when young girls are represented in youth culture, they are mostly depicted as submissive appendages of young men and rarely given their own space. It is in this sense that a teen girl magazine has important social value in shaping the consciousness of young women and forming their distinct culture.

The teen magazine plays a crucial role in the way a teen girl understands the world around her, and yet, has historically reproduced a subjectivity characterized by domesticity, nurturing, lack of critical thought, and subordination to men. There is evidence that American girls regardless of racial and economic background view themselves through the lens of the dominant ideology, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position in society (Durham 211). Studies have shown that the teen girl will abandon personal development and academic interests in order to satisfy societal expectations and demands (Durham 218). If a teen magazine has high impact on a teen girl’s life, it suggests that a simple shift in their rhetoric could potentially empower their readership and undermine patriarchy.

Teenage girls are highly dependent on teen magazines for information because it is one of the very limited materials made specifically for their consumption that provides them any sense of authority (Pierce 491). McRobbie and Garber say that young women are absent from serious

theoretical discussion because of their encouraged absence from public spaces. The teen girl's defined limited role in society does not encourage participation outside of the limited sphere denoted for them. When respectable and "elite" news publications omit her from their target audience, it suggests that the teen girl does not matter nor is it necessary to examine her position in society. And—especially when the teen girl is excluded from a political, socially active publication like *In These Times*—she is not of political value.

While this exclusion is not unique to *In These Times* at all, it still is an unfortunate pattern reflected in a publication that strives to be unique and supportive of marginalized people. Like all journalistic publications under a capitalist system, *In These Times* has a target audience. *In These Times* claims that its highest priority is to give voice to marginalized peoples, particularly "women, communities of color, working people, and other groups ignored by the mainstream media as legitimate audiences, sources, and subjects" ("About Us"). The majority of *In These Times*' readership (83%) has at least a bachelor's degree, which means that their publication is catered toward post-college aged adults more so than any other population ("Media Kit"). This target market means that to *In These Times* and most "respectable" or "elite" publications, the very vulnerable and politically important subject of the teen girl is not seen as an important contributor to their readership and suggests that their oppression in society is of little importance. The fact there is no political "hard" news publication targeted at teen girls continues the normalization of their exclusion from politics. This means that teen girls are trained from a young age to devalue their presence in such matters of public importance, even when it concerns their very own bodies and near futures, and for others to essentialize the lack of intelligent, reflexive, critical thought as inherent to girlhood.

There is no equivalent of *In These Times* for the teen girl subject; however, changes are being made specifically with *Teen Vogue* that are proof of market success for being a news source that purposely includes such a demographic. Elaine Welteroth took over as *Teen Vogue* editor in May of 2016 and began to merge politics and feminism with the publication's traditional focuses of fashion, beauty, and pop culture. Since, the magazine has experienced a 208% traffic increase over the course of 19 months, with November 9, the day after the 2016 Election Day, being their most popular day (Gilbert). Welteroth was officially promoted to editor-in-chief at the end of April 2017 (Hobdy). Many of the public and commentators in the mainstream media were shocked to find *Teen Vogue* as the source behind a popularly shared article criticizing and analyzing Donald Trump's politics and manipulation of the American people. For now, the politicization of *Teen Vogue* is seen as a rarity with little attention paid to the void of publications writing political commentary that includes teen girls in the discourse, or, more importantly, the fact that teen girls may have great interest in continuing these kinds of discussions and are already doing so in their own subversive spaces.

Teen girls can be found already engaged in intellectual discussions about power regimes and ideologies in fandom spaces. In fandom spaces (which continue to be ignored and belittled by mainstream media), girls utilize pre-existing texts to navigate complex concepts and negotiate with the lived realities of their subjectivity as a teenage girl. Individuals who participate in fandoms function as consumers, producers, and contributors, a concept called participatory culture (Jenkins 3). Henry Jenkins, refers to fanfiction, one of the products of a participatory culture, as "repairing the damage" caused by the repressive mass media (Kustritz 374). In fandoms, marginalized groups can explore the subjectivities and ideologies that define and limit them in real life. Fan works

explore the limitations of women and offer opportunities of self-agency, by allowing fans to rewrite or re-envision existing media content and engage in political discussions. The media made for a teen girl that is classified as trivial is used by fandoms to explore real life issues. Resistant reading and active audience is inherent to fandoms, which are mostly female spaces.

If actual news sources do not include the teen girl in their discourse, then the teen girl will continue to create her own subversive space. In fandom, she is a valued political agent and in a position of authority. The participatory culture shown by fandoms demonstrates that teen girls crave political engagement and that the ideologies that define, limit, and subject them have real impact on their livelihood. More importantly, fandom practices demonstrate that these girls are dissatisfied with their oppression and attempting to negotiate ways to avoid their subordination.

The exclusion of the teen girl subject from news media is part of a wider patriarchal and misogynistic system that promotes the constant devaluing of adolescent girls in order to keep them disciplined, controlled, and restrained, and maintain the hegemonic institutions that profit off their continued subordination. It is not enough that there is one slowly emerging politicized teen girl magazine—especially when the political content, so far, is only being published online. Any exploration of social networking sites used for fandom purposes demonstrates that there is a large market of teen girls willing and ready to be engaged politically on a public level. It would be easy to merge the critical, self-aware, political qualities inherent to fandom culture with actual printed press and represent teen girls as a market population.

Fandoms produce self-awareness for the subculture of girls that do participate and contribute to them. Yet, fandoms are not in the public medium and therefore have little impact on the dominant attitude toward teen girls. Those that are active in fandoms do not need public

recognition and in our current state, their exploitation of this fragile and subversive autonomy would be inevitable. However, these mindsets embedded deep within media institutions contribute to the political environment we are in and if Left-leaning individuals and publications want political and systemic change, then the 15-year-old girl should be seen as the prime subject to lead reform.

## **Conclusion**

I had only been at my internship for about a month when Election Day occurred and Donald Trump won the presidency, sending myself, Left-leaning individuals, and *In These Times* into a panic. From that point on, my time at *In These Times* focused on questions surrounding Donald Trump as the president of the United States—as did *In These Times*' issues. How do we, the Left, reconcile with having someone so ideologically opposite as our president? How do we move forward? And more importantly: How did this happen, and how do we make sure this never happens again?

Left-leaning publications are passionate about criticizing Trump's actions and policies, spreading information on events for readers to attend to show their disapproval of the government, and overall undermine Trump as a power figure. However, if publications are truly concerned about the 2018 midterm elections and regaining progressive power (like *In These Times* claims) efforts made to engage teenagers to become or remain politically motivated can only help the effort for an active, fair, and balanced electorate that would assumedly not vote in politicians with similar conservative agendas. Teen girls in particular experience a marginalized position in society and the simple act of treating them as respectable, political entities capable of self-realization and activism would encourage a level of social awareness that would create a more democratic youth

population—one aware of their own oppression and coercion into the perpetuation of such regulatory forces, which would ideally lead to the dismantling of such regimes.

The inclusion of the teen girl subject in matters of politics, critique, and social reform and strategic outreach by journalistic publications will contribute to the overall function of democracy. If only about 50% of the youth voted in the 2016 Presidential election and made up one-fifth of the electorate, their involvement could have likely increased Hillary Clinton's chances of winning the presidency ("Full Analysis"). The mainstream media's perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies in regard to devaluing the teen girl as a political force contributed to this result. Teenagers, especially the generations that will vote in the 2018 midterm elections and then the 2020 presidential election, must be valued. If the mainstream press is truly concerned by the presence of an un-informed citizenry that was able to be manipulated by Donald Trump's lies, any effort made to inform the public, particularly those that are not traditionally targeted, can only help to decrease the chances of a Trump re-election.

Although I praise *In These Times* for any efforts made to instill systemic reform and motivate social movements, I believe that they display a major weakness that is common among mainstream media and "hard" news sources by excluding the teen girl subject. *In These Times* does important work but could improve not only its own publication by demonstrating its mission statement, but the standard of journalism. The simple solution for *In These Times* to become more inclusive for teen girl readers and to help stimulate the progressive politics they preach is to talk about what matters to a teen girl without talking down to her. Incorporating analysis and interpretation of specific products of popular culture targeted to teen girls would help to include their interests in serious political discussion and help to stimulate their public recognition. All



publications concerned with the plights of the oppressed could easily include more conversations about the teen girl's life experience, the media's exclusion of her, and their own publications faults or contributions to this phenomenon. There is no excuse as to why mainstream "elite" and political media continues to reject teen girls as a target audience. If every aspect of journalism and public awareness remains the same, then a second Trump presidency could easily happen in 2020 and similar politicians could continue to hold positions of power. The media is responsible for our political environment and must be more reflexive in order to undermine a corrupted democratic state.

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