Learning from Disasters: Political Media Edition

We expect course-corrections from other institutions. Here are a few ways we in the media could learn from our mistakes.

What is this? It's the White River in Arkansas, which in the 1990s was the center of whipped-up media attention. Hardly any living American can tell you what the Whitewater "scandal" was about. But it led to Bill Clinton's impeachment and disrupted American politics for years. It's one of many gross media errors to reflect upon. (Photo by Deborah Fallows, 2016.)

We all make mistakes. People, organizations, countries. The best we can do is admit and face them. And hope that by learning from where we erred, we'll avoid greater damage in the future.

Relentless and systematic self-critical learning is why commercial air travel has become so safe. (As described here, and recent posts about the JFK close call here and here.) Good military organizations conduct "lessons learned" exercises after victories or defeats. Good businesses and public agencies do the same after they succeed or fail.

Breaking the News is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

We in the press are notably bad at formally examining our own errors. That is why "public editor" positions have been so important, and why it was such a step backward for the *New York Times* to abolish that role nearly six years ago. Similarly this is why I think the generally excellent ProPublica is making a mistake in flatly refusing to address questions about its notorious "lab leak" story from last fall.

Three welcome words: 'I Was Wrong.'

🔗

Here's another example of facing a mistake, versus trying to ignore it: the buildup to the "Red Wave" that never happened in the 2022 midterms.

Pundits and much of the mainstream press spent most of 2022 describing Joe Biden's unpopularity and the Democrats' impending midterm wipeout. As it happened, Biden and the party nationwide did remarkably well.

On the morning after the election, conservative pundit Henry Olsen had an opinion column in the *Washington Post* headlined "I Was Wrong About the Midterms. Here's What I Missed."

That's to his credit. (For the record, I disagree with him about most things.) A number of other writers quickly owned up to misjudgment.

By comparison: In its news coverage, not the opinion page, the *New York Times* had been among the most certain-sounding in preordaining the Democrats' loss. This was its front page just one day before the election:

The New York Times

LATE EDITION
Today, sunny to partly cloudy skies, high 78. **Tonight,** clear to partly cloudy, low 48. **Tomorrow,** cooler with plenty of sunshine overhead, high 60. Weather map, Page A18.

VOL. CLXXII ... No. 59,600 +   © 2022 The New York Times Company   NEW YORK, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2022 $3.00

WHITE HOUSE MEMO

Biden Faces Polarized U.S. As Vote Nears

On Trail With Party's Outlook Bleak

By PETER BAKER

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Before heading into a community center for a campaign rally the other day, President Biden stopped to speak to the overflow crowd that could not squeeze into the small facility.

As often happens whenever Mr. Biden finds a microphone and a willing audience, his family made a cameo appearance. This time it was his long-dead grandparents. "Every time I'd walk out of my grandpop's house, he'd yell, 'Joey, keep the faith,'" the president recounted. "My grandmother would yell, 'No, Joey, spread it.' Go spread the faith."

Mr. Biden has been spreading the faith across the country in recent days, undaunted by the polls and prognosticators forecasting a devastating defeat for his party in Tuesday's midterm elections. Faith has been Mr. Biden's calling card in his nearly two years in office — faith in the system in which he has been a

GEORGIA Hercules and his owner Cam Ashling, center, organized signs for Raphael Warnock, a Democrat, Sunday in Johns Creek.
NICOLE CRAINE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

PENNSYLVANIA Supporters of the Republican Senate candidate, Dr. Mehmet Oz, lined up for a rally on Sunday in Bethlehem.
HILARY SWIFT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

WISCONSIN Amy Waldman, 63, talked with Haley Hagar, 32, while Ms. Hagar was out canvassing on Sunday in Milwaukee.
TAYLOR GLASCOCK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

FLORIDA A supporter showed up at Sun City Center to see Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, on Sunday afternoon.
ZACK WITTMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

MIDTERMS SPUR A RUSH OF ANGST AND CONFIDENCE

LAST PUSH FOR VOTERS

G.O.P. Shows Optimism as Democrats Brace for Losses

This article is by Lisa Lerer, Jennifer Medina and Jonathan Weisman.

DELAWARE COUNTY, Pa. — The turbulent midterm campaign rolled through its final weekend on Sunday as voters — buffeted by record inflation, worries about their personal safety and fears about the fundamental stability of American democracy — showed clear signs of preparing to reject Democratic control of Washington and embrace divided government.

As candidates sprinted across the country to make their closing arguments to voters, Republicans entered the final stretch of the race confident they would win control of the House and possibly the Senate. Democrats steeled themselves for potential losses even in traditionally blue corners of the country.

One lead story had the sub-head "Party's Outlook Bleak," referring to Biden and the Democrats. It mentioned forecasts of "a devastating defeat" in the midterms. The other story's sub-head was "G.O.P Shows Optimism as Democrats Brace for Losses." The first paragraph of that story said voters "showed clear signs of preparing to reject Democratic control." Again, these were news, not opinion, pieces.

Seven weeks later, the *Times* ran a front-page story on why so many people had called the election wrong—and how the Red Wave assumption, fed by GOP pollsters, hampered Democrats' fund-raising in many close races. The only mention of the paper's own months-long role in fostering this impression was a three-word aside, in the 13th paragraph of a thousand-word story. According to the story, the GOP-promoted Red Wave narrative …

> …*spilled over into coverage by* mainstream *news organizations, including* The Times*, that amplified the alarms being sounded about potential Democratic doom.*

The three words, in case you missed them, were "including The Times."

An *NYT* public editor like Margaret Sullivan or Daniel Okrent might have gone back to ask the reporters and editors what they should learn. 1
And how one party's strategy could have "spilled over" to shape a major paper's coverage.

Henry Olsen's three words were better. "I was wrong."
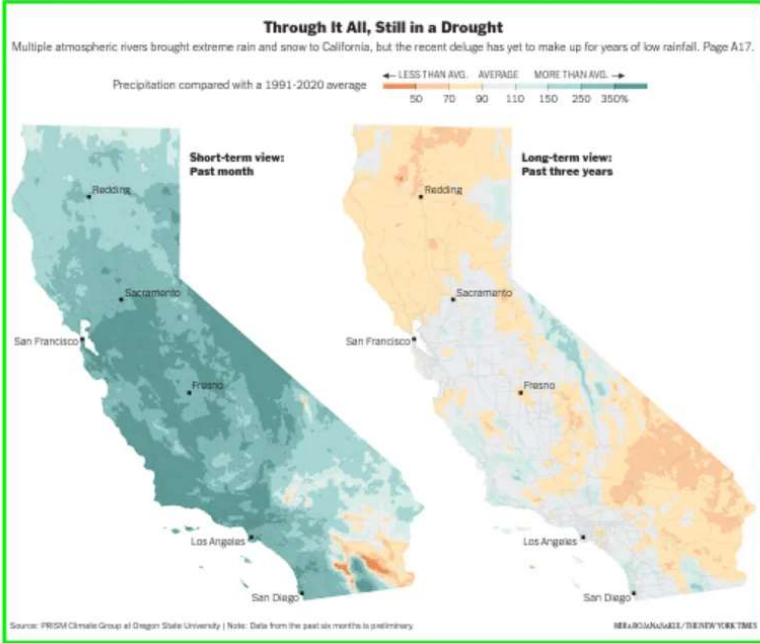

Lessons for readers, and reporters.
🔗

What are lessons-*un*learned signs that readers can look for, and that we reporters and editors should avoid?

An easy one is to spend less time, space, and effort on prediction of any sort, and more on explaining what is going on and why.

Here are a few more:

1. Not everything is a 'partisan fight.'
🔗

Consider yesterday's front page of the *New York Times*—which I mention because the paper has such influence on the rest of the media.

Through It All, Still in a Drought

Multiple atmospheric rivers brought extreme rain and snow to California, but the recent deluge has yet to make up for years of low rainfall. Page A17.

Precipitation compared with a 1991-2020 average ← LESS THAN AVG.   AVERAGE   MORE THAN AVG. →
50 70 90 110 150 250 350%

Short-term view: Past month

Long-term view: Past three years

Source: PRISM Climate Group at Oregon State University | Note: Data from the past six months is preliminary

U.S. HITS DEBT CAP, HEIGHTENING RISK OF ECONOMIC PAIN

With Partisan Fight Likely, Treasury Uses 'Extraordinary' Steps to Pay Bills

By JIM TANKERSLEY and ALAN RAPPEPORT

WASHINGTON — The United States hit its debt limit on Thursday, prompting the Treasury Department to begin using a series of accounting maneuvers to ensure the federal government can keep paying its bills ahead of what's expected to be a protracted fight over whether to increase the borrowing cap.

In a letter to Congress, Treasury Secretary Janet L. Yellen said the government would begin using what are known as extraordinary measures to prevent the nation from breaching its statutory debt limit and asked lawmakers to raise or suspend the cap so that the government could continue meeting its financial obligations.

"The period of time that extraordinary measures may last is subject to considerable uncertainty, including the challenges of forecasting the payments and receipts of the U.S. government months into the future," Ms. Yellen said. "I respectfully urge Congress to act promptly to protect the full faith and credit of the United States."

The milestone of reaching the $31.4 trillion debt cap is a product of decades of tax cuts and increased government spending by both Republicans and Democrats. But at a moment of heightened partisanship and divided government, it is also a warning of the entrenched battles that are set to dominate Washington, and that could end in economic shock.

Newly empowered House Republicans have vowed that they will not raise the borrowing limit again unless President Biden agrees to steep cuts in federal spending. Mr. Biden has said he will not negotiate conditions for a debt-limit increase, arguing that lawmakers should lift the cap with no strings attached to cover spending that previous Congresses authorized.

Treasury officials estimate the measures that they began using on Thursday will enable the government to keep paying federal workers, Medicare providers, investors who hold U.S. debt and other recipients of federal money at least until early June.

But economists warn that the nation risks a financial crisis and other immediate economic pain if lawmakers do not raise the limit before the Treasury Department exhausts its ability to buy more time.

The episode has prompted fears in part because of the lessons both parties have taken from more than a decade of debt-limit fights. About of brinkmanship in 2011 between House Republicans and President Barack Obama nearly ended in the United States' defaulting on its debt before Mr. Obama agreed to a set of caps on future spending increases in exchange for lifting the limit.

Most Democrats have solidified in their position that negotiations over the debt limit only enhance the risks of economic calamity by

Continued on Page A15

COURT CAN'T FIND LEAKER OF DRAFT

Broad Inquiry Into Who Revealed Roe Ruling

By CHARLIE SAVAGE

After Roe's Defeat, Crossroad for Abortion Foes

By RUTH GRAHAM

March for Life Persists, but the Movement Is Split on the Future

For the past 20 years, Eric Scheidler, the executive director of the Pro-Life Action League, has traveled to Washington for the March for Life, the anti-abortion rally that marks the anniversary of Roe v. Wade and is held every year to urge its end.

ever, the family is divided about where to go next.

lies. To that end, prominent anti-abortion leaders have signed onto a new statement urging "significant changes in public policy."

The divergent agendas coincide with an already precarious time for the movement that was once unified around ending Roe.

Abortion battles have largely returned to the states; thirteen have nearly eliminated abortion

---

—On the one hand, this page illustrates what is (mostly) magnificent in the *Times's* coverage. That's the "map is worth a million words" depiction of how much California's recent epic rainfall has, and has not, relieved its long-term drought. The digital-graphics and mapping teams at the *Times* should get their own Pulitzer every single year.

—On the other, it illustrates the drawbacks of reflexively casting issues as political struggles, by describing a potential debt-ceiling crisis as a "partisan fight."

In case you have forgotten, the "debt ceiling" is a serious problem but not a serious issue. In brief:

-The debt-ceiling is a *problem*, because failing to take the routine step of raising it has the potential to disrupt economies all around the world, starting with the U.S.

-It is not an *issue*, because there are zero legitimate arguments for what the GOP fringe is threatening now. (See Thomas Geoghegan's recent article. Also I did a six-part series on the topic back in 2021. The issues are the same, and the links are below.
2
) It's like threatening to blow up refineries, if you don't like an administration's energy policy, or threatening to put anthrax into the water supply, if you don't like their approach to public health. These moves would give you "leverage," just like a threat not to raise the debt ceiling. But they're thuggery rather than policy.

If you prefer a less violent analogy: since these payments are for spending and tax cuts that have *already* been enacted, this is like refusing to pay the restaurant check after you've finished dinner.

This is not a "partisan fight" or a "standoff." Those terms might apply to differences on immigration policy or a nomination. This is a know-nothing threat to public welfare, by an extremist faction that has put one party in its thrall.

Reporters: don't say "standoff" or "disagreement," or present this as just another chapter of "Washington dysfunction."

Readers: be wary when you see reporters using those terms.

Give a gift subscription

---

2. Not everything is a 'perceptions' narrative. 🔗

Here are some more phrases that should make you wary as a reader. They are phrases like "a picture emerges" or "paints a picture." These are clichés a reporter uses to state a conclusion while pretending not to do so. Others in the same category: "sure to raise questions"; "suggest a narrative"; "will be used by opponents"; and so on.

Consider again from the NYT, this new "inside" report on Joe Biden's handling of classified documents.

> *It was a classic legal strategy by Mr. Biden and his top aides — cooperate fully with investigators in the hopes of giving them no reason to suspect ill intent. But it laid bare a common challenge for people working in the West Wing: The advice offered by a president's lawyers often does not make for the best public relations strategy.*

This might be a "classic legal strategy." It might also be following the rules. The presentation reflects a choice about how to "frame" a story.

The mainstream press makes things an "issue," by saying they are an issue. Or saying "raises questions" "suggests a narrative," "left open to criticism," "eroded their capacity," and so on. This gives them the pose of being "objective"—we're just reporters, But it is a choice.

My long-time friend Jonathan Alter, author of an excellent book on Jimmy Carter, has an op-ed column in the *NYT* today arguing that the *narrative* about Biden's handling of the few classified documents will be hugely destructive to him and the Democrats. Even though, as he says, the realities of his classified-documents case are in no way comparable to Donald Trump's. (More on the differences here.)

As a matter of prognostication, maybe Jon Alter is right. I hope he isn't. As he notes, Biden in office has time and again beaten pundit expectations.

But as a matter of journalistic practice, I think our colleagues need to recognize our enormous responsibility and "agency" about what becomes an issue or controversy. "Raises questions," "suggests a narrative," "creates obstacles"—these aren't like tornados or wildfires, things that occur on their own and we just report on. They are judgments reporters and editors make, "frames" they choose to present. And can choose not to.

Which leads us to…

---

3. Not all scandals are created equal.
🔗

Here are things enormously hyped at the time, that look like misplaced investigative zeal in retrospect:

— (a) The Whitewater "scandal." For chapter and verse on why this was so crazy, see the late Eric Boehlert, with a very fine-grained analysis back in 2007; plus Eric Alterman at the same time; plus Gene Lyons, who lives in Arkansas and wrote a book called *Fools for Scandal* a decade earlier.

I would be amazed if more than 1% of today's Americans could explain what this "scandal" was about. I barely can myself. But as these authors point out, it led domino-style to a zealot special prosecutor (Kenneth Starr, himself later disgraced), and to Paula Jones, and to Monica Lewinsky, and to impeachment. It tied up governance for years.

—(b) The but-her-emails "scandal" involving Hillary Clinton in 2016. A famous Gallup study showed that the voting public heard more about this than anything else.

Will any historian ever say that the Whitewater land deal was reasonable grounds for paralyzing the government? Or that "her emails" were reasonable grounds for bringing Donald Trump to the White House? Can people today explain what the Hillary Clinton email "scandal" actually involved?

I doubt it. Yet it was what our media leaders emphasized. I'm not aware that any of them has publicly reckoned with what they should have learned from their choices in those days.

But today's news gives us a chance to learn, with:

—(c) The Biden classified-documents "scandal."

What unites these three "scandals" is that there was *something* there. Possibly the young Bill and Hillary Clinton had something tricky in their home-state real estate deal. Probably Hillary Clinton did something with her emails that she shouldn't have. Apparently Joe Biden should have been more careful about the thousands of documents that must be in his offices, libraries, etc.

But "something" does not mean "history-changing discovery." In the 50 years since the original Watergate, the political press has palpably yearned for another "big one." So every "scandal" or "contradiction" gets *this could be the big one* treatment. And this in turn flattens coverage of all "scandals" as equivalent. It's a slurry of "they all do it," "it's always a mess," "they're all lying about everything" that makes it hard to tell big issues from little ones.

We see this with bracketing of the Trump and Biden "classified document" cases. They both have special prosecutors, So they can be presented as a pair.

Human intelligence involves the ability to see patterns. (Two cases involving classified documents!) But also the ability to see differences. (In one case, a president "played politics" by cooperating with the authorities. In another, by lying to and defying them.)

The similarities are superficial. The differences are profound.

From past errors of judgment, we in the media can learn which to emphasize.

1

Okrent and Sullivan were two of the notable Public Editors at the *NYT*. In a memo announcing the end of that position in 2017, the Times's publisher, A.G. Sulzberger, said that "our followers on social media and our readers across the Internet have come together to collectively serve as a modern watchdog, more vigilant and forceful than one person could ever be… Our responsibility is to empower all of those watchdogs, and to listen to them."