INTERVIEW

DOI: 10.51480/1899-5101.17.4(38).903

Through the Lens of the Media: Media Logic, Fear, AI

Interview with Professor David L. Altheide

Professor Altheide, your concept of Media Logic has deeply influenced media studies and related academic fields. Could you explain how it has evolved, especially with the rise of digital media and Donald Trump's rise to power, which inspired your latest book, Gonzo Governance: The Media Logic of Donald Trump?

The concept of Media Logic emerged over numerous conversations and research projects with my colleague and co-author, Robert P. Snow. He studied at the University of Minnesota with some of the premier sociologists and symbolic interactionists. We were both interested in entertainment and popular culture. Our interest in culture and media was influenced by Georg Simmel's conceptions of social forms. This led to our focus on media as a social form. My initial research was on TV news organizations, while Bob examined radio, particularly radio disc jockeys. Bob was very keen on the importance of radio grammar and rhythm in radio presentations. These media workers had ideas about how to connect with audiences. There was also research by others on para-social communication and how audience members connected with celebrities. I had also been studying professional sports spectacles and noticed how "new" (in the 1970s) sports stadiums were incorporating huge video screens. Moreover, my dissertation research on news organizations took me to both the Democratic and Republican conventions in 1972, as discussed in the book „Creating Reality." It was clear that the conventions were basically TV studios, with emphasis on lighting and acoustics. And politicians were operating with a script and costumes.

There were other changes afoot. Professional sports were changing rules and styles of play to accommodate television, and individual players were becoming more knowledgeable about sports reporter interviews. Indeed, my research with professional baseball players revealed that conflicts were developing between players and sports reporters, partly because TV coverage of games had changed the approach and focus of reporters, often getting more personal, "behind the

scenes," and this created conflict. We were also aware of changes in organized religion, especially as local (Phoenix, Arizona) televangelists were operating out of massive theaters, dressing like pop culture stars, and incorporating more entertainment and music into their services and productions. I was also involved in a study of the Billy Graham Crusade when it was held in our campus football stadium.

These foundations, and other insights that emerged from research projects with students over the next few years, suggested that a central organizing principle in mediated communication was format. Communication could only occur if there was a shared awareness about the format and basic rules of presentation. And, for audiences to participate or interact with the message-persona, they would have to share the guidelines or logic of the format. Most of our initial attention, then, was on radio and TV, the dominant medium at the time. But our subsequent work and publications made it clear that other electronic media, like computers, the internet, and digital social media, had somewhat distinctive formats and grammar. The challenge was to decipher the meaning process. The presenter and the audience had to share a foundational awareness about the time, place, and manner of the communication act. This included rhythm, grammar, pacing, and syntax. We argued that each medium operated with somewhat distinctive logic and formats. My research on how TV news covered the Iranian Hostage Crisis in 1979–80 revealed the foundation of the TV news code: that TV tells time with visuals. Advances in electronic databases enabled this and related projects. The coverage of the crisis and hostages differed according to the availability of visuals, but visuals that were accessible, conflictual, dramatic, and resonated with key cultural symbols and emotions were preferred. So, it became clear why conflict, violence, and war were almost always newsworthy; the challenge in another project was to examine how peace could be covered by TV news in an interesting or even entertaining way.

Social and digital media, as noted, can be instantaneous, visual, and personal. Their formats collapse space to meet technical limits. We adapted research methods to capture, meaningfully sample, and analyze large amounts of data. Several former students (e.g., Christopher Schneider and Ray Maratea) have excelled in delineating the media logic in digital media projects.

The success of fear in American popular culture and news was the foundation for my recent book, Gonzo Governance: The Media Logic of Donald Trump. There is a direct line from fear-as-entertainment to commercial TV ruled by ratings to Gonzo Governance. It was all about entertainment in a commercial media environment. Stories, reports, and images that strike an emotionally responsive chord were preferred. Fear was the ultimate draw in American TV, even more than sex, which was, until recently, largely restricted. Reports stressing fear have led local TV news reports for decades in the United States. And this meant that

crime reporting, especially brutal, violent crimes, was preferred to draw audiences. With fear and entertainment as the key, politicians could grab audiences and appeal to markets and sponsors. Our research on terrorism (see another question) made it clear that politicians liked promoting potential terrorism threats. Moreover, if enough people took for granted that threats and risks abounded, then audiences were primed to be played by propagandists promising that they could protect audiences from these fears. Moreover, propagandists, like Donald Trump, assured audiences that existing institutions of government could not protect them, so they would have to be changed and managed by a savior. Donald Trump's great success at being elected twice as President of the United States depended on an unyielding use of the discourse of fear on both mass media, but especially social media. Tens of millions of followers received daily brief messages about fear, corrupt institutions, false claims against Trump, etc. Most importantly, the audiences were well-versed in social media and had come to accept the logic and format of brief, abbreviated messages with memes and emojis. On Twitter (now X), the limit was 140, then 280 characters; it is now 4,000.

In your 1977 book *Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events*, you explored how TV news shapes public perception. What do you see as the most significant shifts in news media practices since that time?

Creating Reality was one of the early studies of TV news production. Working with news crews who used 16 mm film to capture all-important visuals revealed how themes, frames, and angles helped organize brief and entertaining news reports. Some of the biggest changes in news production are economic and technological. Local news operations, like the ones I studied (although, I also looked at some national "network" work), have changed. Conglomerates, corporation, and syndicates now produce more of the "local" news; reports are sold to stations to air on their local channels. New technologies like video tape, video cameras, electronic processing (rather than editing film), electronic transmission, phone cameras and the internet have fundamentally changed production. Moreover, the expansion of digital media and more news outlets—24-hour platforms—have altered and expanded the entertaining production and dissemination of news. While putting on reports to attract audiences (e.g., ratings) was important for local news, the rise of digital media and access to more entertaining video reports from numerous online sources, promoted organizations to chase reports that would directly appeal to audiences, or "clickbait." Emphasis is on reports about crime, a trend also occurring in national network news. Sports reporting and weather reporting make up a larger chunk of airtime. Indeed, even major network news shows in the U.S. now incorporate weather reports. The expanded competition for viewers, even for a few seconds, encouraged hyping more fear-related

reports with sensational views featuring conflict, drama, and emotion, including violence, victimization, crime, and celebrities. Viewership has also changed; just as few people read newspapers, fewer citizens regularly view the network or local TV news. The TV interview format became very popular and taken for granted by audiences to such an extent that the interview is now a standard social form, meaning that people know what to say and do if given an opportunity for a "TV interview." Even the deaths of loved ones seldom stop people from conducting on-camera interviews expressing their grief.

We must also consider how this changing ecology of news and information alters the time, place, and manner of seeking real news. The portable media enable people to catch information here and there, on the go, while they are doing multiple things; attention is no longer more confined to a place and time to "watch" or to "read" the news, but rather, information is gathered almost incidentally, as brief multi-tasking attention spans gaze at screens or catch bits talked over popular songs, etc. Alternative news sites, like Podcasts, are very popular, and studies suggest that they are becoming a primary source of news for younger people. All these changes suggest that digital social media, with (mainly) brief, thematic emphasis on promoting popular beliefs and personalities, are becoming more important news sources. Moreover, few people involved in these outlets are trained journalists or social scientists, but are bent on grabbing clicks from followers, rather than a reasonable version of the truth, complexity, and significance of events and policies. People's trust in news sources and news has eroded. Institutional news sources are derided as "fake news" by elected President Donald Trump. Indeed, his preferred sources, such as Fox News and his social media account are preferred by a large portion of his followers. These sources give them the propaganda they expect. Part of their appeal is implicit and explicit claims that they are different, if not in sharp contrast, from conventional news sources such as major networks and established newspapers.

Trust has eroded in news sources and news people. Millions of Americans participated in the historic ritual after WW II, where people listened to or watched nightly newscasts. It was a common cultural information experience. Veteran CBS journalist and anchorman Walter Cronkite was regarded as one of the most trustworthy persons in the United States. No one is held in such high regard in the United States today. One factor is the multiple information sources available that accompany expansive information technologies like cable, the internet, and digital social "personal" media via cell phones. Some cable outlets, like Fox News, owned by Rupert Murdoch, drew viewers by claiming that the established network TV news was liberal and biased against conservative views. Few people would accept that Walter Cronkite's words were "fake news," but today, that is a common utterance of Donald Trump and his followers. Indeed, his preferred sources are Fox News, and his social media accounts provide the

daily propaganda that his supporters expect. Indeed, Donald Trump selected many members of his governing cabinet from Fox News.

In your book *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*, you analyzed how fear is used in media to influence public opinion. How relevant is this approach in today's political communication landscape?

Fear continues to be a dominant frame for media to attract audience and user attention. I have suggested that the reliance on fear is partly a byproduct of the entertainment orientation of most media. Fear remains powerful as more statements and emphasis involve anger and hate, which, with some exceptions, are largely based on fear. Targets and sources of fear are more likely to draw attention when they are presented as being closer to home and personal safety, both in terms of space—nearness—and time, with more immediate and short-term impact rather than longer time. An example of the former is threats to one's children; an example of the latter is the "future" effect of global warming. Real journalists, as well as numerous charlatans, use language and visuals (video) to grab attention. In the United States, popular topics like crime, drugs, gangs, terrorism, child safety, and immigrants are used. Most of these terms are used in such a way to prime audiences to include racial and ethnic minorities. Crime is commonly associated with fear, even though crime rates have been falling in the U.S. for several decades. But local newscasts continue to stress crime reporting.

The pervasiveness and cultural penetration of the discourse of fear is so basic in discussions of social, economic, and political issues that it is barely noticed. This can be seen in the 2024 Presidential Election, won by Donald Trump, whose three campaigns have focused on the threats of immigrants to American life, safety, economy, political stability, and even health. During his 2024 campaign, he and his running mate, J. D. Vance, proclaimed that legal Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were eating the pets of residents. When confronted with the falsehood of these claims, Vance, a U. S. Senator, replied: "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do." Their repetitious lies about migrants contributed to their victory.

Numerous media reports claim that the economy was the main factor in Donald Trump's victory. But voter information from the Pew Research Center for the 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections suggests that other issues were relevant, since fewer than 5% of voters cited only one issue in their decision. Voter data suggests that fear played a large role for Trump supporters. I review the significant data from three elections and then explain the role of fear. First, consider that the economy was the most frequently mentioned issue in each election, but Democrats and Republicans differed in their top three issues. For example, health care was the

top issue for supporters of Biden (2020 – 84%) and Harris (2024 – 76%), while Trump supporters stuck with the economy. But it was the 2nd and 3rd top issues that were revealing. Second, Republican voters' other top issues were terrorism (2016 – 89%), immigration (2016 – 79%, 2020 – 61%, 2024 – 82%), and violent crime (2020 – 74%, 2024 – 76%). These were not listed in the top three issues for Democratic voters in the three campaigns. Third, Republican voters increased their emphasis on immigration by 21% from 2020 – 61% to 82% in 2024. And Trump supporters were 30% more likely than Democrats to list violent crime as a top priority in both the 2020 and 2024 elections. Clearly, Republican voters were more concerned about migrants and crime, two issues that Trump promoted as fearful threats. Yet, the vast majority of media reports stress that the economy was the deciding issue.

Media and journalists could do a much better job of suggesting other sources of danger and risk. It is also important to note that when fear is associated with certain terms and issues, there are many others that are neglected. Gun violence is associated with criminals but not with accidents or massive numbers of suicides. The Surgeon General of the United States promoted an alternative version: gun deaths as a public health issue. However, many politicians continue to argue that this is an anti-gun message.

How do you view the role of algorithms and AI in transforming the relationship between media and audiences? Are there unique risks or benefits you see in this transformation?

We must adapt to the use and problems of algorithms and AI, or we will suffer. The major adjustments will be education and expansive media literacy to deal with these potential benefits and threats. Algorithms and AI have altered communication formats and led audiences to adjust to and evaluate messages. Algorithms enable a sender to personalize messages directly and address individual receivers (e.g., readers/viewers) of a message. The power of digital media rests in its format, transmission, and reception, namely that it is personal, instantaneous, and often visual. Most of these messages are shaped by screen technology (e.g., computer, tablet, phone, etc.,) and the audience's routine, approach, and pre-receptiveness of the message. The point is that the timing and meaning of the interaction between an audience and a message are heavily influenced and mediated by the message format. By pre-receptiveness, I mean the expectation, time allocation (usually brief), and mental and emotional orientation to apprehend and engage with the medium-providing-the-message. This media consciousness—the apprehension of its media logic—shapes defensiveness and resistance to new or contrary message content; it does not fit the normal paradigm of message-meaning engagement. Messages are reduced to noise, sort

of there, of some interest, but not significant enough to concentrate or reflect. These format considerations tend to level all messages, whether a one-line joke, a meme, a "breaking news report," or an advertisement. Message expectations become taken for granted and quickly become the baseline cognitive framework for messages. It is the glance and not the focused read/view that predominates.

The overall effect is to minimize the importance or significance of messages. As noted, in effect, messages are noise. This is already a problem that has led emergency responders and organizations that deal with public safety to add a signal, e.g., a beep or other tone, to messages that are deemed more important. Messages are increasingly regarded as redundant, unnecessary, since the casual recognition of the reader/viewer implies that you already know this, nothing new, just move on to the next. But the noise can be important and reinforces biases and prejudices that may be cultivated by previous messages. Curiosity, or perhaps a chuckle, may prompt a reader/viewer to forward the quip or joke or reinforcing bit to another person. This then enables the reader-to-become-a-sender, a semi-powerful and status-enhancing act of communication that can validate the sender as well as the message being forwarded. Ultimately, the message process plays on identity and status processes. Thus, recognizing and sharing a symbol of a huge meaning array—a meme—is like opening a package and being delighted again and again.

The format of such messaging is ideal for product promotion as "clickbait," meaning that when messages are sent, or someone "clicks" on a message link, money is made. There are some dire consequences of this messaging. The political use of digital media powered by algorithms in the U.S. and elsewhere is illustrative. When false information, misinformation, and outright lies are repeatedly pushed, they become more normal and expected. When the technical and organizational sources of these messages, such as platforms like X, Facebook, and others, carry falsehoods and refuse to fact-check, then distortion becomes a constructed vision and framework for issues, problems, etc. A metaphorical spiral of preparation, initial reception, familiarity, affirmation, and resistance to communication violations tends to preclude new information that would require awareness or a glimmer of insight that there are other directions, other views, and other realities. The Trump campaign skillfully used algorithms for political ends that were supported by Fox News, a more traditional news outlet. Quite literally, the same messages, symbols, and personalities flooded narrowcast personal audiences to such an extent that it made sense to many millions of Americans to not only vote for Trump but also affirm his policies and, perhaps most bizarrely, endorse his nomination of officials—who had been providing information to viewers on Fox News—for powerful government positions.

AI can do many wonderful things for daily living, education, science, medical treatments, etc., by managing information and even creating new syntheses.

Retrieval, integration, and creation. But AI can be used to distort our view of obdurate reality by altering images, distorting relationships between things, and contributing to propaganda and falsehoods. One of the most visible impacts is manipulating visual and aural reality, our primordial checks on truth and legitimacy. The capacity to play with perceptual checkpoints and manipulate them for profit and power is significant.

Media bias is frequently criticized today, especially in polarized societies. Do you believe this bias has intensified, or are audiences simply more attuned to it?

The claims about media bias have intensified. But we seldom have much clarity about what bias means. Bias is related to distortions of the "truth" in whatever case we approach. Objectivity is often used in reference to a lack of bias, but we know that various measures used in an endeavor to obtain accuracy, or knowledge can also involve judgments and criteria in the instruments and measurements used. In my early work (e.g., Creating Reality), I argued that people claim political biases constantly, but there are other sources of bias and potential distortion, including occupational perspectives (e.g., physicians, scientists, journalists, and social scientists). I tried to set forth what I called the "news perspective." But most people define bias as a political bias, and in the case of the U.S., this means "liberal" or "conservative." Ultimately, the problem comes down to a breakdown in trust in institutions. Different media outlets and organizations do have agendas and values that they directly or indirectly promote. One approach to this problem is to try to state what those values are, but this is seldom done. Various media have also been used for propaganda purposes, to distort information in such a way to promote certain causes, policies, products, and political parties.

My research suggests that a major source of bias in U.S. media is profit and entertainment. The U.S. is a capitalist society and media organizations are profit-driven, which means that they seek to use their programming to attract audiences to sell advertising for products. The key element of virtually all programming in the U.S., therefore, is entertainment to attract audiences. And as I have argued in my work, the major ingredient in entertainment is fear.

Media proliferation in search of profits in the U.S. has generated claims of bias. A good case in point in the U.S. is the creation and funding of Fox News, an organization dedicated to conservative points of view. This grew out of the claim that established network TV in the U.S. was liberal and did not treat conservative policies, positions, perspectives, and politicians fairly. So, their alternative was to feature hard right-wing commentators, who often attacked established politicians and social institutions. Fox certainly shares a lot of the credit for the popularity of Donald Trump. He amplified Fox's claims of bias

against conservatives. Through the skilled use of digital social media and algorithms, he claimed that most social institutions put out fake news and false information, including law enforcement (FBI), the military, science, education, and journalism. He used this claim to deny all charges against him. The fact that he was elected to a second term as president suggests that his approach has worked quite well and that claims about media and news bias will continue.

Given the rise of influencer culture and social media, how do non-traditional voices impact traditional political communication channels?

Political communication has increasingly turned to digital media and non-traditional outlets. The key is the reputation and respect of the influencer or podcast's main voice. Of course, the political perspective of these individuals matters, but national politicians in the U.S. increasingly are appearing on select programs. At this point, they are not "game changers" for a politician or political point of view, but they can be reinforcing and validating to the cohort of viewers of certain programs. However, these media are quite popular, especially among younger people, and any successful national politician will likely have to be associated with some of the popular outlets.

Looking forward, what do you believe will be the biggest challenges and opportunities for media studies/political communication scholars in understanding the evolving media landscape?

I think the biggest challenge is to grasp the media logics of new media and how they converge with traditional media. The ecology of communication continues to change but there has not been enough attention to how this affects everyday life activities, organizations, and social institutions. Propaganda, power, and products are all mediated. The power and impact of social media platforms demand more attention, and I suggest stronger regulation. My former students' (e.g., Chris Schneider, Nicole Blanchett, Ray Maratea) investigations of how digital media influence social problems, social movements, journalism (pursuit of "clickbait" news stories), and law enforcement (e.g., body-worn cameras) are on track. Solid ethnographic studies of media use in everyday life, including work, fun, and crises, would help clarify how media fit in with meaningful activities, roles, statuses, and definitions of situations.

You have focused extensively on qualitative research methods during your academic career. What challenges or advantages do you think qualitative methods present in media studies today? How do you see the dominance of quantitative research methods in our research fields?

As noted above, qualitative ethnographic research is needed to both corroborate and guide quantitative research involving media use. Comparative studies are terrific. We need to understand how people actually use and rely on media and how social situations are increasingly infused with media formats, images, analogies, language, and perspectives. Qualitative media analysis (QMA) of news reports and other documents is very useful in capturing the meanings of reports and other presentations. I think some QMA is essential for any study, including quantitative analysis. Communications researchers and other social scientists would be advised to select the best method(s) to use that is/are appropriate for their research questions. However, we should not let a particular method determine our research questions.

David L. Altheide was interviewed by Norbert Merkovity in January 2025.

David L. Altheide, PhD, is Regents' Professor Emeritus on the faculty of Justice and Social Inquiry in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University, where he taught for 37 years of his 43-year teaching career. His BA is from Central Washington State College—now Central Washington University (1967), MA from the University of Washington (1969), and PhD from the University of California, San Diego (1974). His work has focused on the role of mass media and information technology in social control, and qualitative methodology. His most recent books are *Gonzo Governance: The Media Logic of Donald Trump* (Routledge, 2023), *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear (2nd Edition, Rowman and Littlefield, 2017),* and *The Media Syndrome (Routledge, 2016).* Dr. Altheide received the Cooley Award three times, given to the outstanding book in symbolic interaction, from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction: In 2007 for *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear (2006)*; in 2004 for *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis (2002)*; and in 1986 for *Media Power* (1985). Dr. Altheide received the 2005 George Herbert Mead Award for lifetime contributions from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, and the society's Mentor Achievement Award in 2007. In the fall of 2012, he was a Fulbright Specialist in Germany (Zeppelin University) and a Distinguished Research Professor in Australia (Law Faculty, University of New South Wales). He also received a Fulbright Specialist Award at The Catholic University in Lisbon, Portugal, in spring 2017.