

Crying, “Wolf!” The Campaign Against Critical Race Theory in American Public Schools as an Expression of Contemporary White Grievance in an Era of Fake News

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Abstract

The recent fervor over Critical Race Theory (CRT) in American public schools is the result of a confluence of contributing factors including: an eroded news media apparatus operating within a capitalist framework where an increasing portion of the American populace consume news through hyper-partisan cable news networks and social media that comports with their individual ideological preference; the decrying of CRT in schools as the latest iteration of historically-reliable White Backlash; and a highly-effective conservative messaging apparatus skilled in fomenting White Rage based on disinformation. In this essay I will, first, briefly survey America’s collapsing contemporary news media industry before discussing contextualizing White Rage throughout American history. From there, I will transition the article’s focus to the modern conservative media machine pushing fake news highlighting the (non-existent) issue of CRT in primarily suburban public schools as an exemplification of White Rage to protect whiteness and its hegemony for political gain.

Keywords: critical race theory, public education, fake news, post-truth, white rage, white grievance, Glen Youngkin

1. Introduction

During the Fall semester of 2021, I began teaching Urban Politics and Economic Development at my university. My class was comprised of thirty-one students from sophomore to senior: twenty-four white, four Black, and three Latino. The first lesson centered on the “modern urban landscape” followed by lessons on the formation of the Federal Housing Administration, post-WWII housing and suburbanization, the origins and legacy of public housing, and by the sixth week of class, the *1956 Highway Act*. All of these topics at first glance, seem non-controversial, yet each has sordid histories mired in anti-Black politics and anti-Black oppression. In attempts to convey the most accurate portrayal of each topic, my class interrogated both contemporaneous accounts of respective policy consequences, as well as modern critiques of such race-based politics that ultimately served to further solidify normative white supremacy in America. For instance, my class were exposed to the fact that Black citizens were specifically deprived access to newly created thirty-year mortgages from the 1930s, and from post-WWII Levittowns that were only available to white Americans enabling only whites to build familial and generational wealth—something that still remains far lopsided in favor of white Americans today. Thus, the roots of the imbalance in homeownership, household wealth, and white suburbanization we recognize in contemporary America, stems back to the 1930s and beyond. My students were largely unaware of that. In discussing the *Federal Highway Act of 1956*, the class through a series of readings were presented with information indicating that many of our nation’s highways were deliberately constructed through Black neighborhoods in urban centers like Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Boston, New Orleans, Birmingham, and Miami—in most cases bisecting thriving communities commonly causing the collapse of thriving Black neighborhoods and businesses, often resulting in residential removal and displacement. My students were largely unaware of that as well. Around the eighth week of the semester, I explained to my students that, “For all the hub-ub you’ve likely heard about Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the media recently with parents showing up to school board meetings and the election of Glen Youngkin as governor of Virginia, you’ve all had about seven classes worth of CRT in the lessons we’ve had.” Not one student raised an issue about the course content or the CRT lens through which we critiqued governmental policies. By the end of the semester, most students in the end-of-course surveys commented that most of the material covered in the course was the first they’d learned of it, with some inquiring “*why didn’t we learn this before in our*

[high school] history classes?”

In attempting to make sense of the recent political and media fervor around America’s (mis)conception of the existence of CRT in schools, it is impossible to conceptualize the ways in which CRT became a consequential partisan wedge-issue without considering media complicity in this recent iteration of White Rage (Anderson, 2016). From largely refusing to unequivocally explain to the American public that CRT is not taught in the nation’s K-12 but is primarily explored in graduate schools of education and law schools; allowing primarily suburban white grievants to morph CRT into anything American history-adjacent that offends their sensibilities while with *not* offering an accurate accounting of what CRT is, and exhaustively covering anti-CRT rallies in suburban towns and district board meetings, mass media took on the role of platforming White grievance to a non-existent issue.

The recent fervor over CRT in schools is not an organic occurrence that emerged as a result of an occurring issue confounding students and parents, but instead is the result of a confluence of contributing factors including: an eroded modern news media where the accurate portrayal of news and accompanying fact-checking to ensure a more informed public, has been replaced with a media prioritizing for consumers’ attention (Hayson, 2015). The sustained erosion of traditional news institutions, along with a growing portion of the American populace consuming their news through cable news networks and social media that comports with their individual ideological preference, creates an atmosphere where what is true and accurate is of less import, than what news consumers want to see. Further, the decrying of CRT in schools as the latest iteration of a historic tradition of White Backlash, coupled with a highly effective conservative messaging apparatus skilled in fomenting White Rage based on misinformation only continued to weaponize the White Rage induced myth of CRT being taught in schools. In this essay I will, first, briefly survey contemporary news media within a capitalist system, before contextualizing White Rage throughout American history. From there, I will shift the focus to the modern conservative media machine pushing fake news highlighting the (non-existent) issue of CRT in primarily suburban public schools as an exemplification of White Rage in its efforts to protect whiteness and its hegemony.

2. Erosion of Democracy of Modern Media

That news coverage and news media has changed dramatically in the past forty years is a given. As American media becomes increasingly consolidated, today mass media in this country is concentrated under the ownership of media conglomerates with the consequence being a less democratically informed public. Initially stated to allow for easier entrance in media operations, the *Telecommunications Act of 1996* ended up eradicating protections against concentrated media ownership (Hendricks, 1999). In the 1980s for instance, roughly fifty media corporations had access to America’s radio and television media markets. In 2021, however, AT&T, Comcast, National Amusements, Disney, News Corp and ViacomCBS control over 90% of the media the nation consumes (Polidori, 2018; Card, 2019). Where prior to the *Telecommunications Act of 1996* caps on market ownership were restricted to no more than a single television station reaching no more than 35% of the nation’s viewers, after 2003, the cap was raised to 45%; as such, more than 75% of what American viewers see on their television is controlled by just six companies (Kang, 2017). In an interview with Bill Moyers, media executive Barry Diller decried media consolidation in commenting, “A handful of companies are in charge of everything both vertically and horizontally that you get to see through a television screen” (PBS WHYY, 2006).

Consolidation in media however was not limited to television alone, but radio station ownership has also seen remarkable contraction following the lifting of the forty-radio station limit for media corporations (Lawson-Borders, 2005). Clear Channel Communications for instance, owns over 1500 radio stations nationwide reaching 110M listeners each week, while Viacom’s Infinity Radio owns over 180 radio stations in the nation’s largest markets (Tiller, 2019). Though deregulation of media ownership has taken place under bipartisan presidential administrations from Reagan to Obama, such deregulation of media ownership legislation has widely been championed by wealthy free-market conservatives and conservative lawmakers which facilitated, along with the rolling back of the *Fairness Doctrine* (1949) in 1987 mandating both television and radio station designate equal time to alternative viewpoints in their news coverage, to the emergence of staunchly conservative radio and cable news outlets like Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, Newsmax, and One America News (Andrews, 2019).

The wholesale makeover of American news media following the *Telecommunications Act* was not limited only to radio and television, as the landscape of the print newspaper industry has similarly grown more consolidated, less democratic, and less representative of the interests of their local communities (Lawson-Borders, 2005). From 2004–2019, two thousand newspapers were lost and at present, over 60M Americans across 1530 counties live in communities with just one local paper, and many remaining smaller community newspapers, merged with national media corporations like Gannett and Advance Media (Hendrickson, 2019). This contraction resulted in both massive layoffs of local reporters, as well as reduced local coverage and circulation. Reduced newspaper coverage

is not without consequence as many localities are left without reliable local coverage on meaningful matters occurring within their communities such as school board matters, as well as coverage on state politics (Andrews, 2019). The diminished capacity of newspapers to report on local newsworthy occurrences reduces the public's ability to hold elected officials accountable which contributes to growing political disengagement from local politics; and with fewer local reporters, fewer people vote in local and off-year elections, and less people run for municipal office (Hayes & Lawless, 2017; Holder, 2019). Declining local political news coverage not only reduces political participation (Shaker, 2014), but also shrinks local political knowledge among community members yielding less accountability for political actors eroding a central tenet of democratic theory that an engaged public improves governmental representation. One study found a strong correlation between vibrancy of community newsrooms and their towns' economic behavior, finding an increase in municipal and revenue bond acceptances in places where there is less local news coverage, thereby costing taxpayers financially; while residents are without the investigative reporters that can expose fiscal mismanagement (Hendrickson, 2019).

With the decline of print media between 2010 and 2014, newsrooms lost 35% of their statehouse reporters and research shows a correlating effect in federal House of Representative races as coverage on campaigns also was lessened prompting more local US House races to become less competitive. Analysis from the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media found that half the newspaper mergers and closures between 2014 and 2018 took place in metro areas with populations of over 1M due to the collapsing of smaller papers (Hussman School of Journalism, 2020; Hendrickson, 2019). The closure of small newspapers leaves many communities with larger outlets as their only newspapers, despite residents having less access to local information, their potential candidates, and elected officials (Johnson, 2021; The Atlanta Press Club, 2019). "Local newspapers are the eyes and ears of the communities they serve...and are vital to their communities in the digital age despite larger newspapers closing their doors due to decreasing circulation and falling revenue" (Hendrickson, 2019, p. 65). The crisis in American journalism raises concern that without sufficient information on local affairs, civic engagement in politics will continue to decline. Not coincidentally, as a presidential candidate, Donald Trump performed best in communities with fewer print and digital newspaper subscribers (Hendrickson, 2019), as local reporters perform the vital function of gatekeeper in national elections by vetting rhetoric and political platforms.

As more consumers of print media are opting for the convenience of digital news, traditional revenue sources for print media have grown increasingly scarce. Between 2008 and 2013, newspaper ad revenue declined by 42% and over ten years, newspapers saw a decline in 68% of its ad revenue—their primary source of revenue, as well as a sharp decline in revenue generated from classified ads. Shrinking budgets impacts newspapers' ability to keep reporters employed to deliver meaningful news. Between 1995 and 2015, newsroom staff fell by 40%, and between 2008 and 2018 newspapers saw a drop of 47%, amounting to a loss of nearly 32,000 jobs (The Atlanta Press Club, 2019; Hussman School of Journalism, 2020). In March 2018, the *Denver Post* announced cuts of 30% of its newsroom staff and Gannett which owns the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and *Indianapolis Star* began a series of similar cuts to newsrooms in 2019 contributing to strains over what stories to cover, often leaving important stories unreported. "When we lose reporters at the rate we're losing them, democracy suffers as there simply is less news about local governments and that translates into less transparency in how our elected leaders carry out their responsibilities on behalf of citizens who elected them" (Hendrickson, 2019, p. 68). According to the global outplacement firm Challenger, Gray and Christmas, newsroom layoffs reached a record high in 2020 growing nearly 200% compared to 2019 where the news industry lost 16,160 jobs across digital and print media (Chan, 2021).

Today's print media landscape in the digital age with cheaper online ads, traditional local news courses have face increased competition from newer media like social media, online news sites and blogs offering free content; Despite the best hopes of many, local online news sites fail to fill the void left by skeleton print newsrooms as substantive coverage continues to suffer. Economic challenges confronting local newspapers which were once positioned to devote time and resources to undertake in-depth, investigative, and public interest journalism has contributed to coverage gaps in recent years yielding "news deserts" around the country as local news organizations took the largest hit with decreased advertising dollars (Hayes & Lawless, 2017). As the growing specter of a further crippled print news industry looms, the traditional business model of relying on print subscribers and advertising to generate revenue is proving to be less viable in the digital age (Hendrickson, 2019). "In drawing readers and viewers from a relatively small pond, local news outlets struggle to attract enough traffic to generate ad dollars sufficient to support the cost of gathering the news in the first place" (The Atlanta Press Club, 2019, p. 7). Newspapers and magazine advertising dollars have continued to drop as more consumers migrate to digital news. Google's ad revenue, for instance, grew from \$1.4B to \$95B from 2003–2017 as print media continued to decline (The Atlanta Press Club, 2019). As news medium continue to diversify from print to online to

social media, advertising dollars have correspondingly gone elsewhere to online platforms like Facebook and Google as news consumers opt to get their news online through their smartphones

As print newsrooms continue to lay off staff and eventually shutter, other newer entities are emerging to fill the void taking advantage of greater opportunities to consolidate their presence within print media markets. Similar to powerful media conglomerates monopolizing ownership of radio and television stations, hedge-fund owners are increasingly purchasing newspaper companies. The motivation behind purchasing newspaper companies appears to be primarily profit-driven as opposed to delivering worthwhile news to consumers. Hedge-fund owners in their actions as newspaper owners exemplify their priority toward earning greater profits in regularly laying off newspaper staff and journalists intensifying the threat to worthwhile journalism. Alden Global Capital, a NY hedge fund that owns a majority stake in Digital First Media, owns 100 local papers yet still eliminated one thousand newspaper jobs over ten years—despite being profitable (Hendrickson, 2019).

2.1 Emergence of a Post-Truth Era and Fake News

Given the vacuum created by decimated print newsrooms that once represented local communities of varied constituencies, coupled with a hyper-consolidated media ecosystem where a very few wealthy actors oversee the bulk of news hundreds of millions of Americans consume, we're witnessing the simultaneous emergence of growing media distrust and consumers self-selecting news media they most identify with ideologically through radio, television, online, and social media (Keyes, 2004). Areas without a strong print media presence are less likely to watch local news but are filling the void by turning to cable news, Facebook and other social media driven news sties leading to an emergence of a self-created echo-chamber and greater resistance to consider information that runs counter to their own ideas. As such, we're witnessing an ever-growing proliferation of partisan "news", particularly from conservatives, that begins gradually morphing partisan news aligned with one's ideology into fake news in a capitalist post-Truth era (Kreitner, 2016).

Over the past three decades, the American right wing has been enormously successful in propagating its partisan message through talk radio with the likes of Rush Limbaugh, and Paul Harvey (Berry & Sobieraj, 2011); cable news with Fox News, One America News and Newsmax; online with the Daily Wire, the Joe Rogan Experience, the Blaze, and InfoWars; and through social media with organizations like Turning Point USA. American conservatives are using a wide network of local news sites to expand their messaging operation in resistance to what many on the right believe to be a liberal bias in popular media (Andrews, 2019). As such, conservatives, along with their wealthy benefactors like the Koch Brothers for instance, have prioritized a message that connects with conservative ideologies of "traditional" America, and "small [anti-tax] government" (Haas, 2014; Boles, 2020).

PragerU for example, is an American non-profit formed in 2009 that generates media content on YouTube for conservative causes to combat a perceived liberal bias on college campuses and in media. PragerU is financially supported by wealthy donors like Dan and Farris Wilks (fracking billionaires), the Lynde and Harry Foundations, the Morgan Family Foundation, the Sid and Carol Verdoon Foundation, and conservative mega-donor, Sheldon Adelson (*Los Angeles Times*, 2019). With nearly 700 YouTube videos on issues related to the denial of fossil-fuel contributing to climate change; the attack on (white) men's rights and Judeo-Christian values; the upholding of "traditional" marriage in opposition of same-sex marriage; resistance to passage of gun-control legislation; opposition to raising minimum wage; support capitalist free-markets; denial of gender and racial pay gaps, racial discrimination, and white privilege (Boles, 2020; *The Guardian*, 2020), PragerU is effective in forwarding its conservative message to its over 3M subscribers.

The success of PragerU and other such conservative news sites online, exacerbates a modern problem of American citizens getting policy information and their "news" based on what aligns with their personal ideology, masked as objective and accurate; where what constitutes news and factual information is blurred into whatever one wants to hear; and what information that does not align with one's values, thus, is therefore not accurate and untrue (Lewandowsky & Ecker, 2017). This phenomenon, however, did not come to fruition organically or by happenstance. In an effort to grow news media consumers, news outlets' norms and customs shifted from being disseminators of "truth", to outlets concerned with presenting "both sides" of an issue—regardless of the factual accuracy of either side (Harsin, 2015). To appear balanced in the covering of issues, news media today rarely call out lies and stated falsehoods explicitly. A 2019 report by the Public Leadership Institute (2019), *Why Does the Media Repeat Lies?* shares:

In 1997, *Washington Post* mediator Ben Bradlee gave a speech about truth and politics saying, "Newspapers don't tell the truth when they don't know the truth, quote someone who is lying, [and] accept someone's false spin." And "even when they know it's falsehood, the media generally won't dare come out and say, "That's a

lie” (p. 1).

Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year in 2016, *post-Truth*, is a culture where what is true or false equally influences the spread of information via rumor, lying, conspiracy theory-pedaling and influences societal actions and decision-making (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019; Mackey, 2019). Credit for the term post-Truth is attributed to Steve Tesich in 1992 as he identifies the Watergate scandal, the Iran-Contra Scandal, the Persian Gulf War as watershed moments where falsehoods, or “spin” was put forward to the public though information disseminated was knowingly misleading stating that “we have freely decided to live in some post-Truth world” (Kreitner, 2016, p. 1).

Deception is becoming more prevalent in the current media-driven world as lies stopped being treated as something inexcusable and grew in acceptance which led to the beginning of the post-truth era (Keyes, 2004). We’re no longer in an era where news organizations act as watchdog digging into stories and verifying the facts before printing. Thus, untruths gain traction as presentations of an opposing viewpoint conveying a false equivalence between what is true and accurate, and what is false and inaccurate - which creates and sustains our modern post-Truth era.

According to Keyes (2004) and Lewandosky and Ecker (2017), several factors leading to today’s post-Truth era include:

- Well-resourced public relations industry paid by clients and governments alike, paid to shine a positive light on events or “spin” the truth to their clients’ benefit; thereby obfuscating what is accurate factually versus what public relations’ clients wish the public to know
- An ever-weakening consensus on who and what organizations are authorities on given topics to adjudicate truth and facts in matters; growing difficulty in accepting truth and facts given the abundance of competing truth claims due to information availability through social media, personal websites, YouTube content, and chat groups
- Individually contrived and created social media spaces where news consumption can be solely determined by news one agrees with while filtering out news that does not align with one’s preference or ideology
- Incentivized personal branding and content material monetization; site promotion; incentivized feedback-looping

Today’s modern news media ecosystem where truth has diminishing profitable value compared to giving consumers what they want or are willing to pay for, maximizing media outlets’ opportunities to turn a profit through direct consumer patronage or paid advertisements, ensured the emergence of “fake news” was not far behind. Though fake news figures prominently in today’s critique of modern media and media consumption, it has a long history going back as far as the late 1800s with the *New York Sun*’s front page coverage of promiscuous bat-people who lived on the moon (Young, 2017) and current supermarket tabloids, yet is growing as a concern specifically pertaining to politics and public health as barriers to enter the world of “media” has been reduced to anyone that can navigate social media or a YouTube page (Lewandosky & Ecker, 2017).

Those wishing to deliberately manufacture inaccurate content find today’s post-Truth era particularly welcoming as fake news can be easily shared through both cable news and social media (The Guardian, 2020; Hern, 2019). Whether driven by a producer’s partisan ideology or profit accumulation, fake news is beneficial toward both ends as its creation is comparatively cheaper to manufacture than authentic news as it does not require fact-checking or hiring of professional journalists; many consumers of fake news cannot identify fake news with its growing sophistication and, consumers often lack the time or will to independently fact-check the news they’re consuming (Young, 2017). Further the presence of social media bots, foreign troll farms, and “synthetic followers” all virtually undetectable by unsuspected laypersons, have the ability to create false and misleading stories that can be consumed instantly and disseminated globally.

Pertaining to fake news and America’s presidential election of 2016, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) write:

- 62% of American adults got their news from social media
- The most popular and shared political news stories were fake and spread via Facebook
- Many people who see fake news believe its veracity
- Most fake news stories favor conservative right-wing politics
- Fake news, due to its novelty in topic and conclusions raised are shared farther and wider than conventional news

Notable iterations of the spread of fake news include: President Barack Obama being born in Kenya; Death Panels

being established during debate on the Affordable Care Act in 2009; “Pizza Gate” where a shooting took place at a pizzeria in Washington, DC in efforts to stop alleged child-sex trafficking; the Bowling Green (KY) Massacre by Islamic terrorists (Hunt & Gentzkow, 2017), and today’s ongoing the “Stop the Steal” movement in protest of the defeat of Donald Trump and election of Joe Biden in 2020. The manufactured furor over CRT in public schools is the latest example of the proliferation of fake news in a post-Truth era forwarded by both social media and mainstream media. While the deliberate spread of “fake news” is commonly precipitated for monetary and ideological motivations (Harsin, 2015; Krasni, 2020), what distinguishes the spread of CRT in schools, is the spread of this specific brand of fake news as a modern iteration of historic “White Rage.”

3. Controversy of Non-Existent CRT in Schools as an Iteration of White Rage

Much has been written about white Americans’ non-violent and violent responses to perceived racial progress made by Black Americans which they equate to a threat to their status at the top of America’s racial hierarchy, *whiteness*. The presence of White Backlash, or White Rage, driven by the conception that more equity in political rights or economic opportunity for other ethnic groups constitutes a loss in rights to white people has been ubiquitous throughout racial history in this nation (Anderson, 2016; DeVega, 2019). From the passing of the 2nd Amendment in response to slave revolts in Haiti and throughout the South (Anderson, 2021); the enacting of Black Codes following the Civil War; the formation of the nation’s first terrorist organization in the Ku Klux Klan after Black people gained access to the franchise, white backlash is a reliable, albeit predictable, response to Black American advances (Yancey, 2015; Cordova, 2020). In more contemporary history white rage through policy can be seen in: Nixon’s contraction of the Welfare State immediately following the Civil Rights Movement’s legislative gains in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Johnson’s War on Poverty deemed to benefit undeserving Blacks; Nixon’s “southern strategy” and pledge to return the nation to one of “law and order” in response to civil uprisings in Black communities in protest to police brutality; Reagan Retrenchment in union-busting, slashing government spending on social safety net programs targeting “welfare queens,” and ramping up the War on Drugs which was tantamount of the War on the (Black urban) poor (Hooker, 2020). The sustained effort to reduce civil rights and perceived economic gains from the 1970s through the 1990s, was accompanied by robust “white grievance” bolstered by “angry white males” prompting Clinton to enact conservative further rollbacks of welfare and prisoner rights, again, viewed as helping Black people, to today’s and tapestry of voter suppression bills and anti-protest laws in conservative led states in response to nationwide demonstrations following the police murder of George Floyd (Anderson, 2016).

While white anxiety, white rage, white backlash is often attributed to primarily “poor, working-class whites” without college education as the white working class historically set aside class solidarity in favor of whiteness (Hall, 2018; Hooker, 2020), such presumption ignores that such sentiments abound across the white citizenry regardless of educational attainment and economic standing. As an expression of white prejudice, in Wisconsin for instance immediately following the passage of *Civil Rights Act of 1965*, much of the support for Alabama segregationist George Wallace was concentrated among the states middle and upper-class whites, not just those on the lower rungs of the economic scale (Rogin, 1996). And while contemporary debates emerge over whether Trump’s 2016 electoral win was the result of racist white nationalist appeals or was substantiated by the economic anxieties of the white working class, it would be a mistake to believe class appeals alone explain the current wave of white backlash and Trump’s ascendancy to the presidency in 2016. White rage played a prominent role in propelling Trump to the White House, not economic anxiety as the median income of Trump supporters was \$70,000 per year—well above the national average (Anderson, 2016). The politics of white grievance is a reliable and lasting force shaping contemporary racial politics in the US. And though not all white citizens are motivated by a sense of grievance or racism, *whiteness*—societal favor gained through belonging to the white racial group—is a material benefit from which all white people enjoy motivating significant segments of white voters to vote in protection of whiteness (Accapadi, 2007). When whiteness or the concept of white people being the standard of normalcy or right-ness, white identity politics is engaged as a response to perceived threat. While the perception that only minoritized groups practice “identity politics”, white people do it in much the same fashion except white identity politics is not in effort the achieve equity for all America’s citizens, but to solidify racial dominance and in solidarity with whiteness (DeVega, 2019).

Modern iterations of white backlash are intensified by increased immigration to America by immigration from Black and Latino nations which is viewed as a threat to whiteness and white people’s place at the top of the social hierarchy as America’s the nonwhite population has grew to 40% in 2019 from 25% in 1990 (Jacobs, 2018). For the duration of American history, white Americans have sole claim to economic, political, and social power, and with the election of Obama, many white Americans believe their hegemony was eroding (Norton & Sommers, 2011). Further, the election of the nation’s first Black president, coupled with the increasing presence of brown

Latino immigrants, visible demonstrations in America's streets through BLM protests against police violence (Hooker, 2020), further inflamed sentiments of white victimhood and grievance embodied in, among other things, increased membership and affiliation with right-wing white nationalist groups and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Shepherd et al., 2012; Hughey, 2014).

Donald Trump and his white nationalist agenda served to sustain whiteness and an assumption that white people should be the favored and dominant demographic in America. Trump was seen to be white Americans' response to Obama, who in many white grievants' eyes, served the interests of only Black people and other nonwhites (DeVega, 2019). Ironically however, what white voters saw in Trump symbolically outweighed the reality that much of Trump's policies benefited average white Americans very little substantively (Hooker, 2020). There are, however, gender differences with respect to levels of white identity as a high percentage of white women identify as being white compared to white men—which runs counter to the popular narrative that holds white women as being more racially tolerant and socially liberal (Accapadi, 2007). To the contrary, to preserve their own sense of status afforded by whiteness, white women are not as aligned with liberal societal change as projected as evidenced by most white women voting Republican since the 1950s. Married white women commonly adopt the influence and partisanship of their husbands and typically are not supportive of egalitarianism as folks might suspect (DeVega, 2019).

With 2020's election victory and of Joe Biden and the nation's first Black woman Vice President in Kamala Harris, the election of two Democratic senators in reliably republican

Georgia, one of whom, Raphael Warnock, the first Black senator in Georgia's history, white rage emerged again (Glickman, 2020). More restrictive voting laws across republican-led states passed following election 2020 (Cordova, 2020). In Georgia and thirty other states passed voting restrictions including banning the distribution of water for people in long lines to vote, the reduction of early voting periods, reduced access to mail-in absentee voting as well, as the construction and passage of hyper-partisan (Newkirk, 2018), gerrymandered voting maps intended to maximize the representation of conservative whites while curtailing representation of Black and Latino citizens (Jacobs, 2018).

Historically, such actions could be predicted as a typical display of white backlash to what they deem to be indicators of Black political progress, but what distinguishes this moment is the effectiveness in disseminating their grievance and fake news through consolidated corporate media, social media in the post-truth world. In the weeks following the election of Biden the "Stop the Steal Movement" emerged alleging that the 2020 election was "stolen" from Donald Trump, and that he was still the rightful president (Graham, 2021). Despite numerous audits in "battleground" states, court cases affirming Biden as the rightful winner, Trump acolytes continued to conduct press conferences, symposiums, and gain airtime on cable news forwarding the myth of a stolen election. And, with social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, and online media sites like YouTube providing a platform for those seeking to put forth similar messaging, roughly 75% of self-identified Republicans today believe the election was, in fact, stolen (Cilizza, 2021). Due to the concentrated and consistent messaging of a stolen election, coupled with primarily white fears of an ever-diversifying American demographic, 40% of Republicans believe violence may be warranted "to take the country back" (Gjelten, 2021).

To be sure, the abundance of misinformation regarding the 2020 election was not the only lingering example of the proliferation of fake news in both traditional and social media, as similar patterns emerged in America's struggles to constrain COVID-19 in our current pandemic. Since 2020, COVID-19 deniers and conspiracy theorists have taken to conservative cable news and social media refuting the existence of the virus first, followed by screeds against the efficacy of mask-wearing, and the vaccination. Within a matter of months of anti-mask and anti-vaccine coverage, millions of consumers of such media months began demonstrating in the streets, in restaurants, and even at school board meetings against a virus they believed to be a hoax or not as serious as government officials insisted; as well in resistance to mask-wearing or vaccine restrictions (Beer, 2020; Gomez, 2022). The consistent consumption of fake news across news platforms drove popular outrage against scientific consensus on the seriousness of the virus as well as recommendations to maximize societal and personal safety against the virus.

Messaging against the existence of COVID and its correlating mitigation measures has been described as a disinformation campaign to first, make people distrust the government and real information, which then allows the disinformation to seep in to move to a more authoritarian regime and inflame the angry white voter base (Gray, 2021). Not coincidentally, a similar pattern emerged with the widespread dissemination of fake news that CRT was being taught in the nation's public schools. What differentiates the spreading of the myth of CRT in schools from the sharing of Fake News related to bat people in the 1800s or COVID-19 today, is that white rage spurred the

drive against (non-existent) CRT in schools. Popular conservative media outlets along with substantial support from well-funded online news sources and social media, forwarded the disinformation in efforts to weaponize white rage for political gain (Gambino & Pengelly, 2021).

3.1 CRT as a Contemporary, Yet Non-Existent, Lightning Rod

In August 2019, the *New York Times* began publishing a series commemorating the 400-year anniversary of the start of African enslavement in America called, the *1619 Project* by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Nikole Hannah-Jones (2021) and contributions from fifty-five other researchers, intellectuals, and poets. The *1619 Project* series consisting of eighteen essays and thirty-six poems was widely read, and before long, was published into a *New York Times* Bestseller, *the 1619 Project: An Origin Story*. Through this award-winning series, Americans of all races and ethnicities had an opportunity to learn how the legacy of racism and slavery resides in every aspect of American life from politics to capitalism, to religion.

Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from the public, including educators and parents, and also in formal reviews published in outlets like *Esquire*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Los Angeles Times*, a significant portion of America's conservative right, viewed the *1619 Project* as patently un-American in its message, and its conveyance of America's history as more racist than they chose to acknowledge. Jones' work was so loathed by the conservative right, that then-President Trump formed the 1776 Commission in September 2020, to "write a report on the 'core principles of the American founding and how these principles may be further understood to further the enjoyment of 'the blessings of liberty'" in an overt push-back against the "twisted web of lies" regarding systemic racism in America (Wood, 2021). The Commission, in January 2021, subsequently issued its forty-three-page *1776 Report* intended to correct the historical inaccuracies of the *1619 Project* (Watson & Segers, 2020). Contrary to the in-depth research exhibited by Jones and others in the production of the *1619 Project*, the *1776 Report* was dismissed as neither academic in nature or grounded in scholarship as factual inaccuracies abound within the Report, but particularly ideologically motivated aimed to reify American conservatism and traditional American heroes like the Founding Fathers. The *1619 Project* has, since its inception, been labeled a work of CRT (Wood, 2021).

During July 2020, Christ Rufo, a former staffer at the Heritage Foundation, and current fellow at the Manhattan Institute, began making the media rounds decrying anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion trainings in the workplace (Wallace-Wells, 2021). His first target of vitriol was a diversity training for staff at the Department of the Treasury. Despite the training being completely voluntary, Rufo's narrative of rampant compulsory trainings of white staff in American workplaces that alleged that white employees must "struggle to own their racism" as "virtually all white people contribute to racism" gained considerable traction across conservative media from the *New York Post* to Fox News throughout 2020 (Rufo, 2020; Hoadley-Brill, 2021). Rufo went steps further than misrepresenting the optional diversity training that are offered at the Department of the Treasury to linking such training to CRT. In a *New York Post* opinion piece Rufo authored, he lamented that "CRT was coursing through the nations veins like some illicit narcotic," and went about labeling any matter where race was topic at work or schools as further proof that CRT was infiltrating both the private sector in American workplaces, and the public sector in government and public schools. Before the year was out, Rufo labeled the US Department of Treasury, Sandia National Laboratories, Seattle Public Schools, Santa Clara Public Schools, Cupertino Schools, Philadelphia Public Schools, and Buffalo Public Schools as CRT peddling institutions (Hoadley-Brill, 2021). Rufo gained popular acclaim alleging that CRT was ubiquitous in American institutions despite it being "anti-American and anti-white", "paid for by [Americans] tax dollars" (Rufo, 2021). Rufo claimed CRT teaches that "all white people can be reduced to their essence, which is a kind of irreducible core of "whiteness" [which is] a synonym for "evil," "oppression," "supremacy"—everything wrong in the world (Hoadley-Brill, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021). Such mis-categorizations of what CRT is, and its presence in American work and public spaces was so widespread that by the Fall of 2020, President Trump began addressing the matter publicly, and eventually banning all federal diversity trainings (Asare, 2020).

Throughout the latter part of 2020 and into 2021, CRT remained a hot topic in the political sphere despite the vast majority of those interviewed, both white politicians and white citizens exhibiting little knowledge of what CRT is in the first place. While the CRT appeared to agitate many on the right with the idea that it was being forced on Americans at work (it wasn't), what vaulted the issue of CRT to the fore was the idea that CRT was being taught in American public schools. While those speaking on the matter exhibited little understanding of what they were even speaking out against, what was clear was that American voters, white suburban voters specifically, did not like nor want CRT taught in schools (Lerer & Epstein, 2021; Gray, 2021). Suburban white Americans were so against CRT, that changes to school curriculum throughout the country began being made to ban terms like "race," "racism," "white supremacy," "diversity," and the like (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). To be sure, CRT does reference these

concepts but what white Americans were railing against was not CRT, it was the teaching of a more accurate and inclusive accounting American History, yet because many opponents taking public positions against CRT do not in fact know what CRT is, CRT was co-opted to mean anything curriculum related that provided a critical interrogation of America's history and its present (Gambino & Pengelly, 2021).

An outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies which challenges hegemony that legitimizes oppression, CRT attempts to analyze our American institutions, including our legal system, through the lens of race. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Affirmative Action have presented civic advances for Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, progress was incremental and time-consuming and did not match the immediacy or emergence of needed advances to achieve racial equality (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Frustrated by the limited success following the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s law professors Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberley Crenshaw among many others, recognized the limitations for achieving legal and political change for those experiencing racial oppression in America (Pellar, 2021). Largely, they reasoned that America was a nation of laws written by, and exclusively for, land-owning white men. *How can laws that were created by exclusively wealthy white men, for the purposes of addressing the priorities and concerns of wealthy white men exclusively, address the needs and priorities of a nation as diverse specifically racially and economically, as America is today?* Quite simply, CRT theorists reasoned, it cannot legally, and thus, structurally, America cannot sufficiently mitigate the concerns of a diverse citizenry because a diverse citizenry was never considered by those who established laws upon which America was founded and still operates (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT went further to note that not only is America structurally marginalizing those who are non-white males, but that America structurally is arranged to protect whiteness specifically (Bridges, 2019). As such, Bell and others sought to provide a legal theory for law students throughout the 70s and 80s to interpret and critique America's legal system and its built-in shortcomings, namely, that racial (and gender) marginalization is omnipresent in American systems and structures (Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Ansell, 2008; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

CRT is a non-dogmatic lens of viewing society and the ubiquity of racism within all American structures and systems (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Such a complex framework for viewing America was introduced to graduate students and law students within the last forty years, and as such, is not taught in America's K12 public schools (Pellar, 2021; Streeter, 2021). This was fake news. Nonetheless, claims of CRT being taught in schools ran rampant across popular media. CRT was mentioned on Fox News 1300 times in four months and Texas Senator Ted Cruz referred to CRT in schools as, "every bit as dangerous as the Klansmen in white sheets," (Hutzler, 2021) and President Trump weighed in calling CRT "toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country" adding "CRT in schools was tantamount to "child abuse in the truest sense of the word" (Hoadley-Brill, 2021).

National politicians were not the only influential voices railing against (non-existent) CRT, but conservative news hosts Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, Sean Hannity, Candace Owens and a host of others repeated similar talking points that CRT was being taught in schools and that it admonishes all white people as oppressors, and positions all Black people as helplessly oppressed which keeps Black people in a victim mindset (Montgomery, 2021). With repeated messaging against CRT, and despite not illustrating sufficient understanding of what CRT is, nor producing evidence that CRT was in fact being taught in public schools, between 2020 and the authoring of this article, nearly twenty-five states enacted anti-CRT in school legislation (Murillo, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). And, in Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial race between Terry McAuliffe and Glen Youngkin, CRT was a prominent campaign issue with Youngkin's vocal opposition to CRT propelling him to victory with the help of suburban white mothers—many of whom voted for Biden just one year before.

In Virginia, local "news" sites like *Central Virginia Times*, *Fredericksburg Leader*, *Central Shenandoah News* along with twenty-eight news sites are owned by Metric Media and Donors Trust which donated \$90M in 2019, ran about 4,657 anti-CRT articles in 2021 alone despite little proof CRT was taught in the state's schools at all (Gabbatt, 2021). The gubernatorial election of Youngkin legitimized the political efficacy of pathologizing a non-existent school curriculum in the state's public schools, though Virginia was not alone in seeing its state plastered with anti-CRT articles to influence elections (Gambino & Pengelly, 2021). In Florida 11,988 anti-CRT articles ran in 2021, with 10,096 articles being run Texas; 6,252 in Ohio, and 2,162 in New Hampshire, all of which are battleground states where either gubernatorial or Senate seats are on the ballot in 2022 (Gabbatt, 2021).

In media coverage against CRT in schools, attention over CRT was dedicated near exclusively to white "suburban moms" of both party affiliations, and aggrieved conservative white men (Streeter, 2021). A commercial even featured a white woman lamenting her crying son when reading Morrison's *Beloved* in a Virginia school influencing white parents to show up at Loudon County Board of Education meetings complaining over CRT's alleged inclusion in the District's curriculum (Lerer & Epstein, 2021). It wasn't.

The existence of both Black and white suburban parents who preferred to see a more representative portrayal of American society was largely ignored in the conveying of the CRT controversy. Streeter (2021) writes:

It seems black and brown voices were ignored, and the voices were centered on white parents' concerns. One thing that frustrated Black parents [in Virginia] was the deliberate misunderstanding of CRT with one stating, "CRT is being used as a dog whistle and a lie that was deliberately deployed to increase Glen Youngkin's chance at victory... this was a fake fire that was set, a political ploy, crying wolf about something that is not there" (p. 2).

The ramifications of the spread of white rage-driven fake news spread beyond resistance to a non-existent curriculum, but has escalated in some states including Arizona, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, and Alaska to pass bills placing restrictions on lessons employing diversity-laden concepts related to gender, race, and sexual orientation, as well as placing outright bans on books written primarily by Black authors (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Worse still, in some states educators caught violating anti-CRT legislation are subject to loss of employment and possibly, felony convictions. While anti-CRT zealotry is prompting sweeping changes in curriculum and consequences for violating state legislation regarding CRT, at present, we cannot ascertain whether, or how, the campaign against CRT will morph nor how successful it will be if weaponized again in the future.

4. Conclusion

The American history of white backlash or white rage in response to perceived gains, economically or politically, by non-whites is robust. The conception that any gains made by Black or Latino people in America, threatens white superiority and the benefits of whiteness, predictably initiates oppressive responses by masses of America's white citizenry, whether through violence and intimidation was evidenced through the birthing of the Klan, or through policies like the poll tax, three-strikes laws, and stop-and-frisk. Threats to white hegemony prompting the centuries-old response of undertaking actions to maintain white hegemony historically, however, was commonly precipitated by the unfolding of actual events. From the outlawing of slavery following the US Civil War, to the elections of President Joe Biden and Democratic Georgia Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, white Americans' response has predictable White Rage. What distinguishes white American's outcry against CRT is that it does not exist in American workplaces, nor public schools; yet somehow myths around the onslaught of CRT were perpetually omnipresent fake news within a Post-Truth era. In such an era, what is true and what is factual, matters less than what media, both traditional news media and social media, consumers wish to consume.

The emergence of today's post-Truth era and the ubiquity of the fake news would have been less likely prior to the collapsing of America's traditional news media apparatus. Decades of deregulation in media, concentration of media markets and corporate media conglomeration eroded the availability of local media to participate in traditional reporting, investigating, and questioning. The result as we see from the emergence of QAnon, the "Stop the Steal" movement that prompted the January 6th (2021) attack on our nation's capital, and citizens drinking urine to prevent COVID infection (Miranda, 2022), our nation's populace is losing the ability to determine truth from fiction to calamitous effect. Unfortunately, there is no predicting how far this goes, but certainly, this does not bode well for America's future.

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