

Insight

The place for opinion and reader interaction

By Janine Zacharia

POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

Too dangerous to disregard

It wasn't until the final days of his presidency that the media finally began to figure out how to cover the provocateur Donald Trump, calling his lies "lies" and cutting away when he complained without evidence about the election being rigged.

Now, journalists face a fresh challenge in Marjorie Taylor Greene, the Trumpist — but far from the only — new member of Congress to spew dangerous hatred and falsehoods.

That the freshman representative from northwest Georgia supported a Facebook post that House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi should be shot in the head and her belief that mass shootings were false flag operations — plus her nutty notion that some kind of Jewish-backed space laser caused California's wildfires — have in a month generated more coverage than most politicians will generate in a lifetime.

Newly elected Lauren Boebert of Colorado has also expressed support for the baseless QAnon theory, promised to carry her Glock into Congress, was fined for setting off the metal detector, and is being investigated for her possible role in coordinating the mob that ransacked the Capitol. Madison Cawthorn, the 25-year-old newly elected representative from North Carolina, has parroted the false conspiracy about thousands of children being sold into sex slavery and encouraged people last December to "lightly threaten" members of Congress.

There have, of course, long been legislators with anti-Semitic, racist and crazy beliefs.

But whereas recent ones like Iowa Republican Steve King — who was stripped of his committee assignments before being ousted — were marginalized, Greene, Boebert and Cawthorn feel like a bellwether of a deranged Republican Party increasingly willing to propagate insane notions for political gain. Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley's move to obstruct certification of President Biden's victory led to his biggest fundraising month ever. In today's politics, outrageousness to the point of recklessness is being rewarded.

Should reporters relentlessly cover Greene's "loony lies," as Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell described them? Or, in doing so, does the media risk exposing more Americans to conspiracies? Would it be better to ignore media-manipulators like Boebert who are too junior to have real impact in Congress?

"I am generally unsure what the best way to handle MTG is now that she's a lawmaker," Charlie Warzel, a New York Times technology reporter, wrote on Twitter referring to Greene by her initials. She is "clearly an attention hijacker



Getty Images

Beneath the absurdity and craziness lurk threats to truth and democracy

... more shitposter than politician ... but also ... a Rep."

We can't worry any longer about inadvertently directing people to conspiracies by writing about Greene and her ilk now that the Department of Homeland Security has declared "ideologically motivated violent extremists ... fueled by false narratives" a terrorist threat. Congressmembers who spread these falsehoods are not only a political story — they are a national security one, too.

In an email accompanying a petition for her expulsion, the Jewish advocacy group J Street summed up how I think about this: "It would be a huge mistake to ignore the serious threat posed by Greene and the far-right antisemitic conspiracy theorists to whom she is now proudly giving voice in the halls of Congress."

When I reached out to John Bailey,

editor of the Rome News-Tribune, the main newspaper in Greene's home district, to get his take on how the media should cover Greene, he said he wrestles with how to write about conspiracists without amplifying false messages.

He doesn't have a lot of time to think through a strategy for covering her in between processing photos and managing coverage. It's a day-to-day decision. "You have to make a call," he says, especially without a dedicated politics reporter and a staff of only five that needs to cover school boards and local government and sports, too. "What's more important?" he asks.

Reporters need a plan. This is why my colleague Andy Grotto and I drafted guidelines for newsrooms on how to report on lies.

Greene will never merit as much attention as a president. Media outlets

both national and local need to signal in story placement and length that she isn't the most important story of the day.

Editors should develop stock language about Greene that is included high up in every story such as, "Marjorie Taylor Greene, the freshman representative, who has endorsed executing prominent Democrats and backed the QAnon movement — now deemed a terrorist threat by the FBI — before saying she no longer believed it ..."

(In an attempt to prevent the U.S. House from stripping her of her committee assignments, Greene said in a speech Thursday she had stopped believing in QAnon and that some of her "words of the past" don't represent her today, before calling the media "just as guilty as QAnon of presenting truth and lies." The House then voted 230-199 to remove her from the education and budget committees.)

Never write a headline that directly quotes her without context.

As Grotto and I wrote, "remember that journalists are a targeted adversary and see yourself this way when digesting disinformation ... Ask yourself: Are we being used here?"

Rather than covering publicity stunts, reporters should dig further into who Greene and other representatives pushing QAnon really are. The Nation's investigation into the deceptions of Cawthorn — a Trumpy freshman member who "misled the public about training for the Paralympics, just as he misrepresented his education and business history" — was a model.

A 2019 video of Greene harassing David Hogg, a survivor of the Parkland high school shooting, was chilling and important.

Media Matters' publication of Greene's 2018 Facebook posts — in which she endorsed the idea that 9/11 was an inside job and that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was staged — was the kind of reporting that should have been done *before* the election.

Too often, Republicans were able to duck questions about Trump's inanities. They cannot be allowed to do this again.

A journalist's job is to report what people need to know to be informed citizens and to help them make sense of what is most important. To that end, I wish every column devoted to her — including this one — could instead be about the existential threat of climate change. But, unfortunately, the media is going to have to rigorously cover legislators like Greene. They are simply too dangerous to disregard.

Janine Zacharia, a former Washington Post reporter, is the Carlos Kelly McClatchy lecturer in the department of communication at Stanford University.

Recall movement a sign of polarized times

His approval rating may have dropped, but Gov. Gavin Newsom has little to worry about when he comes up for re-election in 2022. Democrats now enjoy a 22-point edge in party registration and no Republican has prevailed for statewide office in a general election since 2006.

Newsom's immediate challenge is to get past 2021.

The movement to recall the governor, which began as a conservative pipe dream before the pandemic, gained a semblance of plausibility last week when two well-respected polls showed Newsom's approval rating just over 50% in one and just under in the other. The recall campaign has until March 17 to collect 1.5 million signatures — thanks to a court ruling that granted a 90-day extension due to the pandemic — and about 600,000 have been validated to date.

Could Republicans really succeed in taking out a Democratic governor? The recall petition faults Newsom on

issues that have been floated and failed against him in his three statewide races: high taxes, immigration, homelessness and his opposition to the death penalty.

I raised that question with several of the state's most prominent consultants, Democratic and Republican. None thought it was likely. Yet all thought it was not to be dismissed.

The first step is getting it on the ballot, which is no sure thing. Signature gathering is expensive, and all the more so when Californians are less likely to be out and about and reluctant to be handed a pen as they leave the grocery store. The recall effort would need a major infusion of dollars — and soon — to achieve that threshold for an election this November.

"If you have enough money you could qualify a ban on ice cream or a recall of God," said Dan Newman, a strategist for the governor. "But if you don't have enough money, you couldn't qualify free ice cream for everyone."

The direct democracy conceived by Gov. Hiram Johnson

JOHN DIAZ



as a check against special-interest domination of politicians a century ago has "just sort of become a business," he added.

If the recall does qualify for the ballot, the situation could get wild in a hurry.

As in the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis, voters would be faced with two questions: an up-or-down verdict on Newsom and, if he were recalled, a selection of a successor who would need to secure a plurality of votes in what could become a huge field with an absurdly low bar of entry (65 signatures and \$3,500). The Davis recall drew 135 contenders, from second-tier politicians to B-list actors.

Of course, one A-list actor dominated the campaign: Arnold Schwarzenegger, who won with 48.6%. It was the first successful recall of a governor in California history.

Is there another Schwarzenegger with the ambition and charisma to upstage Newsom? Not likely.

"Clearly the main problem

(in 2003) was Arnold Schwarzenegger. Once he got into the race he became the face of the recall and it became very difficult for us to dismiss this as a scheme by the national Republican Party," said Garry South, who managed Davis' gubernatorial campaigns. "He's a Californian, had his career here in the movie industry ... and had 100% name ID."

Here's what's starting to keep California Democrats up at night: If Newsom were to fall even a single vote below 50% on the recall question — with potentially hundreds of alternatives on the ballot — a replacement candidate would not need to approach Schwarzenegger's numbers to become the next governor.

"A Republican could win," Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., one of former President Donald Trump's most devout defenders, recently tweeted in promoting the candidacy of fellow Trumpian Ric Grenell, former director of national intelligence.

The possibility that a Republican Party with 24% of the state's registered voters could produce a governor would rise significantly if a Democrat were to enter the replacement field. To this day, many Democrats blame the ballot presence of the man they regard as a party disloyalist, Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, as a factor against Da-

vis. It certainly muddled the straightforward message that Davis' strategists wanted to push: Vote against the recall or a Republican might become governor.

"Cruz wasn't an all-star candidate, of course," said Steve Maviglio, who had been Davis' press secretary, "but he gave Democrats a place to go."

It's hard to imagine an elected Democrat of any stature jumping into the replacement field this time. Bustamante's post-recall fate serves as a cautionary tale: He was defeated in his 2006 bid for insurance commissioner, making him the last California Democrat to lose a statewide office. The more likely threat to Newsom would be from an outsider or two from his left who might sense a rare opportunity to seize the moment with its low cost of entry.

Continues on page H13



Lois Kazakoff / Special to The Chronicle

A petition at a Concord restaurant collects signatures for the recall of Gov. Gavin Newsom.



Rich Pedroncelli / Associated Press