

Fake News, Freedom of the Press, and the Fracturing of the Fourth Estate:
The Press and the Presidency in Trump's America

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Literature Review</u>	5
<u>2016 Election</u>	7
<u>2017</u>	11
<u>2018</u>	15
<u>Trump vs Presidential Precedent</u>	21
<u>Historical Contexts of “Enemy of the People”</u>	25
<u>Freedom of the Press in American Democracy</u>	29
<u>Conclusion</u>	32
<u>Works Cited</u>	34

Introduction

“The FAKE NEWS media... is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people!”¹ In the late afternoon of February 17, 2017, the recently-inaugurated President of the United States advanced his vendetta against the American news media by tweeting this to his 25 million followers. It came a mere three months after his surprise win in the 2016 presidential election and only three weeks after his inauguration. What had been an unconventional campaign was clearly evolving to be an equally bizarre presidency. As the next four years unfolded, President Donald Trump became probably the most infamous and discussed character to ever grace the front of American politics. And he achieved this goal through what can only be described as very strategic and inventive tactics for communicating with the general public.

Throughout the 2016 election, Donald Trump ran on the assurance that he would “drain the swamp” – ridding American politics of the pesky creatures that had been dragging the political system down for so many years.² Early in the race, Trump’s campaign identified one of the most prominent characters in polluting the job of presidency – the media. The “failing” fourth estate, he argued, had lied to the American people and was continuing to do so, at his expense. In his view, the most highly-regarded and trusted news outlets were exhibiting an aggressively liberal bias against him, spreading misinformation that made him look bad. Throughout the four years he was in office, Trump used his power (and then some) to limit the influence and agency of these “fake news organizations.”

The freedom of press and expression is one of the most fundamental and important conceptions of American democracy. Allowing the people to critique, admonish, or even insult elected officials is one of the basic, yet loosely defined, checks on the power of the central government. A vibrant and strong media acts as a fourth branch of politics and of society – separate from the government and the people and acting as a fourth institution. Journalists are crucial in the dissemination and explanation of current events and issues and therefore play an unparalleled role in shaping public opinion. The media is the best way for the president to communicate with the people, acting as a direct line between citizens and the executive. Having a president that sees this system as his enemy is bound to have lasting effects on the relationship between the executive branch and the press. Trump’s time in office successfully diminished

¹ Trump, Donald. Twitter Post. February 17, 2017, 3:48 PM. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/832708293516632065>

² Rebecca Harrington, “Here’s what Trump means when he says ‘drain the swamp’ – even though it’s not even an accurate metaphor,” *Business Insider*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-does-drain-the-swamp-mean-was-dc-built-on-a-swamp-2016-11>

public faith in the media, bringing it to an all-time low. The effect of his rhetoric is still being felt today, two years after he left office.

This thesis will study the trajectory of the relationship between Donald Trump and the media throughout the 2016 election and his first two years in office. It will examine the role of the press in American society and the influence Trump has had on their reputation. Because his use of “enemy of the people” insult has significant ties to authoritarian regimes, special attention will be paid to the historical contexts of his rhetoric. Donald Trump’s treatment of the media has done lasting damage to the position the press holds in American society, so this paper will also project the future of press-presidency relations.

Literature Review

There is no shortage of scholarship on the unprecedented nature of Trump's presidency. Political scientists, journalists, and communication scholars have repeatedly highlighted the fact that Trump's election and incumbency was anything but traditional and remarked at its implications for the future of the presidency. When examining the intersection of Donald Trump's politics and journalism, there is a wealth of academia that continues to grow by the day.

This paper will focus specifically on Trump's antagonism towards the media: instances in which he abused journalists and "liberal" publications because of a perceived bias or misreporting. In 2017, Trump inflamed scholars and historians alike when he accused the "fake news media" of being "the enemy of the people." Kalb,³ Graham-Harrison,⁴ and Kenny⁵ examine the historical context of this phrase, explaining why its implication is so serious. As Kalb puts it: "only dictators, detached from democratic norms and values, would use such a phrase."⁶ The phrase "enemy of the people" recalls such regimes as the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin, China's Mao Zedong, and even Nazi Germany.⁷ For Trump to use this phrase to relegate the media as the "other" in American society represents a total inability to tolerate those who disagree with him. However unusual Trump's approach to American politics was, it was not entirely unheard of. Cimaglio argues that it was Nixon's "tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men" that provided the foundation for Trump's "anti-media campaign."⁸ Kalb links Trump's dismissal of the truth to Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist campaign of the 1950s.⁹

This paper will further concentrate on other aspects of Trump's presidency that resulted in such discord with tradition. Meyer-Gutbrod¹⁰ and Pauli¹¹ discuss the Trump White House's press briefings. Gutbrod predicts that the hostile relationship between Trump and the media is an example of "functional interdependence" which will encourage subsequent administrations to

³ Martin Kalb, *Enemy of the People: Trump's War on the Press, the New McCarthyism, and the Threat to American Democracy*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institute Press, 2018.

⁴ Emma Graham-Harrison, "'Enemy of the people': Trump's phrase and its echoes in totalitarianism," *The Guardian*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/03/trump-enemy-of-the-people-meaning-history>

⁵ Paul D. Kenny, "'The Enemy of the People': Populists and Press Freedom," *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2020): 261-275 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1065912918824038>

⁶ Kalb, *Enemy of the People*, 2

⁷ Graham-Harrison, "Trump's phrase and its echoes of totalitarianism."

⁸ Christopher Cimaglio, "'A Tiny and Closed Fraternity of Privileged Men': The Nixon-Agnew Antimedia Campaign and the Liberal Roots of the U.S. Conservative 'Liberal Media' Critique," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 1-19.

⁹ Kalb, Martin. *Enemy of the People*, 98

¹⁰ Joshua Meyer-Gutbrod and John Woolley, "New Conflicts in the Briefing Room: Using Sentiment Analysis to Evaluate Administration-Press Relations from Clinton through Trump," *Political Communication* 38, no. 3 (2021): 241-256 doi:10.1080/10584609.2020.1763527

¹¹ Carol Pauli, "'Enemy of the People': Negotiating News at the White House," *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution* 33, no. 3 (2018): 397-462

“tolerate more aggressive media questioning in an effort to control media messages.”¹² Pauli argues that Trump’s press briefings operated as “opening moves in a negotiation over news content and over the rules of president-press engagement.”¹³ Sugars does a deep dive into Trump’s use of Twitter as a medium of engaging with both the press and the general public.¹⁴

It would be impossible to discuss Trump’s developments to presidential-media relations without mentioning the “fake news” phenomenon. Though he in no way invented the term, he certainly revolutionized the way we think about it. Gallup polls show that Americans’ trust in the media has bottomed out to the lowest points in recorded history.¹⁵ Domke¹⁶ foreshadowed this fall, claiming that conservative claims of a “liberal media” is to blame for the falling levels of faith in the press. Cimaglio echoes this, explaining that conservative elites have been able to successfully claim to be the victims of media coverage because they are so good at media manipulation.¹⁷ Azari connects the conservative message of “fake news” to Trump’s success in 2016: “communication is a big part of the coordination process; when rules no longer hold a party together, a shared message does.”¹⁸ She argues that extensive news coverage of Trump helped him amass supporters and directly led to his eventual victory. It was the “liberal” news media, giving him excessive information because they didn’t think he would actually win.¹⁹

The way a President runs the country during the digital age has important and lasting implications for the future of journalism and its place in American politics/society. The purpose of this paper is to present a theory on Trump’s interactions with the media and to analyze what such approaches could mean for American democracy. Many academics examine the relationship between a functioning and successful democracy and a prominent journalism system.

¹² Meyer-Gutbrod “New Conflicts in the Briefing Room,” 241

¹³ Pauli, “Negotiating News at the White House,” 399

¹⁴ Stephanie Sugars, “From Fake News to Enemy of the People: An Anatomy of Trump’s Tweets,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, January 30, 2019, <https://cpj.org/2019/01/trump-twitter-press-fake-news-enemy-people/>

¹⁵ Megan Brennan, “Americans’ Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record,” *Gallup*, October 7, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx>

¹⁶ David David, et al., “The Politics of Conservative Elites and the ‘Liberal Media’ Argument,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (1999): 35-58

¹⁷ Cimaglio, “A Tiny and Closed Fraternity of Privileged Men.”

¹⁸ Julia Azari, “How the News Media Helped to Nominate Trump,” *Political Communication* 33 no. 4 (2016): 677-680. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2016.1224417

¹⁹ Azari, “How the News Media Helped to Nominate Trump,” 678

2016 Election

Despite being a popular figure among Republican circles for years, with speculations of a presidential bid for numerous election cycles, Trump didn't officially break into politics until June 16, 2015, when he announced his candidacy for president at Trump Tower. The 45-minute speech²⁰ outlined a number of Trump's campaign issues, highlighting illegal immigration, terrorism, and economic competition. Though it made no explicit foreshadowing of his animus for the press, it gave some of the earliest indications of his "truthful hyperbole" approach (a term coined by his *The Art of the Deal* ghostwriter Tony Schwartz to describe Trump's voice²¹). He made sweeping references to "sources" saying things like "it came out" and "somebody said" with no actual citations. This was a trend that was going to continue throughout the campaign, with Trump making up facts and attributing them to an absent/abstract origin.

Immediately after the announcement, Trump began his tour of the country, focusing most heavily on the early primary states of Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada. This period, which usually consists of the year before the first primary, is called the invisible primary, when potential candidates jockey for money and attention. Experts note that the success in this time period is best indicated by the amount of media coverage a candidate receives - "In the early going, nothing is closer to pure gold than favorable free media exposure" (Patterson, 2016). In this area, Trump more than exceeded his competitors. The amount of media coverage he received was unprecedented, considering he was polling so low and wasn't raising much money. Trump received almost twice as much attention as any of his other Republican candidates: 34% of coverage was dedicated to him, 18% to Jeb Bush, 14% to Marco Rubio, 14% to Ben Carson, 13% to Ted Cruz, and only 7% to John Kasich.²²²³ Exposure ranged from live-streams of his speeches and events, discussion panels on his campaign promises and issues, and other coverage of his activities and rhetoric. The amount of attention that Trump received from the mainstream media was so unproportional that it almost became ridiculous. There were points in 2016, arguably one of the most eventful and tumultuous periods in world history, where major news

²⁰ C-SPAN, "Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement Full Speech (C-SPAN)," YouTube, June 16, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkysjbM>

²¹ Jane Mayer, "Donald Trump's Ghostwriter Tells All," *The New Yorker*, July 18 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/donald-trumps-ghostwriter-tells-all>

²² Patterson, Thomas E, "News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters," *Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*, December 7, 2016, <https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/>

²³ Patterson uses "ad-equivalent dollar exposure of each candidate for eight news outlets" to measure this data.

networks were showing coverage of blank stages, waiting for Trump to speak.²⁴ Instead of giving airtime to any of the many natural disasters, wars, or other conflicts occurring in the world (or even any of the other candidates), the American media had its eyes on one thing only: Trump.

By the time the Iowa Caucus rolled around in February 2016, Trump had gone from an underdog, long-shot candidate to the party favorite, polling four percentage points ahead of Cruz, his closest candidate.²⁵ Trump came in second to Cruz in Iowa, but proceeded to sweep, by wide margins, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada, the all-important early primary states. He then won eight out of the eleven Super Tuesday states, extending his lead in the race. More and more trailing candidates continued to drop out, many of whom endorsed Trump within the following weeks. The invisible primary was all but over by May. After Trump won 53% of the vote in the Indiana primary, Ted Cruz (the last remaining competitor) dropped out of the race, making Trump the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party.

This victory was cemented in July, at the Republican Convention. In a more than 70-minute long speech Trump reiterated the promises of his campaign.²⁶ After a year of support-garnering and confidence-bolstering, his rhetoric in this speech was far more aggressive and radical. He promised to solve the “moment of crisis” that America was experiencing by introducing hard-on-crime legislation and anti-terrorism measures. Most notably, the speech made one of the most explicit references to a “biased” or “corrupt” media. His speech, he claimed, would retaliate against the “corporate spin, the carefully-crafted lies, and the media myths” of the Democratic Party. At the Republican event, he argued, “there will be no lies.” This was the first time that Trump had turned his right-wing rhetoric on the press, attacking them for what he would later label as “fake news.” He also began to craft his establishment conspiracy, which argued that the media was working for the liberal establishment to suppress opposition voices: “I will tell you the plain facts that have been edited out of your nightly news and your morning newspaper.” He centers himself in the crusade against the establishment, saying he operates as the “voice” of the common American, who has been betrayed by their Democratic leaders and the liberal press.

²⁴ Jeva Lange, “Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC all broadcast Trump’s empty podium instead of Clinton’s big speech,” *The Week*, May 26, 2016,

<https://theweek.com/speedreads/626702/fox-news-cnn-msnbc-all-broadcast-trumps-empty-podium-instead-clintons-big-speech>
²⁵https://web.archive.org/web/20160202225618/http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/ia/iowa_republican_presidential_caucus-3194.html

²⁶ C-SPAN, “Donald Trump 2016 Acceptance Speech.” YouTube, July 21, 2016,
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?412402-8/donald-trump-2016-acceptance-speech>

Following the conventions, with only four months left until the general election, Trump's campaign ramped up its operation. At rallies across the country, Trump and his supporters lambasted the "corporate media." At one event in West Palm Beach, Florida, the traveling press corps was subjected to chants of "whores," "press-titues," and "CNN sucks" from the crowd of 15,000 Trump supporters.²⁷ Moments before, the presidential-hopeful had argued that the media is "no longer involved in journalism. They are a political special interest, no different than any lobbyist or other financial entity with an agenda."²⁸ This speech, titled "The Clinton Campaign of Destruction," centered the press system as an agent of "the Washington Establishment," designed to ensure that the liberal government would remain in power:

The establishment and their media enablers wield control over this nation through means that are well known. Anyone who challenges their control is deemed a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe and morally deformed. They will attack you, they will slander you, they will seek to destroy your career and reputation. And they will lie, lie and lie even more.

(For context: the tape of Trump's "grab them by the pussy" comments had been released five days prior.)

The same day as Trump's West Palm Beach rally, the chairman of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued a statement calling Trump an "unprecedented threat to the rights of journalists."²⁹ This was the first time in the organization's history that they had openly condemned the presidential nominee of a major political party. In the statement, CPJ argued that Trump had "consistently betrayed First Amendment values" and "made his opposition to the media a centerpiece of his campaign." They warn of his potential election, arguing that "Any failure of the United States to uphold its own standards emboldens dictators and despots to restrict the media in their own countries. This appears to be of no concern to Trump, who indicated that he has no inclination to challenge governments on press freedom and the treatment of journalists."

As November 8 approached, Trump appeared to have the press wrapped around his pinky. A study done by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government found that Hillary Clinton

²⁷ Ben Schreckinger, "Trump Crowds Rain Hate on the Press." *POLITICO*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/donald-trump-rallies-media-press-229778#ixzz4N2qXvnKA>

²⁸ "October 13, 2016 - Donald J. Trump Speech in West Palm Beach, FL." *P2016: Race for the White House*, Democracy in Action, <https://www.p2016.org/trump/trump101316spfl.html>

²⁹ Sandra Mims Rowe, "CPJ Chairman Says Trump Is Threat to Press Freedom." *Committee to Protect Journalists*, October 13, 2016, <https://cpj.org/2016/10/cpj-chairman-says-trump-is-threat-to-press-freedom/>

was subject to far more attacks in the press than Trump was. In surveying eight major news outlets, they found that coverage of Clinton was 62% negative and 38% positive, while coverage of Trump was 56% negative and 44% positive. So although his claims of the media trying to “rig” the election in her favor, they actually ended up doing the opposite. By making *himself* the story, instead of the issues, he effectively “neutered”³⁰ the press. They couldn’t *not* write about him (with all of his vague promises and extreme rhetoric) but doing so gave him the attention needed to accelerate him across the finish line.

Despite all of their skepticism and doubts, the media (and all of America) woke up on November 9, 2016, to a new world order: Trump had cinched 306 of the 538 electoral votes, easily passing the 270 benchmark to win. At 2:30 am, the president-elect paraded across the stage of the Hilton Hotel in Manhattan, met by the applause and cheers of his supporters. In his victory speech, he extended an olive branch to the defeated Clinton, expressing his “major debt of gratitude for her service to our country.”³¹ He made no specific reference to any of his controversial comments or promises, instead only alluding to “this political stuff,” calling it “nasty and tough.” This “political stuff” would soon prove to only intensify as he took office.

After spending 15 months discussing the corruption and failures of the American government, Donald Trump was about to lead it. On the other hand, the media system, which had spent those 15 months following his every move, was about to face the fact that their endless coverage of him had all but ensured his success and launched him to the forefront of the race. The two actors, who were just beginning a questionable and antagonistic relationship, were about to be confronted with the reality of what had only been theoretical up to this point: what would a president who isn’t quiet about his disdain for the press do once in office?

³⁰ Jack Shafer, “How Trump Took Over the Media By Fighting It,” *POLITICO Magazine*, November 5, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/2016-election-trump-media-takeover-coverage-214419/>

³¹ “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Victory Speech.” *New York Times*, November 9, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/us/politics/trump-speech-transcript.html>

2017

Throughout the first year of his incumbency, Donald Trump spent his time cementing the fact that he was going to be one of the most notorious (for better or for worse) presidents that the United States had ever seen. Amidst a number of controversies regarding his inauguration, potential Russian interference, and his first executive orders, the administration seemed to focus a large portion of its attention on the media. He quickly targeted them as an “enemy of the people,” and dedicated significant effort to decrying their “lies” and “corruption.” The first years of a new president’s time in office is always going to be somewhat hectic and turbulent, but Trump (like everything else) took this to the next level.

Trump’s presidency started with a bang on January 20, 2017. In his inauguration speech,³² the president-elect promised to end the “American carnage” that he argued has “robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.” Viewers across the country were quick to point out the bleak and divisive message of the speech. *TIME* called it “one of the most consequential - or one of the most misleading - speeches in the history of presidential inaugurations.”³³

The next day, Press Secretary Sean Spicer held his very first press briefing in the White House.³⁴ The very first thing he addressed was the fact that “some members of the media were engaged in deliberately false reporting” about the inauguration. He focuses on the “inaccurate” representations of the size of the crowd at the ceremony, claiming that it was the “largest audience to ever witness an inauguration - period - both in person and around the globe.” This claim was quickly debunked by fact-checkers, who pointed out that Spicer had no sources or actual evidence to back him up.

A day later, Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to the President, appeared on Chuck Todd’s *Meet the Press*.³⁵ Todd addressed Spicer’s comments, saying that such “falsehood” reflects poorly on the young administration: “it undermines the credibility of the entire White House press office.” In response, Conway told him to not be “so overly dramatic about it” because Spicer was just providing “alternative facts.” When Todd gave a surprised chortle, Conway used the moment to advance the administration’s conspiracy against the media: “the way that you just

³² “Full text: 2017 Donald Trump inauguration speech transcript,” *POLITICO*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907>

³³ David Von Drehle, “Donald Trump's Unprecedented, Divisive Speech,” *TIME*, January 20, 2017, <https://time.com/4641547/inauguration-2017-donald-trump-america-first/>

³⁴ “Statement by Press Secretary Sean Spicer,” *White House Archives*, January 21, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-sean-spicer/>

³⁵ “Meet the Press 01/22/17,” *NBC News*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-01-22-17-n710491>

laughed at me is actually symbolic of the way... very representative of the way we're treated by the press. I'll just ignore it. I'm bigger than that. I'm a kind and gracious person.”

Conway's comments were met with immediate criticism across the Internet, with political pundits, academics, and journalists alike highlighting the absurdity of such an expression. Conway doubled down on her use of the phrase. “Alternative facts” echoed and developed upon Trump's use of the “truthful hyperbole” - bending or obscuring the facts to fit the desired narrative. This episode was one of the first that revealed the true priorities of the Trump administration. They highly valued their ability to warp, manipulate, or distort the truth so that it would fit their version of events. Though the phrase wasn't initially used in reference to the press, it soon became their approach to dealing with news stories they disliked: they could decry anything that they didn't like as “fake news” without question because they had so degraded the conception of “fact.”

Trump started invoking the phrase “fake news” to label his journalistic enemies in January, especially in regard to stories about Russian interference. On January 11, over a week before his inauguration, he tweeted a barrage of insults targeting the press.³⁶ It started in reference to the election: “I win an election easily, a great ‘movement’ is verified, and crooked opponents try to belittle our victory with FAKE NEWS. A sorry state!” He then quickly turned to the Russia investigation, calling it a “total political witch hunt.”

Using “fake news” to denigrate the press became a hallmark of the Trump administration's approach to the media. Though the traditional definition of the term (which, despite all his claims to the contrary, Trump did not invent³⁷) hardly aligns with the way he used it, he certainly popularized and even revolutionized what the general public associates with “fake news.” His use of the phrase as a blanket term for all “liberal” publications indicates the major crux of Trump's approach: he puts the mainstream media in direct opposition to his own movement, thereby “othering” authentic journalism in the eyes of his supporters and driving them into the arms of fringe outlets that traffic in conspiracy theories and actual fake news.

This antagonism escalated significantly during February, when he launched his “enemy of the people” crusade on his Twitter. This tweet came the day after a press conference³⁸ in which

³⁶ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/tweets-january-11-2017>

³⁷ Mike Wendling, “The (almost) complete history of ‘fake news,’” *BBC News*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-42724320>

³⁸ “Full transcript: Donald Trump's news conference.” *CNN*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/16/politics/donald-trump-news-conference-transcript>

he spent a majority of the time (which was supposed to be dedicated to his new nominee for Secretary of Labor) complaining about the “level of dishonesty” of the press: “much of the media [...] speaks not for the people, but for the special interests and for those profiting off a very, very obviously broken system. The press has become so dishonest that if we don’t talk about it, we are doing a tremendous disservice to the American people.” These statements, coupled with the shocking “enemy of the people” tweet marked a new development in Trump’s press strategy. Where he had previously accused them of being unfair and wrong, he now placed the media in direct opposition to the public. By specifically labeling the press as the “enemy,” he encouraged further animosity and distrust of such a crucial institution.

The tweet sent a firecracker through the journalism community. Using this phrase to malign the press was a dramatic moment in American politics. Never before had a president been so openly challenging of the media and so extreme in his criticism. Furthermore, the invocation of “enemy of the people” alarmed many, who highlighted its “echoes of totalitarianism”³⁹ and pointed out that its usage puts Trump on the same stage as people like Stalin and Mao.

The fact that Trump conducted most of his attacks on the press through Twitter is similarly noteworthy. While remaining somewhat formal and conventional during in-person events and situations, he reserved his vitriol for social media, where he could spew his hatred for the media with little to no direct blowback. The CPJ found that in the first three months of 2017, 17% of Trump’s tweets were critical of the press.⁴⁰ A majority (if not all) of these tweets came in response to coverage of allegations of Russian hacking in the 2016 election. At the time, Trump had nearly 30 million followers. And while he rarely used Twitter to reply to or directly communicate with specific people, the site was an unparalleled platform to instantaneously reach supporters and opponents alike.

Later in the year, Trump issued one of his most explicit threats to the media. It again came on social media. On October 11, he tweeted: “With all the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their License? Bad for country!”⁴¹ An hour later, he followed up, tweeting, “Network news has become so partisan, distorted and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked. Not fair to public!” These

³⁹ Graham-Harrison, “Trump’s phrase and its echoes of totalitarianism.”

⁴⁰Stephanie Sugars, “From Fake News to Enemy of the People: An Anatomy of Trump’s Tweets,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, January 30, 2019, <https://cpj.org/2019/01/trump-twitter-press-fake-news-enemy-people/>

⁴¹ Trump, Donald. Twitter Post. October 11, 2017, 8:55 AM. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/918112884630093825>

tweets suggested that he would ask the Federal Communications Commission to examine its licensing procedures for news networks that are critical of his leadership. He implied that if the coverage of his administration isn't positive enough, he would look to outside actors to deliver some kind of punishment.

This wasn't the first time Trump had indicated his view of the presidency as an all-powerful seat. He had, throughout the campaign and first year of his incumbency, demonstrated his belief that he could use *any* political institution for his own personal gain. For example, when the probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election was going on, Trump was clearly shocked that the FBI, ostensibly an agency under his jurisdiction, would investigate him. Furthermore, he made it clear that he intended for Attorney General Jeff Sessions to act as his personal lawyer.⁴² But for Trump to try to bring the FCC into his war against the media meant that he wanted to take his vendetta into real-world action. Before, his anger towards the press had only been construed through tweets and speeches. Now, however, his threats became real: he could potentially take real action against the press that he saw as "the enemy." Though the threat of licensing challenges ended up being an empty one, it showed how real his hostility was and that it wasn't going anywhere.

As the first year of his presidency drew to a close, Trump exhibited no signs of slowing down. He continued to espouse his vitriolic rhetoric and hatred for the media. He became more comfortable in his role as executive. Now that the claims of Russian interference into the election had died down, he was riding the high of legitimacy and support, defended by his boisterous base of right-wing conservatives. The first year of his incumbency had been an exciting one; it seemed that as his opposition grew louder, so did his base, until polarization was at an all-time high.

⁴² Eli Watkins, "Trump says he wouldn't have picked Sessions if he knew he would recuse himself," *CNN*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/19/politics/donald-trump-interview-jeff-sessions/index.html>

2018

Though 2018 was no less eventful than Trump's first year in office, his war on the media seemed to have settled into a routine. He would say something outlandish about "fake news" and the media would pounce, instantly calling out his hypocrisy, to which Trump would get defensive and take to Twitter to address only his supporters. It was an endless cycle of aggression, threats, and intimidation designed to degrade the public's faith in the media and to elevate his own support. And it unfortunately worked.

Trump continued his threats of examining laws regarding news organizations, this time focusing on libel laws. During a public cabinet meeting on January 10th, he promised to "take a strong look at our country's libel laws, so that when somebody says something that is false and defamatory about someone, that person will have meaningful recourse in our courts."⁴³ This comes after numerous attempts by individuals in the administration took legal action against the publication of investigative and exposé books and articles. This was also at the start of the Stormy Daniels scandal. Many lawyers, including a statement from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), pointed out that the president has little power over such laws. He would have to file a Supreme Court appeal or propose a constitutional amendment, neither of which have much chance of success.

Later in January, Trump held the "Fake News Awards," in which he awarded stories and journalists that he perceived as false or otherwise unfair. On January 17, he tweeted a link to the Republican Party's website which listed his picks for the top ten most misleading stories. The site crashed almost immediately due to heavy traffic, but the final list was later sent out via blog post.⁴⁴ Of the ten awards, CNN was included four times; the New York Times twice, and The Washington Post, ABC News, Newsweek, and Time were each given one award. Taking the top spot was a 2016 op-ed by Paul Krugman in which he argued that economic markets are not likely to recover from Trump's election.⁴⁵ Naming an opinion piece (from before he was even in office) as the fakest news of his incumbency perfectly illustrates why Trump's claims of "fake news" are largely bogus. He calls out Krugman for "lying" in his article, in which he simply expresses his

⁴³ Michael M Grynbaum, "Trump Renews Pledge to 'Take a Strong Look' at Libel Law." *New York Times*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/business/media/trump-libel-laws.html>

⁴⁴ Matt Flegenheimer and Michael M. Grynbaum, "Trump Hands Out 'Fake News Awards,' Sans Red Carpet," *New York Times*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/business/media/fake-news-awards.html>

⁴⁵ Paul Krugman, "What Happened on Election Day," *New York Times*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/opinion/election-night-2016/paul-krugman-the-economic-fallout>

prediction for the economy. Moreover, Krugman later changed his claim and said that Trump's budget cuts could actually help the economy. Almost every single story included on the list had been either redacted or corrected almost immediately after publication.⁴⁶ Trump also included an eleventh, "honorary" award for "Russia collusion" stories, calling them "the greatest hoax perpetrated on the American people."

In August, when confronted by CNN reporter Jim Acosta at a press briefing, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders reinforced Trump's use of "enemy of the people" when it comes to the media.⁴⁷ Acosta directly brought up her avoidance of the question of whether *she*, as press liaison for the White House, thinks that the press is, in fact, the "enemy of the people." She sidestepped, saying "the president has made his position known." In regard to her own opinion, Sanders said only that she found it ironic that "the media attack the president for his rhetoric, when they frequently lower the level of conversation in this country [... they] resort to personal attacks without any content other than to incite anger." This event was particularly important because it illustrated the fact that Trump tends to surround himself in an echo chamber. Anyone that disagrees with him is suddenly on the outs and replaced with a more gullible, like-minded agent. It's no surprise that the White House saw a revolving door of Press Secretaries and Directors of Communications. He had four different Press Secretaries and six different Communications Directors. In the latter position, Sean Spicer held the role twice and Anthony Scaramucci may have set the record for shortest time in political office, being fired by the Presidency just ten days after he assumed the role.

As 2018 entered its final months, the animosity between Trump and the press seemed to increase, causing major blowback to the administration and their attacks. On August 16th, the Senate unanimously passed a resolution that stated that the press is not the enemy of the people and reaffirmed "the vital and indispensable that the free press serves to inform the electorate, uncover the truth, act as a check on the inherent power of the government [...] and otherwise advance the most basic and cherished norms and freedoms of the United States."⁴⁸ The Senate (at that point split 51-49 in favor of the Republicans) also condemned any attacks on the freedom of the press as "an attack on the democratic institutions of the United States" and held that it is the

⁴⁶ Glenn Kessler, "Fact-checking President Trump's 'Fake News Awards,'" *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2018/01/17/fact-checking-president-trumps-fake-news-awards/>

⁴⁷ Bengjy Sarlin, "Sarah Sanders refuses to say press is not 'enemy of the people,'" *NBC News*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/sarah-sanders-won-t-say-if-she-disagrees-trump-s-n897086>

⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Resolution Reaffirming the vital and indispensable role the free press serves*, S Res. 607, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in Senate August 16, 2018, <https://www.schatz.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FPR%2008-15-18.pdf>

“sworn responsibility” of all who swear to uphold the Constitution to defend the first amendment. Though Trump was not directly mentioned in this resolution, and in fact did little to cause him to change his behaviors, it delivered a striking punch to his credibility in his party. At the time, Trump’s politics was hugely dominant in the GOP, so for the Republican Senate to take this stand against his approach to the press was immensely important.

A week after this resolution passed, newspapers across the country launched a coordinated campaign in which they all independently published editorials⁴⁹ criticizing Trump’s attacks on the freedom of the press. On August 15th, the front pages of countless publications were plastered with headlines issuing a directive to the Trump administration: “Journalists are not the enemy of the people.”⁵⁰ Each article argued for the importance of a strong media system as a pillar of democracy. Hundreds of organizations – liberal, conservative, national, local – took part, issuing a united front against Trump. He did not respond, and his attacks only continued to escalate.

2018 was a midterm year, and Trump spent a large part of the last few months on the campaign trail, endorsing only the candidates he viewed as allies. These candidates supported his rhetoric against the press, and in turn Trump supported their election. At a rally in October for the reelection campaign of Greg Gianforte, Trump praised the Montana representative for his attack on a journalist. In May, Gianforte body-slammed a reporter from the Guardian who asked about his position on healthcare. When Gianforte tried to defer the question to his assistant, the reporter continued to ask him, causing Gianforte to wrestle him to the ground, shouting, “I’m sick and tired of you guys. Get the hell out of here.”⁵¹ At the October rally, Trump applauded the attack, saying “anybody that can do a body-slam, that’s my kind of guy.”⁵²

He continued to endorse violence against journalists throughout his incumbency. On October 29th, he tweeted twice about the danger the fake news is doing to the country: “The Fake News is doing everything in their power to blame Republicans, Conservatives and me for the division and hatred that has been going on for so long in our Country. Actually, it is their

⁴⁹ “Journalists are not the enemy #FreePress,” *The Boston Globe*, August 15, 2018, https://apps.bostonglobe.com/opinion/graphics/2018/08/freepress/?p1=HP_special

⁵⁰ “Journalists are no the enemy #FreePress”

⁵¹ Christopher Mele, “Montana Republican Greg Gianforte is Sentenced in Assault on Reporter,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/us/politics/greg-gianforte-sentenced.html>

⁵² Emily Cochrane, “‘That’s My Kind of Guy,’ Trump Says of Republican Lawmaker Who Body-Slammed a Reporter,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/us/politics/trump-greg-gianforte-montana.html>

Fake & Dishonest reporting which is causing problems far greater than they understand!”⁵³ He followed that up with this: “There is great anger in our Country caused in part by inaccurate and even fraudulent reporting of the news. The Fake News Media the true Enemy of the People must stop the open & obvious hostility & report the news accurately & fairly. That will do much to put out the flame... [separate tweet]...of Anger and Outrage and we will then be able to bring all sides together in Peace and Harmony. Fake News Must End!”⁵⁴

The “anger” he is referencing were the previous week’s mail bomb attacks. 15 pipe bombs were discovered at the residences and workplaces of prominent Trump critics, including one sent to CNN’s headquarters in Atlanta. No one was harmed, but Democrats and journalists lived in fear for their lives before the perpetrator, Cesar Altieri Sayoc, was caught. Sayoc had been a vocal Trump supporter; his social media was found plastered with right-wing conspiracy theories and pro-Trump messages.⁵⁵ So for Trump to try to blame the media for this event, without taking any responsibility for the “obvious hostility” was openly contradictory.

This trend continued. Also in October, Washington Post reporter Jamal Khashoggi had gone missing in Saudi Arabia, likely assassinated by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman⁵⁶. The CIA concluded that the Saudi government was at fault for Khashoggi’s death, but the Trump administration refused to act on, or even acknowledge, this development. On November 20th, the White House released a statement that announced their support for bin Salman and reiterating the fact that “our relationship is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”⁵⁷ This refusal to punish (or even recognize) violence against journalists was only the next installment in a long line of Trump reactions. Furthermore, Khashoggi was a vocal critic of bin Salman, killed for his dissent. It’s likely that Trump actually respected the ruler’s removal of opposition through violence. He probably identified with the Crown Prince’s disdain for criticism.

⁵³ Trump, Donald, Twitter Post, October 28, 2018, 7:12 PM,

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1056700376718684160?s=20&t=bl64s5yeRaj -TQuxhW aw>

⁵⁴ Trump, Donald, Twitter Post, October 29, 2018, 7:03 AM,

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1056879122348195841?s=20&t=8JgHeRCiOIC9rsYWlpdHdA>

⁵⁵ Meg O’Connor and Jessica Lipscomb, “Who is Cesar Sayoc? Social Media Posts Show Florida Bomber Cesar Sayoc Held Extremist Viws,” *The Maimi New Times*, October 26, 2018,

<https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/cesar-sayocs-social-media-posts-show-florida-bomber-cesar-sayoc-held-extremist-views-10859874>

⁵⁶ Julian E. Barnes, Eric Schmitt, and David D. Kirkpatrick, “‘Tell Your Boss’: Recording Is Seen to Link Saudi Crown Prince More Strongly to Khashoggi Killing,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/world/middleeast/jamal-khashoggi-killing-saudi-arabia.html>

⁵⁷ Mark Landler, “In Extraordinary Statement, Trump Stands With Saudis Despite Khashoggi Killing,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/world/middleeast/trump-saudi-khashoggi.html>

Why Trump's excuses of violence against journalists is so important is because it marks a significant escalation in his war against the media. In 2016 and 2017, he used Twitter and speeches to denounce the press. But now, he was going beyond simple rhetoric to condone violent attacks against journalists. By turning his back on Khashoggi, and those like him who were the victims of violence, Trump revealed the depth of his disdain for the media and its participants.

Though the United States would never accept the executive's murder of a journalist, Trump found other ways to curtail their influence. In a press conference about the GOP's performance in the midterms, CNN reporter Jim Acosta challenged Trump on his rhetoric. Acosta refused to return the microphone, demanding that Trump answer him. Later, Acosta tweeted that he was denied entrance to the White House.⁵⁸ Press Secretary Sanders confirmed that his press credentials had been revoked, claiming that he had put his hands on a young female intern and that his behavior was "absolutely unacceptable."⁵⁹ Sanders then tweeted a doctored video that makes it appear that Acosta shoves the intern, when in reality he merely turned away when she tried to grab the mic, brushing her arm as he did so.⁶⁰ When met with outcry from the journalism community, the White House doubled down. Two days later, in another press conference, when asked how long he was going to leave Acosta "in the penalty box," Trump threatened to revoke the credentials of other reporters, saying "I haven't made that decision, but it could be others also."⁶¹ This event demonstrated Trump's approach to dealing with challenges. If he doesn't like a question, or a story, he denies the offending journalist access, which is arguably their most important asset when covering the White House. Cutting them off like he did to Jim Acosta showed that he views his position in politics as absolute. Criticism can be easily eradicated by rendering the opposition powerless.

Having endured three years of Trump, America was in no way the same place it was in 2015; in fact, it bore very little resemblance to the country of Trump's predecessors. If Ronald Reagan were to have been dropped into the Oval Office in 2018, he would have had no idea what to do. And that is why Trump's presidency is so interesting: because it in no way replicates or

⁵⁸ Acosta, Jim, Twitter Post, November 7, 2018, 6:46 PM, <https://twitter.com/Acosta/status/1060332691143491584?s=20&t=xhuOqoTfOA9auYstdS2CwO>

⁵⁹ Huckabee-Sanders, Sarah, Twitter Post, November 7, 2018, 6:48 PM <https://twitter.com/PressSec45/status/1060333176252448768>

⁶⁰ Huckabee-Sanders, Sarah, Twitter Post, November 7, 2018, 9:33 PM, <https://twitter.com/PressSec/status/1060374680991883265>

⁶¹ Brian Stetler, "President Trump threatens to pull more reporter's credentials," *CNN*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/09/media/white-house-press-pass-threat>

parallels that of any other president. He took all political norms and threw them out the window, completely rewriting what it means for an American president to relate to the American people.

Trump vs Presidential Precedent

Donald Trump wasn't the first president to have a contentious relationship with the press and he probably won't be the last. In fact, rarely do the sitting president and the media have a positive relationship. However, Trump's antagonism took this to an unprecedented level. He shattered the expectation of how a president should interact with the press by going around them altogether. Aside from Fox News, he spent little to no time cooperating with major news networks, instead relying on social media to address the people. This was entirely made possible by the digital age, which had expanded into near-impossible territory during his time in office. Where presidents previously had to rely on the media to update the public about their positions and activities, this was now being done completely within the administration.

The relationship between the White House and the press has always been a complicated one. Presidents must walk the line between being friendly and being harsh. A president who is overly congenial with the media risks being stabbed in the back. A president who is more aggressive when it comes to the press threatens his approval ratings, considering the press is the main agent of communicating with the public. Presidents of the past have balanced this beam far more gracefully than Trump has. In the 1930s, when Franklin Roosevelt became the first great master of the media by carefully walking this tightrope. He flattered reporters, asked their advice, and invited them to dinner, but also controlled what information was accessible by deciding if it was "on-background, off-the-record, or not-for-attribution."⁶²

Presidents of the mid-20th century focused their efforts on the developing medium of television. John F. Kennedy, with his good looks and charming family, invited cameras into the White House in order to familiarize the public with the executive. Lyndon B. Johnson only increased this intimacy. He had television screens and live news feeds installed in the Oval Office so he could always see what the media was saying.

In the later half of the 20th-century, the U.S. saw a significant turn to the right. Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan brought their conservative politics to the White House and, with it, a new approach to the media. The Nixon administration affixed a "liberal elite" label to the media, calling them a "tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men."⁶³ His presidency became

⁶² Maja, Satara. "The George W. Bush Administration and the News Media: the Unfolding of a Turbulent Relationship." MA thesis. University of Oslo. Spring 2008.

⁶³ Cimaglio, "A Tiny and Closed Fraternity of Privileged Men."

characterized by his relationship with the press, as he labored to keep the facts of Watergate from the prying hands of the Washington Post.

Examining Nixon's approach to the press highlights the fact that Trump wasn't necessarily the first of his kind. The Nixon era originated the perception of the media as a corrupt actor with a liberal bias that acted against the American people, which was then lent legitimacy by the White House. Pat Buchanan, special counsel to the president, argued that "Men who are taking an increasingly adversarial stance toward the social and political values...of the majority of Americans had also achieved monopoly control of the medium of communication."⁶⁴ Although Trump did dramatically escalate the discord among the president and the press, he was acting on a pre-established playbook that was developed in the late 20th century, by the conservative Nixon administration. However, one of the most considerable differences between the two presidents was the communication systems they were operating within. Nixon had no choice but to play nice with the press – the traditional news media was quite literally his only link to the American public. Trump, however, thrived in the digital age, as he could ignore the influence of the press, favoring instead social media platforms to address his supporters, while neglecting any opponents. The communication system of the 1970s had no capability to spread a message the way it does today, so therefore it is difficult to assess how successful Nixon's rhetoric was, especially when compared to the effect of Trump.

In the 1980s, Reagan followed in Nixon's footsteps, preferring to keep the media at a comfortable distance. He employed a "line-of-the-day" strategy, where he would select a daily topic to spread to networks that would dominate the daily news cycle and therefore command the political agenda.⁶⁵ He successfully manipulated the media into hanging onto his every word, without ever extending them similar benefits or perks.

At the start of the digital age, in the 1990s, Bill Clinton faced a changing and unpredictable media system. And it can be argued that he did not react well. He limited the access of the press corps, holding them at a distance. He was hounded during the Monica Lewinsky scandal and his reputation was irreparably damaged, largely at the hands of the media.

As the proliferation of the digital age picked up, and unexpected events took place, the administration of George W. Bush found itself at a loss of how to deal with the media. Following

⁶⁴ Cimaglio, "A Tiny and Closed Fraternity of Privileged Men," 4

⁶⁵ Mark Hertsgaard, "Beloved by the Media," *The Nation*, June 10, 2004, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/beloved-media/>

the 9/11 attacks and public disagreement about culpability, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer said in a press conference that the American people “need to watch what they say, watch what they do.”⁶⁶ This threat, which foreshadows Trump’s later directives, was one of the first times that the White House explicitly said that they would not tolerate such dissent.

During the Bush administration, the 24-hour news cycle began to pick up speed. In the expanded digital age, information was becoming available much faster and the media had to react to that. With a new wealth of channels and bandwidth to broadcast, news organizations had to fill more time, so they turned to commentary, initiating the age of opinion news. Instead of just reporting the bare facts of a situation, all coverage was now supported by a degree of analysis from journalists who rose to almost celebrity status.

Trump’s own predecessor, Barack Obama, was hailed as “the Great Communicator”⁶⁷ for his expert use of social media and the press during the 2008 election. He was known throughout his incumbency for his easy smile in front of the cameras, colored by moments of sober instruction. He was criticized by conservatives for being too exacting on the media when it came to leaks,⁶⁸ and he of course faced bad press during periods of low approval ratings and strife.⁶⁹ But his approach to the new digital age of journalism was considered revolutionary because of the way he employed social media to communicate with his supporters. However, one can’t attribute Obama’s success entirely to his own charisma. What was truly revolutionary about his time in office was not his use of the media, but rather the way the media developed itself. Social media was in its infancy in 2008, so it’s difficult to think, in 2022, that he was somehow wielding Twitter with any mastery, especially not when you consider how Trump would later use it. When examining all eight years he was in office and the legacy he left when followed by Trump, Obama enjoyed a relatively easy and traditional relationship with the media. It would be shocking to see Trump be similarly celebrated for his communication skills.

The current administration, under Joe Biden, has been forced to build upon these legacies while also contending with the fallout from Trump’s. Their approach to the media has been a cautious one. Biden has only communicated with the press through delicately crafted press

⁶⁶ Satara, “The George W. Bush Administration and the News Media: the Unfolding of a Turbulent Relationship”

⁶⁷ Ahmad Raza, “3 Moments Where President Earned the Title of Great Communicator,” *Entrepreneur*, September 3, 2016, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/3-moments-where-president-obama-earned-the-title-of-great/280400>

⁶⁸ Ted Galen Carpenter, “Barack Obama’s War on a Free Press,” *Cato Institute*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/barack-obamas-war-free-press>

⁶⁹ Michael Grunwald, “The Selling of Obama,” *POLITICO Magazine*, June 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/narrative-message-media-president-barack-obama-administration-communications-213830/>

conferences, minimizing the chances of being caught off guard. On social media, he posts only coordinated photo opportunities and brief quotes from his speeches or appearances. Though the press criticizes him for his lack of interaction, the administration clearly understands the shadow Trump left behind and the intricate line they must now walk.

Although the history of press-president relations has been a tumultuous one, the Trump era sent the already precarious relationship plummeting off a cliff. Never before had the media been treated with such outright hostility from such an influential office. Trump not only campaigned himself against the media, he set all of his supporters on the attack too. Reporters were harassed and assaulted at events, threats were sent to their homes and jobs, putting them in an unusual position – the defense. The press is usually on the offense, doing the criticizing while enjoying relative security from attack. Trump threw this out the window. Anyone who expressed dissatisfaction with his performance found themselves on the receiving end of a barrage of hate.

In his four years in office, Trump effectively revolutionized the way the American public viewed the media. Not only did his conservative supporters lose faith in the media system, so did his liberal opponents. When they weren't facing complaints about being unfair to Trump, they were disparaged for going too easy on him. Before he came into office, trust in the media was at 40%. In 2016, following Trump's election and subsequent inauguration, that dropped sharply to 32%, one of the most dramatic drops in the previous two decades. Those numbers continued to drop, and currently dwindle at 26%, illustrating the lasting impact of Trump's rhetoric.⁷⁰ Moreover, in 2018, the United States ranked in the top five of the deadliest places for journalists to operate.⁷¹ Trump's anti-media rhetoric has not only been successful in convincing the public that the media can't be trusted, but has also incentivized them into taking action against this "corrupt" system.

⁷⁰ Brenan, "Americans' Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record"

⁷¹ Laignee Barron, "The U.S. Has Been Named as One of the Deadliest Places in the World for Journalists," *Time*, December 19, 2018, <https://time.com/5483773/us-deadliest-countries-journalists-deaths-2018/>

Historical Contexts of “Enemy of the People”

It’s not hard to analyze where Trump fits within the American tradition of government-press relations. However, the narrative becomes more complex and deeply-rooted when considered within the framework of international history. As Trump waged war on the media, many were quick to point out how his language paralleled that of dictators of yesteryear.

Throughout all of Trump’s many attacks on the press, none characterized his rhetoric as strongly as his take that the “fake news media” is the “enemy of the people.” By defining it as a villainous and dangerous institution, Trump effectively relegated the media to the role of *the other* in American society. The phrase implies that Trump feels responsible for dismantling this threat to democracy and justifies his actions in attacking journalists and their organizations. Furthermore, this designation has deep historical roots in totalitarianism. Dictators have used it to malign their opponents and to instill fear and hatred in their citizens. They use it to rationalize their murderous policies and their continued grasps for control. Trump’s invocation of the insult puts him on the same level as authoritarian regimes that have been defined by their oppression and tyrannical leaders.

“Enemy of the people” was first invoked in 1789, during the French Revolution, when violent insurgents ascribed it to any and all opponents. It became a more formal legal tactic in the 1790s, when the Committee of Public Safety (led by Maximilien Robespierre) implemented the Reign of Terror.⁷² In June 1794, they passed the Law of 22 Prairial, which instituted a Revolutionary Tribunal designed to “punish the enemies of the people.” They defined such enemies as “those who seek to destroy public liberty.”⁷³ This law also brought another new term into the lexicon, one that we have also become familiar with, thanks to Trump: fake news. Those who use “false news,” the law said, did so to “divide and disturb the people” and have sought to “mislead opinion and to prevent the instruction of the people.” The law meant that the Committee was allowed to imprison such enemies and the only penalty was death by the guillotine.

The phrase next became popular over 100 years later, as the Nazi party grew in Germany. Hitler’s Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels wrote in a 1941 essay that “every Jew is a sworn

⁷² Andrew Higgins, “Trump Embraces ‘Enemy of the People,’ a Phrase With a Fraught History,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/26/world/europe/trump-enemy-of-the-people-stalin.html>

⁷³ “The Law of 22 Prairial Year II (10 June 1794),” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/439/>

enemy of the German people.”⁷⁴ Hitler himself used the term in a number of speeches throughout his reign, using it to besmirch those populations he didn’t like – Jews, gays, Romanis, communists, and anyone who helped them.⁷⁵ This context is especially concerning when you look at the people Trump has been affiliating himself with recently. On November 22, 2022, Trump had dinner with rapper Kanye West and political commentator Nick Fuentes.⁷⁶ While this may seem innocent enough at first glance, West had recently gone on an antisemitic rant on Twitter and later discussed his “love” for Hitler and the Nazis.⁷⁷ Fuentes is an avid Holocaust-denier and white-supremacist who has made numerous racist comments expressing his desire for a white, Christian America.⁷⁸⁷⁹ As Trump aligns himself with these self-described “fans” of Hitler, he only succeeds in bringing himself closer to the genocidal dictator.

At the same time when Hitler began using “enemy of the people,” the phrase was gaining traction in Eastern Europe, as the newly-formed Soviet government sought to eradicate any opposition to the revolution. Following the lead of the French Revolutionaries, the Cheka (the secret police) began the Red Terror at the behest of Vladimir Lenin, the head of the Bolshevik party. They targeted all political opponents, with the hope of eliminating and annihilating any dissent. In the 1950s-1970s, China’s Chairman Mao Zedong followed in Lenin’s footsteps, using “enemy of the people” to similarly target his enemies as he “crashed through several deadly ideological campaigns.”⁸⁰

The dictator most linked to “enemy of the people” is Joseph Stalin, who ascribed the phrase haphazardly to every single entity who spoke out against him. To be labeled as such, in Stalin’s Soviet Union, was a “death sentence, with execution typically coming only after an abject and wholly fictional confession.”⁸¹ Where Trump and Stalin diverge is when it comes to

⁷⁴Joseph Goebbels, “The Jews are Guilty!” *German Propaganda Archive*, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb1.htm>

⁷⁵Amanda Erikson, “Trump called the news media an ‘enemy of the people.’ Here’s the history of the term,” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/18/trump-called-the-news-media-an-enemy-of-the-american-people-heres-a-history-of-the-term/>

⁷⁶ Marc Caputo, “The inside story of Trump’s explosive dinner with Ye and Nick Fuentes,” *NBC News*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/story-trumps-explosive-dinner-ye-nick-fuentes-rcna59010>

⁷⁷Anthony Adragna and Olivia Olander, “Virulently antisemitic comments by Kanye West spark new GOP criticism,” *POLITICO*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/12/01/ye-antisemitism-republicans-hitler-00071695>

⁷⁸ “Nick Fuentes,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/nick-fuentes>

⁷⁹ “Nicholas J. Fuentes: Five Things to Know,” *ADL*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/nicholas-j-fuentes-five-things-know>

⁸⁰ Graham-Harrison, “Trump’s phrase and its echoes of totalitarianism.”

⁸¹Will Englund, “Why Trump’s ‘enemy of the people’ blunder can’t be compared to Stalin’s savage rule,” *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2018,

treatment of the media. Where Trump maligns and bemoans it, Stalin used it entirely to his benefit. He was able to gain absolute control over the press, using it to publish his own propaganda, effectively gaslighting the entire nation. It can be argued that Trump has attempted to do the same. His regular appearances on Fox News and his active use of social media can be paralleled to Stalin's manipulation of the media, to a lesser degree.

Following Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev worked tirelessly to dismantle his predecessor's "cult of the individual." In his famous February 1956 to the Communist Party's inner circle, he said that Stalin's use of "enemy of the people" made productive debate entirely impossible:

This term automatically made it unnecessary that the ideological errors of a man or men engaged in controversy be proven. It made possible the use of the cruelest repression, violating all norms of revolutionary legality, against anyone who in any way disagreed with Stalin [...] The concept of 'enemy of the people' actually eliminated the possibility of any kind of ideological fight or the making of one's views known on this or that issue.⁸²

For decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the phrase became taboo in Russia. To use it unironically was to equate oneself with Stalin and therefore the bygone times of repression and genocide. It unfortunately re-entered the public sphere when it became an international discussion following Trump's stream of tweets.

Not only does Trump's use of "enemy of the people" link him with authoritarian regimes, so does his general rhetoric. His positioning himself as a defender of the common man, willing to take on the "liberal elite establishment" puts him in the category of a populist leader. His appeal to the lower, uneducated whites of the country and his boasts of being the only person to solve the problems of the country align him perfectly with the "charismatic" ruler that defines populism. And while such promises aren't necessarily a bad thing, populist rule is definitively linked to a decline in democracy.⁸³ Moreover, a core objective of many populist governments is the manipulation of the media and the reduction of dissent in order to control their image. Paul Kenny argues that "populist rule is associated with a decline in most measures of media freedom

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/01/16/why-trumps-enemy-of-the-people-bluster-cant-be-compared-to-stalins-rule/>

⁸² Nikita Khrushchev, "The Cult of the Individual," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/26/greatspeeches1>

⁸³ Jordan Kyle and Yascha Mounk, "The Populist Harm to Democracy: An Empirical Assessment," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, December 26, 2018, <https://institute.global/policy/populist-harm-democracy-empirical-assessment>

relative to programmatic party rule.”⁸⁴ He lists censorship, harassment of journalists, media bias against opposition, and threats to freedom of expression as certain aspects that all increase when a populist government is in power.

All of Trump’s actions regarding the media during his time in office link his incumbency to regime types that are characterized by their oppression and anti-democracy. As America faces elevated levels of democratic backsliding,⁸⁵ the alignment between Trump and authoritarianism is especially concerning. The media plays a crucial role in the sustainment of democracy and freedom and having the most influential political actor in the country threatening that position casts a dark shadow on the future of stability in the US.

⁸⁴ Kenny, “‘The Enemy of the People’: Populists and Press Freedom”

⁸⁵ Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, “America’s Democratic Backsliding is Not Universal,” *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/18/united-states-democracy-backsliding-world-trump-populism-russia-china/>

Freedom of Press in American Democracy

The Framers of the Constitution found a strong and unrestricted journalism system so paramount to American democracy that they made it the very first civil liberty included in the Bill of Rights. The freedom of speech, expression, and press from government interference has operated as the backbone of American society since its institution in 1789. Following years of repression and tyranny under the British monarchy, American revolutionaries relied upon a number of publications as a way to communicate their message across the colonies. Newspapers and pamphlets were distributed among the people, and effectively “fanned the flames of rebellion, sustained loyalty to the cause and ultimately aided in the outcome.”⁸⁶ The Framers recognized the fact that the creation of America was absolutely shaped and encouraged by an independent press, and made that guarantee integral to the country’s understanding of expression. In his first draft of the Bill of Rights, James Madison phrased the right to freedom of the press as such: “The people shall not be deprived or abridged of their right to speak, to write, or to publish their sentiments; and the freedom of the press, as one of the great bulwarks of liberty, shall be inviolable.”⁸⁷

Freedom of speech and expression has been an intrinsic and essential facet of American culture and values. For every citizen to have the right to express their opinions in whatever form they choose has become so basic to our understanding of freedom that we barely question the fact that we have this right in the first place. As the digital age developed, and the realm of journalism expanded, the media elevated to a position of respectability within American society. An average citizen can, traditionally, trust most mainstream news organizations to reliably report the news. Having an active and thriving media system is extremely important in invigorating the public to become politically engaged and intrigued.

Freedom of the press is just as important, if not more so, when it comes to politics. The media has become known as “the fourth estate” in society, referring to the role journalism plays in the dissemination of information and impact on public opinion. This concept derives from a 1840 Thomas Carlyle book, in which he addresses Edmund Burke’s depiction of the French Revolution: “Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament [the nobility, clergy, and

⁸⁶ Todd Andrik, “Reporting the Revolutionary War: An Interview with Todd Andrik,” *Mount Vernon*, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/reporting-the-revolutionary-war-an-interview-with-todd-andrik/>

⁸⁷ “Bill of Rights: House of Representatives, Amendments to the Constitution,” *The University of Chicago Press*, accessed December 4, 2022, https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/bill_of_rightss11.html

commoners]; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all."⁸⁸ It has since come to mean that the press operates as a separate entity in society. They are not known for their economic or social class, but operate in a class on their own. Journalists are not individuals operating in the social hierarchy, they are a force on their own, represented by publications and networks. Sometimes called "the fourth power," the label for the press can also be connected to their place in politics. This refers to the branches of government in a democracy – executive, judicial, and legislative – describing the press as the fourth arm of government.

Examining the press through this lens of politics, it is easy to understand why the media has become such a critical part of the government process. Though they have no explicit duties laid out in the Constitution, as the other branches do, they perform a number of indispensable functions. Firstly, they operate as a direct line of communication between elected officials and the people. The public relies on journalists being able to go places and do things the average American can't do. Reporters are given access to important meetings, events, information, etc that they have a responsibility to then communicate to the people. Politicians can use the media to show their constituents the work they're doing while the public uses the media to get that glimpse into the political process.

This extends into the second job of the media. While the simple broadcasting of current events is crucial, journalists also play a critical role in helping the public understand complex issues. When faced with the bald facts of a situation, the average American will not know what to do with the information. Reporters are thus responsible for contextualizing and synthesizing the day's news so that people can form opinions on it. The way a journalist frames an issue goes a long way in formulating public opinion. Editorial articles and opinion pieces therefore provide analyses and criticism of a politician's activities and decisions and can do even more to help the public understand the nuances and complexities of policy-making.

Such judgments and assessments of political activity are what make up one of the most necessary roles of journalism. While there are institutional check and balances of power within the three branches of government, journalists also do a lot to ensure that no politician goes unchecked. By having a finger on the pulse of public opinion, the media can control a fair amount of a politician's power. Should a government official make a mistake or misstep, the

⁸⁸ "The Objectives of Journalism," *Journalism in the Digital Age*, accessed December 4, 2022, https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010-11/Journalism/index1766.html?page_id=21

press highlights and explains this action to the people and can do significant damage to the politician's reputation. The media acts as a whistleblower for scandals, coverups, and wrongdoings. While this might sound threatening or negative, it is a very important role. Without the press's watchful eye, politicians can run rampant and their constituents would never know about it. The media therefore is paramount in exposing the political process to the people so that they can make informed decisions about their elected officials. Which is probably why Trump doesn't like them very much.

Conclusion

Trump's presidency broke with tradition in a number of ways, but none as dramatic as the way he treated the press. A president is supposed to work *with* the media, using them as a conduit to communicate with the American people. Trump neglected this route entirely, circumventing the media and relying entirely on social media to address his supporters. He showed no desire to collaborate with his political opponents, focusing instead on motivating his right-wing base. This rejection of unity, so central to American culture, has never been so prominent coming from the most influential person in the nation. Political decorum and a balance of powers, each an integral part of the government process, was being thrown out the window. The media is one of the most fundamental and generally recognized actors that lend validity to these aspects. As Trump limited their power and repudiated their legitimacy, the press found themselves in a confusing and unpredictable position.

The current White House administration, under Joe Biden, has done significant work to try and mend the relationship between the press and the presidency. Press Secretaries Jen Psaki and Karine Jean-Pierre have held almost daily televised press briefings, which had not happened for months during the end of the Trump administration. Additionally, the differences between Trump and Biden's approach to social media has been striking. Biden only posts carefully scripted and planned posts, contrasting Trump's streams of consciousness, leading to less aggressive outbursts and interactions.

However, the Biden administration still faces an uphill battle when it comes to the press. The president has held far fewer press conferences and has had far less direct interactions with journalists. The CPJ argues that, while treatment of the media has been a "night and day" difference between Biden and Trump, the new president could be doing far more to restore the relationship between the executive and the press.⁸⁹ Following the abuse they faced from the Trump administration, it is understandable that the media is on edge, but that has resulted in Biden appearing afraid to interact with them. The same is true of Biden's social media approach. Where Trump made frequent use of Twitter's thread feature to post stream-of-consciousness tirades, Biden has only posted carefully-checked, staged, and pre-planned pictures and pleasantries. Trump's legacy has been an irreparable blow to the strength of press-president relations. As Biden and Trump prepare to meet once again in the 2024 election, it will be

⁸⁹ "'Night and day': The Biden administration and the press," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, January 13, 2022, <https://cpj.org/reports/2022/01/night-and-day-the-biden-administration-and-the-press/#whitehouse>

fascinating to watch them build their media strategies and examine the way they develop their relationship with journalists (as friends or foes).

As the American political climate continues to deal with the ramifications of Trump's presidency and his impact on Conservatism, the media system is making similar alterations. As the divergence between the media and the executive branch deepens, it is clear that a reconsideration of what the press means to the presidency is required. Throughout history, the two institutions have been intricately intertwined, with the President relying on journalism to communicate with the people. Trump has intentionally sidestepped this. Politicians can now say whatever they want to reporters because they can go on social media and back up their claims and opinions with "alternative facts" and there is little to no accountability for what they say. Based on the historical trajectory of similar governments and leaders, it is clear that Trump's shadow will haunt future presidents' attitude towards the press, especially when considering the actively changing landscape of social media and journalism.

A strong and independent media, that fears no threats of retribution, is an integral asset of a functioning democracy. As Martin Kalb argues, "Lose one, and you lose the other. A free press guarantees a free society."⁹⁰ For a person of Donald Trump's stature to challenge, then actively threaten the role that the press plays in American politics represents a significant hazard to journalism's place in society. And the worst part is, Trump's rhetoric worked. Faith in the media has never been lower, indicating the people aren't just questioning the validity of their reporting, but that they actually think of the media as their "enemy," a sentiment that has been more than encouraged by the former president. As Trump seeks another term in office, one can only fear what could happen should he win.

⁹⁰ Kalb, *Enemy of the People*, 8

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