

Without a free press, Trump gets a free pass

For a democracy to function, leaders cannot brand the press as fake simply because they do not like what is being published



By [Oscar Bentley](#), Editor (2018)

Tuesday 7 March 2017



Image: Gage Skidmore

The media is “the enemy of the American people”, President Donald J Trump tweeted on Friday 17 February, after just under a month in office. A week later, the White House excluded major news outlets such as The Guardian, The New York Times, Politico, and the BBC from an informal “gaggle” briefing with Press Secretary Sean Spicer. Even before all this, on Thursday 16 February, the President held an impromptu hour-plus long press conference. This was initially to announce his pick for Labor Secretary, but it was spent attacking the media, calling it dishonest, out of control, and a tremendous disservice to America.

So, if you weren’t already aware, The Donald doesn’t really like the media. Actually, that’s not quite true. Some of the media – conservative outlets such as Breitbart, One America News, and Fox News – he is a fan of, and unsurprisingly these outlets number among those invited to the “gaggle”. Others, not so much. The (failing, apparently) New York Times, CNN, ABC, CBS, are all ‘FAKE NEWS’ (capitalised in print, if verbalised shouted with vigour), which is surely the worst insult hurled at a journalist. Trump isn’t just implying that reporting is poor or heavily biased, but is declaring that stories are maliciously created untruths simply to spite him.

This is a huge problem. Trump can’t continue to declare every outlet to negatively report on him fake. For one thing, it’s not sustainable as he’ll eventually run out of outlets; even Fox News is beginning to turn on

him now. Just because the media is reporting stories he doesn't like, that doesn't mean his response can be not only to call the media untrue or question its legitimacy, but to declare it as an enemy. Surely the White House themselves are a bigger source of fake news. Bowling Green massacre anybody?

Rather than combating negative perceptions by changing policy, Trump instead just pretends negative perceptions that the press reports just aren't true. He's declared reporting of negative polls to be fake; his Press Secretary blasted the press for "under reporting" inauguration crowd sizes despite the visual evidence; his counsellor Kellyanne Conway even asked why journalists who "talked smack" about the President not being fired. This is dangerous.

I'm all for regulation of journalistic ethics and standards, and ensuring that comment does not descend into hate speech, but without a free press a democracy just simply isn't that. Democracies need a free press in the same way they need opposition: to hold the government accountable. The executive perusing a monopoly on the press by purging oppositional reporting is a sinister step towards dictatorship. The public relies on the press to stay informed through reporting that is as objective as possible, from outlets such as the BBC (a "beauty", and not in a good way, according to Trump).

And while the press may not be doing the best job at keeping the electorate objectively informed, with devil incarnate Rupert Murdoch on the scene, freedom for the press to report facts is too vital a thing for the President to not only disregard, but to threaten with annihilation.



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