

CULTURE

IS JOURNALISM READY?

The press has repeatedly fallen into Donald Trump's traps. A second term could render it irrelevant.

By George Packer

Matt Huynh

Editor's Note: This article is part of "[If Trump Wins](#)," a project considering what Donald Trump might do if reelected in 2024.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN Donald Trump and the news media has always been a little disingenuous, like a pair of fighters trading insults and throwing air punches at a weigh-in. The hostility is real, but the performance benefits both sides.

Trump claims to despise the journalists who cover him, calling them "the enemy of the American people," suing them, and threatening unspecified reprisals for their transgressions against him. But his narcissism craves their constant attention, and as president he gave reporters far more access than his successor has, taking their late-night phone calls, then framing their cover stories in gold. Media organizations, including this one, have warned for years that Trump is a danger to the democracy that makes journalism possible, and that a vigorous press is essential to a free society. At the same time, the media became dependent on his vile words and scandalous deeds for their financial health, squeezing droplets of news from his every tweet even if the public had nothing to learn. Leslie Moonves, the disgraced former TV-network chair, said of Trump's first candidacy: "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

As soon as Trump left office, readers and viewers disappeared—within a month, *The Washington Post* lost a quarter of its unique visitors, and CNN lost 45 percent of its prime-time audience. From exile, Trump summoned one reporter after another to Mar-a-Lago and gave interviews

for books that both sides knew would attack his presidency and become best sellers. When he returned as a presidential candidate and criminal defendant, cable-news-network ratings climbed again.

It's impossible not to feel that Trump has gotten the better of this codependent clench. His endless stream of grievance and invective eroded his supporters' trust in the news media to the point where 58 percent of Republicans now say they have none. If half the country believes most of what the mainstream media report and the other half thinks it's mostly lies, this isn't a partial win for journalists, whose purpose isn't to strengthen the opposition but to give the public information it needs to exercise democratic power. Trump's purpose is to destroy the very notion of objective truth. The match was rigged in his favor, and being compelled to fight it has not been good for journalism.

Though reporters did excellent work covering Trump's presidency, his effect was to make the American media a little more like him: solipsistic (foreign reporting nearly disappeared), divisive, and self-righteous. Trump corrupts everyone who gets near him—spouses, children, followers, accomplices, flunkies. He corrupts the press by obsessing it; by flooding it with so much shit that news becomes almost indistinguishable from fluff and lies; by baiting it into abandoning independence for activism; by demoralizing it with the recognition that much of the public doesn't care.

TRUMP WANTS POWER AGAIN for two reasons, and a policy agenda isn't one of them: to remove the humiliating stain of defeat, including the prospect of prison, and to exact revenge on his enemies. In a speech in Michigan last June, he named them one by one and promised to destroy them all: “the deep state”; “the warmongers”; “the globalists”; “the communists, Marxists, and fascists”; “the sick political class that hates our country”; and finally—he pointed at reporters in the room—“the fake-news media.”

The first time around, Trump's attempts to use presidential power against the media were desultory. He was accused of trying to deny a large Pentagon contract to Amazon in order to damage Jeff Bezos, the owner of the *Post*. To hurt CNN, he pushed his Justice Department to block the merger of AT&T and Time Warner, which owned the network. He talked about weakening journalists' legal protections and even having them arrested. He created a threatening atmosphere by singling out individuals and organizations. All of it put the media under constant pressure and made their work more difficult. None of it was very effective.

Last April, Trump's campaign website posted a video on deregulation in which the candidate vowed to bring the Federal Communications Commission "back under presidential authority as the Constitution demands"—giving himself direct control over broadcast licenses and other regulatory matters. It's hard to imagine that at the start of his presidency, he knew what the initials *FCC* stood for. "One general nightmare is he will be more competent at undermining a free press in a second term, either through advisers or lessons learned," John Langford, a counsel at Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to combatting authoritarianism, told me.

"People who actually believe are going to do a better job," a conservative who served in the Trump administration and is now involved in efforts by the Heritage Foundation to build a loyal cadre of political appointees for a second term told me. In its approach to the media, he said, the biggest mistake of Trump's presidency was appointing officials who wanted to be liked by journalists. Second-term hires would welcome being the subject of a hit piece in *Politico*.

A second Trump White House would give important policy scoops to friendly publications such as *The Federalist* and *The Washington Free Beacon* rather than to supposedly unfair outlets like *The New York Times*, which would report them unfavorably. "The White House press corps

could be shaken up,” the former Trump official said, explaining that the administration’s director of communications could say to the White House press corps, “I know you have your rules, but we’re not going to play by those rules. Give these people”—administration allies—“press credentials, or we’ll have briefings with only people we invite, in a different room.”

It’s not hard to imagine Trump breaking laws to go after journalists, seeking embarrassing personal information on his most effective pursuers. At the start of his term, he floated to James Comey, the FBI director, the possibility of jailing journalists who published classified information. Comey laughed off the idea; with fanatic loyalists in the bureau, a second-term Trump could carry it out. In a 900-page manual on how to bring the administrative state under the president’s complete control, Heritage advises that “the Department of Justice should use all of the tools at its disposal to investigate leaks,” including seizing reporters’ email and phone records, a practice that Attorney General Merrick Garland ruled out in 2021. The conservative supermajority on the Supreme Court might be less likely to defend press freedom during a second Trump term than the Court has been in the past. Joel Simon, the founding director of the Journalism Protection Initiative at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, has urged colleagues to prepare, practically and psychologically, for legal assaults, economic pressure, “a toxic online environment,” and dangerous streets with violence from both police and demonstrators.

President Richard Nixon put his critics in the press on an enemies list, illegally wiretapped and surveilled them, discussed siccing his IRS on them. Nixon’s henchmen even proposed various ways to kill the columnist Jack Anderson (they postponed the plot, instead bugging the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate, and never got back to it). Trump doesn’t need to have journalists poisoned. He doesn’t even need to have them investigated. His most powerful weapon is his ability to convince large numbers of Americans that the press has no particular

value for democracy and deserves no special protection; that it's just another racket of corrupt, self-serving elites; that its hard-won exposés and running fact-checks are all fake news; that the evidence of the senses can be vaporized by a Truth Social post. His epistemological nihilism drives journalists half-mad, unable to counter him or escape his hall of mirrors.

THE WORST FATE for the press in a second Trump term would be neither legal jeopardy nor financial ruin. It would be irrelevance.

Other democracies have reached this point. “Political leaders discredit the press and plant in the minds of the public that they’re just another political actor,” Simon told me. “The public doesn’t see attacks on the press as threats to their own interests, and that opens the door to consolidation of power.” Szabolcs Panyi, an investigative journalist in Budapest, worries that Americans haven’t paid enough attention to the decline of freedom in other countries to prevent it from happening here. “The American public doesn’t recognize that the same could happen to them,” he told me. “They’re not even aware that democracies can be turned in just a matter of years—two election cycles—into hybrid regimes.”

Starting in 2014, Hungary’s leading media companies were acquired by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s cronies and turned into regime mouthpieces or shut down. (For seven months in 2019, Panyi’s phone was surveilled.) Journalists haven’t disappeared into Hungarian prisons. Orbán has crushed independent media with a combination of economic pressure, Kremlin-inspired disinformation, and the “fake news” label. “They killed the news outlets—they don’t have to kill the journalists,” Panyi said. But the key to Orbán’s success has been public opinion. As he neutralized the press, Hungarian voters gave him four election victories in a row. Power creates more power; once the process starts, it can be unstoppable. “Probably the job that we journalists were doing

was not good enough,” Panyi said, “or we didn’t make enough efforts to describe to our readers why it’s important what we’re doing.”

Sheila Coronel, an acclaimed Philippine journalist and a professor at Columbia Journalism School, began her career on the eve of the “People Power” revolt that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. “We took our freedom for granted,” she told me. “Looking back, maybe we weren’t such good caretakers of that freedom to really serve the public good, as opposed to building profitable media businesses.” As the country’s elected leaders became more corrupt, Coronel said, media companies made fortunes from “entertainment and sensationalism, feeding off political scandals without looking at the underlying causes.”

When the demagogic President Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016, he was able to “emasculate” the media, Coronel said. His successor, Bongbong Marcos, the dictator’s son, feeds the public an information diet of “sheer inanity,” undiluted by a critical press. “It’s death by cotton candy.” Like Panyi, Coronel watched her profession lose popular trust, partly through state pressure, partly through its own isolation and carelessness. “We contributed to the erosion of the allure and attraction of democracy,” she said.

How can the American media prevent their own irrelevance in a second Trump term? First, by getting rid of a few illusions. The press can do little, if anything, to drain the sea of disinformation in which Americans are drowning. *The Washington Post’s* running tally of Trump’s false statements in office—there were 30,573, or about 21 a day—was a worthy project, but did the recording of all those lies change a single mind? Political beliefs are rarely based on demonstrable facts. Information of any kind only reinforces voters’ views and deepens polarization. The *Post* and other outlets should continue to hold public figures accountable for their lies, but none of us should expect it to make much difference.

Nor will there be any Watergate for Trump. Nixon was brought down by the work of aggressive journalists, along with a federal judge, a unanimous Supreme Court, and a bipartisan Congress—by strong democratic institutions. But they worked only because Americans still believed in them—because two-thirds of the public, which had just given Nixon a landslide victory, could not abide a criminal in office. That was a different public. Today, almost half the country is prepared to reelect Trump in spite of his two impeachments and 91 criminal charges. What scandal could investigative reporters possibly uncover that would reduce Trump’s support to Nixon’s 24 percent?

IN A SECOND TRUMP PRESIDENCY, the press would be torn between what’s good for its narrow interests and what’s good for its broader mission of “public interest or public service,” in Joel Simon’s words—that is, democracy. For 25 years, journalists have been scrambling to survive the damage done to their business model by the internet. Venerable outlets perish or self-mutilate; newer ones come and go in a flash; mountains of bait are thrown into the water to see what rises to the surface, producing trillions of bits of data to be collected and examined for financial clues. This exhausting effort consumes so much time and talent that it’s difficult to face the obvious truth: The for-profit model of journalism shows signs of being broken.

And here lies the dilemma: that model works better with Trump. Covering him brought CNN, the *Times*, the *Post*, *The Atlantic*, and other outlets larger audiences. But much of that profitable coverage takes place in a glass booth that seals out a hostile or indifferent public. Claiming a higher purpose, the media flood the zone with their own shit—talking heads, hot takes, angry jeremiads—to stay afloat, and in doing so, they trade long-term credibility for short-term gain. Social-media platforms, far richer and more powerful than the mainstream press, don’t even have to feign a higher purpose. “This is the existential question that we have to ask ourselves,” Simon told me: Carry out a public service at the risk of

economic ruin, or give in to incentives to cover Trump in ways that serve him better than the public?

Panyi, the Hungarian journalist, who has lived through what might await us here, spoke of “the tragedy of real journalism,” by which he meant the imperative to “stick to the good old rules of free, fair journalism even if we’re taking the punches and it’s a battle we’re about to lose.” That would be my hope for the press in a second Trump term: to investigate his presidency relentlessly, burrowing deep into every obscure corner where power might be abused, for the record and the future if not for now, and leave the cotton candy aside. Journalists can give the public what it needs to govern itself, but they can’t save democracy. That will be up to the American people.

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