



The Trump Administration and the Media:

Attacks on press credibility endanger US democracy and global press freedom

By Leonard Downie Jr. with research by Stephanie Sugars



A special report of the Committee to Protect Journalists

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About this report

The Trump administration has stepped up prosecutions of news sources, interfered in the business of media owners, harassed journalists crossing U.S. borders, and empowered foreign leaders to restrict their own media. But Trump's most effective ploy has been to destroy the credibility of the press, dangerously undermining truth and consensus even as the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to kill tens of thousands of Americans. **A special report of the Committee to Protect Journalists.**

This report was authored by Leonard Downie Jr., the Weil Family Professor of Journalism at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Downie is the former executive editor of *The Washington Post* and the author of seven books, including a forthcoming memoir, "All About the Story." He wrote the 2013 CPJ special report, "[The Obama Administration and the Press.](#)"

Stephanie Sugars, a reporter for the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, researched this report. She is a graduate of NYU's Global and Joint Program Studies program in journalism and international relations, and has previously worked at the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Post-Conflict Research Center. Her freelance reporting has been published by Al-Jazeera, Open Democracy, Muftah, Civic Ideas, and Balkan Diskurs.

Cover photo: President Donald Trump speaks to members of the media on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, on February 7, 2020, before boarding Marine One for Andrews Air Force Base. (AP/Patrick Semansky)

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When President Donald J. Trump initially minimized the danger of the COVID-19 virus in the first two months of 2020, he attacked news media reporting about the growing threat and his administration's slow response. "Low Ratings Fake News MSDNC (Comcast) & @CNN are doing everything possible to make the Caronavirus look as bad as possible, including panicking markets, if possible," the president [tweeted](#) on February 26, implying that MSNBC is allied with the Democratic Party.

On March 8, after more press reports about shortcomings in the administration's response, Trump tweeted, "The Fake News Media is doing everything possible to make us look bad. Sad!" The next day, after the Dow Jones Index lost 2,014 points, or 7.79 percent, of its value, the president also blamed it on "fake news." In a March 18 tweet, Trump insisted, "I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously" and "the Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false." At contentious White House COVID-19 press briefings on [March 19](#) and [20](#), he again angrily attacked the news media, saying that "the press is very dishonest" in its reporting on his handling of the crisis and that journalists "truly do hurt our country."

It was all typical of the Trump presidency's unprecedented hostility toward the press. Trump has habitually attacked the news media in rallies, responses to reporters' questions, and many hundreds of tweets. He has repeatedly called the press "fake news," "the enemy of the people," "dishonest," "corrupt," "low life reporters," "bad people," "human scum" and "some of the worst human beings you'll ever meet." As Trump [told Leslie Stahl of CBS News](#) shortly after he was elected president in 2016, he has been trying to destroy the credibility of the news media's reporting about him.

"I believe that President Trump is engaged in the most direct sustained assault on freedom of the press in our history," [Fox News anchor Chris Wallace said](#) at a Society of Professional Journalists press freedom event in Washington on December 11, 2019. "He has done everything he can to undercut the media, to try and delegitimize us, and I think his purpose is clear: to raise doubts, when we report critically about him and his administration, that

we can be trusted."

In response to Trump's steady stream of verbal attacks, members of the press were regularly booed at Trump rallies, and reporters named in his tweets have been repeatedly harassed online. There also have been credible threats to news organizations, with CNN frequently targeted.

The president's press secretaries, other White House aides and administration officials, along with Trump's allies in Congress also repeatedly attacked the press, often parroting the president's language. Along with Trump's thousands of documented false statements and his promotion of discredited conspiracy theories, the administration's attacks on the credibility of the news media have dangerously undermined truth and consensus in a deeply divided country.

"We now have some of the best news organizations that the world has known," said Paul Steiger, former editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, founder of the ProPublica non-profit news organization, and former chair of Committee to Protect Journalists' board of directors. "But Trump has created a climate in which the best news, most fact-checked news is not being believed by many people."

The Trump administration has threatened the work of the American press in other ways. The Justice Department has stepped up investigations and prosecutions of journalists' sources of classified government information, while Trump and his attorneys general [have refused to rule out](#) prosecuting reporters themselves. The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency has questioned journalists at border posts, searched their electronic devices, and monitored their movements in a secret database.

Trump himself has called for boycotts of news organizations and changes in libel law to punish the press. His re-election campaign sued *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN for libel for opinions expressed by their columnists and contributors. He tried unsuccessfully to take away White House press credentials from journalists and news organizations whose questions and stories he did not like. He encouraged federal government interference in the businesses of the owners of CNN, the



Trump speaks during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in the Brady Briefing Room at the White House on March 25, 2020, in Washington. Trump called journalists “very dishonest” for their reporting on the health crisis. (AFP/Mandel Ngan)

traditional broadcast networks, and *The Washington Post*.

As threatening as all of that has been for the news media, Trump’s attacks have had the most success in eroding the credibility of the American press among his many millions of supporters. A major [Pew Research Center study](#) in late 2019 showed that a plurality of Republicans consistently distrusted most of the news media (except for Trump-supporting media like Fox News), while pluralities of Democrats tended to trust them. In a [Pew survey conducted in mid-March](#), 62% of respondents said the news media had exaggerated the risks from the COVID-19 virus.

Some expert observers fear an existential threat to American freedom of the press. “Trump disrespects the press as a core democratic institution,” University of Utah media law professor Ronnell Anderson Jones told me. She said that American news media are dependent on citizens’ acceptance of its First Amendment role. If that erodes, she warned, “freedom of the press is in peril.”

“President Trump’s attacks on the press are an assault

on the validity of the enterprise itself,” Frank Sesno, a former CNN cable news anchor who directs George Washington University’s School of Media and Public Affairs, said in an interview for this report. “It is an Orwellian barrage of dehumanizing language about the purpose of the job, people who do the job and the organizations that employ them. It is a continuing assault on a free press – and on the public’s right to know and the public’s understanding of the role of the press in a democracy.”

Trump’s attacks also appear to have empowered autocratic foreign leaders to discredit and restrict the press in their own countries. “When the president calls the press the enemy of the people, he encourages every autocrat, every dictator who wants to shut down freedom of the press. They’re validated,” said Sesno, who works with news media in Eastern European countries. “It reverberates around the world.”

The president has personally orchestrated and dominated media information about his administration through

tens of thousands of tweets and dozens of encounters with the press in which he chooses the reporters and the questions to which he will respond. By the count of *The Washington Post's* [Fact Checker](#) team, Trump had made [16,241 false or misleading claims](#) in all those communications in his first three years in office.

At the same time, until the COVID-19 crisis, the Trump administration restricted most on-the-record access to White House and administration officials other than the president. Traditional daily briefings for the press disappeared for many months at a time at the White House and the State and Defense departments, and officials often refused to speak on the record in interviews. Only during the COVID-19 pandemic were daily on the record briefings held for the news media, led by Trump and Vice President Mike Pence.

In response, reporters developed confidential sources of information inside the White House and government departments for revelatory stories. Trump then called those stories “fake news” and claimed that their “anonymous sources” did not exist. When Trump attacked those stories and the reporters who wrote them, his supporters often targeted the journalists with online insults and vitriol.

“There are less people on the record now in the Trump administration,” said Anita Kumar, *Politico's* White House correspondent. “We’re not making things up, but people don’t believe us.”

In this report, I will examine the impact of Trump’s attacks on the credibility of the American press; his administration’s restrictions on access to government information; the president’s veracity; his legal challenges to the work of the news media; the president’s attempted interference in the financial independence of some media owners; and the impact on the press in other countries. I also will explore what journalists and media law experts say about how the press should respond.

I interviewed for this report nearly 40 journalists, press freedom advocates, journalism school deans, media lawyers and professors, and administration officials. I relied on extensive research by Stephanie Sugars of the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, a project of CPJ and the Freedom of the Press Foundation. I talked to Michael Dubke, Trump’s former White House director of communications. However, repeated requests for a response to Stephanie Grisham, the White House press secretary whose departure was announced April 7, and her deputy, Hogan Gidley, went unanswered.

PRESIDENTS AND THE PRESS

Trump’s behavior reminds me of Richard Nixon’s public verbal attacks on the press when I was one of the editors working on *The Washington Post's* investigation of Watergate. In addition, Nixon ordered illegal wiretaps and FBI investigations of several reporters, and the White House maintained a political “enemies list” that included newspaper and television journalists. White House tape recordings eventually revealed that Nixon also often raged against the press in Oval Office conversations with his aides, calling reporters “clowns” and “sons of bitches.”

“Even though attacks by the Nixon White House on the press involved criminal acts, some of which eventually lead to Nixon’s impeachment, Trump’s attacks are arguably more pernicious and damaging to the free press,” Michael Conway, counsel to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee in the Nixon impeachment inquiry, [wrote on the NBC news website](#) in November 2019. “Trump is seeking, and to a startling degree succeeding, in discrediting the entire media profession by declaring the press to be ‘enemies of the people.’”

The administrations of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton both courted the press, although Bill and Hillary Clinton resented reporting about their Arkansas business dealings, the president’s affair with Monica Lewinsky, and his impeachment. They were particularly unhappy with *The Washington Post*, where, as executive editor, I directed that coverage. But the Clintons’ anger about some stories, journalists, and news organizations never evolved into blanket diatribes against the news media.

George W. Bush was personally friendly with reporters, and officials in his administration were accessible to the press. At the same time, they were notably disciplined in their messaging, which included false justifications for the invasion of Iraq after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In addition, during the CIA’s covert worldwide “war on terror,” intelligence agencies and the Justice Department began aggressive investigations of classified information “leaks” to the news media. Later, those investigations would lead to unprecedented prosecutions of journalists’ sources by the Obama and Trump administrations.

Barack Obama promised that his administration would be the most transparent in history. Instead it became [the most determined to limit information that the news media needed](#) to hold the government accountable for its actions. It used White House websites and social media to bypass the news media in presenting its own version of reality to

the public, in a precursor to how Donald Trump would later use Twitter. The Obama administration actively discouraged “unauthorized” interviews by government officials with the press, and it went to great lengths to combat leaks to reporters.

Most significantly, the Obama administration prosecuted 10 government employees and contractors for disclosing classified information to the press. Eight of the prosecutions were under the 1917 Espionage Act, which was enacted during World War I to protect the country against spies for foreign governments. It had been used only three times in the nine decades before Obama took office. In several of the cases, the Justice Department and the FBI secretly seized telephone and email traffic between sources and reporters for *The New York Times*, Fox News, and The Associated Press. National security journalists told me that those investigations had a chilling effect on government sources of information.

Yet, the Obama administration “never engaged in public rhetoric against the press,” noted University of Georgia media law professor Jonathan Peters. By contrast, Peters characterized Trump’s verbal attacks on the press as “a systematic effort to de-legitimize the news media as a check on government power.”

By the time Trump was elected president in November 2016, Americans appeared to be irreconcilably divided, not just politically, ideologically, and emotionally, but factually. Poll after poll showed that supporters and opponents of Trump believed very different versions of what they think of as facts because they depend primarily on sources of news and information they trust, regardless of their veracity. “People construct their own reality from a selection of media with which they agree,” Hofstra University journalism school dean Mark Lukasiewicz told me.

TRUMP’S ATTACKS ON PRESS CREDIBILITY

CBS News correspondent Leslie Stahl told a Society of Professional Journalists gathering in New York in May 2018 [about a chat](#) she had with President-elect Trump, in his Trump Tower office, before a CBS “60 Minutes” interview with him in November 2016. “At one point, he started to attack the press,” Stahl said. “There were no cameras in there.

“I said, ‘You know this is getting tired. Why are you doing it over and over? It’s boring and it’s time to end that,’” Stahl recalled. “You know, you’ve won...why do you keep

hammering at this?’”

“And he said, ‘You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so that, when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you.’”

Recalling this exchange, Stahl told me at the beginning of 2020, “The thing that jumped out at me was how calculated it was. He plans it out.

“And I was wrong,” she said about what she thought then that the impact of Trump’s attacks on the press would be. “When you say something over and over, it’s had a huge impact. Repetition is part of its impact.”

Trump’s attacks on the press in his encounters with journalists at the White House “can be frustrating up close,” Mike Bender, *The Wall Street Journal’s* White House correspondent, said. “He has some legitimate complaints about the press, but often it’s a political tool. He’s eager to interact with the press – to have us close to him – but then the attacks begin.”

Michael Dubke, who served as Trump’s White House director of communications at the beginning of 2017, told me that part of the reason for Trump’s attacks on the press and his characterization of the news as fake “is his frustration with how the press has reported on him.”

“There have been no stories on the progress he made with the economy and foreign policy,” Dubke contended. “The stories have been very negative at best.”

“He also was surprised,” added Dubke, now a Republican strategic communications consultant. “The president felt that he had a good relationship with the press as a New York developer. He has always been available to the press.”

Lucy Dalglish, dean of the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism, said that whatever Trump’s intention at the outset, the effect of his denigrations is clear. “Even if it wasn’t a malevolent purpose at the beginning, it’s become one,” she said. “When you travel around the country, you hear people talk about ‘fake news.’ It has done substantial damage.”

Trump devoted increasing amounts of time to angrily denouncing the press at his large rallies of ardent supporters around the country, encouraging the boisterous crowds to react. He regularly pointed to the mass of reporters, photographers, and videographers penned up in the raised press section behind the crowd, prompting people to turn around, boo, and shout things like, “CNN sucks.”

“We’re always in the spotlight at a rally when the crowd responds to him,” said *Politico’s* Kumar. “When the crowd is right next to the press, we’re getting booed, and people



Trump supporters boo the media at a rally in Des Moines, Iowa, on January 30, 2020. Trump regularly taunts the press at his rallies, and encourages the crowd to join in. (Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

are saying mean things to us.”

Fox Business Network reporter Kristina Partsinevelos was in the packed press section when Trump announced that he would run for re-election at a huge rally in the Amway Center arena in Orlando, Florida, on June 18, 2019. “[At] several points throughout the night, not just from President Trump, everybody that spoke before him, did call out the media,” she later [told](#) Howard Kurtz on his “Media Buzz” program on Fox News. “The entire crowd turned to boo. One guy was taunting a reporter next to me, and I didn’t even know what network he was from.”

In a March 2018 panel discussion that I moderated, *Washington Post* White House reporter Ashley Parker recalled how Trump had named her and *New York Times* White House reporter Maggie Haberman at a large rally in San Diego, after they had each written a story he did not like. “We’re in the middle of this room of 10,000 people or more, and he starts complaining about our story. ‘There’s

a woman called Parker and a woman named Haberman, and they wrote the most’ – and I actually had a little name card that I quickly slid my laptop over – ‘they’re the most dishonest and the most despicable – they’re not here, are they?’ And the whole crowd turns around, ‘Boo, hiss! Is Parker here?’

“The good part about being a print reporter is that no one knows who I am,” Parker said at the time. “A lot of my good friends who are on TV, especially women, felt a lot more vitriol. This has been reported, but CNN and other outlets got security for their female reporters to walk to their cars after rallies.”

“I’ve had people post my parents’ address,” CNN White House correspondent Abby Phillip said at the panel discussion, adding that a conservative writer posted a story about her mother, “including posting her photo online, in an attempt to attack me for coverage of a Trump surrogate. That kind of thing has really escalated.”



A video frame shows FBI agents on October 26, 2018, pulling a tarp over a van from Plantation, Florida, covered in pro-Trump stickers. The van was investigated in connection with package bombs sent to the CNN newsroom in New York and to other perceived critics of President Trump. (WPLG-TV via AP)

Even though Trump has never attacked her, *Politico's* Kumar said, "I have felt more animosity than ever before, a wholly different tone since 2016," in the email, Facebook and Twitter criticism of her stories and television appearances. "I sometimes try not to look at Twitter because it's that negative and horrible," she told me. "It's never been like this before."

On Twitter, Trump attacked the news media in nearly 1,900 tweets, from when he announced his candidacy for president in 2015 until the end of 2019, according to a [database](#) maintained by Stephanie Sugars of the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#). Trump's most frequently tweeted phrases to describe the news media and journalists were "fake news," "enemy of the people," "dishonest," and "corrupt."

More than 600 of Trump's tweets targeted specific news organizations, led by *The New York Times*, CNN, NBC and MSNBC, Fox News and *The Washington Post*. He called the *Times*, among other slurs, "fake," "phony," "nasty," "disgraced," "dumb," "clueless," "stupid," "sad," "failing," and "dying." He characterized the *Post* as "fake," "crazy," "dishonest," "phony," and "disgraced." In July 2017, Trump

posted on Twitter a 28-second video in which he is portrayed as wrestling and punching a figure whose head has been replaced by the logo for CNN.

Four hundred of Trump's tweets referred to more than 100 individual journalists at 30 news organizations. In a September 7, 2019, tweet to his tens of millions of followers, Trump called Parker and *Post* colleague Philip Rucker "two nasty lightweight reporters" who "shouldn't even be allowed on the grounds of the White House because their reporting is so DISGUSTING & FAKE." *Washington Post* Executive Editor Marty Baron responded that "the president's statement fits into a pattern of seeking to denigrate and intimidate the press. It's unwarranted and dangerous, and it represents a threat to the free press in this country."

In a November 7, 2019, tweet, Trump called *Post* reporters Matt Zapposky, Josh Dawsey, and Carol Leonnig "low-life reporters" in a diatribe about a story he did not like. Leonnig said that prompted "a significant uptick" in hate mail. "Some of the hate mail is a bit vitriolic and describes me as part of the evil Deep State and stupid as a rock," she told me. "I was tweeted at by people who called me garbage

and repeated the president's low-life description."

At the same time, "I've also seen an increase in supportive people noting what the president called me and my colleagues – and emailing their support for what we do at the *Post* and me personally," Leonnig said. "Community members who know my byline suggested we make T-shirts that say, 'I'm with lowlife.'"

That illustrates the deepening chasm in public reaction to Trump's attacks on the press. While the cable audience for Fox News has grown, there also have been noticeable increases in digital subscriptions to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, as well as donations to public radio stations and press freedom groups. "One of the effects of the way Trump has attacked the press is to remind people about the importance of freedom of the press and our role in holding government accountable," Dan Balz, the *Post's* chief political correspondent, told me.

At the same time, Balz said, "It's serious when he goes after people, something we have never experienced before."

"Trump makes a very calculated decision about who he is going to pick on," said Maryland journalism dean Dalglish, who previously was executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. "He's encouraging the public – actually calling on them – to harm journalists. Somebody is going to get hurt."

There have been threats of murder and mayhem against news organizations. In January 2018, [a Michigan man was arrested](#) for telling an operator at CNN's Atlanta headquarters, "Fake news, I'm coming to gun you down." In August 2018, a California man, who later told reporters that "America was saved when Donald J. Trump was elected president," [made repeated telephone calls](#) threatening to kill employees of *The Boston Globe*. In October 2018, [a man sent inoperable pipe bombs](#) to CNN in New York, as well as to several Democratic politicians and officials. In February 2019, the FBI arrested a U.S. Coast Guard lieutenant in Maryland who was [stockpiling weapons and had a "hit list"](#) of prominent Democrats and media figures at CNN and MSNBC. In September 2019, a [U.S. Army soldier in Kansas was arrested](#) for an online discussion about using explosives to attack CNN's offices in New York.

"In all my years of reporting I never once for a moment looked over my shoulder," Sesno, the former CNN anchor, said. "Trump has mobilized masses to sneer and taunt and do worse to people who are doing their jobs. He frankly acts like a thug, prodding his followers."

PRESS ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT INFORMATION UNDER TRUMP

Trump has taken personal control over what the White House officially says to and about the press. At his direction, traditional daily White House briefings by the president's press secretary became infrequent in 2018 and ended in 2019 under Sarah Huckabee Sanders and her successor, Grisham. "I told her not to bother," Trump tweeted about Sanders on January 22, 2019. "The word gets out anyway! Most will never cover us fairly & hence, the term, Fake News!"

The Wall Street Journal's Bender said the televised briefings in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room "were an opportunity to ask questions on a broad range of subjects from throughout the press corps. A window to White House decision-making closed."

"It's a sign of this administration's contempt for the role of the press that we don't have daily briefings," said ABC News chief Washington correspondent Jonathan Karl, president of the White House Correspondents Association. "The briefings are extremely important. It's symbolically important to see the spokesperson for the president of the United States answer reporters' questions every day."

Beginning in March 2020, the White House briefing room finally came alive again with daily briefings on the COVID-19 crisis by key administration officials led by Trump and Pence. They demonstrated the value of such briefings for the press and the public, even though Trump also has used them to make numerous misleading and self-serving statements and to continue complaining angrily about the press in a presidential election year.

In [a March 19 televised briefing](#), Trump took advantage of a leading question from Chanel Rion, White House correspondent for the far-right One America News, to angrily attack the press. He agreed with Rion that the American press was "siding with China" when questioning his characterization of COVID-19 as "the China virus." Singling out *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Trump denounced their reporting about the administration's response to the crisis as "more than fake news, it's corrupt news." He also joked about drastically reducing the number of reporters in the briefing room. "Really, we should probably get rid of about another 75, 80% of you," Trump told them. "I'll just have two or three that I like in this room." Trump made the comments days after China [expelled](#) at least 13 reporters from the

three U.S. newspapers he named.

Until the COVID-19 crisis, Trump mostly made himself available to reporters in informal “sprays” and “gaggles.” Sprays occurred when a limited number of reporters and photographers were invited into meetings with foreign leaders in the Oval Office or ceremonies elsewhere in the White House or the Rose Garden outside. Gaggles were the rushed encounters with waiting reporters when Trump traversed the South Lawn to or from his Marine One helicopter or when he disembarked from his Air Force One plane.

“He is probably the most accessible president in the last 20 to 30 years,” Trump’s former communications director Dubke told me. “He’s accessible sometimes several times a day – in the Oval Office with foreign leaders, in other White House sprays, around Air Force One, and on his way to Marine One.”

Karl agreed that Trump personally “answers more questions from reporters than any president I’ve experienced” in his years of covering Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. “That’s a good thing.”

Trump, the former reality television star, appeared to treat these rushed informal encounters with some members of the press as performances for the evening news, rather than real opportunities for reporters to learn much about what is going on in the White House and the administration. The president decided which of the shouted questions he chose to hear and answer, as reporters competed with clicking cameras or the loudly whirling blades of the Marine One Sikorsky helicopter. Trump could ignore follow-up questions or insult a reporter and quickly move on.

“Marine One is loud. It’s hard to hear him as he walks up and down the row of journalists,” Bender said. “There is no orderly way to get through the issues of the day.”

Nearly half of the 70 individual press interviews that Trump gave in 2019 were with friendly, right-leaning news organizations, including Fox News, Fox Business News, and *The Daily Caller*, according to the count kept by Mark Knoller of CBS News. “You can go months at a time when you see the president do interviews with only one news organization,” ABC’s Karl told me.

White House Press Secretary Grisham [did not hold a single press briefing](#) from taking the job in July 2019 until her departure was announced on April 7, while doing only occasional television interviews, mostly on Fox News. In January 2020, 13 former White House press secretaries and other spokespeople from three previous Republican

and Democratic administrations signed a public letter calling for the resumption of regular press briefings. “Credible men and women, standing in front of those iconic backgrounds at the White House, State Department, and Pentagon,” their letter stated, “are essential to the work the United States must do in the world.”

In response, Grisham told the *Washington Examiner* that journalists had used White House press briefings primarily as opportunities for journalists to “grandstand” on television, and that she was available to individual reporters throughout each day. “In a press briefing, I would call on one reporter from one outlet and they would maybe get one follow-up question. During my day, I talk to five, six, seven reporters from every single outlet,” she told the paper. “I talk to – I wouldn’t say hundreds – but nearly a hundred reporters a day.”

“She doesn’t talk to a hundred reporters a day,” Karl told me, “and not a lot of information flows out of the press office, compared to other administrations.”

Politico’s Kumar said she missed the opportunity to buttonhole White House officials who attended daily briefings after the cameras were off. Reporters had to take turns participating in Oval Office sprays, and Kumar said she was able to get in only about once a month. Aides in the press office are always accessible, she said, but they often “don’t have information or don’t want to provide information.”

At the State Department, and at the Pentagon until recently, press briefings were infrequent, with none for periods of many months. Both cut down on the number of journalists who could travel with the State and Defense secretaries on trips abroad, even though news organizations pay all the expenses. Occasionally, each department revoked travel for reporters who wrote stories that officials did not like.

“There has been a marked deterioration in the State Department’s relationship with the press under this administration,” said AFP State Department correspondent Shaun Tandon, president of the State Department Correspondents’ Association. “On camera daily briefings have fallen by the wayside,” he said, depriving reporters of the opportunity “to ask questions and get answers on many issues” each day.

On-the-record daily briefings were replaced by occasional visits by State officials to the department’s press area for specific subject briefings, which are not on the record “ninety per cent of the time,” *Washington Post* State correspondent Carol Morello told me. That leaves the reporters’



NPR's Mary Louise Kelly accepts the award for best non-commercial reporter/correspondent/host for "All Things Considered" at the 43rd annual Gracie Awards on May 22, 2018, in Beverly Hills, California. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Kelly of lying about the ground rules for an interview after she asked him critical questions. (Richard Shotwell/Invision/AP)

stories open to criticism that they are based only on an anonymous "senior State Department official."

When he talked to reporters, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was openly hostile when he disliked their questions. On separate occasions, he told a [Nashville television reporter](#) and [PBS News Hour anchor Judy Woodruff](#), when they pressed him in interviews about the dealings with Ukraine that eventually led to Trump's impeachment in the House of Representatives, that it sounded as though they were working for the Democratic National Committee.

On January 24, 2020, Mary Louise Kelly, co-host of NPR's "All Things Considered" program and a veteran national security reporter, interviewed Pompeo on the record about Trump administration policies for Iran and Ukraine. She had a written agreement with his staff to ask about a range of subjects. Pompeo objected when

Kelly asked if he owed the former American ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, an apology for not speaking up for her when Trump recalled her to Washington after a long smear campaign against her.

Afterward, an aide asked Kelly to come to Pompeo's private room, where he angrily upbraided her for asking about Ukraine. Kelly later recounted on NPR that Pompeo asked, "Do you think Americans care about Ukraine?" He used the F-word in that sentence and many others. He asked if I could find Ukraine on a map; I said yes. He called out for his aides to bring him a map of the world with no writing, no countries marked. I pointed to Ukraine." Kelly had not been asked, nor agreed, for that exchange to be off the record.

When his blow-up became a widely reported story, Pompeo issued a [formal statement](#) falsely accusing Kelly of lying to him about the ground rules for the interview

and their conversation afterwards. “It is shameful that this reporter chose to violate the basic rules of journalism and decency,” he stated. “This is another example of how unhinged the media has become in its quest to hurt President Trump and this Administration. It is no wonder that the American people distrust many in the media when they so consistently demonstrate their agenda and their absence of integrity.”

NPR CEO John Lansing responded by telling host Michel Martin in an “[All Things Considered](#)” interview that Pompeo’s treatment of Kelly was “outrageous and inappropriate” and that “the statement from the secretary is blatantly false.” Lansing added, “It is not unusual for there to be tension between government officials and journalists because journalists are – as I said, their duty is to ask difficult questions... But this goes well beyond tension. This goes towards intimidation. And let me just say this. We will not be intimidated.”

The State Department [punished NPR](#) by not allowing its longtime State Department reporter, Michele Kelemen, to travel on Pompeo’s government plane for his subsequent trip to Ukraine. Trump later [praised a smiling Pompeo](#) before a friendly audience at a White House event for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “Very impressive, Mike,” Trump said, smiling himself, as people in the audience laughed. “That reporter couldn’t have done too good a job on you yesterday. I think you did a good job on her, actually.”

State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus did not respond to a request for an interview for this report.

At the Pentagon, under Trump’s first defense secretary, Jim Mattis, “access deteriorated pretty quickly because of reporters’ questions about things in which there was a gap between him and the president,” *Washington Post* Pentagon reporter Dan Lamothe told me. “Mattis was less likely to talk, and the generals were less likely to talk.” During Mattis’ last months, “people were reassigned within the Pentagon for speaking too candidly to the press,” he said.

Access increased somewhat under the current defense secretary, Mark Esper, although there was still less engagement with the press than before the Trump administration, said Lamothe, who has covered the Pentagon for 12 years.

Defense Department Press Secretary Alyssa Farah told me that Esper “regularly interacts with the press and pushes for access.” In addition to Esper’s monthly press conferences, she said, Jonathan Hoffman, assistant to the secretary of defense for public affairs, now holds

weekly on camera briefings. One of Farah’s aides, Navy Capt. Brook DeWalt, said the number of press officers has been increased, and credentialed reporters can roam anywhere in the Pentagon.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been particularly combative about its news coverage. During the tenures of its two administrators under Trump, first Scott Pruitt and then Andrew Wheeler, the EPA repeatedly attacked reporters and news organizations – from The Associated Press to *The New York Times* to the conservative *Washington Examiner* – over stories the agency considered unfavorable. It barred some reporters from EPA events and its master mailing list.

“I’m trying not to get into name calling or picking fights,” Corry Schiermeyer, EPA’s associate administrator for public affairs, told *Washington Post* media reporter Paul Farhi in July 2019. “I honestly just want to ensure that when anyone reports about our policies and issues that the reporting is correct and accurate.”

On January 14, 2020, EPA issued a press release castigating *The New York Times* for publishing a detailed examination of the backgrounds of senior EPA officials. “Under the Trump administration, the people appointed to those positions overwhelmingly used to work in the fossil fuel, chemical, and agriculture industries,” the *Times* story stated. “During their time in government they have been responsible for loosening or undoing nearly 100 environmental protections from pollution and pesticides, as well as weakening preservations of natural resources and efforts to curb planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.”

“New York Times Continues Campaign Against Trump Administration. All the News That Fits the Agenda to Print,” [the EPA’s press release was headlined](#). “Today, the New York Times continued its march to irrelevance through extreme bias,” it began, “launching an interactive hit list on the Trump administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.”

At the Interior Department, Trump appointees “have made pretty clear that climate change is not an area for polite discussion,” said Bobby Magill, who covers Interior for Bloomberg Environment. “They ignore requests for comment on any subject concerning climate change.”

EPA and Interior are among the federal departments and agencies whose websites were scrubbed of information and resources about such subjects as climate change, corporate taxation, the Affordable Care Act, domestic violence, women’s health, and LGBTQ issues, as monitored by the Sunlight Foundation and other open government



Trump takes a question from a member of the media in the Oval Office of the White House on March 2, 2020. A limited number of reporters and photographers are invited to meetings between Trump and foreign leaders. (AP/Andrew Harnik)

groups. Less information is available online about officials' schedules and visitors to the White House and cabinet departments, according to the open government groups' research. The House Committee on Oversight and Reform reported in 2018 that "many agencies have refused to disclose the identities of individuals serving on Regulatory Reform Task Forces that President Trump required each agency to create."

What were already long delays in responding to Freedom of Information Act requests have grown at most federal departments and agencies during the Trump administration, the Associated Press found. The administration spent more than \$40 million in its first year defending its decisions to withhold requested documents from news organizations, journalists, open government groups, and the general public, the AP [reported](#). The Departments of Homeland Security, Interior, and Justice were sued most often, according to [an analysis by The FOIA Project](#).

"Interior doesn't respond much to FOIA requests," said Magill, the immediate past president of the Society of Environmental Journalists. "A lot of us are waiting months and months for FOIA requests to come back."

Carol Danko, senior adviser in Interior's office of communications, did not answer a request for a response.

TRUMP AND THE TRUTH

As he centralized his administration's information control in himself, Trump announced most of his presidential decisions, administration appointments, and departures – and revealed much of what is on his mind – in his many tweets each day. "He uses Twitter to set and announce policy," Rucker of the *Post* told me. "It gives us the clearest sense of his mood, what's on his mind."

The president's tweets "go around the press and directly engage his most ardent supporters," said Bender of *The*



Trump takes questions during a Fox News town hall with moderators Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum in Scranton, Pennsylvania, on March 5, 2020. Nearly half of the 70 interviews that Trump gave in 2019 were with friendly, right-leaning outlets, according to a count kept by CBS. (Reuters/Leah Millis)

Wall Street Journal. “Trump’s tweets are a remarkable window into him and his private moments, something never seen before by a president in my lifetime.”

“The power of the president’s tweets is unprecedented,” former White House communications director Dubke told me. “The press does not know how to handle them. They are reported as ‘breaking news.’ They are much more effective than a press release. Outside the press, people are not actually reading them. They’re getting them from the media. The press almost immediately puts them out without a filter, and then it spends the next few hours interpreting them.”

However, Twitter allowed Trump “to state untruths with impunity,” as *Columbia Journalism Review* digital media reporter Matthew Ingram [wrote](#), “knowing that his

tweets will be widely redistributed by his followers and the media, and to dodge follow-up questions or criticism.”

In doing so, Trump made more false statements than any president in memory. On his first day in office on January 21, 2017, he insisted that a record number of people had attended his inauguration. His claim was quickly refuted by comparisons of photographs of the crowds on Washington’s Mall for his and Barack Obama’s inaugurations. Nevertheless, Trump’s then-press secretary, Sean Spicer, used his initial news briefing to angrily accuse reporters of “deliberately false reporting” of the inauguration crowd size. On NBC’s “Meet the Press” program the next day, presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway was asked by moderator Chuck Todd why Spicer would “utter a provable falsehood.” She said Spicer was providing “alternative

facts,” to which Todd responded, “Look, alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods.”

In the first three years of his presidency, Trump made more than 16,200 false or misleading claims on Twitter, at his rallies and other public appearances, and in encounters with reporters, [according to *The Washington Post’s Fact Checker*](#), run by Glenn Kessler. They included what he said about the economy, taxes, trade and tariffs, foreign leaders, immigration and immigrants, his political opponents, the environment and climate change, health care, guns, voter fraud, Barack Obama’s presidency, and the impeachment investigation of Trump, among other subjects. Several other fact-checking sites also have found a multitude of Trump’s statements to be false or misleading.

“A defining feature of the Donald Trump presidency is the bombardment of lies – Trump’s unceasing campaign to convince people of things that aren’t true,” CNN’s fact-checking reporter Daniel Dale [wrote on its Facts First site](#) at the end of 2019. Some of Trump’s 2019 false statements “were innocent slips, some of them were little exaggerations,” according to Dale. “But a large number of them were whoppers: deliberate, significant attempts to deceive and manipulate.”

New York Times fact-checker Linda Qiu [wrote](#) that Trump uttered at least 18 falsehoods, exaggerations and debunked conspiracy theories in a single 53-minute telephone interview during the November 22, 2019 Fox News morning program “Fox & Friends.” Topics included the impeachment investigation, tax cuts, tariffs, congressional legislation, and a false claim that Trump “opened” an Apple computer factory he visited, which had been operating since 2013.

“I think he often does not know that what he says is incorrect,” Bob Schieffer of CBS News told me. “It’s what he has seen and heard on TV. He may make more errors because he doesn’t know what he’s talking about rather than trying to mislead.”

Some analysts have matched false statements Trump has made with what was said about the same subject at about the same time on Fox News shows that he watches. He also has retweeted false statements that he has found on Twitter, including some from right-wing conspiracy groups.

“No other president has said as many false things as Trump,” ProPublica’s Steiger said, creating “a readiness of people to disbelieve factual reporting.”

The Post’s Kessler and *The Times’* Qiu documented numerous false statements that Trump made during the

COVID-19 crisis. “It’s one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It’s going to be just fine,” the president said in a CNBC interview on January 21. “We’re very close to a vaccine,” he said at a news conference on February 25, when vaccine research was just beginning. “Anybody that wants a test can get a test,” Trump told reporters on March 6, when there were widespread shortages of tests for the virus. On March 11, he said that health insurance industry leaders had told him they would waive all co-payments for treatment of the virus, when they agreed only to waive co-payment for tests.

“Americans don’t have much of a shared reality these days, and Trump has made it worse,” *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan told me. “His falsehoods have become commonplace. There is no expectation of truth and reality at the highest levels.”

When I asked her about news media fact-checking of Trump, Sullivan said, “I don’t know that it makes a difference. It doesn’t seem to make much of a dent among citizens who are Trump supporters. They see it as part of the media elite.”

TRUMP, THE LAW, AND THE PRESS

In May 2018, Trump [suggested](#) in a tweet that news organizations reporting negatively about him should lose their White House press credentials. “The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials?”

That is what happened on November 7, 2018, the day after the mid-term elections in which the Democrats won control of the House of Representatives. The White House [revoked the credential](#), known as a “hard pass,” of CNN’s Jim Acosta after he and Trump argued at a press conference over whether Acosta could ask a follow-up question. Trump called him “a rude, terrible person,” while a White House intern tried to take the microphone away from Acosta.

After CNN filed a lawsuit in federal court on November 13, U.S. District Court Judge Timothy Kelly ordered the White House on November 16 to return Acosta’s hard pass immediately. Kelly ruled that the White House had violated Acosta’s constitutional rights by not allowing him access to the White House grounds to cover news and appear



White House then-press secretary Stephanie Grisham listens as President Trump speaks to reporters on the South Lawn of the White House on November 8, 2019. Grisham did not hold a single press briefing during her nine months in the role. (AP/Andrew Harnik)

on television from there. A 1977 federal appellate court decision had established that, under the First Amendment, the denial of a White House press pass could not be arbitrary. Acosta was given back his hard pass.

At the same time, the White House instituted a new rule that would take away hard passes from journalists who do not go there at least 50% of the time. It made exemptions for the many “senior journalists” who are “consistently engaged in covering the White House” without necessarily being there. This could have given the Trump White House control over who had passes, pending further court challenges. However, no issues had arisen as of March 2020, according to the White House Correspondents Association. With the disappearance of daily White House briefings, many reporters were contacting their White House sources by phone anyway.

Trump also has often called for changes in American libel law, presumably so that he could successfully sue journalists and news organizations who publish unflattering

stories and books about him. On March 30, 2017, he tweeted: “The failing @nytimes has disgraced the media world. Gotten me wrong for two solid years. Change libel laws?” On January 10, 2018, he said during a cabinet meeting that he wanted to take “a strong look” at changing libel laws “so that when somebody says something that is false and defamatory about someone, that person will have meaningful recourse in our courts.”

On September 2018, Trump tweeted repeatedly about Bob Woodward’s book about the Trump White House, “Fear,” saying in one [tweet](#), “Isn’t it a shame that someone can write an article or book, totally make up stories and form a picture of a person that is literally the opposite of the fact, and get away with it without retribution or cost. Don’t know why Washington politicians don’t change libel laws?”

Those politicians and Trump can do little to change American libel law, beyond the potential long-term impact of the president’s federal judicial appointments. Most libel

cases are decided under state laws in accordance with the landmark 1964 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*. The high court ruled unanimously that public figures and officials must prove “actual malice” – a statement made with “knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not” – to win a libel claim. Congress is limited by what it could do under the First Amendment prohibition against any law that abridges “the freedom of speech, or of the press.”

Nevertheless, Trump’s re-election campaign filed separate libel suits during 10 days in early 2020 about opinion pieces published in 2019 by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN. The Trump campaign sued *The Times* on February 26 in Manhattan Supreme Court over a March 27, 2019 opinion column by former *Times* editor Max Frankel speculating about Trump’s 2016 campaign and Russia. It sued *The Washington Post* on March 3 in federal court in Washington over opinion pieces in June 2019 by columnists Greg Sargent, about the same subject, and Paul Waldman, speculating about the 2020 Trump campaign and Russia and North Korea. And the Trump campaign sued CNN on March 6 in federal court in Atlanta, CNN’s headquarters, over a June 13, 2019, opinion piece by contributor Larry Noble speculating about the 2020 Trump campaign and Russia.

Contending that the columns were “false and defamatory” and that *The Times*, *The Post*, and CNN were biased against the Trump campaign, the lawsuits demanded unspecified “millions of dollars” in damages from the three news organizations. They all said they would vigorously defend themselves.

The libel suits “have very little legal merit,” *New York Times* deputy legal counsel David McCraw told me, because they are challenging legally protected opinions about the administration. “I think they hoped to make headlines” rather than prevail in court, he said.

University of Georgia media law professor Jonathan Peters agreed that the lawsuits are “baseless” under legal precedents. But they are “wholly consistent with Trump’s efforts to undermine the press,” he added. “I’m worried that it may chill speech about newsworthy public issues.”

“Filing these lawsuits is a different kind of test of the system, entangling federal judges” in Trump’s battles with the press, Bruce Brown, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, told me. “I’m confident that they will be dismissed in a demonstration of judicial independence.”

TARGETING NEWS MEDIA OWNERS

Defending against such lawsuits may or may not prove to be a costly irritant for news organizations. But Trump also has threatened some of their owners’ financial independence.

In May 2018 he [urged the U.S. Postal Service](#) to double the rate it charges Amazon and other firms to ship packages. Amazon’s founder and chief executive, Jeff Bezos, owns *The Washington Post* through a private company separate from Amazon. Bezos has declined any role in its news coverage. Nevertheless, Trump has frequently referred derisively to “the Amazon Washington Post.” A task force created by Trump later found that package delivery for Amazon and other e-retailers was [profitable](#) for the Postal Service.

In July 2019, Trump told reporters at the White House that he was looking into a \$10 billion, 10-year Defense Department cloud computing contract competition between Amazon and Microsoft. After the contract was awarded to Microsoft, Amazon filed a formal protest in November 2019 in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims. Amazon contended that Trump’s “repeated public and behind-the-scenes attacks” against Amazon and his desire to “screw Amazon” prompted the Pentagon to choose the Microsoft proposal despite its “clear failures.” The complaint cited news reports that Trump had directed Defense Secretary Esper to intervene after it appeared that the contract would go to Amazon. A Pentagon spokeswoman responded that “there were no external influences on the source selection decision.” On February 13, 2020, Court of Claims Judge Patricia Campbell-Smith ordered all work on the cloud computing contract to stop until Amazon’s legal challenge is resolved.

In October 2017 tweets expressing his anger over NBC and CNN reporting about him, Trump called for challenges to the “licenses” of “NBC and the Networks.” In one of the tweets, he said, “Network news has become so partisan, distorted and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked.”

The Federal Communications Commission, an independent federal agency, licenses individual broadcast stations, not networks. NBC Universal is owned by Comcast, which also owns broadcast stations in several large U.S. cities. In response to questions at the time, FCC chairman Ajit Pai said his agency does not have the authority to revoke the license of a broadcast station based on program content. “I believe in the First Amendment,” Pai said. “The FCC, under my leadership, will stand for the



Jeff Bezos, chief executive of Amazon and owner of *The Washington Post*, arrives for a meeting with then-President-elect Trump at Trump Tower in New York on December 14, 2016. The president has frequently referred derisively to “the Amazon Washington Post.” (Drew Angerer/Getty Images/AFP)

First Amendment.”

Trump has periodically put public pressure on the AT&T corporation to influence coverage of him by CNN, which it acquired in a merger with Time Warner in 2017. In a 2016 press release, the Trump campaign noted that AT&T “is now trying to buy Time Warner and thus the wildly anti-Trump CNN. Donald Trump would never approve such a deal.” After Trump became president, the Justice Department challenged the merger, seeking to force any resulting new company to sell CNN’s parent, Turner Broadcasting, as a condition for approval of the deal. When Justice subsequently lost two federal court challenges, the merger took full effect early in 2019.

The President then called on Americans in June 3, 2019 tweets to boycott AT&T to force change at CNN. “I believe that if people stopped using or subscribing to @ATT, they would be forced to make big changes at @CNN, which is dying in the ratings anyway,” his tweet said. “It is

so unfair with such bad, Fake News! Why wouldn’t they act. When the World watches @CNN, it gets a false picture of USA. Sad!”

The Trump re-election campaign even [threatened](#) legal action against CNN in October 2019 for “misrepresenting” itself as a news organization because of comments some of its employees made about politics in conversations secretly recorded by an undercover conservative activist.

Trump also suggested a boycott of Fox News in August 2019, after he objected to some unfavorable reports and comments by the few Fox personalities who were not unwaveringly supportive of him. He began a flurry of tweets by saying, “The New @FoxNews is letting millions of GREAT people down! We have to start looking for a new News Outlet. Fox isn’t working for us anymore.”

The president had used tweets to call for the firings of news executives at NBC in November 2017 and at CNN in August 2018. In October 2019, Trump [instructed his](#)

[staff](#) to cancel White House subscriptions to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

After Secretary of State Pompeo's conflict with NPR in January 2020, conservative radio commentator Mark Levin called the public radio network a "Democratic Party propaganda operation" and asked on Twitter, "Why does NPR still exist?" Trump retweeted it, adding, "A very good question." In his annual federal budget request, released in mid-February 2020, Trump proposed cutting to zero by 2023 the funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which distributes taxpayers' money to NPR and the rest of public broadcasting.

WAR ON LEAKS

From the beginning of his presidency, Trump also sought to crack down on how much information the press was able to glean about his administration from confidential sources inside the government and even the White House. The surprising flow of leaks included drafts of controversial executive orders, proposed policy changes, White House strategy discussions, contacts between some of his advisers and Russia, and even some of Trump's telephone calls with foreign leaders. The leaks appeared to result from White House staff rivalries and concerns in federal departments and agencies about Trump's agenda and consolidation of decision-making in the Oval Office.

"A weird thing is going on. The Obama administration was so disciplined. But in the Trump administration, they're leaking from the top," the University of Maryland's Dalglish told me. "They're trying to find ways to get information out. Reporters have told me that you can find people in the White House to talk."

"Traditional access to the White House and the departments is more limited," said *Washington Post* editor Baron. "But there is a lot of access to individual people because of rivalries, lack of direction, and disagreements over policy. Everyone is trying to undermine each other."

"People in the White House are relatively quick to return calls, even when they hate *The New York Times* and the press," *Times* media reporter Jeremy Peters told me. "There is less loyalty, more leaking."

Within the rest of the government, "the drive to get information out to the public remains very strong," said Scott Shane, a longtime national security reporter in Washington for *The New York Times*. "There is motivation to get their perspective on developments out. There has been escalation on both sides – a crackdown on leaks

and motivation to get things out that has been a good bit stronger."

Trump began tweeting about "low-life leakers" as early as February 2017. He vowed, "They will be caught!" Then, in a private meeting on February 14, Trump [suggested to then-FBI Director James Comey](#) that he should jail journalists who publish classified information damaging to his administration, according to a May 17 *New York Times* [account](#) citing one of Comey's associates.

At a February 16 press conference, Trump said, "I've actually called the Justice Department to look into the leaks. Those are criminal leaks."

In July 2017, Trump complained in a tweet that then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions was "very weak" on leak investigations. Sessions [responded by announcing](#) that the Justice Department had tripled the number of investigations into leaks of classified information than were active at the end of the Obama administration, which itself had significantly increased criminal investigations and prosecutions of such leaks.

Sessions did not say how many of those new investigations involved leaks to reporters. At that point, only one such case had been prosecuted by his Justice Department. A National Security Agency contractor, Reality Winner, [was charged in June 2017](#) with sending a classified intelligence report about Russian interference in the 2016 election to a news website later identified as *The Intercept*. More prosecutions would come.

At a congressional hearing in October 2017, Sessions said, "We have 27 investigations open today," again without specifying how many involved leaks to the press. "We intend to get the bottom of these leaks."

On September 8, 2017, then-White House national security adviser H.R. McMaster issued a memo ordering "every federal department and agency" to hold training sessions for employees "on the importance of protecting classified and controlled unclassified information." Within days, a copy of the memo was leaked to *BuzzFeed News*, which [published](#) it in its entirety.

During Barack Obama's administration, 10 government employees and contractors were prosecuted for leaking classified information, including eight charged under the 1917 Espionage Act. The law was enacted to combat spying for foreign countries and interference with and insubordination in the American military in World War I. Between then and the Obama administration, there were only three prosecutions under that law in 90 years.

By the end of 2019, the Trump administration had



WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange gestures as he leaves the Westminster Magistrates' Court in a police van after he was arrested in London on April 11, 2019. The Trump administration charged Assange under the Espionage Act. (Reuters/Henry Nicholls)

indicted eight government employees and contractors in three years for leaking classified information to journalists. The administration also charged Julian Assange, the leader of WikiLeaks, with obtaining secret military and diplomatic documents and publishing them on the WikiLeaks website in 2010, making them accessible to news organizations in the U.S. and around the world. Six of the nine people prosecuted were indicted for violating the Espionage Act.

Reality Winner, then a 25-year-old Air Force veteran, was the first to be prosecuted under the Espionage Act by the Trump administration. She was working as a contractor for the National Security Agency when she was arrested and charged in June 2017 for leaking an NSA top secret intelligence report about Russian election interference that was published in part by *The Intercept*. She pleaded guilty in June 2018 and was sentenced to more than five years in prison, minus the year she spent in jail awaiting trial.

The Intercept also was identified by Minnesota Public Radio as the recipient of classified documents leaked in 2016 and 2017 by former FBI agent Terry Albury about the bureau's rules for recruiting informants and identifying potential extremists in the Somali-American community in Minneapolis. Albury, who is African-American, believed that the FBI practices were discriminatory and racist, according to his lawyer. Albury [was arrested in March 2018](#) and the next month pleaded guilty to two felony violations of the Espionage Act. He was sentenced to four years in prison.

In June 2018, James Wolfe, retired security director for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, [was indicted for lying to the FBI](#) about his contacts and relationships with reporters. The indictment stated that Wolfe specifically denied knowing national security reporter Ali Watkins, who was working at *The New York Times* when Wolfe was charged. Wolfe and Watkins had a romantic

relationship for more than three years while she was covering his committee, before she was hired by the *Times* in December 2017. While dating Wolfe, Watkins worked for, in order, *HuffPost*, *BuzzFeed News*, and *Politico*. She informed each of them of the relationship but said that he was not a source for her stories.

The FBI opened its investigation after an April 3, 2017, Watkins story in *BuzzFeed News* revealed a 2013 contact between a Russian spy and Carter Page, who later became an adviser in Trump's presidential campaign. When the FBI interviewed Wolfe in December 2017, he denied that he had been in contact with any reporters. When they later showed him a photo of himself with Watkins, he said that they had been in a personal relationship but that he had never given her any confidential government information.

On February 13, 2018, the Justice Department notified Watkins by letter that it [had seized under subpoena](#) some of her telephone and email records for several years through December 2017. On her lawyer's advice, she did not tell the *Times* about the subpoena and seizure until after Wolfe was indicted. The Justice Department did not notify Watkins or the *Times* in advance about the subpoena, which would have given them an opportunity to contest it in court.

The indictment stated that Watkins and Wolfe communicated frequently around the time of the Carter Page story. It also quoted a December 2017 text message in which Wolfe told Watkins, "I always tried to give you as much information that I could and to do the right thing with it so you could get that scoop before anyone else." Wolfe pleaded guilty on October 15, 2018, to a single count of lying to federal investigators about his contacts with reporters. He was sentenced to two months in prison and fined \$7,500. He was never charged with having disclosed classified information, which he denied doing.

The *Times* announced on July 3, 2018, that Watkins was being moved from its Washington bureau to New York to cover local crime and law enforcement. Executive Editor Dean Baquet wrote [in a memo](#) to the *Times* staff that the paper was "troubled" by her conduct. "For a reporter to have an intimate relationship with someone he or she covers is unacceptable," he wrote.

Baquet also stated that "we abhor the actions of the government in this case. Without notice, investigators rummaged through years of a journalist's phone and email records, an intrusion that puts First Amendment protections at risk and violated Justice Department guidelines that have bipartisan support. An undercover border agent,

who appears to have illicitly accessed her travel records, also tried to pressure her into spying on other reporters and their sources."

He was referring to a bizarre incident in which a Customs and Border Protection agent, Jeffrey Rambo, emailed Watkins in June 2017 to arrange a meeting in a Washington bar, at which he questioned her about her sources. Rambo said he knew about her recent vacation with Wolfe to Spain, and he threatened to expose their relationship if she did not help identify government officials who were leaking to the press. The *Times* later reported that the government was investigating the actions of Rambo, who had been temporarily assigned to its National Targeting Center outside Washington, where the travel data for Americans and visiting foreign citizens is stored.

The Committee to Protect Journalists and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press filed a [Freedom of Information Act lawsuit](#) on August 8, 2019 to force CBP to release documents including Rambo's non-governmental emails with Watkins, any communications to CBP containing the phrases "leaks" or "unauthorized disclosures," and policies "describing the role of CBP in investigating disclosures of government information to the news media."

Joshua Schulte, a former CIA software engineer, was [indicted under the Espionage Act](#) on June 18, 2018, for sending WikiLeaks classified documents that detailed tools and techniques used by the CIA to hack into smartphones, web browsers, smart televisions, and automobiles. After WikiLeaks began publishing the documents in March 2017, federal agents raided Schulte's New York apartment and allegedly found on his computer a trove of child pornography. Schulte was first charged with possession of child pornography and later indicted on a total of 15 charges dealing with possession and distribution of classified information. On March 9, 2020, Schulte was found guilty on two counts of making false statements to investigators and contempt of court by a federal jury in New York that deadlocked on the rest of the counts. The government was expected to try him again on the remaining counts. The possession of child pornography case was still pending.

From October 2017 through October 2018, *BuzzFeed News* published stories about suspicious banking transactions made by Russian diplomats and Trump associates, including his former campaign manager, Paul Manafort. On October 16, 2018, Natalie Mayflower Sours Edwards, a senior adviser on financial crimes at the Treasury Department, [was arrested and charged](#) with giving a *BuzzFeed News* reporter confidential reports about suspicious



James Wolfe, center, former director of security with the Senate Intelligence Committee, escorts former FBI Director James Comey to a secure room for his testimony on the 2016 election and his firing by President Trump, on Capitol Hill in Washington on June 8, 2017. Federal prosecutors charged Wolfe with lying to the FBI about his contacts with reporters. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite)

transactions. The criminal complaint showed that the FBI used search warrants to gain access to Edwards's personal email account and cell phone records for email, phone call, and text message activity between her and *BuzzFeed* reporter Jason Leopold. Edwards pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy on January 13, 2020. Sentencing was set for June 9, 2020.

A similar case began when IRS investigative analyst John C. Fry [was charged](#) on February 21, 2019 with “unlawful disclosure” in May 2018 of government reports about suspicious overseas financial transactions by former Trump attorney Michael Cohen. Lawyer Michael Avenatti posted the information online and gave it to a reporter for *The New Yorker*, who was not publicly identified. *The Washington Post* published an article about money flowing in and out of the account of a company Cohen used to arrange hush money payments to Avenatti client Stephanie Clifford, the adult film star known as

Stormy Daniels who said she had an affair with Trump. Fry pleaded guilty on August 14, 2019, to one count of illegally disclosing confidential IRS information to Avenatti. Fry was sentenced to five years' probation and a \$5,000 fine. (Meanwhile, in unconnected cases, Avenatti was charged and convicted in New York with trying to extort more than \$20 million from the sports apparel company Nike, and he has pleaded not guilty in California to tax and fraud charges.)

Daniel Hale, a former National Security Agency employee and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency contractor, [was indicted under the Espionage Act](#) on May 9, 2019, for giving 36 documents about American drone warfare, 15 of which were classified, to a reporter between February and August 2014. The documents were [used](#) in *Intercept* stories and a book about drone strikes against terrorist targets around the world. In autumn 2019, defense attorneys argued in court motions that Hale was a

whistleblower, not a spy, and that his prosecution would chill newsgathering. Prosecutors argued that Hale had signed agreements waiving his right to disclose national security information while working for the government. No trial had been set as of late March.

“Leaks of classified information cause damage to national security,” John Demers, head of the Justice Department’s national security division, said in an October 9, 2019, statement announcing the Espionage Act indictment of Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) analyst Henry Kyle Frese for sharing classified information with two journalists. Court papers identified one of the reporters as his girlfriend, Amanda Macias, a national security reporter at CNBC. From May to July 2018, her byline appeared on CNBC stories about China’s development, testing, and deployment of new weapons systems, attributed to “sources with direct knowledge of U.S. intelligence reports.” The indictment stated that the information came from classified DIA intelligence reports accessed by Frese. The FBI said it intercepted some of Frese’s phone calls, text messages, and Twitter data. Prosecutors declined to say whether they had accessed the reporters’ data. Frese [pleaded guilty](#) on February 20, 2020, to the willful transmission of classified information to two journalists. Sentencing was scheduled for June 18, 2020.

“The trend of prosecutions matters more than individual facts in some of the cases,” such as reporters’ romantic relationships with sources, said Gabe Rottman, technology and press freedom project director at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. The prosecutions “are trying to dissuade sources from coming forward and providing information to journalists.”

The large number of prosecutions of news sources by Trump’s Justice Department “is the fault of the Obama administration,” *Post* media columnist Sullivan told me. “It created a blueprint that has been easy to follow. The use of the Espionage Act for this kind of thing is terrible.”

The multi-faceted crackdowns on leaks by both the Obama and Trump administrations has frightened news sources. “A lot of sources are more careful now,” Shane, the *Times* national security reporter, said. “Trump administration employees have discovered the virtue of things like Signal,” a message encryption tool. “There’s been a learning curve.”

“Everybody’s more careful,” *Washington Post* editor Baron said. “Reporters are using encrypted communications and meeting people in person.”

Kumar, of *Politico*, lists on her emails a cell phone

number that can be reached through Signal or WhatsApp encryption. “Everybody wants to talk in a different way,” she told me. “They are more worried about using emails and phone calls. They want to use Signal or WhatsApp. Not just people in the administration, but also close to it and outside it.”

No reporters have been prosecuted. But the case of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has many press freedom advocates concerned that it crosses that line. On May 23, 2019, Assange [was indicted on 17 counts of violating the Espionage Act](#) by conspiring with former U.S. Army Private Chelsea Manning in 2010 to obtain and disseminate a vast digital trove of classified government documents. The Justice Department is seeking to extradite Assange from the U.K., where he was arrested after Ecuador ended his years of asylum in its London embassy. His lawyer in the U.K., Jennifer Robinson, has said that Assange did not commit a crime by publishing truthful information.

Assange obtained from Manning and published on WikiLeaks raw military and diplomatic documents about the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. News organizations then published many stories about the documents’ content, after doing research to avoid publication of information that could cause harm to individuals named in them. Manning was convicted at court-martial and served seven years of a 35-year sentence before it was commuted by President Obama. His administration also opened a grand jury investigation of Assange but never indicted him, in part because of concerns that it could criminalize reporting techniques used by journalists at mainstream news organizations.

The case was left open for the Trump administration. It decided to indict Assange after what *The Washington Post* later described as a long debate within the Justice Department over its potential First Amendment impact. The indictment alleges that Assange conspired with Manning to “facilitate Manning’s acquisition and transmission of classified information related to the national defense of the United States so that WikiLeaks could publicly disseminate the information on its website.”

Press freedom groups reacted with concern. Rottman of the Reporters Committee said, “Although the government stated that the defendant, Julian Assange, ‘is no journalist,’ the legal theory prosecutors are using would punish activities such as solicitation, receipt, and publication of classified information.”

“It’s not criminal to encourage someone to leak



A Honduran migrant crawls through a hole under the U.S. border fence as journalists take pictures, in Playas de Tijuana, Mexico, on December 4, 2018. U.S. Customs and Border Protection monitored some journalists covering migration in a secret database. (AP/Rebecca Blackwell)

classified information to you as a journalist. That’s called news gathering, and there are First Amendment protections for news gathering,” prominent media lawyer Theodore J. Boutrous Jr. told *The New York Times*. “The ramifications of this are so potentially dangerous and serious for the ability of journalists to gather and disseminate information that the American people have a right to know.”

Trevor Timm, executive director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, told me, “The wholly unprecedented action that the Justice Department has taken against Julian Assange is definitely my biggest worry. He is the first non-government person to be prosecuted under the Espionage Act. It has the potential to outlaw many kinds of reporting of national security information.”

As CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon [wrote in](#) *The Washington Post* in May, 2019, the prosecution of Assange is “a direct threat to journalists everywhere in the world” because Assange, an Australian, is not an American citizen and the actions for which he is being charged all occurred outside the U.S. “Anyone anywhere in the world

who publishes information that the U.S. government deems to be classified could be prosecuted for espionage,” Simon wrote. He argued that this could be a threat to journalists in Colombia “who have reported on the presence of U.S. forces in their country,” those in Pakistan “who have reported on ties between the U.S. government and the country’s shadowy intelligence service,” and those in France “who have reported on U.S. counter-terrorism operations in North Africa.”

Assange faces an additional charge under the U.S. Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which, as CPJ senior correspondent for global technology Avi Asher-Schapiro has [written](#), raises concerns that the law could be used to implicate journalists in the criminal activities of their sources.

Overall, *ProPublica*’s Paul Steiger told me, “the trend toward prosecutions of the press, the violations of our rights to privacy, the digging into phone records and documents are way worse than anything I’ve seen before. The Trump administration is threatening our ability to report.”

HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS AT U. S. BORDERS

Just as troubling for news reporting is the unprecedented harassment of journalists during the Trump administration by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents at entry points into the country. Since 2017, more than a dozen reporters and photographers have said they were stopped, questioned, and searched by CBP officers at airports and border crossings. In some cases, they were detained for several hours. Along the border with Mexico, some journalists appear to have been targeted because their identities, photographs, and movements were in a secret database maintained by the CBP, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security.

In November 2017, then-NBC News journalist Alastair Jamieson of Britain [was detained for an hour](#) when he arrived at the Miami airport from London. A CBP agent questioned Jamieson about his travels in the Middle East and repeatedly accused him of being part of the “fake news” media. In June 2018, *Washington Post* senior editor Ann Gerhart and her husband, *New York Times Magazine* writer Michael Sokolove, [were questioned about their profession and politics](#) when they arrived at the Newark airport from a Caribbean vacation. The CBP agent demanded to know their opinion of Trump and told the two American journalists that the press had been too critical of him and should “fall in line.”

David Mack, an Australian journalist who works at *BuzzFeed News* in the U.S., [was stopped and aggressively questioned](#) about the website’s reporting when he landed at New York’s JFK airport from London in early February 2019. The CBP agent focused on BuzzFeed’s coverage of special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of Trump’s 2016 election campaign, and he erroneously insisted to Mack that Mueller had called *BuzzFeed* “fake news” in a press conference. After *BuzzFeed* complained to the CBP, its assistant commissioner for public affairs, Andrew Meehan, apologized to Mack in a statement and said it was investigating the incident. Mack’s treatment “does not reflect the agency, and certainly not the professionalism that its officers strive to maintain,” Meehan said.

However, harassment of journalists at U.S. entry points continued. American freelance journalist Manuel Rapalo, who reported for Al-Jazeera on migrants traveling toward the U.S. in Mexico, [was stopped and questioned](#) later in February, for the third time, as he was returning home. After scanning his passport at the Miami airport, a CBP agent questioned Rapalo for more than an hour about his

work, searched his notebooks, and asked why they included information about filing Freedom of Information Act requests.

When American *Rolling Stone* journalist Seth Harp arrived at the Austin airport from Mexico City in May 2019, he [was detained and aggressively questioned](#) by CBP agents for four hours about his work, his conversations with editors and colleagues, and his political views. In [an account](#) of his experience on *The Intercept* website, Harp wrote that the CBP agents read his notes and searched his cell phone and laptop computer, recording the laptop’s serial number and the phone’s settings.

Independent American photographer Tim Stegmaier [was detained by CBP agents](#) for more than four hours when he arrived in Detroit in June 2019 from Shanghai after a working trip in the Philippines. The agents confiscated his computer, camera, and phone after finding images of unclothed Filipino children playing in filthy water and industrial waste. Three months later, in response to written protests from media and civil liberties organizations, the CBP said in a letter that Stegmaier had done nothing illegal, and his equipment was returned.

Ben Watson, a U.S. Army veteran and news editor at *Defense One*, an Atlantic Media publication that covers the defense industry, [was stopped and questioned](#) when he arrived from Denmark at Washington’s Dulles International Airport in October 2019. When Watson replied “journalism” to a routine question about his occupation, the CBP agent responded, “So you write propaganda, right?”

When he said no, the agent kept asking the same question, Watson later recounted in articles in *Defense One*, *The New York Times*, and the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker. Watson then said to the agent, “I am in journalism. Covering national security. And homeland security. And with many of the same skills I used in the U.S. Army as a public affairs officer. Some would argue that’s propaganda.” But the agent kept repeating, “You write propaganda, right?” Finally, Watson told him, “For the purposes of expediting this conversation, yes.” The agent returned his passport and allowed him to pass.

“I’ve honestly never had a human attempt to provoke me like this before in my life,” Watson tweeted afterward. “I felt intimidated and bullied,” he told the *Times*. A few days after that encounter, Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan said at a press briefing that harassment of journalists by CBP agents is “absolutely unacceptable, unequivocally.”

In November 2019, the American Civil Liberties Union

[filed a lawsuit](#) against the Department of Homeland Security on behalf of five American freelance photojournalists who had been stopped and interrogated at border crossings at various times in 2018 and 2019. Each had been taking photographs for American news organizations documenting a giant caravan of Latin American migrants traveling through Mexico toward the U.S. border. Trump had publicly railed against the caravan and put pressure on American and Mexican officials to stop the migrants from entering the U.S.

The lawsuit stated that photographers Mark Abramson, Bing Guan, Go Nakamura, Kitra Cahana, and Ariana Drehsler were each detained at border crossings from Mexico into the U.S. and questioned extensively about details of the caravan. CBP agents inspected some of their notebooks and cameras. All five had been named and pictured in a CBP database of journalists covering the caravan, along with organizers, lawyers, and “instigators.” After the database was leaked to a San Diego television reporter, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press sued the government for records about it. The CBP confirmed in a letter that it had worked with other U.S. and Mexican agencies to [collect information](#) about people “possibly assisting migrants in crossing the border illegally and/or having some level of participation in the violent incursion events” at border crossings.

“Custom and Border Protection acts like a rogue agency,” Reporters Committee legal director Katie Townsend told me. She cited “suspicion-less searches of journalists and their phones, notes and equipment” and “hostility toward journalists” in questioning by CBP agents at border entry points.

IMPACT OUTSIDE THE U.S.

Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin were in a good mood when they sat down in front of the press at the annual Group of 20 summit meeting in Osaka, Japan, on June 27, 2019. While cameras and microphones were being set up, Trump joked, “Get rid of them.”

Then, to Putin, Trump added, “Fake news is a great term, isn’t it? You don’t have this problem in Russia, but we do.”

“We also have,” Putin answered in English. “It’s the same.”

In fact, the Russian government already controls major news outlets there, and it has harassed most of its few

independent journalists. Since 2000, the year Putin came to power, at least 25 journalists have been [murdered](#) there in retaliation for their work, according to CPJ research.

Their exchange was a revealing example of the international reach of Trump’s treatment of the American press. Authoritarian leaders in other countries have used “fake news” as their justification for restricting press freedom, and many of them praised Trump’s rhetoric as encouragement.

“His caustic rhetoric and continuing attacks on journalists are echoing around the world,” said University of North Carolina law professor David Ardia, co-director of the UNC Center for Media Law and Policy. “In other countries, they’re thinking, ‘If the U.S. does not value independent journalism, why should we have it?’ It’s diminishing journalism around the world.”

Between January 2017 and May 2019, at least 26 countries have enacted or introduced laws and government rules restricting online media and journalistic access in the name of fake news, according to Sarah Repucci, vice president for research and analysis for Freedom House. Leaders of Poland, Hungary, Turkey, China, Philippines, and Cambodia are among those cracking down on journalists who have cited the example of Trump and “fake news,” often after meeting with and being praised by him.

“What concerns me,” said former White House communications director Dubke, “is that authoritarian leaders who had already placed restrictions on their press are using President Trump’s words to justify what they are doing. It’s convenient for them to do so.”

But Trump’s role is much greater than that, as *New York Times* publisher A.G. Sulzberger said in a September 2019 speech at Brown University, which was then [published in the Times](#). “In attacking American media, President Trump has done more than undermine his own citizens’ faith in the news organizations attempting to hold him accountable,” he said. “He has effectively given foreign leaders permission to do the same with their countries’ journalists and given them the vocabulary with which to do it.

“They’ve eagerly embraced the approach,” Sulzberger said, citing research by the *Times*. “In the past few years, more than 50 prime ministers, presidents, and other government leaders across five continents have used the term ‘fake news’ to justify varying levels of anti-press activity.” Sulzberger listed leaders and officials in Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, Philippines, Hungary, Brazil, Venezuela, Malawi, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Cambodia, Myanmar, Mexico, and Israel as examples.



Activists dressed as Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman demonstrate in front of the U.S. State Department in Washington on October 19, 2018, calling for sanctions against Saudi Arabia. The CIA determined that the crown prince directed the murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi. (Reuters/ Kevin Lamarque)

“I have raised these concerns with President Trump,” Sulzberger said, referring to a July 20, 2018, Oval Office meeting between the two men. “I’ve told him that these efforts to attack and suppress independent journalism is what the United States is now inspiring abroad. Though he listened politely and expressed concern, he has continued to escalate his anti-press rhetoric, which has reached new heights as he campaigns for re-election.”

The Trump administration “has retreated from our country’s historical role as a defender of the free press,” Sulzberger said. “Seeing that, other countries are targeting journalists with a growing sense of impunity.”

At the end of 2019, at least 250 journalists in countries around the world were jailed in relation to their work, according to CPJ’s annual global survey. Three of the worst jailers – Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – have strong U.S. military, economic, and political ties.

When Saudi assassins murdered *Washington Post*

columnist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, on October 2, 2018, he was one of 34 journalists killed around the world that year, according to CPJ. The CIA concluded that the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, ordered the killing and dismemberment of Khashoggi, an outspoken critic of his rule. But Trump has taken no action against the crown prince or Saudi Arabia, while maintaining normal diplomatic, military and economic relations. “The Trump administration chased potential weapons deals with the Saudis instead of mustering the courage to defend America’s values of press freedom and human rights,” *Post* publisher Fred Ryan [wrote](#) on the first anniversary of Khashoggi’s murder.

NEWS MEDIA RESPONSE

How should fact-finding news media and journalists respond to Trump’s determined efforts to destroy

their credibility with the American public?

Trump's false statements and attacks on the press have been amplified by partisan media and by digital trolls propagating disinformation, making it increasingly difficult for many Americans to tell truth from propaganda and lies. This partisan divide also complicates the role of the news media in holding the president accountable for his actions, false statements, and attacks – one of the most important functions of the American press – without appearing to be adversarial.

"I think many of our colleagues see the president's attacks, his constant bashing of the media, as a rationale, as an excuse to cross the line themselves, to push back, and that is a big mistake," Fox News anchor Chris Wallace said in his December 11, 2019, press freedom speech in Washington. "I see it all the time on the front page of major newspapers and the lead of the evening news: fact mixed with opinion, buzzwords like 'bombshell' and 'scandal.' The animus of the reporter and editor is as plain to see as the headline."

"I've never been so worried about public attitudes about the media," said Maryland journalism Dean Dalglish. "I wish the media was not so driven by how much they detest the president. Newsrooms do not appear impartial. Editorial comments pop into the text of news stories. I don't think that serves us well."

David McCraw, deputy general counsel of the *New York Times*, disagreed somewhat. "On the press side, there has been an unusual amount of restraint," he told me. "Mainstream news organizations have not engaged in a lot of back and forth. We put ourselves in a difficult position when we are the attack dog rather than the watch dog. We cannot be perceived as partisan in a political debate."

Washington Post editor Marty Baron famously said at a journalism conference in February 2017, in the early days of the Trump administration, "The way I view it is, we're not at war with the administration, we're at work. We're doing our jobs."

However, changes in the norms of the mainstream news media have contributed to the difficulty that audiences can have in separating fact from opinion. A trend toward increased analysis and reportorial "voice" in news stories, while making them more informative and engaging, can veer into what appears to be opinion or partisanship. Even when labeled properly, news and opinion are intermingled on news websites.

Cable television news networks indiscriminately mix reporting and opinion on the same shows. Newspaper

reporters often appear as guests, some under paid contract, in these cable news discussion formats, which makes it difficult for viewers to recognize whether they are stating opinions while explaining the news.

"We hurt ourselves by going on opinion shows, even though the reporters who go on the shows try not to be opinionated," Leslie Stahl told me. "Just being there makes it appear that they are opinionated. That used to be forbidden. The dam broke, and it's a flood now."

The reporters are brought onto the cable news talk shows "as experts on facts, but the public has a hard time discerning opinion from facts," Maryland's Dalglish said. "You have to be really careful about what shows you go on, unless you work for the opinion page."

That does not mean that the press should pull back from vigorous accountability reporting about Trump and his administration, which clearly is what he wants. "Point out his lies, raise issues, but don't be partisan," ProPublica's Steiger told me.

"The best way to correct the record is for journalists to do good work and to act responsibly," said Georgia media law professor Jonathan Peters. "They should make every effort to get the story right and to tell it fairly. They should be as transparent as possible about their reporting."

However, he said, "In addition to doing good work and acting responsibly, the press needs to stand up for itself as an institution and for the role of a free press in a democracy" and "sometimes suspend normal relations with the administration."

Peters made several illustrative suggestions: "If an official or a surrogate is known to make false claims, he or she should not appear on news programs or be used as a source. If an official refuses to answer a journalist's question at a press briefing, the next journalist should ask the same question. If the administration excludes a journalist from an event on the basis of his or her coverage, other journalists should refuse to attend."

For example, both Peters and Brown, from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, applauded CNN for immediately filing a lawsuit in federal court when the White House revoked the press credential of CNN reporter Jim Acosta in 2018. "It was important that CNN went to court to show the public the importance of press freedom," Brown told me.

New York University journalism professor and media critic Jay Rosen suggested that news organizations change their coverage of the president "to an emergency setting." He urged them in his "Press Think" blog to stop



Trump welcomes Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi to the White House on April 9, 2019. Egypt is one of the world's worst jailers of journalists, according to CPJ research. (Reuters/Carlos Barria)

live coverage of Trump's speeches, rallies and press conferences, no longer participate in his briefings, sprays and gaggles, and not agree to briefings and interviews in which administration officials cannot be named.

Utah media law professor RonNell Anderson Jones also wants the press to do more to fight back. "It troubles me that journalists are still downplaying the threat to the press that the president and his administration poses," she said. "The press is still trying to hold on to its own norms and not get down in the mud with the president. The press needs to advocate to the people for the importance of freedom of the press."

That is what a coalition of press freedom groups and news organizations are doing. CPJ and Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press last year launched the "Protect Press Freedom Campaign." In television, radio, digital and

print ads, and social media posts, the campaign's 50 news media and nonprofit group partners are promoting press freedom and the importance of keeping people informed. *The Washington Post* also started its own Press Freedom Partnership with CPJ, the Reporters Committee and other press freedom groups.

"This is an opportunity for news organizations to remind the public about the important role press freedom plays in keeping our communities informed," Brown, of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, told me. "It is not about politics."

Publishers Sulzberger of *The New York Times* and Ryan of *The Washington Post* – and their editorial pages – have publicly taken Trump to task and vigorously defended press freedom in ways that would not be appropriate for their news pages. "They are the appropriate people to



Members of the media raise their hands to ask questions as Trump holds a news conference in New Delhi on February 25, 2020. The Trump administration has retreated from the traditional U.S. role of defending press freedom worldwide. (Reuters/Adnan Abidi)

respond,” *Times* lawyer McCraw said, “editorial writers, publishers, press groups.”

I had expected the 2020 election campaign to test how the press was evolving in its response to Trump’s attacks on its credibility, as it may still. But the COVID-19 pandemic already has posed a much greater test. The press has a crucial dual role: informing Americans as fully as possible about the health and economic crisis – and thoroughly scrutinizing how the federal, state, and local governments and the private sector are responding. That includes aggressive reporting to hold the president and his administration accountable for how they are steering the country

through this dangerous storm.

At this writing, I believe the news media have been rising to that challenge, despite increasingly difficult working conditions. Despite early public skepticism about the performance of the press, the audiences for broadcast network and cable news and newspaper websites have grown immensely. That may well increase both Trump’s preoccupation with coverage of him and the intensity of his attacks on the press as the election nears. While almost everything about American life continues to change rapidly and unpredictably, the importance of the press and how it meets that challenge will only grow. ♦

Recommendations

The Committee to Protect Journalists makes the following recommendations to the Trump administration:

- Publicly recognize and affirm the role of a free press in a democracy and refrain from delegitimizing or discrediting the media or journalists performing their vital function -- not least during a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Refrain from vilifying individual journalists and media outlets, including on Twitter.
- Resume daily press briefings and ensure that reporters independently credentialed by the White House Correspondents Association are granted access. Ensure journalists and their associations have equal and fair access to the White House and State Department and are not punished for unfavorable coverage.
- Speak to reporters on the record and avoid over-reliance on confidential briefings. Avoid the perception of political favoritism by granting presidential interviews to a range of news outlets, not just those that produce favorable coverage.
- Do not retaliate against media outlets by interfering or threatening to interfere in the financial independence of their owners. Refrain from threats to rescind the broadcasting licenses of television and radio stations regarded as critical of the administration or its supporters.
- Instruct all government departments to ensure timely compliance with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests without regard to the media organizations or reporters filing those requests.
- Implement, at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the recommendations laid out in CPJ's 2018 report "[Nothing to Declare](#)," including requiring a warrant for device searches and releasing transparency reports about such searches.
- Prohibit DHS and CBP agents from asking journalists about their beats, opinions, contacts, or coverage. Provide the information related to CBP as requested in the Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed by CPJ and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP) without further delay.
- End the practice of bringing espionage charges against news sources who leak classified information to journalists, as it creates a chilling effect and restricts the free flow of information on matters of public interest. Drop the espionage charges against Julian Assange and cease efforts to extradite him to the U.S.
- Order the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to comply with the requirement, under the National Defense Authorization Act, to provide an unclassified report to Congress listing individuals determined to be involved in any way in the 2018 murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi. Impose sanctions on those deemed to be responsible, including Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman.



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