

Rhetoric, Reality, and the Digital Bully Pulpit: Analyzing Donald Trump's Alternative Media Strategy and its Institutional Implications

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Abstract: The last few years in American politics have turned all that on its head with Donald Trump. The Trump media policy was designed to provoke a direct feud between the traditional institutional journalism and traditional corporate news organizations. A comprehensive and precise analysis of how and why Trump's alternative media campaign works and the legacy of the deep structures. This paper is not about style but rather proposes an institutional evaluation of the communication system grounded in three processes: rhetorical activation of the 'fake news' paradigm as an epistemic defense device, direct and frequent communication with the public through social media and the complete subtraction of the traditional gatekeepers of the journalistic system. This paper, which is rooted in media populism and in the literature on the digital agenda-setting theory and political economy of the modern attention market, demonstrates Trump's highly profitable and co-dependent relationship with the institutions he verbally attacked. The analysis concludes that this model of media has been able to effectively decentralise political power, hasten the fragmentation of the public information ecosystem, institutionalise irreconcilable data echo chamber and provide an operating manual for current-day populist political players globally. This paper looks at these systematic changes and the structural consequences for democratic accountability, self-regulation of the media, and the public trust in journalism.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Media Policy, Political Communication, Populism, Social Media, Agenda-Setting, Attention Economy, Public Sphere.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The development of communication technologies and the institutional structures of the executive branch to captivate the populace, provide a frame for policy agendas, and create political legitimacy is a fundamental part of the history of the American presidency. All the fundamental shifts in the political communications environment have necessitated a reconfiguration of the way the country's top job relates to institutional gatekeepers. In the twentieth century, successful executives were not only the first to embrace new media, but they also learned about their technical and psychological characteristics in an intuitive way. The mass use of radio gave Franklin D. Roosevelt a chance to fight a generally malevolent corporate press, creating a personal, direct, and extremely intimate relationship with citizens in their own living room through his famous 'fireside chats'. In his press conferences, which he chose to be live, unedited, and televised, rather than offering the printed interpretation, John F. Kennedy perceived the visual grammar and immediacy of television. Much of the same has been achieved in the Obama administration 15 years on, when the administration was successful in adapting early Web 2.0 designs and social media to create very decentralized grassroots volunteer networks that transformed campaign finance, political mobilization and policy advocacy. These differences in structure occurred within a set of common institutional parameters in which each historical president worked. If structurally oppositional, the institutional press was always treated with respect and was perceived as a necessary and legitimate element of democratic accountability. But the press room was still a place where policies were presented and defended, and where external verification was sought. With the political elevation of Donald J. Trump this established normal came to an end. His candidacy brought about a complete change of executive communication. Trump wasn't only trying

to influence, control or engineer the traditional media, but to perceive it as the adversary of the political status quo. Trump has created a very polarized media campaign, labeling corporate media the enemy of the people and making a habit of disparaging critical, information-based news as 'fake news'. Meanwhile, his own social media pages were made official platforms for governance, and he began to govern via his social media posts. This thorough research paper presents a deep structural examination of the operation of Trump's alternative media policy, its ideology and its long-term institutional impact. It's not a series of outbursts or a series of odd behaviors, it's a very rationalized, very coherent media policy, a media policy that will have to last a long time to beat out of the way competitors, a media policy that will have to out-compete in a hyper-fragmented media ecology that's attention-focused and moving very quickly. The gist of the thesis is that Trump's media strategy is an attempt to discredit the traditional information brokers and to take the national narrative from them, for good. In this model neither the executive nor the traditional media networks were cut off, but a very profitable, close and mutually dependent relationship between the two was created. The co-dependency has profoundly changed the norms of political journalism, as well as the public epistemic trust and the democratic public sphere. It has to be understood that this media policy is not just this time's quick debate but should be looked at as a structural issue. The change was not a purely economic or technological one. It was driven by structural shifts over the last several decades: deregulating broadcasting, the downfall of the local press, cable news channels need a constant flow of breaking news, and algorithmic platforms to push outrage over nuance. These trends were intensified and institutionalized as a typical approach to governance by Trump's strategy. This paper delves into the development of this strategy and the reasons why its impact will remain in politics for many years to come.

2. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA POLICY

Understanding the radical change being made by the Trump administration requires a bit of context. The structure of the presidency and the press have been a dynamic one from the inception of the republic. The Partisan press of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was openly funded by political parties and factions. Editors were commissioned to voice the opinion of politicians, and there was no professional norm of objectivity. Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson were close friends of newspaper editors who they could use as direct channels for policy dissemination. The penny presses and the introduction of the rotary type printing press in the mid-1800s changed the economics of journalism from party subsidies to advertising. The development of this commercialization was the precursor to the modern notion of the professionalization of the journalist. The White House press corps was an established press corps by the early twentieth century. The Roosevelt and Wilson Administrations began holding regular press conferences, recognizing that it was essential to executive management at the time to be able to control the press. Roosevelt advertised the presidency as a 'bully pulpit' for influencing public morals and directing legislative agendas. But here, in this pulpit, this still depended on print journalists to interpret and broadcast the president's message. With the introduction of broadcast media, the real paradigm changes towards unmediated communication started. Radio broke down the intermediate layer and physical gap between the speaker and the listener. The use of the medium by FDR provided him the opportunity to reach the people directly, thus bypassing the editorial blinds and filters of the newspaper publishers who were opposed to his New Deal economic policies. Television, which added an important visual element to political communication, was introduced in the middle of the twentieth century. The historic 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates televised the importance of physical appearance, charisma and visual composure as crucial elements of political authority alongside substantive issues of policy. It was possible for Kennedy to become a master of such political theater with his subsequent live televised press conferences, where he could show wit and control. The ability of the Reagan administration to use professional media advisers, television producers and image consultants to make sure that every public appearance was flawless and under strict control was the most refined theatrical aspect. The goal was to fill out the news with a single -- and intentionally designed -- daily message, so that journalists have fewer chances to challenge the official line.

This controlled pattern in the day was interrupted by 24-hour cable news networks, such as CNN, which were followed by Fox News and MSNBC in the late '80s and '90s. Media usage moved from the conventional evening news product to an ongoing and unending information stream. Whereas the Clinton administration adapted to this fast-paced world by creating a lightning-fast communications team to respond to bad news in an instant, before it could take over the endless news cycle. The Internet, digital media, and social networks were added in the early twenty first century. The 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns proved that digital can help create a direct donor network and mobilize voters without relying on corporate media. But the Obama White House, upon assuming power, continued to engage in conventional press management in the usual framework of the White House press room. The institutional structure stayed in place—the press asked the administration questions, and the administration responded to them, and the two respected each

other's authority in the democratic system. The foundations were in place for direct digital engagement, but institutional barriers hadn't been broken.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Media Populism and Epistemic Polarization

Donald Trump's style of media communication doesn't just stem from his personal peculiarities; it's rooted in the theory of media populism. The ideologists offer a dichotomy of society in which it is divided into two homogeneous and hostile groups: the 'pure, authentic people' and the 'corrupt, self-serving elite'. Viewed in this context, institutional journalism does not function as an objective observer but also as a tool of public accountability. Rather it is seen as an ideological arm of the elite which serves its own interest, stifles popular preferences, shapes public opinion, and protects at any cost the status quo. Media populism refers to the ways in which the actors of populism engage in performing this conflict through media and establish themselves as the true voice of the people, in contrast to a corrupt institutional framework. Trump became a living example of the application of these populist ideas when he created an ad hoc political communication system that bypasses the media. He used social media as his primary tool to distribute his message and told his followers that he was able to circumvent the dishonest corporate media filter. As a result of this policy, deep epistemic polarization occurred. Trump's supporters were told that the media was a lie, so that the information they were fed could be accepted as truth. What had been sent to Trump's followers was that the media was a lie and that this is how they could validate the information they were fed. This ecosystem does not judge critiques, investigations and fact corrections by the content of the evidence that is provided. Rather, they were immediately labelled as politically motivated attacks by an elite opponent. This led to the situation of factual baselines being lost and the credibility being exclusively political.

3.2 Digital Agenda-Setting and Reverse Priming

Classical agenda-setting theory, developed by Drs. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, suggests that the media have a stronger political influence because they can influence the public's agenda through the choice of coverage, rather than in influencing the public's opinion. The dissemination of information – what was reported, what was ignored, and what was withheld – is traditionally the preserve of the gatekeepers. Trump's media policy flipped up this classic bit of "agenda-setting" and "reverse priming," establishing a digital agenda-setting and reverse-priming process. With the help of massively large Twitter and Facebook accounts and an easy understanding of media psychology, Trump showed how much influence he has over the daily news cycle of major television outlets and newspapers. The reverse agenda-setting took place via frequent, provocative digital updates. One tweet, usually containing a political tirade, a sudden policy change or a very controversial statement, may result in cable news network's dumping their existing plans and spending hours of airtime to dissect the content. Classical media gatekeepers were put in a reactive state permanently. They were unable to set up the agenda for the news by policy, investigative interest, or public utility, but were constrained by the rhetoric of the Executive. Trump knew that the business model of the contemporary news media required fresh and potent (and often inflammatory) content, and he offered it on a regular basis, keeping himself central to the national conversation.

3.3 The Structural Re-Engineering of the Public Sphere

The idealized idea of the democratic public sphere, which Jürgen Habermas proposes, is the space in which people come together to discuss rationally, critically and, ultimately, rationally and with evidence, to arrive at consensus on a matter, based on shared facts. The model is one in which independent journalism acts as the basic infrastructure for providing verified information on which to base productive public deliberation. Trump's alternative media policy structurally changed this public sphere, from consensus-building to one focused on constant conflict and disintegration. The technical infrastructure of business social media platforms hastened this transformation. The algorithms are not developed to build rational consensus on these digital networks, but instead, the user is used, retained, and monetized. These systems naturally amplify content that elicits strong emotional responses, especially outrage, tribal loyalty, and fear. Trump's strategy played right into these dynamics of algorithms. He employed direct digital communication, bypassing deliberate and slower traditional institutional communication, which is characterized by polarization of rhetoric. The democratic public sphere was transformed into a very polarized network of fragmented echo chambers. In this context, the purpose of political communication no longer was to convince citizens who were on the fence, but to

foster consensus on action towards policy objectives. The primary objective, however, was to continuously mobilize the core political base to change the nature of democratic governance, by engaging the political base emotionally.

4. STRUCTURAL BREAKDOWN OF THE MEDIA STRATEGY

4.1 The 'Fake News' Weapon: Epistemic Defense and Delegitimization

The key rhetorical weapon of Trump's media strategy was the systematic weaponization of the term 'fake news'. It first became a popular term during the 2016 election campaign to refer to completely bogus, commercial content on foreign sites designed to promote their algorithms. Trump, however, ingeniously took up the term, using it as a potent political weapon. 'Fake news' was not a term describing the actual creation of fake news, but, rather, an umbrella term used to refer to any news outlet, investigative piece, polling data or fact that tarnished his administration. This is a semantic shift on purpose and is a way of trying to attack the independent role of the press as a check on political power. This was a very effective epistemic defense strategy. Trump repeatedly said his political base never would be criticized by outside forces because he felt the mainstream media was dishonest, corrupt and had an agenda. If investigative journalism unmasked problems in administrative procedures, disagreements among officials, or even potential legal issues, the nature of the issues had never been mentioned or discussed. Rather, the whole reporting agency was declared corrupt. This manner it destroyed the basis of facts that common to it, on which public accountability might be established. If institutions of fact-confirming are considered illegitimate, then all facts they can provide can be disregarded, and the executive will be the only one trusted for facts for his followers.

4.2 Circumventing Gatekeepers: Executive Governance via Social Media

The other key aspect of Trump's media policy was the complete bypass of traditional media gatekeepers. This is how presidential communications were traditionally handled: through an extremely formalized and institutionalized structure of press secretaries, speechwriters, policy advisers, and formal press briefings. Journalists served as gatekeepers, taking this information, challenging assumptions, giving historical perspectives, and shaping the information for the audience. Trump reduced this entire mechanism to the level of a personal social media, turning his personal social media into the main medium for the official actions of the executive. Many of the key policy changes—imposing foreign tariffs, altering military gender change policies, withdrawing from international agreements to name a few—were made on social media with little advance warning to cabinet officials, congressional leaders or his own communications office. The direct distribution model made the White House press corps obsolete and altered the way political journalism worked. Briefings were either cancelled for prolonged periods or become highly combative and made for conflict rather than information. Journalists weren't able to engage in the policy analysis that required time to explore its possible long-term implementation or take up the ground of its actual impact. The unmediated feed gave the president the power to determine the agenda and conditions of debate, and he did so in a way that made it impossible for the press to question the facts of the policies behind the discussion.

4.3 Exploiting the Attention Economy and Algorithmic Visibility

In today's arena of attention scarcity, Trump's media campaign was a very sophisticated operation. In the digital age, there is so much competition that the most valuable and scarce resource is public attention. But, in a fast-paced digital era, traditional political communication tools, from carefully crafted words to lengthy policy papers and predictable media releases, were no longer proving effective, and Trump had to find a way to get around that. He explored the concepts of "absolute visibility" in the creation of his communication, which was provocative, unpredictable, and visually sharp. To get through the digital noise, he employed capitals, exclamation points, nicknames for people, and dramatic statements. This was an excellent tactic to play the algorithms of major social media platforms that prefer engagement metrics like likes retweets, comments and shares. These algorithms are based around content that has highly emotional properties and elicits a quick response from the user, making Trump's confrontational approach to updates a constant favorite toward the top of digital feeds the world over. It was the structural advantage that came from this algorithmic control. He made it his practice to keep the public's eye on his personal statements and feuds, shoving other legislative items, sophisticated policy arguments and investigations out of the spotlight and letting the world know that the attention market is a potent political weapon in the digital era.

5. THE MEDIA'S CONUNDRUM: COMMERCIAL CO-DEPENDENCY

Part of the structural nature of Trump's media policy that he never talked about but has been important is the way the news media and White House have been so deeply dependent on each other, and Trump's "warping" of them that he so loudly described. As Trump continuously labeled major news outlets and newspapers such as "failing," "corrupt" and "illegitimate," he ascended to the presidency and began his campaign to rule and made a lot of money for corporate media. The modern news business is far more competitive, relies on clicks and ratings on cable, engagements, and revenues from subscriptions. Trump's volatile and confrontational approach was a non-stop very entertaining story line that attracted a lot of views – what was being referred to as “the Trump Bump”. Many top media executives recognized this business reality, observing that Trump's conduct could be very troubling from a normative standpoint in terms of democracy, but was very profitable from a business one. The cable station ratings were off the charts, and online digital sales in big national newspapers were up sharply as an anxious audience watched live on TV about the latest political development. It gave rise to a very serious dilemma of ethics and operation for journalism. As they become professional obligors of the president and their position, news media found itself between a rock and a hard place, having to use the “wildest” and most “partisan” of the president's statements, the ones that have the most engagement and that generate more revenue.

The impact of this corporate influence brought mainstream media under pressure and further polarized the media. With the constant storyline of crisis, different networks and publications started to cater to parts of the audience about how they wanted to cover it. Some networks expressed a decidedly anti-democratic stance, with their news reports serving as a barrier to democracy, while others were pro-administration and went over to the conservatives for the benefit of those audiences. This business fragmenting was responsible for the demise of a neutral public service and a neutral profession. The press was no longer a space for common knowledge; it was highly politicized and polarized, and as one political player exploited the marketplace's weaknesses, one was able to reform the institutional press. The working world of newsrooms has forever changed in this atmosphere. Previously, investigative teams had been working for many months on issues of systemic corruption or policy analysis; now they were being called upon to investigate the top-of-the-news controversy of the day. This high-speed news pace pushed stories that normally would have dominated the political news for weeks to the sidelines in forty-eight hours as the first round of provocative announcements gave way to a new round. Journalism got very reactive, as it was hard to deliver depth in a place where speed, conflict, and quick monetizing of the audience were key.

6. INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND LONG-TERM LEGACY

6.1 The Erosion of Democratic Norms and Public Epistemic Trust

The impact of Trump's alternative media strategy is far reaching and will have long-lasting effects on American democracy's institutions. The most important impact is the general erosion of public epistemic trust. A key precondition of democracy is a degree of common understanding about acceptable evidence, the truth of the facts, and an acceptable institutional legitimacy. Trump's rhetorical campaign against investigative journalists, scientific consensus, and oversight governments over the past four years has succeeded in undermining the legitimacy of those sources of information with a significant part of the electorate. Empirical polling and sociological research before and after his presidency show that there was a strong partisan divide on institutional credibility. Self-described conservatives' trust in traditional news media also dropped to a historic low, and they increasingly relied on alternative, highly partisan information networks. This loss of confidence is particularly hard to overcome when solving problems collectively. If public health direction, election results, economic statistics and environmental data are all interpreted completely through a partisan prism, the potential for rational, public debate is lost, which poses a threat to long term democratic stability.

6.2 Balkanization of the Information Ecosystem

Trump's media policy was very good in terms of cementing the permanent public information divide. This has also been shaped by the events of January 6, 2021, when he was ultimately barred from mainstream platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which have since inspired the creation and expansion of a right-leaning network of digital platforms such as Parler, Rumble and now Trump's own platform, Truth Social. This was a change from the ideologically different readings of a common history to the institutionalization of separate histories. In this balkanized media world, there are big chunks of society, whose basic narratives are totally different and irreconcilable. The structure of these specialized

digital platforms is set up to limit interaction with other perspectives, uncomfortable facts, or checking for other evidence. The place where different arguments can be freely discussed and debated based on logic and evidence: that place is gone and in its place are networks of isolated echo chambers. In this context, misinformation can spread without repercussions and reinforced by group identity, and supported by the structure and design of platforms, especially those designed to encourage ideological polarization.

6.3 The Globalization of the Populist Communication Playbook

Finally, Trump's media policy can be used as a blueprint or operating manual for political communication that has been analyzed and emulated by other populist leaders, political campaigns, and authoritarian actors around the world. The strategy that Trump has been using has been adopted by many leaders worldwide in recent years – including those in Europe and Latin America. Nowadays, that "direct digital feed, not via institutional gatekeepers" approach to targeting investigative journalists as political enemies and to control the national narrative with deliberate shock value is now a common international tactic. Not so different, however, from Trump's media policy, as the world-wide adoption is evidence of this being a structural response to the intersection of commercial digital technology and today's populist politics. Political actors the world over now know that it is possible to beat the traditional journalistic rule, if the actor can create a strong emotional connection with a loyal audience, via other digital methods. The political rhetoric, which was long constrained by the institutional 'guardrails', has now been permanently altered, and a new institutional threshold has been established for international communication and campaigning by the Executive.

7. CONCLUSION

In fact, Trump's alternative media strategy is an unprecedented and lasting re-engineering of the partnership between the executive, the institutional press, and the democratic public sphere. His administration did not operate within the parameters of presidential media management but saw independent journalism as an existential threat and systematically attacked it by creating and disseminating the 'fake news' concept to erode the ability of journalists to serve as agents of public accountability. Trump's direct digital communication channels shifted the role of the news media from a proactive to a reactive one and turned policy making into a series of responses.

This approach worked well to take advantage of the structural weaknesses of the modern attention economy as well as the commercial logic of the 24-hour corporate news machine. An insistent co-dependency formed, one that could evoke such polarizing rhetoric that it would become part of the national conversation with a momentum and buzz that would lead to increased media attention and corporate profits. But the price of this approach has been very high in the institutions. It hastened the fragmentation of the public information space, entrenched fact-based silos, and undermined common epistemic trust to support collaborative and mutual democratic discussion.

From a communication scholar's perspective, or a journalist's or an institutional designer's, the Trump media policy is a case study that cannot be ignored. The digital bully pulpit has created a new structural norm for political communication that's hard to change. The struggles for democratic accountability, journalistic self-regulation and the recovery of a common public sphere will remain one of the most pressing structural crises of the modern digital age as future political players continue to adopt and adapt this operational plan.

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