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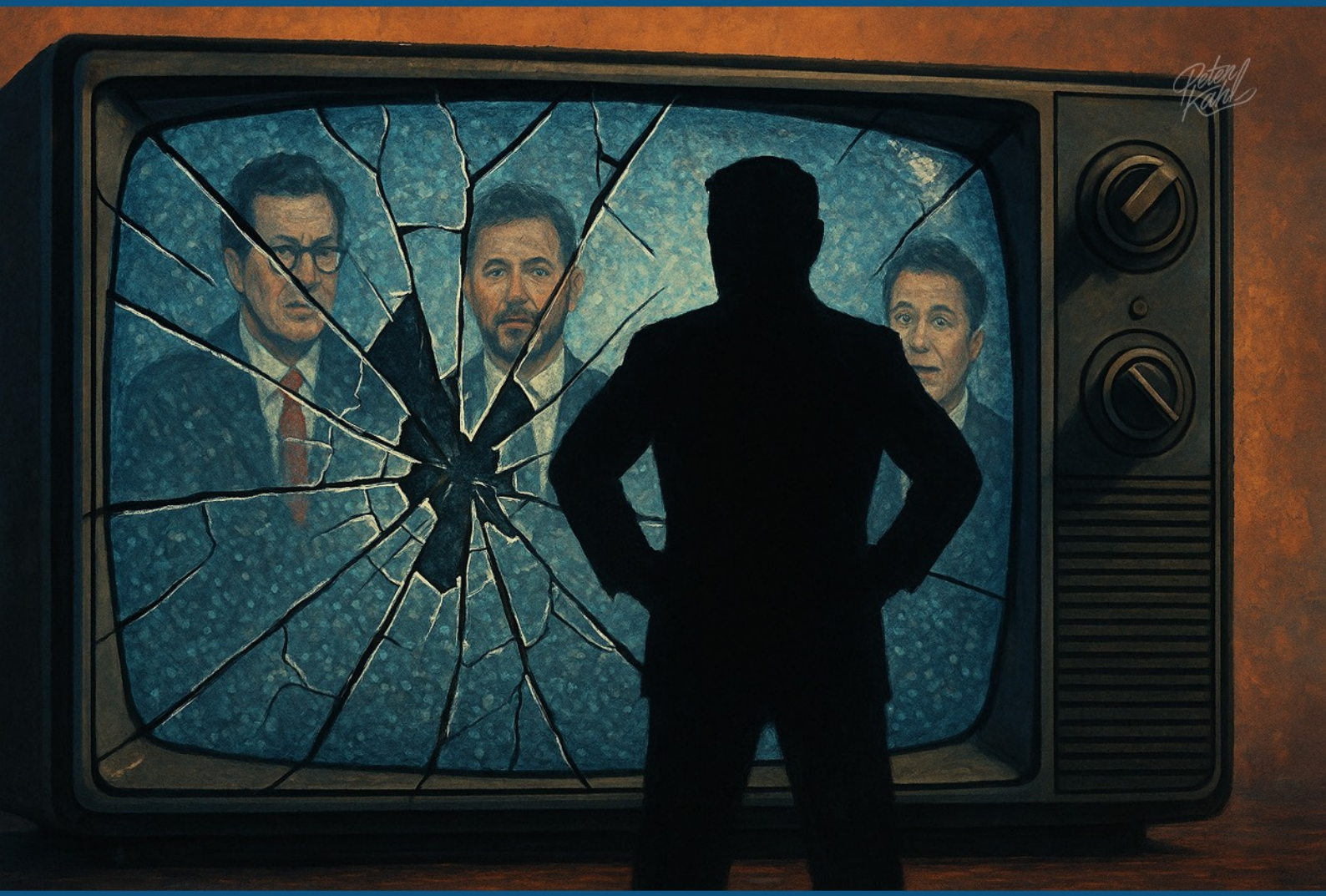

Kimmel Suspended, Colbert Outraged

How Trump Turns Dissent Into Disobedience

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Applied Case Study of Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience

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20 September 2025

First published in London by Lex et Ratio Ltd, 20 September 2025.

About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics, integrating legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies across public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This essay applies the framework developed in *Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience* (Kahl, 2025) to contemporary U.S. politics. It examines the suspension of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* under pressure from President Donald Trump and the FCC as a case study in authoritarian epistemic capture. Obedience is analysed not merely as behaviour but as epistemic submission: the substitution of another's judgment for one's own, the silencing of conscience, and the inhabiting of categories fabricated by authority. Drawing comparisons with Nazi concentration camp guards as test cases, the essay explores how dissonance is channelled into compliance and how fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds might resist such architectures of obedience.

Keywords

authoritarianism, obedience, epistemic clientelism, fiduciary–epistemic theory, cognitive dissonance, trump, jimmy kimmel, colbert, free speech, media censorship, populism, epistemic constitution

Working Paper Status

This paper is a draft contribution to an ongoing research programme on fiduciary–epistemic governance. It represents work in progress and is subject to further revision as the arguments are refined and situated within a broader book-length project. Readers are welcome to cite this version, but should note that substantive changes may be introduced in subsequent iterations.

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Last week, Disney-owned ABC abruptly suspended *Jimmy Kimmel Live* after the host made controversial remarks about conservative activist Charlie Kirk. The move came after pressure from the head of the Federal Communications Commission and was immediately celebrated by President Trump. Fellow late-night hosts Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Jimmy Fallon responded with satire and outrage, calling it what it was: censorship under political pressure.

At first glance, this may seem like another partisan skirmish in America's culture wars. But something more serious is happening. The Kimmel suspension is a case study in how authoritarian power takes root—not through tanks in the streets, but by redefining what counts as legitimate speech, narrowing the field of permissible expression, and punishing dissent.

Trump's second term has already given us a disturbing list of authoritarian moves: sending troops to Los Angeles and Washington against governors' wishes, threatening a military "invasion" of Chicago, deploying masked agents in immigration raids, and weaponising state power against critics. Scholars of authoritarianism like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (*How Democracies Die*) have long warned that this is how democracies unravel: not in a single coup, but through the steady erosion of candour, care, and accountability.

Yet many journalists still hesitate to call Trump what he is—an authoritarian. The reluctance stems partly from professional caution, partly from fear of lawsuits or accusations of partisanship. But words matter. As political theorist Erica Chenoweth has observed, people often realise they are living in an authoritarian state only after it has already taken hold.

The architecture of obedience

What is at stake here is not just freedom of speech in the narrow sense. It is the deeper question of how obedience works—how authority reshapes not just what people say, but what they perceive, believe, and know.

In my recent paper, *Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience*, I argue that obedience must be understood not merely as behaviour but as epistemic submission. To obey is not simply to do what one is told; it is to substitute another's judgment for one's own, to silence conscience, and to inhabit categories fabricated by authority.

The Nazi concentration camp guard provides the most chilling historical test case. Guards were not all sadists or ideologues. Many were ordinary men, recruited and trained in an epistemic environment that made cruelty appear as duty. They swore oaths that transferred conscience to Hitler. They were re-educated to "see differently," taught through propaganda and ritual to perceive Jews as enemies and violence as moral obligation.

Obedience, in this sense, was not just action. It was *knowing as one was told*.

From Nazi camps to campaigns

Of course, Trump's America is not Nazi Germany. But the mechanisms of epistemic capture—the ways in which people are taught to inhabit distorted categories—bear comparison.

When Trump denounces independent journalism as "fake news," he is not just criticising stories he dislikes; he is recoding truth itself as loyalty to him. When the FCC leans on a network to silence a comedian, it is not just

regulation; it is an assertion that public discourse must conform to political command. These are bargains of epistemic clientelism: citizens are offered belonging and recognition in exchange for assent to the leader's categories.

The suspension of Jimmy Kimmel, cheered on by the President of the United States, is not trivial. It is the shadow of the oath in a new guise: an act that tells citizens their judgment counts only if it aligns with authority.

Cognitive dissonance as hinge

Psychologists have long known how fragile independent judgment is. Solomon Asch's conformity experiments showed that people will deny their own senses to fit group consensus. Stanley Milgram demonstrated that ordinary individuals will inflict harm when ordered by authority. Leon Festinger revealed how cognitive dissonance—when actions and beliefs clash—is usually resolved by altering belief to fit behaviour.

For guards in Nazi camps, dissonance arose daily: seeing prisoners as human yet treating them as subhuman. Most resolved it by rationalisation ("orders must be followed"), obedience (conscience deferred to Hitler), or silence (inner dialogue suppressed). A few endured contradiction without resolving it, enacting what I call bounded freedom.

For citizens today, dissonance arises when they witness Trump's authoritarian tactics yet continue to support him, or when corporations like Disney capitulate to political pressure while claiming neutrality. The danger is that dissonance will again collapse into rationalisation, obedience, or silence. The challenge is to sustain contradiction long enough for freedom to persist.

Fiduciary duties of authority

So how should we define legitimate authority? Legal theorist Joseph Raz famously argued that authority provides "exclusionary reasons" for action—that we obey because authority replaces our own judgment. But that definition risks legitimising authoritarianism itself.

My alternative is to define authority as *fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship*. Just as trustees in law must act with candour, care, and loyalty toward those who depend on them, so too must political and epistemic authorities. Authority is legitimate not because it silences judgment but because it dignifies dependence, protecting the vulnerable while guiding judgment.

By this standard, the Nazi regime represented a wholesale fiduciary breach. It demanded loyalty while withholding candour, care, and truth. Trump's current manoeuvres show the same tendency: loyalty demanded, dissent punished, candour distorted, care denied.

Why this matters now

The lesson of history is that authoritarianism rarely announces itself. It arrives through small bargains, normalised distortions, and silenced voices. Guards at camps did not one day wake up sadists; they became entrapped in an architecture of obedience that restructured their world.

Why is Trump doing this? Authoritarian capture is not only about power but about fear. Trump seeks loyalty because it shields him from truth, accountability, and humiliation. To silence critics is to maintain the illusion of invulnerability. To bend institutions to his will is to secure recognition as the sole arbiter of reality. What looks like bravado is also epistemic insecurity: a desperate attempt to prevent dissonance from breaking through.

When a late-night host is suspended for offending the President, when journalists hesitate to use the word "authoritarian," when algorithms filter reality through opaque criteria serving corporate or political masters, we are already within such an architecture.

Are we at the point of no return?

Not yet. The United States still has independent courts, courageous journalists, and citizens willing to dissent. But authoritarianism consolidates through accumulation, not sudden coups. Each surrender to pressure—whether by a corporation, regulator, or media outlet—narrows the horizon of what can be said or imagined.

The point of no return is reached not with one act, but with the erosion of dissonance—when contradiction no longer sparks outrage, when silence replaces resistance, when obedience feels natural. The question is whether we will resist while contradiction still stings, or whether we will allow the architecture of obedience to harden into permanence.

Conclusion: dissonance as freedom

History shows that atrocity begins when fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds collapse—when candour, care, and loyalty are abandoned by those in power. But it also shows that freedom, fragile as it is, survives when people endure contradiction rather than collapsing into silence.

The architecture of obedience is not just a description of the past. It is a warning for the present. And in Trump's America, that warning could not be more urgent.

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Cite this work

Kahl, P. (2025). *Kimmel suspended, Colbert outraged: How Trump turns dissent into disobedience*. Lex et Ratio Ltd. GitHub: https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Kimmel-Suspended-Colbert-Outraged

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Edition History

Edition	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
—	Initial release	None	2025-09-20

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