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17 Breaking the Rules of Political Communication: Trump's Successes and Miscalculations

Susan J. Douglas

Writing about the presidency and the media in 2017 is a perilous enterprise, with Donald Trump violating virtually every rule of presidential messaging, decorum, and press management while the news media, in turn, struggle to adapt and keep pace with the near daily barrage of controversial and thus newsworthy events, while also clinging to—and revitalizing—traditional journalistic practices. This essay analyzes the extent to which Donald Trump and the news media, especially the broadcast and cable news channels, departed from precedent and violated many of the basic rules of campaign and presidential coverage. To appreciate the extent of Trump's rule-breaking—especially via his favorite mode of communication, Twitter—and the news media's response to it, we need to review over one hundred years of precedents that have accrued around campaign and especially presidential news coverage. Twitter also revived the question about whether new communications technologies make campaign or presidential history. And as we'll see, while Trump's style of engaging with the media was highly successful during the campaign in garnering attention and an estimated $5 million in free media, in the eyes of the press and a majority of the public, it began to fail miserably once he entered the Oval Office, where expectations for how to communicate with the press and the public are quite different.[1] So, I argue that while upending historical precedents for political communication can be quite successful during a campaign, where unpredictability is expected, it can backfire once one inhabits the presidency, an institution expected to embody and ensure stability.

Trump and his associates have made it clear that they loathe and have no respect for the press: "the opposition party" as Steve Bannon called them, "very dishonest" and purveyors of "fake news" as Mr. Trump repeatedly asserts. This is nothing new; Trump is simply much more explicit, public,

and outspoken about it, which for a president is not without its perils. Ever since George Washington's ambivalent attitudes toward and often passionate hatred of the press, many American presidents have shared this distrust of reporters and have had to calculate how to deal with the news media and, as communications technologies and outlets evolved and expanded, with the broader media overall. During their campaigns and administrations, presidents seek, by turns, to set the agenda about what is and is not important for the news media to cover, to co-opt, to censor and control, to evade, and even to manipulate and defame. And they have had to confront how these powerful institutions can shape, at times irrevocably and fatally, presidential destiny. In turn, media institutions, executives, and practitioners have had to recalibrate their practices and routines in response to new communications technologies and media environments, and to presidential media management strategies. New communications technologies can't make history on their own, but when their distinctive features, their affordances, mesh well with a president's performance style, new phases of and expectations for presidential messaging can take hold—as long as they also mesh with and enhance communication traditions embraced by the press.

Throughout presidential history, and especially with the proliferation of electronic media, candidates and presidents have sought to manage what the sociologist Erving Goffman famously called the "presentation of self," presenting a "frontstage" self, the ideal version of themselves they perform for voters, and protecting or concealing their "backstage" self, the one out of the public eye, who might be less than perfect. With the rise of public relations and image management, voters and journalists have become especially suspicious of these "frontstage" presentations of politicians, and thus have tried to gain access to unguarded backstage moments as the true indices of what candidates are really like.[2] Trump upended longstanding protocols surrounding such presentation of self as well.

The modern era of presidential news management began with William McKinley's 1896 campaign and his chief strategist Mark Hanna, who organized the distribution of nearly 200 million leaflets, tracts, and posters supporting McKinley and denouncing William Jennings Bryant, the populist candidate. Anticipating the affordances of broadcasting, Hanna backed this up with armies of "spellbinders" who went around the country making pro-McKinley and anti-Bryant speeches. This set the precedent for

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agenda-setting and for developing, repeating, and staying "on message." It was during McKinley's administration that an aide established the White House news "briefing," which Theodore Roosevelt himself took over during his famous "shaving hour" meetings, off-the-record exchanges with reporters that gave them direct access to the president and allowed the president to try to shape favorable coverage; they also formed the beginnings of the White House Press Corps. Roosevelt's secretary George Cortelyou, appreciating the increased agenda-setting power of a by-now robust and powerful press, arranged journalists' access to interviews and events, and gave them new working space inside the Executive Mansion, another precedent.[3] By 1913, Woodrow Wilson had instituted regularly scheduled press conferences—deferential by today's standards—and his successors felt compelled to follow suit. All of this was designed to curry favor with reporters who were seen as conduits to the people, and thus to public opinion.

It was Franklin Roosevelt, confronting the biggest economic crisis to face the nation and a newspaper industry overwhelming hostile to the New Deal, who pioneered in using a then-new medium, radio, to circumvent the press to speak directly to the public. He understood the intimacy radio afforded, with its emphasis on listening and the power of the human voice to convey familiarity and affinity. In both the 1936 and 1940 elections, two-thirds of the nation's newspapers editorially opposed Roosevelt's reelection, so his skilled use of radio through his "fireside chats," with his intimate "my friends" and "I–you" mode of address, was crucial to his political survival. He brilliantly exploited the affordances of this medium, and just as the radio networks were establishing their own news divisions that would now compete with the press.

Television introduced a new dynamic to campaigning, through the famous Kennedy-Nixon debates and the emphasis now on appearance and visual decorum, and to campaign advertising, more expensive than radio with the need for visuals. Dwight Eisenhower was the first president to have televised "fireside chats," and introduced the televised news conference in 1955 as a way to speak directly to the people and to counter the more conservative and critical elements of the Republican Party. These were not broadcast live, however; his media-savvy press secretary James Hagerty edited the films prior to broadcast to put Eisenhower in the best possible light. Indeed, it was Hagerty to whom the term "news management" was first applied.[4] The telegenic John F. Kennedy initiated the live, televised

press conference, a forum that conveyed his ability to be both authoritative and informal, holding sixty-four of them before his assassination. And with the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Civil Rights Movement, Kennedy had to develop effective television addresses to the American people that, by turns, admitted mistakes, reassured a terrified nation, and enunciated national moral standards. By the early 1960s then, the live, televised press conference and national address were established features of presidential messaging where the tug of war between the media and the administration over agenda-setting was fought out.

Despite his two successful presidential campaigns, Nixon hated the press; his and Vice President Spiro Agnew's stance was combative, overtly attacking news organizations and even placing some reporters under surveillance. Given this, and the growing oppositional social and political movements, Nixon did face an increasingly hostile and suspicious press corps, and at a time when television news had established powerful national influence and credibility. This administration demonstrated that striking out at the press could be ill-advised and provoke the news media to be even more adversarial than usual, which undid Nixon's presidency.

It was Ronald Reagan, a former movie actor and radio announcer, and his advisers, especially Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver and the White House Director of Communications David Gergen, who shifted what they saw as a balance of power in favor of the media during the Ford and Carter administrations and returned that control to the presidency. Deaver and Gergen truly refined and elaborated on news management; they understood news routines, the daily needs of reporters and their deadlines, and that the "care and feeding" of the press was crucial to such control.[5] White House aides provided reporters with Reagan's itinerary every day, gave them summaries or full copies of his speeches or comments in advance, and stuck to a "message of the day" that everyone adhered to. Thus, they did at least half or more of the journalists' work for them, making their jobs easier. As a result of all this, and up until the disaster of Iran-Contra, when these techniques both became more exposed and also fell apart, Reagan enjoyed, by all accounts, much better press coverage than he deserved.[6]

By the early 1990s, presidents were subject to new time pressures, as the maturity of CNN News, broadcast 24/7, and the establishment of Fox News in 1996 meant that reporters wanted more instant answers and were constantly looking for stories—and pundits—to fill the news hole. Coverage of

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presidential campaigns was criticized for its emphasis on image over substance and on the "horserace"—who was ahead—instead of the issues at hand. The rising use of email and then the Internet allowed for greater exchange of political information among upstart news outlets and everyday people; the Internet also provided an additional platform for partisan commentary, like the Drudge Report, which broke the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Conservative politicians and activists began denouncing an alleged "liberal bias" in the news, which played a role—along with increased sensationalism in the 1990s—in the eroding trust in the news media. And by the turn of the twenty-first century, print journalism was facing an economic crisis as revenue from advertising declined and migrated to online sites, prompting the closure of some papers and a decline in investigative journalism.

When the George W. Bush administration succeeded, through repeated and disciplined messaging, and with the help of an overly compliant media, to convince a majority of Americans that Saddam Hussein had "weapons of mass destruction" and that Iraq should be invaded, only to have the war turn into an unmitigated disaster, the credibility of presidential public relations and the press reached new lows. What presidents learn, often the hard way, is that when the discrepancy between the public relations message and actual events or the president's actual persona or policies is too large, the public relations staging can backfire. For example, when Bush did his "top gun" landing on the *U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln* in May 2003 to announce the end of major combat in Iraq, underneath the now infamous "Mission Accomplished" banner, while the mission had not been accomplished at all, the press began to become more skeptical of the administration. The gap between how Bush handled the 2005 catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, and what television cameras were showing to the American people, further undermined his credibility. If there is a gap between presidential performance and presidential imagery, typically the media will expose that. And over time, administrations have had to walk that line between disciplined messaging and not being so overly scripted that the press senses deception or weakness.

By the time Barack Obama ran in 2008, the explosion in the Internet's reach, and the affordances of social media like Facebook, YouTube, and texting, meant that presidents and presidential candidates were once again confronting an emerging, transitioning media environment while still also

having to master traditional media, especially television. The Obama campaign exploited these new media aggressively and brilliantly, with an email list that reached 13 million people directly, creating what David Plouffe referred to as "our own television network." Over 1800 Obama campaign-related videos on YouTube garnered more than 50 million views. At the same time, with the user-generated, do-it-yourself affordances of such sites, anyone could ridicule, criticize, or contradict the president.

So, by 2016, these were some of the precedents and routines that Trump and the news media adhered to, yet overturned. Indeed, experience with publicity (Trump) met experience with news management (the media). And by now, Twitter, which Trump used to directly reach his supporters and circumvent the press, had become a major element in the new media ecosystem. Trump was newsworthy because he was a bombastic reality TV star and a wealthy real estate developer with no political experience. As a highly dramatic media performer who loved the spotlight and sensed that voters were weary of carefully scripted "frontstage" personae, Trump took unspeakable comments about race, immigrants, women, and Muslims—as well as about his opponents—out of the backstage and onto the frontstage of his rallies. Twitter, which matched his rhetorical style of short words, declarative statements, and incendiary insults, was the perfect medium for him. Twitter brought in new ways of circumventing yet engaging the news media; no candidate had used the medium the way Trump did to set the agenda and command attention, compelling the media to recalibrate their coverage to fit the novelty of the platform and the candidate. Because the tone and content of his tweets were often highly controversial (and ratings bait), the press provided him an entirely new level of free media by reporting nearly all of his tweets.

But tweets also fit into several established news routines—the use, of course, of headlines and snappy pull quotes, increasingly shorter soundbites given to presidents (and all political candidates), and cable news' reliance on the chyron (see Zizi Papacharissi's "The Importance of Being a Headline" in this volume). Thus Trump's tweets exploited these preexisting practices while also making them more explosive, because what he said to and about fellow candidates (and celebrities) so violated political decorum, the tweets were highly newsworthy. Cable channels have to fill the 24/7 news hole and are always looking for "scoops" or exclusives, especially during a campaign, so when Trump would simply phone in, his calls were of

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course taken and aired. And not only were most of his rallies aired on CNN, they were also plugged with hyped-up chyrons reading "Donald Trump Expected to Speak Any Minute." Because his rallies were filled with drama, vilification, and even violence, they were often front-page or leading stories. So in this way, Trump constantly set the agenda in terms of substance, journalistic practice, and rhetoric, as well as about what was newsworthy—him. He led, and the news media followed.

After the election, there was much hand wringing, from journalists and their critics, about the extent to which the news media, and especially cable news, had enabled Trump's victory by giving him so much coverage. But reporters, accustomed to pivoting from covering someone as a candidate versus as president, and wedded to longstanding traditions about how to do so, had new expectations, based on precedent and journalistic principles, about interactions with the president. And this is where Trump, who got elected in part by breaking the rules around "politics as usual," failed to appreciate the pull of tradition, even in the face of new media platforms, or to learn from his predecessors.

By repeatedly attacking the press (along with his surrogates) as trafficking in "fake news," and disputing obvious facts (such as the size of his inauguration crowd), like Nixon he energized the news media into a frenzy of fact-checking and inadvertently resuscitated investigative reporting. And like Nixon, Trump didn't appreciate the power of angered anonymous sources. By failing to honor and by attacking intelligence agencies, he converted what might have been recalcitrant sources for the press into widespread and serial leaks by people eager to see incompetent or possibly criminal people exposed. (Indeed, the more leaks the weaker the presidency, and the weaker the presidency the greater the leaks).[7] In utter contrast to the Reagan team's "message of the day," or Bush's tightly coordinated PR machine, there was no disciplined messaging at all, with the President, primarily through Twitter, contradicting members of his own administration. As a result, press briefings (which he has threatened to eliminate) have become even more chaotic and contentious. In his first five months, Trump held only one solo press conference in which, as CNN's Jake Tapper (among many others) noted, Trump "said things that were not true" and seemed "unhinged."[8] Nor did Trump, in his first five months, address the nation about any of the serially unfolding scandals surrounding his administration.

While Trump's tweets remained covered, 140 characters—attention-getting during a campaign—are inadequate to laying out complex policy issues, leading news organizations to differ on whether and how to cover them.[9] More to the point, while there has been, so far, minimal "backstage" coverage of Trump's marriage or personal life, his pre-dawn tweets, titillating during a campaign, provide unnerving backstage access to his state of mind, interpretation of facts, and paranoia.

The press have of course over the years become quite wary of and savvy about news management—the staged photo ops, the message of the day, and the like. But in the face of minimal, confused, and failed news management, where nearly every precedent, however suspect, has been ignored or overturned, the news media confront a vacuum that they need to fill. Here, tradition and established practices matter, especially, as Twitter has shown, when new communications technologies and their uses can be so disruptive to existing, respected, and comforting habitual conventions.

Breaking the rules of media engagement and presentation of self was one of the factors that made Trump seem fresh and new to some and thus helped him get elected. But once in office, he was dealing with decades-old traditions of presidential messaging and coverage that his preferred (and often only) mode of communication, Twitter, could not upend. He was also dealing with a press stung by their abdication of agenda-setting during the campaign, and determined to reclaim it, especially from a president whose goal was to undermine their very legitimacy. And, finally, he was dealing with a dispersed bureaucracy with various power centers, not his own business or crowds at a rally. All Trump's rule-breaking thus produced an unstable political environment that Washington's established institutions, especially the press corps, both feed on yet seek to rebalance. Thus, even with the very latest communications technologies, presidents can only do so much to countermand the pull of history and precedent without undermining their own authority, legitimacy, and power.

Notes

1. As of this writing, Trump's approval rating, according to Gallup, is 37 percent. http://news.gallup.com/poll/201617/gallup-daily-trump-job-approval.aspx.

2. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 7.

3. Susan J. Douglas, "Managing th
ed., *Crucible: The President's First*
Press, 2017).

4. Susan J. Douglas, "Managing the

5. Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Kne*
Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1988).

6. Ben Bradlee of the *Washington*
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Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee*.

7. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's*
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8. http://www.cnn.com/videos/po
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9. Michael M. Grynbaum and Sydn
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Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday,

3. Susan J. Douglas, "Managing the President's Public Persona," in Niki Hemmer, ed., *Crucible: The President's First Year* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2017).

4. Susan J. Douglas, "Managing the President's Public Persona."

5. Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1988).

6. Ben Bradlee of the *Washington Post* said, "We have been kinder to President Reagan than any President I can think of since I've been at the *Post*," cited in Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee*.

7. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News,* Newsweek *and* Time (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 119.

8. http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/02/16/trump-press-conference-jake-tapper-unhinged.cnn/video/playlists/donald-trump-press-conference-2-16-17.

9. Michael M. Grynbaum and Sydney Ember, "If Trump Tweets, Is It Always News? A Quandary for the News Media," *New York Times*, November 30, 2016, A16.