

What Did CNN's Interview of Blagojevich Tell Us about the State of Our Political Rhetoric?

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On Friday February 21, CNN's Anderson Cooper sparred with former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich. In the interview—conducted days after being pardoned by President Trump—Blagojevich incredulously called himself a "political prisoner," a label normally and correctly used to describe people who are denied due process, like Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa.

He also insisted the prosecutors were corrupt, refusing to analyze all of the evidence, and that the decision of the Appellate Court was unjust. But Blagojevich could not prove he was denied due process; in fact, he was given every legal opportunity to present his defense—including

two requests for the Supreme Court to hear the case, both of which were denied.

This resulted in Cooper, a respected and fair minded reporter/news anchor, expressing outrage, even going so far as to use expletives and make obvious his personal disdain for Blagojevich—a behavior infrequently exhibited by professionals in the news industry. Having watched many interviews, I cannot recall someone who works for a major television network becoming so impatient to the point of partially losing his composure verbally and via facial expressions.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLM5zb3iVV8&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1fYEMl46BYQ8IAmZndv5XOOctqLtDOWuuRMdC5HnvTReZSR0jl_sVYIar0)

To be clear, I am not condemning Cooper and sympathize with the challenging situation he faced. Nevertheless, as a scholar of rhetoric who for over 40 years has studied political communication, this interview is significant for a number of reasons.

Aside from being appalled by Blagojevich's defense of the behavior resulting in his conviction, the exchange with Cooper underscores and is emblematic of the sad state of our political culture and discourse. It also documents the harsh consequences of abandoning the concept of truth and respect for it.

Why is this happening and what can be done? Rather than blaming each side, there is a larger rhetorical problem deserving our collective

attention. All of us, regardless of political party or ideology, must acknowledge that, while not solely responsible, President Donald Trump's constant refrain undermining the nation's institutions, including the judiciary and media, predictably led to this.

The President licensed, made possible and empowered people like Blagojevich who are guilty of wrongdoing simply to attack our judicial system rather than taking responsibility and expressing remorse for their deeds. It is not surprising that Trump's own discourse, which thus far has successfully kept him from being held accountable, is now being mimicked by others. We must ask: How and when will this dangerous regress end?

For those like me who study rhetoric, the onus is in part on us. I worry that, although quick to share our political beliefs, as academics we haven't yet found ways to communicate with each other in the polarized and uncivil post-truth era. Beyond ridiculing Trump, which contributes to and exacerbates the problem (and of which I am guilty), we must find a way to deliberate, collaborate and solve problems. This has been the calling card of rhetorical studies dating back to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

While I don't have the perfect solution, perhaps the time has come to remember and practice a simple principle: not to communicate is to communicate. In the Blagojevich case, it means the most effective thing the news media might do is ignore rather than engage the outlandish and inflammatory claims made by those they interview. Better yet, why

even make news by conducting such an interview? In the post-truth era benign neglect may be the answer.

If we are unsuccessful in finding an answer to this issue, it is hard to imagine how our democratic republic will survive. After all, since its inception, the functioning of our political system has depended on productive deliberation—something not possible without shared standards of truth, common ground and a recognition that facts matter.

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