

## How the News Media Rhetorically Empower Trump

By Richard Cherwitz



It is clear that, in his impromptu helicopter interactions with reporters outside the White House, the number of President Donald Trump's lies is increasing. These lies are becoming bolder, more brazen and absurd.

Witness the President's remarks to the press immediately following last Wednesday's testimony by former special counsel Robert Mueller. Trump continued to insist that he was exonerated and that there was no obstruction—statements that by any reasonable interpretation bear little resemblance to the reality of Mueller's oral testimony.

Even more significant, President Trump continues to use these free press opportunities, as well as his Tweets and off the cuff comments, to titillate and manipulate the media. All of these deflect attention from newsworthy issues and preemptively undermine truthful and factual claims by more objective professionals.

Consider the evidence for this.

In the last week alone, most major news networks spent an enormous amount of time covering Trump's incessant and racist comments about Rep. Elijah Cummings. Moreover, when the President doubled and tripled down on his

disgusting remark that the four members of the House of Representatives—all persons of color—should go back to where they came from, the media couldn't resist the urge to make this breaking news.

Why is this troublesome?

As someone who has taught and studied political communication for over 40 years, there are serious rhetorical consequences to this media tendency—consequences about which the media must seriously ponder.

First, surely the news networks must realize that repeatedly playing the President's words and pointing out that his assertions are lies and often racist hasn't produced the intended effect of getting more Americans to see the seriousness of this matter.

Second, and more worrisome, this pattern of coverage plays directly into Trump's hands by giving more oxygen to his words. In so doing, the media may be emboldening and empowering the President. Arguably, they unwittingly and unknowingly may be acting as spokespersons for Trump and serving as a megaphone for his claims—something that contradicts the objective of those whose job is to report the news.

The only check on this is for the major media outlets to pull out, refusing to attend and air these helicopter sessions—and perhaps to stop allowing Trump's Tweets and impromptu remarks that have nothing to do with public policy to be reported as news. Whether and how to accomplish this, of course, presents enormous constitutional and practical challenges.

For example, drawing clear lines between which Trump discourse to cover and which not may be an arduous task. In addition, this determination is especially nettlesome in view of the fact that a free press is one of our nation's sacred principles—something that most Americans believe must not be sacrificed by censorship and discriminating about who and what to cover.

Nevertheless, it's time for the media to be less gullible, acknowledging that they perhaps unintentionally are empowering the president. Failure to reflect and act on this issue may assist the President's propagandistic efforts to undermine our democracy by controlling major channels of communication.

This is a hallmark of autocratic countries and one that none of us, regardless of political affiliation and ideology, should permit in the United States.

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