

UNDERMINING THE FREE PRESS

by Cathal Sheerin

The free press is under significant threat in many countries around the world. At its worst, this threat comes in the form of free-speech-stifling laws, violence, arbitrary arrest, and murder. It is almost always preceded by a period in which attempts are made to undermine and disparage the news media.

In February 2016, Chris Morris, a *Time* magazine photojournalist, attended a Donald Trump rally at Radford University, Virginia. At this point, Trump was still only one candidate, albeit the favorite, in the race to become the Republican Party nominee in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Trump knew how to work a crowd, whipping them up into a belligerent fury that sometimes led to violence. At a Nevada rally, he had even boasted of how he'd like to "punch [a protester] in the face." Up until the event at Radford, those targeted with violence at Trump rallies had only been vocal anti-Trump demonstrators.

Unlike other candidates' events, Trump rallies had a strict rule that journalists had to stay inside a gated area (the "pen"), which made them easier to target for ridicule. When Black Lives Matter protesters appeared at the Radford University rally, Morris quickly stepped outside the pen to get a shot; he suddenly found himself confronted by Trump's security agents, who put him in a chokehold, threw him to the ground, and ejected him from the venue. Morris was the first journalist to be physically attacked at a Trump event.

Throughout 2016, Trump made a point of targeting individual reporters at his rallies, insulting them and accusing them of lying. In October, it was widely reported that some of his supporters had begun using a Nazi-era word—*Lügenpresse* (lying press)—for journalists.

Anyone hoping that the anti-press rhetoric and abuse would cease once Trump became President was soon disappointed: almost exactly one year after the attack on Chris Morris, reporters from the *New York Times*, BBC, BuzzFeed News, CNN, *Politico*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Huffington Post were barred from the daily White House press briefing. Chillingly, that same day, President Trump announced at the Conservative Political Action Conference that journalists were “the enemy of the people.”

Although not flawless, the U.S. record on press freedom has served as an example to be emulated by democracies around the world; the essential role of the press in holding elected officials to account has always been (at least grudgingly) tolerated by politicians as a necessary check on power. U.S. comments on press freedom are taken seriously globally. The Trump administration’s attacks on the press are much more than the clichéd behavior of a leader with authoritarian instincts: they are a signal to the world that journalists are fair game.

From the French Revolution to Josef Stalin, the phrase “enemy of the people” has a long, brutal history. Today, it’s most often used in undemocratic, authoritarian regimes (such as Iran, China, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan) where critical journalists are harassed, jailed, and tortured. Describing the press as “enemies” or purveyors of “fake news” is a tactic long-used by authoritarian leaders to delegitimize, and thus neuter, one of democracy’s watchdogs. It’s a tactic that inspires cynicism and intolerance, and it often results in physical attacks on journalists. In many instances, it also leads to legislation restricting press freedom.

The situation in Russia serves as an example. Under President Vladimir Putin, whose approach to press conferences has been compared to Trump’s, journalists have been threatened, beaten, jailed on trumped-up charges, and killed. Laws have been passed that radically curtail free speech and provide scapegoats (in this case gay people, foreigners, American “agents”) for society’s ills. Putin has a scathing disregard for journalists, and, like all authoritarian leaders, he values the press only in terms of its potential for propaganda. The most chilling illustration of Putin’s contempt for the press is the case of Anna Politkovskaya.

An investigative journalist and harsh critic of Putin, Politkavskaya exposed Russian war crimes in Chechnya and corruption within Putin's circle. She was murdered in the elevator of her Moscow apartment block in 2006. When Putin spoke about the killing three days later, he couldn't resist undermining the dead mother-of-two's work: "I think that journalists should know, and experts perfectly understand, that her capacity to influence political life in Russia was extremely insignificant," he said.

Turkey's authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also disdains the press; in January 2017, he praised President Trump for accusing a CNN reporter of lying and then refusing to take his question, thereby "putting him in his place." Erdogan's bad relationship with the press began in a similarly fractious fashion to Trump's: with insults and threats. However, this soon escalated to prosecutions for "insulting Turkishness" and "espionage." Erdogan also exploited a failed 2016 coup attempt to root out all opposition voices in the press and government: though the coup lasted only a few hours, a purge began that was still ongoing nine months later, by which time over 100 journalists were in jail, with another 229 on trial.

All this is not to suggest an equivalence between what's going on in the U.S., Russia, and Turkey. Rather, it is to show that attacking and delegitimizing the press is often the first step on a long road that can lead to a dark place.

Because of its system of government and its economic and cultural power, the U.S. is uniquely placed to set the global tone in terms of the free press and democracy. That tone changed in the early weeks of Trump's presidency. Its influence was rapidly seen in Hungary and in such unlikely places as the UK and Holland, where populist, anti-immigrant political parties—inspired and emboldened by Trump's election victory—purposely began to mirror both his rhetoric and his tactics: attacking the press, undermining "enemies" in the judiciary and civil society, and seeking to "take [their] country back."



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