

Journalism Prof: CNN's Bumbling Coverage a 'Gift from Heaven' to Trump

For the slice of America that still values the craft of journalism and sees a greater need for it than ever, the Trump vs. Media wars have been depressing.

In one sense, the conflict has confirmed the worst fears of those who argued that members of the fifth estate have become [mere shills](#), regurgitators of political talking points from partisan (and often anonymous) sources.

But the meltdown has been worse than that. The press hasn't just looked partisan; they've looked incompetent.

Not all of this is Trump driven. *The New York Times*, for example, recently ran an editorial that suggested Sarah Palin was responsible for Jared Loughner's murder of six people in Tucson, Arizona, in 2011, a claim that has long been debunked. The newspaper is [facing a libel suit](#) for the now retracted claim.

But the bulk of media malpractice centers around Trump and Russia. While there are no shortage of culprits, if you had asked me a few months ago, I would have said the worst wrongdoer was the *Washington Post*.

The tone of Jeff Bezos' paper, which now carries the ostentatious tagline "Democracy Dies in Darkness," grew increasingly shrill in the wake of Trump's victory, culminating in several gaffes. These included its infamous ['blacklist' article](#) that attempted to link numerous right-wing media sources with Russian propaganda efforts, as well as a [bizarre story](#) claiming the Russians were responsible for a hacked utility in Vermont that resulted in mass power failure.

Both stories required “editor’s notes” (what newspapers once called corrections). The correction [to the former](#) explained that the newspaper “does not itself vouch for the validity” of the information it used in the article; the correction to the latter noted there was no indication “so far” that the Russians were responsible for the grid failure in Vermont.

These blunders are ancient history now thanks to CNN.

In the last few weeks, the cable news giant committed a series of unforced errors. The most prominent of these, of course, is the retracted story linking a Trump associate to the Russian government [that cost three journalists their jobs](#). But the list goes on. There was CNN reporter Jim Acosta last week [accusing the president of “fake news”](#)—a phrase he uses five times in about 60 seconds—for citing a figure that turned out to be from the *New York Times*. There was the network’s [overreaction to a silly video](#) created by a Reddit troll, which only served to encourage more silly videos (see below) mocking CNN.

It seems like everyone in the media is on tilt, that they don’t quite know how to cover this Trump guy.

Which brings me to an interesting conversation [between Nick Gillespie of Reason and W. Joseph Campbell](#), communications professor at American University. In a far-reaching conversation, Campbell, who is also the editor of [Media Myth Alert](#), explains how the media is destroying its own credibility and playing right into Trump's hand. Here's an excerpt:

Gillespie: *Let's talk about the concept of fake news, which is the term of art of the past years. CNN recently retracted a story about a Trump administration official, Anthony Scaramucci, for having ties to Russia during the election season. It was based on one anonymous source and has prompted what might end up being a \$100 million lawsuit against the cable news channel. What's your response to this sort of thing? Is this common, or are we entering kind of strange ground here?*

Campbell: *It could be both. It was a jaw-dropping story and it was a jaw-dropping reaction and retraction by CNN, and three journalists lost their jobs over this story, which as you say apparently had one anonymous source as a principal background for the story. It was a real jaw-dropper in many respects. Goodness, it's the latest example of journalists going off the tracks, going off the rails here. It's astonishing as well as distressing because...*

Gillespie: *What's distressing about it? That CNN ran it or that it was wrong or that they didn't stand by it? Is the idea of using an anonymous source, is that just weak for a legitimate news organization to be relying on?*

Campbell: *Yeah, I think so. I think one anonymous source for a major story like this is far too few. What was really astonishing is that the story was quickly retracted and the three journalists who have had a fair amount of success and prestige in their past were let go, were forced to quit, apparently. It was astonishing in that regard. Plus, the*

story was so poorly vetted internally before it was released, is another reason why it was, as I keep saying, jaw-dropping. It's not the first time a major news organization has screwed up, but this is a recent example and it really does have the effect of feeding Donald Trump's campaign about fake news. It's a gift from heaven for him.

Campbell suggests that much of the malpractice is driven by social media, and I think he's probably right.

I have multiple friends who work at major media companies, one of whom recently explained the influence social media is having over newsrooms.

"There is a voracious appetite for content when Trump gets in spats. So it's part self-obsession on the part of the press, but also part ratings/clicks-driven. My best stories, which take weeks or months to report, get 50,000 to 100,000 uniques. There were numerous Trump pieces yesterday [following the below tweet] fired off in a matter of hours that did 500,000.

As a journalist not covering Trump, it's terribly frustrating."

I heard poorly rated [@Morning_Joe](#) speaks badly of me (don't watch anymore). Then how come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came..

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [June 29, 2017](#)

...to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in a row around New Year's Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [June 29, 2017](#)

Journalists like to think of themselves as Walter Cronkite, but we're seeing journalism more in the [Walter Winchell](#) mode. It's a product driven by gossip, rumor and opinion more than fact. It entertains more than informs; it breeds cynicism, not enlightenment.

Instead of rising to the challenge of Trump—an admittedly difficult man to cover—the media continues to lower itself to his level, which benefits no one.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that newspapers “serve as chimnies to carry off noxious vapors and smoke.” One can only wonder what he might have said about television in 21st century America.