



# Trumping the Media

Politics and Democracy in  
the Post-Truth Era

Michael Mario Albrecht



**Donald J. Trump** ✓

@realDonaldTrump

45th President of the United States  
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**MICHAEL MARIO ALBRECHT**

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# Acknowledgments

**T**he days leading up to the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 were bizarre for me personally. On October 31, I hit the milestone of turning forty. A few days later, my favorite sports team, the Chicago Cubs, snapped a 108-year drought and won the World Series, just after midnight on November 3. The general election between Trump and Hillary Clinton went down on November 8, and the media called the election for Trump before midnight. That was a lot to process in a nine-day span.

Along with many progressives, liberals, and even some conservatives, I awoke on November 9, 2016, in a state of shock and disbelief. I spent that day with my students, trying to assure them that everything was going to be OK—though I was frightened that was not, in fact, the case. Even before the election, I recognized the significance of Trump as a political and media force and was already in the process of developing a January-term topics course called Donald Trump: Media & Politics. That course—which I believe to be the first course in the United States focused solely on the forty-fifth president—took on added meaning as Trump was inaugurated halfway through the course. As a class, we watched the inauguration on January 20th from our respective abodes because it was Sunday (though there were many comments on the discussion board). Then on Monday, I took the class to the St. Petersburg iteration of the Women's March—part of the largest single-day protest in US history. The course was a success, the march was cathartic, and I began to think about Trump as an object of study. I would like to thank my former colleagues in the communication discipline of Eckerd College—James Janack and Kristina Wenzel Egan—for their support and encouragement as I developed and taught my Trump course in the 2017 and 2018 winter terms.

As I embarked upon my Trump research, I presented papers about the president at several conferences. The comments and discussions that emerged from those panels were extraordinarily generative and provided fodder for many of the ideas that ended up in this book. I presented papers about Trump and the media at the Popular Culture Association (PCA) conferences in Seattle (2016), San Diego (2017), and Indianapolis (2018); the National Communication Association (NCA) conventions in Dallas (2017) and Salt Lake City (2018); as

well as the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association (MAPACA) conference in Pittsburgh (2019). The 2017 Media, Communication, and Film Studies Programs at Liberal Arts Colleges Symposium in Waterville, Maine, provided a space for me to discuss the challenges of teaching about Donald Trump in the classroom with some amazing teachers and scholars.

The 2017 PCA conference was especially fruitful, as it encouraged an acquisition editor for Bloomsbury Academic's Media Studies division to contact me about the possibility of turning my work on Trump into a manuscript. The seeds having been planted, I contacted Bloomsbury in 2018 and have worked with Katie Gallof, the editor, since then. I would like to thank Katie for her hard work and her belief in this project; it has been a delight to work with her and all of the members of the responsive, professional, and talented team at Bloomsbury. I would also like to thank the reviewers who provided enthusiastic encouragement and provocative suggestions at both the proposal and full-draft stages.

When you tell people that you are writing a book about Donald Trump, nearly everyone responds with their thoughts and offers a take on the subject. Those with whom I have conversed about Trump or who have provided guidance about the book include Matthew Ascah, Brandi Askin, Joey and Zac Burchfield, Summer Cunningham, Analisa and Jeff DeGrave, Alison Dozier, Megan Foley, Chuck Goehring, Leslie Hahner, Dave Himmelfarb, Holly Willson Holladay, Jessie Fly, Abe Kahn, Kembrew McLeod, Jennifer Musial, Tom Oates, Gerni Oster, Christina Petersen, Kevin Reiling, John Roberts, Jessica Thorn, Courtney Walker, K.C. Wolfe, and the members of the Potato Society, especially the late Erin Kitzinger. I appreciate all of your sage advice and lively discussions. I would especially like to thank Karen Pitcher Christiansen, David Heineman, Paul Johnson, Sangeet Kumar, and Zack Stiegler for reading drafts of my chapters during the editing phase. Their insight and sharp commentary have proven to be invaluable as I worked through this book. (Also, one of the aforementioned people suggested *Trumping the Media* for a title, and I am grateful—though not sure exactly who to thank.)

My grandmother, Ann Marcanti, and my parents, Bruce and Nancy Albrecht, have also provided ideas and support throughout the process. (I hope my grandmother loses her wager about Trump.) Thanks to everyone who listened to my rambling about the former president over the years or who tolerated me when I loudly and somewhat drunkenly assured everyone at the 2016 election watch party that he would lose the election—even late on election night when the inevitable was obvious. The Trump era and its aftermath have been challenging and frightening for many people and I am glad to have had such a strong support network and a Boodles to help me navigate this moment in history.





# Introduction

On January 8, 2021, Twitter banned Donald J. Trump from its platform, ending his direct line of communication to his supporters, detractors, and the mainstream media less than two weeks before his presidential term ended. The Twitter ban came in the wake of the occupation of the US Capitol building on January 6, in which Trump supporters broke into the Capitol building and incited chaos for several hours. The insurrection at the Capitol building came in the aftermath of a rally that Trump had on the National Mall, in which he encouraged his supporters to “stop the steal” and to march on the Capitol building. “The steal” to which Trump was referring was the results of the November 2020 election, which Trump lost to Joe Biden but which he refused to concede. Inside the Capitol, members of Congress were voting to certify the electoral votes from the election—an official action, but a *pro forma* one. Trump was furious that the members of Congress had certified the election for his opponent, Joe Biden, calling the outcome an “egregious assault on our democracy.” He then encouraged his opponents to walk to the Capitol, where “we are going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women . . . and we are probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them—because you will never take back our country with weakness.”<sup>1</sup>

Trump did not, in fact, accompany the rally-goers to the Capitol; while they breached the building, Trump watched the cable television coverage unfold and did nothing to encourage his supporters to stop their actions and withdraw from the Capitol as mayhem ensued for several hours. For the next two days, Trump continued to tweet in displeasure of Congress certifying the election results and in support of his followers until Twitter made the decision that his tweets might incite violence. In their memo explaining the decision, Twitter stated that Trump’s tweets “are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021, and that there are multiple indicators that they are being received and understood as encouragement to do so.”<sup>2</sup> Since his rise to prominence in the political field, Trump used

Twitter as a central mechanism through which he communicated directly to a large audience, bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of mainstream media. Moreover, Trump's tweets became news in and of themselves; mainstream media would cover them as news, amplifying their volume and expanding their potential audience. Trump's connection to Twitter was so deeply intertwined that many had referred to him as the "Twitter President," and his removal from the platform created an uncanny absence from the media environment.<sup>3</sup> Trump had dominated the news for so long by inserting himself through his use of social media that his absence was keenly felt across myriad media.

While Twitter was the most consistent way that Trump engaged through contemporary media, he was also able to rely upon skills and discourses from other media to construct the dominant media figure that characterized his campaign and presidency. In *Trumping the Media*, I argue that Trump was quite adept at adopting and manipulating a variety of media and consistently used his ability to navigate contemporary media to his advantage. Moreover, because of his ability to navigate contemporary mediated environments, he was able to circumvent existing media establishments and produce a version of truth that he himself constructed. In addition to the "Twitter President," some pundits also labeled Trump the "reality TV President."<sup>4</sup> Trump was the star of the NBC reality television show *The Apprentice* (2004–17), which increased his popularity and his recognizability before he began his foray into politics. It also taught him the tropes of a genre more interested in entertainment and shock value than in providing the unvarnished truth. It also helped him hone a character that he had been crafting since his rise to fame in the 1980s. Throughout his political career, he performed a combative, boorish masculinity that developed alongside the rise of conservative talk radio in the 1980s and 1990s. His political positions reflected far-right movements that percolated in the swampy depths of the internet on Reddit and 4chan, bringing discourses of the alt-right into mainstream politics. Trump's success at performing in the contemporary media environment and selecting content from various media speaks to changes in the media environment that have transpired over the last several decades. I situate Trump within particular media discourses and show how he was able to use these media to his advantage in his rise to the apex of US politics and his ability to maintain a rabidly devoted political following.

From the time he started his presidential campaign in the summer of 2015, mainstream media could not get enough of Donald Trump, and though many pundits did not think his presidential candidacy was serious, it received tremendous coverage across a variety of media. During the 2016 presidential campaign, the major cable news channels would broadcast his rallies in their entirety, giving Trump a decided advantage in "earned media" over his opponents. The tracking firm mediaQuant estimated that Trump received

approximately \$5 billion in earned media from the generous media coverage by mainstream media in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>5</sup> Late in 2016, CNN's president admitted that it was a "mistake" to air so many Trump speeches in their entirety, and that Trump "delivered on PR and delivered on ratings."<sup>6</sup> This sentiment is echoed by CBS's chairman Les Moonves, who claimed that Donald Trump running for president "might not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."<sup>7</sup> Large media companies were enamored of Trump's rallies and Twitter use from the beginning, and largely failed in their capacity as gatekeepers, preferring to make money by providing direct access to Trump as a new media behemoth.

Because of his ability to perform across multiple media platforms and to hold the attention of the mainstream media, Trump was able to suck the oxygen from other candidates and to become the center of the media environment during the 2016 presidential election and indeed throughout his four-year presidency. Trump was a marketable commodity, and because of the for-profit nature of many news outlets, they were eager to boost his candidacy. This aligns with a traditional political economic critique of corporate news, which holds that when news becomes a for-profit enterprise, it forsakes journalistic ethics in order to seek the highest profits. As media scholar Robert McChesney explains, the owners of news media outlets maintain a "constant drumbeat for profit, their concern with minimizing costs and enhancing revenues, invariably influences the manner in which news is collected and reported."<sup>8</sup> Writing in 2003, McChesney is quite prescient about the corporate media's thirst for a candidate like Trump, who would be able to drive ratings and would subsequently be able to maximize profits.

While McChesney was correct about the mainstream corporate media's lust for cash, he is unable to foresee the potential for politicization that would emerge through these corporate media. The media environment changed with the advent and omnipresence of social media in the world of contemporary politics. McChesney argues that "journalism, which, in theory, should inspire political involvement, tends to strip politics of meaning and promote a broad depoliticization. It is arguably better at generating ignorance and apathy than informed and passionately engaged citizens."<sup>9</sup> The mediated environment that brought Trump to power and which ultimately saw him oversee an insurrection on the Capitol was one in which journalism itself was highly politicized. Trump's followers would refer to mainstream journalists as the "lügenpresse," a term borrowed from Nazi Germany, meaning "lying press" as a show of fidelity to their leader.<sup>10</sup> The very outlets from which people accessed their news were polarized and politicized, and they were consuming different versions of the truth that comported with their political affiliations. Many of the alternative truths found their roots in alternative media that were

devoid of the gatekeeping function of traditional journalistic media, and many of these ideas that would never previously have made it past the journalistic gatekeepers were able to find their way into mainstream discourses.

Because of his direct access to a mainstream audience with decidedly little gatekeeping by established media, Trump was able to construct a version of truth that held purchase only among his political followers. From the beginning, the press had difficulty coming to terms with a politician with a relationship to a singular truth that was markedly different from other politicians. All politicians stretch the truth, omit, or embellish in order to maintain their political standing, but they do so within the constraints of the establishment press who “hold their feet to the fire” by asking them pointed questions that they answer, even if somewhat obliquely. Trump refused to play the media’s game by dismissing the mainstream media as untrustworthy and producing his own version of the truth, often out of whole cloth. Trump’s disregard for objective truth and empirical reality led to journalist Salena Zito’s aphorism that would be often repeated in relation to Trump’s relationship to the truth. She noted that when the soon-to-be president makes counterfactual statements, “the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.”<sup>11</sup> This turn of phrase became widely used by pundits to describe the popularity of Trump and his ultimate success in the November 2016 election. My goal in this book is to take Trump seriously as well as the myriad discourses that surround, support, and maintain the campaign and presidency of Donald J. Trump.

In an effort to take the forty-fifth president seriously, my goal throughout this book is not to decipher what is actually true about Donald Trump but rather to interrogate the complex and often contradictory ways in which scholars, journalists, pundits, and bloggers write and think about Trump. I am less interested in Trump as a unique individual, and instead focus on Trump as a nodal point at which myriad discourses about truth, reality, and contemporary media intersect. In other words, I am less interested in who Trump really is or what Trumpism really means than in the ways in which scholars, journalists, bloggers, and other cultural producers write about Trump and think about Trumpism. As a set of complex and often contradictory discourses, Trumpism circulates as a media construction, and the novel ways in which Trump circulates as political marker reconfigures the terrain of politics in the twenty-first century.

Many of the ideas in the book are not necessarily novel ideas. For example, numerous scholars, pundits, and journalists have made the point that reality television provides a useful framework for conceptualizing Donald Trump. My goal in the book is not to make the same claims that have been made by others but rather to gather and cull the ideas of others and put different versions of

the argument in conversation with one another. In many ways, mine is a meta-analysis in which I construct narratives about Trump and his relationships to truth, reality, and contemporary media from already existing discourses. As such, I often take as my source material existing discourses from editorials, think pieces, commentaries, and existing scholarship, recombining and rethinking existing bits of discourse in order to tell a particular narrative and tell a different story.

Donald Trump is a fascinating figure in US politics and contemporary popular media because he dominated the media landscape throughout his initial candidacy and his term as president. Trump broke presidential norms and expectations so often that the term “unprecedented” seems meaningless in discourses about Trump. The last year of his presidency was particularly chaotic as Trump oversaw a global pandemic, the worst in 100 years, and he became a source of disinformation about the pandemic rather than a trusted leader guiding a country through one of its darkest periods. Moreover, the pandemic came during an election year, and Trump consistently looked to protect his political standing in the face of the pandemic, flaunted the recommendations of his own medical experts, and ultimately contracted Covid-19 during the height of campaign season. After a short stay in Walter Reed hospital, Trump tweeted: “Don’t be afraid of Covid. Don’t let it dominate your life.”<sup>12</sup> This was at a point in time when hundreds of Americans were dying every day from the virus, no vaccine was on the horizon, and officials were desperately trying to contain the spread of the virus.

For Trump, to admit that the virus was a problem was to admit a personal failing, and his followers showed their dedication to Trump by eschewing the use of face masks and downplaying the seriousness of the virus that would ultimately claim 400,000 American lives during the last year of Trump’s presidency.<sup>13</sup> Several days after Trump was released from the hospital after his stint with Covid-19, Twitter flagged the president for claiming that he was consequently immune from the virus after having experienced it. Trump Tweeted: “A total and complete sign off from White House Doctors yesterday. That means I can’t get it (immune), and can’t give it. Very nice to know.” Twitter subsequently tagged the tweet with the addendum: “This Tweet violated the Twitter Rules about spreading misleading and potentially harmful information related to COVID-19.”<sup>14</sup> Twitter was waging an epistemological battle against Trump over the ways in which “truth” could be produced and dispersed across its platform.

For most of Trump’s political career, Twitter had been happy to let Trump tweet whatever he wanted without repercussion, even if Trump’s version of the truth often consisted of myriad lies and derivations from official versions of the truth. Twitter felt that its only responsibility was to be a platform for

free speech, and that it should give particularly wide berth to public figures because of their position in society. Twitter reserves the right to remove users from their platform for violating its terms of service but makes an exception on the grounds of “public interest” for elected officials. According to Twitter’s policies, they “limit exceptions to one critical type of public-interest content—Tweets from elected and government officials—given the significant public interest in knowing and being able to discuss their actions and statements.”<sup>15</sup> When Twitter began to flag Trump’s tweets as being potentially misleading and harmful, they were pushing against the years during which Trump had taken advantage of the platform’s “public interest” loophole through which Trump was able to produce his own truth, his followers were able to retweet without consequence, and mainstream news media were able to cover his tweeting habits as news.

The first tweets that Twitter flagged as potentially misleading by Trump were not about the coronavirus but were instead about Trump’s insistence that mail-in ballots were unreliable.<sup>16</sup> Already in May 2020, Trump was preparing his followers for an election that would be tightly contested and priming them to be suspicious of mail-in ballots. When Trump ultimately lost the election by a thin margin in several crucial states, he immediately claimed that the election had been rigged and that mail-in ballots were to blame for his loss. According to Trump, he had been the legitimate winner of the 2020 presidential election, but a constellation of nefarious forces had conspired to insert Joe Biden into the highest office in the land. Mainstream media have taken to calling this the “big lie,” perpetrated by Trump, and the schism between those who adhere to the version of reality in which Trump won the 2020 presidential election in 2020 and those who refuse the “big lie” is the dominant political schism in 2021.

The term “big lie” comes from political theorist Hannah Arendt, who suggests that authoritarian regimes create a world in which the government perpetually lies until its population can no longer differentiate between facts and fiction. Under such a regime the population will ultimately fall prey to a big lie that tears “a hole in the fabric of factuality”—lies that are so big that they “require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture—the making of another reality.”<sup>17</sup> Writing for the *New York Times*, historian Timothy Snyder suggests that for most of his presidency, Trump’s inability to exploit a “big lie” is what kept his administration from teetering into actual fascism. For him, “as he was unable to enforce some truly big lie, some fantasy that created an alternative reality where people could live and die, his pre-fascism fell short of the thing itself.”<sup>18</sup> However, when Trump began to tout the big lie in the wake of the November 2020 election, and when it escalated to the point of an insurrection by January 2021, the big lie had fulfilled its purpose

of reconfiguring the lived reality of many people. Snyder goes on to argue, "The claim that Trump was denied a win by fraud is a big lie not just because it mauls logic, misdescribes the present and demands belief in a conspiracy. It is a big lie, fundamentally, because it reverses the moral field of American politics and the basic structure of American history."<sup>19</sup> Trump was successfully able to mobilize his base through the big lie because he had primed the pump by insisting upon a candidacy and presidency that rested upon epistemological uncertainty.

Part of this epistemological uncertainty stemmed from a move away from monopolistic control of news media on the part of a few gatekeepers. From the Second World War until the 1980s, most of the national news media were controlled by three major television stations, and a handful of "papers of record," all of which worked to ensure that politics remained contained within a fairly narrow window of acceptability. Conterminously, for those thirty-five years, US politics had bought into the ideals of liberal democracy with a moderate social democratic social net undergirding free-market capitalism dominated by white men. The political space between the two major political parties was relatively narrow, and discourses outside of the mainstream were treated by the establishment media as radical and not treated as serious news. As news was televised on the major broadcast networks, it hewed toward coverage that appealed to the widest possible audience, thereby excluding opinions that were beyond the political pale. Writing about broadcast television in the 1960s and 1970s, television scholar Jason Mittell notes that "television journalism typically tries to present perspectives matching and reinforcing the presumed consensus values and assumptions of its audience."<sup>20</sup> Neither Donald Trump as a person nor his extreme political positions would have survived in a political and media climate built upon pillars of consensus.

The media consensus represented a relative political consensus that stemmed from the New Deal and prevailed in the years after the Second World War through the beginning of the 1960s because of the economic prosperity that the United States saw during this period. This era has particular resonance for Trump's politics because according to sociologist John Campbell, when idealizing the past, "Trump seemed to refer to the 1950s and 1960s—America's postwar Golden Age. This was probably the time most Trump supporters assumed he had in mind when he talked about making America great again."<sup>21</sup> The various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s saw a moment in which people of color, women, and LGBTQ folks gained increased rights and visibility, and established social norms about sex and authority were challenged. The backlash to these advances created a schism in society between those who embraced these seemingly radical changes and those who longed for the country as it was before these cultural changes transpired.



This schism has only deepened today as one party, the Democrats, has largely embraced the diversity of these cultural changes, while the Republican Party has become increasingly the party of white America. Political scientist Alan Abramowitz notes that “compared with American society in the mid-twentieth century, the early twenty-first century version is much more racially and ethnically diverse, more dependent on government benefits, more sexually liberated, more religiously diverse, and more secular. It is also much more divided and more bitterly divided along party lines.”<sup>22</sup> Before Donald Trump popularized a red ballcap emblazoned with his “Make American Great” slogan on it, a segment of the US population had already been prepared to long for an erstwhile era when the country was a better place to live. Further, when Trump used racial overtones to hammer his point home, his audience was already primed to understand that the “great” American to which the hat referred was one imbued with white patriarchal values. Moreover, a sector of the media environment that accompanied the rise of Donald Trump from the 1980s to the 2010s abetted the polarization of the American public and created an audience with a sympathetic ear for the racialized nostalgia inherent in the desire to make America great again.

Trump’s “Make America Great Again” logo was not even an original; it was rebooted from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign, which was also a reactionary push against the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s. The election of Reagan in 1980 saw a shift toward ideological solidification of political parties; in the 1970s there were still many moderate Democrats and liberal Republicans. It also represented a lurch rightward—a shift in the “Overton window” of acceptable political discourses on the conservative side of the spectrum. Journalist Derek Robertson defines the “Overton window” as “the range of ideas outside which lie political exile or pariahdom.”<sup>23</sup> Beginning with the election of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the frame of acceptability for nationally successful conservative politics has continued to move rightward; concomitantly, various new media have emerged to challenge the dominance of the three-channel broadcast media that persisted in the postwar era. In order for the political landscape to accept a figure like Donald Trump, the media landscape had to change, and it did with the introduction of cable television, the rise of right-wing talk radio, and eventually the meteoric rise of the internet.

The shifts in the Overton window have been so great as to have challenged the very premise of democratic liberalism itself. Faith in the electoral democratic system and the peaceful transition of power have always been central to discourses of US politics, and mainstream media have traditionally pushed anything beyond that as unthinkable and beyond the pale. What distinguished the United States in the popular imagination from horrible

totalitarian states like Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR—as well as smaller dictatorships, juntas, and the like—was its commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy and the peaceful transfer of power. That a defeated president would fail to admit defeat and would persuade a considerable percentage of the population to believe his big lie demonstrates that not only Trump's uncanny ability as a politician and a manipulator of media but also the Overton window had already been shifted considerably to allow for the emergence of a figure like Trump. Trump had support from a variety of media that allowed him to bypass those traditional media that would traditionally have served as gatekeepers and stopped the rise of Trump before it escalated. However, by the time Trump descended the escalator of his hotel and announced his run for presidency in 2016, he was already a product of and an adept influencer of a mediated political system that had radically changed in the preceding thirty-five years.

## Chapter Descriptions

In *Trumping the Media*, I work to tell the story of how Trump has engaged and inhabited different media environments in order to achieve power and popularity and ultimately to be elected and to serve as the president of the United States. In Chapter 1, "Politics and Electronic Media," I offer a brief survey of the relationship between politics and entertainment as they have intertwined and coexisted since the first commercial radio broadcast in 1920. Chapter 2 is "Conservative Talk Radio and Shock Jocks," in which I outline the rise of conservative talk radio in the 1980s and the ways in which the genre created an immediate audience for Trump. Further, Trump's public persona of boorish masculinity reflects the shock jocks that emerged in the 1980s alongside of conservative talk-show hosts. More than any other medium, conservative talk radio helped to foster the rightward swing of US conservatism and its polarizing tactics.

Donald Trump's level of stardom grew in the decade of the 2000s as he rode the reality television craze to a hit show and a resurrection of a career that had seemingly been reduced to tabloid fodder. In Chapter 3, "Reality TV, Professional Wrestling, and Entertainment as Reality," I look at Trump's performance as a politician through the lens of reality television. I am particularly interested in the ways in which the genre sculpts the notions truth and reality and the ways that Trump applies the lessons about the malleability of truth and instability of reality to his career in politics. Trump began using Twitter to promote *The Apprentice*, and the microblogging platform ultimately

became the lifeblood through which his entire political existence flowed. In Chapter 4, "The President Is Tweeting," I show the ways in which Trump was able to use the platform to circumvent traditional media to communicate directly with his followers and to create news out of whole cloth. Without any gatekeepers to hold him back, he was able to offer a meta-commentary on his own candidacy, precedence, and the media coverage thereof. When Trump was ultimately banned from Twitter, much of the oxygen left his media performance, and he was no longer able to insert himself into every moment of the news cycle.

The internet was founded on utopian dreams in which every voice could be heard, and no one's would be censored. Unfortunately, this ultra-libertarian stance on free speech allows not only for robust discourse to be debated within the public sphere but also for ideas that most would find highly objectionable to coexist within the same space. In Chapter 5, "4chan, Reddit, Far-Right Politics, and Insurrection," I show that far-right white supremacist groups rallied around the campaign of Donald Trump and were able to use sites such as Reddit and 4chan to distribute a more palatable version of their hateful discourse. Ultimately, the discourses circulating through these sites allowed for a shift in the Overton window such that these white supremacist discourses found their way into mainstream discourses and ultimately found the ear of the president himself. Trump subsequently developed a constellation of various right-wing militia groups and conspiracy theorists who transformed Trump from just another political figure to one that threatened the very structures that undergird the liberal democracy that has prevailed in the United States since its founding.

One of the structures that serve as a foundation for liberal democracy is the notion of a free press that operates independently from the government and ideally independently from commercial interests. While the history of journalism is replete with many occasions when the press failed to live up to these ideals, the Trump presidency caused some journalists and scholars of journalism to question the validity and efficacy of such bedrock journalistic ideals as the "watchdog function" and the press's role as the "fourth estate." In Chapter 6, "The Press as 'Enemy of the People': A Crisis of Epistemic Authority," I look at the ways in which journalists and journalism studies scholars have tackled the role of the press as the profession wrestles with the problems that emerge when a president shows a rabid disdain for journalism and the institutional norms that structure the profession.

One particular point of friction is the discrepancy between the journalistic ideal of finding and reporting objective truth and Trump's complete disregard for objective facts and empirically verifiable reality. In the final chapter,

"Post-Truth, Fake News, and Postmodernism," I examine the notion of truth and look at the ways in which postmodern scholars have interrogated the notion. I situate Donald Trump within these discourses, specifically his complicated relationship to truth. The mainstream media were able to normalize Trump's rampant disregard for facts; only when Trump forwarded the "big lie" and was able to mobilize his followers to violence toward revered institutions did media institutions ultimately rein him in to a certain extent. Even with his insistence that the 2020 election was rigged and that he should rightly have been sworn in for a second term, the majority of his devout followers continued to adhere to his version of the truth and to maintain avid support for him. To quote Arendt, he had torn a "hole in the fabric of factuality," and the consequences of his particular relationship to truth will extend beyond the scope of this book and will affect US media and politics for the considerable future.

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# 1

## Politics and Electronic Media

**P**olitics and electronic media have been deeply intertwined at least since KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcast the first commercial radio signal in 1920 on the night of the presidential election, so that their listeners could learn of the election results. As media have transformed to include television, satellite syndication, the World Wide Web, and eventually social media, politicians have embraced new media to various degrees. Popular entertainment has also followed the development of electronic media since the first broadcast, though the sphere of “serious” news and politics and the unserious sphere of popular entertainment have often remained separate. The ascendancy of Donald Trump to the presidency reflects an erasure of any barriers between popular entertainment and politics. As political scientist Mehnaaz Momen articulates, “at some point, most clearly evident in the era of Trump, we discover that politics and entertainment have largely become indistinguishable from each other.”<sup>1</sup> Trump has lived his life as a celebrity, won the election as a celebrity, and governed as a celebrity; for him, the entertainment value always takes priority over the underlying politics of any situation.

Trump, of course, is not the first politician to use electronic media to their advantage, nor is he the first person to blur the lines between the spheres of politics and entertainment. However, Trump is able to inhabit the role of celebrity so completely and to absorb the logic of different media that he is able to perfect what many others were only able to attempt. To take a turn of phrase from the world of comedy, Trump commits fully to the bit; as such, when other politicians try to dip their toe into the world of entertainment, they come across as disingenuous or stiff. Because Trump has lived his life immersed in the world of celebrity entertainment, he is able to bring that world into politics and use his skills effectively against his opponents.

In *Audience of One*, journalist James Poniewozik parallels Trump’s rise to the highest reaches of entertainment and politics with the rise of television itself. For Poniewozik, Trump has spent so much of his life on television that the celebrity and the medium are indistinguishable. He describes Trump as “a

man who, through a four-decades-long TV performance, achieved symbiosis with the medium. Its impulses were his impulses; its appetites were his appetites; its mentality was his.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say that “because Trump so thoroughly fused himself with the pop culture of the last forty years, because he was both an omnipresence on TV and a compulsive devourer of TV, his story is its story, and vice versa.”<sup>3</sup> I agree with Poniewozik that Trump was indeed a product of TV, but that is only part of the story; he was also able to master other media, either directly or indirectly, and was able to use an entire arsenal of the available mediascape to his advantage to win the presidency. He drew on his experiences on talk radio to develop skills in boorish masculinity that he used to develop a perceived kinship with the white working-class constituents. He also used his radio skills on the television when he used the friendly media space of Fox News for his own weekly call-in show, where he would only appear via phone. Trump was also able to master the medium of Twitter and was thus more able to relate to his constituents through social media than other candidates. He also used the medium to wink toward the more explicitly racist and misogynist trolls who occupied darker spaces on the internet, and found a considerable allyship with the alt-right, though at times he had to disavow any connections in that direction, often reluctantly. Thus, while television is one medium through which Trump derives his power, he uses the entire mediascape at his disposal to fuse entertainment and politics.

In this chapter, I offer a brief history of the century of electronic media that led up to Trump’s presidency and select some moments when new media challenged the way that politics was practiced or when entertainment media and politics crossed paths. This history will focus on the period from the 1980s onward, when Donald Trump joins the story, to show how he used the rise of entertainment media from the 1980s onward to forward his professional career and eventually his political career. As political media and entertainment media become more completely enmeshed in the twenty-first century, the notion of a serious and sacrosanct truth from the world of politics begins to blend with a more subjective version of truth from the world of entertainment, and the political conditions are ripe for a politician with a fungible notion of truth to thrive.

## Radio and Television

After that initial broadcast from KDKA in 1920, Warren Harding won the presidential election, but he would not live to be the first president to broadcast over the airwaves; his successor, Calvin Coolidge, would claim that honor in 1923 after Harding’s untimely death earlier that year. Franklin

Roosevelt was the president who is best known for using the radio to increase his political popularity. Many of his supporters saw his “fireside chats” as a steady, calming voice of a leader in the face of the tragedies of the Great Depression and the Second World War. As radio historian Susan Douglas explains, Roosevelt “understood the intimacy radio afforded, with its emphasis on listening and the power of the human voice to convey familiarity and affinity. . . . 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.”<sup>4</sup> The majority of the newspaper editorial boards opposed Roosevelt in the 1936 and 1940 elections, but Roosevelt was able to circumvent the established gatekeepers of the time and appeal directly to the people, foreshadowing the strategy that Trump would take with social media in his 2016 run. Radio would eventually establish itself to be a staple for news and politics by the 1940s, earning its bona fides through its coverage of the Second World War, and the networks that established themselves on radio after the war made the move to television once that medium exploded after the war.

Roosevelt was actually the first president to appear on television, doing so at the 1939 World’s Fair, but the broadcast did not expand beyond the greater New York area, as television had not yet been perfected and was in very few homes at the time. After the war, Harry Truman gave the first ever televised speech from the White House in 1947, though still few Americans owned televisions. It did portend a future when American presidential politics would be deeply intertwined with the medium of television. By the 1952 election cycle, television was in the majority of American homes, and was a key part of the race. The Republican vice-presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon found himself embroiled in the first of what would become many corruption scandals in his career. Dwight Eisenhower, the presidential nominee, was under pressure to replace Nixon on the ticket with someone with a cleaner record. In order to save his political career, Nixon took to the airwaves and gave a televised speech, with his wife next to him for support, denying that he had taken any illegal funds and explaining their humble financial situation to the entire country. He noted that his wife “doesn’t have a mink coat, but she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat. And I always tell her that she’d look good in anything.”<sup>5</sup> The coup de grace of the speech was when he mentioned that one gift that he did accept was a “little cocker spaniel in a crate that he sent all the way from Texas. Black-and-white spotted. And our little girl—Tricia, the six-year-old named it Checkers. And you know the kids love that dog, and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we’re going to keep it.”<sup>6</sup> Nixon went on to keep his slot on Eisenhower’s ticket and to remain in American politics for the next