

Article

Duck and Cover: Journalists on Being “Enemies of the People” During Early Days of Trump’s “Fake News” World

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Abstract

The experiences of 48 U.S. journalists covering Donald Trump’s inaugural year as president in 2017 provide a contemporaneous account of being “enemies of the people” in a highly charged partisan environment. Using snowball sampling, participants were asked to respond via email during a period bookended by a Phoenix, Arizona, rally in which Trump berated news reporters for their coverage of demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, and then, weeks later, posted disparaging “fake news” tweets. The social media barrage followed challenging news coverage of a devastating hurricane in the eastern United States. Responses came from journalists representing 41 news organizations (including broadcast, radio, cable, online, and print) in regions throughout the country. Qualitative reflexive thematic analysis surfaced deeply intertwined personal and professional concerns, suggesting a need to heighten awareness of the influence sustained trauma has on both personal and professional relationships. Their being labeled “fake” and “enemies of the people” might affect content and routine in ways that include self-censorship, sourcing, transparency, and degrees to which one would risk harm or emotional distress to cover a story. Toughing it out in the face of sustained and wounding attacks might create hidden psychological and professional time-bombs, putting journalists, journalism, and ultimately democracy, at risk.

Keywords: journalism; journalists; Trump; enemy; fake news; enemy of the people

1. Introduction

On his first full day in office, 21 January 2017, U.S. President Donald J. Trump said he had “a running war with the media” (Davis & Rosenberg, 2017, para. 12) and called journalists “among the most dishonest human beings on earth” (para. 3). By then, lambasting news organizations and journalists (Farhi, 2017) for supposedly reporting fakery or not reporting stories favorable to Trump-related interests, was a familiar “fake news” discourse strategy that included outright lies, pointed mockery, and menacing threats (Corasaniti, 2016; Rather, 2016; Tartar, 2016).

But it went beyond that. Trump’s Make America Great Again movement, or MAGA as it is popularly known, embraced a threatening tone that was evident in its members’ rhetoric and, less ephemerally than in speeches and social media posts, in its merchandise. Messages emblazoned on those goods were amplified through both fleeting and enduring posts and ensuing discussions on popular platforms that included Facebook (the dominant platform in 2016, with 68% of U.S. Americans using it (Greenwood et al., 2016), Instagram (owned by Facebook and rising rapidly in popularity (Reuters, 2016), and Reddit and Twitter, noted for news transmission and political discourse at the time (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).



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Photographs of a man wearing a t-shirt that read “Rope. Tree. Journalist. Some assembly required” at a Trump rally went viral globally on social media in November 2016 after appearing on then-*Washington Post* reporter Breanne Deppisch’s Twitter feed (ABC Australia, 2016). Stores, online and mainstream, were selling it and other meme-emblazoned merchandise soon after (Perrigo, 2017) despite the message’s seeming advocacy of lynching. Major League baseball celebrity Curt Schilling retweeted Deppisch’s photo, commenting that it was “awesome” (Darcy, 2016).

In this and many other ways, MAGA-driven political messages of violence (Thornton, 2018) seeped out of rally arenas and into everyday life, providing little cognitive or emotional escape for journalists under attack. Signs of partisan viewpoints flooded the visual and social landscape, with perhaps the most common symbol of far-right unity being the red Make America Great Again ballcap, trademarked in July 2015 (Parker, 2015).

Nearing inauguration, attacks targeting journalists increased, including personal tactics such as doxxing (Henrichsen, 2015) and social mockery (Thornton, 2018). After inauguration, attacks gained official amplification from key administration spokespeople (Jackson, 2017a; Sevastopulo & Weaver, 2017; Stelter, 2017). The pervasive hostility reminded some of the 1950s, when schoolchildren learned to hide under desks in “duck and cover” drills in anticipation of nuclear war.

If the professional identity of journalists in a democratic society is bound to the ideological premise that their job is to tell people what they need to know (Deuze, 2005; Elliott, 1988), then what happens to that sense of self and mission when the leader of the democracy they serve (and much of the public) repeatedly calls them enemies and liars (Easley, 2017a;realDonaldTrump, 2017)? Humans undergo intense sensemaking processes when under pressure, particularly when identity is involved or security threatened. Responses can lead to reevaluation of work and coping strategies; the experience affects emotional responses, personally and professionally (Dworznik, 2006; Dworznik-Hoak, 2020; Frey, 2023; Novak & Davidson, 2013). Studies, such as those referenced, have dealt with the practice of journalism and the care of journalists while reporting trauma (Mathewson, 2022). Still, political attempts to delegitimize legitimate news organizations and their journalists is largely uncharted in terms of its influence on early-stage personal sensemaking related to emotional and job-related reactions during Trump’s rise to political power as a United States president. As one respondent described, there was a pervasive sense of uncertainty about what to expect:

“There was a lot of hate directed toward me just because I was a journalist,” a photographer said of her experience at an October 2016 campaign event, shortly before Trump was elected president, but after he was associated with an antagonistic, derogatory stance toward the press (Rather, 2016; Tartar, 2016; Uberti, 2016). While gearing up for one thing, another can take you by surprise. In her words:

“That was by far the nastiest rally experience I’d had thus far. Tensions were the highest I’d ever seen that day. I was standing on a chair in the media pen shooting into the crowd during Trump’s speech when this girl popped up at the fence and handed me a piece of paper wrapped in a napkin and just disappeared back into the crowd. I stared at it for a second, expecting to open it and read a death threat, but to my complete surprise, the notes said this: “We love the First Amendment. Thank you.” and “Thank you for standing up for what’s right in the face of such hostility. You are the reason we have a functioning democracy and we appreciate it more than we can say.” I keep them in my camera bag and take them with me wherever I go to this day.”

This tightly focused study explores what it is like to be a journalist while the public is urged, by those journalists’ president, to think what they’ve chosen to do is detrimental to the public’s health and that they, as journalists, are the enemy. What is it like for them to be

in a politically charged environment when under attack—professionally, psychologically, and sometimes physically? Forty-eight journalists answered that question via email during three weeks in late summer 2017. The goal was to collect rich description—an intentional, contemporaneous snapshot—of a traumatic and momentous time and interpret it through the lens of the respondents. They revealed vulnerabilities, bravado, passion, fear, and concern for democracy and journalism. What they disclosed suggests an increased need for holistic awareness of the interrelatedness of personal and professional life. Their experiences argue for a recalibration of journalistic practice to include the well-being of journalists themselves.

2. Background: Overview

The day before Trump assumed office in 2017 (and acknowledged his “running war with the media”), he falsely claimed that news reports deliberately underreported the size of his inauguration crowd. As he stood before an audience at the Central Intelligence Agency, he blamed journalists for inventing a rift between U.S. intelligence agencies and himself (Davis & Rosenberg, 2017). On 26 January, Trump said in a CBN interview that he agreed with then-White House chief strategist Steve Bannon’s characterization of the media as the opposition party: “I’m not talking about everybody, but a big portion of the media, the dishonesty, total deceit and deception. It makes them certainly partially the opposition party, absolutely” (Grynbaum, 2017a; Harrington, 2017).

Twenty-seven days after taking office, on 17 February 2017, Trump once again put the imprimatur of the President of the United States on his war, continuing to stoke a decades-long decline in trust from the American public for those whose job it was to provide news (Feffer, 2017; Daniel, 2017; Zuckerman, 2017; Barthel & Mitchell, 2017). This time, Trump’s assessment was particularly harsh and, for many, deeply troubling (Bondarenko, 2017; Erickson, 2017; Grynbaum, 2017b; Higgins, 2017). “The fake news media (failing @nytimes, @CNN, @NBCNews and many more) is not my enemy,” he wrote, “it is the enemy of the American people. Sick!” (realDonaldTrump, 2017). He then deleted the post, only to repeat his words in another tweet sixteen minutes later, omitting “SICK!” and “and many more,” but adding ABC and CBS to the singled-out organizations (Grynbaum, 2017b; Johnson & Gold, 2017; Murphy & Hadley, 2017;realDonaldTrump, 2017). He repeated the charge, showing it was not a fluke: “A few days ago I called the fake news the enemy of the people, and they are—they are the enemy of the people,” Trump told the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (Daniel, 2017; Jackson, 2017b).

That was followed by 175 days of continued finger-pointing attacks, punctuated byrealDonaldTrump tweets, public statements, and rally cries against journalists (Borchers, 2017; Grynbaum, 2017c; Hartmann, 2017; Lemire, 2017; Manchester, 2017; Politi, 2017; Rosen, 2017; Seipel, 2017; Shear, 2017; P. Singer, 2017; Wagner & Johnson, 2017; Watson, 2017). During that time, on 20 July 2017, Trump completed six months in office. Within those days, the president tweeted 82 times (of 991 total for that time period) about fake news, fake media, and fake stories (Krieg, 2017). On 10 August, Trump touted a poll that reflected the view that he was a much better president than Obama and blasted against “Fake News Suppressed Polls” (Savransky, 2017b). A concurrent Pew study showed about half of Republicans believed Trump won the popular vote, despite his loss by approximately 3 million, and would be fine with postponing the 2020 election (until the vote could be secure) if Trump asked (Malka & Lelkes, 2017; Savransky, 2017a).

White nationalists rallied in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 11 August. The demonstration turned into a deadly partisan confrontation on the 12th (Astor et al., 2017). Trump later accused reporters of mischaracterizing both the conflict and his reaction, days later, to what

happened in Charlottesville, saying the “#Fake News Media will never be satisfied. . . truly bad people!” in a tweet (Thrush, 2017).

On 22 August, Trump held a rally in Phoenix, Arizona. In denouncing “crooked media deceptions,” as one observer reported, Trump appeared to whip up hostility in the audience (Cumming-Bruce, 2017). “Over the next 72 min, the president launched into one angry rant after another, repeatedly attacking the media. . .” (Johnson, 2017). A Fox reporter described it this way: “A defiant President Trump rallied with his base for more than an hour Tuesday in Arizona, trashing the media over its coverage of his response to the recent violence in Charlottesville, Virginia” (Pappas, 2017). Mike Allen, reporting for Axios, wrote “It was as if Trump, who was introduced by Vice President Pence, was taunting the rowdy crowd to turn on reporters. In this fevered environment, some journalist could get beaten, or worse” (Easley, 2017b). Some in the media said they feared for their safety (Hasson, 2017; Stelter, 2017; Victor, 2017) and, indeed, tear gas was used in a confrontation outside the convention center after the rally ended (Romero, 2017).

The first email request for a response for this study went out 24 August as the Phoenix rally was in the news. The next day, news coverage began to be consumed by the approach of Hurricane Irma bearing down on the Gulf Coast—which it did with ferocity and devastation. Jim Acosta of CNN, a frequent target of Trump’s verbal attacks in person and on Twitter, tweeted Trump a suggestion: “Not a good time to take shots at ‘fake news.’ Millions will be relying on national and local news outlets to stay safe during hurricane.” *Newsweek* ran a story titled “As Trump attacks the media, reporters are rescuing people in Texas” (Haltiwanger, 2017). For a while, Trump did refrain from such attacks; his approval ratings went up (Reed, 2017). During that time, on August 30, the United Nations human rights chief, at a conference in Geneva, condemned Trump’s Phoenix attacks on the media saying that continued denouncements could incite violence (Cumming-Bruce, 2017).

On 5 September, Hurricane Irma reached Category 5 status and, on the 10th, made landfall in Florida, devastating islands on its way. On the 7th, an earthquake measuring 8.1 occurred off the southern coast of Mexico. On 12 September, after a 14-day stretch without references to journalists or journalism, President Trump once again tweeted about “#FAKE NEWS!,” followed by a 15 September tweet chastising ESPN, and a retweet on 17 September of a disparaging remark about *The New York Times*.

Against the background of these events, the respondents in this study wrote their replies.

3. Scope of the Field

3.1. *Doing the Job*

The tie journalists feel to their profession has been described in ways that range from “calling” to “craft” (Fee, 2013, 2014; Overholser, 2006). The word “profession” itself has been long debated (Banning, 1998), but for the purposes of this study, which is about journalists and their relation to the job they and their colleagues do, the word is used in a general sense. Designations describing the values journalists hold, and their motivations for becoming and being a journalist, are clearer. Gade (2005), in writing about organizational change, wrote “Journalism is guided by professional values, including public service, allegiance to truth, journalistic autonomy, and social responsibility” (p. 374), and he refers to numerous supporting studies, including two landmark decennial surveys: Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) and Weaver et al. (2007).

Weaver and Wilhoit noted, in their 1996 work, that “public disparagement of journalists, although certainly not new, seems more biting” (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996, p. 49). The news industry itself was going through great change, becoming increasingly corporate in ownership and management approaches, and that meant accompanying change for

journalists. Why (Weaver and Wilhoit asked the journalists they surveyed in 1992) would you want to be a journalist? Thematically, among the most common answers was a wish “to make a difference” (p. 51); the scholars described the responses as idealistic and altruistic (p. 53). In the 2007 survey, the authors (Weaver et al., 2007) discerned and profiled four roles: interpreters, adversarialists, disseminators and populist mobilizers. The interpreters, it was noted, “seem to place great faith . . . in the important public service” their organizations provide (p. 151). Adversarialists were watchdogs, disseminators felt they did a “good job of informing the public” (p. 152), and populist motivators displayed “exceptional affinity with the media’s opportunities to help people” (p. 152).

The public service norm has shown itself to be key in negotiations of new routines and partnerships (J. B. Singer, 2006a), and the motivating force in movements as diverse as muckraking (Miraldi, 2000) and public journalism (Rosenberry & St. John, 2009). In an analysis of fifteen codes of media ethics, Roberts (2017) found the codes focused on social context outcomes, and a value of universalism ranked highest for journalists. He used the definition provided by Rohan (2000): “understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature” (p. 261). J. B. Singer (2006b), in reconceptualizing the definition of a journalist in light of vastly altered roles, influenced in large part by technology, suggested the term of socially responsible existentialist to describe “a journalist who chooses to act as a trustworthy source of information that serves the public interest” (p. 2). In doing so, Singer drew “on constructs of professionalism, which sociologists define as involving both autonomy and public service” (p. 3).

Such a definition may be important to the journalist who has an individual need to preserve his or her occupational identity, but it is even more important to members of the public who have a compelling social need to differentiate between information that can be trusted and information that cannot (p. 3).

Kovach and Rosenstiel, in *The Elements of Journalism* (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), wrote that “The first among them is that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (p. 12). Deuze (2005), however, noted that “Providing a service to publics in a multimedia and multicultural environment is not the same safe value to hide behind like it used to be in the days of print and broadcast mass media” (p. 455). That was written before the rise of Twitter and Facebook, but it is easy to see that journalists, perhaps by necessity, lead a far more public life because of social media, and are therefore more vulnerable as well.

3.2. Escalation and “Enemy of the People”

The first seven months of the Trump Administration were characterized, in part, by a demonstrably fierce and driven attempt to delegitimize legitimate journalism organizations, and their journalists, in the United States. The battle, couched in war terms by Trump himself—“The fake news media . . . is the enemy of the American people!” (realDonaldTrump, 2017)—was set in a political and social climate of deep polarization (Gramlich, 2016; Tyson & Maniam, 2016) that had left many, including many journalists, shocked by the U.S. 2016 Election outcome (Goldmacher & Schreckinger, 2016; Love, 2017). Intense discussions followed—on cable and broadcast TV, radio, in print, and around proverbial water coolers (Gross, 2016; Seligman et al., 2017). Prominent themes involved the growth of tribal epistemology during Trump’s rise to power (Roberts, 2017), particularly in relation to the stark difference in which news sources were relied on and regarded by Clinton and Trump supporters (Gottfried et al., 2017). There was widespread curiosity (and derision) about how numerous poll-based predictions of a Clinton win happened, and how their terminal inaccuracy—which was, in part, perception rather than reality (Clement & Guskin, 2016)—weakened journalistic credibility and authority.

Demonizing legitimate journalism in an elective democracy has conceivably high stakes. Possible consequences include severely undermining a protected public service (in the United States, by the First Amendment) and poisoning the search for and publication of credible information needed for democracy to thrive. Journalists, relying on trust and reputation to do their jobs, might find those jobs more difficult (Barthel & Mitchell, 2017). Journalists who depend on the reputation of their organizations to frame their work as credible, legitimate and fact-based (Tong, 2017) might experience new frustrations as those reputations are attacked. In a highly charged partisan environment, those journalists might fear for their safety. A less obvious arena for potential damage includes personal relationships—including the relationship one has with oneself and one's profession—stressed by an increasingly divided public with strong in-group ties. Would an accumulation of these pressures result in changed journalistic routines? Could it result in changed practices? Could it result in changed ways of thinking and professional identification?

"Enemy of the people" is a phrase with long history—Nero was called an enemy of the people by the Roman Senate—as a charge brought against whistleblowers, those protesting dictators and despots, and politically inconvenient countries (Haglunds, 2009). Its resonance was not lost on contemporary journalists against whom that label was lobbied by Trump. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and others (including Voice of America) noted the insult's ties to Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union (Bondarenko, 2017; Erickson, 2017; Herman & Seldin, 2017). "The formula 'enemy of the people,'" Mr. Khrushchev told the Soviet Communist Party in a 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's cult of personality, "was specifically introduced for the purpose of physically annihilating such individuals who disagreed with the supreme leader" (Higgins, 2017). Its use against the press to delegitimize and silence has precedence, but using it to undermine legitimate journalism in a democracy is particularly problematic—especially when there is a falling level of trust between news media and the public (Jones, 2004). "Lower levels of confidence in the media may deprive the public of some of the essentials of democracy: a source of current information and public education that it can trust and a watchdog for public officials in which it has confidence," Dautrich and Hartley warned in (Dautrich & Hartley, 1999, p. 15). Polarization brings with it risks of tribal epistemology, where information is interpreted less by adherence to fact than accordance with group beliefs (Roberts, 2017).

This inquiry explores what it is like to be a journalist when the public is being urged, by their country's leader, to think their journalism is detrimental to the public's health and that they, themselves, are the enemy. How would they describe the personal toll?

4. Methodology

The study was initially intended to query journalists associated with the main news organizations frequently named by Trump as being fake, dishonest, etc. The scope broadened to include journalists whether or not they worked for one of the organizations Trump had singled out for verbal (and conceptual) attack. This was in response to what occurred at the 22 August 2017, Trump rally in Phoenix, Arizona, where the president heightened his rhetoric with regard to directing disdain toward journalists in general (Landler & Haberman, 2017). In hopes of eliciting substantive, frank, meaningful, and transparent answers (an outcome more likely in a relationship of trust), a snowball approach was used. The participants, while known to the researcher and referring journalists, are anonymous in the study. To encourage a range of perspectives, there was an emphasis on choosing diverse news media, job categories, demographic considerations such as culture and gender, and geographic locations. The questions invited journalists to draw on their experience to consider and answer the following in an email directly and solely to me:

“Do you think that repeated attacks on entire news organizations (particularly CNN, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*) and journalists in general as “fake,” “dishonest,” “lying,” “failing,” etc., are affecting or influencing you or your colleagues? If so, in what ways? If not, why?”

The first query and response in this study took place 24 August 2017 (two days after the Trump rally in Phoenix). The bulk of the answers arrived between 27 August and 8 September, two days before Hurricane Irma made landfall in Florida. Almost all responses were returned within a day or two of being asked. The last response was accepted on 17 September. One person declined to take part due to pending litigation at his organization, but others from that same organization provided comment.

All of the “fake news media” organizations named in Trump’s tweets were represented, along with 36 others, several of which were owned by Sinclair Broadcasting or were Fox affiliates, organizations associated with supporting the Trump administration. Representation included the following categories: print, broadcast and cable, online only-, and radio platforms; commercial, public, alternative and non-profit; national, regional and local levels; multiple kinds of journalists, including reporters, editors, and photographers. Respondents comprised 22 men and 26 women, with geographic diversity across the United States.

Analysis was reflexive and thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2021), drawing on my journalism experience to understand and then prioritize the respondents’ own words during a fragmentation and later synthesis of their replies.

5. Findings

Overwhelmingly, the respondents’ messages reflected a feeling they were reacting with strength, in terms of doing one’s job, in the face of Trump-led attacks. They made sense of the barrage by calling it a strategy, baseless, unprecedented, and an attempt to discredit political reporting by media who strive to be objective. Some saw some criticisms as warranted; meanwhile, on the other side of the wide range, one person reduced the attacks as coming from “haters,” a “small, loud minority.” But while almost all of the respondents expressed, explicitly or implicitly, the impression the attacks had backfired (with two respondents using that word), nearly all of them also pointed to ways in which accepting those attacks had caused changes in their thinking, behavior, relationships, or sense of security. The two who said there had been no impact personally followed it up by saying they were concerned about how it was affecting others.

One expressed the situation this way: “These attacks force reevaluation of where journalism fits into all this as well as our roles as journalists and as people and how to handle things when those bump up against each other.”

5.1. Solidarity and Strength, Defensive Bravado and Renewed Resolve

Rather than demoralizing them, the attacks energized many of the journalists. “I think the attacks reinforce—for a group of people beleaguered by endless cutbacks and the relentless drive to produce clicks regardless of the quality of the product—that our profession is vital,” wrote one investigative reporter who’d been in the business for more than twenty years. “To ourselves, we feel like we matter again, and to the public, we hope maybe they’re slowly coming round the proposition that what we do matters to them, too.”

“Should we change our reporting because we’re at the center of a show?” asked another respondent. “Not in the least; in fact I see other reporters willing to double down on our mission despite what the president, or his 6000 loyalists, say.”

This view permeated at least half of the responses, evident as well in this one from someone else: “The cheers, retweets and praise the president receives in response to his

attacks on journalists can at times make me feel hopeless. Despite this, even when I'm at my lowest and question whether people can even hear truth, I still refuse to give up."

"As do many other outlets," she continued, "who are using the attacks as a way to reaffirm their dedication to seek and report the facts. On my glass-half-full days, I even feel this may lead to a surge of support for journalism, and possibly boost transparency between news organizations and their audiences."

"The attacks have backfired," wrote another. "Most reporters I know (me included) openly mock the labels and wear them as a badge of pride. . . . I want to get a T-shirt that says 'Public Enemy #1' or 'Dishonest Journo.' If you can't take the criticism, you're in the wrong line of work. More of the same, far as I'm concerned." That same person indicated, however, that the wry humor expressed by many was also a social cover for deeper concerns: "Where I do really worry is in the policies that will come out with regard to newsgathering. . . ."

There were references to the attacks becoming an "in joke" among journalists, who take a "wry pride" in being targeted. "It keeps us on our toes" and "stiffens [our] spines." "I'm focusing on damn fine journalism," one wrote. Another echoed the sentiment with "Trump lit a fire under me and taught me to never take no for an answer." There is a "redoubling of commitment to get things right the first time," assessed another, who echoed the idea that journalists are "going the extra mile" to get facts correct and not editorialize.

Along with the bravado was an element of compensation for attacks on identity and professionalism: "[We] want to prove our work is trustworthy and important." They called on themselves and their colleagues to "work even harder" with "zeal and gusto," and "only dig deeper to fight for truth and justice." "Many express a duty to work beyond the hate," I was told. Several suggested there might be a rise in engagement and subscriptions from people who "want professionally reported news."

Despite increased industry competition, the sense of a common threat appeared to encourage collaboration, causing journalists to unite to cover current news:

"Journos and recovering ones whom I know and respect are quietly and often openly applauding the news wars between those three organizations. I do, too, but I keep it mostly to myself or to emails. It feels to my generation of reporters, too young to really experience Watergate, but young enough to be inspired by it, that we are in a similar golden age in which the top outlets are tripping over each other to compete on the latest revelations and investigations. My bias has always been toward investigative journalism, it's why I'm here and it's the prism through which I assess a lot of coverage. From that vantage, I think it's been wonderful. Some amazing work is being done."

Behind some of the expressions of strength, of near bravado, were poignant glimpses: "The mantra at my shop has been to continue to seek out the truth, make sure it's properly sourced and stand by our work," one journalist wrote. "If we do that, then we should be immune from any false attacks."

Mostly, however, there were variations on this: "What I've felt in myself and seen in my colleagues is an emboldening of the spirit, a narrowing of the eyes, a standing up and digging in deeper to expose the lies and hold accountable those who attack our profession."

5.2. Vulnerability, Fear, and General Unease

One journalist described the Trump rallies she had covered as awash in "mandated loud music," booing, and inadequate equipment. At one, she recalled, "people came up to the press barriers, which were like the metal bike racks this time, and just screamed at us." Along with her response, she sent links to Instagram and Facebook posts of photos taken during those times. "I remember taking and posting this photo while we waited for edits and feeling like we'd just survived something," she wrote.

One journalist characterized it as “riding the edge of explicit personal threats.” Referring to that sense of unease:

“I’d say this is true of journalists generally in DC [where this person was based] right now: there’s fear that any sort of good solid, day-to-day work can spark the kind of firestorm that makes you question why you’d want to do it in the first place. I’ve had friends (at CNN and Politico) receive death threats and be the subject of frightening propagandistic coverage in alt-right outlets, often precipitated by the president shouting “fake news” about something they’ve reported.”

Another echoed: “Many of our writers certainly feel personally afraid that they could become the target of the next media attack, because everything seems so volatile... I can’t imagine what it’s like to be a novice at a large publication that puts young staffers on their breaking news desk, which is often tasked with quickly aggregating reports from somewhere else, with little time to report. One misstep could land you on the president’s Twitter feed.”

Respondents from two of the oft-targeted large news organizations made a point of saying that safety issues prompted taking extra measures that included defense training and altered practices. One example:

“The biggest way this has affected [organization name withheld] is the fear that someone might do physical harm to a journalist. . . . Whereas before you might openly display the company logo so people knew you were a journalist from a reputable source, we’re experiencing more heckling now to the degree it can give you major pause. So some of us choose to use a plain microphone without the logo for extra precaution.”

5.3. Stress, Anxiety, Relationship Strains, an Uncertain Future

Many wrote how things that rattled them take their toll; this is not just about safety, but about journalism’s contributory role and their continuing—or not continuing—role as journalists. “Frankly,” one respondent wrote, “this Trump thing is like one big trauma anxiety ball that just won’t stop rolling and expanding. It affects us directly as people, indirectly as journalists, and then again as people.” Another wrote: “I wonder how bad it’ll get before it gets better, when I’ll be unsafe, if, when and how I may need to leave journalism. . . .” Someone else echoed: “I’ve reconsidered how I do my job and if I should do my job.”

And another: “Yes, it’s affected my colleagues—I’ve heard them also say they feel shitty and sometimes unsafe. Some have also said they censor themselves.” She, and others, used the words “anxious” and “depressed”: “[S]tress and anxiety are through the roof.”

Family relationships, and friendships, have become strained. Even identifying oneself as a journalist has become a decision: “I often have a few times caught myself introducing myself as a writer, which feels much safer than journalist, but is not entirely a lie.” Others cited the same hesitancy and practice. This excerpt was not unusual in its tone: “And from time to time, my family reminds me that I should have gone STEM; my dad wanted me to be an engineer and my younger brother’s life is super stable and perfect. It’s super fun good times. . . .” A particularly reflective answer (unedited) described the situation at length:

“It is personally influencing me in a negative way. I see some people in my life—family and friends—who are supporters of Donald Trump look at my career in increasingly jaded glasses. Why am I not telling the truth, if there’s an article from my organization they disagree with? If “climate change” or health care is brought up in conversation, failure and stupidity (and worse, usually involving the destruction of the U.S. in some dramatic fashion) is immediately blamed on the “libtards.” Liberals, to them, are the base of evil, of everything wrong with this country, of the rolling back of a way of life they

find comfort in and also in the rolling back of a way of life that no longer supports them. And the vocalization of those beliefs has been strengthened and motivated by the similar proclamations by the most powerful man in the world. And anything that is not Fox News or Breitbart or Rush Limbaugh must, of course, be liberal. And these are folks that I love, that I know as generally warm and caring, and as smart people. But now, if I even simply share an article from the “failing New York Times,” the best response I get is silence. The worst is that I am complicit in something very anti-American and consciously, purposefully participating in as a journalist and member of the media.”

Introspection was evident in many responses, such as here: “We (myself and most of the people I’ve heard talk about this) were afraid to call them out (the Trump attacks) as such when they started because we were afraid of putting targets on ourselves—being unprofessional, losing objectivity, etc.—and we failed to realize the targets were already there.” A bit later: “We’re also still scared and not sure where to find allies.”

Although some said they thought people made distinctions between the national press and local, others found a tarring-with-the-same-brush effect:

“I’m the assignment editor at a 20k Sunday circulation daily. I get calls nearly every week criticizing our coverage in a way that I hadn’t heard in the first 15 years of my journalism career. We’re accused of running dishonest stories, of withholding news, of bias. It’s harder to get our foot in the door with sources who have already decided “the media” is the enemy, which then makes the situation worse as their viewpoint is then not going to be included in our coverage. I’m also finding it harder to be a member of “the media” in my personal life. I have family members who are vocal in their attacks against the industry, and there is no separation in their minds between what the national outlets do and what I and my counterparts at other local outlets are doing. That’s the place that is, for me, the most difficult and disheartening. For many years, I loved being a part of the staff at newspapers, and truly enjoyed conversations with readers and sources when I was out around town. That’s changed so much, and I feel like if someone approaches me about the paper, it’s only to complain. I’m also having to spend a lot more time explaining the story selection and newsgathering process (which is ultimately a good thing), but it’s an explanation that grows out of an accusation that we aren’t doing our jobs correctly.”

In sum: “It is awful feeling like an outsider when all you’re trying to do is aid democracy.”

6. Discussion

Since then, the situation has worsened, globally and in the United States, in terms of press freedom and journalists’ safety (Bocande, 2026). Journalism faces increasingly existential challenges from the economy and partisan forces led by a re-elected Trump (Bauder, 2025). A Gallup poll places recent trust in media at a historically low 28% (Gallup, 2025), an occurrence that likely reflects general unease in the wake of cataclysmic events that include a global pandemic, catastrophic changes in weather patterns, and both national and international shifts politically toward the extreme right (Campion & Poynting, 2021). Still, in 2022 during the first year of the Biden Administration, 77% of nearly 12,000 working journalists in the U.S. told Pew they would choose their careers again, even though 57% had concerns about press freedom and 72% used negative words like “chaos,” “stressful,” and “struggling” to describe the news industry (Gottfried et al., 2022). This suggests that the acceptance of stress in the journalistic job, a longstanding characteristic (Simpson & Boggs, 1999) has remained an acknowledged factor, but recognition of its many sources, and how they feed into each other, may be a rich area of inquiry.

It is easy to see how causing widespread and largely undifferentiated mistrust in journalism could damage democracy while promoting social and civic unrest. Less explored

is how that change in standing affects journalists themselves, and in turn the journalism they produce. Outside pressures are not always obvious or quantifiable. Some are insidious, slow-growing, and so indirect or personal that they're hard to identify or own. The 2017 responses explored in this study indicate a fledgling unease about being targeted by an antagonistic and partisan movement led by the highest elected official in U.S. government. In the responses, we see contemporaneous observations, not reflections of nearly a decade later when a different sense might be made of the challenges they faced. From the vantage point of 2026, an orchestrated prevalence of attacks is clear. In 2017, it was not. Deciding how to react to them was largely an uncharted challenge providing additional stress.

It is evident that attempts to delegitimize legitimate news organizations affected the journalists personally and professionally. This research suggests questions about how their being labeled “fake” and “enemies of the people” might affect content and routine in ways that include self-censorship, sourcing, transparency, and degrees to which one would risk harm or emotional distress to cover a story. Toughing it out, or seeking to appear unaffected and not seeking help, is a documented element of journalistic culture; it is observed by practitioners in the field as well as those who could provide help as managers (Aoki et al., 2012; Miller, 2025). In the face of sustained and wounding attacks, such as those the far-right Trump campaign and administration set in motion, stoic, selfless, or simply insufficiently caring behavior might create hidden psychological and professional time-bombs, putting journalists, journalism, and ultimately democracy, at risk. Future studies in that area could determine ways in which care for journalists, upon whom we as public creatures rely for crucial information, might gain the import that is its due.

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