War Stories: Trump's Narratives and Freedom of the Press

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O n January 8, 2018, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) announced their Press Oppressors Awards. U.S. President Donald Trump won the top award in the category "Overall Achievement in Undermining Global Press Freedom" and was runner up in the category "Most Thin-Skinned."[1] The CPJ observed that the United States, "With its First Amendment protection for a free press, has long stood as a beacon for independent media around the world" ("In Response," 2018). Trump, according to the CPJ, has "consistently undermined domestic news outlets and declined to publicly raise freedom of the press with oppressive leaders" around the world ("In Response," 2018). The CPJ warned, "As Trump and other Western powers fail to pressure the world's most repressive leaders into improving the climate for press freedom, the number of journalists in prison globally is at a record high" ("In Response," 2018). The CPJ also noted that Trump had issued over 1,000 tweets attacking the press since entering the presidential race in 2015. In his tweets and his speeches, Trump called news outlets and individual journalists "sad," "failing," or "garbage" ("In Response," 2018).

Trump's contentious relationship with the press raises important and troubling questions about how a free press should function in a democracy. Trump has—thus far—not implemented official measures that would interfere with the operation of a free press, despite his threats to sue news organizations (Rappeport, 2016), strip media outlets of their FCC license (Brodkin, 2017), and liberalize libel laws (Gold, 2016). We contend, however, that Trump is waging a symbolic war against the press through his narratives and that these narratives have in fact altered the landscape of press freedoms. To support this argument, we will first discuss the role of narrative and

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narrative fragments in public argumentation. Second, we will analyze the predicament, characters, and options for extrication that Trump's narratives create, with particular attention to the characterization of the press as enemies and how this definition delineates and distorts discourse. Finally, we will analyze the ways in which Trump's narratives decenter the debate about press freedom such that reporters and citizens debate Trump's clashes with the press rather than the powerful role a free press should play and the current threats to that role.

Narrative in Public Argumentation

Narratives are central to public argumentation. Walter Fisher (1984) argued that humans are storytelling animals and that public discourse is best understood according to a "narrative paradigm." This paradigm identifies storytelling as the primary way in which people make arguments in public discourse, and narrative rationality as a way to make sense of arguments. Fisher contended that much of the rational discourse that makes up legal and scientific discourses, for instance, are dominated by expert voices, which leave little room for the public to participate. This phenomenon also creates a power imbalance whereby the general public is left out of the debates that may affect their daily lives. But because, according to Fisher, humans are essentially storytellers, the narrative paradigm offers greater inclusion for people who seek to participate in public deliberation. In the narrative paradigm, as Fisher (1984) noted, "the experts are storytellers and the audience is not a group of observers but are active participants in the meaning-formation of the stories" (p. 13). In debates about issues where expert voices tend to dominate, it is important that citizens be able to access public argument through stories. In other words, when the discussion of certain topics in public discourse becomes so specialized that only experts can participate, the general public has a harder time weighing the merit of claims and proof in a traditional rational sense. However, because we are storytelling animals who have the ability to judge narrative rationality (a combination of narrative probability and narrative fidelity), the general public has the ability to judge public discourse. An average person may not be able to chime into a discussion of

jurisprudence and First Amendment case law but the same person does have the ability to determine if a story she or he is hearing hangs together as a story and seems accurate based on her or his lived experiences.

Seemingly in response to the question regarding the dichotomy, Fisher (1989) wrote, "regardless of genre, discourse will always tell a story and insofar as it invites an audience to believe it or act on it, the narrative paradigm and its attendant logic, narrative rationality, are available for interpretation and assessment" (p. 56). In short, Fisher argued that the narrative paradigm as a philosophical statement "is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication— assuming that all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character" (p. 57). It is important, however, to recognize that narratives that shape our understanding of the world are often pieces of narratives or fragments and that we take these bits and pieces of narrative and weave them together into something that makes sense to us. Hayden White (1980) questioned the traditional notion of narrative as having a clear beginning, middle, and end, with central subjects and coherence. He concluded that narratives are fragmented and non-linear and that they function as moralizing agents that do not speak for themselves but are given power through their use. Although he was primarily theorizing about narratives in organizations, Boje (2001) also challenged the traditional notion of linear narrative and introduced the term "antenarrative" to challenge the coherence and completeness of narratives, emphasizing that narratives are pieced together. He explained that the antenarrative captures the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, unplotted and prenarrative aspects of narration.

Although it may seem like a rhetor would be giving up power by not pulling the listener through a complete, linear narrative, "there are cases when the narratives found in public rhetorical discourse might, in fact, gain force or persuasiveness from a certain degree of openness or lack of closure" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 397). This persuasiveness can be achieved because the responsibility to make sense of the narrative is shifted to the listener in a similar fashion as an enthymeme. The

enthymeme, as opposed to a syllogism, is a powerful tool precisely because it does not provide the conclusion for the listener. The listener must provide the omitted premises or conclusion, which requires the listener be engaged. This engagement, coupled with the fulfillment of the enthymeme, works subtly but powerfully to reach a persuasive end. The same can be said for the process by which auditors weave together narrative fragments. Gottschall (2012) described the power of the meaning-making impulse when he wrote "The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them" (p. 103).

The fragmented and non-linear nature of Trump's narratives is especially pronounced because of his heavy reliance on communication forms with limited capacity such as Twitter and slogans. But it is not just the mode of communication that contributes to fragmentation. Trump's fragmented narratives function enthymematically because they require listeners to assemble arguments from incomplete utterances. Due to the co-created nature of narrative, listeners take the fragments from Trump's rhetoric and weave them together with their own fragments, and thus create meaning.

For example, the following speech excerpt delivered by Trump at a rally in Phoenix, Arizona, on August 22, 2017, seemed to be persuasive to the audience (i.e. it was met by roaring applause) although it is extremely fragmented. Trump said:

> So the point is—and I didn't want to bore you, because you understand where I'm coming from. You people understand. But the point is that those were three different—there were two statements and one news conference. The words were perfect. They only take out anything they can think of. And for the most part, all they do is complain. But they don't put on those words, and they don't put on me saying those words. The media can attack me. But where I draw the line is when they attack you—which is what they do—when they attack the decency of our supporters.
> You are honest, hard-working, tax-paying—and by the way, you're overtaxed, but we're going to get your taxes down. You're tax-paying Americans who love our Nation, obey our laws, and care for our people. It's time to expose the crooked media deceptions and to challenge the media for their role in fomenting divisions. And yes, by the way, they are trying to take away our history and our heritage. You see that.
> *Audience members.* Boo!

The President. And I say it, and you know, we're all pros. (Trump, 2017)

In this passage, Trump talked about multiple topics, cut back and forth between them, began sentences without finishing them, and still arrived at the conclusion that the audience agreed with his "arguments." As he observed to his audience, "You people understand" (Trump, 2017).

Recognizing the persuasive power of these fragments is important because as we seek to understand how Trump and the media create stories to influence the public, we must always be aware that entire storylines can be condensed into a few words, and sometimes all we need to do is remind audiences of story elements, like enemies and heroes, to conjure a compelling narrative.

Although it can be difficult to isolate what types of discourse have the most impact on the general public, based on the arguments in the narrative paradigm our interpretation and assessment of our history, culture, and character will be primarily made through a narrative rationality. This is why it is important to determine what kinds of stories are being told and how they are structured by some of the most powerful voices in the land.

The Narrative Construction of Trump vs. the Press

Defining a narrative within a larger discourse can be tricky, partially due to the fact that there are so many definitions of narrative. When scholars have attempted to define the essence of narrative there is often a focus on sequence but this is often problematized, especially within post-modern narrative literature. For the purposes of this analysis, we've selected Gottschall's (2012) definition that argues the universal grammar of narratives features a structural formula of *characters* plus *predicament* plus *attempted extrication* (p. 52). This definition is elegant because it provides just enough elements to comprehend that the form is a narrative but it is not so structured as to define many narratives, particularly non-linear ones, out of existence. Trump's narratives about the press feature these components. In examining these elements as Trump frames them, we will see that he creates a narrative structure that defines a hostile relationship between an evil foe (the press) and a hero (Trump) that Trump

seeks to solve by discrediting the press. Through these narratives, Trump casts suspicion on journalists and news organizations, thereby attempting to weaken the influence of the press and inviting audience members to see the press as primarily an antagonist of Trump rather than as an institution that is essential to an open democracy.

Characters

One of the reasons that Trump's narrative creating a war against the press is so compelling is that it features characters facing off against each other. The rhetorical construction of enemies is a common trope within narratives. This trope enables rhetors to organize and personify "good" and "bad" values. Edelman (1988) argued that political leaders describe enemies during wartime in order to signal their own country's innocence in the conflict. Characterizations of enemies can move audience members to belief and possibly action. As Edelman (1988) observed, rhetorical constructions of enemies in political discourse "give the political spectacle its power to arouse passions, fears, and hopes" (p. 66). Burnette and Kraemer (2012) noted that leaders "have capitalized on the rhetorical power of enemies to motivate their citizens" (p. 150). It is important to note that rhetorically constructed enemies can be individuals or entities. The rhetorical power of organizations as enemies in public discourse can be profound. As Lacy argued, "Dystopian visions express cultural fears that agencies are so out of control, they will supplant or kill humans and the existing order" (Lacy, 2010, p. 29). Trump's positioning of himself as being under attack by an evil enemy—the press—constitutes such a dystopian narrative.

Trump began to craft narratives attacking the press during his presidential campaign. One salient theme of Trump's narratives about the press is his repeated assertion that the press in general and reporters in particular are enemies. He characterized reporters as "really, really dishonest people, they're bad people" (as cited in Thomsen, 2017). Trump has also referred to reporters as "scum," "slime," and "lying, disgusting people" (as cited in Tashman, 2017). Speaking at a rally in Fort Worth in February 2016, he characterized *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*

as "dishonest" newspapers that wrote "hit piece[s]" (as cited in Gold, 2016). As president, Trump has continued to incorporate narratives of the depraved state of the press into his discourse. He also constructed a powerful and insidious enemy and warned his supporters of their dangers. In a rally in Phoenix in August 2017, he said the media was "trying to take away our history and our heritage" (as cited in Thomsen, 2017).

In characterizing the press as the enemy, Trump also constructed a corresponding version of his own character. In this characterization, Trump is a hero: he is the defender against the enemy and savior of the American people. Trump promised that if he won the election he would "open up" libel laws so that "when they write purposely negative and horrible and false articles, we can sue them and win lots of money" (as cited in Gold, 2016). This shows the lengths Trump would go to in order to protect the people. Trump also rhetorically constructed a collective that includes himself and the American people. A few weeks after his inauguration in February 2017 Trump tweeted, "The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people!" (as cited in Tashman, 2017). In October 2017, Trump continued his war against the press by tweeting, "With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their [FCC] License? Bad for country!" (as cited in Brodkin, 2017). Consistent with his character as a savior of the people, he also expressed the depth of his hatred for journalists. He has averred, "I would never kill them, but I do hate them" (as cited in Tashman, 2017). Trump's character is also wiser than the people who need defending; Trump can recognize the enemy where others cannot.

Predicament

Given Trump's reliance on the media to advance his business interests, his disdain for the press might seem incongruous at first. But, as many observers have noted, Trump's attacks on the media have had the primary effect of increasing Trump's visibility and even his popularity. Trump therefore needs the construction of

this predicament to serve his rhetorical ends. Bai (2015) argued, "By now, its clear there's a powerful symbiosis between Trump and the media. We need him for the narrative power, for the clicks and debate ratings and sheer fascination factor. He needs us for the free publicity and the easy, evocative foil."

Journalists have responded in kind to the predicament of conflict that Trump has created. When Trump declared that he would announce the "Most Dishonest & Corrupt Media Awards of the Year" (as cited in Frej, 2018), the Committee to Protect Journalists responded by naming Trump the top "Oppressor" of the free press ("In Response," 2018). They noted that since declaring that he would run for president, Trump had posted "about 1,000 tweets critical of the press" ("In Response," 2018). Trump's repeated characterizations of press reports as "fake news" has encouraged leaders in other countries to use the term "fake news" to dismiss unflattering coverage (Frej, 2018). The CPJ further noted that their research indicates "when public figures and political leaders lob insults at the media, they encourage self-censorship and expose journalists to unnecessary risk" ("In Response," 2018).

Extrication

In order to protect the American people against the enemy that is the press, Trump must provide a solution. Because he does not have a constitutional power to subdue the press, his extrication from the situation is to discredit the press using two strategies. One of his approaches is to suggest that press organizations are failing; another is to expose reporting as false.

One of Trump's favorite targets is the *New York Times*. Stetler (2018) observed that Trump, beginning during his presidential campaign and throughout his presidency, "regularly labels the paper as 'failing.'" In addition, Trump has called the *New York Times* "weak" (Stetler, 2018). This characterization of a foe as both harmful and weak may seem contradictory. As Vanderford (1989) noted, however, this strategy enables rhetors to communicate that they are "threatened and empowered simultaneously" (p. 176). This strategy also resolves the predicament created in

Trump's narratives by suggesting that the press is an enemy that can be successfully vanquished.

In order to cast reporting as false, Trump refers to the media outlets with whom he disagrees as "fake news." He also calls stories he doesn't agree with "fake news." So, both organizations and coverage can be "fake" in Trump's perspective. In 2017, Trump made 320 references to "fake news" in his public remarks (Kiely, 2018) and tweeted the term "fake news" 188 times (Sampathkumar, 2018). Trump has referred to CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* as all being fake news (Britzky, 2017). In April 2018, Trump tweeted that the *New York Times* wrote "another phony story" (as cited in Bowden, 2018). This thread allows Trump to discredit the media without having to make the claim that his First Amendment rights have been violated. This is important because while it is difficult for Trump to argue that his First Amendment rights have been violated (even through libel or slander) when he is a public figure who is constantly on television, this allows him to craft a narrative of the media as enemy who lies about him without calling in the Constitution.

Furthermore, when Trump calls a news outlet or a story "fake," he simultaneously creates an advantage in the narrative by positioning himself as someone who is protecting the general public from the enemy media. In this way Trump assumes a paternalistic role toward both the press and the innocent citizens they threaten. Burnette and Fox (2012) have explored the trope of fatherhood and the enormous advantage presidential candidates experience when they identify as fathers, and/or assume the persona of a metaphorical father to the nation. Trump has attacked those who defend freedom of the press by saying that those who believe in freedom of speech are "foolish people" (as cited in Tashman, 2017). In this instance where Trump casts himself as wiser than those who are duped by journalists.

Decentering the Debate: Implications

Trump's attacks on the press perform several functions, which result in framing and even censoring news of Trump. We will discuss the implications of

Trump's defensive stance against the press, Trump's labeling media reports as "fake news," and Trump's rhetorical construction of his adversarial relationship with the press.

In his criticisms of the press, Trump argues—sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly—that he is the subject of unfair press coverage. Trump thus frames his relationship with the press as one in which Trump must defend himself against the attacks of the press. He also frequently argues that journalists are enemies, not only of Trump, but also of the American people themselves. By claiming that he needs to "defend" himself against the press, Trump is making a doubtful claim that he is being spuriously or unfairly attacked by the press. This claim of oppression by the press suggests a tension that Trump is exaggerating. While Trump often does not like his press coverage, he also "seems to love reporters as much as he hates them" (Feldmann, 2017). But by claiming that the press is "against" him, Trump supports his contention that he can and must be as aggressive as possible in his dealings with the media because of their inherent unfairness to him.

If Trump must adopt a defensive stance in working with the press, an adversarial relationship exists between Trump and reporters and journalists themselves are thrust into their own defensive stance. The press does not need to "defend" its rights; the Constitution does that. However, in response to Trump's attacks, the press must talk about freedom of expression for both reporters and citizens. In this way, journalists shift their focus from producing hard-hitting journalism about political, social, and economic issues to defending rights already guaranteed to them. Moreover, while the public and the legal system have historically defended the principle of a free press, an increasingly conservative Supreme Court that has already ruled to curb the relative power of individuals' freedom of expression in *Citizens United* might well rule to further curtail press freedom. Journalists' defense of their right and responsibility to protect press freedoms might in fact be necessary.

Another implication is that the narrative of this false or exaggerated tension between the president and the press habituates the public to expect the narrative of conflict between the president and the press. This focuses press reports and public

opinion on a he said/they said dynamic of political reportage. One byproduct of this is the increasing distrust that Americans report toward the press. In late 2017, a Politico/Morning Consult poll found that 46 percent of Americans "believe the news media fabricate news stories about President Donald Trump and his administration" (Shepard, 2017).

Trump's Media War and Future Research

Narratives are not created in a vacuum. The media response to Trump's war should also be explored. Although the goal of this paper was to analyze how the war was being waged, any counter attacks or defensive moves will also influence how the general public perceives the battle, even if Trump does not change the narrative in response. Media outlets may seek to wear the insult like a badge of honor, adapt to the environment by backing off, or find less "objectionable" reporters for the press pool, among other responses.

On June 28, 2018, five journalists in Maryland were shot and killed in the newsroom where they worked. The same day, questions began to rise about how Trump's narrative about the media and his characterization of reporters may have played a role. Journalists wrote about feeling targeted and the Twittersphere erupted with tweets such as "With the way that trump demonizes the media is there really any surprise that there was a newsroom shooting today?" (as cited in Sung, 2018). Another wrote, "Mass shooting of the media—Trump is responsible for both the means and the targets here. #Annapolis" (as cited in Sung, 2018). It is impossible to know if Trump's rhetoric influenced the shooter directly, but the important conclusion here is that Trump's narratives casting the press as enemies of the people have created the rhetorical need for the people to defend themselves and their American values against that enemy.

In addition to the media response, future research should also examine other voices who are in this "war" and positioned as enemies, namely, opinion journalists, comedians, and other political pundits, as well as other contextual factors, such as

how the First Amendment is used in discourses affecting other rights[2]. There has been scholarly attention paid to these voices, but not necessarily at the intersection of media and entertainment in the narrative war Trump wages about his First Amendment rights.

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[1] The winner of the "Most Thin-Skinned"category was Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
Willa Frej, "Trump Named the World's No. 1 Oppressor of Press Freedom,"*Huffpost*, accessed
June 25, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-oppressor-press-
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[2] Scholars should explore not only these responses, but also other contextual factors that may influence this rhetoric in significant ways. For instance, the Second Amendment gets used as a way to discuss the First Amendment in several different kinds of discourse. When arguments were made in *District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570* concerning expanding Second Amendment rights, parallel arguments were drawn between the First and the Second Amendments. The American public has witnessed a significant landmark, interpretation in *Heller* that draws into question how these fundamental rights can be reinterpreted in one Supreme Court decision. If the interpretation of the Second Amendment can happen so sweepingly, what's to say the same can't happen for the First?