

Trump's Hatred of Free Speech Is Intensifying

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Desensitization is one of Donald Trump's [most powerful tools](#): Through repetition, he acclimates Americans to troubling and dangerous ideas. Occasionally, though, his statements and actions are so outrageous that they can still provide a shock. The president's hostility toward the media is familiar, but this weekend provided a clear reminder that Trump [hates](#) freedom of the press and will use any government power at his disposal to try to get rid of it.

Yesterday morning, Trump started off with a [post](#) on Truth Social demanding that the Federal Communications Commission do something about "THE FAKE POLLS USED BY OUR CROOKED MEDIA." About 15 minutes later, he followed this with a [long rant](#) about Kristen Welker of *Meet the Press*, complaining that she had noted that Trump's record in recent endorsements had been "a mixed bag." Along with some casual misogyny, Trump wrote, "How can anyone be allowed to say this, working for freely given Public Airwaves? Results are attached. Because of this purposeful inaccuracy, she will be reported to the FCC for rebuke or punishment."

The reasons for Trump's anger are plain: Polls consistently [show that he is deeply unpopular](#), matching or exceeding his own past lows in many opinion surveys. Republicans look likely to lose the House and perhaps also the Senate in this fall's elections, and more Democratic power in Washington would make Trump's life more difficult. As for the endorsements, the record is clear. My colleague [Will Gottsegen noted last week](#) that most Trump-backed candidates still win, but he's had some notable misses as well.

Not only is the reporting that infuriates Trump accurate, but siccing the FCC on it makes no legal sense. The agency regulates radio and TV outlets, but much polling is conducted by print outlets and other organizations. The FCC doesn't have any authority to punish NBC News for reporting on things the president doesn't like, whether accurate or not. The [FCC's site](#) states (for now) that intervening in such cases "would be inconsistent with the First Amendment to replace the journalistic judgment of licensees with our own." If the FCC or any other federal agency can do that, freedom of the press no longer exists.

But Trump doesn't care about this bedrock civil liberty. He's tried to wield the FCC as a political tool, and he's been helped by its chair, Brendan Carr, a Project 2025 co-author who has [advocated for the use](#) of regulatory agencies as partisan hatchet men. Just because the FCC doesn't have the power doesn't mean that Carr won't try. Before Trump was president, MAGA figures complained about what they saw as "[jawboning](#)," when government officials found informal ways to pressure companies; now they are enthusiastic about the practice. Carr has had some success bullying major outlets, though companies have recently been [finding strength to resist](#).

Trump has also attempted to silence the press via lawsuits. He has sued ABC, CBS, *The New York Times*, the *Des Moines Register*, the publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*, the pollster J. Ann Selzer, the Pulitzer Prize Board, and the journalist Bob Woodward. Some defendants have settled; other suits have failed, and still more remain in process. Last week, Trump [updated](#) an absurd defamation case against the *Times*. Part of the goal is intimidation. Huge papers with strong legal departments such as the *Times* and *Journal* may not blanch before such lawsuits, but smaller outlets might think twice about what they publish. (Trump's FBI director, Kash Patel, also recently filed a lawsuit against *The Atlantic*, demanding \$250 million, in response to [reporting](#) he did not like. *The Atlantic* has filed a motion to dismiss, along with a request to begin seeking factual discovery from the FBI and the Department of Justice. "If Director Patel did not want to face this process, he should not have filed this suit," *The Atlantic's* editor in chief, Jeffrey

Goldberg, has said.)

The attitude from the president permeates the rest of his administration. The finance ministers of the G20 are meeting today in Asheville, North Carolina, but the Treasury Department [barred specific reporters](#) from the *Times*, *Journal*, and Bloomberg News. The reasons these reporters were singled out are not clear. The Treasury Department noted that a wide range of outlets had been credentialed for the event but declined to discuss the specific cases on the record. The United States won't have much credibility to criticize crackdowns on the press in, say, China or Russia (both attendees), but then again, this administration probably wouldn't bother. As the National Press Club said in a [statement](#), "When government officials decide which journalists may enter the room, they begin to control which questions get asked, whose scrutiny they face and what the public gets to see and hear."

The situation is even bleaker at the Department of Defense. *The Washington Post* [yesterday reported](#) that top military leaders have warned Secretary Pete Hegseth that extending the war in Iran "is unsustainable and risks weakening their ability to confront threats elsewhere, including the U.S. homeland." The reaction from the Pentagon, which has consistently tried to limit and hide information about the floundering war, was furious. One can understand why the department is, well, defensive: Failed and failing military operations have brought down administrations before.

The Defense Department spokesperson Sean Parnell claimed that the report was "inaccurate" and [added](#) that "publishing highly classified assessments from the Secretary's orders book is a crime." That allegation is, itself, broadly misleading and arguably just [false](#). But MAGA supporters outside the administration [eagerly agreed](#). The Trump ally and *Post* columnist Marc Thiessen, who keeps insisting that the war is going swimmingly, [criticized](#) the leak that his own paper received. (Pro tip: If you're not willing to stand for transparency, journalism is the wrong line of work.)

These are the latest steps in a clampdown at the Defense Department. The Pentagon is trying to turn *Stars and Stripes*, a venerable military newspaper, into a propaganda outlet. (Firings there are paused during litigation.) Whether it makes sense for a government agency to house an independent publication is open for debate, but what's clear is that Trump officials are targeting *Stars and Stripes* because of unflattering reporting—including on conditions aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln—that is truthful and relevant to the public and troops.

Under Hegseth, the department has drastically reduced press access at the Pentagon and, as the [Post also reported yesterday](#), begun hiring right-wing influencers. Despite these efforts, the Iran war is deeply unpopular, and as the *Post* stories demonstrate, traditional outlets continue to report with depth, rigor, and accuracy on the administration's actions. This should be a warning for the enemies of free speech who run the federal government: Targeting the press isn't just un-American; it also doesn't work.

Related:

Here are four new stories from *The Atlantic*:

Today's News

1. [President Trump threatened to strike Iran "hard"](#) after the U.S. and Iran exchanged attacks yesterday for the first time in a month. U.S. forces struck Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz, and Iran said it had attacked U.S. bases.
2. The fashion designer John Galliano [withdrew from a planned Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) exhibition honoring his work after criticism from donors, politicians, and Jewish leaders. Galliano was convicted in France in 2011 for making anti-Semitic and anti-Asian remarks.
3. The Supreme Court [allowed construction to continue on Trump's White House ballroom](#) where the East Wing once stood, before it was demolished last fall. The justices ruled that the preservationists who sued to stop the project lacked standing.