

# Speak at Your Own Risk

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Donald Trump's attacks on the First Amendment



*Illustration by Paul Spella / The Atlantic\**

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On the first day of his second term in the White House, President Trump [signed an executive order](#) on free speech stating that his administration would ensure that “no Federal Government officer, employee, or agent engages in or facilitates any conduct that would unconstitutionally abridge the free speech of any American citizen.” He has gone on to violate that order many times.

Trump [announced today](#) on his social-media network, Truth Social, that he is banning CNN, MS NOW, and *Politico* from the White House in retaliation for their reporting, and complained that “outlets shouldn’t be able to constantly write or report FICTION and LIES when they’re covering the President of the United States, the Trump Administration, or the United States of America.” In other words, if media outlets publish stories that Trump does not like, he will punish them.

This is far from the first time Trump has tried to pressure the media into giving him favorable coverage or punish those who run stories he does not like. As *The New York Times* [has documented](#), Trump’s Federal Communications Commission has repeatedly tried to intimidate networks over their airing of material that Trump finds offensive, including [criticism of Trump](#) and [interviews](#) with Democratic politicians, by threatening to [revoke their broadcast license](#). Three journalists fired from *Stars and Stripes*, an independent

media outlet that is federally funded, are suing the Pentagon, accusing it of silencing them because of their factual coverage of [deplorable conditions for U.S. service members](#). The Pentagon also sought to force media organizations to sign a self-censorship pledge in [exchange for press credentials](#). His Federal Trade Commission is investigating the [liberal media watchdog Media Matters](#), whose work consists mostly of just publishing the things conservatives say, and NewsGuard, a [nonpartisan outlet](#) that provides “scores for news and information websites based on nine journalistic criteria.” Trump sought to ban the AP for refusing to identify the Gulf of Mexico as the “[Gulf of America](#),” as Trump had ordered. This is not even close to an exhaustive list.

During an exchange with the White House today, a reporter described China as “one of the most repressive countries for journalists in the world.” Trump [interrupted to respond](#), “Well, I don’t know about that. I think we’re repressive also.” When he’s right, he’s right. (He went on to suggest that the “fake news” was the one doing the repressing in America.)

Trump’s campaign of censorship is not limited to journalists, however, and the First Amendment does not belong only to the media. Trump’s Justice Department has sought to pressure American [colleges and universities](#) over what they are allowed to teach, whom they are allowed to hire, and whom they are allowed to admit. It has [used federal funding](#) to censor technological, medical, and scientific research. The administration has singled out left-wing organizations [for scrutiny](#) and used federal resources to investigate them for opposing the president. It has sought to deport immigrants because of their [pro-Palestinian views](#).

In a [2025 decision](#), William Young, a federal judge and President Ronald Reagan appointee, called those deportations a violation of the First Amendment, writing that Trump’s “palpable misunderstanding that the government simply cannot seek retribution for speech he disdains poses a great threat to Americans’ freedom of speech.”

Courts have tried to correct that misunderstanding: [Reuters](#) has counted at least 75 federal rulings that found that the Trump administration had “infringed on First-Amendment rights.” But Trump keeps on doing it.

The president doesn’t see any disconnect between his big talk on free speech and his attempt to censor or punish the media and his political opposition—and neither, apparently, do many in the Republican Party. They simply hold their own definition of *free speech*: Conservatives can say what they want. Anything else Americans want to say, they say at their own risk.

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