

A: Did you see President Trump's recent tweet about the media?

B: Which one out of the hundreds?

A: As you know he is often angry with how the mainstream media treats him. There was a recent tweet which appears to be a veiled threat on journalism. He claims that "The LameStream Media is far beyond Fake News, they are treading in very dangerous territory!"

B: What does he mean?

A: He means that the mainstream media, that he nicknames "lamestream", could find itself in trouble because of its reporting on some problems in the Republican Party and the president's approval rating.

B: But that is all true, isn't it? The Republican Party did see some turmoil due to several high-level resignations in 2019; and Mr Trump's approval rating has known some historic lows compared to previous presidents.

A: Yes, there is nothing new here. I've seen quite a few press conferences where Mr Trump appears to bully the media. For example, he branded the press as an "enemy of the people" for reporting on unsavory aspects of his presidency, such as his administration's poor treatment of immigrants, his embrace of racists and his attacks on women of color in Congress.

B: But aren't the press just doing their job?

A: Yes, but Mr Trump does not always seem to accept that. For example, there was the occasion when the White House revoked CNN reporter Jim Acosta's so-called "hard pass", after a testy press conference in which Mr Acosta asked the president multiple questions.

B: I remember that. Didn't the White House also claim falsely that the reporter had been physical with an intern who tried to take a microphone from him during that questioning? I think they later released a doctored video of the event to back up their claim.

A: Yes, and things have been getting worse. During the impeachment inquiry, President Trump increased his already fierce hostility towards news outlets, and also bombards the social media, Twitter most of all, with falsehoods and conspiracy theories.

B: It sounds like the media faces a challenge in finding new ways to hold the US president accountable.

A: That's right. Is it enough to do the job of the traditional journalist, asking the president questions, and faithfully conveying his lies and non-answers? Or have we reached the point where holding Trump and his team to account through the normal techniques no longer works, given the disdain they so often display towards basic facts?

B: It sounds to me that we have reached a tipping point. Are politicians and journalists calling for such lies to be silenced? Should we censor the president and his team?

A: We are at a tipping point, but it is a mistake to stop putting these people on air. Talk of censorship sends a really bad signal of what the media is all about. But news outlets are not obliged to give airtime to Trump and his team. It's up to TV channels to think carefully about who they are inviting on their shows and to ask themselves about priorities.

A: The debate about broadcasting Trump lies has also spilled over into the social media, hasn't it?

B: Yes, Trump has used expletives in his tweets; he threatened the whistleblower in the Ukrainian phone call revelations which provoked his impeachment; he even suggested the possible arrest, for treason, of the Democrat leading the impeachment inquiry in Congress. He also said on Twitter that if he were to lose his bid for re-election next November there would be another civil war.

A: How does Twitter respond to what the President tweets on his account?

B: They now subject his tweets to fact-checking - they said some of his tweets were untrue. Which made the President very angry of course! Facebook was accused by the Democratic party of allowing Trump to mislead the American people unimpeded.

A: Surely, the social media platforms are responsible, in the same way that TV channels are?

B: I think so, but the communications chief at Facebook dismissed the idea of mediating political comments. Generally speaking, Facebook or Twitter don't see it as appropriate to referee political debates and prevent a politician's speech from reaching its audience. Though they delete hateful or false messages.

Summary - Donald Trump often tweets criticism of mainstream media, deeming the press as "the enemy of the people" and revoking press access. However, the situation seems to be reaching a tipping point. Is it enough to do the job of the traditional journalist, asking the president questions and faithfully conveying his lies and non-answers? Or have we reached the point where holding Trump and his team to account through the normal techniques no longer works, given the disdain they so often display towards basic facts? TV channels should be more careful about who they invite on air while social media do not seem concerned about the impact they have.

Questions - 1. Are tweets a useful political tool? - 2. Are all politicians distrustful of the media?

3. How important is the media for holding politicians to account?

4. Can the press be regulated without censorship?