

## How Donald Trump used the media and the industry of outrage to win the US Presidency

Written by Denis Muller, Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

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The media as an institution in the United States is undoubtedly in a deplorable condition, but not for the reasons asserted by Donald Trump.

If anything, Trump has been the beneficiary of the media's failings.

High on the list of these failings is what The Economist three weeks ago called "[the business of outrage](#)".

Individual media personalities such as the radio shock jock Rush Limbaugh and right wing populist copycats Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity have made global reputations and large fortunes for themselves as purveyors of outrage.

Limbaugh is reported to have 13.25 million regular weekly listeners, an audience size guaranteed to generate a mighty revenue stream. He is also reported to be on an 8 year US\$400 million contract, and is [listed by Forbes magazine](#) as the 10th highest earning celebrity in the world.

Online entrepreneurs such as [Matt Drudge](#) jumped on the outrage bandwagon, adding to its momentum.

Turbocharging the outrage industry has been Fox News, the creation of Rupert Murdoch and a former Republican operative, Roger Ailes. Under the ludicrously misleading slogan of "balance" they combined the dynamics of talk back radio with the visual power of television and a bank of outspokenly conservative commentators to create the highest rating cable news channel in the US.

Factual accuracy hasn't much to do with what these propagandists publish under the guise of journalism. Drudge has said that only 80% of his material is verified. Even if we accept that optimistic assessment, how do we know which 80%?

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In the midst of voting in the current presidential election, Limbaugh claimed that former Republican president George W. Bush and his wife Laura voted for Hillary Clinton, a claim [immediately repudiated](#) by their spokesperson.

The outrage industry has added fuel to a fiery political atmosphere in the US, but of course much bigger forces provided the ignition. The world has already seen the evidence of this in the [Brexit vote](#), in the [Occupy Wall Street](#) movement and more recently in the success of racist and anti immigration demagoguery.

Like Trump, the outrage industry has exploited the completely understandable resentment of millions in rich countries who feel left behind by globalisation and sacrificed by governments on the altar of economic rationalism.

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To make it worse, Trump's exploitation has been characterised by racism, religious bigotry and a complete absence of constructive policy responses to the political crisis thus induced. Instead, he proposed a wall between the US and Mexico, vowed to reject international trade agreements, made bamboozling abstractions about "making America great again" and sowed doubts about the legitimacy of the American electoral and congressional processes.

In these ways, Trump has been able to channel and amplify the outrage of those left behind, and in doing so has placed institutions of American democracy under siege.

Not all elements of the US media are participants in this destructive project. But many have gone along for the ride with Trump – his various atrocities having been good for ratings and circulation, and ultimately for revenue.

An honourable exception has been The New York Times. In late September, it declared Trump

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to be [unfit for the presidency](#) , describing him as “a man who dwells in bigotry, bluster and false promises”. Two days later, it enumerated what it said were [27](#)  
[lies](#)  
told by Trump in the course of the second presidential debate.

The Washington Post also [took a stand](#) against Trump.

It was too late. It played into the hands of Trump as further evidence of the “liberal” media’s participation in a grand conspiracy against the American people, a conspiracy to which Congress and the Administration were also said to be parties.

The ease with which Trump has been able to sweep aside what he reviles as the corrupt media is evidence of a loss of public trust in the fourth estate. It will be the media’s task to rebuild that trust from the ruins of this campaign.

A particularly difficult challenge for the media will be creating an ethical framework about how to respond when a public figure tramples on all the conventions of democratic politics. Before this election, it was generally enough for the leading newspapers to report a candidate’s behaviour and statements in the news pages, and then make separate judgements in the opinion pages.

In the face of the Trump onslaught and the unrestrained outpourings of the outrage industry, this has seemed insipid and inadequate. But does an ethical media organisation abandon its principles and join in the rule breaking? How is the public interest best served?

The US media will now have to confront this question. It is timely for the media in other Western countries to face up to it as well.

*Denis Muller does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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