

Fake news: trump, nixon, and the press

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Richard Nixon's political career, in many ways, was a battle between Nixon and the media. After Watergate, journalism emerged victorious: Nixon resigned from the presidency, and faith in the press was at an all-time high. Then, in 2016, Donald Trump ran a campaign that reminded many of Nixon; in particular, Trump's media strategy, especially his attacks on journalists, were likened to that of Nixon's.

But are these comparisons actually warranted? In comparing these two men, it's important to not only consider Trump and Nixon themselves, but also to understand the times in which they lived. Although tactics to exploit the media have not changed dramatically, the changes in the media itself – in the scope, polarization, and goals of the media – have upset the effectiveness of presidents' media strategies; as a result, even though Trump and Nixon had similar media strategies, Trump was ultimately more successful than Nixon was in dealing with the media. Public Attacks, Private Relationship On the surface, it's easy to see why Nixon and Trump are compared to each other. Both Nixon and Trump attempted to exploit the media by presenting a groomed image of themselves while attacking the media at the same time. Nixon and Trump both attempted to sabotage the media by using verbal insults and by acting upon deliberate attempts to silence certain reporters.

Nixon often publicly and privately accused the media actively working against him; he once warned his staff that “ the men and women of the news media approach this as an adversary relationship.” This paranoia eventually manifested itself in actions – later, he even went as far as to try to assassinate a journalist who had written badly about him. Nixon's strained

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relationship with the media is common: after Nixon, presidents have tried to manipulate the media through underhanded, and often illegal, tactics.

George W. Bush, for example, argued that the media was unrepresentative of the American people, and Obama even spied on reporters through their phone records.

Thus, while Nixon's and Trump's relationships with the media have been highlighted extensively, the adversarial relationship has been a trend for the past 40 years. Therefore, Trump's relationship with the media is not a surprise: the biggest difference between Trump and the past seven presidents is that, since Nixon, no one except Trump has singled out the media publicly as one of their top enemies. Trump often verbally attacks the media, referring to news sources that disagree with him as "fake news." He has also acted physically against the media; just a few weeks ago, he arrested a journalist who was trying to question the health secretary Tom Price. Trump has additionally blacklisted reporters to prevent them from accessing his campaign – this action, attempting to prevent his adversaries from reporting on him, was a "Nixonian" move.

Nevertheless, although Nixon and Trump both attacked the media, they also both relied on the media to groom their public images. While Nixon openly despised the media, he utilized it heavily for his campaign. He held meetings with conservative news sources, and claimed that, through these meetings, "Lines of communication were opened that should be helpful later on."

Additionally, the White House Office of Communications was established in 1969, the first year of the Nixon administration. This office ensured that there would be no spontaneous encounters with the media that could

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damage Nixon's image. Since Nixon's presidency, following presidents have all had large communications offices.

Besides the consolidation of the White House Office of Communications with the Office of the Media Secretary in 1972, systems of media control from the White House have not changed dramatically. Even when presidents try to exploit or attack the media, they still rely on the media to preserve their public image. Trump, although fronting an antagonistic relationship with the media, still relies heavily on the media to speak well of him. For example, after Trump's first health care bill failed, he contacted Maggie Haberman, writer for Times, and Robert Costa, writer for the Washington Post. Although he had criticized these two news sources as "fake news," he still contacted them immediately, so that he could have those media sources present his health care plans in a better light.

The Rise of the "New Media" While many might infer that Trump and Nixon shared similar media strategies, this observation ignores the changes in the media from the 1970s to present day. Media has become more widely available, profitable, and, as a result, more polarized; these changes altered the way Nixon and Trump interacted with the media. Attacking the media ultimately served Trump better due to the changing scope, roles, and goals of the media. Since the 1970s, the type and scope of media consumed by the public has changed dramatically, due to the rise of new TV news networks and the creation of the internet; therefore, the ways in which Trump and Nixon tried to take advantage of the media were different. Because of Trump's dramatically larger media outreach, he was able to be more effective in using the media than Nixon. During Nixon's presidency, <https://assignbuster.com/fake-news-trump-nixon-and-the-press/>

there were only a few major newspapers and three major TV networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS).

Due to the limited number of news sources, Richard Nixon was facing a much smaller media. In the 1980s, however, the newspaper industry began to fail due to soaring production prices and mass consolidation of companies, and magazines and TV networks became more popular sources of news. Two new TV networks arose in the 1980s-1990s: Fox News and CNN. The rise of these new TV channels was only the beginning of news proliferation: the 1990s-2010s saw the creation of the internet, on which blogs and social media run by individuals became more prominent. Trump's use of this so-called "new media" ultimately gave him an edge in the presidential election of 2016. Before election day, Trump had amassed a huge following on social media: 19 million Twitter followers, 18 million Facebook followers, and around five million Instagram followers. Due to his large fan base, his messages spread quickly –it is estimated that, during the election, Trump's use of free advertising over social media amounted to about \$2 billion. The 2016 presidential election also demonstrated the power of individual "news" blogs; in particular, Alex Jones' Infowars blog gained much traction for reporting on conspiracy theories. During the election, its network traffic ended up surpassing that of the LA Times, the New York Post, Vox, Slate, the New Yorker, and the CBS, NBC, and ABC news sites.

Ultimately, towards the end of the election, studies demonstrated that Trump in fact had more support on social media than Hillary Clinton. Besides the changes in media format, the faith in the media changed dramatically from the 1970s to present day; as a result, Trump was able to take

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advantage of distrust in the media in ways that Nixon was unable to. The 1970s marked the peak of trust in the media. Due to strong investigative journalism surrounding the Vietnam War, the American public began to believe in the media more than in the government. The Vietnam War was considered the first “television war” – regular civilians were exposed to the horrors of war for the first time, and began to disagree with president about the continuation of fighting.

In addition, newspaper exposes on secret Vietnam War documents such as the Pentagon Papers demonstrated that the government was hiding information from the American people, but that the media would reveal that information. As a result of the belief in journalistic integrity, the public was more inclined to believe the media than Nixon. However, since the 1970s, the sentiment towards the media changed, due to a rise in less reputable news sources and political polarization in already existing, reputable sources. In 1987, a policy for news broadcasters called the “Fairness Doctrine” was over-turned; this doctrine required TV and radio stations that held FCC-issued broadcast licenses to report on controversial topics with opposing views. The revoking of the doctrine allowed television and radio programs to hold serious biases, leading to the polarization of the media.

This polarization has had damaging effects: people tend to trust news sources that have similar political biases as themselves, and people distrust news sources that have different political biases. And, much fewer news outlets have conservative biases than liberal biases. As a result, out of all the political groups in America, Republicans tend to trust the media the least; in fact, only 14% of Republicans trust the media, and only 32% of Americans in <https://assignbuster.com/fake-news-trump-nixon-and-the-press/>

total trust the media. Trump took advantage of this distrust in the media – his frequent attacks on the media and his talk about “fake news” was already widely accepted by much of his audience. Even now, many people don’t even believe Russia meddled in the election; this belief is split between party lines, with 13% of Republicans and 67% of Democrats believing in Russia’s involvement. Then, there’s the question of the media’s goals – today, the media is much more focused on making money; as a result, the way that the media has been reporting on Trump is different than the way that the media reported on Nixon.

During Nixon’s presidency, some of the main goals of the journalists reporting on Nixon’s story were either to oppose Nixon’s efforts in the Vietnam War, or to settle personal disagreements with Nixon. However, in the 1980s-1990s, the media became increasingly monetized – media sources focused more on “profit over product” journalism, concentrating on sensationalized stories that would generate money. In addition, the 1990s saw the mass consolidation of journalistic companies. As a result, the media climate of today is much different from the 1970s: media sources today tend to capitalize on stories that will make them money. Because of this increased focus on money, Trump and the media have a much more mutualistic relationship than Nixon had with the media. As of May 4, 2017, TV networks such as Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN all experienced increased viewership.

Newspapers grew as well – The New York Times, The Boston Globe, The Washington Post, Financial Times, and New Yorker, all grew in subscription numbers. These increasing numbers were strongly correlated with Trump’s rise in power; throughout his 2016 campaign, Trump received much more

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media coverage than any other Republican candidate. The news media and Trump were engaged in a cycle of prosperity; as the media reported on Trump, they improved in revenue, and Trump improved his standing in the election. Trump's brazen attacks on the media, therefore, are beneficial for him and the media alike. Ultimately, the media has transformed so that Nixon's failed media strategy could flourish. Due to the changes in the media, Trump's attacks on the media ultimately prevailed and helped him win the 2016 election – he took advantage of a system that could be controlled by one man spreading a message to all his followers.

The Future of Trump's Media Strategy Will Trump's media strategy keep working, even with his current scandals? Russia's interference in the 2016 election is still being investigated in Congress, and some are likening the situation to Watergate. However, since belief in Russia's meddling is relatively low in the United States population, the American public is much less inclined to believe the exposes from the media. For a Watergate-type situation to happen, it would take much more definitive evidence, and possibly even a message from the president himself. Right now, however, the low trust in media indicates that, even if an incriminating news report does come out, a Watergate situation will likely not occur. However, Trump's use of the media poses a bigger question – what role will the media, especially the “new media,” play in the future? Social media and blogs have already demonstrated the ability to spread fake news masquerading as fact. Trump, in his campaign and presidency, has taken full advantage of this situation – he has already demonstrated the ability for one man to influence millions of people with his words, whether true or not.

As the prevalence of “ new media” grows, it will be more and more difficult to separate fact from fiction. There’s also the issue of the polarization of news. As shown through the 2016 election, liberals and conservatives tend to gravitate towards news sources that share their political views. As this situation progresses, liberals and conservatives can read news articles reporting on completely different facts. Thus, the increased polarization of the news means the increased polarization of the United States public.

If news becomes so different, how can we hope to understand each other? We’re all operating under different ideas and interpretations of current events. As a society, we need to understand the power of the media more. We’re surrounded by media, yet instead of taking advantage of media, media takes advantage of us. How can you deal with this situation? Educate yourself on which news sources are reputable, and what biases they have – afterwards, actively seek out news that has an opposing political viewpoint from yourself. And, take a lesson from Nixon and Trump – understand what the media is like, how it works, and how it can be manipulated.