

HOWARD KURTZ

MEDIA  
MADNESS

DONALD TRUMP,

The Press,

AND THE WAR OVER

THE TRUTH

## CHAPTER 1

# A CATASTROPHIC MEDIA FAILURE

**T**wo days after Donald Trump was inaugurated, Kellyanne Conway dived into a media maelstrom with an appearance on *Meet the Press*.

It did not go well.

She and *Meet the Press* host Chuck Todd had a history. NBC's goateed political junkie had texted her after four a.m. on Election Night, congratulating her on what he called the greatest upset in the history of American politics. Conway said she was "euphoric."

But their relationship took a bad turn when she taped a *Meet the Press* interview in late November.

When she got home that Sunday morning and told her husband George that it had gone smoothly, he said, "What do you mean? You weren't on for even a minute."

Conway called Todd and asked what happened. The anchor—who had booked Conway under pressure from the Trump team—realized there had been a miscommunication. He explained that he had told a staffer the show was packed and the most they could do was run sound bites.

“I don’t give sound bites. I don’t speak in sound bites,” she said.

Todd asked how he could make amends.

“It’s only 8 a.m. on the West Coast,” Conway said. “You can run the whole interview. You’ve done 8 minutes with Ash Carter,” Barack Obama’s secretary of defense, “and I’m falling asleep.” Conway was steamed. NBC News President Deborah Turness called to mend fences, but Conway did not respond.

Now Kellyanne was doing a live interview with Todd from the North Lawn of the White House. Todd demanded to know why Trump press secretary Sean Spicer had made a “ridiculous” statement that was “a provable falsehood” about Trump’s inaugural crowd being bigger than Obama’s. Things turned personal when Todd laughed at Conway’s explanation that Spicer was providing “alternative facts.”

“Your job is not to call things ridiculous that are said by our press secretary and our president,” Conway said. “You’re supposed to be a news person. You’re not an opinion columnist.”

Conway was disgusted and knew her pushback against Todd would not get replayed on any network. Conway was sympathetic toward journalists, but here she was, trying to talk about Trump’s policy agenda, and getting ripped by a guy she had known for two decades. She thought it was “symbolic” of “the way we’re treated by the press.”

Todd regretted letting his emotions show, but not the substance of his questions. He thought Kellyanne had simply run out of talking points, and was laughing at the absurdity of the situation. The fact that it was a satellite interview, lacking the conversational cues provided by a face-to-face sit-down, made his interruptions look overly confrontational.

The president called Conway to congratulate her on her performance against Todd. His vice president, Mike Pence, later joked to her: “Does Chuck Todd have any teeth left?”

But the unfortunate phrase “alternative facts” stuck to her like tar-paper. She had meant equally accurate explanations, like “two plus two equals four” and “three plus one equals four,” but it quickly became journalistic shorthand for White House exaggerations and falsehoods. One viewer, however, liked the phrase.

“In a way, that was genius,” Trump told Conway.

“And in another way...?” she asked.

The president was too busy sympathizing. “They do that to me all the time, take one word,” he said.

Two days later, Chuck Todd texted her with an offer: “Would love to chat when you have time. I also think we should do a face to face sit down on cam. Maybe something more extended for my cable show sometime next week. Just a thought. All about reminding folks we both prefer cordial back n forths.”

Kellyanne happened to be meeting with the president. She asked him how to respond.

“Tell him I thought you were treated with great disrespect,” Trump said.

Conway tapped the words into her iPhone: “President Trump said you treated me with great disrespect.”

Todd quickly replied: “I respectfully disagree. Of course, I’ve taken a lot more disrespect than most reporters and never make it public. I’m sorry this was your response.”

Kellyanne texted, “That was his response. I typed what he said.”

“Well. Let me know what YOU think of my pitch.”

Conway put the phone down. She was done with Todd.

She eventually relented, and Turness, the NBC news chief, came to see her and Hope Hicks, the president’s loyal young assistant. Conway did not hide her disdain for how NBC and MSNBC were treating the administration.

“This is a side of me you never see,” she said. “I’m usually kind and gracious. Your networks are a hot mess.”

Turness said that MSNBC was the province of its president, Phil Griffin.

“No, it’s your stepchild,” Conway said.

“And you’ve got *SNL*,” Hicks added, the comedy show on which Alec Baldwin was brutally mimicking Trump.

Turness delivered an overall apology. NBC wanted to continue a fifty-year tradition of spending a day trailing each new president with a

camera crew. Fat chance, Conway thought, if this is how we're going to be covered.

"I let you guys into the White House and this is what happens," she said.

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Donald Trump is staking his presidency, as he did his election, on nothing less than destroying the credibility of the news media; and the media are determined to do the same to him. This is not just a feud or a fight or a battle. It is scorched-earth warfare in which only one side can achieve victory.

To a stunning degree, the press is falling into the president's trap. The country's top news organizations have targeted Trump with an unprecedented barrage of negative stories, with some no longer making much attempt to hide their contempt. Some stories are legitimate, some are not, and others are generated by the president's own falsehoods and exaggerations. But the mainstream media, subconsciously at first, have lurched into the opposition camp, are appealing to an anti-Trump base of viewers and readers, failing to grasp how deeply they are distrusted by a wide swath of the country.

These are not easy words for me to write. I am a lifelong journalist with ink in my veins. And for all my criticism of the media's errors and excesses, I have always believed in the mission of aggressive reporting and holding politicians accountable.

But the past two years have radicalized me. I am increasingly troubled by how many of my colleagues have decided to abandon any semblance of fairness out of a conviction that they must save the country from Trump.

I first got to know Donald Trump three decades ago and never made the blunder of underestimating him during the campaign. I saw all his weaknesses—the bluster, the bullying, the refusal to admit mistakes—but I also saw strengths that most of my colleagues missed, especially an ability to channel the anger of millions of voters who despise the

press—including the old-guard conservative press—and other elite institutions.

This was part of an all-out culture war that stretched well beyond journalistic operations to late-night comics, musicians, Hollywood celebrities, and Broadway actors, all of whom ripped and ridiculed Trump at every opportunity. From Alec Baldwin to Meryl Streep, from Stephen Colbert to Seth Meyers, they depicted the president as being beyond the pale, an aspiring dictator, feeding Trump's sense of being under siege and prompting him to lash out at those across the media-and-entertainment complex.

This is, at bottom, a battle over the truth. Who owns it, who controls it, who can sell their version to a polarized public that increasingly cannot agree on basic facts.

Everything you read, hear, and see about Trump's veracity is filtered through a mainstream media prism that reflects a lying president—and virtually never considers the press's own baggage and biases.

Everything you read, hear, and see from the Trump team is premised on the view that media news is fake news, that journalists are too prejudiced, angry, and ideological to fairly report on the president. Trump and his acolytes use these attacks on the Fourth Estate to neutralize their own untruths, evasions, and exaggerations.

Organized journalism is built around rules, traditions, and the careful parsing of words. Traditional politics is built around polling, spinning, and the careful deployment of words, which are often drained of meaning to avoid giving offense. While the two sides are nominally adversaries, they are also joined in a mutually dependent relationship. They speak the same language. They know they will be penalized for reckless rhetoric, for statements that can be proven wrong.

Trump doesn't believe in any of that. He is loose with his language. He makes little attempt to vet his presidential pronouncements. He watches cable news endlessly and sometimes regurgitates half-baked comments. And the media's truth squadders punch themselves silly but rarely seem to land a blow.

What many journalists fail to grasp is that Trump's supporters love his street talk and view the media critiques as nonsense driven by negativity. They don't care if he makes mistakes. As paradoxical as it sounds, negative coverage helps Trump because it bonds him to people who also feel disrespected by the denizens of the mainstream press. The media take everything literally, and Trump pitches his arguments at a gut level. It is asymmetrical warfare.

My greatest fear is that organized journalism has badly lost its way in the Trump era and may never fully recover. Even if the Trump presidency crashes and burns—in which case the press will claim vindication—the scars of distrust might never heal.

My view doesn't reflect some evolution or epiphany on my part. I haven't really changed. My profession keeps moving the goalposts.

When Trump first declared his candidacy, I sat on endless television panels with prognosticators who said he was a joke, a sideshow, a summer fling, and then that he was going to implode the next week, the next month, that he wouldn't make it to Iowa, that he had no shot at winning the nomination. They pronounced last rites each time he caused a media uproar with controversial comments. And then in the fall the cognoscenti knew that of *course* he could never win a general election, right up to the evening of November 8, 2016.

When I would say that Trump wasn't going to self-destruct, that he was media savvy, that he was connecting with alienated voters, that bad press only helped him, I was dismissed in some quarters as being in the tank for a bombastic billionaire. Or being a naïve soul who didn't really understand politics. Or being a closet right-winger who somehow kept his disturbing views hidden all these years. Or a person who had imbibed the Kool-Aid at Fox.

The truth is that I wasn't pro-Trump at all, I was pro-reality.

The point here is not that I was right, but that so many in the news business couldn't see beyond their own biases. Or they would say Trump might win, but the prospect was so frightening that the media had to stop him by convincing voters he was a racist liar, *and dammit, why aren't they getting it?*

It turns out they were the ones who failed to recognize what was unfolding before their eyes. It was the most catastrophic media failure in a generation.

To purchase the book, click [here!](#)

