**To Prevent the Next Trump, Reform American Journalism Julia Kastner**

“We were hitting our heads against a brick wall…. If you jumped on one thing, he’d say another. It was the most difficult story we ever covered, especially emotionally. I’d go home literally sick, seeing what that guy was getting away with.”

This quote from journalist William Theis is not a grievance against America’s most recently impeached ex-president; “That guy” is Joseph McCarthy, the Wisconsin senator whose unfounded communist accusations during the 1950s created a situation so hostile and paranoid that *McCarthyism* is a word in the dictionary.

As we breathe a collective sigh of relief in a post-Trump world, now is not the time for the American press to rest on its laurels. The rise of McCarthy and his eerie similarities to Trump show that the era of sensationalist claims dominating the news agenda is far from over.

McCarthy’s lies and belligerent persona are shockingly reminiscent of Donald Trump’s own behaviour, but what is even more alarming are the similarities in both politicians’ manipulation of the press. Both successfully used outlandish allegations to gain press coverage and power, exposing the inability of the media to deal with a lying, headline-grabbing politician. This inability bears critical implications: unless American journalism reforms itself to resist disproportionately publicizing the claims of those who manipulate it, the pattern of a McCarthy-Trump figure dominating headlines and manipulating the media will continue to plague the American press.

Both men used sensationalist claims to target a domestic enemy, overwhelming the fourth estate by fanning the flames of a divided America. McCarthy’s anti-communist attacks played on the Cold War fears of the 1950s, and Trump’s rise coincided with an increase in alt-right groups in 2016.

McCarthy and Trump also exploited the traditional journalistic value of objectivity. McCarthy took advantage of “straightjacket reporting” that gave reporters no choice but to print his words without nuance. Headlines like “McCarthy says ‘You, Too’ to Truman’s ‘Liar’” propagated his lies. Sixty-six years later, Trump’s campaign exploited the same weakness. Political writer Peter Geoghegan describes how Trump was able to take advantage of typical “he said, she said” and “Trump claims” headlines that allowed his false statements to set the news agenda regardless of whether they were true.

McCarthy also manipulated the media by exploiting the pressures on journalists to produce news on tight deadlines, ahead of their competitors. His tactics worked; during the 1952 Senate race he received disproportionate coverage. Donald Trump has had even more success at the same game. ​At one point during the 2016 primaries, he received nearly three times more coverage than Hillary Clinton and sixteen times more than Bernie Sanders.

The same competitive news environment that pressured reporters during the McCarthy era drove the press to prioritize commercial interests during Trump’s 2016 campaign, lending his sensationalist antics disproportionate coverage. As CBS CEO Leslie Moonves notoriously commented, “[Trump’s candidacy] may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS. …. The money’s rolling in and this is fun… . Bring it on, Donald. Keep going.” By the end of his campaign, Trump had benefited from more than 5 billion dollars of free media coverage.

McCarthy and Trump share a passion for assault on the liberal media. McCarthy himself admitted to attacking the “bleeding, left-wing press” in an attempt to sow public distrust against American journalism, using a variety of tactics. He singled out individual reporters, embarrassing them at press conferences. He played the victim, complaining that he was being smeared by left-wing newspapers. He lambasted one particular newspaper in retaliation for its investigations into his tax returns.

The same tactics have appeared in Trump’s playbook, passed on from one generation to the next by Roy Cohn, counsel to McCarthy and mentor to Trump during his earlier years in real-estate. The parallels are striking; Trump has labelled newspapers as biased left-wing media, ridiculed individual reporters (including impersonating disabled reporter Serge Kovaleski), complained of unfair criticism from the press, and lashed out at press reports about his tax returns.

Even journalists’ responses to McCarthy and Trump bear an uncanny resemblance. To counter McCarthy’s manipulation, the press shifted towards more opinionated news. Journalists like Edward Murrow made it their personal mission to bring the senator down. Trump’s election elicited the same reaction, reflected in Christiane Amanpour’s call to be “truthful, not neutral”. Countless articles and op-eds labelling Trump a fascist echo Murrow’s comparison of McCarthy to Hitler. Even Murrow’s dedication to fact-checking McCarthy on his show is consistent with the 200% increase in fact-checking organizations worldwide since Trump’s election.

As if on cue, journalists employed the same strategies against Trump as they did in response to McCarthy. The implications are dire, for if journalistic trends in response to McCarthy did nothing to prevent Trump, the use of these tactics in response to Trump will do nothing to prevent the next like-minded politician’s manipulation of the press.

History helps us explain the present, not predict the future. Rumours of Trump TV alongside Fox News already hint that Trump may evade McCarthy’s political demise following his censorship in 1954. However, the imperfect nature of the comparison by no means renders it trivial. The parallels between the two men and their relationship to the press provide an urgent warning for today’s reporters. The media’s shift towards opinion in response to Trump was tried 70 years ago during McCarthy’s rise, yet Trump had no issue employing the same tactics more than half a century later.

As American journalists embrace the press-friendly tone of the Biden administration, they should not forget the tribulations of covering Trump. Instead, they must imagine a new kind of journalism, one that prevents politicians like McCarthy and Trump from setting the news agenda. Identifying issues, such as commercial pressures, is a start. Perhaps campaign journalism, which favours in-depth coverage of issues (such as climate change or growing inequality) over chasing leads, offers a solution.

Whatever the strategy, journalists and readers must begin reforming journalism now. Success in the matter is of the utmost importance, for unless the weaknesses in the American press are addressed and a new, imagined journalism made a reality, it will not be long before the next McCarthy, the next Trump, dominates the press and the country once again.