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PR flacks may be the media's secret weapon against Trump

LOOK PAST CNN'S POSSE of pundits for a moment, and its Real News™ branding carries weight. Nevertheless, the font of centrist journalism has become a favorite punching bag for the Trump administration and its right-wing media machine, a universal stand-in for the “crooked media.” And an onslaught this week pushed the network's PR shop into the fray, drawing new attention to the role media brand enforcers might play in the press's high-profile rhetorical battle with the Brander-in-Chief.

These oft-maligned creatures are welcome reinforcements and, possibly, replacements in the supremely public Trump-media shouting match over the very definitions of “real” and “fake” news. President Trump discredits the journalistic enterprise wholesale, but also entire media companies as “failing” or “dishonest,” among the other exclamatory or free-associative insults. Businesses have every right to defend their brands from such attacks. It's also why they employ flacks in the first place—to do what reporters cannot and, oftentimes, should not.

Ritualistic chest-thumping on social media has become a favorite journalistic pastime under the new administration. But in Trump's game of media truth-or-dare, he is the only player with a choice, leaving the press a fuddy-duddy calling for traditional decorum. Instead of huffing and puffing on Twitter each time Team Trump cries “fake news” or the like, reporters might consider allowing communications professionals to play the role of paladin in this arena.

Take how the CNN PR shop exposed fork-tongued White House aides in a set of skirmishes over the past week. In the wake of the faux devastation wrought by the Bowling Green “Massacre,” the fake terrorist attack that Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway repeatedly *misspoke* about, the network declined an offer to have Conway on its Sunday show. CNN wanted the vice president on air instead. What's more, a spokesperson explained (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/05/business/the-massacre-that-wasnt-and-a-turning-point-for-fake-news.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fjim-rutenberg&action=click&contentCollection=undefined®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pg) to *The New York Times*, the organization had “serious questions about her credibility.” Welcome to the club.

RELATED: Analyzing Donald and Melania Trump's relationship through photos (<http://www.cjr.org/analysis/donald-melania-trump-relationship.php?link>)

When Conway tweeted (<https://twitter.com/KellyannePolls/status/828643510878347264>) on Monday that *she* was actually the one who declined CNN's offer, the network's flacks fired back with a message that would be retweeted 10,000 times: "[Conway] was offered to SOTU on Sunday by the White House. We passed. Those are the facts." Nary a 140-character fact-check has smelled so sweet.

The next day, minutes after White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer suggested that the network had walked back its comments on Conway, CNN PR responded with what we in the business call a fire tweet. Its ammunition was understatement, its aim true.



A CNN spokeswoman didn't want to say much when I asked her about such widely shared public pushback (<https://www.facebook.com/cnn/photos/a.369810096508.159795.5550296508/10155894059861509/?type=3&theater>), offering only that "we are simply correcting the record." Network President Jeff Zucker similarly took a harder line on Trump in a recent *New York* magazine interview (<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/01/cnns-zucker-on-covering-trump-past-present-and-future.html>) in late January, arguing that for the president "to have an adversarial relationship with [CNN] is a mistake."





CNN Communications
@CNNPR

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[@realDonaldTrump](#) . [@ChrisCuomo](#) did address that point at the start of his interview. snpy.tv/2kvyD29 Those are the facts.

6:16 AM - 9 Feb 2017

504 1,019

Of course, there are less noble reasons for media companies to posture themselves aggressively toward the president in general, and his anti-media invective in particular. Since the election, Slate has sold (http://www.slate.com/plus?wpsrc=sp_all_hp_tap) its premium memberships as a way for readers to check Trump’s power. *Vanity Fair* advertised itself (<https://twitter.com/DavidUberti/status/809471013700456449>) as “the magazine Trump doesn’t want you to read” soon after a mid-December insult, reportedly adding (<http://www.poynter.org/2016/vanity-fairs-subscriptions-soar-after-troll-y-trump-tweet/443165/>) 13,000 new subscribers within 24 hours. Even the more staid ProPublica monetized a White House insult, to date selling more than 2,200 T ([https://cottonbureau.com/products/were-not-shutting-up\)-shirts](https://cottonbureau.com/products/were-not-shutting-up)-shirts) (<https://cottonbureau.com/products/were-not-shutting-up>) sporting the rallying cry, “We’re not shutting up.”

Such positioning, grating when carried out by journalists, is to be expected from flacks. They also employ a method. After Trump recently tweeted about his other favorite target, “the failing” *New York Times*, referring to its “dwindling subscribers and readers,” the company’s corporate PR team counterattacked swiftly from its own account.

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 40m

...dwindling subscribers and readers.They got me wrong right from the beginning and still have not changed course, and never will. DISHONEST

6.3K 2.9K 16K

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 47m

Thr coverage about me in the @nytimes and the @washingtonpost gas been so false and angry that the times actually apologized to its.....

4.9K 2.9K 13K

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 51m

The failing @nytimes has been wrong about me from the very beginning. Said I would lose the primaries, then the general election. FAKE NEWS!

5.8K 4.4K 18K

NYTCo Communications
@NYTimesComm

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.@realDonaldTrump Fact check: @nytimes subscribers & audience at all-time highs. Supporting independent journalism matters.

5:57 AM - 28 Jan 2017

11,493 21,610

“The policy we’ve come to agreement on is that we will respond only on rare occasions to tweets where there is an obvious factual inaccuracy of a corporate nature,” *Times* spokeswoman Eileen Murphy writes in an email. So, subscription numbers, or when Trump falsely claimed (<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/nov/15/donald-trump/donald-trump-says-new-york-times-apologized-bad-co/>) in November that the *Times* had apologized to readers for its political coverage.

Such protocol is eminently more measured than the rapid-response hyperventilation that so many journalists from across the media exhibit on Twitter. “We don’t have a specific policy on how our journalists individually should or should not react to the President’s criticism beyond the general rule that online behavior should be appropriate for a *Times* journalist,” Murphy writes. “Obviously, individual journalists do not speak for the institution.”

It seems like a sensible rule for social media. But with all the talk of norms being broken in the Trump Era, let me propose a new one: Just don’t. I, too, appreciate fast-twitch snark and well-placed puns. I, too, enjoy basking in attaboys from my own filter bubble of rootless cosmopolitan media types. But think twice before you tweet. When it comes to legitimizing the press, the best case journalists can make is, well, journalism. When Trump lashes out, meanwhile, it’s time for the PR professionals to earn their keep.

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(https://ssl.palmcoastd.com/18801/apps/MEMBER1?ikey=5**M02).

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