ENDERS | ANALYSIS

Media and tech under Trump

Politicised regulation and hyper-partisan policy

- Trump II is already proving to be a more serious threat to an independent, robust news media than Trump I
- Trump's direct power around news media is limited, but the threat comes from an unprecedented politicisation of federal regulators, enforcement and procurement—to favour friends and punish enemies
- Opposition to Trump II is weaker and more divided than the broad 'resistance' to Trump I. Big tech companies are going for a close embrace, hoping to steer policy to their advantage—while others bend the knee to avoid punishment

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Trump and the media: limited direct power, but considerable indirect power

The second Trump administration's relationship with media and tech will not be the same as the first's. Although the president's personal powers remain limited to control over media access to the president and private lawsuits, the administration's power to go after media and tech companies it regards as enemies is much greater now. The better relationship between Trump and the GOP has enabled rapid appointment of right-wing MAGA loyalists to cabinet posts and federal agencies who stand ready to use the federal government to target Trump's enemies. The 6-3 right-wing Supreme Court majority provides a favourable legal context.

There are likely to be some limits to this assault, however. Legislatively, the GOP has slender majorities in Congress and is unlikely to retain control of the House of Representatives past the midterms. Judicially, the evidence so far suggests a majority of Supreme Court justices remain committed to retaining media protections—though there is a gathering right-wing movement campaign to overturn them. This leaves executive orders and federal agencies—including regulators—run by Trump loyalists as the administration's primary avenue of attack, encouraging the president to test and expand the boundaries of executive authority—as seen with recent orders defunding and shuttering USAID and Voice of America—with the courts the only real check.

The newly appointed Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chair Brendan Carr aspires to be an enforcer for Trump against media and tech companies. His agenda comprises an effort to roll back anti-disinformation and fact-checking initiatives by major platforms, politicised investigations of FCC licensees—brandishing the threat of broadcast licence revocation – and a politicised media merger approval process.

The Trump administration is already trying to intimidate the media by a range of methods, including exclusion from White House access; political weaponisation of federal regulators, law enforcement agencies, and procurement—on which some media owners' wider interests depend; congressional committee investigations; private litigation, and changes to the law to make such litigation easier.

Among the targets of this assault, public media (NPR, PBS) are in the crosshairs but may be able to withstand it thanks to public popularity and insulation of their funding from the executive's reach. Some commercial news media are vulnerable to pressure—especially those, like the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*, whose owners' interests are heavily exposed to political use of federal regulators and procurement. The need for FCC approval of media mergers and broadcast licences are two possible pressure points for commercial broadcasters.

The administration's hand is strengthened by a larger and growing Trump-friendly right-wing media, whose largest player by far remains Fox News, more tightly connected to Trump than ever—but which now includes an expanding network of right-wing, 'hyper-partisan' online media, including websites, podcasts, YouTube channels and social media influencers.

The administration's relationship with big tech is much closer this time round, reflecting its greater capacity to reward friends and punish enemies. Big tech has a number of interests at stake in good relations with Trump. Besides exposure to regulatory enforcement and competition for federal contracts, tech companies have a stake in new sectors like AI, cryptocurrency and self-driving cars where regulation is still developing. They also rely on US government support against other national governments—including the EU—committed to robust tech regulation, and against Chinese competitors, and need to protect their interests in a tariff war that could raise the costs of components. Meanwhile, the administration stands to benefit from a reorientation of social media platform rules and the media owned

by big tech to suit Trump and GOP political interests. The Trump-Musk relationship exemplifies the new phase in tech's relationship to Washington.

What's different this time round?

Throughout his first administration, Donald Trump regularly inveighed against the news media but did relatively little to punish the organisations he saw as enemies. In part, this was because there was little he could do. Occasionally, individual journalists were excluded from White House events. The AT&T/Time Warner merger may have been held up by the DOJ because Trump was unhappy with CNN. He railed against leaks and said he was going to "open up" libel laws to make it easier to sue news organisations, but he didn't do anything on that score because, as president, it wasn't within his power. Broadly speaking, Trump I was all bark and no bite.

Even before he won the 2024 presidential election, there were signs Trump II would be different. NPR tallied over 100 threats to prosecute or punish his perceived enemies if he won a second term.[1] But the question remains, how different?

Differences to Trump I: Trump is not an outsider anymore

Bigger electoral victory: In 2016, Trump won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote by almost 3 million votes. In 2024, he won both: the electoral college 312 to 226 and the popular vote by over 2 million, adding 14 million votes to his 2016 tally.[2] In the aftermath of 2016, a narrative quickly developed that Trump's victory was achieved by illegitimate methods—'fake news' and disinformation, soliciting Russian interference and Cambridge Analytica—which helped mobilise a broad front of 'resistance' to his administration that extended to members of the GOP establishment. It focused on various investigations into Trump—most prominently, Robert Mueller's into the Trump-Russia scandal—and aimed at his impeachment. In response, Trump and his supporters developed their own counter-narrative that a 'deep state' was working to remove Trump and undermine his administration. In the aftermath of 2024, no similar 'resistance' to Trump has been able to develop. Trump won again, won bigger than last time, and won by fairly normal democratic means (of which lying is of course one). If in 2016 Trump was framed as an exception to 'normal' American democratic politics, in 2024 the depressing realisation is setting in that he and his political style may be the new normal.

Better Trump-GOP relationship: Trump captured the 2016 Republican nomination against the opposition of the party establishment and much of its congressional caucus, partly motivated by the belief that he would lose badly, which also meant there was no plan for how to use a Trump victory. This time, there is virtually no GOP resistance to Trump, and the party prepared much more extensively for a Trump victory.

The last eight years have seen a steady process of fusion between Trump/MAGA and the GOP, each becoming more like the other. Trump's Republican opponents have largely either retired, lost in primaries to MAGA candidates, or capitulated. Loyalty to Trump and adherence to certain Trumpian articles of faith, like his false claim the 2020 election was 'stolen', are now obligatory. This has shifted the party to the right and probably cost it some congressional races. Meanwhile, Trump himself has abandoned many of the more heterodox elements of his 2016 platform and become much more conventionally right-wing. Nobody talks about the 'alt-right' anymore—they've become mainstream. This fusion meant Trump and the GOP went into the 2024 election far more prepared for governing together. One fruit was 'Project 2025', a nearly 900-page handbook of policy for the next Republican administration drafted by the Heritage Foundation. Trump's chosen FCC chair authored the chapter on the FCC. Another fruit was the

[1] Tom Dreisbach, "Trump has made more than 100 threats to prosecute or punish perceived enemies", NPR 22 October 2024.
[2] Besides a larger electorate, turnout was 4% higher in 2024 than 2016.

availability of a crop of hardcore right-wing Trump loyalists for him to appoint to key posts, unlike in 2016-17 when Trump had difficulty filling key positions in his administration and had to fire appointees often. This portends more consistent and sustained policy execution, not least because Trump can now delegate more to his lieutenants at federal agencies and departments in the knowledge they can be trusted to be, as the historian Ian Kershaw once called it, 'working towards the leader'.

A 6-3 right-wing Supreme Court majority: In 2017, Trump entered office with a 4-4 left-right split on the court and the right-wing Justice Antonin Scalia's seat needing to be filled, which Trump promptly did with another right winger, Neil Gorsuch. He also replaced the retiring centre-right Anthony Kennedy with the more right-wing Brett Kavanaugh, and the centre-left Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat upon her death in 2020 with another right-wing justice, Amy Coney Barrett. Biden's presidency had no opportunity to alter the balance Trump created, meaning there is now a 6-3 right-wing majority on the court whose 'swing' vote in 5-4 decisions is now far more to the right. By the time the right-wing Supreme Court majority was consolidated in 2020, the GOP had already lost its House majority in the 2018 midterms. This time, Trump enters office with a 6-3 right-wing majority already in place, providing a very favourable judicial context for the congressional GOP to act in. On the other hand, there are some initial signs that the right-wing majority is not in accord with the Trump administration on all issues, blocking Trump's freeze on foreign aid in early March.[3]

Similarities to Trump I: Trump's power is still not absolute

The GOP is still weak in Congress: Congressional legislation targeting the media is likely to be limited for three reasons. First, the GOP's 5-vote majority in the House of Representatives is extremely slender. Although the GOP is more homogeneously loyal to Trump than in 2016, it still contains enough political heterogeneity to make passing legislation difficult. Second, given the recent pattern of Democratic overperformance in midterms, it is very plausible that the GOP will lose its House majority in 2026, which would block all but the most uncontroversial parts of its agenda until at least the end of Trump's term. Third, in the period leading up to January 2027 we think the congressional GOP is going to have more substantive priorities—immigration, the economy—than pursuing Trump's media vendetta, especially in view of the fact that the Republican majority in the Senate is not filibuster-proof.

The Supreme Court appears to remain broadly committed to press freedom: Despite its 6-3 right-wing majority, there is no sign yet of a majority on the court for overturning the key decisions that protect freedom of the press. Since 2019, Justice Clarence Thomas has repeatedly called for the court to look again at *New York Times v. Sullivan*, the key 1964 decision that sets a very high evidential threshold—'actual malice'—for libel suits by public figures against the media. On the other hand, in a recent case the right-wing justice Brett Kavanaugh—appointed by Trump in 2018—signalled that he remains committed to it. All told, according to the *New York Times*, recent court decisions suggest, "there remain only two votes to overturn the Sullivan decision, well short of the four it takes to add a case to the court's docket, much less the five required to prevail on the merits." There are, however, signs that a right-wing campaign to overturn *Sullivan* is gathering momentum: since 2020, the number of efforts by right-wing legal groups to ask the court to overturn it has increased, and some right-wing justices on lower courts have signalled they are receptive to the idea.[4] One possibility short of overturning *Sullivan* altogether is that the scope of its protection could be shrunk to cover just public officials rather than public figures—this is discussed more below.

[3] Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Rejects Trump's Bid to Freeze Foreign Aid", *The New York Times* 5 March 2025.
[4] Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Signals That Landmark Libel Ruling Is Secure", *The New York Times* 10 February 2025; David Enrich, "Can the Media's Right to Pursue the Powerful Survive Trump's Second Term?", *The New York Times* 3 March 2025.

Trump II means politicised regulation and hyper-partisan policy

Trump and the GOP have reached a modus vivendi whereby, in return for their public loyalty, making his friends and enemies theirs too, and policy action on Trump's core issues, they have broad scope to enact a hard-right Project 2025 agenda. Trump's appointees reflect this deal.

The most important feature of Trump II for media and tech companies is the intense *politicisation* of federal regulators and agencies, in two respects. First, the horizontal range of regulatory issues on which a friend can obtain favours or an enemy be subjected to punishment will broaden: a news organisation seen as an enemy may have problems made for it by not only, say, the FCC (if a broadcaster) but by other regulatory agencies; the broader corporate interests of the parent company may be put under pressure too. This makes news organisations whose owners have a wide range of larger corporate interests, including many that deal closely with the federal government, potentially the most vulnerable, whereas 'pure' news businesses are more insulated. How wide-ranging the pressure Trump and his lieutenants will be able to bring to bear depends ultimately on the success of their attempt to take over, purge and MAGAfy the various federal agencies and departments. Second, the vertical difference between the standards and thresholds applied to the 'friends' and 'enemies' of Trump will be increased, maximising pressure to become a 'friend'. This means de facto taking a differential approach to regulatory standards for friends and enemies—like more intense and lengthy merger scrutiny—while claiming to apply them consistently. But the gulf between claims and reality will of course require spurious reasoning and invite legal challenge. This highly politicised approach to regulatory enforcement is compatible with a broadly deregulatory agenda—one that prioritises the interests of friends of Trump and the GOP.

Alongside the politicisation of regulation and regulators, **a second key feature of Trump II is what could be called a 'hyper-partisan' approach to policy**. The old congressional politics of bipartisanship is dead. In its place comes a new, hyper-partisan approach where policy options are evaluated first and foremost in terms of the GOP's immediate, partisan political interests. Long-established political norms and conventions that disfavour those interests can be violated. The rule of law can be eroded, and the rules of the democratic game changed, where it suits GOP interests. In this hyper-partisan perspective, the state is not seen as a broadly neutral instrument of whichever party is in office, but as an entrenched opponent of Trump and the GOP's agenda—a 'deep state' that must be purged, gutted in some places, and remade. The judiciary, likewise, is a battleground. Everything is up for grabs.

The opposition to Trump II is much weaker and more divided than was the opposition to Trump I. 'Never Trump' Republicans are a virtually extinct species, while the Democratic Party is badly demoralised and split after the debacle of 2024.[5] Meanwhile, a more coherent, stable and unified Trump administration is more able to reward its friends and punish its enemies. For many, the benefits of reaching an accord with Trump are much greater this time round; the costs of being seen to do so are smaller. Consider some of the guests at Trump's second inaugural ceremony not present at the first: Bernard Arnault, Jeff Bezos, Sergey Brin, Tim Cook, Elon Musk, Sundar Pichai, and Mark Zuckerberg. Look, too, at Facebook's recent Trump-friendly policy changes, its replacement of ex-Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg as global policy chief with GOP point man Joel Kaplan, the recent settlement of Trump's lawsuit against the company for $25 million, and Mark Zuckerberg's 'MAGA makeover'. There is a herd effect here too: the more people and companies go over to seek an accommodation with Trump, the less any one case can be singled out for criticism and the more it can be seen and understood as simple pragmatism—avoiding being the only one of your competitors not sitting round Trump's table.

[5] In the 2024 presidential election, the Democratic vote dropped by 6 million, or 8% of its 2020 total: a result of voters staying at home as much if not more than switching to Trump, indicating a serious demoralisation of the party's base.

Trump's FCC will try to bring news media and tech in line with the president's interests

Trump's choice to chair the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is Brendan Carr, a Trump loyalist and former FCC general counsel who Trump first appointed as a commissioner in 2017. Carr authored the chapter on the FCC in the Heritage Foundation's 'Project 2025' handbook, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, where he set out some of the elements of his policy agenda.[6] Carr's agenda is a hyper-partisan one, which aims to bring the news media and big tech more in line with Trump/GOP interests.

Broadly speaking, the goal is to pressure the news media to become less robust and more compliant in their coverage of the Trump administration, while pressuring big tech to abandon any efforts to moderate online content, including tackling disinformation—efforts many on the American right like Carr have come to see as a conspiracy to censor right-wing speech (see Carr's comments at MWC, as covered in Mobile World Congress 2025: In the shadow of Trump (and Musk) [2025-025]). Carr may pursue these two objectives through an unprecedented politicisation and weaponisation of the FCC's regulatory powers, including its power to approve media mergers involving FCC licensees.

An unprecedented politicisation and weaponisation of the FCC's regulatory powers, including its power to approve media mergers involving FCC licensees

The hyper-partisan motivation of Carr's approach is evident from its blatant inconsistency. He has denounced any regulation of online speech by the major platforms as a 'censorship cartel', while simultaneously threatening the withdrawal of broadcasting licences from news media uncongenial to Trump—a far more blatant and dangerous effort to censor speech than, say, Facebook's limited collaboration with some fact-checking organisations to try and label clear-cut cases of disinformation circulating on the platform. The approach is to oppose even basic content moderation that might discourage or marginalise right-wing disinformation, while trying to intimidate broadcasters seen as partisan enemies—the only consistency here is the effort to advance the immediate political interests of Trump and the GOP. Below, we examine the FCC's likely approach under Carr to big tech, news media and media merger approval.

Regulating big tech: Section 230, which shields big tech from liability for the content published on its sites, could be weakened

On 13 November, days before being picked as the next FCC chair, Carr sent a letter—in effect, his application to Trump for the job—to the CEOs of Alphabet, Apple, Meta and Microsoft accusing their companies of playing "significant roles" in a recent, "unprecedented surge in censorship" targeting "core political, religious, and scientific speech" by a "censorship cartel". What he was objecting to was platforms imposing basically *any* regulation for the quality or truth of the content on their platforms, which he framed as an attack on right-wing speech. The regulation he objected to ranged from "removing or blocking social media posts to labelling whole websites or apps as "untrustworthy" or "high-risk" in an apparent effort to suppress their information and viewpoints, including through efforts to delist them, lower their rankings, or harm their profitability".[7] The "cartel" included "so-called "media monitors""— i.e. non-partisan, mostly non-profit organisations that either seek to fact-check news stories or to objectively rate the credibility of news sites.

[6] *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* ,The Heritage Foundation 2023.
[7] Letter from Brendan Carr to Sundar Pichai, Satya Nadella, Mark Zuckerberg and Tim Cook, 13 November 2024.

The letter centred on NewsGuard, a company that creates "reliability ratings for news outlets based on nonpartisan journalistic criteria", as well as a range of other services including podcast trust ratings and human-curated databases for "reliable ad placement". In short, its aim is to help both users and advertisers differentiate between reliable and unreliable news media. Carr claimed NewsGuard's ratings and fact-checking showed evidence of bias. He pointed out that NewsGuard's web extension worked with Microsoft, Apple and Google's browsers and the company had "partnered with social media companies". He asked for the companies to tell him what, if any, relationships their companies and services had with NewsGuard, as well as "any media monitor or fact-checking service" used as part of their advertising services.

The agenda Carr is carrying forward aims to ensure that right-wing media and speech pay no penalty whatsoever online—in reputation, circulation, advertising revenue or anything else—for carrying the kinds of disinformation that these media monitoring organisations identify. The kernel of truth in Carr's belief that media monitoring organisations disproportionately affect right-wing media and speech is that the available evidence so far points to a greater prevalence of disinformation on the US right than the centre or left. That is not to say disinformation exists solely on the right, or that all right-wing media spread disinformation. But, relatively speaking, disinformation is more prevalent in the US in right-wing media—and especially the kind of hard-right, 'hyper-partisan' media that most solidly champions Trump and is more heavily consumed by right-wing Americans—especially those on the far right. Any media monitoring organisation that seeks to fact-check news stories or evaluate the reliability of different US news organisations *should* be finding more problematic content, broadly speaking, in right-wing US media.

In seeking to 'completely dismantle' this supposed "censorship cartel", Carr in reality aims to ensure that right-wing media is exempt from the application of any broadly fair or objective standards of truth or reliability that could become a competitive disadvantage for it—whether in terms of lost audience trust, traffic, circulation on search or social media platforms, or advertising revenue. This is a microcosm in media of the broader Trumpian strategy of attempting to exempt themselves from the normal rules of the democratic game, whose most graphic expressions so far have been Trump's false claim that the 2020 presidential election was 'stolen' and the 6 January micro-insurrection was inspired by it.

The key policy through which Carr seeks to advance this agenda is a reinterpretation of Section 230 of the Communications Act 1934 (amended in the 1990s), which gives online service providers like search engines or social media platforms certain exemptions from liability for the content hosted by them generated by others. This immunity has been interpreted as a very broad one by US courts in the interests of free expression online. Section 230 also gives a second, narrower immunity to publishers for their content takedown decisions—these must be "voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected".[8]

[8] Congressional Research Service, "Section 230: An Overview", updated 4 January 2024, p. 2.

There are three strands to Carr's policy here. The first is his claim that the FCC has broad powers to interpret the meaning of Section 230 and issue that interpretation as guidance to federal courts. The second is a threat to use this power to eliminate the first, broad immunity for all service providers that engage in *any* content moderation, making them suddenly liable for everything published on them because they have engaged in any moderation of it. Third, Carr seeks to narrow the interpretation of the second, more limited immunity so that attempts by service providers to restrict access to or availability of material that is shown to disproportionately impact right-wing material are not "in good faith" and therefore not immune from legal challenge. In his 13 November letter to the GAFM CEOs, he questioned whether content moderation that relied on products or services like NewsGuard's would "constitute "good faith" actions within the meaning of Section 230", given the anti-right-wing bias he alleges.

So far, this move to drastically weaken Section 230 immunity is just a threat—one aimed at convincing the platforms to abandon their anti-disinformation efforts voluntarily

At the same time, in his Project 2025 chapter, Carr suggested Congress needed to legislate to ensure tech companies were clearly prohibited from discriminating against what he called "core political viewpoints", and to ensure internet companies "no longer have carte blanche to censor protected speech while maintaining their Section 230 protections". But given the tiny, and probably brief, Republican majority in the House of Representatives, such legislation is unlikely to be forthcoming.[9] The question, then, is how far the FCC under Carr will get in reinterpreting Section 230 in the manner above and in getting federal courts to follow its interpretation. So far, this move to drastically weaken Section 230 immunity is just a threat—one aimed at convincing the platforms to abandon their anti-disinformation efforts voluntarily. For Trump, its value is that it suddenly makes his control over a lieutenant like Carr a powerful incentive for online service providers to reach a rapprochement with him. This is one of the contexts in which Mark Zuckerberg's accord with Trump and Facebook's recent moves to abandon its relationships with fact-checking organisations need to be seen. These are partly attempts to head off the threat of Carr and the FCC weakening Section 230 immunity, which would leave Facebook open to enormously increased legal risk.

Pressure on news media: investigations and broadcast licence threats

Parallel to his attacks on the "censorship cartel", Carr has taken an aggressive approach to the news media, putting pressure on those media institutions deemed hostile to Trump and advancing his 'culture war' agenda in the media sphere. This has taken three forms:

- Contribution to the broader right-wing effort to undermine and defund public broadcasting
- Investigations of FCC licence holders on a range of grounds
- Threats to revoke FCC licences

Of these, the most serious is the last. Carr said in November on X, "Broadcast licenses are not sacred cows. These media companies are required by law to operate in the public interest. If they don't, they are going to be held accountable, as the Communications Act requires."[10] Since the withdrawal of a broadcasting licence would be a drastic and unprecedented move, it's one most likely to be made first against a smaller institution like a local radio station without the means to mount a well-resourced fight against it, with the

[9] In recent years a number of bills have been introduced in Congress that would significantly weaken Section 230's protections for online service providers but none have gone far. For example, in 2019, the Republican senator Josh Hawley introduced the 'Ending Support for Internet Censorship Act', a bill to limit Section 230's protections to companies that have obtained an immunity certification from the Federal Trade Commission that they do not "moderate information provided by other information content providers in a manner that is biased against a political party, political candidate, or political viewpoint." See: S.1914 - Ending Support for Internet Censorship Act (introduced 19 June 2019).

[10] See Brendan Carr's tweet on 24 November 2024: https://x.com/BrendanCarrFCC/status/1860478092721959090

aim of creating a chilling effect at other, larger broadcasters. Even the mere slightly increased risk of licence withdrawal might prove damaging to the share prices of some media conglomerates, and therefore a threat they take seriously enough to motivate internal reorganisations or editorial reorientations.

Since becoming FCC chair, Carr has launched four investigations:

- **NPR and PBS**: on 29 January, Carr launched an investigation into whether the announcements of underwriters supporting NPR and PBS programming violate the federal law prohibiting them from featuring commercial or other promotional announcements. In his letter announcing the investigation, he said he believed the investigation "may prove relevant" to the Congressional debate over whether to eliminate public funding for both public broadcasters
- **Network news broadcasters ABC, CBS and NBC**: Carr has announced that the FCC has opened investigations into all three after complaints were filed against them by right-wing pressure group the Center for American Rights alleging instances of liberal, anti-Trump bias[11]
- **Comcast (owner of NBC News and MSNBC[12])**: on 11 February, Carr wrote to Comcast announcing he was launching an investigation into its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies—part of a broader FCC offensive against what Carr called "the scourge of DEI" in the media sector, arguing they violate equal employment laws. Carr has already eliminated the FCC's own DEI policies.[13] Comcast is an obvious target because so many of its core businesses are regulated and licenced by the FCC, including its cable and high-speed internet service, wireless phone services and TV stations
- **KCBS Radio in San Francisco**: in late January, the station broadcasted information on the live locations of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents who were conducting deportation operations in San Jose. In early February, Carr told Fox News he had opened a formal inquiry and sent a letter to the station asking "how this could possibly be consistent with their public interest obligations" under their FCC licence. The FCC has broad power under the Communications Act 1934 to ensure that broadcast licensees operate in the "public interest, convenience and necessity"[14]

A politicised media merger regime

On media ownership and the mergers regime, the FCC's approach will be broadly deregulatory in direction but politicised in application: relaxed about media mergers overall, but more so if the parties' relations with the Trump administration are friendly or at least neutral. Otherwise, problems might be made for merger parties, as they were in 2017 when the DOJ sued to try and block the AT&T/Time Warner deal given Trump's hostility to CNN—a case the DOJ comprehensively lost at trial.[15]

The FCC will be relaxed about media mergers overall, but more so if the parties' relations with the Trump administration are friendly or at least neutral

In his Project 2025 chapter, Carr said that "rapidly evolving market conditions" mean the FCC should eliminate "many of [its] media ownership rules".[16] He has in the past supported mergers, like the 2019 merger between T-Mobile and Sprint, the third- and fourth-largest

[11] Meg James, "In Trump's first week, FCC chair signals headaches ahead for media giants", *The Los Angeles Times* 24 January 2025.
[12] MSNBC is due to be spun out from Comcast along with the rest of its cable channels into a new entity by the end of 2025. Comcast's CEO Brian Roberts will retain a 33% voting stake in the new company. See Benjamin Mullin, "Comcast to Spin Off Cable Networks, Including MSNBC and CNBC" *The New York Times* 20 November 2024.
[13] Meg James, "FCC launches effort to 'root out' DEI programs, beginning with Comcast", *The Los Angeles Times*,12 February 2025.
[14] Clara Harter, "FCC investigating San Francisco radio station that shared location of undercover ICE agents", *Los Angeles Times* 6 February 2025.
[15] James B. Stewart, "Was This $100 Billion Deal the Worst Merger Ever?", *The New York Times*, 19 November 2022: "Mr. Delrahim, at the Justice Department, stated repeatedly that the decision to file the suit had nothing to do with Mr. Trump's hostility to CNN, but few at AT&T or Time Warner believed that."
[16] *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, p. 857.

wireless telecoms providers in the US, which the Democrat-appointed commissioners opposed on the grounds that the consolidation would hurt consumers by reducing competition and creating an oligopoly in the wireless market.

By contrast, in September 2024 Carr—then in his capacity as an FCC commissioner—signalled his opposition to the FCC's approval of a media merger where Audacy Inc., a bankrupt radio broadcaster that owned over 200 local radio stations, sold its stations to a nonprofit of which George Soros was a major financial supporter. Along with Carr, a number of Republican members of Congress objected to the merger on the grounds of Soros's involvement. Carr claimed the FCC was bypassing the normal rules and procedures for merger approval to expedite the merger, but the then-FCC chair Jessica Rosenworcel comprehensively refuted Carr's claims in letters to several members of Congress who had written to her to protest the FCC's decision; they essentially repeated Carr's arguments. She pointed out that the same, legitimate procedures had been used by the previous administration on multiple occasions. In November 2024, Carr signalled he was considering opening an FCC investigation into the merger.[17] Of course, one of the advantages of alleging one's opponents have waived the rules for their allies is so that when one does so in future, one can claim merely to be following a precedent already established.

Trump's dispute with CBS could delay approval for the sale of Paramount to Skydance

During the 2024 presidential campaign, the Trump campaign claimed that an interview by CBS's "60 Minutes" of Kamala Harris was deceptively edited to make her answers look better to viewers. CBS refuted Trump's allegation and noted that Trump, having initially agreed to also be interviewed, later decided not to participate after his campaign learnt his remarks would be fact-checked. ("60 Minutes" has interviewed both presidential candidates during every election campaign since 1968.) Trump's claim about pro-Harris bias was probably motivated by the need to justify his evasion of regular journalistic scrutiny. But soon after, he told a podcast host he would sue the network, wanted CBS's broadcast TV licences taken away and that "60 Minutes" should be taken off air. Trump later brought the threatened lawsuit, eventually seeking to claim $20 billion. In early February, in loyal support of Trump, the FCC formally requested the raw transcripts and video of the interview from CBS, then published them online and announced it was launching an investigation.[18]

Trump's lawsuit is "widely seen as lacking legal merit".[19] Yet because of the FCC's role in the merger process, the Trump-CBS dispute threatens to delay approval for the Redstones' plan to sell Paramount (CBS's parent company) to Skydance—an $8 billion deal in which Shari Redstone and her family reportedly stand to walk away with around $1.75 billion. Speaking to Fox News about the merger, Carr said, "I'm pretty confident that news distortion complaint over the CBS 60 Minutes transcript is something that's likely to arise in the context of the FCC's review of that transaction."[20] A recent report in the *New York Times* claimed, "many Paramount executives believe that settling the lawsuit would increase the odds that the Trump administration did not block or delay the merger with Skydance."[21] (On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Skydance is owned by David Ellison, son of Larry Ellison—the tech billionaire and longtime friend of Trump, a guest at the latter's second inauguration, and whom Trump has suggested he'd "like to buy" TikTok.) [22]

[17] "There's a petition for reconsideration pending at the FCC right now. And I want to take a very hard look at that." Kristen Altus, "Trump's pick for FCC chairman vows to take 'very hard look' at broadcast operations, Soros' radio takeover", FOXBusiness 25 November 2024.
[18] See Brendan Carr's tweet on 5 February 2025: https://x.com/BrendanCarrFCC/status/1887232039021097265.
[19] David Folkenflik, "Why CBS stands at the epicenter of Trump's assault on the media", NPR 6 February 2025.
[20] Kyle Paoletta, "Going Broad", *Columbia Journalism Review* 16 December 2024.
[21] Lauren Hirsch and Benjamin Mullin, "Paramount and Trump Seek Mediator for CBS News Lawsuit", *The New York Times* 24 February 2025.
[22] France24, "Larry Ellison, tech's original maverick, makes Trump era return", 23 January 2025; Lily Jamali, "Musk, MrBeast, Larry Ellison - Who might buy TikTok?", *BBC News* 25 January 2025.

On 17 January the *Wall Street Journal* reported Paramount executives had held internal discussions about settling the lawsuit.[23] On 30 January the *New York Times* reported Paramount was in settlement talks with Trump's representatives and "Shari Redstone…strongly supports the effort to settle, according to two people with knowledge of her thinking,"[24] although soon after this report appeared, another in *Variety* indicated the opposition of CBS News's president and CEO of CBS News, Wendy McMahon.[25] In early February, the *Financial Times* reported Redstone was "open to a "reasonable settlement" of the 60 Minutes matter with the Trump administration…but was not currently involved in settlement discussions".[26] But then, in late February, it was reported that lawyers for CBS and Trump had agreed to appoint a mediator, indicating a settlement is in the offing.[27] However, company executives are reportedly concerned about "the risk that paying such a settlement could expose directors and officers to liability in potential future shareholder litigation or criminal charges for bribing a public official."[28]

Would it be unfair to describe the upshot of this sequence of events as: a US president engaged in a shakedown of a media company for his own private enrichment, with the aid of the FCC chair he has appointed? Or, in other words, the FCC has been co-opted in a project of media intimidation and political corruption. If that project succeeds, what is to stop Trump from bringing more spurious lawsuits against news organisations whose parent companies 'happen' at that moment to be engaged in merger activity?

Trump divides the news media into friends and enemies

The primary aim of Trump's approach to the news media is to get the uncritical coverage of himself and his administration he feels he deserves, and which some right-wing news outlets are willing to give him. This includes a free pass when Trump spreads disinformation, as he does very often. *The Washington Post* tallied that by the end of Trump's first term, he had made 30,573 false or misleading claims, or an average of about 21 a day.[29] Trump's view of the news media divides it simply into friends and enemies, leaving little room for objective, robust scrutiny. When ABC News's moderators fact-checked false claims Trump made during his 10 September presidential debate with Kamala Harris, Trump's advisers "erupted at ABC executives and journalists in the middle of the debate," according to *The Washington Post*.[30]

The danger now is twofold. First, Trump and his allies will use the power at their disposal to reward friends and punish the news organisations seen as 'enemies'. It is by no means clear that this assault will be confined solely to the politicised use of sectoral regulators like the FCC: in the most extreme cases it may be multi-pronged, using several federal regulators and agencies, all led by Trump appointees, alongside congressional investigations and private lawsuits by right-wing groups, Trump himself and his allies. A preview in miniature of this approach is the GOP's counter-offensive against the various fact-checking organisations fighting disinformation that they see as part of a "censorship cartel" with the social media platforms.[31] The second danger is that, anticipating the first, news organisations begin to self-censor or weaken their scrutiny of the executive in an attempt to avoid being targeted. Even before the 2024

[23] Jessica Toonkel and Drew FitzGerald, "CBS Owner Discusses Settling Trump Suit, With Merger Review on Tap", *The Wall Street Journal* 17 January 2025.
[24] Lauren Hirsch, James B. Stewart and Michael M. Grynbaum, "Paramount in Settlement Talks With Trump Over '60 Minutes' Lawsuit", *The New York Times* 30 January 2025.
[25] Brian Steinberg, "CBS News Staffers Irate Over Talk of Paramount Settling Trump's '60 Minutes' Lawsuit", *Variety* 31 January 2025.
[26] Christopher Grimes, Daniel Thomas and Anna Nicolaou, "Donald Trump vs the media: US president wages war on the fourth estate", *Financial Times* 7 January 2025.
[27] Lauren Hirsch and Benjamin Mullin, "Paramount and Trump Seek Mediator for CBS News Lawsuit", *The New York Times* 24 February 2025.
[28] Jessica Toonkel, "Paramount Executives Ask: Could They Be Sued for Settling Trump's $20 Billion CBS Lawsuit?", *The Wall Street Journal* 14 February 2025.
[29] Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly, "Trump's false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years", *The Washington Post* 21 January 2021.
[30] Ashley Parker and Josh Dawsey, "Trump wages campaign against real-time fact checks", *The Washington Post* 14 October 2024.
[31] Steven Lee Myers and Sheera Frenkel, "G.O.P. Targets Researchers Who Study Disinformation Ahead of 2024 Election", *The New York Times* 19 June 2023.

presidential election, there were concerns that some news outlets were "pre-emptively self-censoring coverage" that could offend Trump in case he won a second term.[32]

Below, we outline the repertoire of tactics through which Trump and his allies are trying to cow the news media, before turning to look at how this assault is affecting different parts of the US news media.

The Trump/GOP repertoire: Trump's direct power is limited, but he directly appoints the heads of the federal agencies and regulators who can act on his behalf

There are three strands to the Trump/GOP repertoire:

1. The powers directly available to the president, and to the federal regulators and agencies whose leaders are appointed by the president. **These are relatively limited in effect**, as they centre on White House access and federal spending on news subscriptions
2. The powers of investigation and subpoena available to the GOP-controlled Congress. **These powers are much more serious**, centred on the appointment of candidates to the FCC, FTC and DoJ, whose investigatory powers could be politicised by Trump. **The threat is mainly indirect**, as Congress has relatively limited direct powers to go after 'enemy' media
3. Litigation by private actors—including by Trump himself, but also his allies and assorted right-wing pressure groups. **Many of these lawsuits are legally baseless, but settlements so far could encourage Trump and allies. A more distant threat is that conservative lower courts may call libel protection laws into question, but the Supreme Court would need convincing**

(1) **The powers directly available to Trump as president** are relatively limited. The two main methods used so far are exclusion from White House access and withdrawal of federal spending on news subscriptions.

Trump attempted to use **exclusion from White House access** in his first term as a means of disciplining individual journalists he didn't like. This time, the most notable incident so far has been the exclusion of the Associated Press from presidential events for its refusal to call the Gulf of Mexico 'the Gulf of America' as Trump wants. The AP has taken Trump to federal court in an attempt to restore access. Reportedly, a wide coalition of American news organisations opposes Trump's exclusion.[33] The administration has also taken unprecedented control of credentialing the press pool that follows the president.[34] At the same time, the administration has started making more room in press conferences for right-wing media organisations—including new media like podcasters and influencers[35]—more likely to be favourable to the president and to ask more of the questions the administration prefers to answer. In February, the administration told *The New York Times*, NBC News, NPR, Politico, CNN, *The Washington Post*, The Hill and War Zone that they had to vacate their office space at the Pentagon to make room for other, mostly right-wing news organisations like One America News Network, Breitbart, Newsmax and the Daily Caller.[36]

Trump has ordered federal agencies and departments to **pull government subscriptions** to a number of news organisations. Sometimes this has been spurred by disinformation online: in early February, the White House directed the federal agency in charge of contracts to cancel government subscriptions to Politico after a false story circulated online claiming that USAID had provided $8 million in funding to

[32] David Folkenflik, "Did the 'L.A. Times' and other news outlets pull punches to appease Trump?", NPR 25 October 2024. ""One of the central media stories in the U.S. right now is the people who run big media companies making accommodations for a second Trump presidency and thinking about how to avoid antagonizing him," Ben Smith, editor-in-chief and co-founder of the news site Semafor, tells NPR."
[33] David Bauder, "AP again seeks end of its White House ban, saying the Trump administration is retaliating further", Associated Press 4 March 2025.
[34] Laurie Kellman, "The White House says it 'will determine' which news outlets cover Trump, rotating traditional ones", Associated Press 26 February 2025.
[35] Michael M. Grynbaum, "Welcome, Podcasters! White House Wants New Media at the Press Briefing", *The New York Times* 28 January 2025.
[36] David Bauder, "The Trump administration is throwing more Pentagon reporters out of their workspaces", Associated Press 8 February 2025.

Politico to produce news coverage favourable to the Democrats.[37] Later that month, it was reported that the State Department had ordered US embassies and consulates worldwide to cancel all news subscriptions deemed "non-mission critical", prioritising the cancellation of subscriptions to *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, Politico, Bloomberg News, the Associated Press and Reuters.[38] It remains to be seen how long-lasting or effective this edict is. These subscriptions are taken out by embassies and consulates because they are necessary for information gathering—a need that cannot be cancelled by presidential order. Moreover, these subscriptions represent in most cases a small fraction of these organisations' overall subscriber bases. Politico is more exposed to pressure, and soon after the news of the cancellation of Politico subscriptions, there were signs that Axel Springer's CEO was trying to build bridges with the administration, praising JD Vance for a speech in Munich in mid-February.[39]

(2) **The powers available to the heads of the federal regulators and agencies**, who are directly appointed by the president, are more serious than the relatively limited powers directly available to the president. In Trump I, the need to secure Senate confirmation of these appointments, at a time when the GOP still contained a number of members of Congress who owed nothing to Trump and regarded him with hostility, together with a lack of dedicated followers, meant Trump found it difficult to staff these organisations with loyal disciples. Trump II has not seen the same problem. Across the FCC, FTC, DOJ and FBI, Trump loyalists have been installed quickly with no opposition from the Senate GOP.

> In his first presidency, Trump found it difficult to staff organisations with loyal disciples. Trump II has not seen the same problem

The first danger here is of an unprecedented politicisation and weaponisation of federal regulators. As outlined above, the **FCC** has powers it could, under its new, Trump-appointed chair, use selectively to target Trump's enemies. The two key powers here are **media merger approval**, which the FCC could seek to delay or withhold, and **broadcast licences**, which it could at least raise the threat of removing. The **Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the DOJ** could be co-opted to use the threat of **anti-trust** investigations for political purposes. The prospect of avoiding such an investigation if friendly relations with Trump are maintained may be a powerful incentive, particularly for tech companies. Trump's FTC chair Andrew Ferguson has signalled that, while relaxing the FTC's broad approach to anti-trust, he will continue to go after big tech firms.[40] Additionally, there is the more diffuse threat of the possible weaponisation of all kinds of more obscure regulations, state laws, labour regulations, visa rules (against journalists operating in the US on them), and tax audits by the IRS.[41] The danger is of a multi-pronged legal assault that all but the largest news organisations find difficult to fight off without incurring burdensome costs and organisational attention.

The second danger is that Trump's attorney general, Pam Bondi, and his FBI director, Kash Patel, use the powers and resources of **the DOJ and FBI** to go after Trump's 'enemies'. In December 2023, Patel promised the next Trump administration would 'go after' enemies in the news media: "Yes, we're going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig presidential elections—we're going to come after you. Whether it's criminally or civilly, we'll figure that out."[42] Patel's primary targets—judging by his published 60-strong 'enemies list'—are mostly former federal government officials from the Obama and Biden administrations, and it may be that preoccupation with chasing this 'deep state' takes priority. But there is still scope for both the DOJ and

[37] Huo Jingnan & Jude Joffe-Block, "How conspiracy theories about Politico led Trump to cancel subscriptions" NPR 7 February 2025.
[38] Jeremy Barr and John Hudson, "State Dept. orders cancellation of news subscriptions around the world", *The Washington Post* 18 February 2025.
[39] Laura Pitel and Gideon Rachman, "Politico's owner praises JD Vance for his 'inspiring message' in Munich", *Financial Times* 20 February 2025.
[40] Cecilia Kang and David McCabe, "Trump Picks Andrew Ferguson to Lead Federal Trade Commission", *The New York Times* 10 December 2024.
[41] David Enrich and Katie Robertson, "News Outlets Take Unusual Steps to Prepare for Onslaught From Trump", *The New York Times* 13 January 2025.
[42] Jonathan Swan, Maggie Haberman and Charlie Savage, "A New Trump Administration Will 'Come After' the Media, Says Kash Patel", *The New York Times*, 5 December 2023.

FBI to go after news organisations. The most likely route is **leak investigations**, where subpoenas could be used to try and uncover journalists' confidential sources. Under the Biden administration, although leaks were investigated, it was a matter of policy not to use subpoenas to do so. Some news organisations have already encouraged reporters to take steps to reduce the risk of sources being exposed by subpoenas.[43] Some lawyers and legal scholars have suggested that the **Espionage Act**, already used to prosecute government employees for disclosing confidential information, could be used to prosecute journalists who receive and publish that information, or refuse to reveal their sources.[44] The danger would be magnified if courts were to acquiesce to an attempt by the administration to expand the scope of information covered by the Act to include presidential communications—potentially allowing it to target journalists reporting on White House deliberations.

The **powers available to Congress** to go after 'enemy' news media are relatively limited, confined mostly to **committees' powers of investigation**, including the use of subpoenas to acquire documents and records, and require people to testify. Big tech has so far been a key GOP target. The House Judiciary Committee, for instance, recently subpoenaed eight major tech companies over its concerns that they seek to 'censor speech' in the US.[45] The House DOGE subcommittee chaired by Marjorie Taylor Greene has already signalled its intent to investigate PBS and NPR. But it has also been suggested committees may also seek to investigate nonprofit news organisations and their donors. For the latter, the mere fact of intense political scrutiny may create a chilling effect. On the other hand, if congressional committees compel editors and journalists to appear and defend their reporting, there is a good chance such an authoritarian spectacle will backfire.

(3) **The use of litigation—to intimidate news organisations, but also potentially to weaken legal protections**—is the final strand of the assault on the news media. In this area, Trump has led the way, filing lawsuits over the last year against ABC News, Facebook, the *Des Moines Register* and CBS News. These lawsuits appear to be legally baseless. Nevertheless, ABC News settled with Trump for $15 million and Facebook for $25 million.[46] Where they have been settled by the defendants, the motive seems to be at least partly a desire to repair relations with Trump and his administration.[47] But such settlements risk encouraging Trump and his allies to use the tactic more. Elon Musk has publicly mulled suing his critics, and lawyers for Pete Hegseth and Kash Patel, Trump's defence secretary and FBI director respectively, threatened to sue journalists for defamation during coverage of their Senate confirmation hearings.[48]

The use of litigation—to intimidate news organisations, but also potentially to weaken legal protections—is the final strand of the assault on the news media

Despite claiming at times in his first administration that he was going to 'open up' libel laws to allow news organisations to be sued more easily, this is not within Trump's power as president. Libel law is decided by the states, not Congress. News organisations are protected by the Supreme Court's key 1964 decision *New York Times v. Sullivan*, which established a particularly high standard when public figures sue for libel. Such plaintiffs must prove the writer was motivated by 'actual malice'—defined as knowledge the

[43] David Enrich and Katie Robertson, "News Outlets Take Unusual Steps to Prepare for Onslaught From Trump", *The New York Times* 13 January 2025.
[44] Kyle Paoletta, "A New Normal", *Columbia Journalism Review* 22 October 2024.
[45] Annie Palmer, "House Judiciary Committee subpoenas Alphabet, Meta, other tech giants over 'foreign censorship' of speech", CNBC 27 February 2025.
[46] CBS News's parent company Paramount is reportedly considering doing so (as discussed above). The *Register* case is ongoing.
[47] Though Disney were also concerned that, being tried in Florida, the case would be heard by a jury likely to be pro-Trump, and that the case could be used by the Supreme Court to overturn *New York Times v. Sullivan*. See Brooks Barnes, "Inside Disney's Decision to Settle a Trump Defamation Suit", *The New York Times* 18 December 2024.
[48] David Enrich, "Trump and His Picks Threaten More Lawsuits Over Critical Coverage", *The New York Times* 15 December 2024.

disputed statement was false, or a reckless disregard for the truth.[49] The Supreme Court has long recognised the benefit to free public debate that this protection gives.

The indications so far are that despite the 6-3 right-wing majority, a majority of Supreme Court justices remain supportive of *Sullivan*—only two of the nine justices have publicly questioned *Sullivan*.[50] However, there is also evidence that a campaign is gathering momentum among the right-wing legal movement and some right-wing justices in lower courts to overturn the decision. Were the Supreme Court's five most right-wing justices to acquiesce to this, it would open the door to a flood of defamation lawsuits against the news media.[51] But it is also possible that *Sullivan*'s protections could be chipped away at rather than overturned entirely. For example, if the definition of 'public figure' was narrowed to include only public officials then many wealthy and/or famous people in the public eye could become much more able to sue for libel.

In the meantime, Trump has used other laws as his basis for suing the media: in the CBS News and *Des Moines Register* cases, he did so under state consumer protection laws aimed at practices like false or deceptive advertising. His use of these laws is part of a broader strategy by right-wing legal groups and others to, in effect, outflank the *Sullivan* decision's high standard of proof in defamation cases. Another tactic is 'forum shopping', i.e. bringing lawsuits in (usually southern) states where the judges hearing them are likely to be more receptive. Trump's CBS lawsuit, for instance, was brought in Amarillo, Texas, which meant it would be heard by a Trump-appointed judge who "has been hospitable to conservative lawsuits that many lawyers regard as meritless."[52]

The CBS News and *Des Moines Register* cases may be wholly without merit, as CBS's lawyers have strongly argued. But the basic point to understand about Trump's lawsuits is that their legal merit is often irrelevant to their intended effect: to intimidate and impose legal costs. Now president again, the ability of Trump and his lieutenants at federal agencies to punish defendants in these lawsuits in other ways may constitute a more powerful reason to settle with him than the legal risks of the actual case. This appears to be the dilemma faced by Paramount, as described above. And the spectre of a Trump defamation case going all the way to the Supreme Court, where the media's doomsday scenario of five right-wing justices overturning *Sullivan* materialises, constitutes another reason to settle.

How is Trump and the GOP's assault on the news media likely to play out? Below we survey some of the key news organisations likely to be affected by it, before briefly looking at the pro-Trump/GOP news media.

How will mainstream news organisations be impacted?

Despite his threats, Trump does not have a credible pathway to defund public media

One of Trump and congressional Republicans' first targets has been publicly funded domestic media. According to the right-wing worldview, NPR and PBS are incorrigibly left-wing organisations whose federal government funding should be withdrawn to force them to seek commercial funding. Project 2025 calls for the defunding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which funds local stations that are members of both broadcast membership organisations. Elon Musk has tweeted his desire to see NPR defunded.[53]

[49] Merely proving that the statements are false is not sufficient. Additionally, harm to reputation must be proven, and in cases where the litigant has damaged their own reputation—for instance by confessing to sexual assault on tape—reputational harm caused by reporting on the same topic is even harder to prove.
[50] Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Signals That Landmark Libel Ruling Is Secure", *The New York Times* 10 February 2025.
[51] David Enrich, "Can the Media's Right to Pursue the Powerful Survive Trump's Second Term?", *The New York Times* 3 March 2025.
[52] David Enrich, "Trump's New Line of Attack Against the Media Gains Momentum", *The New York Times* 7 February 2025.
[53] Cecilia Nowell, "Trump's threat to defund all US public media has NPR and PBS on the back foot", *The Guardian* 28 December 2024.

Trump's allies will no doubt make a good show of going after the public broadcasters. Marjorie Taylor Greene—a member of the House of Representatives, Trump cheerleader and noted QAnon enthusiast—is chair of the DOGE subcommittee, in which capacity she has invited the CEOs of NPR and PBS to appear and "explain why federal dollars should continue funding chronically biased reporting."[54] Meanwhile, as mentioned above, Trump's FCC chair Brendan Carr has launched an investigation into whether NPR and PBS's underwriting announcements cross the line into commercial advertisements for those contributors. Part of Carr's aim is probably to chill and deter corporate and philanthropic supporters of NPR and PBS programming worried about attracting political heat.

Yet despite these efforts, it is doubtful the MAGA offensive against NPR and PBS will succeed. The CPB's funding comes from congressional appropriations, made two years in advance. Trump would need the congressional GOP's near-unanimous support to defund the CPB and there is little reason to think he will get it. Despite the constant right-wing attacks on them, NPR and PBS remain broadly popular with the American public and widely used—including by many Republican voters. Cutting their budgets would particularly affect the smaller local TV and radio stations in rural areas that are among the most dependent on public funding—and these are heavily Republican areas.[55] Public radio and television stations are also an important, and not easily or quickly replaced, part of the federal Next Generation Warning System that provides critical information during natural disasters and other emergencies.

In short, there are good reasons for congressional representatives to vote against defunding the CPB. We think enough Republicans in both houses will be responsive to them—especially ones from smaller, rural states. Trump made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to defund the CPB during his first term, when the Republicans had a much larger House majority than they do now. The GOP goal is not necessarily to succeed in defunding public broadcasting. It is to act threateningly enough that the public broadcasters self-censor their coverage of the administration. But absent real leverage—a credible pathway to Trump and the congressional GOP carrying out the threat to defund public media—the success of this attempted intimidation also seems doubtful.

Commercial press: under pressure where funding depends on ultra-wealthy owners with other commercial interests outside the news sector

On 25 October last year, eleven days before the presidential election, ***The Washington Post***'s owner Jeff Bezos announced the paper would not be endorsing either candidate. The decision caused a strong backlash among *Post* subscribers—within three days, more than 200,000 (roughly 8% of its 2.5 million subscriber base) had cancelled their subscriptions, over 300,000 by election day.[56] The decision was attributed by the *Post's* former executive editor Marty Baron, who worked under Bezos for nearly a decade, to the latter's need not to antagonise Trump given his wider commercial interests: "I don't think there's any great explanation for this decision … [other] than that [Post owner Jeff Bezos] was yielding to pressure from Donald Trump on his other interests, which are substantially larger than *The Post*, particularly Amazon, which has many contracts with the federal government, particularly in terms of cloud computing, and Blue Origin, a commercial space enterprise that is essentially wholly dependent upon the federal government for its contracts."[57]

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[54] Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, "DOGE Subcommittee Chairwoman Greene Invites NPR and PBS Leaders to Address Biased News Coverage at Public Hearing", 3 February 2025.

[55] Stephen Battaglio, "PBS and NPR on edge over FCC letter and Trump budget scrutiny", *The Los Angeles Times* 21 February 2025. "[Paula] Kerger [president and CEO of PBS] noted that most of the government funding goes directly to PBS member TV stations that are locally owned and managed. The $595 million requested for the next appropriation…is more vital for outlets in rural areas which were more likely to have voted for Trump. "The budgets of those stations are smaller, and proportionately, the amount of government funding that goes to them is usually quite significant," Kerger said. "Sometimes as much as 40 to 50% comes out of the federal appropriation. And so we argue for this money specifically because those stations clearly would not exist."

[56] David Folkenflik, "Over 200,000 subscribers flee 'Washington Post' after Bezos blocks Harris endorsement", NPR 29 October 2024; David Folkenflik, "A Pulitzer winner quits 'Washington Post' after a cartoon on Bezos is killed", NPR 4 January 2025.

[57] Terry Gross, "Veteran news editor expects Trump 'to go after the press in every conceivable way'", NPR 20 November 2024.

In early February, an op-ed by longstanding *Post* columnist Eugene Robinson was highly critical of members of the congressional GOP for not standing up more to Trump, particularly over some of his cabinet nominees. Trump attacked Robinson by name on his Truth Social account, calling him "incompetent" and demanding the *Post* fire him.[58] In late February, Bezos announced the *Post*'s opinion section would be shifting rightwards, "writing every day in support and defense of two pillars: personal liberties and free markets" with other viewpoints "left to be published by others".[59] The *Post*'s opinion editor resigned over the change, and it triggered another 75,000 cancelled *Post* subscriptions. Once again, Baron attributed the shift to Bezos being "basically fearful" of Trump.[60]

Bezos's moves mirror a similar shift taking place at the ***Los Angeles Times***. Starting in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, the LA *Times*'s owner, the medical entrepreneur Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong, has become more involved in managing the paper's opinion section. He has insisted that an editorial critical of Trump was pulled; vetoed the editorial board's planned endorsement of Kamala Harris—which caused four of its members including the editorials editor to resign in protest, the latter calling the decision "craven and hypocritical"; [61] reportedly asked the editorial board to 'take a break' from writing about Trump; "instituted a policy banning editorials critical of Trump unless they are also published with another piece that offers the opposing view."[62] According to the *New York Times*, "Dr. Soon-Shiong's public comments and actions have concerned many staff members who fear he is trying to be deferential to the incoming Trump administration".[63] In January Semafor reported that he was trying to hire more pro-Trump right-wingers to work at the paper.[64]

Soon-Shiong's health sector interests give him a strong incentive to maintain good relations with the administration: his medical products require FDA approval, and he has many patents up for review by federal regulators. In 2017 he tried unsuccessfully to be appointed to a senior health policy role in the first Trump administration. Recently, Soon-Shiong tweeted his public support for the Trump administration's controversial choice of health secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—a vaccine sceptic who has spread false claims about public health. Recently, the LA *Times* edited an opinion piece about Kennedy so heavily that it went from being heavily critical to positive, causing its writer to publicly disown it.[65]

The cases of the *Post* and the LA *Times* illustrate the risks for news organisations arising from dependence on a level of private subsidy only ultra-wealthy owners with other commercial interests outside the news sector can provide. Where the interests of the news organisation and those other commercial interests come into sharp conflict, the latter must inevitably win out—not least because they are the source of the subsidy. The problem is that the continuing difficulty for news organisations—particularly newspapers—in achieving sustainable business models makes resorting to and relying on these private subsidies necessary for many titles.

Among mainstream news organisations, ***The New York Times*** stands out as the most robust in its Trump coverage. Of all the major US newspaper brands, it arguably stands to gain the most in commercial terms from the opportunities Trump II will afford for classic 'watchdog' journalism. Its owners, the Sulzberger family, are unencumbered either by wider commercial interests or by any media interests exposed to Trump's FCC. Meanwhile, the *Post*'s editorial reorientation rightwards and the evident anxiety of Bezos

[58] Katie Robertson, "Trump and Musk Attack Journalists by Name in Social Media Posts", *The New York Times* 7 February 2025.
[59] See Jeff Bezos' tweet on 26 February 2025: https://x.com/JeffBezos/status/1894757287052362088
[60] David Folkenflik, "Bezos' changes at 'Washington Post' lead to mass subscription cancellations—again", NPR 28 February 2025. In a subsequent piece for *The Atlantic*, Baron described some of the ways Trump tried to retaliate against Bezos for the *Washington Post*'s coverage during his first term: "With Bezos pegged as a political enemy solely because of the Post's coverage, Trump pressed to raise postal rates for package deliveries, vowing, depending on the day, to double, triple, or quadruple rates paid by Amazon. He interfered in a $10 billion cloud-computing contract for the Department of Defense with the goal of ensuring that it didn't go to Amazon, which had been perceived to be the leading bidder." Martin Baron, "Where Jeff Bezos Went Wrong With The Washington Post", *The Atlantic* 3 March 2025.
[61] David Folkenflik, "Did the 'L.A. Times' and other news outlets pull punches to appease Trump?", NPR 25 October 2024.
[62] Dani Anguiano, "LA Times owner asks editorial board to 'take a break' from writing about Trump—report" *The Guardian* 18 December 2024.
[63] Katie Robertson, "Los Angeles Times Owner Wades Deeper Into Opinion Section", *The New York Times* 12 December 2024.
[64] Max Tani, "LA Times owner Soon-Shiong finds his MAGA whisperer", Semafor 27 January 2025.
[65] David Folkenflik, "LA Times owner boosts RFK Jr. online, as writer says paper cut his critique", NPR 3 February 2025.

and Soon-Shiong to ensure their titles do not antagonise Trump leaves the *New York Times* with a virtual monopoly among the major newspapers on robustly critical and investigative coverage of Trump. In 2016-17, the *Times* saw a major 'Trump bump' in subscriptions; another boost seems likely. But the New York Times Company's relative lack of commercial or regulatory pressure points, combined with its journalistic orientation, makes it likely it will bear the brunt of the Trump/GOP legal assault.

Commercial TV providers are more exposed, with pressure from the FCC likely, even if revoking broadcast licenses is unlikely

The mainstream TV news providers—**ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC and CNN** (Fox News is addressed separately below)—are all more exposed to Trump's hostility. First, as FCC licensees they are potentially threatened by loss of those licenses. We rate the risk of any of them actually having their license withdrawn as low: anything the Trump administration could plausibly do would more blatantly amount to censorship. The political backlash would be too big. The FCC would be drawn into a big legal fight against a corporate owner with the resources to fight hard and the means of mounting a major public campaign. As discussed above, it seems more likely the FCC would first pick a fight over licence withdrawal against a small local TV or radio station, in the hope that this example is enough to intimidate the mainstream TV news providers. But even just an FCC investigation into whether to withdraw a licence from one of them may be enough to generate a stock price fall necessary to trigger a senior executive decision to, in effect, self-censor.

More broadly, the major TV news providers have parent companies whose dealings with the FCC are frequent and wide-ranging. At a minimum, **the need for FCC approval for merger activity is one pressure point**—and currently a very real one for Paramount and CBS News, as discussed above. If Comcast proceeds with its plan to spin out MSNBC along with its other cable channels, the new company will be potentially vulnerable to the same score as it seeks to merge with other spun-out cable providers. Meanwhile, Comcast itself has wide-ranging corporate interests in a friendly relationship with the FCC as the single largest telecoms provider in the US, owner of NBC, and a potential participant in merger activity. It is probably not a coincidence that Brendan Carr chose Comcast as his target for the FCC's first investigation into a licensee's diversity, equity and inclusion policies. Nor does it seem coincidental that, at a time when MSNBC was reorganising its lineup, Trump targeted Comcast for criticism, calling it a "corrupt operation" and "nothing more than an illegal arm of the Democratic Party."[66]

Trump-friendly media include Fox News, and an expanding network of hyper-partisan new media that bypasses the mainstream

Trump's ability to attack the mainstream news media, and to use—for example—threats to withhold White House access, is a product not only of his hostility to robust media coverage, but of the very friendly, and in some cases virtually uncritical, coverage he enjoys from many right-wing news outlets.

The most important right-wing media organisation remains **Fox News**: in 2024 it was the most common outlet named as Americans' major source of political news in a Pew survey (by 13% of respondents).[67] Initially critical during his rise in 2015, the channel soon swung behind Trump and became his primary source of media support during his first administration, for which it was rewarded with extensive access. Trump II has seen a renewal and deepening of the relationship. As of mid-January 2025, the number of former Fox News employees with roles in the Trump administration stood at 19. Trump's defence and transportation secretaries, his border 'czar', his nominee for surgeon general, and his director of national intelligence—all are former Fox News hosts.[68] Meanwhile, Lara Trump, Trump's daughter-in-law (married

[66] Erik Hayden, "Trump Targets Comcast CEO Brian Roberts As MSNBC Plans New Lineup", *The Hollywood Reporter* 24 February 2025.
[67] Christopher St. Aubin, "Americans' top sources of political news ahead of the 2024 election", Pew Research Center 31 October 2024.
[68] Michael M. Grynbaum, "Fox News Prepares to Cover a Government Filled With Fox News Alumni", *The New York Times* 19 January 2025.

to Eric) and former GOP co-chair, has begun hosting a new Fox News weekend show, "My View With Lara Trump", on Saturdays at 9pm.[69]

Alongside Fox News, there is an expanding network of **right-wing hyper-partisan media**. TV channels like One America News and Newsmax, and station owners like Sinclair Broadcast Group. Websites like Breitbart, the Drudge Report, Daily Wire, Daily Caller, Zero Hedge and the Gateway Pundit. Increasingly, these are supplemented by a growing number of right-leaning and right-wing podcasts and social media influencers: the likes not only of Joe Rogan, Ben Shapiro and Matt Walsh but also many ex-Fox News presenters—Tucker Carlson, Bill O'Reilly, and Megyn Kelly. In January, Fox acquired Red Seat Ventures, a company that provides marketing, distribution, back end and other services for right-wing online content creators, in an attempt to move into the right-wing 'creator economy'.[70]

As this alternative or 'non-traditional' media grows, it increases the ability of Trump and the GOP to bypass the traditional, mainstream news organisations while still reaching mass audiences. Trump has given over 100 podcast interviews, nearly all of them in the last two and a half years; the medium formed a key component of his media strategy during the 2024 campaign.[71] Inviting new right-wing media to White House press conferences gives the administration easier questions to answer.[72] It also empowers Trump and the GOP to attack the mainstream media more aggressively. One consequence of this strategy is that, according to Pew Research, Republicans are "now nearly as likely to trust the information that comes from social media sites as they are to trust information from national news organizations". This reflects both the collapse of their trust in national news organisations (in 2016, 70% said they had 'a lot' or 'some' trust in information coming from them, but only 40% did so in 2024) and a recovery of their trust in social media (up from a nadir of 19% in 2021 to 37% in 2024), probably primarily reflecting the growing strength of right-wing online media there.[73] It is therefore unsurprising that the Trump administration has sought to promote the status of this new right-wing media, granting them interviews with Trump and making more space for them at the administration's media briefings.[74]

Trump's relationship with big tech is transformed since his first presidency

Even the most casual observer can see that the relationship big tech has with Trump II is radically different to and much closer than its relationship with Trump I. The most visible symbol of this was the presence of so many big tech CEOs at Trump's second inauguration. What explains how completely the relationship has changed in the past eight years?

[69] Michael M. Grynbaum, "Fox News Adds a New Host: Lara Trump", *The New York Times* 5 February 2025.
[70] Michael M. Grynbaum, "Fox Acquires Company Behind Conservative and True Crime Podcasts", *The New York Times* 10 February 2025.
[71] Jake Lahut, "The logic behind Donald Trump's podcast strategy", *Columbia Journalism Review* 29 October 2024.
[72] Jake Lahut, "The New Kids in the Room", *Columbia Journalism Review* 19 February 2025.
[73] Kirsten Eddy, "Republicans, young adults now nearly as likely to trust info from social media as from national news outlets", Pew Research Center 16 October 2024.
[74] Christopher Grimes, Daniel Thomas and Anna Nicolaou, "Donald Trump vs the media: US president wages war on the fourth estate", *Financial Times* 7 January 2025.

In the first instance, the tech industry is just responding to some of the differences between Trump I and II outlined in the first section of this note: in particular, Trump's greater control over federal agencies and departments through the loyalists he has appointed to lead them; his greater capacity to reward friends and punish enemies. But there are also a number of interests specific to tech companies:

Regulation of big tech—including anti-trust policy—is now common currency, raising the stakes for these firms to maintain friendly relations with the government of the day

- Since 2016, tech companies have become much more heavily regulated in the US, with investigations and lawsuits opened by the DoJ and FTC. It was, in fact, the panic over disinformation stemming from Trump's 2016 election victory that first awakened policymakers to the idea that big tech needed regulation. Eight years later, regulation of big tech—including anti-trust policy—is now common currency, raising the stakes for these firms to maintain friendly relations with the government of the day
- Some of the key products and services being developed by big tech companies—most notably artificial intelligence, cryptocurrencies and self-driving cars—potentially raise complicated legal and social issues, meaning those companies have major stakes in having a voice able to shape the regulatory architectures around them
- Big tech companies need to be able to convince the US government to apply pressure on their behalf to other national governments to block, weaken or alter their regulation and regulatory enforcement. The EU's regulatory regime has seen Meta alone fined around €3.8 billion so far for antitrust and GDPR violations.[75] Mark Zuckerberg has urged Trump to stop the EU from fining American tech companies, claiming it has already imposed fines worth more than $30 billion.[76] Meta's global policy director, Joel Kaplan, told the Munich Security Conference in February that the company wouldn't "shy away" from taking its case to Trump if it felt unfairly targeted by EU regulation and enforcement[77]
- China's rise to become a major competitor to the US in a number of key areas of tech innovation, including AI, is a common concern for both US tech companies and the Trump administration. It was Trump who in 2020 first called for a ban on TikTok in the US—a move whose primary beneficiaries would, of course, have been American social media platforms like YouTube, Meta and Snap. Trump's reversal on this issue makes the outcome a lot murkier, as a number of different deals have been evoked, some of which scenarios would still keep TikTok as a live competitor to US tech companies. Trump's relationship with US tech was fraught in his first administration but these companies have largely gone out of their way to repair relations with him since his re-election[78]
- At the same time, tech companies with extensive international supply chains have a major stake in avoiding a trade war that raises the costs of components—most obviously Apple, whose enormous Chinese supply chain leaves it highly exposed to the impact of US-China tariffs. After a meeting between Tim Cook and Trump in February, the company announced $500 billion of new investment in the US, presumably with a view to securing an exemption from future US tariffs on Chinese goods, as Apple obtained in Trump's first term [79]
- The federal government is a major customer for many tech firms. Jeff Bezos's interests, for example, range from the billions of dollars the federal government spends with Amazon Web Services—a division that generates more than half of Amazon's total profits—to Blue Origin, which is under a

[75] Reuters, "EU privacy regulator fines Meta 251 million euros for 2018 breach" 17 December 2024; Kelvin Chan, "EU slaps Meta with a nearly 800 million euro fine for engaging in 'abusive' Marketplace practices", Associated Press 14 November 2024.
[76] Aitor Hernández-Morales, "Zuckerberg urges Trump to stop the EU from fining US tech companies", Politico 11 January 2025.
[77] Gian Volpicelli, "Meta Is Ready to Bring Trump Into Play in Fight Against EU Rules", Bloomberg 16 February 2025.
[78] Cade Metz and Cecilia Kang, "OpenAI Courts Trump With Vision for 'A.I. in America'", *The New York Times* 13 January 2025.
[79] Chris Isidor and Clare Duffy, "Apple, facing tariffs on Chinese imports, says it will invest $500 billion in US facilities", CNN 24 February 2025.

> $3.4 billion NASA contract for a moon mission due to launch in 2029 and is now eligible to compete for the next round of national security contracts. In many of these areas, Amazon faces competition for government business from the firms of other Trump-connected tech billionaires like Larry Ellison, whose company Oracle compete with Amazon for major technology contracts, and Elon Musk, whose SpaceX is a rival to Blue Origin[80]

Trump and the GOP have interests of their own in a rapprochement with the tech sector. Tech investment is useful to the Trump administration's ability to tell a compelling story about both future economic growth and maintenance of the US's technological edge over China. Hitherto a major source of support for the Democratic Party, if Trump and the GOP can cement an enduring alliance with the sector over common policy goals it may help the GOP overturn what has in recent elections become a significant Democratic advantage in campaign fundraising.

But the most important benefits come from the potential reorientation of the news organisations and social media platforms owned by the tech giants to suit Trump and GOP political interests. From this point of view, Bezos having become convinced of a need to reorient *The Washington Post* rightwards constitutes one early victory. Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter was another—leading to a purge that saw the entire election integrity team and a third of its Trust and Safety staff fired, and content moderation decisively weakened.[81]

When the first Trump victory in 2016 was heavily blamed in media and political discourse on the prevalence of disinformation and 'fake news' online, particularly on social media, the tech companies took some steps to address the issue by improving content moderation and collaborating with some fact-checking organisations to try and at least label, if not marginalise, disinformation. Over the next few years, many Republicans came to see these efforts as primarily targeted at Trump, the GOP and right-wing media—epitomised in Facebook suspending and Twitter permanently banning Trump for his role in inciting the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol.

The root of this issue lies in the fact that the available academic evidence shows that disinformation and fake news are bigger problems in the US on the political right than in the centre or on the left. In the US, the right-wing 'hyper-partisan' media ecology produces more disinformation and allows it to circulate relatively unimpeded by fact-checking, and right-wing audiences consume more of it. This ought not to be particularly surprising given Trump's capture, first, of the Republican presidential nomination and then his MAGAfication of the congressional GOP. The false claim that the 2020 presidential election was 'stolen' is now GOP orthodoxy. During Trump I, the president made a total of 30,573 false or misleading claims in public over four years, according to *The Washington Post*.[82] It is therefore inevitable that fact-checking and other content moderation efforts aimed at tackling disinformation have affected Trump, right-wing media and right-wing social media users more than others. Yet right-wing politicians and groups have, in effect, responded by denying they have a disinformation problem and claiming they are being unfairly targeted by a conspiracy to 'censor' their political speech.

During the Biden administration, a counteroffensive began to be mounted by Republican members of Congress and right-wing legal groups accusing tech companies and fact-checking, media monitoring and election integrity non-profits, research centres and academics of mounting a disguised conspiracy to censor and suppress right-wing political speech online. A key figure in this right-wing counter-offensive against fact-checking is the Republican chair of the House Judiciary Committee, Jim Jordan, who in a July 2020 hearing of the Judiciary subcommittee on anti-trust declared, "I'll just cut to the chase: big tech is out to get conservatives. That's not a suspicion, that's not a hunch, that's a fact."[83] Since becoming chair of the Committee in 2023, Jordan has used it to spearhead the campaign, which has used congressional

[80] Isaac Stanley-Becker, Aaron C. Davis, Josh Dawsey and Christian Davenport, "For Jeff Bezos and his businesses, Washington has become more important", *The Washington Post* 30 October 2024.
[81] Sarah Grevy Gotfredsen, "Will Elon Musk Break with Community Notes?", *Columbia Journalism Review* 27 February 2025.
[82] Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly, "Trump's false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years", *The Washington Post* 21 January 2021.
[83] David Sherfinski and Ryan Lovelace, "Jim Jordan: 'Big tech' is out to get conservatives", *The Washington Times* 29 July 2020.

committee investigations, subpoenas, records requests and litigation to impose legal costs on its targets, apply pressure on them to stop working together and make it more difficult to do research and raise money.[84]

By 2024, the right-wing counter-offensive had achieved two results. First, it had created a chilling effect on research on disinformation and misinformation, with academics, universities and government agencies "overhauling or ending research programs" in response.[85] Second, and more importantly, it led to tech platforms rolling back efforts to combat disinformation in the run-up to the 2024 election—one consequence of which was that unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud proliferated in the run-up to the vote. Indeed, they were actively solicited on X by its new owner Elon Musk.[86] Since Trump's victory, the campaign has pressed on. As discussed above, Trump's FCC chair has sought to apply more pressure on the tech platforms to abandon fact-checking and other forms of content moderation seen as disadvantaging right-wing speech online. Facebook's decision to drop even its limited fact-checking efforts as part of its rapprochement with Trump is another victory. In early March, Jim Jordan issues a subpoena to Alphabet, in effect seeking to pressure it to follow Facebook in weakening content moderation.[87]

Trump and the GOP's opposition to even the tech companies' limited efforts to impose some basic standards of accuracy and truth on the content circulating via their platforms is now putting the administration on a collision course with EU policymakers, who still remain committed to pressuring the platforms to tackle disinformation online. In his February speech to the Munich Security Conference, Vice President JD Vance signalled the administration's opposition to EU policy. He declared that "free speech" was "in retreat" with "the loudest voices for censorship" coming from the US, where "the prior administration threatened and bullied social media companies to censor so-called misinformation", but now extending to Europe where "old entrenched interests" were "hiding behind ugly Soviet era words like misinformation and disinformation" to express their dislike of "somebody with an alternative viewpoint".[88]

The Trump-Musk relationship epitomises the rapprochement between Trump, the GOP and the US tech sector

Previously a political moderate and donor to the Democratic Party who supported the Democratic presidential candidate at elections from 2008-2020, in 2024 Elon Musk became Trump's biggest campaign supporter (spending at least $277 million) and number one cheerleader, and remade Twitter to right-wing requirements. In return, a strong relationship with Trump and the GOP protects and advances Musk's interests on a number of fronts. In anticipation of this, immediately after Trump's victory, Tesla's stock price shot up. By mid-December, it stood around 70% higher than before the election, making Musk himself substantially richer[89]—although since then it has fallen back down to roughly where it stood in early November before the election, amid a broader rout of tech stocks and increasing fear Trump's tariffs will damage Tesla's business.[90]

We would point out the following of Musk's interests:

- Musk's businesses are heavily reliant on the US government, and according to a *Washington Post* analysis have received "at least $38 billion in government contracts, loans, subsidies and tax credits,

[84] Steven Lee Myers and Sheera Frenkel, "G.O.P. Targets Researchers Who Study Disinformation Ahead of 2024 Election", *The New York Times* 19 June 2023.
[85] Naomi Nix, Cat Zakrzewski and Joseph Menn, "Misinformation research is buckling under GOP legal attacks", *The Washington Post* 25 September 2023.
[86] Naomi Nix and Cat Zakrzewski, "Efforts to combat disinformation in retreat as voters head to the polls", *The Washington Post* 2 November 2024.
[87] Tina Nguyen, "Jim Jordan subpoena pushes YouTube to restore 'free speech' like Meta", The Verge 7 March 2025.
[88] The Spectator, "Read: JD Vance's full speech on the fall of Europe", 14 February 2025.
[89] Faiz Siddiqui and Trisha Thadani, "Elon Musk put $277 million into the election. He's $200 billion richer this year.", *The Washington Post* 15 December 2024.
[90] Aime Williams and Stephen Morris, "Tesla warns Trump administration it is 'exposed' to retaliatory tariffs", *Financial Times* 13 March 2025.

often at critical moments," with nearly two-thirds of that total promised to Musk's businesses within the last five years and 2024 seeing the highest total to date—at least $6.3 billion. Musk's companies stand to make another $11.8 billion over the next few years from 52 ongoing contracts with seven different government agencies.[91] The majority of the funds have come from government contracts to SpaceX from NASA and the Department of Defense

- Tesla stands to benefit in several respects from the Trump administration. First, Musk has argued that the Trump administration's planned cancellation of the $7,500 federal tax credit for electric vehicle buyers stands to weaken Tesla's competitors more than Tesla, helping the company—which already has half the market share—defend its dominant position against market entry by other car manufacturers. Second, Tesla's investment in the development of autonomous driving systems is heavily dependent on its ability to deal successfully with regulatory authorities. Currently, vehicle regulation is managed at state level but Musk has said he wants a federal approval process for self-driving vehicles, which would among other things likely speed up their approval as well as possibly enabling Tesla to face reduced reporting requirements and scrutiny for crashes involving its autonomous vehicles.[92] Third, Trump's imposition of tariffs on Chinese imports may help Tesla, by imposing a barrier that keeps out Chinese electric vehicles—potentially a major source of competition for Tesla. Tesla depends to some extent on imported components for its US-made cars, and the Shanghai gigafactory makes about half of Teslas worldwide, including many destined for sale outside of China, so the key for Tesla is to obtain an exemption or carve-out from the tariffs, though that remains a theory—yet to be borne out[93]
- Musk's companies stand to benefit from a weakening of federal regulatory enforcement as a result of the Trump administration's purge of the bureaucracy. Many of the federal officials fired in Trump's first months in office have been "leading investigations, enforcement matters or lawsuits pending against [Musk's] companies." Others were Biden appointees who, having resigned when Trump took office, have been replaced with Trump appointees likely to be much more favourable to Musk's companies. Altogether, by mid-February the *New York Times* counted at least 11 federal agencies affected, overseeing at least 32 continuing investigations, pending complaints or enforcement actions against Musk's six companies[94]
- Trump's choice for FCC chair, Brendan Carr, is a vocal supporter of Musk who heavily criticised the FCC's denial, under the Biden administration, of $885 million in subsidies from its rural broadband fund to Musk's Starlink satellite internet business. In October he told Politico that in his view up to a third of the Biden administration's $42 billion broadband expansion program could go to satellite providers if it were revamped—with Starlink one of the major beneficiaries.[95] In early March, the Commerce Department announced precisely such a revamp of the program[96]
- Musk may need to try and use the US government as a shield against EU regulatory enforcement. Since December 2023, the EU has been investigating X's content moderation policies, recently requesting information and ordering X to retain relevant documents[97]
- The US government's ban on TikTok in the US, which Trump was the first to champion, stands to benefit X by eliminating one of its competitors

[91] Desmond Butler, Trisha Thadani, Emmanuel Martinez, Aaron Gregg, Luis Melgar, Jonathan O'Connell and Dan Keating, "Elon Musk's business empire is built on $38 billion in government funding", *The Washington Post* 26 February 2025.
[92] Jarrett Renshaw, Rachael Levy and Chris Kirkham, "Exclusive: Trump team wants to scrap car-crash reporting rule that Tesla opposes", Reuters 18 December 2024.
[93] John Cassidy, "Why Is Elon Musk Really Embracing Donald Trump?", *The New Yorker* 18 November 2024.
[94] Eric Lipton and Kirsten Grind, "Elon Musk's Business Empire Scores Benefits Under Trump Shake-Up", *The New York Times* 11 February 2025.
[95] John Hendel, "The DC bureaucrat who could deliver billions to Elon Musk", *Politico* 18 October 2024.
[96] Cecilia Kang, "Federal Grant Program Opens Door to Elon Musk's Starlink", *The New York Times* 5 March 2025.
[97] Supantha Mukherjee, "EU targets Musk's X in first illegal content probe", Reuters 18 December 2023; Marine Strauss and Philip Blenkinsop, "EU steps up probe into Musk's X, days ahead of Trump inauguration", Reuters 17 January 2025.

Trump's administration is in the process of destroying US agencies that support media outside the US

The ramifications of Trump administration policy spread far beyond the shores of the US, whose domestic policy is obviously internationally influential in itself—it sets a standard. The retreat from a commitment to a free media at home cannot but be exploited by authoritarian regimes abroad. In addition to the international impact of the deterioration of US domestic media freedom, though, Trump II is likely to have a highly damaging impact internationally through its attacks on the two agencies funded by the federal government to support media outside the US:

- the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which funds Voice of America and other US state media organisations whose output is directed at advancing US soft power in foreign countries
- the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which financially supports a range of organisations internationally, including foreign media and civil society organisations

In addition, cuts to US federal government funding in other areas, such as scientific research, may lead some American philanthropic foundations to reassign some journalism funding to these other areas.[98]

Trump has shut down the US Agency for Global Media, which funds federal and independent media networks

USAGM is a US government agency with a budget of just under $1 billion, responsible for two federal broadcasting networks—Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting—and for providing the funding for a number of independent, non-federal networks and grantees: the Middle East Broadcasting Network, Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the Open Technology Fund.

Trump I attempted to take over USAGM—albeit it took some time to do so. Trump eventually chose Michael Pack, a right-wing filmmaker and close associate of Steve Bannon, to head the agency in June 2018, a year and a half into his presidency. Resistance in the Senate, including from important Republicans, delayed Pack's confirmation for two years, until Trump's personal intervention saw him finally confirmed in June 2020. Once installed, Pack immediately set about firing senior executives at USAGM and news chiefs at its networks.[99] He then sought to seize control over and interfere in editorial decisions, and eliminated the firewall protecting the networks from improper political influence over their coverage—a level of interference one former employee called "unprecedented" in the agency's history.[100] The aim was, of course, to investigate and remove agency journalists whose coverage Pack believed were 'biased' against Trump.

When Biden took office in 2021, Pack resigned as CEO at Biden's request. The political appointees Pack made in one of his last acts as CEO were quickly fired and the editorial firewall was reinstated.[101] Congress then created a new check to limit the power of the USAGM CEO: a seven-person, bipartisan International Broadcasting Advisory Board (IBAB) whose approval is required to appoint or remove the head of any of USAGM's networks.[102] A subsequent independent inquiry into Pack's tenure launched by the Office of Special Counsel during the Biden administration found that Pack had "repeatedly abused the

[98] Gretel Kahn, Marina Adami and Eduardo Suárez, "Shattered by a perfect storm: How Trump's cuts are crippling journalism beyond the United States" Reuters Institute 7 March 2025.
[99] David Folkenflik, "Trump's New Foreign Broadcasting CEO Fires News Chiefs, Raising Fears Of Meddling", NPR 18 June 2020.
[100] David Folkenflik, "At Voice of America, Trump Appointee Sought Political Influence Over Coverage", NPR 2 September 2020; David Folkenflik, "U.S. Agency Targets Its Own Journalists' Independence", NPR 27 October 2020.
[101] Matthew Lee, "Biden cleans house at VOA after revolt over Trump changes", Associated Press 21 January 2021.
[102] Six IBAB members serve four-year terms and are appointed by the president (subject to Senate confirmation) with a maximum of three affiliated to the same political party. The seventh member is the Secretary of State who serves ex officio.

powers of his office, broke laws and regulations, and engaged in gross mismanagement."[103] It was, in the words of an NPR reporter, "an ideologically driven rampage through a government agency to try to force its newsrooms and workforce to show fealty to the White House."[104]

Soon after Trump's election, it was predicted he would again seek to take over USAGM and repurpose its output.[105] In December, Trump said he wanted Kari Lake—a right-wing Republican politician, Trump loyalist and former TV anchor—to be the next head of Voice of America.[106] Lake said she saw Voice of America's job as "chronicling America's achievements worldwide".[107] In late January, Trump announced he would nominate as USAGM's next CEO Brent Bozell, the head of the Media Research Center, a right-wing pressure group whose output focuses on alleging cases of liberal and/or anti-Trump media bias; Bozell was formally nominated on 10 March.[108] The original plan, evidently, was for another 'ideologically driven rampage' through USAGM to turn it into a pro-Trump propaganda outlet.

There was an impediment to this plan, however: the members of the IBAB—the bipartisan board empowered by Congress to majority-approve the appointment or firing of the networks' heads.[109] Reportedly, during the first weeks of the Trump administration the five current IBAB members were told by email from the White House Office of Personnel that they had all been fired by the president.[110] However, this doesn't appear to be within the president's power: as previously stated, board members are appointed for four-year terms and cannot be fired by the president.

On 14 March, Trump issued an executive order directing USAGM to be "eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law"; Voice of America journalists were placed on indefinite leave and its offices closed.[111] Although it is not yet clear exactly why the White House decided to seek to eliminate USAGM instead of taking it over as originally intended, the most plausible explanation is that the administration realised—whether because of the IBAB issue or for some other reason—it was not going to be able to install its people and take over USAGM's networks as originally planned; failing that, the next best option was to shut USAGM down—an option reportedly advocated by Musk and his DOGE unit.

Foreign aid via USAID has been cut, including support to non-state media abroad

One of the first moves of Trump II was to gut USAID. A stop-work order was issued and all USAID programs were halted pending a 90-day review; almost 13,000 staff were put on administrative leave; Elon Musk boasted on X that he had spent the weekend "feeding USAID into the wood chipper". The plan appears to be to fire the agency's entire staff while absorbing USAID's functions and spending into the State Department, where much closer political control will be exercised over foreign aid. The Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, has also declared that all foreign aid disbursed by any federal agency or department must from now on be approved by him.

The targeting of USAID owes to several factors: the administration has taken an axe to federal government spending more generally, and says USAID's programmes do not align with its foreign policy

[103] David Folkenflik, "Federal inquiry details abuses of power by Trump's CEO over Voice of America", NPR 21 May 2023.
[104] The report further noted, "Pack punished executives who objected to the legality of his plans, interfered in the journalistic independence of the newsrooms under his agency, and personally signed a no-bid contract with a private law firm to investigate those employees he saw as opposed to former President Donald Trump. The law firm's fees reached the seven figures for work typically done by attorneys who are federal employees."
[105] Terry Gross, "Veteran news editor expects Trump 'to go after the press in every conceivable way'", NPR 20 November 2024.
[106] Will Weissert and Jonathan L. Cooper, "Trump taps immigration hard-liner Kari Lake as head of Voice of America", Associated Press 12 December 2024.
[107] Brandon Drenon, "Trump ally Kari Lake tapped to lead Voice of America", 12 December 2024.
[108] Minho Kim and Chris Cameron, "Trump Picks Conservative Activist to Lead U.S. Media Agency", *The New York Times* 22 January 2025; PN26-6—Leo Brent Bozell III—United States Agency for Global Media 10 March 2025.
[109] In addition, if five board members vote to do so, they can remove any network head without the CEO's approval.
[110] Ben Johansen, Sophia Cai and Irie Sentner, "Voice of Trump", *Politico* 4 February 2025.
[111] Sarah Ellison, Yvonne Wingett Sanchez and Aaron Schaffer, "Trump tapped Kari Lake to run VOA. Then he dismantled it.", *The Washington Post* 16 March 2025.

objectives. The agency was seen in hyper-partisan terms: as a den of 'leftists' funding useless DEI programmes, and so on. A recent MAGA conspiracy theory alleged that USAID funded pro-Democrat, anti-Trump media organisations, and formed part of the 'deep state' that needed to be dismantled. Pro-Trump media have alleged USAID-funded media—among others—were behind Trump's 2019 impeachment. Trump tweeted on 6 February that USAID was channelling "payoffs" to "fake news media" to create '"good stories about the Democrats"[112]—a false claim that was instantly refuted.[113]

In reality, one strand of USAID's work is to help fund independent news outlets in foreign countries, particularly where regimes are hostile to independent media. In 2025 the foreign aid budget included $268 million to support "independent media and the free flow of information". In 2023 the agency "funded training and support for 6,200 journalists, assisted 707 non-state news outlets, and supported 279 media-sector civil society organizations dedicated to strengthening independent media."[114]

Reports have emerged about the damaging impact of the freeze on journalism. The head of Reporters Without Borders' Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk has warned the impact will be "catastrophic" for many independent news organisations in former Soviet countries; most in Ukraine rely on US grants.[115] The International Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project is financially supported by USAID—its largest single source of funding—as well as the State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy.[116] The freeze reportedly threatens it with the loss of a quarter of its budget.[117] Around 200 exiled journalists from Myanmar are threatened with a loss of support for their work reporting on the situation in their country.[118] Shafi Karimi, founder of the Afghan Journalists in Exile Network, told *The Guardian*, "many of my journalist friends inside the country have lost their jobs, and several media outlets are at risk of closing…These organisations relied on funding from various US institutions, and without this support, their ability to continue operating remains uncertain."[119] Meanwhile, the freeze has been welcomed by senior figures in the Russian and Hungarian governments.[120]

[112] See Donald Trump's tweet on 6 February 2025: https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1887543203953275347

[113] Lydia Morrish, "News outlets reject Trump accusations of USAID media 'payoff'", Reuters 7 February 2025.

[114] According to a USAID fact sheet that has since been taken offline but was copied by Reporters Without Borders. See, "USA: Trump's foreign aid freeze throws journalism around the world into chaos", 3 February 2025.

[115] Courtney Weaver and Marton Dunal, "Strongmen celebrate as Trump aid freeze hits media", *Financial Times* 6 February 2025.

[116] OCCRP, "Who Supports Our Work"; Ryan Grim, Ștefan Cândea, and Nikolas Leontopoulos, "A Giant of Journalism Gets Half its Budget From the U.S. Government", *Drop Site News* 2 December 2024.

[117] Christopher Grimes, Daniel Thomas and Anna Nicolaou, "Donald Trump vs the media: US president wages war on the fourth estate", *Financial Times* 7 January 2025.

[118] Kate Lamb and Rebecca Ratcliffe, "'We have nothing now': Myanmar's exiled media face existential crisis after Trump severs aid", *The Guardian* 23 February 2025.

[119] Harriet Barber, Rebecca Ratcliffe and Deepa Parent, "Trump's aid cuts will lead to a surge in propaganda and misinformation, say press freedom groups", *The Guardian* 11 February 2025.

[120] Courtney Weaver and Marton Dunal, "Strongmen celebrate as Trump aid freeze hits media", *Financial Times* 6 February 2025: "The deputy chair of the Russian security council, Dmitry Medvedev, who served as prime minister and president of Russia in rotation with Putin, praised Musk's "smart move . . . to plug USAID's deep throat". Balázs Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister's political director, described the freeze as "refreshing"."

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