



## Cancel the Trump Show

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January 8, 2019

As part of my job, I occasionally appear on television and radio to talk about politics. Inherent in that invitation is the same presumption that I will not consciously lie to the audience. These shows and networks hold tell their audience that they will report and analyze the news responsibly and accurately. They often break that trust, giving climate deniers and the like free rein in the pundit octagon, all out of some misguided desire for ideological balance.

They are about to do so again tonight.

It is lunacy that ABC, CBS, NBC and several cable channels agreed to give President Trump free airtime this evening to speak to the American people about, as he termed it in a tweet, “the Humanitarian and National Security crisis on our Southern Border.” That is just more code for the wall for which he has been holding his own government hostage for 18 days now. Once a mere mnemonic device inserted into his speeches to remind him to scapegoat immigrants, Trump has erred and made this a real goal. Bereft of any leverage in this fight, he is retreating to his safest place: television. This makes sense, given that he has treated this presidency as he would a piece of primetime reality programming, with the requisite plot twists and stunt casting.

We don’t know precisely what he’ll say, because the White House won’t tell us. But Trump will lie to us, that much can be presumed. It’s a sucker’s bet that his address will be, as Democratic leaders Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer said in a joint statement, “full of malice and misinformation.” (They plan to deliver a joint rebuttal speech after Trump is finished.) Throughout the decades of his public life, Trump has had an adversarial relationship with facts that are inconvenient to his interests. Trump’s entire case for the wall, to the extent that he has bothered to even make an argument, is based on deliberate misinformation. And his lies about immigration are only increasing in frequency as his presidency progresses.

The decision to air his address live represents a failure of creativity on the part of news executives. What should have been done, they might ask? Former Obama senior adviser Dan Pfeiffer, now of Crooked Media, tells *Rolling Stone* that networks should air it on tape delay with fact-checking on the screen. Karine Jean-Pierre, MoveOn’s chief public affairs officer, agrees. “The only responsible decision would be to show video of the address after it has happened, not live, with proper fact checks and context,” she says. “Or to reject the request outright, which is what all the networks did when President Obama requested primetime airtime to discuss immigration in 2014.”

The shutdown makes this a far more urgent moment than that Obama speech, yet Trump has all but ignored the 800,000 workers affected by his \$5.6 billion border-wall ransom demand. They

might miss their first paycheck this week, but labeling a federal workforce “Democrats” allowed him to erase them — all but those unnamed ones he claims support his obstinance. Now, by allowing him to commandeer their networks for what amounts to a negotiating tactic, ABC, CBS and NBC will allow Trump tonight to give his racial paranoia the weight of a mass casualty event.

Trump’s alarmism becomes even more stark as one recognizes that undocumented immigration is not the crisis he says that it is. NBC News, which will air the speech live, reported on Monday that in fiscal year 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection stopped only six immigrants at the southern border whose names were on a federal list of known or suspected terrorists. White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders lied last Friday when she said that CBP had stopped nearly 4,000 such people. Overall border patrol apprehensions have fallen from about 1.6 million in 2000 to just more than 303,000 in 2017. Yet the Trump administration continues to dramatically inflate statistics to make Mexican and Central American immigrants look like the rapists and criminals that the president pretends. The Department of Justice, too, admitted that these numbers were made up, but refused to correct them. Perhaps that’s because we keep putting them on television and presenting them as credible people because they have certain titles.

“At this point there is no legitimate reason for the networks to be conflicted; carrying the speech means broadcasting the same lies and bigotry we’ve already heard a dozen times,” says Simon Maloy, a senior writer at the progressive nonprofit Media Matters for America. “No network has an obligation to be a party to this nativist garbage.”

By participating in this speech tonight, these news organizations make themselves complicit. The decision neuters their own journalistic integrity to give airtime to a serial fabricator. I don’t suggest that the press treat this president differently or adversely because he clearly doesn’t like us. He fears accountability, not retribution. As much as Trump’s “fake news” and “enemy of the people” invective is meant to injure our profession and possibly the people in it, carrying his live address is a self-inflicted wound.

That said, it is somewhat understandable why news organizations would do this. They are merely following the script. “Americans are justly cynical about the trustworthiness of elected officials, but the reality is that broadcast journalism mostly evolved in a context where most presidents, most of the time, kept their mendacity within reasonable parameters,” says Cato Institute senior fellow Julian Sanchez. “They’d spin, they’d cherry-pick numbers, they’d use misleading phrasing, they’d make contestable claims — but they wouldn’t give major speeches where every other sentence contained an unambiguously false claim. When they did get called on a claim that seemed plainly false, they’d usually either drop it or offer some clarification or defense that could at least be further debated. Trump doesn’t do any of that. He just keeps repeating the false claim.”

By now, journalistic outlets broadcasting Trump live and unfiltered have to know that they are performing stenography for a fabulist. But it is a mistake to air tonight’s Trump’s address live even if the worst comes to pass. Some believe that he will declare a state of emergency in an attempt to circumvent Pelosi and the House Democrats and get funding for his wall. Such a move would itself be a lie — there is no immigration emergency at the border, at least one that he hasn’t created with his own policies. Were news networks to cover the announcement while watching the White House livestream off air, they could immediately report about the state of

emergency to their audience and likely bring more relevant information to the public more quickly than just letting Trump drone on.

We don't need to have Trump announce a state of emergency live on television to grasp the seriousness of it. We are not in a technological moment when folks have to gather around the family radio to hear what FDR had to say in his weekly address. The White House can stream the address on its own broadcast outlet on its website (and via Fox News and Sinclair Broadcasting, natch).

"I think people mistake live broadcasts for coverage," says NPR media correspondent David Folkenflik, speaking for himself. "Yes, we should cover what he has to say. Does that require that all major channels across the spectrum carry him live?"

Certainly not, and here is where we should make a distinction between Trump's speech tonight and other times when he appears live on television, such as press conferences and his forthcoming State of the Union address at the end of this month. As Folkenflik noted in our conversation, those are times when the press is either present to check him or there is an embargoed copy of the remarks released so that coverage can be prepared. Tonight, though we can anticipate being lied to, the White House press office hasn't released a word of what he is going to say.

But even Pelosi and Schumer's rebuttal doesn't solve the real problem at hand: news networks playing by the old rules when the president is mocking them aloud. Trump continues his stress test of this republic and its norms, and the people in charge of our institutions — blinded by their privileges, hopelessly naive or simply incompetent — keep failing us. Besides, do we really think that this is the last time that he will do this? Next up: a primetime address on the Mueller witch hunt! Tune in, America. Which channel? Every channel.