

ON TRUMP'S COVID RALLIES: LYING AND BULLYING ARE DIFFERENT THINGS

Ben Smith wrote a column about how the press should deal with Trump's daily COVID ~~pressers~~ rallies that has pissed a lot of journalists off. In it, he suggests *even having the debate* that he's actually engaging in is tiresome.

I don't intend to reopen the tiresome debate over whether news organizations should broadcast Mr. Trump's remarks. The only people really debating this are the outlets for whom it doesn't really matter, unless you're big on symbolism. How many listeners to **Seattle's NPR affiliate** are proud red hat wearers? And who thinks that the outlets for whom it would matter – Fox News, most of all – are even considering it? The whole debate seemed rooted in the idea that if only your favored news outlet didn't live stream the president, he would just go away.

But that's not the biggest problem with Smith's column.

The very firstline of the column suggests – in mocking tone – that the story of Trump's COVID rallies is his bullying.

Did you hear? The president said some things today. Mean things! About someone I know ... I can't quite remember the details, or whether it was today or yesterday, or what day of the week it is, anyway.

In claiming the COVID rallies are about Trump's bullying, Smith focuses on the warm mutual

dysfunction of Maggie Haberman's relationship with the President. He doesn't talk about the way that the President uses the COVID rallies to denigrate beautiful smart women who are in the room with him, questioning him, which in my opinion is a story unto itself if you want to talk whether symbolism is worth airing or not.

And that's one of the reasons why – contrary to Smith's claim – it's not clear the rallies really are, "The most effective form of direct presidential communication since Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats," because they continue to alienate people like the suburban women whose support Trump would need to win reelection. If it were just about Trump's bullying, Smith's argument would still be suspect regarding Trump's efficacy.

But the debate about the COVID rallies is not just about Trump's bullying.

On the contrary, it's about his lies. In his column, Smith suggests that Trump's COVID rallies only "occasionally" derail the public health response.

[T]hey should cover them as what they are, a political campaign, not as a central part of the public health response except to the degree that it occasionally derails that response.

Trump has encouraged people to take untested medicine, he has refused to model the rules on social distancing his own CDC recommends, to say nothing of wearing a mask in public. He has at times interrupted his medical experts and ad-libbed responses to serious questions with no basis in fact, much less science. He has suggested, over and over and over, that tests are not a crucial part of this response when every single expert says they are. He has used the briefings to celebrate corporations – like Tyson Foods – that haven't provided their employees adequate protection. He has accused medical professionals of stealing supplies.

Trump's derailments of the public health response are in no way an "occasional" thing. They happen daily.

Which is why it's all the more irresponsible – in providing decent advice to go show the human cost of this tragedy (which would entail dedicating the time spent showing Trump's briefing to showing those human interest stories) – that Smith dismisses the import of fact-checking, of the kind that CNN's Daniel Dale and Vox's Aaron Rupa do in real time.

But if the cable networks want an alternative to the briefings, they can get out of the studio and back to what first made TV news so powerful – not fact-checking, but emotionally powerful imagery of human suffering.

During Katrina, for instance, "the power of CNN was having an army of cameras and correspondents all over the Gulf, showing the brutal human and economic toll split-screened against the anemic assurances of the Bush administration," Mr. Hamby, a former CNN staff member, recalled. "It was crippling."

Virtually every media outlet has published at least one story emphasizing the main lesson from the 1918 flu: that leaders need to tell the truth, most importantly to convince people to comply with public health guidelines over time. Here's the version of that argument Smith's NYT published, written by John Barry, who wrote *The Great Influenza*.

That brings us back to the most important lesson of 1918, one that all the working groups on pandemic planning agreed upon: Tell the truth. That instruction is built into the federal pandemic preparedness plans and the plan for every state and territory.

In 1918, pressured to maintain wartime morale, neither national nor local

government officials told the truth. The disease was called "Spanish flu," and one national public-health leader said, "This is ordinary influenza by another name." Most local health commissioners followed that lead. Newspapers echoed them. After Philadelphia began digging mass graves; closed schools, saloons and theaters; and banned public gatherings, one newspaper even wrote: "This is not a public health measure. There is no cause for alarm."

Trust in authority disintegrated, and at its core, society is based on trust. Not knowing whom or what to believe, people also lost trust in one another. They became alienated, isolated. Intimacy was destroyed. "You had no school life, you had no church life, you had nothing," a survivor recalled. "People were afraid to kiss one another, people were afraid to eat with one another." Some people actually starved to death because no one would deliver food to them.

Society began fraying – so much that the scientist who was in charge of the armed forces' division of communicable disease worried that if the pandemic continued its accelerating for a few more weeks, "civilization could easily disappear from the face of the earth."

The few places where leadership told the truth had a different experience. In San Francisco, the mayor and business, labor and medical leaders jointly signed a full-page ad that read in huge all-caps type, "Wear a Mask and Save Your Life." They didn't know that masks offered little protection, but they did know they trusted the public. The community feared but came together. When schools closed, teachers volunteered as ambulance drivers, telephone operators, food deliverers.

Compliance today has been made vastly more difficult by the White House, echoed by right-wing media, minimizing the seriousness of this threat. That seemed to change on Monday. But will President Trump stick to his blunt message of Monday? Will his supporters and Rush Limbaugh's listeners self-quarantine if called upon? Or will they reject it as media hype and go out and infect the community?

This is not a hoax.

Telling the truth is a life or death issue during a pandemic. An early study even suggests that Hannity – one of the most important players in Trump's echo chamber – encouraged his watchers to sustain behaviors that could get them killed.

And in recent days, Trump has repeatedly undermined the advice of his experts, lying about the social distancing of rent-a-mobs challenging shut-downs, and magnifying those who say this virus is, indeed, a hoax.

You cannot separate Trump's COVID rallies from the public health story. Because his rallies – especially the lies he tells – are a menace to public health.

Update: Here's Charles Blow's op-ed arguing the same point.