

Media's choice is between truth and propaganda

By Jennifer Oriel, *The Australian*, 22 May 2017

We know how Donald Trump's presidency will end. The process is familiar. It begins with a politician elected by the people to introduce secure border and rational immigration policies that benefit the national interest. Said politician is conservative and patriotic. He is Christian. He is proud of his culture: Western culture. The PC establishment despises him. The left media class undermines him. A mob of wreckers forms to destabilise his government. The wrecking crew comprises faceless men who leak to the press with impunity; publicly funded activist networks in the media, academia and NGOs; supranationalist organisations such as the UN and EU; and professional protesters. If Donald Trump wants to know what is coming, he should study the rise and fall of Tony Abbott.

The call to impeach Trump is the climax of a long campaign to prevent his presidency and to spoil the election result. The investigation into allegations that Trump is colluding with Russia was given greater credence last week when Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointed Robert Mueller as special counsel. The announcement Mueller would oversee the investigation came shortly after the *The Washington Post* ran a story that Trump had revealed "highly classified information" to the Russian Foreign Minister and ambassador. The - information allegedly compromised an ally in the fight against Islamic State. The *New York Times* subsequently suggested the ally was Israel.

No validated evidence has been tendered to support the extraordinary claims that Trump has colluded with Russia. The White House has said the information shared by the President with Russian officials is publicly available. To make matters worse, the newspapers spearheading the allegations have a track record for bias against secure borders, rational immigration policy and other core policies that catapulted Trump into office.

The question of fake news must be raised in regard to media coverage of Trump and allegations of a Trump-Russia conspiracy. A study published by Harvard University on Thursday found unprecedented bias against the Trump presidency. Thomas Patterson of the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Centre reviewed selected coverage of Trump's first 100 days. He found that 80 per cent of surveyed media reports on Trump were negative. Ninety-six per cent of surveyed media stories on Trump's immigration proposals were negative. By stark contrast, US media coverage of Barack Obama's first 100 days was only 41 per cent negative. The two leading newspapers publishing allegations that Trump has colluded with Russia appear rather biased against his presidency. The study found that 83 per cent of *The Washington Post* coverage of Trump's presidency was negative. *The New York Times* covered Trump negatively 87 per cent of the time. Among the mainstream media sources reviewed, only Fox News offered an even-handed approach to Trump's first 100 days, with 52 per cent negative coverage.

Many media outlets have a professed philosophical view. However, when that view influences the content of news reporting in favour of bias over fact, the credibility of the media comes under attack. If the media cites anonymous sources as though they are impartial and credible, the reader should know whether the source has a vested interest in ousting a democratically elected leader. For example, does the source stand to gain professionally or financially if the

coup against an elected head of state succeeds? How many of the anonymous sources cited by the *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* vote Democrat? How many were appointed by the Obama administration? How many stand to gain professionally or financially if Trump is ousted? Perhaps the reader should be given such information so they can make a more informed choice about the anonymous reports.

Trump-Russia conspiracy stories share an abundance of anonymous officials and paucity of hard facts. The same was true of stories that fuelled the campaign against Tony Abbott. The leakers were given a veneer of authority by the designations “officials”, “insiders” and “experts”. Their anonymity was protected as though they were whistleblowers, but insiders who engineer coups against democratically elected heads of state are not whistleblowers. If they were exposing corruption, they would tender hard evidence. No hard evidence has been tendered to justify the investigation into Trump’s presidency. No proof has been issued. No valid defence has been mounted. No empirical facts have been established. At what point do we call such news propaganda?

Many Trump voters view the investigation into his alleged ties to Russia as a continuation of the establishment campaign against his presidency. It is a zero-sum game. If the political and media class succeeds in replacing Trump with its preferred president without a solid case, liberal democracy will appear as a fallacy concealing a big lie. If the dream that democracy exists is shattered, voters will cease to trust the media and government. America’s silent majority already feels excluded from the institutions supposed to put the liberal in liberal democracy: the law, academia and media. If their last chance at representation, the democratic vote, is trashed by the establishment, middle America will be pushed to breaking point.

At some point, media that campaigns against elected heads of state will be held accountable for destabilising democracy. If there is evidence to support allegations against Trump, it should be printed in plain words. As it stands, the lack of evidence to support the extraordinary claims of collusion between Trump and Russia is threatening the legitimacy of the established media.

The single point of difference between traditional media and emerging alternatives is trustworthiness. People pay for news they can trust. While journalists make mistakes, fake news does not arise from human error. It is propaganda with a predetermined conclusion in mind. The media cannot serve two gods. The choice is between truth and propaganda.