

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, July 31, 2017.

## A crusading US media in the age of Trump is a recipe for disaster

Tom Plate says with even quality US media turning private eye on Donald Trump, the incessant drumbeat on North Korea, and more military men inducted into the White House, the president may well be inspired to try on a new role.



Recall Shakespeare's Falstaff, that boastful cowardly knight, and imagine him cavorting at golf resorts on the dime of a dodgy career driven by money borrowed from wherever.

Yes, imagine President Donald J Trump as a Falstaff rather than as, say, an unhinged King Lear. As Falstaff, his conceited self-absorption blocks awareness that the world's laughing at him. Let's face facts: firing the White House chief of staff amid rumours that the US secretary of state might be next out the door makes it more difficult by the day for his presidency to be taken seriously, especially by the US news media that takes it all in and immediately spits it all back out.

By imprisoning himself in twitchy tweets, comedic illogic and loopy facts – and then crying foul when the media transforms nearly every tweet into an overdrawn newspaper headline or an overheated TV panel beating anew some politically dead horse – Trump winds up generating laughs but not hits. And in making his case that the news media is

the “enemy of the people”, he tends to show less attention to detail than the average high school debate team.

Even so, Trump is not the only one worrying about the US media in the age of Trump. Many fear the media has become its own worst enemy, as much at risk from its own excesses as Falstaff himself.

The job of the US news media is to speak truth to power, but not in a relentless or careless way. A seriously helpful media in an open society must maintain its cool and balance – and thus its constitutional utility. But has it? In a recent essay in the *London Review of Books*, David Bromwich, Yale University’s Sterling professor of English, is - unnerved by the “descent into brashness, which teeters on the edge of open contempt [and] has been a feature of American media coverage of Trump ever since January; it is growing shriller and more indiscriminate, working up to a presumptive climax no one has imagined with clarity”.

Perhaps Bromwich’s argument in “The Age of Detesting Trump” might sound less alarming if even the quality media hadn’t been converting reporters into little more than private investigators labouring for the prosecution in the unseemly annual scrum for Pulitzer Prizes.

In the back of any journalistically ethical mind needs to be a deeply sincere worry that diminishment of the occupant of the office might serve to erode that office itself. Bromwich, in one example, points out that the possibility of improving relations with Russia on its merits has been mass-mediated only against the backdrop of this shady secret meeting or that. As this noted biographer of Edmund Burke narrates: “The Democrats tossed his idea that better relations with Russia ‘would not be a bad thing’ into the general stew of his repulsive ideas on taxes and immigration, and Republicans ignored it as an indigestible ingredient.”

Regime change is always a dream story for the imperial American press, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union, which indeed was a regime manifestly meriting change. But the outcome of more recent regime-change campaigns cheered by the US news media, such as Iraq (the sorriest example) and Libya (runner-up in the - Department of Miscalculation), might suggest the need for more reporting and less crusading.

Consider even the incessant US media drumbeat about North Korea, in the face of whose missile provocations careful caution has been the consistent recommendation of China. But what could a nation so much closer to the North’s missile sites, so much closer to its reportedly restless population of 25 million possibly know, compared to journalists on the US east coast?

From the American media you also get the sense that regime change of some sort could prove as miraculously transformative in Washington as well as in Pyongyang. Though no one knows who might succeed a fallen Kim Jong-un, in the US you’d wind

up with oleaginous Mike Pence, next-in-line as vice president, or Paul Ryan, the next next-in-line as House Speaker. Is this what our media want?

Pinning down Trump with unremitting fire also handicaps the entire US government executive branch, which is constitutionally best equipped to handle America's role globally. Moving into the growing void is Germany's Angela Merkel, filling in reluctantly, and, less reluctantly, China's Xi Jinping ( 习近平 ). For China, the opportunity to expand its global space is now extraordinarily immense, but for starters, Beijing's wisest heads might wish to have their inner circle appreciate the magnitude of their South China Sea gains and put a hold on more pushing and shoving for the time being.

Note well: the powerful US Pacific Command's Seventh Fleet won't fall back to Hawaii without a fight, no matter who is in or out of the White House. If the concept of "soft power" offers tangible utility, it has to mean resorting to "hard power" less. Leading the global charge on climate change will show Beijing acting like an adult and lower the overall political temperature.

By contrast, every time someone unceremoniously exits the Trump administration – seems maybe weekly – the replacement looks to be military (the just-named White House chief of staff is a retired marine general.) The world should take note. Falstaff is no Coriolanus but, surrounded by all that "oorah", Trump might be tempted to try on a new role for size. One thing Trump and our media have in common is a problematic penchant for drama and excess. Beware.

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