

Threatening free speech



By Nate Smelle

Well, it's just after 3 a.m. on Nov. 5 and I am wide awake, anxiously awaiting the outcome of the next 24 hours. In the morning our American neighbours who haven't voted already will make their voices heard. For good or ill, America is about to turn the page, and begin writing the next chapter in their ever-evolving history book. The state of politics in the U.S. has been growing more tumultuous by the hour since Donald Trump entered the fray in 2015. Because of his constant manipulation of the masses that has given rise to the fascist MAGA movement in the U.S., Canada, and around the world, it has been difficult for political junkies like myself to look away from the unfolding chaos that follows former president Trump's every move. That is why for the past nine years critical thinkers everywhere have been living in a perpetual state of anxiety, wondering who and what he will attack next. Acknowledging the vile nature of Trump's racist and hateful rhetoric, and how it has oozed from the far right towards the centre of the political spectrum, we cannot dismiss the fact that under his feeble leadership the world became a more dangerous place for the majority of us. While it is somewhat common for politicians to employ strong language to persuade voters, it is not, nor should it ever become the norm when politicians directly threaten their opponents and their opponents' supporters. Reflecting on a news report I had watched on the nightly news outlining Trump's closing argument delivered at a rally in Lititz, Pennsylvania on Nov. 3, I contemplated how the world of a small town reporter in Canada has changed because of his consistently more hateful attacks on journalists and the media. During the rally in Lititz as Trump complained about gaps in the bulletproof glass protecting him on stage, he fantasized about the journalists covering his speech being killed by a would-be assassin. To get me, somebody would have to shoot through the fake news, and I don't mind that so much, Trump declared, as his supporters cheered loudly. Unfortunately this was not an isolated incident. By repeatedly attacking journalists in public speeches and on social media, Trump is not only attempting to delegitimize the media, he is also encouraging his supporters to view them with hostility. This has led to instances of aggression, such as the attack on BBC cameraman Ron Skeans in El Paso in 2019, which Trump approved with a thumbs-up gesture as the attack was taking place. This subtle approval of violence or intimidation toward the press sends a dangerous signal: that physical or verbal attacks on journalists are permissible if they challenge the status quo. According to a recent report by Reporters Without Borders between Sept. 1 and Oct. 24 of a recent year, Trump insulted, attacked, or threatened the media over 100 times in public remarks alone. This barrage of verbal assaults against journalists fosters an atmosphere of hostility that erodes trust in the media, contributing to a broader societal climate where skepticism, misinformation, and division thrive. When public figures in power routinely disparage the media, it challenges the ability of journalists to perform their essential functions of truth-telling and fact-checking, ultimately leaving the public less informed and more divided. One thing for certain is that Trump's threats against the media have reminded us that hate-filled rhetoric can and will create an environment ripe for violence. It has also raised serious concerns about the safety of journalists, who already face heightened risks while covering contentious political events. At another of Trump's rallies on Aug. 31 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, one of his supporters jumped a barricade and attacked the press. While no one was physically harmed in the attack, Trump's celebration of the breach as beautiful reflects a troubling normalization of

aggression against the media. Adding fuel to the fire during the incident, Trump reassured his followers not to worry, exclaiming, "That's alright. That's OK. No, he's on our side." In the wake of a pair of editorials recently published in Bancroft This Week, "Thank you Donald!" and "What happens in America?" that provided insight into the corrupt influence Trump and his MAGA cult have had on Canadian politics, I received several hateful and threatening letters. While this publication will not spread such garbage, to give you an idea of how Trump has affected the life of one small town journalist I will share a few lines that stood out as a prime example of what journalists have to deal with courtesy of the former president. "I am a free man," wrote one Maple MAGA cult member, "and I have a right not deal, meet, and talk with you, morons (Ecclesiastes 10:1nn); you are damned skunks-dogs (Phil 3, and dog's BS (Philippians 3:8; "skybala" in Greek). Dogs can't approach the sons of Light (John 12:36)! Go to Hell (1 Tim 1:20, 1 Cor 5:6)! The Angel of Death will visit you sooner than you expect (1 Cor 10:10)!" This reader, like the others who wrote in took issue with me pointing out that Maple MAGA "leader" Pierre Poilievre is just a far right appendage of Donald Trump, who is focused on hate and conspiracy theories. Another letter writer who disagreed with my commentary, proclaimed that he only liked to read "unbiased articles." Well, considering my editorials are published on the "Opinion" pages of Bancroft This Week, I believe what this not so gentle man intended to say was that he didn't like reading informed opinions that reveal he is being made a fool of by a fascist felon desperately trying to con his way back into the Oval office. Trump's sustained attacks on journalists and the media pose a significant threat to a free and peaceful society, as they undermine the foundational principles of democracy and open discourse. Central to the functioning of a democratic system is the press's role in holding power to account and providing citizens with accurate, unbiased information. When political leaders, particularly those in power, vilify journalists and institutions, it can lead to dangerous consequences for both the press and the public. Trump's repeated labeling of the media as the "enemy of the people" is a striking example of how his rhetoric mirrors the tactics of authoritarian dictators like Adolf Hitler. History has shown us repeatedly that the type of inflammatory language Trump is using is akin to that used by the Nazis to dehumanize the press, delegitimize dissent, and create an environment where free speech is stifled. The real danger, however, lies in the potential escalation of these hostile words into violent actions. When individuals in power use rhetoric that dehumanizes a specific group, such as journalists, it creates a "us versus them" mentality. In such an environment, journalists may be seen not just as dissenting voices, but as legitimate targets. The normalization of verbal abuse can lead to real-world violence, as seen in the attacks on journalists during Trump rallies. If left unchecked, this hostility could erode the independence of the media, leading to self-censorship or even a climate in which journalists feel physically unsafe to do their jobs. In a free and peaceful society, the media must remain independent and protected from threats, both verbal and physical. Leaders, especially those with significant public influence, must recognize their responsibility to safeguard freedom of the press, as it is vital to the health of the democracy. Trump's repeated attacks on journalists not only undermine this vital institution but also jeopardize the very principles upon which a free and informed society is founded. Whatever the outcome of the 2024 U.S. election turns out to be, as Canadians we need to remember that our values, our love of peace and freedom, has nothing to do with the ideologies of wannabe dictators like Trump and the fascist cults that follow them. We also must remember that our essential right to free speech does not give us the freedom to threaten and intimidate others, especially those of us responsible for keeping the public informed.