

# Alternative facts, fake news and Trump's war on mainstream media



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**Washington:** Donald Trump's ego might dwarf Uluru, but he's exceedingly thin-skinned. However, it would be a mistake to think that drove his bludgeoning of the news media for their accurate reporting on the puny crowd that turned out for his inauguration - maybe just a third of those who poured into the streets of the capital for [Saturday's women's protest against his election](#).

White House press secretary Sean Spicer used his first press conference to criticise the press over their coverage of the inauguration day ceremony. We're familiar with the new President's obsession about any numbers that speak to his sense of his own greatness - rally crowds, polling and TV ratings. And his bilious contempt for those that don't.

Trump does not respond well to the words "smaller than" and "Trump" appearing in the same sentence.

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An estimated 470,000 participated in the women's march in Washington DC on January 21. Photo: Getty Images

The DC metro service said on Sunday that Saturday's women's march was the second busiest day in its history - more than 1 million passenger trips. It fell just short of the 1.1 million trips taken on the day of Obama's first inauguration in 2009.

[Figures reported by Politifact](#) make the Trump inauguration the most poorly attended in more than 20 years. Here are the figures:



The euphoric "Trump trade",

which saw equity markets rally to record highs, has given way to unease. Photo: AP

- Obama 2009 - 1.8 million
- Obama 2013 - 1 million
- Bush 2001 - 300,000
- Bush 2005 - 400,000
- Clinton 1993 - 800,000
- Clinton 1997 - 250,000.

Trump can't pretend to be surprised. He knew that he lost the popular vote by a good 3 million votes; that he squeaked through the Electoral College thanks to just a handful of votes in three states; and that, historically, he's the least popular incoming president ever.



Donald Trump's chief of staff, former Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus, left, joined the attack on the media. Photo: AP

And he can't erase the facts that the [Russian hacking](#) and the FBI's weird intervention late in the campaign took some of the wind out of Hillary Clinton's campaign sails, thereby leaving many questioning the legitimacy of his "greatest win ever".

A smart man, after the inauguration, might have sucked it all up and rolled up his sleeves to get to work making America great again. For months, Trump has been belting us around the ears with his Day One "to-do" list and his First 100 Days agenda; and, last week, aides claimed breathlessly that he had stockpiled 200 executive orders that were good to go - all they needed was Trump's signature.



George Orwell didn't know the half of it. Photo: AP

It was a given that he would be peeved about the crowd reports. But instead of Trump getting it out of his system with an early hours Twitterstorm, the manner in which key members of his team jumped into the trenches to maul the media suggests a pre-planned barrage intended to damage media integrity.

Trump himself was barking at the moon at the CIA's Langley headquarters on Saturday.

Utterly insensitive to the fact that his backdrop was a memorial to CIA agents who had died in the line of duty, he rambled, from assuring his audience their new commander-in-chief was the full quid: "Trust me, I'm, like, a smart person"; to his fame - he had made the cover of *Time* [magazine](#) 15 times, but football star Tom Brady had made it just once.

Openly stating that he was "at war" with the media, [he gave his take on Friday's crowd](#): "We had a massive field of people. You saw that. Packed.

"I get up this morning. I turn on one of the networks and they show an empty field. I say: 'Wait a minute. I made a speech. I looked out. The field was ... It looked like a million, a million and a half people.' ... And they said: 'Donald Trump did not draw well.' "

That's what you'd expect from Trump. But later his newly minted presidential spokesman [Sean Spicer harangued reporters in a briefing](#). It's worth recalling here that, on being appointed earlier this month, Spicer assured reporters: "I've never lied ... if you lose the respect and trust of the press corps, you've got nothing."

[Spicer told the briefing](#): "Yesterday, at a time when our nation and the world was watching the peaceful transition of power and, as the President said, the transition and the balance of power

from Washington to the citizens of the United States, some members of the media were engaged in deliberately false reporting.

"This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration - period - both in person and around the globe. These attempts to lessen the enthusiasm for the inauguration are shameful and wrong."

It brought to mind Saddam Hussein's hapless spokesman Comical Ali, who bizarrely insisted to reporters that Baghdad was safely in the hands of the dictator in 2003 - even as live TV pictures showed that the city had been captured.

Spicer lied demonstrably about the size of the crowd; the numbers that rode the DC metro; the use of magnetometers in security checks which he claimed had stopped people getting in; in claiming that this was the first time that floor covering had been used, which he said accentuated empty space (the coverings were used at Obama's 2013 inauguration).

It was an inauspicious start for a spokesman who claims to not lie and it earned him four Pinocchios from Glenn Kessler, *The Washington Post's* fact checker.

Next into the fray was Trump's White House chief of staff, Reince Priebus, who accused the press of attempting to delegitimise Trump. "It's really not about crowd size. It's really about honesty in the media," he told Fox News.

But what Priebus really meant became clear when Trump's former campaign manager and White House counsellor Kellyanne Conway was interviewed on NBC on Sunday morning. Tackling her on Spicer's loony performance the previous day, host Chuck Todd wanted her to explain the absurdity of Spicer being sent before the cameras to argue what Todd said were "provable falsehoods".

At first Conway deflected: "I don't think presidents are judged by crowd sizes, they're judged by accomplishments."

Todd: "Fair enough, so why lie?"

Conway: "You're saying it's a falsehood, and Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts."

Todd, clearly flabbergasted: "Alternative fact are not facts. They're falsehoods."

So on top of fake news, we now have alternative facts.

George Orwell didn't know the half of it, did he? But with Obama and Clinton off his radar, Trump is making very clear that the media is his next biggest enemy - and it must be discredited, if not destroyed.

Conway was on the same page as Trump surrogate Scottie Nell Hughes who, during the campaign, made this breathtaking statement on National Public Radio: "One thing that's been interesting this campaign season to watch is that people that say facts are facts — they're not really facts. Everybody has a way - it's kind of like looking at ratings or looking at a glass of half-

full water. Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth or not true. There's no such thing, unfortunately anymore, of facts."

Evan McMullin, who ran for the presidency as a conservative candidate, put it this way: "[Trump's attacks are] intended to destroy the media's ability to hold him accountable."

These are dangerous days for the mainstream media. Many have struggled since the advent of the internet, which wrecked their traditional business model, and to the extent that they survive financially, budgets are hopelessly tight. Now there is a new existential crisis as the integrity of their reporting comes under a new and relentless attack from social media, led by the President of the United States.

Yes, Trump won the election. But if a million or more Americans took to the streets of cities across the country on Saturday, it might mean that he has a bigger fight on his hands - if he does want to destroy the American news media.

