King Donald meets his media courtiers

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Monday's meeting between President-elect Donald Trump and two dozen media executives and on-air personalities fully deserves the adjectives unprecedented, extraordinary and disgusting.

Two weeks after the election—in which he won a majority in the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote by a wide margin—Trump berated the assembled media officials for alleged sins during the election campaign, condemning specific reporters, including some who were in the room.

According to a report published in the *New York Post*, quoting unnamed participants, "It was like a f???ing firing squad… Trump started with [CNN head] Jeff Zucker and said, 'I hate your network, everyone at CNN is a liar and you should be ashamed.'" He went on to denounce all of the media as "unfair" and "dishonest."

"The meeting was a total disaster," a source told the *Post*. "The TV execs and anchors went in there thinking they would be discussing the access they would get to the Trump administration, but instead they got a Trump-style dressing-down."

Each of the five networks sent at least one top executive, and in some cases three or four. None of the executives or journalists had the courage to walk out, denounce Trump as a bully, or warn that the First Amendment would be under attack under a Trump administration as never before in the history of the United States.

All five networks whose executives attended the meeting—ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC—observed the ground rules set by the Trump transition team, keeping the entire proceeding "off the record."

The very fact that the media heads agreed to such an "off the record" meeting is an abomination. The president of the United States is not "commander-in-chief" of the media. But Trump summoned highly paid television anchormen and women, and their even more highly paid corporate bosses, who cravenly submitted to a tongue-lashing at Trump Tower.

Trump was accompanied at the session by his chief of staff Reince Priebus, chief White House strategist Stephen Bannon, campaign manager Kellyanne Conway, campaign spokesman Jason Miller, Republican National Committee communications director Sean Spicer, and son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Bannon is an ally of the "white nationalist" and "alt-right" elements who patronize Breitbart News, the ultra-right online site that Bannon ran until he signed on as Trump's campaign CEO in August. His appointment as co-leader of Trump's White House staff, sharing authority with Priebus, signals the entry of the fascistic right into the mainstream of American capitalist politics.

After Monday's media session, according to Conway, there was a "receiving line" of media executives and anchors to meet Bannon, who played a largely behind-the-scenes role during the campaign. "Many people wanted to meet him and talk to him, make some eye contact, exchange some business cards with him. That's just a fact," she told the MSNBC program "Morning Joe" on Tuesday.

The closed-door meeting between Trump and the media is a gross violation of the by now threadbare tradition, more than two centuries old, whereby the press is supposed to constitute a "Fourth Estate," an independent watchdog on the activities of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government.

It is true that for more than a generation, the corporate-controlled media has largely defaulted on this role. More than 40 years have passed since critical coverage of the Vietnam War culminated in the publication of the Pentagon Papers, and the exposures of White House criminality in the Watergate scandal culminated in the forced resignation of President Richard Nixon.

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Today, the watchword of the corporate media is conformity and complacency, while what passes for the "news" is spoon-fed to them by the White House, Pentagon, State Department and CIA. While individual reporters may still take risks and challenge authority—a rare occurrence—the major news organizations, owned and controlled by giant corporations, are engaged in the manufacture and dissemination of government and corporate propaganda.

The thinking in these circles is summed up in the notorious comment of former *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller in response to WikiLeaks' exposures of US government criminality, in which he defended the "war on terror" and declared: "We agree wholeheartedly that transparency is not an absolute good. Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity."

Trump's session with the television broadcasters was followed by a closed-door meeting Tuesday with the publisher of the *New York Times*, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, and a longer on-the-record discussion with *Times* reporters and columnists, leading to a flurry of reports claiming that the president-elect was "moderating" his positions on a number of issues.

These reports are, on their face, complete nonsense. Trump told the *Times* that climate change may be caused by human action, that a special prosecutor to investigate Hillary Clinton was a bad idea, and that he disavowed support from white racist and alt-right groups. Even if these were taken for good coin—and there is certainly no reason to do so—this is setting an absurdly low bar for calling Trump a changed man.

So anxious were the networks to stay on the right side of the president-elect that NBC, in its report Tuesday night on Trump's purported shifts in policy, did not refer to where these comments were made, at a meeting with the *New York Times*, in order to avoid reporting on its own encounter with Trump the day before.

Trump treats the media with complete contempt, while basing his election campaign in large part on free media publicity. He has not held a press conference since July, preferring to be flattered in interviews by sympathetic Fox News hosts. He has not held a press conference since the election to explain to the public his plans for the new administration, another longstanding democratic tradition trampled on.

The shameless rush by the media establishment to ingratiate itself with Trump, only days after an election campaign in which they for the most part portrayed him as a political pariah and moral monster, expresses not only the protracted disintegration of American democracy in general, but more specifically the closing of ranks within the American ruling class behind the ultra-nationalist "America first" orientation he embodies.

This has found a no less noxious expression in the prostration of the Democratic Party before Trump, led by President Barack Obama, and the lineup of its congressional leadership, from incoming Senate Democratic leader Charles Schumer to the supposed "lefts" Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, behind Trump's program of economic nationalism and trade war.

If this is how Trump treats the corporate-controlled media, owned by billionaires like himself and staffed by multi-millionaire celebrities who would never think of questioning the capitalist system, what can be expected when the Trump administration encounters genuine criticism and opposition from the working class? This is a government whose actions and appointments demonstrate ferocious hostility to democratic rights.

The working class must prepare its own response. This includes defending and increasing the influence of the only genuine media voice of the socialist working class, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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