

CNN's *The Arena*

09/23/26

4:36:15 p.m.

13 minutes and 49 seconds

KASIE HUNT: Obviously, the President — the current President has made this a focal point of almost everything that he has done right since he walked on to the stage, since he came down that golden escalator, he has been talking about fake news and picking this fight with the press — often is something that seems to reward him with his base. I mean, how does that dynamic play out here, especially as, I mean, the latest CNN poll has his approval rating, 32 percent, I believe.

KRISTIN DAVISON: Well, you know, I think that this President has probably been one of the most effective in terms of working the press and using it to his advantage. So, we're 36 minutes into this program, and we haven't mentioned the American people once. What does this do to them? We are sitting here in a D.C. bubble saying the poor press, we can't go in, and that is why we talk about trust and how White Houses trust press corps is. The American people don't trust the press. And why is that? Because we've just spent 40 minutes talking about how bad the President is and how, you know, this is a — we are the victims, and that can't be the case. We have to go broaden that, and I think, to your point, we're talking about how this could be a negative, that we're not capturing the arrival of the Chinese president today. That might be a benefit in some of these places, right? If you're running for office in the Midwest or in some of these places, you might be okay. That there's not a glowing image of President Trump and President Xi today. So, there is — I do believe that we have to look a step beyond now. I don't know the legal part of it. Fortunately, I didn't go to law school, but thinking through — that will all work itself out. To your — to your point, your arguments, I'm talking about the political part of it and the fact that right now, yes, the approval rating is down. The press approval rating and trust is even worse. And why is that? Because sometimes we forget the connectivity there, and that is what Trump has been so effective at doing. We've now spent the entire time talking about this and not about his approval rating, not about gas prices, not about diesel, not about the election."

HUNT: Yeah. I mean, I — I do think it is important to underscore, and we touched on this when we talked about the Xi visit, that there may be Chinese state media available to cover that. The point, the point of all of this is not that news organizations are focused on themselves. The point is that independent, objective news organizations are there to get answers for the people who are reading and watching and seeing, because it's the American people who deserve independent eyes and ears, eyes and ears that are not government-controlled eyes and ears. At moments of our most critical national times, and we saw that probably most saliently on September 11th, when there was a pool traveling with President Bush to see Andy Card whisper in his ear as he read to schoolchildren that the second tower had fallen — or had been hit, and that America was under attack. The point of having a reporter from an independent news organization traveling with the President of the United States in that moment is because that reporter has no responsibility beyond telling the truth to the American people. They have no other imperative beyond that, and people who are operating on behalf of the government as government agents, employees, et cetera., they have potentially different motives. They are potentially protecting different things.

They are potentially upholding different things, whereas reporters from independent news organizations are specifically devoted. And do we sometimes fall down on the job? We are all human. We are all human. We sometimes fall down on the job, but the job — the job is to do the very best you can, the very best we can to look and see at what is happening and to tell people what is happening without fear, without favor, and without putting anything ahead of them, without putting anything ahead of thinking about what does the audience need and deserve to know about their government? Because guess what? It's them that are making the decisions about who should run it, who should be in charge. And that is why presidents, all presidents, this President, care so much — okay — about what that reporting is and how it's presented. And Elie Honig, I know you wanted to weigh in, so go ahead, jump in.

ELIE HONIG: Yeah. So Caroline [sic], I think, said earlier, you know, fortunately she did not go to law school. Unfortunately, I did. And so, let me address this point: while we haven't been talking about whether the American people like or dislike Donald Trump, whether the American people favor or disfavor the media coverage of Donald Trump — legally, under the First Amendment, the beauty of the First Amendment is the First Amendment doesn't give a darn whether coverage is favorable or unfavorable. The First Amendment doesn't care whether you're Newsmax, or PBS, or the BBC, or TMZ, you get the same protection. And when you get into saying some coverage good, some coverage bad, some coverage fair, some coverage unfair. The First Amendment says you cannot pick and choose. Once you've opened up the briefing room. Once you've opened up a public accommodation to the media, you do not get to pick and choose. So yes, Casey, as you just laid out, it is absolutely a journalistic virtue to try our best to call it down the middle, to be fair and objective. But the First Amendment also protects you, even if you're openly partisan, even if you openly love Trump or openly hate Trump, you still get the same First Amendment protection. And so, I understand the point — journalistically, I understand the point Ms. Davison is making. But legally, the First Amendment sweeps much more broadly than do we like a given outlet in a given moment or not?

HUNT: Yeah. Tim Naftali wants to jump in here.

TIM NAFTALI: I just want to remind folks that all — all presidents are human beings and they overreact and they get angry, and, until recently, we had a White House that was able to curate a president's moments of anger. Richard Nixon actually wanted to do even worse things that he ultimately was — that he ultimately did. John F. Kennedy had his moments, too, but they had a White House staff, and they had lawyers who were working on behalf of the presidency, not on behalf of the President, who protected the presidency by making sure the President's eruptions didn't become action. What seems clear, I think, is that the February — that, on Friday, the President erupted and his lawyers weren't ready for his ban, and now, they're trying to catch up and come up with sophist — sophist — I would — argument — arguments, but the point here is this presidency doesn't have guardrails or any curation. And what we're seeing is a personalized view of the press. All presidents have had it, but not all of them have shown it, because they know it's not in the interest of the presidency.

SABRINA SINGH: Can I — can I just pick up on what Elie was saying, too, because I thought he made a good point about access and press access to the White House or press access at any

building with the State Department or the Pentagon. When I came into the White House and then later at the Pentagon, one of the things that the Trump the previous Trump administration had done is open it up to other outlets, more right-leaning outlets to allow them into the White House briefing room and to allow them into being part of the pool, and one of the conversations that we had at the White House at the time was, should we revoke these passes because they're not considered legacy media. And, at the end of the day, we chose not to do that, because they not only had been credentialed by the — the White House or the Pentagon, but to Elie's point, it doesn't matter if you have a bias; if you are being credentialed today, it is CNN, MS NOW, and Politico. Tomorrow, it could be someone else. And so, we made that very conscious decision to maintain access and broaden it out. Now, again, we didn't love always the coverage that we were getting from some of these outlets, but we still took their questions. I took their questions at the podium. It was important for transparency, and — and I, again, I think today we're talking about CNN. Tomorrow, it could be someone else. And that's why outlets are banding together.

HUNT: Alyssa Farah Griffin, you wanted to jump in here. Go ahead.

ALYSSA FARAH GRIFFIN: Yeah, I really want to hone in on this particular moment. The fact that it aligns with President Xi's visit, because we know the Chinese government are masters of propaganda. They are looking for any angle to look stronger, any, you know, image that makes them look superior to the Americans. There's going to be so much disinformation and misinformation campaigns run by the CCP while this visit is taking place, and it is such a just — thinking about it more, such a tremendous moment, just not having this independent American feed, the visit, the vision of, you know, from the American perspective, this entrance in. We'll still, of course, have reporting on it. Reporters who are there covering it, and those who even aren't in the building will still get readouts. We're still going to get pool reports, but I've been in Korea; I've been in other parts of the country where you fight for that press access because you never want to give an ally or an adversary just their version of the events, just their imagery of the events. It's so important that the American perspective be seen and that that be the primary focus. So, it really is an incredible moment that this is happening while President Xi is coming in at a moment, by the way, where we're literally in an AI arms race with China, one of the most consequential moments, probably in American history.

HUNT: Yeah. And, you know, Andrew McCabe, let me bring you in here as well, because, you know, on this question of national security, I mean, we have often actually viewed our free press and the way that free and fair information can be spread around the world as something that actually enhances our national security. That obviously has fallen out of favor somewhat in the last decade or so. But I know you are also looking at the ways in which this administration sometimes seems not to prioritize national security. Lay that out for us.

ANDREW MCCABE: Yeah. So, I think you're absolutely right. And I think, you know, part of the — the image and the projection of our American values around the world, particularly with governments like China, like Russia, like places like Turkey, other places, Georgia that don't have a free and fair press, part of our constant reminder to them is, look, we do — we deal with it. We — we suffer the barbs that the press has for us on occasion, because it's more important to have an educated, informed populace, and I think that makes the current situation stand out all

the more. Like, I think Tim Naftali's point was absolutely right. This seems to have developed in an explosive — you know, in a fit of pique on, on, on the part of the president last Friday and the national security rationalization — is something that we are now seeing after the fact as an, as an excuse to, to try to kind of make this all go away. But I think to evaluate that, you have to look at what they didn't do to respond to the alleged national security threat here. I think it was Katelyn mentioned earlier, there is a timeline here that does not favor that interpretation. The articles that — that CNN allegedly published were back as early as last January, and the people who published those articles have had continued access to the White House during this time. That's not something you would do if you actually thought those reporters were involved in some sort of threat to national security. They also did not identify any specific — confidential, or alleged confidential or classified information. You, of course, have to be able to say, for instance, in a prosecution of someone for mishandling classified information, you have to identify what the information was that was either classified or national defense information. And, of course, the administration made no effort to approach the news entities. CNN, MS NOW, and *Politico*, and try to have one of those conversations where you say, look, you really — you are, you know, unintentionally creating a national security threat that could put our troops in harm's way, could put our — our case officers, our agents who work around the world in harm's way, and here's why. I've been in those conversations with some news organizations. And, you know, they listen, and they make their own judgment ultimately as to whether or not they'll refrain from publishing the thing that we've objected to, or maybe go ahead with it. But that's the way the process is supposed to work. Clearly, it didn't happen here.

HUNT: Yeah, really, really interesting insight there. This has been a really strong conversation here as we've been covering the hearing from Judge Kelly around whether CNN, MS NOW, and *Politico* should be reinstated after being banned from the White House. And just to pull it together again, I think it's worth remembering what this is really about, which is the ability of the people, the American people, to have free, fair, independent information about their government and the rights that they have as well to criticize the government. And John F. Kennedy put it really well years ago as, again, a president who didn't always get along with the press had his problems too. But I'll just leave you with his words. We'll be right back.

PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY [on 04/27/61]: Without debate, without criticism, no administration and no country can succeed, and no republic can survive. [SCREEN WIPE] That is why our press was protected by the First Amendment, the only business in America, specifically protected by the Constitution, not primarily to amuse and entertain, not to emphasize the trivial and the sentimental, not to simply give the public what it wants, but to inform, to arouse, to reflect, to state our dangers and our opportunities, to indicate our crises and our choices, to lead, mold, educate, and sometimes even anger public opinion.