

No filter makes Trump a great communicator



Donald Trump listens to a question from the media before departing the White House for the G7 summit in Washington. Picture: AFP

[Chris Kenny](#), The Australian, 12:00AM June 16, 2018

“F..k Trump!” Robert De Niro finally got to write his own line; and its pithy, inane vehemence eloquently exposed the rage of the anti-Trump cohort. Grown men and women at New York’s Radio City Music Hall laughed and cheered. Trump derangement syndrome remains in full febrile flight across the dominant media/political class of all Western liberal democracies.

The President’s successes only intensify the visceral reflux of politicians, entertainers, academics, journalists and commentators who seem to define themselves by the viciousness of their disdain for one man. Many were on the public record throughout the Trump campaign (and even after the polls closed) declaring he could not win, so his victory humiliated them. They seem to think impeachment or failure would somehow vindicate their misjudgments, erase their mistakes or at least deliver vengeance. Also, as with all virtue-signalling, their contempt for Trump is designed to amplify their own merit.

It is embarrassing to watch, and unhealthy for the players as well as the democracies they serve. Rather than learn anything from the Trump ascendancy they seem determined to teach their nemesis a lesson. But their vitriol can only help Trump, bringing his defiance of the media/political class

into sharper focus, highlighting his achievements and ensuring his enemies are stuck in the mire of their disastrous 2016 campaign instead of thinking about how they might do better in 2020. This must be the longest dummy spit in political history.

Coverage of Trump's Singapore summit with Kim Jong-un underscored how the zeitgeist deals with this President. Over the space of just six months mainstream commentators have sought to blame Trump for the nuclear weapons conundrum he inherited on the Korean peninsula, condemn him for threatening military action instead of talking, accuse him of risking a nuclear war, frame him for jeopardising any diplomatic resolution, downplay his achievement in having a summit, mock him for cancelling the summit, criticise his handling of the summit, slam him for shaking hands with a tyrant, question the summit's worth and dismiss its undertakings.

Trump is changeable, to be sure, yet clearly his media critics are even more nimble, shifting positions constantly in order to be at odds with him. You don't have to be a Trump fan to see that the starting point in much coverage is to line up against him and shape the narrative from there. Media which rail against his fake-news jibes constantly spin the news to shape their anti-Trump agenda.

There is much that most of us don't like about Trump. He has been crude, sexist and xenophobic in some of his comments in the past. He has been inconsistent, brash and self-obsessed. He is divisive, confrontational and unorthodox. Above all he is driven by ego. We get this. Those who feel the need to point it out daily have become tiresome. They might as well be informing us that Vladimir Putin is macho or Justin Trudeau is shameless.

Most of the Trump descriptors could apply to successful political leaders of the past. Trump encapsulates them in a particularly brazen and vulgar style. Within reason, political leaders should be judged on results rather than personal characteristics.

The loathing expressed daily by anti-Trump commentators doesn't amount to much and newspaper columns are full of what Trump does wrong, so let me leave those well-ploughed furrows for now. What is more interesting is why he has been politically successful — especially given the antipathy generated by his personal style — and why he so riles his opponents, including mainstream media.

In Singapore, Trump gave a free-ranging press conference the likes of which we seldom, if ever, see from a US president. He fielded questions from all comers for more than an hour, offering free assessments of journalists' work as he went along. By any stretch it was extraordinary, not least for the way in which he, characteristically, injected personal anecdotes into answers and swerved so far away from talking points that you could almost feel the advisers and diplomats wincing at the back of the room.

Yet it underscored two points about Trump's style that help to explain why he resonates. The first might be uncontentious but the second is counterintuitive. Trump speaks to voters. Most politicians get stuck addressing the journalists who ask the questions, shaping answers to fit within the invisibly constrained, politically correct confines of what passes for acceptable, risk-averse dialogue within the media/political class. But this anti-politician speaks directly to his constituents. It is simple and effective. He understands the media only gets in the way of his conversation with voters.

When most other politicians here and overseas are speaking in interviews and media conferences, you sense they are thinking more about what they should not say rather saying what they think. For Trump it is the opposite. He says whatever occurs to him and worries (maybe) about the consequences later.

This sounds easy but is no mean feat and constitutes, in my view, the most important basis for political communication. Some politicians do it better than others — many are hopeless — but Trump is the exemplar at targeting his audience. I reckon this delivers a second advantage (perhaps just finish that mouthful of breakfast lest you choke on this): it makes Trump a more authentic and honest communicator than other politicians. Even when he says something that contradicts an earlier message, or gives away more than he should, there is an unvarnished quality about the revelation that makes clear he is saying what he thinks.

Hence when Trump called Kim "rocket man" and threatened "fire and fury like the world has never seen" last year when he wanted North Korea to cease missile tests, then praised him as "very talented" after this week's summit, journalists played up the inconsistency to attack Trump. Bureaucrats, no doubt, also rolled their eyes because this volatility is the antithesis to the desired incrementalism of diplomacy.

But in the real world everyone knew why the emphasis was different in the changed circumstances. On each occasion the message and intent were clear. And, bizarrely, even with these conflicting missives, the take-out for voters, despite the indignation of the media, is a more authentic and frank real-time appraisal of events than we get from the usual doublespeak of global leaders.

In other words, even though he sometimes thinks different things at different times and sometimes gets things wrong, Trump says what he thinks. There is no filter. He doesn't care about the parsing in full carried out by journalists; he tidies up directly with the public.

Most politicians are all filter — filters of political correctness, diplomatic caution, populist instincts and focus group-tested lines. With Trump there is either no spin, or there is spin so obvious that we are all in on it — like praising an adversary to seal a deal.

Trump is happy to go to war with media rather than cower before them like most politicians. When he says they are biased, tricky and fake, he is often right. When he is wrong they should contest the facts. Instead he has got them claiming victim status — that by hitting back at the media he threatens their freedom — so they attack him in ways that confirm his critique. If voters are offered a choice between backing the media or the President, it will be a no-brainer for many.

We might prefer politicians who are as consistent, informed and competent as possible. But the notion that they should say what they think is also hugely appealing. It should not be too much to ask and it is anathema in contemporary affairs.

The missing filter between Trump's brain and his tongue creates all kinds of risks and controversies. It consistently throws up inconsistencies. But it is also central to his political success. We are about to see whether it will work in international relations.