

The Empty Screen

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At seven o'clock Monday evening, the White House [switched on a 24-hour video channel](#) called Trump TV: The Essentials Station, streaming on its [YouTube channel and at \[whitehouse.gov/live\]\(#\)](#), promising, in its own description, "[the Trump Administration's biggest moments all in one place](#)." The first broadcast was a rerun of the president's July 3 speech at Mount Rushmore. A few hours earlier, the five television networks that have pooled coverage of the presidency since the broadcast era began had [suspended it](#). The United States now has an official presidential channel and, for events the White House controls, no independent television coverage of the president.

It took four days. On Friday, September 18, the president announced on Truth Social that he was banning CNN, MS NOW, and Politico from the White House for "[constant 'reporting' FAKE NEWS](#)," warning that other outlets would follow. Asked that afternoon why, he said, "[No reason](#)." Asked what the ban would look like: "It's a very simple ban. I don't want them in my office." He floated the New York Times and the Washington Post as candidates, calling both "crummy." On Saturday morning, reporters from all three outlets [were turned away at the gates](#) and their credentials pulled. On Monday the three outlets [sued](#) Trump, his communications director, his chief of staff, and the Secret Service director in federal court in Washington, seeking a restraining order to restore their credentials. The case landed before Judge Timothy Kelly, who ordered this same White House to [restore a CNN correspondent's credential in 2018](#). The White House [answered](#) that the First Amendment protects the right to publish but does not entitle anyone to a hard pass or a pool seat, that no president must host "a hostile operation," and that access has always been a privilege. Hold that argument; it is doing more work than it appears to. And on Monday, ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC [declined to take over CNN's assigned pool duties](#), issuing a joint statement with CNN: "The public has a vital interest in receiving accurate, independent information about its government. No administration should restrict a news organization because it objects to its reporting." The pool chair, Fox's Washington bureau chief, notified subscribers that the TV pool would not cover events designated for pool coverage. The Washington Post said it would [withhold photographs](#) of the president's appearances. The channel launched that night.

The four days are the visible end of a nineteen-month sequence, and the sequence is the story.

Step one was taking the selection mechanism. In February 2025, the press office [announced it would decide the composition of the pool](#), ending a century in which the White House Correspondents' Association ran the rotation. "The White House press team, in this administration, will determine who gets to enjoy the very privileged and limited access," the press secretary [said](#). The association's president answered that in a free country, leaders must not be able to choose their own press corps. The administration then

eliminated the wire-service slot, added seats it fills itself, and skewed the new seats toward friendly outlets, by the Poynter Institute's count.

Step two was exclusion by name. The pool survived the seizure of its rotation because most of its members kept their seats. The September ban removed three outlets for their reporting, with the reason stated on the record as no reason, and the threat of more explicit. The president had spent early September calling coverage of ammunition shortages in the Iran war "actually treasonous."

Step three is substitution. The official channel is not a news organization. It has no anchors or reporters, and no editorial staff anyone has named; the White House describes it as [highlights, updated in real time](#). But it now occupies the slot where the independent feed used to be, and the administration [promoted it across its accounts](#) as the place to watch. Select who may cover you. Expel the ones you name as enemies. Offer your own feed as the replacement. That is the structure of a state broadcaster, assembled in nineteen months, and the only thing missing is the journalism.

The precise comparison matters, because the imprecise one is everywhere this week. This is not yet TASS. TASS had correspondents. What the White House has built so far is closer to the propaganda channel's essential core: a distribution pipeline the government owns, carrying video the government selects, available whenever the independent cameras are absent. Its opening days have been faithful to the genre in another way. At Monday's press conference, the White House-provided video [carried no usable audio](#) of the president's remarks. At the ribbon-cutting for his new helipad, he spoke [without a microphone, because the microphone at presidential events is the pool's](#). The government discovered on day one that the infrastructure of being seen and heard belonged to the people it expelled. State media in ambition; public-access in execution. The ambition is what compounds.

The access-is-a-privilege argument deserves its answer here, because on its own terms it is half true. No outlet has a constitutional right to a pool seat, and administrations have always made choices about limited space. What the argument elides is that the government did not make a space choice. It removed named outlets for their reporting, said so in writing, and gave "no reason" on camera as the standard. The 2018 Acosta case turned on exactly that distinction, and the White House's own statement concedes the motive by calling the outlets hostile. By Tuesday's [court filing the reason had become national security](#) and a failure of professional standards; the outlets' lawyer answered that the articles the government cited are "[garden variety reporting](#)." A reason that changes when it reaches a courtroom is a second admission that the first one was the real one.

Now the part of this story that nobody covering it will write, because they are in it. The check that appeared this week was not a law. The pool is a cooperative arrangement with no statute behind it, a custom running since Franklin Roosevelt, kept alive by competitors agreeing to share. When the government broke the custom, no court had yet spoken and Congress as an institution did nothing. What stopped the machine was four networks refusing to take a rival's seat, at real cost to themselves, on the theory that the seat was not the government's to give. That refusal is the entire check. It was improvised in a weekend by the parties with the most to lose, and it echoes the only other check that has worked this

year against instruments like these: when the president settled his own lawsuit against his own IRS and no one in government would oppose it, the adversary had to be assembled from volunteers too, retired judges in that case. The system is not producing its own opposition. Private actors keep having to build it by hand.

And here is the cost of the check, stated plainly because no network will state it. The boycott is the check working, and it is also the empty screen the channel was built to fill. Every hour the pool stays dark, the only video of the president inside the White House is the government's. The networks are right that the seat was not theirs to surrender one outlet at a time. They should also be clear-eyed that their remedy delivers, temporarily, exactly the media environment the ban was reaching for: one where the White House is the sole camera in the room. The president's trip to the UN General Assembly today [has no pool camera at all](#); whatever the world sees of it will come from the UN's own system and the official feed. A boycott is leverage only if it ends on the boycotters' terms. If it simply persists, it becomes the programming schedule.

The courts will probably shorten the experiment. Kelly [heard the restraining-order motion Wednesday](#) and did not rule from the bench; the government asked him, at a minimum, to leave the ban in place until after the Chinese president's visit this week. The judge decided the 2018 case, the precedent points one way, and the First Amendment case against banning outlets for their coverage is strong. But a ruling restores credentials. It does not restore the custom. The pool worked because both sides pretended it was solid when it was always voluntary, and the government has now demonstrated, twice in nineteen months, that the voluntary parts can be taken. Whatever the court orders, every future administration inherits the demonstration.

The channel's name is honest, at least. The Essentials Station: the essentials, as selected by their subject. The rest of it, the parts of a presidency someone else selects, is what the empty screen is currently teaching the public to live without.