CHAPTER 3

Wrestling with the Presidency: How Donald Trump Uses Wrestling and Theatrical Tactics in the Public Sphere

Abstract This chapter looks at the theatrical elements of wrestling (including kayfabe) and how Donald Trump has used them within his campaign and administration. It explores the appeal of wrestling and its tactics to audiences and how Donald Trump has used that to his advantage. His long-standing relationship with professional wrestling has allowed him to use tools like hyperbole and verbal aggression in very specific ways. His use of these tactics has allowed behaviors often contained within theatrical spaces to be released into society leading to confusion over acceptable public behaviors.

Keywords Professional wrestling · Verbal aggression · Theater · Presidency · Donald Trump

In order to better understand Trump’s appeal, it helps to look at the ways he connects with audiences. He pulls language and tactics from modern professional wrestling and deploys them into the political sphere. These mannerisms and behaviors are often misunderstood or dismissed by traditional pundits or academics. They see the bluster as hyperbole when it actually functions as calculated and nuanced rhetoric targeting working- and middle-class demographics. Donald Trump has traded on accepted
theatrical behaviors of wrestling and normalized them as political antagonism. It has allowed the barriers of dramatic production to collapse and allow its affectations to seep into the broader world. Exaggeration exists in theater because stories and arcs have to occur within a compressed time frame. Emotions and reactions are intensified to propel events in an expedited manner. However, these all exist within the confined space of the stage, or in wrestling’s case, the ring. By adopting these tactics outside the arena, Donald Trump has simultaneously engaged an audience base while disintegrating the distinctions between performance and reality. It is imperative to better understand the world of professional wrestling in order to help grasp the calculated mannerisms behind many of Trump’s actions. It is a distinctive way of going public unlike many other iterations. Directed appeals target audiences to pressure actors (lawmakers, media, critics) to conform to behavior, but the language exists almost as code that engages only specific listeners. Politicians use certain words to signal affinities with certain groups, but President Trump uses broader performance. People who are aware of wrestling and its norms see the disconnect between presentation and governance while others less familiar with the medium are often horrified or appalled. Outsiders are often shocked at the loyalty retained by the core supporters who see his language as commonplace bluster to win an edge over a perceived adversary.

Many of us watch in awe or throw up our hands in the face of such an unusual approach by a sitting American president. We are used to professional politicians who welcome the norms of government. Donald Trump is a political amateur exploiting tools acquired from a lifetime of calculated pop culture media exploitation. While many point to his media ventures such as The Apprentice, it is not where he learned this craft. He has had a 30-year relationship with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, formally World Wrestling Federation) and placed the former CEO, Linda McMahon, as administrator for the Small Business Association. When Donald Trump campaigned in Democratic stronghold Connecticut in August 2016, many Republicans openly criticized the choice as a waste of resources (Glueck 2016). He had a rally in Fairfield County where WWE is headquartered and spoke at Sacred Heart University where Linda McMahon sat on the board of trustees (Altimari 2016). The owners of WWE have been loyal associates and Trump has regularly acknowledged it via
actions. In 2007, an Internal Revenue Service filing indicated the McMahons were the Trump Foundation’s largest donor (Alexander 2017). She stepped down from the Small Business Association in 2019 to “chair the pro-Trump super PAC America First Action” (Restucci et al. 2019). On April 15, 2020, Donald Trump placed Vince McMahon on an advisory group tasked with helping reopen the country following the COVID-19 shutdown (Fernandez 2020). His long-standing relationship with professional wrestling functioned as a training ground for his approach to public appeals and rhetorical style. Through exploring the ideas embedded within these sorts of entreaties and their connection to wrestling and political populism, we can better understand exactly how Donald Trump exploits them to weaponize going public for his own ends.

**WRESTLING AS A RHETORICAL MEDIUM**

Professional wrestling is a performance where characters communicate storylines in a very physical manner in front of a captive audience. Wrestling blends the truth and fiction into a product that exists as neither fully one nor the other. It is a stylized drama of amplified reality that allows contemporary issues to be aired and addressed within a constrained space of a theatrical arc. Henry Jenkins asserts modern professional “wrestling heightens the emotional experience offered by traditional sports and direct it toward a specific vision of the social and moral order” (Jenkins 1997, p. 54). Roland Barthes says “[W]restling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque” (Barthes 1982, p. 18).

Wrestling has strong working-class roots with a predominantly male audience. The WWE’s 2015 investor report claims 63% of their audience is male and 44% between the ages of 18–49 with 38% over 50 (“Investor Presentation” 2015). Wrestling has revenue of 633 million with more average viewers in primetime than any other cable network (“Investor Presentation” 2015). Professional wrestling’s online presence is strong with more than a half a billion followers on social media with more Twitter followers than NFL, Google, or ESPN (“Investor Presentation” 2015). Their domestic fans are not fringe Americans, but rather, large groups of citizens who can be activated with appropriate motivation. According to Leverette (2003), the content creators for wrestling “interpret the political and social climate and cull their characters from that
environment. … These characters then perpetuate a myth of America and function as an interpretation of reality for a particular fan base” (p. 182).

Trump uses verbal aggression to emphasize the populist patois that makes inroads in populations many do not commonly associate with Republicans. Wrestling has a long history of spectacle and uses classic devices of hyperbole and exaggeration to evoke strong emotional mythos to reflect cultural concerns and anxieties. Donald Trump has been involved with the world of professional wrestling since his first appearance at Wrestlemania IV in 1988 culminating with his induction to the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013. He has been featured on programs for World Wrestling Entertainment on a somewhat periodic basis since the late 1980s with his most famous performance at 2007’s Wrestlemania 23 where he bet shaving his head upon the outcome of a match.

Jenkins says professional wrestling “bridges the gap between sport and melodrama, allows for the spectacle of male physical prowess (a display which is greeted by shouts and boos) but also for the exploration of the emotional and moral life of its combatants” (Jenkins 1997, p. 53). Wrestling storylines often have large narratives with characters interacting with the onlookers to elicit cheers, jeers, and other responses. Specific language exists within wrestling to “dehumanize the action, to emphasize the ritual, the mechanical, rather than the emotional and personal” (Kerrick 1980, p. 145). For example, most performances are scripted events, yet the talent zealously maintains the concept of “kayfabe,” or in outsider terms, the illusion the events occurring are absolutely real. Any suggestion otherwise is aggressively challenged as a way to get “over” to sell the pretext to the watching audience.

Donald Trump casts himself as a larger than life figure within our social culture. These images have strong grounding within the theatrical nature of his early interactions with the public. President Trump presents himself as a positive protagonist within his own story. Protagonists are frequently seen as the hero or the character that embodies the good fight while moving a plotline forward. Donald Trump, however, regularly employs many negative traits associated with an antagonist. His tendencies toward braggadocio while mocking or belittling others center his natural mannerisms closer to an antagonist rather than a protagonist. The reality within literary devices is Donald Trump probably fits best within the role of the antihero as an atypical protagonist. While humans always contain more depth than literary characters, these categories matter because how
Donald Trump views himself matters. He presents himself more as a character within a narrative role than a person navigating complex situations with often true solution.

Donald Trump’s behaviors and motivations make more sense when one understands rhetorical engagement in professional wrestling. In the modern wrestling world, “the good guy/bad guy dichotomy has been replaced with a more rudimentary strong/weak dichotomy” (de Garis 2005, p. 205). The setup in most engagements is pretty standardized and borrows from theatrical tropes. There is a “conflict, crisis, and resolution” (de Garis 2005, p. 207). The performance itself is always the front and center purpose of every event. Forceful, angry, or emotional appearances are acceptable as long as they drive action and get a response from the audience. Truth rests within the intensity of the argument, not its actual words. Within the world of wrestling, apologies convey weakness so they are never forthcoming. Protagonists and antagonists double down on their assertions to communicate the legitimacy of their words. Dirty tricks, manipulation, and unfair play are all seen as appropriate tactics as long as they make their opponent look weak or foolish.

While professional wrestling apes the grammar of the conventional sporting event, its performance drives much of its dramatic punch from the jarring juxtaposition of the ‘vulgar’ or ‘inappropriate’ with the ‘normal’ codes of athletic competition. Mocking ‘fair play’ with its blatant violation of rules and cheerful celebration of trickery, professional wrestling fractures the athlete-citizen paradigm of impartially judged, equitable competition, highlighting instead the kinds of behind-the-scenes politics and prejudices that obstruct the mobility for the majority of nonbourgeois subjects. (Rahilly 2005, p. 217)

These observations by Rahilly accurately capture the Trump campaign and administration’s modus operandi though they need tweaking a bit for the political, not sports arena. Donald Trump presents a veneer of a politician, but his mannerisms, behaviors, and expectations are more in line with a theatrical presentation. Donald Trump implements tools commonplace in professional wrestling, like verbal aggression to maximum effect while promoting his own version of reality. Tamborini et al. (2008) found “character and competence attacks are among the three most common verbal aggression types in professional wrestling, behind swearing” (p. 253). Furthermore, “the overwhelming majority of verbal
aggression in professional wrestling is communicated for amusement. In other words, characters verbally aggress for no discernable reason other than self and audience gratification” (Tamborini et al. 2008, p. 253). Donald Trump referred to Mexicans as “rapists,” though suggesting many were fine people as well as mocking Nancy Pelosi, the disabled, Megyn Kelly, Elizabeth Warren, Lebron James, among others (Politico Magazine 2016). The following are several instances where Donald Trump has exhibited clear verbal aggression.

Trump regarding Megyn Kelly:

I just don’t respect her as a journalist. I have no respect for her. I don’t think she is very good. I think she is highly overrated. … She gets out and she starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions and, you know, you can see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever. (Schwartz 2015)

Trump responding to comments from Marco Rubio: Look at those hands, are they small hands? And he referred to my hands—“if they’re small, something else must be small.” I guarantee you there’s no problem there’s no problem. I guarantee (Krieg 2016).

Trump tweeting about James’s interview: Lebron James was just interviewed by the dumbest man on television, Don Lemon. He made Lebron look smart, which isn’t easy to do. I like Mike! (Caron 2018).

Trump commenting about 4 congresswomen of color, 3 of whom were born in the United States: Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came (Quilantan and Cohen 2019).

Trump responding to comments that Nancy Pelosi said she prays for him: Nor do I like people who say, “I pray for you,” when they know that’s not so (Baker 2020).

During the vice-presidential debate, Mike Pence justified Trump’s untoward comments by attempting to explain that he was “not a polished politician, like you and Hillary Clinton” (Costa et al. 2016) when rebutting a comment from Tim Kaine. Trump, both as a candidate and president, trades on the dramatic punch of questionable commentary to control the narrative and exposition. He seems to embody the expression “any publicity is good publicity,” which has been attributed to P. T. Barnum, George Cohen, Mae West, Oscar Wilde, Will Rogers, and well as several others without any definite evidence for any one originator.
He says startling things which seem to run counter to the normal standards of political discourse. The reactions to his comments overwhelm the narrative to a news story without real depth into the policy details. In the middle of the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, it was his inimical response to a question that usurped headlines. The reporter asked Trump what he would say to people who were scared and he replied the question was nasty and the man was a terrible reporter (Concha 2020). This response dominated the next news cycle more than the seriousness of the pandemic situation. Many supporters of the president cheer these thumbing of traditional standards because it resonates with their expectations from entertainment venues like wrestling. Over time, the tail begins to wag the dog because these behaviors are then expected from the Trump administration so they seem to pursue events and confrontation that will instigate them.

When Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi ripped up her copy of the State of the Union speech at the end of his address on February 4, 2020, the resulting outrage from the president and other Republicans stemmed from the interruption of their narrative. The president delivered his address rife with several reality television moments. He had the First Lady unexpectedly award the Medal of Freedom to Rush Limbaugh in the audience. He suddenly gave away a scholarship to a young African American student attending a failing public school though it was later found out she actually attends a well-regarded charter school (Carlisle 2020). In perhaps the most reality television segment, President Trump surprised a military wife with her husband who was unexpectedly returned from deployment for this surprise reunion (Lapin 2020). All of these moments were interspersed with a heavily economic policy-based speech touting achievement. It served as a de facto address to launch a reelection campaign without actually using those words. The fact the president clapped for his own speech at points helps highlight the similarities to a wrestling performance. Wrestlers will often clap or wave their hands at the end of their spoken narratives to help draw reactions from the crowd to amplify the response.

At the end of the speech, the president and his Republican allies expected the news cycle for the next day to be devoted to dissection of his actions and the policies he spoke about in the speech. Without saying a word, Nancy Pelosi derailed their talking points and shifted all discussion away from the president and onto herself. She nonverbally expressed an opinion that echoed louder than his “ratings sweeps” moments peppered
throughout his address. She stole his thunder and his anger through Twitter and other media sources the next day reinforced it. Her destruction of her paper copy provided a strong visual rebuttal that upstaged the president. In an attempt to pull attention back onto his message, President Trump and his allies had to craft a false, but compelling account to counteract it. Within wrestling (and other venues with narratives), there is a concept called “retcon” which means retroactive continuity. Retcon occurs when a developing storyline no longer fits the established facts of a situation. However, the writers or others prefer this new direction so the past is either ignored or reimagined to fit the new path. During an early part of State of the Union, President Trump honored one of the last surviving Tuskegee airmen, Charles McGee. Nancy Pelosi tore her copy at the very end of the State of the Union address after the president finished speaking. The next day a video surfaced that retconned the moment Nancy Pelosi ripped the speech as occurring at the moment President Trump introduced Charles McGee. The president shared this video on his own Twitter feed lending validation to this overtly fictional retconned moment (Perrett 2020). This manipulation speaks strongly to the president attempting to shift back the narrative and storyline in his favor while maintaining kayfabe. The president shares this material knowing it is intentionally fictional, but holds to the emotional aspect of the story arc and even falsely perpetuates the rumor her actions were illegal (Timm 2020). His commitment to the idea he was harmed by her actions justifies his anger and retaliation as just retribution. Trump’s tactics root themselves within the need for control and fit squarely within classical definitions of propaganda. Bartlett (1940) discusses similar actions in his book on political propaganda and its techniques. He asserts a propagandist must keep in check an opponent’s “strong element of negative criticism” (p. 80) if they seek to maintain a successful platform in the long term. In addition, “the political propagandist wants to stir up anger, rage and hate against other groups and nations” (Bartlett 1940, p. 77) by advocating “[y]ou must hate and destroy these groups, for they have won what we ought to have had” (Bartlett 1940, p. 77). Specifically, propaganda is “the manipulation of collective attitudes by the use of significant symbols (words, pictures, tunes) rather than violence, bribery, or boycott” (Lasswell 1935, p. 189). Donald Trump trades on these manipulations in rallies, imagery, and even tweets, but in this situation, he aims at creating a completely believable scenario where all his actions were perfect and his
perceived antagonists were perpetuating a hoax or falsehood (even though he is actually the one approving the fabricated message).

In early 2020, Donald Trump and his allies began to push an acquittal narrative to help counter the reality of his impending (and eventual) impeachment. The House of Representatives holds the power to impeach the president. Within Article I, Section 3 of the Constitution, the Senate is granted the power to try the impeachment. However, no place in the Constitution does it contain language for a judgment of not guilty. The Senate penalty simply involves the removal of the president, but not a judgment over the crime. The House of Representatives judged the president and technically impeached him. The Senate lacks any capacity to remove that judgment. These nuanced differences are specifically what many senators alluded toward when they did not argue against the guilt, but insisted it did not rise to the threshold of removal (Wire 2020). The president, on the other hand, attempted to immediately gain media advantage by positioning a narrative of acquittal equating total vindication and erasure of guilt (“White House Declares” 2020). The president had a narrow window to reframe the impeachment into a storyline favorable toward his goal of defining himself as the victim. “The greater the state of public tension, the greater appears to be the opportunity to profit from the undetected lie, or even, perhaps to reap advantage from the story which large numbers of people suspect, though few know, to be untrue” (Bartlett 1940, p. 95). Donald Trump turned to classic wrestling narratives to help advantage himself in this situation. Jenkins (2005) puts forth the idea that wrestling “celebrates and encourages working-class resistance to economic injustice and political abuse” (p. 64). The administration worked to recast President Trump as the victim of a nefarious plot constructed by his enemies to destroy him as well as all who believe in him. In order to accomplish this assertion, the president worked to distract and shift attention away from the facts at hand. Albig (1939) maintains the best way to change opinion is to create diversions elsewhere. He believes “few opinions are changed by being disproved. Much more often, attention is simply diverted to something else” (Albig 1939, p. 216). The Trump administration did not strongly argue the innocence of the president. Instead, they pursued a position of justifiable actions based upon concerns over the behavior of former Vice President Joe Biden’s son, Beau. Though the president was accused of withholding Ukrainian aid as a way to strong-arm information on political rivals, his team worked to recast the situation with a patriotic flair.
After the Senate voted against removing President Trump from office on February 5, 2020, he took steps to encapsulate these above concepts in both actions and words. He maintained the phone call he held about the aid was “perfect” and any accusations were a Democrat hoax (Diamond 2019). In a very real sense, these assertions are examples propagandistic kayfabe. His repetition of his claims matters because it affects recall and perception. People who read biased content are more likely to inculcate the attitudinal direction as well as retain it months later (Albig 1939, p. 222). French theorist Jean Baudrillard grapples with situations when realities become illusionary. In his view, “[T]he only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production” (Baudrillard 1994, p. 22). In other words, in order to retain power, the president has to sell us on his version of reality. The understanding of kayfabe is critical to comprehending why the president prefers to treat the lines between truth and perception.

Donald Trump’s early mass media exposures to professional wrestling indelibly impacted his views of managing the public sphere. Furthermore, kayfabe is not just “pretending wrestling is real,” but it “extends beyond the physical space of the ring and the stadium to the discourse and media around the event” (Chow and Laine 2014, p. 6). It creates “the illusion that professional wrestling is a genuine athletic contest” (Jansen 2018, p. 636). Wrenn (2007) contends within wrestling, the “audience pleasures hinge on… the sustained balance between belief and doubt that allows fans and performers to remain engaged in the game” (pp. 164–165). The president exploits these ideas within the realm of Twitter with extensions into the executive branch. Twitter does a far greater job at achieving at going public than previous presidents could have dared to envision. Twitter almost functions as the president’s internal dialogue rambling unfiltered from a psychiatrist’s couch as an exercise in reactive commentary.

When President Trump belittles, mocks, demeans, questions the intelligence of others, or spreads misinformation or falsehoods (Hasan 2019; Kessler et al. 2019; Thiessen 2019; Goldberg, n.d.), these actions exist as gambits within wrestling. We cannot look at our president and suggest these behaviors are anything except strategic. They are atypical to traditional Washington, state, or local politics, but normalized activities within the theatrical universe of professional wrestling. Faith Popcorn also
suggests people who unable to envision a future seek out emotions by turning to reality television (Abrams 2017). President Trump (as well as professional wrestling) provides a proxy for an emotional release many are unable to express in their daily lives. His brash comments and statements play against the “angels of our better nature” while also externally venting many of the internal emotional sentiments most have to hold their tongue over within their personal interactions. Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka (2004) explore World Wrestling Entertainment as a distinct and coherent subculture. Their research study found several core values present in their sample of fans of the medium. Specifically, they found a “sense of belonging, self-respect, and the alternatives of fantasy adventure, small indulgences and fun/enjoyment/excitement” (Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka 2004, p. 137). In addition, they also found several key attributes and consequences within the respondents. Many couple well with the perceived behaviors of Donald Trump and may help explain the fervent loyalty of his fan base. Three of the six key attributes are amusing, dramatic, and sexual while three of the consequences are vicarious living, fan loyalty, and role model (Deeter-Schmelz and Sojka 2004, p. 137). Though this study was limited in scope, it does perhaps lend insight into why many Trump supporters seem unbothered by his affairs, brash behavior, and attention-getting activities. Donald Trump existed (and perhaps continues to exist) as a regular presence within the WWE subculture for decades. Many people associated with this profession tend to thread the line between kayfabe and reality. Within wrestling, he existed as “Mr. Trump” who shifted between the role of protagonist and antagonist primarily against the owner, Vince McMahon. Many of their theatrical arc interactions (e.g., Battle of the Billionaires, Trump purchasing RAW) play into these fan attitudinal results. They indulge in vicarious dramatic situations where provide loyal viewership while also enjoying their comeuppance. In many of these storylines, both key players (McMahon and Trump) function as dual antagonists pitted against each other with Trump perhaps slightly more protagonist given the antihero McMahon prefers to craft as part of his persona.

However, has Donald Trump had problems “separating fact from fiction” (Margolin 2017, p. 109) within the kayfabe universe of WWE? In 2007, there was a storyline where Vince McMahon’s limousine violently explodes without warning. “Following the broadcast, Donald Trump called the WWE to inquire if McMahon was OK, an incident recounted by Paul ‘Triple H’ Levesque, son-in-law of Vince McMahon, on the
Opie & Anthony Show” (Margolin 2017, pp. 109–110). Fans of the WWE program are expected to buy into the possible scenario of grievous injury which will help propel the next story arc. Donald Trump had already been associated with the world for over twenty years. He had been integral in multiple WWE storylines during that time. These comments suggest Trump even as early as 2007 did not have good boundaries telling the difference between fantasy and reality. His inability to recognize a dramatic action within an entertainment program as fantasy leads toward uncomfortable speculation about his capability of administration within the executive branch. If an American president has issues discerning the fundamental differences between factual events and fantasy narrative, it does not bode well for his filter and perception in more serious situations.

Stories are fun and frequently more palatable than factual material. Within wrestling, the talent always understands when they are using kayfabe to sell a storyline to the audience. The more convincing their performance, the more likely the wrestler will continue to be involved in the story. If President Trump cannot delineate between the person and the fictional performance, then how much of his behavior is persona and how much is actual person? Successful politics at its core relies upon bargaining and compromise (Bianco and Canon 2019, p. 11), yet wrestling demands characters never (or rarely) back down and use aggression for advantage. Moreover, it is well-documented the president watches a tremendous amount of television (Carter 2017; Morrow 2018; Ragusa 2018) on a daily basis. He typically watches four to eight hours a day. The concern, however, is not always the fact he watches television but the content he chooses to watch. Many sources suggest he primarily watches programs like Fox & Friends, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and Jeanine Pirro, among others (Haberman et al. 2017; Morrow 2018). These programs are all opinion-based shows with their hosts providing their own commentary and views upon the news. Does President Trump clearly differentiate between factual news and opinion? Opinion programs have the ability to speculate upon ideas without strong verifiable grounding. Ted Koppel conjectured the American public may have trouble distinguishing between opinion and fact (Koppel 2017). Others, such as Sean Hannity, counter that “[W]e have to give some credit to the American people that they are somewhat intelligent and that they know the difference between an opinion show and a news show” (Farhi 2017). If the Donald Trump sincerely believed an injury occurred
to Vince McMahon on a televised entertainment program he was intim-ately familiar with behind the scenes, it raises serious concerns about his ability to distinguish dramatic narrative from factual accounting. Many of these opinion-based shows are aware the president watches them (Barden 2018; Wilstein 2018; Hains 2019; Melendez 2020) and it very likely impacts the way they present information to help gain loyal viewership and sponsorship.

These ideas matter because of the way Trump presents himself and the populations he activates within society. Bruce Miroff posits a spectacle asks “not only how a president seeks to appear but also what it is that the public sees” (Miroff 2000, p. 302). Audiences have to be receptive to a message in order to be mobilized by it. Donald Trump has concocted an image based upon the media and its portrayals of him and transitioned that into a political voice. In The Art of the Deal, Trump asserts “[T]he final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular” (Trump and Schwartz 1987, p. 58). Thus, the spectacle of the presidency and wrestling are appealing because while they do not merge, they run on parallel paths that play well for Donald Trump and his rhetoric. He developed a media persona centered on the perception of success and wealth. “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. His qualities – or rather his lack of qualities – illustrate our peculiar problems. He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness” (Boorstin 1987, pp. 57–58). While propaganda overtly “makes judgments for them” (Boorstin 1987, p. 34) shoving people in a specific direction, pseudo-events behave in a more insidious fashion. They offer breadcrumbs of truth within a carefully constructed frame to encourage the audience to draw their own, albeit manipulated, opinions. Donald Trump epitomizes the pseudo-event which allows him to dismiss allegations of propaganda while “winking” to his supporters who feel they have done their own research by perusing information from carefully curated and biased sources. They often maintain a semblance of objectivity while presenting material in ways that guide them towards preferred conclusions. In a sense, it’s a bit like a carnival game on the midway. It looks straightforward on the surface, but
in reality, it has been subtly manipulated and rigged to heavily shift the odds to favor the house.

As Donald Trump blends exaggerated and unfiltered reality into one, social confusion over boundaries has occurred. Theatrical norms when applied to daily life generate vastly different reactions than within the artificial confines of an arena. It is not simply a muddling of public and private. Rather, it is a jumbling of theatrical and generalized social standards. When President Trump personally attacks individuals on Twitter, he weaponizes going public in ways previous administrations never engaged in the public sphere. Historically, institutions like Congress were fair game for criticism, as well as their leadership who function as their proxies. Organizations and other macro-level groups were often mentioned by presidents as a way to express frustration or dissatisfaction with policy decisions or directions. President Trump, however, uses it on the microlevel to verbally aggress toward specific targets when he feels slighted or angered. Through directed and often demeaning insults and mockery, he attempts to use the public platform to compel abeyance. After repetitive attacks upon the national news media, an August 2018 Quinnipiac poll indicates 51% of Republicans agree with the president indicating “media is the enemy of the people rather than an important part of democracy” (“U.S. Voters” 2018).

Donald Trump exploits wrestling attributes and has integrated them into his persona, campaign, and presidency. Americans less familiar with them dismissed them, but failed to see them as a way to connect with an audience at their comfort level. Outsiders see personal attacks as abhorrent, while wrestling fans see it as part of the game. While wrestling has often drawn a line between the professional and the personal, Trump has blurred them and we have seen the president as well as private citizens engage in activities that do not transcend into public life well. Racially charged events like the Unite the Right event on August 11–12, 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia exemplify these distorting boundaries. White nationalists march and aggressively vocalize a separationist agenda along with preferential treatments toward their race and perception of history. After breaking laws, they express shock and fear over their arrests and consequences of their actions. The spring and summer of 2018 saw several news articles of racial minorities attacked, arrested, challenged, harassed, or intimidated in public spaces (Eliahou and Zdanowicz 2018; Griggs 2018; May 2018; Riley 2018; Victor 2018). When the accuser faced public humiliation or arrest for their activities, they often
appeared flabbergasted or upset their actions had legal or professional consequences. Their surprise has a certain rationale from perspective of professional wrestling. By utilizing professional wrestling tactics in public life, Donald Trump has given race-baiting or overblown stereotypes validation and tacit approval. When in the ring, these actions rarely face serious punishment beyond jeering. Storylines conclude and the same wrestlers move forward with new protagonists and antagonists with little lingering history. However, when average people behave in similar ways in their private lives, reactions are wildly different with often legal penalties.

The American president is often referred to as the public opinion leader for the United States. Their thoughts, ideas, and positions shape what is considered salient and important to the general public. They not only set the agenda but also its tone. Average citizens look to the president as a gauge for both acceptability and limitations. President Trump behaves as an unfiltered improvisational actor more invested in the reaction than the actions. His supporters among the citizenry often do not place distinctions between showmanship and governance. Instead, they see his actions as normalized and acceptable standards for etiquette. Confrontational and aggressive behaviors toward individuals are appropriate because they are in line with the actions of their president. Distinctions between performance art and daily existence need to be asserted to help reforge boundaries. Otherwise, we risk distractions dominating discourse reducing truth to the loudest rather than the most accurate.

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