

Trump's moves against the media mirror approaches by authoritarian leaders to silence dissent

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Updated 3:45 PM CDT, September 18, 2025
From the AP

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Since taking office in January, President Donald Trump has waged [an aggressive campaign against the media](#) unlike any in modern U.S. history, making moves similar to those of authoritarian leaders that he has often praised.

On Wednesday, Trump cheered ABC's [suspension of Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show](#) after the comedian made remarks about the assassination of conservative activist [Charlie Kirk](#) that criticized the president's MAGA movement: "Congratulations to ABC for finally having the courage to do what had to be done," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

It was the latest in [a string of attacks](#) against news outlets and media figures he believes are overly critical of him. Trump has [filed lawsuits](#) against outlets [whose coverage he dislikes](#), threatened to revoke TV broadcast licenses and sought to bend news organizations and social media companies to his will.

The tactics are similar to those used by leaders in other countries who have chipped away at speech freedoms and independent media while consolidating political power, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a close Trump ally whose leadership style is [revered by many conservatives](#) in the U.S.

"What we're seeing is an unprecedented attempt to silence disfavored speech by the government," said Brendan Nyhan, a political scientist at Dartmouth College. "Donald Trump is trying to dictate what Americans can say."

Is Trump taking cues from Orbán?

Trump's approach to governing [has drawn comparisons to Orbán](#), who has been in power since 2010. The Hungarian leader has made hostility toward the press central to his political brand, borrowing Trump's phrase "fake news" to describe critical outlets. He has not given an interview to an independent journalist in years.

Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders [says Orbán has built](#) "a true media empire subject to his party's orders" through allies' acquisitions of newspapers and broadcasters. The group says that strategy has given Orbán's Fidesz party control of about 80% of Hungary's media market. In 2018, Orbán's allies donated nearly 500 news outlets they had acquired to a government-controlled conglomerate, a group that included all of Hungary's local daily newspapers.

Opposition parties complain that they get just five minutes of airtime on public TV during elections, the legal minimum, while state broadcasters reliably amplify government talking points and smear Orbán's political opponents. Hungary's media authority, staffed entirely by Orbán's party nominees, has threatened nonrenewal of broadcast frequencies to keep outlets in line and forced [the liberal-leaning station Klubrádió off the air](#).

"Here, they bought outlets and replaced editorial staff wholesale," said Hungarian media analyst Gábor Polyák.

The moves against independent media, along with Orbán's systematic capture of Hungary's democratic institutions, prompted the European Parliament in 2022 [to declare](#) that the country could no longer be considered a democracy.

Polyák said that while the American media landscape is far larger and more diverse than Hungary's, he's been struck by the willingness of major U.S. companies to accommodate Trump's threats.

"There is a very strange kind of self-censorship in America," he said. "Even with European eyes, it is very frightening to see to what degree individual bravery does not exist. From Zuckerberg to ABC, everyone immediately surrenders."

[Kimmel suspension is part of a pattern by Trump](#)

Kimmel became the second late-night comic with a history of pillorying Trump to lose their show this year. CBS canceled [Stephen Colbert's show](#) just days after he had criticized the network's settlement of a lawsuit filed by Trump over its editing of a "60 Minutes" interview with former Vice President Kamala Harris, Trump's opponent last fall.

CBS said the July move was made for financial reasons, but Trump celebrated it nevertheless while appearing to foreshadow this week's developments: "I absolutely love that Colbert got fired. His talent was even less than his ratings," he wrote on his social media platform at the time. "I hear Jimmy Kimmel is next."

ABC's suspension of Kimmel on Wednesday came after Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr made a pointed warning about the comedian on a conservative podcast earlier in the day: "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he said.

Carr also launched an investigation into CBS and opened probes into [public broadcasting networks](#) after Trump persuaded Congress to defund them.

The Kimmel suspension has highlighted [the president's broader efforts to pressure journalists](#), media companies, and now [comedians and commentators](#), to align with his views. On Thursday, as he returned from Great Britain, Trump said regulators should consider revoking the licenses of networks that provide what he considers "only bad publicity."

Trump also has targeted social media giants, claiming Meta [dropped its fact-checking program](#) partly because of his threats, which included jailing founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Even powerful media owners have appeared to bend under pressure. Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos, whose companies have significant government contracts, killed an editorial endorsement of Democratic nominee Kamala Harris before the 2024 election and, like Meta, [donated \\$1 million](#) to Trump's inauguration. Disney-owned ABC News agreed to [a \\$15 million settlement](#) to resolve a Trump lawsuit.

Media crackdowns in other countries

Hungary is not the only country where similar patterns to erode an independent media landscape have been playing out. In neighboring Serbia, populist President Aleksandar Vucic has faced accusations of curtailing media freedoms since coming to power over a decade ago.

Critics have cited a combination of political pressure, public smear campaigns and financial pressure on the media as the means Vucic's government has used to establish control over mainstream outlets and the public RTS broadcaster.

Journalist safety in Serbia has worsened since the start of student-led protests some 10 months ago that have challenged Vucic's firm rule. The Media Freedom Rapid Response group — which monitors press freedom in Europe — said in a recent report they were “gravely concerned” that Serbian journalists “have been reporting under immense political pressure, faced with physical violence, censorship, smear campaigns, abusive lawsuits, and daily death threats.”

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin consolidated control over national television early in his rule and later expanded restrictions on civil society, independent journalism and online platforms. Authorities later used a flurry of laws to restrict freedom of speech.

The restrictive label “foreign agent” has been slapped on the few remaining independent media outlets and scores of journalists, and the government has steadily tightened controls on the internet. Putin's crackdown has only intensified after Russia's 2022 [invasion of Ukraine](#), when new laws criminalized criticism of the war and forced many journalists into exile.

The rise in India of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has coincided with [mounting pressure on comedians and satirists](#). Police have [arrested performers](#) for jokes deemed offensive to Hindu deities or critical of Modi's party. Comedians such as Kunal Kamra and Vir Das have faced lawsuits, show cancellations and harassment from nationalist groups for skewering the government.

Leaders also have cracked down on the media in multiple Latin American countries. Nicaragua withdrew from the United Nations' main cultural agency earlier this year [to protest a press freedom award](#) it gave to the country's main opposition newspaper. That publication, La Prensa, has been largely produced by writers in exile since the government raided its Managua offices in 2021.