

# Journalists beware: Trump clones to hit politics

Years ago, I learned a painful lesson watching Donald Trump.

No, not the one who is our president-elect; the candidate whose coverage I witnessed was running for county commissioner, and although he lost, he was Trump-like: loud, uninhibited, angry and loose with facts and accusations. He also was extremely entertaining.

The lesson came when a colleague covered a candidates forum. Such forums (fora?) often are dreary affairs, with well-meaning folks speaking to a modest-sized crowd and, for a couple of minutes each, promising jobs, economic development, careful spending, new programs, devotion to motherhood, love of puppies, etc. The presentations rarely rise above the superficial, usually not because the candidates are stupid or lazy, but because the format allows little time for depth.

But the Trump-like candidate – I'll call him Lance – was different. He was theatrical bordering on frantic, and although much of what he said was vacuous attacking of the incumbent, he aroused the crowd.

My colleague who covered the forum focused his story on Lance. He wrote it knowing Lance was more qualified for "Saturday Night Live" than for



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public office, and his misstep was that he assumed readers would recognize that Lance had no serious positions, just mindless anger at the status quo.

The reporter's reasoning was that the other speakers were bland; at least Lance would draw readers.

Tactically he was correct; readers responded. However, the story was strategically wrong, as it gave too much unchallenged space to a crackpot. The reporter should have written a standard candidates-forum story that mentioned, but didn't dwell on, Lance, then followed with a rigorously reported follow-up showing Lance was spouting absurdities.

That was my lesson.

Now, it would be irresponsible to equate President-elect Trump with Lance. Yes, both tapped into the anger and distrust among the electorate. But Trump, despite his faults, is an accomplished

person with a record of dealing with complex real-world problems. As a candidate, Lance was a dilettante who could deliver a rousing speech but whose background did not merit a decision-making role in government.

Criticism of the news coverage of Trump's campaign has flowed, um, liberally since Election Day, some of it self-directed, although weird. The New York Times' publisher and executive editor penned a letter "To Our Readers," in which they praised "our newsroom" for its election-night coverage, then seemed on the verge of apologizing for something – "... we aim to rededicate ourselves ..." – then snuffed the apology and vowed to diligently cover President Trump.

The Wall Street Journal published a remarkable column by its deputy editorial page editor who had criticized Trump throughout the campaign. The column's thoughts were unremarkable; it was standard, "I'm a columnist, and I have to express my honest opinion" stuff, the very definition of a column.

What was remarkable was that the columnist thought he had to say it. In thinking he had to explain his role, he didn't show much respect for the intelligence of readers.

All of this "rededication" and public introspection seems honorable, but it's meaningless if we don't learn from what really happened in the 2016 campaign. Just as my colleague (and I) assumed voters would see Lance for what he was, journalists started covering Trump as a goofy footnote who would liven up the tedium of the early primaries.

By the time journalists started taking him seriously, their profuse "Look at this funny guy!" coverage had built up Trump's following, and traditional candidates couldn't catch up.

After Trump's election, two outcomes are possible, and they may coincide: (1) More candidates will adopt the Trump-Lance approach of loud, bold, insulting statements – his assertion that Jeb Bush was "low energy" devastated the acknowledged front-runner's campaign – to gain early attention for an otherwise long-shot campaign. (2) Astute journalists, both reporters and their demanding editors, will not let candidates build a following based on bombast.

And one more thing must be considered: Even before The Lesson of Lance, I got a schooling from a different iconoclastic candidate. He was running for mayor, and he ripped into every-

thing the city had done or was doing.

One night after a candidates forum, he took me aside and, smiling broadly, he said, "I trust your story tomorrow will make me look bad."

A young reporter, I was perplexed.

He added, "As long as the press is against me, I know I'll win."

He did, and as I watched Candidate Trump, I thought: If the country is as angry as he says, the negative stories will only help him because the traditional news media is perceived as propping up the status quo fueling that anger.

**THE FINAL WORD:** When I see a book on word usage, I have to have it, so I recently bought "Bryson's Dictionary of Troublesome Words" by the delightful Bill Bryson.

Skimming it, I found that the plural of "mongoose" is "mongooses." Bryson explains: "The word is of Indian origin and has no relation to the English 'goose.'"

This is going to be fun.

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