

Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley may be new to the spotlight, but he's had a long, generally 'constructive' relationship with the media covering his rise

It was the fist pump seen 'round the world.

On Jan. 6, as he strode into the U.S. Capitol, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley raised his fist to acknowledge a crowd gathered outside the building. Francis Chung, a photojournalist for E&E News, a Washington-based group of publications covering energy and environmental issues, [snapped a picture](#) of the moment.

Chung did not know it at the time, but his photo would become one of the most memorable images of a day on which a violent mob of Donald Trump supporters would later storm the Capitol and temporarily halt Congress's certification of the electoral votes that would make Joe Biden the 46th president of the United States.

Hawley, an architect of the effort by some lawmakers to drag out the certification process, was already a rising star inside a Republican Party that has made near-constant conflict with the press a core attribute of its national brand.



(Photo by Dominique A. Pineiro via Flickr)

But since that day in January, and with Trump now out of the White House and booted off Twitter, Josh Hawley has become something more. Missouri's junior senator may be the best current example of an ambitious, populist politician who is successfully capturing the national spotlight while simultaneously issuing dire warnings about "cancel culture" and being "muzzled" by opponents.

To Missouri journalists who have covered Hawley's rise in five quick years from college law professor to state attorney general to U.S. senator to possible presidential contender, the glare from this spotlight is obscuring Hawley's previous relationships with reporters and editors in Missouri. Those relationships have tended to be constructive, they said.

Jason Hancock, editor in chief of the Missouri Independent and formerly Jefferson City correspondent for the Kansas City Star, told Gateway Journalism Review he recalls first speaking to Hawley in the spring of 2016, when Hawley – then a law

professor at the University of Missouri in Columbia – testified in support of a bill dealing with religious expression on college campuses.

“We did a nice long interview on that,” Hancock said. “He answered the phone, and was happy to chat.”

Hawley remained very accessible during his run later in 2016 for Missouri Attorney General, and after he assumed the office in early 2017, Hancock said.

“I can remember numerous conversations with him,” Hancock said. “He was really accessible to Missouri reporters – at least to me, and I’m presuming other reporters. He would occasionally call, just to talk about things. You know, ‘This is what’s happening, this is something that should be on your radar.’ It wasn’t just always his staff. He was someone personally accessible.”

But relations with the press got testier when Hawley challenged Democratic incumbent Claire McCaskill for her Senate seat in 2018, midway through Trump’s presidency.

“It did feel as though there was a lot more testiness between Senator Hawley and the media, and I don’t know if that was the byproduct of a tough campaign, or if it was just catching a wave of anti-media energy coming from the president,” Hancock said.

Scott Diener, news director at CBS affiliate KMOV-TV (Channel 4) in St. Louis, took issue with [a guest column](#) Hawley wrote for the New York Post in January about being “muzzled.”

In that item, Hawley complained that “corporate monopolies and the left team up to shut down speech they don’t like.” The column came after a publishing house canceled a book deal with the senator, some corporate donors suspended their contributions, and lawmakers including Democratic Rep. Cori Bush of St. Louis called for Hawley’s expulsion from Congress.

“Let the record show @KMOV has offered @HawleyMO airtime everyday on Missouri’s most watched newscast for three straight weeks. He has declined. No muzzling here,” Diener [tweeted](#) on Jan. 25. (The tweet went viral, racking up over 19,000 “likes.”)

Diener told GJR that up until December, access to Hawley had been “pretty good.” For example, after Hawley was first elected and went to Washington, KMOV reporter Chris Nagus spent a day with him on Capitol Hill.

“His office would reach out to us on a regular basis – every other week, maybe – and say ‘the senator’s available.’ You’d maybe get only two or three questions in, during five minutes. We’d love more time,” Diener said.

“But in fairness, his office has been really good about talking with us, up until December, and then they kind of went dark on us,” Diener told GJR in a phone conversation in early March. “But they’re back, and we’ve had two interviews with him in the last two weeks.”

Hawley’s office did not respond to inquiries from GJR seeking comment for this story.

Even conservative commentators normally friendly to Hawley, such as KMOX-AM afternoon host Mark Reardon, have scrapped with the senator. During [a Jan. 27 interview](#), Reardon challenged Hawley over his opposition to the certification of Pennsylvania’s electoral votes for Biden. (Hawley said Pennsylvania’s mail-in ballot system violated that state’s constitution.)

“Senator, you more than anyone else – and this is what just personally disappoints me – you *knew* that there was no constitutional path for that election to be overturned once the electors were certified, and there’s a fair amount of people including me that feel that you led people to believe that that option still existed,” Reardon said.

“Look at my statements, Mark. I never said that the goal was to overturn the election,” Hawley shot back.

Then he turned the heat up even more: “It is a lie that I was trying to overturn an election...it is a lie that I incited violence, or that having a debate on the floor of the Senate is an equivalent to violence. That is a lie. I am not going to bow to a left-wing mob that tries to run me out of town.”

A [Morning Consult poll](#) taken during and after the events of Jan. 6 showed Hawley losing support among registered Missouri voters, including among Republican voters, although Hawley still retained strong approval among GOP voters overall.

One of Hawley’s key early backers, former Sen. John Danforth, also withdrew his support in January, saying in [an interview](#) with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that supporting Hawley “was the worst mistake I ever made in my life.”

Hawley has remained defiant, however, and there are signs his controversial stance may actually be helping him. Axios [reported on March 7](#) that Hawley’s campaign brought in more than \$1.5 million between Jan. 1 and March 5, nearly 12 times what Hawley raised during the first quarter of 2020. The website noted that Hawley has also been a fundraising boon for Republicans generally.

“It doesn’t seem to have tarnished him too terribly much, at least among his base, and so the coverage still reflects that,” Hancock said. “After Jan. 6, in that sort of infamous image of him, with his fist in the air, [he] got an avalanche of coverage, from international media on down.”

Looking ahead, much coverage of Hawley will be guided by speculation about a possible run for the White House in 2024, Hancock said.

“The issues he’s been most passionate about are national issues,” Hancock said, mentioning threats from China and the

concentration of power at tech companies such as Google as examples. “That’s where you’ll see a lot of coverage focused: through the prism of, is he doing this to set the table for a future presidential run. And that’s why I also think you’ll see a lot more national attention paid to him – not just the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and Kansas City Star – but The New York Times and Washington Post paying attention.”

Hancock added: “There was a joke somebody told me: ‘If Trump loses, you’ll find that Josh Hawley’s going to end up doing a lot of events in the Kirksville (MO) media market, because it shares a media market with Ottumwa, Iowa.’ That’s the kind of joke that folks are making now.”

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