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The media in support of the American political structure and its institutions as evidenced by newspaper editorial coverage of the Iran-Contra affair

William R. Head

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**THE MEDIA IN SUPPORT OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL STRUCTURE
AND ITS INSTITUTIONS AS EVIDENCED BY NEWSPAPER
EDITORIAL COVERAGE OF THE IRAN-CONIRA AFFAIR**

A Thesis

**Presented to the
Department of Political Science
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**by
William R. Head**

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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4/25/1989

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INTRODUCTION

Knocking the media in this country has become something of a "national pastime."¹ Whatever the problem, it is never difficult to find someone who is willing to blame the media for complacency, if not responsibility.

Broadly speaking, the political left accuses media executives of lacking social initiative and being too preoccupied with turning a profit while those on the right scorn individual journalists as muckrakers. Or, as one author put it: "If the Democrats lose, the fault is the bias of publishers; if the Republicans lose, it is the bias of the underling journalists who warp the news."²

Still, it would be difficult to imagine our society, given its political value system, without an efficient and effective means of communication. Indeed, most people would likely agree that the media are "probably our most important safeguard against the manifold evils to which any large public may fall prey."³

Although we vacillate between cursing and blessing the media, it has been argued that as an endemic part of our society, "the media exert a subtle, persistent influence in defining the scope of respectable political discourse, channeling public attention in directions that are essentially supportive of the existing politico-economic system."⁴ This is not to suggest any sort of collusion between the media and government - although there are several people who believe this to be the case⁵ - but rather to posit that like church and school, the media tend to contribute to the preservation

and promulgation of American values and social order. As Sociologist Charles R. Wright points out:

Mass-communicated news usually reflects social values that are supportive of the social order and of the dominant social structure of that society. This makes sense. Why would any society (totalitarian, democratic, or otherwise) retain a system of mass communication surveillance that "spits in its eye" or otherwise threatens the social order?⁶

In 1969, researchers from Duke University conducted a study of the local news coverage of city council meetings. In finding discrepancies between what the media reported and reality, the researchers concluded that the media supported existing authorities and institutions, adding that:

The general impact of the mass media is to socialize people into accepting the legitimacy of their country's political system; ... lead them to acquiesce in America's prevailing social values; ... direct their opinions in ways which do not undermine and often support the domestic and foreign objectives of elites.⁷

Earlier in this century, Walter Lippmann commented that, "At its best, the press is a servant and guardian of [political] institutions"⁸ and even a cursory evaluation of the television coverage of the inauguration of George Bush as the 41st president would seem to bear this out. All four major news networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN) covered the inauguration live and, later, it was the lead story in each of the respective news programs.

In fact, that same evening, ABC allotted nearly two-thirds of its half-hour news broadcast to the inauguration and related stories while CBS and NBC each devoted nearly one-third of their evening programming

to the event. Additionally, much of the coverage consisted of symbols of support for authority and democratic institutions.⁹ Seemingly long forgotten was much of the tension that existed between the media and the executive office (e.g., complaints about the paucity of President Reagan's press conferences, the government's media ban during the invasion of Grenada, and Dan Rather's live-televised confrontation with George Bush concerning the latter's knowledge of the Iran-Contra affair).

Doris Graber stated that there is a natural conflict between the media and government given the media's role in the political process.¹⁰ However, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that while the media frequently "support or attack public figures and public policies"¹¹ they rarely attack the institution or system of government. Furthermore, most of the media's criticism of public officials frequently concerns those individuals who have been publicly suspected as having failed to live up to the standards established by the institutions in which they serve (e.g., Did Oliver North break any federal statutes and/or betray the executive office?).

Those organizations or people who are criticized are often "already subject to broad social disapproval"¹² having shown themselves unworthy of public support and trust (e.g., Richard Nixon and the Watergate affair¹³).

The validity of this thesis is the subject of this paper as it examines newspaper editorials relating to the Iran-Contra affair to determine if, indeed, the media demonstrated support for the political

system and institutions of this country.

Everyone is well aware of the tremendous amount of media attention paid to individuals connected with the affair such as Oliver North, et al., but how did the media treat the system in which the affair took place? For example, were there any serious attacks on the institution of government or suggestions made for restructuring the system of government in order to avoid future foreign policy mishaps? Or, did the media simply castigate individuals within the system who failed to uphold established standards?

By media I mean print, television and radio communication,¹⁴ although this study will deal specifically with newspaper editorials relating to the Iran-Contra affair. However, other media sources such as television will be used to help illustrate a point about media responsibility.

Studies have shown that people who read newspapers have a better understanding and retention of the news.¹⁶ And, although other media such as television are important socialization agents, newspaper content has a stronger and more lasting impact on the public.¹⁷

Chapter One will address the general relationship between the press and society followed by brief discussions of the press and government in Chapter Two and media ownership in Chapter Three. Chapter Four will address the social responsibility of the media. That is, how do journalists and their critics see the role of the press in society?

The purpose of these chapters will be to explore why one might

expect the media to support the political system and institutions of this country. Chapter Five will provide the content analysis of the newspaper editorials along with a brief look at some of the political aspects of the Iran-Contra affair. This chapter will also provide the conclusion and a discussion of the theoretical implications of the media's coverage of the Iran-Contra affair.

ENDNOTES TO INTRODUCTION

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2. J.E. Gerald, The Social Responsibility of the Press (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1963), 108. See also the discussion in Doris Graber, Mass Media and American Politics (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1976), 11.
3. Bernard Hennessy, Public Opinion (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1985), 288.
4. Michael Parenti, Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), ix.
5. In addition to the above, see Michael Massing, "The Rise and Decline of Accuracy in Media," The Nation, September 13, 1986, 200-214; William Small, To Kill a Messenger: Television News and the Real World (New York: Hasting House, 1970), 249, in which the author calls the media "captives of the establishment." Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Two Faces of Power" in American Political Science Review 56 (December 1962): 947-952, and Frank S. Morrow, "The U.S. power structure and the mass media" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1984).
6. Charles R. Wright, Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective (New York: Random House, 1986), 143-144.
7. David L. Paletz and Robert M. Entman, "Accepting The System," in Media Power in Politics, ed. Doris A. Graber, (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1984), 81-88. Quote on 81.
8. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (London: The Free Press, 1922), 229.
9. ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, and Cable News Network January 20, 1989. It is interesting to note that in 1987, NBC Nightly News began its broadcasts with a panoramic view of the Statue of Liberty with dramatic background music conducted by composer John Williams.
10. Doris Graber, 221.
11. Bernard Hennessy, 286.

12. James Curran, Michael Curevitch and Janet Wollacott, eds., Mass Communication and Society (London: Sage Publications, 1981), 82-83.

13. For a discussion on the relationship between public opinion and the media regarding Richard Nixon during the Watergate affair see Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, "The Media and Watergate" in Doris Graber Media Power in Politics, 202-209.

14. Sociologist Charles R. Wright has been commonly cited for his definition of mass media: Those sources which communicate to "a relatively large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audience" and whose message is characterized as being "public, rapid, and transient." Charles Wright, 7, 8.

15. Ronald Berkman and Laura W. Kitch, Politics in the Media Age, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 136. See also Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics (New York: Putnam Books, 1976), 53.

16. Bernard Hennesy, 266.

CHAPTER ONE

The Press and Society

Max Weber was among the first scholars to appreciate the power and importance of the press in society. He regarded the press as vital to a stable society and essential in bringing about social improvements, stating that the press had the ability to "cement the masses together."¹

Another sociologist, Lester Ward, said that "the supreme duty of civilized man [is] to maintain the continuity of the social germ-plasm" which the press had a role in insuring.²

A more recent observation relating the role of the media in society is as follows:

[Mass] communications serve as a link between man and his environment, and their efforts may be explained in terms of the role they play in enabling people to bring about more satisfying relationships between themselves and the world around them.³

Charles R. Wright, still another sociologist, stated that "Participation in the communication process establishes a person as a social being and as a functioning member of society."⁴

A great deal of the information we receive regarding our political and social environment, values, beliefs, and attitudes are obtained through the processes of mass communication. The demands of modern society require people to use mass-communicated news and

information.⁵ That is, most people receive news about local, national and international issues and events - about which they will later form opinions and potentially act on - through the media.

Consequently, the public has come to rely more and more on the media for guidance.⁶ According to Harold Harold Lasswell, the media provide three basic functions in society: The surveillance of world events, the interpretation of those events, and the socialization of individuals into their social setting.⁷ Doris Graber adds a fourth function involving the "deliberate manipulation of the political process."⁸

The significance of these functions becomes quite clear when you consider that "on the average day, 80 percent of all Americans are reached by television and newspapers. On a typical evening, the television audience is close to 100 million people, nearly half of the entire population."⁹

Also, the United States is one of largest newspaper reading countries in the world as nearly every family receives at least one daily paper, making the newspaper virtually "a household necessity."¹⁰ Frequently, newspapers* serve as the only source "from which the public derives its knowledge of the facts."¹¹

The ubiquity of the press in our daily lives suggests some form of social symbiosis. That is, the structures of the media and society

* Newspapers are defined as "an unbound publication issued at regular intervals which seeks to inform, influence, entertain and serve its readers, and foster the nation's economic development through advertising." Ernest C. Hynds, American Newspapers in the 1980's (New York: Hastings House, 1980, p. 19).

are a reflection of each other.¹² Media organizations are not socially anomalous, rather they are microcosms of the larger society. Thus, it is reasonable that while "newspapers influence society, society influences newspapers."¹³

This was certainly one of the conclusions reached by Herbert Gans following his study of television and print media in the 1970s.¹⁴ Gans stated that while journalists have more power and influence than most of us, "they express, and often subscribe to, the economic, political, and social ideas and values which are dominant in America."¹⁵

Gans said that the news contains "topical values" which express opinions and "enduring values" which "can be found in many different types of news stories over a long period of time; often they affect what events become news, for some are part and parcel of the definition of news."¹⁶

These enduring values consist of ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership.¹⁷ A discussion of each of these will help illustrate the nature of the relationship between the media and society.

Ethnocentrism

Most of the news is reported with an American bias and is occasionally prone to displays of "blatant patriotism."¹⁸ In contrast, much of the news that comes out of socialist or non-democratic countries such as Cuba frequently deals with the

inadequacies of that political system in comparison to the standard of living in the United States.

Although domestic problems are addressed, they are often treated as being socially or politically anomalous and not representative of the true nature of American society. For instance, following the exposure of the Watergate affair in the early 1970's, the press maintained an attitude that "nothing was fundamentally wrong with American democracy even if reforms were needed."¹⁹

Altruistic Democracy

The news often reports on the deviations from the "unstated ideal" of how American democracy should work by calling attention to "corruption, conflict, protest, and bureaucratic malfunctioning ... The news implies that politics should follow a course based on the public interest and public service."²⁰ The news often reflects the ideals first expressed by framers of the Constitution. As a result:

The news endorses, or sets up as a standard, the formal norms of democracy and the formal structures of democratic institutions as established by the Founding Fathers. Concurrently, it treats as suspect the informal norms and structures that have developed in the polity to allocate power and resources; in effect, the news defends democratic theory against an almost inevitable inferior democratic practice.²¹

Perhaps this explains the popular perception of a constantly antagonistic and careless media since "the news consistently reports political and legal failures to achieve altruistic and official democracy [while concerning] itself much less with the economic barriers that obstruct the realization of the ideal."²²

On the one hand, the media's notion of altruistic democracy provides the legitimacy for which to question public decisions and policies while, on the other hand, it fuels debate about the role of the media in society.

This is possible because neither the media nor the government can claim to have access to ultimate Truth, thus making the media's role subject to interpretation.

Responsible Capitalism

Members of the media have an underlying faith that "businessmen and women will compete with each other in order to create increased prosperity for all, but that they will refrain from unreasonable profits and gross exploitation of workers and customers."²³

Consequently, the press pays close attention to the stock market and lauds imaginative and successful business executives such as Lee Iacocca.

The recent Wall Street scandals involving "insider trading" are perceived by the media as a breach of trust and subject to public disapproval legal prosecution. Also, the media is highly critical of socialist or non-capitalistic economies as being socially inferior and inadequate.²⁴

Small-town Pastoralism

The reporting of events in small towns or communities reveals "an underlying respect for tradition." Tradition, of course, is valued because it is "predictable, and therefore orderly, and order is a

major enduring news value."²⁵

Stories about the people and events of small towns (e.g., Charles Kuralt's "On The Road" series) exploit the "virtue of smallness" while attacking "Big Government, Big Labor, and Big Business" which are perceived as having little to no social virtue whatsoever in addition to being "impersonal and inhuman."²⁶

Individualism

Another enduring value is "the preservation of the freedom of the individual against the encroachments of nation and society." Capitalism, for example, is valued because of "the freedom it offers to at least some individuals."²⁷

Individual success stories are common in news reporting in which initiative and achievement are frequently praised, particularly when the individual must overcome many obstacles. For example, it is not unusual to hear or read about a single parent working two or three jobs while advocating for decent and affordable day-care facilities. Or about a person fighting city hall because a proposed waste disposal site will adversely affect the local environment.

Moderatism

While innovative and courageous citizenship is admired, "excess and extremism" are discouraged. Religious fanatics as well as atheists are treated as social pariahs and the press is as suspect of the know-it-all as it is of the uniformed radical.²⁸

Fighting city hall to save the environment is admirable but

refusing to pay your taxes is not.

Social Order

This is perhaps the most important enduring value since it suggests that the media purposely try to maintain the status quo while simultaneously fighting against change.

Often, social disorders (e.g., civil protests) are reported because of their social drama but the emphasis of the coverage is usually "placed on order restoration" (i.e., what is being done to restore order).²⁹ For example, in 1968, a presidential commission examined the media coverage of inner city riots during the summer of 1967 and found that the majority of the newspapers studied (more than 3,700) focused their attention on legislation and planning that would prevent such rioting in the future while television emphasized the police and legal responses to the rioting.³⁰

In most cases, the news media help the public make sense of an event by giving it meaning and significance. They prepare the public to deal with both man-made problems (e.g., rioting) and natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes and floods), and later they tell the public when the danger is over and life can go as before.³¹

Thus, an important function of the media during a crisis situation is to assure the public that the "authorities have the situation under control." Even the Soviet media, following the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, was quick to reassure its audience and the rest of the world that "those affected were being given assistance."³²

Following initial damage reports, news organizations often turn their attention to "morale-building activities,"³³ and the concern for public safety and well-being become major aspects of news reporting:

In American political culture, the normal feuds of politics are suspended when the nation is in danger ... it is increasingly true that the media abandon their adversarial role during a crisis. They become teammates of officialdom in attempts to restore public order, safety, and tranquillity.³⁴

In fact, newspapers have been known to voluntarily "kill" a story when it is felt that it could unfairly affect an individual by causing undue damage to his or her character or safety, or when the story could disrupt society and lead to social disorder.³⁵

In crisis situations, the media not only help inform the public of potential dangers but they also help direct relief efforts while keeping officials informed about the seriousness and extent of the damage. News stations frequently become coordination centers during an emergency, providing casualty reports, updates, and aid/relief locations.³⁶

The media have frequently reported news and events in a manner that reassures public anxieties. For example, many Americans were concerned with who was running the country following the assassination of John F. Kennedy while others were worried about a possible invasion or attack during the crisis. The media's quick and reassuring response to the assassination and its aftermath lead former CBS News president Fred Friendly to remark "television held the nation ... I

think it's broadcasting's finest hour and I think it may have saved this country."³⁷

Stories about moral indiscretion by public officials (e.g., Gary Hart's extramarital affair) are reported to "reaffirm the moral values" of society.³⁸ By reporting moral peccadilloes and framing other stories as questions of morality, the media "act as a kind of Greek chorus for nation and society."³⁹

National Leadership

The media have a high respect and regard for conscientious leadership. Reporters frequently look to national leaders to help explain an event or issue which the media, in turn, then provide to the public. While the media is not in cahoots with the national leadership, they often provide public officials with the means for promoting their goals and policies. As a result, national leaders are frequently perceived as the defenders of our faith, politics, and general well-being.⁴⁰

There is some concern that this "who is in charge" mentality on the part of the press often places an individual source above the true significance of the event⁴¹ and thus fails to offer the public a complete disclosure of the facts.

Gans concluded in his study that regardless of claims of ideological neutrality in news reporting, the enduring values enter into the information system through the selection process of what is reported and how its is reported. That is to say, "journalists make preference statements about nation and society ... both through story

selection and as opinions expressed in specific stories."⁴² (See Chapter Two.)

Media analyst Ithiel de Sola Pool suggested that:

Editors conform to those patterns of life which we would predict for the heads of one of the key institutions in the social structure ... [so] we are justified in treating the prestige paper as the same type of central institution as the dominant church, the army, or the school system.⁴³

According to Pool, "the prestige press has become an institution of considerable importance in the social structure of the Western powers much reflect the personality or idiosyncrasies of any single individual."⁴⁴ Instead, they reflect the social values and beliefs shared by other institutional leaders.⁴⁵

Gans stated that the media have neither a conservative nor liberal ideology but rather is reformist in nature, similar to the Progressive movement in this country in the early 1900's when, according to Gans, the enduring values took root. These values are built into the news selection process and are shared by journalists, public officials, and the general public.⁴⁶

There is, however, some concern that a value gap has developed between journalists and the public. In one survey, while most journalists agreed that public integration into the news process was important, few felt that anything was being done to achieve it. Besides "letters-to-the-editor," there are few, if any, means for individuals to take an active part in gathering or processing of the

daily news. There is a fear that this gap might eventually lead to "feelings of elitism and condescension toward the public" by journalists.⁴⁷

However, such a gap may be irrelevant since most journalists ascribe to the notion of "value-free" reporting.

Journalists strive to be objective, both in intent, by applying personal detachment; and in effect, by disregarding the implications of the news. They do not choose the news on the basis of whom it will help or hurt; and when they cannot ignore implications, they try to be fair.⁴⁸

This detachment lends itself to the media's claim of neutrality and accuracy while advancing its public credibility. Gans reported that a newspaper editor once told him that the paper's stand on any given issue was "less his own than 'a response to the public mood.'"⁴⁹ Walter Lippmann asserted that not only did the press reflect the public mood but that the press reported the news in a manner that reinforced public stereotypes.⁵⁰

Like previous studies, Gans found that most reporters were ideologically moderate to liberal while senior editors and staff personnel tended to be conservative. In both cases, Gans found that they all strived to leave their personal and political beliefs outside the news room because objectivity and credibility were highly valued qualities.⁵¹ According to Gans, American journalists ...

are interested in appealing to their audiences and therefore reflect the values of mainstream American society regardless of their personal political orientations.⁵²

Still, literally hundreds of stories never see the light of day due to production requirements and time restraints. Consequently, "it would be impossible for an editor's own values not to affect news decisions."⁵³ However, any bias that creeps into the process will likely reflect one or more of the enduring values and thus the news is likely to reflect:

A concern for social reform, an interest in the problems of the poor and the minorities, a distrust of big business, a concern for the environment and the quality of life, and a willingness to use government power to do good.⁵⁴

Public opinion reflects a high degree of confidence in the news media. A 1985 survey conducted by the Los Angeles Times revealed that the public perceived the news media as being professional, fair, accurate, and reliable, while perceiving "no serious left-wing bias in the material they see and read."⁵⁵ Sixty-five percent of those polled said that their own newspaper was doing a "very good" job and fifty-two percent said that news accuracy was "fairly good."⁵⁶

Although most of the journalists who were surveyed claimed to be politically "liberal," the public could not infer any ideological preference in the papers they read.⁵⁷

The survey also showed that the news media held the highest public approval rating (43%) in the area of "honesty and integrity" compared with the government (15%), business (13%), and organized labor (9%).⁵⁸ The press also rated the highest (38%) for having "done the most to promote the public good," followed by the government (22%), business (16%), and organized labor (12%).⁵⁹

One of the most important aspects of the relationship between the media and the public is that dealing with political socialization. Socialization is "the process by which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next"⁶⁰ and political socialization is commonly defined as: "All political learning, formal and informal, deliberate and unplanned, at every stage of the life cycle, including not only explicitly political learning but also nominally nonpolitical learning that affects political behavior."⁶¹

This definition easily applies to such institutions as the public school system, which has been legally charged with enculturating children into the American social and political climate,⁶² but it also applies to the media who themselves have become "important agents of political socialization."⁶³

By expressing, dramatizing and repeating cultural patterns, both the traditional and the newly emerging, the media reinforce tradition and at the same time explain new roles. Members of the society thus remain integrated within the sociocultural structure.⁶⁴

Several studies have shown that the media are "the primary factor in the political socialization of children ... [which] includes specific facts as well as general values."⁶⁵

The bulk of information that young people acquire about the nature of their political world comes from the mass media. It reaches them either directly through exposure to the electronic and print media or indirectly through exposure of their families, teachers, acquaintances, and peers. Mass media information presents to the young specific facts as well as general values.⁶⁶

The media have a direct, and frequently immediate, impact on

children's attitudes toward the political system. "Those children who use the news media frequently view the political system favorably and anticipate a greater role in the political processes."⁶⁷ As a result of this early political indoctrination, children tend to be very supportive of the American political system.⁶⁸

One study concluded that while both parents and the media have an important impact on the attitudes of children, "the media are more important and parents are less important in political socialization."⁶⁹ Furthermore, even though children receive political cues and values from their parents, parents, in turn, tend to "rely heavily on the mass media for much of the information and values that they transmit."⁷⁰ It should, however, be noted that other studies have concluded that while the media are instrumental in the political socialization of children, it must be understood in the context of each child's unique relationship with friends, family, and peers.⁷¹

Reliance on the media for social and political cues continues well into adult life. For example, a study in the 1950's examined a community's view of the leadership role of newspaper editors.⁷² The study concluded that not only were the editors viewed as community leaders but the public looked to them to help build community consensus and guidance.⁷³

Does the public rely too much on the media? Can the media manipulate the public? While such questions raise interesting implications, they are nonetheless subjective in nature. At a minimum, it is safe to say that there is a relationship between media

usage and: "(a) an interest in politics; (b) higher [voter] turnout; (c) joining community organizations; (d) superior information; (e) stronger views; (f) closeness to party position; (g) strong candidate preferences."⁷⁴

Such a correlation is not surprising given that:

Personal experiences are severely limited compared with the range of experiences that come to us directly or indirectly through the media.⁷⁵

Consequently, "even when we think that we are forming our own opinions about familiar issues, we may be depending on the media more than we realize."⁷⁶ For example, immediately after the second presidential debate between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in 1976, a poll revealed that the public thought Ford had come out the winner. However, shortly after the media criticized Ford for his comments regarding Eastern Europe, public opinion polls quickly changed to show Carter the winner.⁷⁷

While these studies have shown the media to have a great deal of influence on the public and public opinion, such power is not limitless. Indeed, sometimes the media's influence can be minimal.⁷⁸ Still, by and large, the public tends to rely on the media a great deal. As a result:

We can expect the mass media to tell us about different kinds of social roles and the accompanying expectations, in the sphere of work, family life, political behavior and so on. We can expect certain values to be selectively reinforced in these and other areas of social experience.⁷⁹

In other words, the media provide the public with examples of acceptable

behavior by giving clear examples of what constitutes socially acceptable (and unacceptable) action. "The media thus serve as agents of social control that help integrate and homogenize American society."⁸⁰

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

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40. IBID., 62-68.

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42. IBID., 182.

43. Ithiel de Sola Pool, 140. Pool defined a prestige paper as "a paper in each read by the elite of that and foreign countries, and expressing a segment of elite opinion. It is always in some way tied to the government, the degree to intimacy being a function of the politicization of the particular elite." 83.

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60. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1968 ed., s.v. "Socialization," by John W.M. Whiting. Sociologist Lester Ward said of socialization that it "is conscious, intentional, wished for, and welcomed telic action, not of the individual as such, but of those individuals into whose hands society by whatever means, entrusts the conduct of its affairs." Lester Ward, 547.
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CHAPTER TWO

The Press and Government

An important aspect of the media's relationship with society involves their role in the nation's political processes. The media have a constitutional role in democratic society: functioning as the main link between the public and government.¹

Formal communications departments within the government (e.g., the White House Communications staff) along with the huge number of reporters covering political affairs paint a picture of a relationship that has become both "routine and institutionalized."²

Edmund Burke referred to the press as the "fourth estate" of government because it had become "an unofficial partner in the system of checks and balances."³ By exposing government abuse or misconduct, the press can affect the efficacy of the political system.

The press provides information both to the public and to their representatives in government, serving as the common carrier of political information.⁴ The public relies on the media for news and information about the government while policymakers rely on the media for both policy promulgation and public opinion.

"The media [are] the main, and in many cases the only, source of information for citizens about what is happening in the government and

the primary mechanism by which government learns what is happening in the public."⁵ Public officials sometimes even have a tendency to treat "the press and public opinion as synonymous."⁶

When people accuse the media of being overzealous or vicious in their reporting it is often the result of journalists' belief that the government has failed to promote the welfare of the nation. That is to say, the media "do not love the government less; they only love the nation more."⁷ However, the media's criticism is rarely directed toward any institution. Instead, it is aimed at individuals within the system who are perceived as not meeting the media's expectations of public service.

Despite the popular perception that the press is constantly trying to embarrass and disrupt government, the two generally enjoy very friendly relations.

Far from being separate and inimical entities, the press and government are inextricably linked, woven together for the common purpose of strengthening the cause of democracy. In this union, the press has become a tremendous - and often unappreciated - force for legitimizing governmental institutions and free enterprise.⁸

While there is certainly some degree of intrinsic antagonism between the press and the government, "cooperation and continuity are at the core" of the relationship.⁹ In fact, both reporters and public officials "go to great lengths to maintain cooperative, cordial relations because both sides gain."¹⁰

Arguments between the press and government frequently arise as a result of the struggle over the view of reality presented to the

public. This "engagement is highly competitive, but collegial nonetheless."¹¹ Not only does the media accept the political system and institutions of this country but it "does so surprisingly uncritically." That acceptance extends to those institutions "recently born, and to a host of American principles, values, and conventions as well."¹²

The relationship between press and government is construed as a virtually sacred tie because both are servants of the public. Supporters of the newspapers characterize publicity about activities of government as the bulwark on which the electorate relies both for making decisions and for assurance that venerated institutions and customs will be maintained.¹³

Public officials have acknowledged the influence of the media on public policy. In a recent Harvard study, more than ninety-six percent of the policymakers surveyed said that "the press had impact on federal policy, and over half of them considered the impact substantial."¹⁴

Almost fifty percent of the officials said that they "spent over 5 hours a week thinking about or dealing with press matters."¹⁵ Interestingly, most of the officials did not consider the media an intrusion into their jobs but rather as a resource in conducting routine official business: "It is simply part of the job."¹⁶

The study also showed that the officials perceived the press as having the ability to "speed up the decision-making process ... to push the decision making up the bureaucracy to a higher level of officials."¹⁷ This is due to the perception that "the more intense - and the more critical - the press coverage, the higher the level of

government that deals with the issue."¹⁸

The researchers concluded that the press does not affect policies themselves as much as they affect the policy-making process.

There is little doubt that press coverage affects the capacity of policymakers to get their policies successfully adopted and implemented, and that whether the thrust of the stories is negative or positive is an important factor in determining the effect of the coverage.¹⁹

In 1960, a study in California examined the relationship between reporters and appointed officials. The study revealed that both groups shared:

an admiration for "efficient" city government and tended to avoid stories about latent conflicts within the community ... Their best stories were written when the "city" was in conflict with an "outside" agency. Indeed, the reporters would cooperate - and did cooperate - with the sources in suppressing or postponing publication of a story in order to protect "the city" from threats from "outsiders."²⁰

A 1976 study of journalists' attitudes about the functions of the media²¹ found that an overwhelming majority believed that investigating government "claims and statements" was their most important task.²² However, the intensity of such investigations is rarely extensive or consequential as most news stories are gathered through routine channels such as press releases, press conferences, and interviews. Consequently, the media tend to "rely heavily on government sources who are primarily men in executive positions."²³ While this raises some serious doubt about the integrity of the news, it reveals the symbiotic aspect of the relationship between the media

and the government.

There is, in fact, a revolving-door which exists between the government and the media. For example, David Gergen worked with Ronald Reagan's communications staff and is now the editor of U.S. News & World Report; Patrick Buchanan was Reagan's Communications Director and now serves as a commentator on Cable News Network; and Bill Moyers, who was Lyndon Johnson's Communications Director, is now a journalist and commentator for CBS news.

The ubiquity of the media in the political process lead Doris Graber to remark that:

Media coverage is the lifeblood of politics because it shapes the political perceptions that form the reality on which political action is based. Media do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment.²⁴

Another scholar stated that while eighteenth-century newspapers depended on politics for their news, twentieth-century politics depend on newspapers - "last century [the press] was personal; in this century it is institutional."²⁵

The media can also affect who runs for public office, how successful their campaign will be, and how effective they become once in office.²⁶ Today, political campaigns are "arranged around the media [while] television coverage has had an effect on the types of candidates that are most likely to be successful."²⁷

The media's participation in the campaign process has diminished and weakened the role of political parties by concentrating on the candidates' personalities rather than on their political agendas.²⁸

As a result, so-called "media experts" try to sell a candidate's image rather than his or her policies and plans.

In addition to reporting the business of government, the media also help identify social problems and objectives. They help define what the problems are and offer potential solutions through the exposure of various sources. Simply by providing coverage of an issue or event, the media can affect opinion.²⁹

The importance associated with a story, which is often reflected by the amount of space or time given to reporting it, greatly influences the public's perception of how important it is.³⁰ The press, by providing "frequent and favorable recognition" to an issue or event, "gives it the appearance of importance and makes it salient to the public."³¹ Thus, while the media do not necessarily tell the public what to think, they clearly tell the public what to think about.

This is known as the agenda-setting function of the press in which "political reality is defined for the citizen by what is covered in the news media."³² Whether they intend to or not, the media make an issue or event significant simply by reporting it, that is by doing their job. Conversely, the media can indirectly discriminate against other issues and events by not reporting them. While such decisions are frequently the result of time or spatial restraints, they nevertheless affect the public's perception of political reality.³³

According to Herbert Gans, reporters cannot possibly report everything that happens on any given day and, subsequently, they "must

select some actors and activities from the many millions they could choose. The result is a recurring pattern of news about a fairly small number of actors and activities."³⁴

The process of newsgathering is structured to incorporate pluralistic assumptions about the political and social system. Elites are turned to because they are assumed to be suitable spokespersons for their organizations.³⁵

What is not reported by the media can also be significant. For example, in 1956 Warren Breed conducted a study to find out what kind of stories the media did not report.³⁶ Breed concluded that the press contributed to the social order by consistently printing certain stories and omitting others. Breed said that the media helps maintain "sociocultural consensus" by reporting only socially approved modes of behavior while omitting stories "which might jeopardize the sociocultural structure and man's faith in it."³⁷

Accurate reporting is sometimes sacrificed to these other virtues of respect, decency, and order, that is, the mass media have often placed more emphasis on some value other than truth.³⁸

After all, the New York Times only claims to provide "all the news that's fit to print," not "all the available news" or "all the points of view."

Breed found that the most frequently omitted stories dealt with news relating to the "politicoeconomic area." This involves news about individuals or elites who obtain privileges through "non-democratic means." Breed reported that was a significance lacking of any news about the favors granted to social and political elites."³⁹

Although today there are some obvious differences with Breed's forty-seven-year-old study, other items commonly found missing were those dealing with religion; specifically stories about religious skepticism, disbelief, the increasing non-religious character of church meetings, and internal strife within a congregation.⁴⁰ This is all the more significant given that several major newspapers have a weekend section devoted entirely to religion.⁴⁰

Subjects such as patriotism were treated with deference and strongly defended. Other "sacred cows" in Breed's study included stories about justice, health and doctors, and capitalism.⁴¹ For example, the media usually refrain from "unnecessarily baring structural flaws in the working of institutions."⁴² That is, the media support the status quo by failing to expose flaws in political institutions.⁴³

The relationship between the media and the government is based on common interests or as Ithiel de Sola Pool stated:

The whole relationship between reporter and politician resembles a bad marriage. They cannot live without each other, nor can they live without hostility. It is also like the relationship of competing athletic teams that are part of the same league, it is conflict within a shared system.⁴⁴

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE

Media Ownership

The media, like any business, must necessarily adhere to the basic monetary principles of the nation in order to ensure their economic survival while meeting public demands for news and information. Satisfying these two elements "are fundamental to any business, and newspapers are no exception."¹ Consequently, newspapers tend to reflect the "institutional attributes which have developed as part of the social, political, and economic history of the country."²

German sociologist Karl Bucher regarded the role of the press as being somewhere in between that of an unappreciated civil servant and a reluctant businessman. On the one hand, the journalist is generally well-educated while lacking any position of social prominence. And, on the other hand, he is forced to participate in a highly competitive, profit-oriented economic system.³

Around the turn of the century, the economic growth of the press "led to a progressive transfer of ownership and control of the popular press from the working class to the capitalistic entrepreneurs."⁴ Consequently, media organizations have become profit-making enterprises and more often than not are part of a larger corporation.

As a result, the number of single, independent newspapers has

steadily decreased while multiple-media ownership has increased. Additionally, cross-ownership has become much more common. That is when a single business or enterprise owns several media sources in addition to other business interests and investments. For example, the Tribune Company which owns the Chicago Tribune also has "more than 61 different kinds of companies inside and outside the media field."⁵

Media ownership has "been increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few giant organizations."⁶ As a result of this increase in the concentration of media ownership, fewer than thirty-six cities have more than one daily newspaper today whereas in 1923 more than five-hundred cities had at least two competing daily newspapers.⁷

Limited competition (oligopoly) conditions prevail in the majority of markets [while] intramarket newspaper competition has become rare. Ninety-eight percent of all American cities have only one daily newspaper ... In addition to a monopoly over local print news, paper owners frequently own a local television or radio station as well.⁸

In 1947, the Commission on Freedom of the Press stated that "the agencies of mass communication are big business, and their owners are big businessmen."⁹ And, like any other business, newspapers have many of the same economic interests and goals. Thus, it is not surprising that "the monopolistic tendency evident everywhere in the business world has affected newspapers."¹⁰ A 1982 study revealed that:

The 10 largest [newspaper] chains accounted for slightly over one-third of the total daily newspaper circulation in the United States. This means that one-third of the papers read in the United States on any given day transmit news screened by personnel from only 10 large business enterprises.¹¹

Because many newspapers have become part of a larger business, there is some concern that they have become politically conservative "due in part to the natural conservatism of big and middle-sized businesses in America."¹²

To understand why newspapers so often unheroically support the status quo, one need only observe that, while newspapers may have been "started by men who had something to say, they are carried on by men who have something to sell."¹³

Critics of multiple and cross media ownership charge that the economic concentration of the press leads to "mediocre monopoly newspapers interested more in profits than in serving their readers or the communities in which they operate."¹⁴ One media critic went to so far as to say that media industry ...

consists of vast silent domains where ruthless demands for ever-increasing profits crush journalistic enterprise and block adequate coverage of the news in their communities.¹⁵

One result of the business aspect of the media is that few journalists (reporters and publishers) are Socialists. In fact, most of them tend to reject government intervention in the economics of business and are very supportive of private enterprise. They also "reject egalitarianism and support the notion that people with more ability should be paid more than others with less ability."¹⁶

In fact, some media critics believe that the press has "become the voice for institutions representing stockholders interested in profits," and is "one of the foremost agencies in our American scheme of distribution"¹⁷ while others assert that the press is simply "the

mouthpiece of conservative wealth."¹⁸

At least one study found a "substantial" increase in the coverage of business news reported by journalists over the past several years.¹⁹ Media owners counter that this was due to an increased public demand for business news. Also, media owners argue that if the press is deficient in its presentation of the news it is the result of low public expectations and demand. That is, the press gives the public exactly what the public wants and, subsequently, deserves;²⁰ Consider the low ratings of programs like the McNeil/Lehrer News Hour.

For example, although the government was generally very tolerant of the underground press of the 1960's and 1970's, and while publications such as the Berkeley Barb and the East Village Other enjoyed moderate circulation, their popularity was short-lived because in the long run the public found them too radical to tolerate for any length of time.²¹

In any event, the nature of the media's coverage is generally routine and increasingly less investigative.²² Many critics argue that this is the result of limited media ownership because the concentration of media sources in only a few hands leads to a "homogeneity in content." This, in turn, tends to retard the expression of opposing views and opinions.²³ "The implied threat is that the market monopoly may also mean a monopoly of ideas - the media speaking in one voice."²⁴

This tendency (toward concentration) could ... lead to a situation whereby the news ... is controlled and

manipulated by a small group of individuals and corporations whose view of What's Fit to Print may closely coincide with What's Good for General Motors, or What's Good for Business, or What's Good for my Friends Down at the Club.²⁵

Limited and elite ownership led C. Wright Mills to remark that "the freedom to raise issues effectively seems more and more to be confined to those few interests that have ready and continual access to the media."²⁶ This is compounded by the claim that media owners tend to come from the same social circles as political elites.²⁷

One study concluded that:

Cross-ownership may involve the deliberate distortion or suppression of the same stories by jointly owned newspapers and television stations ... [it] interferes with diversity in the flow of news [and opinions] ... and impediments to diversity in the flow of news and opinions (message pluralism) undermines the search for truth.²⁸

On the other hand, another study concluded that a monopoly of media ownership is less influential than critics claim. The study found that the editorial content of independently-owned newspapers was similar to that of chain-owned newspapers.²⁹ Another study revealed that "156 [different] groups owned 1,186 dailies with 49,773,000 paid circulation" which breaks down into private ownership, public ownership, and corporate ownership giving evidence to more media diversity than people might suspect.³⁰ For example, Thompson Newspapers, which owns the largest number of daily newspapers at ninety-six (1.5 million in circulation), accounts for only five point seven percent of all the daily newspapers sold. And the Gannett

Company, which has the largest circulation at 5.7 million (92 dailies), accounts for only 9.0% of the reading audience.³¹

However, this same study warned against a "dangerous trend" in the newspaper business which was the result of media owners being too concerned with profits rather than editorial integrity.³²

Media owners, of course, insist that editorial policy works independently of business demands. An advertisement by Knight-Ridder went out of its way to make just that point following its acquisition of six more newspapers in 1987:

We Bought Them. But We Don't Own Them. We don't own their opinions. We don't own their news columns. And quite frankly, we don't want to ... We join them in a continuing commitment to excellent journalism, sound management and strong independent editorial policy attuned to the special needs of each community we serve. Because as fellow journalists, we realize that some things should never be for sale.³³

What must be considered is, first, does a monopoly of media sources affect content and, second, does a homogeneity of content affect the public?³⁴ Studies have shown that multiple and cross ownership does indeed "increase the similarity of coverage and of content presented to the public."³⁵ Newspapers, television and radio stations that share common ownership are likely to report many of the same stories.

The danger in content homogeneity is that it leads to a lack of news diversity, causing "the political process and many other social exchanges based on information to be impaired."³⁶

A fundamental concern about news homogeneity is the possible impact that it may have on the political

system. In democratic societies, the press and the political system are in a symbiotic relationship. A self-governing people need information to make decisions. Therefore, without full disclosure of the political information, of the conflicting opinions, people's ability to govern themselves may be impaired, and democracy itself will not function.³⁷

One study found that "chain papers present less argumentative, fewer controversial, and fewer local-topic editorials than independently-owned newspapers."³⁸

However, other studies have concluded that while monopolistic ownership does tend to produce content homogeneity, it is not singlehandedly responsible for how such homogeneity is formed.³⁹ Other factors such as the "economics of the marketplace, journalists' orientations, and bureaucratic news practices [eg., reliance on news services such as A.P. and U.P.I.] are powerful" agents in the formation of news homogeneity.⁴⁰

Still, content homogeneity does affect social behavior by inducing people to conform to social norms. For instance, a 1951 study showed that when people are faced with a unanimous public decision, they tend to agree with that decision "even against their own personal perception. People find it easier to contradict their own perceptions than to disagree with majority opinion."⁴¹

In the end, it would be in the interest of both the editorial and business departments to operate independently of one another since the integrity of the former can help assure the financial success of the latter. While some infiltration of editorial policy is unavoidable, it is likely that most editorial staffs enjoy at least some degree of editorial freedom despite the overall increase in limited, corporate

ownership of the media. But while limited ownership and business demands do not necessarily dictate editorial policy, they certainly influence it.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

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17. George L. Bird and Frederic Merwin, 92.
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19. J.T.W. Hubbard, "Newspaper Business News Staffs Increase Markedly in Last Decade," Journalism Quarterly 64, (Spring 1987): 171-177.
20. Bernard Hennessy, 296.
21. Doris Graber, 347-348. Back in 1942, it was felt that even the most sensational newspapers were rarely radical in their approach. George L. Bird and Frederic Merwin, 7.
22. J.T.W. Hubbard, 171-177.
23. Denis McQuail, "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media," George L. Bird and Frederic Merwin, 84.
24. Robert G. Picard et al., 117.
25. IBID., 107.
26. C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 314.
27. Ithiel de Sola Pool, et al., The Prestige Papers (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952), 139.
28. William T. Gormley, Jr., "The Effects of Newspaper-Television Cross-Ownership on News Homogeneity" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of North Carolina, 1976), 246-247.
29. Bryon St. Dizier, "Editorial Page Endorsements: Chain-owned vs. Independent Newspapers," Newspaper Research Journal 8, (Fall 1986): 63-68.
30. James H. Ottaway, Jr., "Quality, Profit, and the American Newspaper," Nieman Reports 41, (Spring 1987): 8.
31. IBID.
32. IBID., 9-10.
33. Columbia Journalism Review 26, (Mar/Apr 1987), opposite 16. Knight-Ridder owns thirty-four daily newspapers and eight television stations.

34. Robert G. Picard et al., 117.
35. IBID., 119. See also Daniel B. Wackman, "Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," Journalism Quarterly 52, (Autumn 1975): 411-420 and William T. Gormley, Jr., "How Cross-Ownership Affects News-Gathering," Columbia Journalism Review 16, (May/June 1977): 38-43.
36. IBID.
37. IBID., 120.
38. IBID., 119. See also Ralph R. Thrift, "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor of Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly 54, (Summer 1977): 327-331.
39. See Galen Rarick and Barrie Hartman, "The Effects of Competition on One Daily Newspaper's Content," Journalism Quarterly 43, (Autumn 1966): 459-462, and Canadian Journal of Communication 9, (1983): 33-56.
40. Robert G. Picard et al., 124.
41. IBID., 123. See also Salomon Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgment" in Groups, Leadership, and Men, ed. Harold Guetckow, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1951).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Social Responsibility of the Press

"Freedom of the press, as originally conceived, was essentially a negative freedom which implied no standards of performance or responsibility"¹ and yet as described in Chapter One, "the mass media of communications are social institutions that serve the society by gathering, writing, and distributing the news of the day."²

Given this paradox, it is not difficult to understand that as the press began to assume a more influential role in American society and politics beginning at the turn of the twentieth century - largely due to technological advances - it found itself increasingly under attack for not living up to its implicit social responsibilities. A brief examination of the history and debate about the role of the press will help reveal the press's view of its function in society.

BACKGROUND

Many people believe that the press, with its ever-increasing influence, has failed to accurately reflect the "established values of our social institutions,"³ that it has failed to advance social good and order.

These critics feel that providing the fundamental facts of "who," "what," "when," and "where" is simply not enough. They insist that

the press should also provide the "interpretative element" of "why," which means frequently having to tell the public something that "is not directly observable."⁴

Since social responsibility theorists contend that at least some bias in reporting (intentional or not) is inevitable (which is to some degree the result of increased production demands), the news should be reported in a framework that best serves the public interest.

For its part, the press has tended to stand behind the pillars of libertarian tradition while at the same time claiming to possess endemic social value.⁵ Like its critics, the press believes that "as an institution, journalism's 'raison d'etre' lies in the benefits it provides the public."⁶ However, a serious question arises over how the public can best be served by the press.

HISTORY

This question came to a head in 1947 when the Commission on Freedom of the Press published a report criticizing the press for its lack of social responsibility while making several recommendations on how it could improve its public service.

In the early 1900's, people began to reason that the press should aspire to do more than simply make a profit and provide entertainment. Because the press gathered and disseminated news and facts, it was thought that an important editorial aim should be to give "substance" to news stories in order to protect society from propaganda and demagoguery.⁷

Advocates of a socially responsible press said that while the First Amendment protected the press's freedom of expression, it also carried with it the obligation of giving the public accurate and meaningful information.⁸ Critics felt that "the press as a basic institution responsible for the moral integrity and cultural development of the civilization [was] improving too slowly to cope with society's problems."⁹

A growing sense of social responsibility was even evident in the press itself as some publishers began to acknowledge that "a newspaper had some duty to the public."¹⁰ In the mid-nineteenth century, Henry Raymond of the New York Times said that "the newspaper should be free of party but not of principle, that it should give readers the broadest possible editorial coverage, that it should actively promote the community welfare."¹¹

Part of the problem was the result of a tremendous increase in the number and circulation of newspapers (i.e., increased readership)¹² which, in turn, led to a re-evaluation of traditional libertarian theory which was slowly giving way to a more public-minded role for the press.

By the early 1900's, many people had begun to reject the libertarian belief that "man is a perfectible creature of reason, born free, who wishes to know truth and be governed by it." Instead, the public was beginning to perceive mankind "as essentially immature and susceptible to moral corruption."¹³

At the time, two sociologists, Albion W. Small and George E.

Vincent, criticized the press for "not providing adequate services in reporting facts, not giving directions to public opinion, [and] disregarding form and content of their information. Despite its highly organized character, the press [had] remained careless and inefficient in its news coverage."¹⁴

The press was being routinely accused of sensationalism, self-interest, and a proclivity for corruption which "led to a distortion of facts making it almost impossible to glean from newspapers a knowledge of social activities and a proper sense of the ethical attitudes of the people."¹⁵

By 1920, there had developed a "diverse and critical literature of press responsibilities, rights, and obligations of journalists in the United States that reflected not only individual or scholarly concerns but also a perceived need for a regular and systematic treatment of the problems of mass communication in modern society."¹⁶

Criticism of the press ranged from derisive accusations to extreme innuendoes. American economist and sociologist William Graham Sumner said that "the worst papers are the most popular and make the most money." He went on to say that:

The result of the press is, on the one side, an institution of indispensable social utility, and on the other side a foul nuisance. It exerts tyranny which no one dare brave. One of the most remarkable facts, however, about the newspaper at this turn of the century is that a great newspaper becomes an entity independent of the opinion or will of its managers. It gets headway and drags them along with it. It has a reputation and policy and becomes subject to the law of consistency. Its managers are hampered by considerations, and obligations, and if they try to do justice to them all, they dare utter only colorless

platitudes. If then they get to "pitch into" something or somebody who has no power of defence they seize the opportunity to manifest freedom and independence. The result is blackguardism. The young century deserves pity when it accepts this bequest. What priestcraft was to the fourteenth century, press-craft is to the twentieth.¹⁷

V.S. Varros was more apocalyptic in his attack on the press:

The newspapers make and mar political fortunes. They "create" great men out of next to nothing and destroy the reputations of men truly fit for leadership. They decide questions of war and peace. They carry elections. They overawe and coerce politicians, rulers, and courts. When they are virtually unanimous nothing can withstand them.¹⁸

A less dramatic, albeit highly critical, analysis of the nature of journalism was provided by Walter Williams and Frank L. Martin, who wrote that:

[When the journalist] buys or sells news he is in business, when he merely records, he is a clerk and bookkeeper for the day's doings, when he interprets, whether as contributor, writer, editor, journalism is akin to literature, if it is not literature. In its highest sense journalism is not trade nor business, but profession, the profession of the interpreter ... [journalists should] supply the "truth about the facts."¹⁹

Essentially, the general public had come to expect "the agencies of mass communication to faithfully provide a trustworthy service of intelligent information adequate to the needs of self-government."²⁰

However, other people such as Walter Lippmann were less eager to put so much of the blame on the press. Instead, Lippmann felt that much of the problem came as a result of "the concave character of democracy." Lippmann said that:

[The press] is not a business pure and simply, partly because the product is regularly sold below costs, but chiefly because the community applies one ethical measure to the press and another to trade or manufacture. Ethically, a newspaper is judged as if it were a church or a school.²¹

During this time, the press was not entirely unresponsive to the onslaught of criticism regarding its role and duty to the public. In 1923, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) adopted the Canons of Journalism. The ASNE stated that "the primary function of newspapers is to set up a web of communication between all individuals in society on a level of broad knowledge, experience, and intelligence." The goal of the ASNE was not simply to provide a broad statement about journalistic ethics but also "to teach and to interpret" the value and meaning of its canons in "a context of the general welfare."²²

In 1904, Joseph Pulitzer wrote an article in the North American Review in which he advocated the creation of a college of journalism. It was Pulitzer's belief that "the press should put public duty above duty to the counting-room."²³ Pulitzer was joined by others who believed that "the freedom given to business and the press is solely for accomplishing the ideals of the open society and the community's concern for man as man ... Society needs to keep its institutions in repair; it cannot become subservient to them and still preserve liberty."²⁴

But even critics of the press were hesitant to suggest government involvement as was later done by the Commission on Freedom of the

Press. It was thought that legislation would "do nothing to improve the quality of the daily press."²⁵ For example, the California "Signature Law," which required the use of bylines on all stories about people, events, or facts, was viewed as a failure because it did not "enhance the responsibility of the newspaper in the slightest because the publisher is ultimately responsible" for what appears in the paper, not the lowly reporter.²⁶

In an ironic turn of events, the press had begun to abandon its openly political bias only to find out that "sterile neutrality" was equally disliked and unprofitable.²⁷ Critics were demanding that the press serve the public by offering a more meaningful disclosure of the day's events. Such sentiment eventually led to the creation of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press.

THE COMMISSION ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

In 1945, Robert M. Hutchins, who was Chancellor of the University of Chicago, headed a seventeen-member commission to study the press and its role in American society. In 1947, the commission published The Report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press.²⁸

The commission began its report by stating that "the time has come for the press to assume a new public responsibility."²⁹ Hutchins stated that the purpose of the report was to direct the "responsibilities of the owners and managers of the press to their consciences and the common good for the formation of public opinion." Reiterating some of the earlier criticism, Hutchins said that "the

relative power of the press carries with it relatively great obligations."³⁰

There was a sense of urgency in the commission's report, which had stated that "the preservation of democracy and perhaps civilization may now depend upon a free and responsible press. Such a press we must have if we would have progress and peace."³¹

The commission had concluded that "the freedom of the press is in danger." The reason for this was threefold: First, the importance of the relationship between the press and society had greatly increased with the development of mass communication; secondly, the press had "not provided a service adequate to the needs of society, and thirdly, the press did not always act in the public interest and may require government regulation or control."³²

According to the commission, the press would best serve the public by providing: "(1) a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning; (2) a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; (3) a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in society to one another; (4) a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of society and; (5) a way of reaching every member of society by the currents of information, thought, and feeling which the press supplies."³³

Members of the commission accused the press of ignoring its mistakes at the expense of effective self-government: "By a kind of unwritten law the press ignores the errors and misrepresentations, the

lies and scandals, of which its members are guilty ... the media lacks the will to provide the variety of information and debate that the people need for self-government."³⁴

In part, this was due to the press's preoccupation with the business aspects of running a paper and the rise of limited ownership of different news organizations.³⁵ Although the commission said that national press monopolies did not exist, "unitary ownership in a single locality does exist ... [and] this creates a local monopoly of local news."³⁶

The commission made thirteen recommendations dealing with how the government, the press, and the public could help rectify the situation and have "the kind of society we desire." Of the five recommendations relating to the government's role, the most important were: that the First Amendment be extended to include radio and motion pictures,³⁷ that there be no legislation "prohibiting the expressions in favor of revolutionary changes in our institutions where there is no clear and present danger that violence will result from the expressions," and that the government use mass communication to provide the public with information about its policies and purposes that "the private agencies of mass communication are unable or unwilling to supply." The commission had suggested that "the government employ mass communication of its own to supplement this deficiency."³⁸

Among the five recommendations made regarding the role of the press, the commission suggested that the press should "engage in vigorous mutual criticism" and assume a more responsible role in

society while continuing to fight attempts to monopolize the industry.³⁹

There were three recommendations dealing with how the public could help improve the conduct of the press. Included in this was a call for "the establishment of a new and independent agency to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press."⁴⁰

Members of the press were opposed to the creation of an independent "watchdog" agency and vehemently opposed the any government involvement in its activities. Both the press and many of its critics viewed this as anathema to democratic theory.

Although they had told the press that it should "improve service to society's needs or risk government interference," the commission was not exactly advocating immediate or direct government involvement. In fact, Hutchins had declared that the "government must set limits on its capacity to interfere with, regulate, or suppress the voices of the press."⁴¹ Understandably, this did little to calm fears of direct government involvement or control of the press.

The commission had actually hoped to encourage the "self-regulation" of journalists as a way of meeting the public's needs. However, there was no mistaking that the commission had unabashedly issued the press a warning should it prove itself "inadequate" in meeting those needs. "Changes will be forced by indignation, disapproval, or rejection of the press - if, indeed, government is not persuaded to step in and provide a monitor like role."⁴²

Other media such as television were not immune from the effects

of social responsibility advocates who demanded that:

News and documentary programming report the truth so long as social cohesion and national security are not jeopardized; children to be protected from exposure to sex and violence having obvious ill effects on their personalities and clearly contributing to subsequent antisocial behavior; FCC regulation of such practices as the number of commercials per programming segment, restriction of false advertising, limitation on sound levels of broadcasts, and opportunity for recognized political viewpoints to be given airtime.⁴³

The general belief was that television, in addition to providing entertainment, could and should "become an instrument of significant social change ... to inform, educate, incite, and mobilize the public."⁴⁴

Critics claim that the fundamental flaw with the television industry is the paucity of public utility laws and the inability of the FCC to enforce regulations. Also, those laws that do exist tend to be "industry-minded rather than user-oriented."⁴⁵

THE RESPONSE FROM THE PRESS

Few members of the media disagreed with the commission's call for a socially responsible press. Instead they took issue with the suggestion that the press's role could be improved by the introduction of outside forces such as an independent "watchdog" agency or the federal government.⁴⁶

Media scholar John C. Merrill argued that:

when journalists abide by obligations and responsibilities under any kind of pressure or duress or because they have been led by an outside force to

believe that a course of action 'is what is good and responsible journalists do,' they are no longer free."⁴⁷

Also, according to a study conducted by Elmo Roper, the news media are "giving the people just about what [the public] likes." Roper's study concluded that what the public wanted was "a newspaper that is easy to read, that has a sports page, and that overall is lively and interesting."⁴⁸

Others have said that much, if not most, of the responsibility lies with the public and not the press:

In general, the content of the mass media reflects the existing value system of the society in which the message occurs, and there is ample evidence that 'the influence of audiences upon the public communications they receive is apparently greater than the influence of the communications on the audiences'... Therefore, it is the audience that bears the responsibility for content and subject matter. Only when the audience changes its values can the programmers change the message.⁴⁹

Since the mass media are a part of society, they are undoubtedly a reflection of that society, regardless of editorial biases or mistakes. Therefore, it would seem perfectly reasonable to assume that at least some of the responsibility for a more socially-minded press lies with the public and its selection, attention, and use of media information.⁵⁰ If the "ultimate value" in a democratic society is the individual, ultimate responsibility must necessarily rest with the individual.⁵¹

Even Hutchins admitted that "if the schools did a better job of educating our people, the responsibility of the press to raise the level of American culture, or even to supply our citizens with correct

and full political, economic, and social information would be materially altered." The Commission's ideal formula for improving the role of the press was a synthesis of press and public involvement: "The more the press and public are willing to do, the less will be left for the state."⁵²

Wilbur Schramm, former Director of the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford University, believed that the government, the press, and the public each had a vital role in ensuring a more responsible press. None could be "counted on to do the job alone, and on the other hand, none is exempt from the responsibility for doing it." Schramm believed that ultimately "the public can come pretty close to having whatever kind of mass communication system it wants."⁵³

Even the Commission, in the midst of criticizing the press for everything from the lack of objectivity to the absence of social contribution, concluded that every individual must accept the responsibility of being a well-informed, critical, and alert reader just as he must accept his obligation to "pay taxes and serve on jury duty."⁵⁴

The public should "encourage intelligent criticism of the media" and the media, in turn, should respond appropriately. Realistically, the media must respond to public demands if it expects to remain a profitable organization.⁵⁵

In 1981, a study was done to see how publishers, editors, journalism educators, and national leaders felt about the commission's

report thirty-five years later. The results showed that most of the publishers, journalists, and journalism educators "generally agreed" with what the commission had said in regards to the meaning and importance of responsible reporting. But again, the major contention with the report was that an externally organized body like the government or an independent "watchdog" agency interfere with the role of the press.⁵⁶

By turning our attention to the attitudes of members of the press, it will become clear that despite much of the criticism, the press does indeed seek to serve the public in the most responsible way it can under democratic theory and ideology.

JOURNALIST'S ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

Many of the technological advances that took place at the turn of the century helped make newspapers "large, mass production enterprises" which in turn helped "attract men of talent, education, and principle." It was almost inevitable that "public responsibility became good business" as newspapers sought to thrive in their newly enlarged marketplace.⁵⁷

In 1911, Charles G. Ross, who was a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, described the role of the journalist in much the same way most journalists would do today:

The news writer is an agent of the paper that employs him. As such, in a wider sense, he is the agent of the public, which relies on the newspaper to keep informed of the day's happenings. The story is the all-important thing; the reader as a rule cares nothing about who wrote it or what the writer thinks of it. The viewpoint

of the news writer must be that of the unprejudiced, but alert observer. He must approach his story with a mind open to the facts and he must record the facts unvarnished by his own preferences and opinion. Comment on the news of the day is the function of the editorial columns. It has no place in the news story. The writer who willfully injects his own likes and dislikes into the story breaks faith with his employer, whose space he is using, and with the public that buys the paper.⁵⁸

Many journalists feel that, at best, it is only an assumption that there is any intentional bias, misrepresentation, or public disregard in news reporting. Journalists argue that deciding what news gets reported (i.e., news editing) is simply the result of common sense. It would be unjust to call the press biased simply because it does not print everything.⁵⁹ Obviously, not every person who reads the newspaper will be completely pleased with the stories he or she reads but the press serves the public as a whole. It does not cater to individual likes and dislikes and it would be counterproductive to society to do so.

Often times, reporters will pursue a story based on "the public's right to know." This implies that the press is indeed working on behalf of the general public.⁶⁰ Consequently, many reporters see their social responsibility as "indivisible from freedom of speech and press."⁶¹

Not only does the press operate in a more highly organized environment than a century ago, but it is "also under a different conception of freedom" which has taken into account a sense of social responsibility.⁶²

It is worth mentioning that the press was instrumental in the

establishment of many of the "sunshine laws" created in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Many of these laws helped expose government corruption and overspending which, in turn, has helped save taxpayers thousands of dollars annually.

Many journalists think that "a good reporter should be as objective and as untiring in his pursuit of the truth as a scientist doing research work at a university."⁶³ However, in the case of journalism, there are occasions when information is purposely withheld from the public. For example, as a general rule, reporters do not reveal "troop movements in time of war, secret negotiations with foreign countries and the private lives of individuals" unrelated to the public's right know.⁶⁴ In such cases, the press is clearly acting in the best interest of the public and the country.

As far as the argument that the rise of one-newspaper towns has had a negative effect on democratic society, reporters feel that "the sheer responsibilities of a one-newspaper town generally have made for a more objective newspaper ... [because] the most priceless asset a newspaper has is its integrity and reader confidence."⁶⁵

Essentially, "a newspaper can flout an advertiser, it can attack a powerful banking or traction interest, but if it alienates the buying public, it loses the one indispensable asset of its existence."⁶⁶

In 1963, then CBS president Frank Stanton gave testimony before the Congressional Subcommittee on Communications and Power in which he advocated the repeal of the "fairness doctrine" which had been

established in 1949 as part of the Communications Act of 1934. The fairness doctrine was held in contempt by most broadcasters who saw it as a cumbersome nuisance counterproductive to free speech.

Stanton told the subcommittee that the intention of the fairness doctrine had "backfired." Later in his testimony, Stanton referred to the suspension of the "equal time" rule during the 1960 presidential election, explaining that journalists had exercised sound judgement. He stated that:

Contrary to the old implications of Section 315, there was proof on a national scale that broadcasters in this country had far too much sense of responsibility, far too much maturity, far too much sheer will to survive, to abuse the freedom guaranteed by the suspension through unfair, partial or partisan treatment of the candidates.⁶⁷

The press has always justified its existence as having intrinsic social value. The numerous codes and standards established by the media "which prescribe standards for journalistic practice indicate that the foundation of journalistic value rests in providing benefits to the public."⁶⁸

By adopting the ASNE's Canons of Journalism (1923), the Motion Picture Production Code (1956), the Radio Broadcaster's Code (1937), and the Television Code (1952), "the media have linked freedom [of speech] with responsibility."⁶⁹ Although the codes are not legally binding and are considered by critics to be inadequate, they "explicitly acknowledge the media's duty to perform in the public interest, however variously that interest is defined."⁷⁰

In 1971, the Minnesota Press Council was established to handle

complaints about the media in an effort to help open up public access (e.g., increase the number of "letters to the editor").⁷¹ And, a 1986 study concluded that "American journalists are more reflective of the pluralistic society in which they work than the popular rhetoric concedes."⁷²

Clifton Daniel of the New York Times explained that:

Stripped to essentials, the responsibility of the reporter and editor is simply to serve the public - not the profession of journalism, not a particular newspaper, not a political party, not the Government, but the public.⁷³

The debate over the role of the press has been, and to some degree continues to be, over whether the press can adequately fulfill its duty to the public without outside or government involvement. Ultimately, that is for the public to decide. As Walter Lippmann said, "Editors are not to be praised or blamed in any court except that of public opinion."⁷⁴

However, the point worth noting is that both the press and its critics agree that the press has an endemic responsibility to the society in which it operates. While one may debate the fulfillment of the ideal standards set forth by both members of the press and its critics (e.g., the Commission on Freedom of the Press), there is no denying that the press does indeed aspire to serve the public. The only dispute stems from how that service is best provided.

On the one hand the press has been publically forced into a more socially responsible role and on the other hand it has unilaterally strived to be a loyal and faithful public servant, worthy of public

support and trust.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Theodore Peterson, "Social Responsibility: Theory and Practice," in The Responsibility of the Press, ed. Gerald Gross (New York: Fleet Publishing, 1966), 35.
2. J.E. Gerald, The Social Responsibility of the Press (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1963), 3.
3. Allan Casebier and Janet Jenks Casebier, eds., Social Responsibilities of the Mass Media (Washington DC: University of America Press, 1978), xii.
4. Anita Silvers, "Professional Press Ethics - A Case Study of Conflicting Concepts," J.E. Gerald, 58.
5. J.E. Gerald, 38-39. The press is considered to have six basic functions under libertarian theory: "(1) Enlightening the public; (2) Servicing the political system; (3) Safeguarding personal liberties; (4) Making a profit; (5) Providing entertainment and; (6) Servicing the economic system."
6. Anita Silvers, 55. One of the basic functions of the press as been described as distributing "those kinds of news which are intended for the public or which have escaped from being kept secret." Hanno Hardt, Social Theories of the Press: Early German and American Perspectives (London: Sage Publications, 1979), 147.
7. Hanno Hardt, 147.
8. Anita Silvers, 55.
9. J.E. Gerald, 130-131.
10. Theodore Peterson, p. 41.
11. IBID.
12. It is worth noting that in 1870 there were no less than six hundred daily newspapers in the United States but by 1909 that number had grown to more than twenty-five hundred. Also, only three million papers were sold on a daily basis in 1870 as compared to more than twenty-four million by 1909. Robert Lloyd Kelley, Shaping of the American Past (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 499.
13. Hanno Hardt, 43.

14. American Journal of Sociology 20, (1914-1915): 295 as cited in Hanno Hardt, 202.
15. IBID.
16. IBID., 192.
17. Albert G. Keller and Maurice R. Davie, eds., Essays of William Graham Sumner (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1934), 233-234.
18. V.S. Yarros, "The Press and Public Opinion," American Journal of Sociology 5, (July-May 1899-1900): 373.
19. Walter Williams and Frank L. Martin, Practice of Journalism (Columbia, Missouri: E.W. Stephens Publishing Company, 1911), 9-12.
20. J.E. Gerald, 13. For a look at how influential the press was viewed in the early 1900's see Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, Persuasion and Propaganda (London: Sage Publications, 1986), 118-152.
21. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Macmillan Press, 1922), 203-204. Lippmann also said that "public opinions must be organized for the press, if they are to be sound, not by the press as is the case today." J.E. Gerald, 136.
22. As cited in J.E. Gerald, 151.
23. Gerald Gross, 42.
24. J.E. Gerald, 131-132.
25. V.S. Yarros, 379.
26. J.E. Gerald, 103.
27. IBID.
28. The seventeen-member commission was funded by Time, Inc., and Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. Four of the seventeen members were foreign observers; none of them were journalists. At the same time that the Commission on Freedom of the Press was meeting, the English had established the Royal Commission on Freedom of the Press. This commission dealt mostly with complaints that business pursuits had taken precedent over editorial aims. "The editor had lost status and power and the business manager had taken over his prerogative." J.E. Gerald, 173.
29. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, A Free and Responsible Press (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), 17.

30. IBID. vi-viii.
31. IBID. 105.
32. IBID. 1.
33. IBID. 21-28.
34. IBID.
35. As cited in J.E. Gerald, 104. See Chapter Four for an elaboration of this view.
36. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 43, 65.
37. Radio and movies were put under the protection of the First Amendment. See United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al, 334 U.S. 131, 166 (1948) and Superior Films v. Department of Education, 346 U.S. 587 (1954) as cited in Documents of American Broadcasting, 4th edition, ed. Franklin J. Kahn, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 192-193. Also, under the Federal Radio Act of 1927 any interference with the free speech of radio broadcasts was prohibited.
38. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 79-89. The argument in favor of allowing for "expressions in favor of revolutionary changes" was in response to the Alien and Sedition Act of 1940.
39. IBID. 92.
40. IBID. 100. The National News Council had been established in 1973 to hear complaints about the press. However, it never gained enough support or momentum to become viable force in influencing the conduct of the press. As a result, it became defunct in 1983.
41. J.E. Gerald, 173 and The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 8.
42. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 105.
43. Allan Casebier and Janet Jenks Casebeir, xiii. A common complaint against television has been that it dramatically effects election results by over-emphasizing primaries and projecting winners long before all the polls have closed. Michael Jay Robinson and Karen McPherson, "The Early Presidential Campaign on Network Television: Accuracy and Imbalance in the Evening News," in Allan Casebier and Janet Jenks Casebier, 25.
44. IBID. xiii.
45. J.E. Gerald, 120.

46. Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1961), 85.
47. John C. Merrill, The Importance of Freedom (New York: Hastings House, 1974), 80.
48. As cited in J.E. Gerald, 110.
49. Jasper Blystone and Patrick Ryan, "The Socially Responsible Media: Between Ideology and Culture," in Allan Casebier and Janet Jenks Casebier, 175-176.
50. IBID. 187-188.
51. J.E. Gerald, 132.
52. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, vii, 79. The commission felt that it was important that the government do nothing "contrary to the public interest." 118.
53. Former Director of the American Press Institute, J. Montgomery Curtis, puts full responsibility for upholding press standards with the publishers. J. Montgomery Curtis, "The Responsibility for Raising Standards," in Gerald Gross, 91-101, while former Managing Editor of the New York Times, Clifton Daniels, believes that responsibility rests with the editor and reporter. Clifton Daniels, "Responsibilities of the Reporter and Editor," in Gerald Gross, 146-156. In either case, both men's arguments implicitly assume that the press is somehow intrinsically responsible to the public.
54. IBID. 350-351, 356.
55. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 48.
56. Barbara Hartung, "Attitudes Toward the Applicability of the Hutchins Report on Press Responsibility," Journalism Quarterly 58, (Autumn 1981): 428-433.
57. Theodore Peterson, 45-46. Some critics contend that the various and unenforceable codes adopted by the media were simply a way of avoiding more forcible standards threatened by the government.
58. Charles G. Ross, The Writing of News (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911), 17-18.
59. Allan Casebier and Janet Jenks Casebier, 76.
60. Theodore Peterson, 43.

61. Gerald Gross, 89.
62. IBID., 47.
63. As cited in J.E. Gerald, 115.
64. Allan Casebier and Janet Jenks Casebier, 75.
65. Gerald Gross, 87, 88.
66. IBID., 205.
67. Dr. Frank Stanton, "The Responsibility of the Press," in Gerald Gross, 293. The fairness was established in a 1949 amendment to the Federal Communications Act of 1934. Many people felt that it was not a significant doctrine anyway since the FCC rarely enforced it. See Thomas R. Dye and Harmon Zeigler, American Politics in the Media Age (Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1986), 292-293. In a famous letter to the chairman and president of CBS, Fred W. Friendly resigned as president of CBS News in 1966 over the decision to not carry Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings after having fought so hard to have access to the hearings. Friendly was livid that coverage of the hearings had been dropped in favor of reruns of "Lucy" and "The Real McCoys." Fred W. Friendly, "The Responsibility of TV Journalism," in Gerald Gross, 309-313.
68. Anita Silvers, 53.
69. Theodore Peterson, 42. Other codes include: Sigma Delta Chi Code of Ethics, Library Bill of Rights, Freedom to Read Statement, How Libraries and Schools Can Resist Censorship, Advertising Acceptability Standards of the Detroit News, Code of Ethics of the International Labor Press, and Self-Regulation in Advertising. For a text of these codes, see Gerald Gross, 362-408.
70. IBID.
71. Robert Schafer, "The Minnesota News Council: Developing Standards for Press Ethics," Journalism Quarterly 58, (Autumn 1981): 355-362. Some critics, however, insist that journalists lack any ethical standards and "are still foggy about their function in society." See John C. Merrill and Ralph d. Barney, eds., Ethics and the Press (New York: Hastings House, 1975).
72. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, The American Journalist (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), 167.
73. Clifton Daniel, "Responsibility of the Reporter," Louis M. Lyons ed., Reporting the News (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1968), 121.

74. Walter Lippmann, 151.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

The preceding chapters have examined the role and significance of the press in society and why it would be reasonable to conclude that the press tends to support the basic political structure and system of this country. This chapter seeks to validate that theory through the content analysis of newspaper editorial coverage of the Iran Contra affair.

The press's attitude about the significance of the affair is typified by the Washington Post which, between November of 1986 and the end of 1987, ran "more than 90 front-page stories" about the affair and had assigned up to twenty eight reporters to cover it.¹ Given such copious coverage, the press's treatment of the affair vis-a-vis the political structure and system becomes an important question.

One critic contends that the media was unreasonably slow to react to this affair despite early indications that something was amiss with U.S. foreign policy toward the Contras.² For example, a full six months before the affair became public, two journalists reported that U.S. Army General John Singlaub was representing the United States government in supplying "arms to the Contras at a time when U.S. military aid to the rebels had been banned by Congress."³

It was, after all, a Beirut magazine - Al Shiraa - and not the American press that broke the story on November 4, 1986, disclosing the sale of arms to Iran in exchange for U.S. hostages held captive in

Lebanon. Also, it was Attorney General Edwin Meese and not any probing reporter who revealed three weeks later that there had been a diversion of funds from the arms sale to the Contras in Nicaragua.

Whether the press had been lulled to sleep or simply had been intimidated by President Reagan's popular public image remains to be decided.⁴ Despite this, most journalists think that they did "a good job reporting the Iran-Contra scandal."⁵

In any event, the incident stirred a great deal of public debate about the conduct of U.S. foreign policy and the people who formed and carried out that policy.

Much of the debate stemmed from the fact that the sale of military equipment to Iran was prohibited both by Congress and by President Reagan's very own executive order. Also, Congress had cut off aid to the Contras in Nicaragua in an effort to encourage a more peaceful resolution to the political problems of Central America.

Another damaging aspect of the affair was that the operation had been carried out in secret without congressional or public approval, let alone knowledge. Furthermore, the operation was directed by the National Security Council utilizing CIA assets instead of the other way around. Critics considered this a deliberate attempt to circumvent congressional oversight.

METHOD

Editorials were chosen for analysis because they represent "the 'this is what we think' view of the newspaper ... clearly labeled as

such."⁶

Down through the generations, some of the controllers of the media of information have used their leverage to political support for themselves or for others, to ventilate their personal prejudices, to build up profitable media empires, or to better the lot of the public.

Furthermore, an editorial delivers a point of view "with the purpose of changing an attitude or explaining what something means, in the judgment of the writer."⁸ Although editorials are not always widely read, they represent "the soul of the newspaper," often expressing the character and personality of the paper and providing "a tremendous influence in a complex world."⁹

Although "persuasion is the principal objective of the opinion writer,"¹⁰ editorials do not necessarily argue for or against something. Sometimes they are explanatory in nature. But, most of the editorials concerning the Iran Contra affair were not neutral given the time and extent to which the debate raged over the formation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy that lead to the Iran-Contra affair.

The unit of analysis in this study was newspaper editorials that addressed the Iran Contra affair, published between the period of November 4, 1986, and July 22, 1987. Newspapers were chosen from major cities throughout the United States - as found in Editorials on File¹¹ - so that regional bias would be less likely to affect the results of the analysis. With one exception, each of the dailies has a circulation of over 200,000 (See Table I).

November 4th marks the beginning of this analysis because it is the first day that an editorial appeared concerning the Iran Contra affair, dealing with the sale of arms to Iran. July 22nd was chosen for the end date of the study because it was the day after former National Security Advisor John Poindexter completed his public testimony. By then, a great deal of evidence had been publicly

Table I: Selected Newspaper and Circulations

Selected Newspapers and Daily Circulations

Eastern Region

Boston Globe (511,000)
Washington Post (726,000)

Southern Region

Dallas Morning News (317,000)
Atlanta Constitution (211,000)
Miami Times-Herald (417,000)

Western Region

Los Angeles Times (1,053,000)
Sacramento Bee (220,000)
Portland Oregonian (308,000)
Seattle Times (254,000)

Midwest Region

Chicago Tribune (758,000)
Des Moines Register (266,000)
Detroit Free Press (632,000)
St. Louis Post-Dispatch (236,000)
Kansas City Star & Times (526,000)
* Lincoln Journal/Star (78,000)

* Selected because it is in the same state as the author.

revealed, giving people time to form strong and lasting impressions and opinions. (See Appendix A for a Chronology of Events.)

Commonly used units of measure in content analysis are: symbol (e.g., word), paragraph, three sentences and article.¹² For the

purpose of this study, the theme or themes of the editorials (i.e., article) will be measured. According to Ole Holsti,

For many purposes the theme, a single assertion about some subject, is the most useful unit of content analysis."¹³

Also, sentences or paragraphs do not easily "lend themselves to classification into a single category."¹⁴

I.L. Janis describes the procedure of analyzing content for theme as "assertions analysis" which "provides the frequency with which certain objects are characterized in a particular way."¹⁵

John C. Merrill's 1965 analysis of presidential stereotyping by the press included "contextual bias" as a unit of measure which required finding "the overall meaning or innuendo of the report, not by specific words and phrases alone."¹⁶

To help improve the reliability of the analysis of themes, one normally employs the process of having several persons independently code the material being analyzed. This provides a measure known as "intercoder-reliability" in which "more than one analyst, using the same procedures and definitions, agree on the content categories applied to the material analyzed."¹⁷ For example, Merrill used six college students to decide instances of contextual bias which were "counted only when there was agreement among the panelists."¹⁸

This study does not make use of intercoder reliability. However, the results of the analysis are so overwhelming, such a check would seem unnecessary. Even after allowing for some degree of bias by the author, the results are not likely to change significantly.

It should be noted that almost all content analysis potentially suffers from problems of interpretation. That is to say, what one infers from a written document is not necessarily exactly the same as the intended meaning. This is because "as yet no good theory of symbolic communication [exists] by which to predict how given values, attitudes, or ideologies will be expressed in manifest symbols."¹⁹ That is,

Owing to possible differences in the ways people may express their feelings, intentions, and other traits, inferences about the antecedent causes of messages drawn solely from content data cannot be considered self-validating.²⁰

Despite these problems, the data are still useful in drawing conclusions about the theory underlying this study.

The theme or themes mentioned in the editorials were recorded under two variables: subject and contextual bias. The subject variable was divided into the following categories: (1) individuals, (2) policies, and (3) government institutions.

An "individual" is any person mentioned by name in the editorial who held political office, was a government employee or represented - in some official or quasi-official capacity - the United States. (Examples in each category are in Appendix B.)

A "policy" is any action, position or declared intention taken by an official, employee or representative of the government on behalf of the United States.

"Government institution" refers to any one of the three branches of government; executive, legislative and judicial or an agency

thereof (e.g., Department of State or a congressional subcommittee). It also includes any reference to the system or structure of government (e.g., separation of powers). For example, an editorial that discussed the law or the legal process was recorded as an example of "government institution."

A distinction was made between an office or position and the individual holding that office or position. For example, discussions relating to an independent counsel came under "government institution" because it was created by the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 while comments about Lawrence Walsh - who was selected to serve as the independent counsel - were recorded under "individual."

Normally, one might expect the combination of a government's policies and institutions to provide an accurate reflection of a nation's political structure and system. However, in this instance, "policy" and "government institution" were necessarily separated because support of the political system or institution would seem to require disapproval of the policy of selling arms to Iran and/or giving funds to the Contras since both activities were clearly illegal (i.e., anti-government). For example, some editorials were critical of an individual and policy precisely because they were perceived as being in violation of congressional oversight.

Contextual bias of the subjects was recorded as either: (1) positive (i.e., supportive); (2) negative (i.e., non-supportive); or (3) neutral. Only the theme or themes which were emphasized in the editorial were recorded.

If the hypothesis is correct, one can expect a high level of positive support for "government institutions" and/or disapproval for "individuals" and "policies."

Often an editorial referred to several individuals, policies and institutions (e.g., Oliver North, Congress, and the sale of arms to Iran). However, only those themes which were clearly the subject of the editorial were recorded. That is, references found in casual statements such as "President Reagan agreed ..." or "Congress intends to investigate ..." were not recorded unless something else in the editorial clearly revealed an opinion about them.

RESULTS

In all, one hundred and twelve editorials were analyzed. The St. Louis Dispatch lead in editorial coverage with twelve pieces, followed closely by the Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post with eleven editorials each and the Miami Herald with ten. Nine of newspapers carried between six and eight editorials about the affair while two newspapers - the Chicago Tribune and the Des Moines Register - had three each.

The majority of editorial themes dealt with individuals (146). Of these, more than sixty percent were negative (See Table II) with President Reagan, Oliver North and John Poindexter generating the most criticism.

Reagan was most often criticized for being ultimately responsible for the failed policies and the illegal activities of his

subordinates, even if they had acted without his knowledge or approval.

North and Poindexter were attacked for keeping important foreign policy decisions and actions from Congress and the public and showing little regard for the law. The Lincoln Star/Journal went so far as to describe Oliver North's image as "one of corruption" (July 9, 1987).²¹

Media critic Reed Irvine accused the press of trying to destroy Reagan's administration by "giving too much space and attention" to the affair.²² This may very well have been the case if the press was convinced that Reagan was not acting in the best interest of the nation under his constitutional obligation as president. For example, the Lincoln Star/Journal described Reagan as "a man who simply lacks the intellectual capacity and the management skills to adequately handle his responsibilities" (February 27, 1987).

Two editorials discussed the selection of Lawrence Walsh as the special prosecutor. One, the Atlanta Constitution, commended Walsh's selection given his background and experience: "After a 50-year career in the law, the hearty 74-year-old is renowned for his probity, fairness and mastery of his profession" (December 23, 1986). The other, from the Boston Globe, took an opposing view that "Walsh is simply too old to take on a task of this magnitude" (December 16, 1986).

George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger were generally treated well by most editorials for opposing the policy of selling arms to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages. For example, following the

firing of Oliver North and the resignations of John Poindexter and Donald Regan, a Washington Post editorial said that the president "needs strong cabinet officers, especially a strong secretary of state; he is lucky to already have one" (November 26, 1986).

Table II: Type of Editorial Coverage of Iran Contra affair

<u>Type of Coverage</u>	<u>Theme</u>		
	<u>Individual</u>	<u>Policy</u>	<u>Institution</u>
Positive	16%	3%	89%
Neutral	22	0	3
Negative	62	97	8
Total	100	100	100
N	146	61	72

Chi Square = 178.25 df = 4 probability is less than .05

Howard Baker, Frank Carlucci and William Webster, who replaced Donald Regan, John Poindexter and William Casey, respectively, were also lauded for the potential order they would bring to the executive branch following the affair. Excluding these five people from the study raises the "individual" disapproval rating to seventy percent (See Table III).

**Table III: Type of Editorial Coverage of Iran Contra affair
minus George Bush, Caspar Weinberger, Howard Baker, Frank
Carlucci and William Webster**

<u>Type of Coverage</u>	<u>Theme</u>		
	<u>Individual</u>	<u>Policy</u>	<u>Institution</u>
Positive	5%	3%	89%
Neutral	25	0	3
Negative	70	97	8
Total	100	100	100
N	128	61	72

Almost all the editorial themes that dealt with policies were negative (ninety-seven percent) as expected. Initially, policy criticisms concerned the sale of arms to Iran. The focus later changed to the diversion of funds to support the Contras in Nicaragua. These policies were criticized for being developed and implemented under a shroud of secrecy and without congressional knowledge.

The issue of whether to grant Oliver North and John Poindexter immunity in exchange for their testimony was also rebuked. The Miami Herald said that although it may become necessary to grant immunity later, it should not be given until absolutely necessary (December 5, 1986) while the Portland Oregonian suggested that only one witness be granted immunity so that "not everyone would get off scot-free" (December 24, 1986).

On the other hand, eighty-nine percent of the themes that dealt with institutions were positive. The need to include Congress in the foreign policy process was regarded as necessary and essential to the stability of the nation. For example, the Detroit Free Press said that the Reagan administration had failed to "understand how much power the constitution reposed in Congress, and for what profoundly important reasons" (July 15, 1987).

The system of checks and balances was specifically discussed in six editorials, all supportive. The Des Moines Register said that: "The people should and will continue to question covert White House activities that threaten ... the democratic system of checks and balances" (November 13, 1986).

The Lincoln Star/Journal carried seven editorials relating to the Iran-Contra affair during the period analyzed. The thirteen themes discussed mirrored the results of the overall study. For example, in addition to being critical of President Reagan, the Lincoln Star/Journal also objected to the policy of selling arms to Iran even if it had been initiated in an effort to gain the release of the American hostages in Lebanon. One editorial claimed that "to condone with silence a clandestine accord with such an uncivilized and unprincipled country as Iran would be an insult to democratic values" (November 8, 1986) while another described the policy as "just blame dumb. D U M B" (November 13, 1986).

In a reference to the separation of powers, one Lincoln Star/Journal editorial stated that: "Had congress been properly notified, wiser heads might well have steered the administration away from the folly that it pursued" (July 9, 1987).

In an article appearing in Commentary, one observer placed the blame for the affair on Congress because it had unfairly made the executive branch responsible for foreign policy while simultaneously imposing too many restrictions (e.g., the Boland amendments) for it to be successfully carried out.²³

But even this criticism of Congress was based on institutional grounds: that Congress had failed to live up to its own responsibilities. This author also argued that the independent counsel was unconstitutional because it contravened the separation of powers under the system of checks and balances.²⁴

Many of the editorials studied frequently referred to the affair with such obviously negative comments as "Iranscam," "Irangate" or simply as "a scandal." It was, after all, a public embarrassment and a political mistake. Or, as one of the Washington Post's editors, David Broder, wrote: The affair was "a calamity for the nation."²⁵ Consequently, those persons and policies associated with the affair were generally subjected to negative commentary while the intended operation of the political system (e.g., the system of checks and balances) was reinforced.

Three percent of the editorial themes relating to policy were positive. However, their support centered on the idea of gaining the release of the hostages and/or establishing better relations with Iran. For example, a Dallas Morning News editorial said that it was "a laudable objective in seeking to improve relations with Iran" (November 15, 1986). Indeed, most Americans probably supported these policy objectives but were hard pressed to rationalize the secret and illegal activities surrounding their execution.

Another eight percent of the editorial themes were negative toward institutions. For instance, a Dallas Morning Times editorial said that: "It's not difficult to understand the president's reluctance to brief Congress ... given its record of leaking even the most sensitive top secret information" (November 15, 1986). But even this institutional criticism supports the theory because it suggests that Congress was being attacked for not living up to the public's expectation of prudent government.

Despite their many criticisms, several editorials expressed concern that stability and confidence in government be restored. For example, the Lincoln Star/Journal said that "it is a delicate situation that we hope is soon resolved" (November 8, 1986).

A Miami Herald editorial, although critical of Reagan and his administration's policies, said that in order to "save a troubled nation the anguish of impeaching an already-hobbled President" the public should give Reagan "the benefit of the doubt" (July 19, 1987).

Table IV: Regional Distribution of Themes

	<u>Theme</u>			*
	<u>Individual</u>	<u>Policy</u>	<u>Institution</u>	
	% Positive/Negative	% Positive/Negative	% Positive/Negative	
<u>Region</u>				
North	4/58	15/85	75/13	
South	29/65	10/90	90/10	
Midwest	25/55	4/96	86/14	
West	3/76	0/100	100/0	

* Does not add up to 100% because neutral scores are not reported.

The newspapers were selected from four regions of the United States to help insure a representative sample of editorial comment. However, the selection also allows one to see if there was any regional variation among the newspapers in their opinions toward the affair. Given the overwhelming results shown in Tables II and III, it is not surprising that there was not much regional variation (See Table IV).

Interestingly, newspaper editorials from the Southern and Midwestern regions, while still overwhelming critical, showed a slightly higher level of support for individuals than did those from the Eastern and Western regions. This minor anomaly was to be expected given the pro-Reagan bias of these regions. Other than this slight variation, the coverage of the affair was fairly uniform across the country. The so-called "liberal eastern press" was no more negative toward policy than the pro-Reagan South.

In summary, as suggested by the theory, the editorials were generally critical of individuals within the political system but were not critical of the system itself. In fact, most of the positive commentary dealt with the need to protect and maintain the structural integrity of the political system.

A Sacramento Bee editorial that discussed the Tower Commission's recommendations on what was needed to rebuild the trust and integrity of the National Security Council perhaps best summarizes the press's attitude toward the political structure and system: "The [Tower] commission correctly recommends no major institutional change ..."

(February 27, 1987).²⁶

Consequently, this study supports the theory that the media do, indeed, support the political system and institutions of this country. And, while the media do a credible job uncovering the shortcomings of individuals and policies within the political system, there is some serious doubt about their ability to objectively evaluate the structure of government in which these shortcomings developed and existed.

It is, after all, entirely possible that there are some endemic defects within the system that make policy failures and individual infractions of the rules of government inevitable. If this is indeed the case, it is not likely to be pointed out by the media.

Deficiencies that do arise are addressed in terms of poor policy selection and/or individual mismanagement, but never as structural defects. The media are in fact blind to any structural faults within the political system. Consequently, they behave more as an institutional bodyguard than democratic watchdog.

Like the majority of the American public, the media have a great deal of faith, trust, and belief in the American political system.

ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Garry Boulard, "Press feels good about itself," Editor and Publisher 120, (April 4, 1987): 20. The New York Times was second with 73 front-page stories.
2. William Boot, "Iranscam: When the Cheering Stopped," Columbia Journalism Review 25, (March/April 1987): 26, 29.
3. IBID.
4. According to one media critic, after an initially vigorous investigation into the Iran Contra affair, the media began to take a step back as "Commentators expressed fear that the public would believe that the press's real goal was to bring down the president ... Journalism's establishment repeatedly vowed to avoid what it had done in Watergate." "So why not play it like Watergate," Columbia Journalism Review 25, (Jan/Feb 1987): 15. See also discussions in M.L. Stein, "Missing the big one," Editor and Publisher 120, (July 11, 1987): 10 and Time, 17 November 1986, 88.
5. Garry Boulard, 20.
6. John C. Hultung, The Opinion Function: Editorial and Interpretative Writing for the News Media (Hayden Lake, Idaho: The Ridge House Press, 1973), 2.
7. IBID., 3.
8. IBID., 6.
9. George L. Bird and Frederic Merwin, eds., The Newspaper and Society (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1942), 306, 307.
10. John C. Hultung, 62, 63.
11. Editorials on File, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1986 and 1987). Editorials On File "represent over 45% of the total daily newspaper circulation of the United States."
12. Ole R. Holsti, Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1969, p. 118). Today, researchers using symbol analysis often use the Key-Word-In-Context (KWIC) system in which computers provide a list of "key" words from an entire article or content. For examples, see Computers and the Humanities 12, (1978): 3-12, and Computers and the Humanities 15, (1982): 139-154.

13. IBID., 116.
14. IBID., 117.
15. I.L. Janis, "Meaning and the Study of Symbolic Behavior," in The Language of Politics, Harold D. Lasswell, et al., (New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher, Inc., 1949), 57.
16. John C. Merrill, "How Time Stereotyped Three U.S. Presidents," Journalism Quarterly 42, (Autumn 1965): 563-570.
17. Janet Buttolph Johnson and Richard A. Joslyn, Political Science Research Methods (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1986), 209.
18. John C. Merrill, 565.
19. Harold D. Lasswell and Ithiel de Sola Pool, The Comparative Study of Symbols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952), 49.
20. Ole R. Holsti, 32.
21. All editorials cited can be found in Editorials on File.
22. Garry Boulard, 20.
23. L. Gordon Crovitz, "Crime, the Constitution, and the Iran-Contra Affair," Commentary 84, (October 1987): 23-30.
24. IBID.
25. Time, 29 December, 1986, 57.
26. Emphasis added.

APPENDIX A**CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS**

- November 4, 1986 Al Shiraa (A Beirut magazine) reports that former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane visited Teheran for the purpose of selling arms to Iran.
- November 13, 1986 President Reagan publicly states that the United States had clandestinely sent military spare parts to Iran but denied that there was any deal made for the release of the hostages held in Lebanon.
- November 25, 1986 President Reagan announced that - without his knowledge or approval - profits from the arms sale to Iran (estimated between \$10 and \$30 million) had been secretly diverted to the Contras in Nicaragua through a Swiss bank account.
- National Security Advisor Admiral John Poindexter resigns.
- Lt. Colonel Oliver North, Assistant Deputy Director for Political-Military Affairs at the National Security Council, is fired.
- November 26, 1986 President Reagan appoints a National Security Review Board (known as the Tower Commission). Board consists of John Tower, Edmund Muskie and Brent Scowcroft.
- December 2, 1986 President Reagan asks for an independent counsel to investigate the Iran Contra affair under the 1978 Ethics in Government Act (amended in 1982).
- December 2-3, 1986 Lt. Colonel North and former National Security Advisor John Poindexter "take the Fifth" before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

- December 19, 1986 Lawrence Walsh is named independent counsel by U.S. Court of Appeals.
- January 29, 1987 Senate Intelligence Committee releases its report on the investigation into the Iran Contra affair.
- February 23, 1987 National Security Review Board releases its 300-page report critical of many administration officials.
- March 18, 1987 Special House and Senate committees agree to form a joint committee to investigate Iran Contra affair.
- May 6, 1986 CIA Director William Casey dies of pneumonia following surgery to remove a brain tumor.
- May 5, 1987 Public testimony begins before the special joint congressional committee.

The following people testify between May 5 and July 21, 1987:

Richard Secord, Retired Air Force Major General
 Robert McFarlane, former National Security Advisor
 Robert Owen, Lt. Colonel North's liaison to the Contras
 Adolfo Calero, Contra leader
 John Singlaub, retired Major General
 Joseph Coors, Contra aid contributor
 Ellen St. John Garwood, Contra aid contributor
 William O'Boyle, Contra aid contributor
 Elliot Abrams, Assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs
 Albert Hakim, Richard Secord's business partner
 Bretton Sciaroni, Intelligence Oversight Board counsel
 Fawn Hall, Lt. Colonel North's secretary
 Lt. Colonel North
 Rear Admiral John Poindexter

APPENDIX B

Institution (Congress) - Positive

"Congress will have to act to protect the government - and the integrity of its laws and policies - from the trouble a runaway agency could cause."

Institution (Congress) - Negative

"It's not difficult to understand the president's reluctance to brief Congress ... given its record of leaking even the most sensitive top secret information."

Individual (George Shultz) - Positive

"a man of integrity ... hard pressed not to resign."

Individual (Oliver North) - Negative

"... Col. North, inventing fantasies, bullying his way around, is absolutely off the wall..."

Policy (Improved relations with Iran) - Positive

"... a laudable objective in seeking to improve relations with Iran."

Policy (Arms to Iran) - Negative

"how wrong [it] was to sell military material to Iran."

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