

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Sept 30 – Oct. 14

Standards for Evaluating Press Performance

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Maintaining an adversarial relationship with those in power; deterring corruption

- National security journalism and the erosion of the First Amendment; evolution of wartime coverage

Creating a “public sphere” and a market for public affairs information (informed citizens)

- Does a free press deliver meaningful information on issues of the day?

The special case of money and elections

- The appearance of corruption

The Post

The Washington Post

FINAL
EIGHT

FRIDAY, AUGUST 9, 1974

Nixon Resigns

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Ford Assumes Presidency Today

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Richard Nixon
announces
his resignation
in 1974.

Friday, August 9, 1974; Page A01, *Washington Post*
Richard Milhous Nixon announced last night that he will resign as the 37th President of the United States at noon today.

Vice President Gerald R. Ford of Michigan will take the oath as the new President at noon to complete the remaining 2 1/2 years of Mr. Nixon's term.

After two years of bitter public debate over the Watergate scandals, President Nixon bowed to pressures from the public and leaders of his party to become the first President in American history to resign.

Overview

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In democracies, a free press is expected to maintain an “adversarial” relationship with those in power; news coverage as a deterrent to corruption

Outline (Sept. 30 – Oct 5)

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Brief history of investigative journalism

“Indexing” theory and press reliance on official sources

National security as an arena that compromises media’s independence

- Battlefield coverage from Vietnam to the current era

Normative standards for assessing the monitoring performance of the media – police patrols or fire alarms

The special case of money and politics

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A Brief History of Investigative Journalism

Watergate: The Facts

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Did the *Washington Post* bring down President Nixon?

Almost all the information uncovered by Woodward and Bernstein came from official sources mainly the FBI

Other media outlets broke important stories and TV coverage was more important in galvanizing public opinion

Threat of impeachment was pivotal to Nixon's resignation – role of party politics

Watergate: The Mythology

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- One newspaper kept the pressure on, forcing the White House to engage in a cover up
- Individual efforts of Woodward and Bernstein - “David and Goliath” story line promoted by the media and Hollywood

“At its broadest, the myth of journalism in Watergate asserts that two young Washington Post reporters brought down the president of the United States. This is a myth of David and Goliath, of powerless individuals overturning an institution of overwhelming might. It is high noon in Washington, with two white-hatted young reporters at one end of the street and the black-hatted president at the other, protected by his minions. And the good guys win. The press, truth its only weapon, saves the day.”

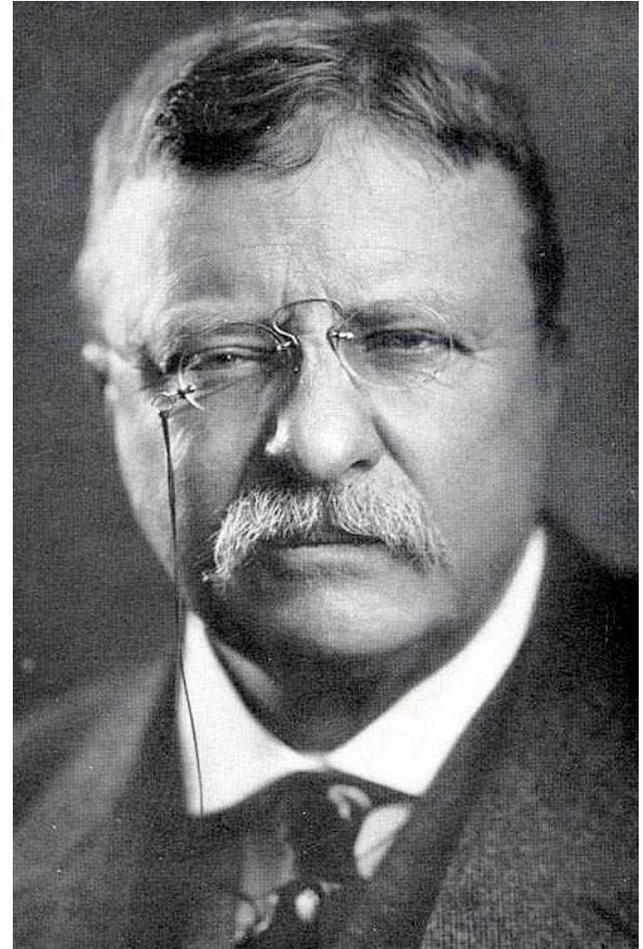
Bottom Line: Multiple Explanations

“... everybody did Watergate and everybody wants credit for it. The fact is, an incredible array of powerful actors all converged on Nixon at once – the FBI, prosecutors, congressional investigators, the judicial system. This included the media. It did not play the leading role, but it did play a role.”

Pre-Watergate; the Muckraking Era

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- High water mark of investigative journalism associated with the progressive movement, TR, and “trust busting” – *NY Journal (Hearst)* and *NY World (Pulitzer)*
 - ▣ Sensationalistic coverage of inequality, plight of farmers, low wages, and child labor
 - ▣ Regulatory agencies including Federal Reserve Board, FTC, FDA created to battle abuses



Muckraking Magazines

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McClure's Magazine

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY
NOV 2 1902
MAG. 2. 1902

VOL. XX NOVEMBER, 1902 NO. 1

THE HISTORY OF THE STANDARD OIL COMPANY

BY IDA M. TARBELL
Author of "The Life of Lincoln"

CHAPTER I—THE BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

ONE of the busiest corners of the globe at the opening of the year 1872 was a strip of Northwestern Pennsylvania, not over fifty miles long, a waste place of the earth, it had revolutionized the world's methods of illumination and added millions upon millions of dollars to the wealth of the United States.

Petroleum as a curiosity was no new thing. For more than two hundred years it had been described in the journals of Western explorers. For decades it had been dipped up from the surface of springs, soaked up by blankets from running streams, found in quantities when salt wells were bored, bottled and sold as a cure-all—"Seneca Oil" or "Rock Oil," it was called. One man had even distilled it in a crude way, and sold it as an illuminant. Scientists had described it, and travelers from the West often carried bottles to their scientific friends in the East. It was such a botchful, brought as a gift



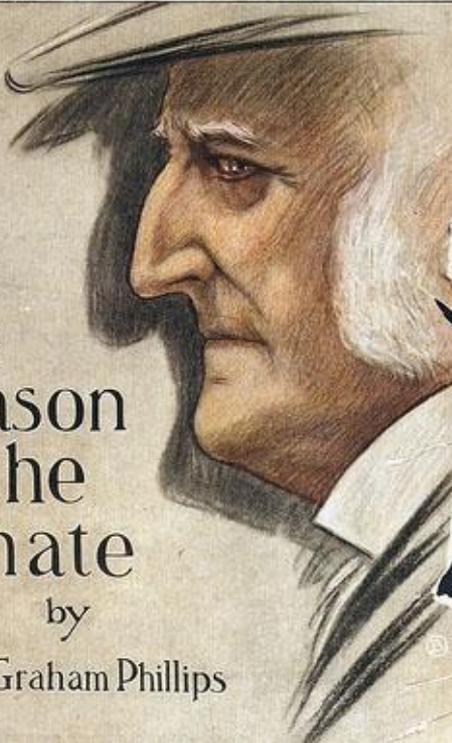
GEORGE H. BISSELL

The man to whom more than any other is due the credit of what is called the "discovery" of oil; for it was he who first took steps to find its value and to organize a company to produce it. It was he, too, who suggested the means of getting oil which proved practical. After the oil company which he organized obtained all in the Drake well, he aided in establishing the needed industries and institutions in the new country.

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MARCH TEN CENT

COSMOPOLITAN



The
Treason
of the
Senate

by
David Graham Phillips

Journalism Set the Policy Agenda

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“the list of reforms enacted between 1900 and 1915 is an impressive one. The convict and penal systems were reformed, a federal pure food act was passed, child labor laws were enacted in several states, forest reserves were set aside, the Newlands Act made possible reclamation of millions of acres, eight hour laws for women, the prohibition on racetrack gambling, the dissolution of the Standard Oil and Tobacco...”

The Iran-Contra Scandal (1986)

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Major effort by Reagan Administration to bypass Congress by secretly arming Nicaraguan “Contras”

- Congress had banned direct funding of the rebels

Initial plan was to sell weapons to Iran in exchange for Iranian efforts to secure release of 7 Americans held hostage in Lebanon

Weapons provided by Israel, then resupplied at no cost by the US

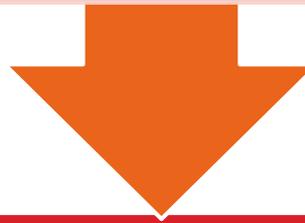
Proceeds from the sale then diverted to fund the Contras

Where were the watchdogs?

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Reagan acknowledged the arms sales in a nationally televised address, but claimed no direct knowledge

14 officials in the Administration indicted, including the Secretary of Defense, and several convicted



It was not a US news organization, but small Lebanese magazine that broke the story

Despite illegality of the Administration's actions and the involvement of high-level advisors to Reagan

The S&L Crisis

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Hundreds of small savings and loan institutions went bankrupt in the early 1980s

Due to combination of bad management and bad policy

S&Ls typically had to pay higher interest to their depositors than they were making on their mortgage investments

The cost of bailing out the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation (FSLIC), which insured the deposits in failed S&Ls, exceeded \$200 billion

Absence of News Attention

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S&L crisis was broken by unknown journalists writing for local papers or trade publications

Mainstream press responded only after Congress scheduled hearings



More generally, business news reporters are heavily dependent on management sources

Absence of News Attention

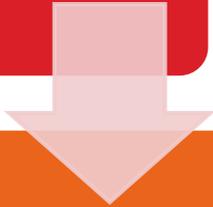
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In The Watchdog that Didn't Bark, media critic Dean Starkman suggests that deregulation and the importance of stock funds to middle class retirees made business reporters more interested in corporate strategy and “access” reporting – making the news a guide to investors

The Weakening of Investigative Journalism

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Beginning in the late 1970s, news organizations faced economic pressures and increased competition for market share



This led to “softening” of the news (Zaller – Bennett debate)



Investigative reporting requires a major investment and audience response is uncertain - editors and publishers became risk averse

Closeness to Sources

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- Indexing system makes reporters especially close to official sources who are unlikely to disclose “scandalous” material
- NYT is the first newspaper to pull out of the annual White House press dinner:

“It did not feel like the right message to be sending to our readers to really be, you know, to be in such a chummy sort of festive setting with the people we’re supposed to be covering.”

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“Indexing” Theory

Press reliance on official sources

“Indexing” Theory: News as a Reflection of Elite Opinion

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When elites disagree, journalists represent the differences in opinion

Greater disagreement and competition of proposals in the area of domestic policy

When there is elite consensus, journalists represent only that perspective

International and national security arena less transparent and competitive

Executive branch domination over legislature and judiciary

Limits on Press Access

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National security

- Relatively “open” information policies in the domestic arena versus “closed” (lack of access) policy in case of national security

The legacy of Vietnam

- “Silence of the critics”

Case Study

- From Vietnam, Grenada, Operation Desert Storm to Iraq coverage

Zaller-Chiu Study of Indexing

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Press coverage during foreign policy and military “crises” involving possible or actual use of U.S. military force



Gather news data and data on Congressional opinion for 39 cases between 1945 and 1991

Interested in relationship between views expressed in Congress (elite opinion) and **slant** represented in news reports



Slant measured as “hawkish” vs. “dovish”

i.e. supportive of or opposed to use of force

Methodology, Data

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Bennett's 1990
study of press
coverage

Case of US policy
toward Nicaragua
in the 1980s

Mainstream media
reflected positions
of the Reagan
Administration

- Hawkish

Methodology, Data (cont.)

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Zaller and Chiu examine news reports in Time and Newsweek dealing with relevant crises

Each paragraph read by coders and classified as hawkish or dovish

Methods (cont.)

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For each crisis, media hawkishness measured as

$$\frac{(\# \text{ of hawkish paras} - \# \text{ of dovish paras})}{(\# \text{ of hawkish paras} + \# \text{ of dovish paras} + \# \text{ of neutral paras})}$$



Parallel analysis of floor speeches and roll call votes--classify Congressional opinion as hawkish or dovish

Correlation between Congressional and media slant was .63

Does the Press Lead or Follow?

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Separate analysis of Senate and House speeches

Senators thought to be less dependent upon public opinion

Media coverage might be leading rather than following opinions expressed by House members concerned about reelection

Results of Analysis

Show no difference in the strength of the correlation for Senate and House opinion

Lends credence to the idea that it is the press following elite opinion (and not the other way around)

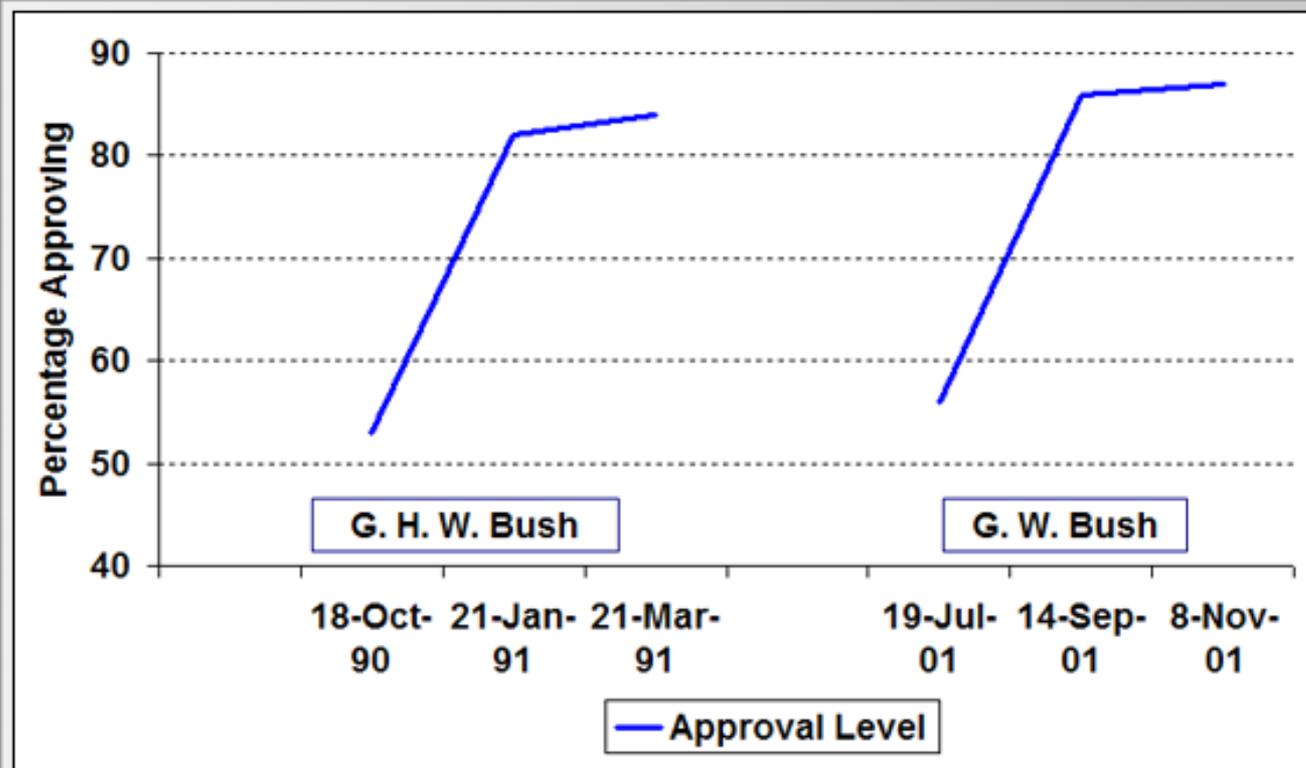
- Press not entirely a “mouthpiece”
 - Journalists are especially dovish for events seen as military setbacks (e.g. Tet)

Consequences of Indexing

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During periods of foreign policy or military crisis, significant “rally effect” behind the incumbent President in response to supportive news reports

Figure 10.3: Desert Storm and 9/11 as Rally Points



Note: Desert Storm was launched 17-Jan-91.

National security as an arena that limits media's independence

Battlefield coverage from Vietnam to the current era

Vietnam: Autonomous Media

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Major news organizations with news bureaus in Saigon, staffed by multiple correspondents

- Accredited journalists given relatively free access to track down stories and cover battlefield events

Voluntary, self-censorship guidelines

- Coverage showed American casualties on a daily basis

Vietnam Reporting (Tet Offensive)

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Viet Cong launched a major offensive in Jan. 1968 which gave them temporary control of major areas of Saigon, Hue, and other areas



Effects of Vietnam Coverage

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Daily reports on course of the war

Provided an impetus to the anti-war movement

Helped candidacy of anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy



As casualty rate increased

Johnson's popularity fell

McCarthy ran a close second to LBJ in NH primary leading RFK to enter the race



On March 31, 1968 LBJ goes on national TV to announce that he will not seek re-election

Grenada: Access Denied

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Grenada, 1983

Press denied access to
war zone (naval
blockade)

Reporters forced to
depend on official
briefings

Reagan Administration

Claims communist threat
(Cuban advisors)

Claims possibility of
American students being
taken hostage

Several key claims turn out to
be false (e.g. airport
expansion)

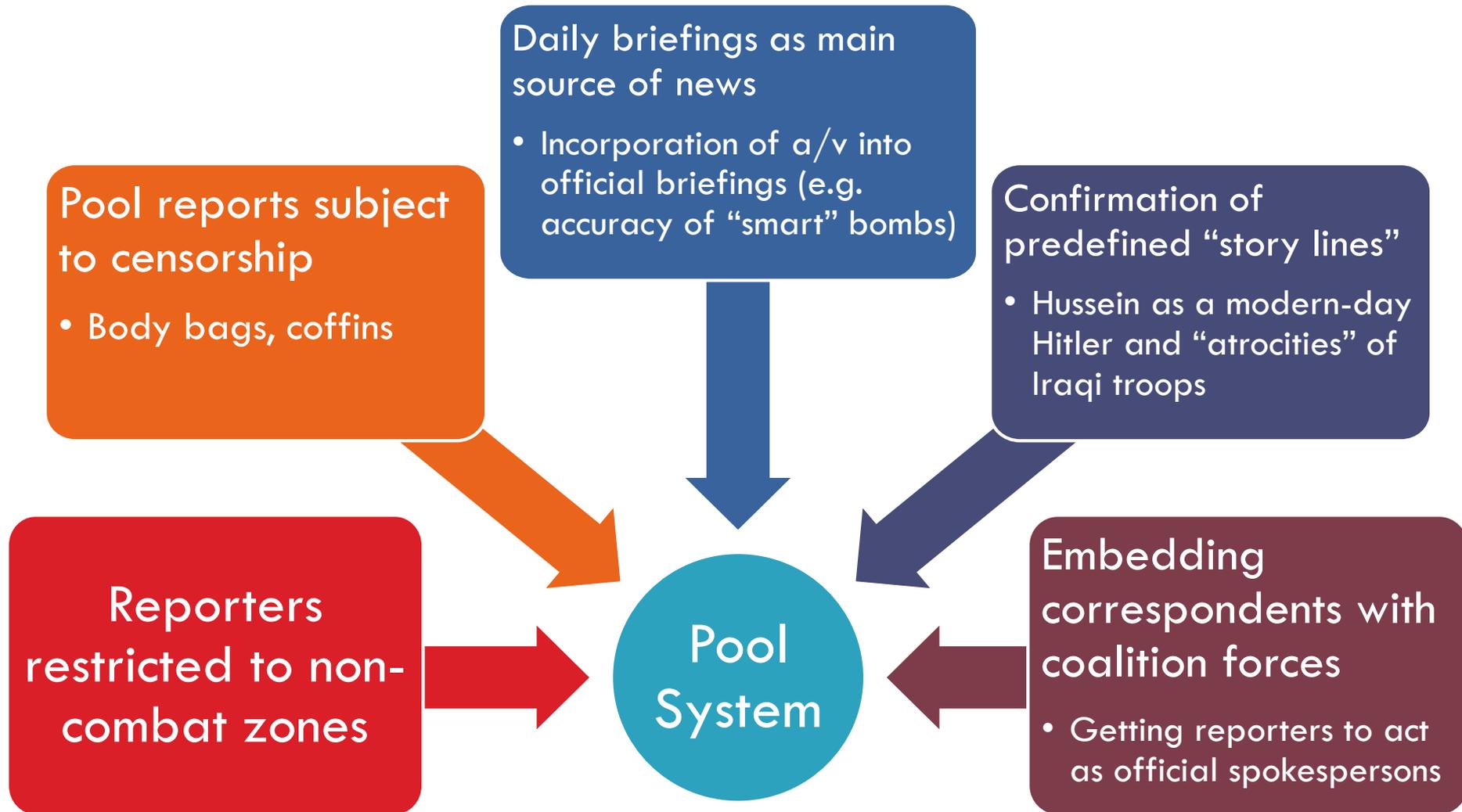
Grenada (cont.)

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“When you are in a situation where your primary source of information is the United States government and where, for three days, basically your only source of information except Radio Cuba is the Pentagon, you are totally at their mercy and you have to make an assumption that the U.S. government is telling the truth. You report that Casper Weinberger, then the Secretary of Defense, says ‘the fighting was heaviest here,’ or Weinberger says ‘the barracks are under siege.’ Well, you believe it. What are you going to do? You report what he says.”

From Grenada to Iraq

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Desert Storm and Press Briefings

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The Iraq War; from briefings to embedded correspondents

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The Iraq War; from briefings to embedded correspondents

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More Iraq Coverage: “Embedded” Reports

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The End of Investigative Journalism?

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- Market pressures and cost-cutting
- “Pack journalism” – if market leaders stop doing it, so will everybody else
- Reliance on official sources and indexing theory
- National security news as pro-regime in slant

The Post-War Verdict of the NYT

“Some critics of our coverage during that time have focused blame on individual reporters. Our examination, however, indicates that the problem was more complicated. Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper. Accounts of Iraqi defectors were not always weighed against their strong desire to have Saddam Hussein ousted. Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all.”

ProPublica: a Revival of Investigative Journalism?

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Nonprofit news organization dedicated to investigative, public service journalism

Endowed generously by Herbert M. and Marion Sandler

Has >\$30 million and has already developed the prestige to have an impact (Pulitzers in 2010 and 2011)

Investigative reports on police abuses in aftermath of Katrina and payments to doctors by pharmaceutical companies

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Normative standards for assessing the monitoring performance of the media

Normative Standards for Assessing the Performance of the Media

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“Can citizens who get most of their public affairs information from the new soft news discharge the duties of citizenship?”

The “full news standard” versus “burglar alarm” standard (Zaller)

- FNS = media should provide citizens with basic information on the issues of the day thus allowing citizens to hold elected officials accountable
- By this standard, the media perform poorly; soft news and horse race journalism dominate

Changes in Civic Norms

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Partisan Press

In the era of the partisan press, citizens behaved as “exuberant partisans” cheering on their team

As journalism moved toward “objectivity,” the citizen was no longer the exuberant partisan, but a detached independent interested in substantive news (exuberance may be on the rise today)

Objective Press

Partisan Press as Cheerleader

- “ANOTHER DEMOCRATIC SHAM” ran a typical heading in the Republican *New York Tribune* in 1880. Democratic papers took the same tack. In 1876, the *New York World* could head a news story about a Republican leader “HOW BLAINE KEEPS UP HIS LYING STATEMENTS.” . .
- **“In this period, then, politics was organized by parties; the good citizen was a good partisan; and a good newspaper was one that presented a fare of reliable partisanship to a partisan audience.”** Zaller, p. 113

Is the Ideal of the Monitorial Citizen Realistic?

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Zaller argues it is unrealistic

- Great majority of Americans are partisan and the more informed citizens are the most partisan

The demand for serious news is non-existent

- If people wanted substantive news, that is what market-oriented media would deliver

Given citizens' news preferences, Zaller's solution proposes that the media force citizens to pay attention when major problems face the country – distinction between burglar alarms and police patrols

- e.g. the collapse of the banking system in 2008

Zaller's Argument re Soft News

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- “the idea is to call attention to matters requiring urgent attention, and to do so in excited and noisy tones”
- Educational value of soft news as in the *Murphy Brown* episode illustrating the divide between the parties over “family values”
- Issue became front-page news during the 1992 presidential campaign; Republicans hoped that moral values would replace economy as the issue of the day

Bennett's Response

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Market-based journalism emphasizes “scandals” on a regular basis

- On matters of little national significance (e.g. the private lives of elected officials and celebrities)

Unlike the world of law enforcement, where false alarms are discouraged

- No such corrective mechanism applies to news coverage

Cynical coverage of elected officials and the displacement of descriptive journalism by “interpretive” journalism has turned off citizens

- Shrinking sound bite

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The special case of money and politics

Campaign Finance and the Appearance of Corruption

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The possibility of corruption – either real or only perceived – has been a major issue in the development of US campaign finance law

Multi-million dollar campaigns financed by individuals and groups

Efforts to regulate campaign finance

Raises possibility that elected officials can be “bought”

Raises possibility that they will provide favors for large donors

Limiting amount of money individuals can donate

Limiting total amount candidates can spend

Donald Trump on “bought” politicians

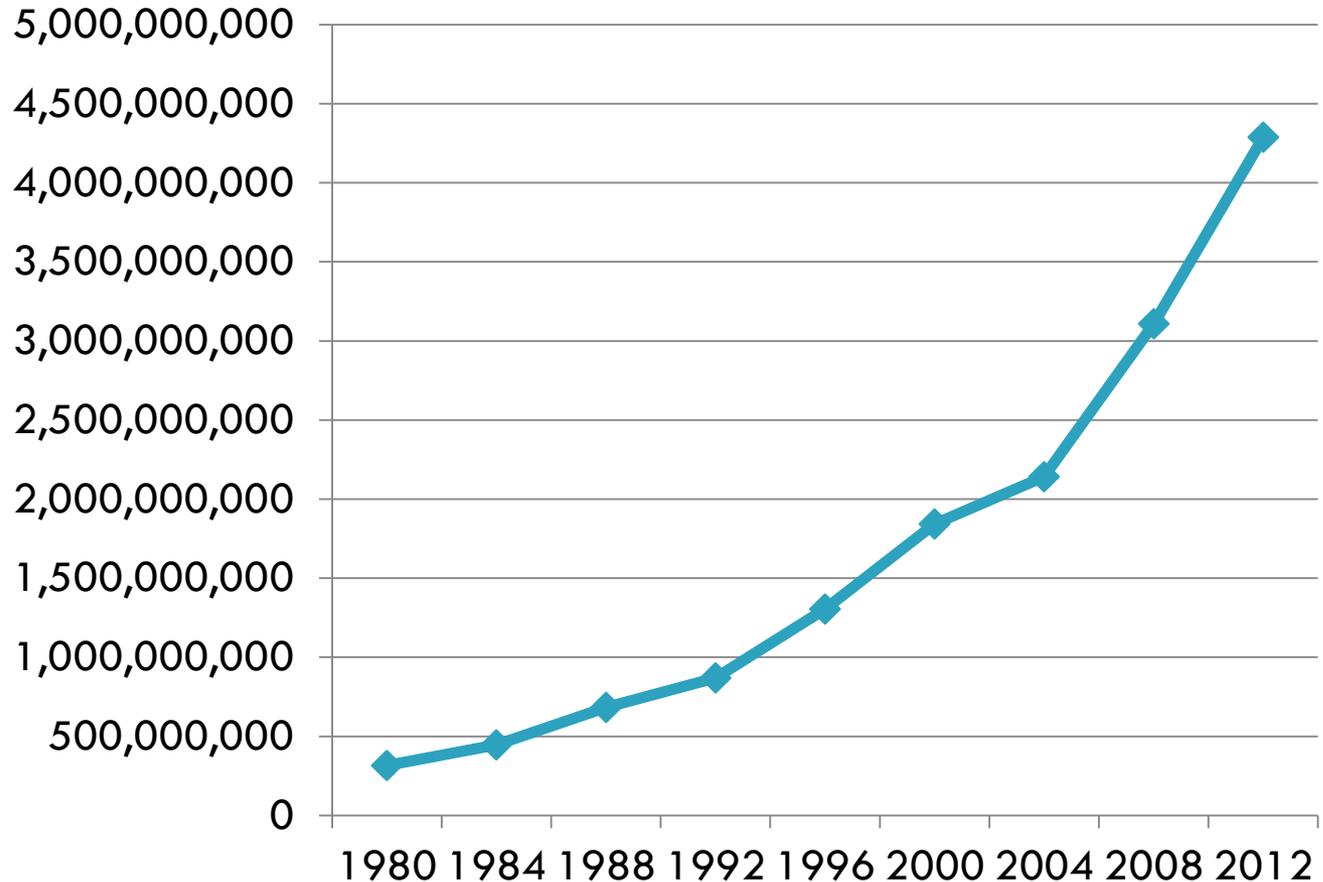
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- “I will tell you that our system is broken,” Trump said on stage in Thursday's GOP candidates' debate. “I gave to many people before this -- before two months ago I was a businessman. I give to everybody. When they call, I give. And you know what, when I need something from them two years later, three years later, I call them. They are there for me. That's a broken system.”

Increasing Cost of Running for Office (Presidential Election Only)

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Note the increased rate at which spending increases from the 1990s



Brief History of CF Law

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Buckley v. Valeo (1976)

Supreme Court defined ground rules for determining when campaign finance limits are acceptable under the First Amendment's right of free speech and association

Contribution limits could be justified by the government's interests in preventing either "corruption" or the "appearance of corruption."

Buckley v. Valeo

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“Of almost equal concern as the danger of actual *quid pro quo* arrangements is the impact of the appearance of corruption stemming from public awareness of the opportunities for abuse inherent in a regime of large individual financial contributions.”

Key distinction between contributions and expenditures

Narrowing the Definition of Corruption

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Since Buckley, as the number of conservatives on the Supreme Court has increased

- the definition of corruption as a basis for regulation has been narrowed (Citizens United v FEC (2010) – prohibition on corporations spending on behalf of parties/candidates unconstitutional

In McCutcheon v FEC, the appearance of corruption is dismissed as a basis for regulation

- replaced with “preventing the appearance of quid pro quo corruption, [and therefore] the Government may not seek to limit the appearance of mere influence or access.”

Quid pro quo corruption = a direct exchange of an official act for money. “The hallmark of corruption is the financial quid pro quo: dollars for political favors.”

Summary

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(1)

- Free press expected to keep elected officials honest

(2)

- Does the US media live up to this expectation?
 - Demise of investigative journalism, dependence on official sources and rise of the national security state

(3)

- Standards for evaluating press performance – full news standard versus burglar alarms

(4)

- Campaign finance and the appearance of corruption