THE FUTURE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL MEDIA

Timothy E. Cook
Department of Political Science
Stetson Hall
Williams College
Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267 USA

timothy.cook@williams.edu

Forthcoming in W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, eds.,
Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy
(Cambridge University Press, forthcoming)

THE FUTURE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL MEDIA

Nowadays, almost everyone assumes the news media are powerful in one way or another. How, when, where and why this occurs, and for good or for ill, brings considerably less consensus. Different conceptions of journalism and theories of what shapes the news and thus of the news media's power abound (see Gans 1979:78-79). Journalists protest that they hold a mirror up to reality, a notion that has been debunked by the constant preference over time for only certain newsmakers, subject matters and storylines. Critics on various points on the left-right continuum contend instead that biased news stems from journalists' particular ideological stances -- whether their own or that of the news organization for which they work (Lichter et al 1986; Page 1996) -- yet this begs the question of how this can occur given journalists' explicit and conscientious exclusion of personal values and dogged pursuit of neutrality if not objectivity (Tuchman 1972; Gans 1979; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996).

Perhaps the dominant explanation among scholars is the role of the news media as organizations having to crank out a predictable amount of news weekly, daily, even hourly nowadays, even though what is news is all but undefinable. In the process of "routinizing the unexpected" (Tuchman 1973), the organizational approach contends, the news gravitates only toward those news sources and subject matters that can easily and efficiently provide opportunities for news on a regular, recurring basis. Although the organizational approach helps us understand the role of powerful authoritative sources, the centrality of newsbeats and the repetition of news formulas (e.g., Epstein 1973, Sigal 1973, Tuchman 1978), there is much that cannot be explained by it. In particular, the need to routinely produce the news has little impact in and of itself on the political content of the news. As Eliasoph (1988) convincingly showed in her study of an alternative news outlet, the radio station KPFA, both mainstream and radical news can easily be produced by the same routines. Moreover, as Gans (1979) noted, organizations may create new values, but at least as often, they reflect the values that are built into the very structure of the organization (see also Selznick 1957). Most of all, the organizational approach to the news cannot explain why there is such apparent similarity in news content from one outlet to the next. Organizations, after all, might well be expected to craft distinctive approaches as their goals and clienteles vary. Yet although we know that different news outlets have considerably different audiences, which actors and which stories are newsworthy, and for what reasons, are

remarkably alike.

One way to answer this puzzle of media power, as I have argued elsewhere (Cook 1998), is to envision the media as a collective institution. Similar to other such collective institutions (see Powell and DiMaggio 1991), news organizations are structured similarly to achieve similar goals, in part because of transorganizational norms of professionalism, in part because of operating in similar political environments, and above all because of the abiding uncertainty of what is important and interesting enough to be considered news. I proposed the following definition: "...institutions are social patterns of behavior identifiable across the organizations that are generally seen within a society to preside over a particular social sphere" (Cook 1998: 70). Three questions then had to be answered for me to be able to conclude that the news media did, in fact, constitute a political institution: "First, can we conclude that the news media create the news based on distinctive roles, routines, rules, and procedures? Second, have these practices evolved and endured over time and do they extend across news organizations? And finally, are the news media viewed by newspersons themselves, as well as those who are not, as together presiding over a given part of social and political life?" (Cook 1998: 71)

Indeed, research has suggested that these questions can and should be answered affirmatively. As a consequence, the news media have become an institution wielding, advertently or not, collective power. Not simply because the public relies upon the media for their information about politics but because officials use the news as well to communicate with each other and influence the all-important context for decision-making, the news media are now a crucial intermediary implicated in day-to-day governance at least as much as a means to connect officials and the public. The dilemma emerges in the tenuous links to citizenship, given the ascendancy of communication that relies upon private financing, that sees its audiences less as participants to be mobilized than consumers to be reached by advertisers, and that consequently focuses on certain news values that have little or less to do with the quality of public policy. The growing importance of the news media to officialdom then suggests an increasing incursion of news values into the very processes of decision-making in government.

Yet there is nothing inevitable about this set of developments. Indeed, as I have shown (Cook 1998: chs. 2-3), both politics and journalism shift because of governmental decisions about public policies toward the news media and/or of technological possibilities that create new openings for new

kinds of journalism. And the developments of 1998 imply new challenges to the future of the media as a collective political institution.

Take the Lewinsky scandal, which was characterized both by the role of narrowcast cable channels that have profited from the presence of a continuing saga in the form of a scandal to build and hold audiences at low cost, and by indications of the role of the Internet, as the story was broken by an gossip website run by Matt Drudge (who eschewed traditional norms of journalism) and then was propelled by on-line releases, such as the report of independent counsel Kenneth Starr. In short, 1998 encapsulated the lessening dominance of any single news outlet (or single set of news outlets, such as network news). The first two characteristics of an institution seem, on the face of it, to be undermined by the expanding range of news outlets and the deteriorating market share of each individual news outlet. In particular, we may wonder whether the onetime homogeneity of the news media -- and the boundaries around the profession of journalism -- are breaking down. In other words, both the "distinctive roles, routines, rules, and procedures" of American journalism, as well as the extension of those practices across a wide range of news outlets, may be eroding.

A second aspect of the Lewinsky scandal -- the dramatic rise in disaffection from the news media reflected in public opinion polls across 1998 through its aftermath -- also raises intriguing questions about the durability of the institutional media. President Clinton's job performance ratings actually went up in the first days of the scandal, particularly after his 1998 State of the Union Message. A poll that the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted from January 30 to February 2, 1998, suggested that Clinton's approval ratings improved in part because of antipathy to the news media: "Sympathy for a president beleaguered by a press perceived as biased and inaccurate is an important element in Clinton's support." (Pew 1998c: 1) After the conclusion of the impeachment trial in early 1999, the public was still unhappy, as another Pew poll conducted February 18-21, 1999, revealed: "The... clear and consistent trend is discontent with the news media. Public criticism of press practices and coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal continues. And the negative view of the news media now extends to its values, with growing numbers of Americans describing the press as immoral, unprofessional and uncaring about the country" (Pew 1999a: 1). These results bring home to us what is possibly a new fact of life for journalists and journalism: that the news media and journalists have moved from being highly respected in the wake of Watergate in the 1970s to disliked and disdained in

the 1990s. The third characteristic of an institution that I sketched above, namely whether it is widely accepted as presiding over a certain part of social and political life, is endangered when public opinion begins to question its legitimacy. As Dennis (1975: 189) asked about another intermediary institution, the political party system, "Are we able to say with any assurance that public goodwill has reached a dangerously depleted level -- a point low enough to make the institution unable to withstand major new stresses during the coming years?" Thus I wish to explore the state and implications of the growing disaffection, recorded in recent public opinion surveys, of citizens towards the news media and toward journalists.

Does the Rise of Narrowcasting Spell The End of Pack Journalism?

In the 1970s, it was commonplace to refer to the way in which the two-party system was displaced by the three-network system. The accelerating collapse of the audience for the three broadcast networks of CBS, ABC, and NBC makes this a quaintly historical bon mot. As surveys of the Pew Research Center (1998a: 2) have revealed, the number of respondents who say they regularly view cable news (CNN, CNBC, MSNBC or Fox News) is just about the same as for network news broadcasts -- adding up the nightly news and the newsmagazine shows and the morning shows -- once one folds in other cable channels with formats and subjects borrowed from the news, namely ESPN (sports) and the Weather Channel. Indeed, this same report suggested that there was no dominant mass audience any more, noting instead, via cluster analysis, six different news audiences with different habits, levels of attention and preferences for news, largely distinguished by their attention to particular broadcast and print news outlets even before one considers the burgeoning opportunities afforded by the Internet and the Web.

On the surface, the greater diversification of the news audience would seem to suggest that we can no longer think of the news media as a single institution. Indeed, it does appear that the news habits of Americans are becoming even more varied if not more haphazard than they were in the past (cf. Graber 1984; Robinson and Levy 1986). The percentage of survey respondents who report watching only television news fell in Pew reports from 30% in 1993 to 15% in 1998 (Pew 1998a: 1). When asked which news outlets they attended to the day before, over half report not reading a newspaper, listening to radio news or reading a magazine, and around 40% did not watch any television

news at all (Pew 1998a: Q8-Q13). Yet the lack of overlap of the news audiences means that only 14% of the survey respondents reported spending no time attending to the news the previous day (Pew 1998a: section 3, p. 1). Add to this the growing number of survey respondents who reported checking the Web or the Internet for news,[1] and one could imagine a qualitatively different political system from the 1970s with its focus on a neatly delineated set of national news media.

Likewise, all news outlets are more sensitive than was the case in the 1970s to the bottom line of economic pressures -- in part because a guaranteed audience is no longer there, in part because of the rise in publicly traded media companies that are now being judged for profit margins much like any other corporations. We might not then be surprised if journalists' onetime autonomy, particularly their apparent ability to neglect if not ignore their mass audiences, might be severely cut back, and in favor of greater attention to their more distinct "niche" audiences. In addition, the growing competition offered by the Internet for the news could produce a new set of sources of the news.

But has this clear rise in "narrowcasting" produced a wide array of differing understandings and interpretations of the news? To judge from the latest round of indispensable surveys of full-time journalists working for mass outlets, conducted by Weaver and Wilhoit (1996), and a recent survey of a representative sample of working journalists by the Pew Research Center (1999a) between November 1998 and February 1999, the answer must be no. The roles endorsed for the news media are startlingly constant over time and across different news organizations by medium and by focus (national or local). Weaver and Wilhoit, for instance, report strong emphasis on interpreting government claims and disseminating objective information (1996, Figure 4.2), and a strong rejection of the role of journalists setting the political agenda. Similarly, the Pew Research Center survey (1999: Q4) revealed journalists seeing others joining the profession overwhelmingly for "providing people with information they need in their lives" and "having the chance to uncover wrongdoing," far above "working to reform society" or "helping to create a sense of community." Journalists exhibited much lower job satisfaction in 1992 than in either 1971 or 1982 (ibid., Figure 3.13), in no small part because their perceived autonomy had also shrunk substantially, in turn attributed to "inadequate staff, time and space" (ibid., Figures 3.2 to 3.5). At least in the early 1990s, then, journalists' complaints (which are many) about the decline of standards in the news says less about being pushed to reflect audience wishes and more about lacking the resources to do the good job they once perceive they did.

Reporters engage in increased self-criticism and disgruntlement about the job they do. In survey responses from 1995 and 1999, journalists now fret about the decline of the news media's credibility and criticize the news for failing to distinguish between reporting and commentary, for factual errors and for being out of touch with their audiences. Yet these answers presuppose the same criteria for quality journalism that have existed for decades. Indeed, there is continuing strong endorsement for the value of objectivity as a systematic method for attaining "a true and accurate account of an event" (Pew 1999a: Q6-Q7). Most strikingly, remarkable consensus on the "core principles" of journalism, with large majorities (usually well over 70%) of both national and local journalists, and of both print and television reporters emphasizing "getting the facts right," "getting both sides of the story," "not publishing rumors," "providing at least two sources to confirm a story based on anonymous sources," "making your reader/viewer/listener your first obligation," "keeping some distance from the people you cover," "always remaining neutral" and "keeping the business people out of the newsroom" (Pew 1999a: Q24).

In sum, the multiplication of different news outlets has not been matched by a diversification of approaches to journalism. More fully, the homogeneity of the news across different news outlets, if anything, has probably been strengthened rather than weakened by recent developments. To grasp this point, we only need to recall the truism that profits can be achieved either by boosting revenue or cutting cost. Judging from the evidence provided by Doug Underwood in this volume, at least for *political* coverage, cost-cutting seems to have had the most impressive impact. For one thing, news broadcasts, as well as newspapers, have sought to emphasize more service-oriented "news that you can use," traditionally more popular than the Washington fare that was the heart of reporting up until the 1980s and that was drastically reduced by the early 1990s (see Kimball 1994). In addition, newspapers have redesigned their format to increase typeface size and white space, all of which ends up shrinking the newshole further at a time when political news is under greater competition from service-oriented news. In other words, the service orientation of the news media has changed the content of political news less than it has reduced the amount of space and time available for it.

Networks and newspapers alike have tended to close down bureaus as one way to present a favorable bottom line. The creation of news now relies ever more on outside reports -- whether pools of reporters or news services of one sort or another -- to provide them with the content that reporters could re-make into stories for their news outlets without ever having to leave the newsroom. McManus's (1994) pioneering look at "market-driven journalism" at three California local television news operations showed how the diminishing resources provided to reporters inevitably meant a greater reactivity to the news and an expanding dependence on the story suggestions of other news outlets, such as local daily newspapers. Yet matters have changed differently than we might have expected. We don't see simply old wine in new bottles, as has occurred with Internet websites linked to existing news organizations which provide Web-surfers with a brand-name assurance of quality and credibility (Davis 1999: ch. 2). Instead, we also see greater *explicit and formal collaboration* between journalists in the creation of news.

The classic studies from the 1970s (e.g. Crouse 1973; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980) not only identified pack journalism but stressed informal reasons for its presence. They stressed how reporters sought to minimize the inevitable uncertainty of what was nonfictional news on a daily basis. In order to give their superiors a product that could routinely be accepted as authoritative enough to be in the news, they tended either to turn to each other on the newsbeat or to rely upon certain news outlets, such as the wire services or the *New York Times*, to give an agreed-upon indication of what was news.

These *informal* mechanisms have not been displaced but have been succeeded by ever more *formal* modes of cooperation between organizations in the production of news. Perhaps the best example here is NBC, which, faced with the dispersion of their audience, has been most aggressive in spinning off two additional cable channels -- MSNBC, as part of a collaboration with Microsoft to integrate an all-news cable channel with an interactive Website, and CNBC, focused in particular on business news (and from the perspective of business) and drawing nowadays on a deal with the *Wall Street Journal* to provide its writers for commentary and insight -- which then feed back into the home-network's programming, as when MSNBC's commentator Laura Ingraham is enlisted to serve as a talking head on NBC's morning show, Today, or when CNBC's Ron Insana provides a film story for NBC Nightly News. The collaboration between Time magazine and CNN may have become at least

momentarily infamous in 1998 for a story on the U.S. Army's use of nerve gas in Vietnam that both organizations ultimately felt obliged to retract, yet indicates how the common ownership of the two outlets now pushes a common content. Add the greater tendency nowadays for journalists from one news outlet to serve as sources for others, sometimes with the encouragement of bonuses from their home organization for appearing on someone else's show. It soon becomes clear that the more widespread dispersion of the news audience and the possible multiplication of news outlets says very little per se about the diversity of news content itself. Homogeneity of the news, it appears, seems to be alive and well -- for better or worse.

Does the Growing Public Criticism of the Media and for Journalism Suggest a "Legitimacy Crisis" for the "Fourth Branch"?

Yet if the news media still act as a transorganizational institution, recent public opinion polls show just how much the legitimacy of that institution has dipped. The General Social Survey (GSS) annually asks respondents to report the confidence they had in various "leaders" of national institutions (FitzSimon and McGill 1995; W.L. Bennett 1998, figure 1). In the early 1970s, "the press" was ranked highly,[2] about equal to the military and usually far more favorably than Congress or the executive branch. Around 1982, the press slipped in public evaluation to the lower levels of Congress and the executive, and those three slumped further in the public's estimation in the early 1990s.

Moreover, there has been a more qualitative shift in the public's views toward the news media from the 1970s, where we can first gauge public opinion, through the 1990s. The portrait from the 1970s, continuing on into the 1980s, is of a generally favorable set of the public's attitudes toward the news media. Lipset and Schneider (1987), re-analyzing Harris and NORC surveys from 1966 through 1986, concluded that confidence in the press was only weakly associated with confidence in other institutions. They suggested that "the press," along with organized religion, are "... `guiding' institutions, outside the normal political and economic order, and to some extent `critics' of that order" (Lipset and Schneider 1987: 65).

The apparent public support for restrictions on press access during the United States' invasion

of Grenada in 1983 clearly worried reporters. Yet reviews of contemporaneous poll results (Gergen 1984; Schneider and Lewis 1985; Whitney 1985; Robinson and Kohut 1988) implied that public criticism may have been relatively limited. Critical of what they saw as a general tendency for the news media to be unfair, biased, and preoccupied with bad news, the public was satisfied with the overall performance of the news outlets with which they were most familiar, rarely provided a majority in favor of government restrictions on the media (ones that reporters strongly opposed), and even viewed the news media as a whole more positively than other institutions.

By the 1990s, however, the news media were no longer immune from the overall decline in institutions that had begun in the early 1970s. Now, as S. Bennett (1998) has found in the 1996 GSS, the correlation of measures of confidence in the news media and in other leaders is significantly positive, in part because public ratings of the news media's performance, independence, fairness, ethics, and completeness all fell more rapidly from the 1980s to the 1990s than they had from the 1970s to the 1980s (see also FitzSimon and McGill 1995).

Data from a Harris survey taken directly after the 1996 general election (Smith and Lichter 1997) and Pew Research Center polls over the last three years fill out this portrait of disapproval of the news media as a whole. Let's examine first the level of confidence that citizens have in the news media. When given a choice between saying "the news media helps society to solve its problems" or "the news media gets in the way of society solving its problems," the public, by a 2-to-1 margin chose the latter in February 1998 (Pew 1998c, question 6). Although a minority opted for agreeing that "criticism by the press keeps political leaders from doing their job," the percentage grew from 23% in August 1989 to 39% in February 1998 and 31% in February 1999 (Pew 1999b, Q20). Strong majorities -- considerably more so than in 1985 -- of the public opted for saying "news organizations generally" "don't care about the people they report on," and "try to cover up their mistakes" with significant increases over time in the public's propensity to accuse them of being "immoral," of "hurting democracy," of "not [being] professional" and of being "too critical of America" (Pew 1999b, Q23). The distrust of the news media extends to journalists, particularly regarding their honesty and ethics, on which a Gallup poll in 1994 ranked them below most other professionals, higher only than "advertising practitioners," "congressmen," "insurance salesmen," and "car salesmen" (FitzSimon and McGill 1995: Table 7; see also Pew 1997, Q32).

It does appear then that the public's trust in the news media has eroded considerably, raising questions about the public legitimacy of news media power. When asked directly, citizens largely say "the news media have too much influence over what happens in the world today"; in the Harris poll from late 1996, 58% said "too much," 7% "too little" and 33% "just about the right amount" (Smith and Lichter 1997, exhibit 3-4). Consequently, the past reticence about governmental intervention to improve the news has diminished (Smith and Lichter 1997, exhibit 6-1).

Does this decline in the trust given to the news media, and to journalists, then suggest a crisis for the institutional media? After all, these findings would seem to undermine the conclusion I reached (in Cook 1998 p. 70) that suggested that the news media, as a political and social institution, "are expected to preside over a societal and/or political sector" by both elites and the mass public. Yet the public's apparent lack of confidence in the news media as a whole may or may not undermine the institutional place of the news media very much, given two other factors.

First, we need to distinguish between confidence in the news media as a whole and support for particular news outlets. It may be that while the public is skittish about trusting the news media, they still find their overall day-to-day performance to be adequate. Just as the public usually dislikes Congress far more than its own representative in Congress or often disapproves of the health care system in the United States at the same time they approve of their own physician or sees discrimination against women occurring frequently in the world at large but rarely in their immediate surroundings, citizens may disapprove of the news media as a whole or of journalists taken as a group yet still be satisfied with the news outlets to which they attend.

Indeed, this bifurcation of support was already recognizable in poll results in the 1980s that showed consistently stronger criticism of the "news media" compared to their hometown newspaper and to either local or network television news (Schneider and Lewis 1985: Table 2). "When it comes to the press, people are very familiar with the newspaper that lands on their front porch every day. Television, particularly network television, is more remote. `The media' represents a distant and abstract force, and people are reluctant to offer unqualified praise for powerful institutions that are removed from their daily experience... When people think of the media, they probably think of a

powerful institution, the role it plays in society, and the kind of people who work for it, as opposed to specific newspapers or television programs or news stories" (Schneider and Lewis 1985: 10).

The most important recent study of approval of national political institutions, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's Congress as Public Enemy (1995), also elucidates citizens' understandings and evaluations of a collective political institution such as the news media. Even in 1992, a year of unusual political anger and disaffection, the American public was highly favorable to the institutional structure itself of Congress, the least popular of the three branches of government. By contrast, the gap between approval of the institution and approval of its members, substantial for all three branches, was especially large with Congress, leading the authors to conclude that the famous phenomenon of the public approving one's representative while disliking Congress was not so much the contrast of individual and institution, but the difference between what citizens knew about their particular member and about all members of Congress as a whole: "People think about Congress in terms of its members primarily because their exposure to Congress usually comes through the actions of the membership" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995: 107).

Like Congress, the work of journalists is increasingly visible to the public. And similarly, there is often negative news about the sloppy processes, ethical missteps and mistakes of both members of Congress and journalists[3] -- not to mention often unrelenting criticism against both of them from the spin control of the White House -- that can serve as data about Congress and its members as a whole, and about "the news media" and "journalists" as a whole. And as with Congress, the public appears disinclined to give the news media any slack. For instance, a Newsweek poll conducted in July 1998, after a series of well-publicized journalistic mishaps and scandals, asked its respondents, "Do you see these recent cases of media inaccuracy as isolated incidents involving a few specific reporters and news organization, or do they make you less likely to trust the news media's reporting in general?" Thirty percent chose the former, 62% the latter.[4]

Yet though the public's more day-to-day support often tends toward the negative, it has been fairly volatile. And the public continues to be satisfied and positive about the the individual news outlets they use, much more so than they are about the institutional news media or institutional actors of journalists. The Pew Research Center's (1998c, Q4) early 1998 survey shows continued strong

approval for local television news (81% saying that their "overall opinion" is very or mostly favorable), network television news (76%), "the daily newspaper you are most familiar with" (74%), "cable news networks such as CNN or MSNBC" (71%), though less so for "large nationally influential newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post (47%). Most strikingly, these figures have been remarkably stable, bouncing around within a limited range since they were first asked for all but cable in the summer of 1985.

To be sure, as the Pew Research Center (1998a) documented in the spring of 1998, news is less important as a pleasurable daily activity (especially among younger cohorts). Large audiences follow national and international news only when big stories have already drawn their attention.[5] However, the general lack of confidence that the people accord to the news media or to journalists does not prevent them from approving the day-to-day practice of the news outlets they attend to.

Second, the public has never been, for better or worse, pivotal to the ability of the news media to act as an intermediary political institution. After all, the utility of the news media in achieving political and policy goals of government officials and activists can be accomplished without the public directly weighing in. Much of what the media do -- particularly in Washington but elsewhere in American politics as well -- is to facilitate communication within and among policy elites at least as much as from those elites to the public at large. Moreover, the effect of coverage is not necessarily to mobilize the public so much as expand the perceived salience of an issue, and thereby enhance the extent to which political actors may have to account for their actions (or even more problematic, their inactions) down the road, whether or not that accounting ever takes place (Price 1978; Arnold 1990). To recall what I once heard as the first rule of lobbying, "People act differently when they know they're being watched."

Since my book appeared, two new indications have emerged to reinforce how much the public is out of the loop -- even when political actors are called upon to gauge "public opinion." One is Herbst's (1998) exploration in the Illinois state capital of political actors' concepts of public opinion. She found from conversations with activists, statehouse beat journalists and legislative staffers that only the activists tended to rely on polls as key measures of what the public thought. Her results underscore a longstanding conclusions of sociological research on journalists: they tend to disdain if not fear their

mass audiences, the main way in which they overtly attend to their readers and viewers is by softening the news, and the greater profit-mindedness of the news media is handled less by attending closely to the audience and more by cutting costs. Of particular importance is Herbst's finding that, even nowadays with the omnipresence of polls, the legislative staffers tended to see media coverage as being a better (not simply more immediately available) indicator of public opinion than surveys themselves.

Herbst's qualitative work has found quantitative confirmation from a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (1998d) of 81 members of Congress, 98 presidential appointees and 151 civil servants in the Senior Executive Service. All three sets of respondents show relatively high disagreement with the statement that "Americans know enough about issues to form wise opinions about what should be done"[6]. In addition, they were likely not to rely on polls, even among members of Congress, for instance, who viewed the public more favorably than their executive branch colleagues. When asked about their principal sources of information on how the public feels about issues -- and, importantly, allowed multiple responses -- legislators pointed to personal contacts (59%), letters and phone calls (36%) and even the media (31%) before public opinion polls (24%). Moreover, 76% of presidential appointees and 84% of civil servants listed the media as a main source of information about public opinion. This poll also provides impressive additional quantitative evidence of the extent to which Washington leaders are far heavier consumers of news than the public as a whole (cf. Weiss 1974). In addition to near-unanimous regular reading of the Washington Post, strong majorities of all three groups reported regularly or sometimes watching network news and CNN, listening to NPR, and reading the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal (Pew 1998d, Q31). Familiarity in this case does not breed contempt. All three sets of elite respondents replied that their overall opinion of the news media was very or mostly favorable -- 61% of members of Congress, 60% of presidential appointees and 62% of senior civil servants -- substantially higher than the 50% of the general public who gave that ranking to the same question in a contemporary survey (Pew, 1998d, Q6).

In short, the declining legitimacy of the news media as a whole among the public has obscured citizens' continuingly strong endorsement of the job that their preferred news outlets are doing, not to mention the esteem of Washington elites, who not only see communication as a key purpose of their work and tend not merely to be heavier news consumers but also evaluate the news media more favorably than the public as a whole. And such attitudes do not even address the extent to which the

news media, whether one likes them or not, are helpful for elites doing their jobs and for the mass public seeking to re-assure themselves that nothing happened in the previous week/day/hour that they needed to know and act upon. The news media, in short, could well be performing as an intermediary political institution, especially though not exclusively among political elites, regardless of their public popularity or perceived legitimacy.

Conclusion

Neither technology nor economics nor the shifting attitudes of the public will, in and of themselves, provoke a decline of the news media's new, largely inadvertent, role as an intermediary political institution. Instead, the continued power that the news media hold owes much to the calculations of political actors who, seeking to get something done in an ever more complex and balky political system, turn to the news media to help them accomplish their goals. The news media's power is then not because the people are in thrall to them. On the contrary, if political elites acted differently, the power of the news media might well be drastically diminished. But in an increasingly complicated, quite possibly ungovernable, political system, the news media provide a key resource for political elites and activists to get something done; that is unlikely to change in the absence of stark shifts in the make-up and structure of the political system as a whole.

Just because the newshole for politics is diminishing and therefore less accessible to any given political actor, and just because it is more difficult to target a particular news outlet, or set of news outlets, that will reach the majority of the American people, in the way that, say, Ronald Reagan's White House aimed for (if not at) the network news, we cannot say that political actors will become any less media-minded. Certainly a lesson of the early months of the Clinton presidency was that an end-run around the Washington press corps, via the circuit extended interviews that candidate Clinton had used so well, was unlikely to be enough publicity in and of itself. And whatever else the Starr Report might symbolize, its release by the House Judiciary Committee over the Internet has also been taken by some to signal a new era of political communication where members of the Washington elite can directly link up to the public instantaneously; yet in fact, if the Pew Research Center's (1998b) figures are correct, just under half of their survey respondents in mid-September 1998 had read "any part of the actual report," and of those, around 22% had read it on line -- an impressive amount, perhaps, but inflated by the Pew Center's acceptance of multiple responses, and fewer than those who said they had read it in a

newspaper (56% of the report readers) or had heard excerpts on television (30% of the report readers). Whatever direct information citizens, or other members of the elite, receive seems still to be put into the context of the communication provided by the news media.

Ironically, the multiplication of news sources only makes it more imperative for political actors to target the media. In a way, I am reminded of words I wrote almost a decade ago about what members of the U.S. House of Representatives that, now, probably extends to any political actors wanting to exert influence through the news:"Press secretaries [to House members] rarely rely on any one medium because none satisfies all four of their crucial criteria: access, a large audience, high credibility, and control of the final product.... Outlets with large audiences and high credibility, such as television, offer less access and control over the final message. Those that provide easy access and substantial control, such as local weeklies and newsletters, offer small audiences and only moderate credibility. The one medium that performs least poorly in all these criteria is the local daily newspaper. But press secretaries cannot concentrate exclusively on them: getting publicity is simply too uncertain a process. As far as House press operations are concerned, the more lines of communication, the better" (Cook 1989: 100).

In short, we should not expect the news media to move away from being a political institution, nor should we anticipate that political actors will become frustrated and try to find other ways of governing. True, there are still empirical questions that remain to be answered. The argument I set forth here was inspired by Cater's (1959) initial formulation that saw the press as becoming a "fourth branch of government" because of the unique American system of, in Neustadt's (1960) words, "separated institutions sharing power." It may be, however, that the rise of the news media as a political institution has less to do with the arrangement of the U.S. Constitution, and more to do with the news media themselves. And if it is true that the news media beyond the United States are becoming "Americanized" themselves, as globalization and privatization take hold, the news media may have emerged as an intermediary and at least partially independent political institution in other countries as well. Clearly, comparative work needs to be carried out if we are to understand whether it is the legally established political system, the public policies thereby pursued, or the nature of the press itself within a country that ends up politically empowering the news media.

And such research seems eminently worth pursuing, given the ways in which the news media do not contribute well to the current state and future prospects of a democratic political system. Throughout the twentieth century, the American news media have tended to see their audiences less as citizens requiring information to intercede in politics and more as consumers seeking ways to spend their disposable income (Baldasty 1992). And as political elites find getting into the news increasingly beneficial for their policies and programmatic goals, they have had to adapt their activities to the news values that do not contribute much to good, let alone democratic decision-making. The irony then is that a "free press," conceived as a "bulwark of liberty," does less to enhance the people's performance as citizens, and much more to bolster the economic power of news organizations and the political power of elites.

REFERENCES

Arnold, R. Douglas. 1990. The Logic of Congressional Action. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Baldasty, Gerald J. 1992. The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Bennett, Stephen. 1998. Trust in government, trust in the media: is there a connection? Paper presented at the research roundtable series, Shorenstein Center, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard, September 28.

Bennett, W. Lance. 1998. The uncivic culture: communication, lifestyle, and the rise of lifestyle politics. Ithiel de Sola Pool lecture delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston.

---, Lynne A. Gressett and William Haltom. 1985. Repairing the news: a case study of the news paradigm. Journal of Communication 35, 2: 50-68.

Cater, Douglass. 1959. The Fourth Branch of Government. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Cook, Timothy E. 1989. Making Laws and Making News. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

---. 1998. Governing with the News. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Crouse, Timothy. 1973. The Boys on the Bus. New York: Ballantine.

Davis, Richard. 1999. The Web of Politics. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dennis, Jack. 1975. Trends in public support for the American party system. British Journal of Political Science 5: 187-230.

Eliasoph, Nina. 1988. Routines and the making of oppositional news. Critical Studies in Mass Communication 5: 313-334.

Fishman, Mark. 1980. Manufacturing the News. Austin: University of Texas Press.

FitzSimon, Martha, and Lawrence T. McGill. 1995. The citizen as media critic. Media Studies Journal 9, 2 (Spring): 91-101.

Gans, Herbert J. 1979. Deciding What's News. New York: Vintage.

Gergen, David R. 1984. The message to the media. Public Opinion 7, 2 (April/May): 5-8.

Graber, Doris A. 1984. Processing the News. New York: Longman.

Herbst, Susan. 1998. Reading Public Opinion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hibbing, John, and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1995. Congress as Public Enemy. New York:Cambridge University Press.

Kimball, Penn. 1994. Downsizing the News. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press

Lichter, S. Robert, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter. 1986. The Media Elite. Bethesda, MD: Adler and Adler.

Lipset, Seymour Martin, and William Schneider. 1987. The Confidence Gap. rev. ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

McClain, Dylan Loeb. 1998. Scandals don't much harm an already bad reputation. New York Times (October 19, 1998): C4 (New England edition).

McManus, John. 1994. Market-Driven Journalism. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Neustadt, Richard E. 1960. Presidential Power. New York: Wiley.

Page, Benjamin I. 1996. Who Deliberates? Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. 1998a. Internet news takes off: event- driven news audiences. Press release, June 8. Available on line at http://www.people-press.org/med98rpt.htm with questionnaire results at http://www.people-press.org/med98que.htm.

--. 1998b. Pew's poll numbers: Clinton moral authority slips: phone calls, not polls, may sway Congress: 20 million go online for Starr report. Press release, September 17. Available on line at http://www.people-press.org/starrrpt.htm with questionnaire results at http://www.people-press.org/starrque.htm.

--. 1998c. Popular policies and unpopular press lift Clinton ratings: scandal reporting faulted for bias and inaccuracy. Press release, February 6. Available on line at http://www.people-press.org/feb98rpt.htm with questionnaire results at http://www.people-press.org/feb98que.htm.

--. 1998d. Washington leaders wary of public opinion: public appetite for government misjudged. Press release, April 17. Available on line at http://www.people-press.org/leadrpt.htm with questionnaire results at http://www.people- press.org/leadque.htm.

---. 1999a. Public votes for continuity and change in 2000: big doubts about news media's values. Press release, February 25. Available on line at http://www.people-press.org/feb99rpt.htm with questionnaire results at http://www.people-press.org/feb99que.htm.

---. 1999b. Striking the balance: audience interests, business pressures and journalists' values. Press release, March 30. Available on line at http://www.people-press.org/press99rpt.htm with questionnaire results at http://www.people- press.org/press99que.htm.

Powell, Walter W., and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds. 1991. The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Price, David E. 1978. Policy making in congressional committees. American Political Science Review 72: 548-574.

Robinson, John, and Mark Levy. 1986. The Main Source. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Robinson, Michael J., and Andrew Kohut. 1988. Believability and the press. Public Opinion Quarterly 52: 174-189.

Schneider, William, and I.A. Lewis. 1985. Views on the news. Public Opinion 8, 4 (August/September): 6-11, 58-59.

Selznick, Philip. 1957. Leadership in Administration. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Company.

Sigal, Leon V. 1973. Reporters and Officials. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

Smith, Ted J. III, and S. Robert Lichter. 1997. What the People Want from the Press. Washington, DC: Center for Media and Public Affairs.

Tuchman, Gaye. 1972. Objectivity as strategic ritual: an examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. American Journal of Sociology 77: 660-679.

---. 1973. Making news by doing work: routinizing the unexpected. American Journal of Sociology 78: 110-131.

---. 1978. Making News. New York: Free Press.

Weaver, David H. and G. Cleveland Wilhoit. 1996. The American Journalist in the 1990s. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Weiss, Carol H. 1974. What America's leaders read. Public Opinion Quarterly 38: 1-22.

Whitney, D. Charles. 1985. The media and the people -- Americans' experience with the news media: a fifty-year review. Gannett Center Working Paper.

ENDNOTES

---

1. Polls asking respondents if they went on-line for news at least once a week show an increase from 4% in 1995 to 20% in 1998 (Pew Research Center 1998a).

2. I put "the press" in quotes to note that we may have strong question effects if we ask, variously, "the press," "the news media," "reporters," "journalists," etc.

3. Ironically, the attention that one news outlets gives to journalistic mistakes are part of what Bennett, Gressett and Haltom (1985) call "repair work," designed to boost the authority of the news and safeguard the agreed-upon methods from criticism. Like Tuchman's (1972) "strategic ritual of objectivity," we may wonder if it works on the mass public as effectively as we once thought -- though whether it works on the journalists themselves may be another matter.

4. Newsweek poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, July 9-10, 1998, question R09, accessed from the POLL archive of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. See also the Media Studies Center poll discussed by McClain (1998) that noted that relatively few people had heard of the June scandals (the highest was 42% reporting hearing of the CNN/Time retraction of the nerve gas report) but large majorities concluded that journalists often or sometimes: invent stories, plagiarize, use unethical or illegal tactics, and have factual errors.

5. "A substantial minority of Americans (46%) only follow national news when something major is happening and an even greater number (63%) react the same way to international news. Only local news attracts a large regular audience that is not event driven -- 61% of Americans follow it most of the time" (Pew Center 1998a p. 2)

6. Not surprisingly, legislators were more positive toward the public, with 31% agreeing compared to 13% of presidential appointees and 14% of civil servants (Pew 1998d, p. 1).