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## Chapter 5

# How Journalists Report the News

*Journalists today find fault with most everything that politicians say and do. The press no longer even has much respect for public officials' private lives—even their bedroom behavior is fair game for news stories.*

Thomas Patterson

*. . . People may expect too much of journalism. Not only do they expect it to be entertaining, they expect it to be true.*

Lewis Lapham

**I**t is obvious why politicians attempt to control the news. The journalistic response to news control is more complicated. When citizens, parties, and interests are fully engaged in an issue, the news is likely to report diverse political views, and we see a healthy democracy through the news window. More often, however, popular participation is limited, and political insiders attempt to control the public agenda by managing the news. In these cases, the press offices of government and political interests continue to dominate what is reported as *hard news*. At the same time, the space for hard news is shrinking due to the economic equations noted in Chapter 3. The drift toward sensationalism magnifies the tendency of journalists to turn against politicians at the hint of a slip, a rumor, or a cheap accusation from an opponent. Even politicians who have managed the news effectively may suddenly find the press biting the hand that feeds them (recall "feeding the beast" from the last chapter).

This strange American news pattern alternates between publicizing political spin and trying to trap politicians in slips and scandals. Far from enhancing public respect, the press game conveys an air of smug insiderism. Even when the press pack attacks, the displays of adversarialism are largely ritualistic, providing little insight beyond

puncturing the image of the target *du jour*. Thus, “gotcha” journalism often comes across to audiences as posturing—as a game that journalists play to make themselves appear independent and adversarial.

In the early stages of the 2000 presidential primary campaign, for example, the press tried to trap George W. Bush into confessing his alleged history of drug use. No matter what Bush said, the journalistic response was generally “gotcha.” He was damned if he admitted it and damned if he denied it. Just exactly what was the point of it all? One of the few newsmakers to try to put a point on the story was Jesse Jackson, who argued that the issue of cocaine use in itself was not as important as the possible inconsistency of a rich white man getting away with using cocaine, and then, as governor of Texas, favoring harsh prison penalties for poor minorities who used crack. For the most part, however, the mainstream press seemed to think that playing “gotcha” was point enough in the news game. As for Jackson, he soon found himself enmeshed in a scandal story of his own involving a child out of wedlock.

The press also played “gotcha” with Al Gore during the 2000 election. Leading news organizations such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* ran incorrect and out-of-context versions of Gore’s remarks on his involvement with facilitating access to the Internet and helping establish a program to clean up toxic waste sites. He soon became branded in the national press as “serial exaggerator” (a term supplied by the Bush communication team). Late night comedians made him a national laughing-stock. Between February and June of 2000, a sample of 2,400 national news articles showed that 76 percent of the stories contained charges that Gore lied, exaggerated, or was somehow involved in scandal. The students and teachers at the New Hampshire high school where the most damaging press misquote originated tried in vain for months to fix the inaccuracy and came away discouraged. A media literacy class at the school compared their tape of the Gore visit with national coverage and issued a press release titled “Top Ten Reasons Why Many Concord High Students Feel Betrayed by Some of the Media Coverage of Al Gore’s visit to their school.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 2004 presidential race, the press anointed former Vermont Governor Howard Dean as the early front-runner, and then just as quickly changed the narrative in response to Democratic party insiders who pronounced him unelectable. Dean suddenly became a candidate who was too angry and hotheaded for voters, and who could not challenge President Bush on Iraq (even though Dean’s rise to the top in the first place was based largely on his opposition to the war). Dean suffered a surprising defeat in the Iowa caucuses, and the press had new front-runners to take to the next primary, creating new plot material for the familiar horse race story that journalists tell in every election.

This chapter explores why so much journalism falls into the two broad categories of (1) reporting the official lines of the day and (2) then playing personal “gotcha” games, often with the same officials and news makers. This dynamic is at the core of the authority-disorder syndrome discussed in Chapter 2, and it contributes in various ways to the other news biases as well. Both of these reporting tendencies present serious problems for citizens and their relation to government. On the one hand, the tendency to open the gates to officials and their carefully managed messages is hard to reconcile with the common assumption that the media are (or at least have the potential to be) objective, independent, professional, and even adversarial in their relations

with news sources. The problem of a free press relying so heavily on what officials (and more importantly, their handlers and their opponents’ handlers) feed it is so perplexing that the reasons have been explored by a number of researchers in the fields of communication (e.g., Jay Blumler, Michael Gurevitch),<sup>2</sup> sociology (e.g., Herbert Gans, Gaye Tuchman),<sup>3</sup> and political science (e.g., Bernard Cohen, Timothy Cook).<sup>4</sup>

The second tendency of the press to then bite the hand that feeds it is in many ways equally puzzling because the resulting adversarialism is more often personal than substantive. As Thomas Patterson has pointed out in the larger analysis from which the epigram that opens this chapter was drawn, the resulting news content is an odd mix: a narrow range of political ideas, interspersed with cranky criticisms of politicians and the games they play. Patterson describes the rising levels of journalistic negativity as follows:

. . . negative coverage of politics has risen dramatically in recent decades. Negative coverage of presidential candidates, for example, now exceeds their positive coverage. . . . By 1990, negative coverage of Congress and its members was over 80%. Each president since 1976—Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton—has received more negative coverage than his predecessor. Federal agencies have fared no better; in the 1990–1995 period, for example, not a single cabinet-level agency received more positive than negative coverage. As portrayed by the press, America’s public leadership is universally inept and self-serving.<sup>5</sup>

Although different researchers propose different specific reasons for why the news comes out in this odd way, all seem to agree that the general answer is a combination of four factors: (1) the economics of the news business, (2) the dependence of journalists on sources who control the information that journalists need, (3) the routine news gathering practices of reporters and their news organizations, and (4) the professional norms and codes of conduct that grow up around those organizational routines. Since we have discussed the political economy of the news and the information management strategies of news sources extensively in earlier chapters, we turn in this and the next chapter to a close look inside journalism itself.

## WORK ROUTINES AND PROFESSIONAL NORMS

*Organizational routines* are the basic rules and practices that journalism schools and news organizations train reporters and editors to follow in deciding what to cover, how to cover it, and how to present the results of their work. Journalistic routines give the news its reassuring familiarity and create a steady supply of news product in a competitive marketplace. *Professional norms* are those moral standards, codes of ethics, and guidelines about inserting one’s voice and viewpoint into a story that enable journalists to make personal decisions. In addition, these codes of the profession enable news organizations to justify what they produce. Both of these factors are shaped strongly by the business pressures explained in Chapter 3. The recent wave of economic change sweeping the news industry not only introduced changes into reporting practices, but created serious strains in important journalistic norms such as objectivity, as discussed in Chapter 6.

It is increasingly clear that the everyday work routines inside news organizations bias the news without necessarily intending to do so. Our first order of business (and the focus of this chapter) is to show how the everyday practices of journalists and their

news organizations contribute to the authority-disorder bias, as well as to personalized, dramatized, and fragmented news. In addition to explaining how reporting practices bias the news, it is important to understand why these habits persist and why neither the press nor the public seems to grasp their true political significance. For example, many members of the press continue to defend their reporting habits as being largely consistent with the professional journalism norms of *independence* and *objectivity*. These standards may go by different names such as accurate, fair, unbiased, or nonpartisan, but the point is that a surprising number of American journalists continue to espouse some notion of objectivity. The peculiar nature of objectivity is so important to understand that the next chapter is devoted primarily to its origins and its defining consequences for American news. In the discussions of professional norms and work routines in this chapter and the next, the critical focus is on how they contribute to the news biases outlined in Chapter 2 and to the capacity of politicians to make the news as described in Chapter 4.

First, a word of clarification is in order about the intent of this critical discussion. In many instances, the practices and professional standards of American journalism have been commendable. In a few celebrated cases, for example, reporters and editors have even gone to jail in order to protect the confidentiality of sources or to defend the principle of free speech. Moreover, routine news coverage of some political issues and situations is rich and full of diverse viewpoints. For example, both reporting and entertainment media treatments of abortion politics have been as full of information, as rich in competing viewpoints, and as diverse in the social voices represented as we can expect a democratic communication system to be.

In other respects, however, the professional norms of independence and objectivity have backfired. In fact, American journalism may have become trapped within an unworkable set of professional standards, with the result that the more objective or fair reporters try to be, the more official (and other) biases they introduce into the news.<sup>6</sup> A five-nation study of political journalists by Thomas Patterson and a group of international colleagues produced a startling finding: Although the American press is arguably the most free or politically independent in the world, U.S. journalists display the least diversity in their decisions about whom to interview for different hypothetical stories and in what visuals they chose for those stories. Patterson concluded that the strong norms of political neutrality or independence among American journalists actually homogenize the political content of their reporting. By contrast, reporters in countries such as Italy, Britain, Sweden, and Germany (the other nations studied) are more likely to regard political perspectives as desirable in covering events. As a result, journalists in other nations tend to cover the same events differently—that is, by interviewing a broader range of political sources and using different visual illustrations.<sup>7</sup>

## WHEN ROUTINES PRODUCE HIGH-QUALITY REPORTING

It is important to remember that the news does not report every story the same way, nor do the news biases apply equally to every issue covered in the news. One of the fascinating discoveries in studying the role of the press in politics is that journalists

using similar news gathering methods can end up reporting stories that range from highly biased to very useful to citizens. This is because reporting is an interaction among the various factors that shape the information system: the sources of news, the economics of the business, and the public reactions to stories.

When is more information rich, diverse, and broadly based news coverage likely to emerge in the U.S. system? News content is most diverse, detailed, and open to competing views when public officials are willing to debate issues openly for extended periods. In such cases, the news organizations cover issues in depth and follow the political process through the halls and hearing rooms of government with citizen input in tow. (Recall the discussion of *indexing* from Chapter 1). We find this relatively open and detailed coverage in a handful of historic cases such as Vietnam or Watergate investigations, and more often in coverage of the moral issues that rage through American politics. Abortion, civil rights, gun control, flag burning, and other enduring moral controversies are most likely to capture the popular imagination, pit politicians and parties against each other, expand the range of political viewpoints, and take the public on extended tours of government at work. In these cases, the news may show citizens how issues move from elections to legislatures, to executive offices, to courts, to regulatory agencies, and at times spill over into the streets in sustained political conflicts.

By contrast, officials tend to handle complex issues of economics, energy, war, foreign policy, and other areas of elite power politics more guardedly. As a result, issues that are arguably the most important to America's future are apt to be reported in the fragmented and officialized language that keeps people guessing about what is going on and why. Many important events receive detailed media attention only after poorly understood policies have already become facts of life.

As noted earlier, studies of the role of the press during the Vietnam War explain that the critical press coverage in the later years of the war was less the singular product of liberal or crusading journalists than a result of news organizations reporting views critical of government policies *after* those policies were attacked by important figures in Washington.<sup>8</sup> In the more typical cases of the Gulf War and the Iraq War, most members of Congress were cautious in expressing their doubts about going to war, and the majority of Washington elites quickly joined the rallying public after the fighting broke out. As a result, the media paid little attention to opposition views or even to unpleasant reminders of the realities of the war itself, such as the untold deaths of Iraqi soldiers and civilians, or even the totals of American casualties. Even though there were numerous national demonstrations against going to war, the major TV news organizations decided not to cover them. During the Gulf War in 1991, for example, the networks ran a mere 29 minutes on antiwar protests compared to 2,855 minutes covering the war.<sup>9</sup> To put this in perspective, they gave about the same amount of airtime to antiwar protesters as to interviews with tourists and businesspeople on how the war affected their travel plans.<sup>10</sup> The case study in this chapter provides an analysis of why the press overwhelmingly reported images favorable to administration war policies on Iraq II during the time in which public opinion on that war mattered most: from the period before the war began in 2002 to the crucial 2004 presidential primaries.

### Case Study: *Top Ten Reasons the Press Took a Pass on the Iraq War*

If the first Iraq war (generally called the Gulf War) was named Desert Storm, the second might be called Perfect Storm. The run-up to the 2003 war witnessed an extraordinary convergence of factors that produced near perfect journalistic participation in government propaganda operations. At least ten factors converged in Perfect Storm fashion to push the press pack to write stories that seldom contested administration framing even though gaps in the credibility of that framing were available to knowledgeable reporters at the time (see the case study in Chapter 4).<sup>11</sup> Here are the ten factors that created this perfect propaganda storm:

**1. 9/11 happened.** The national public was softened by those horrific events to accept almost anything that might produce closure, leading to restrictions of civil liberties on the domestic front and the rise of empire discourse from those in the administration (Wolfowitz, Perle, Cheney, Rumsfeld) who had long harbored fantasies of a militarist reassertion of American power. Where was the press after 9/11? Apparently too wrapped in its cultural-patriotic storytelling to find credible sources to challenge that vision. Thus, the administration was able to push a weak case for war based on fantastic assertions of an al Qaeda–Iraq link, and the even stealthier innuendos that Saddam Hussein was somehow involved in the 9/11 attacks—a connection that 71 percent of the public attributed to the administration as late as the summer of 2003.<sup>12</sup>

The capacity of the administration to successfully push deceptions and misrepresentations through a docile press to an emotionally volatile public may stand as the most ruthless press control operation in history—an operation that achieved such sophistication that at least three distinct press-management factors must be counted separately.

**2. Master scripting and directing by Karl Rove.** The Rove White House communication operation made Reagan press management under Deaver and Gergen seem modest by comparison. No news management opportunity was missed, from the Top Gun carrier landing, to edgy insertions of Iraq into the War on Terror. Even the president's deer-in-the-headlights media presence was countered as described in the case study in Chapter 2 with the relentless spin that he in fact has a natural "swagger."

**3. Beyond spin: outright intimidation.** Intimidation of journalists and news organizations began within hours of the 9/11 catastrophe, as described in the case study in Chapter 1. This intimidation campaign continued through the aftermath of the War in Iraq. When whistle-blowers came forward—such as the investigator of the Iraq-uranium connection, or former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill—they were swiftly shouted down in public and intimidated with personal reprisals.

**4. The press was embedded with the military.** Scratch a good journalist and one is likely to find a vicarious adventurer who seeks to be at the scene of the action telling a Big Story. Apparently one could not be closer to the Iraq War story than in-

side a tank hurtling across the desert toward Baghdad. Nearly every respected journalist (including those too old to go into action, themselves) initially hailed the military embedding as a ringside ticket to great journalism, a perspective that would bring the uncensored reality of war to the American people. Only later did some journalists admit what they might have seen beforehand: that the Big Story was dictated from Washington, and the scenes from inside the tanks were little more than B-roll filler that authenticated a story told by the government. If the embedding operation was as telling about the dramaturgy of the press as about the press-control proclivities of the administration, the next factor moves us even farther into the realm of press responsibility.

**5. Telling the story that promises maximum drama and most likely plot advancement.** When journalists make story choices, they favor narrative elements that are most likely to advance a coherent, dramatic story into the future. In some cases, those choices produce stories that ignore potentially damning evidence to the contrary. Those cases typically involve looking away from sources less likely to deliver future installments and favoring (usually official) sources more prepared to deliver regular updates. Consider the reporting decisions to downplay the volume of doubt linking al Qaeda—and, more generally, 9/11—to Iraq. Consider, too, the volume of doubt about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. Although doubts were reported, they were pegged largely to foreign sources and domestic protesters that were dismissed insultingly by Rumsfeld and company. Finally, consider the widespread journalistic decisions to avoid complicating the Iraq-terrorism narrative with stronger evidence of links between al Qaeda, 9/11, and Saudi Arabia—stories that continued to go begging for major coverage even after a postwar revelation by Saudi officials that al Qaeda operatives conducted training operations as late as July 2003 on Saudi farms, and even after the administration refused to release an intelligence report allegedly linking al Qaeda to prominent members of the Saudi political elite. Seymour Hersh published an early investigative report in the *New Yorker* presenting evidence against the Iraq connection, while pointing something of a smoking gun at Saudi Arabia.<sup>13</sup> These rare acts of investigative journalism were virtually ignored by the larger press community because standard Washington sources offered nothing to advance those stories, serving up, instead, daily installments on Saddam and terrorism. What would it have taken for the press to turn those potential blockbuster alternatives into serious frame challenges to the administration? Did I mention the Democrats?

**6. Where were the Democrats?** Apparently the defeated Democrats had been advised to offend no one and to take no political risks. Although this advice might be questioned as making them seem even more offensive by looking weak and indecisive, they apparently paid enough for their professional communication counsel to follow it. Thus, the party left criticism to a few isolated representatives and to a pack of presidential candidates who criticized each other more often than they criticized the president. News organizations are so dependent on prominent official sources

to advance challenges to a leading news frame that the strategic silence of the Democrats all but killed media deliberation about the war.

Why were the concerns of presidential primary candidates such as Howard Dean or Dennis Kucinich not enough to reframe the story? Because the U.S. press is taken with reporting only who and what the Washington consensus anoints with *gravitas*. Most contestants in the Democratic primary pack may as well have said nothing. Without major figures weighing in, strong antiwar sentiment among the public went largely unreported. Consider a small case in point: In January 2003, I was called by a *Newsweek* reporter who asked the stunning question (as I paraphrase it): "We in the press have become aware of a substantial antiwar movement. Why do you think we are not reporting it?" Why, indeed, did the press fail to report organized large-scale opposition? I explained that the failure to report on the antiwar movement was due to the dependence of the press on official opposition, or on partisan engagement of institutional processes to bring grassroots voices into the news cast. A couple of weeks later, candidate John Kerry raised a trial balloon question about the advisability of war over continued inspections and military quarantine. Kerry was a prominent senator, and he was regarded by the press at the time as the leading candidate for president. Sure enough, the *New York Times* promptly noted the rise of a substantial antiwar movement in the very same paragraph. Kerry, however, promptly went into the hospital, other Democrats stared blankly at Bush's post-9/11 popularity ratings, and so went the opening for the antiwar movement to have a prominent voice in the public sphere. Subsequently, on February 15, 2003, when some ten million people across the globe raised their voices in what may well be the largest coordinated public demonstrations in world history, the American press allowed the president to dismiss it as the ramblings of a "focus group" to which he would not respond.

**7. The absence of credible progressive think tanks.** News stories are often advanced through reactions from experts at think tanks who promote the political policy objectives of those who fund these high-level opinion-making operations. The conservative right has enjoyed considerable media success through a combination of (1) aggressive news management (see point 2 above), (2) dense networking of radio and TV talk pundits and conservative rapid response e-mail lists to create a public "echo chamber" to support policy initiatives and attack opponents (see point 3), and (3) timely delivery of think tank reports and experts to journalists when new initiatives are launched, or when old ones suffer MADS (media attention deficit syndrome) and need new life. Perhaps it is because of funding disparities between left and right—or simply because of the dim capacities of the left to understand how the press works—that there was virtually no coordinated expertise to counter Bush administration war frames. (The Brookings Institution has been so closely identified with promoting the doctrine of Democratic moderation that it seldom advances progressive media positions.)

**8. Press construction of a spectator public.** It is some consolation that publics form their opinions only in part through the cueing of voices in the news. In their lives outside of media representations, people surely look elsewhere for clues about what to think. Perhaps the most impressive thing about public opinion as measured by polls up to the eve of the invasion was that clear majorities favored war only if the administration could build an international coalition (one suspects that a "coalition of the willing" that included Palau and Tonga over France and Germany was not what they had in mind).

As the news narrative built toward inevitable war, opposition levels in the polls were reported only as footnotes for the record. It seems that polls and protests were not enough for the press to turn the public into players in the media spectacle. Once again, journalists forgot that publics can take active roles in the news story of democracy. Thus, when the tide of public opinion rose predictably into a patriotic rally with the outbreak of the war, it would have been easy to conclude that the public supported the rationale for the war all along. Unfortunately, questions about just what the public was supporting would have been hard to air in the midst of a national patriotic rally that was led as much by a cheerleading press as by the administration.

**9. Press ethnocentrism.** More than any other Western democratic press system, the U.S. press is remarkably closed to world opinion. Perhaps this reflects the press's implicit mirroring of the confusing popular cultural impulses of isolationism and patriotic intervention. The inward turn of American journalism may also reflect the unwillingness of most politicians (a.k.a. leading news sources) to risk their patriotic credentials either by questioning the values and motives behind government decisions to use force, or by crediting outsiders when they do so. In any event, international reactions of outrage to the administration's "you're either with us or against us" stand on Iraq were duly noted for the news record and then easily spun away by administration news sources and journalists alike. While news features reported on boycotts of French wine and the renaming of french fries as freedom fries, many commentators adopted a condescending tone for discussing the din of international criticism. No national news organization was more aggressive in its patriotic support for the Iraq War—or its vitriolic condemnation of administration critics, foreign and domestic—than FOX.

**10. The FOX Effect.** This is the last, and I think, the least important factor explaining why the press faithfully reported so many administration claims that could have been challenged. Because of the levels of patriotic cant from FOX reporters, anchors, and talk show hosts, alike, many observers felt that FOX exercised a chilling effect on a competition that was worried about ratings losses among audiences allegedly swept with patriotic fervor. It is true that new standards of jingo-journalism may have been set by the FOX anchor who described antiwar protesters in Switzerland as

“hundreds of knuckleheads,” or by the decision to run a crawl at the bottom of the screen branding nations that refused to join the “coalition of the willing” as the “axis of weasels.”<sup>14</sup> FOX’s hyperbolic reporting notwithstanding, we should not forget the stiff competition among television news organizations during the first Gulf War to display their patriotic bona fides—long before FOX news was a gleam in the eyes of Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch.<sup>15</sup> If FOX’s competition effectively took a pass on critical journalism, I would argue that the effects of factors 1 through 9 were considerably more important than looking over their journalistic shoulders at the FOX effect.

In retrospect, I suspect that, just like their Gulf War forebears, the Democrats remained largely silent during the Iraq War in hopes of an economic downswing or a scandal that would offer safer grounds for attacking a seemingly popular president. If the economy staggered under the Bush tax plan, or if a trail of smoking deception about the Iraq War somehow reached the Oval Office, the press would quickly turn on the man they endowed with Texas Swagger and send him into early retirement like they did his father a decade before. Such a reversal of political fortune would not likely be due to much dogged reporting; it would happen because the press had found a better story.

The emerging conclusion about mass-mediated democracy is that news debates tend to be more open and informative when the government itself is already functioning ideally—that is, when government officials are openly debating and investigating public policies in front of the news cameras. On the other hand, when elites are not debating policy options in public, journalism routines result in narrowing or closing the news gates on stories that might be quite important to the public interest. The weakness in the American information system appears to be those crucial and all-too-common cases where government officials do not confront difficult issues or choices. Should information be shaped so thoroughly by what elites and elected officials are doing in public? Perhaps the press should pay more attention to the stories that politicians (and the public) are avoiding.

The differences in reporting about different kinds of stories are not accidental. They reflect the way the news system in a country is organized. There is a relationship between what journalists believe about their jobs and how they go about them. While recognizing that conceptions of the role of the press in society affect the daily routines of news gathering, it is easier to discuss these two related aspects of the news separately. The focus of this chapter is to show how the professional code of the U.S. press actually perpetuates the kinds of biases and public discontents that becoming professionalized is supposed to prevent. The remainder of the present chapter explores how news organizations work: where they find sources, how they assign stories, and what shapes the development of those stories.

## HOW REPORTING PRACTICES CONTRIBUTE TO NEWS BIAS

Much like any job, reporting the news consists largely of a set of routine, standardized activities. Despite some obvious differences involving the nature of assignments and personal writing styles, American reporters (as noted earlier) tend to cover news events in remarkably similar ways. A fascinating example of how these work routines affect news content was discovered by Timothy Cook in a study of international crisis coverage in the United States and France. In the months after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, crucial international diplomatic efforts attempted to prevent the looming war. When news of these efforts broke, television networks in both countries assigned their reporters to get reactions from key sources. American newscasts flipped through the “golden triangle” of Washington news beats: the White House, State Department, and Pentagon. Even though there was no official U.S. reaction to be had, the reporters were pressured to say something, and they effectively invented the kinds of vague pronouncements that one might expect from officials in sensitive political posts at the early stage of a world crisis. By contrast, French reporters (who do not operate with a U.S.-style beat system) interviewed various political party leaders and generated a comparatively broad range of political views about the meanings and implications of the diplomatic talks.<sup>16</sup>

The existence of standardized reporting behaviors and story formulas is not surprising when one considers the strong patterns that operate in the news environment. For example, the events staged by political actors tend to reflect the predictable political communication goals outlined in Chapter 4. Moreover, most mass media news organizations tend to impose fairly similar constraints on reporters in terms of acceptable story angles, deadlines, and news gathering resources. Also, reporters are subject to the standardizing influence of working in close quarters with one another, covering the same sorts of events under the same kinds of pressures.

In short, reporters confront three separate sources of incentives to standardize their reporting habits:

- Routine cooperation with (and pressures from) news sources
- The work routines of (and pressures within) news organizations
- Daily information sharing and working relations with fellow reporters

Each of these forces contributes to the development of standardized reporting formulas that favor the incorporation of official political messages in the news, interspersed with the feeding frenzies that may undermine the officials themselves. These reporting patterns also lead reporters to write personalized, dramatized, and fragmented news stories. We will now explore each source of everyday pressure on journalists.

## REPORTERS AND OFFICIALS: COOPERATION AND CONTROL

Most political events are so predictably scripted that reporters can condense them easily into formulaic plot outlines: who (which official) did what (official action), where (in what official setting), for what (officially stated) purpose, and with what (officially proclaimed) result. For example:

President \_\_\_\_\_ met at the White House today with President \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ to discuss mutual concerns about \_\_\_\_\_. Both leaders called the talks productive and said that important matters were resolved.

It does not take a careful reading to see that such a formula is virtually devoid of substance. The pseudo-events that provide the scripts for such news stories are generally designed to create useful political images, not to transmit substantive information about real political issues. Because such events are routine political occurrences, reporters quickly develop formulas for converting them into news whenever they occur. Compounding the temptation to report official versions of political events is the fact that reporters live in a world where divide and conquer is ever present. Careers are advanced by receiving scoops and leaks and are damaged by being left out in the cold, excluded from official contact. Like it or not, reporters must depend on the sources they cover. When those sources are powerful officials surrounded by an entourage of eager reporters clamoring for news, it is always possible that those who report what officials want them to will be rewarded, whereas those who fail to convert key political messages into news will be punished.

In view of the patterned nature of political events combined with the press tactics of politicians, it is not surprising that the news seems to emerge from formulas that virtually write themselves.<sup>17</sup> Of course, knowing the formulas does not mean that reporters will always use them. However, in a workday world filled with short deadlines, demanding editors, and persuasive news sources, the formulas become the course of least resistance. Even when a formula is abandoned, there is seldom enough other information available in a typical political setting to construct another story.

In the illusory world of political news, formulas describe official actions, and the seal of official approval becomes a substitute for truth and authenticity, which in turn makes the formulas seem legitimate.<sup>18</sup> Robert Scholes developed these ideas a bit further when he said:

Perhaps the credulous believe that a reporter reports facts and that newspapers print all of them that are fit to print. But actually, newspapers print all of the "facts" that fit, period—that fit the journalistic conventions of what "a story" is (those tired formulas) and that fit the editorial policy of the paper. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Anyone for changing that famous slogan to "All the News That Fits, We Print"? The formulas used to select and arrange facts in the news are produced largely through the mutual cooperation of reporters and newsmakers. These partners may not share exactly the same goals or objectives, but together they create information that satisfies each other's needs. It is all in a day's work.

## THE INSIDER SYNDROME

In addition to developing work habits that favor official views, reporters are also human beings. Behind the occupational roles are people who sometimes identify with the newsmakers they cover. Because reporters have regular contact with officials under stressful conditions, it becomes easy for them to see these officials as sympathetic characters. Of course, when officials go out of their way to antagonize the press, as the Nixon administration did during the early 1970s and as the Clinton administration did for most of its first term, it is more difficult for reporters to identify with the officials. When officials court the favor and understanding of reporters, they are often paid back with sympathetic coverage that sticks close to the officials' political line.<sup>20</sup> Such coverage is easily justified as an objective account of the officials' public actions.

Yet another aspect of the subtle working relations between reporters and officials is that journalists who cooperate with powerful officials often receive recognition and flattery and are taken into the confidence of those officials. In the intensely political environments in which most of our news occurs, nothing is valued as much as power. If one cannot possess power (and there always seems to be a shortage), then the next best thing is to be on the inside with the powerful—to be seen with them, to be consulted by them, to socialize with them, and perhaps even to have them as friends. As Tom Bethell put it:

To be on close terms with elite news sources is to be an "insider," which is what almost everyone in Washington wants to be. It is interesting to note how often this word appears on the dust jackets of memoirs by Washington journalists. But Nixon—his great weakness!—didn't like journalists and wouldn't let them be insiders. . . . Kissinger, on the other hand, was astute enough to cultivate the press, and he survived—not merely that, was lionized as "the wizard of shuttle diplomacy." (Is it not possible that the most awesome "lesson of Watergate" . . . will be a social lesson?)<sup>21</sup>

The perils of being a Washington insider were summarized by Tony Snow, a Detroit news columnist and former speechwriter for George H. W. Bush: "We spend a lot of time hanging out with the high and mighty. It's intoxicating. In Washington, access to people in power is important, if nothing else for social reasons, for name dropping."<sup>22</sup> As the distinguished reporter Murray Kempton put it: "It is a fundamental fact about journalism, and might even be a rule if it had the attention it deserves, that it is next to impossible to judge any public figure with the proper detachment once you begin calling him by his first name."<sup>23</sup>

Ellen Hume, a journalist and scholar of the press, says that she has come to feel that journalists can be "more powerful than any elected official" and that something "urgently" needs to be done to "dynamite" the insiders out of their privileged positions.<sup>24</sup> Steve Goldstein, Washington correspondent for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, suggested term limits for Washington journalists. If news organizations would agree to rotate their stars out of Washington, the power of the "unelected media elite" might be diminished. Even more important, says Goldstein, media term limits:

... might counteract the potential for disconnection, whereby the correspondent suffers a loss of understanding of issues that Americans really care about. Federal policy-making and the impact on the folks at home is supplanted by the view from Washington. There is a difference between Here and There. In Sodom-on-the-Potomac the political culture is secular, while most of America is religious. Here the character issue is often framed as: Did he/she sleep with her/him/it? Out there, the issue is often one of fairness, justice, integrity. All the sleaze we print doesn't fit.<sup>25</sup>

All of this said, setting a term limit for the Washington media elite is challenging. Two or four years may not be enough time for a newcomer to understand the political maze and develop the contacts that enrich his or her reporting. However, in six or eight years, the Washington lifestyle of expensive dinners, exotic foreign travel, and power parties may have already taken hold of the reporter's sensibilities. Goldstein suggests that the press should develop stronger professional norms against insiderism that journalists could call upon to make a personal decision about when to leave:

... one thing is clear. It's time for the journalist to move on, or be moved, when he or she thinks that presenting America as seen through Washington's hellish prism is more important than helping readers understand decisions made on Capitol Hill that will change or affect their lives.<sup>26</sup>

In a lighter vein, Goldstein suggests the following "self-test" for Washington reporters. Offering apologies to David Letterman, he lists the "top 10 telltale signs that a journalist has been in Washington too long":

10. You cannot recall the area code of your hometown.
9. Your best sources are at other news organizations.
8. You go to Duke Ziebert's a second time [a restaurant notorious as a meeting spot and watering hole for the power elite].
7. You think a regional story refers to Upper Northwest [a district in Washington, D.C.].
6. The conductor of the Marine Band salutes you.
5. You reject an interview with the mayor of your hometown because it conflicts with Gridiron rehearsal [a Washington journalist's club that puts on an annual show in which press and politicians satirize each other].
4. *The Capitol Gang* [a TV pundit gathering] offers honorary membership.
3. Larry King calls you by your first name.
2. You cover the story by watching CNN.
1. You become eligible for Redskins' season tickets.<sup>27</sup>

However, before thinking that journalists and the officials they cover are too cozy, or that they are any cozier than in earlier eras, it is important to remember that "cozy" is hardly the way most of them would describe their relationship. Many politicians today describe their relations with the press as regrettably antagonistic and, therefore, necessarily guarded. Reporters often complain that they never get close to officials and must fight through the "spin patrol" of handlers, consultants, and flaks. It is surely the case

that today's political scene is, in many ways, far less cozy and (in the special sense of "gotcha" journalism) more adversarial than that of thirty years ago, before Watergate or Vietnam. Just because many prominent journalists and officials of yesterday were more likely to be friends, drink and party together, and go off the record after 5 P.M., this does not mean that press relations today have lost their cooperative aspects or their insider aspirations.

## REPORTERS AS MEMBERS OF NEWS ORGANIZATIONS: PRESSURES TO STANDARDIZE

If reporters' relations with officials breathe new life into old news formulas, their own news organizations reinforce the use of those formulas. Novice journalists experience constant pressures (subtle and otherwise) from editors about how to cover stories.<sup>28</sup> These pressures are effective because editors hold sway over what becomes news and which reporters advance in the organization. Over time, reporters tend to adjust their styles to fit harmoniously with the expectations of their organizations.

In many cases, these organizational expectations are defended by journalists as simply preserving the "house style" of the news organization—the tone, editorial voice, and format that makes one news outlet distinguishable from another. (Recall this discussion from Chapter 3.) This level of formula reporting is as unobjectionable as it is inevitable in any kind of organization that has standard operating procedures. However, there are deeper levels at which organizational preferences for story formulas do matter. To an important extent, there are industry-wide norms about story values that define what is news and that, in turn, open the news to the kinds of biases outlined in Chapter 2. For example, one young reporter serving an apprenticeship with a major big-city newspaper talked about the somewhat mysterious process of having some stories accepted and others rejected without really knowing the basis for many of the decisions. Equally mysterious were the conversations with assignment editors in which the editor seemed to know what the story was before it had been covered. Over time, the socialization process works its effects, and young reporters learn to quickly sense what the story is and how to write it. Beyond the style of this or that news organization, the whole media system begins to emulate particular formats, themes, and news values.

For the most part, political censorship is rarer than the shading of news formats to fit marketing and audience research. Bending news genres to fit commercial values and socializing reporters to recognize how potential stories fit the familiar formulas are the roots of the news biases discussed in Chapter 2. In all of their variations, however, organizational pressures result in news that typically fits a formula.

### Why Formulas Work

Standardized news is safe. Managers in news organizations must constantly compare their product with that of their competition and defend risky departures from the reporting norm. As Epstein observed in his classic study of television network news, even TV news assignment editors look to the conservative wire services for leads on

stories and angles for reporting them.<sup>29</sup> The wires cover the highest portion of planned official events and stick closest to official political scripts. Following the daily lead of the wires becomes the most efficient way to fill the news hole.

Other organizational arrangements also strongly influence standardized reporting. Among the most powerful standardizing forces are daily news production routines. Newspapers and news programs require a minimum supply of news every day whether or not anything significant happens in the world. Perhaps you have seen a television news program on a slow news day. In place of international crises, press conferences, congressional hearings, and proclamations by the mayor, the news may consist of a trip to the zoo to visit a new “baby,” a canned report on acupuncture in China, a follow-up story on the survivor of an air crash, or a spoof on the opening of baseball spring training in Florida. Slow news days occur during weekends or vacation periods when governments are closed down. News organizations run fluff on slow days because their daily routines report official happenings from the news centers of government.

### The News Hole

In order for a news organization to function, it must fill a minimum “news hole” every day. Producing a large amount of cheap, predictable news normally means assigning reporters to events and beats that are sure to produce enough acceptable stories to fill the news hole by the day’s deadline. During normal business periods, the public relations machinery of government and business fills these organizational needs by producing events that are cheap, easy to report, numerous, and predictable.

With the advent of twenty-four-hour news channels and Web sites linked to papers and broadcast organizations, the news hole has become a gorge. Pressures increase to update stories many times a day, in contrast to once or twice a day in the old era of morning and evening news. The journalistic credo of “advancing” a story has become an obsession for many organizations. Reporters learn to ask leading or challenging questions, often based on little more than trying to elicit a reaction from a newsmaker in an effort to generate new material to report. “President Bush denied rumors today . . .” becomes a familiar lead in a news age with an ever larger news hole to fill.

### Beats

Filling the daily news hole on time means that news organizations must figure out how to make the spontaneous predictable. The obvious solution to this problem is to anticipate when and where the required amount of news will happen every day. Because this task is made difficult by the size of the world and the smallness of reporting staffs, the solution is to implicitly adjust the definition of news so that things that are known to happen on a regular basis become news. Reporters can be assigned to cover those things and be assured (by definition) of gathering news every day. As a result, the backbone of the news organization is the network of beats, ranging from the police station and the city council at the local level, to Congress, the Supreme Court, and the presidency at the national level. Beats produce each day’s familiar run of murders, accidents, public hearings, press conferences, and presidents entering helicopters and leaving planes.

### Special Assignments

To break the daily routine, some reporters are given special assignments to cover big stories such as elections or spontaneous events like assassinations and floods. However, the expense of special-coverage assignments dictates that even the truly spontaneous must be translated into familiar formulas. If an event is important enough to justify special coverage, then it must be represented in dramatic terms. Even assassinations, invasions, and floods quickly become scripted. For example, when it became clear that the United States was planning an invasion of Haiti in the summer of 1994, television news organizations readied large libraries of canned material on the island nation and extensively scripted their coverage well in advance.

Because special coverage is costly and must be kept going, even no news often becomes news. Frank Cesno, Washington Bureau chief for CNN, told of his week of special coverage when John F. Kennedy Jr.’s airplane was missing in July 1999. He personally anchored much of the coverage and spent a good bit of it announcing that there was not much news from the search-and-rescue teams. However, making the decision to go live and assigning the story the top priority for the network required being on the air and keeping the news flowing.<sup>30</sup>

### Bureaus

In addition to beats and special-coverage assignments, many large news organizations have developed a third news-gathering unit, the geographically assigned crew. For example, television networks have news crews (a correspondent and video and sound technicians) stationed in large cities like Chicago, New York, Houston, Los Angeles, and Miami. The assumption is that enough news will be generated from these areas to warrant assigning personnel to them. The use of geographical assignments reflects another way in which organizational routines have shaped the definition of news into a convenient formula. Because national news cannot all come from Washington, reporters must be assigned to other locations. But what other locations? Any location chosen suddenly becomes a defining center for national news. As Epstein discovered in his study of television network news, almost all non-Washington news originates from the handful of cities where the networks station their crews.<sup>31</sup>

To an important extent, the reliance on bureaus has decreased in the past decade. As the profit imperative has been felt at both print and broadcast organizations, expensive bureaus are often the first things to be cut. Among American television news operations, only CNN has retained a substantial network of world information-gathering outposts—in large part because CNN also runs an international channel that demands serious world coverage. All the others have dropped bureaus and reporting staff. The result is that ABC, CBS, and NBC have increasingly settled for buying their raw product secondhand from a variety of world TV wholesale news suppliers. In the newspaper business, pressures to cut luxuries such as remote bureaus have been equally intense. Many big-city papers have been purchased by large conglomerates, which feed all the papers in the chain the same material from centralized bureaus. The few remaining independent big-city papers increasingly rely on secondhand suppliers such

as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which continue to maintain extensive bureaus and sell their stories to smaller organizations. The overall trend is an increasing consolidation of the information channels on which media organizations rely for their daily supply of news.

## Public Relations and News

As noted in earlier chapters, the public relations industry has grown in size and technological sophistication in recent decades. The goal of many public relations and communications campaigns is to place news stories that advance the images and political goals of clients. As news organizations reduce staff, shrink bureaus, and become more conscious of budgets, the supply of public relation (PR) events and news releases becomes more attractive as news material. Indeed, PR wires run into most newsrooms, and public relations workers (who often have experience as journalists) work up contacts with journalists and supply them with story ideas and sources. As a result, packaged pieces on personalities, movies, entertainers, and more generally, staged events in communication campaigns become featured in the news.

## REPORTERS AS A PACK: PRESSURES TO AGREE

As a result of the increasingly routine nature of news gathering, reporters tend to move in packs. They are assigned together to the same events and the same beats. More than most workers, they share close social experiences on the job. Together they eat, sleep, travel, drink, and wait, and wait, and wait. They also share that indescribable adrenaline rush of “crashing” a story—hurtling through those precious minutes between the release of key information and the deadline for filing the story. As a result of such intimate social contact, reporters tend to develop a sense of solidarity. They learn to cope with shared pressures from news organizations and news sources. They come to accept news formulas as inevitable, even though they may cynically complain about them in between mad scrambles to meet deadlines. They respect one another as independent professionals but engage in the social courtesies of comparing notes and corroborating story angles.

In his insightful description of press coverage during the 1972 election, Timothy Crouse called the reporter’s social world “pack journalism.”<sup>32</sup> He concluded that reporters come into such close contact while under such sympathetic conditions while covering such controlled events that they do not have to collaborate formally in order to end up reporting things the same way. Once a reporter has been assigned to a routine event for which news-formulas are well known, there is a strong temptation to produce a formula story. Added to this are a tight deadline and an editor who will question significant departures from the formula used by other reporters; as a result, the temptation to standardize becomes even stronger. Finally, put the reporter in a group of sympathetic human beings faced with the same temptations, and the use of formulas becomes easily rationalized and accepted with the social support of the group.

So strong are the pressures of the pack that they have been felt even by a trained sociologist who posed as a reporter in order to study news gathering from an insider’s perspective. While working as a reporter for a small daily paper, Mark Fishman was

assigned to the city council beat. He quickly fit into the routine of writing formula stories that mirrored the council’s careful efforts to create an image of democracy in action—complete with elaborate hearings, citizen input, serious deliberations, and formal votes. In a rare case when an issue before the council got out of control and turned into a hot political argument, the reporters at the press table reacted strangely. Ignoring a bit of news that did not fit the mold took some social prompting from various members of the pack. As Fishman described it:

The four members of the press [including Fishman] were showing increasing signs of impatience with the controversy. At first the reporters stopped taking notes; then they began showing their disapproval to each other; finally, they were making jokes about the foolishness of the debate. No evidence could be found in their comments that they considered the controversy anything other than a stupid debate over a trivial matter unworthy of the time and energy the council put into it.<sup>33</sup>

Fishman noted the strength of group pressure operating against independent news judgment: “Even though at the time of the incident I was sitting at the press table [as a reporter] making derisive comments about the foolishness of the council along with other journalists, it occurred to me later how this controversy could be seen as an important event in city hall.”<sup>34</sup>

Just as Fishman succumbed to the pressures of the pack while still recognizing them at a conscious level, most reporters are aware of group pressure but seem unable to escape it. In a study of the Washington journalism corps, the nation’s reporting elite, Stephen Hess found that reporters regarded pack journalism as their most serious problem.<sup>35</sup> As Hess noted, however, pack journalism will persist as long as news organizations establish their routines around the predictable actions of officials.

Although the pack generally feeds on the handouts offered by spin doctors and political handlers, it can also turn on the unprepared or vulnerable politician. Cases of the pack devouring its political prey are legendary: Lyndon Johnson fell to a feeding frenzy over the Vietnam War; Richard Nixon lost control of the press during the Watergate crisis; Jimmy Carter was himself held hostage in the Oval Office by the press for 444 days during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979–1980; Gary Hart withdrew his presidential candidacy in 1984 when the press pack took up his challenge to prove that he was having an extramarital affair; the first George Bush plummeted from his standing as most popular president in the history of modern polling as the press pack followed the Democrats in attacking him for an economic recession; and Bill Clinton saw the customary presidential honeymoon period curtailed prematurely by a feeding frenzy. The growing chaos and criticism surrounding the Iraq crisis provided openings for the press pack to turn on George W. Bush, but those openings were balanced against the somber fact that the country was at war.

Whether the members of the press pack accept their daily news handouts with equanimity or bite the hand that feeds them, the problem remains much the same: The resulting news becomes standardized and distorted. Two cases discussed earlier (the Vietnam War and Watergate) have been defended—even glorified—by media scholars as golden moments in which the free press exposed government lying and corruption. Even these two exceptions, however, point to the rule of pack journalism. Evidence of

problems in both situations existed long before the stories became big news; the pack resisted giving big play to critical stories for a long period after reportable issues were available; and the pack feeding frenzy was set in motion by (in the case of the Vietnam War) increasingly public splits among high-level elites or (in the case of Watergate) congressional investigations of the various improprieties of the Nixon White House.

## FEEDING FRENZY: WHEN THE PACK ATTACKS

Although the political content of the mainstream press may be remarkably uniform, it does not always follow the scripts of politicians. What is often mistaken for a critical, independent press is a phenomenon popularly known as the “feeding frenzy.”<sup>36</sup> When politicians become caught up in personal crises, scandals, or power struggles, the news media may descend like a pack of hungry dogs to devour the political prey. Add the hint of a sex scandal or produce the proverbial smoking gun of political corruption, and the frenzy can bring down the high and mighty.

Few politicians have felt the sting of the feeding frenzy as repeatedly as Bill Clinton. The news was spiced during the 1992 election by charges of Clinton’s extramarital affairs, pot smoking, draft dodging, and other personal issues. Clinton’s character became a major preoccupation of the press during the campaign.<sup>37</sup> The resulting challenge for the Clinton communication team was to reassure voters about the character defects raised in the news and reinforced by opponents during the primaries and the general election. The fact that Clinton survived the nearly nonstop negative news and then won the election struck Ian Weinschel, a Republican media consultant, as something close to a miracle. He likened Clinton to the crash test dummy of American politics: “I’ve never seen anybody come back from being attacked in that fashion. It’s like going through a car crash with no seat belts and then going through the window and hitting a wall and walking away. It’s absolutely astounding.”<sup>38</sup>

After the election, Clinton and his staff remained bitter about their treatment by the press during the campaign. When they came to Washington, it seemed as if they felt that they could govern much as they had won the election, by going over the heads of the press through electronic town halls, controlled news events, and heavy polling and image construction. The daily world of Washington politics proved different than the campaign trail, where paid advertising and controlled events stand a better chance of countering press attacks. The now famous decision to close the corridor between the press room and the White House communication office amounted to a declaration of war on journalism’s elite corps. The icy relations left the press pack surly and ready to pounce at the hint of a scandal or personal failing. Clinton’s run of personal incidents continued after the inauguration, and the press pounced on such items as Clinton’s expensive haircut aboard an idling Air Force One on a Los Angeles International Airport taxiway and a scandal in the management of the White House travel office that was quickly dubbed “Travelgate” in the media.

So short was the presidential honeymoon and so notable were the feeding frenzies of the press pack that a number of publications questioned those abrasive press

relations. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a three-part series under the title “Covering Clinton: Did Media Rush to Judgment or Merely Reflect Reality?” In the first article, entitled “Not Even Getting a 1st Chance,” reporter David Shaw observed:

The media battered Lyndon B. Johnson over Vietnam and savaged Richard Nixon over Watergate, but perhaps never in our nation’s history—certainly not in its recent history—has a President so early in his term been subjected to a greater barrage of negative media coverage than Bill Clinton endured in his first 239 days in office.<sup>39</sup>

The second article in the series opened with the observation that “Twelve days after President Clinton took office—with *only* 1,448 days left in his term—Sam Donaldson of ABC News was on a weekend talk show saying ‘This week we can all talk about, ‘Is the presidency over?’”<sup>40</sup>

The third article suggested that a large part of the problem was that the Washington reporters were taking their isolation from an upstart White House staff personally, and they were reminding the administration that the power game in American politics involves the press. In that article, *Newsweek’s* White House correspondent Eleanor Clift found it suspicious that even the prestige press linked Clinton to the fiasco in Waco, Texas, when an assault by a federal force on a religious cult resulted in the fiery deaths of eighty-six cult members. Despite headlines blaming Clinton, Clift noted a national poll in which 93 percent blamed cult leader David Koresh for the disaster. Clift said that she remembered thinking at the time, “The other 7 percent are in the White House press room.”<sup>41</sup>

Another reflective piece was titled “The White House Beast” after the derisive nickname given the press corps by George Stephanopoulos, who was Clinton’s early (and disastrous) communication director, and now serves as a pundit for ABC News. As *Washington Post* correspondent Ruth Marcus put it in that article, “The White House press corps is like this large, dysfunctional family. It’s weird. It’s not normal. Half the time I’m at the White House, my attitude is: No one would believe this.”<sup>42</sup>

There are at least three reasons for the series of feeding frenzies that plagued the Clinton presidency from the start. As these factors often contribute to other feeding frenzies, they are stated here in more general terms:

- Cooperative relations between the president’s communication staff and the press had broken down. (See the discussions of press-politician cooperation earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 4.)
- The communication staff seemed to think it unnecessary (or beneath the dignity of the office) to follow the basic rules of news management in response to the initial outbreaks of negative coverage, as outlined in Chapter 4. They provided few packaged stories to interrupt the negative news, and they had no apparent game plan to spin the incidents that kept the feeding frenzies going.
- The charged and actual offenses involving the president resulted in numerous uncontrolled news situations.

Whether Bill Clinton operated out of some sort of political death wish or simply had more skeletons in his closet than the average politician, only future psychoanalysts and historians will be able to say. As the third factor suggests, the press

frenzy clearly fed on personal episodes that invited questions about Clinton's character and leadership. However, the magnitude of the Clinton frenzies and their occurrence so early in his presidency points to the important roles played by the first two factors as well. Clinton supporters also accused political opponents of feeding the frenzies with well-orchestrated accusations. With the exception of the sex scandals and a questionable real estate deal, however, many of the incidents clearly resulted when Clinton's media handlers left their boss out of position in poorly controlled situations (such as the haircut and the Waco fiasco) that could have been controlled more effectively.

With the exception of the stories that David Gergen was allowed to manage during his brief stay in the Clinton White House (recall the earlier discussions of Gergen's news management style), press relations for much of the Clinton first term remained rocky. For example, influential *New York Times* correspondent (now an influential columnist) Maureen Dowd listed the numerous instances of poor press handling on the part of the press office staff during a European trip commemorating the fifty-year anniversary of D-Day. She recounted a reflective moment at a British pub after a missed deadline: "Sipping champagne ordered by the *Paris Match* reporter, I fantasized about replacing the corner dartboard with the head of one of Clinton's pre-pubescent press-minders."<sup>43</sup>

After the stunning Democratic party defeat in the 1994 congressional elections, the White House began to address its communication problem.<sup>44</sup> Slowly and grudgingly, the communications office became more responsive to the journalists down the hall. The decision to hire Mike McCurry as press secretary proved to be the single best press relations move of the administration. At least when the Lewinsky scandal broke later on, the president was put at a distance from reporters, and the daily briefings from the White House were as effective as could be hoped for in the midst of a frenzy that was well beyond the capacity of routine press management to control.

Even well into his last term, however, Clinton managed to find small ways to antagonize the press corps. On the eve of the Lewinsky scandal, for example, the White House reduced the number of 1997 press Christmas parties from four to two, and in the process, cut the guest list in half. The news organizations, themselves, had to decide who would be excluded from one of the "A ticket" Washington social events of the year. The parties increasingly drew media executives from New York, along with nearly 2,000 journalists, spouses, and hangers-on, who, as Howard Kurtz described the scene,

. . . got to nibble on shrimp and lamb chops, visit the open bar, and pose for official photos with the president and first lady, who had to stand through four grueling two-hour sessions of greeting those who often give them less than flattering reviews. Even jaded journalists enjoy having these prestigious souvenirs mailed to them. . . .<sup>45</sup>

Even as the Clinton team strived to restore routine press relations in many areas of the news process, it seemed to forget that the goodwill of journalists is something that must be cultivated, particularly during the holidays.

## THE PARADOX OF ORGANIZATIONAL ROUTINES

The problem with routine news gathering is that most of the news on most of the channels starts looking pretty much the same. The paradox is that because there are many papers, radio programs, and television broadcasts from which audiences can receive the daily news, it is hard for competing organizations to establish a competitive edge in the news market. In short, routine reporting of news may be efficient, but it limits the share of the market that any media source can capture. For example, if all the news on television is pretty much the same, each network should capture an equal share of the audience, all other things being equal. Thus, efficiency may impose an unintended ceiling on audience share, which limits the growth of profits in the news organization—and news is, after all, a business. The ways around this dilemma involve marketing strategies, budget cutting, and the various other business moves described in Chapter 3—none of which improve the quality of news.

Breaking out of the news routine toward more independent, less sensational news has not been attractive to news organizations because it is not clear what the alternative would look like even if it were profitable to worry about. For example, television executives may point to the *News Hour* on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) as an example of how more in-depth reporting only drives audiences away. Some critics argue, however, that the PBS news, while more detailed, and more likely to broadcast hard news over soft, is otherwise very similar in content to that available on the commercial networks. Why should audiences seek a bigger dose of the same product?

Because news is largely the result of convenient conventions between politicians and journalists, it is not clear where to look for guidance in reforming the product. Any new format would surely draw criticism from politicians and other news organizations, and it might startle the public, risking the possible loss of audience share. As a result, the media do not like to think too much about tampering with the standard news gathering routines. Instead, the competition in most news markets tends to be waged in terms of marketing strategies, brand images, and other matters of style over substance.

### Should the Market Rule the News?

After receiving a survey of audience reading habits, the management of one major daily paper reportedly issued a memo to reporters calling for more "fine examples" of rapes, robberies, and auto accidents on page 1.<sup>46</sup> Whether the marketing strategy involves more human-interest stories or more stereotyped coverage of political heroes in action, the result is the same as far as political information goes: The news trends are toward replacing coverage of government and civic affairs with sex, personality, lifestyle, entertainment, sports, weather, and mayhem.

The contribution of the news doctors to standardized news raises a number of important questions, including the following:

- Should news be based on market considerations, or should it be based on some independent criteria of importance and newsworthiness?

- Because some people (i.e., enough to turn a profit) watch or read news about fires, murders, accidents, and political scandals, does this necessarily mean that (a) they want more of it (b) they think these things are important (c) they think these things belong in the news (d) they do not want alternatives to formula news (e) they would not be engaged by news that actually *explains* more about politics and society?

Such questions are dodged by news doctors and media executives, who reply simplistically that they are only interested in making the news more relevant to people. It is doubtful that current marketing surveys really measure popular demand at all.<sup>47</sup> For example, most media surveys are designed with the assumption that formula news is a given. Audiences are not asked if they would prefer alternatives to news formulas; they are simply asked which news formulas they like best. Thus, the standard excuse that the news reflects what the people want might be stated more properly as “the news reflects what people prefer among those choices that we find profitable and convenient to offer them.” This is not the same thing as saying that the news is responsive to popular demand.

## WHEN JOURNALISM WORKS

Within the limits of business pressures and journalistic routines, there are clearly some news organizations that seem to make greater commitments to news content that displays more diversity, detail, and coherence. Journalists turn out to be among the most self-critical of professionals. Perhaps because they receive such volumes of criticism from all sides (public opinion, politicians, other journalists, and media scholars), they sometimes experiment with news formats in an effort to try to improve the quality of their product. Although these changes are often modest in their impact, they are worth noting.

### Fighting the Mayhem? A Hopeful Trend in Local TV News

In Austin, Texas, the news looked pretty much the same on all the channels: more mayhem than at least some local journalists felt accurately reflected life in the increasingly cosmopolitan Texas capital. Then, ratings leader KVUE-TV broke from the pack. News executives decided that they would screen the mayhem stories for their social or political significance before making an automatic story assignment based on the “if it bleeds, it leads” principle. For example, before a crime story would be shown on KVUE, it had to meet at least one of five significance criteria:

1. Does action need to be taken?
2. Is there an immediate threat to safety?
3. Is there a threat to children?
4. Does the crime have significant community impact?
5. Does the story lend itself to a crime prevention effort?<sup>48</sup>

Soon after these standards were developed, they were put to a test by a Saturday night brawl in a local town that resulted in a triple shooting and murder. KVUE investigated the incident and judged that none of its significance criteria was engaged. The

station held its ground and did not report the story, while its competitors gave it the prominent play generally assigned to such a good example of local mayhem. As the news director at Austin’s K-EYE put it simply, “When somebody’s killed, that’s news.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps it was easier for KVUE to try a new kind of journalism in Austin because it was already the ratings leader. However, the ratings for the new format made for happy news executives. The ratings for the first full month of the experiment were the best ever for the station’s 10 P.M. newscast.

A more general look at national trends shows that KVUE is not alone in its efforts to improve the quality of local TV news. For example, KARE in Minneapolis features a lengthy report on an important issue of the day, and its ratings have risen. KAKE in Wichita has twice the national average in issue coverage and is also doing well in the ratings. WCTV in Tallahassee goes where others have closed operations (such as reporting on state government) and leads its market. These examples are from a larger study of sixty-one stations in twenty cities conducted by Columbia University’s Project for Excellence in Journalism.<sup>50</sup>

The most interesting finding from the study is that serious news tends to be compatible with good ratings primarily when a station makes a commitment to breaking completely with the mayhem format. In other words, stations that incorporate a mix of serious issues and mayhem are not as likely to be rising in the ratings as stations that either make serious news their dominant format or that continue to go with “more mayhem most of the time.” This interesting finding was summarized and interpreted this way:

The stations least likely to be rising in the ratings were those in the middle, which were often hybrids—part tabloid and part serious. This suggests that audiences are not schizophrenic—they are segmenting. There is a group that embraces news full of revelation, scandal, and celebrity. There is another group that prefers a more sober, information-based approach.<sup>51</sup>

With the exception of five out of the eight stations in the high-quality group that were experiencing rating gains, the rest of the picture was decidedly mixed. Indeed, the overall profile of the 8,500 stories from the 600 broadcasts monitored on the 61 stations in the study was not an optimistic portrait of a revolution sweeping local TV:

Despite the good news, the study found that most local newscasts are far from excellent. The general picture of local TV news is superficial and reactive—journalism on the run. Almost half (46%) of all stories were about commonplace events. Less than 10% originated from ideas in the newsroom. Of stories involving controversy, many (43%) gave only one side.<sup>52</sup>

Although this study found a somewhat more reassuring crime volume (28 percent) than other research (using different samples) has found, the substantive problems with local news still seemed large. The Project for Excellence team cited major failings on the local scene with “sourcing, getting both sides of the story, thinking ahead.”<sup>53</sup>

### Reforms on the National Scene

Although there is hardly a tidal wave of reform sweeping the media, a few developments are worth noting. For example, some news organizations have developed “agenda”

features that provide more in-depth analysis of national problems. These agendas are generally relegated to the status of minor features and set apart from the normal news, however, rather than driving the daily news agenda. In many cases, these independent agendas reflect pressures for sensationalism, as illustrated by the many special segments on dramatic examples of government waste during the 1990s. A more positive development is the “adwatch” coverage that many news organizations have introduced to help people decode and think critically about the political advertising during election campaigns.

Even when news organizations vow to improve the quality of coverage, however, other pressures in the information system often intrude. For example, CBS announced a policy in the 1992 presidential campaign to reverse the trend toward shrinking “sound bites” (those direct statements by candidates and politicians that are sandwiched in television news packages). According to a study by Daniel Hallin, the length of the average sound bite hit an all-time low of under ten seconds during the 1988 campaign.<sup>54</sup> The CBS goal of running at least 30 seconds of direct statement from the candidate in each story was soon abandoned, however, as it became clear that the media managers who run campaigns had learned to script their candidates’ performances with those 10-second political marketing jingles in mind.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the length of the sound bite shrank even further in 1992 to 8.4 seconds. Although it seems impossible to shrink candidate statements much farther, they weighed in at a puny 7.2 seconds in the 1996 election according to a study conducted midway through the campaign by the Center for Media and Public Affairs.<sup>56</sup> The 2000 election held firm at 7.3 seconds, with candidates getting only 11 percent of campaign news time.<sup>57</sup> Election night TV coverage has reduced the role of reporters familiar with campaigns and candidates in favor of greater face time for star anchors and pundits who now talk in clipped, rapid fire exchanges.<sup>58</sup>

The shrinking sound bite and rapid pace of TV talking heads are signs that it is hard to change news formats in the direction of more information-rich fare. The sound bite trend reminds us that not all of the inhibitions to change arise from inside news organizations. Candidates hire communication consultants who are also quite comfortable shrinking ideas to fit media formats. Critics argue that the now standard 30-second ad spots used in election and issue campaigns permit candidates to skip over the details of their proposals and aim at often volatile public emotions.<sup>59</sup> Yet many media consultants like former Clinton advisor Dick Morris see no such problem. According to Morris, “There is literally no such thing as an idea that cannot be expressed well and articulately to today’s voters in 30 seconds.”<sup>60</sup>

## DEMOCRACY WITH OR WITHOUT CITIZENS?

Recall from Chapter 1 that political communication scholar Robert Entman has argued that our mass-mediated democracy is in danger of becoming a *democracy without citizens*. This is in part because most news coverage is driven by forces that involve people more as passive consumers than active citizens.<sup>61</sup> For both politicians and journalists, the public has become more of a market to be tested, per-

sueded, and sold than an equal partner in communication and government. The reality of much opinion and participation is anchored in electronic images that move people psychologically in private worlds that may be detached from society and face-to-face politics.<sup>62</sup>

The irony in this is that the technology exists to communicate more information, farther, faster, from more sources, and to more people than ever before. At the same time, the political and business pressures operating behind the news may create just the opposite results. Perhaps the electronic age would not be so worrisome if politicians and the press used the potential of today’s electronic technology to communicate critical ideas to people. The question is how to move politicians and journalism away from the paths of least political and economic resistance in their communication strategies.

In short, it is not hard to imagine how the news could be more citizen-oriented than it is. For example, the press could keep more citizen voices in reporting on important issues—even when public officials attempt to manage, downplay, or ignore those voices. News organizations could require their reporters and editors to run more direct statements from newsmakers and less commentary from journalists. News organizations also could minimize the writing of vapid “meta-narratives” such as the campaign horse race, or the authority-disorder plot that can be applied to almost any generic political situation.

Above all, citizens and their activities should be covered in the news even when officials are not engaged with the issues or viewpoints in question. News organizations could include citizens in their reports and create paths from the broadcast or the news page to Web sites where audiences can learn more about what they can do to make a difference. A good example of such a citizen-oriented news site is the BBC’s *iCann* citizen information project ([www.bbc.co.uk/dna/icann/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/icann/)). What do you think? What kind of news would best fill the needs of a *democracy with citizens*?

## NOTES

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