

American Media

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Abstract: This paper discusses the state of the American media in the decade following 9/11. A framework is crafted from the work of previous media theorists and the writing of the Supreme Court of the United States to understand the specific role of the fourth estate in American society. Once this is accomplished, this paper re-evaluates the success of the media in fulfilling its constitutional role, arguing that the media was, in fact, less deferential to the government line than many critics suggest, particularly following the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Finally, the case is made that institutionalised media is necessary to provide a check on government power, and the expansion of democratized news can only fulfil this mandate to a certain extent.

Introduction

In 1972, *Rolling Stone* reporter Hunter S. Thompson published *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail, '72*, an account of Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern's campaign, from the primaries until his eventual loss to Richard Nixon. In this account, Thompson's reportage solidified his reputation as the pioneer of "gonzo journalism." At one point on the campaign Thompson fabricated a story claiming that Edmund Muskie, one of McGovern's competitors, was addicted to an obscure drug called ibogaine, a story that derailed Muskie's campaign when major news agencies ran with the story.¹ In a television interview at the time, Thompson expressed astonishment that people had believed his story, and clarified his reporting: "I never said he was [eating ibogaine]. I said there was a rumour in Milwaukee that he was, which was true...and I

started the rumour in Milwaukee. If you look carefully I'm really a very accurate journalist."²

This anecdote highlights the way in which the press can have a tangible effect on the government and the democratic system. For Hunter S. Thompson, the intent of his reportage was not to objectively regurgitate the facts, for he believed it was the charade of media objectivity that allowed politicians to get away with their nefarious deeds.³ It took subjectivity to ensure journalism stood as the fourth estate check on government power that it was meant to be; anything less failed to fulfil this mandate. This evolution in domestic journalism highlights a transition in the way that journalism has been done. The media has the power to dramatically alter the way that the public

¹ A quick Google search reveals that ibogaine is a hallucinogenic drug, though it can also be used to treat addiction to opiates and amphetamines.

² Alex Gibney, *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, (Directed by Alex Gibney, Produced by Alex Gibney, 2008).

³ Hunter S. Thompson, "He Was a Crook," *Rolling Stone*, June 16, 1994. <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/graffiti/crook.htm> (accessed February 23, 2011).

perceives events as they happen, and this applies to foreign policy as well as domestic politics.

However, in 2011, it is possible that for the first time in American history, major news organizations might cease to exist as they fail to find a foothold in the market.⁴ The alternative is quite plainly the Internet: democratic, free and unregulated – the ultimate marketplace of ideas. However, there is a downside to unregulated media, in the form of content control. There may be a dearth of information on a given issue from a major media organization, but there is no way to ensure that the information posted on a blog or Facebook, or via a Tweet, is accurate. Indeed, the democratization of news leaves us with an unclear impression of the legitimacy of the source. Throughout the ongoing crisis in the Middle East CNN's reportage has been littered with information that they could not "independently verify," that stems from interviews directly from the streets.⁵ If we accept the importance of media as vital to the function of democracy, we are in an historical era where the exact role that media is playing is patently unclear. More importantly, we cannot be sure exactly *how* the media is going to play this role. The historical record indicates that media has the power to sculpt public opinion and impact politics all over the world. With the decline of

⁴ Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again* (Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010), x.

⁵ In complete fairness to CNN, other newspapers of record have had equally unsubstantiated – though no less newsworthy – statements.

traditional news media, the role that news is set to play in the future is uncertain at best. It raises an important set of questions. In particular, can democratized news and commentary on the Internet fill the void that might be left by newspapers and broadcast journalism? If not, and frankly, even if it can, what impact will this have on politics and policy in the United States?

It is the intention of this paper to investigate the way in which the media affects the American political system. In particular, I want to investigate the way that journalists and journalism have influenced foreign policy in post-9/11 America. The scope will be limited to the coverage of the George W. Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is charged by Victor Navansky, former editor of *The Nation*, that in the post-9/11 period media organizations "internalize[d] the official line," and subscribed to a "jingoistic brand of patriotism."⁶ More generally, critics charge that the media abdicated its role as a check on government power and instead acted as a mouthpiece for government foreign policy, publishing little critical coverage. While I believe this point is arguable, the point is that in 2011 whatever consensus that dominated reporting after 9/11 has been broken down significantly. In the final years of George W. Bush's presidency, the media savaged him for foreign policy issues such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay, not to mention domestic issues such as Hurricane

⁶ Victor Navansky, foreword to *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge, 2002), xv.

Katrina, the environment, and the economy.

Three years after the election of Barack Obama, American journalism is at a significant crossroads. The medium of journalism is in crisis, and while its future almost certainly lies with the Internet, the implications that this will have for democratic governance in the United States has not been adequately examined. However, the mainstream press has evolved since the early years of the twenty-first century, and has managed to find its critical voice, as necessary in a democratic society. The media has bucked Navanky's charge that they are shills of the government line. This includes not just fringe publications from the anti-war Left, but also newspapers of record: in 2007, the *New York Times* officially spoke out against the Iraq War.⁷ However, recent years have also seen increasingly vitriolic and polarizing political commentary from personalities such as Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham. Not to pick solely on the Right, Michael Moore, Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann could potentially be added to the list as shrill personalities from the political Left. Therefore, American media is faced by a crisis of medium, but also is facing the opportunity to further develop its critical political voice. Because of that, the impact that journalism has had on American foreign policy is a particularly important historical question, since we necessarily must consider the role that it might have in the future.

⁷ Anthony DiMaggio, *When the Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 11.

Utilizing a framework constructed from the previous work of media theorists I will examine the criticisms made of the media for its coverage of American foreign policy in the post-9/11 period. This will centre around two charges made by critics: that the media did not have a sufficient critical discussion of Bush administration policies, particularly regarding the Iraq War, and that there was an abdication of the "watchdog" role of the media. I will argue that these criticisms neglect the essential, paradigm-altering effect of the attacks of September 11, which impacted journalism until 2004. In addition, I will also use some of the recent secondary literature that suggests media coverage of foreign policy issues was not as lopsided as critics charge. Finally, I will demonstrate that the incidents at Abu Ghraib revitalized "watchdog" journalism, and the media quickly turned on the Bush administration, re-establishing itself as a critical force holding the government in check.

Journalism and Foreign Policy: Frameworks and Outcomes

The role of the media in civil society in the United States is manifested in two ways: its contributions to the marketplace of ideas, and its function as a watchdog of government.⁸ Professor of Journalism Timothy Cook suggests that these are the most important roles of the media as articulated by the Supreme Court of the United States and the Constitution. The First Amendment to the Constitution

⁸ Timothy E. Cook, ed. *Freeing the Presses: The First Amendment in Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 4-5.

reads (among other things) that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...” an injunction that appears to be perfectly clear on the privileged place of the press in America. Indeed, while the Supreme Court has not been particularly receptive to a “literalist” interpretation of the text of the Constitution, there is no doubt that much of the power that the American media has rests with decisions made by the Supreme Court of the United States. Justice William Brennan affirmed that the purpose of the First Amendment was to ensure “unfettered interchange of ideas for the bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people.”⁹ In *Associated Press v. United States*, Justice Hugo Black (one of the few literalists to sit on the Supreme Court)¹⁰ wrote that the First Amendment “rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of a free society.”¹¹ These statements affirm the first role of the media: to ensure a robust exchange of ideas among different constituents in society.

The Supreme Court has also upheld the role of the press as James Madison envisioned it: “one of the great

bulwarks of liberty.”¹² Case law backs the role of the media as a watchdog of government, endowing substantial powers to critique the government. In *New York Times Co. v. United States*, the Court upheld in a *per curiam* ruling the right of the *New York Times* to publish the Pentagon Papers without prior restraint by the Nixon administration.¹³ Justice Black’s concurrence is a paean to the absolute superiority of the First Amendment, and even went so far as to dismiss the right of the government to hold its internal secrets: “The guarding of military and diplomatic secrets at the expense of informed representative government provides no real security for our Republic.”¹⁴ Justice Potter Stewart felt that the role of the press as a public forum – while obviously important – was quite banal, given its specific place the Founders carved out in the Constitution.¹⁵ Stewart wrote that, “the press is free to do battle against secrecy and deception in government,” and that extensive press freedoms are necessary to prevent the nation from succumbing to “despotism.”¹⁶ Subsequent justices have been reluctant to endorse these constitutional truths, but the fact stands that the Constitution affords the press an unbelievable amount of power to

⁹ *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957).

¹⁰ That is to say, believed that the First Amendment’s statement “shall make no law,” quite literally meant “no law” shall be made that abridged freedom of speech or press.

¹¹ *Associated Press v. U. S.*, 326 U.S. 1 (1945).

¹² James Madison, quoted in *New York Times v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971) (Black & Douglas, JJ., concurring).

¹³ *New York Times v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971).

¹⁴ *New York Times v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971) (Black & Douglas, JJ., concurring).

¹⁵ Potter Stewart, “Or of the Press,” *Hastings Law Journal* Vol. 25, No. 3 (1975): 634.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 636.

publish what they wish. As an institution, the media is firmly entrenched as a cornerstone of American democracy and is readily enabled through the Constitution to carry out its mandate as the fourth estate.

While the media is clearly designated an important role in in domestic politics in the United States, it is not obvious from these examples just how media relates to foreign policy. In “Media and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy,” former chief editor of *Problems of Communism* Paul A. Smith, Jr. sets out two ways in which the media can influence foreign policy. The first is indirect; through the process of reporting news the media sculpts public opinion. Since governments generally respond to public opinion to some extent, the media has an indirect influence on how the government approaches foreign affairs.¹⁷ The second is more direct, though less common and more difficult to quantify. Smith writes that news reportage creates the context in which administration decision-makers think about the United States and its place in the world.¹⁸ This framework is a fairly straightforward and appropriate way to approach the role of the media in foreign policy. While it is a basic (and fairly unobjectionable) framework, whether or not the media actually lives up to its role as a public forum, or a watchdog, or even meaningfully contributes to the foreign policy process is actually a fairly contentious issue. Media theorists such as Noam Chomsky, for example, suggest that the media is merely a pawn

¹⁷ Paul A. Smith, Jr., “Media and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1984): 135.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

of the state and major corporate entities, while others, such as Timothy Cook, are more optimistic about the independent voice of the press. It would be irresponsible (if not impossible) to analyse the role of the media in the United States without discussing the theorists and their views on the role of the press.

In *Governing With the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*, journalism professor Timothy Cook argues that the news media does not just have a role in American politics; they have a role in the government itself.¹⁹ The role of the media is not just one in which information is filtered through to the public, though this influence, when exerted on government through public opinion, can be significant. Cook writes that, “political actors respond to the agenda of the news,” and that government decisions often “anticipate the media’s response;” the news media can influence policy from within the offices of the Washington power elite.²⁰ Indeed, in 1992 then-President George H.W. Bush ordered 20000 troops into Somalia, moved to action by a story in the *New York Times*.²¹ The “CNN Effect” suggests that the media can bring international issues to the attention of officials through their coverage of

¹⁹ Timothy Cook, *Governing With the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ Maryann Cusimano Love, “The New Bully Pulpit: Global Media and Foreign Policy,” in *Media Power, Media Politics*, edited by Mark J. Rozell and Jeremy D. Mayer (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 266.

foreign affairs.²² However, the main question raised by media scholars regarding the role of the news in government is basically, who sets the agenda? That is to say, on the issues of the day, is the media wielding power retroactively, or do they have an active role in crafting policy, if not actually setting the agenda for the government?

Critics of the media often suggest that journalists are little more than mouthpieces for the administration, and that even with the appearance of independence, journalists rely too heavily on official sources and protection in order to be truly independent.²³ Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman argue in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* that the reliance on official information by journalists blurs the line between media and the government to the extent that they become “a part of the elite themselves.”²⁴ The State Department and the Pentagon, for example, have public relations organs that provide much needed information to journalists. Chomsky and Herman allege that because of this dependence the media is loath to voice criticism and lose their access to information.²⁵ The result is that the media basically regurgitates the official propaganda, such that they retain access to figures of power. There is some truth to this, because journalists

²² Ibid., 264.

²³ Anthony DiMaggio, *When the Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Dissent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 22.

do depend heavily on official sources and protection; after all, the access of the media to a war zone without the filter of government is severely limited. But, realistically, the necessary contention that this taints the media more generally, I think is a bit of a stretch. These drawbacks are not a conspiracy of government to inhibit democracy, but rather structural limitations on the way the press operates when it comes to reporting the news.

The way that the media influences foreign policy through public opinion is a relationship that is more easily established than arguing that they exert some control over the context in which public officials make decisions. According to *The Nation*'s Victor Navansky, the media is the “circulation system of our democracy,” and the means by which Americans “make up [their] collective mind.”²⁶ It is orthodoxy in scholarship that there is some impact by public opinion on foreign policy. While at one point public opinion was viewed as irrelevant by foreign policy-makers, the second half of the twentieth century established public opinion as an important consideration for government officials.²⁷ Public resistance to the Vietnam War not only played a role in ending the war, but also had a long-term effect on the use of military force as a viable foreign policy option. It was argued in the 1980s by Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defence Caspar

²⁶ Victor Navansky, foreword to *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge, 2002), xiii.

²⁷ Donald L. Jordan and Benjamin I. Page, “Shaping Foreign Policy Options: The Role of TV News,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1992): 227.

Weinberger that imperial adventures could *only* be conducted if the President had the support of the public.²⁸ Called the “Vietnam syndrome,” the failed imperial adventure in Indochina left a hangover in which the successful use of military force as a foreign policy tool was dependent on the support of the American public. In fact, Anthony DiMaggio concedes that the foreign policy of the Regan administration was likely constrained by public opposition to his agendas in South America and during the first Gulf War.²⁹ It goes with saying, though, that public opinion is not always a deciding factor on foreign policy issues. For example, President Bill Clinton’s use of the United States military in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo were decisions made in an absence of compelling public support for such action.³⁰ However, it can be concluded with reasonable confidence that public opinion is considered by the powers that be. This conclusion, though, is complicated by the question of who exactly influences public opinion? In order for the media to be a player on foreign policy issues, it must have at least some impact on the way the public views foreign affairs.

The debate over the role of the media in American society, and the way in which journalists can actually influence the foreign policy decisions of

²⁸ John Dumbrell, *The Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 152.

²⁹ Anthony DiMaggio, *When the Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 209.

³⁰ Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 289.

the administration is a debate that is by no means conclusive. It is an occasionally bare-knuckled argument, and there are widely divergent viewpoints that draw on theoretical and empirical evidence. However, the history of the relationship between the press and the government suggests that the media does play a role in restraining the actions of government and helping craft the range of legitimate policy options. As such, the framework developed above provides the most suitable means by which to analyze the relationship between the media and foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11.

This section of the paper sets out a framework by which we can understand the role of the media in foreign policy. The media can fulfil its mandate (as established by the First Amendment) in two ways: providing a marketplace of ideas, and acting as a watchdog constraint on the actions of government. Through these roles, the media can influence foreign policy decisions by swaying public opinion, as well as establishing the contexts in which the government can actually make decisions. The media wields power by determining context through the marketplace of ideas, which has the effect of influencing policy options as they are made. However, media also exercises a review power, in which watchdog journalism can check actions of the government that are already in progress. This framework, which draws from the work of Timothy Cook, establishes a foundation from which a more precise understanding of the relationship between media and foreign policy can be made.

It should go without saying that the relationship between the media and

government on foreign policy decisions is not consistent over time. However, the purpose of the framework is to establish what the role of the media ought to be, in terms of its ideal role in society. The reality is that this is not always fulfilled. The standard that media scholars and Supreme Court justices believe the media should live up to is really quite high. The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 ushered in an era dominated by a completely new paradigm of international relations. As well, it altered the way Americans viewed their nation, deeply impacting the national consciousness. Furthermore, it is a period when the media establishment partially abdicated its mandate in society. The next section of this paper will argue that the extent of the abdication was not as severe as some critics suggest, and that the media regained its critical voice relatively quickly in the wake of severe foreign policy mistakes by the Bush administration.

Finally, this argument is intensified because of the revolution in the medium by which we consume news. In early 2011, when the democratic consciousness in the Middle East finally boiled over, this was arguably facilitated because social media allowed protestors to stay one step ahead of their authoritarian oppressors.³¹ With an American election on the horizon, where foreign policy will no doubt be hotly debated, we cannot

³¹ L. Gordon Crovitz, "Egypt's Revolution by Social Media," *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703786804576137980252177072.html> (accessed March 26, 2011).

ignore the changes in how Americans consume media. There is no doubt that this is one of the fundamental questions that the upcoming generation must address regarding American politics.

9/11 and the Unmaking of American Journalism

The events of September 11, 2001, present a unique challenge to the contention that the media acts as a restraint on government power. As the towers crumbled in New York City, Americans rallied around the flag. The media followed suit; expressing a great deal of patriotism, and more importantly, a great deal of deference to the policies of the Bush administration.³² This was not just a result of the McCarthy-style charges of anti-Americanism tossed around in the aftermath, but also the result of outright self-censorship on the part of journalists and editors. Indeed, the trauma of September 11 even brought formerly anti-war critics of American foreign policy into the neoconservative fold. Journalist Christopher Hitchens ended a twenty-year relationship with *The Nation* and departed messily from the American Left, citing the underestimation of the threat of Osama Bin Laden in his final column.³³ In fact, Hitchens had been a vocal critic of the first Gulf War, only crossing the floor in the wake of 9/11.

³² Victor Navansky, foreword to *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge, 2002), xv.

³³ Christopher Hitchens, "Taking Sides," *The Nation*, September 26, 2002. <http://www.thenation.com/article/taking-sides> (accessed March 10, 2011).

The attacks did not just rattle the American populace, but also dramatically altered the paradigms in which journalists, editors and publishers worked and lived daily. The media was not insulated from the events of September 11, and this trauma shaped the reportage produced in the aftermath. However, in my view the media gets criticised undeservedly for their work in the few years following 9/11. The critique basically states that the press failed to see through the Bush administration's errors regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and were unable to have a substantive debate regarding more aggressive foreign policy decisions.³⁴ More generally, critics suggest that the press should have acted as a significant check on the foreign policy of the Bush administration, instead of following along with the rest of the populace. The mainstream media accepted the tenets of the Bush Doctrine; journalists were writing in the same context as the rest of America, and susceptible to the paradigm-altering affect of an attack on national soil. However, the media was sharply critical of the Bush administration on certain issues, particularly in the wake of the abuses at Abu Ghraib. The mistake that critics of the media in the post-9/11 period make is that the fourth estate does not need to be opposed to all government policies at all times. In the years following the attacks of September 11, the American media partially abdicated its role as provider of a marketplace of ideas;

³⁴ Robert W. McChesney, "September 11 and the Structural Limitations of U.S. Journalism," in *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 93.

however, they did not abandon the role as watchdog, calling out the administration on particularly contentious issues that arose from foreign policy decisions.

The foreign policy of the Bush administration is retroactively defined in terms of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; however, a reading of George W. Bush's press release from September 17, 2002, outlines a foreign policy predicated on the spread of freedom, democracy and free enterprise around the globe.³⁵ However, it also recognized the ominous threat of terrorism, and pledged to fight terrorism wherever it may crop up, acknowledging it is the role of the United States as the sole remaining superpower to lead the world in this fight.³⁶ In particular, President Bush outlined the threat of nuclear weapons and stated that his administration would staunchly resist proliferation.³⁷ In terms of the legacy of the Bush Doctrine, it is the call to pre-emptively and "actively fight terror," which foreshadowed the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. This was accompanied by a shift from focussing on state actors to non-state actors and rogue states that presented a unique threat to American security, a view that is articulated through the "axis of evil" designation afforded to Iran, Iraq and North Korea.³⁸

³⁵ George W. Bush, "Introduction, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," *National Security Council*, September 17, 2002. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nssintro.html> (accessed March 26, 2011).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Robert S. Litwak, *Regime Change: U.S. Strategy Through the Prism of 9/11*

While George Bush also committed to fighting HIV/AIDS, and ramped up spending on international development, it is the right to act militarily, unilaterally and pre-emptively that defines the Bush Doctrine in our popular memory. Indeed, these components of Bush's foreign policy are doubtless the most contentious, and he was heavily criticised by the media once their critical voice returned.

The framework in which I have rooted this examination suggests that the media institutions act as a viable, and potent, force in reigning in the government, and providing information to the American population. In the years following 9/11, there was a significant breakdown in the way the media played this role. Mainstream media institutions toned down critical reporting and rhetoric, citing the interest of the nation as more important than partisan concerns.³⁹ In some ways, this is a fulfilment of one aspect of the media's mandate, in that it provided pastoral guidance for the rest of the nation in the immediate and traumatic aftermath of 9/11.⁴⁰ Michael Schudson refers to this as "the prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information."⁴¹ It was, generally speaking, a role that journalists adopted as part of the larger American

(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 2.

³⁹ Victor Navansky, foreword to *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge, 2002), xv.

⁴⁰ Michael Schudson, "What's Unusual About Covering Politics As Usual?" in *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41.

⁴¹ Ibid.

community, rallying to provide comfort to neighbours. Schudson suggests that journalists were aware of criticisms of the administration that they could have made, but knew it "would be unseemly" in the context of a national tragedy.⁴² However, Schudson argues that while this may be a necessary role for the media at the time, as "the moment passed," the media should have resumed its role as a critical observer and source of information for the public.⁴³ The moment was missed, and news organizations became cheerleaders for war as the aggressive rhetoric was amped up by President Bush and his war cabinet.⁴⁴

Media scholar Robert McChesney suggests that not only did the media fail to have a substantive discussion regarding *how* to prosecute the war, but whether or not the United States should go to war at all.⁴⁵ It is this dearth of debate that suggests the media failed to fulfil its role in articulating the diverse views on government policy. However, the media focused instead on a few topics of discussion regarding the potential conflict. There was strong emphasis in the national news coverage of the military planning for an attack, and 75 percent of *New York Times* articles regurgitated the official reports that Iraq was developing, or was capable of developing, weapons of

⁴² Ibid., 43.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Robert W. McChesney, "September 11 and the Structural Limitations of U.S. Journalism," in *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 93.

mass destruction.⁴⁶ These were views that were consistent with a significant discussion regarding the “procedural” implications of going to war, and not directly challenging the right of the United States to go to war in the first place.⁴⁷ In terms of my framework, this critique argues that the media failed to provide a forum where numerous viewpoints on the war might be espoused, and acted as a megaphone for the administration in persuading Americans to go to war.

Since it has been established that the marketplace of ideas is one of the important functions that the media is supposed to fulfil, obviously to fail to have a debate regarding a military intervention constitutes a dereliction of duty. In the years following 9/11, it seems quite clear – and the scholarship nears unanimity – that the acquiescence of the media essentially gave the government carte blanche on its foreign policy decisions.⁴⁸ In a slew of articles, *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller nearly singlehandedly created the weapons of mass destruction hysteria that promoted the invasion of Iraq. *Slate* writer Jack Shafer called Miller’s work “wretched reporting” in an article that dissects some of the claims she made.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Anthony DiMaggio, *When the Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 245-246.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁸ Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino, “Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2010): 60.

⁴⁹ Jack Shafer, “The *Times* Scoop that Melted,” *Slate*, July 25, 2003.

There is little doubt that much of the journalism presented in the major newspapers was, quite simply, terrible, and that there was an unnerving amount of deference to the official government line.

However, recent scholarship suggests that the American media was not as reluctant to report objection to war as critics commonly suggest. Political scientists Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino argue that media coverage of the Iraq War was not as “lopsided” as once presumed.⁵⁰ They root this thesis in their analysis of news stories in the 8 months leading up to the invasion of Iraq – the only systematic study of its kind.⁵¹ They suggest that their analysis shows that anti-war sentiment was often reported in American news, although the source of the dissent was usually foreign critics or media sources.⁵² However, a commonplace criticism of foreign views is that they really have no place in American political discourse, and so this can be disregarded as evidence that the media told both sides of the story. Hayes and Guardino anticipate this, and point out that most of the scholarship that argues this point comes from the Cold War era when the tense political situation, with its strict ideological demarcations meant that journalists were unlikely to seek out opinions critical of American foreign policy.⁵³

<http://www.slate.com/id/2086110/> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁵⁰ Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino, “Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2010): 61.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 63.

While this does not demonstrate an American source of dissent, it does suggest an alteration in the generally accepted view that the mainstream media in the United States completely abdicated its role as the forum for ideas about American politics.

While the view that the marketplace of ideas was severely diminished in the post-9/11 period, and in the lead-up to the Iraq War, systematic analysis of news coverage demonstrates that there were a number of dissenting views presented in the news. Among other indicators, Hayes and Guardino analysed over 6000 source quotes from over 1400 stories on the Iraq War on ABC, CBS and NBC news.⁵⁴ This analysis revealed that 29 percent of quotes were opposed to the Iraq War, whereas 34 percent were supportive of invasion, and 37 percent were neutral with regards to American action.⁵⁵ Admittedly, the research done by Hayes and Guardino focused on television news, and not the print media, but the analysis of certain media sources gives a snapshot of coverage of the preparations for war. Their research suggests that the discourses developed surrounding the Iraq War were not as one-sided as it is often presumed by media critics, and that some indicators suggest there was some diverse coverage of the conflict. Newspapers of record followed this trend as well; after Colin Powell's February 5, 2003 speech to the United Nations that detailed the history of Saddam Hussein's belligerence, front-page coverage was generally favourable.⁵⁶ While certainly

⁵⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Michael Massing, "Now They Tell Us," *The New York Review of Books*, January 29,

not front-page news both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* ran articles that questioned Powell's evidence.⁵⁷ *Newsweek* even systematically critiqued a number of the claims made by the Secretary of State.⁵⁸ The evidence does suggest, though, that the "directional thrust" of coverage of the Iraq War was in favour of the positions of the Bush administration, a result that Hayes and Guardino conclude does not live up to the "democratic standard" of American journalism.⁵⁹ However, the general conclusion that Hayes and Guardino reach is that that the media is representative of a more robust discourse than much of the critical literature suggests.

That does not, however, free the media completely from condemnation for an extensive muzzling of viewpoints critical of the Bush administration. In my view, this is because of the context that 9/11 created and the simple fact that journalists, editors and news anchors are just people. Critics who suggest that reporters were too enthusiastic about intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan neglect the fact, that journalists were not, by virtue of their profession, super-humans able to separate themselves from the events of 9/11. This is the necessary argument when one engages in a hostile critique of the role of the

2004.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/feb/26/now-they-tell-us/> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino, "Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq," *Political Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2010): 80.

media in the wake of a national tragedy. That only an exceptional few, such as Chalmers Johnson of *The Nation* managed to find a critical voice attests to the difficulty of the mainstream media in fulfilling their constitutional mandate. But, it is necessary to remember the context in which all journalists operated: in the days following the attacks of September 11, President Bush had an approval rating of around 80 per cent, and while it declined over time, he experienced upward spikes at the invasion of Afghanistan, and again for Iraq.⁶⁰ That the mainstream press was caught up in this fervour does not excuse their acquiescence; however, it is a point well worth making that the critique of journalists is an easy one to make in retrospect. Regardless of the unwillingness of the American media to participate actively in a substantive debate regarding the Bush Doctrine, the events in 2004 precipitated a tentative resurgence in the role of the media as a watchdog.

Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq was primer for the debate that eventually emerged in the United States regarding the use of torture and coercive interrogation. Essentially, American military personnel working in the prison had taken a number of photographs of prisoners in abusive, humiliating and often sexually compromising situations. The scandal went public on April 28, 2004 when the CBS program *60 Minutes II* aired the story, which released some of the photographs, and

⁶⁰ BBC News, "Bush Approval Rating Tracker," *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6038436.stm> (accessed March 27, 2011).

descriptions of others.⁶¹ The *New Yorker* followed on May 10, 2004 with a piece by Seymour M. Hersh that detailed the abuses committed in the prison.⁶² The mainstream press also responded to the allegations; the *New York Times* ran a story on April 29, 2004 under the headline "G.I.'s Are Accused of Abusing Iraqi Captives." While it was not exactly hard-hitting investigative journalism that acts as a substantial check on the actions of the government, the story took the important step of suggesting that the abuses committed might have been consistent with orders from military superiors.⁶³ The *New York Times* ran another story on May 1, detailing the allegations that the abuse might have been ordered by military intelligence and was hidden from other officials.⁶⁴ While not exactly an American publication, *The Economist* even called for Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to resign over the abuses because "responsibility needs to

⁶¹ Rebecca Leung, "Abuse of Iraqi POWs by GIs Probed," *CBS News*, April 28, 2004. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/main614063.shtml> (accessed April 4, 2011).

It is worth noting that the military had already launched an internal investigation into the abuses.

⁶² Seymour M. Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2004. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact (accessed March 29, 2011).

⁶³ James Risen, "G.I.'s Are Accused of Abusing Iraqi Captives," *New York Times*, April 29, 2004, A15.

⁶⁴ Philip Shenon, "Officer Suggests Iraqi Jail Abuse Was Encouraged," *New York Times*, May 1, 2004, N1, N14.

be taken...at the highest level.”⁶⁵ It was a disclosure that set a precedent for future scandals, such as domestic wiretapping, that the media would come out against strongly.⁶⁶ The Abu Ghraib scandal in May 2004 marks the return of the watchdog media, though it did not yet wield its powers to their full extent.

At the time that the Abu Ghraib story was revealed, public opinion of the war had slipped after weeks of higher-than-normal bloodshed. Just a month earlier on March 31, 2004 four American defence contractors were executed and their corpses mutilated by an enraged mob in Fallujah, Iraq. The *New York Times* described the event in lurid detail, and noted it was “reminiscent of the scene from Somalia in 1993, when a mob dragged the body of an American soldier through the streets of Mogadishu.”⁶⁷ That event had marked a turning point in public support for the Somali intervention, which eventually led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The incident in Fallujah contributed to the decline in American support for the Iraq War, and the publication of the Abu Ghraib photos in that context resulted in a steep drop in public enthusiasm for

the War in Iraq.⁶⁸ However, the hard news pages of the mainstream media were unwilling to dub the actions at Abu Ghraib “torture,” instead using the less loaded term “abuse.”⁶⁹ In contrast, though, the editorial pages of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* raised the spectre of torture, which suggests that there was a growing consciousness among reporters that significant questions needed to be raised about the policies of the Bush administration regarding torture.⁷⁰ While the reluctance of the mainstream press to take a firm stance on the issue of torture is a target for criticism, it can be concluded that the watchdog role of the media was re-established at this point.⁷¹

After these first baby steps, CNN’s Christiane Amanpour remarked that by 2005 reporters had “got their spine back.”⁷² In part, this is no doubt due to the slumping public support for

⁶⁵ The Economist, “Resign Rumsfeld,” *The Economist*, May 6, 2004. <http://www.economist.com/node/2647493> (accessed March 29, 2011).

⁶⁶ Paul L. Moorcraft and Philip M. Taylor, *Shooting the Messenger: The Political Impact of War Reporting* (Washington: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), 199.

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Gettleman, “Enraged Mob in Falluja Kills 4 American Contractors,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/31/international/worldspecial/31CND-IRAQ.html> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁶⁸ W. Lance Bennett et al., *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 78-79.

⁶⁹ Doris Graber and Dennis Holyk, “What Explains Torture Coverage During Wartime?: A Search For Realistic Answers,” (paper presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 30-September 2, 2007).

⁷⁰ W. Lance Bennett et al., *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 88.

⁷¹ A significant amount of space in *When the Press Fails* is devoted to criticism of the hesitancy of the media to call the events at Abu Ghraib torture.

⁷² Paul L. Moorcraft and Philip M. Taylor, *Shooting the Messenger: The Political Impact of War Reporting* (Washington: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), 199.

the war; majority public opinion opposed the war in 2004, an opinion that emerged three years before newspapers of record officially advocated for withdrawal from Iraq.⁷³ Anthony DiMaggio contends that the media responded to public opinion when they spoke out against the Iraq War, and not the other way around. However, this neglects the fact that before late 2004, the media had been reporting events that stimulated a decrease in public support for the war. In reference to the executions at Fallujah, the media does not necessarily need to offer a criticism of Bush administration foreign policy in order for the public to respond negatively to the images printed. An editorially “unbiased” news story might still act as a check on government if it leads to a decline in public support for a specific foreign policy issue. However, even while newspapers might not have taken a distinct editorial stance on the war, a number of individual reporters were defecting to the anti-war camp, and certain papers were reflecting critically upon their coverage.⁷⁴

Former foreign policy hawk and *Newsweek* columnist Fareed Zakaria recanted his position on the Iraq War, essentially blaming the “combination of arrogance and incompetence” on the part of the Bush administration for

⁷³ Anthony DiMaggio, *When the Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 252.

⁷⁴ On point of fact, it is rather odd that critics suggest that an editorially neutral stance on the Iraq War constitutes a dereliction of duty. I suspect given a different set of circumstances, the very same people might cry foul about a biased media.

foreign policy blunders.⁷⁵ The *Washington Post* also did some soul searching; staff writer Howard Kurtz wrote on August 12, 2004 that the *Post* should have done a better job of publishing critical news stories on the front page, instead of burying them in the back pages of the paper.⁷⁶ Simultaneously, a number of books were published that were critical of Bush administration war policies.⁷⁷ Anthony DiMaggio explains that in 2005 newspapers of record demonstrated a spike in the critical coverage of the Iraq War, evidenced by a surge in discussions on withdrawal.⁷⁸ By 2005, the tide was turning, and the media was not only expanding its coverage of the marketplace of ideas, but the watchdog role of government began to return in a robust form.

After the incidents at Abu Ghraib, the mainstream media broke two stories that constituted significant acts of watchdog journalism. Shortly after the attacks of September 11 President Bush authorized the National Security Agency

⁷⁵ Paul L. Moorcraft and Philip M. Taylor, *Shooting the Messenger: The Political Impact of War Reporting* (Washington: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), 198.

⁷⁶ Howard Kurtz, “The Post on WMDs: An Inside Story,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2004.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A58127-2004Aug11?language=printer> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁷⁷ Paul L. Moorcraft and Philip M. Taylor, *Shooting the Messenger: The Political Impact of War Reporting* (Washington: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), 198.

⁷⁸ Anthony DiMaggio, *When the Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 252.

to operate wiretaps and conduct surveillance without the warrants normally required in instances of domestic spying. While this is not *technically* a foreign policy issue, it was a reaction to 9/11, and as a component of the War on Terror it comprises a domestic wing of a larger foreign policy objective and doctrine. As an example of watchdog journalism in the post-9/11 period, it simply cannot be ignored. Information about the illegal surveillance was leaked to the *New York Times* and they broke the story on December 15, 2005, despite requests from the Bush administration that it be kept under wraps.⁷⁹ It is particularly important that the *New York Times* broke the story the day before Congress was to vote on the reauthorization of the Patriot Act; the disclosure could have been a tactical one to influence the voting of Congress.⁸⁰ The story features a brief history of domestic surveillance, with the authors noting that “widespread abuses” in the Civil Rights era lead to the adoption of the “Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which imposed strict limits on intelligence gathering on American soil.”⁸¹ The insinuation is that

citizens must be wary of the contemporary use of surveillance by the N.S.A. such that abuses of power do not occur again. The story, while far from editorializing, clearly disclosed information that the Bush administration did not want made public; this is the essence of watchdog journalism. The next day, Congress declined to renew provisions of the Patriot Act, with some (such as Senator Charles Schumer) declaring they supported the filibuster after the revelations in the *New York Times* article changed their views on the legislation.⁸² Other members of the Senate called for investigation into the allegations raised by the *Times*; this is a contemporary example of the media stepping in and playing a significant role in checking the government’s use of power.

Following the revelations at Abu Ghraib, the allegations and discussion of officially sanctioned torture became a subject of intense interest in the media. For many of the news outlets that published the Abu Ghraib photos, they justified doing so on the grounds that it would act as a check on a particularly gruesome foreign policy decision.⁸³ Abu

⁷⁹ James Risen and Eric Litchblau, “Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politics/16program.html?pagewanted=print> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁸⁰ W. Lance Bennett et al., *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 66.

⁸¹ James Risen and Eric Litchblau, “Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politic>

<s/16program.html?pagewanted=print> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁸² Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Eric Lichtblau, “Senators Thwart Bush Bid to Renew Law on Terrorism,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/17/politics/17patriot.html?scp=7&sq=Bush%20Lets%20U.S.%20Spy%20on%20Callers%20Without%20Courts%20&st=cse> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁸³ Matt Carlson, “Media Criticism as a Competitive Discourse: Defining Reportage of the Abu Ghraib Scandal,” *Journal of*

Ghraib was arguably the first step in the debate over torture in America, and it quickly expanded into a larger discussion over the use of torture by American intelligence forces. In response to the Bush administration claim that the abuses at Abu Ghraib were merely isolated incidents, Mark Danner, writing for the *New York Review of Books* established significant connections between higher-level military authorities, and the abuses perpetrated at the prison.⁸⁴ Indeed, he traced the sanction for these sorts of abuses back to President Bush's denial of Geneva Convention protections to Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters on February 7, 2002.⁸⁵ When the *Washington Post* published an editorial entitled "Torture Policy," they accused the administration of "shamefully" scapegoating the military personnel working at Abu Ghraib, and accused Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and military officers operating in the Iraq theatre of approving such techniques.⁸⁶ Rumsfeld shot back, expressing "dismay" that the *Washington Post* editorial could accuse the administration of complicity with torture. The editors responded by laying out two instances

in which Rumsfeld explicitly endorsed the use of torture techniques.⁸⁷ This editorializing demonstrates an instance when the media clashed directly with a government official, exposing the official line as fraudulent, given the weight of the evidence. This is the essence of watchdog journalism, when the media is unwilling to allow the president, or any administration officials to dominate the debate on a specific policy issue.

Today, these issues are still up for debate, and are the focus of plenty of news stories and editorializing. The focus has perhaps shifted from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo Bay, but the awareness of torture and coercive interrogative techniques still feature prominently in debates. In fact, in an effort to settle the debate over whether or not "waterboarding" constitutes torture, *Vanity Fair* columnist Christopher Hitchens voluntarily underwent the procedure in 2008, concluding that "if waterboarding does not constitute torture, then there is no such thing as torture."⁸⁸ On the subject of domestic civil liberties, the Patriot Act was recently up for renewal in Congress, accompanied by a vigorous debate in the media: writing for the *National Review*, Nathan A. Sales called it a "critical weapon in our struggle

Communication Inquiry Vol. 33 (2009): 265.

⁸⁴ Mark Danner, "Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story," *The New York Review of Books*, October 7, 2004.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/oct/07/abu-ghraib-the-hidden-story/?page=4> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ The *Washington Post*, "Torture Policy," *Washington Post*, June 16, 2004.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A56753-2004Jun20.html> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁸⁷ The *Washington Post*, "Torture Policy (cont'd)," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A56753-2004Jun20.html> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁸⁸ Christopher Hitchens, "Believe Me, It's Torture," *Vanity Fair*, August 2008. <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/08/hitchens200808> (accessed April 3, 2011).

against al-Qaeda.”⁸⁹ In contrast, Radley Balko at *Reason* magazine accused the Republican Party of simply utilizing the Constitution as a political prop, ignoring it when it suits them politically.⁹⁰ But the general trend is that in 2011 the media has regained much of its critical voice, especially on foreign policy issues. The debates over President Obama’s stances on Egypt, Libya and Bahrain demonstrate a media that is actively engaged with foreign policy decisions. Whether or not journalists are sculpting the actions of the administration or shifting public opinion is perhaps a question for historians, but the important feature is that the debate is occurring.

The question remains, then, will the fourth estate continue to fulfil its mandate as a critical check on the actions of government? The reasons for the suspension of critical journalism in the post-9/11 period are inadequately researched. However, it seems convincing, in the dearth of other research, that journalists were swept up in the nationalistic fervour that gripped the United States following the attacks of September 11. But, the media has undergone a significant transformation in the time since then. The proliferation of web-based content has increased dramatically, for example, and the revolution in social media is a fairly recent phenomenon. There is the

⁸⁹ Nathan A. Sales, “Who’s Afraid of the Patriot Act?” *National Review*, February 15, 2011.

<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/259595/who-s-afraid-patriot-act-nathan-sales> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁹⁰ Radley Balko, “About That Constitution,” *Reason*, February 17, 2011.

<http://reason.com/blog/2011/02/17/about-that-constitution> (accessed April 3, 2011).

possibility that the democratization of news will act as a sort of safeguard against a complete consensus forming again, as did with the mainstream news organizations following 9/11. The evolution of new media is the final question that must be considered in this paper. Keeping in mind the struggles of the media in post-9/11 America, and with the ongoing financial problems facing newspapers of record, the changes to the online media system are important for the future of journalism. The reconciliation of new technology with the vaunted role of the media is a task that is integral to the preservation of American democracy.

The Future of the News Media in the United States

One of the striking features of this investigation into American foreign policy and its relationship to the media is that much of the criticism of the media in the post-9/11 era is directed at the mainstream media. Writing in the *New York Review of Books* Michael Massing singles out the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* for their complacent acceptance of official government positions and unwillingness to place critical news stories and commentary in prominent spots in the paper.⁹¹ Walter Pincus, a staff writer with the *Washington Post* says that, “the front pages [of these papers] are very important in shaping what other people think.”⁹² For the

⁹¹ Michael Massing, “Now They Tell Us,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 29, 2004.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/feb/26/now-they-tell-us/> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁹² *Ibid.*

average reader, what is printed in the pages of the major American newspapers or broadcast on the evening news likely constitutes the majority of news that they receive. In many ways, with the evolution of the media today the passive consumption of news is going to become problematic. A massive variety of news coverage of American foreign policy can be found with only a few keystrokes on the Internet, and it need be only a few degrees out of the mainstream. The conservative *National Review*, for example, has been featuring a robust debate on the intervention in Libya from a variety of right-wing perspectives. On the other hand, *The Nation* is offering a perspective on American foreign policy from an ideological standpoint that is decidedly left-of-centre. The active consumer of news has a wide variety of resources that are quite literally at their fingertips, which ought to encourage vibrant engagement with the democratic system.

There is a greater variety of information available to the average citizen today than at any time in history. The number of different viewpoints and interpretations that are offered on the Internet have the potential to catalyze a revolution in the way that we engage with the democratic process. However, it should not be assumed that the expansion in available news will lead to a corresponding increase in consumption. Furthermore, it does not necessarily mean that the media will be a more effective check on government than it is in its current form. In fact, although I would like to be able to conclude that the proliferation of viewpoints will result in a robust fourth estate, it seems unlikely that it will fill the vacancies left as newspapers go

bankrupt. The downside of the democratization of journalism and the democratization of ideas is that at some point they become too diluted, and those writing them lose their authority.

Recently, Jacob Sullum considered the question in *Reason* magazine of whether or not Wikileaks founder Julian Assange ought to be considered a journalist. Sullum points out that the very debate threatens First Amendment protections – “This freedom [of the press] does not amount to much if the government can deny it to someone by questioning his journalistic credentials,” and suggested that with the proliferation of new technology, the constitutional protections afforded to the press will be extended to amateur journalists.⁹³ Of course, this assumes that important journalistic institutions continue to decline, or that readership is lost to the larger, grassroots journalism of the Internet.⁹⁴ But it is an important question – are bloggers, online commentators and self-appointed pundits journalists who deserve First Amendment protection? The Press Clause of the First Amendment arguably refers only to the institutionalized press, and not your average citizen with a computer, for whom the “freedom of speech” must suffice.⁹⁵ If the shift

⁹³ Jacob Sullum, “Is Julian Assange a Journalist?” *Reason*, April 2011. <http://reason.com/archives/2011/03/15/is-julian-assange-a-journalist> (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁹⁴ This is becoming unbelievably important with the proliferation of cell phone cameras, especially when used to record the actions of police.

⁹⁵ Scott Gant, *We Are All Journalists Now: The Transformation of the Press and*

towards democratized citizen journalism continues, it is essential that these writers claim their First Amendment rights; regardless of the medium through which it is transmitted, the press must retain its rights. Even if the entire American population was a vociferous consumer of news, and read many blogs daily, democratized journalism lacks the teeth to be an effective watchdog. At this point it seems ludicrous to think that bloggers might be afforded the same protections as a *New York Times* columnist; no blogger could seriously expect to be granted government press credentials, for example. However, if the evolution towards online, amateur reportage is inexorable, this is the direction that the law must go in order to preserve the fourth estate.⁹⁶

Even assuming that the average writer might get these protections, this still leaves a problem of authority. Whether or not Internet writers can act as an effective check on government, in the same way that a paper of record can, is an open question. Certainly, in terms of resources, journalistic institutions can put more energy into investigative stories, and can afford to send reporters abroad to warzones; things that the average citizen does not have the resources to do. Journalist P.J. O'Rourke says that blogging is "undigested thinking," and the products of the blogosphere do not inspire trust from the reader.⁹⁷ O'Rourke believes

that it takes a reputable news institution to deliver reputable news because of the trust that has been established with readers.⁹⁸ I believe that O'Rourke has a point. While we can increase the marketplace of ideas through the Internet, there is little way to tell if the ideas presented are worth very much. Furthermore, if it takes some serious searching to find worthwhile ideas on the Internet, it seems unlikely that a relatively passive electorate is going to bother to track down this information. It is significantly easier to pick up the *New York Times* with the assumption you are about to read "all the news that's fit to print."

The future of American journalism, then, is at something of a confusing crossroads, both in terms of its survival, and its potential for sustaining itself as a check on the power of the government. The solutions to this crisis are not readily apparent at this juncture, but it seems likely that – as optimistic as I want to be – the democratized journalism of the Internet just cannot live up to the standard of journalistic institutions. It seems unlikely that the next major release of a leaked government document, for example, will happen through a blog or a Facebook post, and not the *New York Times* or another paper of record. For the time being, it will take the institutions of journalism to hold the government accountable. Since the ability of Internet journalists to actually fulfil the roles intended for the media by the Founders is patently unclear, it is in the institutions and icons of journalism that energy ought to be invested. Historically, these

Reshaping of the Law in the Internet Age (New York: Free Press, 2007), 52.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁷ P.J. O'Rourke, interview with Luke Allnutt, July 26, 2010.

[http://www.rferl.org/content/PJ_ORourke_Very_Little_That_Gets_Blogged_Is_Of_Very](http://www.rferl.org/content/PJ_ORourke_Very_Little_That_Gets_Blogged_Is_Of_Very_Much_Worth/2107985.html)

[_Much_Worth/2107985.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/PJ_ORourke_Very_Little_That_Gets_Blogged_Is_Of_Very_Much_Worth/2107985.html) (accessed April 3, 2011).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

are the most likely to check government power. There is no compelling reason to suspect this might change, or that writers in another medium might be an adequate replacement.

Conclusion

The framework that I used for this paper suggests that the media can influence American foreign policy through establishing the context in which policy is crafted, and by influencing public opinion. This is done by two theoretical roles: the marketplace of ideas, and the watchdog check on government action. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, it is argued by media critics that major press institutions abdicated these roles, giving the Bush administration significant leeway on his foreign policy decisions. Indeed, the major newspapers of record did not sustain a significant debate regarding the general philosophy of the Bush Doctrine – there was, for example, little opposition to the philosophical belief that the United States *could* intervene militarily in Afghanistan or Iraq. Instead, the media occupied itself with discussions of the preparations for war. However, the recent research by Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino suggests that critics have exaggerated the lopsidedness of coverage, and that there are indications that the media sustained the marketplace of ideas, even though it could have been more robust. In particular, it seems that this might be the case because journalists were not isolated from the attacks of 9/11, and were impacted along with the rest of American society. Furthermore, in 2004 and 2005, there was the tentative resurgence in the watchdog element of the press, particularly in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal. This

morphed into the discussion regarding torture, a debate that is ongoing today. The *New York Times* also reprised its role as a major check on government, breaking the story of illegal domestic surveillance in 2005. This altered the course of the debate regarding massively expanded security and surveillance powers that had been granted immediately following 9/11. The impact that the *New York Times* had as a watchdog on government power cannot be ignored.

Through these examples, I have made the argument that the media acted more responsibly than many critics would suggest. Indeed, I also make the point that the news need not be biased or subjective in order to exert influence over the political system. On the coverage of the execution of American contractors in Fallujah, it is not necessary for the media to deliver commentary; the video and photo coverage speaks for itself. In many respects, the photos at Abu Ghraib are similar. Atrocity is atrocity, and reporters do not need to hammer out the specifics of the Geneva Conventions in order for this point to be made. But, that does not mean that the debate should not be had. There is no doubt that the press as an institution, and journalists as individuals could have acted more responsibly in the post-9/11 era. It is also the hope that in future crises the role of the fourth estate will not be abdicated. On this subject, I think, the jury is still out, it cannot be conclusively said whether or not the last ten years have set a precedent for reporting standards. However, given the vibrant debate that has existed during the Obama administration, it is entirely likely that this might be sustained into the future.

Finally, it is absolutely worth noting that critics of the post-9/11 media reportage have their sights squarely on newspapers of record: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, et al. A few degrees off the mainstream, and the discourses that emerge change quite dramatically. It is, therefore, not just the media that must enter the democratic arena with its mandate in mind, but Americans must also be more than passive consumers of news. The role of the media in society, then, is something of a two-way street, since consumers need to engage their news, and the media must make an effort to report as robustly as possible. Only through this dynamic can the media live up to the standards set for it as an important democratic institution.

The impact that the media has had on American foreign policy in the opening decade of the twenty-first century has been significant. It was influential in the post-9/11 period by virtue of abdicating its role; by not thoroughly criticising the Bush administration's foreign policy news institutions contributed to the aggressive

foreign policy decisions. However, in reporting on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and disclosing information about nefarious acts that the government was involved in, the media helped turn the tide of public opinion. As an institution, the media engaged the Bush administration directly, such as through the editorializing of the *Washington Post* editors, who sparred with Donald Rumsfeld on the issue of torture. As news shifts more to the Internet, this opens up another dimension for considering the role for the media in society. Personally, I am not optimistic about this evolution, as the nature of journalism acting as a check on government demands an authoritative institution. However, this is speculation, and only the future will show what the new medium of journalism has to offer the American public. Until then, the consumption of news by the public must be voracious, and the work of journalists extensive. The historical record demonstrates that the media has significant clout when the power is wielded. In order to preserve American democracy for the future, this role must not be abdicated.

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