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Thomas E. Patterson

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About the Authors

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and **Joseph N. Cappella** are professors in the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania.

Bad News, Period

Thomas E. Patterson, *Syracuse University*

What did Newt Gingrich do to deserve such awful coverage? Although the Contract With America moved at unprecedented speed through the House of Representatives, statements about Gingrich from national reporters and their sources during the first 100 days of the new Congress were more than 60% negative. And Gingrich was not the only one pilloried. All of the GOP's top congressional leaders, and the Republican congressional majority itself, received more negative than positive coverage (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1995).

Republicans attributed their lousy coverage to the press's knee-jerk liberalism, a charge that might have made sense had the Democrats in Congress received favorable coverage. But, in fact, they, too, were portrayed negatively.

The inadequacy of the liberal-bias theory is also apparent in news coverage of Bill Clinton's presidency. Although Clinton was the first Democratic president in 12 years, he did not even get a honeymoon period; his coverage was nearly 60% negative during the first two months on the job. Two years into his presidency, Clinton's numbers were no better. Except for a month of positive news during the NAFTA debate, Clinton's coverage was unceasingly negative (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1993, 1994).

Ingrained cynicism rather than knee-jerk liberalism is the media's real bias. Reporters have a decidedly low opinion of politics and politicians, and it slants their coverage of Republicans and Democrats alike.

A New Standard: Staging the Negative

The notion that "bad news makes for good news" has long been a standard of American journalism, but the media have raised it to new heights in recent decades. Negativity in the news increased sharply during the 1970s, jumped again during the 1980s, and continues to rise. Since the 1960s, bad news has increased by a factor of three and is now the dominant tone of news coverage of national politics (Patterson 1994; Lichter and Amundson 1994).

Underlying the change is a shift in the style of journalism. In the 1960s, reporters began to question their traditional approach to the news. The existing rules emphasized the words of the newsmakers: to a large extent, their statements defined their coverage. Most of what they had to say about themselves and their programs was positive in tone; as a result, most of their news coverage was favorable.

However, a growing list of government failures and a heightened sense of their own power led many journalists to conclude that they should no longer merely cover top leaders but should also critically examine their actions. Newsmakers' messages would no longer be taken at face value; the accuracy of the message and the credibility of the source would be as newsworthy as the message itself.

Into the early 1970s, this new attitude was tempered by a prudent regard for the facts. The press hounded Johnson and Nixon on Vietnam and Watergate, but only as credible allegations and damning evidence came increasingly to light.

By the late 1970s, however, critical journalism had degenerated into a form of reporting that exalted controversy rather than accuracy. Intent on exposing the failings of political leaders but without the time or knowledge to do the job properly on a daily basis, journalists slipped into a quick and easy form of criticism. When a politician made a statement, they turned to adversaries to attack it. The critical element was supplied, not by a careful investigation of the claim or action, but by the insertion of a counterclaim (Westerstähl and Johansson 1986, 138).

This type of critical reporting, as Larry Sabato (1991) observes, is best described as "attack journalism." It is rooted in controversy and superficial condemnation rather than careful analysis and inquiry. Strife and discord are the theme. This is not totally new; a good fight has nearly always attracted the media's attention. Only in recent years, however, have the journalists themselves staged the fights. The result has been a sharp increase in conflict as a news element. Before the 1980s, most political stories did not contain a clash of interests and opinions; now they do (Lichter and Amundson 1994, 136).

Although portrayed by the press as watchdog journalism, this type of reporting is actually ideological in its premise. Journalists are *presumed* to act out of personal rivalry and naked self-interest rather than also from political conviction (Westerstähl and Johansson 1986, 141). Journalists routinely claim that politicians make promises they do not intend to keep or could not keep even if they tried. Most bad-press stories criticize politicians for shifting their positions, waffling on tough issues, posturing, or pandering to whichever group they happen to be facing (Robinson 1983, 2).

By the rules of attack journalism, the mere whiff of a controversy or scandal is grounds for a story. Although there is no persuasive evidence that official corruption has risen in Washington (Garment 1991), scandals increasingly fill the headlines. In the last decade, ethical lapses have accounted for a fourth of the coverage of Congress compared with less than a tenth in the previous decade (Lichter and Amundson 1994; Rozell 1994).

In pursuing their attack, journalists use perfection as a standard for judging performance, which means that officials typically get little credit when things go right and are often sharply denounced for their failings (Lichter and Smith 1993). News coverage of President Clinton's first year in office illustrates the tendency. The theme that Clinton was reneging on his campaign commitments first surfaced in the news when, during the early days of his presidency, he broke a campaign promise to open the nation's shores to the Haitian boat people and sought a compromise with Congress for a new policy on gays in the military. Compromises over tax increases and deficit-reduction spending cuts and an unexpected delay in the submission of his health-care proposal to Congress kept the theme alive through the summer and into the fall.

In total, however, Clinton kept far more campaign promises than he broke. Among the promises kept in his first year were a tax increase on higher incomes, an end to the ban on abortion counseling in family-planning clinics, a family-leave program, banking reform, NAFTA, a college-loan program, the Brady bill, and a youth training program. He also proposed numerous programs that were still working their way through the Congress as 1993 ended. Clinton's relationship with Congress was extraordinary. Since 1953, Congressional Quarterly has kept track of Congress's support of legislation on which the president has announced a position. Congress backed Clinton's position on 88% of contested votes in 1993, a level exceeded only twice in 40 years—by Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 and Lyndon Johnson in 1965 (Congressional Quarterly 1994, 3620).

Nevertheless, the press repeatedly portrayed Clinton's efforts as inept and insincere, a fiction sustained by the nature of news. When a politician keeps a promise, as Clinton did when he ordered an end to the ban on abortion counseling, it makes news for a brief period only. When a commitment is broken, however, it retains its news value. Clinton's promise to change the policy on gays in the military was in the news for months.

Political leaders are nearly in a no-win situation with the press. Since it is always possible to find an opponent willing to attack what a politician says, and since even the most effective policies are never wholly successful, the press has an endless supply of criticisms at its command and seldom has reason to adjust its negative appraisals. Seven months into Clinton's presidency, *The New York Times* breathlessly concluded on its front page that the White House was in shambles: "The triumphs and wreckage now scattered across his calendar reflect what he himself brought to the Presidency. More by nature than by circumstance, perhaps, Mr. Clinton governs by careening from one tight spot to another" (Rosensteil 1994, 32).

A Disillusioned Public

The media's bad news tendency has heightened Americans' disillusionment with their political leaders and institutions (Patterson 1994, 23; Robinson 1976, 409-32; Center for Media and Public Affairs 1994, 4). Congress has perhaps fared the worst. A relentless stream of negative stories about congressional scandal, rivalry, conflict, and self-interest since the 1970s has helped to drive Congress's approval ratings to historical lows (Mann and Ornstein 1994, 4).

The sharpest indicator of the effect of negative news, however, is the public's view of presidential candidates. Through the 1960s, as measured by the Gallup poll, Barry Goldwater was the only major-party nominee who at campaign's end had a negative image with the electorate. Since then, most candidates have finished the campaign with a negative image; further, the more negative a nominee's coverage in recent decades, the more negative his image (Patterson 1994, 22-24). Attack journalism is not the only reason why voters' impressions of presidential nominees have become so unfavorable, but it is undeniably a leading factor (Goldfarb 1991).

The press's negativity has colored the views even of citizens with a high sense of political efficacy. In the 1960s, mistrust of government was concentrated among people who had little interest in and exposure to politics. Today, their view is shared by citizens who are politically interested, efficacious, and attentive. Unlike the situation in the 1960s, increased news exposure is now positively correlated with a heightened mistrust of government (Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979; Patterson 1991).

It could be argued that the press in recent years is finally telling the true story of politics, that public officials are an ineffective and untrustworthy lot. Perhaps, for example, as the press's election coverage asserts, candidates routinely make promises they have no intention of keeping, and which are made, not only to deceive the voters, but to trick them into supporting actions that are contrary to their interests.

The evidence, however, indicates otherwise. Studies by Pomper and Lederman (1980), Fishel (1985), Krukones (1984), and Budge and Hofferbert (1990) reveal that candidates redeem the bulk of their campaign promises when elected to office. A basic truth is that politicians have a stronger incentive to keep their word than to break it. No following is loyal despite broken promises. George Bush paid dearly even within his own party for breaking his 1988 promise of "no new taxes."

Nor, as the press implies, is there dishonor in the play of politics. The news media disparage the slow deliberation and negotiation that mark the work of representative institutions. The press extols immediate results and unbending leadership, but these are rare and typically problematic in a political system based on an elaborate system of checks and balances that is designed to foster compromise and deliberation (Mann and Ornstein 1994).

The public has few psychological defenses against the news media's claim of self-interested officials and dysfunctional institutions. Unlike messages that attempt to change issue attitudes (such as editorials that take a position on abortion policy), the claim that an officeholder is devious or that an institution is malfunctioning does not contradict deeply held beliefs. Moreover, because the media speak with one voice, the message appears to be factual rather than what it often is—mere opinion. The media, television in particular, present "news without ambiguity, equivocation, or uncertainty" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 126).

Of course, politics is sometimes plagued by officeholders' deceit and myopia, and the media should inform the public about it. Democracy requires a degree of skepticism if it is to operate properly. Lance Bennett (1981, 308-317) talks about "degradation rituals" in politics, which, through the process of subjecting political leaders to close scrutiny, affirm the principle of accountability.

But the press has gone way beyond the point of responsible criticism, and the effect is to rob political leaders of the public confidence that is required to govern effectively. The abrupt and transient form of politics that the press generates works against responsible leadership. It is a politics of shifting standards and fleeting controversies, spurring citizens to demand immediate solutions to stubborn problems which in turn encourages politicians to pursue short-term and ultimately self-limiting policies and strategies.

It is ironic that journalists, who tend to have liberal beliefs, have become the unwitting handmaiden of the conservatives. Right-wing attacks on government activism gain power when the public believes that government is ineffective and run by inept and self-serving officials. Opinion polls during the 1994 campaign indicated that a majority of Americans believed, contrary to fact, that under Clinton the economy had receded, the budget deficit had increased, and tax rates on lower-income Americans had been raised. The Republicans' sweeping victory in the 1994 congressional elections was built on a public so persuaded of official incompetence that it could only assume the worst about government's performance.

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About the Author

Thomas E. Patterson is Distinguished Professor of Political Science in Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship. He is the author of *Out of Order* (Vintage, 1994), which examines the media's role in presidential elections. He is also the author of a full-length introductory American government text, *The American Democracy* (McGraw-Hill, 1996), and a brief edition of the same text, *We the People* (McGraw-Hill, 1995).

The Mass Media as Political Actors

Benjamin I. Page, *Northwestern University*

One can imagine several ways in which media organizations—that is, individual media outlets, chains, networks, or umbrella corporations—might pursue policy objectives. One way could involve standard interest-group techniques for influencing political candidates and public officials. Media organizations (e.g., Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation) and their executives might seek public policies of particular concern to themselves (e.g., relaxation of limits on foreign ownership of U.S. TV stations), by making campaign contributions, doing favors for politicians, or lobbying, just like other interest groups. Journalists and scholars have come upon a number of examples of such influence attempts. A closer look, particularly at possible connections between what media firms lobby for and what they air or print could be valuable. (Devereux 1993, for example, has found evidence that some newspapers' endorsements of Lyndon Johnson in 1964 were linked with policy payoffs.)

I want to focus, however, on a different way in which media organizations might seek to influence policy: the *indirect* approach of using their publications or broadcasts to try and change the beliefs and policy preferences of mass and/or elite audiences, which would presumably affect subsequent policy decisions.[1] This indirect approach might be especially attractive to media organizations because of their special positions as key disseminators of political information. Its use could have important implications for the nature of democratic deliberation.

The concept of "political actor," applied to the media or anyone else, implies observable *action* that is *purposive* (though perhaps functional rather than consciously intended) and sufficiently *unified* so that it makes sense to speak of a single actor. A critical question, therefore, concerns whether—or to what extent—media outlets do in fact use their publications and broadcasts in a purposive and unified fashion to pursue policy objectives.

Subsidiary but important research questions concern what kinds of media act in this way, under what circumstances, concerning what sorts of issues. Also, who drives the process (owners? managers? journalists?), acting upon what motives (economic self-interest? values? ideology? professional norms?), with what degree of consciousness? By what mechanisms could the actions of many individual coworkers be coordinated (ownership interference? managerial hierarchy? selective recruitment? internalized norms and routines?) In what formats are attempts at policy persuasion made? (In editorials and commentary only? Also in news stories? Entertainment?) What persuasive techniques are used? (Framing? Manipulation of salience? Selective quotation? Value-laden language? Evidence and argumentation? Striking anecdotes? False or misleading assertions?) Finally, what effects, if any, do such influence attempts