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The Institutional News Media in an Era of Political Polarization and Media Fragmentation

In the later decades of the twentieth century, some of the unusual characteristics of midcentury America began to fade. As a result, the institutional media began to face some of the same obstacles that historically prevented a professional, influential, trusted media establishment from coming into existence. One change was the repolarization of the party system. As this happened, politicians and political activists began to aggressively attack the institutional media's trustworthiness. From the 1960s forward, this is the main way the historic tension between politicians and the independent news media has reasserted itself: through political attacks on the institutional media's accuracy and fairness.

Another change in the late twentieth century was the fragmentation of the overall media environment. Increasing numbers of alternative (noninstitutional) media outlets placed competitive pressure on the institutional media, pushing some institutional outlets to modify their style by reporting more "soft" news. Also, noninstitutional outlets with partisan perspectives amplified political criticism of the institutional media.

In the face of these changes, the public's confidence in the media as an institution declined dramatically between the early 1970s and the late 1990s. The decline was bipartisan. While Democrats had somewhat more confidence than Republicans at any given time, both parties showed major declines in confidence over the decades.

Yet while trust in the institutional media is diminished, people still have strongly held, clear views on the topic. Even though the media environment has fragmented and the institutional news media are only one part of a diverse media landscape, Americans know what survey researchers mean when they ask about "the media" or "the press." People think researchers are asking about journalists and outlets that adhere more to the professional norms that dominated in the mid-twentieth century. Despite the changing landscape, almost every American has a sense of what "the media" are and knows whether he or she trusts them or not.

The American Party System Repolarizes

In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States became more politically and economically polarized. As mentioned earlier, voting patterns in the House, as illustrated by DW-NOMINATE scores, show that the parties remained relatively unpolarized until the late 1970s. From then on, voting patterns have increasingly diverged. By the mid-2000s, the parties' congressional votes were as polarized as at any point since the end of Reconstruction (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, 8, 29–30; 2009).[1]

At the same time, vote choice has become increasingly correlated with income. The 1956 and 1960 ANES surveys indicate that those in the highest income quintile were only slightly more likely to vote Republican than those in the lowest quintile. Yet by the 1990s, those in the highest quintile were twice as likely to vote Republican (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, 73–74).[2]

Concurrent with these trends, self-identified liberals and conservatives have increasingly sorted themselves into the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. In 1972, when the ANES first asked for ideological self-placement, 27% of conservatives identified as Democrats and 41% as Republicans. By 1996, only 18% were Democrats, while 54% were Republicans (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, 31). In sum, from the mid-twentieth century to the present day, the two American political parties have increasingly represented divergent interests and ideologies.

The Media Landscape Fragments

While the party system was slowly but dramatically polarizing, the nature of the news industry was changing as well.[3] In the mid-twentieth century, V. O. Key Jr. (1961, 394) observed that what distinguished the American

[1] Again, these patterns are the same whether you compare party means or medians, look at House or Senate voting, or include or exclude the former confederacy (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, 8, 29–30, 49).

[2] Gelman et al. (2008, 45–46) find similar results using exit polls. This trend coincided with increasing overall income inequality. The portion of national income going to the top 1% of Americans increased from around 10% in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to about 15% by the late 1990s and over 20% by the mid-2000s (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006, 8; Bartels 2008b, 12).

[3] West's (2001) historical typology specifies an "interpretive media," which is separate from the "objective media" and the "fragmented media." In this book, however, I find it more useful to classify the interpretation done by establishment media figures like Walter Lippmann or David Broder, or "news analyses" done by otherwise "straight" reporters and appearing in the news section (West 2001, 71), as one way the institutional media exercises its power, by expressing its conventional wisdom in the political process. In contrast, I think

news media from their foreign counterparts was "the uniformity of their content" and "the relative ease of access to the public through the media for those who operate within the rules of the game." Different news outlets presented "a fairly uniform picture of the political world to all classes and kinds of people." In contrast to what Key observed, since the 1970s, the institutional news media has increasingly faced intense competition from various other news and entertainment options. These include cable entertainment and news channels, talk radio, and Internet news sources (R. Davis and Owen 1998).

Television options increased dramatically, mostly as a result of the shift from over-the-air to cable. Cable television was used by only about 2% of U.S. households in 1965 and about 8% by 1970. At this point, cable simply showed over-the-air channels to those who could not get clear signals in their homes. In the 1970s and 1980s, new channels started broadcasting only on cable, such as the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (now officially just ESPN), the Cable News Network (CNN), Home Box Office (HBO), and the WTBS "Superstation" (West 2001, 84–87; Prior 2007, 94). By the 1990s and 2000s, cable or satellite subscribers had access to hundreds of channels. At the same time, the number of subscribers increased to one-third of households by 1983, more than half by 1989, 70% by 1997, and 85% by 2004 (Prior 2007, 94). By 2000, the average American household received approximately 63 channels (Media Dynamics 2001, 22; cited in Hamilton 2004, 160n). While most people regularly use fewer than 20 channels no matter how many are made available (Webster 2005; cited in Prior 2007), people vary considerably in which channels they settle on. As a result, news sources now compete not only with each other but also with a wide variety of television entertainment options (see Prior 2005, 2007).

The institutional media also faced competition from ideological talk radio programs. The rise of political talk radio can be traced to the abolition of the "fairness doctrine" by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1985. The doctrine had previously mandated that over-the-air television and radio provide balanced coverage of all political opinions (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 45). Without this requirement, radio programming featuring political news and discussion proliferated (Hazlett and Sosa 1997). On AM stations, most of the increase in political content came from talk shows (95–96), where hosts often expressed strong partisan views. Most successful hosts were conservative. In 2004, *Talkers* magazine estimated that the two most successful conservative radio hosts, Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, had audiences of 14.75

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the punditry of clear partisans, who often do not have backgrounds as conventional news reporters, is best classified as part of the new alternative media.

and 13 million, respectively. A 2003 Annenberg survey found that 10% of Americans listened to Limbaugh's program every week, among whom 78% were Republicans and 85% were conservatives (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 46, 92). Unsurprisingly, given talk radio's domination by conservative hosts, the total audience for all news and talk radio (including all news stations, public and commercial) also tilts Republican, with 36% of listeners identifying as Republicans and 27% as Democrats (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007b).[4]

However, in radio there continues to be competition from the institutional style of journalism through NPR (formerly National Public Radio). Through its affiliate radio stations, podcasts, and website, NPR has substantially expanded its audience in recent decades, despite the increasing competition that has hurt most other highly professionalized news outlets. NPR's weekly radio audience was 22 million people in 2003, a 315% increase since 1985 (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007b). This growth continued through the 2000s, increasing another 20% to 26.4 million by spring 2009 (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010). Yet NPR continues to unapologetically follow a highly professionalized style of journalism directly descendent from that which dominated in the mid-twentieth century.[5]

The first national all-news cable channel was CNN. Founded in 1980 and quite successful by the 1990s, it broadcasts a mix of news and punditry (West 2001, 89–90). In the 1990s, CNN was joined by other news channels, including CNBC, MSNBC, and the Fox News Channel. By 2000, 60% of Americans reported regularly watching a cable news channel (West 2001, 86). Cable news's prime-time viewership has continued to increase in recent years, rising from an average of about 1.3 million a night in 1998 to 3.8 million in 2009 (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). Unlike CNN, which often adheres to the style of the institutional

[4] The well-documented tendency of people to consume information from sources that ideologically agree with them is called "selective exposure" in the political science literature (see Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Brock 1965; Sears and Freedman 1967; Sweeney and Gruber 1984; Iyengar, Hahn, and Prior 2001; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Iyengar and Hahn 2007; Stroud 2008).

[5] NPR even restricts its employees' ability to attend political rallies or post political bumper stickers or yard signs. This is similar to restrictions on political contributions at some network news divisions and establishment newspapers. NPR Senior Vice President for News Ellen Weiss wrote in a 2010 memo to employees, "NPR journalists may not participate in marches and rallies involving causes or issues that NPR covers, nor should they sign petitions or otherwise lend their name to such causes, or contribute money to them. . . . [N]o matter where you work at NPR you should be very mindful that you represent the organization and its news coverage in the eyes of your friends, neighbors and others. So please think twice about the message you may be sending about our objectivity before you attend a rally or post a bumper sticker or yard sign" (Shea 2010).

media, Fox News, founded in 1996, adopted a more opinionated style similar to conservative talk radio. From its inception, Fox prominently featured conservative political talk shows, such as one featuring Bill O'Reilly and another with Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes.[6] By late 2004, 22% of Americans reported getting most of their news from Fox. Its ratings were greater than those for CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC combined (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 47–48). Other cable networks increasingly copied Fox's style in order to improve their own ratings (51). MSNBC tried airing talk shows with both conservative (such as Alan Keyes and Joe Scarborough) and liberal (such as Phil Donohue, Keith Olbermann, Rachel Maddow, and Ed Schultz) hosts before eventually settling on a largely liberal evening lineup, which included hosts such as Olbermann, Maddow, Schultz, Chris Matthews, and Lawrence O'Donnell (see Kurtz 2009).

Opinionated cable hosts have attracted polarized audiences. In 2007, 38% of Fox News's overall viewership was Republican, while 31% was Democratic. In contrast, CNN and MSNBC viewership was only 22% and 19% Republican, respectively, and 45% and 48% Democratic (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008). Turning to specific programs, in 2008, 66% of viewers of Bill O'Reilly's show identified as conservative, while 3% identified as liberal. Viewers of Fox's *Hannity and Colmes* show were 68% conservative and 7% liberal (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). One poll conducted the week before the 2010 congressional elections found that those planning to vote for Democratic candidates constituted 84% of MSNBC's viewers but only 5% of Fox's (Tesler 2010).

The Internet has provided another forum for the growth of alternatives to the institutional news media. Since the invention of the Internet browser in 1993, the World Wide Web has become an increasingly important part of life in developed societies (Hindman 2009, 1). It is now relatively easy for almost anyone to disseminate political news on the web. In his study of Internet usage, Matthew Hindman (2009, 60–64) found that most Internet traffic to news sites is focused on relatively few sites, many of which are the web incarnations of large, conventional news organizations, including CNN, MSNBC, the Weather Channel, Yahoo! News (which largely consists of wire service reports), Google News, *People* magazine, Yahoo! Weather, the *New York Times*, and so on.[7] Most traffic to political sites focused on opinion is also concentrated on the

[6] Colmes, the more liberal of the two, eventually left the program.

[7] Hindman (2009, 60–64) uses data that separates politically relevant websites into "news and media" sites and "political" sites. Of the 2.9% of all 2007 web traffic focused on "news or media" sites, the largest are almost all large news sites like those mentioned in the text.

relatively few most popular sites.[8] However, the popular opinion sites tend not to be run by large, traditional news organizations but to be sites like (in 2007) Freerepublic.com, HuffingtonPost.com, DailyKos.com, Townhall.com, Buzzflash.com, DemocraticUnderground.com, and so on (65–66). These sites often eschew the conventions of institutional journalism, seeing themselves instead as components of political movements of the right or left or simply as forums for political commentary.

Many of these political sites are either weblogs (known as blogs) or at least feature blogs prominently. Hindman (2009, 121) found that popular political bloggers were much more highly educated than ordinary journalists and slightly more educated than op-ed columnists for elite papers (126). A nontrivial portion (21%) of these bloggers consists of current or former professional journalists or columnists (122, 126). Yet whatever their background, most bloggers and other writers for prominent political opinion sites tend to mix opinion with information, in contradiction of the journalistic professional norms created in the early twentieth century. As with talk radio, criticism of the mainstream media is a major topic of commentary on these sites (Chait 2007, 24; Hindman 2009, 127–28).

While talk radio has been an especially hospitable medium for the development of conservative alternative information sources, the Internet has so far housed more successful liberal alternative sources.[9] This is possibly because liberal alternatives were less successful on other platforms, leaving an untapped market, and because web use for political purposes is more prevalent among liberals (Hindman 2009, 23). While still employing some magazines and liberal radio and cable talk shows, liberal alternative media discourse has been particularly focused on liberal Internet sites. Progressive alternative media outlets, centered on the web, have grown in numbers and popularity since 2000. Some of the most prominent members of the progressive alternative media label themselves a "movement," just as the Goldwater/conservative movement has labeled itself for decades, and have copied many other conservative tactics, including undermining the credibility of the institutional news media (Armstrong and Moulitsas 2006; Bai 2007; Chait 2007; Alterman 2008).[10] While conservatives have also used the Internet extensively, it, along with liberal cable talk shows and magazines, has enabled liberal alternative

[8] Among all web traffic in 2007, just 0.12% focused on "political" websites, which include only sites providing political opinions and advocacy (Hindman 2009, 60). Within this category, the top 50 "political" sites got 60% of all traffic (65–66).

[9] On the difficulties liberal talk radio has experienced, see O'Callaghan and Farrelly (2005).

[10] The progressive movement of the 2000s should not be confused with the original American progressive movement of the 1900s and 1910s. While both are movements of the political left, they are historically distinct phenomena.

media sources to now rival the size and emulate the message and coordination of conservative alternative media (Chait 2007).

As a whole, the Internet has become home to both large organizations that are part of the institutional news media and newer political news and opinion sites that serve as conservative or (more often) liberal alternatives to institutional journalism. As a result of noninstitutional outlets playing a relatively larger role online, studies find that, overall, Internet news consumers tend to be more ideologically extreme (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010) and more ideologically segregated across outlets (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010a) than offline news consumers.

While the institutional media's journalistic style has remained much more consistent with mid-twentieth-century professional norms than the alternative media's style has, it did change in one important way over this period. Some prominent institutional outlets, especially network television, have come to provide more coverage of "soft" news, such as nonpolitical celebrities, the entertainment industry, and so on.[11] Economist James Hamilton (2004, 177–78) measured changes in evening network newscasts by counting how many of the "television stars, movie actors, sports figures, persons involved in famous crimes, and royalty" who were featured in *People* magazine's annual "25 Most Intriguing People" list were covered on the newscasts. He found that the percentage of soft news celebrities from *People* magazine covered on network news rose from 39.6% in 1974–78 to 51.9% in 1994–98. John Zaller (1999b, 48–49) illustrated this phenomenon by measuring changes in the content of CBS's newsmagazine *60 Minutes*, which has aired on Sunday nights since 1968. He coded reports on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating very soft news and 5 indicating very hard news. For example, coverage of President Nixon's Vietnam troop withdrawal plan was given a 5, while an interview with Elizabeth Taylor was given a 1. By this measure, *60 Minutes*'s news coverage had an average score of about 4.1 in 1968, which steadily declined to approximately 2.0 by 1998.

A central reason for this change appears to be more competitive pressure from alternative news sources and entertainment media (Zaller 1999b, chap. 3; Hamilton 2004, chap. 6). In a 2000 interview, *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather said that his broadcast aimed for a "rich mix" of soft and hard news: "It's going to be entertainment and news all in a kind of bouillabaisse, and we do a lot of stuff that I think is pretty far over the line in the direction of entertainment" (Downie and Kaiser 2003, 135). Compared to when he started anchoring in 1981, he said, "What's

[11] Hamilton (2004, 165) defines the hard/soft news distinction as follows: hard news largely consists of "public affairs, government action, or international relations stories," while soft news mostly focuses on "celebrities, entertainment news, or tabloid crimes."

changed is there is a much—and I emphasize the word *much*—higher consideration given to competition. It is much larger and more ferocious than it was when I came to the broadcast. And I do want to emphasize the word *much*" (134). In a 1995 interview, *NBC Nightly News* anchor Tom Brokaw expressed similar sentiments, stating, "It's a relatively recent phenomenon of our business that people have so many choices at any given time. . . . [W]hen I started out in the 1960's, there were effectively two network news programs, and at 6:30pm people turned on either Huntley-Brinkley or Walter Cronkite and got their news for the day. I'd like to have that back again" (Mifflin 1995).

The more competitive media environment's effects on the newspaper industry are especially evident. In addition to facing competition for consumers from online, radio, and cable news formats, newspaper revenues have been depleted by free online classified services and more-targeted advertising options, such as those offered by Google (Fallows 2010). As a result, print newspapers are the portion of the institutional news media that have faced the most serious threat to their continued existence. Daily print circulation in the United States declined from 62 million to 49 million from the late 1980s to the late 2000s. Exacerbated by a recession, from 2006 to 2009, many newspapers experienced 25% declines in advertising revenue. Some, such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, entered bankruptcy, while others, such as the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Ann Arbor News*, became online-only publications (West 2009, 2). The loss in newspaper audience has been much smaller than the loss in revenue, however, because many readers simply moved online. In 2008, Nielson estimated that approximately 75 million Americans read newspapers on the Internet (3).

As this section has shown, the American media environment has become more fragmented in recent decades with the introduction of cable television, political talk radio, and the Internet. However, while they have incorporated more soft news coverage, the institutional news media continue to be distinct from the rest of the media landscape and to serve as an important source of political information for many, thus retaining an important role in the American political system. Neilson ratings show that about 36% of Americans watched network evening news programs in 1970–71. Despite a steady decline, that number stood at 23% in 2000 and 15% by 2009 (Bartels and Rahn 2000, 3–4; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010). In 2009, 22.3 million viewers a night watched the network evening newscasts, compared to cable news channels' combined prime-time viewership of around 3.9 million (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010). Similarly, as Matthew Hindman has documented, websites from large news organizations that generally follow the conventions of professional journalism receive more web traffic than alternative

media outlets on the Internet, despite the vitality of such alternative outlets (Hindman 2009, 60).

What has changed in the past 40 years is not that institutional news sources have gone away but that they now face intense competition. Among news options on the right, conservative talk radio, cable programs, and print media constitute what Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella call an alternative "conservative media establishment" (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, ix). On the left, liberal websites, cable talk shows, and periodicals have more recently developed into an alternative liberal media establishment.[12] News consumers increasingly face a choice between institutional and alternative news media when deciding what to consume and whom to believe. As these sources often send very different messages, these choices can increasingly determine the facts a person receives about the political world.

In this way, from the 1970s to the 2000s, the ideological polarization of the major American political parties was accompanied by a greater availability of alternative news outlets more compatible with the increasingly divergent worldviews of liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans. Unsurprisingly, relations between political leaders and the institutional news media changed considerably when leaders were more polarized and knew competing news outlets were available to provide information more consistent with their divergent worldviews.

Political Attacks on the Institutional News Media Increase

After President Kennedy's assassination, in the mid-1960s the Johnson administration bristled at the elevated position reporters had come to

[12] There is a certain similarity between this and the development of the U.S. Congress. As Eric Schickler (2001) has shown, new congressional institutions do not sweep away and replace the old. Rather, in a process he calls "disjointed pluralism," new structures are created in addition to the old, so both exist in parallel, shaping congressional functioning. Similarly, new forms of media have risen up and been grafted on top of the existing institutional news media. While the institutional press have certainly not been unaffected by the expanded and fragment media environment, they still exist, with a structure and style distinct from their newer counterparts. Similarly, the role of the news media in the American political system is not clearly defined and is the result of a variety of similarly eclectic historical circumstances. Cook (1998, 39–40) describes the relationship of government to the media in historical perspective by saying, "One cannot say that there is a coherent and logical public policy toward the news media. Instead . . . such policies and practices emerged in incremental, particularistic, and inchoate manners, often by a process of explicit and implicit negotiation between political actors as a group and the news media as a group that ended up with mutual benefit far from philosophical questions of what kind of information is required for and in a democracy."

hold in Washington. Like FDR and so many other politicians throughout history, Johnson resisted reporters' attempts to be an independent source of information for the public. In Johnson's view, "Reporters were tools to be used to gain an end. . . . He believed that friendly reporters would write whatever he suggested they write, and unfriendly ones were not worth his time. But Washington was not Texas, and the press corps—White House reporters in particular—had come to expect the royal treatment" (Liebovich 1998, 43).

Indeed, as the relatively unpolarized style of national politics of the 1950s and early 1960s gave way to the polarized politics of subsequent decades, leading politicians became more hostile toward the news media establishment. This trend was evident not just in the Johnson administration but (even more so) in the emerging Goldwater movement. The solidly conservative faction of Republicans, after losing presidential nomination fights to "modern Republicans" such as Eisenhower (Dionne 1992, 170–86), finally succeeded in nominating Senator Barry Goldwater for president in 1964. The institutional and ideological descendent of the Goldwater movement—the new right or conservative movement—would come to dominate the party in subsequent decades. Criticism of the institutional news media was a defining characteristic of this political faction.

Several examples illustrate how antipathy toward the media was one of the basic characteristics of Goldwaterism. The night before the 1964 California primary, the Goldwater campaign held a televised rally that attracted 27,000 in person and a million more viewers at home. Historian Rick Perlstein (2001, 352) described the scene this way: "On the dais sat conservative leading lights like General A.C. Wedemeyer. . . . John Wayne looked down from the platform, locked eyes with [ABC news reporter] Howard K. Smith, and said in the throaty drawl he reserved only for the gnarliest of desperados, '*Ah-aystarn lab'ral prass!*' . . . Then Ronald Reagan spoke. He was just as angry. But he made you want to stand right alongside him and shake your fist at the same things he was shaking *his* fist at. It was hard to remember exactly what they were. Clearly they were the enemy of all decent men" (emphasis in the original). Earlier, when Goldwater appeared on *The Steve Allen Show*, Allen tried to embarrass him by playing a recording of a "far-right hotline" sponsored by conservative activists thought to support his candidacy. The recording said, "Keep yourself well informed. Do not trust the newspapers, radio, TV, and newsmagazines for your information. These are the main weapons the enemy has to use against us" (Perlstein 2001, 350–51). Goldwater was equivocal, saying he didn't agree with everything on the recording but supporting the group's right to express itself.

Richard Nixon's long career illustrates many of the ways the relationship between the Republican Party and the institutional press changed

over the course of the twentieth century. Nixon was affiliated, first, with the brand of extreme anticommunism of the late 1940s and early 1950s most closely associated with Senator Joseph McCarthy; second, with moderate, mid-twentieth-century "modern" Republicanism as Eisenhower's vice president; and third, with the emerging conservative movement during his 1968 comeback and presidency. Early in his career, he rarely criticized the press publicly. During his House and Senate races, he enjoyed strong support from the conservative *Los Angeles Times*. Investigating allegations of Soviet espionage against State Department employee Alger Hiss while a congressman, he worked cooperatively with Bert Andrews of the *New York Herald Tribune*. *Time* and *Life* magazines, owned by conservative Henry Luce, served as "practically Nixon megaphones" during his 1960 presidential campaign (Perlstein 2008, 58).

Yet later in his political career, Nixon became a frequent, public, and enthusiastic press detractor. The start of his serious public criticism of the institutional press occurred when he lost his race for California governor in 1962. He famously ended his concession press conference by saying,

> And as I leave the press, all I can say is this: for sixteen years, ever since the Hiss case, you've had a lot of fun—a lot of fun—that you've had an opportunity to attack me, and I think I've given as good as I've taken. . . . I leave you gentlemen now and you will write it. You will interpret it. That's your right. But as I leave you I want you to know—just think of how much you're going to be missing. You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference. And I hope what I have said today will at least make television, radio, the press, recognize that they have a right and responsibility if they're against a candidate to give him the shaft. But also recognize that if they give him the shaft to put one reporter on the campaign who will report what the candidate says now and then. Thank you, gentlemen, and good day." (Perlstein 2008, 59)

Nixon's substantive complaints resemble those of many other politicians before and since. They dislike the news media's propensity to serve as an independent information source for voters, wishing they would serve simply as amplifiers of the politicians' own messages (or in Nixon's words, "report what the candidate says now and then"). An autonomous, influential press is attacked. For instance, Nixon was most content with the press when they offered him partisan support, as the *Los Angeles Times* did early in his career, or when they transmitted his messages directly to the audience, as when *Reader's Digest* (the most widely read monthly in America at the time) gave him a regular column from 1965 to 1968 (Perlstein 2008, 85).

In addition to the emerging conservative movement in the Republican Party, other parts of the 1960s conservative backlash against liberal governance were also culturally hostile to the news media. In his segregationist campaigns for Alabama governor and president, George Wallace regularly attacked the press. In one example, at a rally during his 1966 gubernatorial campaign (technically his wife was running because he was constitutionally barred from seeking reelection), he attacked "these big northern newspapers having a fit because my wife is a candidate for governor." He pointed out Ray Jenkins, an *Alabama Journal* reporter in the crowd, and said, "I see we got the editor of the *Alabama Journal* here today. You know he's one of them Hahh-verd-educated intellectuals that sticks his little finger up in the air when he sips tea and looks down his long nose at us ordinary Alabamans. I had a goat one time, and I fed him a copy of the *Alabama Journal*. And the poor goat died" (Perlstein 2008, 79).

Police clashing with liberal 1960s protesters were frequently as hostile to the news media as to the protesters. At the famous protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, many reporters were beaten by police and their cameras destroyed. On NBC's *Today* show, correspondent Jack Perkins reported, "In the darkness and confusion, policemen used their nightsticks with great zeal, clubbing and injuring about sixty people. Seventeen of them were newsmen—there trying to cover it—including a CBS cameraman . . . an NBC cameraman, and NBC news reporter John Evans. They beat cameramen to keep them from filming policemen beating other people, and newsmen not in spite of the fact they were newsmen but because of it" (Perlstein 2008, 312–14). Later, Mayor Richard Daly defended the behavior of the police in an interview on the *Today* show, saying, "The television industry is part of the violence and creating it all over the country." In an interview with Walter Cronkite, he said, "Many [reporters] are hippies themselves. They're part of this movement. Some of them are revolutionaries and they want these things to happen" (Perlstein 2008, 336–37).

After Nixon was elected president in 1968, he monitored the news with daily summaries prepared by advisor Patrick (Pat) Buchanan. Buchanan made a point of highlighting coverage that would offend Nixon's conservative sensibilities (Perlstein 2008, 407; Karpowitz 2009). While the Nixon administration's dislike of the institutional media was not new, the criticism intensified in 1969 when Vice President Agnew began regularly attacking the media in speeches. The attacks began with a November 13, 1969, speech written by Buchanan, edited by Nixon, and aired live on all three networks. In it, Agnew complained that a recently televised Nixon address was "subjected to instant analysis and querulous criticism" by a "small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts." He called the elite news media

> this little group of men who not only enjoy a right of instant rebuttal to every presidential address, but more importantly, wield a free hand in selecting, presenting, and interpreting the great issues of our nation. . . . What do Americans know of the men who wield this power? . . . Little other than that they reflect an urbane and assured presence, seemingly well informed on every important matter. . . . To a man, these commentators and producers live and work in the geographic and intellectual confines of Washington, DC, or New York City. . . . They talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement to their shared viewpoints. . . . Is it not fair or relevant to question [this power's] concentration in the hands of a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one, and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by government? The views of the fraternity do not represent the views of America. (Coyne 1972, 267–68; Agnew 1989, 67–69)

Agnew continued attacks along these lines for the next several years (Coyne 1972; Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 436; West 2001, 65; Perlstein 2008, 439, 504–6, 525).[13] In response, conservatives sold Spiro Agnew wristwatches and bumper stickers saying "Spiro Is My Hero" and "Spiro of 76" (Perlstein 2008, 442, 446, 504). The main symptoms of journalism's transformation from a low-status trade to a high-status profession—greater education, more uniform and autonomous reporting standards and worldviews, and the resulting greater influence in politics—were precisely the things the administration found threatening and attacked.

By the time the Nixon administration reached its end, it was at war with the legitimacy of the institutional media on almost every level. At one point in 1971–72, it went almost a year without a primetime presidential press conference, holding only seven press conferences total in 1972. David Broder commented, "What we assumed, and it seems sort of dumb in retrospect, was that just because the presidential press conference had grown up from Wilson on and seven or eight presidents had adhered to it, it had somehow become institutionalized. It's not institutionalized at all. In fact, you could effectively say that Richard Nixon has abolished the presidential press conference as an institution" (Perlstein 2008, 568). The Office of Telecommunications Policy, under the direction of its general council, Antonin Scalia, designed plans to gain political control of the Public Broadcasting System's news programming,

[13] One of Agnew's most famous lines was delivered toward administration critics in general, presumably including the press. At a 1970 California Republican convention in San Diego, he said, "In the United States today, we have more than our share of nattering nabobs of negativism. They have formed their own 4-H club—the hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history" (Perlstein 2008, 525–26).

wresting it away from, in Scalia's words, "the liberal establishment of the Northeast" (Perlstein 2008, 596). At a 1973 news conference, Nixon told reporters he "had never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life" (Liebovich 1998, 61). When a new book, *The News Twisters* by Edith Efron (1971), claimed that television networks took "the elitist-liberal-left line in all controversies," biasing coverage against the "white middle class majority," the administration used $5,000 from a slush fund also used for Watergate-related activities to buy up enough copies to put it on best-seller lists. Boxes of *The News Twisters* piled up in the office of White House "plumber" Howard Hunt (Perlstein 2008, 596).

Nixon's White House went to political war with the institutional news media when the latter were close to the height of their prestige and influence. In the short run, the Nixon administration lost. Investigations begun by the *Washington Post*'s Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered a pattern of illegal espionage conducted by the Nixon administration against its political opponents (collectively known as Watergate), eventually resulting in Nixon's resignation in 1974 (Bernstein and Woodward 1974; Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 439–42). However, the attacks on the institutional media made by the Goldwater campaign and the Nixon White House became a fixture of the conservative movement and Republican political strategy. Over decades, they played an important role in eroding the news media's stature.

The increase in Republican media criticism slowed somewhat in the 1980s as the Reagan administration took a bit more conciliatory approach, trying to woo, not just bully, the media establishment. *CBS Evening News* executive producer Sanford Socolow recalled that the Reagan administration returned somewhat to the older strategy of "making the press part of your inner circle, or at least making them believe they were part of your inner circle" (Hertsgaard 1988, 43). Senior administration officials like Michael Deaver and David Gergen developed friendly personal relationships with elite Washington reporters (40–41). Advisor Lyn Nofziger believed that the press had attacked Nixon "because they could sense that hatred. Ronald Reagan likes everybody. He never had this feeling that the press as a group was out to get him" (42). In contrast to his criticisms of the institutional media while campaigning for Goldwater in 1964, when asked in an interview about press coverage of the 1982 recession, Reagan complained about the coverage but was philosophical about the reasons for it. He said bad economic conditions were being exaggerated because news organizations were "more concerned with entertainment than delivering the evening news. It's an entertainment medium, and they're looking for what's eye-catching and spectacular" (Cannon 1991, 227). It was only late in Reagan's second term, after the

Iran-Contra scandal broke in late 1986, that presidential rhetoric about the news media became harsher as Reagan became more disillusioned with his coverage and Pat Buchanan, now White House communications director, introduced stronger media criticism (Cannon 1991, 607–8).

By the 1990s, criticism of the institutional media had become a standard part of American conservative rhetoric. A popular bumper sticker in the 1992 presidential campaign read, "Annoy the Media, Re-elect Bush" (Dickerson 2007). During campaign speeches, 1996 Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole urged people to "rise up" against the media establishment. He said, "We've got to stop the liberal bias in this country. Don't read the stuff. Don't watch television. You make up your own mind. Don't let them make up your mind for you. We are not going to let the media steal this election. The country belongs to the people, not the *New York Times*" (West 2001, 104). Attacks similar to those from the "far right hotline" that had embarrassed Goldwater in 1964 were now actually coming from the Republican presidential nominee.

The conservative alternative media, with strong connections to the conservative movement and a commercial incentive to increase their audience, have always heavily criticized the institutional news media. One content analysis of the *Rush Limbaugh Show* found that the mainstream media was the second most frequent "issue" discussed (Barker and Knight 2000, 168; Barker 2002, 25–26), while another found that it was tied for the most frequent topic (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 169). A 2007 content analysis of all talk radio programming found that the news media was the second most frequent topic, trailing only "election/politics" coverage (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008).

Following in the footsteps of Efron's *The News Twisters*, conservative political activists from the late 1980s on have increasingly produced books attacking the institutional press. To get a sense of this trend, here is just a sample of some of the titles of these books: *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Olasky 1988), *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (Lee and Solomon 1991), *Through the Media Looking Glass: Decoding Bias and Blather in the News* (J. Cohen and Sullivan 1995), *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (B. Goldberg 2002), *Journalistic Fraud: How the* New York Times *Distorts the News and Why It Can No Longer Be Trusted* (Kohn 2003), *Coloring the News: How Political Correctness Has Corrupted American Journalism* (McGowan 2003), *Weapons of Mass Distortion: The Coming Meltdown of the Liberal Media* (Bozell 2004), *South Park Conservatives: The Revolt against Liberal Media Bias* (Anderson 2005), and *A Slobbering Love Affair: The True (and Pathetic) Story of the Torrid Romance between Barack Obama and the Mainstream Media* (B. Goldberg 2009).

In the 2000s, George W. Bush's administration and other Republicans criticized and attempted to undermine the institutional news media in ways comparable to the Nixon administration's efforts. However, this behavior attracted much less commentary because it had become so commonplace. While the Nixon White House promoted *The News Twisters* covertly, President Bush openly endorsed Bernard Goldberg's *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (2002), prominently displaying a copy under his arm in front of photographers when leaving for a trip to Maine in 2002 (Streissguth 2006, 38). Bush held only 50 press conferences over the course of his two terms, compared to Clinton's 62 or Eisenhower's 190 (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 364; Bellantoni 2008; Loven 2009). In a 2005 interview with the *London Times*, he commented on his dislike of the institutional media and his preference to circumvent it, saying, "My job is to occasionally, you know, go out above the filter and speak directly to the people" (Watson and Baker 2005). When he did sit for interviews, he sometimes chose members of the conservative alternative media, such as talk radio and Fox News talk show hosts Bill O'Reilly (2004) and Sean Hannity (2009). During the third 2004 presidential campaign debate, when the moderator asked about health care and John Kerry cited analyses by "two leading national news networks" in favor of his position, it was not surprising when President Bush began his response by saying, "In all due respect, I'm not so sure it's credible to quote leading news organizations about—oh, never mind" (Commission on Presidential Debates 2004). This rhetorical pattern continued into the 2008 presidential campaign, in which Alaska governor and Republican Party vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin often attacked the national institutional news media. Shortly after the election, she argued, "This is for the sake of our democracy that there is fairness in this other branch of government, if you will, called the media. It is foreign to me the way some in the mainstream media are thinking" (Barr 2009).

At the same time, Democratic and liberal political activists developed a parallel genre. While modern liberal media criticism has never been as widespread or prominent, in content it resembles a mirror image of its conservative counterpart. Frequent themes are accusations that the media favor conservative policies and politicians. For comparison, a sample of these book titles includes: *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Herman and Chomsky 1988), *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (Hertsgaard 1988), *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Chomsky 1989), *What Liberal Media?: The Truth about Bias and the News* (Alterman 2003), *Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth* (Conason 2003), *The Exception to the Rulers: Exposing Oily Politicians, War Profiteers, and the Media That Love Them* (Goodman 2004),

Figure 4-1. President George W. Bush displays *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*, by Bernard Goldberg. *Source*: Manny Ceneta / Getty Images.

The Republican Noise Machine: Right Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy (D. Brock 2004), *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* (Solomon 2005), and *Lapdogs: How the Press Rolled Over for Bush* (Boehlert 2006).

Liberal criticism of the institutional news media arose from its mid-twentieth-century lull later than did conservative criticism. While left-wing intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky were criticizing the media in the 1970s and 1980s, prominent liberal pundits and Democratic politicians were less likely to attack the media than their conservative counterparts. As late as the 1988, 1992, and 1996 elections, between 92% and 96% of the media criticism during these presidential campaigns accused the press of favoring the liberal or Democratic candidate (Domke et al. 1999). Its rise may have been helped along by the Clinton administration's contentious relationship with the Washington press corps. Like Nixon, Clinton constantly fumed privately about news coverage (Emery,

Emery, and Roberts 2000, 477). Intensive coverage by major news organizations such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* of a series of Arkansas scandals collectively known as Whitewater and widespread coverage of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky contributed to this hostility. After the Lewinsky scandal broke in 1998, David Broder revealed his feelings toward Clinton when he told *Washington Post* reporter Sally Quinn, "He came in here [Washington, DC] and he trashed the place, and it's not his place" (Quinn 1998). Clinton held news conferences only rarely, including just one in his first twenty months.

Only on a few occasions did he express his private hostility toward the institutional media. One such instance occurred when announcing his nomination of Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court, after Clinton teared up during Ginsberg's statement. ABC's Britt Hume posed what was intended to be the first question by asking about "a certain zigzag quality" to the nomination selection process. Journalist John F. Harris (2005, 62) describes Clinton's reaction to Hume: "Clinton glared, clenched his jaw, then spat back his answer: 'I have long since given up the thought that I could disabuse some of you [from] turning any substantive decision into anything but political process. How you could ask a question like that after the statement she just made is beyond me.' He quickly wheeled off the stage and returned to the Oval Office, bringing Ginsburg's announcement ceremony to an awkward close." Clinton's frustration also came out in several interviews. In one, he complained that his administration had many accomplishments but "the media didn't tell them" (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 477). In another, he said he "had not gotten one damn bit of credit from the knee-jerk liberal press, and I am sick and tired of it, and you can put that in the damn article" (Harris 2005, 146).

Media criticism by prominent Democratic politicians continued during George W. Bush's presidency. For instance, in a 2002 interview with the *New York Observer*, former vice president Al Gore argued, "The media is kind of weird these days on politics, and there are some major institutional voices that are, truthfully speaking, part and parcel of the Republican Party. Most of the media [has] been slow to recognize the pervasive impact of this fifth column in their ranks—that is, day after day, injecting the daily Republican talking points into the definition of what's objective as stated by the news media as a whole" (Kelly 2002a; Krugman 2002b).

As the previous section described, liberal alternative media that grew in prominence in the 2000s employed strategies similar to (and sometimes explicitly modeled on) movement conservatism and conservative alternative media, including attacking the institutional press. For instance, popular liberal blogs like DailyKos.com, run by Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, and Eschaton.com, written by Duncan Black, regularly criticized

Washington journalists as "Washington insiders" or as part of the "mainstream media," the "media elite," the "village" (meaning the District of Columbia), or the Washington "cocktail party" circuit (Bai 2007, 139, 232; Chait 2007, 22). Like conservatives, they criticized institutional journalism's claim to be loyal to professional, rather than ideological or partisan, standards. Duncan Black argued, "Lots of people imagine themselves to be above the fray. The most obvious group which does this is journalists and their brethren. They fail to see themselves as actors on the political stage, instead of detached observers" (Chait 2007, 24). In addition to stand-alone blogs, liberal alternative news sites like TalkingPointsMemo.com frequently criticize press coverage, while MediaMatters.com follows the example of longstanding conservative organizations like the Media Research Center and Accuracy in Media in focusing solely on uncovering and publicizing news media bias (Chait 2007, 24).

Thus, while criticism of the institutional news media is not as common among Democratic politicians as among Republicans—there is nothing comparable to the prominent attacks on the media by their presidential and vice presidential nominees—among liberal activists at the base of the party and in the liberal alternative media, this criticism has become very common. As a result of all this, the institutional media is now regularly undermined by both sides of the political spectrum. Nicholas Lemann (2005, 174) reported, "I spoke to the heads of several large news organizations, and all of them maintained that they get attacked from both political sides, and agreed that both the amplitude and the frequency of the attacks seem to be increasing."

Figure 4-2 provides one illustration of the changing nature of rhetoric about the press among conservative and liberal activists. I coded all articles where the news media was an important theme in the *National Review*, a consistently conservative magazine, and the *Nation*, a consistently liberal magazine, from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s.[14] I chose these two outlets because they have been journals of conservative and liberal activists over the entire period when partisan rhetoric about the press changed, allowing for a comparison over time. For each article, I coded whether it criticized the institutional media, praised the institutional media, or neither. The figure presents the net number of critical articles in each year. Media criticism was common earlier in the *National Review*, where there was a net of about 10 negative articles a year in the seventies and almost 20 per year in much of the 1980s and 1990s, punctuated by a temporary spike upward in the early 1990s. In the 2000s, criticism again increased significantly, up to a net of 40 critical articles per year. In

[14] Data from the *Nation* begin in 1971. Data from the *National Review* begin in 1975, as the magazine is not electronically searchable prior to that year.

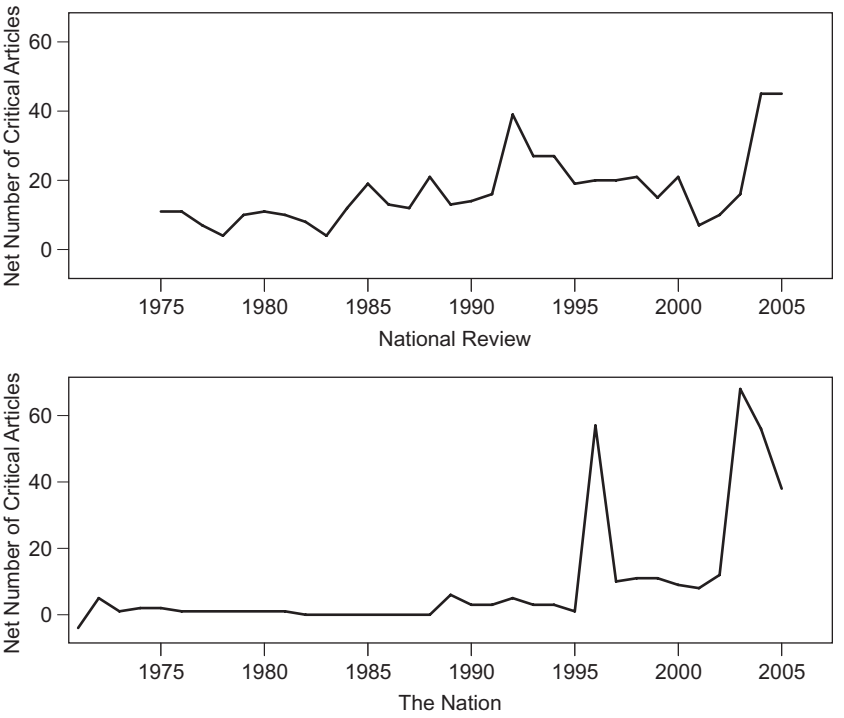

Figure 4-2. Criticism of the news media in ideological magazines, 1970s–2005. *Note:* Lines represent total number of articles in each year in which criticism of the news media is an important theme, minus the number in which praise for the news media is an important theme. *Source*: Coding performed by the author. Coding guidelines are available upon request.

contrast, there was almost no criticism of the institutional media in the *Nation* during the 1970s and 1980s, a temporary spike of about 50 net negative articles in 1996, followed by about 10 net negative articles per year through 2001, followed by a more sustained increase to over 40 net negative articles per year in the mid-2000s.[15]

[15] These trends do not appear to be driven by changes in the overall size of these magazines. To check for this, my research assistant, Amy Cohen, examined the size of these magazines for each year in the dataset. The size of the *National Review* showed no secular change over time. For instance, in 1975 it published 1,496 pages containing 547 articles, while in 2005 it published 1,356 pages containing 532 articles. The *Nation* showed a modest increase in size, from 1,534 pages containing 685 articles in 1971 to 2,026 pages containing 846 articles in 2005. Thus, if anything, accounting for magazine size slightly increases the difference in media criticism levels between these two magazines.

Another measure of elite political rhetoric toward the institutional press is the content of *Washington Post* op-ed columns. While the *Post* itself is a quintessential institutional newspaper, its opinion columns are a major forum for liberal and conservative (as well as centrist) opinion leaders to disseminate their ideas. My research assistant, Amanda Spears, coded all *Post* op-ed columns that commented on the news media from the late 1970s to the mid-2000s.[16] The top panel of figure 4-3 shows that both the number of *Post* op-eds at least mentioning the news media and the number in which the media was an important theme increased over this period. From almost no media commentary in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it became a regular topic of discussion from the mid-1980s through the 2000s. The bottom panel of figure 4-3 shows, as in figure 4-2, the net number of critical articles about the media. It indicates that the great majority of this media commentary that appeared regularly starting in the 1980s was negative.

A couple of examples illustrate this finding. The figure 4-3 data include a column by liberal pundit E. J. Dionne Jr. (2002) titled "The Rightward Press," in which he asserted, "It took conservatives a lot of hard and steady work to push the media rightward. . . . The media world now includes (1) talk radio, (2) cable television and (3) the traditional news sources (newspapers, newsmagazines and the old broadcast networks). Two of these three major institutions tilt well to the right, and the third is under constant pressure to avoid even the pale hint of liberalism. What it adds up to is a media heavily biased toward conservative politics and conservative politicians." The data also include a column where conservative pundit Michael Kelly (2002b) responds to Dionne, saying, "The question . . . —'Does a (still) largely liberal news media (still) exhibit a largely liberal bias?'—can be answered both as a matter of logic and as a matter of fact, and in both cases, the answer is: Sure." He attempts to undermine the institutional media's trustworthiness by denying journalism's professionalism and expertise: "[Journalists] don't have any professional training or discipline. Journalism is not a profession in the sense of medicine or law or science. Journalists do not go through years of brutal academic apprenticeship designed to inculcate adherence to an agreed-upon code of ethics (such as the Hippocratic oath) or an agreed-upon method of truth-determining (such as the method of scientific inquiry). We are not required to meet any standards of knowledge. We are not certified. We operate under no mandated professional set of rules. We need not even be decently educated, as consumers of news frequently notice."

[16] *Washington Post* articles are not available in full-text format on Lexis-Nexis prior to the late 1970s.

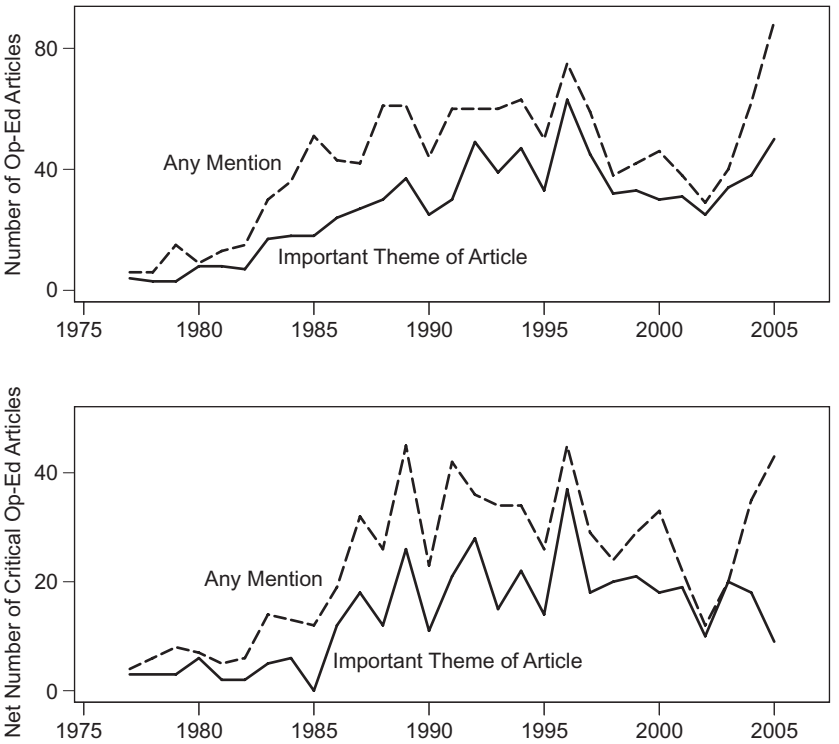

Figure 4-3. Commentary on the news media in *Washington Post* op-ed columns, 1976–2005. *Note*: The top section of the figure displays the total number of *Washington Post* op-ed columns containing commentary about the news media. The bottom section displays the total number of articles in which the commentary on the media is negative minus the number of articles where the commentary is positive. Articles in which the commentary is neutral or by the ombudsman are not used in this calculation. In both sections, the dashed lines indicate results when all articles with any mention of the news media are included and the solid lines represent results when only articles where the news media is an important topic or the entire focus of the article are included. *Source*: Search of *Washington Post* op-ed columns containing the words *media* or *press*, using Lexis-Nexis Academic. Coding performed by the author's research assistant, Amanda Spears, who did not know the purpose of the research project when the coding was done. Coding instructions are available upon request.

Figures 4-2 and 4-3 likely underestimate the increase in media criticism from ideological and partisan opinion leaders over this time period. This is because, in order to create time series that are comparable over time, I use outlets that existed in the 1970s. However, as I discuss in this and the previous section, many of the news media outlets that have come

into existence in the past 40 years, such as talk radio shows and Internet sites, make media criticism a large part of their message. The growth in political attacks on the institutional news media comes from both greater criticism from existing opinion outlets and strong criticism from the new alternative media.

In 2009 and 2010, in their efforts to oppose newly elected president Barack Obama and Democratic congressional majorities, Republican politicians used media criticism as an important part of their strategy for returning to power. As just one minor example of the type of anti-media activism undertaken by conservative politicians and interest groups around the country, in June 2009, Congressman Lamar Smith of Texas founded what he called the Media Fairness Caucus with about a dozen other House Republicans. In 2009 and 2010, the caucus disseminated a weekly newsletter and coordinated attacks on the institutional media from House Republicans. Congressman Smith describes their strategy this way: "We'll come up with strategy, we'll coordinate the one-minute speeches, we'll coordinate news. There's strength in numbers, and getting more people involved, more members involved, will make us more effective in getting our message out there, about the dangers of media bias, as well as trying to get the media to be less biased" (Kessler 2009).

The Obama administration did not maintain warm relations with the press, either. Instead, the inherent tension between political leaders and the media continued to manifest itself. Unsurprisingly, the administration's strongest attacks fell on outlets it considered the most hostile. In an October 2009 interview, White House Interim Communications Director Anita Dunn accused Fox News Channel of being "the communications arm of the Republican Party" (Thompson 2009). A week after Dunn's remarks, Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and Senior Advisor David Axelrod reiterated this criticism on Sunday morning talk shows. On CNN's *State of the Union,* Emanuel described Fox as "not a news organization so much as it has a perspective." On ABC's *This Week*, Axelrod said Fox is "really not news—It's pushing a point of view" (M. Allen 2009).

While its harshest public attacks targeted Fox, the administration also tried to undermine the power of the institutional media. In April 2010, *Politico* reporters Josh Gerstein and Patrick Gavin interviewed a "cross-section of the television, newspaper and magazine journalists who cover the White House." The press corps perceived the administration as "thin-skinned, controlling, eager to go over their heads and even stingy with basic information." The *New Yorker*'s David Packer complained that the White House "seems to imagine that releasing information is like a tap that can be turned off at their whim." Reporters noted that hostility toward their independent institutional role "starts with the man at the

top. Obama rarely let's a chance go by to make a critical or sarcastic comment about the press" (Gerstein and Gavin 2010).

The Obama administration's increasing hostility toward both alternative conservative outlets and the institutional press is further illustration of the inherent incentives for political leaders to undermine independent information sources. *Time*'s Michael Scherer (2009) described the evolution of Obama's media relations as follows: "[T]he White House decided it would become a player, issuing biting attacks on those pundits, politicians and outlets that make what the White House believes to be misleading or simply false claims . . . after eight months at the White House, the days of nonpartisan harmony are long gone—it's Us against Them."

Looked at from a historical perspective, elected leaders and other political elites appear to have had a contentious relationship with the news media throughout most of American history. Criticism has focused on news media whenever they attempt to express independent power or are affiliated with one's political opponents. The apparent exception to this was the 1950s and early 1960s, when the institutional news media achieved brief acceptance as an important political institution and was thus largely spared political criticism. However, in the past 40 years, political attacks on the institutional news media have greatly increased. They are now common among prominent politicians as well as alternative media outlets associated with the modern conservative and progressive movements.

Trust in the Institutional News Media Declines

From the 1970s to the 2000s, as elite discourse continued becoming more critical of the institutional press and alternative media outlets proliferated, trust in the institutional press greatly declined. One useful way to track changing opinions toward the media is with the General Social Survey (GSS), a large, national survey conducted every few years starting in 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Beginning in 1973, the GSS included a question about the press in a question battery probing confidence in various American institutions. As described in chapter 3, prior to 1973 it is difficult to track changes in opinions toward the institutional news media over time because questions were asked sporadically and with different question wordings. The GSS uses the same question wording and a similar survey procedure over time, making comparisons much easier. Figure 4-4 shows confidence in the press in the GSS from 1973 to 2008, as well as average confidence in all other institutions in the GSS battery. While average confidence in institutions has stayed reasonably steady, confidence in the press has notably declined. In 1973, 23% of those surveyed had "a great deal" of confidence

Figure 4-4. Confidence in the press compared to confidence in other institutions, 1973–2008. *Note*: Observations are weighted to account for the unequal probability of inclusion in the sample resulting from the GSS's procedures for subsampling of initial nonrespondents in the 2004–06 surveys and from variation in the number of adults in each household, using the "wtssall" weighting variable. For details, see appendix A of the GSS 1972–2008 codebook. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates "a great deal," .5 indicates "only some," and 0 indicates "hardly any" trust. *Source*: 1973–2008 GSS Cumulative File.

in the press, 62% had "only some," and 15% had "hardly any." By 2008, 9% had "a great deal," 46% had "only some," and 45% had "hardly any." The decline in press confidence occurs gradually, except between the 1991 and 1993 surveys, when it is somewhat steeper. Only a small portion of this early 1990s dip is mirrored in declining average confidence.[17]

Beyond the GSS, a variety of other surveys from the mid-1990s onward also reflect the institutional press's new unpopularity. For instance, a 1995 Times Mirror poll found that only 25% of respondents agreed that "[t]he news media helps society to solve its problems," while 71% instead agreed that "[t]he news media gets in the way of society solving its problems" (Sanford 1999). A 1997 survey sponsored by the Freedom

[17] Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions, other than the press, where confidence was probed in every GSS from 1973 to 2008: major companies, organized religion, education, the executive branch, organized labor, medicine, television, the Supreme Court, the scientific community, Congress, and the military. Results are very similar if one uses the first principle component, rather than the mean, to summarize confidence in all other institutions.

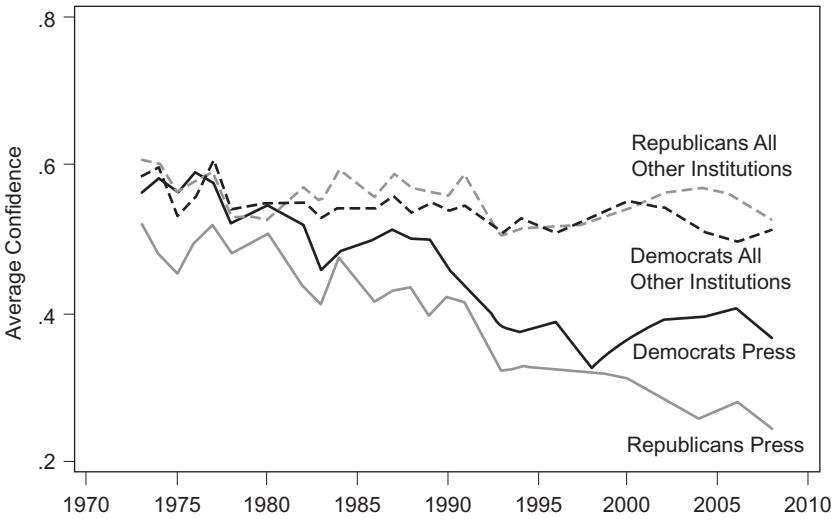

Figure 4-5. Confidence in the press compared to confidence in other institutions among Democrats and Republicans, 1973–2008. *Source and note*: See figure 4-4.

Forum's Newseum found that 62% of respondents thought the press was "too manipulated by special interests" and 63% thought news reporting was too influenced by "the profit motive" (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000, 481). A 2004 survey by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* found that only 10% of respondents had "a great deal" of confidence in the "national news media," while 49% had "some." These numbers are lower than those for most other groups in the *Chronicle*'s confidence battery but about the same as those for lawyers, in which 9% had "a great deal," and 49% had "some" confidence (2004). Finally, a 2007 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that only 39% of respondents thought "news organizations" "get the facts straight" and only 31% thought they were "careful to avoid bias" (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007).

The decline in confidence in the institutional press has occurred in both parties and is only modestly larger among Republicans. Figure 4-5 shows confidence in the press compared to average confidence, as in figure 4-4, but now with each calculated separately for Democrats and Republicans. In both parties, confidence in the press has declined over time both in absolute terms and relative to other institutions. Democrats consistently have more confidence than Republicans, but the partisan gap varies over time. It is fairly modest from 1973 through the mid-1990s, drops to essentially nothing in 1998 when Democratic confidence falls following the

Monica Lewinsky scandal, then reaches its largest margin in the 2000s. Still, even though press confidence is higher among Democrats than Republicans in the 2000s, Democratic press confidence is still notably lower than for other institutions and lower than it was in the 1970s.

The ANES did not measure public opinion toward the news media between 1956 and the 1990s, when much of the decline in press confidence took place. In the 1993 ANES Pilot Study, a striking 83% of respondents agreed with the statement "Media coverage of politics often reflects the media's own biases more than facts." In 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2004, ANES surveys asked respondents, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly (just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never)?" Thirty-seven percent trusted the media "just about always" or "most of the time" in both 1996 and 1998. That portion increased to 48% in 2000 but dropped back to 35% in 2004. As in 1956, these ANES surveys are particularly useful because they contain objective political knowledge questions, which provide a good measure of awareness of political news and discourse. Figure 4-6 illustrates the relationship among media trust, partisanship, and political awareness in the 1993, 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2004 ANES surveys.[18] Here, we see that the partisan gap in news media trust, which we observed in the GSS data as well, is concentrated (at least in the past few decades) among the most politically aware. In each year, more politically aware Democrats have more trust than more politically aware Republicans, with the gap increasing with awareness. In contrast, on the lower end of the political awareness scale the relationship between partisanship and media trust shows no consistent pattern. In 1993, 1998, and 2004, Republicans have more media trust than Democrats among the less aware, but that relationship is reversed in 1996 and 2000.

People Still Have Clear Opinions about the Media as an Institution

What does it mean when someone expresses negative views toward the media in a poll? Given the fragmentation of the American media landscape in the past 40 years, one might wonder what now springs to mind when people are asked about "the media," "the news media," "the press" as an "institution," or something similar. Are people confused about which parts of the diverse media landscape survey researchers are asking

[18] While the 2008 ANES also included a question about media trust, results from that survey are not included in figure 4-6 because the ANES staff had not completed coding responses to the objective knowledge questions at the time this manuscript went to press.

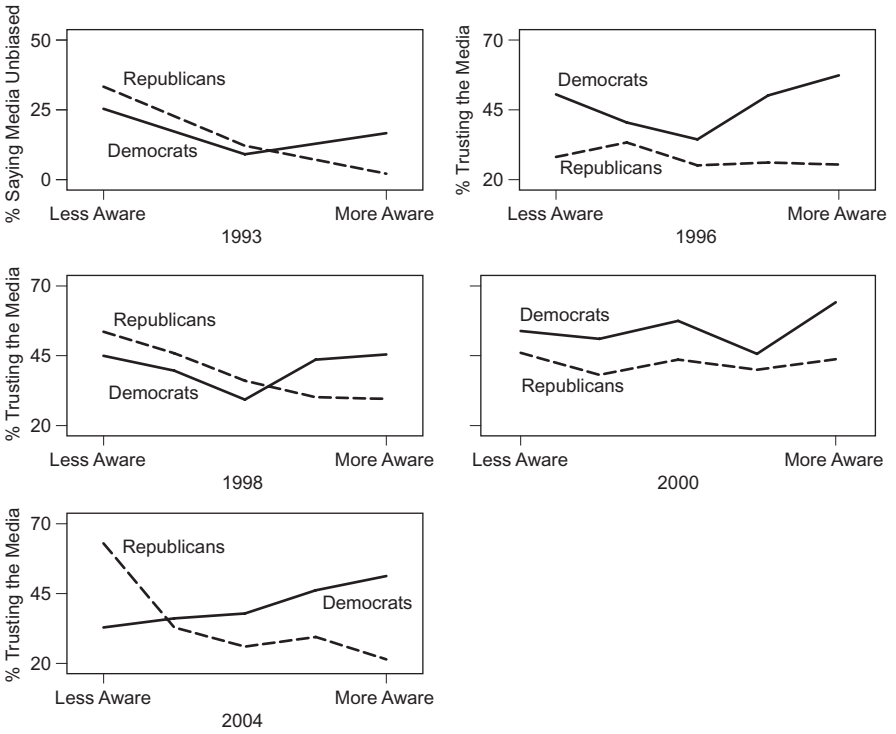

Figure 4-6. Levels of media trust across partisans diverge among the most politically aware. *Note*: In the top left panel, the vertical axis represents the percentage disagreeing with the following statement: "Media coverage of politics often reflects the media's own biases more than facts." In the other four panels, the vertical axis represents the percentage saying that they "trust the media to report the news fairly" "most of the time" or "just about always." In all panels, the horizontal axis represents political awareness, which is measured by a series of objective political knowledge questions. Because knowledge questions were not asked in 1993, I use questions from the 1992 ANES, which all 1993 respondents took part in. *Source*: 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2004 ANES Time Series Surveys; 1993 ANES Pilot Study.

them to evaluate? Do people no longer have views on the news media as an institution but only opinions about particular outlets? If either of these is true, the responses to questions about media trust could be particularly weakly held opinions or entirely constructed on the spot, what Phillip Converse (1964) labeled "nonattitudes."

Psychologists conventionally define an attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree

of favor or disfavor" (Eagly and Chaiken 1993).[19] In this case, the attitude object is the news media as an institution, an abstract concept representing a series of major news organizations and journalists that aspire to the standards of professional journalism. This is what Starr (2004, XI) refers to as "a set of powerful institutions ('the media') that, much to the despair of grammarians, people generally speak of in the singular rather than the plural."

Despite these justifiable concerns, the evidence suggests that most Americans have relatively clear and firmly held attitudes toward the institutional news media. First, survey questions about the news media prompt an unusually low percentage of refusals or "don't know" responses. In the 2004 ANES, only 1 respondent out of the 1,066 asked refused to answer the media trust question and only 1 answered "don't know," producing refusal and "don't know" rates of 0.09% each. When asked the media trust question in the 2008 ANES, 6 of 2,322 respondents (or 0.26%) answered "don't know," and no one refused. As communication scholar Yariv Tsfati (2002, 67) has documented, rates of "don't know" and refusal for questions about the news media are consistently less than 1% and sometimes essentially zero in the ANES and a variety of other surveys.

Second, opinions about the news media are relatively consistent across different question wordings. As I have mentioned, poll responses are notoriously sensitive to small changes in question wording. To take just a few famous examples, respondents have given notably different responses when asked whether government should "forbid" versus "not allow" a communist to give a speech, whether money should be spent on "saving social security" or just on "social security," or whether it was a good idea to fight "the Korean War" or to send "troops to stop the communist invasion" of South Korea (Mueller 1973; Rasinski 1989; Schulman and Presser 1996 [1981]). Different survey organizations ask questions about the news media in quite different formats. Among the questions we have already looked at, the GSS asks about "the press" as part of a question battery probing "confidence" in "the people running these institutions," while the ANES asks in several years whether respondents "trust the media to report the news fairly" and employs several other wordings in various years. Are these questions and the others asked by other organization all tapping essentially the same predisposition?

Usefully, the 1998 ANES included three different questions where respondents evaluated the news media. In addition to the media trust

[19] Definitions by other authors are similar. For example, Crano and Prislin (2006, 347) define an attitude as "an evaluative integration of cognitions and affects experienced in relation to an object."

question, it asked respondents to place the "news media" on a "feeling thermometer" running from 0 to 100, and it asked if they "approve[d] or disapprove[d] of how the news media is handling these allegations (that President Clinton lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky)?"

As Figure 4-7 shows, responses to these three questions are substantially correlated. Those trusting the news media "just about always" have an average thermometer rating of 71, while those trusting the media "almost never" have an average rating of 29. Even though the Lewinsky question asks about coverage of a specific story for which one might expect coverage to be more aggravating to Democrats, who usually express more trust in the media than others, it is still positively correlated with the other two questions, although by a slightly smaller magnitude. Those who strongly approve of the Lewinsky coverage give the news media an average thermometer rating of 65, while those who strongly disapprove of the Lewinsky coverage give an average rating of 45.

In several instances, it is possible for us to go further and see whether responses are consistent when both different wordings are used and the questions are asked years apart. As part of the 1992–96 ANES Panel Study, about 450 respondents were asked both whether they agreed that "[m]edia coverage of politics often reflects the media's own biases more than facts" in 1993 and the media trust question in 1996. Figure 4-8 shows that, even though these questions are worded very differently and were asked three years apart, responses are still substantially correlated.

In another example, as part of the 2000–2004 ANES Panel Study, over 900 respondents who were asked the media trust question in 2000 were also asked the news media thermometer question in 2002, and over 700 were asked the thermometer question again in 2004. Figure 4-9 shows that responses to these three questions are also substantially correlated. Those trusting the media "just about always" in 2000 give the news media an average rating of 61 in 2002 and 62 in 2004. In contrast, those trusting the media "almost never" in 2000 give the media an average rating of 39 in 2002 and 27 in 2004.

Overall, attitudes toward the media do not seem to be overly sensitive to even major changes in question wording.[20] Furthermore, the stability of these responses over time suggests they are not transient reactions to recent events or news coverage. The 2000–2004 panel data are particularly illustrative of this. Between 2000 and 2004, the party holding the presidency changed, partisan control of the Senate changed twice, the terrorist attacks

[20] On the correlation of responses to different media evaluation questions, see also Kohring and Matthes (2007).

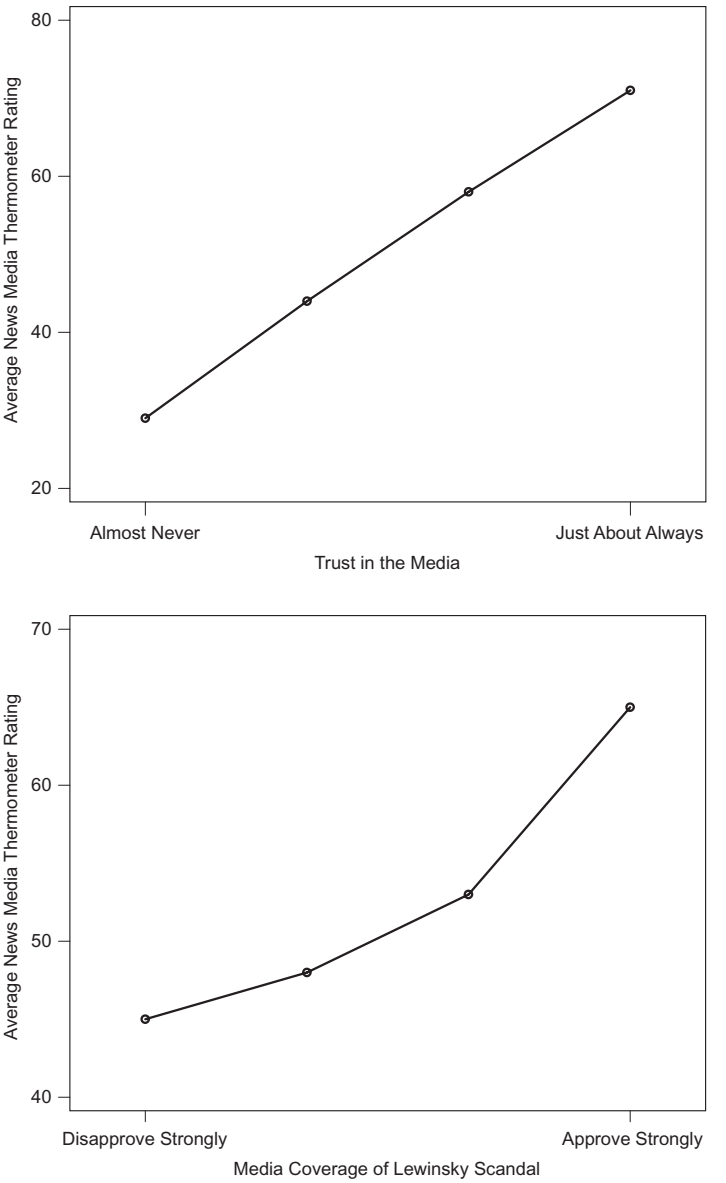

Figure 4-7. Consistency of attitudes toward the news media across question wordings. *Note*: The bivariate unstandardized regression coefficient of news media trust on thermometer is 0.0048 with a standard error of 0.0003. The Pearson's *r* correlation between these questions is .45. The bivariate unstandardized regression coefficient of opinion of scandal coverage on thermometer is 0.003 with a standard error of 0.0004. The Pearson's *r* correlation between these questions is .23. *Source*: 1998 ANES.

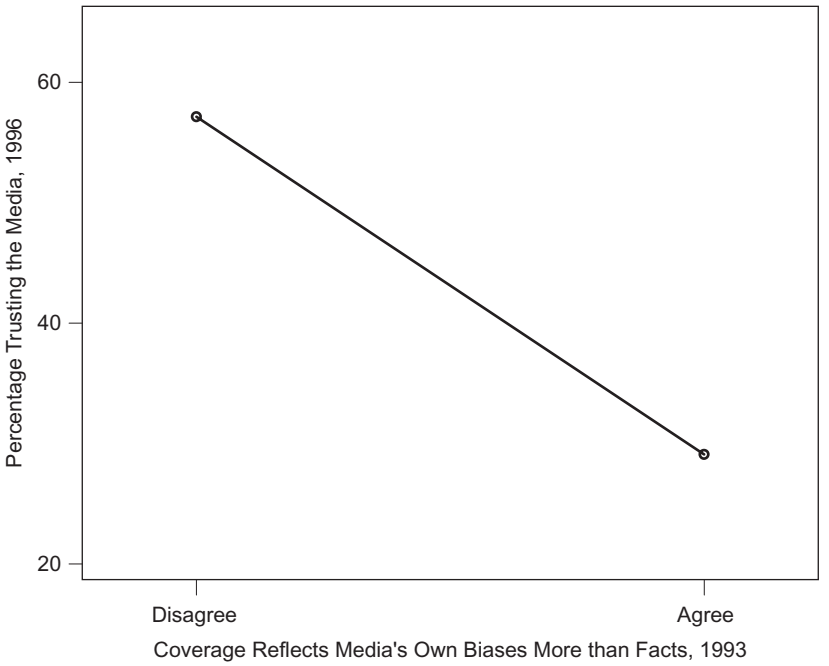

Figure 4-8. Stability of news media attitudes over time, 1993–96. *Note*: The bivariate unstandardized regression coefficient of 1996 media trust on 1993 perceptions of bias is -0.266, with a standard error of 0.037. The Pearson's *r* correlation between these questions is -.310. Respondents are coded as trusting the media if they said they trusted the media "just about always" or "most of the time" in 1996. *Source*: 1992–96 ANES Panel Study.

of September 11, 2001, transformed U.S. national security policy and altered everyday life in countless small ways, and the United States embarked on major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet those who distrusted the news media in 2000 still gave the media much lower ratings in 2002 and 2004, in response to a question with a different wording and format.

When Evaluating "The Media," Most People Think about the Accuracy and Bias of Institutional News Sources in General

While we have seen that people have relatively firm opinions about the news media, it is not yet clear what these opinions mean. The media as an institution is an abstract attitude object. It is not located in a designated place like Congress or the executive branch. It is reasonable to wonder

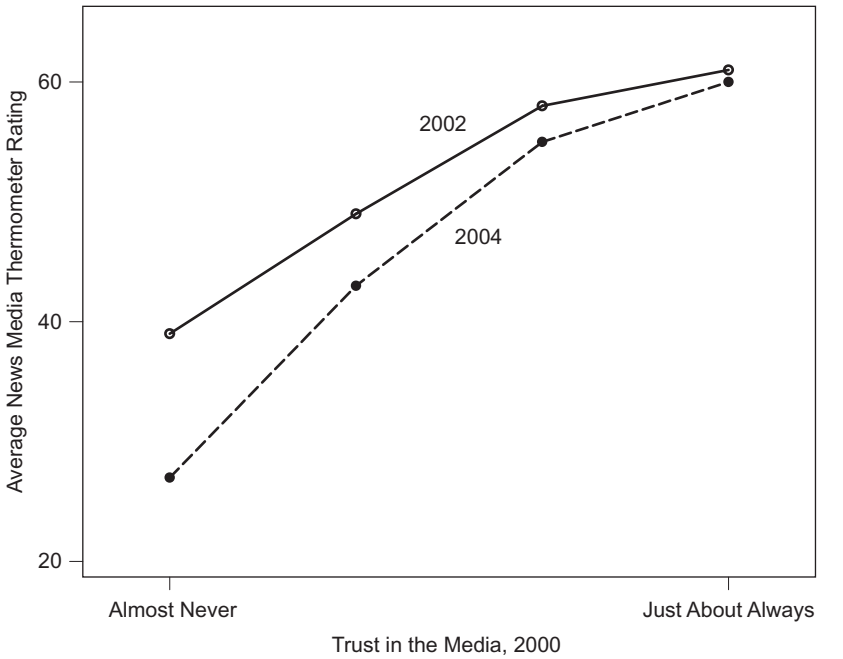

Figure 4-9. Stability of news media attitudes over time, 2000–2004. *Note*: The bivariate unstandardized regression coefficient of 2002 thermometer on 2000 media trust is 25.0, with a standard error of 2.5. The Pearson's *r* correlation between these questions is .31. The bivariate unstandardized regression coefficient of 2004 thermometer on 2000 media trust is 35.2 with a standard error of 2.9. The Pearson's *r* correlation between these questions is .40. *Source*: 2000–2004 ANES Panel Study.

what people are thinking about when they provide answers to closed-ended survey questions about the news media. To investigate this, I used a specially designed sequence of survey questions. In a survey conducted through Knowledge Networks, Inc., an academic and commercial survey firm, each respondent in a nationally representative sample of 1,018 was randomly assigned to be asked one of three different closed-ended questions about the news media.[21] These were the ANES media trust ques-

[21] The interviews were conducted March 8–10, 2005. The questions analyzed here were asked as part of a survey that included other questions unrelated to politics or the news media. Knowledge Networks draws its samples using random digit dialing. Those who agreed to participate were given a free television with Internet access in exchange for periodically answering commercial and academic surveys. Data from Knowledge Networks and other firms with similar methodologies have gained increasing prominence in political

tion, a media "feeling thermometer" question identical to the one I use in an experiment described in chapter 5 and similar to that used in the ANES, and the GSS's press confidence question.[22] For all respondents, the very next question asked, "Still thinking about the question you just answered, I'd like you to tell me what came to mind as you were answering that question. Exactly what things went through your mind?" After people finished answering this, they were asked, "Any others?" and given another opportunity to respond. Open-ended responses to the initial question and the follow-up were recorded for each respondent.

This format is very similar to the "retrospective" "memory dump" questions used by public opinion scholars John Zaller and Stanley Feldman (1992) to measure the "considerations" that come to mind when people answer survey questions (see also Zaller 1992). Zaller and Feldman argue that, on any subject, people "carry around in their heads a mix of only partially consistent ideas and considerations." When they are asked in a survey to evaluate an attitude object, they "call to mind a sample of these ideas . . . and use them to choose among the options offered" (Zaller and Feldman 1992, 580).

In exploring what considerations come to mind when respondents answer these three different questions about the news media, I address several concerns. First, I test whether people are confused about what to evaluate when asked about the news media in general or as an institution. Has the fragmentation of the media industry rendered these types of questions obsolete? Second, I test whether different question wordings, in addition to producing correlated responses as we saw in the last section, also bring to mind a similar mix of considerations? Only if they do can we say, by Zaller and Feldman's definition, that they measure essentially the same opinion.

The open-ended responses were coded by two of my research assistants, Danielle Bush and Amanda Spears.[23] For each respondent, the coders read their complete open-ended comments and recorded whether they mentioned any of 12 different media attributes. The coders were instructed not

science research (Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Hillygus 2005; Clinton 2006; Prior 2007). More details on Knowledge Networks's sampling techniques are available on its website, http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/index.html.

[22] As reassurance that the random assignment was executed correctly, the groups assigned to the three different questions were not substantially different in partisanship or education and were of similar size, with 339 given the media trust question, 331 given the thermometer question, and 344 given the press confidence question.

[23] This coding was blind, in that the research assistants were not told the purpose of the research project until all coding was completed. Written coding instructions are available from the author.

to treat the categories as mutually exclusive but rather to code as many attributes as were mentioned. Figure 4-10 presents the results.

This figure illustrates two important things about the considerations that make up people's attitudes toward the media. First, there is very little difference among the thoughts brought to mind by the different question wordings. This, along with the evidence in the previous section, indicates that opinions toward the news media are relatively firmly held. Second, the two types of thoughts mentioned by far most frequently both relate to the trustworthiness of the information the media provide. These were thoughts about news accuracy, which were mentioned by 41% of respondents, and thoughts about general bias or too much opinion overall, which were mentioned by 22% of respondents. Every other type of comment was made by less than 10% of the sample.

For example, here are the comments of an independent who gave the news media a thermometer rating of 40 and was coded as mentioning accuracy: "You cannot believe everything you read. Sometimes the media stretches the truth and clouds some stories that you don't know if it [is] true or not." Here is another independent, who gave the media a thermometer rating of 60 and also mentioned accuracy: "I think they try to report as close to facts as they can. Sometimes I think in some cases they give too much info." A Democratic-leaning independent, who had "only some" confidence in the press and was coded as mentioning accuracy, said, "The institution is manipulative, doesn't always give the full story, uses information to benefit itself instead of the cause of others." Another Democratic-leaning independent, who was coded as mentioning sensationalism, accuracy, and general bias even though he gave a thermometer rating of 70, said, "I think the news media tries to be fair and accurate, but those that control the purse strings are affected by what they perceive as what the public wants and what draws in an audience (what makes money)—sensationalism, hype and sound bytes." A weak Democrat who trusted the media "only some of the time" and was coded as mentioning both accuracy and general bias simply said, "I think that a lot of the media has their own biases that come through when they report the news—particularly in the area of politics." Another weak Democrat who had "hardly any" confidence in the press and was coded as mentioning accuracy and Republican bias said, "The press has not written the truth since Bush has been in office. [Any others?] That they are afraid to speak against this administration."

Turning to the other side of the political spectrum, a Republican-leaning independent who trusted the media "only some of the time" said this in a comment coded in the accuracy and general bias categories: "They seem to tell us whatever they think we want to hear and what will keep us watching them! [Any others?] They should not have a good

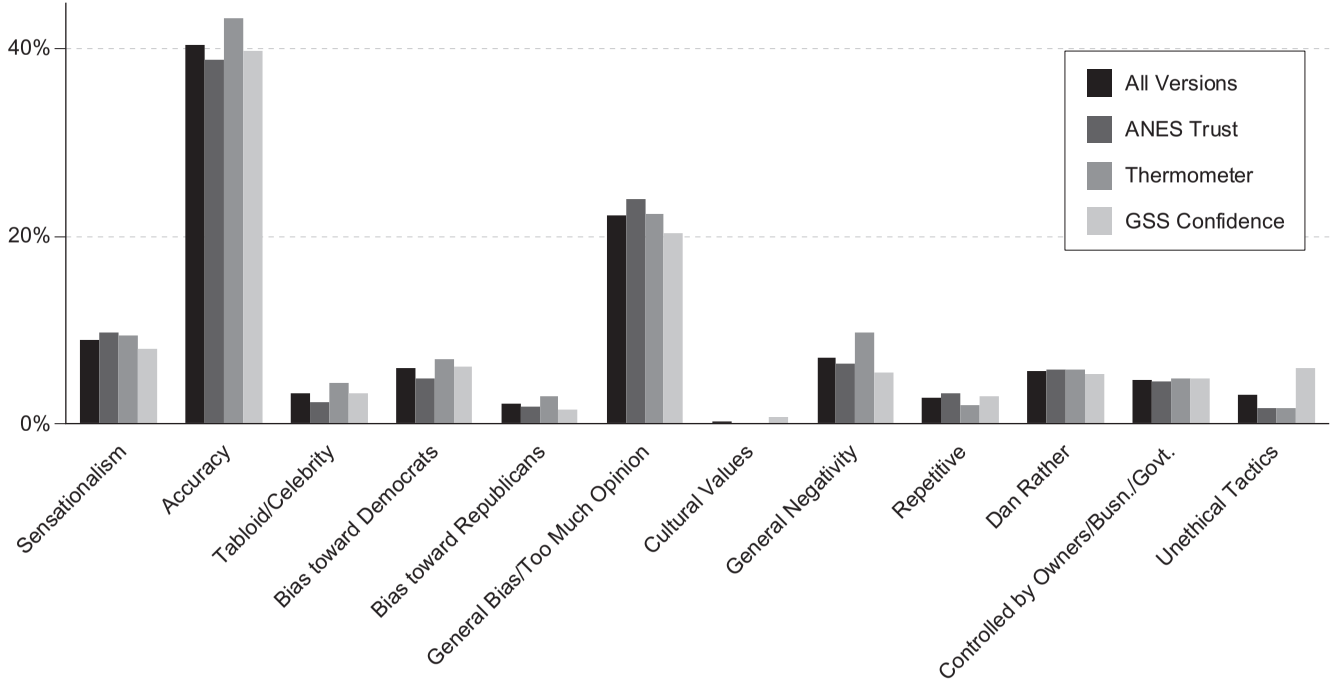

Figure 4-10. Different media evaluation questions prompt respondents to think about similar media attributes. *Note*: The vertical axis indicates the percentage of respondents mentioning the given media attribute in response to the open-ended "memory dump" question. The horizontal axis provides the categories of media attributes. The shaded bars indicate the media evaluation question respondents were asked before the "memory dump." *Source*: Survey conducted March 8–14, 2005, by Knowledge Networks, Inc. See the chapter 4 appendix for the questionnaire.

or bad opinion—just the news!" A strong Republican who had "only some" confidence in the press and was coded as mentioning accuracy said, "Sometimes the facts are distorted. They run to the press too fast before the facts are ironed out." A weak Republican who had "hardly any" confidence in the press and was coded as mentioning accuracy and Democratic bias said, "The press always lies. They'll always dig up dirt on the Republican and then try to cover up and things that will hurt the Democrat. This is starting to become a good against evil. The press is evil."

Of course, not everyone shared only negative thoughts about the news media. Some people rated the media more positively, and their thoughts in response to the open-ended probe reflected that. For instance, here are the comments of a strong Democrat who gave a thermometer rating of 60 and was coded as mentioning accuracy: "Very few times has word come out that a news story is false. Sometimes the story is presented in a way that that the reader may misunderstand." In another example, a weak Democrat who gave a thermometer rating of 85 said, "I feel that the media does a pretty good job with reporting what's going on in the world. I know that there are some things that go on behind the scenes, but they have done pretty good on reporting the war in Iraq. [Any others?] Yes, they are getting better in showing us things that happen here in America as they happen. They are staying on top of things a lot better."

Besides media attributes, my research assistants also coded the comments for any mention of specific media outlets or types of media outlets. Again, these categories are not mutually exclusive; each person's comments were coded in as many categories as applied to them. The results, presented in Figure 4-11, again show very small differences across question wordings.[24] However, the most striking finding in Figure 4-11 is how infrequent mentions of specific outlets or types of media were. The most frequently mentioned type of media was television in general, mentioned by only 7% of respondents. Eighty percent of respondents made no comments about any specific media outlet or type of media. In contrast, only 29% of respondents did not mention any media attribute. Comments about newer, alternative media outlets were particularly rare. Talk radio and the Internet were mentioned by 0.5% and 0.6% of respondents, respectively. The most frequently mentioned category that could be considered alternative media was Fox News/conservative cable talk shows,

[24] The biggest percentage-point difference across wordings is the difference between the thermometer question and the GSS confidence question in prompting comments about television in general. The thermometer question prompted 9% of the sample to comment about television in general, while the confidence question prompted 5% to comment about it.

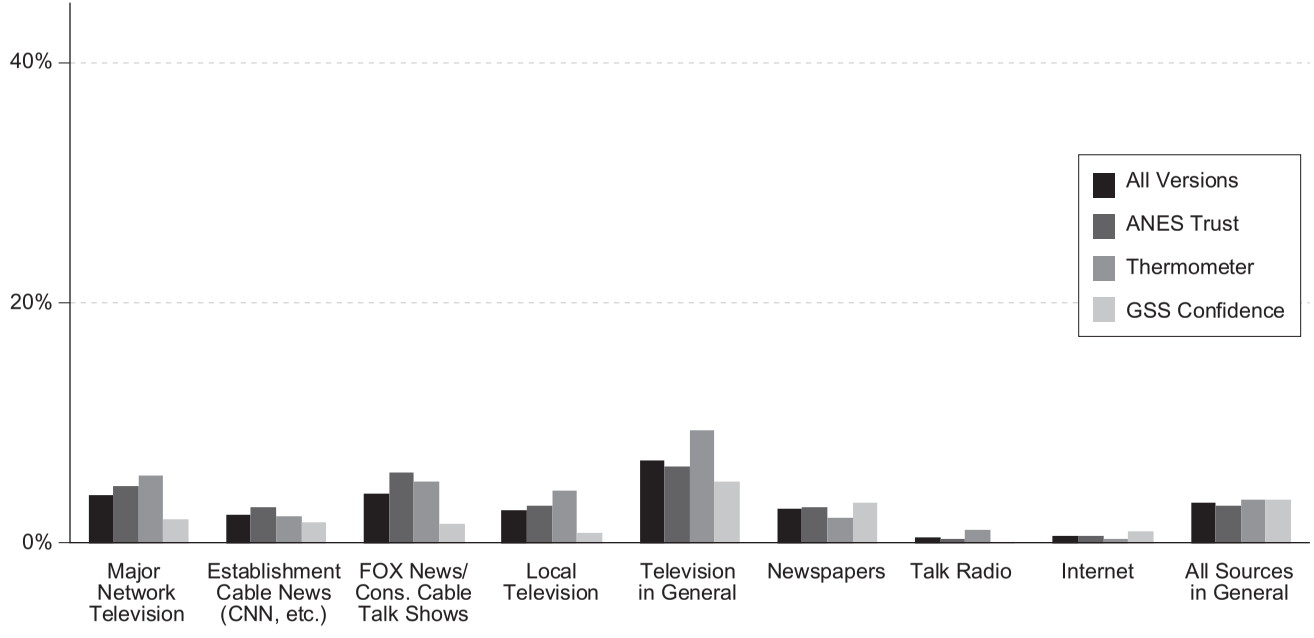

Figure 4-11. Media evaluation questions prompt respondents to think about few specific media outlets or types of media. *Note*: The vertical axis indicates the percentage of respondents mentioning the given type of media in response to the open-ended "memory dump" question. The horizontal axis indicates the different types of media. The shaded bars indicate the media evaluation questions respondents were asked before the "memory dump." *Source*: 2000–2004 ANES Panel Study.

which was mentioned by only 4% of the sample. However, even on the few occasions when alternative outlets such as Fox News were mentioned, it is almost always clear from the context of the responses that these outlets were not considered part of "the media."

Instead, people mentioned outlets like Fox News in order to draw a contrast between their feelings toward them and their feelings toward the institutional media, which they had just evaluated. For instance, a strong Democrat who gave the news media a thermometer rating of 75 said, "Some networks do a better job at being fair than others. For example, Fox News network claims to be 'fair and balanced,' but it is obvious that they are pro-Republican." This respondent's thermometer rating indicates that he or she trusts the institutional news media, which he or she sees as perfectly consistent with disliking Fox News. Similarly, a strong Republican gave the news media a thermometer rating of 30 and, when asked for his or her thoughts, said, "Dan Rather, Republican election exit polls. [Any others?] The news is very pro-liberal except Fox News." Another strong Republican who had "hardly any" confidence in the press said, "The last Presidential election coverage by the old mainstream media was so against President Bush it was terrible. Dan Rather was shameful! [Any others?] I am glad there is Fox cable news. I think Brit Hume is trustworthy."

Overall, very few people think about any specific media outlets when asked these media evaluation questions, and even fewer think about any alternative media. Those who do think about alternative media outlets consider them as a contrast to the institutional news outlets and professional journalism in general. They base their evaluations of "the press," "the news media," or just "the media" on their reactions to these latter objects.

Finally, we can also use these open-ended questions to see if Republicans, Democrats, and independents think about different considerations when they express opinions about the media. Figure 4-12 shows the prevalence of thoughts about different media attributes among Republicans, Democrats, and independents. It shows that the two most frequent types of comments, those about accuracy and those about general bias and too much opinion, were less common among independents than among partisans on both sides. Thus, in general, partisans are more likely to make comments concerning the trustworthiness of media information. The only other notable partisan differences were Republicans' greater propensities to mention bias toward Democrats, general negativity, Dan Rather, and sensationalism. Figure 4-13 reveals very little difference in the frequency of thoughts about specific types of media among Republicans, Democrats, and independents, although this is largely because very few people have these thoughts, whatever their party identification.

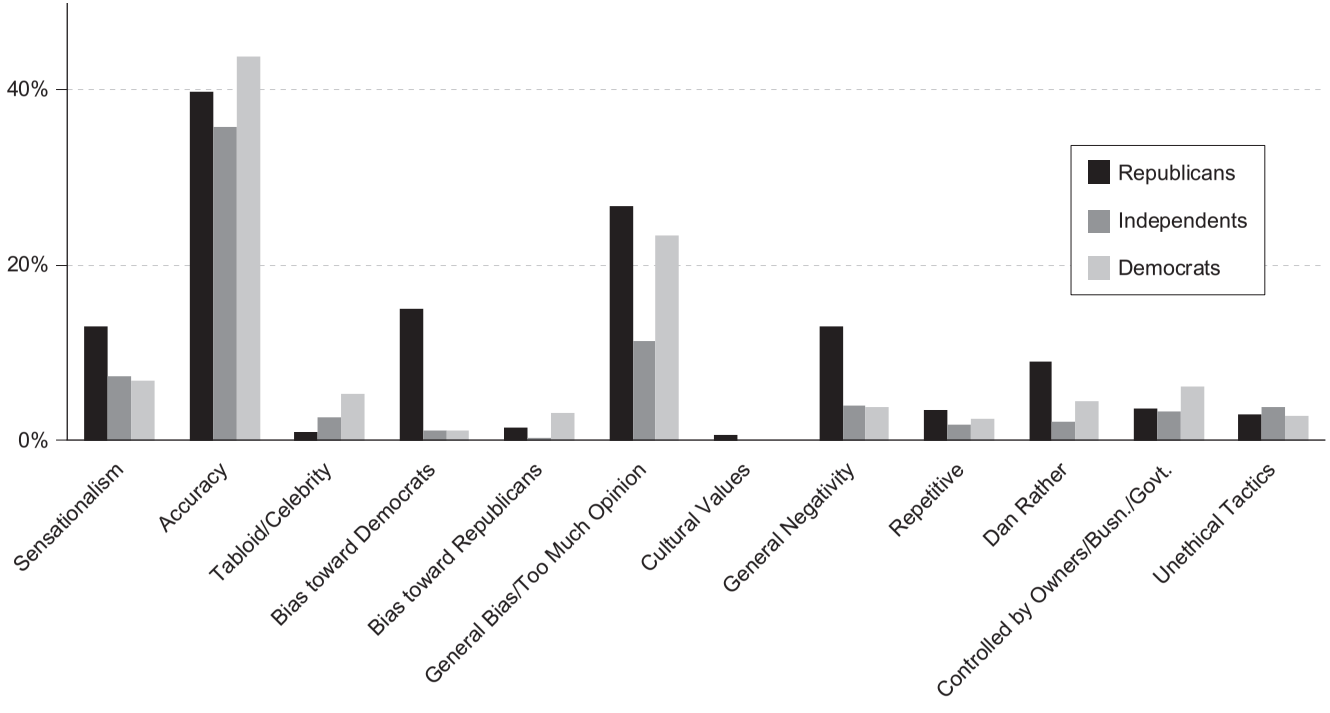

Figure 4-12. Few partisan differences in the media attributes people think about when answering media evaluation questions. *Note*: The vertical axis indicates the percentage of respondents mentioning the given media attribute in response to the open-ended "memory dump" question. The horizontal axis provides the categories of media attributes. *Source*: 2000–2004 ANES Panel Study.

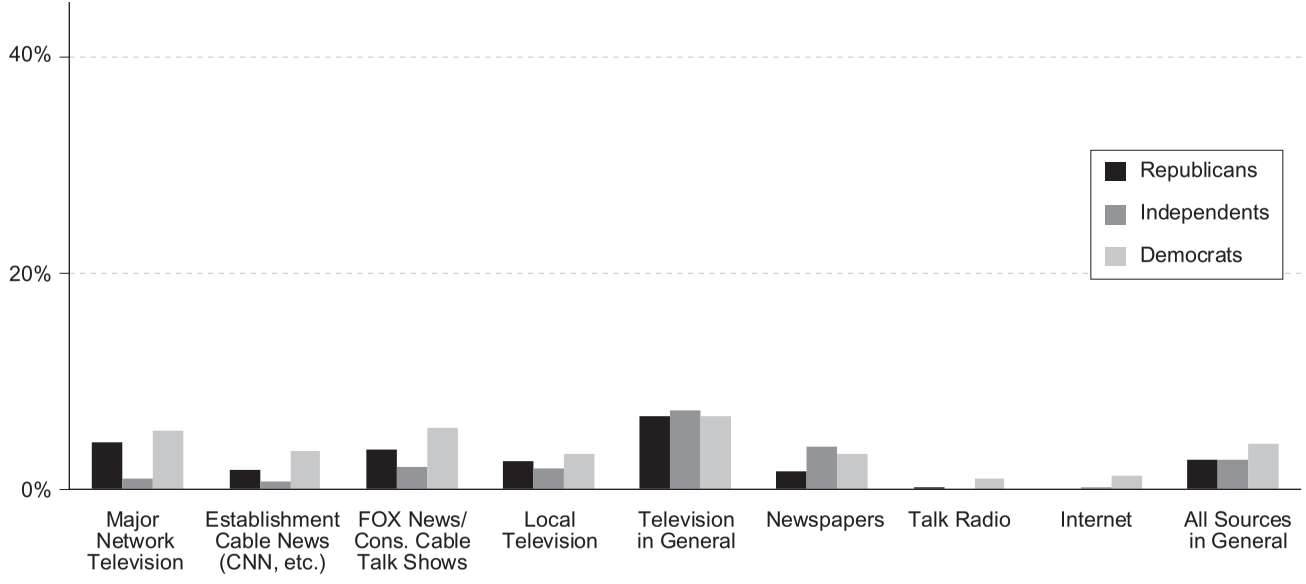

Figure 4-13. Few partisan differences in the types of media people think about when answering media evaluation questions. *Note*: The vertical axis indicates the percentage of respondents mentioning the given type of media in response to the open-ended "memory dump" question. The horizontal axis indicates the different types of media. *Source*: 2000–2004 ANES Panel Study.

Finally, one thing the coders did not find is also important. Only 2 of the 1,018 respondents (or 0.002%) said in their open-ended comments that the media evaluation questions were difficult to understand or too vague in a fragmented media world or complained about the questions in any other way. No one seemed to think, with all the different media options now available, that opinions about the media in general or (as in the GSS question) as an "institution" were no longer relevant. Instead, most people seemed to think they knew what the question meant and had something to say about it. Tsfati (2002, 67) found similar reactions when he asked 267 respondents to provide open-ended comments about "the press and journalists" and "the media." Only 1 of his interviewees (or 0.003%) asked for clarification of what the question meant.

The American people seem to have relatively firm opinions about the news media. They do not merely have views about specific news sources. Looking at the correlation between responses to media questions with very different wordings, the stability of these responses over time, the infrequency of people thinking of specific media outlets—especially alternative outlets—when answering these questions, and the fact that hardly anyone complained about (or refused to answer) these general questions, it is hard to disagree with Tsfati's (2002, 38; 2003, 68) claims that "people have some mental schema for what 'the media' are" and "media skepticism relates to the mainstream media as a whole rather than to a particular source." Furthermore, the open-ended survey responses indicate that when people do think of alternative outlets, they see them as the antithesis of the thing they are evaluating in these questions. Opinions on these questions are based on reactions to institutional, professional journalism, something that, in this age of fragmented media, people seem to feel as strongly about as ever.

In this chapter, we have seen that the news media, which became institutionalized through professionalization and homogenization in the early twentieth century, underwent more dramatic changes in the increasingly polarized political environment of the later 20th and early 21st centuries. Alternative media outlets increasingly challenged traditional journalism, both competing against it for consumers and disregarding its professional norms. At the same time, with the political system becoming more polarized, the traditional news media faced public criticism from politicians and activists on both sides of the political spectrum, much of it coming through alternative news outlets. As this happened, confidence in the media as an institution declined dramatically. In today's political environment, the merits of the institutional news media are a subject of intense public debate and strongly held opinions among the mass public. In the next chapter, I more carefully investigate what factors influence these opinions.

Appendix

Questionnaire for Survey with Retrospective "Memory Dump" Questions

Question 1

(There are three different versions of question 1. Each subject has a one in three probability of receiving each different version.)

Version A: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly, just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?"

A. Just About Always
B. Most of the Time
C. Only Some of the Time
D. Almost Never

Version B: "We'd like you to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 whether you think the news media reports the news accurately and fairly. Zero means very unfavorable, and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. You may use any number from 0 to 100. Where on this scale would you rate the accuracy and fairness of news media reporting?"

Rating: _____

Version C: "I am going to name an institution in this country. The institution is the press. As far as people running this institution are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all?"

A. A Great Deal of Confidence
B. Only Some Confidence
C. Hardly Any Confidence

Question 2

"Still thinking about the question you just answered, I'd like you to tell me what came to mind as you were answering that question. Exactly what things went through your mind?"

Question 3

"Any others?"