Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States

by W. Lance Bennett

Four years of* New York Times *coverage of U.S. funding for the Nicaraguan contras is used to test the idea that news is "indexed" implicitly to the range and dynamics of governmental debate but has little relation to expressed public opinion.

It is by now well established that the mass media in the United States look to government officials as the source of most of the daily news they report (6, 19, 20). However, there is healthy debate about just what this finding means.

One explanation is that granting public officials a virtual news monopoly restricts diversity in the politically volatile "marketplace of ideas," thereby safeguarding the business climate in which media conglomerates operate (1, 2, 3, 15). In this account, restricting the range of voices in news stories is not overt censorship but results instead from routine "professional" decisions about who and what the media should cover with their limited resources. In Bagdikian's formulation, "It is within this necessary professional decision making that corporate values and the central aims of owners are imbedded" (1, p. 104).

A second explanation, not necessarily at odds with the first, regards the dominance of official voices in the news as a result of "transactional" or "symbiotic" relations between journalists and officials (6, 11, 13, 19, 20). These daily interactions hone politicians' news-making edge and enable journalists to fill the daily "news hole" with a steady supply of economical, well-produced material.

A third interpretation (which is at odds with the first, though not necessarily with the second) holds that the press is acting in a democratically responsible fashion by favoring the views of public officials—who are, after all, representatives of the people. Proponents of this view often contend that the news should be even more attentive to official versions of events and less prone to the liberal biases of journalists (10, 18).

Missing in the literature is a theoretical framework with which to evaluate and, where empirically warranted, to synthesize these diverse perspectives into a general theory of the press and the state in the United States. As the ideological gap between the first and third explanations above indicates, it is difficult to begin discussing press-government relations without some sort of normative

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guideline about how the press ought to do its job. When should governments be criticized? When should opinion polls and other social voices be brought to the forefront of news stories? How can a balance be struck between "official" and "other" voices in the news?

Because one theorist's reasonable guideline is often another's extremist dogma, normative assumptions about proper press behavior are often left vague and undeveloped. Theory and ideology clash in the absence of strategies for productive resolution. Without some generally accepted sense of how the range of public debate ought to be represented in the news, it is unlikely that theory building in this important area will progress much further.

As a point of theoretical departure, I propose a guideline for press-government relations drawn from two long-standing traditions in U.S. political culture. It is a norm that theorists on the Left may find too conservative and theorists on the Right may find too liberal—reactions that would reflect the enduring tensions between the two traditions comprising the guideline. The proposed norm is this: Culturally speaking, it is generally reasonable for journalists to grant government officials a privileged voice in the news, unless the range of official debate on a given topic excludes or "marginalizes" stable majority opinion in society, and unless official actions raise doubts about political propriety. In these "exceptional" circumstances, it is reasonable for the press to foreground other social voices (polls, opposition groups, academics, political analysts) in news stories and editorials as checks against unrepresentative or otherwise irresponsible governments.

Each of the two competing ideological traditions that make up this guideline has an important history of political struggle. The idea that the government should be granted broad latitude in setting the boundaries of public debate can be traced back as far as the *Federalist Papers,* particularly *Federalist No. 10,* and to the subsequent Federalist-inspired Alien and Sedition Acts. From these origins comes the strong and enduring belief that government ought to be buffered from direct popular accountability in order to protect the political process from the whims and passions of an often ignorant (and unpropertied) mass public.

Holding this norm in check is a countervailing concern about a government so protected from the people that democracy might wither in the shadow of special interests, imperious officials, and institutionalized corruption. To counter this possibility, Jefferson, among others, articulated a populist philosophy that inspired the battles against the Alien and Sedition Acts. Signaling the important role of the press in safeguarding democracy, Jefferson wrote: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." The enduring legacy is the idea that a strong, adversarial press must be ready to raise its own and other grass-roots voices against government officials who would exclude those voices from deliberations about the national interest. This legacy of the press as democratic watchdog has been kept alive through two centuries of change from an avowedly partisan press to today's corporate mass media. Perhaps more than any other source, journalists

themselves have fueled popular expectations about the news as a window on democracy. By recalling the legendary muckrakers, celebrating cases of adversarialism (e.g., Vietnam) and investigative reporting (e.g., Watergate), and giving much-publicized awards for excellence, the news media continue to advertise their own importance to the quality of public debate and the health of democracy. Add to this the frequent criticisms of politicians about a "too-aggressive" press, and it is easy to see why Jeffersonian images of the political role of the press persist alongside the countervailing norm that government is entitled to some margin of discretion in deciding the public interest.

Together, these two refrains from the political culture combine to create a reasonable standard that the press can be expected to use in striking a balance among voices and viewpoints in the news. The resulting balance would give governments room to deliberate and maneuver while still holding officials accountable to public opinion in the process. This idealized dynamic between press and state has a strong claim to being "reasonable" because it emerges from an enduring political tradition in which U.S. democracy, while not directly representative, is at least held to be broadly accountable to the public. In this tradition, the press is regarded—often by its own acclamation—as the key to attaining the desired level of public accountability. In short, this formulation not only offers a basis for interpreting observed patterns of journalistic reliance on official sources, but it also articulates a broadly acceptable, culture-based language in which academics, journalists, and citizens alike can discuss the health of democracy in the United States.

How can we assess the degree to which the mass media achieve a reasonable balance of "voices" in the news? A hypothesis about actual journalistic behavior can be used to help determine the approximation to the ideal. Based on impressionistic evidence and subject, of course, to more rigorous empirical examination, a preliminary hypothesis about actual press-government relations can be stated as follows: Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to "index" the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic.

This working hypothesis implies that "other" (i.e., non-official) voices filling out the potential universe of news sources are included in news stories and editorials when those voices express opinions already emerging in official circles. Such a finding would imply that the media have embraced the first element of our aforementioned cultural ideal (i.e., emphasis on institutions, deemphasis of direct popular expression) while abandoning the important companion principle calling for publicizing popular opposition in the face of unrepresentative or irresponsible institutions. Evidence supporting the indexing hypothesis would suggest that the news industry has ceded to government the tasks of policing itself and striking the democratic balance.

In the political order shaped by such a notion of journalism, "democracy" would flourish whenever elites, driven by conflicting interests or electoral incentives, opened up public debate on given issues. Conversely, in other areas, democracy might wither in the pale of official consensus forged with little regard to either public interest or expressed public opinion. Through the interplay of power, state priorities, and national elections, such a system might work fairly well in representing popular sentiments on some issues (e.g., abortion), while either ignoring or propagandizing popular views in other areas (e.g., national security and foreign policy). The press in this system might be seen to have settled for a comfortable role as "keeper of the official record" (8) while abdicating its traditional mandate to raise an independent "voice of the people" under appropriate circumstances.

Several concepts must be clarified before we can evaluate the indexing hypothesis. First, the hypothesis is an attempt to explain the behavior of "leading" press organizations (i.e., the prestige national newspapers, wire services, television networks, and the "big three" news magazines) that set professional press standards and influence the daily news agenda. It stands to reason that small-audience news outlets in the sway of ideological missions or local tastes would deviate from this norm. Norms, after all, are not mechanical laws, but behavioral tendencies forged through the interplay of social exemplars (the prestige mass media, in this case) and social deviants (in this case, perhaps the dying breed of small, independent news organizations).

A second clarification pertains to how editors and reporters might gauge the width of the official news "gate" through which other social opinion on an issue will be allowed to pass. The range of official debate is unlikely to be anchored by the most isolated or extremist voices in government. Rather, journalists are more likely to index legitimate voices in the news according to the

range of views expressed by prominent officials and members of institutional power blocs likely to influence the outcome of a situation.

Third, both the academic literature and a casual look at the news suggest that societal voices falling outside the official range of debate are admitted occasionally into journalistic accounts. However, the circumstances surrounding such inclusions usually involve civil disobedience, protests, or lawless acts that establish negative interpretative contexts for those voices (14). Hence, the indexing hypothesis applies most centrally to the question of how the range of positive, legitimate, or otherwise "credible" news sources is established by journalists.

Fourth, the indexing hypothesis is intended to apply more to news accounts of everyday events, crises, and policies than to "special coverage" of things like elections that may have a normative-ritual order of their own (4). For example, during elections the press often introduces public opinion polls independently and with positive connotations; yet polls on the same issues go unreported in coverage of institutional policy debates (5).

Finally, as noted earlier, the range of social voices in the news is likely to vary widely from one issue area to another, perhaps narrowing in areas like foreign affairs and monetary policy and widening in coverage of civil liberties and "pocketbook" economics. Most of this variation should be explained by the hypothesis itself: When the range of official debate varies, so, too, should the width of the journalistic gate. In some cases, however, the presence of "unindexed" social voices in a given story simply may reflect the press's inability to apply the indexing norm. For example, when official opinion is in disarray for any of a variety of reasons, the journalistic process may be relatively more chaotic. With this chaos may come a decline in the familiar "official" narrative structure, opening the way for anomalous news narratives told through disparate social voices.

Before I introduce data from a critical case study to illuminate these aspects of the indexing hypothesis, a few background comments about the hypothesis are in order: What are its origins? What is the theoretical significance of indexing? What sort of explanation of press-government behavior does the indexing hypothesis provide?

Like most hypotheses, the indexing hypothesis originated in subjective experience: reading newspapers, watching TV news, and seasoning the resulting impressions with insights from the academic literature. The goal was to distill a practical explanation of press-government relations that was broad enough to address the diverse array of theories introduced at the beginning of this article. Two interesting encounters with prominent journalists suggested that I was on the right track.

The first clue about how indexing translated into the journalistic consciousness came during an interview with an ABC News vice president serving as director of the Washington bureau. I asked about an ABC cluster of stories on Reagan administration lobbying efforts to convince Congress to fund a large-scale war in El Salvador. Capping the cluster was an "analysis" piece by ABC's

State Department correspondent, who talked over a map of Central America and the Caribbean. As the correspondent discussed the problems in the region, the island of Cuba turned red and sent a large red arrow toward Nicaragua, which also turned red. Nicaragua, in turn, infected El Salvador, and so went the region. This seemed to me to be a fairly slanted piece of "analysis."

The news executive, who at first expressed doubt that his bureau could have run such a piece, later acknowledged that the segment had appeared essentially as I had described it. However, he defended the presentation as accurately describing the government's analysis of the situation; hence, it stood the test of responsible journalism. The implication seemed to be that questions of content selection and balance could be dismissed if the government was the source of that content and balance.

The same message was brought home even more forcefully in an encounter with "NBC Nightly News" anchor Tom Brokaw. At a breakfast meeting with communications scholars and political scientists, Brokaw spoke glowingly of his personal involvement in news gathering, highlighted by his on-the-scene coverage of the 1982 Salvadoran constituent assembly elections. He noted that he was the one journalist who dared to use victorious Arena party leader Roberto D'Aubuisson's local nickname, "Blowtorch Bobby."

In response, I noted that Brokaw was not alone at the time in expressing concerns about the quality and integrity of civilian leaders in El Salvador. The independence and daring of his NBC coverage might be evaluated in the context of contemporary debate in Congress about human rights violations and governmental duplicity. After the 1984 election victory of José Napoleón Duarte and the Christian Democrats, NBC (along with most of the mass media) virtually dropped the El Salvador story from the daily news. Once Congress had been pressured into bipartisan consensus around an "acceptable" civilian president willing to try to implement U.S. policy, the media stopped raising independent concerns about many features of the Salvador situation that remained unchanged with the replacement of a single leader.

Brokaw retorted that I, like many Americans, simply faulted the news for not playing to my personal political agenda. When I noted that Project Censored (16) had just voted El Salvador the most censored news story of the year, a frustrated Brokaw asked plaintively what the media were supposed to do after Congress fell silent on the matter. Many journalists in the marginal, small-audience media continued to find "the story" in El Salvador, yet the mass media, as indicated by Tom Brokaw's sincere question, seemed unable to imagine how to play a story that did not have a legitimating backdrop of official voices.

The idea that mass media news is indexed implicitly to the dynamics of governmental debate offers a coherent basis for beginning to integrate diverse theoretical accounts of press-government relations. Consider, for example, what the indexing hypothesis adds to "transactional" or "symbiotic" theories of press-government interaction. Indexing constitutes a quick and ready guide for editors and reporters to use in deciding how to cover a story. It

is a rule of thumb that can be defended against questions from uneasy corporate managers and concerned citizens alike.

As indicated in the straightforward applications of indexing by the two news professionals above, indexing does not have to be regarded by those who use it as a crass, mechanical, politically safe and economically expedient practice. To the contrary, journalists may be conscious of indexing in another vocabulary entirely—the language of democracy. Governmental definitions of reality are supposed to be, after all, the best approximation of that bedrock of political reality, responsible public opinion. If for some reason the voices of government are unrepresentative or irresponsible, does the responsibility to correct the problem lie with journalists or with the people who elect governments in the first place? Should not responsible journalists report primarily what governments say and let the people form their own reactions? Similar arguments frequently were heard during a 1985 Poynter Foundation conference on journalistic responsibility (12).

My guess is that this version of "journalistic responsibility" is emerging in the industry as a rhetorical gloss on an underlying indexing norm, perhaps signaling an emerging justification for a passive press in a "new" American democracy. Such a shift in the definition of journalistic responsibilities would mark an important break with traditional cultural standards of the sort proposed earlier as our "ideal" journalistic guideline. Yet, in the absence of mass communications examples to promote them in word or deed, who would remind us of our ideals? Who would point out that important changes in the very balance of democracy might be underway? The existence of something like an indexing norm helps to account both for how routine journalistic decisions are made and how they are understood and justified by the actors involved. In short, we have added both a behavioral and an attitudinal component to the everyday journalistic routines described by transactional or symbiotic theories.

Just as working journalists can come to regard indexing in ennobling ways, so, too, the upper echelons of owners and managers in news organizations can use the same vocabulary to justify organizational policies. The "media monopoly" school of thought introduced earlier argues persuasively for the economic advantages of status quo journalism yet offers little detailed explanation of how such company policies can be transmitted acceptably from the boardroom to the beat. The indexing hypothesis adds something to "media monopoly" theories in this regard.

Even if members of the board of the *New York Times* occasionally discuss among themselves policies that would ensure "all the news that fits" the interest of state and economy, it is doubtful that resulting company policy would be sent to editors in those terms. In fact, it seems unnecessary for boardroom discussions to use such a vocabulary in the first place. The presence of an implicit "indexing" norm shared at all levels of the news industry would keep the news compatible with the shifting political and economic interests of the state while enabling managers and directors to think and communicate in a relatively benign vocabulary of press responsibility and balanced journalism. At all levels

of the industry, actors can define their roles as merely informing the public on the actions of government while refraining on principle from trying to set the political agenda or from entering the national political dialogue as independent voices.

There is even a synthetic chord to be struck between the indexing hypothesis and the third school of thought mentioned earlier—those who advocate even greater reliance on official voices in the news as a check on journalistic liberalism. This perspective can be incorporated into our emerging theory with the proposition that journalists may tend to support liberal or oppositional views in the news, but they give voice to those views only when parallel voices are being raised in circles of government power. In short, the liberal press thesis is revised here into a sort of Parkinson's Law of the mass media: Journalistic liberalism expands to fill the space provided by liberal voices in government. Hence, when liberals began to attack the Vietnam War in greater numbers following the Tet offensive, the national media went on the offensive, too. When Democrats in Congress decided to take Richard Nixon's misadventures seriously enough to contemplate impeachment, the media embarked upon a daily news serial of high constitutional drama. Yet, a decade later, when liberal critics in Congress refrained from raising dubious covert activities in the Reagan White House (culminating in the Iran-contra scandal) to the same political levels, the "liberal press" moderated its tone accordingly.

In other words, the indexing hypothesis would recast the "liberal journalism" thesis into new terms consistent with an emerging general theory of the press and the state: "Liberal" news messages rise with liberal tides in government and fall again with ebbing liberal voices. Much in the way that indexing fit into the above discussions of corporate interests and symbiotic journalistic routines, journalists need not regard "indexed liberalism" as ideological bias at all. They can understand it, instead, as nothing more (or less) than a professional responsibility to highlight important conflicts and struggles within the centers of power. Following from such a rationale, it becomes merely a regrettable fact of journalistic life that some portion of the news audience, along with a few right-wing critics and academics, regards the news as ideologically biased.

As these additions and modifications to the three leading schools of thought imply, the indexing hypothesis may help move theories of the press and the state in the direction of a productive synthesis. As a theoretical foundation, indexing introduces a common thread among heretofore diverse explanations rooted in corporate economic interests, daily news production routines, and the individual political leanings of journalists.

The next step is to begin integrating these perspectives into a common structural, behavioral, and attitudinal framework. Although a complete formalization is beyond the scope of a single article, it is possible to specify some general properties of this next theoretical move.

As mentioned earlier, the existence of an indexing norm does not necessarily mean that the editorial board of the *New York Times* or the producers of the

"NBC Nightly News" invoke it directly in the course of decision making. One doubts, for example, that industry-wide coverage of El Salvador changed because journalists in dozens of independent news organizations consulted some authority about the value of the story. A more likely scenario is that El Salvador dropped from the news because the story simply stopped qualifying as "news" in terms of implicit, paradigmatic (6) understandings of the term.

Journalists, in this account, "just know" most of the time what is and what is not news; for those stories that qualify, they also "just know" how to develop reportage and editorial content. Like most "well known" social practices, news production goes forward much of the time with little self-conscious articulation of underlying assumptions. From time to time, of course, those assumptions may be glimpsed on the surface, as when I challenged Tom Brokaw on NBC news policies. As ethnomethodological studies have shown, however, the normative order often remains hidden until such rare moments of challenge or breakdown—and even then the revelations may be partial or fragmentary.

As a result, researchers may not find the "smoking gun" of indexing by looking at overt decision-making activities in the boardroom, in the newsroom, or on the beat. Similarly, interviewers who ask media professionals to reflect on their behavior are more likely to turn up formal rationalizations than helpful insights about the nuances of indexing. As a result, indexing can be observed best in patterns of journalistic content and formal rationalizations that point to the existence of an underlying normative order.

As this discussion implies, indexing is not just an individual-level variable. Norms reside both in social structures (e.g., the "beat" system and the reward structure of the profession) and in the minds of agents within these structures. Norms thus are constituted *in collective action,* which explains why indexing may not be extracted easily from the minds of individuals during interviews or found written in manuals or on the walls of newsrooms. To put it differently, norms emerge in patterns of interaction among individuals who are transcending their separate realities to create a coherent social performance or product. In our case, the news is the coherent normative product of this complex interaction.

The proposed explanation of political patterns in the news thus is not intended as an "individualistic" explanation in a reductionist sense. To the contrary, indexing is offered as a way to help link and synthesize current explanations that tend to "reduce" press-state relations to isolated components of economic structure, organizational routine, or individual-level motives.

Much of everyday social life proceeds on the basis of relatively opaque ordering principles; indeed, it is this opacity that occasions the need for social theory in the first place. What makes the existence of a hidden—or at least partially hidden—journalistic order worth mentioning is the distinct possibility of retrieving it through careful analysis of news and editorial content. The normative order thus discovered may be substantially at odds with the cultural ideal (i.e., the "common-sense" normative order) identified at the outset.

Perhaps the most general payoff from this approach will be an understanding of how two great value systems like liberal democracy and corporate capitalism

work upon each other by shaping the institutions and practices at their intersection. No institutional encounter is more crucial to the "balance" of these value systems than that between the press and the state. From investigations like the one that follows, we may learn how a "common-sense" activity like news production goes forward at all, considering the enormous contradictions in values and the separate social realities that characterize actors in different parts of the mass media. In short, the existence of something like a deeply embedded indexing norm may be essential to explaining how a complex, multileveled social reality like the U.S. public information order is constituted.

The media's coverage of U.S. policy making on Nicaragua in the mid-1980s offers an ideal case for testing the indexing hypothesis. Early in 1983, the U.S. Congress launched an investigation of covert operations by the Central Intelligence Agency against the revolutionary Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Beginning with concerns about the unauthorized and potentially illegal mining of harbors and the organization of a counterrevolutionary or "contra" army, the investigative trail would lead eventually to a "shadow government" selling arms to Iran and using the profits to continue supporting contra forces operating inside Nicaragua. This support was expressly prohibited by Congress at the time.

In the nearly four years between the first signs of congressional suspicion and the eventual unraveling of the scandal, the White House attempted to protect and legitimize its policies by seeking formal congressional authorization and funding for the war against Nicaragua. Vowing to "educate" the public and convince skeptical legislators that he was doing the right thing, Ronald Reagan made support for the contras the cornerstone of a Central America policy that dominated his political agenda during the middle years of his presidency.

For the first three years of this policy struggle, a majority coalition in the House of Representatives raised questions about both the legality and the efficacy of a "military solution" in Nicaragua. Encouraged by a solid majority in the opinion polls and pressed by an active Central America lobbying network, the House rejected numerous military aid requests and offered little beyond "humanitarian" assistance to keep the contra army on the scene as a bargaining chip in hoped-for diplomatic solutions. During this period Reagan suffered some of the most stinging defeats of his political life.

The mass media reported the drama as a grand public policy "spectacle" (9) pitting the White House and the personal prestige of the president against a Constitution-minded Congress led by a politically charged Democratic coalition in the House of Representatives. In an ironic climax, shortly before news of the Iran-contra scandal broke in late 1986 the White House finally won its lengthy battle with Congress, securing authorization for a $100 million military aid package for the contras.

The factors leading to this policy victory can be regarded as variable conditions in a natural experiment. The initial political condition involved an effective opposition coalition in the House attempting to check the power of the executive branch. The resulting scenario typified the U.S. "limited representa-

tion" system in action: "Responsible" institutional factions, insulated from direct public pressure, engaged in debate and decision, duly reported by the press. The important question, of course, is: Just how watchful was the press in this case?

We have a chance to answer this question because the initial political conditions changed in the spring of 1986 with the capitulation of the House opposition bloc and the passage of a large military funding request. If a single "condition" can be linked to this policy shift, it was a barrage of intimidating political rhetoric, unleashed against vulnerable House members up for reelection, charging that legislators who opposed administration contra policy were soft on communism. Delivered by the president (reportedly ignoring his own intelligence agencies [7]) at the national level and through paid media spots in targeted electoral districts, this assault on Congress was termed "outrageous" by the Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee and denounced as "red-baiting" by House members of both parties. The Speaker of the House cited this campaign as key in destroying the coalition opposed to contra aid. Thus a case can be made that the opposition collapsed for less than laudable reasons.

Therefore, as long as an effective opposition bloc operated in the House (or anywhere else in the government, for that matter), the mass media were justified in indexing news content to the range of institutional debate. But the conditions leading to the collapse of that opposition should have led the media to abandon the indexing norm in favor of restoring the democratic balance. For example, news reports from a "watchdog press" might have emphasized more statements by interest groups, played up the outrage expressed by still-committed opponents in Congress, or headlined opinion polls showing a strong majority opposed to the policy. On the editorial side, leading newspapers initially opposed to the contra policy could have raised (or at least maintained) the volume of opposition through masthead editorials, invited opinion pieces, or expert analyses.

The strong counter possibility outlined in the "indexing hypothesis" is that when the range of consequential institutional (in this case, congressional) debate and opposition collapsed, the volume of opposition in news and editorials would be indexed accordingly. The data reported below suggest overwhelmingly that journalistic patterns both before and after the shift in congressional policy on Nicaragua are best explained by continued application of the indexing norm, at the expense of the democratic ideal.

The data for this analysis were drawn from news and editorial coverage in the *New York Times*, arguably the leading news organization in the United States. Analyzing all mass media coverage of a four-year "big story" is not possible here, but the *Times* is the organization from which other mass media outlets take the most cues (8, 9). Evidence also suggests that the *Times* has become a self-conscious keeper of the nation's ongoing historical record (8).

In addition to being an exemplar of journalistic norms, the *Times* provides a critical test of the indexing hypothesis because of its reputation for having a

"liberal" editorial policy. Looking at the way in which a strong liberal paper expressed its opinions on an important policy favored by a conservative president provides a hard test for the indexing hypothesis. We would expect the *Times*'s opposition to administration policy in Nicaragua to endure easily beyond the first major White House policy victory. Indeed, we might expect press opposition to intensify in light of the dubious political conditions surrounding that victory. As it turned out, following the collapse of official conflict on the issue, not only did nongovernmental opposition voices all but disappear from the *Times,* but a few masthead opinions encouraged the once-loathed policy.

These results were generated by measuring the *frequency, direction,* and *source* of all opinions voiced in the *Times* in all Nicaragua-related stories and editorials during the period defined above. News accounts and editorial page content were analyzed separately. For the op-ed analyses, regular *Times* columnists (Tom Wicker, Flora Lewis, Anthony Lewis, and William Safire) were included in the data, along with the full run of invited opinion and analysis pieces. The first three of these columnists opposed the contra war and continued to do so following the collapse of congressional opposition in the summer of 1986. In other words, the dramatic drop in editorial opposition reported below occurred despite the continued appearance of several regular opposition voices on the op-ed pages. This finding reflects a dramatic adherence to editorial indexing vis-à-vis invited opinion pieces and masthead opinions. Excluding the in-house columnists from the analysis of editorial opinion would have magnified support for the hypothesis beyond the levels reported.

The sample consisted of all news articles and editorials indexed under "Nicaragua" in the *New York Times Index* between January 1, 1983, and October 15, 1986. I conducted a supplementary search of actual *Times* text in the Lexis/Nexis data base to determine if *Index* content was suitable for the proposed content analysis. It is interesting that the only category of opinion "voice" excluded with any regularity from the otherwise detailed *New York Times Index* was a substantial percentage of the opinion polls reported on the issue. I retrieved these polls by systematically searching the Lexis/Nexis data base.

A total of 2,148 news articles and editorials relevant to Nicaragua policy were located, from coverage of debates and decisions in Washington, to war stories from the front, to background articles on the history of the conflict. There were 288 editorials and op-ed pieces and 1,860 news articles. A total of 1,177 opinions were voiced on the contra policy, of which 288 were contained in the editorials and 889 in the news reports.

Two coders read the abstract of every story and editorial in the *New York Times Index* and independently judged whether an opinion was voiced on the contra policy. If an opinion was voiced, coders also judged who voiced it and the direction of the opinion.

The first task was a simple, mechanical one, with the coders agreeing in 98 percent of the cases; this resulted in an allocation of 1,155 articles into the category of non-opinionated or "descriptive." Most of the coder disagreement in the 23 discrepant cases was due to clerical error. In a few cases, disagree-

ment centered on whether to count as "opinion" passing references to political debates at home in long articles describing events in the field.

The second task entailed assigning opinions to various categories of "voice": editorial and op-ed, administration source, congressional source, judicial source, or popular (i.e., nongovernmental) source, including interest groups and polls, and, finally, foreign opinion from U.S. allies. Opinions from Sandinistas and contras were assigned "no valence" codes because we were looking at a domestic U.S. policy process aimed at evaluating the relative supportability of Sandinistas and contras. Hence, Sandinista and contra opinions were "canceled out." Since their numbers were approximately equal, this canceling out was of little consequence to the results.

For purposes of this first evaluation, all coded voices were weighted the same. Thus, President Reagan was given the same weight as an undersecretary of state, a poll, or a statement from a grass-roots opposition group. A speech by a senator was coded as a single "voice," as was a Senate roll call vote deciding a funding bill (as long as the vote was summarized in the *Times* in terms of its policy outcome as a "victory" or a "loss"). Articles describing different policy positions were coded as multiple voices. For example, an article documenting a battle between President Reagan and House Speaker O'Neill was double-coded as "administration voice" and "congressional voice."

Valence was assigned as + if the opinion expressed by the voice in question was supportive of administration contra policy, − if the voice opposed contra policy, and ± if the voice was ambivalent or divided about the policy. For example, when an article reported that a House vote to provide "humanitarian aid" to the contra army gave the Reagan administration a major policy victory, the voice was coded as Congress and the valence as +. When Congress was reported as "divided" or "embattled" over contra funding, the valence was coded as ±.

Several illustrative index entries should convey the flavor of the coding scheme. For example, a code of "Congress ±" (indicating split opinion) was assigned to the following *Index* entry:

U.S. House Intelligence Committee is split, mostly along party lines, over whether to recommend cutting off funds for covert support of rebels seeking to overthrow Sandinist Government in Nicaragua. . . (April 23, 1983, sect. 1, p. 5, para. 1).

A code of "administration +" was given to the following entry:

Pres. Reagan says insurgent groups in Nicaragua getting covert aid from CIA are "freedom fighters". . .says it will be "all right" with him if Congress wants to require that assistance be overt instead of covert. . . (May 5, 1983, sect. 1, p. 1, para. 6).

A code of "op-ed −" was given to this entry:

Op-Ed article by John B. Oakes scores election-year rhetoric by Pres. Reagan, particularly on issue of U.S. involvement in Central America; notes that while

Reagan is attempting to overthrow Nicaraguan Government because of few hundred executions and disappearances that occurred five years ago, he supports Salvadoran Government, which was responsible during same period of time for some 40,000 civilian deaths and disappearances at hands of military and paramilitary forces (July 9, 1984, sect. 1, p. 19, para. 2).

As these samples reveal, the *Index* contained fairly extensive summaries of the original articles. Moreover, the index was constructed primarily around "who said what," making it ideal for purposes of coding opinions voiced in news and editorials. The resulting coding tasks were fairly straightforward.

The intercoder reliability on the 1,177 opinion voice and valence codes was .94, with some cases of disagreement representing clerical error (e.g., "Congress" mistakenly coded as "popular") and easily corrected. The remaining disagreements tended to involve differing interpretations of opinion valence, with one coder scoring ± and another scoring − or +. These discrepancies were resolved by mutual agreement. Decisions to keep the codes simple paid off in high reliability and a good first test of whether more sophisticated coding or weighting schemes are required.

The format for analysis was also kept as simple as possible. Having access to the entire population of *Times* stories for the period in question was a considerable luxury. The coding for voice and valence represents all the cases, and it is a very large number. For most of the analyses the three-year period was broken down into 17 intervals corresponding to episodes climaxed by key policy votes in Congress (see Table 1). These divisions let us observe the variation in opinions reported in news accounts and expressed in the op-ed pages during times when there was substantial policy activity (such as committee hearings and funding votes) in Congress and when there was no policy activity in Congress. We also singled out a third division of policy activity occurring after the "electoral pressure" campaign to allow for a stricter test of the hypothesis.

Although the number of cases pooled within these three types of intervals is large (see Table 1), the small number of total intervals (n = 17) makes it inadvisable to rely too heavily on statistical analysis. The following analyses emphasize structural and graphically visible patterns in the data. In most cases, the patterns that bear on the key theoretical questions are quite dramatic. In this sort of exploratory analysis, "confidence" is obtained by building up layers of consistent patterns based on multiple indicators for each critical theoretical question. However, Pearson correlation coefficients are reported for the key patterns of association between *New York Times* editorial opposition and reported levels of congressional opposition in the news pages. Both the strength of statistical association and corresponding visual confirmation (see Figure 2) warrant the statistics used in this case.

The results show that opinions voiced in news stories came overwhelmingly from government officials, both before and after the collapse of congressional opposition. Of the 889 voiced opinions in the news, 604 came from officers, offices, or committees of U.S. governmental institutions.

Table 1: Culminating congressional action on contra funding in 17 time intervals used to analyze opposition to Reagan administration Nicaragua policies, 1983–1986

Period	Dates	Action	No. of stories
1	Jan. 1–Mar. 31, 1983	No activity	72
2	Apr. 1–May 5, 1983	House Select Committee on Intelligence votes to cut off CIA covert funds for covert actions against Nicaragua	93
3	May 6–Aug. 2, 1983	House votes to cancel all secret aid to contras	151
4	Aug. 3–Nov. 19, 1983	House again votes to cut off contra aid; Senate approves contra aid; House-Senate approve $24 million covert aid	131
5	Nov. 20, 1983–Jan. 7, 1984	No activity	115
6	Jan. 8–May 29, 1984	Senate approves $21 million contra aid; House votes against further contra aid	203
7	May 30–Aug. 5, 1984	House approves new budget with no contra aid	110
8	Aug. 6–Oct. 14, 1984	House-Senate approve $470 billion spending bill with no additional contra aid	95
9	Oct. 15, 1984–Jan. 4, 1985	Hearings alert Congress to contra abuse against civilians	161
10	Jan. 5–Feb. 24, 1985	No activity	65
11	Feb. 25–Apr. 29, 1985	House rejects aid request; Senate adopts aid request; Congress fails to compromise and House votes to cut off aid	173
12	Apr. 30–July 26, 1985	House-Senate approve nonmilitary contra aid	160
13	July 27–Nov. 4, 1985	No activity	135
14	Nov. 5, 1985–Apr. 15, 1986	House rejects Reagan's request of $90–100 million military aid; pressure campaigns are mounted against vulnerable House members	249
15	Apr. 16–June 28, 1986	In reversal of policy, House votes for Reagan military aid request	108
16	June 29–Aug. 17, 1986	Senate approves military aid	84
17	Aug. 18–Oct. 15, 1986	No activity	43

Note: Each analysis period began the day after a culminating congressional action or after the cessation of press analysis of that action. January 1, 1983, was selected as an arbitrary starting date; on October 16, 1986, the "Iran-contra arms scandal" emerged in the press.

Only 139 (or 15 percent of the total) opinions came from nongovernmental domestic voices (and many of these came from candidates in the 1984 presidential primaries). Polls occupied a minor place in this category, with only 30 references in all, and many of these came during the 1984 presidential election, when Nicaragua was an issue. Only five times did references to the polls make it into the headlines of the 1,860 news stories sampled.

Perhaps this journalistic marginalization of opinion polls (noted by Lang and Lang [17] in their analysis of Watergate) merely reflects the cultural ideal of granting responsible decision makers relief from the pressure of potentially

uninformed or irresponsible opinion. To be sure, the polls did reflect great factual confusion about who the players were in Central America in the first year or so after the issue of U.S. military intervention hit the national policy agenda. However, in the next two years, levels of factual confusion steadily declined and the public's rating of the issue's importance increased. Despite these trends, the *Times*'s attention to the polls was far greater during the period of greatest popular ignorance than during later periods of lesser popular confusion: Half of the poll references appeared during the first year of the contra controversy, and most of these references were to the single worst case—the New York Times/CBS poll showing enormous popular confusion about which factions the United States was backing in various Central American conflicts, including Nicaragua.

Perhaps even more significant was the nearly total neglect of areas of public certainty and legitimate concern. Only three times did reporters or opinion experts emphasize popular concerns about "another Vietnam" and about U.S. disregard for Nicaraguan sovereignty, even though these factors seemed to explain the remarkably stable public opposition to White House policy, which according to the Harris poll averaged almost 60 percent. For example, a Gallup poll from the period May 18–21, 1984, reported that of the 78 percent of the sample who had heard or read about the situation in Central America, 72 percent thought that it was likely to turn into another Vietnam. In short, there were grounds on which this stable opinion formation could have been granted greater credibility by the press, particularly after withstanding an intense three-year "public education" campaign by the Oval Office. By contrast, the way in which the *Times* reported the polls tended to undermine the legitimacy of public opinion on the issue.

The already small volume of nongovernmental voices in the news all but disappeared following the Reagan policy victory. Only a couple of back-page news accounts noted (for the historical record, perhaps) that the decision to fund the contra war was taken against the will of a stable majority in the polls. Still, it might be argued that, in the judgments of news professionals, no segment of this broad public was informed or credible enough to be granted news space to protest the decision. For the sake of argument, let us accept this possibility and turn to the editorial pages for signs of journalistic concern about the contra funding decision.

The analysis of editorial opinion in the *Times* makes an even stronger case that an indexing norm was rigidly applied in the face of conditions that would seem to warrant more active journalistic involvement in the democratic process. We used several measures of oppositional voices. The indexing hypothesis says that journalists implicitly answer questions about what, how much, and whose opinion to cover by looking to "official" conflict or opposition levels within the government. The institutional sources of opposition will vary across judicial, executive, and legislative branches from one issue to another. In this case, official opposition came primarily from Congress, with 180 of the total 197 official opposition voices reported in news stories. Thus, although Figures 1, 2, and 3 were calculated using all official opposition

voices (including 2 from the courts and 15 from within the administration itself), not only is the opposition coming from noncongressional sources swamped statistically by the volume of congressional opposition, but one also suspects that any implicit journalistic "index" operating in this story was based on congressional opposition as well. Thus, while the figures include all official opposition, they are labeled as congressional opposition to reflect both the statistical and likely journalistic focus of this particular case study. Within this general measure, congressional opposition was calculated as the number of voices, votes, and journalistic characterizations of opposition from members and voting blocs in Congress as a percent of the total of all opinions expressed in the *New York Times.*

Editorial opposition was calculated as net editorial opposition, or the con editorials and op-ed pieces minus pro editorials and op-ed pieces. A second measure of editorial opposition was calculated using the total number of opposition voices as a percentage of all opinions in the *New York Times.* This second measure used the same baseline (i.e., *total* opposition voices) as the "official opposition" measure and, as indicated in Figure 2, actually produced a stronger indexing coefficient (r = .76) between the *Times*'s editorial opposition and official opposition reported in its news pages. However, the first measure of *net* (con minus pro) editorial opposition levels was used in the analyses in Figures 1 and 3 for conceptual and theoretical reasons. Common sense suggests that both editors and readers approach editorial content differently than news content. My analysis to the contrary, common sense says that ratios of opinion in news reports are "supposed" to reflect the realities of power and public opinion in the political system vis-à-vis a particular issue. The op-ed pages, by contrast, contain some obligatory balance (varying from liberal to conservative papers) between pro and con debate. Thus, notable departures from a paper's balance of pro and con views are likely to make an impression on readers and, for purposes of our theory, are the best indicators of a news organization's change in editorial thinking about an issue. Also, from a methodological standpoint, the use of the "net" opposition measure is a more stable way of dealing with the small numbers of editorials that appear in some of the 17 time periods. All of this said, this chosen measure of editorial page opposition also correlates very strongly with levels of official opposition reported in news stories (see Figures 1 and 2) and thus offers strong support for our hypothesis.

As the pattern at the bottom of Figure 1 shows clearly, throughout the entire period, opinion on the op-ed pages was indexed tightly to levels of congressional opposition reported in the news pages. Without exception, when the ratio of voices in Congress opposing administration policy went up, so did the ratio of opposing *New York Times* op-ed page opinion. When the ratio of congressional opposition went down, so did the ratio of *Times* opposition-to-support on its op-ed page. Figure 2 displays this relationship in correlational form, showing that by the two most obvious measures of editorial page opposition, the editorial voices on the *Times*'s op-ed pages rise and fall as if "indexed" to the tides of congressional opposition. The correlation (Pearson's r) between levels of official opposition (primarily congressional) to the contra

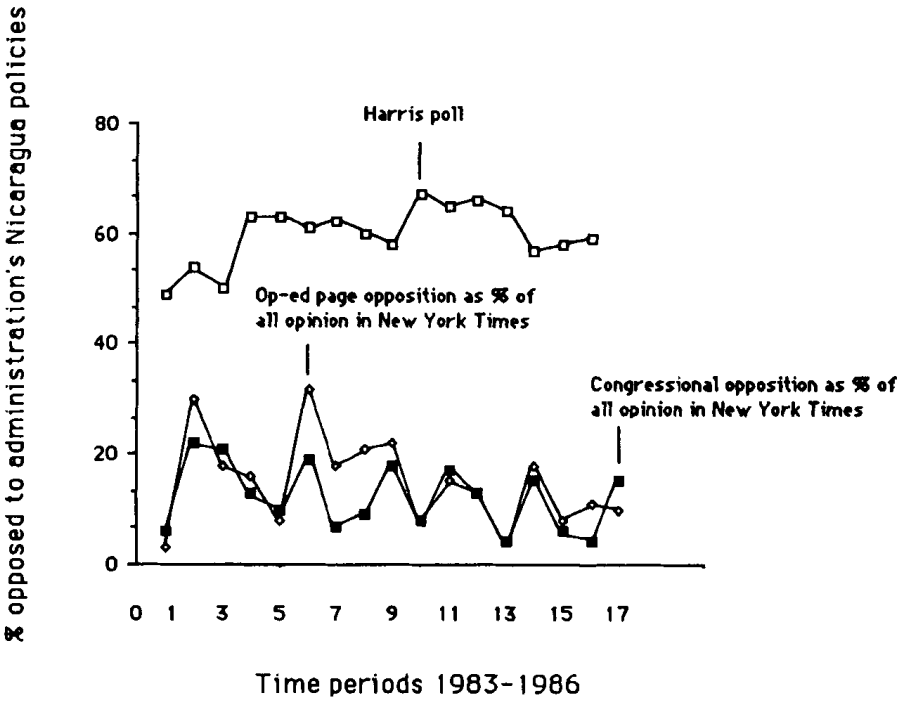

Figure 1: Popular, congressional, and press opposition to Reagan administration Nicaragua policies in 17 time periods, 1983–1986

policy in the news and *net* levels of opposition on the *Times* op-ed page over the 17 time periods in the study is .63; using *total* op-ed opposition voices, the correlation is a healthy .76.

The cautious critic might argue, of course, that debate in Congress was so reasonable that a responsible press merely tempered its levels of support and opposition as the "logic" of the policy process unfolded. This is where our critical test comes in. If, after the White House pressure on Congress, the *Times* op-ed page fell in silent step with the drop in congressional opposition, it would be difficult to argue that the pattern reflected a responsible press monitoring a reasonable policy process.

To what extent was congressional opposition actually silent following the White House pressure campaign leading up to the crucial $100 million funding votes? During the first period of this campaign culminating in the House vote supporting administration policy (interval 16), opposition voices in Congress represented only 5 percent of *all opinion* (pro and con) in the news, compared with an average of 19 percent in the immediately prior period. This 5 percent figure falls well outside the range (12 to 31 percent) for all the other policy periods. In short, Congress's opposition to the contra war policy all but disappeared from the news, despite its strong opposition throughout the two-and-one-half years immediately prior to the White House campaign and despite the magnitude of the policy decision that was before Congress at the time. Indeed, if official opposition voices in the news were used as a gauge of the importance or divisiveness of an issue, Nicaraguan policy would not seem

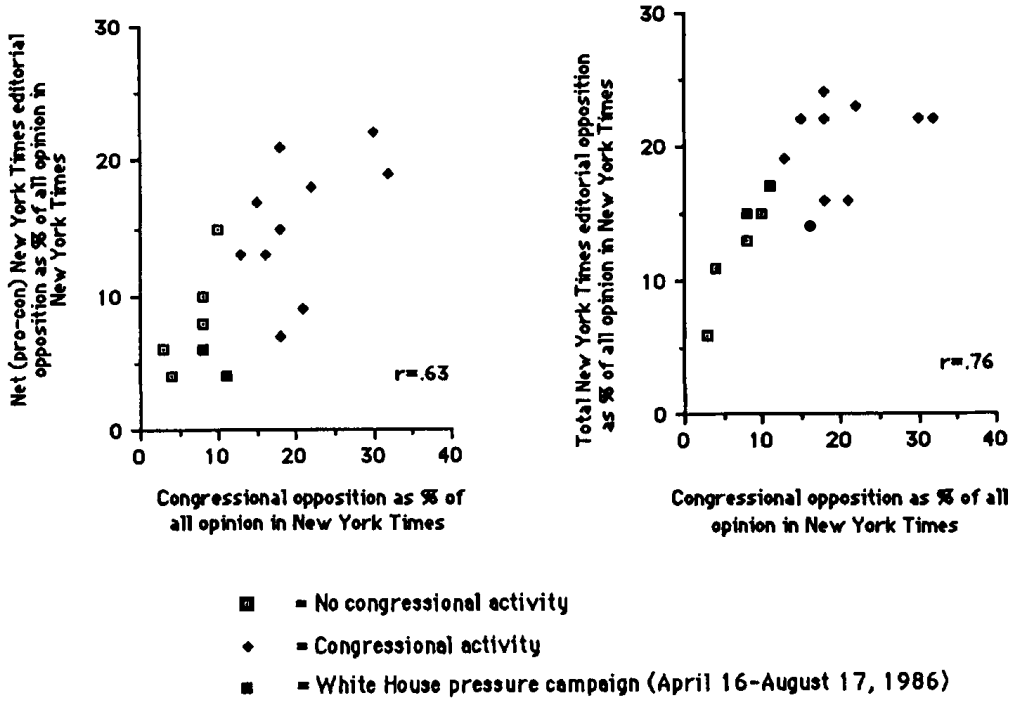

Figure 2: Congressional and *New York Times* editorial/op-ed opposition to Reagan administration Nicaragua policies over 17 time periods, 1983–1986

worth worrying about, since the levels of opposition were characteristic of periods in which there was no congressional activity on Nicaragua at all.

The most dramatic finding is shown clearly in Figure 3. The *New York Times,* like Congress, was also silent during the critical periods of the funding votes. *Times* editorial and op-ed opposition fell to the bottom of its range of previous opposition, even though back-page news articles at the time gave considerable cause for concern about the corruption of the policy process that was going forward. If ever there was reason for the *Times* to display its watchdog function, it was during these two periods preceding the House and Senate funding votes. Yet *Times* opposition fell below levels registered during periods in which there was nothing pertaining to Nicaragua policy on the institutional agenda.[1]

The evidence suggests that *Times* coverage of Nicaragua was cued by Congress, not by the paper's own political agenda or by a sense of "adversarial journalism." The "new professionalism" of the press would seem to operate on the assumption that "the system works," despite any evidence to the contrary, and that the "responsible press" keeps its criticisms within the bounds of institutional debate, however narrow or distorted those bounds may become. A citizen seeking an impression of public opinion on Nicaragua policy might have concluded from the press coverage by the summer of 1986 that contra funding

[1] For a more detailed analysis of these data and the inferences drawn from them, see Bennett (5).

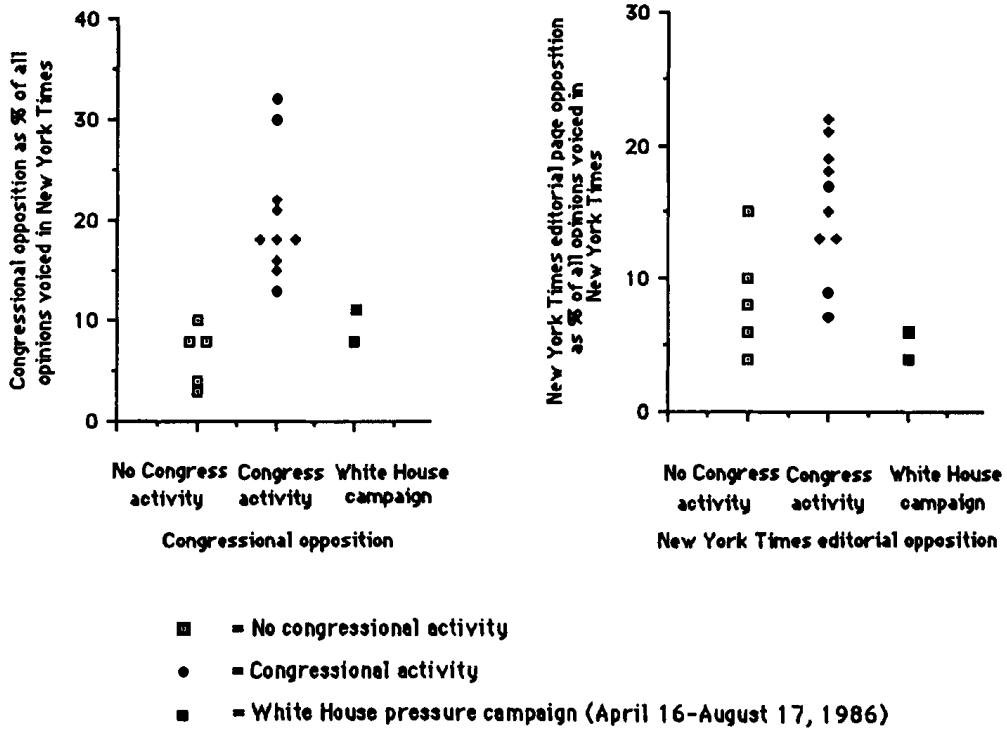

Figure 3: Congressional and *New York Times* editorial/op-ed opposition to Reagan administration Nicaragua policies during periods of congressional inactivity, congressional policy debate, and White House pressure campaign

had legitimate public support. Both in terms of reported congressional opposition and *Times* editorial opposition, that impression would have been correct.

By exploring different cases we may begin to see the general tendencies of press-state relations and thus a profile of the operation of U.S. democracy across different issue areas, as well as the role of the press in ensuring its quality. It is a long way from a single case study to a body of evidence strong enough to support a general theory. There is every reason to believe that patterns of media indexing may vary from issue to issue and from one political situation to another. On some issues that are of little consequence for the corporate economic order, normative vigilance may be relaxed to allow a greater range of voices to enter the news. In other cases, the clean opinion divisions among institutional power blocs required for easy indexing simply may not be present, leaving journalists with little common normative guidance for developing a story.

Among the issue areas in which indexing might be expected to operate most consistently are military decisions, foreign affairs, trade, and macroeconomic policy—areas of great importance not only to corporate economic interests but to the advancement of state power as well. However, the sheer simplicity that it introduces into the otherwise complex business of representing political reality

makes indexing a likely factor in structuring the content of a broad range of issues in the news.

Wherever subsequent investigations may lead, the indexing hypothesis offers a point of departure for thinking about a general theory of the press and the state in the United States. As noted at the outset, indexing brings into a common theoretical framework the three prevalent theoretical accounts of press-state relations: the "media monopoly" or corporate interest thesis, the organizational efficiency (i.e., "transactional" or "symbiotic") explanation, and the "liberal reporter" thesis. By cutting across different levels of analysis in a complex social system, indexing explains how the use of a common norm can accommodate the potentially competing interests and ideologies of actors in different structural locations in the system.

In the boardroom, indexing ties the fate of the corporation to the fate of the state. This does not guarantee, of course, that governmental decisions will always benefit a particular corporate interest. It does, however, minimize risks to the corporate community as a whole that might result if a genuine, unindexed "marketplace of ideas" received serious attention in the press. In everyday news production, indexing greatly simplifies otherwise difficult decisions about how to cover almost any story. Finally, for the individual journalist, who may be more liberal than the average media consumer, indexing creates room on the editorial pages and in news accounts to expand the range of liberal ideas whenever there are corroborating liberal blocs in government to warrant such expansion. This "indexed liberalism" is considerably different from the standing liberal bias charged by conservative critics and scholars. Indeed, it might be argued that media liberalism tends to disappear at precisely those moments when it would be most useful for maintaining the democratic balance in the culture.

Not only do these different slices of press reality begin to converge when interpreted with the indexing hypothesis, but we begin to see how actors at all levels in the system can rationalize indexing as the fairest possible way to cover U.S. politics. Let the institutional representatives of the people speak, and if the people don't like it, they can vote for somebody else. The trouble with this rationalization is that in the modern era of big money, skillful electoral marketing, and a cynical and withdrawn electorate, the people have little chance to correct the ills of the system at the ballot box. Perhaps more important, the images that flow from indexing are not likely to acknowledge any ills in the system to begin with. Barring the unlikely event of major powerholders criticizing the system that keeps them in power, indexed news stories of even the most investigative and adversarial sort will end with the conclusion that "the system works."

A case in point is media coverage of the Iran-contra scandal that broke in the news after the final time period in our case study. Despite considerable hoopla and extensive coverage, the media seemed content to allow the government to investigate itself, assess the importance of the problem, define the solution, and pronounce the denouement of the story. As a result, a scandal with deep institutional roots passed with only minor punishments handed out to minor actors

deemed personally responsible for the breakdown in normal foreign policy making.

Then why did the Watergate scandal become a more "important" matter, leading to more substantial punishments and reforms? I would argue that even in this now-classic case of investigative, adversarial journalism, the content of the unfolding story was indexed according to the more pronounced political divisions and definitions offered up by the executive branch, Congress, and the courts. When all the political dust had settled, the indexing norm left the press with little to conclude but that "the system worked." This was a conclusion not shared by millions of disaffected citizens who registered their sentiments for more than a decade afterward in polls showing extreme loss of faith in national institutions, including the press.

The same indexing norm that "marginalizes" (5, 15) public opinion in news accounts also leaves the media with little ability to understand or respond when that same public becomes disillusioned with the performance of both press and government. This vicious cycle can be broken only by a return to an independent press willing to exercise independent judgment. Such a shake-up would require an industry that is currently comfortable with a convenient and defensible norm to engage in a critical and potentially unsettling period of change. The three theoretical components (boardroom, newsroom, individual reporter) brought into dynamic tension here represent three quite different paths for change. However, as long as the system remains profitable for those above, and morally defensible from those below, strong initiatives are unlikely to come from any of these three directions.

As with most complex social systems, change is most likely to be triggered by outside events that alter the relations among different actors in the system. For example, a big decline in the market for news might trigger openness at the corporate level for reforms. Although there are signs that such a market decline for "hard" news is occurring, the reaction at the top seems to be a conservative turn to "news doctors," better packaging, and more features rather than toward expanding the marketplace of ideas. Another "external" force can be identified in the loss of public confidence in the media, a loss that seems to have its greatest impact in the newsroom. Journalism schools and the profession as a whole may be more receptive to conscious debate about contemporary practices; barring a concerted corporate effort to coopt or subvert such professional debate, it might become another avenue for change. Finally, should society at large take a radical turn to the Left, change could emerge from the initiatives of individual reporters. With more idealistic journalists covering more insistent social voices, the pressures for normative change from below might sway the news organizations to do battle with corporate owners over the nature of the news product itself. These are just several of many possible scenarios indicating that the proposed theoretical reformulation can address what none of the existing explanations does very well alone: how change might occur in the everyday production of news.

Until the current mass information system is pressed from the outside, we will continue to live with news that subverts its own historic ideals. The over-

riding norm of contemporary journalism seems to involve compressing public opinion (at least law-abiding, legitimate opinion) to fit into the range of debate between decisive institutional power blocs. In this ironic twist on the democratic ideal, modern public opinion can be thought of as an "index" constructed from the distribution of dominant institutional voices as recorded in the mass media. By adopting such an opinion index, the media have helped create a political world that is, culturally speaking, upside-down. It is a world in which governments are able to define their own publics and where "democracy" becomes whatever the government ends up doing.

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