MEDIA NATION

The Political History of News in Modern America

Edited by

Bruce J. Schulman

and

Julian E. Zelizer

PENN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

PHILADELPHIA

CHAPTER 4

When the "Mainstream Media" Was Conservative: Media Criticism in the Age of Reform

Sam Lebovic

Apart from their law degrees and their success in politics, Spiro Agnew and Archibald MacLeish had almost nothing in common. As Richard Nixon's vice president in the late 1960s, Agnew built a reputation as a champion of the "silent majority" and a caustic critic of leftists and liberals. MacLeish was an upper-class liberal whose moment of political influence had come three decades earlier, when he served in various roles in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration. Educated at Harvard and Yale, MacLeish was a poet, a New Dealer, and an internationalist, and he counted Dean Acheson and Ernest Hemingway among his close personal friends. He was, in short, exactly the sort of East Coast liberal that Agnew liked to pillory in the late 1960s.[1]

So it is interesting that MacLeish and Agnew shared a surprisingly similar antipathy to what each thought of as the mainstream media. In November 1969, Agnew gave two famous speeches in which he criticized the news media for its irresponsible and biased coverage of the government's policy in Vietnam. He began by criticizing the power of the television news: "the news that forty million Americans receive each night is determined by a handful of men responsible only to their corporate employers and filtered through a handful of commentators who admit to their own set of biases." The following week, he extended this criticism to the press, arguing that "the American people should be made aware of the trend toward the monopolization of

the great public information vehicles and the concentration of more and more power in fewer and fewer hands." "Many, many strong independent voices have been stilled in this country in recent years," Agnew observed. "And lacking the vigor of competition, some of those that have survived have—let's face it—grown fat and irresponsible." Agnew therefore challenged the media to "relate their great freedom with their great responsibility."[2]

In 1941, as a spokesperson for another administration facing media criticism of its war policies, Archibald MacLeish similarly asked whether the press was going to "accept, as a consequence of its traditional right to influence American opinion, a responsibility for the opinion which results?" He complained that there were "minority elements of the American press which are actively engaged in influencing American opinion in directions which lead not to victory but to defeat" and regretted that the rest of the press was not criticizing these "cowardly, half-hearted publishers, and the venal editors of their staffs."[3] Only a few years later, MacLeish expanded on his views of the irresponsibility of the media when he drafted a report on the state of the media as part of an intellectual commission exploring the meaning of modern press freedom. Like Agnew, MacLeish observed in the media a "tendency toward concentration of ownership, and therefore of control, in fewer and fewer hands." And like Agnew, MacLeish worried that monopolization of the press by an unelected and unrepresentative minority threatened the American public's ability to receive accurate news: "the greatest danger a self-governing nation faces is the danger that ideas and information will be kept from the people by dominant political or economic or religious or social groups."[4]

Of course, the two disagreed about something quite fundamental—Agnew was incensed that the media was monopolized by a coterie of irresponsible liberals; MacLeish that it was monopolized by a clique of selfish conservatives. But beneath the difference in partisan flavor, the logic and rhetoric of their critiques was almost identical. Agnew and MacLeish even buttressed their criticisms of media monopoly by citing judicial opinions from the same Supreme Court case—the Justice Department's antitrust suit against the Associated Press in 1943. That case had been controversial in MacLeish's time, for it was seen by conservative newspaper publishers as a New Deal effort to regulate the free economics of the newspaper industry and thus to bring the free press under the dictatorial heel of FDR. New Deal liberals like MacLeish, though, had argued that some state action was needed to

break apart media monopolies—they were pleased that the antitrust suit was judged constitutional by Judge Learned Hand, and that the Supreme Court had upheld Hand's decision in its 1945 ruling on the matter. So it was unsurprising that MacLeish would favorably cite Hugo Black's pronouncement that "the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public." But it was strange that Agnew, in 1969, would buttress his assault on the liberal media by quoting similar sentiments from the opinion of Learned Hand, who was a liberal, in the AP matter, which had been understood as a liberal victory.[5]

And therein lies an interesting historical puzzle. Conservative criticism of the mainstream (or "lamestream") media became a fixture of American political culture in the years after Agnew's speeches, and historians have done important work in unearthing the origins of right-wing media criticism in conservative movement culture after World War II.[6] But criticism of media monopolization and bias began in an earlier era, and it was not originally a discourse of the right. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, progressives and liberals had first criticized media consolidation, arguing that the media was becoming a homogeneous block, hostile to diverse voices. And they had thought that the capitalist nature of the mass media had made it overwhelmingly conservative, hostile to liberal and leftist and working-class voices in particular. By the time of the New Deal, it was almost an article of faith that the mass news media was a conservative force in society. New Dealers and Popular Fronters regularly decried the probusiness, biased conservatism of the press. Conservatives and media figures responded that liberals were simply seeking to shackle the free press—they argued that the news media industries needed to be protected from government and political meddling. Those partisan dynamics changed rapidly after World War II. Agnew's assault on the media in 1969 was criticized by one Democratic congressman as a "creeping socialistic scheme against the free enterprise broadcast industry."[7] It was easy for Agnew to brush off the charge. "That is the first time in my memory anybody ever accused Ted Agnew of entertaining socialist ideas," he quipped.[8] But the barb captured, however unintentionally, a deeper truth. In criticizing the political bias of the mainstream media, Agnew had inherited a left-wing discourse.

This essay reconstructs antimedia populism from the era before World War II, when it was a populism of the left, not the right. It begins in the late nineteenth century, when muckrakers and press commentators first noticed that commercial transformations in the press were creating a more

homogenous news media and when they first worried about the implications of those developments for American politics. Such media criticism moved into the mainstream of American politics during the Depression, when the Popular Front and the New Deal regularly clashed with what they understood to be the "conservative press." The progressive, liberal, and left-wing critique of the mainstream media is an interesting moment in its own right—it captures a fascinating intersection between media and politics, and provides a window into the political culture and intellectual currents of the long age of reform. And consideration of the curious echo of this critique in right-wing populism after World War II also raises broader questions about the historical transformations of American political culture, and about the relationship of the mass media to political life in the modern United States.

* * *

Criticism of the news media was, of course, as old as American politics. Thomas Jefferson had famously decried the press's "abandoned prostitution to falsehood," and suggested that the "malignity, the vulgarity and mendacious spirit" of the press was "rapidly depraving the public taste."[9] And throughout the nineteenth century, political partisans and moralists alike had found content in the press to which they could object. The very point of a partisan press, after all, was that it appealed to one political faction—by definition, that was going to be objectionable to others. And as the penny press and then the yellow press sought to reach ever-larger markets of readers through sensationalist journalism, their sensationalism raised questions about their respectability; the rise of urban crime reporting, in particular, caused much hand-wringing about the prurient appeal of the news.[10]

But in the late nineteenth century, a new form of press criticism began to emerge. More than simply criticism of the moral turpitude of the press, more than partisan swiping at the biases of individual editors or stories, the new criticism began to suggest, first, that the press was becoming ominously homogeneous and, second, that it was becoming homogeneously conservative. The criticism was a response to very real changes in the political economy of the newspaper industry—the rise of newspaper chains, the growth of monopoly papers, the dependency on advertising revenue, and the declining numbers of daily newspapers (which began in 1909, and was noticed shortly thereafter).[11] By 1909, Hamilton Holt documented the ways that the "preponderating weight of commercialism" was transforming the press.[12] The next

year, the *Atlantic Monthly* observed that "more and more the owner of the big daily is a business man who finds it hard to see why he should run his property on different lines from the hotel proprietor. . . . The paper is likelier to be run as a money-maker pure and simple."[13]

Populists and Progressives quickly argued that such commercialism was producing a conservative press, dominated and distorted by capitalist self-interest. Following his 1896 electoral defeat, William Jennings Bryan argued that the press had been aligned against him, and worried about the "predatory interests which own newspapers and employ brilliant editors to chloroform their readers while the owners pick their pockets."[14] In 1906, Henry George argued that the press had become a "pleader and champion for Privilege" because of its financial "bondage."[15] Muckrakers trained their eye on the manipulation of the press by business interests—Ray Stannard Baker revealed "How Railroads Make Public Opinion," and William Kittle documented the corrupting role of the Associated Press in "The Making of Public Opinion."[16] "The charge of conspiracy to suppress the truth is rife on every hand," journalist Oswald Garrison Villard observed in 1915: "I hear constantly that we have all agreed to perpetuate this outrage or that wrong. . . . I was myself asked the other day in a mass meeting: 'is it not true that you are owned by Wall Street?' "[17]

Two particularly important works of the new press criticism emerged from the muckraking impulse. In 1911, after a year of research and writing, Will Irwin published in *Collier's* a landmark series of fifteen articles on the history and operation of the press. Surveying the commercialism of the press, and documenting cases of graft both major and minor, Irwin discovered what he thought to be an "unhealthy alliance" between advertising and the press. He worried about the fact that the press was paid for by big business: "about one per cent of the population, and often the very one percent united, in the present condition of American society, with the powers most dangerous to the common weal." "Publicly," he concluded, the modern newspaper "assumes to exercise its ancient office of tribune of the people. Privately, it serves wealth. . . . The system is dishonest to the marrow."[18]

Almost a decade later, Upton Sinclair came to similar conclusions in his book of press criticism. In *The Brass Check*, named for the tokens used as payments in brothels, Sinclair set out to do for the newspaper industry what he had earlier done for meatpacking. Sinclair considered *The Brass Check* his "most important and dangerous book"—he was apparently worried that it would produce more than fifty libel cases—but it was in truth a far less

successful book than *The Jungle*. Partially written in the mode of autobiography, the self-published book was self-indulgent and self-righteous and often seemed to be an opportunity for Sinclair to settle scores. But the book helped to synthesize the nascent critique of the conservative, probusiness press, and it sold 150,000 copies. "It is the thesis of this book," Sinclair stated plainly, "that American newspapers as a whole represent private interests and not public interests." And Sinclair pulled no punches in making the case that the press was a functionalist tool of capitalist hegemony: "journalism is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over political democracy."[19]

With the "return to normalcy" in the 1920s, press criticism became more muted, focusing largely on professionalization and self-improvement.[20] But the worries of the muckrakers continued to reverberate. In 1921, for instance, sociologist Alfred H. Lloyd suggested that Sinclair's book was "not to be taken whole," but he nevertheless criticized the "peculiar conservatism of the press," its "venal sensationalism," and its tendency to "duplicity" and a "certain habit of fabrication."[21] Oswald Garrison Villard published portraits of the press that emphasized the rise of chains, the consolidation of the press, and its political conservatism—what he called the "prevailing tendencies in the rake's progress of our press, due to the commercialization of what should be the noblest of professions."[22] In their classic sociological portrait of Middletown, the Lynds remarked that "it is usually safe to predict that in any given controversy the two leading papers may be expected to support the United States in any cause, the business class rather than the working class, the Republican party against any other."[23] In 1927, in the most extensive criticism of Jazz-Age journalism, Silas Bent intermingled complaints about business consolidation with worries about the immorality of the press.[24] That seemed to sum up the press criticism of the decade: the concerns about press conservatism had receded, and been diluted, but they had not gone away.

* * *

In the 1930s, in response to the Depression and the polarization of the New Deal polity, criticism of the conservative press reached a crescendo. At first, the rosy press coverage of the early Depression raised concerns that the papers were deceiving the public. At the 1933 meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, one editor introduced a motion criticizing the newspapers for creating a sense of "false economic security." John Dos Passos was

blunter, confessing to Edmund Wilson in 1931 that "I'm beginning to think that every printed publication ought to be required by law to print at the bottom of each page: NB: THIS IS ALL BULLSHIT."[25] New Deal investigations into market failures also produced new evidence that business interests corrupted the press. Fiorello La Guardia's investigations into financial reporting revealed press manipulation and press incompetence. ("If newspapers spent one-third as much for an intelligent analysis of financial news as they do for sports," he concluded, "the loss of billions of dollars by American people in worthless stocks would have been averted.")[26] Extensive Federal Trade Commission investigations into the power trust also revealed that power companies had bought up newspapers and planted stories to resist public regulation. Press critic George Seldes called it "the greatest scandal in the history of the American press."[27]

At the same time, the rise of organized labor and the Popular Front heightened dissatisfaction with the range of opinions presented in the media. "It is a well known fact," Harold Ickes declared in 1939, "that, by and large, the press is unfriendly to organized labor." Representatives of labor agreed, decrying the biased and slanted coverage of strikes, negotiations, and industrial disputes in the New Deal polity.[28] Ferdinand Lundberg, author of a muckraking attack on the concentration of American wealth, decried what he called the "press of the plutocracy" and the "centralized class control over the American press by the very rich."[29] Journalist Max Lerner asserted that the American press was the "most class conscious segment of big-business, since its stock in trade consists of the legends and folklore of capitalism."[30]

Despite the rise of the radio, public debate about media monopoly and political bias remained fixated on the newspaper industry. This was because the radio was only just emerging as a discrete news medium. Through the mid-1930s, the radio networks both relied on newspapers for information and, following the Biltmore Agreement with the newspaper industry, limited themselves to two five-minute bulletins a day. The agreement was often violated, and it soon unraveled, but as late as 1938 67 percent of Americans still said they got most of their news from the newspapers.[31] Liberal critics of radio therefore focused primarily on the banal commercialism of radio—its very lack of political discussion constituting the problem—or on worrying signs that the newspaper publishers were about to extend their monopolistic influence over the new medium. By the end of the decade, in fact, almost one out of every three radio stations was owned by a newspaper, and the critique of media monopoly began to focus on what were soon dubbed mixed-media

empires. And it was the publishers, not the broadcasters, who were in charge of those empires.[32]

Public debate about conservative media bias therefore fixated on the power of the newspaper baron—larger-than-life political figures such as William Randolph Hearst, Robert McCormick, and Frank Gannett. These men did, in fact, mobilize their media holdings as a platform from which to attack the New Deal as a threat to American liberty. McCormick compared the National Recovery Act to fascism, and complained that "business cannot prosper when the President of the United States embarks upon a campaign to destroy the constitution." In a front-page interview with the *New York Times*, Hearst argued that the New Deal was "wasting the people's money in futile and fantastic experiments" and called for the end of the "NRA and its Nonsense, Ridiculous, Asinine interference with national and legitimate industrial development." Later in the decade, Gannett funded a Committee to Uphold Constitutional Government to attack FDR's plans to pack the Supreme Court and reorganize the executive.[33]

And come election time, the press threw its weight behind Republican challengers to FDR. In 1936, Hearst helped to fund and organize Alf Landon's campaign, McCormick paid a large network of Landon volunteers to turn out the vote, and FDR received editorial endorsement from only 37 percent of daily newspapers.[34] "The electorate went to the election booths," observed Oswald Garrison Villard, "under the strongest impression not only that the press was mainly Republican, but that it was fighting not for the country as a whole but for its own personal interests." As the election results came in—FDR would win 60 percent of the vote—pro-Roosevelt crowds in Chicago celebrated by assaulting the *Chicago Tribune*, setting fire to a delivery truck and egging its building.[35] In 1940, even fewer papers endorsed FDR—only one in four preferred him to Wendell Willkie.[36] After that election, journalist Irving Brant decried the existence of the "Press for Willkie" club, noting that the "alliance between the press and Big Business throws into the political scales, all on one side, a crushing weight of propaganda and money."[37] In reality, FDR's comfortable reelection in both 1936 and 1940 suggested that the media were not as powerful as these critics feared.[38]

But in the polarized political climate of the 1930s, the conservatism of publishers like Hearst and McCormick produced concerns about the disruption of democracy, as well as a vitriolic reaction. In the summer of 1936 a group of Chicagoans canceled their subscriptions to the *Tribune* because

of McCormick's "genius for distorting political news."[39] In 1936, Harold Ickes observed in his diary that there was "more widespread anti-Hearst feeling among the people than there has been for a great many years, if ever. I am told that when his name appears on the screen in some movie theaters, he is hissed."[40] Boycotts and mass meetings were held to protest the Hearst press's "attempts to glorify Fascism." In 1936, a Communist Party of California meeting featured a parade of papier-mâché–headed villains of American democracy: Hitler, Landon, and Hearst.[41]

In the late 1930s, an administration frustrated with press hostility took up the critique of conservative media bias. Harold Ickes, the secretary of the interior, was the figure most responsible for bringing the assault on the mainstream media to the center of politics. In 1939, he published a book criticizing the newspapers for their "misrepresentation of individuals and propaganda directed against the public welfare in the interest of the further enrichment and enhancement of the power of our economic royalists, among whom our Lords of the Press occupy a preferred status."[42] Ickes' debt to the leftist critique of the press was clear—the phrase "Lords of the Press" was the title of radical journalist George Seldes's 1938 critique of the conservative press; Ickes' book was entitled *America's House of Lords*. But coming from a prominent member of the administration, accusations of conservative media bias gained a wider hearing and a stamp of official imprimatur. In 1939, Ickes conducted a public debate with Frank Gannett on the state of American press freedom in which he continued his attack on the press. In front of a sold-out New York Town Hall and a national radio audience, Ickes bemoaned the "lack of a free press" in the United States and argued that the newspapers' "vast financial investment, running high into the millions, binds them closely to the business world from which they draw their sustenance. Freedom is impossible . . . when the counting office holds the whip hand."[43] Ickes and Gannett continued the argument in public letters in the press over the following weeks; in 1940 and 1941, Ickes publicly complained again of the "bias and narrow partisanship" of the press.[44]

Other members of the administration, too, took up criticism of the press. In 1938, Sherman Minton added that the press was so opposed to the New Deal that "the administration can't get a headline in the newspapers" and criticized the "propaganda that appears in the sheets of this country."[45] In 1940, Edward Flynn, chair of the Democratic National Convention, said that the newspapers "are under a real dictatorship, a financial dictatorship of their

advertisers and stockholders."[46] Even FDR, who regularly noted that "85%" of the press was against him, insinuated that the press was dominated by probusiness interests and edited "from the counting room."[47] Behind the scenes, it seems that there was even more administration animus toward the press. "Almost every week," observed a June 1937 *Kiplinger Washington Letter*, "there's some White House 'crack' against newspaper publishers as a class—off the record and unpublished."[48]

How much of the public believed in that critique is impossible to quantify precisely. Perhaps very few did. According to one Gallup poll, approximately 75 percent of respondents believed the papers were fair to the administration between elections, and 50 percent of FDR voters thought the press had been fair to the president in the 1940 campaign.[49] But by the end of the 1930s, there was little doubt that *if* the press had a political bias, it was a conservative, probusiness bias. A 1938 Roper poll, for instance, found 61 percent of the public thought that the newspapers soft-pedaled news that was unfavorable to big advertisers in at least some cases, and one in two thought it soft-pedaled news that was unfavorable to business in general. While the majority of the public couldn't decide whether the press was too antagonistic or friendly to the wealthy or to labor, 27 percent thought the papers too friendly to people of wealth, and only 8 percent thought the papers were too antagonistic. Only 9 percent thought the papers were too friendly to labor.[50]

And in some places, it seemed that the critique of the conservative press was becoming almost a form of political common sense. Walter M. Harris, managing editor of two papers in Oklahoma, calmly observed that "a big newspaper is first of all a factory . . . no doubt publishers shade policy to what they think is the protection of their property. The country club influence is a definite class influence. Few editors become publishers without becoming conservatives."[51] In 1939, a study of administrative publicity announced that "there is no denying that newspapers are preponderantly the reflectors of the views of business which has a first interest in making profits and a second concern for the public welfare."[52] In 1946, the introduction to a study of the press by working journalists declared that the volume wasn't "warming up the trite accusations that advertisers control the press, or that owners are in a conspiracy to suppress the news." Nevertheless, the journalists observed that "there is a widespread belief that most of the press favors property interests," argued that the "overwhelming majority" of papers "show unmistakable hostility to labor," and reported that "careful study of many newspapers across the country produces a strong impression that labor is consistently a victim of slanted news stories and prejudiced editorials."[53]

* * *

This critique of the conservative media would never disappear entirely from American political life, but it had hit its peak in the late New Deal. In the second half of the 1940s, some of the interwar critics of media monopoly continued to decry the ongoing consolidation and conservatism of the press. In 1946, Morris Ernst decried the "vanishing marketplace of ideas" created by media monopolies; in the same year journalist George Marion argued that the press was "a tool in the hands of a few finance capitalists."[54] Between 1940 and 1950, George Seldes continued his press criticism in a newsletter called *In Fact*, which documented the political deceptions of the corporate press as part of a leftist challenge to "American as well as foreign fascism, the corrupt newspapers, labor-baiters, anti-semites, and the great and powerful forces of money and greed." The newsletter was short-lived, but it helped to pass the torch of radical press criticism to future generations: both Howard Zinn and Ralph Nader read *In Fact* in their youth, and Seldes strategized with I. F. Stone when Stone began his weekly newsletter in 1953.[55] In the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, a renewed critique of corporate media monopoly would be taken up by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, Ben Bagdikian, Robert McChesney, and others.[56]

But the critique had lost its purchase on the mainstream of politics—it is hard to imagine a member of the Carter or Clinton administrations drawing on Bagdikian or Chomsky in the same fashion that Ickes had drawn on Seldes in the late 1930s. And in the 1950s, as a number of historians have shown, a populist critique of media monopoly would emerge from the right. Grown in the hothouse of conservative movement culture and nourished by the ferment of the 1960s, accusations of liberal media bias became a fixture of mainstream politics. It is Agnew's attacks on the liberal media that resonate in contemporary politics, not Ickes' assault on the "financial ties" or conservatism of the press. By the 1990s, according to one study of press coverage, there would be seventeen mentions of liberal press bias to every one reference to conservative bias.[57]

The displacement of the left-wing critique of the mainstream media by a conservative critique was a significant moment in American political

culture. It was a remarkably quick reversal, raising questions about broader transformations in American politics. It is, of course, possible that media content itself underwent a radical transformation from conservatism to liberalism in these years. But while we lack content analyses of this issue, such a change doesn't seem particularly probable. Postwar newspapers, for instance, overwhelmingly continued to endorse Republican candidates for the presidency—Nixon received between 54 and 71 percent of the endorsements in his three presidential campaigns; his opponents, including JFK, received between 5 and 15 percent.[58] Such editorial policy tells us nothing about the bias of the news content, which was the main concern for conservative media critics, but it does upset any idea of a homogeneously liberal media. Rather than a wholesale change in ideological bias in the press, it is more likely that coverage of certain issues triggered a conservative reaction. We know, for instance, that conservatives were troubled by the mainstream media's belated attention to the civil rights struggles in the South, seeing it as a sanctimonious form of meddling.[59]

In any case, the rapidity and ideological extremity of the shift in media criticism suggests that the content of the media was less important than the lens through which the media was being viewed. Midcentury media critics were not always careful social scientists, parsing close studies of content coverage. They were themselves political actors, making political arguments according to their own normative frameworks about the sort of issues and opinions that deserved coverage in the "mainstream" of American media culture. That makes the transformation of media criticism an interesting moment in the history of American political culture and intellectual life. It suggests that a precondition for the conservative critique of the press was the displacement of an earlier left-wing critique. That displacement can be explained by the broader dynamics of midcentury politics—the impact of World War II and the Cold War, postwar prosperity, the marginalization of leftist critics and critiques during the Second Red Scare. But remembering the decline of the leftist critique of the mainstream media reminds us that the establishment press that was criticized as part of the "liberal consensus" was not considered to be particularly liberal as it was coming into view in the 1930s. And it therefore casts into relief the novelty of conservative accusations of liberal bias.

Comparing left-wing and right-wing criticisms of the press also reveals the marginalization of structural critiques of capitalism after World War II. The long history of press criticism had fixated on the problems of commercialism, industrialization, and capitalist self-interest to explain the inadequacies of the press. But postwar conservatives who criticized the liberal press avoided such issues, which were hard to square with their broader commitments to free market economics.[60] And they found it tricky to explain why advertisers and corporate owners of the press would encourage and support inimically liberal journalistic enterprises. In 1962, in the pages of the conservative newsletter *Human Events*, the business and financial editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* engaged in rare reflection on this issue and was left wondering why businesses were continuing to advertise in the liberal media: "I am tired of defending a system that is headed by such muddled thinking as to ignore its own warriors and pay tribute, glory, and riches to its enemies."[61]

Most conservative critics therefore avoided this can of worms and fixated instead on the political biases of journalists, which were best explained not by economic factors but by the cliquish culture of liberal elites. Agnew, for instance, focused on the fact that journalists were a small group who "live and work in the geographical and intellectual confines of Washington DC or New York City" and who "read the same newspapers and draw their political and social views from the same sources. Worse, they talk constantly to one another."[62] And while Edith Efron insisted that she did not believe in conspiracy theories of liberal media bias, she nevertheless attributed the twisting of the news simply to "tacit determination by a ruling intellectual elite to hold onto a position of influence which is now entrenched."[63] Such conspiratorial and pop-sociological explanations for media bias were not absent from the liberal critique of the conservative media, which regularly worried about the "country-club" influence on the journalistic elite.[64] But the earlier critique usually, if not always, married that sociological explanation to a structural explanation—as Will Irwin put it in 1911, "the financial brake on free journalism is intertwined with the social brake."[65] In the conservative critique of the liberal media, the question of finances dropped away as social factors and cultural politics became all important.

Important as these differences in form are, a comparison of left-wing and right-wing critiques of media bias also reveals an important continuity: populist critiques of the media were a recurring feature of the twentieth century. Perhaps this is just what modern politics looks like: when liberals are in the ascendancy, and run up against media criticism, they decry its irrational conservatism; when conservatives are ascendant, they decry the biased liberalism of their critics. (If one were to look at this situation through particularly

rosy glasses, one could even conclude that this is exactly the sort of criticism that a watchdog press should inspire among government partisans.) But in a long enough historical perspective, the similarity between antimedia populism before and after World War II captures something distinctive about the modern media. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the media were more consolidated than at any earlier point: the major networks dominated the new broadcast media, the overall number of newspapers was declining, and the remaining papers were increasingly monopolistic. And the consolidated media were, by definition, increasingly remote from the mass of the public that depended on them for their news. As the illustrious Hutchins Commission put it in 1947, "the press has been transformed into an enormous and complicated piece of machinery. As a necessary accompaniment it has become a big business. There is a marked reduction in the number of units of the press to the total population. . . . The owners and managers of the press determine which person, which facts, which versions of the facts and which ideas shall reach the public."[66] Assaults on the bias of the "mainstream media," however paranoid, inaccurate, or hyperbolic, seem to have been an important mechanism through which the public sought to make sense of the unprecedented role of the mass media in American politics.

Since the 1980s, the rise of cable and the Internet have begun to break apart this mass, creating the potential for a more diversified media, as well as niche programming and new worries about the atomization of the public sphere. If those trends continue, it might make sense to inter the critique of mainstream media bias as a relic of an earlier era—it is already unclear whether there still really is *a* "mainstream media" of the sort that emerged in the twentieth century. Whether it will persist into the twenty-first century, however, the critique of the mainstream media was a constant in the twentieth. Its surprising history provides a lens through which we can spy some of the broad trends of modern politics: the partisan clashes that defined and then ended the New Deal order; the marginalization of structural critiques of capitalism; the displacement of leftist populism with a postwar populism of the right; the confusing emergence of newly powerful media entities. At the end of the day, perhaps MacLeish and Agnew did share something else in common—as twentieth-century politicians, they provided a channel for a persistent populist feeling that the mass media were distant, different, and dangerously unaccountable.

Company, 1946), 39fn44. On Barnes, see Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 67–83.

45. On brainwashing, see Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). On Packard, see his *Hidden Persuaders* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Ig Publishing, 2007 [1957]); and Daniel Horowitz, *Vance Packard and American Social Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

46. On the Moynihan statement, see Steven Weisman, ed., *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 2. The version commonly attributed to Baruch is: "Everyone has a right to be wrong in his opinions. But no man has a right to be wrong in his facts." See Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred R. Shapiro, eds., *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012).

4. When the "Mainstream Media" Was Conservative

1. Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 430–39; Scott Donaldson, *Archibald MacLeish: An American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

2. "Agnew Attacks Press as Unfair," *New York Times*, November 21, 1969, 1; "Agnew Criticizes TV News," *Boston Globe*, November 14, 1969, 19.

3. Archibald MacLeish, *A Time to Act: Selected Addresses* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 9–31.

4. Archibald MacLeish, *Draft Commission on Freedom of the Press General Report*, January 21, 1946, 3–4, Box 4, Folder 2; Archibald MacLeish, *Commission on Freedom of the Press General Report (Revised Draft)*, February 26, 1946, 6, Box 4, Folder 8, both in Commission on Freedom of the Press Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, Ill.

5. Margaret A. Blanchard, "The Associated Press Antitrust Suit: A Philosophical Clash over Ownership of First Amendment Rights," *Business History Review* 61 (1987): 43–85; Sam Lebovic, *Free Speech and Unfree News: The Paradox of Press Freedom in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 76–84.

6. David Greenberg, "The Idea of 'The Liberal Media' and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 1 (December 2008): 167–86; Mark Major, "Objective but Not Impartial: *Human Events*, Barry Goldwater, and the Development of the 'Liberal Media' in the Conservative Counter-Sphere," *New Political Science* 34 (December 2012): 455–68.

7. "Burch Supports Agnew," *New York Times*, November 15, 1969, 1.

8. "Text of Agnew Speech," *Boston Globe*, November 21, 1969, 23.

9. Leonard W. Levy, ed., *Freedom of the Press: From Zenger to Jefferson; Early American Libertarian Theories* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966), 372–73.

10. Marion Tuttle Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices: American Press Criticism 1880–1950* (New York: Longman, 1991), 7–61.

11. Alfred McClung Lee, "Trends Affecting the Daily Newspapers," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 3 (1939): 497–502; Raymond B. Nixon, "Trends in Daily Newspaper Ownership Since 1945," *Journalism Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1954): 7; Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

12. Hamilton Holt, *Commercialism and Journalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 34.

13. James T. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 48.

14. Linda Lawson, *Truth in Publishing: Federal Regulation of the Press's Business Practices, 1880–1920* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 69–70.

15. Henry George, *The Menace of Privilege* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1906), excerpted in Robert McChesney and Ben Scott, eds., *Our Unfree Press: 100 Years of Radical Media Criticism* (New York: New Press, 2004), 88.

16. C. C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1957), 165–79.

17. Oswald Garrison Villard, "Some Weaknesses of Modern Journalism," in Merle Thorpe, ed., *The Coming Newspaper* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1915), 53; Margaret A. Blanchard, "Press Criticism and National Reform Movements: The Progressive Era and the New Deal," *Journalism History* (Summer 1978): 33–37, 54–55.

18. Will Irwin, *The American Newspaper*, commentary by Clifford F. Weigle and David G. Clark (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1969), 15–16, 52, 71; Robert V. Hudson, *The Writing Game: A Biography of Will Irwin* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 68–73.

19. Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (Pasadena, Calif.: Author, 1920), 39; Kevin Mattson, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2006), 128.

20. Marzolf, *Civilizing Voices*, 76–106, 119–32.

21. Alfred H. Lloyd, "Newspaper Conscience: A Study in Half-Truths," *American Journal of Sociology* 27 (September 1921): 201–3.

22. Oswald Garrison Villard, *Some Newspapers and Newspaper Men* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926), ix.

23. Richard L. Kaplan, "From Partisanship to Professionalism: The Transformation of the Daily Press," in Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, eds., *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 4 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 136.

24. Silas Bent, *Ballyhoo: The Voice of the Press* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927).

25. James Boylan, "Publicity for the Great Depression: Newspaper Default and Literary Reportage," in Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens, eds., *Mass Media*

Between the Wars: Perceptions of Cultural Tension, 1918–1941 (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 160–66.

26. "Press Underemphasized the Slump, Journalism Students are Told," *Editor & Publisher*, April 8, 1933, 26.

27. John W. Perry, "Utilities Abandon Propaganda Work," *Editor & Publisher*, February 18, 1933, 7; George Seldes, *Freedom of the Press* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935), 78, 85.

28. Philip M. Glende, "Labor Makes the News: Newspapers, Journalism and Organized Labor, 1933–1955" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2010), quotation on page 108.

29. Ferdinand Lundberg, *America's Sixty Families* (New York: Citadel Press, 1937), 287–88.

30. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Symposium on Freedom of the Press: Expressions by 120 Representative Americans*, reprinted from December 13 to December 25, 1938 issues, no publication details, 1938, p. 43.

31. Roper Commercial Survey, August 1938, retrieved April 4, 2015, from the iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

32. Michael Stamm, *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio and the Politics of New Media* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 60, 64–66; Eric Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the US*, vol. 2: *1933–1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 17–22, 74–83; Eric Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the US*, vol. 1 (New York, Oxford University Press, 1966), 138, 278; Victor Pickard, *America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 9–37.

33. Richard Norton Smith: *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert T. McCormick, 1880–1955* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 342; David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 500; Richard Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government: The Controversy over Executive Reorganization, 1936–1939* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 64–65, 149; Betty Houchin Winfield, *FDR and the News Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 127–47.

34. Smith, *The Colonel*, 345–49; Nasaw, *The Chief*, 500–527; Michael Schudson, "The Persistence of Vision: Partisan Journalism in the Mainstream Press," in *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 4, 144; Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 128.

35. Villard, *The Disappearing Daily*, 9; "Editors' Afterthoughts," *Time*, November 16, 1936, 84.

36. Nasaw, *The Chief*, 515; Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 128, 130. Graham White has argued that the news was less biased than FDR claimed, but his statistics still show significant press opposition, particularly in the late 1930s. Graham J. White, *FDR and the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 69–91, 109.

37. Brant, "The Press for Willkie Club," in Harold Ickes, ed., *Freedom of the Press Today* (New York: Vanguard, 1941), 59–60; Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 127–47.

38. This would soon become codified as the "limited effects" theory of media reception in Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a President Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

39. Smith, *The Colonel*, 351.

40. Nasaw, *The Chief*, 521.

41. "15,000 Here Object to Rift with Reds," *New York Times*, February 26, 1935, 8; "Educators Assail Hearst 'Influence,'" *New York Times*, February 25, 1935, 18; "Radicals Assail Hearst," *New York Times*, February 4, 1935, 9; Memorandum, re: communist mass meeting, Box 95, Folder: CPUSA, Record Group 233, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

42. Harold L. Ickes, *America's House of Lords: An Inquiry into Freedom of the Press* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), x; George Seldes, *Lords of the Press* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1938).

43. "Ickes and Gannett Debate Free Press," *New York Times*, January 13, 1939, 14.

44. Ickes, *Freedom of the Press Today*, 12; Stamm, *Sound Business*, 104.

45. "Newspaper Curb Bill Offered," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1938, 2; "Minton Asks Bill Falsifying News Be Made Penalty," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 29, 1938, 9.

46. Winfield, *FDR and the News Media*, 144.

47. White, *FDR and the Press*, 91; Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Letter of Congratulations to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch," November 2, 1938. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15566.

48. White, *FDR and the Press*, 50.

49. George H. Gallup, "The People and the Press," in Ickes, *Freedom of the Press Today*, 118.

50. Roper Commercial Survey, August 1938, retrieved April 4, 2015, from the iPOLL Databank, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

51. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Symposium on Freedom of the Press*, 31.

52. James L. McCamy, *Government Publicity: Its Practice in Federal Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 248.

53. Leon Svirsky, ed., *Your Newspaper: Blueprint for a Better Press* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), ix, 16–17.

54. George Marion, *"The Free Press": Portrait of a Monopoly* (New York: New Century, 1946), 11; Morris L. Ernst, *The First Freedom* (New York: MacMillan, 1946).

55. George Seldes Interview with Howard Zinn, n.d., Box 64, Folder 16, Howard Zinn Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University; Pamela A. Brown, "George

Seldes and the Winter Soldier Brigade: The Press Criticism of *In Fact*, 1940–1950," *American Journalism* 6 (1989): 85–102.

56. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002); Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004).

57. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, 113.

58. Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 107.

59. David Greenberg, "The Idea of 'The Liberal Media' "; Major, "Objective but Not Impartial"; Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

60. For an exploration of the tensions between free market economics and theories of liberal media bias, see Daniel Sutter, "Can the Media Be So Liberal? The Economics of Media Bias," *Cato Journal* 20 (Winter 2001): 431–51.

61. Major, "Objective but Not Impartial," 463.

62. "Agnew Criticizes TV News," *Boston Globe*, November 14, 1969, 19.

63. Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), 207.

64. See, for examples, J. David Stern, "The Newspaper Publisher Moves Across the Railroad," or Raymond Clapper, "A Free Press Needs Discriminating Public Criticism," both in Ickes, *Freedom of the Press Today*, 92, 245–46.

65. Irwin, *The American Newspaper*, 69.

66. Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 15–16.

5. "We're All in This Thing Together"

1. Robert S. Allen diary entry, May 18, 1956, Box 23, Robert Sharon Allen Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

2. Schedule for April 11, 1953, Gridiron Dinner, Box 53, folder "Gridiron," James B. Reston papers, University of Illinois, Urbana (JBR).

3. Though he was closeted—and though he entered a marriage of convenience with his friend Susan Mary Patten in 1961—within Washington, Alsop's homosexuality was an open secret.

4. Script for April 11, 1953, Gridiron Dinner, folder "Gridiron," Box 53, JBR.

5. Press release, April 11, 1953, Box 44, folder "v. 56," Gridiron Club Papers, Library of Congress (LC).

6. See Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting From Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

7. Leo C. Rosten, *The Washington Correspondents* (New York: Arno Press, 1974 [1937]), 10.

8. Gridiron script for April 11, 1953, folder "Gridiron," Box 53, JBR.

9. Wendy Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

10. Excavating the cultural life of Washington at mid-century has been an important project for historians of gender and sexuality. See especially Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), and David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

11. Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York: Random House, 1973), 7.

12. To some extent, the social-professional insularity of Washington remains today; see, for example, Mark Leibovich, *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral—Plus, Plenty of Valet Parking!—in America's Gilded Capital* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2013).

13. Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 110–18 et seq. Hallin argues that the media were not as critical of Vietnam policy as is commonly remembered; rather, they mostly followed the government's line. When they were critical in the later years, it was after elite consensus on Vietnam had already broken down.

14. Ruth Gmeimer to Martha Strayer, February 2, 1954, folder "Professional file 1954," Box 1, WNPC President's Files, National Press Club Archives (NPC).

15. Bess Furman to Martha Strayer, February 4, 1954, WNPC President's files, Box 1, folder "Professional file, 1954," NPC. The Gridiron accepted its first woman member in 1975.

16. See Pamela Walker Laird, *Pull: Networking and Success Since Benjamin Franklin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006) for clubs as "buffers" in the business world, preventing the "wrong sort" from gaining access to social capital.

17. NPC Bar Committee Report for 1953, NPC Board of Governors papers, Box 1950–1954, NPC.

18. National Press Club, "*Shrdlu*: An Affectionate Chronicle" (Washington, D.C.: 1958), 5.

19. Carl Charlick, *The Metropolitan Club of Washington: The Story of Its Men and Its Place in City and Country* (Washington, D.C.: Judd & Detweiler, 1964), 275.

20. Ibid., 284–85.

21. Datebooks, Boxes 204–5, Eugene Meyer Papers, LC.

22. Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus*, 223.

23. Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States Since the 1930s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 89.

24. Barbara Matusow, *The Evening Stars: The Making of the Network News Anchor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 53.

25. John. B. Oakes, interview by Kenneth Leish, February 17, 1961, "Reminiscences of John Bertram Oakes," vol. 1, 22, Columbia University Oral History Collection, Columbia University.