

Hallin, D.C. (1986) *The uncensored war: the media and Vietnam*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press (p.3–12)

Defeat in Vietnam has left the United States deeply divided, and no issue has been more bitterly divisive than the role of the media. At one level, however, there has been remarkable consensus since the end of the war about precisely this issue. In the words of Richard Nixon,

The Vietnam War was complicated by factors that had never before occurred in America's conduct of a war ... [T]he American news media had come to dominate domestic opinion about its purpose and conduct ... In each night's TV news and each morning's paper the war was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed. Eventually this contributed to the impression that we were fighting in military and moral quicksand, rather than toward an important and worthwhile objective. More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war. Whatever the intention behind such relentless and literal reporting of the war, the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home.¹

And James Reston, writing on the day Communist forces completed their triumphant final drive on Saigon, concluded, "Maybe the historians will agree that the reporters and the cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issue of the war to the people, before the Congress or the courts, and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam."²

Liberals and conservatives disagree about who was being "more honest with the American people" (as Reston put it in the same column) and about the implications of conflict between the media and government—whether it means more vigorous democracy or a decline of "unity and strength of purpose." But it has come to be widely accepted across the political spectrum that the relation between the media and the government during Vietnam was in fact one of conflict: the media contradicted the more positive view of the war officials sought to project, and for better or for worse it was the journalists' view that prevailed with the public, whose disenchantment forced an end to American involvement. Often this view is coupled with its corollary, that television has decisively changed the political dynamics of war so that no "televised war" can long retain political support. These views are shared not only in the United States but abroad as well; it was the example of Vietnam, for instance, that motivated the British government to impose tight controls on news coverage of the Falklands crisis.³ Back at home, the Reagan administration, with the example of Vietnam once again in mind, excluded the media from the opening phase of the invasion of Grenada.⁴

And the issue of the role of the media in modern American politics goes beyond Vietnam. Vietnam coincided with a number of other dramatic political events in which the role of the media was clearly central. First was the civil rights movement, played out largely on a media stage,⁵ then the urban conflicts of the late 1960s, the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the rise of a host of new political movements, and finally Watergate. And the apparently growing prominence of the media coincided with what seemed to be a crisis in political institutions: public confidence in government declined dramatically during these years, public attachment to both political parties weakened, and the political system began a twenty-year period during which not a single president would serve two full terms of office.⁶ These developments, along with Vietnam, have provoked a broader controversy about the relation of the media to the institutions of American government.

One of the opening shots in this controversy came in a 1975 study commissioned by the Trilateral Commission on the subject of the "governability" of democracies. The section on the United States, written by Samuel Huntington, argued that the American political system of the 1960s and 1970s suffered from an imbalance between its governing institutions—chiefly the presidency—and its

oppositional institutions. Central among these oppositional institutions, which he saw as gaining enormously in power during the Vietnam era, Huntington named the media, with special emphasis on television. Huntington wrote:

The most notable new source of national power in 1970, as compared to 1950, was the national media. . . . There is ... considerable evidence to suggest that the development of television journalism contributed to the undermining of governmental authority. The advent of the half-hour nightly news broadcast in 1963 led to greatly increased popular dependence on television as a source of news. At the same time, the themes which were stressed, the focus on controversy and violence, and, conceivably, the values and outlook of the journalists, tended to arouse unfavorable attitudes toward established institutions and to promote a decline of confidence in government. ... In the 1960s, the network organizations, as one analyst put it, became "a highly creditable, never-tiring political opposition, a maverick third party which never need face the sobering experience of governing."⁷

Huntington later argued that "crises" like those of the 1960s and 1970s resulted from a hostility to power and authority deeply entrenched in American political culture and expressed particularly strongly by the media.⁸ Since the mid-1970s a large body of conservative commentary has expressed this view of the media's role in modern American politics in one form or another.⁹

Journalism has become "professionalized"; an ethic of political independence has come to dominate the journalist's self-image, and that ethic does, as conservatives have observed, contain a strong streak of hostility toward the holders of political power. This hostility arises in part from the nature of journalism as an occupation. Officials, in their efforts to control political appearances, necessarily challenge the autonomy of the media, and journalists naturally resist. As part of the professional socialization process, moreover, the journalist must renounce precisely the goal of political power which the politician pursues. And consistent with Huntington, the journalists' hostility to power probably also has deep roots in American political culture. The notion of journalistic professionalism arose during the Progressive era, with close ties to the Progressive movement. And one characteristic of Progressivism was a strong individualistic suspicion of the wielders of power in the great organizations, including "big government," that were coming to dominate American society. [...]

But opposites interpenetrate, as Hegel showed us, and things that at one moment seem antagonistic at the next seem united in symbiotic harmony. Simultaneous with the rupturing of the media's old partisan ties and the development of professional autonomy, another major change in journalism was taking place. The relation between the media and political authority was becoming "rationalized" in the Weberian sense: it was becoming depersonalized and depoliticized, in the partisan sense of "political," and the media were becoming integrated into the process of government. A sort of historical trade-off took place: journalists gave up the right to speak with a political voice of their own, and in turn they were granted a regular right of access to the inner councils of government, a right they had never enjoyed in the era of partisan journalism. The press was recognized as a sort of "fourth branch of government," a part of the informal constitution of the political system; and it in turn accepted certain standards of "responsible" behavior- These standards involved not merely renouncing the right to make partisan criticisms of political authority, but also granting to political authorities certain positive rights of access to the news and accepting for the most part the language, agenda, and perspectives of the political "establishment." This ethic of "responsibility" became particularly powerful in foreign affairs reporting, as World War II confronted the United States with its first great foreign threat since the early nineteenth century, and the nation emerged from that conflict as the hegemonic power in a nuclear world.

Structurally the American news media are both highly autonomous from direct political control and, through the routines of the news-gathering process, deeply intertwined in the actual operation of government. Culturally and ideologically, they combine the Progressive suspicion of power with a respect for order, institutions, and authority exercised within those institutions that is equally a part of twentieth-century American liberalism.¹⁰ And the individualist suspicion of power has often been displaced in the case of foreign affairs by the nationalism of the Cold War.

In the early years of the Vietnam war, particularly before the Tet offensive and the subsequent shift in American policy from escalation to de-escalation, most news coverage was highly supportive of American intervention in Vietnam, and despite occasional crises, Kennedy and Johnson were usually able to "manage" the news very effectively. Americans have been preoccupied since the end of the

war with the question of "why we lost," and this has focused the nation's historical memory on the political divisions, including those between the media and the administration, which reached their peak between 1968 and 1972. But if one asks instead how the United States got *into* Vietnam, then attention must be paid to the enormous strength of the Cold War consensus in the early 1960s, shared by journalists and policymakers alike, and to the great power of the administration to control the agenda and the framing of foreign affairs reporting.

Eventually Vietnam, along with other events of the period, did push the media in the direction of greater separation from the state. The peculiar circumstances of that war, for one thing, removed an important remnant of direct government control over the media: military censorship in wartime. Because Vietnam was a limited war in which U.S. forces were formally "guests" of the South Vietnamese government, censorship was politically impractical; ... So for the first time in the twentieth century the media were able to cover a war with nearly the freedom they have covering political news in the United States. Probably more important, as the war ground on (the main difference between Vietnam and Grenada or the Falklands is that the latter two were short and relatively costless), and as political divisions increased in the United States, journalists shifted along the continuum from a more cooperative or deferential to a more "adversarial" stance toward officials and their policies. Today journalists often portray the Vietnam/Watergate era as a time when the media "came of age," by which they mean both that the media became more autonomous in relation to government and the professional journalist more autonomous within the news organization. The decision to print the *Pentagon Papers* is often taken as the symbol of this change:

It was, they all thought later ... the first moment of the [*Washington Post*] as a big-time newspaper, a paper able to stand on its own and make its own decisions. ... [N]ever during Watergate did [editor] Ben Bradlee have to call [publisher] Katherine Graham about whether or not they should print a particular story. If you had it, you went with it. It was the key moment for the paper, the coming of age.¹⁰

The change was real, important, and probably lasting. But it also needs to be kept in perspective. For all the drama of events like Cronkite's Tet broadcast and the battle over the *Pentagon Papers*, the basic structure of relations between the media and government were not radically different in later years of Vietnam. Early in the war, for example, the journalists relied primarily on two kinds of sources: government officials, particularly in the executive branch, and American soldiers in the field—the latter being particularly important in the case of television. They continued to rely on these same sources throughout the war; but later on these sources became much more divided, and many more of them were critical or unenthusiastic about American policy. The news "reflected" these divisions, to use the mirror analogy. But that wasn't all; the divisions also triggered a different mode of reporting.

The "profession" of journalism has not one but many different sets of standards and procedures, each applied in different kinds of political situations. It is in these varying models of journalism that the ambivalent relation between the media and political authority finds its practical resolution. In situations where political consensus seems to prevail, journalists tend to act as "responsible" members of the political establishment, upholding the dominant political perspective and passing on more or less at face value the views of authorities assumed to represent the nation as a whole. In situations of political conflict, they become more detached or even adversarial, though they normally will stay well within the bounds of the debate going on within the political "establishment," and will continue to grant a privileged hearing particularly to senior officials of the executive branch. The normal routines of the "fourth branch of government"¹¹ produced a dramatic change in Vietnam coverage over the years, toward more critical or "negative" reporting. But they also limited that change. The Nixon administration retained a good deal of power to "manage" the news; the journalists continued to be patriots in the sense that they portrayed the Americans as the "good guys" in Vietnam. News coverage in the later years of the war was considerably less positive than in the early years, but not nearly so consistently negative as the conventional wisdom now seems to hold. If news coverage largely accounted—at least as an "intervening variable"—for the growing public desire to get out of the war, it probably also accounts for the fact that the Nixon administration was able to maintain majority support for its Vietnam policies through four years of war and for the fact that the public came to see the war as a "mistake" or "tragedy," rather than the crime the more radical opposition believed it to be.

Notes

¹ Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 350.

² James Reston, "The End of the Tunnel," *New York Times* (NYT hereafter), April 30, 1975, p. 41.

³ Robert Harris, *Gotcha! The Media, the Government and the Falklands Crisis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 61-65.

⁴ "Ban on Press in Grenada Linked to Vietnam Role" (UPI), *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 19, 1983.

⁵ David J. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor and Government in the Public Mind* (New York: Free Press, 1983); Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁷ Michel J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁹ Much of this literature is listed in Daniel C. Hallin, "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media," *Journal of Politics* 46 (Feb. 1984).

¹⁰ Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), chs. 2, 6.

¹¹ Halberstam, op. cit., p. 578.