

This article was downloaded by:[Gronke, Paul]
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Political Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713774515>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2007

To cite this Article: Gronke, Paul and Cook, Timothy E. (2007) 'Disdaining the Media: The American Public's Changing Attitudes Toward the News', Political Communication, 24:3, 259 - 281

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10584600701471591

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600701471591>

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Disdaining the Media: The American Public's Changing Attitudes Toward the News

PAUL GRONKE and TIMOTHY E. COOK

After spending two decades studying the news media as an institution, Tim Cook turned his attention to public attitudes about the press, a topic that lurked behind much of his work, most prominently Governing with the News, but one that he had never addressed directly in print. As was typically the case with Tim's voracious intellectual appetite, the project grew into a larger study of public trust and confidence in institutions. This piece represents the first fruits of this collaboration, addressing what began our inquiry: what was the cause of the long known, but seldom explained, decline in public confidence in the press? Was it because they had become, in Cook's words, just another "governing" institution? Or was there something distinct about the press as an institution in the array of public attitudes about the social and political world? In this piece, we demonstrate how confidence in the press is distinct from generalized confidence in other social and political institutions. In particular, we find that the same political indicators that lead to higher confidence in institutions in general drive down confidence in the press. We close by speculating on likely future trends given the adversarial tenor of press coverage.

Keywords trust in government, confidence in press, public opinion, news media

In the early 1970s, in the wake of Watergate and a presidential impeachment, one of the key players in that scandal—the news media—rode high in public esteem. Harris and National Opinion Research Center surveys from that time period reveal that “the people running the press” were trusted and admired, not far below (if at all) those most trusted of American institutions, the military and the Supreme Court, and considerably higher than the more overtly political institutions: Congress and the presidency (Lipset & Schneider, 1987, Table 2-1; W. L. Bennett, 1998, Figure 1). Looking back on that decade, Lipset and Schneider (1987, p. 69) noted a trend “of increasing relative esteem” for the press. Not only were the news media favorably perceived, but also survey research in the 1970s and 1980s revealed that the aggregate level of public confidence in the news media varied in ways largely independent of public confidence in other institutions. To Lipset and Schneider (1987, p. 65), this meant that the press, along with organized religion, were “‘guiding’ institutions, outside the normal political and economic order, and to some extent ‘critics’ of that order.” To the extent that there was any connection, confidence in

We would like to thank John Ratliff for research support, and the faculty and students of Louisiana State University, Reed College, and Williams College for comments on earlier portions of this work. Paul Gronke is Chair of the Political Science Department at Reed College.

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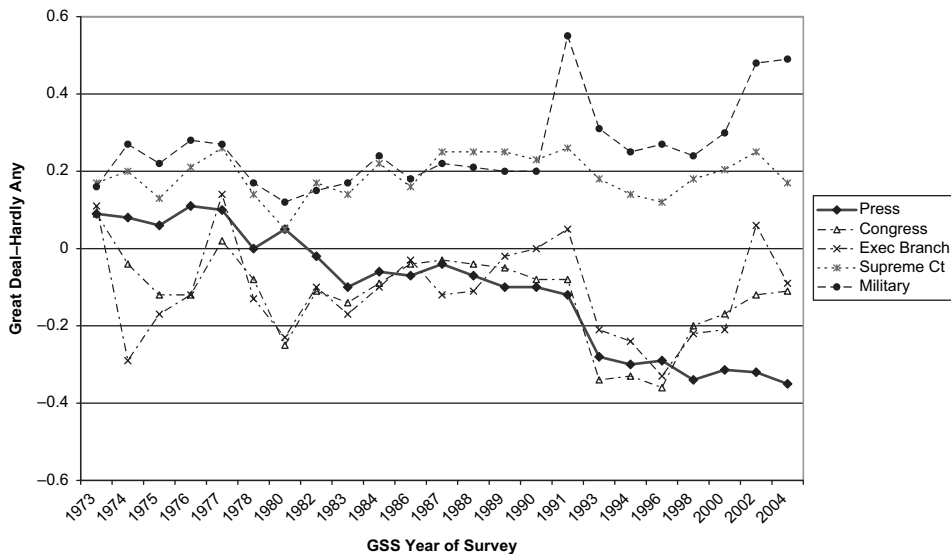


Figure 1. Confidence in the press and television vs. governmental institutions.

the press rose when confidence in other branches, especially the executive, fell, in a “modest but noticeable see-saw relationship” (Lipset & Schneider, 1987, p. 55).¹

Even after restrictions on press access during the United States’ invasion of Grenada in 1983 seemed to occasion little overt outrage, public criticism of the news media remained fairly limited (Gergen, 1984; Schneider & Lewis, 1985; Whitney, 1985; Robinson & Kohut, 1988). Citizens were, to be sure, critical of the tendencies they perceived for the news media to be unfair, biased, and preoccupied with bad news. Nonetheless, the public was satisfied with the overall performance of the news outlets with which they were most familiar, rarely provided a majority in favor of government restrictions on the media (ones that reporters strongly opposed), and even viewed the news media as a whole more positively than other institutions.

For instance, *Los Angeles Times* polls in 1981 and 1985 asked respondents to compare the news media with business, organized labor, and government to gauge which “has the highest standards of honesty and integrity,” “has the highest standards of fairness and impartiality,” and “has done most to promote the public good.” In each case, a strong plurality preferred the news media of the four, while only a handful fingered the news media when asked which of the institutions “should have its power cut back for the good of the country” (Gergen, 1984, p. 7; Schneider & Lewis, 1985, Table 6). In effect, then, from the 1970s through the mid-1980s, the public saw the news media as valuable adversaries to fallible political power.

By contrast, by the late 1990s, in the wake of another presidential scandal and another presidential impeachment, the news media were no longer so favorably viewed. Indeed, of all the institutions examined in the yearly General Social Survey (GSS), public confidence in the press has suffered the steepest decline (see Figures 1 and 2 see, also FitzSimon & McGill, 1995). The ratings of the news media, which were once seen as independent of views toward other political institutions, are now more strongly correlated with them (S. Bennett et al., 1999). According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for

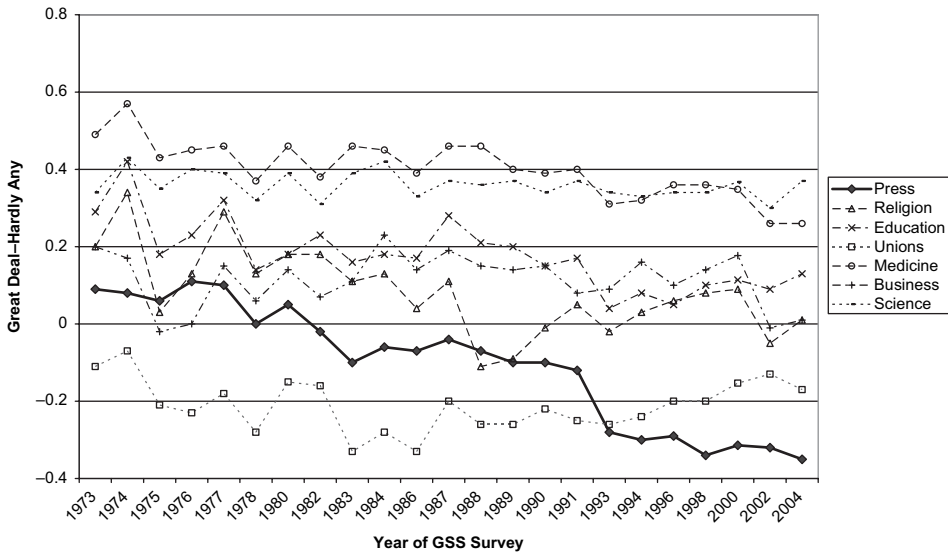


Figure 2. Confidence in the press and television vs. social institutions.

the People and the Press (1998c, 1999b), the public is more inclined to say that “the news media gets in the way of society solving its problems,” and that news organizations generally “don’t care about the people they report on” and “try to cover up their mistakes.” Overall, the news media are now seen as exercising too much influence, leading to a sharp erosion in the former reticence about governmental intervention to improve the news (Smith & Lichter, 1997, Exhibit 3–4).

This sea change in the American public’s attitudes toward the news media is a familiar story. Distinguished reporters themselves have recounted it many times. For instance, E. J. Dionne Jr.’s most recent diagnosis of the ills of American politics, *They Only Look Dead* (1996), followed on James Fallows’s *Breaking the News* (1996) and said flatly “Americans hate the press” and that “we are now in a middle of a new revolt against the journalistic order.” Journalists, when they received awards in 1999 for their defense of the First Amendment, said much the same thing in their acceptance speeches. Marvin Kalb (1999, p. 9), for instance, ominously pointed out, “The American press is lucky that the First Amendment was passed more than 200 years ago; there is little reason to believe that it would be passed today, and there is increasing reason to believe that the American people have lost confidence in much of the press to do the right things.” John Seigenthaler likewise noted in October 1999 that “public hostility toward the press today is ‘more pronounced, more profound’ than at any time in the past half-century” (“Public Distrust,” 1999, p. 1). Those paid by journalists to defend the profession—self-described “First Amendment lawyers”—go even more over the top:

A canyon of disbelief and distrust has developed between the public and the news media. Deep, complex and so contradictory as to be airless at times, this gorge has widened at an accelerating rate during the last decade. Its darkness frightens the media. It threatens not just the communication industry’s enviable financial power but its special role in ordering American democracy. It is a canyon of terrifying proportions. (Sanford, 1999, p. 11)

Indeed, the unpopularity of the news media is taken nowadays to be so obvious that it barely deserves discussion. Dave Barry (1999), in a humor column in early 1999, waggishly pointed out that one reason for public disaffection is that “editors are busy doing surveys on declining journalism credibility, so they have no time to look at the actual newspaper.” More seriously, Charles Overby (1999, p. 3), chairman of the Freedom Forum, recently suggested, “Surely, we are approaching—at least within the media—hate-the-press fatigue.... Whenever three or more journalists are gathered, we create a panel to talk about sagging public attitudes toward the press. We can cite surveys, town meetings, focus groups and newsroom anecdotes. Does it do any good to talk about this?”

Yet, despite all of this talk and hand-wringing, there have actually been astonishingly few systematic attempts to figure out the contours of the declining public approval of the news media, where it comes from, and just what it means. Journalists, politicians, and other onlookers, of course, all have pet theories for the shift in public opinion—the “blaming-the-messenger” phenomenon, a spillover effect of the growing cynicism of the public, public disaffection from more negative “gotcha” journalism, increasing attacks by politicians on the news media—but none of them have mustered empirical evidence on behalf of their claims. In short, while the decline is often cited, it is rarely explained.

Why should this decline matter to social scientists interested in studying politics, political communications, and public opinion? We put forth two rationales. First, if the news media are nowadays a political institution, as some authors have suggested (e.g., Cook, 2005; Sparrow, 1999), it makes sense to ask the same questions of legitimacy that we would ask of the three constitutionally endowed branches of the federal government. Moreover, the news media’s institutional power relies in no small part on whether or not they are seen within a society as “together presiding over a given part of social and political life” (Cook, 2005, p. 71). In effect, whether or not the news media constitute a political institution is an empirical question. Unlike institutions that were specifically empowered by a constitution, institutions that have arisen out of social and political practice are unusually dependent upon the public’s support. Such power is endangered when public opinion begins to question its legitimacy. As Dennis (1975, p. 189) asked about another intermediary institution, political parties, “Are we able to say with any assurance that public goodwill has reached a dangerously depleted level—a point low enough to make the institution unable to withstand major new stresses during the coming years?” However, the institutional approach has largely focused on how the work of the news media has become increasingly embedded in governing institutions and processes, and the work of political actors outside of government. We take the next logical step: investigating the “fourth branch of government” (Cater, 1959) through the lens of public evaluations.

Second, the rapidly growing interest in faith, trust, and confidence in government raises the question whether recent declines in civic engagement, confidence in institutions, and requisite accumulations of social capital constitute a crisis in American democracy. We hope to challenge, or at least modify, this developing conventional wisdom. Most important for our point is that this literature, save a few notable exceptions (Lipset & Schneider, 1987; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; Cook & Gronke, 2005), largely relies on attitudes toward undifferentiated constructs (“government,” “democracy”) and/or fails to discriminate among different institutions other than comparing levels or grouping “public” and “private” institutions separately.

Yet while the trend lines of evaluations of political institutions are consistently downward in the United States, indeed in most Western democracies (e.g., see the essays in the collections by Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997; Norris, 1999a; Pharr & Putnam, 2000), there is considerable variation from one institution to the next, in terms of the absolute levels,

the trajectories of confidence over time, and the factors that encourage citizens to express more or less confidence in each institution. While the overall trend line has received the bulk of attention, we simply cannot understand the questions raised by the students of “critical citizens” or “disaffected democracies” unless we figure out why some institutions have been exempted or at least cushioned from the overall decline. For instance, in the United States, the military has lost little confidence in comparison to the strong decline in confidence in the executive branch or Congress. Whether this reflects simply “easy issues” where the most socially desirable answer is easily given, or deeper and more discriminating understandings of particular institutions for different reasons, has yet to be determined (Gronke & Feaver, 1999).²

Fortunately for our concerns, there are important data to examine. The first item of business is to see if indeed there has been a decline or not in the confidence accorded to the news media, and why. Later investigations will address cross-sectional data of more fine-grained attitudes toward the news media, journalism, news organizations, and the like.

Prior to the early 1970s, there were relatively few poll results that would allow us to track popular views of the press—and the majority of those were collected during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt (see Erskine, 1970–1971). The first data point that allows us to follow trends through time was a 1966 Harris poll. Starting in 1973 and continuing on through 1998, the GSS has included a battery of items assessing confidence in institutions. Respondents are prompted with these general instructions: “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the *people running* these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?”³ The institutions listed were banks and financial institutions, major companies, organized religion, education, the executive branch of the federal government, organized labor, the press, medicine, TV, the U.S. Supreme Courts, the scientific community, Congress, and the military. Our analysis will encompass pooled cross-sectional data from the cumulative GSS file for 1973–2004.⁴

Nevertheless, the confidence series of GSS makes a good starting point. Even those who argue that the question is “narrow and flawed” end up charting its results over time (compare Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995, p. 22 and Figure 2.1). The focus on particular institutions is, at least, an improvement over another oft-used time series, the trust and efficacy questions in the National Election Studies that merely refer to an undifferentiated “government.” Moreover, Lipset and Schneider (1987, pp. 89–93), report that changing the question wording in a split-half sample to refer strictly to the institution, not to its leaders, made little difference, so we can proceed with relative caution that the measure does tell us something about Americans’ regard for the institution.

Charting the Decline

We begin by examining the mean ranking in the GSS for confidence in the leaders of the press, shown in Figure 3.⁵ Although the variation is, unfortunately, constrained by the fact that the scale consists only of three points (“great deal,” “only some,” and “hardly any”), there is an unmistakable drift downward from the slightly favorable average rankings for the years 1973 through 1977. The overall pattern is of stability at a reasonably high level (mean around 2.1) from 1973 to 1977, a fall to a lower equilibrium point (mean around 1.92) reached by 1983, a strong decline from 1991 to 1993, and a yet lower equilibrium for the remainder of the 1990s (mean around 1.7). Six of the drops between surveys are statistically significant by a difference-of-means test at $p < .05$ (1997–78; 1980–82; 1982–

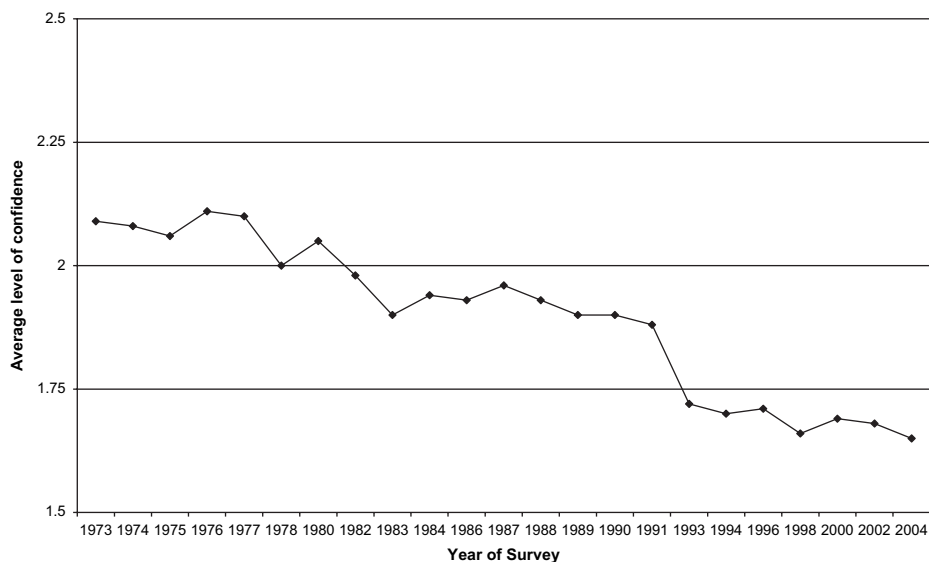


Figure 3. Confidence in the press, 1973–2004.

83; 1991–93; 1996–98; 2002–04), and none of the increases are similarly significant. The constant pattern of decline is only apparent for the press—a similar comparison of means for the 11 other social and political institutions contained in the GSS series shows statistically significant increases and decreases (Gronke & Cook, 2001, Table 2). In short, only the press has experienced declines, and no increases, in public confidence over this period.

The average, however, hides considerably more movement in the proportions that fell into each response category. We plot these data in Figure 4. Note, for instance, that the proportion reporting having “only some” confidence in the press is relatively flat from 1973 (when 62% chose that option) to 1990 (when 60% did so). However, that lack of movement in any single direction is belied by the important shifts away from “great deal” and toward “hardly any” over the same time period. Proportions expressing the highest level of confidence climbed from 23% of the sample in 1973 to 29% in 1976, only to fall to 17% in 1991. By contrast, those who reported hardly any confidence rose from 15% in 1973 to 28% in 1991. Most impressive, however, is the dramatic increase from 28% in 1991 to 39% in 1993 in the proportion who reported “hardly any” confidence in the press, the only consecutive period where both “a great deal” and “only some” dropped by a statistically significant margin. By the end of our time period, 43% of the GSS sample reported “hardly any” confidence in the press, a startling change from the 15% who did so in 1973. In other words, while there has been a gradual, almost inexorable decline in Americans’ average levels of confidence toward the press, these results mask the main story, which is the disappearance of strong supporters of the press and a tripling of the number who express “hardly any” confidence in the people who run the press.⁶

Confidence in the Press Compared to What?

Do we have a finding here other than simply demonstrating once again a decline in faith in American institutions? Numerous scholars have assumed this to be the case. Nye et al.

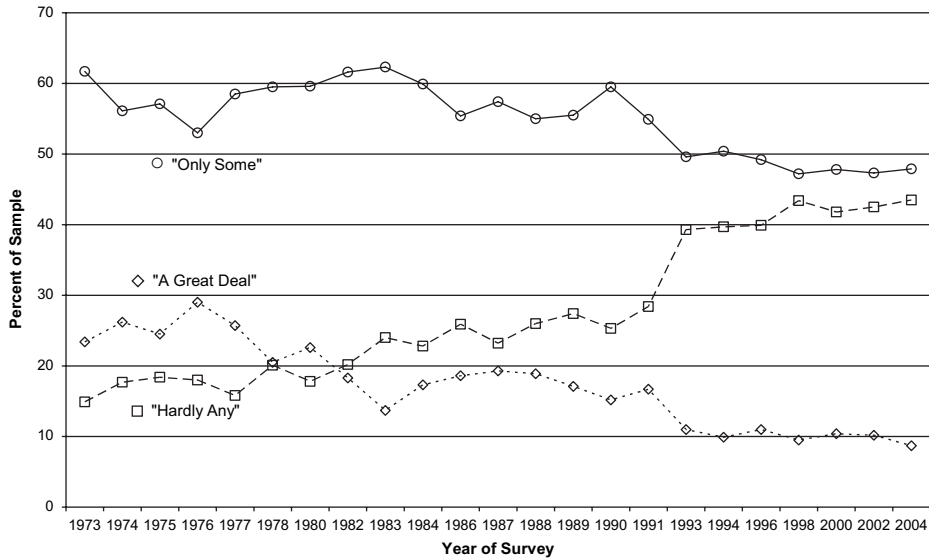


Figure 4. Confidence in the press, by level and year.

(1997) are emblematic of this trend; they correctly identify declines in faith in our major political institutions (especially the presidency and Congress) and then go on to elucidate potential causes. However, since Lipset and Schneider (1987) attempted to do so, we know of no empirical efforts to assess whether or not there is a single dimension of confidence within the American public in a variety of institutions, political or not. Nor, surprisingly, have there been many attempts to examine any of these specific trends.

Consequently, using GSS data pooled for years 1973 through 2004, we calculated a “generalized” confidence scale, with weights determined by confirmatory factor analysis on 10 confidence items, excluding the press and TV questions. For the purposes of this article, we interpret these scales in the analyses that follow as reflecting a general trend in institutional confidence related to but separate from trends for any particular social or political institution. In this, we follow the contention of Lipset and Schneider (1987) and the speculation by S. Bennett et al. (1999) that a single-factor solution best represents the manifest variables. However, additional analyses make us somewhat skeptical about these claims.⁷

Figure 5 compares standardized levels of confidence in the press against the generalized confidence measure (the top panel plots the separate trends, while the lower panel displays the “gap” or difference between the two). These figures show how confidence in the press declined more rapidly than confidence in other institutions. With the anomalous exception of 1977 (presumably during the post-Watergate honeymoon period of Jimmy Carter’s first months), confidence in the press was always higher than confidence in other institutions until the mid-1980s.

After this period, the public’s attitude toward the press declined along with those toward other institutions, yet at a pace that only seemed to accelerate. There is a relatively high correlation in the pooled cross-sectional analysis between confidence in the press and the generalized confidence factor scale ($r = .3354$), but that leaves a fair amount of variance yet to be explained. In addition, the different trajectories of the two series suggest, again, that there does seem to be something happening here that is unique to the press.

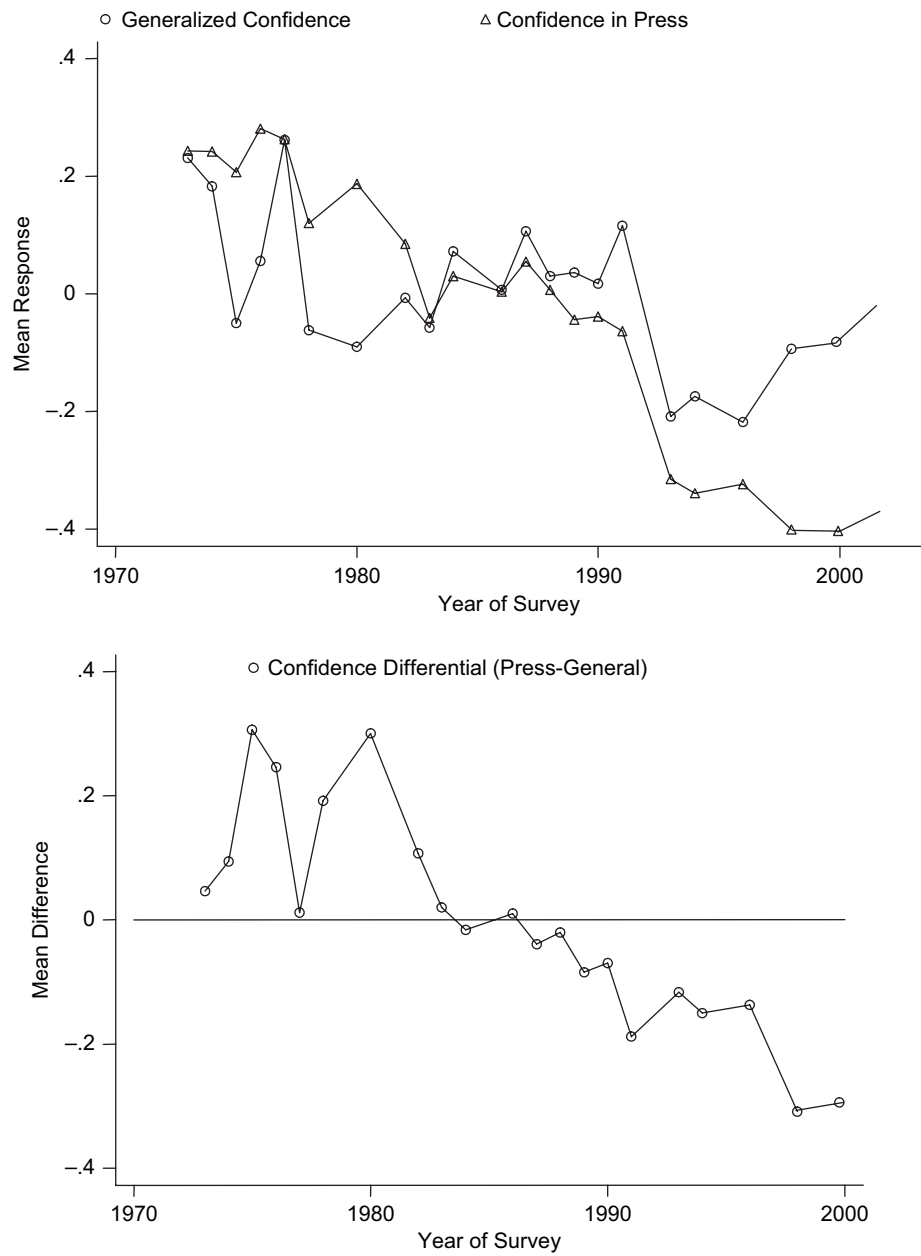


Figure 5. Confidence in the press compared to generalized confidence.

Who Disdains the Media?

Having given an overview of the decline in confidence in the press as well as a more generalized confidence in other institutions, we can now ask: Who is most likely to express confidence in the press? To do so, we pooled the cross-sections from the GSS for 1973

through 2004, and proceeded to run multivariate analyses of the confidence in press and generalized confidence series. One minor specification issue needed to be addressed. Both confidence series move in a systematic fashion over time, but so do other portions of the time series (e.g., education). There is little likelihood of spatial or serial correlation in these data given that they are independent cross-sections. We need to control for between unit (over time) variance (covariance), or else we will bias the cross-sectional coefficients (Stimson, 1985). One simple solution provided by Stimson is to include a set of dummy variables for each year, essentially allocating most of this variance to fixed unit (time) effects. Essentially, this specification (often called LSDV for least squares dummy variable regression) allows us to see the effects of the predictor variables in pushing confidence in the press higher or lower for that particular year, and captures over-time trends via different intercepts.⁸

At this point, we have generated a model drawing upon predictor variables that have been suggested by other studies of confidence in institutions and trust in government (inter alia, Lipset & Schneider, 1987; Craig, 1993; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995; King, 1997; Norris, 1999b; Dalton, 2000; Newton & Norris, 2000). We hypothesize that confidence in the press is a product of a small set of demographic and attitudinal variables.

The demographic variables are education, age, race (1=Black), income, and gender (1=female). These demographic variables, of course, are presumably related to levels of confidence in institutions, in part because they capture dominant cleavages in American society; presumably, those who are more disadvantaged are going to be less favorably disposed to a whole variety of institutions. Cross-national investigations suggest that age, being female, education, and low SES (all other things being equal) have positive and statistically significant associations with confidence in institutions (Norris, 1999b; Newton & Norris, 2000). However, trust in government works in somewhat different ways, which suggests other possibilities, with education, being non-White, and income being positively associated and age negatively associated (King, 1997). However, the differences between social groups are modest at best (see also Orren, 1997, for trust in government).

Is there any reason for us to assume that these groups would treat the press differently? Educated people, for example, might be more favorable to the press than to other institutions, given that they are the beneficiaries of the “knowledge gap,” whereby more educated consumers of the news are better able to understand and use it to learn about politics. Likewise, high-income individuals are the targets of a profit-minded media that may serve the empowered segments of society; in fact, that then means that higher-income individuals, Whites, and men should be more trusting of the press than of other institutions. Older respondents not only tend to be more committed to existing social arrangements but are also heavier consumers of the news.

Other attitudes might also be linked to confidence. Lipset and Schneider (1987) emphasize the importance of interpersonal trust, but more recent inquiries have suggested only weak connections (for a good overview, see Newton, 1999), and given that there were no good measures included in many survey years, we do not consider this possibility further. There are other reasons that an individual may express a high level of confidence generally, drawing from institutional engagement and upon individual life satisfaction.

Individuals who are more closely connected to and/or participate in the activities of certain political or social institutions tend to have more positive attitudes about society—both the generalized “other” and other social and political institutions (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). We include here two such measures from the GSS. The first is strength of partisanship, suggested by Lipset and Schneider (1987), which we interpret as an expression of loyalty to an existing political institution, namely political parties (see also Weisberg,

1981; King, 1997). We also include respondents' self-report of how often they attend religious services as a proxy for close ties to a religious institution. Attendance at religious services (more so than another potential variable, one's own estimate of the strength of religious affiliation) has been found to be a particularly important determinant of a variety of political attitudes and behavior (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

If the preceding hypothesis posits that institutional engagement predicts institutional loyalties, then our second hypothesis posits that individual life satisfaction will be positively associated with confidence in institutions, as has been demonstrated elsewhere (Lipset & Schneider, 1987; McAllister, 1999; Newton & Norris, 2000). We operationalize this concept using two questions from the GSS: whether the individual is satisfied with his or her current job and whether the individual believes that his or her family's personal financial situation has improved "during the last few years."⁹

The literature tends to conclude that confidence in institutions, like trust in government, is most influenced by political variables, rather than demographic or social-psychological variables. We focus on partisan affiliation (the traditional 7-point scale going from strong Democrat to strong Republican) and ideology (a 7-point scale going from liberal to conservative). Left-right self-placement is the strongest predictor of confidence in a variety of institutions in cross-national inquiries (Newton & Norris, 2000). However, partisanship could be important in two different ways. One, of course, is that Republicans and Democrats diverge when it comes to evaluating political and social institutions, with Republicans presumably being more favorable to authorities. In addition, as Norris (1999b) suggests, "winners" express more confidence than "losers." In other words, those who share the affiliation of the party in power tend to be more positively disposed to institutions than those who are in opposition. We thus constructed a variable to measure this "shared partisanship," which multiplies the standard party identification measure by a dummy variable (1 = Republican presidents, 1 = Democratic presidents).

We must leave open the possibility that, despite the levels of correlation between confidence in the press and generalized confidence in other political and social institutions, those who express the highest confidence in most institutions may well diverge when it comes to the press, given the evidence from Lipset and Schneider (1987) and Döring (1992) that attitudes toward the press are quite distinct from those toward what Döring (1992) called the "established order." In particular, we might expect Republicans and conservatives to be less trusting than is the case with other institutions, given the ways in which their leaders have, since at least Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew, made a case for the bias of the "liberal media." Liberals, of course, could also have easily perceived jingoistic coverage during the Reagan and Bush administrations and hostile commentary of Carter and Clinton, which they could easily chalk up to an equally strong conservative bias. However, liberals generally tend to see less conservative bias than conservatives see liberal bias (e.g., Dautrich & Hartley, 1999, Table 5.3). Likewise, we should expect strong partisans and those who share the party affiliation of the incumbent president to have less confidence in the press than in other institutions, given that the self-perceptions of journalists as objective, neutral, nonpartisan, and providing a check on authority may be seen in opposition to partisan interests and to those in power.

Our first analysis is reported in Table 1, which presents equations for confidence in the press by demographics alone; by demographics plus political variables (party identification, ideology, shared partisanship); by demographics, political variables, and institutional attachments; and then finally an equation that shows the impact of those variables over and above what we would expect from the individual's generalized confidence in political and social institutions as a whole.

Table 1
Confidence in the press (GSS pooled)

Variable	Demographics		Plus political		Plus institutional attachments		Plus general confidence	
	Coeff.	t	Coeff.	t	Coeff.	t	Coeff.	t
Education	-0.007	-2.180	-0.007	-2.182	-0.007	-2.049	-0.008	-2.234
Age	-0.003	-5.664	-0.003	-4.776	0.003	-3.931	-0.001	-2.016
Income	-0.023	-6.123	-0.020	-5.441	-0.022	-5.739	-0.017	-4.371
Race (Black)	0.020	0.723	-0.079	-2.835	-0.064	-2.250	0.001	0.035
Gender (female)	-0.030	-1.673	-0.043	-2.368	-0.028	-1.551	-0.013	-0.718
Party identification			-0.047	-9.423	-0.046	-9.256	-0.052	-10.252
Political views			-0.072	-10.330	-0.067	-9.543	-0.071	-9.885
Shared partisanship			-0.018	-3.826	-0.018	-3.899	0.032	-6.818
Strength of partisanship					0.010	1.022	-0.037	-3.774
Attend religious services					-0.018	-5.069	-0.033	-9.127
Job satisfaction					0.013	1.173	-0.025	-1.038
Improved financial state					0.062	2.586	-0.033	-2.883
Generalized confidence							0.482	43.217
Ancillary parameters								
Constant	1.126	16.695	1.091	16.146	1.061	15.110	1.323	18.433
Mu(1)	1.628	117.950	1.647	117.865	1.649	117.794	1.735	118.327
No. of cases	16,535		16,535		16,535		16,535	
-2*[LL(0)-LL(1)]	813		1,123		1,188		2,875	
% correctly predicted	56.10		56.67		56.58		58.60	
Pseudo R ²	.03		.04		.04		.10	

Note. Data were derived from the General Social Survey, 1973-1998.

Entries are maximum likelihood ordinal probit estimates. Models were estimated in Stata 6 and Limdep 7.0. Boldface estimates are more than two times their standard error, boldface italic estimates are more than three times.

Let us examine the first three columns of Table 1. The demographic variables provide an intriguing pattern. Age and income both consistently predict confidence in the press at $p < .005$ (the most appropriate level given the large sample size), but negatively, with a marginally significant effect of education, also negative. It appears that for the heaviest consumers of the news (the more educated, the better-off, older respondents), we have clear evidence that familiarity with the news product breeds a lack of confidence (if not contempt) with the press as an institution.

The political variables, as expected, are more powerful predictors of confidence in the press, although their inclusion only slightly reduces the significance of education, age, and income (and indeed, allows marginally significant suppressed relationships with race and gender to emerge). All of these variables except for gender retain their predictive strength once we add the variables that account for institutional attachments and life satisfaction. In particular, we find that party identification and political views, in and of themselves, are the strongest predictors of confidence in the press, confirming that conservatives and Republicans are substantially less confident in the press throughout the time period. Nonetheless, institutional attachments (especially attending religious services) and life situations (job satisfaction and improved family finances) also affect significantly confidence in the press, with the more religious being less confident in the press and those with better perceptions of their jobs and finances more confident. Although this initial model does not explain much of the variance (pseudo- $R^2 = .0397$), such a result is similar to other attempts to predict levels of confidence in institutions (e.g., King, 1997, Table 6–3; Newton & Norris, 2000, Table 3.5).

In order to see what is unique to the press, the fourth column of Table 1 reports an equation including the measure of generalized confidence as a predictor. Table 2 presents a parallel regression with generalized confidence as a dependent variable (the factor scale is a continuous measure, so OLS is appropriate). In contrast to Table 1, however, here the

Table 2
General confidence in institutions (GSS pooled)

Variable	Demographics		Plus political		Plus institutional attachments	
	Coeff.	<i>t</i>	Coeff.	<i>t</i>	Coeff.	<i>t</i>
Education	0.007	3.305	0.008	3.504	0.001	0.297
Age	0.000	0.136	0.000	−0.779	−0.003	−6.375
Income	−0.129	−7.365	−0.099	−5.292	−0.148	−7.232
Race (Black)	−0.006	−2.530	−0.003	−1.404	−0.013	−4.678
Gender (female)	−0.025	−2.141	−0.019	−1.601	−0.034	−2.604
Party identification			0.008	2.304	0.010	−2.906
Political views			0.012	2.543	−0.004	−0.725
Strength of partisanship					0.097	14.093
Attend religious services					0.028	11.132
Job satisfaction					0.195	11.287
Improved financial state					1.096	11.905
Constant	0.055	1.397	−0.063	−1.403	−0.388	−7.613
No. of cases	16,565		16,565		16,565	
R^2	.0243		.0254		.07	

measures of institutional attachment and life satisfaction are the most powerful influences on generalized confidence.

Strength of partisanship, attending religious services, and improved family finances are all highly significantly associated with generalized confidence in institutions. Demographic variables are also strong predictors of generalized confidence. All other things being equal, older, better-off, and African American respondents were more likely to express less confidence. Finally, the political variables that do best in predicting confidence in the press—party identification and ideology—are only weakly associated at best with generalized confidence, while shared partisanship has a far greater impact. In other words, Republicans and Democrats do not differ much on generalized confidence in institutions once we control for whether respondents' preferred parties are in or out of power. Strength of partisanship, as suggested by Lipset and Schneider, impressively predicts generalized confidence in institutions; based on the *t* statistic, in fact, it is the strongest predictor in the model.

If Lipset and Schneider are correct that individuals' confidence in any one institution is in part a by-product of their more generalized levels of confidence, we need to take one additional step. The fourth column of Table 1 displays the results from an ordered probit estimation when we add the generalized confidence measure to the equation. Not surprisingly, the generalized confidence measure has tremendous impact on confidence in the press, and the fit of the model to the data is substantially improved. Nonetheless, most of the relationships are not affected by the inclusion of this variable. In particular, the political variables (party, ideology, and shared partisanship) are virtually unchanged in terms of the sizes of the coefficients. Some earlier predictors, such as race and age, are considerably reduced in this equation, but others (strength of partisanship, attending religious services, and improved family finances) are now stronger and with opposite signs to the equation for generalized confidence. In other words, strong partisans, more religiously observant Americans, and those who feel better off are, all other things being equal, inclined to deviate from their usual levels of confidence in other institutions when it comes to the press.

In sum, we do find evidence that confidence in the press is closely related to confidence in other institutions. However, what seems to be driving confidence in the press away from other institutions appears to be twofold. First, some political variables (partisanship and ideology) that did not affect general confidence in other institutions once we controlled for institutional attachments and life satisfaction have substantial effects on confidence in the press. Second, institutional attachments and life satisfaction push confidence in the press substantially lower than what we would have expected from the high levels of confidence in other institutions alone. Thus, having illustrated the gap between confidence in the press and confidence in other institutions, we now have an explanation. Over the time period, strong partisans, the more religiously inclined, those whose preferred party was in power, and those who saw their family finances improve tended to be more sympathetic to existing American institutions, but not so toward the press.

Can all of this help us understand not merely the predictors of confidence in the press but why confidence in the press over time has fallen more precipitously than generalized confidence in a variety of political and social institutions? To be sure, there are substantial *Zeitgeist* effects, with dummy variables for specific years often showing highly significant coefficients.¹⁰ Yet, even if we conclude that the impact of the other predictor variables has been constant over time, any changes in the distribution of those variables over time will have important repercussions. Most notably, we should point out how the changes over time in party identification (going from Democratic dominance to parity between the two major parties), in ideology (with the electorate becoming, on the average, more conservative), and

in shared partisanship (with fewer partisans of the party not in control of the White House) have all worked to shrink the pool of those who would be more inclined to express confidence in the press, over and above the decline in generalized confidence. Even the rising education levels and increasing income of the American people tend to work against confidence in the press. Only the decline of strong partisans and in attendance of religious services would work in favor of increased confidence in the press over and above the levels of confidence in other institutions as a whole, and these two influences are outweighed by the contrary shifts in education, income, partisanship, ideology, and shared partisanship.

However, we may wish to go beyond that and note that the winner/loser effect, whereby those from the party in power are substantially less likely to express confidence in the press, might have longer-term consequences. For instance, we might speculate that confidence in the press collapsed so dramatically after 1992 because those in power (Democrats and, to a lesser extent, liberals) were pushed away from their usual favorability to the adversarial media.

But to What Effect?

Invariably, we must answer the “so what?” question. Seeing that confidence in the press has slumped, even (if not especially) among its former admirers, may not say very much about real-world implications.

Our results here show that the public’s confidence in the news media has eroded considerably—and tellingly, across a variety of groups, including those that previously had been most positive toward them. The Pew Center for the People and the Press (1999a) found, as of February 1999, that the American public was more critical of “news organizations generally,” increasingly tending to choose the more negative of a pair of opposite phrases, particularly as compared to the previous times that the public was asked the same questions in the mid-1980s. In short, citizens seem consistent; the results we obtain are not simply the by-product of their response to a particular question.

All of this raises doubts about the public *legitimacy* of news media power. Indeed, when asked directly, citizens tend to say that “the news media have too much influence over what happens in the world today,” as in a Harris poll from late 1996 where 58% said “too much,” 7% “too little,” and 33% “just about the right amount” (Smith & Lichter, 1997, Exhibit 3–4). Relatedly, the same poll showed a narrow majority of respondents responding that the news media abuse freedom of the press (52% vs. 41% endorsing “use this freedom responsibly”), a larger majority indicating that “the news media tend to favor one side” (63% vs. 33% answering that “the news media deal fairly with all sides”), and 74% saying they see either a great deal or fair amount of political bias in news coverage (Smith & Lichter 1997, Exhibits 3–5, 3–7, and 5–7).

Consequently, the one-time reticence about governmental intervention to improve the news has diminished. In the mid-1980, for example, Schneider and Lewis (1985, Table 4) reported a *Los Angeles Times* poll from 1985 that showed no upswell for “limiting news media access to government records and files” (45% favoring and 33% opposing), “allowing government officials to prevent media from publishing or broadcasting a story seen to be inaccurate” (33% favoring and 50% opposing), “requiring a reporter to reveal confidential sources if a court determines the information would provide evidence in a criminal trial” (45% favoring and 38% opposing), “allowing the military to ban news media from a foreign military operation” (39% favoring and 42% opposing), or “permitting the courts to fine news media for publishing or broadcasting biased or inaccurate stories” (52% favoring and 23% opposing). Not surprisingly, huge majorities—78% or higher—of a matching

sample of 2,703 journalists working for the newspapers cited by the sample of the public opposed each of these options. By contrast, a 1996 Harris poll (Smith & Lichter, 1997, Exhibit 6–1) showed majorities of the public ready to ease libel laws (50% yes vs. 46% no), agreeing that “journalists should be required to obtain a license to practice their profession, just like doctors and lawyers” (53% yes vs. 44% no), opting that “courts should be allowed to impose fines on the news media for inaccurate or biased reporting” (70% yes vs. 28% no), and favoring that “the government should require that the news media give equal coverage to all sides of a controversial issue” (84% yes vs. 15% no).

Again, as opposed to the beginning of our time period, when the news media were more frequently seen to be performing a positive political social function as a watchdog over government, citizens nowadays have tended to see them as enmeshed with other national institutions. Sixty-three percent in the 1996 Harris poll responded that the “news media are . . . often influenced by powerful people and organizations,” whereas only 30% answered that “the news media are pretty independent” (Smith & Lichter, 1997, Exhibit 3–7). Not that the public has entirely abandoned the watchdog function as a worthwhile goal—the 1996 Harris poll found that the two activities that the public was most inclined to find the media put too little emphasis on were “holding public officials accountable for what they do” (45% said too little) and “protecting the public from abuses of power” (43% said too little), and strong majorities endorsed each as “very important” activities for the media (Smith & Lichter, 1997, Exhibits 2–4 and 2–5). In effect, the critique of the news media as a whole seems to be not that they are overly adversarial, but that they are seen to be part of the same disdained and distant structure of political power.

Does this decline in the trust given to the news media, and to journalists, then suggest a crisis for the institutional media? After all, these findings would seem to undermine the conclusion that the news media, as a political and social institution, “are expected to pre-empt over a societal and/or political sector” (Cook, 2005, p. 70) by both elites and the mass public. Yet the public’s apparent lack of confidence in the news media as a whole may or may not undermine the institutional place of the news media very much.

We need to distinguish between confidence in the news media as a whole and support for particular news outlets. It may be that while citizens are skittish about trusting the news media, they still find their overall day-to-day performance to be acceptable. Just as citizens usually dislike Congress far more than their own representative in Congress or often disapprove of the health care system in the United States at the same time they approve of their own physician or see discrimination against women occurring frequently in the world at large but rarely in their immediate surroundings (Mutz & Flemming, 1999), they may disapprove of the news media as a whole or of journalists taken as a group yet still be satisfied with the news outlets to which they attend.

Indeed, this bifurcation of support was already recognizable in poll results in the 1980s that showed consistently stronger criticism of the “news media” compared to the newspaper the respondents read, and to either local or network television news (Schneider & Lewis, 1985, Table 2).¹¹ Schneider and Lewis’s (1985, p. 10) speculation is worth contemplating:

When it comes to the press, people are very familiar with the newspaper that lands on their front porch every day. . . . Television, particularly network television, is more remote. “The media” represents a distant and abstract force, and people are reluctant to offer unqualified praise for powerful institutions that are removed from their daily experience. When people think of the media, they probably think of a powerful institution, the role it plays in society, and

the kind of people who work for it, as opposed to specific newspapers or television programs of news stories.

The Pew Center for the People and the Press has found similar results in the two decades since Schneider and Lewis wrote. The American public regularly expresses favorability levels exceeding 80% in local television news, their local newspaper, and network television news, except for one anomalous drop in favorability expressed toward network news from June 1994–June 1995, and again in December 1997 (the latter surely an impact of the blanket coverage given to the Lewinsky scandal).

The most important recent study of approval of national political institutions, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995), gives us additional guidance, especially when it comes to citizens' understanding and evaluations of a collective political institution such as the news media. Even in 1992, a year of unusual political anger and disaffection, the American public was remarkably favorable to Congress as an institution (although Congress is regularly the least popular of the three branches of government). By contrast, the gap between approval of the institution and approval of the membership, while substantial for all three branches, was huge when it came to Congress. The authors conclude that the famous phenomenon of the public approving of its representative while disliking Congress was not so much the contrast of individual and institution, but the difference between what citizens knew about their particular member and about all members of Congress as a whole: "People think about Congress in terms of its members primarily because their exposure to Congress usually comes through the actions of the membership" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995, p. 107).

Like Congress, the work of journalists is increasingly visible to the public. Moreover, there is often negative news about the sloppy processes, ethical missteps, and mistakes of both members of Congress and journalists.¹² In addition, there is often unrelenting criticism against both from the spin control of the White House. Citizens have ready sources of data about Congress and its members as a whole as well as about "the news media" and "journalists" as a whole. As with Congress, the public appears disinclined to give the news media any slack. A *Newsweek* poll conducted in July 1998, after a series of well-publicized journalistic mishaps and scandals, asked its respondents, "Do you see these recent cases of media inaccuracy as isolated incidents involving a few specific reporters and news organizations, or do they make you less likely to trust the news media's reporting in general?" Thirty percent chose the former, 62% the latter.¹³ As perhaps should have been expected, the public is satisfied and positive about the performance of the individual news outlets they use, much more so than they are about the institutional news media or journalists.

It may well be, as the Pew Research Center (1998b) documented in the spring of 1998, that the news is less important as a pleasurable daily activity—with particular declines from oldest to youngest respondents in those answering that "I enjoy keeping up with the news a lot"—and that large audiences apparently follow national and international news only when big stories have already drawn their attention.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the general lack of confidence that the public accords to the news media or to journalists does not prevent them from approving the day-to-day practice of the news outlets they do attend to, however sporadically.

Conclusions

We now have the beginnings of a clearer understanding of the American public's attitudes toward the news media. What then have we learned? We would point to several conclusions:

- There is strong evidence that the confidence expressed by the public toward the leaders of the press has shifted substantially, both on the average and with a near disappearance of the number of people who report “a great deal” and a huge upswing in the 1990s in the proportions who say “hardly any” confidence. Although the GSS data show a steeper decline, we find similar results over time for the Harris surveys for the same time period as well, giving further reinforcement to the notion that Americans’ confidence in the news media did indeed shift to a much more negative assessment from the early 1970s to the late 1990s.
- Although we must be tentative, confidence in the press is only partly connected with that accorded to other institutions. In particular, from 1973 to 1998, confidence in the press started out at a higher level than other institutions and ended up at a lower level. These different trajectories again suggest that the press be conceptualized differently than the bulk of other institutions. Moreover, the substantial effect that improved family finances, attending religious services, and shared partisanship have upon confidence in the press, opposite to the effect that these variables have on generalized confidence, suggests that there are different factors at work in each case.
- It is true that confidence in the press is strongly predicted by a measure of generalized confidence in other institutions, suggesting that it is very much connected with other institutions as opposed to operating from outside the social and political order, as Lipset and Schneider (1987) suggested for the 1970s and 1980s. However, confidence in the press is not a mere extension of how citizen judge other institutions in general, as income, partisanship, ideology, shared partisanship, strength of partisanship, and religiosity all have substantial independent effects upon confidence in the press over and above the impact of generalized confidence. Put otherwise, lower income, moving from Democrat to Republican, moving from liberal to conservative, identifying with the party in power, and increasing strength of party identification all push toward lower ratings than what we would have predicted on the basis of generalized confidence alone. This reminds us of one of the central riddles that we have to note: Those who express confidence in most political and social institutions are not always those who do the same for the press, especially those with the greatest stake in the current political system.
- Consequently, we can do more than simply note how confidence in the press has fallen over time and point out certain years when this occurred (and offer educated speculation about why that might occur). More to the point, confidence in the press has fallen in part because those groups that formerly constituted a core of support for the press (Democrats, liberals, partisans in opposition to the party in power) have shrunk considerably over the last three decades. However, we also point out that as of 1998, many of the essential distinctions between Americans in confidence toward the press had collapsed. In particular, the gaps between Democrats and Republicans and between liberals and conservatives all but disappeared in 1998. The former is not unprecedented and reflects the tendency for Republicans and Democrats seemingly to pay close attention to which party occupies the White House when it comes to having confidence in the press. However, the disappearance of the liberal-conservative distinction in 1998 is new, and it will bear watching to see if this is a one-time-only short-term result (presumably) of the Lewinsky affair or if this indicates a beginning of a new trend. In effect, however, this was a double whammy for journalism, as those segments of the population that were most inclined to be critical of the press both grew in proportion and increased in negativity at the same time.

- Finally, although the press as a whole is judged increasingly negatively, such results do not tell the whole story. From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the confidence ratings for the press as a whole fell substantially according to the GSS data. However, approval ratings of news organizations (local television news, network television news, and hometown daily newspapers) were almost flat during this same period. Even if we were to conclude (and we do not) that the GSS result suggests that “Americans hate the media,” we would note that these results are no indication of a crisis for the public’s relationship with American journalism as a whole. Americans do not disdain the news, even while they are increasingly critical of the news media as a whole. Much of this may reflect a split not only between their preference for the known quantity of the news over the distant and poorly understood institution known as “the press,” but also between their approval of the information they receive and their disapproval of the practices and procedures that they see journalists pursuing.

There is still much research to be done to understand fully how the mass public views, understands, and assesses the news media as a political institution. Additional attention to the vexing question of the dimensionality of confidence can no longer be avoided, as previous scholars have done. Whether or not the patterns from the GSS hold up on other data sets (Harris from 1966 to the present, Gallup from the mid-1980s to the present) is also worth investigating. We have given one possible explanation for why there were shifts from one year to the next, but based on the assumption that the effect of predictor variables will be constant once one controls for the *Zeitgeist* of the average level for that year. However, possibly some of the story is that these predictor variables may well have shifted over time, as we have seen most dramatically for the disappearance of the impact of partisanship and ideology upon confidence in the press for 1998. It would be worth looking at interaction effects or estimating the predictor variables for single years.

However, secondary analysis can go only so far. We are well aware that “confidence” cannot be boiled down to one single question. And while confidence is one important component of the legitimacy of the news media as a political institution, it is by no means the only one, or the most important one, that we could imagine eliciting from the mass public (see especially Weatherford, 1992). In addition, to see just how the news media diverge from other political and social institutions, we must ask the kinds of questions that have been asked of the latter: a fuller understanding of confidence (including emotional reactions); the public’s attitudes toward the mission that the institution has set for itself, as well as the processes and means it uses to pursue that mission; and freer-form discussions, whether via focus groups or in-depth interviews, that would enable respondents to establish categories for themselves rather than submit to those set up by the investigators.

Still, at this juncture, we have a richly detailed—and mixed—picture of Americans’ attitudes toward the news media. Such a depiction can and should give pause to both the champions and the detractors of American journalism (and American politics). We would note that the increasing willingness of Americans to report “hardly any” confidence in the leaders of “the press” is important, not merely in removing some degree of political legitimacy from the institutional practices of journalists but in also, we surmise, encouraging an erosion in the onetime support of the privileges journalists claim on behalf of freedom of the press. We are by no means convinced that this is a negative development.¹⁵ Yet on the other hand, we clearly do not see a crisis that would impel disgusted readers and viewers away from the news outlets to which they attend, however haphazardly and sporadically, quite apart from the even greater satisfaction and support with the news media’s performance that Pew Research Center (1998d) surveys have recently documented for Washington

elites. The collective power of the news media may not then be very well respected or appreciated, but there seems to be little threat to the continuation of that power.

Notes

1. See also Becker, Cobbey, and Sobowale (1978) for similar results in the early 1970s.
2. For instance, Gronke (Gronke & Feaver, 1999) suggests that the confidence in the military is “brittle.” Mass civilian and elite civilian trust in military leadership, endorsement of military symbols and values, and respect for the sacrifices of military personnel are far lower than the apparent high level of confidence shows. Although this article starts out with an overview of the GSS and Harris measures of confidence in leaders of institutions, we are well aware, then, that we cannot stop there. Instead, we must look at multiple institutions in multiple ways.
3. This question wording is not ideal, as we have noted elsewhere (Cook & Gronke, 2005). For one thing, it tends to fuzz over any differences between the institutions, in terms of a set of practices that transcend individuals therein, and the leaders of those institutions. Nor can we say that “confidence” exhausts all the possibilities of understanding how Americans react to their set of political and social institutions, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s (1995) outstanding study of attitudes toward Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court attests.
4. Specific years include 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, and biannually since then.
5. We prefer this approach to the more typical charting of the drop in those who report a “great deal of confidence” in given institutions, which, for some unexplained reason, has become the norm, even though it only tells part of the story (Whitney, 1985, Table 1; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995, Figure 2.1; Blendon et al., 1997, Figures 8–1 and 8–6; W. L. Bennett, 1998, Table 1; Cooper, 1999, Figure 1.2).
6. These results are not an artifact of the GSS. In order to confirm these results, we gathered Harris poll data from 1967 until 2004. Harris asked a very similar question to the GSS item. From 1967–2004, the series has 43 data points—thus allowing a more detailed sketching of changes in confidence than the less frequent GSS. The Harris series and the GSS series track closely—the correlate at .73—and the Harris series shows only two increases that are not discernible in the GSS series. First, there is a sharp boost in confidence in 1973—probably in response to Watergate. The GSS series also shows a slight uptick in this period albeit not a statistically significant change. Second, the Harris poll shows another increase in confidence in January 1979, which is not evident in the GSS data (see Gronke & Cook, 2001).
7. We also conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses in order to test the model against one assuming a single dimension. Allowing confidence in “the press” and television to load on a separate dimension clearly improves the fit of the model to the data. A single-factor solution results in a chi-square of 1,327 with 53 degrees of freedom, whereas the two-factor solution provides a chi-square of 1,148 with 52 degrees of freedom. The difference in chi-squares is itself distributed as a chi-square (Hayduk, 1987, p. 166) and is clearly statistically significant (179 with one degree of freedom). Additional discussion and justification of this factor structure is available in Gronke and Cook (2001); factor matrices can be obtained from the authors.
8. The full results, including coefficients for the year-of-survey dummy variables, are available from the authors upon request.
9. Other potential predictor variables falling under this rubric were investigated, such as a scale of tolerance from the “Stouffer items,” or some items that elaborated on the individuals’ sense of well-being, such as fear of walking at night, general self-reported happiness, or an index of frequency of social interactions. While the effects were consistently in the direction we expected, neither the statistical significance levels nor the problems of missing values from items being asked infrequently prompted us to include them in the final equations.
10. Full results are available from the authors.
11. Note that, asked to rate the “job that it is doing,” 65% of the survey respondents in 1985 gave “very good” rankings to their own newspaper, 51% to the local television news they watched,

43% to network television news, and 30% to the news media generally (Schneider & Lewis, 1985, Table 2).

12. Ironically, the attention that one news outlet gives to its own mistakes as well as those of other news outlets is part of what Bennett et al. (1985) call “repair work,” designed to boost the authority of the news and safeguard the agreed-upon methods. As with Tuchman’s (1972) “strategic ritual of objectivity,” we may doubt that it is working, at least on the mass public, as effectively as we once thought—though whether it works on the journalists themselves may well be another matter.

13. *Newsweek* poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, July 9–10, 1998, Question R09, accessed from the POLL archive of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. See also the Media Studies Center poll discussed by McClain (1998) that noted that relatively few people had heard of the June scandals (the highest was 42% reporting hearing of the CNN/*Time* retraction of the nerve gas report), but large majorities had concluded that journalists often or sometimes invent stories, plagiarize, use unethical or illegal tactics, and make factual errors.

14. “A substantial minority of Americans (46%) *only* follow national news when something major is happening and an even greater number (63%) react the same way to international news. Only local news attracts a large regular audience that is not event driven—61% of Americans follow it most of the time” (Pew Center, 1998b, p. 2).

15. One of us (Cook, 1998) has argued for a rethinking of standard notions of freedom of the press to encourage—as political doctrine and jurisprudence once did more heavily—the rights of the public to the information it requires to participate in politics alongside the rights of news organizations to disseminate what they see fit.

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Appendix: Description of Measures Used in the Regression

- Political views: political ideology, runs from –3 (extremely liberal) to 3 (extremely conservative), with moderates coded zero. Those who said they “did not know” their political views were coded at zero.
- Party ID: partisan affiliation, runs from –3 (strong Democrat) to 3 (strong Republican), with pure Independents coded as zero. Those who said they identified with a third party or did not know their partisan affiliation were coded at zero.

- Strength of partisanship: runs from zero (Independents) to 3 (strong affiliators), essentially the Party ID scale folded about the zero point.
- Race: coded zero for non-Black, 1 for Black.
- Sex: coded zero for males, 1 for females.
- Income, education: left untransformed from the GSS.
- Confidence in the press: respondents in the GSS were asked: "I am going to name some institutions in the country. As far as *the people running* these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?"
- Generalized confidence in institutions: index derived via exploratory factor analysis of nine institutional confidence measures. Additional details in the text.
- Attendance of religious services: 0–8 scale asking respondent how frequently respondents attend religious services.
- Job satisfaction: 4-point scale asking respondents how satisfied they are with their job or with housework.
- Improved financial state: 3-point scale asking respondents whether their financial situation has improved, remained the same, or worsed in the last 7 months.

