# Disdaining the Media in the Post 9/11 World

Paul Gronke
Reed College

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## *Introduction*

The news media in America act as the main source of political information for the mass public, and as the primary "transmission belt"communicating public desires to political elites and governmental actors. Darrell West (2001) describes the "media establishment" as a "major power broker" which exerts "unprecedented power over the dissemination of news" (p. viii). Drawing on David Easton, Timothy Cook deems the news media a "political *institution*" because it presides over a particular political sector and "…engages, along with other political institutions, in the authoritative allocation of values in American society (1998 p. 85-6), and acts as an intermediary not just between the mass public and the government, but within and among branches of government. We may wish to push Cook's metaphor even further. In a system of declining rates of affiliation with political parties and falling levels of participation in community, civic, and other political organizations, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the news media are the dominant intermediary organization in American democracy.

The news media's power stems in large part from its control over public information about politics, and to some degree, its ability to shape, certify, and even embody public opinion (c.f. Herbst 1998). While some may bemoan the performance of the news media, especially in the past twenty years, its role as political informer remains crucial. David Paletz writes that the "media are indispensable to democracy, a political system predicated on the consent of the governed" (1999 p. 3). Without the news media, the public would remain ill-informed about the world "outside of our heads," incapable of managing the "information tide" (Graber 1984) and unable to render rational decisions at the ballot box or even coherently answer questions on a public opinion poll.[1]

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[1] Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997), Geer (1996), and Brehm (1993), among others, view public opinion polls as an important form of political participation, not comparable to the franchise, but undeniably important

Putting aside for now politically prominent, and popular, accusations of bias, distortion, and scandal mongering in the press, the current concern among scholars is that the news media ability may be losing its ability to fulfill its informative role. The proportion of Americans who subscribe to a daily newspaper has declined over the past thirty years from more than a third of the population to less than one-fifth. Over the past twenty years, the percentage of TV watching households who report viewing one of the network news broadcasts fell from near unanimity (over 90% in 1978) to 45% in 1999. And Americans, in general, are paying less attention across the board to the news, regardless of the source, even during a "war on terrorism" (Pew report, June 9, 2002). The content demands of Americans are harder to satisfy as well. Graber (2001) points out the difficulty for news directors of satisfying a public that is split between those who demand tabloid coverage and those who desire more serious news. Add to this mix the increasing reliance on "soft" news and "news you can use" (Cook 2001; although see Baum 2002 for a optimistic assessment of the impact of soft news). Consumers have a dizzying array of choices, thus undermining the ability of any one news outlet to dominate coverage. Ironically, diversification of outlets has not resulted in homogenization of coverage. Cook also reports higher levels of formal cooperation between various news outlets and greater reliance on a few dominant wire services as the news hole has progressively shrunk.[2]

These rapid changes in the news media have occurred in an unsettled period in American politics, during which the mass public's trust and respect for their political and social institutions has, by most reports, eroded substantially. Presumably, there is some relationship between changes in the news media as an institution and changes in the public's assessment of that institution. Few scholarly efforts have been devoted to relating the two. Journalism and communications scholars primarily concentrate on news-gathering and news-production, while public opinion and elections scholars care about the media insofar as it provides information that may alter public attitudes and behavior.

The events of September 11 brought into question many conventional wisdoms in

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in modern democracies.

[2] Others suggest that narrowcasting and diversification have polarized and divided public opinion

the United States: our sense of security, our tolerance for intrusions into our personal freedoms, and, most importantly for our project here, the seemingly inexorable decline of trust in government and governmental leaders. The news media was subjected to particularly sharp scrutiny during this period. It's not hard to imagine why. News coverage during wartime has been a topic of controversy since at least Vietnam, if not before (for an excellent presentation of the issues, see the Newseum's "War Stories" exhibit, http://www.newseum.org). One could imagine two scenarios; in the first, the news media serves to unify Americans, foster our sense of patriotism, fan the flames of outrage, and eventually broadcast the outcome of a successful campaign to overthrow the Taliban. Or one can imagine a news media which acts as critic of the established order, asking uncomfortable questions about government foreknowledge of terrorist activities in the U.S., broadcasting videotaped interviews with Osama bin Laden, publicizing civilian casualty figures, and criticizing Afghani relief efforts. Both are valid roles for the media, but it is unclear whether the public approves more of the press as watchdog or as lapdog, nor how these assessments may change over time. That is the focus of our larger project.

In this paper, I will use public opinion about major social and political institutions, post September 11, as a lens through which I examine and extend our previous work on trust and confidence in the media. In the next section, I review my previous work on confidence in the media, summarizing the theoretical expectations and empirical findings. After that, I examine the spike in American's trust in government post 9/11 and the subsequent "return to normalcy" by spring 2002, highlighting the path taken by public confidence in the media. My expectation is that the media will experience a smaller rally, and a more rapid return to normalcy, than that experienced by any other institution. Finally, I turn briefly to a more detailed examination of public attitudes towards press coverage during this period, drawing on a new public opinion poll conducted for this purpose.

### *Defining and Explaining Confidence in the Press*

Trust and confidence are often used interchangeably when referring to public

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(Mendelsohn and Nadeau 1996, Jones 2002).

attitudes about a specific institution. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will put aside the question of the meaning of "trust" and how it is solicited from the mass public. Here, we are primarily concerned with confidence in a particular institution or set of institutions. Confidence is undoubtedly related to trust in government (and for that matter, trust in others), but is a distinct theoretical and methodological concept.

Most survey organizations (General Social Survey, National Election Study, Gallup, Harris, and CBS/NY Times) employ a relatively simple and brief query:

> "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?"

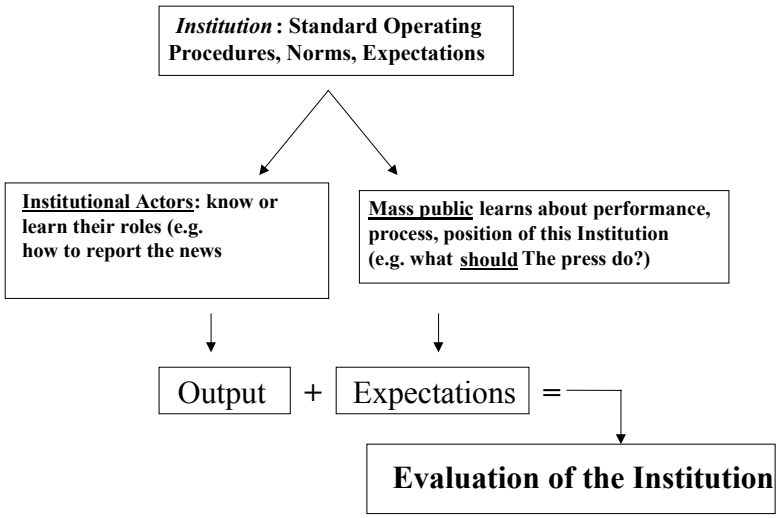
followed by a list of institutions ("the executive branch of the federal government", "big business", etc.). The question is far from ideal. It tends to fuzz over any differences between the institutions, in terms of a set of practices that transcend individuals therein, and the leaders of those institutions. It must be possible for an individual to hold both positive and negative attitudes towards a particular institution, its leadership, and its past and current performance (analogous perhaps to the multidimensional nature of partisan identity). "Confidence" does not exhaust 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 to Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court attests. The varied bases of assessments become particularly relevant during a period of institutional stress, where performance may deviate significantly from traditional procedures and mission.

Furthermore, what specifically might we expect about public confidence in the leadership of the press? How does the press, as an institution, differ from other political and social institutions? I propose a general model of institutional evaluations (including confidence) in Figure One. This figure, meant more as a heuristic than as a causal model, captures the main elements of the evaluative process. In order to form a *summary evaluation* of institutional performance, institutional output is weighed against expectations. Presumably superior performance, exceeding expectations, would result in a positive shift in evaluations, while inferior performance would erode evaluations.

For the time being, however, I am leaving open for the moment what constitutes

inferior performance. Marc Lynch, an expert on the international media at LSU, for instance, points out that the Arab press is disliked but highly valued, because they provide one of the few independent sources of information in the Middle East.[3] We hope to pursue this question in more detail in subsequent work.

**Figure One: A Model of Institutional Confidence**




*Outputs* for the news media consist of the stories, reports, analyses, and video footage that are produced as part of the newsgathering process. This might be described traditionally as the workways of the newsroom. The development of these standard operating procedures—what constitutes "news"—has been the focus of an extensive literature (e.g. Hess 1996; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Gans 1979) and will not be reviewed here.

Institutional actors--journalists, editors, and publishers--control output, in part by acting according to their proscribed roles, but also by reacting to the political environment. Citizens develop expectations about what constitutes appropriate media coverage, drawn in part from their social and political positions as well as from past performance of the institution. Then, far in the background lies "institution": a difficult to grasp bundle of SOP's, rules, constitutional or legal provisions, and the like.

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[3] Personal conversation with Timothy Cook, Summer 2002.

In this paper, I attempt to address a different part this puzzle: the contextual nature of citizen evaluations. If we can understand when citizen evaluations change, then this should provide us some leverage to infer why they change. I proceed by examining changing attitudes during a period of national crisis. What are our expectations regarding citizen evaluations immediately after 9/11 and in the six-month period following these events?

Recent findings of Mutz and Martin (2001) may shed light on public attitudes post 9/11. Mutz and Martin highlight the importance of exposure to conflicting viewpoints in a democratic polity. Such exposure promotes "strong talk" (Barber 1984), encourages reflection and deliberation (Fishkin 1991), and enhances rational decision making (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). A purely homogenous set of viewpoints militates against such reflective democratic decision-making (Sunstein 2001). Mutz and Martin show that the mass media are significantly more heterogeneous than at least one other major source of political information: interpersonal communications (at least respondents reported higher levels of perceived disagreement with political viewpoints from newspaper and television).

It is interesting to puzzle over these results in light of Cook's claims of increasing formal cooperation, and presumably homogeneity, in the mass media. Heterogeneity, at least as measured by Mutz and Martin, means that respondents say they disagree with the content of the news (validated by content coding). This is not news you can use but news you don't like. Our personal network of friends, colleagues, and co-workers, in contrast, is primarily made up of those who agree with us. Yet, what is the role of the mass media if not to expose us to the uncomfortable realities of the world outside of our local network of friends? Certainly no journalist would want to suppress certain facts or viewpoints simply because the public will find them distasteful. On the other hand, if the media are becoming more homogeneous, as Cook argues, then while some segment of the population should find themselves in regular disagreement with the media, another should find themselves in regular agreement. It all depends on the mapping of individual beliefs, values, and ideologies to those carried by the media.[4]

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[4] The causality can be complex. It might be that the media see their role as presenting viewpoints which are contrary to the prevailing wisdom. In that case, it would be true that a more homogeneous media

To bring us back to the topic of this paper, one wonders how the context of a "war on terror" alters this mapping. A wartime situation is quite different from an election campaign (the context studied by Mutz and Martin). In a time of national crisis, it is possible that the public is little interested in deliberating or engaging in "strong talk" over military policy, as expansive as "national security" has turned out to be. Put in the language of the model presented above, "expectations" are contextually determined. We do not know the causality of these expectations, although we have found in earlier work that perceptions of bias vary by ideology. I do not intend to challenge the utility of democratic discourse, but rather am attempting to identify situations where the public may display little tolerance for dissent, and furthermore, blame the messenger who carries signs of public discord. Thus, the media may be faced with an irresolvable dilemma during times of crisis. If the media expose flaws in the war effort, they may be scapegoats; if they simply parrot government propaganda, they will be accused of being sycophants.[5]

Some argue that it has been incumbent on the press to report the facts, however unpleasant they may be. Rosensteil and Kovach, in a recent editorial, write: "…a review of news coverage reveals that over time Americans are getting fewer facts and more opinion—a narrow range of opinion at that—(and at) the same time, polls show the press losing a measure of the respect that it had gained in September, when the public overwhelmingly applauded the timely, comprehensive and informative news coverage" (Rosensteil and Kovach 2002). As Alex Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center put it: "the media can be totally oblivious to what public opinion is, but they have a great opportunity to be tough and illuminative in their coverage" (Gavel 2001). Illuminative, perhaps, but also possibly disdained for being so.

Periods of crisis such as September 11 may help us identify the contextual determinants of media trust and confidence. In a period of heightened public concern over security, and widespread feelings of fear, the media will receive positive boosts insofar as it

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would spark more disagreement with citizen viewpoints. But then this further assumes that citizen viewpoints reflect the prevailing wisdom—as learned from the media (Zaller 1992). We are caught in a tautology.

[5] The labels are borrowed from Smith's (1999) chapter title, "The Mass Media: Scapegoats and Sycophants).

reports examples of national success and accomplishments. After all, if American are rallying around their government during a period of national crisis, should not the mass media enjoy a similar surge in acclaim? I believe it should not. When the media acts as critic of the established order, however, its stature will further erode. My expectation is that the latter is a far more likely outcome, because the press, while is may fit Easton's definition of a governing institution, it is either not viewed as such, or not legitimized as such, by the public. It is this possible disjuncture between the perceived role of the press (is it a watchdog, lapdog, or carping critic) and changes in the role of the institution (performance) that may have resulted in declining confidence over the past twenty years. In order to examine this hypothesis, I next review the available data on confidence in institutions, and the press, post 9/11.

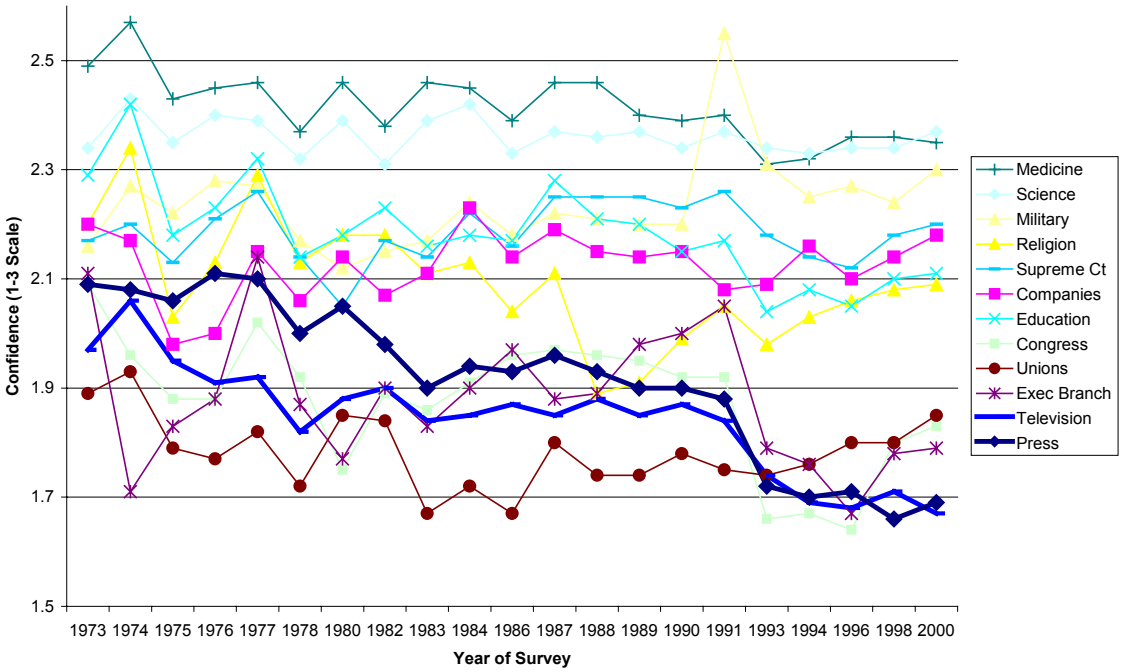
### *Measuring Confidence in the Press*

In a series of other papers (Cook and Gronke 2001; Cook, Gronke and Ratliff 2000), I and my co-authors have reported on our progress in empirically disentangling confidence in the media from confidence in other institutions, as well as identifying some outlines of public expectations about the press. In brief, we have discovered that, while declining confidence in the media can be partially explained by overall lower levels of institutional confidence, the news media has experienced a decline that is deeper and more sustained than either the general trend, or the trend displayed by any other social or political institution.

This is illustrated in Figure Two, which plots confidence in various institutions over the past two decades, using data drawn from the General Social Survey. For convenience, I have boldfaced the lines for "television" and "press." The decline in the press outpaces other institutions during this period. The number of respondents who express a "great deal" of confidence, never especially high for the press, declined to nearly nothing pre 9/11. The percentage difference between the most confident and the least confident has also grown to be the highest for the press during this period. Most importantly, if we wish to answer the question, "confident compared to what", confidence in the press ranks lower than any other institution. This latter measure accounts for the linear decline in confidence since 1972.

Even when the trend is removed, public confidence in the press declined further than any governmental or social institution.[6]

**Figure Two: Confidence in Institutions (GSS)**




We have also been able to demonstrate that the press has no remaining core group of supporters. Subgroups in the population, especially liberals, Democrats, and better-educated respondents, who in past had reported higher levels of confidence in the media, were by 1998 expressing levels of confidence as low as all other groups. The partisan and ideological support base for the press had disappeared. As we wrote at the time, at least for the press, familiarity seems to breed contempt. By 1998 everyone, it seemed, disdained the media (Cook and Gronke 2000, Figure 8).

### *Confidence in Institutions, and the Press, Post 9/11*

It is well known that the seemingly inexorable decline in trust in government, and trust in social and political institutions, was dramatically reversed in the first few months

[6] These results are reported in much more detail in Cook and Gronke (2000), available at http://www.reed.edu/~gronkep

after September 11. An early ABC News poll trumpeted "the end of 30 years of growing distrust of government," with Robert Putnam declaring a turning point in Americans' relationship to their governing institutions (ABC, Sept. 28 2001).[7] Some warned against reading too much into the early data (e.g. Gallup reports, Oct. 12, 2001), yet a few weeks later, a well-respected academic survey organization, NORC, released a report entitled "America Rebounds." Americans were reported to be "even more prideful of nearly all national aspects," wrote survey director Tom Smith, expressing high levels of confidence in government and society (NORC, October 2001). The NORC report is particularly powerful, since it uses a comparison of crises, as suggested here, to illuminate public attitudes. Using the Kennedy assassination as a way to put 9/11 into context, Smith and his co-authors write that 9/11 resulted not only in a surge in confidence, but also increases in trust in others, and a dramatic growth in self-reported acts of volunteerism and community service. Patriotism, pride, self-confidence were buoyed, even at a time when American's sense of safety and security was shaken.

However, one institution stood apart from this trend. While the figures to date are somewhat spotty due to incomplete coverage across survey organizations, rumblings began to appear of a backlash against media coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath as early as November. Gallup reported on November 16, 2001 that most government officials and governmental institutions continued to show historically high levels of support, but that the news media's surge in support had been very short lived. The Pew Center reported somewhat more optimistic results in late November, indicating that public confidence in the media had increased, although "traditional sour spots have not gone away." (Pew Center, Nov 28, 2001). By March 2002, six months after the tragedy, the Pew Center reported that trust in government was "coming back to earth," although ratings of the President and the military remained in the stratosphere.

Our own survey, conducted by the Reilly Center for the Media and Politics in March 2002, confirms the Pew findings. Our respondents were a bit less enthusiastic than many

[7] All survey reports, including newspaper stories, are referenced in a separate section at the end of the paper.

other survey audiences. However, the general pattern is identical. Trust in the military is very high, likely at a ceiling. The Executive Branch and the Supreme Court rank next, followed closely by a bundle of institutions. Our respondents expressed the lowest levels of confidence in the press.

**Table 1: Reilly Center Poll (March 2002), Percent Expressing Confidence in Leaders of Various Institutions**

| | Percent "Great Deal" or "Somewhat" |
|---|---|
| Executive Branch | 54% |
| Congress | 47% |
| Supreme Court | 56% |
| Military | 81% |
| Religion | 48% |
| Education | 48% |
| Labor Unions | 45% |
| Press | 41% |
| Television | 41% |

Source: Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs. Data are weighted by education, gender, and age.

I report two final replications. In Figure Three, I plot Gallup observations, broken up into governmental and social institutions, from 1996 until the most recent observation in June 2002 (although not for all institutions).[8] These lines mirror the GSS up to 2000, but most interesting is the divergence post September 11. The military experienced a strong surge in public acclaim, something commented on soon after the event by numerous pollsters (e.g. Wirthlin Reports, assorted dates; Pew Center March 7 2002; Gallup October 12, 2001), followed to a lesser degree by confidence in the "executive branch of the federal government" and the Congress. This last distinction is important, because Presidential job approval surged dramatically, as did Congressional approval (the Reilly Center poll also showed a 79% approval rating). This highlights the point made during the theoretical discussion: confidence is a multifaceted concept, and cannot be understood with reference to a single answer to a single survey item. There is a crucial difference between asking about

[8] Gaps appear in this plot, as well as in Figure Four, due to incomplete data series. We have not found a survey organization which asked these questions on a regular basis throughout the past two years, not to mention the last twenty. We have assembled as comprehensive a dataset as we can.

"leaders of" and institution, approval of the performance of a particular occupant or set of occupants, and the institution itself (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

**Figure Three: Confidence in Governmental Institutions**

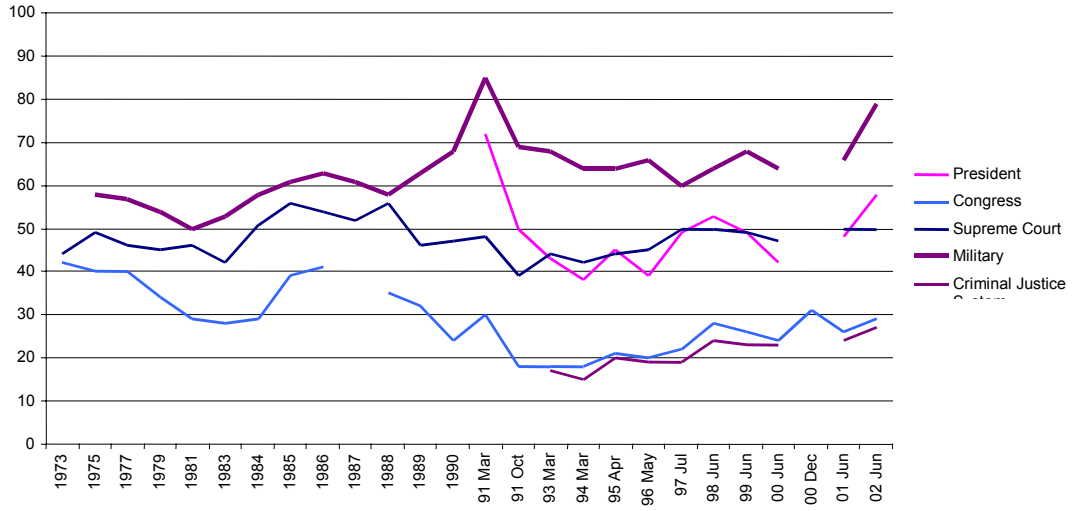
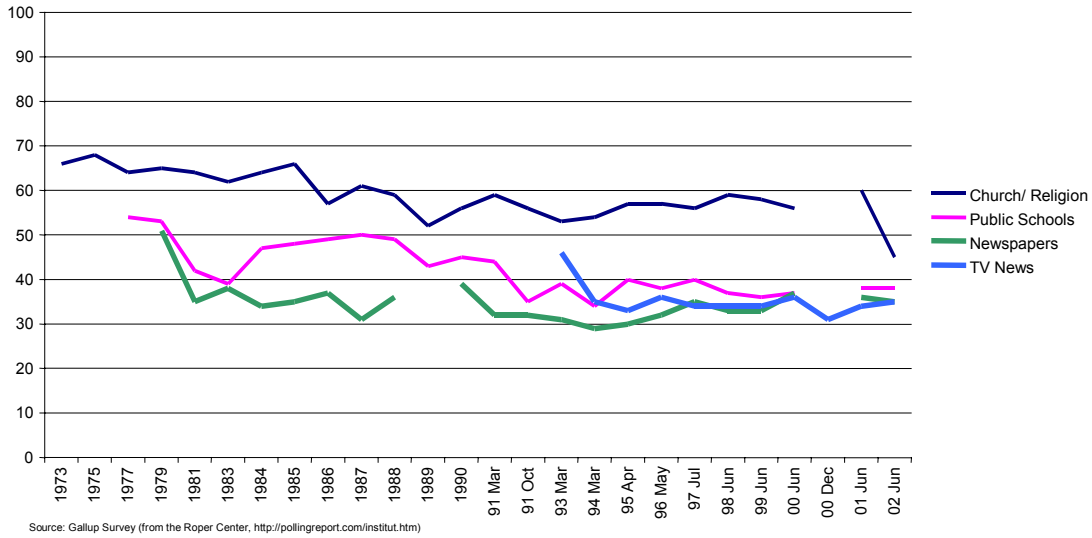



**Figure Three (con't): Confidence in Public**

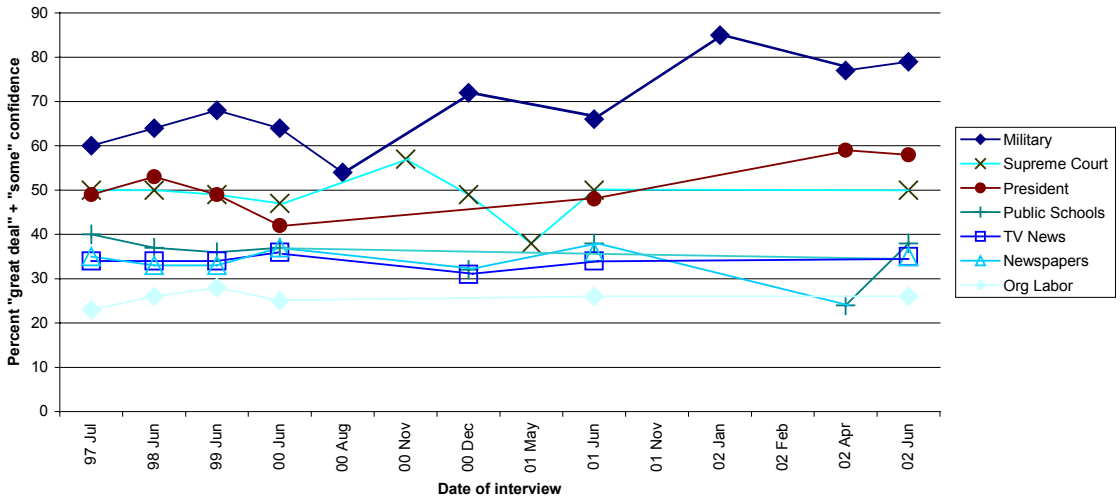



Source: Gallup Survey (from the Roper Center, http://pollingreport.com/institut.htm)

The second replication is obtained by plotting <u>all</u> survey observations taken during this period. For this figure, I have merged the top two categories in the confidence item. Most times, this comprises the "great deal" and "somewhat" options. However, while there is substantial coherence across these organizations, a number of observations have had to be dropped (most commonly because the Internet sources which I relied upon only reported

the percentage who expressed a "great deal" of confidence.) Figure Four reports these data, and it generally sustains our previous results. The military and the president experienced the greatest surge in confidence in the post 9/11 period; confidence in the Supreme Court, TV News, and Newspapers was unaffected, although many reported significant surges in the short term.[9] Six to nine months after the event, whatever surge there had been had withered away.

**Figure Three: Institutional Confidence, Post 9/11 (Various Survey Sources)**




These figures demonstrate that "institutional confidence" is clearly a misnomer. Institutional confidence standing alone is meaningless. The institutions which are routinely asked about by survey organizations occupy very different positions in the social and political life of the United States. The much vaunted "rally" did not extend across all aspects of public life, as might have seemed to be the case immediately after the terrorist attacks. Americans rallied around their governing institutions (the executive branch and the Congress) and the forces of law and order (military, police, and the legal system). They did not, however, rally around institutions that are perceived to be outside of the governing

[9] One problem with these data is that the surge in confidence in the press, as reported in many of the survey reports and press releases documented at the end of the paper, is not evident. I am unclear at present why this is the case. I suspect that I have not assembled as comprehensive a set of data points as hoped. This should be addressed in the next iteration of this paper.

order (a distinction made nicely by Listhaug and Wiber 1995).[10]

Another common thread runs through all of these results: the news media, much as it may function as a "political institution," is not viewed by the public as part of government. Richard Wirthlin wrote, in April 2002, of an unprecedented swing of public trust for most major institutions and leaders, but that this trust remained strong only for those responsible for protecting the people. The military, the president, and to a lesser degree, the Supreme Court, fall into that category. The press (and organized labor, and in some respects Congress) does not. Yet, like Congress, the press must be out front, reporting on the results of the conflict in the Middle East. And like Congress, which seems to have borne the brunt of criticism for poor governmental performance (Washington Post December 2001), the press may have lost public confidence because of its organizational mandate: to report all the news, good or ill.

### *Positive News for the Press?*

All the news is not bad, however. A multidimensional concept means that all parts may not be moving in the same direction, and this appears to be the case with the media. In previous work we showed that, while the public holds negative attitudes about the press as an institution, they continue to hold positive attitudes about particular news outlets. Approval ratings of news organizations (local television news, network television news, and hometown daily newspapers) were almost flat during the same thirty-year period (since 1972). Even if we wanted to conclude (and we do not) that "Americans hate the media," these results do not signal a crisis for the public's relationship with American journalism as a whole. Americans do not disdain the news, even though 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, what they read in their daily paper or watch on TV, over a 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.

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[10] One problem with this claim is the lack of a rally around the Supreme Court, certainly an

We included a set of items in the Reilly Center poll intended to probe deeper in the public's attitudes towards the news media as an institution, and particularly towards news gathering during the war on terrorism, to see if these patterns continued during a crisis. In general, the news was good. 67.3% of our sample approved of the news media in terms of its institutional setup, and 66.7% approved of the "job that journalists are doing." As other surveys conducted by the Pew Center suggest, a large majority endorses the journalistic mission of covering the war on terrorism. 64.7% of our sample advised the media to "dig for facts" about the war rather than just "trust government officials." Almost three-quarters (72.5%) of the respondents thought that the news coverage of Afghanistan has been "accurate for the most part," and even blame what mistakes were made on misleading information on the part of the government rather than poor reporting on the part of journalists.

There are some more negative aspects in our results, however. 57% of our sample think that the news media "look out for a few big interests," far fewer than business (81%), but also far more than the military and about the same percentage as government. Many in our sample believe reports of media distortion, bias, and unproductive reporting: a majority (52-34%) thought that stories were "often inaccurate", 66% charge the press with political bias, and a bare majority (51.6%) think that the press "gets in the way of society solving its problems."[11]

These patterns serve as additional confirmation of the points made above. When asked to evaluate a specific target—recent coverage of Afghanistan for instance—most have positive things to say. Similarly, when asked to evaluate the structure of the institution in the abstract, most respondents approve. Yet, when questions allow respondents to reflect prevailing criticisms of the press (bias and distortion), and especially when asked to evaluate the abstract institution of "the news media", they are quite willing to express their condemnation.

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"institution of order." I am not sure why evaluations of the Court remained unaffected.

[11] Interestingly, as part of a split sample experiment, we altered the wording of these questions so that they mentioned either "the news media" or "the press." Across the three sets of items, "the press" is viewed marginally less negatively than "the news media."

## *Conclusion*

I started this paper by suggesting that, in a period of crisis, we may be able to observe cracks and fractures in public support for political and social institutions. By peering into these cracks, we may gain further insights in the nature of institutional confidence, how it is structured and how it changes. The events of 9/11 resulted in a dramatic growth in trust in government, leaders, and confidence in an array of social and political institutions. However, as many concluded at the 2002 meetings of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, no sustained changes in the structure of attitudes seems to have occurred (NY Times, May 20, 2002). Most of the patterns that we observed in citizens' attitudes towards the news media were also evident in their expressions of that confidence post 9/11.

The 9/11 period did further highlight, however, the relative position of the news media versus other institutions in the public's eyes. For reasons explored in previous work, the news media has moved from an institution that ranked, at worst, in the middle range of confidence. By 1998, at the time of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the media rank at or near the bottom. The press is no longer viewed in the glowing terms of the 1970s. Instead, the press and journalists are seen in terms very similar to another collective institution: Congress. Like Congress, press activities are out in the open, subject to public scrutiny and withering criticism by other elites (most often members of the same press corps!). 9/11 has not changed this picture.

We speculated previously (Cook and Gronke 2000, 2001) that this may have been due to reactions to Lewinsky. If true, coverage of a successful war effort in Afghanistan has done little to resuscitate public faith in the press. Any possibility that sustained public attention to the news during the crisis may increase public confidence seems to have been either misplaced or an opportunity lost. So where do we stand on trust, confidence, distrust in the press and other American political institutions? It is clear that there was an upward trend in trust in government following the September 11 attacks. But the data reported here suggest that this was a momentary blip caused by the focus of Americans on national security and threats to the homeland. As September 11 fades and as people turn back to domestic political issues, we should expect, as we have already seen, the trust in government and confidence in various institutions to fall back to levels similar to those prior to

September 11.

But does this mean that the American public is disaffected and distrusting of American government in general, or just losing confidence in particular institutions? Preliminary analyses of the Reilly Center poll indicate that the public is no more trusting of private power than public power. We have also seen that lack of trust does not prevent people from approving the job performance of a wide variety of institutional set-ups, and even of the officeholders within those institutions. The nation is more confident in the leaders of the military and the executive branch, but this is precisely what would be expected when both have engaged in a successful war effort.[12]

The post 9/11 reaction, in this respect, was quite rational. Perhaps, then, we need not wring our hands about declining confidence in institutions over the past 10 years. Nor should we overemphasize the growth in confidence after 9/11 and what this might mean for trust in government, civic participation, and social capital formation (see, for example, Robert Putnam's comments, quoted in Stille 2001). What this means is that Americans are now, in the words of my co-author, a "nation of Missourians." We all come from a <u>show-me state</u>. Americans do not expect that the leaders of social and political institutions will necessarily do the right thing, but, with differing levels, neither do they anticipate that government will do the wrong thing either. Instead, they are willing to suspend their presumptions and to watch the workings of politics and judge institutions and political actors accordingly. In this light, the decline over the past thirty to forty years of trust in government and of confidence in institutions is not such bad news. It may represent the rise of a public that is healthily skeptical of many forms of power.

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[12] We will report more on these data, encompassing items developed to capture "active trust" and confidence in the media <u>as an institution</u> and as a set of actors (mirroring the Hibbing/Theiss-Morse categories).

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[13] Special credit is due to Aaron Rabiroff for assembling and summarizing these sources.

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