

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

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Introduction

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 and Schneider 1987, Table 2-1; W.L. Bennett 1988, Figure 1). Looking back on that decade, Lipset and Schneider (1987, 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, 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 the press rose when confidence in other branches, especially the executive, fell, in a “modest but noticeable see-saw relationship” (Lipset and Schneider 1987, 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 and Lewis 1985; Whitney 1985; Robinson and 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,” “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 and 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, in the late 1990s, in the wake of another presidential scandal and another presidential impeachment, the news media are no longer so favorably viewed. Indeed, of all the institutions examined in the yearly GSS, public confidence in the press has suffered the steepest decline (FitzSimon and 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 the People and the Press

¹ See also Becker, Cobbey and Sobowale (1978) for similar results in the early 1970s.

(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 and 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 thing.” 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” (Freedom Forum 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?”

Yes, there are many surveys and anecdotes to discuss. But 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.²

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 1998; 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 1998, 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

² The only exception to this is the recent book, *How the News Media Fail American Voters*, by Dautrich and Hartley (1999), which analyzes a panel survey of 503 voters following them in four waves across the 1996 presidential campaign with particular attention to how their respondents used and assessed the coverage therein. This is, no doubt, an important volume. It gives us a clearer sense than we have had before how citizens' media habits and assessments change over the course of a campaign. Moreover, Dautrich and Hartley share with us the conclusion that the news media constitute a political institution which thus justifies attention by political scientists to how the public interacts with and views it, and we have considerable sympathy with their critique of how the news media can be disconnected from the public they ostensibly serve given that citizens have few means to influence the content of the news short of turning it off altogether, by their important finding that "voters' motivations for media use come from reasons that have little to do with the quality of coverage" (p. 166).

However, Dautrich and Hartley do not foreclose the necessity for other investigations. For one thing, their findings are considerably more mixed than the portrait assumed by the title of the book. Dautrich and Hartley, however, seem determined (much like the journalists we quoted above) to paint the public as dissatisfied and hostile to the news media as a whole. In particular, they note that satisfaction with the news media's job in covering the campaign increased substantially from February to November (Figure 4.2), voters overwhelmingly concluded by October that they had "received enough information to make a vote decision" (Figure 4.3), and the percentages that said the news media were not biased, either ideologically or in terms of partisan preference, increased to a majority by year's end (Figure 5.3). The first two are too quickly dismissed as "scratching the surface," and the latter finding seriously undermines their conclusion about "the acute sense among voters that news is characterized by political bias" (p. 112). At least as important, Dautrich and Hartley restrict their examination of the predictors of evaluations of media coverage to a series of bivariate tables. It thus becomes difficult to tell how much media use, education, ideology, party, etc., all contribute to assessments of the news media. Thus, while important and innovative, Dautrich and Hartley's book represents a frustratingly incomplete account of public opinion towards the news.

least modify, this developing conventional wisdom. Most important for our point is that this literature, save a few notable exceptions (Lipset and Schneider 1987; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), largely relies on attitudes towards 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 and King, 1997; Norris, 1999a; Pharr and 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 1999, Gronke and Feaver 1999).³

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 1970-1). 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 General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago 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?” The institutions listed were: banks and financial institutions; major companies; organized religion; education; executive branch of the federal government; organized labor; press; medicine; TV; U.S. Supreme Court; scientific community; Congress; and the military. Our analysis will encompass pooled cross-sectional data from the cumulative General Social Survey file for 1973-1998.⁴ Although our focus will be on the GSS data, we have constructed a contemporaneous data

³ For instance, Gronke (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 our paper 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.

⁴ Specific years include 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1998.

set with similar questions for “the press” and “television news” from a variety of Harris polls conducted from January 1967 to January 2000.

This question wording is not ideal. 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 to Congress, the presidency and the Supreme Court attests. After all, to get the full picture of Americans’ attitudes towards institutions, we would need measures of emotional (e.g., anxiety, enthusiasm, disgust) as well as cognitive response; we would need indications not just in the confidence in leaders of institutions but of the approval of the day-to-day performance on one end and the support for the institutional set-up regardless of the people in power; and perceptions of and attitudes toward the institution’s mission and procedures.

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 and 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 refers to an undifferentiated “government.” Moreover, Lipset and Schneider (1987, 89-93), moreover, 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 to 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 1. 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 and 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). 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. Four of the drops between surveys are statistically significant by a difference-of-means test at $p < .05$ (1977-78; 1980-82; 1982-83; 1991-93; 1996-98). None of the increases between surveys is statistically significant at $p < .05$.⁵ 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 nineties (mean around 1.7).

⁵ However, the increases between 1975 and 1976, 1978 and 1980, and 1983 and 1984 were all marginally statistically significant at $p < .10$.

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

The average, however, hides considerably more movement in the proportions that fell into each response category. We plot these data in Figure 2. 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 proportions 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.

FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE

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.

Seeking further empirical confirmation of these results, we gathered Harris poll data from 1967 through 2000. The Harris survey has been asking a set of standard questions about confidence in American institutions since the 1960s. Respondents are asked

As far as the people running {institution} are concerned, do you have a great deal of confidence in them, only some, or hardly any confidence in them at all?

The question is repeated for a variety of institutions, such as “major companies,” “Congress” or “medicine.” We are particularly interested in two of the institutions on the list: “the press” and “television news.” We constructed a time series of public confidence in the press and television news from these data. The series has 39 data points, beginning in January 1967 and ending in January 2000.⁶ As with the GSS, we calculated a “mean confidence” score for each cross-sectional sample based on the survey marginals. Figure 3 displays the data for the mean confidence in the press as reported by GSS and by Harris. We see that early in the Harris series, from 1967 to 1973, confidence is somewhat low, with a mean slightly below the “only some confidence” level. Confidence increases sharply around 1974, probably in response to Watergate-related considerations, then declines slowly back to the previous low levels by 1976. In January of 1979, the mean confidence jumps to its highest level in the series. During the 21 years from 1979 to 2000, the mean series declines slowly, hitting its lowest level in February 1995.

⁶ The surveys were identified by searching the IRSS (Odum Institute) data archive. More information is contained in the appendix.

FIGURE THREE ABOUT HERE

The Harris series correlates with the GSS series at a high level ($R = .60$), suggesting that the two come close to measuring the same phenomenon. The correlation is not strong enough, in our judgment, for us to follow Lipset and Schneider's (1987) decision to combine the two sources into a single data series. Moreover, although the general downward trend in confidence is apparent, the Harris data are first of all, more volatile, and second, start at a somewhat lower average level than the GSS and end at a somewhat higher average level than the GSS.

Finally for comparative purposes, we plot in Figure 4 mean confidence in the press and in television news from Harris. The patterns are very similar, but the public tends to consistently report higher confidence in television news. This is true of the series overall, and also for every single survey in the series. (The difference between the two series averages about 0.15 on the 1 to 3 scale.) Second, the confidence in television news series exhibits the same general behavior over time as the confidence in press series. The two series move in parallel.

FIGURE FOUR ABOUT HERE

Our main analyses will employ the GSS series. We intend to return to the Harris data in future papers. We remain troubled by some contradictory trends in the two series. For example, the Harris series is relatively flat from 1978 through 1982 while the GSS series is dropping, and Harris rises just after 1991 while GSS displays a significant decline. We will examine these discrepancies more closely in subsequent analyses, focusing particularly on replicating causal analyses across both series. If the differences are simply a matter of level but not underlying structure, then they are less a cause for concern.⁷

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, Zelikow and King (1997) are emblematic of this trend, where 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.

Lipset and Schneider's (1987) analysis is especially intriguing for us, inasmuch as they report that confidence toward the press seemed to follow a different logic than toward other institutions. Nonetheless, one of their key conclusions is that a general confidence trend can be identified across institutions. A recent exploration (S. Bennett et al. 1999, p. 12) has also "raised an intriguing question:

⁷ For example, Gronke (2000) shows that Harris almost always provides higher approval ratings for Democratic presidents, Gallup provides lower ratings, the NYTimes series in the middle. Causal models, however, show remarkable similarity across the three surveys.

Is there an underlying dimension for trust in major societal institutions, where the media as the fourth estate have become comparable to government institutions in the public's eye?" The problem with Bennett et al. is that they take Lipset and Schneider (1987) as their starting point. And less favorably for our purposes, how Lipset and Schneider went about doing that leaves almost as much unanswered as they addressed.

In chapter 2, "The Generality of the Trends," Lipset and Schneider conducted a factor analysis (though they do not tell us what kind) on the aggregate data series of confidence in institutions from GSS and Harris which showed that "a single factor accounts for 66 percent of the variation in confidence from survey to survey for the leaders of all ten institutions. 'The press' showed the weakest correspondence with other institutions. Faith in the press correlated .43 with the general confidence trend, while the other nine factor loadings ranged between .69 and .93" (p. 47). However, in a footnote (p. 47 n. 4), they point out that if one excludes the Harris surveys from 1966 and 1967, the results are considerably weaker, and a second factor, defined positively by the executive branch and Congress and negatively by the press, is generated.

In chapter 4, "The Correlates of Confidence in Institutions," Lipset and Schneider examined the correlation matrix for confidence in leaders of institutions on the pooled GSS from 1973 through 1977 and found that all correlations were positive, and that the average intercorrelation was .21. Note here that the oft-cited negative relationship between confidence in the press and confidence in elected officials (president and Congress) occurred only at the aggregate, not the individual level. Emboldened by the possibility of a "general index of confidence in institutions,' reflecting the fact that people who express high confidence in the leaders of any one institution tend to be favorable toward leaders of all institutions" (p. 98), Lipset and Schneider conducted a principal components factor analysis and came up with a single factor that accounted for 28% of the variance in the responses, on which all of the confidence questions loaded at a level of .43 or higher, indicating "some common content to these questions" (p. 99; emphasis in original). However, in a footnote (p. 99, n. 3), they indicated that "additional factors were extracted [again, without saying how] in order to determine whether there might be more than one 'general confidence' factor." Only one additional factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 emerged, defined by confidence in the press and in television. Thus, again, "both analyses suggest a distinct pattern for the *media* as opposed to other institutions" (p. 99, n. 3, emphasis in original). However, enigmatically, they then said, the media factor was felt to be "insufficiently general" to be included in the analysis.

Most work on confidence in institutions since Lipset and Schneider has concentrated on cross-national surveys, either in advanced industrial democracies, or in Western Europe. Among this scholarship, the most recent investigations have tended to assume dimensionality. For instance, Newton and Norris (2000), examined the cross-national World Values Survey (WVS) administered in seventeen advanced industrial democracies. Institutional confidence was measured for ten institutions: the police, the legal system, armed forces, parliament/Congress, the civil service, the education system, the church, major companies, the press and trade unions. Newton and Norris suggest that these "*can* be divided into public-sector institutions, understood as those most closely associated with the core functions of the state... and other institutions in the private and nonprofit sectors" (2000, pp. 54-55; emphasis added). They then create two scales based on the first five and second five, respectively, of these ten institutions. While Newton and Norris do point out that "these scales proved suitable for

analysis because the separate items were highly intercorrelated, producing scales with a normal and nonskewed distribution with high reliability” (2000, p. 57 n. 3), as measured by the Cronbach’s alpha for the respective scales, they do not report whether one would have received similar results with a single scale, and indeed whether these two scales are at all correlated.

Attempts to posit dimensionality of confidence rankings, following the WVS, have been contradictory, vague or ambivalent. Listhaug and Wiberg (1995) note that one can proceed to set up indices of confidence in institutions either “pragmatically or empirically.” A pragmatic approach means specifying a priori which institutions are and are not governmental and compiling separate scales, but Listhaug and Wiberg note that factor analysis (using varimax rotation) produces a “prevalent tendency for what we can term ‘the institutions of order’ -- the armed forces, the legal system, the police, and, somewhat less distinctly, the church -- to load on the second factor in a two-factor solution.” (1995, p. 306) Instead of reporting, let alone using, the factor loadings, however, they merely note “This underlines the need to make a distinction within state institutions.” (1995, p. 306). Listhaug and Wiberg (1995) refer to Listhaug’s (1984) earlier factor analysis of the Norwegian sample, yet the earlier results undermine their later efforts, given Listhaug’s earlier conclusion that one cannot find two uncorrelated factors with most variables loading relatively well on both extracted factors in a varimax rotation. In particular, for Norway at least, Listhaug (1984, p. 116) noted “The results do not support the expectations of a state/non-state dimension or a private vs. public factor.” These results for Norway found reinforcement in other EEC countries as well, as Döring’s (1992) series of obliquely rotated factor analyses found that in all countries studied except France, there were two positively correlated ($r > .27$) factors with eigenvalues above 1.0, one best defined by confidence in trade unions and in the press, and the other by confidence in the armed forces, in the police and in the church. Other measures of institutional confidence tended to load moderately on both dimensions. The main difference between countries was in which of the two factors (respectively what Döring [1992, p. 136] called “civil society” and “established order”) explained more of the variance. While there was no country where trade unions and the press on one hand, and the church and armed forces on the other, were both on the same factor, confidence ratings in the other institutions (parliament, civil service, education system, legal system and major companies) loaded neither so consistently across countries nor so clearly on one or another factor.

We thus have tantalizing indications that confidence in the press follows a different pattern from that accorded to other institutions. Yet given all of this--the ambiguity in the kinds of factor analysis Lipset and Schneider used and the flexible criteria they applied for deciding when to include and exclude the examination of factors, the presumption of dimensionality without evidence exemplified by Newton and Norris or by Listhaug and Wiberg, and the unclear place of political institutions in this analysis from Listhaug and from Döring--we need to ask: can we indeed come up with a robust scale of generalized confidence in institutions separate from indications of the media? And is there evidence that we can think of confidence in the media as being distinct from confidence in other institutions?

Using GSS data pooled for years 1973 through 1998, we calculate a “generalized” confidence scale, with weights determined by exploratory factor analysis on ten confidence items, excluding the press and TV questions. For the purposes of this paper, 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.

In order to test the assumption of unidimensionality, we constructed a similar scale using alpha scoring. The various confidence measures, excluding those for the press and for TV, do scale well (reliability coefficients exceed .69 for all years and are at .75 for the pooled data set). Furthermore, an exploratory factor analysis (varimax rotation) including *all* twelve of the confidence measures, produces only one dimension with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 (2.657) and on which the press and TV items have the smallest factor loadings. This provides evidence that unidimensionality for institutions other than the media is not far off the mark.

We also conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses in order to test the assumption of unidimensionality. These results are more mixed. 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 1327 with 53 degrees of freedom, whereas the two-factor solution provides a chi-square of 1148 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). However, using the rule of thumb suggested by Hayduk (1987) of a 4:1 ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom, neither a single- or two-factor solution is adequate. This suggests a more complex structure than is commonly assumed.

We believe that further measurement work is needed to clarify these issues. For the time being, then, we assume that confidence in the press may follow a somewhat different logic than confidence in all institutions. In the following figures and tables, we examine two measures, a standardized measure of confidence in the press (standardized so that it is comparable to the factor scale) and “generalized” confidence, the first factor scale described above.

Figures 5 and 6 compare standardized levels of confidence in the press against the generalized confidence measure (the first figure plots the separate trends, while the second displays the “gap” or difference between the two). These figures show how confidence in the press declined more rapidly than confidence for other institutions (excepting, again, TV). 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.

INSERT FIGURES 5 AND 6 ABOUT HERE

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.

Who Disdains the Media?

Having given an overview of the decline in both 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 1998, 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. What is not clear, however, is whether dummy variable solutions cause any problems for ordered probit, which is used to estimate the press confidence models below. We followed a conservative strategy, estimating the equations using both OLS and ordered probit. The substantive results are unchanged. Since ordered probit is most appropriate for a trichotomous dependent variable, which is what we report here.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 and Schneider 1987; Craig 1993; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; King 1997; Norris 1999b; Dalton 2000; Newton and 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 and Norris 2000). However, trust in government works in somewhat different ways, which suggests other possibilities, with education, being nonwhite, 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

⁸ The full results including coefficients for the year-of-survey dummy variables are available from the authors upon request

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 who 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 that were asked 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" as well as other social and political institutions (Brehm and Rahn 1998). We include here two such measures from 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, and Brady, 1996).

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 and Schneider, 1987; McAllister 1999; Newton and Norris 2000). We operationalize this concept using two questions from the GSS: whether the individual is satisfied with his/her current job, and whether the individual believes that his/her family's personal financial situation has improved "during the last few years."

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 seven-point scale going from strong Democrat to strong Republican) and ideology (a seven-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 and 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

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.

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 are. 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 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 and 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 which 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.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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 negatively. 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 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-R² = .0397), such a result is similar to other attempts to predict levels of confidence in institutions (e.g. King 1997, Table 6-3; Newton and 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). The model does a somewhat better job of explaining the variance in the data, with an adjusted R² of .074. In contrast to Table 1, however, here the measures of institutional attachment and life satisfaction are the most powerful influences upon generalized confidence. Strength of partisanship, attending religious services, and improved family finances are all highly statistically 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.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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 a tremendous impact on confidence in the press, and the fit of the model to the data is substantially improved. Nonetheless, most of the other 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) which 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 pushes 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 statistically significant coefficients. 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) would be pushed away from their usual favorability to the adversarial media. Examine Figures 7 and 8, which show the mean confidence differential, disaggregated by partisan and ideological groups. These figures illustrate the slow but inexorable decline in confidence in the media among all groups. Most notable to us is the sudden convergence of these data in 1998, where all groups give far less confidence than previous years and at virtually the same level, both among partisan and ideological groupings.

Whether these results turn out to be a short-term response to the Lewinsky scandal in 1998, whether they would be altered if the Republicans take back the White House in 2000, or whether they are harbingers of further difficulties for the press, this helps us understand why it is that journalists nowadays have such a visceral sense of the media being hated. We know that reporters tend disproportionately to say that they are Democrats and/or liberals (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Put tersely (and perhaps unfairly), reporters can no longer rely upon their traditional friends to support them. There is no core group to give the press "high confidence." Prior to 1998,

conservatives and Republicans were far more likely to withhold confidence in the press than liberals and Democrats; as of 1998, such was no longer the case.

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 had been heretofore most positive toward them. The Pew Center for the People and the Press (Pew 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 (see Figure 9). In short, citizens seem consistent; the results we receive 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 and 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 and 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-1980s, 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); for “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 bar news media from a foreign military operation” (39% favoring and 42% opposing); and “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 2703 journalists working for the newspapers cited by the sample of the public opposed each of these options. By contrast, a 1996 Harris poll (Smith and 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, whereas at the beginning of our time period, when the news media were more frequently seen to be performing a positive political and 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 and 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 was “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 and 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 preside over a societal and/or political sector” (Cook 1998, 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 the public is skittish about trusting the news media, they still find their overall day-to-day performance to be acceptable. Just as the public usually dislikes Congress far more than its own representative in Congress or often disapproves of the health care system in the United States at the same time they approve of their own physician or sees discrimination against women occurring frequently in the world at large but rarely in their immediate surroundings (Mutz and Flemming 1999), citizens 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 and Lewis 1985, Table 2).¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ Note already 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 and Lewis 1985, Table 2).

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 or news stories.

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' understandings 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 one's 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 and Theiss-Morse 1995, 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

As perhaps should have 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. Figure 10 presents data from 1985 to 1999 from the Pew Research Center (1998c) on the favorability that respondents reported toward "network television news," "local

¹¹ Ironically, the attention that one news outlet gives to its own mistakes as well as those of other news outlets are part of what Bennett, Gressett and Haltom (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.

¹² *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 concluded that journalists often or sometimes: invent stories, plagiarize, use unethical or illegal tactics, and have factual errors.

television news,” and “the daily newspaper you are most familiar with.”¹³ Not only are these results consistently high, but most strikingly, these figures have been remarkably stable, bouncing around within a limited range since they were first asked in the summer of 1985.

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 towards 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 70s to the late 90s.
- 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 that is 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 in with other

¹³ The question reads, “Now I’d like your opinion of some organizations. As I read from a list, please tell me which category best describes your overall opinion of what I name. Would you say your overall opinion ... is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?”

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).

institutions, as opposed to operating from outside the social and political order, as Lipset and Schneider (1987) suggested for the 70s and 80s. However, confidence in the press is not a mere extension of how citizens judge other institutions in general, as income, partisanship, ideology, shared partisanship, the 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, 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 that 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 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 to seemingly 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-80s to the late 90s, 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 fully understand 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-80s 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 towards 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 rich and 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 journalism 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.

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 it sees fit.

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 blacks.
- 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 point scale asking respondent how frequently they attend religious services.
- Job Satisfaction: four-point scale, asking respondent how satisfied they are with their job or with housework.
- Improved Financial State: three point scale, asking respondents whether their financial situation has improved, remained the same, or gotten worse in the last six months.

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Figures and Tables

Figure One: Confidence in the Press, by year (GSS)

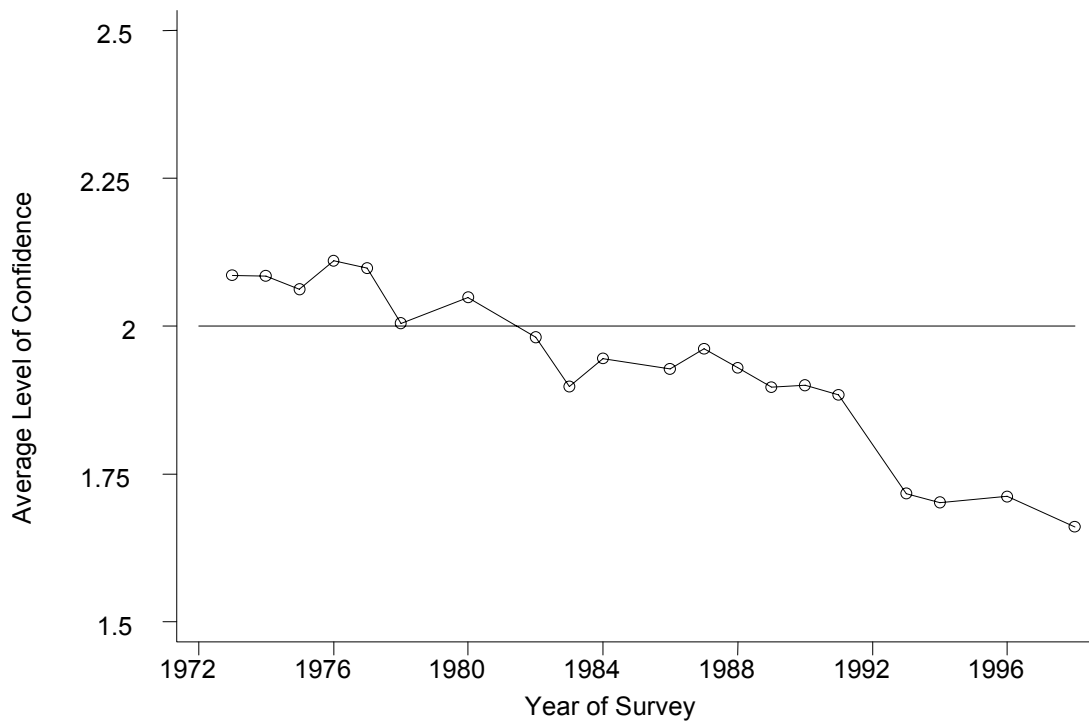


Figure Two: Confidence in the Press, by level and year (GSS)

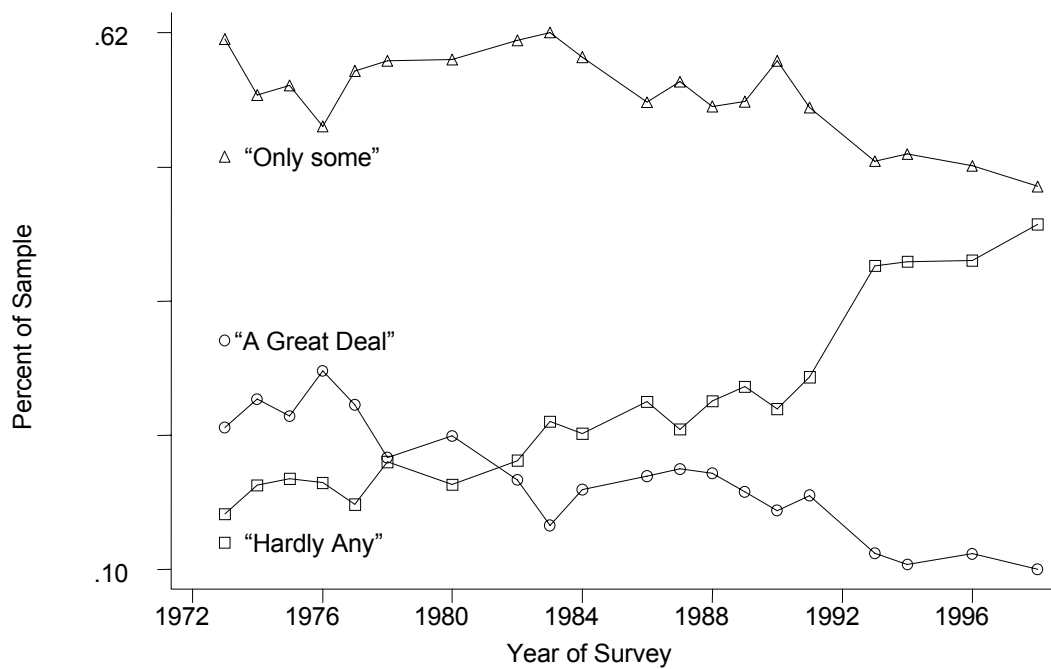


Figure Three: Confidence in the Press, GSS and Harris

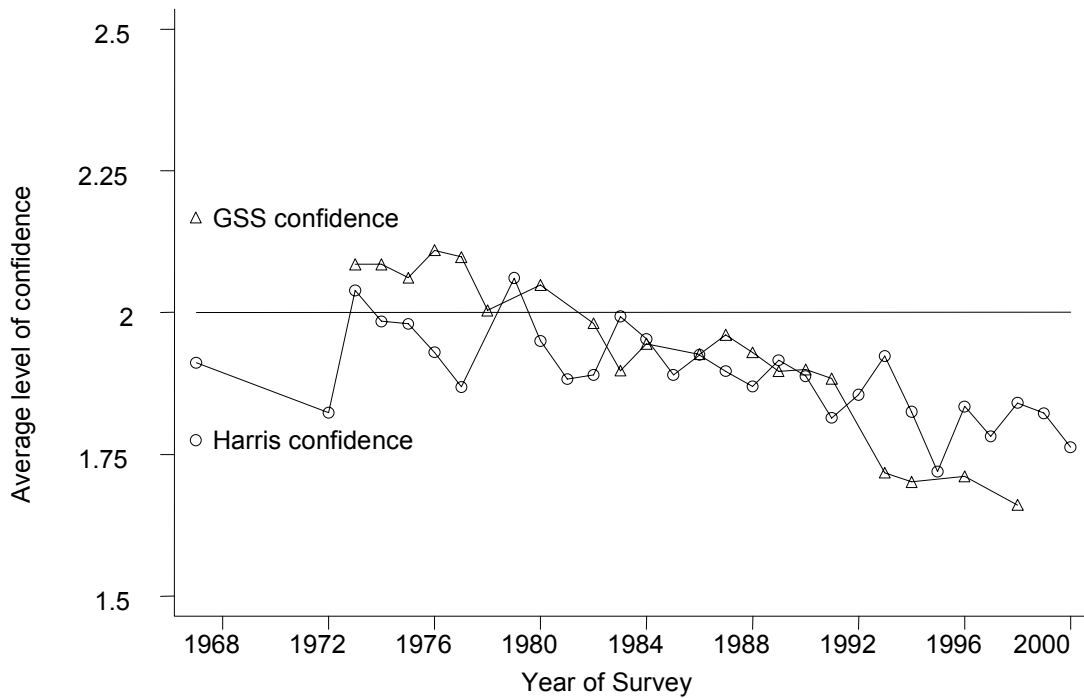


Figure Four: Confidence in Press and Television News (Harris Data)

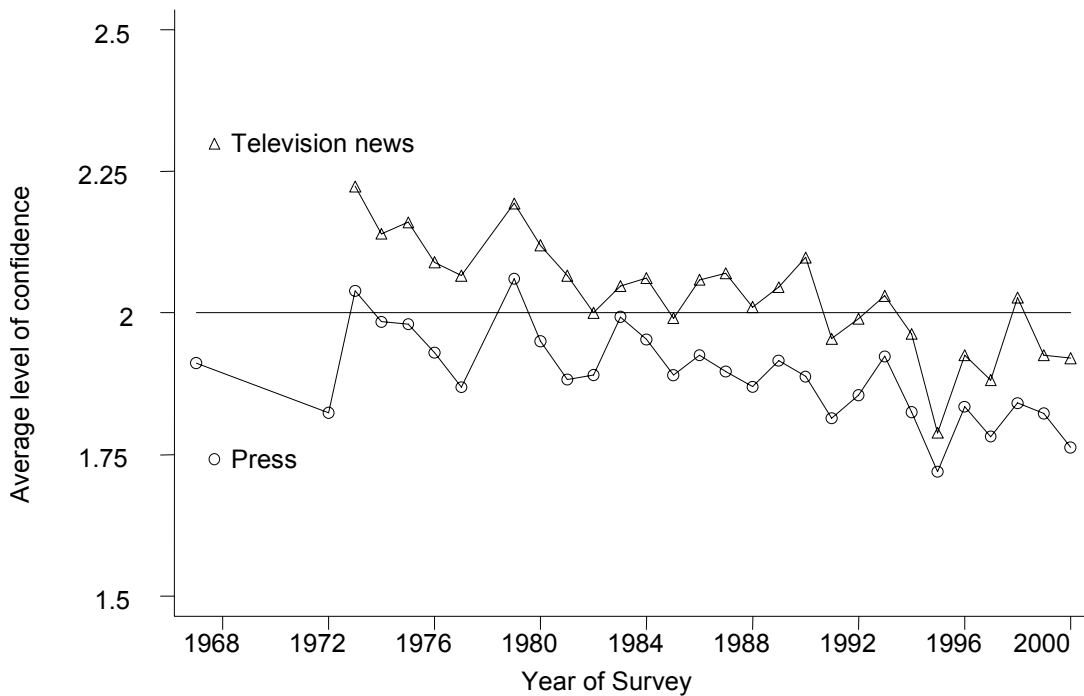


Figure Five: Standardized Confidence in the Press and Generalized Confidence (GSS)



Figure Six: Confidence Differential (Press – General, GSS)

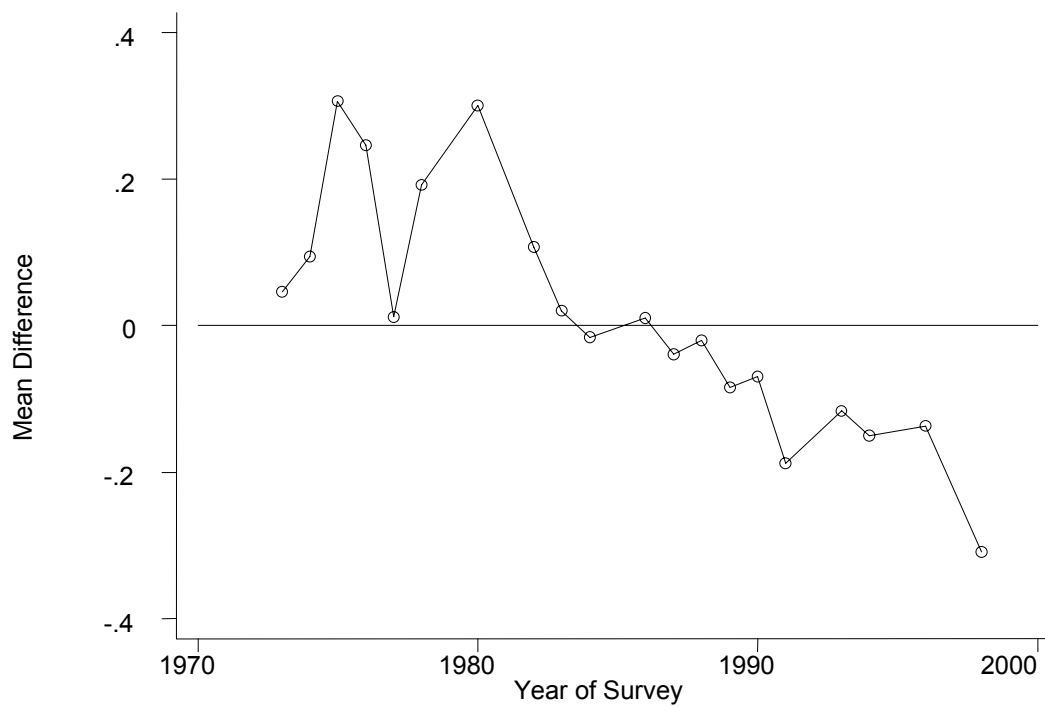


Figure Seven: Confidence Differential, by partisan groupings (GSS)

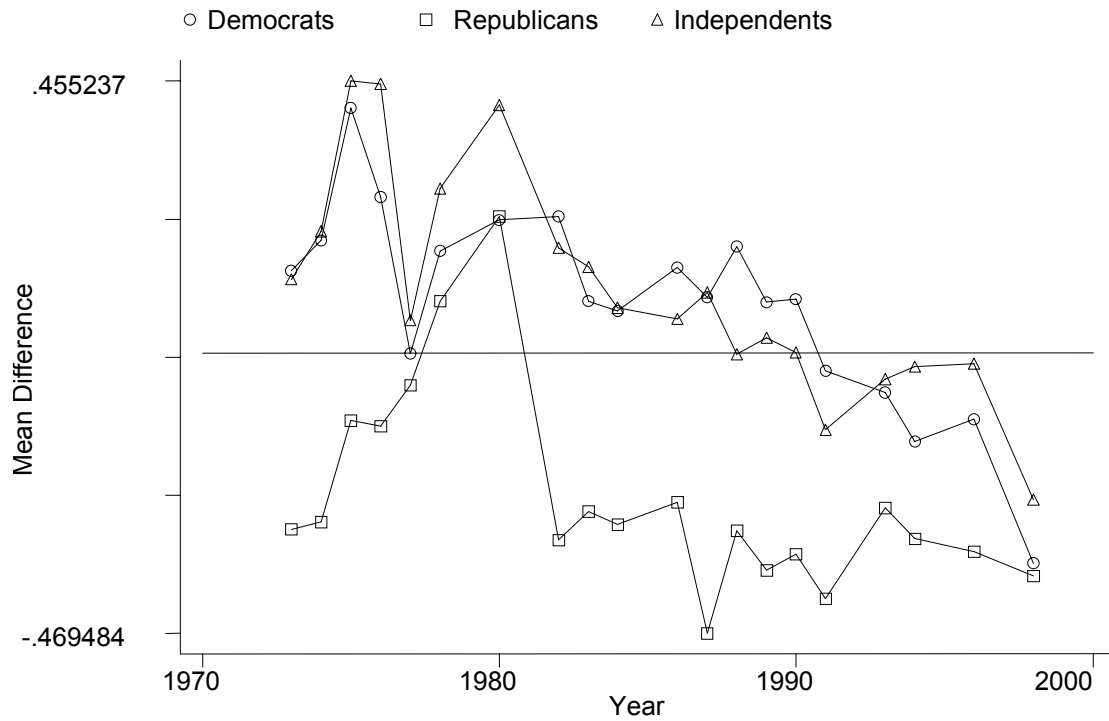


Figure Eight: Confidence Differential, by ideological groupings (GSS)

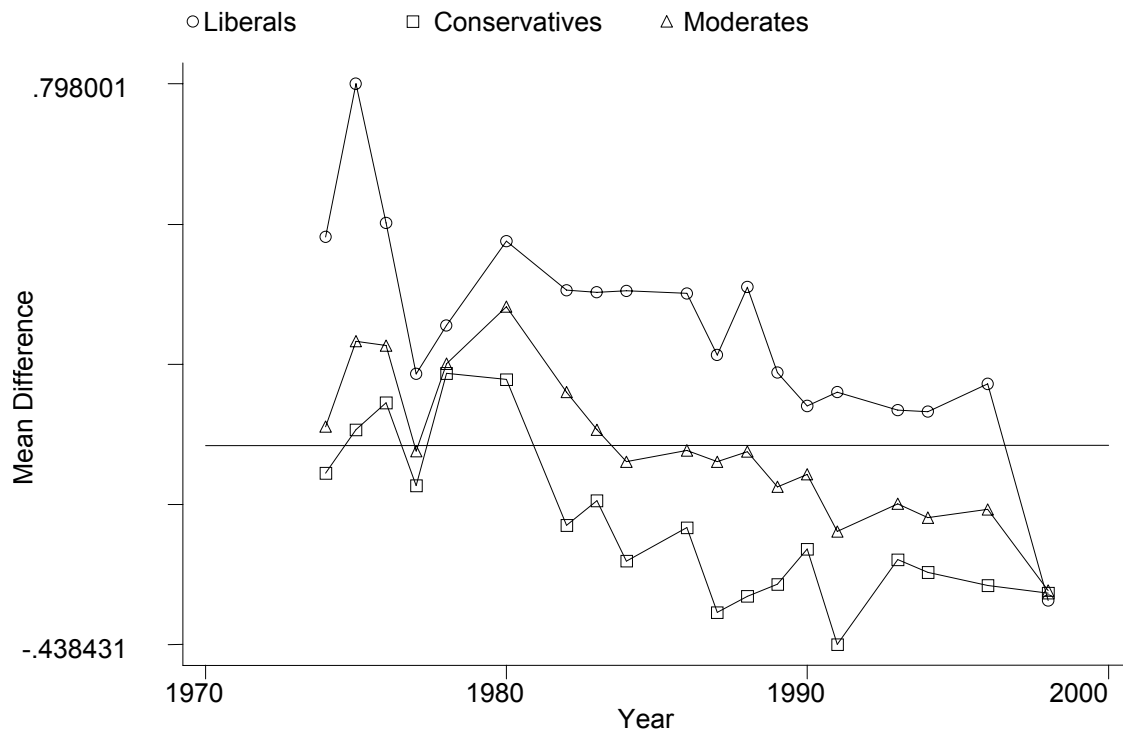


Figure Nine: Negative Judgements of the News Media (Pew)

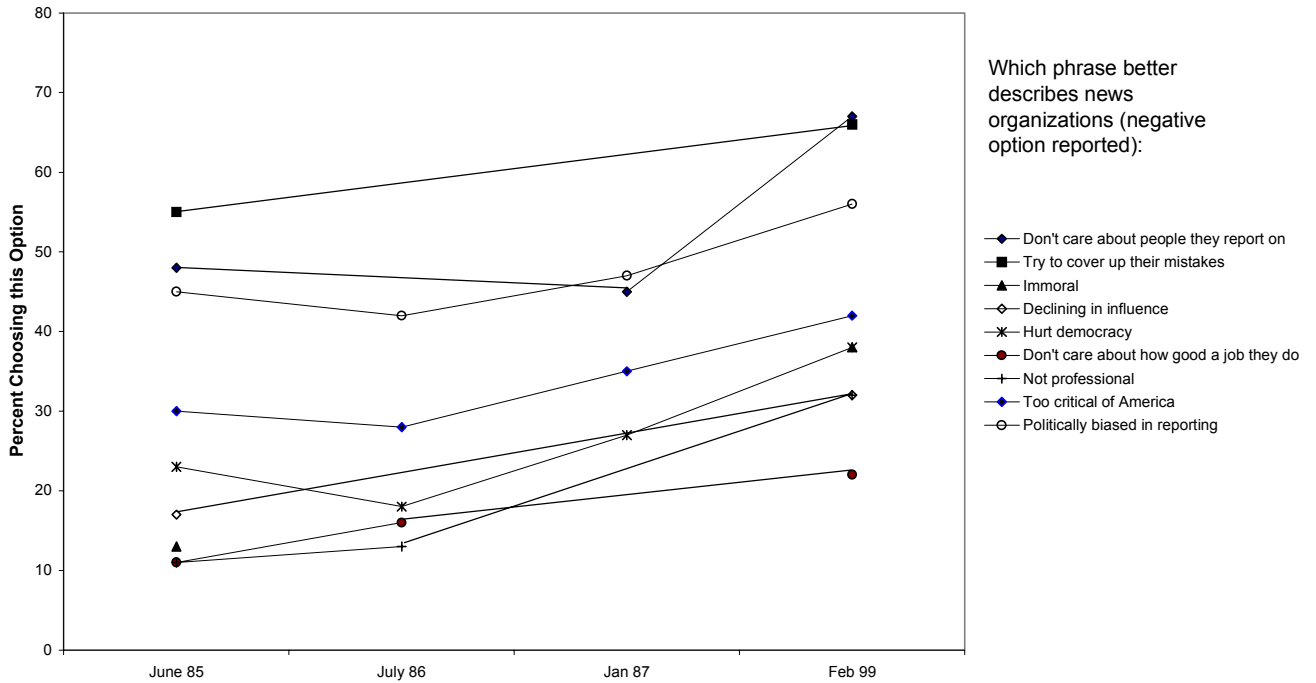


Figure Ten: Favorability Towards Specific News Outlets (Pew)

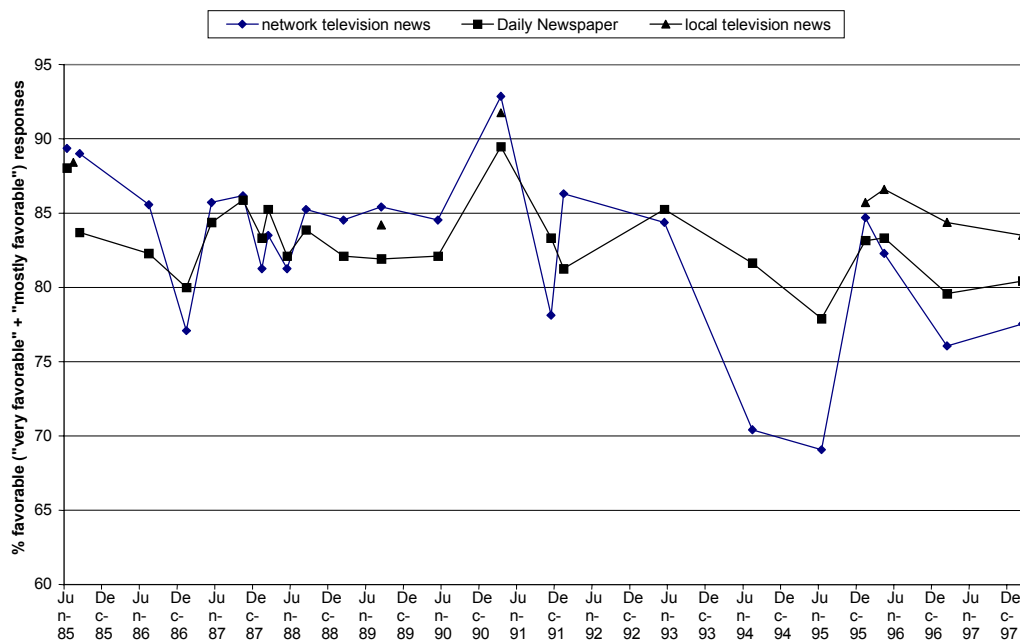


Table 1: Confidence in the Press (GSS Pooled)

Variable	Demographics		Plus Political		Plus Institutional Attachments		Plus General Confidence	
	Coeff.	t-stat	Coeff.	t-stat	Coeff.	t-stat	Coeff.	t-stat
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
N of Cases	16535		16535		16535		16535	
-2*(LL(0)-LL(1))	813		1123		1188		2875	
% Correctly Predicted	56.10%		56.67%		56.58%		58.60%	
Pseudo R-square	0.03		0.04		0.04		0.10	

Source: 1973-1998 General Social Survey.

Notes: 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.

Table 2: General Confidence in Institutions (GSS Pooled)

Variable	Demographics		Plus Political		Plus Institutional Attachments	
	Coefficient	t-statistic	Coefficient	t-statistic	Coefficient	t-statistic
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					0.096	11.905
Constant	0.055	1.397	-0.063	-1.403	-0.388	-7.613
N of Cases	16565		16565		16565	
R-squared	0.0243		0.0254		0.07	