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## The Presidency and the Media: An Analysis of the Fundamental Role of the Traditional Press for American Democracy

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# **The Presidency and the Media: An Analysis of the Fundamental Role of the Traditional Press for American Democracy**

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Political Science,  
University at Albany, State University Of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Political Science  
and  
graduation from The Honors College.

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### **Abstract**

The President is the most important political figure in the United States and as such he is a large topic in the news media. Despite seemingly large changes in recent years with new media, an unprecedented presence in the White House, and shifts in the political nature of the nation, the press's fundamental role in reporting on the Presidency has not changed in our democracy. Democracy needs a free press in order to have an informed citizenry and throughout American history this freedom has remained constant. A history of journalism and the presidency reveals that although the press has gone through enormous changes technologically and politically the fundamental relationship between the press and the presidency has been maintained. The press's relationship with the presidency can be explained through a theory of characterizing presidents as either "open" or "closed" depending on the president's decision when faced with the dilemma of whether to fulfill the desire to be effective versus the desire to preserve democratic values. This theory can be demonstrated with examples of case studies of both "open" and "closed" presidencies including FDR, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Ultimately, the presidency has evolved and shifted with presidents of different personalities and policy positions, and it has changed based on different political contexts in the country and the world, but the fundamental relationship between the press and the presidency is the same. The relationship between the press and the presidency is complicated and combative but the democratic notion of press freedom will always be valued in the United States.

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## Introduction

The President of the United States is one of the most visible positions in the world. As the only lone official elected by the entire electorate, the president, in effect, represents the entire American people both at home and globally. What the president believes is the best course for our nation, and how we navigate that course, has always been essential knowledge to those who are engaged in the political process. Ideally, in a democracy the entire electorate should be engaged in politics. Although the reality is that politicians must represent those who are otherwise too busy or uninterested to be fully engaged, and as such the public ascertains its knowledge on presidential politics through the free press.

Whether a president seeks it or not, the role of the chief executive has always been marked by a pronounced limelight. The president is one of the most central public and political figures in the nation, and increasingly in modern times his role has been transformed into one of a renowned celebrity. As such, the president is a sizeable topic in the press and news media, especially in the United States.

The relationship between the public and the leader of the free world has been characteristically shaped by the link between the executive and the electorate, and the press or news media provides such a link. The president expresses his ideals through the press, either directly or through journalist's analysis of his actions and speeches. The interaction between the White House and the news media has been one of the most ambivalent and complex of American political relationships and the ability of a president to triumph in this relationship can shape his entire legacy. There are two classifications that define this relationship that all presidents throughout history have fit into. These two classifications of either a "closed" or "open" presidency explains how a president interacts with the press and whether the free press is

fostered or not. Throughout history, and especially in recent years, there have been changes in this relationship as new technology and means of journalism have emerged. However, the fundamental relationship remains constant, regardless of whether the presidency is characteristically more “open” or “closed”. Journalists report on the Presidency and the public responds.

The Presidency as an institution has gone through large shifts since its inception but one aspect of American politics as it relates to such an institution has remained consistent, and that is the public’s interest in the executive office. It has been the responsibility and duty of the media and the press to report on the presidency since the first president held office in order to satisfy the public’s need to be informed. Such a responsibility is why the presidential news system exists. The president, the news media, and the mass public comprise the presidential news system. The presidential news system is broader than simply the president, as it is characterized through the interrelationships between the public and both the president as an individual and leader, and the institution of the executive office.

The established journalism of the traditional press has an invaluable position as both a reporter and sentinel of the presidency because the press in America constantly relays and records every action and policy undertaken by the president. The press is constantly watching everything the president and the executive office does, both politically and operationally, and then communicating that information to the world. The relationship between the press and the Presidency is not one-sided however, as the President and the executive understand how to use the press to further its agenda and the press understands how to take the messages and actions of the president and analyze them to provide political truth to the public. The news media in turn “influence the presentation and interpretation of campaigns as well as the performance and

evaluation of those who are ultimately elected” (Farnsworth and Lichter 1). In other words, the press makes the presidency accessible to the people.

The most important aspect for understanding the role the news media plays on influencing the presidency is to illuminate the influence of the press on presidential conduct and explain how presidents have come to manipulate the media. Increasingly today with the immense diversification of the news media- including internet websites, blogs, social media, and the dozens of channels available on cable television - the messages that the public receives concerning political news, and especially the president, are extremely varied and selective. The President is the most covered topic in all of political news, and “that the president dominates the daily news cycle is an often-repeated truism of political science. One need only examine the amount of news coverage devoted to the president relative to any other political figure or institution to reach this conclusion” (Eshbaugh-Soha, "Presidential Influence of the News Media” 549). So although the public now has access to more media than ever before making it possible to avoid political news altogether, the president is still a dominant topic in both the political media and else where, especially during a presidential election.

This large scope of coverage is why there are many websites, publications and media sources that devote much of their coverage to not only American politics in general but to the President. Even the traditional large news organizations devote a considerable amount of their media content on covering the president. However, those in the public who do pay attention to such political news are less in numbers than they once were, mainly because of the wide varieties of media that are now available for mass consumption. Those few who are typically more interested in political news tend to seek out news that aligns with their political ideologies and beliefs, which is easy to accomplish in today’s hyper partisan media landscape. Presidents of the



recent past decades have therefore struggled to have a successful relationship with the press, and even if they do manage to have a positive one, the news media in general is often thought to be not as effective or significant as it once was. However, this is not the entire truth.

Although the press has gone through enormous changes in technology and a shift towards more partisan media the fundamental relationship between the press and the presidency has been maintained. The press in America has gone through large changes and a significant evolution over time, especially in the last decade with the advent of new technology, like the Internet and social media, and an increase in the partisan nature of American politics. Media has changed but the role of the press has not. It could even be argued that the duty and responsibility of the press to report on our world has grown stronger not weaker. Throughout American history the relationship between the Presidency and the news media, or press (I use the terms interchangeably), has been wrought with conflict and struggle but ultimately traditional journalistic values and the role of the press has been maintained for American democracy.

### **The Role of the Press in American Democracy**

A common definition of “republic” according the American Heritage Dictionary is “a political order in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who are entitled to vote for officers and representatives responsible to them.” I would argue that America fits that definition. A common definition of “democracy” is a “government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives.” Likewise, America fits this definition as well. The United States is not a direct democracy, where a country has legislation and policy decided primarily by a majority vote of the people. Some lawmaking is done this way, on the state and local levels, but it’s only a small portion of all lawmaking in the United States. America is like a republic as

well, where elected officials represent citizens in all levels of government, from towns and villages to nationwide. In this way the United States is combination of both, or a representative democracy, where citizens are able to have an active and engaged role politically through direct participation and more often than not, through elected representatives.

Despite these technicalities it is useful to refer to the United States as a democracy, especially in the sense of the modern usage. Certainly the American form of government has been called a “democracy” by prominent legal commentators, politicians and political scientists from the framing of the nation onward. James Wilson, one of the main drafters of the Constitution and one of the first Supreme Court Justices, defended the Constitution in 1787 when he said that in a democracy the sovereign power is “inherent in the people, and is either exercised by themselves or by their representatives” (Voloikh). The take away is that the people are the most significant political actors in our democracy, which is why those elected officials who run the nation need to be held accountable and liable to such a citizenry.

America is a democracy of more than 300 million people and the president of the United States is the single elected leader of them all. Although it can be argued that the president is not truly directly elected by the popular vote, the president is nonetheless the central figure that represents the United States, and therefore the American people. The rhetoric that the president is the “leader of the free world” carries weight, even if only as the commander and chief, head of the executive branch of government, and the face of the nation. As such, it is imperative that the president, as the most important nationally elected official, be held accountable to the people.

The President of the United States is the head of state, which means that he directs the executive branch of the federal government and is the commander-in-chief of the United States Armed Forces. Therefore, the President is considered to be one of the world's most powerful

political figures and the leader of a global superpower. The people, through the Electoral College, elect the president to a four-year term. The president is one of only two nationally elected federal officers, the other being the Vice President of the United States. The President has the authority to appoint justices to the Supreme Court, the executive power to execute or not execute the laws, and the ability to negotiate with foreign countries. Despite this there are many checks on the president set up through the American political system in order to divide power equally among all parts of government. However, the president has the perceived power of being the ultimate leader by most of the American public, which can be an almost greater power than his actual governing authority. The old saying that the “buck stops here” is true. The president is the decisive leader and individual responsible for the direction of the nation and as such the president has the power to set the political agenda.

The president has immense political power today, which makes it remarkable that the delegates to the Constitutional Convention gave curiously little attention to the executive branch of government. In contrast to the prolonged debates over the powers of Congress, the powers of the president were defined rather quickly and without considerable discussion. It can be thought that the framers of the constitution foresaw more power and governing ability in the legislature than the president, which although disputable, is not the case in our government today.

In Article II of the Constitution, the framers created an entirely new position of a chief executive whose power came from the people rather than by heredity or by force. Yet, the constitution provides little suggestion that the president would become as authoritative as he has in modern times. This occurred as power has flowed increasingly to the executive branch throughout history. There are various reasons for this gradual increase in power including the successful exercise of power by ambitious presidents, the growth of the executive as an

institution in the 20th century, and the realization that Congress is ill-suited compared to the president to make timely responses to national security threats.

At the time of the conception and ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America there was a debate on the fundamentals of power that would shape our democracy-and ultimately the presidency- between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. The Federalists believed that a strong national government was needed for America to survive, especially following the failure of the Articles of Confederation. The Federalists argued that the new government created by the Constitution would not be too powerful because it had many intrinsic protections. One protection was that the federal government would be limited by the powers and prohibitions specifically granted under the Constitution. There would be a separation of powers between three equal branches of government. The branches would be balanced and provide a check on one another and prevent the possibility for tyranny.

In the opposite view were the Anti-Federalists who argued that the Constitution gave too much power to the federal government, while taking too much power away from state and local governments. The argument was that the federal government would be too far removed to represent the average citizen. Anti-Federalists feared the nation was too large for the national government to respond to the varied concerns of people on a state and local basis. The Anti-Federalists wanted to protect and guarantee basic rights for the people including freedom of speech. To satisfy this concern the Federalists swore to add a Bill of Rights if the Anti-Federalists would vote for the Constitution. The Bill of Rights lists specific prohibitions on governmental power in order to ensure greater constitutional protection for individual liberties.

It can be said that in the end the Federalists ultimately triumphed. Nevertheless with the inclusion of a bill of rights the Constitution incorporated the rhetoric of the Anti-Federalists to

confirm a protection of the people from an abuse of power. This debate over essentially the design of our democracy is important as it started a discourse that has maintained throughout political history. The two central ideas of the Federalists and Anti-Federalists morphed and evolved through ideas, politicians, and especially political parties to frame the fundamental argument regarding American democracy and the scope of power that the executive branch has even today. These two competing ideological positions at the onset of the nation reflect the discussions that many who study politics still struggle with; what constitutes too much power for the government, especially with the president? What rights are inalienable for the people in a democracy, and how should they be protected?

The question of what degree of power the president should have is still difficult to concretely answer today depending on political ideology and on individual presidents, but the idea that the question be asked and the debate still had is important in itself. I argue that the most critical right given through the Bill of Rights was the right of the people to have a critical voice about their government and the ability to have an unfiltered lens in which to view their government. The first amendment to the Bill of Rights states that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." ("Bill of Rights Transcript." *National Archives and Records Administration*). The first amendment protects the publication of information and opinions, and applies to a wide variety of media. The first amendment is necessary for the United States to remain the distinctive democracy that it is because without the freedom to critically speak, discuss, and report on the actions of the government then the people would be ignorant and uninformed, and thereby exiled from the political process.

A free press is necessary because evidence shows that “sustained degradation of freedom of the press has the potential to diminish the quality of governance and lead to the deterioration of democratic institutions” (Kellam and Stein 39). A free press is not just a part of the Bill of Rights as an added protection of rights but a fundamental component of a functioning democracy. It is an empirical truth that a nation with a free press is a more open and successful democracy because “research demonstrates that greater freedom of the press is associated with less corruption and better governance” (Kellam and Stein 39).

Even though the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, the government does regulate some media. Print media is generally unregulated besides it being illegal to print slander. The Internet has also gone largely unregulated, despite congressional efforts to restrict some controversial content. However, broadcast media is subject to government regulation. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issues licenses and is in charge of regulating the airwaves. This is possible because according to the law the public owns the airwaves so radio and television broadcasters must obtain a license from the government. The FCC polices the airwaves, mostly for violating public decency standards such as the use of profanity. The regulation of the media in America has rarely gone beyond this scope though because it is a hallmark of the United States that a free press exists and many advocates and courts have maintained this principal. When lots of Americans think of freedom one of the token examples is that American citizens can say and report anything that they like, even if it is critical or questioning of government.

The press has long been considered a vital part of United States government and therefore, for the democratic system. Journalism, or the endeavor of reporting the news in whatever form that may take, is so fundamental to the functioning of a democracy that it has

been portrayed as an integral component of democracy itself. In 1841, Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish philosopher, satirical writer, essayist, and historian wrote, “Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all” (Crichton, et al.). Carlyle saw the press as instrumental to the birth and growth of democracy, spreading facts and opinions and sparking revolution against tyranny. Democracy by definition requires informed citizens. No governing body should be expected to govern without knowledge of the issues on which it is to rule, and rule by the people in a representative democracy necessitates that the people should be informed. The Society of Professional Journalists in their preamble states that members “believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy.” The press provides such public enlightenment.

In a representative democracy, the role of the press is to both inform citizens and set up another avenue for discourse between the government and voters besides the other modes in The United States, which are primarily voting, protesting and lobbying. The press makes the activities of the government, and the activities of the president as the central figure of the government, known to the public. This is crucial in order to educate and inform voters so that they can fulfill their duties as citizens in a democracy, even if it is only so far as to vote in the next election or simply be made aware for their own sake as citizens. The most essential role of the media in politics is to report the news and the vast majority of people must trust the media to provide them with information. Democracy requires that citizens be informed because they must be able to make educated voting choices. Likewise, the press provides the president with an avenue to educate, inform, and persuade the public through their representatives.

The media provides a line of communication between the government and the people. This communication goes both ways as the citizenry learns about what the government is doing, and the government learns from the media what the public is thinking. In a democracy, “citizens need access to the president to judge, evaluate, and even provide guidance to the president as he, Congress, and his administration make important policy decisions” (Eshbaugh-Soha "Presidential Influence of the News Media" 549). Without the press the president has little incentive to be held completely accountable to the people. Therefore, in a representative democracy the press is one of the most important institutions. The Committee to Protect Journalists, an American independent non-profit organization, put it best when it claimed that, “aggressive press coverage of government activities being at the core of democracy”.

### **The Fourth Estate of Watchdog Journalism**

The public has a right to be kept informed about their elected officials, especially on matters that concern government affairs, and the president is the most prominent elected official. Lauren Easton, the Associated Press's director of media relations, supported this when she said that, "the AP believes the public should have as much access to the president as possible" (Benac and Jalonick). If the United States is to remain a functioning democracy in the way it was intended, than the president needs to be closely monitored and reported on by the press.

The Society of Professional Journalists, in their Code of Ethics, supports this by stating that journalists must, “recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government.” Watchdog journalism, like a literal guard dog that warns of an intruder, involves alerting the public of any wrong doing, especially in the government decision-making process. The role of the watchdog journalist does not solely entail searching for misconduct, but



involves monitoring and reporting on all information that would be to the public's interest. This means that journalists must act to supply the citizenry with the information needed to stay informed and prevent an abuse of power from those whom they are reporting on.

Journalists must remain unbiased and at a distance from those in power in order to be a successful watchdog and a check on political power. This is especially vital with the president as he is arguably the one most at risk of abusing the power considering his position as chief executive of one of the most powerful nations on earth. Government should be transparent and open to the public, but with little resources to examine government on their own, the common citizen must find out information from the media and press. A highly active and unyielding press is needed and "a subdued press cannot carry out its ideal democratic functions of informing the citizenry and monitoring government if the press lacks adequate protections of its freedom and independence" (Kellam and Stein 39). America needs the press to hold up a magnifying glass to the president in order to hold the executive accountable to the people. This journalistic position as an overseer and guardian facilitates the notion of the press as the fourth estate.

The apparatus that connects the citizenry in the United States to the highest office is often referred to as the fourth estate as "the news media are often viewed as an equivalent to a fourth branch of government" (Farnsworth and Lichter1). The fourth estate is a societal or political force or institution whose influence is not consistently or officially recognized. It most commonly refers to the news media; especially print journalism and the established press. Formally our federal government, as established in the constitution of the United States, has three branches of government. This include the executive branch, which includes the President and about 4 million workers, the Legislative branch, which is comprised of the Senate and House

of Representatives, and the judicial branch which is the Supreme Court and lower Courts (whitehouse.gov "The Executive Branch").

The fourth estate takes its name arguably because the press can be considered a fourth and equal branch to the democratic functioning of the federal government in the United States. Simply put, the separation of powers involves the legislative branch that makes laws, the executive that carries out the laws, the judicial branch that evaluates the laws, and the press or news media that is the mediator between the other three branches and the electorate. Thus the press is considered the fourth estate and ultimate arbitrator between the federal government and the citizenry.

The fourth estate needs to adhere to certain ethical rules and codes of morality in order to uphold its function for democracy. The media, especially the mainstream traditional press, acts as a public representative by holding government officials accountable on behalf of the people. It can be argued that the press is unsuitable to play this role because the press does not face the same type of accountability that politicians face. Kellam and Stein argued that, "the media is not a democratic body in and of itself. Citizens do not elect editors nor do journalists act as direct representatives of the people" (42). I would argue that although the press is not a part of the democratic apparatus as elected stewards or officials, it is still a main component of democracy just as "the people" are. In the same way as the people are needed in American democracy so is the press. The press is composed of citizens, who are "of the people", who are more informed messengers to those who otherwise would not have the time or ability to be as informed as an effective democracy requires.

Another argument is that serving as the representative of the public could undermine the media's objectivity because the act of representing the people might require reporters to take a

position on an issue. To combat this idea that the press is not accountable many professional journalists and traditional news media sources adhere to strict codes of ethics.

Almost all professional journalists have a sense of dignity and pride with their work and position as a watchdog of government. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is an organization that has been dedicated to encouraging a climate in which journalism can be practiced more freely and fully. The SPJ stimulates high standards and ethical behavior in the practice of journalism, and perpetuates a free press. The SPJ code of ethics' preamble starts with their belief "that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity" (Society of Professional Journalists. "SPJ Code of Ethics"). Their code of ethics then goes on to define their four most important principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media. These four principles include "seek truth and report it", "minimize harm", "act independently" and "be accountable and transparent" (Society of Professional Journalists. "SPJ Code of Ethics"). Although in today's media saturated world with citizen reporters on blogs and social media, any professional journalist from a reputable news source worth the title of a watchdog journalist of the fourth estate knows the ethical guidelines of what it means to be a responsive and fair reporter for democracy.

### **The President as News**

There are a multitude of reasons why the press has continuously had a strong role in covering the executive including the democratic responsibility of accountability and the public's interest in the chief executive. Simply put, the president is likely to be covered in the media and

press because Americans are interested. Journalists cannot report on everything occurring in politics, so they must choose what topics and instances are the most newsworthy. The president is reported on more than any other part of government because the public is curious about the president both as an office and as the person. The public also has a vested concern about how the leader of their nation is conducting business on their behalf.

The president is the focal point of a majority of news as “the president’s role as chief communicator has dominated media attention over the last several decades, albeit at the expense of members of congress, other members of government, and other members of his political party” (Sparrow 578). When the nation was formed congress was given more attention and power because it was intended and thought that congress would be closer to the people. In theory this would make sense because they are locally elected and therefore more accountable to their constituents, however increasingly over time the president has become the most important political figure in the eyes of the people. Today everyone knows who the president is, but few people know who their congressional members are. The president is the focal point of news coverage, “a content analysis of network television news reveals that the networks cover the president twice as much as Congress and nearly five times as much as the U.S. Supreme Court” (Eshbaugh-Soha *Breaking through the Noise* 16). By nature the position of the president facilitates publicity in today’s world that is increasingly global and public. It is logical to understand the president as not only a politician but as a celebrity. Ironically, this has more truth to it than ever before with both the rise of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate and now as president.

By choosing which stories to present to the public, the news media helps determine the most important issues. More often than not the press is one of the key actors in setting the

political agenda. Agenda setting is influential because it shapes which issues will be debated in public. Politicians, especially the president, work hard to be in control of their own agenda setting for the nation and to an extent they usually succeed because “presidents have ample opportunity and resources to influence news coverage” (Eshbaugh-Soha *Breaking through the Noise* 17). However, if the press chooses not to focus on a certain policy area, even if the president actively tries to promote such an issue, it will not gain traction with the public. The media is needed to facilitate the messages the president wants to convey to the people along with the actions that he might want to omit.

The public demand for presidential news makes it worthwhile both journalistically and profitably to report on the president, and thus more likely that the president will make the news. The very structure of news production encourages strong coverage of the president because it is what is in demand. Journalists understand that it is their democratic duty to cover and critically evaluate the president on a daily basis. But, they also understand that such news coverage is profitable, wide in scope for a national and even global audience, and cost effective. It is worth noting that the press, like almost every other institution besides government in the United States, is a product of capitalism and is therefore a business. News about the president sells.

Presidential news is also logistically easy to produce, especially considering that the apparatus and precedent on how to report about the president is already in place. Every major news network or newspaper has a White House correspondent whose beat is to report on the president. Beat reporting, also known as specialized reporting, is in-depth reporting on a particular issue, sector, organization or institution. A topic that has a beat will almost always get reported on, and what makes it into the news is influenced by economic pressures, audience

considerations, and the “official line”, which is information provided directly to journalists through a press release, speech, statement or official White House press conference.

The journalists whose beat it is to cover the presidency are a part of the White House Correspondents' Association, or press corps. This is the group of journalists, correspondents, or members of the media usually posted at the White House to cover the president, White House events, and news briefings. The White House Correspondents' Association offices are located in the West Wing of the White House. According to the White House Correspondents' Association website in order to qualify for regular membership, “an applicant must be employed on the editorial staff of a newspaper, periodical, wire service, radio, TV, cable TV or other broadcast organization or newsgathering organization that regularly reports on the White House” (White House Correspondent's Association). Also, a member of the press corps principal journalistic assignments must involve White House coverage.

Currently the very nature of the journalists who cover the president is extremely institutionalized and some even criticize it for being too close to the president. However, since 1914 the White House Correspondents' Association has operated independently of the White House and the White House credentialing process. Its members include some of the most respected news organizations in the country including The New York Times and the Associated Press. This news apparatus that is established around the office of the presidency is reflective of the nature of political journalism today and the market for presidential news. Despite claims that this institutionalized established press is less democratic than a wholly separate and disconnected citizen journalism, I would argue that in America today this traditional press of the press corps is what is needed for the nature of the presidency and democracy in modern times.

## **Historic Evolution of the Press, Journalism and the Presidency**

The media environment in the United States and around the world is undergoing rapid change. These changes have the possibility to effect and alter political behavior and practice. Still these changes will not alter the democratic nature of the press or responsibility of professional journalism in regards to politics or the presidency. Throughout American history there have been dramatic changes such as those occurring now, in both technology and tradition, but since its inception the nation has never seen a complete transformation of the values of the freedom of the press or journalistic accountability. The platforms that are available for journalists to utilize and the very politics and policies they cover differ dramatically from even just a decade ago, but what has remained consistent is the role of the traditional journalist and press in reporting on what is news. And since George Washington first took the position the presidency is the ultimate political news subject.

Journalism is not unique to America, to put it best “the modern press system is the gift of no one nation. It is only the current stage in the evolution of communications efforts, spanning all continents and at least 10,000 years” (Emery, et al.1). However, the way American journalism is defined and practiced, especially in regards to politics, is unique. Also, the development of journalism in America is distinctive, and its history and evolution is worth exploring in order to understand the role of the press today. Before even the founding of our nation the journalistic values of watchdog reporting and the fourth estate were emerging, and through American history such values persisted and expanded-regardless of different presidents and major world events.

There have been several successive periods in the development of news reporting in the United States throughout history as journalism developed and evolved to reflect the changing times. News reporting has seen shifts based on societal, political and technological changes. Six

significant eras in the development of the press in America include the colonial period, the revolutionary period, the period of the penny press; a press for the masses, the interpretive era, the golden age of television, and the period of today with the internet. Each period had their own news values, which correlated with the dominant issues of the time and were reflected in the journalism profession. Across each period the president was covered based on the journalistic methods and practices of the time, but dependably the president was always covered in the press.

The first period of news reporting in the United States emerged during colonial times even before the creation of America as an independent country, from the period of around 1704 to the start of the Revolutionary war in 1765. One of the main reasons for the creation of a press during the colonial period was for the increasing role of commerce in the colonies. Buyers and sellers were interested in the arrival of ships and people also wanted to know the news that was not discussed in European newspapers such as the trade in the West Indies and news from other colonies. News from Europe was also months old by the time the colonial people got it. Most colonial newspapers were weeklies and because of a lack in printing resources space was scarce, so printers had to keep stories concise and the print small. Newspapers at the time also contained essays, stories, and poems besides just the news.

The first “newspaper” by many accounts was Benjamin Harris’s *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestic* which was published on September 25, 1690 (Emery, et al. 22). Under British rule at the time, Harris got in trouble with the local authorities for printing criticism of colonial policy through his account of Native Americans not fulfilling their duties to attack the French. He also got in trouble for violating a licensing restriction. It was not until fourteen years later that the second newspaper was published, in 1704. John Campbell published this second newspaper *The Boston News-Letter*, and because it’s content agreed with the



government it lasted for about seventy years. (Emery, et al.). It did not take long after this for the newspaper industry to grow, as postmasters just like Campbell often became newspaper publishers because they had access to the material to print taken from letters, government documents, and newspapers from Europe.

Commerce and trade controlled the dominant news values during the colonial press era, as it was the primary way for people to advertise their businesses. It also was a period before news was the most important aspect of newspapers, as publications relied heavily on other content such as stories. Also in the colonial period the government regulated news under licensing laws that prohibited the publication of anything that could be considered libel, which restricted journalists such as John Peter Zenger and James Franklin. This stifled the freedom of press attitudes that would eventually evolve in journalism after this era.

The second era of news reporting in the United States came during the onset of the Revolutionary war, and with it brought changes to the values and purpose of the press. The revolutionary press period lasted from the onset of the beginning of the war until it ended, from about 1765 to 1783. The movement toward revolution was gradually shaped by the influence upon colonial thinking of those who did not support the English monarchy based on ideological and economic tensions that were building.

The end of the licensing act inspired a new age of news reporting that was also characterized by the shifting opinions of many in the colonies against Britain. The very purpose of newspapers transformed to a more political nature around the time of the Stamp Act as tensions escalated. The dominant news values during the revolution were extremely partisan and not objective, as much of the press was advocating and using propaganda to spread their position in the revolution. Such news values at the time reflect an entire tone of a colony ready to fight to

be a free and independent nation. In this way the news was often tainted with a revolutionary message making it somewhat biased and akin to war propaganda. However, it was also a time where the idea of freedom of the press was created. If it was not for the press during this period than the ideas of the revolution might not have been spread and the colonists may have never gone to war. It is from here that the journalism of American democracy was inspired and created. From this point in American history the ideals of accountability and political reporting took shape.

The next era of news reporting in the United States occurred roughly between the 1830s and 1840s with the advent of the penny press. This period of news reporting began a press for the masses. In 1833 Benjamin H. Day's the *New York Sun* was published as the first penny press newspaper. A penny paper was a newspaper that could be sold for a penny because of the technological innovations in printing brought on by the industrial revolution, such as steam-powered presses that replaced the mechanical press (Emery, et al.22). This made newspapers cheaper and easier to produce. Therefore papers were now made affordable to the working and the emerging middle classes. The penny press reported on local events, scandals, police reports and human-interest stories.

The press of the common people became respectable publications with vast amounts of information while at the same time it exhibited the first characteristics of sensationalism. The penny press brought a profound change to journalism as the readership vastly expanded, systems of communication expanded, and improvements to resources and production expanded. This would cause a race for news as journalists began to cater to the masses that demanded more exciting and relatable human-interest stories such as crime and scandal. Comparatively, this is more prevalent today in news publications, especially online where pop culture, celebrity news,

and editorial blog stories take up content space besides the hard news of newspapers at other points in history. These fundamental changes to the business of news reporting set a precedent for modern day.

A fourth period of news reporting is called the interpretive era, which was from the 1930s to the 1940s. This lesser known era began a type of journalism that involved analyzing and explaining news in order to place it within a broader context. Such journalism tried to take a more interpretive and investigative position in a world becoming more connected and complex in light of the politics and globalization at the time.

In the 1930s print journalists realized that they could better compete with the new technology of radio by offering something different in the form of interpretive stories instead of clear-cut news. Such stories did not have to be in competition with radio, which was able to break news more quickly. Journalists now became specialists in certain areas of reporting. The dominant news values at the time shifted into interpretation to reflect the concerns of the period involving the political-social-economic revolution of the New Deal and an increase in international relations. This time period saw a fundamental shift in what was appropriate for journalists to do in the profession from simple hard news to analytic work.

A fifth era of news reporting was the golden age of television from the 1950s to the 1960s. This period in post war America not only saw the advent of new technological advancements such as television, but also a long period of prosperity, which fostered a demand for entertainment and a broader range of content from sports to variety shows. The television rose quickly as a staple in many American households and by 1952 it was seemingly everywhere. Television played a large role in the 1952 presidential election and a wide variety of content and programs shifted the focus away from print journalism. The nightly news became a

daily ritual for families. News commentators became familiar celebrities because there were only a few channels to watch. This golden age of television was a peak time for presidential reporting and news where national coverage could be projected into the homes of millions of Americans. This period of television's rise and expansion had great consequences for the news industry as more people turned away from newspapers to television. The evolution of the journalistic profession to the digital age had rudimentarily begun.

*The Presidency in the Era of 24-Hour News* by Jeffrey E. Cohen is an analysis of how the transformation in the news media has shifted in the modern age with the growth of technology and the expanding means for producing news, and how this has impacted the public discourse on American politics and more specifically the presidency. Cohen discusses the "golden age of television" when the major television networks dominated the news the public received in the United States and how the movement away from this age has altered the way presidents communicate with the public and garner popular support. Cohen reveals how the decline of government regulation and the growth of Internet and cable news outlets have made news organizations more competitive, thus resulting in a decreased coverage of the president in the traditional news media and an increasingly negative tone in the coverage that does occur.

The main discussion of Cohen's work is to analyze the transformation in the news media from the modern age, featuring a growth of technology, and how this has impacted the public conversation of politics and more explicitly the presidency. The rise of professionalization of political advocacy, competitive pressure on journalists, anti-elitism and populism in journalism, and the diversification of the news media all accompanied the transformation of the changing media age. Cohen's main analysis is on "the declining impact of news on public evaluations of the president" (Cohen 1). Cohen discusses that even though there is a declining public trust in the

news, news itself has less of an influence even if it is deemed reputable. This is true because less people pay attention to news, especially in a traditional sense.

Cohen argues that the media's influence over public opinion has decreased considerably as a result, and in a direct correlation so has the president's ability to influence the public through the news media. He also suggests that the news media was viewed as more trustworthy and credible at the time of the golden age of television. According to Cohen, "because the media tended to be deferential to the president, negative news, which was rare or unexpected, was also credible to the public" (Cohen 14). Before the shift in the media age the press was viewed as a respectable and honest pursuit where journalists were held to high standards of objectivity. There were only a few major networks and publications, and unlike today, these were considerably less partisan or biased.

Although this it is true that the public's perception and trust of the media has changed in recent decades the goal of professional journalists today, especially from traditional news organizations, has remained the same since the revolutionary era when the value of the free press was engrained into our democracy. So although the new media age of cable and then the internet caused a perceived transformation in the nature of the press this is just a reaction compared to the "golden age" that had occurred for decades before. Comparatively to all of American history the press has gone through periods in the past of varying degrees of positive perception, trustworthiness and influence. It is not new that the press is evolving in the way Cohen describes, and its goals of covering politics has not changed.

Since the period of the golden age of television the media has evolved substantially. Social media is not so transformative as it would seem in revolutionizing the press. As it turns out even though social media and the Internet have expanded the platform of media to everyone

in the world who has access to a computer or phone, the traditional press has just been continued on the new platform. Some would argue that this new era of technology has completely shifted the way news is reported and consumed, and although it is true that any citizen can now report or write or post, the traditional press is still turned to for news more than anything else.

The main news organizations that began as newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Associated Press* still dominate the journalism field today where local news, bloggers and even citizens report what they want and know based on the original reporting done by professional journalists at the top who hold traditional journalistic democratic values. This is especially true with presidential news as those who are part of the White House Press Corps and the White House “pool”, or journalists who have the closest interactions with the president, do most of the news reporting on the president. Social media and the Internet are simply just a continuation and tool of the traditional press.

It is true that the media today has significant influence on its audience. In the United States the media plays a larger role than perhaps ever before as American citizens spend a substantial amount of time exposed to media. Therefore it is inevitable that the media will influence them in some capacity, but most of this media, in regards to news, still comes from traditional media sources. In the last decade the increased popularity of social media websites has opened up entirely new avenues through which news can be disseminated and analyzed. Social media has allowed for increased public participation in American democracy through the presentation and discussion of important issues. In this way social media has been a proponent of a more involved democracy in the United States over the past several years but only to an extent. Citizens are more able to interact, voice their opinions and views, and be politically heard to the public but the news that informs them still comes from the press.

The Internet era has brought significant changes to the media landscape without a doubt but no more so than the railroad did when it made dissemination of the news faster, or likewise with the telegraph and radio and then television. Through out history technology has been developing and revolutionizing the way journalism is done. These transformations in media technology have actually made reporting more efficient, easier and more assessable to the citizenry. There have always been journalists who do not adhere to the journalistic ethics or standards, or common people who do not know how to effectively report, but the Internet did not create this. Nor has the Internet or social media ended traditional journalism. There are new challenges facing journalists today including a lack of interest in political news when any information on any topic is available, and the ability to make a profit when the Internet is free. In today's media obsessed world information can be made available instantaneously through the Internet, because of this the public not only expects information to be available immediately but also for every detail about a story to be disclosed. Despite these new challenges in the digital age journalism is alive and well.

The United States has moved through numerous succeeding periods in the development of news reporting including colonial, revolutionary, penny press, interpretive, the golden age of television and the advent of the internet and social media. Each successive era had its own dominant news standards to define the scope of news. These standards, along with what journalists deemed to be newsworthy, can be directly traced to the context of the concerns at specific times in history, such as an advocating press during the revolution and a press delivered to the masses during the industrial revolution era of the penny press. Each period also saw an evolution in journalism as an occupation that can be traced in time to what can now be seen today.

This evolution is continuing today as “the media environment in the United States and around the world is undergoing rapid change” (Ridout 2). Media and news technology and standards have changed but the role of the press has not. It is a common assumption to think “changes in the media environment have the potential to influence the political behavior of individuals and the functioning of democracy” (Ridout 2). However this is too drastic a claim because although different presidents behave differently and have different world events to deal with, the functioning of democracy will not be influenced substantially.

### **The President’s Dilemma with the Press**

Modern presidents face a dilemma when dealing with the press. This dilemma is outlined in *The Six O’clock Presidency* by Fredric T. Smoller as “their desire to be effective versus their presumed desire to preserve democratic values” (79). The one side of this dilemma is the president’s rational interest in maintaining a favorable approval from the public and thereby friendly and positive media coverage. This is required because the “media coverage of issues primes the public’s evaluation of the president” (Eshbaugh-Soha, *Breaking through the Noise: Presidential Leadership*). This is done through the president’s attempts to manage his message through cultivating an image and persona and then perpetuating that image to the press and media. The term message means the political persona and brand identity that comprises a central theme that a president wants to portray. It is the practice of carefully highlighting positive facts that favor the president’s policies while downplaying or ignoring the facts that work against the president’s favorable coverage. This side of the dilemma fosters a guarded presidency that is carefully thought out, planned and organized.



The other side of this dilemma is the engrained notion of the need for a free press for our democracy as I discussed earlier. The president, along with most other politicians and of course journalists, understands that the first amendment is held to a high regard. They both understand that it is ethically professional and morally democratic for the president to maintain a level of transparency with the press and public on all information that does not directly endanger national security. This side of the dilemma fosters candidness and an understanding of transparency and accountability.

Therefore, the natural dilemma and conflict arises where full disclosure can be politically damaging and hard to control for a positive image, but an abrasive or overly calculated self-serving presidency threatens to weaken democratic accountability and the free press. The fine line that presidents are forced to walk between the two sides of this dilemma ultimately has had the effect of creating presidencies in reality that are in between the two positions. A president may lean more to one side or the other, but in the end regardless of whether or not a president is significantly swayed to one side there is stability to the presidency because of the dilemma. On the one hand the free press in American democracy is never truly in danger, and on the other hand the president always has some support and respect from the American public, even if only through the nature of holding the highest office.

It can be assumed that “each president desires three things: good policy, reelection, and historical achievement” (Eshbaugh-Soha, *Breaking through the Noise: Presidential Leadership* 45). All presidents share these goals, and managing their image, while also balancing sound ideology to political aspirations, is key to a successful presidency. In dealing with the press the presidency must face the two opposing positions caused by this dilemma, and therefore in

choosing a path to follow the president in a way characterizes their administration. The two characterizations are referred to as either an “open” or “closed” presidency.

### **Open versus Closed Presidencies**

The first choice to the dilemma where a president seeks favorable press through controlling media coverage is a “closed” presidency. In such a presidency the president exerts a considerable amount of effort in managing the news. This presidency is characterized by being closed to the press and to the democratic values of transparency. In a closed presidency the press is not completely suppressed but their job is made more difficult and thus more necessary.

The president in a closed presidency might bypass the press to directly appeal and report to the American public. This is done in order to directly propagate the president’s view on politics and policy. Although this was once difficult and nearly impossible to accomplish, today more presidents are themselves able to report directly. Gradually over time with the advent of new technology the president has gained the means to directly speak to the public. At one time the press had to be the intermediary between the president and the public because there were no direct avenues for the president to speak to the entire electorate. The president did give speeches and statements yes, but before radio such speeches had to be delivered to the public through a news source.

Ever since the radio, and then television, and then most dramatically the internet, the president has been able to circumvent the press to go directly to the public. Today this can be done even more frequently and effectively as the president’s messages can be promulgated directly through official websites and social media platforms to the people with the president’s intent and message kept intact. However, due to a multitude of reasons, such as the public’s

unawareness and lack of interest in actively seeking out what the president's official statements are, the public still turns to the press for a more accessible and easy avenue for receiving presidential news.

The president in a closed presidency also attempts to have a favorable and positive image through controlling damaging news leaks from being reported on, regardless of whether or not such leaks are the truth, or if it is democratically an obligation that such information be made available to the people. Press access is strictly curtailed in a closed presidency. The president and his administration will limit direct communication with the press especially by limiting interviews and press conferences, one of the only times where journalists are able to ask questions and have a dialogue with the president. These are limited so that information cannot be exposed that has not been pre-planned or thought out such as is done in a prepared speech.

In a closed presidency the press is only able to report on the message that the president and his administration have carefully cultivated. With access limited the press must turn to whatever information they can have content to report on. This means that journalists have to turn to speeches, press releases and prepared statements that were written by the administration. Or they must rely on second hand information that did not come directly from the president or his staff. Any professional or reputable reporter does not like to do this because the information that is second hand is more likely to be false or less credible.

In a closed presidency the access that the press is allowed is not only more scripted and planned but also less important in nature. Hard news, or news that is about politics or policy decisions, is the news that is withheld in a closed presidency. But more often than not the soft news- "fluff"- is the news that is encouraged. In a closed presidency such activities such as celebrations, family vacations and charity events are often very open to the press. Such human-

interest stories are hard to spin in the media to be damaging for a president. Therefore the access that is encouraged in a closed presidency is to events and information that is less democratically important but more likely to maintain a favorable image of a president. Closed presidencies provide a favorable portrayal on which to view the president simply because the information that is more controversial or political is withheld. Such presidencies are more popular despite their lack of democratic morality to the press.

The second position in the president's dilemma on how to deal with the press is the "open" presidency. This position is arguably the worse choice politically but the better choice morally and for the sanctity of democracy. The open presidency values accessibility, accountability and transparency. The president and his staff communicate with the press often through press conferences and interviews where journalists are free to ask questions and have a discourse with the administration about policy and political decisions. In this presidency the press secretary is kept informed and is not discouraged from communicating with journalists. Efforts to manage the news are kept to a minimum besides the routine statement and speech. The president in an open presidency values the transparency that is needed for complete democracy.

By putting so much value on the first amendment and the people's right to know about what their government is doing, the president in an open presidency imagines that the public will appreciate this accountability and openness. An open president envisions that they will receive a favorable image simply from doing a good job in office and then letting the people decide. Also, they feel that their more democratic way of being transparent and providing access will be looked on favorably by the public.

However, because the president in an open democracy does not cultivate and form a positive image through a constructed narrative that is fed to the media (and therefore then the

people), he is vulnerable to the adverse consequences of whatever coverage the press provides. More often than not such coverage is negative, especially considering world events and partisan politics. Even if the coverage is positive, which is more rare, then the public still has the opportunity to make up their minds about the president instead of being subtly propagated to think that he is doing a good job, as is done in a closed presidency. An open president is more democratically moral but less effective because they give up the opportunity to manage and shape the news.

The dilemma of whether to be politically effective or to be democratically accountable is one that every president since the conception of the nation, when the first amendment was written, has to face. Although these two classifications are caused by the dilemma that presidents face when dealing with the media, no administration is completely open or closed. Different presidential administrations differ in their emphasis on either democratic morality or on how approvingly the public perceives them. How open or closed an administration is falls within a continuum or range where certain presidents are more closed or open than others.

I argue that this range of characterization that defines all presidencies is the fundamental reason why the free press at times in American history, especially today, is thought to be in danger. Although closed presidencies weaken the press's ability and constrain the free press through limiting its access, the press still maintains its ability to report and seek out news on the president. At no point in American history was the free press so constrained that the nation ceased being a democracy. At times in America's history people have thought that the principal value of the free press was at risk concerning the highest office, but in reality the nation was simply going through a period of a closed presidency.

This argument is especially relevant today, as a lot of the public believes that freedom of the press is on the decline, especially with former president Barack Obama and now president Donald Trump both falling under the closed presidency characterization. The reality is that even though there have been consecutive closed presidencies in the recent past the trend towards a declining democracy may be misleading. There have been periods, including today, where a few presidents in succession of one another have been closed administrations. This has caused the appearance that the democratic value of an open and free press is deteriorating, when in actuality the nation is experiencing an era of closed presidencies brought on by a multitude of factors including personality of the president, world events, and the political atmosphere in the nation. Different presidents through out time have exhibited both closed and open administrations, but the role of the press through it all has remained intact.

### **Open Presidencies**

As defined above presidents can be characterized by an “open” administration where they are more accessible, accountable and transparent to the press. They focus less on defining their message and controlling the policy agenda and more on policy making and acting in a responsive way to the press. This type of presidency may be better for the ideals of democracy but can cause persona and approval-rating issues for the president if anything goes wrong in their presidency. This is because they are not actively working to mitigate negative coverage or create a narrative about their administration. Examining a few select case examples of open presidencies in the past provides evidence and support of the theory of characterizing a president based on their choice between “open” or “closed” when it comes to the president’s dilemma with the press. A

few note worthy open presidents include Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush.

### **Case Study: Franklin D. Roosevelt**

Franklin D. Roosevelt, or FDR as he is commonly referred to, had an intimate and successful relationship with the press. Historians make note of the occasionally turbulent association between the press and the president during the mid to late 1930's, but FDR maintained close relations with the press throughout his entire presidency. Characterizations of FDR likened his relationship to the press as one of a father-like figure to journalists and FDR treated reporters with a friendly attitude.

However, FDR's characterization is the most unique because he did spend a great deal of effort on managing his message and image and he even went directly to the people in his fire side chats which are both characteristics of a closed presidency. His administration is ultimately an open one, although less extremely so, because he understood the value of a free press and cultivated the task of journalism. FDR himself proclaimed his value of the free press when he wrote in a letter for the annual Journalism Week banquet in 1934, "freedom of the press means freedom of expression, both in news columns and editorial columns. Judging by both these columns in papers in every part of the country, this freedom is freer than it ever has been in our history" (Pollard 781). It must be noted that a self-proclaimed assertion of cultivating a free press will be biased, but his opinion does demonstrate his belief.

One of the main tokens of his open presidency is that FDR reinstated frequent press conferences. The press conference is commonly held up as a quantitative measure of how open a president is with the press because press conferences demonstrate that a president is willing to

have a discourse with the press where journalists are able to meet with the president and ask questions. According to “The Presidency Project” by Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, FDR had 881 total press conferences with an average of 72.66 a year. On average, and in total, that is more press conferences than any president after him. James E. Pollard in his book *The Presidency and the Press* recognized FDR’s duality in being able to control his image like a closed president would, while still being open when he wrote, “here was an administration with a concept of public relations far beyond that of any predecessor” and yet, “the times called for candor and frankness with the public” (774).

FDR was exceptionally open during the New Deal years, and although it can be argued that he was a war propagandist during World War II, who took what already existed and used it to his advantage, this does not characterize his entire presidency. Even during the war years he still maintained respect for first amendment rights. The openness of his administration can be best demonstrated when Pollard wrote that FDR “took reporters behind the scenes, he furnished them with background, he answered their questions frankly when he could and just as candidly told them when he had no comment. He did away with the hamstring practice of submitting written questions in advance” (774). This quote demonstrates the day-to-day working relationship of the press and FDR and characterizes it as accessible and open.

A study titled “Exploring FDR’s Relationship with the Press: A Historical Agenda-Setting Study,” concentrated on the influence of newspapers in relation to FDR’s political agenda. This article emphasized the importance of reading newspapers for FDR’s administration and that FDR was more influenced by what he read than what he was able to interject into the press. The press influenced him greatly, which is a token example of how the fourth estate as the mediator between the public and the president can be successful. Pollard put it best when he said



that FDR “made the relationship (with the press) such an integral part of his working program that any comparison with any previous administration is futile” (773).

FDR did have his struggles with the press as can be seen with any administration, as one of the fundamental duties of a responsive and democratic press is to criticize and hold the president accountable. Also, the political and world events of the time played a large role in his presidency. However, overall the relationship between FDR and the press was an open one; “Despite its differences with him the working press of the United States is forever in his debt for meeting it on common ground over so many critical years” (Pollard 840).

### **Case Study: Jimmy Carter**

Jody Powell was the White House Press Secretary during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. He once said to a reporter complaining about press access to Ronald Reagan “Jimmy Carter answered all of your questions every day and look what happened to him” (Smoller 81). It is easy to see why Carter is one of the most open presidents as he fits the definition from above almost entirely. He was one of the most transparent and accessible presidents but also one of the most unsuccessful.

Carter’s entire Presidency was marked from the beginning with a sense of populism. He wanted to be one of the people compared to an elite imperialist. He even asked his cabinet to develop plans for staying in touch with the people. He wanted the presidency to be accessible and visible. Sam Donaldson an ABC news reporter and anchor at the time was quoted saying “we used to complain about access to Jimmy Carter but compared to access to Ronald Reagan, I was practically one of the family” (Smoller 82). His openness is also demonstrated by how informed he kept his press secretary Jody Powell. According to “The Presidency Project” by

Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, Carter held 59 total press conferences during his short time in office with an average of 14.75 press conferences a year. Carter also went out of his way to be accessible to the public unlike many presidents who avoid uncontrolled and unscripted encounters with the press.

Carter's downfall can be traced to his open characterization when choosing that path in the president's dilemma. He wanted to conduct successful policy and politics and be accountable to the American citizenry in that regard. He felt that doing a good job and being open about his presidential duties would make him successful. Carter wanted a personal life and felt his personal activities were not deserving of media coverage. However, the media not only desires access but the kind of access that has maintained the president as a profitable news celebrity. Carter would not inform the press when he would go to the opera or to a museum with his family, and because of the press's desire for human interest stories they began to view Carter as aloof and arrogant (Smoller 83).

On the other hand he was perhaps too accountable when it came to his presidential duties. The White House logistically demands regulation of the press because of space and practicality. So although the press demands access they also look to the White House to coordinate coverage and access. Which is why the White House Press Corps and "pool" of designated reporters is so essential. The way the Carter administration did not limit or organize access at all made getting video footage or audio of the president a struggle as reporters had to fight for positions. Typical of an open presidency, Carter's administration, including White House aides, were not inhibited when speaking to reporters. This freedom led to more leaks to the press and ultimately unfavorable portrayals and negative stories about the president early on in his presidency while the public was still forming their opinion of him as president (Smoller 84). In an attempt to be

transparent and not control the media Carter failed on capitalizing and reporting on his achievements, so when political events such as the Iran hostage crisis occurred there was little to create a favorable image of him. Fredric T. Smoller put it best when he said, “Carter naively assumed that the press would mirror his performance in office and that voters would reward hard work and substantive achievements” (85). Carter achieved a substantial amount of successful acts in office such as the Panama Canal treaties, the overhaul of the Civil Service System, and the Camp David Accords just to name a few. But due to his lack in public relations strategy and a desire to formulate his image those successes rarely stood out in later reports following his presidency.

Carter’s commitment to an open presidency made him vulnerable to the desires and drives of the press. He is arguably one of the most transparent and accessible presidents of all time and in a purely ideological sense he was beneficial to the philosophies of American democracy. However, Carter is not thought of as one of the more successful presidents. Negative press coverage impacted his presidency, as he was both unable to control and unwilling to counteract it, and with the Iran hostage situation fresh in the minds of the public he was not reelected.

### **Case Study: George H. W. Bush**

George H.W. Bush was widely seen as a president who lacked a unified and compelling long-term theme in his presidency. He was an open president because he was accessible to the press relatively speaking. According to “The Presidency Project” by Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, Bush held 137 total press conferences during his time as president for an average of 34.25 a year. He could also be considered an open president because he did not put much effort

into the management of his image. Bush did not focus on crafting a strategic plan for his message or how to interact with the press. The press then took the opportunity to delve into his legislative agenda for what it was worth, which was good for a transparent account of the policies of his presidency but bad for his image.

Bush attempted to court reporters, but in a way that did not reflect the increasingly digital and instantaneous media that was developing at the time. Such a strategy would have been more successful pre-television era such as when FDR was president. Bush's presidency more resembled the open presidency of the Democrat president Carter compared to his fellow Republican president Ronald Reagan. This was especially true because Bush lacked the charismatic charm and public speaking ability that Reagan had. However, compared to his predecessor Ronald Reagan, Bush met with reporters on a moment's notice to talk about a myriad of topics and in this way he was much more accessible to the press (Smoller 116).

### **Closed Presidencies**

Most presidents in the history of the United States have more closely followed the characterization of a closed presidency, while the ideal democratic notion of an open presidency is more rare, especially in modern times. Presidents who are closed to the press tend to have a more favorable image than open administrations simply because they are better at managing their press coverage, although this is definitely not the case in all closed presidencies. Higher popularity can lead to better media coverage and presidents who are popular tend to move public opinion more than presidents who do not take any role in shaping their coverage.

The hallmark characteristic of a closed presidency is the inaccessible nature of the presidency to the press. The dilemma that a president faces is ultimately a choice between being

more politically selfish or to follow democratic duty. The choice a president faces involves deciding between a presidency that is transparent to the press but politically damaging, or a presidency that is uncompromising and deliberately self-serving but threatens to weaken the free press. It is true that all presidents do not fit perfectly into these two characterizations, but those presidents who are more closed do lean towards the choice in the dilemma that hides the free press. A few note worthy closed presidencies include Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

### **Case Study: Ronald Reagan**

The last president to truly master the art of the media and the press and to use into to completely shape his image was Ronald Reagan. Convinced that the press had contributed to the decline of Carter's presidency Regan resolved that his presidency would not follow a similar fate (Smoller 97). His presidency was unique as it was the last in an era of major news networks and newspapers, but also because it was one of the first to successfully employ a vast public relations strategy to promote his image to the public. Many viewed Reagan as a powerful, charismatic and overall successful leader of the nation. These views were based more on his relations with the press than anything else, including his actual policies and how successful they were in practice. Reagan came into office at a time when the media was naturally shifting with changing technology, but his administration also had a large impact on advancing the transformation through his policy, powerful public relations apparatus, and the entire goal of his administration in shaping the image of his presidency.

Reagan's presidency more than any other president's was characterized as the model closed presidency where he controlled and manipulated the press so successfully that the media

played into his image. The media was so enthralled with Reagan that they did not critically perform their journalistic duties to the full extent and “media analysts and journalists have chastised the press for being a poor watchdog for democracy during the Reagan administration” (Smoller 117).

*On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* by Mark Hertsgaard exposes how the news media, both through government manipulation and voluntary self-censorship, renounced its responsibility to report on what was really going on during Reagan’s eight years as president. Hertsgaard reveals that there were many instances of network and press executives at *CBS*, *The New York Times*, *ABC* and elsewhere, stifling their own reporters’ coverage of such stories as “Reaganomics”, the invasion of Grenada, and the Iran-Contra Affair. The media furthered both the construction and distribution of the Reagan message and image.

The first few months of Reagan’s presidency, or his honeymoon period with the press, set the tone for the relationship between him and the press for the rest of his eight years in office as it created an established rapport. It was not until the month of August after he took office that the press began to turn critical, but by then Reagan had already gotten his economic package passed on Capital Hill. “The successes of the first six months of 1981 were perhaps the most crucial of the entire Reagan presidency” (Hertsgaard105). This success in passing policy in congress contained the administration’s most important domestic policy achievement and it laid the foundation for Reagan’s continued domination of political thought.

The greatest advantage to setting a positive tone early on in his presidency was Reagan’s philosophy of picking issues carefully, and making sure that once they were picked that he would win them (Hertsgaard 107). The first months of Reagan’s time in office set the tone of positive coverage, even despite the difficulties that would arise later in his presidency such as the Iran-

Contra Affair. This reflects the differences between Reagan's closed presidency as compared to Carter's open one because unlike Reagan Carter was not able to recover from poor policy or negative events.

Both news executives and Reagan's White House staff contend that he was one of the least scrutinized presidents in the nation's history. "As much as through voluntary self-censorship as through government manipulation, the press during the Reagan years abdicated its responsibility to report fully and accurately to the American people what their government was really doing" (Hertsgaard 9). This self-censorship and basically submission by the press to Reagan's administration was because he was so charismatic and had won by such a large vote.

Also, it was easier for the press to simply report on the stories they were fed by Reagan's administration rather than conducting investigative in depth reporting on their own, especially in a White House that would have made this nearly impossible. Moreover the stories they were fed, including feel good human-interest stories, satiated much of the press. White House cajoling and news media self-censorship both added to producing the positive news coverage of Reagan's administration. Reagan's administration realized that they could use the press agency's own strength against itself. "Rather than resist the networks desire for saturation coverage of the president, the Reagan propaganda apparatus would cater to it" (Hertsgaard, 53). In this way the White House understood that if the press wanted visuals of the president then they would be images carefully designed and constructed to promote the Reagan agenda. By creating the illusion of an open and respectful environment for reporters, Reagan's administration held all the power and only gave the press what they could afford in regards to coverage.

Reagan's administration was known for having a "line of the day" where everyone in the executive would be told the message for that day-as decided by the communications meeting in

the morning- and would only be allowed to recite that message to reporters. In this way the information that was going out to the press was uniform for the entire administration and the press could further be influenced to only report on what they were handed. Also, this uniformity of one message kept the current policies that only the administration wanted to focus on in the public eye. Reagan held press conferences less frequently than any other modern president. According to “The Presidency Project” by Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, Reagan only had 46 total press conferences in his two terms as president for an average of 5.75 a year. However, this did not affect positive coverage or support of his policies because his advisors worked so well to direct their messages to the public despite Reagan’s own shortcomings.

Fredric T. Smoller summarized it best when he said that “ no president in this century took fewer questions from the press, held fewer press conferences, kept reporters at a greater distance, exerted more control over the flow of information or used television more ingeniously than Ronald Reagan” (97). That was until this century.

### **Case Study: Barack Obama**

The Obama administration was a closed presidency as it attempted to control the media, circumvent the press to go directly to the people, and suppress leaks and whistle blowers within government. Obama himself has spoken of the need for a free press and has discussed the rhetoric of needing professional journalists. However much like Reagan, Obama had a skilled and calculated way for dealing with the press. Obama’s administration curbed routine disclosure of information and deployed its own media to evade the press. According to “The Presidency Project” Obama had 164 total press conferences during his administration for an average of 20 a



year. But what was most significant is how adept Obama was at being seen in the media without being held accountable to journalists.

Obama would portray his own message to the American public through new media such as official websites, twitter, YouTube and day and night time television programming like talk shows that did not ask the tough policy questions that are needed to keep a president accountable. Journalist's role as the fourth estate requires them to have access to the president to interpolate and examine his actions and policy decisions in order to critically assess the political facts for the public. But when Obama bypassed the press to put out his own "reporting" he did not uphold this role. Just like Reagan's administration did with his public relations policies the "Obama administration has primarily used social media as a way to put out its messages and viewpoints and mobilize the public in support of administrative objectives" (Katz 7). During his two campaigns for the presidency Obama had made a point of going over the heads of the media to communicate directly with voters and this continued into his time as president.

Reporter's access to Obama was limited and what information they did receive was for the purpose of furthering his agenda. In one example during his administration the "press photographers have loudly groused about a lack of access to the president – the White House often prefers to send out its own official shots – and reporters covering the beat say they are generally kept in the dark about what the president is actually doing" (Cherlin). Despite Obama's promises to be open and transparent, reporters have said they are disappointed in his promise of improving access. David E. Sanger, chief Washington correspondent of *The New York Times* said, "this is the most closed control freak administration I've ever covered" (Downie). When journalists wanted to report on the president White House staff directed them to official websites with official Whitehouse content including video, photos and statements.

Obama's administration is also known for its effort to control information through controlling leaks and tips to the press from within the executive branch and other parts of government. Leonard Downie Jr., who was the Executive Editor of *The Washington Post* from 1991 to 2008, said, "the administration's war on leaks and other efforts to control information are the most aggressive I've seen since the Nixon administration"(Downie). The presidency of Obama had initiated or continued high-profile legal action against reporters entangled in leak cases, including James Risen of *The New York Times*. The Obama administration had "prosecuted nine cases involving whistle-blowers and leakers, compared with only three by all previous administrations combined. It has repeatedly used the Espionage Act, a relic of World War I-era red-baiting, not to prosecute spies but to go after government officials who talked to journalists" (Risen). It could be said that in a post 9/11 America the Obama administration was doing what was necessary for national security, but Downie recalled that during the George W. Bush administration journalists were still able to engage knowledgeable officials at the highest levels of the administration in productive dialogue and in practice it was more accepting of the role of journalism in national security than the Obama administration.

Closed presidencies are characterized by their choice to manage the press in order to facilitate a positive image of the president and Obama's presidency accomplished this goal at the expense of press freedom.

### **Case Study: Donald Trump**

The presidency of Donald Trump fits within a closed characterization even though so much of it does not fit within anything we have seen before in American politics. It may seem like the freedom of the press is at risk with Trump publicly berating and denouncing news

organizations and journalists, but this administration is at odds with the press just as presidents have been in the past-although dramatically more so. Like Obama, Trump uses social media and his own communication apparatuses to create his own message and bypass the press, but unlike Obama who claimed he was an advocate for the free press, Trump uses the press as his political adversary. He even went so far as to say that the press is the “enemy of the people”. He publicly attacks the media whenever he can, refused to attend the White House Correspondents Dinner and capitalizes on his slogan of “fake news”. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Principal Deputy White house Press Secretary, said in regards to Trump skipping the White House Correspondents Dinner, “this wasn’t a president that was elected to spend his time with reporters and celebrities, this is a president who campaigned on speaking directly to Americans, and that’s what he’s going to be doing” (Schultz). This decision to skip the dinner and to instead attend a public rally is evidence of Trump politically creating an image and literally going directly to the public, as other closed presidencies have done. Trump has been actively disparaging the media and limiting access, but arguably not more so than other closed presidencies. The difference in this administration is that instead of courting the press as Reagan did, Trump is choosing as a political strategy to use the press as an opposition party.

In January the Trump administration instructed agencies to cease communicating with the public through news releases, official social media and correspondence (Eilperin and Dennis). Although this raises concerns that federal employees will be severely constricted under the president’s agenda this is not much different from actions in previous closed administrations done to control communication. The difference is that Trump is overtly restricting information because he wants the public to know that he is controlling the administration’s, and America’s, message.

Jeff Mason, president of the White House Correspondents Association, when asked about Trump said that there will always be tension between the press and the White House that it covers and that such tension is normal. Trump is uprooting tradition and precedent when it comes to the presidency but the very democratic nature of the office and how it interacts with the press is not in danger.

## **Conclusion**

Despite new media, journalistic professionalism and standards have remained fundamentally the same regardless of the personality and party of the President, or the politics of the time period. American's expect a great deal from the president of the United States and as democratic citizens they demand coverage of the presidency. Even though the media is going through a lot of rapid changes and is constantly evolving, the traditional journalist remains a key voice in defining the public agenda.

The president's performance is often a measure by which American's assess the performance of our country. A president who succeeds makes the American people feel that the nation can succeed, and it is through the president's performance that many citizens understand America's role in the world and the nation's ambitions and aspirations for the future. From the beginning of the nation, presidents have seen the necessity for meeting the need of an informed public and each in his own way has dealt with the press according to his ideals and the demands of the times.

Democracy demands an informed citizenry, as *The Washington Post's* new slogan says, "Democracy dies in Darkness". The dissemination of the news will, and has, changed with the advent of new technology, increased polarization in the electorate, a more partisan media and

increasingly global political events, but ultimately journalism will not change. In tracking changes over centuries in regards to journalism there is a general trend, and not one towards a more weakened freedom of the press as the recent closed presidencies might make it seem. This trend is one of consistency where the traditional press is here to stay. In fact, it is in closed presidencies like today with Trump, that the democratic mission of the press is heightened.

The role of the press in American democracy will continue to be fundamental to the functioning of the nation and even the value of the free press in the world. Presidents will continue to support the free press on some level regardless of if they are open or closed. Presidents may tweak the format of things as they come into office, but there have been questions in the past about limits on the freedom of the press. Eisenhower thought of removing reporters from the White House, and at one point Nixon thought about not having a press secretary, but ultimately presidents realize that having a hundred reporters and photographers in one place can be a great resource.

Throughout history “the United States has had tremendous moral influence when it spoke out about press freedom violations, and not just because of the commitment to the First Amendment. The fact that United States political leaders regularly withstood relentless criticism in the press gave them legitimacy when they called for the protection of critical voices in repressive societies” (Simon). This feature of all presidents accepting media criticism provides the legitimacy for press freedom in the U.S and globally. So although the trend might seem to increasingly point to a decline in press freedom and a suppression of moral un-biased journalists, in reality the presidency and the press have always had a complicated and opposing relationship. Some presidents have merely been more open than others.

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