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Zachary Hayes

Pepperdine University, School of Public Policy, zachary.hayes@pepperdine.edu

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The Rise and Fall of the Media as an Elite Institution

By: Zachary Hayes

Abstract

The election of Donald Trump as President has brought much attention to the partisan media coverage of his administration. Concern about the one-sided nature of reporting and the alteration of longtime standards has caused trust in media to decline sharply. To better understand the current situation, this paper looks at the history of American media, from the initial partisan stage to the development of broad standards. It then examines the recent drift back toward partisanship as an explanation for why trust in this longstanding institution has diminished.

Keywords

Media, Elite, Institution, Bias, Liberal, Illegal Immigration, Climate Change, Presidents, Donald Trump, 2016, Election

Introduction

The American media have gradually evolved into a collective elite institution. In the roughly 150 years following the American Revolution, the press was a highly polarizing and divisive force, as newspapers, the main outlets for information, served as the primary mouthpieces of political parties. During this period, they actively sought to dramatize politics and world events in a way that reflected the beliefs of their editors. But by the 1920s and 1930s, newspapers, together with the emerging outlets of radio and television, professionalized and developed common standards of reporting. Suddenly, Americans began to see the media collectively as a dominant presence in society, a development that transformed journalism into an elite institution.¹ That is, the media were now able to comprehensively mold society in the area of public opinion. Writers spoke for the country, defined its values, enforced mores, and uncovered wrongdoing. This period represented the press at the height of its power, when Americans held it in high regard.

Over the past few decades, however, trust in the media has fallen, accelerating since 2000.² A significant number of Americans have now come to see journalistic outlets as corrupt influences that no longer serve the public interest, especially with regard to politics. That Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016, in part by relentlessly attacking the press, is a manifestation of how large segments of the American people have come to despise it. This paper examines the reasons for the growing public hostility and identifies two areas that could provide an explanation for it: divergence on major issues such as immigration and climate change, and excessively biased coverage of political affairs.

¹ Ladd, Jonathan M. *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, p.63.

² Gallup. "Media Use and Evaluation," "Trust in News Media Chart." *Gallup*. News.gallup.com. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.

Beginnings

To better understand the media's fall from their prominent status as a respected elite institution, it is imperative to grasp how they obtained such high standing. We must therefore trace the media's development throughout the course of American history. In the country's earliest days, the dominant leaders of the press were newspapers scattered across the country. They were highly partisan, pushed a particular political agenda, and did not pretend to acknowledge the other side's viewpoints. This arrangement first became evident in the initial years of the Washington administration, when Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson split over the direction of national policy. Hamilton's supporters, the Federalists, who favored vigorous use of the federal government to promote commerce and national unity, founded the *Gazette of the United States* in 1789 to promote their ideas.³ Soon after, Jefferson founded the *National Gazette* to push the limited government, decentralized, and rural-centric views of his followers, the Democratic-Republicans.⁴ Because these papers received backing from prominent politicians, they began attacking opponents in the government. The *National Gazette* even criticized President Washington for "overdrawing his salary" and "unconstitutional acts" because of his implicit sympathies toward the Federalists.⁵

In the ensuing years, the accusations only intensified with the increasing bitterness of political rivalry. In 1796, the *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, later known as the *Aurora*, declared, "If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been debauched by Washington...If ever a nation was deceived by a man, the American nation has been deceived by Washington."⁶ During the 1800 presidential campaign, the pro-Democratic-Republican *Richmond Examiner* called John Adams "a

³ Ladd, Jonathan M., op. cit., p.30.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

hoary-headed incendiary.”⁷ Most controversially, in 1802, the pro-Federalist *New York Evening Post* attacked Thomas Jefferson for having children with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings.⁸ These media attacks were quite bitter and personal, while simultaneously setting a precedent for media outlets to act as advocates for a particular set of beliefs.

As the 19th century progressed, the nature of newspapers changed. Editorials stopped acting as mouthpieces of particular political parties and began to reflect the independent opinions of their editors.⁹ In addition, newspapers consolidated under a few owners, including William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer.¹⁰ They sought to sensationalize media coverage in a way they claimed was “anti-political,” a practice now known as “yellow journalism,” but they still exerted significant influence over how the public viewed the political affairs of the day.¹¹ Most notably, Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Pulitzer’s *New York World* reported on the Cuban revolt against Spanish rule during the 1890s as a dramatic clash between good and evil.¹² These papers’ portrayal of the conflict aroused readers’ sense of morality to such an extent that they created a public outcry for war against Spain after the U.S.S. *Maine* exploded in Havana’s harbor in 1898.¹³ Thus, during this era of disentanglement from political parties, newspapers remained strong advocates for particular political actors and causes, creating a bias based on the editors’ personal preferences.

As the press moved away from direct party involvement and toward the sensational reporting of Hearst and Pulitzer, one phenomenon continued unabated: politicians’ disdain for media sources. Officials in government during this transition, particularly presidents, saw newspapers as great nuisances seeking to hinder their political agendas. This was particularly the case during the Civil War. In

⁷ Ladd, Jonathan M., op. cit., p.31.

⁸ Ibid., p.31.

⁹ Ibid., p.36.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.38.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp.38-39.

one shocking incident, President Abraham Lincoln ordered the military to shut down the *New York World* and the *New York Journal of Commerce* and arrest their editors for drumming up anti-war opinion by reporting, based on false documents, that Lincoln wanted to draft more New Yorkers into the army.¹⁴ The situation was resolved when the two papers agreed to apologize and admit their sources were fake.¹⁵ This tension continued over the ensuing decades. President Benjamin Harrison, at the end of his term in the 1890s, expressed to reporters his displeasure regarding the press coverage his administration had received, describing it as “cruel, unfair, and discourteous.”¹⁶ In addition, despite generally cordial relations with the press, President William McKinley considered indicting the editors of the *New York Evening Post* and the *Springfield Republican* for their negative coverage of the Spanish-American War.¹⁷ By taking partisan and oppositional stances toward government policy, the press served as a great annoyance to elected officials, who sought to keep it at arm’s length. As such, the media did not gain the influential power of a collective elite institution for roughly the first 150 years of the American republic.

Modernization and Elite Status

During the 1920s and 1930s, the press underwent significant professionalization, which gradually altered its social standing. The main cause of this development was the dominance of Progressivism, which emphasized the need to replace rancorous political debates with the knowledge and skill of experts, as well as the need to find empirical “truth.”¹⁸ One of the most influential figures in this metamorphosis was Progressive thinker and social commentator Walter Lippmann.¹⁹ During World War I, Lippmann had served on President Woodrow Wilson’s Committee on Public Information, led by

¹⁴ Ladd, Jonathan M., op. cit., p.41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.47-49.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.49.

George Creel, which sought to use the media to manipulate public opinion in favor of the war.²⁰ Upon reflection, he realized that the government could pose a significant threat to the press in the future, unless the latter changed the way it operated.²¹ As such, Lippmann strongly advocated in his 1920 book, *Liberty and the News*, for the press to undergo professional education to learn that “good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of scientific virtues.”²² “Modernized logic” was essential for uncovering the “objective” truth and ensuring that reporters did not make the mistake of accepting every comment at face value.²³ Furthermore, Lippmann discouraged the media from serving as advocates for particular causes or candidates because this could draw the press away from the pursuit of truth.²⁴ Rather, outlets were to serve as mechanisms by which society progressed toward the future.²⁵ Lippmann thus argued that the professionalization of reporters and development of journalistic standards would improve the accuracy of information and enhance liberty.²⁶

As Walter Lippmann designed his revolutionary vision for the press, long-term developments combined to turn the media into a collective elite institution and make his vision a reality. First, the number of active daily newspapers declined significantly during the early 20th century. Between 1910 and 1930, the number of cities with two or more competing papers fell from 57.1 percent to 20.6 percent.²⁷ This trend meant that newspapers became larger, allowing for uniform news standards to spread across the country.²⁸ Another major factor pushing Lippmann’s goals was the development of radio and television. Between 1930 and 1940, radio ownership skyrocketed, rising from 46 percent of

²⁰ Broom, John T. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 1st ed., s.v., “Creel, George.” Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/creel_george (accessed April 13, 2018).

²¹ Lippmann, Walter. *Liberty and the News*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995 [1920]. The footnote here cites the introduction by Paul Roazen, p.4.

²² Lippmann, Walter, op. cit., p.74.

²³ Ibid., p.77.

²⁴ Ibid., pp.78-79.

²⁵ Ibid., p.79.

²⁶ Ibid., p.88.

²⁷ Ladd, Jonathan M. *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. p.52.

²⁸ Ibid.

households to 82 percent.²⁹ Radio's reign as the dominant outlet did not last long though, as television soon took over a couple of decades later. The number of households with a television set rose from two percent in 1949 to 87 percent in 1959, a remarkably rapid ascent.³⁰ These forms of media could broadcast over long distances and reach people across the nation almost instantly, creating a need for common production and broadcasting standards to meet growing demand in new markets.³¹ In addition, the television industry saw competition among three major networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC.³² Only these outlets broadcasted into American homes, ensuring that news programs would develop similar formats that could be standardized for nationwide audiences.

The third factor that aided in the development of the professionalized media involved the growing consensus among Americans on economic and political issues. The New Deal and World War II greatly reduced income inequality until, by the 1950s, the wealthiest one percent held nine percent of income, down from 19 percent in the 1910s.³³ Furthermore, the voting patterns among Republican and Democratic members of Congress converged, as both parties accepted a greater role for government in the lives of its citizens.³⁴ This development reduced economic tension and increased the likelihood that people would view the press as reporting a singular truth, enhancing its status among Americans.

The result of these consolidating and centralizing trends was that the media blossomed into a dominant institution during the mid-20th century. Common standards ensured that stories were covered in a similar manner among competing outlets, and professionalization removed the toxic partisanship of old, giving the press an air of objectivity that it previously lacked. The American people grew comfortable with this new arrangement, as indicated by polling from the period. A 1956 ANES poll

²⁹ Ladd, Jonathan M., *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.53-54.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p.54.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.45-46.

revealed that 78 percent of Republicans and 64 percent of Democrats viewed newspapers as “fair” in their coverage, a remarkable level of bipartisan agreement.³⁵ Similarly, two Roper polls taken in June and November 1964 found that 71 percent and 61 percent of participants, respectively, believed that the three big TV networks did not “generally favor one political party over another.”³⁶ These numbers indicate that the press had gained the trust of the American people and now wielded significant power to shape opinion.

Prominent politicians recognized that conditions had changed and began to accommodate the newly empowered media. Though President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration consistently quarreled with leading newspapers that were sympathetic to the Republicans, and sought to discredit their attacks on his programs, subsequent presidents accepted the press as a feature of American politics.³⁷ For example, Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower generally maintained friendly relations with the press, while President John F. Kennedy actively courted it and developed friendships with many prominent reporters.³⁸ This state of affairs represented the press at the height of its power. Americans saw it as a national institution that uncovered the truth and protected them against the misdeeds of prominent political and societal figures. As such, the media were able to influence the outcome of major events, such as the Vietnam War, where CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite’s disillusionment possibly enabled the powerful antiwar movement to gain traction, and the Watergate scandal, where Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post* uncovered the

³⁵ Ladd, Jonathan M., op. cit., p.63.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p.59.

³⁸ Ibid., pp.59-60.

depth of the affair and ultimately forced President Richard Nixon to resign.^{39 40} The press' evolution from partisan mouthpiece to elite institution was complete.

Lost Confidence

Nevertheless, this zenith would prove short-lived, as confidence in the media began to wane in the decades following the 1970s. According to Gallup, the number of people who trusted the media "a great deal" or "a fair amount" reached a peak of 72 percent in 1977, before beginning a downward trend that saw trust drop to 50 percent by the 1990s, around 40 percent in the 2000s, and approximately 30 percent in 2016.⁴¹ 2016 was a momentous year because it saw Donald Trump run for president against established institutions, especially the news media. In the process, he defied expectations by eking out a narrow victory. Even so, this dramatic event that represented how far the press' public standing had fallen could not have occurred without a gradual and significant buildup of tension over a longer period of time. While there are many possible explanations for the decline in media trust that manifested itself in 2016, the most prominent include the divergence between the public and the media on sensitive political issues, and biased coverage of candidates whom the press disfavors.⁴²

The first area where the media and the public diverge involves certain political topics that have divided the country in recent years, such as immigration and climate change. In the case of immigration, many major media outlets have taken an accommodative stance, supporting immigrants regardless of whether or not they entered the country legally. For example, *The Washington Post's* editorial board

³⁹ Achenbach, Joel. "Did the news media, led by Walter Cronkite, lose the war in Vietnam?" *Washingtonpost.com*. *The Washington Post*. May 25, 2018. Accessed February 24, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/did-the-news-media-led-by-walter-cronkite-lose-the-war-in-vietnam/2018/05/25/a5b3e098-495e-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html?utm_term=.7cb5d2e9a08b.

⁴⁰ Ladd, Jonathan M. *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. p.64.

⁴¹ Gallup. "Media Use and Evaluation," "Trust in News Media Chart."

⁴² The following sections of the paper will draw heavily from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* because these newspapers are so firmly established and influential that they constitute the heart of the media elite.

endorsed the failed 2013 immigration bill, which gave legal status to millions of illegal immigrants, and *The New York Times'* editorial board applauded President Obama's executive action to shield between four and five million illegal immigrants from deportation.^{43 44} These sympathetic positions on immigration have colored some of the papers' reporting on the issue. For instance, when *The Washington Post* announced that the Senate had passed the 2013 bill, its report applied subtle pressure to the measure's Republican opposition. The authors mentioned that Republicans faced significant problems with Hispanic voters, which by implication would only get worse if they opposed the legislation, and that a broad coalition of farmers, faith leaders, educators, labor unions, and business groups supported the legislation.⁴⁵ *The Washington Post*, therefore, carried the message of those who wanted fewer restrictions on immigration.

This dynamic also occurred in the coverage of *The New York Times* after the announcement of President Obama's executive action. The editorial board's supportive attitude permeated beyond the opinion section to the news coverage. For example, one piece that the paper published in the days immediately following the action mentioned the Republicans' opposition, but also discussed their divisions on how to proceed due to their electoral problems with Hispanics.⁴⁶ In addition, the article gave outsized space to discussing how advocates for the executive action had pressured the president by criticizing his deportation policy and his slow approach to helping needy migrants.⁴⁷ These pieces from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, by emphasizing the dangers for Republicans on

⁴³ Washington Post Editorial Board. "An immigration bill worthy of support." *Washingtonpost.com*. *The Washington Post*. April 16, 2013. Accessed February 26, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/an-immigration-bill-worthy-of-support/2013/04/16/2ba77e40-a6d4-11e2-8302-3c7e0ea97057_story.html?utm_term=.eca239614528.

⁴⁴ New York Times Editorial Board. "At Long Last, Immigration Action." *Nytimes.com*. *The New York Times Company*. November 19, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/20/opinion/at-long-last-immigration-action.html>.

⁴⁵ O'Keefe, Ed. "Senate approves comprehensive immigration bill." *Washingtonpost.com*. *The Washington Post*. June 27, 2013. Accessed February 24, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-poised-to-approve-massive-immigration-bill/2013/06/27/87168096-df32-11e2-b2d4-ea6d8f477a01_story.html?utm_term=.0c6571acb0e5

⁴⁶ Shear, Michael D. and Julia Preston. "Obama Pushed 'Fullest Extent' of His Powers on Immigration Plan." *Nytimes.com*. *The New York Times Company*. November 28, 2014. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/us/white-house-tested-limits-of-powers-before-action-on-immigration.html>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

immigration, and stressing the supposedly broad and intense support for loosening restrictions on immigration, show that elite media outlets' reporting on the issue is biased.

Even though the press has largely expressed positive views of immigration, the public is distinctly divided on the issue, a trend that has only increased over time. In 2002, for example, Gallup released a poll that showed that 54 percent of respondents wanted to decrease immigration levels, 26 percent wanted to maintain current levels of immigration, and 17 percent hoped to increase immigration levels.⁴⁸ In 2016, Gallup asked respondents the same question and found that 38 percent of respondents sought to decrease the level of immigration, compared to 38 percent who wanted to maintain current levels and 21 percent who hoped to increase immigration levels.⁴⁹ While such numbers may suggest greater acceptance of immigration among the public than in the recent past, they do not indicate the same level of support for open immigration that the press espouses. A large disconnect still exists between the media and the general public on the issue. Furthermore, voters concerned about immigration levels and border security, if aroused, remain a powerful political force. In 2016, Donald Trump repeatedly emphasized his vision of strict border enforcement and limits on legal immigration, and, despite intense media opposition, rallied them to his cause. This trend is best exhibited by opinions about his proposed border wall. According to the Pew Research Center, 79 percent of Trump backers favored building a wall along the Mexican border, indicating that a significant contingent of his support came from voters anxious about illegal immigration.⁵⁰ Donald Trump's unanticipated victory stemmed, in part, from exploiting a longstanding disconnect between the media and a large group of voters on the

⁴⁸ Gallup. "Immigration," "Level of Immigration Table." *Gallup*. News.gallup.com. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Gramlich, John. "Trump voters want to build the wall, but are more divided on other immigration questions." *Pewresearch.org*. Pew Research Center. November 29, 2016. Accessed February 26, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/29/trump-voters-want-to-build-the-wall-but-are-more-divided-on-other-immigration-questions/>.

desired structure of the immigration system. This division damaged the press' elite standing and further eroded its support among the public.

The second major political issue on which the media and much of the population diverge is that of climate change. On this topic, the media typically emphasize the need to protect the Earth as one of the most pressing concerns. As such, they tend to favor government plans that reduce the amount of pollutants in the atmosphere. The editorial boards of both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, for instance, have endorsed the enactment of a carbon tax, arguing that it would help reduce the effects of climate change and raise large amounts of revenue to help the poor adjust to higher fuel prices.⁵¹ ⁵² This stance, in a manner similar to positions on immigration, colored the two outlets' reporting on climate change. For example, after the conclusion of the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, a global pact in which 196 countries agreed to fight climate change, *The Washington Post* gave outsized space to people supporting the action and only briefly addressed the views of congressional opponents.⁵³ Furthermore, the report did not mention the potential downsides of the agreement, instead unquestioningly accepting the narrative that drastic action was needed to prevent global average temperatures from rising by two degrees Celsius.⁵⁴ *The New York Times'* reporting on the Paris Accord was structured similarly. Its news article on the agreement centered on the pact's historic nature and the urgent need to halt the rise in temperatures.⁵⁵ Though it provided more detail on Republican legislative resistance to the deal and its broader implementation difficulties, the piece effectively

⁵¹ Washington Post Editorial Board. "The Carbon Tax." Washingtonpost.com. *The Washington Post*. November 10, 2012. Accessed April 14, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-carbon-tax/2012/11/10/6c576bfa-29f5-11e2-b4e0-346287b7e56c_story.html?utm_term=.0eb41a431101.

⁵² New York Times Editorial Board. "The Case for a Carbon Tax." Nytimes.com. *The New York Times Company*. June 6, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/opinion/the-case-for-a-carbon-tax.html>.

⁵³ Warrick, Joby and Chris Mooney. "196 countries approve historic climate agreement." Washingtonpost.com. *The Washington Post*. December 12, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/12/12/proposed-historic-climate-pact-nears-final-vote/?utm_term=.070c89c63670.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Davenport, Coral. "Nations Approve Landmark Climate Accord in Paris." Nytimes.com. *The New York Times Company*. December 12, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/world/europe/climate-change-accord-paris.html>

repeated the narrative of the negotiators and did not mention that the agreement could have potential economic downsides.⁵⁶ The reporting of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* on the Paris Climate Accord thus reveals that elite media sources are definitively biased in favor of aggressive action on climate change, regardless of the costs.

As with immigration, a noticeable disconnect exists between the media and the general public on climate change. While the press is strongly in favor of taking measures to combat it, everyday Americans are split on the issue. Some polls, such as two from Gallup, have found that more Americans prioritize protecting the environment over obtaining economic growth (57 percent to 35 percent, according to the most recent data), and that more people believe the effects of climate change are underestimated, rather than overestimated or predicted correctly (41 percent to 33 percent to 25 percent, respectively).⁵⁷ A third Gallup poll, however, showed that public concern about climate change depended strongly on political party affiliation, with 66 percent of Democrats and only 18 percent of Republicans saying they worried “a great deal” about it.⁵⁸ This finding indicates that many Americans do not see the impact of such a phenomenon in their daily lives. The country’s overall commitment to fighting climate change is further clouded by the fact that many people do not consider it to be man-made. Pew Research Center surveys taken in the months before the 2016 election revealed that only 27 percent of Trump supporters, 15 percent of conservative Republicans, and 34 percent of moderate/liberal Republicans, thought human activity contributed to climate change.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ These

⁵⁶ Davenport, Coral. “Nations Approve Landmark Climate Accord in Paris.”

⁵⁷ Gallup. “Environment,” “Environmental Protection vs. Economic Growth Table,” “Seriousness of Global Warming Table.” *Gallup*. News.gallup.com. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1615/environment.aspx>.

⁵⁸ Norman, Jim. “Democrats Drive Rise in Concern About Global Warming.” News.gallup.com. Gallup. March 17, 2017. Accessed April 14, 2018. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/206513/democrats-drive-rise-concern-global-warming.aspx>.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, Brian. “Clinton, Trump Supporters Worlds Apart on Views of Climate Change and Its Scientists.” Pewresearch.org. Pew Research Center. October 10, 2016. Accessed February 25, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/10/clinton-trump-supporters-worlds-apart-on-views-of-climate-change-and-its-scientists/>.

⁶⁰ Funk, Cary, and Brian Kennedy. “The Politics of Climate.” Pewinternet.org. Pew Research Center. October 4, 2016. Accessed April 15, 2018. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/>.

surprisingly low numbers that suggest a significant number of Americans are skeptical of the science behind climate change.

Finally, setting aside the lack of public consensus on the existence of the problem, many Americans do not believe the proposed solutions for combating climate change will be effective. The same Pew Research polls indicated that only 33 percent of Trump supporters believed corporate tax incentives—such as a carbon tax or an emissions tax credit—together with 23 percent of conservative Republicans and 47 percent of moderate/liberal Republicans, would reduce the risk of climate change.⁶¹

⁶² Similarly, only 34 percent of Trump supporters, 27 percent of conservative Republicans, and 48 percent of moderate/liberal Republicans believed international agreements would reduce the rate of climate change.⁶³ ⁶⁴ These responses signify that many Americans are not ready, politically, to accept the proposed plans for solving this major environmental issue.

The data above suggest that a major gap exists between media elites and large numbers of Americans on the subject of climate change. While the press tends to support restricting economic activity to curb carbon emissions, the general public is much more ambivalent, with many people outright opposed to such ideas. Similar to those who felt marginalized on immigration, tension built up among many voters who felt ignored or ridiculed for their beliefs on climate change, to the point where they were eager to make a political statement. In 2016, Donald Trump seized on this state of discontent by railing against the Obama administration's initiatives on climate change, winning this segment of the public's support. For example, he rejected a carbon tax, condemned the Paris Climate Accord, and pledged to kill President Obama's Clean Power Plan, which limited carbon emissions from power

⁶¹ Kennedy, Brian. "Clinton, Trump Supporters Worlds Apart on Views of Climate Change and Its Scientists."

⁶² Funk, Cary, and Brian Kennedy. "The Politics of Climate."

⁶³ Kennedy, Brian, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Funk, Cary, op. cit.

plants.^{65 66 67} Given that these proposals were a prominent part of Trump's platform, it is probable that opposition to plans that addressed climate change contributed to his narrow victory. As such, the campaign revealed the extent of the disparity between the views of the media and those of Trump voters and Republicans on climate change. This issue therefore also serves as an indicator of the media's diminished status as a collective American institution.

The second area that reveals the extent to which the press' standing among the public has fallen concerns its biased coverage of particular political candidates. In recent years, Americans have grown disillusioned with how the media have exercised their role in the political process, seeing them as tilting the scales against politicians that their owners and employees dislike. Given that this phenomenon was most clearly visible during the 2016 presidential election, the ensuing analysis will focus entirely on that campaign. Two incidents from this election stand out for particular attention: Donald Trump's controversial comments about Mexican immigrants and the grim tone of his Republican nomination acceptance speech. Both reveal clear instances where the media were not pretending to be impartial.

In the first case, major outlets responded to Trump's allegation that certain immigrants from Mexico were bringing "drugs" and "crime," while others were "rapists," with incredulity, alarm, and fury.⁶⁸ For example, Philip Bump, the national correspondent of *The Washington Post*, cited numerous studies that found very little correlation between immigrants and crime to prove that Trump's claims were untrue.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, *The New York Times* ran pieces seeking to maximize the negative fallout

⁶⁵ Trump, Donald J. Twitter Post. May 13, 2016, 11:40 AM. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/731192363809394688>.

⁶⁶ Norman, Jim. "Democrats Drive Rise in Concern About Global Warming."

⁶⁷ Harvey, Chelsea. "Trump Has Vowed to Kill the Clean Power Plan. Here's How He Might—and Might Not—Succeed." *Washingtonpost.com*. *The Washington Post*. November 11, 2016. Accessed April 15, 2018.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/11/11/trump-has-vowed-to-kill-the-clean-power-plan-heres-how-he-might-and-might-not-succeed/?utm_term=.d05afc9c603f.

⁶⁸ Bump, Philip. "Surprise! Donald Trump Is Wrong About Immigrants and Crime." *Washingtonpost.com*. *The Washington Post*. July 2, 2015. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/07/02/surprise-donald-trump-is-wrong-about-immigrants-and-crime/?utm_term=.1f606b03c24b.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

from the remarks, such as one that mentioned how offended Mexicans were, and another that emphasized how much money Trump lost in business and endorsement deals.^{70 71} These reactions are representative of the overwhelmingly negative and biased view that the media took toward Trump's political agenda from the start.

Secondly, the media criticized Trump's acceptance speech for painting a bleak and divisive picture of America. *The New York Times*, for instance, labeled the speech "dark" by proclaiming it a far cry from Ronald Reagan's message of "morning in America," noting that it contained "little new to offer women, Hispanics, blacks, and others who have been turned off by Mr. Trump's incendiary brand of politics," and declaring that Mr. Trump's language on crime and ISIS made him sound like "a wartime president."⁷² *The Washington Post* conveyed a similar narrative, emphasizing Trump's portrayal of some illegal immigrants as "killers" and noting that the address sounded similar in tone to Richard Nixon's 1968 nomination acceptance speech.⁷³ These adverse responses to the address among prominent news outlets show that some journalists could not recognize that Trump's message accurately reflected the sentiments of a great many Americans.

⁷⁰ Ahmed, Azam. "And Now, What Mexico Thinks of Donald Trump." *Nytimes.com. The New York Times Company*. July 2, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/03/world/americas/donald-trump-gains-infamy-in-mexico-for-comments-on-immigrants.html>.

⁷¹ Rappeport, Alan. "Remarks on Mexicans Take Financial Toll on Donald Trump." *Nytimes.com. The New York Times Company*. July 1, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/07/01/his-remarks-are-taking-a-financial-toll-on-donald-trump/>.

⁷² Healy, Patrick, and Jonathan Martin. "His Tone Dark, Donald Trump Takes G.O.P. Mantle." *Nytimes.com. The New York Times Company*. July 21, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-rnc-speech.html>.

⁷³ Rucker, Philip and David A. Fahrenthold. "Donald Trump positions himself as the voice of 'the forgotten men and women.'" *Washingtonpost.com. The Washington Post*. July 22, 2016. Accessed February 24, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-speech-at-republican-national-convention-trump-to-paint-dire-picture-of-america/2016/07/21/418f9ae6-4fad-11e6-aa14-e0c1087f7583_story.html?utm_term=.f5b4f5fb1f13.

Such persistently negative coverage persuaded Trump that the press was against him, and he decided to fight back aggressively.^{74 75} During the campaign, he frequently attacked the media for treating him unfairly and made them a centerpiece of his anti-elite messaging. For example, he created derisive nicknames for various outlets, such as when he called *The New York Times* “The Failing *New York Times*,” and claimed “they don’t know how to write good.”⁷⁶ Trump also called out reporters on his Twitter account for their slanted coverage and complained that camera crews were deliberately not showing the full crowd sizes at his rallies, so as to minimize his perceived level of support.^{77 78} In this way, he aimed to neutralize the threat that media elites posed to his candidacy.

This tactic ultimately paid off, not only because Trump managed to win the election, but also in that the media emerged from the fight with a major credibility problem. By the end of the campaign, increasing numbers of Americans felt that the press was covering Trump unfairly. A Gallup poll released in September 2016 revealed that trust in the media had fallen to a record low of 32 percent, driven by an 18-point drop among Republicans.⁷⁹ Similarly, Quinnipiac University polling figures published in October 2016 revealed the 55 percent of the likely voters surveyed believed that the press exhibited

⁷⁴ For more information on the media’s anti-Trump bent, see Rutenberg, Jim. “Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism.” *Nytimes.com. The New York Times Company*. August 7, 2016. Accessed February 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/business/balance-fairness-and-a-proudly-provocative-presidential-candidate.html>; and Washington Post Editorial Board. “Trump Is a Unique Threat to American Democracy.” *Washingtonpost.com. The Washington Post*. July 22, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/donald-trump-is-a-unique-threat-to-american-democracy/2016/07/22/a6d823cc-4f4f-11e6-aa14-e0c1087f7583_story.html?utm_term=.825a84a09d62. These sources indicate that members of the media felt obligated to openly oppose Trump because they saw him as vulgar, dangerous, and a threat to democracy.

⁷⁵ Though Trump’s contentious relationship with CNN is one of the most public, much of the bitterness behind it emerged after the campaign as a result of investigations into Russian interference during the election. As such, CNN is not a focus of this analysis.

⁷⁶ Lima, Cristiano. “Trump Blasts New York Times: ‘They Don’t Write Good.’” *Politico.com. Politico*. August 1, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/trump-new-york-times-226546>.

⁷⁷ Trump, Donald J. Twitter Post. December 24, 2015, 2:31 PM. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/680153902952615936>.

⁷⁸ Wemple, Erik. “Donald Trump Again Singles Out Camera Operator for Mass Derision.” *Washingtonpost.com. The Washington Post*. January 11, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2016/01/11/donald-trump-again-singles-out-camera-operator-for-mass-derision/?utm_term=.6919b02279ef.

⁷⁹ Swift, Art. “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low.” *News.gallup.com. Gallup*. September 14, 2016. Accessed February 26, 2018. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

bias against Trump.⁸⁰ The 2016 election, therefore, represented a watershed moment for the media. Never in modern history had a candidate so habitually attacked the press or seen this message resonate so strongly with large numbers of people. The fact that such a tactic was successful is a powerful indicator that the media have lost their premier status among the American public.

Conclusion

For most of American history, the press, in all of its various forms, has seen its status rise among the American public. It began as a reviled tool of partisan politics, designed to promote particular political beliefs and discredit opponents. In the late 1800s, media outlets evolved to reflect the opinions of their editors and reported news in a sensationalized manner in an effort to increase sales. In the 1920s and 1930s, Progressives such as Walter Lippmann sought to professionalize the press and establish standards for reporting the news. The development of new outlets such as radio and television aided these goals over the ensuing decades. Lippmann's vision dominated the press between the 1930s and the 1970s, a period that saw the media develop into a powerful institution and gain immense prestige among the public. Since then, however, the press' standing with a large segment of the American people has eroded due to a variety of factors, most notably its starkly divergent views on issues such as immigration and climate change and its negative coverage of disfavored political candidates. In their recent departure from "objective" journalism that reports facts without excessive commentary, the media have, in effect, returned to their partisan roots. Outlets now aggressively stake out positions on issues and do not hesitate to offer opinions on political aspirants. Given that Americans did not hold a very high opinion of the press in its earliest days, calling it overtly partisan, it seems likely that this trend will continue in the current era of media subjectivity. Such developments indicate that

⁸⁰ McCaskill, Nolan D. "Poll: Majority of Voters Believe Media Biased Against Trump." Politico.com. Politico. October 19, 2016. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/poll-media-bias-against-donald-trump-229998>.

the public wants a disinterested press, and that a return to the standards of Lippmann's day is more likely to help restore its fallen standing among the American public.

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