Croteau, D. & Hoynes, W. (1999). Democracy and a free press. In W. Grover and J. Peschek, eds., *Voices of Dissent 3rd ed.* New York: Longman. 58-65.

Working with the progressive media-watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), sociologists David Croteau and William Hoynes conducted a detailed comparison and analysis of two popular TV news shows: ABC's Nightline *and PBS's* MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, *and found a strikingly narrow range of viewpoints among their guests. As a backdrop to that study, this article systematically discusses the role of freedom of the press in a healthy democratic society. A truly free press would be a press free from both government and corporate control. Contrary to the myths that have been built up around supposedly hard-hitting journalists and reporters, Croteau and Hoynes believe that the press in the United States falls woefully short of what would be expected of the press in an authentic democracy. Too often the U.S. media function more as a "lapdog" to the powerful than as a "watchdog" for the public interest, substituting personality, drama, and spectacle for the aggressive and adversarial role that they should play. Carefully review the authors' explanation of the media's functioning and the examples they cite, and ponder the implications for our democracy and for your own abilities as a "free thinker."*

A "free press" is important for a democratic society because citizens cannot act in accordance with their own individual and collective interests unless they are well-informed. The democratic postulate is that citizens have the right to hear the various sides of an issue and express their own preference, whether through voting, lobbying elected officials, or more direct citizen action.

Perhaps there was a time when direct debate and discussion of local issues in community forums and town meetings served as the foundation of democratic discourse—at least for those privileged interests who usually had access to such forums. Today, though, local issues are usually connected to state and federal policies, which, in turn, are increasingly geared to meet the demands of a competitive international climate. Understanding the forces affecting citizens means understanding regional, national, and even global issues. Citizens are generally in no position to directly experience events that may be affecting their lives but which are happening in distant centers of power. The mediating institutions in our society—such as political parties and labor unions—which once served as sources of information for citizens have been crippled by change. Consequently, in a large and complex society such as ours, citizens primarily rely on the mass media to learn about and participate in the public discussion of policy issues. The media, then, have an important contribution to make toward the construction of a more vibrant democracy.

The Functions of a Free Press

Our criticisms of the contemporary American news media are rooted in our belief that news has the capability of contributing to democratic processes. In essence, we take seriously the potential of a truly free press—free from both government control and the forces of the economic market—to serve as a means of communication, a provider of information, and a forum for political dialogue. But how do we know that a press is truly free? What functions should the media be carrying out in order to meet the needs of a democratic society? Addressing such critical questions will allow us to identify the shortcomings of our current media system and assess the future possibility of creating news media that are genuinely free.

There are several important reasons why freedom of the press is an essential element of a democratic system. A free press can serve as: (1) a watchdog against abuse by those in positions of power, (2) a source of substantial information for citizens about social and political issues, and (3) a forum in which diverse opinions can be communicated to others. Each of these functions, which overlap and are inter-connected, deserves closer consideration.

1. Media as Watchdog

J.S. Mill argued in "On Liberty" that "The time, it is to be hoped, is gone by when any defense would be necessary of the 'liberty of the press' *as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government"* (emphasis added). When the media guard against potential abuses of government and those in other positions of power we say they are serving their role as "watchdog."

The watchdog metaphor is a telling one. Watchdogs serve their owners by alerting them to intruders who threaten life and property. Their bark is intended to summon their owners to defensive action. Similarly, since citizens cannot devote their constant attention to the machinations of politics, a free press has traditionally served as a watchdog to call the public's attention to the misdeeds and threats of those in power. With an increasingly complex (and often highly secretive) government bureaucracy, it is especially important for journalists to serve, in some sense, as representatives of the public in uncovering and publicizing official misdeeds, and thereby providing citizens with the information they need to act.

But times have changed. While the media's watchdog role may once have been taken for granted, that is no longer the case. Jeff Gralnick, former-executive producer of one of the nation's highest-rated news programs, ABC's *World News Tonight,* has argued that "It's my job to take the news as [government officials] choose to give it to us.... The evening newscast is not supposed to be the watchdog on the government." Such bluntly honest admissions suggest that the media have strayed far from their role as a watchdog. Most citizens would not be comforted to learn that some in the media think their responsibility is to pass on news as defined by the government. This used to be the definition of propaganda, now it passes for journalism.

While the reality of a watchdog media is certainly in question, the popular image of the aggressive investigative reporter is still a powerful one. This image is commonly personified by Watergate reporters Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post.* The book and especially the film.4// *The President's Men* made Woodward and Bernstein everyday cultural references that evoke the image of tough, adversarial reporters who are willing to turn over any stone in search of the truth, no matter who tries to stop them. In fact, Watergate is often invoked as the quintessential example of the media playing the role of "watchdog" in relation to the government— exposing greed, corruption, and ineptitude.

The basis for the image is suspect at best. First,, most media outlets were reluctant to carry—let alone pursue—the Watergate story, not wanting to get too far ahead of what was "safe" to publish. Whatever investigative gumption Woodward and Bernstein exhibited was not typical of the media, it was the rare exception. Second, during the Watergate period, other more significant stories were *not* aggressively pursued by the press, including the U.S.'s secret bombing of Cambodia and the U.S. role in overthrowing Chile's Allende government. Finally, the lesson many take from the Watergate incident is somehow that the "system worked"—corrupt government officials and their conspiratorial aides were swept from the White House. In fact, everything from the pardoning of Nixon (which paved the way for his subsequent rehabilitation as a "statesman"), to the more significant Iran-Contra scandal, and the continuing role of money in politics, points to the woeful inadequacies of a corrupt political system and a timid press.

But regardless of the inaccuracy of the Woodward and Bernstein myth, it is the lingering image of an aggressive, fearless press that is of importance today. Media criticism from corporations, the White House, and well-funded conservative think-tanks has helped to strengthen the cultural image of an oppositional media. It is no wonder, then, that popular discussions often begin with the assumption that the media play the role of "watchdog," sometimes even too fiercely.

The myth of an aggressive press continues to persist, in part because journalists cultivate the image as a means of legitimizing their enterprise and avowing their independence. But the media's supposedly antagonistic stance towards politicians is based more on image than substance. Increasingly, the adversarial stance is based on "personality journalism," as reporters dig into the details of the personal lives and backgrounds of celebrities and politicians. While this sort of coverage can and often does become hostile, it rarely provides the public with more than titillating tidbits of information. The sordid entertainment value of personality politics distracts attention from substantive policy debates.

The case of Bill Clinton is a prime example of how the media have generally focused on the personal characteristics of a politician, to the neglect of issues of substance. During the 1992 campaign, much more time and space was devoted to discussing the relationship between Clinton and Gennifer Flowers, than to discussing the relationship between Clinton and the corporate interests that bankrolled his campaign. More Americans knew that Clinton didn't inhale than were aware that he governed an anti-union "right-to-work" state with a poor environmental record. The problem is that personality politics does little to illuminate the real substance of politics: the policies, which will have an impact on people's lives. Whether or not Clinton had affairs, smoked pot, or eats too many french fries will, in the long run, have no effect on citizens. His policy record will.

Retired Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, who withdrew his name from consideration to become President Clinton's Secretary of Defense in the wake of media criticism, may be right that public officials need increasingly thicker skin to survive in Washington. However, this is only half of the story. It is the same press corps that turns over every stone about the personal lives and babysitting needs of Cabinet nominees that acquiesced to military censorship during the Gulf War and maintains routine relationships with an array of powerful sources. While a national media focused on the rise and fall of personalities may help sustain the watchdog *image,* there can be little doubt that personality journalism is a far cry from the substantive core of the watchdog role.

While personality journalism may sometimes bring the press in conflict with those in positions of power, journalists are, in fact, partially dependent upon maintaining good relations with those in power. That is because former and current government officials often serve as key sources for many stories. Maintaining relationships with such sources is a high priority for most journalists who, as is well-known by aspiring reporters, are only as good as the sources to whom they can gain access. Generally, the most efficient sources are not lone individuals, but representatives of government or other large organizations. They do not provide information as a public service, but in order to serve specific political agendas. Journalists who need regular information from reliable sources may be wary of offending such sources for fear of losing access. At the same time, the standard methods of objective reporting virtually guarantee that authoritative voices, particularly those of the government, will be a routine part of the news—often to the exclusion of less "official voices." It should be no wonder, then, that the everyday practice of journalism would make journalists and their official sources more like partners than adversaries.

Journalists are also generally organized around particular "beats" that put them in frequent contact with government officials. The White House, State Department, Pentagon, State House, City Hall and so on end up being the "home" of journalists assigned to those beats. These are the places where journalists look for news each day, and government agencies are happy to oblige journalists with regular briefings, press conferences, and handouts. Rather than maintain a firm "watchdog" pose in relation to these institutions, reporters are just as likely to develop comfortable working relationships with the people who work in these offices. As a result, there is the tendency for journalists to develop a cozy similarity in worldview with those they cover.

The watchdog metaphor for the media is particularly inappropriate in one other crucial respect. Real watchdogs are owned and controlled by their masters. In a capitalist society, however, we ask the privately-owned media to serve a public function. The results have been less than ideal. The mainstream television news industry is for the most part a for-profit enterprise. Even ostensibly "public" television is increasingly dependent on corporate money in the form of "underwriting." Conflicts between serving a public function and meeting the requirements of the corporate "sponsor" are inevitable. Watchdog functions become more difficult as news departments face budget cuts as part of the corporate parent's emphasis on profitability. Serious investigative journalism is an expensive, labor-intensive effort that can take months to produce a single report. It makes little sense for corporate owners who are interested in the bottom line to invest in such efforts.

Finally, in the specific field of television public affairs there has emerged a revolving door between government officials and news analysts and commentators. It's difficult to see the watchdog element of the media when those in government leave their positions to join media organizations and vice versa. Instead of a vigilant maintenance of distance, we see Reagan official David Gergen leave the White House and become a prominent news analyst on the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*—only to return to the

White House with the Clinton Administration. Similarly, Chief of Staff John Sununu joined the media on *Crossfire* after leaving the Bush White House. And after departing from the Reagan White House, Pat Buchanan became a nationally syndicated columnist and news personality, only to take off his hat as columnist and news analyst to wear that of presidential candidate in 1992, from which he, once again, returned to the media.

Instead of serving as a wary watchdog, then, the media often develop a symbiotic relationship with those in power. This relationship helps set the framework for official manipulation of the media.

The Media "Watchdog" on the Government Leash

Rather than having a free press serving to keep government abuses in check, it has been more common for the media "watchdog" to be on a government leash. For decades government media specialists have practiced "news management" and have, in recent years, almost perfected means of manipulating the news media. This does not require any censorship or direct threats to reporters. On the contrary, the techniques of public relations crafted on Madison Avenue are more than sufficient.

Michael Deaver, media specialist in the Reagan White House, minces few words when he talks of the ability of the White House to produce the top story on the evening news night after night. He says, "I found [television reporters] to be fairly manageable... because we were able to give the nightly news good theater, a good visual every evening and pretty much did their job for them." One of Deaver's central points is that White House public relations specialists can be more farsighted than journalists: "Unlike the journalists, we thought a little bit beyond what the story of the day was going to be. We looked at what it was going to be four, five, six weeks down the road and tried to plan for that." The job of government public relations personnel is made all the more easy by a press that has largely abandoned any commitment to its watchdog role. Former NBC News President Larry Grossman has argued that, while the press should ask questions and act "somewhat independently" of the president, "the job of a president is to set the agenda. The job of the press is to follow the agenda that the leadership sets."

The ability of government public relations campaigns to manage the news continues to breed new strategies for disseminating information and creating images. In the mid-1980s the Reagan Administration created the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean—a euphemism for an official propaganda campaign. Furthermore, "national security" often hangs over the heads of reporters, who are wary of reporting state secrets that might put people or policies at risk. For example, William M. Baker, a former public information officer for then-CIA Director William Webster publicly revealed that "improved relations between the press and the CIA had helped him to persuade three major newspapers or their reporters to kill, alter, or delay articles concerning CIA operations."

Sometimes, however, government-media relations are not so amicably resolved and the government has resorted to more direct tactics in order to achieve its goals. Such was the case with the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama. After "acquiescing to demands that it open Panama to coverage" after the invasion, the government made it "all but impossible for journalists to do their jobs," according to one *Boston Globe* reporter. For several days, armed guards prevented reporters from leaving the U.S. military installation where they had been confined "in many cases without food and in nearly all cases without a place to sleep other than on concrete or linoleum floors." After such treatment, "more than 100 members of the news media opted to take a military flight home,...many of them without every filing a story."

The 1991 Persian Gulf War, in which journalists were organized into official, military sanctioned press "pools," was a textbook example of the combination of government news management and journalistic timidity. Whether or not the major media were pleased with the restrictions, they did little to change them. Moreover, the military censorship is only the beginning of how and why the U.S. press acted more as a public relations arm for the U.S. military than as an independent media.

While the networks and major dailies presented a steady stream of stories about the press restrictions, they rarely addressed the more important question of why the U.S. press was serving more as a transmission belt for official positions than as independent investigators dedicated to providing

citizens with a wide range of information. By restricting media criticism to discussion of the official censorship, the regular journalistic self-censorship never became an issue.

The most obvious way in which die major media restricted themselves was in the sources they chose to quote. The policy debate at home was, in particular, sharply limited by the choices made by the mainstream media. In the early months of the conflict—between August and December 1990—the media were not as single minded as they were during the war. Yet, the bounds of dissent only stretched as far as the debate inside the Beltway. For example, there was almost no criticism of the Bush Administration's decision to send troops to the Persian Gulf in August. Only when Democrats in Congress and a series of former generals began to question the effectiveness of war in the Gulf did the media begin to raise questions about the Administration's policy. Still, the questions were largely circumscribed by the participants in the Washington policy debate, and focused on the most effective strategy for destroying Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Often right-wing critics of the Administration's policy were brought on the networks to question the wisdom of war, while the growing peace movement was almost entirely ignored. All of this suggests that the news media act more often as a "lapdog" than a "watchdog"— providing a forum for government officials to present their perspectives and squabble among themselves, rather than a site for open political debate. Journalist Mark Hertsgaard may have captured the relationship between news media and government best with his argument that the media have become little more than "stenographers to power," recording for all of us what those in power think and do. Ultimately, this is not an encouraging sign about either the "freedom" of our media or the health of our political system.

2. Media as Information Source

Perhaps the most obvious role of media is that of information source. The type of information that can be offered to viewers is virtually endless. Everything from home improvement programs to science documentaries, for example, provide information of some kind. Our interest here, though, is with the realm of social and political issues—the area covered by news and public affairs programs. These programs have the potential for providing a vast amount of information that could help viewers better understand the workings of the political world, providing them with resources to make their own decisions and take appropriate action.

One key reason people read newspapers and watch television public affairs programs, is to learn more about what is happening in their communities, the nation, and the world at large. Television is in a unique position to bring substantive discussions of local, national, and international issues directly into people's living rooms. Through public affairs programming, the presentation of a wide range of conferences and lectures, and, increasingly viewer participation programs, the distance between the private world of the home and the public world of politics can be bridged. Television information can be broad, as with the brief scan of world events found in the evening news. But information can also be provided in more depth. At their best, for example, television documentaries can offer substantial context, analysis, debate, and commentary on a given topic.

Limitations have always existed in the media's ability to provide adequate information for citizens. However, over the past decade the shortcomings of mass media as a source of information have been exacerbated because of increased pressure to be profit-making enterprises. Whereas at one time news divisions of media corporations were somewhat protected from the pressures of the bottom line, the media have increasingly abandoned their civic role as conduits of information and debate in favor of their more profitable role as entertainers. In the contemporary news business, as Doug Underwood puts it, "newsroom organization has been reshaped by newspaper managers whose commitment to the marketing ethic is hardly distinguishable from their vision of what journalism is."

The "packaging" of news in order to make it attractive and entertaining has, in many cases, taken precedence over the content of that news. News media, especially television, have resorted to the marketing techniques employed by commercial advertisers to "sell" their news "product." Popular news anchors are identified through focus group analysis. They are dressed to make them appear warm and trustworthy, instructed to engage in friendly disarming banter with other anchors, and sold to the public as news personalities. An industry of "news doctors" has arisen to consult with stations in helping to

raise their ratings through the utilization of more "soft" news, slick sets, "action" cameras, and flashy technologies. As a result, local news broadcasts throughout the United States have taken on a startlingly homogenous look that is intended to sell. These stations often take a sensationalist slant in their news coverage, highlighting the drama of crime and accident victims. The industry even has a slogan summarizing this approach to news: "If it bleeds, it leads."

The media's increasing concern with appearance, drama, and spectacle has been fed by savvy media consultants in electoral politics whose primary function is the manipulative use of the mass media to convey specific messages to the public. Electoral campaigns and the White House routinely have a "theme" of the day which they feed to the networks and newspapers, packaged with attractive visuals and catchy sound bites. The creation of "pseudo-events"—events which exist solely for the purpose of their being covered in the media—has resulted in news which is often the coverage of the *simulation* of events, complete with prepared camera angles and backdrops, rather than actual events.

Increasing concern with image-making and appearance in the news has been accompanied by a decline in the serious substance which a citizenry requires to make informed decisions in a democracy. The near extinction of network sponsored news documentaries is one good example of this. Moreover, the pressure for increased profitability has resulted in the cutting of news personnel, contributing to a further erosion of the quality of news programming. The gap between image and substance was never greater than with the Reagan presidency when voters repeatedly expressed disapproval of specific Reagan policies yet continued to approve of the president (the "image" of the president?) overall. Reagan's skillful manipulation of the press and his ability to project favorable images led him to be dubbed the "teflon" president. Serious criticism of his policies didn't seem to stick in light of his skillful use of media image-making. The Reagan presidency—presided over by a former Hollywood actor—set the standard for the manipulative use of mass media and their image making capabilities. It represented the triumph of spectacle over substance. The lessons of this period have not been lost on more recent administrations who have continued to use the techniques developed in the Reagan era.

Ultimately, instead of in-depth analysis of an increasingly complicated and interdependent globe, we have photo-opportunities, seven-second sound bites, and a growing commitment to "infotainment."

3. Media as a Forum for Diverse Opinions

In order to be active participants in a democratic society, citizens need information about their world. But if citizens are to be active participants in the democratic process, they need information from a wide range of sources, about a wide range of people and events. They need information regardless of the preferences of those with political or economic power. In short, functioning democracies need a truly free media system, one which is not constrained by state or private interests.

In its role as information source, the media ought not to tell viewers what to think. Instead, news should expose viewers to what others are thinking and doing. The role of the news media should be to present the views of diverse groups involved in or affected by any given issue. If citizens in a democracy are to make informed decisions, they must have access to the range of opinions available on potentially controversial matters. Ideally, people representing different perspectives in this range of opinion should have the opportunity to present their case and perhaps debate those with differing views. Thus, rather than providing a pre-digested view of current events, or one that equates "debate" with the views of the two major political parties, television news can serve as a forum that allows for a broad "exchange of ideas." By providing multiple perspectives on issues and events, television can expose us to the worlds and worldviews of a wide range of people.

Mass media have the capacity for introducing viewers to the experiences and thoughts of people living on the next block, across the nation, or the other side of the world. Indeed, since its inception, television has been lauded for its ability to bridge regional, national, and cultural differences. But if news is to serve democratic purposes and live up to its potential, then a commitment to looking beyond convention, moving outside of insider circles, and including fresh perspectives is essential.

Freedom of the press now needs to be understood as freedom of access to the media for citizens with widely divergent points of view. The mainstream media, though, usually do not see it that way. Thus instead of a free and open media that serve as a forum for diverse opinions, we have news media

outlets centralizing into mega-corporate empires offering access only to elite representatives of other powerful institutions.

Questions for discussion

1. According to the authors, why is a truly free press an essential element of a democratic system?
2. How does the government "leash" erode the watchdog function of the media?