

person is in the government and there is any chance that a gift can be perceived as a bribe, it should not be accepted. If a public servant is in a restaurant with a vendor or a regulated party, he or she should pay his or her own way. If a public servant is making an investment, he or she should be certain that it has no relationship to his or her official responsibilities.

Those who work in the government should not expect to make a lot of money. People who need to make a lot of money should leave the government. The expertise and skills developed in the public sector will probably be marketable in the private sector. Once public servants have left the government, they must not recontact their old agency until ethics rules permit, usually one or two years after leaving. Corruption often starts small—with a free lunch or a bottle of Scotch at Christmas. If public administrators do not draw an absolute line, they may soon be rationalizing larger and less subtle payoffs.

By refusing all gifts, public administrators avoid the need to analyze which ones to accept. While we realize this may force public officials to be less sociable than they might prefer, this is simply the price of public service.

Albert Hirschman, in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, identifies three choices that public administrators have if they disagree with an assignment. They can leave the organization (*exit*), they can go public with their opposition (*voice*), or they can mute their opposition in order to retain

their influence within the organization (*loyalty*).³⁵ Essentially the same choices are open if their disagreement is based on ethics. While it is true that operating in the real world involves compromise and accommodation, every individual must draw the line somewhere.

The trials in Nuremberg of Nazis charged as war criminals after World War II demonstrated that individual public servants are accountable to universal ethical standards. If public servants believe an assignment is wrong, they should try to reverse the decision. If they are unsuccessful, they must weigh the three options Hirschman identifies.

There is no prescription we can offer for weighing these ethical choices. Public administrators will not last long in any organization if they see every decision as an ethical choice. Nor will they sleep well if they violate their own code of morality.

In our view, Carol Lewis gives the best specific advice for the ethical behavior of public administrators in her 21 rules of thumb, which we have reduced to five principles:

1. Obey and implement the law.
2. Serve the public interest.
3. Avoid doing harm.
4. Take individual responsibility for the process and its consequences.
5. Treat incompetence as an abuse of office.³⁶

35. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

36. Lewis, *Ethics Challenge*, pp. 164-78.

The Evolving Watchdog: The Media's Role in Government Ethics

By WARREN FRANCKE

ABSTRACT: The mass media's influence on the ethics of public life, as characterized by the press's watchdog role in monitoring the conduct of government officials, is assumed to be vital to democracy. The effectiveness of this watchdog role is less clearly understood. Partial answers are found in the evolving institutional history of the press, including its control, ethics, laws, technology, organization, and the content of news stories. Just as reporters rarely discuss their ethics in terms of teleology and deontology, the press does not conceptualize in sophisticated terms its impact on the ethics of public employees. It traditionally finds motivation from the popular belief in watchdog success models from muckraking to Watergate. As partisanship, news values, and reporting techniques evolve, effectiveness varies. Research sheds light on media trends but focuses more on presidents than county clerks, more on political campaigns than government process. Optimism, as new doors and new technology open to reporters, is tempered by competition from the marketplace and the new digital feast promised consumers.

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THE mass media's influence on the ethics of public life is assumed to be significant. Measuring this role is another matter. Traditional assumptions begin with Jefferson's justification for the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights, giving the press primacy as the watchdog of government, and continue in such classic forms as Cater's summary: "The American fourth estate operates as a de facto quasi-official fourth branch of government, its institutions no less important because they have been developed . . . haphazardly."¹

Cater's observation became a vice president's indignation when Spiro Agnew attacked these impudent and unappointed guardians of democracy. Earlier, the haphazard press role worried a less partisan Walter Lippmann, troubled by inadequate pictures in the heads of a self-governing people. Not a barking watchdog, Lippmann's press was "like the beam of a spotlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision."²

EVIDENCE OF THE MEDIA ROLE

Mundane evidence beneath the metaphors accents the centrality of the media role in monitoring the conduct of government.

The police courts were the first regular assignment for the first reporters in the 1830s, and custom still identifies local news beats as "cop shop," courthouse, and city hall.

1. Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 13.

2. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 364.

Journalism students begin with a basic reporting class, then take "Reporting of Public Affairs." The most celebrated reporting of the nineteenth century exposed New York's Tweed Ring and, in the twentieth, Watergate.

The more famous episodes of watchdogging suggest an easy answer to the crucial question, If the press role is important, is it effective? The full paradigm preferred by media researchers asks, "Who said what in which channel to whom with what effects?"³ and it is common to treat Tweed and Watergate as evidence of powerful media effects. Mass communication theorists, however, caution against such conclusions: effects are easily assumed but uncertainly proven.⁴

This attempt to understand press influence on public sector ethics embraces complexity and searches for answers in the media's institutional history, ranging from partisan control to news content, from ethics to laws, from technology to organizational trends. It assumes that the effectiveness of the press varies as key variables evolve over time and that future impact depends on which traits rise and fall. Will computer-assisted searches of government data soon overshadow the news values that favor more sensational coverage of the personal behavior of public officials? Or will the commercial values of tabloid journalism shape the future?

3. Harold Lasswell et al., *The Comparative Study of Symbols* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

4. Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 2d ed. (London: Sage, 1987), p. 251.

ETHICS UNEXAMINED, MOTIVES QUESTIONED

I have never heard newspeople discuss mixed rule deontology, or anything remotely resembling it.

Donald Gillmor⁵

Ethicists divide the normative decision making of both journalists and public servants into teleology and deontology, then acknowledge the behavioral reality that slip-slides between firm rules and consequences. Thus mixed-rule deontology is derived as a category for scholars and one never to cross the lips of those nouveaux *Front Page* types, who have progressed from feet propped on pressroom desks to fingers poised over computer keyboards.

Perhaps the next generation of journalists, as comfortable in cyberspace as the cop shop, will call up software that intersects the ethical guidelines of the Society of Professional Journalists with those of the National Municipal League or the Council on Government Ethics Law.⁶ More likely, newspeople still will not discuss anything remotely resembling this; they will still consider their concept of the public interest in competition with the motives of administrators, and they will continue to shape public sector ethics, not through direct analysis of the media

5. Donald Gillmor, "A Look at Media Ethics," *Media Ethics*, 6(1):1, 21 (Fall 1993).

6. The 1987 update of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics appears in many publications including Melvin Mencher, *Basic Media Writing*, 4th ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1993), p. 419. For public service ethics codes, see Carol W. Lewis, "Ethics and Ethics Agencies," in *Ethics and Public Administration*, ed. H. George Frederickson (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 136-57.

role, but by the seat of their pants: very indirectly as the product of multiple institutional forces that shape the content of newspapers, magazines, and broadcast news.

Meanwhile, that role will be expressed in the traditional metaphors: watchdogs warning the public to throw the rascals out. In one variation, investigative journalists "alert the public to take appropriate action," and they "provide for the preservation of democracy."⁷ Even when rather grandly proclaimed, this function is supported by a public ambivalent about certain practices.

Generally, Americans believe that news coverage is too negative and, particularly, that watchdogs bark too loud and too long about petty wrongdoing by public officials, namely, private misbehavior. When the press insists on purity of motives—serving only the people's right to know the truth—the people reserve the right to be skeptical. Experience suggests that other motives may be at work, and, if citizens look too readily for political or ideological bias, not to mention profit motives, as causal variables, so often do journalists and public employees.

MUCKRAKING MODELS OF SUCCESS

Historians treat the muckraking decade, 1902-12, as the peak of journalistic influence on public life, but popular notions of the media as a cause of sociopolitical effects are not confined to this period. Tom Paine's

7. James H. Dygert, *The Investigative Journalist* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. vii.

essays inspired George Washington's troops; Harriet Beecher Stowe's book freed the slaves; some mix of *New York Times* reporting and Nast cartoons drove the Tweed Ring from office; and "Woodstein" forced Richard Nixon to resign the presidency.⁸ If more sophisticated cause-effect theories appeal to historiographers, common beliefs about the power of reporting have influence not contingent on scientific proof or scholarly consensus. A nineteenth-century editor reflected on the Tweed exposures, "I imagine that the brilliant success of those attacks on the Tweed Ring has had something to do with the newspaper tendency which has developed so strongly in the last 25 years—that, namely, of finding something to expose."⁹ Whether or not *Uncle Tom's Cabin* caused the Civil War, Upton Sinclair's belief on that point motivated him to similarly "free the wage slaves" by writing *The Jungle*.¹⁰ If the work of Woodward and Bernstein played a lesser role in Watergate than did Judge Sirica or congressional committees, that view was apparently lost on the record number of students who enrolled in journalism to star as the next Robert Woodward/Redford in *All the President's Men*.¹¹

8. See, for example, Gustavus Myers, *The History of Tammany Hall* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1917).

9. "Reminiscences of an Editor," *Printer's Ink*, 15 Jan. 1896, p. 18.

10. Upton Sinclair, "What Life Means to Me," *Cosmopolitan*, pp. 693-94 (Oct. 1906).

11. Robert W. Greene, "Foreword," in *The Reporter's Handbook*, ed. John Ullmann and Steve Honeyman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. vii.

So it was when the muckrakers seemed to reform America. One enthusiast credited Phillips's "Treason of the Senate" series with a key part in the passage of three constitutional amendments,¹² and Sinclair's meat-packing novel is routinely connected to pure-food legislation. In his *Age of Reform*, Hofstadter awarded these reporters and their "business of exposure" the central role in the Progressive movement.¹³

In short, a particular journalistic form at a point in history powerfully influenced public policy, primarily by exposing corruption and conflicts of interest. The result was reform by replacing bad officials with better ones but also by exposing distributive injustices, reform by pushing fairer legislation and administration of laws.

While the extent of the journalistic component versus other causes is debated, magazine muckraking was clearly seen as a success, a model that promised rewards—fame, fortune, the preservation of democracy—if its practices and techniques were properly emulated. Success models, whether Tweed and Watergate or the municipal muckraking of Lincoln Steffens, are also advisory about limitations. The muckrakers complained that the public became saturated with exposures in time, and would-be Woodsteins talked about a Teflon president when ethical revela-

12. Irving Dilliard, "Foreword: Six Decades Later," in *Muckraking: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. John Harrison and Harry Stein (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), p. 6.

13. Richard Hofstadter, *Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 186.

tions would not stick to Ronald Reagan. While the Beltway wondered about the Clintons' Arkansas investment, a network television producer defended prime-time news shows' focus on Manson, Dahmer, and other true-crime sensations, noting, "We could do an hour on Whitewater, but we wouldn't survive."¹⁴

Unethical officials may take comfort that their more recent conduct ranks below Manson's 30-year-old murders as a television ratings draw. On the other hand, even petty bureaucratic bungling—from overpriced toilet seats to late-arriving mail—remains more newsworthy than efficient administration. The institutional conditions behind such ironies are all of interest, but tradition and continued scapegoating demand first attention to the problem of partisanship.

PARTISANSHIP: CONTROL VERSUS CREDIBILITY

The great defender of press freedom, Thomas Jefferson, regretted that public servants must sacrifice not only time and money but "peace of mind and even reputation."¹⁵ Given the politically affiliated press of his day, it is not remarkable that he blamed Federalist partisans for abuses against him, including charges of highly personal misbehavior. More interesting, he initiated the complaint concerning the one-party

14. Richard Zoglin, "Manson Family Values," *Time*, 21 Mar. 1994, p. 77, quoting *Now's* Jeff Zucker.

15. Jefferson to Dr. James Currie, 16 Jan. 1786, in *The Presidents and the Press*, by James E. Pollard (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 55-56.

press—"Though not 1/25th of the nation they command 3/4 of its public papers"¹⁶—exploited later by Franklin Roosevelt and then given its liberal-dominance spin by Agnew and successors.

The compact, updated version of this enduring issue, in terms of media control by owners or managers reflected in presidential endorsements, reveals that Republican candidates received most newspaper support in twentieth-century elections, with Nixon's 10-to-1 choice over McGovern as the extreme example and with Lyndon Johnson's victory over Goldwater and Clinton's edging of Bush as the two exceptions to the rule.¹⁷

The short history of political affiliation by the press describes partisan newspapers, characterized by designated presidential organs, loyally serving elected officials and party leaders from the founding years toward the mid-nineteenth century. The watchdog function was divided: editors howled at the opposition and defended their own.

In the 1830s, the penny press declared its independence from party bosses, as exemplified by the success of Bennett's *New York Herald*. News replaced opinion as the key commodity in attracting readers, and a revolution took place: the first reporter was hired in 1833, and three decades later Bennett assigned more than

16. Jefferson to William Short, 23 Jan. 1804, in *Presidents and the Press*, by Pollard, p. 75.

17. See, for example, Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, *The Press and America*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), p. 572.

sixty correspondents to cover the Civil War. President Lincoln chose not to designate his own partisan newspaper; his desire to reach a larger audience and editors' need to market news overcame political differences. Partisan affiliation lingered into the second half of the century as marginal papers still sought financial backing from political factions, but stronger newspapers were courted by candidates who once controlled them. Bennett supported Tammany on his own terms, and the Republicans could not tame Greeley.

The rise of reporting soon overshadowed other forces, but the charge of partisanship remained the first defense for exposed officials and thus continued to affect media credibility as an influence on public sector ethics. Just as Nixon and Agnew blamed media bias for negative accounts of their conduct in Washington and Baltimore, earlier targets of investigations challenged the source.

Lingering partisanship even led newspapers to play "consider the publican cheered the *Times* exposure of Tweed as "a fearless and most effective warfare on the corruptions of Tammany."¹⁸ A year later, however, it hissed at the *New York Sun's* revelations of Republican involvement in the Credit Mobilier scandal, concluding: "Bah! The whole thing is not worth talking about. It is a sensation from the most unreliable and sensational paper in the country."¹⁹

In 1890, well after exposures of the Grant administration and the flurry

18. *Omaha Tribune and Republican*, 2 Aug. 1871.

19. *Ibid.*, 21 Sept. 1872.

that followed the Tweed case, Pulitzer's *New York World* reported the corruption of U.S. Senator Matthew Quay of Pennsylvania, chairman of the Republican National Committee.²⁰ The lengthy story detailed ethical issues ranging from embezzlement of state funds to boozing and womanizing, but the high-minded *New York Post* noted that little attention was paid the charges because the *World* was "untrustworthy."²¹ Not only partisanship but source credibility—a reputation for sensationalism—could undermine watchdog effectiveness.

In this instance, to present the true story of ethical violations "from a responsible source," sniffed Godkin's *Post*, it seconded the Quay investigation and confirmed Republican corruption in a Republican newspaper.²²

THE NEW REPORTERS: LIBERAL OR LIBERATED?

The Quay episode drew closer to the twentieth-century trend toward a more detached professional reporting, where the formal bias—news values, reporting techniques, formats, deadlines, and other newsroom conditions—grew in influence while politics declined. Contrasting studies of Washington correspondents in the 1930s and then 25 years later showed the 1960s reporters to be more independent of publisher control, thus

20. "Matthew Stanley Quay, A Detailed Story of the Career of Pennsylvania's Great Vote-Buying National Boss," *New York World*, 10 Feb. 1890.

21. "The Life of M. S. Quay," *New York Post*, 16 Apr. 1890.

22. *Ibid.*

more apt to be guided by professionalism than the dictates of a Colonel McCormick, the FDR-baiting *Chicago Tribune* owner.²³

The Nixon-Agnew critique, still popular in conservative rhetoric, saw the working press freer to show liberal bias. Whatever the interpretation of the new journalist's role in shaping coverage of public affairs, the direct control by owners was fading. The Hearsts and McCormicks who could command attacks on public officials by slavish reporters were represented by rare throwbacks, a Loeb slanting his newspaper's treatment of New Hampshire primaries. Such publishers were replaced by the likes of the Gannett group's Allen Neuharth, more apt to be criticized for oversimplifying than partisanizing the news.

There is risk in overstating the rise of objectivity. Nonetheless, the mainstream example of the Associated Press provides a ready contrast between its early-twentieth-century reporting—criticized by Upton Sinclair among others—for reflecting publishers' pro-business bias, and its post-World War II reporting, which provoked major criticism of civil rights and Vietnam coverage from the political right.²⁴ Surveys in 1982 and 1992 confirm political and ideological differences between some journalists and the general population, with the latter more conservative, with the latter more conserva-

23. Leo C. Rosten, *The Washington Correspondents* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937); William L. Rivers, "The Correspondents after 25 Years," *Columbia Journalism Review*, pp. 4-10 (Spring 1982).

24. Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (Pasadena: Upton Sinclair, 1920).

tive and Republican, but the research makes no direct connection with news coverage. Weaver and Wilhoit concluded,

As in 1982, we expect further analysis of our 1992 data to suggest that the newsroom itself, with all its constraints and daily hysteria of meeting deadlines, has more to do with the face of news in America than does a statistical profile of those who gather and disseminate it.²⁵

Others urge perspectives broader than party and ideological labels, seeking deeper roots for news values in such terms as ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, small-town patriotism, and individualism.²⁶ The conceptual terms may change, but the traits at the heart of journalistic practice weigh heavily in explaining media treatment of public officials from the White House to the county courthouse.

SELECTIVE NEWS VALUES

Before the first reporter was employed, printer-editors selectively published passively received news—most commonly from other newspapers or government documents. Ben Franklin's predecessor at the *Pennsylvania Gazette* provided a colonial dichotomy of news values when he advised readers,

We have little news of consequence at present, the English prints being generally stuffed with robberies, cheats, fires, murders, bankruptcies, promotion of some, and hanging of others; nor can we

25. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Journalists—Who Are They, Really?" *Media Studies Journal*, p. 78 (Fall 1992).

26. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), pp. 42-52.

expect much better till vessels arrive in the spring, when we hope to inform our readers what has been doing in the court and cabinet, in the Parliament House as well as the Sessions-House.²⁷

Sam Keimer's disdain for sensational news was not shared by Franklin, who would have far more influence on modern journalism; rather than regarding only public affairs news as worthy, he embraced it all.

The problem was present from the start: how can the serious stuff of governmental process compete with the sensational? The ongoing issue, central to media impact on everyone from presidents to civil servants, came to this point in 1994: Defenders of public employees, including the author of *The Case for Bureaucracy*, claim the media emphasize disturbing news about corrupt, uncaring, or wasteful bureaucrats—stories convincing the public that its generally positive personal experience with government is the exception with the rule.²⁸ The press traditionally replies that content analysis proves there is plenty of positive news but that people forget last week's faithful-service item about the retiring clerk and recall last year's boondoggle trip to Hawaii.

EVOLVING TECHNIQUES

Active news gathering replaced the passive news receiving by printers who published government documents verbatim. Those new report-

27. Samuel Keimer, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 24 Dec. 1728.

28. General subject of Charles Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1994).

ers of the 1830s covered the police courts, adding eyewitness observation to the dominant documentary news. It was acceptable to sensationalize accounts of drunks and harlots dragged before magistrates, but the low status of early reporters limited access to public officials. Three years after the first reporter was hired in 1833 came the first formal news interview—Bennett interrogated a madam after her prostitute's murder. The first interview with a president came 32 years later, when a vulnerable Andrew Johnson "submitted" to questions.²⁹ In the days before reporters, printers preferred affidavits and depositions, official sources, to their own observation, and the earliest interviews derived from official interrogation and were limited at the start: low-status reporters could grill low-status sources, as a detective or prosecutor would.³⁰ A *Herald* reporter could question John Brown, jailed at Harper's Ferry, but only Bennett could talk to a president, and then only quite casually, bantering about the weather.³¹

The interview quite slowly became a tool for probing public employees. Not yet a fully institutionalized practice in the early 1870s, it played almost no part in the Tweed exposures or the Credit Mobilier coverage, both heavily documentary, but gained

29. James Gordon Bennett, *New York Herald*, 16 Apr. 1836; Joseph McCullagh, "An Interview with the President," *Cincinnati Commercial*, 16 Feb. 1868.

30. Nils Gunnar Nilsson, "The Origin of the Interview," *Journalism Quarterly*, 48:707-13 (1971).

31. "The African Slave Trade," *New York Herald*, 21 Oct. 1869.

enough acceptance by 1883 that refusals of interviews by officials became front-page news in Pulitzer's *World*.³² Thus began the presumption that a response of "No comment" from a public servant cast suspicion.

The people sense the interrogation roots of the interview more readily than reporters, as evidenced by public perceptions of rudeness to presidents by the likes of Clark Mollenhoff and Dan Rather. The press sees the interview as a flexible technique to pry anything from officials, but the public sees status: an impudent journalist interrogating a lofty leader.

The evolution of reporting techniques bears on the evocative power of the press in arousing public opinion. The famous front page on the Tweed Ring simply listed ledger accounts, but journalists had adopted a full reportorial and literary arsenal by the time muckraking began to scrutinize local, state, and federal government. News-gathering techniques and narrative devices turned investigative exposures from dry facts into gripping stories with a rich array of characters and settings. Then electronic journalism gave greater dominance to the visual dimension.

The focus on dramatic developments, from muckraking to minicams, risks overlooking the more routine day-in, day-out relationships between journalists and public employees. More common than the adversarial watchdog who makes historic headlines is the sweetheart reporter whose friendly relationships

with city hall sources prime the pump of news. Studies consider "beat parochialism," or the way Wisconsin officials use the press to transmit information, or which U.S. senators receive the most news coverage.³³ Among the many facets of media-government interaction that have been examined, a significant group of studies consider the media's agenda-setting role.

SETTING AGENDAS, SUMMING EFFECTS

Research into relationships between media, public officials, and policymaking is useful and informative, but it draws very limited connections that directly treat media as the cause of effects on the ethics of public employees. The agenda-setting studies, for example, give some attention to the way news-gathering routines shape media content.³⁴ Beginning with the Langs in the 1950s, then McCombs and Shaw a decade later, the proposition that news coverage influenced which issues the public considered important, as opposed to what people concluded about those issues, was persuasive even when the research was inconclusive.³⁵ Nar-

33. Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973); Delmer D. Dunn, *Public Officials and the Press* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969); David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "News Media Coverage of U.S. Senators in Four Congresses, 1963-1974," *Journalism Monographs*, no. 67 (1980).

34. Gene Burd, "A Critique of Two Decades of Agenda-Setting Research," in *Agenda Setting*, ed. Maxwell McCombs and David Prosser (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), p. 283.

35. Maxwell McCombs and David Prosser, "New Approaches to Agenda-Setting," in

32. "The Exposure by Dorsey," *New York World*, 10 Aug. 1883.

rowed from influence on the public to influence on policymakers, the impact of news coverage is suggested by common sense where data are lacking: surely, behavior that makes the 10 o'clock news or lands on the front page should catch the attention of public officials. Even the small in-side-page item about a bureaucrat in a neighboring state who was fired for using the office computer to run his fantasy football league lifts that ethical issue higher on the agenda.

It is tempting to turn the discussion of media influence on public sector ethics into a search solely for certainty about media causes of ethical effects. What makes that pursuit resistible is summed up by Denis McQuail, the leading synthesizer of mass media theory: "The entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that there are effects from the media, yet it seems to be the issue on which there is least certainty and least agreement."³⁶ McQuail tries nobly to compress the results of wide-ranging studies of media effects on political institutions and lists helpful generalizations as to trends: personalities/leaders have become more important; attention has been diverted from the local or regional to the national stage; partisanship and ideology are less important than finding pragmatic solutions; general news values influence the attention-gaining activities of political parties; and so on.³⁷

Even in such broad terms, McQuail's overview reminds that re-
Agenda Setting, ed. McCombs and Proffes, p. 261. See also studies by Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang.

36. McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, p. 251.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

searchers pay far more attention to politicians than to civil servants, just as they study presidents more than county commissioners, campaigns more than the process of governing. Such patterns make the singular work of a Robert Caro more remarkable for his prize-winning book on Robert Moses than for his exhaustive critique of President Johnson.³⁸ While it belabors the obvious to expect that more reportage as sophisticated as *The Power Broker* would enhance our understanding of behind-the-scenes ethics, it remains an open question whether the most impressive and substantial journalism is also the most effective.

THE CHANGING CULTURE OF REPORTING

The same newspeople who never discuss mixed-rule deontology are unlikely to analyze agenda setting; nor do they study in a systematic way their role in shaping the ethics of others. Perhaps the last journalist to both thoroughly investigate public figures and elaborately philosophize about their behavior was Lincoln Steffens, whose massive autobiography ranks with those of Ben Franklin and Henry Adams in American letters. As Steffens explored the real power behind governmental "fronts," he portrayed political bosses with sympathy, treating it as fair exchange when they collected loyalty, obedience, and votes in return for patronage, charity, advice, influence,

38. Robert Caro, *The Power Broker* (New York: Knopf, 1974); *idem*, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, vol. 1, *The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1962); *ibid.*, vol. 2, *Means of Ascent* (1960).

and fixes.³⁹ Much was forgiven if the trains ran on time, a Machiavellian perspective more recently voiced by defenders of Chicago's late Mayor Richard Daley.

Steffens's realism included skepticism about ethics: "No general ethical principle known to me held in practice, or could hold," in part because ethics differed by profession.⁴⁰ Noting that a rich merchant was honored for profiteering, while a Tammany boss was denounced, he decided "that the ethics and the morals of politics are higher than those of business."⁴¹ Steffens sympathized with powerful news sources, including his acquaintance from city-beat days, then New York police commissioner, later president, Teddy Roosevelt. Call it cronyism, sweetheart reporting, or proper cultivation of sources, relationships between news gatherers and news sources influence journalistic treatment of ethics. For example, tradition argues that beat reporters shared with popular opinion a respect for distinctions between public and private behavior.

Post-Watergate revelations about presidential indiscretions reminded that, for a period between the partisan personal attacks of our early history and the present, public officials enjoyed a degree of immunity from reporting about drinking or extramarital affairs. History can be deceptive in this regard, given eventual dis-

39. Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 65.

40. Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), p. 408.

41. *Ibid.*

losures about leaders from Jefferson to Kennedy. Nevertheless, it became the consensus view that cozy press relationships with the likes of JFK or Congressman Wilbur Mills protected them from disclosures about boozing and womanizing. Whatever the past practice, whether it ended when powerful Ways and Means chairman Mills jumped into the Tidal Basin with stripper Fanny Fox or when journalists were accused of sheltering President Kennedy, current practice generally treats private conduct as bearing on public performance. And the practice deimmunizes dogcatchers as well as presidents.

However, with public opinion shaky on this trend, responsible journalists still consider such coverage more debatable than news about public duties or hand-in-the-till corruption.⁴² Marketplace demands, represented most extremely by checkout-stand newspapers and tabloid television shows but spilling into mainstream media, may outweigh professionalism and give growing status to the more lurid revelations about anyone of prominence, including public employees.

OPEN DEBATE, OPEN DOORS

Conflicts between professional norms, on the one hand, and sales, ratings, and profits, on the other, endure, but technical and legal aspects of access to information about gov-

42. Two useful views of press ethics are Edmund B. Lambert, *Committed Journalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); Clifford Christians, John Ferre, and P. Mark Fackler, *Good News: Social Ethics and the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).