

The American News Media Unveiled

by

Evan Jurkovich

The failings of a free press hint at a struggling democracy. All over the world, a free and independent press is a prominent characteristic of a democratic society. When reports of Russian President Vladimir Putin placing more of the Russian news media under state control arise, the questions that immediately follow are questions of the strength of democracy. Even more so, a free and independent press is often thought to serve as a catalyst to move countries towards democracy, as seen when America sent radio waves through the Iron Curtain in an attempt to mobilize citizens to undermine their communist rulers. And currently, the American military is trying to disguise its publicity techniques in Iraq as free and independent news in order to push the message of democracy.

Americans, too, feel the necessity of a free and independent press. Since the founders inscribed into the heart of America the First Amendment that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...,” the ability of the press to act freely has rarely been challenged. When it has, the challenge has never been sustained. The American news media is seen, like news media in other democracies, to play an important role by providing a check against abuses of governmental power. However, the news media appear to be struggling to play their watchdog role in American democracy today. The American news media are often considered the most free in the world and perceived as doing their job in democracy sufficiently. However, the American news media often fail to protect American citizens from government abuses by relying too heavily on authoritative sources of power to guide the news and reporting, so that they miss conflicting views or fail to cover them in sufficient depth. This failure of the American press in its watchdog role calls into question the exact role of the press

in America's democracy.

In examining the performance of the American news media, I looked at three books on the role of the American news media in democracy. These books give both an understanding of the theory of how the news media should function in a democracy, as well as an overview of prevalent critiques of the American news media. *Democracy and the News* by Herbert Gans, *Governing with the News* by Timothy Cook, and *When the Press Fails* by Lance Bennett, Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston assess how well the authors currently see the news media performing and the looming dangers to democracy. Because of the wide time span between two of the books' publication dates (*Governing with the News*, published in 1954 and *When the Press Fails* in 2007), these books provide a well-developed picture of the adaptations the news media have made, or have failed to make, over the past half-century. Surprisingly, given the time span, these books present strikingly similar accounts of the state of the news media in America.

Despite the prevalent talk in American academic circles about the need for a performing news media to sustain democracy, the need for a free and independent press must first be established. Bill Keller, the *New York Times* executive editor, in a letter of response to readers in 2006 regarding the *Times* publication of information about the National Security Agency's domestic surveillance program, writes about the ideal workings of the American press in democracy:

It's an unusual and powerful thing, this freedom that our founders gave to the press. Who are the editors of *The New York Times* (or the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post* and other publications that also ran the banking story) to disregard the wishes of the President and his appointees? And yet the people who invented this country saw an aggressive, independent press as a protective measure against the abuse of power in a democracy, and an essential ingredient for self-government. They rejected the idea that it is wise, or patriotic,

to always take the President at his word, or to surrender to the government important decisions about what to publish.¹

This ideal laid out by Keller is known as the watchdog function of the news media. Gans, Cook, and Bennett, like Keller, address this role of the news media as the ideal for democracy and the importance of the First Amendment.

Bennett maintains that a free and independent press is “our most important democratic institution.”² He writes, “A free and independent press is generally considered essential for democracy, both to raise timely questions about debatable government policies and to report challenges to those policies when they fail.”³ Bennett strongly acknowledges the need for a free press in order for democracy to function and links it to “democratic theory.”⁴ This ideal role of the news media in democracy, which echoes that of Keller, is stated by Bennett:

One of the best-known and most often invoked ideals of press performance in the United States is the notion of the press acting as a ‘watchdog’... This ideal envisions the press keeping a skeptical eye trained on the government, guarding the public’s interest and protecting it from misinformation, incompetence, and corruption. According to this ideal, the press holds the government to account on the public’s behalf – a key rationale for the freedom the press has been granted under the Constitution.⁵

These ideals will be referred to as the watchdog role of the news media. However, two distinctions need to be made from the ideals above.

While Gans agrees with the other authors about the watchdog role of the news media in relation to the government, he sees the role more broadly.⁶ Gans writes:

¹Keller, Bill, “Letter from Bill Keller on the Times’s Banking Records Report.” *New York Times*, June 25, 2006

² Lance W. Bennett et al., *When the Press Fails* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), xi.

³ Bennett, x

⁴ Bennett, 129

⁵ Bennett, 184

⁶ Herbert Gans, *Democracy and the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 79.

...journalists may have their greatest effect when they act as watchdogs, reporting illegal, dishonest, immoral, and other behavior violating mainstream norms. The watchdog story is basically a morality tale; not only of immorality discovered but of moral norms and standards preserved.⁷

Gans' view implies that the watchdog role also applies to a larger scope of societal issues such as informing the poor on stores selling high-quality goods at low prices, available work at decent wages, and welfare offices that are most helpful in job searches.⁸ Gans believes these issues still fall within the watchdog role because the press is still looking after the citizens.

Secondly, Gans ties this broader watchdog role to his belief in a citizen's democracy. Gans' idea of the watchdog role does not end with the news media, but rather the citizens. Cook and Bennett do not make this as clear. To Cook and Bennett, it seems that the watchdog role ends with the media reporting instances of government abuse and corruption.⁹ For Gans, the media must do its job of reporting on the government, but that the last link is when citizens act on the reports of the news media and hold the elected leaders accountable. Unless specifically mentioned when talking about Gans, I will use the term 'watchdog' in line with the more specific ideal of Cook and Bennett.

Using Bennett and Cook's notion of the watchdog role falls in line with some of the most visible successes of the watchdog role over the years of the press. Instances like the muckrakers in the early twentieth century exposing the corruption of the urban political machines;¹⁰ the role of the *Washington Post* and their confidential source Deep

⁷ Gans, 79

⁸ Gans, 103, 104

⁹ Timothy E. Cook, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1954). Bennett, *passim*.

¹⁰ Gans, 79

Throat that helped challenge the corrupt Nixon administration,¹¹ and most recently *The Washington Post* exposing some horrible living conditions for injured veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan at the famed Walter Reed hospital represent a democratic press at its finest. The job the press did in these instances not only exposed these issues to the citizen's eye, but also caused changes: it decreased the power of political machines,¹² forced the President of the United States out of office,¹³ and exacted a promise by President Bush to fix Walter Reed. It is this ideal that Gans, Cook, and Bennett wish happened more often.

One must understand the watchdog role and the need for a free and independent press in democracy to understand how not fulfilling this ideal can harm democracy and why, in America, the Founders granted the press First Amendment protection. The news media in America are granted a special privilege by having constitutional protection. This protection differentiates the profession from nearly every other. But with this First Amendment protection comes a responsibility that the Founders must have intended, that the press would act as yet one more check in a system of checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power. The First Amendment presents the news media with a powerful tool to fulfill its democratic role, allowing it to be “the freest press[,]”¹⁴ according to Bennett.

Addressing the books by Gans, Cook, and Bennet in a certain order helps both to emphasize the similarities and differences between the authors, and to highlight, through a progression from author to author, what appears to be the most pressing issue in the ability of the American news media to do their democratic job effectively.

¹¹ Bennett, 5

¹² Cook, 79

¹³ Bennett, 5

¹⁴ Bennett, 1

I begin with Gans' book as it is the most encompassing view of the news media and the problems they face. This is followed by a discussion of Cook who expands on some of Gans' notions. I then discuss how Bennett furthers the notion presented by Gans and Cook on the press acting too close to government and being too reliant on sources of power for reporting. Bennett highlights these issues restraining the press from fulfilling its role in democracy by looking at how the press has recently failed in its watchdog role.

Herbert Gans' *Democracy and the News* presents a glimpse into the current perception of the state of democracy and the news media today, providing a solid foundation for understanding the crucial issues hindering the news media from fulfilling its democratic role. Gans believes first and foremost that democracy is dependent on the citizen's ability to act democratically. The first issues addressed by Gans are not problems with the press but rather hindrances to citizens.¹⁵ This political and economic "disempowerment" leaves some citizens less able to act than others because of economic inequality and the fact that their voices compete against the voices of corporations and lobbies.¹⁶ These issues cannot be fixed solely by journalists, but Gans thinks journalists can work to stand-up for the citizens.¹⁷

The media certainly can aid citizens and democracy through their work, but Gans recognizes that the news media itself must deal with problems affecting its ability to do so. Some problems the news media face greatly obstruct their ability to do the best job they can. Gans discusses a shrinking industry, consolidation, and conglomeration, as well as increasing profit pressures from news corporations leading to job cuts, fewer

¹⁵ Gans, 5

¹⁶ Gans, 5-16

¹⁷ Gans, 20

resources, and fewer reporters covering the same amount, if not more, news.¹⁸ Gans also worries about what else this demand for greater profits means. The worry stems from the fear that more decisions about what the press produces will be based less on what constitutes necessary news for democracy and more on the demands of marketing and advertising executives,¹⁹ especially as audiences and profits continue to shrink.

The problems that Gans sees facing the news media closely relate to those he sees facing citizens. Gans equates the struggles facing the news media in terms of their ability to report democratically as the same type of “disempowerment” that faces citizens.²⁰ Journalists take on this “disempowerment” because their desire to report freely is constrained.²¹ Gans asserts these problems as more threatening to democracy than the profit seeking ones.

In Gans’ book, the issue of the news media relying too heavily on powerful and authoritative sources takes an interestingly prevalent role. Gans calls this reporting style “top down” reporting, due to the emphasis on using sources in offices of power.²² Gans writes:

These [journalists] deliver news that deals mostly with people of power and high rank. Thus, routine political news reports mostly on leading government officials: from the president and a few cabinet secretaries to the influential members of the House and Senate. For the most part then, political news comes to the citizenry from the top down.²³

Using these officials as sources is not necessarily the problem. Journalists respect these sources because of their office and so report what they say, usually reporting it first,

¹⁸ Gans, 22, 24

¹⁹ Gans, 24

²⁰ Gans, 24

²¹ Gans, 28

²² Gans, 46

²³ Gans, 46

giving their view a distinct advantage over any conflicting accounts.²⁴ It is this and the overwhelming reliance on these sources for stories to guide much of the news, and thus the shaping of the news, wherein the problem of this “top down” reporting lies.²⁵ A dangerous trap opens for the news media to fall into because these sources easily fill the requirements of the mass news media’s needs. Reporters use the views of high government officials to help legitimize their news because many of these officials help make news easily accessible.²⁶ Gans explains:

The sources that fill the requirements of mass production best are the previously mentioned high-government officials. They have the power and staffs to create newsworthy events (ranging from decisions and activities to ceremonies) or statements (including reports, speeches, and news conferences, among others) regularly and quickly. Their power and authority make them credible sources as well, or more credible to editors and other news executives than sources with less authority and status. Whether they are more credible to more people in the news audience than anyone else remains unknown.²⁷

This point of authoritative sources legitimizing the news is important because of how it keeps the news media coming back, especially for less well-known subjects and people that the news media cover.²⁸

The news media’s consistent use of high officials as sources raises a pressing question for the news media’s ability to fulfill their watchdog role. With the media so often relying on the same sources of power for information, a journalist-source relationship builds.²⁹ This relationship calls into question the ability of the news media to report objectively.³⁰ If the ability of journalists to garner the necessary amount of news is dependent on these sources of power to provide it, the journalist may be less inclined to

²⁴ Gans, 46

²⁵ Gans, 46

²⁶ Gans, 50

²⁷ Gans, 50-51

²⁸ Gans, 74

²⁹ Gans, 51

³⁰ Gans, 51

pursue news stories “under the official radar” or to examine critically the information provided by these power sources.³¹ The possibility that the news media’s ability to act as watchdogs might be compromised does work well with the democratic ideal.

Gans does not hold the news media entirely responsible, however. Looking back to the initial problems that journalists face, specifically the smaller news staffs and resources due to the shrinking industry, consolidation, and profit pressures, Gans suggests that relying so heavily on power sources might be the only way journalists can fulfill the news quantity demands of their employers:

If journalists had more of an opportunity to pursue the profession’s democratic ideal. They would have to consider how to reorganize the journalistic assembly line so as to reduce the emphasis on top-down news and the publicizing of the powerful...But journalists would first have to make news firms take responsibility for the economic and logistical costs that accompany these changes.³²

In other words, as long as news media corporations continue their drive towards higher profits, it remains difficult for journalists to step away from relying on power sources.

Gans does not address in depth the need for journalists to consistently and frequently seek out other sources, checking the information of high government officials. There is more room for journalists to make adjustments than is given. However, I think that if seeking out alternative sources is not an option, journalists need to listen with a more skeptical ear, and call for clarification by a source not directly linked to the one in power. All of the authors discussed in this paper fail to address fully if there is more that journalists can do, or if journalists are actually doing everything they can to limit reliance on sources in power. This is an issue that needs to be addressed further.

³¹ Gans, 51

³² Gans, 67-68

Gans' book provides a solid groundwork for understanding where the news media stand today in America. Having an understanding of the other issues facing the news media today, and democracy in general, is necessary to fully understanding why the issue of power reporting has become the norm and in what ways it threatens democracy. By seeing that the pressures of business may very well be contributing to the prevalence of reporting using sources in power, and how difficult these issues might be to solve, it can be seen that the issue runs much deeper than simply telling journalists to do their jobs more effectively. Gans looks at the issues facing the news media as a whole, where top-down reporting is just one.

Even from his limited discussion on top-down reporting, Gans provides much insight. A closer look by Cook reveals more abstract possibilities as to why journalists rely so heavily on official sources. Cook addresses power reporting in much the same way as Gans, but gives a different reason – one based in ideas of efficiency – for why it happens.³³ Cook's approach, in his book *Governing and the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*, focuses in depth on how official sources help create and legitimize the news, but also presents an intriguing argument for the creation of a public policy for the news media.

Cook argues that powerful officials are best positioned to “create news events,” “certify issues as newsworthy,” and being in “positions to know[,]” all of which make them dominating sources for the news media.³⁴ Cook ties these points together by stressing the news media's need for authoritative sources:

Not only are officials well organized to help subsidize the news, but their presumed authority allows reporters to craft a defensible account. And at its most

³³ Cook, 97

³⁴ Cook, 5

basic, journalists end up judging the utility of information at least as much by who say it than what it says. An 'authoritative source' is an individual given a leading role in the narrative of that newsbeat. Someone in an official role within the governmental hierarchy tends to endow information with the credibility of his or her position in the hierarchy and/or with his or her involvement in the decision-making process; that same person outside that position saying the same thing would be more likely to be seen as providing speculation or hearsay.³⁵

Cook also points out that this is, at times, a limited benefit to officials. While often a symbiotic relationship exists between reporter and official source in both getting a story and helping advance the source's policy agenda, (a reason why officials seek out the news media) the story is still subjected to the journalist's sense of newsworthiness.³⁶ Cook explains that as the authority of the source grows, it garners more news-making capability because of its profile and ability to "dictate terms of access" to the news media.³⁷ This seems to narrow the ability of authoritative sources using the news media by still presenting the factor of newsworthiness and limiting the sources with the greatest ability to capture journalist's attention to those with not simply any issue to make public, but to those with the most newsworthiness or the most power.

Cook does not recognize many of the issues Gans states that face news media, probably because many of those issues were not as prevalent when Cook wrote his book in 1954. He sees the issue of power reporting as a consequence of dependency of the news media and the government on each other, and does not think that their closeness is accidental. Cook looks to a long history of government assistance of the news media as the biggest cause of authoritative reporting. At the same time that Cook perceives government assistance as a problem, he also sees it leading to a possible solution in

³⁵ Cook, 97

³⁶ Cook, 95

³⁷ Cook, 102

creating a policy strictly towards the media, something for which Cook believes this previous assistance paves the path.

The prospect of the press developing into what it has without governmental influence is minimal at best. In looking at the news media as distinct from government and retaining a certain amount of independence, Cook disagrees. Cook cites the government's assistance to the press, from the beginnings, as tying the two together. "Generous postal regulations favoring the rapid development of newspapers,"³⁸ the United States' Senate helping establish journalism as a profession by creating a right of access to their proceedings for "bona fide" reporters (as distinguished by editors) instead of looking at reporters on a case-by-case basis,³⁹ the rise of government subsidies for the news media as the directly sponsored press disappeared;⁴⁰ and the creation of certain regulations aiding in a "stable, consistent, and high profit margins" to radio and television are some key examples Cook highlights.⁴¹ Cook writes, "The news media's structure, process, and output have been crucially shaped by government action throughout American history; one must question the interpretation of 'freedom of the press' as referring to untrammelled and independent development."⁴² The recognition that the duties the news media perform actually benefit official sources and government raises the question of how free the new media actually is. As long as the government's message is communicated to the public, the government considers the news media's job done.

Similar to Gans, Cook acknowledges that part of the reason for the prevalence of reporting on authoritative sources is for legitimization and efficiency. Cook sees the

³⁸ Cook, 20

³⁹ Cook, 35

⁴⁰ Cook, 39

⁴¹ Cook, 53

⁴² Cook, 14

government's assistance of the news media as providing strict direction to journalists. Essentially, Cook argues that by the government providing assistance to the rise and sustainability of the news media, it effectively created a political institution that works to fulfill needs of the government.⁴³ Authoritative sources need the news media to deliver their messages and help create public policy.⁴⁴ It is not just the news media relying heavily on sources of power to do their jobs, it is a symbiotic relationship. As noted by Cook, "The American news media need government officials to help them accomplish their job, and American politicians are now apparently finding the media more central to getting done what they want."⁴⁵ Cook continues, "Making news, in other words, is not merely a way to get elected or re-elected... instead, it is a way to govern."⁴⁶ Cook sees using the news media to govern as dangerous as it inhibits its watchdog role and forces it into a role for which it is ill-suited.

One of the questions Cook explores is whether or not the media is prepared for this governance responsibility.⁴⁷ Cook worries that the news media will not be well suited for this role,⁴⁸ a slight irony as many contest that the government is not designed well for this role. Cook states the problem he sees saying "the demands of the news do not match the needs of a polity."⁴⁹ If what Cook says is true about the news media merely being a tool that works for politics and government, then the actions of the news media become incredibly important in the functioning of government. With the news media facing increasing profit pressures, the news is being dictated by what will capture the attention

⁴³ Cook, 84

⁴⁴ Cook, 165

⁴⁵ Cook, 141

⁴⁶ Cook, 165

⁴⁷ Cook, 69

⁴⁸ Cook, 169

⁴⁹ Cook, 169

of readers and viewers, as well as positioning themselves for advertisers. Here, it is rare that the decisions the news media must make about what to report are not always identical to what the government needs. If a defense spending bill is on the Senate floor, it might be best for the news media to cover what exactly the bill says. However, reporting on the bill often becomes reporting on the politics of the bill and how different players are attempting to bring in outside issues to garner enough support for passage. These two things do not inform the public in the same manner, and this is why Cook believes this conflict of interest threatens the needs of the polity and thus democracy.

Cook thinks the First Amendment is an incredibly important tool for democracy. He writes, “the mere recognition of the right of citizens to information reinforces an understanding of the First Amendment around what citizens need in a democracy, not just what journalists and news organizations have the privilege to do.”⁵⁰ Cook sees that not only do the news media and government not need to work so closely, but also that this symbiotic relationship is not good for democracy.

The First Amendment ensures freedom of the press, and Cook says that this often scares Congress from taking action on the press. Not action in terms of limiting freedom, for Cook, but action in advancing:

...we must remember that Congress is only prevented from making a law that abridges freedom of the press. The Bill of Rights does not advocate a ‘hands-off’ governmental position vis-à-vis the news media. Indeed, legislation that facilitates or enhances freedom of the press would presumably not only be permitted but warranted by the First Amendment.⁵¹

Cook justifies Congress taking action by looking back to all the assistance and subsidies the government has provided over the years to aspects of the news media and says that by

⁵⁰ Cook, 182

⁵¹ Cook, 182

giving financial aid, the government essentially has already created a public policy towards the news media. Cook advocates that the government revamp public policy already created around the news media into one aiding in advancing, not hindering, the freedom of the press.

While Cook makes many strong points, he, like Gans, leaves out a discussion of the journalist's responsibility to break the mold. Some mention must be made of the journalist's responsibility to pursue sources outside of the authoritative model and live up to their responsibility to defend democracy. Cook, Gans, and Bennett shy away from directly criticizing journalists for a lack of effort.

Bennett takes the most intricate look yet at this issue of power reporting. In analyzing specific examples of recent failures of the press to fulfill its watchdog role, Bennett seeks to address the larger issue of the entwined relationship of the news media and government.

Bennett's concerns regarding the current state of the American news media closely parallel those of Cook. Bennett worries about the closeness of news media to the government and for whom the news media are really working. He explains, "The short story here is that the press has grown too close to the sources of power in this nation, making it largely the communication mechanism of the government, not the people."⁵² Bennett sees the issue of power reporting stemming not from the creation of a policy toward the news media (as Cook suggests) but from the limitations journalists put on themselves, such as pursuing authoritative sources.⁵³ This does not mean the press is presenting false information, just information created by offices of power. With the

⁵² Bennett, 1

⁵³ Bennett, 29

failure of the press to report sufficient information on the events leading up to the Iraq war, Bennett writes, “The truth was not the issues, power was.”⁵⁴

Another point Bennett mentions is that the use of language becomes an interesting point of emphasis in demonstrating the news media’s reliance on sources of power and the extent of the limitations of press independence. Bennett takes the situation at Abu Ghraib prison and analyzes how it was covered by the news media. Through different news media, Bennett looks at the language in reporting.⁵⁵ Bennett explains that even though a few challenges to the Bush administration initially took place in the wake of the release of pictures from Abu Ghraib, these challenges and the use of the word ‘torture’ were quickly replaced by the administration’s characterization of the situation as ‘isolated abuse.’⁵⁶ The news media soon followed suit, and the word ‘torture’ became nearly extinct from news stories about Abu Ghraib.⁵⁷ Due to the reliance on authoritative sources, ‘abuse’ became the word of choice in the news media with the exception of a few scattered opinion pieces.⁵⁸

The choice of the news media to use ‘abuse’ and not ‘torture,’ following the spin set by the administration, delivers a striking blow to the press as independent and free.

Bennett writes:

...it mattered that the press converged on the ‘abuse’ definition and used the term torture so gingerly, because those basic language choices structured public responses to the story. Even if public opinion still might have sided with the administration’s accounts, and reached closure with the punishment of a few low-level offenders, simply holding up the possibility of torture and even torture

⁵⁴ Bennett, 50

⁵⁵ Bennett, 72-106

⁵⁶ Bennett, 75

⁵⁷ Bennett, 75

⁵⁸ Bennett, 72-106

policy to public view would have created a different climate of accountability in government.⁵⁹

Bennett thinks that in using ‘abuse’ and not ‘torture’ the press greatly limited those who would be held accountable. By leaving the situation as a case of ‘isolated abuse’ and not ‘torture,’ many of the leaders in the Bush administration avoided responsibility for the events at Abu Ghraib and cut off public scrutiny of a larger policy on abuse.

With examples from Gans, Cook, and Bennett on the media’s heavy reliance on government sources, it makes it difficult not to see the relationship forming. Bennett justifies this critique of over-reliance on official sources because of the similarities across news outlets.⁶⁰ Bennett says that so many major news outlets reporting the same stories in the same ways proves the news media’s focus on these sources.⁶¹

More so than Gans and Cook, Bennett spends time discussing why journalists seem to miss the other side of stories. Power still dominates, but Bennett points out that one of the failures comes from the opposition viewpoint not coming from a source of power, that it either comes from powerless people or those with power fail effectively to raise the issue.⁶² Bennett looks at this in terms of the opposition party not fulfilling its responsibility and using its members of Congress as sources of power.⁶³ Bennett also criticizes journalists for not asking questions that dig deeper into stories,⁶⁴ and says the news media largely fail when seeking different viewpoints on situations such as those from international perspectives.⁶⁵ Lastly, Bennett acknowledges Gans’ point that the

⁵⁹ Bennett, 106-107

⁶⁰ Bennett, 55

⁶¹ Bennett, 55

⁶² Bennett, 32

⁶³ Bennett, 32

⁶⁴ Bennett, 115

⁶⁵ Bennett, 121

current market conditions simply do not allow the press to act in a desired way.⁶⁶ By making sure to discuss these points in his book, Bennett clearly sees the issue of power reporting as a combination of factors that leaves journalists with some, though not much, responsibility.

However, a contradiction in Bennett's analysis surfaces here. If these few examples of the failure of the news media in their watchdog role represent a systematic problem, then Bennett cannot also say that "The great irony of the U.S. press system is that it generally performs well..."⁶⁷ A systematic problem usually does not "generally perform well."⁶⁸ Bennett needs to clarify this statement because it creates uncertainty in the arguments he presents.

Bennett deems the early reporting on Hurricane Katrina a victory for the news media. They were able to report on the situation free from authoritative sources due to many in the Bush administration being on vacation. Bennett says, "Thus, Katrina marked a turning point, because the usual rules of the media were temporarily suspended. Some reporters on the scene, disturbed by what they saw, went on the offensive against the very sources to whom they usually deferred."⁶⁹ This reporting led to the exposure of many government failures and charging those responsible. While this proved great for the news media, Bennett says that "it is asking too much to rely on catastrophic events to sustain a large measure of press independence from official spin."⁷⁰

The continued presence of investigative reporters and the belief that the foundations the news media need already exist give Bennett hope. Investigative reporters,

⁶⁶ Bennett, 185

⁶⁷ Bennett, 14

⁶⁸ Bennett, 14

⁶⁹ Bennett, 65

⁷⁰ Bennett, 65

Bennett says, still may press the government to operate within the laws and democratic principles.⁷¹ Furthermore, Bennett continues that the news media still maintain the foundations necessary for improvement. Bennett says that “the traditional model of the press as an institutional watchdog; the long-standing notion of the press as a market place of ideas; and the newer model of civic or public journalism”⁷² still gives hope that the news media may decrease their reliance on power sources. The need for the news media to play the watchdog role in America is a common understanding.⁷³ Bennett urges the press to operate “one degree of separation further” from the current balance point in Washington.⁷⁴

The authors above dig deeply into a problem they see as most threatening to the democratic role of the press; power reporting. This problem exists, and one need only look at the newspaper or the evening news to see where the headlines and dominant stories come from and the sources that are used in their reporting. Journalists must use these sources of power at some level, but it is the heavy reliance on high government sources and the fact that journalists often fail to challenge the spin these sources place on the news that compromises the watchdog function of the news media. Thus, at some level, the problem stems both from officials not using their power adequately in getting their voices heard, and journalists failing to dig deeper into stories that unfold.

Even with the clear prevalence of authoritative reporting that these authors discuss, this issue might only exist as a consequence of other problems. While the

⁷¹ Bennett, 62

⁷² Bennett, 180

⁷³ Bennett, 178

⁷⁴ Bennett, 178

symbiotic relationship that the press and government have created causes concern, there is no way to tell what exactly is causing this threat to democracy.

Where to place blame is a difficult task. Some responsibility appears to lay with journalists themselves for not always working within the ideal of a democratic press by questioning the very sources they report on. The extent of the blame placed on journalists as opposed to the business demands they face remains debatable. This is why Gans' book is so critical to examining the relationship between the news media and the government. The easy way out places significant blame on journalists, but the way journalists today must report appears to link directly to other issues facing the news media: the shrinking budgets and staffs, loss of audience, and the dominance of marketing and advertising in the drive for ever-larger profits. It remains important to analyze the increasing inter-dependence of the news media and the government and the consequences this poses for democracy. The primary issues facing the news media must be dealt with before a solution to power reporting fully emerges.

For many, the news media and journalists supposedly work towards a goal of objectivity, acknowledging that not everyone believes the news media accomplish this. Objectivity should not be the worry though. The case of the news media operating too closely to sources of power does not compromise the objectivity of the reporting. Just because the opposing view is not always reported, does not mean journalists are intentionally promoting the spin given to them. It is perceived, and this should be the case for elected officials under the democratic ideal, that what high government officials say is the truth. In effect, the American people should not worry about if what the news media are telling them is true. Rather, the American people also need to play investigative

reporters, looking for where power reporting might have shortsighted a valid opposing view, and seek out this view.

Discussion of power reporting and other problems facing the news media suggests that the news media are failing in their watchdog role, and this failure greatly hampers and threatens American democracy. This might be too extreme, even though the threat remains. Pressing this question of what exactly the news media's role is in American democracy might not have to be what the ideal of a democratic press – reporting every instance of corruption, abuse, and spin from the government – calls for. Bennett, too, thinks that the expectations for the news media from scholars might be too high.⁷⁵ Bennett also agrees that to adequately fulfill its role in democracy, the news media might not have to act completely in accordance with the democratic ideal saying “...we would note that in fact, a semi-independent press is not necessarily an unreasonable model of the role of news in a well-functioning democracy.”⁷⁶

Even with the recent failures of the news media that Bennett addresses, democracy in America is still strong. Even though the press did fail in those instances, eventually opposing views were raised and disclosed to the public, allowing them to make judgments on the actions of the official sources initially reported. The fear comes from the news media missing an abuse so great that by the time it is revealed democracy cannot be saved. The news media should not have this entire burden. An abuse so great should be checked by the other branches of government, not merely the news media. What the news media can do more effectively is report the abuses of power they see,

⁷⁵ Bennett, 189

⁷⁶ Bennett, 189

sharing it with citizens who then have the ability to demonstrate how concerned they are for democracy through elections.

Effectively, it might just be the presence of the First Amendment and the prominent protection the news media continue to receive that is enough for the news media to play their watchdog role. The simple knowledge of official sources knowing that any abuses they take part in could, at some point, be disclosed by the news media appears to be a sufficient threat to keep those officials honest. All it may take is an occasional major disclosure to keep the government accountable for its actions. I see *The Washington Post's* disclosure of the poor conditions at the Walter Reed hospital for injured soldiers as this type of story. It played the “we’re still here role” for a press that mishandled other major stories around the same time. The role of the news media today might not need to live up to the democratic ideal often demanded of them by scholars. The news media, under the protection of the First Amendment, might simply just need to be present.

The position that the three authors above state, that the news media is merely a means of communication for high government officials, might be changing. The internet continues to change the face of communication, especially with the rise of blogs. This relatively new medium may provide decreased incentive for the need of high government officials to create news events to communicate with the public. Even though much of the internet and blogs are yet to be recognized as mainstream news media, the prominence of both continue to rise.

Additionally, the rise of non-mainstream news media sources, like blogs, may aid in the traditional news media’s working toward the democratic idea. If fewer events were

created by power sources to distribute a message because they were sharing those messages in blogs and other places on the internet, resources would be freed for the traditional news media to pursue frequently overlooked opposing views.

If nothing else, the rise of blogs adds to the check on government. While their role in the news media continues to be debated, it is tough to be too critical. Bloggers, and other people contributing to the alternative news media online, appear to have more time on their hands, fewer budget restrictions, and appear less fearful of offending the sources they cover, probably because of their distance from them. Most bloggers do not have editors that they go through. This, however, is where issues of their role in the news media arise. What blogs do provide, though, could help solve some of the underlying issues facing journalists that Gans discusses. Blogs might provide the necessary resources to aid in pushing the news media to become a fiercer watchdog.

Democracy needs a free and independent press. The moment this freedom and independence starts to waver, people question the strength of democracy. America holds freedom and independence especially high, recognizing its value for democracy and granting it Constitutional protection. The three authors above, Gans, Cook, and Bennett, address what they see as the current state of the American news media in democracy.

The authors create a convincing case of the building of an increasingly symbiotic relationship between the news media and high government officials that threatens to compromise the watchdog role of the news media. This relationship challenges the freedom and independence of the American press. It is unclear how damaging this relationship is to the role of the press in America, a press that continues to enjoy First Amendment protection. The news media might not have to completely fulfill the

democratic ideal in order for them to be effective. A threat to democracy inevitably looms if power reporting persists, but hope appears to be on the horizon as the internet and blogs increase in popularity.

Works Cited

Bennett, Lance W. When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina. Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 2007.

Cook, Timothy E. Governing and the News: the News Media as a Political Institution. Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 1954.

Gans, Herbert. Democracy and the News. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.

Keller, Bill. "Letter From Bill Keller on the Time's Banking Records Report." The New York Times 25 June 2006.