

The Media and Political Power: Vietnam, Watergate, and the Myth of "Mediocracy"

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How powerful are the mass media? How much independent impact do they have on political life? These are difficult questions to answer, and over the years I have found myself arguing sometimes on one side of them and sometimes on the other. In the 1970s, when I began my studies in political science, it was the conventional wisdom that media made little difference. I once went through the *American Political Science Review*, the most prestigious scholarly journal in the field, and found that there was a twenty-year period, from 1956 to 1976, when not a single article on the media appeared. Journalists, meanwhile, held to what we can call the mirror theory of the media: they argued that all they did was to hold up a mirror to society, that they reflected reality and changed it not at all. I have spent a lot of my career trying to make the argument that the media do matter, that politics is communication and cannot help but be deeply affected by the central institutions of public communication in our society.

I wasn't the only one to discover the power of the media, of course, and in the 1970s a new conventional wisdom began to develop--probably first in the United States, but it is now common in many countries; this was the idea that we live today in a "mediocracy," that the media are the preeminent powers in social and political life. This conventional wisdom I also find simplistic and dangerous in many ways, and today I would like to focus on this side of the argument, to give some of the reasons why I think we should be wary of exaggerating the power of the media.

Two events played a large role in inspiring this new view of the power of the media, Vietnam and Watergate. These have become the legendary exemplars of the power of the media to change the course of events. But in both cases, I argue, the real role of the media was much less dramatic than is commonly supposed.

In the case of Vietnam, it is now the conventional wisdom that the media turned the American public against the war and thus forced the United States to withdraw. Interestingly, this conventional wisdom cuts across the main lines of political division about the war. Conservatives, who support the war, see the media as the villains of the story. The media, they argue, played an oppositional role, presenting American policy in a negative light. America therefore lost the will to win a war that it could have and should have won. Liberals tend to see the media as the heroes of the war: they told the people the real truth, which the government tried to conceal, and thus pulled America out of the great quagmire. Most journalists, particularly of the Vietnam generation, believe in this, heroic view of the media and Vietnam. An important part of this shared conventional wisdom concerns the role of television. Vietnam was the first "living room war," the first televised war. Television, according to this view, brought the true horror of war night after night into peoples living rooms, and this inevitably turned the public against the war.

I and other who have done research on the media and Vietnam have argued that this conventional wisdom greatly exaggerates and distorts the role of the media in the Vietnam war. Despite some tensions between the government and the media all along--there were always tensions about the Vietnam war at every level of American society--the media were in fact very supportive of American policy in the early years of the war.

They reflected official beliefs in the necessity of American intervention and official optimism about the potency of American forces. And television, far from showing the true "horror of war" was particularly wary of showing any images that might offend the patriotic sentiments of their audience. Television coverage was focused primarily on the bravery and enthusiasm of American soldiers, and like earlier American war reporting, it helped to cement the emotional ties between Americans at home and the soldiers in the field. Eventually, news coverage did become more sober and more critical. This change took place very slowly, however, and when you place it in historical context, it is hard to argue that the media played the leading role in the change of American policy in Vietnam.

They were much more followers than leaders.

Who did they follow? What social forces influenced the media. In part, they followed the balance of opinion in Washington, among the government officials who are the primary sources of news in the United States as everywhere in the world. The Pentagon, for example, had a team of experts, the so-called systems analysts, whose job it was to assess the vast amounts of data that were sent in from Vietnam. They increasingly came to believe that the American strategy wasn't working, that the war could not be won without a vastly increased level of commitment that would be very difficult to justify. More and more officials were persuaded to this point of view, and the news reflected this shift.

In part, the media followed the morale of American soldiers in Vietnam. Those soldiers were the main characters of the "living room war." In the early years, when they were generally confident and enthusiastic, television coverage reflected that enthusiasm. After 1969, particularly, as it became official policy to try to find a way out of the war,

their morale dropped dramatically, and that very much affected the tone of news coverage.

Finally, the media followed public opinion. Public support for the war in Vietnam jumped up in 1965, when large numbers of American troops were first committed to the war. It peaked early in 1966, and then slowly declined, more or less in a straight line through the rest of the war. By late 1967 a majority of the public believed it had been a mistake for the U.S. to enter the Vietnam war. The greatest changes in news coverage came later, after 1968. Why did public opinion change--to some extent *despite* favorable news coverage in the early years of the war. Probably for the simple reason that the war dragged on for a long time, with high human costs, and no clear end in sight. It is worth remembering here that the first American was killed in Vietnam in 1961, and the last in 1975. It is not clear that any change in news reporting--the imposition of censorship, for example, would have changed this.

Now let's turn to Watergate. Watergate is traditionally told as a David vs. Goliath story: two young reporters from the metropolitan desk of The Washington Post brought down an American president. I was teaching in Germany last Spring, and was interested to learn that my German students were very familiar with this great legend of "watchdog journalism."

Certainly, there is an important grain of truth to it. The Watergate scandal might never have happened without the reporting of Woodward and Berstien. We could say that investigative journalism was a necessary condition for the fall of Richard Nixon. But was it a sufficient condition? But was it a sufficient condition? Probably not. Nixon resigned two years after the scandal first came to light. He probably could have saved

himself if he had "cut his losses" earlier on and avoided confrontational actions that escalated the scandal. It also seems likely that if the President's party had commanded a majority in Congress, the scandal would have remained limited.

In the two years following the initial flurry of investigative reporting, the initiative shifted to the Congress and the Courts, which, unlike the media, have the legal power to compel testimony and require the delivery of documents. Everything that followed--the dramatic congressional hearings, the constitutional confrontations that had to be decided by the courts--all of it was a first class media event. But the media were the stage on which the drama was played out; the journalists were increasingly active as interpreters, since the drama was very complex, but they were not the main protagonists.

The media were, certainly, an important part of the story of both Watergate and Vietnam. In the case of Watergate their role is clear and crucial in the beginning of the affair. In the case of Vietnam it is complex--they probably helped build the initial surge of support for American involvement in the war, and then became part of the process by which that support eroded. I don't want to fall into the opposite error of minimizing the role of the media in these events. I am a media critic: I spend a good deal of my time trying to get journalists to take responsibility for the ways in which their choices affect social and political life. But I do want to insist that the media must be seen as part of a wider process, and that if we isolate them from that process, treat them as though they were the great "unmoved mover" of political life, we cannot understand their role. This principle is relevant, of course, not only to politics, specifically, but also to the broader social role of the media--it is crucial, for instance, to thinking about the effects of

television entertainment on social values--another big subject of debate in the United States today.

I emphasize this point because I believe these myths of media power often lead us to avoid dealing with the reality of historical developments or movements of public opinion that may be disturbing to us. One could say that Watergate in some sense resulted from Richard Nixon's exaggerated view of the power of the media. The initial Watergate burglary was committed by the so-called "plumbers" unit, which had been created to plug "leaks" to the press by government officials. Those "leaks" resulted from deep divisions in Nixon's administration about Vietnam policy, and Nixon would have been a lot better off addressing the causes of those divisions than plotting against his perceived enemies in the media. And on the other side of the fence, among journalists, the great myths of independent watchdog journalism often prevent journalists from being honest about the constraints under which they operate and the limitations of their own perspective on reality.

The media are important in modern society, of course. But we don't live in a "mediocracy," and we shouldn't let the myth of mediocracy distract us from a fuller understanding of the way our society works.