

Opinion: Enduring democracy should encourage rather than discourage media criticism

March 15 2023, by Michael J. Socolow

House Unit, 25-13, Votes to Cite C.B.S., Stanton for Contempt

By **CHRISTOPHER LYDON**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 1—The House Commerce Committee voted today to press a contempt of Congress citation against the Columbia Broadcasting System and its president, Dr. Frank Stanton, for refusing to cooperate with a Congressional investigation of the controversial documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon." The vote was 25 to 13.

The committee action opened the way for a House floor fight on the issues of freedom and accountability in broadcast journalism.

If the House cites Dr. Stanton and C.B.S. for contempt, the Justice Department would be authorized to initiate a criminal prosecution as well as a constitutional test that both

sides in the dispute have said they welcome.

Dr. Stanton had refused to supply the Congressional investigators with film that was not used in the documentary, which dealt critically with the extensive publicity efforts of the armed services.

The House committee's vote to press for a contempt citation was backed by 14 Democrats and 11 Republicans.

Some observers saw room for a compromise that would avoid a vote of the full House. Representative Harley O. Staggers, the West Virginia Democrat who had subpoenaed the C.B.S. film that went into the documentary, had made the issue a test of his leadership

Continued on Page 67, Column 2

A front page story in The New York Times on July 2, 1971, with details about the conflict in Congress over the CBS documentary 'The Selling of the Pentagon.' Credit: New York Times archive

Everyone seems to hate what they call "the media."

Attacking journalism—even accurate and verified reporting—provides [a quick lift for politicians](#).

It's not just Donald Trump. Trump's rival for the 2024 Republican nomination, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, [recently criticized](#) "the Lefty [media](#)" for telling "lies" and broadcasting "a hoax" about his policies.

Criticizing the media emerged as an effective bipartisan political tactic in the 1960s. GOP Sen. Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign got the ball rolling by needling the so-called "[Eastern liberal press](#)."

Democratic President Lyndon Johnson's lies about the Vietnam War clashed with accurate reporting, and a "credibility gap" arose—the growing public skepticism about the administration's truthfulness—to the obvious irritation of the president. Johnson complained CBS News and NBC News were so biased he thought their reporting seemed "[controlled by the Vietcong](#)."

Democrats like Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley, who complained bitterly about [news coverage](#) of the 1968 Democratic convention—labeling it "[propaganda](#)"—and Federal Communications [Commissioner Nicholas Johnson](#), who published "[How to Talk Back to Your Television Set](#)" in 1970, argued that "Eastern," "commercial" and "corporate" media interests warped or "censored" the news.

In 1969, Republican President Richard Nixon's vice president, Spiro Agnew, launched a public campaign against news corporations that instantly made him a conservative celebrity.

Agnew warned that increased concentration in news media ownership ensured control over [public opinion](#) by a "tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, [elected by no one](#)." Similar criticism emerged from leftists, including [MIT linguist Noam Chomsky](#).

The bipartisan popularity of news media criticism continued to grow as politicians found attacking the messengers the fastest way to avoid engaging in discussion of unpleasant realities. Turning the spotlight back on the media also helped political figures portray themselves as victims, while focusing partisan anger at specific villains.

Now, only 26% of Americans have a favorable opinion of the news media, according [to a poll published in February 2023](#) by Gallup and the Knight Foundation. Americans across the political spectrum share a growing disdain for journalism—no matter how accurate, verified, professional or ethical.

Yet open debate over journalism ethics signals healthy governance. Such argumentation might amplify polarization, but it also facilitates the exchange of diverse opinions and encourages critical analyses of reality.

Journalistic failures damaged trust

Americans grew to distrust even the best news reporting because their political leadership encouraged it. But multiple failures exposed over the past several decades also further eroded journalistic credibility.

Long before [bloggers ended Dan Rather's CBS News career in 2005](#), congressional investigations, civil lawsuits and scandals revealing unethical and unprofessional behavior within even the most respected journalism outlets doomed the profession's public reputation.

In 1971, CBS News aired "[The Selling of the Pentagon](#)," an investigation

that revealed the government spent tax dollars to produce pro-military domestic propaganda during the Vietnam War.

The program [infuriated U.S. Rep. Harley Staggers](#), who accused CBS of using "the nation's airwaves ... to deliberately deceive the public."

Staggers launched an investigation and subpoenaed CBS News' unpublished, confidential materials. CBS News President Frank Stanton [defied the subpoena](#) and was eventually vindicated by a vote of Congress. But Staggers, a West Virginia Democrat, publicly portrayed [CBS News as biased](#) by insinuating the network had much to hide. [Many Americans agreed with him](#).

"The Selling of the Pentagon" was the first of many investigations and lawsuits that damaged the credibility of journalism by exposing—or threatening to expose—the messy process of assembling news. As with the recent [embarrassing revelations about Fox News](#) exposed by the Dominion lawsuit, whenever the public gets access to the backstage behavior, private opinions and hypocritical actions of professional journalists, reputations will suffer.

But even the remarkable Fox News revelations shouldn't be considered unique.

Repeated lying

Numerous respected news organizations have been caught lying to their audiences. Though such episodes are rare, they can be enormously damaging.

In 1993, General Motors [sued NBC News](#), accusing the network of deceiving the public by secretly attaching explosives to General Motors trucks, and then blowing them up to exaggerate a danger.

NBC News admitted it, settled the lawsuit and news division President Michael Gartner resigned. The case, [concluded The Washington Post's media critic](#), "will surely be remembered as one of the most embarrassing episodes in modern television history."

Additional examples abound. Intentional deception—knowingly lying by consciously publishing or broadcasting fiction as fact—[occurs often enough in professional journalism](#) to cyclically embarrass the industry.

In cases such as [Janet Cooke and The Washington Post](#), [Stephen Glass and the New Republic](#), [Jayson Blair](#) and [Michael Finkel](#) of The New York Times, and [Ruth Shalit Barrett and The Atlantic](#), the publication of actual fabrications was exposed.

These episodes of reportorial fraudulence were not simply errors caused by sloppy fact-checking or journalists being deceived by lying sources. In each case, journalists lied to improve their careers while trying to help their employers attract larger audiences with sensational stories.

This self-inflicted damage to journalism is every bit equal to the attacks launched by politicians.

Such malfeasance undermines confidence in the news media's ability to fulfill its constitutionally protected responsibilities. If few Americans are willing to believe even the most verified and factual reporting, then the ideal of debate grounded in shared facts may become anachronistic. It may already be.

Media criticism as democratic participation

The pervasive amount of [news](#) media criticism in the U.S. has intensified the erosion of trust in American journalism.

But such discussion can be seen as a sign of democratic health.

"Everyone in a democracy is [a certified media critic](#), which is as it should be," media sociologist Michael Schudson once wrote. Imagine how intimidated citizens would respond to pollsters in Russia, China or North Korea if asked whether they trusted their media. To question official media "truth" in these nations is to risk incarceration or worse.

Just look at Russia. As Putin's regime censored independent media and pumped out propaganda, [the nation's least skeptical citizens](#) became the war's foremost supporters.

As a [media scholar and former journalist](#), I believe more reporting on the media, and criticism of journalism, is always better than less.

Even that Gallup-Knight Foundation report chronicling lost trust in the media [concluded that](#) "distrust of information or [media] institutions is not necessarily bad," and that "some skepticism may be beneficial in today's media environment."

People choose the media they trust and criticize the media they consider less credible. Intentional deception scandals have been exposed at outlets as different as The New York Times, Fox News and NBC News. Just as the effort to demean the media has long been bipartisan, revelations of malfeasance have historically plagued media across the political spectrum. Nobody can yet know the long-term effect the [Dominion lawsuit](#) will have on the credibility of Fox News specifically, but media scholars know the scandal will justifiably further erode the public's trust in the media.

An enduring democracy will encourage rather than discourage media criticism. Attacks by politicians and exposure of unethical acts clearly lower public trust in journalism. But measured skepticism can be healthy

and media criticism comprises an essential component of media literacy—and a vibrant democracy.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Enduring democracy should encourage rather than discourage media criticism (2023, March 15) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-opinion-democracy-discourage-media-criticism.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.