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THE WATCHDOG ROLE OF THE PRESS

W. Lance Bennett and William Serrin

Editor's Note

Power corrupts. Keeping a democracy healthy, therefore, requires institutions that monitor the actions of political elites. The news media fill that watchdog role in the United States. Regrettably, as W. Lance Bennett and William Serrin point out, their performance record has been quite spotty. They have scored many important successes, exposing corruption and mismanagement, and corrective action has often followed. But failures have been more plentiful because investigative journalism is tedious, time consuming, and very costly. The authors suggest remedies for this troubling situation, but the obstacles to effective watchdog journalism currently are so enormous that the chances for success are slim.

When this essay was written, Bennett was the Ruddick C. Lawrence Professor of Communication and a professor of political science at the University of Washington. He had already authored numerous important books covering political communication issues. He is also the founder and director of the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement at the University of Washington, which sponsors communication research and policy initiatives that enhance the quality of citizens' political engagements.

Serrin was an associate professor of journalism and mass communication at New York University. He is also an author and a prize-winning journalist who has worked for the *New York Times,* the *Detroit Free Press,* and *Newsweek.* His essays have been published in the *Atlantic Monthly, American Heritage, The Nation, Columbia Journalism Review,* and the *Village Voice.*

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To begin with, *watchdog journalism* is defined here as: (1) independent scrutiny by the press of the activities of government, business, and other public institutions, with an aim toward (2) documenting, questioning, and investigating those activities, in order to (3) provide publics and officials with timely information on issues of public concern. Each of these elements—documenting, questioning, and investigating—can be found almost every day in reporting about some matters of importance for the working of American democracy. Yet there are also stunning gaps that, in retrospect, suggest the hesitancy or inability of news organizations to act systematically or routinely as watchdogs in covering other matters of high importance. In this chapter, we explore some of the factors contributing to the fragility of the watchdog role. . . .

. . . [T]he watchdog role of journalism may involve simply documenting the activities of government, business, and other public institutions in ways that expose little-publicized or hidden activities to public scrutiny. Much documentation of this sort does occur, yet journalists also often miss early-warning signs of important activities that later blow up as scandals that prove costly to the public. The energy crises and corporate accounting and fraud scandals of the early millennium come to mind here.

Another defining element of watchdog journalism involves clarifying the significance of documented activities by asking probing questions of public officials and authorities. Again, there are many cases of effective press interrogation of officials, as when high officers of the Catholic Church were challenged in the early 2000s about their knowledge of widespread child abuse at the hands of priests. Yet there are also puzzling lapses of critical questions, as when journalists initially reported administration claims about Iraqi links to the September 11 terror attacks and the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq without giving similar space to the volume of challenging evidence to the contrary. When serious press challenges finally emerged, it was in response to questions raised by congressional leaders and public commissions. But those questions about the war came so late that the administration case for war was by then more a matter for historians to judge.

Also included in the above definition of watchdog journalism are the practices of enterprise or investigative reporting aimed at finding hidden evidence of social ills, official deception, and institutional corruption. Some instances of investigative reporting may point toward constructive reforms, or alert and mobilize publics to take action on pressing problems such as environmental hazards or health care abuses.[1] Other investigative reports may be aimed less at mobilizing broad publics than at finding failures that threaten the integrity of institutions themselves, such as the investigations of David Protess and Robert Warden that reversed the wrongful convictions of four black men accused in the brutal murder of a white couple in Illinois.[2]

Whether it involves merely documenting the behaviors of authorities and asking them challenging questions, or digging up evidence of corruption or deception, the idea of independent journalistic scrutiny of social, economic, and governmental institutions is commonly regarded as fundamental for keeping authorities in line with the values and norms that charter the institutions they manage. The watchdog function may also alert publics to issues that can affect their opinions and their modes of engagement in public life. Despite its prominence among the ideals that have come to define the press and its various professional responsibilities, the watchdog role has been rather weakly institutionalized in the daily routines and responsibilities of the press. In some instances, press performance provides exemplary service to the public interest, such as the disclosure of the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, coverage of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, and the more recent widespread reporting on nursing home abuse and neglect of elderly patients. At the same time, there are examples of equally spectacular failures to challenge the claims of authorities, such as the gross imbalance between the high volume of reports and editorials publicizing Bush administration claims about links between the Iraq invasion and the war on terror, and the low volume of timely reports on available evidence that contradicted those claims.

. . . [*New York Times* ombudsman Daniel] Okrent's analysis suggests why watchdog journalism is often lost among the other considerations that drive news decisions: the "hunger for scoops" that lead news organizations to tolerate stories based on anonymous and often partisan sources; the "front-page syndrome" that leads reporters and editors to favor more dramatic and less qualified accounts; "hit-and-run journalism" that keeps news organizations from revisiting earlier headlines in light of later contradictory information; "coddling sources" to keep a story going at the price of granting them anonymity that disguises suspect motives and information; and "end-run editing" that leads editors to favor star reporter scoops, while discounting challenges by other reporters in the newsroom who may have different information from other sources.[3] . . .

Why Watchdog Journalism Matters

Journalism is the heart of democracy, the humorist Garrison Keillor once said. What he meant was that hard-edged reporting aimed at making the world a better place is central to democracy. "More crime, immorality and rascality is prevented by the fear of exposure in the newspapers than by all the laws, moral and statute, ever devised," said the publisher Joseph Pulitzer in 1878.[4] Without journalists acting as watchdogs, American democracy—at least in anything close to the form we know it today—would not exist. . . .

Communication scholars generally agree that democracy requires a public sphere where people can communicate about society and government at least somewhat independently of the authorities that convene and govern social institutions. In contemporary societies, the press and, more generally, the media make important contributions to the quality of this public sphere. Yet the mix of professional journalism norms, public tastes, political spin, and business imperatives that construct what we call news makes it difficult to imagine how to keep the public responsibilities of the press in step with a civic life that is also changing in terms of how citizens define their public roles and relations to government. In other words, it is not clear just how the press should facilitate the production of this public sphere. It is not even obvious how much scrutiny of public officials and their activities is the right amount. Too much press intrusion may become annoying and burdensome both to authorities and publics.[5] Too little critical reporting may produce poor-quality public policy debates and weaken the everyday accountability relations between authorities and publics. . . .

Uneven Practice of the Watchdog Role

. . . [I]t is easier to say that journalists should be watchdogs than to find agreement on precisely what this entails or how it might be achieved consistently. Perhaps this is why the mythic status of the watchdog press looms larger than the evidence for its universally accepted practice. . . .

The veteran journalist Murray Marder argues that the problematic standing of watchdog journalism is revealed most clearly in how reporters praise the ideal without having a firm sense of how to put it into practice. In an address on the subject at Harvard's Nieman Center, Marder noted that, all too often, the press appear not as watchdogs, but as a snarling, barking pack, substituting the spectacle or the posture of adversarialism for the sort of journalism that might better serve the public interest. Marder's prescription for restoring the watchdog role involves a simple recommendation to his colleagues:

> Disassociate ourselves wherever we can from crude, discourteous behavior whether by packs of elbowing news people lying in wait for Monica Lewinsky, or by shouting, snarling participants in a television encounter posing as news commentators. . . . That will not come easy. For in my view, watchdog journalism is by no means just occasional selective, hard-hitting investigative reporting. It starts with a state of mind, accepting responsibility as a surrogate for the public, asking penetrating questions at every level, from the town council to the state house to the White House, in corporate offices, in union halls and in professional offices and all points in between.[6]

What Marder implies here is that the press sometimes gets it right and sometimes does not, but that there is great inconsistency in being able to predict when either result might happen. What accounts for this inconsistency and its accompanying lack of institutional grounding? The most obvious and frequently discussed factor is that most news organizations in the United States are driven by business formulas that exert various limits on defining and elevating democratic press functions above other considerations. In the case of public service organizations, news decisions are made in the context of politically sensitive governmental, foundation, or corporate funding constraints. What seems puzzling is that, for all the criticism of the press, there is surprisingly little formal discussion among journalists of just what the watchdog role might look like in practical terms, and how it might be promoted more effectively. . . .

With little elaboration of a clear set of democratic reporting responsibilities, the news that we witness today has evolved as a strange hybrid of deference to authorities, and ritualistic displays of antagonism and feeding frenzy against those same authorities, interspersed with occasional displays of watchdog reporting. . . . [I]t is clear that reporters and news organizations are most drawn to stories that offer the greatest dramatic potential and hold the greatest promise of continuing plot development. Some of those stories end up being manufactured out of little more than spin, staging, and the efforts of the press pack to inject life into the political routine. . . .

When the Watchdog Barks

. . . [T]here are also many times when journalists raise challenges or discover hidden information that changes the thinking of publics or policy makers about important issues. Thomas Patterson has suggested that in its contemporary form, watchdog journalism may work best when in partnership with other institutions that are serving similar watchdog roles—parties and public-interest advocacy groups come to mind. Watchdog journalism may need these institutional partners in order to prosper—partners such as whistleblowers . . . or political parties that are more concerned about principled opposition than strategic calculations. . . . More probing voices are likely to be introduced into the news for more extended periods when journalists find sources with prominent institutional standing who are already raising critical questions.[7] Hence, the same concerns that existed before the invasion of Iraq (about lack of Bush administration evidence for linking Iraq to the war on terror) were only given sustained voice after the commission investigating September 11 invited witnesses to raise them. By the same explanation, when journalists are the lone voices raising concerns—even documentable concerns—it is far more difficult for them to perform the watchdog function.

Ironically, the independent-press watchdog function may work least well when it is most needed.

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Status of the Watchdog Role

What is the institutional status of investigative journalism today? What is the regard for this tradition among journalists and the public? What are the prospects for better integrating investigative and, more generally, watchdog reporting within the constraining matrix of corporate business imperatives, professional standards of the journalism profession, and the needs of citizens? At the opening of the twenty-first century, there was still a good deal of watchdog reporting going on, but it was scattered unevenly across the media. In the case of investigative reporting—defined as enterprise reporting on important public issues involving the discovery and documentation of previously hidden information—far more of it could be said to emerge from the print press than from television news organizations. A five-year study of TV news at the turn of the millennium found investigative reporting on television, particularly at the local level, in continuing decline. By self-report of news directors in 2002, less than 1 percent of all news was station-initiated investigation. By the research team's judgment, the ratio was more on the order of 1 out of 150 stories, down from 1 in 60 in 1998. Most of the reports that qualified as station-initiated and as containing information not already on the public record dealt with government malfeasance, consumer fraud, and health care scandals.[8]

Whether the subject is investigative reporting, or the companion activities of documenting the claims and activities of institutional authorities and raising probing questions about them, most observers agree that the present period is not a time of rich watchdog reporting in any media. Perhaps this reflects the absence of large numbers of citizens mobilized in reform movements eager for a sense of common inclusion and good information about their causes. Perhaps it reflects a time in which political culture—or at least the parties in government and the corporate culture that supports them—is bent away from government regulation and progressive public legislation. History suggests that these conditions may change and kindle more investigative activity. However, as the run of corporate scandals, environmental deterioration, military adventures, and rising levels of inequality in the 1990s and 2000s indicate, there is no lack of material to investigate. Yet reporting on the epidemic of illegal corporate accounting, disclosure, and finance did not hit the front pages until government investigations and whistleblower reports had already begun. And the timidity with which mainstream

journalism handled early evidence of Bush administration distortions in the campaign to go to war against Iraq suggests that news organizations are not eager to reframe heavily spun stories in the absence of voiced outrage from credible political-opposition voices.[9] In light of these patterns, two concerns seem to highlight the watchdog role of the press in the present era:

1. *The watchdog role has become overly stylized or ritualized.* The press has adopted a tone of cynicism and negativity often without offering original documentary material or constructive solutions to accompany that tone.[10] Television news magazines have appropriated a pseudo-investigative style, emphasizing consumer rip-offs and celebrity confessionals of little broad social consequence.
2. *When potentially significant investigative reports do surface, they are often not pursued or even echoed by other organizations cautiously following the collective lead.* . . . Even though such reports were surely read by many journalists, there was little concerted effort to follow them up or to shift general press coverage in a timely fashion—that is, before situations had grown so serious that officials inside government finally began formal investigations.[11]

Perhaps the good news is that neither publics nor journalists seem particularly happy with this state of affairs. Not surprisingly, the public has been less happy with the negative tone of journalism than reporters, who understandably perceive themselves as doing the best they can, often triumphing under challenging organizational conditions. Andrew Kohut summarized polling on the watchdog role by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in these terms:

> The biggest gap between the people and the press is over the way news media play their watchdog role. Almost all journalists are sure that media scrutiny of politicians is worth the effort because it prevents wrongdoing. But the percentage of Americans thinking that press criticism impedes political leaders from doing their jobs has increased . . . while the number saying they value the press's watchdog role has fallen. . . . Many Americans see an ill-mannered watchdog that barks too often—one that is driven by its own interests rather than by a desire to protect the public interest.[12] . . .

The good news here is that both journalists and publics seem to recognize that the watchdog role has somehow gone off course, and that it may be time to think more seriously about how to bring it back in line with contemporary public values and concerns. Encouraging poll trends suggest strong public support for the watchdog ideal, if not for the way if is often bent in practice.

For example, a review of five national polls from the 1980s through the 1990s showed increases in public support for investigative reporting to a peak of 84 percent in 1997. However, there was also considerable objection to the practices often employed in what passes for investigative journalism today, and the emphasis on pseudo investigation and sensationalism.[13] All of this leads to the question of why watchdog journalism seems to have lost its bearing, and what can be done about it.

The Sleeping Watchdog?

Newsrooms are often organized in an old-fashioned way that dates to the founding of modern journalism in the 1840s. Because of this, many areas that should be important receive little or no watchdog coverage—advertising, the military (except for coverage of war), farming and food policy, taxes, and government regulatory and other so-called alphabet agencies. At the same time, many beats in journalism that should be important essentially are backwaters, among them religion, environment, education, labor, urban affairs, state governments, and road and sewer construction. It is sometimes said that mankind's greatest needs are food, clothing, and shelter: none of these areas are covered well. Beats that came out of the 1960s and 1970s, such as consumer beats, urban affairs beats, and coverage of the environment, had virtually disappeared by 2000.

Generally, rocking boats is not a way to get ahead in newsrooms. Publishers and editors often distrust reporters who they think have a point of view. It is OK to say you want to be a reporter covering sports, politics, or business, say, but if you want to cover the poor or labor or the environment, you are often regarded as a person with an agenda. You often won't be promoted, and you'll be watched with great suspicion.

Journalists have sold their souls for access to public officials. . . . This is not an attitude that makes for good journalism. . . . This is a particular problem in Washington, D.C. Reporters there want to cover the White House or Congress or the Pentagon, but most people do not want to cover the regulatory agencies, where things that affect people happen. Journalistic careers seldom flourish by covering the latter; star journalists are drawn to the glitter of the Georgetown social circuit and the White House. As a result, in the nation's capital, the press is often not the "fourth estate," it is part of government. And the same tendencies apply in the state house, at city hall, and at corporate headquarters.

It is also important to ask the question of who goes into journalism today. As Russell Baker has pointed out, as the news business has become more professionalized, many reporters and editors now come from upper-class and middle-class backgrounds. They are well bred, they have impressive educations, but the average American reporter has little or no knowledge of

how people beyond his or her class think or act. "They belong to the culture for which the American political system works exceedingly well," Baker said, adding, "This is not a background likely to produce angry reporters and aggressive editors."[14] . . .

With conglomeration, and Wall Street's definition of what constitutes proper profits, media corporations are often run as if they were nothing more than any other kind of business. Newsrooms are deliberately kept understaffed to save money. Reporters are pressured to do more stories in less time—again, to save money. Expense budgets for travel are cut. . . .

In all this, it must be remembered that watchdog reporting is particularly challenging. In the case of investigative reporting, the journalist is looking for things that people want to keep hidden. It is time-consuming and expensive. Simply documenting the background details of public activities and official claims takes time and work. Rarely can a reporter drop all other responsibilities to concentrate on one investigative story. Moreover, asking challenging questions of sources that must be covered on a regular basis may strain journalists' future relations with those sources. Reporters, beware the watchdog role: You will make enemies doing it.

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Conclusion

In this essay several factors have been identified that affect when the watchdog role of the press is likely to work well, and when it is not. Not surprisingly, watchdog journalism functions best when reporters understand it and news organizations and their audience support it. The business climate of many news organizations today is not fully supportive; nor is the curriculum in most journalism schools; nor are publics who, perhaps rightly, see too much negativity and insider posturing in place of reporters simply asking hard questions about important subjects.

In addition, it may be time to rethink the curious professional norms of the objective or politically neutral press that remains a legacy of the Progressive Era. Such norms often seem to pit the journalistic commitment to balance and objectivity against the values of advocacy or probity. What the public receives as a result are confusing debates that seem impossible to resolve or make much sense of. What, for example, is the point of the construction of a two-sided debate about global warming when one side consists overwhelmingly of scientists who have little scholarly doubt or disagreement, and the other side consists primarily of politicians and business interests who have quite another agenda fueling their skepticism? What was the point of "balancing" the findings of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission), which stated that there was no

evidence of Iraqi involvement, with continued face-value reporting of unsupported claims to the contrary from the president and vice president? How can journalists moderate such debates when their own current practices compel them to report them in ways that may create more confusion than clarity? The flip side of this normative dilemma is the problem of what watchdogs should do when one side of an issue is dominated by spin from a media-savvy source with high social standing, and opponents have failed for whatever reasons to mount an equally effective press relations campaign. All too often, the watchdog retreats, and what is reported as the public record goes unchallenged in the news.

. . . When today's press watchdog serves the public interest, it is generally in a partnership with other public watchdogs such as public interest or consumer advocacy organizations, courts, interest groups, and government itself.

During an era of a conservative turn away from public life and institutions, this somewhat limited watchdog function may be the best that can be hoped for from an embattled press. Yet there is also a prescription here for strengthening the watchdog role in these times:

1. Find new ways to define the democratic responsibilities of the press through journalism education, foundation support, and public discussion.
2. Strike a better balance between currently embattled professional norms and some broad and well-crafted notion of the public interest.
3. Expand beats and sources to give more voice to those who are currently left out of democratic debate, and who might subscribe to papers and watch the news if they saw themselves represented more frequently and more fairly there.
4. Stimulate debate in the profession about steering a clearer course between fear and favor in relations with the powerful sources who continue to dominate the news.
5. Explore new institutional means—including government support and regulation, public commissions, and new business models for news—to create better accountability relations between journalists and other democratic stakeholders.

Mythology aside, perhaps it is the lack of clear democratic standing for the press as expressed in daily reporting practices that best explains why the watchdog sometimes barks when it should sleep, sometimes sleeps when it should bark, and too often barks at nothing.

Notes

1. See David L. Protess et al., *The Journalism of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America* (New York: Guilford, 1992).

2. David Protess and Robert Warden, *A Promise of Justice: The 14 Year Fight to Save Four Innocent Men* (New York: Hyperion, 1998).
3. *New York Times,* May 30, 2004.
4. As cited in Judith Serrin and William Serrin, eds., *Muckraking! The Journalism that Changed America* (New York: New Press, 2002).
5. See John Zaller, "A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen," *Political Communication* 20, no. 2 (2003): 109–30.
6. Murray Marder, "This Is Watchdog Journalism" (2 parts), Nieman Reports 53, no. 4 (winter 1999), and 54, no. 1 (spring 2000), http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/99-4_00-1NR/Marder_Thisls.html.
7. W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40 (spring 1990): 103–27.
8. Marion Just, Rosalind Levine, and Kathleen Regan, "Investigative Reporting Despite the Odds: Watchdog Reporting Continues to Decline," Local TV News Project, http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/localTV/2002/investigative.asp.
9. W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations" and "The Perfect Storm? The American Media and Iraq," *OpenDemocracy,* August 28, 2003, http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-8-92-1457.jsp.
10. Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Thomas Patterson, "Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News and Weakening Democracy—And What News Outlets Can Do about It" (working paper, Joan Shorenstein Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 2000).
11. See Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
12. Andrew Kohut, "Public Support for the Watchdog Role Is Fading," *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 2001): 46.
13. Lars Willnat and David H. Weaver, "Public Opinion on Investigative Reporting in the 1990s: Has Anything Changed since the 1980s?" *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75 (autumn 1998): 449–63.
14. *New York Review of Books,* December 18, 2003, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/16863.