Public distrust of elected officials and political candidates is growing. Media critics say negative press coverage is contributing to this trend and is weakening American democracy. Should journalists change the direction of their reporting?

Many Americans believe politicians are dishonest, hypocritical, and power-hungry. Americans did not always think this way. When John F. Kennedy was president, for example, 75 percent of Americans indicated that they trusted the government to do the right thing. Today that figure has dropped to 25 percent. A recent opinion poll reported that nearly 80 percent of the public gave elected officials in Washington a low rating on honesty and ethics.

What has produced this widespread distrust among the American people? Certainly, the Vietnam War and Watergate cover-up ended a long period of public confidence in political leadership. Also, since Watergate, the nation’s press has become much more aggressive and negative in its political reporting.

Some media critics, including journalists, argue that the press undermines our democratic system by spending too much time focusing on scandals and portraying public life as little more than a game among scheming politicians. Defenders of the press, however, say that the news media are simply fulfilling their role as watchdogs on the government.

The Influence of Watergate

The resignation of President Richard M. Nixon during the Watergate scandal resulted partly from the investigative work of two Washington Post reporters, Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Helping to bring down a president made them media stars. They made an impression on a whole generation of journalists.

After Watergate, journalists, especially those covering national news, became more skeptical and wary of politicians manipulating them. The press actively tried to expose government abuses. One consequence of this has been more negative political reporting. While demanding an open and more honest government, reporters sought out the mistakes, inconsistencies, and ethical faults of political leaders.

Historians point out that the press has always been aggressive. Virtually every president, starting with George Washington, has become a target for the press. The tabloid press, which thrives on sensational news reporting, was invented over 100 years ago.

Is Press Coverage Worse Today?

But the aggressiveness of the press is not what concerns today’s media critics. They worry about the decline in thoughtful reporting on serious public issues. Frequently, they say, newspaper and
TV news editors cut back on this type of news coverage because it is too boring or lacks the drama of conflict.

Indeed, the media have grown much more competitive in the last 30 years. With today's technology, news can be broadcast around the world as it happens. People expect--and receive--instantaneous reports on assassinations, floods, airplane crashes, even wars. They can receive the information in many new ways--from cable television, satellite dishes, the Internet. Talk radio and tabloid TV news shows, such as "A Current Affair," have grown in popularity. At the same time, fewer people are reading newspapers and watching network TV news. The drop is especially pronounced among people under 30. Trying to keep up with the competition, many newspapers and networks have made their news features shorter and jazzed them up with graphics, pictures, and diagrams. In short, they are trying to make the news more entertaining. Does this mean serious journalism giving way to sensationalism?

One study of press coverage between 1972 and 1992 revealed that news stories about domestic and foreign questions being considered by Congress dropped significantly. On the other hand, stories about political conflict and ethical misbehavior of elected leaders increased. Senator Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyo.), a strong critic of the media, recently made this remark about reporters covering Congress:

They don't want to know whether anything was resolved for the betterment of the United States. They want to know who got hammered, who tricked whom. . . . They're not interested in clarity. They're interested in confusion, and controversy and conflict.

Media critics believe the same is true of reporters from the major newspapers and TV networks who cover the White House. In recent years, those on the White House beat have been mostly reporters who covered the president during his election campaign.

For the most part, these reporters know how to cover campaign politics--who did what to whom, who's up, who's down. But, say critics, these reporters are not particularly expert in the domestic and foreign policy issues that dominate presidential decision-making. Thus, according to the critics, politics--not policy--tends to color much of their White House reporting. In fact, critics believe serious policy analysis is giving way to covering politics as a horse race.

Defenders of the media believe the critics are overgeneralizing. They admit that some newspapers and networks may cover politics as a horse race. But they cite many examples of in-depth policy coverage. The New York Times, Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times devote much ink to policy issues. Every night on television, "Nightline" explores issues. C-SPAN televises complete speeches and policy forums and debates. The defenders say the best-ever political coverage and reporting is going on today. But, they say, people must seek it out in the highly competitive news business.

Should the Media Report on the Private Lives of Politicians?
Another problem critics see in post-Watergate journalism is the greater interest in reporting on the personal lives of politicians. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's legs were paralyzed from polio. He wore leg braces and often used a wheelchair. But reporters and photographers never revealed his disability to the public, because they apparently believed it would weaken the president's image as a strong leader. Such a conspiracy of silence by the press would be unthinkable in today's highly competitive news environment.

Scandals and sexual misbehavior have increasingly become acceptable topics for the mainstream press to cover. That President John F. Kennedy had affairs with women was not considered newsworthy more than 30 years ago. Today, President Clinton's marital problems while governor of Arkansas and the Monica Lewinsky investigation continue to be the subject of news media stories.

Larry Sabato, professor of political science at the University of Virginia, has criticized the press for its current tendency to jump quickly into a scandal story. Sabato says that scandals frequently explode into media "feeding frenzies" where every tidbit of gossip is reported. This type of reporting, he says, gives a great deal of newspaper space and air time to matters that have little to do with the real problems of the country.

Carl Bernstein, one of the reporters who investigated the Watergate story, wrote recently that "we tell our readers and viewers that the trivial is significant and the lurid or loopy is more important than real news." But William Safire, a columnist for the New York Times, takes a different view. He argues that political scandal reporting often contributes to the continuous cleansing of American politics.

The question seems to boil down to what is newsworthy. A president covering up crimes (as in Watergate) is clearly newsworthy. So is any behavior that affects public policy. The debate is over personal behavior that doesn't seem to affect policy. Were Kennedy's affairs newsworthy? Should reporters have revealed them? Do politicians have any right to privacy? Is it right for the news media to withhold information from the public? These questions do not have easy answers. Defenders of the media argue it is better to err on the side of giving the public too much information than too little. Critics say that media scandałmongering is souring people's view of the democratic process.

**Campaign Games**

Press coverage of political campaigning began to change even before Watergate. Theodore White's book *The Making of the President 1960* and Joe McGinniss's *The Selling of the President 1968* both gave an inside look at how campaigns operate.

Many political reporters soon adopted the new "inside politics" approach by concentrating on the tactics and manipulations involved in campaigning for public office. Press accounts began to depict election campaigns as high stakes games dominated by personality clashes and the political horse race among the candidates. The press, say critics, often ignored the voters and the issues that concerned them.
Critics say reporting election campaigns as only a game often resulted in candidates coming across in a negative light. A study of major newsmagazine coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign showed that references to Bush and Clinton were 60-percent negative. A similar study of TV network news shows during the Republican primaries in the spring of 1996 indicated that campaign news stories were 3-to-1 negative.

"There can be no doubt that the change in the tone of election coverage," says Syracuse University political scientist Thomas Patterson, "has contributed to the decline in the public confidence in those who seek the presidency."

Journalists defend their coverage of political tactics and manipulation. Every campaign employs "spin doctors," whose job is to manipulate the media. The press, they say, is merely exposing "the man behind the curtain," the manipulators of the press. Many journalists argue that knowledge of campaign tactics makes citizens more sophisticated and informed.

**Sound Bites**

Media critics believe it's difficult for citizens to stay informed when candidate reporting is reduced to fragmentary "sound bites." A sound bite is a recorded segment of uninterrupted speech. In 1968, the average presidential candidate sound bite on network evening news programs lasted 42 seconds. By the 1992 election, the average sound bite time had been pared down to 7.3 seconds.

While the candidates have been talking less on TV news, political reporters have been saying more. In 1992, TV reporter comments took 72 percent of election coverage air time. Typically, a TV reporter tells a news story using sound bites to illustrate his or her points and then often ends with an interpretation of what the candidate is saying and doing. This kind of reporting is more lively and interesting to the viewer. But critics say sound bites keep citizens from judging the actual words and views of the candidates themselves.

**Changes in Political Reporting**

During the last few years, media critics have called for significant changes in how the news, especially political news, is reported. They want:

- more emphasis on covering the nation's real problems and possible solutions and less on political conflict;
- more coverage of what political candidates are actually saying and less on reporters analyzing the campaign horse race; and
- more on how politicians intend to improve the lives of Americans and less on the personal lives of public officials.

Some journalists have attempted to change reporting by creating a movement called public (or civic) journalism. Public journalism places much emphasis on finding out what problems matter the most to people and then helping them work out solutions.
So far, public journalists have been experimenting mainly at the local newspaper level. Davis "Buzz" Merritt, editor of the Wichita (Kansas) Eagle and one of the founders of public journalism, launched "The People Project: Solving It Ourselves" in 1992. This, like other public journalism projects throughout the country, involved a series of articles dealing with city problems and solutions based on the experiences and ideas of Wichita citizens. The thing that made this different from traditional reporting was that the newspaper played an activist role in organizing public forums where citizens had the opportunity to struggle with the problems facing their community.

An example of this new approach to political news reporting is PBS's "Democracy Project," which devoted 100 hours of prime time during the 1996 presidential election campaign "listening to people rather than to talking heads, Washington experts, [and] politicians."

Traditional journalists resist participating in efforts that try to influence the way our political system works. Instead, these journalists prefer to play the role of public watchdog, reporting the news as it happens in a detached and objective way. As "60 Minutes" senior correspondent Mike Wallace puts it, "our job is to report, to explain, to illuminate." Reporters like Wallace believe that setting up undertakings like the "Democracy Project" moves the press from reporting the news to helping to make it. If this happens, journalist objectivity may suffer. David Broder, a well-respected reporter for the Washington Post, speaks for those who want to change political reporting. He worries that "it will be written at some future point about my generation of political reporters that we covered everything, but we didn't notice that support for representative government and democracy was collapsing."

**For Discussion and Writing**

1. Many journalists argue that they do not give a negative slant to their political reporting; all they do is report reality. Do you agree or disagree with this view? Why?
2. Do you think it's important for citizens to understand political tactics in a campaign? Do you think the media overemphasizes tactics? Why or why not?
3. What do the news media and the public have a right to know about the personal lives of elected officials and political candidates? What do they not have a right to know? Explain your answer.
4. What is public journalism? Do you think it's a good idea? Why or why not?

**A C T I V I T Y**

**What is Newsworthy?**

State with a YES or NO whether or not the following pieces of information should be included in journalists’ coverage of political election campaigns. Give one reason why or why not these items are newsworthy.

1. A presidential candidate’s child has a drug problem.
2. A presidential candidate is having an extra-marital affair.
3. A presidential candidate had an extra-marital affair ten years ago.
4. A presidential candidate attempted suicide during college.
5. While holding a position at a large company, a presidential candidate took several of his previous girlfriends out to lunch on the company tab.
6. While single, a presidential candidate hired a prostitute.
7. A presidential candidate had poor grades in college.
8. Ten years ago, while serving as a judge, a presidential candidate who claims to oppose the death penalty sent a person to the electric chair.
9. Ten years ago, while serving as a judge, a presidential candidate who claims to support the death penalty sent a person to the electric chair.
10. A presidential candidate experimented with marijuana in college.
11. A presidential candidate smokes marijuana on occasion.
12. A presidential candidate cheated on his or her taxes.
13. A presidential candidate bribed a public official in order to get his or her first internship in politics.