THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THE BEAST:¹
An Analysis of the Evolving Interface between the White House
and Network Press Outlets

Emily Bradley

Introduction

The modern American presidency provides a compelling illustration of the departure of a political institution from its original conception. This country’s Founding Fathers envisioned the president as a republican alternative to the British monarchy – aloof from the people and void of attachment to a particular constituency, they expected their national leader’s influence to be constantly challenged by a more powerful legislative body, and thus energized his office with marked institutional powers.² His purportedly aloof stature was by no means accidental– in designing the three branches of government, the Founders attempted to insulate the American political system from the whims of public opinion. The unwashed masses – while a necessary component of the burgeoning democracy – could not be trusted to exert direct influence over the constitutional order. For this reason, the Federalist Papers plainly reject the notion of a pure democracy; and an independent Executive branch, selected by means of indirect election, is perhaps the clearest manifestation of this principle.³ Jeffrey Tulis notes that prior to the twentieth century, the idea of popular presidential rhetoric was largely prohibited, because it was believed to “manifest demagoguery, impede deliberation, and subvert the routines of republican government.”⁴ The Founder’s President was not the champion of common men, but an exceptional individual concerned primarily with the prosperity of the nation at large.

The Founders got a lot of things right. But their vision of the American Presidency – as a monotonous succession of institutionally powerful, politically inconsequential Grover Cleveland types – has proven stunningly inaccurate in modern times. The source of presidential power in America has gradually shifted from aforementioned “narrowly defined constitutional underpinnings”\(^5\) to a “broader plebiscitary base.”\(^6\) In simple terms, the President has become the government official with whom the public most closely identifies, generating an entirely new set of institutional demands. Initially, presidents responded to these demands by forging a working relationship with the media.\(^7\) They communicated with the American people through the conduits of the press, all the while maintaining traditionally strict control over how briefing content could be published. A system of “hard news, openly conveyed”\(^8\) paid homage to the consequence and influence of the Fourth Estate, while simultaneously ensuring that certain truths remained absent from the public discourse. Franklin Roosevelt’s handicap; John Kennedy’s repeated infidelities – members of the White House press corps, very much in the know, never exposed these stunning realities to their reader or viewership.

There is widespread consensus that the described ‘hard news, openly conveyed’ system of interaction was conceived by FDR.\(^9\) At his first news conference in 1933, he announced that he would terminate the practice of submitting written questions, and would

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\(^6\) Ibid, 4.  
\(^7\) Ibid, 8.  
\(^9\) Ibid, 78
plan to provide four categories of information in the briefings he referred to as “delightful family conferences”:”¹⁰

a) Occasional direct quotations, permitted only through written authorization from the White House
b) Press conference comments attributed to the President “without direct quotations”
c) Background information to be used in stories without a reference to the White House
d) “Off the record” remarks not to be repeated to absent reporters¹¹

FDR’s characterization of the press briefing illustrates the central tenants of the press-presidency relationship during his tenure in office: news would be readily available to members of the press corps, on the condition that they deferred to White House stipulations concerning when and how much information was released to the public. While these terms appear ridiculous to modern sensibilities, FDR’s commitment to hard news – regardless of the attached publishing restrictions – warmed reporters to his administration. Relations with the press would maintain “a measure of continuity for [years] after Roosevelt, largely because of the professional correspondents’ attachment to the FDR system.”¹²

Less clear is when the definitive break with Roosevelt’s system occurred. Kernell and others postulate that it was Kennedy who instituted fundamentally different terms for press-presidency interaction; Kernell notes that JFK – a President perhaps best remembered for his rhetorical talents – was the first to appear in televised press conferences, and also the first to institute private, oval office interviews as a regular function of the White House dialogue with reporters.¹³ In this sense, JFK did distinguish

¹⁰ Ibid, 79.
¹¹ Kernell, 79.
¹² Ibid, 83.
¹³ Ibid, 85-93.
himself from the FDR media approach; he relied less on the press corps as a collective entity to translate his message for the American people. The obvious contention with Kernell’s case is that the Kennedy communications strategy was still fully dependent on press engagement. At the behest of President-Elect Kennedy, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger had privately solicited reporters’ views on the possibility of televising live, nationwide conferences as early as December, 1960\(^\text{14}\)– network news outlets in particular were thrilled by the idea of introducing television cameras into the White House.\(^\text{15}\) And the conferences themselves required and attained the full participation of the mainstream media (even of those print reporters who yearned for the ‘private’ press conferences of an earlier era).\(^\text{16}\)

The growing influence of broadcast media, and of television news in particular, strained the intimacy of the presidential – press corps relationship as early as the Kennedy years. But it wasn’t until the advent of the White House Office of Communications, at the insistence of Richard Nixon in 1969, that the implicit terms of relationship experienced a fundamental shift. While other Presidents had experimented with the idea of ‘going public’ with a message, Nixon fully embraced a plan to go over the heads of the Washington media and directly to the American people, and he did so while articulating a marked distaste for the press. Under these terms, reporters became far less willing to adhere to the strict ground rules that previous administrations had attached to access privileges,\(^\text{17}\) initiating a cycle whereby the Office of Communications felt compelled to extend its

\(^{14}\) Kernell, 85.
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 86.
\(^{16}\) Ibid, 86.
\(^{17}\) Maltese, 5.
control in order to counteract a tendency towards negativity in the press. The FDR days were clearly over.

Since the establishment of the Office of Communications, presidency – press relations have become adversarial. Conversations with current and former White House officials and with major network correspondents and producers indicate a collective awareness – on both sides – that the nature of day-to-day interactions between the President and the media has changed over time, and that the changes are not only reflective of the unique personalities of each President, but also of a long-term shift away from the pre-Nixon structure of interface between the White House and the Fourth Estate.

**The Evolution of the White House Office of Communications**

_The Press Secretary, flanked by deputies, steps up to the podium in the White House Briefing room. It is roughly 1:00pm. Chatter ceases, and the network correspondents – seated directly in front of the Secretary – are invited to ask the first questions of the day._

Direct interaction between the President, his representatives, and members of the press corps is perhaps the most recognizable aspect of the press-presidency relationship, and is largely coordinated by the White House Press Office. Operating in the wings is the Office of Communications – a lesser known, significantly more powerful counterpart to the Press operation. Administrations as far back as those of Grover Cleveland and William McKinley recognized the need for a Press Secretary and staff. In contrast, the establishment and evolution of the White House Communications division is relatively modern, and coincides with a marked change in the nature of the dialogue between President and press corps. The ultimate objective of this office is “to influence – to the extent possible – what news will appear in the media about the administration and its

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policies.”  

And while the specific means to achieve that objective have fluctuated under different Presidents, the Office has proven itself a consistently powerful arm of the Executive Branch. “The importance of presidential communications can be seen in the matter in which the topic drives the agenda of daily staff meetings…and the way the function has insinuated itself into the operations of almost every White House office.”

Beginnings

It was Richard Nixon and his campaign team, during the 1968 election bid, who first articulated formalized tactics to shape media coverage. With his 1960 loss to the vibrant, press-savvy Kennedy still fresh in his memory, Nixon was determined to prevent another media blunder from destroying his White House chances. In 1967, H.R. Haldeman – who would later become Nixon’s Chief of Staff – wrote a memo to the presidential candidate, in which he outlined the flaws of the 1960 campaign and offered advice for the upcoming effort. His suggestions were concentrated around the merits of exploiting television to sidestep the conduits of the mainstream press. In his own words, “the time has come for political campaigning – its techniques and strategies – to move out of the dark and into the brave new world of the omnipresent eye.”

Television question-and-answer sessions, during which private citizens and some local media spokesmen (but never network reporters) engaged in dialogue with the Presidential candidate, became a central tenant of Nixon’s reformed election strategy, as did strict supervision of his schedule and public

19 Maltese, 3.
appearances.\textsuperscript{22} Herb Klein, former Nixon Press Secretary, was appointed ‘Manager of Communications’ during the 1968 campaign, and occupied previously uncharted political space in his efforts to establish links with media outside of New York and Washington, to coordinate the flow of news from all parts of the campaign apparatus, and to organize surrogate speakers.\textsuperscript{23} The notion of ‘going public’ with a message minimized the role that the mainstream press could play in influencing public opinion of Nixon as a candidate.

As is often the case when a new President transitions into the White House, the effective components of Nixon’s campaign strategy strongly influenced the function and structure of his Executive Office. In addition to the traditional White House Press Secretary, Nixon appointed Klein – long-time friend and former \textit{San Diego Union} reporter – as the Director of Communications. In this position, Klein would carry out many of the same duties assigned to him during the campaign. By virtue of his journalistic background, he viewed the Directorship from two distinct angles; while recognizing the need for better coordination of Executive Branch press activities, he was also compelled by a desire to act as the presidential liaison for newspapers and broadcasters across the country (a desire which would eventually see him ousted from the White House inner circle).\textsuperscript{24} In response to Klein’s November 1968 appointment, the \textit{New York Times} purported that no other government spokesman had “ever been given such a broad mandate.”\textsuperscript{25} It was true: particularly in the early years of the Nixon Administration, the Director of Communications was understood to be far more powerful than the downgraded Press Secretary.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Maltese, 16-17.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Maltese, 22-27.
\end{itemize}
General Functions

Then and now, the Communications and Press Offices existed as two distinct entities; the former was responsible for day-to-day interactions with DC-based reporters, while the latter oversaw a long-term media strategy, concerned both with the coordination of news coming out of the Executive and with the content of coverage being fed to the American public by the mainstream networks. The initial functions of the Communications Office, carried out by Klein and four senior staffers, were as follows:

1. To coordinate the flow of press releases from various departments, with the ultimate goal of dictating the news agenda. Each Executive office was required to submit two weekly reports to Klein’s communication’s staff, who were supposedly forbidden from dictating the way any particular office chose to run its operation. In reality, Nixon’s communications team frequently drafted press releases for Executive departments, and – at the President’s behest – worked to manipulate the schedule so that at least one major announcement was coming out of the Executive branch each day.26

2. To control which speech excerpts were aired by radio stations. Communication staffers, known as spotmasters, would prepare excerpts from Executive officials’ speeches to be recorded on a telephone answering device, which was then accessed by various radio stations and used in presidential coverage.27

3. To coordinate televised appearances. For the first time since the advent of television, networks were provided with a specific White House contact through whom to lobby administration officials to make guest appearances on their

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26 Maltese, 32.
27 Ibid, 33.
morning, late-night, and Sunday shows. While this development served the needs of a rapidly advancing broadcast industry, assigning control of televised appearances to the communications team also provided the White House with a mechanism by which to make formal suggestions as to who should be interviewed in a given week.28

4. To instruct departmental officers in how to make better use of broadcast media. White House officials participated in formal rehearsals prior to televised appearances; and new hires were made in various domestic public affairs offices, as the domestic wing of the Executive branch was understood to be particularly weak in its interactions with the press.29

5. To manage speeches made by various cabinet members and sympathetic government officials. The Office of Communications worked with speechwriters to develop broad-based themes, ensuring that “each geographic area of the country…would hear the same party line expressed simultaneously by a different speaker.”30 This aspect of the communications strategy grew from of a memorandum written by Marshall Wright, a long-time career Foreign Service Officer, who – in the wake of a fairly inconsequential speaking tour – commented on the potential power of sending locally-connected speakers to spread a national message.31

6. To create fact sheets which outlined major Executive programs, and biographical sheets for political appointees. These were distributed to roughly 1,700 media

28 Maltese, 34.
29 Ibid, 33.
31 Maltese, 36.
outlets (newspaper, radio, television) around the country. Cognizant of the potential for the press corps to accuse his office of engaging in propaganda activities, Klein made an effort to limit these publications to the “cold facts.”

7. To make materials available to pro-administration congressmen and senators. Nixon, infamously paranoid in his approach to political opposition, hoped to cultivate a significant support team in the legislative branch.

8. To work with the Republican National Committee to engage in a 365-day per year campaign for the presidency. 75% of the presidential messages printed by Nixon’s Communications Office were actually mailed by the RNC, and often included a cover letter signed by a member of Nixon’s cabinet, Vice President Ford, a high-level White House Advisor, or by Klein himself.

9. To handle relations between the White House and any special interest group, through the advent of an Office of Public Liaison. Originally, the functions of this office remained distinct from the Communications operation, but as the Public Liaison team engaged in direct mail and speech scheduling, significant overlap occurred.

10. To process media requests for information under the 1967 Freedom of Information Act. Because he viewed press representation as a central component of his Directorship, Klein would find himself increasingly at odds with senior-level staff in the White House given his reticence to embrace this duty.

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33 Maltese, 37.
34 Ibid, 39.
36 Ibid, 42.
The breadth of responsibility which Nixon assigned to his nascent Communications Office is indicative of the degree of his skepticism towards the press. As suggested by the above list of duties, Klein and his associates were truly expected to act as jacks of all trades in their dealings with the media, while the longstanding Press Office was relegated to addressing the daily concerns of Washington-based reporters, generally through the press briefing.

Two underlying themes unite the various functions of the Communications Department: coordination, and influence. As of 1969, the many divisions within the Executive branch would no longer function independently in their dealings with the press; instead, speeches, public appearances, and information releases were all coordinated through the Communications Office. Klein himself called the departments “creaky and antiquated” in their dealings with the mainstream media. He spearheaded an initiative to revolutionize the public image of the White House, through direct supervision of these previously pseudo-autonomous arms of the Executive. The second major function of the Office – and the one with which Klein was far less comfortable – involved shaping the presidential message relayed to the public by members of the press. To this end, the Communications team produced their own media in large quantities, reached out to sympathetic local press in lieu of the traditional, mainstream channels, and eventually engaged in spinning the news through the fostering of an “informal network to cultivate letters to the editor…at the instigation of President Nixon.”

37 Maltese, 33.
38 Ibid, 40.
A Special Emphasis on Televised Coverage

It should be noted – particularly given the confines of this study – that Nixon harbored specific animosity towards television media, and shaped the functions of his Communications Department accordingly. A May 1969 memo from Haldeman to Klein indicates the degree of Nixon’s fixation on broadcast coverage, even in the early moments of his White House tenure:

The President is very concerned about the general attitude of a number of television newscasters and commentators who are deliberately slanting their reports against the Administration’s position.

He would like from you immediately a report on your analysis of each of the principle network newscasters and commentators as to his basic orientation and presentation of the news. Specifically, he wants, of course, the list of those who consistently slant their reports against us…but it would be helpful to try to classify all of the principle people as to their general slant so that he has a feel of which ones we can count on for reliable reporting and which ones we can count on to go the other way.39

Driven by a fixation with the impact of network presidential news coverage, Nixon instructed Klein to establish a “Special TV News Section” within the Office of Communications, which would register its “reactions, both positive and negative, to the commentators and newscasters and networks.”40 The President also established a Television Office, separate from the Press and Communications Departments, which existed to plan his every appearance in front of TV cameras. Later administrations would feature this office under the umbrella of the Communications Department.41

41 CQ Press, 128.
Structural Growth

The figure below illustrates the original structure of Nixon’s Communications Office:

**Figure 1. WH Communications Office, 1969 (Nixon)**

![Diagram of WH Communications Office, 1969](image)


Given the obvious connection between Nixon’s media paranoia and the Watergate scandal which eventually forced his resignation, it should come as no surprise that his two immediate presidential successors – Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter – attempted to dismantle the White House Communications Operation entirely, and to reinvigorate the Press Office and its Secretary as the sole purveyors of the presidential message. That neither Ford nor Carter proved successful in this effort is indicative of the permanent, institutional changes wrought by the Nixon Communications Office, and also by the final scandal which clouded his White House tenure. The President now required a Communications team to deal effectively with the Press; Ford and Carter did not fully

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42 Maltese, Chps. 5-6.
subscribe to this line of thinking, and both failed in their reelection efforts at least partially due to incredibly challenging press relations.

Figures 2 and 3 depict the White House Communications Operation as it existed under Ford. Of the three central functions of Nixon’s communications office – to serve as a liaison with non Washington-based media, to coordinate the flow of information from the Executive Branch, and to operate as a political tool for generating public support of administrative initiatives – Ford initially sought to maintain only the first, and to incorporate it into the responsibilities of the Press Office. His decision to reinstitute a Communications Department was generated by the repeated difficulties of his Press Secretaries, and the need to prepare for the 1976 election. Carter followed a comparable trajectory; having initially downsized communications responsibilities and shifted them onto the Press Office staff, he revitalized a full-fledged Office of Communications in 1978, in an attempt to salvage the incoherent, overtly negative media image of his administration.

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43 Maltese, 114.
44 Ibid, 114.
46 Maltese, 148-160.
Figure 2. WH Office of Communications, 1975 (Ford)


Figure 3. WH Office of Communications, August 1976 (Ford)

Over the past three decades, the Communications Office has experienced consistent structural evolution, but “such administrative flexibility does not seem to affect continuity.” Although each of the communications units—media affairs, public affairs, speech-writing, advance—appears under varying names and in different locations on the organizational chart, “physically the units continue to occupy the same offices as their predecessors,” and to carry out largely the same functions.

In spite of Ford’s and Carter’s early efforts to reduce the influence of the White House Communications Office, “thirty nine years later, the office is even more important today than it was in its early years.” In fact, it has become the plight of the modern Press Secretary to fight for autonomy from the communications team. During the Reagan years, Communications Advisers Thomas Griscom and David Gergen were granted oversight of the Press Office. Clinton placed George Stephanopoulos and Mark Gearan in a similarly superior position until 1995, when Mike McCurry assumed the post of Press Secretary. And the Press Office would revert back to the control of the Communications Adviser under George W. Bush.

A quick glance at the organizational charts from the Reagan and Clinton years (Figures 4,5) speaks to the consistent growth that has occurred within this department since its 1969 inception. While the White House Transition Project has yet to publish comparable data for the Bush ’43 Administration, Table 1 demonstrates that the Office of

47 CQ Press, 128.
48 Ibid, 128.
49 White House Transition Project, 1.
50 CQ Press, 130.
51 Ibid, 130.
52 Ibid, 130.
Communications experienced similar expansion following the transition from Clinton to Bush ’43 (based on number of employees).

Figure 4. WH Communications Office, 1985 (Reagan)


Figure 5. WH Communications Office, 1993 (Clinton)

Table 1. Number of ‘Publicity Employees’ under Presidents Clinton and Bush ‘43

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<td>OEOB Press Office (Clinton White House)</td>
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<td>Total communications staff</td>
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Figures 1-5 highlight an important structural concept: while the Communications office may ‘look’ different depending on the Administration in power, its core functions remain consistent with Nixon’s original conception. In some capacity, a Media Affairs Unit arranges television and radio interviews for Administration figures; a Public Affairs Unit works to perfect a cohesive message, and puts out material to promote the President’s programs; an Advance Unit makes arrangements for the press to travel with the President; and a Speech-Writing Unit is responsible for preparing both major addresses and brief daily remarks. Each of these units can be traced back to a pillar of Nixon’s Communication strategy; they have grown and adapted to effectively serve today’s White House, but the path from the 1968 campaign to the present-day Communications office has been straight and predictable.

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53 CQ Press, 128-129.
Interview Rationale

The list of interview candidates was narrowed to include individuals who previously worked or are now working for the Press and/or Communication Offices in the White House, and correspondents or producers who have had direct involvement with televised presidential coverage.

While a range of media outlets report regularly on the President, televised news programming – particularly programming affiliated with the three major networks – is notable for the relative frequency of its White House-related coverage. Historically, no medium pays more attention to the President than the evening news shows, on which presidential stories routinely comprise the bulk of all government coverage; stories pertaining to the White House accounted for 76% of Evening News reports on the American government in 1981, 88% in 1993, and 82% in 2001. In The Six O’clock Presidency, Smoller offers six reasons for the networks’ fixation with the President:

1. Profit imperative: the American people are captivated by the affairs of the presidency, as indicated by the consistent, marked growth of the White House Press Corps. This preference has emerged in direct contradiction to the aforementioned intentions and predictions of the Founding Fathers.

2. Affiliate imperative: A presidential news story can be delivered to network affiliates as a definitively national story, thereby lessening the potential that network programming will interfere with local coverage.

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54 Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, Over the Wire and on TV (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993).
3. **Political imperative**: in response to critical analysis of network news offerings, executives can reference presidential coverage as evidence of the networks’ legitimate contribution to public discourse.

4. **Budget imperative**: Producing a White House news story is a cost-effective exercise. Cameras, crews and correspondents are already in place, the transfer of footage from Washington to New York is both seamless and inexpensive, and the vast availability of “protective coverage” – stock footage that can be applied to the majority of presidential news stories – renders a fairly simple production endeavor.

5. **Technological imperative**: closely related to budget imperative, and described above.

6. **Career imperative**: the White House is an excellent testing ground for aspiring network correspondents. An individual covering the President for a network program is likely to develop a legitimate public following, and the job is considered highly desirable given the high percentage of airtime dedicated to presidential stories.

The network commitment to presidential coverage would be irrelevant if American audiences had ceased watching nightly news programming. But in spite of a steady decline in viewership, these shows continue to attract a larger collective audience than any other news source. According to the *Project for Excellence in Journalism’s* most recent “State of the News Media” report, based upon 2007 ratings and statistics, network viewership averaged 23.1 million people per night. As a reference point: USA TODAY, the most

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57 Smoller, 19.
widely read newspaper in the country, achieved an average daily circulation of 2.3 million;\textsuperscript{59} and 2.7 million viewers watched cable news on a typical night in 2007.\textsuperscript{60} The power of network evening news programming cannot be overlooked, regardless of declines in the ratings. The longevity of this media’s predominance also allows for a historical discussion of presidential coverage; as Farnsworth and Lichter note, “network television started this period as the leading national news source, and today remains a leading national news source.”\textsuperscript{61}

Network television was thus selected as the focal media source through which to assess the press-presidency relationship due to its consistently high viewership, and its comparatively frequent coverage of presidential news stories.

\textbf{The Modern Press-Presidency Relationship, As Characterized by Media and WH Respondents}

The purpose of conducting the subsequently referenced interviews was to assess how the modern presidency-press relationship is understood by both involved parties, particularly in the context of an ever-expanding Communications Office. With this objective in mind, the following general set of questions was employed:

1. \textit{How would you define the role of the press in covering the White House. What is their responsibility to the American public?}

2. \textit{In general, how would you characterize the relationship between the modern White House and the press corps? Is it necessarily adversarial?}

3. \textit{Mike McCurry was retained to advise Obama on WH relations with the press. In a letter to the President-Elect, he summarized the WH-Press relationship in the following way: the WH chooses a ‘line of the day,’ and the collective wisdom of the press corps chooses a different line.}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{61} Farnsworth and Lichter, 141-142.
a. Is this an accurate portrayal?

b. Is it fair to say that the mainstream, network press regularly reacts against the message proliferated by the WH communications team? In their efforts to control the news agenda, does mainstream media sometimes miss the important story?

4. After the Checkers speech – really the first time that a President went above the heads of the press and spoke directly to the public – Nixon’s Press Secretary said that “what reporters think about the content of the speech isn’t important now. That’s an old story anyway. The best story now is not the speech itself but the public reaction to it.”

a. Speak to the modern trend of Presidents going public with their message...what consequence does this strategy have for the press, and how does it shape coverage?

5. Cheney identified the function of the Communications Office as follows: “you’ve got to control what information you put out. You don’t let the Press control the agenda. If you do that, they’re going to trash you.”

b. Is it in the best interests of the American viewing public for the White House to control the news agenda?

6. With the exception of televising WH press conferences in 1995, the structure of the WH-Press engagement has changed very little since Herb Klein created the Communications Office in 1969. Given the rise of new press mediums, should the White House invest in a complete overhaul of the Communications structure? (Has the WH evolved to meet the needs of new media – cable in particular?)

7. McCurry now says that televising the Press Briefings was a mistake – that bringing cameras into the briefing room compelled everyone to perform, himself included.

a. Is there merit in a considering a return to an FDR-style briefing? Closed door, hard news openly conveyed, greater restrictions on what the press can publish…

b. Alternatively, What if the WH were to extend media transparency beyond scheduled press conferences and briefings? Would the press be more inclined to provide substantial policy coverage if the secrecy of West Wing operations was downgraded? Think CPSAN, WH-version.

i. Does more access lead to better press coverage?

8. The White House Office of Communications was the brainchild of a President now infamous for his paranoia and mistrust of the media. Presidents who followed
Nixon, including Ford and Carter, attempted to downsize the office, as they felt that it counteracted efforts at transparency.

a. How does a modern White House justify the continued existence of an office conceived under such controversial beginnings?

These questions solicited musings on the responsibilities of the press, the nature of the media’s relationship with a President and his administration, and the modern suitability of the form and function of the Office of Communications.

Interview Analysis

Interview candidates were categorized according to their endorsement or rejection of ‘adversarial’ as an appropriate descriptor of the presidency-press relationship, and were then further distinguished based upon the explanatory content of their answer. This classification system produced nine quadrants:
Figure 6. Summary of Interview Findings

(WH) = White House, (P) = Press

Adversarial?

1. No
   - A. Necessary
     - Chris Matthews (P)
   - B. Unnecessary
     - Wolf Blitzer (P)

2. Somewhat
   - A. Necessary
     - Bill Burton (WH)
     - Nanda Chitre (WH)
     - Karen Sugarman (P)
   - B. Unnecessary
     - Nanda Chitre (WH)
     - Karen Sugarman (P)
     - Gloria Borger (P)
     - Nancy Nathan (P)
     - Jen Psaki (WH)

3. Yes
   - A. Necessary
     - Chip Reid (P)
     - Scott Pelley (P)
     - Carin Pracht (P)
     - David Pecker (WH)
     - Dan Bartlett (WH)
     - Leslie Stahl (P)
     - Mike McCurry (WH)
   - B. Unnecessary
     - Leslie Stahl (P)
     - Mike McCurry (WH)
     - Schieffer (P)
Significantly, all but two respondents characterize the White House-press relationship as being, at minimum, occasionally adversarial. The majority of those who answer in the affirmative strongly agree with the use of this term, distinguishing today’s mainstream media from its FDR era counterpart.

1. Not Adversarial

The two individuals who disagreed with the adversarial characterization are moderate to left-leaning cable news correspondents. Wolf Blitzer, host of CNN’s Situation Room, says of the Press-WH interface: “It’s not adversarial, but it’s not necessarily one of friendship, either. It’s one of trying to do your best to get real answers and to make sure that you have enough sources, not only in the White House but outside the White House…people who are really knowledgeable about what’s going on, so you can get to the truth.” He acknowledges that a modern WH press corps faces the constant challenge of overcoming spin control; in his experience, Blitzer has found that “the White House will try to control the agenda – that’s what every White House tries to do. They want to make sure that the President and the Administration look as good as possible. It’s our job as reporters to cut through that, and to make sure that we’re not just stenographers…that we’re not official propagandists for the White House.” He also asserts that it is the “absolute right” of a presidential press operation to formulate and perpetuate a certain message, just as it is the “absolute right” of the media to engage a variety of sources in an effort to “gain a better appreciation of what’s really going on” in the White House. Blitzer approaches the relationship from a practical standpoint; both sides have a job to do, and in his opinion, both carry out their responsibilities without engaging in adversarial behavior.

Chris Matthews, host of *The Chris Matthews Show* on CNBC, similarly rejects ‘adversarial’ as an accurate descriptor of modern press interactions with the White House, but offers a completely separate explanation from the one forwarded by his CNN counterpart. Matthews strongly endorses the merits of an adversarial relationship, saying: “I like it that way as a citizen. It’s very healthy.”63 By his estimation, however, the “tremendous encouragement to be tough,” which in the days of “Leslie Stahl and Dan Rather” was in abundant supply from bureau chiefs and editors, is markedly absent in post 9/11 America. Matthews laments the loss of an adversarial interface, noting that “there are no real personalities in the press room anymore, no people standing up to the President. Press conferences…have become séances…I mean, why are they there? What’s the purpose? It doesn’t seem to me that [the press] are getting encouragement to be adversarial like they were during the Vietnam War and Watergate.”

In characterizing this marked shift in the nature of press-presidency interaction, Matthews doesn’t place blame with the White House. Instead, he forwards the notion that “we’ve lost, as journalists, the ability to be skeptical.” Matthews clearly articulates a desire for adversarial interactions between the WH and the mainstream media, but remarks that “there’s this other direction in the media now that is scary; this unwillingness to stand up and say, ‘I don’t care if fifty people in this room make fun of me, I’m going to say the truth.’” He presents a strong counterpoint to the assertion of adversarial interaction which emerges as a common thread in the remainder of the press and WH interviews, and he holds the media almost solely responsible for what he perceives to be a negative shift away from the adversarial press-presidency relationship of the 1980s and 1990s.

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'Not Adversarial’ Quadrant Summary

The two media respondents disagree that the term ‘adversarial’ accurately describes the modern press-presidency relationship. Blitzer acknowledges the existence of White House spin, and the need for the press corps to carefully investigate any message pushed by the Administration. He feels confident that this is being accomplished, perhaps not in an environment of friendship, but certainly through the conduits of a mutually beneficial relationship. Matthews sees the terms of the press-presidency relationship in a similar light, but presents a vastly different interpretation of the consequences of non-adversarial interface. In his view, the press has abdicated its role as a political watchdog. He advocates for the reinstitution of an adversarial relationship between media outlets and White House officials.

2. Somewhat Adversarial

A handful of respondents acknowledge the periodic occurrence of adversarial interface between the White House and the press corps, but prove divided in their opinions as to whether that interface is necessary.

2A – Somewhat Adversarial, Necessary

Bill Burton, current Deputy Press Secretary for President Obama, provides an exclusively contemporary perspective on the nature of the press-presidency relationship; his Executive experience is limited to the Obama campaign and Administration, a fact significant in and of itself given the breadth of his communications responsibilities. Shying away from use of the term ‘adversarial’ (which was included in at least one of the question
prompts), Burton describes the WH-press interface as boasting “some natural tension,” but generally as being “pretty positive.” His explanation focuses on the direct actions taken by the Obama administration to facilitate positive interaction with the press. “We’ve opened up access to a lot of different things that previous administrations didn’t. We do a lot more in the way of briefings than before; the president is now doing a lot more interviews than have previously been done; we’ve got more prime time press conferences so far than [occurred] in Bush’s entire eight years here. So we’ve done a lot to be accessible, and I think the relationship is good as a result.” It is the subsequent qualifying statement that secures Burton’s placement in the ‘somewhat agree’ category of the adversarial matrix: “I would never say that it’s a great or positive relationship because I don’t think that’s a) true, or b) appropriate.”

Burton’s interpretation of press-presidency interface is worth noting for several reasons. First, he represents the most modern conception of one element of the relationship. Second, he charges the White House, and not the media, with having primary control over the tone of that relationship, a fact which minimizes his concern vis a vis the impact of an adversarial press on presidential coverage. According to Burton, the Obama Administration has reached out to the media in unprecedented ways, building “capacity around the idea that there are a lot of different and important outlets.” While adversarial interactions between the White House and the press corps may be inevitable, the White House now shapes and defines news to such an extent that the potential for truly damaging coverage appears less likely. In Burton’s own words:

When we have press conferences and the president does interviews with media folks, I think that’s recognizing the power that mainstream media still has…but the President also does other things to try and engage all different aspects of

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media, be it blogs or other independent outlets. He does conference calls, and we use Twitter, and we do all sorts of things where we communicate directly with people. We use our website in pretty aggressive ways to put a lot of information out there in a lot of different formats, be it text or video or pictures on our Flicker feed…

Implicit in Burton’s answer is a description of the ways in which President Obama and his communications team are working to bypass the media middleman, and to interact directly with the American public. While outwardly catering to the demands of the traditional news networks (through goodwill gestures like the televised ‘insider’ White House tours), the current administration is effectively running its own media corporation. As such, the adversarial nature of the press-presidency relationship matters much less to Burton than to his counterparts in earlier administrations, though he acknowledges its existence and necessity.

2A & 2B – Somewhat Adversarial, Certain Components Necessary

A Clinton White House official also falls into the ‘somewhat adversarial’ category, but differs from Burton in her denunciation of certain aspects of the modern press-presidency relationship. Nanda Chitre, President Clinton’s Deputy Press Secretary, concedes that “at times, definitely,”\(^\text{65}\) interface proves to be adversarial. Her reflections on the Clinton years, and on modern media coverage in general, reveal a recognition of and marked dislike for the adversarial aspect of the presidency-press relationship. “These days, the press is always trying to show that the White House may try to script the day, and script the events and the agenda, but the press isn’t going to follow it. A lot of that is blowback from the Iraq war…at some of those early Bush press conferences, the press was not as aggressive as they had been under previous administrations.” Aware that American

\(^\text{65}\) Nanda Chitre, interview with the author, Washington DC, July 31, 2009.
interests could have been better served by more probing coverage of the buildup to the war in Iraq, today’s WH press corps has adopted a precautionary adversarial posture. Averse to once again becoming presidential mouthpieces, reporters, according to Chitre, will at times behave in an unnecessarily contentious manner, and will often miss the real story in their efforts to assert independence from the White House:

I think it’s [the media’s] job to ask questions…but at the same time, if an event is going on at the White House, like healthcare, than the ultimate job is to cover that in a complete way that makes sense for their viewership. I mean, you see a little bit here and there. You see sound bites of the President and then, maybe, the teleprompter broke or somebody in the East Room let their cell phone go off. If [the television press] shows that, that’s a real disservice…that’s not the kind of stuff that belongs in the first fifteen to thirty minutes of Good Morning America, or the Today Show, or even World News Tonight. [Those shows are] so crunched for time – those are the places where you should be doing substantive news. So: something happened, and it shows the President in a different light, or makes him look more human. I understand all of that. But there are real, serious issues facing the country. And if the White House chooses to do healthcare as the next line of the day, with a focus on the economy, then [the press] needs to cover that in a serious way. It has to be more than just ‘here’s a video of the crowd, here’s a little sound bite from the President. That’s when they’re doing a disservice.’

Chitre identifies the press corps’ reactionary tendencies as one source of the adversarial tone which can characterize WH-media interface, and in this instance links that tone to coverage she classifies as a “disservice” to the American public.

When asked about the adversarial nature of WH-press interactions, however, Chitre referred first to another distinct characteristic of the press corps: “I think that the public tends to use general characterizations for the press. ‘Oh, they love Obama.’ Initially when Clinton came in, it was ‘yuck, there’s a love fest going on with Clinton [and the media],’ which wasn’t at all true. It’s not just substantive issues [that generate tension], but also the smallest things about coverage.” In other words, even if the media largely supports the President’s policy decisions, an adversarial environment can result from the logistical
challenges of White House coverage. Chitre explains the potential for tension from the Administration perspective:

Every event, every schedule, every trip – you have to take [press needs] into account, and sort of balance it out. Okay, this is the amount of coverage that they’re getting today. Part of it is the White House staff, who have to be strategic in saying, ‘what do we want [the press] to focus on today?’ We may have ten events, but the message of the day is healthcare. Therefore the healthcare event will be open to the press, and that’s really where we’ll build the communications strategy and do the amplification of the message, and the other events will all be closed. The minute you do that you’re accused of being non-transparent.

Chitre’s description of the struggle between a press corps hungry for information and a White House aiming to go public with its message highlights the connection between the advent of the Office of Communications and a now adversarial WH-press relationship. From the Nixon years onward, it became common practice for presidents and their staffs to use access as a means of shaping the day’s news; and the decision to limit press corps coverage opportunities necessarily breeds an adversarial work environment.

As Chitre describes the press-presidency relationship, certain adversarial aspects are necessary, while others are not. In her view, the press fails to provide relevant coverage when it becomes an overly reactionary entity. This type of adversarial behavior is self-defeating. But the adversarial interactions which result from the Communication Office’s control and execution strategies are, in her opinion, a necessary byproduct (explaining her placement in quadrants 2A and 2B of the adversarial matrix).

Karen Sughrue, a 60 Minutes producer with vast White House coverage experience, also recognizes that “the press plays the role of adversary at times,”66 but distinguishes herself from other media respondents in the ‘somewhat adversarial’ category in that she

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identifies specific aspects of the adversarial interface which are beneficial and even necessary:

I don’t think I would describe [adversarial] as the way the White House corresponds should wake up feeling every morning. I guess I prefer the word ‘observer’ and at times ‘skeptic’, and then perhaps at times ‘adversary,’ if there is reason to be an adversary…Essentially: ‘are the President and his people telling you the truth?’ is the big question. It’s not so much, ‘okay, how can I get up this morning and go after these guys? What are they doing wrong?’ You do want to report what they’re doing well as well, and to give them credit where credit is due.

I think that knowing there’s a tough press out there actually benefits the White House. I think that they are better off preparing their policies for scrutiny by an aggressive press corps than assuming that they’re not going to get questions and that they can get away with stuff. In that sense, I think [an adversarial relationship] produces better policies…I do think it benefits the President and the White House to have the press corps there all the time, and asking those tough questions.

Sughrue notes that the selective adoption of an adversarial posture by the WH press corps holds the administration accountable in its formation and execution of policy, and based on this logic she concedes that a tough press stance is both necessary and beneficial. She expands upon this point with specific reference to the Reagan years, and notes that the press is most heavily criticized in moments when members haven’t engaged in adversarial behavior:

There have been, certainly, times when the press has been criticized for falling in love with the President early in his tenure, and not being critical enough. That’s very often said looking back, when something comes out. For example, during the Reagan era, the press was accused of either falling victim to his charm or falling victim to his enormous popularity among the people - for not holding his feet to the fire on certain policies. When it came out later that he was doing clandestine things in national security, people said: ‘well, why didn’t anybody question him about this or find out about this?’ Very often, when the press is criticized for covering the President it comes at a point when the President has screwed up…and the press is blamed for not asking about it earlier. This was true under Reagan, Clinton, and Bush II. I think it’s pretty much a pattern.
Sughrue makes a compelling argument for the relevance of an aggressive press corps, both in terms of the corps’ credibility and the need for an external government watchdog.

However, she also expresses concern with the criteria being used by a modern press corps to identify when it is appropriate to assume an adversarial posture:

I think [that coverage] is getting tougher and tougher, maybe not always in good ways. Nothing seems to be off the table at all. Policy-wise, nothing should be off the table. In terms of the coverage of someone’s personal life and family, there are still some lines which the press won’t cross…but the questions are getting tougher and the skepticism is getting stronger.

When I watch the White House press briefing, occasionally, these days, I get a little uncomfortable myself. Not so much because I’m opposed to tough questioning – I wouldn’t be in this business if I weren’t in favor of that – but because of what I think of as…inside baseball type questioning …I just watch them asking what I consider to be kind of ridiculous questions.

Game is the right word. It does come down to: ‘didn’t you say it this way?’ ‘What did you mean by that?’ I’m not saying you shouldn’t ask a question like that, but when so much time is spent on it…when I started watching the briefings when Obama came in, I guess I was a little bit shocked at how it had deteriorated.

Sughrue views the appropriate application of adversarial press behavior as a necessary component of the press-presidency relationship, but does not believe that the modern press corps is employing an appropriate application. According her observation, they are overly focused on “tit for tat” lines of questioning, rather than on substantive policy issues. Sughrue’s theoretical endorsement of an adversarial interface places her in quadrant 2A, while her practical disapproval of the present-day manifestation of that interface secures her position in quadrant 2B as well.
CNN’s Gloria Borger remarks that the relationship “can get adversarial – it does when I write something or I say something the White House doesn’t like…[but] I feel like you don’t have to have an adversarial relationship. You just have to say ‘look, people are complaining about x. How are you sure this is going to work? Why is this right?...These are the questions that [WH representatives] have to answer from us because these are the ones that the American people are asking.”67 More broadly, her comments reflect a conviction that, while the WH press corps should occupy the role of a “healthy skeptic,” amicable relations benefit both sides. Borger provided a concrete example: “Last week, Rahm [Emmanuel] had eight to ten columnists in to talk about healthcare, and it was a very illuminating discussion. He was honest, and part of it was on the record, part of it was off the record, but I didn’t feel at all co-opted by it.” Borger is clearly in support of less adversarial interactions, but does allude to the occasional frustration of the White House in the face of critical stories, and to the responsibility of the press to “raise the questions that other people can’t,” as realities that can breed tension.

Former Meet the Press Executive Producer Nancy Nathan articulates a similar belief that the WH-press relationship “doesn’t have to be adversarial,”68 emphasizing that “there is a difference between reactive and adversarial” behavior. Nathan strongly defends the need for press outlets to adopt a reactionary posture in their dealings with White House officials; in describing the appropriate strategy for conducting an interview with an administration official, she says: “what you’re trying to do in your job as a journalist, for your organization and for your readers and viewers, is to [identify] what the line is, and to

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put that through some kind of a check or context…I can tell you, from having worked at Meet the Press, that you never want to go into an interview when they’re putting out…a White House spokesman…without anticipating what you know they’re going to anticipate from you. It’s a sort of circular thing.” Nathan’s characterization of the WH-Press relationship is dominated by the sense of gamesmanship previously described, and highlights the potential for adversarial interaction. At the same time, she concedes: “I’m not trying to be too lofty here in saying that [the WH and the Press] are all in this together, that we all serve the public, but there is something to that.”

In describing instances where the press-presidency relationship tends to become adversarial, Nathan points out that for the bulk of mainstream media outlets, “there is somewhat less resistance to being controlled under a Democratic president than under the Bush administration. People in the press don’t have their guard up quite as much.” This observation affixes an interesting political slant to Nathan’s interpretation of the WH-press relationship; according to her logic, members of the press corps are more likely to behave in an adversarial way when interacting with an administration whom they oppose politically. She expands on this idea with specific reference to cable news coverage of Barack Obama’s presidency: “the question is: do people actually resist positive coverage? Yes, Fox resists it. But there’s no effort to resist it…at CNN, and certainly not at MSNBC.” Nathan acknowledges the negative implications of this type of coverage bias, noting that under the current administration, the effort to resist becoming a WH mouthpiece “should be a consideration [for mainstream press], but maybe isn’t.” Given her early comments on the futility of adversarial behavior within the press, it would seem that Nathan is advocating for an increasingly reactionary media approach – as previously
referenced, she supports a system whereby as a reporter, “parenthetically, you’re always trying to put [White House] officials off balance a bit, not in gamesmanship but because you want a candid answer.” Nathan acknowledges that the relationship can become adversarial, but endorses a “reactive” and not an adversarial approach to press interaction with the Administration.

Jen Psaki, Deputy Press Secretary to President Obama, takes colleague Bill Burton’s previously described nonchalance vis a vis the adversarial nature of the press corps one step further, rejecting the notion that press-presidency interface needs to be adversarial at all (though she concedes that at times it has been). According to Psaki, “there are certainly moments – anyone who is in our office or who is a member of the media will tell you – where there are disagreements, there can be yelling even.” But in terms of the necessity of an adversarial tone?

I don’t think it’s necessarily adversarial at all. The Press Secretary has an interesting and challenging balance to play, which is that they have to be an advocate for the president and be an advocate for the press…Everybody else in the press office is supporting that effort. There are times when it is not beneficial to the president, or even sometimes to national security, [to reveal information]. Or maybe it’s less serious than that. Maybe we’re not ready to announce our trip somewhere, or for the Press Secretary to share everything he knows [about an issue] – that’s a challenge. And the Press – it’s their job to get all of the information they possibly can. So I think it’s more that their goals are different, but it doesn’t mean the relationship has to be adversarial. I think most people who are professionals on both sides recognize that you can be aggressive without being an adversary.

Similar to Burton, Psaki perceives the determination of “how to be helpful as we can to all the people who have questions, while still serving the President,” as the foremost challenge for Obama’s communications team. She is less concerned with the dangers of an adversarial press than with “the enormous amount of media interest” that the administration has thus far encountered.
'Somewhat Adversarial' Quadrant Summary

Two of the media-based respondents describe the presidency-press relationship as being at times adversarial, but reject the necessity of this type of interface. Borger acknowledges that hostility can emanate from the White House in the wake of a critical news piece, but more generally argues that the WH press corps operates in and upholds a congenial work environment, and in so doing is given reasonable access to the President and his spokespersons. Similarly, Nathan recognizes the potential for adversarial interface, particularly at times when the majority press is opposed to the President’s political platform. Rather than condoning adversarial behavior, she defends the notion of reactivity in press corps dealings with the White House. A key difference in the way that these two respondents interpret the relationship relates to their assignment of blame for adversarial episodes. Borger charges the White House with becoming contentious in response to negative presidential coverage, while Nathan connects the development of an adversarial tone to the decisions and convictions of media players. Karen Sughrue, a third media respondent in the ‘somewhat adversarial quadrant,’ more strongly defends certain byproducts of the adversarial relationship, making specific reference to the need for reporters to hold the White House accountable in the formation of policy. She does not fully endorse adversarial interface, however, because she perceives the modern media to be unreasonable in the ways that they focus their aggression.

Two of the White House respondents, Nanda Chitre and Bill Burton, also describe the presidency-press relationship as being somewhat adversarial, but differ from their media counterparts in that they believe this characteristic to be an organic element of White House coverage. Burton uses the phrase ‘appropriate’ in describing the adversarial
nature of presidential-press interface, though this interface seems – at least for his administration – secondary in importance to strategies of direct communication with the American public. Chitre understands the adversarial tone underscoring some White House press coverage to be a natural byproduct of efforts by the Communications Office to shape reporting through the logistics of access. She does describe a second breed of contentious behavior which she identifies as being plainly unnecessary: the adversarial conduct exhibited by press corps members in an effort to assert independence from the White House line, even at the expense of producing what is clearly the most relevant story (she is similar to Sughrue on this point). The third White House respondent, Psaki, stands alone in the ‘somewhat adversarial category’ – while recognizing that adversarial interactions do take place between her office and the press corps, she rejects the notion that these interactions are in any way a necessary component of the WH-Press relationship.

Adversarial

The final sector of the matrix includes those respondents who strongly endorse the ‘adversarial’ descriptor. As was the case in the previous sector, some individuals appear in quadrants A and B – they believe that certain aspects of the adversarial relationship are necessary, but highlight others as excessive, unproductive developments. Within the context of a discussion on the Office of Communications, it is significant to note that the majority of respondents agreed that press-presidency relations are now adversarial, and in many cases that they have become more adversarial with the passing of time.
3A – Adversarial, Necessary

Chip Reid, CBS News’ Chief White House Correspondent, argues that the White House-press interface “cries out for an adversarial relationship.”

It has to be that way. There is no possibility of it being anything else, really, because our job is to get as much information as we can possibly get, and to get it as straight down the middle as we can possibly get it. The [White House’s] job is to make it look as good for the President as possible, and to limit the amount of information we get while also giving enough information that they can still claim that they’re open and transparent.”

His description of the interface implies that White House officials and their press corps counterparts, by virtue of their distinct job requirements, exist in natural opposition to one another. The White House effort to control the flow of information while maintaining an appearance of transparency – which he frames as a basic reality of the modern presidency – is the precise byproduct of Nixon’s Office of Communications. Reid sees the press as a necessary adversary because he doesn’t question what is now the institutionalized, adversarial behavior of the White House. In reflecting on the present-day function of the WH Communications team, Reid say that “of course, I would be doing exactly the same thing: trying to get the message out to the American people, using us as a conduit to the degree they have to, but not getting knocked off message by the fact that people in the press are asking tough questions, or questions on different issues.” On the flip side, he agrees that an effective White House strategy breeds a desire within media circles to abandon the conventional line of the day. He says that “the last thing we want to do is to simply be spoon-fed all day, so if [WH officials] are going to simply spoon-feed us, we’re going to look for – if not a different story – than a different angle on the story.”

69 Chip Reid, interview with the author, July 28, 2009.
Reid’s narrative is particularly interesting in that he simultaneously endorses the modern adversarial relationship as an improvement over its FDR era predecessor, and acknowledges that the advantage now consistently lies with the Administration. He argues that the media has “come a long way from the days of Roosevelt, when they wouldn’t even report that he was disabled. And we’ve come a long way from the days of John Kennedy, when reporters at the White House were best friends and knew all about his womanizing. I think it’s a much better world, press-wise, because we are doing our job. We’re reporting what’s going on.” He also readily concedes the advantage to the Administration: “I think it’s working a little better for them than for us, because they are so disciplined and good at it. And they need so little. It is difficult to get information out of them – these briefings with Robert Gibbs I find deeply frustrating, because he almost never goes off point or off message. And he just doesn’t give us a lot of information. I rarely use him in my stories because he just doesn’t offer that much.” Reid fully endorses the adversarial nature of the modern press-presidency relationship, but in a sense, it is a blind endorsement – he can imagine no viable alternative to the current arrangement.

Scott Pelley, former CBS White House reporter and current 60 Minutes news correspondent, identifies and sanctions the adversarial aspect of the press-presidency relationship from a similar vantage point. In his own words, “there isn’t any way around [being adversarial] in terms of the analysis and investigative [responsibilities of the press]. People around the President are going to do everything they can to protect him, and to ensure that his policies are carried out with as little questioning as possible. And so I think it is necessarily adversarial, yes indeed.” He employs the Lewinsky scandal as a concrete example of a moment when the press was required to become an adversary in order to

produce relevant presidential coverage:

At the point when we’re investigating the Lewinsky affair and whether the President lied under oath to a federal judge, the White House became – as it did in the Nixon Administration – a stonewalling operation. Not at all surprising, but challenging from the viewpoint of a reporter who’s trying to get information. The whole thing became extremely acrimonious between the communications staff and the reporters, because the President was lying, there’s no two ways about that. He was lying under oath, he was lying in news conferences, he was lying early, often, and repeatedly…I guess there was actually some emotion attached [to the press response], because we were being lied to and we knew it and they were denying it. And so I think the White House press corps became more aggressive as a result...

The Lewinsky incident provides anecdotal support for Pelley’s repeated assertion that, because the White House is doing “the best they can to control their message,” and because it is the role of the press to “thoroughly investigate the actions of the White House, the motivations of the White House, and in some cases criminality,” the relationship must be adversarial. He also cites a decrease in adversarial press behavior as a potential negative consequence of the now all-encompassing White House communications strategy. In his opinion, the structure of the presidential communications operation both creates an adversary in the press, and threatens the press’ ability to act in an adversarial fashion. The latter assertion is explained through reference to the Bush Administration’s handling of the buildup to the Iraq War:

Moving ahead into the Bush Administration, there was a different kind of control of information, where issues of policy were very closely held, and it was difficult to get information from anyone inside the Administration about which way policy was going. It wasn’t a matter of criminality, so to speak, but a matter of wanting to keep information close and to share as little with the press as possible…

I think you can make the argument, particularly vis a vis Iraq, that not having any transparency in the debate leading up [to the war] was harmful at the end of the day. The White House became insular, it started believing its own rhetoric, and it became more and more determined as time went on. There was not a great deal of discussion about the misgivings of a number of people, chief
among them Secretary Powell, as the war was entered. I think not discussing policy in that way, even in a background way, is self-defeating, at least in the case of the Iraq War. Because it does not allow the American people to listen in and therefore comment on the road you’re going down…

I blame the press a great deal, and myself in particular, because there was not enough critical reporting done. All of us in the press bear some responsibility. I certainly didn’t do my job well enough. If I could only speak for myself, one of the major regrets I have in my entire career is not having done more investigative reporting about the decisions that led to the war…

The press was manipulated very effectively, by not just the White House but also the Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi government in exile in London, the stories that were in the New York Times about weapons of mass destruction… The Bush Administration and the Iraqi National Congress would plant a story, in the New York Times in particular, and then the next day they would come out and say ‘see, what were we telling you?’ It was very calculated, all very much self-reinforcing. The President used his surrogates quite well, the Vice President in particular and NSC Director Rice to spin the blackest scenarios. ‘We don’t want the next 9/11 to be a mushroom cloud’ is one of the things Condoleezza Rice said on the Sunday Chat shows…they did that very effectively.

This excerpt from Pelley’s interview makes a compelling connection between an overbearing White House communications operation, incomplete press coverage, and what proved to be a highly unpopular and initially unsuccessful war. Like Reid, Pelley describes press behavior as having developed in reaction to the White House communications strategy. He advocates for adversarial interaction, and presents compelling evidence of how non-adversarial behavior in the press can lead to poor presidential coverage.

Carin Pratt, Face the Nation’s Executive Producer, sees the press-presidency relationship as being both mutually beneficial and adversarial. Similar to Reid and Pelley, she charges the White House with behaving in a way that forces the press to become an adversary:

Everyone knows that you have to ‘feed’ the press. That’s the mutually beneficial part of it – the press needs a story, and the White House can provide that story. But it is by definition adversarial if in fact the White House is not giving
details. Remember the story, during the Bush Administration, when people claimed that energy companies were coming to the White House and basically writing energy legislation? The White House wouldn’t give out the list of Energy Executives who came. That’s an example – [if you’re the press], you’ve got to have that list! So the White House doesn’t want to give it out. You find some way to get it. And so [the relationship] is both things – it is mutually beneficial and necessarily adversarial.  

Pratt makes a unique contribution to this analysis in that she connects the degree of adversarial interaction between press and president at a given moment to the character of the administration in office. “Some [administrations] are more adversarial to the press than others,” and in her view, Obama’s approach is not remarkable despite his early promises “to be more transparent than the others. In fact, he’s not.” Like other respondents in the 1A quadrant, Pratt does not dispute the function of the White House Communications Office as a filterer of information; she concedes that for WH officials, “there is a line you have to walk between being transparent, and not wanting the press to see everything that goes on because it’s a little like making sausage.” From Pratt’s vantage point, reporters naturally respond to this calculated communications strategy by becoming adversaries to the White House. Like Pelley, she criticizes reporters for occasional breeches in their commitment to adversarial coverage: “especially recently, they just take whatever the White House gives them and say, ‘that’s the news!’ I think their job is to go beyond that…”

Dana Perino, WH Press Secretary from 2007-2009, agrees that the relationship is “naturally [adversarial] but at the same time mutually beneficial and productive. [Reporters] have a job to do, the press office has a job to do, and in my experience we worked very well together.” Her apparent fondness for the press corps deteriorates somewhat as the interview progresses; she strongly defends the right of the White House to

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set an agenda, noting that “if you don’t, you can end up being derailed.” Without prompting, she also articulates a strong conviction that when it comes to coverage, “onus is not on the White House. The White House provides access all day long to Obama, or Bush. The question is: what is the media going to cover? If you look at the network news, there is eight minutes [of presidential coverage] every night. That’s it. The onus isn’t on the White House – we’re trying to communicate all day long.” And in response to a question on whether an increase in off-camera communication might prompt more thorough coverage, she replied: “No. we tried to do off camera, and they refused to cover it. We tried to bring people in to help explain things, and [the press] said ‘this has to be on camera.’ That’s fine then, we just won’t do it.” While Perino articulates strong support for an adversarial press-presidency interface, and suggests that such an interface can occur within a mutually productive work environment, her responses are wrought with the underlying tension of the communications arrangement as it existed under Bush. One senses a lingering frustration towards members of the press corps who did not subscribe to her conception of a healthy WH-press relationship.

Dan Bartlett, who served as White House Communications Director under President Bush, advances a similar view of the press-presidency interface to the one forwarded by Perino, his counterpart in the Press Office. His responses also lack the undertones of frustration which somewhat invalidate Perino’s assertions of healthy WH-press interaction. Bartlett agrees with the adversarial classification, remarking that “there has to be some tension there. Sometimes it gets out of line, but for the most part I think that there’s a pretty healthy balance.”\textsuperscript{73} He assigns responsibility to the press and to the White House for setting the terms of their mutual relationship, and asserts that, in his experience, both

\textsuperscript{73} Dan Bartlett, interview with the author, Austin, Texas, August 16, 2009.
sides tend to behave reasonably. “At the end of the day, [the press corps’] careers are
directly correlated with whether they lead the news, or whether they get a front page story
– so they need us, and we need them. There it is: it’s a two-way street. You need to go
about [interacting] in a way that is aboveboard and honest. I’d say that 90% of the time it
happens the way that it should.”

On the press side, Bartlett notes that “most reporters are good at keeping arms-length
relationships, but also at having good personal relationships [with White House staff].
There were a lot of reporters that I wanted to throw the phone out the window on in any
given day, but I also had good personal relationships with them, because I understood what
they were going through, and they understood what I was going through…most people
approached it that way.” Like a handful of other respondents, Bartlett assesses the
relationship from a very practical standpoint; he recognizes that press coverage cannot
always be favorable, but credits reporters with doing their jobs and “asking the tough
questions,” even during the run-up to the Iraq War.

In speaking about appropriate White House media strategy, Bartlett stresses the
importance of building a rapport with those individuals covering the president, even prior
to the general election:

A kind of intimate relationship develops during the campaign, because
you’re all on the plane together…for the most part, you really get to know
each reporter and they really get to know you. That’s not to say that they
develop a bias towards you, but what you’re aiming towards is the benefit
of the doubt – that when something comes up that may not square with their
thinking, instead of just jumping to a conclusion, they’ll come to us and say:
‘well wait a minute, I kind of know this guy. That doesn’t jibe well with
what I think of that person.’

…Increasingly, if you have journalists who are just covering the White
House – they’re not covering George W. Bush, they’re not covering Obama
- then they get that distance in which cynicism grows. The personal
relationship matters, though it may be very much in the margins…the President or the Chief of Staff would say, “See? We gave them access for an hour and look at that piece of crap story that came out of it.” It’s never going to be that transactional, unless they’re totally in the bag on our side, and then it’s going to be a freebee. But usually, those freebees don’t move the needle, because [the reporters] don’t have a large audience or a lot of [clout] to move the narrative…

Access is important, because…when push comes to shove, if there is a big crisis, you want the press corps to feel like they have some sort of understanding personally of the President. Then maybe they’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.

Bartlett describes adversarial interface between the press and the President as natural and necessary, but clearly asserts that such interface can exist as one element of a mutually beneficial, even friendly relationship. Though he frames the press – and not the White House – as the adversary, he charges the latter with the task of fostering an overall healthy dynamic. He articulates only one general complaint about presidential coverage: that what “shapes the mindset of the press, more than anything else, is the polls. Even for a President who self professed not to care about polls – we were pretty comfortable with low approval ratings – it was still very frustrating, because of how much [polling] shaped the narrative and the coverage.”

3A & 3B – Adversarial, Some Components Necessary

Leslie Stahl, who covered the White House for CBS during the Carter, Reagan and Bush ’41 Presidencies, mirrors Pelley’s assertion that changes in the White House have made it increasingly difficult for the press to engage in adversarial interface: “I think what’s happened over the years, and this is true of all Presidents, is that they get more and more insistent on controlling the press…perhaps starting with Reagan, at least in contemporary times, the White House has tried very hard to have as little transparency, to
be as opaque as possible. I think it becomes very, very difficult [to be tough].” On the other hand, Stahl emphasizes the need for balance, and cautions against a transition from adversarial to acrimonious behavior, particularly on the part of the White House. If WH officials become acrimonious in their dealings with the press corps, Stahl remarks that

> Everybody gets hurt, everybody looks bad. What began to happen when television became so prominent in covering the White House is that the reporters themselves became part of the story. The Press Secretary did his briefings on TV, presidents had more little mini-conferences…and if the questions were tough, as they should be, the questioner became part of [the story]. The tone became part of [the story]. And the President would use that and deflect away from whatever the issue was. He would make reporters the issue: ‘why are they being so angry? Why are they being so hostile?’ If the adversarial relationship turns nasty, then I don’t think it’s helpful to the public – I think the story becomes skewed by that.

Stahl certainly defends the notion of tough, adversarial interaction on the part of the press, but cautions against acrimonious White House behavior.

> She makes another important contribution to our understanding of the nature of press-presidency interface; in her experience, “it’s also very difficult to be tough when the President is popular…first of all, reporters really do need sources, despite what a lot of our critics say. And when a President is popular, people in the know are more likely to be reluctant to speak to the press. When a president’s ratings start sinking, these sources start thinking that they have some sort of license to go out and tell the story…I think it’s some kind of hidden law of nature that takes place in Washington.” In other words, it is difficult for the press to engage in appropriately adversarial behavior when a President has high approval ratings. Like Nathan’s theory vis a vis political slant and aggressive reporting, Stahl injects a political element into our analysis of the press-presidency relationship. Stahl thus belongs both in quadrants 3A and 3B – she articulates the necessity of adversarial

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74 Leslie Stahl, interview with the author, New York, August 8, 2009.
interface, arguing that at times, that the press is not enough of an adversary in the face of high presidential approval ratings and aggressive White House strategy. What Stahl identifies as unnecessary is the extreme form of adversarial interaction which can characterize WH behavior, and divert attention from the real news of the day.

Michael McCurry, who worked as President Clinton’s Press Secretary during the Lewinsky scandal and advised the current administration in a PR capacity during its transition period, has also been placed in the ‘necessary’ and ‘unnecessary’ quadrants of the ‘yes, adversarial’ sector. Like Stahl, he makes a distinction between appropriate adversarial interface, and inappropriate acrimonious interface. In his words,

[the press-presidency relationship] is by definition, adversarial. I think that’s proper, because the press needs to be skeptical about the work of government and the work of the President, and information will reveal the truth. But the problem is that, in recent years, the adversarial relationship sometimes slips into a much more acrimonious relationship. And the level of trust that probably ought to exist between both sides begins to evaporate. The press corps can be very cynical, and White House press operatives can be very cynical. There very often seems to be a lot of ill will on both sides of that relationship.\(^{75}\)

McCurry defies the trend whereby the press charges the WH with forcing them to become an adversary, and WH operatives charge the press with unfounded acts of aggression. He sees fault on both sides of the relationship, and articulates grave concern that in its modern, acrimonious form, press-presidency interface simply isn’t “healthy.” On the press end, McCurry believes that “the skepticism that goes into the relationship leads a journalist to be automatically dismissive of the line of the day in the White House. It could be that the line of the day is really want the American people want to hear about, so [they] ought to try to extend the information [they’re] hearing from the President instead of just dismissing it out of hand. People who work in the White House expect the press to just bend over

\(^{75}\) Michael McCurry, interview with the author, Washington DC, July 29, 2009.
backwards to try to discount any of the news being put out on a given day.” And from the perspective of the Executive, McCurry acknowledges that with the advent of a Communications Office, the White House added a new element of tension to the relationship:

They tried to develop capacity to do what the press corps was ostensibly trying to do, and this is partly what fueled the mistrust. The press said ‘look, we’re here to report on the news, you’re not here to tell us what the news is going to be on a daily basis…the growth of the modern communications operation began under Richard Nixon…you could probably go back now and predict that because of that, you were going to see higher degrees of mistrust in the relationship, because people were just not confident that they were getting the straight story every day.

While McCurry concedes that a “proper” presidency-press relationship is “by definition adversarial,” it is clear that he does not endorse the present conception of that relationship. He returns, repeatedly, to the notion of mistrust, going so far as to propose a unprecedented level of transparency in the West Wing in order to quell press “cynicism” and “restore people’s confidence in the government’s ability to get things right.” McCurry pushes a unique position in that he wants to maintain the adversarial tone of WH-press interface, while improving the degree of trust which exists between the two involved parties. He says, “it has always struck me as the great irony of this relationship that both sides ostensibly want the same thing – they want information to go to the American people…in theory, everyone has their interests aligned, but of course the problem is that one side’s version of the truth is not what the other side thinks is the important truth of the day.”

_3B – Adversarial, Unnecessary_

Bob Schieffer, CBS’ Chief Washington Correspondent and _Face the Nation_ moderator, also acknowledges the adversarial nature of the press-president relationship,
specifically since the advent of the WH Communications Office in 1969:

The Nixon Administration pretty much became the model for [White House -press interactions]. HR Haldeman had been an advertising man out in California – he was Nixon’s Chief of Staff – and he really wrote the book on dealing with the press. He was the first of the modern advance men. The whole idea of the term ‘photo opportunity’ came from the Nixon White House; that you would just call the press in for a picture, but you wouldn’t let them ask any questions…with the coming of the Nixon Administration you have a Communications Office, and the Press Secretary would become just one of the people in that office, reporting to a much more powerful insider…

My observation is that every White House learns from the previous Administration. People used to ask me: is the Bush Administration more secretive than the Clinton Administration? And I’d say ‘yes, and the Clinton Administration was more secretive than the Bush ’41 Administration. They all learn from the previous group, and basically what they do is put more of a plan in place to control information.\textsuperscript{76}

Schieffer clearly holds the White House responsible for the development of an adversarial press environment. But while he assumes that “the Office of Communications will continue to be a part of the White House,” he is far less convinced of its necessity than are other respondents, citing “growth of bureaucracy” as the driving force behind the office’s prolonged existence. In his own words, “it’s a funny thing that happens [in Washington] – once you’ve put something in place, it’s there to stay.” Perhaps most significant for the purposes of this study is Schieffer’s hypothesis as to why the modern press-presidency relationship has become more adversarial: “I think it has become more distanced, and because of that maybe it’s become more adversarial. Part of the reason for this is security…when you put security in place then it is much easier for elected officials to keep their distance from the press.” Schieffer remembers covering the 1988 presidential campaign, when the closest reporters could get to the candidates was 50 or 60 yards away. In his experience, politicians “are sometimes able to use [security] to their own

\textsuperscript{76} Bob Schieffer, interview with the author, Washington DC, July 29, 2009.
convenience when they don’t want to talk to the press,” forcing the press corps to become an adversary of the President in order to produce worthwhile coverage. Like Reid, he views the current arrangement as being “advantage politician, whether it’s meant to be that way or not.” But Schieffer expresses no conviction that the presently adversarial quality of the press-presidency relationship is necessary and/or desirable, which explains his placement in quadrant 3B.

‘Adversarial’ Quadrant Summary

Chip Reid, Scott Pelley and Carin Pratt assess the press-presidency relationship from similar vantage points. Each of them charges the White House Communications Operation with effectively forcing the press to become its adversary through efforts to spin news and control the flow of information. Each of them also accepts this fairly modern development as a natural component of any presidential strategy. Reid presents an interesting paradox in that he endorses the modern press-presidency relationship as an improvement over its Roosevelt era precursor, but also concedes advantage to the White House. Pelley focuses on the potential dangers of non-adversarial interface through reflection on media coverage of the run-up to the Iraq war, and Pratt touches on the dangers of press complacency in more general terms. She also connects the degree of adversarial interface at any given moment to the individual character of the administration in power, distinct from the more common assertion that the relationship has progressed in a linear fashion since the advent of the Communications Office.

On the White House side, Dan Bartlett also views adversarial interface as an existing and necessary precursor to presidential coverage, but more generally, describes a
relationship built upon tenants of friendship and mutual understanding. He advocates in particular for White House efforts to engage reporters in personal relationships; he does not see these efforts as being at odds with his previous endorsement of adversarial interface, but instead understands them to be the natural precursor to fair, ‘benefit-of-the-doubt’ oriented coverage.

Appearing in both the A and B quadrants, there are several respondents who agree with the adversarial characterization, but understand it to be necessary and productive only in a specific context. Leslie Stahl strongly advocates for tough press coverage, but cautions against movement towards an acrimonious relationship between the press and the White House. She blames WH officials for forcing the move away from healthy adversarial interaction, noting that the prominence of televised presidential coverage allows the White House to deflect criticism back onto the aggressive reporter, making him/her the new (and less relevant) focus of the story. Michael McCurry endorses adversarial interface as well, but views the current standing of press-presidency interaction as unhealthy and counterproductive. Like Stahl, he cautions against acrimonious behavior, and cites the advent and growth of the Communications Office as the foremost cause for distrust in the media, which has largely destroyed what should be a mutually compatible relationship.

Bob Schieffer, the most veteran of the respondents, stands alone in this quadrant in that he recognizes the adversarial nature of the press-presidency relationship, but gives no indication that he believes it to be a necessary component of coverage. He speaks to the progression of the WH communications strategy since the Nixon years, with every administration becoming more secretive than its predecessor. He also cites security, and the distance it creates between president and press, as a central reason for why the
relationship has become more adversarial.

**Conclusion**

The opportunity to interview such an impressive cast of White House and media players has had the predictable effect of generating more questions than answers.

In reflecting on the nature of the press-presidency relationship, respondents often identified contradictions in their own rationale, particularly when the conversation turned to the Office of Communications. If this interview group can be taken as an accurate representation of current views within the White House and network media outlets, the majority of WH officials unequivocally defend the necessity of an expansive communications operation. The majority of network press figures recognize the adverse impact of the White House communications strategy on their ability to produce comprehensive coverage, but accept the Communications Office as an ingrained component of the Executive Branch. Perhaps most significantly, all but one of the individuals interviewed makes at least an indirect connection between the functions fulfilled by the Communications Office, and the adversarial nature of press-presidency interface.

That representatives from both the White House and the press now understand their mutual relationship to be adversarial is a significant development in and of itself. This new reality signals a permanent departure from the Roosevelt style of press-presidency interaction, and given that most respondents credit White House efforts to control the message with having created an adversary in the press, it is reasonable to assume that the establishment and evolution of the Communications Office is in some way connected to a change in the nature of press-presidency interface.
But was it a necessary change?

One particularly interesting result of this interview project was the discrepancy of opinions which emerged when respondents were asked to gauge the necessity of today’s adversarial WH-press interface. Predictably, media figures more strongly endorse the need for an adversarial relationship than do their White House counterparts (67% versus 50%). In both cases, a significant minority denounces the adversarial characteristic of modern interface, and advocates for a different kind of working relationship. Neither the press nor White House officials are united in their understanding of the appropriate terms for press-presidency interaction. Those who reject the merits of an adversarial system are even more scattered in terms of the justification that they provide for their disapproval.

These insights on the connection between an evolving White House Office of Communications and a modernly adversarial press-presidency relationship open the door to a secondary research question: how has this change in interface affected the quality of presidential coverage? Further investigation will also address the following limitations of this original paper:

1. The notion of a monolithic press – can network news outlets be assessed under a common heading? Scott Pelley cautioned against “falling into to the trap…[of referring to] a capital ‘P’ press.”77

2. The Obama White House as an anomaly in political time. While the current White House has not officially released organizational charts detailing the structure of its Communications Office, Nanda Chitre, in an August 13 correspondence, suggested that Obama has placed uncommon emphasis on the Press Office over its Communications counterpart. Jen Psaki also made passing

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77 Scott Pelley, interview with the author, New York, August 11, 2009.
reference during her interview to the fact that the physical office space occupied by the current Communications Director, Anita Dunn, is located further away from the West Wing than it was under previous Administrations. If Obama’s White House does not, in fact, subscribe to the Communications trend analyzed in this paper, new questions will be raised vis a vis the nature of his interactions with the press, and his potential presidential legacy. Could Obama follow FDR and Nixon as President who instituted the third major revolution in White House Communications strategy?
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